Layers of self - an unfolding conversation through painting, encaustics and doll making

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

In

The Department of Fine Arts

State University of New York
New Paltz, NY 12561

May, 2023
Layers of self - an unfolding conversation through painting, encaustics and doll making

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Submitted In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts at the State University of New York at New Paltz
Children are born to play. They use their imagination to create alternate worlds they can manipulate through animated objects and dolls. I loved imaginary play as a child - and perhaps my adult artist was born in those early experiences of unstructured, instinctive play. In this way, my childhood imagination grew from the same soil of millennia of children. Kate MckElderkin in her article “Jointed Dolls in Antiquity” says, “That children learn by imitation was as true in antiquity as it is today. Toys, by means of which they could simulate the activities of their elders, were an important item in their lives then as now, and nothing delighted them so much as miniature representations of people, animals and inanimate objects, such as wagons, boats or dolls’ furniture."¹

Perhaps this play is a child's form of prayer. Creative expression of all kinds sparks the imagination, and transports children to a dimension beyond the facts of this world. Artmaking and imaginary play are sacred realms in which a child can feel safe, loved and engaged with mystery.

Most children enter adolescence and struggle to find self-definition in a culture that values the rational and manifested over the imagination and unseen. This impacts women strongly as they are primarily valued in mainstream American culture for their looks and their relationship to men. Many adolescent girls feel unmoored during this time. Their inner orientation shifts dramatically from one of peace and pride, to fear and competition. Mary Pipher in her book Reviving Ophelia illuminates this common phenomena. As with many girls in the transition from middle school to high school, I shifted from being confident, outspoken and at home in my body, to feeling anxious, insecure and ashamed of my body.

¹ Kate M. Elderkin, “Jointed Dolls in Antiquity,” American Journal of Archaeology, Volume 34, No.4 (1930) page 455.
Mass media tells women our value lies in our beauty and youth. It is no different with most Western Romantic art. Typically during this period, the male was the artist and the female was the model. The male was active, the woman passive. The male was the viewer, the woman the viewed. The male was standing at his easel, the woman was reclining. The male was dressed, the woman was naked. “Luncheon in the Grass” by Manet is a case in point. Though Manet’s other famous work Olympia gave the woman a bit more agency as she is directly facing the viewer, one can still imagine Manet ogling over his very young-looking model.

During my studio practice, I wondered how my painting and making could be free and open, maintaining a sense of play from childhood, while also being an anecdote to this plague? Since I believe play and the spirit are deeply connected, was there any sacred imagery of woman-ness from history I could look to in order to release this burden?

My first step was to create a series of collage and photographed self-portraits using wings, elephants and words to explore who I was and who I aspired to be. These images sprang from my imagination. I learned later through the work of David Deida, that these symbols can resonate with women as expressions of the desire to “be taken” on a journey. Large nude works of myself as an older woman were a public statement of agency. These pieces were an important part of the process; creating big portraits of a standing powerful woman was strengthening and grounding.

Through the creative process, I realized I was in part motivated by my need to “be seen” and “accepted” by the male gaze. This insight shifted my attention from my own body, to a more symbolic approach to the female body. I began to paint women in
upright positions facing the viewer. Through the advice of an instructor, I gave myself limitations - simplified my color palette to Sanguine and Indigo and created a series. These large works felt to me like the walls of a new temple, harkening to Egyptian hieroglyphs and Goddess cultures - while moving the picture from the external body to the inner world. To expand my search for goddess imagery, I explored the MET’s Ancient Greek and Roman wing. On display were fully colorized statues, revealing the original colors - primarily sanguine and indigo blue - “coincidentally” the two colors I had chosen for this series.

Next I turned to Ancient Syrian Statuary. I had not made the connection between my work and Statuary, but decided to visit the Dorsky Museum to see an artifact from ancient Syria, dated 2000 BC. The goddess, though literally made of clay, seemed to breathe. She resonated with my breath and was alive in the same way as the dolls were alive when I was a child. The goddess seemed trapped in the museum. She had been worshiped in 2000 BC and was now sitting in a flat file in a closet in the Smiley Art building in New Paltz, NY! I felt that she needed to be worshiped again! This experience, combined with my fascination with the encaustic figurative work of surrealist artist Victor Brauner led me to create a new series of encaustic drawings intended to honor her. Choosing encaustic was serendipitous. I became interested in the method as I loved the texture the wax created and felt it was a natural material for my scribbly approach to drawing. Little did I know that encaustic is one of the earliest art materials humans used. Unintentionally, I was linking my present art practice to the beginnings of civilization.
During the period of encaustics I was inspired by a good friend who had survived breast cancer and wrote a memoir about her choice to not reconstruct her breasts, but to remain “flat.”. The vision of her body after surgery was inspiration for another series of collage paintings with photographs of cancer survivors, and then a series of encaustics that through the layering of material, touched on the spirit inside the body as well as the physical form with stitches where breasts used to be.

The series of encaustics were complete but I still felt I needed to create something more to worship the goddess artifact - and perhaps locate a layer of myself buried within. I was inspired by Nikki Saint Phalle’s large scale Nonna statues and her tirs shooting series. The series expressed her rage toward the Patriarchy and how it was transformed - literally the materials she used were pieces of the colorful, lively and vibrant Nona dolls. My desire to shift to soft sculpture was a decision at the nexus of reclaiming a symbol of girlhood, with a need to create an object similar to the statuary and align myself with the herstory of Nikki Saint Phalle. It was and is a return to my childhood fascination with dolls. I wondered what role they could have in my current life as a woman artist. If as a child, dolls were showing me how to be a woman, what could dolls show me now? I was worn down with mainstream culture’s obsession with youth and beauty. I was a mother myself with a daughter. I became even more concerned with the limited categories of acceptable looks for women and girls. I tried to shift my focus from the outside to the inside.

Next in the studio I “gave birth” to four doll-woman-goddesses. The dolls were a creation of yearning - where is the divine spark in me? Where is the eternal radiance beyond the physical form? The dolls seemed to grow from the same desire I had a
decade earlier - to see myself in all my glory. I created large cloth bodies. I placed gems in their breasts and vagina. I added weaves as embellishments. Who are they? I feel that they are all aspects of a scared self. When I look in the mirror, I see my aging face, my sun damaged skin. I see my pedestrian clothing, my glasses, my gray hair. When I sit with the dolls, I see the me that glows within me. They are alive. I became curious about the connection between dolls and prayer. In ancient Egypt, there was an overlap between dolls and idols.

“Evidently many of the figurines discovered in the temple excavations really served a double purpose, first as playthings and later as offerings, but when we try to separate the toys from the purely dedication objects we are on safe ground only in the case of jointed dolls, and even these have occasionally been mistaken for idols.” 2

The dolls I created have a few uncanny resemblances to dolls of ancient antiquity including gems on the breasts and vagina, decorated bodies, and movable limbs. Next came a need to move in a more intimate direction. I channeled my rage at the recent overturn of the roe vs. wade decision and increasing limitation of women’s bodily autonomy by creating a series of smaller dolls with the words “my vagina, my choice” and an even smaller set of purses with images of vaginas that say “my purse, my choice.”

I recently watched the documentary “Marwencol" filmed in Kingston. The film follows a young man who, after a tragic beating, suffers brain damage. As he works to regain his life, he creates an elaborate doll world in which he can “play out” his feelings, invest in characters, and craft a world to his liking. He calls his character his “alter ego”. The film made me curious about the value of creative play for adults.

2 Elderkin, page. 455.
These explorations led me to wonder what art making could reveal to other women about their layers of self? What if I shared my experiences with a group of women in a workshop format and invited them to create their own works? My outside thesis advisor, Sibel Golden, is the founder and director of the Northwest Creative and Expressive Arts Institute Arts Institute, an organization in Seattle, Washington. Together, we designed and facilitated a workshop called “Layers of Self” on April 28, 2023 with seven female participants ranging in age from 21 to 82. The workshop began with me presenting a slide show on my thesis work called, “layers of self” - and giving examples of different works and describing my process and understanding. Next, Professor Golden led an expressive arts invitation in which participants engaged in a creative process to uncover their own layers of self. Using the metaphor of Russian nesting dolls, the attendees were asked to create an outer self, inner self and core self in a shape or form that most spoke to them. This could be through cut outs of doll shapes, abstract shapes, words or collage. After thirty minutes of creative time, each participant shared their creations and reflections.

What struck me most was the sense of relief that each participant expressed through the process of doing. The invitation seemed to be an opportunity for the separate selves to be seen and integrated. This reminded me of the Jungian concept of separate selves and the lack of ritual in contemporary society for an experience of integration. Art historian Michael Leja describes this phenomena as the dilemma of the modern human being. He exclaims,

“Trapped in the labyrinth of the private mind, modern man has lost touch with the healing communal forms of pre- modern societies. Drawing upon this paradigm, many
look to art as the vehicle of psychic integration, whose function paralleled ancient forms of ritual."³

Though the particulars of the layers were individual the general response was consistent - outer layers being those masks we present to the world, inner layers conflicted and multidimensional and the inner core a vulnerable, sacred and innocent being connected with all others. The group seemed to concur that the aging process allows for less masking, more vulnerability and a greater degree of integration. The post workshop conversation also led back to childhood and art making. Many of the participants experienced art shaming and grew up unable to access their own natural, visual creativity. They asked how I am able to remain grounded in playful experimentation. I discovered that the spiral of investigation of self through artmaking is limitless and for me, a key element is continuing to engage in my profession - mural making with children. Through these interactions, I am reminded regularly that creativity is a natural inclination and through making, we become and become again - the true beings that make us human.

Will be blessed with peace, joy, loving-kindness and compassion.