2018

MATRIX OF COMMUNITY

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MATRIX OF COMMUNITY

By

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, 2015

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Studio Art

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2018

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Matrix of Community

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ma·trix noun

Origin: Latin

Matter → Matrix → Matrix

Matr- Breeding Female Womb

1. An environment or material in which something develops, a surrounding medium or structure.

2. A mold in which something is cast or shaped.

3. A rectangular array of quantities or expressions in rows and columns that is treated as a single entity and manipulated according to particular rules.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis committee, Professor James Bailey, Professor Elizabeth Dove, and Ph.D. Rayna Sage for their expertise and support. It has been an honor and a pleasure to work with each of them individually these last few years. I am particularly indebted to the chairman of my committee, Professor James Bailey, for providing me personal guidance and professional opportunities such as Matrix Press.

I would also like to thank my peers and fellow M.F.A candidates—especially my friend and colleague Cori Crumrine—for their helpful criticism and encouragement. I would additionally like to express my appreciation to my undergraduate thesis advisor and printmaking teacher, Professor Jack McCaslin, for motivating me to continue my education at the graduate level.

I am grateful to my close friends and family members who have made efforts to keep in touch despite distance and my hectic schedule (you know who you are). And of course, I would like to express my immense gratitude to my mother and father, Kimberly and Kirk Hanson. My parents have imparted to me the necessary perseverance and tenacity for this unique experience, and have graciously allowed me to share the stories that inspire Matrix of Community. This work would not be possible without their overwhelming love and support.
Introduction

Familial relationships are inherent to the human experience and everyone is part of a family system. It is through our families that we have learned how to assess and maintain other types of relationships. *Matrix of Community* is my visual representation of this experience. *Matrix* has dual meaning: an environment or material of which is developed or shaped, and womb. Family is what forms community; the womb is the place where life is conceived and gestated. *Matrix of Community* intends to call attention to the value that society places on family and our preconceptions of what family should look like. Family relationships are diverse, precarious, and have a predisposition to change.

*Matrix of Community* is comprised of many cookie-cutter house silhouettes with interiors and exteriors. While the form of the house is relatively unchanging, these forms represent the variety of family systems. This variety is represented through the use of the multiple, different media, and the precarious pedestals by which the houses are stabilized. I rely on color, materiality, the house as a symbol, and personal artifacts such as financial ledgers, mammograms, and letters. Together, these elements offer a rigid dichotomy; truth will be visible in the face of what seems perfect (or should be so). *Matrix of Community* invites the viewer into my autobiographical work and guides the spectator to think about their narrative, which includes memory, stories, identity, and familial relationships.

I wish to share my experience—fragments of my past and intimate family life—so that my audience in need or desire, will know they are not alone and understand the impossible standards attached to the institution of family. Even though I run the risk of being obvious or misunderstood, my work ultimately seeks to undermine preconceptions
surrounding family. Feminist writers such as Audre Lorde heavily influence me. I first read Lorde’s memoir, *The Cancer Journals*, when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her statement, “Silence has never brought us anything of worth”\(^1\) has remained relevant to my life and current work. While Lorde was talking specifically about encouraging women to speak up and to act out of their experiences with cancer and other threats of disease, her words inspire my work to accept and share the conditions of our lives in order to create meaningful change, or at the very least reduce the commonality of isolation. Each piece contains layers of visual information that may be pertinent to the viewer’s life and offers a deeper understanding. My intention for this work is to be a contemplative, empathetic occurrence when consumed in its entirety by the viewer, conveying a sense of comfort in familiarity.

This paper will trace the trajectory of my practice by first sharing my background. I will then expand on the exhibition, *Matrix of Community*. Artistic influences, movements, and socio-historical factors that have helped form my work will also be discussed. Additionally, the use of color and the house will be examined.

**Background**

From an early age, my views on family have been inclusive. I focus on function: how families act and what families actually do. If living arrangements look like family and it feels like a family, it is a family.\(^2\) If individuals consistently and affectionately interacted with my immediate family, I believed them to have some relation to us. This

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led young Shelby to referring to friends as cousins, aunts, and uncles. *Because I was playing my Spice World album on a Boom Box, I would say this was around 1998 or 1999. I would have been either five or six.* I am reminded of one instance where my mother and I were in her room discussing our annual beach vacation. We always invited the same two families with us and I wondered if they would be coming again that year.

“Are Aunt Kathy and Uncle Tom going to be there too?” I asked. My mother’s response surprised me; “You know that they aren’t really related to us, right? They’re just really close friends of ours.” This birthed an on-going conversation regarding who was related to us and how.

Significant discussions regarding our family are as follows:

1. My grandfather on my mother’s side is not my biological grandfather.

   *Growing up, I was under the impression I was Native American because I thought we were biologically related. Once I realized we were not, I then thought we were adopted into my grandfather’s tribe because he legally adopted my mother. It was not until I came west and began researching Indigenous customs that I realized how wrong these assumptions were.*

2. My biological maternal grandfather was an abusive alcoholic.

   *I will never forget the story my mother told me of Chet attempting to shake my father’s hand the first time they met. It was at my maternal great grandmother’s funeral (Chet’s mother), and my father refused*. I am happy to say that I never knew him.

3. My father was adopted as a baby. It was a closed adoption.

   *Although it was closed, my paternal grandparents were not secretive about my father’s adoption. My father has known ever since he can remember and he especially enjoyed it as a child because he had two birthdays: his birthday as listed on his certificate and the day he was adopted.*

---

*In the first iteration of this paper, I stated that it was my maternal great grandfather Chesley’s funeral, which gave the situation a different context. I misremembered this discussion with my mother that took place when I was a young child, fusing stories regarding Chesley’s death and another funeral.*
4. Out of six children, my paternal grandparents adopted two children (including my father) and then had four biological children. Two of their biological children are gay.

At a young age, I had suspicions that my Uncle Eric and my Aunt Sarah are gay. Sarah has been with her wife, Lee, since before I was born, and I met a couple of Eric’s former partners as a child. I know many of our relatives tried to hide this truth from my brothers, my cousins, and myself.

5. The life and death of my Uncle Tim.

Tim was the first child my paternal grandparents adopted and the oldest of the Hanson children. He was described as quiet and creative, an advocate for racial equality and gay rights. He passed from AIDS before I was born. We don’t have many things to remember Tim by with the exception of pictures, hand made ornaments and jewelry, and my personal favorite: a small, weighty, green glass ball that sits on top of a tiny gold pedestal.

6. Relabeling my childhood friend as a cousin because he is the adopted son of my Uncle Eric’s former partner. He has remained in our lives.

August has been in and out of prison for a while. In our first exchange of letters, he revealed to me that he never truly felt part of our family. Eric and I are the only people who stay in contact with him.

7. Divorce. One on my father’s and three on my mother’s sides of the family. All related to infidelity.

While divorce occurred within my extended family during my formative years, it was not until the possibility of my parents’ divorce did I fully understand the shock and distress my cousins must have suffered. Numbers 8 and 9 compounded emotions that I was experiencing.

8. My mother’s cancer diagnosis.

In the fall of 2014—during the height of my parent’s marital problems—my mom was diagnosed with D.C.I.S. (Ductal Carcinoma In Situ) and tested HER2 positive. (HER2 is a protein that promotes the growth and invasion of cancer cells.)\(^3\) There is nothing worse than the prospect of losing your mother and truest friend.

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9. My father’s relationship with alcohol.

   *My father took his first drink when he was in his early teens. He has struggled with consequences of drinking for a number of years. Christmas of 2016, my father formally addressed our family to say that he was quitting. It was a powerful moment.*

10. Finding my biological paternal grandmother.

   *I met Kay for the first time after I graduated from college, exchanging e-mails often. Although reconnections such as ours often do not work out, my family and I have grown close with Kay and I sense this will strengthen over time. Our relationship with her continues to be a family secret.*

These conversations and moments of discovery were crucial in forming my views on family and are manifested within pieces of the exhibition. I have come to understand my family as a nuanced structure that differentiates from other families, and that other families are just as distinct despite what it may appear to be from the outside.

My thesis work stems from earlier artistic endeavors that conveyed personal experiences and perspectives that are worth mentioning. My Honors Thesis as an undergraduate was developed out of my propensity to collect documents that were written or hand-drawn and were sent to me by postage from family members. I replicated these documents through a variety of printmaking processes in order to illustrate that the artifacts were personal, enduring, and universal. Upon entering graduate school, I was committed to creating work about my mother’s breast cancer diagnosis. While time had passed and my mother was beginning to recover when I moved to Montana, I was still fearful of recurrence and continued to scrutinize its meaning within my life. I wanted to discuss the lingering affects the disease continued to have on my mother, our family, and myself. After my first year, I realized my art was not representing the emotional content that I wanted to portray. Since the subject of family was present in both my
undergraduate thesis and initial graduate work, I then decided to make family my central focus. Originally, I wanted to explore the rapidly changing, sometimes unpredictable nature of familial relationships. I am now devoted to subverting Westernized views of the ideal family by sharing the realities of mine.

Matrix of Community Exhibition

Family is the matrix of community. We are born to mothers who create families and these families form the fabric of our society. The exhibition, *Matrix of Community*, was installed in the Gallery of Visual Arts at the University of Montana from March 20\textsuperscript{th} – April 12\textsuperscript{th}, 2018. My intention is to synthesize form and material with concept in a gallery to create an environment that challenges or highlights the viewer’s beliefs and experiences as it pertains to the family system. *Matrix of Community* is comprised of four mixed-media pieces: *Blood is Thicker (Sometimes); Inclusionist, Exclusionist, Moderate; Kinship; and The Unwavering House*. I am interweaving autobiography with cultural themes and symbols, which portray conditions and individuals that influence familial bonds. When I look at my show, I feel that I am essentially playing ‘house’. The wall immediately to the viewer’s left when entering the gallery displays personal stories pertaining to my views on family that feel reminiscent of portraits on the wall. The two-dimensional houses (print, fiber, and projection) act simultaneously as windows and heirloom objects. I consider my sculptures within the installation to be stand-ins for individuals that occupy the space, and the gallery is the home in which they live.
**Blood is Thicker (Sometimes)**

This piece features four fiber houses, each with a decorative border. The houses feature characteristics such as different appliques and borders, one form is divided, one is solid in color while others are fragmented, one is tall and skinny versus short and wide, one features text and an allusion to a window, etcetera. The American country music singer and songwriter, Kacey Musgraves, inspired the title. In her song *Family is Family*, Musgraves humorously makes pithy observations such as, “You’d wash your hands of them, but blood’s always thicker”. Some may identify with this statement, but biology does not determine stability or longevity of familial relationships.

The window of the tall, dark blue house is a small glimpse into dysfunctional, interior family life (fig. 1). The short, wide houses expand on this by using the monotypes within the floral borders, offering a complete view of the interior. Dividing one of the houses formally frames the central house and directly shows that some families are fractured.

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Figure 1: *Blood Is Thicker (Sometimes):*  
“Concealment”,  
Fabric, Monotype, Laser Jet Transparencies,  
Applique, 2017.

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The floral appliques and border components create visual and conceptual contrast against the monotype background (fig. 2). I hope by choosing floral elements that the viewer associates a sense of welcoming, the familiar, traditional, and domestic. The background was created from cropping and cutting a series of prints, and then recombining them to create fragmentation and dysfunction. The aesthetics of the prints themselves derive from sewing patterns and blue prints, which offer rules and plans to construct entities. The background indicates deviation from these schemes, possibilities for difference, and change.

These pieces were sewn together using the serpentine stitch, which has dual function. It binds the fragmented prints together, but also shows inconsistency through skipped stitches and excessive overlap. Additionally, the serpentine stitch is reminiscent of symbols in genograms (fig. 3). A genogram is an in depth family tree that analyses emotional relationships and medical history in order to visualize patterns that occur within families. The zigzag pattern can represent distance or closeness as it pertains to hostility, violence, and abuses, depending on color and repetition. The form of the skipped stitches and overlapping within the piece reference these dysfunctions and others that can occur in families.

Figure 2: Blood Is Thicker (Sometimes): “Schism II” and “Things Need to Break”, Fabric, Monotype, Applique, 2017.
Blood is Thicker (Sometimes) holds feminine components that include stitching, floral fabrics, sewing patterns, and appliques. I have always been attracted to these accessible elements and use them often in my work for their familiarity. At an early age, my paternal grandmother taught me how to embroider, knit, weave, and use a sewing machine. Her talents were passed down from her mother, her mother before her, and so on. While I first understood these strategies as hobbies and traditional duties, it is from my academic career that I have understood their places in fine art. Blood is Thicker (Sometimes) utilizes these feminine strategies to testify to the emotional, the intuitive, the personal life, the domestic, the family, and the universal. I am employing them within my pieces to change ideas about family without transcending their essentialist connotations. However, these elements are meant to be evidence of strength—their purpose of joining, mending, planning, humanizing, subverting—not of ‘women’s weakness’.

Using such gendered materials and methods highlights the product of the institutions and ideologies of public life, celebrates the thankless work of anonymous women, and pays homage to my own ancestry. Together, the elements within Blood is

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Thicker (Sometimes) create a metaphor for family. Families project wholesomeness to society, but the interior daily life is often complex with deficiencies, limitations, or differences.

**Inclusionist, Exclusionist, Moderate**

Notions of difference and the interior and exterior are themes in the piece *Inclusionist, Exclusionist, Moderate*. The work consists of ninety-seven screenprint and sewing pattern houses. It is based on the sociological survey, *Constructing the Family*. The survey divides Americans among three groups: Inclusionists, Exclusionists, and Moderates.6 These groups have different beliefs in what constitutes family. Exclusionists are traditional and define family by marriage and biology while Inclusionists have a more modern view, embracing diversity.7 Moderates are transitional, lying somewhere in between the aforementioned typologies.

![Inclusionist, Exclusionist, Moderate, 8’ 8” x 11’ 11”, Mixed Media, 2017.](image)

Figure 4: *Inclusionist, Exclusionist, Moderate*, 8’ 8” x 11’ 11”, Mixed Media, 2017.

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7 Ibid.
the sewing pattern houses denote the Inclusionist category. It was important to me to use color and material in this way because of blue’s history as a color of moral and value⁸, while the layered sewing patterns create complexity. The houses appear to be evenly distributed among the three groups, however the Inclusionist category is slightly larger to emulate the statistics in Brian Powell’s survey. More people are beginning to hold Inclusionist views. The different house forms mimic structures in daily life, alluding to different places and socio-economic status, with the Inclusionist category utilizing the most variety.

This piece also incorporates elements of text through two approaches. First, acetone transfers were applied to the surfaces of these forms. The transfers come from data and graphs from *Who Counts as Family?* published by the Russell Sage Foundation and Powell’s article *Changing Counts, Counting Change*. The information was assigned to each group of houses corresponding to the typology it depicts. I selected acetone transfer as a method over screenprinting for its loss of clarity when depicting information. Surveys often have discrepancies, as they do not encompass all individuals and can omit other factors. Second, laser jet transparencies of letters from my family members were cut into rectilinear shapes and adhered to the houses in order to reference windows, a way to view into the interior. Combining sterile form and data with moments of the personal through letters creates a more comprehensive representation and highlights our current social views.

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Inclusionist, Exclusionist, Moderate uses masculine strategies that seem at odds with other works (fig. 5). While domestic sewing patterns are used to represent the Inclusionist category, it has more relationship to technical blue prints. Overall, this piece is the most neutral in terms of materials. It does not hold the same eclectic, decorative, and gendered formulations of the aforementioned piece; Blood is Thicker (Sometimes). In this instance, I am taking a more critical stance when depicting surveys and data. This messaging is demonstrated through the blue palette, organized structure of the houses, and the manner in which it is displayed. The presentation of the piece is exhibited in the form of a grid and references a bar graph by separating the typologies. It also has relationship to geography. While there are exceptions, most Exclusionists reside in the south, while Inclusionists are more present in the North. Some houses are close together and others have large gaps in between. This is to represent disparities in surveys. It is worth noting how I have internalized ideas and intellectual strategies, and consequently have given logos (appeal to logic) masculine qualities while pathos (appeal to emotions) holds feminine aesthetics. This stems from Victorian success in preserving sewing and similar activities to the women’s sphere while language is coincident with the patriarchy, thereby establishing values and organizing personal life to
have division between public and private, professional and domestic, intellectual and emotional, masculine and feminine.\footnote{Rozsika Parker. *The Subversive Stitch.* 205-215.}

**Kinship**

The projection, *Kinship*, is comprised of still images that further focus on Inclusionist values through the subject of my family (fig. 6). Throughout the slideshow, different house exteriors are juxtaposed against interiors and intimate moments often unseen by others outside of a family unit. All of the images are masked to create a house silhouette as recognized in previous pieces. The mask allows these different houses from various locations, spaces, and artifacts to be framed. Some fit within the enclosed form and others do not. This goes to show that families are not a monolith and often do not fit within perfect boxes.

The viewer will see interiors and exteriors of my parent’s old lake house, their Prairie Village starter home, our neo-colonial Virginia home, my great grandmother’s centennial farm, and my mother’s and father’s respective childhood homes. Some photos will include my family members, who give life and story to the spaces in which they occupy. Because *Kinship* was inspired by denotations of the exhibition title, I included sonograms of my brothers and I. Cyanotype blue house forms are intermittent within the projection for visual pauses. Sharing these very intimate photos and documents in

\[Figure 6: Kinship, 11’ x 11’, Projection, 2018.\]
contrast to the anonymous, neutral exteriors permits the spectator to see a nuanced interior.

I chose not to include photos or documents without a personal connection so as not to confuse the viewer with what is mine, and take what belongs to someone else. I also wanted to remain genuine to the origins of this body of work and my own experiences regarding family by sharing my own. Featuring my family within the projection and not including others could be potentially viewed as me ignoring differences. However, I do not wish to appropriate someone else’s experiences, especially ones that I have not lived.

**The Unwavering House**

The fourth piece, *The Unwavering House*, sketches out a cast of characters and personal reflections pertaining to family discussions and enigmas as stated in the Background section (fig. 7, 8). *The Unwavering House* consists of fifteen sculptural houses dedicated to a specific family member or a subject that is considered private.
Figure 7: The Unwavering House, 26’ 5” x 51’ 3”, Installation, 2018.

Figure 8: The Unwavering House

When the viewer enters the gallery, they are first met with a key detailing where each house is positioned within the gallery and what, or whom, it is dedicated to (fig. 9). Following the key are nine personal narrations that were crucial in shaping my views on family, with some being manifested within the installation. These houses show the viewer minimal exteriors and complex interiors. I utilize interiors and exteriors within my work to further illuminate difference and remind my viewer that family is a public and private institution. The exterior signifies
impressions of one’s self and family as seen by others, and the other connotes reality: intimate moments and relationships that are not visible to society.

The forms of the houses are relatively unchanging, but often use two different silhouettes with high and low roof pitches. The repetitive forms are simultaneously equalizing and suggestive of varieties of family; intertwined and separate entities. This multiplicity is also represented through the use of different interiors and media and the precarious pedestals by which the houses are stabilized. The copper pedestals signify value, yet representative of change and conflict. The supportive copper pipes are comparative to familial instability as copper is susceptible to damage through time and conditions.

In addition to representing institutions that intersect with family like finances and religion, certain houses are dedicated to specific family members. For this paper I will discuss three houses with a matrilineal connection.

- **House 13: ‘Mom’s Mammograms’ (fig. 10)**
  - This structure is dedicated to my mother and her cancer diagnosis. I worked with my mother’s mammograms directly where I incorporated cutting, weaving, and also included digital manipulation. Cutting is an act of removal and directly correlates to the surgical act of a lumpectomy. Rather than eliminating the calcifications, I removed the surrounding area to draw attention to the cancerous mass. Running stitches that contour the breast strengthen the reference to lumpectomy. The nature of a running stitch is to be visible on the surface of the sewing and used to assemble or join pieces, which is similar to surgical sutures.
The weaving, a strong and orderly structure, sought to be the regularity or normalcy desired in the midst of the daily disruptions of doctor’s appointments, check ups, surgeries, prescription pick ups and drop offs. I then scanned the altered form into Photoshop to be digitally manipulated and printed, which then lined the interior.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 10: “Mother’s Mammograms”
from *The Unwavering House*

- **House 5: ‘Evidence of Relationship with Kay’ (fig. 11)**

  - This house is dedicated to my biological paternal grandmother, Kay, and the relationship we have developed. Inside the house, the viewer will see the physical letters from her and the plane tickets from when I visited her for the first time, which I scanned, then layered and altered in Photoshop. Emphasis is placed on
certain parts of her letters due to barcodes and other line work from the plane tickets. Additionally, I retraced certain words or phrases in blue for the viewer to take notice of. I selected them based on their relevance to the direct subject matter of family, or the relevance to her specific story. Words such as “family”, “home”, “life”, “nonfiction”, and “complex” are visibly defined. Artists Mary Kelly and Tom Phillips inspired me to use the method of stripping or stressing certain words or phrases of a text. In *A Humament: A Treated Victorian Novel*, Phillips takes a forgotten Victorian novel and births new poems and visual images through an ambitious variation of William Burroughs’s “cut-up” technique.

![Figure 11: “Evidence of Relationship with Kay” from *The Unwavering House*](image)

- **House 8: ‘Popop’s Osage Heritage’** (fig. 12)
  - This sculpture represents my maternal grandfather and his Osage background.
    - The interior is coated in a suede material with painted native designs and myths.
    - Two sides of the interior feature a Ho e ka—a trap that ensnares all life and a
symbol used by most Siouan peoples.\textsuperscript{10} It is frequently shown as a rectangle with a missing short side and commonly shows one to four winds (breaths of life) or four valleys of life’s journey: childhood, young adult, mature adult, and old age. The interior base depicts an Osage spider; a stylized black widow. Osage myth conveys the spider’s web—like the Ho e ka—is a snare that traps all living things and holds them there on earth until they die.\textsuperscript{11} Both designs are painted with the sacred colors red, dark (black), yellow, and blue. The two other sides tell the Genesis Myth of the Osage people that explain the origins and symbols of Osage clans. Often these oral myths have many repetitions to help with memory, but are eliminated when written. I chose to reincorporate repetition when I painted the myth onto the surface and included layering to reinstate expression.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure12.jpg}
\caption{“Popop’s Osage Heritage” from \textit{The Unwavering House}}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{11} Burns. \textit{Osage Indian}, 166.
Although my houses are not strictly dedicated to women, many women in my family are featured in this installation and are important the language of my exhibition. The show title, *Matrix of Community*, discusses families as the beginning of society’s formation. The Latin definitions of ‘matrix’ as outlined in the Abstract invoke the feminine. Although not all women become mothers and not all mothers are female, all children—and by extension families—are birthed by mothers. Mothering is an activity that men, as well as women, can do. Nevertheless, it is because of a complex interaction between women’s childbearing capabilities and patriarchal society’s childrearing needs, that mothering is typically women’s work.\(^\text{12}\) It is because of the power of communication, specifically the connotations of origins, and the historic experiences of women mothering, that it was imperative to dedicate houses to my mother and other women in my family.

The four pieces of *Matrix of Community* visually communicate my research and experience surrounding family where I am challenging predictability, order, and perfection. Multiple, cookie-cutter houses signify family variety and highlight notions of family, but also serve as a symbol of worship. As a culture, we highly value family and are riveted by it. Contemporary society blends family into everyday life through literature, music, film, television, and art. The popularity of shows like *This is Us* and *Parenthood*, or even *Weeds* and *Sons of Anarchy*, illustrate the fascination we have with families and inner lives. It also mirrors that of real life family presentation and interaction and alters the way society views specific kinds of families. Family is also central to points and debates within politics, and it is through subsequent laws that certain families receive the rights and privileges thereto.

Minimal exteriors create a social camouflage in order to represent the ideal family and how we present ourselves to others. Minimalism, an art movement that emerged in New York during the 1960’s, used industrial materials and emphasized anonymity often to create three-dimensional objects. While I do not identify with Minimalism, I am using it as a camouflage strategy to separate the exterior of the houses from my expressive, autobiographical interiors; to make the forms appear to be the same and not easily recognizable at first glance. The strong geometric form of the house and their simple exteriors highlight the conformist values regarding family in our society and surface perfection of suburban life in opposition to the striking interiors, which reveal more subtleties. Demonstrating this through my art is significant because I believe these concepts need to be more evident and differences should be readily accepted by society.

Artistic Influences

When looking to historical influences of my art, I find rapport with the works of Michelle Grabner, Miriam Schapiro, and Mary Kelly.

I am inspired by Michelle Grabner’s exhibition *I Work From Home*, which includes paintings, prints, video, and sculpture (fig. 13). These works are dedicated to distinctive values and ideas: working outside of dominant systems and towards community. Textile patterns

Figure 13: Michelle Grabner, *I Work From Home*, 8’ x 8’, Installation, 2013.
and repetitive form appropriated from domestic environments are what attract me to her work.

Miriam Schapiro’s work transforms traditionally undervalued materials into new, original pieces that are monuments to anonymous women’s work. She often used buttons, hand sewn and embroidered pieces, doilies, lace, handkerchiefs, tea towels, and other personal mementos to then assemble into dynamic, exploding compositions (see fig. 14, 15).  

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Figure 14: Miriam Schapiro, *New Harmony B*, 68” x 50”, Acrylic and Fabric on Canvas, 1979.

Figure 15: Miriam Schapiro, *Dollhouse*, 81” x 79”, Mixed Media, 1972.

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In the sculpture dedicated to my paternal grandmother in *The Unwavering House* installation, I used a found handmade quilt for the interior lining as a symbolic fabric, a way to pay tribute to memories of sewing with her (fig. 16). Aside from similarity in form and use of gendered material, I feel that both of our work synthesizes structure, the decorative, societal views, and personal iconography, even though our concepts and reasons for creating are different.

Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (PPD) examines her son during his early childhood development and the psychological changes she was experiencing as a new mother (fig. 17). Kelly incorporated psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan regarding
early psychological formation and personal artifacts such as diaper stains, medical and educational records, clothing, and confessional notes in order to challenge notions of nurturing, intuitive mothers, womanhood, and art.\textsuperscript{14} By creating work that juxtaposed childhood objects and Lacanian diagrams and analysis, Kelly was able to deconstruct codes that produced sexual difference. I look to Kelly for how she combines personal records, themes of family, and theory to interrupt stereotypes.\textsuperscript{15} This can be seen separately in pieces \textit{Inclusionist, Exclusionist, Moderate} and \textit{The Unwavering House} installation. In my opinion, the structural nature and process oriented treatment of PPD is antithetical to the treatment of personal objects within my exhibition and my intuitive approach to \textit{Matrix of Community}.

Schapiro, Kelly, and Grabner each inform my art practice and validate my need to utilize private documents and domestic materials.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Mary Kelly, \textit{Post Partum Document} (Detail), 8”x10”, Mixed Media, 1974.}
\end{figure}

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Pattern and Decoration Movement

In the mid-1970’s, artists working independently in diverse ways to counter Minimalism and Conceptualism came together to form the Pattern and Decoration movement. Formed by Miriam Schapiro and painter, Robert Zakanitch, this artistic movement subverted regards of “high art” and endorsed the traditional activities of women. By doing so, this violated established boundaries between the private space of the home and the art gallery. I position my work within the Pattern and Decoration movement because of my use of color, multiple through form and pattern, implementation of traditional handicrafts by other women, and wallpaper-like interiors.

Schapiro wanted to reclaim Art for humanity that had been considered too sentimental and essentialized to femininity. She stated,

“Part of my ethos is to test sentimentality. I want to know how far I can go with it because it’s too taboo in terms of high art. I’ve chosen to use fabric and decorative arts as tangible symbols of my connection to domesticity and to express my belief that art resides in domesticity. For me the fabric of my art and the fabric of my life neatly equate each other.”

While I am not interested in challenging high and low art, I do agree with Schapiro that I have selected certain materials and imagery for its connection to family life. Repetitively using artifacts and designs from other people’s lives helps bring awareness to outdated, exclusionist ideology and subvert the ideal family. I consider Matrix of Community and the Pattern and Decoration movement both to be amalgamations of media and humanizes our daily spaces.

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Color

Blue

The implementation of the color blue within my work began with an earlier piece I created during my time in graduate school, *Interpreting Intersections* (fig. 18). I catalogued my relatives individually by height, and groupings by color, in order to diagram my family and to describe each relationship through embroidery floss. The color and measurement of the thread was chosen based on a minor survey where relatives had to denote their favorite color and their actual height. I then selected colors based on trends I noticed among groups, rather than relying on color symbolism. Blue was the color of preference.

The color is a historical conundrum; it was little appreciated in antiquity and today is by far the favorite color. While blue was always evident in Western daily life, it did not originally serve the same symbolic level and functions as red, black, and yellow.\(^{18}\) It was not until the 12th century that blue became a color with moral implications. This was when depictions of the Virgin Mary in dark blacks, greys, browns, purples, and greens shifted to blue (fig. 19). All of the colors—including blue—were meant to signify suffering and grief, but the blue became brighter and more appealing over time to

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The brighter blues were often more expensive to create and in turn helped increase blue’s value as a color. Blue is important to my work because of its connotations as a color of moral and value, which are equal to the meaning and significance society attributes to family.

I have selected this specific, cyanotype blue featured in *Matrix of Community* for its relationship to blueprints (fig. 20). A blueprint is a large-scale technical drawing of an architectural or engineering design, and less formally referred to as a floor plan. Blueprints serve as a foundation to a plan. This process was introduced in the 19th century where an individual would contact print onto light sensitive paper or linen. Bright lines and dark blue background characterize them. Due to advances in technology, this process is considered antiquated and has become obsolete in the construction world. The aesthetics of blueprints, line quality and color, are visible in *Blood is Thicker (Sometimes); Inclusionist, Exclusionist, Moderate; Kinship; and The Unwavering House*. For me, the outdated form of plans parallels old-fashioned views on family.

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**White**

Blue’s close counterpart includes white, with which it has been frequently paired. The opposition between white and pigment heightens sensitivity to richness and concentration.\(^{20}\) White carries connotations of purity and cleanliness, as well as emptiness, erasure, a blank slate, and the unwritten. I incorporate white in my three-dimensional houses to create contrast, but also because of its association with the “White Picket Fence” mentality, where people consider family to be innocent, idyllic, and un tarnished. It is a state of mind that blindly holds onto the idea of a perfect family and lifestyle, regardless of inevitable circumstances.

**Sewing Patterns**

Sewing patterns are utilized in some fashion within three pieces of the exhibition: *Blood is Thicker (Sometimes); Inclusionist, Exclusionist, Moderate;* and *The Unwavering House.* As mentioned earlier in the text, I value sewing patterns because they are gendered as a material and have similar aesthetic to genograms and blue prints. However, they are also reminiscent of skin. Sewing patterns are suggestive of skin due to their color, and when layered, delicate lines are formed and mirror the subtle, unique patterning of human epidermis. Skin contains seventy percent of human protein-coding genes, which is relevant to genetic links and ancestry. *Inclusionist, Exclusionist, Moderate* and *The Unwavering House* use sewing patterns to function as exteriors. Like skin, these exteriors are used as a barrier to protect the on goings of the interior and to conceal, regulate, or control what is visible to the outside environment.

\(^{20}\) *Ibid,* 16.
In contrast to the skin-like exteriors, *Blood is Thicker (Sometimes)* uses blue and white sewing pattern imagery purely to create a fragmented, dysfunctional interior. All three pieces carry levels of complexity and lack of clarity developed from layering or cropping and reorienting. The three works are meant to represent inclusive families or families that deviate from the perfect family that have their own individual rules and plans.

**The House**

My thesis work utilizes multiple house forms to represent Westernized notions of family. Curiosity of our origins and the desire for connection are inherent to the human experience. However, these characteristics are also accompanied by our propensity for detachment and estrangement. I seek to articulate this duality by using my family as a point of reference. The aesthetics of my pieces draw from an array of sources, including the architecture of homes.

Cookie-cutter house silhouettes serve as a collective symbol for family and connect one piece to the next. Variations in silhouette forms and use of media allude to alternative family structures. The house silhouettes range from solid to open forms in order to explore the juxtaposition of the interior and exterior: what is visible to society and what is hidden. Houses are what protect a family’s relationships and intimate moments. Houses blanket us in security. Even if it is dysfunctional, it is our normal and the dysfunction is kept sequestered from outsiders. Houses are also a place to regulate accessibility, where we can insulate ourselves from society intentionally. They serve to
protect us from elements of nature and society. Similarly, the institution of the family it self is also simultaneously public and private.

This is manifested within *Matrix of Community* through neutral, unoffending blue and white exteriors in the three-dimensional work of *The Unwavering House* and friendly floral fabrics of the two-dimensional pieces like *Blood is Thicker (Sometimes)*. The interiors showcase daily family life through artifacts signifying themes such as sickness, finances, and heritage and complete the house forms. Objects include quilts, sewing patterns, ledgers, and medical documents. Additionally, the house silhouettes are paired with unpredictable pedestals to indicate an unstable, precarious—rather than supportive—structure. The pedestals are copper pipes sleeved onto a steel rod base. Copper is an expensive metal used for functional and ornamental purposes inside (plumbing and electrical) and outside of the home (gutters, window frames, roofs). I enjoy the metaphors this material has to offer. Like family, it is treasured and valued, and is durable. However, in certain conditions it is prone to galvanization and corrosion, similar to the treatment of relationships. The copper pipes stabilizing the houses in *The Unwavering House* are not pristine. They have fingerprints, scrapes, oxidation, patina and drastic bends in order to convey familial relationships can be inconsistent, contradictory, and strained.

I repetitively use the house silhouette because it serves as a symbol that derives from our cultural shared meaning and creates a sense of worship. The use of the multiple also stems from my background as a printmaker, but repetition in this instance is not associated with the process of reproduction. I consciously selected this method of working to communicate a number of themes and be subversive. I acknowledge that not
everyone lives in a home that looks like the forms I have created. However, I did change the pitch on some of my houses to indicate different socio-economic status. *My father owned a class A roofing and construction company in his off time as an Air Traffic Controller.* Growing up, I learned that higher pitches denote higher income families and lower pitches denote lower income families. I enjoyed implementing this little-known fact to create difference through a subtle approach.

**Socio-Historical Context**

According to Stephanie Coontz, the ideal family tends to represent the interests of the dominant members of society and relies on gender roles (i.e. father works, mother is a homemaker, children assist with chores).\(^{21}\) Coontz’s assertion also depends on less powerful groups to regulate the individual’s place in the overall social network.\(^{22}\) Due to instances of outside help and our history of adhering to gender roles, my family fits Coontz’s description of the ideal family. However, other influences are absent from Coontz’s ideology that would disqualify my family structure from being “perfect” such as divorce, stepfamilies, adoptive families, homosexuality, cross-racial parenting, abuse, and addiction.

There are patterns in definitions of family and they have changed over a short period of time. As mentioned earlier in the text, Americans are divided among three broad groups: Inclusionists, Exclusionists, and Moderates. Exclusionists focus on the

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structure of family as sanctioned by law and religion, often in gender specific terms.\textsuperscript{23} Inclusionists focus on the function of family. They do not distinguish certain relationships or roles and place emphasis on love and commitment to one another. Moderates are in between Inclusionists and Exclusionists because they require marriage or parenthood to define permanent relationships.\textsuperscript{24} The rise of Inclusionist ideology depends on cohort replacement, where younger generations replace older generations at the voting booth, and younger generations are more likely to hold these views as they age.\textsuperscript{25} However, even older generations are changing their minds due to increased intergroup contact. Ultimately, these differing groups help us determine where we stand in our definitions of family and who is deserving of rights and privileges of family.

In her book, \textit{A Strange Stirring}, Coontz reflects on \textit{The Feminine Mystique} in relationship to privilege, race, class, and family. Coontz takes us back to the 1960’s, demystifies the mystique, and examines what Betty Friedan actually meant. \textit{The Feminine Mystique} spoke from Friedan’s experiences as an educated, middle-class housewife. Although she was largely speaking to the white, suburban woman because she had been one herself, Friedan called attention to, “a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique.”\textsuperscript{26} Coontz highlights that Friedan helped us understand that there have traditionally been women who attended college and wanted to work—who did not just want to be housewives and mothers—but would never be part of the employed world. She goes on to explain that Friedan’s insistence on breaking

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{24}] Brian Powell. “Changing Counts, Counting Change” 91.
\item[\textsuperscript{25}] \textit{Ibid}, 92.
\item[\textsuperscript{26}] Stephanie Coontz. \textit{A Strange Stirring}. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011) 103.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
down assumptions about women, work, and family are essential to viewing personal experiences as universal problems, stemming from societal origins of dilemmas.\textsuperscript{27} It is this sentiment (“the personal is political”), which underlies the exhibition, \textit{Matrix of Community}.

While there is still a glass ceiling and there are new mystiques in play, today women’s academic achievements are not confined to traditional “woman’s fields” and women receive a majority of bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Women no longer need to choose between completing their education and having a family. It is important to note that these changes were not due to \textit{The Feminine Mystique} alone and that they were not immediate. \textit{A Strange Stirring} points out that it is because \textit{The Feminine Mystique} was not ahead of its time—it was part of larger conversations and concerns that had been taking place—that Friedan was able to expose contradictions in ideology and reality. Similarly, I acknowledge that \textit{Matrix of Community} is not the beginning or end of illustrating discrepancies between stereotypes and reality in regards to family. However, I hope that by bringing together the use of multiple house forms with personal documents that I challenge dominant systems in a way that can be easily understood and explained to others.

\textbf{Conclusion}

\textit{Matrix of Community} draws on the \textit{womb}, the place where life is conceived and gestated, and the origin of society. As Americans, we value the ideals of motherhood, fatherhood, and kinship, but we often find it difficult to accept families that deviate from our traditional principles. \textit{Matrix of Community} explains that family is not a monolith

\textsuperscript{27} Stephanie Coontz. \textit{A Strange Stirring}. 167.
through simplified houses, with careful division between the interior and the exterior, and
the transformation of materials like sewing patterns, letters, mammograms, pictures, and
post cards. It is a collage of lived experiences, the masculine and the feminine.

I do not wish to diminish the value of family, but rather to help others see the
importance of familial relationships, whether they are biological or constructed, extended
or nuclear, close or distant and to accept them for what they are. Acknowledging that the
natures of our families are not isolated incidences—that all families are complex and
deviate from the ideal—help us connect, understand the importance of these differences,
and allow us to make appropriate social changes. Awareness, acceptance, and societal
transformation are more possible by giving voice to these truths. My thesis exhibition
lends my experiences to the quest so that my audience can examine and take what they
need as pertinent to their own lives.
Bibliography


