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Collect Her
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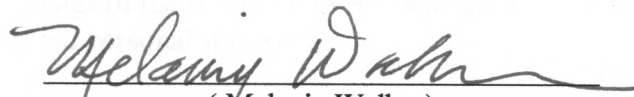
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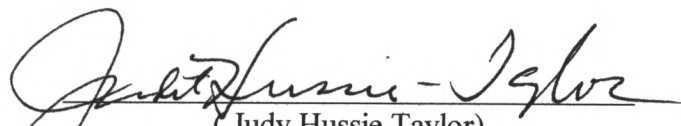
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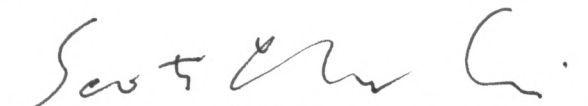


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This thesis entitled:
Collect Her
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the
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Collect Her

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Melanie Walker

Many writers, including Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust, structure memory out of the space and furnishings of the home. Drawers, beds and cupboards become secret hiding places for untold personal stories.....

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Many writers, including Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust, structure memory out of the space and furnishings of the home. Drawers, beds and cupboards become the secret hiding places for untold personal stories. For some, these stories and the "home" in which they reside offer up refuge, for others the physical and emotional dwelling place of their past is characterized by violence, competition, and insecurity. The notion of home has alternately figured as either a shelter or an inside from which there is no escape. The home, both physically and metaphorically, provides the space for emotional, psychological, and sexual dramas as well as the space for a respite from those dramas. I try to construct an architecture that evokes something in between these two poles: a place that is neither wholly nostalgic nor wholly disturbed.

The indeterminacy of the home and the objects, spaces, and memories associated with it are essential to these installations. A bed is never a only a bed. A bed is also, and simultaneously, a stage, a womb, and a frame for certain behaviors, moods, thoughts, and secrets. A wardrobes is at once a place to store clothes and a child's hiding place. China cabinets hold pieces of passed down familial history, plates that are the tiny pedestals for Christmas dinners, the objects of domestic ceremonies. These are objects that demonstrate the ways in which a home is like the space of the gallery and vice-versa. These are objects that engender stories with no clear beginnings, middles, and ends; that always mean more and less than we imagine. Objects and spaces garner this positive or negative surplus (and yes, I believe that negativity can act as an entity and not just a "lack") by being engaged with by the body; by being handled and lived with. My work is both about giving body to memory and engaging, bodily, with ideas. Proust accurately describes the way in which the body, rather than the eyes or mind, can come to know the world.

My body, too heavy to move, would try, according to the form of its tiredness, to restore the position of its members in order to induce from that the direction of the wall, the place of the furniture, in order to restore and give a name to the house in which it lay. Its memory, the memory of its ribs, knees, shoulders, offered it in succession several of the rooms in which it had slept, while around it the invisible walls, changing positions according to the form of the imagined room, would whirl in the darkness. And even before my thought, which hesitated at the threshold of times and forms, had identified the house by bringing together the details, it-my body-would recall for each the type of the bed, the position of the doors, how the windows caught the light, the existence of a corridor, along with the thought that I had when I would fall asleep, and that I would find again when I would awaken.¹

Consumption (whether the consumption of the packaged art object, identity, or food), obsession, and the cooperation between materials are all very important to my work. I use half dinner plates, charred silverware, hardened marshmallows, tangled wire, severed bottles, and marked porcelain in my work. Together these materials tell the stories of dysfunction, reconstruction and chance; stories that are at once sad, funny and bizarre. Plates that can no longer hold food offer up works of art for the spectator to consume, utensils for eating become the ominous tools of a medical laboratory, and bottles that once held something to quench a thirst are cut in half and filled with childhood playthings. These transformations trace the back and forth movement between childhood and womanhood; a path I feel I've worn thin by crossing with a constant and deliberate stride. They also linger in that weird space after childhood without having or wanting a clear definition of womanhood.

The "pedestals" for many of these objects are home furnishings. These familiar domestic fixtures which once stored china, clothes, or food are painted glossy white, characteristic of museum pedestals. These pieces make the connection between a nostalgic

¹ Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past. Trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff. New York: Random House, 1961, p 1:5.

desire for the old and the avant-garde desire for the new. These two poles are emblematic of most twentieth century engagements with history: either looking to the old as a time of comfort and security or looking to the future as a violent time of transformation. I also hope to suggest that the items once held by a china cabinet or wardrobe, things like plates and clothing, are similar to art objects in that they are both used to construct some notion of identity. Another object I use, the bed frame, is, similarly, transformed from the frame for private acts (sex and dreaming) into a wall that literally puts those things on display. The bed frame operates as a metaphor for the power of "framing" that the gallery has long held. The gallery and museum have long been places where the private and public strangely intermingle; a place where personal expression, which through the 20th century has largely been figured in terms of sexuality or "unconscious" desire (acts that take place within the frame of the bed), is offered up like a neatly packaged product for public consumption...a point I emphasize by placing dinner plates under each of the bed's legs. I want my work to evoke feeling rather than cold institutional critique but I think the relationship between artist, art object, and spectator and the forces of display, performance, voyeurism, and judgment that exist within this relationship are important to consider.

I never begin making art by articulating problems or analyzing issues. I am not motivated by the conceptual aspect of art, but rather the intuitive instinct that I get when actually engaging myself with the materials (most often materials that are readily found in the home). I am a compulsive studio artist, meaning that I engage forcefully with materials at hand in my studio. I am constantly making, unmaking , and learning from both the interactions that result in objects I keep and the interactions that result in objects I destroy. The repetitive process of assembly and disassembly helps me to be more comfortable with putting things on display. I only begin to formulate clearer ideas after my objects are made far more ambiguous.

I am also an obsessive collector. I am especially attracted to objects that define human

relationships, like beds, cribs, or silverware. I look for objects that are well worn; that either look like they've been put to hard use for years or lovingly cared for. I disassemble, reassemble, cut, burn, wrap, and color these objects until there seems to be some kind of narrative lurking just beneath the surface. I prefer to let these narratives remain, for the most part, concealed because an incomplete story is always somehow a little more frightening, funny, and hopeful. Much of my process is about developing a strong physical relationship with these objects; I spend considerable time touching and moving these objects. These are, however, never comfortable interactions...there is always something of the uncanny in the assemblage of objects I use. The uncanny for Freud, "derives its terror not from something externally alien or unknown but--on the contrary--from something strangely familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it."² This is an apt description of what these pieces are meant to evoke.

Marie Howe, in her poem *What the Angels Left*, beautifully describes the hold certain objects can have on someone. So as not to risk losing any of the meaning of the poem I will quote Howe at length.

*At first, the scissors seemed perfectly harmless.
They lay on the kitchen table in the blue light.*

*Then I began to notice them all over the house,
at night in the pantry, or filling up bowls in the cellar*

*where there should have been apples. They appeared under rugs,
lumpy places where one would usually settle before the fire,*

² Sigmund Freud. "The 'Uncanny.'" In Sigmund Freud: Collected Papers (Vol. 4). Trans. Joan Riviere. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1959. 368-407.

*or suddenly shining in the sink at the bottom of soupy water.
Once, I found a pair in the garden, stuck in turned dirt*

*among the new bulbs, and one night, under my pillow,
I felt something like a cool long tooth and pulled them out*

*to lie next to me in the dark. Soon after that I began
to collect them, filling boxes, old shopping bags,*

*every suitcase I owned. I grew slightly uncomfortable
when company came. What if someone noticed them*

*when looking for forks or replacing dried dishes? I longed
to throw them out, but how could I get rid of something*

*that felt oddly like grace? It occurred to me finally
that I was meant to use them, and I resisted a growing compulsion*

*to cut my hair, although, in moments of great distraction,
I thought it was my eyes they wanted, or my soft belly*

*-exhausted, in winter, I laid them out on the lawn.
The snow fell quite as usual, without any apparent hesitation*

*or discomfort. In spring, as I expected, they were gone.
In their place, a slight metallic smell, and the dear muddy earth.³*

My piece *Collect Her*, perhaps more so than any other piece, exemplifies my process and the call of certain objects that Howe describes. *Collect Her* consists of an old china cabinet painted “gallery white” and numerous sliced glass-ware vessels that hold strange specimens of my dream-world. The fragmentation of the bottles, the dismemberment of figures, and the inclusion of fluids and sexually charged mechanical forms work to create the elements of the museological display case, medicine cabinet, and china cabinet. The “collector”/“collect her” word play points to my own obsessive desire to gather as well as the museological desire to

³ Marie Howe. “What the Angels Left,” *The Good Thief*, Persea Books, 1999. 5-6.

collect and order things. Though it seems like these bottled sexual objects, that allude, variously, to feminine, masculine, biological, and mechanical forces, are compartmentalized and “safe”, they also, because of the fractures in the bottles, the fluids that threaten to spill forth, and the human-like limbs that seem to want to escape, seem to verge on violence and frenzy.

This ambiguity between safety and violence is something I’ve alluded to throughout this short paper. From the home as a place of security or the source of emotional insecurity to the bed as a frame for private acts or the public display of those acts, the back and forth perception of safety and violence is key to my work. My sense of this ambiguity has been greatly informed by artist Annette Messenger. In Messenger’s *The Boarders at Rest* (1971-72) rows and rows of dead birds, cloaked in tiny knitted sweaters, lie in a glass display case. The birds are both real dead birds and stuffed and stitched feathers made to look like birds. Messenger, herself, knits each bird its own brightly colored piece of apparel. The contrast here between gently nurturing and caring for the birds and their tiny dead bodies is both beautiful and frightening. As one critic asks, “is the artist mothering these sparrows because of her insatiable maternal instincts or are her motives darker and more enigmatic?” A boarder is someone who must pay for their care. Just as these birds have paid for the attention given them with their lives, so to have many of us paid for our childhoods with emotional damage. Rarely does anyone receive love and care at no expense and in a way, we are all boarders.



Annette Messenger, *The Boarders at Rest* (*Le Repos des pensionnaires*), 1971-72, detail

Much of Virginia Woolf's literary work is concerned with the dissolution of subject and object; people and the furnishings that define their physical and emotional movement dissolve into one another.

*All the colors in the room have over flown their banks. The precise brushstroke was swollen and lopsided; cupboards and chairs melted their brown masses into one huge obscurity. The height from floor to ceiling was hung with vast curtains of shaking darkness. The looking glass was pale as the mouth of a cave shadowed by hanging creepers.*⁴

Here Woolf describes a darkness that envelops the room to the point where the forms of the furniture melt "into one huge obscurity." This palpable darkness even overtakes the mirror, turning a reflection of oneself into the absent hole of a cave. Woolf, by giving substance to the darkness and taking substance away from the home, its furnishings, and its occupant, confuses presence and absence, subject and object, and reality and dreaming.

I too attempt to confuse these binary distinctions. The home is a place of security and insecurity, of longing and satisfaction, of birth and death, of privacy and display, and of so much more. Homes, like memories, decay and whither unless tended to, unless "kept up," and

⁴ Virginia Woolf. *The Waves*. Harcourt, Brace: New York, 1931. 157-158.

this work is about a kind of up-keep that is neither preoccupied with cleanliness nor order. It is instead about putting those things that seem to be easy to define and brightly lit into the shadows of a corner and about moving those things indistinguishable from the darkness a little closer to the light.

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