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Becoming and Un-Becoming

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Becoming and Un-Becoming

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

by

Monica Zeringue

B.A. University of New Orleans, 1993

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ABSTRACT

My work is about becoming and un-becoming. I seek to capture a time of transition and possibility. The pre-pubescent girls in my drawings are actually reduced versions of me, going back to a time of innocence and potential, and I multiply them as a means of self-exploration. They split apart, re-combine, and re-configure, trying to make a new whole. They are rendered with detailed accuracy, yet the world around them is empty, like a partially recalled memory.

In this thesis, I will explore the use of the self-portrait, twinning, and re-configuration as they relate to identity, memory, and nostalgia. I will investigate the surrealist aspects as well as the different types of space—psychological, illusional, and physical--and how they work together as part of the narrative. Finally, I will investigate how the work can be both seductive and discomfoting to the viewer.

INTRODUCTION

The 1979 movie “The Brood” by David Cronenberg¹ is the story of the physical manifestation of anxiety and anger. The main character is a woman who undergoes a radical, fictional “therapy” where repressed anxieties are channeled through reenactment with her therapist, to give physical form to emotional pain. Her anger and repressions become actual flesh, giving rise to identical “offspring” who act on their mother’s anxieties. These girls are “born” from the main character in a non-sexual way from an organ she has developed outside of her body, attached to her by an umbilical cord. The resulting “brood” of little girls have one purpose, to work together to right the wrongs against their mother, in a very deadly, vengeful way. The world I present in my recent drawings also contains multiple, identical little girls, not only “born” of me, but pre-pubescent versions of me. While far from violent, my girls serve a similar purpose, created in part to work out what I could not as a child.

The girls in my drawings are all me, at about eleven years of age. They have long, slightly wavy dark hair, which often obscures their faces. When their faces are not hidden, they show identical little girl features with dark eyes, full lips and cheeks. They are sometimes outfitted in clothes similar to what I would have wore when I was their age (in the 1970’s), but are purposely more timeless. In most of the drawings, they are only in their underwear--white, lace trimmed sleeveless undershirt and panties with white socks. They are rendered in extreme detail in graphite, and are very small, usually about three inches tall. Their environment is a sparse one, barely articulated. Shadows are vague, almost non-existent, and the only “props” are the ones that are necessary for the action taking place. The space they have to move around in is very flat. Nothing occurs in the distance, only in a small, confined area in the center of the page,

¹ *The Brood*, DVD, directed by David Cronenberg.

surrounded in a field of emptiness. The drawings are on white paper, usually 22” by 30” in size, and almost always oriented horizontally. I also include embroidery in conjunction with the graphite in some of the work.

My drawings are about becoming and un-becoming. They capture a time of transition and possibility. The transference of myself back to childhood is a metaphor for a longing to return to the condition of potential this age represents. The use of the self-portrait as a child is an investigation of nostalgia and memory, not only as indicators of the past, but also the present and the future. The effect of using the self-portrait in multiples relates to memory and an investigation of the self. The girls split apart, re-combine, and re-configure, trying to make a new whole. I am exploring identity, and how parts work together to make an individual.

The world I present is a dreamscape, reminiscent of memories, both surreal and ambiguous. The physical and psychological space of the drawings is defined by the elements of the drawing. The white paper, the graphite, and the embroidery or silk fabric, as well as the composition and the act of drawing and sewing, work together to create a mysterious space where time is warped and slow.

NOSTALGIA AND RECONFIGURING THE PAST

The term “nostalgia” is often associated with a wistful sentimentality. In art, especially, associations are usually negative, regarding it as indulgently emotional. The American Heritage Dictionary defines nostalgia as a “bittersweet longing for things, persons, or situations of the past.”² The Merriam-Webster Medical Dictionary also refers to a yearning for an

² *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s. v. “Nostalgia.”

“irrecoverable condition.”³ It is that aspect of nostalgia—this irrecoverable condition—that I am interested in.

My work investigates this kind of longing, especially in its connection to the present. In my recent drawings, I portray myself as a young girl, just before adolescence. This specific stage is a time of major change and possibility. The desire for this condition is what I am trying to convey in my drawings, not the actual events and memories from my childhood, nor a longing for them. Nostalgia is present in the 2005 drawing *Reflection* (Figure 1), which shows a young



Figure 1: *Reflection* (detail), 2005, graphite and thread on paper, 22” x 30”

girl in her underwear, holding a string, which leads to a pull-toy in the shape of a two-headed puppy. She is peering into an oval-shaped, dark void, symbolically facing an uncertain future, while holding onto her childhood. Yet if the pull-toy represents memories of her childhood, it is a distorted version of it. The toy is two-headed, and their resulting wheel configuration doesn’t allow it to roll forward properly. There is an interruption in the continuum between the past,

³ *Merriam-Webster’s Medical Dictionary*, s. v. “Nostalgia.”

present and future. Writer Therese Lichtenstein, in her book about surrealist photographer Hans Bellmer, describes nostalgia as acknowledging “an anxiety and a disconnection to the present and future. Yet, paradoxically, through its connection to another (lost and distant) time in a dream vision of imagined wholeness, nostalgia may provide a transition to the present or future.”⁴ Nostalgia is more about a lacking in the present, rather than any “perfect time” which may have existed in the past. This “disconnect” is what generates a desire for that irretrievable condition.

I represent this desire by actually transforming images of myself from current photographs back to that specific age. This involves negating the signs of adulthood from my body, in essence, reversing what puberty brought on. This is a strong metaphor for nostalgia, for the desire to return to a particular time. But using current photographs, as opposed to old family snapshots of me as a child, also means I do not have to rely on found images, and therefore existing memories. I can place the girls in any pose and still maintain the level of realism that situates the image in the realm of memory. Yet I am in complete control of the “memory” and how it is represented. In drawings such as *Reflection* and *From the Inside* (Figure 2), the girls definitely look like me. They are children, and have the features of children—rounded cheeks, longer legs, no hips or breasts. Yet they still seem to retain some of the adult me. In the five drawings that show my face, they actually look more like me now than as a child. Even where the faces are not visible, the bodies still look like mine. This is important to me because I want to blur the line between the adult and child. I want the drawings to exist on a continuum between present and the past.

⁴ Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 147.



Figure 2: *From the Inside*, 2004, graphite on paper, 18" x 24"

My own reminiscences of my childhood are not infallible. When my family and I talk about the past, we often each have different versions of a particular event. Memory is malleable. Recall of the past can be affected by many things—confusion, the passage of time, changing points of view. It is also affected by conditions in the present. Lichtenstein describes the unfixed nature of memory in relation to nostalgia:

Part of the lugubrious pleasure of nostalgia lies in the fact that the participant produces and “controls” the experience. In nostalgia the past offers a realm of temporary security, blocking out the uncertainty of the present and the future; it is a kind of edited reply as wish fulfillment. The fantasies are constructed precisely to suit the person’s needs.⁵

The use of the word “fantasies” is very telling. These remembrances no longer exist as pure memories; they have become constructs of the adult mind. What is lost, or never obtained, is

⁵ Lichtenstein, p. 147.

replaced by thoughts of a better time, or a fantasy of it. These “memories” are about the needs of the adult, not the child.

In revisiting the past, memories can be, and are, reconstructed to both pacify and repair. Like the movie “The Brood”, conjured memories become conjured offspring. These children were made to repair the past, eradicate bad memories, and change the present. They existed only to carry out the adult’s wishes, and lived only long enough to do so. They had no other function. The girls in my drawings also represent a desire for wholeness. They serve as a conduit for the manifestation of desires and fantasies, and the search for ways to move forward. In my drawing *Unravel* (Figure 3), four girls run together. They are all dressed only in their underwear and ankle socks, running on a strange grid-like pattern created with embroidery thread. Their hair is joined in one mass of embroidery stitches, blurring the distinction between them. One girl falls away from the mass, her hair actually tearing away from the others. Just as nostalgia revises and edits memory, she is discarded, no longer relevant to the group. They continue on without her.

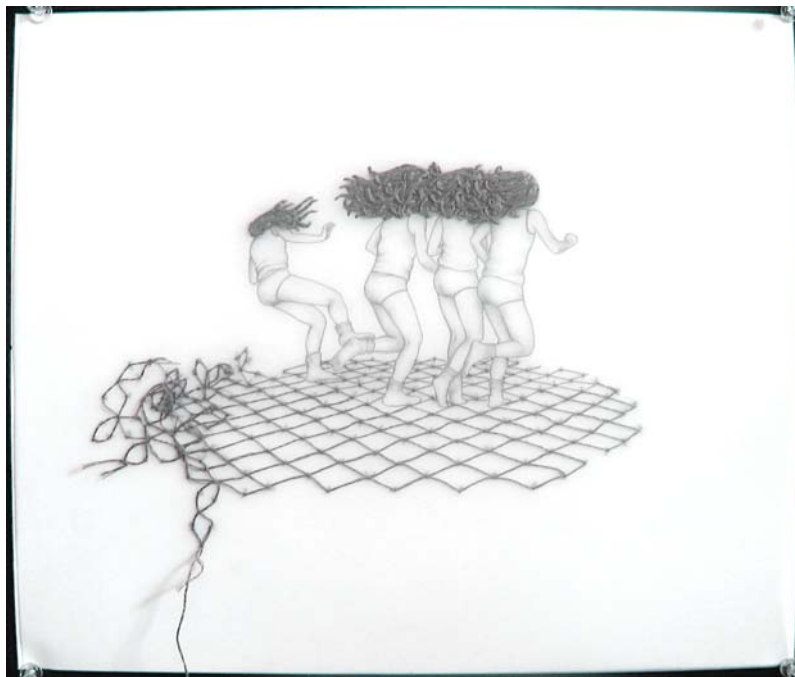


Figure 3: *Unravel*, 2005, graphite and thread on Mylar, 11” x 13”

If nostalgia involves an editing of the past, then the empty spaces that arise become fertile ground for fantasy. I have said that my drawings are only *based* on memory. Their real power comes from the interplay between memory and fantasy. Out of these voids come images that are not only separate from memory, but separate from reality. The fantasy images are a way of connecting with the condition that nostalgia longs for, the potential found only in childhood. In his *Surrealist Manifesto*, Andre Breton describes the connection between the return to childhood and surrealism. “It is perhaps childhood that comes closest to one’s real life...Childhood where everything conspires to bring about the effective, risk-free possession of oneself.”⁶ Surrealism is a way to connect with the “irrecoverable condition” of nostalgia and childhood in a way reality does not.

TWINNING

Memory of the past is not linear. Recalled events exist simultaneously in one’s mind in the present. Time is compressed as memories are laid out, rearranged, repeated and overlapped. Likewise, the girls in my drawings are repeated, overlapped, and merged. In *Unravel*, the boundaries between their bodies becomes blurred. Like nostalgia and reconfigured memories, the doubling/twinning of the young girls (of myself) be can used as an investigation of the self. In late nineteenth century literature, the double or doppelganger often appears as a literary tool, appearing in works by Fyodor Dostoyevski and E. T. A. Hoffman. Freud wrote about its use in Hoffman’s “The Sandman” in his famous work, “The Uncanny”. He refers to double as a means of self-scrutiny.⁷ Like memories of the past, the self consists of many parts existing simultaneously. The use of the double in literature and art is a way of separating these parts for

⁶ Breton, “First Manifesto of Surrealism,” p. 452.

⁷ Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 142-143.

examination. The multiple versions of the same girl in my work are consistent with this use of the double. They represent parts of the past (memory), of the individual, of the self (identity). They are parts of a whole, working together, their interconnection emphasized by their identical features and their joining, physically or implied.

In Dostoyevski's *The Double*, the main character creates another "personality" to help him deal with social situations, of which he is quite inept and fearful. The double, at first, is only in his subconscious, but then appears in the flesh as his doppelganger. His double compensates for what he is lacking in his own abilities.⁸ This is not unlike the girls in "The Brood", who compensate for Nola's lack of power. I see my girls as serving a similar purpose. Although each girl is not assigned a specific attribute, I do see them as individual parts of a whole, each taking on a certain role. The two girls in my 2005 drawing *Forward* (Figure 4) are working together, forming a modified version of the children's game of wheel barrow racing. One standing girl



Figure 4: *Forward*, 2006, graphite on paper, 22" x 30"

⁸ Hoenisch, *The Construction of the Double as Social Object*.

holds the legs of another girl who uses her hands, or rather the garden claws in her hands, to form the front of the “wheel barrow”. They each have a role, and must work as a unit to move forward.

Hans Bellmer presented surrealist photographs of a reconfigured, homemade mannequin, which he broke into parts, then rearranged, doubled, edited, and manipulated to create a strange mutated doll. He often replaced the upper body with a second set of legs, result being a top as the mirror image of the bottom. The “mary-jane” shoes and ankle socks they wear place them firmly in the realm of childhood. Although these photographs are shocking and uncanny, Bellmer wanted them to feel nostalgic. He saw them as a connection to his own childhood, by representing both a repression of the reality of childhood and a desire to overcome the horrors of his past.⁹ The repetition of parts in the doll constructions also deals with the reenactment of the splitting and fusion of the self. In his own writings, he suggests that the double is actually two parts of a whole individual, something like the separate personalities of a schizophrenic. He believed that mastering the double leads not to madness, but enrichment.¹⁰ Likewise, recognizing the separateness of the past and future, and integrating the parts leads to awareness.

The desire for wholeness that is part of nostalgia involves the integration of parts, while maintaining their separate-ness. Duality coexists in drawings such as *Forward*, where the parts are still unique, but become a whole. In other drawings, such as *Unravel*, wholeness comes from the discarding of parts. But in *Born Again* (Figure 5), the girls seem to both merging and separating. Both integration and disintegration are investigated as a means to achieve completion.

⁹ Litchenstein, p. 145.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57. Quoting Bellmer from *Anatomy of Love*.



Figure 5: *Born Again*, 2005, graphite, silk fabric, and thread on paper, 30" x 22"

THE UNIQUE SPACE OF MEMORY

If, as suggested earlier, memory consists of overlapping parts, re-configured to be self-serving, then it may also be edited for the same purpose. This selective memory draws attention to its repressions, to the fact that it always conceals more than it records.¹¹ Like a dream, or a partially recalled memory, some parts are portrayed in extreme detail, while others are left out. My drawings, with the mimetic illusionism and large areas of white space, work in a similar way. The emptiness suggests gaps in the narrative. What is missing or forgotten becomes as important, or almost as important, as what is actually represented on the paper. The drawing emerges from the empty space, so that emptiness is not “created”; it exists because the paper was left bare, because information was left out. A reduction to black and white in the drawings also suggests that something is absent. These works are meant to feel like an old photograph, or a fading memory with the lack of color information heightening this vagueness. The choice of graphite-colored embroidery thread is part of this effort. Embroidery thread is usually associated with colorful designs. Here, it seems faded or even negated, as if the color was actually removed. Like the selective memory of nostalgia, what is present and absent are equally important.

The emptiness further becomes important in the creation of a sense of space. Shadows in the works are very vague. They exist enough to give the drawing a sense of space, but not really a sense of place or time of day. They are not strong enough to give any indication of a light source, whether it is natural or artificial, whether it is day or night. The shadows do not define the ground underneath the girl’s feet. All that is given is that the girls are not floating; they do stand on a solid surface. But the space they are given is decidedly flat. All of the action is

¹¹ Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, 67.

confined to a shallow plane, with no references to what may be happening behind or in front of them. Their environment is artificial and uncertain.

Their space and their existence are surreal. They are expressionless, and seemed to be caught mid-action, even though there is no sense of movement. In *Forward*, there is evidence of movement in the trail of “footprints”, or claw marks, that trail behind them, but no movement is shown. One of the desires of nostalgia is a suspension of time, and here, the girls always seemed posed, as if they are waiting for something. But there is no sense of before or after. In some, where the girls are bound together by their hair, there seems to be not even a possibility of before or after. Three girls crouch on a hill while their hair joins together to form a twisting mass in *Spire* (Figure 6). How long did it take for this to happen? Have they been posed there

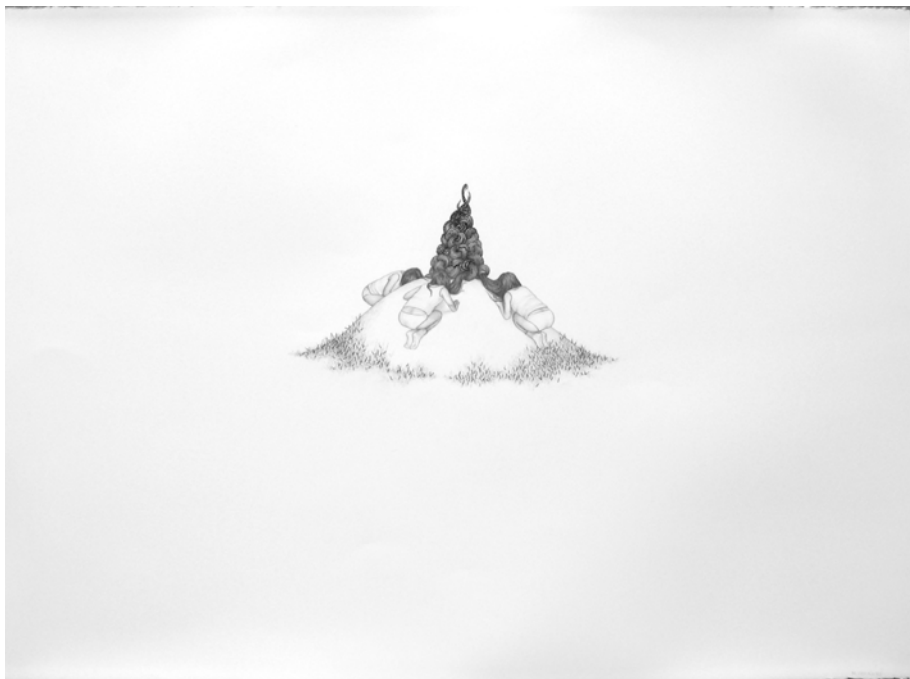


Figure 6: *Spire*, graphite and thread on paper, 30” x 22”

for an eternity while their hair grew? They seem to exist only for that moment. This coincides with the way memory works—all of the elements of the remembered past exist at once. Time is

completely undefined, either a dream-like slowness, or racing at a super speed. All of this ambiguity and absence leaves room for the viewer to fill in the spaces themselves, to place their own experiences in the void. The mingling of my fantasies and reconfigured memories with the viewer's creates something entirely new and unique to both the audience and myself.

DRAWING AS A NARRATIVE TOOL

I would like to emphasize the importance of drawing as a medium to the presentation of these ambiguities in my drawings. First, and most obviously, a graphite drawing would naturally exclude color, and therefore information. Graphite also has a translucency that does not cover up or obscure, as opposed to painting, which by nature covers and obscures. If, as I said earlier, the drawing emerges from the white space of the paper, then the blank space is “perceptually present, but conceptually absent.”¹² Drawing also has an immediacy, and an intimacy that lends itself well to the intimacy of the images and the ideas of memory and nostalgia.

Using a pencil to mark white paper is a universal experience, and often one of the first means of expression for children. It is a vernacular medium, not requiring special tools or knowledge like oil painting. But this simplest of art-making tools is used here to make very informed and precise images. These are not the drawings of a child. Using such a common medium is part of the shift back and forth between the adult and the child in these works. Also, the use of graphite, along with the compact size of the images, puts the drawings into the realm of illustration, specifically the illustration of children's books. This brings to mind fairy tales, fantasy, and even tales of morality found in children's literature. Again, the reference blurs the line between adult and child.

¹² Dexter, “To Draw Is To Be Human,” p. 6.

EMBROIDERY: PUNCTURING THE ILLUSION OF SPACE

I have already addressed three different kinds of space in my drawings: nostalgia and memory that are part of psychological space, the two-dimensional space of the paper's surface, including the composition and arrangement of the different elements of that composition, and the illusionistic three-dimensional space created by the rendered images. The use of embroidery in my drawings encompasses all three of these spaces, and one more. The actual three-dimensional space of the paper as an object becomes a factor as well.

I use embroidery as both a conceptual and visual tool. First, it is a reference to women's work, or domesticity. In her book *The Subversive Stitch*, Rosita Parker traces the history of needlework as "a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness". She goes on to describe needlework in nineteenth century society as a means of educating women "into the feminine ideal, and of proving that they have attained it, but it also provided a weapon of resistance to the constraints of femininity."¹³ Artists who have incorporated embroidery in their work, such as Ghada Amer and Elaine Reichek, are operating within the paradox described by Parker: using a traditionally feminine endeavor to forge new models of womanhood and claiming high art identity for an activity relegated to the status of craft.¹⁴ (Associating embroidery with pre-pubescent girls as they are forming personalities suggests all of the societal constraints put on definitions of femininity, and their vulnerability to these types of conditioning. This will be covered in the next section.)

Artists like Ruby Osorio, while using embroidery to reference women's work, also considers the line created by the thread a significant visual element in her watercolor works

¹³ Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, Forward.

¹⁴ Aurricchio, "Works In Translation."

depicting adolescent girls. In my drawings, the embroidery also works as a linear element, which, along with the graphite elements, defines space and completes images, also bringing attention to certain areas of the drawing. In *Reflection*, a single line of straight stitches defines the pull string on the girl's toy, also emphasizing the connection between the girl and the two-headed toy. In the same drawing, a more densely worked chain stitch defines the hole into which the girl is peering. Incorporating embroidery also enables me to introduce a decorative element or ornamental patterning that interacts with the drawn illusionistic space. Patterned stitches run through hair of the two girls stacked on top of each other in *Column* (Figure 7). In this drawing,



Figure 7: *Column*, 2006, graphite and thread on paper, 22" x 30"

one girl positions herself on top of another crouching girl so that their hair flows into one continuous column. The embroidery in the hair emphasizes the connection between them by running continuously between one girl's locks and into the other's, and at the same time transforms the hair into roots as it hits the ground.

While the thread adds texture to the flat surface of the paper, it also becomes the flattest part of the drawing. The thread stays at a constant width and cannot diminish into space like the graphite lines in the drawings. The thread also seems dull in comparison to the luminosity of the graphite. This upsets the sense of space. The flat lines of the pencil drawing actually appear to be more three-dimensional than the truly three-dimensional lines of the raised embroidery thread. In this way the embroidery thread introduces another sense of “reality” to the pictorial space. The thread is an actual object working with the illusionistic space, becoming part of that illusion while maintaining its own physicality. The chain stitches in the “hole” in *Reflection* reads as both a void and as a raised object with texture and depth. Again in *Column*, the stitches which define the hair look as though it is sitting on top of the drawing, even where the stitches seem to recede (they get smaller and closer together according to the rules of perspective). They become a three-dimensional illusion, yet the pencil lines, which make up the flowing hair underneath, betray this by describing space more accurately. In *Unravel*, the embroidered grid beneath the girls’ feet recedes with the laws of perspective, but becomes unraveled and distorted behind them. Thread actually hangs loose on the surface, emphasizing the flatness of the drawing. The result is a confusing reality, which intensifies the dream-like quality of the psychological space.

The disruption caused by the actual puncturing of the paper negates illusion of space. Stitches on cloth do not leave obvious holes, but obvious holes are present where the thread enters the paper. The viewer becomes aware that the stitches actually continue *behind* the paper. The thread weaves back and forth between the observed world and the hidden world. Therefore, the flatness of the paper is further emphasized, while the possibility of a new space and a new narrative, existing behind the paper, is introduced.



Figure 8: *Mound 2*, 2006, graphite on paper, 22" x 30"

Two of the drawings, *Born Again* and *Mound 2* (Figure 8), have silk elements. I cut luxurious white silk into small leaf shapes and sewed them onto the paper with white thread to form vines. The silk vines in *Born Again* are substantial, both in area and thickness. Hundreds of leaves overlap and layer, taking up much of the composition and rising off of the paper more than a quarter of an inch. But the physicality of the mass is subverted by the lack of color. The silk does have a certain luster, but, against the white paper, the white leaves need shadows to give it form. It is both a substantial and allusive base for the girls to stand on. Again, the flat graphite image of the twins seems more solid than the three-dimensional element, here the mass of vines. The constant push and pull of different layers of reality are consistent with the psychological layers I have described.

BECOMING AND UN-BECOMING

The history of embroidery in America and Europe in the nineteenth century can be viewed as model of the construction of the feminine ideal in society. According to art critic Holland Cotter, young women learned that proficiency in crafts like needlework were a display of dexterity that might enhance prospects of marriage. “They also incorporated words and images—piestic homilies, domestic scenes—that reinforced societal norms. Among them was a feminine ideal that valued handiwork over intellectual pursuits, ingenuity over originality, stasis over movement.”¹⁵ My use of embroidery in my drawings acknowledges the forces that mold femininity and define the identity of young girls. Yet, nowhere in my drawings are the girls shown engaging in needlework activities. The connection of embroidery to femininity was a construct of privileged society. The reference is confined in use to merely a surface treatment. I am interested in presenting an environment for the girls that does not include such pre-determined ideals.

I choose pre-pubescence as the age for my girls because it is a time when the identity is still forming. That stage of life is also a metaphor for a time of growth and potential, as adolescence brings the beginnings of both physical change and a new set of expectations by society. The girls in my drawings are all on the cusp of this potential, yet they are still somewhat androgynous. They have not yet begun to show signs of adult female bodies. This is very important to me. Because I reduce photographs of my adult self to a pre-pubescent form, I am denying sexuality, reversing puberty. I want the girls to exist in a place where gender is not an issue. I present them without reference to the masculine. Ruby Osorio’s depiction of adolescent girls in her watercolor paintings suggests, as Jeffrey Hughes writes, “an understanding of female

¹⁵ Cotter, “New Samplers That Give Old Pieties the Needle.”

identity that does not require a foundational opposition, no masculine/neutral/feminine.”¹⁶ Their identity is not formed by defining themselves in opposition to others. My goal is not to deny gender, but to lessen its importance. The use of embroidery acknowledges the outside forces that mold femininity, but I try to place them in a world where they are shielded from this. I want the search for identity to remain internal. The girls never look outward. They are the only inhabitants of this world—no other children, no adults, and no boys. They are self-contained.

I discussed earlier the break down of identity and memory into parts, and the visual equivalent, the twinning of the girls. The effort to define, or redefine identity must include a re-integration of these now separate parts. Bellmer wrote that mastering the double leads to enrichment.¹⁷ The young girls in my drawings attempt to recombine in different ways, similar to Bellmer’s doll parts: elements are cast off and while others are integrated in unexpected ways. In some of my drawings, the girls are stacked, crouched over, with bended knees, one on top of the other, separated by a shallow “disc” cut from the trunk of a tree. In *Stack* (Figure 9), there are four girls in one column, the hair of the uppermost girls flowing over and into the hair of the girls below. The girls in *Formation* (Figure 10) configure in different ways. A stack of three girls is in the center of the drawing, while off to left side, two girls form another stack, and one girl is crouched over with a larger section of tree on her back. These are different attempts at coming together. They combine visually and metaphorically with each other and with the tree parts, reflecting an effort to find a new way of being. But they remain unstable, especially in reference to the solid nature of an uncut tree trunk they seem to be mimicking. Here, the attempt is the focus, the act rearranging, editing and redefining. Bellmer compared the body to a

¹⁶ Hughes, “Tresses and Wonder,” 19.

¹⁷ Lichtenstein, 57, quoting Bellmer.



Figure 9: *Stack*, 2006, graphite on paper, 22" x 30"



Figure 10: *Formation* (detail), graphite on paper, 22" x 30"

sentence “that invites us to disarticulate it, so that, through a series of endless arrangements, its true contents may be recomposed.”¹⁸

Another drawing has a different take on reconfiguring. *Born Again* shows two girls joined at the waist, standing on a cloud of vines made of silk. This could be a birth of sorts, where one girl emerges from the other (similar to the non-sexual birth in “The Brood”), or they could be caught in an incomplete fusion. Either way, the occasion is made to feel special, or even ceremonial, by the mass of vines they are standing on, like the depictions of the Virgin Mary with clouds under her feet. The half-girl presents her more complete sister with scissors, but it is unclear whether it is meant to free them from each other or from the vines twisted around their feet. Are they becoming, or un-becoming? The uncertainty is deliberate.

Before I started this series of drawings, I made paintings that dealt with this in-between space, the space between death and renewal. Those paintings involved uprooted rosebushes, waiting either for replanting, or their demise. In *La Poupee* (Figure 11), actually named after



Figure 11: *La Poupee*, 2004, oil on wood panel, 24” x 30”

¹⁸ Ibid., 19, quoting Bellmer in *Anatomy of an Image*.

Bellmer's series of photographs, a rosebush lays, splayed out like a body, with its tender roots exposed, its branches over-pruned. Transplanting would bring the possibility for stronger growth, but this new chance is only a possibility, not an actuality in this painting or any in the series. The plants are never shown placed back into the earth. This uncertainty is the same one the girls experience in their transitory phase between childhood and adulthood. In other paintings, the plants begin to show signs of change and adaptation. In *Reconfiguration*, a root bulb is still exposed to the elements, but it is beginning to double, or split off like a simple one-celled organism. Like the stacks of girls, the roots are reconfigured, with one end of the double on top of the other where one would expect the stems to be. It is rearranging to become something new, hopefully to survive.



Figure 12: *Reconfigured*, 2004, oil on wood panel, 24" x 30"

In some of my drawings, the girls are also becoming something new altogether. The changes can sometimes be superficial, like the abnormal growing of hair and its combination with other girl's hair. But it begins to become more. In *Column*, the two girls are stacked one of the top of the other, with a tree trunk on top. They are not just mimicking a tree, but actually

becoming a tree. Their heads are aligned, and the hair from the girl on top combines with the girl underneath. As it spreads out over the ground, it changes into roots. Both girls combine with the tree trunk to become something different than the individuals. The same thing is happening in *Spire*. Three girls come together on top of a small hill, attached to each other by their hair, which is twisting into a rising spire. They are becoming something else, as evidenced by the embroidery in different patterns used to define the knots at the top of the mound of hair.

HAIR

I think it is important to address “hair” as a narrative element. The state of the girls’ tresses is a theme throughout, not just an afterthought or decorative element. As mentioned earlier, these pre-pubescent girls are androgynous. But their long hair and clothing, which defines their gender, is part of a cultured femininity, one that is not inherent, but learned. Hair is considered to be an important sign of femininity, as is apparent in any fashion magazine, where pages of articles and ads are devoted to hair care, styles, and what is “sexy this season”. I emphasize the hair as a response to “cultured femininity”. In *Unbecoming* (Figure 13), an earlier drawing in the series, one girl is having her ponytail cut off by another. The second girl is using gardening shears to perform the haircut on the first girl, while nature grows unnaturally in the form of a strangely shaped rosebush behind them. There is a tension between what is natural and what is not. The girl may be choosing to rebel against expectations about femininity by “pruning” her hair, while the rosebush presents a challenge to conventional gardening standards by not being pruned.



Figure 13: *Unbecoming*. 2004, graphite on paper, 18" x 24"

Hair is also a binding agent between the girls. In *Unravel*, the three running girls are bound together by their hair, emphasized by the heavily worked embroidery. The three heads become one mass of entangled hair. This further emphasizes the breaking away, or falling off, of the fourth girl. Her hair is also made of thick embroidery thread, emphasizing her now-defunct union with the other girls. Also in *Stack*, *Column*, and *Spire*, the girls are again bound by their hair, the connection further articulated in *Stack* by the running embroidery stitches between them.

In many of the drawings, the hair is representative of the changes that are taking place in the girls. It is portrayed as growing out of control to impossible lengths, bringing in an element of fantasy. The hair grows together, blurring the distinction between the girls, binding them together. And often, the hair becomes something else, as I described in *Spire*. The hair growth suggests an uncertain, even dream-like, passage of time. The lengths, the knotting, the structures that the hair becomes are impossible in the short lifetimes of these young girls. The surreal

aspects of the drawings remind the viewer that these images are not actual memories, but artistic constructs.

THE UNINTENTIONAL VOYEUR

In the last chapter, I discussed presenting an environment where the girls do not have to reference an “other” to define themselves. There are no boys or adults to invade their safe space. I am still careful to keep them non-sexual. I purposely protect their innocence. Although they are dressed only in their undergarments, their private areas are completely covered. Their lace-trimmed underwear is more an expression of their age and the private, dream-like quality of their environment. Yet the drawings can still seem provocative.

The painter Balthus produced numerous works depicting nude and partially nude girls around the age of adolescence. They confront the viewer, or their own reflection in a mirror, with a knowing sexuality. Or they show a little too much leg, or glimpses of their panties underneath their skirts, purposely enticing the viewer. These girls are certainly aware of their changing bodies and the power over men this will bring. The paint also has a sensual quality in the way it mimics the texture of the skin, enticing its audience further. Su-en Wong’s portraits of herself in multiples as a girl/woman (age is purposely ambiguous) are equally unapologetic about their sexuality. Her work, a combination of painting and drawing, openly place the viewer in the position of voyeur.¹⁹ But the knowing-ness of their gaze, as well as that of Balthus’ girls, keeps the audience at bay.

The girls in my drawings have not yet reached the age of sexual awakening. There is nothing overtly erotic about these images. But they are only in their underwear, and they are

¹⁹ Taylor, “Su-en Wong at Shoshana Wayne.”

“combining”, touching, and on top of each other. Their long, soft hair flows from one girl over the body of the next. Although there is nothing sexual about it, there is a certain sensuality present. The audience feels that they have stumbled, or even intruded, upon a private moment. The girls are unguarded, partially undressed, in the privacy of their own environment. The small scale of the drawings intensifies this feeling of privacy. These conditions, according to Laura Mulvey in her book *Fetishism and Curiosity*, invite voyeurism. (p. 68) The audience is looking in on something they are not a part of, maybe something they are not supposed to see. Yet the image is created, packaged (framed), and presented (on the gallery wall), precisely *to be seen*. I choose materials that have an intimate, sensual nature about them, and the viewer is also drawn closer physically to see the delicate, intricate lines of the graphite, thread and silk. While my girls do not beckon and tease the audience the way Balthus and Wong do, the elements of the drawings pull them in, offering a sensuality that transcends the overt sexuality. Still, the comfort level of the audience is compromised by their attraction to these scenarios, by their unwilling voyeurism. Because there is no complimentary exhibitionism on the part of the girls to encourage the attraction, “the sense of looking on, unobserved, provokes a mixture of curiosity and anxiety.”²⁰ Thus, in the mind of the viewer, the girls continue to oscillate between the adult world and that of the child.

CONCLUSION

My drawings exist in an in-between space. They are between childhood and adulthood, between action and inaction, between desire and fulfillment. It is this state of suspension that I am most interested, the potential and promise of an event on the verge of taking place. Every

²⁰ Mulvey, 68.

element of my drawings works towards this feeling. The confusion between adult and child on the continuum of memory, along with the temporal quality of the action/inaction of the girls (and their hair) relates and uncertainty of time. The interplay between memory and fantasy, the fractioning of the girls, the purposeful vagueness of the environment and space all contribute to this suspension of being. Even the drawings themselves are caught in an in-between-ness. The addition of embroidery to the work causes it to vacillate between flat drawing and object.

I am also interested in leaving room for potential. I include elements of growth and change. Nostalgia seeks to reverse time, causing this postponement of action. But, as I have shown, nostalgia can also be the key to the present and the future. It is not only about looking back, but providing a way to move forward. The reconfiguring, separating, and merging of the girls shows an urge to become whole, closing the divide between desire and fulfillment, between potential and realization. Un-becoming is a means of becoming.

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