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Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things

By
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A thesis presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

I view my creative process as alchemy, the transformation of materials through experimentation. I use wax as a material that transcends its historical use as a sculptural process for casting and instead, use it for its transmutable qualities to inform content. Because of its plasticity and duality as fragile and resilient, wax is symbolically submissive and assertive. By applying heat, wax can be molded and formed into new shapes. Once it cools, wax reverts back to its natural state; solid and impermeable. I use objects to explore desires of origin and life. Transitional objects, the first “me not me” possession that replaces the mother as a developmental tool, represent childhood within my works. By displacing these objects, I explore how childhood and the body, void of spirit, become uncanny. Inspired by fairy tales and mythological narratives, my work uses symbolism to create art that investigates the uncanny, the macabre, and the ephemeral. It is my assertion that through the use of metaphor and alluring handling of materials my work permits viewers to transgress social limits of taboos surrounding the female body and mortality in order to contemplate a richness of existence.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	3
Chapter One: Wax On, Wax Off.....	5
Chapter Two: The Ephemeral.....	9
Chapter Three: The Macabre.....	14
Chapter Four: The <i>Unheimlich</i>	17
Chapter Five: Once Upon a Time.....	23
Chapter Six: Transmogrification.....	26
Chapter Seven: Trust the Process.....	30
Conclusion.....	33
Notes.....	34
Illustrations.....	35
Illustration Citation.....	57
Bibliography.....	58

Introduction

I view my creative process as a transformation of material through experimentation. By taking an ordinary object and combining it with wax, I am able to transmute an object's significance into something else. My inspiration has been mythological narratives, specifically fairy tales, that serve as a stimulus for my creative explorations. The theme of grisly impermanence found within fairy tales has consistently helped carry an element of the uncanny into the sculptures I make. I use sculpture to penetrate boundaries of the viewer and the conversations that develop from them.

With the broken and voided body, we are asked to contemplate the ephemerality of what makes us human. Sculptures that are in the midst of transformation, twisted in agony, or even made from our own bodily fluids, show us ways of understanding ourselves that transcend language. By combining wax with the metaphors and symbolism found in fairy tales, my work operates beyond the sensory experiences of the body and emphasizes the limitations and fragility of corporeal form.

I have always had a fascination with fairy tales. I was born in the early nineties where childhood could be categorized into Beanie Babies, Hot Wheels, and, of course, the Disney Princesses and Princes. There was magic, hope and happy endings in every tale. But my family believed that to truly understand something completely you have to start at its roots. I was encouraged to read the original Grimm fairy tales. These were dark and twisted tales, with many of the happy endings, which I was used to, nowhere to be found. Heroes were maimed, killed and disfigured, but all the while they persevered. I found myself fascinated with the challenges on those pages.

As I grew older my fascinations did not cease. As I continued my education, I looked for courses of study that would challenge my interpretations and uncover deeper understandings of fairy tales and the myths. The symbolism in those books began to creep into my artistic practice. By using wax as a medium within my sculpture, I use the uncanniness found within these tales to bridge topics about life and death, images of the voided body, and the soul. By using dualities of the grotesque and the alluring, my work allows our imagination to go further and blur the lines between reality and make-believe.

Chapter One: Wax On, Wax Off

During my childhood, summers were always spent outside. Playing in the dirt, scraping my knees, climbing and falling out of trees. Our skin, turning brown from the relentless summer sun, was always protected by a layer of sunscreen. One day, my father came home from working in the fields, his skin red and blistered. The next couple of days were spent peeling his skin. During the summers, when someone I know has had the unfortunate luck of getting a sunburn, I find myself filled with joy knowing that I might be peeling away someone's epidermis in soft flakes.

Once upon a time, when someone was looking at my artistic work, they asked me why I was obsessed with death. I had never really thought of myself as someone who was infatuated with morality and death. But then, more and more people were starting to ask me the same question, why death? And it made me start to question how and why I make the things that I make.

I enjoy the visceral feeling of wax; the contours and crevasses that are created when hot and cold wax merge, clash, in a beautiful and chaotic way. My love affair with wax began while in undergraduate school. I was asked to make a painting without using paint or the usual traditional methods. Oils had been my first love and I wanted to keep the beautiful qualities of oils, the way they could capture light and create a mood. In my research I came across encaustics. The similar ways in which wax interacted with light reminded me of oils. As I began to use the wax, I found that it held other similarities to the fairy tales and stories I loved.

Historically, artists and artisans have used wax as a sculptural tool. It was not thought of as a final form but rather a part of the casting process or as a modeling guide. Looking back through history, I came across one of my favorite wax modelers, Anna Manzolini. She was an

eighteenth-century wax artist who made wax models used for anatomical guides.¹ These models were beautiful and anatomically correct in every way. They were not just models for science and observation but works of art. Her work was groundbreaking, not just because she was a woman, but also because of the miraculous care for detail she took into every wax model she made. Even her self-portrait is unique (figure 1), showing her at work dissecting a human brain. During the eighteenth-century many artists would use clothing to inform social rank, and yet Manzolini is dressed well above her station. She wears a beautiful pink gown with pearls and jewelry. This in itself would not be as important if not for the open skull between her hands. “The seat of knowledge that lies quite literally in her feminine grasp is a clear provocation to those who would doubt a woman’s intellectual authority”.²

Wax, used as a sculptural material, has a plasticity that allows the artist to create different textures and meanings. When in its natural state, wax is solid and impervious. When a little heat is added, the wax becomes soft and malleable, allowing the artist to mold the wax into new configurations. Because it’s fragile and resilient, wax is able to be both symbolically submissive and assertive. Like an oil painting, the wax is able to capture light in its many layers, giving the figure a sense of life. Wax is a fatty material and, as such, evokes corporality through its surface resemblance to bodily tissues and skin.

An inspiration of a lot of my work is Berlinde de Bruyckere. Her use of wax and the corporeal body demands a different analysis. While wax is used as a material that characterizes the physical forms of the body, it is equally capable of transforming the body into something beyond itself. The wax complements and emphasizes the limitations, ephemerality, and fragility of the corporeal form. When considering de Bruyckere’s *Schmerzemann V* (figure 3), we can

see the delicacy within her damaged and sickly figure juxtaposed against the cold iron pillar. With these two contrasted materials, the wax is emphasized as fragile and the pillar as permanence. Together, they become the perfect metaphor to carry themes of the fragile body and the stability of existence. The yellows, blues, and grays of the fleshy qualities of the apparently rotting skin are reminiscent of the Black Death. The body is de-void of life. It hangs on the pole as a reminder of what was once flourishing. Even without a face, this corporeal body is able to illustrate the same feeling of acceptance a face can. There is pain that is witnessed within the curling gesture of the toes, but we can also see a relaxation within the limbs that comes with acknowledgement of that pain (figure 3). While de Bruyckere's skins are smooth and have the color of decaying flesh, the skins in my work are flakier. They more resemble rotting or sloughing organic material (figure 4).

Berlinde de Bruyckere is not the only artist to use wax within their work. Urs Fischer uses a range of materials in his sculptures that allow for a corporeal construction and deconstruction in his works. Wax is the perfect material choice which produces this effect. Within his work, Fischer wants to explore the ephemerality of the sculpture and its relation to that aspect of the human body. Some of his more well-known works are wax sculptures of men and women that melt throughout the duration of the exhibition.³ Their dripping and melting forms help carry the idea that sculpture and the body both share a material transformation, as well as, a mortality (figure 5). With the literal transformation of the human form within his works, he is able to comment on the inescapable demise of both material and subject.

I relate to the idea that wax allows the destructive qualities of the corporeal form to emerge. *Mirrors* is a performative sculpture in which I formed two wax faces, one of myself and

the other of a friend, and turned them towards each other (figure 6). As they faced each other I lit a single wick at the center of each head allowing them to burn. I wanted to create a discussion about how the intense gaze between the faces became a burning desire, just like the flames. The faces then burned together for several minutes, mirroring the destructiveness of a gaze. During the performance the heads began to burn at different rates. One head would burn quickly and then slow, seemingly allowing the other head to burn faster. It felt like a dance. By the end of the allotted time, both heads had burned down to the same point, to the end of the nose.

It has taken me years to come to terms with the fact that my sculptures will wither and “die”, melting until there is nothing left. But I have found that there is beauty in this transformative quality of the wax. Everything has a future, but eventually as something else. The passing of time creates urgency and is a force for us to pay attention to things.

Chapter Two: The Ephemeral

When I was young, maybe four or five, I had my first real encounter with death. My grandmother and her sister, my great aunt Linda, decided that I should accompany them to several different funerals over the summer. I was young and didn't really understand what was happening. It wasn't until we arrived at the first funeral that something felt amiss. I wasn't sure why so many people were crying. Everywhere I looked, faces were gloomy and despondent. As I approached the coffin, the man inside seemed peaceful; like he was sleeping. But something was wrong. His skin was rubbery and looked like plastic and he wasn't breathing. Or was he? His shirt would flutter ever so slightly, giving the illusion of faint life-giving breaths. I immediately screamed. At any moment I thought his eyes would fly open and he would reach out of the coffin to grab me, taking me with him to the unknown, but surely dark place of nothingness. You could say that this was my first encounter with death.

My grandmother quickly grabbed my arm and spirited me away from the crowd of mourners. I was ashamed by what I had done. In a calm and comforting manner, she explained to me that it was just the air vent that was blowing softly on the gentleman's clothes, giving the illusion of breathing, and that there was nothing I should be afraid of and to remember we all must die eventually. The thought of nothingness, of ceasing to exist, to never see my loved ones or feel the heat of the sun on my skin, scared me for years afterward. But this dread slowly turned to curiosity. My art became the means by which I could delve into metaphysical curiosity about the unknown.

This past summer, my grandfather died. He was surrounded by friends and family, in no pain, but it was not a peaceful death. His labored breathing and the abrupt silence that followed, still haunt me. It was the day before his death that I remember the most. Surrounded by the emotional chaos of my relatives, my grandmother, shedding no tears, sat calmly beside my grandfather. A gentle and sometimes playfully spiteful woman by nature, she said nothing as she held his hand. My mother came over and gently reached across the bed to hold both of their

hands. In that moment no words were exchanged, but everything that could be said took place within this simple gesture of them holding each other's hand.

I had an overwhelming desire to capture this moment in an oil painting (figure 7). My use of color within this piece was important in setting the tone. With gentle blues and creams, I created an environment that would support a hospital-like atmosphere. The circle created between the hands of my mother, grandmother and grandfather can be interpreted as a form of healing. However, it is the metal arm of the hospital bed that creates the feeling of morbidity. It grounds the viewer into the realm of sickness and death. As a distinguishable object, we understand that this type of bed is used in hospitals with the sick and injured. Its hygienic coldness is in stark contrast to that of the warm skin tones. The metal rail can change a warm feeling to that of a cold one instantaneously, which brings our attention to the hands.

From the generic hospital gown with the polka dots to the metallic arm of the bed, the hands stand out in stark contrast. I used reds, yellows, creams, and blues to give the illusion of life. The hands carry a warmth, not only in color, but in the gentleness in which they interact with one another. When viewing hands within this setting, we are reminded of healing hands and the power of touch. However, without faces to inform us, we cannot be sure if the hands are there to heal the sick or to comfort the loss of someone's life. When we see the hands in direct contrast with the metal of the hospital bed, the skin tones of the hands seem more waxy and dead. We shift from viewing a healing theme to one of mourning. I did not want to include the faces of anyone within this moment because I did not want to have facial expression inform the viewer. It was this ambiguity of gesture that captivated me when I took the photo. Other art-

works of mine have revolved around the gestural language as a narrative. This painting needed to have the same theme.

One of my favorite artists is Magdalena Abakanowicz. Her sculptural figures implore a sense of melancholy. Laid out on the floor or standing in rows, these organic and hollow forms leave only glimpses of what once was human (figure 8). The only recognizable part of the body is the wrinkled and hollowed out forms of the human back. Hunched over themselves or lined up in a soldierly formation, from some invisible pressure, these corporeal forms summon a sense of memory of what once was. Situating individual forms within a crowd, she confronts memories and the anxieties that surround a chaotic past. In many of her sculptures dealing with the horrors of war, Magdalena Abakanowicz challenged the use of the organic and the non-organic to summon an awareness of the ephemeral of both the corporeal form and that of a memory.⁴ Her work heavily influenced the skins that I made first semester.

The ephemeral body and that of the body in suffering is a theme recognizable in my works, as well as, other contemporary artists. Fat and wax share a similar feel and chemical make-up. Considering the John Isaacs sculpture, *The Matrix of Amnesia*, we can see a comparison of the suffering body to the use of material (figure 9). Under the weight of an overabundance of fat, this body has collapsed in an exhausted pile on the ground. Repulsed by the sheer size and magnitude of the work, a viewer is drawn in by imagining the struggle to move under so much weight. There are several kinds of shock value. I am not the biggest fan of the shock value that Isaacs invokes within his work. Instead of gruesomeness, my work is more relatable to Titians, as in his *Flaying of Marsyas* (figure 2). The skins are not bloody like they have been peeled from the body but rather void of something internal; the soul. The liberation of

one's soul from the body is just one of many themes to be found within the painting. I want to distinguish my work further by invoking the sensation of the evanescent. My work, *Vaccus*, became the brain child of this attempt (figure 4). The bodies that are hung, sagging and rotting, are voided shells; reflections of what once was. They make the viewer question the life the bodies had before their demise and what will happen to them now that purpose is over.

When thinking about childhood and things that remind us of never growing up, we may think of the transitional objects of our childhood. It could have been the teddy bear given to help us stop crying or the blanket we refused to sleep without. The transitional object is a child's first "me not me" possession. It is the thing we first bond to that is inanimate.⁵ This means that the object has become a tool in the development of the child. Once the object is given to a child, it comes to represent the mother exclusively, where replacing the object, if lost, or has changed its smell, could produce anxiety in the child.⁶ The object is taken everywhere, becoming so essential that it becomes directly associated in the child's mind with pleasure.

I have long been fascinated with the corporeal form, its relationship to the wax that I use and the metaphors it contains because of its ephemeral qualities. Compare the teddy bear and the human body. Both bodies have insides; batting verses muscles and tissues. They both have outer layers of skin. The bear's might be fluffy and soft to the touch versus the waxy smooth skin of a human, but both types of skin hold memories of the past in the form of scars or rips and holes. I remember when my favorite lion beanie baby had a small rip in one of his seams and all of the small white beads fell out of him like blood, running out of his tiny body all onto the floor. Transitional objects have had lives and bodies of their own. This makes me think about my childhood and the age-old question, what do you want to be when you grow up? And I imagined

how the bear would react to this question. Would they look forward to growing up and trying on different forms of “skin”? The idea of being able to strip off one’s skin and take another seemed strange to me then. I have gotten used to my lumps and bumps, and scars, but I understand the appeal of being able to choose a different one.

Chapter Three: The Macabre

Every Friday was Show-and-tell day at our school. There was always a bit of a panic that surrounded the day because you wanted to make sure you brought the coolest thing. That particular day, I don't even remember what I brought. I just remember the boy in class who said nothing as he placed a jar on the table in front of me, a jar with his extra finger.

There is a long history of the strange fascination with the macabre and the corporeal body. Flesh, bone, and muscle combine together to form perfect, powerful bodies that can climb, contort, and move freely. The body is a mesmerizing object. But when we take a body, a beautiful and familiar object, and distort it, making it unfamiliar and uncanny, something beautiful begins to appear and twist this form into the macabre.

One of the first macabre works I made was *Hush* (figure 10). The work is a charcoal and pastel painting on a wood panel. Surrounded by a black background, the subject is a woman cradling a sleeping child, but instead of a human head the woman's face is that of a teddy bear.

The idea of a corpse, or of one of my skins, reflects this uncanny alternation. A piece of flesh or a limb no longer has its original meaning or is tied to the body from which it came from. When someone dies, they are no longer seen as a person but rather a vessel made of flesh, a thing. They are referred to as so-and-sos dead body and become an object. Peter Schwenger said it perfectly in his book *The Tears of Things*:

If the corpse is waste, that doesn't mean that it has simply crossed to "the other side of the border." Rather, it is a peculiarly unique object, an object that is a border. A border between what, then? Between "I" who expel and that which I expel, to be sure; between the pure and the polluted. But most disturbingly, between subject and object. For the dead body has now become object, it is not wholly so; it bears the imprint of a residual subjectivity, residue within residue.⁷

I like this idea of the body being a residue of life. Like the wax I use in my work there is always a residue left over, on hands or in a thin film on the ground where the sculpture previously stood. The collective body of my wax works are a residue within a residue.

The macabre is a way in which we are reminded of the ephemeral qualities of our lives. Collections of specimens in jars, human remains, and wax mutilated figures that are hundreds of years old still exist in collections all around the world.⁸ The gruesome and deathly qualities of these collections are important enough for them to be cared for all these years. These collections bring up the question of what comes before and after life. This desire to seek answers of some unknown has obviously persisted over time. In his book *The Absent Body*, Drew Leder speaks of birth and death:

My birth is the beginning of my life: in it I was placed, and once and for all, into the world, and posed in being before I was able to posit any act voluntarily. Yet this central event to which I refer in dating all the events of my life leaves no memory. I am always after my birth – in a sense analogous to that of being always before my death. I find myself alive – I am already born. Furthermore, nothing shows me that there had been a beginning of myself: my birth is precisely what remains hidden from my consciousness.⁹

There is something beautiful in thinking about the elusiveness of our origins. Comparable to death, we do not know what came before and can only imagine what it was like. We are thrust

into this world from an unknown place and are simultaneously thrust towards another form of unknowing. We may not consciously acknowledge this desire to discover where we come from or where we are going, but it spurs our actions every day.

Objects can also be vessels for us to examine this desire to discover our origins. While we may not be able to comprehend our own theoretical desires, art has a way of contextualizing these thoughts and feelings into visual form. I want to use my work to start conversations about these hard, and sometimes taboo subjects. My latest work is about the relationship between birth, life, and death. I created an overwhelmingly large pile of burnt wood, ash and other darkly colored materials. You see and feel it as overwhelming. But this pile is hollow and split in half. Inside, you can find one section filled with stuffed animals and materials representing the transitional objects of childhood while the other half has hollowed parts of the human body.

Chapter Four: The *Unheimlich*

For the longest time, I never knew what was behind the door. Old chipped paint fell off of it as the white slowly faded to yellow. It was a mystery, this random door in my grandmother's kitchen. It was off to the side, next to a south facing window located in its own nook behind the refrigerator. The crystals that she hung in the window would catch the afternoon light and cast beautiful bursts of colors across its face. One day I asked what was inside. (The mystery was just too much for my small mind to handle.) The cast iron door handle felt unusually cold in my hands. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I was greeted by pots, pans, cans of nonperishable foods, and random boxes. A small wooden ladder appeared towards the back. Its worn wooden steps led up to a platform that was perfectly sized for my toddler body. Excitedly, I scrambled over the junk and climbed into this new cubby of hope. As the darkening void swallowed me whole, I finally felt like I was home.

The door was still faded and chipped when we sold my grandparent's house. The stairs where still there leading to what was once my secret place of solitude. Everything was the same, except for the ghosts of the past that haunt it now.

I am fascinated with the idea of putting away one's childhood and deciding to grow up, somehow leaving these objects to be forgotten. Within my piece, *Neverland* (figure 11), I used teddy bears to represent childhood in a universal way. Each bear is unique in how I dipped them repeatedly into hot wax, coating them and transforming them. Each time they were dipped they became less and less of what they once were, yet they still held onto their form. It was when the wax began to coat their faces and distort their figure that they began to mutate into new forms. Wax can be used as a preserving agent, but on this occasion the wax distorted and coated the bears until they were unrecognizable.

The feelings that uncanny objects provoke are eerie, strange, mysterious, and creepy, yet there is a familiarity to them as well. These feelings of the uncanny can often be found within the simple transitional object. The word uncanny stems from the German word *unheimlich*. Over time the direct translation of the word has been lost and cannot be related to an English word. According to Sigmund Freud, the definition of *unheimlich* means “un-home” or something that is familiar and strange. Freud states that this term “applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come to the open.”¹⁰ He goes on to say that,

Not everything that is new and unfamiliar is frightening, however; the relation is not capable of inversion. All one can say is that what is novel may well prove frightening and uncanny; some things that are novel are indeed frightening, but not by any means all. Something has to be added to what is novel and the unfamiliar if it is to become uncanny.¹¹

The object must be both familiar to us, as well as, unfamiliar. Without this familiarity, these objects would not have the same power. They are not simply a scary or gory object, but rather an object infused with the ability to make us uncomfortable. For instance, think of a small teddy bear abandoned on the side of the road. Instead of finding its slumped figure on a child’s bed, the bear is displaced and in an area that you would not think to find it. The sudden shock of finding it there makes you pause and hesitate. A long-forgotten memory tickles the back of your mind. The memory is foggy and unclear, just out of reach, never fully becoming a recognizable thought. The sudden juxtaposition and displacement of the bear that has been infused with a memory allows the object to become uncanny in this instance. It is dependent on the individual’s memory corresponding with the unusual to invoke these feelings. Otherwise, every random new object that we come across would frighten us and make us feel uncomfortable. If you did not own a teddy bear, then the object may not hold the same uncanniness for you as it would for

someone else. To Freud, the uncanny is “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.”¹² The transitional object, the teddy bear or the stuffed animal from your childhood, is familiar to you and yet if we see it in a different setting than one we are used to it provokes a different understanding and mood. This is how powerful a transitional object can become uncanny. The artist Mike Kelley delves further into the transitional object, writing about how these objects within sculpture change the objects objectivity.

Transitional objects once displaced are objects that have the characteristic of what was once familiar and the capability to become unrecognizable and transformative. Within his essay, “Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny”, Kelley describes how some objects that are smaller than life-size can provoke these uncanny atmospheres. Dependent on the age and experiences of the individual viewer, Kelley notes how stuffed animals and “magical objects”, like Egyptian funerary sculptures, are surrounded by the eerie and mysterious qualities associated with the uncanny.¹³ By taking the transitional object, out of its original setting, it no longer represents the mother but instead is something lost. The connections that the object had to a specific place and memory, have been removed. The meaning and extension of the child’s self has been shifted or lost.

I like this idea of shifting the original association of an object and applying larger symbolism. When I used multiple bears together it changed the understanding. Seeing one bear with melted wax protruding from the wall being held by a white hand is sad, but when you have twelve it becomes disturbing and overpowering (figure 11 and 12). They become both an offering to you and at the same time a theft. Naming an object can transform it. According to

Robert Esposito, “by transforming a thing into a word, language empties it of reality and turns it into a pure sign.”¹⁴ This makes choosing an object for my works extremely important. Because an object carries so much symbolism, I have to choose something that will work within the context to strengthen my meaning. The teddy bear does this for me.

Much of my understanding of the uncanny can be traced to Freud and to Ernst Jentsch, a German psychologist who wrote on the uncanny in 1906, thirteen years before Freud’s essay was published. Jentsch refers to the uncanniness of wax figures and how the materials used to make such figures affect the uncanny qualities.

The fact that such wax figures often present anatomical details may contribute to the increased effect of one’s feeling, but this is definitely not the most important thing: a real anatomically prepared body does not need in the least to look so objectionable as the corresponding model in wax.¹⁵

Here, Jentsch is talking about how the uncanniness of a wax model is not uncanny because it is grotesque or unpleasant to look at, but rather, because it is so familiar to us that we can recognize ourselves within it. It is the recognizable relationship to the familiar yet unfamiliar that makes us question its existence. He goes on to state that the uncanny object,

...in wise moderation, avoids the absolute and complete imitation of nature and living beings, well knowing that such an imitation can easily produce uneasiness: the existence of a polychrome sculpture in wood and stone does not alter this fact in the least, and nor does the possibility of somewhat preventing such unpleasant side-effects if this kind of representation is nevertheless chosen. The production of the uncanny can indeed be attempted in true art, by the way, but only with exclusively artistic means and artistic intention.¹⁶

Both Freud and Jentsch see the act of copying nature as a way for the uncanny to arise. I copy the body, which gives the viewer a pathway for the uncanny to surface. The use of material, such as: wood, stone, or wax, in combination with my subject creates the unfamiliar within the familiar.

According to the literary critic and poet, Susan Stewart, the relationship between the object and display also plays a role in the disposition of the uncanny.

Although the given qualities of such animate objects allow them to endure beyond flux and history, this very transcendence and permanence also links them to the world of the dead, to the end of organic growth and the onset of inaccessibility to the living.¹⁷

Objects and materials that are organic are dead materials. It is when an object is mechanized or given features that resemble the living that we sense the unsettling. Uncanny objects transcend their original meaning and become something more; they become alive and dead all at once. By displacing them in a new and unfamiliar way, we are exposing the material as a dead material and allowing the uncertainty in our own minds to come surface. Wax has a similar because it can only decay by burning or melting.

Artists like Kiki Smith use the uncanny to show how something taboo can be viewed as natural and beautiful. Widely known for her feminist works, Smith challenges the stereotypical view of the human form and the conditions in which it is displayed. Her use of various materials asks the viewer to see beauty in the grotesque. Through her use of the uncanny, Smith is able to take a grotesque body or bodily function and give it power and purpose even as it goes against social norms. Both of her sculptures *Train* (figure 13) and *Tale* (figure 14) do this. Within each

of these works, Smith has taken a natural bodily function and given it a new perspective. Natural process, such as menstrual bleeding and defecation, are considered taboo and distasteful in western culture. The standing female form in *Train*, has knees slightly bent and trails of what seems to be blood is coming from her vagina. Smith uses beaded strands to represent blood as a lure to draw viewers closer. She uses the tension between the pervasive social idea of the grotesque, with regard to the natural processes of menstruation or defecation and challenges the viewer to see them as beautiful.

I was first drawn to Kiki Smith for her work involving the fairy tale. She interpreted legends and stories from the past and connects them to our lives today. *Rapture* (figure 16), a 2001 sculpture made of bronze, has a woman stepping out of a wolf's stomach, referencing, of course, the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*. This tale was largely used as a warning for young women to beware of men and their sexual fantasies. What I see when I look at this piece is a woman, emerging from a male dominated world, capable of overcoming incredible odds. Little Red Riding Hood did not need saving from the wolf but rather she was able to escape and save herself. Even a traditional tale can be re-written and given new life.

As a female artist, I try to bring this reinterpretation into my work. I see flesh and decay as parts of life and, therefore, capable of being natural, beautiful. My wax skins and coated bears make many viewers turn away. Their waxy quality so resembles rotting skin that it disturbs people. However, when the initial shock of the uncanny skins and bears is overcome, viewers are drawn to the details within the wax and want to touch it, becoming a tactile experience.

Chapter Six: Once Upon a Time

One day I was in a store with my two older sisters, Natalie was in high school and Shelby would have been around 8. At the time I would have been about 6 years old. My attention was caught by a pile of books in the middle of the aisle. The cover showed a boy on a broomstick, stretching out his hands trying desperately to catch a small golden winged ball. Within the background you could see a beautiful unicorn and what appeared to be a three-headed doglike creature. Spellbound, Shelby and I pointed out our discovery to my sister Natalie. Giving in to our relentless cries, she promised to read the book to us and if we didn't like it, she would return it next week. That night snuggled warmly into our beds, a family sisterhood tradition of reading and telling stories began.

My fascination with stories and myths has always been a part of my life, fairy tales being my favorite allegorical and creative outlet. Fairy tale characters are treated crudely and horrifically. Mutilated, burned, raped, and slowly tortured to death, they are put through hell and somehow miraculously survive. Despite the gruesome acts within these tales, we tell them to our children at bedtime and in doing so, we scare them to sleep. This idea that a child must be scared into being a “good little girl or boy” and for them to then go peacefully to sleep with these disquieting thoughts has always fascinated and disturbed me.

Like the transitional object, fairy tales become a powerful tool in a child's imaginative development. There is something both beautiful and melancholic about these cultural stories. Within fairy tales there is magic and mayhem, allowing for our imagination to take over and run wild with childhood enthrallment. Witches, talking animals and objects, princes and princesses are pushed to their limits through trials of trepidation and enchantment. The duality between the

beautiful and the strange enflames the imagination and blurs the lines between reality and make-believe.

The history of the Grimm Brothers is surrounded by controversy. During the early 1800s, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm set out into the German countryside. During the Romantic age many Germans felt that their identity as a nation was in jeopardy. Education of the lower classes had disrupted the social status. Political unrest and the call for unity more apparent than ever, gave the Grimm brothers the opportunity¹⁸. The Grimm brothers wanted to give Germans a connection. Fairy tales and folktales had become a way for cultural traditions to survive. By collecting stories that were “native to, or predominated in, a given area, so that a particular story might be claimed as belonging especially to a particular national culture” the Grimm brothers were able to collect bits of cultural history.¹⁹

My interest in death and mortality has become a newer element within my work. While reading some of the Grimm Brothers fairy tales I stumbled upon a lesser known tale about a girl who believed that the unfortunate circumstances of her life were her fault because she was born a girl. In my sculpture, *Voiceless*, I wanted to capture the despair and the hopelessness of that character. The reclining wax figure is positioned with one hand covering her throat while the other lays loosely at her side (figure 15). The way in which she is leaning back and has her legs crossed insinuate an uncomfortable and fatiguing gesture frozen in time. The wax complements and emphasizes the limitations, ephemerality, and fragility of the female form. We can see the delicacy of her damaged and breaking figure as she cracks and slowly melts into the floor. Perched on her shoulder is a black raven made of wax, fabric and wire with wings that drape down her back and onto the floor. The blue-black feathers contradict the warm yellows and reds

of the fleshy figure. As the raven sits on her shoulder, its body drips black wax down onto the girl, giving the illusion of time passing. Covering her mouth is a single black feather. This is to indicate that the female figure is unable to speak and free herself from the imposing bird. Within today's context, this work can be seen as illustrating how women are trying to speak out and even though they are able to be heard, no one is truly listening. The raven is seen throughout history as a messenger for either good or evil. In combination with the theatrical lighting and trickling of wax, this raven represents a messenger of tragedy.

Chapter Six: Transmogrification

Sundays were never my favorite day. Sundays meant going to church and sitting for an hour in fancy clothes that felt itchy and listening to some man preach about something I didn't understand. The stained-glass windows would cast colorful shadows onto my skin. I would imagine these shadows were portals into other worlds. I would become something alien, something beautiful.

One of the most beloved puppets is Pinocchio. Though Disney's adorable adaptation of the fairy tale was less likely to give your child nightmares like the original tale, I prefer the gory and nightmarish tale written by Carlo Collodi. This tale recalls my past works in which Pinocchio was the subject (figure 17). Having a deep yearning to become a real boy, Pinocchio went through many chaotic and destructive adventures to achieve his goal. Perched precariously on thin glass, my Pinocchio was made from wax and would burn slowly from his head. As time wore on, the wax slowly dripping to the floor, grew into long tendrils. I wanted to capture the self-destructive tendencies and the regret that surrounded this puppet.

I started to ask myself what truly makes a puppet or a marionette? Both have a body or form that is being manipulated physically by strings or hands to give the illusion of life by a puppeteer. At this moment in my practice, I felt like multiple forces were pulling me in several different directions. I was being pulled academically, by family issues, and personal motivations to succeed. I felt trapped and that I wouldn't be able to get away no matter what I did. I was a puppet, being pulled by my own invisible strings.

For my puppet, I decided to use wax to give a fleshly quality to the limbs I casted. I have live-casted in the past and knew the toil and anguish my models often go through, but I wanted

to cast myself; after all, I am the puppet. These limbs emerged from the wall, struggling with or against its own strings (figure 18). Instead of string, the limbs were tangled up in candle wicks. They too, protruding from the walls, implying that they existed beyond the white barrier, that someone or something else was controlling them. It is a match that is clutched in the left hand and catches the viewer's attention. As the right hand pulls one of the strings toward the unlit match, you can see that the corporeal form has an idea of how to free itself. Yet, this could also be the body's destruction. Once the match is lit and the wicks are aflame, the body will be consumed by fire.

There are a lot of religious connotations within my work; I ritualistically dip into wax and use flame to make my sculptures. Similarly, Berlinde de Bruyckere uses gestures caught within her forms to infer a darker interpretation which references religious iconography and allows the viewer to see a beauty in repulsion. I use the of layering of waxes to inform my content. de Bruyckere's sculptures manifest religious iconography and give her sculptures a feeling of the sublime. In *Schmerzemann V* (figure 3), we are able to identify several religious iconography representations, such as the body in pain and the crucifixion. The titles of her work also carry symbolism and meaning. *Schmerzemann* in English means 'Man of Sorrows'.²⁰ This invokes iconic depictions of the Passion of Christ naked from the waist up, with evidence of his recent crucifixion on his hands and blood pouring from the spear wound on his ribs (figure 21).

A common understanding in Christian religions is that Christ suffered and died on the cross to save humanity from sins. Raised Catholic, I can still remember the first time I saw the stations of the cross. It was disturbing to think of the pain and suffering one man had to go through. In my work, *Vaccus* (figure 4), the corporeal forms resonate with the theme of the

fragility of life. The frail and voided rubberized forms with twisted limbs and contorted toes, connote anguish and agony. Not only are the gestures referencing the Crucifixion of Christ, but also how I arranged the display of the corporeal bodies. The spectator is made aware of how they are to view the piece by recognizing its careful placement within the room on its armature. Having the bodies draped across metal bars and hung from rusty metal chains from above invokes a religious and Christlike analogy. Carefully placing the figures higher than eye level, the observer is required to look up to examine them. By making the viewer an active participant, a scene comparable to being witness to the Crucifixion is invoked.

In the 2013 exhibition catalogue *Cripplewood*, de Bruyckere spoke of how Saint Sebastian has been an inspiration throughout her works.²¹ She tells the tragic story of a youthful Roman officer who is accused of being Christian, which was blasphemous and illegal in Rome during this time. After being compelled to deny his faith and refusing to do so, Sebastian is secured to a tree, where he is to be executed by arrows (figure 19). Apollo, the Greek god of plague and war, was believed to have used arrows to transmit the Black Death.²² Because Sebastian's life was spared and the arrows did not harm him, he became the Patron Saint of plague victims. It is in these depictions of Saint Sebastian that de Bruyckere finds inspiration.

It's his stubbornness, mostly, that attracts me. This young officer in the Roman army, tortured to death, as he would not deny his Christian faith. The stoical acceptance of his fate, pride in his posture that remains unaffected. Not a glimpse of pain in his expression. The arrows do not seem to harm him, although they penetrate his body. This tells me something about his mental state; he embodies a combination of beauty and self-contempt, a "mystical pain".²³

By no means did saints lead tranquil lives. In actuality, it is the sorrows and afflictions that they endured throughout their lives that qualified them for sainthood. Saint Bartholomew is most commonly depicted carrying his flayed skin over his back, as punishment for not renouncing his Christian faith (figure 20). It was during the Renaissance that artists first began to use flayed bodies known as *écorchés* to study the human anatomy and form,²⁴ which gives these works a historical foundation. The thin and fragile edges of the figures skin visually resembles that of a flayed membrane (figure 4). Shifting your gaze to the limbs of each figure within *Vaccus*, you can see the creases, folds, and rolls of the skin. There are stains and rips and hair. Only something that is hollow or void of anything can give this desired effect.

Mystical pain is something that has intrigued me. It is something that I strive to understand and capture within my work. There are moments when the body is twisted and in pain that it becomes beautiful. Not in a creepy serial killer way, but in the sense that the body can endure so much. There is a moment when even after all of the pain, the body and soul is able to find peace. The idea that the body can endure and find peace led me to my final work.

Chapter Seven: Trust the Process

I remember the day I was taught how to swim. My father was hanging on to my hands pulling me behind him in the water. He had a twinkle in his eye and a devilish grin. I knew what was coming and begged him not to do it. Then he just let go.

My making process has always been a little like swimming. I have to dive right in to making before something starts to emerge. In the beginning I like to sketch, ask myself why the piece should be made out of certain materials and what is the bigger question. But it is within the actual making, the dirty chaotic mess of making, that my ideas form. There is a moment when time stops and the only thing that matters are my hands and the material.

My largest work to date is the sculpture I made for my MFA thesis show, *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* (figure 22). It's been through many stages of progress. I attempted to combine all of my research and previous works into one idea. All of my research and questioning approached this conclusion. I developed my understanding of the idea that when we are born, we come from a place unknown, an unknowing void, and we also go to an unknown place once we die. I like to think of them as one and the same, circular and not linear.

The concept for this piece was inspired by an antique spinning wheel. I searched for days to find a spinning wheel that was reminiscent of the wheel I used during the summer I was a historic interpreter. I needed an object that would carry symbolism, as well as transition seamlessly into my sculpture. The spinning wheel that fit all of these criteria was from a family in Pennsylvania. For over seventy-five years it had been passed down from generation to generation. Wear and deterioration from multiple owners are evident on its natural wood grain.

The thought that I was able to connect with the people of the past who used to use this device for their livelihoods gave me chills.

The spinning wheel gave me the opportunity to move away from literal figural forms within my work. I wanted to combine objects instilled with symbolism from fairy tales and the corporeal forms I make from wax. I needed to use materials that would carry symbolic nature within themselves and yet, when combined, have new meanings. As the spinning wheel became my own figure, so did the rest of the installation.

The scale for this piece is overwhelming to insinuate a never-ending entity. I used burnt pieces of wood as a material because the dark sootiness of the transformed wood would give the feeling of something that once was and could also continue to be. As I was chopping wood with my father, it occurred to me how ironic it was that I was using pieces of the ash tree to represent my piles as 'ashes'. I would have nine-foot high hollowed halves of one pile that would make up my concept of the void. I say pile, but a steel structure is welded together underneath to resemble a pile of stacked wood. While one side of the pile represents the before, childhood and the beginning of life, the second half represents death. Inside, there are parts of the transitional objects, teddy bears. These teddy bears are not whole but rather in parts to represent what is to come. When the sculpture is viewed in full, the burnt wooded halves of the pile form the shape of a womb that surrounds the spinning wheel. The feminine quality of the piles cradles the spinning wheel, giving life and sheltering life.

Historically, spinning wheels have a multitude of symbolism; social, sexual, and spiritual. Just thinking of one reminds me of Rumpelstiltskin, Sleeping Beauty, or even the Three Fates from Greek mythology. In her book, *Memories of our Lost Hands*, author Sonoko Toyoda uses

the Grimm fairy tale of the Handless Maiden to explain how feminine creativity stems from a woman's hands and that in order for a woman to create she must recover the power of her hands by understanding the past⁵. As the story goes, the miller unwittingly promises the devil his daughter in exchange for wealth. As a pious girl, who cleans her hands with water, the devil is unable to claim her and demands that the father cuts off his daughters' hands. She lets him but washes her bloody stumps in her own tears, defeating the devil.⁶ It is the loss of her hands and her source of creativity that the author believes creates a loss of feminine spirituality.

As a craft mechanism, the spinning wheel is directly connected to hands. Because women were the primary users of the spinning wheel, this object can never be detached from the feminine textile history or that of the female labor. A burned wooden structure cradling the spinning wheel, emphasizes the connection to the feminine.

One of my favorite references of a spinning wheel comes from *The Wheel of Time Series* by Robert Jordan.

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legends fade to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long passed, a wind rose in the Maintains of Mist. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was a beginning.²⁷

I have always loved this passage. In the beginning of every book in the series, this passage is slightly different but always starts and ends the same. I want my spinning wheel to have this kind of representation of life. The wheel to spins out wax, the flesh of life, a sort of umbilical cord, connecting the two halves and therefore, connecting the two voids.

Conclusion

Someone once asked me if I was obsessed with death. I prefer to think of it not as an obsession with death, but rather a curiosity about life. My work is a representation of that curiosity. I strive to find objects and stories that help me explore how I fit into the world. I create works that help me understand where we are going. Using fairy tales as a creative outlet for my imagination, I combine the uncanny and the ephemeral qualities of wax with symbolic objects. Comparing my works to artists such as Kiki Smith, Urs Fischer, Magdalena Abakanowicz, and Mike Kelley, and Berlinde De Bruyckere, I explore how my artistic creations relate to similar subjects and materials. Through the narrative qualities of my work, I encourage my audience to begin conversations about taboo subjects like death.

Once upon a time, when I was a little girl I came upon a corpse. It was a small animal, but its rotting flesh made it hard to tell what it once was. The fur on its body hung loosely off its bones. The body seemed to be moving of its own accord, until I realized that maggots were the culprits. Life had somehow found a way to thrive off of this death. "Children shouldn't play with dead things..." echoed my mother's voice in my head. But I could see that it wasn't just death, that there was life here as well.

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- ¹ Rebecca Marie Messbarger and Anna Morandi Manzolini, *The Lady Anatomist: The life and Works of Anna Morandi Manzolini* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 101.
- ² Ibid
- ³ "Urs Fischer Biography – Urs Fischer on Artnet," accessed May 4, 2018, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/urs-fischer/biography>.
- ⁴ "Magdalena Abakanowicz," accessed May 3, 2018, <http://www.abakanowicz.art.pl/>.
- ⁵ D.W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" (1951), in *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1958), p. 229.
- ⁶ Mike Kelley and John C. Welchman, *Mike Kelley: Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 75.
- ⁷ Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 157.
- ⁸ Paul Gambino, *Morbid Curiosities: Collections of the Uncommon and the Bizarre* (London, United Kingdom: Laurence King Publishing, 2016).
- ⁹ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).
- ¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, David McLintock, and Hugh Haughton, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 132.
- ¹¹ Ibid 125.
- ¹² Ibid 124
- ¹³ Ibid 75
- ¹⁴ Roberto Esposito, *Persons and Things: From the Body's Point of View* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 9
- ¹⁵ Forbes Morlock, "Doubly Uncanny: An Introduction to 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny'", (*Angelaki* 2.1, 1995): 17-21.
- ¹⁶ Jentsch 10
- ¹⁷ *Visual Display: Culture beyond Appearances* (New York: New Press, 1998), 31.
- ¹⁸ Christa Kamenetsky, *The Brothers Grimm & Their Critics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), 59.
- ¹⁹ Robert Darnton. *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes In French Cultural History* "Peasants Tell Tales" (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 18.
- ²⁰ Nancy Patterson Ševčenko. "Man of Sorrows." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*.: Oxford University Press, 1991. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195046526.001.0001/acref-9780195046526-e-3308>.
- ²¹ Berlinde De Bruyckere, John M. Coetzee, and Herman Parret. *Cripplewood: Berlinde De Bruyckere & J. M. Coetzee Kreupelhout*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.
- ²² Ibid
- ²³ Ibid
- ²⁴ Postle, Martin. "Flayed for Art: The écorché Figure in the English Art Academy." *The British Art Journal* 5, no. 1 (2004): 55-63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41614517>.
- ²⁵ Sonoko Toyoda. *Memories of Our Lost Hands: Searching for Feminine Spirituality and Creativity*. First ed. (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2006).
- ²⁶ Ibid, 19.
- ²⁷ Robert Jordan. *The Wheel of Time: The Eye of the World*. New York: Tor Books, 2012. 1



Figure 1
Self-Portrait of Anna Morandi, 1750-1755
Wax and mixed media



Figure 2
Titian
Flaying of Marsyas, 1570-1575
7' x 7'
Oil on Canvas



Figure 3
Berlinde de Bruyckere
Schmerzensmann V, 2006
14' x 3' x 3'
Epoxy, wax, iron



Figure 4

Vaccus, 2018

15' x 18' x 4'

Wax, iron, chain, muslin, hand-sewn teddy bear



Figure 5
Urs Fischer
Untitled, 2011
6.5' x 2' x 1.5'
Wax, pigments, wicks, steel

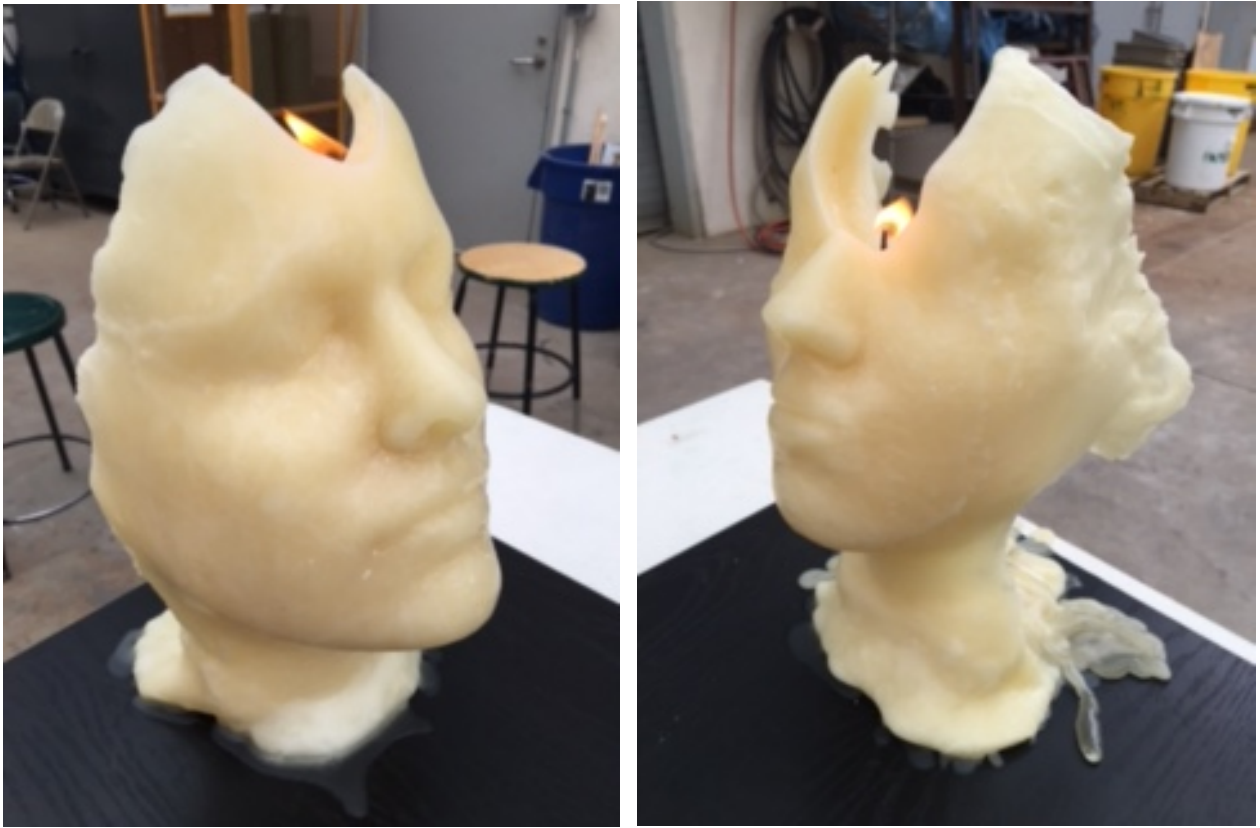


Figure 6
Mirrors, 2017
1' x 2' x 3'
Wax, wood, wick, and flame



Figure 7
Memory, 2018
2.5' x 3.5'
Oil on wood panel



Figure 8
Magdalena Abakanowicz
Baks, 1976-1980
2' x 2' x 2'
Burlap, resin



Figure 9
John Isaacs
The Matrix of Amnesia, 1997
6.5' x 5' x 2'
Microcrystalline wax, oil paint, fiberglass resin



Figure 10
Hush, 2018
18" x 32"
Charcoal on wood panel



Figure 11
Neverland, 2017
12' x 3' x 15'
Wax, teddy bears, wick, flames



Figure 12
Neverland, 2017 (detail)
12' x 3' x 15'
Wax, teddy bears, wick, flames



Figure 13
Kiki Smith
Untitled (Train), 1993
53" x 55" x 168"
Wax with beads



Figure 14
Kiki Smith
Tale, 1992
160" x 23" x 23"
Wax, pigment, papier-mâché



Figure 15
Voiceless, 2019
4' x 5' x 4'
Wax, cloth, wood, wire



Figure 16
Kiki Smith
Rapture, 2001
67 ¼" x 62" x 26 ½"
Bronze



Figure 17

Liar Liar, 2015

8' x 5' x 5'

Wood, glass, wax, oil paint, wick, flame



Figure 18
Deliverance, 2017
4' x 4' x 5'
Wax, sand, plaster, wick



Figure 19
Perugino
Saint Sebastian, 15th Century
3.5' x 2'
painting



Figure 20
Pierre Legros II
Saint Bartholomew, after 1738
34"
Marble

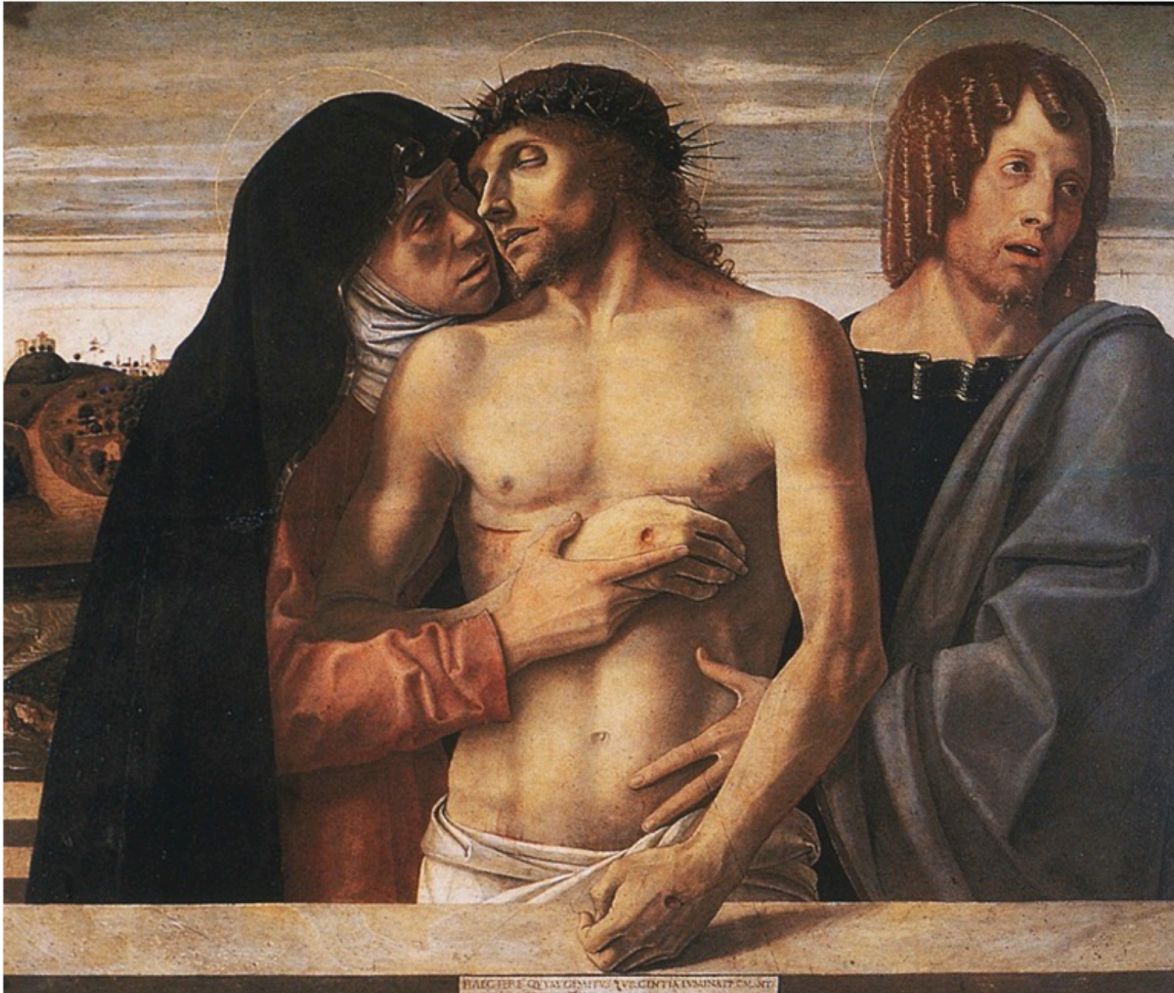


Figure 21
Giovanni Bellini
Pieta, 1516
2' x 3.5'
Oil on wood



Figure 22
Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things
Variable Dimensions
Wood, wax, steel, charcoal, wire, yarn

Illustration Citations

After a composition by Pierre Legros II (Italian (born France), Paris 1666-1719 Rome). after 1738. *Saint Bartholomew*. Sculpture. Place: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. https://library-artstor-org.libproxy.wustl.edu/asset/SS7731421_7731421_11499248.

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