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Unforeseen Connections

by

Miranda Mattson

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Metals and Jewelry Design

School/Department for American Craft

College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

May 14, 2021



College of
Art and Design

Thesis Approval

Unforeseen Connections

Thesis Title

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of **Master of Fine Arts**

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Abstract

Using floriography within my own work, I captured the essence of human emotion and used its familiarity to bring mental health issues to the foreground of conversation. The parallels of hidden emotion and social discordance between the Victorian era and the 21st Century inspired my introspective research into "invisible" illnesses: health issues that affect both the mind and the body, respectively. Utilizing knowledge in mixed media, as well as traditional metalsmithing techniques, these ideas manifested into a series of wearable art and sculpture with the intention of prompting in-depth discussions on mental health stigmas. Without compromising the ambiguity of floriography, I have fabricated a collection of semi-abstract flower forms to provide a tangible representation of different states of mental health.

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Terms	5
Methodology	5
Inspirations	6
Body of Work	9
Conclusion	15
Images	17
Work Cited	23

Introduction

During the Victorian era (circa 1837-1901), floriography gained prominence as a secret, nonverbal mode of communication where flowers characterized different emotional responses. Although the trend developed over thousands of years based on the traditions of each country, it was the British subset that engrained itself into American culture, due to its mass publishing and distribution of flower dictionaries. This specific time period saw public displays of emotion as improper, or lacking manners (Roux IX). Thus, flowers and other plants morphed into important tools for a sub-culture of self expression. Today much of the symbolism remains, albeit obscurely hidden, deeply within the history of our traditions.

My research involved studies on human behavior, scientific interactions between the mind and body, and the historical contexts of floriography in the United States. Because of the suppression of sentimentality in both Victorian and modern-day contexts, flowers became important instruments in embodying the taboo elements of personal expression. This exploration resulted in the fabrication of both sculpture and wearable art forms; each representing a specific state of human emotion. The flora materialized through the use of traditional metal forming techniques, as well as fibers and other mixed media. Using the pre-established ambiguity of floriography, I crafted tangible representations of feelings within my compositions to isolate individual states of human emotion.

The philosopher Baba Ram Das spoke on the connection between nature and human consciousness in this sense:

“When you go out into the woods, and you look at the trees, you see all these different trees. And some of them are bent, and some of them are straight, ... and some of them are whatever. ... You see why it is the way it is. ... And you don't get all emotional about it. You just allow it. You appreciate the tree. The minute you get near humans, you lose all that. And you are constantly saying 'You are too this, or I am too this.' That judgment mind comes in. And so I practice turning people into trees. Which means appreciating them just the way they are.” (Quotable Quote)

Throughout my studies, I practiced turning people into flowers. Flowers are deeply symbolic in cultures around the world with differences in meaning, structure, and cultivation; some may be missing petals, others lack nutrients, a few bear the battle wounds of pests... And people, I think, share many similarities with that. However, unlike people, flowers embody those imperfections in that each one is as they appear to the naked eye, with every dead leaf and ripped petal on display. Flowers do not concern themselves with developing into the perfect specimen of their respective species. Flowers are flowers, and humans are only human. Each one has been shaped by their experiences and can be very different from one another; yet we find the commonality in being part of a group.

Because mental health involves the complex intertwining systems of psychology, social well-being, and emotion, the pressure to hide these imperfections from the public eye seems to stunt an individual's personal growth. Numerous personal conversations and interactions have yielded the conclusion that speaking up about emotional distress has assisted in lightening the stress. It arouses feelings of empathy and compassion in others, aiding the healing process. Whether crying through a loss, or venting out

frustrations, knowing you are not alone is a genuine comfort for most people. The level of relatability in interpersonal interactions has been directly correlated to the improvement of the individual via multiple studies ("The Importance of Speaking Up"). Thus, these relationships strengthen when people embrace inherent vulnerability.

Terms

Floriography- A secret language developed during the Victorian Era using the ancient cultural symbolisms of flowers (Roux IX)

Mental Health- the combined aspects of emotional, psychological, and social well-being within an individual that affect decision making, relationships, and the ability to handle stress ("What Is Mental Health?").

Methodology

In my studio practice, the process of art fabrication is similar to the process of building a relationship. Sometimes there are rough patches, other times it all clicks into place, and occasionally the whole thing gets scrapped; but in the long-run, the product either turns into something truly special or I have learned a little more about myself. It is a sporadic, yet controlled chaos that I live for, and the boredom in-between is the sweet spot of new discovery and self-generated inquiry. Much like connecting with people, this development of art with long-established techniques requires time, hard work, and dedication to achieve the best results.

Having had a transition between long hours of active progress and short periods of self-reflection, I achieved a deeper level of conceptual thinking. The connections between my artistic style and influences became more readily apparent after stepping back long enough to see the big picture and allowing my mind to ponder recent artistic

decisions. Such realizations guided my methods of research and established what questions needed to be asked.

Mixing metal and fibers into each of my pieces projected a personal struggle in building strength in adversity, while also maintaining some level of intimacy with the viewer; a balancing act of being approachable, yet protective of any insecurities. I have most often associated fiber arts, whether speaking on yarn, threads, paper, or fabric, to the concept of *hygge* (hōögə): a danish term used to describe a moment of comfort, coziness, and contentment in daily life. Metalwork, however, has been a stark contrast in regards to its somewhat unyielding surfaces. A concrete decisiveness and forceful hand is needed to manipulate the material. There is little room for mistakes, and ones that do occur can ruin the entire piece; whereas the fiber materials give in easily with minimal risk of failure. The contrast in both my choice of materials and techniques stemmed from a challenging personal struggle to willingly accept vulnerability as an essential step in bonding with others.

Inspirations

A primary influence on this body of work is the history of floriography and its applications in the Victorian era. The use of a "secret" language, widely available to the public, embodied my ideas of what it meant to be hidden in plain sight. There was a choice for the giver to express their true feelings, and a choice for the recipient to understand and acknowledge those feelings. In representing mental health with this same approach to language, I provided the audience with a choice to understand the emotions behind the work. The symbolic meaning of each flower is easily accessible,

yet not straightforward in its physical form. The viewer must make an effort to meet the artist halfway in order to truly appreciate the imagery.

The use of music in my studio provided a similar influence. Musicians often write with a poetic and somewhat cryptic language to express emotion, where the meaning behind each verse is a single internet search away. But most listeners enjoy the song alone, or even assign their own meaning to it. This is yet another example of hiding symbolism in plain sight.

But music also provided a space to develop a meditative focus on the emotions worked into each piece. The playlist changed with the art, and vice versa; they reacted to each other to create a unique sensory experience during the fabrication process. With music, I either guided my mood in the direction I needed or I let it decide where the work day went.

A conceptual influence on this exhibition, Carol Milne has impacted my work in multifaceted ways. Her fabrication processes for casting in glass inspired my own approach to metal casting. Milne and I also share a passion for alternative fibers. The sculptures she casts are meticulously woven knit patterns, with actual knitting needles carefully placed within the glass loops. She sees the intertwined strands of knitwear as a bond between people; the singular threads being weak until interlaced to form a powerful composition (Milne). The connection to social structures in her art is not unlike my work using fibers to convey a sense of comfort in being with other people. The strength is reliant on the functioning of the whole. Her work blends fine art with craft in the same captivating way I strived for in my artistic practice.

Branching off of floriography, the extensive study of plants innately involved an exploration of gardening, a personal passion inspired by both Monet and Van Gogh. The relationship developed between the gardener and their plants is an intimate and tedious one; so much so, that even the slightest changes in appearance become highly noticeable to the grower. Claude Monet, known for his beautiful depictions of water lilies, cultivated his flowers before painting them (Adler). And Vincent Van Gogh, while undergoing mental health treatments in a clinic, spent much of his time painting still-lives based on the garden outside his window. His famous sunflowers symbolized the gratitude he had for his family and friends during recovery ("Van Gogh's Sunflowers"). Assistants to the art of nature, gardeners were responsible for the tall tales and mysterious origins of names, meanings, and uses for various plants. The culmination of which created the basis of flower languages (Dietz 6-7). Through my studies, I achieved a heightened level of accuracy within my depictions, extending to the point where the material itself, along with the occasional alterations in size, became the only difference between abstraction and a true-to-life rendering.

Throughout my thesis research, I delved into the relationship between the mind and the body; specifically in the mind's ability to alter emotions and perceptions, causing a range of physical responses. For example, the unconscious choice of posture an individual makes relates back to not only their current state of mind, but also how they perceive those around them. This unspoken understanding of body language innately affects social structures, which led me to examine forms of meditation, behavioral therapy, and, surprisingly, color theory.

The prominence of specific colors in the environment can subject people to certain moods, or trigger biological reactions like hunger (Taylor). In exaggerating the abundance of these colors, I guided the audience toward the specific states of emotion I wanted them to feel for each piece. This was mostly used as a contextual hint as to the meaning behind the works on display.

Body of Work

Whoops-a-Daisy

Whoops-a-daisy commonly refers to the acknowledgement of a mistake. Its origins trace back to the association the daisy has with innocence, motherhood, and new beginnings. Traditionally the phrase, "ups-a-daisy", from which the former is derived, motivated children to stand back up after taking a fall. In Norse mythology, daisies are the flowers of Freya, the goddess of love and fertility, making them a common gift for new mothers. And the term, "fresh as a daisy", refers to how the flower closes its petals at night, then reopens in the morning, ready to begin a new day (Fresh). The evolution of personal resilience embodied in these expressions provided a foundation for the concepts of this necklace.

The pendant, materialized from brass and nickel sheet metal, represents an unyielding strength and durability in the struggle of prioritizing the care of others over oneself. I viewed each petal as a pivotal moment, an interaction with someone and the part of myself that I gifted to them. Not tangible to the naked eye, but felt deeply in the heart, the gifts of trust, love, care, hope, and time are ones that are not easy to replace. Reacting to the continuous pressure on the mind to stay strong in negative interactions,

the body itself begins to break down and deteriorate; because of this, cracks and bruising become more apparent on the daisy's surface as one stops to read the words on each petal.

Contrastly, a woven rope of cotton threads and steel wire wrap the neck in a comforting embrace, allowing the pendant to be cradled in the center of the chest. It represents the good intentions behind each course of action and the supportive role a person plays when volunteering their services. The natural green tones reference a healthy and thriving stem, the supportive base of most flowers. A strand of steel wire woven into the fibers acts as the "silver lining" of hope to be found in times of hardship.

Body Scanning

To the Victorians, a columbine had drastically different meanings based on its color; blue for foolishness, purple for resolution, and red and yellow for anxiousness and trembling (Boeckmann). Using basic color theory, my rendition of this flower amplifies its natural scheme and carries it into the wearable components. Red, a color known for drawing attention, often symbolizes anger and intense passion ("Red"); while yellow activates memory as well as a feeling of warmth and belonging. Yet an excess of this color has been shown to lead to feelings of isolation, loss of focus, and a tendency to be over-critical of others ("Yellow").

I crafted the wearable piece based on emotions of fear, anxiousness, stress, and worry. The versatility involved in its construction relates to the understanding of how emotions manifest into biological responses. Symptoms such as tension headaches, shaking hands, and stomach churning are a few (Nummenmaa). The inspiration for

such an adornment comes from the meditation technique of directing one's concentration to discomfort felt in various parts of the body. Breathing with a focused attention on the areas of uneasiness carries with it the possibility to trigger a process of healing for the mind, body, and soul.

I invited the viewers, through miniature versions of this work, to wear a flower in a place they felt appropriately reflected their relationship with the aforementioned emotions. The intention behind their placement replicated a moment of focused meditation, while the meaning is shared with more exclusivity.

Your Laughter Still Echoes

This artwork is a highly personal rendition of the bouquets Victorians used to convey secret messages (Roux IX-X). Using the meanings of various flowers, I created a soft sculpture to represent the grief one feels over words left unsaid when loved ones pass on.

The focal piece, a larkspur flower, carries the meaning of lightness and levity; the ability to bring humor into difficult situations (Dietz 64). Surrounding are carnations, a classic symbol of love and appreciation. The pink ones, in floriography, mean "I will remember you," and are gifted to close friends or relatives to show how much their presence is missed (Dietz 75). Beautifully accenting are the edelweiss, a study flower that grows in the Swiss Alps. These are symbolic of bravery and dedication, characterising the men who scaled the mountainsides, roughly five to ten thousand feet above sea level to bring one home for their sweethearts ("Edelweiss Flower").

A black ribbon wraps around the vase as a hint to the occasion it is intended to be gifted to, in mourning a loss. The vase itself, gilded in copper ornamentation, is based on one of the many styles of glassware to emerge during the early nineteenth century, in both Europe and the United States (Manley 21). The clear crystal embodies a visual lightness in its transparency and also acts as a window into the construction of the intertwining stems. Each one, composed of either coated steel or aluminum wire, is meticulously braided by hand to embody the level of familiarity a relationship requires to evoke a feeling of loss. The stem of any plant provides the structural foundation needed for the flowers to grow, similar to the cultivation of a relationship through consistent meaningful interaction.

The Victorians embraced floriography to express unspoken feelings between individuals that did not follow the elite etiquette set forth in their social hierarchy (Dietz 6-7). In following these traditions, my bouquet represents the regret of not telling someone their importance in your life. It is capturing the healing beauty of the grieving process and preparing the heart to move forward, having learned from past mistakes. Although intended for a specific individual in my past, it serves as a permanent reminder for all to live a life without regrets.

Inevitability (Lily of the Valley)

The Lily of the Valley, or May Lily as it is sometimes called, has always had a positive connotation, but in reality it is highly poisonous. This flower symbolically denotes a "return to happiness" and is often featured in custom bouquets and jewelry for special occasions. Every part of the plant can cause cardiac arrest when ingested,

and in those who are more susceptible, simply touching the plant can result in a rash ("The Poisoned Garden").

After researching the botanical uses and symbolism of the lily of the valley, I created a sculptural piece based on the notion of fleeting happiness. The transitions in the petals and leaves equate to a motion through time, where what once provided joy no longer does. The changing of both components represents the choice to move forward, leaving the older parts of oneself behind to embrace the new and often better versions, as scary as that may seem. However, the frequency of changes can warp one's sense of self, making it a double-edged sword. This contradiction serves to embody the duality of seeking happiness, and paying the cost of achieving it.

The stem, a central part of the May Lily, provides a grounding stability amidst the chaos; the patterned wrapping of the stem is designed to mimic the way human beings rely on the straightening of their spines to achieve a sense of balance in meditation and yoga. And the scent of green florals captures the feeling of spring and new beginnings. Lily of the Valley is well known for its intoxicating aroma, which is unable to be processed into any type of oil ("The Poisoned Garden"). The closest comparison I found in my explorations was bitter orange blossom, an equally pungent and springtime-y flower, which I then used on lava beads to retain the fragrance for several days at a time.

Sense and Sensitivities (Red and White Carnations)

Carnations are the second most popular flower on the global market after roses, and are one of the few available year-round. From high school Valentine's to Mother's

day bouquets, this flower permeated cultures for centuries (Kirchhoff). One such tradition involves academic testing at Oxford University. For each exam, students wear a carnation for good luck; white for the first, pink for the interim, and a red for the finale ("Oxford University Exam Traditions"). Red carnations traditionally stand for admiration, deep love, and devotion, and the white are pure love and good luck (Dietz 75).

The miniature bouquets like those I have constructed, are specifically made as adornments for the body. In the late eighteen-hundreds, socialites throughout Britain and the United States would wear smaller floral arrangements, called nosegays or tussie-mussies, tucked into their articles of clothing. Dress ribbons, suit lapels, hair and hat accessories, and even a singular stem through a buttonhole provided a means to express personal feelings. The discreet nature of nosegays also allowed for a heightened level of sensibility to be achieved amongst the social classes ("Victorian Florals").

Today these customs live on almost exclusively in ceremonial arrangements, accenting outfits for proms and weddings alike (FloraQueen). When arranging my nosegays, I encapsulated those moments of love and devotion; the haloing, cloud-nine, warm and fuzzy emotions of two individuals that can be felt in the soft glow of my incorporated LEDs. Paired with the carnations are eucalyptus leaves for protection and removal of negative energies, and baby's breath for everlasting devotion, sincerity, and trust (Roux 64; Dietz 85,101; CraftwayFloral). I wrapped each bouquet in floral tape and placed them in cloth pockets to indicate their wearability within the gallery space.

Such is Life (Yellow Carnations)

Yellow carnations signify feelings of rejection, disappointment, and disdain: a lack of respect towards or received from others. These flowers are either gifted to send a strong message or to ask for forgiveness from the recipient (Forney; "Carnation Flower"). Discerning the intended message relies on what, if anything, the flower is paired with.

Crafted to represent past mistakes and negative criticisms, the carnations sprout off of a vine-like chain and wrap around the body. Chains, especially in my older works, represent a bond with people, in both negative and positive contexts. The mixture of copper wire within the petals themselves is a phase where wilting transitions into rust with age. A lengthy amount of time is dedicated to replaying disruptive memories, fueling hurtful commentary, and developing a cycle of self-deprecation instead of carefully sorting out the useful feedback and letting go of the rest. The choice to wear such a bulky and visually disruptive adornment is a choice to continue to carry the weight of the past on one's shoulders instead of relinquishing it in anticipation of a brighter future.

Conclusion

In researching the suppression of emotions, I discovered feelings had actually been hidden away in various aspects of life, including music, historic traditions, and physical aches and pains. A sole pervasiveness in floral symbolism across centuries of human existence acknowledged how connected people truly have been in their shared feelings of emotional inadequacy. By understanding the imperfection in the human condition, I developed my own interpretation, or hidden language, to bring recognition to the emotional complexity of socializing. The original intention had been to assist in the

strengthening of bonds between individual people. However, my art progressed in a slightly altered direction by also providing a space to process intense states of feeling.

Allowing a breathing room to focus on a singular moment, the act of being present with the work allowed a calmness in the mind where other obligations could fade out of conscious memory. One had the ability take a step back, and contemplate the feeling as a transitory state of mind rather than a personality trait. The success of my thesis, therefore, established itself not only in the completion of physical renderings, but also in the experiences each one could provide the viewer.

Whoops-a-Daisy



Body Scanning



Your Laughter Still Echoes



Inevitability



Sense and Sensitivities



Such Is Life



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