

PROTRAPMENT

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

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By

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INTRODUCTION

When I was a child, and then a young man, I believed that I would always be able to keep myself in situations that would make me happy. I'm not even sure what I thought happiness was back then. I suppose my parents were partly responsible for my attitude. I'm sure that they expected life to be easier for me than it was for them. For the most part they were right. Because I was aware of this, and because I associated the idea of an easy life with being happy, in my mind it became a certainty. My culture certainly contributed. Throughout my entire life I have been bombarded by commercials with happy people doing fun things. The "American dream" was, and is, alive and well. Now, at thirty, I realize that I cannot always be in control. The idea of being happy seems silly, even shallow. There are many things that make me happy, but neither happiness nor despair are things that can be sustained for long.

I have come to realize that most of the choices that I have made, most of the situations I have chosen for myself, have two sides. To be more exact they are an unstable continuum where on one extreme you have protection, and on the other you have entrapment. I say "unstable continuum" because I do not believe that a perfect balance exists in the middle of the two extremes. Every circumstance is different, some are more protective than they are entrapping and visa versa. Therefore the point of balance will not be in the exact center. A person may have a job that makes them feel trapped, but if keeping the job will help them reach a goal then they can accept the

entrapment. The entrapping side may overshadow the protective side most of the time, but a balance can still be maintained. We seem to feel differently day by day as well. A person may enjoy going to work one day and hate it the next. Perhaps these mood swings are a subconscious way we keep ourselves in balance. I suppose that separate circumstances are somewhat combined in our heads to affect the balance. For instance, if an event occurs which makes you extremely happy, that happiness may be sustained throughout other events that are not usually pleasing. There will always be moments of happiness as well as moments of despair, but in between there is a place that is easier to sustain. That place is contentment.

As this idea of maintaining a balance was evolving I began making pieces that were concerned with specific aspects of my life. For instance one piece is a pendant where a sperm is just penetrating an egg. This conception is taking place within a cage that the egg fits snugly into. It was my intent for the cage to be both entrapping and protective at the same time. I believe the piece is very effective in communicating both aspects of one situation, but because it is so specific, I feel that it will not apply to all viewers.

After considering this problem I came up with the idea of using found objects which are easily recognized as safety materials, such as a dust mask or a face shield, and combining them with an entrapping structure. The combination must be unified enough that each piece seems to possess a single function while at the same time not losing either protection or entrapment. In this way I believe the idea of finding balance may be suggested.

I believe that many people try to deny the existence of an entrapping side or, for the very pessimistic, a protective side. To deny either side is dangerous. The first might make life seem more pleasant, but it is unstable. The second is to live in despair.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It was my intention to create pieces that seem to be both entrapping and protective at the same time. I hope that, as the viewer attempts to interpret each piece, there will be a shift back and forth from one to the other until both sides are accepted and a balance is found.

QUESTIONS

1. Does the combination of protection and entrapment suggest the idea of balance ?
2. Will the elements of protection and entrapment be viewed as a single entity, or will each piece seem no more than a juxtaposition of conditions?
3. What materials and recognizable forms or objects can be used and combined to communicate protection and entrapment?

METHODOLOGY

I have created eight pieces which combine objects of safety which are easily recognized with structures that appear to be entrapping. For the entrapping structures, I have used materials that are traditionally identifiable with entrapment or restraint such as leather and metal.

If asked for the opposite of entrapment my first response would be freedom. When I think of freedom in terms of my own life I end up with security as the primary factor in feeling free. Security because fear is the main source behind feelings of entrapment and security negates fear. Since security is practically synonymous with safety it was easy for me, and I believe for most people, to see protection and entrapment as direct opposites. In order for them to balance each other they must be accepted as such.

I felt that in order to suggest balance, each piece must seem balanced. As I was working on the first piece in the series I realized that it was crucial for the safety materials in each piece to retain, or at least appear to retain their original function. It seemed to me that the entrapping aspects would create more powerful emotional responses than the safety aspects. Without their ability to function the safety devices might lose their impact altogether. The pieces would then seem to be about safety being overtaken by entrapment.

It is very important that each element of a piece be seen as parts of a whole, such as the yin and yang symbol represents two parts of a whole. I believe that allowing the safety objects to retain their function helps in this respect. Another way I tried to make each piece seem unified was to use as much of the original design as possible in the way each piece would be secured to the wearer. In many of the pieces I replaced their straps with ones made from leather. I felt that the leather would enhance the other devices I applied to create entrapment by seeming overly secure to the point of being restrictive. I tried to keep the new straps similar to the originals in the way they are positioned, both

on a wearer and where they attach to the device. I believe that keeping this similarity allows the aspects of entrapment and protection to fit together in a way that seems natural. I was concerned that the opposing aspects of each piece might seem to have been placed together in a surreal manner, implying a bizarre psychological state rather than a normal occurrence. I believe that treating the straps the way I have allows a good transition from one side to the other, leaving a certain amount of familiarity to the viewer which keeps the semblance of surrealism to a minimum.

I made Protrapment I from a dustmask combined with a muzzle-like structure constructed from a heavy gauge copper wire and leather straps with buckles. I made the muzzle form take on the shape of the dust mask so they fit together snugly. The dust mask was then riveted to the inside of the muzzle. The original straps that were on the mask were simple rubber bands stapled directly to the mask. The straps that I replaced them with are connected to the muzzle structure but are still similar to the originals in regards to where they are fastened to the piece as well as the position they would take if worn.

Protrapment II began with a face shield. The plastic shield is the only part of the original safety device left. I replaced the head piece that the shield is connected to with a copper structure very similar to the original. I used a heavier leather for the straps than in Protrapment I adding to the idea that the straps are overly secure. For the entrapping side I added a shackle collar that hangs on more leather straps from the head piece and would fasten around the neck if worn. The use of the shackle seemed to be such an effective device that I would use it again several times in the series.

In Protrapment III I used a respirator mask with two filter canisters. Because the canisters themselves are the crucial parts to the device it seemed essential to somehow use them in creating the entrapping side. My solution was to pierce each canister with a brass loop. I attached each loop to either end of a chain. The chain runs through another loop which is attached to a rounded cement object that appears to function as a restrictive weight. Once again I used leather straps, this time placing them on the piece in the exact format as the originals.

I used the orange safety netting that is put around construction sites to create Protrapment IV. A framework was created from aluminum and then the netting was stretched within the frame to create the semblance of a cage. Instead of making an entire cage the sides were cut short and hung on the wall to close off the back. I tilted it out from the top in order to give it a more immediate presence. I wanted the viewers to get the feeling that it was looming over them. I thought that this might help add to the entrapping side.

Protrapment V started with a mask that is made to protect the face from a baseball. Although this safety device might not be as easily recognized as the others I feel that its function is fairly obvious. The original piece only had one strap to hold it in place. Using only one strap didn't seem secure enough so I cut two more slots in it on top and bottom and added extra straps. As with number II, I attached a neck shackle to create the entrapping aspect.

I used a pair of steel-toe safety boots and leather work gloves to create Protrapment VI. I riveted a shackle to each piece so that if a person were to wear the

devices they would also have to wear the shackles. The shackles are connected by lengths of chain much in the way we may see prisoners shackled while being transferred. I was concerned that the viewers might not understand the protective function of the boots so I rubbed yellow paint into the words "Steel Toe" on the side of each so they would stand out.

Protrapment VII utilized a back support belt. Again I used shackles and chains to create the entrapping side of the piece. To connect the two sides I simply riveted two small plates to the belt. Each plate has a half loop soldered to it which in turn is connected to lengths of chain. I created the chain and shackle structure once again to resemble the form we might see worn by a prisoner being transferred.

Protrapment VIII came about because of a sense of incompleteness I felt with number IV, which I will explain shortly. I felt that the safety netting is such a recognizable part of our landscape that I needed to try and use it again. It occurred to me that the netting itself actually functions in both a protective as well as restrictive manner when used as it is intended. The solution for a piece I came up with was an installation which restricted traffic flow within the gallery. I created a fence which closed off part of a room in the gallery. One end led right up to a wall, so the audience was forced to walk in and out of the structure in the same location. I doubled the height in order to add to the restrictive effect.

With the exceptions of numbers IV and VIII, I made simple wooden pegs on which to hang each piece for display. I considered several options, such as having each piece worn by a model. I was afraid that the way I chose to display them might create

an effect different from that which I had intended. I felt that if the pieces were worn in a gallery setting the entrapping side would overshadow the protective because the safety devices would not be functioning in the manner they were designed. The models would not be participating in an activity that would make the devices necessary.

Since I was already concerned that the entrapping sides held a greater impact, I came up with the idea of displaying them in such a way that they would seem to be posed and ready for use even though they are not being employed at the moment. I felt that the pegs would make them seem as if they had been put away temporarily, as if they had been hung up for the night and would be used again tomorrow. I believe that this presentation, combined with the fact that they all do retain their ability to function, keeps the safety side in balance with the restrictive side.

The work that I was doing just previously to this series was geared more towards personal choices. I mentioned the sperm penetrating the egg within a cage. I also made a piece with a set of wedding bands in a container that had a plastic mesh top which was intended to represent both protection and entrapment. I feel that the idea of choice is still crucial to my intent. If choice weren't represented, I believe that each piece would seem far more entrapping than protective and balance could not be accepted. Although most of the pieces fasten in some way there are no actual locking devices. The straps are fastened with buckles and the shackles are all bolted shut in a way that the wearer could easily remove the piece. Number IV has a door which stays open and has no fastener at all, and number VIII had an opening through which anyone could enter or exit as they desired.

I feel that number IV is the weakest because it is really just a representation of a whole. I think that the other pieces work because they are complete. It is easy for the viewers to imagine themselves wearing the other pieces, or in the case of the fence they are actually impeded by it. The cage on the wall however cannot be seen as having two parts which make up a whole because the piece itself is not whole.

I feel that overall the series is successful. I think that when seen all together the pieces have much greater presence than when seen one at a time. Numbers VI and VII when seen alone seem to be trying to make a statement about labor more than just dealing with safety and entrapment, but when displayed with the rest of the series I believe the intent is more clear. There are certainly any number of interpretations that might be applied to the series, but I believe the consistent and obvious application of protection and restriction in each piece is an effective solution to the stated problem.















