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Final Essay

SMP in Studio Art 2014

As an artist my overall goal is to provide a new way of observing the organic world. I specifically choose subject matter that my viewers have seen before and know well. I create designs from naturally occurring textures to try and show viewers the uniqueness and artistic magnificence of our genetically formed natural world. Photography and digital art are tools for creating my work as well as conceptual subject matter for my sculptures. Taking a photograph of an animal or texture is not the finished piece for me. I must interpret it and abstract the designs of that animal further to call it finished. My overall interest for my final SMP show revolves around the abstraction and simplification of animal membranes to create a sculptural installation.

By choosing well-known subject matter such as a horseshoe crab or blue crab, it allows viewers to focus on my abstracted designs rather than just the subject matter itself. If I were to choose unknown subject matter, then viewers would spend most of the time just trying to figure out what they were looking at. That is not my goal. As a society we are over exposed to photographs and over time begin to ignore or just passively view the subject matter within the photographs. I believe that in order for people to actually observe and analyze something familiar, you must present it in a way that is unfamiliar. If I were to just post my original photograph on the wall as a finished product, then people would say “oh, it’s a horseshoe crab, ok”

and move on. By expanding out the horseshoe crab's form into a three dimensional sculpture, the viewers can walk around and interact with each layer. My work presents the horseshoe crab and blue crab in a new context that people will want to engage with. My goal is to make people see the subjects in new ways and to look at my abstractions as a representation of the life form. Also, I choose familiar subject matter that exists in mass numbers because I see how the individuality of each animal is not seen as distinctive. If you find four blue crabs and actually look at the markings on their membranes, each one will be different. Nature has not been created in a factory by robots made to make each animal exactly like the previous one. Genetics and natural selection within nature allows for each animal to be unique. Most animals' membranes' will adapt to their environments in order to be camouflaged and survive. So, in a sense the markings and designs on the outer membranes of animals are maps of their environments. I as an artist am interested in these maps. I create my digital designs from these naturally occurring forms to try and show viewers the uniqueness and artistic beauty of our genetically formed natural world.

Photography as a process compresses our three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional distorted image. Through the configuration of my sculptures I am expanding the flattened image, once again, into a three-dimensional form created by four Plexiglass planes. I am reversing the spatial characteristics of photography by expanding a photograph into a sculptural installation. I use photography as the first step to creating my work. I find the subject matter I want to display and then photograph it. I edit that photograph with digital tools such as Photoshop and

Illustrator to bring out the lines and shapes within the natural textures of my subject matter. When the finished design is placed next to or on top of the original photograph you can see where the lines and shapes existed within the textures. Originally hidden in photographic context, my digital designs bring out the unique forms. I then cut my digital designs out of vinyl and transferred them to Plexiglass. The Plexiglass sheets (30" by 36") hang from the ceiling 10 inches apart, enough to still see the layers come together to create the entire form when standing in front of the sculpture. As the viewer circumnavigates my sculpture the animal's form begins to deconstruct and materialize. From the side, the layers can be seen as individual designs. From the front and back of each sculpture, the entire form can be seen. The designed layers are made so that as you progress through the sculpture you are progressing through the animal's body until you come out the back/bottom of the animal. Each sculpture has three layers forming the main part of the body and a fourth layer that is from the opposing side of the body. For the Horseshoe crab the final layer is the top shell and for the blue crab the final layer is the bottom belly of the crab. The addition of these layers adds to the three-dimensional quality of the sculpture and makes the animal whole.

The materials I use are very important to the overall conceptual and aesthetic goals. I chose Plexiglass because of its transparency and relation to industrial materials. I chose vinyl because it is fully opaque, colorful and durable with clean-cut lines. In our society we are exposed to mainly all manufactured industrial materials. Therefore, we are accustomed to interpreting these materials more than natural objects. Plexiglass provides transparency while also providing an

object to hold the vinyl suspended in the air. Vinyl is opaque and colorful allowing my work to stand out and the designs to be seen well.

I find my conceptual goals and practices to be similar to that of Natalie Jeremijenko. She is an environmental artist currently working in New York City. Her work deals a lot with the urban environment and how animals and the ecosystem of New York are intertwined with the human inhabitants of the city. She focuses on the environment and how humans and non-humans interact (Weiner). Jeremijenko focuses a lot on urban animals and most of her recent work asks people to “reconsider the relationships they have with urban animals... by recognizing our interdependency with them” (Ashlock). In one of her more recent works titled *OOZ: Amphibious Architecture*, she created floating buoys, which were placed in the River. The buoys had lights on top of them that would signal when Oxygen levels were low as well as when fish were present (Boyers). The area of the river that these buoys were located was accessible to the public so that average people could see the work. Jeremijenko also created *Lures*, these were gelatin snacks for the fish that had cleating agents in them that would bind to the PCBs in the fish’s body and allow the animal to excrete the PCBs safely. The premise of the *Lures* was that if the fish are healthier, then we would be healthier. Also, *Lures* were safe for human consumption and were consumed in another one of Jeremijenko’s pieces: *Cross(x) Species Dinners*. When people are eating something that an animal can eat as well, a new level of connection to the environment is formed. “Eating together is the most intimate form of kinship” (Berber). Sharing food with the fish shows a new level of interrelationship (Berger). Jeremijenko’s works are more like the script to

encourage an interaction between humans and the natural systems surrounding us. For *Amphibious Architecture* and *Lures*, I believe she succeeded in creating a dialogue about the health of the river and fish as well as how humans are related to it (Weiner). I respect Jeremijenko as an artist because she is not imaging things and showing viewers an imagined world. She is using our lives, our environments and science as her subject matter. She knows that the normal person cannot read scientific charts or graphs and that the average person may not know about PCBs in fish or the depletion of Oxygen in our rivers. She finds new and creative ways to translate the important scientific data into art. In another one of her more recent works *Cross(X) Species Dinners* she invited people to come to dinner at a gallery. The meals were based off environmental themes. Some themes include oil and wetlands. These dinners included a speech from Jeremijenko herself and were interactive artworks. Five courses of cocktails, food and environmental context all come together with Jeremijenko's speeches. With each course she explains why it was chosen, the ingredients in the food and how each element is relevant to improving our ecosystem (Dawkins). Ingredients include Water Buffalo's milk, wetland soil bacteria, chelating agents and many more ingredients that are very common worldwide that can have an environmental impact on biodiversity. Specifically, Water Buffalo's require wetlands to graze; Jeremijenko's goal is to create a demand for Water Buffalo ice cream so that the demand for wetlands will increase, therefore strengthening environmental health. Although this is not a normal approach to environmental awareness and action, it seems to be an eye opening experience for those who participate. As an artist myself I am not interested in interactive and

public artworks as Jeremijenko is, but our end goals are similar. She wants people to rethink nature as not something that it “out there” but something that we live in and through. She wants people to realize the urban environment as being combined with animals and not separate. I relate the concept of using real life information. Not in a data and statistic way but in a way of using real animals and real information. I do not hand draw and imagine the designs I make. I use photographs I have taken of real living animals. I do not alter and rearrange the lines and forms to be more aesthetically pleasing. I stay true to the animals and to what the genetic codes of nature have created.

An artist that I am in conversation with both conceptually and formally is Maya Lin. She is traditionally a public art sculptor and is best known for the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. Most of her work is environmentally related or in direct reference to environmental activism. Lin’s goals are to incorporate viewer interaction with science and nature, through art. She wants to reveal a little about nature that is often unseen to the unrecognizing eye. I too started talking about my artworks in this way long before researching Lin. I wanted to show people the unseen elements of the natural objects they came into contact with on an everyday basis. Lin “seeks to create works that offer a point of entry into our experiential relationship with the natural world” (Mock). Works such as *Wavefield* tap into this experiential nature of human movement through space. *Wavefield* is located near an engineering building where the students would research the Stokes Wave. Lin was inspired by this waveform and decided to make an outdoor installation mimicking the wave’s structure. This resulted in rolling grass waves next to the engineering

building that was acres large. When finished, participants could walk through the waves and sit in the crevices of the waves and become consumed. In cases like this work, she has found a unique way to abstract the truth. She did not imagine the wave or create the curves. She used scientific formulas for the Stokes Wave as a reference. My work relates to Lin and Jeremijenko's work because they are both using data and science to make large-scale public works to raise awareness of the real natural world. I relate to this conversation because I am not imagining the designs I create. I am using photographs and studying my subjects. For Lin's *Systematic Landscapes* at the Corcoran, she explains, "I have started to create artworks that translate technological view into sculptural forms" (Andrews). For this show she used geological and geographic data to create multi layered sculptures displaying natural landscapes in new ways. *Caspian Sea (Bodies of Water Series)* was part of a series of sculptures made of multiple wooden layers to create the geographic landscape of the disappearing seas. In a documentary filmed for the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle Washington, Lin explains that she uses topologies and schematic representations as a way to translate what is familiar (or not so familiar) outside, into a representation which we can understand; she is essentially "systematizing landscape" (Plotts). When viewed from the top the sculpture's shape is that of the top of the Caspian Sea, what humans see. As the layers progress lower, they follow the real under water landscape and geological data. The end result is a sculpture that shows viewers the layers of the sea in a way that no one ever could. It makes the scientific data and numbers have a physical form (Corcoran). By doing this she hopes that she has raised a new awareness and curiosity in the viewers. I

am in conversation with Lin because of her overall goals of awareness and the simple want for people to re-think natural phenomena. Her *Bodies of Water* series when viewed is very similar in physical appearance and conceptual goals to that of my piece. She layered the sea based on real life shapes, into a form that can be viewed. Her sculpture is more concrete and one solid form whereas mine is separated and more of an installation.

The work of my past has always involved nature and animals. I have always found things that naturally occur without human intervention to be intriguing. I started my artistic career producing strictly photographs, both film and digital. I focused on how seeing subjects through the lens of a camera changed our perception of that subject. Then I progressed further with photography and was interested in seeing with the camera, things that our eyes couldn't. This led to photographing with slow shutter speeds to capture lights unseen to the eye due to our faster brain processing speeds. I also began to zoom in on objects to reveal natural textures on a macro-photography level. I began photographing the fungus on brick stairs and the natural growths on man made objects. This was the start of the turning point in my art career. I started looking closer at objects and seeing the textures that existed. I could not see or did not realize the textures were there with my own eyes, but with a camera in hand my eyes could focus. I soon traveled to Italy with an art study tour and was being taught how to draw. There was an exercise forcing us to draw the outlines of objects without looking at the paper. This was the first time I had to pay attention to the minute forms and lines within an object with my own eyes and not through the lens of a camera. This is when I started becoming



fascinated with the lines and forms within nature. It was in Italy that I began photographing textures at a macro level for the purpose of solely the textural designs. Once back from Italy I began learning how to translate those textures into digital designs and formulated my own process that I have altered but still use today for most all my work. With my designs I took an interest in fashion. Junior year I began printing my designs on fabric as well as projecting the designs onto existing. I became interested in the concept of having another animal's or natural object's markings on the human body. We as humans put on clothing as a way to be fashionable and change our appearance. What does it say if we choose to wear the design of another animal?

Coming into senior year I knew I wanted to stay on the track of textures and I wanted to explore the possibilities of natural textures more. When I create a design based on a texture or animal membrane that I really love, I will try and translate that texture in every way possible. I also wanted to experiment with different methods of separation and segmentation. Building off of how a turtle's shell is formed through segments called "scutes" I made many works comprised of many individual pieces. This is what led me to my Fall show. I wanted to experiment and analyze how viewers would react to the same design multiple times through the use of multiple different mediums and materials. I made a Diamondback Terrapin design and presented it in multiple different ways. I painted multiple sheets of paper and configured them into a grid format on the wall. I made a drift wood bark terrapin sculpture. I layered etched Plexiglass sheets into a sculpture that made the terrapin design three-dimensional in appearance. I created vinyl stickers that could

be passed out and placed around in our human environment. Finally, I placed my pet turtle into the gallery so that people could look at my work and then look at the turtle and connect my artwork to a physical living object.

From the Fall show I kept a few elements and moved forward with them. I knew I wanted to work further with Plexiglass as a material. I wanted to analyze segmentation in the same way the Plexiglass sculpture did (a lateral segmentation), and of course continue analyzing natural textures, specifically animal membranes. Also, I learned from the Fall show that I enjoyed when people could circumnavigate my pieces rather than standing back from a wall. I decided to make large scale hanging sculptures similar to that of the Plexiglass terrain, just not etched but with a more opaque substance. I chose Vinyl because of its color qualities and ability to be clean cut and, the artist's hand would not be seen as in the etched piece. I photographed two animals I had never made a design from before: a horseshoe crab and a blue crab. Both animals have a large impact on their ecosystems as well as human life. Blue crabs are a large food source for humans and are bottom feeders that keep the waterways clean and safe for fish. The horseshoe crab's blood is used for human medication and scientific research and as a species they support many bird and other aquatic species. Their eggs when washed up on beaches feed specifically the Red Knot (a small wetlands bird) population. Without horseshoe crabs, the Red Knot population will cease to exist. I also chose these two animals because they are seen together in mass quantities. They are rarely seen as one animal. They live in communities and in huge populations. As people we often will overlook their individualities because we see them in mass populations. I took the

time to look at the individual animals and their unique characteristics on their membranes. No two animals are exactly the same.

My nature-based art is in conversation with Natalie Jeremijenko and Maya Lin in conceptual and physical ways. I am analyzing the process and medium of photography as well as how humans relate to nature through the physical choices I made while creating my sculptural installation. I create designs from naturally occurring textures to try and show viewers the uniqueness and artistic beauty of our genetically formed natural world.

