




5-2016

Stories of Otherness

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May, 2016

To the Dean of the Graduate School:

We are submitting a thesis written by Lee Ann Harrison entitled *Stories of Otherness*.

We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

Shaun Cassidy, Thesis Advisor

Paula Smith, Committee Member

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Dr. Karen Stock, Committee Member

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College of Visual and Performing Arts

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Graduate School

STORIES OF OTHERNESS

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty

Of the

College of Fine Arts

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the

Requirements for the Degree

Of

Master of Fine Arts

Winthrop University

May, 2016

By

Lee Ann Harrison

Abstract

The thesis exhibition *Stories of Otherness* is an interactive installation created using dance, music, photography, video, ceramic figurative sculptures, and armatures of found objects to create a voyeuristic and physically participatory experience of situational art. Many artists from various art and literary genres influence my research and art, including Petah Coyne, Mona Hatoum, Pina Bausch, Mia Michaels, and Jeanette Winterson. The multi-faceted combination of art mediums and artists inspires me to create a mixed media, multi-dimensional installation for an immersive participant's experience as a source for awareness, empathy, reflection, and ultimately as a "call to action" evoking change.

This thesis statement comments on the work by examining the connections surrounding the participant's experience in an art installation; the specific choices and juxtapositions of art material; the participant's spatial relationships; and the conceptual framework intended to manipulate the participant. The physicality of the experience further explores the idea of sexual orientation through the use of spatial orientations of a body in a confining, discriminatory environment. The theme is exclusion - more specifically, the ostracized outsider who must conform to the insider's norm. The intent is to frame a space and an experience that will allow for a reversal of roles and, ultimately, a reflection on the complexity of these roles.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Winthrop University's College of Visual and Performing Arts, Dean, Dr. Wohl, and Assistant Dean, Dr. Voder Bruegge, for the amazing MFA opportunity. Also, sincere gratitude to the Winthrop University Graduate School, specifically, Dr. DeRochi, April Hershey, and Katie Dykhuis.

I would like to give special appreciation to my MFA committee. Paula Smith, you mentored me for over 20 years during my Winthrop Undergraduate, CPCC Undergraduate, and Winthrop Graduate experiences and I am eternally grateful for your support. Thank you for encouraging me every step of the way. To Shaun Cassidy, thank you for your untiring support and guidance throughout my journey. You make me a better teacher and a more-empowered artist conscientiously aware of the materials and each artistic choice as I pursue my vision. Your influence will resonate in my daily art making for the rest of my life. Alf Ward, thank you for sharing your time to help me. You taught me the skill of refinement in my art making. Your passion and commitment to art inspires me. Dr. Stock, thank you for sparking my love of Art History and my quest for understanding the art world, past to present. Tom Stanley, thank you for believing in me and for providing your humor and support throughout this process. You give so much of yourself. To all, I treasure every minute of your time and your influence.

I extend gratitude to the entire Department of Fine Arts. I am incredibly honored to have Dr. Paulino's time, energy, engaging curriculum, and careful attention to detail during my studies and the culminating thesis. Dr. Paulino, you bridged my thoughts, intent, and art intuitively and you helped me understand the power of my concept and voice. Tom Stanley and Carolyn Sumner, thank you for the beautiful opportunity to work with you as a Graduate Assistant in the Department of Fine Arts. I loved supporting you both. The year was one of the most fluid, artistically consuming, and influential years of my entire art life. Thank you for granting me this privilege to be a part of your world. Thank you, Mark Hamilton, for sharing your energy, your passion, and your commitment to the fine art of Photography. Mark, you infuse my art with authenticity. I also want to thank Paul Martyka (from afar) for his intensity and thoughtful critiques in my Undergrad and

Graduate studies. Caroline Rust, you changed my art and initiated my thesis when you introduced me to Petah Coyne. I am deeply grateful. Thank you to Aaron Padgett for your patience, assistance, and creativity during our many hours of installation. Thank you to Karen Derksen, Matt Horick, and Winthrop University Galleries.

This journey to the completion of my MFA is a result of the support from my family. To Gigi, thank you for believing in me and for helping me fulfill this life-long dream. You are an amazing person who loves selflessly and constantly. Emerson, I am forever grateful for you and how your beautiful life created the epiphany for my artist self. Nate, you are the creative collaborator who joins me in the clouds. To the Harrison-Houser Family, I love how we laugh and cherish our world together! To my children, you are the voice of the future.

The thesis also honors my grandmother, Myra Harrison, who taught me how to live strong; to persevere and to pursue dreams; to parent gently; and to love unconditionally. Thank you to my mother for cultivating my artistic interpretation of the world. Your influence is immeasurable. Thank you to my mother, father, and sister for supporting my art and my teaching career. I am also thankful for the special gift from my children when their presence returned my family.

Thank you to the following CSD administration, friends, teachers, and students who helped with the Audio/Video elements and support as photographers, editors, stylists, models, costume designers, and creative muses as we pursued *Stories of Otherness*: Faith Mottershead, Kimberly Luper, Aaron Padgett, Tom Seay, Tiffany Lament, Joy Warner, Connie Wessner, Pauline Carter, Jim Dumser, Sarah Dumser, Chris Lundsten, Maria Katibah, Meredith Katibah, and my students, J. Drake, B. Flannery, B. Holland, M. Johnson, M. Marsh, K. Smith, A. Vowell, and J. West.

Thank you to Jeanette Winterson for inspiring me with your literature. Your gift is “lighthousekeeping” as your words bridge the dark to the light.

All influential artist images are included for purely academic purposes.

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Dream Deferred (Harlem)
By Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

“Trust me, I'm telling you stories.”

Jeanette Winterson, *Written On The Body*

Introduction

In my installation *Stories of Otherness*, the Winthrop University's Masters of Fine Arts exhibition, I create a voyeuristic experience that moderates the participant's physical participation in a game of conflicting, opposite-laden layers. Using Installation Art, I expose a minority identity's use of cryptic narratives as a way to express the outsider's experience of otherness in relation to society's categorization of normality. My thesis examines the specific social roles of outsider and insider that result in oppressive violence against one's identity.

The entire installation looks like an expansive, life-size spider's web, cocooning iron objects and vintage repurposed farm tools. (See Fig. 1) A thick rope resembling an umbilical cord extends into the space and serves as a leading line to the opening. Distorted figurative sculptures line the path of a passageway and emerge from the shadows as the suspended human figures slowly spin. The installation of these figures emphasizes the negative space between the sculptures' end points and the confining walls and floor. Most of the sculptures hang in the four to six-foot eye-range level to intrude in the participant's vision. The hanging sculptures may move and turn – yet the pieces are always contained by threads.

I invite the participant into the web-like, manipulated space through the use of directional ropes and iron tools; an audio component that includes murmuring and music; and the allure of a red light and the light flickering from

a small-scale video screen placed behind suspended, vertical discs with peephole openings. I conceived this space as a *trap* that converts the viewer into participant once he or she enters the passageway. I built it using a suspended, weathered wooden farm plow as the hulled armature to connect woven strings, ropes, chains, wire, leather, farm tools, and pulleys to the floor, walls, and ceiling.

Overall, the trap is constructed in a way that plays with the participant's experience within the altered space. As one moves deeper into the passageway, threatening elements, like iron prongs and barbed wire, appear as a prodding mechanism and as a test to the participant's persistence. Farm tools that are used to manipulate and restrict animals foreshadow the participant's upcoming loss of freedom of movement and choice. After the trap narrows and significantly alters the available space, the participant may choose to leave. However, if the participant accepts the threat, he or she adjusts uncomfortably in this confining space to view the video screen through a small peephole housed at the end of the corridor. The video is a seductive element that uses surreal photographic images to stage a make-believe world, somewhere between imagined stories and reality, which contrasts with the physically awkward and threatening surroundings. The trap is designed to captivate and contain a participant as long as possible to demonstrate a transition from freedom of choice and individuality to limitation and constriction between conceptualized "walls" representing society's constraints. Thus the

insider experiences the oppressive limitations normally placed upon the outsider. (See Fig. 2)

The thesis shares the experience of an altered life, uber-conscious of the separations between insider and outsider. I use the participant's movement and physical orientation within this space as a symbol of the constraints I experience due to my identity and sexual orientation as a lesbian. The theme explores the majority's control of available recourses – money, career, family access, religion, marriage, and the ability to speak and act freely and openly. As a consequence, the outsider is forced to live a dual existence, which emerges out of a bound, manipulated history to reveal the disparity between shadows and foreground; excluded and included; and judged and judge. More specifically, the thesis highlights the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) life experience, which includes many levels of complexity, judgments, hidden "lives," and rejection; however, the intent extends beyond the LGBTQ identity. The premise is that the space limitations are a universal paradigm, denoting the compromises demanded of the individual to satisfy and be accepted by the majority – any individual, any minority, and any majority.

As a creator, I am the newly-appointed insider as I inflict the experience of ostracism on the newly-appointed outsider, in a sneaky reversal of roles. My intent is to create a reflective and charged participant response as I push the stressors of a forced immobility. As I visually interpret the experience of duality, of "passing" and altering one's life to fit into society and a

heteronormative world, I want the participant's active reflection on how it feels to be an outsider and experience the pressure to conform.

There is one final twist in the game of power: As I fear revealing too much of my hidden life in this representation, I cover the revealing details with a make-believe world in the video and censor any "outing." Once the participant gains access to the illusions of my storyline in the video, he or she moves into the role of the participatory *voyeur*. Subsequently, I become the *voyeur* of the *voyeur*, noting my own self-consciousness in the participant's gaze. The truth in the installation is that I fear the participant's disdainful rejection due to my minority identity. The truth in the thesis statement is that I fear these words permanently recorded and bound in print. The paradox is that I am both an outsider and my own jailor, acutely aware of the possible consequences of disclosure. I fear these consequences, real and imagined. For a brief moment in this installation, my double-consciousness bridges into an illusory hologram representing my minority self – the outsider and the insider within. The truth is that without self-acceptance and self-empowerment, the duality is an uncompromising multi-ality of an internal jail cell.

Roles

In *Stories of Otherness*, the duplicity of the powerful and the victim reveals physical and emotional layers. To carefully examine the interactions within the installation, we must define the various roles in the work itself.

“What you risk reveals what you value.”

Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body*

The Artist

As the creator of the installation, I transition through multiple roles of outsider and insider, which obscure the delineation between controller and controlled. The installation explores the complex circle of power: 1) This *artist* is a *victim* of society's exclusion. 2) The *artist/victim* transforms into the *creator*. 3) The *creator* constructs an installation for the *viewer*, who represents the “majority,” the group that defines *otherness*. 4) The installation attracts the *viewer*, who becomes a *participant* upon entering the installation's space. 5) The participant experiences a lack of power and a sense of victimization and entrapment as he or she moves through the installation, under the gaze of “watchful” objects. 6) At the end of the passageway, the *participant* watches the video of hidden stories, real and imagined. The participant is then “the watcher,” and transitions to the role of the *voyeuring participant*, who metaphorically has earned the secretive information in the video. 7) The *newly-empowered artist* watches the *voyeuring participant*. The artist may also

observe the *exiting participant* who leaves the installation, rejecting the continued experience, or the *non-participants* outside the installation, who avoid the entire enclosure and experience. 8) The circle is completed when the self-conscious *artist/victim* loses her temporary power, after disclosing intimate duality stories in the video. The *artist/victim* may gain power again with the *participant's* recollection of the experience. More power may be available within a *universal voice* for all individuals who exist outside the current expectations of a normative-moderating society.

As the master conductor and orchestrator during the installation's creation, I imagine observing the participant's discomfort in a mentally voyeuristic way. *Stories of Otherness* exposes me to judgment and rejection - spatially, figuratively, and symbolically as my life is embedded in the bindings; encapsulated in the figurative sculptures; and encrypted in the "outing" of my artist intent. Power playfully inverts from the excluded to the included through perspective shifts, although the distinction of roles continues to be somewhat elusive and the roles are complex and fluid. Am I limited to the victimized voice expressing the powerlessness of an individual against a group? Which role is more powerful – the participant's or the artist's? Is the participant the victim? Or is the victim again the artist since the participant carries the power outside of the installation? My empowered role always grapples with the dualities of the many conflicting personas: hidden/exposed; accepted/rejected; included/excluded; forced conformity/rebellion against tradition; and finally, empowered/forbidden. Who empowers whom?

The Trap

I have been referring to the sculptural installation as a *trap* that seduces the participant's physical presence within its womblike space. The trap is the meeting ground for the artist and the participant, who signify opposing forces, reversals of power, and dualities of existence. I want to earn the participant's attention right at the entrance of the gallery space and manipulate the experience to generate a disconcerting disorientation. Initially, the visitor sees an entanglement of netting and woven fibers loosely tied, depicting frailty in the weaving, but also intimating the possibility of injury if the netting collapses. The open passageway is like a spread vulva of woven fibers that changes into a narrowing birth canal, representing a birth of the double-consciousness as the participant moves towards the end of the passageway. The trap narrows and threatens the body with confinement. The immersive environment creates more and more discomfort. Iron rings, representing omniscient eyes, and twisted figurative sculptures, either encased in grenade-like cages or bound in string and iron prongs, line the passageway. I want the participant to feel the sensation of being watched, to experience the oppressiveness of expectations in a self-conscious way.

Continuing further in the passageway, the netting's openings gradually shrink and create an even more restrictive, claustrophobic space enhanced by the threat of piercing iron prongs. At the end of the passageway, the space collapses in height and width and requires an uncomfortable stance for the

voyeuristic reward of a peepshow housing a looping video of conceptual photography.

The Participant

The participant's role is the focus as it determines the success or failure of *Stories of Otherness*. I manipulate the participant as I force mental and physical adjustments. An outsiders' spatial relationship to the insider's hidden room requires redesigning, blending, and adaption. The participant's existence within the womb of the installation brings forth the intimacy of secrets and of a vulnerable, penetrable private space. The *voyeured participant* who views the video while crouching becomes the *victim* to the physical constraints of the space. The participant has the choice to exit or to stay and watch the video loop so there is always a residual of freedom of choice and individual discretionary power. If the participant exits before getting close to the video, the participant assumes the role of the empowered majority again. He or she will join the *unengaged participant*, who rejects the experience from the start and judges from the safety of the exterior of the trap. I cater to each of the roles as a way to acknowledge the continuum of the inverted power.

If the installation's concept, the message of forced empathy, or the conflicting sources of power create a resonating "call to action" in the participant, the artist's intent has been achieved. The challenge is to create a space for a power transfer that gathers momentum to the point of generating the participant's empathy. In the trap's illusion, the role reversal offers the opportunity of acceptance.

Sculptural Ceramic Figures

Three-dimensional forms hang from the ceiling in a looming, intrusive manner, creating obstacles and a directional push defining a specific, entangled path. I contort, deconstruct and reconstruct the androgynous clay figures to highlight deformity, missing appendages, and bindings as a way to communicate the manipulation of identity. (See Fig. 3) The violated bodies represent the movement limitations of the compromised, marginalized *self* in response to a majority group's dominance. Twisting and contorting materials illustrate the confining contradictions of a gay individual "passing" in a heteronormative world. This duality is integral and the materials serve as a mirror to the conflict and the sacrilege.

Found Objects - Reconstructed/Deconstructed

The rusted iron rings hang throughout the installation to capture the participant's wandering, escaping attention. The openings may feel like eyes, reversing the gaze back to the participant. The rings activate the space, purposefully challenging the passivity of the participant. The holes in the rings conceptually represent vaginal openings, pierced and immobilized by the collective bindings of thread and yarn. I use the iron material for its weight, tactile texture, and evocation of blood. It has an earthly presence due to its transformation through rusting and its longing for gravity. I want the iron to stabilize the passageway, but to also threaten the integrity of the passageway. There is alternation between the subtly moving iron objects and its form as pointed meat hooks face the participant. The violence of the point of an iron

prong with its pliant yarn wrapped loosely, or intricately, is meant to trigger notions of safety, manipulation, redirection, and/or protection.

Many of the found objects are menacing-looking tools and apparatuses used to control farm animals, including calf weaners, yokes, barbed wire, and harnesses. Each tool is a device designed to forcefully change nature. For example, the calf weaner is a powerful element that I used conceptually to explore the parallel between the altered individual and the domesticated animal. The tool adds a spike to the calf's nose so when the calf goes to draw milk from the mother, the calf injures the mother's udder, and the mother instantly rejects the calf out of pain. The mother loses her calf before nature's intended weaning and she transitions to the dairy cow role. The abandoned calf is separated and moves into its own destiny of becoming meat, milk, or other product. The calf weaner symbolizes this brutal rejection and abusive trick, and will be the conceptual source of a new sculptural installation to follow the MFA thesis. (See Fig. 4)

Audio/Video Elements

I use Digital Media as a lure, a way to attract the participant into the passageway and to play with the juxtaposition of the reality of an installation perceived as threatening and a virtual, imaginary world. The video and the audio layer complex meanings to further manipulate the participant's physical and emotional response in its dichotomy of attraction and repulsion. Ultimately, the video cancels the implied violence of the found objects' positions with its surreal storytelling and veiled imagery.

The camera is a tool that offers a double voyeurism. I watch and record. I create and alter. I see myself in the capture and design of the image, and I edit, rearrange, and compose a finale. My theme throughout the video's construction is to share internalized symbols and repeated memories that represent the haunting remnants of my past. I am the watcher behind the lens and the participant in my awkwardness and self-consciousness, represented through the models, the dancers, and the seemingly innocent people in the video.

The difference of scale between the video and the surrounding environment is deliberate, and the emphasis is on the intimacy of the small screen that offers secret stories. When the participant voluntarily takes the uncomfortable crouching position necessary to view the video, he or she receives more information.

There is a perverse quality in the video's peephole presentation through the small orifice, the entry of vision and the escape of light. Now the participant's role is that of the passive spectator as he or she absorbs the storyline that accounts for a participant's limited attention span or his or her tentativeness in the confining space. Photographs merge and loop into stop motion videos that play with the idea of the passage of time as they fast forward, slow, repeat, and hiccup with the omitted frame in the storyboard. The imagery portrays flowing, symbolic journeys; transient selves; limited individuals; fear and longing; and escape and imprisonment. I intend for the imagery to create frustration in this passive spectator since the stories loop

and lead to a climax that never occurs. Over and over the stories build, holding on to the tension of revealing and concealing truth and lies, yet the end result is inconclusive, at best, and definitely anti-climactic after the manipulations the participant experiences to get to this point. The ultimate participant, the one who is confined and immobile, receives this temporary, falsified comfort in the form of a surreal reality that only exists in a video screen and recognizes that it will not ever lead to fruition: the video leads nowhere. It is another manipulation of the active consciousness while the participant is captured in the trap. (See Fig. 5 & 6)

The audio is a compilation of percussive and murmuring that offers a cadence in the jarring words, flowing thoughts, and layered repetitions. Eggs crack, wire hangers slide across an empty clothes rod, people murmur, whisper, tell secrets, and take footsteps - walk, run, walk – creating an auditory space. The sounds slur and loop and resonate in the space to keep the participant moving towards the entrapped video and to unveil the mystery of a deconstructed installation.

Overall Installation within the Gallery Space

From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art is a book by Julie H. Reiss that investigates the power of Installation Art. The author examines the radical entrance of Installation Art in our art history lineage and the way it redefined the roles of the gallery, the museum, the artist, and the participant. Reiss challenges us to see the infusing impact of Installation Art and its movement to the “center” or mainstream of the art world. I apply her

explanations of the intensity behind Installation Art to create a resonating viewer's experience during my entire development of this immersive happening/event for my participants.

I explore installation using the enclosure of a room and the addition of these sculptures, found objects, and video. My intention is to occupy and command the space. Part of the installation exercise is the organic response to my surroundings in an effort to consume and transform the participant's environment. The installation is site-specific and thereby forces me to respond to the space's limitations; to the physical proximity of other artwork by other MFA candidates in the same show; and to adjust to the gallery's rules, protocol, and access. I enjoy this challenge of construction that requires creative responses to the environment. I also move my installation to conscientiously respond to others' intents and parameters as a way to honor my intent of showing the individual's modified presence within a constructed space.

Artist's Intent – The Layers of the Art Installation

My intent is to present my work as a complete, sensorial experience for the participant. Since the installation of *Stories of Otherness* serves as the connection between the spectator/participant and the narrator/artist, it has many layers that create an infinite number of interpretations. I can only extend my view of the multi-faceted, double consciousness of the layers. Mostly, I intend to attest my self-consciousness of being an outsider when adapting to the insider's world and to reveal the complexities of my hidden life. My

fascination with watching the voyeur engaged with my art further highlights my obsessive hyper-awareness of being viewed and judged. To clarify the circle of power, I offer my past outsider's experiences of discrimination and ostracism, even though it is a vulnerable and reluctant artist's voice. I only visit society's norms as a guest. This is the voice, yet it is a compromised voice suffering from oppression. Even as I serve as the omniscient, manipulative controller of the participant's experience, I compete with the opposing instinct of self-censure. Violence and a sense of danger are consistent threads within my work. Conceptually, the presence of violence signifies a pent-up protest against the societal controls that redirected my life. Specifically, the anger is at the loss of irretrievable moments and opportunities.

At the end of the installation's experience, I want the participant to return to his or her normative reality with a new, lingering, and haunting memory. The completion of the work is the participant's recollection.

Artist's History

"Every journey conceals another journey within its lines:
the path not taken and the forgotten angle."

Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*

Stories of Otherness is a complex personal narrative that dissects the separatist nature of our human condition and its impact on my life, the life of an outsider. The physical and visual construct of the narrative allows me privilege and access to power. Subsequently, the insiders and the outsiders

are everyone, no one, and *me*, a cloaked artist redefined with the participant's interpretation.

The question *who am I?* is a conundrum for the identity chameleon that adapts and transforms too fluidly. My MFA endeavor cultivates many harrowing autobiographical stories beginning with my undergraduate studies at Winthrop and spanning to the completion of this body of work, over 20 years later. My thesis offers a historical snapshot in a current world of rapid advancement of marriage equality and LGBTQ acceptance, yet it also creates a need to separate my experiences of hardship that built up to this current moment of advancing societal acceptance.

I arrived in the MFA program with a clear, impassioned focus on the conceptual exploration of my lesbian identity. My goal to complete my Fine Arts degree at Winthrop served as a way to heal my torn past of losses of opportunity due to my sexual orientation. I came out as a lesbian during my sophomore year at Winthrop in the late 1980s. It was a brutal time to come out with the news media sensationalizing the AIDS epidemic. It was a closeted time of a secretive underground culture in a conservative Southern town; of choosing and creating a gay community within a college campus and the outside world; and of protecting our identities until we felt safe with our identity disclosures. I experienced the beginnings of endings: my relationship ended; my family connection ended; my Winthrop studies ended due to a lack of financial support; and my Winthrop supportive LGBTQ community ended. I was homeless, but eventually, a survivor who worked my way back to school,

back to a supportive group of family and friends, back to a desired career path, and to a created family of a wife and two children.

During my MFA research and exploration in visual arts, I would disconnect and revisit these experiences from the past as I created in the quiet of my studio space, and this pause offered a healing time with a heightened sensitivity to my visual creations. I proceeded to work my way through artwork that dealt with my past traumas of family disownment; a suicide attempt during my Winthrop undergraduate years; and my hauntings from a dual life between a LGBTQ subculture and a heterogeneous world. It has been a personal, cryptic journey as a MFA candidate, and I did not share the back-stories or sources of the imagery and context...until now. I realized that I redirected conversations and deflected attention as a coping strategy to protect myself and this aspect was (and is) the central infusion of my work.

I have an affinity for the intuitiveness of the clay medium and the ability to sculpt my past and present in the clay's surface. I discovered features of people in my past in these autobiographical forms, and then I chose to hide the faces in protection or to share a vulnerable throat or twisted arms to render the figurative sculptures powerless. My process distorted the known identities in focused, controlling hand-building gestures. It was a way for me to process the past, but the participant only saw the final façade, not the layers that built to the surface.

Videos containing photography and sound helped bridge my cryptic messages into a fantasy confession and a surreal identity that left enough

cloaking of my messages, but still revealed stories of truth. The paradigm shift came when I realized that the work was no longer an autobiographical narrative, but rather a pulse of my generation's "coming out" embarkation and the consequences of altered lives and thwarted dreams and directions caused by a discriminatory society.

I discovered my obsession with the participant's role in my situational piece during my MFA Candidacy show, *Bindings IV*, and this awareness transformed my work. I created a space where the participant stepped on eggs to enter the space of woven string, carefully lit entrapments, and projected shadows to view a video screen. My role was the passive watcher of the destruction of the space by the participant. It was fulfilling to see the tentative steps and crushed eggshells as the perfect analogy to my self-consciousness in the eyes of the public domain. I offered tools for additional destruction such as scissors hanging from the ceiling and large 8-inch sewing needles in the corners to pierce the surroundings. A suspended anthropomorphic pregnant bird swung haphazardly in the room casting a shadow to evoke a lynched innocent being. I played with the idea of a bird restrained from flight while physically showing a conceptual birth representing the unattainability of opportunity when it is encapsulated inside a bird's nonexistent womb. This particular show inspired *Stories of Otherness* as a way for me to interact with the participant. I wanted the participant to merge into my world as conceptually and as uncomfortably as possible, with the hopes of "being changed." (See Fig. 7)

During the pursuit of the *Stories of Otherness* installation and thesis statement, my vulnerability as an artist increased. The more I exposed through revealing information, the more I tried to cover it up to cleanse the intensity of the truths within my narratives. Consequently, I shared the hardships of the daily experience of “coming out” and “staying out.” The fear of the words of my thesis statement in print halted my research on many occasions.

Unfortunately, time and time again, my internalized self-judgments made me the eternal outsider who lost all power as I experienced the real or imagined penalty of exposure, analysis, critique, spotlight, and then public assimilation of content. The fear of this scrutiny altered my art and its presentations. The art and the writings in my thesis shared these multi-forms of camouflage layered from years of identity self-consciousness. To fulfill my artistic objectives, I have to leave the words typed, leave the cues and clues of the visual prompts available in plain sight, and force my hand of disclosure. It is a dance of revealing and concealing details, but the truths rest in the ambient installation and the printed words in this thesis statement.

Artistic Influences

“But not all dark places need light, I have to remember that.”

Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

Jeanette Winterson’s writings offer support to my cryptic narrative. She is the pensive, quiet instigator of change as she leads the reader through her layers of personal symbolism captured within a surreal world hovering below

our reality. Winterson addresses contemporary issues on LGBTQ identity and acceptance, yet she deals with hauntings from her family's rejection and betrayal. I find her focus on truth embedded within stories inspirational. Her minority voice summons other minority identities as she penetrates the majority's world through fiction. Winterson's weaving stories and captivating creativity inspire me to explore my dual world and to conceive it within the reality of an art installation.

Petah Coyne's work is an important visual and spatial inspiration for me. I relate to her desire to invade and consume a space with intricate sculptures resulting from layers, weaving, and suspension. Terrie Sultan wrote an essay in Coyne's "**black/white/black**" exhibition catalogue at the High Museum of Art. She describes Coyne's sculptural installations "assertively claiming and controlling a physical space," as Coyne explores the concept of identity (Sultan 5). Violence and compassion of human nature are Coyne's recurring themes. I understand this violence and relate to her work as I echo this emotion in my sculptures and installations. The intricacy of her material evokes a person's abstracted memories - obsessively layered, hidden, retrieved, reflected, and buried again. Her menacing yet captivating sculptures share the reality of consequences like a secretive, but urgent gesture and outreach to the participant. I sense that Coyne, too, has life circumstances altered by an outside force. I see the physicality of her life experiences in her work as the resulting casualties of her "dream deferred" (Hughes 75). (See Fig. 8)

Dance choreography by Mia Michaels, accompanied by the haunting song “Hanging On,” by the musical group, *Active Child*, conceptually inspired my thesis. The female dancers hang from suspension ropes on the stage while male dancers move the women by pushing and sending the women sailing through the air, then pulling their bodies back close again. The choreography consumes the stage and defies gravity as the dancers swing into the air. The women move so freely with complex movements, yet the male dancers, like puppeteers, contain and control them with the always-attached ropes. The climax of the choreography occurs when the women try to escape by climbing up the ropes away from the men. We realize the women are moving from one constraint to another with their inability to climb up the ropes to nowhere while the men circling them watch from the ground below. Finally, the dancers fall to the ground in surrender. My interpretation of Michaels’ choreographed captivity is that the outsider’s choices are not choices at all since the insider controls the possibility and impossibility of escape. (See Fig. 9)

A still photograph from the 1977 German expressionist dance performance of “Blaubart” (“Bluebeard”), choreographed by Pina Bausch, is a lingering image that conjures my conceptual ideas of limiting movement and physicality within a space. Also, Wim Wenders created an inspirational tribute film documenting Pina Bausch’s surreal, conceptual dance choreography. His video clips of her reenacted work resonate in my visions of an escapist world that I create for my own video. For example, in Wender’s film, a woman tied with rope around her waist is anchored to an undisclosed entity or person. The

woman runs desperately towards walls in successive attempts, misses the door openings, and finally collapses in surrender at the end. This imagery reminds me of my repeated attempts to create change and to escape a jail of self-scrutiny. Another scene in Wender's film depicts the violation of a woman standing as she is inspected, judged, moved, irritated, physically manipulated, and transformed by a group huddle of men. She protects herself by turning inward with closed eyes denying the activities. Eventually the swarm of men knocks her off balance. This scene causes me to consider the futility of my intensely self-protective nature that causes my duality and attempts of "passing" to fit in. (See Fig. 10 & 11)

The performance, video, sculpture, and installation artist Mona Hatoum uses danger and threatening aspects to alarm and emotionally engage her viewers. Her work explores identity and the sense of belonging. She repurposes everyday items like beds and kitchen utensils and adds in alarming juxtapositions to remark on limitations and constraints. I continuously think of the way she perceives space as an enclosure, a warning to the viewer, and as a form of manipulation housing her art and her powerful messages. She is a master of seduction, aversion, and repulsion. Hatoum challenges me to deliver a strong, distinct voice, and I find power in my work through her artist persona. (See Fig. 12)

Conclusion

“In the space between chaos and shape there was another chance.”
Jeanette Winterson, *The World and Other Places: Stories*

The culmination of *Stories of Otherness* reveals the complexities of hidden lives, discrimination, and rejection. The complexity of the installation’s experience begins as soon as the participant enters the perceived safety of the path’s entry point. The participant can stay – bound - or the participant can *think* he or she leaves - still bound, but bound differently ... bound by thoughts.

Overall, I remark on society’s influence as a controlling destiny. A gay individual, in addition to other minorities and other oppressed groups of people, carefully measures words and deflects details about his or her life. There are gaps in the LGBTQ individual’s history – camouflaged, unshared, edited, censored, hushed, or partially revealed. We experienced persecution throughout history and in the 1980s, 1990s, and the 2000s as we ventured out of the “closet” to earn today’s political and social awareness campaigns. The travel to here and now is important to me as I push forward the concept of a dual life and the insufficiency of a LGBTQ individual “passing” in a straight culture. Any search for an outsider group’s history is difficult at best when outsiders live underground and risk the threat of emotional or physical persecution. In response, an untempered society misshapes the individual by creating a reality of discrimination and forced conformity. I use the installation’s gaps, the actual negative spaces created in-between the strings and menacing

objects, to illustrate the denial of a truthful, shared presence and to represent the rejection of the whole self. Furthermore, the gaps exist as a lapse of continuity and share the hiccups of skipped and censored truths. Ultimately, the emptiness illustrates the loss due to the individual's submission to discriminatory influences in order to have inclusion.

My shortcoming is the double-consciousness I created through years of adjustment, discrimination, rejection, and as a defeated acknowledgment of the success of "passing." The duality of an inconsistent life is overwhelming, yet an incessant habit. The *Stories of Otherness* video flickers through the peephole, creating visuals out of dreams, stories, truths, lies, and realities. The content reflects on a past, sorts through inconsistencies, and travels to the idealized future. There is some power in *Stories of Otherness* because it enables me, the outsider, to permanently print these pages in defiance of the self-censoring and accommodating responses that I demonstrate in my day-to-day life. In an empowered voice, I can say that I do not work towards mere tolerance or the granting of acceptance and approval by a majority, as this would only acknowledge the majority's overriding influence. I work artistically for a self-avowing approval that forces my dignity and for a powerful presence that evokes change in me and in mainstream society.

My hope is that the participant changes to a reformed insider who will accommodate the outsider fluidly. My hope is that we reconstruct. Is such a story possible? Can the insider/outsider dichotomy ever end? We have momentum, but momentum does not lead anywhere – yet. Just like the video,

we appear stagnant even after important historical progress counteracts the divisions. The pulse of today is irrelevant in our steps towards a fluid and rejoining future, but necessary all the same in a progressive continuum of change. The future will exist, and the story will unfold.

“Tell me a story, Pew.
What kind of story, child?
A story with a happy ending.
There’s no such thing in all the world.
As a happy ending?
As an ending.”

Jeanette Winterson, *Lighthousekeeping*

Appendix 1

Truth for anyone is a very complex thing. For a writer, what you leave out says as much as those things you include. What lies beyond the margin of the text? The photographer frames the shot; writers frame their world...There are so many things that we can't say, because they are too painful. We hope that the things we can say will soothe the rest, or appease it in some way. Stories are compensatory. The world is unfair, unjust, unknowable, out of control. When we tell a story we exercise control, but in such a way as to leave a gap, an opening. It is a version, but never the final one. And perhaps we hope that the silences will be heard by someone else, and the story can continue, can be retold. When we write we offer the silence as much as the story. Words are the part of silence that can be spoken...

...I believe in fiction and the power of stories because that way we speak in tongues. We are not silenced. All of us, when in deep trauma, find we hesitate, we stammer; there are long pauses in our speech. The thing is stuck. We get our language back through the language of others. We can turn to the poem. We can open the book. Somebody has been there for us and deep-dived the words. I needed words because unhappy families are conspiracies of silence. The one who breaks the silence is never forgiven. He or she has to learn to forgive him or herself.

Jeanette Winterson,
Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?

IMAGES

My Work



Fig. 1 *Stories of Otherness*, MFA Exhibition *Fault Lines*, Installation View, Mixed Media 2016



Fig. 2 *Stories of Otherness*, MFA Exhibition *Fault Lines*, Participant in "Trap," Mixed media 2016



Fig. 3 *Stories of Otherness*, MFA Exhibition *Fault Lines*, Figurative Sculpture, Clay, 2016



Fig. 4 *Stories of Otherness*, MFA Exhibition *Fault Lines*, Calf Weaner, 2016



Fig. 5 *Stories of Otherness*, MFA Exhibition *Fault Lines*, Peephole Discs, Mixed Media, 2016

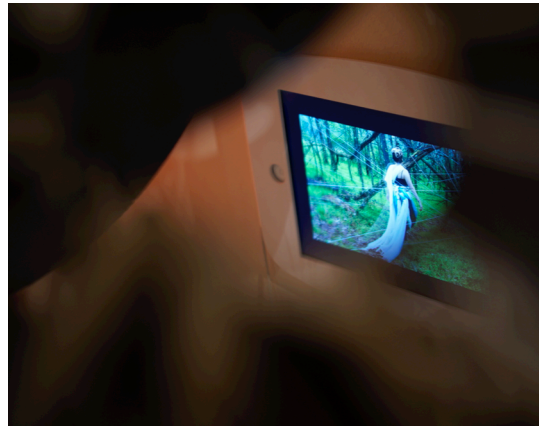


Fig. 6 *Stories of Otherness*, MFA Exhibition *Fault Lines*, Image from Video, 2016



Fig. 7 *Bindings IV*
Installation, Mixed Media, Winthrop University Student Gallery, 2014

Influential Artists' Work



Fig. 8
Petah Coyne: *Untitled Installation*, Mixed Media, Brooklyn Museum, 1989



Fig. 9
Hanging On (Mia Michaels Choreography), Video
So You Think You Can Dance, Season 9, 2012



Fig. 10
Blaubart (Bluebeard) Choreographed by Pina Bausch, 1977



Fig. 11
Wim Wender's film, *Pina*, Choreographed by Pina Bausch, 2011



Fig. 12
Mona Hatoum, *Home*
Wooden table, 15 steel kitchen utensils,
electric wire, 3 light bulbs, software and
audio
Tate, 1999

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