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ARTIFICIAL KINGDOMS

Lindsey Elsey

Clemson University, laelsey@g.clemson.edu

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ARTIFICIAL KINGDOMS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Art

by
Lindsey Ann Elsey
December 2015

Accepted by:
Prof. Valerie Zimany, Committee Chair
Prof. Anderson Wrangle
Dr. Andrea Feeser

ABSTRACT

Fairy or folk tales and fantasy appear to be innocuous means of entertainment in contemporary society. Often relegated as pap for children, this view belies the gruesome origins, cultural significance, and means of personal expression and identity that is afforded to the author and reader/audience through the construction of fantasies.

Through the creation of environments and experiences that center on porcelain vessels and sculpture, I explore the expression of uncomfortable desires and situations in the guise of fantasy. In some instances folk and fairy tales act as a means of escapism; an expression of desire for the fleeting and the unattainable. This relates to my personal acting out against the inexorable pull of time and desires to preserve certain moments that inevitably become distorted and fade.

The indicators of fairy tales, set in kingdoms long ago and far away and marked by the inclusion of magic or other fantastical elements also provide a safe platform to express needs or desires that are uncomfortable to address in the real world. Many tropes, especially that of the wicked stepmother, point to very real and serious questions of survival in the time periods of the stories; issues of inheritance, famine, and the inevitability of age. Topics considered taboo to point out with neighbors or family members could be illustrated with dragons and kings and witches.

I draw both from literary tradition and my personal constructs of fantasy within my childhood to create situations that explore topics that might not necessarily be broached in polite society.

DEDICATION

To my family; those of blood and those of kindred heart. To the women who have shaped my life across the centuries and across the table. To those who have been there for me every step of the journey in person and in spirit; I offer my sincerest thanks.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Once there was a young girl who lived not far from here. The girl loved sweets more than anything else; pink heart-shaped cakes that left a waxy coating on the roof of her mouth, chocolate truffles that burst with a gooey surprise when she cracked the shells with her teeth, orange popsicles that revealed themselves by inches from their cardboard tubes.

Best of all were the packages that came in the mail, filled with small packets of patterned paper tied up in tendrils of curling ribbons. Inside were nutty brownies dripping with salty caramel sauces, or chewy ginger cookies that tingled her lips with spice. But the girl's favorites were the linzer; lacy sandwiches of sugar cookie wedged with seedy, sweet raspberry jam and dusted with a haze of powdered sugar. As she inhaled, she could taste the scent of her grandmother's house through each crumbling bite.

Her grandmother lived in a house with many rooms and a shaded garden. In the summer, the girl would play cards on the screened porch or curl up on the sunspots that broke through the oaks. Her grandmother would give her green beans to snap and ears of golden corn to free from their cradles of silk, but nothing would please the girl more than to make her linzer cookies.

So her grandmother would send the girl for the recipe,

written on index cards lined with bright strawberries, and they would pull out the heavy roller from the cabinets. They would raid the cupboards for sugar and powders while the girl's grandmother showed her the way as she learned from her own grandmother, who came on a boat across a great ocean speaking nothing but Swedish. And as they assembled and concocted and created, the grandmother would tell the girl a story....

- Accompanying Title Story

Fantasy and fairy tales, both in the oral tradition and as subsets of literature, are powerful means of shaping world-views and communicating personal and cultural values that can be difficult to express in more straightforward manners. Within the gallery space of *Artificial Kingdoms*, I engage in dualities that seemingly conflict in my life: the tempering of good and evil, constructs that govern artifice and reality, and the striving for and relinquishing of control. Each piece is structured to act as an individual narrative operating within the overarching framework of an anthology that manifests both through literary text and works of visual art. This exhibition employs functional, decorative, sculptural, installation, literary, performative and photographic work to create an experience that offers the audience multiple access points to the show's major themes.

Artificial Kingdoms is structured to resemble a storybook, with the entrance and exit denoted by the respective texts of "Once upon a time..." and "The End." The tale of the girl and her grandmother, which opens this section, accompanies the title wall and acts as the framing

narrative device for the show. The stories throughout the show are original works drawn from both my personal experiences and literary tradition while investigating themes explored in the artworks through a written platform.



Figure 1.1 & 1.2: *Artificial Kingdoms* entrance and exit

The first work encountered in the space is *Porcelain Sweetness*, which as part of the closing reception becomes an interactive piece. Punch cups and petite-fours plates cast in porcelain from plastic ware in pastel colors are served from tiered tables with jasmine tea and chocolates, providing the audience with a physical manifestation of their time in the gallery space. *Grotesque* creates an environment that both attracts and repulses through decorative elements. In *Semper Augustus in Repose*, a tulip-inspired vessel resides in a fantastical world within the gallery walls. The sculptural installation, *Honeysuckle Memories*, cre-

ates a space that juxtaposes moments of doubt and certainty. As people leave, the photographic series *Nothing Gold Can Stay* faces the show's exit. The broken cup in the photographs reflects the audience's parting with the work. Here, the audience must leave their souvenirs from *Porcelain Sweetness* and exit under the emblem of "The End."

Each accompanying story blends personal experiences with familiar tropes found in fairy, folk tales and fantasy to create an experience that ties my individual narrative to the history of traditional tales. In each re-telling the narrator is presented with the opportunity to insert their own personality, agendas or desires into the existing framework of the story. Angela Carter, an author who creates contemporary revisions of classic fairy tales, posits that the draw of these stories is their accessibility as a universal platform rather than a unique origin, like recipes for potato soup or meatballs.¹ In *Artificial Kingdoms*, the access point of these familiar structures blurs attraction and repulsion, certainty and hesitation as the audience navigates the show and is confronted with their own curiosity, nostalgia and desires.

Contrary to a contemporary view of fairy tales as strictly for children or the infantile, the stories I have researched were originally for adults, and explored dark subject matter. These tales, which psychologist Sheldon Chashdan, PhD, points out, explored cannibalism, incest, and often bawdy humor, broached many topics that would not have been considered suitable for children.² In *Artificial Kingdoms*, I draw upon that play between expectations of darkness and innocence. The subject matter across this body of work employs layers from lighthearted surfaces to misgivings of inner turmoil. In *Porcelain Sweetness* and *Nothing*

Gold Can Stay, the desire to forever enjoy a sweet moment is undercut with the bitterness of loss. In *Honeysuckle Memories*, conviction meets the uncertainty of doubt. *Semper Augustus in Repose* deals with consent, control and the spell of desire. *Grotesque* explores the deception of appearances in a world of imitation and artifice.

In my own life, find it difficult to express desires I hold closest or reveal the things I consider important. It is through the construction of fantastical worlds that clearly operate outside the realm of reality that I am able to freely communicate my thoughts, fears and motivations. The gruesome world of fairy tales, plagued with evil stepmothers, cannibalism and charmed beasts is removed from the plane of reality through signifiers of magic, but these tropes belie the harsh reality of circumstances that inspired their creation. The stepmother of many tales, as that in Cinderella, highlights the struggles of blending families in a world where mortality was high, resources were low, and the course of inheritance could mean the difference between life and death. The mother in the Grimms' *The Children Living in a Time of Famine* tells her daughters she must butcher them so that she may eat and live, upon which the girls lie down and never wake again. In her article for *The New Yorker*, Joan Acocella posits this is an expression of a wish that children who must die might do so without crying³. Topics that were distressing to face in the context of a neighbor or relative could be broached more freely when set in a land far away and populated with trolls and dragons and handsome princes.

It is this complex freedom found within the creation of worlds that operate outside the realm of reality that makes the format of the fairy

and folk tale appealing to operate within for my thesis show. In the creation of fantastical worlds, narratives and experiences that play upon the artificial constructs that govern myself and the gallery experience on a daily basis, I am able to explore and express topics often considered taboo or distressing to broach.

CHAPTER 2
FEMININE SIGNIFIERS IN WESTERN CULTURE

Once there was a maid with one eye deepest green and one eye blue as blue could be. All who knew her loved her, save her stepmother, for when the woman looked into the eye green as a summer leaf, she saw only hunger, and when she looked into the eye blue as an iris bud, she saw naught but dotage. So she cursed the child, and when the girl ripened into maidenhood, she fell into a deep slumber from which there was no awakening.

Though many wept at the girl's misfortune, the stepmother rejoiced that she would never again look into those eyes. So she set up a small monument deep in the woods, where she could at last cherish her daughter. For years, people came from far and wide to gaze upon the maid who grew lovelier each day she lay in repose.

One day, word of the enchantment reached the King's court, and the prince vowed to start a quest to see the visage for himself. He crossed ragged mountains and defeated many treacherous foes on his journey to the forest where the maiden lay. Upon approaching her monument, the prince was nearly blinded by the radiance of the girl and determined to bring her to his kingdom that he might gaze upon her forever.

The first day of his travels, her blushing cheeks made the prince weep with happiness. The second day, her bloom-

ing smile made the prince gnaw his lips to shreds with longing. The third day, the beauty of her gently rising bosom so overcame the prince that he could not help but to make her his completely.

When he finished, the spell of the girl's beauty upon the prince was broken. Free from the thrall of his desire, he resolved to leave, but as he rose, the girl stirred! Trembling, the prince fell to his knees and grasped her hand as she yawned and stretched; certain that true love had lifted the enchantment. But when she lifted her lids, all the prince saw in the inky pits where the gemlike spheres had once been was death.

*-Accompanying story from *Semper Augustus in Repose**

The theme of fairy and folk tales, long associated in the oral tradition with the domestic, is coupled with motifs in Western culture that are linked to the socio-normative role of the feminine: botanical forms, decorative elements, crafting, prettiness and sweetness. My work is strongly influenced by my upbringing in a traditional home in the American South. I am particularly interested in the signifiers associated with women in my culture and how they are interpreted. I utilize motifs of confections, flowers and pastels, elements often depicted as lacking in assertiveness or substance, to draw focus on situations that imbue them with agency and empowerment.

In *Semper Augustus in Repose*, the center of focus is on a vessel modeled after the Semper Augustus tulip, the most expensive breed of

the 1630's Tulipomania that gripped Holland before resulting in a massive collapse of the market. This particular strain was prized for its distinctive color breaks; the result of a viral genetic mutation that simultaneously drove a breeding frenzy and the extinction of the species.⁴



Figure 2.1: 17th century Watercolor of *Semper Augustus Tulip*

The stylized porcelain form in *Semper Augustus in Repose* that reaches towards the small opening at the base of the enclosure conflates flora with a curvaceous figure. Slightly swollen in scale from that of a tulip, the vessel, with inclusion of red coloring, also bears resemblances to female anatomy. It lies in wait behind the walls, betraying desires kept hidden beneath the neat surface, broken through and revealed by a

gesture of violence. The positioning of the work behind the wall brings to mind *Étant donnés*, the last work of Marcel Duchamp, which implicated the viewer as a voyeur. Just as the princess in many tales lies in indefinite suspension in a lofty tower, this work can only be discovered after climbing a set of stairs to its level. It requires action and intention on the part of the viewer. To fully investigate the world, they must satisfy their curiosity.



Figure 2.2: *Étant donnés* by Marcel Duchamp



Figure 2.3 & 2.4: Framework & detail of *Semper Augustus in Repose*

Having already completed one action in ascending the steps, it becomes more plausible that the audience might take it a step further. The illuminated vessel can be seen with some effort through the hole situated near face height, but the inclusion of a small hole at the height of the hand provides a beckoning temptation to break through the gallery wall and touch the surface. Through the relationship of the scale and placement to the hand, I call into question the actions and intentions of the viewer: the temptation to touch, to stroke, to dominate and own. Should this barrier be breached, though, the person responsible will be branded with red dye; a signifier that brings to light issues of consent.

Martha Grover, a contemporary ceramic artist, also works with vessels that conflate the line between female anatomy and botanical forms. She is able to explore taboos of public sexual interaction through

the formal vocabulary of vessels; actions that would normally be expected in the course of utilizing the object can be made uncomfortable due to the seductive nature of the forms.



Figure 2.5: *Perfume Bottle and Wall Stand* by Martha Grover

The correlation between women and botany, especially as passive baubles utilized to illustrate patriarchal wealth, is a far-reaching trope. Women are shown interchangeably with flowers in cultural depictions from portraits to movies to advertising. These iterations of beauty, softness and fragility often deny agency, and those who act against the expected roles are viewed as monsters.

The traditional literary stepmother follows this path, made wicked through her refusal to accept the more docile and socially acceptable role of the virtuous and long-suffering heroine. In the accompanying story, as in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, it is her refusal to accept her inevitable position in society that strands the wicked stepmother in a world of deceptive illusion; replete with power but ultimately enslaved

to a reflection she cannot control except through destruction. *Semper Augusts in Repose* and its connecting story blurs the lines of who is truly in control when we act on our desires and the extremes to which we go when confronted with the uncontrollable. By changing the way in which the audience views the signifier of flowers, which are normally coded as dormant, I draw parallels to how matters of control, especially in regards to women, are perceived.

The default attempt to make feminine signifiers appear more empowered is to make them more masculine. Artists or designers may juxtapose extremes of femininity with more masculine signifiers, as Kelly Reemsten does in her paintings that feature women in sun-dresses carrying power tools. However, this contextualization does not in fact change the view of things being associated with being female as being weak; it simply says to be strong, one must become more masculine.



Figure 2.6: *Pardon the Interruption* by Kelly Reemtsen

Rather, I choose to operate within these signifiers: pastels, sweets, botanical forms, etc. in a way that utilizes their inherent qualities to subvert culturally-informed expectations. The sweetness of the candy and associated coloring of *Porcelain Sweetness* highlights the fleeting desirability of moments in time and contrasts with the bitterness of letting go. The fragile beauty of the blossoms in *Honeysuckle Memories* reflect our own tenuous connection to memories.

Three female artists guide the audience's experience of the reception. Dressed in white with ruffled pinafores, these women embody girlish innocence. The performers create an avatar through their uniformity that complements the work in the gallery and plays upon expectations associated with the style of dress. These women operate within the role of coordinators, guiding the flow of the viewers' experience from a subdued, yet empowered position. It is these women who shape the audience's experience in the gallery, controlling how and where one enters, initiating physical interaction with the forms, and reclaiming the punch cups from *Porcelain Sweetness* at the exit.



Figure 2.7: Performers during reception

CHAPTER 3

ARTIFICE & APPEARANCES

Once there was a princess whose dearest companion in the world was a small kitten. Each meal, the puss would sup gracefully from its golden dish placed on the grand table next to hers. Each evening before sunset when the maid drew the princess's bath, the kitten would dance along the edge of the gilded tub, flicking the water with its white paws. Then, the kitten would curl up under the downy comforter, nestled against the princess's breast as she would kiss it between its pointed ears and wish it sweet dreams. But her maid, bent with age and superstition, would only shake her head in sad disapproval and mutter, "A beast is a beast" as she locked the door tight and shuffled through the twilight down the winding tower steps.

When the midday sun shone brightly, the girl would take her kitten to explore the maze of hedges that wound endlessly round her tower. Always the kitten was at the girl's side, and always her old maid was watching over them, muttering, "A beast is a beast."

But one day the sun did not shine, and when the princess turned back her covers, her kitten was not to be found. She called and called, but there was no response, not even from her withered maid. The oak door that guarded the room, heavy and impassive, was no match for the will of the small, desperate creature as she burst into the shrouded gloom of the descending

stairway. In the dim purple-grey light, the clouds hung dark and heavy over the small, shuddering figure, who braced herself against the bellows and stalked out to the looming bushes. Worn and weary, she combed every corner for her lost prize until she heard a faint cry. The princess dropped to her knees and worked to free the kitten from its entanglement, when flesh was ripped by a sharp barb. A fat drop of red blood pooled from the wound and she pressed her lips against the surface to draw it out as a sharp, glinting shadow crept across her shoulder. "A beast is a beast," whispered her maid, seeming to have grown in stature as she hovered above them.

Just then, the sun glimmered through, and the girl smiled beatifically up, holding her lost companion. The old maid slipped the thin blade up her sleeve and turned toward the tower when a sticky river spread down her back. The gloom deepened over the small princess and her chaperon. Trembling, the maid whimpered, "A beast is a beast," her eyes glazed and vacant as she fell before the smiling mouth, scarlet and dripping with flesh.

-Accompanying story from *Grotesque*

The work in *Artificial Kingdoms* deal with matters that may seem to be largely black and white at first glance, but often reveal themselves to be filled with complexities and deception. *Grotesque* investigates the deception of appearances, the concealment of true natures and the duali-

ty of attraction and repulsion in artificial constructs. This grotto, a cavity inhabited by porcelain teacups amidst an assemblage of mosses cast into clay, draws the viewer into its fantastical setting by playing on the notion of curiosities. The scale of the cups vary from normal expectations to the size of a fingernail. This shrinking draws upon cuteness and curiosity-hinting that there is more to be discovered from prolonged exploration. Yet, further delving into this piece can be an unsettling experience.



Figure 3.1: *Grotesque*

The environment is based on artificial grottoes, whose intricate shell and rock-work inspired Rococo. The word is derived from *rocaille*, which the French used to describe the rocks and shells in the grottoes of Versailles. This appetite for excesses and opulence led to the evolution of the grotesque, the word itself stemming from grotto, as a grossness of excess or distortion. Within the grotesque are dueling forces of attraction and repulsion; the admiration of intricacies and abundance in contrast to

the destabilized response to being overwhelmed by stimuli or details.

Grotesque contains replicas and imitations of natural elements. The aquariums of the Victorian era, both the “parlour jewelboxes” and the large-scale public spectacles that populated venues like the Crystal Palace, displaced natural elements from their environments and commodified them as decorations. In *Grotesque*, I translate moss into porcelain by casting and burning out the original material, in effect turning it into a decorative replica of its former self. Celeste Olalquiga, in her book entitled *The Artificial Kingdom*, says this mimicking of reality through grottoes and the grotesque creates a “style of loss”- a nostalgia for something that never truly has existed.⁵

The cups in *Grotesque* are modeled after fine porcelain vessels and adorned with decorative elements. Traditional teacups point to a very specific era and rigid structures of civility. These objects, made with white porcelain and gilded handles, contain the latent history of etiquette, class systems and showmanship designed to create an illusion of refinement that elevated those with appropriate training and resources above the lower classes. Yet, the decoration that drapes these objects is feral rather than inviting; a gesture that dismisses notions of use though curiosity might draw one in. Each cup bares a tiny set of gilded teeth; small reminders of the true nature that lurks beneath the layers of refinement.

This utilization of the built-in history of porcelain and its surrounding cultures is popular in the field of contemporary art. Chris Antemann uses porcelain figurines of the Meissen era, decorated lavishly in a traditional manner to explore relationships and activities at odds with notions of courtly refinement. These works are at once intriguing and uncomfort-

able to explore, demonstrating the undercurrents and intrigues of behaviors normally kept out of site in social rituals associated with formal dining.



Figure 3.2: *A Tasty Morsel* by Chris Antemann

The story that accompanies this piece also explores savage natures lurking behind layers of refinement. Here, a hidden blood-lust is revealed in the unexpected figure of a small princess. The work and its story, along with all the stories, is accompanied by a hand-drawn frame. In this piece, it serves to denote a theatrical space: an artificial arena populated by small figures. The frames themselves are rooted in literary illustration and the pen and ink sketch. Each tale incorporates an illuminated letter into the frame: marrying literary text with imagery. The illuminated letter appears through out the gallery space: a furthering of the blend between text and image. On this wall, I have placed a quote of text at the scale that recognizes it as a work of art: setting the tone that we are in fact in a space constructed of artificial kingdoms.

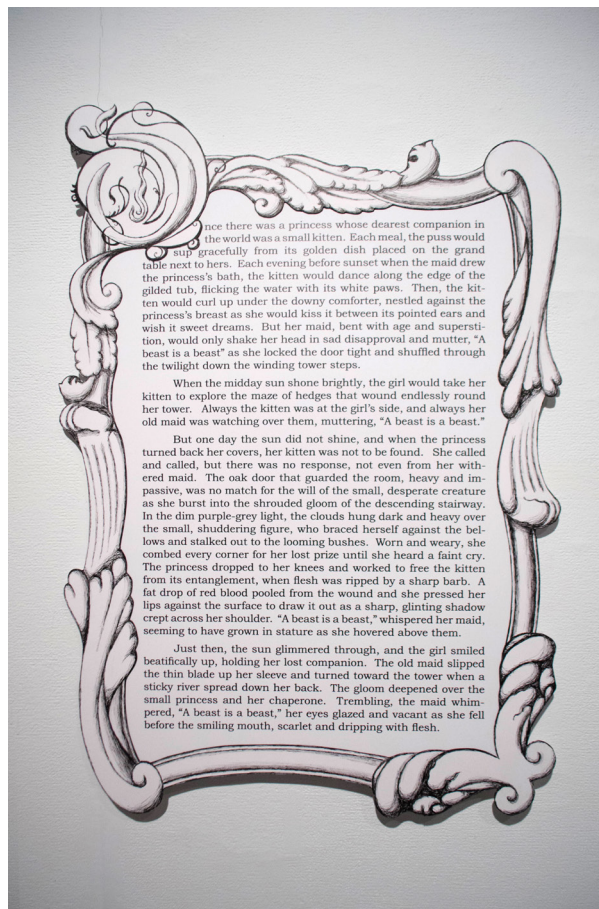


Figure 3.3: Accompanying story for *Grotesque*

Once, when the Earth was new and full
of wonders...

Figure 3.4: Wall vinyl of quote from stories

Grotesque and the accompanying story draw from many tales with themes of transformation and disguise: *Snow White and Rose Red*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *The Frog Prince*.

Beauty and the Beast, or *La Belle et la Bête*, written by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, is a source of inspiration for *Grotesque*. French in origin, as the Rococo movement, the story deals with the deception of appearances and conflicts of attraction and repulsion. The animate objects that populate the well-known story also link to this piece; here vessels serve in place of a monster, with fine adornments and the forbidding presence of teeth-like thorns.

The wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* speaks sweetly and charms his victims in spite of his appearances. Princes are often disguised as monsters or hunchbacks or toads, as in *The Frog Prince*, only to be released by a kiss or a violent act born of passion. *Princess Finola And the Dwarf*, an Irish tale that vividly recounts gruesome elements of disfigurement and sacrifice, is told mainly from the perspective of a crippled dwarf, whose state is revealed to be an enchantment. It is not until he sacrifices both his eyes and swims through a river resembling blood that his hidden nature is revealed.

Semper Augustus in Repose, too, builds upon the idea of hidden natures being revealed. I grapple with the constructs that govern the gallery space; how work in this very artificial setting is contextualized and poised for interaction. Throughout the gallery, I provide references and reactions against the white-walled experience: pointing to hidden fantasies lurk beneath the structure in *Semper Augustus*, moving outside

the gallery for the performance in *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, providing rare moments of private intimacy in *Honeysuckle Memories*, and breaking the unspoken rules of interaction with *Porcelain Sweetness*.

CHAPTER 4
THE CONFLICT OF DOUBT

Once there was a girl who always knew best.

“Come!” her youngest brother would say. “I’ve found a bush so full of berries we could never eat them all- good as any in a store!”

“Down the street is one better!” called the elder as he made for the empty lot covered in brambles and dark, glistening berries.

But the girl ran towards the graveyard, past the spikes of dried, dead weeds and stones in lazy lines to rake her hands over and over the brambles of berries she knew she liked best.

“The wide path back from school is safest,” declared her father, “with no roots to nibble at your heels or ivy to burn your skin.”

“Your friends and brothers can all walk together; you will talk and play and never miss the time that passes,” her mother urged.

But the girl dashed across the tumbled trails through the woods, leaping across roots, outrunning monsters and skirting past the ivy so she could lie in hiding for her brothers to arrive and scare them, as she knew she liked best.

“Teacher says never to test honeysuckle from jasmine,”

murmured the crowd of children as they ringed round the forbidden bush looming in the schoolyard.

“My mom says if you eat jasmine you’re poisoned and dead,” announced one, eyeing the luscious blossoms laden with nectar.

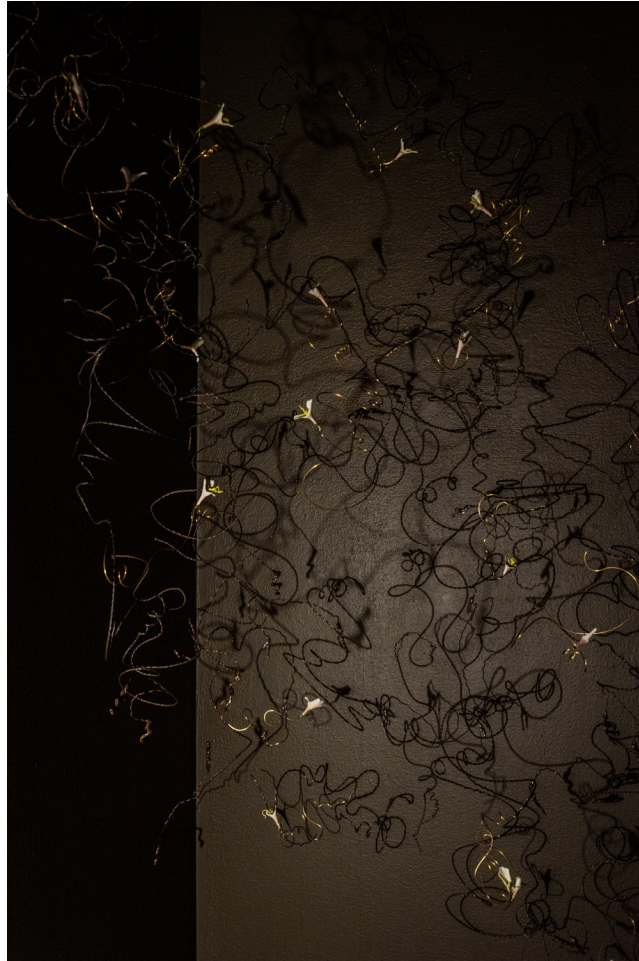
But the girl plucked a fragrant bud and held it to her lips, certain to taste the sweet syrup she knew that she liked best.

-Accompanying story from *Honeysuckle Memories*

The theme of dual natures is further explored in *Honeysuckle Memories*. In this installation are manifestations of confidence and doubt. *Honeysuckle Memories* is based on fantasies stemming from nostalgia; a melancholic patina that coats memories due to the inability to accept the passing of time. The very smell of honeysuckle and jasmine incites very specific and powerful memories of my childhood- memories of sweetness and summer evenings and school playgrounds. In her book, *A Natural History of the Senses*, Diana Ackerman explains that scent triggers direct sensors in the brain, and being the most deeply wired it is therefore the hardest to pin of our senses. We do not need descriptors or language for scents; they conjure up associations and reactions on their own.⁶

Though I am able to escape into almost trance-like recollections of times past, these memories are fragmented and obviously altered by time. The stylization of the flowers on the wires represents the mythologization of childhood. The accompanying story is rooted in actual events of my past, but as time casts a patina over memory, events evolve, con-

dense and magnify.



The characters in each story throughout the show draw from my relationship to fairy tales throughout stages of my life. I position myself as the narrator; one who inserts themselves into tales they have heard and told thousands of times before. The girls of these tales have elements of myself, people I know and stock characters from literature blended together.

Here, I focus on the assurance that the hero knows best and the tension of circumstances that are difficult to control. There is underlying

fragility and possibility of breakage; the unpredictable movement of the piece presents the viewer with moments of uncertainty.

I have cast the blooms in porcelain, in effect preserving them through the translation of material. Porcelain serves as a metaphor for preservation throughout this show: making permanent that which is passing.

In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart posits,

“As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced with the nostalgic myth of contact and presence. ‘Authentic’ experience becomes both illusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present... In this process of distancing, the memory of the body is replaced with the memory of the object, a memory standing outside the self... The experience of the object lies outside the body’s experience- it is saturated with meanings that will never be fully revealed to us.”⁷

As I deal with the passing of childhood and the transition of present action to nostalgic recollection, my association with the experience becomes fixated on souvenir-like triggers, here exemplified by honeysuckle blooms. These flowers will never rot or lose their color, but they are ultimately only mimicry of the real thing. Though preserved, they still remain very fragile, a testament to the ability of time to erase despite all efforts to the contrary. The blooms themselves sprout from gilded and golden wires, referencing the ability to coat reality in the nostalgic gaze backwards. Overwhelming these, though, are dark steel wires

that are twisted and gnarled in reminiscence of thorns. The dark wires, formed in reaching, grasping gestures, provoke notions of doubt and creeping uncertainty; the chance of injury or danger.



In spite of their appearance mimicking honeysuckle, the scent that each flower bears is that of jasmine. To those who know the difference, this disconnect further heightens the feeling of uncertainty and something amiss. For those who do not know, the work reflects the failings of hubris and deception of appearances.

The sculpture is located within an enclosed space, sequestering the experience of the scent within the smaller walls, and allowing the memory to be something that is stepped into and experienced intimately. Limiting the light to concentrate on the work serves to further isolate the viewer from the outside world. The vines act as metaphors for things

that creep and connect, in the manner of synapses in the brain that must be bridged in order to relay information.

CHAPTER 5
THE NOSTALGIC GAZE

Once, when the Earth was new and full of wonders that neither you nor I have ever seen, there was a girl with two eyes that twinkled below her brows and a third eye that dozed between the braids on the crown of her head. No matter where the girl went, the third eye sleepily kept watch on all the things she left behind.

One day after her chores, the girl was chasing the dragonflies that flitted in the sun-spotted shafts between the trees when she happened upon a little red fox in a cunning woolen jacket. Now the fox by far the cleverest of creatures, and so sly he could steal an egg right from under the feathered skirt of a hen even as he wished her good morrow.

“What do you have in your basket, my dear?” the fox asked sweetly.

“Eggs that my little golden hen has laid for me,” the girl replied. “I am going to sell them at the market to have new shoes made for winter.”

“Ah, but do you know what would be worth far more? A persimmon like those that grow on this tree above us can fetch three times the price of a plain old egg.”

The girl raised her head and sure enough a large persimmon drooped tantalizingly from the highest branch. So she thanked the fox, hiked up her skirts and began to climb as her

two sharp eyes carved a path for her toes to grip.

“Higher, higher,” cried the fox. The basket swayed from her arms as she climbed, her eyes fixed on the path ahead. “There! It is just behind you if you could reach it,” called the fox from below as she dangled between slender branches.

The third eye caught sight of the persimmon behind her and it was so bright, so alluringly close, that she took leave of all other senses. From her slackened arm, the basket tipped out the eggs in a pebbled cascade, where the fox’s open mouth was waiting to gobble them up before a single one hit the forest floor. Blindly, the girl pitched forward and she fell through the air, the one eye focused on the persimmon as it drew farther and farther away.

-Accompanying story from *Porcelain Sweetness*

Through the creation of environments and experiences that center on porcelain vessels and sculpture, I explore the expression of discomforting or taboo desires and situations through the construct of fantasy. These constructs speak to a desire for something beyond the normative, everyday experience; an expression of desire for the fleeting and the unattainable. The references to escapism embody my personal grappling with the phenomenon of time and the fallibility of my attempts to capture and preserve moments as they pass me by.

The first and the last works of the series, *Porcelain Sweetness* and *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, represent the beginning and end of the gallery experience as well as the beginning and end of a story. These works,

being so closely related, are also the only directly continued stories of the show.

Porcelain Sweetness features two tables displayed in tiers. Each is laden with porcelain objects cast from plastic wares in an array of candy colors and piped in a manner resembling confectionery decorations. One table is set with punch cups and topped with a cast punchbowl while the other displays an arrangement of chocolate candies on porcelain petite-four plates. The casting of disposable plastic into the permanent and refined material of porcelain mirrors my actions to preserve moments that constantly slip my grasp. These further embody the connection between femininity and sweetness and blur the lines between the materials of sugar and porcelain. This blending of the candy and clay highlights the transition between ephemeral moments and the relics we use to embody that experience.



Figure 5.1 & 5.2: *Porcelain Sweetness* & detail

Porcelain Sweetness is part of the larger investigation into functional wares that has been a significant part of my time in the graduate program at Clemson. I am attracted to ceramic wares not only in terms of formal qualities, but the experiences and relationships that develop in the course of intimate interactions with work. I am particularly interested in heightened awareness or unease that comes in social situations, especially through the lens of etiquette. As my work has developed into this particular body, the decorative elements serve as reminders of labor that goes into social celebrations and the caution with which one must navigate these prickly fields.

In the course of this defense and my closing receptions, the piece is interactive, guided by a performer, allowing participants a physical manifestation of their relationship to the gallery experience as the work is disassembled and distributed. Each person is served from the tables and encouraged to consume the fares. The jasmine tea is a precursor to the connections between scent and memory that are more deeply explored in *Honeysuckle Memories*. Each candy is decorated with a piped confectionery shell; a reference to the shell-work of the Rococo period that influences *Grotesque*. These confections are also hollow shells, a reference to the emptiness of sugar calories; the lack of sustenance provided by reliance on overly sweet things both in the nutritional and metaphorical sense. Through the structuring of entrances and exits, the drinks and candies are the first artwork to be experienced at the reception and carried through the gallery to the end, where they are surrendered to a performer at the exit.



Figure 5.3: *Porcelain Sweetness* detail

The story accompanying *Porcelain Sweetness* further develops the idea of the nostalgic gaze backwards. In it is a desperate grasping for things that are ultimately beyond my reach. The story accompanying *Nothing Gold Can Stay* breaks expectations, being the only story to start with an illuminated letter other than “O” and the only directly continued storyline, following the fate of the girl from *Porcelain Sweetness*. Here, the nostalgic gaze is resolved in the course of letting go the thing considered most precious.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: THE TURN

Now the girl was despondent over the fox's trickery and wept many red tears from the two eyes that could no longer see. Inside her basket, her fingers found only one small egg, riddled with tiny fractures. She stumbled down the path to the market, but no one would even look twice at a cracked egg.

Filled with sorrow, the girl tried to navigate the woods home, but she could only see the obstacles she had already fallen for, and soon her unshod feet were too numb in the deepening dark carry her any further. Shivering, she tucked herself in a dead tree trunk that had fallen by the wayside and waited for the frost to curl its soft fingers around her throat. In her hands, she cradled the broken egg as though it had hatched a baby bird. And as she did, she dreamt she felt the egg grow warm and radiate from her fingers to the soles of her feet.

The next morning the fox, who lived close by, saw the glow of the object the sleeping girl clasped so tightly and instantly coveted it. So he disguised his voice and asked the child, "Little girl! Ah, little girl!" What is it that troubles you so?"

So the girl told the fox her story, and at the end he said, "Ah, you are in luck! For I am a fairy and know what will give you your sight. You must go to the magic well in the heart of the woods and drop your most precious possession inside. Then, you will have one wish- any wish you want!"

“But I have nothing of value,” the girl protested uncertainly.

“Everything has a value, even that old egg,” answered the fox. And he cajoled her so that she gave in and pushed deeper into the woods. As she stumbled, she held ever tighter to the egg, which now seemed to beat with its own pulse. Meanwhile, the fox had dashed ahead to the crumbled dry well to lay in wait at the bottom. He dozed in boredom for several hours before he finally heard the halted shuffling of the girl.

“Come closer!” he boomed from inside the well. “Come and give me the price for a wish!”

Hovering at the edge, the girl grasped the egg so tightly she wondered that it did not burst. But she held it to her lips and kissed the crazed surface before dropping it into the abyss.

“Eaugh!” cried the wicked fox as he choked on the object, now heavier than a lead ball. Seeing clearly as she never had before, the girl found the fox dead on the well floor. So she drew him up and when she had skinned and gutted him, she found her egg lodged inside- every crack glittering and gleaming such that when she peeled off the bits of shell she revealed a heart of pure gold.

-Accompanying story from Nothing Gold Can Stay

The reception, and consequently the show, will close with me breaking the cups. Each action is a replica, as each cup is a replica, but each is an authentic moment, as each cup underwent a unique ex-

perience. This breaking is both a loss and a celebration; the marker of the end of one era and the beginning of another. As in Jewish wedding ceremonies where the glass is broken to remember the destruction of the temple and temper sweetness with bitterness, so too do these actions and the reason behind their existence encapsulate the eagerness to move forward and longing to look back. As I break the physical relics, the experience changes from tangible to mythic. It can only exist to the participants as a story or an image. The series of photographs, each a still in rapid succession of the breaking of a beautiful cup, references cinematic frames. Together, they imply movement and action, but in reality are fragmented suspension; a reference to the inability of recreations to truly capture the original experience.



Figure 6.1: *Nothing Gold Can Stay*

I have been investigating ephemeral events involving cast porcelain wares for several semesters at Clemson. The series of photographs in *Nothing Gold Can Stay* comes from one such event, where I staged a picnic punctuated at the end by the breaking of wares by each participant. This investigation started with me exploring the artificial nature of celebrations and images depicting social ideals. Suzanne Heintz, a photographer who dismantles notions of the perfect family by photographing herself with mannequins, influenced the work.



Figure 6.2: *Life Once Removed* by Suzanne Heintz

As my work has developed, I see it now focus more on the moment of letting go. The power of the action of breaking something precious now consumes the visual space, repeated over and over again. Ai Weiwei has also used imagery of breaking valuable art, famously in *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* to stress his agendas. The solemn moment of breakage in *Nothing Gold Can Stay* releases me from my attachment to these objects and events.



Figure 6.3: Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn by Ai Weiwei

Nothing Gold Can Stay embodies the feeling of the performance by capturing the breaking of vessels at the conclusion of a previous event. Here, I foreshadow the ultimate fate of the work in *Porcelain Sweetness*—the moment of destruction. Often my desire to hold onto the past can blind me to the present, as in the accompanying story. Despite my efforts to preserve these moments, I must let them go.



Figure 6.4: Performance during reception

The gallery space is itself an artificial construct designed to influence the audience's approach to works of art and guide their behaviors. In *Artificial Kingdoms*, I draw attention to and bend the white-walled experience to my own will. Through text, spatial settings and human agents acting on my behalf, I have designed an experience that both critiques the nature of this space and uses it to explore themes relating to the artwork on a further level. This mirrors my initial attraction to functional work: the relationship, both implied and physical, to the viewer based on indicators of interaction. This relationship shows up time and again through varying approaches to accessibility and media as I invite, tempt, bestow, confront and deny my audience.

In the final story, my heroine ruthlessly discards the chaff that has been her downfall and peels away layers to reveal a heart of pure gold. It is this cutting away, this breaking from the past, painful though it may be, that I find so compelling. As the author and creator of this

experience, I punctuate the closing reception with the destruction of the cups from *Porcelain Sweetness* under the words “The End.” This action consists of twelve drops, echoing the chimes of the clock that strikes midnight for Cinderella, here breaking the spell and freeing the audience from the constructs of *Artificial Kingdoms*.

APPENDIX

RECIPES

All work and recipes in the show are fired to cone 6 in oxidation.

Clay Body

Makins Porcelain- cone 6-10

Grolleg Kaolin 55

Nepheline Syenite 23

Silica/Flint 22

*Add .35% Darvan No. 7 to make casting slip

•Pink

5% Alumina Pink Mason Stain #6020

•Peach

3% Saturn Orange Mason Stain #6121 + 1% Canary Mason Stain

#6410 + 1% Coral Mason Stain #6032

•Yellow

5% Canary Mason stain # 6410

•Green

5% Chartreuse Mason Stain #6236

•Blue

5% Dark Turquoise Mason Stain #6374

•Purple

4% Alumina Pink Mason Stain #6020 + 4% Lavender Mason
Stain #6319

Glazes

Chocolate Base Glaze- Cone 6

Minspar 200	20
Gerstley Borate	31
EPK	5
Talc	14
Silica/Flint	2
Bentonite	30

*Clear glaze with feathering when pooled. No crazing at cone 6.

#150 Base- Cone 6-10

Nepheline Syenite	35
Dolomite	20
Whiting	5
Grolleg	20
Flint/Silica	20

*Soft satin-matte at Cone 6.

Washes

•Brown

Gerstley Borate	50
Dark Chocolate Mason Stain #6160	50

•Rust

Gerstley Borate	50
Yellow Iron Oxide	50

•Orange

Gerstley Borate	50
Light Rutile	50
•Light Green	
Gerstley Borate	50
Chartreuse Mason Stain #6236	50
•Bright Green	
Gerstley Borate	50
Chromium Oxide	50

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