

THESIS

DOMAIN: EMINENT

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### DOMAIN: EMINENT

As an artist with a background in politics, my work is propelled by a need “to do something”. I am particularly interested in the crossroads of action and inaction. My work history, the political actions I have organized and participated in, and my transition to the art world lead up to my final body of work. *Domain: Eminent* is an installation of abstracted claw forms that is a reliquary to fossil fuels. The dueling political tensions between curbing climate change and expanding economic prosperity inspired and motivated this work. The installation honors the beauty and benefits these fuels have brought to our world while at the same time symbolically putting them in their “restful” space as an untouched material.

## **I. Introduction**

In this age of environmental degradation, survival takes on new meaning. Direct relationships between destruction and existence, violence and peace, and power and oppression are becoming both more apparent and more volatile. As an artist with a background in politics, my work is propelled by a need “to do something”. I am particularly interested in the crossroads of action and inaction. My art is inspired by societal issues and often provokes viewers to engage. To understand my current artistic choices it is important to know a bit about my background. My work history, the political actions I have organized and participated in, and my transition to the art world will be discussed. From here I will explain the work that led up to my thesis, followed by my thesis work itself.

## **II. Background**

I came to higher education with a background in activism and community organizing. Political topics I have worked on include environmental sustainability, the prison industrial complex, alternative health care, Tibetan rights, media justice, and “at-risk” youth issues. Past experiences include working on Native American reservations around the issues of mining, self-preservation, and land justice; working on immigration and asylum issues on the U.S- Mexico border; building schools and community septic tanks in northwestern Mexico; as well as working in various environmental and media oriented non-profits. I hold degrees in Peace and Conflict Studies, Policy and Social Values (a Philosophy degree), and Humanitarian Assistance. I also earned a certificate in “International and National Voluntary Service Training” (INVST)—a two-year service-learning program at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In the INVST program my politics solidified into a lifestyle. During the school year, I studied social change

movements and philosophies as well as community organizing strategies. In the summers, my INVST class worked in various activist contexts in the U.S and Mexico.

After college, I worked as a morning news anchor at a community radio station. This experience taught me the power and importance of the media while highlighting the deteriorating diversity within mainstream news outlets. The birth of our corporate media monopolies and the dwindling of investigative journalism were particularly notable at this time as well. The bonds between news sources and corporate power holders became more pronounced, and disinformation more prominent. This trend has only gotten worse, which further propels me to use political subject matter within my work.

### **III. Activism**

My need to be part of a solution rather than a societal problem, as cliché as this sounds, propelled me into the world of activism—particularly non-violent “direct actions”. A direct action is a strategic, nonviolent tactic where activists physically use their bodies to call attention to political issues in order to captivate media attention. Wikipedia says:

Direct actions occur when a group of people take an action which is intended to reveal an existing problem, highlight an alternative, or demonstrate a possible solution to a social issue.<sup>i</sup>

I am trained as a climber, tree sitter, and media activist by two direct action training organizations. The first is the Ruckus Society, whose mission “is to provide environmental, human rights, and social justice organizers with the tools, training, and support needed to achieve their goals through the strategic use of creative, nonviolent direct action”. The other is Greenpeace, which is “the largest independent direct-action environmental organization in the world.”<sup>ii</sup>

I took a leadership role in three direct actions. One was a banner drop, 10 days after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in which we hung a 100-foot banner off a 15-story crane in Denver, CO [fig. 1].



Fig. 1, Brian Klocke, *Wage Peace Now*, Sept. 2001, photograph, Denver, CO.

The banner read “Wage Peace Now” with imagery of the Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King, Jesus Christ, and Gandhi. Here, alongside the banner, we held a press conference with key local leaders and academics speaking about the 9-11 attacks and alternatives to war. Not only was the banner positioned as a backdrop to our press conference but was also hung so drivers within miles of HWY 25 and Speer Blvd could read it. This action successfully captured local and national media attention, which forced the popular news networks to talk about alternatives to war (a period when American flags were flown from most houses and cars and a time when attacks against Muslims in the U.S increased).

Another direct action took place on the Tax Day after 9-11. Here we created a billboard (from the backside of an old billboard) that linked taxes to the funding of war. I designed the billboard and co-organized a team of activists-- myself included-- to replace a corporate owned billboard with our own. We chose a high profile location off a major

thoroughfare in Denver. The sign was the Postal Service's logo (the graphic eagle); however, in our altered version the eagle's talons carried a bomb and the text read, "The United States has gone postal" [fig. 2].



Fig. 2, Amy Johnson, *United States Goes Postal*, sticker representing a billboard image, April 2002.

This action was less successful because we only received a small amount of local media attention. Regardless, this billboard was my first "culture jam", which is a form of "subvertising":

Many culture jams are intended to expose apparently questionable political assumptions behind commercial culture. Common tactics include re-figuring logos, fashion statements, and product images as a means to challenge the idea of "what's cool" along with assumptions about the personal freedoms of consumption.<sup>iii</sup>

This piece and the "Wage Peace Now" banner were my first political creations.

My third direct action was also my first international action abroad. On behalf of Students for a Free Tibet, I went to Beijing during the 2010 Olympics and was part of a large, globally organized campaign focused on exposing China's harsh colonization of Tibet.<sup>iv</sup> There were eight teams that conducted direct actions over the course of the Olympic Games. The mission was to coopt China's international spotlight in order to speak out against China's oppressive colonization of Tibet. Here, Tibetans were unable to protest

due to the intense travel restrictions during this time. Students for a Free Tibet, based in New York City, stepped in and hired activists from other organizations operating out of the United States and Europe (it was easy for most foreigners to get visas and access to the Olympics). I was part of a team of seven activists. We dropped an LED-lit banner at night that read “Free Tibet” in both English and Chinese. The backdrop for the action was the iconic “Birds Nest” stadium, designed by the Chinese political artist Ai Weiwei [fig. 3].



Fig. 3, Amy Johnson, *Free Tibet*, Direct Action, August 2008, Beijing, China

Our banner was highly successful in creating international dialogue about China’s occupation of Tibet. This image was put into a New York Times article about China’s occupation of Tibet and also captured other national and international news outlets including CNN, MSNBC, Fox, and the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation).<sup>v</sup> Playing a direct role in creating the visual messaging for actions like these sparked my initial interest in rendering political imagery.

#### **IV. Transition from Activism to Art**

The day a friend gave me a handful of bullet casings asking if I could use them in my jewelry was the day I realized I could make jewelry that “spoke” with a political voice as well. Up until that day I had simply taken two weekend workshops in metalsmithing and



was purely enjoying the physicality of creating. However, on that day, with shell casings in hand, I realized I could combine my politics and my art. As such, I began juxtaposing bullet casings with text, nature elements, and other forms that helped push the content in each piece. My intention was to create jewelry that provided the wearer with an additional way to self-express. I wanted to go beyond highlighting the wearer's character and style to include an element of their societal paradigm. I titled each piece individually to further push the jewelry's subject matter. This series made up my first jewelry line: *Beyond Bling*. At this point my commitment to creating conceptual art was solidified.

## **V. Graduate School**

The term "outsider artist" resonates when I reflect on my entry into graduate school. With no understanding of art history and little education in metalsmithing, my first year was filled with an overwhelming sense of immersion—immersion in technique and craftsmanship as well as an overall immersion in the history of both art and craft. Realizing art was simply another language, full of historical content and in a constant state of communication, was powerful (as obvious as this sounds). The work of political artists like Hans Haacke, Ai Weiwei, Wafaa Bilal, and Alfredo Jaar as well as more broadly oriented conceptual artists like Mona Hatoum, Mel Chin, Do Ho Suh, and Patricia Piccinini captivated me. The work of these artists showed me how materials could be used to create powerful, societally oriented art. Through studying their work it became apparent these artists approach materials without any limitations; rather, they choose each element based on its ability to best communicate their conceptual framework. Seeing materials as vehicles of communication has profoundly influenced the way I create. I no longer approach my art through a limited material paradigm. Instead I prioritize materials based on their

effectiveness in communicating my content. Although I prefer to have my hand in every element of my work, creating a strong conceptual work of art now trumps this need. Therefore, if I do not have the tools or ability to work with certain materials I seek assistance.

Some of the materials and processes I have explored in graduate school include concrete, wire mesh, resin, three-dimensional enameling, etching, blacksmithing, welding, mold making, casting, creating and using armatures, as well as various techniques and processes in steel working. As a jeweler I was, and remain, interested in jewelry's ability to enter into a larger range of societal contexts, existing outside museums and galleries that require visitors. Exploring jewelry's public accessibility was originally my plan for graduate school. However, engaging architectural space became increasingly alluring and exciting because it greatly expanded my ability to contextualize my subject matter. It gave me the ability to create experiential atmospheres for the viewer, which freed me from the boundaries of the body. This led me to create work that engages, and even overwhelms, the body rather than depending on it. As such, I moved from seeing the body as the canvas to using it as an element within my work.

As a "news junkie" most of my work stems from current societal and political stories. The tensions within these topics are what inspire my work. For example, the dueling tensions between economic prosperity and the health of our environment, and how these play into societal power dynamics, create an intersection of dialogue that inspires me. My aim is to highlight these tensions in the hope that viewers engage in, and reflect upon, these crossroads.

As mentioned, my initial attempt at creating conceptual work was through jewelry. Pieces like *Blow Up The Piles* and *Disturbing the Peace* juxtapose found bullet casings with forms that highlight the tensions between humans and our environment [fig.4].



Fig. 4, Amy Johnson, *Blow up the Piles*, Ring, 2007 Fig. 5, Amy Johnson, *Disturbing the Peace*, Ring, 2006  
*Blow Up the Piles* has a shell casing on top of strips of sterling silver to symbolize the destructive nature of over consumption. *Disturbing the Peace*, on the other hand, has a bullet casing within a flowering form [fig. 5]. These juxtapositions seek to highlight humankind's frequent dissonance with our environments.

With this jewelry line I entered graduate school. My intention was to explore political jewelry. As such, I began exploring concrete as a jewelry material [fig.6].



Fig. 6, Amy Johnson, *Paving*, 2010, concrete, fabric, 1.5" x 2" x 2"  
With concrete being a universal building material, I hoped it would enable me to reference and evoke the public realm. This was largely unsuccessful. The material in and of itself did not say enough, particularly when used at jewelry's small scale. To push these ideas

further, I moved on to exploring steel. Steel not only enabled me to create larger forms due to its strength but also enabled me to evoke an industrial aesthetic in my work. The first steel form I created remains one of my favorites today. It consists of a steel rod projecting from a wall with a section that zigzags like an EKG symbol. The piece ends with a budding steel “cage” that encases a silver aquatic-like form [fig. 7a, fig. 7b].



Fig. 7a, Amy Johnson, *Projection*, 2011, car door, steel, silver, bronze, resin, 4'x 7'x 6'



Fig. 7b, Amy Johnson, *Projection* (detail), 2011, car door, steel, silver, bronze, resin 4'x 7'x 6'

Due to steel's high yield and tensile strength I was able to orient the piece to project directly off a wall. This enabled me to create a sense of movement and force, and began my exploration of projecting forms. In connecting an organic form to an EKG symbol and projecting it through a broken car window, this work highlights the dissonance between man's actions and nature—a dominant theme in my work.

I followed this with a steel body harness piece, which terminates in a fragile, protruding enamel flower [fig.8].



Fig 8, Amy Johnson, *untitled*, 2011, steel, copper, fabric, enamel, size varies

As the steel harness protects the wearer, the flowering form extends off the wearer like an offering. This piece explores the tensions between arming and disarming oneself while also blurring the line between self and environment. I soon learned how to weld, cut, and bend steel, which propelled me to push the scale of my work further.

The resulting artwork laid the foundation for my thesis. With a determination to further investigate the crossroads of action and inaction, and being inspired by the Arab Spring, I created two pieces that focused on the role of the uncomfortable.<sup>vi</sup> This realm is often seen negatively yet can be the force propelling us to experience new ways of seeing, feeling, and being. Two specific pieces, *Portrait* and *Gather*, illustrate my interests in creating a controlled discomfort. Both pieces provoke viewer engagement through aggressively activating the spaces between the forms and viewer. *Portrait* is a series of sculptures formed from steel, concrete, and copper. The forms were created to represent different energies associated with power: direct and indirect, as well as oppressive and submissive styles [fig. 9].



Fig. 9, Amy Johnson, *Portrait*, 2011, steel, concrete, copper, rubber, size varies

Each structure approaches the viewer in a distinct way—from above, below, shooting off the ground, as well as one that undulates stealthily from its base to the viewer. Through an abstracted, military industrial aesthetic each piece provokes viewer engagement by placing the viewer in direct relationship to its force. This series is intended to promote both a personal and societal self-reflection on power dynamics. The tallest piece shoots up over eleven feet high, 6ft out, and drops down to hover over the viewer's head [fig.10a, fig.10b].



Fig. 10a and Fig. 10b, Amy Johnson, *Portrait*, 2011, steel, concrete, copper, rubber, size varies

The end has a convex mirror for viewers to see themselves, highlighting their dominated and vulnerable position. Another element projects out of its base at a direct angle, similar to a cannon, towards the viewer's face [fig. 11].



Fig. 11, Amy Johnson, *Portrait*, 2011, steel, concrete, copper, rubber, size varies

With the pointed, copper end extending just beyond the steel form, it appears as if the copper element is launching. Here the viewer is directly engaged with aggression. The third piece undulates off the ground and “cups” the viewer toward the end. A similar copper element is used here too; however, it remains inside the end of the form rather than projecting out of it [fig 12a, fig. 12b].



Fig. 12a, Amy Johnson, *Portrait*, 2012, steel, concrete, copper, rubber, size varies



12b, Amy Johnson, *Portrait*, 2011, steel, concrete, copper, rubber, size varies



This sculpture approaches the viewer more indirectly and highlights a surging, internal energy. The last sculpture in the series is one that lies on the ground [fig. 13].



Fig. 13, Amy Johnson, *Portrait*, 2011, steel, concrete, copper, enamel, Rubber, size varies



Fig. 14, Amy Johnson, *Portrait*, 2012, steel, concrete, copper, enamel, rubber, size varies

At 4 feet in length it is considerably smaller than the rest, and moves away from the base along the floor. The end turns at a 90-degree angle upward for a few inches and has a lightly enameled copper form, often interpreted as a flame or a flower. Here the viewer stands above it in a position of dominance. The relationship between viewer and object mimics a popular paradigm that places humans above nature. This textured enameled form works to subvert this paradigm by alluring the viewer to take a closer look, requiring that they bend over in some way [fig. 14]. The scale and grouping of this series creates a dialogue between the viewer and the forms as well as between the forms themselves. Through physical positioning of the viewer's body, *Portrait* provokes the viewer to reflect on their personal and societal relationship with power.

A second key work is an installation titled *Gather*, which was also inspired by the Arab Spring along with a belief in the motivating effects of being uncomfortable. Here,



forty-five delicate, enameled forms were suspended from the ceiling of a gallery entrance [fig. 15].



Fig. 15, Amy Johnson, *Gather*, 2012, steel, copper, enamel, size varies

The forms filled the entrance and were hung in close proximity to one another, forcing the viewer to walk through them with an enhanced sensitivity. The intention was to explore body consciousness and our connection, or disconnection, to the atmospheres we find ourselves in, with a particular focus on the strains between humans and the natural world. Through the fragility and placement of these forms, the installation simulates the tender and brutal extremes of nature while also placing the viewer within its content.

## VI. THESIS

From the tubular projected forms of *Portrait* to the aggressive yet fragile enameled forms of *Gather*, I arrived at my thesis titled “Domain: Eminent”. It is an installation of 20 abstracted “claws” created with steel, bronze, glass, and various raw fossil fuel materials. The installation is mapped to mimic the proposed Keystone XL pipeline that would cut through the United States from Canada. The forms are predominately steel; however, the

sharp “talons” of each is bronze and shaped to house a tiny piece of glass that holds a fossil fuel sample [fig. 16].



Fig. 16, Amy Johnson, *Domain: Eminent*, 2013, steel, bronze, fossil fuel sample, size varies

The dueling societal tensions between curbing climate change and expanding economic prosperity inspired and motivated this work. With only a small sector of U.S industry related to environmental sustainability, our consumption remains at some of the highest levels in the world and depends directly on the fossil fuel industry. As such, our consumption has a high environmental cost, which is now affecting the personal lives of numerous individuals. Ultimately, this installation is a reliquary for fossil fuels. Regardless if peak oil<sup>vii</sup> has passed or not, this work intends to honor the beauty and benefits these fuels have brought to our world while at the same time symbolically putting them in their “restful” space as an untouched material. In *Domain: Eminent* the materials and form intend to frame the discussion. Through using mostly square steel tube I suggest industry; through bronze talons, weaponry; through glass, the essence of a “window”; and by mapping this installation to mimic the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, I suggest movement and define space. Housing these raw materials within a sharp and threatening bronze talon

(located at the top of each form), the materials are elevated and “embalmed”. In response to the increasingly harsh, and more evident, effects of climate change I use the claw form to represent aggression and movement. Through mimicking the map of the proposed pipeline, which would cut across our country from north to south, this work is intended to dissect a gallery and act as a provocateur for viewer interaction. Lastly, the title of this piece plays off the legal term “eminent domain”, which is:

the power to take private property for public use by a state, municipality, or private person or corporation authorized to exercise functions of public character, following the payment of just compensation to the owner of that property.<sup>viii</sup>

Through exercising eminent domain, the Keystone XL pipeline could be built. I reverse the words in my title to not only evoke the role of this legality within the work but also to act like a warning for the potential environmental repercussions such a project could have. The aim of this installation is to incite viewers to think about the role of fossil fuels in this age of environmentalism and climate change as well as to ponder how our natural world is being altered on their “public” behalf.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Throughout my work, from the *Beyond Bling* jewelry line to installations like *Domain: Eminent*, my work remains inspired by societal tension and seeks meaningful viewer engagement. Having moved from small-scale jewelry to larger installations, graduate school has enabled me to explore my voice through expanding my material and technical understandings. I have come to realize the importance of choosing material wisely as well as the difficulty in creating strong, conceptual works of art. The line between saying too much and not saying enough is a line I will continue to explore within my studio

practice. I remain committed to combining my passion for politics with my love of making art. The political artist Alfredo Jaar says it best: “Don’t think like an artist, think like a human being”—a mantra of utmost importance. In this age of environmental degradation, social and political engagement is needed. I create from this place and believe artists can play an important role in fostering dialogue for meaningful change.

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<sup>i</sup> "Direct Action." Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Direct\\_action](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Direct_action) (accessed Mar 3, 2013).

<sup>ii</sup> "Ruckus Society." Ruckus Society. <http://www.ruckus.org/section.php?id=69> (accessed Feb 23, 2013). ; "Greenpeace." Greenpeace. <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/en/campaigns/> (accessed Mar 3, 2011).

<sup>iii</sup> "Culture Jamming." Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture\\_jamming](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_jamming) (accessed Mar 10, 2013).

<sup>iv</sup> "Tibet lies at the center of Asia, with an area of 2.5 million square kilometers. The headwaters of Asia's major rivers originate on the Tibetan plateau, which supply 85% of the population of Asia with water—approximately 47% of the world's population. Tibet is comprised of the three provinces of Amdo, Kham, and U-Tsang. Amdo is now split by China into the provinces of Qinghai and part of Gansu. Kham is largely incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan, and U-Tsang, together with western Kham, is today referred to by China as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). The TAR comprises less than half of historic Tibet and was created by China in 1965 for administrative reasons. It is important to note that when Chinese officials and publications use the term "Tibet" they are referring only to TAR. Tibetans use the term Tibet to mean the three provinces described above, the area traditionally known as Tibet before the invasion in 1949-50. Despite over 60 years of Chinese occupation of Tibet, the Tibetan people refuse to be conquered and subjugated by China. The present Chinese policy—a combination of demographic and economic manipulation and discrimination—aims to suppress the Tibetan issue by changing the very character and the identity of Tibet and its people. Today, Tibetans are outnumbered by Chinese in their own homeland." ["Students for a Free Tibet." Students for a Free Tibet. <https://www.studentsforafreetibet.org/about-tibet> (accessed Mar 15, 2013).

<sup>v</sup> JACOBS, ANDREW. "5 Americans Are Arrested for Protest in Beijing - NYTimes.com." The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia. [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/20/sports/olympics/20china.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/20/sports/olympics/20china.html?_r=0) (accessed April 3, 2013).

<sup>vi</sup> "The Arab Spring (Arabic: الربيع العربي, *al-rabi' al-'arabi*) is a [revolutionary wave](#) of [demonstrations](#), [protests](#), and [wars](#) occurring in the [Arab world](#) that began on 18 December 2010. To date, rulers have been forced from power in [Tunisia](#),<sup>[1]</sup> [Egypt](#),<sup>[2]</sup> [Libya](#),<sup>[3]</sup> and [Yemen](#).<sup>[4]</sup> civil uprisings have erupted in [Bahrain](#),<sup>[5]</sup> and [Syria](#).<sup>[6]</sup> major protests have broken out in [Algeria](#),<sup>[7]</sup> [Iraq](#),<sup>[8]</sup> [Jordan](#),<sup>[9]</sup> [Kuwait](#),<sup>[10]</sup> [Morocco](#),<sup>[11]</sup> and [Sudan](#).<sup>[12]</sup> and minor protests have occurred in [Lebanon](#),<sup>[13]</sup> [Mauritania](#),<sup>[14]</sup> [Oman](#),<sup>[15]</sup> [Saudi Arabia](#),<sup>[16]</sup> [Djibouti](#),<sup>[17]</sup> and [Western Sahara](#).<sup>[18]</sup> ["Arab Spring." Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab\\_Spring](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_Spring) (accessed Mar 17, 2013).]

<sup>vii</sup> **Peak oil** is the point in time when the maximum rate of [petroleum extraction](#) is reached, after which the rate of production is expected to enter terminal decline.<sup>[1]</sup> Global production of oil fell from a high point in 2005 at 74 mb/d, but has since rebounded, and 2011 figures show slightly higher levels of production than in 2005.<sup>[2]</sup> There is active debate as to how to measure peak oil, and which types of liquid fuels to include ("Peak oil - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peak\\_oil](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peak_oil) (accessed April 3, 2013).).

<sup>viii</sup> "Eminent Domain." Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eminent\\_domain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eminent_domain) (accessed Mar 13, 2013).