

2015

belt melon grass

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015.

Bachelor of Fine Arts, The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, 2009.

Thesis Advisor: Siemon Allen, Visiting Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media.

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
2015

CONTENTS

preface.....	1
introduction.....	4
belt.....	7
melon.....	12
grass.....	13
appendix i.....	17
appendix ii.....	18
bibliography.....	19

ABSTRACT

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This essay was written largely after the completion of my thesis exhibition which shares its title. An integral aspect of the work was the after-hours maintenance it required. Below I describe the unforeseen personal significance that labor came to hold and the way in which it functioned as a healing ritual. Through this work, and those leading up to it, I have a reinvigorated awareness of the importance of therapy as an aspect of my art-making, of which this thesis is a testament.

preface

This year, I've come to a reinvigorated awareness of the presence of therapy in my art-making. It began with a would be performance. That term, therapy, is one I've been to be suspicious of, one I've wanted to ignore, but the work I've made keeps staring at me in silence. I now feel ready to speak for it, and all that I've gained through making it.

I was going through a painful break-up over the summer and music, music I had always listened to, helped me get through. Marvin Gaye, Erykah Badu, the Gap Band, Fiona Apple, Teddy Pendergrass, Chaka Khan. But it seemed like I had never really listened before because here was Marvin Gaye, singing "Distant Lover" sometime before I was born and, lyric for lyric, describing my summer experience.

Sometimes, you listen to a song and it strikes a chord, it makes some feeling muscle inside you throb, so you listen to it again to feel that thing throb, to make it sing. The song can become a sheath, something that wraps around the throbbing feeling and gives it opportunity for contact. The feeling feels hugged by the song; a friend said it's like having someone sing and scream for you when you can't let yourself go. At a certain point though, the connection can calcify,. In this way we abuse songs, use them as tools to turn our lives into fixed narratives, and block the ebb and flow they have the

power to induce.¹

With that in mind, I devised a recorded performance. Wearing nothing but dance shoes, I would let myself loose on top of broken mirrors to all the music that had helped me through the summer. A video camera would be aimed at the glass, capturing the faceted reflections of my dancing body. The playlist was titled “Summer Love Exorcism.” I anticipated the piece would come off as cheesy, but imbued with an intensity that viewers couldn’t deny. They would have to swallow it whole.

In a practice session, I set up the mirror shards, got the camera ready, and warmed up to music that lacked the charge I was trying to capture. When I put on actual playlist, my body began to open up, something nasty began to come out. I was releasing a blockage in me, it felt necessary.

It felt necessary, something I needed to do and almost instantly I was upon myself, angry at the situation I was in. It was an action I needed to take to keep things moving, a self-prescribed ritual for my own emotional survival. But I would have never enacted it had I not thought it potentially capable of bearing the mantle of Art. It turned out to be a dull video, something I wouldn’t want to share with anyone. Why couldn’t I have set all that up for my own sake?

My peers and I had come into ourselves with the freedom provided with the knowledge that anything can be a source for art, especially personal experience, but I think I and many others have forgotten the power our creative energy has to work things in us that aren’t for an audience. Artists like Joan Jonas, Carolee Schneeman, Paul

¹ see appendix i for a related passage about ebb and flow from *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*.

McCarthy, and Lygia Clark, had blazed the trail the would-be work was on, but for me, in making the considerations required when there is an audience, I ran the great risk of becoming self-conscious and not letting the therapy I had stumbled upon perform its work.

So I was angry at myself, and then at all my contemporaries also indebted to feminist performance art. My mind turned to the story of King Midas, who, thinking all that mattered in the world was gold, asked for a gift from Dionysus. Thus granted, he could turn dull rock to gold, but couldn't eat food or touch his loved ones. My contemporaries and I now run the risk of valuing art to the exclusion of all else and at times it seems like we are a bunch of Midases, running around the world touching everything in order to turn it to art, not letting life do its own work on itself.

I find myself at a crossroads now, knowing that my work has the power to move blockages in me as well as others, but still unclear about when that power should be kept apart and private in order to avoid abuse, and under what circumstances it can truly speak to others. I think my thesis work succeeded in this, but as I disclose its impact on me, I still wonder if I'm giving up too much, getting in the way of the possibility of me or my readers generating real motion from it.

belt melon grass

I was walking home on the large median that runs down my street one night, chewing over a desire I had had for some time. I wanted to make a cast of grass after someone had been sitting on it, before it had reasserted its posture. It was a basic urge that I couldn't explain to myself, which wasn't yet enough to justify entering into another mold-making splurge. For some reason, it also needed to be a thin cast, a sheet of grass. Going over and over it in my head, I thought, "Shit! That's going to be fragile and break. Why am I always making things that are on some edge, objects that can barely hold themselves together?" And as I took the next step on the wet grass beneath my feet, the idea turned itself around; breaking could become an integral part of the piece. The seed of the piece was in that one step, where some membrane cracked in my mind and a basic property of the material I wanted to use shifted from a problem into the engine of the work.

I work in this way: Some material property or aspect of my body catches my mind's attention and I set to work on it. Everything that comes later, i.e. the content, the reception, begins to feel like some latching on of many little fish onto a faceless whale already in motion.



Those hangers-on are critical, they describe the outer edges of the work, help people engage with the inner mass. But it is through the work's own movement that content hooks onto it. Its not an intellectual dart board or coat rack, and I guess that's why the terms "strategy" or "operation" never made much sense in relation to what I do.

It was the same with the melon. I had a birthday party where we all ate a large watermelon. Everyone spit seeds into a bucket in the middle of my apartment. Washing out the bucket in the morning, I was caught by the way the black seeds swirled in the water. I wanted to make a work out of that. Everything that it has become, a comment on life support, a color field, an absurd idea of what a germinating watermelon looks like under its skin, came out of trying to complement the beautiful motion of that initial glance.

The belt was different. Its image came to me in a dream one night after putting

down *Jacob's Room*, Woolf's book about Jacob Flanders, a young British man in the years leading up to his death in World War I. In some ways he is a ghost throughout the book; we only learn about him in bits in pieces through the more detailed accounts of the people around him. As much as we wait for him to occupy the center of the book, a void remains in his place, until his mother comes to collect his belongings from his room.²

² see appendix ii for the last chapter of *Jacob's Room*.

belt

In the dream a long belt was floating in space. My head was inside the loop it drew, its imprinted interior scrolling past my eyes. I couldn't read it but I knew it was Virginia Woolf's suicide note, which I had never seen before. The belt length was determined by the length of the text. Upon waking, I found it too strong an image to shake off.

My father killed himself when I was 2. I first learned about his suicide when I was a senior in high school; up until then I had been told he had died of a heart attack. My mom had chosen to keep it from me until she thought I was old enough, and as angry as I've been with her at times for the choice she made, I still wince to think that she carried it on her own for 18 years without sharing the burden with me.

Since then, I've learned more about my father, his family, his state at the time of his death, but it has been in bits and pieces. I still don't know enough, I don't make enough time for my mom to tell me more about him. I don't even know if he left a note, I've never asked. With that grievance against my myself, I wasn't ready to ignore the image in the dream. How did I know that it wasn't pointing me towards something I'd been avoiding?

I've never made anything based on a dream. I felt like I couldn't alter the dream

image, any license my waking self took with the object ran the risk of ruining it and any chance I had of learning from it. With equal parts relief and discomfort, I was stuck with what I had got. Relief because, working through suicide isn't something you can force. I can't call my mom up and ask "Was there a note?" There's a violence there, it usually takes us a few days of contact for another fragment to bubble up between us. The same is even more true for art-making. I can't sit down and decide, "I'm going to make a work that processes feelings I have about my father's suicide, the burden it has been on my life, my mother's life, etc." The project offered me a space removed from critique, which surely would have killed it one way or another.

It took me almost three years to finish, in large part because of the discomfort the work held for me. Who was I to use this woman's note, the last line of which is "Will you destroy my papers?" I had a dead British father, and widowed writer for a mother, but was the making of the work going to help any of us? An encounter with an academic early on in the project helped solidify my fears. His name was Ted Bishop, and he had written about the suicide note in one of his books, in a passage where he describes "archival jolt"

The scene: Ted Bishop the Scholar in the Manuscript Room at the British Library, sifting through Woolf's papers, slowly dozing off. The clerks quietly bringing material in and out, the hum of noise from the window, the manuscripts themselves, were all bringing him to sleep.

Then, as he describes in the book....

I opened up the next manila envelope, and slid out a single sheet. It was handwritten...it was only a single page and it was well spaced. I would be out of here soon. I found myself reading a letter I had read in print dozens of times before. Anybody who works on Woolf practically knows it by heart, it's reprinted so often. It begins:

Dearest,

I want to tell you that you have given me complete happiness. No one could have done more than you have done. Please believe that. But I know that I shall never get over this: and I am wasting your life. It is this madness.

I felt a physical shock. I was holding Virginia Woolf's suicide note. I lost any bodily sense, felt I was spinning into a vortex, a connection that collapsed the intervening decades. This note wasn't a record of an event—this was the event itself. This writing. And it was not for me. I had walked in on something unbearably personal. It probably took less than thirty seconds to read the letter, and in that interval I had been blasted back to March 1941 and staggered up to the present, time roaring in my ears, and no one had noticed...

.....I now see that the suicide note added nothing to my textual knowledge, but it added enormously to my corporeal knowledge, a knowledge difficult to quantify or describe, but not for that reason to be dismissed or ignored. It did make me aware of Leonard's place in all this. I had become the recipient of the note. Part of the reason we work in archives is, I'm convinced, for the archival jolt, a portal to knowledge and, in itself, an assurance that we have connected with something real.³

He had empathized with the piece of paper so deeply. His initial feeling was that it was not for him, that he "had walked in on something unbearably personal," and yet left feeling that he "had become the recipient of the note. I too had felt "connected with something real" in my dream, so I looked forward to sharing my project with him. I wrote to him explaining the piece and asked if he could point me in the direction of a quality

³ Bishop, 33-36

reprint.

Here's what he wrote back—

Hi Andrew -

It's been years, but as far as I know the letter is still in the British Library in London. When I went back to check it they said they didn't have it, and so I had to badger them (I guess they don't want tourists looking at it, and so you'd probably want to write to the curator first and get clearance).

As for turning it into art, it does make me uneasy. The letter has been reproduced endlessly of course, but aestheticizing it is something else, and I think you'd want to be clear about what you're hoping to accomplish. I know art shouldn't have to come with it's own justification / explanation, and I'm usually impatient with arguments about appropriation, but in taking a suicide note and making it yours, and for public display.... I don't know.

Good luck.

best,

Ted

It's strange looking back at it now, it seems like a relatively benign letter, no chastising or outright claiming of territory, just an air of doubt. But at the time it threw me. It seemed so hypocritical that he would publish an essay about his incredibly empathetic experience but would question my intentions. I wrote back a long email he never responded to, full of over-justification, trying to ward off the fears he had inadvertently poked at.

I held those fears with me and it was uncomfortable working on the belt in public. When I was finishing it in the print shop a few months ago, people would approach me

at the work table and ask about this long thing and the text I was pressing into it. What was the text? I felt obliged to tell them, "Virginia Woolf's suicide note." I hated the way the words felt coming up through my throat, and dreamed of the day when they didn't have to, on their way from the belt to the viewer. In my voice I could hear all the indecision, fear of misunderstanding, the potential of unsettling others without benefit. But the text couldn't speak for itself, written in a desperate script even I had a hard time reading even though I too practically knew it by heart. The text needed a representative, but I wasn't the right one. I wanted the work, with the aid of a wall placard, to speak for itself. I wanted whatever judgement people made of the belt or the person who made it, to be made in the presence of the finished piece.

I've never put the belt on. There is some tension there, it doesn't seem right to leave it unused. I've been tempted to put it on at least once, but I don't want anyone to see that, not even myself. Putting it on is taboo. It is a belt that will never be worn.

In my mind, I do imagine myself wrapping it around my waist, the words pressed against my body. It has to go around at least three or four times before it reaches the end. I see my arms holding the excess, out away from my body. How much belt do you need to hold your pants up? Whoever is wearing that sixteen foot belt has much more than they need. They have overcompensated, overdone it based on some unmanageable fear of their pants falling down, their second skin falling apart.

melon

Notes from my mother, Deanne Schlanger.

The juice, the seed, the flesh watermelon
the pumping, floating vital seed
adrift, afloat, alive in her words even
the words that became her tombstone.
Andrew's landscape. Andrew's heart, being
the luscious, juicy, meaty, delicate flesh.
He laid him out, the body of his father
who left no note--did he want a note, does he?
That landscape both intimate and private, public and exposed
An ode to the fragile, to the organic, to decay, to mortality, to life
to creation, to the static and the next generation,
to circulation and stillness, to the sadness and pleasure of destruction.
Andrew, the heart of the matter.

grass

A teacher once told me, “Don’t try and imitate Nature, Nature always wins.” With mold-making and casting so central to my work, there’s always a danger that I will forget the lack embedded in the cast and unwittingly make it a stand-in for something much fuller than it will ever be. The same danger lies in using physical sensation as a source. How do you translate the piquant sensory experiences that precipitate out of your own presence in the world into something other people can feel? Somehow the grass, breaking under foot, acknowledges its own inability to regenerate a memory of suppleness, and in that acknowledgement makes space for a shadow sensation to arise.

Because the distinctive crush of stepping through the grass was the core of the piece, I knew early on I was going to have to remake the fragile skin constantly. At that time, before I had begun installing or fully connected the grass to the belt or melon, I envisioned the labour akin to the nocturnal activity of a Greek demigod, setting the stage for a new day while the world slept. But it also felt absurdly Sisyphean, the constant repatching of something intended to break. I believed there was something vital for me to learn in that situation held between exalted labour and infernal punishment.

In fact, it turned out to be a decidedly human kind of caretaking. Maybe that was an inevitable place to find myself, in between the two poles I had anticipated. I thought it was just going to be the grass, but I had to take care of everything. I replaced the ice that kept the juice cool at 9:30 in the morning and 5:30 in the afternoon. I juiced 3 fresh watermelons every third day, rinsing out the glass orb before putting in new juice. Even the pedestal that the belt lay on had to be maintained. A fine layer of dust settled on it each day, kicked up by viewers stepping over the grass, and when the belt was removed, you could see the lighter line where it had masked the pedestal. The belt had to be removed and the pedestal repainted every time I cast more grass. It took me a few days, but once I got into the rhythm of the various tasks, I began to see the room as more of a whole, one entity that needed care, not three separate works whose tasks complicated each other.

To my own surprise, I never grew tired of performing the maintenance. Some nights it was harder to get my energy behind the work, but there was never any resentment towards it, or towards whatever part of myself had chosen to take on the responsibility. It felt like “it” needed me, without me, it would lose its charge. It would die. Have you ever gone to the zoo to see some animal like the bears, and they are not there? The sign says they should be, there is a pool and everything else for them, the other people waiting, but they’re nowhere to be seen. The crummy zoo habitat stares back at you apologetically, and you are unable to forgive it. This inability for the spectator to forgive, which meant me being unable to forgive myself, was always waiting for me the morning after I chose not to keep the space going. “It” wasn’t like the bear, it

wanted to be there in the room, it wanted to be seen, there was no wild place for it to go, but it needed me to make it visible, sensible.

What is this “it”? The it is something that doesn’t stop. It keeps turning like the seeds. The it runs through all the works. It runs through me as I rework the space. The it needs me, I need it to feel like something is moving in me, something stuck is moving in me. Somehow I found myself making a work that needed constant attention, a work like a young sapling or an aging parent. It wasn’t enough to make a work that could be left alone; it’s as if I needed an excuse to look in on it every night to make sure it was still alive.

Despite all this, at times the caretaking felt devoid of feeling, based in a blindness that felt closer to the biochemical. Life generation is happening around us all the time. As we look at a field of grass, cells are dividing, roots are growing, the organism is maintaining itself. We sit on top of ourselves, as all the parts of our bodies manage to keep moving, down to the enzymes that bond to their substrates based on chemical attraction. At times I felt like an assortment of enzymes drawn to action while the sensing body, in this case the viewer, didn’t feel or see my presence.

Over the course of the nightly sessions, I generated 2500 lbs. of broken grass. That mass begged the question, “How can care involve such waste?” The answer felt connected to the work, the result of attempted simulation, a false manifestation of a sensation. Simulation is always more expensive than the real thing. The real thing, grass growing, costs nothing. I met someone on the lawn outside the gallery one day;

we were going to look at the show together. There was a tree in the process of being planted and a pile of dirt the size of a body lay next to it. I burst out laughing when I saw it, calculating in my mind how much money I would have had to spend to make enough of my grass to amass a pile that large. I felt the amount of work required in my body too. Grass and earth are so abundant, that green layer covers so much area, underneath which lies a deeper volume of dirt. My piece, held up on the 3rd floor of a building seemed totally fragile in comparison, unsustainable when held against them.

Every night was a recurring install. All the tarps and floor protection were laid out, the sculptures and their pedestals covered. The latex molds and buckets of plaster brought into the space. Every night was a miniature deinstall as well, a royal mess that then had to be cleaned up and the space returned to exhibition state. But when it came time for the real deinstallation, when all the rubble had to get carried back down the stairs by which the constituent parts came up, it only took a day and a half. As worried as I was that the work would leave some indelible mark in the gallery, when the clean floors and white walls stared back at me, I felt disappointed. The pristine gallery space had reasserted itself violently, there was no visible trace of what had been there before. At the same time, I now feel through with the work, which in my experience is an exceedingly rare feeling. It's over, I don't feel obliged to it anymore, I gave it room to grow and move in, and now it's exhausted itself.

Appendix I:
Excerpt from *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, Chapter 9.

Connie heard long conversations going on between the two. Or rather, it was mostly Mrs Bolton talking. She had unloosed to him the stream of gossip about Tevershall village. It was more than gossip. It was Mrs Gaskell and George Eliot and Miss Mitford all rolled in one, with a great deal more, that these women left out. Once started, Mrs Bolton was better than any book, about the lives of the people. She knew them all so intimately, and had such a peculiar, flamey zest in all their affairs, it was wonderful, if just a trifle humiliating to listen to her. At first she had not ventured to 'talk Tevershall', as she called it, to Clifford. But once started, it went on. Clifford was listening for 'material', and he found it in plenty. Connie realized that his so-called genius was just this: a perspicuous talent for personal gossip, clever and apparently detached. Mrs Bolton, of course, was very warm when she 'talked Tevershall'. Carried away, in fact. And it was marvellous, the things that happened and that she knew about. She would have run to dozens of volumes.

Connie was fascinated, listening to her. But afterwards always a little ashamed. She ought not to listen with this queer rabid curiosity. After all, one may hear the most private affairs of other people, but only in a spirit of respect for the struggling, battered thing which any human soul is, and in a spirit of fine, discriminative sympathy. For even satire is a form of sympathy. It is the way our sympathy flows and recoils that really determines our lives. And here lies the vast importance of the novel, properly handled. It can inform and lead into new places the flow of our sympathetic consciousness, and it can lead our sympathy away in recoil from things gone dead. Therefore, the novel, properly handled, can reveal the most secret places of life: for it is in the passonal secret places of life, above all, that the tide of sensitive awareness needs to ebb and flow, cleansing and freshening.

But the novel, like gossip, can also excite spurious sympathies and recoils, mechanical and deadening to the psyche. The novel can glorify the most corrupt feelings, so long as they are conventionally 'pure'. Then the novel, like gossip, becomes at last vicious, and, like gossip, all the more vicious because it is always ostensibly on the side of the angels. Mrs Bolton's gossip was always on the side of the angels. 'And he was such a bad fellow, and she was such a nice woman.' Whereas, as Connie could see even from Mrs Bolton's gossip, the woman had been merely a mealy-mouthed sort, and the man angrily honest. But angry honesty made a 'bad man' of him, and mealy-mouthedness made a 'nice woman' of her, in the vicious, conventional channelling of sympathy by Mrs Bolton.

For this reason, the gossip was humiliating. And for the same reason, most novels, especially popular ones, are humiliating too. The public responds now only to an appeal to its vices.

Appendix II:
Jacob's Room, Chapter 14.

He left everything just as it was," Bonamy marvelled. "Nothing arranged. All his letters strewn about for any one to read. What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?" he mused, standing in the middle of Jacob's room.

The eighteenth century has its distinction. These houses were built, say, a hundred and fifty years ago. The rooms are shapely, the ceilings high; over the doorways a rose or a ram's skull is carved in the wood. Even the panels, painted in raspberry-coloured paint, have their distinction.

Bonamy took up a bill for a hunting-crop.

"That seems to be paid," he said.

There were Sandra's letters.

Mrs. Durrant was taking a party to Greenwich.

Lady Rocksbier hoped for the pleasure. . . .

Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there.

Bonamy crossed to the window. Pickford's van swung down the street. The omnibuses were locked together at Mudie's corner. Engines throbbed, and carters, jamming the brakes down, pulled their horses sharp up. A harsh and unhappy voice cried something unintelligible. And then suddenly all the leaves seemed to raise themselves.

"Jacob! Jacob!" cried Bonamy, standing by the window. The leaves sank down again.

"Such confusion everywhere!" exclaimed Betty Flanders, bursting open the bedroom door.

Bonamy turned away from the window.

"What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?"

She held out a pair of Jacob's old shoes.

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