

Transitory Body - Heather Marchand

My art practice is fixated on various reoccurring concepts and explorations. I am fascinated by science and the natural world; the mechanics of the body and its organs; phenomenal creatures found in nature that seem too bizarre and wonderful to be true. I am obsessed with the battle of the romantic and the abstract vs. reality and the physical; the deception of aesthetics and the truth of touch. The notion of the object, the token, the memento or the sentimental article; beauty and aesthetics; as well as the push and pull of uncomfortable desirability in other words, how something can be both attractive and repulsive at once. It is from this database of inspiration that my imagery and underlying sensibilities are drawn. Some influences are more visible in my work than others but all are very important to the development.

The specific imagery I have been working with is abstracted forms, adapted from the shapes of a jellyfish. The organic, transparent and bubble like shapes are paired with long frilled and flared tentacle-like strips. Jellyfish are beautiful but hold a painful sting. Their aesthetic appearance is magnificent but their touch is slimy and vile. Somewhere between plants and animals, they have no heart and no brain, they cannot think only react. They float suspended in space, the ocean giving them body and form. If removed from the water their form falls apart. With nothing to support them they become a sickly draping blob. Their arms and tentacles cast out like decorative lace tangled and interweaved. They are strange ornaments of exquisiteness and hazard. Evocative of the jellyfish's bell contour is another form reoccurring in my work, stout and bulbous, a vegetable: the turban squash. Growing from a spindly vine the squash is robust and metamorphic. Rounded and puckering they grow out of themselves. But unlike the jelly, they substantially hold space. When combined, these forms are sinuous, supple and

ephemeral yet bodily. They can seem unearthly, though are derived from nature. They are not overly direct. Not meant to be representational but rather open to various understandings, encapsulating and appropriating the attributes of the original stimulations.

Emphasis is put on tactility, texture and the connotations of the materials. I have tried to vary the materials drastically to help create a richly textured and palpable dialogue between the elements. They are considered carefully, noting their associations and their qualities. I have chosen to work in a palette basically void of colour, mostly white/buff/ivory, translucent and clear, with the natural lustre of aluminum, to allow the textures exposure rather than relying on the colour to make their distinction. I use fabric to draw the majority of my shapes. It is warm, malleable, comforting and natural. Fabric and sewing as a medium, throughout history have always carried the suggestion of female domesticity. Textile based work has been used both as a tool for the oppression of women and the liberation and it is an element I knowingly implant in the work.

Before the invention of the industrial sewing machine, young girls were taught to sew instead of being taught to read and write. Things like stitch samplers with moral messages were used to teach girls gender virtues, docility and class roles (Hedges 18). Ultimately textile craft was used to keep women powerless, in the home and inside a world of women. However, it was through craft and textile arts that women were able to form communities and support systems for action (Hedges 17). The suffragettes in the early 20th century used fabric and textiles to make their banners and propagate their message of equal rights. It is this duality of female power and oppression that is embedded in the fabric that I find invaluable. Passed off negatively as ‘women’s busy work’, craft has been demoted and lowered in the art world. Nevertheless, I embrace the craft, and use the ingrained qualities of fabric that make it inherently feminist to

inform the work. Women beaten, bound, naked and violated, particularly in performance work from the 1970's, are the images that resonate when many people think of feminist art (Mars 21). But images like that are negative and not accessible for most people. Therefore they can be very unsuccessful in relaying an idea or can in fact give off the wrong idea. For me it is the subtlety of the feminist undertone to fabric is important. Through materials my work aims to open feminist dialogue without being aggressively confrontational.

The fabric is partially covered in silicone. It is rubbery, fleshy, smooth and membrane-like. Silicone is sensual and when applied to the fabric it appears wet. It is unnatural, a man-made plastic, foreign to the forms. The silicone opens a door to erotic interpretations and impressions through its simulacra of bodily fluids and use in the production of sexual devices. It can be intriguing yet surprising, its texture being sordid but seductive. If the fabric denotes the female, perhaps then the silicone refers to her sexuality.

Aluminum, smooth but aggressive, shiny and cold is another natural element but one with suggestion of industry. Contorted, twisted and sharp it adds a sense of jeopardy when juxtaposed to the soft, flowing fabric and fleshy silicone. Its gleaming surface plays off the matte contour of the plush. As a sculptural medium in more contemporary work, metal has typically been used in a very masculine way, like in the works of Richard Serra and Henry Moore. The scale and the weight to the metal makes their work especially forceful. I wanted to give metal a more feminine approach, taking the mass away but keeping the strength. My metal is slight and thin yet it still has contrast to the fabric. The pieces move and contort like fabric. It is not entirely firm so the metal can be yielding to the elements. It is not monumental but instead atmospheric.

My work is very much about a phenomenal experience and enchantment. Not only about looking but touching and feeling a space. Claes Oldenburg, author of various soft sculpture and art happenings, writes on the notion, "I may have things to say about us and many other matters, but in my art I am concerned with perception of reality and composition which is the only way art can be really useful – by setting an example of how to use the senses" (48). I identify with his desire to transcend from picture making to generating sensory reactions. It is not necessary to always think through a piece but instead one should make deductions from the occurrence of the work. Much of the modern world is experienced at arms length. Through virtual worlds, the internet and the media, the experience of that discovery, looking, seeing, touching, hearing and has been disconnected. I want a real, physical space that is all surrounding, entombing and enveloping that is not experienced through a filter. I want objects to touch and hold, things that are real and irrefutable. I have broken the pictorial convention of flatness and stretched my mark making out in to a physical space. Forms are no longer illusionary, instead existent, not stationary, living. As Oldenburg well knew, the conflict of objects in physical space in undeniably arresting. Oldenburg's work had resolution in opposites; ordinary and the extraordinary; aesthetic and anaesthetic; solidity and bodilessness; pathos and indifference; mystery and common place (Oldenburg 54). These elements are the basis for elusive meaning and interpretation that are needed for an individual experience and it has been my attempt to construct a work that provides that.

Oppositional forces are intriguing to me and a common device in the making of my work. My favourite dynamic pair is the Surrealist value of attraction and repulsion. The occurrence of being disgusted, but also so intrigued that you cannot look away is mystifying. A combination of pleasure and pain, sex and violence gives Surrealist work a sense of unrest, discomfort and peril.

I find it makes the work in a sense even more real. The idyllic is taken away and a trueness surfaces. Much of the Surrealist work of the 1920's could be taken as very misogynistic because of its violent sexual content toward women. But with my work I have tried to subtly marry Surrealist aesthetic and dynamics with feminist position.

I have always had an interest the notion of the real vs. the romantic. In the past it has materialized itself as work that discusses nature, science and the human body in opposition to thought, emotion and consciousness. I consider myself a romanticist yet, a self aware or ironic romanticist. As much as I idealize, I know the contrary to be true. My strong appreciation for the sentimental and aspiration for the glorious, battles my pragmatic and cynical side. I feel this is a sort of ingrained undertone in all of my work, the story of the romanticist's idealism; situations are continually built-up, with beauty and perfection yet never manage to be played out as imagined. (Insides are wrapped in dramatics, heartache, and constant disappointment.) I describe it as romantic disappointment.

This romantic disappointment is embedded in a novel by Jeffery Eugenides that has been very influential to me. His novel *The Virgin Suicides* is about five teenaged sisters who ultimately commit suicide. Their lives are chronicled from the outside by a group of neighbourhood boys who become obsessed with understanding them. The whole town becomes enthralled in a macabre fascination by the girls' suicides. The boys are haunted, fetishtic-ly coveting the girls discarded possessions in a desired attempt at knowledge of them. Reading one of the girls' diary the narrator says, "We felt the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy, and how you ended up knowing which colours went together. We knew the girls were our twins, that we all existed in space like animals with identical skins, and that they knew everything about us though we couldn't fathom them at all" (Eugenides 43). This

book illustrates the contrasts between the romantic and the authentic. It speaks to desire, attraction and idealism however; Eugenides descriptive writing never allows the flaws to be forgotten. The characters and the world they exist in has the ability to draw and deter at once. Proving how still there is an embedded desire in the things we fear and denial that we are attracted to the depravity.

I take wonder in the bizzarrities of science and nature. The practice of looking and observing is relative to any art practice. The seemingly impossible animals that live are far stranger than any imagined creature of fiction. Details of life can go unnoticed and unseen but continue to exist and change regardless of our knowledge of them. Nature's functions can never fully be understood, so instead should be marvelled; murderous but life giving. The world is both beautiful and cruel (Dillard, 9). The complexity of animals, bodies, ecosystems; reoccurring patterns and universals; and collective consciousness are all beyond comprehension. Acknowledgment of the unknown has been significant for me, to have a sense that there is inexplicable force that makes bodies pump blood and lungs bring in oxygen without even thinking. It is this phenomenon that I want to bring to my work. Claes Oldenburg said, "What I want to do more than anything is to create things just as mysterious as nature" (49) and I could not agree more. I just desire for wonder, something that can parallel the peculiarity of nature. I make things I want to see.

"My work is thoroughly and honestly self-projective, narcissistic. This 'weakness' constitutes its power. My desire for an audience is the desire to confess, a desire to reach, or be reached, be saved from enclosure. Which never happens. No one reaches me. I reach no one, except thru disguises and thru others" (Oldenburg, 27). My work has a desire to be seen, looked at subjectively from all angles. The viewer is the looker, toucher, feeler and knower. My work

will be, whether it is seen or not, growing, changing and developing. But the viewing is what opens me; I have engrained myself in it, with coyness and apprehension behind cover. Open to multiple readings the work waits for relationship. When all elements are combined dialogue begins between them in attempts to create a phenomenal aesthetic experience of female subjectivity.

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