

Journeying Through a Housecoat

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## Journeying Through a Housecoat

### **ABSTRACT**

## Journeying Through a Housecoat

Sasha Fligel

This thesis consists of personal research involving reflections into particular threads of my life which have sewn change into the fabric of my artwork. Through an autobiographical approach I have investigated the path of this change and documented how the change occurred. In doing so, I have recognized my need for broader research methods and acknowledged a very different community of artists with which I can identify. The conclusions I make for my own personal journey and my role as an art educator are poststructuralist in nature. I recognize the value of multiplicity and individual experience in the processes of making, thinking about and discussing art.

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## **An Autobiographical Patchwork**

I don't believe that there is any quantum leap of time, which separates the 'then' and 'now'. Life is an ongoing, morphing well of experiences that can be tapped for the knowledge to live and to function in the world. I tip my imaginary hat to all the philosophers and cultural observers who have theorized and finally destabilized rigid structures in favor of multiplicities and rhizomes. For me, the fluidity and ever changing realities of this world today provides a far more comfortable place to be than the seemingly unyielding era I was born into just less than forty years ago.

I offer up threads of events, which have helped to frame certain aspects of my life. All the information needed to understand the intricacies around those threads is impossible. So I offer a few strands of my life and plenty of omissions, which can be taken or left or embroidered upon if so desired. It is the absence as much as the presence that makes anything complete.

### **A Beginners Sampler**

I was born practically on the doorstep of Glasgow School of Art on Renfrew Street. Next door, in fact, to the 'Mac' (Mackintosh Building) as it was always referred to. My parents were both art school-trained painters. My mother trained in Glasgow and my father in Montreal. The aroma of Renfrew St. and home for me was linseed oil and turpentine, which I loved.

For as long as I have been drawing, and speaking, I knew where I wanted to be and what I wanted to do. It was painting at art school or nothing. But now all these years



later, I wonder about that choice and how it came to be. Particularly as now I have changed my direction and notions of what art has come to mean to me. Certainly there was the appealing sensory overload of being a child wandering along the corridors of one of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's most famous buildings. There were the sweet toxic smells I loved so much and the atmosphere of creativity there and at home. But there was more.

I grew up with three siblings and an art supply cupboard, which was always full of paper, paints and drawing materials. These were 'courtesy' of Jordanhill College, where my father taught art graduates the diploma course, which enabled them to teach art in Scottish secondary schools.

All four of the children in our family showed talents one way or another, but I definitely showed a talent in art and particularly drawing at a very young age. My father encouraged and praised me. This was what I was good at. This recognition, similar to my fathers, by schoolteachers also helped my passage through school when I began to waver then rebel against educational institutions.

School eventually became a battle for me. The institutions seemed rigid and unbending. Usually they were 'right' and I was 'wrong' and sometimes the reverse. Lessons on binary coding were simple but virtually impossible for me to understand, as were a lot of the lessons and rules at school. I became precocious and opinionated which sometimes did or didn't help matters at school.

From 1970, my first year at school at age five and six, I did not question why the girl's had to wear skirts and the boy's trousers, or why the little kids were put into the girl's playground and not the boy's. Presumably the girls were to take care of the younger

children. I was denied trumpet lessons on the basis of being a girl, and although this did not sit well with me, I accepted it. All seemed normal in my primary school where the headmaster was feared and the boss of all the other teachers, who were women. I did not question that the studio at home was my father's domain. We all had to knock before we could go in, including my mother. She was permitted by my father to use the studio to teach painting classes.

Although enormously talented, my mother laid aside her paints and talent to take care of the four of us instead.

### **Losing The Thread**

After my parents divorce in 1975, my mother, siblings, a very senile aunt, various pets and I moved one hundred miles north to a rural area in the Highlands of Scotland. My father remained in Glasgow. Life altered completely for all of us. We attended a small primary school with twenty-eight or so children. Our teacher veered mainly towards the arts. And we, the girls and boys, had no trouble in diverting her away from teaching us maths in favour of more preferable subjects like reading, art, or story telling. Although she obliged us in this way, we still had to follow a curriculum, which separated girls and boys at points in the week for activities deemed gender-appropriate. Girl's sewed and boys did sports and wood work.

In 1984 Rozsika Parker described how sewing was seen for British girls and women. 'The sexual division that assigns women to sewing is inscribed in our social institutions, fostered by school curricula, which still directs boys to carpentry and girls to needle work' (p.1).

Women were and perhaps still are, seen and encouraged to contribute to society through domestic activities. Certainly in the rural Highlands of Scotland this was and is a traditional role, played by many women.

However all I could see at school were the boys out practicing sports for the single school sports meddle, while the girls were not. The unfairness of it all prompted me to write a letter to the 'Equal Opportunities Board', which was the government's response to 1970's British feminist demands. My observations were not appreciated by my teacher, nor was the letter she received from the board. And, nothing changed.

In secondary school I rejected domestic-based lessons as soon as I could, opting for Latin instead of the 'girls-only' Home Economics classes. It was not an easy option. Even outside school I curbed my 'sewing and making' activities, which was a large part of my creativity. Perhaps I was instinctively following a historical precedent where in the 19<sup>th</sup> century women who wished "to be taken seriously in supposedly 'male' spheres deliberately declared their rejection of embroidery to distance themselves from the feminine ideal"(Parker, p.6).

From the two years of the small Highland school until my last day at secondary school, I was extremely rebellious. I railed against religious 'instruction', but would have gladly accepted a religious 'education'. I refused to go to these classes too. I found school an authoritarian place, which I had no taste for. I was a persistent truant. I instinctively knew that there was injustice and inequality on many levels, but was not equipped with the vocabulary or the sense that I had any 'right' to an opinion about it. In their book, *Knowledge, Difference and Power* the authors, Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy and Belenky (1996) describe this as an 'intuited' way of knowing. Somewhere

between the trumpet and the sports medal, I went from being a “receiver” to a “subjectivist” (p. 86) as described by the same authors. Rather than receiving knowledge and accepting it from authority, I began to know subjectively how that authoritarianism was offensive to me in my life. But, it did not change the way the world operated around me. If anything, I felt stigmatized by it. I became a politically left wing punk rocker in order to embrace the role.

Art classes became my major focus. It wasn't the type of class where I felt necessarily comfortable, as my position in class was one of privilege due to my talent, but I was able to do what I loved doing. When I was sixteen, I had a teacher with whom I got along well. She was young and accepting of my rebellious ways. She would give me matches so that I could go and smoke a cigarette in the toilet. (This is not something I have brought forward into my own teaching practice). She put my name forward to be a 'prefect' at school for “a joke”. She knew well that prefects were part of the hierarchy that I hated. By nominating me, she was being rebellious herself. Even though I would never have been considered prefect material, it was an act of defiance that both she and I enjoyed.

Drawing and Painting were particularly encouraged by my art teachers (who were mostly male), and of course by my father too. Batik and weaving were the only types of fabric courses taught at school other than the standard fare of drawing and painting, printmaking and clay sculpture. Batik and weaving were taught as craft. The few art history lessons we had reinforced the idea that the 'standard fare' of fine art was considered to be of more consequence than any other type of artwork. And of course,

no women artists were mentioned in the same sentence as fine art, although I do vaguely recall images of women weaving and embroidering.

I applied to Glasgow School of Art in 1983, and when accepted I immediately began to work towards an honors degree in Drawing and Painting. This amounted to one year of foundation and three years of solid painting studio. Working with fabric was never an issue for me. It belonged to the department of design, or it was, as I had seen before, relegated to craft and the domestic.

Throughout my years of education, it seemed clear to me that in order for me to really become accomplished as an artist, it had to be through fine art. In spite of never having been aware of more than one successful women painter, everything in my life seemed to channel me towards being a painter. I was happy that I knew what I wanted and, unquestioning, I got accepted to and entered the drawing and painting department.

There was one female tutor in the department, which on average had seven full-time painting tutors. More than 50% of the student population in drawing and painting were women. The disparity was similar in all the fine art departments. However in the textile department there was less of this disparity.

The painting department functioned using a very modernist approach. In the 1980's value was attached to an unbroken connection with instinct and feeling. This was the idea that the more a person painted the better 'in tune' they were with the medium.

There was also a high degree of experimentation with figures. Figures and landscapes emerged predominantly from the student's imaginations, or were dictated by the quality of the paint application, and for the most part held no political or social comment. The success and recognition of this style of work was foremost just before I entered the

painting department in 1984. One of the painters, Steven Campbell, who left for America in “a blaze of glory” (Chivers 1999, p. 110), returned to give a talk at the art school in 1985. He told us, he had been asked by someone of import why he had painted a particular figure in front of another figure. He confided in us that he had done it to hide the leg of the figure behind because he couldn’t get it right. This example embodies and demystifies the notions of ‘instinct and feeling’ that ran through the department at that time. There was no instruction to conceptualize, or attempt meaning in the artwork. My own painting tutor did not hold tutorials and was more interested in the composition and painterly quality of the work. He did not question content and never held his students accountable for it. Though there tended to be plenty of material for psychoanalysis if that had been warranted the major vein that ran through the department was one which encouraged students to imitate the painterly qualities of their tutors work. Paintings had to stand on their own with painterly merit and largely be understood purely at a visceral level. Looking back it is far easier to see the historical master/apprentice dynamic at work. In some senses this worked well for me. It was a time where I could concentrate fully on developing visual skills which have been hugely important in my ability to have a critical dialogue with the aesthetic qualities of my work. But the lack of being held accountable for content did not equip me with the intellectual skills to theorize and understand the larger significance of the artist’s role in society.

Steven Campbell was part of a larger group of extremely successful painters who had graduated in the mid eighties. Although they did not work together as a group, and differed greatly from one another, they collectively became known as ‘The New

Glasgow Boys'. This name is juxtaposed with the regular 'Glasgow Boys' who were a disparate group of men trained at the Glasgow School between 1840 and 1920. There is no philosophy or reason why these artists were grouped together either, other than the connection to the Glasgow School of Art. They were known for their work in the Art Nouveau, Colorist and Cubist movements.

Academically the prescribed reading by the Glasgow Art School was E.H.Gombrich's (1962) *The Story of Art*. Women were completely omitted from this tome. In addition to this, the entire faculty of the Historical and Critical Studies Department were male.

There was an atmosphere like a cloud of cigar smoke, indicative of an 'old boy's club', around the art school. Many of the tutors, including my own, were members of Glasgow's exclusive 'Art Club'. This club opened its doors in 1867 to professionally trained male artists. The doors were finally open to women in the early 1980's. But according to one non-artist member I know, the club members were so hostile towards any attempts by women to join that it delayed the process till the 1990's.

### *A Reactionary Blanket Theory*

It was around this atmosphere that women such as myself tried to function as artists. There were without a doubt many biases toward males and a certain amount of disdain and neglect for women who entered the field of painting.

There had been 'The Glasgow Society of Lady Artists' which had run for nearly a hundred years, but had been disbanded long before I went to art school. In any case the name suggested positions of social privilege and predominantly the 'Society' took a back seat to the more 'serious' men's 'Art Club'.

In retrospect it is clear that over my entire educational experience the waves of change were at my heels: from trumpets to trousers and woodwork for girls, to the public success of a few of my women peers at art school. The year I graduated (1987) was marked by the controversy and success of one of my peers, Alison Watt. She had shockingly painted a portrait of the Queen Mother to look like the old woman she really was. Years later she became the youngest living woman to show her work at the Museum of Modern Art in Edinburgh. After Alison, came Jenny Saville another internationally renowned painter who has reclaimed female flesh in a way which mocks the 'male gaze' and affectations of 'beauty'. In recent history, there are a great many women who are known as successful artists from Glasgow. The achievement of being a woman in her own right and a good artist is of course not a new phenomenon. It is the public recognition and acceptance which is new.

In 1990 a book titled *The Glasgow Girls* was published. This book redresses some of the neglect with regard to Scottish women artists from 1880-1920. In the preface of this book, Ray Mc Kenzie, Glasgow-based art historian and lecturer, articulates that attitudes toward Scottish women artists have finally begun to change. He recognizes that historically there has been little or no public recognition of Scottish women artists. And he acknowledges that the academic community has been forced to "reconsider their approach to the whole task of historical analysis" (p.15).

The times thankfully are changing. Many of Glasgow Art Schools 'old guard' have retired, or been shocked into leaving by the postmodern rupture in their comfortable world. And at the present time (2004), the Director of Glasgow School of Art is a woman named Seona Reid.



It is with this hindsight that I am now able to situate myself and truly see the influences that surrounded me. At the time, I felt unworthy and demoralized by the slights and preferences of this extremely male environment. The sexism that existed displayed itself both subtly and overtly. Overall there existed an atmosphere, which did not allow me to flourish or gain confidence in myself as an artist. I was one of many who left art school with a severely diminished desire to create artwork.

When I left art school, and in spite of what is deemed a good degree, I did not apply for scholarships or anything that would help me continue my practice. Instead I went to work as a community artist. I was very lucky to get such a position, even with years of prior teaching experience in community art. Positions as full time, salaried and unionized community artists were completely unheard of. It was a position originally funded by the European Union to help combat the severe effects of poverty and unemployment in the area of Hamilton North, just outside Glasgow. By 1987, the Thatcher government had been in power for about a decade, and the fallout from her policies in Scotland was devastating. Hamilton North, a defunct mining area, boasted the highest rate of heart disease in Europe. Perhaps it was a sign of heartbreak at the collapse of their communities as well as an indicator for unemployment and extreme levels of poverty that existed in the mainly prefabricated post-war housing schemes. I was happy to sink my teeth into battling the notion that art was elitist and or inaccessible. My job gave me a great deal of freedom to go into the communities and find out what was relevant and possible to do with them. I worked with every conceivable community group, all ages and abilities, in schools, at community centers and housing cooperatives. I liaised with community leaders, police, teachers and social

workers. I was able to negotiate my way into the community and to my amusement all these years later, I managed to reach a deal whereby I was able to store my mural paint in the police morgue. I devised, taught, coordinated and ran classes and projects in the various housing schemes. I worked for two years producing murals, community sculptures, and providing classes where members of the public could learn about and make art in all its forms. I also taught courses to professionals on how to provide art practice in any surroundings. It was an all-encompassing job that I believed in passionately and politically. In this capacity I understood the value of artists providing the means through which community groups and individuals are able to raise their voices creatively.

During this time I wasted money maintaining a small studio, which I barely used. This was the thin edge of the wedge between paint and me, yet I still considered myself a painter.

### **Unraveling**

In 1989 I decided to leave Scotland for what I had planned to be a year of traveling. It turned into almost ten years. I lived, worked and traveled predominantly in Asia, but I also traveled in Europe, North America, Africa and the Antipodes. It was a completely revitalizing period for me personally. Traveling allowed me to be liberated from the smallness of Scotland. My belongings were limited due to the nature of my transient lifestyle. That itself was freeing, yet it also liberated me from the guilty feeling that I was not committing myself to painting. All I could carry around with me was the minimum I needed to make images: a sketchbook, some drawing materials and a

camera. I often itched to work on canvass with oil paint, but I knew that without some measure of permanence, continued practice would be too difficult. This was a small point of frustration, but the next episode of my life had opened up and taken over. In 1998, after three years of living in Okayama, Japan, I produced a small exhibition of mixed media drawings and paintings. This was just before I left Japan to travel slowly back to Scotland to try to reestablish myself there. For the exhibition, I knew that I was rehashing imagery, and that the drawing techniques I was using were ones which I had honed over the years. The experience was very unsatisfying. In an interview, Marina Abramovic described her idea of “art pollution”, where artists keep multiplying and making the same work over and over. She related that a professor had told her that this type of “virtuosity actually stops progress”. *Galleries Magazine* (1995, p. 23-24).

Although I had a wealth of images related to my travels, I felt I had progressed very little in the way I presented my images. Money from sales was little compensation for my own personal contribution to ‘art pollution’. But in spite of it I still knew that I could not ignore the aesthetic and creative side of my nature, which was as restless as ever.

### *Picking up the Stitches*

Back in Scotland, I decided that it was time to tentatively poke my nose back into the art world again. I wanted to teach art and make art again. But I found that when I returned, the art world had undergone a radical transition, which I had been oblivious to. I rented a studio in a condemned bus depot, which was filled with creative people of all kinds. I tried hard to paint but it was a difficult and contentious time. I was polluting

again. And I was not happy doing it. The best works I produced were shrines to popular icons. This work lifted me beyond what was 'real' and 'serious' in fine art, or so I believed. I had fun, but I did not believe it to be serious. I was so bogged down by my own expectations of painting that I had forgotten the value of experimentation and play. It gradually became obvious that I needed to explore the many directions that art was taking and renew the position that I had found myself in. Postmodern contemporary theory and connections with society and media had now become the language used to propel conceptually based art. Modernist 'High Art' in its male-dominated, patriarchal form seemed to have been kicked from its pedestal in favor of something radically less exclusive. I decided that the best move I could make was to go to graduate school and get my teeth into understanding what had happened. Underpinning this decision was that, even as a questionable artist and an educator, I owed myself and my future students knowledge and a better understanding of the contemporary western art world. When I was a school student, faced with what seemed to be outdated and irrelevant teachings, I found it hugely frustrating that none of it seemed to relate to the reality around me. Although this is not really the case, I found that my educators were not able to explain the connections with the present time. This led me to believe that I was learning about isolated incidents which existed in bubbles of their own, rather than providing contexts from which the present has emerged.

I decided to leave Scotland and come to Montreal mainly for two reasons. Firstly I was missing the cultural diversity I had become accustomed to. Secondly, I was missing a great many of the current British cultural references that had emerged during my years away. I found that I was expected to know what had gone on inside the country while I

had been gone, which of course was not possible. Instead I had a much broader knowledge base with a few specifics about everywhere I had been. In this sense it would be easier in Montreal to come from 'away', and not be thought odd asking all the questions I needed to equip myself with the appropriate knowledge.

Going to graduate school I hoped would be a chance for me to familiarize myself with the Postmodern ethos and contemporary philosophy. Plus I wanted time to consider my foundations as an artist and art educator. And sew it did.

### **Sew and Tell**

In the context of being a graduate student, I began to re-examine myself as an artist and as an educator. I found that my commitment toward art education had not wavered and was reinforced by simply being in an environment dedicated to this kind of education. However the wavering confidence in myself as an artist did not bode well for my teaching practice. My drive to become effective as a studio art teacher is with the knowledge that an educator who is filled with the excitement of discovery is far more valuable to her students. I believe that above anything else a passionate, inquiring and excited educator transforms the educational environment and motivates the learner. A practicing artist who subscribes to critical thought in the research and development of her own ideas is more likely to impart those skills to her students. Even when planning lessons, 'virtuosity' will hinder progress as each studio situation and dynamic merits a new and pertinent approach. In my experience of education, those educators who allow themselves the comfort zone of repetition are the most uninspiring educators of all. And so, in order to fill myself with a sense of excitement and discovery, it became

imperative to find my way forward to an art practice which would give me the sustenance that I needed. What follows is the research and learning that took place.

### *Beginning to Add-Dress New Materials*

I wondered where and when the changes began. Searching the past I found a particular memory which might have affected my choice to use clothing as a device in my artwork.

To this day my mother recalls, how “pretty” my brown nylon/polyester dress with the yellow and orange-flowers was. I loved it too. I loved earthy colors. When I first got the dress the hem sat just below my knees. When I finally had to give it up, I had to pull the hem down fiercely to keep my underwear color a secret from the boys. But no matter how stretchy it wouldn’t accommodate my growth spurt. I remember part of my life through that dress. I remember occasions. I remember the feeling of my body growing tall and gangly. And I remember clumsily kicking my ankles as I walked. A telling sign of a growth spurt in a child is their inability to negotiate with their new body. My mother kept that dress in a drawer along with other clothing that brought her memories of her children when they were small. She remembers how all four of us used to pile on the couch beside her, becoming one mass of limbs and child smell. She loved it. I don’t remember. But I believe the clothing in the drawer brought back her memories of our young bodies, her love for us, dependent upon her, and that mass of limbs with scraped knees and elbows.

Nevertheless I am not sure exactly what led me to consider clothing as a medium. It leapt from an unknown place inside my head and started to dance around to grab my

attention, even in the small hours of the morning, keeping me alert to its potential.

Some ideas seem to come from nowhere, but writer George Elliot says of her creative process that,

“The conclusions at which I have from time to time arrived, have not been arrived at as solutions of questions raised; but have been arrived at unawares-each as the ultimate outcome of a body of thoughts which slowly grew from a germ”. (Elliot in Ghiselin, p. 224)

So, indeed there may have been this cotton-seed, which grew into an entire wardrobe of an idea, all without me being aware of it.

I don't believe I was aware that artists other than Joseph Beuys had used clothing, but then I had been so absorbed by paintings that it was difficult to tell. In any case, I began to see clothing as a way to express the invisible known and felt experiences of memory. I thought a great deal of my mother's special drawer. I wanted to find 'pretty' dresses which would recreate those times and memories from my perspective. I went to the Salvation Army Store to find them. It seemed to me that the very fabric of clothing could hold onto the memories of a body, a smell: an occasion, an incident. I spent a long time looking for the dresses that I wanted, the dresses, which evoked my memories of girlhood. Those times were full of innocence, cruelty, vulnerability and secrecy. I wanted to show these states in a piece of artwork that responded to a question about identity. I wanted to catch that time within the space of my life.

Levering and Van Manen (1996) describe the phenomenon of secrecy as an inner space which “presents itself as a hidden, invisible, imaginary, mysterious space in which secrets dwell that one does not want to divulge” (p.109). I wanted to show this 'inner

space' of my girlhood. I wanted to show how secrets can be indelibly scored into the evolving psyche and become part of the matrix of identity, that never-ending complexity.

I made a piece of art using the 'pretty dresses' and titled it 'Secrets' (Figure 1). I took the dresses that I had chosen and folded them neatly. I stacked them and cut a hole through the central area of each dress. Physically this area would be around the heart. I made a sock-like pocket from a pink baby blanket and placed this inside the hole.

(Figure 2.) I stitched it to the top dress, and I attached the dresses together and painted them with pink oil paint. Each phase of the work was meaningful and deliberate, and as I worked I became aware of just how powerful a medium this was for me. There was a kind of catharsis and release from many of the influences, which had come to be my shackles to oil paint and canvas. I was finding a part of myself that had not been encouraged to surface within a male environment. Nor had I wished it to. The oil paint I had used on the piece was out of its usual context. I loved the smell, and I loved being the ruling mistress of it. Using this medium and the clear language of clothing meant I could begin to speak specifically about my experiences as a woman.

I have asked many mothers if they kept any of their children's clothing, and the answer is invariably 'yes'. Fabric and clothing seem to be powerfully evocative for many women. Mirra Bank (1979) finds this visceral quality in the recollections of women who made quilts; one woman recalls her great grandmother saying, "My whole life is in that quilt. It scares me to look at it. All my joys and all my sorrows are stitched into those little pieces"(p. 94). Bank also recounts an instant of memory attached to clothing being used in quilting found in the 1889 memories of a woman, 'I liked



assorting those little figured bits of cotton, for they were scraps of gowns I had seen worn, and they reminded me of the persons who wore them' (p. 20).

### Women's Work

It would be a mistake to assume that memory and understanding of the underlying language attached to clothing is an entirely female domain. Nevertheless, it does seem that, historically and sociologically speaking, it was predominantly associated with women.

Heather Sealy Lineberry (1997) addresses the issue of women and clothing in her introduction to an exhibition at Arizona State University called *Art on the Edge of Fashion*. She says, "Women predominate in cloth production and distribution, and its processes have traditionally been related to women and the home" (p.16).

Many of the images we receive from the media of garment workers around the world tend to be overwhelmingly images of women. The garment industry is notorious for its use of cheap labor (mainly women and children) and sweatshop conditions.

With regard to the largest amount of unpaid work done in the world, the United Nations Statistics Department report that it is done by women. This is linked very much to domestic activity where women on a worldwide scale do most if not all of the domestic chores. (Exceptions given to the 'new men' born of a more progressive era.) These chores invariably would include taking care of family clothing, just as my mother and her mother did before her. The Norman Rockwell type 'Mother' darning or sewing by the fire is a clichéd image of domestic bliss that does not take into account the band-aid covered fingers, the ruined eyesight or reality.

After making the art piece, 'Secrets', I still had the soft pink baby blanket that I had used for the interior space in the stack of dresses. I began to think about how this pink colour was representative of a girl's life from the first days of birth. It was the sign that she was to fulfill the role that society assigned to her gender: to be pretty, to be nice, to be selfless, to be domesticated. I began to imagine that that baby blanket was the beginning of that journey like a pathway in life. I went back to the Salvation Army Store. I began to ask friends if they had any girl's clothing. I began to collect pink baby hats and baby's romper suites. I wanted the memories of this clothing to be stitched onto this pathway. I wanted to see points in time with their many experiences fixed onto a pathway or broad expanse of fabric. Each piece of clothing had the potential to speak volumes of layered meanings, with as much or as little interpretation as the viewer might allow herself. Suddenly I had to stop sewing. I had to put the blanket away. I needed distance and most of all I needed to consider the implications of this work for me. I put the blanket away for a year and more. I tried to draw and paint again but with limited success and more 'pollution'. I had not shed the clothing work, it was merely resting beneath my skin waiting to re-emerge, perhaps again from my subconscious, in a way that made more sense to me.

I did not cease gathering clothing. I put the word out that I was looking for clothing and many people obliged. Sometimes I would receive items in the post from good friends. I'd call and ask about the piece of clothing. There would be stories attached, which might be similar to this one:

"I bought this for my mother, but she wouldn't wear it. She said it was too young for her. Layered below this would be the subtext of previous

conversations. She works too hard, and she should be retired and enjoying herself. Our relationship is tentative, I don't know why we fight so often".

Layered below *this* were other subtexts: the need for her mother's approval; the fear of her mother's mortality; and the impending sense of having to take on the mantle of womanhood and of becoming part of an older generation. Common fears and musings, shared by so many of the women I know and talk with at deeper levels of conversation. That particular item of clothing is symbolic for me as a metaphor for the complexities of those issues. Yet, because of the personal nature of the stories and the trust that has been built over years of friendships, I will not divulge any of the detailed information attached to any item given to me.

I was given a maternity bra, a pair of girl's lace gloves, a blouse, a doll's dress. Each piece seems to carry something of the giver. Each item of clothing tells a story, and is layered with personal and symbolic meaning. I believe that these material objects can evoke an assortment of meanings and memories for different people which can remain hidden and personal belonging only to the beholder. I began to look through my own clothing and found items which might also be used. What secrets could I symbolically represent? What memories of my own could I bring? What layers of experience and symbolism could I silently offer? What humour could I sneak in?

My formal training made me consider that negative space was just as important as the objects themselves. What is not there is equally important. Absence can be full of meanings. The space between-often referred to as the 'third space'- is a place, which is open to all kinds of possibilities. In his parable *The Parasite* (1982), French

philosopher Michel Serres calls this space 'the parasite', which translates in French as the same word used for static interference. This is the space where interpretation can take on meaning influenced by all present parties including the space that we presume to be empty and quiet. Serres asks us to consider that this space is actually full of noise, which has an effect on meaning. The absent presence of girls and women's bodies in the collected items of clothing became significant for me. I found myself quietly contemplating as a way to 'listen' for the 'parasite' and to consider the possibilities. Clothing of different sizes and styles triggered 'body' memories in me. I remembered how I physically felt at certain times in my life, just as I had done before with my pretty brown dress. I began to wonder how others might perceive or interpret meaning through the clothing. Would other women connect with memories and events in their life, elicited by an affinity with certain types of clothing?

It was at this juncture that I began to think about how I was going to present these items of clothing. My original thoughts had been to stitch some kind of pathway, and use the idea that the clothing would represent the intricacies of women's journey through life. But for many women, that journey is often surrounded and fed by the domestic. The house becomes the center in which and from which she operates. For example Marina Abramovic in *The House/ My Body* describes the rooms inside her house as being extensions of herself. Each room functions to contribute to a part of her identity. Her kitchen is not only a place for her nourishment but it is also an important room when she fasts: it marks the absence of food and highlights her fasting. (Galleries Magazine, 1995, p.74-80.) My own, rather transient lifestyle is marked by the absence of a permanent house, and the incongruity of relishing the domestic when I settle for periods

of time. Each time I occupy a house space, it also becomes an extension of my self and my needs. Each room becomes a reflection of me.

On a domestic level, women have historically carried the burden of the house and the work to be done therein. They tend to be involved in the most intricate details of running the house and creating an environment which caters to the people who live there.

I think of the roles played by my mother and my maternal grandmother. Each of them, by virtue of their societies and their times, placed themselves in the domestic world as most women were expected to. They lived inside houses, giving their unpaid labours to turn those spaces into functioning homes, probably more for the benefit of others than for themselves. Yet their homes still reflected in great part who they were and what was important to them. Neither of them was particularly happy with the prospect of housework, yet they did what was expected of them. My grandmother loathed housework. I have memories of my mother in particular doing endless rounds of housework, and the smell of bleach that lingered around her when she was scrubbing the bathroom. My own inherited habit of using bleach around the bathroom has been the ruin of many items of clothing. I don't remember my mother ever wearing any protective clothing when doing housework, but my grandmother wore a light blue nylon coverall. In the late 1960's and early 1970's I have many memories of being shooed away by my friend's mums and grannies in this type of coverall as they were trying to get on with their housework. Sometimes they'd shout, "Gitaway fae ma guid durt", which translates to 'Get away from my good dirt'. There lay a point of confusion which still bewilders me. Different styles and fashions of protective clothing came and

went, but this is the style that I most remember. These were overcoats that had three quarter length sleeves and were used particularly for domestic work around the house. These 'housecoats', as I had heard them called, tended to be a type of thick nylon. Some of them were checked and some of them plain, some were both. The housecoats protected clothing, but also protected the rest of us from acknowledging the dirty housework done by the wearers of such garments, even if it was 'good dirt'.

It made sense for me to attach the clothing I had collected to something which would symbolically represent domesticity and women. It is an aspect of the experience of womanhood, which paradoxically I embrace and am repelled by.

It was time to start stitching again. The initial pink baby blanket I had been working on became the start. The clothing I had stitched to the blanket so far was mostly pink baby romper suits and small dresses. I used pink as a metaphor for all the girls who were told to 'be nice'. For me it became a colour of compliance. I attached a long train of paler pink fabric onto the blanket. Although I could not find an original housecoat, I decided to use any kind of coat that would be strong enough to pull seven meters of clothing behind it. As it turned out, the only article I could find which was suitable was a cotton dressing gown. This was an item of clothing that my grandmother would wear continually as she sunk into the depths of her depressions. Her house would become a nightmare of clutter and dirt during her retreat. Auspiciously -or not as the case may be- this is what I used. There were no buttons or fastenings at the front of this dressing gown/housecoat. This suited my purpose, as I wanted the weight of the train of clothing to be perceived as another aspect of the artwork.

I worked from the baby blanket onto the new pink fabric chronologically representing all ages from the very young to the very old. I tried to represent different stages of a female life: a 'herstory' belonging to any and all of the women I know, including me. I marked the time by using more items of clothing when time seemed slower, as in a child's time. I used less and less clothing from each 'era' to mark how much faster real time seems to go by. I sewed items from childhood days through to the final item of clothing stitched to the back of the 'housecoat' - a baby pink nylon bed coat to which I associate memories of agedness, frailty and hospitalization toward the end of life. I remembered the hospital ward where my aging aunt with Alzheimer's disease spent her final years. There were many women who wore pink bedclothes. It seemed the end of a woman's life had to include that pink colour too. The passivity of the women there seemed total except for the intermittent eruption of anger, which abated fairly quickly. The stitching work was laborious, painful and repetitive. I wrote a journal, to follow my progress and thoughts. "My finger is raw from pushing the sewing needle, and I had to stop every so often because the work became backbreaking" (March 2003). I smeared the blood from my needle-pricked fingers onto the fabric. I rubbed it in. There is a lot of blood mixed into the 'Housecoat', which may say something of my needlework skills, but it seemed a pertinent gesture to mark pain in a comprehensive way.

Back pain and impatience took over at one point and I turned to a sewing machine for help. It was a terrible mistake. I felt alienated from the clothing, and removed from the intimacy I felt for the work. I realized that my personal narrative, which was accompanying me along the journey of making the 'Housecoat', was an important and

significant part of the process. Using the sewing machine had broken the thread of my thoughts, which were entangled in the whole work. If anything, the sewing machine made me understand how vital the process of slow hand sewing had become. It was also very important for me to remember the tedious repetition of domestic work.

The process of working on the 'Housecoat' was very different from the immediacy of painting. From my journal I wrote,

With a painting a simple stroke could turn back time and render the work more incomplete than the moment you walked into the studio. With this sewn piece, each stitch moves the work progressively forward towards completion. This is comforting and encouraging to know. With painting there is always a sense of trepidation, there is always a fine line for me. I can never plan and execute a painting, but this piece, I conceived of, worked toward, and although there has been some problem solving, it hasn't been so intense and alterable.

The slow repetitive action of sewing lulled me into reverie and contemplation. I found myself meandering through memories with specific clothing. I listened for Serres' mischievous 'parasite'. I called my mother often to ask her to confirm or expand upon my memories. I began to uncover parts of my mother and grandmother's domestic lives.

Lineberry describes two dimensions of working with cloth:



On the one hand, calming repetitive motions, warm materials and the maintenance of domestic order and on the other hand, the drudgery, boredom and restrictiveness of household labor (1997 p.16).

I was glad I was not alone in all of this.

When the sewing of the individual pieces was done, I needed to unify the 'housecoat' as a whole. I needed to make sure that 'housecoat' represented 'one' life, while the many items of clothing represented various ages, incidents and experiences. All along, I had planned to cover the housecoat with a unifying colour. I had contemplated the colour a great deal. I did not want to make it red. I felt that would be too restrictive. I needed the color to symbolize many elements associated with women. I chose a deep, pinky purple, acrylic based house paint. I used a large sponge and systematically soaked the color into the fabric. At different points I used red and pink artist acrylic paint. The colors and hues symbolize many aspects of the female identity, as I see it in Western culture. Yet they are also representative of the bonds which tie the women of my family. There is the pressure to adhere to expectations of gender; there is the blood and warmth of life; there is the recognition of the Suffragettes and the colours they used to identify themselves; there is softness, sexiness, anger, fury, rouge and lipstick; there is what moves beneath the skin.

The unification that I had previously visualized in my mind seemed to work. Much of the stitching became hidden beneath the paint and the individual pieces blended and became part of the whole piece. The items of clothing now required a more inquiring eye to see them as separate and individual. Aesthetically the whole piece became more

pleasing to me. The housecoat became a stronger and subtler presence. I was happy and surprised to discover that I had produced a piece of work that I would be happy to exhibit. This was a 'first'. There it was, the colours of a grateful heart.

The next step in the process was to line the piece. I wanted fabric that was sumptuous and soft, yet filled with strength. In my mind's eye, I had already visualized some kind of crushed velvet. Due to the restraints of my cash flow, I chose an inexpensive nylon version of crushed velvet. The color: a deep red with a pink undertone. It needed an interfacing to keep it flat against the housecoat, and a willing friend for assistance with the task. My friend Emily, who had helped me find the fabric, obliged and we spent a very hot humid weekend cutting, pinning, ironing and sweating. It was such a pleasure to work with a good friend and experience a very different atmosphere. The camaraderie helped to offset my feeling that this was an endless project. It was so good to have a lighter and more humour filled time as the labour continued. Later Emily told me that there was also some of her blood smeared into the housecoat and that her fingers had blisters too. There is always a place for new blood.

A few days after Emily had helped, I finally set about the task of finishing the piece. I had to sew around the whole piece and firmly attach the inner and outer layers. There was about 20 meters of hand stitching to do. I spent one evening where I lost track of time and sewed almost hypnotically for hours until I lost the feeling on the pads of my index finger and thumb. I have no idea what possessed me. The interface layer had caused the lining to stiffen. The feeling of the fabric had turned into something which feels akin to cured animal skin. The effect was one which I had expected due to the glue layer of the interfacing, but I was not sure whether I would like it or not. But as I

sewed I was happy that this had become another layer and another subtext within the narrative of the piece. The colour and texture of the lining seemed evocative, conjuring plays of meaning from my mind. It became linked with royalty: carmine ermine; and religion: the sacrificial and the fetishistic; and the play between men and women: the lover, the whore, the seduction, the hunted - the whole damn pack of cards.

Perhaps more than anything else, the process of working on 'The Housecoat' had allowed me such a great deal of space not only for contemplation and reverie but also to let my thoughts travel in streams of consciousness. Allowing playfulness with the visual and verbal helps me towards understanding my own process and how I wish to function as an artist. I am certain of a few things. I no longer feel the pressure of 'high art' bearing down on me. I am now free to explore any pathway which points me toward my own creativity. I am at liberty to play with ideas and to sit and listen for them surfacing from a body of many thoughts. I am learning again and I am finally letting go.

### *How Wearing*

The use of clothing and needlework in much of contemporary art can be historically traced to the 1970's feminist art movement where women artists reclaimed what was traditionally utilitarian in women's work. Feminist artists such as Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly and Faith Ringold were among the first artists to reintroduce sewing and fabric as important signifiers of the profound differences in women's experience and art from that of men's experience and art.

While a great many women artists have trained as painters in the very male world of 'high art', many of them have turned away from the medium of paint. Perhaps in some part this has been due to the attitudes of art institutions toward women artists. Judy Chicago wrote that she was "continually made to feel by men in the art world that there was something 'wrong' with me" (Chicago in Witzling (1991), p.370). Later on in her life after the start of the women's movement she had a conversation with Anais Nin about her confusion with what direction she should take in her work. Chicago explained,

I felt as if my art was not reflecting my whole self and that I thought that the best thing I could do would be to give up painting and become involved in some other art-making method (p.374).

Many women artists felt as if there were something 'wrong' with them in the predominantly male art world. After all women were almost entirely excluded from most historical records as artists and contributors to the field. And in order to acknowledge themselves it would be important not only to valorize women's experiences, but to find media and methodology which would assist in the formation of artwork in a feminist/female context. Media and processes, which had historically been associated with women, had been previously relegated to craft and folk art. But when women artists in the 1970's began working with these materials, their work came loaded with challenges for the world of 'high art'. Whitney Chadwick (1996) notes that much of the work done by women artists in the 1970's was multi media, conceptual and cross-disciplinary. In my mind this indicates that women artists were searching and

experimenting with ways to find their own voices and language in order to represent their experiences. And that the route of pursuing excellence in one particular discipline in 'high art', though accepted as hegemonic, did not represent them or their goals in art. Mary Kelly used clothing in her work *Post Partum Document* (1973-79) which culminated in a 165-part work. The work explores the mother-child relationship and she uses children's clothing as well as hospital gowns to say something of her experience and analysis of it. In *Corpus* (1985) she used photographs of female clothing juxtaposed with fashion photographs. Kelly concentrates on issues of motherhood, domesticity, femininity, sexuality and class. Although her work does not only rely on the use of clothing, it is an integral part of her narrative. Kelly refused to use direct representation of women in order not to objectify them; but in her work the clothing she uses represents women in ways which directly pertain to the experiences she explores in her work.

Judy Chicago deliberately used materials which had been devalued for being predominantly used by women. Her most well known work, a collaborative piece titled *The Dinner Party* (1979) was made using ceramics and needlework. Chicago also used needlework in another collaborative piece called *The Birth Project* (1985).

In the 1980's Faith Ringold, art educator and artist trained in fine art, pursued her own voice through story quilts - narrative works of painting and quilting. Her story quilts hark back to the slavery of African Americans where the slave women produced quilts for their white owners. In their own time, the slave women also produced quilts for themselves, often with elements of African design and mythology. One of the

challenges of Ringold's work as she sees it, is to confront fine art with the concept of 'craft' quilts and their connections to women's lives.

Until the feminist era, and apart from the women who were privileged enough to pursue fine art (whether or not they were historically ignored), women did find ways to articulate themselves visually. Women's artwork had been mostly confined to areas of the domestic where sewing and needlework were accepted forms of female creativity. Ability in this domain was often what was thought to be an indicator of a good housewife. This assumption prevailed until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in some communities it has gone on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In order to redefine the history of art, feminist artists needed to reclaim the materials historically available to women under normal circumstances, where the domestic and the creative were combined. Lucy Lippard (1995) comments that, "many women artists today are rehabilitating the stitch-like marks, swaddling and wrapping, the techniques and materials of women's traditional art and work" (p.142).

Early feminists rejected 'fashion' for its reinforcement of the objectification of women. Yet for decades many artists have used clothing and representations of fashion in their artwork to explore meaning. The readability of fashion and functional clothing allows us much insight into societal norms historically and in the present-day. Today fashion tends to be a manifestation of the complexities and multiple-positionings of identity which reflect the postmodern era. As a society we have become highly literate in the symbolism represented by fashion which allows us a great deal of scope in decoding meaning from it.

Lineberry (1997) says of the artists taking part in the *Art on the Edge of Fashion* exhibition, that they “recognize clothing’s highly readable sensual and symbolic language, and our mass participation in that discourse” (p.13). It may be interesting to note here that of the eight artists taking part in this exhibition, only two were male. Many artists have made items of clothing using materials which are not traditional fabrics for clothing. In this sense the clothing takes on a sculptural form; yet as we are able to identify with the clothing shapes, it is the materials which communicate the main message of the artwork. In the exhibition, artist Christine LoFaso made a blouse using her old credit card slips, which she then covered with gold leaf. The blouse then implied the workings of capitalism and consumerism within this society. It particularly suggested to me the financial debts which might be accrued in order to meet the standards of particular fashion-wear in vogue. Perhaps this work also alludes to the pressure of society to conform to those standards. This visual statement by LoFaso remains pertinent as the fashion industry continues to use underpaid labour whilst charging exorbitant prices for their product.

Lineberry writes that, “The sensuality of clothing, and its association with the body and its own materiality, are part of its effectiveness as a language” (p.15). Much of the artwork that uses clothing allows us this corporeity. It is this quality of physical existence that the artist can use to make us aware of our physical bodies and our presence. In essence clothing is able to signify the presence of absent bodies.

Artist Jana Serbak’s most poignant work is, for me, the dress made from electrified wires and titled, *I want you to feel the way I do* (1984). This dress affected me on a physical level: I could feel my nerve endings and understand the truth of the phrase,

‘being frazzled’. Sterbak has used clothing as the form for her conceptual works.

*Remote Control* (1989) is a metal dress-shaped frame with a battery and remote receiver set on wheels. The artist fits into a harness in the framework and relinquishes the remote control to a male member of the audience in her performance. It comments on the position of women, and the seeming hopelessness of being able to gain power and control over our own destinies. Sterbak’s *Meat Dress* (1991) made of prime raw steak caused a media furor, as it made a very ‘raw’ statement about the objectification of women and the ‘flesh industry’.

Artwork such as *Elegant Façade* (1994) by Rachel Echenburg is another artwork, which gives me a sense of my own corporeality. It is a pair of dinner gloves that have been sewn together. The fingers of the left hand and the right hand have been attached to form what would be known as a ‘lady-like’ pose, when the hands rest on the wearer’s lap. The sense of physical and cultural constriction in such settings is very effective.

The use of certain fabrics can accomplish meaning. Yinka Shonibare’s work, *How Does a Girl Like You Get to Be a Girl Like You?* (1997) consists of three clothed mannequins in stiff postures wearing high-necked Victorian dresses complete with bustles. The fabric is highly patterned and colourful and appears to be of African origin. David Hopkins says of this work that, “notions of dress, ethnic status, museum display and artistic value are brought into collision” (2000 p.242).

The work pulls us into a narrative where the British Empire, politics and prejudice are all at play. Not only this, the title suggests that women question imposed gender identities and our buying power in the global economy.



From these few examples, there can be no doubt that clothing can be used for compelling and powerful narrative-not only politically but personally. It is a potent medium that offers layers of possible interpretation and discourse.

### *Sew How Does This Relate To Art Education?*

Throughout the process of making the 'Housecoat' I was very conscious of the layered personal meanings and memories I was finding within the work and the clothing. I had meant for the 'Housecoat' not only to have personal meaning, but also to be part of the wider discourse on women. For me the 'Housecoat' represents women in general. However I must relate that I do not hold with any essentialist notions or universal theory of art or feminism. As postmodernism embraces multiplicity and the individual loci from which to interpret and experience, I celebrate all that is and all that could be there. Michel Foucault (1969), in his essay *What is an Author?* describes the post-structural conditions for acquiring new knowledge as those when one discourse crosses over onto another, hence blurring the originality of authorship. If a discourse is visualized as circular, then endless ellipses of discovery are possible. Not only this, but the individual must understand any discourse from profoundly individual experience. I infer from this that people involved in casual discussions describing their individual experiences and perspectives also constitutes potential learning. Miriam Cooley(2001) describes in her essay *From Gossip to Narrative Inquiry* that narratives and private communications can be “brought forward and incorporated into the construction of knowledge” (p.26) and used within a feminist framework to understand women's learning experience. The word 'gossip' has always had a very negative connotation

when used to demean the discussions of women, particularly as women try to define the experience of others. In reality, this type of informal discussion has always provided women with a very real education about the world around them, especially at times when women were denied access to formal education. The settings for such learning exchanges have often been where women have traditionally gathered to sew and work together.

In order to celebrate this type of learning and to discover if the 'Housecoat' was able to generate its own discourse as well as contribute to others, I decided to invite a few friends over to my apartment for an evening.

### *Not a Sewing Circle or a Quilting Bee.*

The friends who were privy to the first viewing of the finished 'Housecoat' were my peer group from the Art Education Department at Concordia University. Each of these women is very articulate and visually literate. We all know each other pretty well and have socialized together on occasion. I wanted the evening to be completely informal so that my friends would feel relaxed and free to verbalize their thoughts. I also needed this type of atmosphere for myself. After such a huge change in direction artistically, I needed to feel the security of an environment that would positively reinforce me as an artist and encourage my tentative steps towards showing my work in a larger arena.

I decided that I would answer questions and try not to ask too many of them, in case I prompted responses and fed my friends with my own ideas about my work. However it must be noted that my friends had already been privy to many of my thoughts and processes throughout the period when I had been working on the 'Housecoat'. I

recorded the evening on audio- tape, and made sure that the recording did not feel intrusive.

The discussion ran for about an hour. These are summaries of the remarks made by each of the participants and following these are my own thoughts about the reactions to my work.

### **Adriana**

Adriana found that the chronological development of the clothing reminded her of a girl growing up. The fact that the 'Housecoat' could be worn meant for her that whoever wore it would be carrying "the story of growing up". She found that she wanted to touch the piece and investigate whether she was able to open the clothing, and that there were particularly sexual connotations with the presence of the zippers. In her investigations with the clothing she found that there were items that had been sewn shut. This led her to consider the artist's intentions, because open or closed held different meanings for her. There was the consideration that the artist had left that choice with the viewer. Adriana talked about temporal meaning in the clothing. When it was sewn 'shut', the piece of clothing ceased to exist on a functional level, "the clock had stopped". However if she could interact then the item was "still alive". She commented that the absence of 'the body' somehow made 'the body' even more present for her. She also found the 'Housecoat' to have a painterly quality and likened the colour of the lining on the underside to a Velasques painting.

### **Chloe**

Chloe described the 'housecoat' as not being joyous and that there was a certain ceremonial feeling to it. She did not want to touch the clothing or interact with it on a

physical level because in some way it was a violation. The red paint on the black dresses was disturbing in that the red suggested sexiness while the black indicated violence. Chloe looked carefully at the application of paint and noted the differences of brushstroke throughout the work.

### **Carol**

Carol described how she had reacted to the 'Housecoat' on an emotional and visceral level. Her initial gut instinct was to pull away from it. She said that if she had not known the artist she would have been able to tell that it had been done by a woman, and was able to relate to the work through her own experiences. When she began to look at it aesthetically, and in particular the threads, it triggered memories of her and her mother sewing together. She found that, through the narrative she was able to "bridge the gap" and enter the artist's space. She likened the clothing to 'skin', and described how women could be empathetic toward the piece whereas men could only be sympathetic. She thought that the work was not sugary or gentle and that there was a sexual feeling to it like a "Parisian boudoir". She described the colour of the lining as not solid, giving the work "another depth". She discussed how she would not be tempted to touch or open any of the pieces of clothing and felt that the work did not dictate that it should be. She felt that the onus was left on the viewer.

### **Emily**

The real sewing bee, Emily, was not able to attend the evening but her participation with the work of the 'Housecoat' had been social and practical in nature. As an experienced sewer she was able to teach me some techniques and help me with the

practical steps in lining the 'Housecoat'. She has assured me that there is definitely some of her blood smeared into the piece, and that she left with a blister on her finger which is how she imagined it would be after doing quilting.

Emily wrote to me of her thoughts after our 'Housecoat' sewing session.

It got me thinking about conservation...your piece has preserved these articles in your very transformation of them. I've been pondering conservations grand illusions of objectivity...that conservation is so often regarded as a neutral activity, universally motivated. The objects you chose to preserve and our means of doing so is obviously the result of a subjective process. So why is it that often women's-in art and the everyday- conservation activities are regarded as inherently sentimental, political, or, for that matter tremendously personal?

In his introduction to *The Necessity of Informal Learning* Frank Coffield (2000) places much value on the experience of informal learning and the settings in which it takes place. He admitted to learning more in the pubs of Glasgow than during his years at Glasgow University and adds, "For me it acted as an indispensable complement to, rather than an easy replacement of, formal knowledge" (p.2). I have had the same experience in my own education. When discussing my artwork, art and art education in informal settings I found that friends and peers have suggested different artists to look at and articles or books to read, as well as contributing to and expanding my overall understanding.

My learning experience from the 'Housecoat' evening was [man]ifold. I was able to gather much not only as an artist, but also as an educator. As an artist, I found that the 'Housecoat' contributed to a lively conversation about the meaning and intent of the artist. As the artist, I did not wish to issue directives, yet it was very plain that on some levels I had. To some of my friends this was an important aspect of the artwork and significant in their analysis of it. Much of what I had intended my work to mean on a general level was understood by my friends. But the individual items of clothing as well as the overall construction of the 'Housecoat' prompted discussion over and above my original meaning. Through the many different interpretations and layered meanings personal to each viewer the 'Housecoat' had generated its own discourse. Since the 'Housecoat' evening, our gathering has been revisited in many conversations I have had with the participants. This implies that the consideration of the artwork and the contributions of the participants did not end with that evening. All the comments summarized previously have allowed me to think further on the meaning of my work and possible implications for future work.

I consider all the comments from my friends additional appliqué to the piece and my understanding of it. It is with great respect and gratitude to these women, that I can say I learned an enormous amount from them in this instance, and in many informal gatherings. It reinforces my faith in this type of educational dynamic where individual experiences and perceptions are shared in a way that opens up new considerations and thought for all involved.

### *Stitching This Thing Up*

It has been personally very rewarding to research and discover reasons why my artwork has taken such a turn. As an art educator, it has always been important for me to put an art movement or artist within a context to find greater meaning. However as an artist, I had denied myself a similar approach until I essentially, and with some discomfort began to move away from the processes that I had previously been taught to use. Much of this change occurred as a result of my experience trying to produce work within a very male dominated culture. And much has to do with trying to navigate my own experience as a woman. This has also allowed me to look to a new community of mainly women artists as my peers. I now have a preference to produce work where the materials, clothing and otherwise, are a vehicle for my thoughts rather than relying on paint for core meaning, which was part of my training. The possibilities to broaden my experience with materials and subject matter for future studio inquiry, is now endless. And as an artist and art educator I now feel as if I have crossed a bridge whereby I am able to look at art within a postmodern context.

My artwork using clothing is not a closed chapter. The seams are not stitched shut completely. I already have many ideas for further work, which hopefully will manifest as a one-woman show. This has been a long held dream, which now holds a measure of promise. Ideally the 'Housecoat' will be exhibited and I will be able to gauge its impact on a broader public. I look forward to finding out how men and children will view it. I also look forward to the different venues that I can show it in, and to exploring whether there will be opportunities for the piece to be worn around an audience.

At the heart of art practice there must be a sense of self-transformation where discourses layer and cross over each other - where new areas of knowledge are discovered and used to generate more inquiry. Rigid structures are not able to take much strain without snapping. If we create 'structures' that are more fluid we will find they have the ability to include, create and absorb a plethora of knowledge and new understanding. It's simple. Adding a new item of clothing to our wardrobe can change how we see what is already there.





Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

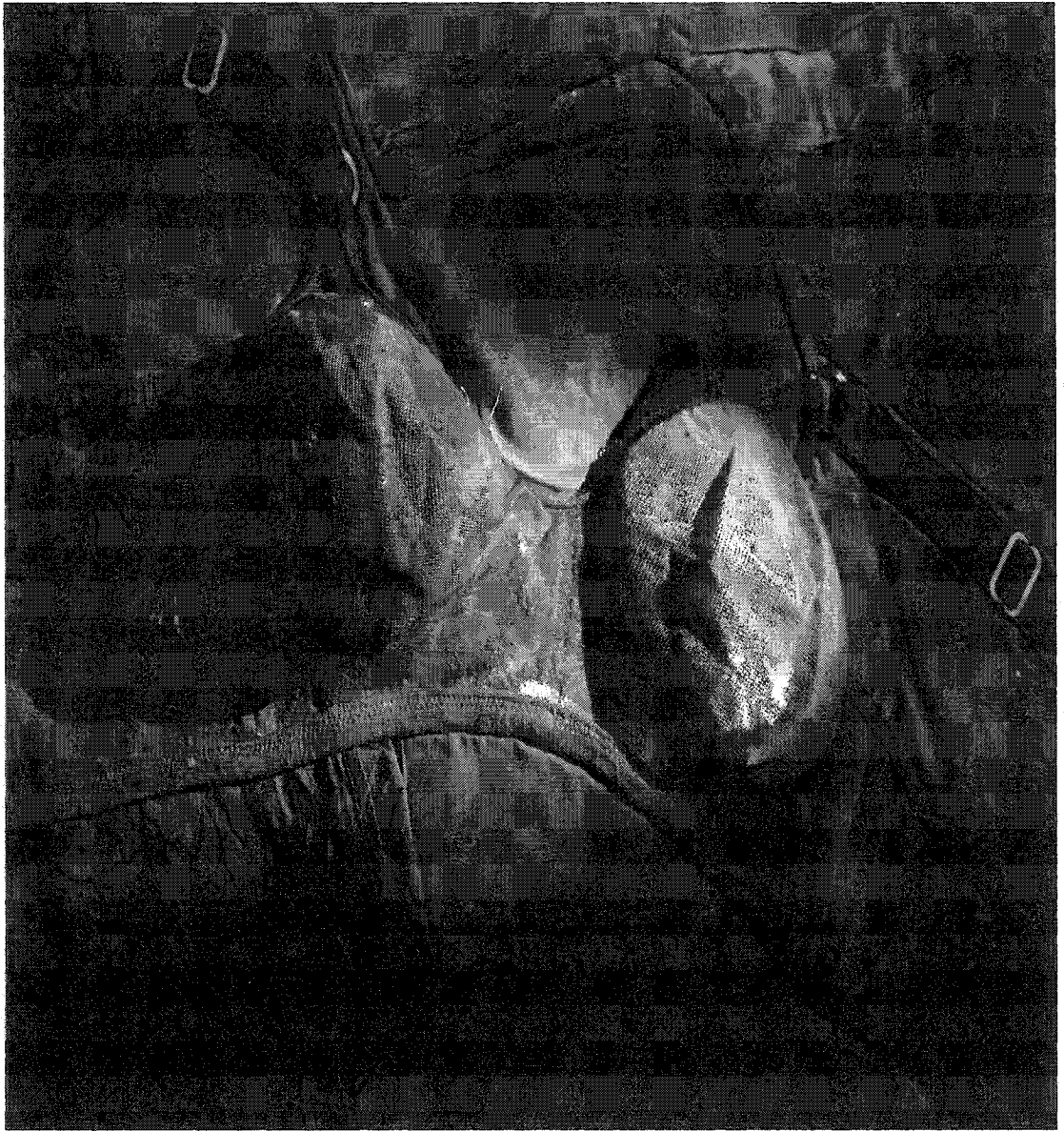


Figure 4.



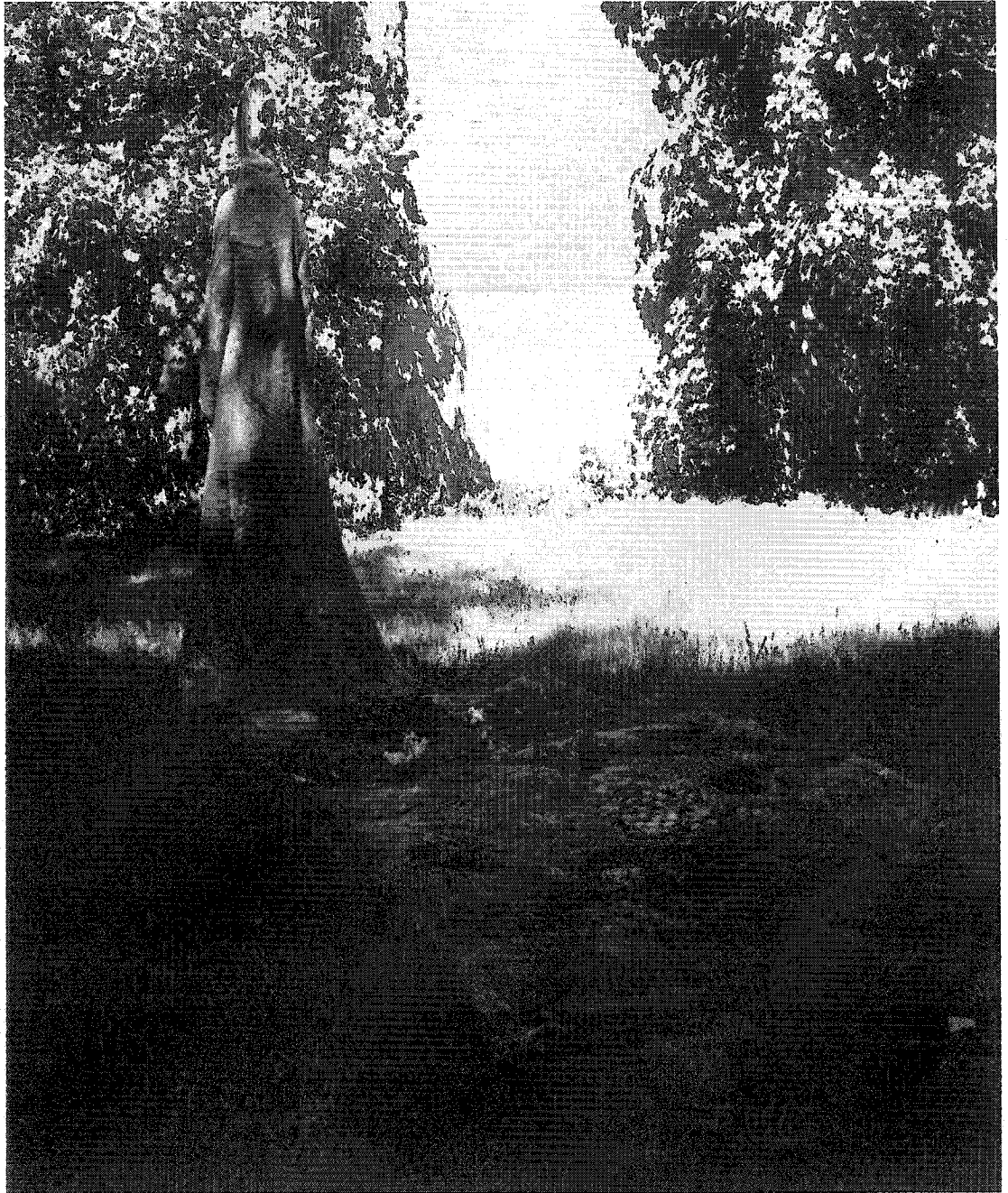


Figure 5.



Figure 6.

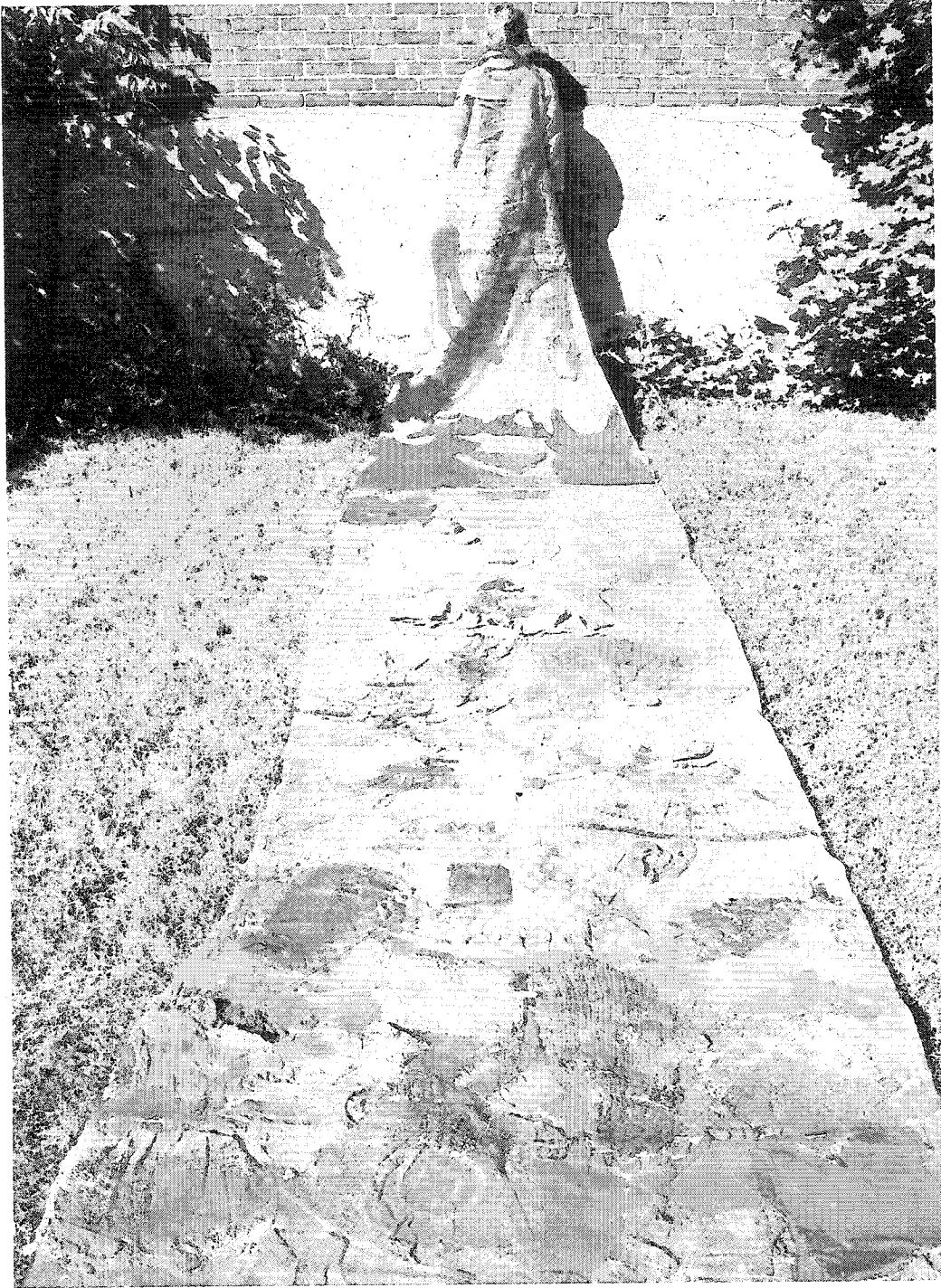


Figure 7.

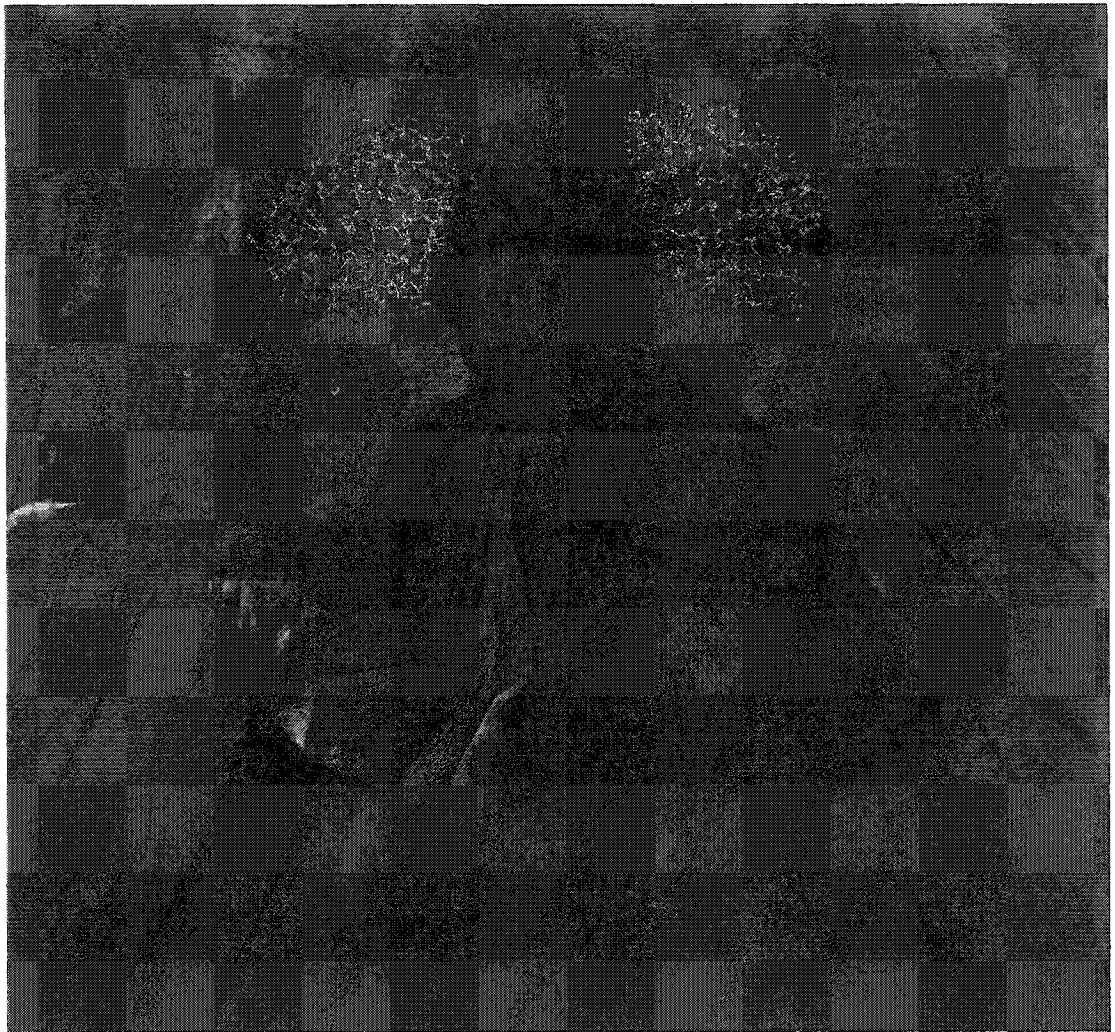


Figure 8.





Figure 9.

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## **Appendix**

## **CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

**This is to state that I agree to participate in an evening of research being conducted by Sasha Fligel of the Art Education Department of Concordia University.**

**A. PURPOSE:** I have been informed that the purpose of the research is to discover ways that women discuss and learn from each other informally. In this particular case the setting is to view a piece of art, which is particularly made with women in mind.

**B. PROCEDURES:** The research will take place in my (Sasha Fligel's) apartment over the course of an evening. The conversation over the evening will be taped, but you the participant will be able to read, edit or withdraw any statement that you are uncomfortable with. Confidentiality is guaranteed and use of a pseudonym can be used if so desired, otherwise you will be referred to and quoted using your initials.

**C. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION:**

- 1) I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.
- 2) I understand that my participation in this study is confidential.
- 3) I understand that this data is for an MA Art Education thesis, which will be available at Concordia University in published form.

**I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE INFORMATION GIVEN OVERLEAF  
AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. FREELY CONSENT AND  
VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.**

**NAME (please print)**\_\_\_\_\_

**SIGNATURE**\_\_\_\_\_

**WITNESS SIGNATURE**\_\_\_\_\_

**DATE**\_\_\_\_\_

If you at any time have questions about your rights as a research participant, please  
contact Adela Reid, Research Ethics and Compliance Officer, Concordia University, at  
514-848-2424, ex. 7481 or by email at [Adela.Reid@Concordia.ca](mailto:Adela.Reid@Concordia.ca)