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Darwin or Frankenstein?

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

by

Sylvia Sophia Santamaria

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2012

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Abstract

Through sculpture and drawing, I create my own versions of natural specimens primarily based upon the visual unity of disparate organisms. Invented specimens are composed using a variety of processes employing a mixture of atypical materials following the (20th, 21st century) Postmodern shift away from formalist and traditional uses of any singular medium. As well as a variety of art materials, the specimens are hybrids of organic and biomorphic elements, blurring boundaries between botanical, animal, fungal, metal, and mineral. Is my approach perhaps like Charles Darwin, observant and studious naturalist, or am I more like Dr. Frankenstein, science fiction maker of monstrosities?

Keywords: art; sculpture; assemblage; nature; specimen; biomorphic

Introduction

I am interested in exploring the forms and textures of natural life without the boundaries of reality. My work follows various artistic traditions, beginning specifically with the Surrealists, that continue in contemporary art, including found object appropriation, physical and conceptual deconstruction, abjection, and the uncanny. In *The Tangled Tree*, David Quammen promotes the idea that evolution is not accurately pictured in the form of a linear tree but rather something more tangled and web-like; genes pass, and mutations occur across species boundaries and even different kingdoms of life.¹ Changes to an organism occur both with and in response to other organisms, as well as the environment around them. My approach to my creations is not unlike a scientist working with biological manipulation or a naturalist observing biological mutations over time – I oscillate between the two, sometimes channeling Charles Darwin and at other times evoking the science fiction sensibilities of Dr. Frankenstein. My work capitalizes on the possible physical evolutions of natural forms among changing environments.

I. Considering the Psychology of Physical Object Interaction

My primary concern is with sculpture. There is significance to a three-dimensional object because of how a viewer is compelled to respond to something in their immediate vicinity. It is inherently unique to interact with something physical and in the round. The physical presence of an art object elicits an awareness, however subtle, to the viewer's own body in

¹ David Quammen, *The Tangled Tree*.

relation to both the object and the surrounding space. Take, for example, a snake – a photograph of a snake may make some people feel uncomfortable, but there is no threat of physical harm and thereby reaction is in response to past visual or physical interaction; physically crossing paths with a snake, dead or alive, can provoke a response to the potential threat that the presence of an actual snake provides. It is this instinctive and varied reaction that I elicit in my artwork based on the viewer’s relatable experiences. For myself, as the sculptor, it is the difference between choosing to create a naturalistic representation of a form versus one that resembles something false, like a toy. These individual, instinctive responses and the potential of physical interaction is what attracts me to sculpture. For the New Museum’s 2007 exhibition, *Unmonumental*, Massimiliano Gioni writes in his catalog essay that, “traditionally, sculpture has been the territory where permanence is celebrated. The history of sculpture overlaps and intersects with that of the funerary monument... supposed to be solid, even indestructible.”² Traditional sculpture is often singular in medium and in form – a wood or marble carving, a bronze cast, a specific ceramic piece. These art objects



Figure 1: *Masti-piscis (Chew-fish)*, bronze and chewing gum, 2017.

² Massimiliano Gioni, “Ask the Dust” in *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century* (London: Phaidon, 2011), 64.

often have a function whether practical, decorative, or memorial. Instead, contemporary sculpture challenges the applied tradition of the purity of medium, working beyond the primary techniques of carving, modeling, and casting to incorporate the mass-produced, the synthetic, found, and even non-archival or waste materials. The sculptural composition or arrangement of objects is called *assemblage*, the fourth of the primary sculpture techniques.

In contrast to the tradition of the bronze monument, I have used cast bronze as a material to depict a humble fish-like mass that I titled *Masti-piscis (Chew-fish)* [figure 1]. The piece is comprised of a gnawed lump, a cast portion of human jawbone, and a cast thumb fused together in bronze. It is then violated by the inclusion of chewed orange bubblegum, a mass-produced, synthetically flavored candy. The title is derived from the Latin words for “chew” and “fish”, intended to mimic the scientific names given to organisms in natural biology. It is lightly sardonic, resembling a modest creature and rendered in a material typically reserved for something of greater significance.



Figure 2: Meret Oppenheim, *Object (Luncheon in Fur)*, teacup, saucer, spoon, Chinese gazelle fur, 1936.

As the artist, I can essentially make anything out of anything. This freedom of material use is something I find more personally engaging than with most two-dimensional mediums. In my work, I incorporate aspects of all four traditional methods, but I use

assemblage as the process by which I bring varied sculptural techniques together. I will often combine synthetic materials like polymer clay, urethane plastics, or silicone, with non-archival materials, typically things found in nature shed by the living or left by the dead. Whiskers, bones, shells, and teeth are included with the intention of observing changes over time as they decay or as a rumination on the conceptual interaction between the man-made and the natural.

Daydreaming of subverted reality is a key element in the work of the Surrealists. I was introduced to Surrealism at a young age by my mother, primarily through painters like Dalí and Miró. As an undergraduate, I learned more about the Surrealists working in three dimensions, with which I came to identify and incorporate into my own ideas. While I responded to sculptures by Picasso and Dalí, the artist I found most intriguing is Meret Oppenheim. Learning about her, beginning with her *Object (Luncheon in Fur)* [figure 2] was a revelation for me. The simple material shift created by covering a teacup, saucer, and spoon with soft fur lends such a unique interpretation to something so well-known, inviting the viewer to imagine the experience

of consuming tea from this furry cup, complete with sexual undertones. This moment where context is uncertain and where something is simultaneously both foreign and familiar is termed the *uncanny*. German psychologist Ernst Jentsch first defined the *uncanny* as the strange or anxious feeling when one encounters a thing where one “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might be, in fact, animate.”³⁴ In my work, I want to evoke simultaneous feelings of discomfort and familiarity.

The appropriation of found objects in fine artworks allows for an expansion of dialogue by meeting the viewer at a point of known reference. In the tradition of Oppenheim and Marcel Duchamp, my piece *Bos-tuberosa (Dinner Column)* [figure 3]. is to me a visual pun; Bos as in the genus name for cow, *tuberosa* as in the Latin species name for potato. It is a stack of found bovine vertebrae with a cast plastic and plaster human jawbone on top. Where some of the teeth have fallen out, growths appear – casts of potato eyes with dried plant cuttings emerging from within the gaps.



Figure 3: *Bos-tuberosa (Dinner Column)*, bovine vertebrae, urethane plastic, plaster, and plant matter, 2018.

³ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” in *The Standard Ed. Of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1964).

⁴ Jentsch, Ernst. *On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)*. Trans. Roy Sellars. (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

One professor during my undergraduate studies told our class in that all art is, to some extent, a self-portrait. This piece to me is a reminiscence of sorts, thinking about my niece recently losing another baby tooth and imagining a more literal take on the phrase “you are what you eat”. It is a fabrication of my feeling in a moment that takes on a new presence when on its own, as if it had always existed like this – possibly a specimen born from the memory of a past dinner.

II. The Natural Object / The Specimen

Historically, the specimen has been a scientific learning tool; organisms were most often collected alive, studied through taxidermy, or observed in drawings and writings. In the sixteenth century, specimens, objects, and oddities were placed into rooms called *kunstkabinett* or *wunderkammer*, literally translated as ‘cabinet of art’ or ‘room of wonder,’ what we now call cabinets of curiosity. Naturalists, from the seventeenth century forward, used these spaces to discuss, observe, and consider questions about the ‘new’ world (outside of Europe) and the natural order of things. Perhaps there is some level of intuition in picking up an intriguing object and displaying it, comparable to the drive of early humans to create cave drawings of the creatures cohabiting their territory. I spent much of my childhood observing animals. Careful observation is still one of my central means of learning. Early biologists created classification systems based on observations to organize the organisms of life into increasingly specific categories. These categories, or taxonomies, influence the ways organisms are studied and

interacted with, creating an inherent element of separation or otherness between life forms. I combine life forms and can explore what I observe in a way that deconstructs the rigidity of taxonomic classifications. These two concepts, *deconstruction* and *hybridity*, are defining characteristics of my work.



Figure 4: *Experimental Skins series (Turtle & Snail)*, plaster, urethane plastic, clay, pigment, 2017.

Deconstruction, as described by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the means of examining a structure often to reveal inadequacies. Human constructs and hierarchies carry no intrinsic meanings because they are defined by unstable and arbitrary signifiers.⁵ I work in a way that visually deconstructs the physical form to mix and match elements from different origins. I can take flexible direct impressions of simple things like fruits, vegetables, shells, skin, or anything else non-porous. I then take portions or whole molds and combine them in different ways, melting together distinctive parts to create an entirely new form from the same essential components. Working carefully as to be able to reuse the flex-wax, I experiment with the

⁵ Biro, Matthew. "Art Criticism and Deconstruction: Rosalind Krauss and Jacques Derrida." *Art Criticism* 6, no. 2 (1990): 33-47.

resultant forms in a way that mimics evolution. There are slight variations from one object to the next, maintaining the flaws and imperfections from permutations before. Much like natural evolution, the outcome is left to chance within certain logical parameters, resulting in many awkward and failed attempts between what I consider successful hybrid individuals. [figure 4].

A hybrid is a cross between multiple distinct things. All the work I create is a combination of at least a few different components, be it in material or subject matter. The underlying question that inspires my work is this: what could things become if nature could be combined at will? For example, what could it look like if a starfish had two limbs cut off, but instead of regenerating, it became plant-like on one side and mammalian on the other? Often, the more an organism resembles something else, the more I imagine them growing into, through, or even becoming each other. The *Self with Fruit as Fungus* pieces [figure 5]. function for me in this way. Individual forms are comprised of the textures of plant and human skins; they are cast in plaster and made in such a way that they protrude directly from the wall. Clustered together, they build up to become something that resembles a shelf fungus, recognizable but unreal.



Figure 5: *Untitled (Self with Fruit as Fungus)*, plaster, clay, fruit peels, pigment, metal, 2017.

In my first semester of graduate school I began making plastic casts of fruits and vegetables as a sort of meditation. The casts were often mistaken for the natural objects from which they were cast – “Can I have some blueberries?” or “Isn’t that carrot going to rot?” Once I determined a method I liked, I began combining it with other



Figure 6: *Untitled (Artichoke Pangolin)*, cardboard, urethane plastic, metal, shellac, 2016.

materials or making partial casts with other previous casts inserted to make these familiar objects into new conglomerations. The *artichoke pangolin* piece [figure 6] was a first step in this direction. It began as a rumination on extinction and its relationship to agriculture, or perhaps the exploration of something I may not get to experience in my lifetime (interaction with a pangolin) through the lens of something I can regularly grab at the grocery store. At this time, I was still trying to decide upon what I wanted my work to focus – human manipulation of nature through scientific and agricultural process was one potential avenue for the ideas, but I ultimately decided to not get bogged down with such specificity in the work.

It was during a particularly conflicting point in my work that I had a studio visit with artist Mark Dion that ultimately encouraged me to expand my ideas thematically. He told me to not worry so much about a specific audience and that success as an artist is all in how I would

like to define it for myself. “You may not get into all the shows and not everyone is going to understand your work, but that doesn’t matter. I don’t make work for people who don’t know what a pangolin is.” For an internationally-recognized artist to be able to relate so candidly to me helped me feel empowered in a moment where I had previously been filled with doubt.

III. Considering the Insides

After the hour or more I spent with Dion that afternoon, I became more comfortable letting each piece be what it is without bearing the burden of a greater overarching narrative; it could be about nature for my own personal reasons and not something more overarching. I started thinking back to works by women like Janine Antoni, who reached a certain level of fame in the 1990s and who works in non-traditional ways of incorporating the body both in context and in the process of art-making.

Evoking Antoni’s 1992 installation *Gnaw* [figure 7], I started biting lumps. In gnawing on lumps of clay, I found myself mildly disgusted by the overlapping impression of my teeth, the shiny bits of saliva that



Figure 7: Janine Antoni, *Gnaw*, two 600-pound cubes of chocolate and lard, installation view, 1992

would get trapped in crevices, the oddly salty aftertaste, the thought of them being both bubblegum-like and beetle-grub-like. As I explore with several of my specimens, the boundaries between inside and outside or alien and familiar are blurred to a point of fragility of what defines a subject from an object. This is an expansion on the idea of the *uncanny* called *abjection* (or the *abject*) which Julia Kristeva describes in her 1941 essay ‘Powers of Horror’ as “show[ing] me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. The border [between life and death] has become an object,” Kristeva writes, “How can I be without border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present... is here now, jetted, abjected, into ‘my’ world.”⁶ The *grubs* [figure 8] are direct impressions of myself becoming something separate – slick and contorted, also simultaneously intestinal or genital depending on the viewer (like Oppenheim’s *Object*). The larger grubs are partially cocooned within a clay shell that has been pressed from both of my hands, frozen in a moment of transition from their instar stages toward adulthood. I attempted to make a representative for each subsequent stage but consider the others a failure. It is more enjoyable to me to imagine the possible growth variations without resolution. These were made in a time where I was experimenting with working automatically – *automatism* being another technique employed by the



Figure 8 *Grubs*, polymer clay, air-dried clay, and shellac, 2018.

⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 3.

Surrealists. It is a means of free association that shifts production, so the significance is no longer in my ability to recreate fine detail but in the use of non-traditional manipulative forces of a body; create forms quickly and respond without conscious thought or reason.

I continued to experiment with random combinations of casts inserted into new casts as they were solidifying, building up a strange collection of fruit, vegetable, finger, bone, shell, and whisker assortments. While reading about Antoni's *Milagros*



Figure 9: Janine Antoni, *to return (Milagros Series)*, polyurethane resin, 2014.

series of personal healing talismans [figure 9], I began thinking about my own body and how I feel existing in a time of massive discussions about female bodily autonomy.⁷ For a small group of works I have taken to calling my *nipple/navel* series [figure 10], I altered plaster casts of navel oranges. Inside of each orange is a different urethane plastic fruit – lime, satsuma, and strawberry. They are varying colors and combined with different elements to visually consider how I would describe the occasional discomfort of breasts, especially during menstrual cycles (feeling stiff – with the fist, or sensitive – bright and open, or sore – just uncomfortable and tight as though being pulled in different directions).

⁷ Ian Forster, "Janine Antoni Finds Healing in Art Making." *Art21 Magazine*. January 24, 2014. Accessed October 25, 2017. <http://magazine.art21.org/2014/01/24/janine-antoni-finds-healing-in-making/#.WfoEG1tSyUk>.



Figure 10: *nipple/navel*, urethane plastic and plaster, 2017.



Figure 11: *Manibus-saltador (Palm-frog)*, bronze, 2017.

I kept biting or squeezing lumps of clay and to see what creatures could be interpreted from those forms. One became a bronze piece – *Manibus-saltador (Palm-frog)* [figure 11], named from the Latin for ‘hand’ and the Spanish term for ‘jumper’ to reference the frog. As I refined the leg on this lump imbued with the texture of the interior gesture of my closed hand, I started thinking to past experiences with frogs – dissections in high school anatomy class, driving on the streets of my neighborhood during a good rainstorm and seeing all the little frogs

hopping around only to find some smashed by cars on the pavement on a walk once the rain cleared. I thought about catching them and holding them in my hand and the curiosity of skin, imagining if they became the same skin – a hybrid born of myself. In his 1977 work, *Le Patate*, [figure 12]. Giuseppe Penone grew potatoes into a special container with molds of lips, ears, and other facial parts, then cast those potatoes in bronze. Like my own bronze pieces, they are an exercise in growth, variation, and the inevitable form of nature.



Figure 12: Giuseppe Penone, *Patate*, bronze and potatoes, 1977.

IV. The Intrigue of Two-Dimensional Representation

I often use drawing when I work, as there are certain qualities to each medium that allow me to explore specifics in detail or combinations that would be much more challenging in a sculpture. Without the limitations of physics, things like scale, weight, and texture can be manipulated freely in infinite combinations. In some instances, the sculpture comes first, and drawings are made in response to varying angles or capturing a moment in the lifespan of a component – like a plant element that will eventually lose all color, wither, and decay. The drawings are also a way to think of shapes or combinations quickly, a



Figure 13: *Lizard-leaf*, dry point etching, 2018.

problem-solving method to merge objects too delicate to manipulate in real life. An example would be in the drawing I made merging a lizard leg and tail to a dying orchid leaf, both found discarded in my house courtesy of the cat, I call *Lizard-leaf* [figure 13]. The format I am most drawn to is a creature in nondescript space, disjointed drawings of something where I can imagine their environment fluctuating. Instead of me defining the space for each specimen, I enjoy thinking of the viewer considering their own past experience to guess where something could reside – is it under a rock? Are they hidden in bushes? Does it live in water, in the pipes,

in a puddle? Is it massive or microscopic? Are those teeth or claws? Does it have a mouth at all? How does it grow? Without the context of determined space, the drawings are placed into the realm of the specimen, up to the viewer to envision where it ‘belongs.’

I am drawn to the authority visually attributed to biological illustrations. It is the appearance of old textbooks with such close attention to detail that it somehow feels unquestioningly accurate. Albrecht Dürer’s 1515 woodcut illustration of a rhinoceros [figure 14]. based solely off written descriptions is a fascinating example. The animal, en route to Portugal, drowned with the sunken ship. The representation seems close yet is so far from accurate. Drawings done from observation, such as the Victorian medical or scientific illustrations from the 1800s are ethereal, meant for learning, but they have an abject quality when the renderings are of cadavers. Anatomist and surgeon Henry Vandyke Carter’s sketch of a kidney typifies the

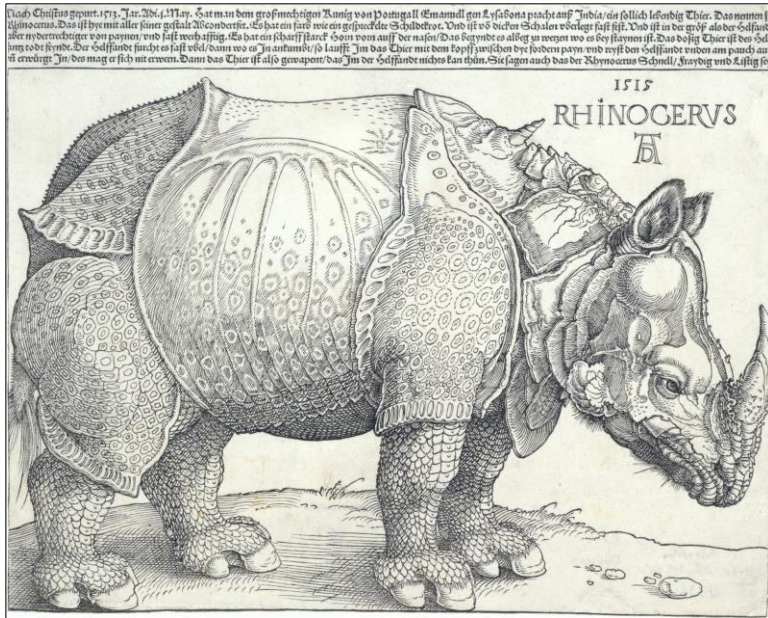


Figure 14: Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinoceros*, woodcut print, 1515.

style. [figure 15]. Sinewy lines and bulbous organ shapes are beautiful in their rendering but are also repulsive in the way they make me think of my own interior details.

An early drawing I made in reference to illustrative rendering is an image that fused the face of a cow and the peeled half of a lemon, titled simply *Lemon-bovine*. [figure 16]. Based in observation, but not in reality, the chin and cheek hairs of the cow merge with the fibers of the fruit, becoming simultaneously floral and anatomical. I took this drawing and made it into my first dry-point etching print. I have always tended to become immersed in details and spend dozens of hours rendering a single small drawing to a point of perfection. It was suggested I try printmaking as a way to work through ideas more quickly. I could focus on the line work and then print several copies; I would experiment by drawing on some of the off-prints to try out different color and shading variations instead of committing large swaths of time to a single image. I noticed each print varied slightly and thought of these imperfections like the changes in DNA that carry on through generations.

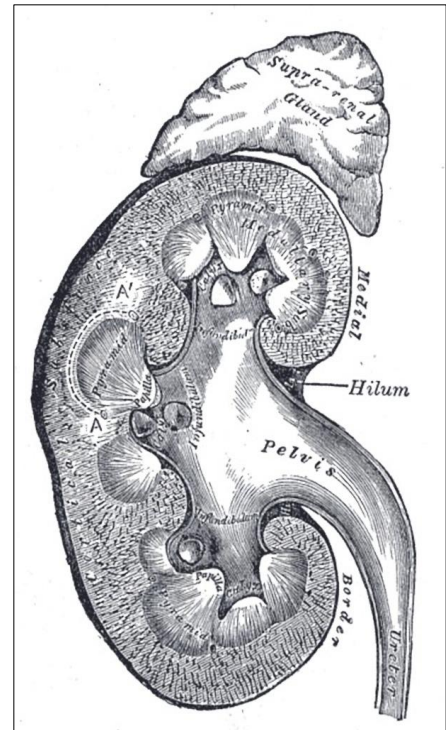


Figure 15: Henry Vandyke Carter, *Vertical Section of Kidney (Plate 1127)*, etching, before 1858.



Figure 16: *Lemon-bovine*, dry point etching, 2018.

Printmaking, like the process of casting in sculpture, is essentially cloning where each new scratch or imperfect application of ink is a simple mutation within a lineage. A series of prints and drawings relates to the sculptures in an effort to consider the individuals through different methods or perspectives.

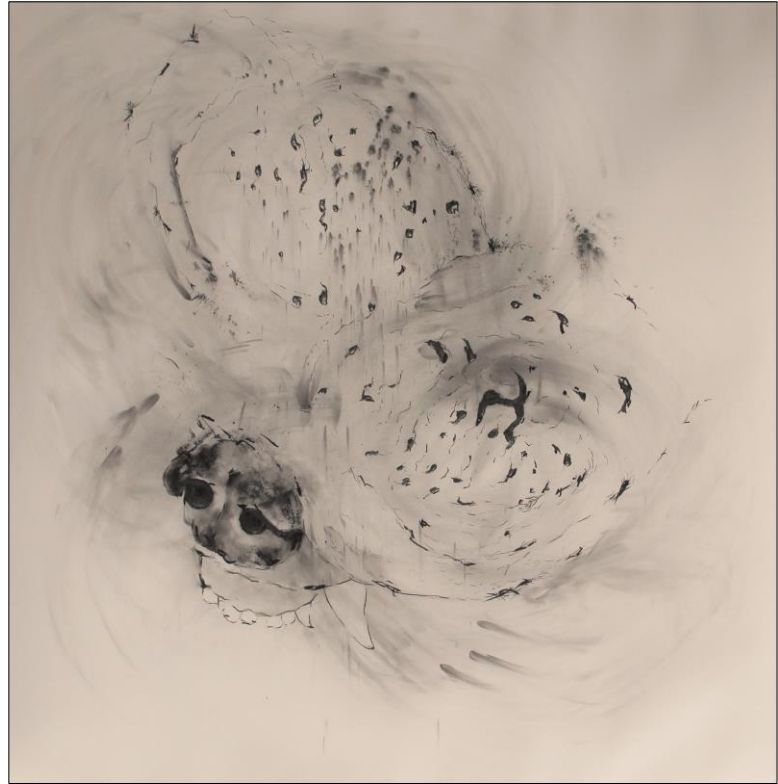


Figure 17: *Wolf-peach*, graphite and charcoal on cotton rag paper, 2018.

Graphite drawings have provided a format for simultaneous consideration of interior and exterior. Swirling forms, less contained than the simple line work of the drawings intended for etching, are a hazy and imaginative space for me. One of this graphite series, a piece I refer to as *wolf-peach*, I recreated at a large scale to see how the shift affected the recognizable elements of its details. [figure 17]. The more I looked to the objects around me for two-dimensional inspiration, the more I felt pulled to interact with the objects themselves. By presenting a combination of drawings and sculptures, I invite the viewer to consider their perspective and the way perception shifts with texture and scale.

V. Presentation is Key

Despite mixed feedback on a critique early in graduate school of an assortment of small sculptures on a table, I kept coming back to it in my mind as a potential display method. Over the summer between my second and third years, I started accumulating things on a small drafting table in an unused area of



Figure 18: Curiosity Specimen Table (Installation), mixed media, 2018.

one of the classrooms. On the table were little objects I had picked up, like fish bones and dried flowers, next to various urethane plastic and plaster casts that hadn't quite found their purpose. I found the conversations the table elicited from people passing through the room fascinating. I kept adding to the table, rearranging things near each other and stacking them up in different ways until I was satisfied. I built a new table to present several of these new specimens like a cabinet of curiosity presented openly and horizontally. [figure 18]. I felt particularly drawn to the way my eye could bounce between objects, thinking about the similarities and differences between each small specimen. [figure 19]. This association with the cabinet ties with my interest in early naturalists, who collected specimens and made drawings based on their travels. Learning happens not only from the individual objects but also in the relationships that are

established in the ways they are arranged and organized. My goal is to break down the selection hierarchy and emphasize the connections between beings. Evolution has moved life to a point of diversity that is now becoming threatened with each subsequent environmental shift or event. In terms of human involvement, there have been great strides in the technologies involving gene editing and splicing; there have also been losses of great numbers of different species through hunting and encroachment, ending the millions of years of natural genetic variation that had established those lineages. I am neither condemning nor celebrating these changes but ruminating on them. Through small material explorations I can create my own associations of color, texture, and form across species and even biological kingdom boundaries. Each table creates its own conversation and creates a dialogue with its neighboring objects, even those in more singular presentations on shelves or individual pedestals.



Figure 19: Curiosity Specimen Table (Detail), mixed media, 2018.

Larger specimens require a different presentation method, something with enough space around to not visually overpower the smaller objects around them. Three untitled pieces, all amalgams of found wood and metal scrap with additions of

organic matter and modeled clay forms, were built into a larger platform mimicking a sort of museum display [figure 20]. When all the work comes together on tables, platforms, various shelves, pedestals, in drawings, and in prints, it creates the feeling of a *wunderkabinet* like those made by Dion, populated by specimens from my personal science fiction. Like the open table, careful curation of sculptures and drawings throughout the gallery space allows for deeper viewer engagement. A goal for the drawings is to collect them into a small field guide, perhaps as another nod to the influence of Dion's work. Just like the idea of the uncanny is rooted in familiarity, I stimulate that moment of recognition for a viewer in a new context. Will they see the sculptural specimen formed from an amalgam of natural parts or the rendered drawing first? How long will they spend trying to discern the real from the false?



Figure 20: Platform (Critique Installation), 2018.

Conclusion

Art in a sense lets me play as a sort of casual scientist. I can be both Charles Darwin and Dr. Frankenstein, engaging in both careful observation and unnatural combination without the pressures of viability or reality. Or more specifically, I can investigate freely, work to solve my questions aesthetically, use chemistry and physics to create and manipulate materials into new forms, and engage in a discussion about nature that I have pondered since childhood. With each new interaction or artifact comes new inspiration. The work I have done in graduate school has been neither a singular project nor series that will ever be truly completed; it is a perpetual examination on growth and change as I navigate the world.

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Vita

Sylvia Santamaria was born in Caracas, Venezuela, and shares a birthday with Charles Darwin, only 181 years later. She immigrated with her family to the United States in 1993, winding up just north of New Orleans in 1998. She completed her undergraduate studies at the University of New Orleans in 2012 and remained friends with various students and faculty, returning for her master's degree four years later.