

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

Tiny Spaces: Navigating the Intimate

by

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Under the Supervision of:

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Preface: Thoughts on Collecting

Collecting and categorizing objects and information are constant activities for me; they are both satisfying forms of self expression and methods of developing knowledge. Collecting allows me to observe variations between similar types of things and brings up many questions: What need does this object meet? What might variations between objects of the same function signal about the needs, wants, or tastes of a particular time period or society? What does the rarity or over-abundance of an object signal about a culture?

Collecting is an intuitive process that improves object-literacy and allows for the discovery of potent cultural symbols. Collecting is tactile and intimate, unpredictable and mysterious. I find that the process successfully straddles the absurd, the obsessive, and the spiritual without losing contact with reality; an activity where desire, indulgence, and a need for control can be gratified. Collecting is an ancient system that acknowledges the power of objects. While typical consumption is driven by uncontrollable needs or fleeting desires, collecting is guided by an internal logic kept in check by restraint. My life-long practice of collecting and arranging objects is intrinsic to how I inform and conduct my artistic practice.

The Project

My BFA thesis project consists of two investigations. The first explores how stylization and fragmentation of different parts of the figure influence emotional and psychological responses to the human form. I have especially focused on the human hand because of its ability to communicate emotion and its central role in the acquisition of physical and immaterial desires (Images I-III). The second investigation questions how domestic tools (i.e. containers: bath-tubs, bottles, spoons and body maintenance devices: combs, forks, mirrors) determine how humans

alter and maintain their bodies and how desire interacts with these acts of alteration and maintenance (Image IV).

The work embodies and elevates a 'feminine' aesthetic while commenting on the objects, images, and ideals alternately celebrated by, imposed on, and associated with women by society. S-curves appear in the forms of the small female figures, hands, containers and tools (Images V and VI). Surfaces are carved away and sanded down to a smooth, unblemished finish. Ceramic sculptures are left naked or dressed in sugary pastel slips and shimmering glazes. Openings in vessels and holes in forms quietly reference bodily orifices. Inserts in objects are playful yet serious : another understated allusion to the extensive world of body maintenance that is so often gendered toward women, whether it is the culturally indoctrinated self grooming expected of women- often enacted in order to make oneself more seductive or desirable- or the body care expected from them by partners and children (i.e. cooking, bathing, etc.) (Images VII and VIII).

Grooming tools and the paradox they contain fascinate me: they are simultaneously whimsical, useless and oppressive. I find it both sad and hilarious that they resemble the tools used in medicine, science, and war. I will always remember what a male friend once asked me on a train, as he watched a woman pull an ominous metal contraption from her bag and raise it in-front of her eyes: "What is that thing?" I responded with immediate recognition and nonchalance: "It's an eyelash curler." He was perplexed. Women are burdened with knowing the function of the eyelash curler. Taken out of context, its silhouette could find many twins: speculum, livestock dehorner, garden pruner.

My associative game of grouping objects and labeling things can go on endlessly: lipstick as bullet, mascara wand as cattle prod, comb as rake, concealer as eraser (Image IX). These

things are used to make new lines and paint over, to disguise, penetrate, tame, smooth, and order. To refine and edit. These tools all prepare an animal, plant, or human for visual, physical, or sexual consumption. Beauty tools decorate and make decorative. Their doppelgängers kill, conquer, and colonize: implements used by the western world when ‘convincing’ nature to “reveal *herself* to science” (Image X).

I meditate on these devices and activities by making. Maybe by doing so I alleviate my need to participate in them. Hopefully, the final objects and images temporarily relieve viewers of the need to participate in them as well. I think the work is both whimsical and melancholic, but also resistant. Instead of refining and masking the body, I refine, mask, groom, and beautify the *material*. Unlike the tools offered at a typical cosmetic retailer, the ceramic, glass, and paper tools are functionless, fragile, and individually crafted. They are neutered of their branding and specificity. Restraint is key: tailored forms and a muted color palette create intrigue. This delays satisfaction and heightens desire. I hope that these precious, modest miniatures offer temporary harbor from the onslaught of flashy mass-produced goods in our world. I hope that through the work viewers are able to celebrate the pleasures form and color offer without the pressures of consumption.

Japan

In May 2016, I attended a trip to Japan lead by Dr. Meghan Jones and Dr. Bruce Rosenthal of Alfred University. Observing how Japanese culture embraces nature, spirituality, craft, restraint, modesty, simplicity, and minimalism; and the extreme care Japanese establishments invest in the presentation of food and goods made a significant impact on me. In American society, individualism, extreme capitalism, and vast continental space have cultivated

a culture of excessive consumption and immediate gratification. Here, cheap, easily manufactured products are often market leaders. In Japan, societal collectivism produces a softer capitalism and limited land space discourages excess. These aspects of Japanese culture allow products of durability and quality to thrive. It was in Japan that I was able to experience first-hand how restraint in consumption, attention to craft, and minimalism in presentation increase desire and heighten the pleasures of an aesthetic experience for a participant. These three principles strongly influenced how I created and presented work this year. Throughout the trip, I was able to source much valuable visual research (Images XI-XVI).

It was also in Japan that I became entranced with the ability of hands to connect people and communicate emotions and ideas (for example, religious messages as communicated by the bronze and wooden hands of buddhas and bodhisattvas in Japanese temples.) As an icon, the hand has a unique ability of treading between the spiritual and the material worlds. Realizing this tension increased my interest in the human hand's symbolic power. By varying my stylization of this already resonant symbol, I was able to study how reactions differed between audience members: female colleagues in the studio often gravitated toward the squat, chubby, paw-like hands, while male professionals - specifically, the Ford motor car designers who visited Alfred earlier this semester - gravitated to the elongated, aerodynamic, mannequin-like hands.

Material and Process

I love discovering the characters of different materials and the processes used to shape them. A good friend I worked with over the summer told me that clay, glass, and metal are all 'ceramic' materials and that ceramicists are idealists because, unlike the stone or wood carver, they can fix what has been broken. I haven't decided whether I believe this, but I do love the

diversity, plasticity, and speeds of making that glass and clay provide to me. I have not yet found another medium that can be both two-dimensional and three-dimensional, painterly and sculptural, fragile and architectural. The two materials allow me plenty of time to obsess over the shape and surface of forms because both processes involve many stages: wet-work, carving, sanding, burnishing, firing, sanding, glazing, firing. Or: wet-work, moldmaking, annealing, cold-work. Transforming the plastic into the static lends sculptures a sense of verve, a sense of being frozen in motion. It is also important that these materials straddle the worlds of art and industry. I like the challenge of transforming materials that are familiar to us from the 'everyday' into something that defies placement in any one particular category.

Installation

Visual research and advanced planning was key in designing and producing display furniture for the exhibition. By studying the display techniques of Ken Price, Marisa Merz, Takuro Kuwata, and Arlene Shechet, I was able to borrow design elements from both modernism (symmetry, minimalism) and postmodernism/contemporary art (asymmetry, instability, material diversity). In the final exhibition, tall and narrow concrete pedestals isolate and elevate small sculptures; a cantilevered table suggests movement and gesture and references the size and height of a dining table or bed; expansive white shelves seclude intimate miniatures. Material choices were selected for their ability to fade into the color palette of the work and exhibition space. Concrete pedestals and white shelves match the floors and walls of Turner Gallery, while the pine and raw silk of the cantilevered table fade easily into the pastel color scheme of the work. During install, I placed work minimally to avoid over-crowding surfaces and as a means of clarifying and heightening the relationships between objects. (Images XVII-XX).

Images



Images I. Ava Carney, *Lilies of the Valley*. 2016-2017, Stoneware with vitreous slip, 36 x 5 x 5 and 21 x 4 x 3 in.

Image II. Ava Carney, *Forget Me Not*. 2017, Stoneware with vitreous slip, 49 x 6 x 5 in.

Image III. Ava Carney, *Blue Bleeding Hearts*. 2017, Porcelain with colored grog, 5 x 3 x 3 in.



Image IV. Ava Carney, *Doppelgänger*s. 2016-2017, Stoneware with vitreous slip and porcelain, various sizes.



Image V. Ava Carney, *The Spread*. 2016, Porcelain, 6 x 6 x 2 in.



Images VI. Ava Carney, *Elixer*. 2016, Porcelain, 5 x 3 x 2.



Image VII. Ava Carney, *Fro*. Stoneware with vitreous slip, 2016, 5 x 6 x 4 in.



Image VIII. Ava Carney, *Among Animals and Plants*. 2016-2017, Terracotta with glaze and glass, 3.5 x 3 x 3 in.

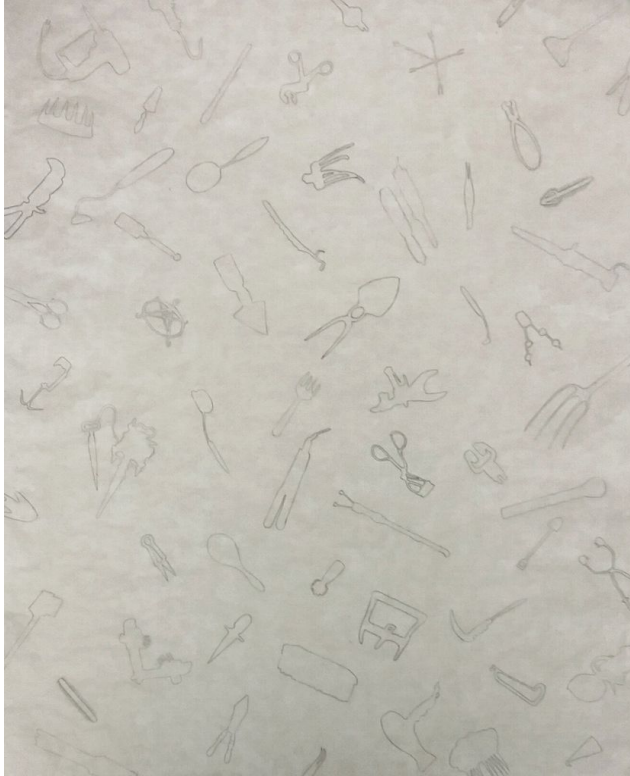


Image IX. Ava Carney, *Groom, Garden, Slaughter*. 2016, Graphite on abaca, 36 x 24 in.

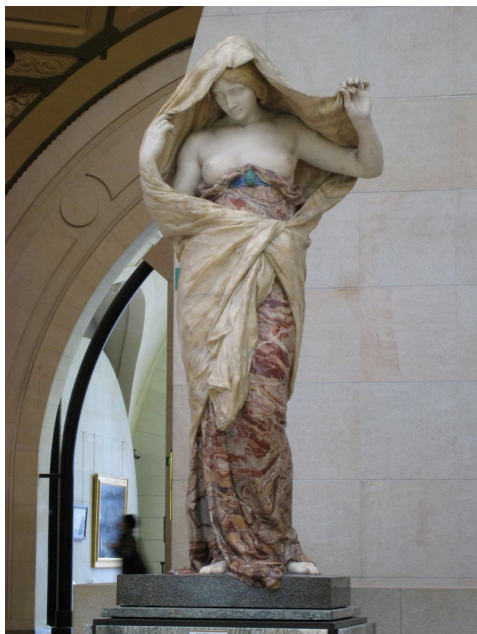


Image X. Louis Ernest Barrias, *La Nature se dévoilant à la Science*. 1899, marble, onyx, malachite. Musée d'Orsay. Available from: Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature_Unveiling_Herself_Before_Science (accessed May 7, 2017).

Images XI - XV (personal photographs taken at various locations by Ava Carney in Tokyo and Kyoto, Japan)



Japan Images cont.





Image XVI. Sanjusangendo Temple. 1164, wood. Higashiyama District, Kyoto, Japan.
<http://www.burgessbroadcast.org/japan/sanjusangendo.html> (accessed May 7, 2017).



Images XVII. Ava Carney, *The Spread*. 2016-2017, Stoneware with vitreous slip and glaze, Porcelain, Terracotta with glaze, Glass, Raw Silk, Papier-mâché, Pine, 84 x 36 in.



Image XVIII, Ava Carney, *Her Wants//Her Needs*. 2016-2017, Stoneware with vitreous slip, various sizes.



Image XIX. Ava Carney, *Hide and Seek*. 2016-2017, Terracotta with glaze, Glass, and Concrete, 10 x 36 in.



Image XX. Ava Carney, *The Empty Space*. 2016-2017, Terracotta with terra sigillata, various sizes.