

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

PROVIDENCE

A project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

in Art

By

Erika Christina Ostrander

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## Dedication

For Robert, Wayne, Elizabeth and Chris, thank you for your love and constant support. For my friends, thank you for always being there. For my teachers, thank you for expanding my mind and helping me understand process. For Grandma Edna and Grandpa Ves, thank you for teaching me about love. For Grandpa Gene and Nana, thank you for making higher education accessible and realizing that art is not just “underwater basket weaving.”

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ABSTRACT

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Equivocation between different theoretical frameworks initiates an exploration of the self and discourse, an attempt to question the composition of identity and the human tendency to fit within a composed structure. My art practice is inextricably shaped by the perpetual flux in environment and ideology within which I had to function growing up and by my current need to create connections between seemingly opposing ideas. Through the process of making sculptures and multi media installations, I question discourse as much as I question myself, constantly deviating between various theoretical structures and language as a way to understand experience.

## Introduction

A professor once spoke to me about going through life with “Soft Eyes.” I equate this idea to the concept of epoche in phenomenology, the suspension of judgment, essentially, understanding the history or outcome of an event but suspending that knowledge in order to perceive an experience as it presents itself (Husserl). This is the space where the subjective can be seen through an objective lens. Equivocation between different theoretical frameworks initiates an exploration of the self and discourse, an attempt to question the composition of identity and the human tendency to fit within a composed structure.

The creation of a cardinal identity binds oneself to a history, providing a structure that is familiar. According to Judith Butler, the construct of identity is like playing dress up, a method for categorizing and rationalizing structures that provide the illusion of control and safety (Butler). Ambiguity lies on the horizon, an interstitial space where the understanding of identity can fall apart, effectively opposing the beliefs instilled within a community (Bhabha).

I was born into a polarized family, and my way of coping was to blend into space like a chameleon, quickly adapting to contrasting environments and expectations as a way to create stability for myself. The structure of my art practice is inextricably shaped by the perpetual flux in environment and ideology within which I had to function and by my current need to create connections between seemingly opposing ideas. Through the process of making work, I question discourse as much as I question myself, constantly deviating between different theoretical structures and language as a way to understand experience.

## Wrapping

I am interested in different cultural articulations of acceptance and transformation that are bound to the earth and the concept of God. Many North American Indian tribes hold rites of passage to signal the transition out of childhood, leaving civilization for days at a time, venturing into the wilderness alone, fasting and pushing the body to its limit, returning as a spiritually aware adult (Penny). Christian beliefs set up purification rituals such as baptism to cleanse the body of earthly sins, not only enabling acceptance by the group but also providing safety in the Kingdom of God (Audi, Bell, Preston).

Advertising and product design bombard consumers with ways to change or alter the physical body or the self in order to fit within contemporary. People are told what they lack and, in the hope that something will fix these faults, they seek different structures for the cure. Having worked in a waxing salon for four years, I saw this in clients who ritualistically appeared at the salon every four weeks for “maintenance.” If the duration between appointments was inconsistent, clients complained about turning into “hairy beasts.” Women feared showing significant others their “unmaintained” bodies. My work *When you Lay be a Good One* responds to this compulsive behavior the goal of which might be to secure a mate or fit within a societally acceptable way of being.

*The Things I thought I knew (Bible Sausage)* is a direct response to the construct of Christian society. Growing up, I had many friends and family members who were extremely religious. The fact that my mother came out as a lesbian when I was in first grade provided alarming contrast. From a young age, I was compelled to sort out questions of morality and the “right” way of being. *Bible Sausage* addresses this polarity with a pulped bible. Breaking down text and ideas and feeding the pulped bible into

animal intestines became a way to question what is the “correct” or “right” way to live.

My *Wrapping* performances establish a personal structure that reifies transformation. Wrapping myself within the natural pig casing, ripping it off, and cleaning and purifying my body repeatedly reinforces the casing becoming part of my skin. The act of wrapping a naked body in cold, raw animal innards fostered a heightened physical experience that began as visceral chaos and ended in a psychological space of meditation and serenity. Becoming part of this abject material forced me to confront my mortality as well as my humanity, effectively subjecting my body to the same treatment I exerted on the Christian Bible.

Each time I performed *Wrapping*, I concentrated on a different body part concentrated. I wrapped feet, legs, arms, torso, chest, neck, or head until the process encompassed my entire body, and always concluding with a sense of inner calm. By removing the casing attempted to remove the unclean, or problematic, element. As I engaged in this ritual performance, I considered, or meditated on, personal qualities that I wanted to improve. When wrapping my neck, I concentrated on my “voice,” the idea of speaking one’s truth, and being honest with myself and others. My personal wrapping ritual transferred negativity outside of my body to tangible relics.

Repeated exposure to and exploration of a material creates tacit understanding, allowing process to guide one project into another. The installation *Home in the Body Away from the Body and Home* was realized after the completion of *Wrapping*. The sausage casing had become another skin through layering and peeling, whereas the tub became a surrogate for the body, a vessel holding abject debris and life’s filth. I painted the gallery walls to emulate the inside of the “unclean” tub, thereby locating the audience



within the process I had endured. This project completed a body of work, concluding my use of casing and releasing me from psychologically restrictive and physically dirty elements.

### *Higher Octave of Zero*

An individual's understanding of or way of coping with life relates to the process of neurons firing in the brain and triggering pre-programmed responses (Blakemore, Damasio). The brain's complexity can be seen after the severing of the corpus callosum in patients with severe epilepsy; this ameliorative procedure effectively turns a person's brain into two halves. Internal binary opposition is exhibited in patients who outwardly fight with themselves due to the lack of connection between the right and left hemispheres, which separately process information and want different things (Ornstein). Although few people lack a corpus callosum, the two hemispheres function individually but communicate through the highway of neural fibers. Another layer of complexity is seen through the brain's evolution, resulting in the three distinct brains working to create a whole person. The reptilian complex (located in the brain stem) is associated with instinct: fight or flight and control over bodily functions. The limbic system allows for deeper experience through emotion: feelings, love, images, dreams, and play. Functioning separately from these is the neo-cortex, which is responsible for complex thought: language, poetry, art, logic, and awareness (Ornstein, Ramachandran)

The installation *Higher Octave of Zero* alludes to the three brains by separating its components into three parts. Awkwardly placing the dome structure at the gallery entrance, I compel the audience to consciously navigate the environment. The weathered 4x6 inch photograph acknowledges the vulnerability of emotion; I attached it to the wall and covered it with glass to emphasize this frozen moment in time. Ambiguous wall text encouraged the audience to connect the different parts of the installation.

The dome's interior environment brings together multiple types of sensory data, including olfactory, auditory, and tactile elements, in order to engage the audience on different levels of stimulation simultaneously. Many people reported spending longer in the space than they had anticipated. One student added to the installation, and a few visitors had emotional reactions, some being moved to tears. When the audience is free to have such reactions the work effectively transcends the artist.

*Higher Octave of Zero* draws on my personal experience, binding together furniture from my childhood home and from my current residence in order to create a fort, shack, or womb-like enclosure. The video and sound contribute an unsettling, droning, and trance-like soundtrack within the space, and a blend of essential oils and burning sage provide a calming contrast. This installation explores the emotional nature of one's personal history and uses repetitions of the number three to symbolize body, mind, and spirit, as well as past, present, and future, the whole establishing a personal understanding of my past while not binding me to that history.

## Providence

I thought about my life experience for my thesis project. Born in 1984, I experienced childhood by playing in the backyard, building forts, and going to the park; technology did not inform my young life. I remember when my elementary school introduced computers in the classroom environment, and I still recall my day-to-day experience without the Internet. Now childhood is filtered through digital media and lacks a knowledge base in physical skill sets. This detachment from the physical and the enthusiastic acceptance of technology as a conduit for experience creates a different understanding of the physical world as well as a lack of accountability for one's actions (Bauman, Jenkins)

Using Arduino software in *Providence* allows me to create an interactive electronic environment and is important on multiple levels. First, the definition of "providence" is "being protected or guided by God or Nature" (*Merriam-Webster*). I juxtapose this notion-of "God or Nature" with technology within a ¾-scale house built for me in the mid-1980's-that has been left outside since that time. I made sound recordings in the place where this house first stood to capture layered audio of the coexisting natural and artificial environments; this sound collage creates a neurological condition called synesthesia, in which one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway. As a consequence, people entering the installation become part of the house's past and present. The plexiglass floor has a mirror-like, polished stainless steel surface that helps bring the experience to life by reflecting each visitor's presence and imprinting his/her footprints for the next visitor.

In a gallery or museum setting, patrons typically keep a safe distance from the work on display. *Providence* invites the audience to participate in the work. The house's dilapidation and reduced scale encourage a heightened sense of physical awareness in each visitor, while the interactive technology facilitates stimulation of multiple senses.

This installation has allowed me to let go of the past. The house provided a place of solitude for me as a child. Built when I was little, it holds childhood memories and dreams; I used to play house with my friends and younger brother, and together we pretended to be grown up. When I left home, the house became a storage shack; neglected and worn, infested with termites and spiders, it was no longer a place to dream. Psychologically unable to tear it down, I moved the house into the gallery to share my experience and make a meaningful connection with the audience.

## **Conclusion**

In one respect, the process of making art is a clear path; I make work in response to my environment and in an attempt to cope and understand. However, the equivocation in vocabulary subverts discourse and allows me to embrace ambiguity and explore interpretation. I aim to challenge perception and understanding in order to prompt the audience to connect with an object or situation to which it would not organically relate or would initially reject. Ultimately, this connection binds audience and artist together through empathy.

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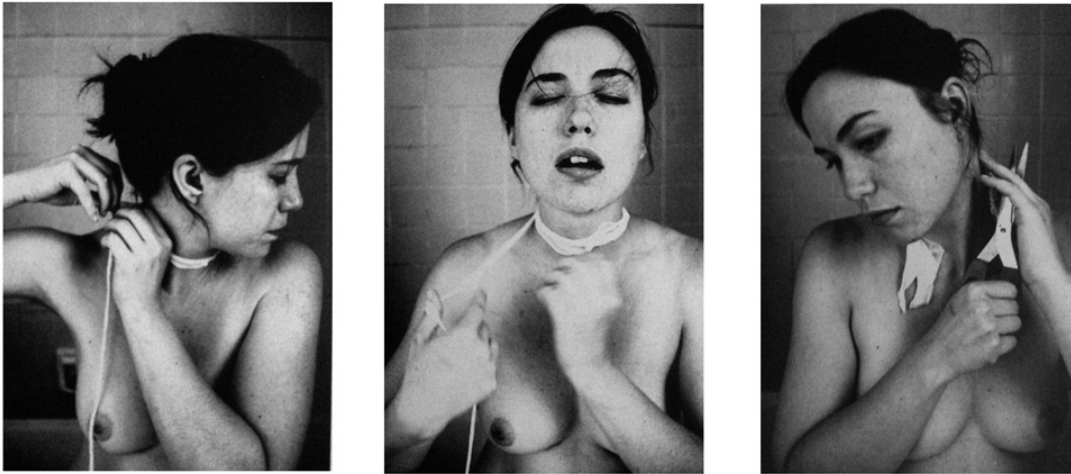
IMAGES



*When You Lay be a Good One*, 2012, Labia Hair and Blue Wax, 8" x 3"



*The Things I thought I knew (Bible Sausage)*, 2011, Pulped Bible and natural sausage casing, 8" x 1.5"



*Wrapping 7*, 2011, Performance Documentation, 8"x10"



*Wrapping 10*, 2012, Performance Documentation, various

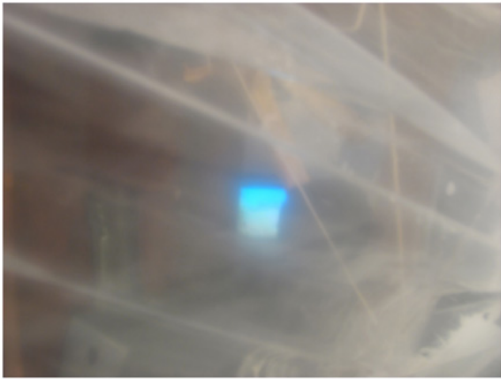


*Home in the Body, Away from the Body and Home*, 2012, Installation sausage Casing and  
Human hair, Tub 5'x 3'



*Home in the Body, Away from the Body and Home (detail), 2012, Installation sausage*

Casing and Human hair, Tub 5'x 3'



*Higher Octave of Zero, 2012, Mixed Media Installation, photo 4"x6" Dome 6'x6'x5'*



*Higher Octave of Zero (detail), 2012, video still*



*Providence, 2013, Mixed Media Installation, 7'x6'x7'*