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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The College of Art and Design

School for American Crafts

In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Metals and Jewelry Design

Wrought

By

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ABSTRACT

This body of work was my investigation into why I have been so fascinated with armor and protection. I wanted to go beyond the desire for physical protection and discover why I felt fixated upon it. This led me to look at the strength one finds when acknowledging the underlying vulnerability rather than trying to hide it and seeing the positive outcomes that can result from times of struggle.

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INTRODUCTION

For many years my practice has revolved around the history and development of armor, themes that have been present in my work both intentionally and subconsciously. Looking at my practice and portfolio over the last few years allowed me to discern this pattern and lead me to question why it was so prevalent, even when I had not consciously focused upon these concepts. I have long been fascinated by the negative connotations of armor; how it requires maintenance, is demanding to wear and often limits movement and endurance. It reduces sensation to external stimuli and restricts vision. The positive aspects of wearing armor are a sense of invulnerability and power, and rather than being claustrophobic, it can feel comforting to be surrounded by a second skin, stronger than one's own.

With this understanding of the direction my art had taken me so far, I wanted to discover why I was so interested in outcomes of protection and why I was making work that was straightforward, functional, and historically inspired. Following the thread of armor-themed work, I looked at the idea of self-protection and what I needed in order to feel secure. Considering the positive benefits of wearing armor lead me to look at my chronic struggle with Lyme Disease, as it has caused symptoms that are directly ameliorated by feeling safe (anxiety), functional (overwhelming physical pain and fatigue), and concealed from view (my belief that people shouldn't see my weakness). I have struggled with Lyme for over two decades, and have made tremendous progress over that time, but I am not fully healthy yet. However, I can see many positive outcomes from my long-term illness that I would not have profited from had I not gotten sick. Therefore, my thesis work came to be focused upon the idea of acknowledging the

need to feel protected, but looking past it to discern the underlying causes and addressing that vulnerability to resolve the uncertainty and fear.

From the start, I wanted this body of work to be about my struggle, but also to create a space for others to talk about theirs through my acknowledgement and ownership. This acknowledgement is both of how far I have come and of how vulnerable talking about my condition makes me. Through being open about my sickness, it can give license to others to open up about their difficulties. This is in contrast with humanity's history of the fittest surviving and the weak being preyed upon, which does not foment an environment to discuss or reveal one's sickness. This can be seen in the wealth of advertising that promotes youth, beauty, and health, and the temporary pharmaceutical fixes for any ailments that allow one to not have to show or discuss the shortcomings of their body. My aim thus became to make small, intimate pieces that invited physical interaction and promoted one on one or small group discussion in a non-pressuring way. I decided to not make large scale pieces as I felt they would be dominating and have a very different kind of power to the small, seemingly delicate conversation pieces I envisioned. I wanted to make these pieces using a simple, repetitive process; to highlight the chronic nature of my illness, but also to recognize the incredible patience I have nurtured and grown over the years. With Lyme, as with many chronic and debilitating illnesses, you often have repetitively similar days - good and bad - going through similar motions. Habits and routines that contribute to better health and more reliable energy levels can unfortunately reinforce this sensation of time starting to lose its meaning when every day is the same, until one loses perspective of time. Making art with repetitive motions is my positive choice. I can do it well because of being sick for so long, which I see as turning my weakness into a strength. My

hope is that this then becomes an inspiration for others to see that progress and growth can be possible through the accumulation of small victories, however insignificant they may seem.

Another important aspect was the material choice. I wanted to move away from heavy and protective towards color and lightness to make it clear that these pieces are not protective through resistance, but through acceptance and the freedom and peace that can bring. Something important at this stage was that while what I made may seem vulnerable, far from being fragile, they have intrinsic strength. An obvious choice for my goals was to use the process of needle felting. Not only is it light, strong, and colorful, but the repetitively simple and the traditional nature of the material appealed to me greatly. One pushes a lightly barbed needle through the layers of carded wool to interlock and compact the fibers, creating a cohesive material that is flexible, strong, and can be any shape, size or color required.

This process also references the aggregative nature of working through difficult times as I didn't want them to look effortless, instead seeking 'effortful' pieces. When a thing is wrought into something new, it becomes forever changed. I wanted the process to show the textural evidence of this making and suggest the change that the piece has gone through, just as I have. Another important aspect was the fact that I had not worked in felt before, and color has been conspicuously absent from my practice thus far. Pursuing both a new medium and incorporating color reinforced my aim of getting out of my comfort zone and dealing with the difficult questions surrounding my illness. This meant that I was not relying on previous skill sets that would have lead me into familiar ways of working and thinking, instead breaking new ground of physical processes that promulgated openness in my conceptual thinking.

While the needle felting itself is surprisingly strong, I wanted to give greater rigidity to some of the pieces by incorporating a substructure framework of welded rods. This was to give

the impression that the pieces, though fragile looking, still had underlying layers and reserves of strength. The forms I wanted to create were sculptural, organic, suggestive of movement, and referenced the body without directly reproducing it, resulting in forms that are familiar without being specifically recognizable. Alongside this was the theme of unintended or unwanted departure from one's expected path. Had I not gotten sick, I may well have never started making art, would not be writing this paper, may never have come to the United States, and wouldn't have met and married my wife. I choose to see the benefits that Lyme has brought me, instead of lamenting opportunities missed and paths not trodden. I now wish to focus on where I am, not where I could have been. My aim was to make pieces that had the sense of not fitting neatly in the frame, nor aligning with expectations, but that have a beauty and presence because of the very fact that they are not controlled and borne of expected outcomes.



'Unplanned Development'

Wool Felt, Plastic, Stainless Steel, Cotton Thread

This theme of non-conformation can most clearly be seen in '*Growth I*'. The felt is globular in form, clustered in small groups that are reminiscent of fungus, but the bright purple color keeps the viewer from directly recognizing it as such. I created a distinctive 3D framework

from several found plastic objects - the ends of a thread spool and a striker flint frame – stitching them together with white thread, which created obvious negative spaces. I then felted onto this structure, arranging the ‘growths’ so that they are not aligned neatly with the holes and apertures, instead appearing to have forged their own independent path. The length of chain was added to finish the composition. I wanted to incorporate movement, strength, and history and to me, chain and chain making represents this.

The use of found objects and recycled materials was my allusion to the limited options available to us when we are sick. Incorporating them into pieces that acknowledge struggle seemed a natural choice. When our options are limited, our day becomes precious if we focus on what matters and make the best of things, rather than what we feel pressured to do, or guilty that we are not well.

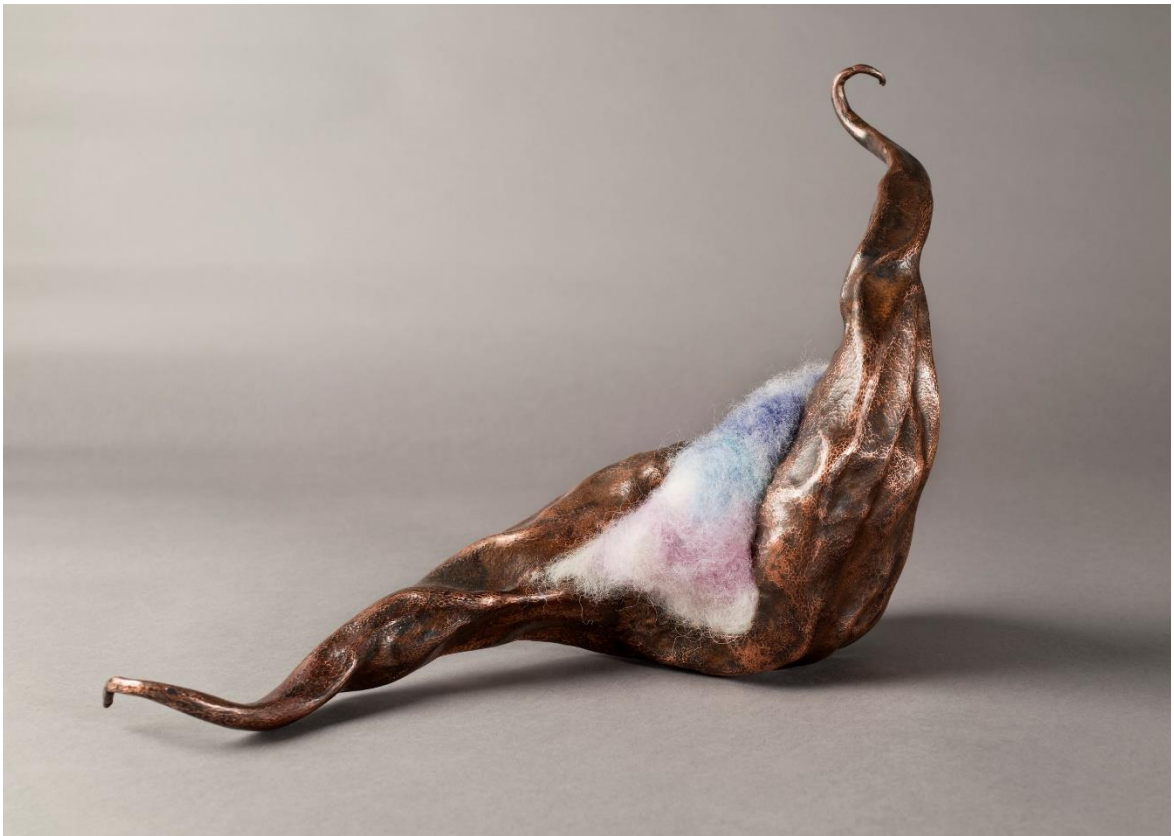
The sculptural and textural nature of this body of work is intended to invite tactile and haptic interaction from the viewer, but it also references my love of making, and the overriding sensation of physical experience. I find it hard to concentrate when in pain, and similarly distracting when experiencing pleasure – both extremes cause a certain circumvention of the higher brain functions, resulting in a more primal reaction. Just as a simple, repetitive physical task can be relaxing or meditative, I find the direct physical interaction with art to be an engaging experience that can subvert one’s analytical or cognitive appraisal. This lead me to try to create work that invites interaction on this physical level, rather than as an intellectual exercise.



'Rupture 2'
Wool Felt, Welding Rods

This theme was central to my thinking as I made *'Rupture 2'*, seeking to arrange the piece so that it would be difficult to process from a single angle, requiring the viewer to pick it up and to rotate and manipulate it to explore all angles. The physical interaction would also inform the viewer regarding the rigid tension and substructure of the enclosing beige versus the soft flexibility and concealed strength that the dusky pink 'tentacles' exhibit. I wanted this piece

to suggest breaking out and escaping, even though what is coming out is not immediately recognizable and is neither positive nor negative. I made this piece using a TIG welder to connect welding rods for the substructure, shaping them with round nosed pliers to create the form, and then needle felting the color over the top of this metal framework. The tips of the appendages were felted from the inside, driving the fibers outward to create a softer, contrasting texture.



'Transition'
Copper, Wool Felt

This piece was my effort to reconcile my passion for raising and the desire to hammer something, which felt at the time to be a reassertion of masculinity; and the compulsion to work in such a yielding and soft material that has an undeniable strength.

I began with a large oval of 16g copper sheet, approximately 18 inches by ten inches, and immediately started to form it through the process of raising – repeatedly striking the metal with a steel raising hammer against a steel forming stake. This compresses the metal sheet into itself, creating a smooth transition to a dished form without creasing or folding the plane of the metal sheet. I repeated this process multiple times, thinning the metal and bringing the edges of the original oval together at the ends, forming the tentacular protrusions. I then used a TIG welder to fuse the seam, creating a closed form. Next, I began to form and texture the metal surface to give it depth and texture, using a narrow steel stake inside the closed form and striking it with a small embossing hammer to create dense patterns of hammer strike marks. Once I was happy with the result, I used liver of Sulphur to blacken the exterior surface with oxidization and then employed fine emery paper to clean the raised ridges between the hammer strike marks. This defined the texture and gives the piece a shimmering finish.

The idea of outgrowing one's security and protective habits was forefront in my mind, and the materials neatly fit this theme. Once one has established a hard shell, they become unable to move beyond that, and the emotional density of it may weigh them down – therefore, I seek to break free, shedding the hard and rigid confines of harsh masculinity, and embrace the softer, what is perceived as feminine side of gentle color and yielding texture. A man can absolutely be both of these things, as I try to be, but there is not the support structure from other men to facilitate this. The dense texture on the raised vessel alludes to the work that goes into protecting ourselves, how we spend so much time and effort ensuring that we are safe, and even though it can be valuable, it can still become detrimental.

CONCLUSION

My perception is that the functional and direct art focused upon armor and tools that I had made previously, was my effort to control and rationalize my illness and struggle. This body of work is different in the regard that it is acknowledging and accepting the patience, resilience, and empathy I have gained, rather than obscuring, justifying, or fantasizing about what I can do and the ways in which I am stronger than others. However, I am aware that it is still a method to control and rationalize.

The small size creates a non-pressuring environment for the viewer and makes interaction easier. It is not a towering sculpture that inspires awe or reinforces the ego of the maker. These are quiet and unassuming pieces that invite interaction without demanding it. There was a revelation for me when I began to see these pieces as a product of struggle that brought about 'retro-nourishment' (Leonard Urso, 2018). It is not necessary for my audience to have a complete understanding of these pieces, as long as they perceive the evidence of passing through struggle. There is a universal aspect to suffering and struggle, irrespective of intensity, for we have all been there at some point. Therefore, this work is an attempt at unifying us through opening dialogue about this shared experience. We often do not share it, instead concealing our struggle, denying sickness, proving how tough we are, not wanting to elicit pity from others. This refusal to show vulnerability not only isolates us and prevents others from helping, it also suggests to others that they are not allowed to show their pain.

Looking at these pieces now and after talking with others regarding their reactions to my work, I see that they have gone beyond my intended focus of personal struggle through sickness. Within them, I now see questions regarding gender, space and place, and situation. Focusing upon my personal struggle was essential for creating this body of work. Now that it is done, I see

that it could be relatable to others in different ways. The idea of rebirth or reinvention of oneself is prevalent in this work and one that could resonate with others in regards to their struggle, irrespective of how closely to mine their experience has been. It is this element above all others that makes me believe that this work is successful, for I sought to open a dialogue with others about their struggle, creating a space that we can all make use of to be honest and vulnerable with each other.

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