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Body/Mind:Matter

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BODY/MIND:MATTER

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
Mary Ratcliff
B.F.A., University of North Florida, 2017
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Abstract

Body/Mind:Matter presents the unfiltered experiences of living in a period of momentous instability. Three life-sized figurative sculptures stage my emotional journey towards mindfulness as a direct response to the pandemic and my growing concern for our collective future. A winding network of crocheted yarns and growing vines interweave the troubled figures to signify our complex dependencies upon one another and our environment.

The condition of the encumbered bodies is a result of the worried mind. Revitalized matter proposes reconciliation by introducing a sense of hope; decaying surfaces reveal new life; fused wires hold up under immense pressure; and soft woven fibers form a protective web. These encouraging formations indicate a pursuit of healing and seeking balance.

Introduction

Body/Mind : Matter stages the emotional rollercoaster ride that transpired my final year in graduate school, which coincided with a global pandemic. I had every expectation that this moment would challenge me, but I could have never anticipated the tumultuous journey that unfolded. 2020 was turbulent for the entire population. The rapid spread of Covid-19, and the isolation that followed, deepened our understandings of our biological and psychological connection to one another. It also unveiled our vulnerabilities within nature and our reliance on the material world. Reflections of these complex relationships are the conceptual foundation for this exhibition. My anxiety-ridden journey takes the form of three life-size figures that inhabit an entangled landscape of dependency.



Figure 1. *Body/Mind : Matter* (installation view) Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

Only Time Will Tell



Figure 2 & 3. *Only Time Will Tell*, Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

A lowered head with clasped hands is the first indication of the somber mood set by the deteriorating figure. The body's exterior surface appears hard and longstanding, but its disjointed stature proves otherwise. The decayed portions reveal an interior of obscure visceral matter. Rusty tendrils wrap, grow, and penetrate the weakening form. This winding network of roots descend from the feet spreading towards the other figures and the viewer. It is unclear whether this organism is preserving the withering body or if it is responsible for its degeneration. Moss and new life sprouts from areas of decomposition signifying natural cycles and a transfer of vitality.

Only Time Will Tell arose out of the civil unrest that afflicted our lives last summer. The country was attempting to manage traumas of the social, political, and health crises, while our

planet recorded another record warming year with more global wildfires and hurricanes than ever before. I could not help but reflect on notions of deterioration and death, as it has never been so present in my life. In fear and sadness, I returned to my Ohio home to be near family. Visiting the secluded tranquil setting of my childhood surfaced a profound connection to both the landscape and my ancestral roots. I was considering our evolutionary origins as a society and contemplated what our ending might entail, specifically the biological and ecological forces that will influence that story. Accepting the inevitability of death seemed to trigger an internal analysis of how I was living in the present, questioning my roles and responsibilities to society, to family, and to myself. This introspection resulted in the replication of my own body.

The first step to constructing *Only Time Will Tell* was using my body as a template for casting the plaster bandages that form the first layer of the figure. The nature of the plaster bandages caused inconsistencies in the surface; some areas were too thin, others seemed to bulge. I abandoned past desires to achieve an idealized finish and came to appreciate the honesty in the deformations as the individual parts became a whole. I attempted to maintain this outlook as I contended with the fragility of my materials; thin applications of concrete or plaster caused cracking and crumbling; too much expandable foam distorted the form; and in my attempt to grow moss, I grew mold. I responded reflexively, hacking and purging the excess foam and ripping away the infected body parts. The result was disfigurement and a raw exposure to the previously hidden interior structures. At first, I was horrorstruck, but then I found myself seeing these mishaps and my reaction more reflective of the world I was living in—unstable, anguished, impulsive.

Previously, I would have fixed these defects without a second thought, but now I wanted to highlight them. The damaged and severed portions epitomized the susceptible body, but I

wanted to take that a step further, also indicating the undeniable connection of the outside world to the inside. To do this, I crafted the rusty iron network that infiltrates the body. The system appears as roots and vines on the exterior, but transitions into veins on the interior. The rapid spread of Covid-19 was a stark reminder of our body's permeability, and the growing iron network implies that our internal anatomy is in a constant state of exchange with our external environments.



Figure 4. *Only Time Will Tell*, Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

The pandemic initiated an international dialogue on the vulnerabilities of our bodies and prompted debates over global health and personal choice. Fear of contamination, susceptibility of the body, and mortality were inescapable conversations, thus I gravitated towards the artwork of Kiki Smith. Her abject bodies from the early 1990s respond to various ideas about the body

circulating around the AIDS crisis and the politicization of the female body. I was particularly drawn to her beeswax and paper forms for their raw, yet delicate qualities. Her withdrawn figures exude humility and realness through their distressed body language and visceral surfaces. I aspired to achieve this same charged emotion and relatability in *Only Time Will Tell*, bowing the head with hunched the shoulders, disintegrating the surfaces, and exposing the internal.



Figure 5. *Only Time Will Tell*, Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media



Figure 6. Kiki Smith, *Virgin Mary*, 1992, Wax with pigment, cheesecloth and wood, 171,5 x 66 x 36,8 cm, Photo: Ellen Page Wilson, Courtesy Pace Gallery, © Kiki Smith, Courtesy Pace Gallery

Where Smith's figure, *Virgin Mary*, appears isolated beyond repair, I aim to conjure the possibility of restoration by incorporating a living landscape and new growth. In a time that we are hyper-focused on the wellness of the body, I want to shift the discussion to include our external environments. While I was secluded in nature with family, I felt reconnected to the shifting world I was living in and a renewed sense of purpose. Maybe it was the tranquility I discovered in the woods or the sense of belonging radiating from my familial home, but I felt connected and inspired. I was reinvigorated by the love of my parents and the green spaces that consumed me. I wanted to be better and do better for them, for me, for our future. I intended for *Only Time Will Tell* to express a sense of deterioration and death that was felt around the world, but I also wanted to emit notions of spirituality and regeneration. By blurring the identifiable features of humans and plants, I am suggesting the interconnectivity of all living things. The

addition of sprouting organic matter indicate that new life and outlooks can be cultivated from this moment of despair.



Figure 7. *Only Time Will Tell*, Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

Determined to Rise



Figure 8. *Determined to Rise*, Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

A massive heap of objects dominates the center of the gallery as a series of globular bundles precariously balance on the back of a rising figure. The threatening scale of the pile in relation to her small frame suggests that this extraordinary action requires superhuman strength. That of which is seemingly supplied by the networks flowing into the body; streams of bright red escalate from the floor pouring into the hands of the rising body, moving through the arms and into the torso. Vines crafted from natural fibers enter through the feet and climb through the body. Below the ascending figure, a shadow of dirt reveals the preceding cross-legged position.

From a peaceful sitting posture, she rises using only core strength in a demonstration of unyielding power.

The ominous pile atop of the body contains an array of functional, sentimental, and obsolete items that embody a commentary of my concerns about the future. I am responding to many aspects of contemporary culture: what we deem valuable, our addiction to technology and material things, our climate crisis, our health crisis, a failing education system. Personal belongings like clothes and shoes are revealed directly on the back of the figure sticking out of various types of bags, which are secured and adorned with zippers and lace. An entanglement of communication cables and wires are mixed in with an assortment of old telephones. Plastics and natural objects are crisscrossed into a collection that merges the organic and man-made. Intestine-like forms made from plastic bags bulge outward. A collection of boxes, packing materials and shipping envelopes are stacked and fused into one massive entity. Masks, gloves, and sanitizing stations are revealed just below a rooftop made of books. This collection presents a hierarchy of my concerns, the most important at the top but furthest from the rising figure. In all honesty, I feel helpless to the major forces shaping our future, so I am searching for aspects that I can control, which involves an analysis of daily living.

I accumulated most of the materials for *Determined to Rise* over the past few years as I began evaluating my personal consumptions and waste. Moving to Louisiana was the first provocation for this analysis. There is a multitude of observable environmental concerns; coastal erosion threatens communities, oil refineries and chemical plants line the Mississippi River seeping toxicity into the air, water, and neighboring lands, and most visibly—garbage is everywhere. It is simply not possible to avoid. I switched to reusable napkins, water bottles and grocery bags, composting food wastes, and attempted to get a second use out of everything, if

not a third or fourth. I started taking responsibility and growing concern for the wastes I was generating at home and in the studio.

Last winter, our entire studio arts building, a nearly 100-year-old facility, had to be vacated to undergo renovations. Decades of accumulated materials, tools, and equipment were being sorted and evaluated for their worth. Supplies and artworks by past students filled every corner, destined for a landfill. I could not resist rummaging through the building to see what was being left behind. I started envisioning various objects, like an abandoned hammer, not only as a functional item, but as a marker of its unique history. I was compelled by the graveyard of antiquated technology, reminiscing when phones were used for actual conversation. As I scavenged through personal studios, I felt the nostalgic presence of past artists through their abandoned artworks. I rescued several of them along with a long list of studio supplies. As I hauled my collection to my new studio, I felt proud of my thriftiness, yet also concerned about the massive pile of “stuff” I had accumulated, and unsure as to where it would take me.

Previously, I would design an artwork, buy the materials, and then follow my blueprints for construction. Creating in this manner provides me a safety net. I can plan, budget time and money, and know generally what the final product will entail. This methodology was thrown out the window with *Determined to Rise*. With one basic sketch I just started building. It took me twice as long to construct the armature than I anticipated. Every wire connection was crucial. As one area was strengthened, another weak section emerged. It ended up taking hundreds of individual connections for the figure to be strong enough to withstand the weight that would bear down on it. As frustrating as this was, it felt insightful in keeping with a time when individual actions were determining the safety or the potential harm of the greater population. Nonetheless,

stubborn in my attempts to make this difficult stance possible, I struggled to achieve balance the entire time.

I also discovered difficulties in arranging my collections into a coherent, meaningful way. I found myself often too close to the work, too wrapped up in my own personal connections to the materials. I deconstructed and reconstructed the forms and dyed and painted their surfaces in hopes of relating more authentically to the viewer. The mundane eventually transformed into a new being; a tower of stacked components with complex wrapping and weaving now compelled investigation. In *Determined to Rise* I presented objects that suggest the challenges society faces, but through strategized calibrations and transformation, I also indicate we have the power to shape the future narrative.



Figure 9. *Determined to Rise*, Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

Determined to Rise was the final work to come together in the exhibit and it had me at my limits. Again, I found myself working more boldly, only this time it was against the clock. I assembled and disassembled repeatedly. My organized collections had practically exploded all over the studio and there was no evidence of this material consciousness that was mentioned previously. I also found myself ordering from Amazon, shopping at Walmart, eating fast food, all places I typically try to avoid. I felt defeated in my complicity but determined to shift the course of future actions. The daily stresses we carry often feel monumental, they can pile up so high we that we lose our selves in them, acting out of convenience and time saving philosophies. Working impulsively helped me to convey the experience of uncertainty we were living it, yet it also led me to evaluating my own responses to it.

I am fortunate to have this moment for reflection and cultivating change in my life and studio practice, but it should also be noted that this luxury of choice is not universal. *Determined to Rise* embodies my concerns for the future, but also confronts my own involvement. The rising figure presents our strength and ability to overcome, but the difficulty of this motion also implies that our current way of living is unsustainable. The growing connections to the two other figures implies that a much broader outlook is necessary for us to prevail over these challenges.

I Need You for Healing



Figure 10. *I Need You for Healing*, Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

I Need You for Healing is a vibrant network of crocheted yarns consuming a cradled solitary figure. A series of woven chains contour the body, outlining its form. Underneath the protection of the soft but sturdy form, shades of grays and blues swirl like storm clouds. This detail combined with the positioning of the curled body introduce a sense of worry and vulnerability. However, the radiant yarns form a web that provides a physical barrier around the entire body. This defense, as well as the rigid yarns that wrap the body, indicate a protected environment. The dispirited temperament of the figure is dramatically offset by the encircling bright warm colors that radiate through the body. Within the pulsating landscape of lively crocheted components, a vast range of patterns and textures emerge. Closer investigations reveal many individual components linked to form the massive overtaking that appears to be in

progress. Crochet hooks with yarn ready to be stitched into the network have been placed to indicate ongoing development and encourage viewer participation.



Figure 11. *I Need You for Healing*, Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

One of the most exciting elements of this exhibition is the feature of collaboration, as most of the intricately woven pieces were crocheted by friends, family, and various supporters from across the country. At the onset of the pandemic, we were confined to our homes and instructed that it was unsafe to be in contact with others; all the while, we were receiving an onslaught of contradictory guidance by government and health officials. This debilitating situation led us to yearning to be together. I saw this as a moment to act, especially since all other projects and studio activity had come to an unsettling halt. I wanted to bring people

together across this state of instability. I returned to materials from a past collaboration; colorful crocheted yarns that were already infused with a celebration of community.

I strive to construct meaningful, memorable experience for viewers in which they feel connected to my artwork and welcomed in the gallery space. *I Need You for Healing* invites visitors with crochet knowledge to add directly to the work, while also designating a crochet area with a variety of yarns, hooks, and a tutorial demonstrating a single crochet stitch. The artwork is recognizably boundless, although its growth is completely reliant on viewer participation. In Claire Bishop's perceptions of relational aesthetics, she claims that *audience is envisaged as a community: rather than a one-to-one relationship between work of art and viewer, relational art sets up situations in which viewers are not just addressed as a collective, social entity, but are actually given the wherewithal to create a community, however temporary or utopian this may be.*¹ By allowing the artwork to be in a perpetual active state, it inherently places the audience as the primary acting forces fueling its development. The intention is to continue showing this work and with each iteration, a new community is woven into the matrix.

¹ Claire Bishop, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*. October 2004. 110. 51-79.



Figure 12. *I Need You for Healing*, Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

My desire to connect with others resulted in several different types of participation. First, I hosted several crochet sessions with fellow graduate students which entailed me teaching the basics and then us launching into conversation. The pandemic caused a desperate lack of an arts community and these gatherings helped foster engagement and new friendships. As the facilitator, I found joy in simply observing the dialogue taking place. Some of my favorite compilations in *I Need You for Healing* are a result of these gatherings. I also reconnected to friends and family through social media and gained a tremendous support from an online fibers art platform called Ravelry. I have been excitingly sharing this journey with people, mostly women, from across the country.

One of the most meaningful engagements were with the ladies from St. James Place, a local assisted living home. One resident, Jackie, (Figure 13) had not crocheted in years but was eager to help. During one of our crochet sessions, she told us the story of her grandmother

teaching her as a child in the 50s. It turns out her grandmother was very skilled in crochet and could copy anything she saw even though she could not read or follow a pattern. Jackie set off to teach herself, eventually writing her own patterns, and teaching her grandmother to do the same. I was excited to return Jackie to crochet, to recall her childhood memories, but even more thrilled to have her visit the exhibition and see her crochet work in the gallery as part of a new community. Jackie and I plan to continue our visits and we are discussing a potential new crochet club.



Figure 13. *I Need You for Healing*, Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media
Mary Ratcliff(left) with participant Jackie Ducote(right)

I aim to invite as many people as possible to leave their own signature on the work through a medium that we naturally perceive as warm and comforting. Janis Jefferies declares, *“Care” can also be proposed, as a verb just as to craft is also to “care.” Both lead to a notion of material doing both in practice and in ethics.*² Crochet is one of the first artforms I was

² Janis Jefferies, *Crocheted Strategies: Crafting their Own Communities*, 2016, *TEXTILE*, 14:1, 14-35

exposed to as a child via my mother. Mostly, she was fashioning blankets for birthdays, baby showers, and holiday gifts. Rarely did a blanket stay within our home. The brightly textured patterns of crocheted blankets remind me of my mother's thoughtful nature and selfless efforts, and as a crochet novice, I have newfound respect for the time and dedication she put into her labor-intensive gifts. My mother's endless offerings of sincerity and care is something I strive to manifest in myself and in my artwork. Thus, I am proud to represent my maternal heritage in crochet, but also eager to share this tradition with others. When teaching beginners, I adopt the role of the maternal figure, guiding participants through the crochet process; providing space to learn and discover.

Crochet is a rhythmic and direct process; it requires patience and attentiveness. The practitioner sees instant results with a formation growing at their fingertips. The technique involves continuously looping yarns through one another with a crochet hook. Typically, crochet artists use premeditated patterns which are fashioned row by row or in concentric circles. However, the crochet process also allows for the free form ability to create any shape, with endless possibilities. I connect this notion to the spirit of collaboration in thinking that the artwork has infinite possibilities of what it could become, both in aesthetics and in dialogue. This idea is also applicable to our individual selves, that we too, are in control to shape and fashion our daily lives. Belinda MacGill declares that *craft does not reside in the body, but it moves between the maker and the object being made. It is accumulative and is assembled.*³ It is in this dynamic exchange that I aim to reroute our current anxieties. I believe that through deploying

³ Belinda MacGill. Craft, Relational Aesthetics and Ethics of Care. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 2019, 4(1), 406-419.

creative expressions and engaging in both internal and external dialogue that we can reconstruct new outlooks and ways of being.

Installation/Connection Elements



Figure 14. *Body/Mind : Matter* (installation view) Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

Through the placement of the figures and their associated networks, I aimed to create an intimate, active experience. I wanted to naturally infuse the installation into the space, so I strategically considered the architecture of the gallery in my arrangements. The bodies are entangled with one another, but do not exist in any sequential fashion. While the viewer is guided by winding yarns and vines, the freedom to walk over or through them remains. The suggested barriers prompt the viewer to become an active explorer, and the close parameters psychologically create a space to approximate. Furthermore, to establish an autonomous

experience with each figure, I have positioned the bodies away from one another, so that the viewer can only face one at time. The three figures are linked into one complex arrangement by elements that naturally grow between them:

Upon entering the gallery, the connection that is first visible is the system that grows from *Only Time Will Tell*. Vines fuse with rusty wire extending from the iron roots winding its way toward *Determined to Rise*. The organic network enters the feet of *Determined to Rise*, grounding the figure. This connection also defines the pathway the viewer is being directed.



Figure 15. *Body/Mind : Matter* (installation view) Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

The growing vines also lead the viewer to approach *Determined to Rise* from the side. A stream of vibrant reds is discovered behind the figure, coming from *I Need You for Healing*. These tributaries of red crochet rise far above the floor, introducing a passageway for the viewer

to travel under. Arriving in this intimate area means that the viewer is surrounded by the three bodies.



Figure 16. *Body/Mind : Matter* (installation view) Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

This confined space between the figures reveals crocheted yarns growing on the floor guiding the viewer to begin circling around *I Need You For Healing*. The extending arrangement of the woven yarns lead the viewer around the head of the prone body and into the colorful crocheted network. The yarns impose boundaries to encourage attentiveness as the viewer orbits the last figure.



Figure 17. *Body/Mind : Matter* (installation view) Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

Post-Installation Reflections

Mostly, the installation came together as envisioned. The figures were staged as planned, but the landscape that emerged was another act of intuition. I had brought my excesses of yarns with the intention of incorporating them but was unsure of how it might come together. The first addition was the moss-like fibers that hung from the concrete wall and gathered at its base. This collection of yarn was one of my studio art building rescues, the remains of an abandoned installation. The hanging threads helped immerse *Only Time Will Tell* into the gallery space but left a stark contrast to its neighboring white walls. Natural transitions and transformation are suggested all through the exhibition, thus it seemed pertinent to maintain this shifting landscape throughout the entirety of the space. To do so, I gathered and hung tangled crocheted yarns at the bottom of the walls in a way that suggests a rolling terrain.



Figure 18. *Body/Mind : Matter* (installation view) Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

One aspect that I would have liked to develop further is the arrangement of the crochet pieces. The rectangular and square pieces were more structural than the rounded, floral, and the free-formed sections, so I positioned them against the wall, juxtaposing their order against the chaotic yarn landscape, giving the essence of an overgrown pathway. However, looking back, I wish I would have integrated these entities more, as interconnection was a primary theme.



Figure 19. *Body/Mind : Matter* (installation view) Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

I also configured a section of the gallery to highlight the participation of others. This was also used as a strategy to display crocheted entities that I deemed particularly special, but also ones that could have tampered with my conceptual intentions, like the American flag. I was blown away by some of the beautifully crafted crochet sections, so displaying every piece was important to me. However, because I had only a short window to install the work, I felt that I was rushed in their arrangement. Nonetheless, I look forward to returning to the crochet sections and reimagining them in a new space.



Figure 20. *Body/Mind : Matter* (installation view) Mary Ratcliff, 2021, Mixed Media

The most rewarding experience of the exhibition was witnessing the engagement of others with one another and the crocheted artwork. The day before the opening I was still poking and fussing at the work when a young man by the name of Nico had come in to view the installation. I told him that there was a participatory crochet element and offered to teach him. He joyously responded and we spent the next several minutes in the chairs designated for crochet getting to know one another, as I periodically gave advice on how to adjust his hands, the hook, or bring tension into the yarn. Once he was comfortable with the technique, we relocated to the pillows on the floor so that he could add directly to *I Need You for Healing*. We continued our conversation for quite some time until Nico had reached the end of the yarn he was crocheting. It was obvious he was proud of his new skill and thrilled to be included. I invited him to the

opening the next day and he assured me he would be there. The opening had an exceptional turn out. I was able to teach a few more people how to crochet, but more excitingly, I got to witness those who I had previously taught, pass the skill to someone else. One of those people being Nico. He returned with a friend and they sat side by side next to my work growing the participation and my sincere gratitude. It was in these special moments that my stress and anxieties of the outside world melted away. My goal was to create an authentic experience for gallery visitors in which they feel welcomed and valued, and in this moment, I felt successful.

Conclusion

In a time of dire unpredictability, this figurative body of work narrates my personal journey yet represents the human experience. The challenges that I faced over the past years has prompted a shift in perception, both in daily living and my studio practice. The pandemic revealed complicated cause and effect relationships with nature, but also how the stresses and consumptions of daily life strains our mental health and relationships with others. It is undeniable, we need to act together. The backbone of this exhibition is my desire to profess this. *Body/Mind: Matter* implies that small actions functioning as a unit have unlimited potential. This is symbolically suggested through the communal efforts of the crochet participants but also through physical strength in *Determined to Rise*. Sustaining the worldwide outlook that was induced by the pandemic is essential for a hopeful future.

My intention for this exhibition is to express my troubled disposition, but also signal that angst can be converted into action. I am hopeful that through our anxieties that we can become more accepting of challenges that lie ahead. That through the process of connection and transformation, through personal, civil, and global turmoil, we seek ways to find balance in the

world around us. *Body/Mind : Matter* signifies an end to one chapter of cultivating my craft but will be withstanding in my future aspirations to continue evolving and connecting with others through my art.

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Vita

Mary Ratcliff is an artist from the backwoods of Allensville, Ohio. She graduated Summa Cum Laude from the University of North Florida in 2017 with a BFA in sculpture, and a minor in professional education. Her artworks are recognized as public sculpture, installation, fiber, and community-engaged art. Upon graduation, Ratcliff will be teaching as an adjunct professor at Louisiana State University.