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My Favorite Things

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My Favorite Things

Alex T. Klein

A thesis presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract:

In this thesis I discuss my material practice as it relates to a history of still-life painting, and the cyclical recurrence of assemblage in western art history. The traditional still-life object is examined through the lens of my material-gathering process at estate sales. Objects reconstituted at these sales are the impetus for an investigation of the still-life object's connection to magic, the mutability of meaning, and the fading American middle class. The use of these objects for assemblage sculptures in the studio prompts a discussion of the history of assemblage and found-object sculpture in Dada, Merz, Surrealism, and contemporary practice. I also compare critical eras in twentieth-century history with present day to form a hypothetical link between unstable environments and ephemeral works. As my sculptures are disassembled and their components scattered, I speculate on the future lives of the objects I once gathered, and confront the critical role of documentation.

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01 Transformations: Material Gathering and The Still Life

Most of my recent work has begun with a type of material gathering—I peruse the local estate sales online and then, a couple of times a month, head out to shop for miscellanea. It's a habit that began as an inexpensive way to gather objects for still-life paintings like this one, *Pink for Scale* (fig.1), from 2019. I've never had trouble finding these objects because, as it turns out, the

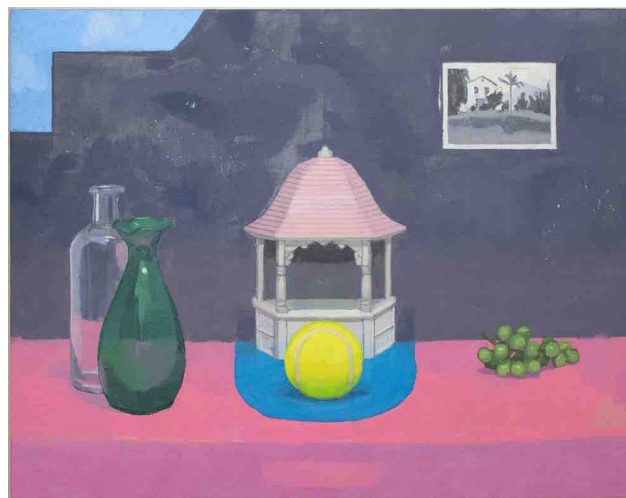


Figure 1: Alex Klein, *Pink for Scale*, Oil on Canvas, 22"x28", 2019

mass-produced items that fill estate sales—candlestick holders, faux crystal, colored glass, styrene fruit, etc.—resemble typical still-life objects. I don't think the ubiquity of these materials is a coincidence. Rather, the same qualities that make this bric-a-brac ideal fodder for still lifes also makes them popular in the Midwestern homes from which I purchase them.

The still-life tradition, first made popular through seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, teaches us that objects can embody meaning. Dutch Golden Age examples demonstrate that an orange can *become* status, or a fish can *become* a reminder of life's brevity. The objects depicted in these paintings are coded with and project out nuances of existential experience. Similarly, the objects that fill contemporary homes are empty vessels inscribed with coded meaning, reflecting the individuals who possess them. Ethnographer Stephen Harold Riggins identifies the “transactional space of the living room” as one in which objects are collected and communicate their owner's tastes and values to visitors. He focuses on the living room as a social space that

can be found in most houses and apartments, and is thus the space where many objects socialize as well.¹

Still life has always had a complicated relationship with commodities. If we again look back to the Dutch example, the prototypical model for Western still-life painting, it is directly linked to the Dutch merchant class. This new group of wealthy citizen traders helped to urbanize the Netherlands and brought new and diverse goods into the homes of the wealthy Dutch.² Still lifes of this time were commissioned by members of this quasi-middle class, who could now afford these luxury objects with their newfound wealth. These modestly sized paintings affixed these luxuries into images, as if in some kind of ritual to preserve their newly attained status.

Not only did sixteenth-century still lifes depict symbols of wealth—luxuries that were available in large quantities for the first time—the paintings themselves were status symbols. In many ways, the subjects of these paintings were simply the things that were readily available, such as fresh fruit and ornate decorative items. And we see this trend continue with later European and American painters who incorporate the types of objects that are around them:

Chardin painted vases, pitchers, and fruit; Peto painted bottles, candlestick holders, and pipes.

The genre is primarily characterized by the depiction of domestic objects at hand

The kinds of domestic objects popularized by the early masters of the genre have dominated still-life paintings ever since. A quick *Google Images* search of “still lifes” pulls up images upon images of tables

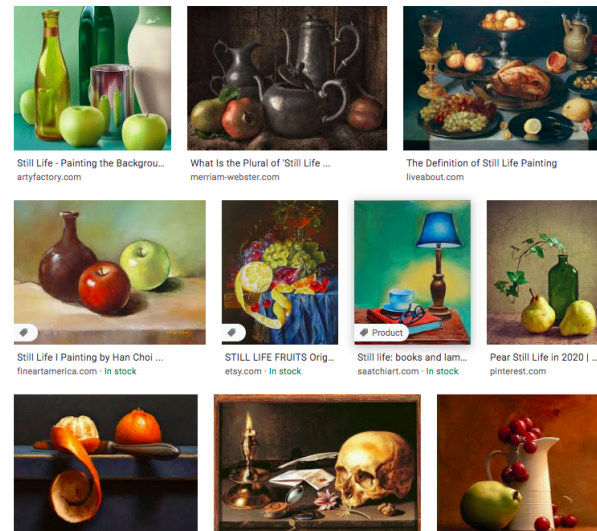


Figure 2: Google Screenshot, 2020

similarly laden with fruit, pitchers, and bottles (fig.02). If this demonstrates anything, it is how ingrained the vernacular of these arrangements has become. At some point, these objects became so synonymous with the still life that people started to acquire them for their aesthetic value more than their purely functional qualities. French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard notes that objects in the home have taken up the “ideological force” that “blood, birth, and titles of nobility” once held.³ They seem to me to have fallen out of the pictures into middle-class homes—not as functional objects, but as decorative vessels of meaning.

When the members of the mid-century American middle class purchased homes, objects reminiscent of the still life were then mass produced to fill them. No longer were these things purely functional as they traditionally had been—you might see a bowl of inedible glass fruit on a table, a pitcher and washbasin that never touch water, porcelain plates hung permanently on the wall. Baudrillard goes on to say of these historical signifiers:

“The door has thus been opened to a mass of 'authoritative' signs and idols (whose authenticity, in the end, is neither here nor there); the market has been invaded by a whole magical flora of real or fake furniture, manuscripts and icons. The past in its entirety has been pressed into the service of consumption.”⁴

Middle-class individuals purchase, then proceed to arrange, these things based on conventions learned from still-life paintings. In this way, coffee tables, windowsills, mantelpieces, and other surfaces of the home become a re-enactment of the traditional still-life.

In my own practice, an unexpected outcome of searching for estate sales to attend was coming across the website *Estatesales.net*. It aggregates the location of sales, and allows their organizers to post documentation of the wares. These images work like a type of marketing image and are intended to give you an idea of what type of stuff will be available. Perhaps due to overwork, the sheer volume of stuff that employees are required to document, or a lack of any kind of technical training, the images posted to *Estatesales.net* always appear to be hastily shot

and carelessly uploaded. They are flipped, duplicated, blurry, and are always low resolution. And perhaps that is all they need to be in order to entice potential buyers who—like myself—enjoy searching through the glut of stuff available at the sale.

In her essay, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” artist and writer Hito Steyerl notes that the qualities that make images “poor” are: “thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion, on intensity rather than contemplation, on previews rather than screenings.”⁵ These images give viewers impressions of what will be available at sales. They trigger a hunter-gatherer instinct that would remain dormant if the photos provided too much information—tempting us with the subtle suggestion of real-life plunder that is rich in physical detail. It’s clear that, while the objects themselves may have monetary value, the images are not treated as precious. I don’t think “dump” is an inappropriate term to describe the way in which these images are unceremoniously posted online. Some of the features noted above clearly denote a lack of curatorial intent.

Maybe the sheer volume of images posted to *Estatesales.net* each week makes it impossible to properly sort. This week alone (March 2-8, 2020) there are eight sales within a five-mile radius of my apartment, each of which have uploaded well over 100 images—and this is what happens virtually every week. These hoards join the flood of images available to us online. The quantity of online images is so high that there couldn’t possibly be a demand for all of the supply available. The images at *Estatesales.net* are only intended to be available for a short period of time. They are posted before the sale—to give would-be attendees a general idea of what would be available—and as soon as the sales begin, these images are en route to being functionless. As the sales come to an end, so will these images, leaving these images in a state of disorientation.

When I am trying to decide which sales to attend, I spend hours with these “poor images.” Initially, I downloaded images of the object I might buy. This habit quickly expanded to include images that I am impulsively drawn to and have no interest in pursuing for purchase—from empty stairways to heavy furniture. Once the sale has passed, the images stored in a folder on my computer desktop no longer serve their intended purpose. In the increasingly crowded folder on my desktop, qualities I had previously been unable to recognize in these images become highlighted after the sale. Like the objects they depict, they have lost all functional value—and have adopted an aesthetic one.

In my 2019 work, *Vase* *Vase* (fig. 03), I arranged a set of objects against a photographic sweep. Organized in a configuration that is precarious at best, these objects appeared as if they would only hold together for the time it would take to snap a photograph. In commercial photography, photographing objects against a sweep is usually done with the intention of removing any sense of place and context from the things being photographed.⁶ In this way, sweeps often operate similarly to what the blank white exhibition space proposes to be—a contextless void in which objects can be viewed. As opposed



Figure 3: Alex Klein, *Vase Vase*, Found Objects on Inkjet print, 30” x 25” x 15”, 2019

to using a white backdrop, the sweep in *Vase Vase* is itself a photograph culled from *Estatesales.net*. In it, objects don't appear to be locationless, but rather a part of an environment in which they can move freely.

In person at the estate sales, when I encounter potential still-life objects, they have usually been wrenched from their arrangements. Estate sales often take place soon after the previous owner of the home and its contents has passed away or been otherwise forced to leave their home. It's a fact that is jarringly apparent in every corner of the home—from notes still tacked to fridge surfaces, industrial-sized pill organizers stacked in a bathroom, family photos haphazardly gathered in boxes. In this sense, the objects we are buying haven't willingly been dispossessed, but removed from an individual's possession involuntarily.

The objects at estate sales, which were once fervently gathered and lovingly arranged, now sit boxed up alongside other recently unmoored baubles. The person who had once been their companion in meaning is no longer present to complete that connection. I began to wonder what the objects I had come to admire had meant to their previous owners. And while I have to acknowledge that it was impossible for me to access the previous symbolic expressions, this line of thought prompts new questions. Do objects inherently connote something? Are their values only contextual, and are they projected ones? How do objects affect each other? The estate sale started to feel less and less like idle object-gathering and more like an opportunity to explore how objects express their meaning. I began to think of the objects in estate sales as objects between meanings—or perhaps between periods of having meaning thrust upon them.

The images on *Estatesales.net*, then, also act to complicate the meanings of these objects. As I peruse them, I am again reminded of Riggins' discussion of the role of photography in ethnographic field studies. He says:

“The experienced ethnographer will demonstrate a sharp eye for the physical artifacts. Photography is an essential tool in this process. Many of the subtleties of domestic artifacts will elude the researcher unless it is possible to closely examine photographs.”⁷

Of course, this reinforces the role of the environment in which objects are viewed in informing their meaning. I also think there is something in this quote about the need to affix objects in some way in order to understand their meaning. Objects are constantly in a state of transformation, so that we are only able to understand their expression of meaning through documentation of particular moments. Documentation in this way continues to fracture and complicate the meanings of things.

This fragmentation differentiates these objects from those encountered at other kinds of secondhand sales. Objects at a garage sale, for example, have already been marked by their original owners as something that is no longer desirable or needed. At an antique shop, objects have already been purchased, reconstituted, cleaned, and evaluated. Objects at estate sales were owned by someone, and then poof! The owner vacated their home, most likely not of their own volition, and now the objects are unowned. This fact lends a distinct morbidity to the shopping experience. It is not one of pure consumerism, but a form of cannibal reconsumption.

I choose to attend estate sales on the last day of their runs. The things that are left on the last day of the sale have been continually passed over by other shoppers, and are at their lowest prices. The types of objects left on these days seem to have no value to the traditional market. There usually aren't any high-value antiques—just bottom-shelf, mass-produced stuff. At the same time, though, even mass-produced items from the previous century are of a higher quality than most items today. And as a bona fide Midwesterner, they have a nostalgic value to me, as I can recall growing up surrounded by the very same objects in friends' and family members'

homes. So, outside of my stated intention of using these objects for still-life paintings, I have a genuine affection for these things that extends beyond the studio.

Furthermore, the homes in which most estate sales take place often have several bedrooms (plus a basement, attic, or garage) filled with objects collected by the former occupant. As I temporarily occupy these spaces, I cannot help but think that I and many of my peers will likely never be able to afford many bedroomed and or even basemented homes.⁸ I desire these objects in part because they, and the spaces they inhabit, are symbolic of a fading middle class. I am typically a very frugal, cost-conscious person. But I can justify buying as much as I like at estate sales because it is a part of my practice. It would be impractically burdensome—and often still is—to purchase these things were they not for my work. It provides an outlet for me to spend time and work through my relationship to owning things. Simply by the nature of their origins, these objects are able to conjure up something of the middle-class comfort, permanency, and financial security with which they are coded. Marcel Mauss, the cultural anthropologist, speaks about the history of this sort of magical thinking in his text, “A General Theory of Magic,” outlining the law of sympathetic magic as: “Like produces like; contact results in contagion; the image produces the object itself; a part is seen to be the same as the whole.”⁹ The power of these objects and images comes from the fact that they are linked sympathetically to the space and the things that they represent. Buying these objects is the first step in a kind of ritual: enacted through the idea that these symbols will produce the stability they symbolize, that my contact with stuff of the past will somehow congeal a fading middle class, and that I am buying shares in an otherwise inaccessible stability.

02 Material Out of Place: Objects Enter the Studio

After sitting for an unknowable period of time, the objects I buy at sales are moved at what I can only imagine must feel like break-neck speed, by comparison, to my studio. When they arrive, I often take time to sit and look at what I've collected. In the raking fluorescent light, set against the stark-white backdrop of the studio, it often feels like I am seeing these things for the first time—recalling their heritage as still-life subjects. Others seem to notice the change, too. When I first encounter these things in dusty basements, or under the tungsten light of bedrooms, people freely handle them. In the studio, visitors keep a polite distance and crane their necks to observe them from all angles. Again, these reactions remind me of the mutable nature of these objects. The exercise of bringing them into the studio directly illustrates the transformation of value I had previously only abstractly considered. These objects have their histories as still lifes so clearly preserved within them that in the studio they seem to jump back into the inaccessible picture plane of their origins. They easily re-embrace their innate role as art materials.

Just as the objects seem to change within the context of the studio, so do the questions the estate sales prompted me to ask. How are objects affected by their contexts? Do things have inherent meaning—and if not, how do they acquire it? These questions take on a new dimension in the studio, and generate new ones. What happens when these objects enter the studio? What is the art historical implication of bringing found objects into the studio? What is the relationship between how objects project in the home, and how they project in the exhibition space? These materials, and the questions they prompted from me, became the starting point for a new series of works.

Still-life painting was the original format for me to work through these questions. But my focus on physical objects—both in and out of the studio—prompted me to display the objects themselves in the form of found-object sculptures. While these works are derived from my interest in still life—and in their primary subject matter, domestic objects—they present physical objects as opposed to their depictions. Early on, these works were made up of objects I had collected to make paintings of, but instead arranged as sculpture—perching them on plywood shelves. The shelves kept the objects up against the wall, and contained them in a relief-like state. The Israeli-American artist Haim Steinbach, who predominantly uses shelves in his work, refers to the shelf as an object that mediates between private and public space in the home.¹⁰ By this he means that we often display private or sentimental objects in the home on shelves for anyone to view. In my sculptures, the shelves provide a bridge between the austerity of the exhibition space and the domestic objects displayed within it.

For *Sun Transformations* (fig.04), completed in mid-2019, I placed a set of disparate objects next to each other on a shelf in an attempt to explore how objects could appear to have physically transformed. A faux-silver chalice; a bong-like vase containing an acid-green liquid; a corked, globular phial half-filled with a Tang-colored potion; and a tennis ball



Figure 4: Alex Klein, *Sun Transformations*, Found Objects, Felt, Potions, 30'' x 24'' x 11'', 2020

sat in a row on a gray, felt-covered shelf. I set these against a collaged felt backdrop, minimally representing a desert landscape with the sun setting or rising behind the dunes. Each object in the arrangement bears some of its own physical characteristics onto the objects next to it—each one representing a data point on a linear array. The final point on the array, so to speak, is the sun, implying that the tennis ball has jumped a vast distance into the picture and become the sun. In this way, *Sun Transformations* showcases my earlier imaginings that objects could jump in and out of the picture plane.

In an untitled effort from around the same time (fig.05), I sought to find some immutable aspects of the objects. Several of the things I had gathered—a metal cup, a goblet, a vase, and a candlestick holder—all shared the same size circumference either in the opening of the vessel, or in its supporting base. With a game-like whimsy, I set about trying to stack these objects in various configurations. The testing out of objects and materials, just to see what they could do, is a strategy that I have returned to ever since—and I hope that the humor and levity with which I approach the works is reflected in the viewer's experience. The arrangement in the untitled work implied that the object's value was not to the observer, but to one another. The objects were dependent on one another to maintain their position, and without one of them, the structure would tumble. Their value was based on an immutable aspect of their construction, and not on any projected symbolic meanings.



Figure 5: Alex Klein, *Untitled*, found objects, potions, 42"x x 5" x 5", 2019

The images I collected from *Estatesales.net* became the basis for several new sculptural and painted works. The first step in these works was printing the images that previously only existed in digital space. This gesture recalls the relationships between still-life objects and paintings, and the way they move from the domestic space into the picture plane and then back again. In this case, the images are leaving the digital space and entering the physical realm of the studio.

When I started to work in collage, assemblage, found photography, and found-object sculpture, I had to do a bit of remedial work to learn more about the histories relevant to the strategies I was using. It became clear that I was adopting strategies that were used by groups of artists that thrived in the 1920s and '30s—particularly the Dadaists and the Surrealists. These artists had responded to the overt uncertainty of their moment in time by inventing new strategies—some of which I found myself gravitating toward. When I looked to contemporary practitioners whose work I was in dialogue with, I found that they were also adopting these strategies in opposition to, or in response to, precarious climates. By more closely examining the time period in which these strategies developed, I hope to identify similarities that can provide clues for why these means of production persist and reappear in moments of uncertainty.

The period that birthed the first Dada and Surreal artists, 1920s Europe, was preceded by rapid industrialization. Within a few decades, Europe went from a mostly agrarian economy to one that produced automobiles, chemicals, and household goods. European workers no longer spent their days in the field, but on assembly lines, as components of the new division of labor. Technology completely overhauled the nature of work—akin to the effect digital technology has had on our own time. In his essay, “The Mass Ornament,” Sigfried Kracauer, a cultural theorist of that era, writes: “Since the principle of the capitalist production process does not arise purely

out of nature, it must destroy the natural organisms,”¹¹ suggesting that in order for industrialization to advance, it needs to destroy the organic and replace it with the inorganic. We have always understood this to be true: Machines need to consume and destroy the organic for the inorganic to function, as the consumption of coal, oil, and ore enables the electric vitality of machines. However, the “natural organism” Kracauer is referring to is not a fossil fuel, or other raw material, but the worker. He posits that, purely through being a part of the assembly line, humans begin to mimic the rigid geometric actions of factory machinery. Kracauer identified the Tiller Girls¹²—a kind of proto-Rockette that rose to popularity in the 1910s—as an example of where the DNA of mass production had entered into popular culture. In the movements of these dancers, Kracauer observed precise movements and gesticulations that mimic pistons and gears of a machine. The Tiller Girls sharply recall mechanization, as their limbs act independently of the rest of the body, and in synchronization with the other dancers. These performers are aesthetically influenced by the system of production that is synonymous with the age, and they emblemize the cultural changes emerging during this time.

From stone-age weaponry to the digital age, there have been innumerable examples of new technologies being put to test in war. And so with the innovation of mass production in the early twentieth century comes the ability to produce tanks, planes, machine guns, toxic gas, and artillery more efficiently and in greater numbers than ever before¹³. The trench can also be thought of as the assembly line translated into warfare, with soldiers arranged in orderly rows of military labor.¹⁴ We also see during World War I examples of humans melding with machines, with soldiers wearing gas masks to protect themselves from chemical-based weapons. The result of the new hybrid of roboticized soldier and industrial-strength technology was horrific and devastating, with death tolls in the millions.¹⁵

The influence of industrialization can be observed in a group of artists from the early part of the twentieth century: the Dadaists. Originally founded in Zurich during the war, Dada quickly became popular throughout Europe in the mid 1910s.¹⁶ These artists were characterized by a broad approach to artistic production, including performances, installations, collage, and sculpture. The most direct influence industrialization had on this group can be observed in their material choices. Mass production made the found object a favored material of Dadaist sculptors, and magazine cutouts were a plentiful fodder for photomontage artists. The favoring of these newly available materials reflects a responsiveness that these artists had to their own moment.

Kurt Schwitters, a German artist, often associated with the Dada movement, formed another nonsensically named movement—Merz. The closest we have to a definition of Merz is Schwitters' declaration that "Pure Merz is pure art."¹⁷ Schwitters attached the term to pretty much all of the work he was producing during the time: Merz drawing, Merz painting, Merz sculpture, and Merz poetry, among others. In Schwitters' Merz



Figure 6: Kurt Schwitters, *Picture with Light Center*, Cut-and-pasted colored paper and printed paper, oil and pencil on paperboard, 33 1/4 x 25 7/8, 1919

works, there is almost a complete lack of material hierarchy. The material list for his 1919 work entitled *Picture with Light Center* (Bild mit heller Mitte) (fig.06) includes cut-and-pasted colored paper, printed paper, oil, and pencil.¹⁸

Schwitters is another important touchpoint in my work from the Dada era, although he did not consider himself to be a part of that movement. Using a variety of materials and methods, his work displays a complete lack of material hierarchy. A piece of mine that reflects this attitude is a 2020 work, *Snakes in a Box* (fig. 07). In it, I printed a found image of an antique mail sorter on canvas, stretched it, and used it as the substrate for a gestural painting. I



Figure 7: Alex Klein, *Snakes in a Box*, Found Objects and Inkjet print, 24'' x 44'' x 35'' 2020

then propped up the printed image on four spray-paint cans for display. Atop the image, three-dimensional bric-a-brac are arranged as if connected by a line that snakes across the image. In this way, the image operates like a plinth for a sculpture, elevating and bracketing the arrangement of objects covering its surface. Similar to Schwitters' *Picture with Light Center*, this work allows images, objects, and paint to intermingle on a single surface.

Politically, in the 1920s, Europe was in a state of unrest. In Schwitters' home country, the German Empire was dissolved and a new democratic republic—dubbed the Weimar Republic—formed in its place. The German populace responded to the new era of uncertainty with simultaneously radical and reactionary behavior. The first half of the twentieth century saw

increased membership in both the Communist and National Socialist parties, both of which planned and executed failed coups of the Weimar government during the 1920s.¹⁹ The rise of Communism in this era is inseparable from that of industrialization—it is a party that was born out of the plight of factory workers. And so, as the number of factories continued to grow during this time, so did the ranks of the party. The idealized efficiency promised by fascism shares structural similarities to that of a factory, in which everything is run with top-down effectiveness. Of course, neither the factory or fascism runs this way. And the result of this mistake became devastatingly apparent over the next few decades.

The Surrealist thinkers of the 1920s and '30s attempted to combat the political unrest and rise of European fascism through the promotion of a variety of artistic and political strategies. Two French intellectuals of the time—Roger Caillois and George Bataille—directly engaged with sacred and magical practices through their secret society and literary review—Acéphale. In “The Sacred Conspiracy,” in which the secret papers of Acéphale were collected and translated by Marina Galletti, a researcher at Roma Tre University, describes the political dimension of the organization as:

“The society—charged with rejuvenating an enfeebled society, and thereby changed ‘the face of the world’—intended to be a more effective subversive force than political parties, whose actions get lost in ‘the quicksand of contradictory worlds.’”²⁰

Acéphale, which translates to “headless,” was spearheaded by Bataille. Its members planned to spread their brand of thinking by invoking ancient rituals, which would hopefully spur the population into a new sacred mindset that would protect them from the “racial magic” used by the fascists.²¹

Every so often in my reading about the interwar period, I would come across a line of text and be unsure what time period it was referring to. In these moments—when I had lost the thread

or spaced-out in some way—a quote like this from Walter Benjamin would completely disorient me in time.

“The oppressive wealth of ideas that has been spread among people, or rather has swamped them entirely—ideas that have come with the revival of astrology and the wisdom of yoga, Christian Science and chiromancy, vegetarianism and gnosis, scholasticism and spiritualism.”²²

Passages like this made my research start to feel eerie—as if I was stuck in a cheesy TV time-loop episode. This sentiment—expressed by Benjamin in 1933—felt like it could have been written today. How could one not think of the bulk-delivery information system that is the internet when Benjamin speaks of the way ideas were “swamping” people? And his references to the revival of pseudo-magical practices in the form of astrology, yoga, Christian science, and other ideologies seem to almost line up one-to-one with interests that were popularized (at least in the West) by the internet.

So, like a character made aware he is reliving the same day over and over again, I started to identify and anticipate similarities between the present day and the twentieth-century Western history I was studying. Technologically speaking, it’s easy to compare our current digital revolution to that of the industrial revolution that happened in Europe during the nineteenth century. Each of these shifts resulted in a near complete readjustment to the way that people went about operating within the workplace. The machine is no longer merely an extension of physical labor but, with the advent of machine learning and algorithms, of mental labor as well. Within the last few decades, software can now write news articles,²³ TV plotlines,²⁴ and determine what media we encounter.²⁵ Similarly, we might parallel the shock of 9/11 and the resulting global War on Terror with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand that triggered World War I. Like the technological advancements that came out of the First World War, we have used drones and other computer-aided warfare since 2001.²⁶ Sadly, we have also seen an

increase in the kind of fascist sentiments that defined the first half of the twentieth century: The election of Donald Trump and the so-called “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, brought this fact into sharp relief. Continuing this dark timeline, we are currently experiencing the blight of COVID-19 worldwide, coming just over a century after the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic bookended WWI.

The eerie similarity between present day and the first half of the twentieth century makes my adoption of assemblage and found-object sculpture, as well as the ease with which I slip into pseudo-magical thought, feel less the result of happenstance and more a reflection of the time in



Figure 8: Alex Klein, *Potion Plane*, Found Objects on Inkjet print, 24”x44”x35”, 2019

which I practice as an artist. I am responding similarly to how the artists in the 1920s and ’30s did to the advancements in technology, societal unrest, and global conflict. A work from 2019, *Potion Plane* (fig. 08), evokes a relationship between sorcery and provisionality. In the sculpture, a cup appears to float on a transparent pedestal. Another object, an industrial light-stand, looks as though its legs are hovering off of the platform. Despite these magical undertones, its construction is flimsy and fleeting. One could easily reach into the arrangement to pick up the tennis ball or knock over the cup, revealing the wires that maintain the illusion. *Potion Plane*’s

construction is akin to the time in which it was made—precarious and unsettled—recalling the Dadaists and their strategies.

Another series of works that recalls art made in the '20s and '30s is made up of collage-

paintings that use images culled from *Estatesales.net*. These works are akin to the Dadaist collages, which used as their material the mass-produced advertising imagery of the day. In an untitled work (*fig.09*) from 2020, images and areas of color are printed onto the canvas. I ran the canvas through the printer

multiple times to introduce a sense of chance

and spontaneity into the printing process, as the found images overlapped and accumulated on the surface. In the spirit of collage, I overlaid abstract shards of paint over the images like floating tatters of cloth. Printed images, blank canvas, and paint all intermingle on the substrate.

Contemporary poet Andrei Codrescu proposes in the opening of his book, *The Posthuman Dada Guide: Tzara and Lenin Play Chess*, that Dadaist strategies have the potential to counteract moments of “crisis.” He writes: “The accidental production of novel objects results occasionally from the practice of Dada. During times of crisis like wars and plagues, some of these objects can be truly novel because they sabotage prevailing sentiments.”²⁷ While it is hard for any work to achieve this lofty goal, Codrescu’s sentiment is encouraging—it implies my strategies have the potential to counteract the things about my own time that I dread so deeply—namely the rise of fascistic sentiments.



Figure 9: Alex Klein, *Untitled*, Oil on Inkjet print, 30'' x 36'' 2020

Perhaps the most notable contemporary exhibition of precarious assemblage and collage was the New Museum's 2007 exhibition, "Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century." In it, modesty and informality are privileged above the sturdy austerity that has traditionally defined sculpture. The catalog essay by Massimiliano Gioni points again and again to the context of contemporary society as the primary influence on the works included in the exhibition:

"In their very physical appearances, today's sculptures seem to announce an almost schizophrenic division between the desire to dissolve into the world and a need to fortify their borders. In this indecision the sculptures of today might resemble the state of paranoia that we live in as we stand divided between carrying out a new war to conquer new territory, or instead, retreating and carefully protecting our own ground."²⁸

Gioni draws our attention to the way in which these sculptures physically manifest the uncertainty and division that was a prevailing side effect of the Iraq War (also referred to vaguely as the "War on Terror") throughout the 2000s. The unclear moment in which these works were made is directly manifested in their physical construction. Sculptures no longer act as monuments or memorials to past events, but reflect the real-time instability of the individual.

The divisiveness of the moment that Gioni is pointing to is illustrated in a work shown in "Unmonumental," *Driscoll Garden*



Figure 10: Carol Bove, *Driscoll Garden*, 41.3" x 77.5" x 32," 2020

(*fig. 10*) by Carol Bove. A variety of found objects and disparate sculptural forms are deliberately placed on a wooden tabletop that itself sits—not atop a plinth—but two raw cinder blocks.

Driscoll Garden is seemingly asking viewers to put these disparate elements together, but the task is inevitably impossible. Their variety—from concrete cubes to feathers—makes this task seemingly impossible.

While Codrescu points to the societal impact of Dadaist strategies, and Gioni illuminates how they are a reflection of their environment, the reason these sculptural strategies continue to reemerge remains unclear. One insight can be found in a text by contemporary art historian Spyros Papapetros, “The Animation of the Inorganic.” In it, he speaks exhaustively about snakes—particularly their apparent loss of appendages and their status as evolutionary anathema:

“Once an organ disappears it cannot grow back again or regain its primitive function; however, if it does not cease to exist and is merely reduced, it may regain a new significance that goes beyond ornamental survival. These rudimentary appendages become the living traces of a prior organic state that now continues to exist in a modified form. Organisms perish and cultures die, yet something remains of them that creates a link with further transformations. The remnant is not only a monument to the past, but also the link to a future development.”²⁹

This passage seems particularly noteworthy in light of my interest in the reemergence of provisional sculptural strategies. Might it be that these strategies—like Spyros’ snakes—have become “living traces” that are encoded in the trauma of the interwar period? And while the 1920s and ’30s is a well-trod period in Western history, work in this vein captured something more difficult to communicate—the existential dread of *living* during unrest, conflict, and uncertainty. Precarity, instability, and provisionality appear in my work and in the work of others—reappearing not out of any desire to recreate or emulate the Dadaist tradition, but by dint of their potential as a “link to a future development.”

03 Alienation: Material Leaves the Studio

The provisional nature of many of my sculptures means that they are always in a state of being taken apart and put back together as new works. They are documented, hang around for awhile, or fall apart. Despite my affection for the materials that comprise them, their provisionality is inseparable from their design. When I leave my current studio, I will give away or donate the objects I have collected during my time in St. Louis. This decision is foremost a practical one, as moving this stuff would be prohibitively expensive, and I will most likely lack the space required to store the glut of material I have accumulated. The objects I have collected during my time at estate sales are boxed up and brought to a thrift-store or offered up for free on the curb. They are allowed to continue their expressions of meaning in new places, and through new owners. While I don't know where the objects will end up, who their new owners or what their donned meanings will be, my hope is that they will become a part of new set-ups in homes or apartments—that they will be given new value and find new companions in meaning. This hope is rooted in the idea that they will return in some way to the beginning of their journey—as valued possessions. Despite the practical factors that require me to dispossess these things, this gesture allows for the continued exploration of meaning that is deeply rooted in the origins of my practice.

Shedding these materials means that much of my sculptural work will eventually exist purely as documentation. In images of the works, the everyday objects I have collected are fixed—within an exhibition space or my studio—eternally recalling their brief lives as art materials. These works join the ranks of the many others that exist only in documentation.

Documentation can be both a form of preservation and means of circulation for works of art. From intentionally ephemeral performances, to works destroyed in historic or contemporary

conflict, to those made inaccessible in private collections or museum storage, documentation acts to extend their reach in time and space. Walter Benjamin's points to this reality in his essay, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility." Saying:

"Technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room."³⁰

And while Benjamin goes on to say that reproductions have less of the "authenticity" or "aura" inherent to original works of art, I think that nowadays images of artworks within exhibition spaces or studios retain some of the authority of those spaces—the gleaming white void of the gallery lending them a kind of contextual aura. Additionally, as previously discussed, my works have never existed as unique and concrete objects, but as a singular moment in the lifespan of the objects that comprise them.

Although I still intend to recirculate my sculptural material, for now (like most things, in light of the ongoing pandemic) those plans are on hold. Akin to how I removed these objects from their previous owners, then recently deceased, my departure from my campus studio was not one that I foresaw. My favorite things are right now collecting dust in the studio I was forced to abandon. While I had anticipated getting rid of these things, not having agency over their removal is jarring in a way I couldn't have anticipated. A new set of questions have surrounded my objects in a time when the luxury of collecting has transformed into a danger. How can objects express meanings when they are alone and isolated? What will it be like to return to my objects in the studio? In a time when surfaces are inherently dangerous, what is at stake when distributing physical objects? What do my objects look like now? Where did I leave them?

The insecurity surrounding the things I have spent so much time collecting and caring for has begun appearing in a new series of works (fig. 11). In them, my things appear not as physical objects, but as fragments of still lifes drawn from memory. Within hazy rectangles, these drawings sit alongside scraps of paper and idle scribbles. Each element floats in space, isolated—conducting a series of distant conversations. In this new, overtly magical place in my mind, objects morph and amass into Frankensteinian shapes. In the imperfect space of my recollection, objects



Figure 11: Alex Klein, *Untitled*, Colored pencil, inkjet, and collage, on paper, 22"x30", 2020

sprout feet or swap handles. While these objects are undoubtedly based on my favorite things, they have formed into new characters with new meanings. This place, wherein new creations sit alongside familiar still-life characters, is undoubtedly one born out of necessity—not only to access my objects, but to allow me to occupy another place. For now, these works represent the final transformation of my objects—owner-less and suspended in an imaginative realm.

Notes

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Gallery

Alex Klein, *In Scale*, Oil on Canvas, 22"x28," 2019



Alex Klein, *Vase Vase*, Found Objects on Inkjet print, 30" x 25" x 15," 2019



Alex Klein, *Sun Transformations*, Found Objects, Felt, Potions, 30" x 24" x 11," 2020



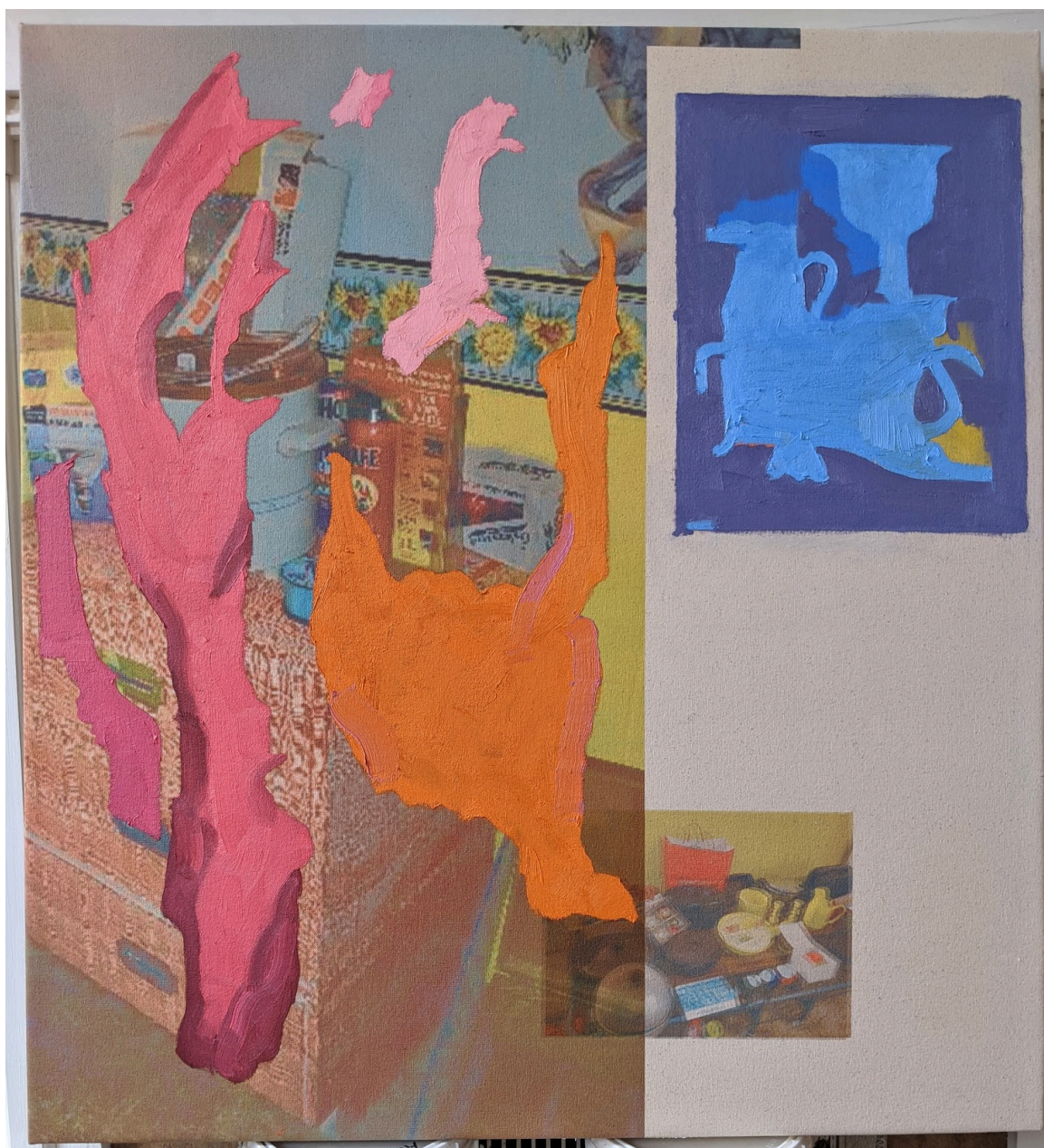
Alex Klein, *Untitled*, found objects, potions, 42"x x 5" x 5," 2019



Alex Klein, *Snakes in a Box*, Found Objects and Inkjet print, 24" x 44" x 35," 2020



Alex Klein, *Potion Plane*, Found Objects on Inkjet print, 24”x44”x35,” 2019



Alex Klein, *Untitled*, Oil on Inkjet Print, 30" x 36" 2020



Alex Klein, *Untitled*, Colored pencil, inkjet, and collage, on paper, 22"x30", 2020

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