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UNTITLED

By

Janet Rose Engel-Julian

Bachelor of Science, Illinois State University, 2001

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree in Master of Arts,

With a Major in Ceramics/Sculpture

Governors State University

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Table of Contents

Hanging Garlic.....	4
Slip Cast Garden.....	5
Prints on Stoneware - Put a You Shoes.....	5
Reception.....	7
Sounds of Cavatelli /Preserve.....	7
Figures 1 - 7.....	11
Figures 8 - 12.....	12
Bibliography.....	13

The emotions from memories and the passing of time can be an intriguing thing. The more time that passes the more difficult it can be to remember details thus changing the memory. The more people who share a specific memory, the more memories may exist, yet each person's recognition of the event may vary. When family members recall a childhood event, they can have a plethora of viewpoints and interpretations all depending on the time passed and roles played along with previous life experiences. For centuries, history was recorded orally through ceremony and storytelling, and some cultures also involved the sharing of food. Family traditions and life lessons were kept alive by teaching them to the next generation. When a memory is lost, a part of history is lost or obscured forever, interrupting the flow of tradition and evoking change.

The memories of my family and the emotions I have when I think of them are the inspiration for most of my artwork. As Louise Bourgeois once stated, "It is a great privilege to be able to work with, and I suppose work off, my feelings through sculpture." The culture on my mother's side is alive and close to me. From their journey to the United States from a small town outside of Palermo, Sicily in 1962, to family traditions I experienced growing up, all of these memories play a significant role when I create my pieces. I think about the hardships and life-changing experiences my family went through that make them the people they are today.

I grew up with large family gatherings. Every Sunday, birthday, and holiday included large amounts of delicious food and loud, spirited conversation. My

grandmother flew around the kitchen making sure the third and eventually fourth generations of family that filled the dining room, kitchen, and family room were fed enough. Plates of pasta, meats, potatoes, salad, fruit, and dessert covered every table and countertop. While crystal pitchers of water with ice were always available, glasses of hand-pressed homemade wine and 7UP were usually the drink of choice around the table. It was not uncommon to see my grandmother skinning rabbits down in the lower level kitchen; I think she tried to hide it, but we knew what was happening in that room with the door cracked. We would eat small bits of raw meat while we watched my grandfather case homemade sausage as well as cook pasta for the larger gatherings in that very same room. There would be strands of garlic and sausage hanging from the makeshift hooks in the ceiling along with a freezer filled with frozen zucchini bread, handmade pasta, and a variety of packages labeled in Italian. The gathering of family and food was a very powerful experience for me. I believe it gave me a sense of belonging and bond with not just my immediate family but my extended family as well. I did not realize until later how extremely rare this is. Because of these family experiences, food is a vital part of any gathering of people in my life. The feeling of camaraderie fills me as I prepare and serve food to satisfy my own family and friends.

I believe even at the very end of my grandmother's life, even if she didn't remember what holiday we were celebrating, who had gotten married, or who had graduated high school, she always appreciated having her family together around the dinner table. She would bustle about adding more food to our plates and make

comments on how none of us could leave until all the food was gone. At the end of her life when she spent her time in the hospital, one of my last happy memories of her is an intimate outside gathering with family eating a bunch of grapes. I wonder if that was the last time she smiled. Her last trip out in the open October air, her last happy food gathering, even if it was small and simple. Many of those memories both joyous and painful seem to be burned into my memory as though they happened yesterday, even though her death was four years ago. They seem to replay over and over like a movie in my mind while I am making my work. Being able to install the work I started years ago is a wonderful thing; almost like therapy. My work is an exhibit of memory and therapeutic process in not just visual and physical form, but interactive as well. When others view my work, whether or not they know the background from which I pull my ideas, they still get a sense of time passing and understand the importance of the interactiveness of certain pieces.

The installations in this body of work are the first pieces that started me down the path of exploring my family and the passing of time within my artwork. The installation aspect allows the viewers to physically immerse themselves in the altered environment and become a part of the replicated memory while recreating their own new memory. Photographs, digital documentation and sound complement the change in the environment that accompanies them. Each of these installations includes multiples. The process of slip casting allows the opportunity for exact replicas of an object but because of different variables within the casting process, with working with porcelain, and human error, the

multiples are not exactly the same. The variety of tomatoes cast relates to how several people can recall the same event yet focus on different details about the event causing them to remember it differently. The hand rolled cavatelli signifies the process and work of preparing for a gathering. Each porcelain noodle is unique. A distinctive memory or experience created in a concrete substance as if to try and preserve it as time passes. The interactive pieces in this body are examples of enjoying and observing a time that has already passed while creating a new experience, pondering it and perhaps learning from it. Whether they are shoeprints in raw clay or meals shared with friends, the viewer creates new memories while looking upon the documentation of a previous memory.

Hanging Garlic (Fig.1)

Although this was intended to have a singular strand of white slip cast porcelain garlic bulbs, I omitted it because I was not happy with the way it turned out, which meant this was the only piece that did not include clay within the work. Because viewers still questioned what media was used, it still played the exact role I had hoped for. When a person is focused on other aspects of an object and surrounded by a certain environment, that object can be camouflaged and the viewer begins to question whether that object is real or fake. Memories of the past can be altered or idealized when recalled at a later time. Were “the good old days” truly what we think of them or has time and our ability to remember changed them? The viewer must reflect on this as they consider the new or altered memory in connection with their recollection of the past.

Slip Cast Garden (Fig. 2 - 3)

I created a smaller version of *Slip Cast Garden* several years ago with squash and pumpkins in a backyard garden. Though I was happy with the results, I knew I could create something bigger and better; something that didn't have to be site-based. Throughout my life, I have watched my grandparents do wondrous things, especially in gardens. They possess skills that seem long lost to the modern person--skills of the "old country." I have seen my 80-year-old grandfather bury a fig tree in the fall to keep it alive in a climate that is not native; marry fruit trees to create unique hybrids; feed his family with a jungle of a garden; and make gallons of wine that he is proud to serve. The porcelain vegetables in this piece are cast from real vegetables and displayed with organic garden plants just past harvest. Glaze experimentation is also a part of this process. I became interested in the chemistry and experimentation of how the raw materials interacted with one another and how results changed when certain variables were altered in the mixing or firing process. This process also reminds me of the time I spent as a child watching the women in my family create some of the greatest meals and have always felt drawn to experimenting in the kitchen with my own recipes.

Prints on Stoneware - Put a You Shoes (Fig. 4-5)

I started this piece in 2007 and was still pondering how to continue it until about a year or so ago. The shoeprint texture, although slightly abstract, makes me think of my grandmother and her journey--from her younger days as an immigrant and seamstress to her final days that still weigh heavy on my heart. I began by

stepping on the clay to make interesting abstract relief textures. Then I cut the pieces out and formed them into puzzle pieces. After some investigation and input from other artists, I decided to change the direction; instead of working small, I decided to go big. What started as small puzzle pieces turned into large tiles. When installed and grouped together, the tiles have a scale of approximately 9'x12'. After exploring a variety of clay bodies, stains and glazes, I chose an iron oxide and rutile stain on stoneware for the final finish. Though this piece also started as a very intimate work of art, as the tiles got bigger the shoeprints gave off a more urban feel. This then led me to take my work to the streets of Chicago and test the public on their willingness to participate in public art. My experience was extremely positive. Leaving their literal footprint into a piece of permanent art and history intrigued complete strangers. They wanted to be a part of a moment in time. They especially wanted their children to be a part of this happening. The digital video of the process and experience put on display along side the finished tile installation complements the rest of the piece because it literally is a recording of the passing of time. As I view the installation as a whole, I realize it has aspects of a calendar counting time while it also appears to deconstruct and become fragmented much like the brain and memory as one ages or time passes. The textures vary in depth, detail and abstractness. The variety of finishes allows the viewer's eyes to flow through the work while the fragmented pieces complement that natural movement within the installation.

Reception (Fig. 6)

This piece is considered a performance piece as well as an installation. In the beginning as soon as the installation is up, the table full of food and the aromas that fill the space give the viewer the sense of warmth and welcome. The camaraderie that takes place when others join in and begin interacting with friends, family, acquaintances, and strangers plays a major role. Only the people who are there at the time witness the food, gathering and interactions that take place. Those who are there also each witness and remember their own fragmented version of events that can be shared or kept private. The food that is served is equally important. Each person reacts differently to the menu due to his or her past experiences. At the end of the evening, this culinary performance piece leaves the remnants of a gathering, which also clearly gives the sense of time that has passed. For those who didn't attend the reception, it is as if it never happened and they will only know about it if others share their memories with them.

Sounds of Cavatelli /Preserve (Fig. 7)

The porcelain hand-made pasta forms cover a darkly stained table to create contrast. The photographs on the walls document the event of making pasta, which has already passed, again, giving the viewer a sense of the documentation of time. The video that accompanies this work focuses on the prominent clicking of the hand-crank cavatelli machine, which accents the experience by allowing the viewer to use an additional sense other than sight. The small edition of preserved

porcelain cavatelli noodles labeled and displayed in individual cases signifies the more sacred memories that one may hope to never forget. Whenever I create hundreds if not thousands of these little forms that I grew up making and eating, it becomes therapeutic and lets my mind wander back. I think about the meals I watched my grandparents prepare for their family, the meals I watched and helped my mother prepare for our family, and the meals I now prepare for my family. I also think about the traditions that have been handed down that I don't want lost. I believe my art is an emotional process, an exorcism, and a way to catalog and preserve these traditions.

While my family's past is the main inspiration for my art, there are two female artists that have captured my attention and influenced my style: Louise Bourgeois and Ruth Duckworth. Bourgeois is a French artist born in Paris in 1911 whose work mostly relates to her past experiences and relationships with others (PBS). She was known for creating art as therapy to some of the painful memories she experienced as a child. Not all of Bourgeois' work is installation. In addition to some larger sculptures, she did many drawings and paintings (Fig. 8-9). All sprinkled with a similar theme of her childhood and her past. Though she died in the spring of 2010, her work is still widely celebrated all over the globe. The emotional connection with her art albeit paintings, drawings or sculptures, is always present.

Duckworth was born in 1919 in Hamburg, Germany. Most of her work took the form of smooth modern looking abstract figures, some of a more intimate size and some larger (Fig. 10). In the mid 60s she was offered a teaching job at the

University of Chicago where she created a remarkable commission for the entryway for the physics building. She changed the entire entryway with the installation of her ceramic mural called, *Earth Water and Sky* (Fig. 11-12). She went on to create other installation pieces like it such as in the lobby at the Chicago Board Options Exchange. She included incredible textures and depth with her extremely sculptural wall forms. When asked to describe where her talent comes from, Duckworth responded, "...It isn't in one spot...it's got to be in your unconscious to start with..." (CBS). The distinct style and inspiration of both of these incredible female artists have influenced my work and style from the emotion behind the work and therapeutic, creative, and physical process to the mere size, texture, and the ability to alter an interior environment.

Taking over a space and transforming it to give the viewer a sense of time passing and yet a sense of interaction with the artwork is a theme throughout my installations and performance pieces. Texture and sound are some of the elements I focus on in many aspects of my work, whether it is an interactive piece with participants and viewers, or simply the documentation of the participation in the art that is sometimes gathered and recorded and sometimes only witnessed in brief moments.

Without the interaction of others, the memory or record of time changes. When another person is involved, there are more ways the event is recalled later on. My work has helped me not only recall my memories but fill in the places where memories were lost or didn't exist with the perspectives and memories of others. Different perspectives that are influenced by a realm of past experiences and

interactions can influence one's own interpretation of the event, while also influencing the emotion that surfaces while experiencing an event or recalling it from memory. As art mimics memories, it also creates them for the present and memorializes them for the future.



Figure 1 – J. Engel-Julian
Hanging Garlic, Mixed Media, 2011



Figure 2-3 – J. Engel-Julian
Slip Cast Garden, Mixed Media, 2011



Figure 4-5 – J. Engel-Julian
Prints on Stoneware, Stoneware, 2011



Figure 6 – J. Engel-Julian
Reception, Mixed Media, 2011



Figure 7 – J. Engel-Julian
Sounds of Cavatelli/Preserve, 2011



Figure 8 – L. Bourgeois
Femme-maison, Oil and ink on linen, 1946-47



Figure 9 – L. Bourgeois
Spider, Mixed Media, 1997



Figure 10 – R. Duckworth
Ceramic



Figure 11-12 – R. Duckworth
Earth Wind and Sky, Ceramic, 1968

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