

Saree Silverman
Integrative Project Thesis
April 20, 2011

"I Am One and Also Two"

There is something to be learned, valued, and even gained through personal hardship. In the past six years I have suffered and recovered from an almost debilitating eating disorder, watched my grandfather and mother slowly die from cancer at the same time, under the same roof, and dealt with my own mysterious health issues soon thereafter - all while trying to figure out who I am, discover my place in the world and earn my undergraduate degree. To say that I have learned a lot about myself and life would be an understatement. "I Am One and Also Two" is a culmination of some of the most significant lessons I have learned and ideas I have embraced throughout these trying times. It tells a story. It is a story about my Mom, myself, and our relationship. It's a story about women, bonds, and interconnectedness. It's a story about emotions, strength, and persistence. It's a story about illness, weakness, and fragility. But most importantly, it's a story about balance, equilibrium, duality, and a unity of opposites.

It all began with a tree. I was on my way to the Matthai Botanical Gardens in Ann Arbor, Michigan in hopes of drawing inspiration from the remarkable plants contained within the one-hundred-year-old ecological conservatory. However, I never made it inside the gardens. As I emerged from my car, took three steps onto the black pavement of the parking lot, I was immediately halted by the beauty of what lay ahead of me. Blanketing the entire 30 square feet of concrete, just before the entrance to the gardens, was a mass of what appeared to be thousands of dead, yellow butterflies. I

had never seen anything like them. From a distance they all appeared to be the exact same shade of yellow and the density of them was so compact I could barely make out the ground beneath. Upon closer examination I was relieved to see that they were actually leaves. I was intrigued. The form of each leaf is simple, yet graceful. There are no jagged edges, abrupt angles, or protruding veins - just a smooth, flat blade. The perimeter softly flows from the vertex of the stem, at a diagonal, where it then slowly turns, flutes at the top until it reaches the other side where it falls back down at a



diagonal to meet the stem, once again, from the other side. The veins of each leaf are subtle and only noticeable at a close distance. They begin at the bottom of the blade, and fan out toward the rim of the butterfly-shaped leaf. As I examined the carpet of foliage, someone walked by and mentioned their

name, "the Ginkgo tree." I was in love.

Prior to my new found infatuation I had been struggling to find a focus for my B.F.A. senior thesis. I recognized that there two prominent themes in my work, women and nature, and I was desperately trying to find a way to bridge them. I started reading everything I could find on the subject of women and nature. I studied essays written about women's contributions to environmental history, read nature poetry by female writers, and learned why women are thought to have a different relationship to the land than men. Then I saw a piece done by the 2010 Art Prize winner, Beili Liu, that shifted my approach in attempting to combine both my interests.

The piece was entitled *Lure/Wave*. It is an installation made up of thousands of red coils which hang from a red thread suspended from the ceiling. Each thread is hung at different heights to create a slowly undulating, wave-like form. It was inspired by an ancient Chinese legend which says that when children are born they are connected by an invisible red thread to the one they are suppose to be with.¹ I was drawn to lightness and subtle movements of each of the coils, the bold color, as well as the overall form. But what I was most moved by was the story. It is not over-thought or complicated in its conception. It is beautiful in its simplicity.



Lu describes herself as a material based artist. She has said, "My work depends on a genuine connection to the material. By playing with the material—testing, manipulating, experimenting, and examining, even leaving it for months—I watch for the moment of surprise, when the material responds to one or a series of actions, and leads to an exciting physical or conceptual outcome. That outcome itself sometimes becomes the lead into a new project."² I like to work in a very similar way. I enjoy exploring different materials to see how they can take new forms. I realized that was all I had to do - play. I didn't have to over-intellectualize a concept but could continue experimenting with materials until a

¹ <http://www.beililiu.com/>

² <http://www.beililiu.com/>

concept or story or moment of inspiration hits me. When I discovered the ginkgo leaf, that is exactly what happened.

Upon my first interaction with the leaves I was immediately reminded of a story I had read about Chinese women in the early 1800's and their struggles with inequalities. The story, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, by Lisa See, describes the life of women in "19th-century, rural China where education and scholarship were limited to the male elite. Secluded from age 7 until death, "married out" into a husband's family where they remained abject in stature and subservient to their husband's mother unless they had sons, women were isolated from anyone who cared about them personally. What they said and how they communicated was rigidly formalized, learning the calligraphy of men was prohibited, so they developed a secret writing called nu shu. Only in nu shu and only to each other could they write or speak from the heart."³ Nu Shu is a 1,000-year-old language, believed to have been the only exclusively female language in recorded history. Fans were used by these women to communicate with each other in secret.

Through a very formal process, young girls are paired with a longtime best friend called a sworn sister or *laotong*. It is with this lifetime partner that the main character in the novel, Lily, shares her secrets. This relationship "sustains her through every harrowing moment. As she re-reads messages on the fan, Lily recalls "Snowflower and I were to be like long vines with entwined roots, like trees that stand a thousand years..."⁴

Upon reading the first few pages of See's novel, I was immediately captivated by the book. I am attracted to any story about the injustices done to women, it doesn't

³ Brickman, Julie. *Unfolding Secrets: An old woman's memoirs reveal a culture wrapped in a story*. San Diego Union Tribune. 2003.

⁴ See, Lisa, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. Random House Publishing, 2005, New York, NY.

matter from what culture or what time. I grew up in a very gendered family and as a result struggled with my own identity as the only girl. I continually asked myself what it meant to be a girl, a female, a woman in our society and how or if that was different for a boy? Moreover, since I have experienced hardships that have frequently been described as primarily "female problems", I have a deep sympathy for women's struggles.

Just as Beili Liu had found a story to tell in her piece, I had found mine. As I researched and learned more about the Ginkgo tree I realized it provided the perfect metaphor to tell this story. The Ginkgo originated in China. It is believed to be the oldest tree in the world, dating all the way back to the early Jurassic period. Ginkgo's are known for their resilience and ability to grow in disturbed areas, which is the reason they have survived for so long. In fact, there were six trees still growing in Hiroshima after the 1945 atomic bombing.⁵ I wanted to use the fan-like structure of the leaves to tell a story about the women I had read about. I thought it was the perfect way for me to combine my love of nature and my affinity towards women's issues. I intended for the leaves of the Ginkgo tree to stand as a symbol for the fortitude and strength of women. The piece would be an installation made up of thousands of paper porcelain clay Ginkgo leaves and would stand as an acknowledgement of the connection between women and the environment. More significantly, it would be a commemoration of their fight, their resilience and their spirit. However, as I got to working, a much more intensely personal story began to arise.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ginkgo_biloba

My mom was beautiful - and by beautiful I mean breathtakingly gorgeous. Everywhere we went, heads turned and jaws dropped in awe and admiration. However, preserving her appearance and maintaining that attention had been an obsession of hers from a very young age. She felt most of her value in the world came from her beauty. Thus, she never left the house without perfect make-up, perfect hair, a perfect outfit, and the perfect heels to match. She obsessively exercised, counted calories and constantly degraded herself. Because we were so close and I was an impressionable young girl, her obsession eventually became mine. I wanted to be that beautiful, that thin, and get all that attention. By the time I finished my second year of college my issues had gotten so serious that I entered myself into a rehabilitation center for young women with eating disorders and took a break from school. During those first two years I was in school, my Mom became mysteriously ill. By that time, after my month long stay in rehab, her health had alarmingly worsened. She couldn't spend more than an hour or two out of bed. She had chronic pain, constant migraines and many other unexplained, debilitating issues. Caring for her was a full time job. I was still in recovery from a disease that, in large part was influenced by her (not that I blame her), so learning to balance my own needs with hers was a tremendous and heart-wrenching task. It took a very long time for me to accept that I couldn't be there for her, day and night, like I had wished I was able to do. I had to learn that were times I needed to deal with my own issues before hers and other times when she came first.

A few years went by and my Mom was eventually given a diagnosis - she had gall bladder cancer, it had spread to her liver and abdominal wall, and it was terminal.

There was no hope. She died a year later.

During that year following her diagnosis, I experienced a roller coaster of emotions. There were times when I had complete emotional breakdowns, and cried for hours, even days. But I knew I needed to have those moments. Through recovering from my eating disorder, I learned the importance of being vulnerable, open, raw. I understood the importance of letting oneself feel. I knew I needed to grieve. And most importantly I knew I needed to share my feelings with those close to me.

I watched as my brothers went on to live their lives, party with their friends, hang out with their girlfriends and keep their emotions bottled up inside. To them, and to the rest of my family, I was the "weak" one, the emotional one, the sensitive one, the "girl." But at my mother's funeral they were the ones who were sobbing uncontrollably, going through countless boxes of tissues, and dampening their shirts with tears. Though I was sad, I had done my grieving. I was at peace. Two years later, they still have trouble accepting our mother's death. I am by no means happily floating through life unaffected - I still have my moments - but I have more acceptance and understanding of the situation than they do. I am able to seek comfort in what I learned during those trying times and in the fact that there she can live on through the things that I do.

A couple months after she passed away I decided to finally read *Snowflower*. I remembered that my mom was very moved by the story and had recommended it to me.

Upon finishing it I knew why she was so touched by the story. Whether she realized it or not, my mom was very similar to those women in some ways. Her life was far from easy. Living with an undiagnosed, debilitating illness for over eight years was one of many hardships she faced, yet despite all that, she kept persisting, pushing, living - finding ways to give meaning to her life. For all the years she was sick, I rarely heard her complain about the excruciating pain she was in. Despite her seeming fragility and her undeniable beauty, she had a fierce, quiet strength - similar to the characters in the novel.

The strength and resilience my mom displayed over those years inspired and motivated me throughout the course of this school year. Prior to the beginning of this year and before embarking on my IP project, I had been experiencing my own fairly serious health problems. Similar to my mother's situation, none of my doctors had been able to figure out what the cause of all my symptoms was. Once the school year started, I struggled not only to come up with a project idea but also to have the physical and mental energy to actually do it once I did. As I battled to make it through each day and accomplish what I needed to get done, I was constantly reminded of my mother and her own illness. Once I realized how much my life paralleled hers, the focus of my piece shifted. Rather than being a commemoration of women's struggles, told through a specific story, it became about finding strength within fragility - the idea that one must embrace both emotions or states of being in order to find peace and balance. (maybe talk about how you envisioned the piece here).

When I set out to work on making my leaves, I thought very hard about why I wanted to use paper clay. It occurred to me that this particular medium was the perfect symbol for the ideas I was exploring. The material is deceptively strong. It looks fragile and delicate but it is very resilient - just like my mother, like those other women, and like me.

The system I set in place to make each leaf was very repetitive, laborious, and time consuming. I was strongly encouraged to find a way to mass produce them, but I knew the meditative repetition was important to my process. It was palliative and cathartic. There were moments and days that I felt so sick it was hard to motivate myself to do my work. Having a system set up that required very little thought made it easier for me to work. On those particular days I was reminded of my mother even



more than usual. If she could endure years of illness and cancer while still managing to get things done and have some what of a life, then so could I. Thus the repetitive process became ritualistic - as if I was somehow honoring her and her fight through my own.

Moreover, it was also important for me to keep the leaves white, almost ghostly. White symbolizes purity as well as loss of life. I didn't want the clay pieces to look like tacky replicas of leaves that one could purchase at some place like Hobby Lobby. Instead, I

wanted a level of ambiguity so that the viewer could interpret them on his/her own. I was also aware that the leaves were reminiscent of butterflies, which was an intentional image.

One of the many things I learned through all the hardship is that no one is an island - you have to learn to rely on others in order to survive and your actions have seismic effects on the world, whether you are aware of them or not. I have always been interested in this idea of the Gestalt, of collective mass, of individual pieces banding together to create a larger whole,

purpose or impact. That is why I knew I wanted to work with multiples. In working with a profusion of tiny objects to create a larger mass the work of Tara Donovan frequently came to mind. Her ability to see the most mundane object as thing of beauty or intrigue fascinates me.



The novel, [In the Time of Butterflies](#) by Julia Alvarez, was another tale I was very inspired by and another reason I chose to work with multiples. The story is the perfect example of how a small group of people can have a tremendous impact on the world. The historical fiction account tells the story of the four Mirabal Sisters who opposed the cruel dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic. Together they formed a group of rebels who peacefully tried to overthrow Trujillo. They were given the name "The Butterflies" by their underground accomplices because they were not only beautiful

but incredibly effective in communicating the word about Trujillo's cruelties. Their purpose spread like wild fire. They were incarcerated, interrogated and tortured numerous times, but continually refused to give up. However, on November 25th, 1960, the sisters' car was stopped. They were led into a sugar cane field where they were mercilessly beaten and then strangled to death by some of Trujillo's men.

Trujillo thought he was finally free of "the problem". But his plan backfired. The people of Dominican Republic, along with the Catholic church, were outraged. The murder of these women brought more attention to the rebellion. Instead of eliminating the overthrow of his dictatorship he brought its downfall. This contributed to his assassination in 1961, only six months later. ⁶

There is a saying that "when a butterfly flaps it's wings in China, the air disturbance may cause a storm in Nunavut, Canada a month later." My piece is about this interconnectedness. I wanted the piece to look as if it were in motion - flowing and undulating like a flock of birds, swarm of bees, or fleet of fish - moving and communicating in unison. I purposely made the more horizontal areas denser, as if the leaves were pooling and the more vertical areas were more dispersed as the leaves climbed up or fell down the form. Not only do the ceramic leaves look like butterflies, but I chose to suspend them in a way so that when one moves it hits the one next to it, which then hits the one next to that until they are all in motion. As each piece hits the next they create a beautiful and soft sound, similar to how a wind chime sounds as the breezes blow. This sound became very important to me as I was installing the piece because it kept me calm and peaceful through out the grueling process.

⁶ Alvarez, Julia. *In the Time of Butterflies*. Penguin Group, 1994, New York, NY.

But perhaps the most significant part of the entire piece isn't the individual leaves, their movements, or the sound they make, but the actual form they take - a mobius strip. The mobius strip represents everything I learned over the past six years, through all the trials and triumphs. The mobius strip has some very interesting characteristics. It looks as if it were made up of two intersecting lines and two planes, but is actually only one-sided. If cut down the middle the result is one large strip with two full twists rather than two separate pieces. If another cut is made down the middle, the result is two strips wound around each other. Thus it is a symbol of balance - an equilibrium of continually flowing, opposing forces - a unity of opposites.⁷

Johan Wolfgang Von Goethe, German poet, scientist, botanist, and philosopher said it best in a poem he sent to his former lover. Along with it were two Ginkgo leaves glued to the bottom.

Ginkgo Biloba

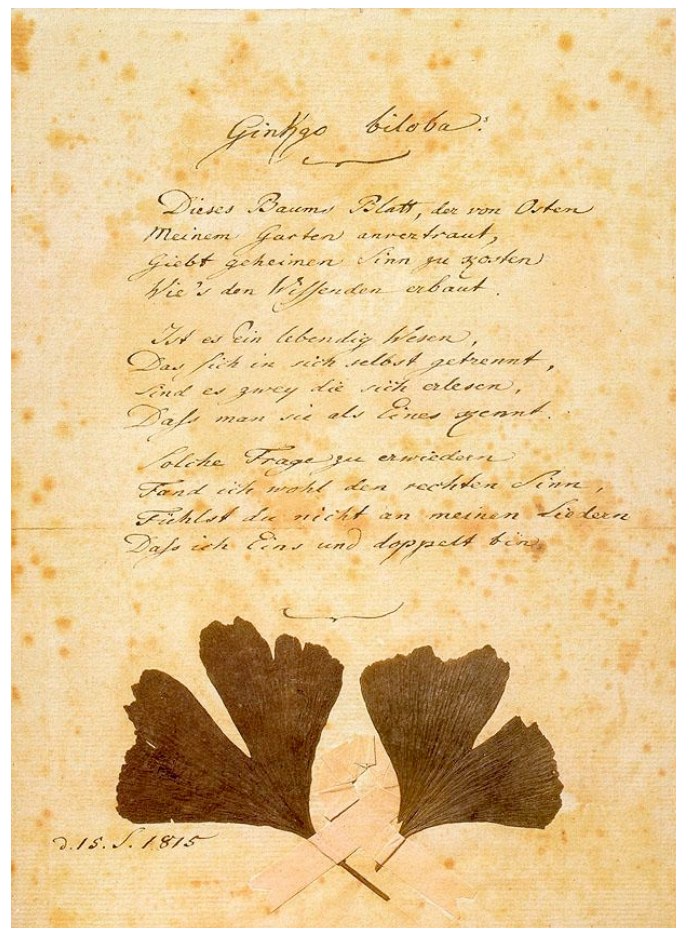
"In my garden's care and favour
From the East this tree's leaf shows
Secret sense for us to savour
And uplifts the one who knows.

Is it but one being single
Which as same itself divides?
Are there two which choose to mingle
So that each as one now hides?

As the answer to such question
I have found a sense that's true:
Is it not my songs' suggestion
That I'm one and also two?"

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%B6bius_strip

I am one and also two. I am myself and also my mother. I am Lily and also Snowflower. I am fragile and also strong. I am vulnerable and also guarded. I am emotional and also contained. I am sensitive and also tough. I am half full and also half empty. I am an artist and also an athlete. I am one and also two.



Works Cited

Alvarez, Julia. *In the Time of Butterflies*. Penguin Group, 1994, New York, NY.

Brickman, Julie. *Unfolding Secrets: An old woman's memoirs reveal a culture wrapped in a story*. San Diego Union Tribune. 2003.

"*Ginkgo Biloba*". http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ginkgo_biloba

"*Mobius Strip*". http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%B6bius_strip

See, Lisa, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. Random House Publishing, 2005, New York, NY.

www.beililiu.com

www.xs4all.nl/~kwanten/goethe.htm