

TRANSPOSE

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requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

By

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I dedicate this work to my parents for forever encouraging, supporting and believing in me.

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ABSTRACT

TRANSPOSE: AN EXPLORATION OF MATERIALITY, PROCESS AND ARRANGEMENT

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My thesis study explores a variety of themes voicing several binary oppositions, creating abstract forms transposed from industrial or craft-based materials. These themes include relationships between conventionally “masculine” and “feminine” roles; work versus home; dependence versus independence; and freedom and constraint. These themes are investigated through an exploration of materiality (metal, glass and fibers) process (welding, weaving, embroidery, glass-blowing) and arrangement.

INTRODUCTION: MATERIALITY AS PARADOX

“...the finding of the object strictly serves the same function as that of a dream, in that it frees the individual from paralyzing emotional scruples, comforts him, and makes him understand that the obstacle he thought was insurmountable has been cleared.” (Krauss 42)

I produce abstract forms using industrial or craft-based materials to metaphorically evoke the different kinds of negotiations that take place in a romantic relationship. These include the clash of conventionally “masculine” and “feminine” roles (symbolized by the opposition between geometric and organic forms); work versus home (manual and mechanical skills versus decorative craft); dependence versus independence (leaning or suspended elements versus self-supporting structures and forms); and freedom and constraint (binding and wrapping versus open and extended form). The way in which these themes are explored is partnered with an attention to arrangement, process and materiality.

BACKGROUND/HISTORY

My thesis exhibition is comprised of a series of works that explore my personal history of exposure to traditional craft techniques, nodding to my mother's passion for the decorative arts and my dad's mastery of traditional metalwork and carpentry. My use of these inherited processes and materials is informed by my familiarity with the history of post-minimalism and process art, as well as the psychological focus and disciplined repetition of gesture instilled by my earlier training as an athlete.

My mother's involvement in craft and the decorative arts ranges from interior design to painting, sewing and basketry. One of her most memorable projects was an Easter basket that is on display in my family's home every year during the Easter holidays. This was made from a repurposed store-bought, vine-woven basket that she painted white and embellished with clusters of nests, birds, ribbons and speckled eggs. Her exuberant, yet dreamily arranged composition of these forms has strongly influenced my own aesthetic. The arrangement of objects have always been a part of my vocabulary, although my work differs from my mother's in that the objects I use are hand-made and arranged with an attentiveness to formal relations.

The influences of my father are as wide as they are varied. He is a metal smith, woodworker, welder, painter and sculptor, among many other talents. His current work, ornamental wrought iron railings that can be found around my family's home, show his proficiency in handiwork and craft, but his figurative sculptures made of welded thin steel rods, bolts and springs have had the longest impact on my artistic development. His small sculptures range from humorous scenes of a man sitting on a toilet, to a band jam on stage. Each figure is simple and to the point, without hidden meaning. I attribute my love of raw materials to these

small sculptures he created. They represent an unapologetic love of material and the handmade, and have subconsciously become a part of the vocabulary with which I create.

The mixture of traditionally masculine and feminine techniques, such as welding and weaving, have become essential to the visual language in which I work. I believe my work is a subliminal blend of the way in which my parents exercise their creativity. I have been inspired to combine and transpose contradictory materials and diverse ways of making through a series of laborious processes ranging from the skinning of sculptural frameworks, to glass blowing, to weaving and welding. This style of experimental learning forms the foundation for the works in this exhibition.

Labor and materiality are two of the most important qualities of my art. I have found an immediate love for the pairing of contemporary and non-traditional materials within a series of repetitive gestures and labor-intensive processes. I am intrigued with the binding of non-traditional materials with elements of traditional craft. The combinations and arrangements of these elements result in opposing forces that are aesthetically pleasing to me.

Repetition has also always been a constant in my life. Repetition plays a part in decorative pattern-making as well as athletic practice and sport, two disciplines that share much in common: learning the language, practicing the fundamentals, then adding original decisions. Experimentation is based on a deep knowledge of the rules of the game.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

In experimenting with nontraditional combinations of traditionally masculine and feminine techniques, I was led to investigate the work of artists Lee Bontecou and Eva Hesse. These women share: a common language of sculptural and graphic form, a laborious work ethic, an eye for raw materiality, and an interest in repetition and seriality. Much like Bontecou and Hesse, my work places heavy emphasis on the importance of labor-intensive making and the natural, uncompromised beauty of materials.

Bontecou's strategy was to reexamine the materials and techniques traditionally used in women's art practices, such as craft and decoration, and reintroduce them in an unconventional way. The product of Lee Bontecou's alternative style and use of material was a "practice that activated a more individualized form of engagement, one aimed not at the presentation of a fixed ideal, but at a more open-ended and contingent experience" (Speaks 199).

Bontecou used found materials in most of her sculptural endeavors. The first sculpture she created was a wall relief constructed of fabric fastened to steel armatures. Bontecou's work was commonly described as combining masculine and feminine traits. On the surface, the work seems tough and industrial, but upon careful observation, the viewer can see the expressively feminine and handmade quality of the patterns sewn into the rough burlap surface. The reliefs themselves are highly fragile; the canvas is patched and sewn together, showing the artist's hand.

Bontecou's mixture of traditionally masculine and feminine techniques such as welding and weaving are an important influence on my own melding of soft fibers and hard metals within open sculptural forms. For example, I used prefabricated steel shown in the framework of

Construction with Steel Frame and Floret, a freestanding sculpture that is built to mimic a traditional pedestal, with woven and embroidered embellishments (Figure 1).

Eva Hesse, a painter turned sculptor, drew much of her inspiration from minimalism, but her embrace of materiality and process led her to develop a very different language of form. In her search for a new aesthetic, she experimented with non-traditional materials such as industrial felt, wax, molten lead, rubber and even found materials including rope, wire, and fiberglass. The materials Hesse commonly used were “soft” and not generally identified with major sculpture of the time, like those made by Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and other minimalist contemporaries. Hesse unearthed new ideas, creating sculptures with simultaneously opposing qualities: hard and soft, exact and unbalanced, solid and vulnerable. In my own work, I too enjoy pairing materials that have opposing qualities. For example, in *Altered Glass Forms and Coiled Rope*, I have created a two glass blown forms, both similar in color and size, but varying in shape, and have paired them with a soft sculpture composed of white, woven rope and string (Figure 16).

Much of Hesse’s work was related to the human body and to the idea of its natural vulnerability. The ephemeral aspects of Hesse’s life, her family, her thoughts, echoed throughout her art. Hesse said, “Life doesn’t last, art doesn’t last (Chave 112).” These humanistic qualities are very apparent in her work, specifically exemplified in the flesh-like works made with flaccid or flexible materials, which Hesse described as “non-forms, non-shapes non- planned” (Chave 113). For instance, if we look at Hesse’s *Right After*, made in 1969, we can see the separation from minimalism simply through the delicate nature of the figure, the transparency of the fibers, and the organic vulnerability of the sculpture.

Right After expresses the artist's emotion to the viewer as well as the physical struggle she endured while creating the sculpture. These aspects of Hesse's work deeply intrigue me, in that she allows the natural qualities and vulnerabilities of the materials to shape the sculptures she creates. Similarly in *Altered Glass Forms and Coiled Rope*, I worked against the natural tendency of blown glass to assume a spherical form, letting the malleable qualities of the molten glass interact with gravity and the slight pressure of the hand (Figure 16). The extreme vulnerability and flexibility of blown glass are what drives my interest in experimentation and mastery of this material. Along with glass, *Altered Glass Forms and Coiled Rope* also has two rope-woven attachments.

MATERIALS/PROCESS

Like Hesse, I use wrapped and coiled rope as a form of drawing, as “skinning” for a landscape of hand built forms, and as a material for creating forms directly from the rope itself, independent of any framework or base. The decorative aspect of the rope has evolved from surface level decoration to the investigation of the flaccidity and strength of the material standing alone.

For my piece entitled *Steel Canvas and Coiled Rope* I have woven 30 coiled, vertical forms, each containing 50 or 100 feet of diamond braid synthetic cord. Each has its own unique personality (Figure 9). The only initial decision was to coil a vertical, flaccid form: the way in which each form takes shape was decided during the coiling process. Differences in length, shape, tensility, and surface serve to differentiate forms that are united by process and material. Paper drawings and sketches help to generate ideas about how to build the final construction, but they are not blueprints for the dimensions of the individual pieces. As I work, I consider how to exhibit together the coiled forms.

The inclusion of glass in my work is a recent innovation but one that makes sense because the process of making is similar to that used in the production of my coiled, rope-built forms. The initial decision was to create a bulbous form, containing the natural hole that is made when blowing glass.

Glass blowing requires step-by-step knowledge of how glass behaves and what materials to bring to the gathering and shaping process, yet there are many spontaneous decisions made in the heat of the moment. After glass is gathered on the pipe, it is made symmetrical while the pipe is kept rotating. Air is blown into the pipe and it is capped. The artist may choose to gather

more glass, add color, melt color, gather the glass and repeat different steps until desired size, cuts in jack lines, punty, switch poles, and so on are reached. In the end the glass is annealed and cooled.

For the works in this exhibition, I purposefully selected gray, black and neutral colored frits to yield dark black or coal black forms. I enjoyed that my forms were not perfectly symmetrical and to ensure this I altered each vessel by applying pressure to the glass while molten. The color, the amount of glass gathered, and the way in which the forms were shaped were decided in the moment. Very much like the formation of my rope pieces, each glass piece has its own identity but the colors and shapes were devised to act as one piece.

DISPLAY PHENOMENA

As a sculptor, my pieces become further defined as I select a means of displaying them. At this stage in my creating, arrangement becomes the key element of my work. Sculptors who show work in a formal museum setting can make use of the floor, the walls, and the ceiling for their work. Scale and how the sculpture interacts with its surroundings is crucial to its reading.

I created a steel frame from a drawing with several rope covered accoutrements, attached and coming off of the piece. The metal was measured to create a pedestal that was three feet tall and one foot wide. The frame was created by welding the steel with a mig welder, grinding off the excess welds. The ground areas of the frame appear shinier where the original surface has been worn away.

My reason for leaving the ground metal surface unretouched is because I fabricate my works myself to the best of my abilities. A rectangular frame may not be perfect, but it displays my skill level at the moment of its creation. My welds aren't perfect but they are the handiwork that I know and have come to love, and accept as flawed. They are specific to the way in which I create.

WORKS

The piece with the steel outline of a pedestal, titled *Construction with Steel Frame and Floret* is a freestanding sculpture, with a 3' x 1' x 1' hot rolled, square stock steel frame (Figure 1). On top of the frame sits a welded 'stem' and embroidered floral arrangement, with hanging woven pods, dangling from the stem's end. The Styrofoam petals are embroidered with light pink embroidery thread and thin steel spokes that project from the stem. On the opposite end of the stem dangles two woven pods, made from two single strands of cotton thread. Each pod is woven using diamond braid synthetic cord and cotton string coiled into a circular form that contains a frontal orifice. *Construction with Steel Frame and Floret* expresses themes of masculinity and femininity as well as work versus home. The ideas of masculinity and work tie into the industrial materials and traditional metalworking techniques used to craft the frame and flower-stem, in contrast to the delicately embroidered flower and woven pods that are representative of a femininity and domesticity.



Figure 1. Renee Roberson, *Construction with Steel Frame and Floret*, 2015



Figure 2. Renee Roberson, *Construction with Steel Frame and Floret*, 2015 (detail)

The piece titled *Woven Rope, Steel and Suspended Form* composed of a shallow, hand-hammered steel plate, folded and woven rope and a suspended form, is installed extending one inch out from, and perpendicular to, the wall (Figure 3). The hand-hammered steel is a concave plate, capped with a folded, rope-woven form. Attached to the woven “cape” is an embroidered French knot, harnessing the pillow-like object. The cushion is skinned with a vinyl fabric and bloated with Poly-fil stuffing. The cushion’s edges are sewn together using a blanket stitch, and the surface is indented with a series of embroidered French knots. This work contains binary oppositions similar to the *Construction with Steel Frame and Floret* in that it also displays masculine and feminine themes with the pairing of industrial and handmade materials.



Figure 3. Renee Roberson, *Woven Rope, Steel and Suspended Form*, 2015

The piece entitled *Wall Made of Invisible Rocks* is created from a series of organic forms made from galvanized hardware cloth, cut into rectangular strips, bent into circular forms, and tied together with steel wire in a perpendicular, patchwork system (Figure 4). Then each form is covered in clear plastic wrap. Each form is created with the same circular form in mind, but vary in shape and size. The plastic-wrapped “rocks” are then tied together with steel wire and monofilament, and framed within a 4' x 7', hot rolled, square stock steel frame. The front of the frame sits on top of one yellow, readymade saw-horse, while the back of the frame is mounted onto the wall, with a handmade L-bracket. To help with balance, I used two C-clamps, each attached from either side of the frame to the L-bracket, and tightly wound to ensure stability. The combination of the handmade and the readymade separates *Wall Made of Invisible Rocks* sculpture from the “crafted” aesthetic of the other works in the exhibition. The readymade sawhorses similarly allude to process while evoking the masculine domain of carpentry and hardware-supply stores, like the wire netting of the “rocks” but contrasting with their delicate, open-weave, pillow-like forms. The sawhorse also represents the sole intrusion of bright color within an otherwise monochromatic body of work. The monochromatic body of work is reflective of my will to maintain the materials raw beauty, however, I chose a yellow, readymade, sawhorse because I believed the unexpected pop of color would add another element to the installation’s aesthetic. The readymade was ‘raw’ in its industrially modified state, without alterations by myself, similar to the manufactured steel and rope that I have acquired and altered to make my own.



Figure 4. Renee Roberson, *Wall Made of Invisible Rocks*, 2015



Figure 5. Renee Roberson, *Wall Made of Invisible Rocks*, 2015 (side view)

The piece entitled *Construction with Steel Frame and Suspended Form I* is a freestanding sculpture, with a hot rolled, square stock steel frame standing 7' x 3' x 2'. The frame is composed of two walls, two and three feet wide (Figure 6). The frame was built in an "L" shape for balance. The "wall" that is three feet wide includes a suspended form from the top of the frame. The hanging form was created from vinyl, synthetic cord and embroidery thread. The vinyl was cut into a series of geometric shapes and is embroidered together using a blanket stitch. This became the body of the hanging form. The patchwork body was then attached to the neck, composed of flatly, coiled rope. The coiled rope has an oval shape. The structure resembles a large, hollow pillow. The inside of the figure is bloated with Poly-fil stuffing and cardboard to help maintain the desired shape. The inside is lined with faux fur, and contains a decorative, geometric steel 'stem' and floret. The bloom is composed of hand-embroidered vinyl, using a blanket stitch, accompanied by thin steel spokes. The form is dangling from a series of grey threads, tied with a French knot around the neck of the cord. The threads are tied together and secured to the center of the wall's frame, creating a cone shape in space. This work also contains dual oppositions similar to the *Construction with Steel Frame and Floret* in that it displays masculine and feminine themes with the pairing of industrial and handmade materials as well ideas of dependence of the suspended form from the independent, freestanding frame.



Figure 6. Renee Roberson, *Construction with Steel Frame and Suspended Form I*, 2015



Figure 7. Renee Roberson, *Construction with Steel Frame and Suspended Form I*, 2015
(detail)



Figure 8. Renee Roberson, *Construction with Steel Frame and Suspended Form I*, 2015
(detail)

The piece entitled *Steel Canvas and Coiled Rope* is composed of thirty vertically, coiled forms ranging from fifty to 100 feet in length. Each flaccid form is coiled using synthetic cord and cotton string (Figure 9). Every strand is uniquely expressive. The vertical coils are paired with a 36" x 36" piece of sheet metal. The sheet metal is painted white, with a hint of sparkles, using acrylic urethane. The metal square is hung two inches out from the wall, balancing on four screws. Below the painting hangs a sequence of 50' coiled forms; while on the right side of the painting hangs a series of 100' coils. *Steel Canvas and Coiled Rope* considers themes of masculine and feminine roles symbolized by the opposing geometric and organic forms. Themes of freedom verses constraint can also be contended through the way in which the vertical forms are so tightly bound juxtaposed with the clean, free surface of the sheet metal.



Figure 9. Renee Roberson, *Steel Canvas and Coiled Rope*, 2015

The pieces entitled *Pairing I*, *Pairing II*, and *Pairing III* are each created using coiled synthetic cord in combination with altered pieces of blown glass (Figures 10, 11, 12). Each piece of blown glass has been horizontally sliced using a glass band saw. The pieces that preserved an interesting shape and/or color scheme are the pieces I chose to couple with the woven rope forms. The glass was then pressed into each form, wrapped and sewn together using monofilament. *Pairing I*, *Pairing II*, and *Pairing III* each display opposing themes of freedom and constraint similar to that of *Steel Canvas and Coiled Rope*, in that each slice of glass would freely slip out of the woven, concave shell without the barred effects of the monofilament holding the glass in place.



Figure 10. Renee Roberson, *Pairing I*, 2015



Figure 11. Renee Roberson, *Pairing II*, 2015



Figure 12. Renee Roberson, *Pairing III*, 2015

The piece entitled *Steel Tubing and Floret* is comparable to *Construction with Steel Frame and Floret* in both style and subject matter (Figure 14). The steel, hollow, square stock stem, lays vertically on the walls surface. The top of the steel tubing is left raw and untouched. At the bottom of the tubing, five petals emerge. The petals are made of vinyl. Each petal is filled with Poly-fil, and sewn together using a blanket stitch. At the end of each petal is an embroidered loop, using cotton thread to add a touch of color. The petals are accompanied by thin steel wire. *Steel Tubing and Floret* conveys themes of gender specificity as well as soft versus industrial materials.



Figure 13. Renee Roberson, *Steel Tubing and Floret*, 2015 (detail)



Figure 14. Renee Roberson, *Steel Tubing and Floret*, 2015

The piece entitled *Construction With Steel Frame and Glass* is a freestanding sculpture, made of steel containing fourteen pieces of blown glass (Figure 15). Each piece of glass was carefully placed in the rectangular frame, non-adhered and left free to be arranged and rearranged. Each piece of glass varies in shape, color and size. This piece is suggestive of several themes. The act of making glass is a form of manual labor and technical skill evocative of work, while the arrangement of the glass according to color and shape conveys themes of the home and decorative craft. I would also argue that freedom and constraint are topical, in that at first glance the glass appears to be adhered to the floor/frame, however the glass is arranged and can move in and out of the frame freely.



Figure 15. Renee Roberson, *Construction With Steel Frame and Glass*, 2015

The piece entitled *Altered Glass Forms and Coiled Rope* is a diptych, wall hanging composed of two pieces of glass paired with two vertically coiled rope forms (Figure 16). The blown glass is sliced using a glass band saw and epoxied back together to appear off-balanced. Each glass form contains a frontal cavity from which the vertical forms hang. *Altered Glass Forms and Coiled Rope* delivers dependent versus independent undertones. Each half of the diptych is using the wall as a delivery system for hanging, just as the vertical rope is using the glass for hanging support. Each element is dependent on its former; the glass to the wall, the rope to the glass.



Figure 16. Renee Roberson, *Altered Glass Forms and Coiled Rope*, 2015

The piece entitled *Construction With Steel Frame and Suspended Form II* is comprised of a 2' x 2' x 6" hot rolled, square stock steel frame. Similar to *Construction with Steel Frame and Suspended Form I*, it too contains a hanging piece made from sections of vinyl, hand embroidered together to create a floating figure, identically suspended from the frame (Figure 17). The form was made as a second iteration, identical in creation and external appearance to *Construction with Steel Frame and Suspended Form I*, however *II* does not contain an open-face center cavity.



Figure 17. Renee Roberson, *Construction With Steel Frame and Suspended Form II*, 2015

CONCLUSION

My research of industrial and craft-based material through arrangement and process have led to a deeper understanding of the metaphorical negotiations that are reflective throughout my work. I have uncovered a series of binary relationships including the clash of conventionally “masculine” and “feminine” roles; work versus home; dependence versus independence; and freedom and constraint, all of which lend to the transposal of materials into art.

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APPENDIX A: EXHIBITION



TRANSPOSE:
RENEE ROBERSON
OCTOBER 26 - NOVEMBER 13

Western Carolina
UNIVERSITY

Join us for a public reception on
Thursday, November 12th, from 5-7 pm.

Western Carolina University
Fine Art Museum
199 Centennial Drive
Cullowhee, NC 28723

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Figure A1. Artist Show Card for Thesis Exhibition



Figure A2. Installation view of "Transpose: Renee Roberson"



Figure A3. (Alternate) Installation view of "Transpose: Renee Roberson"