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Artist Statement

My artwork is a metaphor for how the brain categorizes, juxtaposes and seemingly illogically organizes visual information. By researching the meaning and history of symbols, archetypes, the collective unconscious, as well as dreams and memories, I explore the way the psyche reveals information to us. While much of this information is cryptic it is also clear to me that my subconscious mind is often trying to expose to me what it means to be a woman. My artwork is also a tool for examining and understanding the female experience.

The Psyche

The psyche is such a vast and mysterious territory that locks away our deepest, darkest secrets and can be very difficult to penetrate. It can, however, reveal the things we long to know about ourselves, allowing us to grow and evolve as whole, healthy individuals in society. I have a strong desire to tap into this place within myself so that I can better understand who I am as a woman and how to relate to the people around me. Only through a deep investigation of my psyche can I start to observe the history that has shaped me, the relationships that have made deep impressions on me, the roles that I have played throughout my life and the many levels of inexplicable emotions that surround all of these things. I believe a continuous challenge of the notions of self is what we need to understand who we are and how we fit into this world with each other (Stein 15-16).

First and foremost my artwork is a self-examination and catharsis, but the work also becomes a probing into the human psyche as a universal entity. As I pursue both conscious and unconscious territory of the psyche, I am forced to face the influences, thoughts, behaviors and personality that make up my identity and self-perception and I can't help but wonder if these things are felt by people in similar situations as myself.

My Process

I use an intuitive approach to art making and rely on my instincts to create ambiguous narratives that indirectly describe the inner workings of my mind. The most effective way for me to access my subconscious is to examine a collection of both contemporary and historical images and then dissect the meaning. I collect my source material from books and magazines, and take photographs of the things around me. A visual catalogue is built to inform my work. I make instinctual choices regarding what images and symbols to collect, and in retrospect I often find these are representations of objects, people and places that provoke deep thought within me and challenge my idea of what is normal and accepted by society. There is a necessity to spend time with these images, combine them in different ways and understand them on many levels. Sometimes I reflect on memories or dreams that are connected to the images I've found. As I engage with certain images I am drawn into a place in my mind that is both emotionally charged and yet not immediately identifiable. I experience an urgent need to visually describe these feelings through my experience of these images by telling a story.

The narrative always involves a female figure. The images of women I choose to work from are ones that I feel I can relate to; women that I see a piece of myself in. These women are usually surrounded by animals and inanimate objects that activate the environment she is in. I use flat color and pattern combined with highly rendered areas when describing the imagery. The woman is sometimes in a domestic space and other times she inhabits a landscape. Without planning very much, I compose the objects impulsively, letting them speak to one another and gain autonomy. I use a wide range of media as well as mark making techniques to create a collage aesthetic. Not being tied down to any one way of rendering contributes to this creative flow of energy and stream of consciousness. This method allows me to juxtapose contradictory images and embrace stylistic differences. If I try to control this process too much it loses the excitement and mystery for me and I stop learning from it. The power is in the process. The drawing is alive while I am making it, revealing the inner workings of my psyche.

During this process I am uncertain of the meaning of the piece at first and the narrative is unclear. But, by embracing this intuitive art making experience, a new perception of reality starts to become realized. Unknown fantasies and nightmares are brought into consciousness. My artwork reveals fascinating and terrifying parts of myself that were locked away. Reflecting on this new and surprising realm of identity, I start to understand my unconscious intentions. How I feel about myself as a woman becomes more apparent to me. I also start to see both my place in the world I have created and the one outside of the drawing more clearly. This meaning in the artwork often comes later. It's always present, but not yet realized. As I near the finish of the piece I allow myself to analyze it thoroughly. Time is spent writing down the connections found between objects and symbols and why they are significant to me within both my own visual history as well as a universal understanding of the cyphers. This new understanding of myself, and the way I see the world is cathartic, healing and empowering.

The Female Experience

There is a calling within each drawing I create to explore and understand the female experience. The figures in my drawings are always female and although they do not represent any one woman in particular, there is both a part of me described in each character as well as a universal woman represented. I invent women that I hope will teach me about what it means to be a woman. I intuitively tell the stories that are not just my own, but that of my mother, my grandmother and the women that have permeated my life. These women are my friends and family members, but they are also women I identify with from history. The books that I have read of accounts of uniquely female experiences throughout different time periods, cultures and political and social milieus trickle into my narratives sometimes without my awareness.

By taking a closer look at women's history, I realize that the term is a misnomer. History documents "his" story not "her" story. Women have been reflected in art, literature, philosophy and religion as mans' "other". (Lerner xxi) Up until very recently the female point of view has

largely been ignored in reconstructing the past. Activities of men were considered to be much more significant to historical development while activities of women have been marginalized. (Gerda Lerner xix) But women are anything but marginal. Women's experience encompasses all that is human. They share and always have shared the world equally with men even if they have not had an equal voice. (xix)

Through my image making process I look for ways to show a uniquely female perspective and imagine what history would be like if seen through the eyes of women. I think about how the world has been defined for women and how they have been alienated in so many ways throughout history. (xix) I have been inspired by a collection of individual women who have lived through incredible hardships. Some of whom have found ways to overcome their dire circumstances and others who were destroyed by a society that could not accept them for who they were.

These women that inspire my work occupy a huge range of status and character. While some are women of great power and prestige many of them were victims. They are queens, abolitionists, feminists, suffragists, physicians, midwives and psychoanalysts. Some were abused, some were slaves, mistresses, some lived with disabilities, depression and psychological disturbances. Some of the women were many of these things at once. Women such as Anne Boleyn, Louisa May Alcott, Margaret Sanger, Helen Keller, Aileen Wuornos, Sabina Spielrein, Betty Freidan, Anne Frank, Freda Kahlo, Nan Goldin, Marlene Dumas, Sylvia Plath, Pearl S. Buck, Coco Chanel, just to name a few.

These women come from all classes and categories of society. Their challenges were each unique yet strangely similar. They appear to me to be a composite picture of the female past. And I assemble their experience into a narrative that delves into the concerns, fears and hopes of women as a whole. (xx) Making these images of ubiquitous women is not only a way for me to understand the woman that I am, but the woman that I want to become. I am completely liberated

in revealing the pain and confusion of the female experience. It becomes a ceremonious communion for me with all women who suffer. I aim to be brutally honest about the struggle of womanhood, which allows me to achieve a healing and self-defining resolution within myself. Only after I finish a drawing can I start to truly see and celebrate the growth and progress made by these women that I admire and learn from.

Recurring Themes Surrounding Womanhood

When I draw women I ask myself "what is the female experience? What does it mean to be a woman? How do women see, feel and know things differently from men?" When I reflect on these questions I come to some conclusions. The first most obvious one being that a woman is different biologically. The unique physical capabilities of the female body are profound and life altering, but society has for centuries seen procreation as a duty of women not a right. Women have also been seen exclusively as a resource for sexual pleasure. But a woman is not just her body. I also conclude that gender has been in many ways socially constructed. Women are expected to play specific roles such as mother and caretaker, but a woman is so much more than these gender specific roles. Being a woman is more than biological, and goes beyond critically looking at gender as a social construct, but I cannot deny that these things have been defining characteristics of women for centuries and must be incorporated into what we know and understand about women today in contemporary society.

Today women are expected to do everything that a man can do and has done historically and still play the same roles that women have historically been expected to play. So now women have been asked to do more than a man has ever been expected to do. They must be mother, wife, care taker, career women, political activist, community leader as well as eternally young, thin, beautiful and sexually desirable. But women cannot do it all. No one can. These unreasonable expectations are the plight of women. When women try to achieve the impossible they become exhausted, defeated and self-critical.

While contemplating both the physical and societal expectations that have been so much a part of the female persona throughout history as well as what is expected of them in contemporary society, I am fixated on some recurring themes in my artwork. These themes include pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, domesticity, subordination, women's rights, corporeality, body consciousness, pressures and freedoms of sexuality, beauty, aging, depression and mortality. When I draw women, what I am most interested in is confronting and dismantling the titles that women are given and revealing some truth behind the unreasonable expectations society has of women. My work is about the conflicts between women's physical characteristics and their defined roles by society. I think of the women in my drawings as timeless and they analyze appropriate concepts womanhood.

Abjection, Pain and Suffering

My artwork replaces knowledge with interpretation. There is a breaking down of previously understood meaning that often leads to abjection, which in turn results in redefining the self and the reality we live in. The poststructuralist thinker Julia Kristeva introduced the idea of "abjection" in her book "Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection" as the basis of a fundamental differentiation between the self and non-self. Abjection is defined as a reaction to the confrontation of bodily fluids and the corpse causing disgust or phobia. Kristeva says these things are seen as a threat to the self, who rejects them even though they can be simultaneously beautiful and unsettling, and grotesquely appealing. She defines abjection as "a disturbing of identity, system, and order without respect for borders, positions, and rules". (Kristeva 207-210).

Much of the artwork that forces us to face and question our definition of self has to do with transgressing physical boundaries. Kristeva believes that anytime identity is challenged it brings the physical body into the picture. She theorizes that when physical boundaries erode, the self must deal with the body in a way that betrays social norms and biological givens in the process (Frank 18).

Within every story I tell in my artwork there is a disquieting feeling of eeriness, potential danger and abjection. I have found that grief often becomes palpable when I am immersed in my work and it is often connected to some form of disruption to the body. Sometimes this comes in a dramatic and literal form such as decapitation, while other times it is subtle, such as the rendering of limbs in the greys and blues of death and decay. Referencing both psychological and physical suffering that I've experienced in my own life as well as the pain I've witnessed other women undergo, my stories cross boundaries of societal rules and assumptions about bodily functions in order to disrupt and redefine identity. Paralyzing anxiety and insecurity are a unifying characteristic of the women in my work, which I often support with objects of abjection. My images contain menacing knives, the clenched teeth of anguish, creeping, and twisting veins, and organs separated from their bodies. These symbols are indirectly a manifestation of my emotions. The art making process allows me to face the fears I have that define the roles I play in my life and in turn discover otherwise unknown truths about my own reality as a female.

Symbology

Using symbols in my work is a way for me to find intermediaries between the unconscious and physical world. My drawings often contain a vast array of symbols elaborately layered in space and this charged environment is an active opportunity to open a portal between levels of consciousness and visual representation.

I reference Carl Jung and his thoughts and theories on this psychological subject matter. He has said that a symbol stands for something unknown and cannot be made clear or precise. It is Jung's understanding that symbols are not consciously invented by the ego, but appear spontaneously from the unconscious mind. A symbol is the best possible statement or expression for something that is either essentially unknowable or not yet known. Symbols open one up to mystery (Stein 82).

We create symbols almost instinctually, pulling from a reservoir of various sources including life experiences and unrealized archetypal knowledge of the past. This is how I choose my source material for my drawings. I have created my own personal symbolism to explain the alternate universe of my psyche.

Because symbols are transient there can be multiple interpretations. Their complex meanings evolve as an individual evolves. The symbols in my artwork *are* transient and *do* have multiple meanings. The power that the symbols in my drawings hold is because of their ability to change and transform with both time and interpretation, allowing them to be related to on many levels (Stein 160-161).

Collective Unconscious

I rely on the collective unconscious to look beyond my individual consciousness, which is of a personal nature, in order to tap into a more universal source of symbols, rich in meaning. Our culturally and socially constructed ways of knowing and experiencing phenomena come from the archetypal knowledge of the collective unconscious. What I hope to do with my artwork is reflect upon and reinvent these consciously constructed symbols of society to expose underlying assumptions of established knowledge (Stein 88).

A long history of cultural myths and fables reveals that our collective unconscious works through story telling. The stories I tell are invented with spontaneity. They often refer to vague remnants of memories or dreams I've had, depicting a unique account of an event that I am not immediately familiar with or consciously recalling in the moment. The narrative invites the viewer to question, analyze and interpret the bewildering event unfolding. Along with my viewers, I am challenged to push the boundaries of empirical knowledge. These highly personal investigations at times border on the absurd and the nonsensical. The lack of static meaning in these narratives affords me,

and my viewers, many opportunities to find new epiphanies within them long after they have been made.

Dreams, Memories and Surrealism

Dreams and memories are important resources I use to tap into the realm of the unconscious world as well. In our dreams we tend to create and perceive our world or reality simultaneously. Our world creates itself as we are discovering it. This is precisely what happens when I am drawing. I am creating a fantasy world, or an alternate reality and at the same time I am learning about the significance of this new environment as it is being realized. My compositions are full of strange or unexpected juxtapositions of objects and characters that nevertheless still seem familiar to me. Wild animals often feel out of place in the domestic spaces they inhabit, and yet seem right at home. The purposefully skewed space and lighting as well as items of unrealistic scale and color provoke an eerie or uncanny feeling. The subconscious seems to be motivated by emotion rather than reason. In dreams we don't remember the beginning or the end, or how we got there. We just seem to be in the middle of it. There is no logic or order to the narrative.

The dreamlike spaces and imaginary worlds in the artwork of the Surrealists have had a huge impact on my work. The Surrealists believed that we must baffle the eye and confuse the mind in order to free humanity from the control of reason and moral order. They created their own symbolic language by stripping ordinary objects of their normal significance to create compelling images that went beyond ordinary formal organization. Like the Surrealists, I combine elements in my work not normally found together to produce illogical and startling unions. This way of working allows me to expose psychological truths by inducing the experience that the Surrealists called the marvelous or uncanny. They aspired to revolutionize how we experience art on a personal, cultural and social level in order to redefine who we are as human beings (Waldberg 17-20).

Drawing is a way for me to disassemble, analyze and recognize both the complexity and simplicity of mortality. This method of image making helps me to find my own sense of being and an awareness of my individuality, and yet I am also made to see the value of a shared experience of being human with all of its challenges. There is a debate within me each time I create a new image about who I am and how I share my experiences with other women. I pursue a cathartic reinvention of the self. Confronting fears and anxieties about corporeality, my goal is to understand how it defines identity.

It is important for me to continue to create new ways of seeing the self in order to reveal underlying assumptions of established knowledge, which call for a greater investigation into identity. By creating artwork that acts as a metaphor for how the brain synthesizes visual information, I expose an uncertainty of meaning within the psyche. This forces me and my viewers to confront the socially accepted boundaries of how we function in society.

Transgressing a previous way of seeing things can open a door to progress. This begs the question: how does our shared experience affect who we are, not only "to" each other but "for" each other? Our shared condition of mortality can become a basis for empathic relations amongst living beings. Humans can come together by identifying with the same stories and experiences that reference both personal symbolic language as well as the collective unconscious. My artwork can be a bridge between myself and the other women that I long to connect with and understand. I believe that the desire to question identity and connect with one another through this experience of inquiry is what causes us to evolve as individuals and as a society (Frank 35).

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