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My art allows a space for the questions and struggles about my upbringing and the taboos embedded in it to be fully explicated. My memories, identity, views on the roles of women in American society, and religious upbringing come together in my work to create a space where the glittering, opulent, shiny, brightly colored, ornamented, and prohibited pieces of my past can triumph. My work combines the dualities inherent in being an artist operating between responsibilities to my family, church, husband, society, and artistic community.

IMPROBABLE BEAUTY

By

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I
THE IMPROBABLE

Growing up in a Southern ultraconservative family has formed the subject of my work. The rituals and rules of my life governed accepted lengths for dresses (long and longer), brightness of cosmetics (if allowed), when it was deemed appropriate to voice an opinion or when it was not valued or requested, what places could or could not be visited (barns, wilderness, kitchen, house, fields) and the functions inherent with these spaces as controlling which activities I was permitted to participate in. Through the influences of my father, a minister of a Wesleyan Methodist Church, and an extended family whose lives were largely constructed by their religious beliefs and occupations associated with the Pilgrim Holiness and Nazarene denominations, (four of my uncles are ministers, my sister married a minister, one uncle is an evangelist and religious historian, etc.), I noticed many contradictions as well as unique beauty. Although some in today's society have deemed these structures given to life to be trivial, I have found them to be highly significant, both in their observance and in their rejection. In my art I represent the complexities of my female identity through the incorporated memories ranging from agricultural to those that are gender-specific. The materials that I use create multiple sensory experiences in installations that combine scent, light, tactile surfaces, referenced customs and acts of performance, and my simultaneous resistance and conformance to observed societal restrictions.

Fishing line, seed, human hair, flower petals, fabric, soap, cosmetics, ribbon, insulation foam, galvanized wire, and pearl beads compose the dualities of my identity. Listening to stories about hunting adventures is as much a part of who I am as applying cosmetics. I find beauty in that which may otherwise be unnoticed. This is rooted in the recognized dichotomy of my existence. For instance, my attraction to corn dyed with vibrant pink poison is akin to pearls being formed through irritating oysters to the point of nearly killing them. Dual identities of pink are referenced by corn that is used for planting which comes coated with poison that gives it a bright pink color. The pink color is a sign to birds that the corn is

dangerous and keeps them from eating it once it has been planted. I have created a similarly inconceivable relationship with nests made of hair that hold planting corn. Shelter for corn is created through a construction used by birds to generate new life while simultaneously acknowledging the juxtaposition of these items as completely improbable and menacing. The appeal of planting corn and pearls lies in the contradictory properties which make them both seductive and dangerous. Similarly, monofilament's translucency and reflectivity is alluring, but also creates entrapment through deception. Untangling fishing line recalls rituals that range from brushing hair to unwinding thread.

Through the custom of bathing, soap is the only object that comes into contact with a person's entire body on a daily basis. Not only a ritual of personal hygiene, bathing has become more about time set aside to be by oneself and relax. My installations associate acts of cleansing to the purity of the white block of soap. The contradictory components of soap are lard and fragrance; these ingredients may be read as a microcosm of the duality of the female experience as they symbolize both attraction (fragrance) and that which sustains life (fat). For many, the scent of Ivory soap is distinctive and acts as a trigger of particular experiences that are often linked with specific places. The intimacy of such a ubiquitous object that is constantly in a state of being worn down through its use is also fascinating to me as I think about the connectivity of time with transformation. In my own work, I have found that change, as the bars shrink, crack, and release perfume because of the process of drying, becomes another way of marking time. In my piece, Flower Bed, rose petals seemingly grow out of bars of soap. This juxtaposition points out the improbable relationships of man-made perfumes in opposition to the natural scent of petals, the delicacy of flowers against the density and weight of the soap, and the luxury of rose petals contrasted to the cheapest, harshest type of bodily cleanser.

Initially the bars of soap are not decipherable as such, but read as a solid field. When the viewer recognizes individual soaps they are then read as both separate and unified. The ability of the soap bars to concurrently transcend their identity and maintain recognizability is much like my own capacity to move between different worlds: conservative and liberal, domestic and career, agricultural and academic. My placement of numerous bars of soap grouped close together on the floor creates an imposing presence.

Oscillating hues and saturations of the petals across the "bed" blend and seemingly swirl into one another transforming them into a field that both conforms to and breaks the plane on which they are resting.

CHAPTER II

HUMAN NATURE AND THE NATURAL WORLD

My work also explores how man-made constraints may either enhance or inhibit the natural world. One example features satin pods which contain dirt that is producing grass. The improbable but completely practical necessity of organizing plant life into rows and/or increments is fascinating to me, and thus my work is displayed in evenly-spaced rows. My art with repeated lines relates to the unnatural activity of organizing that which is resistant to structure (plant life). Planting requires a person to walk along an area in a methodical, planned, and incremented way which controls the experience of that land. The rows in my installations construct experience. The viewer traces the way materials have been placed, and they mark the course my body took to create it.

The decision to use satin is based on it being a manmade interpretation of silk; the grass is genetically engineered but organic. Each material cradles and supports the other. The pods would collapse without the dirt and the dirt would scatter without the pods. This interdependence can be viewed as either an amalgamation or as divisive to the goals of each. The question is raised: do the manmade qualities of each material work together or are they in opposition to their natural purpose? The satin does not operate as a means of pristine decoration, and the grass does not provide a covering for the ground.

Flowers petals are employed like skin. I see the petals as a microcosm of life cycles which are manipulated through my interventions but never completely controlled. The petals are in varying states of decay through drying processes or I retard their decay by dipping the petals in a preserving liquid. By the conservation of the petals I am resisting their natural state in much the same way that personal appearance is modified, conditioned, transformed, or maintained by applying cosmetics, plastic surgery, and anti-aging products. The affects of light, drafts, cold, aging, dust, heat, drying, and humidity all mould each petal's individuality. As the petals continuously change, my relationship to them also changes as I recognize their ephemeral existence. One of my works has thousands of flesh-colored rose petals tied together with tangled

strands of monofilament and hung at varying distances in front of a wall of silver coated insulation foam. The hardness, solidity, cool color, and implied weight of the reflective backdrop contrast with the shared qualities of skin and rose petals: warm, matte, translucent, ephemeral, light transmitting, and fragile. Simultaneously, the reflectivity of the background with the petals creates an interaction similar to the way the metals of jewelry sit against the body.

CHAPTER III

RITUALS AND PERFORMANCE

My endeavors center on ritual and performance as an integral part of forming my art. I go through many steps in my pursuits: repeatedly tying strands of monofilament or thread, sewing thousands of beads or pieces of ribbon, planting, watering, and fertilizing. In one of my works, I "planted" corn along the planks of an empty house that I used to visit regularly as a child. Both planting corn and regular walks to the same series of historic markers are ritualistic activities which I have combined with my current custom and responsibility of caring for the floor in my house. By continuing the integration of nature into an interior space through simulated seeding, I responded to the transient character of the abandoned house that has become both an indoor and outdoor space through time.

Human hair is a theme throughout my endeavors because of its symbolic implications and its ability to act as both a token of memento and object of repulsion. For example, jewelry made from the hair of a dead loved one can be both an object of repulsion and of sentiment. Hair is both a unifying trait and object of distinction. It constructs a woman's identity and is also an indicator of compliance with what is physically expected. As a child I was ingrained with Biblical stories and remember the repeated significance given to hair. For example, with Sampson and Delilah it represents both strength (sexual and physical) and vanity. Mary showed humility when she anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume and then wiped his feet with her hair. Absalom's hair became a fatal trap when it became entangled in an oak tree. The diverse interpretations on the subject of hair have influenced my decision to use it in my work. The widely varied applied meanings of hair infuse my work with both menacing and magnetizing properties.

The feminist themes that inform my work can be revealed through logic by defining the contradictions that are both societal and profoundly personal. Religious overtones influenced nearly every action of my family. The culture of living in the South also imposed elevated standards of femininity. I have noticed in my connection to rural areas that the women there are especially concerned with creating

individuality separate from their agricultural and blue collar existences--an identity decidedly adorned, colorful, and elegant. While abiding by the standards of acceptability within my religious upbringing, I also found myself using, in much the same way as I saw other women behaving, appearance as a signifier of my identity. In my mind, the lines became increasingly blurred between what was and was not taboo concerning female gender roles. To me, most of the rules of acceptable behavior created more questions than they solved. Is the beautification of the body a sinful gesture? Where does the line exist between what is expected of me as a female and what is selfish decoration intent on creating hierarchy or an unachievable ideal? Why is a broach worn on clothing not sinful while a necklace worn against the skin is? Why is some jewelry accepted but earrings, (especially pierced earrings), are not? Is it because they require an actual altering of the body? Why is a skirt more modest than pants when the pants cover the entire legs and the skirt does not? When do views necessitating restrictions on how the body is presented become resentments of the actual body? My art does not intend to "answer" any of the questions which I have asked myself many times. I seek through these thoughts to build a new way of seeing the world through which is still closely connected to my unique community. As a result of these struggles and questions, much of my art resembles a visual experience that allows a space for all of these impermissible acts to be fully explored.

My work also deals with the possessions of life and the preciousness of these items. Selecting and collecting materials is an activity long practiced in my family and is one I have adapted into my art practice. One of the only possessions I have from my grandfather is a pearl that he found and gave to me. This heirloom is significant in relation to my work because it came from that which had been discarded; it was found amidst oyster shells after they had been harvested. My use of pearls references memories of looking through shells hoping to find pearls hidden in a man-made rubbish heap of nature. I seek to offer similar unanticipated circumstances in my work. For example, on my family's land is a chimney which is all that remains of an old homestead. Not far from there are several recently abandoned chicken houses that have feathers left on the floor. I collected the feathers, smeared the inside of the chimney with lard and pressed the feathers into the lard until the inside was completely covered. The activity of gathering up the feathers was important to me as connecting past agricultural histories with current practices. Both the feathers and the chimney were things left behind at different points of time. The lard is significant as a base

of life, not only as a source of sustenance, but as a traditional mainstay of food preparation (and thus women's roles) in the South. The result resembled a nest or an animal turned in on itself.

CHAPTER IV

THE UNATTAINABLE

Throughout my work, many things are kept out of reach and thus become unattainable attractions. One of my pieces is a kaleidoscope filled with pieces of rose petals. Encapsulated in an unseen chamber beyond the glass walls of the object itself, petals envelop the viewer and simultaneously remain beyond touch. Another work has masses of petals hovering above and below eye level with most of the petals kept beyond attainability. In the nests of hair and corn, the corn's vibrant color, wrinkled texture, and gem-like scale dramatically differentiate them from the soft dark hand-like bed. However, the color is actually a poisonous coating that prohibits handling. Another improbable relationship can be seen in the works that I place upon the floor. This creates an awkward relationship between the solidity of the ground and the fragility of materials such as dried rose petals, ribbons, and beads. The subtleties of the work cannot be grasped from an upright position and demand crouching over. Regardless of viewing position, the relationship between viewer and work remains unnatural and uncomfortable.

Materials I use signify that which can never be possessed. I channel the appeals of jewelry whose attraction lies, in part, in their great expense which makes them unattainable. In addition, my resources relate to my upbringing which was overlaid with a constant awareness of jewelry and cosmetics as self-indulgent ornamentation that blasphemed the perfection of God. My use of make-up in my art is based on observations of both condoned and condemned beliefs towards women decorating their bodies. My choice of "decadent" materials lies in the attraction of that which is forbidden and my questioning of those principles that call for such definitions.

CHAPTER V

ABSENCE

Veils create a controlled viewing experience of partial visibility and obscurity. One can see through a plane and simultaneously be aware of obstacles to the screening field. Space can be framed and hidden through the use of veils. Through creating a wall of suspended strands of fishing line I constructed a situation where the viewer may concurrently perceive what is in front and what is beyond. Another work that continues with the theme of veils is a curtain of black thread. The thinness of the thread gives an appearance of ephemeral weightlessness, while the dark value and mass of threads create volume. To heighten the sense of a veil as governing the viewer, I painted the ends of the threads with magnetic paint and hung them just above a magnetic disk. The magnet is attached to a mechanized device that slowly moves it to the left and right. The effect is an unseen force slightly pulling the threads back and away from the viewer's space and then releasing them.

The element of color in my work is highly significant. In Western culture, white is traditionally considered a sign of innocence, red an indicator of passion. Pink lies somewhere between these extremes and ranges from suggesting traditional roles of women within Western society, referencing the body, and representing sexuality. Through my use of intense shades of pink and large scale areas compacted with materials traditionally used in small areas, such as embroidery work and ribbon trim, I create an overwhelming presence of femininity that a viewer must confront.

In Eastern cultures, white has a funerary significance. This interpretation of white is intrinsic to my work as I consider the death of innocence and the death of conventional femininity. In some of my pieces, the absence of color creates spaces where the viewer must experience them beyond the literal. For example, my "curtain" of monofilament hovers at shelter height above the viewer and in a clearing above a creek. Because fishing line is clear, one must be aware of everything around the work (the light reflected off it, the shadows, the way light reacts differently to the monofilament as opposed to other opaque objects)

to see it. In correlation to the achromatic works, I see the lack of light in the color black as functioning on the other end of the same ideas centering around the idea of sensory absence. In my piece consisting of a wall of strung black threads the extreme darkness of the threads brings into inquiry whether they are actually black or are they in shadow as it too responds to light. In addition, the interplay of light and shadow heightens one's sensory awareness to the subtleties operating within my art. Reflectivity plays an important role in other works, as well. The silvery surface as seen in the insulation foam of my work, Butterfly Kisses, changes according to the person standing before it and causes the viewer to literally bring color into the work and participate in its constantly adapting formation.

CHAPTER VI

EXPERIENCE

My great-grandmother desperately wanted to buy two pieces of jewelry, a cameo broach and a gold bangle bracelet. Where she lived, the rural outer banks of North Carolina, the only means of income available to her was cleaning shrimp for one of the local fish markets. She was not paid for the shrimp she peeled, but rather for the weight of the waste, (the skins, heads, etc.). She eventually purchased the jewelry with the money she received from her labors. I see the importance of this account as an example of her striving against her disadvantaged circumstances and successfully finding a way to trade vile, disgusting matter into the exquisite. Her profound struggle of creating beauty from waste is a model to me of form, process, and experience.

Like my great-grandmother, I work out of necessity. Making art it is the only means that I have for the manifestation of ideas, emotions, and remembrances I possess. I transform discarded fragments of my life into the realized dreams of what my existence can be in my work and thus encompass the transformative power of art. It is the space I have taken for myself where I can create a world that would otherwise be lost in external factors that control my reality. My art is a way of leaving a trace of my existence, and through the working, my experiences are brought into new clarity of self knowledge and human connectedness. I work because I know some things cannot be communicated in words; they can only be seen, then felt, and subsequently experienced.

CATALOGUE

1. NEST

human hair, planting corn, rubber coated wire
1.25" x 2" x 2"

2. FLOWER BED, (included in MFA Thesis Exhibition)

Ivory soaps bars, dried rose petals
3.5" x 144" x 48"

3. BUTTERFLY KISSES

insulation foam, dried rose petals, monofilament
96" x 32" x 192"

4. SILVER QUEEN

planting corn
dimensions variable

5. HOLDING IN

lard, found chicken feathers
approximately 36" x 30" x 54"

6. WATERFALL

monofilament, crab trap line, galvanized wire
156" x 18" x 96"

7. VEIL, (included in MFA Thesis Exhibition)

pipe, crochet thread, magnetic paint, motor, magnet, wood, nails, rubber belt, pulleys, screws
86" x 30" x 108"