

1995

Absolute thoughts of the incoherent

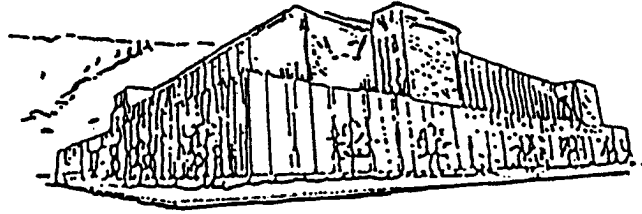
Stacie Scherfenberg
The University of Montana

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ABSOLUTE THOUGHTS OF THE INCOHERENT

by

Stacie Scherfenberg

B.A. University of Puget Sound 1990

Post Baccalaureate School of the Art Institute of Chicago 1992

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

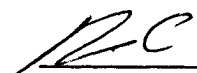
University of Montana

1995

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Dean, Graduate
School

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INTRODUCTION:

For the last three years, I have used art to research how one derives self perception informed by social attitudes and opinions. In the past, I have incorporated issues that pertain to self perception, such as eating disorders, exaggerated body image and negative interpersonal/intrapersonal relationships.

Last January I was diagnosed with Manic-Depression, or Bipolar Disorder. The diagnosis and the treatment have forced me to redefine my self perception. One aspect of the redefinition has resulted in a collection of pieces showing self perception through the use of an attraction and repulsion dynamic. In the art, the use of the attraction/ repulsion process works on different levels; conceptual, social, personal, physical, and emotional. In this paper, I will show how the use of attraction/ repulsion functions in my choice of materials, my historical preferences and in the levels of the work itself.

The artwork included in this thesis exhibition represents my redefinition of self perception through experiencing extreme mental states. Through this I am not attempting to become too personal; rather to describe a disorder that is often misunderstood by the public. Most importantly I hope to cause the audience to consider their own position of mental illness.

“ Once “ said the Mock Turtle, at last, with a deep sigh, “ I was a real Turtle.”

Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

The precondition for the use of attraction/ repulsion, was the diagnosis of Manic Depression, and the subsequent prescription of psychtherapeutic/ psychotropic drugs. Basically, Bipolar Disorder encompasses the swings between mania and depression. Mania defines a very active state, for me a very creative state, often with grandiose delusions and sleep deprivation. Depression defines a lethargic, suicidal state accompanied by panic disorder and paranoia. Both states of being are a chemical imbalance in the brain. In the past year, I have taken multiple prescriptions at numerous dosages and combinations. I have been all of Snow White's Seven Dwarfs at the same time: Happy, Doc, Sleepy, Grumpy, Dopey, Bashful and Sneezzy; with their associates: Prozac, Lithium Carbonate, Valproic Acid, Klonopin, Imipramine, Serentil and Cyproheptadine. Many of the chemicals cause nausea, hot flashes, dizziness, shaking, extreme drowsiness and headaches, which for the most part, eventually subside. So while I was trying to intellectually adjust to the diagnosis of being mentally ill, I felt absolutely, physically awful. This is where the attraction/ repulsion process begins. Attraction: I must take the drugs to become emotionally stable, "normal", and functional; Repulsion: I feel physically ill. One of my fears during this adjustment was that I was becoming a comotose drone. The even larger fear was loosing my artistic, manic highs; or of becoming one of the number of people who stuck their head in the gas oven.

While manic, I preceived myself as the thin, beautiful, super artist, who could finish thousands of pieces in a single month. I never ate. I slept three hours a night for two months. I functioned on grandiose delusions of time,

energy and realism. While depressed I perceived myself as a fat, ugly, suicidal freak. I slept all day. I was afraid to leave the house. My self perception included swinging from the extremes of attraction to repulsion. The precipitate of this personal experience is the art work. These circumstances and events are translated through the work by the process of attraction and repulsion.

MATERIALS AND TECHNICAL CONCERNS

I have just described the physical level of the attraction/repulsion process in its personal realm; I will now describe how it translates into the material level of the art. I make formal decisions on what properties attract people and what properties repulse people. Materials are chosen that fascinate and hold my attention. For example, I am attracted to cigarette butts; the delicate white paper, the lipstick marks, the crushed, curl of a snuffed- out butt. However, most others find these to be disgusting remnants of "cancer sticks". Even the average smoker does not like cigarette butts, discarding them as soon as possible. The actual, physical presence of the cigarette butts is a metaphorical example of self perception according to social opinion. I am attracted to what is socially repulsive. I then take the objects, that are considered repulsive, and attempt to beautify them. I get my ideas from advertising: bright, shiny colors; slick, smooth surfaces; lights and frilly fabrics

The other physical level, in the work, is to choose media for visual and symbolic reasons. Certain textures can only be achieved with particular media. Clay is comfortable and forgiving to use; it is supple and elastic. Physically, after firing, it has a hard, permanent finish, while retaining its suggested visual

softness. In reference to the historic and connotative symbolism between the vessel form and clay, I mold the porcelain to represent bodily containers or vessels including the intestines, stomach and heart. I also use it for teeth and boney protuberances. Porcelain glazed in red lead appears bloody, scabby and raw.

Steel represents cold immobility. I treat the steel bird cages as a structure, similar to that of a dressmakers form. I am intrigued by the metaphorical ties amongst birds, women, cages, stays and corsets. The bound nature of women's fashion, and rigid underpinnings influence the pairing of steel and tulle. I pair the steel cages with tulle, a fabric, which is euphoric, exuberant and airy.

In the wall plaque pieces wood is the basic ground, a common material. I take it out of its found context by disguising it with acrylic paint, varnishes and assemblage, so it becomes unidentifiable. Acrylic lends itself to syrupy, saliva like surfaces. It also gives a commercial sheen to dull material. In edition I have recently begun using photography to document private, personal performances art pieces. I like how I can use the camera to manipulate the image of myself and the lighting to recreate mood swings of Manic Depression.

I use a process of experimentation until the desired effect of attraction/repulsion is achieved. In describing the various levels of attraction/repulsion it is important to mention the layering in the work. The pieces include multiple levels of media; layers of text, acrylic, wax, glaze, photography, epoxy, intestines, lights and fabric. These are more material manifestations of the

levels, social, personal, conceptual, emotional and physical.

HISTORICAL

“We cannot understand all the traits we have inherited.

Sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves.” V.S. Naipaul, A Way in the World.

The historical perspective of artistic lineage, seems to me a muddled and confused mesh of ideas, influences, loves and hates. The art I am inspired by does so through either total attraction, total repulsion or both. My inheritance or artistic lineage has little to do with which artists have had mental illnesses. I am slightly interested in recent literature linking some writers, poets, and artists to mental illness. However I do not believe that mental illness automatically gives one artistic advantage. Yet people with mental illness do perceive things on a different level and can be more sensitive to different stimuli. This difference in perception is seen in the artwork.

I am influenced by artists who use distortion and decay of the body to symbolize emotional and spiritual attributes of being human. This is another description of attraction/repulsion. The Renaissance and Baroque periods influence my sculpture in their juxtaposition of the opulent and the grotesque. I am drawn to the fantastical approaches of Hieronymous Bosch's interpretation of humanity, through the use of quick al fresco painting of the body, body like containers, the individual searching or seen amongst a throng of humanity (Garden of Earthly Delights, 1503). The effect of the visually packed picture plane is also enticing. The viewers eyes cannot rest on a single area without

being pulled to another equally compressed and bizarre. Examples of artists who use this approach in these periods are Albrecht Dürer, Matthias Grunwald, and El Greco.

I also relate to the symbolic use of everyday objects in the Still Life paintings of the Baroque period. The function of objects to connote spiritual development or physical decay in lavish and excessive paintings has greatly influenced the small wall plaques. My favorite artists who render these still lifes are Hans Holbein, The Ambassadors, 1533, in the High Renaissance to Jan Davidsz De Heem, Still Life of Desert, 1640; Pieter Claesz, A Vanitas Still Life, 1645; and Willem Kalf, Still Life with Lobster, Drinking Horn and Glasses, 1653 in the Baroque.

Many artists have portrayed the human figure in ways that inspire my work. The list of artists who use the figure that influences the way I not only see life but how I make art is infinite, or so it seems. I am captivated by extremes in sensual, quivering pulchritude to the emaciated, contorted and deformed. Again, I will reference the Renaissance and Baroque periods. One of the best examples of contortion is in Jean Fouquet's Virgin and Child. In the multiple use of spheres from breasts to heads to pearls, he absurdly packs the picture plane with glowing orbs. And Diego de Silva y Velazquez, Las Meninas, with his juxtaposition of the tiny, perfect princess next to the equally tiny court midgets.

Regarding the modernists influences on the figure I remain impelled to the attraction/ repulsion theory of the beautiful and the deformed. Egon

Schiele's paintings and drawings of women have a delicate feel, rather transparent; but at the same time the body seems contorted and cramped; Seated Woman with Bent Knee, 1917. On distortions of the figure I am drawn to Man Ray, with his multiple exposures, photocollages and extreme lighting, for example Tomorrow, 1932. Perhaps the greatest modernist influence on my work as been Meret Oppenheim's diverse use of materials. I am drawn to the overt obviousness of the materials and the more covert meaning the work implies.

Finally the Post Modern artists in which my preferences happen to be predominately women. This is partly due to the feminist content of their work. But also the way they uses their materials in a implied feminine way. I will address their work from a formal approach. I have definitely emulated Rebecca Horn's installation like style. I have used this additive sculpture method, of the individual pieces to create an overall atmosphere. The most influential artist for me currently is Kiki Smith. Although I have yet to see an actual sculpture, I am amazed by the photographs I have seen and her overall approach to the physical body. I love the use of diverse materials, constructed in a raw and unfinished way. The multiplicity of her objects lend the overall delicate and finished feel to the work. It is that tension in the objects I strive to create in my own work.

Influences outside the Fine Arts world, are post World War II to contemporary advertising. I readily utilize the complex but narrow way in which individuals are defined by popular culture through obvious tactics. These

obvious tactics include the definition of normality and success through the acquiring of the advertised good. I am especially attracted to the ads that speak about products that enhance or socially beautify the body, for a singular example hair removal ads. I use many of the actual ads in the work, but basically their tactics of design also influence my wall plaques and sculpture.

MAIN

At the introduction of this paper, I stated the implementation of attraction/repulsion, which vacillates between the levels, social, personal, emotional, conceptual and pphysical, in the art work and in the process of self perception. I have discussed the media as being part of the physical level. The media is the outcome of the emotional and physical levels of my personal experience. Now I will discuss these levels in the individual pieces, which collectively function to describe the sensations of Manic-Depression through the process of attraction / repulsion. Individually, they represent singular experiences.

Prop. XLIII Stimulation maybe excessive and bad; on the other hand grief may be good, in so far as stimulation or pleasure is bad.

Proof: Localized pleasure of stimulation (titillatio) is pleasure, which in so far as it is referred to the body consists in one or more of its parts being affected more than the rest; the power of this emotion maybe sufficient to overcome other actions of the body and may remain obstinately fixed therein thus rendering it incapable of being affected in a variety of other ways : therefore it may be bad. Benedict de Spinoza, On Human Bondage

Primarily, any sculpture invades the actual physical space of the viewer.

It does not function as an illusion of space but as actual demarkation of space.

I consider the sculptures to represent the physical body as individual organs or as various mixed parts.

Since I was diagnosed a year ago, I have found descriptions of mental illness rather absurd. They define the illness in the confines of the mind. Mental illness therefore, is an illness that remains, purportedly, in the parameters of the mind and precludes any bodily symptoms. Since the body is basically excluded the head becomes detached. I have previously discussed the definite physical manifestations of Manic- Depression. In mania, the heart races, speech is faster, one tends to loose weight because there is a constant pull toward activity. In depression, one wants to sleep all the time, or can't sleep, and sometimes loses appetite. Psychotropic drugs definitely affected my body, with nausea, dizziness, headaches and acute shaking. The main ramification is the function of a body without a head or vice versa. Not only am I Bipolar but I am Bi-bodily. So I attempted to show how the body functions, with a mental illness if the body is separate from than the mind.

My first examples are the red porcelain pieces. The petite, irregularly shaped vehicles, setting on asphalt chunks, are reminiscent of toys, with the casters and baby doll heads. They represent dysfunctional organ- toys. In one sense they are beautiful because of their bright, shiny, red exterior. In a way they are unnerving; it is a bloody red on a cramped form. They really cannot function as toys, because of the positions of the casters, the tiny needle like windows and the intestinal handle. Nor can they function as organs, due to the holes in the wrong places, and the tubes leading to nowhere. The four headed piece is probably the best example. This one has plenty of heads, but no body, just a contraption to move, like a little red wagon.

The porcelain pieces that hang at head level, appear to be hacked out, for the viewer to dissect. Dissect can imply exploration on a small scale; or it can imply a cutting away of layers to see what might be inside. On the other hand, dysfunctional directly connotes an ailment in the organs. Both definitions are characteristics I want to allude to with the red porcelain pieces.

The trouble she had gone to! She'd had her nose bobbed, her tits pruned, her bum elevated, she'd starved and grieved away her middle age spread. She'd had her molars out, giving the allusion of cheekbones. Her face was lifted up so far her ears had ended up on the top of her head, but happily the wig hid them.

Angela Carter, Wise Children

The three bird cage pieces are absent of the interior, showing only the exterior. They are the body's cosmetic counterpart. They imply frivolity, ebullience and fecundity. All of the adjectives are characteristics of the exterior. These three adjectives, like the pieces, can suggest femininity. Since the work is about my experience with mental illness, and I am female, my self image is tied into society's expected, feminine qualities. The bird cages are costumes, or apparel that changes the characteristics of the exterior. The tulle fabric is usually used for extravagant underpinnings, like a foundation or slip of a prom dress. Tulle is also used for veils; something to hide the virginal bride or the bereaved widow.

All describe a superlative of their situation. The prom tulle represents the Barbie Doll fantasy, of a one night event. To extend this hyperbole, I would like to recall the phrase, "Off like a prom dress." It is the moment of truth; the elegant is removed to expose the mundane. However with the Prom Dress Bird cage, there is no interior to be revealed and scrutinized. Therefore all is left to the

imagination and it becomes the perfect date.

The Bridal cage, massive with prenuptial folds, bubbles over its rigid stays. The tulle is so all encompassing, it hides the empty interior behind the folds of the exterior. Personally, the piece alludes to the private secrets hidden from the most cherished companion. Possibly, these inner surprises could be ones that break social mores or ideals kept by the partner. It is the lines between the hidden and the revealed.

The black tulle piece shows the mourning of the lost self. The cage is analogous to a Princess- line dress; the fitted bodice delicately exploding at the hips. It is the adult version of the prom dress, except now it is the Cocktail Dress. Its exterior is sleek, conservative and stylish. The black tulle mourns the loss of innocence, youth and naivete'. It also addresses the new well put together, medicated self, back from months of emotional bingeing.

"Imagination, the supreme delight of the immortal and immature, should be limited. In order to enjoy life one should not enjoy it to much. I rebel against this state of affairs." Vladimir Nabokov, Speak Memory. An Autobiography Revisited

My collection of wall hangings are collages of a multitude of emotions, individual thoughts and numerous memory fragments. The bases are various sizes of wood blocks covered in layers of acrylic paint, Chinese prayer paper, photographs, cigarette boxes, butts and ashes, matches insects and small objects. As a matter of clarification, the objects do not fall under the category of found objects. They come from a lifetime obsession, which I believe is genetic,

of hoarding other peoples' trash. Some of the pieces were generously donated by individuals who are trying to break this accumulative habit.

I derive great pleasure producing these plaques. First of all, they satisfy my urge to be repetitive, and again, obsessive. Secondly, I like the sense of humor they convey. This black humor is important, not only for the audience, but also the artist. Humor has the ability to make an emotionally packed statement accessible to the audience. I believe people remember things that make them laugh, as opposed to that which makes them uncomfortable. These pieces function as both the uncomfortable and the humorous. These small hangings function as diary like sketches; they are quick and tangible. The tangibility or reality stems from the use of photographs and actual objects, not illusions.

The photographs, or snapshots are also actual but simultaneously emotional. Photographs, usually, serve to reliably capture some type of realism of the subject. Snapshots are what our culture uses to credibly "capture the moment." They predominately function as recordings of time, childhood, vacations, weddings, and other events. I use the self- portrait photographs as someone else would use photographs to record stages in life. Instead, I am recording the changes in myself from mania to depression and through the effects of psychotropic drugs. I am also recording memories of places, according to how they looked at different times of the year, or the day. These places trigger different specific emotions or memories of smell, sound and feel. For example I look at a photograph I took on a winter morning, at around four

a.m.; I remember the rumble of the train, the peal of the crossing gate bells, and the misty cold air. More specifically, I remember why I was there taking pictures and how I felt at that particular moment in life. Although, I believe everyone goes through those sensations, not everyone experiences memory loss, or confusion of memories and current existence.

I am always tormented, by ghosts, but relatively in control. Moods. My moods are growing stronger, more tyrannical. I am more gripped by them. They come to the surface; they explode. Less control. But a wonderful flow. In short both the normal and abnormal are strong. I feel life and I feel the dream, both of them absolutely.
Anais Nin, Incest. From a Journal of Love

This quote describes the emotional terrain which I have attempted to map with the plaque pieces. These plaques stand as a mental map to the sculpture and to the sensations. They also function as the key to this map, in that they describe, in detail, the emotional content of the room. They initiate the intimacy with the viewer not only because of the small scale, but also with the honesty of the style. Since they surround the room they lend cohesiveness and a boundary to the chaotic content of the room.

Conclusion

The diagnosis of Manic Depression in the last year, has resulted in a body of work representing my redefinition of self perception through the levels of attraction/ repulsion. I intend for the work to challenge the audience to question their own opinions of self and the mentally ill. The levels conceptual, physical, emotional and personal vacillate between the process of self perception and the

work. This paper provides an analysis of the process of attraction/ repulsion in the work.