By now you know

Mary Johnstone

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By Now You Know
Mary Shannon Johnstone
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Artist Statement

When I was seven, I almost drowned. I fell through the middle of an inner tube and sank to the bottom of a swimming pool. While under the water, I imagined I existed in two selves, one old and one young. As this division took place, a beautiful blue void settled inside of me and has remained with me ever since. It is a void of silence and it is a recurring theme in my work. *By Now You Know* represents hope through transcendence. I am now above the water looking in.
The Story

It is the middle of winter. I am seven years old and with my father in an indoor swimming pool. The pool is very large. The gradating shades of blue tell me how deep the water is. The smell of chorine fills my nose and stings my eyes. We enter the pool from the turquoise blue side. I jump in feet first. Not knowing how to swim, I try to stand in the shallow water, but my feet touch the bottom of the pool. The water is cold. It consumes my entire body, licking the top of my head. My father picks me up and places me inside of a black inner tube. We make our way toward the deep end of the pool. I am watching the colors slowly change and feeling the water pass over my legs. It reminds me of putting my hand out of the window while driving on the highway. My father sees his friend at the side of the pool and stops to talk to him. I am turning myself around in the inner tube, watching my legs and the bottom of the pool. My arms are becoming heavy and strained and I cannot hold on any more. Feeling cold, I let go. My heart is beating faster. I can see my father's legs and watch as the bottoms of his feet and his black swimming shorts become smaller. I try to wave at them, but only fall faster. I can't breathe. I think I am dying. I want to scream, but realize I can't. Looking around, all I can see is varying shades of blue. I can hear nothing, smell nothing, taste nothing and feel nothing but the heaviness of weightlessness. Suddenly I am calm. I am distant from everything, yet this distance is my own. I feel complete and peaceful. This is my space and it is blue.

I do not remember how I was pulled back up. I assume my father turned around, realized I had fallen and fished me out of the water. While I was not physically harmed from this experience, I was nonetheless transformed. I felt a perfect balance under the water. I experienced a disconnection from everything, and yet through this disconnection, I felt a connection with myself. Under the water, I felt a balance of contradictions -between anxiety and peace, heaviness and
weightlessness, rhythm and discord, and close to someone who was very far, as well as distant from someone who was very near. The varying shades of blue that I saw under the water filled me with a beautiful sense of loss and longing, as if a choice were being made for me. The closer I came to what I thought was nonbeing, I closer I felt to myself.

**Thesis Statement**

This balance of contradiction often overcomes me during times when I feel out of control. I become overwhelmed with a sense of panic, but suddenly I am calm, giving myself over to a calm complete self. The color blue reminds me of this process. I use blue as both a color and concept in *By Now You Know*. Though this installation, I hope to fill the viewer with the same fragility, sadness, and beauty that the color brings to me.

Throughout my working process, I draw on the themes of the fragmented self, common in phenomenology and existentialism. Specifically, the idea of the self existing as mere fragments reflects the existentialist notion of the self in the present moment as well as phenomenological ideas on perception. In addition, I have found inspiration in the writings of novelist Milan Kundera. I use these sources as a way of discussing my themes, metaphors, and aesthetics. The essence of my thesis is connecting with a part of myself, a self that is complete and whole only through fragmentation. Through the installation, *By Now You Know*, I provide an opportunity to bring the viewer to the edge of their consciousness and to give themselves over to their unconscious.
MFA Thesis Exhibition

By Now You Know

The exhibition, *By Now You Know*, was viewed at the University of Rochester's Hartnett Gallery from April 19-May 17, 2001. It was comprised of two parts: a video installation, and a series of color photographs. The Hartnett Gallery is approximately 55 feet long and 25 feet wide. The gallery is shaped in the form of an isosceles triangle, with a 6-inch width apex in the tip of the triangle. At the tip of the triangle, in the front of the gallery, the ceiling height changes from 10 feet high to 22 feet high. Architect I.M. Pei designed both the University of Rochester's Wilson Commons and the Hartnett Gallery. Converging walls, glass ceilings and dramatic angles create a unique building and gallery that is filled with tension. One of the goals of this installation was to provide a transformative experience for the viewer as they looked at my art. This is achieved by creating a space in which the viewer is immersed. The installation to be experienced not just observed. The Hartnett Gallery is a perfect environment for this approach. Originally, Pei designed both spaces (Wilson Commons and Hartnett Gallery) to resemble a pinball machine. In the Wilson Commons Building, where Hartnett Gallery is located, the architect used arched glass for the main ceiling, sharp angular walls and curved staircases to make the person feel as if they were a pinball bouncing through a game. Fascinated, I wanted to use Pei's design in my work. After working for several months with two foam core models, I realized all of my installation ideas relayed a message of hope and transcendence despite a gallery space that favored anxiety and disjunction. Unsure of a resolution, I made a visit to the Hartnett Gallery. While I was there, I discovered bright clouds and sun shining through the curved glass ceiling of the Wilson Commons building. I realized my video installation would reiterate the presence of the sky, symbolizing hope and transcendence through an
opening into the heavens. This realization allowed me to create a gallery installation that combined the weight of my photographs with the airiness of my video.

Photographs

The photographic portion of By Know You Know is comprised of fourteen figure-in-landscape chromogenic prints. All images are different shades of blue. All images are out of focus and blurry. Ten of the prints are approximately 28" x 28", while the other four are 40" x 40". All images were photographed with a broken 2.25 Rolicord, using 120 Agfa Ultra 50 film. My camera has been dropped several times and has a few malfunctions, including light leaks. I manipulate my camera’s light leaks through slow speed film and extended exposures. These manipulations left my images unfocused and saturated. In addition, they gave the photographs an atmospheric quality.

My broken camera is a metaphor for my personal vision. I use my camera to inscribe the intangible. I record what is unseen with the eye, but experienced in emotion. Traditionally, cameras are used to record what is visible. They are used to document the existence of a person, place, event or situation. On the contrary, I am interested in recording emotion. By defying photographic optics I create spatially impossible surfaces on film. I use my camera to record the trace of a memory, giving life to photographs that are the emotional equivalent of this memory. By Now You Know photographs bring the viewers to the edge of visibility, allowing an opportunity to give themselves over to their own unconsciousness.

In the novel, Immortality, Milan Kundera discusses self-awareness through altered optics, using sight as a metaphor for memory.

"When he was very young, he was shy and wanted to make love in the dark. Yet he kept his eyes wide open in the dark, so that thanks
to the weak rays that penetrated the drawn curtains he could see at least a little.

Then he not only got used to the light but demanded it. When he found that his partner had her eyes shut, he urged her to open them. And then one day he found to his surprise that he was making love in the light, but with his eyes shut. He was making love while remembering.

Darkness with eyes open.

Light with eyes open.

Light with eyes shut.

The dial of life."¹

The use of my broken camera is sight with eyes shut, remembering and revisiting with altered optics, bringing me closer to myself. Through this fragmentation, I reconnect with my whole self. Although my underwater experience was very personal, I believe these emotions are universal and can be triggered through art. I want the success of my photographs to lie in their ability to transform the viewer through their presence. Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses how the simple elements in a work of art, such as light and color, can transform the viewer from merely seeing to experiencing. He describes this kind of perception as an opportunity to become closer to one's true Being.

"Quality, light, color, depth, which before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our body and because the body welcomes them. Things have an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence."²
Although Merleau-Ponty limits his discussion of "art" to painting, his ideas can be applied to my photographic approach. Merleau-Ponty argues that painting is the medium best suited for this transformation because painting resembles the world as opposed to illustrating it. In this sense, my photographs act in a similar manner as painting. They do not illustrate reality, or tell a specific story. Instead, I use my camera as a painter would use brushes, creating art from an interpretive, personal point of view. The result is art that speaks about the mood and tone of human experience from a private, not public place. Through this process, I hope to provide the viewer with a haunting feeling of absence that is at once sad and beautiful, like my underwater experience, and like the fragmented self.

Blue

I use the color blue in my work as both color and as a vehicle for private emotion. In my photographs I use blue as a color. Rich shades of blue gradually fade in and out of black allowing the figures in my photographs to oscillate between foreground and background. These figures balance the blue spaces, giving the color an actual presence. This presence elevates blue from just a color to blue as an entity. In Western culture, blue expresses a magnitude of mood and emotion. For example, blue has been categorized as a state of mind (I feel blue today), a musical genre (the Blues) and has been used in a variety of ways by poets and writers ("his hands were blue from all the giving...3"). However, blue is significant in my work because it expresses the fragmented self. Blue depicts the split between body and soul that I felt under the water when I was seven. It is at once beautiful and sad. Milan Kundera discusses this notion of blue in his novel, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.
"Death has two faces. One is nonbeing; the other is the terrifying material being that is the corpse... I have mentioned Thomas Mann's story before. A young man with a mortal illness boards a train and takes rooms in an unknown city. In one room there is a wardrobe, and every night a painfully beautiful naked woman steps out of it and tells him a long bittersweet tale, and the woman and her tale are death. They are the sweet bluish death of nonbeing. Because nonbeing is infinite emptiness, and empty space is blue, and there is nothing more beautiful and comforting than blue. It is no mere coincidence that Novlis, the poet of death, loved blue and sought it out wherever he went. Death's sweetness is blue."4

Kundera associates blue with the lost self, whether in life or death. Blue possesses emptiness and illusion. Blue, for Kundera, is disappearance. It is death without a corpse. Although I am also haunted by the color's ability to provide beauty and comfort through the transformation, for me, blue is not empty. Blue is filled with a silence created through absence and distance. Blue express what being separated from my body feels like. Immersed in blue, I was at once everything and nothing, suspended by weight. Under the water, I separated myself into two parts: old and young, body and soul, being and nonbeing. Through this fragmentation, I was filled with a sense of peace, comfort, and oneness. Blue expresses this tranquility and balance of contradictions.

**Video Installation**

I am drawn to art that is interactive—art that is changed by the viewer's presence and viewers that are changed by the art's presence. I believe this is what Merleau-Ponty means
By Now You Know video installation, 20' x 10' x 10'
when he states that painting is the key to perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, since painting is an abstraction of reality and it requires the viewer’s total perception both with the mind and the eye. This type of perception involves reflection and contemplation, which offers an opportunity to connect with one’s true self. Video installation is an integral part of my art because it lends itself to this approach. It allows an exchange between the art and the viewer.

The video installation portion of *By Now You Know* consisted of a silent Kodachrome Super 8 film transferred to video and projected into the corner ceiling and side walls of the gallery. The film was a two-minute loop of walking underneath the clouds. The clouds were bright at first, but then change into dark storm clouds. The projection was approximately 8 feet in diameter, with the installation creating three isosceles triangles. Depending on where the viewer was standing, the perspective and installation changed. For example, if you were standing directly underneath the projection, the shape of the installation resembled the bow of a boat. If you were standing in front of the projection, the installation looked like a baseball diamond. I really enjoyed this aspect of the installation because, like the photographs, the work changed depending on the perspective of the viewer. The cloud imagery was chosen because it echoed the glass ceiling in the Wilson Commons Building. Not only does the glass ceiling make the sky and the passing clouds visible, but it conveys a warm quiet airiness, as if in a bubble separated from the rest of the world. This was also the mood that I wanted to convey with my video installation. My video installation was calming and subtle in a way that the photographs were not. Where the video installation conveyed release and hope, the photographs reacted to this in their anxiety and tension.

Subtlety is the strength of this installation. I was very interested in the interplay between the photographs and the video installation. Often video installations over power photographic work when placed in the same environment. *By Now You Know* video installation is so subtle the viewer
might have missed the piece if they did not walk over to the corner of the gallery. This quiet installation builds on the idea of solitary perception. Merleau-Ponty's defines this type of perception as vision- the ability to not just see an object, but to experience it.

"For I do not look at it (painting) as I do at a thing; I do not fix it in its place. My gaze wanders in it as the halos of Being. It is more accurate to say I see according to it, or with it than I see it."5

Like my photographs and my broken camera, my video installation provides the opportunity for exchange and inward thinking through its quite presence. The video installation is about hope and transformation. It is like looking up to the heavens, and it is the inverse of my underwater experience. Under the water, I gave my self over to the trauma of the situation and I felt comfort. Though the video installation I hope to offer the same opportunity for transformation, minus the trauma.

**Sketchbooks**

I have worked with sketchbooks for about 8 years. They are a way for me to explore my ideas. They help me to keep track of and organize my ideas and themes. I began working with sketchbooks as a suggestion from one of my undergraduate professors from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago Angela Kelly. I continued to work with them even after I graduated.

Eventually, the sketchbooks became the sole link to my art in the years in between undergraduate and graduate school. I now use sketchbooks as the starting point for all of my art. When I work in these books, I do not edit myself; therefore the sketchbooks become a safe outlet for the work. I use little blank books, usually 3” x 5”, and fill them with clippings from my contact sheets, photocopies of my work, digital print outs, and my drawings. I often combine these materials with type from
Letteraset. Most of my text comes from phrases I write in my journal. The rest of the text comes from segments of dreams I have had, or from an idea that I wanted to remember. The relationship between image and text is very important. I treat the entire page, including the blank spaces as part of the whole image. Since the placement of text in relation to the photograph or drawing changes the meaning of the image, I take extra care with sequencing and layout of my books. Even though I give myself the freedom to try something that may not work, I am never random or careless with the images and text in my sketchbooks. The sketchbooks work as both process as well as a piece of art in their own right. They are complete objects although they are fragmented and sometimes unfinished.

The attached book enclosed with this thesis is also called *By Know You Now*. The title *By Now You Know* occurred to me while I was working in my sketchbook on a project specifically about my family. The title refers to an idea that I exist in two selves, one that is older and wiser, and one that is younger and impressionable. The younger self is always trying to learn what the older self already knows. *By Now You Know* means the time has come when I am emerging out of a younger self phase. It means I could not be a child anymore. For a long time I deceived myself, not admitting the things I believe I already knew. If I felt stress, I escaped within myself by retreating to the safety and security of the blue. The photographs, video installation, and book are a part of this journey. I use the title *By Now You Know* as hope in transcendence. The text and title are the voice of my older self, while these visual images are the expression of the younger self.
By Now You Know
Digital book
First Year MFA

Since I began my Master of Fine Arts program at Rochester Institute of Technology in the fall of 1999, I worked with the themes of silence, distance and absence. These ideas interested to me because not only are they aligned with my underwater experience, but also represent the underlying tensions that surround my family. I find myself drawn to these themes in photography as well as other arts, such as film and literature. Throughout my first year I worked primarily with photography and video installation trying to convey the mood and tone of silence, distance, and absence. I hoped to create an environment with my images that mediated the viewer with the subject. I also hoped to envelop the viewer in a space that resonated with emotional distance and silence. My approach appeared to embrace similar concerns as those found in existentialism and phenomenology. During my first year at RIT, I developed both my themes and approach into my thesis exhibition.

First Quarter

In my first review at RIT in the Fall Quarter of 1999, I showed one video installation, six color photographs, and two sketchbooks. The video installation consisted of a black and white Super 8 film, transferred to video, of triathlete swimmers struggling as they traverse choppy water. The video was projected onto the surface of a 22" bucket of milk. I wanted to use the combination of water projected into milk to speak about time, space, and separation. In my artist statement I wrote:
"Water represents a paradox between flying and sinking. For the past three to four years I have photographed and filmed the human body in water. I use the human figure in water as a metaphor to represent the in-between. The in-between refers to an area where lines are crossed from the internal to the external, safety to danger, rhythm to discord, and anxiety to peace. My intention with this selection of works is to expand on the metaphor of water by using other imagery to convey the same idea. The idea is to explore the areas where lines are crossed and a loss of control begins."

Although the video installation was successful as means of conveying my ideas, the installation needed some refinement. For example, the video projection cast a rectangular image that was approximately 40" x 60". Since the bucket was only 22" in diameter, the projection cast a frame around the bucket that was disjunctive. Several faculty members commented on the fact that I may need to consider either working in or out of the frame because showing both conveyed an unfinished look. In addition, the bucket of milk had a leak. Throughout the day of the review, the milk seeped out through the sides and bottom of the bucket. On the one hand, I enjoyed the leak because it was uncontrollable. It represented this slow, unyielding emotional state that I was trying to express. On the other hand, I did not like the leak because it was uncontrollable. Since the leak was unexpected, it was unrefined and extremely problematic. I had to continually mop up the milk throughout the review. I realized this would be a difficult, if not impossible, piece to control if installed for longer than a day.

The six color photographs were approximately 18" x 22", dry mounted on black foam core and hung on the back wall with Velcro. The photographs illustrated city scenes capturing the same
tense emotional state conveyed in the video installation. The city scenes conveyed the same jarring struggling tension found in the swimmer video. Although I felt the photographs were successful on their own, I agreed with a comment I received on my written review "Still images seemed to lack compared to video installation. Two pieces seemed to work not really in unison." One obvious reason may be that the lights needed to be off while viewing the installation and the lights needed to be on in order to view the photographs. Although the photographs were made at the same time as the video installation, and were derived from the same idea, they functioned very differently. The photographs were static and did not share the same strength of presence of the video installation.

The two sketchbooks I showed were approximately 3" x 5", and were filled with photographs and Letteraset text. I wanted the sketchbooks to act as a presentation of the origin of my ideas. In the sketchbooks, I used images and text experimentally in an attempt to find visual resolution for my ideas. The sketchbooks were about becoming through trauma.

Second Quarter

In my second review, I showed two video installations. I titled all pieces Invisible Words. Although I still made photographs and worked in my sketchbooks, I decided not to show them during this review. I thought it was better to focus on video installations which had become my preoccupation during the winter quarter. Working with the same themes, I used images that did not involve water, but still addressed issues of tension and emotional distance. In my artist statement, I wrote,

"Invisible Words is a video installation that explores the emotional space between remembering and forgetting. The themes of weightlessness and heaviness in my work strive to visually map
out this void. Film allows me to describe the void through time and repetition, as opposed to a static image. Like a topographical map, my films direct you into the space without explaining what it is. It is my intention to form this space through the use of an animated visual presence.”

The first video installation of *Invisible Words* consisted of a black and white Super 8 film transferred to video of a plane taking off. The perspective of the film was from a seated passenger looking down at the ground. The viewer sees the acceleration of lines written on the runway as the plane lifts off the ground. The film was approximately 45 seconds long, looped on hour-long videotape. It was projected onto an 88" piece of tissue paper. The film was mirrored by an adjacent projection, which allowed the runway lines to flow into each other. I wanted the viewer to be enveloped by the installation. This was the first time I worked with installation in order to create a space that would transform the viewer. The importance of this approach led me to my second quarter work as the foundation of my thesis.

The second video installation consisted of a Super 8 film transferred to video. The subject matter was a boat hanging on a crane in midair. The perspective of the film is from standing underneath the boat, looking up, and watching the boat drift slightly back and forth in midair. The film shifts from black and white to color and then back to black and white. It was projected onto the ceiling. I was pleased with the outcome of this video installation because it blended quietly into the room. It was very subtle, yet provocative. The boat on the ceiling drew the viewer in and remained constant and silent, like an omniscient eye. In turn, I noticed viewers gazing quietly for quite a long time engaged with the boat. This installation achieved both the perceptual and emotional change that I desired.
Third Quarter

During Spring Quarter 2000, in my third review, I had three video installations, a set of 8 photographs, and three sketchbooks. As in the first quarter response to my work, the video installations over powered the photographs. Therefore the two were not presented in relation to each other. However, I titled all the pieces in my third quarter review with the same title, *Near Too Far*.

The first video installation contained a circular black and white video projection about one foot in diameter projected on a floor covered in black cloth. The projection was of a figure turning in circles on a pedestal; continually loosing and regaining balance. The figure was surrounded by a blank sky. In the projected area on the floor, water was poured over the black cloth and dyed gray with watercolor paint. The dyed water caused the projection to reflect back up to the ceiling. When the viewer stepped on the cloth the dyed water moves slightly, altering the reflection on the ceiling, but not the projection on the floor. I chose the subject matter for two reasons. First, I wanted to reference the contradictory feeling of simultaneously sinking and floating. The feeling of being at once weightless and heavy signifies a moment that exists only in perfect balance. Secondly, I wanted to create a space that would be altered by the viewer's presence. When the viewer approached the projection, the reflection became rippled and unrecognizable, and thereby transformed. The viewer is no longer an observer, rather a protagonist. The viewer became the cause for disruption. My art revolves around the idea of being caught in a tense space that dies a moment after it happens. However, the moment is not the most important part of my work. The emotional distance that the moment creates is the most important part. This is why the installation part of my work is so important. As much as I want the space to be transformed by the viewer, I want the viewer to be transformed by the space. I want them to feel this same tension I am visually
Near Too Far, video installation
9" x 9"

Near Too Far, video installation
40' x 70'

Near Too Far, video installation
3' x 5'
describing. Like phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty's idea of Vision, I do not want the viewer to simply look at the work. I want the work to be experienced. The environment needs to mediate the subject in order for this exchange to occur.

The second section of Near Too Far contained a 40' video projection of feet bobbing up and down in water. The image was projected into a curved sync, further distorting the feet. The feet move unnaturally with a slight jerk. Although the feet bobbing up and down only lasted about six seconds, the videotape is looped for 30 minutes, so the same action was repeated. Again, in this piece repetition was used to create a hypnotic image that conveyed a tense cycle, yet embraced the viewer in the space.

The third section of Near Too Far was a more refined version of the second section. Although the subject matter and aesthetics were radically different, I wanted the third section to have the same purpose and function as the second. The third section consisted of a video projection of a face lying sideways. The face never changed its expression or stopped looking at the viewer. Sometimes the eyes blink or the mouth moved slightly, but the eyes remain fixed in the same place. The projection was 3' x 5' and was shot on Super 8 film, and then transferred to video. The video was two minutes and thirty seconds long, but looped continuously on a 30-minute videotape. The film quality was represented in the image by the flickering and pulsating of light on the face. Combined with the gaze of the eye, this flickering created a hypnotic image that resonated with tension filled silence and emotional distance. The video was projected on the wall at eye level, so the viewer could approach the image. With all three sections of the video installation, I chose subject matter to subtly depict a fleeting moment in the experience. However, I feel that my art is not about the image. Instead, it is about the space and what happens to the viewer as they experience it.
Influences

I did not come from a background rich in art or art history. My most vivid memories of visiting various art museums are the trips to the food court. Art was not something that my family discussed or paid much attention to. So it wasn't until college that I was exposed to many different types of art and photography. In fact, when I first became interested in becoming a photographer, I imagined myself crawling on the floor of the jungle while photographing tigers or apes for National Geographic. I thought this was the most prestigious dream a photographer could have. Carrie Mae Weeds was the first artist I encountered who shattered this fantasy.

Carrie Mae Weems

In November of 1991, I attended a lecture by Carrie Mae Weems on the campus of the University of Wisconsin in Madison. I came in late and stood in the back of the auditorium. A slide lecture was in progress. Black and white photos of African Americans with text written on the bottom were projected onto the main screen. The first slide asked the question "WHAT ARE THE THREE THINGS YOU CAN'T GIVE A BLACK PERSON?" The next slide said "A black eye, a fat lip and a job." The auditorium, which was made up of about 90% white college students, fell silent and stiff. Carrie Mae Weems hit the podium and started laughing, and said, "I think that's funny!" Everyone was silent. I was stunned. It was the first time I had ever seen a photographer use blatant text and seemingly harmless images to confront social and racial tensions. The most amazing part of her lecture was not her ability to shake the audience up, but the way in which she continued to speak about her work, her influences, and interests with passion. Weems explained her
work in terms of beauty in both form and idea. I never imagined photography to have this power before; to be completely beautiful and provocative, drawing out the tensions beneath the surface of social archetypes. I have seen Carrie Mae Weems lecture on two other occasions, and each time it is as if I have never seen her speak before. My perspective on photography and art is transformed every time.

I admire Weems articulate and direct manner of speaking. She pays close attention to the details in the world around her, using beauty and wit as her tools. I am influenced by Weems's ability to visually articulate transformation of the self beyond stereotypes and cliches. She is interested in the fragmented self defined by history, folklore, culture and family. I am influenced by her ability to visually depict this complex self.

**Michal Rovner**

Michal Rovner is another artist who I was introduced to in college. While I was a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I saw Israeli artist Michal Rovner's exhibition, *One Person Against Nature*. At first I did not understand her work. The images in front of me seem to be color fields with figures that interrupted the space. I was puzzled, so I spent a long time with these images before they started to change me. As I spent more time with her work I began to feel sad and lost. Her work expresses an intangible feeling of being simultaneously far from something that is close to you (and vice versa). The large color prints radiate with beauty and sadness. Rovner's work is extremely emotional without any sentimentality. This is something that I strive for in my work, and I did not think this was possible until I saw this exhibition. Rovner's work is a perfect balance of beauty, complex expression, and simplicity. Identifying these traits in her work gave me an awareness of what I wanted to achieve with my own work - subtle beauty mixed with
complex emotion. As I studied Rovner's work farther, I discovered her work was not just personal, or aesthetically exquisite. The art is also a comment on Israel as a lost home. Although Rovner claims this was not her intention when she made the work, her work, nonetheless, comments on her Israeli culture. Rovner's images can be used as a metaphor for an entire race of people who are isolated and silenced, struggling to be present.

Like Rovner, my artistic process is intuitive. I am not always aware of the larger implications of my work until after it is made. During my defense, which was presented on May 10, 2001, I received the question how the theme of becoming relates to growing up female. Although my work is does not discuss a self as defined by female roles, or any roles for that matter, my work speaks about becoming whole by reconnecting with many fragmented parts. The connection to coming of age is the struggle to define oneself as a complex and individual, the sum of many parts. This is a struggle I share with my artistic influences as well, especially in regard to Carrie Mae Weems and Michal Rovner.

**Felix Gonzalez-Torres**

Felix Gonzalez-Torres is another of my art influences. I was introduced to Gonzalez-Torres's work shortly after I was introduced to Rovner's work. The simplicity and beauty of his work moves me. Gonzalez-Torres died of AIDS in 1994. Before he died he created, "Untitled (ideal body weight)". I was extremely touched by this installation. It was comprised of tiny blue candies wrapped in blue foil wrappers placed in a perfect rectangle on the floor. The exact amount of candies was based on how much Gonzalez-Torres weighed at the time. When you came into the room you were overcome with the sweet smell of candy and blue shimmering on the ground. What struck me the most was the way Gonzalez-Torres identified with his art. The art was an extension
of him. Gonzalez-Torres uses candy as a metaphor for his existence. His installation represents the self as made up of many smaller parts, weighing the same as his body. The self is fragmented and complex, whole through unification. Again this work is highly personal and specific, but it is also political. It deals with themes of harmony in cycles of life, death and rebirth. But it also deals with issues of AIDS and dying with AIDS. The essence of Gonzalez-Torres's work, however, is in the experience. His work needs to be breathed and taken in through all of the senses. His work, like Rovner's, is overwhelming with a beautiful sadness of what it means to be leaving and to be left. Gonzalez-Torres was the first artist who introduced me to the phenomenology of installation art. His installations speak about a self that is complicated and fragmented, but complete. A self that has given over to being comforted by trauma, much like my underwater experience.
Conclusion

My connection to my influences lies in both process and content. Like Weems, I create work from personal memories and stories, drawing on the self as a complex being with in time and space. Like Rovner and Gonzalez-Torres, I create environments for the viewer to experience. The essence of By Now You Know is about connecting with a part of one's self, a self that is complete and whole only through fragmentation. Through my thesis work and installation, I provide an opportunity to bring the viewer to the edge of his/her consciousness and to give themselves over to their unconscious. This is the direction in which I am moving as I continue photographing, filming and creating little books and large installations.

3 Sallmann, Jenny. Joe, 1991
6 Wolf, Sylvia. Michal Rovner, Chicago, IL, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1993, 6
7 Ibid, 7
8 hooks, bell. subversive beauty: new modes of contestation, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Editor, Russell Ferguson, Los Angeles, CA, The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994, 47
Bibliography


Wolf, Sylvia. *Michal Rovner*, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, 1993
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