

THESIS

ABSTRACTION, IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY

Submitted by

Maria Hettinga

Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2014

Master's Committee:

Advisor: Stephen Simons

Co-Advisor: James Dormer

Dan Beachy-Quick

Ajean Ryan

Cyane Tornatzky

Copyright by Maria Hettinga 2014

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

ABSTRACTION, IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY

My graduate work has been in printmaking, specifically monoprints. I print a variety of materials which reference landscape as well as domestic life, including common household materials such as wax paper, plastic wrap, sewing machine-stitched swatches of textiles and paper, tulle and lingerie.

My personal biography is instrumental in my work; my cultural identity has played a major role in shaping my personal identity. I was raised in a Dutch immigrant farming community on the rural perimeter of Los Angeles. Domesticity, decorative arts, fashion and femininity were intertwined to create a fixed notion of beauty and to enforce a strict definition of gender roles. My insular, conservative community contrasted with the ever-changing natural environment of Southern California in the 1970s—1990s; the landscape was altered by urban expansion as well as pollution.

I make abstract visual references to fashion, femininity and landscape in effort to create imagery which evades easy definition. I employ abstraction to destabilize traditional, taken-for-granted ideological narratives. While challenging authority, I promote a mindful approach to social and environmental progress which acknowledges the complexities of the twenty-first century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my printmaking advisors, Steve Simons and Jim Dormer, for their encouragement and guidance; they have been profoundly influential in helping me to develop and refine my work.

To Dan Beachy-Quick, Ajean Ryan, and Cyane Tornatzky for serving on my committee; their insights and suggestions strengthened my thesis in unimagined ways.

To Gail and John Brownfield, Denise Kramer, Ron Pokrasso, Terry Davitt-Powell, Cheryl Whitney, Eleanor Moseman, Mary-Ann Kokoska, Emily Moore, Suzanne Kent, and my siblings—Peter Hettinga, Carla DeVries, Paula Hettinga Deemer, and Alysa Hettinga Giorgetti—for cheering me on.

To my late grandmother, Ida Hettinga, for my first introduction to art appreciation.

To my late father, Harvey Hettinga, for teaching me to question authority and fostering a love of nature in me.

To my mother, Alice Hettinga, for her unfailing encouragement.

To my husband, John Duffy, for his love, patience, and for encouraging me to follow my passion and pursue an M.F.A.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
PROCESS.....	5
INFLUENCES.....	10
FASHION AND FEMININITY	13
FEAR.....	18
LANDSCAPE AND THE ENVIRONMENT.....	21
IDEOLOGY AND TRANSFORMATION.....	25
ART HISTORICAL LINKS.....	29
CONCLUSION.....	40
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	41

INTRODUCTION

My graduate work has been in the field of printmaking, primarily monoprints. These are one-of-a-kind works on paper, in medium to large format.

I work abstractly. Rather than dictating fixed content and meaning, I make allusions, poses question and entertain possibilities through my work. This open-ended approach allows me to experience and interpret the work on different levels at different points in time. I resist talking about my work; I want to avoid attaching any particular idea to it. I experience ideas as ever-evolving things; each new moment of experience has the possibility of altering and/or enriching an idea. Therefore every experience of an idea is an iteration of that idea; the collection of multiple iterations of an idea is best characterized by fluctuation.

I use abstract art to conjure ideas or feelings which cannot easily be defined or categorized by other means, such as through text or speech. By suggesting the indescribable, I challenge fixed ideologies which rely on words and systems; these ideologies not only seek to categorize and define every aspect of life, but prescribe the behavior of individuals.

My personal biography is instrumental in my work. My culture of origin informs my worldview, in all its past and current iterations. In my experience, a specific fixed ideology defined cultural and individual identities. Identities were narrowly defined to achieve cultural stability, often at the expense of individual freedom.

Within this ideology the elements of domesticity, decorative arts, fashion and femininity were intertwined; they were used to create a fixed notion of beauty and to enforce a strict definition of gender roles. I refer to these elements by using materials associated with the

domestic and the feminine: wax paper, plastic wrap, mosquito-netting, tulle, lingerie, and sewing-machine stitched swatches of paper and textile.

I use a range of vibrant, desaturated, warm and cool colors. In many cases I consider my palettes to be feminized color schemes. I specifically link them to femininity because they echo the aesthetic appeal of palettes which appear in fashion magazines, which are marketed primarily to women.

I use color to create contrast between shapes. This results in some areas being activated while other areas remain static. The sense of activation is echoed in shape life. Shapes often appear in a state of flux, whether swaying in billowy swaths of netting, contorting under machine-stitched garments, surrendering to oxidation, or slowly cracking under heat, as seen in figures 1 and 2.



Figure 1: Maria Hettinga, *Stringfellow*, 2012
monoprint, 40" x 26"



Figure 2: detail of Figure 1

I play with scale and space. Abstracted shapes resemble silhouettes of figures or landscape, heightening the ambiguity of scale, as demonstrated in figure 3. Through layering transparent and opaque shapes and textural marks, flat space expands to illusionary space. The depth of suggested space ranges from work to work and within works. In some cases the suggested space is the shallow space of woven fabric. In other cases it is ambiguous; it vacillates between the vast and the intimate, presenting as both a satellite view of the earth and as a magnification of aged human skin.



Figure 3: Maria Hettinga, *Hinkley, CA*, 2013
monoprint, 40" x 26"

For some works the orientation I prefer changes; sometimes I place them vertically and other times I place them horizontally. This is the case with figure 3, which I sometimes read as a figure, other times as landscape, and other times as neither. It is this state of flux which draws me

to the image. Its strongest characteristic is its ambiguity. Because it cannot be hemmed in by a simple classification it remains open to many interpretations.

The etching press that I use limits my works to under 38" x 60". The sizes of paper I use range from 36" x 40" to 38" x 50". These pieces are large enough to call attention from some distance while small enough to invite a viewer to a close inspection. I eliminate borders and print on the entire surface of the paper. (The black border which appears in figure 3 is behind the print, not on it; the print's imagery extends to the border of the paper.) Shapes often extend to the borders of the picture plane, suggesting that they continue beyond a field of vision. The continuation of the imagery combined with ambiguity of space suggests the ubiquity; the imagery may be all pervasive at microscopic and macroscopic levels.

I employ a vocabulary of color, shape and texture to create abstract imagery which mediates between topographical and bodily references. I blur the line between landscape and figure in an effort to call into question specific cultural forces which have naturalized their cultivation and manipulation. I coningle references to fashion (which itself has an instable, changing nature), femininity and landscape in effort to create imagery which evades definition. I do this in order to challenge and destabilize ideologies which have traditionally been used limit individual freedom, particularly in the realm of gender identity.

PROCESS

My image-making process begins with feeling and evolves under the influence of feeling. This involves identifying emotions inside of me at the outset of the process and responding to other sensations which are evoked during the process.

The critic Frank O'Hara observed, "One of the crucial decisions for the contemporary artist ...is the very question of conscious composition, whether to 'make the picture' or 'let it happen.'"¹ I do not fit neatly into either camp. Most of my image making involves a similar process: I access a limited set of tools and materials to produce an image, the image is typically printed onto one of two sizes of paper. In those respects I "make the picture" in a certain way. However, when it comes to making plates, selecting color and arranging the picture plane, I lean more toward the "let it happen" side. I pick colors, choose materials and make images that reflect something about how I feel in a particular moment in time; the feeling is often something that I cannot or choose not to verbally articulate.

When I work I prefer to be left alone in the studio (or at least not disturbed by anyone) and to listen to music. Music puts me in a frame of mind where I can focus on my artwork; it allows inarticulate feelings to emerge while day-to-day concerns fade away. The music includes countless genres spanning contemporary rock to classical Western and Eastern music. Through music I sense my connection to humanity. In spite of differences of sex, gender, race, nationality, and temporality, I resonate with other artists who express and create.

Surprise and flexibility to embrace surprise play major roles in my work. Sometimes, when preparing to make one image, I stumble upon another image that is much more appealing

¹ Frank O'Hara, "Helen Frankenthaler," in *An Exhibition of Oil Paintings by Frankenthaler*, ed. Frank O'Hara (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1960), 6.

than the one I had planned. My strongest work has emerged out of such serendipitous moments. These pieces remind me to take risks and to be open to deviating from any plans I make.

The artist Susan Rothenberg commented, “The way the horse image appeared in my paintings was not an intellectual procedure. Most of my work is not run through a rational part of my brain. It comes from a place in me that I don’t chose to examine. I just let it come.”² Similarly, my process is more akin to responding to impulse and surprise rather following a premeditated plan, with a few exceptions.

One of those exceptions involves selecting specific materials. For example, I almost exclusively use Akua ink. It is easy to mix, is easy to manipulate, does not dry out when exposed to air, is economical, is water-based, and does not require toxic chemicals for clean up. The primary reason why I prefer Akua ink is because it is non-toxic. I take measures to prevent exposing my body to excessive toxins because I have been exposed to high levels of pollution; I am afraid of the possible cumulative effects of exposure to pollution and toxins, so I limit my exposure whenever possible. I appreciate the technological advancements that have made non-toxic Akua ink available to me. While I am not a chemist, I trust the company’s claims about non-toxicity. I use this ink hoping that it makes less of an overall toxic impact on the planet than if I had chosen oil-based ink.

I base my color decisions on how I feel about a color as I mix it. If a color does not please me I alter it. I try to avoid analyzing colors through the lens of color theory. Most of the time I add generous amounts of transparent base to the inks in order to increase transparency; this becomes evident as different layers of ink overlap each other.

² Susan Rothenberg, “When Asked If I’m an Expressionist,” in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Kristine Stiles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 280.

Once I have mixed ink I place a Plexiglas plate on the press bed; I apply ink to the plate using a brayer. Sometimes I apply a uniform coat of ink; other times I apply bands of different colors. Sometimes I aim for even coverage of ink; other times I allow brayer marks to leave geometric patterns that vary in transparency.

Next, I place of any number of the following materials onto the inked Plexiglas plate: wax paper, plastic wrap, newsprint, decorative rice paper, netting, tulle, stencils of simple shapes such as circles and ovals, tape, shapes cut out from former prints, and some of the aforementioned materials which are stitched together using a sewing machine. I sometimes refer to these materials as monoplates. When run through the press, the monoplates both deposit impressions on the inked Plexiglas plate and they absorb ink (later they can be used as individual plates to deposit ink onto paper).

I use the press as a mark-making tool. I rarely draw directly onto plates or paper. Instead I prefer somewhat of a removed approach: I carefully or haphazardly place materials onto the Plexiglas plate then let the pressure of the printing press determine the resulting imagery. In this respect, I “let marks happen.” I like the feeling of distance the press affords me in making imagery. This sense of removal paradoxically allows me to deal with very personal feelings at a safe distance.

After running the monoplates through the press, I face a multiplicity of options. I can remove some or all of the monoplates, thereby exposing some or all of the underlying Plexiglas plate which then bears the inky impression of the materials; I can mask off portions of the inked plate by placing monoplates on top; I can add more ink or wipe some away; I can turn the monoplates over so that the inked sides face up.

Then I place a sheet of archival paper on top of whatever is exposed and run it through the press, thereby transferring the image onto paper. I can explore each option by printing each one on a different sheet of paper or I can use the same sheet for several options. I typically print more than one layer of imagery onto a single sheet of paper; transparent layers add the illusion of depth to the image.

Often there is so much ink left on a plate after an initial printing that I pull a second or third print from the plate. These subsequent prints are called ghost prints; they resemble the first print but the imagery tends to be less saturated.

The flexibility of the monoplates makes them incompatible with precise replication, or traditional editioning. Each time they are run through the press they move to some degree or dispense a different range of color, and therefore yield a slightly different image. The prints they yield are called monoprints, which are one-of-a-kind images. Some bodies of monoprint work share a strong family resemblance. They are similar enough to be considered iterations of each other, however their differences are prominent enough for their individuality to be manifest.

I find that I often have more success by limiting my options to a given set of materials and methods, which I mentioned previously. On rare occasions I use other methods and materials. They have included drawing with pastels, charcoal or graphite; collage; and cutting up a print and turning it into a monoplate, which will be inked up and used to transfer an image onto another sheet of paper.

Figure 4 demonstrates some of the processes I employ other than printing. I began this piece by drawing, erasing and blurring graphite drawn onto paper. Then I added several layers of monoprints. Finally I stitched small pieces of a map of Los Angeles county and tulle on the paper using a sewing machine.



Figure 4: Maria Hettinga, *Santa Monica*, 2014
mixed media: monoprint, graphite, stitched tulle and map, 50" x 38"

It is the seemingly endless combination of processes, colors and shapes that inspire a sense of the sublimely infinite in me. Moreover, the immediacy of the process—the quick decisions that happen on a whim, the surprises that come out of left field when I am about to call it a day—that give me a tangible sense of connection to the inexplicable and the unplanned. Consequently I am driven create works which speak of the quality of the moments in which they are created: moments which are electrified by transformation, possibility, uncertainty, and surprise.

Once a work is completed I try to decipher what feelings or thoughts the work evokes in me; that becomes the basis for the title. I may assign a title days, weeks, months, or even years after a work's completion; occasionally I re-title a work. I see the title as a flexible component; it can change as new experiences and perspectives inform my feelings about a work.

INFLUENCES

My work is influenced by my identity; my identity has been shaped by my sensory experience and the cultural ideology of my community of origin.

My experience is significantly informed by landscape and nature—the air, the sunlight, and all living creatures. This includes places and things that I currently experience as well as those from my past.

When I create I frequently draw upon memories of my childhood. I grew up on my family's dairy farm in the Chino Valley, at the periphery of the Los Angeles urban sprawl, during the 1970s—1990s. Our farm included a small menagerie and a rose garden. The sights, sounds, smells and textures of cows, dogs, cats, llamas, horses, sheep, chickens, geese, ducks, peacocks, flies, roses, hay, grass, grain, dust, manure, and diesel engines were constants.

I was raised in a conservative, Dutch immigrant, farming community. Most of the people in the community attended one of a handful of Dutch Calvinist Reformed or (the nearly identical) Christian Reformed churches. I attended private elementary, middle and high schools that followed Christian Reformed educational curricula; most of my classmates came from families much like mine.

The community prided itself on its theology, which it claimed was based on the Bible. The overt message was that all who loved God would join him in the afterlife, enjoying his endless wealth and joy for all eternity. Anyone who looked forward to such an afterlife would do everything possible to please God in the current life. Honoring him was defined as being productive, prosperous, and generous in the current life. Prosperity signaled God's blessing. Prosperity (in many forms including money, musical talent, and business acumen) was expected

to be funneled back into the church. The reasoning was that God wanted to bless each person and he wanted to individuals to share that blessing with the church community.

In addition to the overt message, there was an unwritten code which was derived from this theology. The code reached out and prescribed many aspects of life from dress to sex, to what leisure behavior was appropriate on Sundays. Questioning the theology or the code could be interpreted as questioning God's authority; rebellion against God could result in social ostracism in the present life and loss of eternal salvation in the afterlife.

At home, however, I was not dissuaded from questioning authority. While my family abided by most of the community's rules, my father openly challenged some aspects the community, its theology in particular. His model of questioning authority made a powerful impact on me. Through him I learned how to navigate the boundaries of social acceptability.

Gender roles took a prominent place in the community's unwritten code. Men and women were expected to marry and have children. Each sex played integral and complementary roles that ensured the survival of community: women's primary duty was to bear and raise children; men's duty was to provide for their families.

Young women were moderately encouraged to obtain an education beyond high school; education was valued in so far as it would supplement women's eventual roles as wives and mothers. Acceptable careers for women included hair stylist, bookkeeper, teacher or nurse. However, once a woman was married with children any career beyond the home and farm was discouraged.

Much of a woman's identity would be determined by who she married as well as the social status and wealth of her husband's and her families of origin. A woman was expected to take her husband's last name. A young couple often lived on the same farm as the man or

woman's parents; the parents often became business partners with them, helping them take over the family farm or underwriting a new farm for them.

Physical appearance played a key role in the formation of identity for a woman; moreover it represented a vast sea over which each woman had to navigate. Appearance was an indicator of social status and an outlet for personal expression; for some it was even a commodity and a means of social mobility. A woman's limited education meant limited career options; therefore her husband's financial success was all the more important to ensure her well being as well as that of her children. The more physically attractive a woman was the more partner options were available to her.

Appearance was indicator of social status in that physical traits indicated one's family of origin. Physical traits are so prominent in some families that siblings look like iterations of each other. In a community that specialized in animal husbandry, the implications of good breeding applied to both humans and animals. Inherited traits were one aspect of appearance which was pre-determined. There were other aspects over which a woman had some control: her grooming, her clothing and, for adult women, the decoration of the home which she was responsible for keeping.

FASHION AND FEMININITY

The appearance of hair, nails, clothing and home decoration indicated how stylish a woman was. Personal and home fashion were some of the few areas in which a woman could express individuality, albeit in encoded form. Fashion was a means of expressing creativity, interest in trends, beliefs about physical and material modesty, and desire to conform to one degree or another.

The more a woman conformed to fashion trends indicated the disposable income and prosperity of her husband and/or family, as well as her interest in the world outside of the community.

Reflecting trends from outside of the farming community was a means of alluding to and flirting with the world beyond the cultural bubble, which the community othered and labeled dangerous. The community promoted the idea that the world outside of it was an unsafe place; it also promoted the idea that following its moral and spiritual guidance resulted in physical and spiritual protection. Thus being trendy, on one level, reflected some degree of rebellion from the community.

This is where navigating aesthetics became problematic. Being fashionable could increase a woman's attractiveness—financial and physical. However being too trendy was looked down upon, particularly in more pious circles, as it indicated being too worldly. Being too worldly translated into being less inclined to be controlled by the community.

Wealth was a touchy subject for the community. On the one hand, the community praised prosperity, proclaiming wealth to be a sign of divine blessing. As long as a person tithed, this wealth would be shared by the community within a church setting. On the other hand, the

community was threatened by the power which money afforded. Wealth could release members from dependence on the community and tempt them away.

Furthermore, the community was threatened by the ever-changing foreign language of fashion that was spoken in the world outside the community's bubble. This language of visual symbols referenced the world beyond the insular farming community—a world marked by cosmopolitanism, pluralism and flux.

Fashion and beauty communicated nonverbal messages of power. No one spoke of the value placed on fashion because it was considered gauche. Furthermore, to do so would reveal one's fluency in the currencies of the world outside of the community—power and money. These currencies were overtly materialistic and linked to sin. For women to even discuss power dynamics was viewed as a display of power, and a threat to masculine hierarchies. The domains of power and money were masculine domains; they were generally not appropriate for women, who were to be concerned with being good wives and mothers. No one spoke of the links between fashion, beauty, power and money, but they were silently present and understood by all. Wealth and power were openly displayed by some families in the forms of large farms, expensive clothing, luxury cars, lavishly decorated homes, and extravagant vacations.

While the links between fashion to money and power remained tacit, the idea of quality was openly discussed. As an adult I now see that the idea of quality was full of cultural coding. Amelia Jones points out, "Notions of 'quality' and 'greatness,' ...always harbor ideological investments."³ Quality was marked by that which lasted longer than other products (either through physical wear and tear or by a "classic" style). Expensive products that were characterized by quality were spiritually justifiable; their durability was linked to Biblical

³ Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context," in *Art and its Histories: A Reader*, ed. Steve Edwards, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 149.

notions of stewardship; moreover they signaled prosperity (read: God's blessing). In this way a link was made between the material and the spiritual/ideological.

The community was insular in so far as marriage was concerned, but we participated in many of the popular trends and activities common to middle class southern California culture. The broader culture outside of my community's little bubble populated the freeways and shopping malls of the urban area. These were places where we were exposed to people from many segments of society, however briefly.

Trends that took a foothold among the women in my community included permed hair sustained by aerosol hairspray and artificial tanning. While going to the beach, watching TV, and exploring the latest fashions were acceptable to some degree, there was an awareness that these trends and activities outside of the community needed to be carefully mediated and modified; they had to conform to our community's standards of modesty and financial stewardship. Most women who underwent plastic surgery kept this extremely private, as it was viewed as vain and indulgent.

Clothing was an integral component in the culture and it was integral to my play. As I child I played with a collection of Barbie and Ken dolls that had extensive wardrobes. It was through mimicry that I explored the world and my feelings about the world. Through handling a variety of glamorous—albeit miniature—garments I was able to have a tactile experience with a range of textiles and begin to understand the social coding involved in fashion. And since sex was a taboo subject, through dressing and undressing of dolls that I was able to freely explore models of human bodies, however unrealistic. Dolls allowed me to explore the world at a safe distance.

As a child I noticed the contrast between the exterior culture's message which praised highly sexualized bodies of women and my community's message of modesty. Exterior culture's message was strong: I saw it in the bodies of my Barbie dolls, of actors in shows such as *Charlie's Angels*, of models in magazines that I saw during my mother's weekly visits to the beauty shop. Fashion played an instrumental role in how these sexualized bodies were presented. I detected tension in the message of highly constructed/developed body and the need for specific garments that had to be covering it at certain times. Appreciation for human form contrasted with the need to alter it, to cover it, to manipulate it.

FEAR

Media and fashion continue to communicate that women's bodies should undergo high amounts of processing in order to be socially acceptable. Fear of rejection motivates many women to comply with social norms.

This pressure to physically transform has a parallel in nature. The expectation of change imposed upon women's bodies parallels the cultivation of the earth. In my community, urban development was unquestionably viewed as progress; physical expansion was vital to economic growth. More city-dwellers meant a greater demand for dairy products. Higher land prices meant being able to sell out and start a bigger farm where land was cheaper. Unless criminal activity was involved, to question the means by which economic growth was achieved equated to questioning God's plan for blessing his people.

As stated earlier, questioning anything that was generally accepted—from social conventions to business practices to theology—were discouraged and could result in ostracism. Consequences of ostracism might include being ignored or shamed at social gatherings, being ex-communicated from church, and not receiving financial benefits from family. Thus fear of ostracism was used to maintain tradition.

In church we were taught that all bad things—everything from pollution to disease, crime and the Cold War—were the results of original sin. While we could contribute good or evil to the world, we could never completely rid it of sin. Pain, hardship and corruption were inevitable. Moreover, catastrophic events were indicators of a Biblically prophesied apocalypse. The worse conditions seemed, the more likely the end of the world. Thus a positive spin was put on all forms of evil and mortal threats: they were precursors to Jesus' second coming. If we held onto

our faith we would be saved. Fear in the here and now was displaced and transformed into a hope in an afterlife.

When I was a child my parents remarked that the world seemed to be getting more dangerous; they cautioned me to be wary of men, particularly men from outside of our community. They made it clear that because I was female I was a target.

Their fears were fueled by highly publicized murders. This included serial killer cases such as the Zodiac killer in Northern California and the Hillside Strangler of Los Angeles. The Chino Institute for Men, a state prison just ten miles from my home, was a very close reminder of the worst aspects of the metropolis. In 1983, when I was in the third grade, an inmate escaped from the Chino prison and brutally murdered four local residents.

As an adult I learned that the media's sensational coverage of the Hillside Strangler case prompted Leslie Labowitz and Suzanne Lacy to create *In Mourning and In Rage* in 1977. Staged on the steps of Los Angeles City Hall, this piece of performance art protested violence against women—both criminal acts of violence as well as the media's portrayal of women as victims.⁴ Learning about this piece solidified my connection to other women both within and beyond my community who lived during that time. Moreover it helped me to better understand the roles that the media and fear have played in women's lives.

Within the broader culture of southern California, my community was just one little school of fish, desperately trying to stick together and not get swallowed by a bigger school of fish. The community's goals were material and ideological control: to stabilize gender roles,

⁴ Yolanda M. Lopez and Moira Roth, "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 149.

ensure that they served the needs of the community, and ultimately ensure the survival of the community.

To counteract fear, the community actively promoted its ideology. It used fear, in the form of us vs. them rhetoric, to keep its members bound to one another. By conforming to the community's social standards, it would insulate members from having to interact with many people from the outside; by accepting its theology, eternal damnation could be avoided.

This messaging resulted in my perception of an invisible fence. If I strayed beyond its physical and psychological borders my community could not protect me. I could be swallowed up by a godless, homogenized metropolis. My personal identity was wrapped up in my cultural identity. Losing my cultural identity was tantamount to losing my life.

But there was something in me that questioned my community's message. So I decided to test the waters and explore the world beyond the invisible fence. I went to college, studied abroad, moved to New York and worked in publishing, then moved to Los Angeles and worked in advertising.

I learned that life beyond the fence was not as threatening as I had thought. I began to see that my identity is not limited by an invisible fence. I am connected to all of humanity and nature on a fundamental level; there is no us vs. them, it is all us. Moreover, I am accepted and embraced in multiple communities; there are many places where I can thrive.

Making art became a vehicle for busting through the fence of fear and connecting with others. Art's power lies beyond words and ideologies. Through the visual I am able to explore and express what is denied by the realms of the discursive and hegemonic masculinity. This is a common theme among feminist artists. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard explain feminism's role in empowering women through art:

Through feminism, women were among the first to arrive at the realization that the self may only exist within social framing, and so the cliché of the individual vs. society, which had been a male myth all along, was brought into question by feminist women, who now saw the categories as not only interdependent but also problematic.

It was the achievement of feminists to articulate that very problem in art. In the words of Judy Chicago, the agenda for women artists was “to transform our circumstances into our subject matter...to use them to reveal the whole nature of the human condition.” Instead of asking, “Who am I?,” they posed a new question, “Who are we?,” as if only by exploring the shared, collective “circumstances” of women could individual women come to understand themselves as human beings. One of the first areas of circumstantial identity to be explored was the female body.⁵

Through art I have been able to literally see and articulate fear’s role in my personal circumstances and the shared, collective circumstances of all women. For instance, I see this in the contorted figure in *Hinkley, CA* (figure 3). The figure writhes beneath a faded red garment amidst the golden sand of a heat-soaked desert; jagged blue mountains descend on a horizon, which is shifted vertically; the silhouette of a nipple looms like a mirage. The connection between the conditions of the female body and that of the earth unfold in this work; through it I am able to see the human condition with new eyes.

⁵ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, “Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 22.

LANDSCAPE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The Chino Valley spreads out between the Chino Hills and the San Gabriel, San Bernardino, Santa Ana mountain ranges. During my childhood the rural part of the valley spanned about 6 miles by 10 miles. Surrounded by rugged horizons, we were reminded that forces far greater than us, forces that spanned millennia, had crumpled the earth like a cast off garment. Living in this valley came with its share of dangers.

Several times a year the ground we stood upon swayed as mild to moderate earthquakes reverberated from nearby faults, including the San Andreas fault, which lay about 20 miles northeast of our home. Every tremor reminded us of our vulnerability to forces greater than ourselves.



Figure 5: Maria Hettinga, *Mystic Lake, CA*, 2014
monoprint, 38" x 50"

The air was almost always saturated with smog. Our lungs would ache on particularly smoggy days; asthmatics were forced to stay indoors. Smog filtered the sunlight, creating fantastic coral-tinted sunsets; it masked the surrounding mountain ranges, reducing them to ghosts which haunted the horizons.

Over the course of my childhood, fields, groves and vineyards slowly surrendered to freeways, housing tracts, and strip malls. It seemed that urban development was an inevitable last step in the life cycle of the land. Everything we experienced, no matter how solid it appeared, was in a state of transformation. Cows were nurtured, bred, gave birth and milk over and over until they were deemed unprofitable, then eventually slaughtered. Fields were sown, harvested, and plowed over and over; ultimately they would succumb to urban use. It was not so much the land that surrendered, but the farmers who tended it; they traded it in when the price was right.

The possible environmental impacts of industrial agriculture were often overlooked or silenced. To question the high concentration of livestock and its impact on groundwater was anathema among most farmers. Farming was a way of life that many were born into; farming was an integral part of a person's identity, which had been predestined by God. To change farming practices or to move to another location would be costly. The reasoning was that if God wanted change, he would make it clear—on an economic level. To suggest possible negative aspects of farming was viewed not just as a personal attack, but as a challenge to God's plan. If toxic effects of farming were acknowledged, their potential impact was minimized. For instance, many believed that the nitrates deposited by high concentrations of livestock would have little impact in the future, that they would naturally be absorbed into the earth within a short span of time.

Many who lived by fields were exposed to pesticides spread through crop dustings. Many who lived on farms drank well water, which was believed to be safe. Most farmers were not concerned by our proximity to the Stringfellow Acid pits, a hazardous waste dump site. At the time of its discovery, it was considered to be one of the most polluted sites in the county. Most people chose to stay in the valley regardless of the risks; the cost of moving was too high.

The prints shown in figures 1 and 3 are named after toxic waste dump sites. The Stringfellow Acid Pits is a toxic waste dump site used for over 34 million gallons of acids, solvents and pesticides from 1965—1972. The site is located in Glen Avon, CA, about 7 miles upstream from my childhood home. After local residents complained of cancer and respiratory problems, it was found that the site was not properly equipped to handle toxic waste. The story made national news because it was one of the most polluted hazardous waste sites in the country. Additionally, the Environmental Protection Agency's mishandling of the cleanup resulted in the toppling of several high-ranking Reagan Administration environmental officials.⁶

The Hinkley, CA site is in the high desert, about an hour north of the Chino Valley. The film *Erin Brockovich* is based on the 1993 lawsuit which the town of Hinkley filed against the Pacific Gas & Electric Company for dumping of hexavalent chromium at this site. The contamination of local groundwater was linked to various cancers, miscarriages, and health disorders in the local population. A local dairy family who had moved their farm across the street from the site was a plaintiff in the lawsuit.⁷

As a child, the processes of “beautification” imposed upon women and the development of land was all around me; I took it for granted; it seemed normal. I was unaware than anyone

⁶ Seth Mydans, “Settlements Reached on Toxic Dump in California,” *The New York Times*, December 24, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/24/us/settlements-reached-on-toxic-dump-in-california.html> .

⁷ Robert W. Welkos, “Digging for the Truth,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 2000, <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/mar/12/entertainment/ca-7856> .

felt differently until I became an adult. Then I began to see how the conditions of humanity and the earth—conditions ranging from environmental pollution to inequalities in sex, gender and race—were the results of specific cultural influences. As far back as the 1970s feminist artists had been working toward, what Lisa Tickner labeled, “the de-colonization of the female body;” they aimed to reclaim it from masculine objectification.⁸ Other feminist artists extended de-colonization to environmental issues. In the 1980s and ‘90s, feminist artists were at the forefront of raising ecological awareness through Earth Art and Goddess art.⁹ However, because feminism and environmentalism challenged social traditions and elevated the importance of the earth (in some cases, deified it), they were disparaged by my community; they challenged a monotheistic, Christian world view.

⁸ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, “Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 22.

⁹ Gloria Feman Orenstein, “Recovering Her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess,” in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 177-8.

IDEOLOGY AND TRANSFORMATION

Within my community of origin, norms, mores and ideologies were taken for granted; this is the case in many communities and societies. Social constructs were naturalized and made to feel like common sense. They echoed the order, rhythm, and inevitabilities of raising animals and cultivating the land. With the intertwining of God, morality, gender roles and material possessions, the community has remained relatively cohesive for over eighty years in spite of cultural, political, economic, and environmental forces which have put pressure on it from the outside.

While specific aspects of my culture are troubling, there are many aspects of my community and cultural heritage that I appreciate. For instance, I was raised on a farm in a stable home; all of my basic needs were met; and my parents encouraged me to go to college. Most of all I am grateful for what my father modeled to me. While he abided by most of the community's rules, he openly questioned and challenged some aspects its ideology. His model of questioning authority made a powerful impact on me.

As a young adult I was not able to articulate the power dynamics of my community, but I was aware enough to know that I did not want to conform to them. After college I took a publishing job in New York City, where I lived for several years. The stark contrast of my community to one of the most richly diverse urban centers on the planet opened my eyes. It caused me to become more aware of two ideas which continue to influence my work: the restrictive nature of ideology (particularly that of my upbringing) and the susceptibility to transformation of all things. These ideas, more than any artist, critic, philosopher, anyone or anything else, have exerted the most profound influence upon my work.

The notion of the restrictive nature of ideology causes me to be skeptical of almost any entity which seeks to define, articulate, systematize, and create some cohesive worldview. I approach it as a veiled manipulation, a threat to bind individual freedom; I suspect a hidden agenda. I am more at ease with ideologies which question authority and promote curiosity; my use of abstract imagery reflects these values. The notion of veiling is echoed in my work through the use of transparent layers of ink. Binding is referenced through the use of mechanically processed textiles and stitched surfaces.

The second idea—susceptibility to transformation—is echoed in a number of the formal qualities of my work. My prints are done on paper, which is more susceptible to atmospheric changes than other mediums, such as painting and sculpture. Images are constructed using monoplates, which produce varied marks with every printing. I work abstractly, blurring the lines between figure and landscape, questioning the natures of both.

Transformation is reflected in my work a conceptual level as well a formal level. My interest in textiles, fashion, beauty and femininity are important not only in relation to my experience with my community, but because of their broader associations in contemporary culture. The documentary *Miss Representation* details how mainstream media's disparaging portrayals women contribute to under-representation of women in political leadership. It explores how society has encoded the external appearance of women in ways that limit women. Erika Falk explains:

When press representations of women who are running for the highest offices in the land are focusing, for example, on how women look, instead of what they've done, or their issue positions, that's got to affect the audience in terms of how they evaluate and judge those women. One of the things it does is it trivializes them; it makes women seem less powerful.¹⁰

¹⁰ Erika Falk, *Miss Representation*, directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom and Kimberlee Acquaro (2011; Ross, CA: Girls' Club Entertainment), 1:30; MPEG; posted on Netflix.

It is clear to see how imagery is culturally coded, particularly when communicated by mass media. Power is communicated through the code, which is the combination of imagery and the narrative which accompanies it. Those who are in power have the privilege of assigning words to images and disseminating a narrative which suits them. The narrative reinforces stereotypes to maintain cultural normativity. I am interested in using visual means to challenge this normativity.

I believe that complex, abstract visual images which evade easy definition are a means of destabilizing traditional, taken-for-granted narratives. While I am not interested in casting all tradition aside, I suggest we carefully choose to eliminate traditions which promote inequality. For instance, if the media wants to promote equality instead of sensational, sexist narratives, I suggest that newscasters treat female politicians as they treat male politicians and focus on what they do and say instead of how they look.

I believe that acknowledging complexity is a key component to thoughtful cultural and societal transformation. My interest in social transformation is linked to progress. Progress is a loaded word. Ronald Wright, the author of *A Short History of Progress*, defines the problematic nature of progress as such:

In defining progress, I think it's very important to make a distinction between good progress and bad progress. Things progress in the sense that they change. Both in nature and in human society there appears to be a clear trend towards increasing complexity as change proceeds. We tend to delude ourselves that these changes always result in prudence, from the human point of view. We're now reaching a point at which technological progress and the increase in our economies and our numbers threaten the very existence of humanity... Things start out that seem like improvements or progress—these things are very seductive; it seems like there's no downside to these. But when they reach a certain scale they turn out to be dead ends or traps.¹¹

Like Wright, I see the importance of not taking tradition and technology for granted, but instead critically analyzing how they affect the earth and its inhabitants. While I advocate progress,

¹¹ Ronald Wright, *Surviving Progress*, directed by Mathieu Roy and Harold Crooks (2011; Vancouver, British Columbia: Big Picture Media Corporation), 1:26; MPEG; posted on Netflix.

change needs to be evaluated before it is made. Scale and impact need to be taken into account. And, of course, the values of whoever is doing the evaluating come into play. For instance, I place high value on social equality and sustainable global living. Not everyone shares my values. And even among those who share my values there is a lack of consensus as to how to implement them.

While evaluating social and environmental progress is challenging, my personal experiences with gender inequality and pollution compel me to seek social transformation. In order to be effective, or to be what Wright might call “good progress,” transformation must acknowledge the complexities of the twenty-first century. Moreover I believe we need proceed with care when it comes to change, for the appeal of “the new” can easily cause us to overlook negative ramifications.

Feminists of the 1970s found that studying “the social construction of gender” was the first step toward consciously constructing gender equality.¹² Similarly, I believe that becoming mindful of our agency as humans is the first step toward progressing in a better way—both socially and environmentally. This is a transformation of consciousness that happens on an individual as well as a societal level; it involves each of us realizing our participatory role in human history; it extends to our interaction with the natural world as well as our active participation in the formation of society.

¹² Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, “Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 22.

ART HISTORICAL LINKS

I resonate with aspects of the Abstract Expressionist and Post-Painterly Abstraction movements but I hesitate to identify with them because these movements privileged white, heterosexual males from the east coast.¹³ While some minorities were acknowledged by these movements, art historian Jeanne S. M. Willette notes the recognition earned by a handful of female artists during this period came with strings attached. She raises doubts that Lee Krasner, Eileen de Kooning, and Helen Frankenthaler would have been recognized as great artists had they not been married to and/or intimately involved with powerful men in the art world.¹⁴

Because of overt, hidden, or unconscious agendas which have historically excluded minorities from the art world (and admitted some, often at a great price), I hesitate to contrive a personal art lineage. I do not want to affirm an institution of art history that perpetuates such behavior. I do not want to be associated with movements that herald the avant-garde yet limit it to the realms of formalism or intellectualism. To me, being avant-garde involves critically analyzing all aspects of the art making process, art criticism, and art history.

It has been said, "History is written by the victors."¹⁵ The idea of mentioning some artists and critics whose works have moved me is problematic, for the people who have been publicized are those that the art world has crowned the victors. I wonder how many "losers" have gone unrecognized, not because of the quality of their art, but because of their race, ethnicity, sex and/or gender. But the history I have is the only one available to me. So I cite figures, knowing that some may have been complicit in a system marked by prejudice. With an awareness of the

¹³ Norman L. Kleeblat, "Introduction: Action, Abstraction, Reaction," in *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblat (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 11.

¹⁴ Jeanne S. M. Willette, "Feminism in Art and Culture," Art History Unstuffed, July 6, 2012, <http://www.arthistoryunstuffed.com/tag/helen-frankenthaler/> (accessed March 3, 2014).

¹⁵ anonymous

limitations of history, I seek out contemporary artists with whom I resonate and whose race, ethnicity, sex, gender and/or inclusiveness promotes a more diverse world of art.

There are a number of contemporary and historical artists and thinkers whose work and/or practice informs mine. Ron Pokrasso is the first printmaker who influenced me. I was introduced to printmaking through a workshop that he taught on monoprints. He also introduced me to Akua ink. He dismantled hierarchies by inviting new and experienced art students to work side-by-side; I was one of the new students to benefit from this experience. He encouraged me to follow gut feelings and explore new territory, no matter how unconventional. From him I learned to avoid formulaic, academic approaches and instead foster and embrace the more vital elements of art: responsiveness and immediacy.



Figure 6: Wangechi Mutu, *A Shady Promise*, 2006
mixed media on mylar, 87.5" x 108.75"

Wangechi Mutu is an artist who works in painting, collage, and installation. She creates mythical worlds rich in textures, vegetation, and contorted female bodies using appropriated

materials. Her work invites socio-political exploration and transformation. Her work inspires me to take greater risks with collage, color, texture and content.

My interest in collage and the figure began with Matisse. He made elegant shapes with confident strokes—whether strokes of the brush or, in the case of collage, of scissors. Though often irregular, the strokes of the scissors never lack purpose. Using vibrant colors and lush designs, he constructed pictorial spaces possessed by women, where their bodies could be free of corsets and judgments, where they could spill out, exhale, and revel in leisure. Here, on canvas and paper, figures could behave in ways that could not be openly discussed in my community.



Figure 7: Henri Matisse, *Large Reclining Nude*, 1935
oil on canvas, 26 1/8" x 36 3/4"

While it can be argued that Matisse's work promotes a male gaze, which traditionally has been exploitative of women, I choose to be open to multiple interpretations. For instance, rather than entirely discounting Matisse's work, I see the identification of the male gaze as an agent of empowerment and change. Articulating the gaze opens the door to a dialog of gender politics. For instance, from a contemporary point of view, the woman (in figure 7) may be engaging with

a female viewer, seducing her, or challenging her to free herself from the constraints of fashion and to disengage from the demands of fast-paced world.

Laurie Brown is a photographer whose 40-year career has focused on terraforming, the process in which “unappealing expanses of land are bulldozed to create more visually engaging curves and hills.”¹⁶ She has paid particular to changes in the landscape of Southern California. Her work reminds me of how important a role landscape has played in my life. Furthermore it reminds me of the extremely powerful cultural forces that are exerted upon landscape, human bodies, and identities alike.



Figure 8: Laurie Brown, *Recent Terrains #6*, 1991
gelatin print on paper, 34" x 49"

Over twenty years ago I saw Lee Bontecou’s work for the first time. Hers was the first purely abstract work I fell in love with. Her forms constructed by stitched fabric, steel, and canvas showed me the possibility of a visual language that simultaneously articulated the organic and the mechanistic. It also opened me up to an abstract language in which I was empowered to freely interpret what I saw.

¹⁶ Dan Cameron, *California Landscape into Abstraction*, exh. cat. (Newport Beach: Orange County Museum of Art, 2013), 42.

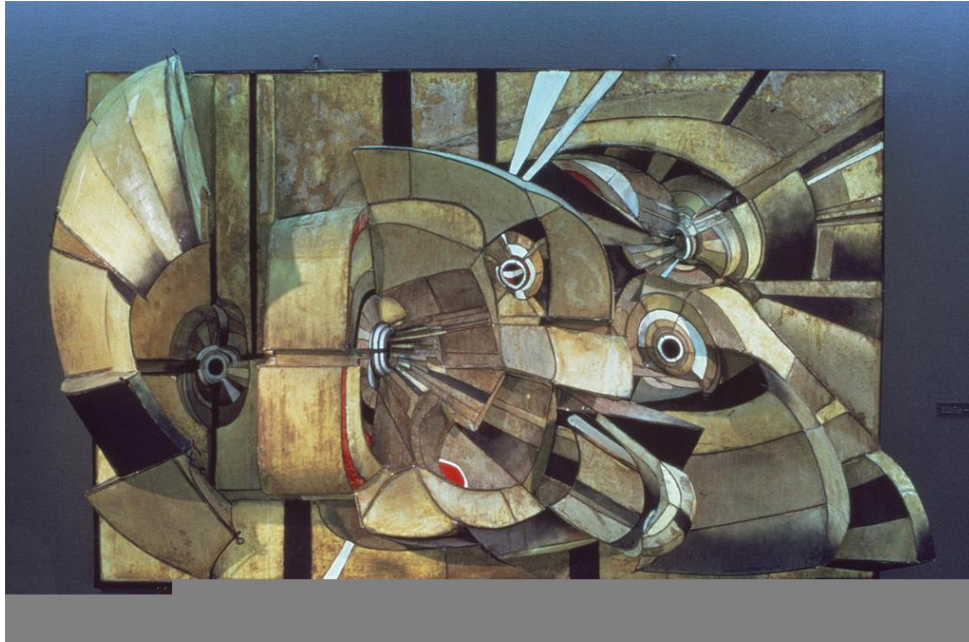


Figure 9: Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1966
steel and wire, 199 x 303 x 79 cm

Since then I have developed a stronger affinity for abstract work. I have also developed a greater sensitivity to representation which is used to exploitative ends.

I have resisted making statements about my work; I wish that no one narrative dominates it. I want it to be open to multiple interpretations. Inspiration for my work springs from my sub-, pre-, and unconscious, which is a non-discursive terrain. To affix a label to an image limits the image, pins it down, hems it in, and leaves it vulnerable to judgment. Judgment parades under the banner of reason, categorization, and systemization: all of these are processes of enculturation.

I feel the need to protect my non-discursive capacity and expression from the colonization of culture. I trace my resistance to my upbringing where so much of the world (appearance, behavior, education, and societal role) was prescribed by my community's ideology. Even though I have moved outside of my community's bubble, I still feel cultural

pressure exerted upon me. Some of that pressure might be psychological vestiges of my past, but some of it springs from contemporary culture which sends specific messages to me as a woman.

Some of the cultural messages I currently sense include: I should dress a certain way in certain circumstances (sometimes sexy, sometimes conservative); I should present myself as likable; I should monitor how intellectual I appear based on my company, as I should not intimidate others; I should be careful of how and when to discuss feminist issues lest I alienate non-feminists; I should be careful when challenging authority, especially if I might need to seek that authority's approval for getting a job.

My skepticism surrounding visual art's links to fixed narratives is echoed by Clement Greenberg. In 1940 he exhorted to the art world to get beyond realistic imitation and to explore abstraction. He believed visual art that portrayed literal narratives was based on seventeenth-century literary art forms, and he pushed the art world to evolve.¹⁷

The pressure that contemporary artists are under to make statements about their work harkens back to art's historical imitation of literature. It also suggests that those who demand a statement from an artist are not comfortable with their degree of fluency in a visual language, that they are threatened by the ambiguity that a work—particularly an abstract work—might suggest, or that they believe visual language is somehow lacking and requires the accompaniment of text. This is one area in which the art world still has room to evolve. I question whether any work which is dependent on text or narrative can be considered avant-garde, or even truly free.

While I agree with some aspects of Greenberg's modernist, formalist criticism—particularly his affinity for abstraction—I live in a post-modern era and thus take his writings

¹⁷ Clement Greenberg, "Towards A Newer Laocoon," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1985), 36.

with a grain of salt. While I resonate with Greenberg's call to move away from narrative, I believe he defended too narrow of a position. I disagree with his firm insistence that visual art must "confine itself to what is given in visual experience and make no reference to any other orders of experience."¹⁸ The notion of art confining itself is ridiculous.

As I have stated earlier, elements of my personal biography play an influential role in my work. I cannot completely deny these elements; however they do not necessarily need to be spelled out in order to appreciate my work. I feel the same way when it comes to analyzing the work of other artists: their biographies or statements play a supplemental role to the art work. It is up to the viewer to determine whether to incorporate any discursive elements into the appreciation of the work. This approach allows viewers the freedom to interpret the work for themselves rather than to have some other voice (e.g., the artist, an art critic, etc.) dictate an interpretation to them. Thus there may be multiple interpretations to a work. Later I will return to the proliferation of meaning.

Abstraction, in particular, offers the possibility of introducing new meanings and disrupting the status quo. Yet I embrace abstraction delicately, as its link to Greenberg and formalism has a troublesome history of reinforcing hegemonic viewpoints, as Amelia Jones explains:

From the perspective of Chicago and other feminist artists and artists of color working in the 1960s and 1970s, Greenberg's insistence on the autonomy of art (especially as his more complex arguments were reductively deployed by writers such as Kramer) was perceived as motivated by a reactionary apoliticism that supported the status quo, excluding from the privileged domain of "high art" elements of popular culture and work by women and other groups of people marginalized by elitist institutions of high art. Greenberg's formalism came to be seen as synonymous with modernism's conservative privileging of masculine values and white, male artists.¹⁹

¹⁸ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Art Theory and Criticism: An Anthology of Formalist, Avant-Garde, Contextualist and Post-Modernist Thought*, ed. Sally Everett (Jefferson: Mcfarland & Company, 1995), 115.

¹⁹ Amelia Jones, "The Sexual Politics of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context," 148.

Knowing that formalism carries this history, as a female artist I consciously employ abstraction. I hope to disrupt abstraction's lineage of privileging white masculinity and promote a new lineage which promotes inclusivity.

I resonate with Greenberg's call for each medium to make the most of its unique characteristics rather than to imitate each other. I feel that I have explored the unique aspects of printmaking, particularly by using the press not only as a means for making marks, but for making monoplates. However I disagree with Greenberg in his decrual of the use of illusionistic space in abstract two dimensional work.²⁰ Illusionistic space, particularly as it contributes to ambiguous space and form, is a key component to my work.

While I admire Helen Frankenthaler's use of abstract shapes, her innovative canvas staining techniques, and her approach to color, as a woman I am challenged by her "adamant refusal to be associated or categorized in any way with 'women artists' and their issues."²¹ My best guess at understanding this is that she did not want her sex or gender to be a factor in appreciating her work; she wanted it to be judged by its formal qualities alone. Feminist art history reveals that she and other women artists of her generation "had long struggled to negotiate their female identities and to find acceptance as 'artists' pure and simple, within and despite what Lee Krasner would later describe as 'the misogyny of the New York School'."²²

²⁰ Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 116.

²¹ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, "Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 17.

²² Ibid.



Figure 10: Helen Frankenthaler, *Flood: det.*, 1967
polymer on canvas, 124" x 140"

In one interview Frankenthaler talked about starting a painting with a feeling, and letting that feeling dictate the color scheme, which would evolve and sometimes completely change as the painting developed.²³ I appreciate this approach because it is one that I use. I begin my works based on feelings which are difficult if not impossible to verbally articulate. It is the dynamic tension created by a resistance to articulation amidst a simultaneous expression of emotion that I find most compelling in abstract works.

Abstraction not only resists articulation but provides an arena for the ineffable—that which cannot be articulated with words. I believe that the areas of human experience that lie beyond language and text are just as important as those which can be quantified and qualified with words. These areas are the terrain of emotion. I do not know how to describe them; perhaps

²³ Helen Frankenthaler, *Painters Painting: the New York Art Scene 1940-1970*, directed by Emile de Antonio (1973; New York; Mystic Fire Video) 1:57; MPEG; posted on YouTube.

they fall into the realm of the subconscious, the spiritual, the non-rational, or the intuitive. My ideas concerning the non-discursive nature of art and its connection to emotion are informed by the writings of philosopher Susanne Langer. She argues that “art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling.”²⁴

I resonate with Robert Motherwell’s efforts to tap into the feelings of the unconscious mind through what he called the techniques of plastic automatism. These techniques included scribbling or doodling to release sub-, pre-, or unconscious elements; reflecting on the elements to see what they suggest; and ordering the elements.²⁵ For me, these sub-, pre-, or unconscious elements exist in a realm beyond the systems of rationality and language. Serendipitous, unforeseen experiences and inspirational feelings emerge out of this realm; from here my best work has emerged. I see sub-, pre-, or unconscious elements as a necessary components to informing conscious decision making; they reveal the limitations of the conscious, the intentional, the rational, the verbal, and the systematic.

Through abstraction I resist ideologies which promote singular interpretations. In this way I am sympathetic to the views of a number of post-modern thinkers and writers. Having taken a critical lens to my community of origin, I particularly resonate with the way in which Michel Foucault inspects “the taken-for-granted exercises of power” within society.²⁶ His writings have caused me to carefully consider and question what is considered normal and abnormal, and the role society plays in determining these judgments.

²⁴ Susanne Langer, “The Symbol of Feeling,” in *Art Theory and Criticism: An Anthology of Formalist, Avant-Garde, Contextualist and Post-Modernist Thought*, ed. Sally Everett (Jefferson: Mcfarland & Company, 1995), 79.

²⁵ Robert C. Hobbs, “Early Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism,” in *Art Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Winter 1985): 299.

²⁶ Stephen J. Ball, *Foucault, Power, and Education* (London: Routledge, 2012), 145.

As a maker of monoprint iterations (rather than near identical editions), I am informed by Jacque Derrida's writings on iterability and proliferation of meaning. John M. Balkin interprets Derrida accordingly:

Deconstruction's emphasis on the proliferation of meanings is related to the deconstructive concept of iterability. Iterability is the capacity of signs (and texts) to be repeated in new situations and grafted onto new contexts. Derrida's aphorism "iterability alters" means that the insertion of texts into new contexts continually produces new meanings that are both partly different from and partly similar to previous understandings.²⁷

Derrida shows how a static work is nonetheless alive as new meaning continually springs from it.

Langer discusses proliferation of meaning, using music as an example:

Music is revealing, where words are obscuring, because it can have not only a content but a transient play of contents. It can articulate feelings without becoming wedded to them...The assignment of meanings [in music] is a shifting, kaleidoscopic play, probably below the threshold of consciousness, certainly outside the pale of discursive thinking.²⁸

I resonate with the relationship Langer makes between music and meaning; I extend this relationship to all forms of art. Art has the ability to shift the assignment of meaning; it is closely linked to feeling; it can articulate feelings without using words.

I view destabilizing formal elements (such abstracted shapes, ambiguous senses of space, or variations between iterations) as environments where new visual experiences have the potential to emerge. It is the dynamic potential within a static work—a potential to transfer new meanings and empower viewers with broader perceptions—which fuels my desire to promote unfettered abstraction.

²⁷ Jack M. Balkin, "Deconstruction," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Law and Legal Theory*, ed. Dennis Patterson (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 363.

²⁸ Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (New York: New American Library, 1962), 206.

CONCLUSION

With my work I call into question the culture in which I was raised as well as contemporary culture. By examining my personal circumstances, I have been able to see my connectedness to the shared circumstances of other women; through this I have gained a broader sense of connection to humanity.

I am purposeful in working abstractly on a formal as well as a conceptual level. I combine a feminized color palette with ambiguous space, scale, shapes and textures. Through my work I draw comparisons between figure and landscape; I suggest the limitations of language and the power of the visual; I demonstrate how beauty, fashion and femininity are intertwined; I examine the relationship between personal identity and cultural identity; I highlight how society uses fear to exploit and control individuals; I challenge the ways in which culture attempts to ensure its own survival; and I promote a mindful approach to environmental and social progress.

It is possible that my work may someday hang in someone's home, perhaps serving a decorative purpose. I hope that its abstract qualities incite curiosity, introspection, or perhaps closer examination of the history surrounding the work. Moreover, I hope that it inspires a sense of possibility and liberation in those who feel bound by forces beyond their control.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ball, Stephen J. *Foucault, Power, and Education*. London: Routledge, 2012.
- Balkin, Jack M. "Deconstruction." In *A Companion to Philosophy of Law and Legal Theory*. Edited by Dennis Patterson. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Broude, Norma and Mary D. Garrard. "Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century." In *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*. Edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994.
- Cameron, Dan. *California Landscape into Abstraction*, exh. cat., Newport Beach: Orange County Museum of Art, 2013.
- Falk, Erika. *Miss Representation*. Directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom and Kimberlee Acquaro. Ross, CA: Girls' Club Entertainment, 2011; 1:30, posted on Netflix, MPEG.
- Feman Orenstein, Gloria. "Recovering Her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess In *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*." Edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994.
- Frankenthaler, Helen. *Painters Painting: the New York Art Scene 1940-1970*. Directed by Emile de Antonio. New York: Mystic Fire Video, 1973; 1:57, posted on YouTube, MPEG.
- Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting." In *Art Theory and Criticism: An Anthology of Formalist, Avant-Garde, Contextualist and Post-Modernist Thought*. Edited by Sally Everett Jefferson: Mcfarland & Company, 1995.
- Greenberg, Clement. "Towards A Newer Laocoon." In *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*. Edited by Francis Frascina. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1985.
- Hobbs, Robert C. "Early Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism." *Art Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Winter 1985): 299-302.
- Jones, Amelia. "The Sexual Politics of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context." In *Art and its Histories: A Reader*. Edited by Steve Edwards. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.
- Kleeblat, Norman L. "Introduction: Action, Abstraction, Reaction." In *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976*. Edited by Norman L. Kleeblat. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.
- Langer, Susanne. *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*. New York: New American Library, 1962.

- Langer, Susanne. "The Symbol of Feeling." In *Art Theory and Criticism: An Anthology of Formalist, Avant-Garde, Contextualist and Post-Modernist Thought*. Edited by Sally Everett Jefferson: Mcfarland & Company, 1995.
- Lopez, Yolanda M. and Moira Roth. "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism." In *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*. Edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994.
- Mydans, Seth. "Settlements Reached on Toxic Dump in California." *The New York Times*, December 24, 1991. <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/24/us/settlements-reached-on-toxic-dump-in-california.html>.
- O'Hara, Frank. "Helen Frankenthaler." In *An Exhibition of Oil Paintings by Frankenthaler*. Edited by Frank O'Hara. New York: The Jewish Museum, 1960.
- Rothenberg, Susan. "When Asked If I'm an Expressionist." In *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*. Edited by Kristine Stiles. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
- Welkos, Robert W. "Digging for the Truth." *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 2000. <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/mar/12/entertainment/ca-7856>.
- Willette, Jeanne S. M. "Feminism in Art and Culture." *Art History Unstuffed*, July 6, 2012. <http://www.arthistoryunstuffed.com/tag/helen-frankenthaler/> (accessed March 3, 2014).
- Wright, Ronald. *Surviving Progress*. Directed by Mathieu Roy and Harold Crooks. Vancouver, British Columbia: Big Picture Media Corporation, 2011; 1:26, posted on Netflix, MPEG.