

BLIND

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Abstract

Blind

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I am interested in moments of disassociation that create memory; shadows and peripheral information found between elements make up the real content of my art. The work comes from dreams, memories, and writings. The writings are visual sketches of places I find myself, it is a particular symbolic code derived from the combination of emotion/intuition and a place.

For my thesis show I created an installation that conveyed information through a series of blinds both physical and sensory to lead the viewer into an experience of exchange with their physical surroundings while still being guided by specific visual content. The piece, titled Blind, is modeled after blinds such as the type used by hunters to hide themselves while hunting, specifically a duck blind, which is constructed in a hut shape out of grassy materials.

It relates to an earlier installation done in 2009 where I constructed a hut/dwelling out of bamboo modeled after the duck blind form. I am drawn to the shape and thematic content of the blind because of its protective and defensive qualities. For this project I wanted to add several more layers of blinds to serve as both obstructions and possible entry points to the work. The work is centered on the sensation of triggered memory, to examine the connections between the visual signs and language within the content of my work, and the way in which one phrase can have multiple meanings depending upon its usage.

Introduction

The summer I was ten years old I went with my grandmother, aunt, and cousin to the house where my grandmother was born. My grandmother had recently purchased it back from the people who lived there after her parents' death. The front of the house's property connects to Hightower Trail, first known as Hi-tah-wah by the Creek people who used it, while the back of the property is bordered by a creek along which Union and Confederate armies camped during the Civil war.

By the time she purchased the property, the house, her childhood home, had stood empty for several months, maybe even a year while it was on the market. The original garage, turned two-story apartment was burned out on the inside, not destroyed but blackened and hollow. There was however, very little evidence of the damage on the outside except for smoke stains reaching out the windows.

My grandmother's house was built in the early twentieth century to be a comfortable farmhouse with a large roof to trap heat and a big screen porch around the front of the house. When we were there, the day and the house felt quiet and brooding as did the other structures on the property and nearby. The presence of the burned apartment interior was especially striking, a scene of violent transformation preserved.

Next-door was an old Victorian house my great aunts had lived in, three or four women who for whatever reason decided to live together, sisters and cousins. I had heard stories about them, how they was hidden except for the upper third of the second floor in overgrown privet hedge and kudzu. All I could think about when I first saw it was an image of the giant bathtub sinking slowly through the rotting floor in the dark with all those vines. I imagined the aunts still sitting as their house decayed around them, watching the plants grow over the windows outside.

My cousin and I crawled through the undergrowth to the aunt's house and its sunken green porch. There were flowers in the yard of the house growing where they'd first been planted long ago. The front door of the aunt's house stood open showing only black inside; I watched as my cousin got up on the porch and went inside. She returned with a brass bed knob and a book in hand. She said there was a lot more stuff inside the house, but it was buried in dirt or too rotted to touch. I remember being worried the house would consume her. It was barely standing at that time, and about a year later, the roof collapsed down onto the rest of it like a tomb.

Right before we left the property that day, I walked by myself around to the front of the main farmhouse, grandma's childhood home, mentally getting lost in the heat and thinking about the dead aunts in the rotting remains of their house. When I walked around the corner of the front porch I saw a huge black snake moving in slow motion down the side of the house like liquid. It must have known I was there because when it reached the ground it coiled there briefly then began moving away in gentle waves. The slowness of the snake's movement crept into my mind, transfixing me with the strange sense that it was floating around above the ground through the dry grass next to the house. While watching the snake I experienced a moment of comprehension and memory, triggered by the snake. Immediately, the snake, and the rest of the surroundings became the symbols of that memory, though the actual origin of the memory was several years earlier.

The memory was something my friend Sarah had told me about the meaning of the phrase 'snakes in the grass. According to her it was an almost mystical act of rape when the penis sends itself into the pubic hair of a woman, being a 'snake in the grass'. In her description of sexual behavior, female and male bodies remained passive while the phallus took on almost divine molestative qualities, leaving the body and acting independently of the man's will. This description of sex unconsciously informed my

understanding of male and female power dynamics: the woman the receiver and victim, the man also victim but owner of the instrument of power that acts on the woman.

In my thesis installation I am using the memory of my grandmother's house, and items representative of that place in association with this earlier memory. They are all tied together by the snake, which is itself a mnemonic trigger for recognition of the conversation with my childhood friend Sarah and its associations. That event became significant once it was brought up by the sight of the snake.

The memory takes place on my grandmother's land so I tried to use objects and items that referenced the feel of the place these layered memories triggered by visual sensory information, the black snake in the grass, and the snake became the symbol that tied the memory together. In this installation, I placed a series of black belts at the center of the structure to show the snake and its connotations as being the bridge between experience and memory.

This experience of remembering an earlier memory in conjunction with another occurred to me when I began thinking about constructing another blind for my thesis project installation. I first thought of the shape of the blind structure and next, an idea for the projections with the idea of using the two to layer and contrast with each other as a further blind or layer the viewer moves through.

Chapter One: Blind

In this installation, the outer structure does not enclose the inner. more framed shack; it is meant to be incomplete so that neither the shack nor the blind looks the same from more than one direction. The interior shack, outer blind, and projection are meant to visually obscure each other rather than to work together as an assimilated unit. Similar to how a blind traditionally functions when constructed for hunting or hiding, the blind is made from materials found in the surrounding Sylva-Cullowhee area of western North Carolina so as to appear 'natural' and embedded while being used to conceal the interior.

The blind is made from kudzu, bamboo, found sticks, and twine. The bamboo and kudzu were chosen to construct the blind because they share the quality of being local, and reference how hunting blinds are embedded in the landscape by being made of materials that come from that landscape.

Kudzu and bamboo are light materials that can be easily put together and layered on top of each other to obscure and create an interesting dynamic between the straight green shapes of the bamboo and dark curving shapes of the kudzu. The bamboo is arranged into triangles and joined together with twine woven in an intersecting pattern. After building the bamboo braces the kudzu was arranged in an alternative direction to build strength and provide lines to move the viewer's eye over the piece.



Fig. 1 *Blind and Wooden Interior*

Chapter Two: Wood Interior

The interior shack is constructed from wooden boards and old windows taken from a site in Asheville, N.C. Most of the boards were broken and in various stages of decomposition, so the construction of the parts for the shack had to take place in stages in order to create structural strength within each segment. The windows on the roof and side of the shack were left as originally found, with the exception of one that I attached boards to for visual rhythm between highly worked pieces and the relative 'found' quality of the windows. The frame on which the sculptural wooden board pieces are attached is shaped in a simple square form. This frame is mirrored on the exterior with the same form but at a greater height to lift the blind material, the kudzu and bamboo pieces, off the ground to obscure the interior wooden shack.



Fig.2 Detail of Wood

Chapter Three: Working in Pieces

Blind is similar to how Louise Nevelson used smaller, more intimate pieces in her larger wooden frames to balance her work between more abstract sculptural qualities and symbolic items that have personal relevance. I wanted each of the pieces to look special and distinct from each other. I see this as an attempt at adding ornate, ceremonial qualities to the work, rendering each piece to be different rather than creating a unified shack or structure to magnify the feeling of a specially constructed space.

Working in segments allowed each piece to have its own life within the future of the entire installation. I wanted each segment to be individual so the overall effect of the installation would feel worked and have more of an impact on the viewer. I intended the combination of visual information and smell of the herbs would make an impression upon the viewer of a similar to my nonverbal feelings related to the memories of house and snake stories.



Fig.3 *Working in Pieces*

Chapter Four: Ash and Fire

The interior and exterior I covered in a layer of ash, with more mixed into the dirt on the floor of the shack. The ash was taken from fires burned in the fireplace of my house over the past few months. I gathered the wood for the fires from Pinnacle Rock trails in Sylva, N.C where I've been walking since I moved to this area and used past art to light the fires.

Chapter Five: Ash Cover

I decided to cover the piece in ash to suppress the entire structure, to have a way of covering or embedding the entire object within the space of the gallery. When the piece was installed, I realized I would have liked to add more ash over time, I liked the way it fell and accumulated in the cracks of the wooden pieces of the interior shack, and if it had been reapplied repeatedly the formal relationship between the ash and wood would have increased.

The ash is used to hide, to represent a punishment for pride, to suppress or reject vanity of appearances. It also is meant to reference the house of the aunts, a place of cloaking. Women who chose to live together rather than living traditional lives where they started families of their own, women on the outside of society who are allowed to live more or less freely but have to cloak themselves in some form of standard normal behavior to retain that freedom.

Chapter Six: Herbs

In the fires I burned to create the ash I also burned and included a collection of herbs in dried form in the installation space of the galley. Most of the herbs I used have very strong and distinct smells; I wanted to use these smells to help make an impression on the viewer. The herbs are: valerian, mugwort, pennyroyal, wormwood, lavender, cedar, sage, and damiana, chosen for the traditional medicinal and spiritual properties of each. The use of the herbs in the installation is meant to draw on the connection between herbs and women, how herb use is thought of as women's fireside medicine, folklore, magic, and ritual.

Chapter Seven: Dirt

On the floor of the interior shack is a layer of dirt taken from the banks of the Tuckasegee River. The dirt is meant to reiterate the feeling of being inside by providing a floor for the viewer to stand on as well as a tool for cloaking sound. The sonic and textural relationship of the dirt to the surrounding parts is meant to serve as another point of sensual and sensory orientation for the viewer. Embedded in the dirt are walnut seed pods, large green pods that turn a deep brown color as they decay. I choose to use dirt to relate to burial, ground, the internal subconscious, and the interior of a structure.



Fig.4 Dirt Floor with Belts

Chapter Eight: Belts

The belts inside the shack directly reference the black snake in the memory I had on my grandmother's property. They are all black belts that have been boiled in wax and ground charcoal to create stiffness and texture, to make an impression of containment by restricting the manner in which the belts can move and feel to the viewer. Some of the belts are nailed to the frame using found nails taken from the same location in Asheville as the wood for the interior structure, the rest are lying on top of the dirt or mixed into the dirt on the ground.

Chapter Nine: Projections

There are two different types of video during the projection. While making the videos I began experimenting with more within the video and filming the projected shadow of dancers rather than the dancers. I had the dancers move in a circle around a central point meant to imitate a fire around which they were dancing. The walls surrounding the dancers were lit to push back the distinct features of the dancers, so their forms were silhouettes. Components of the interior wooden shack were also placed around the room to suggest that the dancing took place inside.

Chapter Ten: Reflection during Construction

While I was constructing the pieces for the installation, the entire structure began to seem more like a body to me, the changes of light provided by the projection were supposed to inspire a feeling of presence. Included in the cycle of videos projected on the blind is a video of me taking down the piece. My taking down the shack is meant to reassert my relationship to it, to place myself in the gallery while I am not there, and to show a past of the piece. I was influenced by the ceremonial dances of the Creek people during their four days Green Corn Festival. I wanted to experiment with the connection between dancing and spiritual expression, to make reference to circle dances by the direction I had the dancers move though it is not evident to the viewer while in the installation space. My grandfather's mother was Creek, but because of the time and place that she lived in South Georgia, there isn't much record of her. I have become more curious about her especially knowing that she would have had to suppress that part of herself in order to mix into white society. I have been studying the culture and traditions of the Creek and Cherokee peoples because of my ancestral connection to them and because their histories are layered under the world we live in today.

Chapter Twelve: Family Legends

As a child I was attracted to the stories of the aunts who had lived in the decaying house because of how lively they seemed compared to the dilapidated relic that bore witness to their existence. In my art I used recovered objects to refer to the difference and connection between past and present. It is similar to being compared to a long dead ancestor and having a new dimension of self - understanding open up because of that connection.



Fig.5 Interior of Wooden Structure

Chapter Thirteen: Ash as a Relic of Transformation

I associate ash with change; literally it is an artifact of transformation and action, a silent result of an amazing process. I wanted to use this to make a personal connection back to the place, the memory, the burned apartment on the property, the way it leaves traces of itself and talks directly to the lives of the people involved. When my grandmother was dying, my aunt and cousins built a fire pit in the middle of the field behind her window so she could see it burning. Since then, the fire pit has been embellished with bones, quartz rock, shards of pottery, and melted glass from bottles we put in once the fire has burned down to embers. Fire has played an important role in dealing with grief over her death. I see death as similar to the ashes left over after a fire, the stillness of realizing repeatedly that whomever one is missing is simply not there anymore. One returns again and again to the cold ashes of memory until the reality of the transformation between life and death establishes itself.

Chapter Fourteen: Mnemonic Recording

I found that memory and location were bound together so that particular memory and location exchange qualities with each other. I remember events in conjunction with a series of visual symbols construed from my bodily location and state at the time of remembering. Memory in conjunction with a place is a tool for recalling information; it is called the “place method” when used in that manner and has origins in ancient Greece:

The place method was used by Greek and Roman orators and this is the source for the alternative name for the method, loci, which is Latin for places. Classical links can be found in the very word mnemonic which derives from the ancient Greek goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, who was the mother of the nine Muses.”(Gruneberg 43) The way I think and process memories in this piece is through representing the memory with a certain visual language, which is largely based on elements from my grandmother’s farm and other places in the south, specifically because of the layering of time and histories that can be embedded in a place like archeology.

Chapter Fifteen: Recording

I'm interested in how works of art relate elements of personal history and experience. Artists who incorporate the universal through the revelation of the personal, such as Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels (1973-6) constructed in the Utah desert that allow the viewer to respond personally through a universally shared perception of the sun moving around the tunnels over time. In my piece Blind I'm relying on universally shared feelings related to enclosure, the difference the viewer automatically feels depending on whether they are inside or outside the piece. Similar to the type of universal experience of moving through a space I would like viewers to feel while moving through the gallery space of my piece. I'm influenced by artists that use memory, perception, time, and nostalgia as themes in their work

Nan Goldin's photographs were a means for her to identify, record, and preserve moments of importance and people in her life. Her relationships with people are tied to her feeling for them; she uses her photographs to manifest her sight of another person, to hold them dear. Her photographs also have two different lives in the difference between how she regards them and the manner in which the viewer reads them. Outside the context of her world and personal knowledge, the viewer invests the photographs and a desiring exchange occurs between person and mythic symbol. Signs within myths become universal entities that are then used to construct a new vision of reality, similar to how words and phrases gain new meaning depending on context and usage. She uses her art as a method of record keeping, a tool of memory the way I wanted this installation to function as a visual representation of a mnemonic tool of my own. In my work I used the common hunting structure both for its original purpose and as a conceptual tool to convey the theme of memory's elusiveness in concrete terms, since one is blinded literally by the piece while observing it.

Chapter Sixteen: Desire, Alternative Spaces

While making this piece I remained conscious of the various manners in which the viewer would read it. My interest in how this piece is read relates to my concern for setting up a situation and place where the viewer can enter into an exchange with the installation. I wanted to anticipate potential ways in which different elements would affect the viewer. I manipulated the setting to convey a similar feeling to the nostalgia and emotions related to my personal memory. Despite the individual viewer's approach to the piece, no matter where s/he might first become engaged in the work, s/he would end up at the same place, the center of the piece, as someone else. I wanted to convey via sensory elements such as the lighting, the dirt, and the smell, a feeling similar to my own memory and experience while I was processing and creating this piece.

My experience of the phrase 'snake in the grass' is like this: I heard the phrase at a young age with what could be called an incorrect definition attached to it; a sexual act that involved a very specific behavior rather than its common definition of a deceitful person in one's midst. The snake in the grass is hidden by what surrounds it, as a hunter is by a hunting blind, a person one thinks one can trust but is actually untrustworthy, or my connection to it through the memory to a description of a sexual act. The connection my earliest understanding of that phrase has to the colloquial understanding is the manner of hiding, or blind usage. There is a suggestion of deceit and molestation present in all explanations, becoming the bridge between different meanings of a common phrase.

Instead of simply seeing a literal snake in the grass when I saw the physical snake, I saw it and interpreted it as a sign; it became a figure of archetypical meaning in relation to memory. I related it to this story in my past without consciously creating a connection between the two. "We are well aware that the real object can be produced only by an external causality and external mechanisms" as in the viewer's orientation to a gallery space and its literal properties as a gallery such as its walls, location, and

expressed purpose." (Deleuze 23) Once inside the gallery space the relationship to its standard reality as a commercial/museum space is supposed to be suspended in exchange for a belief in the content of the art as somehow transcending its relationship to the space.

The viewer must enter into an exchange with my art where subjective desire to express feelings and memories and the viewer's desire to investigate play active roles I want the viewer to enter into the sensory properties of the installation, to be drawn in because of what is not given and appears to be hidden behind the blinds. Desire is what fills in the gaps of what is not expressed, and I want desire to be what draws the viewer into the work, desire for information and to see their own reflections in the infusion of meaning; I want to create the setting for this to occur.

Chapter Seventeen: Night and Day

In this installation I draw upon the thematic difference between night and day settings, how events occur at night in theater, myths, mythic history, that cannot occur during the day. I wanted to explore the narrative idea of a different terrestrial plane where alternative, abortive things can occur. This is something I would like to continue to address in my work because I don't think this component, of a night setting, was clear in this piece.

The night is interpreted as a time for the unconscious, blurred boundaries, and exposure of alternative selves. Derrida writes in the chapter Aphorisms of his book: *Psyche, Inventions of the Other*, on the scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* when Juliet addresses the name of Romeo from her balcony in the middle of the night. Juliet assumes that Romeo is not present, though he has actually snuck into the garden of her home and is listening to her address him in secret, hidden in the garden. Because the scene takes place at night, Juliet speaks to Romeo's name as she speaks to herself, separating him bodily from his name since she doesn't realize he is actually physically present.

This drama belongs to the night because it stages what is not seen, the name; it stages what one calls because one cannot see or because one is not certain of seeing what one calls. Theater of name, theater of night. The name calls beyond presence, phenomenon, light, beyond the day, beyond the theater. It keeps-whence the morning and survival-what is no longer present, the invisible, that will no longer see the light of day." (Derrida 135). I want the viewer to have the experience of addressing something beyond what is physically present in the context of the gallery. I see the experience of presenting and viewing art to be one similar to participation surrounding theatrical expression. One addresses both the name and beyond the name, as a person or symbol is both what it is and what it is outside of its named category. I decided to keep the lights off in the gallery not only to create a difference between the rest of the museum and the work, but also to conjure these elements of

darkness, privacy and solitude, alteration. The theater of the night is the space/time setting with narrative thematic conditions.

Conclusion

This project attempts to export the feelings of a personal memory onto the viewer; I want the viewer to be able to engage with the piece on a subconscious level; to enter into a personal process of exchange with the work. I choose to illustrate this exchange by drawing the viewer in through the use of a blind structure, to make reference to the relationship between what the blind obscures and protects, and what is exposed to the viewer. The snake itself is a blind between different memories, acting as a door in the remembering process like how I wanted the door to the interior of the shack to appear to the viewer once they had passed into the blind on the outside of the structure. By putting the snake symbol at the most interior space of the installation, I hoped to remove its ability to serve as a blind because it had become part of the central space. In my work I hope to convey the sense of very personal thoughts and feelings by provoking sympathetic/similar feelings in the observer.

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The Dream

By Jorge Luis Borges

While the clocks of the midnight hours are squandering
an abundance of time,

I shall go, farther than the shipmates of Ulysses,
to the territory of dream, beyond the reach
of human memory.

From that underwater world I save some fragments,

inexhaustible to my understanding:

grasses from some primitive botany,

animals of all kinds,

conversations with the dead,

faces which all the time are masks,

words out of very ancient languages,

and at times, horror, unlike anything

the day can offer us.

I shall be all or no one. I shall be the other

I am without knowing it, he who has looked on

that other dream, my waking state. He weighs it up,

resigned and smiling.