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Metaphor in fiber, metal and stone

Marilyn Feinberg

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

METAPHOR IN FIBER, METAL AND STONE

by

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THESIS STATEMENT

My art emanates from personal dialogue; both internal and external. I explore the concerns and questions of this dialogue through visual metaphorical statement. A metaphor, according to Aristotle's initial definition, forces the participant to consider the similarities of objects and/or ideas that ordinarily are considered dissimilar. This confrontation carries the potential to break old habits of understanding and allow an individual to see from a new perspective. The points of confrontation are paramount, not the objects and/or the ideas themselves. The juxtaposition of the phenomenon thought to be dissimilar potentially creates interrelationships that disengage the preconceived notions and open a moment for insight. This possibility, this opportunity, for insight essentially initiates, drives, and concludes my efforts.
SEEDS AND GERMINATION

My first twenty-five years do not easily yield facts, that offer direct insight into why, at forty, I would be writing this master of fine arts thesis. I did not pursue visual art in any noticeable way during those years. The seeds for my current endeavors, however, still lie deeply embedded in that time. These initial encounters are not visual art experiences but, they are the significant events that form the essential nucleus from which my art process evolves. This body of artwork presents the first conscious harvest of these cultivated seeds.

I am deeply attached to the outdoors. I established the connection sometime before conscious memory. I simply have no memories earlier than ones that include the outdoors. My entire life as a preschooler and most of my spare time since then, I has been spent there. Early life defined itself in and by this environment. The knowledge internalized there continues to influence how I see and act in life. The elements of nature, then and now, continue to offer me clear metaphors of the human condition. In nature, acts and conditions are commensurable. Human beings appear incommensurable. It may be that my assessment simply reflects an unavoidable myopic view of human kind. This perception, however inadequate, expresses my understanding. Nature's forms and materials in their various stages of change, resemble aspects of the human condition, only less cluttered. In my visual expressions, I bring the resemblance I see in nature and my questions
concerning this particular human condition together. Then, I see what I can
discover for myself, about myself and about others. The pieces represent the
physical product of this process. Outdoor experience, by its integral part in
this process, significantly defines how I work as an artist.

Academic training in science instills another kind of understanding that
helps to delineate my art. Complete deference to a good question, forms the
cornerstone of scientific inquiry. Hypothesis guides knowledge in science.
Once a hypothesis has been concocted, any number of proofs can be conducted.
This attitude permeates each piece I create. I do not try to convince the
viewer of what I know. Instead, I invite him/her to dialogue with me on a
stated question(s). I am delighted if the viewer chooses to converse but, I
am not insulted if he/she chooses not to partake. I accept individual choice.
Dictatorship does not interest me. This attitude opens the way for possible
conflict: questions can have many viable solutions. The viewer (myself
included) may see meanings in the art that differ from my original thoughts.
Contrary to feeling that this constitutes a problem, I find the conflicting
interaction intriguing. If the question is imagined well enough, the conflict
provides so much richness and depth to the inquiry that, in essence, the
incongruity exposes raw nerve. I believe that the heart of most of my
questions, lies there. As much as possible, I want this tension ridden
interface present. I achieve this situation mostly through hypothesis; the
approach I learned to value in science.

In addition to scientific thinking and my relationship with nature,
poetry and its spiritual connotations also guide my visual art pursuits. My
father often read poetry when I was young. I remember many poetic lines in
his deep, sonorous voice. I also remember the spiritual enrichment poetry
provided on significant occasions. My father recited an appropriate poem at
every family event and he always knew exactly what to read when someone was
sad, or afraid, or joyful. Poetry addressed the areas of life normal language found difficult or impossible to express. Poetic form disrupts ordinary expression with its sounds, rhythms and metaphors. This disruption can deconstruct preconceived notions enough to impart meaning that normally escapes notice in daily turmoil. I transfer this understanding to my art process. I use qualities in and of my materials that tend to exist outside their normal function. This disturbs normal assumptions and forms the basis of my invitation to the viewer to question. I accent the poetic value of the statement by mimicking poetic sound and rhythm with the formal principles of design. The completed work delivers the effects of this poetic attempt as such a clear distinct sensibility that John Worden, art critic for the Democrat and Chronicle, labeled my work "visual poetry."¹ Employing poetic devices individuates my work and, in the case of this critic, summarized it.

Experience with music significantly, but less directly than poetry, plays a part in my visual art process as well. My major caretaker as a young child was an active piano accompanist. Her music and her music activities were just an accepted part of my environment. My friends and I often used music to entertain and express ourselves. Music made me aware of the power of expression, that lay outside the boundaries of words and mathematical formulas. I quickly identified the same potential for expression in visual arts when I began experiments in fiber. This initial knowledge increased my attraction to visual processes and continues to drive my visual pursuits.

The social values of this caretaker constitute the only other influence that directed my life toward visual arts and away from science. This caretaker had spent her teens escaping the Nazis in France. This experience left her feeling adamant that an honest exploration of an art or arts was paramount for achieving a quality life. She saw it as one of the few ways modern man had left to combat the monsters inside each of us and the monsters

in society. My family and immediate environment did not support her convictions. The wisdom of her words, however, made more sense than theirs, as I encountered life. Eventually, I abandoned the values of my more prevalent social environment and chose to guide myself with values closer to hers. The switch from a economically sound and stable industrial job in order to pursue this path, represents the most obvious indicator of this internal change.

So, although I cannot recall any significant encounters from my youth with visual art, the fundamental experiences that shape my current endeavors occurred then. My choice of materials, my processing and the ideas that drive the process emanate from all of these early experiential origins.
The fundamental beginnings just enumerated did not initially present themselves as a complete and comprehensive body of knowledge. As I developed artistically, the existence of these roots became known in the midst of process or during reflection after working. It was as if in breaking ground to grow I unearthed seeds and root structures, here and there, that had cultivated in my own darkness. The developmental stage that unearthed these original seeds continues as a crucial force behind the present body of work. The important aspects of this next growing phase will be delineated in this section.

I entered Rochester Institute of Technology’s day program for textiles three years ago. I came with basic drawing and design skills, and with significant knowledge of loom and dye techniques. I sought this educational opportunity because I wanted to do more than manipulate fibers and dyes to produce cloth. I did not, however, know what the more meant specifically. That first term Fall of 1991, I created Between Heaven and Earth (figure 1). This piece involved a technically complex combined weaving and dye process. Although the process provided many technical challenges, it had nothing to do with the heart of the experience for me. The importance of making this tapestry resided in concept. I used undyed silk and, a weave
structure and color. I tried to express an idea. The visual expression of personal thoughts fascinated me. The only negative experience emanated from the limitations I sensed in loom-controlled flat structure. I simply could not find enough contrast and dimension. I could only create the appropriate color. I spent the next year exploring the avenues that would help me realize my visual ideas more fully.

Basketry offered the first possibilities for solving this dilemma. Contrasting materials and dimension form an integral part of basketry. The word 'freedom' best describes what I felt as I began to explore this medium. I created three different works during this class (figure 2, figure 3, figure 4, figure 4A). Each work attempted to express a personal concern or explore a human condition that I questioned. All these pieces were shown to the public as part of the Rochester Institute of Technology's booth at the American Craft Council's Baltimore Show. I received a tremendous and positive response to the work. People expressed great interest in what I was doing and in what I thought I would do next. I was unprepared for this level of public response and it took me some time to assess what this meant, and how it would influence my future development.
Figure 2

Guarded

Figure 3

The Heroes
During this evaluation period, a refined version of Crossings was accepted for the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery's "Finger Lakes Exhibition." This piece received critical attention. The comments helped facilitate the
evaluation that the Baltimore responses had perciptitated. Worden’s newspaper review (mentioned in the first section) and Judith Reynolds’ gallery lecture, described my work using poetic references. I had not consciously identified these qualities in my work until they had noted them. I immediately understood truth of their statements. After years of exposure, I was subconsciously extrapolating what I understood of the poetic process and reinvesting it into my visual art process. Instead of using words as my basic building unit, I used physical materials and/or forms to create poetic metaphors for a visual poem.

Gaining this insight into my process, I consciously proceeded to study the poetry I read. This allowed me to more concretely identify the specific poetic qualities that are pertinent to my work. Metaphor provides the deepest and most direct connection to poetry. Recognizing this information, I chose to pursue metaphorical statement for my thesis. Metaphors provide the vehicle to consciously pursue what previously occurred only subconsciously. The work from this period transformed long established values into a conscious working practice on which I could build, artistically. This challenge initiated my thesis work.
This thesis body consists of four works; all based on metaphorical statement as it is understood in poetry. I will acknowledge my corroborative associations first, and then discuss individual work. I specify corroboration because I do not consider these people to be influences as I understand the meaning of the word. The first section of this paper enumerated what I consider influence to be. The authors and artists I will elaborate on in this section, only confirmed and/or strengthened ideas and values I already held. They are not in any way responsible for creating my artistic values. Paul Ricoeur’s discourse on metaphor, Pablo Neruda’s late poetry and Ann Hamilton’s installations and supporting commentary clarified and supported my work. This section will conclude all preliminary discussion. The whole thesis body contains two sub-groups. ...the end as it was in the beginning... (figure 5 and 5a) and The Opening (figure 6) form the first group. Cradled (figure 7) and Anchored (figure 8) create the second one. The ideas of the first group inspired the questions involved in the second group. Therefore, I will elucidate The Opening and ...the end as it was in the beginning... before I pursue any explanation of Cradled and Anchored. This will provide a more logical statement. With this written organization the reader can consider
all the factors of origin in conjunction with the specific discussion of the work. A final response will conclude this section and this entire document.

... the end as it was in the beginning ...

Figure 5

Interior View of
... the end as it was in the beginning ...

Figure 5a
The Opening

Figure 6

Cradled

Figure 7
Paul Ricoeur basically reassessed philosophy’s definition of metaphor in the late 1970’s. He then created a revised definition that combined information still relevant from the historic definition with the new understandings established in psychology and linguistics. I essentially agree with his revised definition. Ricoeur’s emphasis was unconsciously present in my breaking ground work, even though I had not been exposed to any specific writings. I commenced work with the first group having read only one essay. I continued to read Ricoeur as I worked. His perceptions clarified my approach to my visual metaphors. Ricoeur’s essays are too dense to completely elaborate on here. I will mention only the two points that totally permeate my work.

Ricoeur agrees with Aristotle and, I agree with both of them, that a metaphor revolves around the ability to see similarities in dissimilar things:
To metaphorize is to see resemblance. It creates new order by disturbing but not destroying old order. Physical realities that are normally understood to be remote are seen alike inspite of or through their differences. This occurs because an object or an event is seen as something else and not just like something else. Like something else denotes analogy or simile. A metaphor brings the considered objects in closer proximity by seeing the literal object figuratively. A metaphor transposes original meaning in this way. When I create my visual metaphors, I constantly ask myself: IS THIS WHAT IT IS? IS THIS HOW IT FEELS? If I cannot say, "YES," to these questions, I revise it or take it out completely.

Understanding metaphor as a predicative activity as opposed to a denominative one represents another idea of Ricoeur’s I used prior to encountering his writings. Later I consciously invested in this definition. A metaphor does not just rename something. Instead, it introduces new meaning that can result only when the interrelationships of an entire statement are considered. Metaphors communicate through the relationships established; they do not reduce a subject to a single identification. I focus on interrelationships when I develop a visual statement. The interrelationships provide the necessary space to question and explore that substitution and nonmetaphorical statement would omit. The conscious definition that I developed through Paul Ricoeur’s essays helped to clarify my efforts.

My corroboration with the poet, Pablo Neruda, presents itself more obviously. I have read Neruda since the early 1970’s. I have always felt a deep kinship with his words. This strong personal connection makes it

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5 Sacks, On Metaphor, 156.
6 Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor, 72.
difficult to sort out where my thoughts end and his begin. Neruda voices my concerns and speaks about what I already feel. The most concrete bond arises in our intimate connections with the earth, in all its stages of birth and death. The mortality of stone, winter’s silence, the eternity of the sea, rotting flesh, dark moist places, indelible springtime, wind, and hands that both hold and let go resound throughout his poetry. In synchrony with his images I choose bark covered with lichens, stones that peel and fracture with the slightest disturbance, rusted steel and amber with insects. I use these materials because of the connections I sense with them. Neruda’s words about these kinds of materials demonstrate a similar connection. I am at home with these materials. I find a way to myself and out of myself through the connections I have with them. Neruda stated it this way:

I came back
with each of my bells
and I stood waiting
searching for the meadow
kissing bitter earth
like a bent over shrub.

Because it is our duty
to obey winter
to let the wind grow
within you as well,
until the snow falls
until this day and everyday are one,
the wind and the past,
the cold falls,
finally we are alone,
and finally we will be silent.
Gracias.7

I cannot imagine seeing life differently than this. Therefore, I cannot imagine creating any work without acknowledging these sentiments, even if it’s only obliquely.

Ann Hamilton constitutes the last individual I wish to note under corroboration. Ann Hamilton only came to my attention after completing the

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first group of thesis work. Some concerns of hers paralleled my own. She often juxtaposes collections or the process of collecting with deterioration in her work. Accumulation accounts for human involvement and accretion intimates monumental time that human effort cannot transcend. Hamilton’s preoccupation with accumulation and accretion closely correlates with my simultaneous inclusion of natural eroded materials and intensively labored objects. Bark with lichens, and fossilized stones address time outside our control or beyond personal references in these pieces. Kumihimo (Japanese braids) reminds us of the conscious labored products of civilization. When juxtaposed, these objects question temporality just as Hamilton’s rusting tables and teeth collections question temporality.

Ricoeur, Neruda and Hamilton did not initiate my ideas. They, however, did clearly guide and expand my on going processes. They simultaneously represented peers and mentors as I navigated the different questions and problems of this course. They constituted a vital support system.

With the deep seated factors, initial attempts and corroborative efforts delineated, I will next pursue a rooted and logical discussion of each piece. Each piece explores a different question. They are united by their common materials, and their similar expressed concern for the human condition.

I produced ...the end as it was in the beginning... and The Opening first. I created and completed them simultaneously. The specific concerns of one do not significantly relate to the other; only the broader overall concerns enumerated in my earlier statements form relationships between the works.

... the end as it was in the beginning... began as a question about ritual. Without the strong presence of organized religion, the enrichment that meaningful religious ritual offers to daily life, is strangely absent.

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8 ann hamilton (San Diego, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 23.
Ritual acknowledges, through formal presentation, aspects of life that escape our grasp in normal physical reality. I became intrigued with creating a formal presentation meaningful to me. This required intense questioning in two areas:

1) I questioned what would constitute a meaningful presentation.
2) I questioned what could suffice as a sacrificial object.

This required perusing my past and the history of other cultures in order to understand what I needed to include in the statement. Generally, ritual honors life and death through objects and events that address the continuity of these mysteries. This is done so that we can cope with the incomprehensible nature of this question. After much research and thought, I designated certain features as essential and necessary to include in my work. I needed formal, balanced design; forms that addressed the circularity and continuity of life over time; and elements that recognized the existence of civilized life in the midst of all life. The depth and breadth of this work would depend on the ability of the individual components and the interaction of these components to reveal this.

In the basic physical structure I implied the following three ideas: I referenced a funeral pyre, a baptismal bowl and a ship. A funeral pyre alludes to death and connotes the action of burning. Burning as an activity denotes the end of matter and the birth or release of energy as light. I included a mica base assembled with a copper log cabin fire-starting structure; a supporting copper grate in the central offering; and amber, as a visual coal, on top of the copper grate; in order to communicate pyre and burning visually.

The bark vessel represented a cross between the general visual parameters of a boat and a baptismal bowl. A boat implies the journey metaphor for life and baptism ritually acknowledges the official entry into this journey in most civilized life. Baptism appears in one form or another
in almost every culture. The bowl of holy water exemplifies this rite most vividly for me.

I brought the different priorities of time together through the juxtaposition of the various elements in the structure that I used. I stacked the mica so it could remind the viewer, simultaneously, of the ever-changing surface of the sea and of the earth from which the mica is actually taken. I also questioned the constraints of civilized time in relation to time with a big T. I did this by constructing a bark vessel with copper rivets and kumihimo braids; and by considering elemental rock forms such as amber and calcite, in conjunction with computer chips. The braids and the rivets very concretely hold in and shape the rest of the statement. This is appropriate. Meaning can only be extracted by going through the civilized mask. It constitutes the glue or mortar for the rest. The rocks and the computer chips remind the viewer that time is circular and paradoxical. Mortality and resurrection compose most events. Ages ago, the amber acted as sap. It provided nourishment for a tree and a tomb for unsuspecting insects. Here, in this offering, this prehistoric entity is resurrected as a fossilized crystal with its ancient physical life encapsulated. I mixed this fossilized symbol with computer chips. I did this in order to raise the possibility that computer technology and its physical components could be a future sap. Society constantly berates computers for the destruction they administrate on existing society. I do not deny that computer technology destroys traditional life. However, I also think, that this technology could constitute the beginnings of new life; much like the primordial soup of amino acids came before what we currently define as life. I placed the chips right in the amber. This symbolically disturbed the ego-centric focus on time.

The calcite on top pays a clear homage to life in its inanimate form. Therefore, it unifies the entire message. Calcite contains calcium carbonate;
chemicals present in life cycles at the biochemical level. In conventional understanding the crystal is not alive and yet life does not proceed without it. Its importance to life cannot be ignored but the status of life cannot be attributed to it if normal definitions are accepted. This paradox, in some way, permeates the entire statement and keeps the questions active.

This piece presented the most intellectually complex challenge I encountered. The necessary ambiguity I needed to maintain, and the questions I needed to ask effected a constant struggle, that would have fallen into trite banality, if I had not continuously analyzed. The fact that the second group of work emanates from questions ...the end as it was in the beginning... attests to the success of this endeavor.

The Opening originated from questions more personal in nature than the universal issues addressed in ...the end as it was in the beginning.... My experiences with self-discovery and opportunity did not match the meaning of opening as it would normally define a moment of self-discovery or opportunity. The closure that encompasses an opening and the interference that denies direct access to the discovery, compose as significant a part of an opening experience as the initial hole. An opening addresses closure as much as it addresses an opening. I wanted to explore the polar nature of the parameters that visually define this moment.

I devised the basic form through sketching. I chose nonaligned quadrangles that together did not exactly run parallel with the ground. I placed strong bars in front of the quadrangles that I registered perpendicular to the ground in order to emphasize the upset condition. A disorientation with normal life typically accompanies these moments and this form depicted that change. I made the bars large enough to be purposely menacing. I wanted to desire their removal from The Opening so that I could view the hole. The bars in the initial design did this.
After establishing the design, I looked for materials that would best express this situation. I chose rusted steel; mutilated copper, color-treated with heat; and braided silk rag. I chose rusted steel for the background quadrangle and for the bars. The ragged empty quality of the rusted torch-cut sheet evoked the appropriate association to the void this experience creates. The rust on the bars tied the surface interference of the bars to the larger universal condition via the rust. This interrelated the bars while their own voice remained intact. I manipulated the copper sheet until it resembled raw flesh. This presented the idea of an opening as a wound and suggested the pain associated with this condition. I isolated this sheet between the emptiness and the external surface interference. The sheet was tortously held in place with large rivets. I introduced a large silk kumihimo braid to enhance the nuisance quality of the bars. I see the bars symbolizing the deep rooted civilized structure with which humans have always lived, and the braid represents the current interpretation our society imparts on this structure. They act together to cloud and deter direct access to the knowledge of self discovery. The design established the sense of change and disturbance. The materials drove the psychological turmoil that challenges the inadequacy of the normal definition of opening for denimating this experience. Again, this work triggered some of the questions for the next pieces just not as significantly as ...the end as it was in the beginning....

Many people commented that ...the end as it was in the beginning... reminded them of a cradle. Although the work projected some of the physical elements of a cradle, it did not address the condition cradled adequately. Too much security existed in ...the end as it was in the beginning.... After some reflection, I proceeded with creating Cradled. A cradled state exudes security but, only tenuously. Time will force change and only by expending tremendous energy can the cradled state be maintained. A cradled condition
temporarily protects by separating the object from external threat through a suspended hold. These properties of suspension and vulnerability determine the individual character of a particular cradled condition. The idea of cradled cannot be adequately considered without considering suspension and vulnerability.

I started with a u-shaped, suspended, bark structure. The u-shape mimicked a parabola or a sine curve: A mathematical symbol for change as time. I used bark to emphasize the temporality of this condition. Inside this larger bark structure I suspended a rock in a silk net. I started and finished the net with kumihimo braids. Beneath the netted rock, I constructed an overgrown silk thicket. The juxtaposed elements worked together to promote an overriding sense of vulnerability and suspension. The bramble appeared as a nasty threat, simply because it encroached on the netted rock in a monstrous way. The silk braids and the basket’s copper rivets alluded to civilization’s part in this scenario by their integrated presence. This inclusion occurs similarly to the inclusion of braids and rivets in ...the end as it was in the beginning....

The strength of this piece rests in the elements that exist outside the central structure. The steel cable that suspends the piece over twenty feet, and the granite stone placed under the main structure, suggest the presence of a greater force. It also suggests an inherent fragility. The structure cannot express these conditions alone. This work imparts the precious and precarious condition to Cradled that the experience cradled embraces.

*Anchored* evolved from the interest, that the production of *The Opening* and ... *the end as it was in the beginning*..., piqued concerning questions of stability. The idea that permanency and stability define rock-solid conditions does not seem valid at this point in my life. Yet, I still encounter moments of stability in the midst of constant shifting experience.
I wanted to visually explore some of what this paradoxical experience means. First, I imagined sheets of sliding mica in sketches. Just as situations in life occur in all different planes and head in all different directions, I drew mica to state this visually. I then developed forms to enhance the qualities of this main metaphor. I introduced an oval rock form as a central figurative element. I embedded this element so that it directly interacted with the shifting mica. I placed the rock at a right angle to the ground. This infers the illusory security individuals maintain in their life so that life proceeds more easily. I secured the shifting strata and the rock to an undulating copper base with heavy steel tapers. The spikes drove through the mica at contradictory angles in order to accentuate the difficulty of holding this changing condition together. Silk braid ropes bind the rock to the spikes. Consequently, the rock also connects with the undulating base. The braids entrap the rock in with hangman nooses. Balancing all the planes and connections requires tremendous energy. Similarly, a balanced life requires tremendous energy. In life momentary balance produces harmony despite the obvious tensions. Anchored emits this harmony strongly. The strong harmony temporarily masks the tenuous state. However, harmony rests inside the tension and creates an overall understated beauty.

The actual physical composition of the materials also questions stability and instability. Elemental mica exhibits simultaneous hardness and fragility. The inherent strength of steel spikes is challenged by rust and the questionable durability of a silk rope. All accentuates this paradox. The blackness of the central rock form creates a stillness at the center of change. This basic metaphor became a multi-faceted statement as a result of the interrelationships the additional elements created.

The discussion of Anchored concludes the explanation of the work. Each piece presented a different question that personal experience raised. The process and materials used remained constant throughout the study. They
constitute the factors that make the work appear as a unified whole. Elemental materials and specific forms metaphorize an experience. The metaphor through its interrelationships raises questions about the idea. This narrative quality mimics the narrative quality in poetry. I offer the viewer fragments of an idea. I do not present an entire story of the idea. This treatment allows me to stay at the heart of my issues. Time and stability reoccur as a part of each piece. A consuming interest in meaning mediates the entire process. This is an uncertain time defined by man’s abundance and consumption’s spiritual depravity. This condition compels me to continue my visual questioning. I hope I can integrate and enrich my life with the knowledge I gain, and having enriched my life, I can enhance the life of those around me. I see this thought as the idea to hold in mind as I move toward the future and the creation of more work.
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