HEARTSCAPE:
JOURNEY THROUGH A LIFE

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis exhibition

to my soul mate, friend, lover, and husband

Phillip C. Dutcher
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There have been many times over the last three years when I felt I was in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing. For all those people, teachers and friends, who kept urging me to continue, I want to say thank you. In particular, I want to say thank you to Rick Mills who told me to "just stay focused", to Charlie Cohan who gave me a much-needed kick in the mental butt, to Jo Rowley who said I could do it, and to Abby Golden who said I was worth it.

I would also like to say a special thank you to my thesis committee: Fred Roster, Pat Hickman, Tom Klobe, and Ron Kowalke. They were patient with me, but not too patient, and very encouraging when I needed it most.

And finally, I want to say thank you to my husband, Phil. Without his support, both mental and emotional, I couldn't have done this.
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HEARTSCAPE:
JOURNEY THROUGH A LIFE

The Inspiration

Having studied as a Kagyu Tibetan Buddhist for many years, my understanding of these teachings is that the only place a person can become enlightened is in the human realm. There are realms other than the human one, such as the hell realm where one suffers from heat and cold, the hungry ghost realm where one suffers from hunger and thirst, and the animal realm where one suffers from ignorance and stupidity which leads to blind instinctive behavior, but there are no dharna teachings in those places. The dictionary defines dharna as "the principle or law that governs the universe in Hinduism and Buddhism."2

It is only in the human realm that the dharna is taught by enlightened teachers. Only humans have the inner ability and capacity for this understanding. These dharna teachings form the core of my belief that everything we do is important, even though it might simply be some ordinary, mundane action.

With this conviction of the truth of the dharna, each sentient being is a soul with countless lifetimes, sometimes as a human, sometimes as an insect, animal or other being. Each lifetime in which a soul incarnates is like a suit of clothes that the soul puts on. When the suit wears out, it is discarded, and a new one is made.

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During these lifetimes, certain souls have *karmic* connections with other similar souls. *Karma* is defined as “the effect of a person’s actions during the successive phases of a person’s existences, regarded as determining the person’s destiny.”

Lama Rinchen, one of my teachers of spirituality, says, “When you see someone on the street, or at the mall, and your eyes meet, you are connected to that person in some way.” These souls with *karmic* connections tend to travel together, and after many lifetimes, special bonds are formed.

I have been lucky to find one soul mate, and to have spent the greater part of my life with him. The bond between us has helped to define my life. Though we are two separate people, our hearts beat in syncopation with each other, like a vast landscape that seems to go on forever, or that which becomes as minute as the striations on a blade of grass.

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3 *dictionary*, 465-466.
The Metaphorical Meaning of the Installation 
and Some Historical References

The choices I have made in the installation of my exhibition (the postures of the figures, the space around them, and their positions in the gallery) relate to my long time Tibetan Buddhist beliefs. Although, in my art making, I continue to be influenced by everything around me, Tibetan Buddhism is about the study of the true nature of the mind, which goes beyond what we see in the everyday world.

Several years ago, on television, I saw a program about a girl who, for about two years, had lived on the streets of New York City. During that time, studying in old abandoned stair wells, she put herself through high school. Her story of prevailing over the difficulties she faced was extremely inspiring. After she graduated from high school, she applied to Harvard and won a full scholarship. During the interview, she said, “Take everything that comes your way. Take it and use it in some way.”

Artist David Hockney says that the smallest kind of event can become a story if you tell it in a new way. The way it's told can make it exciting; the way of the seeing tells the story.4 David Hockney is able to look at something, a scene or a person, or an object, and fragment it in such a way so as to make a person look beyond what is happening in just one place. He does this on a two-dimensional plane.

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4 Hockney the photographer (Chicago: Home Vision, 1983) VHS
Kiki Smith is one of the most influential sculptors of her generation. She is concerned with the space around her castings of bodies, which are expressions of real functions: tears, self mutilation, bodily excrement, menstrual periods. She may place her figures far apart from each other, allowing the viewer to interact with them from a distance or with as much closeness as they wish. She also places them

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in various unusual positions, such as hanging from a wall, or high on a pedestal.

In my work, I am trying to follow the leads of David Hockney and Kiki Smith. I am taking the story of two people, fragmented three-dimensionally, and I am enabling the viewer to see into the space that surrounds and envelopes those people. In the *Heartscape* exhibition, two people travel together through a lifetime. They met many years ago, and now, at this point in their lives, they are still journeying together. Their body castings perform real actions, in a way that is related to relationships.

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6 http://www.uam.ucsb.edu/Pages/kiki_view.html
Another artist, George Segal, has also inspired me. He takes plaster impregnated fabric and applies the fabric to people’s bodies, clothes and all. He then places the cast figures into situations and surroundings. He says, “I want to walk into a second world of my own making peopled with friends and ordinary objects, ordinary places that are somehow charged with the invisible yearnings, passions, and thoughts of daily life.”

George Segal, *Waitress Pouring Coffee*, 1973

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I also place cast figures into settings, but my situations have to be imagined by the viewer, as there are no props. They are implied by the positioning of the castings. Furniture and architecture are referred to by the placement of the cast fragments.

I decided to cast my and my husband's bodies, because of the way the body acts as a calendar, a statement of time. Aging bodies like ours have wrinkles, and parts sag. Even though these things happen, the body can still be beautiful, captivating, and poignant. I chose to cast fragments as the human form is a fragile thing, something that can easily die, disintegrate, and disappear; something that looks as if it is solid, but is, in reality, comprised of atoms with lots of space between them. In that space, there are energy fields, which we don't see, but they are there, affecting us. I chose plaster as the medium for casting because of its brittleness when it is thin, yet I have strengthened this material with cheesecloth, so that only the edges break. They keep breaking until they meet the cheesecloth. The vulnerability of the plaster symbolizes the soul's suit of clothes for this lifetime, to be discarded when the life is over. The cheesecloth denotes the dharma teachings that holds our lives together. Sometimes, during the casting process, holes appeared in the plaster. They were unpredictable. The holes serve as a metaphor for areas in everyone's life where something unexpected happens.
In the exhibition, three groupings of figure fragments represent places where our bodies meet daily: the living room couch, the bed, the bathroom.

The bathroom is a place where our most intimate moments are revealed to the other person. There is nothing hidden here. We see each other performing the most commonplace bodily functions humans do, so we can't take ourselves too seriously.

The grouping of fragments representing the couch has two sides, each with three pieces. Each side is similar: a leg, an arm, a half torso. Two people come together on the couch at the end of the day, to listen to each other's innermost thoughts and remind ourselves that we appreciate one another.

The bed, another place where physical and emotional closeness is expressed, consists of four separate fragments. The main piece is large, two figures snuggled together in bed. Another small bit, a hand, seems to be an extension of the larger two-body fragment. In addition there are two castings of legs.

The gallery walls and floor are painted a warm neutral gray. The white plaster of the cast figures subtly contrasts with the gray, and the shadows that overlap under and behind the figures tend to reinforce the feeling that the pieces are floating.
When the soul does rise above the conditions of ordinary life into meaning and healing, it hovers closely and floats; it doesn’t soar. Its mode of reflection is reverie rather than intellectual analysis, and its process of healing takes place amid the everyday flux of mood, the ups and downs of emotions...⁹

Inside the gallery, the body castings interact with different elements of the exhibition space. The castings reflect in the glass at night. Shadows of the bamboo come into the gallery and move across the walls and floor during the day; and over the course of the day, there are shadows of people standing outside the gallery. Inside the gallery, looking at the reflection of the couch piece in the glass, the six body fragments seem to rise and sit as one passes them. The mirror images of the pieces in the bed give the impression that they are swimming through people or over the cement outside the gallery.

The exhibition space is a coming together of vertical and horizontal two-dimensional planes, out of which the three-dimensional pieces arise. The space between the three groupings of body fragments is extremely important and represents the atoms with lots of space between them within our bodies. The gallery itself signifies the area that surrounds each individual person invisibly, yet connects each with threads of energy because we are tied to one another by our thoughts about and for each other, our touch with one another, and our feelings for each other.

THE TECHNICAL PROCESS

My technical process has been to cast body parts. First, the body parts are painted in flex wax, a relatively low temperature wax, and then cast into plaster and partially reinforced with fabric.

Melting the flex wax takes approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The best temperature to paint the wax on the body is about 130 degrees, but the wax has to get hotter than that to melt well. Then it has to cool back down to the proper temperature. Even then, sometimes it still feels too hot, and it burns the skin, as some areas of the body are very sensitive. Those areas vary from person to person.

The wax is painted directly onto the body with a latex paint brush. After the first layer of wax is applied, the wax can be hotter because the first layer insulates the skin against the heat. It's still hot, but more bearable. About an eighth of an inch of wax is built up in layers all over the body parts to be cast. In places where there are joints, such as two feet together, or a hand touching another body part, more wax needs to be applied, with as much as a quarter to a half inch of wax added in these areas. However, if too much wax is applied, it will be difficult to remove the wax from the positive plaster casting. It is important to find the right balance of wax to apply.

After the wax is fully painted, a layer of cheesecloth, dipped in plaster, is laid over the whole wax casting. This acts as a “mother mold”, to help keep the wax from distorting. Once the plaster has formed a
crystalline structure and become hard, the plaster and wax molds are carefully lifted off the body. Distortion of the body part can occur at this point if the mother mold of plaster is too thin and is unable to support the more flexible wax negative.

To make the plaster positive, or replica of the body part, a small amount of plaster is mixed in a container, like a large soda cup, and a thin skim coat of plaster is applied to an area about eight to ten inches long on the inside of the wax negative. Then pieces of cheesecloth (approximately twelve inches by eight inches) are dipped into the plaster and laid onto the skim coat. As more cheesecloth is laid down, the edges of the cloth overlap each other. The cloth is smoothed out as much as possible as it is applied, but it is at this point that the unexpected holes in the plaster positive can appear. Despite thinking the cheesecloth has been smoothed out in the plaster, a bubble of air may have formed under the cheesecloth, between it and the skim coat of plaster. That won't be known until the plaster positive is revealed later.

The plaster/cheesecloth process continues until the plaster in the cup is used up. Another batch is mixed, and the skim coat is again laid onto a new section of wax negative. Pieces of cheesecloth are again dipped into the wet plaster mixture in the cup and laid onto the skim coat.

Once the entire wax negative has been built up with plaster and cheesecloth, and the plaster has hardened, the outside (mother mold)
plaster is pulled off and discarded. The flex wax is also then pulled off the plaster positive. That wax can be recycled and melted again. Although plaster may be left on the wax from the mother mold plaster, it sinks to the bottom of the pan when the wax is remelted, and it can be strained off later and thrown away.

Now a plaster positive of the body casting is achieved, and the cleaning up of the casting proceeds. There are still many places where the wax needs to be taken out, either with a dental pick, screwdriver, or other specialized tools. It is important to remove the wax carefully, as the plaster can still be damaged, and the detailed impression of the body skin, with its wrinkles and folds, can be lost or scraped off. Once all the wax has been removed from the plaster positive, an exact replica of a person's body remains. There is an incredible richness of detail in that body part.
The Process

the first layer of wax

four or five layers of wax

the plaster over the wax

the hand inside the wax and plaster molds

the negative space: inside the casting

applying the plaster and the cheesecloth
the inside of the positive cast
peeling off the outside "mother mold" plaster

peeling off the wax
taking off more wax

the last bit of wax
the edges of the cast body fragment
Overall view of HEARTSCAPE exhibition
Commons Gallery
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa
November 30-December 5, 2003
Close-up view of the couch, view 1
Close-up view of the couch, view 2
Detail view of the couch
Detail view of the couch
Close-up view of the bed, view 1
Close-up view of the bed, view 2
Detail view of the bed
Detail view of the bed
Close-up view of the bathroom, view 1
Close-up view of the bathroom, view 2
Detail view of the bathroom
Detail view of the bathroom
Detail view of the bathroom
CONCLUSION

"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

-Albert Einstein

The process of casting the pieces for this exhibition contained many serendipitous moments. For example, after making a single cast of the right side of the couch piece, it broke apart. It seemed like a disaster, but after the torso section came out of the wax, and the leg broke off, I realized that the piece was much better in three parts, rather than my original vision of one solid form, even though I had to recast the arm and leg again.

In the crouching figure, as I was going to cast the other leg, I became conscious that my original vision "said too much". It was a more exciting work without the second leg.

Several times, the wax distorted itself to make a more interesting version of the human body. A knee folded in on itself. An ankle became wider. A thigh spread out.

More serendipity occurred when figuring out the positioning of the rods. A balance point, or points, had to be found. For some, that balance was achieved almost instantaneously. For others, it seemed that there was no balance point. However, after experimentation, once the balance point was found, the casting rested securely in its space.

Other unexpected moments happened. During the opening reception, a viewer who looked out through the glass from inside the
gallery, could see the reflection of the single standing cast as though it seemed to be among a group of people. The crouching form seemed to sit at a table outside the gallery, or alternately, in the reflection within the glass, it rose up and crouched down again.

Through my studies of Tibetan Buddhism, I have found that though we seem to be separate, individual people, in reality, we are all part of a communal, unifying, mysterious universe, in which a spiritual relationship between souls provides opportunities for growth towards enlightenment.

With the wish to free all beings
I shall always go for refuge
To the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha
Until the attainment of full enlightenment.

Enthused by compassion and wisdom,
Today in the Buddhas’ presence
I generate the mind of enlightenment
For the benefit of all sentient beings.

As long as space endures
And as long as sentient beings remain
May I, too, abide
To dispel the miseries of the world.¹⁰

¹⁰ Refuge Prayer: Generating the Mind of Enlightenment, clipped from somewhere, scotch taped to our refrigerator.
WORKS CONSULTED


Refuge Prayer, Translation source unknown.