Double Distance

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Tinsley, Victoria, "Double Distance." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2016.
doi: https://doi.org/10.57709/8514067

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My thesis exhibition *Double Distance* is an installation of paintings and sculptures exploring my changing relationship with myself and with my mother as she succumbs to a degenerative brain disease. Through the intersection of surrogate life-size figures made from found objects alongside and within paintings of hugging bodies, the exhibition reveals the simultaneous enmeshment and separation that occurs in caring for my mother. In repeating similar figures within and outside the painted surface, the exhibition reflects on the act of caregiving and the desire to reproduce what is loved and that which has been lost. The works included in the exhibition not only serve as preemptive memorials to my mother, but they also stand as monuments to resilience. The resulting exhibition *Double Distance* highlights the challenges of holding on and how sculpture and painting can serve as proxies for reconnection.

**INDEX WORDS:** Painting, Sculpture, Emotional, Comfort, Surrogacy, Loss, Degenerative Brain Disease, Abject Art, Found Objects, Figurative Abstraction
DOUBLE DISTANCE

by

VICTORIA TINSLEY

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

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016
DOUBLE DISTANCE

by

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May 2016
DEDICATION

Dedicated to my amazingly brilliant, always dependable, and unconditionally loving mother Barbara Vaughn Tinsley.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the many individuals who supported me and helped shape my thoughts throughout this creative and writing process. Thank you, thesis team for providing infinite wisdom and solid truths regarding my work and the resulting thesis exhibition. Thank you to my sweet husband Matthew Warenzak for supporting my desire to pursue a career in fine art and going with me to so many, many art receptions. Thank you, family (the whole bunch of you) for encouraging me to share our story of loss to a terrible disease. Thank you sister Jackie for always cheering me on and believing in me even just like mom would have. And thank you, mom for being the best mom to the point I still can’t stop thinking about you and caring for you and loving you even when you seem so many millions of miles away.
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1 INTRODUCTION

The figure at the heart of this déjà vu is subjected to double distance, being both near and far away; it is near, yet continually shying away, but also far, while reappearing with the force of something that has been repressed.

~ Gervais, The Vanished Child

For my thesis exhibition Double Distance, I chose to not only explore the relationships between the figures in my paintings, but also the connections created between sculpture, painting, and their service as surrogates. Since entering graduate school, my obsession with losing my mother to a degenerative brain disease has dominated my art practice. This fixation has resulted in a plethora of work related to her presence and simultaneous absence, our changing relationship, and my anxieties over possibly inheriting her disease. These artworks have taken the form of painting, drawing, sculpture, installation, performance, video, and animation. Upon entering the third year of my MFA program, figurative sculptures and paintings of hugs, both nurturing and violent, appeared to dominate my practice. This work has carried me through my final year and serves as the basic structure of my thesis exhibition. Although personal in nature, the generality of these figures and their interactions tap into shared experiences of love, longing, and loss. I have been asked over the past three years if artwork can be judged if it is emotional in nature. This exhibition offers my answer to this question and whether contemporary painting has a place for the emotional in art.
In 1960, psychologist Harry Harlow published *The Nature of Love*, a study on the roots of maternal bonding. In this paper Harlow theorizes that it is contact comfort, over other factors such as food or imprinting, that fosters love between mother and child. Harlow came upon this realization after studying how baby monkeys navigated their environments with the company of only surrogate mother monkeys that were constructed by the research team. The babies were given two mother monkeys with similar facial features but different qualities providing comfort; one was made of a soft terry cloth body with no milk source, while the other was made of a hard wire frame with a nipple for nursing. What Harlow found was that the baby monkeys clung to their terry cloth mothers in varying degrees of stress and were more explorative when these particular surrogates were present in new scenarios. The tactile comfort of these “mothers” provided a layer of psychological nourishment to the baby monkeys that could not be duplicated with the presence of the milk-producing surrogate mother.

When I read this article, I realized how comforting the physical presence of mother continues to be even though she is no longer mentally present. In order to exorcise the fear of losing this comforting presence, I began working on my own series of surrogate mother figures. At first, I made a human-size surrogate sculpture similar to those of Harlow (figure 2.1). This work loomed above viewers’ heads and smiled blankly down at them below. I left the body a hand-constructed ladder, which in reflection I wish I had covered in Harlow’s yellow terry cloth. This piece was an important point in moving forward in my work because it allowed me to not only reference the bodily connections between my mom and myself, but it also allowed for me to create a proxy beyond the representations of my mother’s actual physical features.
Figure 2.1 More Perfect Human Mother, Acrylic, foam core, masking tape, wood, 2015
This line of questioning also led me into a whole series of work exploring textiles and how they can be made to reference the body and flesh. I made paintings on fabric stretched on stretcher bars that extended beyond the traditional rectangular dimensions. The fabric stretched over these wood frames like skin over bone. Alternatively, a sack of fabrics looped into an intestinal tangle and sat atop legs made of uneven wooden bars. These experiments allowed me to see the possibilities of my materials and took me closer to the work exhibited in Double Distance.
3 ART FROM LIFE

When I first entered graduate school, I had a moment of panic in realizing I knew nothing about contemporary painting practice and theory. I felt paralyzed in creating because I did not want to make art about art. But eventually, my need to create pushed me forward and I made what I wanted when I wanted. The result was a plethora of work about my mother and our relationship. I have had to come to terms with the fact that this subject is what drives and pushes me onward in my art making. Many people ask what I will do once my mother passes, but I feel this is a strange question. I have faith that my intuitive process will lead me onward into other explorations dealing with interpersonal relationships. My fascination with such dyads is what led me into practicing art therapy and now what propels this work. As Jessica Jackson-Hutchins describes in an interview with Stuart Horodner for Bomb magazine, “I’m certainly more interested in making art that is connected to life” (figure 3.1). As Faith Ringgold (figure 3.2) shares in the documentary Bernice, “I wanted to tell my story. If not me who? If not now, when? I can’t wait ‘til later. As an artist, you need to tell it at the time it is happening. When it is going on. Who are you now?” I have a desire to explore and expose these inner workings of myself, my relationships, and my own reflections both on them.
Figure 3.1 Jessica Jackson Hutchins, *Still Life: Chairs, Bowl and Vase*, Chair, plaster, collage and salt-fired ceramics, 2008
The specificity of my work, in dealing with my relationship with my mother, was troubling at first due to the inability of others to connect with my subject matter. Yet, through surrogate figures and storytelling through painting, I have learned that it is easier for audience members to attach these proxies to their own experiences and relationships. As Jackson-Hutchins continues, “It’s all about positioning and specificity, to get down to making a piece that means something
but also that evades meaning a little bit too”. There is a coming together between the personal and the general so that my work does not echo in upon itself. The work of my thesis exhibition came about through a series of small steps and the overlapping of the many trajectories my work has taken over the past three years (see figures 3.3 and 3.4).

Figure 3.3 *LM # 2*, Acrylic on canvas, 2015
Figure 3.4 *I've Got My Eye on You*, Acrylic and ink on canvas, 2015
Between my second and final years of the graduate program, I desired for two such trajectories to merge. I actually sketched an image of these two types of works hugging. This little sketch was the beginning of the hug series (figure 3.5). The two types of works embracing were the contour line paintings from the end of my second year and the monkey-mother imagery from that same period. The line paintings had allowed me to play around with facial structure and the monkey faces offered simplicity in facial expression. By beginning to merge these exaggerations, I pulled away from representative painting and into a way of expressing the emotive content of my relationship with my mother. The two hugging characters have evolved more and more into simplistic fleshy sacks and have allowed further experimentation in gesture, composition, and color. As Gervais describes with the figure, “It serves as a focal point, drawing attention, but it is also used as an interface and a relay, a way of understanding as well as an interpretive principle”. Painting paired with sculptural figures offer the possibility to create symbolic narrative and address the emotional layers such as fear, sadness, desperation, anger, and hope.
Figure 3.5 Sketch of combining new and old work, Ink on paper, 2015
4 PAINTING AS VIGNETTE

When I entered the graduate program, I thought of myself as a painter and maybe a draftsperson, but nothing beyond these terms. As studies in contemporary painting developed and provisional painting was introduced, I began to wonder if painting was at an end and if I should pursue other modes of art making. My natural curiosity and this fear of the end of painting led me to explore sculpture, textiles, and video as additional avenues of expression. But time and again, I have returned to painting and now am comfortable in the role of painter. As Zachary Cahill (figure 4.1) described in his ArtSlant interview about Wellness Center, “My practice has involved performance, sculpture, etc., but I think there is nothing I can’t do with painting”. My comfort with my title as “painter” has allowed painting practice and my skill to develop while in the program. There are limitations to this practice and benefits of working in several mediums, but paint literally touches every surface and binds all parts of my thesis exhibition Double Distance.
In terms of the materiality of the paintings, I use color to push the tension between beauty and disgust, between calm and chaos. For example, in *Incriminating Hug* (figure 4.2), I use bright, cheerful colors to expose a dark scene suggesting an impending death or burial. Viewers have commented on my use of color as contradictory to the subject matter they represent. My response is that I hope to highlight the myriad of psychological impacts dementia imparts on families beyond just a sad, mopey gray. According to Marlene Dumas (figure 4.3), she uses color to change the response of the viewer: “In the painting I try to make it more touching through use of colour. It has a completely different psychological impact, due to the colours and brushstrokes.” (170) Within my figures themselves, I model oranges and pinks into fleshy sacks.
that lack gender or race and resemble bodies that have been boiled down and emptied of their supportive structure. These color-enriched forms are also typically highlighted by a singular light source, which creates a dramatic mood. The use of light and the pairing of opposite faces nod to the Janus masks of theater. Further amplifying the emotional content of the work is the manner in which the paint is applied and serves as a recording of mark-making on the surface.

Figure 4.2 Incriminating Hug, Acrylic on panel with down-stuffed fabric, 2016
Figure 4.3 Marlene Dumas, *The Painter*, Oil on canvas, 1994
In looking at the personal nature of these paintings, I also see them as portals to a parallel world. As Dana Schutz (figure 4.4) points out in a 2012 *Brooklyn Rail* interview, “To make a painting with people and things is not just ‘subjective whatever-ness.’ It’s who we are and where we come from and can parallel the world, not just in a fictional or allegorical way, but also structurally.” And this experience can be shared through expressionist strokes of color and illusion of form as is the case with the hug series. Schutz states “painterly painting is another mode of communication” and has become more disconnected from its ties to 1970’s Neo-Expressionism. Having the baggage of expressionism and emotion in art invites me to create it, because as art critic and writer Jarrett Earnest states, “Everyone gets very uncomfortable at the idea of art expressing the feeling of an artist.” Earnest goes on to elaborate, “Of course you’re a person and you make things because you have feelings and reasons, but if it doesn’t exceed into something else, it’s actually not a very interesting painting.” I believe my work is a response to this notion. I want to paint personal, uncomfortable narratives because I believe my paintings exceed into the personal narratives of my audience members. They are no longer just sad paintings of my mom, but push farther into a reservoir of shared experience.
Anxieties abound as these painted figures attempt to connect with one another. In particular, one pair of paintings house a figure in each. From across a gallery corner, these adjacent figures within *Split Hug* (figure 4.5) stare at each other longingly as if they might exit their paintings to reach one another. By this diptych being split, it magnifies the longing while also referencing the traditional placement of diptychs as being side by side. It questions the necessity of proximity. The placement of the paintings within the space point to the challenge of connection within my personal story while pointing back to traditional methods of painting as storytelling.
Within the hug series in particular, painting has provided a window into another realm where these creatures reside, and harken back to the traditions of paint as a storytelling method. The painted surface allows for depth and flatness, a mix of reality and imagination that occupies the experience of caregiving. Beyond the physical attributes of the surface, painting has allowed the figures to tell stories that relate to my self and the changing relationship with my mom. The hugs pull close, and at times also push away (figure 4.6). One hug frets while the other stares ahead. At times I see myself as the fearful being, and at other times the complacent one. At times I see myself as both. According to Nicole Eisenman, she paints so as to exorcise her anxieties (figure 4.7). She states, “painting those fears as abject characters was a way of grappling with them, making fun of it all” (16). I use creating as a way to the tame scarier aspects of death and
dying, and in doing so I regain some control over fear of this process. Additionally, in toying with humor, I am able to exhaust fear’s power over me. Loving someone with dementia is beyond simple hand-holding and feeding, and this complexity is what I want to show within these vignettes.

Figure 4.6 *Nighttime Hug*, Acrylic on fabric stuffed with batting, 2016
Figure 4.7 Nicole Eisenman, *Inspiration*, Oil on canvas, 2004
Regardless of the subject being painted, I learned from Dana Schutz’s *Brooklyn Rail* interview something I had not processed until writing this thesis; the importance of structure within a painting. I realized that no matter the subject matter, a painting’s structure is what these creatures, colors, shapes, lines, etc., hang onto to. This has brought about a way of thinking about painting that I want to further explore in conjunction with my chosen subject matter. Not realizing this connection, I spent a particularly long amount of time studying and drawing from Mary Cassatt’s portraits at the National Gallery of Art last summer (figure 4.8). These paintings were fully engaged, with the background being as thoughtfully rendered as the figurative subjects who sat within them. The importance of how these parts worked together did not seem relevant until I read Schutz’s descriptions of how a painting should operate. Furthermore, now that I am aware of structural presence, I foresee stronger paintings focused on the painting itself and how its parts come together, or not, for the viewer.
Figure 4.8 Mary Cassatt, Woman with a Red Zinnia, Oil on canvas, 1891
5 SCULPTURE AS SURROGATE

The hugs within my paintings are tied closely with the sculptures within the exhibition. These bodies, made of found objects and paint, stand as surrogates for my mother and my self. Their difference in size references mother and child, while their facial expressions belie their emotions. Their gestures suggest awkwardness in navigating the real world environment, as if they fell out of their painted worlds and had difficulty standing in ours. They do not hug and they do not have arms, but stare ahead as if to engage with audience members. Their size and bodily presence highlights their reference to actual bodies. As Jessica Jackson-Hutchins describes, “A sculpture is in the room, and so it always has its factness, even more so with the familiar found objects.”

The idea of creating sculptural surrogates evolved from my work with the Harry Harlow mother monkey sculpture I created in my second year. I like the idea of creating my own mother again in a haphazard way so as to suggest I needed to make this new mom quickly out of desperation, which is in some ways true and is about making do in tough situations. There are countless ways our culture recreates the comfort produced from a mother’s touch -- there are hugging couches, rent-a-mom websites, food that provides the comfort of home. The fear of losing my mother’s touch to the inevitability of death is what spurs me on to create such objects. The physical presence of Two Hug Halves (figure 5.1) is comforting while also a reminder of her eventual demise. As Mike Kelley explains “the art object is a kind of fetish, a replacement for some real thing that is missing” (84) (figure 5.2). The fragile balancing of the sculpture’s components on two thin rods summons the sculptures of Franz West (figure 5.3). The creatures occupy physical space but the fragility of the form makes one question whether they will survive/remain functional/remain intact.
Figure 5.1 *Two Hug Halves*, Acrylic, Mylar, masking tape, cardboard, metal stands, synthetic turf, acrylic eye, 2016
Figure 5.2 Mike Kelley, *Fruit of the Loins*, Stuffed animals, 1990
Figure 5.3 Franz West, Untitled (Green/Yellow), Papier mâché, Styrofoam, acrylic lacquer, metal, 2008
The sculptural works evolved from explorations with the materials and only after completing them did I realize I had created life-size creatures. Their size is important because of the way in which they resemble human forms. Because they are similar in size and shape to the viewer, they evoke empathy from the audience and thus a relationship. Mike Kelley’s essay “Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny” explores this notion of figurative sculptures serving as transitional objects, similar to that of an infant’s transitional object as she weans from the constant presence of her mother. Kelley summates, “It is an object that does not picture what it symbolically stands for, yet it holds the same (often greater) power than the thing itself” (75). I argue that the same can be said of Two Hug Halves; they are surrogates serving the role of pre-memorial and physical stand-in for the actual person they are about. In my doubling of my mother through my work, I insure my loss is not a total one.

By exploring the relationships between painting, sculpture and their modes as surrogates, I combined their materials within the majority of works in the exhibition. For example, pillow-like surfaces bump out from paintings’ traditionally flat surfaces, and paint occupies each sculptural element. Because of their plush qualities, these works call on a desire to touch them. But, within the behavioral code of the gallery, the audience must not trust this desire as these pillow paintings are artworks within the gallery space. The only person allowed to touch them is myself, the artist, and gallery workers. The limits placed upon viewers to not touch the work inform the audience of the work’s subject matter -- the impossibility of holding onto something that is just within arm’s reach. The formalism of the gallery space and how the works are organized within it serve to reclaim the materials as art and not as object that one can hold. Paintings claim the walls and sculpture hover near the corners; thus, the invitation is negated by their traditional gallery placement.
6 MIRRORING

Like the mirroring that happens when a child reflects the mother, *Double Distance* abounds with duplicates and repetitive pairings. Each panel measuring six by six feet in the largest pair of paintings, *Incriminating Hug*, is repeated in the smallest piece *Incriminating Hug (study)*, which is made up by two six inches by six inch paintings. The larger set invites the viewer into the world depicted, whereas the smaller pair is object-like. This change in scale between objects references mother-child relationships and also offers two ways for the audience to interact with the work. The life-size pieces reflect the viewer’s physical presence and thus provide a passage of mental and emotional connection. Alternately, the hand-sized works serve as transitional objects that can serve as reminders of the totality of another. As Kelley describes, “they function in a very real way as substitutes for the mother, and as extensions for the child itself” (75).

Mirroring happens on both surfaces and through repetitive facial expressions. Across the room, *Nighttime Hug* and *Nighttime Floor Hug* share the same pair of figures yet one remains within the formality of the frame while the other sits on the floor. The Mylar surface of *Two Hug Halves* reflect its audience; thus, the viewer is brought into a relationship not only through the human-size scale of these sculptures, but also literally onto its surface as well. The mirrored surface offers a reminder that the figure is physically present but also a sum of all that is around it. As Gervais so succinctly puts it, “the figure is the result of a manipulation, which succeeds in making the absent present, thus sustaining this precarious presence of another, who is never completely there” (Gervais, 78).
7 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I believe the work in Double Distance offers an alternative reality mirroring my experience of caring for a loved one who is dying. As I developed each work, I was enlightened to another understanding of the loss process and how it relates to our shared relationships with others. I have realized in my thesis planning and execution, there is a dialogue between myself and the work that happens before, during, and after completion. Double Distance is a culmination of these new insights and, unlike most other works about dementia, highlights the caregiver’s inner dialogue as the disease progresses. Such a focus on myself is not meant to lessen the importance of my mother’s experience in this disease that has destroyed her life, but to add to the discussion and awareness of what happens to those left pick up the pieces. These works exemplify the power of contemporary painting to express this emotional journey and allow viewers to take part in a typically secret and hidden story.
REFERENCES


