

Making Time, Finding Space & Building Self

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Abstract

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3D4M: ceramics + glass + sculpture

In order to understand the current moment, I have been researching and dissecting our collective human history along with my personal experiences. The former gives clarity to what makes us, us. The latter provides me with *qualifications* to take on a subject. In this thesis I will make a case that craft, mastery and working with one's hands has greater implications on the development of individuals and societies beyond skill obtainment and the objects produced. I will argue that through the act of making in the physical world morality and character are developed. I will present a case that physical interaction with materials and the use of one's hands develops cognitive abilities that no other type of learning can foster. The art works presented in this paper will touch on topics of memory, personal and collective histories, past and future loss, and questions our individual and societal identities.

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Introduction

The Problem with Explicitly

Words try to make the implicit explicit. They attempt to universally describe, define and explain concepts that many times need to be felt or experienced. Writing about tacit knowledge and skilled craftsmanship developed through an art practice adds an additional layer of complexity. In the age of big data and mass consumption we have started to move faster and faster as a species. There has been a social shift away from what the hands can accomplish, giving primacy to the mind over body. The focus in our American society is now on formal, explicit teaching, making it more important to be able to explain a process rather than being able to carry it out. This idea of codifying all subject matter using language has killed the transfer of tacit knowledge. The study of philosophy is a prime example of the issues that occur with language. Once a theory is written down, we are able to pick apart its shortcomings and dig into every word in order to rebut a given theory. It is easy to completely miss the spirit of what the philosopher is trying to express. Many times, groupings of words destroy the most important parts of the essence of what is being defined. Art is implicit, it is nuanced, it is all the intangible elements that occupy tangible objects. As we write about things that words fail to describe there will be loss. Visual art attempts to make the implicit experiential. Writing about artwork is often like seeing a film version of your favorite novel. It is obvious that it is not the story's intended format.

Mapping Language: A Guide to Reading This Text

I have found it paradoxical to use words and images to communicate about my visual work. This paper can only act as a signpost, pointing in the direction of my intentions, but it is not meant to

“explain” my work. My explanations are in the gallery, my clarifications are the visual, my language is the material, and my expression are the marks made through the act of making. Carl Jung tells us that, “[words] are signs, and they do no more than denote the objects to which they attach.” I have selected a career as a sculptor in order to better understand reality through the creation of objects. Jung continues to explain in *Man and his Symbols*, “Because there are innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding, we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts we cannot define or fully comprehend.”¹ Making sculpture and installation work exploits the phenomenon of emergence.² The combination of materials, light, sound, and their occupancy of physical reality is vital for the viewer to experience.³ An image can only show a superficial surface of what a sculpture does. I do believe that words and images are pragmatic, but my goal is to insist that people physically engage with stuff. The material, the real, the tangible.

As the reader moves down the following pages, I have inserted images to help to bridge the gap that language creates. I have included additional pieces of writing that can be referenced throughout the reading of this paper or read as supplemental works. The images have been embedded in the text while the additional forms of writing will be found in the appendix. My intention is to offer these less direct and more poetic words to bring some of the *implicit* back into the very explicit document.

¹ Jung, C G, and Marie-Luise . Franz. *Man and His Symbols*. New York: Dell Pub. Co, 1964.

² In philosophy, systems theory, science, and art, emergence occurs when an entity is observed to have properties its parts do not have on their own. These properties or behaviors emerge only when the parts interact in a wider whole.

³ Experiencing being defined as: practical contact with and observation of facts or events.

Gathering Thoughts

This is Not a Self-Portrait

In this thesis I will address my practice and the importance of craft and making. I will also dive into the conceptual themes of my work. I would like to directly point out here at the beginning that I am not making work about my life. I am making work *informed* by my life and experiences. I research topics that are relevant to unpacking my past and for navigating the future. Not everything I research or experience needs to make it into my work or be communicated to the viewer, but the research must be done for me to be productive in the studio. Some ideas become subject matter for the works created, and others inform my process and guiding principles. When I use words like memory or identity it is not anecdotal but general. When using the pronouns, we/ us/ our I am referring to humans, and in some instance specifically Americans. The focus on U.S. culture is not because I believe the United States has the most important story to tell, but it is however my story. I can only reflect upon American culture because it is all I have ever known.

The topics I address are ones with which I have a close personal history. I am not in the business of attempting to communicate things I have not lived. In *Antifragile* Nassim Nicholas Taleb opens his prologue by informing the reader that he “writes with his scars.” He states, “I eat my own cooking...if I am wrong, I will be the first hurt by my ideas.”⁴ Taleb’s writing has been extremely impactful on the way I understand the world. He employs scientific and mathematical methods, covers psychology, aesthetics, business, economics, and even gives practical advice on how to be “robust.” His writing balances technical language and anecdotal story telling. His overarching

⁴ Antifragile

topic is the tremendous impact of rare and unpredictable outlier events. Much of the focus is illuminating the way humans find retrospective, simplistic explanations for these events. Despite covering many subjects and writing five books, Taleb refers to his work as “one single idea.” He is refreshingly honest about how he is making his points. In *The Black Swan*⁵ he writes,

There is a contradiction; this book is a story, and I prefer to use stories and vignettes to illustrate our gullibility about stories and our preference for the dangerous compression of narratives.... You need a story to displace a story. Metaphors and stories are far more potent (alas) than ideas; they are also easier to remember and more fun to read.

The range of subjects covered in this paper is not driven by a lack of focus, but rather the need to understand topics in a holistic way. My approach is foundational and at a minimum requires a broad understanding of many intersecting topics. What I am truly interested in is the nexus of larger ideas and how they relate to one another. Our personal and collective histories are the general starting point for my work, but even a start date for these histories is hard to define.

Selecting a Start Date for History

A major inquiry of my current investigation is understanding the place and function of humans in the greater context of the world. Studying the emerging field of “Big History” has been clarifying for me as I attempt to dissect and understand humanity and its recurring problems along with the new concerns of the Anthropocene. Through big history I have been grappling with the idea of history being everything. Many of us look at human history as all the stuff that has happened since we started writing things down, but truly this is just an arbitrary human selection. If we assume the universe is 13.8 billion years old, then humans eventually developed from the ashes of the big

⁵ Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. Penguin Books, 2007.

bang.⁶ Since humans are the same matter that was formed 13.8 billion years ago then is that not the start of our history? By recontextualizing our lineage in this way much broader inquiries in the story of the universe can be explored. In zooming way out to see the big picture, new questions can be asked or answered. While some resolution is lost, this multidisciplinary approach is helpful in finding moments of alignment to discover things that the compartmentalization of knowledge has missed.

The work in (Figure 1) was made by scanning fossils from the Burke Museum of Natural History⁷, 3D printing the scans and then casting them in bronze. These tiny fossils came from some of the earliest mammals on earth and help tell the story of warm blooded, land dwelling life alongside the huge reptiles of the



Figure 1: *Jurassic Era Mammal Jaws* (2018)

time. As geological time passed mammals gave rise to homo sapiens.

⁶ The first law of thermodynamics is that matter and energy cannot be created or destroyed

⁷ These castings will be used as touchables in the Jurassic exhibition of the new Burke Museum opening fall of 2019.

My interest in the rise of homo sapiens typically doesn't result in works related to hard sciences (the above work being an exception) but is pivotal to my understanding of how and why humans have arrived at such a precarious point in history. This desire to understand humanity can be illustrated through the Thomas Hobbes v Jean-Jacques Rousseau debate. Each of these philosophers viewed the onset of agriculture as a major moment that would shape our morality and our human identity. With the same set of information, they reached radically different conclusions. Hobbes is famously quoted as saying, "No art, no letter, no society, and which is worst of all continual fear and danger of violent death and the life of men, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Rousseau on the other hand had this to say,

The first person, who having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say, "this is mine" and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared, had someone pulled up the stakes or filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: do not listen to this imposter, you are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all, and the earth to no one.

In 1820 the ratio of impoverished to wealthy countries was 3 to 1, today it is closer to 7 to 1. Is developed society synonymous with progress? Is inequality a fair price to pay for technological advancement? How we interpret the lives of early human foragers largely determines our view of history and the fundamental nature of the human character. Is humanity fundamentally good and corrupted by technology and modern social orders, or are we fundamentally flawed and in need of some sort of structure and authority?

With the onset of cities and villages we erected shelters that needed to be filled with functional things for human use. At a very basic level we interact with furniture in all aspects of our lives, particularly chairs. They are in our homes, offices, studios and schools. They are also in our trains,

cars, planes and shopping carts. They are at bus stops, waiting rooms and public parks. We miss them immediately when we go camping or when we don't have enough for everyone. The need for a chair is something that makes us all human. Other furniture can act in similar ways. If we build a dwelling on this earth we tend to fill it with furniture. This represents collective learning and invention, it can represent craft, art and making. Furniture can be ornate or simple, but its function remains the same no matter how gilded or plain it is. It seems to encompass everything that went wrong with human nature (inequality rises with organized societies)⁸ and at the same time everything that is beautiful (invention, craft, creating spaces to live and work together). Furniture is the physical representation of Hobbes v Rousseau manifest through the use of domestic objects. Particular types of furniture can represent particular aspects of the human

experience. A rocking chair can be an analogy for motherhood, childhood or old age. A table can be a place of gathering, of familial connection, or a place where power structures are played out, such as a boardroom. (Figure 2)

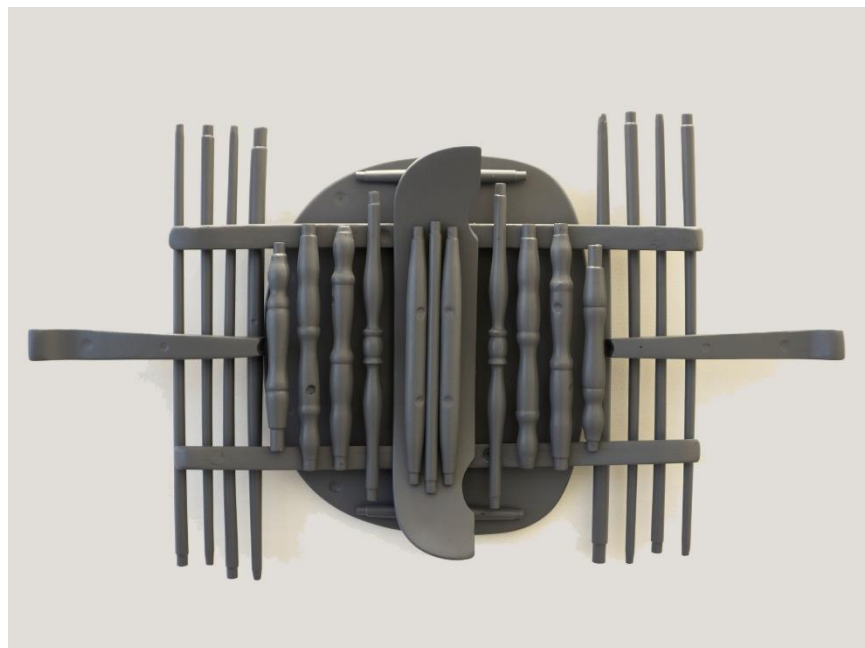


Figure 2: *Portrait Series- Chair No. 1* (2019)

consists of one disassembled rocking chair. Titled, *Portrait Series- Chair No. 1*, this piece is one of four rearranged chairs. Each

⁸ Much of this generalized understanding of “big history” is influenced by the writings of Daniel Lord Smail in *On Deep History and the Brain* and from Yuval Harari’s *Sapiens*.

is meant to stand in for the image of the person that once occupied their seats and as a group creates a series of pseudo family photos.

Sourcing Materials

Creating Raw Material

The use of dwellings and the subsequent invention of furniture tells the story of modernity. As we developed so did our furnishings and with this our consumption of the natural world increased. Our use of raw materials became vast and sophisticated and soon our inventions and trappings began to fill a new human invention, the landfill. In my work *Fully Furnished*⁹ (Figure 3) I reroute discarded furniture from the landfill to gallery. In carefully disassembling various tables, chairs, beds, and cribs I transformed them back into raw materials (Figure 4 & 5). What was once finished and complete, then used and loved, broken and repaired, and finally discarded became piles of new potential. The dismantled pieces were organized, categorized and then reassembled to create one monolithic artwork.

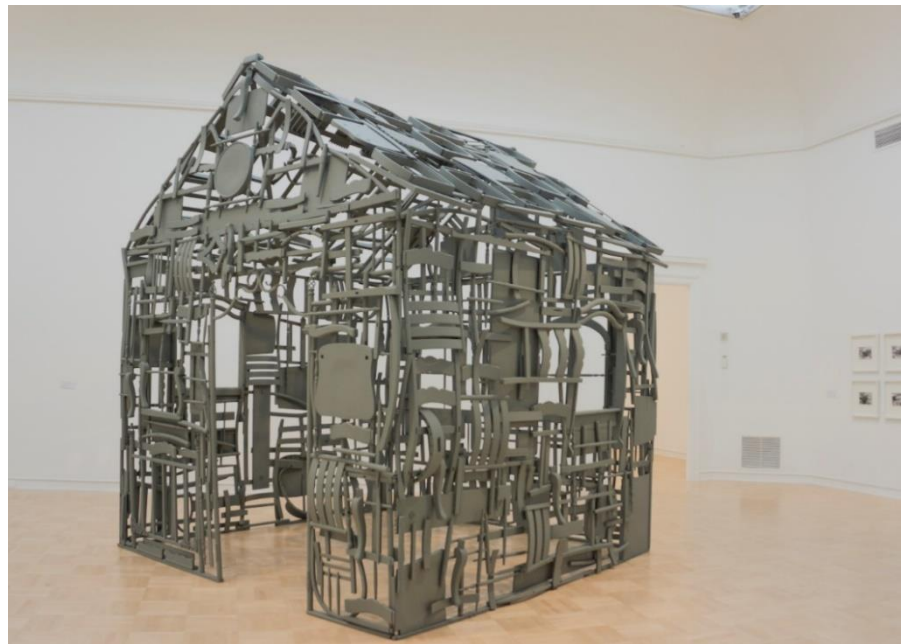


Figure 3: *Fully Furnished* (2019)

⁹ View of the work on display at the Henry Art Gallery. This work will ultimately be installed outdoors.



Figure 4: Buckets of chair legs and seat backs



Figure 5: Piles of furniture turned into “raw materials”

My use of the *discarded* stems from a desire to collect and reassemble the past memories of various types of homes. Each piece of furniture was obtained for free mainly by using Craigslist¹⁰ (Figure 6). While collecting I gathered things from large, lavish houses to rundown tiny apartments, prisons, public houses and neighborhoods from all socioeconomic demographics. As U.S. consumers, we fill our lives with furnishings and the quality and aesthetics of these objects tend to reflect incomes and preferences. Our furnishings reflect and record us. The dismantling of these objects, with their seats, arms, legs and backs began to feel like the pulling apart of the person that once owned them. As I was collecting, I was told stories

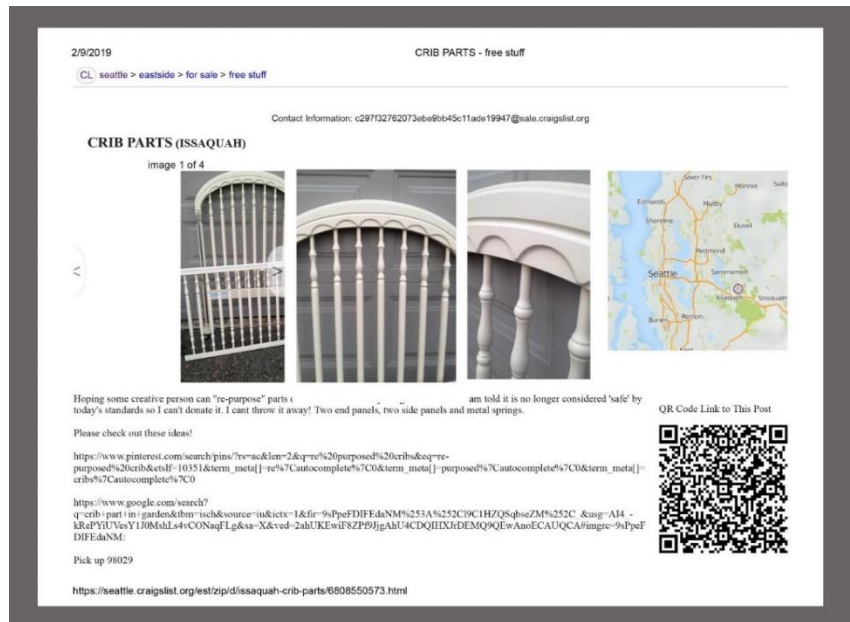


Figure 6: An example of a Craigslist ad used to gather free furnishings

¹⁰ About 90% of the furniture in *Fully Furnished* was sourced from Craigslist. The other 10% came from friends, my own home and one chair was a mystery donation left in my studio.

of people raising children, moving homes, and rearranging their lives through furnishings. I began to sympathize with the maker of the objects, with the care, or lack of care, put into the construction of items made for heavy use. These chairs and beds were loved, intimate objects until they were abandoned long before the end of their useable life. In this case the *means* justifies our *end*. The need for new furniture and the lack of need for the old will only contribute to environmental collapse, but furniture's disposability seems such a necessity. A crib, a highchair, a rocker, a marriage bed, a hospital bed. We have made a case that we need each of these in order to live well. Part of what I am questioning in this work is how we will continue as a species with this need for consumption. We leave an imprint on our furniture and our furniture leaves an imprint on our planet.

Using the Leftovers

I am heavily interested in process, and as expressed above, the history of the materials being used.¹¹ I enjoy embracing the puzzle of what something has the potential of becoming by analyzing what something once *was* and what it once *meant*. There is so much beauty in the byproducts of process and the marks left through messy processes.

¹¹ When asked what I do I tend to reply, "I make stuff." This can seem passive or superficial, but I believe it states something important about my work. My artist statement, which can be found in Appendix A, speaks to this identification as a maker.

Collected Remnants- 9 Samples (Figure 7)¹² displays collections of “leftovers” from my studio to archive parts of processes that would normally be throw away. Each glass vessel holds a memory of a past work, a



Figure 7: *Collected Remnants- 9 Samples* (2019)

remnant of a process now mastered. Similarly, in *Quilted* (Figure 8) the process of making was recorded, and additional life was squeezed from studio waste. The work is constructed with pine tiles made from discarded tabletops and finished with various stains from past projects. The other half of the tiles are clay pressings of used sand molds (originally used to cast a rocking chair and a rag rug¹³) and finished with India ink. I was interested in capturing the record of the mold, of the negative space that is cast aside when the casting process is complete.¹⁴ The finished piece is the approximate size of a twin bed in order to references the marks of childhood. The patchwork

¹² Glass vessels containing biproducts from various projects including stained shop rags, aluminum castings coated in beeswax, plant matter coated in foundry wax, metal scraps from quilting, one 3D print of a scanned Formation, Bronze spills, the dry materials to make a single red brick, aluminum dust from cutting ingots, pieces of sand molds and other foundry leftovers

¹³ The Rug and Chair referenced are included later in this paper. See figures 17 & 18

¹⁴ The molds referenced here are *piece molds* which use a *resin* to bind together sand in sections around a *positive*. The pieces are then taken apart and the positive *pattern* is removed from the mold and the pieces reassembled. The caster is then left with a void to fill with molten metal. After the metal is poured the sand is removed from the fresh casting and thrown away. Many times, the molds are left with the impression of the object being made but are no longer able to hold up to the heat of a second pour, making the sand unusable for future casting processes.

pattern is meant to reiterate the idea of pulling together scraps to assemble something new, in this case a protective covering.¹⁵



Figure 8: *Quilted* (2019)

Making Time

Craftsmanship

Thus far this paper has skirted around what I will call *craftsmanship*. Some of crafts peripheral concerns have been introduced, but it is now time to dive into the topic. In developing my own definition of craft and craftsmanship I draw heavily on the writings of Matthew Crawford, Richard Sennett, David Pye, Walter Benjamin, Christopher Frayling, John Ruskin, Robert Morris, Robert Pirsig, and Alexander Langlands. Langlands attempts to define craft in his book titled *Cræft*, which references the original appearance of what we have come to call craft derived from Old English. In his preface he begins,

¹⁵ In Appendix B the reader will find a poem about the impressions and marks of childhood that are insidious to who we become as adults. Additionally, Appendix C includes a writing about processing these impressions as an adult.

Sir Christopher Frayling echoed the sentiments of David Pye, in *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, when he called craft, “a word to start and argument with”...craft has become so ubiquitous that it’s increasingly difficult to state with any exactitude a definition precise enough to satisfy everyone...The *Oxford English Dictionary* can find no word to exchange, like for like, for Old English *cræft*, and instead offers an amalgam of ‘knowledge, power, skill’, and an extended definition where a sense of ‘wisdom’ and ‘resourcefulness’ surpass in importance the notion of ‘physical skill’.¹⁶

Like Langlands, Pye and Crawford each express this sentiment of knowledge, skill and power learned through time and making in order to develop a particular type of wisdom. Each also explores a deep need to do a job well for the sake of “doing good work.” When I speak of craft in my practice, I refer to a way of thinking and approaching the process of learning/ making, but not of one particular process. One can do just about any job with craftsmanship. Sennett has the following to say in a section of his book *The Craftsmen* where he is talking about the medical field,

In higher stages of skill, there is a constant interplay between tacit knowledge and self-consciousness, the tacit knowledge serving as an anchor, the explicit awareness serving as critique and corrective...Skill is a trained practice; modern technology is abused when it deprives its users precisely of that repetitive, concrete, hands-on training.¹⁷

In looking at the language used to define craft it is clear that making time for development is at the heart of becoming a craftsman. It takes time, dedication and the self-control to say no to many, many other things in order to become skilled at just one thing.

Repetition & Skill Building

Like Taleb, I want to” eat my own cooking.”¹⁸ I have frequently critiqued our technology loving society. In rejecting the constant use of the fast-paced digital world there is a risk being “less

¹⁶ Langlands, Alex, and Harry Brockway. *Cræft: An Inquiry into the Origins and True Meaning of Traditional Crafts*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.

¹⁷ Sennett, Richard. *The Craftsman*. Yale University Press, 2008

¹⁸ Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. Penguin Books, 2007.

connected.” If this lack of online connection is detrimental, I will be the first hurt by my ideas. There will be a loss of Facebook invitations and up to the moment news. A lack of knowing what friends and family are posting and community happenings. The processes I employ are inherently tedious and take time, training and hard-earned skill to accomplish. These ideas of slowing down don’t stop with skill mastery or techniques but are integrated my conceptual ideas.



Figure 9: *IxI* (2017)

In the project *IxI* (Figure 9¹⁹ & 10²⁰) I forced my mind and body to be fully engaged and removed from all forms of digital technology. This type of work requires a large amount of repetition, it builds a muscle-memory that is engrained into my hands and back and feet forever.

¹⁹ *IxI*: Mixed Media Installation including three video projections documenting the process of brick making (one brick at a time by hand), "one-person assembly line workstation", hand carved wooden tools and brick molds, steel buckets, water vessel, 189 sand-struck bricks. A giant lazy Susan was built to produce standard struck, red, queen size bricks. All the dry clay and sand materials were mixed by hand and fired at various temperatures for color variation.

²⁰ The tools and workstation are pictured here as they were installed in the gallery. The viewer was encouraged to handle the bricks and the tools and well as use the handles on the tabletop to turn the entire assembly.

Repetitive projects imprint the smell of the material and sounds of construction in my mind, forever. Not only are my skills and knowledge transferable to other similar processes and materials, there is also an intuition that is formed through manual work. One gains an understanding of the physical, hones an ability to make basic assumptions about how a tool or a material can or cannot be used. Each project builds keen problem-solving skills for the next set of tasks.



Figure 10: *1x1* Detail (2017)

Skill building requires failure in order to learn and move forward. Mistakes are not efficient, but they are the most effective and potent type of learning. Failure is humbling and helps build compassion in one's character. Knowing failure is key to compassion. Working hard to accomplish something difficult makes it easier to relate to the struggles of others. Throwing out an entire piece

and having to deal with its physical disposal because of your own errors is not the same as pressing a reset button or clicking a back arrow. Pye contrasts work done with uncertainty with that of automation. He defines *workmanship of risk* as “workmanship using any kind of technique or apparatus, in which the quality of the result is not predetermined, but depends on the judgment, dexterity and care which the maker exercises as he works.”²¹

Wroughting

Over the past century our education system has been obsessed with the 3 R’s, which at present refer to reading writing and arithmetic.²² We have fashioned our education systems on these three pillars, many of us believing that this way of teaching dates to the Enlightenment. But if we take a moment to investigate where this idea originates, we will find that it evolved from a similar expression commonly used in the eighteenth century. The three Rs were then considered to be “reading, reckoning and wroughting.” Reading encompasses the use of language therefore covering writing, reckoning a term for mental arithmetic, and wroughting was the word used for making things. By the 1850s, in the era of the Great Exhibition, wroughting was dropped for writing.²³

In his TED Talk, Sir Ken Robinson proposes that our current education system is killing creativity when it is most vitally needed in society. “Creativity now is as important in education as literacy,

²¹ Pye, David. *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*. The Herbert Press, 1968.

²² We are now shifting into STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), which accounts for our shifts in technology, but is still based on our assumptions that reading, writing and arithmetic are the most important aspects of learning.

²³ Frayling, Christopher. *On Craftsmanship*. Oberon Books LTD, 2011.

and we should treat it with the same status”, says Robinson. “The whole system of public education around the world is a protracted process of university entrance. And the consequence is that many highly talented, brilliant, creative people think they’re not, because the thing they were good at at school wasn’t valued or was actually stigmatized.”²⁴ The issue of removing wroughting from education reflects our cultural values. It is causing the death of the craftsmen and the loss of the values that craft instills.

Slowing Down

For 250,000 years hunter-gatherer society changed and developed very, very slowly. There was much time for reflection and we slowly adapted to our environment. Now things change quickly, and our attention is endlessly directed to something new. We don’t reflect, but we push ahead without understanding the ramifications of our actions. We now adapt our environment instead of ourselves. Humans still have many of the same issues that were present during the onset of agriculture, namely resorting to war. Instead of using new understandings to end conflict and create equity, we build bombs and attack each other through social media.

Much of our technology is used to fix the problems that earlier technology created, but we still push ahead with new, unpredictable applications and programs.²⁵ How will new ways of working change humanity? What does it say about humans that we seem to want to make every task as easy as possible? In removing life’s day to day challenges, we have created a world where we need to

²⁴ Robinson, K. (2006, February). Ken Robinson: How school kills creativity [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html

²⁵ Alter, Adam L. *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*. Penguin Books, 2018.

simulate the challenges that have been eliminated or replaced. For example, because many of us don't use our physical strength regularly we end up in gyms creating fake challenges to preserve our bodies. We don't have to use our memories in the same way either. We can store data digitally, meaning we no longer need to memorize or pass down information orally. This changes our relationships with each other and erodes our memories. We tend to think there is always tomorrow, always someplace else, that there will always be more to take. Scientists from varying backgrounds have started talking about terraforming Mars as a place for future humans, and no longer just as science fiction. Astronomer Lucianne Walkowicz voices a different sentiment. She urges taking care and crafting a better earth as she explains why Mars should not be a backup planet. If we can terraform Mars, build led walls to protect ourselves from radiation, and recycle urine in order to make Mars a feasible place for humans to survive, it seems that we should be able to figure out the "far smaller task of keeping our planet alive".²⁶ We have here, on our home planet, fresh air and water, the proper food, and an ecosystem which we have evolved with for over 250,000 years. If our scientists tell us we have the ability to live on Mars within our grasps, we should be able to utilize those same abilities to keep the Earth habitable.

Making things by hand slows us down, this is true. But allowing efficiency to take primacy over quality and care is a major cause of the mess we humans find ourselves in. In all we can do we still don't even understand consciousness. Yuval Harari suggests in *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* that we should spend one minute, and one dollar focused on understanding human consciousness for every dollar and minute spent developing new technologies so that we might program our

²⁶ Walkowicz, L. (2015). Lucianne Walkowicz: Let's Not Use Mars as a Backup Planet [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/lucianne_walkowicz_let_s_not_use_mars_as_a_backup_planet?language=en

values into the world of tomorrow.²⁷ Tim Harford recommended slow motion multitasking from the TED stage in order to let ideas influence each other and to see a bigger picture.²⁸ The idea is to work on several projects simultaneously across disciplines in order to avoid the pitfalls of compartmentalization. Jaron Lanier, the inventor of the term *Artificial Intelligence*, is campaigning for remaking the internet. As an early arriver in Silicon Valley he has seen marketing take over what was intended to be a way to share ideas and information. He is now trying to explain to the general public how large corporations' value our personal data above gold and we are just giving it away for free.²⁹ There is no bigdata to collect from the slow process of learning and making with one's hands. It appears to me that the idealistic craftsmen may actually have the antidote to solving some of our current issues.

The subject matter of my work and my approach to my studio practice is guided by these ideas of slowing down and taking care today of what we want to have tomorrow. In my work *Seating for Several* (Figure 11) I made a space for the viewer to sit and reflect. Two options are presented in this work. Once seated the viewer has the option to sit with their back facing the



Figure 11: *Seating for Several* (2019)

²⁷ Harari, Yuval Noah. 21 Lessons for the 21st Century. Spiegel & Grau, 2018.

²⁸ Harford, T. (2019, January). Tim Harford: A Powerful Way to Unleash Your Natural Creativity [Video file] Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/tim_harford_a_powerful_way_to_unleash_your_natural_creativity?language=en

²⁹ Lanier, Jaron. Who Owns the Future? Penguin Books, 2014.

others on the bench or to turn into the hexagon and look across at those sitting with them. There is an effort required to swing your feet around. In doing this you can connect. You also realize that your presence creates a sacrifice. Your image cuts away part of the projection of a following river. This is meant to remind us that we leave a mark on the natural world. The action of either engaging others or literally turning your back on them is a choice whether the decision is made actively or passively.

My work is not activism. While I hold beliefs about what we should and shouldn't do with the planet, these are under currents running in the work and I never explicitly provide my opinion to the viewer. I want to make reflections, reflections of our current moment and of ourselves. In this way I hope that we can confront and consider them together. Over 40 years ago Robert Pirsig wrote about manual works ability to have this effect:

I think that if we are going to reform the world, and make it a better place to live in, the way to do it is not with talk about relationships of a political nature, which are inevitably dualistic, full of subjects and objects and their relationship to one another; or with programs full of things for other people to do. I think that kind of approach starts it at the end and presumes that the end is the beginning. Programs of a political nature are important *end products* of social quality that can be effective only if the underlying structure of social values is right. The social values are right only if the individual values are right. The place to improve the world is first in one's own heart and head and hands, and then work outward from there. Other people can talk about how to expand the destiny of mankind. I just want to talk about how to fix a motorcycle. I think what I have to say has more lasting value.³⁰

³⁰ Pirsig, Robert M. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*. HarperTorch, 1974.

Building Foundations

Identity Development

For the past five years the overarching, most general theme of my work has been identity development. This study of identity is filtered through two major lenses, the universal/ collective and the personal/intimate. My work often provides the viewer with some



Figure 12: F is For Foundation (2018)

unknown memory, aftermath, or didactical presentation of pseudo artifacts or dream like spaces.



Figure 13: Viewers presence blocking river projection

In my piece *F is for Foundation* (Figure 12) I utilize my handmade bricks to build a foundation and again use a projection of a river³¹ in which the viewers entrance into the work cut away at the water (Figure 13). As I laid this physical foundation, I thought about what a person's foundation is made of. What

do we rest all other things about ourselves upon? This is a question I am still exploring. Appendix D includes an essay that was read as a performance while standing within this “foundation.”

³¹ Footage from the Mississippi River filmed under the Stone Arch Bridge in Minneapolis, MN

I stated early on that my work is not a self-portrait or my particular story. It reflects a generalized experience of lower middleclass, middle American. In my piece *Residual* (Figure 14) I explored the childhood bedroom. The work is the pairing of four labor intensive pieces, each handcrafted and made without fabricators. Installed in a small room that could be the size of a child's bedroom or a jail cell, the work explores the imprints of childhood that shape who we become. Themes of gender, protection, and identity formation are at the forefront of this work. In addition to the crafted objects the room was filled with the smell of baby powder and the sound of subtle white noise.



Figure 14: *Residual* (2018) Installation at the Jacob Lawrence Gallery



Figure 15

The quilt of steel was made of hand bent sheet metal (Figure 15). Different colors of patina create a traditional pattern called the *Irish Chain*. In Ireland it's the *American Chain* and its original origin is unknown I then welded the piece together as a replacement for sewing. I was interested in the *bastardization* of the quilt, the origin of its pattern and process in which women normally make quilts.³²

The bed was made of shingles and encased in wax. (Figure 16). It considers various types of protection from the roof of our homes to the blankets on our beds.³³



Figure 16

³² I encourage the reader to take a moment to read Appendix E in order to gain a full understanding of this piece

³³ Appendix F includes a poem written during the making of the overall installation of Residual and Appendix G includes one directly on protection.

Molds & Voids

The foundry was a watershed in my relationship with art as a practice and sculpture as a discipline. The process and the rules gave organization to life. Coming from an unstable childhood and not always understanding why and how the things around me were happening I embraced the rules. There was also a power that I had not experienced up until that point. I could rearrange atoms into any order I wanted. I could make a vacancy tangible and fill it. I could flood a cavity with molten metal and tell it, “this is what you are now. You will stay this way until I rearrange your atoms again”. A sense of permanence and stability was born knowing that the only other power that could reshape these atoms was a great geological force and an extreme amount of time, one that no human can observe.

Casting however is more than a technical process. Creating and filling these voids relates directly to the conceptual content of my work. Figure 17 is a cast aluminum rocking chair originally created for



Figure 17

Residual but took on new meaning when my husband and I found out we could not have children. *Residual* gained more depth for me as I realized I was not only fossilizing my childhood but also



Figure 18

processing a future I would never have. The hardened surfaces of the child's bedroom became both about past and future. The rag rug in *Residual* is woven from discarded children's clothing. My husband helped me shop for these articles of clothing at various thrift shops and it wasn't until afterwards that I realized this would be the only time we would buy kid's clothes together. In processing this vacancy that was now a part of my life I left the need to

make a void for it, the foundry mold. I made a casting of the rug in aluminum in order to make a space for the future absence of motherhood (Figure 18).

Vacancy

Empty, vacant spaces can be found throughout my work. An open chair, an empty bed, the cavity of a mold, an unoccupied "foundation," a house of furniture with no furnishings inside.³⁴ This is



Figure 19

³⁴ Interior view of *Fully Furnished* (Figure 19)

not just about loneliness or the voids that are part of our lives, but it is space for the viewer to occupy. We bring so much with us when we observe art. We each have our own memories, passions, traumas and knowledge we can use to unpack some of the potential meaning of an artwork. My objects and spaces provide a controlled, directed sensory experience. Regardless if it's a single object or an immersive room, the negative space, the light, the sound, the potentially ephemeral qualities are considered. Through installed environments the viewer's focus, and gaze are funneled in a particular direction. They are pointed to a curated set of information, where what is not included is as important as what is. The goal of the work is then to encourage the viewer to analyze, speculate and most importantly to ask questions of what arises through the pairing of objects and the creation of unique atmospheres. As the maker my intention is not to tell the viewer what or how to think, or to pass a long an opinion, but to ask them to consider the given information and the relationships formed through the work. In this way the incomplete narrative is as significant as the completed one.

Conclusion

To think, to make, to reflect. Whether it be an art object, a sentence, a home, an identity. The same goes for one's 'self' as one's art practice: if you want something; build it.

Appendix

A: Artist Statement

I am a maker. A maker of objects, images, spaces, sounds, reflections, sentences and mistakes. My heavily material based practice incorporates handcrafted objects, 2D images, as well as sound and video typically resulting in installed environments. I often combine various mediums, but the resulting works live in the domain of sculpture. Utilizing experimental casting techniques for metal and clay I fossilize memories and reflections of everyday moments and formed ideologies. Philosophical inquiry guides my studio decisions while also developing my character. Drawing heavily on my personal experiences of American culture I create atmospheres for the viewer to reflect and question ideas about our society and themselves.

Wisdom of a process gained over time, development of a muscle memory, and an intimacy with a tool or material changes the source and scope of knowledge. Through this way of working and learning both the head and hand are engaged in the development of tacit knowledge. Within my practice I'm processing how the marks and memories of our personal pasts are insidious to who we become. I'm seeking to understand how individual identity development has led to increasing polarization. By creating or recontextualizing furniture and other domestic objects my work reconsiders our remembered histories. Remnants of process and everyday items are repurposed and function as an archive of what they once were and what they once meant. In the making of craft objects historically viewed as women's work through processes typically assigned to male labor, I question both the place of skilled craft and gendered work in our modern society.

B: "Imprints"

It left an imprint. No, more like a fossil. A history of the past that replays itself anew over and over. The home, someone's protection, it built a foundation which can now be challenged, eroded or just left alone. Did the little cell provide safety? Would we know safety if we saw it, felt it? Cast, incased, and woven together, it is all still there. House or home, protection of flesh or heart or mind. Broken and repaired, avoided and relived, a little space to breathe or hide or rest. A vacant house is just a ghost of a home.

C: "She Called a Week Before I Turned 30"

She called a week before I turned 30. My mother like a child. It wasn't so much of an apology, but really the understanding that an apology should have been there. It was more genuine in that sense, more real, more true. I never wanted an apology, just the affirmation that one was meant to be there. Not that I was owed anything, but that I should have been. She called just 7 days before, it seemed at the last moment and she allowed me to be seen. Just 30 years, and now she heard me, there standing in the middle of the room screaming. It happened, even if she never tells another soul she told me. She called a week before I turned 30 and nobody knows it but me.

D: "On Foundations"

What is the foundation of communication? All of our forms of communication are just stories. Want to give meaning to data? Summarize it in a short story. Want to tell your husband about your day at work, create a narrative. Piece together sentences that have a relationship to one another to

paint a picture of what happened. Just a quick anecdote. Never anything more. Statistics don't lie, the stories people tell about them do. Facts are harmless until we as humans make meaning out of them and relate them to a past, present or future. Without context we have no way to understand a chain of events, the size of an objects, the meaning of a change. We only come to grips with our reality through stories, and stories are never reality. Reality is fleeting, and we can only ever document things and then share our documentation. I what to know if this is who we are now and how and when we got here. Tell me a story, I'll tell you one. Never anything more than a story.

What is the foundation of a person? The narrative story that people have held on to that they believe makes up who they are. Growing up I experience that, and then I did this, and then I learned that, and now I realize this, and these are the things I believe, and this is the information that I have obtained, and now I know that, and if we do this, then that will happen, and I am sure of these things, and I don't know about this, and that means that I am me, and you can't argue with who I say I am because I would know. The foundation of a person can be errored by time, pain, mental illness, adversity, love, knowledge, lack of knowledge, societal systems, power structures, fresh air, poor nutrition, lies, truths, and manipulation.

The people of the past don't matter, only their stories do. Stories can be created more easily than identities. Would it matter if our heroes and villains never existed as long as their stories did? Do the facts really matter in the future or is it just the preservation of the story? Does it matter if we understand the true nature of an artifact so long as well can take some meaning from it? Do we

care about fact or fiction, or just the stories we tell each other to push forward our own versions of progress?

E: "Piecing"

Women make quilts. They cut and prep and assemble and sew. They build a layer of comfort piece by piece. As they were taught. Shown by past generations of women. Respectful and in place. They find joy in making and accomplishment in completion. Hung on a wall or strewn over a bed. They create beauty, they create comfort, they create space for love and rest and warmth.

Men make things too. But not out of fabric, not the men I know. These men either wear suits or dirt and grime. They make hard things, like a man should. They make things women are too fragile for.

Subverting comfort and warmth for strength. For real protection. Protection of flesh and not of heart or mind. A quilt of steel will require harsher conditions to breakdown. This is not a women's quilt, and this is not a man's process.

F: "Strangers Live There Now"

Strangers live there now, in the place that was once part of you, part of your identity.

They live there where *you* know the spots of peeling paint, where you know how the scratches got in the banister.

The place that at one point you could walk through in complete darkness and by running your finger across the edge of the sofa could map out the entire room.

Not quite echolocation, but a sensory way of knowing your place among the objects.

These strangers who's faces you have never seen lay in bed looking up at the same bumpy ceiling making their own constellation out of the clusters of texture and *not* your constellations.

The peck through *their* own blinds out *your* windows. Do they even weed the garden or say hello to the mailman?

At night you can still sometimes hear the sound of the old washing machine with its slightly off beat rhythm, the sound letting you know your mother was still awake.

The smell of the oil stained garage floor is still stored in your memory, but maybe by now the strangers have cleaned it up.

The grass that once poked through the spaces between your toes could now be dead or gone and *you* wouldn't even know.

Did you leave an imprint on the house the same way the home imprinted you? The room that once teetered between a cell and a sanctuary is not yours at all anymore, but the time spent there has residual effects.

G: "Protection"

Sometimes I see him standing there. Like a child built in wax. The boy with the pain behind his eyes. Looking back, it was always there. From the moment I first saw him. From the first image created of him. The sheer anger, the lack of ease, the hurt creeping out so obvious. I knew then but I didn't see until much later.

They tried to protect him, to layer him with the necessary boundaries, to lock him in place, to keep him safe. Boasting of the roof overhead with its stark blackness. The failed attempts at protection.

I don't know him anymore, but his fading photos haunt me. That cry of injustice hunts me. The frustration turned to anger and violence. I still see it; I still hear it. He creeps into my mind often and sometimes I find myself waiting for the call that will tell me he is dead.

I wonder if he is dead. I mean in the ways that matter. I wonder who he is now and if he would ever tell me. I wonder if I could have protected him.

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