

CIRCLES

By

JAMIE MARIE WAELCHLI

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
The requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Department of Fine Arts

MAY 2007

To the faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of JAMIE MARIE WAELCHLI find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Chair

CIRCLES

Abstract

By Jamie Marie Waelchli, MFA
Washington State University
May 2007

Chair: Michelle Forsyth

In *Circles* I examine how contemporary society's focus on autonomy is fostering isolation. I explore how repetition and ritual can be used for comfort in times of loneliness. I also consider how repetition can be a negative force, such as in the case of addiction. I regard how productive repetitions are culturally sanctioned, while comfort repetitions are generally discouraged. The concept of repetition is used both physically and visually as a thread that unites my digital and drawn work.

In my drawings, the element most often repeated is circular mark making. I have become interested in receipts as a surface for meditative circular drawing exercises. Receipts are a poignant symbol of contemporary ritual and culturally sanctioned repetition. They become intimate evidence of the stores and items an individual relies upon when collected over time.

In my video work, I reflect on commonplace personal repetitions for comfort; chewing gum and taking an evening bath. In *Bathe* you are seeing many nights of bathing in November through December 2006 superimposed over each other. In this way, the footage becomes a record that shows how each night, the same private ritual took place over and over. In the gum performance, *Little Pleasures*, an act that is intended as a simple comfort escalates into an act of self-torture.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
SECTION	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. REPETITION & CIRCLES.....	2
3. DRAWING.....	6
4. VIDEO AND SURVAILLANCE.....	7
5. CONCLUSION.....	10
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	12

INTRODUCTION

Many Americans experience isolation as a result of a contemporary emphasis on self-sufficiency. In my practice I combine digital video and drawing to consider how this focus on autonomy fosters seclusion.¹ In *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*, Christine Ross writes that people have become detached from life and one another. She explains that in the 1970's, ideals such as discipline, prohibition and repression became devalued, and the expectation of independence based on individual initiative rose up in their place. As Ross states, "These norms of independence structure the users' (non)relationships. They produce individual beings in search for identity."²

Circles consists of two digital video works and a series of repetitive circular drawings. The first video work, *Bathe*, is projected onto a suspended eight by four foot sheet of light box plexi-glass. *Bathe* involves layering transparent footage from sixteen solitary baths. The second video piece, *Little Pleasures*, is shown on a large television monitor. *Little Pleasures* involves footage from a performance involving the intake of five packages of gum. The drawings include a collection of receipt works that span November 2006 through March 2007. There is also a collection of thought maps and mixed media collages on vellum and wood. I consider my work to be a self-evaluation, as well as a reflection on the repetition and isolation of contemporary life.

1. "Marriage is at its lowest rate in recorded American History". (Cowen <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/19/business/19scene.html?em&ex=1177128000&en=a4fb6c2b36b56663&ei=5087%0A>). The people who do eventually marry tend to stay single for longer and 37 percent become single again after divorce. (Noxon 161). More than a quarter of all households in the United States are a single adult living alone. Fewer members of generations X, those born 1965-1979, and Y, born 1980 to late 1990's, are married than previous generations. (Hobbs <http://www.unmarried.org/statistics.html#single>).

2. Ross xxiii

REPETITION & CIRCLES

I've long sought out the repetition, both physically and visually, in my practice. This impulse began with the image of small table fan that I consistently repeated in my paintings and drawings. I was fascinated with the circular shapes of the fan and the rhythm of its movement. This shape evolved into a series of concentric circles that created an illusionist pull to the center. I became interested in the meditative exercise of drawing a mathematically perfect circle freehand. This impulse grew to include dissecting the circle with a line down the center, and then a second line perpendicular to the first. In this way the circle would be dissected into quarters. I then proceed to dissect the quarters into eights and then into sixteenths. This action is repeated indefinitely, until a rhythm develops between the lines of the spokes. The thrust of these lines direct one's eye simultaneously inward and outward. Energy radiates out of the tension between the opposite pulls. I strive to achieve geometric precision in this endeavor. This has been relaxing and fulfilling, especially when done at length with multiple circles. The resulting image never achieves mathematical perfection, but instead takes on an organic quality. The exercise may be completed on a variety of surfaces, but transparent vellum at least 11" x 17" is preferable. The pen should be an extra fine pilot precise V5 rolling ball with black ink.

People may develop rituals and habits as a way to heal themselves and find order during times of isolation and distress. Repetition and ritual are explored in psychoanalytic theories of identity. In his Nirvana Principal, Freud suggested a person must maintain mental tranquility by discharging tensions.³ One way that people reduce tension related to

3. Storr 23

trauma is by repeating the circumstances of that trauma. This can occur either through talking about it, or by re-enacting the trauma using symbols. This process gives the person a sense of control over the shock they experienced.⁴ Freud believed that obsessive ritual could shield one's ego from confronting things that are repressed, while simultaneously expressing those impulses.⁵ He explained, "The neurotic repeats instead of remembering."⁶

Societies are born out of acts of repetition. Pierrette Rouleau Stukes discussed Judith Butler's observations on how repetition shapes culture and gender in the article "The Symptomatic Repetition of Identity: Gender and the Traumatic Gestalt." Similar to the way that children learn the alphabet by singing it over and over, they become familiar with gender roles and acceptable behaviors by seeing these roles enacted by adults time and time again.⁷

In my drawings, circular marks are repeated. In my video work, I reflect on personal rituals. In this exhibition these rituals include eating behaviors or taking an evening bath. I desire to repeat the same physical motions and drawn marks because these movements provide an anchor that allows inner impulses to come to the surface. Repetition also endows an act with a meditative focus, allowing the subconscious to break down personal boundaries, and to investigate unconscious impulses.⁸

4. Storr 47

5. Storr 111

6. Appignanesi 129

7. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler explains that the rules of any society are created out of the repetition of accepted norms. Without these repeated norms, cultural law would not exist. (Stukes 396)

8. In *The Infinite Line* Brioney Fer explains that repetition "is a means of organizing the world." But she goes on to contradict herself, "It is a means of disordering and undoing." (Fer 2) Fer explains that through the paradoxes of repetition in artwork, the viewer may be transformed in their perception of the subject and of time. Repetition breaks the mind out of its regular speed for processing information. She quotes Roland Barthes to explain "repetition affords access, in effect to a different temporality." (Fer 3)

Repetition can be divided into two categories. First there are culturally acceptable repetitions that involve goal-orientated actions. These include activities performed by a worker at their job, or a person in private at their home. Consider the motions involved in doing the dishes or folding laundry. Many culturally acceptable repetitions are performed in a designated area, such as doing aerobic steps at the gym. The second type of repetition, the type I focus on in my work, is repetition for comfort, the repetition Freud observed in response to trauma or repressed ideas. This type of repetition may seem abnormal and socially dysfunctional. Those who perform it in public are diminished and become vulnerable, making those who witness it uncomfortable. Performances may become powerful when comfort repetition is employed, because of the unease it stirs. The repetition of an action or image has become a common motif for describing isolation and depression in contemporary art. In *The Infinite Line*, Brioney Fer questions if art may be one of the few culturally sanctioned places where repetition can be experienced without an expectation of increased productivity.⁹ In *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*, Christine Ross explains her theory as to why many current artists use repetition and loop media imagery:

*The subjects are imprisoned in time; unable to learn from their failures, self absorbed and disengaged from the other...the work also systematically stage individuals putting huge efforts into actions that don't produce anything other than predictable repetition...it is the very unproductively of the repeated effort that condemns the individuals to isolation.*¹⁰

I relate to Ross's ideas of repetition with my *Little Pleasures* performance. Here I am seeking comfort through a repetitive act that escalates into a means of self-torture.

9. Fer 4

10. Ross xv

I have become interested in receipts as a surface for meditative circular drawing exercises. Receipts are a poignant symbol of contemporary ritual and culturally sanctioned repetition. They become intimate evidence of the items an individual relies upon when collected over time. Receipts appear insignificant; they are often discarded, left to blow around on the pavement. However, the items we purchase on a regular basis give profound insights to our insecurities and ideals. In our society the items we purchase can make up a significant part of how others define us, and how we form our sense of self.

DRAWING

My thought-map drawings were born out of a visual technique for writing papers that I learned in second grade. My class was instructed to organize the information we used for our papers in a series of circles that formed a drawn web of ideas. This exercise allowed a young child to visually organize the information they were using in their report. I have found this exercise is also instrumental in ordering anxieties, understanding tensions, and managing adult life. I do not believe the actual words on the webs are as relevant to the viewer as the fragile web of drawn marks. The significance of the thought maps comes not from the meaning of the text, but from the notion that these marks reflect intimate thoughts. This is why I have made the private information difficult to decipher by turning the text opposite face to the viewer.

VIDEO FOOTAGE AND SURVEILLANCE

In *Circles* I combine layers of video footage from the documentation of a performance entitled *Surveillance*. In this work I focused on the concept of self-monitoring. I addressed this topic in three categories; intake, finances, and schedule. I also recorded thirty minutes of footage of my personal life at home in the evening over a period of time. The most significant component was the detailed log of the way I spent my days, especially my time spent with others versus my time spent alone. This piece was intended to be a meditation on the sensation of being watched, the desire to have a witness to one's life, and to explore how being watched may make one behave differently. Since I live alone, the camcorder became my witness. In this way, it was my hope that the camera could accustom me to being watched in private, after being alone for so many years. I felt that this monitoring would help to make me accountable for how I spend my time during my last year of graduate school. I was also trying to better understand the point where self-reflection and self-awareness may become unproductive. I am interested in Lacan's idea of the "mirror stage," this stage occurs between the ages of six to eighteen months, when a child becomes aware of itself as the person they see reflected in the mirror.¹¹ At this stage the child becomes aware of the separation of the self from the other, as well as their own dependence on others. In *Art Theory*, Robert Williams writes about the threatening aspects of this stage of development. He explains that while the ability to see oneself in the mirror offers illusory pleasure, "it can also have a more threatening aspect. As we look out at the world, the world 'looks' into us: it objectifies us in an impersonal- indeed, inhuman – realm of visibility." Lacan termed

11. Williams 248

being observed as an object “the gaze,”¹² He explained “I see from only one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.”¹³ Lacan believed visual arts could be employed a tool in protecting oneself from this reality. In *Art Theory*, Robert Williams agrees:

*A picture is a mirror of ourselves as much as a window onto the world; it acts as a “screen” on which we project our fears and desires, but with which we are also able to objectify in turn, and to manipulate, to “play” with them.*¹⁴

I relate to the sensation of oppression and fear caused by being watched. I also agree with Lacan’s ideas of art as empowerment over the mirror stage. When I use my own image in my work, and control the way I am perceived, I am enabled to feel a sense of control over the anxiety I feel regarding Lacan’s notion of “the gaze” and corresponding self-consciousness.

In my video work, *Bathe*, one sees many nights of bathing in November and December 2006 superimposed over each other. In this way, the footage becomes a record that shows how each night, the same private ritual happened over and over. Each night, the same physical movements were made again and again.¹⁵

One positive but unexpected effect was that while recording the footage I took solace in knowing that although I was engaging in a solitary act, the performance would become a communal experience shared with viewers of the piece. In this way

12. Williams 249

13. IBID

14. IBID

15. I relate the bath footage from surveillance to Rosalind Krauss’s discussion of Lynda Benglis ‘s video work *Now*. Benglis used the media of video to manipulate the temporality of her actions by showing two separate, close up layers of her profile opposite each other, asking repeatedly ‘Is it now?’ Krauss uses *Now* to illustrate how through video “all layers of now are equally present.” (Krause 55)

I was not alone.¹⁶ The viewer was present in my private experience as it was happening, just as I am present in the viewer's experience of watching the piece. Similarly, in the *Little Pleasures* video, the physical revulsion felt during the performance became more bearable because of a shared communion with future viewers of the piece. Throughout the surveillance project, I understood and related to the eye of the camera as if it were the eye of the viewer, a living person who could see me, share in the experience, and understand it as if we were together while it was happening.¹⁷ At the same time, however, because I meditate on loneliness in my work, the fact that I performed this work alone adds an authenticity to the sense of isolation present in the piece. I don't believe it would be as effective if the piece had been originally performed in front of an audience. My main objective with the surveillance project was to recognize the ways in which I isolate myself, and to meditate on how I could bring more socialization into my life. In this way, the piece changed me.

16. This experience relates to a passage in *Touch* by Laura Marks. She describes that cinema is "an exchange between two bodies." (Marks 13)

17. In the essay *Cinema and Embodied Affect*, Anne Rutherford describes how the eye of the camera becomes the viewer's eye, and how the spectator's body becomes the body of the camera. (Rutherford 6)

CONCLUSION

The primary impetus for *Circles* is to explore and document contemporary repetitions and loneliness so that both the viewer and myself might better understand them. In addition, I find the process of making this work has been an important tool for coping with my own experiences with isolation and self-consciousness.

Points of comfort with my peers have rapidly transitioned from being group based and physical to becoming more digital and singular than ever before.¹⁸ In *Life on Screen*, Sherry Turkle describes how, because of our technology, many of the people we are intimate with are people we've never met in person. She states, "In the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along."¹⁹ Some individuals seem to connect more deeply through blogging and Internet networking sites than they do in person. Turkle quotes one fan of virtual spaces as saying "why grant such superior status to the self that has the body when the selves that don't have bodies are able to have different types of experiences?"²⁰ Our reliance on technology for interpersonal fulfillment reflects changes in the notion of a desirable personality and a healthy identity. People start to believe that they should perform and feel like the self-sufficient machines their routines depend upon. Perhaps, while our world becomes increasingly homogenized, there is also a sense of globalization in our ideals of how humans should perform, look, and feel. The state of optimism and independence becomes more and more valued and enacted upon. In *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*, Christine Ross describes

18. Turkle 10

19. IBID

20. Turkle 14

depressive fatigue as the result of “the desire to be the ideal propagated by the norm as long as it concerns the self and not the other.”²¹ The unique traits and negative feelings that do not conform to this ideal are often considered illnesses that should be fixed with medication. Throughout chapter one of her book, Ross explains that the concept of melancholy was once considered a valuable mental state. Our perception of melancholy has transformed from being a state provides the sufferer with a keen artistic genius, to being a biological imbalance. However this concept has transitioned, partially because of the influence of antidepressant pharmaceuticals, to the contemporary concept of depression as biological imbalance. Ross quotes J.C. Wakefield that mental disorders are “internal dysfunctions that a particular culture defines as inappropriate.”²² However, these same idiosyncratic traits and strong emotions may still be appreciated as vehicles for productive exploration in the art community. In the sphere of art, it is still possible for one to be heard, understood and cherished as a unique individual.

21. Ross xxv

22. Ross xxvi

Bibliography

- Appignanesi, Richard. 1979. *Introducing Freud*. United Kingdom: Icon Books.
- Cowen, Tyler. 2007. Matrimony Has Its Benefits, and Divorce Has a Lot to Do With That. *New York Times*. On-line. Available from Internet, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/19/business/19scene.html?em&ex=1177128000&en=a4fb6c2b36b56663&ei=5087%0A>, accessed April 22, 2007.
- Fer, Briony. 2004. *The Infinite Line*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hobbs, Frank. 2005. *Examining American Household Composition: 1990 and 2000*. U.S. Census Bureau. On-line. Available from Internet, <http://www.unmarried.org/statistics.html#single>, accessed April 22, 2007.
- Krauss, Rosalind Krauss. 1976. The Aesthetics of Narcissism. *October*, Vol. 1 (Spring): 50-64.
- Marks, Laura. 2002. *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multi-Sensory Media*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Noxon, Christopher. 2006. *Rejuvenille: Kickball, Cartoons, Cupcakes, and the Reinvention of the American Grown-up*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Ross, Christine. 2006. *The Aesthetics of Disengagement*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rutherford, Anne. 2002. Cinema and Embodied Affect. *Senses of Cinema*. On-line. Available from Internet, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/25/embodied_affect.html, accessed February 25, 2007.
- Storr, Anthony. 1989. *Freud: a Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stukes, Pierrette Rouleau. 2001. The Symptomatic Repetition of Identity: Gender and the Traumatic Gestalt. *Psychoanalytic Studies* 3 (Nos.3/4): 393-409.
- Turkle, Sherry. 1995. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Touchstone: New York.
- Williams, Robert. 2004. *Art Theory: an Historical Introduction*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.