Michelle Bennett

Forgiven

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Painting

State University of New York at New Paltz
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I paint about pain and internalized struggle. Language is often inadequate to describe the effects of trauma and pain. The reality of physical pain is inaccessible to those who are not directly experiencing it. We are shaped and influenced by our past experiences, but when fragmented memories are written into the body confusion increases (Scarry 42). In considering the representation of memory we must look “outside” ourselves. Our tendency is to construct narratives of our memories; however, traumatic or extreme affective experience resists this process. By turning my emotions into a visual dialogue on canvas I began, so to speak, to put a skin on my memories. Jill Bennett writes that to deal with images of traumatic memory one should not only describe the past event, but also involve the present experience of memory and self. Thus my thesis work reflects my effort to channel certain of my traumatic experiences onto the canvas.

Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo elaborates on this category of memory: “Experience is there, fixed and unchangeable, but wrapped in the impervious skin of memory that segregates itself from the present ‘me’... everything that happened to this other ‘self’.. doesn’t touch me now... so distinct are deep memory and common memory” (Bennett 25).
Although always influenced by my own experiences my paintings are open-ended and universal in their intent. Pain and trauma is represented through a multitude of different experiences which has allowed me to develop these works based on themes of trauma. The internalization of struggle distinctly affects the way in which we remember traumatic events; whether it is abuse, neglect, war, or other ravages, physical imprints of each event are processed, affecting the body and mind (Scaer 58). Thus unresolved elements of trauma have driven and given substance to my creative process. Using a series of binary pairings, juxtaposing, for example, innocence and experience, revelation and concealment, I evoke sensations of traumatic memory. Vision unlike words, serves the affective experience of memory. The body, understanding that our conscious mind can screen elements which are too harsh to be confronted, imprints on the adult traumatic recollections from childhood.

“If the skin of memory is permeable, then it cannot serve to encase the past self of another” (Bennett 45).

I investigate the inner subject of pain. The works in Forgiven evoke sensation, experience, and simulation in order to sustain awareness and communicate meaning. Trauma, having been represented commonly in political art, is not what I offer through this work.
I give the experience of suffering and pain an extension in space. The layering of material and information create an awareness of life’s struggles. On my own terms I creatively challenge the trauma as a means of confronting and attempting to master the delayed pain we carry around. In this way I evoke an awareness of detachment from painful memories.

The dialogue from painting to painting is an important investigation in my work. While each piece stands on its own, when shown together the paintings significantly expand the narrative possibilities. The vehicle is experience, generating my series from innocence to exposure and beyond. Disturbance existing within my paintings cannot be described fully in physical words. Through layering of oil paint, descriptions of flesh, sensations of the body, vulnerability of form, I reflect on the emotional rollercoaster of life’s weight and struggles.

The figures’ unease is shown through their exposure and isolation, physically and mentally. Psychological spaces, mental disturbances and awkward motion carry visual impact. I paint figures isolated from everything else except the weight of the psyche and its impact on the present body. Innocence warped by experience. I expose inner scars/memories portraying the psyche’s confusion from growing up too fast; I create sensation on canvas through my engagement with the medium. The imagery within this series superimposes the present experience of memory on past events. I emphasize uncertainty by exploring the various ways paint can create illusion; employing abstraction to encourage connections and associations.
Teetering, the first painting within this series was a major jumping off point for me. With its exposed figure and jarring color palette, this painting sets the tone for the supporting works by combining innocence with disturbance. Emotive intensity builds through the first four paintings, finding resolution in the fifth. The progression from Teetering to Soiled removes the figure to emphasize the sense of its elimination; this allows the viewer to step inside the space and complete the story. Traumatic experiences are common occurrences in more than half the population of the world (Caruth 105). By alluding to uncomfortable truths that develop after years of suppressing painful memories, I aim for the paintings to be felt before being understood.

Years of abuse, neglect and isolation can have serious effects on the developing brain of younger children, “... our bodies can become irreversibly damaged by our own stress responses,” (Bremner 6). Through evidence in advance brain scanning we know that trauma has a severe impact of the functioning of the brain (Leys 105).

Our memories become fragmented, leaving physical imprints on the psyche and body. As we begin to understand stress in relation to memory, the role each plays processed by the same parts of our brain. No two people recognize or process information of a stressful or traumatic event the same way. I paint randomness and chaos to reflect the fragile
reality shared by adult survivors of childhood trauma. In the painting *Affected*, I visually describe the figure in a completely overwhelmed state. The blurred motion and chaotic movement of limbs and head indicate her almost toppling over with emotion. By detailing the feet I ground the figure, allowing the illusion of movement and color to disturb the stillness.

Imagery functioning in the vein of awareness: my paintings deal with imprints left on the mind and body, drastically affecting the makeup of an individual. Felt-experience is the only way to access the reality of physical pain. Having personally grown up exposed and abused, my work explores how the relationship between the body and mind is affected by turmoil. By stimulating a personal as well as a painterly investigation on canvas I open up new ways to explore human fragility. Through the process of painting I have gained a sense of true self.
Teetering, oil on canvas, 60”x 40”, 2014
Soiled, oil on canvas, 60”x 40”, 2014
*Defiled*, oil on canvas, 60”x 40”, 2014
Defiled, detail
Affected, oil on canvas, 60" x 40", 2014
Affected, detail
Forgiven, Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition, located at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art

Forgiven, Installation shot
*Transpose*, installation shot


Imagery that operates in the vein of awareness, my work reflects an effort to channel memories and experiences onto the canvas. I paint about pain and internalized struggle where language is often inadequate to describe these effects. Each painting deals with the imprints left on the mind and body, which drastically affect the makeup of an individual. I am interested in creating psychological spaces with figures whose unease is uttered through their exposure and isolation, physically and mentally. By layering oil paint, I strive to find resonating descriptions of flesh, sensations of the body and vulnerability of form. Having personally experienced growing up exposed and taken advantage of, my work explores how the relationship between mind and body is affected by disorder. The process becomes a personal and painterly emotional rollercoaster reflecting my life’s weight and struggles.
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Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition

Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
State University of New York at New Paltz
Alice and Horace Chandler & North Galleries
1 Hawk Drive
New Paltz, New York 12561
845.257.3844
www.newpaltz.edu/museum

Opening Reception
Friday May 16, 2014 7:30 - 9:30pm

Exhibition Dates
May 16 - 20, 2014 11am - 5pm

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Front: Tweetering, oil on canvas, 60"x40" 2014