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The Girl Who Didn't Know She Wasn't Singing

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Abstract

I am interested what is obscured by the mundane, diurnal nature of objects that surround us which uphold a comfortable rhythm that easily resists close observation. My thesis work examines states of flux, a body of work that is neither here nor there, but hovers in an in between area: in existing between painting and sculpture, in revealing transcendent qualities of the everyday, raising questions about value, and fundamental acts of seeing and considering artwork. context becomes key in framing the experience of the work, each piece is perceptually contingent on external factors; in viewership and the individual viewer experience constructing meaning, attention contingent, time of viewing and conditions of viewing. Driven by a collage sensibility, and discovering and inventing narratives that accompany found objects; collecting is an important part of my studio practice. Narrative process and material meanings are referenced in the final medium, using assemblage and collage, and works existing between media, living somewhere between sculpture and painting. Obscured by comfortable rhythms, my work confronts what is ignored and hidden, what is absent, what remains as a trace, and the material metaphors that exist in between.

Introduction

Particularly I am interested what is obscured by the mundane, diurnal nature of objects that surround us which uphold a comfortable rhythm that easily resists close observation. My thesis work examines states of flux, a body of work that is neither here nor there, but hovers in an in between area: in existing between painting and sculpture, in revealing transcendent qualities of the everyday, raising questions about value in both the everyday and art. In the work, context becomes key in framing experience, each piece is perceptually contingent on external factors. Using found and everyday objects in my thesis project, I call attention to hidden material qualities and to the often ignored act of seeing and interacting with an artwork.

On Found Objects

A collage sensibility has led me to use all the materials at my disposal, and I am particularly attracted to objects that have been disposed of and raising questions of value that inherently arise in using them in an artwork.

I am interested in the conception of what is valuable, particularly in relation to memory, both collective and personal. Ilya Kabakov offers a relevant reframing of objects without intrinsic value, in *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, Kabakov describes several people coming upon an apartment whose owner (absent while this story is taking place) never threw anything away. Those who enter are shocked at what they see, The narrator finds several documents within the apartment that explain the apartment owner's view of his objects, a relevant excerpt below:

a simple feeling speaks about the value, the importance of everything. This feeling is familiar to everyone who has looked through or rearranged his accumulated papers: this is the memory associated with all the events connected to each of these papers. To deprive ourselves of these paper symbols and testimonies is to deprive ourselves somewhat of our memories... To deprive ourselves of all this means to part with who we were in the past, and in a certain sense, it means to cease to exist... Grouped together, bound in folders, these papers comprise the single uninterrupted fabric of an entire life, the way it was in the past and the way it is now... Moreover, strange as it seems, I feel that it is precisely the garbage, that very dirt where important papers and simple

scraps are mixed and unsorted, that comprises the genuine and only real fabric of my life, no matter how ridiculous and absurd this may seem from the outside. (Kabakov 100-1)

In a lot of ways I feel like this text could be a manifesto of sorts; a distilled text that describes how I feel about objects. So much history is wrapped up in them, and imagined narratives follow. Kabakov goes on to argue that unsorted garbage is a truer archive of our daily lives, making the claim that the dump can be viewed as the most honest cultural archive. The huge amounts of detritus that we accumulate each day, compared to what we consciously keep to surround us, provides a truer portrait of how we view our objects, something equivalent to a portrait en medias res.



Figure 1 Rebecca Lothan, *The Angle of Repose* (installation view at BFA thesis show), 2015

Made of mostly found materials; I am interested in the history of objects, and the people and narratives that created the life of this object. The tablecloth in *The Angle of Repose* is my childhood table cloth that got stained and my mother was going to throw away; I stretched it across found stretcher bars. Found objects accompany a narrative, whether personal (and relatively unsurprising and straightforward, in this case) or unknown. Once collected, my goal is

to create a new life and meaning for the object through manipulating context. The desire to fill in the historical blanks for objects that I find drives a lot of my work.

A work of fiction by Leanne Shapton I turned to repeatedly throughout this year is *Important Artifacts and Personal Property From the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry*. Using the most emotively drained medium, the auction catalog, Shapton recounts the history of a relationship through objects. What I admire about her treatment of objects in the book is nothing is categorically made more important or valuable than any other object, all are non-hierarchically presented to tell the story of Lenore and Harold's relationship and the viewer is left to sort through meaningful and meaningless bits of an archive of lived time. Formally, as an auction catalog, it calls attention to the genre of fiction and how narratives can be constructed and presented. The work makes reading an act of piecing together a narrative through objects, each assigned a price and appearing in a sterile format. An active, self aware relationship with the reader is something I admire and materially create, in a different form, in my thesis work.

Found objects and materials with an unknown history I find incredibly compelling, and often will find my job to be piecing together bits of an unknowable, imagined narrative, in a way that treasures the fragment.

On Viewership

I am interested in attention, and shifting attention in my work, in my use of found/everyday materials, but also as a referential nod to activities in my studio practice and to my personal narrative and interest in attention particularly as it relates to my visual perception of the world. In *The Angle of Repose, But When* and *Tape Drawings*, I direct attention to what is typically ignored; elevating the quotidian by simply manipulating it to create an art object, by

Figure 2 Rebecca Lothan, *The Angle of Repose* (detail), 2015, found objects, Lothan family table cloth, tape



highlighting the unique material qualities, and also by robbing each everyday object turned material of their utilitarian function.

My tape works, culminating in my thesis works, have a material subtlety that invites closer viewing, to notice the green lines that appear where the tape is not touching the glass. This act of noticing, picking out of easily ignored visual stimuli, is self referential and reflects my practice of collecting.

In the collections and assemblages appearing in most of my thesis work, are an attempt to make

sense of found objects, to create a new context that draws attention to this act in its in between-ness. Susan Stewart writes that the “the collection represents the total aestheticization of use value. The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context” (Stewart 151).

The conceptual content of *The Line Up* comes from the specific selection of materials— a disassembled dormitory desk, scrubs, hospital gowns and blankets--all objects commonly made in united states prisons. *The Line Up* challenges our understanding of quotidian objects and calls attention to a fraught and ignored group of makers. The work, and how it functions as a

collection serves to forge a removed connection between viewer and inmates through the creation of the collection, through a shared attention to objects.



Figure 3 Rebecca Lothan, *The Line Up*, 2014, Plaster, scrubs, hospital gowns, disassembled wooden dorm desk

Imaginative attention is another kind of activation of fragments that happens more in this work; the act of remembrance is displacing context from the past to the present (Stewart). This kind of imaginative attention is what captivates me when I go out collecting objects, and then what guides my use of that particular object. This narrative of creating and process is something I want to shape the viewing experience of my work.

Accepting instability of meaning and viewer contingency means giving up an aspect of control of meaning to the viewer; the work is always in flux, and is activated by viewership. In my thesis work, in using unstable materials that I lean, existing between painting and sculpture, I call attention to the act of viewing. In his famous short story on memory, *Funes, the Memorius*, Jorge Luis Borges outwardly addresses altered perception, and heightened attention. After he regained consciousness, the narrator describes visiting Funes after the accident, “the present was

almost intolerable it was so rich and bright; the same was true of the most ancient and most trivial memories. A little later he realized he was crippled” (Borges 112). Borges’ story, describes an extreme change in perception, or an extreme sensitivity to perception, where all perceptual information is non hierarchical, realizing he was crippled came a little later. To Funes, each bit of perceptual information was so new, fantastic and singularly memorable, that it could not be grouped, generalized or extrapolated from; learning was no longer possible for Funes. An element of this perceptual chaos described contributes to my personal narrative and interest in this topic; something of Funes’ perception reflects how I take in sensory information, all at once, without hierarchy, my tag in my shirt competes with Microsoft word. I am often overwhelmed by a deluge of information, just being in the world requires a slowness, in this slowness encompasses something of what I want the viewing experience of my thesis work to reflect. In my thesis work, in its in-between-ness I want to function in a similar way with a step removed, to require a slowness of viewing, and also point to the act of perception. Heightened perception and sensitivity to objects that directs the process of collection; I want the viewing experience to mirror the creating process in this way. Leslie Hewitt is an artist that I look to in this respect.



Figure 4 Leslie Hewitt, Make it Plain, 2006

Leslie Hewitt uses the spaces between media to activate her viewers. She wants her viewers to pay attention to their position as viewers: “Without this awareness, the images fall into convention and ensure a comfortable sort of spectatorship, where one needs to neither reflect on their stance nor question the images presented. It’s important to remind ourselves that photographic meaning isn’t something that’s produced by the artist or inherent in the subject. We’re all actively involved in its negotiation, all the time” (“Leslie Hewitt Talks about *Untitled (Structures)*”). She is invested in calling attention to a fundamental act of viewing and seeing, to bring back a more fundamental questioning in the act of viewing.

Hewitt also uses leaning as a tactic to draw attention to the act of looking; something I use in my thesis works, *The Angle of Repose* and *Repos ition*, to place them somewhere between 2D and 3D. In both of these works, I am also using the armatures of painting in *The Angle of Repose* and painterly marks in *Repos ition* both protrude into space in a way that paintings do not normally. The works exist somewhere between painting and sculpture, the leaning creates a fragmented and uncertain experience of the work, that calls attention to the act of looking and typical categorization of media. The leaning works also reference a state of transition in the life of an artwork, in preparations for an art show, when deciding where to place works, artworks are provisionally leaned up against the wall until final placement is determined.

In addition to existing between discrete media, deconstruction and reconstruction of objects that don’t necessarily fit, asks the viewer to slow down, and question the connection between the objects. Assembling and reconstructing objects that do not necessarily fit is a direction I am interested in continuing with in my practice, while also deconstructing media to their most elemental.

Material as Metaphor, Process as Narrative

My practice of collecting has informed my working process this year, and has always been an important part of my studio practice. I am constantly picking up found objects and bringing them into my studio. I am particularly interested in objects that show a history of use, in the unknowable history that these objects contain, and how my work with them intercepts their lives and changes the course of them.

Once collected and brought into the studio, I will spend time with the newly collected objects, and then reassess all of the other found objects and materials in my studio, considering and sometimes imagining an internal dialectic between objects, until I feel they fit. My decision to pick up an object and bring it into my studio, the act of noticing and choosing, already speaks to an affective thingness that for me, that specific object radiates. (Bennett)

Collecting as a studio practice is also incredibly important to Gedi Sibony, another aspect



Figure 5 Rebecca Lothan, *But When*, 2015, tape and glass

of his work and practice that I esteem. He collects and then brings objects into a white room individually, and with other objects, for consideration (Thompson). The care and narrative reflected in his process he describes, “Sibony also manages to see an autobiographical element in his sculptures—if only in the act of finding, considering and arranging their materials. “I did something to these objects; they kept me company,” he says. “I can’t help but look at them as something that reflects me” (Thompson). In a similar way, the narrative of collecting and dialogue between himself and the objects becomes important in Sibony’s works.



Figure 6 Rebecca Lothan, *Repos ition*, 2015, tape on metal bathed in acid

Repos ition; is the culmination of my exploration of the collection. In using a shelf as a display mode, I make this conversation entirely apparent. Amassing a collection of objects over the course of a year, I continually rearranged these objects, to consider a variety of dialectical relationships between objects through different orders, combinations, groupings and orientations; each time observing different conversations that the objects have amongst themselves when

situated differently. This work was an investigation of the continuing lives of objects. *Repos ition* also exemplifies a more expansive look at the material metaphors of tape; in this case using tape as half utilitarian and half formal. The material metaphor becomes evident in the narrative embedded in making; I was using tape to protect different metal surfaces from corroding when I then bathed the plates in acid.

The Angle of Repose includes transparent tops from plastic wrappings I found, the residue of a tearing open, a recent event. Collecting as an activity where meaning and value comes from the narrative of collecting, the story of acquiring the object will often imbue it with meaning. However, once collected, each object is decontextualized; the aesthetic relationship between objects and their arrangement, rather than temporality, is the organizing principle. (Stewart). Through manipulation of context the individual objects' place within a constructed whole invites material metaphor, and narrative and meaning is accrued and changes over time.

In *The Angle of Repose* tape serves a function, to hold up the glass, it acts as the surface, and the glass, as a material. The tape and the glass are framed by a quadrant of the stretcher. The tablecloth is only stretched halfway across the stretcher. In making this work very much about revealing the functional support that typically is covered by the primary image to be considered. I am giving primacy to the support, and in this way these works situate themselves in Robert



Figure 7 Gedi Sibony, *Untitled*, 2011, Frame

Ryman's legacy, and I particularly like to view my work in conversation with Gedi Sibony's and Analia Saban's work (Hudson). Gedi Sibony, who similarly uses minimalist tropes and found objects to call the value of both into question. Gedi Sibony's *Untitled* works, with the material listed as "Frame" a similar goal is achieved, however in his work, the absence of the image is that much more obvious, because in some of the works in the series a faint outline of the image is visible from the backside. In this work, the tape also becomes an aesthetic element, turning what was originally purely functional, used at the service of an absent image, now we are being asked to consider the formal qualities of the tape. In a playful, but somehow sad gesture, this work functions in a manner that my tape works function in; in hiding and revealing, or hiding in order to reveal. The work embodies pothos, but of a slightly different flavor than my tape works.

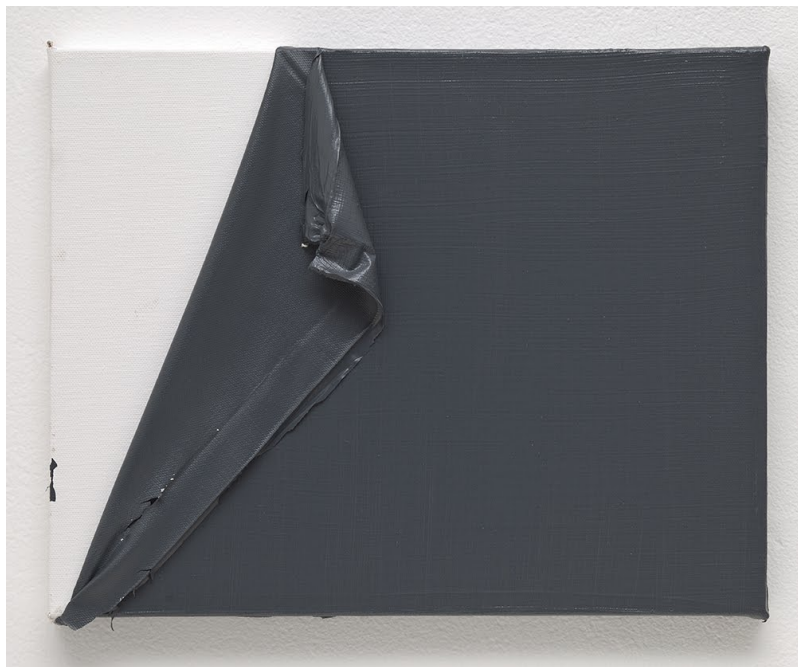


Figure 8 Analia Saban, *Cover*, 2011, acrylic paint on and off canvas

Analia Saban, an artist I admire whose work can also be situated in Robert Ryman's legacy, works using essentialized gestures to examine elements of artwork; she works deconstructing and reconstructing painting in a way that doesn't claim power. Her work aims to

call into question conventions of painting, and give primacy to that which is typically considered the support for the image. The example of her work below has a Ryman-ish flavor to it, because it leans heavily on this last tactic. Overall what makes her work interesting to me is that it challenges the role of everyday objects, and ways of seeing and thinking about art.

(“Information Leaks 2010”) The space where Analia Saban’s work with deconstruction, and my thesis work and Hewitt’s work come together is in the act of viewing, in wanting to slow down the viewing experience.

Conclusion

In revaluing and calling attention to found objects, and detritus, I am also calling for a major shift in perception. Jane Bennett describes what I might imagine would result from a transformation in perception that my work points to:

If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief. Vital materialism would thus set up a kind of safety net for those humans who are now, in a world where Kantian morality is the standard, routinely made to suffer because they do not conform to a particular...model of personhood. The ethical aim becomes to distribute value more generously, to bodies as such. Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself. (Bennett 13)

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Image Sources

Figure 1: Rebecca Lothan

Figure 2: Rebecca Lothan

Figure 3: Rebecca Lothan

Figure 4: Leslie Hewitt. < <http://www.lesliehewitt.info/index.php?/main/riffs-on-real-time---installation/>>

Figure 5: Rebecca Lothan

Figure 6: Rebecca Lothan

Figure 7: Gedi Sibony < <http://www.gladstonegallery.com/artist/gedi-sibony/work/fullscreen#&panel1-4>>

Figure 8: Analia Saban. < <http://lafilleblanc.tumblr.com/post/70206790995/analia-saban-cover-2011-acrylic-paint-on-and>>