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My Girls and Me

by

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

The University of Montana
May 2000
INTRODUCTION

My thesis body of work is based on my personal endeavor to come to terms with my role as mother. Through these paintings I address the many facets of my motherhood experience. My focus has been on exposing both the emotional turmoil and the joyous beauty inherent in mothering in an attempt to reconcile the one with the other. The tension created by both aspects in unison is what I wish to express.

Based on a humanistic aesthetic, I envision a large and global audience. The importance of having a dialogue with the world precludes my use of a realistic mode of representation as realism best communicates ideas with a wide audience. However, my choice of a fairly realistic vision of subjects has as its structure the abstract use of the media since my ultimate desired effect is not to imitate or mimic nature. The process I choose relies largely on an emphasis of the pictorial surface and is equally based on abstract ideas of expression and intuition as it is realism, as determined by a sense of illusionary depth. My main goal is a realism that allows me to converse about a physical as well as emotional reality. This hybrid encompasses how I view the world around me and understand my place within it.

My personal concerns and efforts are from the point of view of a mother. My maternal turmoil is not unusual, out of the ordinary, or even severe, but is often the cause of much confusion and guilt. This work is an attempt to portray, in an open and honest way, the many aspects of the motherhood experience. I want the paintings to embrace both the so-called “good” and “bad” sides of parenting to achieve a whole experience. One cannot attempt a genuine relationship by denying half of its components.
Stylistically I have chosen to enhance gestural and linear qualities and limit my palette to browns and blues in order to heighten visual characters that may be indicative of an inner struggle. Absent is the warmth and comfort of the colors provided by sunlight. The dark and somber tone of the work, along with the agitated linear surface, attests to the presence of the "negative" or brooding aspects of motherhood that is often times counter to our polarized vision of the child's image within the arts. Conversely, the meditative or peaceful posturing of my children, modeled in a caressing way, pays homage to the loving and nurturing feelings I have for them. The ultimate goal in harmonizing these two equal realities within my paintings is to represent a psychological journey that penetrates beyond the immediate surface of things and finds an enduring beauty.

My emotive and conceptual notions of motherhood are manifested through the formal language of the painted surface. The process itself stands as a symbol of reflection and struggle. Through the physical act of painting, I am able to ritualize a parallel reality. My process continually reiterates and symbolizes a dialogue and an expression of the duality of my mothering experience. By synthesizing the 2-dimensional reality of abstraction and the potential 3-dimensional illusion of realism, I am able to achieve a harmonious understanding and balance between the myths and the realities that are the foundation of my daily life.
A direct influence on my work has been the working model of the studio artist passed on to me through my professors during my undergraduate studies. Their examples of a work ethic of discipline, dedication and hard work included the importance of overcoming technical difficulties in order to translate meaning. Fundamental to my endeavors is my desire to be able to do what I find formally difficult and challenging. Early on, this was the ability to render the human form realistically. Today my skill and confidence to work with the human form has given me a freedom to concentrate on other approaches to rendering that are more expressive.

I have been working on the ability to obtain the impression of naturalism through a simplified means of application. John Singer Sargent’s portraits are examples of such a simplicity. The affect of his method is a sense of spontaneity and grace. Upon close examination Sargent’s highly realistic modeling appears to be achieved effortlessly. His facility to scrutinize vision allows him to keep the innate character of a paint stroke intact while at the same time putting it to the service of illusion. His seemingly smooth and highly polished surfaces do not mask the physicality of the medium or the gesture. The gown worn by Madame X, for example, is evidence of a skill of observation so finely tuned that a few strokes of paint, just abstract marks on a black surface, resolutely lends form to an otherwise formless mass. In my work I strive to create tensions and harmonies
by maintaining the integrity of the true nature of the viscous medium, while at the same time, using it to render naturalistic form.

An extreme example of a figurative artist concerned with the innate properties of the medium is Willem DeKooning. Unlike Sargent, his paintings are abstractions of realism; his marks are severe and his efforts are harsh and laborious. I find in them an affinity because of the physicality of DeKooning’s marks, specifically in his *Women* series, and the obsessive intensity of their presence. In this series the model has been carved out and defined from the chaos of the painted surface, as if DeKooning had to confront unbridled spontaneous emotion in order to transcend it and find something stable and real. This is the metaphor descriptive of my own psychological process in relationship to paint and the physical act of painting.

Another similarity is DeKooning’s quality of paint application which is more reminiscent of the aggressive gesture attainable through drawing; it is in contrast with the smooth flow associated with the paint stroke. In my work, I apply the paint with a palette knife and sponge in order to conjure a drawing sensibility. I prefer the characteristics of drawing which have the capacity to submit to illusion or the ability to remain only as marks on a surface or become a hybrid of the two. By drawing with paint, I am able achieve an immediacy and spontaneity I do not experience painting traditionally with a brush. DeKooning’s *Women* paintings echo a similar and almost obsessive sentiment. DeKooning’s marks have a life and will of their
His female forms seem merely the gravitational force for the arrangement of his medium of which he is acutely and respectfully conscious.

My awareness of the medium's reality or flatness and its illusionary character necessitate my sensitivity towards the figure/ground relationship. I strive to achieve unity within the picture plane and work towards the equilibrium of these two elements. A perfect example of this balance is the work of Oskar Kokoschka. His use and combination of meandering lines of value and tone attains an expression of spirit through the plasticity of paint. His abstract marks move throughout the naturalistic figures and their background recalling a dialogue between the nature of vision, and the 2-dimensional presence of the painted surface. One mark crosses over a figure's physical boundary and stands to represent both a highlight and a background surface texture. These strokes of line and mark become formal connections between content and context and render the figures with a personal energy that extends their bodies. The spirit of the sitter is not contained within their bodies alone; they merge peacefully into the physical world.

From studying the work of Carravagio, I have absorbed many of his formal devices in order to attain drama. His figure paintings, specifically of saints and martyrs, are about a profound human drama. Through the guise of biblical narrative, his work embodies a humanistic philosophy and aesthetic. The emotional and ephemeral drama
Carravagio depicts is achieved through the value structure within his composition. Carravagio’s paintings’ structure is built on the contrast between light and dark, and an ambiguous and foreboding context countered with a highly modeled figure bathed in light. I attempt to structure my images similarly. I also place the entirety of the figure central to the picture plane as a compositional way to focus the viewer’s attention. Emphasizing the figure and creating formal tensions in this way works to represent and evoke a dialectic of drama on a human scale.

The subject and content of Balthus’ paintings are a constant source of inspiration. Among the few artists in history who have tackled the subject matter of children, Balthus’ paintings are among the most powerful. Like Munch’s pre-pubescent women, Balthus’ subjects are adolescent girls. What is immediate and intriguing to me is Balthus’ apparent dialogue about the anxious and tenuous relationship between adult and child, viewer and subject. Their delicate and sensitive age alone imbues the works with a sexual tension, but these paintings are not so easily interpreted; their content remains ambiguous. I feel the paintings of my children have at their root a relationship that is equally ambiguous and
MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

The working process I have come to use is consistent within the body of my thesis exhibition. It is a direct result of many years of struggling to balance my formal criteria with ones of expression. I desire most a synthesis of the importance and significance of the ways and means of these two necessities that regularly support and fortify each other. These aspects within my work function together and are intertwined in a symbiotic union. My process is a layered one, applied and conceived in stages. For the purpose of this discussion, I have divided my working methods up into three parts, beginning, middle and end.

Beginning Phase

My thesis exhibition consists of 10 paintings. The majority of the works exhibited have all undergone the following process with the exception of the two paintings on paper (Grape and Reclining #1 x 2). I size each canvas with a mixture of rabbit skin and brown paper custom colored latex house paint. Then, working on the floor, I activate the canvas by dividing it into dark and light areas using straight black latex house paint as my dark value and the brown paper color as my light value. This approach allows me to both consider the whole of the canvas in an all-over way, and serves to structure the composition. In my most recent pieces, these initial marks are
done by alternating between a squirt bottle to apply streams or beads of paint and a large stiff brush to move those resulting lines around. The incorporation of the motions of my arm and body to apply and move the paint gives these initial tones and marks a linear and gestural quality not unlike that of drawing.

I consider the process of my current body of paintings to be more directly related to the activity of drawing than to that of painting. Like a drawing, I begin in a sketchy loose and spontaneous manner concentrating on the interconnectedness of contrasting tones that exist within the photo I use as reference. I endeavor to transfer, exaggerate or recreate that same interconnected relationship throughout the canvas.

I always use photographs as my visual reference. I take digital camera photos that are equivalent to the snapshot in their size and quality. I rarely stage my figures; instead I stage my lighting and take multiple versions. My ultimate choice of image is usually based on its compositional strength, giving preference to the immediacy of strong shadows and severe highlights over ambient illumination.

Walking around the canvas disorients my focus on the photo primarily to shapes, tones and directional movements. This process is the beginning of my observation of the photo which, as the painting continues, manifests into more specificity and detail.

Applying these initial marks in an intuitive and gestural way ties-up the canvas into one active surface event and satisfies formal as well as the self-expressive elements I find inherent in painting. Both necessities function on an abstract level. I am able to consider the 2-dimensionality of the picture plane, while at the same time, I have an arena through which the physical act of applying material transcends conscious comprehension.
Middle Phase

The middle phase starts when the canvas has been fully incorporated and my level of attention begins to wander towards form. I then orient the canvas on the easel. With a mixture of raw sienna, ultramarine blue acrylic paint and marble dust as my dark tone, and the brown paper latex mixed with marble dust as my light tone, I repeat the initial process using a palette knife. I designate temperature of hue in the lights and darks by adding either the blue or the sienna. My point of departure remains focused within the dialogue of surface treatment; however, lines and values become less general as the process of rendering form and light is initialized. At this stage there is an overall visual effect of rhythmic patterning of surface area. I maintain the active and flowing movement across the surface while delineating form which, as a result, lends itself to a similarly rhythmic relationship between figure and ground.

I include the marble dust into my paint mixture for several reasons. The most important reason is its density. I desire an end product that reveals the process the canvas undergoes. The marble dust marks remain apparent even after they are covered. The complexity of texture which is created perhaps reveals in a physical way the complexity of thought and process.

The marble dust applied in conjunction with palette knife also aids in the abstract way in which I seek to approach or locate form. The existence of the marble dust on my canvas cannot be ignored. Attempting to model specificity of form is limited in a way that I prefer. The economy of an impression of forms is more my aesthetic desire than that of mimicry of the details. The drawback to using a photo as a reference instead of a live model is its potential for dissection and study. A live model moves, real daylight
shifts and changes, and in general, detail of forms is far more difficult to pin-down. By building-up the surface texture in this way, I attempt to recreate that technical difficulty.

The middle stage is the most complex and involved. In this portion of working, initial ideas and approaches are played out and transformed until a reconciliation of both formal and expressive necessities are achieved. Included are multiple stages or layering in which I incorporate the entire canvas and build layer after layer, line and tone upon each other. As this method progresses, the figure and its context begins unwittingly to reveal itself until images of form emerge. When I begin to desire more definition and specificity, and I start to see the parts that make up the whole, is when the final stage begins.

**End Phase**

I finish up by using a damp sponge along with the palette knife. Using the sponge is similar to using a brush in that I can blend and glaze. The result of applying the marble dust laden paint with a sponge is a very smooth superficial surface. Even the roughest textured areas are given this smooth finish if treated with the sponge. In my thesis exhibition, the amount of modeling in this last phase has differed. Some of the paintings maintain very little of this smooth modeling; while some make use of this technique consistently throughout the painting surface.

In this final stage of the painting I focus on the details that describe form and light. I am most drawn to intimate areas of form: definitions of the figures and their postures as revealed through hands and feet, muscle tone and bone structures; and light: passages of high contrast that can be used as a structural device as well as aid in the
readability of form in space. Skin and cloth separate themselves and the definition between context and figure comes into sharper focus and contrast.

In seeming opposition to my previous efforts to fuse figure and ground, I begin the process of pulling the figures out of the ground. The level of realism in the painting is the result of a concentration on the effects of light on form. The naturalism or fine-tuning I desire to pull out of an abstracted surface has slowly been building up a momentum since the initial phases. It is a conclusion or resolution of ideas and expressions that I wish to reside harmoniously with one another. The formal elements or ideas contained are centered in my equal treatment and recognition of both painting's potential for 3-dimensional illusion and the reality of its 2-dimensional plane. The expression is located in the painting's ability to encompass the abstract and realistic which co-exist within the painting as they do in life both metaphorically and figuratively. In this way I invent and reinvent a whole and complex understanding: a tangible reality.

I envision the "Materials and Techniques" as a recapitulation of my content. I consider my surface manipulation, from the Beginning Phase up until somewhere in the Middle Phase, as a means of initializing structure and texture on which to begin the process of physical representation. The abstract and ambiguous visual quality is representative of the chaos and confusion of everyday life as the mother of small children and its resulting pervasive sensation of a life of general turmoil and disorder. Once I set myself to the task of depiction, with this sub-structure, I then begin working towards order by a rational or seemingly linear rendition of forms. This layering of opposites, chaos with order and abstract with naturalism, parallels my ultimate desired goal to reconcile the daily experience of emotional frenzy with a pervasive sensation of
emotional well being, stability and happiness.

MY GIRLS AND ME

Prior to graduate school, my work was always a form of self-portraiture. The significance of the self-portrait has typically been the obvious quest for an understanding of self. Through the use of the figure and specifically me, I was able to explore my identity and come to moments of self-realization. The self-portrait also lends itself to a direct communion with the viewer. The self-portrait is a universal icon since it is about the individual, and in turn, about all individuals' struggle for meaning and identity.

My work in this thesis exhibition is also self-portraiture in nature. I use my children as the symbols of myself, but they are more than just stand-ins. There is no clearly defined division between my children and me. My identity now is inclusive of their lives, my affect on them, my relationship to them, and my goal towards the nurturing of healthy, happy individuals. My portraits are no longer of the lone isolated figure, a fairly straightforward relationship, but have broadened to encompass a much larger picture and a more complicated understanding of myself in connection to the world. The experience of motherhood and the role as mother define my reality; a distinction that will remain forever.

My current work attempts to reconcile my perception of myself within this complicated relationship in a clear and truthful way. The use of the figure in my work is tantamount in that it sets up a dialogue about humanity. The use of a naturalistic rendition of the figure directly communicates this dialectic. I focus on the everyday as a
point of departure, since the everyday makes up the whole of my experience and understanding. Through the common gestures or posturing of my children I endeavor to relate the universal drama inherent in the everyday events within my scope of reflection and perception.

The content of my work is an exploration of my everyday experience as a mother. What I have come to realize and appreciate about this journey is that it entails coming to terms with the negative aspects of mothering in order to form an honest portrayal and awareness. The beauty and joy associated with children and motherhood include in contrast a much darker picture, which encompasses the psychological stress associated with nurturing emotionally and physically well developed humans within the context of everyday stress that is experienced in a home with small children. From waking until sleeping, a parent makes choices. Some are clear and obvious while others are more ambiguous in their 'correctness'. The hundreds of how-to texts, along with their numerous revisions, only stand as reminders that the art of good parenting has no clear definitions. At the end of the day, tallies are gone over and impatience and self-doubt weigh as much if not sometimes more than righteousness. This constant contemplation and stress of being a good
parent, while at the same time maintaining a focused self-view, insights psychological tension and drama which I wish to bring to my work. I find this aspect of parenting emotionally powerful as there are unspoken sanctions against openly discussing less than perfect feelings regarding your children. We demonize mothers who appear to be in emotional conflict about their role, and thereby perpetuate a false representation of motherhood.

I attempt a whole vision of motherhood by celebrating all the parts of its entirety. A device to work through feelings of guilt and confusion, my children first appeared in my work. By harmonizing and navigating between the “good” and the “bad”, I now openly address these less than perfect parts and feelings, with the hope that by embracing them I am having a truthful and complete experience.

Through the process of my work, I set up a parallel complexity of tensions and dramas. Within the first half of my actual
working, I recreate on the canvas surface conflicts which represent an inner struggle with anxiety and fears. The foreboding darkness in value and ambiguity in rendition that exists in these paintings represent the constant fear and worry I have for my children everyday and that extend obsessively into the future. My once limited vantage point has been forced to take into consideration global events. The tense and haphazard line, along with the rough surface quality I utilize, reiterates the multitudes of conflict I regularly experience emotionally and mentally. The contrasting and interlaced tones are symbolic of an overall sense of drama or melodrama that weaves in and out of my daily life. Just as chaos and confusion provide the foundation of the journey to knowledge and understanding, the formal structure or ground I create initially for myself to work from, becomes a subconscious or rather non-linear exercise in self-expression that
reaches a climax of exhalation, followed by a conscious need for resolution. This resolution is achieved by carefully and naturalistically defining the figures.

I pull them out of the murky depths and pay close attention to perceivable, namable and unconditional feelings of tenderness I have for the forms that represent my children. I manipulate these forms, the space they inhabit, and the light that caresses them by emphasizing the texture and sensual quality of their skin, muscle, and bones.

The drama or melodrama that pervades the entire process of working and thinking, expressive of emotions and ideas, is represented by the juxtaposing of the differences in stylistic approaches. I play whites against darks, warmth against cool, smooth modeling against rugged surface and abstract against realistic. The naturalistic portrayal of my children’s images play against the backdrop of an overall quality of
agitation and tensions which culminates in a harmonic balance of visual extremes coinciding with emotional extremes.

Although the content in my work is consistent throughout the body of my exhibition, concentration on different formal aspects distinguishes one painting from the next. For example, Reclining #1 x 2 (Fig. 1) is the first attempt at a rhythmic figure ground, through the use of a shallow space, reclining position and the folds of fabric. I found this a successful way in which to more believably merge subject matter with context. I have used this spatial device repeatedly since then with only three exceptions. (See also Reclining Esme #1 and #2; Fig. 2 & 3).

Pink (Fig. 4) and Blistex (Fig. 5) were direct attempts at unifying figure and ground without the use of shallow space. Grape (Fig. 6) was a conscious effort to convey a sense of drama through the use of the high contrasting elements of light and
color. In keeping, *Grape* was my first consideration and introduction of the introverted or self-possessed, more peaceful, less active posturing indicative of an everyday nonchalance. I have maintained this countenance in all of the subsequent paintings in this exhibition.

By slightly angling the perspective of the figure, or foreshortening, as in *Dds Dressup* (Fig. 7), the figure exists in an allusion of space instead of hovering on a plane parallel to the surface and viewer. I have used this device in the four subsequent paintings, *Blistex, Tutu* (Fig. 8), *Disney Sheets* (Fig. 9) and *Reading Lamp* (Fig. 10). *Disney Sheets* has a lack of overall finish which the majority of the works in this exhibition possess. My tendency to keep that which is there visible as evidence of the physical working process the canvas undergoes, coincides directly with my search for honesty. I do not want to deny, repress or otherwise cover up any aspect of my reality. With *Disney Sheets*, I began a consideration of the evolution of the layering process I utilize in order to further this exposure. In emphasizing and de-emphasizing certain areas within the painting, the compositional tensions are extended and the surface depth is intensified. *Reading Lamp* is the last painting in this series, immediately following *Disney Sheets* and employs this same device.
Except for Grape and Reclining #1x2, there is a noticeable absence of saturated hues. My reason for using few tones, made up of only raw sienna, ultramarine blue, paper bag brown and the natural white of the marble dust, results from an increased concentration on form and line. These few colors serve mainly as cools and warms and darks and lights, which lend a serious or moody tone to the overall body of work. For this reason I purposefully re-introduce other colors, pink in Tutu and saturated blue in Disney Sheets to balance out what may perhaps be an overt negativity. However, the dark and somber mood of this exhibition is in keeping with a psychological expresivity I wish to impart. Throughout this body of work, I openly conversed with the distressing issues of my content. The importance and purpose of revealing the negative aspects beyond that of the positive is to offer an alternative aesthetic depiction contrary to the common images of children in art we are used to confronting.

CONCLUSION

The lack of the child image in the fine arts and the over-saturation of it in the low arts, such as mass media, raise questions about my chosen subject matter. Both forms of under or over representation reveal a discrimination or bias towards the subject of children. Neither, however, truthfully confront the issues of children in our everyday lives. For a large majority of our society, the parent/child relationship is undeniably one of the most challenging and fulfilling experiences. Today stereotypes and defining lines between male and female family roles are diminishing regularly. Yet there remains few
if any views of children in contemporary fine art. The dialogue and the viability regarding the child as subject matter have been reduced to stock for the mass media industry. Not surprising, this paragon of cultural taste prefers a one-sided vision of children and parenting, which negates any strife. The false images of what children are like and what childhood was like perpetuates an impression of either our preferred memory of a past experience or an idyllic portrayal of a future to come.

My paintings serve as an alternative to the mythic relationship that floods our collective consciousness through the media arts; and attempts to restore viability to the significance of the child as subject matter within the fine arts inclusive of all the force and immediacy of a real and sometimes painful struggle.

Pivotal to My Girls and Me has been the necessity to maintain a dialogue about my own experiences of motherhood. The impetus for doing so was the paradox I found between my experience and the social model of this experience. The lack of a cultural representation of which I could identify, left me with a sense of personal isolation, which led me to emphasize, explore and depict negative aspects of parenting.

Through the actual physical process of working, I have found an expression of ideas and feelings that recapitulates, fortifies and ritualizes my desire for an honest perception of my reality. This is acted out by means of my awareness of the true nature of the medium, both its abstract qualities and its potential for illusion. The tension between these two characteristics within the painted surface recreates the inner psychological struggle that pits the ambiguity of deep emotions with the clarity of profound feelings: anger and joy, fear and hope, anxiety and love.

Because of my work on the body of My Girls and Me, I no longer see in such
terms as “positive” and “negative”, “bad” and “good”. These paintings represent and replace the absent dialogue about the real, all encompassing, experience of motherhood. The good and bad have merged gracefully within and throughout each other resolving into a unique beauty.

I attempt to express foremost this genuine vision in order to enhance my life, empower others who sense the isolation of a cultural paradox, and impart to those who have yet to question the impressions of a societal sentimentality, the true importance of the role of the parent as an individual conferred with the responsibility of the healthful nurturing and development of fellow individual members of our society.
LIST OF IMAGES REPRODUCED

John Singer Sargent pg. 3  Madame X, 1883-4
Willem DeKooning pg. 4  Women I, 1950-52
Oskar Kokoschka pg. 5  The Tempest, 1914
Carravagio pg. 6  St. John the Baptist, 1600
Balthus pg. 6  Patience, 1943

Reclining #1 x 2  60"x48"  Oil on paper  (Fig. 1)
Reclining Esme #1  44"x61"  Acrylic with marble dust  (Fig. 2)
Reclining Esme #2  44"x61"  Acrylic with marble dust  (Fig. 3)
Pink  61"x44"  Acrylic with marble dust  (Fig. 4)
Blistex  61"x44"  Acrylic with marble dust  (Fig. 5)
Grape  69"x48"  Oil and acrylic with marble dust on paper  (Fig. 6)
Dds Dressup  61"x44"  Acrylic with marble dust  (Fig. 7)
Tutu  61"x44"  Acrylic with marble dust  (Fig. 8)
Disney Sheets  61"x44"  Acrylic with marble dust  (Fig. 9)
Reading Lamp  44"x61"  Acrylic with marble dust  (Fig. 10)
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