

THESIS

TRANSFIGUREMENT; ANIMOPHILIA

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

TRANSFIGUREMENT; ANIMOPHILIA

The illustration-based installation *Transfiguration; Animophilia* contends with the integration of my subconscious and conscious mind by suspending disintegrated parts that describe a process of transformation. The work is not intended to portray an integrated, resolved person. Using transparent materials that include viewers as they explore illustrations of my body in metamorphosis, I expose the membrane of my subconscious to scrutiny. The metamorphosing chimeras present in this work are distortions of the form I inhabit, yet detailed illustrations coax viewers to suspend their disbelief in these neo-beings. The moments when these creatures merge reflect my drive for individuation and the investigation of my personal metamorphosis. To shift back and forth between visible illustrations and the translucent spaces between images is to invite viewers into my chaotic inner dialogue, where reason argues against feeling, integration alternates with disintegration, and the real parallels the fantastic.

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Trans.fig.ure.ment (*trans-fig-yer-ment*) verb.

1. *To alter or change; to metamorphose.*
2. *To change so as to glorify or exalt.*

A.ni.mo.phil.i.a (*ani-mo-fil-eya*) noun.

1. *A feeling of unity, friendship, and affection for animals.*
2. *An affinity for the unconscious feminine expression within the psyche of a man or the unconscious masculine expression within the psyche of a woman.*
3. *A fascination with personifications of the unconscious, particularly the duality of light and dark aspects of the psyche, and where animals are the symbol set that formulate the archetype of the self.*

Thesis

In *Transfigurement; Animophilia*, several dozen silk panels hang lightly in space, lit in the round and gently fluttering at the slightest movement in the air. This work is part of my process to integrate the person I used to be with the person I am now, while understanding that the person I am now is still changing. The installation contends with self-integration by showing disintegrated parts and describing processes of transformation. The sum of these panels does not portray an integrated, resolved person. By using translucent materials that include the viewer as they explore illustrations of my body in metamorphosis, I expose the membrane of my subconscious to scrutiny.

Pictures of familiar plants and animals invite viewers to enter this installation. Here they are confronted with depictions of charged transformations, where my body appears as a hybrid of beast and bird. This oscillation between still environs and active bodily change parallels my own metamorphosis in gender, philosophy, and outlook. The artwork invites the viewer to access my emotional and psychological terrain as I attempt to create my individuated self. The making of this artwork is as much a *part* of the process of individuation and self-examination as it is a *depiction* of that same process. Metamorphosis occurs when a body's composite parts break down and re-integrate into a new shape that is able to do something that the original body cannot do. This installation is about isolate and disparate pieces of myself coming together to make an integrated whole.

The images depicted in *Transfigurement; Animophilia* are of living things in the process of metamorphosing into one another to become something unique and integrated. Tigers, moths, birds, and snakes are creatures of liminal spaces; they live their waking lives in twilight or dawn and at the edge of visual perception. I allude to this transitional space by juxtaposing images and

materials that are hard and soft, sharp and gentle, and dangerous and vulnerable. The work spends as much time in the liminal space between understanding and confusion as it does on a specific observation of an animal, my body, or the pattern of overlapping linden leaves.

I create the world by illustrating the population that will live there. Veils of silk partially obscure views of a tiger, moths, and milkweed; viewers catch sidelong glimpses of metamorphoses among creatures and landscapes. These drawings show a metamorphosis in progress where each animal is still distinguishable as they morph together. I add images of my own body taken from photographs spanning several months, and merge these self-portraits with the images of animals to create beings, narratives, and patterns. The viewer will see this clash of bodies and also continue the transformation in their imaginations; the lines between beings and origins will blur.

Metamorphosis and Integration

I depict my body undergoing metamorphosis and becoming a chimera with other animals to illustrate momentous internal shifts that are both physical and emotional. Delicate, simple illustrations of flora and fauna surround these intense and even violent bodily changes. The intensity of the images is balanced by the quiet environment; the silk forest gently flutters at the slightest movement. I keep the images in black and white to encourage this polarity.

In Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, the principal character Gregor Samsa finds every aspect of his life disrupted by his bodily transformation into a monstrous insect. In Kafka's story, Gregor is also faced with the challenge of integrating his new self with the knowledge of who he used to be. I engage with this same challenge in my artwork. In the conclusion of Kafka's work, Gregor ends his life by sheer force of will to rid his family of the shameful burden he has become¹.

¹ Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1946).

Gregor's suicide can be seen as cowardice, but can also be viewed as an acceptance of the death of the *a-priori* self, or the death of an immature stage of life. This reading implies the evolutionary continuation of life in a new form. Gregor's choice is to risk disintegration of his current body in the hope that the torment of lacking an integrated identity will end. My piece grapples with the horror of the death of the childhood self and the movement of my personality toward an integrated adulthood; hence these depictions of transformation within still and tranquil environs. My botanical studies both contest and mask my body and my self. In some areas, repeated patterns of flora and fauna verge on the overwhelming. I include moths within this assortment as straightforward signs of metamorphosis. Moth metamorphosis involves a complete disintegration of the larvae before the moth can form. I am terrified of—yet desire—such disintegration and re-integration. I want to emerge whole, but fear dying in the process of breaking into my composite parts.

Integration of component parts into a different structure is discussed in another way in James Elkins's *The Object Stares Back*. Elkins describes how the human brain completes the visual resolution of an object when given incomplete information. In a way, this mental filling-in develops a kind of metamorphosis of visual information: forms appear as incomplete, self-portraits are diffused at the edges, and the torso is cropped. Lengths of pattern prints imply infinite extension in all directions. Stippled and diffuse effects occur in the very narrow thresholds between marks that form lines and curves. Elkins goes on to discuss how diffuse and indefinable visual cues (such as the night sky) are “intolerable to our eyes,” causing people to fill the heavens with imagined pictures and forms.² Elkins also describes the human need to see bodies as complete. Even though I depict moments of change and distortion, I ask viewers to

² James Elkins, “Seeing Bodies” in *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 125-139.

consider or even complete the in-progress transformations: to imagine a complete and integrated body of unexpected component parts. Elkins writes that, “There is a desire at work here, perhaps the most primal desire of all: we prefer to have bodies in front of us or in our hands, and if we cannot have them, we continue to see them, as afterimages or ghosts.”³ *Transfiguration; Animophilia* invites viewers to imagine complete views of the bodies presented, to integrate the composite parts, and to be immersed in the transformation of silken ghosts.

Membranes and Skin

My work brings viewers inside a kind of body where membranes of fabric act as surrogate protective veils and yet are obviously penetrable. These veils are layered to encourage viewers to look closely, deeply, and outwardly. *Transfiguration; Animophilia* is a set of skins upon which I have tattooed a life and a legacy. Throughout the piece, imagery oscillates between dense and dispersed—just as the panels are clustered and distributed. Viewers move through a place hung with self-portraits depicted in the midst of transformations, at intense stages of their life cycle. Illustrations on silk integrate self-portraiture with descriptive drawings from my collections of images and specimens. The installation becomes a body holding symbols displayed as personal history. I tattoo my own skin with autobiographical symbols to remember events and to signal stories worth telling. The accumulation of images in this piece shows the viewer a symbolic being with a story worth memorializing. Similarly, the process of creating this work mirrors the layering effects of the final piece. I draw my tattooed body becoming one with animals and plants that are themselves illustrated with symbols for those living creatures. The silk panels are adorned with composite images. Each penetrable layer alludes to narratives and to the physical depth of layers of skin.

³ Ibid., 132.

I create images from observations of the world around me and portray them as a kind of membrane that buffers the vulnerable drawings of my body and mind from the outside world that I often find chaotic, loud, and overwhelming. The natural world is an impartial companion in a society that constantly seeks to impose meaning on every event and interaction. I can escape into wild spaces that have no interest in my suffering and mental games, and spend time in places where my mind quiets enough to integrate what I experience, learn, and feel. The installation *Transformation; Animophilia* decorates a space with a refined version of the environments that nurture and empower me. It is in these safe spaces that I carve for myself a place where I am able to do the mental work of integration. This integrative work is described in *Transfiguration; Animophilia* with images of metamorphosis and the suggestion of layered skins. With my ephemeral silk drawings I attempt to make beautiful the metamorphic process, obscuring what is considered “unnatural” by bringing the style of scientific illustration to my chimeras. The way the panels are hung suggests the stillness of mist and encourages the calm that comes from contemplating small, detailed objects.

Translucency

The sheer, permeable nature of silk organza allows several illustrated planes to combine into narrative structures, which change in relation to viewing proximity—from exterior through to interior. Frail and delicate rectangles of silk recall privacy screens, scrolls, folios, or stage-sized book pages. These shapes refer to human documentation; they provide frameworks for documenting my own experiences and observations. The cleanliness of the sheer rectangles is interrupted by the marks of the drawings, creating distortions in the layered translucency of the

whole work. It can be a challenge to bring some images into focus. Specifically, the wavelike moiré effects are an intentional challenge to visual clarity.

By impeding the viewer's ability to clearly observe each detail of the work at once, I am able to convey a sense of chaos and hint at my own challenge in finding emotional clarity. The work *Transfiguration; Animophilia* goes a step further by layering images, meanings, and signals. There is a kind of lifecycle in the work as viewers change positions, as portions of images are revealed, and while other segments are again obscured. It is impossible to view the work in its entirety without obfuscation of some imagery—a metaphor for our inability to fully perceive ourselves.

To juxtapose the dense visual information contained in the piece, translucent silk acts to unify the illustrations and create a cohesive visual experience. The emotions I want to express were clearly present while I made the work, yet the silk layers distort each image, describing the challenge of making myself understood. Louise Bourgeois once said that, “The material is the means, not the end. The material is chosen because it allows you to express something that another material does not allow you to. You have to keep finding new ways to express yourself: [The fear is of] the hurt of not being able to express yourself properly.” Lustrous, challenging optical effects that involve minute marks on silk sheets both reveal and disguise: veils conceal, but drawings on silk reveal aspects of bodies. By using these material properties, I refer to the fear I have of being misunderstood as I expose myself to others.

Translucent silk sheets evoke a sense of thinly veiled secrets. I take viewers into my confidence and also require that they expose themselves—I show my hidden scars and tattoos and in turn viewers are visible through silk, becoming a part of the work and presenting their bodies as part of the story. Viewers cannot help but be seen in my work: translucent materials are only

superficial shields for someone walking amongst these panels. The viewer engages with the work by alternating attention on single panels and details. By moving through the piece, views of overlapping panels animate and change; the movement of figures within its translucency becomes a kind of mark making.

A Body in Space

The use of my own body as subject oscillates between seeking empathy and emotional involvement in other people and my desire to have a clinical, objective look at my physicality. By suspending fragment views of my body in space this way, I bring viewers into my experience of metamorphosis. I am trying to integrate my physical and psychological self: images of my torso burst apart with wings and the heads of animals. The content of *Transfiguration*; *Animophilia* pushes a feeling of invaded privacy because my body is on display and occupies a space in which nature appears to be in quiet limbo.

Emotionally, the subtle marks that give form to my belly and hands engage with the cataract fog of the silken ground, creating an ethereal experience that I intend to be soft, earnest, and melancholic. Intellectually, viewers are challenged by the invasion of the human form by birds and mammals and by the transformation from human into chimera. I feel a constant push and pull between emotional vulnerability and the urge to be stoic and intellectual (black and white; delicate and durable; expansive and thin). Viewers observe this tension in the way the body is pulled into its composite parts and then re-integrated into a compound being: the effort of avoiding the pain of disintegration.

In *Transfiguration*; *Animophilia*, images hover in space, without horizons or a sense of structured, classical perspective. There is only one moment to consider per panel, and the viewer

is given the freedom to fill in the narrative around each individual image. The way a viewer experiences the environment of the work and the beings in it constantly changes. Just as I accept the reality that my selfhood in each given moment is transient, it is also true that my body can only be in one moment at a time. This is the instant *Transfigurement; Animophilia* evokes: where time briefly stands still with the internal self in a state of metamorphosis. When the body of a viewer engages with this work, suddenly a new dynamic is introduced to the environment as viewers' slightest movements send the silk in motion. The way the body is illustrated in this artwork juxtaposes fixed moments and an acknowledgement of entropy. As audiences engage with the work, they experience the stasis of the work in the gallery and see how panels change in the presence of someone else.

Conclusion

Viewers participate in the metamorphosis that is ongoing in *Transfigurement; Animophilia* by mentally completing bodies and repeating patterns, and are welcomed as characters in this story of transformation. The materials used in *Transfigurement; Animophilia* act as membranes and skin upon which a narrative is tattooed, and where I explore the permeability of my identity and the fragility of my personality. Translucent silk panels—illustrated with stippled dots and patterned with printed dye—hang in layers. A viewer's gaze can penetrate several layers before the panels fog together. Semi-transparent materials hold marks that illustrate the delicacy of natural structures. With soft panels fixed in space and time, I strive to create fragile constructs that also are sturdy and long lasting. This creates a paradox, considering that the images of my body describe a state of transformation, even though the literal image is fixed. The images in the work are distorted, and this deformation is multiplied by the layering of translucent silk and

moiré optical effects. As drawings from life (even the chimeras, which are comprised of elements of myself and the natural world), these pieces are a step removed as they enter the realm of distortion. Balancing this distortion is the viewer's mental completion of incomplete imagery rendered in realistic detail.

The metamorphosing chimeras present here are distortions of the form that I inhabit; yet detailed illustrations coax viewers into suspending their disbelief in these neo-beings. The moments in which these creatures are merging reflect the drive for individuation that I seek in my investigation of personal metamorphosis and transformation. To shift back and forth between images and within translucent liminal spaces is to invite viewers into my chaotic inner dialogue, where reason argues against feeling, integration alternates with disintegration, and the real parallels the fantastic.

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