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When He Could Not Sleep, He Worked in the Shed

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WHEN HE COULD NOT SLEEP, HE WORKED IN THE SHED

By

Emily Ward Bivens

B.F.A., Colorado State University, 1999

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Art
Department of Art and Art History
2004
This thesis entitled:
When He Could Not Sleep, He Worked in the Shed
written by Emily Ward Bivens
has been approved for the Department of Art & Art History

[Signature]
Committee Chair

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Committee Member

Date Nov 12 2004

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Bivens, Emily Ward (M.F.A., Ceramics)

When He Could Not Sleep, He Worked in the Shed

The Committee Chair for this thesis is Associate Professor Jeanne Quinn

The events that I describe in this written thesis are events that influenced the work that I made for my thesis exhibition. I also think of this as a piece. Ideally, I envision this work being read aloud—by me, in the presence of my work. But this is no longer possible. You will have to read it.
CONTENTS

When He Could Not Sleep, He Worked in the Shed
This is dedicated to my husband, David Bivens
During his recent visit to CU, the artist Harrell Fletcher conducted studio critiques. He did not come to my studio, however he did make a studio visit to Julie who is on the other side of the wall from me. As is customary in our studios, when anyone is having a critique, studio visit or argument, we listen in order to provide a detailed summary of the discussion to the group. We devised this method realizing that one person cannot be responsible for absorbing every detail and properly analyzing subtle innuendoes. Then, when reconstructing events, it is collectively skewed. This relies on something called ‘yap dynamic’, which requires all individual information and experiences to be discussed and dissected collectively. You might consider this eavesdropping and gossip, but it is not. It is group recognition that the factual events that make up a moment vanish the second that they happen. The events are then recreated again and again in a realm collectively differentiated from reality.

So, Harrell Fletcher- I listened as he said that when he got to graduate school, he realized that he was less interested in art and more interested in human interaction. In that second I almost broke the unspoken code that requires you to pretend that you are not on the other side of the wall, even though all involved are aware of your presence. I wanted to tell him that, in that second, I absolutely loved him and that I thought that we could have a future together as best friends. It is not his work that I am overwhelmingly interested in, although I am interested. Really, it is him and his approach that I like. Specifically, I am interested in his use of interaction.

On several occasions I tried to explain this to Harrel - mostly in brief awkward encounters in the hall. I tried to explain my fascination with
stalking people—people who, I have surmised, in some way want to be
stalked or at the very least take it as a compliment. I could tell that he was
not altogether comfortable with this and I thought I might try the old trick of
legitimizing strange behavior by calling it art and adding that I like Sophie
Calle. I caught myself before I said this, knowing he would be on to me. This
usually works better on relatives and hardware store clerks, who are looking
for an explanation that will allow them to go on loving you or ringing up
your array of strange purchases—twenty jars of Vaseline, a hunting vest and a
hoe.

Justifying behavior, if this is even a concern to you, is fascinating. In
my family, there are four categories in which strange behavior can be
justified: religious devotion, the need for order, obsessive compulsion and art
making—a category added for me. While all of the categories are well worth
discussing, I want to concentrate on obsessive compulsion. My mother and
stepfather were in for the weekend to see my thesis exhibition. On the way to
the Denver airport, we stopped at the diner on Tower Road. My Ma and I
were talking about my work. Ted, my stepfather, was looking at the wall
with glassed-over tired eyes. At first I mistook this expression for one that
drives Ted crazy when my grandmother, Fatty, makes it. The expression is
usually made when the conversation is neither about nor concerning the
person making the face. Ted grew to hate our family dog because he said that
she would lie there all day and make that face at him. It was in the end of
Muffin’s life that it really got to him. She was blind and deaf and was
missing one ear from a run-in with a coyote. I think that it was the mix of
being both indifferent and pathetic.
Fatty got her name when Ted was in the Army. She is a short round Irish Italian woman who wears her weight well. When Ted got back from the Army, Fatty had lost so much weight that Ted ironically called her Fatty. With her son home safe, Fatty could eat again and regained her roundness.

My Ma also noticed the look that Ted was making. When Ted is doing something that is like his mother, Ma says in a loud voice, "O.K. Rita." Rita is Fatty's name. Ted, realizing that we had mistaken the look, said, "Nah, you never had a chance dawl'in. On all sides everyone is so damn obsessive. I'm proud of ya."

I asked what he thought Fatty was obsessed with. He said without thinking, "herself." Ma nodded solemnly in agreement. But I don't know about this. Ted told me that when he was a kid, Fatty made the same dish on the same night of every day of the week. They, as did most of New Orleans, ate red beans and rice on Mondays. They ate lamb chops on Tuesday, spaghetti and meatballs on Wednesday, meatloaf on Thursday and fish on Fridays. One day Fatty decided to try a new recipe out of a magazine. Ted says that his father and brother refused to eat. I have asked Fatty about this a few times. Every time she assures me that they ate fish on Friday- as if I am questioning her Catholic faith. In The Catholic Church, you cannot eat meat on Fridays in Lent. Most people do it all year round out of habit.

It is true that on all sides of my family there is an inordinate amount of obsessive behavior. So much so that if you do not go overboard with something then you are thought to lack conviction. I started smoking cigarettes when I was around ten years old. I tried throughout my teens to develop it as a habit. It was not until I was in my early twenties that I felt
secure in my addiction. I finally felt like I had a backbone. At twenty-four I had to quit drinking alcohol and smoking due to a brief serious illness. It was difficult to give up and I felt so satisfied-not in giving it up but in loving it so much that I had to fight myself to stop. I am fond of telling people that I used to smoke...as if I were a veteran or something. The realization that this amazing feeling existed motivated me to develop other habits that might take hold of me so that when I denied myself it further illustrated how much I loved them. None, however, could compare to smoking.

Smoking made me feel close to people in my family with whom I had little else in common. For example, my Great Aunt Joan. Nobody really understands my deep admiration for Aunt Joan. She was a caustic, bitter woman who chain-smoked while doling out the insults. The last time I saw her she said to me, "Who are you? Never mind, I know who you are. You are just like your mother." I thanked her and she told me that it wasn't a compliment. Aunt Joan was a waitress at Ron's Seafood Hut for most of her life and if you knew just how to talk to her, you could get her to tell you stories about how she ran off with her third husband, "the cowboy." To most of the family, these stories were embarrassing, so I was often left alone with Aunt Joan on the smoking porch. I was not allowed to smoke with her, so when I was alone I would emulate her smoking, with her lips tight, her shoulders high, her eyes squinted-exhaling as if it were the biggest burden in the world.

But this work really isn't about Aunt Joan-it just reminded me of her. I just love it when people get to talking. My husband's Uncle Jimmy is also an unappreciated storyteller. I could sit and listen to him for hours. The first
time that I met him was at David’s parents house. I was sixteen and was in my Catholic school uniform. He said, “Oh, you are one of those girls. What are you doing here?” I said, “Yes, Sir, I am and I am here because I am David’s girlfriend.” He took a long look at me with his head tilted up, “Do you luuuuvvvv him?” I said, “Yea, I love him.” He said, “Are you going to marry him?” I replied, “Yea, I might marry him.” He proceeded to tell me his theory about marriage and how each person’s kin line up in a battle formation to begin a lifetime of fighting against each other. I listened to his theory. At this point in conversations with Uncle Jimmy most people get up and walk away aggravated. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye and said, “Yea, but Uncle Jimmy, you and I both know which side wins.”

Even though I don’t really believe this, it was enough to win Uncle Jimmy’s respect and the key to unlimited family stories and more theories. He was particularly fond of walking through David’s parents house, which he and David’s Mom grew up in, saying, “Oh Lord, if these walls could talk.” He is always talking about the book that he is writing and how, “people round here better hold on tight when that book comes out.” This starts to talk about my work. As much as I think that Uncle Jimmy likes me, I have never seen this book. I don’t know what the walls would say if they could talk, but I have a few ideas based on hints and evidence. Little bits and pieces that start to make a story.

Aunt Nonie is one relative who comes up over and over with Uncle Jimmy. The details are blurry and it is really not a story for me to put together here. Aunt Nonie is David’s grandmother’s sister. For my MFA graduation, David’s mother sent me a piece of Newcomb pottery that
belonged to Aunt Nonie. She loved pottery and made slip cast ceramics. In fact, the mold that I used for the teacups that are in the exhibit are cast from her collection of plaster molds that I found one summer in David’s family’s attic. David’s Mom didn’t know this and the card enclosed implied that although Aunt Nonie loved pottery, she just dabbled in a little ceramics and wasn’t an artist. When I pointed out the irony of this to David, he told me that his mom kept Aunt Nonie’s long braids in a box after she died. He said that this really scared him but that it also reminded him of me. I don’t think that Uncle Jimmy knows about Aunt Nonie’s braids. David’s Mom says that some things are meant to be shouldered and when you die, they die with you.

That is neither here nor there. Although it is interesting that objects start to hold some of the story. Where there are missing facts, there are physical details that could point anywhere. This reminds me of something that happened when David’s Mom and I were driving from Louisiana to Colorado. We stopped in a small restaurant on the side of the road. We noticed that all the men in the restaurant had pliers in small holsters attached to their belts. As we were leaving, we passed two men with pliers on their belts. Rose asked the two men why everyone had pliers on their belts. They laughed to each other and said, “Well, you can’t hardly put your pants on in the morning with out them.” Completely deadpan, Rose replied, “Are all of your zippers broken?” I really loved her at that moment.

It is true that objects function as evidence and indicators, but other events seem to point to something much more. When I was a teenager, all of the girls in my class wore their Mother’s high school class rings. I had listened to my Mother complain about how she opted to get a pearl ring
rather than her class ring. For some reason or another, she never got the pearl ring and always felt a little bitter. My mom’s best friend, Jan, offered to let me wear her class ring. Jan’s ring was from Sacred Heart Academy in New Orleans. This ring was amazing and irreplaceable. It was a rectangular stone with the school’s crest on the front. When you took the ring off, there was an image of Mother Mary floating inside the stone. I don’t know how I lost it, but one day it was gone. I thought that I must have done something to deserve this and I began to pray. I watched every move I made and tried to redeem any past poor behavior. This went on for months. I prayed and prayed. One Saturday, I was sitting in my room thinking about my new reformed life. A realization swept over me. I was good. I thought about my new closeness to God. I decided that in the morning I would call Jan and tell her that I had lost her ring. I was smiling to myself, thinking of being good and honest, when my older brother, Toby, walked in my room. He had totaled his car the week before and had just returned from the junkyard. He said that he went back to his car to look for some homework that he couldn’t find and asked if the ring in his hand was mine. I couldn’t even tell him what had just happened. He handed it to me. I returned Jan’s ring the next day. Within the month I returned to my less conscientious self. I knew it and felt guilty. It had been a few months since I had returned the ring to Jan. She phoned me in a panic. She said she had dreamed that I had lost her ring and asked if I still had it. I assured her that I had returned it and reminded her where she had placed it in her jewelry box. She left the phone to look. It was indeed there, so she apologized and said she didn’t know where this idea
came from. I wanted to tell her the story, but my relief was too great and I just politely got off the phone.

I want to believe in this form of religious mysticism that makes the impossible possible or the unbelievable believable. I want to believe that Aunt Nonie’s things are migrating to us because the objects have a life of their own. One day I think that her braids in the box will come.

When I told my stepmother that I was thinking about objects and their secret life, she reminded me of a story. I gave her a pair of earrings a long time ago. She loved them and I was proud that I had given them to her. One day she was wearing them and noticed that one was missing. As she was retelling the story, she included details that she either didn’t tell me or I didn’t remember. Kathryn was feeling really guilty about something that she did. She didn’t want to say what exactly she felt bad about. She said to herself, “if this is why I lost my earring then it will come back to me.” A week later, on her way to work—she was a social worker at many different middle schools—she was walking through a gravel parking lot and happened to look down and saw her brown earring perfectly camouflaged in a pile of brown stones.

As I was defending this thesis, my advisor said that she wished I had included a story that I had told her a few months ago. It is an amazing story. I have known my husband’s parents since I was fifteen. When I started to get to know them, I was struck by how little they interacted. They seemed to live in the same house, have the same five children and yet they didn’t seem to share the same life. Nobody talked about this, it was just the way it was. Then about five years ago it all changed. Rose, my mother-in-law, has always
been a religious woman. I went to the same Catholic girls school as she did—Saint Scholastica Academy. She said that she could not come to terms with what the Catholic Church was teaching, and after she and Bill got married she left the church. She is a folk singer and has an affinity for gospel music. In fact, one time the two of us drove two hours to go to church in Mississippi because she had heard that the choir was really something. The service started with a woman in a black robe and a colorful sash around her neck. She said, “Good morning brothers and sisters! Would everyone please turn to your neighbor and say, ‘you are in the right place at the right time’!” Rose and I turned to each other and said, “You are in the right place at the right time!”

Anyway—Bill and Rose. Rose has a strong connection with Jesus and the Christian religion appealed to her more than the Catholic religion. Bill is a scientist who works for NASA. For years his religion was science and he seemed to look down on devotional religion. After his favorite uncle died, devotion hit him over the head. He became born again. Although he seems to be a different man, he approaches the Bible with all of the laws of science. After this Rose and Bill had a new marriage. They did everything together and talked about each other when not together. They even vacationed together.

Rose, at times, does things that seem odd to me. Over thirty years ago, Rose walked out the house and saw some dirt that David’s oldest brother, Thomas, was playing in and thought that the dirt looked particularly fertile. She decided to put it in pots and save it for a garden in the future. I had never seen David’s dad wear a wedding ring—some men don’t—but he did have one.
So, some thirty years later, Rose decided to plant a garden using the dirt that she had saved in the pots. As she was sifting through the dirt she found Bill’s long lost wedding ring. The last time he had seen it was in 1972 when he was in the yard with Thomas. It is as if that ring came back to him when he was ready for it. He wears it now- but it only fits on his pinkie finger.

I want a suspension of disbelief to exist in the works that I make. My mother told me that when she was looking at the horse in my exhibit she saw his eyes move. My grandfather passed away while I was here in school. I often associate his death with my time in school. I think of him while I am making things because he was a natural craftsperson. Ma said that it was Paw Paw that made the horse’s eyes move and that it was to show her that he was there.

This accompanies something that Paw Paw showed me when he was alive. His neighbor’s son had a heart attack at only forty years of age. There was a picture of Kenny on his mower framed in the house. Kenny’s nephew commented one day that it was his favorite picture because of the Jesus in the tree. On closer inspection the branches of the tree did form a perfect resemblance to the face of Jesus. With this discovery, they made hundreds of copies of the picture and sent it out to everyone they knew. Paw Paw showed my brother, Boo, and I the picture. It was so uncanny that Boo couldn’t even touch it.

That was just a tangent. But the part about my grandfather making the eyes move is important. See, I made the horse because I had to. It was as if it already existed and it was just waiting for me to make it physical. And this stuff about Aunt Nonie, I think that those plaster molds were making some
sort of metaphysical beeline for me. If asked why I made the work in my thesis exhibition, I could talk about artists who did similar types of things and talk about white walls- not the padded ones, if that is what you are thinking. When I really think about why I made this, I think about religious devotion, the need for order and obsession compulsion and I think about my family.