Anxious care

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Anxious Care

by Shara Burrows

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This thesis is dedicated to Joan Elizabeth Dominguez.
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Abstract

The intent of my thesis is to translate objects that relate to our bodies into glass and mixed media. The purpose of this endeavor is to create a dialogue between media and form about the fragile and dependent nature of human relationships. Glass breaks and it can be repaired. Glass objects must be handled with care. The material translation of functional objects into fragile glass forms supports the content of my work.

The basic premise of my thesis is the universality of the human experience of loss. Everyone has or at some time will experience the death of a loved one. Unfortunately, I suffered a great deal of loss at a young age. When I was seventeen my mother suddenly and unexpectedly died after a life long battle with drug and alcohol addiction. She was thirty-six. Three years later I became pregnant and experienced the death of my son during the seventh month of pregnancy. The experience of losing a child became a powerful inspiration for this body of work. The work is not, however, a direct representation of a single event.

The goals and objectives of my thesis are to generate feelings of discomfort, frustration and loneliness in an audience. The grouping of objects that I create will function both as an emotional narrative and as evidence of past events.
I grew up in Massachusetts by the beach. I’m an only child and my best childhood memories are of being at the beach swimming in the ocean and making sandcastles. Growing up I was always creative. I knew that I wanted to attend a private art school but I didn’t know what material would be the focus my degree concentration. During my senior year of high school and two months after the death of my mother, I took a beginning glassblowing class taught by Peter Ivy at MassArt for two weeks. The process of making objects out of molten glass made me really happy at an incredibly unhappy and confusing time in my life. Blowing glass was different than any other material in that once you start something you have to finish it without stopping. That was perfect for me because I have difficulty working through ideas and this process forced me to focus and have the confidence to finish the work. It was a very positive and rewarding experience because I was able to focus and accomplish something during a difficult time. The process of glassblowing ultimately inspired me and gave me the drive to attend an art school.

Learning to blow glass had also motivated an interest in sculpture. The proximity of the Ohio State University Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio, allowed me to explore contemporary art forms as I continued to develop technical skills with glass. I completed my BFA degree with a solo glass and mixed media undergraduate exhibition at the Columbus College of Art and Design.

Although glassblowing is my favorite process, I struggled with my own technical abilities to make the work that filled my sketchbooks. My frustration led me to see casting as a more suitable process. I had taken a glass casting class at Pilchuck Glass School the year before attending RIT and I explored additional mold and casting processes when I moved to RIT for my graduate degree. I learned many new techniques from Michael Rogers and visiting artists Stephen Paul Day and Sibylle Peretti.
As I refined and developed the processes that I wanted to work in glass, I also began to focus on the content of my work. Conceptually, I was interested in personal issues relevant to my own history and experience. During my undergraduate education I worked directly with patients for five years at an inner city hospital in the Emergency Department. I witnessed many interactions between families and was affected by those experiences. I found the sterile environment of a hospital and the stainless steel instruments and medical devices to be visually compelling. In addition to working in a hospital, I have had significant experiences as both a patient and a visitor in hospitals. As I put together these events and sensations, I also began to consider the long history of glass as an utilitarian material in hospitals. Bottles were often used as a container to store medicine. Blown glass jars were used to store breast milk. Syringes and IV bottles were made out of glass. Glass was even used for operating tables.

I chose to cast a baby bottle because while a bottle requires the interaction of another person in glass, the solid form denies its function. Casting the form allowed me to achieve much greater detail while working with a life sized form, aspects that would have been difficult to achieve with blowing. When I held the cast object it was almost visually identical to the real object albeit much heavier than the actual bottle. I had a strong commitment to that form and explored different possibilities for manipulating it. The conceptual goals, however, continued to remain the same: creating a cold sense of frustration as an indicator of an inability to care. The bottles were successful in conveying the original idea but there were some technical issues with the surface of the glass.

The material translation of objects into glass supports the content of my work because of the inherent fragility of the material. Glass breaks and it can be repaired. Glass objects must be handled with care. I think that when we take care of an object we develop a greater connection with that object. The material translation of glass into objects that relate to our bodies also contains the object and removes a personal act. In glass a functional form sometimes becomes useless and is uncomfortable to use. This rigid and uninviting object creates distance between two people.
Through the process of casting I created molds, then wax positives of the object which were then used to make rubber or plaster molds. As the body of work developed and I spent a considerable amount of time in the studio working with wax and eventually began to use it directly as a sculptural material. I had made a rubber mold of a pair of children's crutches which was then made into glass. I then used that rubber mold to
create many wax crutches which developed into a separate piece. The choice to make multiple objects speaks of an anxious excessive need to care. The white wax crutches talk about how easily bones break and the disappointment when our bodies have failed us.

Fracture 2006 36"x 18" x 10" wax and mixed media Shara Burrows

There are a number of artists whose art has been inspirational in the development of my work. Throughout my undergraduate and graduate education Louise Bourgeois was significant and I admired both her subject matter and the honesty with which she discussed her work. She continued making work up until a week before her death, always revisiting the same themes throughout her career. I have chosen to include the following quotes because they resonate with me and summarize many feelings that I have about my own work and process.

"The subject of pain is the business I am in. To give meaning and shape to frustration and suffering. What happens to my body has to be given a formal abstract shape. So, you might say, pain is the ransom of formalism."

Louise Bourgeois
"My sculpture allows me to re-experience the fear, to give it a physicality so I am able to hack away at it. Fear becomes a manageable reality. Sculpture allows me to re-experience the past, to see the past in its objective, realistic proportion."

Louise Bourgeois

Another artist who has also been inspirational is Mona Hatoum. Working in a variety of media, she turns familiar everyday objects into strange and often harmful devices. Using materials that cause a strong visceral response, there is often a threat of violence or pain. Her thoughts about comfort and support and a loss of function in the forms that she creates relate closely to my own thoughts about the baby bottle:

"I like to use furniture in my work because it is about everyday life. Some of the objects are vaguely useful, but often they turn into uncanny objects. We usually expect furniture to be about giving support and comfort to the body. If these objects become either unstable or threatening, they become a reference to our fragility."

Mona Hatoum
I've always been inspired by artists that use glass as a material to express ideas. Annie Cattrell's Capacity, 2000-2007 are a pair of flame worked glass lungs. She combines art, science and medicine to create beautiful objects.
I often visited Seattle during graduate school and loved to visit the University of Washington's Henry Art Gallery and Western Bridge. One of my favorite installations is Carsten Holler’s Neon Circle. Holler holds a doctorate in biology, and he uses his training as a scientist to inspire his work as an artist, concentrating on the nature of human relationships.

According to Carsten Holler, Neon Circle was intended “to produce a very peculiar state of the mind, something near a loss of orientation, a kind of perplexity of not knowing what to do, a reduced ability to maneuver, while at the same time experiencing joyful, happy, self-sufficient, purified, introspective feelings.”

This piece is one of my favorite installations because the space with its minimal concrete floors is very bare while the installation with its intense white light is very inviting. After I entered the Neon Circle I sat on the ground and enjoyed the work. It's difficult for me to describe but there was something perfect about that experience.
Although my thesis exhibition was predominately cast glass I always continued to work in the hotshop developing ideas and technical skills. The last piece I created for the thesis exhibition was my favorite and I feel, the most successful. It was a hanging piece of multiple white glass IV forms. Excessive rubber tubing connected each bag together; again denying the object it's original function. The tubes continuously fed into each other. The visual weight of the piece, originally meant for one person was exaggerated. While IV bags usually contain saline or medicine, white was chosen to again reference milk.

This piece was more playful and experimental. I created multiples to convey a sense of excessive and anxious care. It was the last piece that I completed and I felt that it successfully conveyed my thesis concepts: discomfort, frustration and loneliness. It was playful because the IV bags are blown glass and the process of blowing glass is very enjoyable so I felt that I was able to combine the process that I most enjoyed while also successfully expressing my ideas. Previously I had focused on casting to convey my ideas.
Conclusion

Immediately following my MFA Thesis exhibition, I had a very strong emotional connection to the work and to glass. It was hard for me to continue making this work and I felt I needed to take a break. Following graduation I moved to Japan for three years. I taught ESL in public schools and private art lessons to children. I was fortunate to travel extensively throughout Asia. I studied traditional Japanese arts, Ikebana and Sado. I was inspired on a daily basis by my new surroundings and experiences.

On the weekends I often visited the Hara Museum in Tokyo or the 21st Century Art Museum in Kanazawa to view contemporary exhibitions. I also had the unique and wonderful experience of staying at James Turrell's House of Light. The last trip I took before moving was to Naoshima a small island known for modern art and architecture. I feel that through these new experiences I have more to contribute to future work.

Unfortunately, I returned to America after three years because my aunt who had been my "mother" for the past ten years was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Again I suffered a great loss while in the midst of trying to complete this written thesis.

I do not want the subject matter of my work to always be the same, but my memories and experiences will probably come up again throughout my career and be seen in future work. I want to always continue to grow and evolve as an artist, creating new work and learning new techniques. My hope is that I will have a lifelong career as a studio artist and the work will continue to evolve.
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