

Made Me/Sustains Me

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Introduction

My work strives to create catharsis through the construction of shared experiences rooted in both identity and place. I do this by creating engaging sculptural works that viewers can interact with both mentally and physically. My visual research takes the form of houses, nests, or swings and references play, rest and prayer. These works become safe spaces for people to engage and form connections with those around them and within themselves. I intend to create enjoyable experiences for viewers with the purpose of gaining an opportunity for introducing deeper contemplation on ideas such as how identity forms over time, and through what means. My culminating thesis work encourages viewers to contemplate home and how our origin can deeply influence our identity.

Identity

Where is our identity found? Is identity solely based on where we live, by whom we are raised, or what we worship? The very root of our identity begins when we are growing in our mother's womb. How we attach to our mothers during gestation and after birth can greatly impact how we develop as adults. Notable psychologist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby's study of privation in relation to maternal attachment formation references the occurrences when children fail to emotionally attach to their mothers. Whether this occurs because of parental neglect or abuse, mental disability, or otherwise, failure to attach to a maternal figure can be detrimental to the development of a child and subsequent growth of that child into an adult. This failure to attach can cause depression, aggressiveness, anxiety, and more severe mental illnesses to manifest over time (Bowlby 211-247).

Considering Bowlby's work on gestational attachment, I created my work, *Contentment*, where I attempt to recreate the maternal womb so that it is large enough to cradle an adult. The piece is a series of nearly thirty suspended womb-like swings in the middle of a flower-filled pathway in a park. Upon sitting down into *Contentment*, each

participant is able to feel the tight swaddling of heavy fabric embracing them. This swaddling pressure is referred to as "deep touch pressure" and has several neurological benefits. It can calm and focus



the mind while simultaneously providing an increase of activity to the parasympathetic division, while decreasing activity in the sympathetic division of the nervous system (Chen 463). Through this increase and decrease, neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine are released into the nervous system, creating a sense of calm and lessened anxiety. Endorphin levels are increased while blood pressure and heart rate are decreased, effectively comforting the participant and allowing them to relax (Poon).

Because of this increase of serotonin and dopamine to the brain, participants may become less guarded and choose to engage with those around them, swing freely, or curl up inside the swing and spin. These swings provide the safety needed for inhibited participants to let go and play, while also providing a comforting space for others to rest. If they choose to lift their feet from the ground, they safely and gently sway back and forth in the wind as if being rocked to sleep by a parent. For those participants lacking maternal attachment, this

can become a comforting substitute for missed childhood experiences. For those participants who grew up with healthy maternal attachments, this piece can become a loving and playful reminder of their youth.

Play

In addition to the neurological benefits of touch-sensory art experiences, encouraging uninhibited playfulness can contribute to a cathartic experience for a viewer when engaging in participatory artworks. I am attracted to playfulness as a therapeutic means of healing and self-discovery, and I strive to make environments where others feel safe to play without restrictions. Playing represents complete freedom. Artist and theorist Lygia Clark speaks extensively about play and its different aspects. She refers to participatory artworks as play or ritual that requires complete absorption of the participant. Clark describes how she is able to turn her private practice into something the viewers can experience alongside her. She transfers the "...ritual of the gesture from a painting process experienced exclusively by the artist to the viewing experience of every spectator" (Dezeuze). I strive to go a step further, and transform my own ritualistic sculptural gestures into something that is not only meant to be seen, but experienced, in a sensory and tactile way.

My sculpture, *Prayer House*, is another example of a piece that cannot exist without the participation of the viewer. In a prior exhibition, the bare-bones house form I constructed with loom-like walls stood empty and unrealized until participants voluntarily filled the walls and roof with their handwritten prayers. Together, we created a meaningful experience

through the fusion of participant, artwork and artist, something I have found to be imperative to the success of my work. I create environments for viewers to become lost in just as much as I seek to create works to lose myself in during the making process. The unique experience of losing one's self in an artwork is something I strive to recreate for my viewers by providing them with appealing environments with which feel safe to engage. This creates an opportunity for them to begin contemplating more important ideas about identity and place.



Home

Often we categorize different times in our lives based on where we have lived; making our home just as much of an influence on our lives as a religion or a parental figure. Houses are meant to protect the contents and people inside of them from the natural elements. Similarly, parents are supposed to protect their children from the malevolence in the world, just as prayer within religion serves to protect our minds from spiritual malevolence. These connections can help a viewer make the leap from looking at a sculpture of a house to contemplating their own homes both past and present, metaphorical and physical. It could allow them to consider what occurred within them, and how those occurrences shaped who they are today.

As adults it is common to “nest” in our homes as we decorate and furnish the spaces with things that represent who we are and what we believe. I have found that the house form

is the most basic and relatable object that can be used to convey finding our identities in the places we reside. My house sculptures are easily recognizable due to their simplistic lines and angles, and are inspired from the unfiltered innocence of a child's drawing. This simplicity allows the viewer to move past the object itself and explore the materials, meaning, and physicality of the object. These qualities make it easier for the viewer to begin to understand the concept behind my work. In *Made Me/Sustains Me*, I seek to explore the idea that we are in charge of our own identities, and that who we were raised to be does not have to be who we become. By using houses as a metaphor for self, and incorporating unique features like metal scars or soft fiber, I can convey this message through visual cues.

Community

Similarly to how we “nest” in our homes, we often “nest” within our chosen communities. Whether the community is a literal geographical location and its surroundings, or a group of like-minded people with whom you choose to spend time, we each belong to our own unique communities. By creating sculptural works that engage more than one participant, I attempt to create new communities. However, I have found that encouraging people to step outside of their comfort zone and participate in a foreign communal experience can be difficult; making the task of creating a multiple-participant experience within a work of art all the more challenging.

Isabel Berglund's *Monument of Stitches* was a social art project done in 2015 utilizing hundreds of volunteers living in six neighboring cities in Denmark. Volunteers knit colorful triangles to be used as an exterior material to cover six life size houses (Warde). Her goal was to create an expression of cohesion and community among the people in the towns by gathering them to make something together. Not only did she give several hundred people a

new community in which to interact, but she also extended that community to include all who visited her exhibit. This is something Lygia Clark would refer to as a “play community.” “There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences” (Dezeuze). The experience of walking through the exhibit invokes a sense of wonder and curiosity that naturally brings about deeper contemplation. This reaction among viewers as they engage in a newfound play community is something I strive to do in my own work when utilizing the house form.

In part, I believe *Monument of Stitches* was so successful because of the large scale in conjunction with the accessible materials she chose to use for the project. Weaving, sewing, stitching, and knitting have historically been known as domestic work; a term that conjures up images of women sitting on porches conversing and working on their latest projects together. By allowing men and children to be part of the pool of volunteers, a more diverse community was formed; by using commonly available yarn as a primary medium, less experienced volunteers could potentially feel more comfortable participating. I use the fiber arts in a similar way. By creating large, colorful works made of easily recognizable soft materials, I create approachable objects. This approachability is one way I attempt to help viewers lower their guards enough to feel comfortable participating in the new community formed by the sculptures themselves.

Use of Materials

Another way I create appealing environments that encourage participation is through the juxtaposition of oppositional materials. Steel and fiber are the two materials I favor and frequently combine for both a visual and tactile contrast of hard and soft, dark and light, tension and compression. Fiber work is often synonymous with domestic work, however

fiber work also has historical references within many religions, secular traditions, and cultures. I relate to fiber in a spiritual way much like the fiber artist Sheila Hicks does, often titling her works after towns or objects related to Buddhist tradition, or crafting her sculptures to resemble Moroccan prayer rugs. Textiles and weaving hold rich metaphors of life and time and how we are woven together. Each individual is formed into a unique tapestry of colors and other attributes that come from a multitude of sources and experiences over a lifetime. Intersections of experience and memory, people and places – all as threads piled on top of and in between – creating a weaving that is strong in its unity and unbreakable despite its lightweight and porous elements.

Steel is its opposite in nearly every way. Rusting, gouging, welding, hammering are all techniques I utilize to distress this rough material. Steel can represent endurance and strength in trials through fire; a dark ugliness we hold within us and try to hide from passerby. In *Made Me/Sustains Me* I use steel in conjunction with fiber to create a noticeable dissonance that sparks ideas about identity and place. I find some of my identity lies within the crude ugliness of the steel that represents childhood trauma and struggles; and another part of my identity lies within the soft beauty of the fiber that represents my connection with God and those around me. It is in the combination of the two materials that a more full identity is formed. The steel is needed to enhance the beauty of the fiber, and the beauty of the fiber is only more intensified by the ruggedness of the steel.

The House that Made Me

Made Me/Sustains Me is a work that consists of two identically proportioned houses standing side by side. The first of the two houses is titled *The House that Made Me*. The house is 4' x 5' x 8' and constructed with a wooden skeletal interior and steel exterior. The

inside of the house is painted black and has hundreds of tic marks scrawled in white paint and scratched into the steel walls and roof. The outside of the house remains unfinished, rusted steel complete with a gouged out front “door.” The tic marks symbolize a passage of time, a record of wrongs, a number of days spent in the house. The plasma cut door has a thick, black curtain that allows very little light to penetrate the interior. Black sandblast abrasive covers the floor and seeps out from under the walls, helping to visually ground the structure in space. Inside the house a hidden speaker plays the recording of my paint pen making tic marks against the steel. The sound reverberates within the small space and helps immerse the viewer in a multi-sensory environment. This house stands in opposition to the one beside it and represents everything the other house is not; it represents a previous self, a place of origin, a dark past to which I sometimes return.

The House that Made Me represents my own origin story and my struggle to leave it behind. As a survivor of childhood abuse, I have endured a multitude of traumas that occurred during the prime developmental years of my life. The effect of experiencing constant trauma during those years ultimately shaped much of my cognitive development,



molding me into the adult I am today. These facts paired with my faith in God as a Christian have lead me to believe that the abuse I endured will be transformed into experiences I can use to encourage or help others in similar situations. This project is a metaphorical representation of the house in which I was raised, and the emotions I experienced during my fourteen years trapped inside.

My intention is for each viewer to enter into the house alone and become overwhelmed by the small space and writing on the dark black walls combined with the audio of rattling steel that blocks out all other sound. In the corner of the house sits a 12” tall steel stool that, when sat upon, forces the viewer down to a child’s height and provides an intimidating view of the small space. Once inside, the ripped black curtain almost obstructs the view to the outside entirely, so the other house form, *The House that Sustains Me* is barely visible. This signifies the lack of hope in a better future and adds to the loneliness and helplessness felt by the occupants of the house. The black interior and small stature of the house creates the sense that the walls are about to close in on those who opt to step inside onto the dirty, grainy, black abrasive covered floor. These features make it so the viewer does not wish to spend a significant amount of time inside the house and will encourage them to move along quickly. Having this experience serves to further intensify the relief they will feel upon leaving this house, while moving on to the second.

The true catharsis comes when the buildup of tense energy is released upon exiting the darkness. As guests exit the house, the black abrasive from the floor will track their movements, which is part of an important metaphor. When participants move from the first house to the second, their pathway will be a visual representation of the time that passed on their journey. Their footprints will also be visible if they choose to move back and forth between, or circle around the two houses. This can signify our instinctual desire as humans to return back to our past because of its familiarity, even if what’s familiar is dark and painful. This further implicates my own journey back and forth between the house that made me and the one that sustains me and sends a message to the audience about how we tend to bring our

past into our present no matter how much we have worked to change our identity over the passage of time.

The House that Sustains Me

The second house in my installation is titled *The House that Sustains Me*. It is my representation of the house of God; a house that has no fear or condemnation and sustains both my life and spirit. After living half of my life as a victim of abuse, I reached out to God for help and received spiritual guidance. I was able to move forward and begin a new life away from my abuser. This new life however is not without its memories of the past, which is why the two houses in this project face towards one another. Through slats in the weaving of *The House that Sustains Me*, you can clearly see the rusted form of *The House that Made Me*. This serves as a reminder that the past is best not to be forgotten, rather learned from. If we are aware of the past and take steps to learn from the trials we have experienced, we can keep them from repeating in our future.



This house has the same dimensions as the first, but is made using thin birch wood that has been painted white, which gives it a more open and inviting feel. Also adding to the welcoming nature of this house are the woven walls and roof. Each surface consists of intricately woven fibers in a multitude of colors and thickness of material. Light penetrates through the more sheer fibers, and the spaces between the woven areas and wood. This allows for an open and spacious quality to be perceived by the viewer in contrast to the claustrophobic nature of the first house. The

entrance is circular and necessitates that the viewer must duck into the house where they are provided with a soft white rug and pile of pillows to relax on and take in the vibrant view. The space inside is warm and nest-like, comforting and soft. Participant's shoes will likely have some black abrasive on them from the first house when they move into the second. Any abrasive that crosses the threshold into this space only further represents the reality that we must live with some elements of our past in order to learn from them and move forward.

The presence of the fiber in this house is not without thoughtful purpose. Weaving is a time consuming and repetitive task that is meditative in nature, and is in direct opposition to the anxiety ridden writing of the tic marks from the first house. While weaving, I can connect with a higher power through meditation and prayer while I manipulate the fibers and lose myself in the process. I like to think of *The House that Sustains Me* as a sacred sculptural space, created in part through divine inspiration and communication with my Creator. Through my faith and by embracing fibers as a medium, I also understand that fiber can be a metaphor of my relationship with God. The title, *The House that Sustains Me*, refers to the love of God that sustains me and has rescued me from the events that transpired within *The House that Made Me*. Both pieces have been integral in creating my own identity, and my intent is for the viewer to lose themselves as they move between these houses for the purpose of reflecting on the experiences in their lives that have created their own unique identities. By creating a sacred space that entices the viewer to linger, situated beside an uncomfortable space that is dark and consuming, I subliminally encourage the participant to focus on the positive changes they can create in their own lives and how they can advance their own journey from darkness to light.

Environmental Psychology

As an artist who utilizes processes that often involve tedious and repetitive tasks, I have often contemplated the differences between anxiety-driven repetitive tasks, verses healing or meditative ones, and how their results can create vastly different environments within a participatory piece of sculpture. For instance, the tic marks inside *The House that Made Me* are made with a quick scrawling gesture that causes variation of size and thickness.

Some marks are written in an ever-fading paint pen, and some are brutally scratched directly into the walls using various metal instruments such as scrap steel or nails.

Although the marks do not convey language, graphology (or handwriting analysis), would argue that because these markings are so



varied and erratic they serve to create a more anxiety-ridden experience for the viewer. The irregular qualities of the markings make it clear that the author was in a state of distress while writing (Povser 195). “Environmental stress is related to actual or perceived adverse properties of the physical environment that can produce both psychological and physiological negative effects on people” (Evans). Although fitful, scrawled handwritten tic marks in various sizes are not the only adverse property of the house. The looping audio that plays a recording of my mark making serves to further intensify the experience by adding yet another anxiety producing stimuli. The black interior, loud audio, bulky inner structure, dirty floor,

tiny stool, lack of natural light and incomplete gash of a doorway only intensify the negative psychological effects of the house.

Within *The House That Sustains Me* you will also find evidence of tedious repetition, but the effects of those processes only serve to create a meditative and calming environment. The fibers are woven meticulously, not erratically with frayed edges or misplaced strands. The regular horizontal lines create harmony that is neither distracting nor overbearing, and the color palette is soothing, not harsh or gaudy. This orderly alignment of natural materials

within a space is derived from aspects of the Chinese practice of feng shui and the US derived environmental psychology. In both practices, “particular importance is given to the restorative role played by direct contact with natural elements, as



well as views of nature” (Hartig). When the soft natural elements, such as fiber and light, combine with the more fully open doorway and an accessible large window view of the outside, it produces an environment that is both calming and inviting. “The first feng shui-inspired constructions were sacred buildings, like temples, tombs, and imperial residences” (Bonaiuto). My second house is also a sacred space where prayer and communication with God has taken place. Much like other sacred buildings, prayers and petitions occurred within the walls before and during construction. I spent time communicating with God within the walls of *Sustains Me*, an act that sanctifies the house and gives it special meaning.

Conclusion

Subcreation is the “action or process of creating a fully realized and internally consistent secondary world” (Oxford). I have always felt that we are created in the image of God and are creative beings by design. Subcreation gives us the opportunity to exercise our unique abilities within the context of creating artwork, regardless of religious affiliation.

Made Me/Sustains Me is a secondary world which I have created within the natural world, or “primary creation”. I have constructed an interactive work intended to create a shared experience with the audience. Viewers can feel safe to cast off their inhibitions and have a more fully immersive experience within the work due to this constructed environment. This immersive quality can lead to feelings of catharsis and deeper thought on ideas about how our many homes can influence the development of our identities over time. Through my exploration of my own identity within these two houses, I am not only using my work to reflect upon my own life, but also as a vehicle for engaging those around me. It is only through forming deeper connections with other individuals that progress is made towards any common goal.

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