CREATIVE MALADJUSTMENT

"All I’m saying is simply this, that all life is interrelated, that somehow we’re caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I can’t pretend that I am not writing this essay at this exact moment – on the eve of an historic election (even though by the time this goes to print the anxiety of this moment will hopefully have passed). The historic moment should be the election of the first female President of the United States of America, but in many ways that history, while deeply related to the election of a woman on the heels of the election of a black man, is overshadowed by the historic divisive and vitriolic nature that has characterized this election year in America.

I also can’t pretend that I am not writing an essay about young artists who live and work down the street from Ebenezer Baptist Church and the home of Martin Luther King Jr.’s archives. These two realities that I can’t pretend to ignore are, of course, related and more importantly they set the frame under which these nine artists – consciously and unconsciously – are making work.

On December 18th, 1963 at Western Michigan University – some 757 miles from Atlanta, some 53 years from today – Dr. King delivered a lesser known speech proposing a new organization – The Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment (first introduced to me by the artist Cauleen Smith) in which he argues:

"Modern psychology has a word that is probably used more than any other word in modern psychology. It is the word 'mal-adjusted.' This word is the ringing cry to modern child psychology. Certainly, we all want to avoid the maladjusted life. In order to have real adjustment within our personalities, we all want the well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurosis, schizophrenic personalities.

But I say to you, my friends, as I move to my conclusion, there are certain things in our nation and in the world which I am proud to be maladjusted and which I hope all men of goodwill will be maladjusted until the good societies realize."

And in this historic-for-others-reasons moment, I find myself thinking… and looking… listening… and looking again… at the world and the work presented in this exhibition. While our world at the moment is filled with voices, claiming of spaces, and identities defined by anger and grievance, the artists in this exhibition present their voices, their histories, and their identities with the glorious and empowered maladjustment for which Dr. King so rightfully advocated. What we have lost sight of as a nation in this election, these artists have made personal, universal, and resonant. Class, economics, immigration, gender identity, lineage, inherited histories, dis haunted histories, environment – these are their stories. Some of the stories are more overtly narrative than others, but they hold in common, despite their rightfully disparate representations, nine individuals who choose to forefront and engage a struggle to locate themselves inside of their histories and experiences.

We can almost telescope through the nine artists, beginning in the macro with Kathleen Sharp’s rich, illusionistic photographs that use light to betray dimension and space. Enchanted in a deep single color, the viewers’ senses are violently reduced to create an ambiguous landscape. Sharp’s Red Series is an experiential exercise in disorientation that creates a physical space that is both serene and aggressive, and asks the viewer to distinguish between realities and fictions.

Where Sharp’s architectural and dimensional works leave the viewer in a psychological space, Joe Hadden’s textural paintings are an exploration in surface. The works, highly dependent on the artist’s process and muscle memory, are as autobiographical as they are geographic. The surfaces themselves are almost dystopian in their reflection of chemical and organic decay. The combination of entropy and abstraction become a metaphor for loss and the attempt to regain control.

Where Hadden’s work can be located somewhere in a sci-fi atemporal universe, Larkin Ford’s paintings, despite being dystopian themselves, exist in a specific landscape: the Gothic American South. The paintings function almost as parables, but exist in ambiguous time, where the viewer is never sure if the decay, chaos, gore, and debasement takes place as a warning of a future or a past. The specificity of each scene can resonate on a personal level—you’ve experienced something like this or know someone who has. Regardless, the hope lies in the truth of the portrayals.

A mixture of familial folklore and personal experience underpin the abstract, yet bodily ceramic forms that Michelle Laxalt creates. The physical feats performed by the objects themselves, balancing on their weighted and awkward forms, convey both a fragility and a stature that mimics the life cycle of a body strengthened over a lifetime, yet steadily weakened through age. The evidence of hand in the surface of the material is referent to the care worked in over time. Laxalt’s objects, in these forms, function simultaneously as “patients,” but also as talismans – imbued with all of the magical healing that is part of southern and rural culture. These talismans move beyond the discomfort of the ailment, and act as vessels of healing.
In her seminal text On Photography, Sontag states “there are photographs that give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people take possession of space in which they are insecure.” 1 Where Lasdun’s work seeks to alleviate the insecurity of the physical body, her peers, the photographers JOHN PRINCE, BEN BOWDEN LEE, AND TYLER MANN, look both to pasts and temporal insecurities to negotiate personal history and identity.

JOHN PRINCE’S series Aluminum City is inherently linked to a previous body of work The Near and Elsewhere. Both projects are an exploration of a family history in post-industrialized zone and the cataloguing of what remains. Aluminum City’s focus is on New Kensington, Pennsylvania and its socio-economic relationship with Modernism and the outside world which it is subject to. Prince’s eye tends towards a documentary style that confesses its historiography, and yet conveys the distance and objectivity that comes from someone searching to understand a generation from which he is removed.

BEN BOWDEN LEE’s works, rather than existing as documentary, weave unknown or lost narratives back together. The works themselves expand photography’s mechanical limitations – in some works through digital manipulation of personal family photographs, and in others by placing found images in relation to others through more sculptural interventions. The images are linked through formal relationships as well as content and invite the viewer to fill in the gaps, as if reading the memories of family histories lost. The images are not always pretty or easy, but portray narratives of human relationships not often discussed – the kinds of liminal images that were captured before the self-reflexive awareness that came with digital technology.

TYLER MANN’S road photos are searching, much like Prince’s, yet are centered around locating the body (even when it’s not physically present) in the vast, non-specific America that lives outside of urban centers but thrives in great American literature. They tell a story compounded as the narrative builds with each successive image. Placing his body, over time, over space, in zones of relative discomfort and unknowing, Mann’s photographs are quietly anxious, wistful and sensitive, and an exercise in contemporary Manifest Destiny—claiming America for trans bodies. Again, Sontag: “[p]hotographs will offer indisputable evidence that the trip was made.” 2

Society and its slowness has made the transbody a political body, much in the way that bodies of color are forcibly made political bodies.

ELHAM MASOUDI, who arrived in the US just two and a half years ago, brought with her a critical eye towards the political limitations placed on female bodies and voices of dissent within Iranian culture. But like the other artists in her cohort, Masoudi is ready to complicate what we think we know about censorship within Iran. Through painting, installation and reclaiming the censorship tool of pixelation, Masoudi explores the rich cultural lives underneath the mask of the hijab and behind the closed doors of private homes to demonstrate acts of private protest.

Artist RACHEL BALLARD also seeks to undermine pre-determined perceptions of the female experience, however in this case, the material – ceramics – and the content of the work are neurotically linked in process and form. In Excalibur, the raw clay transcends its physical limitations in its工地ed forms and becomes almost bodily in its weight – physical and emotional. The viewer is left to wonder, is Ballard seeking to overthrow the medium, or even more specifically the craft, or does she have bigger plans at hand? Admittedly deeply invested in exploring the reach and negotiations of trauma, Ballard’s choice of material is almost a physical manifestation of working things out – whether personally, artistically, or with a feminist edge.

The creative maladjustment that underlies the work of all nine of these artists can be found in their collective resistance to strict formalism – to engage narratives that tell real stories – that take the America that has become so staid down to headlines and slogans, and infuse it with the real struggles they face. They present stories that not only refuse to lay flat, but through truth, vulnerability, and exploration refuse to be taken at surface value. History and the future, as it has been presented this year seems insurmountable – pre-ordained – a momentum in which we only become more embroiled. AND YET, these artists offer richness, they offer hope, they offer a real language of conversation. And so, perhaps unknowingly, they echo the wise words of their spiritual neighbor, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who some 53 years ago left us with the mission of creative maladjustment that they, as emerging artists, begin to fulfill.

“Somewhere along the way we must see that time will never solve the problem alone but that we must help time. Somewhere we must see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability.”

Sarah Workneh
Co-Director, Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture

1 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Speech at Western Michigan University (December 18, 1963), accessed November 8, 2016, http://thepossibilitiespractice.com/martin-luther-king-jr-on-creative-maladjustment/.
2 Ibid.
4 Ibid.

The Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design and Georgia State University are honored to present this year’s MFA candidate exhibition, Creative Maladjustment at Aqua Art Miami 2016 — the emerging international art fair during Miami Art Week. This is Georgia State’s sixth consecutive year participating in this exciting satellite fair, now in its eleventh edition. Once again, the works produced by our graduate students offer a glimpse of what is possible when afforded the luxury of time, focus and unfettered exploration. Collaborative in nature, the art fair experience is a marquee highlight of our MFA program that provides real world practice for our studio artists, as well our graduate art history candidates who contribute to the editorial content of the catalog. Additionally, I would like to extend our appreciation and thanks to Sarah Workneh, Co-Director of Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, for her thoughtful catalog essay and taking the time to visit the campus multiple times to do studio visits with each of the artists.

Located in downtown Atlanta, the Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design seeks to provide a challenging and cross-disciplinary studio setting where a diversity of experiences, backgrounds and talents are put forth and tested — in the studios, in the classrooms and on the streets. This urban experience has informed the ideas, messages and approaches of each artist and scholar. Under the guidance of established faculty, who are all active in the contemporary art and design worlds, the programs at the Welch School seek to cultivate a level of inquiry and commentary that is unique to each student.

The 2017 MFA candidates have used the past three years both to build on and to deviate from established practices in their respective fields. It has been a journey fraught with excitement, angst, clarity, uncertainty and passion — a passion for learning, for personal exploration and, ultimately, for making. These students of Art History, Ceramics, Drawing, Painting, Printmaking, Graphic Design, Interior Design, Photography and Sculpture have achieved much; but more importantly, they stand on the edge of even greater possibilities.

The Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design is proud to present the works of its outstanding 2017 MFA degree candidates at Aqua Art Miami 2016.

Michael White
Director, Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design, Georgia State University
DRAWING, PAINTING & PRINTMAKING:
A: Larkin Ford p12
D: Elham Masoudi p22
J: Joe Hadden p10
CERAMICS:
B: Rachel Ballard p24
C: Michelle Laxalt p14
PHOTOGRAPHY:
E: Ben Bowden Lee p18
F: John Prince p16
G: Kathleen Sharp p18
I: Tyler Mann p20
GRAPHIC DESIGN:
H: Bryan Perry p26

Photo: Dave King
Q: You work with color and light and how the two interact. How is working monochromatically different than working with multiple colors? And how does experiencing one color, for you, differ from experiencing several colors at once?

A: Working monochromatically allows me to focus on a specific color’s effect on a space. I want my images to engulf the viewer, to drive them towards specific emotive and psychological responses. Narrowing the color field minimizes distraction and allows the viewer to focus on the illusion of space that the interaction of light and color create.

Q: How does light affect the experience of a color?

A: Light constitutes the experience of a color.

Q: You have been working solely with Red. What other color(s) might you want to develop in the future?

A: I am finishing this study on Red, and I have plans to continue this series with other colors. I plan to approach each primary color first and then the secondary colors. This will give me a more foundational understanding of color in all future works.

Q: Your pieces are about viewer participation. How does one experience those pieces?

A: I want my pieces to present the viewer with an illusion of space. With Red specifically, I create spaces out of a very theatrical manufactured red where the viewer is both drawn towards the space in awe and confronted by the aggression behind the color.

Q: As a photographer, are there other media you want to explore?

A: My current work deals with presenting the illusion of three-dimensional space through a two-dimensional medium. I could take this approach with other media, but I feel it is a more rewarding challenge as a photographer.

– Interviewed by Anna Dobbins
Q: Your work recalls perceptions of cave space and geological environments. Can you speak more on the idea of immersive, interactive space in relation to your art?

A: Land surface and immersive environments have the ability to create deep space or deep nature. 452B is the title I gave an immersive and interactive abstract geological installation that took the shape of a cave and had engulfed my studio for the past two years. Living and working in the cave space taught me that an immersive and interactive environment produces individually unique and thought-provoking experiences where the viewer is both an integral component of the piece, as well as a foreign sightseeing entity, removed from the known world and placed in a bizarre supplemental offshoot. The subsequent paintings then become re-enactments of forces, impressions or events that occur within the abstract geological environment while creating a new atmosphere or habitat that awaits exploration, invites immersion, and tempts interaction.

Q: Artistic process is essential to your final outcome. Can you give us an insight on what this process is like?

A: Conducted experiments catalyzing material processes into concrete forms make up the artifacts of my artistic practice. Through alchemical procedures I gain knowledge relating to the chemistry, biology and physics of a wide range of art materials, household ingredients and toxic chemicals. I hope to always be surprised by my work and by the reactions occurring within a piece. These surprises take many forms, some of which include: changes in color or viscosity, emerging textures or pockets of corrosion, glowing phosphorescence and growing crystalline forms. Thankfully, there are still countless reactions unbeknownst to me. Like an alchemist’s aim to achieve the Philosopher’s Stone by turning base metal to gold, I aim to achieve a painting capable of immersion into environments that evoke a desire for interaction and exploration. These paintings are achieved by testing the limits of multiple mixed mediums through experimental material processes. My studio has become a laboratory, a workshop, a testing ground, a museum, a home, and a foreign environment, but perhaps most importantly it is a place of imaginary solutions and motivating surprises.

Q: You have also said that memory studies are very significant to you. How do you emphasize memory in your art? Why is it so important?

A: Attending to visual memory traces of a painting or installation that is no longer present is how I attempt to recapture the forces of previous abstract atmospheres within new works. Capturing the same impressions is nearly impossible as those recollections are riddled with misinformation, due to the faultiness of auditory attention and visual memory stores. These faults in memory translate to new impressions in the paintings and, in turn, create new and exciting environments that can be misremembered and reimagined indefinitely. The unfamiliar and ever-changing immersive environments that make up my work highlight both what is retained and what is lost in our visual and auditory memory.

-- interviewed by Ceallsach Crouch
Q: Looking at your work, I see a bit through the lens of Edward Hopper and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. There are elusive and grotesque elements at play in some of your work. For you, does the grotesque fall under a sense of schadenfreude or some other realm of critique?

A: For me, the grotesque body always comes back to an insistence on our materiality by exaggerating the permeable borders between the body’s interior and exterior. Wounds, dialysis tubing, open mouths, urination, and defecation have found their way into various works. Although there is often an implication of pain, there’s also an element of farce in many instances of the grotesque, as in the young man urinating through the screen door.

The wounded or deteriorating bodies, on the other hand, are tragic figures. When I use elements of the grotesque—the reduction of individuals to bodies—I use it in order to emphasize our transitory state, our vulnerability and mortality. The work often springs from emotional sore spots, so the imagery is inevitably charged, but I do my best to paint from an unsentimental position.

Q: There is a lot of pictorial space and emphasis on elongated limbs, fragmented or otherwise jutting angularly in your work. I was wondering if you could speak more towards the nature of these fragmented or disjointed limbs?

A: Reaching limbs suggest curiosity and vulnerability. I think of them as feelers, like a snail’s eye stalks, probing for meaning or exploring unfamiliar areas. In some cases they cross thresholds, reaching into open space or intruding into others’ territory. I also find that large, cropped limbs lead the viewer more directly into the illusionistic space than figures seen from a comfortable distance. This sense of physical proximity can implicate the viewer in the unfolding action.

Q: Your figures do not exist in a comfortable suburban cul-de-sac nor a lavish beachfront vista. They live in mild disarray and often in buildings isolated from others. Where do these figures fit into the grand socio-economic scheme of things? Is this important for your work?

A: Generally, these figures reflect the rural South, or the swath of it that most interests me, having grown up there. Dilapidated or cluttered interiors are very often the product of abject poverty and genuine struggle. I’ve tried to represent these homes in some of my paintings. On the other hand, my own home is messy because tidiness is a low priority. That messiness enters the work because I find it visually rich, loaded with ambiguous symbolism, and underrepresented in contemporary painting. Domestic disorder mirrors the chaos of life.

— interviewed by Ariana Yandell
Q: When I visited your studio you said that your work is rooted in corporeality: the aging body, the sick body, the strength of the body and so on. Can you talk about how these issues inform the work that you are exhibiting at Aqua?

A: My work is motivated in part by the experiences that I have had with caregiving. I worked for a few years at a daycare in the infant and toddler room. While I was working there, my father was living with his father and caring for him during the last year of his life. Shortly after that, my mother moved in with her mother to care for her during the last three years of her life. So, my parents and I have shared experiences in caring for bodies that couldn’t care for themselves. These circumstances were formative because they allowed me to experience and observe varying degrees of vitality, weakness, and exhaustion as expressed by infantile, elderly, and deceased bodies. While these experiences weren’t easy or pleasing, they allowed me to develop a respect and curiosity for corporeality.

I see my textile and ceramic pieces as reminders of the body. The ceramic vessels reference older bodies in how they pucker, pinch, wrinkle, sag and bulge simultaneously. These marks and textures suggest the body without illustrating it literally. Though the vessels reference aged bodies, they are triumphant in their vertical orientation and fecund color palette. As such, they hold abjection at bay by celebrating the body as a redemptive entity, despite its ephemerality and eventual failure.

Each of the textile pieces incorporate hair, materials that we cast-off and shed. This material is effective in making the body present despite its absence, and it alludes to the degradation and ever-changing nature of the body’s life cycle. The scale and materiality of the textile pieces also reference the bed space, which has been a source of inspiration for my work. I see the bed as a complex space in which we are confronted with our physicality, our sexuality, and our mortality.

Q: How does sculpture function as a vehicle for your ideas?

A: Since my work deals with the body, I am interested in creating works that are three-dimensional, like the body, and which require exploration on behalf of the viewers. Clay allows me to create likenesses and stand-ins for the body that occupy space on a scale similar to our own. Lately, I’ve been thinking about clay like fabric: I fold, dart, wrinkle, and crease the clay like a sheet of cloth to create fleshy textures and to record my tactile mark-making gestures in a three-dimensional medium. Through my use of specific materials, like hair, along with the incorporation of found and altered objects, I am able to create artworks that range from being odd and unnerving to comforting and alluring simultaneously. I am interested in the concepts of the abject and the uncanny and want to provide viewers with objects and scenarios that are visceral and unusual, but also hauntingly familiar.

— Interviewed by Cynthia Farnell
Q: How does this series compare to your previous works?
A: The common thread in my practice is the exploration of place, community, and the evidence of human activity in the landscape. My other series “The Near and Elsewhere” looks at the anonymous qualities of a familiar landscape, while “Aluminum City” explores the social fabric of a town carrying the weight of Post-Industrialization.

Q: Why New Kensington, PA?
A: New Kensington is a place that I have visited since I was a child, long before I began making pictures. The town of New Kensington exhibits many of the classic signs of wear and effect from American Post-Industrialization, but offers its own unique account reflected from its exceptional origin story. It is a town that continues to struggle, as it has for decades, under the weight of economic forces beyond its control and far exceeding its carrying capacity.

Q: You mentioned the town as a “modern” place, could you go into detail about what you mean?
A: I wouldn’t consider New Kensington a “modern” place, but it has modern threads woven into its history. Aluminum could be considered a modern material when compared with steel, which PA is known for. Aside from aluminum production another large thread is New Kensington’s connection to Bauhaus architects Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer who were commissioned to build the housing project for the Alcoa aluminum defense workers.

Q: Time plays a large part in the concept of your series and the time you spend in New Kensington is usually relatively short. How does this affect your approach to the spaces and people?
A: Not living in the place in which you’re making work is always tough. The parameters caused by time constraint make me more productive since I know I will not be there as long as I’d like. This time constraint doesn’t have as much effect on photographing the landscape as it does when photographing people. I prefer to talk to and spend some amount of time with the people I photograph, which can be limited with short trips.

Q: By introducing portraits into your work, how has this affected the overall series?
A: I am in the process of learning more about how the portraits will be a part of the project as a whole. I’m interested in the human condition, more specifically when desires are incongruent with actuality.

Q: You describe Aluminum City in terms of “documentary-style” photography. Could you discuss why you chose this style?
A: The “Documentary style” or “Documentary aesthetic” term is used to free the work from the constraints of the traditional definition of “Documentary” photography, which one might assume is in some way relating the truth. I really like a quote by Geert Goiris where he says, “My images are not ‘Documentary.’ They do not claim to show things as they are, but more as they seem or as they might be.” There is no real “truth” to the project since the work is the result of a number of subjective decisions, so I think of the work as more of a factual fiction. The subject matter benefits from the representational qualities of the “documentary style” which allows me to move through the city with a camera and respond to the landscape, the people, and the way time has affected the idealized visions for this community.

– Interviewed by Lauren Cantrell
Q: Tell us about the most recent body of work you are creating.
A: The most recent body of work (The Feeling of Being OK) explores the found photograph and vernacular image. I am fascinated by what people have documented or collected, what they once deemed so vital and important to their lives, but has since been lost or abandoned. I’ve collected and repurposed these snapshots into a collage, seeking to re-contextualize the experiences of others, in order to build new relationships and narratives.

Q: In your work, the failure of memory is a crucial component, yet photography has traditionally been associated with preserving memories. Describe the way in which you play with the concept of memory failure, and how this has manifested itself in your work.
A: To me, I think dealing with memory loss is the most terrifying thing in the world. I had to come to grips with that when my grandfather, who was suffering from Alzheimer’s, didn’t recognize me anymore. I had inherited a King Collection cigar box containing photographs and negatives upon his passing. It got to the point where my mom said that he might not have even taken these. The family history narrative got really complicated, and it amplified the fact that anything he could have told us before he passed was now lost. That’s where memory and photography gets really interesting and complicated, for me, because it’s so fragile and it can be so full of fabrication.

Q: Where did you go to find the photographs you work with?
A: I started out with my family, because of that moment where the photographs in question may or may not have been part of my family history. Eventually, I started finding and collecting other peoples’ photographs, comprised primarily of photographs that I have just found. I have turned to places such as estate sales, eBay, Goodwill, and on the ground. I have found entire family albums just lying on the street. These are things that people have obviously let go. It’s like trash, you know? If it’s out by the curb, it’s public domain at that point. But I just have to keep looking and keep an eye out, because they are everywhere.

Q: What do you want viewers to take away from your work?
A: I want them to have the same dreamlike feeling of discovery while looking at photographs that I do. I feel like other people are also fascinated with looking into the lives of others, and hopefully there is something to take away from that. It’s going to be a very subjective experience. I have my own reasons for choosing the photographs I work with, and I have my own experiences that I’m pulling from, but my hope is that those experiences can be shared with other people. If it’s not, I’m just sharing part of myself.

– interviewed by Samantha Long
Q: Your work is heavily autobiographical. Explain to us where you see yourself most reflected in your work.

A: Yes, it is. I have a tendency to make work that is directly related to what is happening in my life, and I think that it’s much like a journal or a diary for me when I am working. It’s just how the world looks to me, or how I am processing certain things, or what’s going on in the world around me, even politically.

Q: Tell us about your most current body of work.

A: This project is based in language, photography, movement, and all of the things I am finding important as I am documenting the road trip. But from the perspective of being a transperson on the road, and trying to navigate the space of the American road trip as a masculine rite of passage, it’s hard not to think of the coming-of-age road trips of Jack Kerouac and Lee Friedlander. There’s something really interesting in that for me, to discover where my own masculinity lies. There’s also the fact that it’s not always safe for me to travel, or to go places, or to use a bathroom, and there’s always an impending anxiety or fear that something could happen.

Q: Along with the anxiety or fear that may come from the concept of the road trip, what do you see when you reflect on work you have created?

A: I have recognized that it is a journey for me, and it’s a good thing for me to do because I think it puts a little pressure on me to get over some of the anxieties that I have. But it’s also an amazing thing to do because of all of the reasons that other people have done it. It’s a beautiful eye-opening experience to travel, especially alone, and this allows me to experience all of the things that are happening around me. The road trip makes you get a better perspective on yourself and where you are in the world, and that you are very small in terms of the land, and that your biggest problem is really pretty small.

On these road trips, I enjoy photographing from the car, which was something difficult to master. Photographing while driving – I don’t recommend it, it’s not safe.

Q: How does your work address and formulate the relationship between poetry and photography?

A: I think that images can work in the same way that poetry can in the way that poetic typography functions on a page. I think that poetry is incredibly visual. The layout of images can work in that same way, and that you can create pauses and punctuation the same way you would in poetry.

Q: Do you think photographs could be compared to metaphors?

A: Yes, I like metaphors because they are something that is really something else and metaphors allow for the blurring of those two things. Images have so many metaphors within them, and anyone who sees a photograph brings their own experience with them. I have these things that are important and that I can see in them, but I also appreciate the things that others inherently bring forth.

– interviewed by Samantha Long
Q: You were initially inspired to create colorful, pixelated figures when viewing an image from the 2016 Olympic games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, of a female volleyball player clad in a bathing suit. Why did this particular image speak to you?
A: When you live in Iran, as I did, one becomes accustomed to seeing pictures of blurred and pixelated women if they are lacking the proper hijab. After living in the United States for two years without this censorship, however, seeing a blurred image of a female volleyball player grabbed my attention, and the picture of this censored female player became a new sort of identity to me.

Q: Much of your work references Iran and its cultural heritage. Were you inspired by any particular works of Persian art? Do miniature Persian paintings play a role in your current works?
A: I am mostly fascinated with Persian calligraphy. In the majority of my works, I have adapted my basic painting structure from the traditional art of Persian miniature paintings. Often in my work, moreover, there will be a nebulous form created from a repetition of a particular Persian word.

Q: Could you please describe the current divide in Iran between the younger female generation and the older generation? How do you explore this through your art?
A: The main theme in my artwork is to illustrate and compare the youth of yesterday who experienced the Islamic Revolution and the youth of today who now live in the post-revolution era. It seems obvious that the Iranian Revolution affected many communities’ behavior and attitude; and as a result of this, people are now becoming more assertive and fearless... I like to capture these moments in my artwork.

Q: How do you incorporate both modern and traditional customs of Iranian culture in your works?
A: In my painting there are two elements – one from the past and the other from the present. For me, mosques represent the past, and the pixelated figures and brightly colored walls represent modern customs.

Q: Describe the juxtaposition between the black and white Persian drawings and the colorful women in your paintings.
A: I believe that many Iranian artworks often disregard large groups of Iranian women. In my works, I criticize this censorship of women – of their images, their voices, their aspirations – by contrasting black and white shadows, colors that traditionally are designated for Iranian women, with colorful and pixelated figures. This contrast provides the viewer with two distinctly different images, merged together.

Q: How do shadows play a role in your painting?
A: Shadows primarily represent the hijab in my works. I believe that traditions, regardless of how outdated they may be, have everlasting impacts on Iranian man and women. The shadows reveal these old traditions, ones that continue to be a part of a young and modern Iranian woman’s identity.

— Interviewed by Jillian Jantosciak
You recently expanded into video. Not long ago, you were encased in lots of clay for the video Excalibur (2016). What was going through your mind towards the end of this performance?

The feeling of suffocation that I was experiencing toward the end of the performance was a powerful metaphor for the end of being in an abusive relationship. I felt like I couldn't breathe and that I couldn't see what was directly in front of me. I finally told myself, "I can't take it anymore. I am going to die if I try to endure this any longer." That's why I believe it is really important that you see me re-emerge from this pile of clay—muddied, disgusting, exhausted, but alive.

In another video entitled Use Me (2016), you take on the persona of Amber Fine Sparkle. Is her personality tied to people you find laboriously obsessed with clay or perhaps the idea of perfection that is often present in the ceramics art world?

There is definitely a tendency to fetishize technique within the craft community. Amber Fine Sparkle embodies and simultaneously teases that fetish through satire. Her character represents a duality and struggle within myself to embrace my southern craft-centric roots while also working to push beyond them into a broader art context.

If this is the case, how does Excalibur (2016) create a dialog with Use Me (2016) as it concerns the position of ceramics within the art world and your shifting role within that construction?

I equate my first experience with clay to finding my "Excalibur." With clay in my hands, I believed I could do anything. I believe both Excalibur and Use Me address varying forms of consumption surrounding the prevalent insularity of the ceramics community. One represents an intellectual consumption, while the other is more psychological.

Your work clearly grapples with gender, femininity, trauma, and domesticity. The bathroom speaks to these themes. Can you talk a little about the spatial and intellectual role of the bathroom in your recent works?

The bathroom is a cleansing space essential to our well-being and it just so happens to include a lot of ceramic products. We wash ourselves, release ourselves, and are given temporary moments of peace and self-reflection when we rest upon our porcelain throne. Oddly enough, as a child I spent most of my time drawing and studying on the floor of the bathroom because it was the quietest space in our home. I longed for the tranquility and privacy that only the bathroom space seemed to provide.

In speaking of performance, how does it feel to see a moving image of yourself in video?

It feels exciting and familiar. Growing up I made a ton of home movies with my two younger sisters, which were heavily influenced by the campy song and dance routines on the Lawrence Welk show, so it is certainly not the first time I've been in front of the camera.

The works being presented at Aqua are a marked shift from your early work, especially since your body, whether through a persona or not, is the crux of meaning. Has this whole process been cathartic?

I have never been more confident and proud of the work I have made.

-- Interviewed by Genevieve Miliken
Bryan Perry

Bryan has worked professionally as a designer of traditional and digital media for over 20 years. He has worked with organizations as diverse as advertising and marketing agencies (J. Walter Thompson, Green Olive Media), finance (ING), news (CNN, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Athens Banner-Herald, Community Newspapers, Inc., Mother Nature Network), transport (CSX), telecommunications (BellSouth/AT&T), sales management (Ockham Technologies), and many small and medium-sized business clients ranging across an array of retail and service providers. He teaches mobile application design at General Assembly and graphic design at Georgia State University, where he is also pursuing his MFA in Graphic Design. He received an undergraduate degree in English and Literature from Duke University where he learned the value of a good story which he thinks lies at the core of all good art and design.

He designed the catalog you are holding now as well as its accompanying website: www.gsuaqua.com.

Credits

Lauren Cantrell is a 2nd-year MA Art History candidate at Georgia State University focusing on Self-Taught and Folk Art. She received her BA in Art History at Columbus State University in 2015. Her master’s thesis focuses on the self-taught visionary art site Pasaquan in Buena Vista, GA where she interned with the Kohler Foundation, Inc. during her undergraduate career.

Ceallsach Crouch received her BA in Art History at Columbus State University. She is a 1st-year graduate MA Art History candidate at GSU with a concentration in Medieval Manuscripts.

Anna Elizabeth Dobbins grew up in Alabama and received undergraduate degrees in French and Art History from Auburn University. She is a first year graduate Art History student at GSU with a concentration in 19th-century French Art, focusing on images of women and the construction of gender.

Cynthia Farnell has an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design, a BFA from Auburn University and brings her broad experience as gallery director, curator, arts writer, teacher and artist to her diverse projects in the visual arts. Farnell is currently the Gallery Director in the Welch School of Art and Design and a 1st-year MA Art History candidate with a focus in Contemporary Art.

Jillian Jantosciak received her BA in Spanish from Mercer University. She is the Business Manager for the Anthropology Department at GSU and is a 2nd-year MA Art History candidate.

Samantha Long grew up in Nyack, New York, and got her undergraduate degree in Photography from the Savannah College of Art and Design. She is a 2nd-year MA Art History candidate at GSU, with a concentration in the 19th-century history of photography.

Genevieve Milliken grew up in New Orleans and got her undergraduate degree in Studio Art from Georgia State University. She is a 2nd-year graduate MA Art History candidate at GSU with a concentration in Northern European Art of the 16th- and 17th-centuries.

Ariana Yandell received her undergraduate degree in Art History from Georgia College. She is currently a 2nd-year MA Art History candidate with a concentration in Modern and Contemporary Art.

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Associate Professor/Graduate Director
Georgia State University
Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design
10 Peachtree Center Ave., Room 118B Arts & Humanities Bldg.
Atlanta, GA 30303
404.413.5229
adrennen@gsu.edu
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