

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

**Fluid Bodies**

A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

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## *Abstract*

This paper is a support to my thesis exhibition *Fluid Bodies*. My art and creative process are deeply informed by my experience of my body and its interaction with the natural world. I don't experience my body as an isolated unit; it is fluid, seeping, made of the same material as the rest of the world. I see similar patterns existing in the body and natural world, a web of connections and relationships that I represent in my art. In this paper I will describe personal feelings, ideas, anecdotes and experiences that have deeply influenced my creative expression. I will not attempt to define my art. There is no right or wrong way of understanding my work; each individual will have a different experience of it, and understanding comes from this direct interaction. I hope that my description of personal thoughts and feelings will provide a catalyst for the viewer's own experience.

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## **Chapter One: The Fluid Body**

*The blue churn of the sea  
fused her green heart.  
She was born to the tribe  
of terrible longings,  
lungs to gills,  
skin to scales.*

Karen Connelly, *The Vacation*

When I was a child I obsessively made things with my hands. I would draw pictures, form shapes with my food, make sculptures out of sand, clothes for my stuffed animals and dolls, animals out of snow - I've never been able to keep my hands still. My other obsession was water. I have always felt a deep connection with water; I cannot be near a natural body of water without experiencing a desire to be immersed in it. My passion for water and creating things is very similar, because both feelings involve an overwhelming need to be completely absorbed and transformed.

Bodies are living processes, existing along with their environment; they include the space that surrounds them, taking in and giving out. A body is not a fixed, bounded, contained entity. I don't experience my body as an isolated unit; it is fluid, seeping, made of the same material as the rest of the world.

Where does the body begin and end? Where does inside end and outside begin? What is interior and exterior? We cannot really demarcate the body's limits. We think of blood as internal, but does it not flow to the outside during menstruation, or when we

have a wound? If we do not bleed, the wound will not be cleansed; so too, the body must rid itself of menstrual blood. When we breathe, 'external' air comes inside us and 'internal' air is pushed outside. Where do these borders lie?

I am interested in exploring alternative possibilities of bodily experience and representation. My work always refers to the body in some form or another: whether I represent the whole body or a part of its interior or exterior; or whether I create an elusive corporeal abstraction or simply leave a trace of a very physical mark. My bodies are ambiguous and connected with everything around them. I represent fragmented bodies, internal and external bodies, diffusing bodies - bodies which are not categorized, fixed, bounded. I represent bodies in ecstasy, bodies in danger and in fear, empty bodies, full and sensuous bodies, dead and lifeless bodies, living bodies. I create veins that extend beyond the container, some full of life and others raped and split open to the world. Some bodies are permeated with water; others are fragmented and alone, torn apart, dripping with blood. I am interested in the openings and orifices of the body, those ambiguous spaces that are neither inside nor outside. These are the spaces where things flow in and out. We ingest air and food, and expel waste, bodily secretions, blood. I represent the interior (organs, veins, blood, roots) along with the exterior (skin, leaves, branches) to indicate that there are no real boundaries between beings, between interior and exterior, unacceptable and acceptable, proper and improper, living and dead.

The body is co-existent with the space that surrounds and encompasses it as well as with other bodies. When I love, I experience this wholeness, this essential connection with other beings; the act of making love involves becoming part of another body. The

process of creating is like loving or making love: they are both sensual expressions of this unity, fusion, absorption.

Why do I make things? Because I always have and don't know how not to. Because it's a part of me just as much as every part of my body. Because I would shrivel up and die if I didn't, just as I'd shrivel up and die without water or love.

## Chapter Two: The Body Object

*O Rose thou art sick.  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night,  
In the howling storm:*

*Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.*

William Blake, *The Sick Rose*

From a very young age I was drawn to ‘strange’ physical activity: I would sink deep into water, holding my breath for long periods of time; I would spin myself round in circles until I was dizzy; I would twist my body into odd positions or stand on my head, feeling all the blood rush downwards, making me high. I still do many of these activities. Despite social pressures to conform to ‘normality’,<sup>1</sup> I have tried to continue to explore my body and bodily possibilities.

The body has continuously been a site for the dialogue on aesthetics and normality throughout art history; until the twentieth century, artistic bodily representations have been largely idealized and have determined the standards of beauty,

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<sup>1</sup> I see normality as a relative term that changes radically over time and from one society to another; the standards of normality regulate people’s behaviour and experience of their body. See poststructuralist analysis, such as Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Trans. Richard Howard. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965). Foucault maintains that each society regulates people through policing the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable, proper and improper, normal and abnormal.

normality and sexuality. In antiquity, the male nude expressed the idea of physical perfection and power, and the female body expressed grace and sexuality. In the Renaissance, the nude reflected both mortality and idealized beauty. In the past few decades, feminist art and art criticism have emphasized the re-representation of the female body by exploring new possibilities of bodily representation, challenging its traditional objectification by the male 'gaze'. For example, many feminist art critics have maintained that in the historic tradition of western art, the female body has been represented as a contained, harmonious and sealed whole in order to police its borders.<sup>2</sup> Although it is true that the female body has been particularly objectified in its representations, I believe that this regulation of the body's limits extends to images of all bodies, including the male nude.

I am interested in representing the human form, but in a way which is perhaps incompatible with the traditions of art history or social standards of 'normality'. "After all, how 'great' is yet another image of a nude woman displayed upon a couch, no matter how well it might be painted?"<sup>3</sup> I present bodies that are ambiguous and metamorphosing, crossing gender distinctions. They cannot be defined or contained: they are transforming and interchangeable. In my installation *Fluid Bodies*, I have represented the human bone structure, veins and internal organs that extend beyond the surface. I explore a body that is not gender-specific or 'normal'. The webs I've constructed allude to a universal body: they connote veins, the arterial or bronchial

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<sup>2</sup> See Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art Obscenity, and Sexuality* (London: Routledge Books, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Judy Chicago asked this question in Judy Chicago and Edward Lucie-Smith, *Women Contested Territory and Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999), 11.

system, roots and branches, as well as referring to the empty spaces and orifices of the body. I confuse different identities and characteristics to suggest a state in which all is elusive and changing.

As I grew up, I continuously came into contact with glamorized representations of the body in the media and in art. Being a visual person, I found these images began having a negative effect on me. They have made it difficult for me to have a healthy relationship with my own body because I began experiencing my body through outside images. I would often experience myself by comparison; it was as if I were on the outside looking in, judging how well I conformed to society's dictates. For several years I struggled with an eating disorder. Although painful and isolating at the time, this violent struggle helped me to understand myself: it forced me to face my fears, come to terms with my anger and negative feelings toward myself, and recognize my capacity for self-destruction and violence. And paradoxically, it helped me to understand and connect with my body - looking after and loving my body is imperative for having a healthy relationship with myself, with others and with my environment.

One of the ways that I was able to overcome this disorder was by recognizing my obsessive traits (the tendency I've had in my life to focus compulsively on something) and direct them into positive activities and actions. Art-making played a crucial role in this process because it was one of my main outlets. Much of my work involves obsessive, repetitive actions like tying knots, tearing rope or sewing bits together. It often involves violent mark-making and erasing - another way I let go of my destructive tendencies. If I don't direct them into making things, I hurt myself.

When I read Morris Berman's book *Coming to Our Senses* (1989) several years ago, it had a great influence on me and made a lot of sense based on my personal experience. He believes that the denial of physicality in our culture has caused a large void or gap; we have lost a sense of wholeness through a lack of grounding in our bodies. He maintains that because creativity is a somatic process, it generally gets repressed due to our fear of sensual exploration and openness. The result is that most people who are creative express themselves in a compulsive, neurotic way, resisting and fighting against this repression.<sup>4</sup> During the years that I had a negative relationship with my body, I found it difficult to create. I find that I am able to express myself creatively when I have integrated my mind and body.

I have explored the mind/body connection through physical activity, such as yoga, dance movement, hiking and swimming, and all of these experiences deeply inform my creative process. When I make a mark, stitch something together, or cut into wood, I am aware of how it feels in my muscles and body as well as emotionally and psychologically. The process of making art is very physical for me and involves my whole body. I have been attracted to drawing more than any other art discipline because I find it the most sensual and physical; when I draw, I can incorporate my whole body and express myself spontaneously. Although I have considerable training in printmaking, I found myself gradually moving away from using print techniques. Printmaking requires more control and focus on technical aspects and involves a long process before

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<sup>4</sup> See Morris Berman, *Coming to Our Senses: Body and Spirit in the Hidden History of the West*. (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd., 1990).

one sees the result of the mark one makes. I find it restrictive because I have less connection with my body and the physical marks I'm making. Drawing, by contrast, is immediate and physical. The sensation of drawing feels spontaneous and natural like moving through water.

### **Chapter Three: Dissolving Bodies**

*You send me your hands  
printed, sculpted,  
laid down bare  
searching the darkness for  
something, anything,  
to grasp, to feel, to love.  
You send me the  
light in small things,  
an honest fragility,  
the story  
thin bones tell of  
what must be protected:  
heart, paper, skin.*

Michael Stone, "The beauty asleep in things"

I dive down deep into water, so deep that I feel the pressure in my ears and eyes and water pushing in all around me. I remain immersed until I can't take it any longer, when I come gasping up for air. It is frightening. But it is also a soothing, peaceful act, one that I have done ever since I can remember; it is the feeling of the body extending beyond itself, of being absorbed, immersed.

Ever since I was a child, I have had a desire to disappear or dissolve. It is a strange feeling - a desire to be so absorbed in my environment that I no longer exist as me, but as part of everything around me. At times it is infused with a deep sense of sadness and melancholy - perhaps stemming from a fear or dislike of myself, a desire to escape the 'I' and become fused and unified with the world.

The other day I had this feeling very acutely and began thinking about how it manifested in my work: the objects I make are also dissolving, fragile, deteriorating; I'm driven to make things which appear to be falling apart, things which are stitched, risking breaking, things that extend beyond themselves. My bodies are dissolving, disappearing, fusing with branches and roots. My web is held together by fragile string and knots; my lanterns and blanket are stitched together with delicate thread. The process of stitching and tying things together is soothing and cathartic for me; it is an attempt to find a wholeness in the world, to feel connected, less alone. Physically, emotionally and psychologically, everything is dissolving - dying, changing, renewing.

What happens when I explore places of personal discomfort, expose what lies beneath the surface, go inside the orifice or wound both literally and metaphorically, and explore those feelings that I tend to shy away from and fear? I am interested in revealing and facing these fears, in representing some of these spaces and anxieties that I repress in the unconscious. The creative process can be a painful one, and often, as I find myself in my studio working through upsetting memories and images, I wonder why I do it. Perhaps I do it because it is therapeutic. Certainly, it is a difficult process; however, if I don't work through these concerns and recurring images and express myself, I turn this pain in on myself in some form. I can be playful too, exploring new and undiscovered areas of myself; eventually, I am able to find peace and even joy through this cathartic process. Like being immersed in water, creativity and the imagination are healing (even if there is always the risk of drowning!).

I see the importance of the Swiss analyst Carl Jung's emphasis of play and the imagination in order to access material normally repressed; it is in this state that one becomes spontaneous and feels the freedom to imagine anything. Jung discussed the significance of these elements in the creative process:

Every good idea and all creative work are the offspring of the imagination, and have their source in what one is pleased to call infantile fantasy. Not the artist alone, but every creative individual whatsoever owes all that is greatest in his life to fantasy. The dynamic principle of fantasy is *play*, a characteristic also of the child, and as such it appears inconsistent with the principle of serious work. But without this playing with fantasy no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable.<sup>5</sup>

I am interested in exploring the unconscious, but I find that it is difficult to give unconscious images, imagination and fantasy free reign because I often desire control over everything: my mind and body, my life, my relationships. I realize that my desire to regulate my life is unhealthy because real control is impossible. Relinquishing control is a radical act, giving up a lot of the standards and definitions by which I rule and measure my life. Only when I let go of the illusion of having any real control do I begin to tap into the unconscious and all the things that I repress.

I used to be afraid of drawing without a preconceived subject in mind. It felt unsafe; with a subject, there is always something to look at, refer to, record. I have found that it is when I eliminate the subject that I have begun to access unconscious images, the fantasy- and dream-world. I would agree with Martin Jay that the modernist era has been dominated by the sense of sight above the other senses; "modernity has been normally

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<sup>5</sup> Joan Chodorow, Ed. *Jung on Active Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 5.

considered resolutely ocularcentric.”<sup>6</sup> This bias manifested itself in my art education - in art school, I was usually given a visual reference to record. The result is that I became dependent on the subject; I felt alone and at a loss without it. I wonder what interesting things might emerge if we used other sources, such as reacting to a texture, to a piece of music, a poem, or a dance piece? Or if we had no reference at all, if we were forced to look inward, to the imagination, to the dream-world, to the unconscious?

It is this process of going inward, letting go and playing that has been the most terrifying for me, because it involves relinquishing control. But it is also this process that has uncovered the most fascinating and intriguing images, those symbols that are not clearly recognizable and come from a deep, invisible and unconscious place.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity” in *Vision and Visuality*. Ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1999), 3.

## Chapter Four: The Living Body

*Veins and roots  
come out of her pencils.  
In the two-edged sunlight  
rock cracks are seeping,  
bleeding water with quiet  
pulsing and new violence  
this beautiful dark world  
awakes. I want to feel our  
feet drink into the dirt,  
our backs ripple and burst  
like flowers trying to pull down the sun.*

Tadzio Richards, "Desire"

In nature I see recurring patterns and striking similarities of form. Blood vessels, tree roots and river beds all have the same visual pattern. We are all part of a larger system: bacteria, plants, trees, insects, and humans are all connected. The natural world is a harmonious system in which all things interact and depend on each other; it too is a body.

The organic world is a source of symbols for the body, and the body is extended symbolically in all its manifestations. Trees are bones; branches and roots are the bronchial and arterial system; water is bodily fluids and secretions; the flower is a symbol of the vulva or reproductive system. Roots supply the tree with water just as veins and arterial system supply the body with blood. I represent the patterns I see everywhere, such as the web of roots, branches, arteries, the veins in rocks or the body, the ripples in

water. I deliberately blur the boundaries between nature and the human body. For example, *Limbs* refers to the similar patterns between the limbs of the body and the limbs of trees. *Green Fuse* involves a fusion of human and organic bodies.

The body is part of the natural world just as nature is part of the body. When I connect with my body, I connect with the earth. My art is deeply informed by my interaction and relationship with nature. In my installation, *Shedding*, I incorporated stones, columns of dried leaves, and materials that moved with the wind. My series, *Whelmed*, deals with the absorption and wholeness while submerged by water. The natural elements manifest themselves in my work.

In my installation *Fluid Bodies*, I have used materials that are delicate and sensitive to movement because movement is part of life and nature, from the expanding and contracting of cells and muscles, to the swaying of trees in the wind and the rushing of water in a stream. The layering of materials on rice paper reflects the layering of the body and of the natural world. Just as the body consists of layers of bone, muscles, veins and skin, the earth is constructed of strata of soil and stone and trees grow by layering their bark. The media I use also connote the body: the wrinkles and veins in rice paper are like the surface of the skin, bark or leaves; string is similar to veins and arteries. These materials are both delicate and strong, just as the body and the natural world are fragile and resilient. Although leaves are delicate, they can stand up to great storms; the skin can easily be cut, and yet has a powerful ability to heal. This apparent paradox also reflects my emotional and psychological being, which is fragile and yet has strength.

In nature, everything moves in cycles - constantly decaying, dying, renewing, and transforming. Trees shed their leaves in winter and grow new ones in spring; the sun and moon alternate their appearance daily; flowers die, but new buds are born; cells continuously renew themselves. I often use a circular format to reflect these cycles. In both my installations *Shedding* and *Vein*, the viewer was forced to walk around the installation in a circle. *Vein* involved several drawings which had circular marks.

These cycles are not only present in nature, but also on an emotional and psychological level. I continuously experience emotional births and deaths: I am wounded and heal; I swing from happiness to sadness; I am traumatized and recover. My installation *Shedding* celebrated this process of change. *Shedding* had many references: to the shedding of leaves, part of the process trees undergo to regenerate; to the shedding of hair, reflecting the psychological and emotional deaths and rebirths I constantly go through to survive; to the shedding of light (from the lanterns), or the illumination and peace occurring when one embraces this natural process of letting go and renewal.

I reuse and recycle materials to reflect nature's regenerative cycles. In my installation *Shedding*, I wasted no materials: the leaves I printed, I hung in columns from the ceiling; the remnants of the lanterns were sewn together to create a large blanket. I often draw over old drawings that I dislike to make them into something new, but leave traces of old marks. My recycling of materials also reflects my environmental concerns. In contemporary consumer society, I see an incredible amount of waste; we treat everything as commodities subject to disposal. Nature continuously regenerates, and so I try to reuse everything that I can.

Just as everything in nature is in flux, so I also make art that deteriorates and changes. In my installation *Shedding*, I used leaves, hair and water-based inks; the lanterns moved constantly; the candles burned to nothingness. My web has faded with the sun and, depending on how it is hung, it always has the potential to be something else. I have used it in my current installation *Fluid Bodies* differently from the way I used it in my installation *Vein*, and I will change it again in the future. I enjoy allowing the materials and environment to have a say in the work, relinquishing the idea that the artist has real control of his or her media or environment.

The way I make things is extremely important and is also cyclical. I worked on the web for over a year. Constructing it was a repetitious process of dying string, tying it together, letting it fade and deteriorate, re-dyeing areas, adding to the web, pulling it apart and making holes, and tying the strings together again. I found this cyclical process very calming: whenever I felt anxious or obsessive, I would tie the string together to soothe myself, helping me to swing from sorrow or anxiety to peace or joy.

## **Chapter Five: The In-Corporate Body**

*So I will write my poem, but I will leave room for the world.  
I will write my poem tenderly and simply but  
I will leave room for the wind combing the grass,  
for the feather falling out of the grouse's fan-tail,  
and fluttering down, like a song.*

Mary Oliver, *Work*

The last day I was in Paris, I woke up very early in the morning as the sun was rising. I was a little delirious, feeling strange and a little lost at the end of the time I had spent studying art in the city. Something very spontaneous came over me that morning. I took an edition of etchings I had done during my stay, left my apartment, and walked down by the river, to all the spots where I spent a lot of time walking, sitting, and reflecting. I posted the prints in these locations – on old stone walls by the Seine, on poles and on buildings. This little spontaneous ritual was a sort of rite of passage for me. It reflected my need for closure, for commemoration of an end and of a new beginning. It reflected my growing disillusionment with the hierarchies of the western art world. And although it wasn't conscious at the time, it reflected my desire to free myself from these oppressions – the oppression created by the division between art and life, by the importance placed on traditional techniques and media, by the ideal of the precious art object, and by the structure of the gallery or museum as a sacred place to exhibit work.

Personally, I often find museum and gallery spaces intimidating, sterile and inaccessible, and feel disembodied in them. What the museum does to art, the medical system does to the body: it objectifies and observes the ‘subject’ from a sterile, emotionless and disembodied perspective. The western attempt to capture an unchanging ideal in the art object is reflected in the way that art is displayed on pedestals or walls. For me, this sense of ‘preciousness’ makes it difficult to access the work because it creates distance between me and the art, preventing me from fully experiencing or participating in the art or from feeling present in my body. When I lived in Paris, I had access to some of the most extensive museums in the world, and yet when I was in them I lost my energy and missed the natural world and the freedom, space and spontaneity I feel when I walk in the mountains or when I float in water.<sup>7</sup>

To feel embodied I need to feel a connection between myself and other things. When I am present in my body, I can achieve a more poignant visual experience because I relate more fully with the environment. I am interested in creating spaces in which people can be *in-corporated* – rediscover their inner physical vitality by feeling a relationship with their own bodies and surroundings. I want the viewer to be able to interact and participate in the environment, feel part of the space, and be present in his or her body. In my installation *Shedding*, I invited everyone to join me for a candle-lighting

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<sup>7</sup> See Norman Bryson’s article “The Logic of the Curatorial Gaze” in, *Still, The Museum*. Ed. Annette W. Balkena and Henk Slager (The Netherlands: The Still Foundation, 1997), 32. He maintains that we often experience a loss of the bodily in the museum, because the gallery “is postulated on the absence of the body”. He claims that it is a shadow of one’s actual body “that moves through space, as though being governed totally by aesthetic rules” and existing “within an aesthetic dimension that, in a fact, expunges out the real body”. What results is an “extreme violence perpetrated by modernist space upon the bodies of those who enter such spaces”; the viewer loses his or her sense of embodiment.

at the end of each day; the people present helped me to light the candles and then we would sit and experience the installation in darkness.

In my installation *Fluid Bodies*, I have hung the web at varying levels so that it has a relationship with the drawings and the viewer; in order to access the space, the viewer must interact with the web and find a path within it. The drawings on the wall have a pattern, but are hung in a sporadic and unpredictable manner. When I look at a forest or the ripples in water, I see patterns running through them; however, the way that nature grows and transforms is surprising and emerges and disappears in unpredictable ways. The viewer is challenged to pay attention to what is present as well as to what is absent. The mixed-media drawings act as a gate or a skin to the installation.

I am interested in creating installations because they narrow the gap between art and the viewer by incorporating the viewer in the space and tying him or her to the present. I had a certain vision when I started the project. The plan I had, however, didn't work in that particular space, and so I adjusted it accordingly. At first, I had the drawings on the wall hung in a row at eye level; I felt that it wasn't challenging or absorbing because it was far too predictable. The process of setting up the installation over three days in the museum was an extension of the process of making the work itself - the work changed and transformed in the new environment. Installation challenges the ideal of the unchanging art object because the experience of an installation is dependent on a particular moment in time, in a particular space.

## **Chapter Six: The Energy Body**

*Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou. Between Chuang Chou and a butterfly there must be some distinction!*

*Chuang Tzu*

I grew up in a mixed family of mixed faith, with several different traditions. My father's roots are Eastern European Jewish; my mother was raised in Quebec, with a Roman Catholic Francophone mother and an agnostic father who had emigrated from England. Neither of my parents felt a particular attachment to the faith they grew up with, and so the family celebrated the traditions and holidays of both Jewish and French Canadian Catholic culture for tradition's sake, with little emphasis on religious ideas. As I became an adult, although I felt enriched by these traditions and cultures, I didn't feel a deep spiritual connection with either of these religions in this form. Feeling a little lost in relation to my own identity and deeply interested in spiritual ideas, I began studying comparative religion at university, and became influenced by Buddhism, Taoism, and various mystical traditions.

The Buddhist idea of co-dependence has influenced my work. Hua-Yen Buddhism teaches that absolute reality and temporary phenomena are interfused; all phenomena interpenetrate each other. In the Garland Sutra there is a famous image of a

tree of jewels. Each jewel reflects every other one, and within that reflection there are infinite reflections; all reflect each other infinitely, making the tree a symbol of reality in which everything is interconnected. In my installation *Shedding*, the lanterns are layered with the image of an old woman and leaves; when lit, each panel reflects every other one. My web symbolizes the web of relationships and interconnections of the body, nature, and of all reality.

Taoism emphasizes the importance of the empty space - it is this 'nothingness' that gives things their use. Lao Tzu writes, "Knead clay in order to make a vessel. Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the vessel."<sup>8</sup> We tend to pay so much attention to what is present that we often forget what is absent. Part of what is present is what is absent; an object doesn't exist without the space around it, and this space is part of what it is. In my installation *Vein*, I incorporated drawings of vessels and of lungs to reflect the importance of this space: without the empty space in the bowl, it has no function; lungs need the space within them to breathe in air and give life to the body. The empty space in the drawings and in the web as well as in the installation as a whole is the space where breath flows.

Taoist texts refer to opposites to indicate that any term we use is specific and limiting. Opposites cannot exist without each other and are interdependent. The Tao's movement is described as 'reversal' or 'turning back', meaning that it causes everything to undergo a process of cyclic change. This quality of reversal manifests itself everywhere, such as in day and night, life and death, hot and cold, joy and sorrow. In this

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<sup>8</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*. Trans D.C. Lau (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 67.

sense there are no real opposites, because they rely on each other. What is weak becomes strong. When this reaches its limit, the opposite process occurs; this is an endless cycle of change. My work is also about cycles and change and the interdependence of things; it is both fragile and strong, peaceful and disturbing; it is about life and death, presence and absence. My deliberate use of ‘opposites’ reflects the essential illusion and interpenetration of all dualities.

Tao’s characteristics are spontaneity and change. Taoism views the natural world and Tao as one. It teaches that one should work with Tao and the natural order of things without resistance through non-action, meaning letting oneself be carried by Tao naturally without effort while allowing feelings, instincts, and imagination to have free exercise. One should not put in too much effort looking for results, but let things proceed naturally according to the Tao; one must simply be. When I work, I try to forget about myself and goals and act spontaneously and instinctively; I find when I’m completely peaceful and relaxed, some form of energy is able to carry me and I feel a sense of unity and wholeness. At these times, I find that my expression comes most naturally, and feel as if the work I created didn’t come from me.

The goal of mysticism is union with the divine or sacred; it is the feeling and knowledge that everything is interconnected. Rumi, a famous Sufi poet, describes the mystic experience in his poem *Suddenly A Moon Appeared*:

Suddenly, in the sky at dawn, a moon appeared,  
 Descended from the sky,  
 Turned its burning gaze on me,  
 Like a hawk during the hunt seizing a bird,  
 Grabbed me and flew with me high into heaven.  
 When I looked at myself, I could not see myself

For in this moon, my body, by grace, had become soul.  
 And when I traveled in this soul, I saw nothing but moon,  
 Until the mystery of eternal theophany lay open to me.  
 All the nine heavenly spheres were drowned in this moon  
 The skiff of my being drowned, dissolved, entirely, in that Sea.<sup>9</sup>

I've been attracted to mystic writings because they often involve words and images that I've felt a lot in my life - a desire to dissolve, transform, to be absorbed. The mystic experience is often described as a borderless state of being in love. Being in love, the experience of mysticism, and the creative process are very similar experiences: they all involve a feeling of union or a desire to merge with something else, a desire to feel more whole.

Bruno Borchert, in his book *Mysticism*, compares the experience of the artist and the mystic; they both have the sense that something is not quite right in the social order, and that this vision "keeps vanishing below the threshold of consciousness."<sup>10</sup> I certainly feel that my drive to make things has partly sprung from this feeling of dissatisfaction and inability to accept all the social values and structures offered to me. My creative exploration is a search for alternative possibilities and ways of seeing; it wells up spontaneously within me, and yet always threatens disappearance. I feel the need to express these images and ideas immediately, or else they will dissolve into nothingness.

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Harvey, ed. *The Essential Mystics* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1996), 156.

<sup>10</sup> Bruno Borchert, *Mysticism: Its History and Challenge* (Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1994), 17.

## Chapter Seven: Our Common Body

*Like you I  
love love, life, the sweet smell  
of things, the sky-blue  
landscape of January days*

*And my blood boils up  
and I laugh through eyes  
that have known the buds of tears*

*I believe the world is beautiful  
and that poetry, like bread, is for everyone*

*And that my veins don't end in me  
but in the unanimous blood  
of those who struggle for life,  
love,  
little things,  
landscape and bread,  
the poetry of everyone.*

Roque Dalton, *Like You*

Art is an expression of living and being; it springs up in all of us. Although I am affected by and admire many artists, I cannot say that any one artist has had a direct and conscious influence on me. The historical tradition of western art classifies and categorizes art and artists, creating a linear progression of work and influences. But doesn't creativity and art well up everywhere in the world? Aren't the specifics of art history absorbed by this instinctual drive to create amongst all of us? We all drink from the same creative ocean; we take from this source and give back to it. My creativity springs from being and interaction with the world, from this web of life and creation, not

from a particular artist or artistic movement. When I develop relationships and connect with the world, when I tap into this source, I am naturally creative and this 'art' comes from something greater than the individual ego. I enjoy doing collaborative work that assimilates many different forms of art because I feel an intense connection with other creative outlets such as poetry, music, theatre, and dance. As visual artists, we tend to focus on influences from fine art, but I feel deeply affected by *all* art forms. We take from the world, express this experience and give back through creativity.

My relationship with the world and its creation have informed me more than artists or movements; these experiences have ranged from listening to a piece of music, reading a poem or dancing, to sitting with a close friend or walking in the mountains. The greatest effect on me has been the creativity that springs from relationships with other people and with nature. Walking in the mountains, sitting under a tree, swimming in the sea, being enveloped by the great sky, and being with the people whom I love, have had the most significant influence on my work.

## Conclusion

*somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond  
any experience, your eyes have their silence:  
in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,  
or which i cannot touch because they are too near*

e.e. cummings

For me, the act of making things is emotional, intuitive and personal and springs from my visceral interaction with the world. The source of my creativity is my pain and sadness; creative expression is a cathartic process that helps me to deal with this pain and transform it into something positive. I express the pain I experience from living, seeing, touching, feeling, the pain of connecting with the sadness in the world, the pain I take in and hold in my body, the pain that lurks in my muscles and hands and wells up in my eyes. The expression of pain and sadness is also that of joy and beauty, because I can only experience sadness when I also see the beauty and joy in things; one cannot exist without the other. Sadness is everywhere and is part of the beauty of the world. In Japanese, the word 'aware' means 'the sadness of things'.<sup>11</sup> Making marks helps me to let go of this sadness and express this awareness of the world; in this expression healing and catharsis can take place.

The creative process is like making love or the mystical experience: I am penetrated, absorbed, I feel more whole. When I swim, make love, draw, dance, practice

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<sup>11</sup> Will Ferguson, *Generica* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2001), 10.

yoga, or make something, I am celebrating love and life and death; all these experiences are about relationships, about the wholeness of things. This connection with the world, with all its beauty and its sadness, allows me to express love and creativity.

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