

Holly McCabe  
MFA-BLR Thesis Statement 2016  
Massachusetts College of Art and Design

Art-making has always been an exploratory process for me, and a veritable extension of who I am. This includes practices, experiences, and artifacts that belong irrevocably to the hardware of my own human nature. It offers me a peek into an elusive window of underlying emotion that I strive to comprehend as my physical body perceives, manages, and reflects upon the thoughts, actions, and reactions that result in the creation of my work. Like artists Judy Pfaff and Richard Tuttle, my art is highly intuitive, and finds a foothold in the fact that, as Tuttle explains, “it’s not about making something happen, but about allowing something to take place.” Once manifested, my work becomes autonomous, and it is only then that I can begin to understand its meaning in context.

As an introvert, my default thought process cannot help but turn inward, as I obsessively dissect elements of my own personae in order to understand my inner being as separate from the world outside, in an ongoing attempt to reconcile the two. The phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty stressed the idea that our entrance into reality, and the perception of that reality, is directly through the body, or “existence before essence.” He speaks of the physiological human form as a vessel for consciousness, into which we are inextricably bound. As I navigate the entities, objects, and spaces in this world through my own corporeal lens, I assign very specific connections to each and every one of the stimuli and situations that I encounter. And yet, these meanings are often so emotionally complex and deeply visceral that I find they cannot merely be tied to the limited associations of language. Instead, I turn to pure unmitigated perception, and utilize physical media, artifacts, and spaces as a way of accessing these primal feelings, sensations, and revelations. I accomplish this in my work through the use of soft, sharp, pliable, and highly receptive materials like fabric, paper, metal, and clay, that are put through the uber-tactile, labor-intensive, and often painstaking multi-step processes of hand-constructing each of the unique pieces that comprise my sculptural conglomerations. While in this flow, I remain wholly conscious of the inter-relationships between my own intensely intuitive headspace, and the mechanical movements of my physical body as I manifest these highly subjective artifacts into reality.

In less than two years, I’ve progressed from expressive self-portraiture to abstract fabric-based installation art. After more than a decade of staring at my own face and barely scratching the surface, I turned instead to revisiting childhood memories of spending hours a day alone in the woods, constructing strange creatures, unlikely substances, and protective spaces out of sticks, dirt, rocks, found objects, and leaves. I remember how deeply satisfying it was to create such real and physical forms directly from raw and re-purposed elements. I invented new species that blurred the lines between flora, fauna, fabric, metal, plastic, rubber, and earth. Stems and aluminum scraps turned into the exoskeletons of delicate trilobites, petals assembled into makeshift wings, and inverted blobs of seed-filled berry guts transformed into clutches of eggs. I swept out the detritus-laden ground beneath shrubs, and dug out tunnels in snow banks, fabricating my very own crude, yet reassuring cocoon-like environments to escape to, play in, and simply be content.

This new body of work intends to capture the deepest elements of those personal experiences. I no longer wish for passive observance, but rather, to feel as though I am an integral part of these pieces, losing myself in objects and spaces that hover somewhere between the natural, the handmade, and the man-made. These sculptures and installations create an aesthetic surface that is simultaneously solid and structured, yet open and formless. They are at once comforting in their ability to hug the gallery space like a love-worn blanket, but also remain somewhat alien, like a virus, steadily encroaching in a potentially threatening manner. In this way, the pieces do come alive, forming unexpected visual moments as they adapt and evolve to inhabit various locations.

Because the work remains largely non-representational, with echoes of living biological and quasi-wearable forms, I imbue them with a phenomenological sense of discovery while sussing out the makeup of the assembled piece, and how it affects its surroundings. With each new arrangement, I push the visual impact of the larger spatial context, but also dwell on the oddness of form, and the hints of patterned fabric, deconstructed text, loops of repetitious stitching, and layers of materiality. Structural wires hidden beneath the surface help me to establish an alchemical illusion of sharp versus soft, and stiff versus slack, fostering the defiance of physical limitation. Moving in closer still, I highlight the individual idiosyncrasies and imperfections inherent in every single one of the visibly handmade elements as they beg to be touched, handled, and questioned.

In my eyes, the Minimalist and Post-Minimalist aesthetic has dealt beautifully with the brute physicality of objects, the activation of the spaces they inhabit, and the simple honesty in allowing materials to be themselves. In particular, Agnes Martin's grid paintings engage me, as I wish to engage my own viewers, with a highly personal and emotional experience tied directly to the activation of a visual field. Channeling the philosophies of Richard Serra, I see sculpture as an open and extended region, as well as autonomous object. The empty spaces in my work bear the same weight as the sculptural components, including cast shadows, open latticework, and constricted but navigable paths peppered throughout a varying density of symbiotic elements. I look and feel for how these subtle shifts in visceral physicality change the mental and emotional tone of these tactile environments into which I offer an open invitation.

Eva Hesse, among others, burst through social, cultural, and political barriers in the twentieth century to allow female artists like myself to practice without such constraints. Though my own agenda has been a great deal more personal and somewhat private, I do still find myself relating to Hesse's affinity for various dichotomies of identity, visual aesthetic, and surface texture. Likewise, my own modular, pliable, and posable soft sculpture environments also remain perpetually open to participation, from initial installation to engagement with the finished piece. In addition, my aesthetic approach finds kinship with Lee Bontecou, who remains deliciously tied to a naturalist's way of looking at the world, both in terms of macrocosmic dimensions, and the very smallest elements of nature. Influential to my own work, which continues to defy categorical constraints, the beauty and richness of such complexity is that it can be linked to so many different things without being tied directly to any of them. It is in this space, this perfectly imperfect human space, that I can allow for a vast array of perceptual, reflective, and interpretive responses to a single work of art.

My entire practice comes under the guise of an unrelenting obsession with our fragile, tactile, visceral, and ever-changing human bodies. In a similar but more biologically-oriented style to the sculptural multiples of Annette Messager, I ascribe to Gestalt psychology, which asserts that we do not perceive things other than in a context; that the meaning of individual elements of an experience depend on their relationship to the whole experience. As I carry on constructing my own artistic environments, and the inhabitants therein, it is important for me to focus on the uniqueness of each element, organism, and form, while allowing them, in multitude, to feed into larger entities with an ever-expanding richness, depth, and mass. This vision remains directly reflective of who I am; a steadfast individual, burgeoning artist, and integral member of a global collective hurtling through an inscrutable cosmos, through which I continue to question: where do I end, and the world begins?