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I started the MFA Program thinking a lot about my experiences in America. As a newcomer from Serbia, I have been pondering about the changes that I went through while being here. My cultural, social, and psychological foundations have been shifted ever since I came to America. This has lead me to reflect on my former life back in Serbia through the lenses of memory of people, places, and relationships. This act was what kept me in touch with my roots. My work trajectory revolves around my life adaptation to a new habitat. Through material such as wax and brick, my intent is in ringing together what is fragile, delicate, and ephemeral, with that, which is strong, durable, and unbreakable.

MATERIAL ADAPTATIONS

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Since beginning my MFA, the trajectory of my work has revolved around adaptation. My work directly correlates to my thoughts about my home, family and friends from Serbia. Since immigrating to the USA from Serbia, my cultural, social, and psychological foundations have shifted. The past 2 years have been spent reflecting on my former life through the lenses of memory of people, places and relationships. Through the use of materials such as wax and brick, I am bridging the fragile, delicate and ephemeral with that which is strong, durable, and unbreakable, in search of finding a direct correlation with defining what home is and how to retrieve it.

My grandparents were my family's bedrock in Serbia. With the loss of them, I find achieving a solid foundation very difficult. This loss began my line of questioning, "How do you confront a groundless foundation? What does this place look like? This becomes an illusory space in which words like illogical, false, empty, baseless, reside in. In this imaginary space, I find myself mentally grappling between the present and unknown future.

In working with wax and brick I recognized similarities in their physical attributes with those of the human body. For example, when melted/heated, wax expands and when it starts to cool down, it contracts/shrinks. This is also true for the body which swells up when exposed to the heat or it becomes tighter and firmer when exposed to cold. Brick

with its physical peculiarities also suggests traits that are common to the human body.

Through its open cell structure – pores, brick breathes like a body.

CHAPTER II

ABOUT THE BRICK

My work questions human relationships with their home, friends and family once we have migrated to another place. How do you reestablish what is left behind? We live in a world in which the words *displacement* and *exile* are commonplace. In spite of global diasporas, people do stay connected via technology. However, this kind of connection is not sufficient. I need direct human encounters in order to maintain meaningful and lasting relationships. I need a solid ground on which to build those relationships, one on which both sides are investing equal amount of quality time with one another to create something strong and balanced. Just like in building a house or buildings, structural groundwork is crucial for the stability and balance of a relationship.

Home represents feelings of harmony, balance, unity and belonging. These meanings were gone from my life and so I was in search of what could replace them. In my work, Untitled I, I became curious to discover the possibilities and limitations of the brick without its mortar. Each brick has its unique set of irregularities. Some were rough and unbalanced, others were very smooth and difficult to make adhere to one another. This had an impact on brick stability and ultimately determined (limited) its stacking possibilities. The outcome was a row of 6 bricks high. I was interested in finding a way to raise bricks to my own height (5'11"). As I was thinking about my body and its

connections to home in Serbia, I imagined soft, and pillow like forms covering the brick leaving only one side exposed. I thought of how safe and protected I felt in my childhood home surrounded by family, friends and community. Friendships that I made in Serbia are connections deeply rooted from the early childhood. Harmony, balance, unity and belonging are what I experienced living in my childhood home and I saw the interconnected pillow forms being analogous to these feelings. My decision to use materials such as swimming hats and sand grew from two needs; one was based in wanting to transform the brick; second choice was based on the structural needs of the work. By filling the caps with the sand both functions were achieved. The sand helped counter balance the brick weight, which also permitted greater height than before. Aesthetic/symbolic function was accomplished through the interlocking of the white, soft part (bathing hats), which were emblematic of interlocked hands. The juxtaposition of the tender, smooth, and fluid, pillow like cover, next to the hard, rough, durable, and protective form of the brick, stands for the strength and vulnerability of the human body and psyche.

I have visited my hometown almost every year since I came to the USA. Every time the plane approaches Belgrade, I am affected emotionally by the vista of red roofs. The harmony of the undulating brick covering spreads across the land bringing calmness to my whole body. This wave – like feeling exists strongly within me like a heart beat. Mental images from childhood come to me, and I remember seeing brick in two ways. One is in bulk, lying in front of the people’s homes. The second is the wall paper of my childhood home. This material, often seen stacked neatly in front of people’s

houses, typically represented leftovers from recent construction. Often, brick appeared as if it could have been in a state of near oblivion, although its strong physical presence was unavoidable. I saw brick as the foundational material for a house as well as a metaphor for the people who were responsible for my own grounding. My parents are my foundation and their parents were theirs. I see my family as an interconnected foundation that is rich in cultural and social content. Brick represents this essential generational infrastructure. Like the brick, some of this fundamental human framework is part of the earth now, but I am continually reminded that what is soft, delicate and ephemeral could be transformed into hard, eternal, and beautiful.

CHAPTER III

HISTORY OF THE BRICK

As I began creating sculpture with the brick and additional materials, I noticed that consolidating multiple bricks altered their individual appearance in interesting, often anthropomorphic ways. As a group, bricks appeared strong and unified, like a wall or crowd of people. As individuals, the brick seem functionless and without purpose. One brick cannot make a home, but it is symbolic of it. Each brick is distinctly different, carrying its own weight, its own history and fragility. This solitary conception of the brick made me think even more about human interdependency. As individuals we do stand strong, but being surrounded with family and friends is what makes us even more powerful and durable. Suddenly I began to compare and contrast my previous life my childhood in Serbia to my adulthood in America. From this point on, I began to use the brick as a metaphorical representation of my childhood home and family. I kept envisioning brick as unified with the human form. I wanted to make it appear more dynamic and lively like a body. I made a cast of different body parts such as toes, legs, fingers, and fused them with the brick body. The result was an interesting synthesis of the two forms.

In my research about the history of construction methods I read about traditional types of mortar. Lime mortar is the oldest kind and dates back to the 4th century BC.

Today in a variety of cases of restoring old masonry buildings there are issues existing with the compatibility of old bricks being combined with new ones. This problem has to do with the switch from the traditional mortar mix (recipe) to performance - based mortars, which are focused more on speed and technology rather than quality and durability. This made me think about the cultural changes that prioritize immediate gratification in many aspects of life. Even when the world is in greater flux and transition we need to find and make connections. We must allow fragility and vulnerability to occur and be present. For my work, *Untitled II*, I decided to explore this notion of replacing traditional, strong and durable brick mortar with fragile and ephemeral wax. I positioned two bricks lying down on their wider and longer side, being 2 inches apart. I built a mold around the bricks using metal sheeting. Then, I poured white paraffin wax supplemented with pulverized brick. This powdered brick addition gave flash like color. The result was a great surprise and new discovery. This new form, which now connected the bricks, resembled something alive and existent. As I further continued making the space between each new pair of bricks wider and wider, something new was happening. I noticed that as the wax was drying, a new space was created on the side where the wax was poured. This depression or dent resembled part of the human body. On one hand, it appeared to be pulling in, or being sucked in, similar to a person taking a breath. Also, this wax form made me think of hands - palms being open like a gesture of offering or receiving something. I made a total of 10 rows of brick – wax bodies. The first and the smallest space between the two bricks consisted of 2 inches of wax. As this area between the bricks got gradually larger 20 inches at the end, the brick – wax body connection changed

too. The narrowest side embodied the feeling of connection despite the material (wax) fragility. Now the bricks appear more detached and distant.

I proceeded in my research to consider houses and buildings in physical terms. Specifically, I paid closer attention to the structure of the buildings and houses as well as the materials that were used to build them. Throughout the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, traditional Serbian architecture was simple in its design, but it was constructed to be very functional. The most important room in the house was the central room, which was called “the house.” Since the early 20th century, one-room modest dwellings were the most common type of house built in Serbia. Later, even though the room number increased to two-room and multiple-room houses, the importance of the central area of the house did not change and it was still considered by the family members as the major part of the house. My experience of this essential, central space is being happy and sad, quiet and noisy, hot and cold, wet and dry. The importance of the house-home space lies in the richness of its content as well as the people who create this content. I saw Serbian brick standing as a symbol for the life that is bursting with social vibrancy. On the other hand, I saw American brick as peaceful and dried of social contact. I described this duality in my life through the juxtaposition of opposites such as absence and presence, solid and weak, stable and unstable, substantial and vulnerable. In my work, I searched for those materials that corresponded in some way to these binary states, for example, plaster and foil is what I used to capture the desired form. In *Untitled XX*, I used foil to make an impression of an assemblage of 28

bricks. Covering the bricks, the foil was further transformed by additional layers of white paraffin wax. This new form appeared solid even though it was empty.

In a similar way I used plaster to capture the form of the exterior layer of the brick. This yielded 85 hollow white molds. I saw these as the outer layer – shell of my elusive Serbian brick. This version struck me as fragile and powerless. In its new state, the brick appeared almost formless and functionless. The brick became incapacitated, like trying to hold onto a memory or removing the soul from the body. When not given proper care, the body gets weaker and sicker, secreting fluids through the pores. What comes to be exposed is its fragile and soft inside. I envisioned brick as being in a state of tenderness and brittleness.

These experiments led to a new series of explorations, as I decided to bore holes into the bricks. Seeing brick in this new and sensitive state served as a reminder of its humble beginnings as earth, which was metamorphosed through a process of heat. It is quite powerful to see brick in such extreme opposite states/forms of existence: brick in its most vulnerable, ephemeral state (powder) as well as in its durable and eternal state. This reality in which the two opposite states coexist is not paradoxical. We just don't see it as often. It is also true of the human condition and its relationship with nature. We often show our strong and dominant side while concealing what is inferior and weak.

CHAPTER IV

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Artists having the strongest influences on me are Rachel Whiteread, Doris Salcedo, and Carl Andre. Although their work is different in intention and origin, it is connected conceptually through fixation with memory and displacement. Works of these artists indicate absence and displacement through the sculptural reinvestment of found objects (Salcedo), the rearranging of private (domestic) space (Whiteread), and the arrangement of ready – made or found materials in simple geometric configurations.

Carl Andre is an American minimalist artist known for his linear and grid format sculptures. He separated sculpture from the processes of manipulation – carving and constructing. The essence of his work is in material properties of every piece that he selects, as well as their arrangement in the space. My interest in Andre’s work is in his direct approach in the use of materials, and in his non – material manipulation. In his work, *64 Steel Square*, (1967), Andre arranged 64 steel plates in a square grid without joining them. The gestalt and materiality of the work is fore most apparent. On the first look piece appears to be stark and simple, but on the closer inspection of each square variety of surface textures, scratches, and marks are revealed. Andre’s work has helped me to allow my materials the freedom to exist the way they are, and to pay attention on

the things that might have slipped before because of the focus on transformation of materials.

My influence by Salcedo lies in her process of manipulating and transforming domestic materials and in her often minimalist use of form that beautifully and elegantly evokes the fragility of human life. For instance, in *Disremembered IV*, (2015), work which is based on society's inability to mourn, Salcedo used woven raw silk and 12,000 needles. When seen from different angles, sculpture parts fluctuate between visible and invisible. Her thoughtful choice of materials in which the sparkle of the nickel and the sheen of the silk come to the light and disappear as one, creates the feeling of fading memory. In another work, *A Flor de Piel*, (2011-2012), Salcedo again transforms material and space. She stitched together thousands of rose pedals giving them form of a delicate covering that spreads lightly on the floor. Being suspended between life and death, the petals are so vulnerable that could easily tear if touched. This fragility becomes an essence of the work. She explained about the importance of sowing the pedals: "Suturing the pedals is very important because it was a way to bring together all these parts." This makes me think about my work, and the ways in which I am trying to bring parts of my Serbian home closer to me. Her work makes me analyze and question my work more. How can I connect the broken brick parts to create something that would embody feelings of home and foundation that is missing? Could I use smaller parts of the brick and stitch them together like I did stitch one of the brick pieces on the paper? How can I make brick to resemble the human body, how can I manipulate the surface to be more like skin? I am very much inspired by Salcedo's work and I feel encouraged and

stimulated by her process of working. Salcedo makes sculptures and installation using objects which have domestic implications, symbolizing absent human body. In *La Casa Viuda*, (1992-1995), Salcedo evokes the loss of home and foundation of rural Colombian families. She uses pieces of furniture such as door and chest of drawer and she embeds materials such as clothing, a child's toy chair, human bone, to evoke the human presence transforming the house into a space of mourning.

Rachel Whiteread takes familiar objects - a bed, a table and transforms them into something that we no longer recognize. Materiality and place, made known to us through the process of casting, and placement and intervention in space of the cast object are constant themes of her work. The choice of site helps stimulate a sense of dislocation and, so, helps to create in a viewer feelings of unfamiliarity. When I think about the displacement of objects in space, I often think of rearrangements that I have done back in my childhood home. I would move furniture or smaller objects throughout the room in order to get a new and fresh feeling and perspective of the space. The question that arises from this is how can I build foundation that is flexible and adaptable to the life changes while retaining and preserving the past laid groundwork? This makes me further think of act of commemoration of people and places, which is present in Whiteread's work. How can something intangible, something that exists as a memory become more concrete and tangible? In the *House* (1993), this is achieved through its weightiness and monumentality.

Whiteread's process is crucial in her work. She uses an object from our material culture (furniture, houses, bookshelves, water towers) and she frames it by making a

mold around the object. Through the method of casting, Whiteread sets in focus an object that she wants us to pay attention to. Her work, *House*, (1993), strongly demonstrates disregard towards architecture as an object, a structure, a shell. We live our lives in connection to these architectural spaces and configurations (walls, roofs) and yet we seem often uninterested in these parts. Whiteread wants us to be aware of the time and the space that we are living in. In her work we testify to the complexity of collisions between opposites such as, presence and absence, past and future, public and private, empty space and solid, temporary and permanent. This duality of contrary states, and the way they coexist both literal and as well as metaphorical, has been my interest as well.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

My life and my work are closely related. My work has become autobiographical. Although it remains quite abstract, the struggles and questions I face have been able to find direct corollaries in materials and shapes. When I became a mother a few years ago the bond with my own mother strengthened. The function and importance of preserving culture and tradition, customs and beliefs became more tangible. I understood this continuum better. I saw it more clearly.

Oftentimes, in my work, I felt inclined towards the act of commemoration of people and places. I wanted to have a physical place that would be devoted to the memories of my lineage. I wonder if recollection of words and stories would be enough to return to this absent space that I long for. These questions are what push is me forward in my work. I am going to continue in my quest towards understanding better the space that I am in now – the space caught between two cultures, present and past, adulthood and childhood.

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