Reconstructed Memories

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School of Art
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
In Fine Art Studio

Reconstructed Memories

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Thesis Approval

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Abstract:

In the following document, I discuss the body of artwork I completed for my Masters of Fine Arts degree at Rochester Institute of Technology. The thesis work as presented, explores visual metaphors that relate to memories and emotions associated with past relationships. This autobiographical memoir visually illustrates loneliness, heartache, and nostalgia. Through installations of abstract nontraditional quilting and printmaking, I have depicted visual representations derived from my own experiences and universal ideas about relationships.
Introduction:

Memories are often reconstructed, forming new or skewed versions of recollections based on real events. My thesis work deals with personal memories that hold many common sentiments, creating a connection between the viewer and myself. Utilizing fabric, installation, and printmaking, I use muted colors and repetitive linear marks as a method of abstract storytelling. The muted color palate was used to represent memories that have faded over time. The repetitive marks are metaphorical of how ingrained memories are within myself. The reoccurring memories that are evident in my artwork deal with relationships, lost love, and loneliness.

Process and materials are integral components of my work. Fabric is a medium that I have always found interesting. I started making quilts in 2008. The fabric represents my own personal memories and piecing it together into a quilt is a metaphor for connections. When sewn together, the individual pieces of cloth represent segments of life combined into a non-linear time line. I approach my quilts as abstract paintings created out of fabric and assemble them intuitively. Quilting provides me with a medium that is tactile, easily manipulated, and rich with personal memory.

In addition to quilting, I extend my media exploration into installation and printmaking. I create immersive environments utilizing a range of source materials including fabric, drawings, prints, and found objects. In these works, I strive to create a space and a sense of place in which new memories are sparked. In my prints, repetitive lines and pattern are key elements in my visual language. I typically use thin, curved lines with my patterns, conveying a sense of delicacy and fluid movement. Keeping the lines parallel within the patterns, I am able to have a sense of order within the chaos. When I make these patterns, it is a meditative process where I control the
composition in a space. This in turn, creates a visual narrative where connections and pathways are addressed intuitively. Due to the length of the process and the quantity of the prints made for my pieces, I was able to use the pattern-making as a method of self therapy. Being able to spend time with the work fostered a reflection on memories associated with people who have made an impact on my life.

The purpose of this thesis artwork has been to explore various ways to visually abstract memories and the emotions associated with reflection. It has been my goal to fuse the three elements of my work, large scale quilted fabric pieces, installation, and printmaking, into one exhibition. I have created pieces that aesthetically and conceptually connect. Aesthetically, each piece breaks out of its traditional compositional format to create a dialogue with contemporary art and the genre of installation. I seek to create a visual narrative with the use of color, mark making, and tactile elements. Conceptually, each piece has a purposeful connection to my memories. In the following essay, I will discuss how each of these decisions are embodied in my work.
Context and Influences:

My thesis work is autobiographical. It originates from memories of past relationships that have had a significant impact on my life. These partnerships have transformed my understanding of self and who I am as an artist.

Relationships are part of the human experience, and I consider love and loss to be universal occurrences. With every relationship that I have experienced, I walk away learning something new about myself. Shared experiences with another person can have a lasting effect on the psyche. When those experiences end, heartache, and loneliness remain. This thesis work explores a metamorphosis of personal experiences with lost love.

During my exploration, I found inspiration and influence from the artists Louise Bourgeois, Tracey Emin, and Kiki Smith. Individually these contemporary artists have all dealt with personal experience and memory. In the book “Contemporary Art and Memory” by Joan Gibbons, the author describes Bourgeois’ use of memory in her work by saying “…for Bourgeois, the exercise is not to systematize or to objectify memory, as is the case with the ancient art of memory, but to find a physical expression not only for which has occurred but also for the complex of emotions that accompanied the experience” (Gibbons, 17). In the same text, Emin’s work is described as “the gestures Emin makes are declarative displays of a private life in which the soul is bared” (Gibbons, 19). These sentiments both resonate with my work and me. Kiki Smith, an artist that I have looked up to for most of my career, has extensively explored memory in her works. Her art is categorized as being a constant reflection on the human experience (3). In 2009, Smith exhibited a show titled “Her Memory” in which she used a variety of mediums to create a space of reflection with “strong visual and poetic charge that cannot fail to make an impact on visitors” (3).
Evolution:

As an artist, I tend to work in an intuitive and organic process. When beginning a piece, I typically do not have an outcome pre-visualized. I allow my work to grow and evolve naturally. With my thesis work, I ended up making several pieces and editing them down later for the exhibition. I had a general idea and theme for the body, but each individual piece was constructed with an instinctual and spontaneous method. As the work was produced it evolved into a graphic representation of my ideas.

The evolution started from my interest in using traditional quilting methods. After an intense investigation with the methods and forms of traditional quilting, I began to rethink and reframe the processes. I intentionally broke the mold of what is typically thought of when envisioning a quilt by disassembling the elements into a space. This introduced me to the method of installation, which became an integral part of my work. I started my experimenting with bringing quilted fabric off the wall. Untitled was made from sections of quilted material, suspended from the ceiling to create an abstract illusion of clouds (see figure 1). This piece was a starting point for the fiber pieces I created for my thesis exhibition.

Excited about breaking the rules of quilting, I began experimenting with different methods of printmaking to achieve results that are more nontraditional. I learned that through repetition and use of linear mark making, I was able to convey conceptual messages in my various pieces while keeping the aesthetics of a block quilt. One of the pieces that became a stepping-stone for my thesis work was entitled Strangers in the Forrest (see figure 2). This series of intaglio prints depicts a grid of all of my past lovers. Each portrait was accompanied by a personalized poem. The poems were created using found text from a book titled “Strangers in the Forrest” by Carol Brink. I took pages from the book and used oil pastels to block out everything
but a few selected words. This is a practice that I have been utilizing since my undergraduate study. The poetry has become means of brainstorming. Manipulating the written text to depict extremely personal and ambiguous narratives has been necessary for my process in developing the conceptual ideas I display in my thesis artwork. The titles of each of my final pieces were created in this manor. I carefully selected words on a page to give the viewer a small amount of information about my pieces. These poetic segments of text help further clue the viewer into my emotions and allow them to experience a deeper individualized connection to the work.

As my work developed, I found a happy medium between the two ideas and created three pieces for my thesis that consisted of a traditional quilt, a fiber installation, and a print installation. With these works, I hope to portray the sentiments of faded love and memory, the feeling of brokenness, and somber reflections of touch and human intimacy.
Figure 1
*Untitled*
Quilt Installation
20’ x 10’
Figure 2
*Strangers in the Forest*
Intaglio Prints and Found Poetry
60” x 60”
Body of Work:

a. *I Remember Your Caresses*

*I Remember Your Caresses* symbolizes the memory of touch and human intimacy. Using non-toxic intaglio prints, I created repetitive and abstract patterns that allude to fingerprints in a large-scale installation. A white empty chair, representing a figure or lack thereof, faces towards the fingerprint pattern. It holds many metaphoric elements. First, it acts as an abstract self-portrait. It is a place for me to reflect on the intimacy of my past relationships. Second, the chair becomes a place for the viewer to mentally place themselves in their own memories of human embrace. Lastly, the emptiness of the chair conveys a missing person, someone who has left impactful impressions of the viewer’s and my life.

The use of repetitive linear patterns was to create a visual representation of remembrance of physical intimacy. The curved parallel lines express fluid movement. I used them to convey the motion of touch. The installation spans up the wall fifteen feet, and projects out onto the floor space. The size creates an astounding visual presence. I seek to pull the viewer into the space, leaving everything else behind.
I Remember Your Caresses
Print Installation and Found Object
15’ x 8’ x 6’
Certain Parts Seemed Irrelevant

Certain Parts Seemed Irrelevant is a quilt that conveys the idea of remembering someone from the past. It represents how over time our memories evolve and fade. In my experience, certain memories maintain importance, while others fade into our subconscious and we forget them altogether. Giving a quilt conceptual meaning was a turning point for me in my process. Although it still maintains many elements of traditional quilting, its structure and composition relate to my overall theme. The quilt is constructed using clothing from various past partners. I cut up and reconstructed the pieces into a dreamy abstract composition. Clothing holds strong trace memories of the person it once belonged to. It almost becomes a second skin as it represents personality and individuality. Clothing also holds sentimental value when passed from the original owner to the partner. Although the idea is universal, using specific past partners is a way for me to preserve my memories.

Next to the quilt, I displayed the remnants of the clothing on a pedestal. The scraps juxtaposed with the quilt, represents the idea of discarded memories that fade over time. As time passes, memories become more selective and moments you choose to forget are often lost. This piece can also be used as a blanket. You can wrap yourself up in a quilt for security, and with the lack of said persons in my life, it was a way to comfort myself in their absence.
Certain Parts Seemed Irrelevant
Fiber Art
5’ x 6’
b. Shattered

*Shattered* is a quilt installation that conveys the feeling of complete brokenness after the sudden ending of my most serious relationship. At the time of the break up, I experienced extreme heartache and utter loneliness. I went through a period of serious depression and mental instability, and the only way I can describe the feeling is through the term *shattered*. The graphic and jagged edges of each individual piece replicate a broken mirror. This metaphor is representational of my reflection looking back at the unsettling memories. I used striped fabric to depict a strong visual narrative. The use of perpendicular lines generates a sense of anxiety and causes the viewer to strain their eyes. The difficulty of viewing the piece represents the complexity of emotions associated with the memory of the break up.

I envisioned this installation being displayed on the floor to give the allusion of a mirror that has fallen and shattered. In the Bevier Gallery, the viewer would have had the opportunity to see the piece from within and above the gallery space. From the main floor, the viewer would have been able to fixate on small segments of the quilt. This viewing distance would have represented the small moments that lead to a break up. From above, the viewer would have been able to see the entire piece, representing the big picture. Due to space restrictions, I elected to install the piece on a balcony over hang and trickle it down an adjoining wall. This accomplished a similar relationship between the viewer and the quilt. The viewer could approach the lower pieces on the wall, seeing details up close, but is forced to move away to experience the piece as a whole. The monumental scale directly relates to the scale of the grief I experienced.
This piece expands the boundary of fiber in the contemporary art world. *Shattered* not only breaks the traditional, rectangular shape of a quilt, but also uses installation in an unexpected way.
Shattered
Fiber art Installation
25’ x 10’ x 6’
**Presentation:**

After the completion of my work, the final step was presentation. I created a to-scale model of the Bevier Gallery and tested various arrangements of my work. Due to the scale of my pieces, I knew I was going to have to make a compromise and work with the space in the gallery. Because my work consists of modular components, each piece can be rearranged differently for each site-specific location. Originally I was planning on having the piece *Shattered* presented on the floor, to represent the quilt having been dropped and shattered due to impact. Through the process of installation, I decided to present the piece on the wall. This turned out to be a happy accident, mirroring my evolving process of creating the work. I found it to be thought-provoking to utilize unexpected wall space. The other pieces were more straightforward in their display. Due to its size, *I Remember Your Caresses* needed to be displayed on the twenty-foot wall in the gallery space. After installing this work, I originally had the chair facing out toward the viewer, but upon further reflection, I decided that having the chair facing in toward the piece created a sense of contemplation rather than exhibition. This resounded truer to how I intended the piece to speak. The quilted piece *Certain Parts Seemed Irrelevant* was hung on the wall, with the fabric remnants displayed on a pedestal next to the quilt.

Because I had never seen the work in its entirety before the installation, I learned how to pre-visualize and plan accordingly due to the scale of the work. I learned how to work within the constraints of a sight-specific place and still convey my intentions. For example, the balcony wall was concrete, so I needed to spontaneously switch my hanging material from pins to adhesive velcro. Through intuitive play and the evolution of installation, the final work mimics the process of creating.
Conclusion:

In conclusion, this body of work has allowed me to explore diverse methods of expressing an autobiographical memoir about my past relationships and the sentiments attached to them. The memories you take away from a shared experience with another person can be lasting. In *I Remember Your Caresses* I was able to convey the memory of touch and human intimacy through creating abstract finger prints. Thinking about the tangible qualities of feeling another persons’ touch, *Certain Parts Seemed Irrelevant* visually translated memories of past lovers through a quilt comprised of their clothing. I continued to reflect on past relationships in *Shattered* where I created a visual metaphor of heartache through jagged modular quilted pieces. While reflecting on my thesis, I have processed my personal feelings from the past experiences depicted in the work. Creating this work was pivotal for me as an artist. I developed a strong visual language and broke out of my comfort zone as a maker. It is my intention to continue to develop various modes to express myself through fiber art installations, and to reframe the dialog of fiber within the context of contemporary art.
Bibliography:


http://www.fmirobcn.org/exhibitions/1121/kiki-smith-her-memory