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Momentary Eddies

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MOMENTARY EDDIES

A Thesis

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Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art

in

The School of Art

by

Leah Marie Hamel

B.F.A., University of Alabama in Birmingham, 2012

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Abstract

Our lives are in a constant state of change, from the most intimate scale physically and emotionally to the world surrounding us externally. The relationships we build with ourselves, others, and the world surrounding us are important structures we carry with us throughout life. *Momentary Eddies* is a visual poem about the interconnectedness of our inner and outer landscapes. I have created a hauntingly dreamlike space that explores a landscape of emotions that are an entangled part of personal intimate relationships and how the emotional and physical topographies of these relationships connect to the environment surrounding us. These paper sculptures and layered sounds represent a personal narrative, which illustrates the tender beauty of vulnerability and the ephemerality of everything

Introduction

Life is a river made up of millions of moments, always continually flowing forward. These moments come and go and are often easily forgotten, but some events run deep, and linger for longer than they should. Emotions tied to these events seem to surface when least expected, swirling around like an eddy, capturing my mind in a whirling motion, suspending my thoughts for a brief moment in time. For that moment, I feel like I will be caught forever, but the eddy always breaks, and streams of thought continue into their forward motion once again.

My work has always been narrative; in that the stories I tell stem from my personal experience, but are told through representations of nature. In my installation *Momentary Eddies*, I ask my audience to connect to the feelings of intimate exposure and fragility of life and love that I am expressing visually, through the wrinkled and worn textures of the skins of my pieces, the muscular likeness of the bone-tree's insides, and the gestures that suggest life still persists in this seemingly desolate landscape. When we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, we physically feel how raw and textured our emotions can be, whether it is smooth and flowing or rigid and course. Navigating emotion can be tricky and dynamic; which in turn, makes for a difficult terrain to traverse at times. I use my personal experiences of vulnerability and past losses of love to connect with the same emotions that everyone has experienced at some point in their life.

Perceived Permanence

I am intrigued by the idea that everything is temporary and that permanence is an illusion that we create to ease our minds and give a sense of comfort through stability. I define ephemeral things as those that are visually fragile and/or obviously momentary: a leaf, a breeze, or a passing thought. These things unmistakably reveal their impermanence. My idea of perceived permanence is something that appears to be everlasting, but in reality, is actually ephemeral in its organic nature. One example is a tree, which can thrive for hundreds of years. Its ability to live beyond our lives gives us the idea that it is permanent, but trees are still vulnerable in their risk of disease, natural disaster, or human influence. Often times, relationships can fall into the category of perceived permanence. We settle into the comforting idea that these bonds, or relationships with others, will not falter. Perceived permanence can reach even small spaces within us such as habits, thoughts, or physical ailments that feel as though they have indefinite lives.

Much like relationships, nature is constantly undergoing change and renewal on a micro and macro level. Bulbous fleshy seedpods fall from the Golden Rain Tree; their skin flushed in rosy gold hues. Once fallen from the tree, they become dry, crumbly, and fragile. The ocher outer skin flakes away, revealing a few black seeds inside. The possibility for new life exists. This cycle of a continuous ebb and flow of regeneration is mimicked in the way our bodies react after an intimate moment. Damp skin, flushed pink after the height of the moment has ended; we are especially fragile after sharing ourselves in this way, and much like the fallen pods bearing their seeds to the ground, we too have

the potential to experience new life. Not only literally, by the possibility of creating an offspring, but metaphorically we are changed after each intimate union.

Biomorphic forms, like *Seed*, allow me to evoke the connection of body and nature (Figure 1). I am particularly interested in bodily shapes that suggest shelter, structure, and suppleness such as bones, skin, and organs, especially wombs. I see similarities in spinal columns and the stem of a banana tree bloom, or a bare cypress



Figure 1. Leah Hamel, *Seed*, 2014.

tree, a uterus and seedpods, a dried up leaf and wrinkled skin. I create sculptures from wooden spline or thin metal rod and hand-made paper. The wood or metal works as a skeletal system, which wet paper is draped over and dries to form a skin around the frame. Only parts of the rigid frame are revealed through the taut paper. These forms hover in a space between our inner and outer landscapes, mimicking parts of our human

bodies and reflections of things I observe in my natural surroundings. I am particularly interested in bodily shapes such as organs, especially wombs, bones, and skin.

Process and Material

Impermanence is an important aspect of my current work. These pieces have a temporary life since they exist for only a time until either through my doing or eventually the elements break them down and the fibers are allowed to become a part of something new. Like our human bodies, when the outer paper skins are removed or naturally break down, a skeleton beneath is revealed that remains much longer. The act of re-using material and transforming it into a new sculpture is a metaphor for the transformative cycles we experience throughout our lives (Figure 2). The paper will retain some of its original qualities in its color or texture and will also take on new qualities. It may appear to be softer, wrinkle differently, or have the ability to be pulled in extremely thin translucent sheets that have surprising strength and durability that it may not have contained in its former life.



Figure 2. Leah Hamel, *Beneath the Surface*, 2015
(A paper sculpture that was broken down to become a new work, *Memory is a Ghost of the Past*, made from the same fibers.)

The transformative qualities of paper as a material are part of what makes this material poetic. It can go through multiple transformations and be broken down from a solid state into millions of tiny fibers and then reformed to become even more beautiful and stronger than it was previously. It is deeply related to life, and how we sometimes need to transform ourselves in order to allow for new growth or regeneration after experiencing a loss. This shift in our lives is important. It transfigures the inner landscape of our minds and the landscape of our daily lives. It also serves as an important reminder that we must let go of the past in order to experience rebirth and positive change. The transformative nature of paper represents the natural order of death and rebirth; it is a reminder that permanence is only an illusion and not reality.

Throughout my process of creating Momentary Eddies, I have been working on the process of letting go of things both metaphorically and physically in my personal life. In my past work I often used clay as a material both for its ability to accept the control I applied to it, but also for its ability to withstand time. While clay and paper share similar qualities on the surface and in workability, the finished product differs in its existence. Fired clay is long living and unable to disintegrate and become a part of the earth again. It represents an idea of holding on, memorializing an idea or emotional event; it is a way to solidify something. It becomes a permanent reminder of the time it represents. When I work in clay I have a need to fire the object so that it is immortal. It is the part of my inherent urge to hang on to an idea or a memory, and give that experience or emotion a place to survive. The meditative process of creating paper pulp and pulling sheets which can break down almost as quickly as they are made has reminded me of the importance of accepting change or loss as a necessary and beautiful part of life.

Memory is a Ghost of the Past

My use of natural materials; interchangeable textures that mimic wrinkled skin and rumpled blankets; colors that are fleshy, bone-like, and muscular symbolize the strong connection between body and nature. Even when I create an object that is based more in reality, like the bed, it still alludes to the human form by taking on bodily qualities in the softness and suppleness of the curves or alluding to the more macro idea of shelter. The texture of the paper is similar to skin but also gives the illusion that it is actually fabric or inversely something harder and more permanent like ceramic. It is another container for the body, a type of womb, which we return to daily. The fact that the bed is a place where our bodies spend a generous amount of time clearly represents the natural transformation, vulnerability, and intimacy we experience throughout our lives. We end each day comforted by the suppleness of our beds and even perhaps by someone we share it with. We experience sleep, a rejuvenating cycle and in a sense a type of death and re-birth.

The bed sheet hovers hauntingly above the ground, alluding to the bed itself, which is absent (Figure 3). This piece contains an intimate quality, since our bed sheets are something that is close to the body, touching us daily and acting as a second skin or a form of protection, the same qualities shared often with a partner in our lives. Large sheets of paper were created and formed directly over my bed while they were wet so that once dry they would become one large sheet of paper and an immediate impression of the bed. It remains only as an empty husk, or perceived shelter. It speaks to a personal death of a relationship where the bed was something we shared for many years. At times this

was the only place we would see one another. Me, asleep when he would come home, and him asleep when I would get up to start my day in the morning. Silence filled the space between us, which seemed to widen each day until that area was so thin that we



Figure 3. Leah Hamel, *Memory is A Ghost of the Past*, 2016.

broke apart into two halves, each with a piece that didn't quite fit into its other half after the break. Even before we no longer shared our bed, I felt alone in the relationship. The bed felt hollow and empty, and so did I. Upon the ending of the relationship I was left with the bed to myself, which speaks the ghostly nature of this piece. It felt huge sleeping alone in it. I suddenly needed to sleep with more blankets. And the act of sleeping, for a time, became quite a challenge.

I was haunted by the moments just before he left. I relived those confusing and painful moments in my dreams nightly. The bed in its physical emptiness reflected the vacant feelings I was carrying before and even more so after the end of my marriage. The

weightlessness is palpable yet the connotation of the bed has mass and weight to it (Figure 4). I was a cavern, left with the echo of a decade undone.



Figure 4. Leah Hamel, Memory is A Ghost of the Past frontal view, 2016.

Deciduous Communion

Nature is a place of comfort for me, providing me with a sense of safety, sanctuary, and clarity. When I was a little kid, I would sit outside for hours writing. This was a form of meditation and reflection for me. I felt joy when I laid in the grass, my skin burning in the southern summer sunshine. I recall taking hiking trails near my parents house that lead down to a creek where I would sit listening to the sound of the stream, the wind rustling the leaves in the trees, and the rest of the forest sounds; and this would make me feel safe and comforted. The trees offered a protective barrier between the rest of the world; the stream's repetitive trickling, bubbling sounds always called my attention to the present moment. The symphony created by the sounds of this spinney wrapped around me like an invisible blanket, swaddling me in a state of rumination. I could write for hours about anything. I could allow myself to be vulnerable there.

The idea for creating a forested space with spindly trees stemmed from my lifelong connection with forested spaces and more recently my trips between Baton Rouge and New Orleans (Figure 5). During these drives I do not usually listen to music. Instead, I drive in silence, embracing the landscape that surrounds me. The hum of my car moving down the interstate creates a type of meditative state. I am always drawn to the mass of thin dead cypress trees that jut up out of the water along the I-10 as you cross Lake Pontchartrain. The image of these is both solemn and beautiful. This bleak landscape reminds me of a barren time in my life, visual symbols of remnants of a life I shared with someone.



Figure 5. Leah Hamel, *Deciduous Communion*, 2016.

I mimic the harmonious linear quality of the cypress tress of Lake Pontchartrain with the trees I have created that are placed throughout the gallery. The black reflective floor of the gallery is reminiscent of the surface of Lake Pontchartrain reflecting the trees' quiet stillness. The uncomfortable confrontation and simultaneous comfort of protection that is gained by being in the middle of these structures is a similar feeling of being in a relationship. We find security and protection in the idea of the other person always being there, but sometimes we are faced with their vulnerabilities as well as our own. We expose ourselves to one another. Allowing for vulnerability is difficult following the experience of losing a partner. The openings on the trees sometimes are timid in their size, really making the viewer strain to see the words (Figure 6). Other openings are larger and more vulnerable, further exposing the trees "insides" and allowing the viewer to easily read the fragments of poetry (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Leah Hamel, Deciduous Communion detail, 2016.



Figure 7. Leah Hamel, Deciduous Communion detail with poem, 2016.

Your Body is a Landscape

The contours the bone-trees mimic the shape of the body of our vertebrae- the part that protects the spinal cord and the main passageway for information between the brain and the rest of the body. I employ the use of my own written text on muscle-like paper that is exposed in openings on the trees to represent the ideas that are moving through these spinal bone-trees. These texts are poems that I have written in the moment of an event happening, or in reflection after an experience has ended. The act of writing about experiences is a practice in awareness, it is meditative, and at times has served as a healing process. I like the idea of solidifying life's intangible and fleeting moments by writing them down. Writing is a way to make an idea persist in a more permanent form although it still remains temporal by relying on storytelling and/or safe keeping of the paper to stay alive.

I express my vulnerability through my sculptural forms and written poetry. My poems represent personal narratives. It is within these narratives where I often compare the outer landscape to our inner emotional terrain in order to describe a particular emotion or the physicality of that experience. I see the physical body as a type of landscape that is interwoven with our emotional landscape. In order to read the text that is contained within the openings on the trees, the viewer must get close, bend over, stand on tiptoes, and peer into the openings. Little bits of the poems are revealed in each opening, but the poems are broken apart and fragmented, much like our memories tend to be. The viewer must explore and draw his or her own connections through reading the text.

Artist Influences

I find inspiration in artists whose works are visceral and evoke the connection of the body to nature, specifically Ann Hamilton and Eva Hesse. I am drawn to artwork that is narrative, whether the work tells a personal intimate story, or one that is broad and reaches a larger crowd. These two artists are also craft oriented women, which is important to me since sewing is part of my personal history and as an artist my materials are based in craft. In her installation *The Event of a Thread*, Ann Hamilton creates an immersive environment by filling a very large room with swings, which are connected to a curtain that spans the room and hangs from the ceiling (Figure 8). As the people throughout the room glide back and forth on their swings, they pull on different parts of the curtain, causing it to dance. This installation offers an intimate setting in the midst of being in a crowd or what Hamilton refers to as a congregation. She explains that these overlapping experiences create a comfort that we as humans need.



Figure 8. Ann Hamilton, *The Event of A Thread*, 2012-2013.

I have pushed for these same intimate qualities within the immersive space I have created. My viewer's physical interaction with the work in *Momentary Eddies* is subtle, as they bend their bodies, squat, or stand on tiptoes to see inside of the openings of the trees. I engage mentally with my audience by creating these crevices in the trees that reveal their muscular insides. There the viewer has the chance to read fragments of personal poetic texts, which are arranged in flowing patterns, breaking occasionally and forming eddies while the rest of the text continues to flow downward. They have to imagine the parts that cannot be read and create connections which inevitably is their own personal contribution to the piece. I purposefully place the pink paper in such a way that only a small portion of each tree's story is revealed. This relates to how we wake from dreams and only remember parts of them, or reach back into memory and find gaps that cannot be filled; thus leaving us with fragmented memories. Similarly to Hamilton, I use text to represent the passage of time and the different layers of ephemerality we experience through life.

Eva Hesse's work touches on themes of femininity, sexuality, and the tension between our bodies' interior and exterior space. Like my sculptures, Hesse's works are bodily in their supple shapes and their surfaces that resemble skin. Our works both connect this to the idea that we are a reflection of our landscape and our landscape is a reflection of us. Hesse explores the contradictions of mass and perceived weightlessness in her piece *Contingent* (Figure 9). As you walk through the environment I have created, the bed seems heavy and solid, yet it hauntingly hovers above the ground, ghostly in its illusion of weightlessness. Like Hesse, my works are seductive and curiosity draws you

closer, yet the intimate human qualities make them somewhat uncomfortable to approach or be surrounded by.



Figure 9. Eva Hesse, *Contingent*, 1969.

Conclusion

Momentary Eddies has been as investigation into human experience, sexuality, love and letting go. This environment I have created is intended to encourage a sense of vulnerability and consideration of the experiences our bodies go through both internally and externally (Figure 10). I invite my audience to enter this intimate space where they can make discoveries of their own vulnerabilities. My use of paper is important not only for the skin and bone-like qualities, but also because paper is an ephemeral material that is paradoxically used as a way to immortalize and remember stories throughout history. Both the process of making paper and writing my own experiences on it are cathartic acts of letting go of the past, which have played a part into my research. The creation of objects that are temporary, or can easily be undone was necessary to this research and installation, since after all, nothing is permanent.



Figure 10. Installation view of Momentary Eddies, 2016.

Poems Included Within the Work

1.

bobby pins collect on your bedside table
match sticks
that won't light.

burning sunset
electric fur
a straw blanket
warm against my cheek.

Send shockwaves through
wanting muscles
aching
for more.

realize my grip
tense
release.

2.

my tectonic plate's shift beneath you

your balance is tested
my trembling legs offer no stability

a crack in the stone wall
you see your way in

take what is offered with no regard
i won't protest aloud

feed my yearning spirit
a pint of pining is toxic enough

is it light that shines through
or a mirrored reflection of something long gone

low hum
a welcomed grinding

comfort in the uncomfortable shift

3.

a film resides over the top of the murky swamp waters
appearing as a moss covered ground
soft and welcoming blanket
what is shrouded below the surface
a tight seal falters
allowing occasional breaks
where to step is unclear
secrets lurk like alligator gar
patiently awaiting their prey

4.

last night
AC blowing full blast
sticky skin
under red polyester
fly paper
your legs glued to mine
you woke yourself up laughing
terrified in my restless sleep
i missed the excitement
in that moment
between open eyes
staring at the light slipping through
cracks of thick black blinds
its hard to tell what time it is now
oh, 10 minutes has passed
two hours and twenty three minutes
plus ten

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Vita

Leah Hamel earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts with concentrations in ceramics and sculpture and a minor in art history from the University of Alabama in Birmingham in 2012. Her artistic practice has formerly focused primarily on sculpting with clay and found objects as a means to bring her ideas into three dimensions. Through experimentation while in graduate school at Louisiana State University, she has discovered an interest in papermaking and has added this to her lexicon of making. She has remained an active member and officer in the Ceramic Arts Student Association at LSU throughout her tenure there. She has also had the honor while (Hamilton 2015)attending LSU of receiving the Deans Medal of Honor and the Michael Daughtery scholarship in recognition of her academic achievement and leadership in the arts program. Some recent works have been selected for the notable National Handmade Paper Triennial, which will be on view February through June 2016 in Washington D.C and Cleveland, Ohio. These works received an award, which will grant her studio time at the Southwest School of Art and Craft. Leah is expecting to graduate from LSU with a Master of Fine Arts in sculpture in August of 2016.