

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

The Aesthetics of Forgetting

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Introduction Statement

My work begins with an intuitive action. I may start with a slab of thick clay, a wooden board, an object, and from each point of departure I search. I do not have in mind a conclusion for the piece. Instead, I work with the materials at hand, clawing, digging, adding, subtracting, finessing, until I stumble upon a form that does not cry for change. The piece may take weeks to approach this point, or a few minutes. The way I work with materials varies from a rigid violent gouging to a careful and tender licking of the fingers.

There are certain symbols, types of touch, and a personal aesthetic that emerge from this process of searching. Some reoccurring symbols within my work are hair, fabric, holes, eyes, impressions, fruit, jewelry, and flesh. All of these objects reference the body, but they are devoid of the presence which once employed them, so now point to an absence. I portray the presence of absence. The objects I use act as a metaphor for an intense desire for something lost. The way in which the imagery is rendered, from intangible abstraction, to carefully sculpted elements, to a piece that is a cast of an object itself, mirrors the way in which a memory recedes into darkness and ambiguity or how it may come into a tight and stunning focus. The process of remembering and forgetting is always in flux. Even when a presence does come close, it will skirt around the perimeter of clarity within the mind's eye. I objectify the obscurity of fleeting memory images, creating a monument to unattainable desire for the past.

The Aesthetics of Forgetting

The time, people, or places, that I yearn for are idealized, distorted, and are not able to be experienced again. I explore the fluctuating concreteness of remembering. My work will concurrently hold familiarity, and the feeling of the unknown. Alex Potts discusses in *The Sculptural Imagination*, “...sculptural objects can be projected as imaginatively resonant in two ways: either as a presence that is felt to be so close that we feel it almost as an extension of our inner world, or as something set in a sphere quite apart from the immediate environment we inhabit, seeming almost to hover against a distant horizon...”(87). My sculptures are often on the brink of being something recognizable, but fail to completely cross the threshold into something known and ordinary. For example, the piece *Untitled (Stomachs)* may look like it comes from inside body, but it’s rigid materiality, straight cut edges and disembodiment complicate this connection, leaving it in an unknown space.



Detail of *Untitled (Stomachs)*, 2016

Alan Watts states in *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, “Like words, memories never really succeed in ‘catching’ reality. Memories are somewhat abstract, being a knowledge about things rather than of things. Memory never captures the essence of the present intensity, the concrete reality of an experience. It is, as it were, the corpse of an experience, from which the life has vanished”(91). The rejection of absoluteness within a singular piece aestheticizes a memory image, in its irresolute aloofness. In the way a poem uses words that reference objects, and abstraction to enliven an emotional state, I sculpt representative and ambiguous objects to do the same. An abstract state of mind can be more thoroughly represented by symbols that we can materially and metaphorically grasp. I touch and move materials as a tool for representing the kind of emotion within a specific piece. Careful sculpting or casting an actual object may be necessary in a piece where I am concerned with clarity and a likeness to material such as in *Untitled (Seat)* where I have taken a mold of a sheet draped over a box. In contrast, fast scraping, haptic decisions, and a more guttural interaction with the material will be used in a piece where I am concerned with achieving a maddened state of desperation such as in the piece *Untitled (Tunnel)*.



Untitled (Sack) Studio photograph



Untitled (Tunnel) Process Photograph

The Mold and the Cast

My sculptures are not sculpted, but are a cast of that which was sculpted. The object that was full of my presence and my touch has been twice removed. The objects present in the gallery space have never touched those objects. A mold was taken off of the original, creating a negative space, and this negative space was filled with liquid plaster that hardened into a dense material. This new object is not a positive, but represents the absence of this original. It is a solidified negative. This new object is materialized memory, functioning in the same way a death mask would preserve an image of a face in stone at the time of death, cementing that moment in time as the actual body begins to dematerialize. The original pieces made out of clay or other materials, are destroyed in the process of taking a cast off of them. Marcia Pointon expands on the function of the death mask in her essay *Casts, Imprints, and the Deathliness of Things: Artifacts at the Edge*, “The imprint is abject- it connotes the absence of something that has been cast away, whether by intention, accident, or the passage of time. In this case, it is the corpse that has been excluded, leaving the death mask as its trace...”(178).



Untitled (Sack) Mold



Untitled (Sack) In process of pouring Plaster

A cast of an object represents the absence of the original. Casts are similar to a photograph, in that they capture an image of matter at a point in time. The thing depicted may be destroyed or go on changing but its cast has solidified the past presence of the thing. This gives us an image or form to remember it by, in place of the reality of decay. Although I am not casting death itself, The action of creating a cast alone speaks to life's brevity. Poynton states "Imprints are part of everyday life, but even in the case, for example, of the child's boot in the mud or the dog's footprints in the sand, they are also suggestive in that they signal the connection between a body that is no longer there and a material thing that remains. They evoke absences and, in their fragmentary character, imply disembodiment. Thus, death masks are both familiar, what we know in the form of the human face, and unfamiliar, human flesh rigidified by the effects of death and by plaster. It is this melding of the familiar with the unfamiliar that resonates and arouses"(78). It is this space between the familiar and the unfamiliar that I search for when I am creating the forms in my work and also within the materiality of plaster. Plaster is a material that is used to represent marble, an actual durable stone, but plaster itself does not stand up to the test of time. The bottoms of my sculptures hit the floor unevenly and reveal the materiality of the sculptures. They are not crafted to exude the confidence and totality of stone, but are crafted to reveal the ways that they fall short of monumentality. The cast stands for an object that is not there, and does not try to be that object, but instead reveals its own shortcomings such as this uneven edge, bubbles at the surface, and the loss of detail due to the casting process.

Still Life, Object Symbolism

Throughout art history objects have been used as symbols to represent something other than their literal and physical selves. Symbolic objects within art hold a duality in that they are a representation of an object, and a representation of something else that they may point to or reference. The dual identity of objects may not always be available or obvious to the viewer and the meaning of these objects are constantly in flux through time and cultures. Because of this it is not possible to summarize the roles that specific objects play within the whole of art, but only to individually interpret objects with consideration of the culture and time that they were formed within and who they were formed by. Within my work I use literal and identifiable objects to function as themselves but also as symbols representing aspects of identity, loss, desire, and other psychological experiences.

Dutch Still life paintings evolved out of figurative paintings when the supporting objects within a work began to take on more importance than the individual figure themselves. Objects began to stand in for the figure by representing the identity of a person through the use of symbolism. By the 17th century figures were almost completely eliminated in Dutch paintings and moral or religious narratives were referenced by only objects. The still lives latent with the most symbolism represented the brevity of life and were referred to as Vanitas. This brevity and the passing of time is often represented by candles, a butterfly, roses, remnants of consumption, an hourglass, smoke, oil lamps, and soap bubbles. All of these objects are things that are in some way in flux and not stagnant. The experience of these objects is time based, and force us to consider our world and ourselves as moving through time. Physical death is often represented by the death of flowers or fruit, a skull, broken dishes, seashells, a blown out candle, and decaying architecture. These objects have a more permanent identity and reference an end instead of just a progression through time. Symbols of rebirth or resurrection are grapes, ears of wheat, cornstalks, bread, and wine. These objects are elements that are alive and point to consumption of life in the present or near future. The juxtaposition of objects creates the metaphor of the piece. Such as in the painting *Vanitas Still*

Life with Flowers and Skull by Adriaen van Utrecht, a skull and a bouquet of flowers share the same picture plane and create a metaphor for the fragile barrier between life and death. Tables with lush amounts of treasures and plentiful food speak of a luscious intense desire, while a table with disheveled and dying objects speaks of the impermanence of our time, comfort, and identities.

Still lives attempt to grasp a fleeting moment and in doing so reference the impermanence of the moment and point to the ending of our relationships with objects, places, and individuals. Frida Kahlo illuminated the function of still life painting when she said “I paint flowers so they will not die”. Symbolism transforms the humbleness of domestic objects and gives them an alternative identity as a metaphor for an internal experience. Within the format of a still life the items depicted objectify a mental space where we project our internal experience onto the lives of these objects. The objects play the role of a mirror, and the table, a stage. I look to The golden age of Dutch still life paintings, sometimes adopt their symbols, but most prominently I am drawn towards the presence of absence within these paintings, the remnants of life, and the desire those remnants provoke. My sculptures are existential in that they are contemplative of the passing of time and an end to our experience of life. In the piece *Untitled (Fruit)* I use the symbol of an apple. It has been flattened slightly and has been polished to a milky shine. I use this object to represent a strong and luscious desire.



Untitled (Fruit) , 2016

The Absence of Color

When forming the pieces to cast in plaster, a white to off-white material, I am painting with light and shadow created by three dimensional form. All of the final work is the natural color of the gypsum cement because adding color would be a gesture of presence, when the final object speaks to the absence of life and of the original object. The whiteness of my work is not one of purity, but is the white of ghosts, ashes, and a fading photograph. The only surface treatment on these objects is sanding and rubbing, making certain areas reflect light more directly. The surface texture varies from that akin to polished marble, to a chalky dullness. The whiteness of the sculptures makes the smallest dips in their terrain visible. I do not want the subtle ripples and shapes in the sculpture have to compete with the gesture of color. When I work with white material it is less about actually using the color white, but about neutrality. This allows room for an acute perceptive experience of the way light hits the surface, about how an area shines, or how it is in shadow. I consider how these pieces exist in a gallery space. I want it to feel as if in this space color does not exist, as if all color has been sucked out of the room, and we are left with only the shell of what was present.

Susan Sontag wrote in her essay *The Aesthetics of Silence*, “As long as a human eye is looking, there is always something to see. To look at something which is “empty” is still to be looking, still to be seeing something—if only the ghosts of one’s expectations. In order to perceive fullness, one must retain an acute sense of the emptiness which marks it off; conversely, in order to perceive emptiness, one must apprehend other zones of the world as full” (10). The emptiness of my sculptures allow room for the viewer’s personal wavering projections. Something that is perceived as empty can not only point to absence, but must point to that which is now out of the frame, that has created the absence felt.

The Monument, The Statue

The Latin roots of monument are monumentum, (“memorial), and monere, (“to remind”).

The historical function of the monument and statue are to solidify a singular perspective of an individual, happening, or time that by nature is extremely complex and layered. Abstraction was rarely used in statuary monuments before the late 1800’s because as James E. Young points out in his essay *Memory/Monument*, “abstraction encourages private visions in viewers, which would defeat the communal and collective aims of public monuments.” Although the purpose of the statue was to seize an individual in stone and to create a sense of continuity, the gesture can not help but point to life’s brevity. Through the stoniness and the scale of my sculptures I reference the marble base of a figurative sculpture to bring form to the intense desire for something of the past, but also to objectify the failure of solidifying an internal experience that defies concreteness. The uneven bottom edge of my sculptures and the quickness in which I sculpt are present to remind the viewer of my perspective as a critic of permanence and totality. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood discuss in the book *Art in Theory* “Postmodern forms of art are those which make manifest the very impossibility of presenting that which cannot be presented” (1017).

Supple skin and flowing drapery chiseled out of a hard and brittle material such as marble, is a gesture meant to solidify the fleeting and ungraspable experience of time. The softness of the surface, the hardness of the stone, and stubborn physicality of marble sculpture has an identity rooted in attempting to cling to an individual, time and place. My sculptures are not chiseled out of marble, but are casted out of plaster, a material historically used to mimic marble. The varying levels of resistance in the materials I sculpt allow me to quickly build, erase, and search without the possibility of error. In casting these objects I can physicalize the desire to bring a hardness and absoluteness to the experience of the past. The final objects are not solid stone, but a thick shell, reinforcing the hollowness of their attempts. Statues and Monuments are symbolic of the fear of forgetting, the fear of loss, and the fear of death. My sculptures

speaks the inevitability of these fears being brought to fruition. The piece *Untitled (Seat)* directly points to the figurative plinth, which sits abruptly empty. The seat draped in fabric points to the supporting structure of a figure which is now absent.



Untitled (Seat) In Process , 2016

Poetry

Edge By Sylvia Plath

The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,

The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,

Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:

We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,

One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.

She has folded

Them back into her body as petals

Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed

From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,

Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.

Her blacks crackle and drag.

When reading poetry I mentally objectify the language, cascading the objects around the plinth, solidifying the unfolding events into stone. I also consider painting and sculpture to be visual and physical poems. In the Poem *Edge* by Sylvia Plath, the words that are objects describe a more experiential and emotional perception of a moment through the use of physical and material similes. Pitchers of milk speak to the failed function of her empty breasts. Petals of a rose are used to describe the way in which the woman folds her children into her body. The moon's light is piercingly white but as dull as bone. These objects that we can identify with specific images help the reader internally grasp the depth of an experience, although those objects are not actually present within the scene being depicted. This is the main difference between object symbolism in sculpture and in literature. An object can be used to describe and bring life to a scene, but the object does not actually need to be present in the narrative of a poem. Poems do not seem to be stagnant imagery as in a sculpture or a painting and can contort, change, and exist in a myriad of different forms within a person's mind. Within my installation the singular pieces themselves can remain as individual elements, acting as a word, symbol, or stanza, or they may be perceived as bundled together, creating a poem depicting the space where memories lie. With the form of the pieces as interchangeable blocks, the sentence can change. An apple sitting next to an article of clothing can appear set in stone, but can be taken apart and reorganized into another juxtaposition. The way in which an installation's terrain can change parallels the impressionable mind. It is a poem in unrest.



Technical Statement

I make my work on the floor. I have a 4 by 8 piece of melamine wood on the floor of my studio. I am drawn towards the floor because that is where the most space in my studio is, the least amount of limitations for scale and quantity. I like to be working on many pieces at a time and I like to be surrounded by them. Although it makes more work for me later when I am installing, I do not cover up my pieces in the studio because I want to be amongst them, reacting to them, getting to know them. I cannot hide these pieces from the dust and from my gaze. I need to learn from them in order to create a body of work.

I begin with a large slab of clay. I may have clay on the side for building onto it or I may just begin scraping into the slab of meat. The clay being on the floor allows me to crouch over this mass of material and dig into it as if I am digging into the ground. Every piece I make begins with movements that are of impulse. I dig a finger into the clay to make a hole, I drag my fingers lightly on the surface to create a sketch, I grab a handful and raise it from the interior material. I crawl around the piece trying to find my orientation. I pinch, caress, smooth, puncture, scrape, and erase. When a mark I have made gives me pause, I then react to it. Every progressing gesture holds more and more of my personal aesthetics and conscious decisions, until I arrive at an object that I can not bring myself to change. When a sculpture feels wrong it is really difficult for me to let it be, I must react to it. A piece may sit in my studio for a few days and suddenly ask to be dealt with again.

The piece *Untitled (Stomachs)* began with a slab of clay as long and wide as the final plaster piece, but only about two inches thick. When I work on something of this scale I can sit on it, lay down next to it, and deal with the material with my entire body. This process is illustrated by the empty space next to two the two objects where I sat within this landscape and worked. This amount of space given to these objects makes them feel like they were cast off, or left behind. Because they are not in the center it feels like there was something that once accompanied them, and they are remnants left in the dirt.

To make any piece I begin with clay or other materials such as fabric or fruit. To transform them into the finished plaster pieces I use the following steps.

1. I surrounded the sculpted objects with a large coil wall.
2. I melted the appropriate amount of Moulage, which is a reusable rubber, for the piece to be covered at least half an inch and poured it into the dammed off shape, covering the sculpted area.
3. After letting the rubber cool, I slowly and carefully lift the rubber mold off of the clay.
4. I put this rubber on the mirroring side of the slab, trace it, and dig its shape out of the clay.
5. I put the rubber into this hole and seal off the seams with coils of clay, inlaying the negative into the clay slab.
6. I make sure that my clay is the texture I want the piece to be and then cover the clay with porcelain slip so that the iron from the clay does not stain the plaster, and also so that the plaster releases easier from the clay.
7. I set up my cottles around the piece and seal it up with clay on the inside and the outside. I then mix up my Hydrocal Plaster and pour it into the mold. In a large sculpture such as *Untitled (stomachs)* I use about one bucket for the relief on the top of the piece, and two buckets for the sides.
8. For the sides I let the plaster sit up until I can hold it in my hand, a whipped consistency, pour it into the mold, and then quickly start scraping and pulling it up the the cottle's walls making sure to get an even coat, about 1.5 inches thick. This can be done at any point. The Plaster can be hard before I add the next layer, I just have to make sure to score the edge where the plaster will be connecting.
9. After the plaster sits up for a few hours I take the cottles off, carefully lift the piece onto its strongest side, and take the clay and rubber off of the face. The clay comes off the plaster very easily in large chunks.

10. Once the piece has been de-molded I spend a large amount of time sanding and rubbing the pieces, to bring them to a shine. No polish or any other material is used for finishing the pieces. I use up to a 2000 grit sandpaper.

11. I can put the clay back together and make the next piece. The large clay slab used to make *Untitled (Stomachs)* was then used for the piece *Untitled (Tunnel)*.



Sculpted clay



Rubber mold poured



Rubber mold inlayed into clay, cottles in place



Plaster piece flipped on its side after casting



Piece right out of mold



Detail of piece after cleaning and sanding

Works Cited

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