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One-Person Exhibition

BY

Samantha R. Mendoza

The following work is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree at Northern Illinois University. The work was produced between December 2016 and April 2019. It was presented in an exhibition from April 28th through May 4th, 2019 in the Annette and Jerry Johns Gallery, Jack Arends Hall, Northern Illinois University - DeKalb, Illinois.

List of Works

1. Flame Fatale, Woodcut on Fabric, April, 60 x 75”, 2019
2. Distance Makes the Road Stretch Longer, Woodcut, 30 x 44”, April 2019
3. The Daughter That Bit Me, Woodcut, 30 x 44”, April 2019
4. A Thorn in the Tale, a Fade in the Dream, Woodcut, 30 x 44”, November 2018
5. Honor, Burn, and Bury, Woodcut, 30 x 44”, December 2016

6. Marlboro Mujer, Woodcut on Fabric, 60 x 75”, April, 2019

7. Slipping Poison, Screen print, Various Dimensions, April 2019

8. Liberation, Screenprint, 18 x 24” April 2019
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Name: Samantha R. Mendoza  Department: School of Art

Title: Documentation of the One-Person Exhibition

Major: Art  Degree: Master of Fine Arts

Approved By:  Date

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
A DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE MASTER OF FINE ARTS

SCHOOL OF ART

BY

SAMANTHA R. MENDOZA

DEKALB, ILLINOIS

MAY 2019
Certification: In accordance with School of Art and Graduate School policies, this documentation is accepted in partial fulfillment of degree requirements.

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Chair, Graduate Advisory Committee

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Date
Storytelling has always been an important force in my life. Growing up, it seemed to permeate more thoroughly into my subconscious, weaving itself into how I began to distinguish the world around me. Drawing inspiration from great works of literature, theatre, film, and music— I was attracted to anything rich in emotion and lush detail that could light a fire within me.

Printmaking eventually became the ideal vehicle to funnel my ideas into. As my work has always been heavily based in drawing and rendering, I was naturally attracted to the range of media that offered variety within mark making and texture, and the creation of multiples. The idea of the multiple appealed to me for various reasons— the ability to give, trade, and sell hand-crafted copies, or extra prints to experiment with. Moreover, the idea of creating an edition instilled in me a sense of technical formality that took patience, effort, and thorough understanding of the process. The act of printmaking is a very ritualistic experience. It becomes an almost spiritual exchange, with a process that demands rigidity as well as creative problem-solving.

Though I’ve always found myself switching between different print media, the bulk of my focus has been anchored to breathing life into my narratives via woodcut. Its direct and straightforward manner enabled me to work larger— it both challenged and appeased my graphic sensibilities.

Being increasingly preoccupied with myth and storytelling, my works remained figurative and narrative in nature, often relying on established tropes I found to be universal, but simultaneously were able to relate to my own experiences on a deeper level. I was fond of Dark Romanticism, and its employment of the personification of evil, and the investigation of human fallibility. I was also curious about Luciferian ideals, long before I discovered its historical ties to Romanticism and Socialism. The idea of Satan as
a representative of legitimate rebellion interests me for both its political implications, as well as the moral quandary it creates. Though I never used Satan or any recognizable deity or power in my work, the inspiration behind them is universal, and I pick up on the aspects of similar stories.

The execution of each piece took on more and more importance, with the process becoming a cathartic act that allowed me to meditate on the more tragic aspects of my past and present that I had learned to suppress. Using my work to reflect on these more negative aspects gave me a route that allowed me to wade through my tendency to dissociate in order to self-analyze. I began to explore other aspects about my life and identity—such as my confusion toward gender and race, having always felt constrained somewhere between these binaries. Also reflecting on loss and heartbreak, I began to translate my heartbreak and turmoil visually to satisfy an undeniable need for expression and reflection. The more I let stories and myths fuel me, the more thematic commonalities became apparent.

Through creating, I began to understand the psychology behind my process. I was worried at the prospect of being a victim to my circumstances, so my work became a way for me to take back control in some way. Though the events or figures depicted may be fabricated to some degree, it became a very real and effective method in providing a path to self-empowerment and transformation.

I find aesthetics of eras past to be extremely influential. Though my scope was wide initially, I found myself responding strongly to the detailed ornamentation of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. I have expanded on my research in the fields of design, especially derived between the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, where I have found many of my interests overlapping. The Aesthetic Movement and the Arts and Crafts Movement
provided me with an understanding for that lust for craftsmanship and design I’ve always possessed, and I also found commonalities with other artists who utilized these values. I developed an interest in the work of William Morris, especially in regards to his treatment of aesthetics of the past, contributions to print, and even political leanings.

With printmaking and early graphic design being tightly interwoven, I’ve stumbled across many inspirations toward a decorative and stylistic approach that dominated the visual culture of the time. Color print development and mass media at the turn of the century propelled the aesthetics of western society, which adapts well into contemporary printmaking and has helped to enrich my own stylistic sensibilities.

Alluding to the past gave me a sense of misplaced nostalgia as well as mystery, which was a tone I wanted to harness and utilize at my command. This became a tool to mesh elements of romanticism with aspects of the occult. I was drawn to the idea of simulating spirituality, and control over nature in my narratives in a way that couldn’t be achieved in reality.

My interest in preexisting myth, legends, and lore has always been present within my work, but with more recent pieces I’ve allowed them to take on a more subtle role within my subject matter, languidly bleeding into my own invented narratives. These typically blur the line between the fabricated and the autobiographical, and are progressively reliant upon heavy symbolism of a more intimate nature. Because my own experiences meld organically with universal motifs collected from the collective unconscious (mythologies in general), I believe the work entreats the viewer to enter into these worlds and find aspects of relatability, projecting their own experiences and interpretations. The use of magical or supernatural elements have been toned down to a certain degree, and are rather woven into static scenes- slightly stripped of the caliber of
drama my earlier pieces held. I focus more on my everyday thoughts and concerns—my struggles between vice and virtue, mental health, my relationships, and socio-political ideals. I take snippets of these thoughts and convert them into symbols—collaging them into a scene that revolves around denser and more specific issues in my life. The assemblage then transcends into a new fable, though the underlying meaning remains. Using guilt as an overarching muse, I have confronted my dissociation with my father’s death, my inability to communicate with my mother, cycles of unproductivity and depression, burdens of longing in a long term relationship, and a propensity for over-indulgence and self-medication. I invent ways to interject the mystical, transmogrifying these otherwise ordinary settings. This serves as a way to speculate and humor the possibility of hidden forces having influence over people or situations. I consider this to be a type of visual metaphor— a method of creating imagery that provides a different way of considering and observing the world.

Mythology and the idea of the collective unconsciousness has become an important consideration in my growth as both a person and an artist. In understanding the ways in which I use mystical elements in my work, I find ideas rooted in Chaos Magic to be extremely telling in how I navigate my research. It asserts that though we hold different deities, belief systems, and magical practices, they’re are all interconnected. The collective unconscious brings about a plausible concept that explains how various cultures divided by place and time developed similar belief structures and paradigms simultaneously. Through this lens, archetypes could be elaborations on pre-existing patterns.

I am especially fascinated with female archetypes as a historical journey, comprised of social and cultural influence. I found myself discovering an event of the
past, only to wind up stumbling across associations that exposed the interconnected nature of my research. Upon organizing aspects of feminist history, I found parallels in my own philosophy, morality, and unanswered questions in my introspective musings which instinctively stimulate the thought process that drives my art. I am interested in female depictions regarding socio/political/economic roles and how they have evolved over time. Through reading and vying to understand others, I am able to view myself with more clarity- realizing my particular contradictions, emotions, idiosyncrasies have actually been shared experiences and characteristics for centuries.

*Of Vice and Virtue*

A prevailing theme within my work is moral confusion. The coexistence of indecent action and noble intention is a more honest portrayal of humanity. A classic measure of women of virtue is evidence of endurance and suffering. Using models from Antigone to Isis, we see that through their sacrifice they become worthy and admirable. None serves as a better example of this than the Virgin Mary, also known as Our Lady of Sorrows. She is an icon who is celebrated world-wide for her role as protector and devoted mother, and is made glorious because of her intense suffering and ability to withstand it. These women are revered for their qualities that for centuries were considered indications of a Good Woman.

Conversely, the antithesis is also illustrated in lore throughout various cultures. Women are typically praised in association to motherhood. Failed mothers witnessed in legends such as La Llorona and Siguanaba, are instant indicators of dishonor. They are villainous women who suffer, but without integrity, and serve as cautionary tales. Variations are present within many cultures. Like La Siguanaba, they often use their
sexuality to prey upon men, such as the Greek Sirens, Scotland’s Baobhan, the Native American Deer Woman, the Medieval Succubus, Columbia’s La Tunda, and Venezuela’s La Sayona.

These tales of the Femme Fatale seek to conflate women, sexuality, and evil in order to counsel men to rise above their lust, as sin and the female have been closely linked since the transgression of Eve. The archetype is an ancient one. This ‘seductress’ type contrasted dramatically with the idea of everything a ‘good woman’ should be: pious, nurturing, domesticated. But within modern context, the femme fatale has become more nuanced. In early film, especially within Film Noir, Femme Fatale is used to describe women who opted to be ‘bad girls’ in the eyes of society rather than victims of their circumstances. These stereotypes of lustful and destructive women often result in fateful tragedy- but we begin to see the complexity in their motives. Women who desperately needed control over their lives-- women who lack money and political power- decided to use their manipulation and sensuality (their only bargaining chip). As the layers are further peeled, we see women who had an air of danger because they took themselves with a seriousness that couldn’t be undermined. As forces to be reckoned with, they help to balance representations of women in history that were tragically misunderstood; they were individuals who didn’t lack depth, but rather, were denied the time and effort to be deserving of deeper contemplation.

The Femme Fatale resides in the woman of contradiction- a woman who struggles to keep herself together whilst appearing to fall apart. She may be vulnerable, but never weak, and in fact, exhibits enduring strength despite recurring suffering. She is burned by shame but built up by self-liberation. She is both saint and sinner, creator and destroyer, and always a work in progress. Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés’ novel, Women Who Run With
the Wolves, delves into the archetype of the Wild Woman and its many forms. Estés also brings a solution to the problematic idea of the sexualized woman by asserting that lust exists beyond a sexual context— that it fuels creative energy and passion.

It is within this context that I find parallels within my narratives. The women depicted in my work represents not only me, but other conflicted women who are fighting for virtue and clinging to vice. These female protagonists I utilize contain mystery— not just to the audience, but to themselves. Using art and storytelling as a means for self-exploration and discovery is a way for me to meditate on my guilt, flaws, and raw emotions whilst striving to empower myself to overcome them. It is my hope that continuing to learn and understand the motivations and factors that have historically existed for women will allow it to filter into my work and become a way to visually communicate versions of feminine mythology that have always been present, albeit hidden, across various cultures.
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