Faining pain and care

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FAINING PAIN AND CARE

A Thesis

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by Lindsey Elizabeth Maestri
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ABSTRACT

Simple repetitive actions such as rocking or jumping paired with garments that contain, heighten, or limit the movements of such actions are the focus of my thesis work. Through the pieces in the show, I track these actions and plot them over a course of a lifespan, looking at the ways they define moments, change in meaning, and sometimes come to contradict themselves.
PROLOGUE

In the last days of my grandfather's life, I realized how actions change throughout our lives. My father always carried a tube of warm original flavored Chapstick in his pocket. The distinct smell of this balm brings me to a time in our relationship when teaching through small acts was important. He would put the Chapstick on my dry lips when I was a child, realizing I would have to use it by myself someday. And I did. Two nights before my grandfather died, I watched over him. He was a strong man. I had never before seen an ounce of weakness in him. He was in pain. He moaned and was disorientated. He did not know who I was. As his lips dried from the labored breaths, I would wipe them, wetting them with a small sponge on a stick and then apply a coat of Chapstick to the cracked flesh. I apply the same substance to my own chapped lips now. This action was adjusted as the people involved in it aged. As children, my father, grandfather and I were all receivers of care. As we grew, we became givers of care. As a dying man, my grandfather was once again in need of receiving care.

*Faining Pain and Care* comes from a search for acts that are *tender*, a word that means both aching pain and gentle care. A *tender* situation, over the course of a life, may change its definition based on context. The Chapstick application was tender in its delicate nursing as it went from father to daughter and daughter to herself, but from granddaughter to grandfather the looming sadness of the situation overshadowed the quiet nurturing in the act.
Fain, as a description of an action, can mean either eagerly or out of obligation. I use this word as a concept for comparing how actions are performed. Willingly doing something is dissimilar to being required to do it. As time passes and circumstances change, fain produced in the willing sense for one action may come to be produced in a required sense for the same action. I did not do as my father had taught me and voluntarily apply the Chapstick to dry lips in need of the substance when I was putting it on my grandfather’s lips. It was indebtedness that I felt in those moments. My perspective for the act changed from eagerness to obligation as my once beloved smell memory of Chapstick grew to encompass the last days of someone I loved.

An action is doing something. An act is the process of doing or performing something. My interest is in the process. It implies a prescribed procedure, a way things happen, and a sense that they might get modified along the way. Life is a process and to represent it I have chosen five acts: feeding, jumping, petting, rocking, and digging. Although they may seem a random selection when compared to the plethora of acts our human bodies are capable of performing, each was selected, like tender and fain, for its ability to change in meaning. These acts are recurring. They are carried out over the years in different ways with different implications as we grow, learn, form relationships, reproduce, and age. They are at some points in our lives very literal, the physical action of the act. At other points they are symbolic, a metaphor for a span of time in our lives.

Our understanding of the act adjusts as we apply its previous teachings to new situations. This evolution can sometimes lead to diverging emotions for the act. These five acts can be
comforting and wanted, and therefore willingly performed with gentle care. They can also be the opposite, uncomforting, unwanted, and performed with aching pain out of obligation. I am interested in the changes and shifts in these acts as we move from birth to childhood, through adolescence and adulthood and ultimately onto death, and how they can come to define a life. There is a transformation inherent in each and this is the reason I have chosen to construct my thesis around feeding, jumping, petting, rocking and digging.
THE THREE PIECES

THE GARMENTS

Three times each week my mother would dress the four of us up, comb our hair, and put us in the car. Tuesday night bible study, Thursday night ministry school, and Sunday morning sermon was the order of our week. As a child I liked these activities, the dressing up, the hair combing, the car riding and even the church going. I had never known any different and it was not yet clear to me that there was another option. As a teen, I began to question and rebel against these events I had once enjoyed. They became a chore and a growing source of contention in my home. The dressing up became the final stand in the battle. I emerged from my room in the most inappropriate assortment of church attire I could find. A too short and tight skirt from the previous year, a pullover rain jacket and a pair of clunky Doc Martins. I expected my mother to be horrified, too embarrassed to drag me along. She knew my game, never batted an eyelash, and in the car I went with the rest. Setting through the service I had lost faith in was usually bad enough. Setting through it with everyone staring at me for looking ridiculous was worse. I knew she had won.

Dressing up plays a prominent role in my visual memory. Many of the dresses I wore and loved as a child, and grew to hate as a teen, appear in some form in my work. Our dress clothes were often homemade with puffy sleeves, pronounced collars, pleating and bows always built in. These design choices surface repeatedly. Most of my material is reclaimed form thrift stores and mimics the patterns and textures of these childhood garments. The
combination of pre-owned materials and childlike motifs, such as bows, leave the outfits I construct in an unfamiliar realm with an unknown user. The age of their proper owner is indiscernible due to the fact that they reference both old and young.

Much like the dress that defined the battle between my mother and I, clothing is often an indicator of an occasion. Being wed is an activity that needs a wedding dress. Remembering the dead requires black attire. “Sunday bests” are reserved for worshipping. There are school clothes for learning and other clothes for playing. Garments give prescribed behaviors to specific times throughout our lives. Likewise, I created an outfit for each of the five acts I used to represent the span of a life. The christening gown comes out only once, while the garments I make may be worn repeatedly, as acts I chose happen multiple times throughout the years.

As I selected each act that appears in the exhibition, it also received a construction mode in the form of a fiber-based technique such as weaving, knitting or quilting. Based on the method, I picked corresponding material. The coupling of action, technique and material choice helped build an aesthetic connection between the garment and the action it portrays. I designed a structure for each that would highlight the action by limiting mobility. By incorporating objects associated with the actions into the outfits, such as a rope for jumping or a comb for petting, I reinforced the purpose of the garment.
THE VIDEO PERFORMANCES

I knew it would not simply be enough to just create the garments. I had to get inside them to realize the implications of the actions. The performative aspect of the work comes from a need to understand the actions I had chosen. Comprehension, for me, comes with repetition. The five actions I selected are repeated steadily and deliberately throughout the performances. Much like the word *fain*’s ability to produce two responses for one action, repetitive actions have always both intrigued me and made me anxious at the same time. In the videos of the performances, the acts are portrayed in a continuous cycling loop that alternates between full-screen and close-up shot. This forever repeating of action is meant to offer the viewer the same conflicted experience I have with repetition. The physical movement on the screen captures their intrigue while the anxiousness is manifest in the wanting for something to end that never does.
To serve as a framing device, in which the videos of the acts would take place, I made a stage consisting of two wooden 2x4 beams with a long, thick wood curtain rod connecting the two. I wrapped the wooden stage with yarn and hung a cloth valance from the rod. In every video the stage appears the same, centered on the screen at the same depth and angle. This offers continuity between the videos of the performances, but it does something else as well. By performing the five acts under this stage, I am referencing act as both the process of doing something and as dividing points or sections in a play. Each action is an act in the play that is a lifespan. The stage is an indication that the play will come to life here.

I set the performances over the course of a day: daybreak, midmorning, noon, late afternoon, and dusk in order to emphasize the lifecycle the actions would represent. For
each performance, the outfit for the action was worn and the action was performed under
the stage in various, non descript locations. I was looking for anonymity with these places
that would be relatable to a wide array of viewers. The locations include, in corresponding
order to the lifespan: a gravel lot under an overpass, a park basketball court, an empty
parking lot, a street with nothing on it, and a grass field. This cross section is not an
accurate description of a big city or a small town. None of these sites are overly kept. Like
the material for my garments as it waits in the thrift store for me to take it home, each
location feels a little forgotten.

THE GRAPHS

My mother’s mother has always kept a list of telephone numbers, carefully written on lined
paper and encased in a brass picture frame next to the kitchen telephone, although I know
she and my grandfather both know all the numbers by heart. Les and Linda, Mitchell and
Chris, Tammi, The Shop, would each be spelled out in her 1930’s schoolgirl script with their
corresponding digits placed a little further down the line. Aesthetically each of my pieces
start from some place like this, some place in the home, but the graphs begin with my
grandmothers well memorized telephone list.

Plotting the five acts, graphing them by means of their coordinates in life allowed me to
look at the way they change in meaning. This differentiation in what the act signifies is a
key component of this body of work. I do not, however, claim to be an anthropologist. I do
not possess the background, formal training and years of study required to properly carry
out their intensive research. The last time I remember trying to create a series of graphs to display results was in the six-grade when I was tracking the probability of colors of M&Ms in any given bag of the coated chocolate candies. My research might not have been the most accurate, but I vividly remember being proud of the prettiness of my graphs, each column of my data perfectly color penciled in with the appropriate corresponding shade. This is the same way I approach these graphs now. The information is important to my understanding of the work but I also place importance on their visual qualities.

The graphs serve as a visual timeline of the actions the garments and performances portray. I began making them as a way to understand why I chose the actions I did and in what years of one's life they were most prevalent. I am attracted to the pseudo-science of the graphs as they try so hard to define something that is not scientific or build on literal
facts and therefore against their core nature as an instrument of science. This is not fake data by any means; however, I do not claim it as fact. I have observed it based on averages that exist in the lifespan as it is broken down into stages. Like my grandmother’s telephone list, the display of this data on lined notebook paper is informal, but the handwritten care given each graph and diagram lends it an importance. The viewer has likely made similar graphs in their elementary years, and I take advantage of this common history in the informal importance I set up.
THE FIVE ACTS

ACT ONE: FEEDING

A mother bird feeds her young with an awkward precision, collecting the food in her own mouth, mashing it in her beak and transferring it to the throat of her child. This is her responsibility as nurturer. The baby’s duty as receiver is to swallow the nutrition. Although this is an act that requires two, a giver, or feeder, and a receiver, or fed, one person can grow to understand both sides of this process life progresses. The act of feeding changes vastly as one is trained to feed itself, comes to feed others, and learns once again to be fed.

When I began work on the paired garments to depict this act, I knew the momma to baby bird interaction was the model I wanted to work from. The feeder suit consists of a pillowcase belted to the chest of its momma figure. This apparatus is meant to resemble a false, homemade pregnant belly. As the giver, I chose is a male. In selecting man for this role, I show that feeding is more than just a mother to child scenario. Hidden inside the case is a bag filled with instant mashed potatoes. Much of my aesthetic decision making process comes from a combination of personal interest and practicality. This food choice indicates my fascination with the substance and a need for something cream in color, bland in taste, and easy to mix on location. Attached to the bag is a small clear hose that the potatoes are pumped from. Taking cues from soft baby chicks, the suit for the fed is hand
knitted and fuzzy to mid-torso followed by row after row of featherlike lace trailing to the ground.
From inside I know I must eat what is given me, gulp it down as it is poured in. My legs are crossed under me, and my arms locked in from shoulder to elbow and at elbow they are free. My fingers, exposed from second knuckle up to nail, are stiff and extended like tiny feathers as my hands flap wildly with the excitement of food. My feeder stands over me. He is quiet and still, focused on dropping each pump from his bag into my mouth, like a hospital machine dripping fluid from its tube to nourish the feeble.

ACT TWO: JUMPING

The act of jumping is one associated with play, movement and games. The literal, physical action of jumping begins with toddlers discovering their motor skills. A mastery of these skills set in on the playground with activities such as hop-scotch, sack races and jump rope. After childhood play is finished, one keeps bouncing for a period of time. This is a metaphorical jumping around in life, an uncertainty that comes with not knowing the next move to make, career path to take, or hope and dream to follow.
The garment for this act was actually the first I made in the series. All of the questions associated with symbolic jumping were overwhelming me and I felt a little literal jumping might help. I found a well-worn silky sleeping gown at a thrift store with lace detail at the neck and started the outfit's construction from there. I altered a pair of thick white child sized tights so that the two legs became one and split into two again at the ankle. Metal snaps run the length of the legs and snap the two together. Above the tights at mid thigh length, the skirt of the gown ends. A tutu of sorts is fixed at the waist of the garment. In the front it hangs long, flat and apron like. In the back it is short and pleated. The juxtaposition between long and short is meant to emphasize the uncertainty in my jumping. Mitten clips attach lace hand covers to the ends of the long sleeved gown. An old piece of rope hangs from hand cover to hand cover and is the rope I must jump over.
All I can do from inside the garment is jump. My legs are bound together and my hands are tied to the rope. I spent nine years of my young life taking tap and ballet dancing lessons. This history instinctively returns to me as I count, one-two, three-four, five-six, seven-eight and begin the number sequence again. To keep the beat of the rope as it hits the pavement I add a one thousand to the end of each number and repeat one-one-thousand through eight-one-thousand until I cannot jump anymore. My urge to move is satisfied.

ACT THREE: PETTING

Someone once told me that grooming is a form of affection. I like to believe this is true. The act of petting in many ways is similar to this description of grooming, a transfer of affection through touch. This bodily contact can exhibit itself in variety of manners. The average person loses his or her virginity at 17.3 years of age to a form of embrace called heavy petting. That same average person becomes a parent at 24.9 years of age. At this point he or she will likely learn a new from of contact driven affection exchange as the new
parent washes the skin and brushes the hair of its offspring. Since I defined petting as a transfer, meaning from one to another, I decided to depict it as paired act.

To showcase this action, I made two gray t-shirt material footsy jumpers with zip up fronts. The fabric and design was chosen to bring an ambiguity to the garments, not specifically identifying one gender from another. By allowing this flux of gender to occur, the viewers are able to place themselves in either role. For each I made a large bib of poodle hair that fastens at the neck of the outfit with a bow. One arm of each long sleeved jumper is adorned with a cluster of decorative pins. The pins are like small badges that represent various accomplishments in the wearer’s life. Mittens were sewn to cover the hands. One of the mittens on each garment is plain, but a small black comb is attached to the left hand of one and a small black brush to the right hand of the other. The comb and the brush are to perform the petting of the bib.
Reaching across to the bib of the one in front of me, I pet using the comb that has been sewn inside my left mitten. The same act is done to my bib with his brush mitten hand. Our legs cross one another and our plain mittened hands are clasped to one side. As we pet, combing and brushing at the hair bibs that cover each other’s chest, the hair begins to loosen itself and patches of our false manes fall out, tumbling away in the breeze.

ACT FOUR: ROCKING

Nervous habits are repetitive actions, often executed subconsciously to ease the anxiety of a stressful situation. Lip biting, hair twirling, leg bouncing and rocking; there is a comfort to these motions. An adult steadily rocks a child to soothe its cries and lull it to sleep. An elderly person performs the same act to pass the time of an empty day. And an unstable being continuously rocks to and fro to calm its nerves when life presents its most insecure
moments. While the body’s physical movement is similar in all three scenarios, the mental implications of each are vastly different.

Much of my work involves collecting, scouring thrift store after thrift store to find all of the things I need. Here is a list of things the area thrift stores might be short on due to my gathering: brass picture frames, television sets with faux wood exteriors, decorative pins and belts. The garment for rocking began with a second hand rocking chair. I amassed two hundred and eight used belts, the most extensive collecting I have done to date, and wove them into a blanket of sorts. I sawed off the back of the chair and laced the belt blanket to the rocker’s base, intertwining it around the legs and under the seat. The belt ends were crisscrossed into a hood to cover the head and help hold up the weighty garment. A gap in the front of the woven strap apparatus leads to a pocket in the middle of the structure. From there I can get inside, sit on the seat, surrounding myself in the belt blanket and rock.
The belts are heavy on my head, pushing me further into my seat with their substantial mass. I fold my knees towards my chest, allowing the cumbersome walls of the woven outfit to engulf me like the lead x-ray blanket I wore once as a child. To and fro. To and fro. I rock softly in this sea-sawing manner, the only motion my strapped in position will allow me to make. With each swing of its runners the chair creaks loudly under me. This is a labored act.

ACT FIVE: DIGGING

Digging is a way of searching. Throughout the play of life I constructed, I was searching to grasp the changes in the show’s five acts. Digging is the final act in the performance. As a literal exploration, a dig can be a quest for the next rock to unearth from the dirt. Symbolically, it can be a hunt for an end, a resting place, and ultimately a grave.
In the garment for the act of digging there is an abrupt shift of fabric just over the waist built in to mirror the significance of being above and below the dirt. Underneath the waist I sewed row after row of quilted floral patterned fabric petals each backed with cloth taken from a thick, itchy polyester blanket. The petals are hand quilted, tied with red yarn, the same string my great grandmother used to hand-tie the quilts she passed on to my mother when she died. I spent many hours as a child fingerling these knotted nubs made by a woman I had never met but whose temperament I am said to share. Connected above the quilted petals there is a black vinyl top to the garment with a gold zipper that runs its full length. On either side of the zipper a small circle is cut out the vinyl and a black nylon extends out from inside each hole. I sewed the nylons together from the elbows to the wrists and attached a rusted garden cultivator to the end of each.
Once inside the dress like form, I kneel. Just past the bend in my elbows, my arms jut out of the garment. My hands firmly grasp the digging tools affixed to the sleeves. I begin to dig, pulling at the dirt, uprooting grass and wildflowers along the way. I keep pulling and searching, reaching my body out farther in each direction to cover as much ground as possible. I dig and dig but never unearth the hole I am searching for.
CONCLUSION

When I began the work for Faining Pain and Care, I knew that the same action could take on varied roles over a lifetime. Through the processes of making the garments, performing the acts, and studying my graphs, I realized I was looking for the catalyst that brought about the change. Why was the Chapstick application I was taught by my father so unlike the one I had to learn myself as I used it on someone else? Caring for new life usually comes with the acknowledgement that he or she will someday posses the skills to fend for him or herself. When watching a person turn to others to perform the functions he or she was once capable of, it is difficult not to look away or court this as evidence that someday your own independence will also wither. Having an act and losing it is eminently different from discovering it for the first time. It was the failure of the body that ultimately altered the act and rendered in a new reframe.
Lindsey Maestri was born in 1983 in Northwest Arkansas and shares her birthplace with that of the world's largest retailer and largest poultry producer. She has yet to pinpoint the effects of these facts on her upbringing in the region, but she is fairly sure that they exist. In 2005, she graduated from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in ceramics and art education. She promptly left the Natural State and headed for the Sunshine State, where she attended a post baccalaureate program at the University of South Florida in Tampa. In 2007, she was accepted to Louisiana State University as a graduate student in ceramics and will receive her Master of Fine Arts degree in the summer of 2010.