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ARTDES 400.03
Integrative Project
Senior Thesis

Relics of a Bird's Past

I have this space inside my head. I see it every night while I lay in bed. I am walking through an older house. The furniture is minimal and the walls shaded gray. There is no one home, but there is the feeling of a recent inhabitant. As I continue throughout the house I realize that inhabitant, so mysterious and solemn, is me. Although this is a home I have never lived in, the remnants of my past and current life surface throughout the house in various forms of a nest. Some are in the cupboard, in the fridge, some on the mantle, the closet, the shower, or are hidden underneath my bed. These nests are built from the tangible items pertaining to my life, providing an overwhelming realness to my experiences. This home, this giant nest made for humans, is hoarding my history through mimicked homes of another species.

My Senior Integrative Project consists of a series of twenty-four nests fabricated out of various materials that capture and convey the physical and emotional suffering-I experienced during a dark time in my life and my attempt to find answers and eventual recovery. Through the repetitive practice of layering and weaving materials that relate to my experiences, such as hair, a shattered mirror, nutrition labels, etc, to construct habitat spaces, I am able to find meaning in the experiences themselves. This year's worth of work has been an amazing process, not only because I have learned innovative techniques and use of new materials, but also because I discovered much about myself, who I am, and where I am going.

Background

Last summer, I began to slip slowly away into a dark place. Depression and anxiety took control of my mind. It was frightening. This place of depression was extremely foreign territory to me, and for a long time I tried to avoid coming to terms with it. I couldn't grasp the fact that I was actually there, in a place I never imagined being; I had reached a point so low that I could not bring myself out of on my own. Undergoing culture shock from spending time abroad in a third world country, I was deeply disappointed with the way our society functions. In this ultra-consumption based society, I found a lack of respect for other humans, and more so, a lack of respect for nature. Frustrated by my inability to change these cultural pitfalls, things spiraled downward for me as I began to contemplate life after graduation and in direction my life was going to take. This was shortly followed by the death of my grandmother, who I held dearly in my heart. Ultimately, the intertwined timing of these events led me into a powerful eating disorder...anorexia.

To aid my concerns, I sought to use my Integrative Project as a tool to unfold answers. I began with the idea of developing a series of objects that would bring people closer to nature, because at the time, while in the midst of my illness, this is was the only place I found peace. Over and over again I focused on creating a project to aid others from the harsh realities of our fast-paced society and the mental stress that accompanies it. Little did I realize that, in the end, this project was to be the greatest aid to myself instead.

Struggling to overcome this disease, I began tracing my steps back to my childhood in hopes of finding what spawned the sadness that ultimately resulted in an 82 lbs physical version of myself, having lost just as much in cognitive feelings and emotions as I did in weight. Until I came face to face with this disease, I always felt that I had dealt effectively with many of the

details in my life in order to get by and move on quite easily. But as thoughts began to linger in my head night after night, I realized that I had not fully developed an understanding for them, I hadn't yet established how I felt about them. I constantly asked myself questions of what it was that drove me to obsessively stare at nutrition labels, counting calories that eventually lead me to stop eating one day. What was it that allowed me to subject myself to a psychologically abusive relationship for two and a half years? Why did my feelings of returning home to my family over the past fifteen years pivot back and forth between love and comfort to destruction and anger? What was it about being alone in nature that made me feel so at home?

As these questions began pouring in and overwhelm me with all that I was going through at this point in my life, I felt extremely out of place, lost in days that would pass me by. I was constantly seeking a place to just let go of all of my problems, but felt helpless in trying to find it. I knew that being around others only frustrated me more as I watched my friends have a set path ahead of them. I couldn't bear to watch the faces of loved ones who no longer looked me in the eyes, but rather stared in horror at the fragile limbs barely holding my body together. In a sense, the only place I could feel at home was in nature, alone. Nature was my nest at this point.

As I look back at it now, it is hard to pinpoint what exactly led me to the concept of my nests. Frustrated by my attempts to form a concept around the shortcomings I had previously experienced regarding society's disconnect from nature, I one day threw it all out the window. I curled up in my lazy-boy in the corner of my studio and just began making the thing I was intuitively drawn to the most- a nest. The nest represents a form of refuge, a place of retreat. It has the ability to encourage life and growth, acting as a shelter from enemies and bad weather, or in this case a shelter from harsh emotions and self-torment. It is a place for a mother to bond with her young, nurture them, and provide warmth. It is a home.

Process

My first nest was simple. Made from copper wire, I created a frame-like structure. From there I crocheted wire to form a net to cover the structure that I then used to weave hammer-textured copper wire in and out of, over and over again. I enjoyed this repetitive action of building. The construction of the piece acted as a therapy to my then-current state of mind. In the time I spent constructing, all my problems seemed to temporarily disappear and I found peace in the idea of creating my own space, my own refuge. From here, I realized I needed to continue this construction method and began to build many nests out of the tangible items that corresponded to my personal issues. Ultimately, I found the creation of nests as a way to encode the occurrences in my life that I had not yet found understanding in, and as a way to analyze the problems I was currently facing.

Process, Form & Content

As I began to study various forms of nests, I realized that like humans, birds construct their miniature representations of home in many ways using various materials and techniques. Humans tend to explore the structure of a home through material, scale, form, layout, and placement creating an array of housing types. Birds have done the same in creating their nests. Some nests are small and made from the simplest materials, such as sticks and grass. Others are larger burrows carved into the muddy ground. Some birds use their beaks to hollow out a tree and line the inside with food chips and soft wood pieces. There are nests that hang down from tree branches like large teardrops made from nature. There are others made in an elaborate manner with sticks, string, leaves, and various materials such as bottle caps and paperclips

brought together through systematic weaving techniques. These nests range in size, strength, and durability depending on how long the bird plans to occupy her nest.

Like a bird, I experimented with different techniques and modes of construction to mimic the various nests made by different bird species. I explored what certain forms and structures mean in relation to the issue or experience that particular nest pertained to, such as discovering the difference between a “cup” shaped nest with its inner resting place exposed versus a “pendant” nest which hangs like a tear drop, hiding the contents inside. These different shapes played an important role in expressing how I felt about the meaning of each nest.

Furthermore, the various materials determined the meaning behind each nest. For instance, I created an enclosed teardrop shaped nest that sits burrowed in a wall corner that symbolizes a destructive relationship that I experienced for two and a half years. Like the relationship itself, the outside is made from the shredded pieces of the soft material of my ex-lover’s clothing mixed with pieces of lint and dust to represent the time gone by in the relationship. Concealed inside however, are sharp nails all pointing inwards, making the nest inevitably uninhabitable.

Other nests rely on context to express the meaning, such as a nest made of individual cut strips of nutrition labels housed inside a cabinet. The tedious task of cutting of the labels in such a manner to be legible corresponds directly with the time I would spend contemplating nutrition facts of the food I was eating during my illness. The massive amount of them protruding out of the cabinet door symbolizes the intense overwhelming feeling I would get from deciding what to eat. I would imagine the bird inhabiting this nest would feel the same sense of urgency to escape this nest that is seemingly too large for the space that exists in. Yet the bird does not want to move the nest because it wants to stay hidden away from the view of others.

Home & House

The nests will be displayed in different ways, but all involve the context of a house. In the beginning stages of this project I was initially concerned that the nests would too closely resemble the idea that a bird once lived in each, and has flown away. However, I realized that in some way, this is how I feel about home, along with many of the experiences that have happened in my life. I go home to see relics of my past that once meant so much to me infesting my room. But now that they don't pertain to my daily life currently, I do not think about them. However, they still affect me. My room is an empty nest, uninhabited, but still arranged and decorated, as if it were waiting for me to come back to live in it once more. My room is also one little piece that fits into a house, a house I have constantly changing thoughts about. They bounce back and forth between the good and the bad, the sad and the comforting. It's a chaotic mass capturing my every feeling and thought throughout my life, encompassed by a man-made two-story structure.

All of the nests are photographed in the specific space of the house that I envisioned in my dream. There is a nest made of a mass of my hair photographed over the shower drain to symbolize the rapid accumulation of my shedding hair that would clog the drain while I was malnourished. There are nests made of sticks covered in plaster mimicking the nest form of the chimney sweep bird, photographed above the fire place mantle, representing a family portrait that no longer pertains to reality; of my mother, father and I together before their divorce. Crocheted nests stuffed with branches and sticks are photographed hanging from the rooftop outside my house, revealing the comfort I find in the repetitive action of pulling the yarn through my fingers against the needle and the joy I find being outside. These photographs are framed and hung on the wall of the exhibition space as family-like portraits.

For my exhibition, I display the physical nests in an armoire, cupboard, and shelving unit

that I will use to create a home-like atmosphere mimicking their photographed environment. Some will hang from branches installed on the walls, while others are mounted in the wall corner or placed on the floor.

Implications & Conclusion

I want the viewer to envision their own life represented through natural forms. I am curious to see if this juxtaposition of extracting experiences and translating them into tangible natural objects placed in a man-made structure will produce new understanding and meaning for the viewer. Will it provoke new feelings about their life's experiences as it did such for me? This will ultimately be accomplished through the viewer's personal interaction with the overall form of the nest, materials from which it is made, scale of the structures, and context of their placement in both the photographs and physical placement in the gallery.

Healing

I not only explored how my nests differ in their structural qualities, placement, and material make-up, but also in their capacity as a place of refuge. I discovered which nests provide the greatest feelings of safety, of confinement, of solitude, growth, pain or anguish, of comfort or discomfort, as derived from my experiences. I used the repetitive action of weaving, layering, and constructing as a therapeutic mode of expression. Through the process of creating each one, I discovered the real energy and purpose that fills my life; my life that at one point seemed so vacant and hollow... nothing but a measly eight-two pounds of bones.

Influences and Artistic Context

The knowledge obtained through my undergraduate studies, research, and the works of other environmental artists fostered my imagination and inventiveness in this creative process. According to the well-known psychologist William James, the brain spreads itself between two main forms of attention: fascination and direct attention. Fascination implies the type of involuntary attention that “is experienced when, out of innate interest or curiosity, certain objects (e.g., large trees, animals, flowing water) or processes (e.g., exploration, mysteries, puzzles) effortlessly engage our mind.” The later, on the other hand, “requires significant effort in dealing with tasks lacking innate fascination.” (De Young).

I experienced the contrast between these two forms of attention during my suffering. Tormented by saddening thoughts and a body that was malnourished, my brain did not have the capacity to function correctly and I was unable to focus my attention on anything. My mind seemed to do nothing but wander. At the grocery store, I would stare at nutrient labels for hours, unsure as to why it was so hard to decide between two types of cereal, one with 115 calories and 0 g of fat, the other with 100 calories, but 1.5 g of fat. Immersing myself in nature and art was the only relief I found from these thoughts, both of which allowed fascination to capture my attention.

The works of Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*, and the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and other environmental theorists reflect on the idea of natural living. I have studied various environmental behavioral models to obtain information about the psychology of the growing separation between man and nature. Books such as *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-deficit Disorder*, by Richard Louv and *Secret Spaces of Childhood*, by Elizabeth Goodenough, examine the effects of this separation on children today. Children once

used outdoor spaces as a form of escape, but over the recent decades they have come to rely on indoor spaces “where the plugs are.” Various studies show this disconnect to be a large cause in the increase of ADD or ADHD in children (Louv). My childhood experiences in nature were some of the happiest moment in my life. I felt most alive when climbing a tree, my palms sliding against the rigid bark, or building a rain shelter from broken branches and twigs. The form of the nest draws me to these same feelings of joy and refuge as a miniature hideaway from my diseased thoughts.

In many ways, my work relates to that of Louise Bourgeois, an influential sculptor whose work centered on the ideas of nurture and protection of the human body from the frightening parts of this world. Conflicts she suffered throughout her childhood with rage, fear, and remorse are relived through her use of art making as a recuperative process.

I am also enthused by the work of Patrick Dougherty for his use of material and modes of construction. In his on going series, “Stickwork,” he creates woven-wood, large-scale sculptures from saplings. He uses weaving, snagging, and flexing of sticks to create playful, nest-like architectural forms that play on themes of shelter, habitat, and sustainability. Furthermore, I enjoy the idea of physically being able to step into these pieces. To me, they speak of another world, the natural world, and have that “escape-like” quality that I seek to obtain through mimicking nests. They effectively separate one’s self from his/her everyday being and provoke a sense of wonder and contemplation.

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ARTISTS:

Patrick Daughtry:

“*Stick Work*, ”

Love his use of found objects in nature to create an individual space/environment. Some of his work reminded me of “nesting” in nature, a topic I am interested in for my own work, but I am looking to scale down this idea of personal “nest”/environment.

<http://www.stickwork.net/>



Louise Bourgeois:

“The shape of a child's torment,”

Mixed media sculptor.

I find my process of creating very similar to hers in that we both draw the concepts of our work from experiences that have caused us suffering in the past. Like her, I attempt to find feelings of nurture and protection through my work from these experiences.



Andy Goldsworthy:

LOVE EVERYTHING OF HIS! He has been an inspiration since my freshman year. Love the forms he creates from nature, they all draw your eye to a center space. Also, very inspired by his use of color in some of his works, and how he can truly capture the beauty of nature. I am looking for ways to mimic/create colors like his, but in a way in which they are sustainable for a longer period of time, verses his that short-termed and weather based.

