

I am fascinated by the complexity of human psychology; by the ways we develop our sense of self and by the ways our social experiences influence that development. I find myself drawn to self-portraiture because I am able to analyze feelings of fear, helplessness, and shame that were created during my childhood. The abstracted figures that make up this body of work are mutilated, deteriorated, wounded, and writhing in pain. The physical traumas that my sculptures depict are the manifestations of emotional distress I have experienced over time. This attraction to self-portraiture has come about because I have ignored myself for such a long period of my life that it feels so cathartic to pay attention to my feelings. I feel as though focusing on and understanding my emotions helps me develop as a person.

Looking at my sculptures is like wandering into a scene of carnage. Some of the figures are crouching hopelessly in corners of the room. Others have entrails bursting from inside of them as they attempt to hold themselves together. One form is leaning against a wall in agony because it can not stand on its own as it is collapsing. Another lies stretched out along the ground having already lost the struggle before we arrive on the scene. All of the forms are avoiding the gaze of the viewer by hiding their faces behind their long, braided hair that wraps around their bodies like chains or ropes. The source of the trauma that the figures are experiencing is not made apparent to the viewer. There is no sign of an external force. The injuries appear to issue from the figures themselves. The viewer is not completely aware of who the figures depicted are. The bodies of the sculptures suggest female anatomy, but the figures' identities are left blank. What the viewer doesn't realize when they first observe these sculptures is that the forms are actually self portraits.

My sculptures are self-portraits, but are not actual representations of my likeness. The forms are sculpted to reference the gestures of the body, but lack specific details such as facial features, hands, and feet. Rather than using materials to mimic actual body parts and innards of the body, I let the materials I use retain their own identity and purposely abstract the forms of the figure. I have found that by utilizing the direct properties of my materials such as plaster, wax, cardboard, and wire and by abstracting the forms of the body that the sculptures are convincing as bodies and body parts, but retain the texture of sculpture materials. For instance, I puddle wax as a way to imply rupture, but choose not to make it look like blood and guts in order to focus on the emotional implications rather than actual physical injury.

In my quest to find a way to express personal emotions by abstracting the forms in my sculpture, the artist that I am the most inspired by is Louise Bourgeois. Bourgeois created a sculpture titled self-portrait that has no likeness to her actual self. Instead, the piece displays abstract references to both male and female genitalia including breasts, vulvic folds, and the whole as a phallus.¹ Bourgeois successfully expresses more about her life in this abstracted self portrait than if she had merely shown us an image of herself. When asked why she had never created a self-portrait in her likeness, Bourgeois responded: “Because I am not interested in myself. I am interested in the other... ‘I, me, myself’ horrifies me.”² I take this seemingly contradictory statement that Bourgeois makes to perhaps mean that Bourgeois is interested in how others perceive her. To Bourgeois, self-portrait may be a way for her to inspect others around her. This

¹ Meskimmon, Marsha. (1996). *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century*. Scarlet Press: London.

² Herkenhoff, Paul, Schwartzman, Allan, and Robert Storr. 2003. *Louise Bourgeois*. New York: Phaidon Press Inc.

statement could also refer to Bourgeois' work referencing her childhood, which I will discuss later in the paper. Like Bourgeois, I choose not to depict myself realistically because I am more interested in the emotions I am trying to confront than the realistic portrayal of my body.

My sculptures rely on basic human gestures as a way to express the experience of emotional pain. For instance, "Self-Portrait; Guts" is expressing the fear of loss as her hands and arms are placed on her stomach in order to hold in her "guts" that are exploding out of her. "Self-Portrait; Yellow Spine" and "Self-Portrait; Engulfed in Braids" are frozen in gestures that deliberately hide their face from the viewer. One has her arm held in front of her face as if in a defensive mode, but the arm she is using as a defense mechanism is falling apart. Another sculpture other holds her face in her hand in shame. These recognizable gestures help create a narrative for each figure and a collective narrative.

I also employ symbols in order to further the narrative meanings of the sculptures. I consider the drapery I use to clothe the figures as a symbol of femininity. On the figures that have drapery, the cloth meshes into the figures and can be seen as a part of their bodies. The drapery flows out from the sculptures and cascades onto the floor; mimicking their bursting wounds. It crawls along the floor underneath some sculptures in order to act as an environment for the sculptures. One symbol that is present in all of the figures and so unites them as a group is the long braid that hides their faces and wraps around their bodies. This is a symbol of me as a child. I have had long hair since I was a child and I have used it as a facade to hide behind. The braid acts both as a figural element and a metaphorical burden that drags some sculptures to the ground while

engulfing and overwhelming others. In addition to the braid referencing hair, it can also be understood as chains or rope that is attempting to help or hurt the figures.

The use of gesture and symbolism to create an autobiographical narrative about myself in my work is similar to Frida Kahlo's approach to self-portraiture. Unlike me and Louise Bourgeois, Kahlo's self-portraits look like traditional self-portraits with her likeness portrayed. However, Kahlo expands on the traditional self-portrait to express her internal states of mind using symbolism rather than just showing her likeness. Many of Kahlo's self-portraits reference the literal physical trauma she experienced from a bus accident during her childhood. Kahlo's body suffered lifelong complications because of the wounds she suffered from this accident.³ Frida Kahlo used gesture and symbols in her work to convey physical and emotional pain as well as hope. Kahlo usually represents herself in a calm gesture to express a sense of hope and determination in her self-portraits although she is enduring a lot of physical pain. For instance, in "The Broken Column", Kahlo uses a crumbling architectural column as a symbol for her shattered spine, and pins stuck in her body as a sign for the pain she experiences. Her orthopedic corset attempts to hold her dissected body together as she is sitting with her chest and face lifted, her eyes staring directly at the viewer. Kahlo is vulnerable and completely exposed to the viewer, yet her pose is strong and she is staring straight at the viewer.⁴ My sculpture with the yellow spine is similar to "The Broken Column." The yellow form can be understood as literally yellow soft bone marrow that makes up one's spine. The form can also be understood as attempting to exit the body; slowly leaking out of the exposed back of the sculpture to leave the form without a backbone. The sculpture is exposed and vulnerable

³ Billeter, Erika (Ed.). 1993. *The World of Frida Kahlo*. Houston: Museum of Fine Arts.

⁴ Herrera, Hayden. 1991. *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

while the braid is wrapping around the figure in an attempt to hold the figure together. The gesture of the figure suggests hopelessness, but the wrapping of the braid suggests hope.

Another similarity in our work is the referencing of interior body spaces as an expression of internal emotional states. Kahlo figuratively opens up her body to expose her emotions to the viewer. In my sculptures, I literally and open up the skin of the forms to expose the armature underneath. This idea of layering as a metaphor for accessing levels of emotional states is expressed in my work through my literal process of making figures using multiple layers of material. The actual layering differs from Kahlo because there is both meaning in the objects themselves, and meaning in the process of layering. The sculptures are created using layers of cardboard, wire mesh, plaster gauze, plaster, foam, and wax. This process of creating by layering these feels to me like an analogy as though the figures are developing and building upon each other like I have been developing in physically and psychologically since childhood. The materials in this process seem to build upon each other until the form collapses.

Layers not only build upon each other, they also hide behind each other. I promote the mysteriousness of layers in my work by opening up the sculpture to expose layers underneath the surface. The literal layers in my sculptures express emotions and feelings that I hide from the world. By opening up the layers, I am exposed to the viewer. Sliced open and torn apart to expose what I am hiding underneath. In some sculptures, material is flowing out from the incisions of the sculptures, like blood from a wound. In other sculptures, there is only armature with empty space between that is

exposed. These sculptures have layers upon layers of built up emotion that bursts out of them in a hysterical flurry.

My childhood is the crucial inspiration for my work. My work focuses on my childhood as a way of analyzing a time that I felt emotions in an extreme manner and was not sure how to handle them. Many of my emotions have been seen as less desirable by significant influences in my childhood because of the vulnerability and exposure involved in displaying them. I am still learning what I might hope to get out of revisiting times of my childhood. At the moment, the catharsis of revisiting is the greatest motivation for the artwork.

Louise Bourgeois' work, like my own, is a window into her childhood. She admits that most of her work is autobiographical and that her childhood still haunts her. As a child, Bourgeois had to deal with an unloving relationship between her parents and adultery that happened within her own home. One of Bourgeois' works titled "Seven in a Bed," displays provocative sex between seven bodies. Some of the bodies have multiple heads that face different bodies in the bed. In this work, "childhood innocence, fairytale and nursery rhymes are reexamined in the light of adult knowledge and experience."⁵ "Seven in a Bed" gives an interesting perspective into Bourgeois' childhood as she recalls incidents. Critic Robert Storr believes that Bourgeois' work is an attempt to repair her childhood. Storr explains that "The obsessional return to those traumatic times, and the hope-against-hope that damage can be retroactively undone or patched has

⁵ McKeith, E. 2003. Louise Bourgeois: Stitches in Time. *CIRCA Art Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.recirca.com/reviews/louisebourgeois/index.shtml> on February 1, 2007.

been the driving force behind everything that she has made.”⁶ Perhaps Storr believes that Bourgeois is attempting to repair her childhood because he does not know why else she would manifest the trauma without suggesting a solution. I know what it feels like to have your childhood haunt you. Perhaps Bourgeois and I revisit our childhood in our work in order to gain a new perspective and move on.

While the vulnerability and direct inspiration from childhood of my work resembles the work of Bourgeois, its morbidity and attention to trauma to the body is more closely related to the work of Kiki Smith. Smith also draws inspiration from her childhood, though not from specific instances from her childhood. Although Smith’s use of the body in her sculpture is often more anatomical and realistic than my sculptures, the distortions of body parts in our figures express many intense emotions. In my works, the necks of the forms are out of proportion with the rest of form. The long neck becomes longer and longer with each form until it appears that the heads of the forms could not possibly be supported by its neck. One of Smith’s untitled sculptures features a woman crouched low to the ground with her extremely long arms stretched out in front of her. Helaine Posner comments that “Her entire being seems perilously overextended and ripe for punishment.”⁷ The distortions in both of our works make the figures appear more fragile and vulnerable, which heightens the sense of shame in the forms. Another similarity in our work is a sense of a loss of control in our forms, but whereas Smith’s sculptures have uncontrollable body fluids, my sculptures have uncontrollable emotions displayed through the exposure of layers and the explosion of entrails. In Smith’s works “Pee Body” and “Blood Trail” the forms are excreting strings of gold and red beads that

⁶ Herkenhoff, Paul, Schwartzman, Allan, and Robert Storr. 2003. *Louise Bourgeois*. New York: Phaidon Press Inc.

⁷ Posner, Helaine. 1998. *Kiki Smith*. Boston : Bulfinch.

resemble urine and blood. The foam and wax explosions from my forms are similar to Smith's approach to displaying the emissions in these works, but best resemble her approach in her piece called "Tale."⁸ In this piece, a figure is crawling across the gallery floor with a brown excretion that resembles intestines but could be seen as human waste is coming out of the back of the figure. The ambiguity of the materials and the use of actual materials such as glass beads, foam, or wax focus the viewer on the wound of the forms (or the bodily function of Smith's sculptures) rather than the literal matter that is flowing from the forms. Smith and I do not show anger in our figures, only shame and pain. "The absence of anger makes some think Smith celebrates victimhood. She doesn't, nor does she condemn aggressors. In her work pain is often just a blameless fact."⁹ In my work, pain is also a fact. It is something that just happens. No fingers are pointed; viewers are made to just understand the emotions on display.

Ultimately, I want the viewer to witness a very intimate part of myself that can only be made tangible through my art-making. I also want the viewer to relate to the emotions displayed on a deeper level than my autobiography. My sculptures are not easy to look at. I think that shows how powerful emotions are and how more powerful they can become when forced to be repressed. My work shows that emotions are essential to life, even the less desirable emotions, because they are what build our selves.

⁸ Posner, Helaine. 1998. *Kiki Smith*. Boston : Bulfinch.

⁹ [Princenthal, Nancy](#). 2007. The Candor of Kiki Smith. *Art in America*. Retrieved from Ebsco Host Databases, St Mary's College of Maryland on February 12, 2007.