11-1-2008

The botanical thread

Kaitlin Wilson-Bryant

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THE BOTANICAL THREAD

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Art in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

Angela Kelly, Committee Chair

Dr. Therese Mulligan, Committee Advisor

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November 2008
In memory of Gay Bennett

I miss you
Acknowledgments

I express my most sincere gratitude to the members of my committee: Associate Professor Angela Kelly (Chair), Professor Elaine O’Neil and Dr. Therese Mulligan. Each has graciously shared their knowledge and passion with me for these past two years. I will always be indebted for what I have gained from my experiences at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

I thank my classmates who have provided invaluable critique and support from the germination to the outcome of this body of work.

Thanks to Shannon Johnstone and Wendy Savage. I came to this point because of the both of you. I will carry you with me where ever I am.

I thank my family for their tireless support and participation in my artistic life and vision. This could not have come about without them. Thank you for believing.

Most importantly, thank you, Chris. I made it through because of you.
THE BOTANICAL THREAD

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ABSTRACT

My thesis is an exploration of my dual desires of creation/destruction and manipulation/transformation as realized through the remediation of botanical specimens gathered from my domestic environment and transformed into works of art.

Each image questions and presents an understanding of the history of botanical representation, within Western art history, as symbols of nature and femininity and the domestic skill of needlework, a traditional skill learned by women as part of the feminine. I created a conceptual dialogue with those who preceded me, intrinsically linking the acts of sewing and botany as re-interpreted feminist acts.

In this work, I attempt to reveal connections between the physical transformation of the plants and the historical bind of femininity. Thread is utilized symbolically to represent the weight and impact of the history of women.
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Introduction

This thesis is the result of an intense period of exploration of the botanical as subject. The journey of this work began not with the botanical itself but with an object that held intimate and personal meaning—the journal. It is through a fundamental shift in artistic process (as realized through the journal) I was able to approach the botanical in a radical and conceptual manner. The botanical has been intrinsically linked to my domestic life for many years now (figure 1.1) but I had yet to open the door to their rich world of metaphors and interpretations. I opened that door through the use of needle and thread. It is through the exploration of new artistic tools that I was able to engage with the botanical on new levels of understanding, interpretation and meaning.

The concept of the botanical has been transformed in The Botanical Thread into a metaphorical subject. It has led me to re-evaluate concepts of the feminine, nature and my understandings of both. Through artistic experimentation and research, I radically alter the accepted norm of both the botanical and the feminine. It is because of an innate
desire to deconstruct and transform the botanical that I am able to dig deeper into the meaning and metaphor associated with this subject. It is through the use of needlework I am able to realize these desires of deconstruction and transformation, the core of my artistic work.
The Discovered Thread

I began my thesis as a means to bridge the gap between photographing plants as a purely aesthetic, private and pleasurable endeavor to utilizing the botanical as a subject to be transformed, explored, and conceptualized. *The Botanical Thread* is inherently linked to a significant change in my artistic process that occurred during the winter of 2008 when I briefly explored sewing the pages of my private journal (figure 2.3). The previous year I completed *Sewn Apart*, a series of digital scans of journals, which were digitally manipulated to look as though they had been physically torn apart and sewn back together (figure 2.1). Sewing was an essential element of this work but functioned as a metaphor rather than a physical reality. I was driven to explore the symbolic action of destroying something intrinsically linked to my artistic identity. The digital journals represented a severance of my past artistic processes in order to grow and expand my personal methods of creating art. The desire to transform an object is a continual thread running through my most intimate work.

The paper journals I kept during my life are objects that contain the most
intimate and brutal explorations of self. These journals are composed of poems overlaid with watercolor drippings, photographs, pastel smudges, ink stains, found objects and pencil markings (figure 2.2). They function dualistically as exhilarating outlets of creativity and apprehensions because they are physical evidence of past emotional states. A key function of these journals was the ritual of sharing them with viewers. This action removed them from expected functions of privacy and intimacy usually associated with the journal. Although created within the spheres of privacy and intimacy, I would share them with whomever expressed desire to view them.

Sewing pushed the journals to another level of meaning and to a fuller understanding of my creative process. Two significant changes occurred. The first of which was the creation of work that ceased to rely on the literal and the literary representation of emotional states, I utilized metaphor instead. Tearing the page began the metaphor. The torn pages were sewn back together, literal wounds displayed within the pages of a book (figure 2.3). Sewing diminished the act of destruction to a wound, a transgression that would heal but would also leave a scar. I then photographed the
sewn journals with a limited depth of field, in order to focus on areas in the journals where the needle forced itself through the page or the stain of watercolor bled onto another page. By focusing on the needle’s prick the act of reconnecting the two sides of the wound became the emphasis of the work. The wound itself was the subject. The concept of the journal, as an intimate, private sphere in which to engage and document personal experience, was one I decisively took apart through the tearing of the page, putting back together, and photographing the resulting transformation of the pages.

The second change was the understanding I had a specific artistic need to work with physical objects while exploring issues and actions of deconstruction, creation, control, manipulation, and transformation. These “new” journals were explicitly about deconstruction and creating a new object to be photographed as opposed to digitally constructing an object that never physically existed. I also knew that to make a body of work which could satisfy my own personal standards of art making I needed to work with objects that held the same preciousness as the journals. I knew that I wanted to work with plants. Plants are linked to both my domestic and artistic life. Early photographs from the beginning of this series were not only a myriad of various methods of exploring botanical subject matter (figures 2.4 – 2.6) but also an expedition into my relationship with plants to find the best species of plants to use in this body of work. I wouldn’t photograph a plant if it failed to resound within me.

The plants used in The Botanical Thread are plants I photographed time and time again as traditional botanical imagery (figure 2.8). The agave in figure 2.8 is the same
plant that the photograph *The Familial Thread* represents (figure 2.7). I began my work with a variety of plants, many were plants my mother gave me, some were cut flowers, others were bulbs and seeds forced to grow in the winter months, and a few were collected from their native environment of upstate New York. *The Botanical Thread* is made up from many smaller series of photographs, each one organized by plant type. The plants represented in the final body of work include specimens from the following plant families: Succulents\(^1\), Pothos\(^2\), Ferns\(^3\), Philodendrons\(^4\), Lilies\(^5\), Agaves\(^6\), and Mosses\(^7\). Succulents are used in the majority of the images due to their malleability and “flesh-like” properties\(^8\) I needed to successfully transform the plants. The Kalanchoe plant (common name the Velvet leaf plant, part of the succulent family) was particularly

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1 Water-retaining plants adapted to arid climate or soil conditions. Succulent plants store water in their leaves, stems and/or roots. The storage of water often gives succulent plants a more swollen or fleshy appearance than other plants.
2 Epipremnum aureum, is known as the Pothos, Silver Vine, Money Plant and Devil’s Ivy. It is an aroid native to southeastern Asia and New Guinea. It is a type of vine which climbs by means of aerial roots which hook over tree branches. The leaves are evergreen, alternate, heart-shaped, entire on juvenile plants, but irregularly pinnatifid on mature plants.
3 Any seedless, nonflowering vascular plant of the class Filicinae, of tropical to temperate regions, characterized by true roots produced from a rhizome, triangular fronds that uncoil upward and have a branching vein system.
4 A tropical American climbing plant belonging to the genus Philodendron, of the arum family, usually having smooth, shiny, evergreen leaves, often used as an ornamental houseplant.
5 The large plant family Liliaceae, characterized by chiefly herbaceous plants growing from bulbs, corms, rhizomes, or tubers, having narrow, parallel-veined, usually basal leaves, often showy flowers, and fruit in the form of a berry or capsule.
6 Native to hot, dry regions of the New World and having basal rosettes of tough, sword-shaped, often spiny-marginned leaves. Also called the century plant.
7 Any tiny, leafy-stemmed, flowerless plant of the class Musci, reproducing by spores and growing in tufts, sods, or mats on moist ground, tree trunks, rocks, etc.
8 A result of retaining water in their leaves, stems and roots.
pliable when the thread was pulled tight enough to break the leaf but not cut through it completely. Many of the plants were chosen based on their inherent haptic elements, the Kalanchoe plant is very soft and supple in appearance. The same was true of the Agave, Philodendron and Pothos. Each of these plants contained intrinsic qualities to which I was drawn, especially qualities referencing the human body. An Agave leaf, when removed from the main plant, withers, shrivels and shrinks like aging human skin. The Pothos, as a bound form, referenced body limbs bound by string. The Lily took on the appearance of corpse’s skin. These qualities attracted my imagination and a desire to deconstruct them.

My domestic environment was the studio where I photographed the plants. I made an early attempt to photograph a series of Daffodil bulbs in a lighting studio but lost all connections with the space and how I wanted to experience the plants. I returned to my home to photograph the plants in front of a southeast-facing window. Each plant is suspended by thread in the same window and photographed. Much like the repeated actions of manipulation the photographs represent, the process of photographing them became a ritual. I would wake up each morning and set the camera up in front of the
window. I would then sit on the end of my bed and begin selecting material. Many of the images were shot in early morning light, the intensity and quality varying on weather conditions. Many times the creative direction of the shooting would depend on the light. Some mornings the light would be bright, contrasty light while other mornings the light would be soft and diffused, indicating vastly different interpretations of the plants. The swatches of color in the backgrounds are pieces of sky and houses on the street. Quality of light, the plant, and the background all needed to converge in the right way in order for the photograph to be successful. My process was a constant exploration of all three factors for the duration of the series. Changes in one area significantly affected another.

It was a constant balancing act between all three.

Although houseplants make up the majority of subjects in the final thesis, I didn’t begin by photographing my houseplants. I began my exploration with plants I forced to grow from seed in the middle of winter by using a grow light. The first images of this series included a Spathiphyllum plant (common name Peace Lily). I began with subtle manipulations. I loosely bound the roots with brown embroidery thread (figure 2.9). Thicker than thread used for sewing, it was ideal because it mimicked the shape, texture and form of the plant, invoking the idea that the plant’s roots were reaching up to choke the existence of the plant. The next set of plants I photographed, the Narcissus pseudonarcissus’s bulb (Daffodil), were simple explorations of the plant’s form (figure 2.10). Twisting and turning the plant, I bent and forced the plant into unnatural shapes. I favored cyclical forms, presenting the idea of a botanical Mobius strip, eternally returning to its beginnings over and over again. These first
explorations established several crucial elements present in the final selection of images for the thesis exhibition.

The first major aesthetic element established was the decision to use the square format to unify the images. This format also functioned as a kind of container for the plant. I wanted a mathematically proportionate space in order to emphasize their natural beauty and form. It was essential to establish this aesthetic so the manipulations I performed subvert the traditional botanical genre. The first images, the plant was directly placed in the center of the square. Feedback I received from these initial images included suggestions that I engage more forcefully with the space of the square, to bleed images off of the side in order to create tension and interest and that I use the form of the plant to lead the eye around the frame in a visually captivating manner.

The second aesthetic element was the treatment of the background space. Although I wanted the plant to be the main subject of the photograph, the background needed to relate to the elements of the plant through color and ambience. I initially attempted to create interest in the background through water drops and streams of water. The conflict that resulted didn’t create the right amount of tension, instead it muddied both the subject and the environment. As a result, I utilized a limited depth of field and blurred the background further in digital post-production methods. This enabled me to keep the color palette that related to the subject but remove extraneous elements as needed.

After establishing the formal aesthetics, I turned to the plants and the manipulations I wanted to perform. I knew I wanted to manipulate plants with thread but needed to explore various methods of how to implement my concept. I explored binding the plants which shifted to an exploration of sewing the plants. As I made this shift, I left behind the plants I had forced to grow. I now engaged with plants that held significant personal meaning. I began to sew my houseplants. They were originally collected due to the plants’ striking variegations and unusual structures. I worked to enhance or emphasize their aesthetic properties. I used thread to mimic parts of the plants, in figure 2.13 I used thread to mimic the red hairs of the moss. The sewing I performed at this
point was so minimal and delicate it often mimicked leaves pulled from my houseplants. A plant might have a single thread going through its flesh, pulling the plant against itself (figure 2.11). I mimicked what I observed as occurring naturally in the structure of the plant. It was during this exploration I removed the threads from an Agave leaf I had sewn with embroidery thread. The resulting image focuses on the marks left when the thread was removed and the indication of an open wound (figure 2.12). The destructive aspect of this unnatural sewing and my own visceral reaction informed of the possibilities I could create with the combination of thread and plant. Looking back at the entire body of work, I see the Agave image as an essential stage in the creative development of the thesis. It indicates a switch from the intuitive and experimental to a consistent and methodical approach. Although its implications weren’t fully exploited at the time, the Agave formed the desire for the manipulations to be forceful and violent. Feedback I received echoed the desire to see these forceful manipulations referenced but not visually represented.

I began each shoot looking for a decorative element in the structure of the plant I had chosen in order to manipulate it. These images tended to indicate a visual harmony between the thread and the plant. In figure 2.13, the moss’s fine red hairs growing through green leaves are threaded with loops of white thread added to emphasize the aesthetic element that appealed to me. After I completed the first set of photographs of a plant I would bind it violently. With the moss, I threaded more and more loops, beginning
to draw the thread tighter and tighter. The experience of pulling the thread tight, the moisture dripping from the moss as it became more and more compact resonated within me. It was a visceral experience of taking the life from a living plant. Unlike the Agave where I had simply undone the threads, now I was essentially forcing the life (moisture) out of the plant by binding it (figure 2.14). In several instances the images of the sewn plants were decidedly more successful than the decimated plant.

Feedback I received from my committee indicated the work had a good selection of different uses of thread but did not speak to the potential power of the thread both conceptually and formally. One approach to answer this problem was the sequence and organization of the photographs. We discussed creating diptychs and triptychs in order to enhance the visual and conceptual strength of the images. As I began creating the diptychs and triptychs I saw how I could use sequence/juxtaposition to reinforce the visual language that I had created through form, texture, color and line. I assumed two different approaches to the diptych/triptych format: one approach created a repetition of form, color and space (figures 2.15, 2.16), the other utilized juxtaposing the plants (figure 2.17) according to how thread was used. The juxtapositions consisted of selecting one image in which the thread was used passively and one image in which the thread was used aggressively. Each approach emphasized and magnified the act of sewing/binding by controlling how the viewer engaged with the images. This solved part of the issue of
how the thread functioned conceptually but the series still needed more forceful examples of the thread.

In one monumental push I returned to the plants in front of the window. I utilized the forceful approach I established with the Moss images. I employed it immediately to each plant I photographed. In figure 2.15, I cut a length of a Pothos vine and wrapped it around itself. I then took a spool of white thread and began to bind it as tightly as I could. It was not only physically taxing but also emotionally. The tighter I wrapped the thread, the more I felt something constrict inside of me. The Pothos and the thread were well matched. They created a balance of the plant’s form and the thread, the thread didn’t cut into the Pothos instead it constricted it and overwhelmed it but did not destroy it. This balance of plant form and thread was what I had been searching for in this series. I was looking for the breaking point of each plant, the moment before the plant was destroyed by the thread. It was this moment I wanted to photograph. I approached the Kalanchoe plant with a different method but was once again able to find that balance, the tension that was needed between the plant and the thread (figure 2.16). I did the same with the

Figure 2.15
Philodendron and Moss using different decorative methods, cutting into the flesh of the plant in varying ways but not destroying it.

The last set of images I made for *The Botanical Thread* linked back to the plants that I previously manipulated in earlier photographs. My committee and I talked a lot about transforming the plants through manipulation. As I worked on this series I kept the plants that I had sewn or bound in a box instead of throwing them out. I returned to these plants to photograph them again. Some had begun to rot, some were too withered and fragile to photograph but as I pulled the succulents from the box I knew I had to photograph them. Succulents whither when removed from their water source. These plants represented how the thread continued to irrevocably alter them, even in death.
The holes where the thread had been pulled through was swollen and puckered (figure 2.18). They were continuing to be transformed by the manipulation of the thread. The marks of aging and of needle and thread reference the entire process of *The Botanical Thread*.

As I made the photographs in my thesis, I accepted *The Botanical Thread* as an exploration into themes of botanical subject matter, needlework, and photography. After finishing this work and writing about my artistic process I began to understand that as much as the work is about these themes, it is undeniably a deep and personal exploration into my dualistic impulses of destruction/creation, manipulation/transformation and ruin/repair. Needlework is the perfect metaphor and means for these impulses, especially when combined with the living organism. Needlework is about repair but it is not repair without alteration. The photographs in my thesis speak to the damage of the needle, the implications that the plants are irrevocably changed by the needle. Dually, needlework is also about the creation of something new. It is through these acts I sought to understand my needs and desires for transformation.

Figure 2.19
The Historical Thread

This historical backdrop grounds *The Botanical Thread* not only within traditions of botanical illustration but also within the lineage of nature’s representation in the canon of Western art history. The present-day relationship between humans and nature is at a critical point in history and it can be compared to how previous civilizations have impacted nature. Evidence of our presence on nature is undeniable present in contemporary society. Contemporary artists are a barometer of the continuing complexity of the relationship between nature and humans, especially the fragility of both nature and humankind. Natasha Egan, in the introduction to the exhibition *Consuming Nature*, speaks to this fragility:

In Western art since the late eighteenth century, the romantic notion of the sublime competes for space with the spirit of human endeavor. On one hand, humans are weak and in awe before the power of nature, and on the other, they are energetic and domineering builders, diggers, and settlers. Civilizations grow and intrude upon nature, relying on her bounty. Then they peak and decline, leaving few marks, and nature reclaims its own. The process cycles on, perhaps hastened by contemporary technology, serving as a constant reminder of the durability and fragility of both nature and mankind.9

The shift between images of the botanical used as either pure decoration or scientific evidence in art history and worthy of intellectual and social meaning is evident in the symbolic paintings of the early European Renaissance. Individual specimens of the botanical world, such as Tulips, are included in the symbolic language of still life genre paintings. In the sixteenth century, Clara Peeters, a contemporary of Anthony Van Dyck and one of the first still-life specialists, contributed to the formation of the banquet and breakfast scene. Her paintings depicted elaborate displays of food, dishes, animals and flowers (figure 3.1). Several elements in her paintings were considered vanitas themes. Vanitas paintings are symbolic still life paintings that speak to the transience of life and certainty of death. Flowers were often included in vanitas paintings as symbols of the fleeting nature of life. When a vanitas painter included flowers (figure 3.1), the

flowers might be losing their petals, symbolizing the passage of time and our mortality. These paintings present nature as not only an aesthetically beautiful object but also a means for conveying core views about the existence of humankind. The Botanical Thread achieves a similar approach through its symbolic use of the botanical to reference the history of women and the feminine.

Advances in botany paralleled the growing popularity of the botanical subject in painting. Plant illustrations were not directly created from nature until the mid-sixteenth century due to a heavy reliance on copying previous illustrations. At this time, systems of plant classification developed concurrent with the emergence of gardening as a leisure activity. This led to the development of the transition between herbals as a pure source of medicinal information to books that were objects to be appreciated for their aesthetic value. This spreading of botany from pure science to a leisure activity would grant it access to the domestic realm and, by association, the realm of women.

The popularity of botanical subject matter corresponded to the expansion of botanical exploration. Ships traveling overseas brought back all manner of botanical plant life in order to expand scientific advancement and the activity of collecting rare specimens. The desire to bring the world into the home to be studied and categorized allowed women to be involved with botanical illustration from

11 Herbals were medicinal books written about the healing properties of plants. Chadwick, 130.
the onset of this popular genre of botanical subject matter. Rachel Ruysch\textsuperscript{12} was known for her still-lifes while Maria Merian\textsuperscript{13} became known as a foremost scientific botanical artist (figure 3.2) during the 18\textsuperscript{th} century.

The Victorian era marks a wave of professional and amateur botanists, many of whom were women. The domestic realm was one in which women could participate in without trespassing wholly into the scientific arena dominated by men\textsuperscript{14}. Anna Atkin’s prolific work with cyanotypes of botanical subject matter resulted in the first book to be illustrated by a photographic method (figure 3.3). Photography has been deeply rooted to the theme of nature from the beginning of its conception not only is Talbot’s ‘Pencil of Nature’ is a representation of physical characteristics of photography but it advanced its role as a device to document the natural world. Atkin’s albums were intended to function as scientific catalogues, utilizing the cyanotype process as a means to create reproducible images, but they also function as aesthetic works of art from a contemporary standpoint. *The Botanical Thread* links itself to photographic practitioners such as Atkins in shared subject matter (images of individual specimens of the natural world) and a desire to document and understand the details within the specimens. Atkin’s sense of design, the white outline of the plant on the cyan background, was beautifully and intelligently employed in her photographic work. I took this sense of design as a forerunner and inspiration for “The Botanical Thread.” Her design methods

\textsuperscript{12} Rachel Ruysch’s popularity was due in part to her presence within the mostly male Dutch society of painters. Ruysch was invited to Dusseldorf to serve as court painter for John Wilhelm and on her return to Holland, continued to produce large-scale paintings of flowers and fruit for well-known clientele.

\textsuperscript{13} Merian’s work depicted insects on leaves and flowers, she documented a wide range of insects in her lifetime (1647-1717) and produced several comprehensive volumes of her work. Chadwick, 132.

\textsuperscript{14} Botanical illustration was available to women for a variety of reasons, including its’ classification as an “amateur” activity and its’ association with the domestic realm, based on the crossing of boundaries between art and craft, science and leisure activities. Armstrong, 79.
emphasized the detail and form in order to produce an accurate and scientific specimen. While “The Botanical Thread” seeks these details out in order to manipulate and alter them, Atkins employed the cyanotype process in order to scientifically document and record the forms of the plants.

Mid-20th century women artists, who are celebrated for their depictions of botanical subject matter, are the forerunners for this thesis. Imogen Cunningham’s photographs of plant matter revered their form, sensuality and aesthetic value (figure 3.4). Photographs such as Cunningham’s and Georgia O’Keefe’s paintings of flowers influenced and deepened my personal connection and understanding of the botanical subject matter and methods for depicting them. They expanded my idea of how nature is traditionally depicted by providing dramatically different interpretations and experiences of plant life. Not only did their approaches offer an alternative technical approach to the botanical but a personal one as well. I interpret O’Keefe’s paintings as visual representations of a spiritual connection with the botanical. The abstraction of the botanical form inspires a spiritual connection to botanical life.

From a contemporary standpoint,
The Botanical Thread relates to work which has taken the botanical as its subject and transformed the viewer’s expectations of the natural object. I look to Betty Hahn as an artist who has achieved this but is also a significant example of how an artist can work with a subject, like the botanical, and interpret in so many different ways. Hahn’s photographic series, including “Passing Shoots” and “Botanical Layouts”, are important examples of this transformation. “Passing Shoots” is a long-running series the artist completed with a toy camera, merging the snapshot and the art object. Many of the photographs from this series are botanical images. “Botanical Layouts” is a series of botanical material photographed on top of diagrams of plants (figure 3.5). Hahn comments on the uneasy quality of these photographs: “Whatever it is, I can’t put my finger on it, but the “Botanical Layouts” have something a little too anatomical about them. They’re like an autopsy—they have that edge that makes them more than just elegant pictures of flowers.”  

It is this edge that I wanted to achieve in “The Botanical Thread.” The remediation of subject matter that occurs in this series of photographs influenced my own approach to the botanical. I strongly desired to present another, unaccustomed view of the botanical. I wanted to go beyond the “elegant pictures of flowers.”

Another aspect of Hahn’s work that is important as a precedent is her rich and intellectual use of stitching. Hahn made photographic images on fabric and stitched part of the photograph. She sought alternatives to the contemporary use of the realistic photograph by pushing the boundaries of what constitutes a photograph. David Haberstitch comments on the common theme of healing and destruction that exists in Hahn’s sewn photographs: ”To stretch a metaphor like thread, she was performing surgery with a needle on ailing photographs.” Like Hahn, I utilized thread to manipulate an object as a means for exploiting its metaphorical possibilities. I desired to push the boundaries of what constitutes the botanical and expected relationships with the botanical.

15 Steven A. Yates, Betty Hahn: Photography or Maybe Not, (University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 43
16 Yates, 31.
Figure 3.6
The Gendered Thread: Nature as Feminine

The construct of nature is to culture as female is to male\textsuperscript{17} has been a persistent formulation in Western thought (figure 4.1). This is evidenced in philosophical traditions established by Plato and Aristotle.\textsuperscript{18} The ancient Greeks personified nature as feminine and saw it as the origin of everything (the universal mother), including culture. A dualistic Western philosophical tradition regards nature gendered as female as passive but also secretive and mysterious. “She” is the object of scrutiny and the male-orientated scientific investigation. This relationship has undergone constant revision through changing societal values and advances in science and philosophy, however, representations of nature continue to be linked with the feminine. Contemporary

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{figure4.1}
\caption{Figure 4.1}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{17} Barbara Kruger, \textit{We Won’t Play Nature to Your Culture}, 1983, Institute of Contemporary Art, London.
\textsuperscript{18} \url{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristotle}
examples include language which still indicates nature as a feminine entity (mother earth) and images that consistently link women to nature (most notably advertising photography, figure 4.2). While the term “mother earth” has empowering connotations for the feminine connection with the earth, advertising tends to make correlations between “natural beauty” in both nature and in women and limits that connection to aesthetic purposes.

Nature as a subject in art has represented this outlook in varying guises. Renaissance art, concerned with the rational and the scientific, assumed it could master and transcend nature. There existed a male desire to discover and understand “her” secrets. The personification of nature as female represented a need to dominate and conquer in the quest for knowledge. Paintings presented “nature” as female and “science” as male, with the artist himself representing rationality and control (figure 4.3). Durer’s famous woodcut of how to represent perspective in drawing is at once a clear example of this dichotomy and proof of its continuing influence due to the fact that it is often shown in art history courses. Of particular importance is the transition that took place in the 18th century as philosophical explorations into the nature of sexual differences reshaped older explanations. Jean Jacques Rousseau, a contemporary of Voltaire and Antoine Thomas (contributors to a natural law theory of equality), was part of a group of thinkers which “explicitly denied the equality of men and women on grounds of law or nature.”

Helen Chadwick states in the introduction to her book *Women, Art and Society*:

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19 Chadwick, p. 40.
Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ideas on the proper place of women in the social and political order that became identified with the new, modern world...It is consistent with a lengthy Western tradition which has rationalized the separation and oppression of women in patriarchal culture. Rousseau believed women to be naturally inferior and submissive. The influence of Rousseau lay behind an increasing identification of femininity with nature in the second half of the 18th century.”

These identifications with nature continued through the 19th century into the beginning of the 20th century. However, during the 20th century artists, scientists, philosophers, and historians begin to take this analogy apart and devise new meanings and understandings of the feminine. In Sherry B. Ortner’s 1974 essay *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?*, the author outlines some of the pervasive issues of why this analogy continues to persist in contemporary societies:

*Why Is Woman Seen as Closer to Nature?*

It all begins of course with the body and the natural procreative functions specific to women alone. We can sort out for discussion three levels at which this absolute physiological fact has significance: (1) woman’s body and its functions, more involved more of the time with “species life,” seem to place her closer to nature, in contrast to man’s physiology, which frees him more completely to take up the projects of culture; (2) woman’s body and its functions place her in social roles that in turn are considered to be at a lower order of the cultural process than man’s; and (3) woman’s traditional social roles, imposed because of her body and its functions, in turn give her a different psychic structure, which, like...
her physiological nature and her social roles, is seen as being closer to nature.  

*The Botanical Thread* seeks to reference the historical gendering of nature in order to subvert it through the use of a skill—sewing—historically assigned to the feminine in order to form constructs that represent both the oppression that such outlooks had for women and as an act of empowerment as re-claimed by the artist. On one hand, I have created a visual representation that speaks to the historical male point of view of nature: I have bound, controlled and manipulated the botanical to the point where it is transformed into something else. On the other, I have embraced the transformed botanical as a representation of nature, decorated it, made it my own in order to celebrate its inherent qualities of struggle, growth, beauty and possibility.

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Threading the Needle: A Short History of Needlework

“I’ve always had a fascination with the needle, the magical power of the needle. The needle is used to repair the damage. It’s a claim to forgiveness.” – Louise Bourgeois

This chapter seeks to ground my thesis within the historical lineage of needlework and its relationship to the construct of femininity. The art of needlework has long been a means of educating women in the framework of the feminine ideal. This chapter will give a brief outline of the historical process by which needlework became identified with a specific set of characteristics linked to women and domesticity. With this I bring the presence of the feminine in The Botanical Thread full circle, demonstrating the interweaving of botany and needlework to illuminate areas in which concepts and ideas overlap. In a broader view, it takes to heart Rozsika Parker’s statement that “to know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women.”

The Botanical Thread utilizes several different methods for using needle and

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23 A brief note on femininity: I chose to use this term in the same manner that Rozsika Parker has defined it, which describes the feminine as “the behavior expected and encourage in women, though obviously related to the biological, is shaped by society.” Femininity is constantly being re-defined over the course of history, whether it is through evolving social mores or through personal discovery. Rozsika Parker, The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine (New York: Routledge, 1984) 3.
24 Parker, iv.
thread, including sewing, stitching and binding. The term needlework refers to sewing, embroidery, needlepoint, and stitching. In this thesis I will use this term to broadly refer to both methods I used in creating my thesis. When appropriate I will refer to individual images and the methods of needlework employed.

Parker’s book on needlework and the making of the feminine, *The Subversive Stitch*, analyzes the art of needlework and its transformation beginning in the Middle Ages into a skill set associated with the feminine ideal. The accepted concept that women are naturally predisposed to needlework conceals the fact that up until the 18th century men did the majority of embroidery work. During the 16th century, needlework “served two functions: endowing an education with elevated class associations, and making an education, which might otherwise been deemed dangerously masculine, safely feminine.”

In the 17th century, needlework, specifically embroidery, was utilized as a tool to inculcate femininity from such an early age that it would appear to be innate. This continued into the 18th century through the use of embroidery as an activity shared between mother and daughter and a bond between unrelated women. Embroidery is “the art or handicraft of decorating fabric or other materials with designs stitched in strands of thread or yarn using a needle.” Instead of filling a specific function, such as sewing clothes, embroidery is solely a decorative craft. Embroidery signified both self-containment and submission, representing the constraints of femininity. This concept of constraint, in its specific association with the feminine, is distinctly present in “The Botanical Thread” through the metaphorical use of thread to bind and decorate the plants.

The Victorians re-discovered Medieval embroidery and wrote the first histories of the craft. They re-interpreted history so that it reflected Victorian morals and views. Because of this they projected embroidery as a feminine skill throughout history.

25 Parker, 60.
26 Parker, 72.
28 Parker, 11.
29 Parker, 17.
defining it as a feminine craft, it continues to be associated with the domestic crafts, contemporary views of needlework are still heavily influenced by the Victorian model.

**Threading the Needle: Feminine (ist) Threads**

My work takes up the attitude of feminism similar to the definition Peggy Phelant supplies in her anthology of feminist artist, *Art and Feminism*:

> "Defining feminism as a conviction, I am trying to accent the notion that it is also a way of interpreting the world... The promise of feminist art is the performative creation of new realities. Successful feminist beckons us towards possibilities in thought and in practice still to be created, still to be lived."  

The 1970s feminist art movement questioned and reclaimed the value and meaning of domestic activities on an unprecedented scale. Traditionally assigned feminine practices and acts were re-evaluated and explored in new contexts, including needlework. It symbolized a life skill that had been left behind in the 1960s with the proliferation of manufactured clothes but was still closely tied to women and domesticity. Feminist artists questioned the division of craft and art, meaning and decoration. Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1979) is an icon of this status elevation of needlework. It also raises the craft to symbolic and conceptual levels (figure 5.2). Chicago and other feminist artist elevated needle work as a viable means of creative expression of the female experience. By using a traditional “feminine skill” to create feminist works of art, these artists took needlework into conceptual and political realms.

Of particular importance to my thesis is the dialogue established around low and high art, specifically the acknowledgement that women’s work can reflect both sides of this aesthetic spectrum. Craft in my work functions as an action of empowerment and as a means of control. In taking up the needle and thread, I am simultaneously exploring and continuing this feminist lineage through these symbolic tools. In many ways, needlework (specifically those photographs representing sewing) seeks to both “heal the damage” as Louise Bourgeois states above. I symbolize the damage that has occurred within the history of women by using thread in violent ways. The acts performed on the

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plants are violent, I manipulate the world within these photographs to reflect that women have been controlled, condemned, confined throughout history.

Feminist artists, such as Chicago, Mariam Schapiro, and Joyce Kozloff utilized “women’s work” as a means to questioned the division of craft and art, low and high art, and meaning and decoration. Feminist artists would use traditional arts, such as needlework, to create introspection and question the structure of how we analyze and view not only previously accepted forms of art but craft as well.

Contemporary work of Elaine Reichek uses sewing samplers\(^\text{31}\) to take on contemporary means of communication, such as the World Wide Web (figure 5.3). Contemporary trends in sewing, knitting and needlework reflect “the dissolving of the categories of art, craft and design that have fragmented the world of aesthetic and functional objects for more than a century.”\(^\text{32}\) The Botanical Thread reflects this blurring of categories by utilizing traditional needlework tools as a means to explore and conceptualize not only botanical material but also these acts of needlework. Thread is intended as much as a way to hold the work together as a means of communication. It can be interpreted to mean that, like the individual act of sewing, we each are manipulating the world around us. We all hold the threaded needle in our hand.

\(^{31}\) A [needlework] sampler is a piece of embroidery produced as a demonstration or test of skill in needlework. It often includes the alphabet, figures, motifs, decorative borders and sometimes the name of the person who embroidered it and the date. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sampler_(needlework)

\(^{32}\) David Revere McFadden, Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting, (New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2007), 6
The Botanical Thread: Exhibition

The sequence and presentation of my thesis began with selecting photographs for single, diptychs and triptychs presentations. My committee aided me in deciding which images were strong enough to be presented singularly and which images functioned better in triptychs and diptychs. Four images were selected for single presentations and the rest were grouped into diptychs and triptychs based on design, aesthetic and conceptual elements. Two diptychs contain images from different shoots while three of the triptychs contain images from the same series.

As I created the diptychs/triptychs I allowed my intuition and sense of design to dictate which images worked with one another. Only after I felt the design of the images was strong would I begin to find the conceptual links between the images. Juxtaposition became an important visual aspect in some groupings (figure 6.1) while other groupings depended on each image to build a cohesive language (figure 6.2).

The concept behind the choice of images was to make a selection which would build upon itself to create tension between not only the individual works but between the viewer and the work. The manner in which the thread was used (loosely wrapped, bound tightly, stitching the flesh of the plant) was a means for stipulating how the images would be grouped. For example, in figure 8.2, the triptych depends on the Western practice of reading left to right. The thread and it’s tension builds until the third photograph, where the thread literally cuts and severs the plant irrevocably. The first two images in the triptych indicate the tension and violence in the thread by beginning the process of
severing the plant. In the third image, the thread’s presence represents a distinct and undeniable fissure in the plant. By building up this visual information, the final image’s impact is much more forceful.

Figure 6.2

The final presentation of my thesis consisted of ten inkjet prints, each photograph 15” x 15”. The photographs were large enough to examine the details of each plant but not so immense as to physically overwhelm the viewer and the gallery space. The photographs were formally presented in frames of ash wood and white mats. This presentation was carefully considered in order to allow the photographs to be the emphasis of the exhibition while allowing the framing method to relate aesthetically to the subject matter. I wanted the display of the work to be cohesive and sensitive to the subject matter. The wood frames successfully separated the work from the gallery walls while not overwhelming the presence of the work.

*The Botanical Thread* was presented in the Green Gate Gallery in Honeoye Falls, NY from May 1\textsuperscript{st} to 31\textsuperscript{st}, 2008. The gallery is located in The Lower Mill, a historic stone mill built in 1827. This location was essential to the overall experience of the exhibition. The intimate scale (275 square feet) of the gallery was essential to experiencing the work on the wall. I wanted an intimate space in which to experience the work. My thesis was created in an intimate space and I wanted that feeling to be represented in the gallery. Like my journals, I wanted the viewer to experience my work’s intimacy as closely as possible. The gallery’s 275 square foot space ensured the viewer a physical proximity to the body of work as a whole. Standing in the center of the room, a viewer
would be surrounded by work. It was important to create an intimacy with the viewer within the gallery in order to emphasize the scale and physical presence of the work. The viewer could step back to view the work but not too far back, ensuring the viewer a controlled proximity to the work. Two walls were hung with the single images, on either side of a widow. The other walls were hung with the diptychs and triptychs. The sequence was partially dictated by the space since the construction of the gallery was limiting. I could only hang the diptychs and triptychs on certain walls due to spatial constraints. The gallery, prior to the exhibition, was purely utilitarian, which was then re-ordered as a clean, light-filled, private place to observe the work on the wall. Offices were on one side of the room, a staircase led up to an unknown space on another side of the room and several wooden beams cut through the space. I think this made the gallery somewhat awkward to navigate.

An important aspect of the gallery was the presence of natural elements in the gallery. One wall in the gallery is an original stonewall of the mill (figure 6.3). In this wall was a tall window that brought the natural world into the space through daylight and the trees outside the window. This wall brought natural elements into the gallery, juxtaposing the work on the walls with the reality and experience of the natural world. During the reception of the exhibition, tall glass containers placed on the window’s frame emphasized the window’s presence. These containers were filled with red tulips, stones and moss. Each one of these elements referenced the work in the show, the tulips and moss were subjects represented in work on the wall and the stones referenced the stone wall of the mill. The Tulips brought their own living energy into the exhibition and created a vivid contrast between the photographs and the plants themselves.
Future Threads/Conclusion

To this day, I am making photographs which continue The Botanical Thread. The driving force to understand my relationship with these botanical specimens continues to deepen and expand as I explore the boundaries of this subject and its accompanying metaphors. I continue to be fascinated by the life cycle that each plant represents. I have begun bringing The Botanical Thread into the landscape (figure 9.1), to create connections between the land and myself. Besides the camera, I continue using needle and thread. I use the thread as a metaphor for my spiritual connection to the land. By wrapping and binding living sections of the landscape I am exploring new approaches to the use of thread, sewing pieces and parts of the landscape together. I am also engaging with the element of time in this work, I sew plants in their native environments and observe them as time passes. I make photographs that focus on the marks of time and the natural elements as they effect both plant and thread. By subverting the botanical, I contribute to the historical struggle and dialogue of and about the feminine. It is by taking up the needle I utilize my interpretation of the botanical to express my feelings, ideas and motivations for making photographs.

In Michael Pollan’s book. “The Botany of Desire,” he speaks to the reciprocal relationship of humans and plants:

“The human desires that link their (plants) destinies to our own. Its broader subject is the complex reciprocal relationship between the human and the natural world, which I approach from a somewhat unconventional angle: I take seriously the plant’s point of view.”

I, too, take seriously the plant’s point of view.

Figure 9.1
Select Bibliography


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