

AFTER

A THESIS

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TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FINE ART

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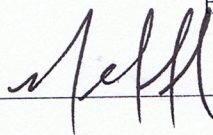
OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

OF TULANE UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY

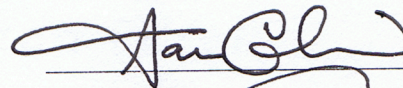


MICHELLE SWAFFORD

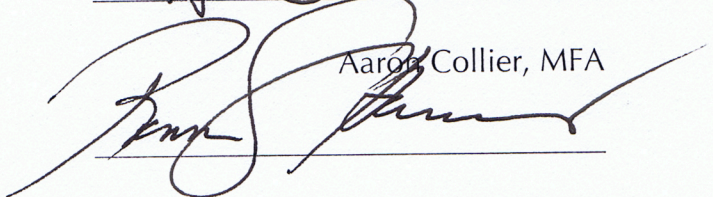
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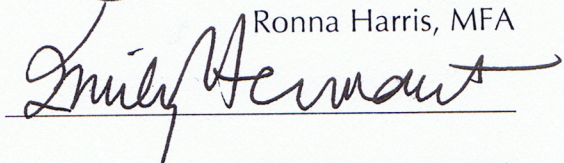
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Traumatic events and personal tragedies have a way of ripping one's life into two distinctive parts: "before" and "after." The work in my thesis exhibition uses the visual language of the fragmented female figure, as well as that of domestic objects and household disasters, to investigate the turbulent emotional spaces that occur "after" intense personal hardship.

Before beginning the MFA program at Tulane, I was a potter, making functional porcelain pottery, which I sold through galleries and at art fairs. Even upon applying to graduate school, I never intended to pursue anything beyond the vessel. However, in the summer before I started at Tulane, my life underwent a dramatic shift. Very serious problems erupted in my family; personal and familial tragedies that tore my life into "before" and "after." I didn't intend to use the emotional aftermath of this difficult time as inspiration for my work during graduate school, but I found that themes of damage, destruction, repair and reconciliation nudged their way into my work again and again.

Exploring these of destruction and repair, I invited repeatedly invite damage, and at times rebuilding, into my process. The sculpture entitled *Catastrophic* resembles a rocky coastline or a grouping of tiny islands in which the remnants of household items such as cups, cutlery and kitchen tools are embedded. *Catastrophic* captures the sudden and destructive nature of emotional trauma and loss by referencing common sources of household destruction, such as flood and fire. I created the swirling piles by dipping found blankets and pieces of lace first in a copper solution and then in liquid clay, which is called *slip*. I then embedded

into the pile a variety of familiar household objects, including a box grater, a can opener, and numerous pieces of cutlery. The porcelain slip coats every fiber of the textiles, which burn away during the firing of the piece in the kiln. Remaining is a record of the textiles' textures and forms, the slip having created a sort of fossil by replacing the soft organic materials with hardened, inorganic ceramic material. The copper solution builds up on the high points of the folds, and becomes crusty and darkened upon firing. The familiar forms of the found cutlery and kitchen tools become distorted and discolored from the searing heat of the kiln, drooping and melting in places. Ceramic dishes are caught in the tempest as well, though they remain quite recognizable, even in a broken state. The narrative of *Catastrophic* implies that these familiar household items have seen multiple disasters, and the damaging effects of both flood and fire are forever recorded in their distorted and fossilized states. This piece calls to mind the work of ceramic artist Lauren Mayer, who routinely uses porcelain slip to record everyday items like clothing and furniture, in an ongoing effort to explore the human tendency to physically and psychologically accumulate objects.¹

The sculptures *Matroyshka* and *Lost Knowledge*, as well as the wall piece *Apologies and Hate Mail*, build on the themes of destruction via flood and fire. *Matroyshka* is a group of small charcoal gray porcelain forms that resemble Russian nesting dolls (known as *matroyshka*). Traditionally, Russian nesting dolls have

¹ Lauren Mayer. "Artist Statement," accessed March 17, 2016, <http://laurenmayerstudios.com/artist-statement>

depicted women and girls in colorful traditional dress and headscarves, wherein each doll begets the next, with the smallest doll representing a tiny baby.² However, the surfaces of the forms in *Matroyshka* are dark and mottled, pockmarked with scars and indentations, as though these unfortunate tchotchkes had been caught in a household fire that stripped them of their saturated color and cheerful imagery. Instead of resting in a nested state, or in a largest-to-smallest linear arrangement, the doll-like forms are huddled together in a tight group with the largest two forms in the back and the smallest three in the front. Calling to mind the format of a standard American family portrait, *Matroyshka* speaks to the ability of a family to stand solemnly together despite disaster, but with the inability to hide its effects.

The implied destructive impact of flood is evident in the sculpture *Lost Knowledge*. To create this piece, I coated the pages of found books in layers and layers of white and gray porcelain slips, and heaped them into a pile. In their wet states, they slump and fold over each other, as though they had been thoroughly soaked and tossed aside as refuse. In reality, the actual books are mostly burned away in the firing process, with the fired slip now recording the negative spaces that once occurred between the pages. In the heat of the kiln, the once glossy book covers transform into delicate flaky bits of soft green and pale pink. The sodden pile of books is transformed into a delicate structure of ghostly pages, with all of their original information forever lost. The whole of the piece appears as though it

² Cynthia Coleman Sparke, *Russian Decorative Arts* (The Antique Collector's Club, Woodbridge, Suffolk, United Kingdom, 2014), 283.

might blow away in a strong wind. *Lost Knowledge* conceptually investigates the ability of tragedy and trauma to strip away one's previous knowledge of oneself and the outside world, leaving only ghosts of those previous certainties.

Lost Knowledge calls to mind a number of other artists who have burned books as part of their artistic practices. The Japanese artist Nishimura Yōhei (b.1947) interprets *yakimono*, the Japanese word for "ceramics," in the sense of its literal translation: "burned things." Much of Nishimura's work has revolved around the firing of books, newspapers and magazines, sometimes with clay as an additional material. With this process, Nishimura creates otherworldly objects that question our perceptions of time and physical reality.³

Iraqi artist Halim al Karim (b. 1963) has also burned books as part of his artistic practice. For his series *Soul Archive* (1982-1991), al Karim coated his personal journals and sketchbooks in slip and fired them. As in *Lost Knowledge*, the original books burned away and only the thinnest of ceramic shells are left to describe the former pages. Al Karim used this process to deliberately conceal and obliterate the content of his journals, which commented on the political situation in Iraq at the time. By electing to simultaneously destroy and immortalize his journals, the artist protected his testimony and prevented anyone, including government officials, from altering the true content of his books.⁴

³ Rupert Faulkner, *Japanese Studio Crafts: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, (The University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1995), 72.

In a similar spirit, I created the wall piece *Apologies and Hate Mail*. To make this piece, I wrote pages of letters to various important people in my life, coated them in porcelain slip, and fired them in a kiln. Unlike *Soul Archive* however, I used ink created from ceramic materials, which allows the content of the original letters to be visible beyond the firing process. The translucent nature of the fired porcelain slip simultaneously allows the captured ceramic ink to peek through, but prohibits actually reading the letters. In dramatic and cathartic fashion, the personal writings held in the letters are both destroyed and memorialized. The letters are strung across the wall in an arc that resembles a row of wet linens hung out to dry or a string of prayer flags. One might imagine a narrative in which these letters were soaked by a flood and strung up in order to preserve them for the future, or perhaps they were written and purposely hung up in the outdoor air, allowing the wind and rain to symbolically transmit their content. Whatever the reason, the implied narrative is that the letters are important enough to be preserved, but of such a personal nature that the content must be protected from prying eyes.

The pieces described to this point have utilized various forms of destruction in an attempt to visualize the turbulent emotional terrain of extremely difficult personal situations. Eventually though, hard times do end and some things that were destroyed in the process are ultimately salvaged and celebrated. For the wall-mounted sculptures entitled *The Thing With Feathers*, *Fragmentation*, and *Sense of Self Portrait #1*, I tore sheets of thin porcelain clay into shreds and used the delicate

⁴ "Soul Archive," Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1158192/soul-archive-also-known-as-porcelain-notebook-harim-al-karim/>

pieces to build the sculptures inside molds. In these pieces, I aim to visualize and make tangible my own private emotional space, as I perceived it to look and feel during a time of personal hardship. These three sculptures are extremely delicate, the victims of past damage and possible future peril. Their fragility and vulnerability echo the effects of emotional trauma on the human soul and psyche, which can leave one feeling fragmented and broken. However, the painstaking nature of their careful construction speaks to the poignancy and poetry inherent in picking up the pieces and making something new out of the wreckage.

The Thing With Feathers makes use of large pieces of torn clay slabs, pieced together to resemble a pair of bony wings. The title is an homage to Emily Dickinson's well-known poem that begins with the phrase " 'Hope' is the thing with feathers/that perches in the soul."⁵ In times of intense difficulty, hope is an essential emotion. Without the hope of a better future, times of hardship would be unbearable. However, *The Thing With Feathers* also cautions that hope is a fragile and delicate thing that may have to be pieced together again and again. Vulnerable to destruction, hope may eventually cease, metaphorically coming to resemble bones bleached by the sun or the discarded shell of a creature that has undergone a transformation and left parts of itself behind.

In *Fragmentation*, the bits and pieces of torn porcelain come together to imagine fragments of a woman's upper back. Hand-written embossed text runs vertically across the parts, but the exact content of this writing is unintelligible.

⁵ " 'Hope' is the thing with feathers by Emily Dickinson," Poetry Foundation, accessed March 26, 2016, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171619>

Words and short phrases begin to emerge upon extended viewing, speaking to the scattered and fragmented nature of thinking and feeling during a time of crisis and chaos. Thanks to the Gestalt law of closure, which is the visual tendency of humans to combine many parts into a simpler whole, the fragments and pieces can be perceived as the whole of the woman's back, which speaks to an innate human ability to make whole the scattered and ruined.⁶

Sense of Self Portrait #1 utilizes similar shreds of clay to create a tattered but elegant slip or nightgown. Embossed with a lacy pattern, the torn bits and pieces appear to alternately come together and fall apart as they create the delicate garment that describes an absent female body. This piece investigates the psychological concept of *sense of self*, which is defined as the way a person views his or her traits, beliefs, and purpose within the world.⁷ In *Sense of Self Portrait #1*, I imagine one's sense of self as an intimate garment, worn close and seen only by a select few. The inherent beauty of the lacy embossed porcelain contrasts with the sense of destruction to create a poignant object that visually describes the feeling of delicately reassembling a sense of self that has been torn apart by catastrophe.

The final piece in this exhibition is an installation entitled *Reconciliation*, which consists of a dining room table and ornate china cabinet, both coated in a flat medium gray color. Displayed on the table and in the cabinet are dozens of

⁶ "Design Principles: Visual Perception and the Principles of Gestalt," Smashing Magazine, accessed March 26, 2016, <https://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/03/design-principles-visual-perception-and-the-principles-of-gestalt/>

⁷ "Sense of Self in Psychology: Definition and Development," Study.com, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://study.com/academy/lesson/sense-of-self-in-psychology-definition-development-quiz.html>

creamy white dishes with gold rims that have been shattered and carefully put back together, with branching gold lines highlighting the areas of repair and the still-missing voids. To create these dishes, I used a contemporary version of the historical Japanese art of *kintsugi*, also known as *kintsukuroi*, in which broken vessels are repaired with lacquer, and the repair lines dusted with gold powder or another metal powder. In *kintsugi*, the intention in repairing the broken vessel is not to render the damage invisible; rather, the injury transforms a beloved but broken object into a new object, one that would often acquire a higher value and appreciation than it had in its undamaged state. This is due to the distinctively Japanese sense of aesthetics that discovers a profound and moving quality in flaws and imperfections.⁸ The damaged and repaired quality of *kintsugi* appeals to the emotions as well as the eyes, creating a poignant reminder that broken things need not automatically be discarded, but may be salvaged and made more beautiful for the effort.

The imagined narrative for *Reconciliation* might be that of a set of household china that has suffered some sort of disaster, perhaps an earthquake or even an altercation between family members. However, instead of hastily throwing out the broken dishes, one might imagine that someone has diligently and delicately repaired each dish, salvaging as many pieces as possible and electing to use shining gold leaf to call attention to the repair efforts, rather than attempting to

⁸ *Flickwerk: The Aesthetics of Mended Japanese Ceramics* (Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 2008).

seamlessly hide them away. Repairing the destroyed china and again displaying it prominently sparks a hopeful note and metaphorically replicates the process of reconciliation within a family. Each dish might also be interpreted as an individual person, broken and imperfect, but beautiful and unique at the same time. By displaying all of the dishes together, one can imagine a large extended family of imperfect people that together create a valued whole.

The artwork in *After* is strongly personal work that explores many aspects of the “after” side of tragedy and loss. In it, we see the destructive forces of catastrophe and disaster, but also the tremendous strength of the human spirit. By electing to salvage, repair, display and honor the broken and damaged pieces, one can move forward through emotional wreckage and turbulent terrain to eventually find places of beauty, reconciliation and peace.

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Biography

Michelle Swafford is a ceramic artist living and working in New Orleans, Louisiana. Born and raised in Colorado, Michelle threw her first pots as a teenager in a community center clay program, where she would later become a studio assistant and instructor. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Multimedia from the University of Colorado-Denver, but continued to study ceramics on the side by attending workshops and classes at local art centers and community colleges.

From 2011 to 2014, Michelle was an Artist-in-Residence at Baltimore Clayworks in Maryland, and is currently pursuing an MFA in Studio Art from Tulane University, with an expected completion date in May of 2016. Her most recent body of sculptural work investigates the emotional aftermath of personal tragedy and loss through the language of damaged household objects and the fragmented female figure.



Catastrophic, porcelain slip, copper sulfate, fired blankets, dishes and utensils
13" x 50" x 21", 2016



Catastrophic (detail)



Matroyshka, black porcelain
8" x 6" x 7", 2016



Matroyshka, detail



Lost Knowledge, found books, gray porcelain slip, white porcelain slip
7" x 30" x 18", 2016



Lost Knowledge, detail



Apologies and Hate Mail, porcelain slip, ceramic ink, paper, metal clips
24" x 96" x 3", 2016



Apologies and Hate Mail, detail



The Thing with Feathers, porcelain paper clay, acrylic, resin epoxy
20" x 16" x 3", 2015



Fragmentation, porcelain paper clay, acrylic, resin epoxy
17" x 15" x 3", 2015



Sense of Self Portrait #1, porcelain paper clay, acrylic, resin epoxy
31" x 10" x 4½", 2015



Reconciliation, found dishes and furniture, gold leaf, gray paint
2016



Reconciliation, detail



Reconciliation, detail



Reconciliation, detail



After exhibition, as installed in Carroll Gallery



After exhibition, as installed in Carroll Gallery