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Push and pull

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PUSH AND PULL

A Thesis

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

In

The School of Art

By
Tessa Ann Mouton
B.A., McNeese State University, 2000
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For Mom,
my inspiration

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ABSTRACT

“...motion means...passing through time and through space.”¹

“Pushes and pulls seem to be the cause of motion.”²

“Push and Pull” is about exploring process. While trying to locate my form of expression and process, I rediscovered my mother’s form of expression and process – crochet. I decided in order to continue forward, I must explore the past.

¹ Richard Wolfson, *Simply Einstein: Relativity Demystified* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 20.

² Wolfson, 20.

CHAPTER 1

THE PRE-IDEA

1.1 Interview with Mom, part 1

T: Why did you want to crochet in the first place?

M: Well...We were away from family and watching my neighbor enjoying crocheting and making things for the people you love handmade really got me started on it.

T: When did you learn how to crochet?

M: I was about 27 years old and I started crocheting afghans for babies as gifts and then for my own children and other family members, parents, brothers...just to make something homemade.

T: So 27, was that the year I was born?

M: Yes

T: Did you do it before you got pregnant or was it something while you were pregnant you decided to do?

M: While I was pregnant. To make blankets just to have for baby blankets...and with my neighbor's help, Betty, which really was a big influence in me continuing even with all mess-ups I made.¹

1.2 Introduction

When I was younger, Mom seemed to know everything. She was the beginning and the end – the Venus of Wilendorf. I watched everything she did and tried to emulate her. She'd sew and I'd want to sew. She'd quilt and I'd want to quilt. It was only obvious that if she crocheted, I wanted to crochet.

¹Merle T. Mouton, interview by author, tape recording, Lake Charles, LA, 11 April 2004.

I lived in a typical middle class house setting. Mom was a stay-at-home mother before she was a secretary. Dad brought home the paycheck from the local plant. Before entering the workforce, it was Mom's job to take care of me and my brother and sister along with the familiar household duties. Because Dad worked all the time, I was more exposed to Mom's lifestyle. It was both parents who taught me the value of a hard day's work and the importance of family, but it was Mom who exposed me to the idea of process.

Because I was the youngest of three, Mom stayed at home with me and my siblings until I entered kindergarten. It seemed that the daily routine of Motherhood revolved around process, routine, and repetition. Mom had many tasks to face as a housewife, such as cleaning, cooking, and running errands. In order to prevent catastrophe and chaos, Mom performed these little annoying jobs repeatedly. To escape this list-driven life, Mom turned to textiles. (She tried gardening, but lacked a green thumb.)

Mom sewed out of necessity. It was cheaper to sew us clothes than to buy pre-fab. On occasion, she joined a quilting bee at a neighbor's house. I loved to watch as the group of women gathered around the stretched quilt with thimbles and needles in hand creating works of art. It was a beautiful sight.

Mom was also a self-taught crocheter. While pregnant with me, she ventured out and purchased a how-to book and with the help of a neighbor, Mom became a successful crocheter. Crochet became her method of relaxation. She began to crochet afghans for everyone – me, my siblings, her parents, and her siblings. Sometimes I would sit down with her and watch in amazement. How did she do it? I was determined to find out.

Unfortunately, I lacked patience and never got past the chain stitch, the first row. For some reason I couldn't grasp how to get from the first row to the second, so I decided to just crochet chain stitches. I became the master of the chain stitch, until Mom got aggravated with me for crocheting a 10 foot long chain which messed up her ball of yarn.

With my patience level low, my interest for crochet became dormant and my interest for sewing came into play. For my tenth birthday, my godmother gave me a children's sewing machine. I was thrilled. I wanted to design an entire wardrobe and become the next fashion designer to the stars. Instead, Mom had me make a pillow. She said I could work my way up. After successfully completing the pillow, a turquoise fabric with a centered pink cat, I was moving up in fashion and began sewing an apron. In the middle of my denim apron masterpiece, my sewing machine broke. I was disheartened and soon became distracted with other interests. It wasn't until graduate school when these interests resurfaced.

CHAPTER 2. THE IDEA

2.1 Interview with Mom, part 2

T: What are some of the main things you enjoy about crocheting? Do you like just the act of it ...

M: It's very relaxing. It gets your mind off of everyday matters because you are making something for someone and it does need your attention in many ways but in other ways you are just crocheting and time just goes on by. Basically I started crocheting when the babies were taking naps or at night when they were sleeping and waiting for my husband to get off the graveyard shift. Just a good way to pass your time and be constructive.

T: What did you think when I decided I wanted to learn how to crochet?

M: Well I was kinda excited that the tradition of crocheting would continue in the family and hopefully you would be making blankets for people you cared for.¹

2.2 Masterstudy

Graduate school was always making me a nervous wreck. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do with my work, nor did I not know what direction to go in. I needed some kind of a break. That was when crochet reentered my life, but it didn't enter as my subject matter at first. I needed something different to focus my attention on, to take a break from graduate studies. I ventured out to the local hobbycraft store and picked up a how-to book and some yarn. This time I was determined to get past the chain stitch. Mostly with the help of Mom and the accompaniment of the instructional book, I succeeded. I was ecstatic and began to crochet. I didn't know what was going to be the

¹Merle T. Mouton, interview by author, tape recording, Lake Charles, LA, 11 April 2004.

outcome of the crochet, a scarf, an afghan, etc., but I didn't care. I was focused on doing it right. I started to make little things, such as kitchen towels and Christmas ornaments. I realized that in order to become an expert of crochet, I needed to learn from an expert.

I turned to the afghan Mom made for me when I was a child, a square patterned afghan with alternating pastel colors of pink, lavender, blue, and yellow. I went back to the local hobbycraft store with the afghan in hand and purchased colors that closely matched mine. Obviously, I was not going to have a perfect match considering that the afghan was approximately 15 years old and had been washed numerous times. Because this was a "master study," I wanted to attempt to recreate the piece on my own without Mom's help. For the most part, I was able to do so. I spent so much time working on Mom's process, crochet, that I neglected my own processes which I loved, painting and drawing.

CHAPTER 3. THE DEVELOPED IDEA

3.1 Interview with Mom, conclusion

T: How did you feel when I decided I was going to incorporate it into my actual artwork and into my thesis?

M: At first, I was totally confused...didn't quite understand why your talent would go in that direction instead of continuing with your figure drawings...and I guess I learned to see that there is art in every form.¹

3.2 Purpose

The purpose of my thesis is to take the method of Mom's expression, crochet, and turn it into my own using the methods of painting, drawing, and acrylic medium transfer. I wanted to use the image of crochet and its process together with the images of my own processes to create the essence of time, movement and repetition.

3.3 Process 1 (The Merge) and Process 2 (The Methods)

When exploring the idea of process, I rediscovered a method of working that was taught to me in undergraduate school, acrylic medium transfer. To explain briefly, this transfer method involves taking a xeroxed image and coating it with acrylic medium, most commonly used with acrylic paints. Once dry, I scrub the paper off using water, leaving only the image on the acrylic medium which had a finished consistency of pliable plastic. This process, both long and drawn out, is perfect for my concept.

In "Process 1(The Merge)," I wanted to represent a fusion between Mom's process and my own. I stitched a piece of crochet and xeroxed it at different degrees of brightness

¹Merle T. Mouton, interview by author, tape recording, Lake Charles, LA, 11 April 2004.

and contrast levels. Connecting these 8 ½ x 11” xeroxes into a minimal composition, I created a quilt using the acrylic medium transfer method. I reinforced the idea of textiles by using my interest in quilting while emphasizing the repetition of crochet through the composition.

“Process 2 (The Methods)” involves the same acrylic medium transfer method. Instead of transferring an image onto the acrylic medium, I decided to use the medium as a translucent brace for the objects within this second quilt. Stuffed in the quilt are by-products of the processes I used throughout the thesis show – paper, acrylic medium, thread, charcoal dust, etc. “Process 2” illustrates the idea of time – the time involved in making the individual works and the time spent collecting the objects. By showing remnants of the materials involved in the making of the works, I hope to invoke a sense of process.

3.4 Film 1 (Generations) and Film 2 (In the Studio)

When I decided to make short films for my thesis, I did not realize the time and effort needed to create these moving images. I wanted to create a film that would project onto a wall instead of a video that would play on a television. In order to do this, I had to go back in time before the invention of the video cassette recorder, when 8mm ruled the home movie market. Luckily, my boyfriend Greg’s mother came to the rescue, providing me with the camera and projector to make two 10 minute films focusing on family and process.

I wanted the film and projector to invoke a sense of time and process, so I decided to use a Bell and Howell Double 8mm camera Greg’s mother had that dated back to the

1950s. The clicking of the projector and the running of film through the light onto the wall would invite a nostalgic feeling. “Film 1 (Generations)” and “Film 2 (In the Studio)” are about the handing down of a process through generations. In “Generations,” Mom was shown teaching “me” (played by my niece, Cede) how to crochet. I filmed closely on the hands to emphasize not only the process of crocheting but the closeness Mom and I shared.

In continuing with the idea of generations I decided to include my eight year old nephew, Christopher, who is slowly developing an interest in textiles, mainly sewing and crocheting. The last scenes in the film showed me, second generation, assisting my nephew, third generation.

“In the Studio” represents my processes as a development from Mom’s processes. The film focused specifically on the process of acrylic medium transfer. I chose to focus this film specifically on the process of acrylic medium transfer instead of painting and drawing because it is a more physical technique that relates to Mom’s work as a stay-at-home mother. Scrubbing the paper off the transfer makes reference to the cleaning duties Mom dealt with, while the imagery on the transfer relates to Mom’s crochet process. I left an unfinished painting and drawing in the background to give insight about my other processes.

3.5 Triple Stitch and Popcorn Stitch

The charcoal drawings “Triple Stitch” and “Popcorn Stitch” are observational studies named for the specific types of crochet they portray. Even though crochet is a consistent pattern of stitches, I wanted the individual personality of each stitch to be shown – the imperfection of the creator. These pieces represent the process of drawing.

“Triple Stitch” is a fully completed drawing of crochet stitches examined close up while “Popcorn Stitch” is a drawing of crochet stitches still in process, leaving open spaces and marks from the initial sketch. The evidence of the draughtsman is still there. Just like crochet stitches, these drawings do not have a main point of interest. Even though each stitch is slightly different from the other, their imperfections do not completely distract the viewer from the overall patterned image. Rather its subtlety invites them into the drawing to examine the details.

3.6 Push and Pull 1 and Push and Pull 2

Not only did I want to use the imagery of crochet but also the act of crocheting. I explored this idea in “Push and Pull 1” and “Push and Pull 2”. I also introduced color into my thesis work through these mixed media drawings. I wanted to use color to accentuate the imagery but not overpower it. I accomplished this idea by using a neutral palette of browns and grays. My main inspirations for this palette were the paintings of Giorgio Morandi.

“Push and Pull 1” uses an unimposing grid format as a backdrop to drawings of hands crocheting. Each hand drawn is slightly different from the other, similar to an animated film, traveling vertically across the plane. This movement of the hands, each drawing relying on the ones before and after, mimics the act of crochet. “Push and Pull 2” has a similar concept but each part of the drawing is a separate entity instead of a collective whole. I decided to layer individual drawings to create visual movement in specific areas. Unlike “Push and Pull 1,” I created a spatial illusion with the paint through layering and glazing.

3.7 Scavenging Through Time

This piece is an attempt to have fun and poke fun at my ideas. All of my pieces in the show represent the subject of crochet but I never incorporate actual crocheted objects with these works. I like the idea of crochet, a very soft and tactile object, being represented on cold, flat surfaces, such as plastic and white drawing paper. When I decided to place crocheted objects into my thesis show, I wanted to extend the irony of the visually harsh surfaces by placing acrylic medium transfers over the crocheted objects. I also decided to go a step further with the idea of representation and used an image (photo) of an image (my drawings) of crochet for the acrylic medium process.

I used photographs of the finished drawings “Triple Stitch” and “Popcorn Stitch” as well as photographs of the drawings in process. I placed a small crocheted object, approximately 3 x 3” in size, between two pieces of the transferred medium, approximately 4 x 4” in size, and stitched them shut. To keep with the same monochromatic color scheme, I used colored yarn and tinted medium to mimic “Push and Pull 1” and “Push and Pull 2.” This work displays the real and the imitation, Mom and my self. The title “Scavenging Through Time” represents the idea of having individuals thumb through these objects, observing each one, noticing different stages of my drawings and comparing them to actual crochet. I will place 300 of these objects in a haphazard pile on a pedestal three to four feet high to encourage audience participation.

CHAPTER 4. THE CONTINUING IDEA

I realized while in graduate school that I had a love for process, for learning about art, and most importantly making art. In order to move forward with my life, I realized I needed to look back to my family history. I started this journey with “Push and Pull,” to explore my intense love for process. Even though I still don’t have all the answers, I know I am closer.

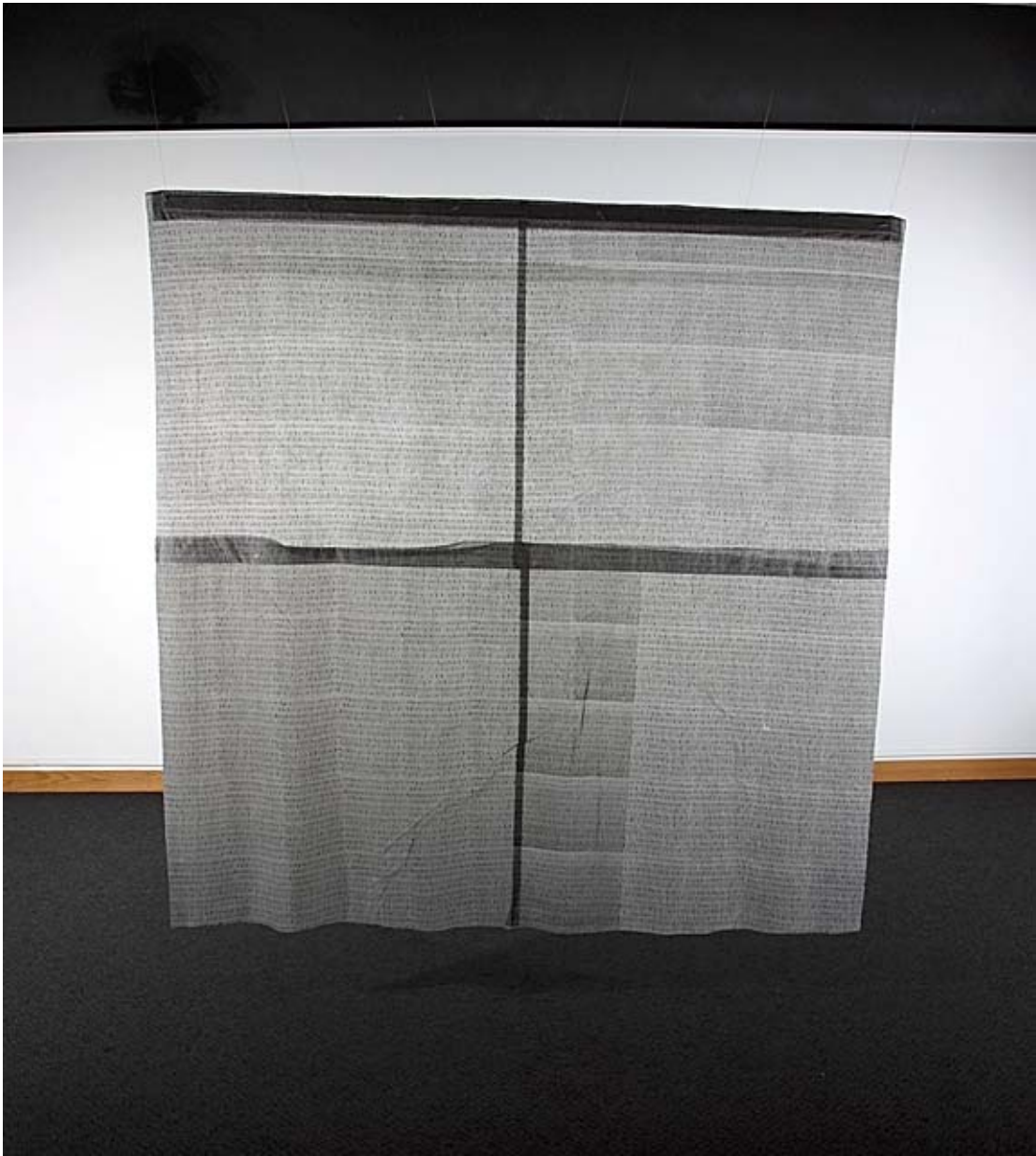
IMAGES



1. Installation view, left side



2. Installation view, right side



3. Process 1 (The Merge), 84'' x 84''



4. Process 2 (The Methods), 84" x 84"



5.1 Film 1 (Generations) and Film 2 (In the Studio), installation view



5.2 Film 1 (Generations) and Film 2 (In the Studio), detail



6. Popcorn Stitch, 42" x 42"



7. Triple Stitch, 42" x 42"



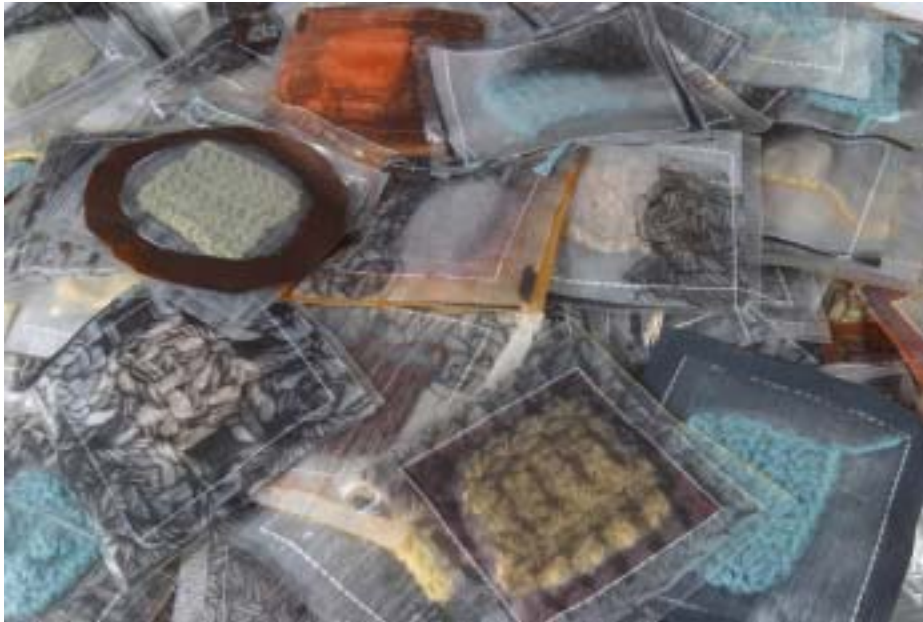
8. Push and Pull 1, 42" x 42"



9. Push and Pull 2, 42" x 42"



10.1 Scavenging Through Time, each piece 5" x 5"



10.2 Scavenging Through Time, detail

VITA

Tessa Mouton was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana, in 1979. She is the daughter of John and Merle Mouton. Tessa attended McNeese State University in Lake Charles and graduated Magna Cum Laude in 2000 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in studio art. She graduates from Louisiana State University summer of 2004 with a Master of Fine Arts in studio art (Painting and Drawing). After graduation, Tessa will return to Lake Charles and remain there until she figures out what to do with her life.