A Journey to happiness

Laura Bauer
A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of The College of Fine and Applied Arts in Candidacy for the Degree of MASTER OF FINE ARTS

A Journey to Happiness

By

Laura E. Bauer

May 23, 1992
Approvals

Adviser: Edward Miller  
Date: 5/20/92

Associate Adviser: Jack Slutzky  
Date: 5/21/92

Associate Adviser: Karen Sardisco  
Date: 5/26/92

Associate Adviser: Alan Singer  
Date: May 21, 92

Special Assistant to the Dean for Graduate Affairs:  
Date: 5/28/92

Dean, College of Fine and Applied Arts:  
Date: 6/4/92

I, Laura E. Bauer, 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.

Date: 
Special thanks to my family and to Craig
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank Edward Miller, Karen Sardisco, Jack Slutzky, Alan Singer, Phil Bornarth, and Judd Williams for their support and guidance.
This thesis represents a coming to terms with my feelings of being a victim of rape. The body of paintings that I completed communicates an active involvement on my part to use art as a healing process. By using abstract floral forms I have worked towards achieving a feeling of inner peace. I have realized that by expressing myself through my work I was able to confront my feelings of vulnerability but have also begun to develop and assert my feelings of strength.

This paper reflects my ability to speak of the crime, and by looking at some of the reasons behind the rape expressing my feelings about the incident in my life and discussing the individual pieces of work and their relationship the process of healing that they represent.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS................................................................. 1
PREFACE.................................................................................. 2
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.......................................................... 3
BODY....................................................................................... 4
WORKS CITED........................................................................... 11
BIBLIOGRAPHY.......................................................................... 12
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. I Am Scared
2. I Am Alone
3. Field of Flowers
The formal definition of rape as described by The American Law Institute reads:

Section 213.1 Rape and Related Offenses.

(1) Rape. A male who has sexual intercourse with a female not his wife is guilty of rape if:
(a) he compels her to submit to by force or by threat of immanent death, serious bodily injury, extreme pain or kidnapping, to be inflicted on anyone; or
(b) he has substantially impaired her power to appraise or control her conduct by administering or employing without her knowledge drugs, intoxicants or other means for the purpose of preventing resistance; or
(c) female is unconscious; or
(d) the female is less than 10 years old.

(11, p24)

It was only recently that I recognized that an incident in my life had serious implications for me.

Upon entering college I began developing friendships. I discovered the excitement of new relationships. The shy, introspective individual that I entered school as soon blossomed into a more outgoing and confident person. My personal life began to evolve and mature. As I matured my artwork became very important to me.

This new confidence was shattered one night. It was like any other night, going to parties and sharing with friends. On this particular evening after a night of too much partying, I decided to sleep it off at my friend’s apartment. Since I was fairly intoxicated I don’t remember much other than waking up the next morning and discovering that I had been raped.
Six years ago I had never considered the possibility of becoming a rape victim. I discovered that I was a vulnerable young woman and I didn’t realize that I had to protect myself when in the company of friends.

It has only been recently that the concept of “date rape” has been seriously discussed. This recent awareness has had a tremendous influence me. It has enabled me to confront and acknowledge that I had in fact... been raped!

I recognized that I fell into the category of women who, in a situation like this, have conflicting feelings about the role they play in this kind of assault. This testimony from a woman who was raped about her feelings regarding the rapist after the incident;

“People always say, you know, “ time heals all wounds,” “things get better with age,” et cetera. I hate that fucker more today than I did when it happened to me.”

(1,p364)

This quote seems to encompass the source of some of my inner anger.

I found that because I was not violently attacked it was hard for me to acknowledge this incident as a rape. As I tried to ignore the incident, I found that my feelings of self-worth began to erode. I began to live a new life engulfed in innocent promiscuity and as many parties one could fit into a week. This destructive behavior began to influence my schoolwork, my social life, and my
interaction with my family.

For the past 3 years I have been trying to deal with my feelings concerning a sense of violation and a diminished sense of self respect. My one and only salvation has been my artwork. I realized that the physical nature of painting allowed for a pent-up emotion to be released. That became very important to me. I discovered that through my painting I was able to begin to re-establish feelings of self worth. This statement by Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh describes a similiar painting process used by Van Gogh and Soutine in their paintings: “Van Gogh and Soutine painted violently but their paintings were momentary releases from the battle they waged with themselves.”(3,p49)

I found myself drawn to using nature as the impetus for my paintings, because it had always given me a feeling of inner peace. Somehow I felt that I belonged to nature due to the imperfections found in nature. I could now relate on a closer level, feeling somewhat damaged by the rape. Now I am also able to see that nature is full of imperfections, but each imperfection is perfect in it's own right. This paradox became the central theme of my work. It became very important for me to find a source of non-threatening imagery with which to diffuse some of the negative and aggressive feelings I was having.

The artist Elizabeth Layton was also able to work through a tough period in her life using art as the vehicle for healing. This quote from the book Through
the Looking Glass: Drawings By Elizabeth Layton describes the healing process that this artist traveled through:

"Each drawing, it seemed had some story or character behind it, some play-acting was crucial to its making. The result, Layton began to realize was something like an exorcism. Drawing was cathartic. She had noticed that her depression seemed to be withering, her grief over her son abating. "Contour drawing is a wonderful way to get rid of anger or whatever you want ot get rid of," she told Lambert. It’s even "one way to escape depression.""(8, p9)

I found that the evolutionary process of painting becomes an experimental roadway filled with many exciting and unusual results. Change is a part of any creative process. Through the growth and development of my work I noticed relationship between the positive and negative changes that occurred throughout my life. By working through these changes in a way that allowed me to be detached on the conscious level, I was able to begin my own art therapy. This route allowed me the non-threatening modality which was necessary for my healing process.

When working on a piece I want to achieve a final product that will empower the audience to reach out and touch the painting. Having the viewer interested in the texture and application of the paint would satisfy my conceptions of an effective work of art. I feel that it is important to totally engage the viewer. Henry David Thoreau talks about the importance of opening yourself up to nature and regarding every change as significant. I feel the same idea applies
to painting. He writes,

"you must walk sometimes perfectly free, not prying nor inquisitive, not bent on seeing things. Throw away a whole day for a single inspiration of air... You must walk so gently as to hear the finest sounds, the faculties lay over eye level with her smallest leaf, and take an insect view of its plain."

In the symbolic sense, my paintings represent an image of myself being deflowered. The progression from "I Am Alone" to "Field Of Flowers" represents the rebirth of my inner self. The painting "I Am Alone" shows confusion and anxiety representing my self worth. After more than ten layers of paint, and many hours of indecision I finally was able to reach an appropriate image. This was my first breakthrough on my journey towards healing. I was a fragile flower that was suddenly uprooted. It took more than 6 years of hard work to relearn that I deserved to be loved. Moving onto "I Am Scared" was a less difficult task. I found that after one layer of paint I was satisfied with the results. The transition from the first painting did not seem as threatening. As I moved onto my final piece, "Field of Flowers", I found myself trapped in a similiar mode as in "I am Alone". Looking at other artists work such as Joan Michell and Pat Steir, I was able to pull this work together. I used an unusual surface of fiberglass screening streched onto a wood frame. The paint was applied both by brush and by a palette knife. Many different layers of paint were involved in this experimental process. This painting proved to be a great challenge for me. My initial idea of this painting was that it would serve to complete the series, and in effect my theraputic needs. I would later discover that
they may never be satisfied, and certainly not by two years of work and three paintings.

The vibrant, bold yellows, reds, blues, greens, and purples in my work represent my anger both at myself and the attacker. For a long time I denied the incident even occurred. Then, the world became more and more overwhelming I came to recognize the incident. The pure anger coupled with my new found ability to use art as a vehicle for which to express my intense emotions, has carried about this body of work.

My work in the printmaking studio became more detailed and story-like, still very strong in emotional content. My etchings allowed me to clear up some inconsistencies about the attack for myself. This also reinforced that the attack actually occurred. In fact these etchings were stirring up so many emotions that I seemed almost compelled to cut the zinc plates up and throw them in the acid so that the image would hopefully disappear. I eventually did do this and there was a great feeling of relief when the image was gone forever. This enabled me to disassociate myself from the incident and allowed me to move to another level. In the book "No Fairy Godmothers, No Magic Wands: The Healing Process After Rape", Judy H. Katz describes almost the same feelings I had while writing this thesis. She writes,

"Upon completion of the first draft, I found myself trying once again to leave the rape behind me. I would look for ways to avoid going back to the manuscript, fearing that other feelings and issues would resurface as I reread and reworked the manuscript. Finally one year later I developed the impetus to complete the final draft. My fears that the
wounds would reopen did not hold true. As I reread the
manuscript, however, I gained new insights into my own
healing process. I found that I described the rape as “my”
rape. Somehow I was still owning being raped, that is, taking
responsibility to some degree that I had been raped. I also
discovered that in the long term healing process, I had described
feeling very anxious at times about the possibility of being
raped again. Now I find the degree of anxiety has lessened.
I also discovered that the issues related to the long-term
process of healing were clearer to me when I returned to
the second draft. This only points out how very long it takes
to integrate the experience into one’s life. Even when I thought
that I had fully integrated the rape, I re-learned how deep the wounds
really are”(7,100-101)

I can’t say that I will ever be totally “healed”, but this work has allowed me to
expell some of the anger that I had stored up in me for a long time. I still feel
very angry. Sometimes it seems like I am a tea pot ready to scream. I know I
still have alot of work to do.
I Am Alone, Oil on Canvas, 72" x 96", 1991
I Am Scared, Oil on Canvas, 72" x 96", 1991
Field Of Flowers, Oil on Vinyl Screening, 72” x 96”, 1991
WORKS CITED


