The Wounded Inheritance: Epigenetics and the Family Line

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The Wounded Inheritance: Epigenetics and the Family Line

by

Lisa Banta

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts in University Honors and Art Practice

Thesis Adviser

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Portland State University

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Through the process of researching, conceptualizing, and creating my honors thesis I have been investigating my previously unknown family history and the events that led into generations of parental abandonment and inflicted trauma, in tandem with learning some basics about the research and science of epigenetics. In my own family line, the traumas endured by and inflicted upon the last five generations have, with no exaggeration, shaped every aspect of my life and history. Epigenetics explains how severe trauma can be passed down many generations through chemical changes in DNA. In other words, individuals may carry within their own bodies the trauma of their forebears from generations ago. These DNA changes, or, more accurately, changes in gene expression, lead to bodily issues such as cancers, autoimmune diseases, mental illness and more, resulting in shorter and unhealthier life spans. On a behavioral/social level, PTSD resultant from trauma has effects that trickle down and can lead to familial issues such as abuse, neglect, and parental abandonment. An ancient aphorism avows that the sins of the fathers can pass down to the third and fourth generation. Oppression in forms such as Racism and Abuse can substantively change the DNA expressions of the descendants of those who have been traumatized by them.

This sculpture is meant to illustrate the trickle down of these kinds of trauma on a family line, the glue becoming inseparable from the rope itself, woven among its strands, sticking to the fibers and itself, becoming part of the history and very fibers of the object.

Titled *Inheritance//Loss*, the completed sculptural installation is centered around a large, unraveled rope, approx. 4-6 inches (with much larger protrusions containing objects embedded and tied into the fibers) in diameter, the height of which is
approximately 12 ½ feet, with additional length swirled around the base of the sculpture. At the top of the rope is hung a shallow bronze vessel containing a glue created from natural materials, namely, rabbit skin glue and glycerine. The rope itself is a found object but has been unraveled by hand and augmented with natural fiber weavings woven into and upon its surface. In addition, many items, both found and created, have been woven and hidden into the fibers of the rope, including small bronzes, stones, sticks, and other items of personal significance, along with an abundance of greenery, stems, and both fresh and dried florals. The vessel hung above the rope is attached at the very apex of the rope, allowing the amber-colored glue to trickle down the entire structure. As the glue drips down the sculpture, many different effects come into play, glue soaking into the rope and weavings, accumulations of glue building up in some areas more than others, and glue dripping down the rope onto the plexiglass barrier protecting the museum floor. There is also an expression of light that comes into play as the liquid interacts with it, adding movement and creating the illusion of a work that is activated and living.

This piece represents both a continuation of previous work and an expansion from it. Previously, I have created material-forward pieces built on ideas of permanence and impermanence, decay, physical transmutation and synthesis, the body and its relationship to the earth, memory, and conceptions of memorialization. Often these ideas stem from the sculptural materials themselves, as I consider part of my practice to be the exploration and discovery of the language of physical objects through making, both of the sculpture itself, and often of the materials used in making. I investigate these meanings by developing an understanding and familiarity with their physical properties.
Following that, I moved into the creation of form and conceptualization utilising that meaning. This thesis work continues that exploration but with a pivot, which is an attempt to dive as deeply into my own voice and history as that of the materials I am examining.

Images: Sketches, Process Work, and Final Artwork Documentation
Concept Sketches for *Inheritance//Loss*, 2020-2021
Weaving + Onion skin dye bath, 2020-2021

Natural Glue Experimentation, 2021
Bronze pour, 2021

Fresh florals + willow branches + greenery, 2021
Inheritance//Loss, 2021, mixed media
Title Card

Inheritance // Loss

2021

Jute cord, copper vessel, silk thread, onion + tea dyed cotton loom weavings, hand-woven net, bones, cast aluminum, cotton thread, deer hoof, branches, fresh greenery, deer hide, hemp thread, dried shooting-star wildflowers, seed pods, pain, chalk, alpaca yarn, feathers, bark, rags, apron pocket, agate, work, flowers, pinecones, suede cord, rabbit skin glue, glycerine, heirlooms, shells, willow, family joy, stems, tumbleweed, pottery, dried leaves, antler, thorns, memory, thistles

Description Card

This work is the story of family. Carried down through forebears and ancestors. Their traumas, both experienced and inflicted, are more than stories; the science of epigenetics reveals how these experiences chemically change DNA and gene expressions for generations to come. Their stories become our stories, living and lived out in their descendants, creating shorter and unhealthier life spans, autoimmune diseases, mental illnesses, and cancers; the inheritance of oppression, racism, abuse, neglect and abandonment; substantively changing bodies and lives, seeping into our genetic fibers, becoming inseparable from love and familial joy.
Detail from *Inheritance//Loss*, 2021, mixed media
Detail from Inheritance//Loss, 2021, mixed media
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Detail from *Inheritance//Loss*, 2021, mixed media

Bibliography


