

I give permission for public access to my thesis and for any copying to be done at the discretion of the archives librarian and/or the College librarian.

Emily Groth

May 14, 2007

ABSTRACT

FEARS OF IMMOBILITY

Emily Groth

Examining and confronting one's greatest fears is an act of great courage and is the inspiration for my current works of art. I have major joint problems, including arthritis, chondromalacia, tendonitis, and a significant leg length discrepancy, for which I have undergone two major surgeries. I have been told that I will likely need a knee and hip replacement in my lifetime and that I should have already been in a wheelchair.

I am an athlete, and have always identified as such. As an athlete, losing my mobility would change my life completely. I lost a part of myself when a knee injury ended my basketball career and I am terrified of what will happen next. Will my knee deteriorate further, will arthritis reclaim control of my joints, will I need joint replacements, and most importantly, will I be faced with a life of immobility? Questions of identity and time are constantly on my mind.

I explore all of these fears through my sculptures, building knee replacements, braces, and wheelchairs out of junk, scrap metal, wood, and other objects. I wanted them to be rusty and corroding to emphasize the way my joints actually feel now and how they are physically wearing down. I think the material relays the idea of deterioration and pain. I also use random objects to emphasize the idea of foreignness. These braces and joints are made up of objects that were never designed for that purpose. I investigate the human condition, evoking feelings of weakness, frustration, resentment, misery, fright, sympathy, and vulnerability, but also strength and power.

Knee braces gave me a greater opportunity to relate more directly, emotionally, and physically to my work, as I built them up and around my own leg, measuring them to fit my body. It was like building my own support system, trying to fix myself both emotionally and physically. Making the replacements and braces more and more scary and painful in appearance helped me to cope with my own pain by externalizing my burden. My pain is something that I usually keep hidden from the world; it's something that ebbs and flows, but always compounds as it seeks an outlet. By confronting this pain publicly, I begin a healing process.

FEARS OF IMMOBILITY

Emily Groth

Department of Art and Art History
Mount Holyoke College

Art Studio Honors Thesis
2007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for the overwhelming support and encouragement in this project. This would not have been possible without the help of these individuals:

Charles Spurrier
Rie Hachiyangi
Joe Smith
Nathan Margalit
Karin Stack
Nancy Campbell
Rose Ryan
Bob Riddle
Ann Hamilton
Mary Brigid Barrett
Richard Groth
Elizabeth Groth
Patrick Groth
Dana Kvalheim
Lucia Fenney
Cecily Merrill
Nancy Hellgeth
Hannah Seki
Wendy Watson
Marianne Doezema
Lucas Coffeen
Leah Brown
Austin Soucy

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I: Artist's Analysis

PART II: Images of the Artwork
(CD-ROM)

CD-ROM Information

1. Knee Braces and Replacements Series
2007 exhibition display view
Found object sculpture
2. Knee Braces and Replacements Series
2007 exhibition display – alternate view
Found object sculpture
3. Knee Braces and Replacements Series, Future wheelchair
2007 exhibition display view
Found object sculpture
4. Future Wheelchair, Childhood Wheelchair, and Knee Brace and Replacement Series
2007 exhibition display
Found object sculpture
5. Childhood Wheelchair, and Knee Brace and Replacement Series
2007 exhibition display
Found object sculpture
6. Pain Journal Collage
2007 mixed media collage 6' x 8' x 1'
[x-rays, metal, paper, wood, paint]
7. Pain Journal Collage
2007 mixed media collage 6' x 8' x 1" – another view
[x-rays, metal, paper, wood, paint]
8. Pain Journal Collage
2007 mixed media collage 6' x 8' x 1'
Detail
[x-rays, metal, paper, wood, paint]
9. Knee Braces and Replacements Series
2006-2007 2' x 5" x 5"
Detail – Bone replacement
Found Object Sculpture
[bone, metal connecter from golf cart]

10. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 3' x 1' x 1'

Detail – Crutch brace

Found Object Sculpture

[crutch, sheet metal, metal grating]

11. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 3' x 1' x 1'

Detail – Crutch brace

Found Object Sculpture

[crutch, sheet metal, metal grill]

12. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 3' x 6" x 2"

Detail – Crutch replacement

Found Object Sculpture

[crutch]

13. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 3' x 8" x 5"

Detail – Leg brace

Found Object Sculpture

[metal, piping, hoe, golf cart straps]

14. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 3' x 8" x 5"

Detail – Leg brace

Found Object Sculpture

[metal, piping, hoe, golf cart straps]

15. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 2' x 6" x 2"

Detail – Knee replacement

Found Object Sculpture

[metal, bolts]

16. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 3' x 8" x 10"

Detail – Painful knee brace

Found Object Sculpture

[pipe u-bolts, piping, sheet metal, can, metal found objects]

17. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 3' x 8" x 10"

Detail – Painful knee brace

Found Object Sculpture

[pipe u-bolts, piping, sheet metal, can, metal found objects]

18. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 2.5' x 6" x 7"

Detail – Knee brace

Found Object Sculpture

[metal, wood, leather belt, metal found objects]

19. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 3" x 10" x 9"

Detail – Rake knee brace

Found Object Sculpture

[metal piping, rake, sheet metal]

20. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 3" x 10" x 9"

Detail – Rake knee brace

Found Object Sculpture

[metal piping, rake, sheet metal]

21. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 3" x 10" x 9"

Detail – Rake knee brace

Found Object Sculpture

[metal piping, rake, sheet metal]

22. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 2' x 6" x 5"

Detail – Immobile knee replacement

Found Object Sculpture

[piping, paint sprayer, metal found object]

23. Knee Braces and Replacements Series

2006-2007 2' x 6" x 5"

Detail – Immobile knee replacement

Found Object Sculpture

[piping, paint sprayer, metal found object]

24. Future Wheelchair

2007 detail 4' x 2.5' x 1.5'

Found object sculpture

[sheet metal, chair frame, wheel barrow wheels, bike wheels, wood, metal grating, wire]

25. Future Wheelchair

2007 detail 4' x 2.5' x 1.5'

Found object sculpture

[sheet metal, chair frame, wheel barrow wheels, bike wheels, wood, metal grating, wire]

26. Childhood Wheelchair

2007 detail 3' x 2' x 3.5'

Found object sculpture

[wood, sheet metal, piping, golf carts]

27. Future Wheelchair

2007 detail 3' x 2' x 3.5'

Found object sculpture

[wood, sheet metal, piping, golf carts]

Examining and confronting one's greatest fears is an act of great courage and is the inspiration for my current works of art that explore a serious and extremely painful knee injury. All my fears stem from issues of mobility, independence, and athleticism, which have all been greatly affected by my knee injury. My knee literally hurts every minute of every day. I cannot escape the pain. My sculptural work is a series of visual investigations of that painful experience.

In order to thoroughly understand my artwork, my complicated medical history must first be discussed. When I was three and a half years old, I was diagnosed with Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis in my left hip. I had a major surgery on my hip and was in a wheelchair for weeks. The doctors predicted that I would be in a wheelchair by age eleven. Recently, it has been my left knee that has bothered me. I have chondromalacia of the patella, patella tendonitis. The doctors discovered that I also had arthritis in my knee for most of my life. The arthritis in my knee caused a major leg length discrepancy that has added to my current knee problems. In another major surgery two years ago, all the cartilage and scar tissue was removed from my left knee, then ligaments were cut to make sure my kneecap slides back into place. I am already slated for a knee replacement later in life.

I am an athlete, and have always identified as such. As an athlete, losing my mobility would change my life completely. I lost a part of myself when my knee injury ended my basketball career and I am terrified of what will

happen next. Will my knee deteriorate further, will arthritis reclaim control of my joints, will I need joint replacements, how much longer do I have left in my athletic career, and most importantly, will I be faced with a life of immobility? Questions of identity and time are constantly on my mind.

I explore all of these fears through my sculptures, by building knee replacements, braces, and wheelchairs out of junk, scrap metal, wood, and other found objects. The sculptures are symbolic representations of actual functional objects that also convey my complicated feelings. I have made them rusty and corroding to emphasize the way my joints feel and how they are physically wearing down. I believe my use of material relays the idea of deterioration and pain. I also use random objects to emphasize the idea of foreignness. These braces and joints are made up of objects that were never designed for these purposes.

My process began with the examination of my knee joint and the idea evolved into the building of knee replacements. I started bolting things together; creating objects that are able to move and bend like a real joint. Being an athlete, I am interested in the physical aspects of art, specifically sculpture. I love to use my physical strength to create my work. In this project, my physical and emotional relationship to the pieces extended beyond the idea of knee replacement. The project evolved to incorporate the building of knee braces as well. Knee braces gave me a greater opportunity to relate more directly, emotionally, and physically to my work, as I built them up and

around my own leg, measuring them to fit my body. I was building my own support system, trying to fix myself both emotionally and physically.

Making the replacements and braces more and more frightening and painful in appearance has helped me to cope with my own pain by externalizing my burden. I am exteriorizing an interior pain, making visible something that is invisible. Looking at myself with one of the knee braces on is the embodiment of my deepest fears, but it also pokes fun at them, making them easier to bear. It is horrifying to imagine having one of these foreign creations in your body, but it is also absurd and darkly humorous to even imagine these objects used for that purpose. Pain and fear are universal emotions. Using humor to overcome and deal with difficult issues and circumstances is also a universal reaction to difficult situations. I feel that my use of humor in dealing with this pain helps bolster my determination to successfully overcome my injury. After wearing one of the braces—a physically uncomfortable load to carry—my real knee braces do not look as intimidating. I even feel lucky that I will never have to use something as raw and painful as my constructed braces.

I depict flesh and blood as robotic and mechanical. I want my audience to see weakness, frustration, resentment, and misery. I feel that strength can also be seen in the work. I want to evoke fright, sympathy, distress, vulnerability, and anguish. I feel unstoppable until my pain reminds me of the delicacy of my injury, that at any moment it could all be over. This is a frightful insight,

but with it I gain a sense of great strength and accomplishment. As a child, I was faced with a future of immobility, but I was strong enough and loved enough to challenge that prediction. I did not let a doctor's prognosis affect my competitive efforts; I tried out for sports like basketball and volleyball. I have accomplished so much, and have faced my fears head on, leaving me with a feeling of great personal strength and power. My pain is something that I usually keep hidden from the world; it's something that ebbs and flows, but always compounds as it seeks an outlet. By confronting this pain publicly, I begin a healing process.

The next step in my work, after the braces, was to create a wheelchair from found objects. Wheelchairs represent my ultimate fear of immobility, loss of independence and freedom. I first built a wooden wheelchair that evokes the wheelchair I was in when I was younger. It is built from memory and imagination. I only remember that it was wooden and when sitting in it my legs were out straight in front of me, resembling a wagon. Having never been formally trained in woodworking, this piece is built randomly, with nails and screws sticking out, and an uneven, un-sanded surface, using scrap wood and old golf carts. My novice woodworking and engineering skills actually aided my work. I want feelings of pain, terror, deterioration, and unsteadiness to come across and the shoddy construction of my sculptures embodies those feelings. It is definitely not something one would want to or feel comfortable being in, let alone see a child in it. This sculpture represents the wheelchair of

my past, which I have escaped. It portrays the challenges that I overcame, and is the reason why I play and compete so fiercely in sports.

The second wheelchair I built visually resembles a wheelchair more directly. It is built of scrap metal, wood, bike, and wheelbarrow parts. It represents the wheelchair that looms in the future. The sculpture is rickety and unsteady, intimidating and uncomfortable. The idea behind a wheelchair is a replacement for one's ability to walk. The dictionary uses descriptions such as "for persons who cannot walk" or "a sick or disabled person," and "invalid". These are words and descriptions that I would never associate with my identity or myself. This is one of the first times that I have ever publicly made my illnesses and pains known, because of a desire to avoid sympathy or be associated with weakness or terms of weakness. I think the definition's description of the wheelchair have negative associations. For some, a wheelchair is a savior, allowing them to have freedom of movement and independence, although limited, when they would not otherwise. For me, I do associate the idea of a wheelchair with feelings of negativity and fear. This is because I have been able to live an athletic and active lifestyle, but had the prognosis of being wheelchair-bound at a young age, and am continually reminded of it by doctors and by the pain of injury. It is a threat to my athletic lifestyle. I completely fear the idea of a wheelchair and therefore it has negative connotations of weakness and immobility. A wheelchair makes the unsteady steady. It gives one the ability of movement when movement is lost.

This wheelchair, the materials used, and the construction of it, all show that a wheelchair is not a suitable replacement for me. It can never and will never replace my abilities of movement and athleticism, my personality or my identity. It embodies my ultimate fears of immobility.

The creating and building of wheelchairs allowed me to imagine what my life would have been like if the doctors had been correct in their prognosis. I would be a completely different person. This is hard to fathom, but it also allows me to gain a great sense of personal victory. A wheelchair is where medicine and science told me I would be. I have, instead, made myself into an active, successful athlete. This project has helped me to reflect upon my qualities of strength, perseverance, and determination. Fear and decay cannot touch these qualities. The act of building and creating the actual objects of my fears has empowered me.

The last piece I created is entitled “Pain Journal Collage.” It is a large two-dimensional structure built in the same style as my knee braces and replacements, made of found objects. On the surface, I collaged and painted images from a pain journal manipulated book that I kept throughout the year. The idea was to step away from the intimacy of the book, and make public my medical past, my writings, and my pains. I collaged on images of x-rays, knee replacements, prosthesis, and pages from my pain journal. I wanted it to be a chaotic surface portraying the confusion of my medical history.

Two artists that inspired my work on this project are John Chamberlain and Ted Meyer. Chamberlain's working process—compressing, compacting, bending, folding, and crushing scrap metal to create amazing gestural forms made of automobile parts—inspired my use of material. He said in an interview with critic Phyllis Tuchman, "I'm sort of intrigued with the idea of what I can do with material and I work with the material as opposed to enforcing some kind of will upon it" (Blessing). I wanted to do the same thing with my junkyard materials, and my process of reusing materials gave me the freedom to employ more imagination in my work. Like Chamberlain, I fabricated completely new uses and meanings for objects that already had meanings, and convinced others to see those new meanings as well.

Ted Meyer's work in his exhibition at the National Museum of Health and Medicine, "Scarred for Life," in which he displays prints of scars that he has made directly from people's bodies, was most inspiring to me. He sees scars as evidence of "healing and resilience" (Kennedy 2006). He was born with a rare genetic disease called Gaucher disease, which affects joints and organs. He had to have his spleen removed at a young age and has also had the first of two planned hip replacements in his early thirties. Meyer describes the inspiration for his work, speaking about Joy Mincey Powell, a woman in a wheelchair who has a large scar running down the length of her back, which he used for one of his prints, stating: "The scar was not just a marker of a disability but rather part of what made her unique. It wasn't just a scar. It was

her scar. Something that no one else had. Not only did it make her physically unique but emotionally” (Kennedy 2006). The Museum Director for the National Museum of Health and Medicine, Adrienne Noe, said when speaking about the show, that there is “something universal about a scar—everyone has one or knows someone who does. But your scar is yours, like a fingerprint. It doesn’t look like anyone else, so there’s the great quality of the particular and the personal too” (Meyer). I relate to Meyer’s personal struggles with medical problems from a young age, and as an artist, to his ways of expressing and coping with his illness through his work. His work is about empathy and a connection with others. He makes pains and injuries into beautiful objects that inspire optimism.

Upon examining my work, I would like to continue to work on my “Pain Journal Collage.” I feel that there needs to be more structure to the chaotic surface so it is more easily understood and not as overwhelming. I also have been examining the knee brace and replacement series, wondering if the sizes of the pieces are too uniform. The pieces were built to fit the measurements of my own leg, which is why the sizes are so similar, but maybe it would be more dynamic if there were more variation.

One of the most interesting parts of this process was the actual response of the audience at the Senior Art Majors Exhibition. I was first told by an older woman in a walker that her nickname is the “Bionic woman,” because she has had thirteen body parts replaced with medical, mechanical instruments. Her

immediate reaction to the knee replacement and brace sculptures was recognizing their resemblance to the actual functional objects they symbolize. She then related it to her own experiences. This emphasizes the artworks' ability to relate to the human condition and to greater society. Others have had similar experiences with medical conditions and are able empathize with the pain, suffering, and fear portrayed in the artwork. They also realize the feeling of empowerment in the work. This woman is unashamed to publicly announce her medical conditions and continues in her daily activities with the help of a walker, which immediately externalizes medical restrictions. Her medical problems have not stopped her, and meeting her was a great source of inspiration for my continuation with this project with a new sense of greater societal meaning.

The artwork also has alternate readings, which I was unaware of due to my closeness and absorption to the personal meaning of the work. Another older woman thought the knee replacement and brace series was a political response to the war in Iraq. She related the sculptures to prosthetic devices and amputee soldiers returning home. The artwork does relate directly to prosthetic devices, but I had not thought about or intended the work to have political meaning. Her reaction allowed for me to become more aware and open to the other meanings of the artwork. I am now aware that I need to look beyond myself and see the broader meaning of my ideas and inspirations. The art is

specifically made from my own personal experiences, but the audience's reaction confirms that there is a societal place for my private fears.

These pieces are just the beginning of my explorations of fear and injury. I will continue to investigate the ideas of the human condition. I would like to add to my series of knee replacements, braces, and prosthesis. Also, I have thought of incorporating ideas of hospitalization into the work, creating a stretcher or hospital bed and possibly an emergency room or surgical room installation. I have been in the hospital so frequently and yet, with every visit, I am still intimidated by the inner workings of the emergency room. Images of the bed, the curtains, the lights, etc. are ingrained in my mind. I will examine my interaction with the braces, wearing them, moving in them, and playing sports in them. Exploring ideas of braces that actually improve performance and ability, for example, that make you jump higher than you can even without injury, also interests me. I believe that the future of my artwork revolves around the idea of the externalization of something interior, making known something that is hidden.

This series of sculptures deals with issues of empathy, hope, and a connection to society. It is about a human condition. The pieces are inspired by my body, but they could represent any body. Some pieces directly relate to my knee, but it is the presence of a bodily condition, a physicality, that is portrayed; and in that sense the work is social. Everyone has interior feelings, thoughts, fears, injuries, and pains, which are hidden to the world. My

sculptures are about externalizing those hidden feelings, literally wearing your emotions on your sleeve. Or leg.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blessing, Jennifer. "John Chamberlain." Guggenheim Website.
<http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_29_1.html>
- Kennedy, Randy. "Artist Celebrates Scars' Fierce Beauty." *The New York Times* 4 Oct. 2006, sec. Arts B: B1-B9.
- Meyer, Ted. "Scar Art." Ted Meyer Website.
<<http://www.artyourworld.com/home.htm>>.
- "Wheelchair" *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)* Random House, Inc.
<<http://www.dictionary.reference.com/browse/wheelchair>>.