Vessel manifest

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VESSEL MANIFEST

A Thesis

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The School of Arts

by

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ABSTRACT

*Vessel Manifest* explores vessel forms and their pathways through time and experience. In using semiotic definitions to define the term *vessel* I investigate the ways in which it has become profound in my life. In seeking comfort and in searching for an explanation for the process of life and death, I look to the ways in which a vessel can manifest itself, physically, emotionally, mentally, and metaphysically. Memories of life spent on the water and theories and tenets of Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy are sewn together through images of physical vessels and abstract vessel forms. The large-scale intaglio prints incorporate multi-media methods to enhance their sense of physicality. Form and scale are exaggerated and reversed to amplify organic forms and human systems. Through this enhanced sense of corporality, *Vessel Manifest* becomes a recording of the collective identity that is our “soul”, as it continues its passage forward.
“Red sky at night, Sailors’ delight,
Red sky in morning, Sailor take warning.”
-Proverb

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of *Vessel Manifest* is to investigate and communicate a sense of what defines a vessel, the tangible and intangible forms. I wish to express an overarching idea of vessel as a metaphor, as it relates to concepts and conditions of one’s physical body. I am interested in shifting the scale of image and print matrix in order to gain perspective. The work in *Vessel Manifest* is heavily layered, both physically and conceptually, to reveal a vocabulary of images that I observe both in my everyday life and from theological and philosophical research. The lexicon I have built relies upon my background both before and since I arrived in the Deep South. This body of work becomes a timeline of sorts that runs from my birth to my ultimate death, encompassing my past life, present life, and an imagined future life. Throughout this exploration I yearned to find a common thread of personal experiences related to a larger universal commonality. I seek to discover how our inner selves are manifest in the outside world.

My childhood preoccupation with both death and water has not dissipated, and they reappear as vehicles for the idea of the vessel within this body of work. Life after death terrifies me; life on the water however, is paradise. But it brings with it uncertainty. In many myths Death himself ferries us across a river, ghost ships are harbingers of death, and even the color of the sky above the sea can indicate poor fortune. The most comforting theory of death is not of a loss of the
vessel and transposition of the soul but of a constant stream of consciousness, which in Buddhism is the concept of punarbhava\(^1\), best described in Western Terminology as a “river of consciousness”. It is explored in the tube-vessel images of *Cutting My Teeth*, *Rites of Passage*, and *Mollusks: Sarntäna*. After the death of a body, the soul, or consciousness, continues. In this way a person becomes a palimpsest\(^2\), the body is erased but its ghost lives on in another form. Printmaking affords me a very similar concept. The steel plates that I use to create imagery are deeply etched and difficult to erase. I reuse plates, leaving an image of its past life; the plate holds its history and presents itself within the new image, they become one. If I am a container for my soul, which travels forward, the next stage of consciousness that follows possesses the ghost of my former life. We hold onto the impressions made upon us, as do plates, stones, and paper.

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\(^1\) Punarbhava is Sanskrit for the Buddhist term “rebirth” or “becoming”, part of the doctrine of an evolving consciousness or “mindstream”. According to Wikipedia, after death, “the consciousness in the new person is neither identical to nor entirely different from that in the deceased but the two form a causal continuum or stream.”

\(^2\) Palimpsest |ˈpalimp-sēst|  
A manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain.  
- Figurative something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form.  
ORIGIN mid 17th cent.: via Latin from Greek *palimpsēstos*, from *palin* ‘again’ + *psēstos* ‘rubbed smooth.’
CHAPTER 1: CHILDHOOD

There Was a Little Girl

There was a little girl,
   Who had a little curl,
Right in the middle of her forehead.
   When she was good,
   She was very good indeed,
But when she was bad she was horrid.
   -Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Sailing the Bathtub

Fairytale-like and based on childhood memories of “sailing my blanket” through the kitchen and wooden floors of our living room, Sailing the Bathtub is the first print of the series. The bathtub print is inspired by poems and illustrations of Robert Louis Stevenson’s book, “A Child’s Garden of Verses” that my grandmother used to recite to me. When dreaming of sailing as a child I was always alone on the ship, and the empty boat symbolizes the dream of sailing, rather than the act of sailing.

Although the print is intended to be dreamlike, it is printed in a cool, velvety black. Black denotes a truth, and its symbolism in my prints is used in the way that text is printed in newspapers and books; it is concrete fact. Sepia tones indicate memory, the
fading of dark black truth. Sepia can also signify an assumption, a theory, a non-fact. In *Sailing the Bathtub*, the layers of monotype use a childlike, less sophisticated color palette both under and on top of the steel intaglio. This layering creates a skin of ink on top of the paper. It is heavily worked, and brings to mind layers of persona, of memory, and to me, the meaning of a childhood dream, both remembered and alive.

**Down the Drain**

As an adult, my relationship with water is divided between my past on the Lakes of Michigan, my present with the mighty Mississippi, and my future, the Atlantic Ocean. The memory of making and sailing newspaper boats as a child finds me in much smaller bodies of water; bathtubs, puddles, kiddy-pools. The adult content of the newspaper contrasts with a less sophisticated color palette. Movement of the boat toward the bathtub drain enhances the sense of time and tension. Does the viewer have similar memories of floating boats or of making paper captains hats? In “Down the Drain” I am looking back as an adult to a simpler time.

This print reinforces my use of black vs. brown colors as a primary method of wiping the intaglio plate. Although the concept represents a strong memory, it is still faded, and like an old photograph, has turned brown and frail. Was my brother there too? Who taught me how to fold the simple little boats and color them in with crayons? The moving ghost-like images begin as transparent figures on the right side of the tub and slowly gain opacity as they move left. The
translucent boats are silkscreened in Crayola\textsuperscript{3} chronology, Mulberry and Violet Purple, over the layers of monotyping before becoming a fully described form in the sepia-wiped copper-plate intaglio.

![Figure 2- Down the Drain](image)

**Ground Boat I: Wreck of the Windwalker**

“Ground Boat I” represents an important, formative era in my life. I was becoming an adult; my family was separated, confusing, and small. Family health problems only increased my angst regarding death and fear of separation. Being on the water was my solace. One summer, while on a trip up the Michigan coast in a caravan of many friends’ boats, we were caught in a major storm. My Dad strapped my brother into the V-Birth, and me to the mast. My task was to man the mainsail and lower it manually, as the force of the wind rendered it impossible to furl while my Dad navigated between fifteen-foot swells of cold water. Choppy waves of Lake Michigan pounded the Windwalker with no time to recover before the next hit. At times, the shore disappeared from sight, and while my Dad struggled to keep our heading, every extraneous movement of the

\textsuperscript{3} Crayola retired 13 colors. Mulberry being one of them, which was offered in their standard box of crayons between 1972 and 1989.
tiller meant a potential to capsize. Our dingy sunk, we suffered major tears in the jib sail before it could be taken down, and we were soaked head to toe; I was more exhilarated than I had ever been in my life.

The storm dissipated as quickly as it came, and within an hour we were anchored safely in the Port of Acadia. Days later when my brother and I had ended our trip and my Dad continued on without us, another larger storm hit. He remembers little of the squall, except that it was the largest he’d seen, and that in the harbor, all three anchors were secure. He awoke in the morning covered in sand, with water up to his bunk, and every loose object floating. Not only had the Windwalker run aground, but the starboard side suffered a 12-foot square hole, and was now one with the rocky beach.

“Ground Boat I” is by no means an attempt to narrate this story. The experience I shared with my Dad and brother is now a symbol in my memory of what a death can be. My fear of death is its finality. The images used in the print of water above, and a grounded boat below are metaphors for possibility. The boat may be broken and unseaworthy, but it also speaks to the hope of repair and eventual return to the water.
CHAPTER 2: AS A YOUNG ADULT

“Something settled inside me, something heavy and hard. It stayed there, and I could not think of one thing to make it go away. I thought, so this must be living, this must be the beginning of the time people later refer to as 'years ago, when I was young’.”
- Jamaica Kincaid⁴, “Lucy”

Cutting My Teeth

Change, Growth, Transition. Chew, Gnaw, Masticate. Teenager-dom, as with many other times of change, life, can be both painful and difficult, sobering and bittersweet. Throughout my young adulthood, (and even to the present day) I have had violent dreams of losing my teeth, sometimes simply falling out, but most often I was pushing them out of my mouth with my tongue, forcing jagged shards out of my jaw, very bloody, and tearful with pain. In this print the teeth represent this intense physical and emotional grief and brutality. The tree rings represent the literal and gentler idea of growth, age, and evidence of growth. The tunnel, with its transition in shape from tiny entrance to swelling exit, represents my path, my means of travel.

⁴ Jamaica Kincaid’s character “Lucy”, similar to her earlier character “Annie John” is disillusioned in a period of her life when she “coming-of-age”.

Figure 4- Cutting My Teeth
This tunnel/tube form is also representational of the Saṃtāṇa⁵, in Buddhism, the “mindstream” of consciousness that the soul can follow. Moving my parameters beyond the concrete idea of time as a fixed progression, and to a time based on memory and emotion, allowed for both a broader and yet more specific definition of Vessel: a tube in which a body fluid may flow, a craft used for water transportation, and a container, which may encompass both physical or meta-physical objects.

Rites of Passage

My understanding of this term is a process that marks a change or transition from childhood to adulthood. This state print⁶ is derived from the original “teeth” plate. It mimics the violent act of chewing that is visualized in “Cutting My Teeth”, but the passage of time in this print is more evident via my use of the “infinity symbol tube”. The Sanskrit term punarbhava literally translated means “becoming again”⁷.

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⁵ Saṃtāṇa is Sanskrit, described in “A Living Buddhism for the West” as the concept of “mind” that is in constant flux, not as permanent and unchanging, but as a series of individual moments independent of physical process.

⁶ A state print is a proof, a print pulled while the plate is considered still in progress.

⁷ Comparable to but slightly opposing the Judaic monotheistic belief of a cyclic form of reincarnation, the Buddhist “eternalists” postulated on “an eternally existent self or soul… the ātman survives death and reincarnates as another living being, based on its karmic inheritance”, essentially a continuous flow of consciousness.
Life and time do not stop for us. The symbol for time unending, infinity, is broken in *Rites of Passage* representing a journey both on and off of a direct path, (I travel through it, become one with it, and then will eventually leave, ending the journey). The infinity tunnel is a visual interpretation of my path, my punarbhava, an earthen and corporeal cut through the landscape. The tube is inset on chiné collé’d Japanese paper, and sewn into the bottom of the vertical print. The original steel plate has acted as a palimpsest and produced three states of prints, each print using some imagery from the last. The à la poupée wiping technique, under-printed layer of wood grain, and upper layer of wax and pigments create a skin not unlike our own.

**My Outside Ribs**

I am a vessel, (for my soul, for my organs, for all I take in). A ship is a sea craft, a vessel for the water, a vessel too, for me. My shell is of skin; its shell is of wood, fiberglass, and paint. Our ribs support us in the same way, an inner structure of bone or of teak. In the end we are all susceptible and defenseless, (when our insides become our outsides, when we are no longer bodily whole). “My Outside Ribs” is a testament to the person I am today and to the ability of the human spirit to become stronger with time; to grow a thick hide.

In this piece the wooden ribs of a boat and the human thoracic cage become one at the spine, deteriorate to frail and broken shards, growing both together and apart. The large vessel, although dilapidated in some areas, remains bulky and strong. Near the bottom of the print, the boat/body/ribscage transforms into the Mississippi River System and the Gulf. During my time in the
Deep South these formidable bodies of water became major influences. They are vessels in themselves; living breathing masses, facilitating life. They feed, and like human vessels, they can become poisoned, polluted, and frail, yet still they flow on.

*My Outside Ribs* marks a definite change in color scheme when compared to the prints that represent the earlier stages of my life. The muddy waters, rich red dirt, and bright flora make appearances in my palette of inks. The 44” by 60” steel plate is wiped à la poupée in swamp-water sepia; a deep aqua blue tone invades the brown marshes as the rib cage meets the Gulf Ocean. An inner light emerges from the center of the vessel created through the use of an under printed layer of monotyped wood grain. The bow/sternum delineates the top end of the print, the paper itself shaped like a church apse, reinforcing the concept of body as vessel, or Anātman⁸.

**To Carry**

The function of a vessel is to hold, to contain, and to carry. Mammals have what many consider the distinct privilege and at times a unique fear of becoming host bodies. As a woman I am designed by nature to carry children. I

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⁸ Anātman in Sanskrit is the Buddhist idea of non-self, that the mind is self-contained and not affected by outside sources.
am told that this role is considered a blessing and an event to be celebrated; yet I regard the prospect of this experience with reservation and fear. My fear of procreation and birth came with the realization of what may be passed on through my genes.

*To Carry* depicts two distinctly different feelings about the process of procreation. The abstract organic vessels in the upper portion of the print are a cooler mirroring of the scientific process of reproduction, while the basket below is a warmer, more emotional response, but still empty. The two areas of the print are visually and conceptually separated by color and form, creating a vertical diptych. Similar to *My Outside Ribs*, the large egg shaped wicker basket is lit from within; a subtle yellow light tone creeps up the edges of the wicker pattern. Although the plate is wiped in dark black ink, foretelling a truth in my life, it simultaneously represents hope.
“I was afraid of the dead, as was everyone I knew. We were afraid of the dead because we never could tell when they might show up again. Sometimes they showed up in a dream, but that wasn’t so bad, because they usually only brought a warning, and in any case you wake up from a dream.”

-Jamaica Kincaid, “Annie John”

Mollusks: Saṃtāna

At low tide on the Mississippi gulf shore, large, spiraling concrete tunnels emerge from the sand. Surrounded by pink moon jellyfish, I stared into them from the ripple-patterned beach. They led to nowhere. They trickled out water. The outside surface was covered in pink and black shelled sea life. I could see only where the tunnel began. There is no way to know where it ends. My tunnels are an attempt to find the end point. To find it safely. I am unsure the end point is physical. If it is a mental, emotional, or spiritual end point I am searching for, or searching through, then

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9 Jamaica Kincaid. “Annie John”, PG 4. Annie John’s preoccupation with death is just one of many wedges that are driven between her and her mother’s relationship. Becoming a young adult is increasingly difficult for Annie as her mother pushes her away, asserting both of their independence.
it is a journey for the Anātman\textsuperscript{10}.

The Saṃtāna is what Buddhists describe as a stream of consciousness. The tube/tunnel that sits on top of the oversized mollusk forms is a perfect physical manifestation of what I imagine the Saṃtāna to be. Like the spiraling tunnels pushing through the sand to the Gulf, I believe they are a channel to a place, full of life, surrounded by life, a vessel that connects. The mollusks themselves are vessels too, perfectly shaped to hold and be held; they mirror the shape of cupped human hands, (hands holding water, hands in prayer, hands held in an expression of love).

Ground Boat II: The Harbinger

Many cultures and religions have different myths of what defines a harbinger. Dark, wailing, and ghostly personages often represent these signals of impending future events. The ghost ship is the harbinger of death for many a sailor, but to me it also has overt connotations of hauntings and ghost stories. My harbinger is the grounded vessel. It appeared all too real in my early life, as represented in the early print, \textit{Ground boat}

\textsuperscript{10} The Anatman is used here to mean the non-physical self, in Sanskrit.
I: Wreck of the Windwalker. One day each one of us will die. We will become one with the earth. The horizontally composed print is imagistically divided. On the left side of *The Harbinger* a small fishing boat is pictured, wrecked and grounded in a lake in Louisiana. On the right side is pictured a double ended shovel. This is my symbol of the inevitability of death.

The Voyage of Marie

This animated video relates the story of a child’s growth and relationship to her small family, (my growth, my family), in regards to her experiences with the water. The ten-minute piece is more playful and narrative than its companion printed works. The *Voyage of Marie* is my story, but told from a third person perspective, from a sometimes ironic, bird’s eye view. The cast of characters ranges from the girl’s brother permanently dressed in his Halloween costume, to an aggressive and antagonistic bird-plant creature. It is filmed in hi-def video, uses print media and digitally reproduced photographs, as well as animation, and is projected on steel plates. The steel plates serve as more than just a screen on which to view the short film; their presence behind the video projection reinforces its history and process. Printmaking is historically
considered a two-dimensional medium, when in reality, the surface of a print can be very topographic; the embossed lines of an intaglio visible to the naked eye, and the raised ink surface of a relief. The two-dimensionality of the projected video image overshadows the flatness of the print, and the quality of the printed surface is emphasized.

The use of prints and video as a hybrid format frays the lines of medium specificity, and creates a visual presence larger than the sum of its parts. The ink and plate of the archival and antiquated printmaking process are married within the era of pixel and light. Like the passage of time between birth and death, the work also creates a connection between traditional printmaking and new digital methods.
CONCLUSION

As I stared into the vast waters of the Gulf, I became increasingly aware of the sand under my feet, the brackish smell in the wind, and the life systems surrounding me. The Pink Moon Jellyfish at my feet, once alive and blooming with translucent tentacles, conceded to die on the beach, rather than fight the tide.

I feared death intensely at that moment. I could not imagine a life without consciousness, without breathing, without water and sun and breath and love. The willingness of the jellyfish to accept what was to be is still a mystery to me. My work changed that day; gray and dead as it seemed, the Gulf Shore still in hibernation.

My work in Vessel Manifest came to terms with the necessity of conveying corporeal and metaphysical concepts in a universal language, of overcoming the fear of the gray landscape that lay before me on the seashore. I was looking for explanation, for definitions, and for certainty. In the development of my personal artistic lexicon I found clarity in the face of complex philosophies of memory and existence. The narrative created by viewing the pieces of Vessel Manifest should give the viewer a sense of travel through memory, from the life of a child to the possibilities of the after-life experience.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Jessie Hornbrook grew up on the Lakeshore of Western Michigan. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Central Michigan University with concentrations in printmaking, drawing, and painting. Since moving to Louisiana, Jessie has found she is a Southerner at heart. After she has been awarded the degree of Master of Fine Arts from Louisiana State University she intends to buy a sailboat, continue to print, and settle in the south.