If i had one -- it would be huge

Melissa Lee Matthews
IF I HAD ONE - - IT WOULD BE HUGE

by

Melissa Lee Matthews

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Jeff Weiss, Thesis Board Chairperson
Associate Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York

Martha Leinroth
Associate Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York

Ken White, Associate Professor and Head
Imagining Arts
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York
DEDICATION

TO
MOTHER NATURE

May her children grow up some-day soon.
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ABSTRACT

By alluding to genitalia, "If I Had One--It Would Be Huge" calls attention to the need in contemporary society to eliminate gender bias in favor of more relevant criteria for evaluating an individual's worth and potential. Gender is never an appropriate criterion. By referring to "one," it also alludes to bringing what appears to be opposite elements, materials, and viewpoints into compatibility.

On examination of the completed pieces which I selected for the thesis exhibit, I found that a quote from Eugene Delacroix¹ was very appropriate as the "Artist's Statement" for my thesis exhibit:

The scientist discovers the elements of things, if you like, and the artist, with elements having no value in the place they chance to be, composes, invents a unity, in one word, creates; he strikes the imagination of men by the spectacle of his creations, and in a particular manner. He renders clear the sensations that things arouse within us, and which the great run of men, in the presence of nature, only vaguely see and feel.

This thesis also describes the installation of my work in general and in terms of the materials in the four individual pieces. "Opposite" elements are incorporated into four pieces (Untitled--Slide #1, Chick--Slides #2 and #3, Building--Slides #4 and #5, and Altar--Slide #6) primarily through the use of unusual combinations of materials. In addition to the material combinations that make up the installation, symbolic elements are also suggestive of "opposite" elements. The choice of particular materials is based on the interpretation of the environment and what seems to dominate it. Each of the pieces is intended to be clear, honest, non-didactic, and accessible.
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Melissa Lee Matthews
Post Office Box 1461
Fairfield, IA 52556
515/472-2314

Date: June, 1992
THESIS-SHARING APPROVAL FORM
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MFA IMAGING ARTS

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

The entire thesis is merely an elaboration on the title, "If I Had One--It Would Be Huge." The title reflects critical and complex positions. One of these positions has to do with the status of females and males--and how that status is evaluated. Clearly, genitalia are not a legitimate consideration in deciding one's worth or one's potential as an individual, as a professional, or as a member of society.

I believe that many of the most pressing contemporary conflicts grow out of seeing males and females as opposites--with opposing points of view. I also believe that the success of our society depends on adults finding ways to make compatible these seemingly opposite views. "Compatibility of opposites" makes it unnecessary for males to exaggerate the hard and callous side that they mistakenly consider to be their "maleness." The daily exposure to conflict and suffering that are produced by the male-dominated society is unnecessary, but, unfortunately, a habit.

If I am successful, both the individual pieces and what they represent together in the installation will be consistent with my artist's statement. They will have a scientific and an artistic quality and each will be timely enough to express some of the contemporary gender issues in effective and comprehensible ways. Furthermore, "opposites" in each of the four pieces selected for the exhibit will serve each other symbiotically. This symbiotic relationship was found in attributes such as appearance (of brick and glass), function (of test tube and monofilament fishing line), and impact on society (of tadpoles and eggs). Such materials supported and depended on each other in the individual pieces.

OVERALL DEVELOPMENT OF THE THESIS

In May, 1990, I wrote and submitted a "final" version of the proposal for the exhibit which became "If I Had One--It Would Be Huge." I proposed to represent the "compatibility of opposites" in ten matched pairs--a total of 20 pieces--by the use of contemporary and archetypal symbols. I associated the symbols with the five "basic elements" of space, air, fire, water, and earth. I intended to "prove" my point about opposites needing each other. That overall concept for the exhibit has persisted. The concepts, technologies, and procedures have only changed,
however, in a direction of greater simplicity and minimalism—somewhat like breaking a paragraph down into the alphabet.

Furthermore, I intend for my work to evoke basic thought about substantial issues. I had a genuine interest in incorporating humor. I found myself needing to laugh about the pieces while, at the same time, seriously examining their relationships to progress/regression in society.

Understanding this particular demand triggered a new style and approach to expression. For quite some time, it was most frustrating. I created pairs (described in the earlier proposal) and showed some of them during routine reviews prior to the thesis exhibit. Having not yet achieved the essential new style and approach to expression, the pieces did not represent the elusive quality that I needed. Taken separately or together, they represented the fusion of ideas—but not as clearly as the final pieces, which were even more simplified. Taken separately, the five (two complete pairs and one incomplete pair) out of twenty proposed pieces were adequate. However, the partial installation never quite represented what had inspired it. Satisfaction of my desire called for a deeper level of minimalism.

Not having achieved the quality in my work that I wanted, I was seeking a greater level of minimalistic expression with both my materials and my ideas. Intuition and experimentation presented me with four "huge" pieces rather than the twenty pieces that I had proposed. I had four pieces and four honest, non-didactic and accessible ideas. They expressed such interesting duality that it was not necessary to have paired pieces for comparison—as I had thought originally. Each piece contained both complements of the dualistic idea. Literally, the four pieces together contained my favorite "elements" of space, air, fire, water, and earth. The use of these "elements" seemed to be my tie to tradition.

From this sustained need developed a new level of minimalism in my work. I needed to find a way for less to say more. Viewers could see reflections of themselves and of other pieces in many variously-shaped reflecting surfaces of individual pieces. The transparent materials and spaces in each piece allowed viewers to see all pieces through each individual piece. These reflecting and transparent surfaces were not separate from the pieces but, rather, were structurally and aesthetically integral to the pieces.
The four concepts, corresponding to the four pieces, had come out of an estimated million urges, dreams, objects, and sounds. Ideas came up, grew, and found completion—but not so smoothly or easily. My brain had processed all of my "input" and "collaged" it to evoke ways of seeing and saying.

**MATERIALS, PROCESS, AND INSTALLATION**

During the first and second years of work toward the exhibit there were times when ideas began and failed. The ideas that failed occupied frustrating amounts of valuable attention and time. They represented a "creative cap"—continuous production with no substantial product. The pieces were second-rate and, of course, disappointing. I was trapped into emphasis on completion of pieces rather than quality or aesthetics of pieces. This wheel spinning frustrated me over and over again. Frustration gave way to deep annoyance and disgust.

Finally, I experienced maturation in my work. The pressure that had produced the emphasis on completion and quick resolution gave way; irrational thought about the work diminished and the wheels of progress achieved some traction. Process became more important and became the focus of a stronger desire to communicate. The work became more honest as innocence became imperative. During the third year, all the negatives became positives. Both the acquisition of substantial studio space and an attitude of creative independence contributed to this.

Three of the pieces are associated in contemporary society with male-dominated, life-endangering areas of endeavor. Women have been almost completely excluded from decision-making roles in government, science, economics, and the arts. Clearly gender, and not potential contribution, has been the main criterion for this exclusion.

The fourth piece of the group is associated with a function that has been restricted biologically to women. Nurturing a fetus to birth is a biologically-determined function which men have not mastered. Ironically, however, legal and medical decisions regarding this function have been dominated by those very people who cannot experience the function.

Each of the four pieces were disassembled in the studio and installed "from scratch" in the gallery. Location was critical. The mechanics of maintaining the installation were unique. The
live tadpoles of the "Chick" piece required daily cleaning of the spring water in which they lived. They were fed each morning and evening, and the water was oxygenated each night between gallery closing and opening. Care of the tadpoles was according to instructions by "Ward Scientific Supply," which contributed them for the show. Use of live flame in the "Altar" piece required that an attendant be present in the gallery throughout the show. Candles were replaced when they burned down, literally and symbolically. A spare propane tank was available so that refilling did not interrupt the show.

**The Untitled Piece--Slide #1**

Glass test tubes, grass, soil, monofilament, and a dilute water solution of acid serve as materials for this piece. Each test tube is tied separately and suspended separately from the gallery ceiling. Five hundred acid-filled test tubes suspended by individual monofilament lines from a fifteen-foot ceiling and "falling" at various vertical levels toward a four-foot by six-foot natural floor of grass create the visual image of rain. This is augmented by the hollow, echoing sound of dripping water. The vertical line formed by each of the 500 monofilaments creates downward movement as it swings almost imperceptibly, picking up vertical flashes as it reflects the light emitted from the four flames of the "Altar" piece.

From the perspective of contemporary experience, the "Untitled" piece was inspired literally from a cheap fake-water fountain in which oil flowed "tackily" down a monofilament. Conceptually, it was inspired by the contemporary "acid rain" threat to survival. Acid rain is a direct reaction of nature to the industrial pollutants "we" put in our air. Breaking down the issue into elements was the first step. The simpler the breakdown, the easier it was to capture--one symbol for one element. In the case of acid rain, the simple element became test tubes. The test tube related to the concept of acid rain because dangerous acids are generally handled in test tubes--and acid rain is not without danger.

The suspended test tube evokes the idea of "safe" acid rain. This created an element of humor, a lighter approach to a critical issue. I wanted to create an installation in which the viewer could think freely--not be compelled to take a specific point of view.
The installation started in my bedroom before my studio space was acquired. Test tubes were suspended from a frame because the apartment ceiling could not be damaged. The initial hanging was about 100 test tubes. (This became 500 in the final installation). Each test tube was suspended by a two-pound fishing filament in a particular space in an imaginary "cube" of acid rain. Diligently, they were suspended in a random, "unintentional" pattern. This was derived from the image of rain or dripping water. (To evoke more sensory participation in the final show, an audio tape of dripping water was played throughout the show).

Once the test tubes were hung, there arose questions regarding bringing closure to the concept. For example: What would tie the test tubes to the environment? Photographs of damaged environments or of grass? Actual plant life? Water? Photography was a secure medium--but shallow, harsh, and limited in this context. The representation had to have a warm, innocent texture. The choice was finally made. Authenticity was essential.

The plot of grass was placed underneath the four-foot by six-foot by eight-foot "cube" of test tubes when the grass was about 1 1/2 inches tall. During the following weeks it grew to four inches, drawing together the two elements of the installation. In its final stage, this installation looked like frozen drops of rain suspended in the air over a deep green oasis of grass. Each test tube was full to the rim with dilute acid. The piece was placed in the middle of the gallery so that the viewer could experience the piece from all sides. Lighting was arranged so that the filament would shimmer like falling rain itself. It was peaceful to see the test tubes hanging over the grass in the gallery and to hear the echoing sound of dripping water.

The Chick Piece--Slides #2 and #3

The woman provides the fetus' universe. "Chick" is the male's contemporary and repugnant term for both "woman" and "girl." It degrades "female-ness." The "Chick" piece presents to the viewer a perspective on being female. The "Chick" piece is made of pure spring water in a twenty-gallon, clear-glass urn, an egg suspended in the center with monofilament, and three bullfrog tadpoles. The urn rests on a gleaming, cylindrical pedestal of stainless steel--a "chick" on a pedestal. The fetus is in the water of the woman's uterus.
What more can be said—in the contemporary sense? She doesn’t move. She doesn’t challenge. "Chick" contains. She keeps inside. What does she keep inside herself? Biologically, the "chick" keeps the fetus inside. Contemporary society persists in trying to give her no choice. Which comes first—the woman or the egg?

The "Chick" piece was conceived during the creation of the rain piece. However, it did not mature fully until the rain installation was completed and hung with the grass underneath. The approach was to solidify first the idea of using a container as the representation of woman. During the developmental stage, "Chick" consisted of a pickle jar full of condoms, diaphragms, and birth control pills—with the phrase, "Which comes first, the woman or the egg," glued on the jar. The pickle jar had an insensitive quality that did not represent appropriately the initial impulse for the piece. It was too cheap.

Seeking more appropriate materials for a simpler, more minimal presentation involved going from the birth control devices to the egg. The presentation of the egg went through a number of transitions—bunches of eggs, floating in oil, floating in water, etc. Finally, at the end of the pickle-jar stage, I discovered that a single egg was the clearest and simplest expression. The urn replaced the pickle jar; the urn and the single egg reinforced each other as feminine symbols. The tadpoles came last; they added to the reproductive representation.

At the outset the container had only a few requirements. It needed to have elegance; it needed to made of transparent glass so that the egg could be seen. Finally, it must be huge. With these three guidelines, the search began. Searching for something that did not yet have a specific image—existing only in a state of representation—was elusive and exhausting. It was not easy to trust intuition when the imagined need was to have a definitive plan.

The glass urn was eventually found in an unexpected place. It was huge—at least twenty gallons. Having the opposite shape of the classic urn that so frequently referenced the woman’s body, this urn was a "slight" sarcasm of that particular stereotype. No other container could have done "the job" better. The urn sat in the studio for a few days declaring its space. It brought a feeling of the installation being close to the end. The egg in the bottom of the urn established the
idea in such a simple and beautiful way; it seemed almost complete. Suspending the egg was the next step.

The test tubes and urn set the precedence for glass; it was incorporated into the remaining two pieces. The stability of the total installation was established at this point. Confidence was irreversible and decisions came more easily. I was "over the hump."

Having hollowed the egg and attached the filament inside it, glue was used to attach the filament to the bottom of the urn. A "suspension point" for the egg was found midway between the top and bottom of the urn. Once the urn was filled with clear water, the refraction caused the egg to look twice its size. Lighting in the gallery rendered the filament invisible. Viewers were intrigued by how the egg was suspended, never moving, in the middle of the water-filled urn.

Is a pedestal necessary? If so, how and what? Progress stagnated with these questions for too long. Finally the idea "arrived" of using polished stainless steel--a sanitary pedestal. An insulated fireplace chimney pipe served the purpose. I covered the top edge of the tube with a turntable plate. The bottom edge was covered with a wooden disk that I sanded at least 30 times to give it a smooth texture suggestive of silk. Both pedestal edge covers were painted black. The classic shape was there. The pedestal was wide at the top and the bottom--with the center remaining streamlined and straight. The urn, however, was the exact "opposite" of the pedestal--small at the top and bottom but wide and voluptuous at the middle. The piece had a classic look, not in the sense of an "hour-glass" figure, but rather beautifully fat.

Now the pedestal and egg needed only one additional element. They needed the tadpoles to represent the sperm. The tadpoles were not acquired until the day before the show so that they could live in a "normal" environment until opening day. It was always nice to save some surprises for the last moment.

Prior to the move to the gallery, the two installations, "Untitled" and "Chick," were left in a special studio space that was reserved for finished pieces--to avoid any damage and to allow room for them to develop a sense of space. During the solidification of the previous two pieces, the third piece, "The Building" was starting to develop.
The Building Piece--Slides #4 and #5

Twelve gold-painted cubes of six bricks joined by mortar, ten thin vertical plates of glass, and a gold credit card constitute this metaphor for a male-dominated, growth-limiting economy in an industry-dominated society. The bricks are fake gold bouillon, the gold credit card is fake money, and the glass is fake power. "Building" is fake stability. Touch it and it collapses.

How did this piece begin? As the previous two pieces neared completion, the piece about the economy was full of transitions--of both material and structure. The bricks were the source of the idea. They were the typical building blocks of society. They seemed to be appropriate for the classic representation of the "steps of success."

A prototype kit was built of wooden blocks having about the same dimensions as the anticipated final version. Using wooden blocks allowed for experimentation with precarious structures without the danger of falling bricks. A single cubic structure was constructed with nails and glue by stacking six wooden pieces in a criss-cross fashion. Twelve such blocks were necessary in order to experiment with "architectures" such as tables and pyramids. The final and most convincing structure can be thought of as a "two-cornered pyramid without a top." Without the keystone, the pyramid arch looked as if it would topple inward on itself.

Although the keystone intrigued many viewers, it was a secondary focus in the initial construction. The main challenge and focus was the design of the brick cubes and their delicate balance and support. Six red bricks were affixed with mortar in the criss-cross pattern to form a cube the width of each brick's length. Each cube of bricks was about 40 pounds. A primer was applied to and dried on each cube. Next came two coats of gold-leaf spray paint to give the final image of golden bricks mortared together into cubes. Gold bullion was jokingly suggested by their appearance.

Stacked in stair-step fashion, each cube (beyond the first one which rested on the floor) was supported by 1/8" glass. Since one stair-step structure was a mirror image of the other, each piece (gold cube and glass rectangle) was duplicated.

The architecture of the piece demanded a brick-cube overlap of no more than one inch. Since the keystone was to be supported by opposing forces alone, each construction in the studio
and in the gallery was an intense challenge—not unlike the pressure of balancing an unstable economy. The choice of keystone called for finding an additional symbol for a false economy. What is one of the most prestigious symbols in our economy? The gold credit card was the winning candidate. It fit structurally and symbolically—and precariously. It represented unseen or non-existent wealth.

The keystone in the "arch" for the "Building" piece is literally the much-desired gold credit card set in a fragile glass plate. Viewers see the precarious balance and are appropriately uneasy. A "credit-card-based economy" is symbolized in the piece by an arched golden bridge that goes precariously from nowhere to nowhere by way of plastic money. How dangerous is corporate greed? How estranged are we from purposive product and service exchange? How empty are our materially-based values?

Building the dreams of a society on fake gold and credit cards is like stacking bricks on glass and depending on pressure and friction to keep them stable. And yet, "Building" stands alone, and viewers respect its aesthetics and delicate balance. Each of the two stacks of 36 bricks has "equity" with its counterpart on the other side of the gold card. If the structure is not disturbed for long enough, it begins to give the impression of permanence and dependability. "Look but don't touch" is how most people in our society participate in the economy. When those who are outsiders (the poor, the ethnic minorities, the women) attempt to touch the economy, equity and balance disappear in favor of imbalance, anger, protest, rage, and violence.

The Altar Piece—Slide #6

The "Altar" piece creates visually the silhouette of a particular "factory" in northern California. It is constructed from iron pipes joined together to make a frame, plate glass for a platform, ten glass beakers and Florence flasks containing ten chemical elements, two silver tanks of propane gas fueling two Bunsen burners whose flames and heat reach into the space around the altar and into the entire installation, and two slender candles whose flames reach upward from the silhouetted smokestacks. Structurally and aesthetically these elements support and depend on each other in "Altar." I wanted "worship" to be the first impression of the viewer.
The piece developed from an experience of living for three months in Los Angeles, which I view as one of the "super pollution networks" of our world. I developed the feeling that the LA experience induces a sense of involuntary worship of industrial destruction. LA speaks a "save our world" language but lacks an awareness of problem sources. This fourth piece came from this LA experience that we contribute to our own deaths world-wide through this worship.

This piece was a radical departure from its "prototype"--a "finished" piece from a previous exhibit. The earlier version had been a much smaller wooden structure, lacking in the simplicity and elegance of its refined off-spring. From my two years of frustration with the piece, I knew that it needed to be larger; the earlier version was not "grand" enough.

Except for the glass beakers and flasks, all materials had been used previously in industrial applications. I chose not to use new items because of the cost and because I wanted the visual harshness of the "weathered" materials. I wanted the materials to suggest that I had literally removed them from a factory.

Going from the wood of the prototype to the iron pipe brought a drastic change in appearance and development. The transition reminded me of moving my vision from that of a "craftsman's shack" to a vision of a factory. This was a better "fit"--and the materials seemed to "build together" much more easily. The materials themselves functioned more like a team, even with each having its own glory.

The process of building the altar consisted primarily of preparatory acts. Tools were purchased for use exclusively in the construction and break-down of pipes. The physical labor was beyond the "normal." Connecting the pipes was a puzzle, requiring planning out the sections before they were attached. The planning was unique because screwing two pipes together in one section frequently would un-screw pipes in another section.

The ten chemical elements which are a part of "Altar" are irreplaceable on Earth. They are slowly being stripped from the earth's crust and processed into products that contribute to the poisoning of air, water, and earth. While the mostly-male government and industry leaders give lip service to the value of human beings and other living things, our homes are primarily altars where we worship the products of industry. Whether they are useful or harmful, we are urged to
worship them, buy them, and discard them. Even if they bring neither harmony nor beauty to our lives and relationships, we consume them and they consume us.

Both the precursor and the final version raised questions. Should we look to our future with the eyes of the aggressive industrialist, with the eyes of the ecological extremist, or with the eyes of someone planted firmly at a carefully-considered position in between? How can we harmonize our taking and our receiving from the earth’s chemicals? How can we make compatible and utilize fully our feminine and masculine selves?

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A work of art comes from the interior of the artist. Art does not reproduce what we see. Rather, it makes us see. At one time, getting something made was important. Now, however, making something important is imperative.

In this process the only consistent concept I deal with is the concept of "creating." As human beings we grow and change. This thesis project has confirmed the mechanics of creating for me and has made it possible for me to recognize and express in words the organizing frameworks that are intimate to my work.

I discovered something about purpose. Rather than having a purpose, my work takes on purpose. This work took on the purpose of giving viewers an experience of the imbalance in society—more specifically, the gender imbalance. The work took a direction toward depicting "incompatible" elements and materials in close structural and aesthetic cooperation. It included symbiotic relationships that are comprehensive.

The most pressing contemporary conflicts grow out of seeing different points of view as opposites. Successful problem-solving requires finding ways to make different views compatible, ways of making the complex simple. This requires a merging of opposites without loss to either point of view.

The so-called progress of our industrial society is owed to the very people who slowly and coincidentally are destroying our Earth. One can say that it is "progress" by the fact that the
positive effects of their actions come more quickly than the long-term destructive effects of the same actions.

The challenge is to become aware of the deep implications for what we think of as industrial progress. Then we will deliberately choose the conditions which can bring back to contemporary society the harmony, equity, and accord that are necessary for beauty, balance, and peace on the planet.
REFERENCES


SLIDES

Slide #1: The "Untitled" Piece

Glass test tubes, acid, grass, monofilament

Slide #2: The "Chick" Piece

Glass, stainless steel, wood, tadpoles, egg

Slide #3: The "Chick" Piece (Detail)

Slide #4: The "Building" Piece

Bricks, plate glass, gold paint, gold credit card

Slide #5: The "Building" Piece (Detail)

Slide #6: The "Altar" Piece

Iron pipes, 10 elements "important" to industry and the economy, plate glass, glass beakers and Florence flasks, propane gas, Bunsen burners, candles