

CONTRADICTIONS IN A MAD WORLD

A thesis exhibition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
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ABSTRACT

CONTRADICTIONS IN A MAD WORLD

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Director: Joan Byrd

My thesis exhibition consists of creating a surreal world to express the mad reality we live with every day. This world deals with my own deeply felt contradictions. These contradictions include; life/death, love/hate, reality/fantasy, fear/courage, war/peace, good/bad, heaven/hell, confinement/freedom, and even Caucasian/Native American. All these dichotomies hinder one's ability to feel secure and whole, and though I present these contradictions as personal, in the end they are universal. I convey these contradictions through an installation. The genre of installation sets up and controls an environment and gives the viewer a world to examine. In my installation the viewer ventures through a tunnel-like path that surrounds a garden space of surreal beauty. It is often said that we are not afforded the luxury of stopping to smell the roses any more. I choose to give my audience roses, but only after I take them on a disquieting journey through thorns. I am allowing the viewer to walk through the landscape of my mind in as vivid a way as possible, perhaps causing them to be as uncomfortable with the fragility of life as I often am.

Both the tunnel-like sculptures surrounding the garden and the garden itself consist of components made of porcelain and glass. Individual "beads" of hand built and carved porcelain are painted with layers of colored porcelain slips. The layers of color are sanded back to reveal a surprising colors and patterns directly related to the carving underneath

Lampworked glass pieces separate the porcelain forms. Steel rods in various shapes and sizes have been welded and bent to serve as the armature for the beads. Dark and threatening forms are arranged as a boundary, a tunnel-like path, leading the viewer down the path around a garden. The garden's sculptural forms are light, airy, and colorful incorporating surreal flora and

fauna also created as beads. Each sculptural form can stand on its own as an individual piece, but when placed together, they create a cohesive experience for the audience.

My influences for this work are many. I draw upon painters such as Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keefe, and Salvadore Dali; upon glass workers such as Janis Miltenberger, Kari Russell-Poole, and Robert Mickelson; and sculptors including Liza Lou, Kiki Smith, Tara Donovan, and Michael Sherrill. Other inspirations include beadwork, which I have done all my life and which is in part responsible for the colors I utilize in my work; Mexican culture and art from growing up in Southern California and the swamps of southern Georgia, where my ancestors originate; and Native American art and culture from my lineage. All of these influences have led me to this work I have created for my thesis.

INTRODUCTION

Contradiction is the foundation of day to day issues in life. Life/ death, heaven/ hell, love/ hate, war/ peace, reality/ fantasy, confinement/ freedom, good/ bad, etc... Contradictions that each of us experience as personal become, in the end, truly universal. These are issues I attempt to express in my work through the metaphors of a tunnel-like path surrounding a garden. This installation represents the good and bad aspects of life and the journey through those emotional experiences.

As a child, I found the need to be in my own worlds. These worlds which I created were my sanctuary that I could hide in. I would develop wild stories that I played out. I would build tree houses, forts, cardboard rooms, all in an attempt to create a peaceful, safe environment. These spaces were fully realized habitats. They were worlds I could escape to whenever I needed to. As my work progressed, I continued to have this desire to create an environment that is fully realized; but now as an artist, I want to share the experience. I consider the environment I have created for my thesis to be a Henri Rousseau meets Tim Burton kind of environment: whimsical, full of fantasy, semi-realistic on occasion, mixed with colorful abstraction and pattern. The setting has an edginess, or uneasiness, as well.



Figure 1. Henri Rousseau, *Apes in the Orange Grove*. Date unknown. Oil. 162.5 x 111 cm.



Figure 2. Tim Burton, *unknown*.

JOURNEY BETWEEN THE TUNNEL AND THE GARDEN

Every aspect of life is part of the whole at a particular moment in time. One component, out of sequence, would change the entire configuration. Each of these parts is fraught with contradictions. Like a fork in the road, these opposing forces give two paths one could choose for her own journey. Depending on how one responds to those choices, one's whole being could be irrevocably changed. Since the whole is always evolving, being whole is just an illusion.

What I create now is directly related to what I have created in the past, transformed by the daily events in my life. This is why I find that components or "beads" become so important in my work. Just as in life, everything comes together in the end. At the moment it is conceived, the work is merely a fragment of the whole it will become. That evolution and growth is important. The minute the journey stops is the minute the work loses its ability to mature.

The journey through the installation begins with the tunnel-like opening that leads to the path around the central garden. The dark, thorny pieces represent all that can hurt us in the world. This part of the installation is meant to make the viewer uneasy, unsettled, and even scared. The thorny edged path expresses aspects of the journey that is life: all the ups and downs we experience along the way, and the very fragility life represents. We walk through the ugliness, glimpsing the beauty, and hoping to reach the serenity we long for.

The garden full of my stylized flowers, plants, a pond, and animals represents many things. There are the obvious religious connotations such as the "Garden of Eden," but the garden also represents growth, both personal and physical. It represents Nature in all her glory. The garden represents peace and, in some ways, the end of a long journey. It is meant to evoke pleasant feelings and to touch on the valued memories we cherish.

Through the mist of my childhood, I spent a great deal of time in nature. Whether camping, riding my horse for hours through the hillsides of Perris, California; wandering through the Okefenokee Swamp in Folkston, Georgia, in the summer; or just helping my Pop in the garden, I was always outside. The outside world equaled freedom. It was the one place where there were no expectations, the place where make-believe could, for a moment, feel like a special kind of reality. These are the feelings I want to evoke and recreate with the garden.

The two concepts combined present a three dimensional view that is intended to remind us that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. It is meant to evoke the memories and feelings of the past and point towards the journey forward into the future.



Figure 3. Julie Fawn Boisseau. *Contradictions in a Mad World* detail. 2012. Porcelain, glass, steel.



Figure 4. Julie Fawn Boisseau. *Contradictions in a Mad World* detail. 2012. Porcelain, glass, steel.

MATERIALS

I am drawn to porcelain, glass, and metal. The combination of these materials is exciting to me as a maker. There are contradictions between these materials that are as opposite as night and day. However, there are also similarities between them that make them extremely compatible and can evoke interesting juxtapositions. Each of these materials requires a major learning curve, but combining the three demands an even greater attention to detail and skill.

Porcelain once carried a value higher than gold. It is the clay body which is closest to glass in chemical makeup, and it may be the most difficult clay body to master. However it is the whitest and most translucent, and takes color the most brilliantly. It also carves like butter and takes textures well. Because of these characteristics, it is perfect for my work.

Like porcelain, glass has a long history and has always been highly valued. As a “craft” material I believe it to be at the top of the hierarchy. Glass, like porcelain, is difficult to master. It is perhaps the material that requires the most concentration and skill. Although there are many ways to work with glass, I am drawn to lampworking, which involves the melting of glass in the flame of a torch. Arguably this is the most intimate of all glass techniques. Lampworking is a solitary, meditative means of sculpting glass. It is also a traditional means of creating glass beads.

Steel provides the understructure for my standing pieces. Metalworking has had its traditions throughout history, just as porcelain and glass have. It is tough, yet malleable, and will support an extreme amount of weight. This makes it the most appropriate material for my armatures.

PROCESS

I will never tire of learning different processes. I am constantly attempting to learn new techniques and then utilizing those techniques in conjunction with previous skill sets. This helps to push my work into its next evolution. It is a journey I will always pursue.

My current work with porcelain derives from techniques I learned from Michael Sherrill during a workshop at Arrowmont School of Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. This workshop enabled me to take the idea of beads and texture, which I had been working on for years, to a new level. Using the techniques Sherrill demonstrated, I create hollow pieces utilizing the extruder. After texturing these beads, I apply layers of colored porcelain. Subsequently sanding the layers back to the carving underneath, I am able to obtain a surface that is visually exciting.

Glass provides the most technically challenging aspect of my work. Taking a workshop at the Pittsburgh Glass Center with Robert Mickelsen enabled me to hone my lampworking skills. By utilizing a technique for which Mickelsen has coined the term “networking,” I can incorporate larger glass elements into my pieces. This technique requires the use of a small jeweler’s torch and very fine glass rod. The rods of glass are bent in the torch and welded to each other in a lacelike fashion. The networked glass water lily in the garden is an example of this.



Figure 5. Julie Fawn Boisseau, *Contradictions in a Mad World* detail. 2012. Glass. 16”x16”x6

Building the armatures determines the way in which the beads are strung together. Bending the steel rods into the shape I want the piece to take, I have to consider whether or not the angles will stand when placed together and whether they can hold the weight of the porcelain and glass. The rods are then inserted into pipes welded to a heavy steel base.



Figure 6. Julie Fawn Boisseau, *Contradictions in a Mad World* detail. 2012. Porcelain, glass, steel.

PERSONAL SYMBOLISM

Dennis Stevens, in his essay “Validity is in the Eye of the Beholder,” takes an interesting point of view on the art/craft conflict when looking at an artist’s work. “Often, on the surface the work looks like common and sometimes kitschy objects intended to be disarming, but at second glance these works are frequently subversively loaded with signification” (Buszek,52). Perhaps, at first glance, some might consider my work to be “kitsch,” but there is personal symbolism hidden in every aspect of the work, from the color, to the texture, to the imagery itself.

The color can evoke feeling: red as anger, as blood, as war; blue as cold, as sky, as sadness; black as night, as evil, as emptiness. Color raises sensations that can be felt to the core of one’s soul. Manipulating the response to color is very interesting to me, and I try to utilize that possibility in every piece I create. I also have a particular palette that has evolved from my years of studying and making Native American beadwork. As this is my ancestry, I am compelled to utilize the color schemes from that history in my current work. Color further comes into play in another manner of personal historical reference. My palette represents the desert where I grew up, and the swamps of Georgia. The colors are often an unconscious response, because they were so much a part of my young and impressionable life.

Like color, texture can evoke memories. Soft or hard, busy or subtle, texture is an element that can change the look of color and help to determine the overall feeling of the work. It is another aspect of concept and content that appeals to me. Though my work is not really about touch, I believe that the visual textures can evoke sensations that are tactile. Texture also becomes important in the actual creation of the beads. While carving the porcelain or networking glass in the torch can be very methodical and even tedious, these actions are akin to a sacred ritual for me.

As I work, I am locked in my own mind and can contemplate and analyze aspects of life for hours, while my hands do their job.



Figure 7. Julie Fawn Boisseau. *Untitled* beaded collar and earrings. 2004. Glass beads. 10"x5"x1/8"

Imagery is important in my work. Even when I create functional objects, my repertoire of images remains the same. Almost all are images of plants and animals, which often come directly from Woodland Indian styled beadwork patterns that have appeared in my beadwork over the years. In this installation I have taken the imagery from the surface and made it three dimensional. Owls, for instance, have been utilized on my functional vessels for a very long time. In many Native American tribes, the owl is the messenger of death. As I watched my husband

battle cancer, and lose that battle, owls came to visit many times. They told us what we knew was coming, and I honor them, and my husband, by using their images in my work.



Figure 8. Julie Fawn Boisseau. *Contradictions in a Mad World* detail. 2012. Porcelain, glass, bird nest.

INFLUENCES

I am influenced by a wide range of exceptional artists. I draw upon painters including Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keefe, and Salvador Dali; glass workers such as Janis Miltenberger, Eunsuh Choi, Robert Mickelsen, Kari Russell-Poole, Ginny Ruffner, and Harvey Littleton; and sculptors Liza Lou, Kiki Smith, Tara Donovan, and Michael Sherrill.

Michael Sherrill's sculptures have had the greatest influence on my work. Studying his combination of porcelain and glass, his use of plant imagery, as well as his color, has allowed me to take imagery off of my functional pottery and give it a three dimensional life. While Sherrill displays a consistent realism in his work, based on the natural features of Western North Carolina, my work is based on memory and imagination.



Figure 9. Michael Sherrill, *Tossed Rhododendron*. 2003. Steel and porcelain.
17"x22"x14"

Janis Miltenberger's work is a form of networked glass. She uses colored borosilicate glass in larger diameter rods than artists who are networking. Her pieces are the philosophical embraced by the organic. Birds, chairs, cages, hands, and plants repeat themselves throughout Miltenberger's work. There is always a feeling of strong emotional content. This is the feeling I attempt evoke in my installation.



Figure 10. Janis Miltenberger, *Articles of Faith*. 2007. Borosilicate glass. 5''x 14''x 12''

Frida Kahlo knew about contradictions. She lived a hard life, walking a path sometimes chosen for her and sometimes of her own choosing. She painted surreal images of dreams and personal life events that were breath-takingly beautiful, and terrifying at the same time. Her life

and her memories were expressed through her art. As I do in my own work, Kahlo was constantly playing with her own life's ever-changing contradictions.



Figure 11. Frida Kahlo. *The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Myself, Diego and Señor Xolotl*. 1949. oil on canvas. 27 ½" x 23 ¾".

CONCLUSION

Artists cannot escape or control how their own history will come through in their work. I believe our past is always present, near the surface, and I am certain that the past enters the work I create. The contradictions experienced throughout that history continually intrigue me. They come through in my work through the use of medium, through the personal symbolism, and through the metaphorical, yet organic, installation. My installation is where the many facets of me can shine equally to evoke feelings and memories, and where the contradictions of life are ever apparent. In the end I only hope “Contradictions in a Mad World” is a visually exciting experience that allows viewers to remember and feel their own personal history.

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