A Thesis

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MASTER OF ARTS

in

Art Studio

by

Roberta Leslie Rousos

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2014
THIS IS MY VERSE

A Thesis

by

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Date

Department of Art
This thesis accompanies a tightly focused body of work looking at relationships, opposing systems, and the necessity of integrating seemingly paradoxical aspects into our lives in order to become fully realized human beings. Two disparate elements, disassembled obsolete machines and stiffened hand-knit swatches, are brought together into a single sculpture. The new constructs are not works of order and logic or chaos and impulsiveness; rather they capture the best of both combined into a single new world.
DEDICATIONS

"Sometimes our light goes out but is blown into flame by another human being. Each of us owes deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this light."

-Albert Schweitzer

Professor Andrew Connelly continually encouraged me through numerous sculpture classes to stop doubting myself. He always treated me with respect, as his less experienced peer rather than his student. Professor Connelly gave me the freedom and the supportive environment to express my barest emotions in my work.

Associate Professor Robert Ortbal firmly yet quietly pushed me way out of my comfort zone (mentally and geographically) my first semester back in college. Then again in my final year of the Master’s program, he legitimized my eclectic style of working.

Professor Sarah Flohr pressed me to find and express my raw emotions in Advanced Drawing. She worked with me to develop my own style on paper and then to incorporate that style into sculptures.

My sister, Paula, reminded me to question everything, to think outside the box, to
incorporate all my varied experiences into my work, and to believe in myself. She picked me up more times than I can count all the while reminding me that I was the one choosing to stand up. She taught me that not everything has to be how you wish or thought it would be, but it can still be good.
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INTRODUCTION

“Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill’d with the foolish,
What good amid these, O me, O life?
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?
Answer.
That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.”

-Walt Whitman

The past seven years of my life have been concerned with the question “What makes life worth living?” We need food and shelter. We want the best schools and healthcare. We go into debt to buy the newest cars and computers. However, none of these things bring us more than a temporary sensation of happiness. Tragedy can force us to look at our life and question its’ trajectory. Over time, this self-analysis provided me a set of guidelines within which I committed to live my life:

- Listen to my inner voice.
- Focus on the positive possibilities.
- Notice the beauty of the small moments.
- Take full responsibility for my life.
- Be myself, genuinely and proudly.

I choose to live my life by these rules. I make my art by these rules. My legacy, my verse, is fashioned by these rules.
HERITAGE

“My heritage has been my grounding, and it has brought me peace.”

- Maureen O’Hara

I come from a long line of artisans and crafters. Making is my heritage…grandparents to parents to me and then to my children.

I am a mixed media sculptor, a mother of three adult children, and a widow. My life as wife and mother was good, but ended in 2007 when my husband died in a car accident. In an instant life became about surviving the day, the hour, the minute. I had two teenage daughters at home to be strong for, but I was hollow. My family, friends, and relative strangers stepped forward to help me deal with the practicalities of life and supported me emotionally so I could support my children. They showed me how strong I could be; they showed me that my life, my choosing to live again, could serve as inspiration to others.

From childhood I was a crafter eagerly trying out every new product I could get my hands on and watching every craft show on television. Carol Duval (host on HGTV and DIY networks) was my goddess. Upon my return to college for the Fall semester 2007 I
set aside crafting in favor of fine art. I was almost embarrassed by my crafting background, fearing it made me less qualified to be an artist. Gradually it dawned on me however, that women throughout the ages expressed themselves in their crafts when they had no other outlets. There is a certain continuing of my heritage in making well crafted beautiful objects. I no longer deny my craft sensibilities; women’s crafts are incorporated into my art.
STRUGGLE AND PROGRESS

“Sometimes the greatest thing to come out of all your hard work isn’t what you get for it, but what you become for it.”

- Steve Maraboli

My work at the beginning of the graduate program utilized primarily rusted sheet metal. Strips and scraps were welded together into large swirls or figures. The figures were gestural drawings in space; usually reaching upwards towards something more, something better (figure 1). The scraps symbolized our varied experiences that are often difficult, but put together, they create a life. The focus was on the relationship between the body and the soul. The body is grounded in this life, while the soul is only temporarily bound within the body.

As the semester progressed, rusted metal slowly included color treatments and acrylic tubes. The sheet metal itself became more manipulated as well. Some of these experiments were successful; some merely added more techniques to my arsenal. The color though, seemed to merely sit on the surface with no purpose. While it was fun to work with the acrylic tubes, heating and twisting them, they too seemed to have no purpose when added to the metal. The search and the struggle to find my voice continued.
The figures remained upright yet became increasingly abstract. The swirls moved to enclose the figures. Parts of musical instruments were incorporated resulting in one head lump (mine) and one interesting percussion sculpture. None of these paths filled me with excitement and passion unfortunately.

Towards the end of the second semester and almost as an accident, fiber joined the rust. As it turned out, it was a happy accident. The fiber, in this first case, strips of wool fabric was joined to the metal with wrapped twine. My mother braided wool rugs from this very type of fabric strip and my father taught metal shop. In my sculpture, my mother was literally bound to my father (figure 2). Artistic understanding would come later, for now I was curious about what was happening between these two contrasting elements.

The wool strips gave way to yarn – weaving, knitting and crocheting. The metal began to slip into the background as a mere conveyance for the fiber (figure 3). They needed to be equally important though. Second semester reviews exhibited a complete shift away from metal alone to a metal fiber partnership. This echoed my personal shift away from focusing on the trauma of my husband’s death towards an exciting open future. My past was assimilating into my future. My analytical nature was incorporating my free spirited side. My reality was incorporating new hopes and dreams.
Progress continued through the summer between the two graduate school years. Preparing a cohesive body of work for the Advancement to Candidacy Exhibition was paramount. The needle stitched yarns became more refined and regimented. The fiber became textured, 3-dimensional in its own right. A competition developed between the metal and the fiber. Yarn could be the aggressor over steel. Steel could exert tremendous pressure on yarn and yet not tie it down (figure 4). The exhibition was a triumphant success in that it was a culmination of many months of hard work and careful planning. The realization that “I am an artist” was finally sinking in. My visions were as valid as anyone else’s visions. I would continue progressing toward my unknown future.
POINTE FINALE

“There is no such thing as the final touch. But touch we must, both to perceive as well as to create. Neither will the creation ever be complete nor its perception absolute.”

– Robert G. Breur

Work on the final body of work in the master’s program must begin, a choice of direction must be made…actual versus illustrated tension, unifying or contrasting found objects (metal and/or natural) with yarns or surreal works using both elements. A new product discovery however, caused yet another major shift of direction…rabbit skin glue. Hide glue, or rabbit skin glue, is refined collagen derived from processing animal skins and other parts. It is an archival adhesive that was used on the furniture found in Egyptian Pharaoh’s tombs; it was used to stiffen canvases before the invention of gesso; it is a reversible adhesive excellent for violins and book binding. For my purposes the glue would stiffen the knitted pieces into whatever shape is desired. Excess residue is minimal and while the colors darken slightly, the yarn retains its fiber look. Dipping the knitting into rabbit skin glue allowed me to capture a fleeting moment of the knitting wafting through the air (figure 5). The knitting could resemble a hug around the metal, smoke billowing up and away from the metal, or liquid dripping from the metal. Within gravitational limits, the knitting became a full fledged independent element.
At this time, the metal selections themselves evolved. What were originally heavily rusted steel objects became finely crafted industrial age machine parts. Obsolete equipment from predominately women’s occupations (sewing machines, typewriters, adding machines…) were striped of their cases and disassembled to expose the actual working elements. I deconstruct already existing machines to remove their original purpose becoming an anti-inventor. The innovations of our pre-digital economy were magical, marvelous gadgets made up of a conglomeration of intricate smaller wonders that deserve to be exposed.

The re-formation process involves choosing parts and welding them together into a new whole. This composition might begin with a single intriguing part. Maybe it has an interesting shape or color; maybe it is slightly different from other parts of its kind. The focus is on architectural formations, primarily verticals and horizontals with some elements protruding out toward the viewer. The visual density varies from heavy and concentrated to light and minimal. The composition must retain a visual order to preserve a sense that these constructs still do something (figure 6). In our western culture we are conditioned with the assumption that machines do something purposeful. Jean Tinguely used found machinery to create sculptures that destroy themselves. Their use was short lived, but they had a function. Upon a closer inspection of my work, the viewer realizes that these particular assemblages have no purpose and actually do not generally move at all. Yet we continue to think that they could move at any moment.
My finished mechanical compositions are 3-D exploded views of an elegant machine with an unfathomable purpose (figure 7). The coverings, the skin of the original machines have been stripped away to expose the inner workings. The mysteries of the mechanical universe have been laid bare for our examination. What the viewer finds however, is not a single machine but a conglomeration of many machines and the realization that we no longer understand how our equipment works. Mass media has indoctrinated most of us in America with an instant unquestioning trust that new is better and that improved will truly improve our lives.

The mechanical structures are now ready for their knitted component. Whereas the machine parts come from women’s occupational tools of a bygone era, the knitting is from an even older era. The origins of knitting are unclear. Knit-like socks were found in Egyptian tombs dating to the 300’s but they were made by a knotting technique called nalebinding which is still practiced in Scandinavian countries. European paintings dating to the mid 1300’s depict the virgin Mary knitting with two sticks and thread and the word knit was added to the Oxford Dictionary in the 1400’s. At this time producing yarn from silk and cotton was a labor intensive process affordable by only the wealthy. By the 1600’s however, women began processing wool from their own sheep into yarns from which they could knit for their families. Garments were knitted for purely practical reasons but as with most handicrafts, artisans inserted their own designs and embellishments. Written instructions with needle size and yarn type as we know them today only began to surface in the 1860’s. With the rise of feminism in the mid 20th
century women focused on careers and disdained domestic pursuits. The 21st century, however, sees women searching for a more balanced life: career, family, and self-fulfillment. Knitting is now seen as a luxurious hobby. Today’s women are rediscovering a pride in their ability to create beautiful functional objects.

Knitting is a repetitive process, calming, meditative. Large knitting needles, fine yarn, and numerous dropped stitches cause it to take on cellular characteristics. It looses the regularity you would expect to find in a sweater. Once stiffened, the yarn adds a sense of whimsy and magic to the contraption (figure 8). It defies logic; it defies gravity. It is intimate because of the time and effort it took to make it by hand, yet has a cold sensibility because it is hard and immoveable.

At first glance the mechanisms appear rigid and unbreakable (traditionally masculine) while the knitting appears supple and malleable (traditionally feminine). At some point our thoughts reverse and we realize the elements’ roles have reversed. Hard has become flexible; malleable has become stiff.

These are not works of order and organization or recklessness and impulsiveness. These sculptures capture the best of both worlds with an underlying structure from which you can break out of. Freedom without any order is chaos and anarchy.
INFLUENCES

“I think there are influences that you open the door to, and influences that come under the door.”

—Harrison Birtwistle

In my studio practice, the guiding principals of Ikebana vi are right in line with my making philosophy (figure 9):

- off balance / asymmetrical
- lines are vital
- color and texture are vital (figure 10)
- all elements must be in harmony
- continual working will train your intuition
- “…the work’s spiritual and philosophical intentions need not be apparent, but it is the fact that they are there behind the creation of the arrangement (art) that gives it its vitality.”

I have been fortunate to have had some strong personal influences in my life. My father taught me the importance of loving what you do. Whatever you do, do it to the best of
your ability. At 52 years old I am still a daddy’s girl and hope that he would be proud of me.

My maternal grandmother (Grandma Jennie) has been a powerful influence in my life even though she passed away while I was a baby. She was an imposing woman who survived the loss of a daughter and her husband. She loved nothing better than to plan everything for her family. On the surface, she was easy-going, but behind that veneer was a powerful force. Her strength and determination are a powerful antidote for the periodic loss of confidence.

Numerous contemporary artists have provided inspiration, not always directly translated into my sculptures, but as confirmations of my instinctual way of working. Lee Bontecou (b. 1931) was one of the few female artists to achieve wide recognition in the 1960’s. She stitched fabric onto steel frameworks and consistently utilized a black hole in her iconography. Viewing Bontecou’s body of work taught me the importance of building a strong prolific body of work that also has a concentrated focus. Prior to studying her oeuvre, I feared being formulaic so jumped from one idea to another. Afterward, I understood how to delve into a subject while remaining fresh.

Martin Puryear (b. 1941) needs to make things with his own hands; he needs to feel the material in order to understand the material. Puryear utilizes common materials such as wood, tar, rawhide, and stone to create striking pieces that combine modern geometry
with traditional craft. Sculpture employs an element of physical connection that most other art forms do not. My hands must be in, on, and over the work for it to be satisfying.

Ruth Asawa (1926-2013) crocheted wire. Her work from the early 1950’s to early 1960’s has a vertical fluidity, holds its own shape and creates its own volume. Untitled, S273 strung several continuous lobe forms separated by narrow tubes to fashion repetitive linear sculptures. Untitled, S065 utilized orbs within orbs. She used an all encompassing structure and organization reminiscent of nature; water drops, gourds, bird nests. In later decades Asawa switched from crocheting wire bulbs to tying wire into multi-branched snowflake structures. She stayed with a material that resonated with her, but still continued to evolve as an artist.
INTUITION

“The things that are acquired consciously permit us to express ourselves unconsciously with a certain richness.”

-Henri Matisse

The standard advice to young writers is to write what you know; I have applied this to my work as a visual artist. My early work using rusted scrap metal spoke directly to the pain of losing my husband. Feeling broken and useless was an integral aspect of this work. Illustrating the separation/integration of our body and soul was a central theme.

Working through the grieving process manifested itself in my evolving work. Searching for a new purpose, putting together a new whole became additional themes. Usually the work changed before my realization of my internal change. Art has long been used in grief therapy because we can often express ourselves visually where we cannot verbally. Our emotions leak out around our logic. In particular, socially unacceptable emotions find an outlet in art against our minds’ stop-gates. My own fears of being weak and vulnerable began to show with my exposing the inner workings of machines and the less than perfect knitting.
My work has been my journey through heartache and is now, an exploration of my expansion into the new wonders of life beyond grief. This new work shows at first beauty and a sense of wonder (figure 11), perhaps a bit of humor and finally you might question what it means.

Intuition can only point the way. We must choose to follow the path and then figure out why we were compelled to go there.

I have always been a maker. Making just one or two items were never enough, let me make seven or twenty. Making can however, be an escape from thinking and feeling. Returning to college was a way to keep busy. Art was a purposeful way to keep even busier. Being busy meant not dwelling on the pain. As the pain lessened, the habit of diligent work remained. Creating led to learning and discovering, while pre-thinking only led to illustrating ideas. Making followed by looking trained my intuition by adding new experience to my unconscious. Working via intuition grew my instincts and strengthened my abilities to express the unrealized.
EFFORTS AND PURPOSE

“Art is not delivered like the morning paper; it has to be stolen from Mount Olympus.”

-Wayne Thiebaud

My work has evolved because of my desire and choice to continue living a life of purpose. To be a fulfilled human being, my logical analytical strategic left brain must work in harmony with my passionate free-spirited nurturing right brain. These two sides are seemingly incompatible, yet must work together for the benefit of the whole.

“Formal art is essentially rational. Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.” I am a combination of rational and conceptual (figure 12). My work is both a unity and a dichotomy of the rational and the mystical.

Nietzsche wrote that art bridges the gap between intellect and intuition; that we must look within ourselves, but then expand beyond ourselves to the universal.

Carl Jung wrote that artists continuously struggle to control the chaotic creative process.

“The creative aspect of life which finds its clearest expression in art baffles all attempts at
rational formulation…the creative act, which is the absolute antithesis of mere reaction, will for ever elude the human understanding.”

The idea of a work is born through the act of making it. “The artist may not necessarily understand his own art. His perception is neither better nor worse than that of others.”

Our contemporary society is full of paradoxical truisms:

- We build up and then tear down.
- We separate in the name of individuality and then bemoan our lack of unity.
- We demand government do what we mock individuals doing for themselves.
- We compartmentalize and then systematically destroy whole segments.
- We separate beauty/love/art from work/life/politics.
- We revere anything quantitative while denigrating the ephemeral, the spiritual.
MY VOICE

“*I learned patience, perseverance and dedication. Now I really know myself, and I know my voice. It’s a voice of pain and victory.*”

-Anthony Hamilton

Returning to school after the death of my husband was something to do – finish my bachelor’s degree. Having a long-term goal was irrelevant. Progressing through school, I began hearing how I was an inspiration for other people – how I had turned my life around instead of wallowing in grief. I realized that I wanted to be that inspiration for more than just my own daughters. I am not an activist, that is not my personality, but I do believe a whisper can be as effective as a howl.

My work has always been about my state of being. Originally it was about being broken and putting the (rusty) pieces back together. Gradually beauty re-entered my work. Power and strength entered my work. My work has become intimate; small details are becoming major elements (figure 13). The contrasting elements are becoming inter-dependent. The divergent elements are celebrating their differences and conversing with each other rather than struggling for dominance. Their elemental roles are actually reversing and shifting from their assumed identities and taking on their opposite characteristics.
I rediscovered art through grief and found a profound passion for creating. My ultimate goal is to convey that life is worth living, that sometimes the way out is through, and to pay attention to the small things because in the end they mean the most. I am a pragmatic woman who is driven to make objects. Jung said that “art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument.” When I hear of someone who is moved by my work, I am satisfied. You can move a mountain one rock at a time; I make one sculpture at a time.
ILLUSTRATIONS

1 *Directing Infinity*, sheet metal & alcohol inks, 40”x18”x15”, 2012
2 Parents, steel & fiber, 62”x41”x19”, 2013
3 A Moment, steel & fiber, 60"x21"x14", 2013
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Orange Coin, found objects & yarn, 32"x21"x10", 2014
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i Rabbit-skin glue

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vii Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective

viii Martin Puryear

ix Ruth Asawa

x Art and Its Significance, Sol Lewitt: Sentences on Conceptual Art

xi Art and Its Significance, Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy

xii Art and Its Significance, Carl Gustav Jung: Psychology and Literature

xiii Art and Its Significance, Sol Lewitt: Sentences on Conceptual Art

xiv Jenny Holzer coined the term “truism”.

xv Art and Its Significance, Carl Gustav Jung: Psychology and Literature