

WHAT REMAINS

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Abstract

My goal with this body of work was to create an installation that would resemble both a chapel and a shotgun house. The installation was constructed out of mixed media vignettes revealing both memories and constructed commentaries that reflect and document a moment of “real time” for me.

The work I have created over the past several years speaks of human frailty and the mystery of existence. My thesis exhibition has allowed me to further develop my own personal symbols, which serve as fragile reminders of hope and transformation in a hostile world. I have created an environment with an iconic shrine-like quality that allows viewers to reflect upon their relationship with the surrounding environment.

Introduction

My work deals with a profound sense of loss and the potential for metamorphosis that stems from loss. The objects I construct breathe a fierce emotional charge. They are reminiscent of geology and archeology's concerns with the layering of time, place, absence, presence and process. I have an obsession with history and how related natural phenomena from the past can be revisited in the present. The artifacts and materials in my work appear to be held motionless and represent the evidence of recurring cycles that enter into our contemporary midst.

My work over the past several years has dealt with human frailty, the mystery of existence and the continuum that exists between conflicting ideas, such as the cycle of life and death. For me, the strongest artwork embodies contradiction, which allows for emotional tension between opposing ideas. I use flowers, birds, insects and domestic wares to draw upon images from different life experiences that symbolize loss, tragedy and renewal. I uncover, restore, pile, weave and build motifs in a repetitive, ritualistic manner and often produce work that has odd spiritual overtones. Art for me is both an investigative and spiritual practice.

Influences

Historically, I'm most attracted to Catholic decorative iconography found in stained glass windows and illuminated manuscripts, as well as paintings with the theme of memento mori. I'm inspired by the motifs, in these paintings, including the flora and fauna that are often depicted with manmade objects. The motifs are used as metaphors for frailty, strength and metamorphosis. *Memento mori* is a Latin term meaning, "remember to die" or, more colloquially, "remember that you must die." The term originated in ancient Rome, where the underlying point was also conveyed by the expression *carpe diem*—"seize the day"—which also entailed the advice to "eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow you will die."

The idea of memento mori evolved with the rise Christianity, where emphasis on the salvation of the soul brought death even more strongly into everyone's consciousness. The Christian context of the memento mori acquired a moralizing purpose quite opposite to the concept's interpretation in pagan antiquity, which implied going ahead and indulging because tomorrow it might be too late. The Christian version served as a warning *not* to overindulge; otherwise, your soul might not make it to heaven. The prospect of death emphasized the fleetingness of earthly pleasures and luxuries, and also served as a reminder of human failures and errors. The artistic genre of memento mori is related to that of *vanitas* (literally, "vanity"), a widespread theme in still-life painting. Vanitas paintings show insects, flowers and fruit at the height of their beauty but with the suggestion of impending decay to imply the transience of beauty and of life itself. These paintings display domestic arrangements that also include symbols of mortality, such as skulls, insects, timepieces, and broken or chipped pottery, which prompt viewers to behave well, because life is short and soon we will all be faced with judgment day. Vanitas still

lives were meant to be enjoyed and meditated upon and were often displayed in Christian homes.



Image 1: Installation view, *Dragonfly*, and *Alight*



Image 2: Installation view of *Chapel*

Time and Place

My thesis show, *What Remains*, has an iconic, shrine-like quality that draws inspiration from the concept of the memento mori. My installation is constructed using domestic vignettes that contain different aspects of my experiences over the past several years that are memories and constructed commentaries reflecting and documenting moments of “real time” for me here in Louisiana.

My immediate environment always inspires me. I have always been drawn to the South because of its conflicted past. When I was a child, my grandmother told me stories about the grand plantations and beautiful Victorian homes, and how some of my ancestors were from the South and had owned slaves. She believed this was why there was a legacy of racism and abuse within my distant family. For this reason, I’ve been interested in both Victorian architecture and the folklore of New Orleans, and especially in how stories and tales unfold and reveal themselves. There is the beautiful, gentle, soft quality of “bygone days” in Louisiana. There are also decadent celebrations, which contrast with abuse, oppression, sadness and tragedy. This quality of contrast and disparity is something I strive to reveal in my work.

Absence and Presence

What Remains is about haunting loss and desire. It’s about peeling back the layers of rubble to reveal truths. I have created intimate pieces that deal with the circumstances of human folly and loss on a grand scale. I see my show as a spiritual platform for communicating my present thoughts and hopes for renewal. My work reveals what has been lost, but it is also about the hope for restoration and metamorphosis.

Process

My methods of working are informed by a layering of influences and processes. I intuitively draw, collect and observe within my environment. Gathering this information keeps me actively engaged and in search of ways to make my work more powerful. The materials I use are very important to the content of my artwork. Although I use found objects, I consider clay my main medium. Clay is very versatile. It has the ability to mimic so many other materials, such as stone, wood, chipped paint, metal and moss. With my handmade ceramic pieces, I often appropriate domestic materials with history and sense of memory because they help add content, and serve as a record of a particular time. Using domestic wares offers more recognizable possibilities to add a sense comfort and lure the viewer into my intimate space. I understand that artists throughout history have used scenes from the domestic world to express their feelings, both personal and universal, about being in the world. As mentioned earlier, Christian memento mori paintings appeal to the viewer in this manner.

My process of making has analogies with the rituals of the Catholic Church in that I too engage in repetitive, ritualistic practices. Although my process could be considered arduous, I find this way of creating both habitual and meditative. I was raised a Catholic, yet I am not interested in Catholicism as a religion or for the beliefs it promotes, but because Catholicism represents an ideal and has the ability to mystify and embody perseverance and hope.

In addition to my interest in Catholicism, I am also intrigued by ecology and evolution. I have been particularly interested in the study of insects because of their resilience and ability to adapt, mimic and reproduce faster than any other species on the planet. Insects have been used as totems of spiritual life as well as models for the

study of ecological development. They have also been portrayed as symbols of regeneration and transformation in music and in art. This is why I relate to the workings of insects and use them as metaphors in my work.

In my artistic practice I engage in the ritual of improvising that is intuitive and instinctual. The act of weaving, interlacing and building shows evidence of the making and is about transformation. Repetition allows for evolution. I'm interested in how many times an act has to be repeated before it resonates and begins to change and evolve into something else.



Image 3: Front of Installation, *Centerpiece*, and *Cobbled*



Image 4: *Centerpiece, detail*



Image 5: *Centerpiece*

Centerpiece

Centerpiece is the sculpture that opens my show. It is a wreath that is both a welcoming and warning. This is my version of a memento mori. It encompasses aspects of time, place, absence, presence and process. The conglomeration of repeated handmade porcelain within the piece was made directly from castings of broken dishes and light fixtures that mimic flowers and finials. Instead of looking light and airy, it appears heavy and hard like stone. It presents two conflicting postures that impose an emotional tension. *Centerpiece* is mounted on an architectural column as its base and is then impaled with rusted, gold-plated flatware no longer suitable for eating a fine meal. The piece is made up of artifacts and remains from Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans almost two years ago. My intention was to make *Centerpiece* appear transfixed and held motionless, similar to a memento mori painting, implying that it is on the verge of collapse. The piece serves as a commemorative plaque to represent human loss and human folly, as well as, loss of landscape due to weather and global warming.



Image 6: Front of Installation.



Image 7: *Cobbed*, detail.

Cobbled

The word “cobbled” means to put together clumsily. This sculpture consists of a shelf, made from collaged and repaired gingerbread architectural parts, that resembles the roof of a house. This particular architectural style was produced during the Victorian era, a time of many contradictions. The Victorian era was characterized by strict, repressive moral views and conservative values, yet it co-existed with a class system that produced harsh living conditions for many. Although Victorian morality was antithetical to slavery, many of the Victorian homes in New Orleans were built by poorly paid African Americans, including former slaves.

On top of the cobbled shelf sit clipped, wingless and injured doves that appear fully capable of flight, but somehow devolved and unable to fly. The doves are the original builders of this place and can no longer leave, yet if they stay they can't survive. They are stuck on top of a house that does not provide safety or shelter.

Doves are often metaphors for the soul, peace and fragility, and they are not all white. This piece represents the African Americans who were trapped on their rooftops in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The doves are spirits trying to break free from the architecture they seem to be bound to and are also representative of the painful legacy of their ancestors and slavery.

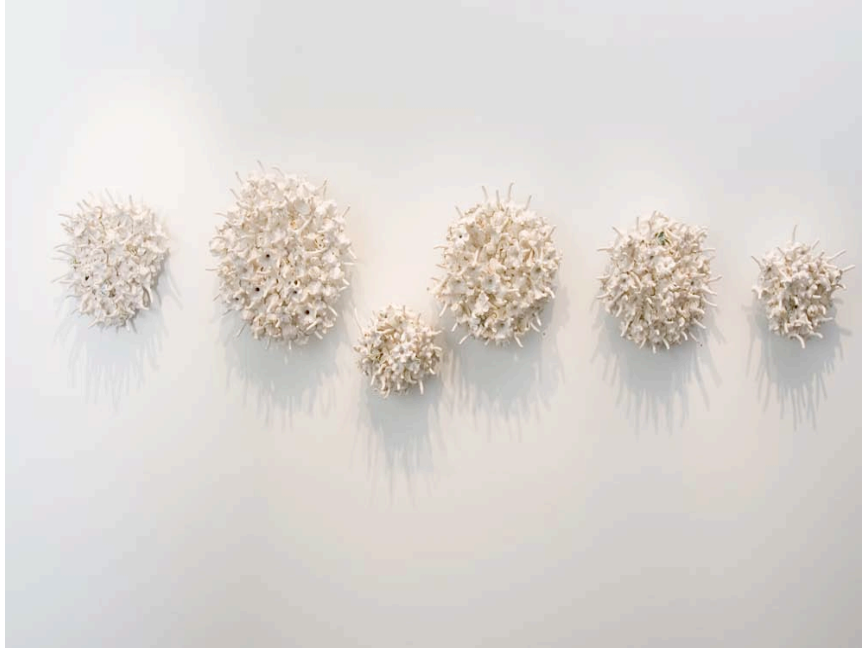


Image 8: *Lily patches*

Lilies

The "Lilies" are clusters of amputated porcelain flowers and insects that represent both life and death. They are fragile and held together only by each other. I mounted these sculptures onto architectural column caps, so that they would cantilever off the wall and exert their presence, invading the viewer's space. They look as if they are either growing or about to fall apart. Every flower is individual, handmade, touched and cared for in a repeated, ritualistic manner. Each one is an embodiment of meditation.



Image 9: *Lily Patch*.



Image 10: *Lily Patch*, detail



Image 11: *Lily Patch*, detail



Image 12: *Alight*

Alight

Alight is a chandelier and relic that survived Hurricane Katrina. I rewired, restored and decorated it with additional ceramic flowers and birds and hung it at half-mast, so to speak. The word “alight” has multiple meanings: as an adjective, it may mean to be aflame or illuminated or bright with joy; as a verb, to come upon by chance or settle like a bird on a branch. It is meant to be both a memento mori and an oracle of hope. *Alight* is not meant to be viewed as being transfixed, like *Centerpiece* and *Cobbled*; it represents the start of new life.



Image 13: *Alight*, detail

Spring

Spring is an antique bed box spring I mounted to the wall with architectural parts, ceramic flowers and fired lace. The verb “spring” has multiple meanings: to be released from a coiled position, to come into being, to arise, to grow with new life. When I spotted this frame of repetitive circles I was instantly drawn to it and inspired. Much of my work includes the design element of the circle because circles have historically been used as symbols for the life cycle. In addition, the bed was important to me because it used to be a support for the body and once provided comfort and safety. By hanging it on the wall I have changed its orientation and function. Now collaged with other cast-off parts from other bodily supports, such as chairs, architectural house parts, and stair railings, it becomes a symbol for new life. The fired lace represents the remnants and residue of what used to be a bed spread. I use lace and doilies in my work because lace is intimate, cared for, delicate, fragile and carefully made with a repetitive motion. Lace can also have a relationship with the body, which it both covers and reveals. I attached ceramic flowers to these

doilies and arranged them like a colony or garden. The porcelain flowers are glazed with contrasting colors that are both jewel-like and geologic. *Spring* is the most colorful piece in the show. It is a resting place with a pulse and new growth.

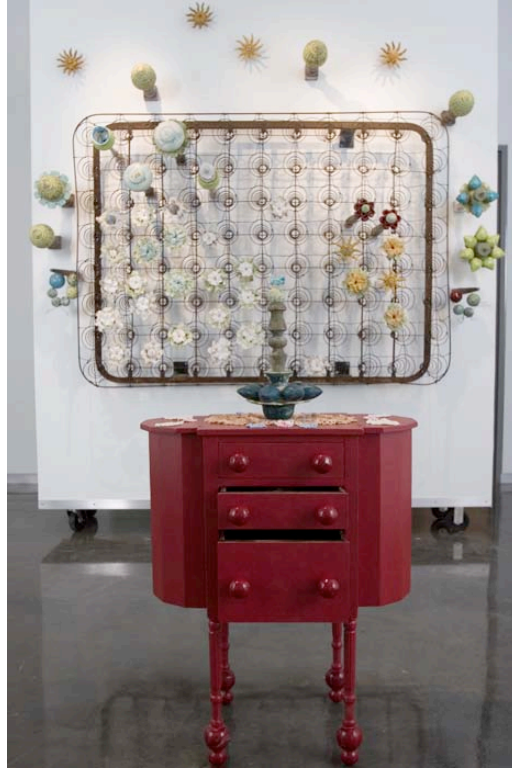


Image 14: Installation view



Image 15: *Spring*, detail.



Image 16: *Spring*, detail.



Image 17: *Reliquary*, detail.

Reliquary

Reliquary is a Victorian sewing table that was stripped, refinished and painted bright red, the color of love and life. It is the repository of traditional and symbolic mending implements—antique lace-making bobbins, for example—that are neatly placed in each individual drawer along with insects, birds and fabric. Both instruments and natural curiosities are kept safe inside the table for the preservation and mending of history and what remains.



Image 18: *Detritus*



Image 19: *Detritus*, detail.



Image 20: *Detritus*, detail.



Image 21: *Dragonfly 1*, with *Flower Bombs*



Image 22: *Dragonfly 2*



Image 23: *Dragonfly 3*



Image 24: *Flower*



Image 25: *Flower*, detail



Image 26: *Dragonfly 3*, and *Flower*

Conclusion

Installing my show has been a performative act. Installing the artwork is the moment when the final ritual occurs and the work coalesces. I find it to be a time of contemplation because the work then reveals a different type of seeing and knowing. My perceptions changed while I built new meanings and had new revelations about how ideas and thoughts evolve. The environments I create are places that are filled with contradictions, which are the result of how I'm feeling about being in a particular environment. Creating this body of work was cathartic in terms of dealing with my own feelings of loss and desire. After witnessing such great loss for the citizens of New Orleans, I now have a better appreciation for life, my community and the environment. I hope my show can instill in viewers a better awareness of their environment and encourage them to reflect on and appreciate life with all of its tribulations and feelings of joy, perseverance and hope.

Vita

Cynthia Giachetti was born and raised in Sacramento, California. She studied painting with Wayne Thiebaud and ceramics with Annabeth Rosen at the University of California at Davis and considers them her life and artistic mentors. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the University of California at Davis in 2002. In fall 2004 she moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to study art. In fall 2005 she bought a Victorian shotgun-style house at 135 St. Rose Avenue. She will receive her Master of Fine Arts degree at Louisiana State University in August 2007. She lost her beloved seventeen-year-old Pomeranian Louis on April 5, 2007, shortly before her thesis show. He will surely be missed. She has had a rich experience while being in Louisiana, both happy and sad, and plans on staying in Baton Rouge in her sweet little comfortable house indefinitely.



Image 27: *Little Lou*