Vivum excoriari

Kristina Marie Stafford

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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 Art

“Vivum Excoriari”
Kristina Marie Stafford
Master of Fine Art – Ceramic Sculpture
May 2008
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I have a lot of people to thank, so in no particular order I would like to thank:

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I. INTRODUCTION: A NOTE FROM THE ARTIST

“Don’t tell me; show me.” – Rick Hirsch quoting Franz Wildenhain.

I am not a writer. I am a sculptor and a maker. I make because it is the only way I can thoroughly communicate. I must talk in a physical way. I speak, I write, I breathe into my work, it is a physical manifestation I am confronted with everyday.

It is important to me that whoever reads this understand, if nothing else, I was honest for better or worse (probably for worse). I want the reader to accept that the following is constructed from my thoughts, ideas, truths, experiences, and interests nothing else.

My thesis body of work has yielded a wide range of responses, both positive and negative. People have projected ideas onto and identified with my work in ways I had never considered when creating it. Still, it remains my own, and while I can understand others’ responses, I can only see my experiences mirrored back at me and it remains deeply personal to me.
II. **Thesis Statement/Absract**

My inspirations for this body of sculpture are implements of torture and antique tools. I am interested in the relationship between historical value and psychological response; the push and pull of the terrible and beautiful. I am exploring the emotive substance of the objects by choosing implements that evoke an emotional and psychological response. I am obsessed with objects that crush, grasp, cut, constrict, and bind such as axes, meat hooks and, most recently, medieval torture devices. I find them simultaneously beautiful and unsettling. These objects express themselves so clearly as a threat through their form, allowing the viewers to instantly recognize the purpose of the implement and relate it to their own bodies. I find beauty in the straightforward honesty of the object - it does not pretend to be anything other than itself. Through this body of work I want to communicate both visually and psychologically the disturbing and horrific history of the object as well the beauty of the form.
III. **NOTABLE EXPERIENCES: SCARED FOR LIFE**

The part I don’t really want to write and you probably don’t want to read.

Before I explain anything further about the work, you need to understand a little about me, or at least the experiences I feel shaped my work. I am going to get through this in as few words as possible.

My strongest childhood memories are the negative ones, with the exception of my parents’ ‘antiquing’ obsession. To this day I am hard pressed to pass an antique shop without stopping in. Now pause for a minute: I don’t want you to think I had a traumatic childhood because of my family, my parents are great people. However, I am a stubbornly negative person, and the bad stuff just seems to remain clearer in my head. Also the thought of my family reading this chapter makes me sick to my stomach, but I promised to be honest.

First, a happy story: As a family, my younger brother, parents and I would scour the countryside for antique shops and old barns, looking specifically for lighting rods, and the balls and arrows that decorated them. My father would routinely approach some good ol’ boy (as he said) and offer in exchange for money or work to scale the man’s barn to acquire some sort of lighting rod affiliated treasure (this worked more often than you would think). On one weekend my father traded removing the farmers sheep from a tangle of barbed wire fence in exchange for a weathervane. I specifically remember that instance because it resulted in a tetanus shot for me after I stepped on the barbed wire and it pierced my shoe and foot. I mention this because antiques and tools have been an important, treasured and sought after part of my life as long as I can remember.

I think it is also important to recognize my strained relationship with men at this time; a love/hate relationship that continues throughout my life and to this day. At the age of twelve I was molested by two -- let’s call them ‘friends’ -- on a couple of occasions, resulting in me guiltily fleeing the scene with things like “don’t tell your dad on us!” trailing off into the distance. This was a turning point in my life. I know better than to think this way, but I felt I shouldn’t have run away because they would have liked me better. Classic, I know, but none-the-less true. I believe
that is why, in my teen years, I sought attention and approval through sex, perhaps I still do. Men like you better if you put out, right? I experimented with bondage and role-playing trying to find a sexual relationship I could be comfortable with. To this day I find myself searching for that moment of pure tension in which I get to make the distinction to walk away or stay, that moment is both terrifying and beautiful, and it is mine to enjoy or regret.

The final experience I will mention is the most recent and happened the summer before I started graduate school. A friend, with whom I had been intimate, died. He was only twenty-five and his death was originally ruled a suicide by hanging. I have never much reacted to death - I have always felt it was just apart of life - even in this case, when the guy I had been sleeping with just a few weeks prior knocked himself off. But the hanging part struck me strangely.

The circumstances of his death are still murky. He allegedly gave his animals away the day before and there was some other behavior that could be seen as a sort of tying up loose ends before he killed himself. However, he left no note and was found dead hanging from a noose but his knees where only an inch from the floor: he could have easily stood up. Later authorities ruled the death accidental by auto-erotic-asphyxiation. This hit a note with me. I understand the attraction to this practice, a sort of thrill-seekers sex. Choking or being choked in an imitate relationship plays into and magnifies sexual tension and brings up the question of trust. For my friend, however, taking his pleasure with a little bit of pain and fear killed him. So I ask myself: am I chasing the proverbial dragon as well?
IV. INSPIRATION: SEARCHING FOR A POINT OF REFERENCE

In order to truly explain my journey to what became my thesis, I feel I should begin well before graduate school. After being dragged to Massachusetts at the age of fifteen, I enrolled in a vocational high school and received my diploma and a certificate in graphic design. Vocational schools tend not to expect you to go to college, we were rarely encouraged to apply. I worked retail until I decided to further my education. I received my Bachelors of Art with Honors in 2006 from Bridgewater State College in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. Originally I had planned on majoring in criminal justice or history until I took my first metals class. I was passionate about jewelry design and I loved metal as a material. To fill an elective requirement I took a ceramics class and fell in love with the material. In the end I had to choose between metals and ceramics, I obviously chose ceramics, however, the techniques and materiality of metal working are consistently visible in my ceramic work and process.

The following fall I arrived at the School for American Crafts. I quickly learned my BA education was lacking. To say that I struggled through the first year is a gross understatement. But this struggle forced out all of the good, meaty emotional stuff that became the content for my work. Through feeling so out of place and needing to feel accepted and good enough, I tapped into all of my past experiences.

The role of men in my life was compounded by the fact that my clay mentors and professors had all been male. I struggled for their approval. My work hinted at my frustration through its phallic and yonic forms. But it seemed I was incapable of connecting my ideas with the objects. I repeated the idea of touch and penetration in my work through roughly textured phallics threatening soft or fragile feminine forms.

By the end of my first year, I had focused in on clearer ideas - ideas I was excited about. I was starting to reach back into my childhood filled with antique treasures and the ideas of touch and a point of impact.

Over the summer I continued to think about what I wanted to do with my work, where I wanted it to go, and what I was passionate about. I spent hours wandering around antique
malls and flea markets, feeding my eyes with forms, textures and patinas. I began to collect tools, and found I was interested in tools that were aggressive. Axes, meat hooks, ice picks and tongs, animal traps and so on - objects that evoke an emotional and/or physiological response. Tools that I could associate with my body in a negative way; cutting, pinching or restraining are most attractive to me. I was beginning to combine my two obsessions: antiques and moments of psychological tension.

At the beginning of my thesis year, I continued to research antique tools, and I began to collect images of rare and highly decorated tools. I was drawn to the patterns and decorations placed on mundane objects by their craftsmen. I researched axes with flowers and scrolls carved into the blades, custom designed for the purchaser. The more decoration on the tool, the wealthier its owner; these decorated tools were also status symbols. Decorated tools are not specific to one culture or country, they are found all over the globe. Up until this point my work had consistently been finished with rough and gritty surfaces that discouraged touch, but the idea that these aggressive tools could be decorated so beautifully was fascinating. So, I incorporated some of these traditional markings into my work and began my love affair with pattern.

While researching tools, I stumbled across images of torture devices, and that is when my obsession began. I stayed up all night researching all the devices I could find. I learned what each one was for, the Latin names, what they were made out of, where they originated, what provoked that particular punishment, when it was invented and how it was used. I started collecting images of old block prints illustrating the devices in action. I had no idea there were so many ways people had come up with to hurt and punish other people.

At the same time I was also collecting pattern; looking at tapestries, clothing, wallpaper, tin ceiling tiles and anything else that had ornate surface decorations. I knew I wanted to combine these two elements: beautiful patterns and the abstracted forms of torture devices.
It is important that I recognize a few of the references to which I feel a connection. I do not feel that these artists’ works directly affected or are necessarily visually present in my work. My affinity with them is only through concept and process. I feel closest to, and most inspired by, objects and decoration.

Ann Hamilton’s ideas about process and making are important to me. While she often focuses on installation and temporal ideas, I feel a connection to her ideas about repetition and labor. In the piece “Privation and Excesses, 1989” Hamilton meticulously laid 750,000 copper pennies onto a floor that was covered in honey. I feel a certain comfort in performing laborious tasks and a tremendous sense of accomplishment when I finish the piece or project. My work consistently includes repetition and tedious patterning. I often find myself making the same object multiple times.

Matthew Barney is another inspiration for me. I find his images romantic, beautiful and terrifying. I am enthralled and captivated by his Cremaster Cycle. Barney’s imagery embodies several of the ideas I hope to explore in my own work. His images are so beautifully executed and captured that I find it easy to forget what is happening or not even notice a gruesome and disturbing act because I am so distracted by the beauty of the images.
“Him” by the printmaker and painter Paula Rego is a piece that gives me nightmares. I am not sure how I came across this print but it has haunted me for years. This piece was one of twelve that Rego did for a book entitled “Pendle Witches”, written by Blake Morrison, published in 1996. I love this print, and I hate it. I cannot seem to look away from it. It speaks to my youth and the monsters that I still seem to think are under my bed. When I look at this image, I continue to wonder what is happening here. This girl, or woman, appears to be attacked by a man with a wolf’s head, but she does not seem very upset about it. Is she enjoying this? Is it play? Something about it seems sexual to me, perhaps it is just the imagery of an alpha male. This image remains a constant fascination for me, but I doubt I will ever research the story; I fear the truth would never hold a candle to the scenarios I have invented.

My greatest reference and biggest influence is the human race and our cruel behavior and tolerance of the terrible. Who has not watched a movie where either the heroine or the villain is tortured or executed while the audience of actors cheers jubilantly? The general acceptance of these acts is not only expected but often celebrated through media today as well as throughout the written history of man. Torture and death are a part of life, a part that fascinates us endlessly.

A perfect example of our fascination with torture is the Christian Crucifixion. Today this act is still practiced as a symbol of piety. Think about this act for a moment. The Cross, originally a cruel Roman execution device, has since been transformed into a very popular wall-hung tchotchky. Today, rather than using the cross as an execution device, it adorns homes and churches with the aestheticized image of Christ, adorned with a crown of thorns, hanging from the cross, spilling blood from his side, hands and feet. This gruesome image is looked upon
adoringly, as a beautiful image. In all reality the original cross was a gruesome torture device that used gravity to slowly suffocate its victims with their own body weight. That is assuming the executioner was careful not to drive the nine inch spikes through any major arteries causing the victim to bleed out too quickly – as this would ruin the onlookers joy of the slow and painful death they had all gathered to witness (it could take days).

Thanks again to our Roman friends for the Apaga of Nobise. This device was essentially a bear trap for humans built to look like an inviting woman with open arms. Sadly, when her arms closed to give you a warm hug, these limbs were lined with metal spikes. My favorite example of taking an otherwise horrible implement and dressing it up to look less murderous is the Iron Maiden. A German device, the Iron Maiden, is essentially a coffin lined with spikes – adjustable spikes, no less, so that the torture or execution may last longer. I can only assume the torture was prolonged for the enjoyment of the torturer or audience. The best part about the Iron Maiden is that the face is said to be modeled after the Virgin Mary. Possibly the most beautiful of all torture devices is the Pear of Anguish. It is an ornately carved and decorated pear-shaped object, that, after being inserted into the offending orifice (mouth, anus or vagina), it would be slowly expanded outward until the particular area rips.

The human fascination with the terrible continues through modern times, and I can only assume it is a part of our nature to make these terrible acts and objects meant for death more appealing. We dress up torture devices as the Virgin Mary, we turn the Crucifixion into a celebrated and pious event, and we just cannot seem to turn away from a good hanging. It is this idea of beautifying the terrible or perhaps just seeing the very dark beauty in these objects and acts from which I draw my inspiration.
VI. THE WORK: FABRICATION AND INSTALLATION OF IDEAS

The title of my thesis show is Vivum Excoriari, which, in Latin means “alive in chains.” I came across this term in a book on torture. The term seems to embody the ideas I have tried to address in my work. The most logical way for me to talk about this body of work is chronologically. The work was made with its presentation in mind. I secured a gallery space in an old industrial building. The space is about 50' by 50' with a poured concrete ceiling and floor and has six, four foot wide round pillars and cinderblock walls. In the center of the space are four pillars that form a squared section of 16’ 6”. I installed the first piece I made in this square section. It is not sight specific, but I would be hard pressed to find a more perfect space. I had this site in mind the entire time I was planning and creating the show.

The first, largest and most labor-intensive piece I made was Fallbeil. “Fallbeil” means falling axe in Latin. You may recall from the chapter “Inspiration” that I begin my thesis journey by researching more domestic items - items you may find around a farm. I knew from the beginning of this piece that it was going to consist of farm related tools. I also knew that they would be hanging, and that this would fit nicely into the gallery spaces’ squared off center. Traditionally, and to this day, it is common for farmer’s tools to be hanging from the rafters of the barn for easy access. I enjoy referencing the utility of the objects in their display. The most difficult part was deciding what tools I wanted to use as inspiration. I settled on eight different tools and began drawing abstractions of them. I wanted to reference the forms of the objects, not copy them directly.

Knowing the size of the space, I wanted these objects to be fairly large - around 24” each, and I decided that 64 of them (eight of each) would cover a 14’ square area. I made each piece by carving the original out of a larger piece of clay and then making two part press molds. I then began experimenting with surface treatment, hanging technique and lighting. After settling on a black surface and rusty chains for hanging, I completed the army of 64.

Originally Fallbeil was going to be Raku fired, however, after taking the advice of my committee, I decided to spray them with thin layers of varying shades of black acrylic mixed
with matte medium. The finished result is similar to the smoked effect I had desired from Raku firing. After a lengthy search for antique metal chain, I discovered that the 240’ of chain I needed to hang the tools would be too difficult to find, so I purchased chain from a hardware store and rusted it with muriatic acid and ferric chloride.

The finished piece was everything I had hoped it would be. Each piece hung from the 13’ ceiling, the lowest tool 6’2” off the ground. Fallbeil engulfed the center of the gallery space. Each piece was hung at varying heights about 21” apart in an eight by eight piece square pattern. The individual pieces gently swayed from a single line of rusted chain fastened to the ceiling with a concrete anchor. Fallbeil also marked the entrance to the gallery, making it impossible to view the rest of the show without traveling underneath it. The piece embodies my thesis statement; creating tremendous sense of tension and antagonizing an emotional or psychological response from the viewer. Not only are all of the objects aggressive, they are also hanging just above head level in a black mass. The color gives them visual weight despite the fact that they are all hollow.
After completing Fallbeil, I was very happy to get back to making individual sculptures and I began with Shrews Fiddle. The shrew’s fiddle was a medieval torture device used to embarrass and make a public spectacle of out-spoken women. I drew several abstracted versions of the device and then made a pattern of the form with paper. I draw out my sculptures in full scale and create patterns from the drawings as a seamstress might. After I slab-built the piece, I began working on the patterns and designs for decoration.

I use antique patterns for inspiration, however I do not trace them. I design patterns that fit the shape and style of the work and the original object. Because the fiddle is a traditionally English form of punishment, I used designs from English woodworking and wallpaper as inspiration. Following the assembly of the piece, I wait for the clay to become bone dry in order to transfer the patterns onto the piece from the patterns I have created on tracing paper. Next, I paint over the pencil drawings with several coats of Polycrylic. Finally, I wipe the entire surface of the piece with warm water, removing clay around the Polycrylic and creating a raised surface. I then fire the piece to cone 04 twice (once for bisque and once for glaze). This process...
remains the same for all of the subsequent pieces. I completed Shrews Fiddle with black flocking lining the opening for the victim’s hands and neck. The flocking adds depth and richness of texture in the piece. Finally, I rubbed India ink into the cracks of the red transparent glaze to give the surface more depth and reference the idea of age and patina.

Rising Tide is based upon a Turkish form of execution through drowning. The victim was tied by their neck to a post that went deep into the sand of the ocean shore. The victims were tied up at low tide only a few inches off the ground and as the tide came in, they where trapped and would drown. For this piece I used Turkish inspired patterns and incorporated metal. The base, post and neck shackle are all clay, while the bolts that hold the post down and the chain that holds the neck shackle to the post are rusted steel. The interior of the neck shackle where the skin would come into contact with is lined with eggplant colored flocking. The piece is glazed a turquoise blue to reference the water and then sandblasted to give the glaze a sea glass, worn surface. This is a floor piece, however it was shown on a four-inch pedestal because the concrete floor and glazing were too similar in tone.
Judas Cradle Small and Judas Cradle Large are based off of an implement of torture called a Judas cradle. This particular piece was the most difficult for the viewers to recognize. Recognition requires a great deal of imagination or prior knowledge.

I built two four sided pyramids in clay, and chose to use Turkish inspired designs again, honestly, because I find them the most beautiful. The wooden bases for the pyramids were constructed out of ash, painted with a wash of milk paint and then flocked in green and eggplant. For the larger of the two, I made a copper tip that slipped over the clay piece to create a very sharp point, exaggerating the point of contact for the victim. Once again, I chose vibrant transparent glazes, but with these two I also incorporated under glazes of a similar color to the glaze to create more depth and give the pieces a sense of layering. The two pieces were also finished with India ink to accentuate the crackle. These are free standing and individual pieces, however I showed them on a very low pedestal and as a pair. Aesthetically they were more interesting as a pair, and the colors became more vibrant on a white pillar than on the gray concrete floor of the gallery.
Collar and Cuffs is loosely based off a device called the Spanish Collar. This device was worn around the neck. It weighed at least ten pounds and was lined with spikes. The intention of the original device was to make the wearer very uncomfortable (if the fact they were in a dungeon did not already.) I made a large collar with a 33” diameter that slid open and closed on walnut dowels and two cuffs about 16 1/2” across to match. With this set I was more interested in the idea of discomfort, so the forms are non-referential and founded on concept. Once again I leaned toward Turkish style decoration and all three were finished in a pale chartreuse green transparent glaze.

Restraints is a set of five pieces based loosely on shackles. The larger is for the neck, two smaller for ankles and two others, smaller still, for wrists. When designing the form of these I considered what a queen’s or princess’s shackles should look like. I wanted to make the prettiest and most non-threatening restraints I could. Perhaps these would represent the extremely fancy bondage kept in the back room of the specialty store that you have to ask for or special order. Wall-hung, they are all a rich medium green with dark green under glaze to give a worn or aged surface to the designs. I also incorporated other materials in these pieces - burgundy velvet ribbon to restrain and antique brass buttons for the clasps. The patterns on these are the only Greek - inspired ones; they are also the only pieces on which I freehanded the designs directly onto the work. These pieces were also treated with an ink rub. In this case, I used dark green ink for a more subtle crackle.
The second to last piece is called Garrotte SML, named after the original device. A garrotte is an execution device. The victim is strapped into a simple chair with a post for a back. Next, a strap is wrapped around the throat, and the base of the spine is lined up with a pointed metal or wood cone intended to sever the spinal cord. The strap is tightened from behind until the victim either suffocates or the spinal cord is severed. I was most interested in the shape of the cone that severs the spinal cord. I worked on the idea of just the cone on a base creating three different sizes. These are hung on the wall one above the other at heights that reference a child, woman and man. The decoration is loosely based on Turkish design.

At 44” tall, my final piece, and the largest single sculpture, Stocce is also the only one that stood directly on the concrete floor. “Stocce” is an Anglo-Saxon word that means a plank of wood or tree trunk. I think the reference to the original object is very clear because “the stocks” is a term that is still used. Also, the scale of the form forces the viewers to consider themselves in relation to the piece. Ash wood is incorporated into this piece, working as the lock or clasp to secure the arms. The surface in this piece is slightly different than the others; slight variations of a single design are repeated throughout the surface. After glazing the piece a deep purple color, I sand blasted it, rubbed India ink into the cracks and used black acrylic washes to make the surface deeper and richer.
VII. ALCHEMY AND FINDINGS

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<th>Cristina Cordova's Clay Body Cone 04 (modified)</th>
<th>Debs Clear Cone 04</th>
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<tr>
<td>EPK</td>
<td>Frit 3134 30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tile 6</td>
<td>Frit 3195 45</td>
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<td>Gold Art</td>
<td>+ 5-10 % Mason Stains *</td>
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<td>Talc</td>
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<td>Wollastonite</td>
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*As mentioned in the “Work” chapter, many of my pieces have India inks rubbed into the surface to enhance the glazes crackle. Blues, greens and purple stains do not seem to crackle.

I used the above clay body and glaze recipe for all of the work in my thesis show with the exception of Fallbeil and Shrew's Fiddle. For Fallbeil I used a cone 04 stoneware with grog because I had originally planned on Raku firing that piece. For Shrew's Fiddle I used the cone 04 stoneware again because I was comfortable with the clay body and knew it would work well for a large piece. However I stopped using that body because of its gritty texture and off-white-yellowy color that dulled the glazes.

Information that would have been helpful before I began:

-- When using acrylic: to create a matte surface without sanding use 50% matte medium and spray it on in several layers of very thin coats.

-- India ink will NOT come back out of the cracks, so make sure you want it there.

-- Remove the zinc coating from metal before you try to rust it with muratic acid, and use baking soda to neutralize it (careful it foams, a lot). Then submerge the metal in a diluted mixture of Ferric Chloride and water. Let stand for 30 minutes, then let it air dry. Repeat. Don't just leave it the chemical bath, it will not work as well or fast, the metal needs oxygen to rust.
VIII. CONCLUSION

Despite the negative and even gruesome undertone of this body of work, I did enjoy researching and making it. I intended the objects to be beautiful first and terrible second, allowing for beauty to be found in the honesty of a gut response. This body of work is a result of my newly found passion for our human fascination with the gruesome, and this passion will continue to inspire my work for the future. I look forward, with much anticipation, to continuing to work from this rich territory of ideas and objects.
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“SHREWS FIDDLE”
Glazed earthenware, india ink and black flocking. 39” x 22” x 7”
“Restraints”

Glazed earthenware, india ink, velvet ribbon brass buttons.
Largest 10”, dimensions variable.
“STOCCE”

Glazed earthenware, acrylic and ash. 44” x 19” x 9”
“Two Cradles”

Glazed earthenware, india ink, poplar and flocking. Dimensions variable.
“Judas Cradle Large”

Glazed earthenware, india ink, poplar and green flocking. 64” x 13” x 13”
“JUDAS CRADLE SMALL”

Glazed earthenware, india ink, poplar and purple flocking. 56” x 8” x 8”
“Garrotte SML”

Glazed earthenware.
Large 9”, Medium 8” and Small 7”
“Collar and Cuffs”

Glazed earthenware and walnut.
Collar: 33” x 29” x 4.5”
Cuffs: 16.5” x 13.75” x 2.75”
“RISING TIDE”

Glazed earthenware, steel and purple flocking. 27” Tall. Dimensions variable.
“Fallbeil”

Stoneware, acrylic and steel.
Largest piece 26”
Dimensions variable 14’ x 14’