

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

Art and Design Theses

Ernest G. Welch School of Art and Design

Summer 8-11-2011

The Nature of my Art

Anastasia Fink

Georgia State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/art_design_theses

Recommended Citation

Fink, Anastasia, "The Nature of my Art." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2011.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/2099804>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Ernest G. Welch School of Art and Design at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art and Design Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

THE NATURE OF MY ART

by

ANASTASIA FINK

Under the direction of Melanie G. Davenport

ABSTRACT

In this arts-based thesis for a Masters degree in art education, I explored the meaning of my artwork through a constructivist investigation. During the process of artist research and making artwork, I was able to push boundaries for my art and myself and I was able to discover what kind of artist I was and what meaning was behind my artwork. This process of research, questioning, reflective documentation, and discovery has provided new tools and styles for teaching my students how to find their own personal voice in their artwork.

INDEX WORDS: Arts based thesis, Constructivism, Ceramic magnolias.

THE NATURE OF MY ART

by

ANASTASIA FINK

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Art Education

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

Copyright by

Anastasia Fink

2011

THE NATURE OF MY ART

by

ANASTASIA FINK

Committee Chair: Dr. Melanie G. Davenport

Committee: Dr. Melody Milbrandt

Dr. Kevin Hsieh

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2011

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my Mom and Dad, Nancy and Burton Fink. I can't thank you enough for always believing in me and for supporting my choices throughout my life. You instilled in me a love for education and the great outdoors. Thank you.

I also dedicate this thesis to my dog, Tashi Tahki, who loved me through thick and thin! He was always there for a hike and a great doggie smile. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to be around when I finally finished this. Namaste Tashi.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My appreciation and thanks to Dr. Melanie Davenport for her enthusiasm and guidance of my thesis. Without Dr. Davenport's patience and many edits I never would have finished this.

I would also like to thank my good friends for their support and encouragement of keeping me on track to finish my thesis. Without their words of encouragement, help, and humor, I don't think I could have done this. Many thanks to Allison Williams, my voice of reason, who not only gave me pep talks of the importance of getting my masters and how proud of me she was, but also for all the love and help she gave my dog. Thank you Noelle Petersen, Nikki Staton, Carrie Staines and Mindee Adamson for putting up with me at work, and out of work! I really appreciate your empathy and advice when I was so overwhelmed. Thank you Betsy Eppes, you said I would never forgive you for getting me into this, but I do. You knew I wanted my masters and you felt it was important for me to do this, you were right and in the end I'm glad I did it. And thank you Jonesy, I loved the enthusiasm and excitement you had for me when you found out I was finishing my masters. I couldn't have formatted this thesis without you!

Thank you Yoga for keeping me sane.

And thanks to all the magnolia trees and flowers for my artistic inspiration.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
CHAPTER I	1
Introduction	1
Purpose of the study	3
Artistic Journey	4
Definition of Key Terms	9
CHAPTER II	12
Literature Review	12
Exploring Nature	13
Eco-feminism	15
CHAPTER III	18
Project Plan	18
Reflection on process	23
Limitations	24
CHAPTER IV	25
Implementation	25
CHAPTER V	28
Final Reflection	28
Conclusion	30
REFERENCES	33

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Urban Garden	5
Figure 2. Sketchbook Drawing 1	7
Figure 3. Sketchbook Drawing 2	7
Figure 4. Unfired Magnolia With No Glaze	19
Figure 5. Fired Magnolia 1	20
Figure 6. Fired Magnolia 2	21

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Time and time again I'm drawn to the outdoors as my jumping off point to create artwork. I grew up in the country with lots of land and an Environmentalist mother. The garden was an important part of growing up for me; sustainability, composting, and being organic were all integrated into my life long before the present trend. However, what did this really mean and how did I start producing artwork from this influence? I have always liked sketching plants and flowers; early in my life, they were an easy and accessible subject to be drawn. The beauty of nature really drew me in to capture a movement or the color of a flower or plant. I also loved the more scientific botanical type of drawing or documentation, but it was just sketchbook material at the time. My art led me to get my undergraduate degree in graphic design; I worked in magazines, advertising and print houses, but ultimately I was drawn back to fine arts. The design world was not satisfying for me.

I have never thought of myself as a conceptual artist, I thought I was a straightforward artist - form for beauty's sake, an aesthetic study - but that seems to have changed. My arts-based research was an investigation of the purpose and deeper meanings behind my works of art. This thesis includes a study of environmental artwork, postmodern thoughts, and it draws from various artists working in this arena.

It is important to me that my students know me as an artist; I want them to know that what I ask of them is also what I do. I base my teaching practice on the constructivist theory. To make art I must research, question, explore, learn, experiment and push boundaries from different directions to fully produce and give meaning to my work. The art produced becomes a

statement as to what I value in life, and it may not have any recognizable connection to the starting point. I guide my students into their own self-inquiry, and to not just take my point of view. I warn them that they might end up with something totally different - and that is ok.

In class, I initiate projects and subjects for my sculpture students and I give them the structure that will lead them, hopefully, to art that is more meaningful; something they can personally connect to from their investigation and inquiry in their artwork. The exploration process that I utilize in teaching my students to make art parallels the explorations of this thesis. I had to dig deeper into something meaningful in my artwork and produce a body of work that reflected the nature of my art and nature itself. The investigation and discovery I went through is also the approach that I teach. Walker (2004), a professor of Art Education at Ohio State University, who wrote *Understanding the Artmaking Process: Reflective Practice*, writes about how to understand meaning in making artwork. Walker says that “big ideas” are a “a major conceptual factor that shapes the artist’s practice” (p.7). Big Ideas can be themes “that captivate the artist for extended time periods, often for years” (Walker, 2004, p.7). Walker’s ideas for finding meaning in artmaking come under the constructivist theory in education, Walker focuses on the theory in art education. She found that through conscious reflection throughout the artmaking process, for example, keeping a journal of what’s going on as one makes art, researching other ideas or artists, and pushing boundaries make the artist create new knowledge and connections to their work. Through the actions in constructivism, I wanted to better understand and explain my artwork in this study.

Purpose of the study

I needed to find my voice in my artwork. Through the process of making the magnolias, continuing research, and stretching my idea from compartmentalizing nature, to perhaps more of the urban garden or an eco-art view, I wanted to answer the following questions: Who am I as an artist? Am I an eco-artist addressing the urban landscape or society in the urban landscape? Am I an eco-feminist looking at “human domination in our environment” (Fowkes & Fowkes, 2004, para.1), thus addressing a more political aspect? How does one define themselves as an eco-artist, what do they produce, how does it involve the garden, or sustainability? I needed to find out more answers. I investigated artists such as Alice Ballard, Helen and Newton Mayer Harrison, Joyce Kozloff, and wanted to talk to local eco-artist Pandra Williams and went to local gardener Ryan Gainey’s gardens, to understand how they define themselves and what they created. Would my installation need the viewer’s response to complete it, as in postmodernism? Would my installation voice an ecological attunement I haven’t been able to understand, or take a stand on, or will it be more of an aesthetic experience? And lastly, did I embrace the constructivist idea, did I end up knowing why I made this artwork and what connections got me there?

The reason I wanted to conduct a studio based research thesis was because not only do I teach art, but I also am an artist and I believe I should produce pertinent work. For me teaching full time sometimes prohibits developing a larger body of work; I spend most of my time creating inventive lessons for students. I will produce sculptures throughout the year, sometimes with a train of thought to a larger picture, but then not follow through with it. Summertime is my time for investigation to get to more cohesive artwork. This thesis was a chance to examine what I have been touching on in the last couple of years and it has allowed me to fully explore in a

constructivist type of investigation. This was the chance to search myself from the inside out, to go through a self-discovery investigation, and to question why I wanted to create an installation of magnolias. The technical aspect was probably the easier part, but finding the meaning behind the installation was most important.

Artistic Journey

I continued my education, wanted to redo my degree in textiles, and thought about getting my teaching certification. Instead, I ended up concentrating in sculpture, earning my certification to teach art, and discovering that I was a 3D artist! I have been teaching high school art for 14 years now and teach Sculpture I and II and Advanced Placement 3-D. When I studied sculpture, I spent a lot of time experimenting with process, working in metal, clay, an array of multi-media, and just produced anything I could. As I progressed as an artist and accumulated more work, I started fabricating various pieces of my work together. My metal castings started to be part of a structure, a multi-media piece of work, not just a sculpture standing on its own. One of my earlier works that led me to where I am was a circular iceberg cast in aluminum. The sculpture was unique in its shape and it needed to have its own pedestal to be displayed correctly, so I built a pedestal that fit the integrity of the sculpture and enhanced its form. The iceberg is very organic in form and movement and is elevated to an unusual height because of the long thin pedestal on which it balances. This sculpture initiated my fascination with casting natural forms and recreating nature in metal, but it was more about its formal qualities, not conceptual. After the *Iceberg* I started mixing my metalwork with other materials to create other sculptures.

My first real multi-media sculpture started to use the influences in my life that are leading me to the questions and problems I have now addressed. This sculpture was a large generic

flower plant form with tall thin leaves cast in iron, called *Urban Garden*, as shown in Figure 1 below. I built a house out of found wood from torn down houses in my neighborhood and captured my iron plant in it, you can see into the house from two sides. A thick tree limb, found cut down from a tree at my school, holds up the house and flower. The whole sculpture stands up from cast iron roots at the base of the limb. This work of art was my jumping off point for meaningful questions to make meaningful artwork.



Figure 1. Urban Garden (60"x25"x8")

The *Urban Garden* started to address community through my process for developing the idea and acquiring the materials. The whole piece looked at how we compartmentalize nature to

fit our needs. I was thinking about community and then I started to broach an environmental thought process of our society in the urban garden. I considered man's infringement on beautiful things. I considered the "human domination in our environment" (Fowkes & Fowkes, 2004, para. 1) especially in the urban setting, or the urban garden, because that's where I am now; living in the city, not the countryside.

The nature of my art in this body of work is the magnolia. A couple years ago, I was out drawing the Japanese Magnolia blooming in early spring, as shown below in Figures 2 and 3 Sketchbook Drawings. They were so pretty and simple; and I just wanted to sketch them because of their beauty. After the drawings, I thought about creating small sculptures of them. I wanted to recreate them smaller than life as intimate little beings captured forever and cast them in bronze. There would be a number of the magnolias cast in different stages of blooming; each would be able to screw into a wall, as if blooming from where they hung, isolated and beautiful forever, indoors. At this point, I started to feel like I was growing and connecting with more conceptual thoughts, like environmentalism. I was also considering repetition, my work as groupings, and how they could become installations.



Figure 2. Sketchbook Drawing 1



Figure 3. Sketchbook Drawing 2

My first attempt to cast my magnolia in bronze was disappointing the flower was humongous! I created another magnolia, it was also giant, these flowers were not small and delicate, and there was no way I could hang them on a wall. I couldn't seem to work small, now what? And, once again, why did I need to have this flower on the wall? I went back to the drawing board. I started drawing the more dramatic magnolia grandiflora and creating them in

clay, I thought with clay surely I could work smaller and lighter, even though I had now chosen the larger of the flower species. My first clay magnolia's were free-standing and very difficult to create, they were also, once again, too large or difficult to hang. I needed them to hang on the wall somehow. Through my teaching, I found my hanging solution from introducing my students to relief work on buildings. I would build my magnolias in high relief off panels like on a wall.

Last summer I wrestled with what I was doing with the magnolia, both technically and conceptually. I had considered aspects of it such as, which material, bronze or clay, what clay, how should I present it, how will it hang, what glazes or colors? I also researched artists and inquired within myself trying to figure out what I was trying to communicate through this art. My previous artwork was organic so I felt that I had been slowly leading up to this type of work. I had felt like this installation had to happen; so I continued to develop and expand the work I did last year. The panels I did last year were more experimental and searching for answers, many of them broke. I finally felt that I was ready to produce the magnolia panels I envisioned.

Definition of Key Terms

Aesthetic – The study or philosophy of beauty or appearance. “commonly known as the study of sensory or sensori-emotional values, sometimes called judgments of sentiment and taste” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesthetics>, 2007).

Conceptual – A philosophy in art that questions our assumptions of what art is. Conceptual “art should be about intellectual inquiry and reflection rather than beauty and aesthetic pleasure, the work of art is said to be the idea at the heart of the piece in question. “In the words of Kosuth, ‘[t]he actual works of art are ideas’ (Lippard 1973, 25). For conceptual art, ‘the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work’ (LeWitt 1967, 166).” Conceptual Art (2007).

Constructivist Theory – An educational approach based on experiential learning that that is used in Art Education. Constructivism has a number of traits but “In short, constructivists view knowledge as constructed by the learner in a particular context, and not pre-existent or given from an expert or authority.” (Milbrandt, Felts, Richards, Abghari, 2004, p. 20). There are considered three parts to Constructivism; the social learner, the active learner and the creative learner. Constructivism is not just hands on learning; it is finding meaning through knowledge and making connections in art to other subjects.

Deconstructive breakdown - A mental condition suffered by artists near completion of their thesis, due primarily to a seemingly arbitrary and conflicting array of nonsensical formatting requirements. There is no known cure.

Eco-Artist – An artist whose subject and concern is environmental and environmentally conscious raising. Eco-art can be collaborative, temporary, and installation based, but it always has ecological concerns and/or statements.

Eco-Feminist – An environmentally conscious raising artist who is considering the environment as a place of raising ecological questions and concerns. Relationships may not be based “on hierarchy and domination, but on caring, respect, and awareness of interconnection” (Fowkes & Fowkes, 2004, para. 19).

Ecological Attunement – How one is ecologically aware of their environment and one’s relationship with nature.

Glaze – A layer of colored glass fused to the surface of ceramics from melting at high temperatures in the firing process. Glazing is used to decorate (color or paint) ceramics, seal the surface or both.

Hand building – Forming clay by hand creating work from slab, pinch or coil methods, not using the wheel.

High Relief/Low Relief – A type of sculpture that is attached to and extends from a flat surface. Low Relief will protrude slightly from the surface while high relief will extend at least half it’s depth and one could put their hand around it; it would be referred to as having undercuts.

Installation – A large, or larger scale sculptural exhibit that is created for a specific space or site, and specifically arranged by the artist for a specific reason.

Plasticine clay – A non-drying oil based putty material, referred to as modeling clay, that is used like clay to create practice models for sculpture.

Postmodern – A movement in 20th century art that allowed artists to break away from the core history of Europe. Not all contemporary art is postmodern. Postmodern broke away from modern art rejecting it for art for art’s sake, for instance, viewing it for just the formal qualities. “In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality only comes into being

through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually. Postmodern relies on concrete experience over abstract principles” (<http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/genglos/postm-body.html>, 1995, para. 1). Postmodern work can have multiple meanings; there will be no right way to read it since each viewer will bring a different experience to the art in question.

Slab – A rolled out flat piece of clay.

Sustainability – “Sustainable developments are those which fulfill present and future needs (WECD, 1987) while [only] using and not harming renewable resources and unique human-environmental systems of a site: [air], water, land, energy, and human ecology and/or those of other [off-site] sustainable systems, (Rosenbaum & Vieria, 1993).

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

The investigation to my thesis was creating magnolia panels with them blooming at different stages, but simultaneously researching artists that also looked to nature as their subject in art. Asking myself what my art really meant needed artist research to answer the question, otherwise my installations' meaning would not exist. I also had to break down parts of constructivism. In my research I found a surprising new aspect to constructivism; there are three roles in the Constructivist Theory; known "as the *active learner*, the *social learner* and the *creative learner*." (Phillips, 1995, as cited in Milbrandt, Felts, Richards, Abghari, & Phillips, 2004, p.20). However, a new view, to me, was one of the roles being "Radical Constructivism" (Gregory, 2002, p.3). Gregory feels Radical constructivism is focusing on our own thinking and that it has a "political agenda" (Gregory, 2002, p. 3). Gregory states, "Radical constructivists are really asking for a revolution. They are asking for people to really examine what they have been taught and to really figure things out for themselves." (Gregory, 2002, p. 3). Gregory also says "Reconstruction, or...deconstructions of events and beliefs is the primary goal." (Gregory, 2002, p.3). I believe I have already incorporated the active and social learner theory into my work, but I thought that "Radical constructivism" could possibly also relate to my work. It addressed my questions of our ecological attunement that I have been asking myself about and my possibility of being an eco-feminist. When I finally finished the magnolia installation, I believed I had more answers to my questions.

Exploring Nature

During the process of artistic exploration, I looked at artists who use nature as a means to convey their art such as; Alice Ballard, and Pandora Williams whose ceramic work deals with natural forms and who all do installations. I also looked at what eco-artists Helen and Newton Mayer Harrison (the Harrisons) were saying with their installations and visited Ryan Gainey's garden. All these artists work abstract, conceptual, and focus on the environment. I even looked at traditional ceramic artists and what they said about their work. One in particular was Japanese artist Yagi Akira.

At first glance, Akira's work is the very traditional: teacups and bowls. Moreover, he groups his work in multiples. However, a very important aspect to his work is space: the space between. Akira says the space or direction in which he places his bowls or vases is very important, because it can change how one thinks about them, his work could have a completely new context if he just changes the arrangement (Earle, 2005). Akira's thoughts on space made me think of the importance of how I will arrange my work. The panels will create different feelings if placed organically or in a linear grid.

I really liked Alice Ballard's ceramic work. She is a sculptor and uses clay to convey her artwork as a relationship to the organic in nature. She looks at nature and reproduces it from season to season, so some is somewhat scientific, but they are also still her interpretations. Ballard is inspired by nature and says that simply walking through her neighborhood can inspire her. She does not over intellectualize her work. Ballard exaggerates some of her buds into totems, or creates an installation of colorful pods or extremely large flowers or she sexualizes her plants. She says "It's an old Georgia O'Keefe trick. When you change the scale, the feeling

changes entirely.” (Alice Ballard, <http://aliceballard.com/pods.html>, ND). Ballard also creates her works as installations on walls in groupings and specific arrangement.

Pandra Williams is an Atlanta based sculptor and creates all kinds of art and installations addressing the environment. She is very passionate about the environment and the garden.

Williams is not only an artist, but also an environmentalist and an activist. Her sculpture and installations are about nature and ecosystems. She definitely questions the viewer’s ecological relationship and wants the viewer to respond. “I want to encourage and nurture wonder and empathy by creating a new consideration of the natural world.” (Williams, 2010, para.5).

Williams’s studies in nature also address the urban garden and its destruction for development. She has rescued indigenous plants and shrubs from an urban wild area that was to be devastated by development and re-planted them in areas where they should flourish. Williams’s art is a direct response to her environmental activism; she says “the loss of habitat for the myriad life forms they support, often hits me as an emotional/physical blow.” Her art and activism are combined together. Williams is also the Director of Eco Addendum a local group that’s “mission is to heal Georgia’s environment by reintroducing native plants into Georgia’s landscape through environmental education, greenspace installation and native plant sales.” (<http://www.ecoaddendum.org>, 2010). To me, Williams’s work and agenda fits the definition of Radical Constructivist, her work has a “political agenda” (Gregory, 2002).

I visited the gardens of Ryan Gainey, a local gardener to Atlanta and author of the book, *The Well Placed Weed*. Gainey didn’t seem to have such a “political agenda” (Gregory, 2002, p.3) his design and work with gardens was more about having fun designing your gardens and it being almost a decoration. I really enjoyed his gardens though and the fact that he shares it with

the public is really amazing, it's not supposed to be in isolation. Beauty and community are very important to him. His gardens are a work of art growing all the time.

The Harrisons are considered some of the pioneers of the environmental art scene, also known as eco-art. Their work also addresses a “political agenda” (Gregory, 2002, p.3) in the Radical Constructivist definition. The Harrisons’ works are installations that involve “watershed restoration, urban renewal, agriculture and forestry issues...” (<http://theharrisonstudio.net>, ND). Some of the works the Harrisons have created have actually changed government policies. They seek out public engagement with their work and are involved in the community in which they will work in, but their specific in saying the “They will only take on a work if there is a general agreement that their actual client is the environment itself” (<http://theharrisonstudio.net>, ND).

Eco-feminism

Eco-feminism was a new term to me. What makes some woman’s work feminist, or eco-feminist? I think of feminism as raising consciousness for female ideologies. How do the artists I’ve mentioned define themselves? Feminist artist Joyce Kozloff mentions her work as feminist by “how to create art that is both graphically satisfying and intellectually questioning.” (Kozloff, ND, para.4). The Hungarian exhibit of the *Unframed Landscape* also addressed this question, they say “Eco-feminists aspire to move beyond dualistic thinking and to establish relationships based not on hierarchy and domination, but on caring, respect, and awareness of interconnection.” (Fowkes & Fowkes, 2004, para. 19). The Harrisons are also mentioned in *Unframed Landscapes*. They are celebrated for how they think of the world in their artwork; the Harrisons include everything equally, ‘everyone is involved, not only people, but trees, and rocks and landscapes and rivers.’ (Fowkes & Fowkes, 2004, para. 17). I have always thought of the

feminist artist having more of a political or activist agenda, but if you're an eco-feminist artist then it's all the above! I am not an activist, but according to what the Unframed Landscape and Kozloff says, I do embrace the feminine aspect of it and maybe my work is just starting to address ecological issues.

I felt my magnolias were copies, clear and recognizable, but copies. This idea of copies led me to think of postmodern thoughts, but in postmodern art, the viewer is an essential part of the work; they need to interact with the work, and they are possibly needed for a response to complete the work. My viewers will experience viewing each flower and have a response, but their response will be emotional or critical, not part of the actual work.

In addition, in postmodern art there is this accepted idea of copying another artist's work and considering the psychological meaning behind it. I am not copying another person's work of art, but I am copying nature. Because I consider myself to be copying nature, I thought my installation could be considered slightly postmodern. In my search for copying nature I found an exhibit from 2004 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Dunaujvaros, in Hungary, it was titled *Unframed Landscapes*. The *Unframed Landscapes* exhibit wasn't about copying nature, but an essay and exhibition about the reassessment of landscape as a genre in contemporary art. The show really pushed the definition of how we the public expects an artistic landscape to be. I related to the message "that theme of nature in contemporary art acts as a measurement of barometer of our ecological attunement." (Fowkes & Fowkes, 2004, para. 1). I found this statement enlightening; it made me feel more connected with the eco-artist, or maybe more so, the eco-feminist. I had not thought about the symbolism in my work or the feminine symbolism until one of my professors asked me about the lace texture in the slabs or the symbolism of the flower itself. I had not questioned why I was doing it; I had just gravitated to it without a

conscious reason. Although I do not think of my work as a feminist statement, I do think of my work as feminine and possibly eco-feminist, because of the feminine symbols of the magnolia and lace combined with the beauty of nature.

CHAPTER III

Project Plan

This spring, I started creating my ceramic magnolias for an installation and I intended to produce 10-20 panels. I anticipated that making the entire magnolia installation would take me from April into July. I had to make the flower panels, fire them, and glaze them. I experimented a lot with glazes and hanging mechanisms for the panels, I had enough scrap magnolia panels that I could work out these questions on and keep producing new magnolias. All of the work for this thesis project was new from this year.

To actually start creating the magnolias took several clay bodies to choose from, some of the clay had too much grog and was too grainy after being fired. I needed a very smooth clay that I could force dry to hold the shape of the thin petals, but also wet down again and manipulate as needed without breaking and cracking. I finally found Highwater's White Earthenware low fire clay (cone 06-02) it was perfect. The clay had a lot of talc and felt like plasticine, it was amazing! I could completely dry the petals, re-wet them, and reshape them without cracking them, and this clay body was very smooth and fired almost white. That worked. The clay was also easier to fix cracks or actual breaks than other clays. Figure 4 below is a photograph of an unfired magnolia, dry, unglazed, and ready to be fired.



Figure 4. Unfired Magnolia With No Glaze (11"x10"x3.5")

Glazing was hard; there were many options available. I thought about washes, stains and underglazes as well as glazes. I had also thought about non-traditional surface treatments to the flowers instead of glazing. I experimented with some encaustic methods using wax and pigments, but it proved too inconsistent for me, tedious and I lost the lace texture. I also thought about leaving the sculptures unglazed, but my first choice was to stick to a glaze. I liked the heavy velvety feeling of the magnolia petals, and the glaze coating sitting on the surface would do that. Glazing would take up a lot of time and I had to factor that into the process. I also had to factor in re-making flowers that did not glaze well. As I worked on the glazes, I kept careful documentation of my glazes in my sketchbook of what worked and what didn't. When I found

the formula, it was documented and I was able to regulate the surface consistently. Figures 5 and 6 below are photographs of fired magnolias with no glaze.



Figure 5. Fired Magnolia 1 (10.5"x10"x4")



Figure 6. Fired Magnolia 2 (11"x11"x3")

As I progressed into the installation creating and constructing my flowers, I continued to build answers to my questions by research, discussion with other artists, gardeners, and perhaps environmentalists. I kept a sketchbook of my progress for just this installation with sketches, drawings, pictures and research that documented my experience and progression. Like Walker says documenting your work as you progress through it answers a lot of your questions to why you're making it. Once I started glazing, adding color, and actually hanging panels, I re-visited constructivism as an educational paradigm and reflected its success.

Artistically, I created 12 panels of the Magnolia Grandiflora in various stages of blooming. I made more than that, but not all of them are useable due to breakage and

unsuccessful glazing. I got faster as I create more panels, but I wanted a lot of them, so it took time. I knew how to make the magnolias, but I still had to technically figure out how to best hang the panels. The panels were heavy and I experimented with the broken flower panels (that I wouldn't use) to figure out a couple different ways to hang them securely. I have put holes (that do not come through the panel) in the back of the slabs so that the panels can hang on nails. I also used an epoxy to seal a hanger in the hole if the nail didn't stay securely in. Each panel hangs so different from the next.

The body of work that I created was an installation of ceramic high relief magnolias popping off thick slab panels. There are 12 panels hanging from the wall. Some of the slabs are torn and fragmented and have lace pressed into them for texture. Each panel has a magnolia that is in a different stage of blooming, some even have the magnolia leaf, either hanging off or has fallen to the ground. The arrangement and spacing of the slabs was also an important part of the installation.

The final arrangement can vary. I can set them up organically in a circle or scattered or in rows like a grid; the grid being more of a postmodern arrangement. In postmodernism, Jack Williamson talks about the grid and space as a design aspect in graphics in his article *The Grid: History, Use, and Meaning*. Williamson says the grid is “concrete” it lacks explanation making the viewer bring their own reality and perspective to understand the work in front of them. Postmodern is an individual understanding and not generalized for all. (Williamson, 1986). Once again, I view my work through postmodern thoughts. For example, how much space will be between each panel? How will it affect my work? Yagi Akira says that his work is about the spirituality in the space the work of art creates around itself. Akira works in repetition and he says when he changes the placement of his groupings then the energy changes (Earl,

2005). The arrangement is important because it can change how I view and feel about my work. Right now, the flowers are in two horizontal rows, giving the organic a sense of order.

Reflection on process

To reflect on my process I kept a sketchbook on just the magnolia installation. I documented, researched technicalities, problems, sketched, took photos, reflected on the artist's I have looked at, and recorded new observations and ideas. I needed to be thoroughly engaged to answer all the questions I had of why I was making this artwork and what type of artist I am.

As I worked each day, I needed to evaluate as I created my magnolias and document my thought processes. I asked these questions to myself as I proceeded:

- Is the magnolia supposed to be an exact replica of one?
- Am I getting more detailed and stiff as I go?
- Am I able to let go and give the flower more movement?
- Do I abstract the flower at all?
- Do I present the magnolia less botanical or more interpretive?
- Can I present these magnolias beyond the panels?
- Do the panels blend in with the magnolias?
- Does the magnolia emerge more from the panel breaking free of it?
- Should the panels look torn at the edges or not?
- What glazes do I like and why? Do the colors completely change the flower?
- Does the background panel need to contrast with the flower?
- How does this work make me an eco-artist, eco-feminist?
- Am I really being postmodern?

- How will my process help my students?

As I completed this project, I documented reflections regarding these questions and derived the implications towards classroom practices.

Limitations

This installation and study could go on and on, it could really delve into the history and symbolism of the magnolia in North America as well as in other continents and cultures. I could have looked at artists such as Georgia O'Keefe and Judy Chicago to compare and contrast what I am creating and thinking about, there could have been multiple directions of influence and relations to my work. Nevertheless, I have chosen to focus my magnolia installation in a more modern context of, feminism, contemporary environmental issues, and postmodernism. Due to time, I have narrowed down my ideas of research and how I wanted this installation viewed. I would have liked to produce 20-30 panels, but due to time, that wasn't possible. I thought that in the end, the glazing would take up more time than it really did. I was familiar with pre-mixed commercial glazes, but had limited knowledge in the science of mixing my own glazes, so I thought the new experience would be time consuming. I had to make sure I allowed the time to work on glazing and firing.

CHAPTER IV

Implementation

It was easy to conceptualize the installation of magnolia panels, but explaining why I created this artwork was difficult. Similarly, my students also have a difficulty assigning meaning to their work. When I am teaching students I help push their boundaries and help them give voice to their work, but how do I get them to do that on their own? Working in the constructivist theory and practicing the methods of reflection that Walker (2004) defines in *Understanding the Artmaking Process: Reflective Practice*, I think, are key to explaining what one is doing and answering the question of what does your art mean?

Like Walker proposes, I documented throughout creating and constructing my magnolia panels. In my sketchbook, I kept my thoughts, ideas, questions, decisions and connections to help me come up with answers and push my boundaries when I was stuck. Walker talks about coming up with a big question, which can be a theme to work in; mine is nature, one that I have been exploring for awhile. From now on, I will introduce students to the work that I have made or am working on in the beginning of the semester. I will show them how I walk through my own process of problem solving. Students will see my sketchbooks, the documentation, questions, answers and how I arrived at meaning.

In class my students are required to have a sketchbook they are also required to research artists as homework (even if they don't) to help accumulate connections. However, as I have asked, how will my process help my students? As I have learned to gather meaning to my work through daily documentation, I have now come up with a way for my students to further explore their own work and give it more meaning.

Having a student come up with a theme is easy; they understand how to do that. How to go beyond the obvious will take some guidance. To get students to question their own artwork, make connections, and give them a voice to their work, not only will they keep a daily sketchbook of their research and process (rough draft sketches, theme ideas, media exploration), I will also provide them with three to four questions they will have to answer daily. Walker talks about pushing boundaries to explore constructivism deeper. I thought about giving students questions each day that they would have to answer to create more meaning in their work. Some examples of the questions would be; what artist do you most relate to in your research today, and why? What new technique did you try today? Did you do something in your artwork today that scared you and made you think you would mess up your work? I would also ask for more than three written sentences to get more in- depth answers from my students. Students will also get a sketchbook grade for completing research and questions. Another way to expose students to other ideas is to show students how famous artists think about their work. A great way is to show students YouTube clips of artists talking and questioning their own work. I plan to integrate more video clips for students to view and discuss as a class.

Walker (2004) writes that reflective practices in constructivism create meaning making in artwork. One is documenting your work in your sketchbook as you progress in your artwork, like I did, and the other is what Walker calls “Seeking Closure/Delaying Closure” (p.10). “Delay in closure often surfaces as an important factor in creativity research that investigates problem finding and problem solving” (p.10). I find it natural to push the boundaries of what I’m creating, I also find it easy to push students boundaries beyond the obvious, but for students this is scary and usually not intuitive. I love presenting students with further options and getting them to delve deeper into their work, but I want them to do it more. I think that having my

students keep their daily reflections and answering the questions I give them will really help them push these boundaries. Closure will not be so fast anymore and students will be able to give more personal meaning and connection to their work.

My search for meaning in my artwork has really let me explore and engage further in constructivism and has led me to new ways of guiding my own students in constructive reflection. When I had problems, I would think back to how I would advise a student with the same issues. I would look for connections with the students work and ask them to relate to other artists or ask them what they were afraid of or what was important to them. I could question my students to get them to go beyond basic understanding, now it's their turn. I saw how important it was to be "forestalling final solutions and actively reshaping the problem throughout the process" (Walker, 2004, p.10). Now I hope that my students will be able to "actively reshape" their own work.

Delay of closure has really shown me a new approach of how to teach my students reflection in their own work and give them their own voice. Through my own personal journey of creating art students will actually see how this is a tangible way to pursue further meaning in their own work.

CHAPTER V

Final Reflection

Reflecting on the documentation in my sketchbook, I felt like I had many answers to my questions. I recorded thoughts on my processes, frustrations, investigations on artists, general magnolia documentation and drawings, as I made this body of work. Thinking about the artists that I have researched and where I am now, I have discovered that I really do not have to over intellectualize what I do. It is kind of a relief! My magnolias look like magnolias. I did not end up abstracting them nor getting looser with my interpretation of them: they are all still kind of stiff and formal looking. To my surprise, I ended up treating my panels more like a canvas and that is where some of my interpretation happened. It seems that my graphic design background has shown up in my sculpture. I liked a sense of order and I thought a lot about composition. Space was very important on the panel. I did not think of the space like Yagi Akira, but more of an isolated panel or canvas of beauty. I thought about where the magnolia should go on the panel, how a leaf should hang and where. The interpretation was more about where I placed the plants, the composition. I did rather abstract the magnolia composition by separating it from its branches and some of its leaves, but not the actual flower. In some of the panels, I would let the leaves float through the space instead of attaching them to branches and making them exact botanical studies.

I also learned that I am not a production artist. It got boring making the same subject repeatedly. I liked reinventing the composition, but the magnolias were delicate, fragile, and many times hard to connect to the panels. I did not look forward to the tedious relief work. Another aspect I missed was the social discourse. I was alone in my studio most of the time

listening to music as I worked, I felt like I was in this bubble of isolation. I thought of questions and answers to my issues, sketched, and did all the research I have mentioned, but it was not like working with other artists in a class or having critique. I missed having conversations, fresh ideas, advice and new avenues to engage in. I thought about how my students constantly engage ideas with each other and it feeds their creativity. I needed more engagement with other people as I worked. In the future I plan to set up a critique group with other artist to continue growth. The social aspect is another important part of connections that needs to be included.

Glazing my work was not as hard as I thought it would be, I thought about the aspect of leaving them unglazed. If I left the flower panels unglazed they could have possibly been more sculpture like, such as a marble carving, but they were ceramic and that made me crave color. It was also scary deciding on color after that fleeting thought, what if it ruined them and I could have left them as they were? However, the glaze enhanced the thick feeling of the petals and the lace texture was subtly emphasized by the pale off white stain on the panel behind the magnolias. I ended up using a combination of commercial glazes and stains with some recipes from ceramic artists. I mixed the two to create a waxy finish on the petals and leaves and rubbed stain on and off the background to pick up the texture. All the ideas I had previously, like the wax and pigment, would have been too overwhelming for this work; simplicity in color choice and application was answer.

In the end, the installation can be a grouping of blooming magnolias and have the visual impact of repetition and abundance, or they can be appreciated singly unto their own. I liked them in two linear rows. I again thought of Akira when I arranged the panels. Akira's works are similar, like bowls or vases, but they range from small to large so they lend themselves to interesting arrangements that change the space between them. My magnolias have a big visual

impact and need space in-between, but you can look at them individually and not consider the space in-between. Again, the space I considered was in the placement of the magnolia on the panel.

Conclusion

As I have created more and more magnolias I have really tried to answer the two big questions, which are, what does my art mean and what kind of artist am I? I researched several artists, ideas, and I looked at several types of artists I related to and could possibly define myself as. Am I an eco-artist? Am I an eco-feminist? Does my work talk about sustainability or the urban garden? What is my agenda? Am I a postmodernist?

Looking at The Harrisons, Pandra Williams, or Joyce Kozloff I now know I do not have a “political agenda” nor embrace “Radical Constructivism” (Gregory, 2002). I am not trying to solve any ecological problems or ask the viewer to create a new consideration on their ecological attunement from my work. My work was and is about paying attention to what’s around you. Notice the beauty of the blooming magnolia in your yard; look at the beauty of the flower. In my work, you are viewing nature through my eyes. I separated the magnolia from its environment and isolated its beauty as a composition, stopping time as in a still life. It is an aesthetic experience, beauty for beauties sake and a feminine experience because of that.

I related more to the essay in *Unframed Landscapes*. I do think I deconstruct my nature and place it in a frame (Fowkes & Fowkes, 2004), but the *Unframed Landscapes* says this frame is viewed by a distant viewer, my view is closer, and the frame is the panel the magnolia is attached to. To me the panel is the fragment of an old house or building the magnolia grows next to or into because the building is disintegrating. It’s the backdrop. But I am not really

“conveying human domination over nature”(Fowkes & Fowkes, 2004, para.1) that, again, would be having “political agenda”(Gregory, 2002).

My work is feminist, but not by raising political gender issues. It is feminist in the aspect of trying to portray something beautiful. I like softness, the delicate, alluding to reproduction, and the fact that nature is connected to femininity. I did not consciously choose the magnolia for its metaphor with femininity, the southern flower, or the strength of southern woman (i.e. as in the movie, *Steel Magnolias*, Bishop, 2011). I honestly did not realize it stood for purity, or symbolizes things at their beginning, like birth. However, I like that it does symbolize all those qualities and that I further enhanced the feminine by the lace texture in the background.

My work is postmodern, but not because my work needs viewer interaction, it needs the viewer’s reaction. I want and need the response, but it will be the viewers’ emotional response based on their personal aesthetic. Like Williamson (1986) said the viewer will bring their own understanding to the work and that’s postmodern enough. I felt like displaying my panels in linear rows, grid like, gave a sense of order that I think has its origins from my graphic design background, not necessarily postmodern, I’m only working in a postmodern era.

For years I have been creating artwork about nature, it is my theme, and I’m still exploring it. I felt like my research and magnolia panels have definitely embodied the constructivist theory and I will continue my future artwork in this method for more self-discovery. My students will also benefit from my thesis because I plan to teach with more reflective documentation and they will learn how to delay closure themselves. My students will find their voice as I found mine. My magnolias are not an end to this theme; but they are an end to this body of work. Maybe one day I will be able to define myself as an eco-artist, and have

some kind of political agenda, but presently I am happy with being a feminist sculptor who creates art to convey beauty in nature and my relationship with it as an aesthetic experience.

REFERENCES

- Ballard, A. R. (2011). Metamorphosis of nature's forms. Retrieved January 12, 2011 from <http://aliceballard.com/index.html>
- Bishop, K. (2011). Magnolias: Flowers of divine beauty, life force and perfection. Retrieved May 13, 2011 from <http://thelightworkerchronicles.blogspot.com/2011/05/magnolias-flowers-of-divine-beauty-life.html>
- Conceptual Art (2007). Retrieved April 7, 2011, from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conceptual-art/>
- Ecoaddendum. (2010). Retrieved April 6, 2011 from <http://www.ecoaddendum.org/>
- Earle, J., North, H., & North, A. (2005). *Yagi Akira: Contemporary clay, Japanese ceramics for the new century* (pp. 78-81). Boston Museum of Fine Arts.
- Fowkes, M., & Fowkes, R. (2004). *Unframed Landscapes*. Retrieved July 21, 2010 from <http://galerijabalén.net/unframed/essay.htm>
- Gregory, D. (2002). Re: *Constructivism* [Online forum comment]. Retrieved March 8, 2011 from <http://www.getty.edu/education/teacherartexchange/archive/May02/0879.html>
- Harrison Mayer, N., & Harrison Mayer, H. (N.D.). *The Harrison Studio*. Retrieved March 26, 2011 from <http://theharrisonstudio.net/>
- Jewish Women's Archive. *Joyce Kozloff*. Retrieved March 26, 2011 from <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kozloff-joyce>

- Kosuth, J. (2008). Art after philosophy: Institutions and objections. In C. Harrison, & P. Wood, (Eds.), *Art in Theory: 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, (pp. 852-860). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Kozloff, J. (N.D.). *Biography*. Retrieved March 26, 2011 from <http://www.joycekozloff.net/>
- Milbrandt, M. K, Felts, J., Richards, B., & Abghari, N. (2004). Teaching to learn: A constructivist approach to shared responsibility. *Art Education*, 57 (5), 19-33.
- Postmodernism. (1995). Retrieved April 10, 2011 from <http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gengloss/postm-body.html>
- Rosenbaum, & Vieria, (1993). *Defining sustainability*. Retrieved April 5, 2011 from <http://www.arch.wsu.edu/09%20publications/sustain/defnsust.htm>
- Walker, S. R. (2004). Understanding the artmaking process: Reflective practice. *Art Education*, 57 (3), 6-12.
- Wikipedia, *Aesthetics*. Retrieved July 10, 2011 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesthetics>
- Williams, P. (2010). *Pandra Williams Environmental sculpture & installation*. Retrieved April 5, 2011 from <http://www.pandrawilliams.com/profile>
- Williamson, J. (1986). The grid: History, use, and meaning. *Design Issues*, 3(2), 15-30.