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Creatures of Habit

by Joyce Hankins
BFA Statement 2014

Abstract:

Creatures of Habit is a body of artwork that explores how patterns, habits and records relate to the human desire to find fulfillment and understanding. The work was approached using two distinct ways of making. The first draws upon the concept of a “closed system” to create my own self-contained processes to work within and form imagery around. The second way is responding to pre-existing patterns, or open systems, that allow for a transfer of internal and external information. Open and closed systems represent the human struggle to find control as well as feel connected to the surrounding world. The influential roles of the artists Idris Khan, John Early, and Andy Goldsworthy, as well as the theorists Allen Sekula and Alexander A. Gurshtein are discussed in relationship to my work as well.

My artwork is rooted in the concept of accumulation, which means a “to gather or acquire (something) gradually as time passes.”¹ Within my studio practice, or the process I use to create art, I split accumulation into two lines of thought: repetition and collection. Each type has a different underlying structure. Repetition refers to multiplicity. More specifically, accumulations built from repetition consist of the same things multiplied, such as in an edition of prints. Repeated objects and images are referred to as “patterns,” and repeated actions are referred to as habits. Collections, on the other hand, are structured around the organization of a group. Instead of relying strictly on repeated objects, accumulations built from collections consist of a number of things gathered and then arranged with an intended purpose. An example could be a group of objects that make up an exhibit in a museum. Collections are made of objects, thoughts, images and marks. When comparing collections to repetitions, I replace “actions” with “marks” because I use marks to record actions.

My most recent body of artwork, *Creatures of Habit*, explores how patterns, habits and records relate to the human desire to find understanding and fulfillment. I drew upon the concepts of closed and open systems as a metaphor for the ways we not only create self-contained habits but also integrate ourselves into larger systems as a way to cope with the overwhelming fact that we are small and the world is large. A closed system is “a complete and seemingly unchangeable set of doctrines, ideas, or things; a self-contained system that is unaffected by outside influences.”² In other words, a closed system is only concerned with internal processes and ignores external forces. On the contrary, an open system is “a region separated from its surroundings by a boundary that admits a transfer of matter or energy across

¹Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online

² Dictionary.com

it.”³ Instead of being isolated, open systems exchange information between internal and external sources. Normally these terms are associated with fields such as physics, chemistry, thermodynamics and engineering. However, I adopted them within my own studio practice to represent two distinct ways of making art: creating my own systems and inserting myself into pre-existing systems.

Habits are a crucial manifestation of closed systems in *Creatures of Habit*, as they deal with the formation of regulated and consistent experiences. It is uncomfortable to recognize that there are significantly more things that are uncontrollable than controllable. As a result, finding even small areas that we can supervise is comforting. Understanding this about myself, I wanted to figure out how to visually capture my own processes of habitual behavior. The first system I highlighted revolves around the habit of throwing my purse and backpack into the front, passenger seat of my car. In order to capture a record of my repeating actions, I placed an etching plate in the passenger seat. Every time I threw my bags onto the seat, they hit and scratched or chipped marks into the coating of the plate. At the end of the month the plate was removed, etched, printed, recoated in hard ground, and placed back in my car. The resulting series, named *Seven Months* (fig.1 and 2), consists of seven, 4”x6” prints illustrating the gradual accumulation of habit-driven marks.

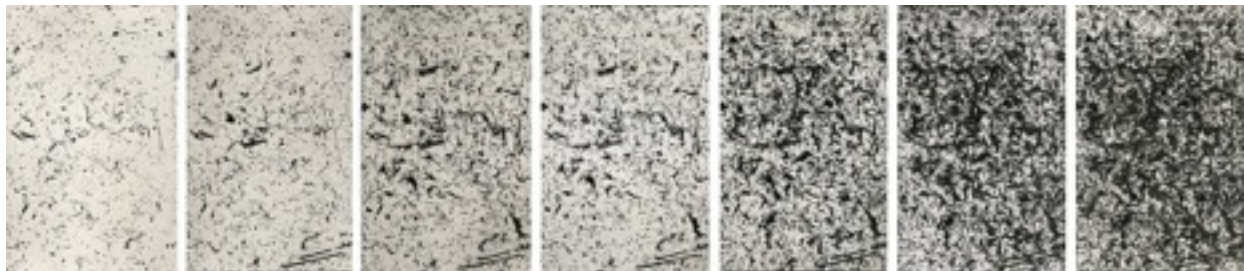


Fig.1) detail of *Seven Months*

³ Dictionary.com



Fig.2) Installation view

The layering of marks top of each other each month consistently darkens the plate and forms a layered, or composite image. My conceptual background in the theory of the composite comes from two sources: an essay by Allan Sekula called "The Body and the Archive," and works by the contemporary artist Idris Khan. In his essay, Sekula defines a composite image as "a collapsed archive" (Sekula 372), referring to the process of compressing multiples into a singular image. Looking for examples, I turned to Khan. He uses photography to create layered images of literary and historical collections, as seen in his body of work from 2004 entitled *Every*. In the piece, *Preludes...Sergei Rachmaninoff* (fig.3), from 2007, Khan photographed each sheet of music for Rachmaninoff's *Preludes* and then digitally layered them on top of each other.

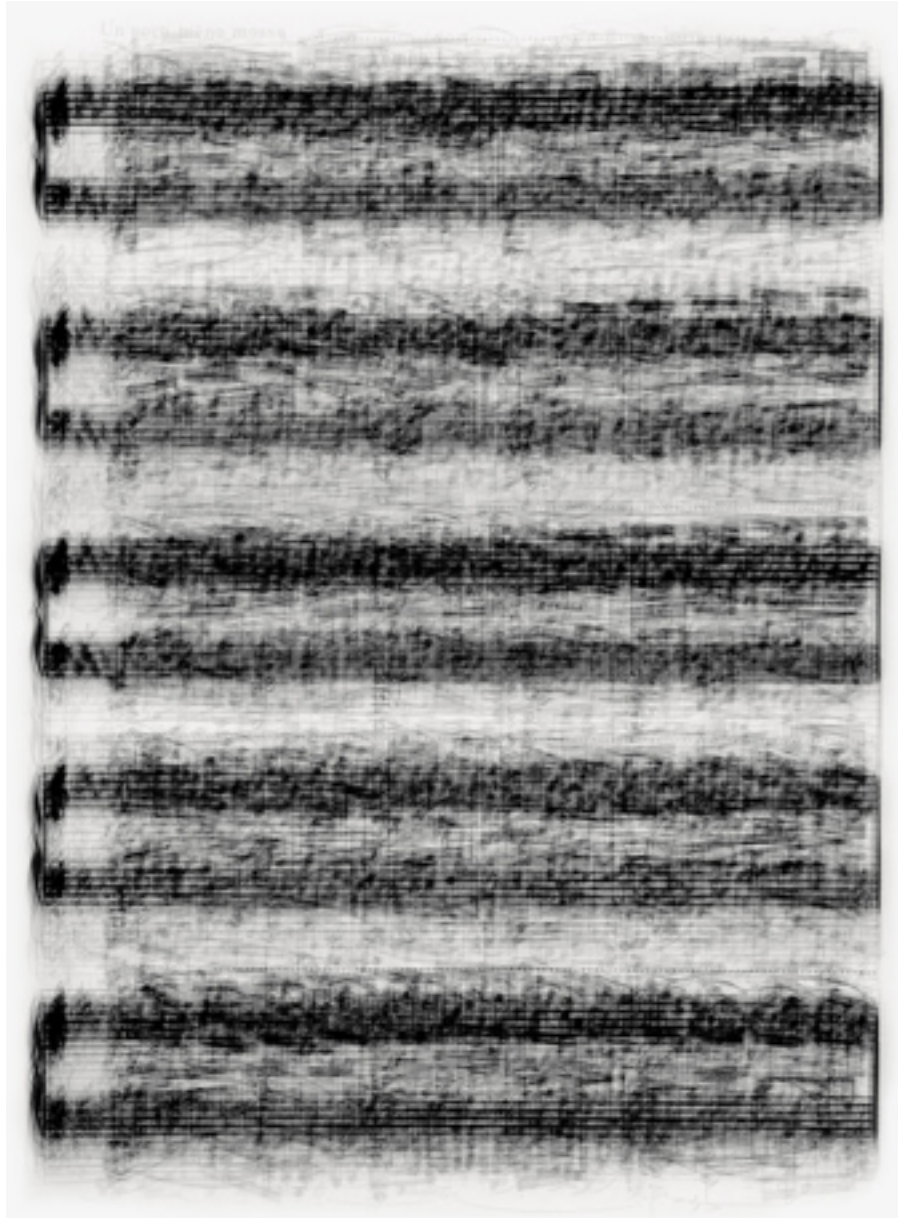


Fig. 3) *Preludes...Sergei Rachmaninoff, 2007, Idris Khan*

During an interview with Magnus Anderson, Khan says “I like to think that when people look at my image they no longer think about looking at what is photographed, for example a sheet of music, but look at the surface of the image... When the audience engage with the work, I rarely hear them discuss it as a photograph, but more about looking at the image as a series of marks or traces on a photographic surface” (Anderson 2). In a similar way that Khan’s final image uses

music notes to create a field of marks, *Seven Months* is a record of compiled marks. However, my etchings expound upon the concept of compilation to reference the accumulation of our habitual patterns.

In a second piece, my schedules, or weekly routines, create a closed system. *Entangle* (fig.4), is a seventy-nine foot scarf. In the piece, the crocheted stitch is used as a repeated mark that tracks my movement between six of the most important places I spend my time. Each place has an assigned color that builds a striped pattern over time. My studio is cream yarn, my apartment is white yarn, my fiancé's apartment is gray, my church is a speckled tan, my parent's house is dark gray, and my parents' office is a rusty brown.

Functionally, scarves serve as protection and comfort from the cold. However, after six months of continual crocheting, the scarf outgrew its functional qualities and transitioned into a burden and source of anxiety. First of all, the bigger the scarf became, the harder it was to carry around with me. Secondly, it got to the point where I was working on it so often and it was so cumbersome that, on February 7, 2014, I had my first nightmare about it. Since then I have had several more nightmares and it is so heavy and bulky that it is painful to carry. The fact that I started having stressful dreams signals that the scarf had a true psychological impact on my anxiety levels. The transition from functional to a source of anxiety reflects the way habits, such as schedules, while set in motion to create a sense of structure, have the potential to trap and confine us instead.



Fig. 4). *Entangle*, 2013-2014

In response, I made *Untangle* (fig. 5) as a partner piece that takes a new approach to the display of the original scarf. I scanned the scarf at a 1:1 scale and bound the pages into an accordion style book, which reorganized it into a more manageable layout. In book form, the scarf is suddenly easy to hold and transport. Similarly, viewers can easily flip through the pages to follow the scarf's growth and patterns instead of having to pull and tug at the large, heavy original. The 1:1 scale and accordion nature of the book still provide the same length as the

actual scarf but it is not overwhelming or suffocating. *Untangle* represents a method of taking back lost control in an overwhelming situation. When our habits lose their positive functionalities, it is necessary to take a step back and re-evaluate. For this reason, it is important to think about *Entangle/Untangle* as closed systems because they not only highlight a negative consequence of our attempts to strictly govern our lives, but also because it shows how failed attempts can be readapted to fulfill original purposes.

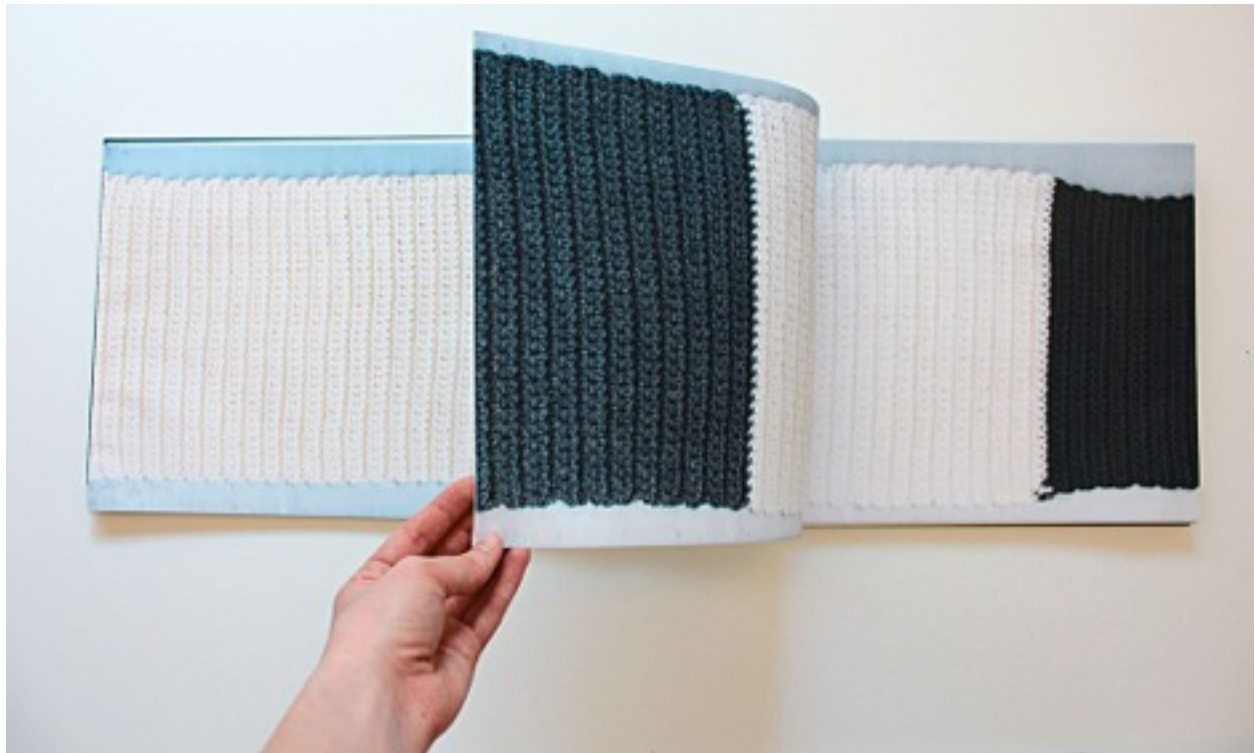


Fig.5) *Untangle*

However, when the adaptive process of internal based fulfillment fails, looking outside of ourselves using open systems is another option. John Early's piece, *Swivel Swing* (2012) (fig.6) serves as the perfect transition between closed and open systems because it integrates both ideas.



Fig. 6). *Swivel Swing*, 2012, John Early

Existing from start to finish in a gallery, *Swivel Swing* consists of a stool next to a wall that participants sit on while swinging their arms in a circular motion. Their movements are marked on the wall by a pencil they hold (Early). Working as a closed system process that records repeated actions, Early establishes a set of rules: sit on the stool and mark your arm movements with a pencil. Then, instead of focusing on one person's actions, Early opens the system by encouraging the interaction of outside viewers. This integration of Early's rules and the inclusion of exterior participants situates the piece into my definition of an open system. The more people that participate, the more marks are added to the wall, resulting in a drawing that builds and changes over time.

While interacting with open systems does not give you the ability to completely monopolize the system, it allows you to become a part of a larger whole. The inclusion into something bigger offers the individual a greater purpose. An example in *Creatures of Habit* is the

installation, *Studio Topography* (fig.7 and8), where I find and then respond to a pre-existing system in my own way. The pattern I recognized was the accumulated holes in my studio wall made by students pinning up art over the last decade. For each hole in the wall, I pushed in a yellow quilting pin as deeply as it would go, creating a surface record, or topography of the wall. Over 3,600 in total, the pins represent a type of history of the wall's surface.



Fig. 7). *Studio Topography*, 2013.



Fig. 8). Detail of *Studio Topography*, 2013.

Marking the holes in my studio wall is not only similar to the flattening and layering of composites, but it is also an act of preservation. The ability to make what is fleeting, such as time, more permanent through recording is a common practice. The future may be unknowable but the past is recoverable and can be preserved for the future. Understanding the past is a way to feel more secure in the future. In regards to his artistic practice, Andy Goldsworthy discusses that he “need[s] to make works that anticipate, but do not attempt to predict or control, the future. In order to understand time, I must work with the past, present and future” (Friedman 7). While he claims to not “predict or control the future,” I argue that any action that inserts us into pre-existing systems is unavoidably an act aimed to gain control.

Constellation Drawings (fig.9-11), a series of drawings and monoprints, discusses that very concept. In the drawings I use star charts as the basis for completely new imagery. By translating the stars onto paper and then connecting them into my own patterns, I not only insert myself into the naturally occurring stellar arrangements, but actually alter the system for my own purposes. The act of creating something new out of a larger system is fulfilling in its own right because it lends itself to the creative power of making something out of nothing. I would argue that any alteration or change of a pre-existing system, whether it is moving clay from outside to a wall inside a gallery, such as Goldsworthy's *Clay Wall*, from 1996. (Fig.12), or re-imagined constellations, constitutes as an act of assertion.



Fig. 14). *Clay Wall*, Andy Goldsworthy, 1996.

Another reason I specifically chose to work with constellations is because of their history. Alexander A. Gurshtein mentions these histories in his essay, “The Origin of the Constellations.” While his main focus is figuring out if the “picturesque images” (Gurshtein 264), as he calls them, had a functional purpose, I am more interested in the idea that they were created “for some form of spiritual comfort” (Gurshtein 264). Taking into consideration how expansive and unknowable the universe is today, even with all of our scientific discoveries and advances, it makes sense to me that constellations could have been originally been drawn to try and understand such a vast concept as the universe. If there is anything that makes me feel small it is night sky. How better to close the gap between myself and the universe than to take the millions of pinpoints of light and reconnect them on my own?



Fig. 9-11). *Constellation Drawings*, 2014

The metaphor of trying to close the gap between ourselves and that which is vastly unknowable is the driving force behind *Creatures of Habit*. Whether it be through self-fulfilling habits or finding purpose in something outside of ourselves, we all search, we ache, for the things that will make us complete. For me, faith in someone greater, in an all-knowing God, is

what fills me up and soothes my fears. *Creatures of Habit* asks others to think about and pinpoint how and where they look for fulfillment in their own lives, as well as where their habits and personal repetitions get in the way.

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