And there were green tiles on the ceiling

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AND THERE WERE GREEN TILES ON THE CEILING

by

Jean Richardson

A Selected Project Report submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Department of Visual Arts

Brigham Young University

August 2007
GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a selected project report by

Jean Richardson

This selected project report has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

________________________________________
Peter Everett, Chair

________________________________________
Brian Christensen

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Joseph Ostraff
As chair of the candidate’s graduate committee, I have read the selected project report of Jean Richardson in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place, and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

Date

Peter Everett
Chair, Graduate Committee

Accepted for the Department

Robert L. Marshall
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Accepted for the College

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Acknowledgements

I am proud of the personal and artistic development I achieved while carrying out my studies here at Brigham Young University and would like to thank those who have helped and supported me along the way.

I would like to thank BYU for the financial assistance provided through the Charles W. Nibley scholarship and Visual Arts Department scholarships.

I thank my professors, for their guidance and support. I am grateful for the freedom they gave me to experiment through out my studies, which let me rediscover and define my creative process. I also value the input from my peers and visiting artists, which helped in my artistic development and the strength of my work.

I appreciate all my friends who have helped me out, especially in the run up to my exhibition. Thank you to all who lent a hand gutting out the Crandall house and assisted in installing the show.

It is quite daunting exhibiting your work and wondering how it is going to be received. I thank everyone who attended my show, for your support and appreciation. To those who shall read this document, thank you for your interest.

I would also like to express a special thanks to my friends, for your friendship while I was a long way from home and to my family for your love and support while I was away.
And there were green tiles on the ceiling
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Photography by Chaunté Vaughn
Prelude

In this document I shall explain my art process, and reflecting on my work, will explore the themes and emotions that evolved. I shall accompany the images of my MFA exhibition with personal poetic vignettes. These vignettes are memories and thoughts that surfaced both while making the art and while viewing the final exhibition. While the primary experience is looking at and being with my art, I hope these anecdotes and stories give some insight into my motivations and actions as an artist. In these stories I shall use my own voice; I am Scottish and will tend to use local vernacular.
My work is an open-ended exploration that evolves naturally as I let thoughts and ideas surface out of my artistic process. I work on multiple projects at the same time and when I feel the need to develop a piece I let it take precedence. Working intuitively establishes a quiet and open quality within the work. My art poses questions and thoughts to ponder rather than statements. I am interested in the emotions and ideas artwork can evoke and aim to create poetic works which allow access for the viewer.

My work has grown out of an interest in memorabilia; in particular, how it assists in the documentation of the past and how it can trigger memories. I am interested in the fragility of memories—why we only remember specific things as time passes and how they fade becoming memories of memories. I am intrigued by nostalgia and the emotions it produces, especially comfort and longing. The pieces in my show were initially created out of this interest and a desire to articulate it. I wanted to convey the passing of time and those feelings involved with remembering the past. When viewing my exhibited work, there was a fresh realization of how much it drew from my memories and experiences. As I was creating my work, memories were being brought to the forefront of my mind and the emotions they triggered were being woven into the sculptures.
Letters

When I came to Brigham Young University, I was a painter. I had an undergraduate degree in Painting and Drawing. As an undergraduate, I learned screen-printing and incorporated it in my BFA final show. I also made a few object-based works that were sculptural but I was predominantly a painter, and I still think of myself as a painter. However, along the way, in my graduate studies, I became interested in sculptural installations.

It started with the objects I brought to BYU. I brought a baby journal my mother had written while pregnant with me, letters she had written to her Mother in Scotland while she lived in America, and a pair of baby dungarees my sisters and I all wore when we were about one year old. I was interested in memorabilia in my final year of undergraduate studies and had based my final year’s artwork on it. I brought the letters, journal and dungarees thinking I could continue what I was exploring, and also to bring something I knew and understood.

In my first semester, I started painting my mother’s letters. They were well painted, but they did not say much. I realized I was interested in the memories they contained, but I was not conveying that. They were not my memories. I was in a similar situation to my mother; I had moved from Scotland to America to go to University and I missed home as my mother did back in the early Eighties. However, I did not write letters—I spoke to my mother on the phone; I shared my stories, anxieties, and frustrations aloud. Those memories were not being recorded. I was jealous of my mothers’ letters and how I could handle them, look at her handwriting, the stamps and the aging paper.
I started to write letters to myself, telling my own stories. I would write everyday, sometimes more than once. Sometimes, I would post myself a collage or a random watercolor. These letters became my diary, but they were more than a diary—they were proof of my existence with official stamping from the post office. When they returned with all their markings, they felt finished to me. Some I would open and reply to, others I would leave closed to open at a later date or to stay sealed forever.
Letters

Letters written by and posted to myself.
Bundles were displayed in nooks and crannies around the house.
This set is in an air vent opening.
Collecting

The body of work I developed throughout my studies initiated from my collecting habit. I am a hoarder; before I left Scotland, after watching a documentary on obsessive hoarders, I made a conscious decision to get rid of my rubbish. What went first were my shoeboxes full of four years of receipts—my cat lady days were over. However, after a year in America I had a new bundle of receipts in my bedroom.

The habit slowly crept into my art. In the letter project, writing each day was repetitive and calming. As the pile of letters grew in my studio I became more interested in making art that involved collections and groupings. I did a piece in Spain where I collected glass bottles from the streets and put letters in them. I displayed them first on the floor and then released them into the sea. It was from this piece that I became interested in artworks that could be made from found objects, and in works that evoked the feeling of transience.

In conjunction with the collective nature of my work, I tend to embark on projects that have a repetitive nature. Although they get tedious and ridiculous at times, I feel there is significance in the repetition. The execution of the work becomes important, possibly more important than the finished object. The repetitious process and labor driving my work is monotonous and creates a sense of melancholy, but there is also humor in the absurdly repetitious. Sometimes it does get to be too much and I feel myself wondering why I even started. So I have to leave it for a while to let something new begin and take its place. Some works do not get finished, or maybe they get left behind to become something at a later date.
Receipt Chair

My receipts, collected from 2003-05 and sewn together.
Receipts

I do not really know why I started collecting receipts; it was not deliberate. I do not collect them like one collects stamps. It is more that I cannot throw them out. I mean to. I guess it is a budget thing and fear of my identity being stolen. I keep my receipts with the intent to record my spending and cross reference them with bank statements, but I never really do it. Then I have a lot of receipts to throw out but I am afraid of identity theft. It took leaving the country to get me to shred my first collection of receipts. Then at the beginning of 2006 I had about two years of receipts, so I made a New Year’s resolution to get rid of them. When I got round to it, I felt guilty tearing them up, I did not want to throw them out. My sewing machine was set up in my room so I took a few and sewed them together. Then I sewed a lot of them together and made a flat piece of receipt fabric. I did not know what it would be, but I liked how it looked and the silliness of doing it. I kept doing it each day. I would sew as many together as I could then when I felt myself losing it, I would stop and do something else.

Slowly, the fabric grew. At first I thought I would just make it into a large blanket—I had it spread out over my bed one evening and although I liked it I felt it had to become something else. In my bedroom I had a small upholstered chair. I draped the receipt fabric over it and decided to make a slip cover for the chair and have it flow out on to the floor. I was thinking about the covering of furniture with drop cloths when decorating or when an old-fashioned mansion is being left empty (like you see in movies). I was interested in the covering symbolizing absence and protection. I had sewn the receipts together with the print on the underside, and made a decision to eliminate the receipts that had bright color advertisements on them to keep the fabric predominantly white.
The use of white crept into my work—it was not a conscious choice at first, but developed out of writing the letters and putting them in white envelopes. I hung my letters up in my studio and they would float like small ghosts. My studio was white and things felt right in my studio when they were white too. White pieces were quiet and unassuming and I liked how that added to the gentle and delicate qualities inherent in my work.
My shirt-based work happened by chance. I bought white shirts from a charity shop to use the fabric in another piece. When I sat taking them apart, I became intrigued with the individual components of the shirt; the buttons, pockets, collars and cuffs. They sat in small piles in my studio and I no longer wanted to make the original piece. I wanted to do something with the bits which I first thought I was removing to discard. I started rolling the collars up thinking they might grow into a large abstract shape. However, I stopped when the wound-up collars could fit inside the circumference of a collar wide enough to go around my neck. The rolled cuffs began a little while after the collars. Inside the cuffs I stitched with white thread, thoughts, prayers, desires, and fragmented text I had collected from old library index cards. I then rolled them up and repositioned the buttons to keep them closed. When exhibited, the viewer was invited to open them up.

I decided to use the pockets as a metaphor for the heart because in men’s shirts the pocket is always on the left over the heart. Similar to the envelopes, the pockets had the ability to contain and conceal. I wanted to use them to hold and to hide things that are close to my heart; so inside the pockets I inserted little sentimental art works, collages, watercolors, and letters and then sewed the pockets shut. The viewer could see through the fabric and know items were contained within. They could touch the fabric, but could not open or touch in the same way as the cuffs.

I did not really know why I wanted to make so many pieces using the shirt parts. Utilizing the materials was one factor, but my associations to white shirts were a strong reason now that I look back. Maybe it is too suffocating to say it was because I wore a school uniform, but I did wear a school uniform for 12 years of my life, and a white shirt for 6 years in secondary school. In those clothes, I was figuring out who I was and what I wanted to be.
Now that I am twenty-six, I know who I am and what I am doing, but I am beginning to wonder who I am again and what I am really up to. Maybe that is why at this period in my artistic career I am interested in play, in experimenting, and rediscovering how to create. I feel the integrity of creating with familiar, nostalgic materials has empowered this iterative process.
Collars

Shirt collars wound together to fit inside a collar which fitted my neck.
Dungarees Replica

I made replicas of the baby dungarees my mother kept, which I brought from home. My sisters and I all wore them as one year olds. At first, I made the replicas out of canvas and stiffened them with gesso in the shape of an absent body. I made five of them because I have four sisters. They were uncanny; they evoked a ghostly feeling which was intriguing, but their stiffness seemed cartoon like. I left the idea alone for a while, but later I made about twenty of them out of white muslin and hung them all in a space created out of muslin curtains. The space was quiet and meditative and I felt the piece was finished. I took a sewing class to learn how to sew better and made a near exact replica of the dungarees. Using the new replica, I made a super-8 film of the dungarees suspended in front of a window with a muslin curtain. It was a version of this configuration I used in my final show. I chose it because it was less fussy—it was quiet and I preferred the singular. It made more sense to have the one pair suspended as a ghost of the original. There was something more delicate about the individual.

In a different room in the exhibition, I had the super-8 film of the dungarees playing. I chose to display the film really small behind a keyhole in an old door I had found. I liked the idea that this piece could be easily missed, that one would have to stumble on it. It was like a forgotten memory stuck at the back of my head.

I also made another piece using the dungarees. I took black and white photos of them and developed the film in buckets in my studio’s bathroom. The photos came out scratched and overdeveloped. They were pretty bad photos, but I had a nice collection of metal mint and candy tins, so I decided to cut up the photos and display them in the tins. I liked how they created perfect miniature frames, especially the oval tins that linked together. I felt those were like jewelry lockets. I covered the photos with wax so they became soft and muted and displayed them similar to the way people display family photos. This was a little homage to not just my past but my sister’s, mother’s and granny’s past.
Bottles

Dreams and aspirations written, erased and written over and erased again, encased in the bottles. Bottles collected from reception openings and restaurants.
Bottles

I have a mild cerebral palsy; as a child it made me stand out from other children and made me the special case in my family. My disability has factored into who I am. As a child, I knew I was different and there was nothing I could do about it. I have lots of memories of coping with it and even being silly with it—using my quirks to laugh at myself and make others laugh. Being the comedian was my coping strategy. I had a desire to be accepted, to belong and although I did, I always felt different and a little out of place. I was and am confident, however there is a side of me that still hides my anxieties, paranoia’s and worries. I bottle a lot up. I still retell the stories of ‘when I wore a splint…’ to make people laugh. I hold onto them because I feel they are me, but I also wish they were not me. At times, I wish I could escape myself. I think coming to America was a little bit of escapism for me. To go somewhere were no one knew me and truly be myself. But soon I was telling the same stories I always tell, and wishing I had people around me that knew them too.

Therapeutically, the letter piece was helping me adjust to living in America. The letter writing was more than documenting memories. There was a need to get stuff down and out of my mind. While studying abroad in Spain, I started to collect discarded glass bottles. Inside I put letters that I wrote. I wrote letters about bottled up emotions that I wish I had shared with others. A lot were to boys I wish I had told I liked or loved, others were to friends and family and some were to me. I guess they were all to me really because no one was going to read them. I threw them into the sea, a dramatic gesture of getting things off my chest, but really they are still bottled up in the sea somewhere.

I redid the bottle piece in my show, but this time it was a little different; encased in the bottles were my dreams and aspirations written over and over again. I would take a sheet of paper and write them out and erase them and write over it again and erase it again so the paper had the faint hint of smudged text. Then I encased the tops of the bottles in the ceiling.
I wanted to give them a sense of floating. My mother calls empty bottles dead soldiers and when viewing the finished work I liked how they did look like bodies with their heads stuck in or breaking through the ceiling. When I was younger, my Dad would say I had my head in the clouds (I think I still do).
Installation

I chose to have my exhibition in a non-gallery venue. I wanted a setting similar to where the works had been created. My studio was a bedroom in a converted house and my pieces felt at home in that space and environment—so I decided to have my show in a house. I had the opportunity to exhibit in the University’s undergraduate studios. The studios were in a modified house that had recently been emptied for demolishing. I was excited to get the house as a venue. It had two levels and lots of rooms with good space. The house environment meant the viewer could move around from bedroom to bedroom discovering different art works inhabiting the home. Having the sculptures displayed in this manner enabled the individual works to come together as a body and be viewed as an installation.

I feel the house presented a venue that hovered between the public and private worlds. It was not pristine like a gallery—it was lived in and had character, especially as it had been home to art students for years. It was fitting to reuse it as a found object for my show and as its last leg. Having different-sized rooms, halls and nooks and crannies to display the work was ideal. I wanted to have an ambiguous flow to the exhibition, so there was not an obvious beginning or end. I used to have a reoccurring dream where I could pick a dream from drawers where they were stored; but they were not filed in an organized manner and were in were all sorts and types of drawers. I set up the show with that dream in mind—so one could pick or happen upon what they fancied. I liked the idea that each room could be viewed like a glimpse of a fractured dream, memory or thought. I wanted the rooms to feel intimate and aimed to create spaces where the viewer would want to dwell and reflect.

It was important to find the right place for each work so they could come alive and feel at home. I was thrilled as the show took form, seeing the pieces living and belonging in their space. A lot of my pieces only work when they are displayed—the majority of them can be stored in shoe boxes when not needed.
Most of the time, my studio just looked like a room with piles of paper and fabric. Having it all exhibited generated a great sense of productivity and accomplishment.

When choosing how to exhibit my show I wanted to maintain the experimental and improvisational qualities inherent in my work process. I had created delicate, subtle works intuitively and wanted to exhibit them so these qualities were preserved and enhanced. For example, the button piece was very delicate, so suspending it from the ceiling and informing the viewer they were strung on my hair strengthened the fragility of the work. Also, using old drawers as shelves within the show, coming precariously out of the walls, enabled the fragile plaster envelopes and the small prayer cuffs to be displayed as precious objects.

Although I was exhibiting artwork, I was also letting people view me through these private rituals. I felt it important to maintain the balance of exposure and concealment inherent within the work—choosing when to let the audience read personal content within works and when to let the audience touch pieces. At first, the book covers were going to be exhibited in a pile on a chair or desk, but I decided to put them on the wall. On the inside of the book covers I had written about people in my life—they were open for the viewer to read if they could read my handwriting.

There is a strong element of touch in my work as all of the pieces were constructed by hand through prolonged and repetitious activity. I felt the need or want to touch pieces was present and invited the viewer to actively interact within certain works. I chose to let the viewer open sealed envelopes to reveal collages made out of my recent keepsakes. However, with the shirts I chose to sew the pockets shut so the contents were only vaguely visible through the fabric. I was going to let people read my letters, but chickened out. However, some viewers misread my title cards and thought they could read the letters. Mortifyingly, a boy I liked actually read one of them about how I had fancied him.
Envelopes

Old envelopes dating from the 50’s, containing collages made from my personal memorabilia. The envelopes were sealed and the viewer was invited to open them.
The process of my work combined with its display evoked fragility and the ephemeral. The objects used linked the work to the personal—triggering a theme of identity, which allowed the work to share feelings of vulnerability and longing. The transformation of found objects with the banal becoming precious assisted the underlying moods of displacement and insecurity. There was strength to the pieces being in a state of flux that I had not anticipated. Like the receipt chair flowing over the floor, or the paper spirals unraveling, if you stayed in the room for a while you could see a paper or two softly fall away from the bundle. I felt they suggested the transience of time beautifully.

Memory, emotion, and thought are not stationary or tangible. I hope striving to articulate the intangible through my work has been poetically successful.
Prayer Cuffs

Cuffs taken off of used shirts,
inside embroidered with thoughts, emotions and desires.
(They were buttoned shut and the viewer was invited to open them.)
When I was six years old and in Primary two at school, our class went on a trip to the Huntrian Museum in Glasgow to visit an American Indian Exhibit. When I got home, I couldn’t wait to tell my family about my trip. I still remember walking home excited with my face painted like an Indian. I really just remember telling my Mum, but I think my sisters were listening too. I had never been on a school trip so I told my Mum everything about the experience. While describing the entrance of the museum, I told her there were green tiles on the ceiling. It took me a long time to finish my story.

My Mum likes to tell this story as the epitome of my character and why I’m an artist—because I noticed the tiles on the ceiling. It has become a family joke now. Sometimes I wonder if I really remember it happening or if I just remember the retelling of the story. I have a photo of myself in my school uniform with my face painted trying to look like an American Indian. When I look at it, I think I remember it, but I’m not sure. It’s like that with so many stories. I wonder if my memories are really mine or fractured memory accompanied by the memories of photos and stories.

I’ve always been a storyteller; I remember random things and feel the need to tell them. My sisters will make hand signals and wind me on to finish a story faster or ask me “were there tiles on the ceiling?” if I am giving too much information.
Book Covers

Book covers inscribed with all the people who I have known and can remember by name; plus how I knew them and some stuff about them, with repetition and mindless ramblings.
Snow encompasses childhood to me. When it snows heavy it is so perfect at first, but in Glasgow it is wet and soon the snow becomes sludgy and gets dirty and melts very fast—most of the time it is gone by the next day. As children, we would go sledging on the smallest amount of snow. We would live for the snow and would even, go sledging in the middle of the night in fear of it disappearing by the next day. We would run up the hill and slide down over and over again until we were soaked through and our Mum would call us home for hot Ribena. It was brilliant if the snow stayed and you could go out again the next day, but most of the time it was gone and you had to wait, sometimes a whole year to go sledging again.
Altoid Tins

Black and white photographs of dungaree replicas, covered in wax and framed in sweetie tins.
I do not drive. I find comfort in riding public transport, especially at night. I enjoy travelling alone and try to sit by the window. I go into a world of my own and stare at my reflection, watching the streets and buildings move through my face. Sometimes, I get lost watching and miss my stop. I watch the people get on and off—after a while I start to recognise them even though they are always strangers.
Tape

Text removed from books with scotch tape.
I was born with cerebral palsy. It is very mild, you probably wouldn’t even notice. My parents realized something was wrong when I was getting to the age of learning to walk. They took me to the doctors and tests were carried out including Cat Scans. The brain damage was acute, but the Doctors were unsure how badly it would affect me. They told my parents I would have difficulty with motor skills on the right side of my body and that I could suffer from mental disabilities.

It was hard on my parents, but apart from having a smaller foot, an uncoordinated hand, and being very clumsy, you really wouldn’t know.

As a child, I had to wear a splint to correct my foot and gait. At story time in class, I had to sit on my chair because I couldn’t cross my legs on the floor with the other kids. I still can’t cross my legs—it is annoying. My right side has restricted control and sometimes I’ll hit people harder than I mean to.

I had a ligament and muscle stretching operation when I was five and had to wear a plaster cast for a long time. I would make up stories about how I broke my leg to tell kids who asked at school.

My sisters are all really good swimmers and were on a swimming team. I can swim and I’m strong, but I’m not fast. Once my Dad asked me if I wanted to join the disabled swim team, I didn’t want to because there were disabled swimmers with missing limbs that could swim faster than I could and I had all of mine.

I have felt frustrated over the years by this. People don’t notice my disability and I tend not to tell people unless I feel comfortable or have too. But at times I do wish it was more obvious.
I have tried to do things I can’t and end up hurting myself. When I was younger, I was more defiant, and didn’t care so much, or wasn’t as scared. I would try to do the things my sisters and friends did with ease. When playing, I would have my Mum’s voice in my head “be careful Jeannie, you can’t do things other kids can do.” It was true, but sometimes I would say “stuff it” and try to climb the tree or roller skate down the hill and end up getting stuck or falling really bad and banging my head. Most of the time, I would sit at the bottom of the trees my friends were playing in and make little stones houses to catch and put frogs in.
Envelope Molds

Letters, hand made maps and drawings enclosed in a plaster. (The paper works were placed in an envelope, then plaster was poured in and the envelope was licked shut; when dried the envelopes were removed.)
Keyhole

Super 8 film of baby dungarees replica, viewed through keyhole space in an old door.
When I was younger, I really liked planting things. I would get books and gardening things for gifts. When I was about four, before I started planting real things, I used to plant buttons out in my Mums rockery. One day, I came home from school really late and my Mum was a little worried about me. I had stopped to get her a plant on the way home from school—it was growing out of a crack in the pavement and had a pretty pink flower. I was sad to find out it was a weed and that I had wasted my time trying to dig up the plant without breaking the roots.
Buttons

Buttons collected off of used shirts and sifted out of a barrel full of buttons in an antique shop, strung on thread made by my hair.
Book Shelf

Artist books encased in the wall.
(The viewer was invited to take them out and look through them.)
At home, lollipops were on paper sticks. The sticks were made out of one piece of paper rolled up tight to make the stick. I would eat the lollipop and then unroll the paper stick and roll it up over and over. I liked how tight you could get it. When I was at art school during my undergraduate studies, I had a friend that smoked and would roll his own cigarettes. Although I never smoked, I was curious to learn how to roll his cigarettes. He taught me how. When I get nervous or anxious, I do a few fidgety things. I rub my index finger under my nose as if it is itchy or tuck my hair behind my ear repeatedly even if I don’t need to, or I'll find a wee bit of paper and roll it up over and over again like the lollipop stick.
Pages

Pages from the inside of old books rolled together, then unwound on the floor.
When I was younger, I wanted to learn how to iron, so my Mum would let me iron my Dad’s handkerchiefs. I would iron them into little squares and really enjoyed doing it. As I got older, I would iron my Dad’s shirts if he needed me too. He would ask any of his daughters if they could help him out and iron a shirt for him. We would moan, but when I took my turn, which I think came around more, I did like doing a good job for him. I also liked to iron my school uniform and lay it out for the next day, but along the way I got lazy and would try to not iron –now I don’t really iron anything.
Pockets

Shirt pockets containing letters, drawings and collages, sewn shut.
As a child I collected caterpillars. I found a hairy one once and my Dad helped me make a home for him in an old sweetie jar with a tuft of grass. I kept him in the green house. My big sister thought it was cruel to keep him, so she let him go and told me he had turned into a butterfly. I believed her and was sad I had missed seeing him transform.
Wall Paper

Stories transcribed from my Mother’s letters and my letters written in glue. Japanese paper found dusty and forgotten on the back of a shelf in the paper stock room I worked in and old tap found in a bush in the back garden of my studio.
Prayer Books

The insides of books with holes put in them, fixed with rolled paper that had prayers written on them.