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WHIFF OF BLACK ICE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

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This document is a concentration of thoughts, peripheral and direct, that occurred around the making of my thesis exhibition at the Anderson Gallery, Whiff Of Black Ice. While these thoughts meekly occupy space on the following pages, I assure the reader that they are quite physical, even extending three-dimensionality to them. My awareness of their form and their containment within the inner space of the mind, which also extends to the body, becomes central to understanding their meaning and, finally, knowing them.

Fruit-filled studio muck

While in process, the art thing is me. It is reflections of current-self and always-self filtered, sometimes more, sometimes less, through intellectualized decision making. When the thing stops being actively made and becomes part of the world it is no longer me. Yet it remains active, having acquired its own self. Weathering with time, the material nature as well as the presence in the world. A fresh thing is only fresh for a second, with each other second it is slowly making a recess in the universe, settling in a custom crevasse. We grow aloof, and sometimes don't know each other. This is not sad, this is circulation.

In the studio, believing in presence, in mood, in photogenic memories, transferring to a consciousness in the art. If I know these things the groped thing knows them too. The time spent, the awareness brought becomes the "about" in "What is it about", and is always in flux day-to-day but somehow unchanging for a lifetime. This awareness, chased by self-doubt, and too often detained by the stickiness of language for months at a time until words turn into processed syllable, mere sounds. A mushy mantra.

Abstract Familiarity

Mastication is the physical act that brings awareness to food consumption. Best understood while seated in a comfortable position, relaxed limbs, in the nude or wearing some sort of stretching pant, so as to not be beleaguered by the pressure and contour of anything but the inner mouth. If standing, I am likely to start pacing to keep with the rhythm of the chew, getting distracted by some small necessity, swallow without noticing the opportunity to sit with a Mouthful.

And laying down, although relaxing, can lead to a catastrophic plug up. Tragedy is comedy plus time.

And so, sitting is most benevolent.

The material enters my mouth as a bite sized clump of recognizable substance. It bursts with the provincial sensations of taste and temperature, hot and sour (!), arousing the salivary gland to squirt some initial digestive enzymes.

Now, grinding the particles with the teeth, shifting it from either side of the mouth, I visualize the sacred cow patiently pacing the rhythm of munching. As the particles get mashed up, cracking peppercorns and other spotty ingredients, the taste complicates and fills the small voids of tooth imperfection. Saliva starts to prepare the food mass, and the mouth acclimates to all of the sensation.

The boundary between Taste Mass and Flesh Mass is doubtful.

After a good 20-30 kneads, a well-worked homogenous mass is ready for the next meditation.

But not yet. I become aware of the ravine that is my mouth, the multitude of notches and underneaths which, with their contours, inform this experience as much as the actual clump consumed. Blocking out taste, I think about the occupied void of my mouth: dense, yielding, nameless.

Now, I stay still with the mouthful of alkalized form.

When I eat I am deaf and dumb, when I chew my ears are closed to all. My mantra is loudly inside my face.

On Arbitrary

Questioning the arbitrariness of made and yet unmade ideas, like, what is worth making? It might be worthwhile to pursue arbitrary, just to find that nothing really is. Or better said, something can be too arbitrary and often is, but nothing is plain arbitrary, and I sometimes wish it was.

Consumed by looking for, or fretfully avoiding this “arbitrary”, has led me to Rolodex search, unrightfully dismiss imagery, and succumb to a kind of Nihilism. At times, landing me in a Freudian ditch climbing up Repunzils’s filthy braid, gooped up and slicked by years of human clammy-palm oil. Do I mean what I mean or do I mean what came out? What came out is so telling, but not the intent. Time to change the it? Intent gets weighed down by specificity and vision. These are just too narrow and ordinary for investigation; and locating extraordinary in ordinary conditions is not likely.

Inner Space does not suffer from the same ordinariness because the field of inner space is a vast thing, a small thing, a precise and unruly thing. Quite arbitrary.

The Helpers

Some in my field of vision are limits, constrainers of space and body. Boxy, hollow rooms.

Then there are the helpers...

Gashes and protrusions that work harder than flat surfaces just so I can have a handle for my idle hands. A conforming hold, sympathetic to my body which is too tired to carry without a helper.

Doorknobs that flange with my body considered, opening up new realities, escapes from the boxy hollow rooms (responding with such ease that cats and babies can often labor them). Every time I want out, I end up in again: Out of the bedroom, into the living room, out of the house, into the street, out of the city, into country, out into space.

Hovering in space.

Anyway, there is still the moment of out, the turning of the handle, looking into unframed space.

Packed bags and a ticket, baby.

Nooks for slicky things, for soaps and fats impressed into tubs and cupboards, those benign confiders, fostering residue from day one. The residue becomes a shadow, which in time becomes a cradle made of the same stuff that rests in it and adds to the mound.

Bar Soap at other people's house is suspicious. It is slimy and foreign until my hands are gloved in lather. Basically sometimes it takes contact, immersion, to get over otherness.

Helpers feel personal, anatomically sympathetic.

I imagine the helpers, my guardian angels, every time I move. They are easing my step, catching my foot just before it hits the ground too fast. Guiding my antsy hands, "here hold on to this strap, and here is a pocket for the other one...".

Growth

A physical form that grows without figurative boundaries carries a presence, like the body that is envisioned from inside one's mind, breathing and formless. Growth implies a sort of endlessness, any current size is just a resting point, a snap shop, but not the potential, which is not any sort of dimension but the volatility of the thing.

If growth could be appreciated in quantitative terms...

It would be the hormonally imbalanced growth, a steroidal disaster. A boiling mass that explodes with disgust and terror at itself; secreting hyperbolic muddle while in a state of perpetual allergic reaction.

There is also inner growth, a perceived action that is also an imaginary form, the best kind of abstract morsel. Because of morsel a discreet form in the world can be much fuller and active than its square footage. It can radiate traction, materiality, and presence past its physical contours; acquiring realty with deserving insistence on being larger than it is!

The mindfulness of inner space is measured by the effected area around it; the selfishness of inner space, so unexpected...

Green Space, rather than green set, is another type of homogenous world where, like in earth world, objects follow gravity and agree to three dimensionality. However in green space the contours of gravity and dimensionality are lawless. Space is suggested but never prescriptive. Soft Walls and Limpid Air, these are not blocking agents.

In fact, they seem to know where I am heading and move, stride my stride, turning into walkways deep. A physical depth simultaneously acts as a metaphor and exists as mere form. Like a container that has three concerns – having contents inside of it, being a form itself, and isolating itself and it's contents from the rest of space. A container for a container doesn't just create double the concerns; it adds a type of hierarchy, which works more like a Rubik's cube than a pyramid. Thus implying a system, a way of thinking or living, for which such complexity is necessary.

In Green Space there is willing vertigo, and it is a gift.

A freefall not guided by gravity, descending deeper but never down. The fourth dimension creates more space than the third rationalizes, carving them out of non space, bubbling up fat, hollow atoms. At the same time showing itself in the nude and affirming, I do not exist.

In Green Space the guides are Useful, Invisible, Mute.

Unconscious sculptures, made to be rolled, to be touched, to show something about the world, but never themselves. When does the art thing become conscious? Sometimes prematurely while still resting in my head. Too well thought out, miscarried before it can start having physicality.

On the contrary. I can make a Shelf and a Shim.

Everything Traumatizes

Too much traumatizes, as does too little. This is true.

Anything in between begets a lost person, suburban in the soul, who can't claim either side of trauma.

All is victim of having been done to. Having been looked at, taken, bleached, having been made malleable...

The victimization is just a role of the inactive, in the sense that a masseuse can be the victimizer and the massage receiver a victim. Perhaps a less anxious way to talk about this is to say shape rather than trauma.

Regardless, it is important to address the permanence in this without drowning in fear, or the paranoia of consequence. This is it, this thought, a breath, a scribble all set in stone. Every time a stone.

A Skin Memory

There were two African college students seated in front of us at the opera house in Kiev. The students were the first dark skinned people I had ever seen, and hence I indulged in staring well passed being acknowledged. With fresh, swallowed accents, but otherwise perfect Russian, they offered my mom and I their seats perhaps because it was obvious that I was too short to see over their heads.

One of them playfully shook my hand and then lifted me up over the aisle to the upgraded seat. His hand was large and I was mesmerized by the pink of his palm wanting to hold and look at it after being placed in my new seat; for sometime after, wanting to draw the edge where his skins met.

Vita

Alina Tenser was born in 1981 in Kiev Ukraine. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 2003 and her Master of Fine Arts from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2012, where she proceeded to be the Director of the Summer Studio Program. In her final year of graduate studies Alina was awarded the Dedalus Master of Fine Arts Fellowship from the Robert Motherwell Foundation.