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## That's Life

Shelley L. Geiger

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# THAT'S LIFE

Shelley L. Geiger, B.S.

A Master's Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the  
Department of Art of Lindenwood University in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the  
Master's of Art

2001

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2001

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Peter Geiger and Lindsay Dencker, for being models

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## Preface

After a 17 year absence from art and teaching I reentered the art education arena in 1996 to find myself smack dab in the middle of many educational reforms. Today's standards in education have taken a steep leap upward. Student knowledge and performance as well as teacher accountability are paramount. It is no different in art education as evident in newly developed testing for elementary children administered on a state wide level in the fine arts beginning this year.

Since becoming a reborn art educator five years ago and picking up where I previously left off on this degree from 1979, I have gone through relearning, reanalyzing, and reevaluating of my art while experiencing new training in studio art and education by 1998-2001 standards.

Finally I feel I've produced a body of works that are truly mine. *That's Life* began in last year's sculpture class as a project where I conquered my fears of the "figure" through *Church Lady*. In reflection, through this exhibition, I've discovered my own process and style which I have been struggling to attain for years.

Secondary, and equally important, as an educator this exhibition serves me well as the planning of the art elements and principles, the media process, the creative expression, style and purpose, and art influences can be transferred to my everyday teaching with elementary art students. In fact, I plan to invite my fourth and fifth grade students to view, analyze, and critique this work and to carry it over into a project of their own in the near future. This exhibition therefore may influence others hopefully in a positive way.



## Returning to Graduate School

In the fall of 1998 I took my first tentative step back into studio art with a drawing class at Lindenwood University. My life had been void of art making for many years.

Drawing class reawakened observation skills I hadn't even thought about for almost two decades. Drawing things from life became my comfort zone. Drawing figures in class, though a challenge, yielded results. I was constantly evaluating form, value, and proportion. During that four month period, the intense study of the figure became a focus that would become the most important influence of my later works.

In the fall of 1999 in sculpture class for my last project I decided to build a figure life like to scale. *Church Lady* slowly evolved by instinct starting with my grandmother-in-law's hat. She was prim and proper, a religious "do gooder" and lived to the age of 100 out of sheer stubbornness. I admit I intended to paint the finish piece or even leave the clothing exposed. As I was constructing her, it struck me the monochromatic textured surface of the brown paper towel gave a eerie quality to the figure. This encouraged me to cover the clothing as well. The old church pew in places repeated the same benign value of the figure, adding unity to the finished work. To be honest, *Church Lady* brought satisfaction to me throughout her construction, and now tenfold over in the viewer's response I've witnessed. Her texture and scale give her presence. The double take she invokes on viewers thrills me.

Sometime this past fall I made the decision to build more life sized papier mache figures. The goal was to create a series intentionally that would show an expressive style that is consistent and uniquely mine, something I had never done. I began constructing



*Library Boy*. As I made this figure I had to recall the thought process and methods I used in *Church Lady* a year ago. I also documented the technique here to preserve knowledge of that process.

### **Media and Process of Papier Mache Figures**

All figures in this show are made from recycled materials except for masking tape and papier mache paste and are built in segments from measurements of live models for proportion.

A preconceived figure, pose, and site began the process. Unlike George Segal and Duane Hanson, of the 1970s these figures' bodies are not cast in plaster or resin from live models but are rendered by hand in paper (Amason, Prather, & Wheeler, 1998). Using the additive process, grocery bags, plastic shopping bags, newspaper, 4" diameter heavy cardboard tubes are assembled. Extensive body measurements from a live model of every aspect of length and diameter of head, neck, chest, waist, hips, thighs, calves, feet, hands, fingers, upper arm, forearm, and shoulder are recorded on a diagram of the figure for reference throughout construction. As all body components are formed, the figure is constantly tacked together and taken apart to make adjustments in proportion, posture, balance, and stability.

The head is a common light weight plastic bag like a Walgreen's shopping bag. Stuffed with newspaper to the proper proportion, masking tape is wrapped to freeze the shape of the form. A 4" diameter cardboard tube is inserted and connected with tape for the neck. Excess length of the tube is anchored into the upper torso, usually a stuffed grocery bag, so the head is free standing. With the neck secured into the torso, other grocery or plastic bags are used for the abdomen and hips depending on the sex and pose of the figure. In

some figures these two torso segments are then joined with tape or papier mache, in others they are left separate depending on the logistics of the dress of the figures.

The legs have 4"x12" cardboard tubes padded with newspaper for thighs and pieced together with a small stuffed paper bag for the kneecap. This joint is left flexible in some cases until the figure is dressed and in it's final pose. If the natural leg is shown, in some figures, old panty hose or lady's tights are stuffed with crushed up newspaper for the calf and attached to the knee "bag" joint. In other figures the legs are made entirely out of rolled, crushed newspaper and masking tape.

The arms evolve out of plastic shopping bags, or again old panty hose, or rolled up newspaper stuffed and taped to form thickness in the upper arm, elbow, forearm and wrist. The arms are attached to the torso right before the clothing is added. This way the arms remain flexible during the dressing of the sculpture. The papier mache layer is then applied.

Hands are hand rendered using a small lunch size paper bag for the palm and newspaper fingers are formed and taped to the "hand" bag. Fingers are bent to express joints posed to do or hold something. Inside shoes, feet are made using dry newspaper and masking tape. The feet assist in attaching the shoe to the leg. One sculpture is barefoot and has toes.

Once the entire figure's internal structure and form is established usually a preliminary layer of papier mache is added to stabilize the figure's form. Details on the face are built up using small pieces of dry newspaper crumpled, twisted, and taped. Here the eyes, nose, mouth, chin, cheek structure, and ears emerge. Sometimes subtraction of materials is needed to create more relief on the face. Using an X-acto



knife, areas are cut away to create indentations for eye sockets. More details are added by sculpting built up wet kitchen (Bounty) paper towels with papier mache paste and then adding the final layer of brown paper towels for eyelids, brows, lips, hair, etc. . .

The paste used in these figures is Ross papier mache paste. It is mixed slightly thicker than the directions call for of one gallon water to one box paste. This medium yields a clear, smooth jell. The drying time of each layer of papier mache is usually 24-72 hours, depending on the humidity. The final layers of papier mache are Boise Cascade high capacity unbleached industrial rolled paper towels. Since the time I built *Church Lady*, this color of towel has been replaced in the industry with a light tan. After experimenting I found this new towel to be too neutral. I had to search around the St. Louis area to get the desired value of brown. A gas station in O'Fallon, Missouri was kind enough to let me order a case of towels. Now my figures would have consistency of value and look more clay-like.

Logistics of the clothing to be used and when to dress the figure is planned next. Some of the figure's clothing is real and used as is. On the other hand some of the clothing is devised by combining materials to create the illusion of real clothing. For example on *Library Boy*, the letterman's jacket was a wind breaker from a local thrift shop. The structure of the jacket was in the baseball bomber style already. The school letter, year, pirate, and basketball patch were made of layers of felt and sewn to the jacket. Strips of rolled up paper towel were also added to give the illusion of the jacket's heavy seams of wool to leather. On another figure, *Church Lady*, the "old lady" shoes are really a combination of a boot and a tennis shoe to create the heeled oxfords from the 1950s.

While working on *Girl with Green Backpack* I discovered the

necessity to cut the clothing apart in order to dress the figure. The clothing segments were easily repaired with masking tape. This gave me more freedom in the last three figures to go forward with a pose and know dressing would not be a problem later.

Having established a process I'm happy with, I have tried to perfect the process by making each figure's pose progressively more difficult to construct, hence there's an element of a never ending challenge of each piece.

### **Other Influences**

I credit *Church Lady* as a new beginning for my work. The continuous study of the human form in drawing class, without realizing it, gave me a foundation and a comfort level to tackle a figure for my sculpture class a year later. I wanted to build something large to scale, economically, and site specific. Also I wanted the freedom to move and install my own work, so weight of the finished piece was important.

Working part time at children's summer art camps at St. Peter's Cultural Art Center is what led me to my association with Rich Brooks, its director. His Pop montage like papier mache works intrigued me. He'd recycle anything for armatures and underlying forms and eluded details, shoes, bicycles, bowling balls, retail display fixtures, card board, Styrofoam etc... Then he'd cover the entire work with whole industrial paper towels and wheat paste. Lastly, his whimsical pieces were finished in bright multicolored acrylics. One weekend at the Mosaics Art Festival in downtown St. Charles I watched him build and finish in three days a life sized whimsical witch riding a bike that smacked of *The Wizard of Oz*.

At the beginning of summer 2000, to celebrate our twenty-fifth



wedding anniversary, I talked my husband into a trip to New York City. We stayed in walking distance to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art. Each day in New York was devoted to a museum. This fall I took Contemporary Art at Lindenwood University. Interpretations of works, the complex genealogy of movements within Modern Art and influences of artists on other artists of this art era now appeal to me more so than ever before.

In one of the Whitney's permanent exhibits is a collection of Edward Hopper's work left to the museum by Hopper's late wife, Jo. I loved Hopper's figures. "...the primary focus of many of Hopper's paintings is his figures. He never ventured far from reality, and, like an illustrator, depicted subjects which could be interpreted narratively (Berkow, 1996)." One favorite of mine is *New York Movie*, 1939, at the Museum of Modern Art. The intimacy of the movie theater and the lone female usherette makes you wonder what is she thinking.

Between the Art Institute of Chicago, the Cleveland Museum of Art and the New York museums, I've viewed several of Segal's works like *Walk, Don't Walk* (Whitney Museum of American Art, 1976) where three figures are waiting to cross a busy New York street. Segal explains, "For years I've liked the idea of making an environment, by taking sculpture off the pedestal and being able to walk into it -it's a literal Cubism for me. I can walk around it and see the same thing from different points of view (Hunter, 1989)."

Like Edward Hopper and George Segal, I'm very comfortable with some version of the real world in my figurative art tinged on nostalgia. I'm satisfied with the concept of how these figures force the viewer into being a voyeur of sorts. The viewer might feel for an instant they are interrupting someone's private space and thoughts. At last a

viewer response to my work. Now after completing Contemporary Art course work, we're planning a longer return trip to New York summer of 2002.

The hallway wall of the St. Charles High School Library's facade is mostly windows like Lindenwood's Harmon Hall's gallery. This offers the viewer views of my figures from a great distance. The distance adds to the element of realism. Upon viewing the figures close up, visitors realize they've been deceived. Here again is that "inside" and "outside" world of windows like Hopper's "viewing" theme in his icon painting *Nighthawks*, 1942, The Art Institute of Chicago.

### **Figure Series**

*Library Boy* is loosely based on my high school junior son who will begin college in a year. As I scheduled this exhibition in the St. Charles High School Library due to my employment as an art teacher in the St. Charles School District, I decided to make two figures, *Library Boy* and *Girl with Green Backpack*, truly site specific. I plan to leave them here in the library on loan after this show is concluded. These figures interplay with each other and represent knowledge and dreams as a foundation to a productive future as students prepare for college and their life's careers. Inside *Library Boy's* sculpture are bits of my son through his posture, clothing, and dimensions which make me sentimental over this work.

A pattern by now was established with each figure and some prop from real life like George Segal's site installation vignette's of the 1970s. Yet Hanson's Superrealism of the same period is not my goal. My figures lie closer to Segal's early sterile white figures than Hanson's excruciatingly detailed version of realism. The success of the first three pieces now gave me encouragement to try more difficult poses.



*Golf Shores Revisited* is autobiographical and a self portrait. Golf Shores, Alabama is what is getting me through this long winter. Having rented a beach house there two years ago for a week, we decided to return this summer. *Golf Shores Revisited* represents total relaxation and freedom to do absolutely nothing.

With less clothing, *Golf Shores* becomes the most difficult piece thus far. Undereneath the papier mache, she is literally sculpted out of dry newspaper from head to toe to create muscle tone and bone structure. Though simple in pose, the figure represents a larger risk in construction. In both *Girl with Green Backpack* and *Golf Shores* I'm experimenting with sculpting more varieties of texture in hair and relief of facial features. Manipulating the gooey wet brown paper reminds me of working with clay, only with cruder results.

*Golf Shores* splashes some color to the series. I felt papier macheing over the swimwear would yield a nude figure. Instead, the contrast between the real swimsuit and the brown paper towel outer layer works as sun tanned skin.

I'm finding it's not unusual to build part of each sculpture, let it "freeze", then tear parts of it out or off and redo it until I'm satisfied. The papier mache is forgiving and allows me that freedom. As I have imposed a tight time line on myself on producing the work for this show, I am also working on more than one piece at a time. I'm usually spending hours on one sculpture, getting it to a point it must dry, then moving on to the next sculpture.

*Walking the Person* introduces movement to the show. Not only movement, but standing figures. The balance issue was my toughest problem to solve. *Walking the Person* literally at times became a wrestling match between myself and the figure. I was determined to construct him by myself. At times I could have used three hands to



hold and tape the form. Of all the figures, *Walking* has the biggest investment of my time.

*Walking the Person* also has more of an infrastructure than the other figures. I used 1"x1"x14" pieces of pine to create a pelvis for the walking legs and to connect the upper torso to the pelvis and hips. To stabilize the ankles, I ran a piece of scrap metal 1/2"x1/8"x12" from the foot to the shin. The biggest internal structure inside each leg is two 4"x14" cardboard tubes joined together to add sturdiness and volume to the legs.

To assist me in *Walking's* construction, I used an open doorway in my studio with a tension rod (my son's chin up bar) running horizontally under the figure's chin. I could then attach the figure to the rod for support until the papier mache "froze" the figure. This is because the figure could not stand by itself until the last phase of construction.

My last figures are interacting with each other instead of being solitary pieces. *Coffetalk* represents all the informal informational exchanges we communicate and the decisions of life that are made over a simple cup of coffee at the kitchen table.

These two sculptures were built simultaneously. They remind me of Helen Cordero's modern Pueblo *Storyteller* sculptures with the open mouth and listening companion. Everybody has a story to tell.

### **Conclusions**

Over the past three years I feel a sense of progression to my art work. *That's Life* for the moment is the pinnacle. Without a doubt it is the largest art project I've ever developed and constructed. I plan to continue to work in sculpture and on a large scale for the immediate future. I could easily add to this series of work.

I have a sense of accomplishment in developing a work style and making art objects that normal everyday people seem to react positively to. All but *Church Lady* were constructed between the time of Jan. 4-April 13, 2001. In three months time I have achieved my production goal of six figures for a total of seven for *That's Life*.

This intense focus on papier mache will definitely influence my curriculum next year with my students. We will construct human figures on a smaller scale probably in fourth or fifth grade.

In closing, *That's Life* as a whole represents some of my life, to others it sets up reflection of spirituality, knowledge, dreams, relaxation, work and everyday chores. It's simplicity is it documents something each viewer has done or felt hopefully in an effort to make a connection between the artist and viewer.

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## Slide Registry

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Home: (636) 946-4715

Work: (636) 724-4751 or 724-6632

<b>Title</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Media</b>	<b>Price</b>
1. <i>Church Lady</i>	48"x51"x32"	papier mache	NFS
2. <i>Library Boy</i>	51"x30"x36"	papier mache	\$300
3. <i>Girl with Green Backpack</i>	51"x23"x40"	papier mache	\$300
4. <i>Golf Shores Revisited</i>	32"x25"x57"	papier mache	\$300
5. <i>Walking the Person</i>	68"x32"x97"	Papier mache	\$400
6. <i>Coffeetalk</i>	50"x53"x50"	Papier mache	\$600





1. Church Lady



2. Library Boy



3. Girl with Green Backpack



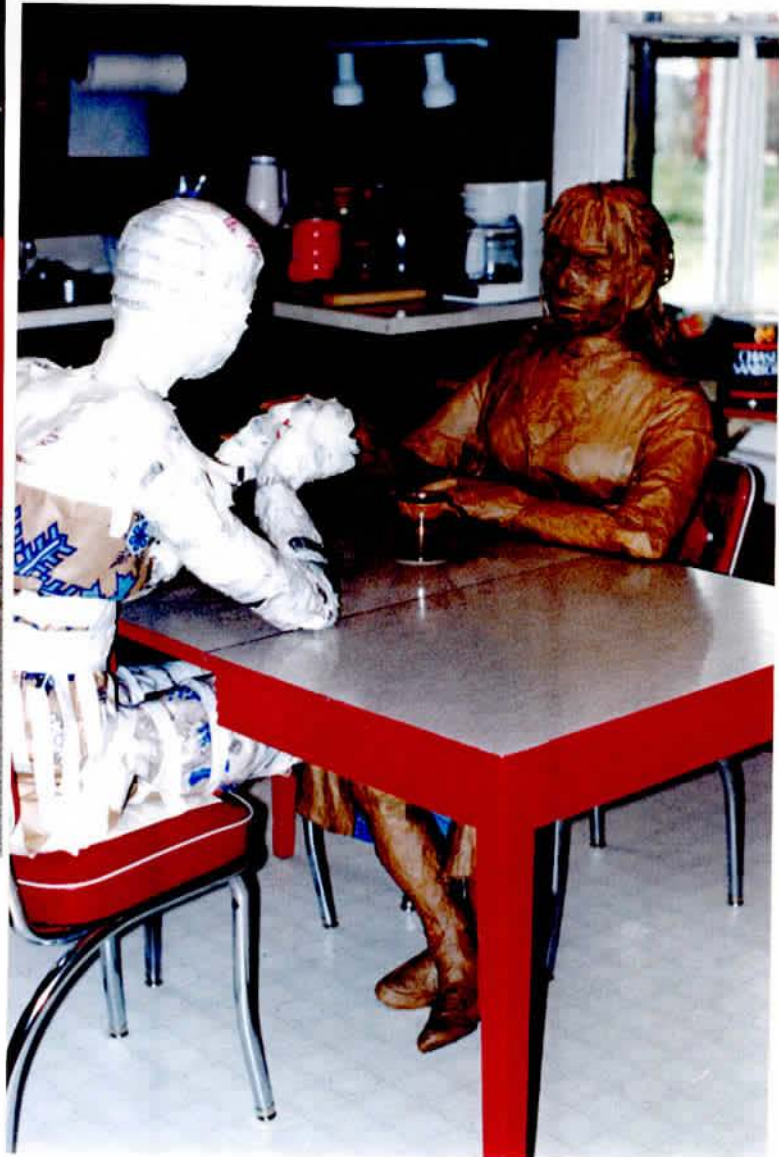
4. *Golf Shores Revisited*



5. *Walking the Person*



6. *Coffeetalk*  
(in progress)



# *That's Life*

St. Charles High School Library

May 4 , 2001

**Shelley L. Geiger**

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1. <i>Church Lady</i>	48"x51"x32"	papier mache, mixed media
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