CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Compression and Expansion of the Body and Architecture

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Masters of Art in Art

Visual Arts

By

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Preface

This thesis focuses on four works selected from the body of work I made during my time as an M.A. candidate. I approach these works by examining my process, research, intention, and the historical contexts which surround them. I first focus on, ‘Swaddle,’ and then continue on to larger ideas including, intimacy and structure, skin and separation, and sculpture as experience. This thesis is primarily categorized around ideas to demonstrate how specific concepts are thematic throughout multiple works. My time as an M.A. student has taught me there is not a set way to create art. Rather, the art making process is a continual navigation through seemingly disparate interests and through this process I am able to make associations. This thesis outlines the overall ideas that fuel my studio practice.
Dedication

To my family and Jamie, I am indebted to you for all your love and support.

To my committee, thank you for investing in the development of my work. I will carry your advice and criticality into my studio practice beyond csun.
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Abstract

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Brittney Hoogervorst

Master of Art in Art, Visual Arts

It is human nature to ensure our memory lives on, we desire to grow beyond the capabilities of our bodies. Expansion and compression are two ways in which my work triumphs the physical limits of the body. This is done through binding my limbs useless, by allowing a cast block of caramel to reject its form, or by deconstructing a chest of drawers with an axe. Materials such as drywall tape, cement, and wooden floors use the inherent language of structure to question the vexed relationships between intimacy, attachment and solitude. By taking action upon the embedded poetics of materials, the work explores the vastness between existence and dissolution.
Swaddle

“My desire was to predict and measure the infinity of the unbound universe, from my own position in it, with dots- an accumulation of particles...I wanted to examine the single dot that was my own life. One polka dot; a single particle among billions.” - Yayoi Kusama

I would like to posit that as humans we crave to grow beyond the capacities of our bodies. We battle against our physical abilities in many ways and across multiple interests. For example, in Ultimate Fighting Champion, UFC, fighters train their bodies to perform at their absolute limits. Through conditioning their bodies they are able to do things such as lift their opponent up and throw them across the ring. In contrast to UFC fighters, others participate in Cosplay where they assume the identity of a fictional character from a video game, movie or comic book. This roleplaying includes dressing up and acting as the character (fig. A). Playing the role of a fictional character does not give Cosplayers those character’s attributes, for instance the ability to fly or to maneuver an absurdly large sword, but through assuming these roles Cosplayers bring fantasy into reality and get to live out the impossible. While these examples are incomplete they are meant to demonstrate that across interests we are searching for ways to confront the limits of our bodies. Instead of being hindered by our physical limitations we are seeking alternative ways of existing and we crave to experience the world in new ways.

In “Swaddle” I fight against the physical limitations of my body by using compression and expansion. I am wrapped from ankle to head with drywall tape, which binds my limbs useless. I then deconstruct a chest of drawers with an axe until it
collapses in on itself (fig. 1). Through these actions I triumph the physical limits of my body by enforcing tension and release. Three performances take place and are photographed, the total work of art is equally performance and photography. Listed below is the order in which these performances take place:

1. My body is wrapped with drywall tape from my ankles to my head.
2. I use an axe to deconstruct a chest of drawers until it collapses on itself, I then bundle the drawer together with a bungee cord.
3. The pieces of broken wood from the drawer are wrapped onto my body using drywall tape until the entire drawer is wrapped around me.

Each performance has an image correlated with it that is printed to life size scale. In the first performance the drywall tape is tightly wrapped around me and attempts to camouflage my body. My limbs are useless and my breathing is constricted as I am compressed. In the second performance I use the action of chopping the drawer as a way to expel beyond my body. Each swing of the axe maps the reach of my arm and the drawer becomes my body as it opens up on itself. The third and final performance uses the failure of camouflaging my body in the first performance and the expansion of the drawer in the second performance to ultimately champion the constraints of space. The drawer is no longer a solid form or bound by its rigidity but instead the sum of its parts allows it to expand into space. These pieces are then tightly wrapped
around my body until the figure is dissolved and the performance has succeeded in constraining and expanding.

I would like to focus on two of Rebecca Horn’s body-extensions that were influential in the way I use my own body as a material, “Finger Gloves” and “White Body Fan” (fig. B). Each piece is worn and allows the wearer to interact with their surroundings. However, these interactions are constricted, limited, and isolated. They illustrate the desire for us to extend and exist beyond our physical body, in doing so new possibilities for interactions and experiences are created. “Finger Gloves” are two black gloves in which each finger is extended in length increasing the distance the wearer can reach. The ability to pick things up is still present but as Horn explains, “I can move them without any effort. Feel, touch, grasp anything, but keeping a certain distance from the objects” (Horn). These gloves extend her body but she is physically more distant or removed from objects. In “White Body Fan” all the possibilities of her reach are made possible by mapping them with a continuous piece of fabric while her legs are bound together by the structure of the piece. She cannot move with ease but is able to show her full arm’s potential at once, she has simultaneously expanded and constricted herself. I’m interested in the way Horn uses the body and extensions as tools to enhance or alter interactions with space and surroundings. The body acts as the most frustrating form of structure and we are bound by it’s physical properties. Through art, sports, and role playing we are seeking new ways to triumph these limitations.
**Intimacy and Structure**

“You crave to grow out of your own body and merge with another person’s body, to seek refuge in it…” Rebecca Horn

Comparison of materials is poetically used to highlight the complexities of interpersonal and intimate relationships. ‘Caramel and Cement’ illustrates a visceral relationship by bringing materials together that are normally disassociated. As the exhibition begins, a cast block of caramel is placed on a cement pedestal, where it melts, slowly rejecting its form until it becomes one entity with the cement pedestal (figure 2). The piece is reconstructed every time it is exhibited and destroyed by its conclusion. This marriage of materials reinforces the idea that cement is a hard, heavy, and monumental material, while the caramel is chewy, tacky, and cannot hold its own form. The caramel envelopes around the cement and loses its structure in order to take on the form of the pedestal, the two materials finally become indiscernible from each other. The caramel and cement are now inseparable and relationships are associated with a tactile and visceral experience.

In the building industry, structures both domestic and commercial are made using similar materials and methods. Cement is poured as a foundation, wood is used to construct walls, drywall tape connects seams and flooring is installed to walk on. These materials create lasting structures but in time they too, decay. ‘Caramel and Cement’ uses the inherent language of cement as a building material to parallel relationships with structure. Structures are protective from adverse weather conditions but also apportion and confine our intimate space. I believe we live in a society that bombards us with the
pressure to be both self-sufficient and intimate. Attachment becomes a growing concern when there is potential for loss and for promise.
Skin and Separation

Skin serves a multitude of purposes as described in “A Concise Companion to Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Culture,”

“The skin is permeable and impermeable. It is superficial and profound. It is truthful and deceptive. It regenerates, yet is permanently drying out. [...] It provokes libidinal investments as often narcissistic as sexual. It is the seat of well-being and seduction. It supplies us as much with pain as pleasure. [...] In its thinness and vulnerability, it stands for our native helplessness, greater than that of any other species, but at the same time our evolutionary adaptiveness. It separates and unites the various senses. In all these dimensions that I have incompletely listed, it has the status of an intermediary, an in-between, a transitional thing” (Marcus.)

Metaphorically skin is a liminal space that separates our internal thoughts and feelings from the external world. Skin serves as a physical boundary and a transitional space that divides the struggles between internal and external, private and public, existence and nonexistence. I recreate this idea of skin with a door jam in “Within, Without, and In Between” and with drywall tape in “Swaddle” (fig. 3.1, 3.2 and 1). To better understand transitional spaces and their power to divide I created “Within, Without, and In Between.” A door jam is constructed spanning a portion of the gap in my studio wall, a generic non-descriptive white door is installed and along the door jam and door edge aluminum tape is laid. The door is shut on the leaves of a house plant and the plant is reflected on itself along the aluminum tape (fig. 4). When a viewer approaches the piece they can enter into my studio through the gap between the door and wall. When standing in the gap the viewer is simultaneously inside my studio, outside my studio, and in the infinite space the plant is trapped in. The plant and viewer become one another as they share a direct physical relationship, together they are neither within nor without.
This ultimately creates empathy for the plant and allows the viewer to reflect on their own role within the piece.
Sculpture as Experience and the Treehouse

“What’s important about each new piece is not whether it is better or worse than your previous efforts, but the ways in which it is similar or different.” - “Art and Fear”

“Everything lives in a sort of pre-quake, in a house about to collapse beneath the weight of walls which, when they too collapse, will have achieved definitive burial.”

Gaston Bachelard

In my thesis exhibition I reconstruct my childhood tree house to create a ‘sculptural experience’ (Barlow). A tree house’s most understood context is in a backyard and used for play, in order to create a ‘sculptural experience’ I remove the structure from this known context. The treehouse is fragmented, flipped on its back, painted fluorescent pink and orange, and is in a gallery (fig. 5 and 6). Doing this creates a way to experience the object divided from it’s function and known aesthetic. In a recent interview Phyllida Barlow, British sculptor and installation artist, describes this as what she calls ‘sculptural experiences’ (Barlow). She begins with an anecdote about a man searching for his home in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Barlow goes on to describe how this man is wading through thick black mud in search of his house and he ends up bewildered about it’s location until he spots a familiar tree. He knew this tree to be at the beginning of the street he lived and as he followed in the direction of the tree he comes across a house upturned on it’s roof. Barlow goes on to explain how she is fascinated by his description of this experience because he never once uses the word home or house to describe his home. This, Barlow explains, “is a very sculptural experience, where you divest the object of it’s literal association” (Barlow). By divesting the tree house from it’s
understood context I seek to create an experience that questions the relationship between space and memory.

The ‘Treehouse’ poses questions about what happens when space, memory, and experience collide. What happens to the spaces from our memories when they are experienced out of context and removed from site? How can space be experienced as an object? Philosopher Gaston Bachelard describes how space is experienced through daydreams in the following passage:

“In the past, the attic may have seemed too small, it may have seemed cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Now, however, in memory recaptured through daydreams, it is hard to say through what syncretism the attic is at once small and large, warm and cool, always comforting” (Bachelard).

How do we apply memory to an object when it has been bisected, flipped on it’s back, and painted fluorescent? The object transcends nostalgia, it is no longer for function, or for play but it is now an art object and a ‘sculptural experience.’

My thesis exhibition serves as an intermediate exhibition, showing the treehouse in a state of evolution. The treehouse is installed as a sculptural object. Integral to my process is a tempo of making that allows a work of art to translate and transform. Through this process the total work of art includes multiple mediums. For example, “Swaddle” begins as three performances and by the end of the process the total work of art is equally performance and photography. “Caramel and Cement” is constructed and destroyed every time it is exhibited and the treehouse will also exist in multiple mediums including prints and a deconstructed object. The work is reinvented, re-newed or part of a continual process to mimic the process of birth, existence, and continuation.
Conclusion

“I've been arm-barred and I let my arm be broken, and I didn't tap, and I got out, and I still won that fight.” - Ronda Rousey

My time in graduate school has been disproportionately full of triumph and defeat. For every time I made something that felt successful I had left countless pieces unresolved. I initially felt continual defeat until I learned, through the mentorship of my committee, that I’m not trying to provide answers but rather I’m seeking to pose deeper questions. As discussed in “Art and Fear”

“…artwork does not emerge from a secure common ground […] Making art now means working in the face of uncertainty; it means living with doubt and contradiction, doing something no one much cares whether you do, and for which there may be neither audience nor reward. Making the work you want to make means setting aside these doubts so that you may see clearly what you have done, and thereby see where to go next. Making the work you want to make means finding nourishment within the work itself. This is not the Age of Faith, Truth, and Certainty” (Art and Fear).

While my time in graduate school has built up to my thesis, I now intend to use it as a spring board into my studio practice outside of school. The treehouse will continue to transform and translate into multiple mediums and I will continue to nourish my studio practice. Christian Tedeschi, my committee chair and mentor, would often give me the same advice Nancy Rubins gave him. He would explain your studio practice to be a flame, and when life gets hard and that flame is barely flickering you must do whatever it takes to protect that sacred flame. Even if it’s faint, you must always keep it burning. So now is when I begin to protect my own flame.
Bibliography


Appendix A

Figure A

Cosplayers dressed as the Marvel’s Avengers
Figure B

*Finger Gloves, Rebecca Horn*  
*White Body Fan, Rebecca Horn*
Appendix B

Figure 1

Swaddle, digital print (drywall tape and drawer), 3 images at 36” x 72”, 2014.
Figure 1 (detail)
Figure 2

*Caramel and Cement*, caramel, cement, 40” x 9” x 9”, 2014.
Figure 3.1

*Within, Without, and In Between*, constructed door jam, house plant, dimensions variable, 2013.
Within, Without, and In Between, constructed door jam, house plant, dimensions variable, 2013.
Within, Without, and In Between, constructed door jam, house plant, dimensions variable, 2013.
Figure 5

*Untitled (Treehouse)*, wood, acrylic, 75" x 110" x 98", 2015.
Figure 6

Untitled (Treehouse), wood, acrylic, 75" x 110" x 98", 2015.