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**The Presence of the Absent**

A Thesis Presented  
by

**Verónica Peña-Martínez**

to  
The Graduate School  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements  
for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

in

**Studio Art**

Stony Brook University

**December 2009**

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**Verónica Peña-Martínez**

**2009**

**Stony Brook University**

The Graduate School

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This thesis, *The Presence of the Absent*, is an autobiographical recounting of the production of my major works from 2006 through 2009. This period was marked by my separation from family and from my native country, Spain — and by my father's suicide.

Since I left Spain, I have compensated for the physical absence of my loved ones through the creation of works that, through confining my body, function as thresholds between the (me) here and the (they) there. These works comprise a series of installations and performance pieces.

Among my more important influences are the works of the visual artist Carolee Schneemann, and of the writer Milan Kundera.

To my family

Ubaldo, Mercedes, Rebeca, Sara, Anastasio, and Begoña.

Their love continues to give life to my projects.

To the memory of my father,

Ubaldo.



# **THE PRESENCE OF THE ABSENT**

By

**Verónica Peña**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### *Enwalled*

*Two years ago, an employee found my father hanged from a post in the garage he owned. My sister Sara used to work with my father in this garage, which was also my studio during the times I visited my family in Spain. After that happened, Sara did not come back to the garage anymore. I did, and what I remember is the garage floor sparkled of green-blue forensic rubber gloves and pieces of white rope. I remember looking at those pieces and thinking that they could be the rest of the cord that kept my father from breathing.*

*...In the end, I would be the only one to keep coming back to the garage. Today, in the train that is taking me to New York, the only two visions that accompany me from those days are my father's false teeth in the dog's water bucket... and my body confined within one of the walls of the garage.*

*I envision my body confined in the wall where his office was, where an old air conditioner used to be. Only my hair shows through the wall revealing my presence. Two years after his death, I still imagine myself enwalled there.*

From my notes, New York, May 2009

Two years after the loss of my father, I still imagine myself enwalled in the garage. Since I left my native country, four years ago, I have compensated for the physical absence of my loved ones through the creation of artworks that by confining my body function as thresholds between the (me) here and the (they) there.

## II. PERFORMANCE AGAINST SEPARATION



*Plate 1, 'Skins of Plastic', 2005 Unintended Performance  
Lynchburg, Virginia*

### *Skins of Plastic*

Since I was a child I have always thought of a mystical encounter, perhaps influenced by a Catholic atmosphere, or by the scenes in cartoons when the encounter of enemies fighting and of lovers kissing was represented with halos of light; when I was a child, I used to lie on my bed at night imagining my body levitating over my bed, and a blinding light inundating the room every time I felt that God was appearing to me. Today, at the age of twenty-eight, a feeling of being left alone persists inside me, and I walk against the current of people in the subway with the hope of meeting a predestined someone.

When I will meet that someone, no words will be necessary between us; there will only be a silence of understanding. Most of the time, I am uncomfortable engaging in conversation with others; I prefer to listen and to look at them. I take the subway because people don't talk but just look at each other. I think that it is at those moments of no engagement on my part that I feel

with most intensity the absence of my loved ones. Their absence has nourished my sadness and my artwork during my three years here in New York. After the loss of my father, a year ago now, I started to question my behavior: Why do I go away from my loved ones with the excuse of making art, if that submerges me in a perpetual state of melancholy?

At the beginning of the program, we were required to introduce our work to our colleagues; it was through the preparation of those initial presentations that I first started to reflect on the artwork that I had created since the time I left my native country, Spain, and my family. I realized that soon after I left, in my first months in The United States, I started using an intuitive gesture in my work. I covered my head with a skin of plastic, and I remained numb under its touch (*plate 1*). This plastic skin was made with transparent sheets of glue, pigmented mostly with acrylics. This originally unintended performance started in the intimacy of my bedroom while feeling intense emotional pain for being abandoned by my predestined someone. When I entered the program, the situation that had originated that pain was relatively recent. My reflections about that unintended performance and the permanency of my pain encouraged me to continue to use the intervention of my body as a tactic of healing from abandonment.



*Plate 2, 'Healing Time', 2007 Installation/ Performance Duration: 7 hours  
Charles B. Wang Center, Stony Brook University  
Stony Brook, New York*

### ***Healing Time***

I conceived of *Healing Time* (Plate 2) thinking that my beloved would see how guilty I was feeling about his departure. This was my first public performance on how the self might experience the presence of the absent.

When I started thinking of *Healing Time*, I was researching the work of Kim Jones and his alter ego Mudman. In the seventies Jones involved his body within a three-dimensional structure of sticks, mud, and other organic materials, and walked as a living sculpture through the streets of Los Angeles ("Wilshire Walk" January 28, 1976, Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles).

His work reminded me that when I performed the gesture that originated *Skins of Plastic*, I was reading about Native American cultures, in which a method of punishment was to cover the

body with layers of mud; the body couldn't breathe. Instead of covering my skin, I thought of removing it.

For seven hours, I covered my body with translucent tape as if it were embracing me (*plate 3*). Afterwards, I lied on a platform installed at the center of an indoor pool, looking through a skylight (*plate 4*). While lying there, I transformed the building into my own chamber, and froze time in a space between death and life. When I removed the tape, I also removed my death skin, and released myself from the past.



*Plate 3, 'Healing Time', 2007 Installation/ Performance Duration: 7 hours  
Charles B. Wang Center, Stony Brook University  
Stony Brook, New York*





*Plate 4, 'Healing Time', 2007 Installation/ Performance Duration: 7 hours  
Charles B. Wang Center, Stony Brook University  
Stony Brook, New York*



*Plate 5, 'At Least You Exist', HDV Video Animation Duration: 4:37 minutes*

### ***At Least You Exist***

In 2007, I also edited the video animation *Al Menos Existes (At Least You Exist)* into which I slowly transform into a being of paint while sleeping with my partner (*plate 5, plate 6*). My real “I” emerges while we sleep. Each night he hugs a monster.

### ***Bruises of Water Color***

My reflections on *Skins of Plastic* and the conception of *Healing Time* awakened a memory of my early childhood. It involved my grandparents: They took care of my sisters and me until I was five, when my parents took us to live with them in another city. During one of our visits to my grandparents' house, when it was time to leave, I convinced my sisters to paint bruises with watercolors on their bodies, thinking that if it appeared that we were hurt, we could stay at our grandparents' house. I considered this my first intervention upon my body.

Now that I look at my work in perspective, I understand that my first works in Stony Brook, *Healing Time* and *At Least You Exist*, were a visual evolution of the intuitive gestures that originated *Skins of Plastic* and of my childhood memory, *Bruises of Water Color*.

Embracing my body in a plastic membrane in *Healing Time* and my transformation into a being of paint in *At Least You Exist* was the result of losing that someone that I always wanted to find. My work since he left me, and especially my work after the loss of my father, has revealed itself as a series of steps directed towards the achievement of a feeling of communion with another being.

Following is a description of my major works over these years: *Without Name* (2008), *Don't Leave* (2008), and *The Death Placenta* (2009). All of them are performance/installation pieces involving the prolonged confinement and disappearance of my body among layers of manipulated materials, suggesting a process of metamorphosis: Metaphors of pupa, or placenta.



*Plate 6, 'At Least You Exist', HDV Video Animation Duration: 4:37 minutes*

### III. PERFORMANCE AFTER DEATH: PUPAS



*Plate 7, 'Sin Nombre' ('Without Name'), 2008 Performance/Installation Duration: 3 hours  
Lawrence Alloway Memorial Gallery, Stony Brook University  
Stony Brook, New York*

#### ***Without Name***

*The last time I saw my father he was angry. After he left home, I sat on the couch in the living room. I needed to smoke a cigarette, but I did not want to open the pack that he had left on the table. He would have known that I smoked. It was at this moment my grandma called me and told me that he was dead.*

From my notes, Stony Brook, 2008



*Without Name (plate 7)* was a response to the loss of my father. When life confronted me with this irremediable separation, my desire to experience a union with my father exacerbated my need of performing.

When I started conceiving of *Without Name*, I was reading the book by Robert Katz about the death of Ana Mendieta, *Naked By The Window*, and I felt identified with the visceral quality of her performances.

In order to feel closer to my father, I created the world of the absent, and also transformed myself into one of the absent. I transformed the art gallery completely, creating a sense of entering another reality when crossing the gallery's threshold. I covered the room with a thin layer of plastic and, thinking of the garage where he died, I painted red over the plastic. I painted the entire room, included the floor, using a small brush, leaving the marks of thousands of brushstrokes. The time that I dedicated to transforming the space was a time during which the presence of my father imbued the room, so the process of transforming the room had to be as intense and extended as possible.

I crossed the red room with strings from wall to wall. Using the strings, I built a group of two sculptures in the center of the room. One was a standing figure, metaphorically rooted to the floor and trying to leave, and the other was the evocation of a corpse. They were made of white paper soaked in glue and black enamel; white entrails in black blood (*Plate 8*).

These two sculptures, the standing figure and the corpse replicated the sculptures that I had in my studio, started as three-dimensional paintings of my beloved. Thinking that creating his body was the only way of having him, I put canvases on the floor, and in a state of impatient manipulation, I worked the materials with my bare hands, imagining that I was manipulating real viscera, and I filled my studio with these three-dimensional bodies representing us, anchored to the surface of the canvases.

When my father died, some months later, I felt a need to hug and sleep with the bodies anchored to the canvases in my studio. In order to bring the bodies out of the canvases, I crossed the studio wall to wall with strings, from which the sculptural material grew. I created my father lying as if in a bed, and me standing close to him. Seeing the representations of our bodies together made me feel closer to him (*plate 9*).

The show was completed with a performance for which I covered myself in a skin of plastic and paint; I sat or stood in a corner, a living sculpture, numb for hours (*plate 10*). I enacted this performance three times. Every detail was taken care of, especially the lighting, which was very dim in order to create a complete ambiguity between reality and illusion, life and death. When performing, I could not see, only hear. Hearing is the last sense we lose when we are dying... I built the space and waited for my father to come, but it did not occur.

In *Without Name*, I externalized my emotional state for the loss of one of the persons that brought me to this world, for the loss of one of my connections to this world. By burying the gallery and myself under layers of plastic and paint I created a limbo, a room between life and death, which I inhabited in the form of an amorphous living doll, a breathing but dying mass of paint and flesh.

When burying my body and the gallery I thought that I was covering it with the skin of another realm. Creating another realm was a mechanism to facilitate communion with an absent being. This thought was innocent, but the visual result grotesque.

I used everyday materials (not precious) like plastic, paint, paper, cord, tape, etc., and by combining them I created a fantastic world. I wanted the artist to be identified by the viewer as a person who used her imagination to create a world of fantasy by projecting her interior through common materials. The hand of the artist was present through the marks of the brushes on the

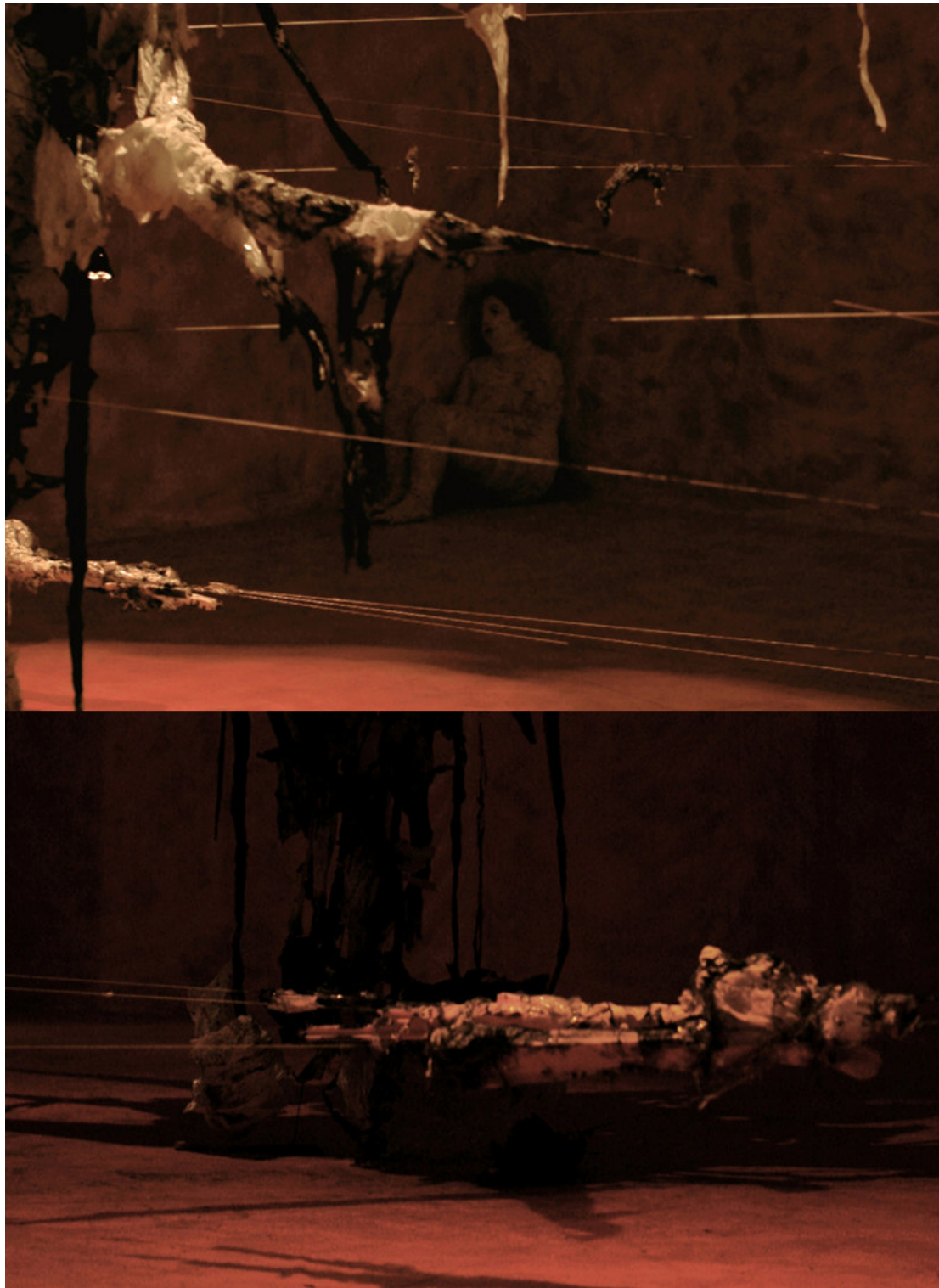
plastic over the wall, and through the organic manipulation of the materials. The choice of materials, the color, the dim light, even the smell, contributed to externalizing my inner feeling.

By allowing the viewer to intrude into my space of mourning, I opened the doors of my inner realm to them. I did not want any contact with them, but I needed them to enter my reality of internal destruction and witness my loss of identity, which was also my process of rebirth. The spectator was confronted with the visual expression of hidden emotions, with overwhelming intimacy. When I was there trying to feel my father's presence, memories of his false teeth in the dog's water bucket, of his pack of cigarettes, mixed with the song that I listened to when transforming the room, "Eres, lo más bonito en este mundo, eso eres..." ("You are, the most beautiful thing in this world, that's what you are..."— as the song goes) and with the light coming from the gallery's door, only the childish screams of the American audience kept bringing me back to the reality of the here and now.



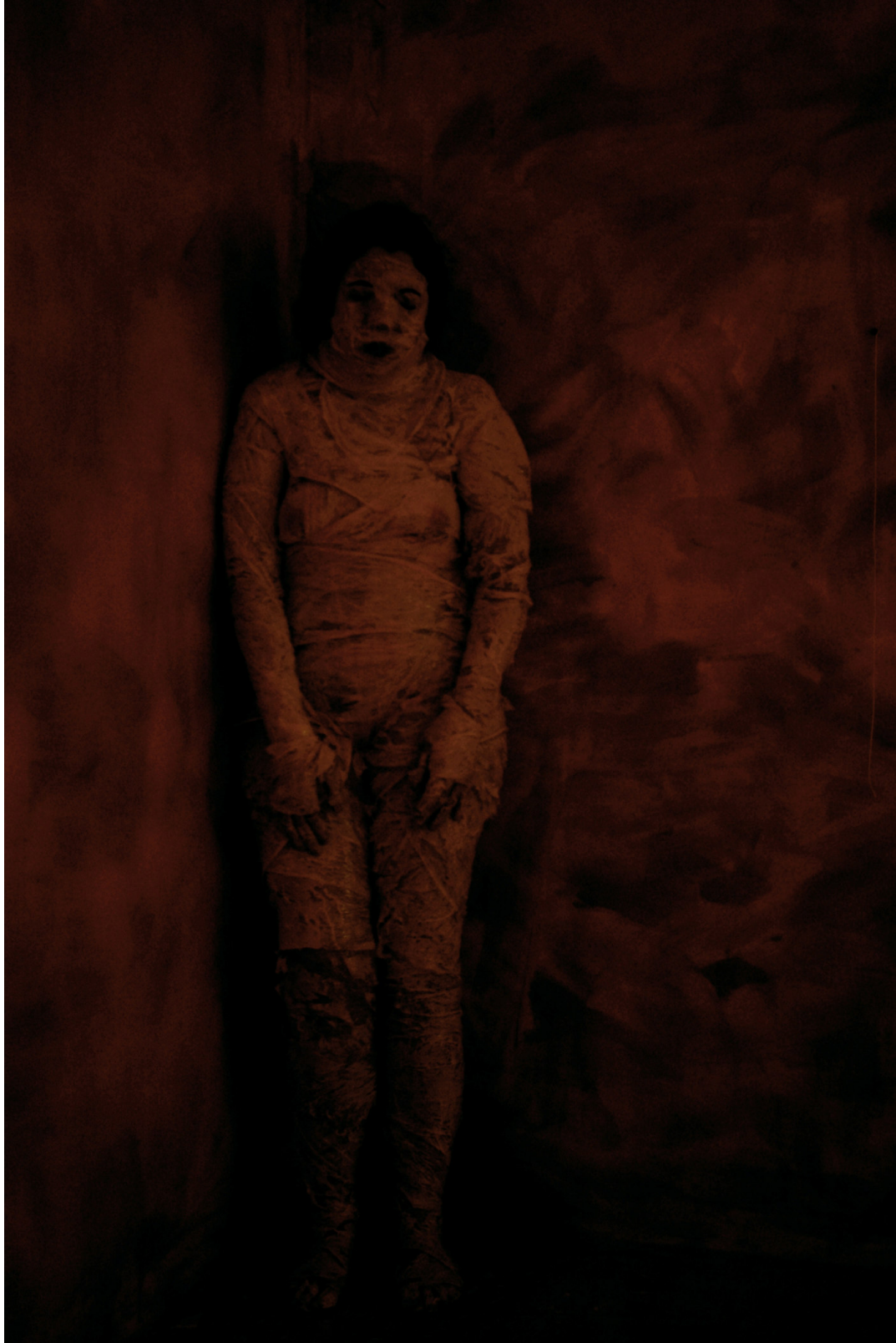


*Plate 8, 'Sin Nombre' ('Without Name'), 2008 Performance/ Installation Duration: 3 hours  
Lawrence Alloway Memorial Gallery, Stony Brook University*



*Plate 9, 'Sin Nombre' ('Without Name'), 2008 Performance/ Installation Duration: 3 hours  
Lawrence Alloway Memorial Gallery, Stony Brook University*





*Plate 10, 'Sin Nombre' ('Without Name'), 2008 Performance/ Installation Duration: 3 hours  
Lawrence Alloway Memorial Gallery, Stony Brook University*



*Plate 11, 'Don't Leave', 2008 HDV Video Animation Duration: 3:29 minutes*

### ***Don't Leave***

*"Me haría muy feliz que no te fueses Vero"*

*"It would make me very happy if you would not leave Vero"<sup>1</sup>*

After my father died, I felt more than ever the absence of my family. We are not very given to express our emotions through words: Maybe it is for this reason that the words above that my grandfather said to me before I left are still shaking in my head. When I returned to Stony Brook after my father's death, I spent many hours looking at photographs of my family. While looking at their photographs, I started to cover my feet, my legs, my chest, my hands, and my head with layers of translucent tape. The tape created a whitish membrane around my body. I cut

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<sup>1</sup> "Vero" is a nickname for Verónica

this membrane, introducing a scissors between the tape and my skin. I then taped the pieces back together. Doing these molds from my body was exhausting, but I kept on thinking of my family.

I suspended these body molds from the ceiling of my studio with nylon threads. I sat on the floor against the red walls and I looked at them cooled by the current of the air conditioner that moved them against the light coming from the window. When looked at closely, the light revealed the skin inside them: dead skin floating in the air of my studio. Their movement transported me to the seaside, where I could hear the shells breaking under my feet, and I thought of death, of empty containers evoking absent beings: the absent beings to which I owe my birth. While looking at the containers of my death skin back in my studio, I imagined all of us seated around a table in a whitish room full of shiny reflections: my assembled family and I.

While making the molds of my body parts, I thought of assembling them in order to create the bodies of my family. I would assemble my body molds to create their bodies and I would position them as in my photographs. I imagined myself embodied in tape, seated with my assembled family, motionless.

The loss of my father turned the absence of my family into a constant preoccupation and into the reason for my artwork. Among my notes from that time, there is this fragment which I titled "*The Plant*":

*The Plant*

*Inside the car, where nobody could hear me, I cried, laughed, and shouted, all at the same time. I abandoned the mental chaos of my studio and drove home with the desire to eat. Eating gave me an instant pleasure that released my angst for some minutes. Then, I went to bed. I and the piece of Styrofoam that still remained attached to my chest went to bed.*

*The next day turned out to be like the day before. However, instead of driving back home to eat, I decided to clean up the table in the studio. I was clearing the cloth in the sink, when I saw the plant. It was just in front of me, with the dishwasher, the solvent, and the brushes. I had seen the plant before, but never paid attention to it. I was not sure if it was dead, but I decided to rescue her from the reality of the sink. I placed it on the clean table.*

*I got mad at me for being so worried about my artwork, a dead reality; while not being able to perceive a reality that was alive and dying in front of me, a plant.*

On the opposite page to this text there was a picture of my family. After the episode of *The Plant*, I started to continuously reflect about my family and me not living (dying) together. I started to ask myself who I wanted to experience my time of life with.

After some months of making molds from my body, I concentrated exclusively on making molds from my head. But instead of hanging them from the ceiling, I pinned them to the wall. It was maybe the thought of giving corporeal presence to the beings contained in my photographs, which induced me to stab the molds of my head on the walls, first of my studio, later of my bedroom.

During the same time that I was making these molds, I kept drawing, but I had stopped drawing on paper and began drawing on the wall. I would darken the wall with charcoal and then erase a crochet pattern. The crochet pattern is a motive that I had use previously in my paintings. In the wall of my room this pattern became a threshold.

I started wondering why I shifted from drawing on paper to drawing on the wall. Thinking of this intuitive gesture, and curious about what was hidden in my subconscious, I

started to pay attention my unconscious gestures. During that time I was taking Prof. Kuspit's Art and Psychoanalysis course, which I believe was a major influence on the conceptualization of this and my next work. One of my spontaneous gestures that I became aware of was that sometimes I kissed the edge of my bedroom's door. Because I found myself kissing the door suddenly, without realizing when or why the gesture began, I thought that it was not me who was kissing the door, but the door *who* was kissing me.

This thought brought my head molds and my drawings of crochet patterns together into the video animation piece, *Don't Leave*. In this video, the actions of drawing and performing became gestures of a ritual that I enacted in order to bring my family to the place where I was. Following bellow is the statement that I wrote describing my experience of the work:

"I enacted the performance in the video some months ago. I found myself sitting in the corner of my bedroom facing the wall. I sit there darkening the wall with charcoal and erasing lines to draw a crochet pattern. I leaned back against the drawing, and with a mask covering my head, I remained there. I moved my head from side to side. I kept still and listened to my breath.

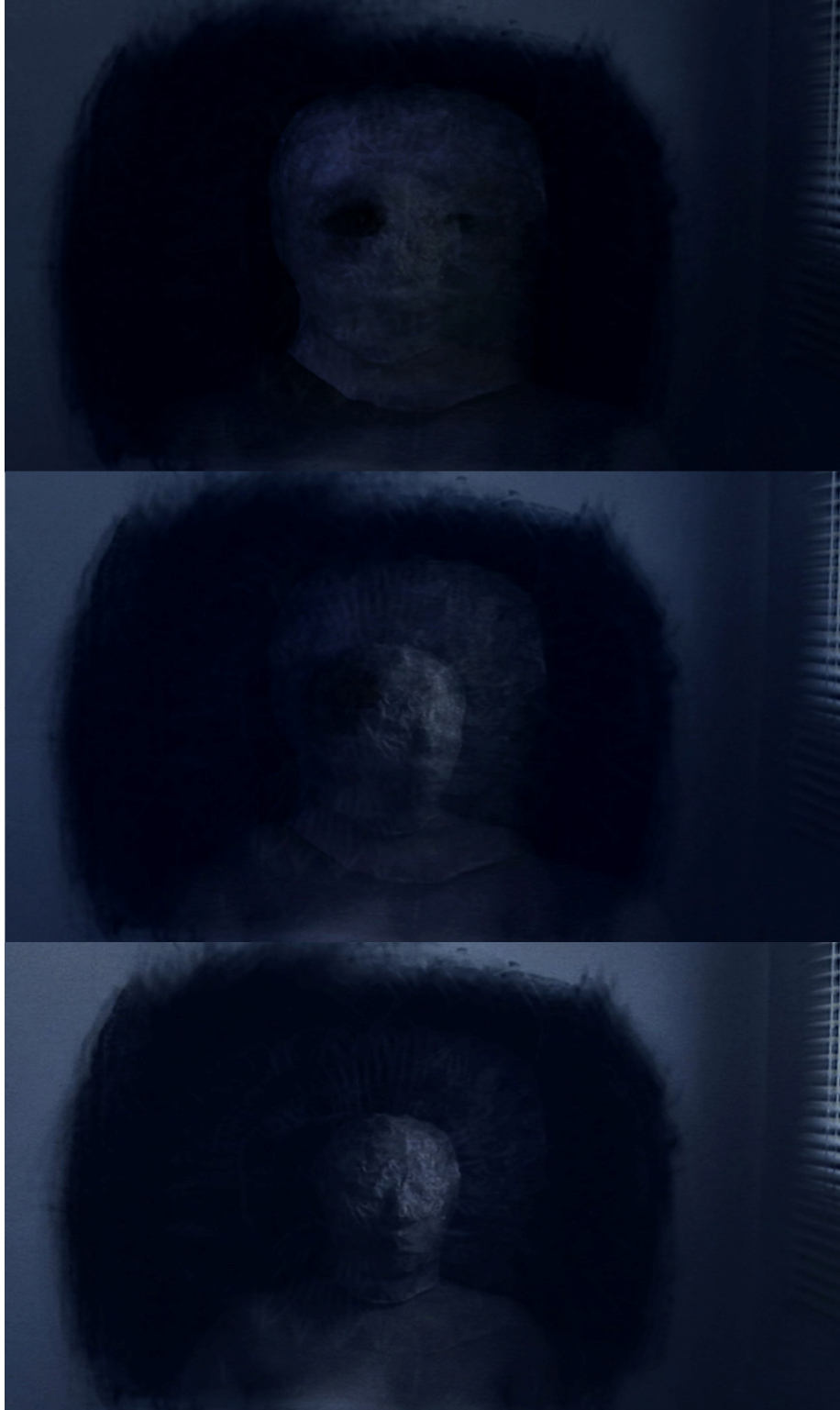
"I have been trying to notice the things that I do, which seem normal to me, but which maybe are not. When I started wondering why instead of drawing on paper I was drawing on the wall, I realized that I was also kissing the door. This was some months ago. I suddenly find myself doing these things, without realizing when or why the gesture began. Because of this I thought that maybe it is not me who wants to kiss the door, but the door who want to kiss me.

"Some months ago, my grandfather asked me to stay. Maybe it is he who is making me draw and put a mask on, to be with me.

"Distance may fill Art, but Art does not fill distance."

Here, like in *Without Name*, my use of performance responded to my desire for the magical arrival of an absent being. This idea was expressed in the video through the form of a translucent white head which emerged from a drawing made on the wall. The white head was slowly filled from inside by a living head, which turns into the torso of a woman with a head mask on her. When I was doing the video, I was thinking of a living head of paint emerging from the wall of my bedroom. At that time, I also started to understand distance as a premature death of the one who is distant, and it was curious to me, that this emerging head had the appearance of a Greek burial portrait brought to life.





*Plate 12, 'Don't Leave', 2008 HDV Video Animation Duration: 3:29 minutes*



*Plate 13 'The Death Placenta', 2009 Performance/ Installation Duration: 1 hour  
The University Art Gallery, Stony Brook University*

***Each Time I See Tables. The Death Placenta***

I was sitting on the floor of my studio by a pile of long thin pieces of styrofoam. I submerged a long thin piece of gauze in a bucket of black enamel and tried to tie some of the pieces together. I lay on the floor and with paint still dripping from my hands I covered my body with the styrofoam pieces. I rose from the floor, and after rearranging the pile I covered it with a white sheet. I imagined the sheet full of holes, caused by contact with spikes.

During those days, I would imagine that when I was asleep I dreamed he was coming to me. I imagined that while I was asleep a skeleton of burning black spikes emanated from my body, destroying it, and killing the person who slept by my side. The only reminder of this nocturnal happening would be the sheet on my bed full of charred holes each morning.

The representation of a desired but harmful encounter through the distortion and disintegration of my body in the form of spikes is an imagery I started to develop in 2007, two years before the completion of this piece, *The Death Placenta (Plate 13)*.

The scene in the studio and the imaginings narrated above originated with an emotional experience I had in 2007, of seeing a table in a store that reminded me of the table that my ex-boyfriend and I had at home. While looking at the table in the store, I began crying. Like the table at home, the one in the store had two drawers; I could not remember which of the drawers was his, the one on the left, or the one on the right. I felt sad, because I realized how long I had lived without him.

I was looking at the table, when I envisioned hard black protuberances emanating from it and criss-crossing my body. I imagined these protuberances blending with my body, and my body turning into the material. The spikes growing from the table reached and impaled me all over, until we — both the table and I — were unrecognizable, just a chaotic dark mass.

After this experience, I started a search that ended two years later, in 2009, with the creation of *The Death Placenta*. This piece is a highly sculptural painting. I cut long thin pieces of pink styrofoam and tied them together with glue and shreds of gauze in order to create a three-dimensional network. Then I attached it to a wood panel on which was a painting recounting the experience of the table.

During the two years I dedicated to its completion, this piece went through several stages and kept revealing to me some of the notions contained within it. While conversing with this work, I came to know that what I really wanted was to be one, with him, with the other, with anyone, as I was with my mother or as if I were the mother.

In my head, entering the artwork was the ultimate step towards meeting him, my dead father, and my family. It was through the incorporation of performance into the piece that the

relationship between my artwork and my body became real, and my longing for communion with the other temporarily calmed.

While studying Art and Psychoanalysis, I looked in depth at the work of Carolee Schneemann and I was influenced by the kind of relationship that she establishes between her body and her installations, her body becoming part of her installations. I kept in mind especially her performance/installation piece, *Eye/Body*.

For the performance, I created a plaster mold of my body and embedded it in the wall of protruding styrofoam. This mold was followed by a large sheet of translucent plastic with drips of black enamel and carrying a pile of styrofoam pieces (*Plate 14*).

Before the performance, I entered the mold with the help of an assistant. Once I was inside, the assistant closed the mold by rolling gauze around my head, arms, and legs. Once I was enclosed, the public was invited to enter the gallery. I performed by remaining inside the mold, motionless, for the duration of the performance, one hour (*plate 15*).

When I am inside the mold its weight constrains my body. I feel embraced and rocked by the sound and the warm smell of my breath. Although I am deprived of movement, left helpless in the arms of the audience, I feel safe. I hear the voices of the spectators as an environmental sound, only interrupted by the noises emitted by the styrofoam when I moved my body to balance it. This world of sounds transports me from inside the mold to the port of Santa Pola, a little town where I used to spend the summers with my grandparents, and where the homogenous sound of the sea and people is only broken by the creaking of the wooden boats.

Initially, some spectators were not aware of my presence within the artwork. Although my hands and feet were not covered by the mold, they were camouflaged by paint. From the documentation of the day of the performance and the comments from my assistants, I think that most of the spectators noticed my presence only when taking a close look at the piece, or when

they noticed I had moved to balance myself. When I was inside the mold, I couldn't know if there was someone close to me: however, a viewer told me afterwards that each time somebody approached me closely, I moved more. I remember only that I noticed the presence of the viewers close to me through the smell of their perfumes.



*Plate 14 'The Death Placenta', 2009 Performance/ Installation Duration: 1 hour  
The University Art Gallery, Stony Brook University*





*Plate 15 'The Death Placenta', 2009 Performance/ Installation Duration: 1 hour  
The University Art Gallery, Stony Brook University*

#### IV. CONCLUSION: THE ABSENCE AND THE CONFINED BODY

In less than three years, I lost him and my father, and I have started to feel the absence of my family as their premature death. By confining my body, *The Death Placenta* functioned as a threshold between the (me) here and the (they) there. My continuous creation of works through which I can embrace my body is a visual demonstration of my fight against separation.

But why insist on coming back to a placenta that cannot feed me?

In my thesis show, close to *The Death Placenta*, I showed one of the drawings that I made while I was creating this work (*plate 16*). Although I experience the embracing of my body by *The Death Placenta* as a healing ritual through which I transport myself to where the absent are, this drawing, which shows a distorted body, reveals the destructive nature of this embrace.

While I acknowledge this, it is my fate to prolong my enactment of this poisonous embrace. Because after all this time — almost four years after my involvement with *Skins of Plastic* — the most banal of circumstances has brought him and me together again.

The day after I saw him, I lied on my bed wearing the head mask that I used for the performance recorded in the video *Don't Leave*. I put the mold on my head, wishing to feel our past again. Instead, I saw myself as if I were a stranger lying on a bed with a mask on my head. The thought that maybe I could not sense the past anymore brought on the same anguish I felt when he left me three years ago.

This experience with the mask made me reflect on my behavior: On how sometimes I pass from a feeling of strong despair to normality in an instant. Maybe I belong to the European type that Milan Kundera describes as *Homo Sentimentalis*, and I have been enacting feeling because I want to feel. Is the complete hugging of my body by a plaster mold my strategy for feeling? Is making art my strategy for feeling?





*Plate 16 'In my Bedroom', 2009 Charcoal and Conte Pencil on Paper 75" x 55"*

## EPILOGUE

### *Uprooted*

This last chapter of my thesis is a record of how sometimes undesirable circumstances can interfere with our goals, but at the same time contribute in unexpected ways to achieving them. This thesis should have been finished in May of 2009, but a health problem prevented me from writing these last pages until today, November 21st. From April, I have gone through three life experiences that have kept me from making art, but I am convinced they will have significant impact on my future art projects.

The first of those experiences has been a period of hospitalization in which I have spent a long time in bed looking at the ceiling of my hospital room, thinking on everything but on nothing, sensing my body, experiencing moments of intense pain and feeling the drugs running through my veins. The second factor, which has channeled me into the third, is the hard economic period affecting the globe these days. The third and most important has been to become part of TRUCE (The Renaissance University for Community Education).

This month of November, I have started an internship as a Teaching Artist at TRUCE. It is a program located in Harlem, whose school population is Afro-American and whose focus is youth media-literacy and leadership development. Part of Harlem Children's Zone, TRUCE is based on experimental, arts-based and project-based learning. Its mission is creating young minds capable of thinking critically and creatively, and capable of analyzing and deconstructing the various forms of "media" which make up their world.

This internship has already taken me into a reality very different from my own, but within three weeks' time, I have realized the powerful connection I have with this community.

Through my interactions with the students and through conversations with the teaching staff, I have come to know about their Diaspora-driven concerns as they relate to the incorporation of the individual within the greater community. The program promotes the connection of these students with their African roots through the selection of topics of discussion and through activities that among others have recently included a field trip to Africa. Separation from culture of origin is a source of my artwork, and one that in many variations I share with my students at TRUCE.

On conversing with Aisha Norris, the Program Coordinator, I have also come to know that in the past year, a wave of violence hit the neighborhood, and several students lost their friends in shooting incidents. Aisha would recount to me how “The students would come to the school crying because one of their friends had been killed”. Going through the experience of losing a loved one in a dramatic situation, or simply losing a loved one and coping with the absence, is common ground to all of us.

This school thus provides me with an environment for the development of a project that I conceptualized during my time at Stony Brook, *Uprooted*: A project that I am interested in bringing into the classroom as a conduit to learning, student growth and self-awareness.

*The Death Placenta* was a first step in the conceptualization of *Uprooted*, which builds upon the image of a suspended human-tree form as a metaphor for a person feeling disconnected from his culture of identification, or close community. I always thought of this project as collaborative and now, a month before the conclusion of this thesis, life has brought me the opportunity of developing it.

Although I envision *Uprooted* as a collective performance, I have adapted the beginning of the project for development by my students through a series of postcards visually recounting their experiences of loss.

Dr. Kuspit has always insisted on a context for my work that would make it meaningful – in context and as a collective endeavor. It has been only at the end of my work in the Master of Fine Arts program at Stony Brook that I have realized this. The internship has made available to me the logistics for developing this project, but also, it has helped me to feel less lonely — to feel myself part of a community.

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