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I have always found that I experienced a strange kind of comfort in indulging my fears. Growing up, I was fascinated by the very things that would unnerve me. I would try and find something beautiful or humorous in them. These feelings of fear maybe produced by something morbid, strange, abject, violent, and humorous and at the same time strangely beautiful.

Fear is a vital response to physical and emotional danger-if we couldn't feel it, we couldn't protect ourselves from legitimate threats. But often we fear situations that are in no way life-or- death, and thus hang back for no good reason. Traumas or bad experiences can trigger a fear response within us that is hard to quell. Yet exposing ourselves to our personal demons is the best way to move past them. (Psychology Today)

All organic creatures fornicate, conquer, and destroy. As grim as this sounds, I try to have a little fun with the brutal conditions of life. As strange and savage as it might be, these pieces still exhibit traces of dark humor, and abjection.

According to Julia Kristeva in the *Powers of Horror*, “the abject refers to the human reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. The primary example for what causes such a reaction is the corpse (which traumatically reminds us of our own materiality); however, other items can elicit the same reaction: the open wound, sewage, even the skin that forms on the surface of warm milk”.

Kristeva's understanding of the “abject” provides a helpful term to contrast to Lacan's “object of desire” or the “*objet petit a*.” Whereas the *objet petit a*, allows a subject to coordinate his or her desires, thus allowing the symbolic order of meaning and intersubjective community to persist, the abject “is radically excluded and,” as Kristeva explains, “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. It is neither object nor subject; the abject is situated, rather, at a place

before we entered into the symbolic order. As Kristeva puts it, “Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be”. The abject marks what Kristeva terms a “primal repression,” one that precedes the establishment of the subject's relation to its objects of desire and of representation, before even the establishment of the opposition, conscious/unconscious. Kristeva refers, instead, to the moment in our psychosexual development when we established a border or separation between human and animal, between culture and that which preceded it. On the level of archaic memory, Kristeva refers to the primitive effort to separate ourselves from the animal: “by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism.

With my work, I have created my own version of lively, carnivorous, funny organisms. They seem to take over the space that they inhabit. They are beautiful, inviting, repulsive and threatening all at the same time.

According to Jacques Lacan, “symbolic order exists once a child enters into language and accepts the rules and dictates of society. The symbolic is made possible because of your acceptance of those laws and restrictions that control both your desire and the rules of communication”. Lacan's unconscious is structured like a language, which gives language a key role in constructing our picture of the world, but also allows the unconscious to enter into that understanding and dissolve essential distinctions between fantasy and reality.

When creating a painting I utilize specific colors to stand for a certain emotion or group of emotions. I find that this will engage the viewer visually, giving them the opportunity to decipher what the overall shape of the piece might be. Robert Motherwell states that; “Abstract expressionism was the first American art that was filled with anger as well as beauty. It may be

that the deep necessity of art is the examination of self-deception. In a way, painting is like wine: it is as old, as simple, as primitive and as varied. Like wine, it is a very specific means of expression, with a limited vocabulary, but vast in its expressive potential”.

The surface structures of my paintings are manipulated in order to suggest an inner emotional state that others may identify with. This can be anything from the use of color, to one of my many abstracted childhood fears.

In life, we need things that divert our attention away from our worries and fears. The same can be said for the work that I produce. I try to pull and push the viewer from one emotion to another using these visual cues. The colors may vary in saturation, shape, and size but so does the emotional content that they represent. Emotions are a universal language. They can reinforce the common boundaries of people. Colors and textures function as a means of nonverbal communication to the viewer and can be interpreted as differently as the individual viewing it. Even though the shapes represented in the work encompass a wide range of abstracted human expression and emotion it can be seen as something entirely different from one person to the next.

My work has taken many different forms over the years. Inspired by the research of macro/micro biology, sea creatures, flowers, abject human forms, and fantasy.

Resulting in a type of de-evolution. The first of the series were mounted on platforms, confining them to a limited space. In doing so I gave the illusion of safety. Although the work has the same elements as the remaining pieces, they represent only the beauty of form. From there the work was removed from the platform and allowed to invade the wall. This brought a new dynamic to the piece. No longer confined to the platform; individual units within the work were able to interact with one another in closer proximity. Various arrangements of the individual pieces became suggestive of a conversation. Other arrangements were visually

suggestive of animal instinctual behaviors (e.g.: herding, predation, mating). And yet other groups of pieces seemed to refer to single and multi-cell organisms and theories of evolution. The largest and most carnivorous of the series are a combination of mutated orchid/biological mishaps. They are much larger than the rest of the series, and thus are visually dominant. This series of two, illustrates the idea of birth. The large blooms and empty glossy caverns give the impression of hatching, or escape. I have incorporated into my work a mixture of textures and shapes. Many of these creatures suggest oozing or coagulate physical forms. Some of the shapes carry with them an external/internal anthropomorphic appeal. In multiplying and arranging these shapes I hope to suggest various simple narrative scenarios.

The definition, modes of manifestation and function of the collective unconscious are discussed. In addition to the personal unconscious generally accepted by medical psychology, the existence of a second psychic system of a universal and impersonal nature is postulated. This collective unconscious is considered to consist of preexistent thought forms, called archetypes, which give form to certain psychic material, which then enters the conscious. Archetypes are likened to instinctual behavior patterns. Examples of ideas such as the concept of rebirth, which occur independently in various cultures and ages, are advanced as evidence for the collective unconscious. It is felt that there are as many archetypes as there are recurring situations in life, that when a situation occurs that corresponds to a particular archetype, the archetype presses for completion like an instinctual drive; resistance to its expression may result in neurosis. The existence of archetypes is demonstrated in the analysis of adult and childhood dreams, active imagination, psychotic delusions, and fantasies produced in the trance state. A case history of a paranoid schizophrenic is examined in terms of the manifestation of archetypes in the patient's delusional system. (Collected Works of C.G. Jung)

Jung about the Collective Unconscious: “The collective unconscious - so far as we can say anything about it at all-appears to consist of mythological motifs or primordial images, for which reason the myths of all nations are its real exponents. In fact, the whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious... We can therefore study the collective unconscious in two ways, either in mythology or in the analysis of the individual”.

(The Structure of the Psyche, CW 8, par. 325.)

The unconscious mind is a term invented by the 18th century German philosophy romantic philosopher Christopher Riegel and later introduced into English by the poet and essayist Samuel Taylor Coleridge. [1] The unconscious mind might be defined as that part of the mind which gives rise to a collection of mental phenomena that manifest in a person's mind but which the person is not aware of at the time of their occurrence. These phenomena include unconscious feelings, unconscious or automatic skills, unnoticed perceptions, unconscious thoughts, unconscious habits and automatic reactions, complexes, hidden phobias and concealed desires.” The unconscious mind is a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that are outside of our conscious awareness. Most of the contents of the unconscious are unacceptable or unpleasant, such as feelings of pain, anxiety, or conflict. According to Freud, the unconscious continues to influence our behavior and experience, even though we are unaware of these underlying influences. (Psychoanalytic Theory)

The rationale for using forms associated with the “organic” is to call to the viewers mind those fears that we all harbor for health, harm, and things that haunt our dreams. In some cases, the work can carry the feeling of life or demise with in it.

I find that the use of plaster gives me the opportunity to explore the concepts of the “unconscious mind”. This material due to its drying time, requires me to work quickly, I feel more clearly focused when forced to work in this manner.

The process that I use in creating these works require the use of several different materials, such as strips of canvas dipped in plaster of Paris and molded over various other objects in order to create some interesting shape. I use balloons, tubes, and bits of plastic, mainly organic non-symmetrical objects that will allow me to find the “creatures” that lie hidden in the form.

I will then carve into the dried plaster with various tooling instruments. The piece will eventually be cropped, sanded placed onto a board, and painted to give off a certain effect or impression. What the end result will be is not always certain. In some ways the work will take on a look completely different from my initial intention, producing something I had not expected.

These “happy accidents” bring a sense of humor to some of the work. What that humor will result in can be a wide array of things, from a piece which visually suggests a Muppet dissection,

to my attempt to give a concrete form to what I fear internally, and give it a life in this existence. Even when my pieces are based upon very real fears of mine, I cannot resist poking fun at my own seriousness. It is up to the viewer to decide whether they are offended or amused.

Some of the pieces that I have produced recently have taken on the look and concepts associated with vessels. I feel that the “Vessel” carries a couple of meanings with it; a woman can be seen as a vessel, a carrier of life, a basket, a womb, bowl, egg, cup and even our own two hands can be seen as vessels.

I have selected a few of the works to connect to each other with a strip of plaster and paint covered fabric. Playing with the idea of connection can bring a new dimension to my work as well as explore how we are all connected in one form or another. By utilizing this technique, I have taken one of the first steps towards morphing my work closer to a biological form. There is a type of comfort in this idea that I would like to explore. It would seem like a natural phase to transition into.

I cannot say that my work can be summed up into one convenient meaning. It is always in flux, almost in the same way that we change and grow as individuals each day, so does my work with each series that has been created. Each piece can be seen as a different emotion or thought that is on the edge of becoming something entirely different from what it originally started from.

The latest series in my work consists of several hundred of water formed, micro creatures. They are the end result of this invented fantasy. They infest the wall like a colorful rash with their whimsical, swarming spirals. Engulfing a huge surface area. Though these tiny creatures are not as aggressive as their antecedents, the mass amount of them creates a sense of agitation and domination. They have their own visual form of communication with each other by giving the sense of chasing, following, and engaging the viewer as well as each other.

Finally, my most recent work utilizes the material of hot glue that allows me to incorporate a mixture of textures and shapes. The method that I use to form the latest series of whimsical creatures, is to pour hot glue into an ice bath, manipulating the glue in various directions, and inserting the T-pin before the glue cools completely. Once dried, I apply paint, and other embellishments, such as feathers, to add aesthetic appeal and movement to the piece.

In my future work I would like to expand upon the whimsical effects of these pieces. Whimsy can appear to be something, which is harmlessly beautiful. However, this visual effect can also be observed within the organic world as masking dangerous and savage organisms.

Some of theories of the late Robert Motherwell have had an influence upon my own work. Some of his ideas which have been of interest to me include the theory that color has hidden meanings and can carry a non-verbal communication to the viewer, and his use of his rigorous background in rhetoric and pathos to convey meaning and understanding to non-representational art. This is a concept that I see as key to understanding my work.

Lynda Benglis is another person that has given me inspiration and direction in my work. She has created work that expresses a feminist belief. I admire the techniques and methods that she utilizes in her work. According to Regina Hackett: “They creep over, puddle and change the character of the floor, depriving it of its function as a common base for all. Bengalis has a fluid movement to her sculptural pieces that leads the viewer to draw on their own instincts in order to decipher the piece”. (Regina Hackett, Arts Journal)

I find that, by utilizing some of her methods, my work has taken on a better visual tone. After seeing her work, I no longer fear being too excessive. I believe any element may be included as long as it serves a purpose.

Kiki Smith is another artist whose work has influenced me. Her work has inspired me to employ the female form as a way to communicate many different aspects of political and

emotional understandings. Most of my work up to this point had not represented the ideas and shapes associated with the female form. I find that by embracing my idea of “female”, I can add a new spin to the concepts that go into my work.

Another artist who has influenced me is Elizabeth Murray. Elizabeth Murray's shaped canvas work has inspired me to explore and expand how I utilize canvas.

Making art is about all your fantasies finally getting through...and poetry, too. I know it's not any different, really. I get to be a doctor and tear open the chest and really pull out the heart and do this and that and some of it's really a lot about acting out all of the things that you ever really wanted to be and you didn't even know that you wanted to be them. All of that takes place. Making art is that kind of arena for those things. (Elizabeth Murray, 1987 Interview)

All of these artists and philosophers' have significantly shaped and influenced the material and methods of my work. Many of the materials that I use can be seen as very physical, and have to be created in an aggressive manner in order to achieve a desired look. Barbara Hepworth is another influential person I have drawn on for direction in the handling of my materials. I admire the way that she finds inspiration in all of the materials that she uses for her work.

Kiki Smith is one of the artists I researched while producing this work. Through studying her, I found that my work could change as I do. “Some people think or expect that you should make the same kinds of art forever because it creates a convenient narrative... I want my work to embody my inherent contradictions.” (Kiki Smith)

One of the most important things I hope to convey to the viewer is that the feelings of life and death, happiness and sorrow, and the fear of the strange and unknown are emotions common to all of us. We are conscious beings, aware of our own fragility. I hope that my work provides the viewer with a moment to reflect upon our shared mortality.



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Melissa Sirk  
MFA Thesis Exhibition  
**INFESTATIONS**



















