

ABSTRACT

Decadent Afterlife

by Michael Patrick McAteer

July 2012

Director: Beth Blake

School of Art and Design: Painting and Drawing

“Decadent Afterlife” has been a way for me to harness and channel my personal responses to the experiences in my life and display them. This thesis can be viewed as two series of work about control, mortality, and the fragility of life. The use of simulated fungus in my “Biological Phoenix” series serves as a metaphor for the embodiment of the afterlife and acceptance of the loss of my older brother. In “My Diabetic Body” series, the simulated fungus and food serves as a dark yet humorous metaphor for all things sugary, sweet, and loaded with impending doom. In Dr. Shelley Carson’s *Life As Art* she states, “One of the most consistently-replicated findings in psychological research is that writing a narrative about a negative experience in your life (called expressive writing) can lead to improved psychological and physical health.”(Carson) I believe my art-making serves this same purpose. It has served as a form of catharsis and control in regards to both my psychological and physiological health and provided me the strength to keep growing; through the ashes that are the loss of my brother and the ashes that are my diabetic condition. Life will always spring from decay, and this act of nature germinates the hope for a better tomorrow. “Decadent Afterlife” gave me this hope.

Decadent Afterlife

A Report of Creative Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Art and Design

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Painting and Drawing

by

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DEDICATION

To my older brother John Joseph “Mac” McAteer IV, for the invaluable inspiration; you are always loved, and never forgotten.

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I would like to thank: my father Maj. John Joseph “Jack” McAteer III, for all your support over the years, my Grandmother McAteer, for all the times you said I would be a great artist and I never believed you, my Uncle Tim and Aunt Teresa McAteer, for all the support, you are my surrogate parents, my older sister Kathleen “Katy” McAteer, for all your support, and the faculty of the East Carolina University School of Art and Design for passing on your knowledge, skills and creative values, you will always be my mentors.

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BIRTH OF A PHOENIX

On April 7, 2009 my older brother drove off a cliff in the mountains of Virginia in his 1996 Crown Victoria. He always loved the film *Thelma and Louise*. He left a note in his pocket that said, “Get Busy Living Or Get Busy Dying.” Later, I discovered this quote in the book *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, by Stephen King, about a wrongfully convicted and incarcerated man seeking salvation from prison. Prison had been familiar to my brother. Before he left this world, we were getting busy living. I had just moved to Greenville, North Carolina to begin graduate school, he was working as a diesel mechanic for a truck stop. We had not spoken to each other in about a month. I do not remember the last conversation we had or the words we may have exchanged, but I never had the chance to tell him how I felt, one last time. That is when I began my thesis work with my older brother in mind.

BIOLOGICAL PHOENIX

The series of work about the loss of my brother in “Decadent Afterlife” is titled my “Biological Phoenix”. I began thinking of how as young boys he and I always found fungus, molds, mushrooms, and any other related mycology to be mysterious, fascinating, and entrancing. We wondered how mushrooms, called foxfire, would glow at night in the treetops? Why did mold always turn up on the other side of the loaf of bread you wanted to use for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich? How could the same loaf of bread that was made with one type

of fungus, yeast, become food for another type of fungus, the blue green rhizopus stolonifer? Where did they come from popping up literally over night? Some could be deadly or even fatal.

Although they are considered to be a part of the plant kingdom, fungi differ from plants in that they lack chlorophyll and must rely on organic material for nutrition. They do this in one of three ways: as saprophytes, as parasites, and as mycorrhizae. Saprophytic fungi live on dead organic matter such as wood, leaf litter, dung, or tissue of living trees. Parasitic fungi attack living plants or animals. Mycorrhizal fungi establish symbiotic relationships with plants, extracting nutrients from the plant's roots. (Lincoff 12)

In my "Biological Phoenix" series I chose to emphasize and mimic the saprophytic fungi and the parasitic fungi the most because these strange and quirky

pseudo-plants use dying matter as a source of life. These fungi are as much a part of life as they are death, functioning as a biological phoenix; the natural cycle of life succumbing to death and death giving birth to new life, an afterlife. These art works serve as an investigation of mortality, the fragility of life, and serve as a memorial to my brother.



PLATE 1: Do You Believe In Magic?



PLATE 2: Along Came a Spider on the Morning of January 7.



PLATE 3: Along Came a Spider on the Morning of January 7, Detail 1.



PLATE 4: Along Came a Spider on the Morning of January 7, Detail 2.

BIOLOGICAL PHOENIX PROCESS

I wanted to render the illusion of capturing and containing a moment or, more specifically, the moment in time at which death and decomposition gives birth to life; the biological phoenix moment. To do this I use a variety of materials to fabricate or visually mimic



PLATE 5: Our Secrets Will Be Revealed In the End

the subject matter of my pieces; polymer clay becomes fungus; flocking becomes mold; wire coated in enamel becomes the stems of the fungus; resin becomes water and condensation; latex rubber becomes the fungus coating; phosphorescent pigment becomes bioluminescence (glow-in-the-dark effect); and bits of dried store-bought moss are used to compose the base. This variety of materials allows me to capture the level of naturalism and preserve the durability of the work. The believability of naturalism is reliant on

my ability to mimic and achieve detail and flawless craftsmanship in each piece; this is visually essential for interacting with my audience, attempting to have them question “is this living?” The durability of the work is essential to its preservation and to keep the work from being damaged while transporting them to potential exhibition locations.

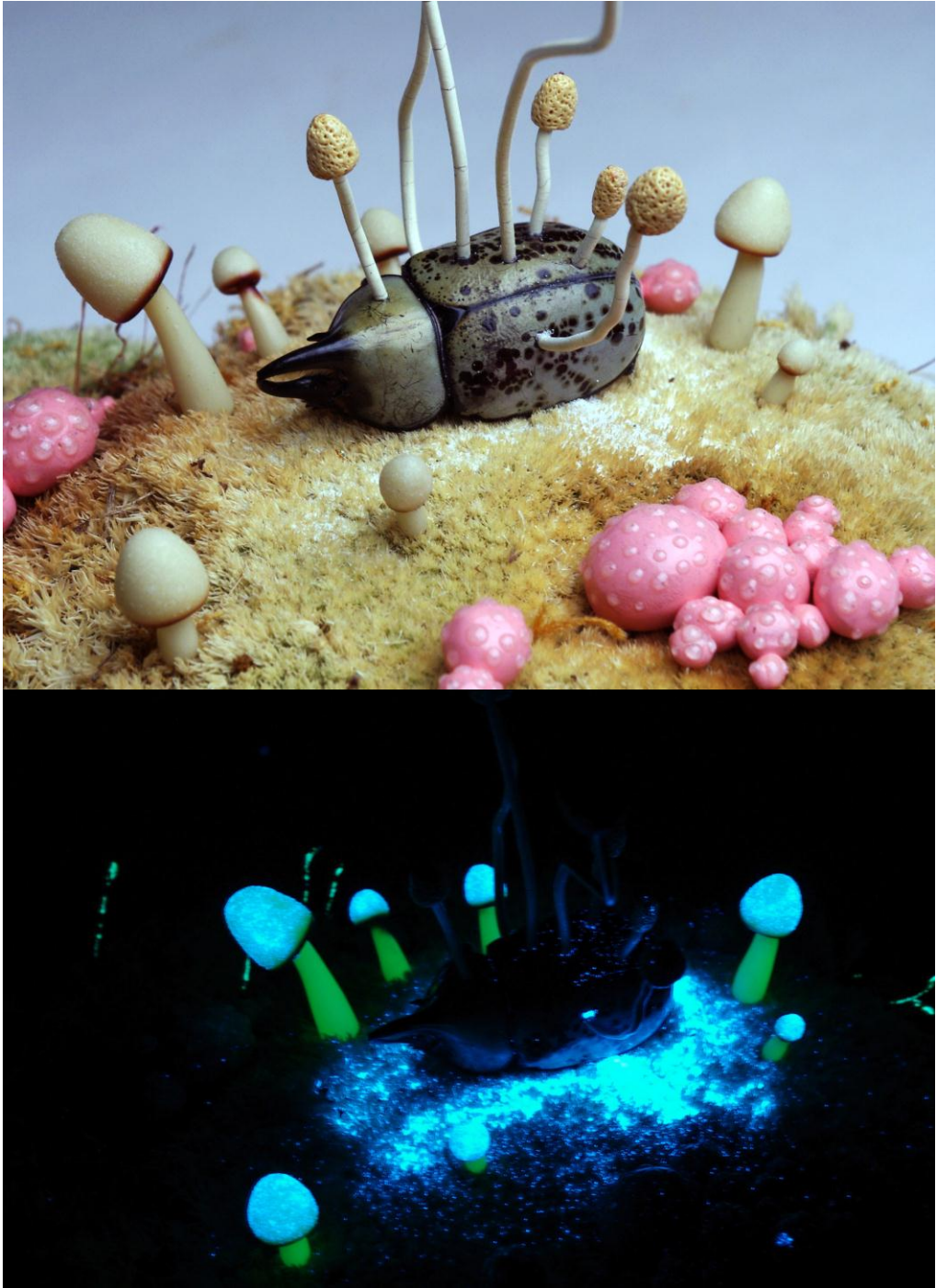


PLATE 6: Our Secrets Will Be Revealed in the End, Detail with bioluminescence.

The cloche or glass cover appears in both the “Biological Phoenix” and “My Diabetic Body” series of “Decadent Afterlife”. The use of the cloche in both series is intended to allude to a similar glass dome that is placed over a plant to protect from frost and to force its growth or a glass cover that is placed over a plate to keep food warm or fresh. The use of the glass cloche also intends to evoke the sense that the viewer is in a museum or perusing the aisles of a cabinet of curiosities. Similar to a cabinet of curiosities, the works under glass are like objects whose categorical boundaries have yet to be defined or understood. The German words “Kunstkammer” is often used in place of the term cabinet of curiosities and translates to “art room”. They were often viewed as microcosms or theatres of the world. The Kunstkammer symbolically conveyed the patron's control of the world through its indoor, microscopic reproduction. (Fiorani 268) Harboring the suspended moments in time represented under the cloches alludes to a scientific and museum-like analysis, or a type of diorama of life to be studied up close. Furthermore, the use of the glass cloches serve as a metaphor of emotional and psychological control as well as acceptance of the grotesque yet beautiful events represented inside them.



PLATE 7: Listen Closely and You Will Hear the Sound of Trumpets



PLATE 8: The Destroying Angel



PLATE 9: The Destroying Angel, Detail 1.



PLATE 10: The Destroying Angel, Detail 2.



PLATE 11: Not All Who Wander Are Lost



PLATE 12: Not All Who Wander Are Lost, Detail 1.



PLATE 13: Not All Who Wander Are Lost, Detail 2.

DIAGNOSIS

On January 7, 2011, I was awakened into darkness- not because I woke up in the middle of the night, but because unbeknownst to me, my body was beginning to go into diabetic shock. My vision had begun to fail and it was getting too dark to see; almost too dark to stumble my way through my bedroom, to my bathroom, across the cold tiled floor and finally to the toilet where I fell unconscious.

A week prior I had visited two separate physicians in two separate towns after I had been feeling seriously ill; frequent urination, frequent headaches, flu-like symptoms, all of the typical red flags that are a diabetic give away. The only part the physicians had not tested was the most crucial part, my blood. If they had, I would not have gone misdiagnosed or undiagnosed. They would have seen that my blood glucose levels, or blood sugar levels, were through the roof at almost 400 milligrams (normal blood sugar levels are between 70 and 130 milligrams according to my endocrinologist Dr. Sylvester Odeke). However, all the doctors that were visited were not at fault for not detecting my condition sooner. Although I did fit the type 1 profile for being physically thin, I did not fit the profile for the age group at which individuals



PLATE 14: Stay Frosty Type 1

are usually affected by diabetes; as juveniles. I was 26 years of age when I finally was diagnosed and the endocrinologists call my rare case “late adult onset type 1”. They theorized that I contained a genetic predisposition for acquiring an auto-immune disease such as diabetes. My body only needed a trigger to set off its self-inflicting destruction; this trigger was theorized as being the common cold virus.

As I lay in a hospital bed, coming in and out of consciousness, swathed in warm steaming towels, hooked up to life-monitoring machines that pumped precious liquids into my body, I felt newly, but uncomfortably resurrected. Sometime later, a doctor strode into my room and before speaking a word, began to write in his notepad. The incessant scribbling sound echoed in the



PLATE 15: The Chronology of an Unfortunate Cupcake

room, telling me the diagnosis was anything but joyful. He looked up at me and exclaimed that he hoped I did not mind that some medical interns would like to ask me a few questions. To say the least, I am not sure which was worse at the time, being told I had type 1

diabetes, a serious, yet manageable disease, or the barrage of questions from interns which would follow; eventually at all hours of the day. This was followed by needles, blood pressure pumps, and sponge baths; interrupting my sleep and my time to heal, my time to accept this new thing in my life which could not be undone.

The therapy and diabetic education that followed my release from the “memorable” experience at the hospital included therapy and education to help me survive with my condition. This involved regulating and monitoring my blood glucose levels, administering insulin (a couple milligrams to the stomach) with every meal, being mindful of not consuming sugary foods, and counting carbohydrates- everything needed to balance my body, mind, and spirit. Or, as my endocrinologist stated, everything a diabetic needs to manage and take control in order to feel “normal”.

MY DIABETIC BODY

As a newly diagnosed type 1 diabetic, I have been experiencing the effects of high and low blood sugar on my body. Each day I perform my diabetic routine of checking blood glucose levels, administering insulin, monitoring what I eat, how much I eat, and counting carbohydrates; every day reminded of the fragility of life. I know I may not change the world with the series of



PLATE 16: It's Not Actually Alive!

work “My Diabetic Body”, but if I could it would be for the benefit of all diabetics: a cure, more medical funding, etc... However, “My Diabetic Body” of

work was a way for me to investigate and make new discoveries about who I am, accepting what I have; my condition, adapting to it, and living another day in the light even if it means a couple days in the dark. For all those who may view my work in a gallery, or museum, my hope is that they will see it is about control over my fear of my condition. Through inspiring, disgusting or frightening people with my work, I intend to plant the seed of investigation and good health.



PLATE 17: It's Not Actually Alive, Detail

Our country is suffering from an epidemic of diabetes due to poor dietary health. About 16 million Americans have diabetes, according to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases' latest estimates (American Diabetic Association). A diet high in carbohydrates, too many calories, and too little exercise contributes to ninety five percent of type two diabetes cases (overconsumption of sugary foods does not contribute to acquiring diabetes, but only seriously and rapidly spikes blood sugar levels to dangerous highs). A

small number, five percent, of the diabetic population is type one; being born with the inability to produce the hormone insulin rather than acquiring the inability through poor diet and exercise (Mendoza 1).

If I was going to take control of my physical condition with medicine and diet in order to feel “normal” I wanted to make a body of work that would also contribute to feeling “normal”

My battle with diabetes had taken its emotional toll; I was angry, depressed, frightened, and confused. Day-by-day as I adjusted to my diabetic routine I began facing my own mortality, coming to terms with the fact that my body is a resilient, yet fragile vessel. This experience became an intimate yet grotesque idea; these natural processes, life and death are often strange to us and may hardly seem normal in the eyes of anyone who has never had a near-death experience early in their lives. Many people use the old adage, “Life has a funny way of doing things”, or something close to that. I actually do find life, if it can be personified, to actually contain quite a



PLATE 18: The Jelly Inside Was My Favorite

sense of humor.

Life waited until I was comfortable with who I was as a young adult, allowed for me to acquire an intense sweet tooth, and although I seemed physically,

emotionally, and psychologically well, underneath it all my body was a ticking time bomb, ready to release a dark, cruel joke within me. I wanted my work to serve as the same dark, cruel joke, and a humorous metaphor for all things sugary, sweet, and loaded with impending doom.

My work needed to be representational of the effects of sugar on my physical diabetic body, and simultaneously represent all the sweet foods I used to love; now my eternal worst enemy haunting me for the rest of my days. Like the “Biological Phoenix” work this new series

also suspends the passage of time. In these food pieces, the suspension of time serves as a metaphor for my perception suspending the effects of diabetes on my body with the use of a synthetic hormone, insulin. Most importantly, making such representations of my worst enemy, the decadent sweets, makes me feel that the pursuit of control over my condition and ultimately my life, is not in vain; having control over my condition had become a parallel idea to having control in my work and vice versa. Furthermore, I found my choice of materials (foam, polymer clay, resin, latex rubber, flocking, etc.) would also allow for control over the aesthetic value and durability of my work; which leads me to the importance of control in my process of making simulated sweet things.

DIABETIC PROCESS; A ROUTINE

Before beginning the process of creating “My Diabetic Body” I proposed the question why build these representations of food when I could simply work with actual food that has molded? I



PLATE 19: Blackberry Cheesecake Kings Me

build representations of food as displayed in “My Diabetic Body” because it allows for a variety

of control over a naturally occurring process that would ultimately claim actual food over time. Like the concept of time in my “biological phoenix”, the act of building food from durable inorganic materials allows me to simulate the food decomposing during a moment in time, which allows for aesthetic control and ultimately a feeling of physical control over my mortal diabetic condition. As stated, my choice of materials used to build my diabetic food pieces allows me to have control over a full range of representational qualities. However, because my creative process is comparable to my actual diabetic routine I will describe my everyday diabetic routine, from beginning to end. A day in the life of Mike McAteer, the type 1 diabetic, typically begins



PLATE 20: The South Shall Raise My Blood Sugar

protein and vegetables with a shot of insulin. For dinner, 6 pm, I eat a meal consisting this time of protein, vegetables and a cup of carbohydrates with a shot of insulin. Upon going to sleep, 11 pm, I take an even larger dose of insulin (6 ml Lantus only when sleeping); all the while

with awaking at 8 am in the morning for breakfast which consists of a bowl of cereal or oatmeal and a banana. Before eating I take a shot of insulin (2 ml Novolog only when eating as prescribed by my endocrinologist). For lunch, at 1 pm, I eat a meal consisting only of

avoiding sugar, checking nutrition labels, and checking blood glucose levels. The routine for my creative process is carried out in a similar fashion, every part and step is thoroughly planned out before execution. Because my creative process requires combining a variety of different inorganic materials together, experiments must be carried out between carefully planned steps. These inorganic materials include many of the same materials used in the “Biological Phoenix” work such as polymer clay, resin, latex rubber, and flocking with the exception of new additional materials such as molding paste.

I have discovered that the way in which real foods are prepared for consumption, must also be followed when working with synthetic materials in order to create the believability of a real food. In the piece, “The South Shall Raise My Blood Sugar” the simulated, decomposing coconut cake is made from foam which is prepared in an actual cake pan and the frosting is made from acrylic molding paste which is applied to the foam with a spatula. Fungus, growths, mouse droppings, and coconut (the simulated coconut shavings are achieved with the use of a cheese grater) are made from polymer clay, and mold is made from flocking. All the materials are forced to coexist; as I am forced to coexist with my condition and my body is forced to coexist with a synthetic hormone that I must force into it as a form of physical control. All the while I keep making connections between the work and myself. Process becomes routine and so when both coexist, satisfyingly successful results can be achieved efficiently, without losing quality and integrity.

Although the idea of control fuels my work conceptually and technically, it is difficult for me to leave out the factor of spontaneity. There is no light without dark, chaos without order, and spontaneity without control. I have made these assumptions on my own because they are as much a part of my work conceptually as they are with my process. Before being diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, I felt completely healthy and “normal”. Within a few days I was reduced to being rushed to the hospital, as though my body had spontaneously imploded with the disease, spreading to all corners of my being. My body felt like a birthday cake or that peanut butter and jelly sandwich that had been left out too long; mold breaking down the organic matter in blue green and black plumes and spots spreading spontaneous patterns over time across the surface, seemingly without rhyme or reason.

Inspiration and motivation often begin under similar spontaneous conditions; I will visit a junk store or antique store, searching for an old food related object or container that often visually tells the tales of time. These found objects then become as much a part of my concept of the passage of time as they do with the sweet food objects themselves and so both coexist in their decomposing glories. Often the found objects (food containers, toy appliances) contain old text printed that



PLATE 21: A Health Food

may state the condition or the quality of the product originally housed within the object (an ice cream container stating it is “a health food!” or a tin cake box stating, “economy and cleanliness go hand in hand”) which when paired with the dangerous or fatal effect they would have on a diabetic, and the rusted, crusted, condition of the found object, becomes humorously ironic.

INFLUENCES

The connection between art-making and the realization of our mortality has existed for centuries. The Dutch painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries such as Osias Beert, Jacob Van Es, Juan Sanchez Cotan, Johann Friedrich Gruber, Georg Flegel, Willem Claesz Heda, and Jan Davidsz de Heem are referred to as “vanitas” painters. The term “vanitas” literally means “emptiness” and was applied to the style of painting at the time to describe the, “meaninglessness of earthly life and the transient nature of vanity. A reminder of the transience



Willem Claesz Heda. Breakfast Table With Blackberry Pie. 1631.

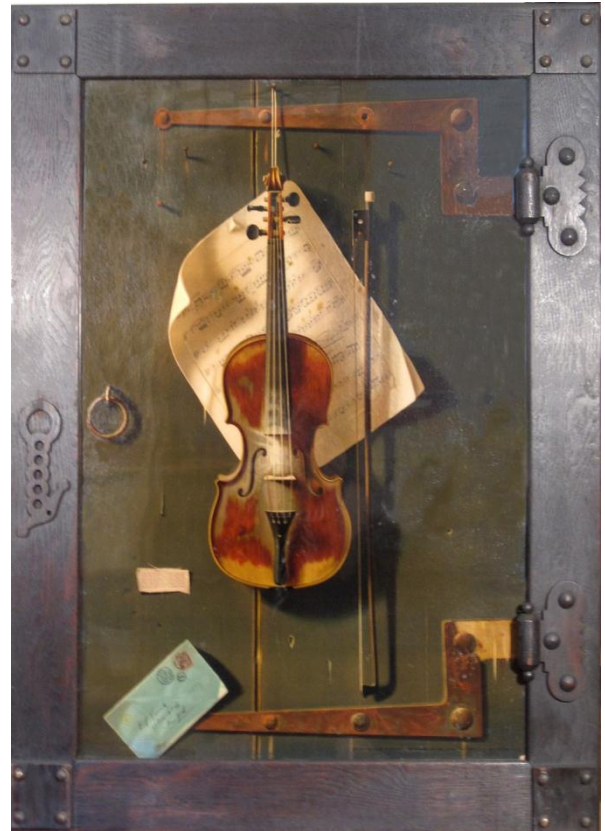
of life, the futility of pleasure, and the certainty of death.” (Van Miergroet 1) Paintings often depicted aestheticized and attractive objects alongside decaying food or flowers. These

paintings instilled the moral message that the trivial pleasures of life only last but so long before they are wiped away in death, so do not get too carried away during your earthly time here. I felt a kinship to the idea of portraying the temporary nature of life through the aestheticization of death and the use of a high level of detail to evoke beauty in the decaying food and objects represented in the vanitas paintings to my own aestheticized representations of food and objects.

Another group of artists that have influenced my work on a formal level are the “trompe l’oeil” painters of the late nineteenth century, particularly William Harnett. “Trompe l’oeil”, which translates to “fool the eye” in French was a style of painting which was often characterized by extremely realistic imagery intended to convince the viewer of the illusion that the objects in the painting were three-

dimensional. The level of representation and aestheticization of often worn, rustic, chipped, or crumpled objects paired with his meticulously composed compositions seem like more contemporary versions of the “vanitas” paintings.

William Harnett was the first to incorporate found objects as a part of his paintings often using cabinet doors to frame his paintings, adding even more three dimensionality to his work. (Van Miergroet)



William Harnett. “The Old Violin” 1887.

The pop artist Claes Oldenberg is well known for his large public sculptures of food and objects. The environments, such as a gallery space, a pond, or a downtown urban area, in which he situates his objects are re-contextualized for the large-scale theatre that is the world.



Claes Oldenberg. "Floor Cake" 1962.

This idea is represented in my own work in the form of installing and situating lighting on the interiors of my found objects that house my food pieces. The found objects paired with my sculptures act as mini theatre sets, incorporating drama within the piece. The pieces are recontextualized from the environment we would normally see them, the dinner table so to speak, to an environment we would not, on pedestals in a gallery. Oldenberg celebrated the arbitrariness of American pop culture and the overuse of food imagery and objects in advertisement. Similar, to Oldenberg, I am showcasing an awareness and connection between our American food culture, overconsumption, and diabetes.



Plate 22: Emergency Use Only.



PLATE 23: Emergency Use Only, Detail 1.



PLATE 24: Emergency Use Only, Detail 2.

The essay, *The Death of the Moth* by writer and poet Virginia Woolf is a piece that I am drawn to conceptually as well as visually. The essay details the struggles of a dying moth in its last moments. The moth serves as a metaphor of the struggles the author is experiencing in her own life as a woman and a writer during the late nineteenth century. She tells of a moth flying about a windowpane, its world constrained by the boundaries of the wood holding the glass. The moth first flies from one side to the other, its tiny legs struggling while life outside the window continues, ignorant of its movements. At first indifferent, Woolf was eventually moved to pity the moth. Woolf was ultimately portraying the idea that life is just as strange and familiar to us as death, both being cyclic and forever connected. Woolf's words, painterly in quality and

articulation, are so deeply descriptive that she is able to manifest strong imagery like that of any work of visual art and so her words continue to make ripples in the pond that is my work.

Contemporary American artist Phil Ross has worked on a variety of pieces that involve “...interrelationships between human beings, technology and the greater living environment.” Of particular relevance to my own work was his project titled “Pure Culture” in which Ross builds structures that function as food for the fungus he plants within them. A laboratory functions as his studio; completely sterilized and uncontaminated by foreign pathogens, particles, and insects that may interfere or kill the growing fungus. He then predicts how the structures will look when the fungi have grown from them through a series of painted drawings; this serves as a



Phil Ross. “Pure Culture” 2008.

type of predicted documentation.

Although Ross’s creative process is more directly involved with growing actual fungus, I feel our processes are similar

and kin to one another being “based on research, experimentation and long term planning.”

(Ross) Furthermore, we are creative kin in our use of containers; Ross builds containers to house his fungal creations out of cautious necessity (exposure to spores) rather than for aesthetics or concept (my glass cloches and food containers).

Finally, contemporary American artist and engineer Kim Kever uses large-scale photography to capture meticulously constructed miniature topographies which he creates in a 200-gallon tank, and then fills with water. These dioramas of fictitious environments are brought to life with colored lights and the dispersal of pigment, producing ephemeral atmospheres that he must quickly capture with his large-format camera. It's Kever's process



Kim Kever. "West 91r. 2008.

and use of an extensive array of materials such as pillow fluff, plaster, found objects, herbs, and pigments that, similar to the process of Phil Ross, I could relate to or connect to in my own process.

However, Kever's work resonates strongest with my own due to his flawless craftsmanship, mimicry and representation through creative construction. Although Kever's process may be contemporary in approach, the results of his imagery recall the nineteenth century American landscape painters such as Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt.

THE END RESULT

In the end, “Decadent Afterlife” has been a way for me to harness and channel my personal responses to the experiences in my life and display them. In Dr. Shelley Carson’s *Life As Art* she states, “One of the most consistently-replicated findings in psychological research is that writing a narrative about a negative experience in your life (called expressive writing) can lead to improved psychological and physical health.”(Carson) I believe my art-making serves this same purpose. It has served as a form of catharsis and control in regards to both my psychological and physiological health and provided me the strength to keep growing; through the ashes that are the loss of my brother and the ashes that are my diabetic condition. Life will always spring from decay, and this act of nature germinates the hope for a better tomorrow. “Decadent Afterlife” gave me this hope. The wrongfully convicted and incarcerated character in the book *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, leaves his best friend from prison a letter, like that of my brother leaving his note. The character writes his friend saying, “Remember Red, Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.” (King)



PLATE 25: The Chronology of an Unfortunate Cupcake

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