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This Thesis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

FATHOM

By

Daniel Raffin

B.F.A., University of Connecticut, 1992

*Antiquities*  
*William*

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the  
Graduate School of the University of Colorado  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
1995

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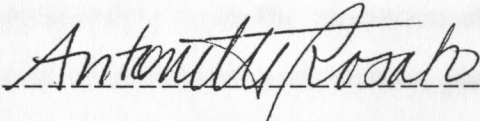
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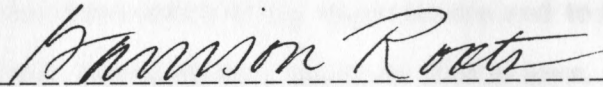
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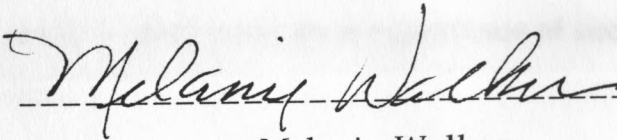
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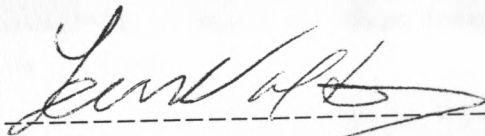
Antonette Rosato



Garrison Roots

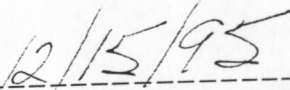


Melanie Walker



Luis Valdovino

Date



INTRODUCTION

To accomplish the task of saying a few things about this work which presents me with elusive visual and psychological phenomena I feel it is necessary to abandon any pretence to objectivity and rather affirm my own experience of the work. This is necessary for two reasons: 1) Anyone's experience of this work is personal, more so than of most work because it requires intimacy with an image in the work, and perhaps with an image in one's mind, of the absent other. Why pretend I can speak for others? 2) This work is inseparable from the emotions of love, and theory simply will not do justice to movements so subtle, particular, and contradictory. I have written this paper in the first person and in fragments to remind you that these are utterances of my experiences and to forestall any attempts at theorizing the contradictory solitude that is love. These utterances are decidedly male, and perhaps heterosexual. Take them for what they are and no more -- only your own experience of such matters is of great importance.

\* This introduction is based on ideas from Roland Barthes' introduction to Discourse of a Lover.

## INDEX

"It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so; she weaves and she sings; the Spinning Songs express both immobility (by the hum of the Wheel) and absence (far away, rhythms of travel, sea surges, cavalcades). It follows that in any man who utters the other's absence *something feminine* is declared: this man who waits and who suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminized. A man is not feminized because he is inverted but because he is in love. (Myth and utopia: the origins have belonged, the future will belong to the subjects *in whom there is something feminine*.) (Discourse of a Lover. Barthes.)

Upon immediate entrance to the installation the drawing stands as an index to the sculpture. It points to, indicates, or discloses aspects of my experience as it informed the making of the sculpture. What is most peculiar about the drawing is that it shows an ear that has become erotically female. What does it mean for the ear to have *become* erotically female? An ear might already be interpreted as vaginal in that it is an orifice which may receive. The drawing moves beyond this commonplace metaphor toward a more complex relation which tests the boundaries between the physical and spiritual to achieve a speech oriented erotics. From the outer ear there is an immediate movement to the inner ear -- the physical movement of the outer ear (that part of the ear we see and think of as an outside) is brought directly against the inner ear (that part of the ear which is the beginning of the nervous system of hearing or the terminus of the brain at the ear). The middle ear (that part of the ear which is the medium between the outside world and our nervous system) is notably absent. By erasing this medium the drawing marks and tests the boundary between the inside and outside. This boundary is further marked and tested by the correspondence of a body (an outside) with the inner ear. This is a correspondence between particular representations of

the body and the inner ear. The representation of the body is female and erotically posed, the representation of the inner ear is a diagram of the spiralic movement of fluid within the neural receptor. The movement of the fluid corresponds with the body in such a way that it seems to flow into the vagina of the woman. The implication of such movement is that the fluid caresses or stimulates the vagina as the terminus of the mind. Thus, the vagina transmits electrical impulses which have their origin in sound. But, whose ear is this? If I identify this ear with my own I recognize my inner ear as invaginated. I have received the speech of the beloved with erotic pleasure. I am the feminized male in love, I am he who awaits the caress of the voice of the beloved. If I identify this ear with the ear the beloved, I imagine that my voice caresses the vagina of the beloved. Thus do I sustain myself as a lover in waiting.

BODY

"Absence persists -- I must endure it. Hence I will *manipulate* it: transform the distortion of time into oscillation, produce rhythm, make an entrance onto the stage of language (language is born of absence: the child has made himself a doll out of a spool, throws it away and picks it up again, miming the mother's departure and return: a paradigm is created.) Absence becomes an active practice, a *business* (which keeps me from doing anything else); there is a creation of a fiction which has many roles (doubts, reproachs, desires, melancholies). This staging of language postpones the other's death: a very short interval, we are told, separates the time during which the child still believes his mother to be absent and the time during which he believes her to be already dead. To manipulate absence is to extend this interval, to delay as long as possible the moment when the other might topple sharply from absence into death." (Discourse of a Lover. Barthes.)

I long for the absent beloved. To endure this absence, to overcome my melancholy, I repeatedly imagine the return of the loved one. Time and again I retrace my memories of the beloved and compose them into a narrative of desire -- the narrative of the departure, journey, and return of her. At times I may fail as my own guide and storyteller and so languish. It is my experience of such fictioning and languor that inspires this work.

"The discourse of Absence is a text with two ideograms: there are *the raised arms of Desire*, and there are *the wide-open arms of Need*. I oscillate, vacillate between the phallic image of the raised arms [fictioning], and the babyish image of the wide-open arms [languor]." (Discourse of a Lover. Barthes.)

FATHOM: [ME fadme from OE faethm meaning outstretched arms or the length of the outstretched arms; akin to ON fathmr meaning fathom, Lat patere meaning to be open and pandere meaning to spread out and GK petannynai]

- 1. a unit of measure equal to 6 ft. used for measuring the depth of water
- 2. comprehension
- 3. to measure by sounding line
- 4. to penetrate and come to an understanding of
- 5. to take soundings
- 6. to probe

Fathom: the image of one with one's arms wide open to measure a fathom of rope is the image of need

Fathom: the act of fathoming is motivated by the desire to possess the absent

\*Cadastral mapping is the mapping of land parcels. Cadastral mapping is the mapping of land parcels on the earth.

When I enter the space of the installation I enter a mapped space. I see large structures which mark a place. These are understood as such because when I look into these structures, which are modeled after marks on a map, I see that they are structures that are *set upon* wells. They are structures that mark the wells as places. Atop these structures are surveying tripods on which are mounted slide projectors. The tripods and the projectors allude to both the practice of cadastral mapping and the practice of sub-surface mapping\*. On the one hand, they allude to cadastral mapping because the tripods are items of surveyor's equipment and the projectors are almost pointing toward horizons as transits. On the other hand, they allude to sub-surface mapping in that the tripods and the projectors are arranged in such a way that the projectors seem oriented toward the earth, and in fact they project images downward much as sonic equipment used in sub-surface mapping projects sound into the earth. Because these instruments allude to both kinds of mapping, I think of them as instruments for finding the threshold between the worlds above and below. It is the wells as thresholds that are mapped, it is the wells that are remembered. But what are the wells remembered as? Are they sites at which I can find water? Yes, but not the kind I would expect to find in a well. It is a peculiar water of seemingly infinite depth, in which, at these particular places, images occur. And when I finally look into both wells and note the similarity of their material content and the relationship of their images I realize that I am not looking at water, but waters that exist as a world below my feet. I see the images residing in this world below.

\*Cadastral mapping is the mapping of property. Sub-surface mapping is the mapping of structures, water, etc. within the earth.



Were these images to be projected upon a solid surface, such as paper, then my relationship to them would be similar to my relationship to any photograph as an index of something that has occurred. This index is an image which both "captures a moment" and marks the moment as forever lost. But, in fact, these images are projected into a fluid. There the image resides below the surface as an index, but with the peculiar quality of being open to my probings. Unlike the surface of the paper which I cannot transgress without destroying the image, the fluid allows me to physically penetrate its surface without destroying the image. When I look at a photograph on a piece of paper I metaphorically enter the illusionistic space of the photograph through the *mental* act of a suspension of disbelief, allowing myself the illusion of becoming spirit through a forgetting of my physicality. The paper itself is necessary as the material which bears the image, but it does not signify because it is an impenetrable surface. When I look at these images in the fluid and skim the penetrating tip of the plumb bob across the surface of the fluid I commit the *physical* act of entering the bearer of the image, thus allowing it to become significant as a place, without permanently altering the image itself. I say I can not permanently alter the image, because I only *momentarily* alter the image by periodically relocating a part of it above the fluid. This rhythmic relocation of parts of the image occurs when the plumb bob is swung -- the bob momentarily intercepts the projected image at the same or similar points at regular intervals as it casts a shadow below itself onto the fluid. Thus, parts of the image oscillate between the world of the fluid and the world of my physical space. This quality of being impervious to permanent alteration by touch, of actually being able to pass through the image without permanently altering it, renders the image as a

ghostly apparition, that is, as spirit. I think of the swinging plumb bob as a gentle sexual union of the physical and the spiritual. This gravitational swing is the rhythmic coupling of the physical and phallic plumb bob with the spiritual image it penetrates in the dark well of the fluid of night. This inability to permanently effect the image sets up a difference between way myself and the image -- I am reminded of my own physicality and my inability to transcend it. Thus, I must manipulate the image as best as I can to seemingly cause it to become physical or present "to delay as long as possible the moment when the other might topple sharply from absence into death." I am haunted by their otherworldliness and persevere in my (see page 1).

Where are these images I am allowed to enter, whence do I retrieve them? I find them in wells which are points of access to waters beneath my feet. They appear at the very threshold of my physical world and some other dimension below me. Above, I spoke of them as images projected from memory. This must be qualified, for these liminal images haunt in a way conscious memory does not, and they appear as apparitions in a medium which has no structure of its own. This dark fluid, in which things might suddenly appear, and in which things can not be seen at a distance though they seem to be at an infinite distance because in another world, is the unconscious. I am haunted by their otherworldliness and persevere in my attempt to relate them to myself in my own world. I manipulate the absent to endure and await her return that I may turn away from the unconscious business of absence toward her as presence.

came from, that is, the way in which the unconscious is not a...  
 the unconscious is not a...  
 Monica Escalante, with whom I have been...  
 coming here to study...  
 a student. This...  
 which we could...  
 to endure. It is this...  
 think about the...  
 in a...  
 What happens when...  
 medium of speech...  
 me because it has...  
 is critical to an...  
 appear to be means of...

I have referred to these images as "her, the absent other", leaving it this general in order to write about the things through which the image appears. Thus, I implicitly have raised two questions: Who, specifically, are these images of? And what are the significant qualities of these images?

Who, specifically, these are images of is important only to those who already know the answer. For the typical viewer this question is moot, but at a certain level of generality the question makes sense. This more general level will be addressed, without abandoning the subjective utterance, when I examine the significant qualities of the images. For those who know the specific answer that these are images of Monica Escalante, my wife, there is the adjunct significance of where this work came from, that is, its inspiration. As follows:

Monica Escalante, with whom I had lived for four years just prior to coming here to study, lived in Richmond, Virginia during my tenure as a student. This separation by a space so vast as to become a void across which we could not reach caused us both great sufferings and exertions to endure. It is this distance and attempts to close it that gave me to think about the subjects of speech, memory, and imagination:

What happens when I try to retrieve the absent through an electronic medium of speech, such as the telephone? This question has preoccupied me because it has been central not only to my past two years, but because it is critical to an understanding of my present world as one filled with what appear to be means of communication with an absent other. Note that I

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write "appear", because these means do not facilitate communication with the absent as the *body* as pain and pleasure, but rather only with the other as a *mind* in a symbolic order, which in itself has no *necessary* connection to pain and pleasure, because it is hallucinated transcendence. These means, in fact, only mark the other's body as absent, because they can not transfer the body across their virtual space. I must settle for the sonic image of the other, and believe that the caress of the other's voice upon my ear will return. And I must believe that the other's body as seen in an image (a photograph) will return to caress my own body. How do I sustain such a belief, but through imagining such caresses? It is the aim of this work to self-consciously sustain this belief. The pretence of technological media to imagine these caresses is mocked in the process of achieving this aim. The way that this work attempts to imagine these caresses can best be understood by an examination of the caress and the significant qualities of the projected images.

Listening is tactile in part -- to listen is, in a sense, to allow myself to be touched by the other. To speak is, in a sense, to touch the spoken to with my breath. It is apparent to me that the loved one's voice is a particular texture, a warmth or coolness, a softness or firmness, etc. that embraces me, and that much of this particularity is lost in an electronic medium like the telephone, because the medium comes between the embrace that is the other's voice as felt.

Is not the body palpable? "Palpare" says, to "caress".

We caress and quivering to life comes the body. The approach of a finger and light disappears into darkest space. "Palpebra", akin to "palpare", says, "eyelid".

The body is felt, not seen.

What then are the significant qualities of these images, or who is the person in the image in a general sense? This is a twofold question, because I see two images of the person, two images to which I have different, but significantly similar relations. Relations which sustain me and mock the technology which makes them possible.

The significant portion of the person in one image is the ear. She is seen in silhouette, with the ear being the focal point of the composition, in that it is central to the composition and the only portion of her head that is in focus. She offers her ear to me as a receptacle for my desire. Her ear marks the threshold at which it exists. She is the absent to whom I feel compelled to speak or express myself. It is her absent ear I wish to caress with the breath of my voice.

The other image is one which might speak to me or one of expression. Her eyes ask me to consider her, they speak to me of her desire for me to be a receptacle for the breath of her voice. They mark the threshold at which they exist. I feel compelled to listen.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

These images alone do not allow me to feel the caress of the voice (all is silence) nor the caress of the body (I am looking at an image). These images alone metaphorically remind me of the beloved's voice on the telephone and literally of the beloved's photographic image I gaze upon in her absence. They mock me as a being dependent upon technological means of imaging the absent one. How do I in turn mock these technological means and transcend them by imagining the caress? I transgress the threshold marked by the images. I reach into the very place in which these images exist through the plumb bob, an instrument as physical as me. The plumb bob, when still, touches the ear. The plumb bob, when still, touches the mouth. And if I send the plumb bob onto its oscillating course I rhythmically touch and am touched by various parts of the absent other. We exchange our voices in silence and touch each other's body at an infinite distance.

Move only to meet the darkness

And like a long-legged fly on a stream

Move mind upon silence.

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Slide List

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts

Daniel Raffin

has submitted this written thesis

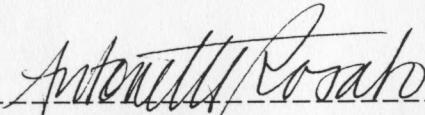
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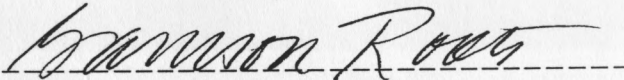
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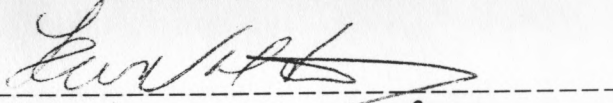
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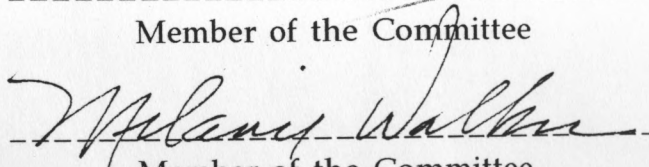
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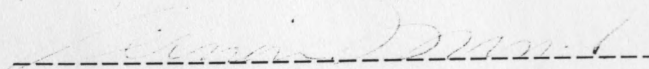
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Chair, Department of Fine Arts

## Slide List

1. Full View. 36'L x 15'W.
2. View of single well. 11'L x 11'W x 10'H.
3. Detail of projector and tripod.
4. View of plumb bob.
5. View of projected image.
6. View of drawing. 78" x 66".