

Living Objects

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Abstract

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During the last two years I have found new ways to develop and maintain relationships with others through my relationships with objects. Understanding the purpose of the object, the functionality, the way it exists within our world, and interacting with it to elucidate meaning outside of the traditional, functional scope that the object is originally intended is imperative to my work. The ritualistic acts of deconstruction and construction have given me the opportunity to bring tactility to intangible concepts regarding my identity within the context of my relationships. These rituals have shown me that it is much easier to comprehend the question of what it means to be human after requesting an answer from an inanimate object.

"I always say that I practice my religion precisely the way my forbearers did 50,000 years ago. I make it up as I go along." – Donna Henes (1)

September 2nd, 2015 was a particularly strange day for me. I had condensed all of my belongings to what could fit into my Mitsubishi Outlander and drove to my mother's house to say goodbye. During this visit, she performed a ritual to search for a crystal to give to me, a process that took nearly two hours. She cupped a pendulum for a brief moment, and then slowly pulled the chain of the pendulum tight so that it hovered just above the dining room table.

After she established what the pendulum does when it wants to communicate "yes" and "no", she began to hold a second crystal, and asked the pendulum if this crystal ought come with me to Washington. After going through a number of crystals with unsatisfactory results, she claimed that the pendulum simply did not want to be cooperative and moved onto an alternate method. She gave me a crystal and asked me to describe how it felt as it lay in the palm of my hand. Does it tingle? Does your hand feel warm? Often these are associated with an energy that is being emitted from the crystal, indicators that the crystal has chosen you.

As a child, I watched my mother attempt to understand and take ownership of her life through interactions with crystals, herbs, and the concentrated energy contained within these precious materials. The term "ritual" gives the implication of a religious or ceremonious event that, within the context

of my childhood, had initially seemed too fantastical a term to apply to these seemingly minor events that occurred at home. Because of this influence, it had become easy to grow into the idea that every object carries a sort of essence with it.

I grew up within a large, multifarious family consisting of a single mother and a total of eight children from three different fathers. The struggle to establish my identity mediated through these family dynamics has become a crucial part of my work. Not only has my mother's ritualistic practice deeply influenced the way I approach the art making process, but also readily available objects and materials often inform and alter the work. I am constantly searching for clarity within my relationships by exploring objects that best define them. This pursuit is often carried out through ritualistic acts of construction and deconstruction on these objects of symbolic significance. By considering such artifacts beyond their generally accepted applications, I am fascinated to discover hidden truths and histories surrounding the physical nature of the objects themselves and, through the act of storytelling, the people they can represent.

The material quality and the potential for symbolic significance are the two primary components when looking for objects. For the former, I look for objects that are generally softer in nature because they are more willing to receive the manipulations I make on them. The latter has some ambiguity. For example, some objects may have a literal connection; heirlooms serve as physical representations of relatives who have passed and they gain sentimental value

through these associations, making them a fitting representation of the actual person. However, some of these chosen objects have a loose association, a found chair or a found disco ball may not have had any direct relationship to the individuals they are bound to; however, they embody particular aspects of these people. I believe that my work, regardless of its specificity to my own experiences, opens up a path that the viewer can comprehend and relate to on their own terms.

Throughout my years as an art maker, I have found myself placing more emphasis on the metaphorical qualities that are inherently tied to the process of making work. It became apparent that each piece had begun to depend upon the story of its making (or unmaking). I found myself referring to my art making process as being ritualistic, and more often than not, private. This felt fitting: I place specific limitations on my process and each step in that process has allegorical significance to the end product. These limitations are often systematic in regards to how the object is manipulated, destroyed, and displayed; and all of these are structured through the narrative that is associated with the objects.

"From the beginning, I've been interested in the fact that a baby puts everything in its mouth in order to know it. And sometimes, through that process, destroys it" -Janine Antoni (2)

When my great-grandmother passed in 1989, her set of fine china had been given to my mother. When one of the teacups from this set was handed down to me, I was uncertain of what to do with it. I hadn't had a relationship with

my great-grandmother; she passed a couple years before I was born. My relationship to her was solely through storytelling and photographs.

In fact, much of what I heard about my great-grandmother was through my own mother, who had an obvious admiration for her. Upon receiving the teacup, I was struck by a childhood memory of walking in on my mother as she destroyed a teacup plate from the very same set. As a child, it was a rare opportunity to even see this set due to its preciousness, let alone watch as it was placed on the floor and hit with a hammer.

This set of china had been crafted so finely it practically demanded proper etiquette in its handling. Now fragmented, the painted vines weaving around the rim were broken, the handcrafted flowers shattered just as the blunt end of the hammer made contact with its brittle surface. In that moment, I had viewed it as an act of betrayal to interact with these sentimental objects in such a destructive fashion. It had taken some time before I realized that she didn't do it maliciously. Her gesture was gentle and concise. She gathered the broken remains and pieced them together, transforming the plate into a mosaic. It was her way of relieving the burden of carefulness. It no longer gathered dust in the cupboard, but was proudly displayed in the house. It was her way of honoring her grandmother, my great-grandmother. Since I did not know what to do with the teacup I had been given I decided to follow in my mother's footsteps and, in an attempt to reconnect with this lost relative, I destroyed the cup.

I wrapped the teacup in a towel and hit it with a hammer, not dissimilar to my mother's manipulation to the plate. Once I had broken it up into small fragments, they were ground using a mortar and pestle, another tool my mother has used in her work as a naturopathic healer. By grinding the teacup into rubble, I had hoped to turn it into a physical representation of my great-grandmother, who was cremated. Through the process of breaking the cup and grinding it into a powder, the cup had become more precious to me. I recognized that the ritual of grinding the cup did not help me relate to my great-grandmother; instead, it helped me appreciate her granddaughter, my mother.

Family heirlooms such as these serve as physical representations of stories and individuals that are no longer present. This particular example shows how these objects gain sentimental value through direct contact with an individual, and through these associations, these objects have become personified and immortalized. It's the logic behind celebrity memorabilia, the reason why someone would spend \$5,001 on Britney Spear's used pregnancy test, or \$523 on a jar of air that "may contain air molecules that came in direct contact with Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt." (Emphasis on "may"). (3,4)

I began to drift away from this concept of direct relational value shortly after I moved to Washington. Moving away from my family presented challenges regarding the lack of accessibility I had to specific objects. Therefore, I began to look for objects because of their human qualities that are comparable to the individuals I wanted to work with as opposed to objects that had a direct

relationship to them. Perhaps a found object would act as an equivalent of an actual object of sentimental value, as in this next piece *Anton's Chair (I Double Checked, He's Not Here Anymore)* (2016).

During my first winter in Washington, I found a charming blue velvet armchair. It was modest in its demeanor, but proud. It seemed to have embodied the qualities of my stepfather Tony, or at least my perception of him. He passed away in 2012, six weeks after we had found out about his esophagus cancer. My mother hesitated on washing his clothes and the bedding, wanting to find a way to somehow keep him in her life through these minor extensions of him. For me, I had always associated him with his chair in the living room, and after he passed I never used it because it seemed to be an extension of him.

She told me about his last few weeks, about how he was afraid. I never thought of Tony as being someone who would admit fear; he was always reliable, strong, and structured like his chair. But chairs, like humans, age. Peel back the durable layers of fabric and you find the vulnerable human qualities that inhabit them.

It was a conscious decision to take the chair apart; I had hoped to find closure after Tony's passing through the deconstruction of this chair. As I started to strip the chair, I found that the blue velvet shed like skin, tissue and metal springs that served as muscle are removed to expose a skeleton made of wood. Staples, an overwhelming number of them, held all of these parts together. These staples served as emblematic gestures; the accumulation of them building

a union between fabric and wood, held together with tenderness and care. This chair gives, as Tony gave. He gave my mother a place to rest her head and heart, and gave her children a place to rest their worries.

“You are informed by objects that are being informed by you.” –Morgan Ritter (5)

My mother has had children in her home for the bulk of her life, with her oldest being born in 1980 and youngest in 1997. She’s had a fairly crowded nest up until mid-2016 when my little brother moved out, and shortly after she was given the chance to flee small-town Minnesota to move in with her best friend. This meant quitting her job, packing up her car, and making the drive to North Carolina. It wasn’t so surprising that those plans fell through, however. What was unexpected was the determination she had to leave despite not having a place to go. My mother left Minnesota in September of 2016, just a year after I did, and began to drift along the east coast for nearly five months.

During that time, my understanding of our relationship shifted. Of course she will forever remain my mother though I am no longer dependent on her, but I have little knowledge of her outside of that maternal scope. There has been no literal transformation of her character; merely my perception of her has changed.

I attempted to grasp her motivations through the deconstruction of a disco ball, in a work titled *The World Post-Disco (2016)*. This object is not directly connected to her; rather, it’s symbolic in nature, an icon of my mother’s youth. The mirror portrays her public self; her personality is fluid and often a reflection of

others. As I pried away each individual square of mirror, I was confronted with the unique construction of this disco ball. This particular object was handmade, the bits of mirror cemented onto the exterior of a Japanese world globe. The surface of the globe began to tear away in my hurried attempt to see this entire world that surrounds my mother. This destructive gesture left me with a fragmented map, a mosaic made of mirror, and a ball attached to a chain.

As I incorporate these rituals into my work, I am drawn to Swiss healer Emma Kunz. Kunz considered herself less an artist, and more so a researcher. She made numerous abstracted drawings that acted as instruments within her healing practice. She would place a drawing on the floor between herself and her patient, using a pendulum and the drawing to find the patient's lifeline, enabling Kunz with answers regarding the patient's past and future. "Apart from their aesthetic value, her pictures reach far beyond the concept of art to express her work as a researcher and healer. The pictures are records of her inspirations and her quest to understand relationships of great complexity through consciousness and thought." (6) The importance of the relationship Kunz had with her patient through the pendulum and her drawings is awe-inspiring. Kunz and her practice has always been a bit ambiguous in nature, but it's apparent that this practice assisted Kunz in developing an understanding of her patient's ailments and how to cure them. The ability to have such an introspective experience through this abstracted ritualistic event supports the view that the disco ball is not solely a study in material form, but also evidence of a thought process.

This physical manifestation of a thought process is what pushes me towards more established ritualistic practices such as Voodoo. This is an instance of doll craft and manipulation. In Voodoo, the dolls serve as conduits, effigies that bear a resemblance to specific individuals, specifically those that are significant to the practitioner, including the practitioner him/herself. A doll can be made out of any material and is bound to a person because some detached part of that person is sewn into the doll (fingernail clippings, hair, tooth, etc.).

Once the doll has been made and bound to an individual, then the practitioner may interact with the doll. If the doll is left alone for a period of time, its powers become dormant. Thus, there is an underlying emphasis placed upon the continued interaction between practitioner and doll.

Within this practice, pins serve as gestures of intent; they are color coordinated to assist the ritual's objective (e.g. white pins can represent healing and positivity). Though the use of the pins in the ritual appears to be a destructive gesture, it acts as a passive request rather than an aggressive demand. Often, the ritualistic use of pins helps the practitioner resolve internal conflicts rather than external ones, giving a sense of control to those who feel powerless. It is about visualization, attempting to put things in motion through the pin while picturing the desired outcome.

In relation to my work, voodoo dolls have become increasingly significant to me due to their remarkable similarities to my current artistic process. The emphasis that's placed upon the relationship between human and object is

something I have consistently considered within the art making process. As I've discussed earlier, the practice is malleable and can be altered to suit many different contexts. This is significant to my work as it gives me the freedom to modify the ritual based on the symbolic significance of the materials used.

As I've been doing research on Voodoo I have found that the "doll" that is an integral part of this practice isn't necessarily all that specific. Sometimes the use of the doll is to target specific parts of the human body; for example, if a patient had a broken arm, it would be easier and potentially more effective to use a figurine that had an armature similar to that of a human. However, I'd like to make the argument that other objects can also serve this function of the doll and still be equally as effective. Many objects have references to the human form even if they don't blatantly suggest them. A chair can have arms, a table has legs, and shoes have tongues. These objects serve as symbolic associations rather than literal ones, and through my projections these objects gain personal value.

My use of Voodoo incorporates these loose associations, and often these associations are not necessarily tied to the individuals but to the stories affiliated with them. The primary end of this Voodoo work is to confront my perceptions of my own identity within the context of my interpersonal relationships. Even if a person is involved through the story associated with the object they are never the intended targets of these rituals.

I have merged this ritual in my own art making practice, through projection as opposed to direct relationships made between person and object. For example, a past lover had once told me that I would often speak with negative undertones. This remark had been a contributing factor to one of my Voodoo pieces. In *Chew* (2017) I had taken a long strip of Hubba Bubba Bubblegum and tore it into two segments. I began to chew on the first half while inserting white pins into the second. By inserting these white pins into the second segment of the gum, I had hoped to channel positivity through the gum in my hands to the gum in my mouth, altering my use of language. In our time together, this past lover had consistently chewed bubblegum and I had established a link between him, bubble gum, and positive language. The act of working with the white pins and the bubble gum served as an acknowledgment of my shortcomings and the conscious decision to change them.

The incorporation of dolls within the context of ritual and art making is not a new concept. It can be argued that prehistoric sculptures such as the Venus of Willendorf created around 25,000BCE (7) and the Venus of Hohle Fels from 40,000BCE (8) are both examples of objects used in ritualistic context. Both of these sculptures have been interpreted as being fetishized objects for a type of ritual, potentially with fertility and reproductive wishes in mind, which would explain why they are described as fertility goddesses (hence the name, Venus of _____). (7, 8, 9)

Often the figure has exaggerated features: larger breasts or buttocks, with

legs that taper down to a point, with small or even nonexistent feet. If the figure has a head, it's usually smaller and lacks facial features. They aren't realistic; rather, they are, as Jane Ellen Harrison described in her book *Ancient Art and Ritual* "painted prayers" and "sculptured prayers" (10). They are wishes that have been defined through a specific medium.

I find these figures to be of particular interest to my most recent body of work. I began to develop a mythology, a pantheon consisting of mythological creatures. Starting off as found objects, stuffed animals and decorative figurines, they are manipulated with similarly destructive gestures that reference the influence of my mother and my own Voodoo practice (pinwork, binding, visualization, etc.).

This act transforms stories from my upbringing into immortalized myths; these creatures are created through the stories associated with their material and symbolic nature. Stories that have been reduced down to emotions are transferred onto these objects. These emotions are introduced to these creatures as a direct result of my manipulations, giving them an essence similar in nature to the essence imbued in the crystals from my mother.

In their simplest form, these creatures signify the peculiar themes derived from childhood stories where I had gained a new understanding of the world. This development of myth displays the surreal nature of our memories; the stories we share of our childhoods and how we came to be are easily distorted and manipulated to stand in for the lessons we've learned.

These creatures, collectively titled *Pantheon: A Never Union (2017)* have been infused with emotions such as desire, affection, tenderness, and fear. All of which have, at some point, controlled my life. By placing the burden of these emotions onto an object, I have shifted the weight of the relationship, giving the creatures a power over me that is almost godlike in nature.

The influence of objects, their associations, and the limitations that are inherent within them brings me to find another artist, Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work so intriguing. In his piece *Untitled (Perfect Lovers) (11)* Felix takes two identical clocks and arranges them on the wall side by side. These clocks have been set to the same exact time. Over time, the clocks fall out of sync due to the limitations of the batteries placed within them. With the implication that these clocks are "lovers", the inevitable becomes known through the limitations of the medium: batteries die, clocks stop ticking, relationships end.

During the last two years I have found new ways to develop and maintain relationships with others through my relationships with objects. Understanding the purpose of the object, the functionality, the way it exists within our world, and interacting with it to elucidate meaning outside of the traditional, functional scope that the object is originally intended is imperative to my work. The ritualistic acts of deconstruction and construction have given me the opportunity to bring tactility to intangible concepts regarding my identity within the context of my relationships. These rituals have shown me that it is much easier to comprehend the question of what it means to be human after requesting an answer from an

inanimate object.

Gabriella Aguilar

Image List

Title: *Nana's Teacup*
Medium: Ground teacup
Year: 2015



Title: *Anton's Chair (I Double Checked, He's Not Here Anymore)*
Medium: Deconstructed chair
Year: 2016



Title: *The World Post-Disco*
Medium: Deconstructed disco ball
Year: 2016





Title: *Chew*
Medium: Hubba Bubba bubble gum, pins
Year: 2017



Title: *Pantheon: A Never Union*
Medium: Mixed Media
Year: 2017

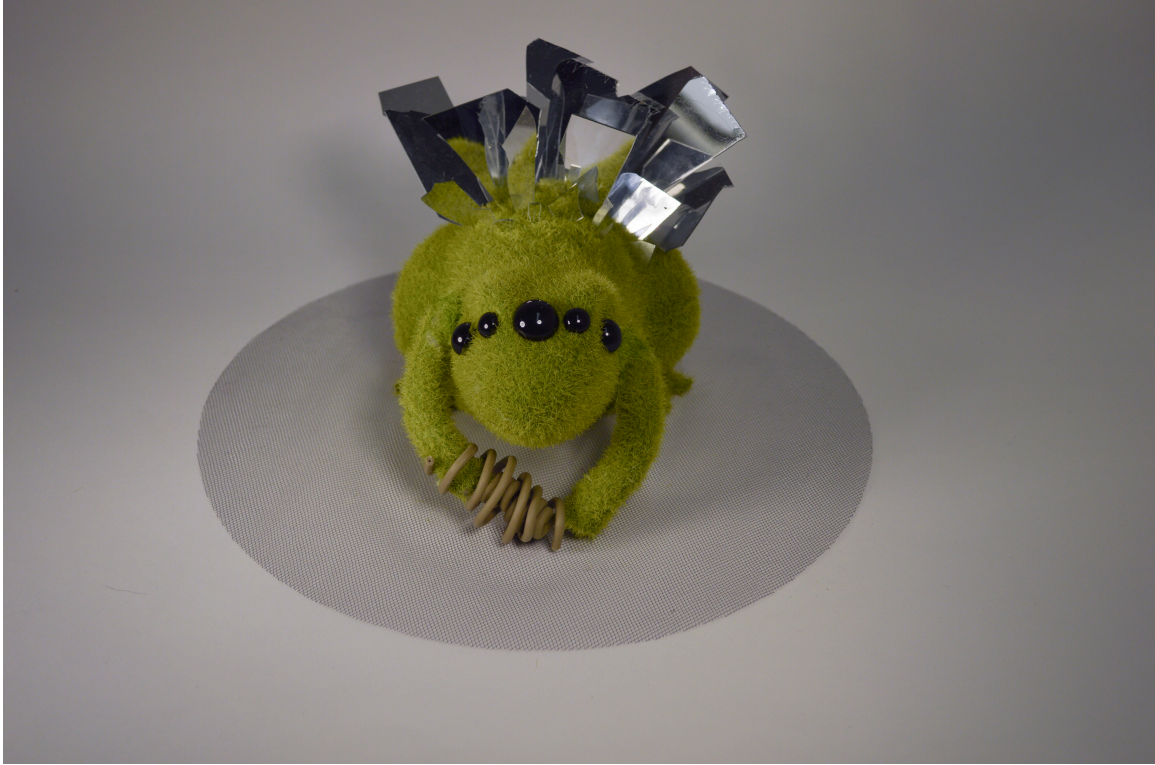




Pantheon: A Never Union (Creature shot)



Pantheon: A Never Union (Creature shot)



Pantheon: A Never Union (Creature shot)

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