

Fragmentation and Redemption

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Abstract

For “Fragmentation and Redemption,” a series of sculptures has been created to explore the connection between Roman Catholicism and the corporeal self. These sculptures utilize the rich iconography of the Roman Catholic Church and express the sanctity of the body as it relates to grief and loss. “Fragmentation and Redemption” was generated out of the researcher’s loss of a close friend and asks the question, what happens to us physically, emotionally and spiritually when in a state of grief or shock? While creating this series of work, it became evident that the thread that binds both spirituality and art making is the body, as it is the instrument with which we experience the world around us. This research draws from a number of contemporary artists who reference the body conceptually in their artwork in order to discuss catharsis, fragmentation and transformation. In “Fragmentation and Redemption,” the body became a symbol for the struggle to understand loss and trauma through the metaphorical enactments of flagellation and fragmentation. The body and its different elements were then brought back together from their fragmented state to document healing from grief and a continuity of life after loss. In this way the exhibition “Fragmentation and Redemption” describes the artist’s path from a state of grief to a place of healing and movement forward.

1. Body of Paper

The series of sculptures, “Fragmentation and Redemption,” evolved out of the loss of a close friend in the fall of 2011. As I worked to cope with the emotional and psychological pain I looked to my experiences with the Roman Catholic Church as a child. I recalled beautiful midnight masses on Christmas Eve, my own communion, and the comfort that I took in the sacredness of the rituals. These memories of the Church were of great comfort, and it was these memories, along with the grief that I was experiencing, that became the lens through which I approached this project. This research is both an investigation of Catholicism’s capacity to heal, as well as a catharsis for my own pain.

A number of contemporary artists have informed this series of sculptures. Major influences include the work of Kiki Smith, who utilizes a wide variety of mediums and techniques to explore her Catholic upbringing and the human body. The series “Fragmentation and Redemption” and Smith’s work both share a strong connection between the physical aspect of the body, and the spiritual aspect of religion. In her *Untitled* piece from 2004, (see Figure 1), she silvered the surface of twelve bottles and engraved the name of a different bodily fluid onto the surface of each one. This piece was inspired, Smith has said, by the medieval book of hours, which are volumes of Christian observance that provide a source of meditation.¹ The context of Smith’s work is related to the reliquaries I constructed in the way that they both reference the Christian church’s practice of reverence and meditation upon life and death through the use of the body as a vehicle. Like Smith’s bottles, each reliquary contains a different bodily fragment of the artist’s (blood, urine and hair) and is linked to the idea of self-examination and contemplation. Just as in Smith’s work, the body is fragmented, separated and then examined.



Figure 1. Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, 2004.

The surface of my reliquaries have been “antiqued,” or made to look older than they are, as to reflect the constant handling they would have received if they had been used. Reliquaries were often kissed, touched and wept upon, and so different areas of the wood have been rubbed away and discolored to reflect this use. The wood has also been purposely damaged in areas to show age.



Figure 2. Katie Johnson, *Reliquary II (back view)*, 2012, mixed media

Reliquaries I, II & III contain fragmented corporeal material from the artist’s body which is then displayed and lit behind a lens with the use of interior lights. The lights act as a metaphor for the sacred power that the body holds in the theology of the Catholic Church. The sculptures created for this series utilize the fragmented self as a vehicle for discussing the self-examination that took place after the death of my friend and the desire to pull myself together in order to heal from my loss. These reliquaries are “conduits” of passage for the artist’s power. Parts of the self were collected and then magnified to concentrate their “essence.” Contained in the back of the reliquaries are objects that symbolically relate to the material in the front. For example, *Reliquary II* contains the blood of the artist with the reverse side containing the wings of a bird in flight. Wings in flight refer to ascension of the soul to heaven and the material of blood metaphorically refers to death and change. Together, these images express the way we may

experience many personal deaths before we reach the kind of “heaven” where we find peace on different levels: spiritually, emotionally and psychologically.

The shape of the reliquaries is intentional as well. Christians had first placed relics, especially bones, in elaborate caskets that were then elevated for the ease of viewing. There was soon an evolution towards a design that referenced a “house” for the bones.² In the history of religion, the grave is considered the “house of the dead” and therefore was given a corresponding form, whether as an underground crypt or in the form of a tomb above ground. Christians, however, hoped for a dwelling in heaven and therefore many medieval reliquaries were constructed in the form of houses, churches and temples. These dwellings represent the home on the other side.³



Figure 3. *Reliquary III (detail)*



Figure 4. *Reliquary II (detail of front)*

A second contemporary influence for this series of sculptures is the artist Janine Antoni. Antoni shares Kiki Smith’s preoccupation with the body as a source of knowledge, however much of her work has been an exploration utilizing performance. Anotini’s work involves transformations, or in the context of religion, transubstantiation. For *Gnaw* (1992), she laboriously chewed parts of 600 pound cubes of chocolate and lard until their tops and corners were worn away by teeth marks. She turned the chewed residue into two-dozen chocolate boxes and 300 hundred lipsticks, which were then displayed in a kiosk made to look like a department store display. She has commented that the work is about the cyclic nature of processes and a connection to her materials. The act of chewing was similar to the Catholic believer ingesting the body of Christ and being transformed by this action into something new and whole.⁴

“Fragmentation and Redemption” shares a similarity to the way Antoni implies the absence and presence of the body, as well as the transformation of material in her work. As a means to create a kind of “skin,” I developed a method of “paper-mache” that involved tracing paper, wood glue and coffee layered on top of a surface. Once dry, this new material could then be removed and sewn, cut or pierced in any way needed. This method was used on the surface of a mannequin to create a hollow three-dimensional form that references the human body. This skin material was then sewn, burned and pierced as part of a larger piece, the “Altar.” Skin is important because it is what encloses us. It is a protective and sheltering cover, an identifier but also a concealer. In Western culture, we believe that what is truly authentic lies beneath the skin, as in “beauty is only skin deep.” Skin becomes an important boundary metaphor that describes an inner and outer self.

According to scholar Claudia Benthien, the metaphor of skin as clothing dates back to early Christianity. She writes, “Central to the clothing metaphor is the process of putting on and taking off the bodily garment. Biblical language, for instance, has the expressions ‘put on flesh’ and ‘put on a body’ but also ‘to put on the human being,’ which describes the assumption of human form or, as in the last phrase, a change of attitude. The bodily garment, as the garment of the soul given by God, must remain unstained; should it become soiled, it must be cleaned of penance.”⁵ As discussed later, the issue of skin and penance is addressed by a series of garments created for this body of artwork.

For “Fragmentation and Redemption,” the paper-mache material is used to reference the bodily garment that has been pierced to expose the psychological space beneath. While the skin holds the shape of the human form, it has been systematically “traumatized” through the process of piercing and burning, also referencing the process of penance through a cleansing fire. Skin is treated as a fragment of the entire corporeal and metaphorical self. The skin form created for the sculpture *Altar* is also only a fragment of a person— just the skin and only the torso— leaving the viewer to contemplate the rest of the form. What lies beneath is the implication of presence, and the question of wholeness.

The development of my series has also been informed by the work of the contemporary sculptor Nick Cave. He creates wearable sculptures that reference his place in the world as an African American gay male and his own personal history. Called “Soundsuits,” these sculptures are meant to be danced in and to create a cacophony of sounds. He created his first Soundsuit in response to the 1991 beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers. At the time, he had just moved to Chicago and taken a job teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he now heads the graduate fashion program. “That incident was so traumatic for me. It flipped everything upside down,” he says. “But art has been my savior. I was able somehow to translate those emotions.”⁶ The endless video loop of the King beating drove Cave to thoughts about humiliation and response, silence and outrage. Having long worked with found materials, he started to realize how the most humble objects— the fallen tree twigs and sticks he saw everywhere on the ground— could be woven into a symbolic body armor. By cutting the sticks into three-inch lengths and wiring them to a handmade undergarment, he produced a kind of silhouette on which thousands of the sticks hung loosely like bristling fur. It seemed like a defensive image, “a kind of outerwear to protect my spirit,” he says. But it had an aggressive feel too, projecting “the power within the black male, that intimidation and scariness.”⁷

Nick Cave’s wearable works inspired the garments included in “Fragmentation and Redemption,” all of which are fully functioning sculptures that are meant to be worn. These works of art, like Cave’s, are made from humble materials and then transformed into something with power and meaning. While Cave utilizes thrift store clothing, twigs and fake fur, these works transform baling wire, glue and hair into garments that are meditations on the connection between grief, the body and religion. The garments made as a part of the “Fragmentation and Redemption” series are also part of a cathartic experience, in the same way that Cave created his first Soundsuits out of a reaction to the Rodney King beating. For both Nick Cave and myself, making art is part of a way to process trauma and create something in response. The sculptures created for this exhibition are a physical manifestation of a very difficult time in my life and were made as a way to process personal feelings related to grief. Through art, I metaphorically fragmented my Self and then put the pieces back together, in the same way that Cave responded to the Rodney King beating by creating garments that could armor or protect him emotionally and psychologically.



Figure 5. Nick Cave, *Soundsuits*

The sculptures *Hair shirt, for Mary* and *Wire Cloak* (see Figures 6 and 7) originated from a desire for catharsis from emotional and psychological pain. The last interactions that I had with my friend who died were strained and never resolved. I felt terribly guilty that things were never put right, and there was a desire for penance and

absolution. These sculptures reference the practice of corporal mortification, which was once common practice and was meant as penance for the individual's sins, as well as the sins of the world. Each vestment constructed for this series of sculptures refer to the body in the way that they are all meant to be worn, but they also refer to the way materials feel on the skin. A hair shirt is a penitential garment woven typically from the hair of mountain goats or camels and is worn close to the skin or as bedding (see Figure 6).⁸ The hair shirt created for this series of sculptures is created out of burlap, leather and human hair. The use of human hair in *Hair Shirt* has multiple levels of meaning. It references strained emotions— the way one may cut their hair in a moment of crisis, or their hair may fall out because they are distressed. Hair is also something precious and in Victorian times was kept as a memento of loved ones. The mass of hair used for this sculpture is an overwhelming tribute to the loss experienced when a loved one leaves. On a more conceptual level, the use of hair references the complicated relationship Catholicism and our culture has with the material of hair. One of the many aspects that I find particularly fascinating is the relationship between Saint Mary Magdalene, hair and penance. In a very real sense, Mary's long hair can be viewed as an expressive trait in and of itself. In one case, it is meant as a mirror for her unrestrained grief at the death of Jesus. In another, she is reduced to her raw feminine self in her sadness. But it is the representations of Mary at the end of her thirty years of asceticism that her long hair becomes even more pronounced. Her rejection of all that is worldly is so complete that she no longer wears clothing at all. In this way, hair becomes a concealing and purification force.⁹

For *Wire Cloak*, the practice of self-flagellation is invoked by the creation of hand-fabricated wire spikes that are bent inward and dig into the flesh when worn. The design of this sculpture was drawn from the use of a device that wrapped around the upper thigh of the penitent and digs into the flesh when tightened with a leather strap. Often, this device would be worn throughout the day as a remembrance and atonement for the sins of the world and self. Like other sculptural elements such as the "skin," this choice of material explores the tension between interiority and exteriority in the way that Christian theology conceived flagellation as the tension between spiritual cultivation and an affirmation of the body. This tension was manifested through the presence of discomfort and pain— it is palpable and corporeal. In Catholicism, spiritual cultivation is connected to this affirmation of the body in a paradoxical way. In essence, the more one focuses on denying the body and subjecting it to trials, the closer one becomes to being like Jesus, and therefore holy.¹⁰ Penance was an important aspect of this process of becoming more like Jesus through bodily sacrifice, and oftentimes self-imposed punishments would include nightly vigils of counting rosaries and saying Ave Marias.



Figure 6. Katie Johnson, *Hair shirt, for Mary*, 2012, felted human hair, burlap, leather and wire.



Figure 7. Katie Johnson, *Wire Cloak*, 2012,
leather, hand-fabricated wire spikes

The idea of penance and counting is related to the third vestment created for this series. This sculpture, entitled *Fluid*, is comprised of a leather collar that connects to strings of hand-constructed plastic “tears” falling to the ground. The “tears” resemble a multitude of rosary beads, which are to be counted out as the penitent says their prayers. This sculpture was constructed after the completion of the first two vestments, and can be understood as a conclusion to the process of seeking atonement. While the first two garments acted as an exercise in causing pain or discomfort, *Fluid* is about relief from pain. I imagine weeping from happiness and a sense of release, rather than continuing to be weighed down by feelings of grief. The hope is that there is an end to the process of grief and a means to move forward towards healing.

The culmination of “Fragmentation and Redemption” was finding a way to resolve the idea of the wounded, fragmented self and create a sense of wholeness and healing. When I thought about the process of healing, I thought of stitches, scabs and scars which lead back to the material of skin and the body as a metaphor for the process of grief. To create a sense of wholeness and continuity, I decided to display the skin material created for this research on the walls of the gallery by creating one long strip that encircles the entire space. The skin has “points of entry,” where the material has been sewn, pierced or otherwise altered, which describe the idea of a healing process in some way. Some parts of the installation are more literal than others, where the “skin” shows actual sewing and closure or still raw-looking flesh in the process of being healed over. Other parts of the sculpture, such as the stars that line the back of the gallery wall, are metaphorical in nature. The stars represent the religious or celestial presence in the process of healing. The influence of Roman Catholicism on my childhood as well as my search for understanding and comfort while in a state of grief brought me to a place where I personally searched for a sense of spirituality in order to make sense of my loss. It’s why the body was fragmented in the context of the reliquary and why my guilt was expressed through the guise of a hair shirt. The stars embedded in the “skin” on the gallery walls are a metaphor for the role that religion played in my own sense of healing and continuity.

This research has documented a lengthy personal process of healing from a significant loss in my life. Beginning with extreme feelings of guilt, to self-examination and finally healing, each part of this exhibition tells part of my individual narrative. I began by asking the question, what happens to us physically and emotionally when in a state of grief and shock? What is the role that spirituality plays in the processes of healing? I found the answers to my question in the objects that I created. What happens to us physically and emotionally is that we break apart in order to become new people. For myself, the process of creating artwork and my spirituality were integral in my path towards healing. During the making “Fragmentation and Redemption,” the body was made a symbol for the struggle to understand loss and trauma through the metaphorical enactments of flagellation and fragmentation. The body and its different elements were then brought back together from their fragmented state to document healing from grief and a continuity of life after loss. In this way the exhibition “Fragmentation and Redemption” described my journey from a state of total grief to a place of healing and movement forward.

2. References

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