Becoming: transformation and the body

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BECOMING: TRANSFORMATION AND THE BODY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art

in

The School of Art

by

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B.A., University of Alabama at Birmingham, 2005
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Abstract

My intention is to focus on human flesh concentrating both on its imperfections as well as its beauty. Beauty is seen in the marks of age and imperfection as time forms the deepest wrinkle to the darkest mark. Cycles come in and out growing dark to light as cleansing takes place. Veils of material cover and hide inner feelings and thoughts as a shape unfolds itself in my hands. The forms soften and grow from one small stitch to a more complete shape. Successive layers of marks, represent hidden truths and human growth through the passage of time. Memories are fragile and impure and can easily become abstracted. I use layering of material to abstract and distort human forms. Through this exploration I hope to gain a better understanding of the nature and scope of human fragility and the mystery of existence.
Becoming: Transformation and the Body

She lies covered within cotton whispers, pleasant but overwhelming. Around her a gentle tide tightens, forcing air out of her chest. She falls into a warm and pressing hole, suffocation around her, she is afraid to breathe. She is covered deeper and deeper, scraping noises wail in her ears. Burning madness an uncontrollable eruption darkens the view, her knuckles bone-white anticipating calm. Dripping and wasting marks on her body soften the noise and the tethers begin to loosen. Gentle moments move on and colors begin to change.

Grey Eyes piercing unseen flesh, knowing but requesting understanding, eyes forced open by wiser generations. Lines left on the face, worn and strange. The lines of her body are covered by layers of disgrace thick and smoldering, too burdensome to carry any farther. The layers peel off slowly falling gently to the ground. The lines of the story are blurred, words come in and out of focus... brown pages scribbled with confusion burn on the green and are caught up by the wind.

The colors muted to a dull throb, quieting with every beat. She moves through yielding, paler lines that only reminisce of a shallow past. The layers thicken in a tender movement, loose and relaxed. White lines on pink skin slow every motion. She falls back only to a grey, the pace quickens; her grip tightens as lines move faster. Breathe accelerates, in and out. It stops, calm comes rushing back and the ground is solid and fertile ready for a new
variation. She walks through fields of green, each step lighter than the first as her movements become clear. A gentle breeze blows across her skin in a delicate caress, it is spring now.

The smell of sweat cotton flicks through the air, loosening the sway. The lines are easy to hold and move with familiarity on every page. The marks have changed, stronger and lasting much longer than the first, constructing pure lines full of color and brightness. Hands support the fullness of a new gift that has been found.

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I began this thesis work with the goal of trying to express feelings and thoughts I am otherwise unable to express. As the process begins a quiet calm comes like a whisper on my skin. As the marks pour out of my hands a new history begins, and the long forgotten has already begun to pass. Things change and evolve, a new motion circles. My materials inform the motion, direction, and quality of each piece. These hands bury themselves in the parts until an unbroken whole is prepared. I pull these mounds of fabric from place to place like a comforting blanket, while carefully stitching and mending its parts, until it is complete. Then I can let it go and the cycle begins again.

In these pieces a gentle veiling of layers both hides and gives meaning to the delicate form. Softly colored surfaces are fragile and sensitive just as the human body is and they grow as emotions grow. Some elements are dense and block the light in the veils but they are still able to breathe and to ripple. As
the parts move in and out with a familiar stroke the layers are protected and hidden by a delicate translucent skin. An emotional depth is created as well as a physical one in which the layers can be peeled back like the layers of an onion. Some parts are folded in on themselves collapsed and tight, only allowing small breaths in. I stuff and mold fragments and stitch them into a whole, some sections stuffed as full as a pumping vein. Parts and pieces move in cycles hanging from side to side as colors stain and seep through layers altering their inner qualities. Still there is peace and calm knowing what lies beneath and colors change and fade as the light touches their tender skin.

As I move through a piece, I begin with a general shape that the piece is to become and as I work through the piece I slowly pull and pour out sacred parts of myself. Each piece slowly builds and becomes the self it is meant to reveal. Every piece is a shape, a simple expression having partly hard and partly soft forms in its layers which motion to a shell, a woven, marked film of material. Just as each person conceals fragments of themselves, each of my works contains has hidden layers of mystery left for the inquisitive viewer to discover. Fresh understanding is found as the body changes through new discoveries. Wounds appear and begin to heal as stitches pull parts to a whole, mending much as a surgeon repairs a wound. I stitch and pull the fabric making its design my own; a design of healing and growth, opening itself for everyone to see.
My intention for this thesis work is to gain further understanding of the human experience as well as expressing fragments of me I don’t understand. Every step leads to another, false or secure we make them one after the other; as we move forward we are damaged and are restored. Our breath is taken and found again. Seeing clearly, beauty is found in this motion.
Images

Figure 1: Passage

Figure 2: Untitled I

Figure 3: Untitled I, detail

Figure 4: Untitled II
Figure 5: *Untitled II*, detail

Figure 6: *Delicate Focus*

Figure 7: *Untitled*

Figure 8: *Constant II*
Figure 9: Constant I

Figure 10: Constant I, detail

Figure 11: Breathe

Figure 12: Pressing Calm
Figure 13: *Pressing Calm*, detail

Figure 14: *Becoming I, II, III*
Vita

Melissa McDonald Graves was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1983. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in printmaking from the University of Alabama at Birmingham in 2005. The degree of Master of Fine Art will be awarded at the spring of 2010 commencement.