Beauty Within Decay

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Abstract

Beauty Within Decay is a series of sculpture that examines and obverts the idea of grotesqueness of decay. This body of work presents three life-sized female figures, along with four smaller sculptures, representing my creative processes. These sculptures capture decay as a natural cycle that creates beauty by giving a new identity to a degrading form. Drawing inspiration from a wide range of sources these abstracted female figures are layered with the evidence of events that have shaped them as survivors. Their skin tells a story, reflective of theories about the concept of monstrosity linking decay with the idea of unexpected byproducts of destruction. I hope that my negotiation of complex source materials and layered processes results in a rich tapestry of philosophical meaning within the sculptural forms.

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LAKE FOREST COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

Beauty Within Decay

by

Ashley Ackerman

April 25, 2016

The report of the investigation undertaken as a Senior Thesis, to carry one course of credit in the Department of Art and Art History

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Eli Robb, Chairperson

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ABSTRACT:

*Beauty Within Decay* is a series of sculpture that examines and obverts the idea of grotesqueness of decay. This body of work presents three life-sized female figures, along with four smaller sculptures, representing my creative processes. These sculptures capture decay as a natural cycle that creates beauty by giving a new identity to a degrading form. Drawing inspiration from a wide range of sources these abstracted female figures are layered with the evidence of events that have shaped them as survivors. Their skin tells a story, reflective of theories about the concept of monstrosity linking decay with the idea of unexpected byproducts of destruction. I hope that my negotiation of complex source materials and layered processes results in a rich tapestry of philosophical meaning within the sculptural forms.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

iii  Abstract

1  Introduction

2  Physical Description
   3  Wisp
   5  Steadfast
   6  Cradle & Egg
   8  Wilting Aspirations
   9  Tangled Path & Running Fascination
 10  Encapsulation of the naïve

11  Material & Process

12  Themes
   12  The Monstrous & the Grotesque
   14  Decay

14  Artistic References
   14  Ana Mendieta
   16  Alexander McQueen
   16  Tom Czarnopys
   17  Dustin Yellin
   19  Susan Sensemann

20  Conclusion

21  Works Cited
INTRODUCTION

*Beauty Within Decay* is a series of eight plaster sculptures. This body of work is made up of three life-size human figures and five small abstracted figural forms. In various ways I draw in influences from ancient sculptures, contemporary artists, social theorists, and gothic genre novels and films. The three largest sculptures are of women distorted in different ways by processes of decay. Along with the life-sized figures, there are fragmentary sculptures, which began as byproducts of my creative process. In addition to these sculptural works, watercolor preliminaries and gesture drawings help connect my thought process and notions of decay, and along with ideas from philosophy, all came together to form my final body of work. In this series, I am exploring ideas of decay while experimenting with the properties and capabilities of plaster as a physical manifestation of the destructive and re-creative processes I am investigating.

*Beauty Within Decay* examines elements of the grotesque, the monstrous and the foreign, as presented in the Gothic literary genre. The grotesque is an artistic expression of the estrangement and alienation that grips mankind when our belief in a perfect and protected natural order is weakened or destroyed. As Wolfgang Kayser states in his famous analysis, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, “The grotesque is concerned with the estranged world, with its absurdity and incomprehensibility” (1). We see this grotesque foreignness in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein’s monster, for instance (and the film monsters based upon it), or more recently, in Zombie literature and film. In both cases, dead matter comes to life. While these monsters evoke the natural and beautiful cycles of biodegradation and fertilization, winter and spring, stagnancy and growth, they do so in a way that is frightening, disturbing, and alien. This uncertainty, this erasing and
redoubling of identity are among the meanings of the sculptural works in *Beauty Within Decay*.

This figurative series showcase processes of decay in order to expand our thoughts about the decomposition process. Decay is often perceived as a destructive and evil force, but in my work, I highlight decay as a process that recycles things that are broken, returning them back to nature. In nature, nothing is wasted: every dead discarded thing is the seed of new life.

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION**

As a group there is a range of physical attributes that talks about decay as a cycle. In the gallery space the show was arranged in an oval configuration that suggests this continuous process. The two figurative works, *Wisp* [fig.1] and *Steadfast* [fig.2], have the most apparent textured surfaces and as the figure becomes less apparent in the smaller, more abstracted works, the rest of the sculptures in the series have a surface treatment that is meant to be more smooth and flowing. The similarity in the surface treatment and the curvilinear formal qualities of the smaller sculptures refers to the entropy system of degradation of matter, ultimately resulting in uniformity (Merriam-Webster, “Entropy”). This sameness refers to a philosophical connection to the world no matter what shape one will end up. Texture is a way to express what is happening to the forms at different stages of a process and to unify it as a whole. Uniformity is also seen as chaos because it destroys our perception of the natural order of things. The constant mixing and mingling of opposites is incomprehensible to us.
Exploring ideas of entropy resulted in a body of work that departs from the figurative form and gradually develops to the abstract, liberating our conventional understanding of the decay cycle. *Beauty Within Decay* does not focus on the respective identities of the individual figures; rather, the figures embody a process of change. As curator Vivien Knight and painter Alan Gouk write, “they do not recreate the outward identity and appearance of individual bodies; rather, these figures attempt to evoke forms that express not just the structure of the body, but also its essence and the nature of its movement; where the spectator experiences a physical empathy with the figures” (12). This is the methodology that explains the shift from figurative forms to abstracted sculptures.

*Wisp*

The *Wisp* sculpture has a textured surface that speaks about the weathering process of decay [see Figure 1]. *Wisp* is a seated female figure. The trailing flaps of skin emphasize forward movement and the process of change. From the back, however, it seems like drapery is being blown onto and past the figure, making wing-like appendages, but also evoking a shroud. There is a clear separation between the front of the figure and the back of the figure. Contrasted to the smooth back of the figure the front of the figure is heavily textured to give the appearance of water running down the form. The front of the figure is also colored by applying light washes of watercolor to enhance the appearance that the sculpture was exposed to water as it decayed.

Along with the watercolor detail the *Wisp* figure has other elements that indicate that the work embodies the process of weathering. This decomposition involves slow
smoothing and shaving of the plaster surface. This process metaphorically allows an individual to forget the past, because the weathering process acts as an eraser by slowly evening and polishing the surface causing it to lose physical details. Geologically, weathering is “the various mechanical and chemical processes that cause exposed rock to decompose” (“Weathering”). I use the effects of weathering to convey metaphorical and physical meanings. The metaphorical meaning is that some people have to forget their past in order to move on, lest they destroy themselves by means of excessive drinking, addiction to narcotics, or recklessness, etc. The process of forgetting, in terms of decay, involves breaking down the physical form, severing its connections with the past. The styling of the *Wisp* figure was initially influenced by the sculpture *Nike of Samothrace* — also known as *Winged Victory* (see Figure 3) — a depiction of the Greek goddess of Victory (Nike) in the form of a winged angel standing defiantly on the prow of a ship, braced against the strong wind, which blows through her garments (Marie-Bénédicte). According to scholar and historian Marie-Bénédicte from the Louvre Museum, the details and stylization of this deity expand on the identity of this foreign sculpture being taken out of its original context and placed in another—making it a foreign body. This figure was sculpted to reflect extreme weather conditions such as ravishing winds and punishing waves. These conditions required the garments and hair to be styled dynamically and differently than those of a figure in a temperate setting: “The colossal work was placed in a rock niche that had been dug into a hill; it overlooked the theater of the Sanctuary of the Great Gods” (Marie-Bénédicte). Being placed outside exposed the sculpture to the elements, where physical weathering could take place on the surface of the figure. The highly theatrical presentation, combined with the goddess's
monumentality and the vigor of her forward-thrusting body—all forces complemented by the process of actual decay—inspired the *Wisp* figure.

An additional inspiration for the *Wisp* figure as a reflection on weathering is The *Spirit of Ecstasy*, an ornament adorning the hoods of Rolls-Royce luxury cars. It is the source of the figure’s dynamic gesture (see Figure 4). In designing *The Spirit of Ecstasy*, sculptor Charles Sykes intended to design an icon to represent speed and grace as a reflection of the elegance and performance of the cars (Hastings). These sources of inspiration not only helped me visualize the figure, but also helped me develop a personal backstory for the original identity of the figure. After millennia facing the elements, the power of this ancient lady still graces the hood of the car. *Wisp* investigates the timelessness of this weathered female figure.

*Steadfast*

In contrast to the whimsical nature of the *Wisp*, the second figure, titled *Steadfast* (see Figure 2), is posed to talk about stability. *Steadfast* is a crouching figure based on the Hellenistic sculpture titled *Crouching Aphrodite* (see Figure 5). There are major slices cut out of this sculpture, mostly on the underbelly. Within these gashes, there are reflective materials that create light patterns below to reference an aspect of the figure hidden from the audience. The reflective material also references the end product of the decay of rocks within the earth, referred to as the “rock cycle” (Marshak 241). In the rock cycle, rock is broken down and re-formed by pressure and heat to create igneous, sedimentary, or metamorphic rocks (see Figure 6). A focal point of this particular work is the crystalline structure that forms as rock melts. Artist Christina West’s sculptural work in the show
Unmet used layering to show the transition between one’s own state of mind compared to another person’s: “Her process is to sculpt fully articulated faces, and then carve into them to expose interior strata of color and pattern, similar to the process of excavation, of removing material with the aim of discovering new information” (Sculptures of Christina West) (see Figure 7). West exposes the interior layers of an individual’s history. Her interpretation is of human memory compares it to the layers within the earth’s crust in search of one’s core.

In keeping with the geological theme, the key to this figure is the resemblance to geodes that come from volcanic eruptions. According to geologist Stephen Marshak, the rock cycle is “the progressive transformation of Earth materials from one rock type to another” (240). The geode is a byproduct of fragments of rock melding together through a destructive process to create something beautiful. As individuals I believe it is through our most challenging times that we find our gems, the special qualities that make us distinct. These gems are the characteristics that define one’s personality. Hence, my use of mirrors to represent the geodes, and their placement near the heart and center of gravity.

Cradle & Egg

The last large figure in this series, titled Cradle & Egg, references biodegradation (See Figure 8).

Biodegradation is nature's way of recycling wastes, or breaking down organic matter into nutrients that can be used by other organisms: "Degradation" means decay, and the "bio-" prefix means that the decay is carried out by an assortment of bacteria, fungi, insects, worms, and other organisms that eat dead material and recycle it into new forms. (“Environmental Inquiry”)
**Cradle & Egg** is a sculptural pairing of a partial torso and a sphere that references a head. The distorted torso only has one arm-like appendage. The chest has a major tear in it. The torso’s gesture is an arch that cradles the round sphere where its head should be. The bottom of the sculpture twists upward into a shape reminiscent of a cradle or the beginning of a growing tree. This work addresses the continuation and extension of life going beyond the singular bodily form. In both the sphere and the torso there is the presence of flora breaking or covering the sculptures. This growth is evidence of the regeneration that follows bio-degradation.

Flora, or plant life, is an instrument of biodegradation, where plant roots break apart dead organic matter in order to absorb nutrients. As a result of the nutrients left in deceased flesh, condensed plant growth replaces dead body parts leaving silhouettes. This silhouette is an example of how the presence of the dead can still leave impressions on the living world. Thus flora while fresh and alive acts as a constant reminder of the past. Flowers for example biodegrade. The phrase “you reap what you sow” might be cliché, but the idea that reminders of one’s past continue to live on endures. Floral artist Kirk Cheng uses flowers and plant foliage to reference how people use flowers as symbols of growth and death, a symbolic ritual use that echoes flora’s natural functions. Cheng’s art also, like mine, bridges the gap between beauty and decay. His show *Circle of Life* (see Figure 9) expresses the meaning of flowers and plant life in every milestone of our lives. Cheng says: “The process as it dies and dries up is actually how we understand beauty; there is a kind of romance in it” (Cheng). Having plant life present in nearly every stage in our lives symbolically encompasses a continuous cycle. Having representations of
floral elements in my body of work, like Cheng’s, links it to personal and familiar associations.

_Wilting Aspirations_

The characteristics of a plant can be found in both the sculpture’s title, _Wilting Aspirations_, and in its gesture (see Figure 10). This work directly references monstrosity and decay because the work resembles both a flower and a human hand and forearm. This disembodied arm can be linked to associations of zombies and the famous gothic genre work _Frankenstein_, which is about a scientist that creates a monster out of parts of deceased humans. According to literary theorist Judith Halberstam, monstrosity is intertwined with decay because “the monster’s body always is in a state of decomposition, it constantly threatens to unravel, to fail to hold together” (Halberstam 127). This work’s front and back are treated and perceived in two different ways. The back resembles the human hand, where the grotesque and monstrous quality is enhanced by the smears of charcoal. The front on the other hand is left pristine and white. The front appears to look like a doll wearing a dress. The contrast between the two sides also references the creation of Frankenstein’s monster. “By his very composition, he can never be one thing, never represent only a singular anxiety. His formation out of bits and pieces of life and death, of criminals and animals, animate and inanimate objects, means that he is always in danger of breaking down into his constitutive parts” (Halberstam 100). Dividing the work into two distinct faces prevents the work from having a single identity. Thus, it comes off as dangerous because of the contrast of the two different sides making the work hard to read.
Tangled Path & Running Fascination

In this sculptural pair there is a dialogue between the internal and external states of being. This pair of sculptures focuses on weathering as their source of deterioration (see Figure 11). They appear to be formed by the wind. Their styling is very similar and yet they complement each other by having different axial orientations—one horizontal, and the other vertical, embodying different drafts of wind. The two sculptures have similar textures. The vertical sculpture has a liquefying, wet texture on its exterior, and a smoothed and polished texture for its interior. The horizontal sculpture reverses the textural surfaces.

Along with their appearance, the two figures are also foils to each other in terms of their meanings. The horizontal sculpture titled Tangled Path individually represents the passage of time and the unexpected meanderings of life. When one is living in the moment these unexpected paths in life may not always be seen as constructive and may even be understood as destructive. Thus, only with time can some foreign and unfamiliar experiences find their value. This work is about the journey, not the destination.

The second, vertical sculpture, titled Running Fascination, has personal meaning for me about goal orientation and never feeling satisfied. I always need a fascination to drive me. It is extremely hard for me to enjoy the present because I am constantly looking towards the future. Constantly striving for the next thing is taxing and wears both mentally and physically.

Viewed as a pair, Tangled Path & Running Fascination reflect the internal and external processes of decay. The internal process of decay is about the mental state. If
one is mentally strained it can result in extreme emotions that can lead in the most severe case to one’s death. The external process of decay is physical wear and tear on the body that restrict its ability to function properly. Together this pair addresses the connections between these two processes of decay.

Encapsulatio

Encapsulation of the Naive

Beyond the internal and external state of a body there are two distinct kinds of bodies that Encapsulation of the Naive addresses. These two bodies are the mundane body and the foreign body. The most prominent sculpture in this set is a wave-like form that appears to threaten to engulf two smaller sculptures beneath its over-hanging lip (See Figure 12). These two smoothed and curvilinear sculptures contrast in scale, surface texture, and bodily meaning, from the complete and normal body of the smaller two sculptures to the unfamiliar and abstract body of the dominating wave figure. Another contrast between the sculptures is their relationship to the human. The larger sculpture’s connection to the human is difficult to discern: it appears foreign and unfamiliar.

Foreignness, as I discussed, is connected to monstrosity and decay. To quote Halberstam again: “a monster combines in one body fears of the foreign and the perverse” (43). The larger form’s undulating ribbons are ultimately unfamiliar but its smooth surface texture loosely connects the work to the human.

In contrast to this unidentifiable sculpture, the two smaller forms are appealing because they tacitly invite the viewers to pick them up. The smooth form of these small sculptures is crafted to fit in the palm of the hand. These smaller sculptures are complete and whole, unable to blend with the large figure. Their unity closes off their
understanding of the abstracted body. When placed with the larger wave figure, the various differences invite a discussion about the contrast of a normal body to a foreign body.

MATERIAL & PROCESS

These works are a result of the various formal qualities of decay as a transformation process. The main material I used was plaster, a material that itself has connections with my theme of decay as a mode of transformation. For the plaster starts out as powder, and when mixed with water it turns into a liquid. Then it dries to a solid. The nature of the material itself transforms. Additionally, the materials used in this series reference organic processes found in nature. The bases for these freestanding sculptures are armatures made of wood and expanded metal lath. From these base materials, the “skin” of the figure is an accumulation of plaster layers. Within some of the figures, cracking or abrasion provides evidence of decay. The cracks and hollow cavities of these forms are encrusted in some places with materials that reference nature, such as rocks, moss, watercolor, and glass. I approach these works in different ways, using additive and subtractive methods, smearing the plaster when wet, and breaking down the plaster when dry, as well as applying layers with different viscosities. When the plaster was dry I shaped the surface with a chisel and/or hammer to break down areas. The hammer was used for extensive excavation to fix interior supports. I even mixed other materials into the wet plaster to create different textures. In the final stages of my production I spattered, drizzled, and flung low viscosity mixtures of plaster onto the surface to create a wet appearance. In some cases smoothing and polishing the exterior was necessary and that
was achieved using a rasp, file, and various grits of sandpaper. The finishing touches included applying watercolor to the surface of the plaster to give the surface a light touch of color that connects to natural processes.

Besides getting inspiration from decay I drew inspiration from ancient art from museums for the concepts behind the figures. I started creating a figurative body of work but as I learned and experimented with ideas of decay I developed works that gradually became abstract. The link between my initial figurative sculptures to my abstracted small sculptures is *Cradle & Egg*. This development was the first time as an artist that I experimented with abstraction in sculpture. The organization of my works in the gallery space represents my thought process from figurative to abstract. Abstraction was my way of presenting the grotesque and the monstrous because it is unfamiliar and incomprehensible.

THEMES

The sculptural forms took shape when I used abstraction as a freeing method that opened my eyes to new possibilities of sculptural form that I had not considered prior to this revelation. This method of art making helped me better connect my themes of the monstrous, the grotesque, and decay.

The Monstrous & the Grotesque

As I stated, *Beauty Within Decay* examines elements of grotesqueness, monstrosity, foreignness, and the Gothic literary genre. This was the philosophical inspiration for the work. The grotesque is an artistic expression of the estrangement and
alienation that grips mankind when belief in a perfect and protective natural order is weakened or destroyed. According to Wolfgang Kayser, author of the book *The Grotesque*, “The grotesque, therefore, is concerned with the estranged world, with its absurdity and incomprehensibility. Surprise, confusion, the monstrous and the sinister are some of its characteristic elements, and in its macabre universe the laws of nature are suspended, the inanimate comes to life, and life itself is at the mercy of unseen forces” (1). Fear of the unknown is centrally fear about death. This uncharted state leaves room for interpretation for it may mean a fresh beginning, such as reincarnation. Knowing what is beyond death is seen as monstrous because it is taboo to know beyond life. To have a creature such as a zombie or Frankenstein’s monster come back from the unknown is something dreadful because it knows the beyond and we are not prepared to handle such knowledge. To highlight uncertainty and the erasure of identity are the functions of the sculptural works in *Beauty Within Decay*.

The relationship between inward and outward appearance where the conflict represents the monstrous is also examined in Oscar Wilde’s Gothic genre novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The main character, Dorian Gray sells his soul to be forever young and to have all of his misdeeds represented on a painting of himself rather than on his actual body. Because he is judged by his outward, unchanging appearance, Dorian is able to get away with many sins. As time goes on Dorian may look the same but his inward personality dramatically changes and his portrait reflects the grotesque monster he becomes. Identifying a person’s character with his or her appearance, as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is to see the person through a narrow lens.
Decay

Ultimately, as its title indicates, this figurative series showcases processes of decay in order to expand viewers’ thoughts about the decomposition process, a balancing act between the human and nature’s encroachment upon it. It is only natural that we eventually return back into nature but it is the fear of how we break down that makes people unsure about it. Decay is often perceived as a destructive and evil force, but in my use of decay, I highlight it as a process that recycles things that are broken, returning them back into nature. In this series, decay acts as a source of transformation that allows for growth and development either by erasing the past or by crystallizing it in order to allow the individual to move forward. This idea of transformation fascinates me as an artist because it is not a predictable system, but rather one that is unique for every situation; although every living thing dies, each is nonetheless transformed by death in a unique way. This central idea that decay acts a potential source of re-generation or growth is the major theme of the work.

ARTISTIC REFERENCES

In addition to the Nike of Samothrace, Gothic genre literature like Frankenstein and The Picture of Dorian Gray, and the work of Christina West and Kirk Cheng, Beauty Within Decay reflects the influence of a range of other artists as well, whose work is different in form, process and points of reference, but is united by its concern for the human body’s susceptibility to the forces of nature and the effects of time.

Ana Mendieta
Ana Mendieta was a feminist artist in the 1970’s who focused on identity and nature. She used performance art and sculpture among other forms to understand these two themes. Much of her work resonates with metaphors of death, rebirth, and spiritual transformation, using interlacing modes of art such as land, body, and performance art. Mendieta’s art and my own are linked in that nature serves as an extension of the female body. The cornerstone of Mendieta’s art is her attempt to connect with her roots, as she was exiled from Cuba due to political events that ultimately escalated into the Cuban Revolution. This detachment from home inspired her to make Earth-Body-sculptures (Bryan-Wilson 15). In describing her Earth-Body-sculptures Mendieta writes: "I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body..."(Barreras del Rio 10).

This extension of nature is implied in Cradle & Egg, where some of the figure’s limbs are degraded. The devastation of the figure does not make it a partial figure, though, because there are natural elements that extend beyond the dismembered limb, making the form complete. My tailored meaning of decay resonates with Mendieta’s Earth-Body-sculptures. She immersed or inscribed her own body within nature; I use decay as a transformation rather than just a dilapidation.

In Imagen de Yagul Mendieta lay shrouded in an ancient Zapotec grave letting natural forms visually eat up her bodily form (See figure 13) (Frank). In this work tiny white flowers appear to devour and obscure her body in a manner that is understood as the decaying process of a deceased person. Even though the foliage abstracts her
silhouette, the flowers’ growth patterns complete the degrading form, thus nature becomes an extension of her own body. Similarly, in *Cradle & Egg* the sculpture comprises fragments of the human body, which are being revitalized by flora.

**Alexander McQueen**

Along with the employment of nature, renowned *Avant-garde* fashion designer Alexander McQueen pushed the boundaries between fashion and art, playing with contrasting ideas to create new ideas of beauty. McQueen was a prominent intellectual artist at the forefront of progressive fashion (Cartner-Morley). What relates his work to my own is how he directly connects beauty and misfortune in his garments (see Figure 14). About his collection *Gothic Masquerade* McQueen states that he is dealing with the concept of the dark side of a person’s personality and the mingling of opposites such as life / death, happiness / sadness, and good / evil (Bolton). Similar to my work where each sculpture tells a story, each artwork tells a story for McQueen. His work was deeply rooted in nature, using natural elements to enhance his artwork’s meaning. He conducted extensive material searches and textile experimentation to create clothes that physically told a story about change. He used items associated with death and the grotesque such as skulls, taxidermal animals, and blood, and incorporated them into his art form, which is widely acknowledged for being beautiful. He was able to change societal standards of what is beautiful by crafting art that frames destruction as transformation.

**Tom Czarnopys**
Sculptor Tom Czarnopys transforms old material and repurposes it giving it a new life. What relates Tom Czarnopys’s art to my own is his philosophy about decay and his relation of nature to the human form. According to Fred Camper, writer for The Chicago Reader, Czarnopys constructed human figures that were about his impulse to locate the self within nature (Camper). These figures were constructed on chicken wire armatures or from casts taken from the artist’s own body and overlaid with birch bark (see Figure 15). Our works have physical similarities, but differ in that my intention is to discuss decay metaphorically, while Czarnopys takes decaying material to have a direct connection with the process. His main objective is personal exploration and the remembrance of his childhood when he felt closest to nature. Czarnopys’s works are based on his memories as a boy and he points to "another major current in the work: the coexisting sense of decay and growth” (Camper). In the woods, growth depends on decay. If you take a tree that has rotted out, it's basically become a tree shape of sphagnum moss, and if you tear into it a little bit there's nothing but root systems from all the things taking nutrients from it” (Camper). My collection investigates how development is not always constructive, and how the times that are not positive are just as important to one’s story. The exchange of nutrients and the shifting of form speak to an individual impacting his or her surroundings. The need for decay in the environment speaks to how someone can influence the world after one moves on.

Dustin Yellin

A different way to leave one’s mark on the world is to spread social knowledge that can be relatable to the widest possible number of viewers. Sculptor Dustin Yellin
specializes in cuboid collages made from acrylic paint and cut-out pictures from magazines, newspapers, books, etc., which are glued onto multiple sheets of glass. The process of collage resonates with how Dr. Frankenstein selected the makeup of his ultimate human out of disembodied parts. When Yellin’s glass sheets are fused together they create a three-dimensional, suspended image (Cowles). The body of his work I am focusing on was produced for New York City Ballet’s *Annual Art Series*. The series consisted of twelve six-foot-eight-inch-tall effigies, which Yellin called “Psychogeographies”, or archives in the shape of humans (see Figure 16). His purpose was to redefine the insides of individuals. In order to bring humans together and to evolve together towards a brighter future, we need to become one. Yellin claims “that countries, borders and religions are not relevant when it comes to humankind. Instead of being divided by external elements, [he] believes in exchanging as much as we can before the world of differences we produce and live in collapses” (Collins). Yellin’s exploration of the human character is a patchwork of ideas, images and backgrounds. This collection speaks to a multifaceted personality, which grows and changes as Yellin layers the glass slides together. The life of the individual images that make up these figures refers to the decay process. Ripped away from their sources, they take on a new life when these fragmented pictures are re-formed to make Psychogeographies. The fact that these fragments do not completely compose a unified body speaks to the act of decay as a method of re-creation. Form is constructed, plural and multiple, not fixed. Yellin explains this lens into human identity by layering pictorial images to explore the physical and mental. *Beauty Within Decay* is also about a constantly transforming identity, not fixed to static criteria, but multi-layered. I argue that character is just as susceptible to outward
appearance as one’s body, as they are both constantly changing and are affected by one another.

**Susan Sensemann**

Susan Sensemann experiments with the internal and external in a personal and biographical way. Sensemann is a photographer and a painter who uses surface treatment as critical to meaning, as do I in *Beauty Within Decay*. My works leave echoes of the figures’ past as a way to enrich their characters as they continue on to the next stage the way Susan Sensemann uses the visual condition of the skin as a method to transform or alter her identity. She achieves this by digitally grafting external sources onto her photographic self-portraits to mark a personal change in identity (See Figure 17). Leisa Rundquist describes the foil of the outer appearance on Sensemann’s work as “Skin. The soft, pliable material which covers the human body: dividing the inside from outside. A visible measure of youth and beauty. The largest sensory organ. I play with skin, transform it, and allows its decay” (Rundquist). Sensemann uses her skin to reference external cultural identifiers. She also reveals internal elements by allowing her skin to degrade.

These identifiers extend to modern society’s superficial emphasis on the quality of one’s outer appearance as an indicator of inner character. As Judith Halberstam remarks, skin also refers to “certain nineteenth-century monsters, [and] becomes a kind of metonym for the human; and its color, its pallor, its shape mean everything within the semiotic of monstrosity” (25). The appearance and surface quality of the skin that is manipulated with the decaying process transforms the body into an unfamiliar
“monstrous” body within my work. This play of interior vs. exterior is one of the themes I explore in my own art as well.

CONCLUSION

This series is about decay and describes and evokes ideas of the unfamiliar. I drew inspiration beginning with ancient sculpture and delving into various works of contemporary artists. By learning about these artists I was able to better explore the body with thematic ideas that interest me. My intentions in Beauty Within Decay are to capture the beauty of decay in connection with the female form in the process of being destroyed. Each of the figures and small sculptures embody different processes or states of decay. This series involves a process of opening up new ideas with the intention of generating critical consideration and re-consideration that there is something to gain from the decaying process. Even though the original identity of the figures is barely present, processes of destruction signal a metamorphosis to a new form. In nature, nothing is wasted.
Works Cited


Figure 1. Wisp, Hydrocal and watercolor with boot. April 20, 2016.
Figure 2. *Steadfast*. Hydrocal with mirror. April 20, 2016.
Figure 3. Nike of Samothrace. 3rd Cent B.C. Sculpture. Louvre, France. 
Figure 6. Rock Chart.

Figure 7: Christina A. West, Unmet #6, #7, 2014. Pigmented hydrocal.
Figure 8. *Cradle & Egg*, Hydrocal, moss, and watercolor. April 20, 2016.
Figure 10. *Wilting Aspirations*. Hydrocal and graphite. April 20, 2016.
Figure 11. *Tangled Path & Running Fascination*, Hydrocal. April 20, 2016.
Figure 12. *Encapsulation of the Naïve*. Hydrocal. April 20, 2016.
Figure 16: Dustin Yellin. Three “Psychogeographies.”
http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/08/dustin-yellin-art-brooklyn-utopia
Figure 17: Susan Sensemann, “Photography 10-47; 12-47.”
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