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UNLV Calvert Award

Creative Works Entry

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A Body of Hair

A reflection of process and research

Hair offers intriguing qualities on both physical and contextual planes. It is connected to both death and life simultaneously. Physically it is dead matter, but while still attached it is associated with vitality, beauty, and strength (Biddle-Perry 183). The body is the natural place for hair to reside, it is of the body, produced by the body, and the nature of the body remains even when the hair is separated from the head. Though something strange happens when hair is disembodied. It becomes repulsive, grotesque, and unfamiliar. Disembodied hair brings to the forefront questions of our own mortality, of life and death, and their inevitable intersection. This material survives after the flesh, existing in a liminal space in between.

In recent months, I have become obsessed with the many facets of hair. Its connections to cultural and social values, rituals and practices, are so vast that this subject could be studied and written on for decades. Inspired by its rich and inherent content, I began delving into hair and its relation to sexuality, power, marriage, feminism, identity, folklore, and spirituality. I gathered more books than I could carry, checked them all out, managed to transport them to my studio, where I sat surrounded by hair, brown hair, red hair, grey hair, and began searching through the

pages of my many books in an attempt to narrow my focus. A chapter in *Hair in African Art and Culture*, “A note on Hair and Mourning Especially in Ghana,” immediately pulled my attention. It discussed how shaving the head is a primary symbol of mourning amongst most African peoples (Sieber 89). The symbolism behind physical action resonated as the severing of loss.

Bereavement and hair are connected across cultures. *In Death Lamented: The tradition of Anglo-American Mourning Jewelry*, by Sarah Nehama elaborate and detailed examples of seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century mourning jewelry are illustrated and explained. These objects often featured braided locks of hair of the deceased, sealed inside of rings, brooches, and necklaces. The concept of honoring through hair and objects moved me on an psychological and personal level. In the last year five people in my life have passed on in various ways, ranging from suicide, to overdose, and old age. My work and practice act as a catharsis, and enable an investigation into that which I do not understand. Hair has become an agent to physically research and explore death, mourning, grief, and the transitory nature of life.

In understanding hair in mourning practices, loss itself must also be examined. Texts such as *Between Life & Death* by Robert Kastenbaum, and *On Death and Dying* by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross have been thorough sources on this subject. Chapter eight of *Between Life & Death*, discusses the way in which art, literature, and song serve as a way of communicating with the dead, preserving the relationship and memory of the deceased (Baum 126). Through my art I began exploring my own ritual process of mourning with hair.

Acrylic hair, exists in a space between the real and unreal, and visually is absorbed as the uncanny representation of the separated body. Utilizing this material, I wanted to discuss the body, while emphasizing its absence. What covers and shelters our skin? Clothing, our clothing outlast our bodies, our hair outlasts our bodies. I made a gown of hair, seven feet in length, standing five feet tall. I wove this gown of hair, and rendered it inaccessible, or rather impenetrable. The collar tight to the neck, doubling as a source of protection and suffocation. The dress, a queen's gown. As little girls, women dream to become queens, not because of the beautiful clothing, but because of the absolute positions of power, control, authority, and respect. This piece "Power Suit" is an attempt to take back the power and control that grief inflicts over the bodies that are left living in the wake of loss. My process and research are fundamentally infused, and each support the other in my quest for a deeper understanding of the meaning of life.