2012-06-13

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Effluvia and Aporia

Emily A. Melander

A selected project submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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August 2012

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ABSTRACT

Effluvia and Aporia

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My final thesis exhibition, *Effluvia and Aporia*, explores impermanence, loss and uncertainty. I use materials and images in a poetic way, where there is a link between what the work is and what it means. I use looped videos with images of water, light, and dissolving clay to invite a meditative state. I also use materials like tissue paper, paper-mache, and paper thin porcelain tiles to invite fragility and complexity into the viewer’s experience. I am concerned with creating an interactive environment that allows for a multiplicity of responses and interpretations from each viewer depending on their unique perceptions.

I am interested in impermanence, loss and uncertainty as themes because I find that they are ever present in life. My intention is to explore these ideas and create an experience that allows for the viewer to reflect on them as well.

Keywords: installation, poetic, impermanence, loss, uncertainty
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The word *effluvia*, refers to the flowing of material too subtle to be perceived by touch or sight. *Aporia*, relates to some difficulty, a point of doubt or indecision. My final exhibition *Effluvia and Aporia*, came together after two years of exploration in the MFA program at Brigham Young University. During this time I allowed my work to be guided by personal questions and interests rather than the concerns of any particular medium. However, as I expanded the scope of my practice, I also expanded my understanding of ceramics, sculpture, video, performance, and installation art. Along the way I was given encouragement from my committee to “trust the process.” One of the experiences I value most is surprise. In particular the space that follows being surprised or startled, a space where new ideas, perspectives, and possibilities arise. My final exhibition was an experiment into this realm of creating a space or environment that allows the viewer to be engaged with the work through their senses and movement of their body in a similar way that I privilege my body and senses during the process of creating. In this paper I will outline three aspects of my final exhibition: themes, process, and how I contextualize the work within contemporary art.

I. THEMES

**Impermanence, Loss, and Uncertainty**

My art practice has been a process of discovery in which over and over, I uncover resonances of impermanence, loss, and uncertainty. I find that as I continue to work with these themes in my art, I come closer to my own humanity. I’ve also found that the experience of facing myself can be psychologically trying. At the same time there's always something humorous in being faced with your own humanity. I use elements of
duration and drama to recreate the humor, as well to incorporate that trying quality that tends to arise when I am faced with myself.

Impermanence, loss, and uncertainty are ever present in life. Emily Dickinson regarded uncertainty as both needed and dreadful, “it is true that the unknown is the largest need of the intellect, though for it, no one thinks to thank God.”¹ Uncertainty serves as ground for invention and imagination. Rather than resist the reality of impermanence, loss and uncertainty I use my art practice as a way to become better acquainted with it.

Acute observation is as important to the poet as it is to the scientist. In physics the nature of things depends heavily on the observer. In the book Biocentrism, Eugene Wigner, a physicist, is quoted, “it is not possible to formulate the laws of physics in a fully consistent way without reference to the consciousness of the observer.”² The author goes on to explain that “when quantum theory implies that consciousness must exist, it tacitly shows that the content of the mind is the ultimate reality, and that only an act of observation can confer shape and form to reality.”³

For example, Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, which states that there is a limit to the precision with which certain pairs of physical properties can be simultaneously known. Light will behave either as a wave or a particle, depending on if it is observed and how it is measured.⁴

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Addressing the uncertain nature of things, philosopher Joseph Campbell remarked,

Apparently in every sphere of human search and experience mystery of the ultimate nature of being breaks into oxymoronic paradox, and the best that can be said of it has to be taken simply as metaphor—whether as particles and waves or as Appollo and Dionysus, pleasure and pain. Both in science and in poetry the principle of the anagogical metaphor is thus recognized today: it is only from the pulpit and the press that one hears of truths and virtues in definable fixed terms.”

I am interested in flux on all levels; from the smallest shifts on an atomic scale, to the shifting layers of experience and perception through which each individual interprets the world.

I am interested in Emily Dickinson’s writing because it embodies a “volatile truth.” She believed “‘that subjects of which we know nothing are all around us.’ There are many unknown subjects in her mental universe, among them: Death and the afterlife, God, nature, artistic and poetic inspiration, one’s own mind, and other human beings.” I also assume I know very little about anything and that things are always in flux. Thus, the themes of impermanence, loss and uncertainty resonate with me.

In my exhibition I choose to use water and light, two metaphorical as well as physical embodiments of the themes I have mentioned (see image 1). Reflecting light on

the surface of a lake is one of my earliest memories. I still cannot comprehend the complexity or delight of a sparkling water but it points me toward impermanence, loss, and uncertainty.

**Meditation**

Our experience is always in flux, as Joseph Campbell put it, our life consists of oxymoronic paradoxes. In Buddhism this observed flux is described as the Eight Worldly Winds: praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. The practice of meditation relieves suffering not by eliminating flux, but through the development of equanimity and compassion.\(^8\)

Buddhist principles such as mindfulness, and meditation are also themes I hope to evoke in my exhibition. I was interested in creating an installation that allowed for flux and paradox as well as awareness, thus creating a meditative environment. I did this by using repetition, nature, and space as key elements throughout the installation. The videos are looped and the images are of water, sky, light, or dissolving clay. Space around each element in the installation provides the viewer with time to pause and reflect. “The locus of identity is in the mystery of awareness.” I heard these complex yet simple words from a Buddhist teacher and they are often a consideration in the work I make.

**Complexity and Fragility**

Complexity and fragility are also themes in the body of work I made for my final exhibition. The title, *Effluvia and Aporia*, refers to both these concerns. The large tissue

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paper web wall shivers with silver reflective cellophane hanging behind it (see image 2). This piece is an attempt to make visual the very fragile yet interconnected state of being human. I use tissue paper in the form of webs, to emphasize the fragile and beautiful qualities of existence. Each web has its own center, which relates to ideas of pluralism and individual consciousness. I also enjoy working with reflective and lightweight materials because the mutability of these materials enhances the liveliness of the space as well as the viewer’s perception.

Another piece in the exhibition that embodies complexity and fragility are the hanging porcelain tiles (see image 3). I use a fan to activate the installation and create a sound that is constant and ever changing. The piece subtly responds to the viewer’s body in relation to the fan and tiles. The entire installation is meant to activate a viewer’s participation in an environment in flux, influenced by their presence: the tissue paper web wall responds subtly to the motion of a person walking by, the sparkly water projections are disturbed by the shadow of people in the space (see image 4), and the large paper-mache sculpture provides space for the viewer to enter inside of, sit, and view the show from a different perspective (see image 5). I would like to activate ‘nimble believing’ in the viewer because art based on settled beliefs is not engaging to me.

Desire

In the middle of the installation space there are two screens hanging parallel to each other, creating a passageway between. A sparkling river is projected on to each screen from behind, creating a flow in opposite directions. I find that one of my deepest

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II. PROCESS

Poetic Process

I am an artist concerned with poetics, grateful for the unknown, given to the observation of impermanence, the excitement of light dancing on the surface of a body of water. I work with Dickinson and Whitman in mind, poets who precisely dealt with what “glimmers at the edges of knowledge - all we do not know.”10 I borrow from their acute and accurate ear for the complexity of language; literary devices such as repetition, metaphor, and meter, in order to build a visual language, which is at once acute while leaving room for interpretation. My work explores the fluidity and fluctuations of human experience "sympathetic towards what cannot be said,"11 revealing dissolved boundaries between interior and exterior, known and unknown. I privilege embodied experience and exploration to expose the slippery essence of existence.

I consider my work to be poetic in that I choose to work with materials and forms that relate to the themes I am exploring. For example, in a literal sense I use the form of a deer dissolving in water, to talk about losing something that is dear (see image 7). I work

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with tissue paper, paper-mache, and unfired porcelain; fleeting and ephemeral materials to express fleeting and ephemeral ideas. The fired porcelain in the show is extremely thin and fragile in form. The tiles are translucent, like skin. Each tinkling sound serves as a reminder of the fragility of form; including our own bodies.

**Phenomenology**

Another important aspect of my process is engaging the body. Phenomenology is perception based on embodied experience. The pieces in the exhibition are meant to engage the viewer, inviting experience and interaction. The process of making my work obviously engages my body and often involves repetition. Repetitive processes allow me to get to know the forms and materials well. For example I made over 800 porcelain tiles. I rolled out each tile extremely thin, pushing the material to its limits (see image 8).

As discussed earlier, the installation with two screens and sparkling water, is meant to engage the viewer between two directions. This illustrates the meaning of the word *aporia*; to be stuck at an impasse or indecision. However, the viewer has the ability to turn and face one direction or the other, using their body to limit and shape their experience (see image 9). “I am my body,” says Merleau-Ponty, “and to live the body, it also is to live the space.”

I consider the installation poetic because of the careful choices of materials and the engagement of the viewer’s body and perceptions to activate meaning.

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III. CONTEXTUALIZATION

I contextualize my work both formally and conceptually with many contemporary artists. I will discuss four artists whose work most relates to my final exhibition: Kimsooja, Olafur Eliasson, Shirin Neshat, and Spencer Finch.

Kimsooja is an artist working in video, installation, and performance. Her work, To Breath (see image 10), was installed at the Crystal Palace in Madrid, Spain. In this installation she used space, light, mirrors and sound to explore the subtle complexity of being human. She explains how:

A mirror can be another tool of ’sewing’ as an ’unfolded needle’ to me, as a medium that connects the self and the other self. If ’mirroring’ can be a form of ’sewing the self’, which means questioning the self, and connecting the self, ’breathing’ is, in its dimension of action, a similar activity of ’sewing’ that questions our moment of ’Life’ and ’Death’. In mirroring, our gaze serves as a sewing thread that bounces back and forth, going deeply into oneself and to the other self, re-connecting ourselves to its reality and fantasy. A mirror is a fabric that is sewn by our gaze, breathing in and out.¹³ I am inspired by Kimsooja’s poetic work that unites form and content.

In several of my pieces I also use a mirror as a basic format. This format encourages reflection and introspection, as Kimsooja said, “our gaze…bounces back and

forth, going deeply into oneself and to the other self.” An example of using a mirror format in my own work is the video of the dissolving deer (see image 7). The unfired porcelain forms are in a tank of water, facing one another as though looking in a mirror and nearly touching. The video consists of the deer slowly dissolving until they crumble into two, cloudy mounds. I also use the format of a mirror image in the large paper-mache sculpture (see image 11). The form is complicated with four deer ears to amplify the idea of reflection and meditation, as well as confusion and indecision.

Olafur Elliasson’s installations are meant to engage the viewer. His work addresses questions like, “What is illusion and what is real?” He says,

I... think that there is a somewhat proportional relationship between what you could call 'the level of representation' in which you orient yourself and the engagement of your body and senses. The more senses, the less representational.

By engaging the viewer’s senses, as in his piece Beauty (see image 12), consisting of light and water that create ever changing rainbows, he is able to pose questions about perception.

Shirin Neshat is a video artist whose two channel video installation Turbulent, was especially influential in the way I set up my video installation on two screens. In Turbulent, Neshat uses two screens opposite of each other, one with a man performing to an audience and one with a woman singing to no audience (see image 13). The two

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screens seem to be aware of each other and interact with one another in the brilliant way of using the viewer to connect the content. “The two groups often appear to watch each other across spaces that are physically separated, only reconciled by the presence of the viewer’s gaze that joins them both.”16 My intention is also to engage the viewer, who reconciles the flow of opposite directions by choosing how to experience the installation with their body. In this way I used a similar format as Turbulant, which, “engages the viewer, who stands in the middle of this work, in a visual conversation. The passivity associated with traditional cinematic situations is absent as the viewer actively experiences both screens.”17

Spencer Finch is a contemporary artist who employs both a scientific and poetic approach to a variety of media and materials in attempt to explore the phenomenological and psychological aspects of perception. Finch uses a poetic approach to illuminate the immaterial.18 He considers his work to be attempts at pointing to something that can never fully be defined, in part because of its ever changing qualities, as well as the limitations of perception. "There is always a paradox inherent in vision, an impossible desire to see yourself seeing. A lot of my work probes this tension; to want to see, but not being able to.”19

His large work involving 700 individual panes of glass is an attempt to represent one point of the Hudson River through a study of the changing light, color, and

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conditions of the water (see image 14). The title of this piece, *The River that Flows Both Ways*, refers to the Native American name for the Hudson River, a tidal river that embodies fluctuation and change. The title of this piece very closely relates with the themes I am interested in exploring. Finch’s process involved floating down the river in a tugboat. He photographed the same moving spot in the river every minute, for 700 minutes. The colored panes of glass correspond to a pixel of color from each photograph. Finch’s watery subject informed his choice to use glass; both are reflective, translucent, and liquid. He is interested in the impossibility of making an image of something that is always changing, “700 attempts gets closer than if doing it just once.”

Finch describes how poetry is a model for his work by the “necessary” and “tight relationship between what the work is and says,” or, “between the form of the work and the subject matter.” In a similar way I choose materials that have a “tight relationship” between the idea I am exploring and the work itself. Like Finch I am also interested in exploring things that have a fleeting but familiar quality. And I seek to understand these themes through various angles and media in attempt to approach what is essentially ungraspable.

In an interview Finch describes how all the work he makes is driven by the impossible desire for representation. “Ultimately the sun is always the impossible goal of my work - always the goal, always absent.” “Though it looks abstract,” he explains, “it

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is a representation of something specific.” In my own work I also feel that I am working with the impossible goal, of representing something that is intangible. And like artists like Finch, Kimsooja, Elliason, and Nishat I work with various media in a poetic way.

**Summary**

I work in a range of media, and I acknowledge myself as the link that ties the work together. I have a desire to understand something as mysterious and ever present as my own humanity in the same way that Spencer Finch has a desire to capture something as immense, distant, and pervasive as the sun. My work consists of a playful constellation of media that the viewer must put together in order to decipher meaning. I do not have an interest in presenting precise answers; I am more interested in the questions. As I follow this interest in understanding myself, and my humanity, I find connection to everyone else. Like the author Richard Rhodes expressed, “in one sense, I need to write my books for myself; but the outcome is a shared experience, what physicists might call a resonance.” I also hope the viewer will have a resonate experience viewing my work.

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