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THE EPHEMERALITY OF THE LIVING AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE INANIMATE

By
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A thesis presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

I create fragile, sculptural works with paper. Either cast from pre-existing objects or constructed forms, my three-dimensional works ultimately become pure paper objects. I use the visual language of absence, memory, ruin and ephemerality to present modern artifacts and address the now. I am interested in how the manufactured crumbs we leave behind as a species reveal our collective desires, and our relationship to the body and mortality. I am fascinated with, and even enchanted by, the proliferation of material objects and their tendency to surpass the lifespan of any single human. Perhaps this behavior of producing lasting creations is somehow a way to defer an acceptance of our own disappearance. By translating material remnants into delicate paper shells, I explore the tension between the ephemerality of the living and the everlasting persistence of the inanimate.

I combine imagery and material sourced from machinic, bodily, living, dead, non-human animal and human domains and blend them into a state of atemporal ambiguity. Salvaged artifacts originating from multiple generations function as temporary armatures for my cast paper sculptures. I choose objects that connote the body in utility and form, and animal figures that are represented as objects, ruins, or human projections. By sourcing images from cemeteries and infusing materials with dead matter, I create connections to the departed. I am interested in how commonplace objects function as prosthetics to breach biological and social limitations, and the way in which they expedite the reciprocal process of human domestication.

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INTRODUCTION

BLENDING

I create fragile, sculptural works with paper. Either cast from pre-existing objects or constructed forms, my three-dimensional works ultimately become pure paper objects. I use the visual language of absence, memory, ruin and ephemerality to present modern artifacts and address the now. I am interested in how the manufactured crumbs we leave behind as a species reveal our collective desires, and our relationship to the body and mortality. I am fascinated with, and even enchanted by, the proliferation of material objects and their tendency to surpass the lifespan of any single human. Perhaps this behavior of producing lasting creations is somehow a way to defer an acceptance of our own disappearance. By translating material remnants into delicate paper shells, I explore the temporal relationships between the ephemerally animate and the longevity of the things we create.

I use imagery and material from machinic, bodily, living, dead, animal and human domains and blend them to become semi recognizable and semi ambiguous forms. Salvaged artifacts originating from multiple generations function as temporary armatures for my cast paper sculptures. I choose objects that connote the body in utility and form, and animal figures that are represented as objects, ruins. By sourcing images from cemeteries and infusing the paper medium with dead matter, I create connections to the departed. I am interested in how body-serving objects function as prosthetics for biological and social limitations, and how they expedite the process of human domestication.

This thesis will cover my thinking and approach to works I produced between 2019 and 2022. I will open with a dialogue around the transposability of the domesticated and the domesticator, and my relationship to the manufactured environment. I will address the object-body relationship in how that is referenced in my paper-cast forms and other works in contemporary art. My process of creating will be illustrated to reveal how material handling and

content merge to form a dialogue around mortality, ephemerality and material excess. I will expand on the idea of presence and absence, and lastly discuss the function of the collection. I invite the reader to step into my psychological studio and aim to provide gravity and context to my practice.

PREAMBLE

WHERE I WAS ONCE

Before inviting my art practice into an academic setting, I centered my education around conservation biology and field research. Pursuing my degree at the unconventional Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington allowed me to simultaneously study organisms in a distant theoretical context, as well as completely immersed in the field. When I was nineteen, I worked my first field job as an avian nest searcher in the lowlands of the Peruvian Amazon.¹ This formative experience is relevant because it was my first extended engagement with an environment that was not dominated by human creations. My sleeping tent was the only spatial (and futile) barrier I experienced that separated myself from the complex and chaotic ecosystem “out there”. I was the species minority, reverent and yielding to the power of a system in which birth, life, death, sex, decomposition and transformation are mercilessly taking place everywhere, simultaneously. As a brief visitor to this domain, I was prompted to reflect on the insulating, built environment that composes the location of my upbringing, as well as the growing multitude of human-centric spaces just like it.

Though these ideas are the preliminary inspirations for my practice, my work is not directly about the land, species and people who are exchanged for capitalistic growth, and it does not evoke a sense of material excess. My practice responds to the environment I know best. I present the domestic and the domesticated, in samples and in fragments, while approaching my practice with a scientific curiosity. I am interested in the psychological and physical relationships that arise in a world full of devices, and our attempt to delay and deny the bodily processes so unapologetically occurring in biospheres like the Amazon. Instead of the coevolutionary exchange between species, the members of the capitalist, western region I call home share a symbiotic relationship with the objects around us. Now that I have set the stage for my inspirations, concerns, and what my work is *not*, I will now pivot to my subjects of interest.

CHAPTER 1

THE RECIPROCITY OF DOMESTICATION

My relationship to objects is intensely ambivalent and situationally fluctuating. I contradict myself, always caught between a feeling of desire and gratitude for their assistance, and total resentment for their dominating presence as well as their satiation of wants rather than needs. When encountering a kiosk of electronics or the exterior of a Party City, I cannot avoid lamenting the quantity of resources required for their production. I imagine decorations exiled to the trash on the 5th of July and the 18th of March. I envision a more global fate for last year's iPad, as its discarded metallic parts traverse the span of an ocean to be picked through and sold back to the company of origin for next year's edition.

Despite my sober aversion to the excessiveness of objects in general, I have always *felt* for certain objects as vulnerable subordinates, in a similar way that I do for children and animals. This is not to strip the latter of agency, or to say that animals do not have complex, validated lives in a context that excludes my thoughts and opinions. However, the human imprint is so prevalent, that I think of it when I think of them. And when I think of that altogether, I observe the wellbeing of non-human animals being decided for by our species, much like the way parents control the lives of children. I had not consciously thought to extend that analogy over to objects, though I do believe I have always felt it in these terms. In a book on the photographic works of J. John Priola, writer and historian, Rebecca Solnit, provides an eloquent deconstruction of this idea in her essay, *The Color of Shadows, The Weight of Breath, the Sound of Dust*. She remarks...

Children are instinctively animists, and they believe in a biography and a soul for everything. In English schools it was once the custom to set an essay topic the life of a penny as it passes from hand to hand; Marquerite Yourcenar, with French seriousness, spun this into a novel, *A Coin in Nine Hands*. Perhaps children like these stories because they too are decided for, passed around, presented, withdrawn without their volition, like objects, or perhaps because everything is alive and evocative for them...In children's books, in fairytales, and myths, people and objects trade places freely; people become

statues, stones, trees, water, objects speak and come to life; and though this is uncanny it is also comforting because it makes the communicability between the worlds.²

The tendency to anthropomorphize, empathize with and elevate common objects has been my habit for longer than I have thought to identify themes in my work. Shockingly enough, this pre-reflective time period continued through a portion of my post baccalaureate degree in studio art. During that time, I instinctively produced *Cone II* (Fig. 1), a 60" x 40" collagraph print depicting a massive still life of five objects on an ambiguous surface in front of an indistinguishable abyss. I problem solved the issue of having access only to a small press bed by composing this work on multiple panels and suturing them together with linen tape. The objects I selected had a preexisting role in my life as passive trinkets scattered about my Brown's Addition apartment and included a semi sentimental poodle pin, a found kiln cone, a decorative gourd, a single mummified cochineal bug (the small, dark crumpled mass in the foreground), and a ceramic bead in the shape of a unicorn. In the top center, a fly hovers. Each member of the image holds various levels of animacy and "usefulness". The fruit and the poodle pin are decorative, whereas the dried insect and ceramic cone are utilitarian, however the cone exhibits more of a bodily presence than the deceased animal. The dead insect was raised purely as a product, and the gourd would likely be set somewhere and discarded after the holidays. The gnat is a transient visitor. The other two animals, the poodle and mythical unicorn are mobilized as bodily accessories. Perhaps it was my way of celebrating those that collect dust and pointing to the gateways between worlds that Solnit describes. When I made the piece, however, I don't think I was thinking about viewership. In fact, the 60-inch print and plates were retired to the trash years ago, despite having liked it.

Animal forms in their multicategorical states have resurfaced in my work and will forever continue to do so. Through material or context, I often try to communicate a sense of ambiguity regarding their level of animacy or their objecthood. For the master's in fine arts thesis exhibition at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum titled, *Nine Ways from Sunday*, I installed two pieces. One of which, *Untitled Duet* (Fig. 2), was a paper floor sculpture depicting two animal figures from my ongoing series, *Quadrupeds*. They are referenced from a photographic archive I have been cultivating over the last decade, of the sheep-shaped adornments located on some cemetery headstones. The subjects in the photographs are often broken and worn from decades of contact with weather. I try to maintain this unrefined quality through a crude process of construction and feel successful when the pieces read as slightly unsettling. As the title implies, the forms in this series are unspecified, four legged animals, resembling sheep, but also dogs or polar bears, or something undecided. Without access to touch, they may read as stone or paper, and sit positioned like resting creatures on the gallery floor. Hovering a slight inch above the ground, their legibility of seated farm animals is gently disrupted.

I hold a variety of intersectional associations with ovids that compose my tireless interest. First, they are beautiful, cumbersome animals full of texture and mystery. As domestic animals, they possess contradictory qualities that make them difficult to place, at least in the ways in which I have learned to categorize ideas. For me, they bring up questions of agency, the body as a resource, coevolution and evolutionary time. Aside from the wolf-to-dog transition, sheep were one of the first animals to be domesticated by humans.³ Animal domestication is an ancient technology and I see it as an early example of our species sourcing what is immediately available to problem-solve discomforts associated with labor and survival. This is what we have come to

be experts at, and I find it perpetually interesting to keep seeking backwards to imagine how our predecessors expressed a mindset towards efficiency, progress and production.

I encounter the Anthropocene as a commonly explored topic in contemporary art, as artists respond to the omnipresent alarms sounding about the health of our planet. Big production artists like Tomás Saraceno, who made a massive solar aircraft composed of used trash bags,⁴ or Olafur Eliasson's project, *Ice Watch*,⁵ where he relocated fragments of a Greenland glacier to be observed melting throughout London. I reference these artists, not because I see them as relevant to my practice, but to make a distinction of the timeframe in which I am regarding this era of human impact. These artists are critiquing issues that have presented themselves in the last several decades. As an artist concerned with deep time, I draw inspiration from a timeline of human impact discussed in archeozoological literature, that highlights the early variations of modern tendencies expressed in the human species. In trying to place the start of the Anthropocene, archeobiologists, Bruce D. Smith and Melinda A. Zeder argue that it began over ten thousand years ago, when humans started significantly reshaping ecosystems as a result of the domestication of plants and animals.

In our view the beginning of the Anthropocene can be usefully defined in terms of when evidence of significant human capacity for ecosystem engineering or niche construction behaviors first appears in the archeological record on a global scale. While there is certainly evidence for a range of different forms of human niche construction prior to the Pleistocene-Holocene boundary (Groube 1989; Smith 2011, p. 836), these earlier human niche construction behavior sets provided human societies with only a limited ability to reshape ecosystems. In contrast, the domestication of the wide variety of species of plants and animals world-wide in the early Holocene provided human societies for the first time with the ability to significantly modify ecosystems. These domesticates constituted a major new type of human niche construction and formed the basis for the subsequent development and still ongoing global expansion of agricultural landscapes.⁶

In this multi-century process, it is not only the domesticated animal that is altered. As this behavior persists, both subjects, human and animal, begin to change in response to one another.

For the *Quadrupeds* I wanted to use animal imagery sourced from cemeteries, to link the timeframe of a single human life with thousands of generations of animal and human relationships. The proximity of *Untitled Duet* to my second work, *Study Skins* (2021-22), points to the contemporary use of technology since, somewhere down the line, the duty transferred from animals and plants to an entire taxonomy of devices (Fig. 3).

CHAPTER 2

AMONG ENDLESS COMPANY

I am as interested in the objects we create as I am in their physical and psychological relationship to the body. The taxonomy of objects that are created to assist or conceal bodily processes are intriguing to me because, in addition to their corporal utility, they often formally mimic biological anatomy, and take on the likeness of animacy. My second piece installed in the exhibition, *Nine Ways from Sunday* (2022), is a collection of paper cast objects mounted on the wall arranged like archeological artifacts in a museum (Fig. 4). The casts are yielded from a collection of objects and through color and skin-like surface quality, suggest decay.

My process for this piece involved salvaging a small archive of discarded items that relate to the body in their utility and function. On daily walks for pleasure and commute, I foraged for source material in common purgatorial sites for ownerless items such as alleyways, trash piles and second-hand stores. From the chaos of the unwanted, I curated a collection of objects that, in their working lifetime, were created in service to the body. Most of them are primarily associated with comfort and convenience, or assist with beautification and longevity— a hairdryer bonnet, a cumbersome massager, a portable ultrasound device, a neck pillow for arduous flights, etc. I would argue that none of them are true necessities, but they share a strong, yet forgettable closeness with the body. I was pleased when I found objects that have a cryptic function not readily deciphered, or an elaborate design for a solution to a highly specific, singular problem. In scenarios where the energy expended to create a device significantly exceeded the inconvenience of the problem that it was designed to solve, I found myself thinking of excess. I pondered the intimacy we share with many devices and consider them almost as prosthetics, assisting to intensify and expedite the domestication of the human species. This category of objects seems to respond to a collective lack. Many of them supplement what, in

other scenarios, might come from human touch, and some are marketed as “must-haves”, playing against insecurities and minor discomforts.

These ideas align with Michael Foucault’s assertions around the aesthetics of existence, as illustrated in an article titled, “The Body and the Aesthetics of Existence”, as they link social and cultural body standards to commodity and consumerism.

Our relationship to commodities and the self is no longer based on ‘need,’ but more on a desire that can never be satisfied so we seek new objects to consume in a system where choices are infinite, and desire and pleasure become integral parts of material and social production that in turn produce or construct more desire/pleasure...The idealized corporeal images of youth, beauty, health and fitness support body maintenance and related industries ensuring that the body is attractively packaged, marketed and sold. Health no longer simply involves caring for the body and seeking its optimal functioning, but involves disciplining its appearance movement and control...⁷

In addition to the bodily relationship of the objects sourced for *Study Skins*, the process of constructing them is almost surgical and has a strong likeness to specimen preparation. I gained a familiarity with study skin preparation during my undergraduate degree, as I regularly volunteered in the Evergreen State College natural history collection. I was drawn to the process because it touched on some of my most potent curiosities, like mysterious organisms, corporality, and tediously artful tasks. In short, the preservation of a specimen requires an opening up and extracting of a salvaged body. Cotton batting twirled around a wooden skewer takes the place of viscera and fills the hollow cavity like a puppet. White cotton peas supplement eyes and are nestled into an empty skull. The body is then sewn up with a light dusting of borax to ensure proper dehydration, and the feathers or hair is styled with a toothbrush to restore its natural grain.

There were several aspects of this process that captivated and even amused me. At the risk of sounding voyeuristic, there was a strong satisfaction associated with the opportunity for possession that could never be achieved with an autonomous living being. Once dead, the thing

became an object that I could examine without opposition. There was an element of morbid humor in moments where the animal's violated state was emphasized, especially in its deconstructed and floppy form. In some collection specimens I have encountered, the comedy carries over to the finished product, when the craftsmanship has been compromised by a practicing student (Fig. 5). I celebrate this botched quality when it presents itself in some of my paper casts as well. It is almost as if the object is trying to be something that it isn't, unsuccessfully feigning vitality and convincing no one. Both *Study Skin / Little Scoot* and *Study Skin / Chicken Recliner*, (2021) are nice examples of a successfully pathetic work (Fig. 6).

Observing the materiality of the mechanisms that animate a being only generates more questions and complicates my understanding of what it means to have a body. One paradox that continues to challenge my perception, is the dualist illusion of being and possessing a body. It is this persistent mirage that sustains my interest in the corporeal, both animate and uninhabited. It goes without saying that the issue of duality is ancient and imagined in vastly different ways across cultures, religions and in various scientific fields.⁸ In her texts illustrating the various ways to think through the body, theorist, Lisa Blackman, pushes beyond the dualist mentality and deconstructs various sociological, biological, and experiential ways of understanding corporality.⁹ Even in this textbook-style literature, I found it helpful to question exactly which type of body it is that I'm referring to. The answers will forever be unclear to me, as the bodily experience is flexible and, at times, contradictory. Yet is in the state of death where there exists an apparent distinction between material corporality and the animated life - a state that is only perceptible from this side of the lookingglass. It appears that, following the unforeseen moment when I inevitably extinguish, part of me will remain momentarily, just like an object; something unrelatable and indelibly unresponsive. Perhaps this is why I find devices to be curious and

almost intimidating, consequently allowing a great deal of space for them in my practice. It is as though they are mocking my immanent surrender to a functionless form. Just as viewing the material body has the potential to illustrate a dualist mentality, on the contrary, I believe seeing the body within objects is an exercise in navigating the somatically felt body. This is defined by Blackman as an “affective and tactile-kinesthetic body.” When we allow ourselves to be moved by the energy transference of objects, we are picking up on how they behave, occupy space, emit and sense. In my *Study Skins*, I aim to underline this connection for viewers, by accentuating biomorphic qualities in the work.

In *The Spell of the Sensual*, David Abram defines a body that is permeable to the exterior world. He talks about actual ingestion of the material world through food, light and air, and how matter is constantly exchanged with ourselves and the outside. Where the body begins and ends is impossible to define. He later expands this idea of exchange to illustrate the active participation and reciprocity in the perception of animate and inanimate things.

Our most immediate experience of things, according to Merleau-Ponty, is necessarily an experience of reciprocal encounter – of tension, communication, and commingling. From within the depths of this encounter, we know the thing or phenomenon only as our interlocutor – as a dynamic presence that confronts us and draws us into relation. We conceptually immobilize or objectify the phenomenon only by mentally absenting ourselves from this relation, by forgetting or repressing our sensuous involvement. To define another being as an inert or passive object is to deny its ability to actively engage us and to provoke our sense; *we thus block our perceptual reciprocity with that being.*¹⁰

In my textile piece, *Floating Figure / Sewing Sketch*, I tried to depict a body akin to the pervious beings that Abram describes, by using a combination of transparencies, contours, washes and ambiguous orientations (Fig. 7). I incorporated images of an animal that I imagine to live an exact opposite experience from what I know as a human – the faceless fish. This animal lives in the abyssal zone of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and has abandoned the need for eyes or facial

features early on in its evolutionary history. I wanted the alien fish and the anonymous translucent figure to share the same domain, in a liquid and layered column of space.

With a more melancholic tone, Peter Schwenger identifies the inherent distance between the perceiver and the objects being perceived in what I would summarize as a kind of object envy.¹¹ Through the philosophies of Freud and Lacan, he explores the idea that one can never perceive an object in its totality, because it is inherently separate from our anatomy.

Additionally, the object has longevity, a complete lack of self awareness, and no knowledge of the viewer's existence. I wonder if, through a work of art, it is possible to simultaneously encompass the feeling of vitality and loneliness in the material world.

It wasn't until I made my first paper sculpture, *Seated Twins* (2021), in which I cast the backs of antique chairs and hung them on the wall at human height, that I consciously assessed the likeness of many objects and object fragments to the body (Fig. 8). Viewing this work felt like being among company. They appear like us because they are made *by* us and *for* us. A chair is a supplement for the extra hours we prefer not to stand. A hair dryer expedites evaporation and arranges tresses better than our hands know how to do. A massager is a stand-in for the touch of another and alleviates pain from excessive movement or movement deficiencies.

The idea of material assistance to outsource energy and expand our biological limitations is not new, but always evolving with new technology. In her book, *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway illustrates the complex intersectionality of all categorical boundaries in a lived experience.¹² As an example, she describes a photograph of a nurse log¹³ in a California canyon that assumes a striking resemblance to a large, seated dog. She talks about the high biodiversity of life found on this "inanimate" object and questions what all she is "touching" when she perceives it. She uses the word touching to explain seeing through a digital photograph and

recognizes the optical prosthetics that grant her access to the image. She further acknowledges her own biological capabilities of perception as a product of our primate lineage. She continues on to write...

We touch Jim's dog with fingery eyes made possible by a fine digital camera, computers, servers, and e-mail programs through which the high density jpg was sent to me. Infolded into the metal, plastic and electronic flesh of the digital apparatus is the primate visual system that Jim and I have inherited, with its vivid color sense and sharp focal power.

Within the ordinary scenario of a decaying tree in a random forest, Haraway makes relevant the living, the dead, the singular and the collective body, the natural, human-made, inanimate, transtemporal, animate and the cyborg. This example is a literary cousin to the spirit of my practice, because it takes a sample of a greater picture, and breaks down the connections between the seemingly disparate elements. Haraway seems to view the environment through a chimeric perspective that I aim to communicate through my work.

My understanding of the body in art expanded after reading *Part Object Part Sculpture*, an exhibition catalogue of post war works by European and American artists that was installed at the Wexner Center for the Arts in 2005. In the introduction, Helen Molesworth describes the vastly different, yet overlapping, modes in which the body and the object share territories in distinguished sculptural works. This catalogue exposed me to a collection of art that is saturated with body content yet is virtually void of representative images of the figure. While works like Jasper John's *Lightbulb*¹⁴ series contextualized the involvement of the artist's hand in replication of a mass-produced objects, more abstract works pushed my concept of body art further. For example, Eva Hesse's *Accension II*, 1967,¹⁵ which is essentially a grey box with thousands of inward-facing rubber noodles, is impossible to view without imagining the sensation of putting one's hand inside the work. Exposure to works such as these have instilled my confidence in the

power of tactile materials and their ability to entice the viewer and activate the sensuous imagination.

CHAPTER 3

PAPER AS EPHEMERAL / PAPER AS DOCUMENT

My process of making often begins with a material interest. After all, no matter how conceptually planned out my work is, the material vehicle for that content determines the language through which the piece speaks. Sometimes I am driven to try a new technique simply because I am curious to see how a substance will behave in combination with other ingredients and methods. I am drawn to tactile works and am most intrigued when the combination of elements produces something unresolved. In Harima Midori's paper sculptures, she assembles xeroxed images of people and animals and constructs them into three-dimensional, free-standing forms (Fig 9). What I find most compelling about the work, is the natural disruptions that occur when transferring the two-dimensional image to the sculptural surface. Facial qualities misalign and anatomical dimensions are slightly off, disturbing the gestures and expressions we might expect to see in the figures they represent.

I started paper casting simply because I wanted to see if a form would have structural integrity. Additionally, I experimented with inking and casting chocolate molds, and even imbedding collagraph illustrations within the handmade paper. I wasn't satisfied with the particular way in which the ink rested on top of the fibers. What held my attention most were the forms that relied on light and shadow to illuminate their nuances, rather than an application of ink or drawn marks. I started to experiment with ways to imbed pigment within the pulp.

Color operates in a mystic language of relativity. As Josef Albers puts it in his text, *Interaction of Color* "Practical exercises demonstrate through color deception (Illusion) the relativity and instability of color. And experience teaches that in visual perception there is a discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect".¹⁵ Rather than focusing too closely on the flexibility of colors when placed in different combinations, I have chosen to turn down the volume on my color use so that subtle changes are made apparent. I try to capitalize on the

opportunity for quiet hues to speak distinctly by excluding those of intense saturation and contrast. In *Seated Twins*, only the wood stain from the original chair, transferred during the casting process, provides the discreet variation in color. My more vibrant pieces are pigmented from materials selected from a collection of detritus that I have been cultivating over the last decade. My freezer and closet is full of flowers, lichens, dried mushrooms, and food scraps that I steep like a tea into the pulp. *Little Scoot/Study Skin*, was created with stolen marigolds, an accumulation of avocado shards, and purchased cochineal. The pallet possesses a muted quality and will likely wane over time. The pigment collaborates with the paper material to emphasize the impression of brittle fragility. Color tends to concentrate towards the edges as they taper to a thin deckle, literally outlining the most fragile areas. It is these small material moments that suggest a barely there-ness and murmurs cautions of disappearance.

I have recently learned of a Chinese funerary tradition that makes me think about ephemerality and the decision to either memorialize or let go. Following the death of a loved one, those who participate in this practice commission intricate paper sculptures from a specialized artisan, to purchase and send away with the departed by way of burning. This practice is rooted in the belief that those who transcend this world will spend time in purgatory, and eventually move towards rebirth. The shops that supply the paper sculptures, known as paper-horse stores, labor intensely over the creation of the objects, knowing that, within the week, they will be engulfed in flames. I find it interesting that these objects which represent a withstanding dependency on money and material goods are projected into an afterlife - a space I imagine to be void of physicality or corporality. In, *Up in Flames: The Ephemeral Art of Pasted-Paper Sculpture in Taiwan*, the authors describe a continuation of monetary exchanges in the afterlife.

Death does not terminate social and family relationships; rather, they continue well beyond it. The living communicate with the dead through spirit mediums, and the dead may contact or make demands on the living in a number of ways. The exchange between the living and the dead is dominated by notions of reciprocity and retribution.... The notion of supplying money to the netherworld is based on the complicated idea that each spirit has a particular incarnation and fate, acquired by means of a loan from celestial treasuries. Part of the loan is spent on acquiring a body for rebirth and part is spent for a future life.¹⁷

As an outsider to these customs, I am interested in the energy expenditure in the craft, the immediate destruction, and a scenario in which our material possessions follow us to the next life. The way I understand it, it is the ultimate display and contradiction of ephemerality.

In spiritual practice, and in banal activities or daily chores, paper products are associated with single use, and dispensability. As an artist working with paper, I feel satisfied knowing there is a correlation between my work and paper plates, stage props, children's crafts, and even toilet paper. Frequently, when I explain my practice to a new acquaintance, my listener makes an emotional connection to the naming of my preferred medium through a distant memory of an elementary school project. Their recollection reminds me of mess and uncoordinated bodies, and I smile knowing my work is illustrative and tidy, and that both scenarios can be achieved through the same material.

Paper is versatile. In part, it is fragile and therefore ephemeral, but conversely, it often performs the task of preservation in the form of a document. The *Study Skins*, too, function as documents. Each one is a birth certificate for an item that existed, beginning as a fleshy soup and ending as a mummified skin. The paper itself holds memory from its history of being pressed as pulp into the contours of the form, resurrecting each detail through the bulk of the material, and making it visible on the surface of the object. While the general form is preserved, many of the details are lost in the transfer, affecting the look of age or an object recently unearthed. With

care, the records have the capability of lasting centuries, if treated as an artifact, however I am indifferent to their outcome. The tension between fragility and durability is something Kiki Smith acknowledged in a panel discussion at Oklahoma State University in 2017 when discussing her paper figures (Fig 10). She describes them as deceptive, having a delicate appearance, but in actuality, possessing a “fierceness and a vitality”.¹⁹

In addition to the way the substance behaves, I work with paper because out of all the sculpting media available, it is relatively low impact in regard to toxicity and resources it requires. It exists in a state that is fairly close to its living origins. Although it is manipulated, bleached, and incorporated with other ingredients to be something other than a tree, the primary ingredient is still tree. In part, my use of paper is where I find compromise in being one of many artists who produce material things and leaves them for the world to inherit, without consent. When constructing forms to cast, I use and reuse a combination of wool, tin foil, coupons from the foyer of my apartment building and old grocery bags.

To test the limits of the material ferocity that Kiki Smith speaks of, I increased the scale of one piece in the *Quadrupeds* series. This work, still under construction, is a physical culmination of ideas that were presented separately in previous works (Fig. 11). It has manifested as an eight-foot hollow quadruped made exclusively out of paper. It incorporates domestic items and furniture in both its construction process and its final form. The creation of the piece happened in the living room of my one-bedroom apartment (Fig. 12). Instead of investing in a wire armature or some other established sculpting material, it began with a crude assembly of furniture and empty boxes to develop the core of the structure. Using the items existing in my house, I built it up and out with pillows, luggage, reams of felt, a cat tower, a soft-sculpture-turned-cat-bed, several winter coats, a sleeping bag, two crates, a shower curtain, a wooden

chair, a chair cushion and a towel to loosely form a sheep shape. Once the armature was encased in tin foil, I followed my usual protocol of constructing limbs out of wool and garbage, then applying a layer of plaster, a layer of plastic grocery bags, and lastly a covering of paper pulp. The pulp was soaked in charcoal at inconsistent intensities and combined with previous casts I had made of domestic objects. Embedded in the skin, like fossils in a sample of Earth, are the embossments of an entire 6-paned window. On the left side of the piece is a dry fleshy nozzle submerged in the surrounding white. On the other side, a smooshed impression of piping breaches slightly from the form. A vacuum hood is plastered to the sheep chest. Flecks of indistinguishable recycled casts bespangle the exterior like leaf stains on pavement. My goal in making this work is to produce an absence that occupies a significant amount of physical space. I want to impress upon the viewer, a simultaneous dominance and lightness of absence.

CHAPTER 4

BARELY THERE

Absence emphasizes what is not present. In art,²⁰ it is an activating attribute that initiates viewer participation to imagine or sense what might be missing. To existence, it is an essential ingredient, as for every one thing that is present, there is an unquantifiable amount of what is not. As a sensation, I cope with negative space through desire and consumption. As a social being, I praise emptiness in landscapes and conversation. As a former research assistant in ornithological field work, I acknowledge inherent informational deficiencies, and comply with the unknown. Absence is sometimes more realistic than presence and carries a detectable weight.

My work utilizes absence in both material conduct and references to the past. In my two- and three-dimensional works, I have preferred to use objects as substitutes for human subjects, because it regards the subject as unspecified. Through Rosalind Krauss' text, *Notes on the Index*, I encountered Roman Jakobson's concept of the interchangeable "I" and "you".¹⁸ He frames these pronouns as "shifters", able to indicate a different subject depending on the context. I feel that by using anonymous objects as stand-ins for people, I am presenting a collection of "shifters" to be interpreted as both your objects, our objects, my objects, my body, your body, our bodies etc. It is a way of equalizing the potential and the actual and confronting the mutability of individual experience. In my collaged print and fabric hanging, *While Seated (Eating Crackers, I Recalled Apes Exist)*, I cut from cloth an anonymous pair of shoes and a vacant seat. In the receded background, I printed depictions of animal crackers that simultaneously read as worn statues or ruinous sculptures (Fig. 13). The inherent nostalgic quality evident in collagraph printing technique, concurrent with the absence of the subject evoke memory. The dimensions and tactility of the piece recall those of a cotton baby blanket. I wanted to use absence, comfort materials, and titling to explore humancentric and childlike associations with animal species. Animal depictions often manifest in some extraneous consumer form such

as pool toys, chicken nuggets, PJ's, party decorations, or crackers. Though I am often charmed by the variety of animal shaped options in consumer goods, I find it rare that they refer to the species or individuals themselves, allowing for an exponential disconnect between humans and animals.

Embedded in my paper sculptures, there is an intrinsic reference to absence and memory of both a recent past and a history linked to deep time. First, the casts act as decoys that stand in for what is nonexistent. They refer to the object being represented but are only reproductions of the original. Secondly, the hollowness of the forms holds literal empty space, made visible through pinholes or translucent areas where the paper is just a few fibers thick. They are vessels, shells, exoskeletons and ghosts.

I belatedly look to other artists who explore the expansive topic of absence associated with memory, time and loss. I am interested in learning about the various ways in which artists chose to omit or include elements of their work and how each strategy performs the idea of “nothing”, or “used to be”. I relate to Christian Boltansky’s references to the anonymous life and loss in general. He has used objects and the archive to stand in for his subjects, such as ownerless clothing, light bulbs, and heartbeats.²¹

In my own work, I hope to achieve a combination of subtlety and prominence. I see this expression in Rachel Whiteread’s casts, as they announce emptiness with deliberate gravity by making physical the atmosphere within a structure or object. In her temporary piece *House*, she coated the inside of a three-story apartment in plaster and concrete before demolishing the original, to produce a dominantly elegant cast of negative space (Fig. 14). The inverse structure revealed the impression of every nuanced window, sill, and door. In *House*, there is a dense immobility to the piece that is activated only by slight shifts in material hue, from the sooty top

floor to the dusty warmth of the lower levels. Even more relevant to my work, are her casts of domestic objects. She also focused on small intimate items, such as a series in which she cast the inside of hot water bottles in dense materials like concrete, resin and plaster (Fig. 15). Each one is baby-sized and limbless, bodily and represents an object that was made for the body.

As an artist, I am interested in the omnipresence of the human species, and how the strategy of only representing a fragment or an incomplete scene effectively highlights this by contrast. It seems to disrupt a normalized state of expectation and peak the viewers' unsettled attention when pieces are missing. In his fabric replicas of former dwelling spaces, Do Ho Suh simulates the vaporous quality of memory with the use of delicate, sheer fabrics. I had the pleasure of viewing his work while on break from a field job off the coast of Southern California, when I spontaneously visited the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego with no knowledge of the current exhibition. Upon entering, I was unexpectedly confronted with *Apartment A, 348 West 22nd Street*, a life size interior of an apartment situated within the otherwise empty room of the museum (Fig 16). The structure occupied the same dimensions as the original, but the translucence of the walls and appliances was puzzling and seemed as though they could be brushed aside with the back of my hand. I remember the colors of the polyester fabric being bright like the pallet of neon gases, yet there was a gloom that loitered in the unfurnished space. The ceiling rejected just enough photons to create an overcast ambiance. It was a vacant apartment, taken out of a living context and absent of the expected tabletop crumbs and misplaced socks one might find in a regular living space.

In addition to his apartment facsimiles, Do Ho Suh creates paper versions of individual objects in the fashion of frottage; a technique that involves thoroughly rubbing all faces of an object's surface through paper or fabric, to extract and transfer an image of its physical

characteristics. He then assembles the length, width, and height to form a three-dimensional twin. I am unsurprisingly captivated by these paper sculptures, particularly his yellow telephone titled, *Rubbing / Loving, STPI, Artist Studio 35, 41 Robertson Quay, Singapore, 238236* (Fig. 17). Any visible marks made from the pastel is a record of physical intimacy and care. I see correlations with this process and my methods of casting objects, in that the entire surface of each must be pressed and touched to achieve a translation of its form.

In the *Study Skins*, I seek to abbreviate time by sourcing ready-mades from multiple decades (Fig. 18 and 19). The material treatment of the casts obscures their exact era of origin and shrinks the distance within their temporal relationships. By organizing these items within a collection, this further softens the edges of a categorical grouping. In her book, *On Longing; Narratives of the miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart explains the nature of the collection and its relationship to time.

The collection replaces history with classification, with order beyond the realm of temporality. In the collection, time is not something to be restricted to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collector's world.²²

What I am trying to achieve by ignoring associations with a specific decade is an obfuscation of time that coincides with both the drama of the last century as well as the formation of seas, to be taken as a humbling reflection on the relatively short amount of time in which humans have occupied the planet.

CONCLUSION

My work is a response to the built environment, and explores the temporal disconnect between living things and the items we manufacture. I am interested in object-body relationships, and what the items we leave behind reveal about our collective desires and the way we navigate as finite beings. I use the visual language of absence, memory, and ruin to present modern artifacts and address the now. Paper is my medium of choice, because it holds memory and communicates a sense of fragility. By translating manufactured items into hollow paper shells, I subvert the materiality of their original forms, inviting a contemplation on ephemerality in an environment that is built to last.

I draw inspiration from a background in conservation biology, and a strong connection to living things. To emphasize a fluidity between categorical borders, I combine imagery and materials from the living, the inanimate, the animal, the human, and the departed. I am interested in communicating a sense of deep time while speaking about matters of the present.

I would consider my work successful if it activated an emotion, basal in origin and difficult to place, within the viewer. I hope to provide a microcosm where time is elongated, and a meditation on corporality and earthly connectivity can be felt.

NOTES

- ¹ Nest searching involves stealthily trapping around off trail in search of bird nests to collect data on individuals and populations.
- ² Solnit, “The Color of Shadows, The Weight of Breath, the Sound of Dust,” 113
- ³ Vigne, “The origins of animal domestication and husbandry: A major change in the history of humanity and the biosphere,” 171.
- ⁴ Turpin, *Art in the Anthropocene*, 57. Tomás Saraceno created *Museo Aero Solar* in 2009.
- ⁵ Olafur Eliasson, *Ice Watch*, London, 2018
- ⁶ Smith and Zeder, “The Onset of the Anthropocene,” 8.
- ⁷ Besley and Peters, “The Body and the Aesthetics of Existence,” 45.
- ⁸ Blackman, *The Body: Key Concepts*, 7. Abram, *The spell of the Sensuous*, 48.
- ⁹ Blackman, *The Body: Key Concepts*, 2.
- ¹⁰ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 56.
- ¹¹ Schwenger, *The Tears of Things; Melancholy and Physical Objects*, 3.
- ¹² Harraway, *When Species Meet*, 5.
- ¹³ A fallen tree that acts as a microclimate, hosting new vegetation and habitat.
- ¹⁴ Molesworth, *Part Object, Part Sculpture*, 111. *Part Object Part Sculpture* was curated by Helen Molesworth, and on view from October 30, 2005 – February 26, 2006.
- ¹⁵ Molesworth, *Part Object, Part Sculpture*, 124.
- ¹⁶ Albers, *Interaction of Color*, 2.
- ¹⁷ Laing and Liu, *Up in Flames; The Ephemeral Art of Pasted-Paper Sculpture in Taiwan*, 7.
- ¹⁸ Krauss, *Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America*, 69.
- ¹⁹ <https://museum.okstate.edu/art/past-exhibitions/2017/kiki-smith-and-paper.html>.
- ²⁰ The depiction of absence has a wide and deep history in US contemporary art. As an early example, Robert Rauschenberg ignited a dialogue about past, and former states of being by using subtractive methods to make marks or create negative space, such as in his 1953 image, *Erased De Kooning Drawing*.
- ²¹ A reference to Christian Boltansky’s *No Mans Land*, an installation shown at the Park Avenue Armory in New York in 2013.
- ²² Stewart, *On Longing; Narratives of the miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 151.

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PLATES



Figure 1.

Erin Johnston
Cone 11
2019

Collagraph on five *Stonehenge* sheets
60 x 40 in
Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 2.

Erin Johnston

Untitled Duet from the *Quadrupeds* series

2022

Paper, charcoal, pastel, natural pigment

dimensions variable

Image courtesy of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum



Figure 3.

Erin Johnston

Untitled Duet from the *Quadrupeds* series

2022

Paper, charcoal, pastel, natural pigment

dimensions variable

Image courtesy of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum



Figure 4.

Erin Johnston
Study Skins
2021-2022

Paper, natural pigment
dimensions variable

Image courtesy of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum



Figure 5.

Student specimens at Universidad ICESI in Cali, Colombia
2015

Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 6.

Erin Johnston

Little Scoot (Study Skins detail) and Chicken Recliner (Study Skins detail)

2021

Paper, cochineal, marigold; Paper, avocado

3.5 x 8 x 3.5 in and 3.5 x 5 x 3.5 in

Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 7.

Erin Johnston

Floating Figure/Sewing Sketch (detail)

Muslin, silk organza, thread, etching ink, walnut

13 x 34 in

Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 8.

Erin Johnston

Seated Twins

2021

paper

48 x 46 x 6 in

Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 9.

Harima Midori
Never mind mind
2013

Paper, Xeroxed archival paper, archival tape, methyl cellulose paste, paper clay
Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 10.

Kiki Smith
Hard Soft Bodies
1992

Paper and papier-mâché

A (upper torso with head): 6 feet 7 in x 16 in x 8 in

B (full torso): 38 x 19 x 7 in

Image courtesy of the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art



Figure 11.

Erin Johnston

Untitled from the Quadrupeds Series (work in progress)

2022

Paper, natural pigment

8' x 4' x 4.5'

Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 12.

Images showing process of a Quadruped construction
Images courtesy of the artist



Figure 13.

Erin Johnston

While Seated (Eating Crackers I Recalled Apes Exist)

2020

Muslin, silk noil, etching ink, cochineal, marigold, walnut, thread

42 x 36 in

Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 14.

Rachel Whiteread

House

1993

193 Grove Road, London E3

Concrete

Photo by Sue Omerod; Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian.



Figure 15.

Rachel Whiteread
Untitled (torso)
1988
Pink Dental Plaster

Rachel Whiteread
Untitled (torso)
1988
Resin



Figure 16.

Do Ho Suh

Apartment A, 348 West 22nd Street

2011 - 2015

Polyester

Do Ho Suh, photo courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong, by
Pablo Mason



Fig. 17

Rubbing / Loving, STPI, Artist Studio 35, 41 Robertson Quay, Singapore, 238236
2017

Pastel on paper

29 1/8 x 24 3/4 x 6 1/2 in

Do Ho Suh Photo courtesy of the artist, STPI and Victoria Miro, London/Venice



Figure 18.

Erin Johnston

Study Skin 10/Vertebrae

2022

paper, pigment from nuts, flowers, skins, seeds and minerals

36 x 14 x 7 in

Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 19.

Erin Johnston

Study Skin 8/Carnation

2021

paper, pigment from skins, seeds, minerals, roots, soil

32 x 24 x 6 in

Image courtesy of the artist