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...A Search for Comfort/Nothing is Beautiful and True, Still

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... A Search for Comfort

Nothing is Beautiful and True, Still

By

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B.F.A University of Texas at Tyler, 2010

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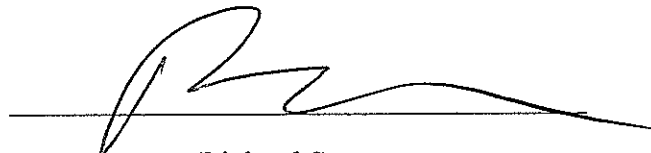
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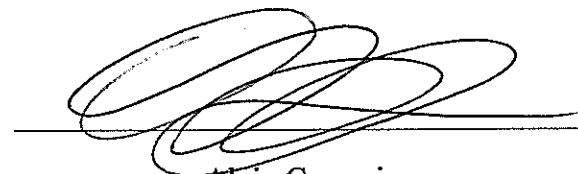
*This thesis entitled:
... A Search for Comfort
Nothing is Beautiful and True, Still
written by Abby Bennett
has been approved for the Department of Art and Art History*



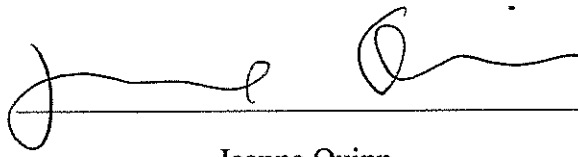
Richard Saxton



Yumi Roth



Alvin Gregorio



Jeanne Quinn

*Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.*

The Domestic / Intimacy and Identity / Space and Place

What objects do you cherish? Where and in what do you find comfort? What stories do you tell yourself to help begin to understand your life? How are those stories anchored and reflected in the things you surround yourself with – furniture, photos, family memorabilia, that particular wall sconce? And at some level, doesn't this constellation of objects and the narratives they are bound up with end up influencing your most intimate understanding; your ideals and values down to what "home" is and means? Don't the things in our lives and the stories we associate with them go a long way in establishing who we believe ourselves to be?

When I was young my family established itself in the outskirts of Indianapolis, Indiana. In 1988, my grandfather began clearing the family land to design and build houses. What started as small developments quickly grew into several suburban neighborhoods. Many years of my childhood was spent around these building sites, watching and learning. I observed the entire process of creation, from the initial design to the final nail. It was through watching these building sites that my interest in the process of mechanical creation began. And it was here that I first started to ask myself, what a house is and what makes a house a home, is it the wood, nails and bolts or something else? These same kinds of questions are still being raised and considered in my work.

We all have inherent expectations, needs and desires. The home is a place where many of these come to fruition as expression in the constellation of objects a home contains. As an object maker, my perspective is that this space isn't about emptiness but rather its capacity; what one's home is capable of holding and containing, hiding and displaying, and the way these modes of physical expression reflect people and relationship. Domestic spaces – and all the most intimate

personal spaces – often project both what we want people to perceive and what we perceive about ourselves. Our homes hold the contents of our life, however simple or complicated.

The everyday objects in domestic space provide crucial information about who we are. They show our responses and interactions socially, economically and culturally. Objects can speak to a range of different personal and social meanings: a person's values, worth, wealth, sentiment, nostalgia, compulsions, habits. I admittedly have allowed objects to consume my space because I feel they have something to offer me, or visa versa; be it sentiment, practicality, or style.

Over time, I have tried to create art objects that speak to the ways we form these kinds of personal connections and associations either with, or through objects. At times this means creating a polarizing spectacle of my own personal mementos. In other cases I have highlighted the stark objectivity, the “thingness,” if you will, of the elements of a specific work. But consistent across all my work I have tried to create an effect for the viewer that requires them to reflect on their own relationship to the objects and elements on display or the associations they evoke.

However, before launching into a discussion about my own body of work and the ways I have attempted to explore and express these intimate themes, it is important to ground my process and my work in a wider context of artists who have utilized similar gestures of construction and development to touch on similar topics.



Zittel, Andrea. *A-Z Comfort Units*, 1994

In 1994, Andrea Zittel explored the domestic by combining ideas of order, comfort and aesthetics to create her *A-Z Comfort Units*. The units were compact, streamlined, and filled with only the necessities. These modular homes featured a central bed surrounded by four ancillary units on castors. Each unit served a particular purpose: allowing the user to perform all of the day's tasks without ever leaving the security and comfort of bed. In addition to providing strong metaphorical objects, Zittel created these works to satisfy her personal needs and desire for a comfortable yet highly functional dwelling space so that she would never have to leave her bed.ⁱ In a conversation titled: 'Home is Where the Art is' with Benjamin Weil for *Art Monthly*, Zittel responded: "*Also you point out that I initially saw A to Z as a service. Later, I realized that ultimately I was only able to design to serve my own needs. Because I could not truly design for anyone else, I had to come to terms with the idea that once a product departed from my own possession, it would need to be claimed by its new owner.... What we forget is that there are at least two author of every object – one is the designer, the other is the owner (or user).*"ⁱⁱ

Intimacy and Identity

Similarly, I also work to both serve the viewer and as a way of trying to better understand my own needs. It's through personal experiences, relationships, creativity and the transformation of materials that the work defies classification, creates experience and prompts viewers to stop and consider their relationships with objects. Leaving them to ponder what it is (or isn't), noticing the everyday objects they often ignore, questioning their belongings and seeing objects as a reflection of themselves.

I am curious about the (sometimes) intimate relationships we create with objects, possessions and things and the way in which these inanimate objects make their way into our lives. My works are physical objects driven both conceptually and formally by the making process; they reference other objects, often domestic, and make dialogue with (and about) the things we have and use.



Bennett, Abby. *Nothing is Beautiful and True*, 2010

Through the piece, *Nothing is Beautiful and True*, I began exploring the tension between the emotional associations I tend to form with my own possessions and the underlying (and in many ways more important) physicality and objectivity. The piece is a made-to-measure display case filled with many personal effects given to me from different family members for one reason or another. Some are mere trinkets and some are intense reminders of painful and tender times in my life. As the keeper of these objects they are all sentimental and nostalgic, burdens and comforts. They hold and represent the memories of both their original owner/user, and mine. But to anyone else these objects are just simply, things.

In some ways, the making of this piece seemed entirely selfish, so personal and loaded that I was unsure if it would communicate what I wanted for the viewer. However, I pursued the piece because I was interested in exploring the relationship between the objects as merely objects and the loaded narrative I associate with them. I felt that at a root level, the objects had absolutely nothing to do with the stories or history I had attached to them and I wanted to present the viewer and myself with the powerful feeling of this disjunction.

When showing the work, I found that for the viewer there is an aesthetic appeal to the object itself. That is, people ended up being called toward certain objects in the display regardless of whether or not they had formed a personal attachment to the actual objects. Anyone who was the slightest bit curious, ended up looking closer trying to figure out what the objects were and why they were there. But the more they searched through the piece, they realized the things presented were just objects that someone finds important but that they themselves have no attachment to. Because the viewer lacks any personal connection to the piece, they begin to create some sort of narrative between the objects. Connecting them in ways that can foster their own stories.

For myself, observing the viewer as they go through this process only solidifies that the objects are simply, things. They have their own lives as objects, for instance a baby hat (one of the objects on display in the piece) is a baby hat, regardless of my personal connection to it. This only further perpetuates my curiosity about the way I fill my life with objects and material things and how through the act of letting people objectify my personal belongings, I'm able to disconnect from them, even if it's only momentary.

As a viewer, it can be hard to connect with, not unlike the experience of someone opening a scrapbook full of vacation photos that you have no connection to or interest in. Yet as a maker and keeper of these objects, what I am most interested in is being able to experience the objectification of these objects through other people as a way for myself to disconnect or let go of them. I wanted the reassurance that these are indeed, just things. A reminder that these objects don't make anybody know anyone they don't already know.

Space and Place



Bennett, Abby. *Sometimes what it is, is what it isn't*, 2012

Unlike the objects that have come directly from my life, *Sometimes what it is, is what it isn't* is extremely simplified. This piece is made from three simple and basic materials: concrete, steel and fluorescent lights. The fragile fluorescent lights have been permanently imbedded into the concrete and is shown in an empty artist's studio space, which is ironically also made from steel, concrete and fluorescent lights. There is a distinct relationship created through the combination of light and concrete. These materials are held in permanence and can no longer exist without the other. Each element is made co-dependent; the lights rely on the concrete for stability and support, while in return offering a new value to the concrete.

This object is both functional and dysfunctional; it provides light in a space but at the cost of being heavy, cumbersome and taking up space. Nearly every day I work in a studio made of white walls, concrete, steel and fluorescent lights. After two years of working day in and day out, I question if this place has become so familiar that these materials and my relationship to them has become blindly comfortable. The room is space for creation and experimentation, which is a personal process but the objects are an extension and result of that very room. Although the room is not a domestic space, for me, it is the alternative space to my own home.

Desire and Multiplicity

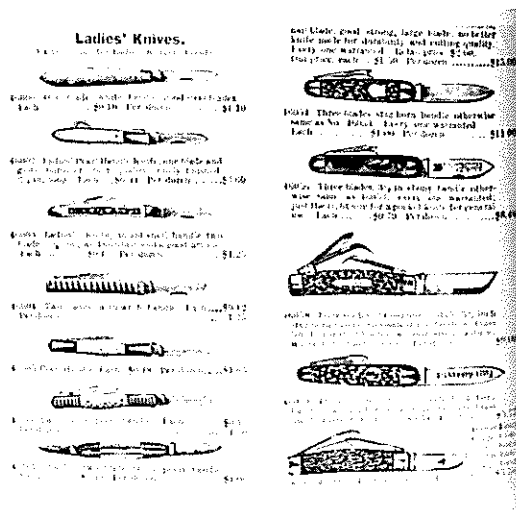
"The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity."

Dorothy Parker

Desire can be an overwhelming and accelerating force behind the creation of objects. It can foster obsession, need and want, which in turn can lead to acquisition and possession. It is commonly assumed that the reason we buy things is out of need. We have natural needs, which

ensure our survival, such as food, shelter and clothing.ⁱⁱⁱ These lead to other needs, such as transportation and electricity. Perhaps the difference between needs, wants, and desires can be seen in the way in which we acquire things.

“In the 1895 catalogue, the American mail order company Montgomery Ward & Co. offered 131 sorts of pocket knife. The knives were grouped into four categories, ‘ladies’, ‘men’s’, boy’s’, and ‘men’s heavy pocket and hunting’. Although there were differences between categories, the variations within each category were relatively slight.



From Montgomery Ward & Co. catalogue, no.57, 1895, pp. 440-441

Of the 131 pocket knives that were offered for sale by Montgomery Ward & Co. in 1895, 17 were described as ladies’ knives. Although it is unlikely that there was any significant difference in the mode of cutting practiced by American men and women, the ladies’ knives were all smaller and had pearl or white handles; the men’s knives were larger, and many of them had horn handles.”^{iv}

The production and creation of new things have accelerated exponentially with time. The constant design and production of new things creating varieties, options and choices have

transitioned needs to wants and have quickly led to an abundance of goods. And not unlike the expansion of designed pocket knives is the history of another commodity, soap.

“Soap products were not manufactured for specific classes of consumers until W.H. Lever began to market his new soap, Sunlight, by giving it a brand image with specific working class appeal. Soap for laundering clothes and for household cleaning was manufactured in Britain on a scale that grew steadily throughout the nineteenth century. As one of the main soap manufactures explained at the time: ‘...there is little or no difference in the quality between different makes of Bar Soap- there is a Thomas’s Primrose, a Knight’s Primrose, a Cook’s Primrose- all the same soap.’”^v

The progression and commodification of soap was even further expanded by a New York-based advertising agency, Benton & Bowles. This advertising agency had one primary goal, which was to promote their clients’ Proctor & Gamble. The result was the invention of radio soap opera. This means of advertisement later expanded to include additional manufactures such as Dial Corporation, Colgate-Palmolive and Lever Brothers, both as sponsors and producers.^{vi} The American press coined the term “soap opera” in the 1930s to denote the extraordinarily popular genre of serialized domestic radio dramas. The "soap" in soap opera alluded to their sponsorship by manufacturers of household cleaning products; while "opera" suggested an ironic incongruity between the domestic narrative concerns of the daytime serial and the most elevated of dramatic forms.^{vii}

Seen through the histories of both pocket knives and soap, is the expansion in variety, driven from desire, turning needs into wants and in turn allowing objects to begin to define personal identity. I’m interested in not only this variety of the same object (or product) but also the way in which these things are staged for consumer acquisition.

I believe soap, in particular, defines a specific feminine link to the home. Manufacturers created soap operas as a way to sell soap to women. This was done by engaging their fantasy lives (in their own homes) and then intermittently reminding them to clean their home, thus engaging the guilt of their own desires. These desires not only perpetuate the creation of a multiplicity of the same products, but it also fosters their desire for sexuality and domestication but simultaneously reveal that their desires are intertwined with the obligations and safety of home. I often wonder (and embrace) the compulsion for manufactures to be so prolific with designs for their products. By my own admission and experience, there is a power associated with variety and choice that enables me to feel more secure in my own individuality.



Bennett, Abby. *Nothing is Beautiful and True, Still*, 2012



Nothing is Beautiful and True, Still, is comprised of sixty cast soap houses held on acrylic shelves and backed with a single strip of floral wallpaper. Through the process of casting soap I

am able to create unity, variety and multiplicity. Each soap is unique in color and fragrance but their forms are nearly identical. This is not only a representation of my personal desire to find individuality but also my interest in the variety created through design.

By casting soap in the form of a house a material metaphor is created. It combines the signifier of home with the raw material that cleanses the naked body, these represent my own experience of all homes, families and people (represented through form) who have hidden secrets and desires (represented through material). The soaps are arranged in nearly floor to ceiling rows. This arrangement is a reflection of my memories growing up around developing suburbs and my memories of watching rural land be plowed and leveled for new developments. The once scenic view seen while driving over a hill is now overwhelmingly and endlessly cluttered with nearly identical houses and nicely paved streets. The viewer can sense this experience through these high towering rows.

Materialism and Formalism / *Art and Design*

“When you see an object, you make so many assumptions about that object, in seconds. What it does, how well it’s going to do it, how heavy it is, how much you think it should cost. The object testifies to the people that conceived it, thought about it, developed it, and manufactured it. Ranging from issues of form to material, to its architecture, to how it connects to you, to how you touch it, how you hold it. Every object intentional or not speaks to who put it there.” viii

Jonathan Ive, Senior Vice President of Industrial Design at Apple, Inc.

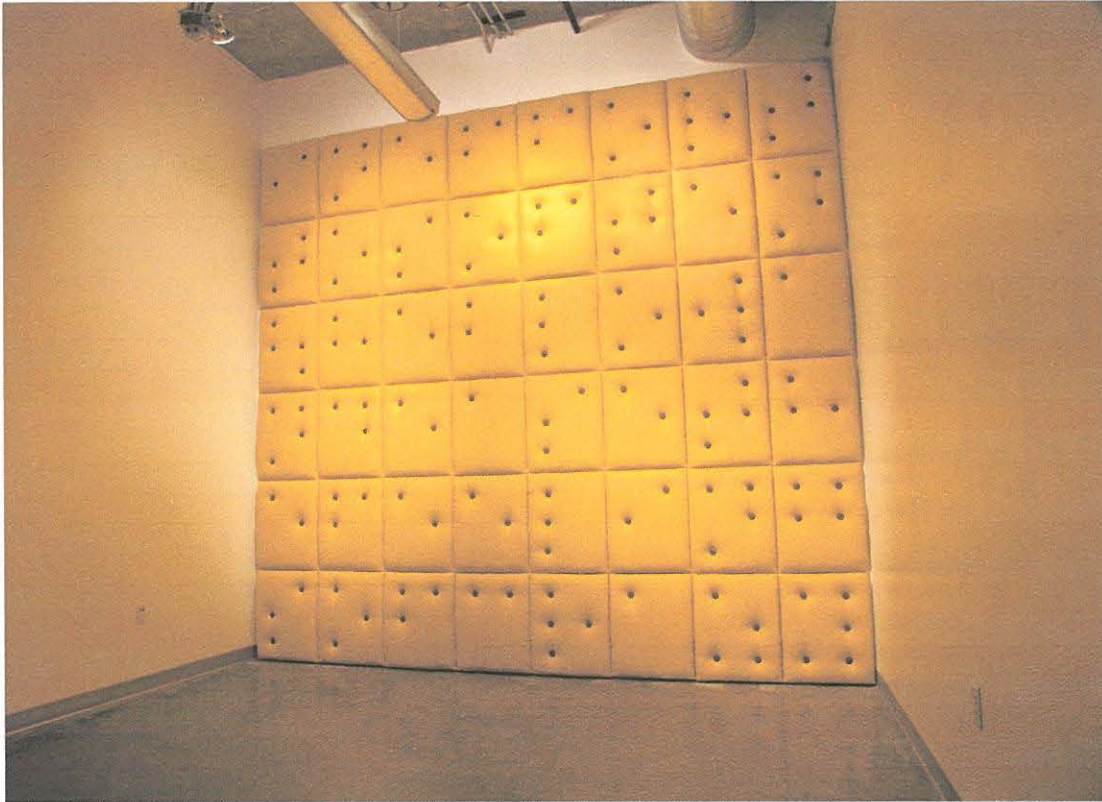
The form of an object can be extremely telling to the ideas of who made it. Each element and detail can give multiple aesthetic/visual and functional bits of information. The history of formalism is rooted by the idea that the value and information of the work is purely contained within its form and the way in which that form is made and what it's made from and heavily relies on three-dimensional elements, like color, line, shape and texture as opposed to context or concepts.

In my art practice I consistently explore new materials and methods of working, which informs my process and allows me to develop specific relationships, languages and metaphors between the materials and the content of the work. My work often creates a variety of narratives- life and death, commitment and burden, time, fragility, choice, independence and stability and develops through the formal aspects of each piece, via textures, surface, form, visual weight or lightness.

The curiosities within the materials themselves can be sparked by various sources that range from home decorating trends, do-it-yourself/craft culture and industrially designed objects. Through working with and transforming the materials of the objects they supersede their original meaning, making them art objects. And although my own work is not always without ornamentation, my aesthetic often centers on simplicity and a careful process of selection of each component, in an effort to minimize distraction and allow clarity of thought. It is these concepts in conjunction with design elements that I pursue my work.

I choose to work within the art world because, unlike design, the work provides the viewer with a dialogue, while at the same time provoking more questions. I work specifically with objects because they can serve as tangible reminders of the past or our ambitions for the future. I believe what carries objects beyond their design and intent is its user. We use these

objects and rely on them, how they define us and we define them.



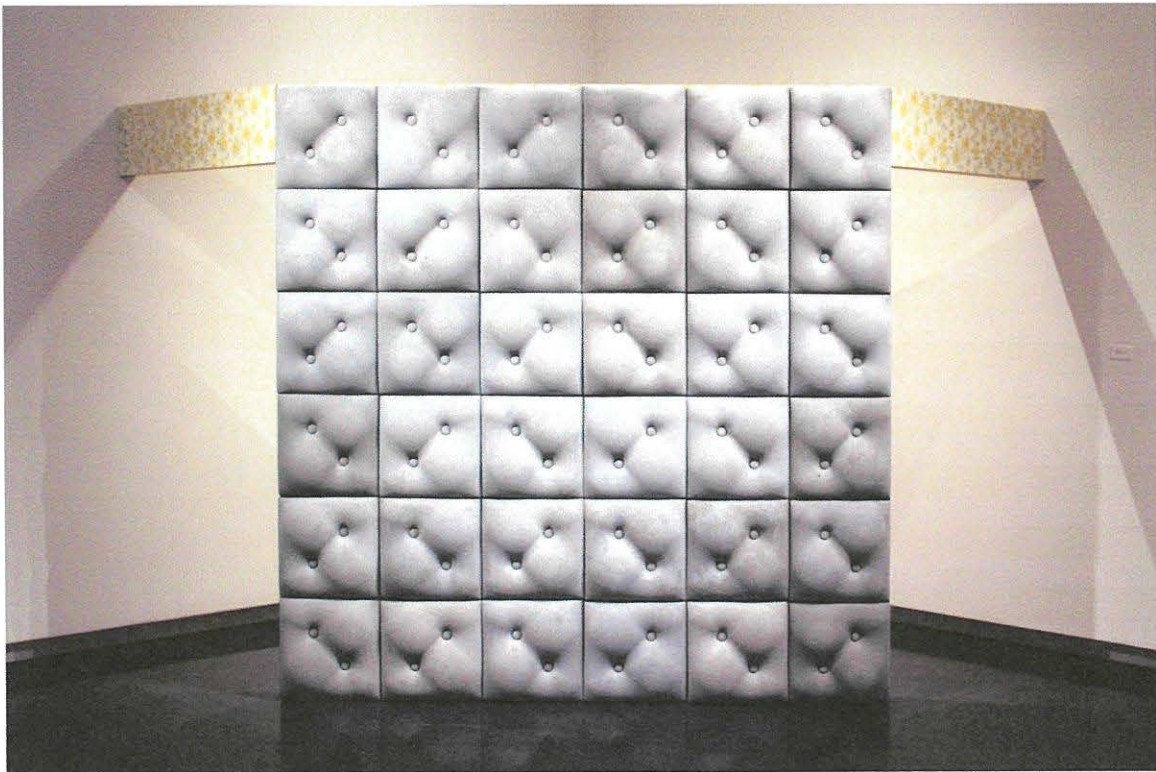
Bennett, Abby. *In Effort...*, 2011

In Effort... is a large-scale work consisting of forty-eight individually upholstered panels. Each panel contains a specific arrangement of upholstery buttons, which are used to create a single braille letter creating language through form. In its entirety the piece reads: “In effort to soften the blow and ease the feelings of crazy.” This piece was a response to working and being in a new environment while at the same time searching for comfort and attempting to ease the mental stress and discomfort that came during that part of my life.

There is both irony and frustration in this piece in that they are plush and evoke the kind of comfort, security, forgiveness of an intimate space, yet the viewer is denied full access to that very comfort. Additionally, the braille is unreadable by touch due to the height and scale. I’m interested in the impracticality of communicating with braille through this form and material.

I've become increasingly interested in refining these types of simple gestures and their mechanics and I'm constantly exploring ways to clearly articulate these themes and ideas. Something I've discovered, through this piece and body of work, is that I don't have all the answers. No work I've created has answered all of these specific questions but the process of making them has allowed me to refine and hone the gestures I'm creating.

... A Search for Comfort



Bennett, Abby. ... *A Search for Comfort*, 2012

It is through combining ideas of the domestic (things associated with and about the home), making formal decisions, drawing metaphor through materials, and autobiographical experiences that ... *A Search for Comfort* was created. The collaboration of form and material intersected with art, architecture and design creates the opportunity for a shift in expectation and

reality. This is done in hopes of offering a simple response to the complexity of my own life and highlighting the role art can play in making the world more familiar and human.

Transforming the familiar to unfamiliar, leaving materials and forms suspended in ambiguity, is often a cornerstone of my work. Although clarity and efficiency have become expected in our current fast-paced, instant-information driven culture, the importance of ambiguity shouldn't be underestimated, as it has the potential to compel creativity in a way that nothing else does. In my own practice ambiguity is the metaphorical 'rabbit hole' opening the door for the viewer to fall into a whirlwind of creation where the imagination begins to work. It is important to me that the materials used in my work go through the process of transformation until they have transcended their normalcy or predictability. The resulting work compels the viewer, through the familiar turned unfamiliar, to embrace their own ingenuity, exploring all possible interpretations and to arrive at some kind of basic understanding. This curiosity driven search can be cathartic, philosophical and magical. Ambiguity spans the space between left and right, where "maybe" and "sort of" are often the most precise answers. Within that ephemeral region of question and curiosity, lives the courage to not know something for certain.

It is undeniable that I create and carry associations with everything I interact with. These may manifest quickly or take years to develop. This is certainly applicable to materials. I'm interested in the transition of raw material from a chaotic, undetermined state to a determined, organized state. I choose to do this through the process (both conceptually and physically) of sculpture. I believe the in the way, language and semantics can form thoughts and determine how we understand one another. I also believe, the act of making, forming and combining of materials can create a language. This is first done through understanding each individual material and the association that come with it. It is only once these materials are understood that I can

begin to experiment, combining them and reassessing their relationships to one another and the potential metaphors they can create. I'm interested in using these combinations as poles, cornerstones or boundaries, which can then begin to guide and parallel thought.

As the family business flourished and more homes were built, and although each house was somewhat unique, there was an equal need to sell each development. Part of this process, involved staging each home; a process where the goal is to make a home appealing by providing some amount of comfort and welcome, but leaving enough room for a potential home owner to imagine themselves there. My family owned several pieces of 'staging' furniture that would move from house to house, helping to sell people on their own dreams and imaginations of what their home could be. I remember as child not being allowed to interact with this furniture although it was completely functional. I saw the same furniture come and go between several houses. From time to time, when that style of furniture lost its general appeal, we would replace it with a more trendy/up-to-date version. It's this situation of experiencing and creating a façade through ambiguity that has never left me. Throughout my life, I've wondered and questioned the house and the home, as an object and structure both inside and out, its contents as symbols and representations and the outside as a boundary or façade. ... *A Search for Comfort* is made from 36, somewhat unique, concrete panels, which have been assembled to create an 8' x 8' façade.

My interest in working with concrete stems from my personal understanding of it being something we rely on for stability and support and its use as a primary medium for our homes (something we walk on, build our houses on, etc.). By using concrete in the form of soft and approachable upholstery I'm able to, through their associations to materials, draw the viewer in. This sets the stage for comfort yet there is no allowance for the natural progression of that comfort and they are not being comforted at all. Although I've never owned my own home, I've

long been searching for my domestic space to provide some amount of comfort both physically and mentally. This wall is perhaps a small portion and suggestion of a larger place.

Comfort is luxury without waste, prides itself in modesty and comes as a fair reward for labor. If comfort demands some degree of immaterial space, “home” determines its character. We can manifest these ideas out of materials and into space, creating the domestic. It is through a variety of mediums, crafts and styles that I search to find, define and redefine the domestic, for myself. The use of making art objects to answer and solve questions within my own life is for me a way to distill and process my surroundings. Helping me to understand where I am, how I’ve arrived there and the relationships that I am a part of.

ⁱ Zittel, Andrea, Paola Morsiani, and Trevor Smith. *Andrea Zittel: Critical Space*. Munich: Prestel, 2005. Print.

ⁱⁱ Benjamin Weil, 'Home is Where the Art is', *Art Monthly*, no. 181 (London, February 1994) 20-2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Boradkar, Prasad. *Designing Things: A Critical Introduction to the Culture of Objects*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2010. Print.

^{iv} Forty, Adrian. *Objects of Desire*. New York: Pantheon, 1986. Print.

^v Forty, Adrian. *Objects of Desire*. New York: Pantheon, 1986. Print.

^{vi} Meyers, Cynthia. "From Radio Adman to Radio Reformer: Senator William Benton's Career in Broadcasting, 1930-1960." *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 16.1 (2009): 17-29. Print.

^{vii} "The Museum of Broadcast Communications." *The Museum of Broadcast Communications*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=soapopera>>.

^{viii} "Objectified: A Documentary Film by Gary Hustwit." *Objectified: A Documentary Film by Gary Hustwit*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.objectifiedfilm.com/>>.

