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The Grace With Which We Fight

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The Grace With Which We Fight

by

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A very special thanks to ...

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In Loving Memory
of
Mary Loomis Rickman
Introduction

For my thesis I intend to explore women and traditional women's art forms in relation to breast cancer. My primary focus will be on personal and emotional aspects of breast cancer.

Countless women in my life have died of breast cancer and I found a lump in my right breast when I was 18 years old. I lived in terror for three months until the extraction and biopsy found it to be benign. My fear grew from the loss of the women in my life who had been taken away by breast cancer and the helplessness of becoming a statistic.

Not since the March of Dimes to cure polio has there been such an enormous fund raising effort as is currently being held to fund breast cancer research. Both of these movements were and are organized predominantly by women who fought first for the lives of their children and now for the lives of their mothers, sisters, daughters, friends and themselves. One of the largest fundraising movements sells quilts donated by people fighting for a cure.
Quilting is traditionally women’s art and many of the quilts being collected for the cure are very traditional. In my thesis I explore quilting as well as other “women’s” materials such as handmade paper and glass in combination with other sculptural materials and techniques to create a body of work in which women are the focus. I illustrate the sadness of the disease as well as the dedication of women fighting to save themselves and the beauty and grace with which they continue to fight.

The basic premise of my thesis was to create a body of work dealing directly with women and breast cancer and do it in such a way that it would ultimately speak to a wide audience. My goal was to walk the line of conceptual art without straying too far into heavy interpretation, which would only appeal to those who have seriously studied art, or become so illustrative that the work was too philosophically one-dimensional. My challenge has been to stay true to my thesis statement while still remaining true to a diverse audience.
Mary Hickman, a close family friend and artist, passed away after a long battle with breast cancer in the spring of 2004. I mourned her loss as I faced the task of composing a thesis proposal. Unable to clear my mind for any other possibilities, I set out to create a body of work feeding off the pain of yet one more loss of a loved woman to this terrible disease. This decision was not without premise as I had completed a large hanging sculpture entitled “Pink Ribbons” (figure 1) earlier that academic year which confronted the same issue of breast cancer.

As I began to conceptualize this body of work in spring of 2004 I was thinking mostly of fear. The terror of learning that someone else I love would discover a malignant lump in their breast or that I may, in fact, find one myself, controlled the imagery of my original sketches. I sketched women being pulled from their families wrapped with yards of pink

Figure 1
Pink Ribbons
Gretchen Spittler
2003
7’x2’
It was cruel and desperate, like a mugging or a random act of violence. The images seemed somehow wrong to me though. Breast cancer isn’t the same as getting hit by a car. It isn’t a quick snatch from your family. It is years of painful treatment, disfiguring surgery and very long goodbyes. Significantly, there is always hope. Hope, and very strong women. Consequently, I changed my imagery from fear and desperation to the dignified, tender, graceful moments of hope embodied in each of the quilts made in homage and donated to the many quilting for breast cancer groups.
Inspirations

Mary Fisher is an artist and an AIDS Activist. Her “Abataka” exhibit was shown in Bevier Gallery the fall of 2003, just as I was beginning graduate school. Though I had never seen her work before, I felt an immediate connection to it. She had created a series of large format quilts with photographic images of AIDS victims with whom she had been working in Africa (figure 3). The faces stared out from the quilts and the viewer was instantly confronted by the reality of each individual on the wall. She also uses text and statistics to literally spell out her horrifying messages. I admire and am inspired by Fisher’s courage to state so frankly exactly what she wants to convey to the viewer. Through doing this she is able to reach a wide viewer audience and no mistakes can be made about her mission. I have been heavily influenced by this body of work as is evident in my
own thesis work.

Judy Chicago was an important installation artist during the Women’s movement of the 1970’s. Her most famous piece, “The Dinner Party” (figure 4) has been called an “icon of feminist art”.

One of the ideas of “The Dinner Party” was to draw attention to women through the use of traditional women’s arts. These arts included ceramics, ceramic painting and needlework.

Chicago wrote: “One of the central goals of “The Dinner Party”... was to confront the public domain of high art (the province of men, who empower themselves by excluding women’s culture as low art or craft) with the private realm of domesticity (conventionally assigned to women)” (Jones, pg 25). In order to draw attention to women, Chicago was using traditional women’s art forms which had been, until that point, kept out of

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2 Jones, p 25.
galleries and not promoted commercially.

In thinking about breast cancer, through the influence of Judy Chicago, I decided that because my thesis surrounds women, I would use quilting, a traditional women’s art form, to help encapsulate the ideas of my thesis proposal.

While doing research I stumbled across a collection of prayers by Patricia Hauze. It was through the discovery of A Quilter’s Prayer that I was able to complete one of my final thesis works, “Mending” (fig 18). While seeking resolution for “Mending” I meditated on Hauze’s words:

“... As I cut each length of thread, may I be reminded of the doors that must be closed in our lives so that a new and stronger door may be opened.
As I twist each knot, may I be reminded of a bond of love so strong, nothing will break it.
As I run the thread between my fingers, may I be reminded of the times you have touched my life, my heart, my soul.
As I sew each stitch may I be reminded of the healing power of grace in each of us.”

The dialog of this prayer helped me to visualize the completion of “Mending” and inspired me to conceptualize it in a more expressive way than I had originally planned.

In the movie "Wit", Emma Thompson stars as a literature professor dying of cancer. One of the continuing themes throughout this movie is a poem by metaphysical poet John Donne. Thompson’s character recites the poem:

“Death be not proud
Though some have called thee mighty and dreadful
For, thou art not so,
For, those whom thou think’st,
Thou dost overthrow.
Die not, poor death
Nor yet can’st thou kill me.
From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do goe,
Rest of their bones and soules deliverie.
Thou art slave to fate, chance,
Kings and desperate men,
And dost with poysion, warre and sickness dwell.
And poppie or charms can make us sleepe as well,
And better than thy stroke;
Why swelllest thou then?
One short sleepe past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more,
Death thou shalt die.”

This poem stayed with me for a long time after seeing the

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When dealing with a subject matter as difficult to comprehend as death, I looked to this poem for a source of meaning, as did the character in the movie. It was this poem that helped me to work past the initial theme of fear in my thesis exploration. Though the poem’s speaker confronts death with the knowledge that he will in time die, there is a calming voice speaking that death is not the end and that death in and of itself is powerless against the ultimate eternal life “one short sleep past”. At 25, trying to grasp a concept such as death seems incomprehensible without being overwhelmed by fear. It was through the inspiration of this poem that I was able as an artist to work past the fear and deal with the subject matter of breast cancer.

**Early Experiments**

My earliest thesis experiments were in glass. The first is a glass box (figure 5), designed to fit like a pedestal cap over the figure of a woman. The glass case is engraved with a variation of a traditional rotated X or cross quilt pattern with overlapping layers of etched roses. The rose design was styled after a fabric
swatch. The idea was to create a case designed to protect the woman inside. The box would have the imagery and feeling of a quilt, but as the viewer looked more closely it would become apparent that the box was fragile and insufficient but also the only form of protection for the figure inside. Because of the feelings of fear and fragility, which I did not ultimately want to focus on, this piece achieved only limited objectives of my thesis proposal.

The second experiment is a cast glass female torso (figure 6). The stylized front of the piece has one breast and one arm covering
up the absence of the other breast. The same rose pattern is etched into the glass. The back of the figure is polished and the layers of kiln cast glass are revealed as a twist of innards. The gory counterpart to the modest front side was designed to highlight the outward composure and grace of women battling breast cancer while their insides battled for life. I began this piece concurrently with the glass box. For the same reasons, after completion, I felt that this piece also strayed from what I had hoped to achieve in my original thesis intent.
The Spiritual

I am a deeply spiritual person and I realized not long into the thesis process that I wanted an aspect of my thesis to deal with prayer. When thinking about any sort of fundraising effort to save lives but especially the quilt projects, I found myself thinking about the amount of hope and prayer that were also tied into those efforts. In making a quilt to raise money for breast cancer research the artist is, with every stitch, praying for a cure and hoping that their efforts will make a difference.

It was with this thought in mind that I began a third series of sketches designed to be completed in stained glass. I wanted to use stained glass because of the religious connotation of a traditional liturgical stained glass window. The designs were triptychs incorporating angels pulling themselves three-dimensionally out of the windows and in doing so, resisting the finality of death by becoming an angel. However, in the end the work seemed to again have an underlying violent struggle and I was unsure of the connotation of the glass and how to tie it into my thesis proposal. It was from this experiment that I decided to
switch my full focus to quilting.

After deciding to focus not only on the concept of quilts, but to actually create with fabric and quilting, I designed a series of quilt sketches with three dimensional sculpture emerging from the quilt surfaces. These sketches would ultimately become the basis of my thesis work. What would not be included in further research were freestanding, figurative sculptures which I had originally conceived to obscure and interact with the quilts. The figurative sculptures were designed to be viewers, groups of people in various poses interacting with the women in the quilts. Their lost mothers, wives, sisters, daughters etc. These figures were heavily influenced by George Segal's collection of plaster-gauze figures (figure 7).

Segal worked on his series of plaster-gauze figures over the course of twenty years. Many of his sculptures included multiple figures interacting in a specific space. Many of his single figures interacted directly with the viewer. My concept was to take this idea of full figure interaction and create figures to interact with my quilts. What I came to realize while creating these figures, was that I was essentially creating an audience. In doing this I was

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Illustrating how I wanted the viewers to interact with my works. Consequently, I was preventing the viewer from actually interacting with my works. This realization led to the elimination of the freestanding sculptures.

However, by focusing solely on the quilts, I had a solid body of designs which finally encompassed what I had hoped for in my thesis proposal.
Thesis Exhibit Work

The first piece I began is entitled “Mary, Who Loved the Sea” (figure 10). Before Mary Rickman’s passing, she had completed a series of paintings of the Mediterranean Sea inspired by her visit to Greece the previous year (figure 8). Her use of blue and the sensitivity shown in the depiction of the water, in contrast to the brightly colored Greek fishing boats, is what inspired the watercolor quilt design. In my research I had also seen “Faerie Wood” by Beth Ann Williams (Figure 9). Her integration of subtle changes of color helped solidify the visual design.

Figure 8
Greek Fishing Boats
Mary Rickman
2002
2’x3’

Figure 9
Faerie Wood
Beth Ann Williams
1999
30”x39”
Figure 10
Mary, Who Loved the Sea
Gretchen Spittler
2005
$5'x3'x2'$
But, in this piece as well as in the tradition of watercolor quilts, there was no strong focal point. In keeping with my thesis proposal I knew I wanted the focal point of this piece to be a woman. In order to integrate a figure into the piece I built her to emerge from the quilt itself. After creating the figure I used the same fabrics used in the quilt to cover the surface of the three-dimensional sculptural areas and blur the lines between the two elements. The exception to this process was in the creation of the figure’s hair. After stiffening a simple wig, it was painted to maintain a natural texture as opposed to covering it with cloth. In a light portion of the quilt, the hair is painted dark. The shape was mimicked in the outside dark ring of the quilt in order to draw attention to the figure and help set it away from the rest of the quilt.

In the partial figure’s hand is a picture of Mary Rickman, scanned and printed out on a light fabric used in the quilt. A navy blue embroidery stitch outlines the photograph (figure 11).
The figure holds a picture of Mary because this piece was my tribute to her. I also used it as a tool to draw attention to the face of an actual victim of this disease. Mary Fisher also used this tool in her “Abataka” series.

Before deciding on using a picture I had contemplated using a name, statistic or some other visual. It was in viewing an episode of the television show “Queer As Folk” that I decided on a photograph. In this episode a protest was being held for public officials to acknowledge gay bashing in the community. In order to illustrate the point that it was not a faceless mass that was being affected by this problem, they used photographs of victims.⁶ It is much harder to ignore the image of someone who existed and was loved than a nameless, faceless statistic.

The second quilt I began for my thesis is entitled “Gathering Strength” (figure 12). This piece was inspired by Ithaca, were I lived previous to coming to graduate school. In Ithaca I found people from all walks of life coming together to make the community stronger. Ithaca remains, in my mind, a place where the weak and under-privileged are fought for by the community instead of

Figure 12
Gathering Strength
Gretchen Spittler
2005
9’x6’x8”
persecuted or exploited. Ithaca is a place where the general public feels a strong sense of social obligation. Ithaca is also a place where there is a daily connection with nature as it is situated on Cayuga Lake and the town is interwoven with streams, waterfalls and breath-taking gorges. For these reasons I wanted one of my thesis pieces to be very natural, both in design and fabric. For this quilt I chose hand-dyed batiks in varying earth tones. These fabrics were then woven together in a flowing grid.

Originally, the design had two partial female figures emerging from the quilt with their hair of felted yarn dreadlocks growing together into a three-dimensional basket. That design left the quilt looking more like an elaborate backdrop. To better incorporate the quilt itself, I changed the design to have a variety of

Figure 13
Gathering Strength detail
partial breast and hand casts built into the surface. The hands are in protective positions as they reach for and cradle the breasts (fig 13). The woven pattern of the quilt guides the viewer's eye inward to where the weave becomes tight and strong. The casts, though stationary, have a feeling of gravitating toward this central area of strength and so determined the title.

The third piece created for my thesis exhibition is entitled “Jacob's Ladder” (Figure 14). This quilt's design is the only one of my thesis quilts which is based on a traditional quilting block. I wanted this piece to have an antique feeling as though it were an heirloom and not just recently created. For this I chose period reprints from the 1920's so that the color and design scheme would have the feeling of parents' or grandparents' homes.

I choose to use the Jacob's ladder square for this quilt as well as using the name for the title because of the religious connotation. In the bible, Jacob is welcomed to heaven when a ladder appears before him leading into the sky. Jacob's ladder is a metaphor for dying and in my piece it is a symbol of taking breast cancer to a personal level. I altered the traditional quilting block by substituting a diagonal lace pocket for a half square triangle. In
Figure 14
Jacob's Ladder
Gretchen Spittler
2005
8'x12'x5'

Detail
these pockets I placed small objects of mine. In the center of the quilt is a larger empty pocket surrounded by the words “What of mine will you keep?”. 

In thinking about dying I thought about all of the things one leaves behind. If I were to be diagnosed with breast cancer, what would those who love me want of mine to remember me by? I was inspired by a sculpture by Virginia Cassetta entitled “Locked Doors” (figure 15) which was completed in the fall of 2004. In this piece Cassetta created a wooden shadow box in the shape of a house. In the different compartments or rooms she placed personal objects, both commercial objects and objects which she had created. Her use of personal objects including socially recognizable objects not only spoke of Cassetta as a woman, but also allowed for the viewer to create a personal connection with the sculpture.
After creating the quilt I wanted to expand the visual idea more, so I designed an installation space. I removed the quilt from the wall and hung it out in free space so that the viewer could get close to it and examine all of the little lace pockets and read the words clearly. I then took the corner space behind it and filled it with a barrage of objects and imagery from my life including clothes, toys and photographs. This piece was very difficult for me to install because every object that I put in the space was mine from my everyday life. The context in which I was placing my things signified my own mortality. Even though that was my intent with the piece, it made me intensely uncomfortable.

The overall effect of the installation read as a corner of the attic filled with the possessions of a family member who had passed away and whose family could not throw out the remaining items.

The final quilt for my thesis show is entitled “Mending” (figure 16). The quilt pattern used is an original design incorporating lines of contemporary fabric overlapping, twisting and weaving. Two arms emerge from either side of the quilt and come together to the center where there are two rips in the quilt the approximate size and shape of the wounds left behind from a double radical
mastectomy. Each hand holds a needle and thread and is in the process of sewing up the rips. I wanted this piece to really illustrate the way in which women work to heal each other through the “Quilting for a Cure” movement. This piece also represents hope that breast cancer can be cured. To finish this piece I meditated on the Quilter’s Prayer and was able to reach a hopeful resolution within myself and apply it to this final quilt.
The final work in my thesis exhibit is not a quilt but a wooden sculpture entitled “Milagros” (figure 17). “Milagros” is the first wooden sculpture I have ever attempted. I began this piece with no intention of including it in my thesis show. As the piece progressed, however, I found that it tied in perfectly and also finally resolved my desire to have a sculpture based in the spiritual. I began “Milagros” with the intention of making a rosary. I was raised Catholic and, although I no longer identify with that faith, I still view the rosary as a recognizable symbol of focused prayer on a specific subject matter. In my original design I replaced the decades of beads with wooden breasts and the crucifix with a stylized female torso with only one breast. While discussing this idea it was brought to my attention that in using the specific form of the rosary, I might end up having the message of this piece lost in an uproar of angry Catholics who may have felt I was blaspheming a religious icon. It was my desire to have my work interpreted correctly that led me to continue my research on other kinds of prayer beads.
Figure 17
Milagros
Gretchen Spittler
2005
8'x4'x2'
In my research I read about the Latin American tradition of milagros. In Spanish, milagros means miracles. Milagros, or miracle charms, are objects in the shape of a body part that is causing pain to you or someone you love. Common milagros are hearts, legs, arms, and backs. The milagro charm signifying one’s ailment is then attached to a string of prayer beads and the prayers are directed specifically for the healing of that body part. Now that my concept could more broadly mirror religious tradition I no longer felt that my piece would be interpreted as sacreligious.

To complete my fifty milagro beads I collected a variety of different woods to represent women from all cultures. I then stack laminated and carved the breasts. Although I had never done this process before I felt instantly comfortable with it. It reminded me very much of quilting. Starting with a big piece of material, cutting it into small pieces and then reassembling them to create a big piece again. I felt that I was quilting with wood. The torso was made with the same process. All of the wood was finished with natural oils.

http://gigibeads.net/prayerbeads/milagros.html
When it was decided that “Milagros” would be included in my thesis installation I sewed a cloth backing for the piece. Because, along with all the quilts, “Milagros” is a wall hanging piece, the cloth backing helped provide visual unity throughout the show. For the cloth backing I chose an orange and purple batik and a dark purple border. These bright colors reference the Latin American culture. Through this piece I was able to show visually the prayer involved in the fight against breast cancer.
Conclusion

I feel that through the work presented in my thesis installation I was able to convey the intentions stated in my thesis proposal. During my thesis exhibition I was able to gain feedback from a general audience who, for the most part, understood and respected the ideas portrayed in the work. Each piece evoked a different emotional response from the viewers and I believe that I was successful in relating the concept to a wide viewing audience.

"Milagros" received the most interesting feedback. While middle aged women seemed to relate very closely to the piece and, without prompting, walked up and interacted with the piece by touching it and closing their eyes, most men who viewed it seemed uncomfortable by the one-breasted Venus figure. They were also unwilling to touch the beads as they were afraid that it would seem inappropriate. In hindsight, posting a brief explanation of the origin of the tradition of milagros would have benefited the piece. Taking into consideration the geographic location of the exhibition in western New York, very few people from this area are familiar with Latin American religious traditions. Perhaps if the show were
in southern California or a region with a more concentrated Latin American population such an explanation would not be necessary.

The strongest responses came from “Gathering Strength” and “Jacob’s Ladder”. Though one of the most abstract pieces in the show, or perhaps because of it, “Gathering Strength” held the viewer’s attention longer than the other pieces and was generally considered the strongest piece in the series.

“Jacob’s Ladder” related to viewers in a different way. The viewers were able to directly relate to “Jacob’s Ladder” because of the objects that they recognized from their own lives. While the piece was originally designed to bring the issue of breast cancer to a personal level for me, in the end, the objects of everyday living related directly to the viewers so that they were able to take it to a personal level within themselves.

The most significant comment I received during the exhibition was from a woman who originally approached my mother whom she mistook for the artist. After being directed to me, the woman looked at me in confusion and commented that she never would have guessed that the subject of breast cancer could be so eloquently portrayed by someone so young.
As I continue to explore and expand on this body of work I will take the feedback gained into consideration to strengthen future work. As for this exhibition, I feel that in my research and experimentation I was able to focus my work through my thesis proposal and accomplish the goals I set for myself.
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