Hey, Mom, Let's Go On an Adventure!

Submitted to the Art Department, Allegheny College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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May 2, 2010

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Artist Statement

Hey Mom, Let's Go On an Adventure!

Life is what we make of it. It has its twists and turns, its delays and surprises. We create, we learn, and we carry on. This is the documentation of my evolving journey into the reality of growing up, and into the reality of myself, using inspiration from my favorite childhood book illustrations and storylines. This project developed over the course of the semester and I realized that I grew with it. Because I started out this school year interested in quilting as an art-making process, I surrounded myself with strong, independent women, received advice from them, and researched them for as inspirations my project. This helped me find a balance within my womanhood that I did not know existed. It became a personal tale of going through life's boundaries and coming home again on the other side, with different layers of my being, stripped away. Structurally, I used a plethora of materials and mediums to convey sculptural and quilt-like scenes that narrated the winding path moving through the different assemblage pieces. However, rather then just conveying my own story, I want the audience to look within themselves and create their own unique rendition of my project, and see it as their personal story.

Stephanie Irish

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to my parents for being so, so supportive and comforting throughout this whole process. All those phone calls were needed. I could not ask for anything more then their pride in my work. I love you both so much!

My Advisors Sue and Val deserve such recognition for giving advice throughout the semester that kept my brain working, my ideas rolling, and my heart pounding with the excitement for new possibilities. I thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

My wonderful, loving friends, for their kind words of encouragement, their laughter, and the little notes they left for me to find in my studio space, urging me onward. I owe you all so much. I love you all, thank you.

My Comp Buddies and other Art Friends! Because honestly, without any of you I would not have survived this semester. I could not have done this work without you to talk me down from multiple panic attacks. I love you all, you guys are the best comping partners I could ask for.

My Mentors, especially the strong women in my life, including Shelly Brucar, Mary Berg, and Cally Raduenzel. Thank you for your guidance and patience with all my questions.

And lastly, to My Hands, who put up with so much pricking, poking, and bleeding this semester. Could not have done it without you!

My Senior Comprehensive Project is composed of three handmade and machine- crafted assemblage pieces inspired by the act of quilting and the assembly of materials that create soft sculptures. These works are connected by a trail that reenacts the dimensions of my life, from what I can remember to the present moment, and characters from the children books I read as a kid inhabit each piece. I used different types of materials including fabric, paint, canvas, thread, cardboard, cotton batting, and lithograph scraps to name a few, to create a scene that can stand on its own or lead the viewer along the trail and witness the movement throughout all the pieces. The path starts from the right, against the viewers' preferred way of reading from left to right, and flows until it reaches the end of the quilt, passing characters from *The BFG* by Ronald Dahl, *Stellaluna* by Janell Cannon, and *The Napping Hous*e by Audrey Wood, along the way.

It then floats, unaltered, to the next quilt in a knitted form where it splits into two paths, replicating a choice scene from the book *Dominic* by William Steig. The trail on the right of the characters leads to a cliff, on top of the third quilt, where characters from Shel Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* reside. The path on the left leads down, made from braided fabric, to the last quilt, where the main character who walks along these trail can be seen, reading the books that she has grown so fond of, that she has come to live in. Characters from *If You Give a Moose a Muffin* by Laura Numberoff, *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Stories* by Jon Scieszka, and *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* by Judi Barrett, make an appearance in this final quilt. The size of each piece can be noted by the wooden frames that they reside on, 26 x 32

inches, and each work is crafted with mat board and paper that includes text from the actual books in order to represent the documentation of my life.

What a journey this has been. From beginning to end, this senior project has been nothing if not an adventure. I remember when I first found out I was actually going to be working on my senior project after not getting into Carnegie Mellon for graduate school. I was scared, truly, but also excited. This is an opportunity to actively push myself in ways that I have not been able to before.

I started to concentrate on the idea this summer, when I was interning at a local art gallery near my house. An artist, Shelley Brucar, I grew to admire was a regular and a favorite of the gallery owner. I remember hanging up her art, visions of landscapes and lily pad-filled ponds. It was a kind of soft fiber art hung on wooden stretchers. I loved the way I could touch it, get close to it and see the colors, see the stitching, the blending of fabrics and mediums. I was instantly in love with this technique that I never knew existed. I knew I wanted to try it sometime, for myself.

Over the course of the fall semester, I tried to think of ideas for my thesis, but could never settle on one. I wanted to do something fun and innovative but also something that did not just define me as an artist, but also as a person. Junior Seminar had ended for me. The photographer in me was satisfied. I knew that chapter was finished, but would be revisited when my thirst for imagery and film would need to be quenched again. I wanted to try something new. I wanted my art to do the talking, but to speak in a language I had never attempted learn before.

I remember I was sitting in my friend's bedroom, sunlight pouring in through her windows, behind blue curtains. We were talking about our fall break plans to visit a friend in Ohio and like everything about our friendship, our conversations quickly changed course, to one of our childhood. It was after a couple of favorite children's book titles were brought into discussion, that I was startled to a halt in the middle a sentence. This was it. The actual definition of what I wanted to do. I would remake my favorite children's books, and use Shelley's technique of fiber art.

My childhood is a big part of who I am today, and by reflecting on it in college, I would learn more about myself in the process. It was something familiar and also something foreign. I could feel a hunger for creation beginning to grow. I knew this was a good idea, I knew I would be satisfied with this challenge.

As an artist, I have always liked to have a plan. I am all for experimenting on the way towards a finished product, but in establishing a concrete foundation to build off of, I like to have a strong notion of what I want. To me, it is the feeling of a safety net. It is also a symptom of the good girl complex.

In the beginning of this semester, I really wanted to stick to a designed plan of building upon story lines written by my favorite childhood writers. I drew out these ideas for mixed media quilts, centered on images I found or edited in the storybooks. At that point, my body of work was more about trying to define myself through someone else's images and thoughts rather then create my own. I was stuck knee-deep in this swampy feeling of fear. I think it was a fear of branching out, of growing more independent, of taking risks, and I was constantly

worrying about what I wanted to say. I did not feel as if I had a fair enough advantage to try and draw an audience's attention to myself and have them focus upon me, make them believe me, make them listen to me and hear my own individual voice. I was creatively blocked by this fear. I was making these little studies and able to focus on them intently, but as soon as they were done, I was stuck out in limbo again, with nothing to do.

It was not until I physically sat down in my project station, pulled my little art studies around me like the quilt that I was trying so hard to make, and looked at them in silence, that I realized that I did have a say, a meaning to my art, because I have a purpose as a person. Your art will always have meaning because you as a person feel significant. I just had not found my trail that was supposed to lead me through the working process. This was supposed to be a journey for me of self-discovery, but until that moment, I had not put my feet on the ground. I started out slowly, building up ideas from my own childhood and life up until this moment, making the characters from the books' special friends of mine, instead of the main character. That position I saved for myself.

The path started to form; it spread from the dark. It grew into a forest, into a meadow. It wove and dipped, looped and fell textured, at my feet. It split into two roads, showing the power of choice. It faded out slowly, then became saturated and strong, an image of today. It came to a rest with its significant cargo, a version of myself coming to a rest as well. Although, now the path leads toward a future. An unknown future.

When I was first researching for my senior project, I was looking more into the technical scheme of quilting rather than actually looking into a new direction for my project and myself. I researched a fair share of innovative artists but never really thought about branching out in terms of tradition. I was focused on staying within the realms of the quilting that I was reading about.

To me, it had to sustain the ritual, that quilts were supposed to be flat, concealed within this square of fabric, and meant as a means of physical comfort, more so than emotional. Until then, I had always thought that quilts could tell stories, but not embody a story that same way a painting or drawing could. Questions riddled my notes in the planning part of my senior project. What was the summary? What was my relationship with the story? What does it mean to dialogue another person's image with my own image? All of these questions lead to this idea of embodying a story within my work. The answer lay within the plan that I would have to make my work about myself and I would have to physically put myself in. That was when I starting look up other quilt-makers that told their own stories in their quilts.

Faith Ringgold was one of those artists. Her *Tar Beach* (Figure 1) quilt is one of my favorites. "Ringgold remembers how, on hot nights, families moved to the roofs of their brownstones (their tar beaches) to cool off. Ringgold's happy memories of such nights, 'when it was safe to be on the roof top under the open sky' were vivid. There were other families with children on adjourning roofs, and it was like an outdoor party; 'you had the sky and it was beautiful" (Cameron 47). Even though we both want a wide-range of audience members, we both want the

same basis to our audience: children. Whether it be an the actual, physical form or just addressing the child in someone, we internally want to reach out to that individual and make them feel something or remind them of a certain time. "…*Tar Beach*, the quilt that was the basis of Ringgold's first children's book in 1991. In the 1990s Ringgold has increasingly addressed children as both audience and subject. Since 1991, she has written five children's books, and she intends to write more. Children are portrayed as central characters in both The French Collection and The American Collection…In addition, there is a focus on relationships between generations of older and younger women, who literally or symbolically occupy mother and daughter positions" (Cameron 50). I felt I was able to connect with her art on a personal level, as her art was about the relationship between family members, especially the relationship between mother and daughter. My strong relationship with my mother was brought to light in my senior project; she plays a character from *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* in my third assemblage piece.

Being able to connect with the audience was an important factor in my work. Everyone has a family member to look up to. By playing up the emotional relationship I have with my family within my pieces, I was drawing from Ringgold's capability to depict past memories and use them as an inspiration for my own work.

Hollis Sigler's *Breast Cancer Journal* is a body of work that was inspirational in creating emotional imagery with specific word choices that enhanced the meaning of the work. I also have an expressive context in my quilts

and try to relate unseen emotion to the audience through the imagery I have laid out without actually telling the audience what they are viewing. “Although I wanted emotions in my art, I was determined to be silent about their cause. Emotions are a common denominator; what causes the emotions are particular to the individual. …To illustrate: you have a dream that is emotionally powerful. You wake with the dream coloring how you feel throughout the day. When you relate that dream to another person, it is not easily understood because the other person does not share the same icons and images in their dreams that you do. But they can relate to having a dream so powerful as to influence their life” (Sigler 19). I could not have said it better myself. In relation to my first quilt, the drama and darkness shown in the beginning part of the trail are in remembrance of my father’s addiction to alcohol in the first years of my childhood.

Not everyone would be able to relate to my work if I had put beer bottles and angry parents behind a blackened curtain, but everyone can understand a nightmare, or the unsafe feeling of walking home alone, in the winter woods. Books were the stability of my childhood. They were there for me when I needed an escape from any bad feelings and I could depend on them like a friend.

Another thing that is similar between Sigler’s art and my own is the repetition of forms and images throughout each painting or quilt. Sigler’s *To Kiss the Spirits: Now This is What it is Really Like* (Figure 2) shows the repetition of the womanly form flowing up a beautifully delicate staircase. In her other works, there are similarities in clothing, chairs, trees, rooms in houses, and the color scheme is repetitive as well. It shows the transitions of the woman’s body during

a time in her life of ultimate pain, strife, and stress. But mostly it is documentation on the emotional journey, much like my own journey, although hers is a more weary and winding road, riddled with potholes and dangerous imperfections. “Cancer has been an emotional trial mostly. But the emotional impact has changed my life forever. That is why I have found my experience more of an exploration into the realms of spirit, heart, and mind. One day they will discover the cause and the cure. Whether I will live to see this happen is another question. In the meantime, I will continue to chronicle my journey along the way. Like all of us, I am just passing through” (Sigler 32).

Annemieke Mein was one of the first artists that heavily influenced where my senior comprehensive project ended up, just for the fact that her work is like nothing I have ever witnessed before. When I was still stuck on the idea of creating flat quilts, Mein came into my life and changed my perspective on textures, lines of thread, and how the art can actually come out into negative space. Her works are visually stunning and remind the viewer about the beauty bestowed by the Earth and all creatures that reside on it.

Mein’s attention to detail, especially like the *Eastern Water Dragon* (Figure 3), impacted me with the belief that beauty resides in the detailing of a piece of work and if the artist truly loves and is passionate about what they want to achieve, then the audience will be just a appreciative. “The works are also designed to have a strong visual impact through larger-than-life relief dimensions, textural variations and colour combinations. I especially enjoy depicting species that are not normally considered interesting, let alone beautiful,

and visually enhancing their individual charms and attributes by giving a great deal of attention to their fine details" (Mein 7). I concentrated on the detailing in my body of work, even if it meant spending more time then was necessary on an individual aspect of one of the pieces. I wanted to show how much I loved doing this senior project by proving my capabilities in the tiny details and working at it until they slowly formed and created a whole, a story filled with imagery and appreciation for craft and the potential to create great things that mean something to someone, and mean something to myself.

Judy Chicago is mostly known for her work on *The Dinner Party*, which chronicles the women's movement through history, and her work in *The Birth Project* is just as interesting, yet on the subject of creation myths. The book documents the journey through the creative process; from initial sketches, to meeting with the women who conducted the needlework, to the finished body of work. My favorite pieces were from the *Creation of the World* Series (Figure 3). Gerry Melot, one of the women who worked on the series, explained that, "The image is of a woman lying on her back giving birth to the world; it is a very powerful image of womanhood, an image that is not seen very often. It tells a new story of creation while still incorporating the theory of evolution; there is a sea with fish that become the sky and birds which in turn become the infinity of space" (Chicago, 18).

I love the grittiness of Judy Chicago's work, how her full focus is on the artwork and the ability to execute everything planned. The changing of ideas might occur along the way, but she focuses so intently on the work, that nothing

else matters until the work is completed. That is what my senior comprehensive project felt like.

Something that I did not take away from Chicago's work was making the audience feel uncomfortable about viewing the work. Chicago even talked herself in the documentation about being uncomfortable while she was thinking up the imagery and overlooking the working process. I did not want to turn the audience off from my work or disturb them in any way. My goal always was to create and establish a relationship with the audience where they would independently view my art and form their own story along with mine.

Magdalena Abakanowicz opened my mind up to the idea that art does not need an structured plan. Her woven sculptures are never premeditated and she creates against the norm, against what is expected of her. A storyline has to exist in order for work to form, but every detail does not need to be represented in the initial stages of planning. I started not caring if stitches showed or not. I let mistakes happen and kept my studio space full of loose fabric and various materials to grab if an idea occurred to me on the spot. I needed to learn this when working and Abakanowicz inspired me to move without overanalyzing my motives. "My art has always been a protest against what I have met with in weaving…Ultimately it is the totally obliteration of the utilitarian function of tapestry that fascinates me. My particular aim is to create possibilities for complete communication with an object whose structure is complex and soft" (Abakanowicz 48). I love the richness of Abakanowicz's work, especially *Red*

Abakan (Figure 4). It is whole-bodied and fulfilling to behold. I drink in the color, satisfied every time I view an image.

Color was played a definite role in my body of work. It was never muted and rang out, almost musically. With the use of fabric as my paint, and needle and thread as my paintbrush, I wove worlds into existence and used color as remembrance for my childhood, which was full of color, almost to the point of bursting.

Throughout this whole process, the idea of comfort has always been present. A quilt is used as a means of warmth, comfort, and shelter. Even the children's books that I referenced in my work give me a warm, smiling feeling. Sewing to me can also bring a sense of ease. It is a very relaxing thing; to sit quietly in a corner sewing, slowly pulling the thread as arm's length and then releasing it back down to your lap, only to return again in this meditative circle of motion. Even in the initial versions of my project, I used fabric for the warmth and comfort it created, and for the incentive of physically laying out memories in front of me. To help me remember. To not forget where I came from before I move on into life.

William and Paul Arnett phrase the context of comfort beautifully in *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, a documentation of the women of Alabama, who create works of art for their homes and their families in the slums of Gee's Bend. They write, "Quilts are rituals of life. Along with shelter, the quilt safeguards the human body during its greatest vulnerability, sleep. The complex ritual of the quilt was integral to rural and frontier American survival. In the Bend, quilts often provide

the only color and decoration in unadorned living spaces" (39). In this poor, secluded environment, women are creating quilts not only for the pleasure and leisure of quilt making, but also to comfort their families physically and emotionally, and give their houses a warmhearted atmosphere that only something homemade could contribute.

That is how I have felt throughout this whole process of working. That I am proud of whatever I create because I created it with my own two hands. What a journey this has been. Literally blood, sweat, and tears have been shed for this project and I would not change it for the world. In its essence, this body of work not only embodies the story I have lived and documented, but it has also helped me on a path of self-discovery. I feel like any art that I create touches me in some way, leaves a mark on me, and leads me onto a path I would not have chosen in the first place. My only hope is that this project will give the same warm, comforting feelings to the audience as it does to me. Because this senior comprehensive project has become my shelter and my path out into the real world. My only choice is to follow my feet.

Cited Works



Figure 1.

Faith Ringgold. *Tar Beach*. 1988.

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed fabric.

74 x 69 inches.

Image Courtesy of:

http://laflaneuse8.tumblr.com/post/555124939/faith-ringgold-tar-beach-part-i-from-the-woman



Figure 2.

Hollis Sigler. *To Kiss the Spirits: Now This is What it is Really Like*. 1993

Oil on canvas with painted frame.

66 x 66 inches.

Image Courtesy of:

http://www.skylinenewspaper.com/Metropolis/03-24-2010/Battling_cancer_with_art



Figure 3.

Annemieke Mein. *Eastern Water Dragon.* 1982

Low-Relief Wall Panel.

117 x 132 x 6 centimeters.

Image Courtesy of:

http://picasaweb.google.com/Kaena.W/AnnemiekeMein#5154962185008413074



Figure 4.

Judy Chicago. *Creation of the World*.

Embroidered by Pamella Nesbit. 1981

DMC floss on cotton.

8 ¼ x 16 inches.

Image Courtesy of:

http://artstor.wordpress.com/2010/11/10/ten-questions-for-judy-chicago—interview-by-christine-kuan/



Figure 5.

Magdalena Abakanowicz. *Red Abakan*. 1970-1975

Sisal weaving.

118 x 118 x 19 ½ inches.

Image Courtesy of:

http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2008/02/artist_magdalena_abakanowicz.html

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