

Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Scholar Works

Theses

8-11-2011

Cyclical

Edna Madera

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Madera, Edna, "Cyclical" (2011). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.

Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Cyclical

By Edna Madera

8/11/2011

Final Approvals

Chief Advisor:

Leonard Urso

Date:

Associate Advisor:

Juan Carlos Caballero-Perez

Date:

Associate Advisor:

Tina Lent

Date:

Chairperson:

Don Arday

Date:

I, Edna Madera, hereby grant permission to the Wallace Memorial Library of RIT to reproduce my thesis in whole or in part. Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or profit.

Abstract:

The works presented here are portraits of my Mother meditating for motherhood between religious faith and will power, the creation of which, became a personal means of coping with her death. Catholic rosaries and knitted baby booties are depicted as I explore feminine identity within the context of fertility and the social views that condition it. Material explorations include, rusted steel, body fluid, and animal tissue.

“Blood is liquid life. When blood escapes our bodies...
It is life leaking out of us.”

Mark Ryden, 2003

Our bodies have the ability to give life, while some choose not to, many look forward to creating such a gift. But when it becomes a difficult struggle to achieve, one then has to decide how to channel this life giving energy productively. Many choose faith, but it comes in different forms. This body of work is a portrait of two opposing faiths and cultures that I unify and walk between. Both have a repetitious nature that involves the rhythmic movement of the hand and mind.

Saying the rosary is the oration and counting of prayers along a string of beads during time set aside for devotion. Though there are prayer beads from different cultures, the Catholic *Rosario* was present in my parents' hands to send prayers to *La Virgen de Guadalupe* for another child. As I was raised in the United States, religion seemed less prevalent and will was the “American” faith of choice by planning and preparing for the wanted arrival of life by counting the moments of meditation with each stitch of material.

Like the cyclical rhythm of knitting and prayer, the female body stains this timeline. It is mourning the loss of life.

As the only child to my Mother, I am the narrator of her hours.

Meditative practice has traditionally been used to still the mind and realign it with one's body to recognize the present moment, but in today's increasingly narcissistic culture, meditation has shifted away from its intent. Meditation and prayer has become a means to a superficial end. In other words, "to get what I want." I have observed this in receiving advice to pray to patron saints as though they were fairytale genies in a bottle. There exists a spectrum between faith and desire and we as humans have to balance our free will somewhere in the middle to find our spiritual purpose and the life imagined with all our trappings. Growing up in the Chicago suburbs to Roman Catholic-Mexican Immigrant parents, I watched the two oppositions, religious faith and medical science, face off.

I have chosen to create portraits of my Mother meditating for motherhood in both of these opposing states. By referencing the Catholic rosary and the process of knitting, I have juxtaposed two meditative acts that, at minimum are demonstrative of passivity versus pro-activity, but also call for physical participation, the hands, to initiate momentum within the abdominal cavity. They are both a repetitious ritual to form a beginning and an end that resemble the cyclical order of a woman's body. This work explores why motherhood calls such desire from some women and so much heartache when their bodies will not answer their prayers. The exhibition illustrates my Mother's struggle with conception up until her death at age 50.

Failure to conceive was a source of tension in her marriage that affected the overall dynamic of the family. Frustration and resentment, I feel were elements that inspired anger and domestic abuse by my Father's hand. Obviously, they succeeded once, but there still existed a drive for more than one.

Gaudencia Orquiz Vega, my Mother, was diagnosed with small cell carcinoma located in her ovaries in May of 2002. Five months later, she died on October 21 as my Father and I were signing 'Do Not Resuscitate' orders on her behalf. The neon orange document with the header 'DNR' was on my lap and the pen still in my hand, which I just laid down from numbly scrawling my signature, when a nurse barged into the room and pulled the hospice director away. Upon her return 30 seconds later, she informed us that my Mother had just died. It felt as though we signed her life away less than a minute earlier.

Before I was born, my parents tried for two years to start a family and finally turned to the aid of a physician. After my birth in July 1977, over a decade passed until they surrendered to the reality that they would have only one daughter. As I watched my Mother slowly fade from life due to a diseased organ that had been previously pressured with so much hope for creation and was now causing her impending death, I found it painfully ironic.

Armando Cabral Madera, my Father, suffered a horseback riding accident in his early teen years. While attaching a lead to the horse's bit, he dropped the coiled slack on the ground by his feet. Very quickly, the young horse protested his handler with a buck and unknowingly, my Father stepped in the center of the coiled rope just as the horse charged forward and tightened the rope around his ankle, subsequently dragging him faced down, for what seemed like an eternity, over the rocky terrain that surrounded a natural pond on his childhood ranch. Once the unbroken horse exerted its jolt of adrenaline, it stopped for a drink at the edge of the water. Meanwhile, my Father grabbed a hold of the base of a *nopal* cactus and seized the opportunity to free himself before

being dragged further. He expected it would be to his death if he didn't act quickly. Luckily, he was able to unhitch himself, but he sustained injuries grave enough that he felt made him equally as responsible for he and my Mother's reproductive challenges.

After the burial, I informed my Father that I would stay home with him to manage the house and her belongings, but his immediate insistence for me to return to school and continue on with what I set out to do academically left me with no time to unravel in any solitary mourning. I had to grieve through my art. As a result, intellectual analysis did not precede this body of work, life and death did. Once the grieving/creating was over, analyzing it into an academic thesis felt like having to rip open wounds to suffer the loss anew. It has taken a long time to process the emotions, that I initially denied myself to feel, so that I could set them aside to gain clear insight to view my work as something other than a personal means of coping with death. Not having counseling support prolonged this as I had to work through it alone while going through life.

A series of rosaries and baby booties tell this story. Rosaries were all constructed of silver to highlight an alternative material as more precious than would be perceived with out it, in this case, rusted steel, blood stained gauze, and pig gut. The installation rosary piece, "At age 50: Portrait of my Mother" contained no precious metals and was assembled with similar materials as were the baby booties.

In "Of the Body 2004", a rosary made of sterling and pig gut, I chose the organic material of pig gut, or a pig's intestinal lining, for its translucent qualities when stretched, its rigidity and withered flesh-like appearance when dried, and its flexibility when worked. Helen Chadwick also used gut in *Loop My Loop*, 1991, "in which a gleaming pig's intestine intertwines with golden Barbie doll hair in a braided embrace seems more

deliberately perverse in its pleasures. Femininity is represented here both as surface and depth. The fetishized sign of femininity is inseparable from a visceral and forbidden interior.” “The golden hair has a dual function as a fetish object, both erotic and, in a form of memento mori, marking lack – the hair which was braided into Victorian jewelry to commemorate a dead loved one.” (Betterton, p. 142)

Sterling silver capped both sides of the gut beads, a sort of memento mori, to appreciate the perception of its value as it is not normally hailed as precious object of sentiment such as a lock of hair. The contrast could only have been more drastic had I used pure gold and platinum, which I was not in a position to acquire at the time. “In anatomy, a membrane is any tissue that is spread thin, so that it serves as a boundary. Like a mark, a membrane can be a delimiter, a non-spatial division between two adjacent spaces. Just as a contour in drawing is that which separates and defines two forms, two color fields, or two spaces, a membrane in anatomy is that which separates two regions of differing constitution. It may be therefore, that skin is not a part of the body, but a condition of its intelligibility, a marker of the oppositional difference between inside and outside, body and world.” (Elkins, p. 36) In my case, as I have tried to illustrate, between body and spirit or the tangible and intangible. The title, *Of the Body*, references not only the use of membranous body tissue, but also the deep cellular summoning during intense meditational prayer that ignites human will power.

“Ritual: of the Body”, was constructed solely of pig gut. I later learned that I was not the first to knit these materials as Jayne Parker had already done so in a performance piece. “In K, 1989, the artist appears to expel a long string of viscera from her mouth which she then ‘knits’ with her arms into a dress which hangs down in front of her naked

body. But rather than suggesting a violent disemboweling, the film offers a meditation on the interiority of the body and the irrational fears it engenders. The disgust and horror we might feel at ‘innards’ revealed is converted into a recognition of beauty, even of domesticity, as she slowly weaves her body’s visceral covering” (Betterton, p. 141).

To prepare for my knitting session, the membrane was thoroughly rinsed clean of the brine it was packaged in and placed in a bucket of fresh water, which acted as my “ball of yarn” from which I cast onto my knitting needles and followed a basic baby bootie knitting pattern. This was a way to illustrate a portrait of creativity using the body differently; physically by hand as opposed to physiologically in the womb, but in a very resolved way. “She cannot use her will to force her baby to develop faster; nor can she use her will to determine when her child will be born” (Northrup, p. 195). I would add that one cannot will conception either, but this idea, to fabricate in an attempt to create something in the flesh introduces a crossroads between acceptance and resistance to her situation and from which state her will power is sparked. “Similarly, all of the creations that come from deep within us, from our ovarian wisdom—whether they be babies, books, or works of art—have a life of their own that we have a responsibility to initiate and allow, but ultimately not to control. Just so, our deepest creativity cannot be forced. It must be allowed the time and space to grow and develop in tune with its own internal rhythm. Like biological mothers, we as women must be open to the uniqueness of our creations and their own energies and impulses, without trying to force them into predetermined forms. Our ability to yield to our creativity, to acknowledge that we cannot control it with our intellects, is the key to understanding ovarian power.” (Northrup, p. 195)

We can choose what we channel our creative life force into, spiritual fulfillment; it is not strictly limited to parenthood. Strip away the flesh, bones, and the egotistical mind that houses societal influences, we are then left with a soul that can be satisfied by whatever life's mission lies in its core because, I feel, therein lies our authentic self. Dress up said self again with flesh, bones, and the egotistical mind again and if there is a conditioned or acculturated resistance to the authentic self's purpose, there can be negative consequences. "When a woman does not heed her innermost creative wisdom because of her fears or insecurities about the world outside herself, ovarian problems can arise." (Northrup, p. 198) Eastern philosophy is referenced in Northrup's thoughts on a woman's creative energy force. "The internal pelvic organs (ovaries, tubes, and uterus) are related to second chakra¹ issues. Their health depends upon a woman feeling able, competent, or powerful to create financial and emotional abundance and stability, and to express her creativity fully." (Northrup, p. 152) Though I am not qualified to diagnose my mother under any medical philosophies, I feel that spiritually, the constant struggle she had to endure between her dreams and the familial expectations placed on her contributed to her strife. These expectations of her were varied and many she inherited as the eldest daughter, who had to halt her education at the 9th grade so she could take care of her younger siblings and assist her mother with housework; who had to leave her country to find better opportunity in another land to support herself and the others left behind; who felt she had to remain in a physically and verbally abusive marriage because

¹ Seven spiritual centers of the body.

old-world traditions of *marianismo*² pressured her to; and to raise an American daughter rooted in a new cultural -hybridity³ that created challenges, unique to the immigrant experience, in relating to her. These blows to the spirit were contributing factors, if not the only factors, that led to her development of ovarian cancer. “The left side of the body represents the female artistic reflective side, while the right side is the more analytic male side. Each woman will have to decide for herself what this means, but most of the ovarian cysts I see are on the left side-symbolic I feel, of the wounded feminine in this culture.” (Northrup, p. 201) When we resist or are forced to resist our intuition and feel shackled in obligation, the state of our spirit will affect our body, be it tension or illness.

Sylvia Ann Hewlett conducted a series of interviews with highly successful women who broke through the glass ceiling in their respective fields and found that none of them had children. Initially this was not an apparent issue that begged to be addressed, but then questions of motherhood were asked and who initially seemed like very satisfied and complete women in their careers, opened a discourse for feminine identity and how closely it was related to motherhood or moreso, the absence of. “...Immensely able women had the courage and good sense to take the passion and compassion they might have invested in children, and channel it into something else—something thoroughly worthwhile. I find this deeply inspiring. Childlessness need not shrivel the soul or shrink the spirit. These generous-spirited women—and others I interviewed for this book-had the guts to turn their creative energies elsewhere, to projects and endeavors that will have

² The female counterpart to *machismo* is *marianismo*, which is directly connected with the veneration of the Virgin Mary in Hispanic Catholicism, and which describes the idealized woman. (Villarejo)

³ “—what it means to be raised within one culture, and to represent oneself through the visual traditions of another” (Betterton, p. 169).

lasting benefits to themselves and others.” (Hewlett, p. 72) Many of the women Hewlett interviewed faced disappointments along their journeys.

“There are no secrets to success in the business world. Able individuals merely have to put together the determination and grit to perform at a very high level. If this involves extraordinarily long hours and brutal travel schedule, so be it.” Ten years previous to this interview, she realized she would probably not get married and have kids, at which time she became acquainted with an industrial psychologist who offered her some advice: “...and he told me that to remain strong and vital I needed to find something in life that could be as important to me as children. If I could do this—find some interest that had deep, personal meaning—it would force me to balance my life. Otherwise, there was a danger my soul would shrivel—I still remember his exact words—and I could become some kind of unidimensional workaholic.” (Hewlett, p.71)

Feminine identity seems to be interconnected with what women focus their life into whether it be managing a home, a company, or both. No matter the choice, there will be some judgment if not self-induced, then externally, as others will assess you according to their expectations of womanhood. “For women, the decision to have or not to have a child, whether by choice, circumstance, or reason of infertility, is inevitably shaped by representations of what motherhood means in our culture. Childbearing and childlessness are intimately connected with a sense of identity and self-worth for women. The issues are complex and often deeply contradictory, offering little alternative between the pain of infertility and concerns about medical invasion of the body. Such ambivalences and dilemmas are to be expected in an area which is so deeply entwined with our innermost fears and desires. Paradoxically, by extending choice to more

women, reproductive technologies reinforce the idea that reproduction is essential to femininity.” (Betterton, p. 108)

The incorporation of knitting into my body of work was not only to introduce a very domestic activity, but it also was to serve as an analogy to man-made creativity as is medically assisted fertility treatments, such as Artificial Insemination and In-Vetro Fertilization. The financial and physical commitments required to endure these procedures, which almost always require more than one treatment if not escalating degrees of treatment, are significant in addition to the heavy strain placed on a woman’s emotions and self-esteem when, almost inevitably, initial attempts prove unsuccessful.

“I began to resent my sexual organs. I mean, if these parts and these functions turn out to be completely useless, how can I do anything but resent my big breasts and bloody periods. They are merely burdensome.” (Hewlett, p. 49). This drain on the self-esteem strains a woman’s feminine identity. During Hewlett’s interview with Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, Wendy Wasserstein, she relayed her experience with various doctor assisted fertility treatments. “...by this point I’ve gone through so many procedures—and been injected with so many drugs—I can’t even keep track of them all. What did I get out of all this? All I’ve proved is that I can’t get pregnant, that I’m really not a girl.” (Hewlett,p. 39) “You take a woman of my generation, someone who is seriously accomplished, it isn’t enough. And then when she fails to get pregnant—and most of us do fail—it erases her sense of professional competence and erases her confidence as a woman. I know these procedures left me feeling more depressed than at any other time in my life.” (Hewlett, p. 40)

Financial resources are required to cover the cost of fertility doctor treatment. “One woman was on a protocol that cost \$30,000 per cycle. She had just re-mortgaged her house. The other women were talking about what they still had to sell, so they’d have the money to keep trying.” (Northrup, p. 359) “After the second miscarriage we got deadly serious. We took out a second mortgage on our house and signed up for IVF.” (Hewlett, p. 49)

“My Faith has Oxidized” was assembled with sterling silver and rusted steel fibers that flaked rust particles onto the display surface emphasizing the erosion process much like that of one’s exhausted faith. To oxidize steel, within a metallurgical context would be to rust, which acts as a protective coating on heavy steel surfaces that have been exposed to oxygen or other corrosive ingredients in an attempt to preserve the material within. In the case of “My Faith has Oxidized”, the already thin material, fine steel wool, has corroded thoroughly, leaving red ash-like remains beneath the rosary bead that are similar in color to oxidized blood. This is meant to be a visual representation of a faith, strained and corroded as well as an ‘ashes to ashes’ reference.

“Cyclical”, made of sterling silver and blood stained gauze, pushed me to face my own fear of judgment from viewers for my choice of materials. The most direct and concise approach to visually and conceptually articulate the idea was to use gauze stained with menstrual blood, as another sort of *momento mori*. “The menstrual cycle is the most basic, earth cycle we have. Our blood is our connection to the archetypal feminine. The macro-cosmic cycles of nature, such as the ebb and flow of the tides and the changes of the seasons, are reflected on a smaller scale in the menstrual cycle of the individual female body. The monthly ripening of an egg and subsequent release of menstrual blood

or pregnancy mirrors the process of creation as it occurs not only in nature, unconsciously, but in human endeavor. In many cultures, the menstrual cycle has been viewed as sacred.” (Northrup, p. 97) The initial visual perception for the viewer is likely to be that the fabric is made precious because of its proximity to the sterling silver it is encased by, but I contend that it is the blood itself that is precious and holier than any religious relic.

Using blood and the depiction of one bleeding, inferred or graphically, in art elicits an empathic response. When we see someone bleed, we assume pain is likely to be involved, whether it be a paper cut to a serious flesh wound we analytically respond with some level of concern. After the initial emotional response like a cringe has passed, we instinctually know bleeding must be stopped. Catholic imagery depicts Christ bleeding physically as is his anthropomorphic bleeding heart to which a first time viewer and the devout follower empathize with pain.

Kiki Smith: “One of the things about Catholicism is it’s a religion that’s about making things physical, about taking emotional and spiritual ideas and making them physical. When I went to Hamburg this fall, I saw medieval paintings, and people were crying and Christ was bleeding, sweating blood from each pore, I started crying too....they’re showing the suffering of their world.” When Gould asked if Smith felt like it was happening to her or a relative, she replied, “You become so filled with empathy, and with your own experience, and someone is painting it physical.” (Shearer & Gould, p.71)

The beads used in *Cyclical* were fabricated with cotton gauze that was dyed with blood, dried and oxidized for 2 to 8 weeks, then set with vinegar, a common textile

process that helps colorants to adhere to fibers better. Artist's gel medium, mixed with a little water for easy absorption, was soaked into the fabric to act as a stiffening agent, in lieu of starch, but also as a sealant, like varnish, to keep the color variations as they were so they would not oxidize further and to act as a barrier for hygienic purposes. The gel had a matte quality because a glossy finish would have been contrary to the withered appearance of the organic anatomical textures consistent throughout the study. The title, *Cyclical*, refers to the repetitive prayer cycle of reciting ten Our Fathers and one Hail Mary as well as the repetitive cycle of a woman's body releasing an ovum and finally ending in blood shed at the end.

The use of blood and gut in the overall body of work was to bring internal conflict, the unseen, out to where it can be seen. "A diffused pain exists somewhere inside the body. A muscle throbs, or a headache pounds. An entire body, straining under a fever, feels dull and hot. These are the kinds of unlocalized pain that tell us something is wrong with the inside of the body. With the skin, it is different. If I hurt someplace on my skin, then I know exactly where that place is. I can see it..." (Elkins, p. 35)

Judy Chicago's *Red Flag, 1971* "was that of making the invisible visible" (Betterton, p. 137) Chicago states, "The lithograph I made was inspired by a conversation I had had at a friend's house. Four of us, all women in our early thirties, were discussing menstruation. Suddenly we realized that none of us had ever openly discussed that subject in any depth before. As we were all involved in art, that realization led us to a conversation about the absence of menstruation images in art and literature made by women. I decided to do a menstruation lithograph, called "Red Flag." It was an image of a woman's hand pulling a bloody Tampax out of her vagina. I tried to make the

image as overt as I could, and even then some people interpreted the Tampax as a bloody penis, a testament to the damage done to our perceptual powers by the absence of images of female reality. (Chicago, p. 135)

The second pair of baby booties, *Dressing Wounds*, 2004, was made of blood stained gauze that was cut into narrow strips and pieced together like spun yarn and then knitted. The wound referred to in the title is that of an emotional one caused by resistance to accept what is, the inability to conceive. The rosary it opposed, “Cyclical”, also used blood stained gauze, a sight I think most people can relate to as an un-bandaging of a significant wound. However the wound I refer to is of a metaphorical and emotional wound, that of feeling inadequate as a woman based on “the Mexican yardstick for measuring womanhood—becoming a mother.” (Hinajosa, p. 1) But where did the ‘yardstick’ originate from?

Mexican culture is deeply rooted in Roman Catholicism, which is where I searched for insight into where the standards for womanhood began. It is commonly believed that “the basic function of a marriage was to provide a stable environment for the production and rearing of family heirs.” (Shelton, p. 43) It was “Augustus, who was emperor from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14, was concerned about the declining birth rate, particularly among the members of the upper class. He therefore promoted legislation that was intended to encourage people to have large families, and the Julian Laws were passed in 18B.C.” (Shelton, p. 29) The legislation had “little effect” and later “promoted similar legislation. The Papia-Poppaeian Laws were passed in A.D. 9.” (Shelton, p.29)

In “Ritual,” blood stained wool was knitted and sprayed with gel medium. Because the egg rosary was a long-term project and the rosaries were designed early on,

the booties were the first to be made simply because knitting was a skill I did not have and needed to learn right away so I could practice. Once I understood how to knit and purl, I followed a simple pattern. Wool was the best material to use for two reasons, the first being that it would hold dye, or in this case blood, very effectively; the second is that this series was to have an opposing rosary, that would have the same materials and/or textures. “My Faith has Oxidized” was the opposing piece. Both would have a fibrous texture with oxidation patterns.

“At Age 50: Portrait of my Mother” took the essence of the rosary and expanded it over a lifetime. With 468 egg shells covered in pig gut, it was the culmination of my rosary studies. My intention was to use the rosary as an analogy for a record of a woman’s lifetime during childbearing years or more specifically, ovulation, that is the number of times an ovum is released from the ovaries and presented as an opportunity to conceive. Each cycle, much like a prayer, releases an egg from the body, just as the fingers release a bead after the completion of reciting a meditation.

Each egg, drilled and blown out by hand, was wrapped in pig gut to continue the correlation to the body. The test pieces that were strung together on bleached muslin appeared too pristine and I could not relate to it as though it were made of flesh. Once all the eggs were emptied of their protein content, they were individually wrapped in gut and left to air dry. Muslin was torn into thin strips onto which the eggs were threaded on like rosary beads and in a continuous 10-1 sequence, separated by knots. The knot connecting the Our Father, was a blood knot with an inward coil which is “primarily used by anglers, who tie it in their fine lines” (Budworth, p. 58) but I chose the knot style for its name and the contrast between the fragility of the egg shells and the “numerous wrapping turns

[that] make this knot both strong and secure” (Budworth, p. 58). The muslin was lightly stained with blood, sprayed with starch and also wrapped with pig gut. “In the last five years, I have seen works made of sheets of homemade felt:...bed sheets painted with Vaseline;...sausage casings filled with dried rabbit skin glue...” The use of these materials can be found in the “works by artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Robert Gober, and Kiki Smith, [they] have this one essential property in common: they circle around and eventually return to the concept of skin or membrane,”(Elkins, p. 45) and ‘webbed and slit constructions by artists such as Robert Morris and for dangling hammocks by Eva Hesse...” (Elkins, p. 38)

Choosing blood as a dye was an easy decision on paper, but to actually execute it was terrifying to do and to admit. Using red textile dye to simulate blood was suggested and considered, but I really wanted this to be as authentic as possible. I researched ways to purchase animal blood, but it was nearly impossible due to Mad Cow concerns. Pricking my fingers for little drops of blood was the next option, but droplets were not going to give the impact I sought. This led me to reconsider my first “not an option” concept, to use menstrual blood. As I write this today, I realize that being in a state of mourning gave me the courage to follow through with it. Grieving is an inevitable part of life that other artists have used in their process such as Judy Chicago, “Jerry’s [Chicago’s husband] death gave me my fathers’ death and for a year and a half, I grieved. My friends moved me into a big, green house at the beach, and I turned to my work as my refuge and my salvation and as the one thing in life that I could never lose.” (Chicago, p. 26) My need to sort through my thoughts and emotions helped give me what I needed to fuel my studio exploration where I dedicated long hours of study where I also tried “to

make images out of my feelings.” “After Jerry’s death, I worked in my studio constantly, trying to make images out of my feelings. I did drawings that contained shapes tumbling down the page, like Jerry’s body falling through the air and down the cliff... I wasn’t always conscious of the meaning of these images, but in the process of struggling to come to terms with my circumstances, I made myself into the artist I was always determined to be. It was in the year and a half after Jerry’s death that I learned what it meant to make art seriously.” (Chicago, p. 27)

Kiki Smith said in an interview, “...what I’m trying to deal with in my own personal life at a given moment. But I always wanted to make things that didn’t have overt context in my personal life, because I thought that separates other people, whereas, if you just make things that are kind of open, just something plain, like blood, then everybody adds their own life to it, everybody knows their relationship to it. But it makes you think about what you think about it too.” (Shearer and Gould, p. 68)

Being in graduate school was a huge opportunity for me so my thinking was that if I was to create, I may as well do it full throttle even if my choice of media meant being perceived as unconventional, to say the least.

“If I Could Fill Just One: Self-Portrait Before Conception” was the second of the two portrait installations and as the egg rosary illustrated looking back at the end of the life cycle, this piece is right at the beginning of the cycle. Raised as a Roman Catholic, the after life was painted in black and white as Heaven and Hell so if the spirit hovers above, then looking down and choosing to fill a body is how this piece is placed low to the ground for the viewer. While developing the body of work, I wondered what being a spirit without a body was like in the search to become flesh and bones, which I learned

Kiki Smith did also. “I’ve been more interested in thinking about being born, and this is what the work is about to me. It is one of the most dramatic things that happens to us, getting here physically. That we come from nonexistence into the physical. A couple of years ago I was in my own life, struggling to be here physically, and at that time I made a whole body of work that was about being born, birthing and the necessity to birth oneself.” (Shearer and Gould, p. 70)

Initially, having to admit that I was using menstrual blood and membranous tissue that once cased swine fecal matter was a little daunting. But as I looked at the works of Kiki Smith and Judy Chicago, I think they simply wanted to convey the truths as they viewed it at one moment in time just as I wanted to convey mine. “One of Smith’s most important contributions as an artist has been to reclaim the female body from patriarchy and to refigure it as the site of women’s lived experience. This is not the fixed, self-contained, or harmonious body of Classical art. It is the uncontrollable body that leaks, stains, defecates, and otherwise exposes its interior...These sculptures represent the female body in defiance of the multiple strictures that society erects to police it. They are bodies that refuse to behave. Pee Body and Train release their fluids and stain the world. They do so paradoxically, in shimmering glass beads that suggest the ubiquity of urine or blood but retain rarity of beautiful jewels.” (Posner, p. 20)

In revisiting these works, I learned that I had not only had to release emotions directly from death of my Mother, but also from her life’s pain. Like any recurring thought, unless we release it into the physical world, verbally, or somehow creatively, it remains stagnant in our mind and can inhibit the growth of a new one. The creation of this work allowed me to take a step outside to look in at the life I shared with my Mother

to release and resolve sadness and know we no longer have to live with fear or suffering.
We are not obligated to those who cause us pain and I do not have to carry her or any
other burdens. I am freed to have faith in my abilities and create a life perfect for me.

Body of Work

At Age 50: Portrait of My Mother, 2004
468 egg shells, blood over muslin, pig gut.
Shown on 6 yard long platform

Cyclical, 2004
sterling silver, blood over cotton gauze
24" long

My Faith Has Oxidized, 2004
sterling silver, rusted steel
24" long

Of the Body, 2004
sterling silver, pig gut
24" long

Ritual, 2004
blood over wool
3" deep

Ritual: of the Body, 2004
pig gut
3" deep

Dressing Wounds 2004
blood over gauze
4" deep

If I Could Fill Just One: Self-Portrait Before Conception, 2004
blood over gauze, egg shells
Dimensions Variable

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hinojosa, Maria. 1999. *Raising Raul: Adventures Raising Myself and My Son*. New York: Viking Penguin.

Northrup, Christiane M.D. 1994. *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom: Creating Physical and Emotional Health and Healing*, New York: Bantam Books.

Betterton, Rosemary. 1996. *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body*. New York: Routledge.

Elkins, James. 1999. *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hewlett, Sylvia Ann. 2002. *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children*. New York: Talk Miramax Books.

Posner, Helaine.. 1998. *Kiki Smith*. Boston: Bulfinch Press.

Gould, Claudia and Linda Shearer. 1992. *Kiki Smith*. Williams College Museum of Art, MA, Williams College, 1992. And Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, OH, The Ohio State University, 1992.

Chicago, Judy. 1975. *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Shelton, Jo-Ann. 1998. *As The Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Budsworth, Geoffrey. 2003. *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Knots & Ropework*. London: Hermes House.

Villarejo, Monica M. Gimenez. 2003. *Acculturation, Ethnic Identity and Attitudes Toward Motherhood in Hispanic Women: A Dissertation in Counseling Psychology*. Kansas City: University of Missouri.