

# **MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH**

A Thesis

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University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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in  
Sculpture

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a critical analysis of the processes, concepts and imagery of my artwork. In my art, I intended to explore death anxieties, individuality and the uncanny. I am interested in what we leave behind after we are gone as proof of existing post mortem. My themes include procreation, forensic science, and religion among others. My imagery includes fragmented bodies, reliquaries, and forensic evidence. I use traditional and non-traditional sculpture materials and processes that are intended to conceptually inform the viewer further.

## INTRODUCTION

In my art, I examine two conflicting worldviews: the individual after death versus the fear that there is nothing more than this physical life. I explore ideas of mortality through both scientific and spiritual images. My intent is to produce work that evokes an underlying uneasy feeling, the same kind of feeling that results from the inconsistency in our cultural concepts concerning mortality. Contrary messages of traditional aesthetic beauty juxtaposed with images of illness, isolation, and death compound this tension. This contradiction parallels the paradox of mortality: in order to have life, you must have death.

I chose my mediums to correspond to and intensify the internal meaning of each piece. The purposeful setting and placement of both objects and images convey and enhance the intended meaning of the piece. Intentional use of dramatic lighting, subtle nuances, and minimalist spacing of pieces is used to create a foreboding atmosphere and strengthen the impact of the work.

Many sub-themes are layered through my work, intended to add depth and interest. Themes of individuality, procreation, bodily metaphors, and medical and forensic imagery all are components. My work also addresses Judeo-Christian beliefs about death, which include conflicting thoughts about dying being both a good thing (going to heaven) and a bad thing (becoming nothing.) Although my work speaks of illness and death, it is intended to be a reminder of the preciousness of life. This statement is, I believe, intensified by the belief that there is nothing more when we die.

## EVIDENCE

The first set of works, the series “Trace Evidence” and the piece “Dust to Dust,” scientifically and forensically examines traces left behind. To increase tension, some of these pieces have Christian themes and overtones that remind us of the instability between science and religion. But ultimately the pieces are about authentic evidence of someone’s previous presence.

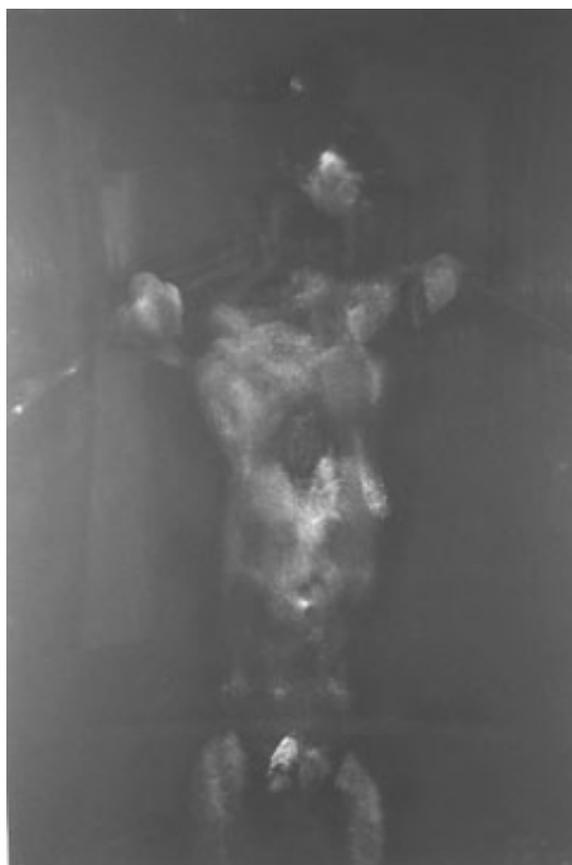
“Trace Evidence” (Plates 1, 2, & 3) is a set of mono prints created by powdering a body with talcum powder and pressing it against black paper to leave traces of the figure behind. The process in which the print is made emulates the ritual and personal intimacy of attending to the body. The compositions of the figures in the prints are meant to reinforce the idea that the images could possibly be made post mortem. Some images reference ancient burials sites; others show figures that are bound or in a fetal position. Each individual print is titled according to the position of the figure and the feeling that the positioning invokes. “Trace Evidence: Shroud,” for example, shows hands and arms on the top and legs and feet from the knee down on the bottom. With the limbs crossed as in the common Western funerary position, the figure conveys a funeral shroud like the Shroud of Turin. “Trace Evidence: Home” is an adult figure in fetal position, reminiscent of figures found in the excavation of Pompeii. The composition is meant to reference both the fetus and the way a person might curl up to die. The title refers both to the concept of the in utero fetus being home and safe in the womb and to the contradictory notion of coming home as a metaphor for dying.

Talcum powder, associated with both babies and the elderly, is used as a medium to allude to the life cycle itself and convey the idea of the life cycle being at an end. The process of printing by directly using the body to leave something behind further develops the idea of the traces we leave behind once gone. The Christian biblical phrase “ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” part of a common funeral elegy, is referenced in the image by the talc’s dust and its ashlike color and consistency. The figure seems almost to be made of ashes and dust, a concept intensified by the light, airy feeling of the talc. The subtle gradations from light to dark in the figure draw the viewer in closer for a better look, thus creating intimacy between the viewer and the image. Since only the top layer of the body’s powdered surface touches the paper during the printing, the resulting bonelike markings give the impression of an imprint from a shroud as well as that of a skeleton denoting death itself. The dusty look also references vaporized human remains in Japan after the atom bomb was dropped. Black paper is used not only because the color is traditionally associated with death but also because it makes a striking contrast to the white imprint, offering a foreboding and eerie image.

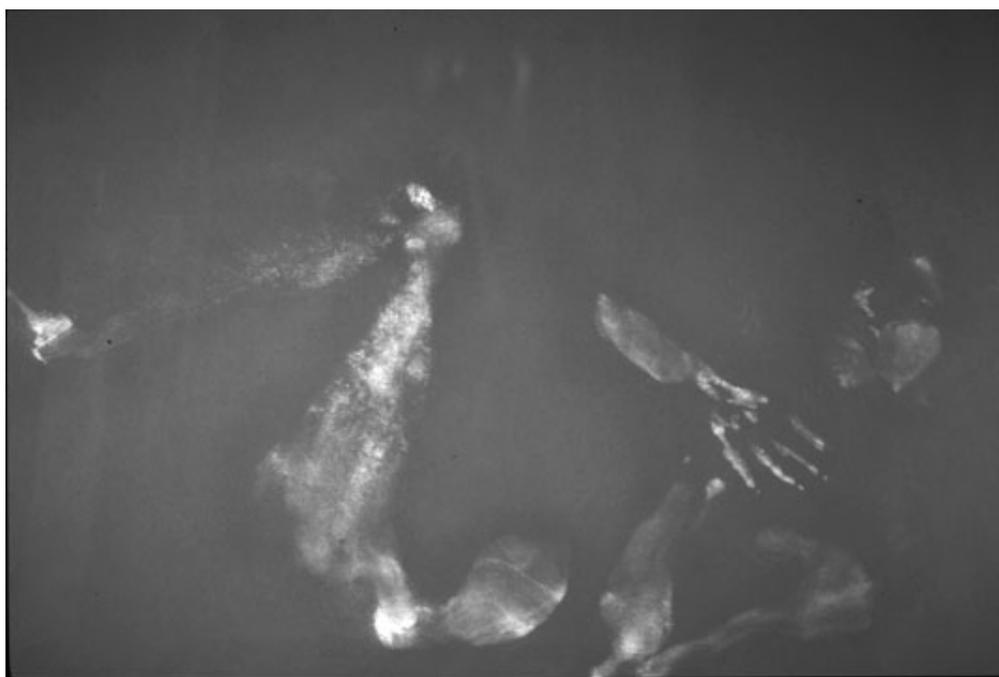
The series title “Trace Evidence” is a term used by forensic scientists to describe small amounts of bodily excretions or residue that scientifically proves someone was previously in that location. Talcum powder could be trace evidence. The works were titled such to render the idea that the print is scientific evidence of existing after one is gone, again referencing mortality and what happens to us after death.



**Plate 1. "Trace Evidence: Shroud" talcum powder on paper**



**Plate 2. “Trace Evidence: Emmanuel” talcum powder on paper**

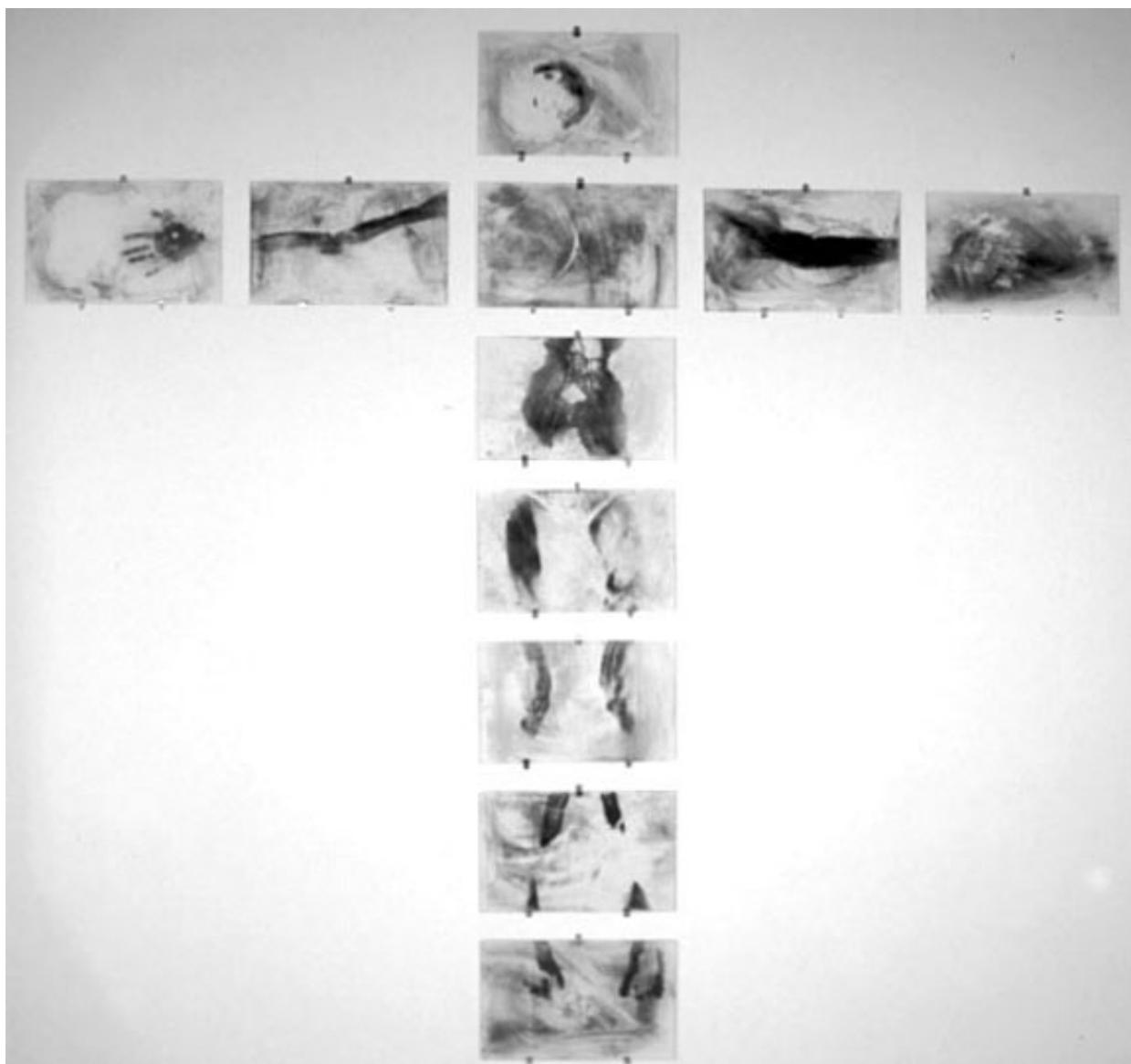


**Plate 3. “Trace Evidence: Home” talcum powder on paper**

Like the “Trace Evidence” prints, the piece “Dust to Dust” (Plates 4, 5 & 6) investigates the idea of physically leaving something behind. The piece takes the concept a step further by actually scientifically proving that someone who was once there has left something behind. The image is created by the same process a forensic scientist would use to prove beyond reasonable doubt that an individual once touched the glass from which it was made. “Dust to Dust” consists of 11 rectangular quarter-inch glass panels 10 by 16 inches each that together form a whole figure. The panels are spaced 2 inches apart and held on the wall by metal clips. Each panel was touched by a different part of the body, leaving a latent print made from the oils from the skin. The glass was then dusted with black fingerprint powder to raise the latent prints left behind from the oils. This is done with the same technique that a forensic crime scene analyst would use to develop fingerprints and with the same implements, a small brush and black fingerprint powder. The process proves not only that someone was there but also that a specific person unique to that fingerprint once occupied that space. The print signifies the authorship of the individual that left it. This works much in the same way as Chuck Close’s portraits made from fingerprints and Jasper John’s “Skin Series,” in that there is something left behind of the individual in each piece.

The panels of “Dust to Dust” are mounted in a cross pattern, five horizontal and seven vertical, on a white wall. The total image is of a figure on glass with arms outstretched in the same manner as a crucifixion. This image symbolizes in Christian mythology the resurrection of Christ, thus referencing the idea of life after death. The conjunction of the scientific method and the mystical concept of resurrection are intended to add tension to the piece and add another dimension by cross-referencing conflicting ideas. Once the body has left the glass, the eye sees nothing there. We must have faith enough to dust the glass and resurrect what seems to be nonexistent. Although this is a faith in science, not religion, the image of the cross has become synonymous with the idea of rebirth in Western society. The boundaries of science, once thought to be finite and able to answer our questions about mortality, instead open up infinite possibilities. Each question answered leaves more questions to ask, thus making many scientific theories about mortality as faith-based as traditional religions are. Although the fingerprint process is hard proof of a person’s former presence, the juxtaposition of scientific versus religious doctrines points out the instability of each.

The title “Dust to Dust” references both the materials and the process used to create it. To obtain the image I “dusted” for prints with fingerprint powder, which is a kind of dust. The title is word play on that process and on the religious funeral elegy about what happens to the body once life is gone. Whereas crime scene images reflect these techniques, it is the science behind them that I am ultimately interested in. By using a process associated with crime investigation I am adding yet another layer by positing death as an offense.



**Plate 4. "Dust to Dust" fingerprint powder on glass**



**Plate 5. detail of “Dust to Dust” fingerprint powder on glass**



**Plate 6. detail of “Dust to Dust” fingerprint powder on glass**

## INNOCENCE

The series “Interpose” (Plates 7, 8 & 9) is meant to investigate our essence and individuality: Is there something inside us that makes us each different and unique? Like death, this is unknowable and one can only theorize whether or not individuality exists. Postmodern theories<sup>1</sup> propose that we are only a product of our times and that there is nothing wholly original. This conflicts with our culture’s insistence that we are each unique, paralleling the tension created by conflicting concepts concerning mortality. The strive for individuality is closely related to immortality. By being unique, the memory of you can outlive your physical body, thus rendering you immortal. The memory of you is also something left behind once you are gone and is evidence to your once having existed. These pieces use jars as a metaphor for the body as merely the container of our self. The artworks also reference the deterioration our bodies go through as we go through life.

The “Interpose” series consists of five small plaster and mixed media statues and five corresponding mono prints. The statues are cast from children’s dresses, making them diminutive and dainty, and are in various states of subtle deterioration. Cloth dresses are used as a mold to cast the plaster figure. This is done by filling the interior of a young girl’s dress with wet plaster, placing a jar inside, and manipulating the plaster as it dries. The cloth is then torn away leaving the plaster figure with the jar inside. The jars are filled with found objects and are sealed with wax at the top as if preserves. The plaster has been dug away to reveal the jars and their contents, recalling the phrase “windows to the soul.” Left behind are the imprints from the lace dresses, the little armless sleeves, and the windows to the inside of the figures, all intended to give them a delicate ghostly feel as if innocence has been taken away. Rachel Whiteread uses a similar process of unlikely molds to examine negative space not usually thought about.

The series speaks of childhood, mortality, and the unstable era we live in. From birth, we are set on the path of life that must end in death. Childhood, thought to be a time of fond memories, is too often a time of predators and lost innocence. Childhood innocence is a myth in this era, and the eeriness of the pieces is meant to depict this as well. Because femininity is associated with passivity, the use of girls’ dresses is intended to add a layer of vulnerability to the pieces.

The items in the jars are associated with illness or death and allude to each person’s mortality. #0000001 has pickled pig’s feet inside. In this context, the red meat gives the impression of human insides. Pig organs are used to repair and replace anatomical human parts; many people now have insides that are truly part pig. The uncanny use of equating pig’s flesh to human organs is meant to be a disturbing reminder that we also all are made of meat. The interior of #0000002 is filled with hundreds of pills. This is to bring about the association with illness or suicide. One takes hundreds of pills when enduring a chronic illness. Or one hoards pills to take all at once in order to overdose and die. #0000003’s insides consist of a lighthouse. Around the lighthouse and in the cracks of the glass there is red paint to correspond to the insides of the human body cavity. The jar is broken to give the impression of an old snow globe, perhaps a childhood souvenir of a family vacation at the seashore. The broken globe and the lighthouse are both metaphors for mortality. When the glass breaks, the snow no longer falls, the

liquid leaks out, and the globe is useless. When the light goes out in the lighthouse it is also rendered useless. #0000004 contains hundreds of army men. Childlike naive images of war and killing replicated in children's toys convey another way to die. #0000005 has moss, a symbiotic growth that either thrives on decaying matter or can asphyxiate its host.

The title "Interpose" was chosen because the process used in creating the pieces places the materials between each other, paralleling the layers of the human body. The process of using the inside of the dresses and putting a jar inside and filling the inside of each jars all is done to emphasize this concept. Broadly, we/the pieces are alike but we/the pieces are also individuals. The jars are each filled with something different to denote their differences, but they all reference death, a process each human must go through, intended to remind the viewer of their similarities. Each is made from a different dress but all are made from dresses. Each has the same interior jar but each jar differs in its state of deterioration. These variations are meant to address the contrary ideologies people are faced with today.



**Plate 7. "Interpose Series" cast plaster/ mixed media**



**Plate 8. "Interpose #0000001" cast plaster/ mixed media**



**Plate 9. "Interpose #0000002" cast plaster/ mixed media**

After the sculptures were cast, the cloth dresses were torn off and used to make mono prints (Plate 10). Each dress was rolled with black lithograph ink, placed between two sheets of paper, and run through a press to create a detail image. The prints show the texture of the cloth, the patterns of the lace trim, even the impression from the buttons and hooks. The dresses were placed in the lower right corner of large white paper to make the image seem isolated and ghostly and to emulate lost childhood innocence. The torn nature of the cloth, the subtle gradation from grays to black, and the contrast of black ink on white paper are all meant to reinforce the concept of lost innocence and mortality.



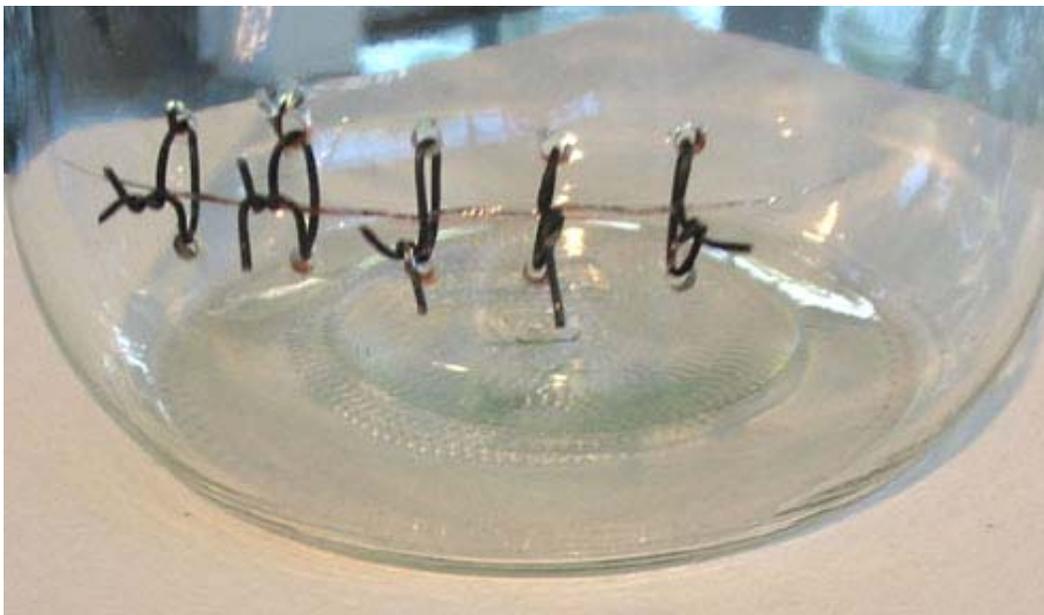
**Plate 10. "Interpose #0000001" monoprint**

The pieces “*fig. 99. Iatrogenic Dislocation of the Soul*,” “*fig. 89. Natogenic Dislocation of the Soul*,” and “*fig. 80. Biogenic Dislocation of the Soul*” (Plates 11, 12, & 13) intend to emulate humans’ failed attempts to fix our bodies after illness, injury, or even death. The pieces are made from broken glass jars that, in an apparently inept endeavor to fix and make whole, are stitched back together with wire. The jars are large pickle jars that are used for food storage or in biology classes to hold specimens. The jars are an allegory for the body as a container of our essence; once broken, they can never be whole again. The choice of glass as a medium connotes the delicate nature of life and the close proximity and irreversibility of death. The broken glass is a metaphor for our incapability to restore our bodies to new after damaging them. The tension the viewer is intended to feel by the precariousness of cracked glass is meant to parallel the tension and instability most feel about impending death. The jars are wrapped at the top rim with gauze and sealed with flesh-colored wax covering both the top of the jar and the rim where the gauze is wrapped. The jars are sealed to evoke the idea of trying to carefully preserve what is inside the jars — although this also is a failed attempt because there is nothing inside of them. The emptiness of the jars combined with the attempt to carefully seal in something precious that is no longer there is intended to leave the viewer with the feeling that something is missing, that something seeped out when the glass was broken. The gauze bandages the injury and is neatly pinned and covered in wax to become part of the seal and protection. The wax has a skinlike color and texture to represent the idea of the human body. The scarred surface of the thin wax conjures the image of human fragility. The jars are linearly fractured in the shape of a scar to parallel the thin line between life and death. Along the sides of each break there are holes in the glass. Wire is threaded through holes on each side of the break and it is stitched as if it were a wound sutured by a medical doctor. The wire is black and tied at the ends like sutures. Very small amounts of red dye can be seen inside the crack and in the holes that the stitches are threaded through. The blood color reinforces the image of the body that is or was a living entity. Each piece’s deliberate break is positioned purposely to reflect a different kind of surgical procedure that coincides with the title. The titles are derivatives of Greek words, italicized, and include a figure number — linguistic devices used so that the titles will recall medical illustrations from publications. The words in the titles are specifically chosen to read as medical text. This is to reference illness or death. Taking the titles a step deeper, the meaning of each title ponders a different reason one could have surgery, all of which could cause impairment and/or loss of life. “Natogenic,” from the Greek words for “caused by” and “birth,” has a break placed to imitate a bikini cesarean incision. “Biogenic” means “caused by life,” and its break reflects an appendectomy scar. “Iatrogenic” means “caused by a doctor”; its break coincides with a zipper scar from the opening of the chest. “Dislocation of the Soul” in each title refers to the absence of our essence from our body after death.





**Plate 12. "Natogenic Dislocation of the Soul" mixed media**



**Plate 13. detail of "Natogenic Dislocation of the Soul"**

## JUST FLESH

Severed body parts are used to break the boundaries of the body in many of my pieces. These pieces directly deal with Freud's theory of the uncanny<sup>2</sup> in that they are familiar as parts of us but unfamiliar as just flesh. This is a reminder of our mortality, which according to Freud is something we try hard to repress. This repression references the anxious feelings most have over the permeability of the body and the fragmenting of the body after death. The image of dismembered body parts is meant to evoke the uneasiness felt when reminded that one is just a piece of flesh or meat and will like all flesh die.

The piece "*Fig. A. Void*" (Plate 14) consists of two feet on a metal shelf. The shelf is at waist height and made of shiny metal as if it were an examination table. The feet are placed so the soles are facing the viewer, as they would be if seen on a slab in the morgue. The feet are used because they are highly personal when alive but impersonal in death, and this parallels life and death itself. They could be anybody's feet amongst many in any morgue. The sculpture is stark and minimalist, intended to provide a macabre and desolate feeling. The subtleness to the piece is meant to leave the viewer to fill in the blanks. The big toes are apart from the rest to imply that a toe tag could belong there. The feet are made of cast plaster and white wax, giving them a waxy marble or deceased quality. The wax was applied while the plaster was still somewhat wet causing the plaster to discolor under the wax as if bruised. The lighting on the piece casts a shadow above the slab onto the wall that depicts feet dangling as if a person was hanging behind the viewer. This is to raise the image of the person's death being a possible suicide, adding another layer to the piece. The title "*Fig. A. Void*" is meant to read like medical text, like the "*Dislocation of the Soul*" pieces. The title itself is word play on the thought of death being nothing but a void and that it is something a figure should avoid. The piece is informed by Andre Serrano's morgue series, especially his use of subject matter, the handling of tension between the beautiful and the disturbing, and the stillness of the image.



**Plate 14. "Fig. A. Void" cast plaster/wax/mixed media**

“a. Covet” (Plates 15 & 16) works in the same way as “*Fig. A. Void*” in that it draws on themes of the uncanny. It differs because the dismembered body part is a sexual organ and associated with objectification, cancer, and plastic surgery. “a. Covet” consists of a breast cast from life into a shell of thin wax. Made out of wax to correspond to the fragility of life, the sculpture sits isolated in a glass case. The breast has a thin white layer with a red one underneath and blue veins under the red. A single white light embedded in the case’s floor lights it from below. The lighting makes the breast glow as if alive without the rest of the body attached. This is intended to render the image as amputated as well as uncanny. The glass case, selected because it resembles those from a school science lab or old hospital, is black and has one glass shelf on which the breast rests to the far right. The breast is placed in the case to provoke images of things precious, collected, and coveted. Damien Hirst’s influence with his use of vitrines and his minimalist composition can be seen in the composition of “a. Covet.”

“b. Covet,” a monprint of a breast, sits above the case in dialogue with the wax breast. Framed in a simple black frame, the rectangle mimics the form of the glass case. The breast was printed from a rubber prosthesis cast from the same mold the wax breast was made from. The process of printing from a prosthesis removes the act of printing away from body just as the print is of a breast separated from the body. The process parallels the substitution of a prosthetic for a real breast when a breast has been removed surgically. The print is printed in red, peach, and light brown lithograph ink. The color palette, although beautiful, is chosen to emulate bruising as if from an injury or mammogram. The placement of the print, in the far left corner of large white paper, allows the print to balance the breast in the case. The beauty of the breasts in contrast to their dismemberment is a device used to add tension to the image. The separation of the two breasts and the use of very different mediums add to the separation from the body of the breasts themselves. The detachment of a body part that is normally a sexual fetish is meant to increase the distressed feeling the image is supposed to effect in the viewer. The title “Covet” describes how the breast is seen in our society. The objectification of the breast as a desirable object, the envy of or lust for women with large breasts, and the loss of self-esteem when a breast must be removed all merit the situation of coveting.



**Plate 15. “a. Covet” and b. Covet” mixed media**

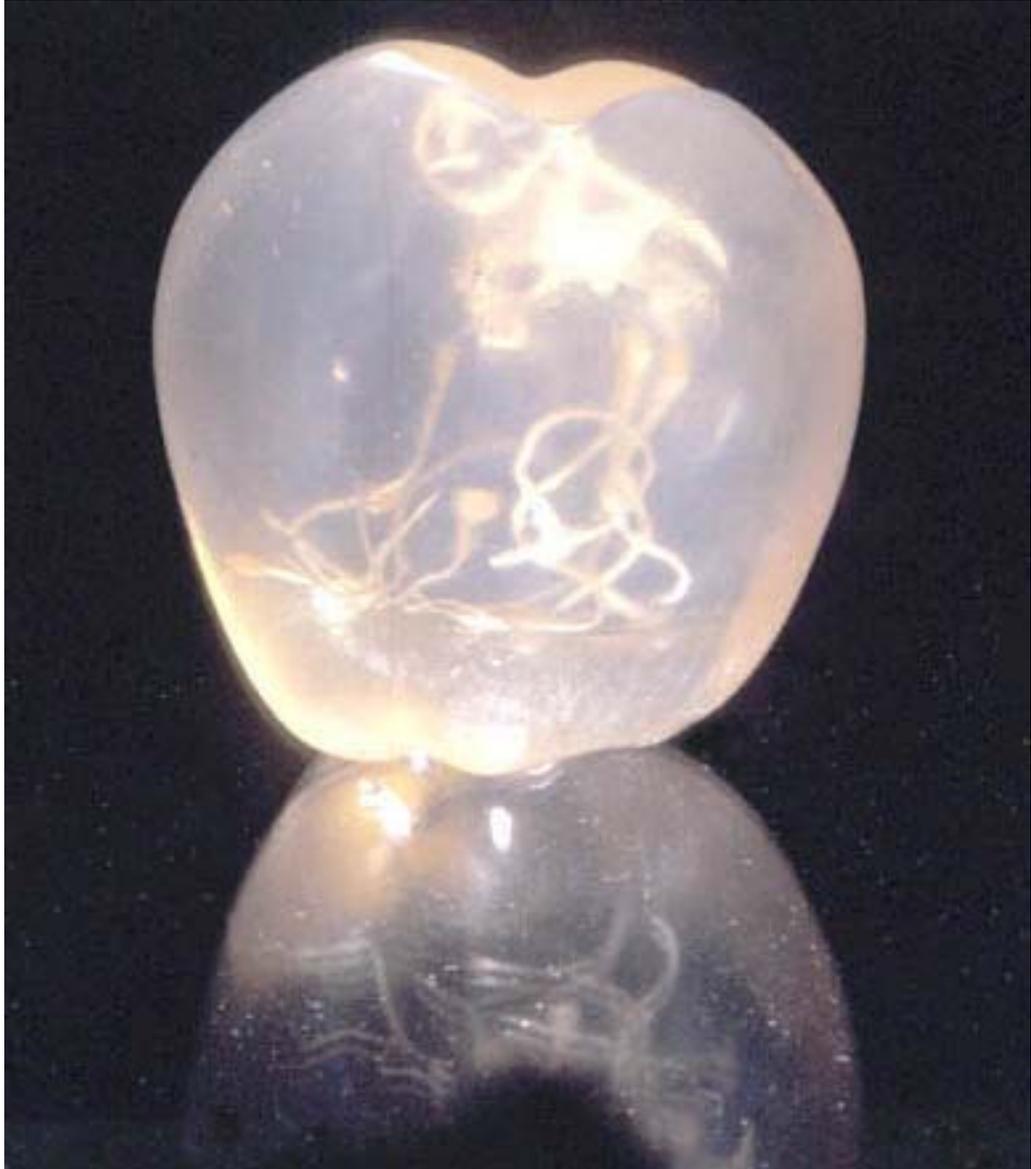


**Plate 16. detail "b. Covet" wax**

## PROCREATION

The next set of works investigates themes of procreation and its intersection with immortality. The piece “Eve’s Temptation” (Plate 17) consists of a life-size apple cast in polyresin with sperm floating inside. The image of the apple in Western tradition is embedded with the Christian myth of Adam and Eve. The temptation of eating the apple leads to Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden. From that point on humans are mortal and procreation begins. Henceforth the life cycle as we know it today: birth, procreation, and death. Sexual themes corresponding to “Eve’s Temptation” relate directly to humans’ desire to leave something of themselves behind after they are gone, proof that they were once here: children as legacy. In the Eve myth, the beginning of mortality creates the need for procreation. Procreation ensures immortality through children. These concepts are entwined by the mere fact of the need to continue the human race.

The apple sits by itself in the middle of a large white wall on a very small white shelf that is meant to blend into the wall. It is lit by a strong spotlight, which creates a halo effect against the wall. The light that travels directly through the apple creates an intense shadow with a glowing middle that is meant to represent the essence of Eve. The lighting makes the apple radiate and look glass- or jewel-like, as well as highlights the sperm inside. The sperm are made from white tissue paper wrapped around small plant seeds. These objects were used to make the sperm because tissue paper is commonly used to wipe up semen when male ejaculation occurs. The seeds further correspond to the semen in that they are both a seed used to create new offspring. The resin the apple is cast in has a pearlescent white tint that intends to recall semen. The concept in this piece, like the others, centers around mortality —here, the start of mortality itself.



**Plate 17. "Eve's Temptation" polyresin, seed, tissue paper**

The series “Enhanced (lingerie for your special girl)” (Plates 18, & 19) builds on the themes of individuality and procreation. Like “Eve’s Temptation,” “Enhanced” addresses procreation but intertwines other concepts as well. The series also shares the concepts concerning originality and individuality described in the Interpose series. The “Enhanced” pieces use lingerie, a stereotypical fetish item, and twist the garments into a new and more complex concept. The “Enhanced” series consists of six lingerie garments made for women with sexually enhanced bodies. The garments are hung on padded cream-colored satin hangers with name and price tags, as if on display in an exclusive boutique. Each garment is intended for a woman with a different and unique body. The enhancements include such body configurations as multiple breast and bottoms, and atypical placement of multiple erogenous zones.

The strive to be an individual in postmodern times is a major concern when nothing seems original. People have begun to change their bodies in an effort to stand out. Plastic surgery, body modification, and piercing have become a way of trying to make oneself unique. This is thought to be not only a way to achieve individuality but also a way to make oneself desirable to the opposite sex. The more desirable one is, the more chances one has to meet the best mate, and the more one’s procreation and immortality are assured.

In a similar way, deformities make a person unique and therefore closest physically to one of a kind. Conjoined twins are extremely rare and hence original. Each set is different from another in how they are joined; no two sets are alike. We are fascinated by deformities yet repulsed — is this because they are a reminder to us that we are not unique? Where the Chapman Brothers address eugenics, reproduction, and genetic accidents, the “Enhanced” series looks at how these new scientific discoveries could be used to augment our reproduction. The Chapman Brothers’ work shows genetically altered pre-pubescents whose misplaced sexual organs leave them nonfunctioning as reproducing human beings. It references problems with asexual laboratory cell reproduction. The “Enhanced” series, although it addresses the same science, produces a different outcome. The enhancements are meant to make the body more sexual and therefore more reproductive. Body modification and deformities that deliberately make someone sexually improved should increase one’s chances of procreation.

The “Enhanced” series is meant to take all this into consideration. Although the series at first glance can be seen as funny and a little tongue-in-cheek, when one digs deeper, one finds a chilling discomfort with the subject matter. It is the kind of discomfort where you’re not sure if the slight chuckle is from amusement or from embarrassment and displeasure. The idea of being, or having, a sexually enhanced woman appears to be a good one at first, but upon reflection, it becomes very disturbing. The fact that some of these enhancements could be made today (if you found the right surgeon) only adds to the angst. Also, the advancements in genetics could lead one day soon to rearranging the human figure. Scientists have already found the gene that adds eye to the wings of flies; can human alteration be far behind? The fear of a body becoming superhuman, the other, or alien, is a distressing thought in an age where we are redefining what it is to be human. Trepidation about superbeings causing the end of the human race is touched on when thinking of genetic engineering and eugenics.



**Plate 18. "Enhanced" series**



**Plate 19. "Enhanced" series**

With all this in mind, the “Enhanced” line is ready for the future. Each garment is named with the improved figure in mind. The “Full Round Bullet” bra is a white bra made for a woman with breasts on her back as well as her chest. The bra has four B cups, two on each side. There are zippers for easy access, and the cups are shaped in the traditional fifties fetish style of the bullet bra, which points the breast into a torpedo shape. The “Double Dolly” full bra and girdle takes its name from my hero, Dolly Parton. It proudly displays room for four DD breasts, adorned in lace in a square pattern on the front of the garment, and a slimming girdle to help cinch the waist for that Dolly-like figure. The “Octa-Pussy” (Plate 20) merry widow in red and black with garters and classic black stockings to match has room for eight limbs. This consists of two arms and six legs, making it all the rage with the leg men. The stockings come in tall only and the garment comes with a sheer matching shirt. “Double Trouble,” a full-piece corset-girdle, comes in sexy black and has room for two full bottoms and four legs. The bottoms are adorned with tiny satin bows down each pelvic center and they both have a cotton liner in the crouch. The “Bi-Lateral” uni-girdle is made for the woman with four horizontal breasts in the front. It is black with small red satin rose appliqués and comes in a B cup. With a strapless back, this graceful one-piece can be worn with any of number of dresses. The “Conjoined Siamese” bra is made for conjoined twins attached at the nipple. It comes in beige and is a DD cup for full-figured gals.

The title of the series, “Enhanced (lingerie for your special girl),” was chosen to emulate a commercial lingerie line and also presents the concepts of the work with one small slogan. Lingerie marketing strategies focusing on improving the figure are common. “Enhancing one’s figure” fits both the current idea of lingerie function as well as the process to alter one’s body. The phrase “special girl” plays on the multiple meanings of the word “special”: unique, deformed, or beloved (as in your special someone).



**Plate 20. “Enhanced: Octa-Pussy”**

## MORTALITY ANXIETIES

My work is in dialogue with Damien Hirst's art. In his pieces he attempts to preserve the un-preservable, to contain the uncontainable, to stop death and the process of decay. The actions are entangled with humans' attempt to repress their fear of death. By preserving the form and denying inevitable death, Hirst's pieces reflect societies current cultural attitudes toward death and dying. As Elisabeth Kübler-Ross concludes in her book *On Death and Dying*:

The more we make advancements in science, the more we seem to fear and deny the reality of death. How is this possible? We use euphemisms, we make the dead look as if they were sleeping, we ship the children off to protect them from the anxiety and turmoil around the house if a patient is fortunate enough to die at home; we don't allow children to visit their dying parents in the hospital, we have long and controversial discussions about whether patients should be told the truth (Kübler-Ross, 21).

Hirst uses similar euphemisms juxtaposed with scientific images to create tension and address our mortality anxieties. My work, on the other hand, admits that death is inevitable. The fantasy of the body's impermeability is removed and exposed. Bodies are shown not as segregated wholes that could be rejoined but as fragmented parts. Clinical, sterile aesthetics begin to corrode and decay, leaving a softer, sensual image behind. My work, unlike his, is penetrable; the seals are broken and the attempt to preciously preserve the body's boundaries has failed.

Joel-Peter Witkin and Andres Serrano art also inform my work. Their work turns mortal humans into iconographic imagery as an attempt to create immortality. They use euphemisms of Christian ideology to speak about mortality anxieties thus implying that a mortal can be immortalized. Aesthetic traditional ideas of beauty and form are juxtaposed with images of death and decay, thus making the grotesque beautiful. My work includes similar techniques but intertwines science, forensic technology and secular humanism, therefore, placing science in the same realm as religion. As philosopher David Loy<sup>3</sup> points out "Our attempts to repress the fear of death returns in the form of a compulsion to immortalize ourselves in symbolic forms."

## CONCLUSION

The validity of my work in today's postmodern world lies in the uneasiness we feel about our inevitable death. The juxtaposition of science and individuality (originality) comes into question both in life and in its reflection, art. Many contemporary artists explore these ideas in their work. I believe the ideas are relevant in this time as we face the reality of such discoveries as DNA, cloning, genomics, and eugenics. Concepts of when death occurs have been changed by new scientific discoveries. For centuries death occurred when the heart and lungs stopped; now it is determined by whether or not brain waves are detected. When ideas thought to be concrete in our culture change at a moment's notice, it is bound to create anxiety. It is no coincidence that artists today question who and what we are and ultimately what it means to be human and an individual, and what becomes of us after we are gone.

My body of work explores concepts and themes about mortality through imagery, mediums, and process. It examines issues of the finite versus the infinite in today's postmodern society. The work intends to emulate the beauty of life and the trepidation of impending death. It aspires to create tension that parallels the apprehension most feel about beliefs of the continuation of the individual after death and the thought that there is nothing more when one dies. This is achieved through themes of individuality, procreation, bodily metaphors, and medical and forensic imagery as well as processes. Many other artists have explored these concepts and I am compelled to continue in their vision.

## ***NOTES***

1. Post Modernist theorist Baudrillard concepts revolve around the idea of the empty signifier, the copy without an original. Thus proposing that nothing is totally original when everything is made from a copy of a copy. See Baudrillard, Jean Simulacra and Simulation Ann Arbor: UM, 1994: 1-42

2. Freud proposes that the Uncanny occurs when repressed fears resurface. Since we have repressed impending death, it is both familiar and yet unfamiliar because we know it is coming yet deny it to ourselves. Anxiety caused by this remembrance is described as an uncanny feeling. Fears of death can resurface when we are reminded of the permeability of our physical body. See Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny", Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol XVII, trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press. 1955. 217-256

3. Loy, David. expands on Freud, post modernism and Buddhism. His work combines Eastern and Western thought adding new insight to each. He focuses on Freud's concepts of repression and the Buddhist doctrine of nonself. See David Loy, Lack and Transcendence the Problem of Death and Life in Psychotherapy, Existentialism, and Buddhism, New York: Prometheus Books. 1996

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## VITA

Jessica Goldfinch was born in New Orleans. She received an Associates Degree in printing and graphic arts from Delgado Community College in 1989. She continued her education by pursuing a double major at the University of New Orleans obtaining a Bachelors Degree in Fine Arts concentrating in sculpture and a Bachelors Degree in Sociology focusing on social deviance and criminology. She has exhibited her work in New Orleans and New York City.