Fashion Slow: Poetic Threads of Fate and Decay

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FASHION SLOW
Poetic Threads of Fate and Decay
A gallery of embroidery and other works by Adrienne Rugg
Advised by Dr. Lori Martindale
June 10th, 2024
Abstract

This collection of multimedia art, poetry, and embroidery pieces showcases the process of learning and working in a new medium. This project prompted me to engage with a new mindset of constantly adapting, combining, and practicing new skills throughout the learning curve. Inspired by the urge to create something more meaningful than the onslaught of new “art” produced by AI, I spent the past months finding meaning in the process of creation rather than the product. The product is only a stationary glimpse into an ever-changing collection of ideas—but proof that the very human work of creation is more powerful than the meaningless output of Artificial Intelligence.

Artist Statement

Four years ago, I came to WWU amid the COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown. I lived in the dorms but experienced my first year in the Honors curriculum completely virtually. The future was unknown, and without many avenues for social connection, I found refuge in creativity and learning different forms of art—and then I never stopped.

The most wonderful thing about the Honors college, for me, is that it celebrates the process of learning and connecting different fields, such as sciences, humanities, and arts. As an English major and art lover, I have thrived here. All my classes have given me opportunities to integrate new skills and creativity with everything I learn. Especially in my classes with Dr. Lori, I took every chance to make something multimedia with both writing and arts and crafts. I did animation, crochet, digital art, traditional art, poetry, short stories, and all kinds of projects, always for the sake of trying something new.

This past year, with the popularization of ChatGPT and all the controversy around AI art, I started to feel stressed, as an artist, that I would never be able to accomplish anything that a computer could not learn faster. But here’s the thing—AI can make art, but it will never know why. I came to understand that the thought process, the learning curve, the troubleshooting, and figuring out new skills, has always been more rewarding to me than the final product of my endeavors.

That’s why I chose to do this project. I knew I had to incorporate writing and crafting to encompass my full experience in this program, so I chose a crafting medium I had never worked in before. I was gifted this embroidery machine, which is much older than me, so I set out to learn how to use the machine, how to create and program digital embroidery files, how to transfer them onto the data cards, and how to work with a multitude of different materials and variables for every single piece I created.
When I started gathering my poems and ideas, I realized that much of my work falls into certain themes, so when you look at these, you can see some of the categories they fall into, and some of the symbolic elements I chose to represent in the pieces. I believe that these encompass my experience here at Western, in the Honors College, and the thought processes that got me here.

So that is what I am proud to present to you all today: not only the final products of my work, but also the learning curve, and the time it took to learn, and earn each of these products. And, the promise that I am going to keep learning every new medium I can get my hands on.

The Work

The pieces in this gallery are sorted into four themes: Fear, Idolatry, Fate, and Decay. These words encompass parts of my soul, my core values, and the core outlets of my artistic expression. All the poetry and art I create touches on one or more of these themes, because to me, they encompass every part of this world.

These works consist of poetry, art prints, and embroidered fabric pieces. They exhibit various aspects of the process of learning to use these mediums. Each has a cost, not in dollars but in the currency of time—they are each worth the time it took to learn, program, and commit them to reality.

Fear

Much of my poetry is written from a place of fear. The words that come from nightmares are tangible to me and lend themselves to poetry as a purveyor of fear and also a processor. I used to say that could only write when I was afraid, but now I write from many places. Still, fear is one of my horsemen, the earth, the winter, the west, the dark moon.
Scorpion Mother

Fear – 2024
Mixed media: polyester thread on cotton
Price: 2 months

Its in their nature, they say
Ruthlessness
even in kindness
My scorpions are not ruthless
but Intense
Loyal
Precision
Powerful
Incarnate
Hydraulics

Fear – 2024
Digital print
Mirror

11:11
In the quantum cities between the molecules of my bone marrow, there are empty towers with yellow carpets and long, off-white halls. They have never been cleaned because no one is there to make them dirty. They hold no cobwebs because there are no spiders. They collect no dust because the air is still.
Only those who seek an untold terror can enter here. The fear is unlike that of death, removed from failure, and cannot be replicated by a logical mind. It's like the peripheral worry of the ocean, or maybe the abyss of space. It's the dread of two little girls standing in the rain – a reverence reserved for the old deities.
I breathe in and out in a long oval, the same shape as a day. I've gotten too good at distracting myself from the spiders on the ceiling. If I keep looking, I might slip into a room with a yellow carpet, where I know they can't follow.
I'm not afraid of the dark. But, the dark makes it easier to be afraid. I close the door and turn off the light. Look into the mirror and try to imagine my smile.
Sorry, little girl. I know the faces haunt you, but you don't have to sleep alone. I'm stuck with myself all night.

12:34
Later at night, there's a woman in my bathroom. She fills the bathtub with grass and plants holly trees in the medicine cabinet. She drops me off at the edge of the sandbar. I walk the dotted lines in the riverbed one by one so she knows which boundaries not to cross.

1:23
In the hours after midnight, the concrete seizes with anticipation. The earth is pregnant with darkness. In the warm swaddling void, the embrace of the conqueror is flirtatious and hungry – but the waltz between us is a sacred, fleeting ceasefire.
Frost creeps into the soil. I look up into his eyes a last time and wait for them to flash from green to red.
Incubus

Two girls stand across a parking lot
One dressed in black
One dressed in white.
The rain pounds down onto the asphalt
so hard that their faces are blurred through the distance.
If they even had faces
they would be the fragments of my long-lost lovers —
the ones I’m not guilty to forget.
My clothes are weighted with water.
This ring of champagne-gray Mercedes,
Empty
with the passenger-side doors open to the harsh rain,
separate us
but the space does not dull the creeping dread.
They are holding hands.
These are the children of the incubus. This is what
springs forth, foaming and raving from the stark depths
of my fear. This is what comes when the
Gods are gone.
Before I sleep I listen to music that I can’t understand
The lyrics whisper strange promises
that someday we will all be ashen remnants
and that is payment enough.
There are still two girls standing in the rain.
It’s the dreadful clenching panic in my heart
of drowning eternally in the deep
Rain
Idolatry

Idolatry is a weighty word, I know. To me, it is not so reminiscent of false gods as it is believing in something so deeply that it rules you. It is an obsessive care that influences me on every level, like art, or philosophy, that seeps into every part of life on a cosmic scale. Idolatry is the water, the south, the spring, the moon waxing.

Moon Sink Low

Idolatry – 2024
Digital print

The body-shaped darkness has outgrown me again
And left me smaller than the universe
A scale in a mayfly’s wing.
Caen

Idolatry – 2024
Mixed media: polyester thread on twill
Price: 2 months
Graduate

Idolatry – 2024
Mixed media: polyester thread on felt, College Graduation Cap
Price: 4 years
listen to cicada

the world ended while we were buried
metamorphosis evolution rebirth hibernation
vindicated by the rusty skies
we emerge from our time of imagination

the cities our grandfathers hummed
through the unpleasantries of everyday
watched the hellscape in its self awareness
and bedded down to do the same

long years in the sun are longer in the cave dark
waiting in the roots for the day we stand
on the surface of a steely earth
and begin our crawl to the promised land

Dust

You underestimate the gathering of dust
It lingers in the corner of your eye, waiting to settle as you turn your back. It accrues on the lampshades, drapes itself on your cobwebbed antlers, dulls the luster in your pinned polaroids. Find me. Leave now before you have to sweep again.

Cross the vast plains, scale the crumbling cliffs, be absorbed by spongy moss Blaze across the desert until the thirst scorches from inside and the sun scorches from out Look for me out there, in the dirt kicked up by your heels, your wheels, the rattlesnake patterns laying ladders in the sand.

Deconstruct your idolatry to its barest essence
Dip into the tide pools where crabs sift in the silt, the water cloudy with eons of wonder. To learn the secret of the earth you must give your skin—let it wash upstream, disintegrate, feed the swarms beneath and join the dust.

Wake up on the shore spluttering free the juices
Let your raw muscle scrape up the rocks to the mountaintop until sinless and boneless with nothing left to trade but your mortal soul. Crawl to my shrine and I will let you go home. Now you have seen the world. It is only dust.
Saffron

Idolatry – 2024
Mixed media: faux fur, minky, polyester fiberfill, and polyester thread on minky
Price: 4 months
Fate
I always have to wonder if my choices matter. Do I have free will? Perhaps everything I do is predestined from the start, but I only learn my destiny as it plays out in my history. The future is a blank blazing void before us, and yet by the time we reach it, it never could go any other way. Fate is the fire, the east, the summer, the full moon.

Empty Space
Fate – 2024
Mixed media: polyester thread on felt, chiffon, and wool blend
Price: 6 months
**Time**

Time is the fisherman at the lakeside  
He casts his line, wrinkled clasp of steady hands  
Listen for a tug on the rod—  
We bite down before we know it  
Our lives already hooked and reeling  
Each turn of the earth a turn of his spool  
Cranking in the line.  
We wrestle and tug, swimming down to stay young  
But the barbs rip against our lips and we tire  
As the years ripple by  
Sunlight filters down into our dark-accustomed eyes  
We breach into the mirror-white sky  
Where the gentle fisherman welcomes us at the surface of the water

**Florida Pacifica**

There's not much downstream from here.  
But the deer of the delta grow blossoms in their branches  
And the women become willows
  
  And the centaur of our curiosity and doom comes out of the cave in bright silver and gold light and crushes our green glass bodies to the ship deck when we reach the harbor on a hot winter evening

Astride the muddy miles of the delta  
The deep dweller reaches out with his vines of mourning glories and fuses our splintered bodies with his tears  
We follow, destined to follow

  swallow the last of our brackish water and trudge  
  down the sphere of the beach where all directions are up

  I sit on a sea glass sprinkled beach  
  Underneath the glacial moraines of rain city  
  and I try to block out your thoughts of Florida  
  I don't want to meet you anymore though the timber of your voice  
  tastes like eucalyptus  
  fashioned in a ladder to the moon  
  we should reach the surface on a cold summer night  
  Standing in its spotlight I can appreciate what you did  
  to subject me to new colors beyond the range of visible light  
  to drop me a rope when I fell in the river and haul me back onto the bridge  
  but little did you know  
  I wanted to swim downstream
Decay

Like the cosmic and eternal Idolatry of art is a birth of creation, so is there a death. In everything cyclical, death and decay is not the end, but the precursor to dormancy, and out of that stillness burgeons life. The forest knows this, so why still do we struggle against it? Decay is the wind, the north, the fall, the waning away.

Recompose

Decay – 2024
Mixed media: digital media, technology, paper, fabric
Price: Unknown

It is no reverence to recompose the dead
But are not our sinews the same
Once waxed poetic?
Deadhorse

Her name unmatched in melody this morning
now looms just after midnight
a dead horse between my ears
I wallow in the muddled musk
spider legs curling like hair in a candle flame
one by one, eight by eight
I unfurl them onto my fingertips like gelid thimbles
exoskeletal semi-permeable membranes
so I don’t eat myself alive
These solitary nights use me to walk the knife’s edge of discomfort
between joyous haunting and papercut-to-the-brainmatter fear
as time reaps me toward the end of the line
I wake with the deadhorse still in my periphery
A rigor stiffening every word
Flooding up to the boundary and lapping at the seawalls
Stilling my pen as it becomes the soundtrack to the rocks, the lakes, the cliffs
The polyrhythm of falling trees
three by four, seven by eight
The wood returns to the water
The dry returns to the rot
The blood that runs red stills blue
Her body pooling in the grass like a single bruise

Fear of Falling

Remember your burning flesh in the haunting fires of fall
The smell of fresh roasted chiles
And red lilies with their lips dyed in blood.
You are trapped on a stage for all your burning life.
Emergency exits glow red
To your right.
Falling leaves and flat notes on pianos
As out of tune as the drumbeats in your head.
Your heart beats in your head.
You beat your head against the emergency exit,
Tinted glass beats back with the haunting fires of a wet summer
Until you pass into the burning lilies,
Lips died in red.
The Display

Though there were many more poems, designs, and inspirations always in the works as this project developed, these are the ones I chose to display. In the interest of showing the full scale of each piece, I would like to include the four tables that made up the thematic gallery.