

THESIS

ACTS OF EMERGENCE

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Art

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2015

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ABSTRACT

ACTS OF EMERGENCE

In my thesis installation *Acts of Emergence*, impressions of memory and past experiences emerge from canvas through layers of stain and stitch. Each piece suggests a fragment of memory—real and imagined. Several dozen fragmented units represent a mapping of memory through space, as if each component manifests pieces of a moment in time, flowing across the wall.

The format of this piece presents a kind of disjointed timeline that contains partial records of an experience. The work as a whole is scattered across and floating away from the wall, creating a fragmented composition made up of bits of densely stitched canvas. Viewed more closely, each fragment itself becomes a composition. Stains suggest the presence of memories left behind.

Each piece in this panorama holds a moment; together the units present a kind of suspended place or moment in time. These fragments appear to travel across the wall, emerging from my memory and stained with references to a history, not unlike paintings made by the Mexica people of Pre-Hispanic Mexico, who conceived time and space as intrinsically linked.

I draw much inspiration from the human body's capacity to convey many emotions. The dancing figures in my work are anonymous: each with their own identity, yet not seen as anyone in particular. They are frozen in specific moments, offering a view of that moment as well. Together, suspended figures plot multiple moments within this spreading map of memory.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people who have accompanied me on this journey:

My parents Mary and Jerome LaBarre for their constant support and understanding.

My mentor and friend Jan R. Carson for many hours of impromptu critiques and moments of laughter.

Thomas Lundberg for nonstop encouragement and inspiration.

My thesis committee Del Harrow, Jane Kneller, and Ajean Ryan for your guidance.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Mary Rebecca Connelly LaBarre,
who first showed me how to look at the little worlds all around me,
and who now shows me the truth of memory's impermanence
and the gift of moments of joy.

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*“To gain any kind of knowledge, to recognize, associate, to behave
or to create—is to remember.”*

Jan R. Carson¹

Memories sometimes seem to emerge from the murkiness of consciousness. A stain on a shirt may evoke the memory of a chance encounter. The shape of the stain itself may provoke the flash of an image, like a remembered dream. In my thesis installation *Acts of Emergence* impressions of memory and past experiences emerge from canvas through layers of stain and stitch. Each piece suggests a fragment of memory—real and imagined. Several dozen fragmented units represent a mapping of memory through space, as if each component manifests pieces of a moment in time, flowing across the wall.

The work as a whole is scattered across and floating away from the wall, creating a fragmented composition made up of bits of densely stitched canvas. Viewed more closely, each fragment itself becomes a composition. The islands making up this map are carefully and methodically machine stitched. The sewing-machine needle is a kind of stylus, cross-hatching the surface of the fabric. While graphite, ink, and paint commonly lay on surfaces, thread penetrates, mends, and builds repetitively upon each prior stitch, until the fabric becomes rigid and strong. Heavy stitching contrasts with dreamy, ethereal imagery.

The format of this piece presents a kind of disjointed timeline that contains partial records of an experience. Stains suggest the presence of memories left behind. There is a tension here between what I plan compositionally and the surface effects that result from gravity and seeping. I approach the process of staining fabric as a series of small random acts. The act of stitching into these stains is conscious and intentional, as if coaxing a memory to emerge into concrete

form. The stain becomes something nurtured, not shunned. Stains become the shapes and colors that lead viewers along the wall.

Each point on the map is suspended within the space it inhabits, frozen in a moment. While I stitch, I interpret memories and experiences. It is within these acts of remembering that my work methods recall philosopher Robert Emmett Mueller's theory of mnemesthetics, named for the Greek goddess of memory, Mnemosyne. In this theory, Mueller discusses how the acts of making and viewing art are ways of "playing it back"² in our minds. This is very different from mimicry. Mueller describes how we try not to recreate the world around us, but to relive experiences. Mueller posits that recreating a moment is how we as viewers can access an artist's consciousness. He says, "We value art, and do not want to forget certain works of art, because they help us recall the depth, magnitude and diversity of our humanity, and they do so in a particularly vivid way."³ There is a shift in how we receive what is before our eyes. When I create, I give form to experiences that I have felt. Depictions of body movements have the greatest immediacy because we can foster an immediate sense of how it could *feel* to hold that pose or live within that microcosm. Alice Kettle, known for large-scale machine-embroidered textiles, says about her artwork that they are, "Collections of work which evoke moments in our lives. Here are people and glimpses of stories marking themes of our very existence."⁴ This statement rings true in my own work, especially as viewed through the perspective of mnemesthetic theory. Like Kettle, my machine stitching creates blurred textures, surfaces that are at once concrete and ethereal. Physically embedded within these textures are figures that appear poised within a moment. These women are graceful and flowing, even though wrought through rigid, repetitive acts of stitching. These stretching figures take form through minute movements of fingers and wrists held steady by my own body that stays still and tense.

TIME AND PLACE

Each piece in this panorama holds a moment; together the units present a kind of suspended place or moment in time. These fragments appear to travel across the wall, emerging from my memory and stained with references to a history, not unlike paintings made by the Mexica people of Pre-Hispanic Mexico, who conceived time and space as intrinsically linked. The Mexica created maps that depicted the history of their own arrival to the land and which also measured physical spaces. There was no distinction between what happened yesterday and what happened years ago. If a figure was represented in a map, it depicted an event *and* a place. The figure evoked a collective memory *and* a historical reenactment. In a similar way, each component of my map emerges from a history and a narrative.

STITCHED HABITATS

Ever since I was a young girl, I have created little worlds. Growing up in the Northwest, and as the youngest child by several years, I had many hours to myself each day. I would use this time to look closely at the small things around me. This need to focus inwardly continues into my adult life and manifests itself in my embroideries. As I look, I imagine being small. What would it be like if the pebbles by a particular stream were my home? Could a cluster of moss become my forest? I draw from small microcosms and develop new versions in my stitched pieces. Within each fragment I build a web of stitches and textured surfaces, which suggest miniature habitats.

As the sewing needle punctures the fabric, a sense of atmosphere begins to grow as stitches layer and overlap. As figures emerge within these small spaces, each silhouette appears

to react to its surroundings. Within these microcosms, the viewer is witness to yet another moment in time.

MAPPING MOMENTS

Dance has played a special role in my life. I draw much inspiration from the human body's capacity to convey many emotions. The dancing figures in my work are anonymous: each with their own identity, yet not seen as anyone in particular. They are frozen in specific moments, offering a view of that moment as well. The still pictures become like snapshots or chance encounters. When I form these figures in stitch, I am reminded that the fleeting moments of movement last much longer in a photograph than a fleeting memory: this is the reason for monochromatic colors within the figures. There is a sense of nostalgia when we see the human form captured by photography. When we view a still of a figure captured in mid-motion, our minds can reconstruct how this moment might have fit with a sequence of gestures. When we watch a dance performance, our bodies may tense and stretch, subconsciously empathizing with the movements we see. Robert Emmett Mueller speaks to this when he writes, "The metaphor of a sunset is powerful because we see its splendor and feel its warmth daily; the metaphor of emotions acting like ocean waves is powerful because it is easy for us to summon up the experience of tossing on waves."⁵ I think the experience of viewing a body in motion is like this tossing on the waves. I invite viewers to share this physical empathy as dancers gesture within habitats created for them. Together, suspended figures plot multiple moments within this spreading map of memory.

¹ Jan R. Carson, *Heartwater* (1995).

² Robert Emmett Mueller, "Mnemesthetics: Art as the Revivification of Significant Conscious Events," *Leonardo*. Vol. 21, No. 2 (1988), 191.

³ *Ibid.* ƒ

⁴ Alice Kettle, (accessed March 24, 2015). <http://www.alicekettle.com/gallery.cfm>

⁵ Mueller, 192.

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