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The collaged practice : (un)familiar

Raina Beth Wirta

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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THE COLLAGED PRACTICE:
(un)familiar

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 Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Raina Wirta
B.F.A., Saint Cloud State University, 2008
August 2013

I'd like to dedicate this body of work to my sister Rachel, whom I lost tragically almost four years ago. She has never left me. I think about her daily, and miss her hugs the most.

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ABSTRACT

My thesis exhibition is an installation of works including sculpture, video, paintings, a hand made book, sound, and drawings that emanated from a series of two-dimensional collages: self-contained forms that evoke the surreal, (un)familiar, and/or grotesque. Infused with a sort of mysterious being-hood and intended to inspire curiosity (at the least), they are unfamiliar in relation to a particular biological thing, but (mostly) recognizable in the autonomous bits and pieces. I seek to question where our physicality ends and the next form of biological life begins, and our responses to that physicality. With childlike inquisitiveness and wonder, and a healthy dose of humor, what emerges is the imaginings of these strange groupings and the desire to perhaps arouse that sense of wonder and inquisition within the viewer.

These works were installed in a 5,000 square foot warehouse loft to create an embodiment of the ideas described in this paper. My intention is to create a reflexive experience for the viewer with gaps, or pauses for thought and contemplation, throughout the space. I see this body of work, as most bodies of work, as a practice, and defining that practice will continue to happen through the course of my artistic career. By working in the warehouse space, I was able to reveal layers and correlations between content and process. For me, it is an (un)familiar practice because of the intuitive, layered, and complex habits.

This document serves as a reflection on this collaged installation that became a practice in and of itself. For my purposes, I have defined the collaged practice as layered exercises with various processes and materials coming from the same series of cut-paper collages. A large part of the vision for my thesis work is comprised of the human element, the interaction of persons within the transformed warehouse space, with the individual parts of the installation, and the collaborations therein.

THE COLLAGED PRACTICE: (un)familiar

As stated above, all of the works within my thesis exhibition emanate from paper collages created as imaginative amalgams of biological life. These works include graphite drawings, sculptures, video, sound, a wearable object, and paintings. This body of work is an exploration of our relationship to our own physicality, the strange and the familiar inside and out of the body. These pieces transformed a 5,000 square foot warehouse loft into a psychological space, lived in, and embodying these ideas. There is a history within the exposed brick walls. Overlooked marks on the walls or floor become a foundation or background for a certain collage.

The genuine human response is what interests me the most. It is the viewer's curiosity of what is located on the other side of the room, the intense investigation of an intricate collage, or laughter at the absurdities therein that is the crux of my thesis. Where one set of eyes are repulsed by the sexually suggestive image, another's might be attracted to a perceived violence in the cut and spliced imagery. The absurdities at play within the self-contained form and the power of imagery fascinate me.

The writing within this paper is my investigation into the intuitive process that went into making this work, of the pieces themselves, and their installation within the space. It moves in and out of specific moments during that process and deep-rooted memories that resurfaced, to conversations that have allowed me to give more thought and context to the physical forms and materials.

Imitation Begets Innovation

In the spring of 2012, frustrated with my current state of ideas and materials, I began to experiment with a new set of materials and process. Those materials being imagery found in magazines and the process being collage. I began to subtly imitate the artist, Wangechi Mutu, whose work comments on identity, race, and sexuality in culture. Her work is collage and drawing based, creating images that reference traditional African masks or female faces, she integrates cut pieces of skin on top of Victorian medical illustrations of diseased female genitalia and reproductive organs. These drawings serve as the foundation for her concept and design structure for the composition.

What intrigued me with her work was the power of the imagery within the context of femininity and sexuality within culture. Often abuse is ignored and violence is hidden within floral papered walls, sexuality is seen as taboo or perverse when it is expressed through a woman. It is not my attempt to begin to tackle all of those issues, however I believe it is important to address the similarities within our use of collage. Her work has allowed me to generate my own ideas of expression of identity with visual puns and camouflaged collages.

Wizards and Lizards

When I was younger and my father was still alive, I was exposed to a large dose of sci-fi movies and television shows on his account. I now have him to thank for my fascination in otherworldly creatures and space travel. One of the most vivid memories I have from these viewings is of the TV show “V”. The plot is basically about aliens that look like huge lizards that come to Earth and infiltrate the population by embodying a human skin as a suit (of sorts). They become the person whose body they’ve taken. I never actually knew what was happening in each episode, I just remember being fascinated with the way the skin would rip off of the human face to expose the alien underneath it. How bizarre that something reptilian would hide behind the organ of human skin and what a weird interplay of epidermises. The images that stand out most are the ones that show the small bit of lizard exposed with the remainder of the skin intact. The combination of those two surfaces layered atop one another was so strange, but so fascinating.



Figure 1: Cut-paper collage example from *(un)familiar* series. This piece no longer exists in its original state.

I remember questioning the falsity behind the relationships between human-humans and lizard-humans. How was it that this skin was the only thing, the mask that could be the camouflage for this alien thing? How was anyone to know who was an alien and who wasn't? Then there were other questions about the flimsiness of the skin. How does it rip so easily? Does all skin tear like that? The way the skin ripping looked on the show was reminiscent of peeling

an orange. It just tore off in irregular shaped chunks. I remembered thinking about how my grandmother's skin looked like someone had attempted to rip her skin mask off but just stretched it a bunch and was left there to wrinkle together.

The autonomy of each skin remains intact, the two have not merged to create one single thing, but rather exist as a whole within their close relationship. These memories, amongst many others similar to it, have been an unconscious influence to this body of work. The collages are created out of various images, the subject matter of which covers a broad range of biological life. The collage fodder is taken from National Geographic magazines, insect books and animal behavior books, and cookbooks, among others. As unobstructed surreal assemblages, the collaged bits of biological forms are Frankenstein-ianly constructed together to subvert the anticipated perception or representation from where it was taken.

In Franz Kafka's famous novel, *The Metamorphosis*, the protagonist Gregor awakes one morning to find that he has been transformed into a large insect. The physical description is never taken to more than describing the large appendages, the hard shellback, and Gregor's difficulty in maneuvering this new skin/body through the house. The mystery is held within that withholding of information. The malevolence of circumstance has brought him to this transformed state of being, yet we, as readers, are uncertain of what exactly this new creature looks like. There is no clear description of the specific type of insect he has now become.

The nightmarish depiction of this sad sucker's life, stuck in his house for fear of the humiliation and disgust from local townspeople. By the time I finished the novel, my desire to know what kind of insect this is was insatiable. What makes this novel great and applicable to my thesis is that desire to know the unknown. The insatiability of knowing what the thing is, the vivid depiction of a nameable thing, something recognizable, and rather the imagination is allowed to ascertain what it will to define that thing.

Each collage is unique and distinct from the one next to it. With no particular framework in mind, what I find to be most intriguing are the intuitive relationships that happen between the surfaces or bio-matter. Completely incongruous in the natural world, these can only exist in this abstract and imagined form. A type of sensual perversion is at play; they are beautifully grotesque and have a seductive presence that both attracts and repulses, depending on the instinctive response of the viewer. They are my interpretation of the ambiguities that puzzle human experience because of incongruity.

These incompatible surfaces remain in the realm of the other or the unfamiliar. What happens in the places where they collide, touch, link, press, or penetrate? In the undefined place of unfamiliarity, not defined as a thing but within the place where definitions are allowed to shift. Interpretation is open-ended because of the duplicity within the ambiguous.

“Peter Shire said eroticism is OK” or Don't Try to Tame the Unconscious

Working intuitively while also allowing my unconscious to do as it does while cutting paper, I began to notice that many of the collages were sexual or suggestive of either gender

sexual organs but mostly suggestive of both. Not denying my sexuality, as I am a sexual being and think about sex probably more often than I should, it is not surprising that some of the collages began to exude an erotic sensuality. The timing couldn't have been better for a studio visit with Peter Shire. As a visiting resident artist for the semester, Peter had time allotted for the creation of his performance piece, lectures, studio visits, and in class collaborations. I was fortunate enough to have a studio visit with him in the beginning of February shortly after I began joining the collages to wallpaper samples.



Figure 2: Revealing some of the “naughty bits.” *Organ Cream*. Collage on Wallpaper. This piece no longer exists in its original state.

Integrated into the found wallpaper samples, these collages become either concealed within the decorative motifs or stand atop. The kitschy floral patterns became camouflage for blending into. Exquisitely suspended within the decorative designs and teeming with life, they are ambiguous at best, yet ripe for reflexive imagination and subjective interpretation. Peter Shire located these “naughty bits” that I had assimilated into the collages, and told me to not be

so apprehensive about these things. “Tell them,” he said during the studio visit, “Peter Shire said eroticism is OK.”

We talked for a while about the pieces I had put up on the walls, the direction I was going, the impulses, the sources, and what not for the work. I wrote down his comment in my sketchbook. Not that it was divinely bestowed upon me from an artist who is well known in the cannon of contemporary art, but it was candidly said towards me, towards my insecurities. I think he knew at the time that it was what I needed to here, as though he were my conscious reaffirming my intuition and disproving my doubts.

I realized after this conversation with him that the comment he made was less about the collages being perverse, or sexual, or fetishistic, or whatever, it was more about the integrity I maintained within the work I was producing. Perhaps about noticing the small details that are “moments,” humorous or off-putting, are the best places to start.

The Hand Drawn from the Hand Cut and the Simplicity of a Silhouette

As much as I enjoy making collages in a scavenger hunt of sorts, searching through magazines for the right color, texture, or shape to complete a collage, I felt as though I needed another avenue or process to explore the two-dimensionality of the printed image. I began to consider what happens when various surfaces within the collages become hand drawn and others within it are left as an outline. The five graphite drawings included within my thesis express the tactility of those surfaces. Within each of the drawings is the play between full and rich textural drawings; where textural surfaces meet a silhouetted outline.



Figure 3: *Bundle Nose*. Graphite on Paper.

The silhouettes are another iteration of the collage forms but they leave bits for the imagination to fill in a different way. The idea that the silhouette can be seen in so many different ways is interesting to me. It can read as turning in space, a profile, rotating, straight forward, etc. It starts to become an emblem or design pattern, used because of its interesting

form, or its outline. It evokes a familiar yet unrecognizable organic form. Used repeatedly, it becomes iconic; less a form and more of an overused, ubiquitous shape derived from the collage. There is a loss of meaning perhaps, or a new meaning is imbued within the outline of the collage. It is taken to a state of near obliteration in each autonomous texture and selectively redrawn.

For instance, in *Absence of the Inparticulars*, the silhouetted forms have been removed from the delicate floral design allowing the background of the exposed brick walls to be seen. These outlines are suggestive of an organic “something” yet inexplicably remains as simply a shape reflected.



Figure 4: Installation view of *The Absence of the Inparticulars*, marker, medium, used paper towel on drywall.

Organ's Organ or Only One Noggin will

As stated above, everything included in my thesis exhibition emanated from the paper collages. Acting as “sketches” for the larger sculptural forms and wearable based on the collage’s outline and textures, many of the collages have gone through iterations as realized in three-dimensional forms, wearable pieces, silhouetted shapes, and drawings. As the paper collage is composed of varying pieces of texture and surface, so too the objects are a collage of a various materials. One specific collage, *Peel Back* is the sketch for the iterations of the wearable *Organ's Organ* and *Organs' Organ*.

Organ's Organ is an iteration of the paper collage *Peel Back* and evolved out of an exercise in rendering the collage in three dimensions. I had made a smaller version, hat-sized, and it got me thinking about the interaction of these sculptures with the body. As a hat, it becomes an accoutrement; an item that is strange when placed upon the head, but has little interaction with the body. The sculpture is hollow on the inside, and I began thinking about the inhabitation of another organ, a limb, a torso, or foot perhaps. It is the extension of collage into a corporeal realm, whereby the coupling of the wearer and the object are transformed into a new thing, indefinable and surreal.



Figure 5: *Peel Back*. Cut-paper collage.

The wearable is made in much the same way as the hat sculpture, however it is large enough to fit over the head and possibly shoulders of the wearer. Made of plastics and latex, fabric, cupboard liners, paper pulp, and memory foam, it is an exterior organ, an abscess. When upon the bearer, it becomes a new appendage, a bodily outgrowth that envelops the wearer's face, impeding functionality. The object as an appendage implies a loss of removability, forever attached, and a cumbersome oddity.

A wearable isn't realized until worn. When not in use, it rests lifeless on a grey swivel chair. I asked my friend, Bonny, who is a performance studies graduate student, to wear *Organ's Organ* for a photo shoot. The interaction between her and the wearable was surprisingly wonderful. Her sight was limited, as the elliptical blob consumed her head face and the front facing layer is made of semi-translucent plastic, but it did not restrict her bodily movements. She herself became another iteration of the collage, a living collage, strange and beautiful.

The video “Dancing Organ” was serendipitously created from the progression of pictures taken during this photo shoot. Bonny jumped, flexed, lunged, and curtsied wearing this large growth on her head and a tattered lace dress, responding effortlessly to its weight and vision impediment.

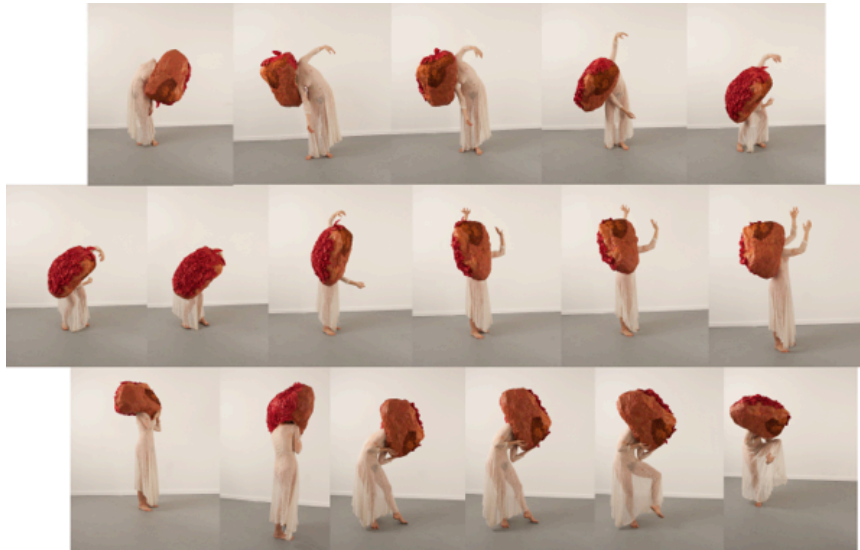


Figure 6: 17 still photographs from the “Dancing Organ” video.

For the exhibition, “Dancing Organ” was projected onto a wall covered in found wallpaper. A repeating red silhouette of the collage *Flyeye* altered the pattern of the wallpaper is embossed with a gaudy floral pattern that ascends and descends on top of which the red silhouette appears ambiguous but flower like in diagonals across the wall. When the video is projected onto the wallpaper, it becomes blurred, blending the imagery of the wallpaper with the imagery of the video.



Figure 7: Installation view of “Dancing Organ” projected onto wallpaper. *Organ’s Organ* rests on the grey swivel chair.

Organs' Organ Or We Share the Same

This suspended sculpture is also based on the collage *Peel Back*. It is a complex sculptural piece with the addition of the sound element. Shaped like a dome, it hangs between three-and-a-half to four feet above the floor so interactors can crouch under the edge to stand up inside of it. The inside is covered with abaca paper manipulated to appear sinuous, like a paper wasp nest or thin pieces of sewn flesh. The exterior has a sliver of bright red folded pieces of rubber undulating down the side, while the rest of the exterior is covered in long, tan-colored, faux animal fur.

Inside what is heard is an amalgam of human, animal, and ambient sounds, made as a collaboration between me and my colleague Devon, that resonate within a large hanging sculpture. It is human breathing, bat sounds, Geiger counter, and other manipulated sounds spliced and composed to radiate as a cacophony or collage of sounds.



Figure 8: Installation view of *(un) familiar* exhibition. Foreground shows *Organs' Organ* (with two sets of legs).

Just for Fun

The book of collage imagery inspired by the Surrealist novel, *Un Semaine de Bonte* by Max Ernst, is a childlike interpretation of imagery, the misinterpretations of which are used to construct complex visual metaphors of human emotions, violence, cruelty, or innocence lost. I am interested in exploring what that means to our individual experience of perceptual imagery. Can it still be powerful and thought provoking or are we inured by the bombardment of images on TV, in newspapers, or across social media platforms? Is it all “just for fun” or is there a deeper problem within the seeming disregard for the complexities within human relationships? Maybe these questions aren’t really what I’m attempting to answer, but they are questions conjured up by the imagery.

The collection of collages inside this book is relational, situational, or experiential. Strange mixes of human-animals and animal-humans are seen below.



Figure 9: *Just For Fun* front cover and two inner pages.

The Space or Shrapnel from Practice

I chose the 5,000 square foot, exposed brick warehouse loft to transform it for a short time. Something fascinates me about an unoccupied space and those who were there before. For a moment it becomes alive and embodies, takes a breath, then exhales and it's over, with only nail holes and white wash as remnants of anything having taken shape in there. Occupation then inevitable vacation, like thousands of rental properties throughout the country.

The placement of the collages upon the brick responds to the space. Not simply placed as a series, but a series of disconnections dependent upon the spaces in between. A darker brick or an eroded mouse hole becomes the focal point, significant to understanding to the collage placed near. As the space continues to transform here and there betwixt the collages and I-beams are remnants of the building process, reminders of the efforts made and the thoughts thought. It is the overlooked within the space that I wish to draw the viewer to.



Figure 10: From left to right, bat's eye views of the installation space looking north and looking south.

As stated in my introduction, a large function of this body of work is the human interaction with the individual pieces and within the space. The around the room collage continually transforms the viewer's perspective. There is an unpredictability of movement of persons in the space and I am interested in what is perceived as she moves around the room to imbuing it with resonances or echoes of her presence. Her experience may become completely different as she sees through the silhouettes of absence or the alignment of one form in front of the other. Elements seen in the periphery also layer into that experience.

In the example below, I've combined multiple installation images that depict the responses I made within the warehouse space. The collaged practice is not just the practice of

collage in its two-dimensional form, but for my purposes, it is how I used the history of the walls within the space to create a new meaning for and bring life to the space.



Figure 11: (clockwise from top left) *Swimmers* collage, placed in corner near dark brick; *Delicacy* silhouette, installation view; paint remnants and water stains; Installation view of wall with collages; Installation view of *Pink thing* with floor silhouette and remnants in the back.

To conclude, the work described in this paper has been the culmination of personal investigations into identity, sexuality, human nature, and the practice of collage with a range of pieces. This document serves as a reflection on this collaged installation that became a practice. For my purposes, I have defined the collaged practice as layered exercises with various processes and materials coming from the same series of cut-paper collages.

From the paintings to the silhouettes to the collage book, after experiencing my thesis installation and the works therein, my hope is that the viewer will come away with a deeper interest in some of the complexities of human nature or the absurdities therein; and arouse further questions than the ones posed here. I also hope that the reflexive experience within the space allowed moments of self-realization for the viewer; that moments or things overlooked can become a source of inspiration.

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VITA

Raina was born and raised in Midwest Minnesota. As one of seven girls had by her mother, she was the only one to make her mother scream during childbirth. Some of her most favorite things are mushroom foraging, insect collecting, and laughing. Her path towards artistry began when she was a young girl, but did not pursue art in academia until 2005. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Saint Cloud State University in 2008, with concentrations in Sculpture and Ceramics. She is co-founder and currently artistic director of Elevator Projects, a grass roots artist collective located in Baton Rouge, LA. Elevator Projects makes art an event, with performative works centered on interaction and participation from the audiences.