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Art as Ritual: The Realm Between Identities

Haley Scarboro

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ART AS RITUAL: THE REALM BETWEEN IDENTITIES

by

HALEY SCARBORO

(Under the Direction of Jeff Garland)

ABSTRACT

Ritualism is everywhere in the world and something that everyone takes part in, whether we acknowledge it or not. Rituals can be as simple as a morning routine or as monumental as memorializing a loved one. The works in this thesis are within the covenant of southern witchcraft and how it comes together in Ritual Art. Through documentation, memory-fueled found objects, and time-based installation I consider how growing up in Georgia and being a practicing witch played a role in my identity formation. Rituals are vital to the identities themselves and the history they hold. Symbolism plays a major role in deciphering these identities and allows me to display relatable emotions to a viewer unfamiliar with the in-group iconography.

INDEX WORDS: Photography, Witchcraft, American South, Documentation, Ritual Art, Time, Identity, Familial Objects, Self-Portrait, Rituals, Installation
ART AS RITUAL: THE REALM BETWEEN IDENTITIES

by

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ART AS RITUAL: THE REALM BETWEEN IDENTITIES

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis (and all the years spent at Georgia Southern) to my loving husband Chace, for always supporting me and my crazy ideas. I would also like to thank my various friends over the years for always motivating me and never letting me give up: Laura, Emily, Jalen, and Ashley. Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my Aunt Tracy, my little sister Payton, and any future woman in my family striving to achieve Higher Education. We are only the beginning.
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Ritualism and Identity are two major themes within my work, as well as the bridging bridge between two seemingly polar opposites within my own identity. I began this series by examining the rituals I learned in becoming a practicing witch. This included what is seen as spells, a combination of symbolic ingredients, usually botanicals, food, or crystals. Working with these rituals helped me develop a framework for considering witchcraft and symbolism. This led to research on rituals within my other lived experiences. As I thought about the symbolism in witch rituals, the symbolism and traditions of my identity as a woman living in the South became increasingly evident. As this new series developed, it became clearer how these seemingly unrelated identities shared a type of Ritualism.

Rituals relate to multiple aspects of the human experience, including identities that are not spiritually or religiously affiliated. These works began to bridge the gap between real life and my experiences with the mystical. Mystical, within these works, is defined by a mysterious and fascinating experience not known to the mortal realm. The idea of symbolic ingredients like the use of herbs or colors in a mystical context, then transformed into the use of historical or traditional symbolic ‘ingredients’ from my southern upbringing. Instead of using physical objects as ‘ingredients’ in all cases, I began to use these objects as placeholders to symbolize emotion, personal memories, societal pressures, or tradition. This also began to transform on another level of using documentation as an ingredient itself, which resulted in the preservation of ideals within my identity.
CHAPTER 2

WHAT IS A SELF-PORTRAIT?

Self-portraiture appeared to be an accessible way to showcase and document my dual-identity. First, I had to consider how self-portraiture functions within the world of ‘fine art’, and what “ingredients” are needed to create a self-portrait. Psychologically, a self-portrait is intentional in its conception. It is a vehicle to share how one wants to be viewed in a public space. The implication of the self-portrait is that you alone control how you are portrayed. The following quote is from the Center for Educational Policy Studies journal article on the psychology behind self-portraits:

‘The self-portrait is a reflection of the personality in a visual, physical sense, as a concrete form, a summary of the external characteristics of the artist, but also in a psychological sense, when the self-portrait becomes a mediator of communication with the self, a medium of self-investigation. In this way, the self-portrait exists as a means of self-reflection, self-awareness and acceptance of the Self.’

In contrast, art used self-portraits as a representation of the artist's skill and style.

When looking at my married not Married photo installation, there are two self portraits within the one installation. There is myself photographed as I am in time physically, posed and intentional in every way. It also helps that the extension of the ripped veil reflects my extended arm and leg in the photograph. The other example, and not commonly seen as a self portrait, is the figural elements of the veil itself. Having it hung at my height starts to create a figurative sense of shadow. The background knowledge that the veil is commonly worn on the head and over the face created the rest of the implied narrative that there was a representation of a person. Whether there was a person under the veil or not, the viewer still gets the sense of a person being there in space based on concepts of veils and the height at which it is actively

1 Pivac, Dunja, and Maja Zemunik.
hung. A veil sitting in a drawer or on a table has a different context and speaks to a person, but in the past. Having it hung along with the other self-portrait creates a present tense of the person behind the veil.

Figure 1: Scarboro, Haley ‘married not Married’ 2022

The art world considers many different things to be self-portraiture, and some self-portraits resist being a figural representation of the person in any recognizable visual form. The Tate Museum describes the beginning of self-portraiture as being “an interesting sub-group of portraiture and can often be highly self-revelatory”. They also discuss different ways self-portraits have been shown historically, ranging in representation and medium. I began thinking about this in relation to artifacts and personal items, especially with the idea of changing

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2 Tate. “Portrait.”
mediums. My self-portraiture isn’t about the physical, figural sense of what a self-portrait is. Instead, it is more about intentionality, the representation of self-image, and the life put into these objects.

I considered this with my mother’s recipe box, a familiar object growing up that I saw next to all her recipe books. It contained every recipe from a relative including time of year and/or place. This box was a container of both the emotional and physical, much like people themselves. The box is not a portrait because of the collection of memorial recipes; it is instead a self-portrait showing others’ reflections and influences on me, the artist. The human body never knows how much it can take from memories until it’s time to relive them. We are not always physical, figural beings, we’re also metaphorical beings, filled with experiences that can’t be seen. Phenomenology studies how people hold these memories, and this research approach became central in how I dissected theories of human memories and identity. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Psychology* describes phenomenology “as a much wider range, addressing the meaning things have in our experience, notably, the significance of objects, events, tools, the flow of time, the self, and others, as these things arise and are experienced in our ‘life-world’”\(^3\).

Essentially, we are partly products of our environment. If we are products of our environment, then we are also visual representations of what our environment did for us, positive or negatively. We pick up emotions, memories, and experiences from the world, but our brain needs to process what to do with these notions and whether they have the validity to be remembered. This is where intentionality comes into play. Humans are intention-based in terms of remembering some, but not all, memories in order to build this self-portrait of ourselves.

Looking back at my previous obsessions and inspiring artists since starting to make art, I noticed a pattern. I was interested mainly in artists that had these products of an identity, like

\(^3\) Smith, David Woodruff, "Phenomenology"
Cindy Sherman or Tracy Emin. Emin is the most reminiscent of a non-traditional self-portrait in her ‘My Bed’ installation. It creates an extremely intimate space that is very telling of a person’s internal dialog. Her installation features the intimacy of what an audience can infer is an interpretation of her own living space, including objects like alcohol and underwear to further the narrative. Her work that involves her own personal history with ideas of intimacy are seen as ‘shock value art’ even though it is just a descriptive experience of herself through art as an outlet. It is incredibly important to portray your life or experiences authentically, despite any ‘shock’ from within other groups.

*Figure 2:* Emin, Tracey “My Bed”, 1998
CHAPTER 3

WITCHCRAFT AND COMMUNITY-BASED IDENTITIES

Witchcraft and witches as an identified group of people are an example of a lived identity that is often met with shock or other extreme emotion. The idea of witches have evolved over recent centuries, mainly in how they are seen in society. Witchcraft in the modern sense can be practiced in any level of commitment and with a single person or group of people.

When researching my thesis, I came across the concept of a purple door. I had seen a repetitive symbol of the purple door across social media, and learned that the purple door indicates a witch living in that home as a symbol of pride. I was intrigued by this color as well as the concept of a door as a portal. There is no definite historical background to this trend mainly due to the obvious issue of witches being hunted and mistreated in the past, so as a result they were unlikely to self-identify in public as a witch. It has been theorized that the color purple is tied to the chakra Sahasrara as well as being just a generally ‘mysterious and magical’ color. Sahasrara is the chakra associated with the mind as well as spiritual enlightenment⁴. The development of this symbol speaks volumes to the confidence that witches now have with speaking freely and showing their craft. The purple door is a portal between past and present, in that it represents how witchcraft has evolved from a seemingly rigid commitment to a fluid system of hope. In this we find a commonality between witchcraft and being a southern woman, both are group-based identity systems. Traditionally, witches are seen in covens, arguably synonymous with the structured family system living in the South

⁴ Yumiko. “Legend of the Purple Witch Door.” 3 Cats and a Cauldron
creates. Growing up in the South, there was an expectation or learned trait of always being around and supporting your family. In a sense, your “coven” was always in your corner.

*The Southern Experience*

Growing up in the South, I felt the desire to erase myself and the identity that I was raised with. When taking on the identity as ‘Southern’ outside of rural and suburban Georgia, you are often met with stereotypes. Having heard and seen these negative stereotypes growing up, once I became an adult who could define myself with identities I wanted to shed the southern stereotypes.

*Figure 3: Scarboro, Haley “Beltane”, 2022*
In my photo piece, *Beltane*, I revisited pieces of my childhood. This involved breaking down stereotypes or perceptions of being ‘too much’ or ‘not enough’ of an identity. In my early works, I feared the inability to control a viewer’s biases and known stereotypes for being a southern woman or a witch. Now, I make art about my combined identities without categorizing myself as being solely a ‘Southerner’ or ‘Witch’, allowing me to reject being defined by the separate stereotypes. Not all of my experiences living in Georgia are ‘Southern’ stereotypes, but I am a southerner just by living in the south, and so I hope that by creating work that resembles my childhood I can show what exists outside those stereotypes.

By showcasing my dual identities in art I am able to separate my “self” from a hyper-performative self. In the past, I have made singular-identity works that lean into or conform to others’ assumptions. It is important to note that on top of being Southern, I am a woman in the south, which further informed my upbringing and lived experiences. While including my own personal history in Georgia, I am also including the history of the area. I weave in regional flavor, like boiled peanuts, chicken and dumplings, or the idea of ghosts or “haints”.
CHAPTER 4

PHOTOGRAPHY, DOCUMENTATION, AND INTENTIONAL NARRATIVE

Documentation was crucial to the reproduction of experiences in an art form, translating from decades of separation of time. It allows for reproduction and combination of narratives. Documentation and the illusion of space itself is present in the work shown due to many pieces of research. Cindy Sherman jump started my journey into photography in my early teenage years. Sherman showed a path to visualizing a photograph as a scene or illusion in space rather than just using photography to document a moment in time. She has an ability to create identities that don’t belong to anyone specifically, but feel like they could, because of how well she represents them physically. Photography is no longer limited by the limitations of what already exists because of artists like Cindy Sherman. Ingrid Sischy wrote about Sherman that “In her hands, images aren’t straitjackets but vehicles to show the infinite possibilities of who she could be.”5 Her use of intentional objects in an illusionary space inspired a similar approach to using relatable yet imaginary scenarios in my own work. These pieces create cinematic illusionary experiences that exist between everyday life and the mystical. The coexistence of a cinematic experience breaks the viewing experience of time with physical elements. This was a difficult notion to work through due to the fact that an audience can get lost in the set up of a photograph and that it doesn’t seem tied to real life. I experimented with using photography more as a material and less as a medium, as a product of reproduction and altering the reproduced image in process. Reproduction allows for changing of literal space and a creation of a new narrative. That’s what I love about the use of photography, is that it is ever-changing as to what this altered, mystical space is.

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Intentionality through objects served the need for a narrative without outright spelling it out. Much like how a photograph creates the illusion of space, intentionality through objects creates the illusion of narrative and identity. Illusion of space also led to the illusion of time, which was just an additive to the implication of narrative. For some cases, there needs to be some sort of ‘grounding object’ in the frame that hits all the notes of implying narrative as well as being somewhere between reality and mystical space. This fits into the notion that for art to be interesting it has to hit some sort of middle ground: a normal object and an extreme object don’t have the same level of interest as something unfathomably in between. This grouping of works are not all photographs, but they all have this “inbetween” quality. There is a note of familiarity, a bottle of wine you recognize from the store or a veil that is commonly seen in wedding settings. There are also notes of the mystical: candles, herbs, Tarot cards. To some people, the idea of the mystical space is so out of their realm of thought that it feels unfathomable and they glaze over it without extra thought. It isn’t until objects from these two worlds are placed together that they take a step back to further consider the overall piece.
Other than the use of photography as documentation, medium specific art didn’t fulfill my plans. As I continued working through new ideas, a pattern of materiality versus medium formed. There is no longer one medium used continuously throughout my works. My pieces connect not through medium, but through their own combined relationship within identity. Artworks have the ability to act as people, identities, and experiences, so assessing each individual work for its best-suited medium made more sense as a technical approach. For example, *Preservation of Memories* was a material rendition and reenactment of a memory specific to Georgia. It represented a generalized memory recognizable to Georgians given the heavily marketed image of Coca-Cola in Georgia, and it also represented a performative act of me partaking in an older familial tradition. While there is significance in using photography in some of these works, there are performative aspects present as well, such as a Coke & Peanuts tradition or the action of writing on a postcard that are better presented physically in space rather than through photography. Pieces like *Preservation of Memories* give a tactile narrative and illustrate a vivid, recognizable feeling that a viewer could relate to. In opposition, *The Best Day*
of a Woman’s Life presents an example of capturing aspects of memory using photography. Best Day comments on the recollection of achievements of women in my family, mixed with ideas of Southern stereotypes. Here the recognizable feeling creeps in through subliminal messaging of symbols like a graduation cap or wedding bouquet. When presenting this piece, I was asked why I chose not to include these women in childbirth as their “best day” as well. My family did not collect as many photos in the hospital as they did in church for a wedding. I found one photo from when my little sister was born, and my mother made me promise not to include it in the piece because she thought she didn’t look “pretty enough”. I spiraled into thinking about how childbirth is seen as a major accomplishment in a woman’s life, and yet is considered too gory, too unseemly, and not “pretty enough” to be captured.

Figure 5: Scarboro, Haley “The Best Day of a Woman’s Life” 2022
Title Cards and ‘Grounding Objects’

Similar to using a “grounding object”, title cards in this series allow the viewer to slow down and pick out new meanings and nuances within the piece. Title cards also give identities or aspects of an identity within each described ingredient. It calls attention to what is hidden within the piece but also questions the objects and their relation to meaning. The viewer might ask why adjectives such as “Store Bought”, “Discounted”, or “Ability” hold enough importance to be included in the end product. In my title card for *married not Married*, not only was there detail in vocabulary chosen but also in how it was presented. The two gold nails symbolize two people equal in a marriage, while the black lace backing refers to the photo and veil installation itself. It is a direct mirroring of the piece shown, not all parts obvious; this allows a back and forth when between the installation and viewing card. The title cards serve as an easier introduction to the idea of Ritual Art, as in some of the pieces *like Home is Where the Altar is* as an allowance of
information and transparency of what is taking place. They are exact calculations into what would go into a piece like this, so that if a viewer would like to, they could reenact the ritual in their own way.

Figure 7: Scarboro, Haley “Home is Where the Altar is”, 2021

Ritualism in Art

Ritual Art serves as a balance between these works and the concept of ritualism, as well as ritualism itself being a balance cross-culturally. Harvard Art Museum wrote in an article that artists making Ritual Art ‘invent and embellish [rituals and routines] in the future, opening up new possibilities for understanding and making our lives more meaningful.’ This is achieved through recognizable objects and performative traditions from past, present and future. The improvement that Harvard talks about is both the physical renditions and improvements, but also the communication of them between time. Time is necessary in ritual because of the care and intentionality that rituals typically require, in order to show importance in our lives. Multiple pieces within this exhibition have time-based elements that relate to the idea of ritualism. In
Beltane the grounding object itself, the flower garland, serves as a time connection from the photo to the installation and also a tactile ritual that my family has taken part of for decades. Time is a connector just like the combination of one’s identities.

Figure 8: Scarboro, Haley “Remembering Someone Not Here”, 2023

CHAPTER 5

THE EXHIBITION AND DEFENSE

The exhibition showcased a combination of my photo works with installations. My newest installation, with photographs, What is a Morning Ritual? was showcased, featuring
morning rituals of myself, my mother, and my grandmother. The placement of this one installation set of frames was purposeful with the opening to the following gallery, allowing it to be the first piece viewed from coming into that door. Also featured was married not Married (figure 1) so that it was the first to be viewed from the main door and windows. This became more important in the defense because of the knowledge of the audience being met with two different versions of myself either way they enter. One of the highlights of the exhibition was Remembering Someone Not Here, centered in the room and was a walk around installation. The popularity, looking back on it, was most likely due to the imagery of the postcards and the recognizable imagery within them. It was one of the first instances that I saw an audience interested in the idea of tarot, due to it being an actual reading mixed with a postcard message that requires extra time to understand the connection. With the installation also being in the center of the gallery, it allowed for a focus of the space itself and not to have everything against the walls. Other acknowledgements of space and color were important in the layout of the exhibition, with more colorful photos like Purest Form of Protection and Healing with The Best Day of a Woman’s Life (figure 5) next to each other.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Any life or identity has the potential to be magical. This can be found in the rituals we practice over time and the memories gathered along the way. These together make living anywhere or as anything so great and important. I believe preserving and documenting these rituals through my work helps keep these memories alive. My work documents these memories through photos or by encasing experiences in installations. The works presented in my show and discussed in this thesis, with their multiple objects, hold a significant amount of meaning to me. This meaning is revealed over time to the viewer that is practicing the ritual of art.
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