

IN HER NATURE

By

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Rachel Scribner

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Abstract

The following is a written thesis of the conceptual background and visual expression of Rachel Scribner's MFA thesis exhibition, installed at the University of Kansas Art and Design Gallery February 23-28, 2014. The exhibition, titled *In Her Nature*, includes nine oil paintings displayed on the walls of the gallery. The paintings are based on structures existing in nature, but suggest an interior landscape and personal expression. Ranging in size and orientation, the paintings compromise an investigation of space, relationship to the natural world and feminine legacy.

IN HER NATURE

I breathe a sigh of relief. Decorated by a transient altar I have constructed using a collection of objects and mementos on my studio desk. I keep these articles as reminders of my visual tapestry: draped lace, collected rocks and shells, jewelry, thistle. I study the objects' delicate and patterned structures, mysterious cavities, and repetitious echoes of form. Drawing loose, vague images in my sketchbook, accompanied by phrases, descriptions, and lists, I experience the germination of my thoughts. I am comforted by their natural presence. These specifically chosen pieces of the physical world are constant companions.

Most precious of the objects is an ivory cluster like a pile of fallen branches: pieces of a broken bar of lavender soap that has been with me in all of my studios. I carefully pick up a shard of the soap and take in the scent, infused with memories of a period in my life that revolved around my relationship with a one person, my grandmother. I place the fragment back on the desk with the rest and walk across the room to paint.

My studio swells with paintings stacked against the walls, surrounding me as a garden of painted thoughts. At first, my paintings resemble nothing but a cacophony of marks. I turn the canvas one way for a session of painting, and then another day rotate the painting and continue to paint. During different stages, the painting will begin to resemble one form, and then morph into another. The structure of the paintings is built upon a merging of memory and reality. Creating the paintings is an act of faith and intuition. There is no pattern to follow, no instructions that lead me to a desired result. I dig through the garden of marks, planting and weeding, watching the life grow. My hands ask the image to emerge, coursing the world into being.

I leave and carry the memory of the image with me home, on a walk past woods and gardens while I stare at the complexity of tree branches and nests. My mind wanders and remembers treasured parcels of time and memory: girlhood, milestones, upsets, heartaches, strange and mysterious images burned into my subconscious.

Once my grandmother brought out an aged cardboard shoebox cradling a braid of auburn hair that belonged to my great-great aunt. My hand tingles as I remember delicately caressing the hair with my fingertips, fused with the moment I knew that the braid and myself were forged of the same essence. The braid's physical representation of youth, femininity, death and legacy was somewhat frightening its silent tangibility. The braid was a legacy of nature's power to bring reiterations of life, connecting a family like seasons that at times overlap: mothers, daughters, granddaughters, and grandmothers. We are part of a creative act of regeneration.

At night, I dream of my grandmother being swallowed by the earth, while I am standing above on the ground watching. It didn't happen this way. My grandmother, I was told, is underground surrounded by a cedar coffin, in a cemetery five miles outside of my hometown. I have no proof because the last time I saw my grandmother was three months before in the nursing home. She sat on her bed, surrounded by her favorite photographs and butterfly knick-knacks and various lavender scented products. I was no stranger to that cemetery. I had visited the seemingly endless rows of grey pillars with my grandmother every year to put flowers on my grandfather's grave. As my grandmother softly scrubbed the tombstones with a worn toothbrush, I sat nearby, my bare tan legs on the soft, sun warmed grass above my grandmother's designated plot.

I was devoted. This woman was the genesis of my life, the woman who raised my mother, and who then and now plays a significant role in my own actualization.

Going to my grandmother's house was welcome distraction and treat, leading me away from the congestion of a house with four children, all remarkably close in age. The fact that my grandmother took pride in the visual experience of her home, life and environment certainly encouraged this development. I gladly soaked in her essence, like her hand embroidered tea towels absorbed pure clean water.

Over the years, I adopted many of her teachings, from sewing, to cross-stitching, to an ability to discern types of roses, wood, and fabric. My observations fed my imagination. My imagination urged me to make links between what I saw and who I was. Because she was my mother's mother, I believed that in her house, I could find the answers to all of my questions. I made it my mission to investigate my grandmother's house and all of its offerings: the belongings of her family, charged with memory and use, and the stories my grandmother would tell me, laden with details that gave me an increasingly inquisitive hunger to explore the world of the past, the world I inhabited in the present, and the physical evidence of their connectivity.

My investigations began with the cataloguing of the boxes of photographs I found in the basement. I sorted through the photographs, wavy plates of century old tintypes, zigzag edged squares, monochromatic worlds of people who resembled my siblings and parents, and sometimes even myself. I sought out my favorites intuitively, like choosing a special piece of jewelry, and studied them by drawing the portraits and faces in pencil on printer paper. My grandmother, an expert in our family genealogy, filed these genealogical specimens away in a manila folder.

As the catalogue of drawings grew, I began to select the objects in the house that I felt a connection to and kept them in the pale pink guest room, which I had adopted long ago as my own. The room became a cabinet of curiosities. Items chosen for their resonance or mysterious

power that I secretly believed they possessed, but did not express to my grandmother because I knew she would say that sounded like “phooey”.

Eventually, as I assessed every object in the house, I found a photograph of my great-great Aunt Flora, whose braid of auburn hair was now in my bedroom. I set her the photograph next to the braid. I marveled at the connection between this illusion of the past, a memory of a moment in time, and a piece of physical reality, an intimate element of the woman I saw, but would never meet.

Part of the ritual of staying with my grandmother was that it was an overnight treat. I slept in the pink guest room’s spacious bed at night and in the dark, I felt a strange nervousness toward the photographs and objects I brought into the room, hung on the walls and placed on the nightstands and dressers. Those objects, the people they were linked to, were part of me and I felt their presence. Their soft exposed neutrality greeted me with the morning sun. My grandmother’s familiar smile in the doorway was next, suggesting I shower before we went to church.

Sitting awkwardly in my pantyhose on the stiff, red wool of the pew at my Methodist church with my grandmother never brought me the spiritual experience I desired. With a direct line of sight with our pastor, we were twenty feet away from the pulpit. My grandmother had situated she and I in the optimal position to receive the word of God.

On several occasions, my grandmother proudly showed me her Star of David pin that she had earned for twelve years of perfect attendance of Sunday School. To her, soaking this all in was as natural and nourishing as breathing. Over the years, I started to wonder what I was missing. My first question involved the presence of God, and where I could discover Him. The only logical conclusion I could surmise was that the building itself must have a mystical quality

that set it apart from other spaces, and made it holy. Limited by the space and perspective of that pew for countless Sundays from approximately 10:15 to 11:30, I catalogued the sanctuary.

I began by counting the tiles, studying the pattern of the grain in the wood, or the series of tiny stained glass windows that lined the edges of the room, illustrating symbols like goblets and swords, scrolls. The images mocked me with their vague flatness. If I could just find a brick in the wall with an esoteric inscription or a secret door that led me to a room of profound answers, I would be satisfied. Finally, I began to venture secretly away from the pew during the service to explore the unknown regions of the building, excusing myself to my grandmother by telling her I needed to use the restroom. In disappointed, patent leather steps, I would return to the pew. The church remained enigmatic. I resented its invulnerable stability.

By the time we returned from church to my grandmother's house for lunch, I was inevitably hungry to resume my endeavors there. Relieved to be back in what I acknowledge as my first studio space. At home with my parents, I longed for the generous amount of freedom I possessed there. I craved to express my creative connection to the world around me. Grandma and her home, her many memories that were becoming my own, steadily fusing with my imagination, were my true sanctuary.

One day, I found myself sitting in the front row of the church attending her funeral, and glanced back at the space where I sat with her for countless services. I listened to the sound of the pages of the church hymnal as I turned them, quiet dry leaves caressed by the wind. The altar, surrounded by a strange garden by the thirteen clusters of maimed flowers, felt empty. The traditional gesture of abundance during loss, like trying to fill the open space she should have occupied, repelled me. If it were up to me, I would have buried her in a deep, fragrant pile of lavender. She and this scent were inseparable in my memory. Her house exhaled the fragrance

of objects from lotion, to soap to bouquets, and we inhaled the scent together. Her garden was being taken over by the lavender bush in her front yard since I had left, and she had left. No one tends to it now. I watch the garden grow more and more wild. I watch nature continue to reign over her home. Her house is a world of memory.

I absorbed all that she could give me through our time together. The natural process of death has given birth to a new season in my own life. Without that world of resources, creativity and history at my fingertips, I began a period of intuitive connection to the earth. In the same way I chose objects that held a sense of resonance and brought them into my environment, I began to use my eyes to collect visual specimens in the form of observations of the natural world around me. I discovered a new relationship to structure, and a fresh source that I could mine for inspiration and nourishment: the wildness of untamed nature, a flourishing tree full of asymmetrical order, the skeletal suggestion of the bare branches, the woven complexity of a leafless bush, the unfathomable expertise of a bird's nest, tangible examples of the cyclical power of life, the genealogical reiterations and representations of nature's existence.

I began to bring the memory of these structures into my studio, leaving behind the figure for the first time in my artistic career, and focused on building environments, connecting to the forms I saw in the natural world, including nature and my own body. Skeletons, bones, branches, roots, tissue, nests, foliage, hair, teeth, thorns, nests, caves, and stone became my inspiration. I sought complete acceptance of the mysterious materials of my construction and the natural world. I began to construct my own visions of the world within myself, inspired by these materials and the enduring processes of nature.

My paintings are not the narrative explanations that I sought as a young girl, spelling out a story that I could connect to in a pedantic manner. These paintings were physical, the mark

itself a character in the story of the world I had created. Unlike the hours I spent dedicatedly denying the evidence of a human hand in my sewing lessons or starching and ironing blouses for church, I embraced my tendency to be less than perfect, to leave a raw mark, a crooked line, or an asymmetrical form. The longing for connection and freedom I sought visually and personally, I found in nature.

The spaces of the paintings suggest a sense of activity, motion and evolution. The forms and structures are formed intuitively, existing as perennial forms in a boundless and fertile environment. The environments are layered with countless brushstrokes, each made in an effort to discover the world I am creating. The impermanent and eternal quality of nature is powerful to me, able to continue its processes during periods of halcyon to periods of loss. My paintings are opportunities to fully engage with my intuition and my creativity, to rise in each period of uncertainty and my connection to the natural world.

My grandmother and I used to arrange bouquets cut from her flowerbeds on late Saturday afternoons in dusty vases from the basement. She liked the roses that were just beginning to open. Not buds, but only partially bloomed. She is the one who taught me to appreciate the flowers that were in transition. I go to my studio, and my work is constantly in transition. When a work's life has reached a state of completion, it dies. Death is not an end; it is a legacy. One life enriches another by sharing space, experiences, nourishing the time they spend together and leaving the seeds of something new. My paintings are legacies of my growth and awareness of my domain, which is always in transition. This is the world of my true nature.



Bastille, oil on canvas, 38x30 inches, 2014.



Aerie, oil on canvas, 45x45 inches, 2014.



Diaphanous, oil on canvas, 40x40 inches, 2014.



Sophic, oil on canvas, 30x34 inches, 2014.



Halcyon, oil on canvas, 60x48 inches, 2014.



Catharsis, oil on canvas, 30x40 inches, 2014.



Deluge, oil on canvas, 43x54 inches, 2014.



Amphora, oil on paper, 41x41 inches, 2014.



Haven, oil on paper, 46x46 inches, 2014.