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Feminine Rhyme

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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Laurie Mantecon for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Painting were presented May 22nd, 1996, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Laurie Mantecon for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Painting presented May 22, 1996.

Title: Feminine Rhyme

'Feminine Rhyme' is a sequence of objects and paintings that resonate with women's experience in contemporary culture. The components I have used are: the structure of the grid, aggressive surface handling, and language derived from text. I have reconfigured these elements to direct the viewer in exploring layers of information that can be viewed in fragments as well as understood within the containment of a sound whole.

I have explored the relationship of gender identity in our culture, and the role women play in association to masculine power. Through repetitive use of the grid, combined with isolated words and images, I have created paintings that can be read either in a formal manner through the use of structure and materials that are visually pleasing, or in context to a visual dialogue of contemporary gender myths.

By fragmenting text in the form of torn book pages, I have altered and personalized the order, lending weight to chaos. Words become a form of mark making, a lyrical device to be read at random. I have obscured the imagery by hiding the text, leaving only scattered bits of information. These bits are derived from a 'therapeutic model' found in self help books, diet books and romance novels which exploit "feminism" as a commodity, serve as cultural documents, and influence women as to how they should perceive their bodies, their minds, their freedom.

The end result is a visual interplay of form and color within the context of personal testimony and societal conditioning of the female experience in contemporary culture.

FEMININE RHYME

by

LAURIE MANTECON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

ART: PAINTING

Portland State University

1996

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“The true woman is an artificial product that civilization makes, as formerly eunuchs were made. Her presumed ‘instincts’ for coquetry and docility are indoctrinated, as in phallic pride in man.” -Simon de Beauvoir¹

The central theme of the exhibition, ‘Feminine Rhyme’, is the manipulation of the grid, and the exploration of various materials producing work that is composed of multimedia. This series of work is composed of boxes reconfigured into various grid formats. These grids are combinations of book pages, paint and photographic images, revealing layers of information that have been partially obscured and diffused by surface handling.

My interest is in the grid as a formal structure. Books work in a linear grid format; the ‘code’ of left to right and sequential pages must be understood to realize the intended meaning.

In the history of art, ‘modernism’ functioned as a way to break down social ideologies. In the 1950’s, art critic Greenberg described this process as “the logical game of visual aesthetics, the search is for an absolute or linear utopian vision, the goal: to imitate ‘god’, by creating something solely in its own terms the way nature itself is valid, something given independent of meaning and

content.”²

This enforced realm of activity ignores nature and the cyclic process, life-death-rebirth, substituting instead a linear order. This ideology produces a psychologically gridded society, where most western thought reveres one life, one death, human order.

I am interested in the juxtaposition of the ‘authority’ in grids, with the societal dictation of female experience in the form of the written word. A book is read in linear format that must be considered sequentially to understand its form. It is the authority of structure, through the written word in the order of a page.

By fragmenting text in the form of torn book pages, I have altered and personalized the order, lending weight to chaos. Words become a form of mark making, a lyrical device to be read at random. I have obscured the imagery by hiding the text, leaving only scattered bits of information. These bits are derived from a “therapeutic model” found in self help books, diet books, and romance novels. These books exploit “feminism” as a commodity, serving as cultural documents that influence women in how they should perceive their bodies, their minds, their freedom. The fragmentation within the work is to break down imposed beliefs, becoming isolated pieces within themselves. The grid, serving as a formal code, is juxtaposed to a collective female experience, where content is to be found within the words and surface of a finished painting.

CHAPTER II

WORK PROCESS

The materials I use are approached in a very physical manner. The work involves repetitive movement in making hundreds of frames, cut to work individually or arranged like a puzzle to serve as the groundwork for a finished piece. The result has been forms of rectangles, squares and circles, put together with fragmented pieces to form a whole. My intent is not to form finished pieces to fit exact dimensions with clean edges. I am more concerned with what happens within the process of colliding elements together. This process is alluded to by John Briggs: "At any moment, the feedback in a dynamical system may amplify some unsuspected 'external' or 'internal' influence, displaying this holistic interconnection. So paradoxically, the study of chaos is also the study of wholeness."³I have accomplished this by creating fragments, placed in a structured format. Richard Sennett makes reference to the architectural sense of space. In his book, The Conscious Of the Eye, he claims that the planned city in grid form is an act of "domination in the planning of neutral space, becoming a modern form of power, defining our space and our bodies. It subdues those who must live in the space, disorienting their ability to see and evaluate relationships."⁴ Thus, a geometry of power is created by the attempt to control chaos.

I am interested in how the grid functions as a confining force imposing an ordered position of civilization. The grid in modernism was used to turn nature into a formal code, creating boundaries. The content of the work is directly related to how social conditioning affects human experience.

In my work I have treated surface in an aggressive manner. The result is a distressed surface indicative of the cycles of nature where we age, weather, decline, and renew. This primal cycle is caught within the contradiction of the grid. I have used book pages, rice paper, photo emulsion and paint, to collage and distress the surface layer by layer. When placed as a whole it is hard to tell what came before or after. The finished surface is reminiscent of billboards and walls where the deterioration of the old is mixed with the new.

The result is a visual interplay of form, color, text and surface. The words may get covered through surface handling, leaving only hints of each treatment. This works as a subliminal imitator of psychological states, as we flip from relationship to relationship, situation to situation. In some pieces the text may become abstractions, leaving only hints of words or partial sentences. This technique of repeating or obscuring text leaves the space for the viewer to establish her/his own order. Whether it be within the content of the work, or with the formal interplay of the painting.

CHAPTER III

LANGUAGE AND THE BODY

The conceptualist Joseph Kosuth claimed, “a sentence can have different meanings if repeated on different occasions, this is the language game.”⁵

The piece Time Object, (Fig. 1) consists of a vertical diptych. The bottom panel is a photographic image of a woman holding an apple. The top panel reads, “time object.” This is a play on words that can have a double meaning. A classic scenario of the myth of Eve, symbol of the eternal “feminine,” locked into the awareness of time on the body. Time Object can be read as an objection to time, or the objectification of the body of Eve. Eve is the eternal maiden, the modern version of Lilith, keeper of lust, seduction, forever young, representing the feminine game of ‘she as other’.

Feminist Simone de Beauvoir says in her book The Second Sex: “In male dominated western culture, women’s knowledge and creativity have been understood within the confines of a gender ideology that defines women with the reproductive and sexual body and regards both women and the body as the other.”⁶

In the piece Knots of Desire, (Fig. 2) fragmented words and imagery deal with the idea of seduction being the art of

appearances, the ultimate game of power. I have made multiple boxes displayed in a horizontal line. The piece contains transparent layers of rice paper with repetitive photographic images of knots and fragmented words. The knot image serves as the grid, the text as a binding and knotting in the sentence structure. Constriction and control are read within enclosed spaces.

Seduction and femininity are fused, they are the reverse side of sex (masculinity) meaning and power. Post-Structuralist Jean Baudrillard makes reference to this by stating “a universe where the feminine is in not what opposes the masculine but what seduces. Seduction is the absolute master in the realm of appearances turning all structural truth into a game, playing with all systems of power.”⁷

My interest is in the metaphor of how language and words work as a construct to cultural myths. In my piece, Trinity, (Fig. 3) I have constructed a triptych placed in the form of a triangle. The piece consists of monochromatic surface with photo emulsion and paint. Two lead framed boxes sit at the base of a triangle form; above them is a wood frame, containing within the word, ‘meta’. The forces of constriction and expansion are in constant exchange. In the resulting trinity, ‘control’ and ‘forget myth’ show the passive and aggressive elements of constriction. Without the lead framing, ‘meta’ represents expansion. In Roman mythology the god Saturn (lead his attribute) rules the physical plane. He is related to

discipline, limitation, and the physical senses, and treats the body as a form of constriction. For the Greek he is Kronos, guardian of time. Marking moments is one of our most powerful and sublime social constrictions.

I began tracing bodies, confining them using a collage of words and paint. The incorporation of language served to integrate human experience. Individual words have the power to trigger emotional responses. Pages, sentence fragments and single words began to reveal their power of social context mixed with personal history. This combined with the symbolic power of the shape of the body.

The piece Feminine Rhyme (Fig. 4) is a grid painting, composed of multiple boxes placed within a raw wood frame. I found a less literal representation of the body when I covered the figure with written pages. Torn directly out of books based on the therapeutic model of feminism that has been commodified in self-help books such as, “Women Who Love Too Much,” “How to Make a Man Fall in Love With You,” etc...., the messages in these books exploit women as a symbol. The format of the written word serves as a negative metaphor for how women should act, feel and define their security within society.

Feminist theorist Linda S. Kauffman claims: “These books, complete with expensive marketing and research campaigns are not only targeted for an exclusive female audience, the list of books

seems to be endless.”⁸ This media formatting keeps women believing they are victims of their own femininity, or as Linda S. Kauffmann claims, “the love junkie masochist that needs to be cured of her addiction.”⁹

The surface build-up on the book pages serves as a record of time. Hidden behind the scraped layers of pages are previous paintings and images formed by the use of the photographic emulsion applied directly on to wood. Hints of words such as “myth” and “meta” are visible. Over the layered text and paint is a red sphere, representing life-death-rebirth, symbol of the female, imposing on the grid. The result is a systematic inquiry into the beauty of materials used within the painting, the seduction of time within structure.

The second piece to this series, Grid Lock, (Fig. 5) consists of a large rectangular panel done in the form of a grid. Layers of diet book pages were applied with glue then peeled or scraped away. Built up with paint, collage, wax and linseed oil, the surface began to grid, to be read or viewed as isolated images within the context of the whole. The end result is a formal play of color and surface, rhythmic patterns of subverted words.

Grid Lock is about our culture’s obsession with the body. Media hype, magazines and fashion statements perpetuate the stereotype that the body is more important than personality, intelligence and emotional capacity. Raised in Southern California,

where the body was displayed like a trophy, I personally became a victim to that cultural obsession with thinness, and like other women, deliberately starved myself to meet the subliminal standards to be more like a girl than a woman.

How did this belief infiltrate our society? What gain is served when men are more enamored with the body of a girl than with the body of a woman? Mary Wollstonecraft said in 1792, in the *Vindication Of the Rights Of Women*, “men indeed appear to act in a very unphilosophical manner when they try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to always keep them in a state of childhood.”¹⁰

On a psychological level, starving my body became an obsession for self control. The combination of subliminal social messages and validation led to the integration of external control. With the inclusion of the diet book pages in the painting’s grid structure, the symbols of this form of restriction have been isolated and visually presented.

The companion piece to Grid Lock is a treated book I have created to be placed within a lead box. In Entrapment (Fig. 6) I have scraped and peeled pages during the layering process. I have obscured with paint these torn fragments which then become a finished product within itself. A former journal of mine has been used within these pages. It includes writings pertaining to my anorexic experience. The pages are placed within a sarcophagus

like lead box to be buried on a new moon, a metaphoric closure to the “anorexic” ritual.

A third piece in the series, Control, (Fig. 7) consists of raw wood frames in a form of a chessboard pattern. Half of the frames are turned to show their depth of an inch and a half. One box is empty, another contains lead, and the remaining have a repeated photographic image which is sewn into the inside of the box with red thread. The repetitive image is of a female in a submissive position. She is crouched in a fetal position, with her hands over her head. The female image conveys the objectification of women, “the victim”, surrounded by order and control. The queen, a result of a bad end game, trapped in the corner of the board.

In Circular Notation, (fig. 8) the concern was to give an overall roundness to the gridded structure, without losing vertical and horizontal planes. I then began connecting frames together with mending plates, in a ritualistic format. Selection of images, blank squares and text served to create both an overall whole and individual integrity.

The piece Transform (Fig. 9) took place over a period of one year. The rectangular piece began with the painted image of the figure which progressed into a deteriorating wall of gridded diet book pages. This was whitewashed and defaced, literally and figuratively marking time. In a rectangular box I confined whole but separate pages. They can be seen as pages, but not consumed

as content. The end result is an interplay of content with a structurally formal painting.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

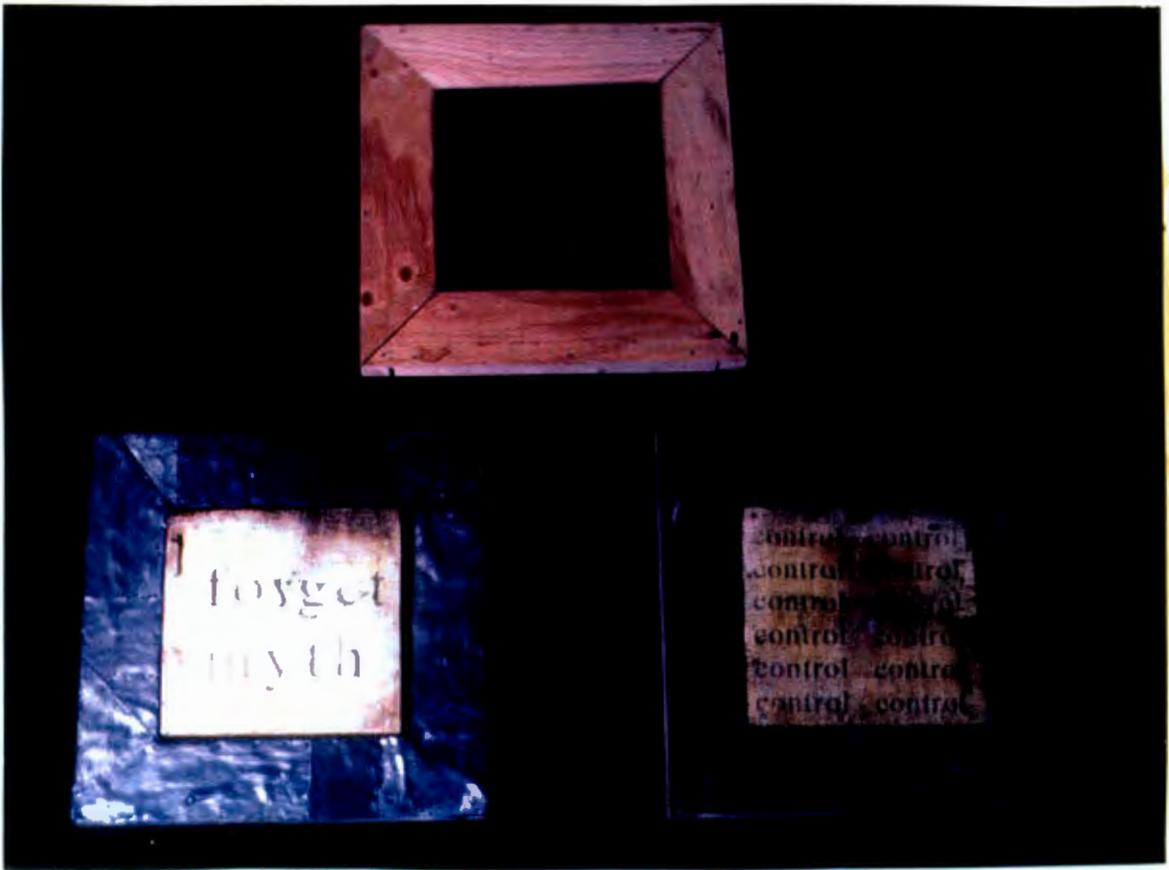
This exhibition, “Feminine Rhyme”, has been a two-year process of investigation with materials and spatial relationships of fragmentation in the make up of grids. The result is work representing societal conditioning of the female within culture as confined within a gridded structure. I utilized materials of wax, oils and collage because of their beauty and form. The work becomes like fractal geometry, which traces order in irregular formations. What is seen as chaotic or random also becomes visual metaphor for the patterns of life and conditioning, the process of creation, transformation, disintegration and integration. It has been an experience of blending the art process and life, working with the symbols of social conditioning.

The work leaves room for growth, with a deeper investigation to come with the structure of the body in relation to human experience. Why is it that we put everything in structural order, including ideas of gender?

I am not sure whether or not the finished pieces set a tone for a deeper understanding of the above observations, I can only hope that in the future in my work I can gain a clearer representation of my own role as a female in context with society through formal investigation of materials and personal testimony.



Time Object (Fig.1)



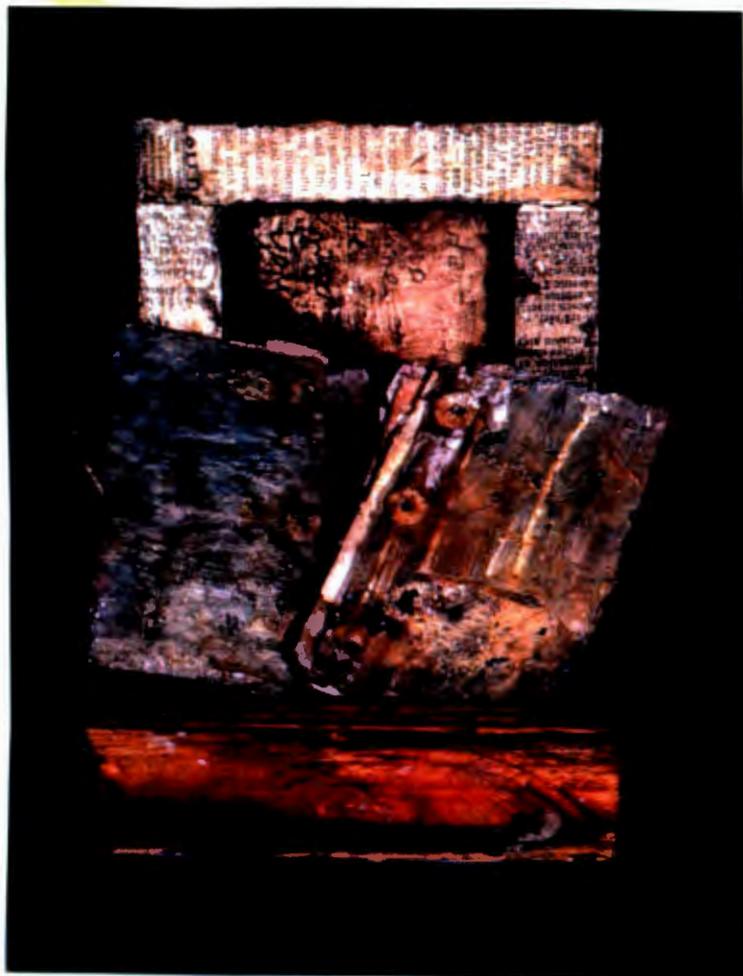
Trinity (Fig. 3)



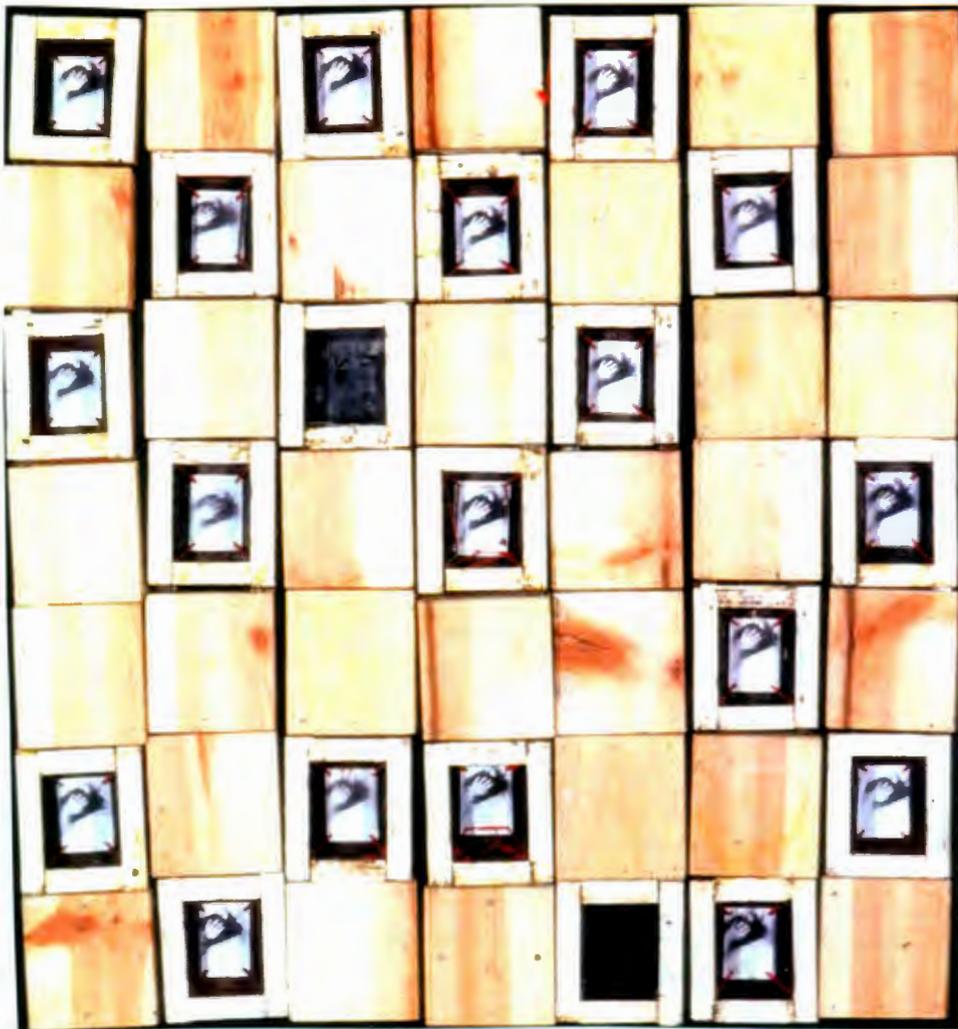
Feminine Rhythm (Fig. 4)



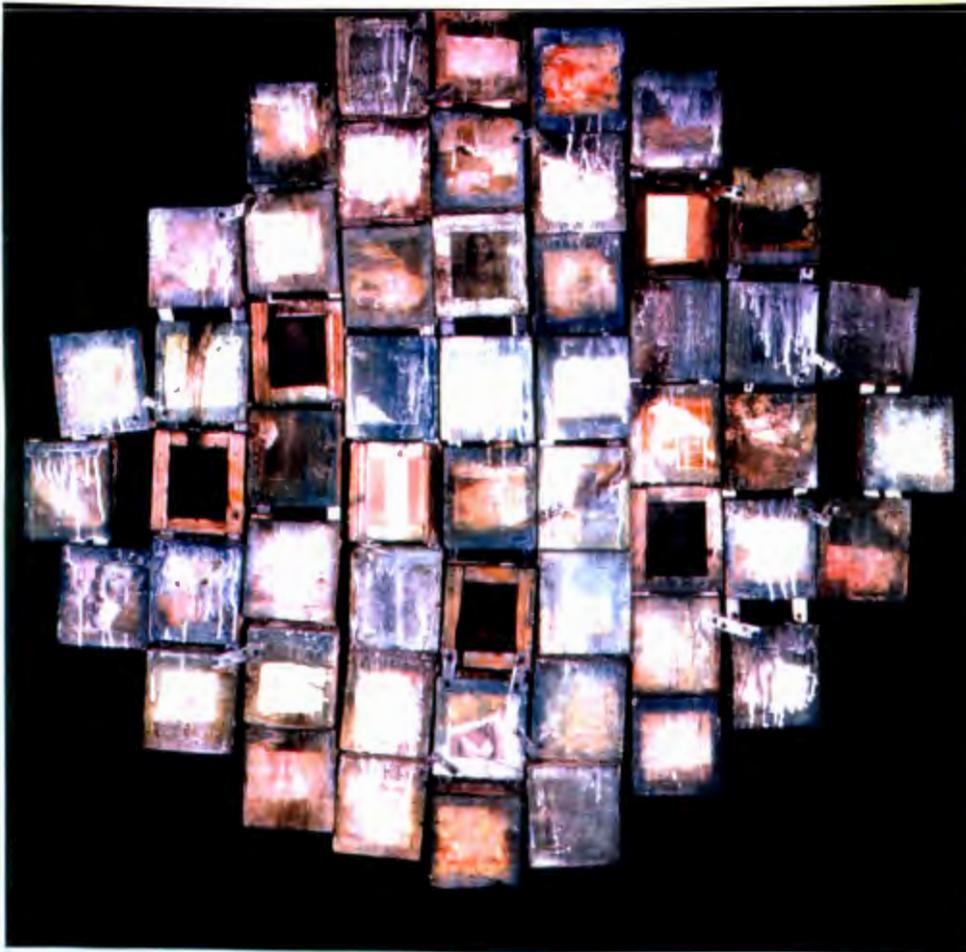
Grid Lock (Fig. 5)



Entrapment (Fig. 6)



Control (Fig.7)



Circular Notation (Fig. 8)



Transform (Fig. 9)

ENDNOTES

1. Simone de Beauvoir The Second Sex (Vintage Books Edition Random House, New York, New York, 1952) p.324.
2. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" Pollock and After: The Critical Debate (Francis Frascina, New York, New York, 1985) p. 32.
3. John Briggs, Fractals, the Pattern Of Chaos (Simon and Schuster, New York, New York,1992) p. 108.
4. Richard Sennett, The Conscious of the Eye (W.W Norton and Company, New York, New York, 1992) p. 108.
5. Joseph Kosuth, Art After Philosophy and After, Collected Writing (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991) p. 66.
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7. Jean Baudrillard, Seduction (St. Martin's Press, New York, New York 1990) p. 41.
8. Linda S. Kauffman, "The Long Goodbye" American Feminist Thought. At Century's End (Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1993 p. 262.
9. Ibid. , p. 262.
10. Jane Mills, Womanwords (The Free Press, New York, New York, 1989) p. 103.