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ABSTRACT

Embodied Communication: Visually Representing Movement

Cecily Merrill

This thesis examines the kinetic energy of the human body and its artistic response to materiality through an art making process. By examining my movements through materiality, my sculptural work reveals a shared human sensibility that describes the rhythms of our own mortality. The materials I study in this thesis are steel, ink, and cloth. I primarily work in steel because I can directly convey the physical weight and movement of my body onto the material. My greatest inspiration for making this art comes from the knowledge I absorb through my body when I dance. In my art making process, I draw on the imagination of my body's movement in conjunction with the information gathered from my experimentation. I use dance as a tool to conceptualize space and movement. Then I collect information through experimentation. I do this by cutting, bending, drawing, folding, hammering, buffing, and grinding material. The purpose of this thesis is to confront the power and energy of our humanness through visual expression. This work is about returning to the body and appreciating our human touch.

Embodied Communication: Visually Representing Movement

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In his book The Courage to Create, Rollo May notes that just as the heart pumps blood to the body's organs, enabling them to function, the artist must possess a heart of courage to make creativity possible. Everyone has courage. "In the absence of courage—rather, the ability to move forward in spite of despair-- we do not take action" (May 12). As an artist, it takes significant courage to explore and create a visual body of work.

My courage to create art is founded on my experiences in movement and dance. Every sculptural piece I create follows a process that expresses a human sensibility that describes the rawness of our mortality. Logical Necessity is a succession of steel sculptures that pay attention to the instinctive motion of my body. Similarly, my "Inner Ear" uses size, texture, and cloth to conceptualize my internal and external movement and balance. The purpose of these visual works is to examine the kinetic energy of my body and its artistic response to materiality through my art making process.

My knowledge of my body's kinetic energy stems from my upbringing. I have danced and played sports competitively since I was a child. I am comfortable with my physical interaction with the world. I appreciate working in three dimensions because I can feel a physical sensation. It is the source of my creative identity. I use dance because "I can express something inside myself that is inexpressible" (May 13). Unlike other modes of expression, I can literally throw my entire body into action.

Another inspiration for my work comes from researching artists who work in steel in the larger art community. David Smith and his steel art are important influences on my work. Possibly Smith's greatest contributions to steel-working history were the Voltri and Cubi series in the 1960's. The geometric forms in the series stood as unique human-like drawings of light and space (Marcus 1). His work makes me think of my own play on light and space through buffing and grinding. Unlike Smith, I am also interested how ground steel contributes to my sentiments about the life and death of my sculptures. The grinding also reminds me of the temporary nature of my work. I know that someday my sculptures will age and break down just like the human body.

Another artist who provides inspiration to my work is Lee Bontecou. Bontecou's use of steel and canvas is strongly dynamic. The geometric shapes that jut out create a wave of different levels and dimensions. Many of her pieces are simultaneously warm and cold. The forms seem contradictory because of the industrial feeling coupled with the organic shape. Her use of parallels between the industrial and natural formations creates a successful dialogue. I considered Bontecou's use of canvas and steel in my thoughts about the inner ear. Though I did not use her method exactly, her work helped me recognize the importance of integrating the dueling materials. Just as she weaves the thread around the canvas and steel, I loosely weave the cloth and steel together.

Process permits me to intuit acts of motion. It is one of the greatest influences in my work. I often do not know how my work will end up until I take a course of action. I use my process as a ritual to focus and connect with the inner wisdom of my body. Through my bodily process I can access “the dynamics of the psyche, triggered by movement or stillness: memories and habits of the mind are revisited and often reformed over time and from new perspectives” (Lowell 5).

My creative process is dictated by my body’s needs and functions. When I begin work in steel, I like to dance to warm up my body. I use dance as tool to enhance my imagination. It helps me conceptualize space, texture, and volume. It also works to transcend my experience of embodiment into a drawing. In my drawings I prefer to use pens and inks. When I use a pen I do not question my mark making. I feel the bold quality of my mark making in pen verses pencil is more meaningful. I like how the strength of the marks mirrors the lines of steel I draw in space. In addition, drawing helps me visualize the crude texture, shape, and line quality of a three-dimensional form. After the completion of my drawing, I gather my momentum and work. I use verbs like get rid of the semi colon to cut, to bend, to lighten, to press, to shape, and to punch to jump start my work. To achieve these actions I use tools like steel brushes, hammers, wire cutters, steel shears, torches, an anvil, and materials like an old tree stump. The tool I use often and find most interesting, however, is my body. Unlike other specialized tools for steel working, I like using the weight and muscle of my own

body. I think this directness of working with the steel is more successful in conveying the organic quality of the body.

In the first half of the year, my untitled art works were primarily process-oriented studies. These studies were crucial in the making of my final pieces. In my first series, “Logical Necessity,” I applied the knowledge I gained from my untitled works by transforming and connecting steel on a broader scale.

Reflecting on the finished series has shown my joy at the organic feeling of the steel when it is woven and threaded together. The sculptures have a presence, which I find exciting. In addition, the series shows my growth in my ways of thinking and process. I need to practice playing with different elements of steel so as to understand better my movement with other materials. I am confident this series successfully depicts the necessary actions of the body. It is about giving meaning and life to an unspoken language, which is expressed through my body.

Originally, I was concerned about this series because I used a different method of working. Instead of completing one piece at a time, I quickly sketched out a number of steel sculptures. Then, I went back to each to fill in the forms with shape, texture, and volume. I didn’t like this method of working because the different hammered and cut elements didn’t contribute to the forms’ overall function. The elements felt decorative and disconnected. If I could start over on this series, I would use all the elements to contribute to the forms’ structure. I

would consider every element's role in the literal and figurative weight and balance of the collective piece.

When I began to encounter frustration in my process from "Logical Necessity," I decided to start my inner ear project. I was inspired to create an inner ear because I wanted to make the movements of my thought visible. I began this project by visualizing the inner ear in drawings made with pen, markers, and ink. I remember my relief at returning to two-dimensional form. The drawing shows a great release of frustration. I think the building of the form through variations of small, large, strong, bold, and sometimes colorful lines is attractive. The physical act of this drawing was informative as well as motivating for my return to sculpture.

One of my professors commented on the fabric-like feeling in my drawing of the inner ear. I realized then that I had to incorporate fabric into my steel representation of the inner ear. This fact, however, was unsettling to me. Few artists who use cloth with steel impress me. I think it is an enormous challenge to transform the two materials into one fluid form. The making of this piece intimidated me. I wanted to break away from steel's traditional role as an armature and cloth's role as skin sewn over a form. I wanted the two materials to read as one body.

I thought about how the two materials can mirror each other. I thought about steel bars and cloth strips in terms of line. Then I combined the two different

material lines together by weaving thin sheet metal through thick cloth and thick cloth onto steel fabric. I liked how the cloth warmed the steel. I also liked the raw nature of the crumpled steel and unsown cloth. There was some question about whether I should have continued to weave the steel through all of the cloth. I intentionally left out the steel in the upper portion of spiral section of the ear. I did not want to disturb all the lines created by folds in the cloth. My decision was based solely on personal preference. I liked the contrast created by the interrupted and uninterrupted lines.

The conceptual aspect of making the sound of my thoughts visible still intrigues me. There is a lot of noise in my head, which influences my process of art making. If I had successfully talked to myself out loud and recorded it while constructing the ear, it may have worked better. As a result, I decided to take the sound element of the inner ear. I was disappointed in myself for not following through with my plan. I did not like the idea of editing the sound because it was inconsistent with the raw organic quality of the piece.

In the past I've paid little attention to my inner ear, but through this project I learned it is too important of a part of the body to forget. The inner ear may be small, but without it we cannot stand up, balance, interpret sound waves, or make action. The most successful part of the inner ear work is the way this piece notices the value of the inner ear. The inconspicuous inner ear has a voice to be heard.

My movements through materiality reveal a shared human sensibility that describes the rhythms of our own mortality, just as my work gives a voice to the inner ear. I want to continue to create a visual body of work that reminds my audience to notice and appreciate their bodies. Every human being relates to the world through his or her body. Our body is the only vehicle we can use to experience our reality. We identify as human through the usage of our bodies. As a result, my body's interaction with steel is internal as well as external. My touch is familiar to the viewer. This visual work holds meaning to the collective world because it returns us to the body. It is about not taking for granted our kinesthetic relationship to the world.

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