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# Expression through Memory and Material

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# Expression through Memory and Material

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commentary

## Expression through Memory and Material

—Saird Gallagher

As a fine arts major with an emphasis on sculpture, I am very interested in conveying narrative through visual aspects such as form, space and materials, and the relationships among them. My research topic focused on finding combinations of materials which, when assembled into a three-dimensional sculpture, would evoke certain emotional responses that are significant to me. By the end of the summer, working through a variety of methods and experimentation, I found subject matter and materials; but neither came easily. The piece *Emergence* was the principal result of my summer's work, but arriving there showed me how long and hard the creative process can be.



My summer research began in the solitude of my workspace, surrounded by various supplies that I thought I might use. As I sat in the dusty, humid sculpture building, I waited for the ideas to come pouring in, or at least a plan of where to begin. I had never had so much time to explore my ambitions as an artist, or to learn about a technique that was unfamiliar to me: assemblage and mixed media art. This caused some anxiety about the weeks ahead, and I became unsure if I could complete the objectives of my fellowship proposal. Responding to these

uncertainties, I began to write and sketch, giving voice to my doubts on the page. A vast number of memories and situations in which I had felt similarly overwhelmed came welling up. I wrote chaotically over the pages as one memory transitioned to the next, translating years of experiences into phrases of emotion and sensory recollections.

I noticed that specific instances repeated in my mind as I wrote, and that they were often of times of disorder and unease in my life. Easily resuscitated, these memories brought with them the same somatic reactions, a shortness of breath or an increase in heart rate, as they had at the time of occurrence. Fresher and more powerful than memories of calmer times, these moments of distress have often pushed me to re-examine my understanding of things. They have shaped my outlook on life and the ways in which I communicate and identify with others. After the release of these reoccurring memories onto paper, I knew that I wanted them to be the main expression of my project.

Having an idea of where I was headed allowed me to begin experimenting with forms and materials that would support my objectives. Referencing from various sketches and writings within my journal or scattered about my workspace, I began to develop configurations stimulating to me. I also spent time researching the works and lives of many established sculptors and painters who had inspired me in the past or had been recently introduced to me by my faculty mentor, Benjamin Cariens. Works by such artists as Magdalena Abakanowicz, Antoni Tàpies, and Kiki Smith inspired me to expose the more concealed parts of myself.

I began to explore possible materials by working in clay, a material that provides malleable stability and allows quick changes to its surface. After experimenting with different structures, I found that it could not convey the emotions that had surfaced when journaling, so I abandoned it and began the search for more suitable materials.

As I searched, the idea of a ribcage structure formed. A ribcage protects from harm, but it also restricts and confines what is inside. My memories of growing up are similar in that part of me wished to be protected from the inevitable difficulty of the outside world, while another part yearned to venture outside the protective barrier. What materials would convey this contradictory memory and its accompanying emotions? I had worked in my studio classes with such materials as plaster, microcrystalline wax, and burlap. Turning to them, I jotted down descriptions of what they communicated by themselves, such as *fragility*, *warmth*, *solidity* or *flexibility*. When grouped with other materials, they formed relationships to create feelings of *restriction*, *movement*, *vulnerability*, or *discomfort*.

The process of working with and against each material's inherent characteristics proved the most trying aspect of my research. While every material I used could be manipulated in ways to enhance or downplay certain qualities, attaching or combining them didn't always have the anticipated results. I learned that some materials didn't fit with or adhere to one another. In one instance, I found that the smooth surface of wax, which coats the ribcage form, rejects most attempts at adhering it to another surface and also pulls away from most materials. As my project developed, I realized that some materials and structures did not support the modifications I wished to make. With *Emergence*, the idea of the figure came after the cage was completed. Placing the figure inside it was difficult. I had to cut things apart, force things together, recreate things more than once; and often they bent, folded, collapsed, broke, melted, or failed altogether. I learned that some materials support wrapping, stretching, pulling and tugging, like tarlatan and burlap, while others, like plaster, remain solid and unyielding.

Through this sometimes frustrating process of experimentation, I began to develop my own sensitivity to the materials, and they meant more to me than just what they looked like on a roll or in a bucket. The tarlatan, with its used, inked and torn surface became my experiences with loneliness and fear. The smooth coatings of wax became protection from harm, and the figure struggling to free itself of what had kept it safe became me leaving the refuge of old memories. For *Emergence*'s final form, I wrapped layers of burlap dipped in wax around a wire armature for the rib cage. The core of the figure is Styrofoam built upon with plaster, wax, and cheesecloth. I encased the form in old tarlatan and sewed around the contours with black upholstery thread.

As the weeks passed by, my work took me to different places than I had expected, and my newfound knowledge of materials and ideas caused me to slowly abandon the detailed proposal I had planned to work from. Adhering to this proposal would have given me a sculpted piece to show, but it would have been one that

I had developed on paper long before having many learning experiences that shaped my ideas, goals, and technical knowledge. Deciding instead to let the experience transition as I acquired skills and spent more time reflecting on the desired outcome produced, I believe, results which were richer and more sincere. The work that I completed during my research ended up being as much about endurance, acceptance, and the creative process as it was about the finished piece. My summer research gave me an awareness of the ambition and dedication that rest just under the surface of any piece of art, and of the power that emotion and experience play in the process of creation. In the end, *Emergence* is a visual depiction of what cannot be described or written about, but only felt inside.

*I would like to thank the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship program (SURF) and its sponsors for providing me with the opportunity to make my research goals a reality in the summer of 2005. I would also like to express my gratitude to Benjamin Cariens, my faculty mentor and friend, who has given me much more than the ability to create. His consistent encouragement and support has helped and inspired me, one semester at a time.*

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### ***Author Bio***

*A native of Wolfeboro, New Hampshire, **Saird Gallagher** is a senior in the BFA program with an emphasis on sculpture. She will graduate in the spring of 2007 and plans to go on for an MFA. Her research project, funded by a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF), was an adventure into new territory. "I had never had complete freedom to choose materials and subject matter," she says, "and I had to design the project and manage my time without outside help." *Emergence*, the piece that resulted from her SURF project, was shown in a winter, 2006, regional BFA exhibition at Boston University. Saird is inspired to continue working with new materials and ways of expression.*

### ***Mentor Bio***

*In 2002 Assistant Professor **Benjamin Cariens** came to the UNH Department of Art from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. At UNH he teaches a range of drawing and sculpture courses. He is particularly interested in the relationships between the two fields and in employing alterative processes in both. His work with Saird was his first mentoring experience. It was, he says, "an opportunity to introduce a broader range of materials and techniques" than any single course could offer. "To witness her personal vision manifest itself with such power and articulation has been a deeply rewarding experience."*