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ABSTRACT
In My Family
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The role of family plays an integral part in the establishment of an individual's standing in their surroundings. It is through family that we learn to grow, change and adapt. Relationships, like life, are in a fluid state of motion. They shift, develop, falter, and move on. The very first relationships that are encountered are the ones within each person's own family, and it is through these relationships and outside influences that a person is molded into an individual.

I have always been intrigued by the roles of family members. What effect do family members have on one another? How do individuals come together to create a collective family unit? What are the effects of the different relationships within the family? And how do relationships change over time?

The purpose of my thesis is to discover what roles people play within their own families. I strive to give voice to a topic that is often silent. The role a person plays within a family is very hard to put into words. It is a concept that is based in actions, in emotions, in gestures, and in internal contemplations. It is not a topic which can easily be identified and quickly expressed. I attempt to draw the concept of family relationships out of individuals and produce a thought provoking piece of artwork that seems so simple at first glance, but which in actuality is laden with deeper meaning.

My project involves asking people what role they play within their own families, and then asking them to provide me with a self-given title as a description of that role. I have silkscreen printed these titles onto the front of white t-shirts and have asked participants to explain their roles. I have used many forms of communication in an attempt to reach the widest range of participants. I asked people over the phone, face to face, through other people and through the internet and email. I have interacted with family members, friends, strangers, peers, friends of friends, and acquaintances, and I have gotten titles from people all over the globe.

Family is a universal concept, and everyone understands the topic of roles played within a family. Each individual has their own role, and though it may seem similar to other people's specific roles, they are all completely unique. I seek to organize and express the feelings and emotions involved within families and advocate for the importance of feeling a part of a greater whole. Though we are all individuals, we are also all a part of a bigger picture that everyone can relate to.

In My Family

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Art Studio Honors Thesis
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CD-ROM Information

1. In My Family
2007 Installation
Mixed Media
2. In My Family
2007 Installation
Mixed Media
3. In My Family
Installation Detail
2007 [t-shirt, ink, photography]
4. In My Family
Installation Detail
2007 [t-shirt, ink, photography, table, DVD, “Inside Out”]
5. In My Family
Installation Detail
2007 [paper, ink, twine]
6. In My Family
Installation Detail
2007 [t-shirt, ink, photography, shelf, DVD, paper, twine]
7. In My Family
Installation Detail
2007 [t-shirt, ink, photography, shelf, DVD, television, “Sustained Family Dynamic”, paper, twine]
8. In My Family
Installation Detail
2007 [mirror, ink, photography, paper, twine, wood shelf]
9. In My Family
Installation Detail
2007 [mirrors, ink]

DVD Information

1. Sustained Family Dynamic
2007
Video 55min
2. Inside Out
2007
Video 7:30min

Artist's Book Information

1. In My Family...
2007

Family has played a constant and vital role in the shaping of people and societies. Family is a universal concept that not only contributes to the development of each of its individual members, but also acts as a microcosm for the rest of mankind:

“Compare the nations of the world to the members of a family. A family is a nation in miniature. Simply enlarge the circle of the household, and you have the nation. Enlarge the circle of nations and you have all humanity. The conditions surrounding the family surround the nation. The happenings in the family are the happenings in the life of the nation. Would it add to the progress and advancement of a family if dissensions should arise among its members? Nay, this would be the cause of the effacement of progress and advancement. (United States Baha’i National Spiritual Assembly, Developing Distinctive Baha’i Communities)

Family plays a central role in the lives of its members. Who someone becomes, and how someone reacts to the world around them, is influenced greatly by the role individuals play within their own families, by the way other family members treat one another, and by shared or unshared moral, emotional, and goal oriented expectations. For this reason I feel it vital to investigate the concept of family. I want to focus on the relationships within families. Specifically, I want to examine the importance that individual roles play in creating and sustaining a family dynamic.

To fully understand this concept and how people affect and are influenced by family, I feel that finding a definition is of utmost importance. One such definition states that family, when used in the mathematical sense, is “a given class of solutions of the same basic equation, differing from one another only

by the different values assigned to the constants in the equation.”¹ I see a correlation between this definition and my concept of a social or biological family. There is an important thing to note about family dynamics; every family has its own, it is constantly changing, and it is affected by everything around it. For an individual to state that she is the mother in a family, this title has a set of meanings and responsibilities attached to it for that specific person. For another woman to state that she is the mother of her family, a completely different set of meanings is associated with her statement. Every family members’ title is affected by the rest of the other family roles, personalities, outside influences, stages of life, age, birth order, personal interactions, relationships, responsibilities and external events.

For me, my creative process is often sparked by the desire to create for the people I care about and to incorporate other peoples’ passions, desires, or personalities into works of art that I believe they will relate to. These concepts can often be shared between people and opened up to a greater audience.

Over the past year, in an attempt to create for others, and explore the medium of screenprinting, I created and printed designs on t-shirts for friends. I incorporated the personalities that I had grown to know and love into their individual designs, paying close attention to content, color, shirt style and size. I felt a disconnect between fine art and the act of creating socially. It was not until an encounter with Ann Hamilton that I started to make the connection

¹ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/family>

that one of the roles of art is to give voice to subjects or concepts which otherwise do not have a voice of their own. Through learning more about Hamilton's work, I started to make the connection that art does not necessarily have to come entirely from the individual.

We live in a world that is extremely connected. We are influenced every day by our surroundings and interactions. What is most important is that as artists, we make connections. We find threads that connect us. We find ideas that are correlated in ways that maybe others have not seen. We express ideas and concepts in different ways. This project seeks to use screenprinting to create a link between my passion for family, my need to create for others, and the enjoyment felt in organizing information and objects.

The history of the t-shirt provides a background to my project. Before World War One (WWI), t-shirts had not been introduced into American society. It was during this time that American soldiers discovered the white cotton t-shirt that the British Army wore under their uniforms. (Kidner and Knee 9) By WWII white t-shirts had been fully incorporated into standard American uniforms. Soon images of American soldiers wearing just their t-shirts and army pants in warmer climates were seen in the States and began to effect American fashion. People began to use t-shirts as a form of underwear, under their shirts. Not long after, t-shirts were used to advertise for political parties and became a typical form of sharing ideas and information.

“According to the *New York Times*, the 1948 presidential campaign of New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey produced a "Dew It for Dewey" T-shirt, which was followed in 1952 by "I Like Ike" T-shirts in support of Dwight D. Eisenhower. John Wayne, Marlon Brando and James Dean all wore them on national TV. At first the public was shocked, but by 1955 it had become acceptable.”²

This shifted t-shirts from underwear to outerwear. T-shirts became a way of not only advertising political views, but also the wearer’s personality, identity, likes and dislikes. They became a form of advertising a person's individuality. In an attempt to be personally understood, individuals have taken a once hidden object and made it a revealed form of expression, which has opened new avenues to give voice to concepts and ideas that are often only felt internally.

Similar to the early history of t-shirts for advocacy, I wanted to use t-shirts to promote the importance of family. I started to ask people what role they felt they played within their own families, and asked them to create a self-given title as an expression of their role. I then printed in black stencil lettering these titles onto the front of white t-shirts in each person's specific size.

By requesting input from people, I am not only taking a very personal, hidden relationship and advertising it to the public eye, but I am also asking the individual to express in words a concept that is hardly ever spoken about. I am taking something that was hidden before, just as t-shirts used to be a hidden form of clothing, and making it public, making it known, and making it

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tshirt>

a part of the individual. People are forced to re-evaluate their roles and discover how they really fit into the family. Often people will immediately tell me how other family members see them, but when asked to think about how THEY feel they fit into the family, the role and title change.

Once the t-shirts are made I ask people to explain their family role while I videotape them wearing their titled shirt, standing against a black background. I ask them to tell me why they chose their role. I do this because there is a story behind every title that is given. A stranger looking at the title “Little Black Rock” might assume that the individual feels forgotten in the family, or overlooked. But in reality, when hearing the reasoning from the actual individual, you learn that the title, “Little Black Rock” actually relates to the feelings of support and stability involved in holding the family together, while at the same time being an annoyance to certain members of the family; a little black rock in someone’s shoe. One title can mean a number of different things to the wearer.

I also take photographs in the same manner by asking my subjects to stand facing the camera. I document the titles along with the actual faces of the individuals. I need to show that these titles hold personality. They hold meaning, and they are a form of expressing identity. They are short, concise statements packed with a whole person’s history worth of information. They are not light. They are not insignificant or trivial. They are not supposed to be forgotten. They live and dwell within the people wearing the shirts. And

though the shirts are just cheap, white undershirts, the titles that correspond with them are not cheap. The titles might change, just as family dynamics change over time, but they all play a part in creating the individual, thus contributing to the make-up of a family.

The concept of family role has a level of shared universality because everyone has a relationship to their family, but at the same time their relationship to their family is unique. No one ever has the exact same role as someone else. For this reason I not only ask individuals in my immediate area what their roles are, but I also ask friends who were raised, lived or currently live around the world. I use the internet as my main form of communication to explain the process and ask for titles. I received responses from people all over the globe; from China, France, Belgium, Norway, Trinidad, Mexico, Hawaii, Israel, Japan and Malaysia, among others. It is impossible for me to videotape or photograph all of these subjects, due to geographical and time limitations, so I have wrapped their printed t-shirts in brown packaging paper and tied them with twine along with a tag giving the individual's title, town, country, and size. (CD-Rom Image 5) I hope that this will allow the audience to understand that the concept of family, and the roles within families, occur all over the world. All of the t-shirts will eventually be mailed to each of the individuals in the project, no matter where they live in the world. This will enhance the fact that these are not simply being made for an art project, but

they are actually being made for people, for a purpose, and to be worn by the titleholders.

The display of my project takes many forms. It is, in essence, an installation which focuses on the domestic lifestyle. (CD-Rom, image 1) It is crucial that the viewer feels a sense of family life as they looked at my pieces. I have painted the wall a color I like to call a light grandma green. The reason I chose this color was not only to help the white t-shirts stand out from the white wall, but also because the green reminds me of my grandmother. Grandparents have shifted through the most family roles. They have experienced childhood, have taken on the role of adolescence, raised children, become empty nesters, and then had the joy of grandparenthood. They have experienced everything that comes with those roles, and have the most perspective in looking back over their family lives. Their roles have not only affected their lives, but they have also shaped the lives of many people as well. The green represents a sense of shifting identity and flexibility while also contributing to the domestic and homey feel of the installation.

In the installation, t-shirts are found tacked to the wall, thrown on the floor, piled in a hamper, and folded in piles on shelves. Twenty framed 8x10 inch black and white photographs are hung in four rows of five, each row above the other. (CD-Rom, image 4) These photographs are images of individuals wearing their white, titled, t-shirts. Below the photographs is a table with a

DVD player playing images of the individuals wearing their t-shirts and verbally explaining their family roles.

The titles all over the installation are prominent as they force the viewer to inspect each print, searching for one that they feel fits their own role the best. A mirror which states, "In my family," followed by six smaller mirrors with titles printed on each is hung to the right of the vertical hanging t-shirts. Below the mirror is a small black shelf which houses two picture frames, a number of folded shirts, and brown packages, tagged with titles and destinations. (CD-Rom, image 6)

On a small stand is a television playing a family scene at dinner. (CD-Rom, image 7) In this video each of the individuals are wearing a white t-shirt with a title printed on them, just like the shirts on the walls. They are interacting with each other, bonding, and spending a dinner together. This is a scene of my family. This is our main form of interacting. Though we are often all apart, when we do come together, we spend a long time socializing over our dinner meals. I think that sharing meals, or a time when all members can verbally communicate with each other, is an important part of sustaining a good family dynamic.

Today so many members of families are off doing their own things and don't take the time to come together to communicate, bond, or assist each other to truly progress. This lack of communication is contributing to the decay of family relationships, specifically those between children and parents.

Many families have lost the ability to comfortably interact between themselves, and have lost one of the most influential and supportive safe havens in society: “Like the world as a whole, the family is in transition. In every culture, families are disintegrating, fragmenting under pressure of economic and political upheavals and weakening in the face of moral and spiritual confusion” (BIC, Family in a World Community). I believe that this loosening of family has been carried into society life. How many conversations these days are focused on petty, materialistic problems, rather than sincere and genuine concern or wonder for each other? I want the audience to really think about the role that family plays in their own individual lives.

The large mirror stating, “In my family,” followed by six smaller mirrors, is a project that deals with my specific family, and titles that I feel portray my family’s roles. (CD-Rom, image 8/9) Each mirror is hung at the eye level of each of the correlating family members. The reason I printed on mirrors was because I wanted viewers to make the connection that they too play a role within their own families. I also wanted my family to see themselves in the roles that I had chosen for them. I want them to understand how I perceive them in our family. I gave a role to my mother, father, younger sister and brother, and my two remaining grandparents, all of whom, except for my sister, will be able to view the installation.

The act of asking people what role they play not only fulfills my desires to focus on family relations and textile printing, but also presents the opportunity to socially interact with individuals. I am allowed to probe and push for deeper explanations regarding family relationships that I may not otherwise have been able to do without the excuse of a thesis project, especially since a number of my interactions have been with people I do not know very well. In the process I have learned not only what role individuals feel they play, but I have also been given examples, allowed to hear family histories, learned about the depths of relationships, and have been let into a world that I had not previously entered prior to this project. I am able to connect with people on a deeper level because I am listening to some of the most important aspects in people's lives... in creating who they are. I get to know each person in a completely different way. This project has been a conversation starter within families and between people because everyone can contribute and comment on whether or not they feel the roles specified are warranted. I have had the opportunity to attend a family baby shower for my great cousin during the project, where I took full advantage of asking people what roles they felt they played. The atmosphere that was created was one of humor. We laughed a lot, but at the same time everyone was very sincere and heart-felt in giving his or her answer.

This project was designed to advocate and investigate family and the bonds and roles that people play within the family. It has evolved into an activity that also creates a bonding environment. My project enhances conversations and leads

to an agreed acceptance and un-judged ability to listen and be listened to. I hope that the project also creates a similar dynamic and dialogue between the audience and either their friends, family or simply within themselves. I am excited to continue the exploration of family roles and dynamics long after the installation has been dismantled.

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