

2016

so much apparent nothing

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so much apparent nothing

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Craft/Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

SO MUCH APPARENT NOTHING

By Emily McBride, M.F.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Craft/Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016.

Major Director: Jack Wax
Professor, Craft/Material Studies

This document contains reflections on motivations behind selected works leading up to and including my thesis exhibition *so much apparent nothing*. Through journal excerpts and analysis of my own psychology, I attempt to put into words my thoughts concurrent to my making, indirect as they may be. The following text shares my personal conflicts and ideologies surrounding art-making, the permanence of objects, and the acceptance of an identity in flux.

January 23, 2016

I was thinking about it in the shower this morning, I let my mind go there, tried to stop obsessing about things I didn't know and didn't need to waste my energy on. My work from graduate school really does reflect the obsessions in my mind at that current point. They have changed. It starts out on the back-burner, but then I let it boil, and it sometimes boils over before I realize it. Eventually I know what the source was, even if I didn't seek to know it at the time. I can pinpoint everything now, what each piece I made was and its accompanying obsession. I won't ever actually share it though, it's unnecessary.

Let go/hold on

To let go of or to hold on to.

An inner conflict I confront with frequency and longevity. Years ago, I had a daily yoga practice lasting two brief months, the entirety of my first Penland School of Crafts concentration. At the end of this intensive experience in an immersive community environment, of making immediate close friendships (only for everyone to disperse to their given locations across the country or further) my mantra became *let go*.

let go.

let go.

Repeating *let go* as I sunk into the hip openers.. and then into child's pose once the tears came.

Let go is my way of dealing, saying goodbye, moving on. Through my adult life I have

been transient. 3 concentrations at Penland, 5 consecutive summers at Pilchuck Glass School, Scranton, Philadelphia, Louisville, Richmond, not investing much into relationships because I know I will leave. Chronic dissatisfaction, always wanting to be somewhere else, thinking if I am somewhere else I could be someone else. I've been told I'm a heartbreaker, not untrue. When I finally wanted to break my habit of building up a wall, not letting others in, I told myself to be vulnerable with this one, that it will be worth it even if I end up getting hurt. And that's exactly how it went.

In 2015 I got real low. It may have started as early as March, the pockets of time intermittent, then increasing. Each depressive episode is said to be harder to get out of than the last.¹ Mid-summer it really hit. I was full of misdirected anger, self-hate, and confusion. I later learned about myself that I make up scenarios in my head not based on facts. With all of this came sadness, loneliness, more confusion, fear, self-doubt. Into the fall it grew into panic attacks, and crying everyday. A good cry is not foreign to me every few months, but as a daily for months, I felt stuck. Depression is something I've always dealt with, I get low, but then I get out of it. This depression had no end in sight, everything I had grown up to be was tangled up in it. For the first time in my life I sought help, and was waitlisted.

Psychology fascinates me. I perhaps over psychoanalyze myself. I think often about my self, who my former self was, who I am now. I realize I rarely think about who I will be, because I can't conceive of it whatsoever. I wonder how much I can let go of myself, if I

¹ Segal, Zindel V., J. Mark G. Williams, and John D. Teasdale. *Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: A New Approach to Preventing Relapse*. New York: Guilford Press, 2002.

try. If I rid myself of signifiers of my Self, what will be left? When you end up letting go of so many things, the importance then shifts to what you choose to hold on to.

I wonder if I wedge myself between what it means to *let go* of something and what it means to *have lost* something. My mom will sometimes ask me about this pink scarf her father brought back from Japan. Her father who I never met because he died before I was born. I have no idea where that scarf went. I wouldn't get rid of it because I knew it was my mom's and it was important to her. Unless I forgot. Maybe it went with everything else, all of the things I donated, during the second foreclosure, in my moment of I can't take any of this with me. I have a picture of the pink scarf from when I was twenty, in Italy, wearing it as a shirt, like a bandana wrapped around my chest. I looked pretty in it.

I'm glad I've done most of my writing before ever reading any Rebecca Solnit. Better that I've had all of these thoughts on my own and put them in my own words, before finding them already perfectly stated for me.²

² Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. New York: Viking, 2005.

the ethics of making

January 19, 2015

What I want to do is create a feeling. That feeling you have when you are alone and you can feel the vastness of the universe, and it's just you and the nothingness, but your body is swimming in a sea of other's sweaty bodies in the pit at an against me! show and everyone is screaming at the top of their lungs with everything they have, all the hopelessness and passion in their souls that 'everything is gonna be alright', with the sarcasm and desperation that line implies. Yelling along with you, you realize that all these other people feel the same empty nothingness, they feel the same thing at that moment. What sort of feeling? The loneliness of being, or the connectedness of a stranger in a crowd.



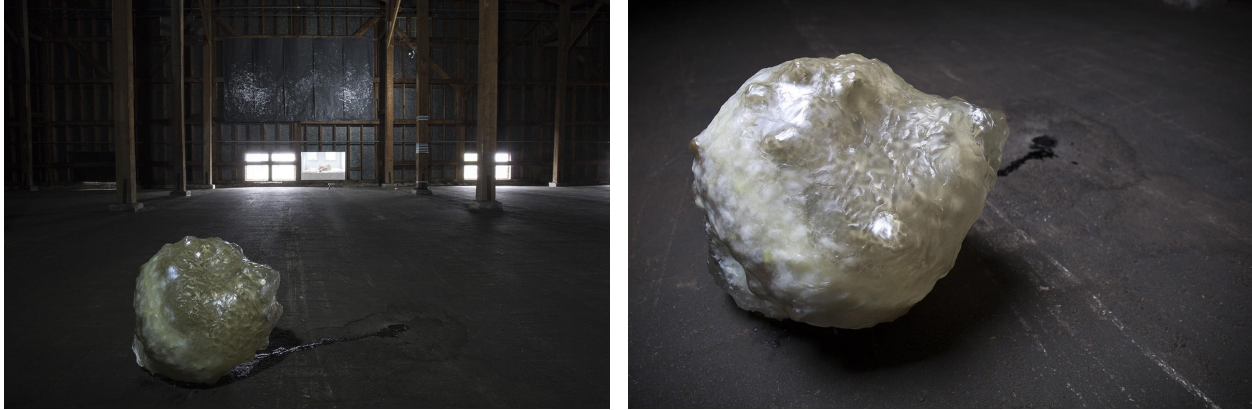


fig. 1

I made my last object at the end of my first year in graduate school. Slicked up with vaseline and covered in fingerprints, the glass object represented not just the weighted burden of material things but also the burden of the dysphoric body. Meant to be engaged with physically, moved and handled by me with uncertainty. Cumbersome. The elements of the installation *swimming in honey* offered a window into psychological states where fixations, indifference, denial, bodily discomfort, desire, and disgust coexist. The repetitious fidgeting performed in the video is unending. I gain confidence and then I lose it. After making this piece, objects were of no interest to me. I wanted to alter my spaces, my situations, my self.

I became a glass artist 10 years ago. The relationship with the viscous material developed out of hard work and attention. Working with hot glass is communal and social activity, so as an introvert, glass helped me make friends and provided opportunities for me to travel, fulfilling areas in my life I lacked otherwise. Glass gave me goals. Glass gave me confidence. The objects I made with glass proved my individuality and inventiveness. These objects represented years of my achievement in

a craft, an aspect of myself to be proud of. I found comfort in this skill; excelling in a craft lent a sense of stability.

Glass gave me validation.

The growing frustration wasn't glass's fault, it was my own for allowing the inanimate to give me purpose. I grew frustrated by objects, viewing them as a burden of sentiment I was obligated to hold onto. These objects of a manageable hand-held scale seemed pointless with their fate being either a shelf/pedestal/or storage bin in the basement.

Consuming resources, spending money, using other people's volunteered time to make something likely to be trash, non-recyclable, non-degradable, non-reusable; making waste and feeling guilt for contributing. These objects began to represent so much but I failed to find a justification for making beyond self-gratification. The act of making was to satiate an urge, for something physical, tactile.

I feared abandoning my identity as an object-maker. Yet, my wants changed towards something unknown, something that couldn't be held onto, like a feeling. I recognize being in flux, not stable. I tried to dissect and redirect my urges, identifying my fixations and giving into the indulgences. Pinching, mouth things, body feels. Not comfortable in my own skin, not comfortable in my own head.



fig. 2



fig. 3

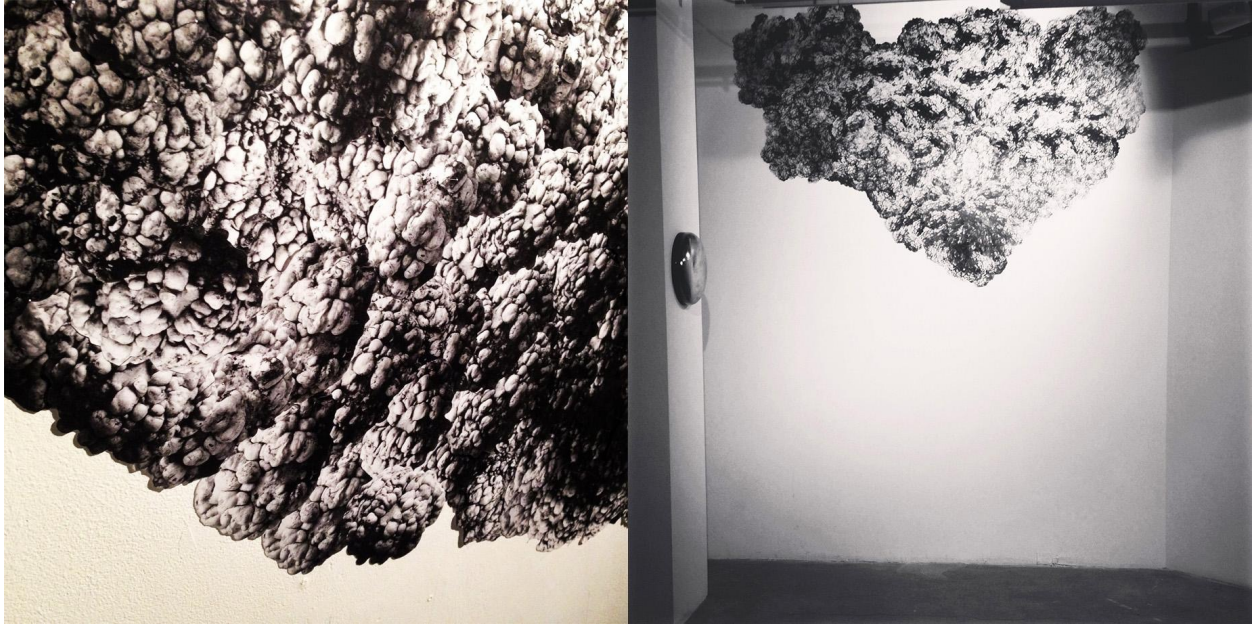


fig. 4

As my desire shifted to an impermanence, I sought out inconsequential materials. My concern for storage was relocated to GBs and MBs. Things needed to be in reach, paper, photographs, accessing what already was in existence. I wanted to affect things subtly with ease, to make without making. A new challenge of the ambiguity of objectness. I wanted to leave only traces. Small attempts to prove I still existed even when trying to minimize everything about myself. As if I went into hibernation as I attempted to let go of my external signifiers. To curate my posterity was to curate my absence. I isolated myself. I needed clarification, and in order to achieve it I needed to let go of attachments and obsessive thought cycles. Like when you develop an allergy, and you need to eliminate certain foods or lotions in order to find out what was causing it. But with me I just tend to cut everything out, so the problem goes away but I don't actually know what the solution was. My chronic depression was causing a crisis of identity, and I overhauled.

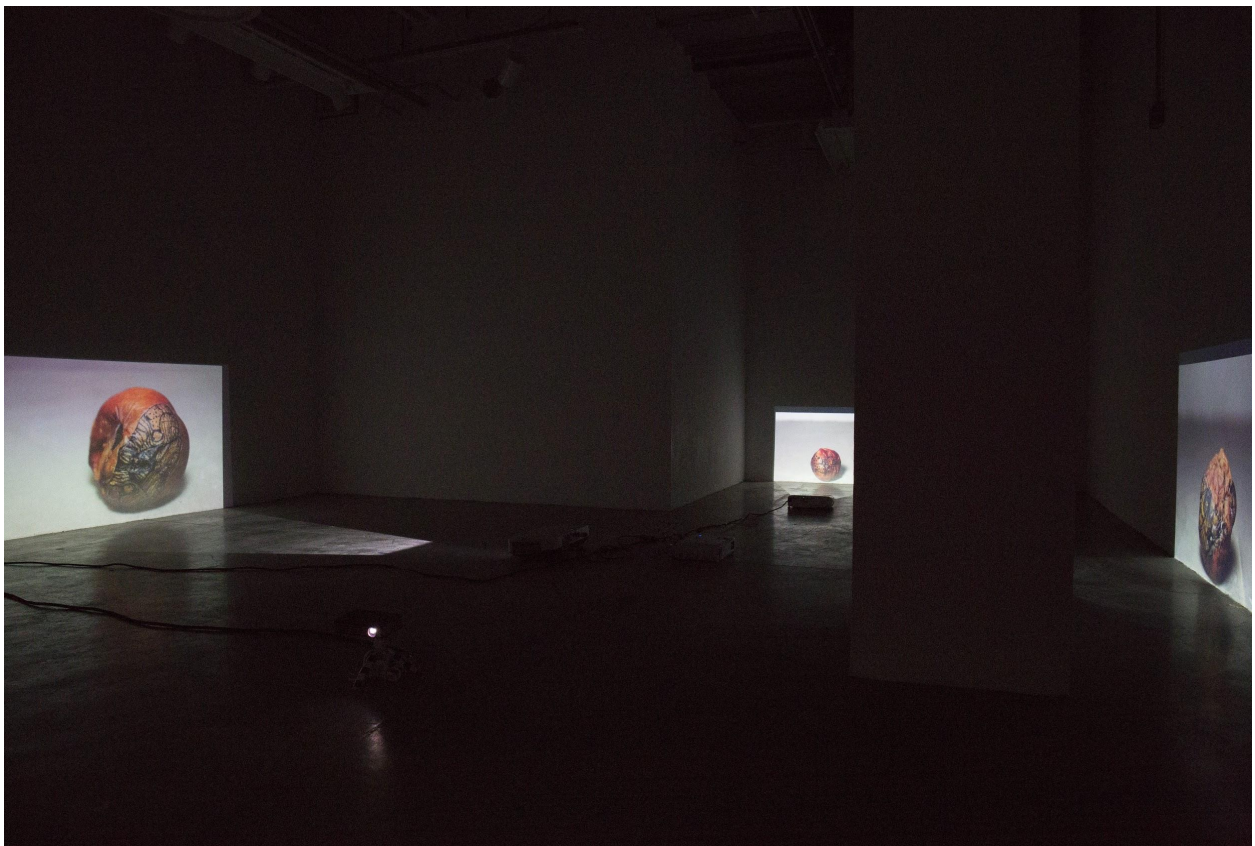
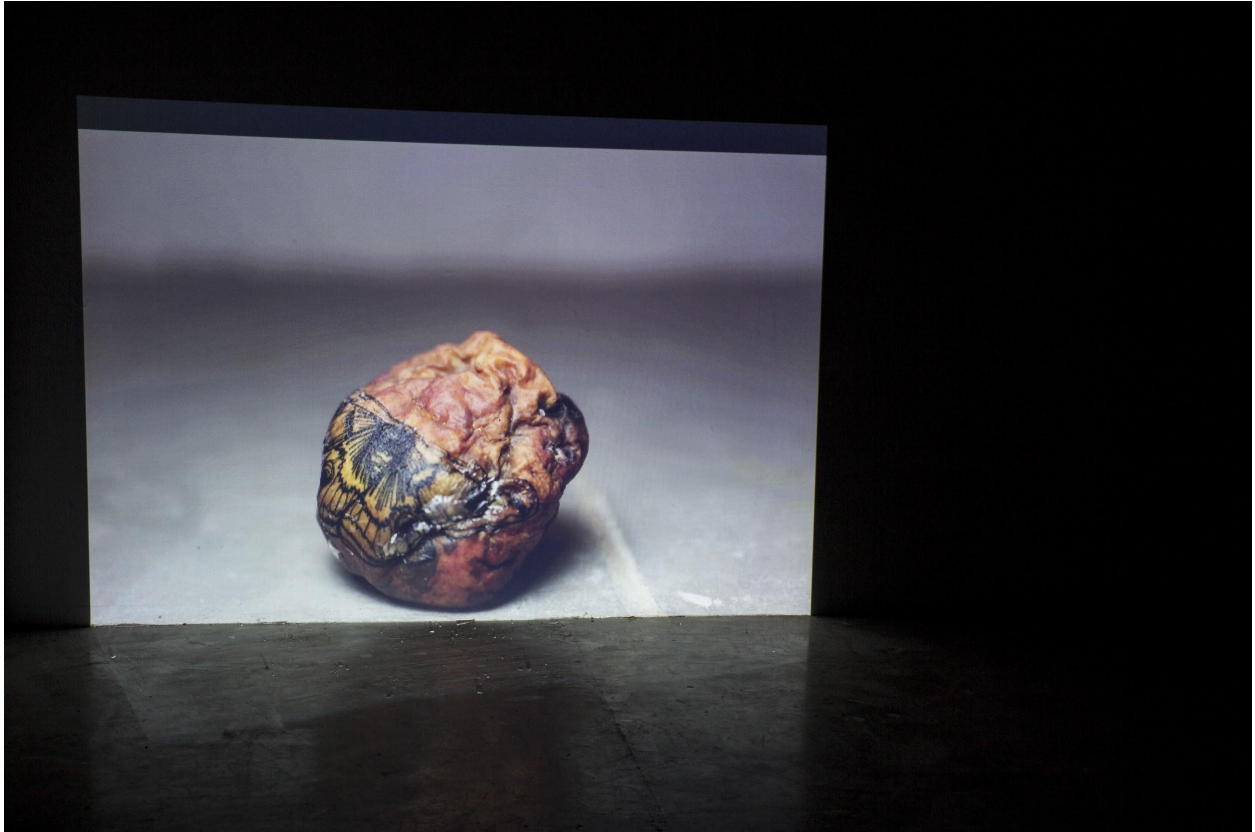


fig. 5

an abstract trace of something that was

September 25, 2015

I want to get rid of all of my possessions, which is a difficult task. There is necessity and the question of sentiment. I want to narrow down all of my possessions to the essentials, those perfect doc marten boots, shampoo bars from lush, my computer, hard drive, cellphone, my car and what will fit in it. One bin of sentiments to hide in my mom's basement, she can have my bed for the guest room and get rid of the one I am convinced I was conceived on. Maybe my dad could have my guitar, I could play it when I visit. There is so much to disperse, and it is so hard because a lot of it is art that has been given to me, there is guilt in letting go. It's disrespectful, discompassionate. Kyle says it is liberating, I wonder how he did it. Two of my homes growing up had been foreclosed. So much left behind, so much left unsaid afterwards. Maybe that's what makes it easier for me, I'm not that sentimental, I understand that you can't save everything, understand that material things are often pointless. Our possessions are our burden. What recently brought me down thinking about the foreclosures came the night after a day of rummaging through someone's abandoned house. It was the thought of someone rummaging through my abandoned homes, whoever cleaned them out, what they may have thought about the lives once lived there, what did my abandoned belongings say about me? That night Kyle got a text saying his friend died, and there I was next to him weeping for my past. That was the last night I slept next to him, I miss his arms, I loved looking at his arms wrapped around me. I don't understand why he doesn't want to hold me anymore.



fig. 6

From September 18-November 27, 2015 I took a picture of my bed every morning upon waking. My bedsheets and pillows became a drawing after a night of following my body through stages of sleep. As a project, I thought about using the labor of sleep to create this collection, slyly mocking my peers seeking perfection in their studios, but really an inside joke confronting the value systems I established in my years of learning a craft. More so it became an archive. An archive of my nights sleeping alone, and archive of the days I woke up again and got out of bed. The season shifted from summer to fall, daylight savings to daylight wasting. I thought of On Kawara's postcards: *I got up* and *I am still alive*. I could have kept going, but decided not to.

loss of self

The MATMOS lecture resonated with me most. I can listen to Drew Daniels ramble forever about the re-dematerialization of the art object and how the digital sheen can either increase the risk of missing out on or amplify an encounter with the real.³ I connected most with Daniels' expression of the influence of Darby Crash⁴ and the idea behind the Germs burn. Not that I identify too deeply with any hardcore punk scenes, but there was something in what he said that struck a chord in me like this feeling I've had for years but could never quite pinpoint or put into words what it was. He was describing his interest in fandom and the desire driving memorialization, and the futile attempt to hold onto something that keeps changing.

The theory behind the Germs burn.. a way of permanently marking your attachment to punk rock. A way of acknowledging that subcultural life has a temporality, that subcultures die. A desire to go beyond that attachment of adolescent rebellion through this idea that there is a way to permanently mark.

There's something deeply melancholic I think about this as an expression of the

³ Daniel, Drew, and M.C. Schmidt. "The Re-Dematerialization of the Art Object." Lecture, Matmos ATC Lecture from UC Berkeley's Art, Technology, and Culture lecture series. Berkeley, CA. Accessed December 2015.

⁴ Born Jan Paul Beahm (September 26, 1958 – December 7, 1980) American punk rock vocalist and songwriter who, along with long-time friend Pat Smear (born Georg Ruthenberg), co-founded the Germs. Wikipedia contributors, "Darby Crash," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*.

psychology of fandom. You want to be permanently attached to something, but that very desire acknowledges the fact that there is no such thing as permanence because burns fade, just like attachments to bands fade.⁵

As Drew Daniel continued to describe the actions of Darby Crash he spoke of Crash's suicidal ideations as his desire to dissolve the self, to be nothing, to be an ocean. What I am most scared to admit in this thesis is all of the work made from the end of summer through December, evidences of my own suicidal ideations*. My own desires to let go of the signifiers of my self, to disappear, to no longer be.

*I am not/was not suicidal. There is a difference between suicidal-related behaviors (ideations, thoughts) and suicidal behaviors (involves a degree of intent to die).⁶

⁵ Daniel, Drew, and M.C. Schmidt. "MATMOS." Lecture, Fall 2015 Visiting Artist Lecture from VCUarts Kinetic Imaging. The Depot, Richmond VA. 3 Nov. 2015.

⁶ Van Orden KA, Witte TK, Cukrowicz KC, Braithwaite S, Selby EA, Joiner TE. The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide. *Psychological review*. 2010;117(2):575-600. Accessed November 26, 2015



fig. 7

I say there was desire to disappear, but maybe I was really attempting to prove my existence. I photographed myself, gave myself only temporary distinct markings, subconsciously acquiring the aesthetic of my generational demographic, striving to be different in all the same ways. I could become present and anonymous. A blur within the stripes. Quiet yet loud. Noticed, but unnoticed. This series of *selfies* arose from my apprehension and aversion to the social network. I love instagram for it's filters, but I

hate that it is another demand for a curated identity, another interface of distance between people, more ways to filter. Navigating Likes fills me with anxiety, being susceptible to the affirmative feeling a Like provides with accompanying longing for actual unmediated contact.

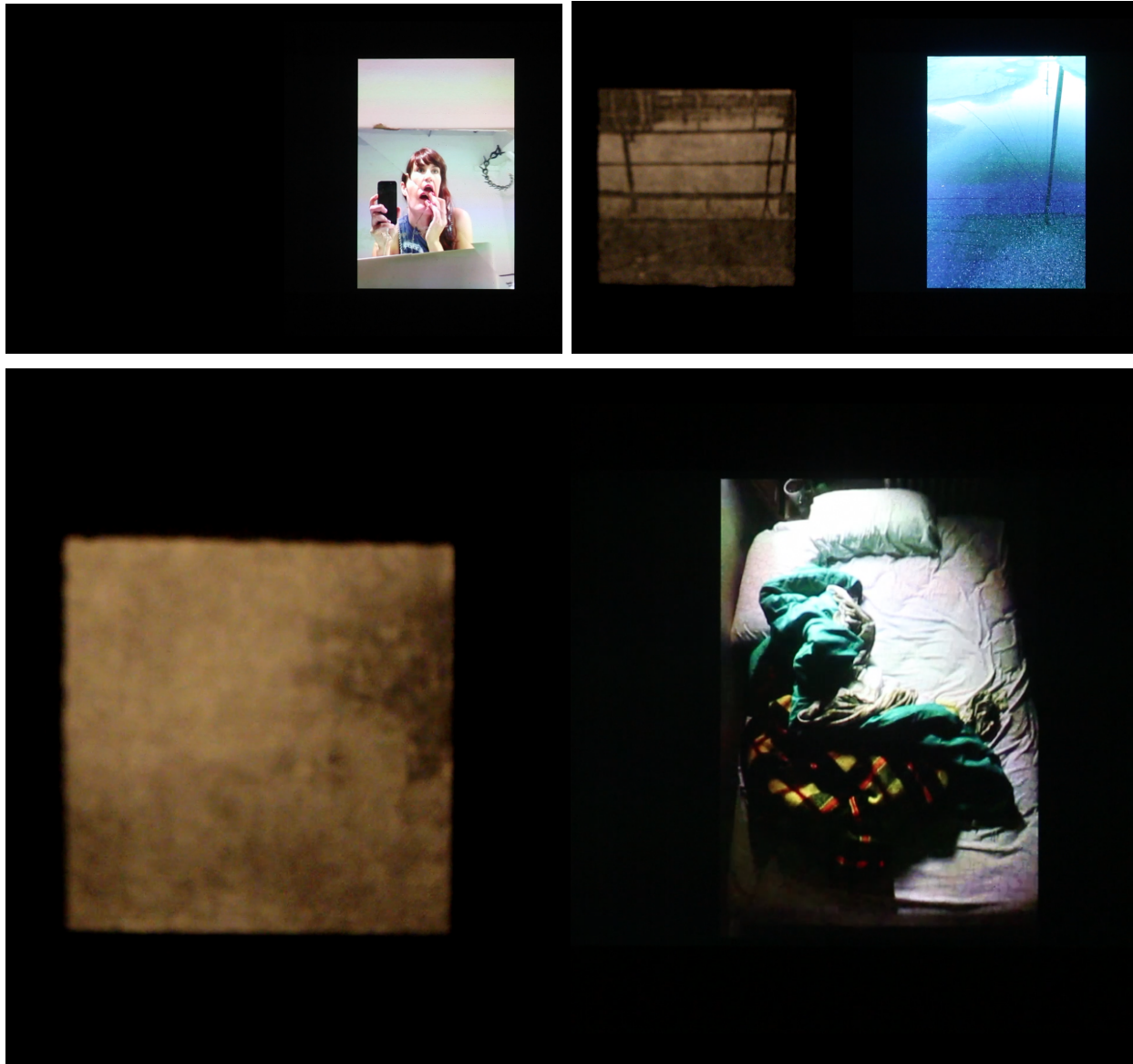


fig. 8

My images became my material. I was struggling to bring any new objects into my periphery or to create anything with a much of a physical mass. The right side of this video, *the last 12 months*, sequentially displays all of my photos taken with my iphone

from Nov 30, 2014- Nov 30 2015 for .10 of a second. Unedited and uncurated, it rapidly exposes my mundane fascinations and intimate moments. The archive became both extremely personal yet anonymous in an oversaturated shared image culture.

On the left, *i just want to hold your hand(le)* highlights places from my personal collection of images. They are filtered by instagram, made into slides, and then projected through an out of focus lens of an old school slide projector. As my memory of the places fade with time, I attempted to bring a tactility back to these images, yet through distortion and uniformity, I would lose the memory further.

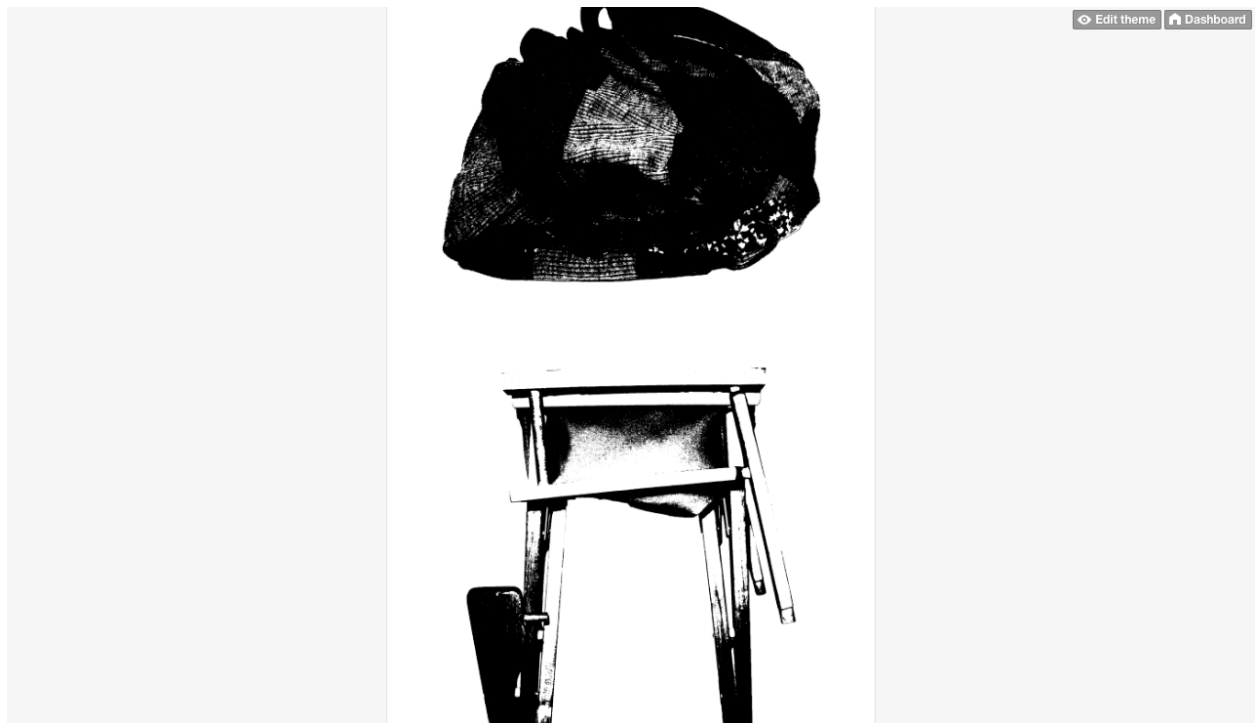


fig. 9

If I wanted to change then I would have to *let go* of aspects of my former self. I sought to *let go* of the things that were becoming a burden to carry with me. I felt obligated to *hold on* to many of these things because they were artifacts of memory; glass objects that I made, or things that were given to me. Driven by the desire to liberate myself from the burden I felt from objects, I began documenting (and continue to document) items I

currently owned and processed them into a digital record (an unlinked tumblr page), before giving them away. The archive acts as an intangible storage for my sentiment and can activate my memory of each possession, until the memory inevitably becomes displaced by the memory of the archived image. These items have either the fate of being gifted to a friend, donated, or placed in the “Free Art” box I’d set out front by the sidewalk, to be taken away most satisfyingly by strangers each day. I question if I am exploiting the sentiment of others through the act of giving by forwarding my obligation to hold on to these things. I wonder if the archive is a trace of who I was. I feel no guilt nor regret as of yet.

exercise for a panic attack

Notice:

5 visuals. Red bricks, scratches on car bumper, signpost, budding leaves, black asphalt.

4 feels. The canvas of my carhartt jeans on the skin of my legs, the bars of the fence I am leaning my back against, my feet inside my boots, the coldness of the air inside my nostrils as I inhale.

3 sounds. The distant highway, dogs barking, the buzz of the electricity in the power lines.

2 smells. My faint perfume wearing off on my skin, my hair.

1 taste. The taste toothpaste wearing off in my mouth, it's always the same taste I notice.

insistence on the present

February 16, 2016

I asked Kyle if he wanted to go to the Joe Jack Talcum show with me. Maybe I shouldn't have. Maybe I should have asked my best friend instead of the person that made me sad. I woke up to a text this morning from him, a picture of a pile of snow, that was melting quickly. it got me up, I went to see it, I felt urgency again, like I have to make a mold of this, but not because I wanted it, to preserve it, because I thought Kyle would think it was cool. I stopped myself, I didn't really want a mold of the melting snow. So I went back to the pile, and instead I sat and watched it melt, for an hour, it was so small now. I wanted to invite him to come sit with me and watch the snow melt, I refrained. I imagined sitting next to him and holding his hand, until I stopped myself, I was doing it again. Imagining things that were not true. Instead I did my exercise of noticing things, the color of the brick sidewalk, the scratches in the car's bumper, the feel of my legs inside my canvas carhartt jeans, the feel of the bars on my back from the fence I was leaning back on, the sound of the air, the taste of toothpaste wearing off in my mouth, it's always the same taste I notice. I tried to notice the snow melting, the distance of the top peak to the edge of the sidewalk, the bottom to the pebble, I think it melted half an inch in half an hour. I got cold sitting there, except when the sun came out briefly. Few people passed me, I thought someone might kick the pile. I think about how I want to leave this town, how I feel like I might be able to start my happier life new somewhere else, hopefully it is true, but isn't it how I always feel? I shouldn't have asked him to the show, I can't separate these intense emotions I feel towards him, I can't play it cool. Today I took this screenshot with my phone of me telling him I loved him in an unsent text message.



fig. 10

The title for my thesis show *so much apparent nothing* comes from Sarah Manguso. In “Ongoingness”, she describes her realizations of her futile attempts to preserve every experience of her life by keeping a daily diary for 25 years.

The trouble was that I failed to record so much.

I'd write about a few moments, but the surrounding time- there was so much of it!
So much apparent *nothing* I ignored, that I treated as empty time between the
memorable moments.⁷

I chose this as my title because it is the *nothing* that I notice. The nothing I take pictures
of. The recurring nothing that gets lost in memory. Finding value in moments of
boredom. There is no choice in which memories are lost.

I feel distant from my thesis already, with ease I disconnect. Sometimes I am too good
at letting go. Letting go of what I felt without remorse. Will I get so distant from my
former self that I won't recognize her anymore?

My final semester was like starting over. I was getting out of the depression but I didn't
know how to trust how I was feeling. I didn't know what to make for thesis. I worried
about setting a parameter for myself against making objects. I gave myself permission
to break my own rule, even if contradicted myself by making the traffic cones. I
continued my method of following intuition and discovering what is at the end, though I
still struggle to to explain my reasoning for making these objects amidst my desire
towards impermanence. I might discredit myself by just talking about process, and say
making glass traffic cones was nothing more than a physical glass feat, that I missed
being in the studio making friends, that I wanted a challenge. There's more to it though.

⁷ Manguso, Sarah. *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015.

I walk a lot. One of my favorite songs is titled *walking is still honest*. When walking my mind wanders, easily done when passing the same daily landmarks. I start thinking about scenarios, people, reminders of the past, making up things in my head that are not based on facts. Sometimes anxiety builds but if I catch it happening now I can sometimes get myself out of the cycles of thought. When I walk I also notice things, the things that take me out of letting the usual landscape pass by, out of the cycle of thoughts. I collect pictures of things I find on the ground, alley couches, dead birds, city kitties, crusty snow piles, construction markers. For my thesis I wanted to share the things I noticed, with subtle alterations to make one not fully know what they are looking at. Each element shares an ambiguity, a sense of viscosity, and a quietness. I wanted to call attention to small sensations. To allow some time to slow, and then go on.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Darby_Crash&oldid=715805547

Vita

Education

2016 MFA, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

2008 BFA, Tyler School of Art/Temple University, Philadelphia, PA

Awards

2016 Clearcut, Post-MFA workshop at Redmyre Art Lab, Rejmyre, Sweden
Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
Graduate Travel Grant, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

2015 Graduate Student Award, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA (also 2014)

2009 Christy Wright Scholarship for Glass Art, Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC

Exhibitions

2016 *so much apparent nothing*, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA

2015 *International Online Student Exhibition and Juried Selection Catalog*, Glass Art Society
Warehouse 22, VCU Craft/Material Studies Candidacy Show, Richmond, VA

2014 *Forefront*, FAB Gallery, Richmond VA

2013 *GATHERING: Contemporary Glass from the Heartland*, IU Kokomo Gallery, IN

2012 *Glass: A Juried Art Show*, Minnetrista, Muncie, IN
New Beginnings, OZ Gallery, Louisville, KY

Experience

2015 Adjunct Professor, Introduction to Glass Fabrication, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

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2014 Hot and Casting Studio Coordinator, Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, WA
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