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BETWIXT: Temporality and Comfort

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BETWIXT: TEMPORALITY AND COMFORT

Laura A. Newman

18 Pages

I push against traditions of ceramics by purposefully inviting breakage within my work. Destruction expresses fragility, temporality, and impermanence. I consider themes of frugality, familial relations, collections and nostalgia through my investigations of clay, steel, and glass.

KEYWORDS: Art, Sculpture, Temporality, Installation, Ceramics, Destruction, Fragility

BETWIXT: TEMPORALITY AND COMFORT

LAURA A. NEWMAN

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BETWIXT: TEMPORALITY AND COMFORT

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INTRODUCTION

“The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context. Like other forms of art its function is not the restoration of context of origin but rather the creation of a new context, a context standing in metaphorical, rather than a contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life.” (*On Longing*. 151-152.)

My thesis exhibition, “Betwixt,” is a presentation my own hand-made collection. Hundreds of objects made of glass, steel and metal occupy the gallery, shifting meaning in various compositions. What is whole in one context becomes a component in another. What references plant life in one portion of the installation represents fabric in another, all alluding to fragility and temporality.

I push against traditions of ceramics by purposefully inviting breakage within my work. By embedding steel rods and wire within clay, I embrace the cracking that occurs as clay dries and shrinks around metal. Firing the pieces furthers the cracking, resulting in sculptures that are intact but broken, always in a state of change. Destruction expresses fragility, temporality, and impermanence.

Writings by Svetlana Boym, Susan Stewart, Gaston Bachelard, and Michele Hardy have influenced my thoughts on home, nostalgia and the collection. In this paper I describe my exhibition and explain how decisions in the making and installation of the show refer to fragility, mortality and the ephemeral.

CHAPTER I

JOY IN MAKING

In the essay titled, "Feminism, Crafts and Knowledge," Michele Hardy writes about the necessity of responding to the material as the work is being made: "Craft encourages sensitivity and empathy for one's medium. This burl of wood, lump of clay or skein of yarn is not simply the object upon which skills are worked. It is the medium and thus active in the sense that it determines, develops and changes throughout a process, requiring minute, subtle reactions and decisions by the craftsperson." (*Object and Meaning*. 181.)

I work in materials that record and reflect my decisions. Just as clay holds impressions of fingerprints, glass bears witness to its molten existence, revealing the pull of gravity or tool during the making process. I work quickly and instinctually, making choices based on the movement of the material. Creating in small increments lets me focus on the moment, shaping what is in front of me. Repetitive motions such, as cutting, twisting, and squeezing are inherent in the making of each piece. Regardless of how redundant, each step in the process is of equal importance; the end result reflects the investment of time of each activity. Freedom comes from the knowledge that I have the ability to make changes as the work progresses. Like the bones of the body, pieces join to create something bigger than their lone existences.

The feeling of squeezing wet clay around the rigid surface of steel rod is quite satisfying, even with the knowledge that at any time an errant end of a wire could pierce my fingers. There is a brief moment in the process where all clay surfaces are solid and intact, softly sheening with moisture. Yet, within hours of creation, as water begins to evaporate, the clay shrinks and cracks around the metal. This process of breaking provides me with unexpected relief. No longer do I need worry about how the piece will fare during the firing process, the cracks provide a roadmap for what will happen in the future.

I see beauty in my work in what is and what can be. When my work crumbles and breaks I feel a brief but sharp pang of sadness as I acknowledge that what once was will never be again. Fortunately all is not lost as destruction is an opportunity for repair. What appears to be broken at first glance contains potential to become part of something bigger, of more importance than its former existence.

CHAPTER II

EXTERIOR

Garden



Figure 1. Garden

Light shines into the darkness, inviting the viewer to step into the gallery. A few paces into the room and to the right, a form that references a tree or large bush rises from the floor. A rigid border composed of many individually made pieces of ceramic, steel, and glass delineates a fence line around the tree. Abstract shapes, some woven, and others round and bulbous, allude to stalks,

leaves, and petals. Pieces stack precariously, one on top of the other, existing in a place between natural growth and controlled construction.

Varying shades of orange dominate the color palette in this brightly lit portion of the room. It is the color of clay that has undergone the process of being fired in a kiln, not hidden by a cover of glaze. The bare ceramic is unapologetic in its appearance. Most of the pieces are cracked, revealing how the material shrank as it dried. Charred black and flaking metal is exposed in the breaks of the clay.

Tubes move outward and upward from the orange center trunk of the tree form. The hollow interior is revealed at the truncation of each tube. From within those orifices, spindly limbs constructed of steel and clay hang out and sag down. Though delicate, the twisted branches retain enough strength to stay intact despite drooping from their own weight. The resilience of the broken steel and clay is akin to that of the human body and spirit. Splashes of color such as dark blue, white, deep glossy red and a sickly green appear intermittently on the stalks. It is unclear if the pieces once grew from the center trunk, or if they were placed there by unknown hands. In either case, it is fair to assume that at one point this form had life.

The dry shells of plants show recent neglect, though the composition of the space indicates this was not always the case. At one time the garden was lovingly maintained, now it is being reclaimed by nature. From within the decimated flowers of steel and clay sparkling blue glass stigmas shine and glimmer,

providing unexpected signs of growth in an arid landscape. The bursts of glass twinkle under the bright lights and serve to remind one that things are not always as they seem. Hidden beauty lies amongst the grotesque. What appears dead may only be dormant, waiting for the right time to bloom.

CHAPTER III

INTERIOR

The home provides shelter and safety from the outside world. To the human psyche, home means privacy, comfort, rest and intimacy. Gaston Bachelard considers the human need for home as timeless and innate as the instincts of animals: “A nest-house is never young. Indeed, speaking as a pedant, we might say that it is the natural habitat of the function of inhabiting. For not only do we *come back* to it, but we dream of coming back to it, the way a bird comes back to its nest, or a lamb to the fold.” (*The Poetics of Space*. 99.) No matter how far one goes, the memory and feel of home will always follow.

Entry



Figure 2. Entry

Above the back border of the garden hang four empty clay rectangles. They suggest the outlines of windowpanes. They are solid, without cracks, alluding to the strength of the home. An empty space next to the windows forms a doorway. The room beyond is relatively large and spare, counter to the density of the crowded yard. The pieces in this portion of the space are a combination of

recognizable furniture objects and abstract forms. If the garden is considered wild, the interior space is both controlled and reserved.

Around the Corner



Figure 3. Foyer

Walking past the windows one enters the house. To the left is a foyer. On one of the walls are four evenly spaced nails at the height one would hang a jacket or scarf. Kitty-corner from the nails, a white grate-like form leans against the wall. It references the domestic space, perhaps acting as a fireplace or painting that has fallen from the wall.

Below the nails and next to the grate, there stands a form that resembles both animal and furniture. It has the same orange ceramic lattice found in the garden and is embedded with three large, clear glass bubbles. It stands at attention on three legs that could be turned wood, or hooves or bone. Is it unclear if the stubby legs hold up a shell or a cushion. Bulging glass shows evidence of movement; life at an earlier time. This ambiguity causes one to question what is real in this created space. By leaving some objects unclearly defined, I allow the viewer to decide what it is they see.

Thin sheets of porcelain, wrinkled like fabric, hang from the nails. Copper and steel wire, still shiny off the spool, loops around edges of porcelain, like lace on a curtain. Charred metal and bony forms are suspended from the nails, along with glimmering glass baubles and rings of ceramic. They overlap one another, the old and the new showing age; what once was shiny will eventually dull. Careful placement of the objects indicates they hold special meaning.

The act of valuing and displaying sentimental objects is a form of a yearning for the past. Svetlana Boym writes about reflective nostalgia: "Reflective nostalgia is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the

irrevocability of the past and human finitude. *Re-flection* suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis. The focus here is not on the recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and the passage of time.” (*The Future of Nostalgia*. 49.) Objects that represent memories of people and moments hold special meaning. To reflect upon them is not an attempt to recreate the past, but to acknowledge the passage of time.

Bedroom



Figure 4. Bedroom

On the far wall beyond the windows is a bed-like form. It is constructed of the same steel and clay as the pieces in the garden. The structure of the bed is

mostly flat with slight undulations; there is a subtle dip where pillows typically rest. Curvilinear patterns of ornamentation move between rigid right angles that define dimensions. The structural framework of the bed is encased in a pale pink encaustic that shines softly, like marrow that has pooled on top of broken bone, filling in the cracks in the clay. The waxy façade hides the futility of preservation; for the bed's fragile state cannot be repaired. The additive process is like embalment, offering merely the illusion of life preserved.

A lone chair is placed beside the head of the bed. White with a dry surface, it rests off-kilter into its base, thus giving the impression of being recently vacated. The placement of the chair indicates it is used in a variety of ways. Most often it is a place to hold clothes as they accumulate during a busy week, yet its location also yields a more somber connotation. The bedroom chair is where one spends hours sitting with the ill, hoping for health to return to a dying body.

The walls around the bed are empty, except for a half sphere of sculpted glass, crisscrossed with wire, clay and wax. In this world it acts as a lamp, though the light it emits is negligible as the interior in this corner of the room is still much darker than the outside.

At the foot of the bed on the floor rests an unidentifiable form. Is it a beloved family pet or a pile of laundry? What look like haunches could also be a folded pant leg. The juxtaposition of the clearly recognizable with the abstract asks the viewer to explore potential references and meaning within the installation.

Dressing Room



Figure 5. Vanity

Behind the false wall of the bedroom is a smaller space, almost hidden from view from the entrance of the room. It is a very private, intimate space with just enough room for one person to stand comfortably. If the garden represents the external persona, the dressing room is the very innards of one's internal

existence. Bachelard writes: "...every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the germ of a room, or of a house." (*The Poetics of Space*. 136.)

A vanity and a stool occupy the dressing room. A mirror hangs on the wall above the vanity. The surfaces of the furniture are all finished with the same pale pink encaustic that covers the bed. The space is deliberately gendered feminine. Small, delicate pieces of wire and clay dangle from the empty mirror, alluding to jewelry. On top of the vanity is a vase with a now-dead white plant, clay twists into what could be tissues and sits next to a glass bar with copper embedded inside. To the left of the vanity, three empty ovals sit on the wall, framing voids. They suggest loss of a personal nature. It as if the person who hung them could no longer bear to look at the images that once occupied the frames.

There is no glass in the mirror; only the empty border hangs on the wall, rendering the space useless. The person who uses this room is unable to see their physical appearance. As the mirror does not return the gaze of the viewer there is an opportunity for reflection deeper than the physical.

Throw Rug



Figure 6. Close-up of throw rug

On the floor, outside the space of the bedroom and dressing room, is a dense circular composition comprised of hundreds of small pieces of ceramic, glass, and steel. The arrangement is the size of a small throw rug. It spans approximately three feet in diameter and spirals outward from a center point. Most of the pieces are abstract and organic in nature. Shades of yellow, pink, brown, teal, and green interrupt large swaths of small pieces of white unglazed porcelain.

Variation of color provides a place for the eyes to rest during navigation of the many components. Use of color also alludes to memory. Bright or intense colors represent vivid memories, always on the forefront of the mind. White in its many subtle tones refers to moments that fade from memory. What once had clarity and strength may eventually dim.

References to the body are present throughout this accumulation and serve as a reminder of temporality. Thin sheets of clay share the same texture as aged skin, soft and lined. Glass the color of urine twinkles next to glass the color of pale blue eyes. Bone-like shapes repeat throughout, in fragmented shards and abstracted vertebrae. The center of the rug stands out as a ruffled washcloth or a vulva, both references to the feminine and origin of life.

Above

A large white form constructed of steel and covered in clay hangs from the ceiling above the rug. Lines of blue and yellow appear on the piece without pattern, breaking up the overall whiteness. Metal curves protrude from a center circle, like petals on a sunflower. The ambiguity of the piece makes it open to several lines of interpretation. If the piece is considered to be part of the physical world it might be a chandelier, fan or cloud. If the piece represents the unseen it alludes to thoughts or moods that hang over a room, affecting the people within.

CONCLUSION

Death of a loved one is likely the greatest source of anguish one can experience. When loss happens, it is common for belongings of the deceased to be kept as a sentimental means of connecting the physical to the ethereal. I create work that contemplates mortality and the ephemeral to serve as a reminder that time is fleeting. Creating pieces that are both fragile and strong is an acknowledgement of the resiliency of the human spirit. Cracked clay and glass expresses the beauty of temporality and impermanence. By combining the representational and the abstract, I ask the viewers to question what they are seeing and to determine for themselves how the pieces fit together within the space and in their minds.

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