


SOME THINGS I CAN'T EXPLAIN

by

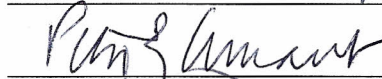
Rahshia Sawyer
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Art and Visual Technology

Committee:

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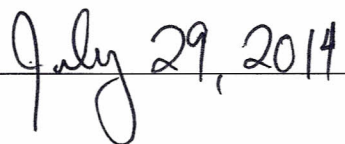
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Dean, College of Visual and
Performing Arts

Date:  _____

Summer Semester 2014
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Some Things I Can't Explain

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art and Visual Technology at George Mason University

by

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Corcoran College of Art and Design, 2004

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Summer Semester 2014
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Fairfax, VA



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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to those who are willing to fail.

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ABSTRACT

SOME THINGS I CAN'T EXPLAIN

Rahshia Sawyer, BFA

George Mason University, 2014

Thesis Director: Peggy Feerick

I make photographs as an inquiry into the existential questions of reality, identity, and the beliefs put in place by the individual. This thesis describes the photographic series of works leading up to and the installation of *Some Things I Can't Explain*, a photographic and sound installation examining the transformation of going from the known to the unknown. This Daedalean journey contrasts *beauty* against loss. The installation creates a multi-sensory experience of floating by combining two complimentary elements -- the large-scale delicate silk photographs coupled with sounds of indistinguishable conversations, and a mechanical hum filling a low-lighted room. The installation dwarfs the viewer, recreating a singular struggle with our emotions -- an experience we all share.



1 - Some Things I Can't Explain 210, 2014. Inkjet on Silk 48 by 72 inches

CHAPTER I

In the midst of life-changing events, questions inevitably arise:

“When will things be normal, again?”

“When will things settle down?”

These inquiries reflect a sense of disconnection from reality, oneself and one's environment. Reality can be defined as the state of things as they actually exist, rather than as they may appear or be imagined. This is a reality that can be touched, held, and seen. The reality to which I refer to is a perceived reality. This existence is shaped by one's identity. It is the lens through which one experiences her surroundings. The perceived reality is the combination of her environment (where she is) and identity (who she is.) An assumption can be made that her perception dictates her reality. If on a dreary rainy day she received exciting news, then the experience of the day would be altered, and her perception of the world would be changed. Another example of this assumption occurs when two people attend the same event. Each person will experience and interpret the event differently. The recount of the event will be significantly different as influenced by each person's perception.

Consciously or not, we are constantly forming and reaffirming our identity and beliefs based on our experiences. The identity doesn't consist of separate and distinct parts resulting in a static finite experience; it solidifies over time and matures, becoming rigid, but never finite. For example, if one's notion of himself is that he is not creative, then this perception will affect his experiences, which will reinforce his belief in creative situations. This notion acts as a filter for the situation, confirming what he believes. These core beliefs guide him through his experiences. If something is perceived as "good," then it can be done again; but if something is perceived as "bad," then it is to be avoided.

The identity is formed by a sense of continuity, uniqueness from others, and connection to a self-identified group. When examined, the identity is an ever-evolving core where one's health, genetics, culture, loved ones, positive and negative experiences, choices made, opportunities missed, and deeds good, bad, and regretful come together to create who one is at the moment. This results in a cause-and-effect relationship between reality and identity. Making the perception and emotion paradoxically dependent.

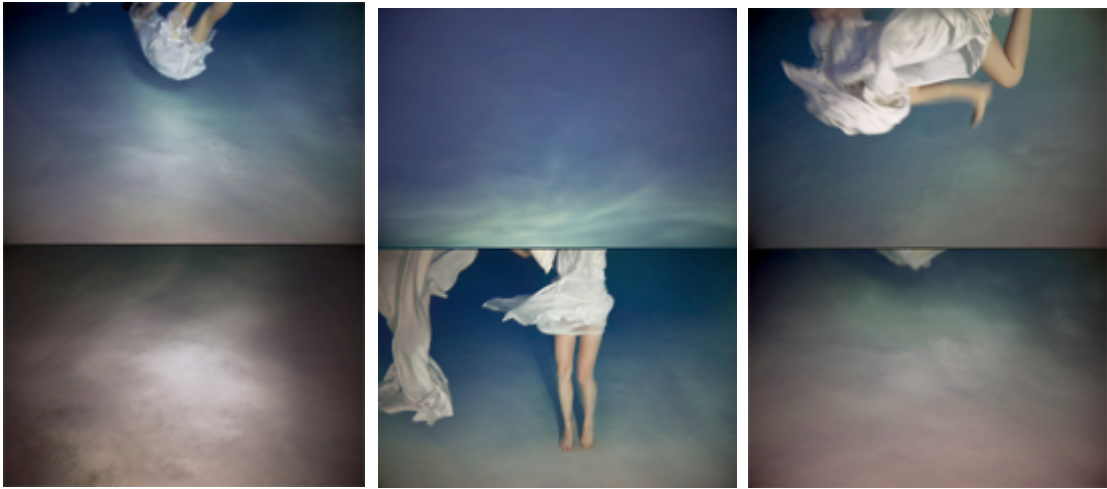


2 - Inflected Forms, 2012. Digital C-print 60 by 30 inches

Inflected forms (2011), poses questions of perceived reality. The *perception* and the *real* are dependent. Reality, on the left, shows the floating figure draped in a cloth. On the right, an image four times the length of its pair, implies the perceived recognition of the other. The imbalance of the diptych, the right being longer than the left, implies the persistence of viewpoint and importance. Experiences happen in a blink of an eye, yet the feeling of what happens persists; acting as an undercurrent, feeding this preceived reality. The two are more than connected; they are dependent – one cannot exist without the other.

Admittedly, “life-changing events” is a broad statement. We all encounter events that cause us to form and/or alter our identity, thus our reality. The type of life-changing events to which I refer here are not situations that temporarily cause one to be uncomfortable or upset. They are irreversible occurrences that force a permanent adaptation, creating an immutable space where one is able to confront and question her identity - who she knows herself to be. These events challenge what one knows to be true and real.

We know that life ends with death. It is inevitable. But our experience of life is that it continues day after day. Time passes and the small effects of entropy aren't visible or recognized. The naïveté of youth lulls us into a belief that we are in control of our body, environment, and will. We can choose to run on command, re-arrange our surroundings, and be who or what we want to be. This façade of reality cocoons us into a sense of security. It creates a predictable structure in which we live. This expected arrangement is what we cling to. It has us believe that we have dominion, and that entropy does not apply. A break in this reality is an opportunity to see past the smooth façade of the illusion of control and permanence. The break allows us to examine the principles that govern our mind and behavior.



3 - Out There 04, 02, 06, 2012. Inkjet 20 by 30 inches

Out There (2011) presents imagery in an unorganized sequence, with the beginning and end shuffled and presented at once. There is no progression, no build up – just the image waiting to be seen, akin to Laurie Fendrich’s “quiet space” for abstract painting. The photographs are vulnerable to any interpretation. I often try to organize my memories, feelings, and facts into a specific narrative, but a satisfactory description eludes me. I add and subtract, rearranging my viewpoint, trying to find the one translation, the one true combination that will explain why I am the way that I am. But each question contradicts the next and negates the latter, leading me in a circular inquiry.

Once one glimpses the construct of his reality and identity, the urge to retreat is instinctual. This threat triggers the freeze, fight or flight instinct. Being provoked will cause an effect not only at a cellular, physiological level, but also at a psychological, emotional level. This instinct will inevitably become a visceral fear, not just in the brain, but also in the body. The body will likely become rigid, prompted into survival mode. Yet at the same time, part of the identity will realize that this fear that has “frozen” the body makes no rational sense. Though rationally one isn’t in a life-threatening situation; the perceived reality is exposed and must be defended.

The assault to the identity isn’t often apparent on the surface, but subconsciously chaos reigns. Statements are made referring to the feeling of being disconnected, “When will things settle down?” or “When will things be normal again?” suggesting that a permanent adaptation is occurring. The subconscious mind understands that it either has to confirm the reality (what is known,) or interpret and adapt to the newly altered reality (what is unknown.)



4 - We Are Not Made of Wood 030, 2012. Inkjet 40 by 60 inches

We are not made of wood (2012) depicts a single figure detached from the ground, adrift in her surroundings. The form is neither rising or falling, but is awkwardly in-between. The image is imbued with experiences of losing control, and creates parallels between themes of fragility and confidence. This series is an attempt to capture the strength it takes to be helpless and out of control. The tenacity of one's will is often overshadowed by her circumstances. The photographs stylistically pull from master post-Impressionist painters. The soft focus underscores the abstract quality relying on movement and form similar to Vincent Van Gogh's paintings. His paintings were not only about the subject, but more importantly, the mood he was looking to create. In a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Ginoux Saint-Rémy, the owner of a café he frequented in Arles, he wrote expressing sympathy for the man's ill wife:

*"Diseases exist to remind us that we are not made of wood,
and it seems to me this is the bright side of it all. And after
that one dreams of taking up one's daily work again, being
less afraid of obstacles, with a new stock of serenity..."*

*- Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Mr. and Mrs. Ginoux Saint-Rémy, 30 or 31
December 1889*



5 - We Are Not Made of Wood 023, 2012. Inkjet 40 by 60 inches



6 - After, We Are Not Made of Wood 006, 2012. Inkjet 40 by 60 inches



7 - After, We Are Not Made of Wood 023, 2012. Inkjet 30 by 20 inches

CHAPTER II

What captures my interest, as an artist, is the interruption of reality. The disruption creates an abstract space for the identity: it is disconnected from reality, and the individual is then compelled to distinguish who they are and what they know to be real. I draw from my own experiences of facing my own mortality, being acutely aware that I may not have a tomorrow. Knowing what my body allowed me to do in the past may no longer be possible in the future as in the present. I am currently in a physical limbo, and at the affect to my emotions, churning through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance - the five stages of grief -- gives me little comfort.

I would (vainly) try to will my acceptance only to be at the consequence of one of the other emotions. The shock of my own mortality forced me to question my purpose, and left me feeling disconnected from my world and myself. What I knew to be true was no longer valid. I was adrift, questioning my relevance. While presenting a brave face, feelings of hopelessness consumed me. Instinctively, I knew if I postponed my existential choice, my feelings of disconnection could take root and become real. This was my personal perplexity I had to untangle. I formed a love/hate relationship with my emotions; wanting to control my responses, understand their meaning, and not wanting to be at their affect. This struggle was not macabre; it was transcendently beautiful -- allowing me to embrace my loss.

Loss is not an emotion openly embraced, and adapting to loss is both important and significantly hard. The emotional waves of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance that occur are referred to as Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief. Although grief is often misinterpreted as a linear experience, these stages are not a continuous singular experience, rather a churning of all the stages. There is a clear starting point: the life-changing event. After the event, the emotions couple together randomly. The pairing of these emotions results in an unorganized examination, testing one's existential resolve.

The ensuing battle provides an opportunity for the transformation of oneself to be set in motion. The process of moving forward and coping can seem impossible, for so much has been changed or lost. When a break in reality occurs, he is faced with a choice. He can choose to revert, or redefine and adapt.

As the constructed identity is no longer a match to his principles, a decision has to be made. Reality no longer presents itself in a way that is predictable or easily understood, but it is more often unpredictable in nature. The relationship that he has with his environment and himself is dismantling. Seeing past that veil reveals the fragility of being alive. Instinctively, he understands the paradox of identity and reality. And he can embrace the simultaneous fear and freedom of understanding that tomorrow is not promised.

Some Things I Can't Explain (2014), a photographic and sound installation examines going from the known to the unknown. This Daedalean journey contrasts *beauty* against loss. The installation creates a multi-sensory experience of floating by combining two complimentary elements -- the large-scale delicate silk photographs coupled with sounds of indistinguishable conversations, and a mechanical hum filling a low-lighted room. The installation dwarfs the viewer, recreating the singular struggle that is an experience we all share.



8 - Some Things I Can't Explain 109, 2014. Inkjet on Silk 48 by 72 inches



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CHAPTER III

The installation creates an environment where the viewer can walk through the maze of suspended billowy diaphanous silk panels, evoking a contemplative solitary public environment. The struggle between the floating figure, the barren blue landscape, and the material signifies our relationship with our emotions. The panels float at varying heights above the floor with ample space around them for physical movement. Their transparent quality creates a layering effect that moves and changes, depending on the viewer's position. As the viewer descends into the space, the photographs are first viewed fully saturated as the environment of light blue transitions into black. The weightless figure and material engulf each other, unknowingly dependent on the other. At the end, both the figure and material have surrendered to the conflict. Upon ascending back through the panels, the viewer reads the unsaturated photographs from the reverse side, as if recalling the memory of the image. The nonlinear narrative seeks to reveal the façade of reality, exposing the beauty within adaptation.



25 - Installation view of Some Things I Can't Explain



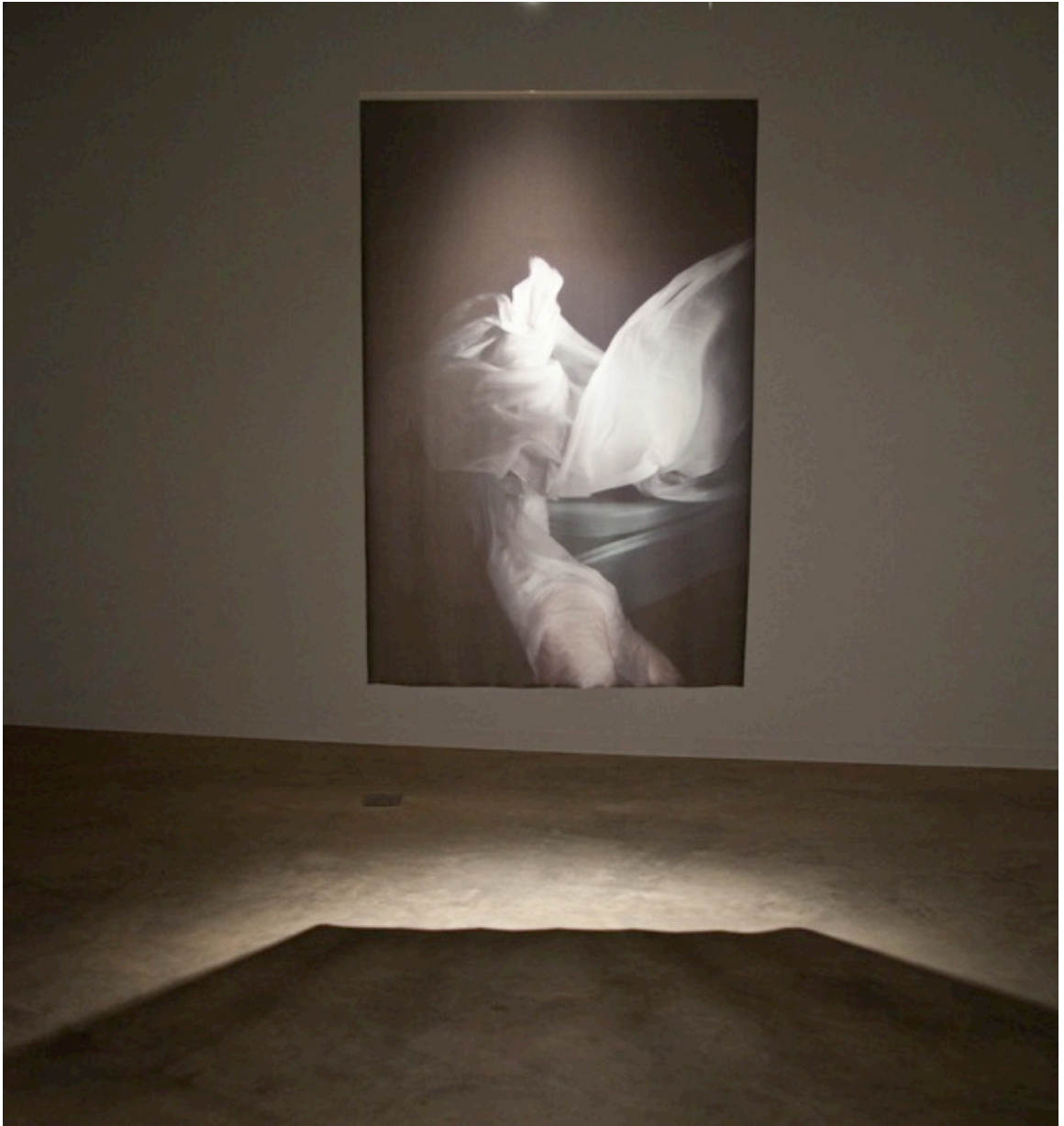
26 - Installation view of Some Things I Can't Explain



27 - Installation view of Some Things I Can't Explain



28 - Installation view of Some Things I Can't Explain



29 - Installation view of Some Things I Can't Explain

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BIOGRAPHY

Rahshia Sawyer (American, b. 1976) her photographs consider the uncertainty and ambiguity of the human condition. Rahshia's achievements include the 2012 Inaugural Dublin Biennial, a \$25,000 award from France's Francios Schneider Foundation, exhibitions in 17 states, and George Mason's Award for Academic and Artistic excellence. In 2014 she received her M.F.A. from George Mason University in Virginia, and in 2004 her B.F.A. at the Corcoran College of Art & Design in Washington DC. A California native, who grew up in Thailand, and currently lives in the Washington D.C. metro area.