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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

The Wet Chaparral

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Audrey Hope

Committee in charge:

Professor Anya Gallaccio, Chair
Professor Amy Adler
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2017

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2017

DEDICATION

To BB Tovi and Herr Camingi.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Wet Chaparral

by

Audrey Hope

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2017

Professor Anya Gallaccio, Chair

The Wet Chaparral: Poetry at Home (Out There) is an MFA thesis exhibition of new sculptures by Audrey Hope. The thesis paper describes the exhibition, discusses the artist's personal and artistic motivations, and analyzes writings relevant to the work.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Wet Chaparral is an installation of sculptures, some incorporating photographs, surrounded by a bowl of dyed bed sheets, which are strung from the gallery's ceiling with hand-wound rope. This paper is an effort to work out a way of talking about these forms. By way of personal recollections, laying out theoretical stakes, a discussion of garden and domestic architecture, and a description of the installation and its elements, I intend to locate the new artworks within my broader practice and amongst the works and thoughts of my predecessors and contemporaries.

Specifically, after a time of personal storytelling that ties together some of the interests behind *The Wet Chaparral*, I will lay out the relationships between my recent shows and this one, the reasons that I choose to work between sculpture and photography, and the connections that I see between my practice and the works of other artists like Phyllida Barlow and Carol Jackson. Also, I will explore the influence that so-called "Outsider" artists like Judith Scott and Leonard Knight have had on my practice, the political stakes of my interests in Outsider art and its relationship to my work as a teacher. I will also situate my art practice in the cultural analysis of contemporary aesthetic theory, paying particular attention to my long standing interest in grottoes as sites for imagination and a collapse of manmade and natural formations. While this paper is a space to look outward, my thesis show is a home for memories and feelings. *The Wet Chaparral* aims to incite a personal and global chain reaction of associations for the viewer. My hope is that

she will experience moments of recognition and discomfort in the exhibition space as she navigates the hanging panels of fabric, patterns, the colors and textures that threaten to embrace her and then retreat into their own ruminations.

1.1 To Begin: Recollections

When I was maybe seven, my folks rented a condo in Santa Cruz from another family for whom my mother did daycare. My father ran a wholesale rhododendron nursery on a hillside in Scotts Valley. As a side business, he brokered palm trees from Hawaii through a showroom in San Francisco. The palm tree people suddenly lost their space in SF in the middle of winter, and needed somewhere to house the 25-foot display palms. My dad proposed our place, as the living room had two story clearance. He loaded in about thirty trees in 50 gallon pots into our small home. My memories from this time are of crawling through the trees in order to get to the kitchen. I understood the magical transformation that trees could make when they were brought inside. My dad is a little eccentric. He has some wild ideas about how people can and should live. Living with palm trees made anything possible. The tree trunks were a natural obstruction to our regular ways of moving through the house. For the person walking beneath them, their fronds created an indoor canopy. Looking over them from the second floor balcony, they were a green spikey carpet.

I recently asked my dad how long the palms were in the house, imagining that we had lived with the trees for a weekend or so. My dad remembered the time of the plants as having been closer to a month. I took from this experience an unusual flexibility about what belongs in domestic space; trees, bugs, and dirt are fair game for the indoor world. I saw that by mixing up that inside/outside binary, one could engender a new way of seeing a familiar space. I think about this story in relationship to my interest in installation because it revealed that filling a space with stuff, right up to the ceiling, could shift ones relationship to that space into one of greater consciousness and wonder.

When we got kicked out of that condo about a year later, we moved into the

woods onto a piece of family property in the hills outside of town. There was a campsite out there that my father had built and lived in during the summers when he was a kid. It was a flat clearing on a hillside in a circle of redwood trees. My great grandfather had planted those trees. There was a water spigot connected to a well and a stone half dome for a fireplace. That summer, we took what was pitched to me and my brother as a “long-term camping trip.” We slept outside, looking up at the trees in those woods behind my grandparents’ converted chicken coop home.

Living completely out of doors in this way was another formative moment in my thinking about the distinctions between indoor and outdoor worlds. There we were, lying down in the middle of the trees. Those trees, that clearing, they still grow on the property. The life of that land dwarfs our momentary occupation. The campsite is a container for my memories of that time, and for the people who spent their summer there. We gathered, huddled for a moment, and then traveled on.

I often think of my exhibitions in relation to this experience. My artworks are my family members in our sleeping bags, and the landscape a gallery. A show is a collection of works on a journey. I gather up the objects, they may have been shown in another space in another form, but here I place them in relation to the interior architecture and to that specific moment in my practice. In the sacred space of the trees or the holy white walled gallery, my artworks complain and tell stories. Once the show closes, we pack up, clean up, and hike on to be transformed in another site.

Abject street-level homelessness was very common in Santa Cruz, and my father once pointed out that there are many types of houselessness, saying, “Just because you are homeless, doesn’t mean you don’t have any friends.” Our community of friends and family in Santa Cruz propped us up. We had the luxury to make odd housing decisions, knowing that they wouldn’t be permanent. Our outside time was about the absolute necessity of connection with other people. This is part of the reason I used a Jane Stembridge poem as the starting point for my thesis exhibition. “Summer Children” ends its relations of “I”s and “you”s with

a proposed exchange, “I lift up the wire while you go under, and you lift up the wire for me” (21). In my work I rely on the commitment of an audience to our exchange. I want them to cross the traditional boundaries of art with me, to walk with me a while into a perplexing fort of memories.

One evening, while I was walking down a dark country road in the Mekong Delta, I looked over at a small house because I heard singing coming from it. There were no visible doors to the house. The structure was lit from inside, and I could see all the way through to the dark forest behind. A woman holding a microphone rested in a hammock that was strung across my view to the back of the house. She was singing karaoke alone. The words that I recognized were “animal” and “tree,” I think. Whether or not I heard her right, I responded to this moment for the apparent differences in our desires for privacy, and most especially for the ways that the borders of her home were established. I perceived a certain fluidity in her relationship to the outdoors; she was both visible to her neighbors, and in a fantasy space that described nature. If I could present that moment of spying on her as my thesis, I would. I want to create something akin to my experience on that road for my viewers. I want my work to be a space to explore the breakdown of the divisions between inside and outside. I hope that the viewer will come away feeling as though she has encountered a very personal world, one in which a woman lounges alone singing karaoke about the landscape outside.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Stakes

I am intrigued by a talk that Foucault gave in 1967 to a group of architects in which he attempts to describe certain cultural spaces as “heterotopic.” Heterotopias as Foucault defines them are spaces where transformation takes place, “where a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites...are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (3). A heterotopia embodies otherness as a tool for transformation. This otherness is something that I look to engender in my art. Foucault describes numerous examples and specific traits of heterotopias. For my work, I find his brief and parenthetical connection between the idea of rug and garden useful. “(the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space)” (6). The rug is a site for decoration and exploration. In a home, the portable rug intertwines thread to depict an idealized nature in a picture plane to be walked upon.

In his chapter “the dialectics of inside and outside” in *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard analyzes a Rilke poem with a description that could also be used to describe what I take from the story of my family’s palm tree filled living room. He writes, “The exaggerated nature of the image that seeks to upset the relationship of contained to container makes us shrink in the presence of what can appear to be a mental derangement of images...imagination localizes suffering and creates and recreates imagined anatomies.” (225) The palm trees in the house created a dramatic shift in scale that I reimagine in my work as an artist. I see the furniture,

our couch, chairs, chandelier, all human-sized, dwarfed by the palms. Additionally, the palms are absurd, larger than any houseplant, bizarre in a domestic space that can barely contain them. The palms are a key memory of mine from my childhood home, and in the cosmos of home that Bachelard reflects on in his book, the imagined anatomy of home, the palms planted on our carpet leads to a few of Bachelard's questions, "Inside and outside are not abandoned to their geometrical opposition. From what overflow of a ramified interior does the substance of being run, does the outside call? Isn't the exterior an old intimacy lost in the shadow of memory" (230)? Bachelard's "mental derangement of images" describes what I hope happens in my photographs. A home, in Bachelard's universe, is both a personal space and a human one, with wide ranging implications.

The Poetics of Space also gives voice to my concerns about photography. Bachelard uses the term "images" in a broader sense, but in my own work images are in the mind, in spaces, and can be conjured up by photographs.

Great images have both a history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly. Indeed, every great image has an unfathomable oneric depth to which the personal past adds a special color. Consequently it is not until late in life that we really revere an image, when we discover that its roots plunge well beyond the history that is fixed in our memories. ...But we must lose our earthly Paradise in order to actually live in it, to experience it in the reality of its images, in the absolute sublimation that transcends all passion. (33)

As Sianne Ngai highlights in *Our Aesthetic Categories*, the ways in which our culture inundates us with acceptable gender norms contains an indelible element of violence. My materials bear witness to that violence: I rescue bits of cute stuff from the ground, and then grind them into cruel panels of crust. My art is built from the detritus of our culture's feminine excess; its material degradation gives voice to the social degradation already implicit in those norms. At the same time, though, I do not deny a sincere affection for these parts of my culture's visual palate, nor the degree to which I participate in their associated norms. Thus my artworks are always simultaneously seductive and grotesque, attractive and repulsive, affectionate and suffocating.

Chapter 3

Out There/In Here: The Wet Chaparral

My installation in the main gallery incorporates four types of object that are central to my art practice: hand wound rope, photo sculptures, a room divider, and dyed fabric panels. These four different ways of working come together to create a single space. The ropes are draped across the entrance to the gallery. They'll have to be moved in order for a visitor to enter the space. Upon entering, the viewer is confronted with a steel frame sculpture (room divider) with fabric draped over it and light that glows through it. If she steps to the left or right of the nine foot form, the viewer can proceed into a bowl of dyed and snipped old bed sheets roped to the ceiling. The fabric hangs down the walls and drapes across the floor and over seven discrete sculptures that incorporate photographs. The plaster soaked sculptures are stuffed with batting and built over steel armatures. Some are softer, glue-soaked, and bound up with ropes, others are stiff and heavy with plaster. The fabric is punctured with holes that condense over the sculptures, and create a screen, through which the photographs are partially visible.

In Stembridge's *Summer Children* (21) she describes a an image of "out there," somewhere to go. This somewhere is both past and future, known in the moment of her description. The starting point for the photographs is the idea of a collapse of indoor and outdoor space. I think that this is an important facet of human experience, the ways in which we draw boundaries around our bodies for comfort,

separate ourselves from nature, and then draw controllable elements of nature up close. Stenbridge embodies the voice of the storyteller, and conjures up memories of the “in here” and the “out there.”

Stenbridge’s message to the reader in *i play flute* inspires me for her integration of a deeply serious commitment to social change with a playful creative practice. Her poems were written while she was fighting for voting rights in Mississippi, and her poems reflect that journey. My causes don’t have nearly the stakes or urgency of Stenbridge’s, and their presence in my artwork is latent. My pedagogical practice, which parallels my artmaking, is for this moment my most direct and involved way of taking action through art. Through program management, direct work with underserved students, and curriculum development, I seek ways to highlight the value of youth voices in art. I also firmly believe that the practice of interpreting art, which comes quite naturally to young people, should be better connected to the process of material explorations that artists enact. This strategy of freeing up the creative potential of material and found objects is something that I hope to pursue and articulate through my FISP work at Vallecitos School in Rainbow this summer.

The Wet Chaparral is out there. Wet chaparral is a dewy morning, a walk through the marine layer drenched canyons. The installation is intended as a kind of fabric landscape. It is an *in here* that refers to the *out there*, a dusty and warm room for imagining the landscape outside.

Chapter 4

Photography: Pictures in the Chaparral

The photographs in the show were taken at moments when I noticed a strange collapse between inside and outside. The images that are pasted into the sculptures are from Salvation Mountain out near the Salton Sea, Miguel Ventura's indoor garden in Mexico City and a collection of cacti planted in half painted beer can halves on a window sill at Obrera Centro in downtown DF. They also come from a patio window in Condesa and an oak grove on Catalina Island. In each image I see a juxtaposition of nature and human order. Plants grow from within and without in the window in Condesa, the vines wrap the window grate, and shoot out toward the sunlight. The photographs capture small tender moments that link back to the time of the palm trees. The images represent peoples' idiosyncratic ways of managing the relationships between nature and home.

In *The Banquet*, a photograph that I took on Catalina Island, my aunt, father and brother eat lunch on oak perches, shaded overhead by branches. We had brought our home out of doors; our backpacks litter the clearing as we break for a meal during the trans-island hike. This picnic image is the only figurative one in the show, and it is easily the most personal. Backpacking, which I still refer to as "the annual family death march," calls up endless memories of soft trauma for me. The wonders of backpacking through the Sierra Nevada mountain range every summer since the age of three you can imagine for yourself. The deep family

connections, survival know-how and character that gets built through participation in an annual 15 person, 7 day trip is all there. But all of that experience is wound up with shame, hunger, lack of privacy, danger, discomfort, the feeling when you accidentally wake up on a bear burrow, strain, fainting spells, fevers, pent up anger at having to put all decisions in the hands of a disarmingly reckless and contrarian father, pride in being able to do with very little (i.e. no tents unless snow is predicted) and the weight of family history. The landscape gets complicated. Nature is after you; it wants you dead. In these photos, I seek images of nature that reflect the human desire to seek comfort. The nature is corralled, trained to be nice. In my images it behaves; it creates a pleasant composition. Many of the plants that feature have been cultivated for our pleasure for a very long time. My pained experiences underpin the images. Memories of playing at home amongst the palm trees inspire the images, but a hunger for control and safety in the face of an unpredictable universe of danger form the undercurrent.

At Salvation Mountain the desert dust was combined with paint and thrust up toward the sky on a precarious pile of hay bales held aloft by tree branches and telephone poles. The Salvation Mountain Museum is a sublime tinderbox. The Museum, a later part of the Salvation Mountain construction, intrigues me for its architectural splendor. The enormous igloo-like construction is dotted with windows made from car windshields. Inside and embedded in the walls of the Museum are artifacts from the construction and preservation of the Mountain.

When I was first visiting the environments of self-taught artists across the US as part of a travel fellowship, I sought to describe the self-awareness of these artists as a way to combat the assumption that being self-taught or “Outside” the art world meant that they did not self-historicise or see themselves as making fine art. At the moment that I was looking at these sites, Outsider Art had come back into fashion. The work was being recontextualized in ways that made problematic assumptions about its creators.

Leonard Knight, and many others like Howard Finster and Father Mathias Wernerus, preserved their own archives and highlighted their influences in unusual versions of museums. I have always been intrigued by the ingenious systems that

people devise out of the materials at hand. Leonard Knight's framed photo of a cat - which I rephotographed, and which has become the basis of a *Kitty Rock* series of my own - embodies both Knight's interest in working with gifts brought to him by visitors.

A visitor took a photograph of a happy pregnant cat strolling in from of the Museum. The foregrounded cat looks into the visitor's camera. The photographer likely went home, printed out the digital image, and returned to give the photograph to Knight. Knight then took the photograph, covered it with a piece of plexi glass, and made a caulk frame around it to attach it to a piece of brick. The Kitty Rock has since disappeared from the Museum. My photograph of a photograph taken inside of the structure of which the original photograph was made, featuring a charming feline wandering carefree, has become a touchstone for my practice. I've remade my own sculpture featuring the image four times. In my work, I have appropriated the Kitty Rock for my own purposes, to tell a story of love and friendship. I don't think that my claim of making an homage excuses my decision to build Knight's work into my pieces wholesale, but I see it as a way to bring up these complicated relationships of influence and curation through an integration of photography and sculpture.

Leonard Knight built up his Salton Sea-adjacent home over the course of many years, and the landscape underwent numerous transformations. Knight's first mountain was actually a hand stitched hot air balloon with the message "God is Love" emblazoned on the side. The balloon never got airborne, as it would rot in the desert sun as Knight sewed the thing back together, again and again. Eventually the crumpled and sun baked balloon fabric became the base for the Mountain, which through many material failures became the adobe, sand, and paint mound that it is now. All of the paint and material know-how was bestowed upon Knight by visitors and friends. Knight lived in a caulk-frosted truck at the Mountain. I've taken inspiration from many of Knight's ways of working. I see *The Wet Chaparral* as an inside out imagining of Salvation Mountain and its Museum. The decayed hot air balloon, the ways of handling photographs and documents that pointed to the world out there and connected Knight to friends, and the cheap second-hand

materials come together in *The Wet Chaparral* to create a new kind of home for imagination and memories of other spaces. I want to point toward home, toward the ways that people surround themselves with objects and the ways that these objects impact the people dwelling alongside them.

4.1 My Relationship to other Artists’ Photographs

I left my photography practice behind about ten years ago, but I continued to explore the world through images. At their most basic level, photographs served as stand-ins for people and things, as portals to other spaces. In this series of sculptures I have trusted my desire to capture and to collect, and to build my photographs into a series of talismanic hollow plaster boulders. I printed the photographs on canvas, framed them in plaster-soaked burlap or bed sheets, set their picture planes at strange angles, and made them into a personal rock collection.

Bachelard deals with images in the mind and images as described in words. In my work, I use photography to describe the images in my mind. Photography is a tricky thing. Ever since I became interested in art, I’ve been interested in the photographs of American artists from the early 1990s like Philip Lorca di Corcia, Tina Barney, Sally Mann and Larry Sultan. They inherited Martin Parr’s banal vivid domesticity in a dystopic suburban US. The 1991 MoMA exhibition “Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort” brought together works by many of these artists. For me, these photographs captured a familiar alienation in a world of uncertain people and odd objects. People close to the artists feature prominently in their images, and the photographs’ ability to depict that intimacy intrigued me. However, recently the objects and spaces represented in in these vignettes seemed to be as revealing, as loaded with narrative content, as the human subjects.

William Eggleston’s photographs, a generation earlier, are the best example of using the objects that spaces that surround people in order to represent their being. This red ceiling with light bulb as both light source and multi plug says as much about a place and the people who move through it as any direct representation

of those human actors. I wanted to shift my camera from my subjects' bodies. I moved it a few feet to the left of them in order to point at something that tells more truth than a face could. I want to point at the thing by pointing to the thing to the left of it.

4.2 Relationship Between Photography and Sculpture

The fact that my work embraces both sculpture and photography points to some of the most important of my aesthetic values. From photography, I take the idea of a reproduction that captures something that no longer exists. Photography has a unique power to evoke the magic of a space, to imbue an image with a reliquary aura. My photographs are tokens of travel, like rocks collected on a pilgrimage. From sculpture, I take the idea of the hand, especially as theorized by Richard Sennett. Sennett sees the hand as central to thought. I share this with Sennett, and this is a large part of why I need to work sculpturally as well as with photographs. One of the problems with photography, for me, is that it tends to efface the presence of the human hand; by building photographs into sculptures, I am able to bring one of the things I value most about artwork, touch, back into the photographic environment. The apparent contradiction here – between the tactile and the representational – is always an animating element in my work.

4.3 Sculpture in The Chaparral

For *The Wet Chaparral*, I've experimented with different ways of pushing the images back into the forms, so that the images are part of the forms, rather than the forms simply serving as frames for the images. First, I wanted to create a uniformity across the images, so I used different colors to create duotone images. The colors were chosen for their ability to reveal and hide detail in the images. The color obliterates some of the recognizability of the images as photographs printed on polyester banner fabric. It keeps the viewer suspended in her moment of "what

is that?” Next, I tried to create sculptures that were primarily about the forms themselves, bundles, tents, upturned tables, and secondarily about their images. I can trust that the images will be read for content by an audience, but I wanted to experiment with forms that would intrigue the viewer first. Each form is based roughly on a structure for dwelling: room divider, ottoman, pup tent, but it is not important to me that this is apparent to the viewer. The forms should feel relatable and strange.

I was in Geisel Library staring into the atriums on the ground floor when I first decided to create these sculptures. Those atriums are like soothing little parks in the Library. They bring a sparse rain forest indoors, a space to gaze into over the top of your laptop. They’re also a bit sad. Not very deep, the inconsistent plantings end in yet another concrete wall. Looking up, we see filtered sunlight, but the light is gritty and plastic. I like these odd spaces very much. In one atrium there is a green hose wound into a pile and life-sized bronze crane statue. Those objects, inconsistent with the pretend forest, got me thinking about a series of sculptures to plant around the spaces, sculptures that were about my shared impulse to manipulate nature into a tool for contemplation.

The forms would be both familiar and unknown, and serve as “planters” to the photographs. The photo sculptures would be like pots with plants in them. The “plants” would be images of nature guided by the hands of men, and the “pots” would be the sculptures that hold the images, cradling and hemming them in. I imagined that the atriums would be a perfect place to hide my large sculptures in advance of my thesis exhibition date in June. Instead, I’ve put off the idea for this library show until the summer, and chose to use various group exhibitions around southern California as storage solutions in the lead up to my thesis show. The Geisel Library atriums were a starting point for the sculptures, and I hope to highlight the relationships between the sculptures and the spaces that inspired them in the future.

I started thinking about rope making as a way to intertwine found materials into a three dimensional form. I had been looking at Sheila Hicks’s shining woven ropes and Harmony Hammond’s rag rugs, and I wanted to take their feminist approaches

to sculpture and devise a nasty rotten version comprised of low'found materials. Rather than caking up materials on a flat surface, I imagined that I could wind rope from tinsel, mardi gras beads, cotton, toys that I found on the ground, bed sheets and bits of rope. The ropes didn't work out as I had envisioned. I still haven't found a way to get a variety of materials to bind together well. Instead, I have been winding rope from old bed sheets. I love the dusty bleached out colors, and the way that the sweat, blood, and cum stains disappear into the tight folds of fabric.

For *The Wet Chaparral* I have arranged the ropes like a beaded curtain over the gallery door. I hoped that the rope curtain would accentuate the fluidity of the inside/outside divide that my art brings up. The ropes would demand touch before the viewer was permitted into the gallery. The bed sheet ropes might refer to a curfew break on a Friday night. Or perhaps a viewer might imagine the many bound up bodies that have sweat into these sheets as the ropes graze her arms. Most of all I want the ropes to forestall a total view of the exhibition space.

The trouble with the Main Gallery is that you get the full spread eagle of the artwork installed within it as soon as you glance through the doorway. I prefer to require a little more work for access to my art. The fourth floor gallery at the New Museum in New York has the same problem as the Main Gallery at UCSD. When *Phyllida Barlow: siege* was exhibited at the New Museum in 2012 the artist dealt with the full reveal issue by planting a piece called "Untitled: 21 arches" in front of the elevator. directly in front of the elevators. When viewers explored her show, they wanted to walk amongst the arches (which of course remind me of the palm trees). Barlow's dynamic surfaces also incited the desire to touch them. On touch, Barlow says, "I think this issue of touch is, for me, problematic. I think touch is a language, a non-verbal language, and how you imagine touching something seems to me to be more important than actually reaching out and touching it, where the minute you've touched it, the mystery, or the imaginative process, gets solved. You know, that's closure on it. (Greg)"

She is right about touch answering a question in a way that short-circuits imagination, but I also believe that her position comes from having to deal with

museum policies. For *The Wet Chaparral*, I was excited to create an installation that was welcoming to a public audience, but that also allowed for some satisfaction of the desire to touch. Visitors are invited to walk over the bedsheets on the floor, and in order to enter the space they must pass through the wall of ropes. My policy is, “The art may touch you, but don’t go out of your way to touch the art.” This for me, gives the viewer enough agency to navigate the space on her own, hopefully while avoiding the sensation of being chastised by guards for what is a natural and expected impulse when there are no clear barriers: to reach out.

The installation that I’ve built could be thought of as an inside outside living room. I hope that viewers leave the show thinking more freely about the functions of space. I grew up napping in a fairy ring of redwood trees, and I want people to consider objects in a gallery as full of potential, as a site for imagination and ruminations on the creepy otherness of nature.

4.4 More on Outsider Art and Touch

Judith Scott’s yarn wrapped found objects are some of the art world’s most beloved “Outsider Art,” and her forms inspire my way of thinking about touch and mystery as questions of sculpture. Looking at her works is like walking into a house full of bedsheet draped furniture. I love to imagine dancing my fingers over Scott’s surfaces. Her forms’ bulk and softness look like they’d be a pleasure to touch. I like their lumpy mystery. Her process of collecting, even stealing, material for her armatures indicates a longing to protect. She takes materials away from the world and sequesters them in string. Are the objects being cached away for later? Or are they buried for eternity? The answer to this question would tell us whether her work holds out for a coming utopia. If they are gestating, or being preserved to survive the apocalypse, then in Scott we can identify a physical manifestation of a teleological preparation. We could imagine a future time when normative bodies are enlightened in the way that she is, a time when we have been thoroughly moved by the uneasiness of her sensitive combinations of fiber and object to be ready for a world of peace and personal autonomy.

With Scott's work, the audience's desire to rip the sculpture open and find out what is inside has to be suppressed. She is master over her material, and in this way there is an entrepreneurial aspect to Scott's work. In her domination over collected stuff, she embodies a self determination that non-disabled allies want to see for the disabled. I think this quality is one of the reasons that Scott's work is so beloved. It matches an aesthetic sensibility that is at once crafty and low with high minimalist aesthetics and a singular personal drive and vision. She controls her materials, she is king of the stuff. My sculptures draw on Judith Scott's strategy of overlaying found objects and concealing them to highlight their otherness. Additionally, they are influenced by the processes of other artists who build photographs into their sculptures, including Carol Jackson's works for the 2014 Whitney Biennial and Leonard Knight's odd picture frames.

4.5 Other Artists who Incorporate Photographs Into Their Sculptures

Jackson composed a fascinating series of sculptures from photographs and papier mache. Their flat shiny photographic surfaces are juxtaposed against the matte cracked formally complex surfaces to compose wild sculptures. The resulting forms looked like twisted up cross sections of the images. I wanted to combine images and forms similarly, but I sought to flip the relationship, for photographs to become sculptural and the form to be a simpler fabric surface.

Chapter 5

Grotto

The grotto (which is related to the word grotesque) is a space set apart, a cave with water features, arrangements of rocks, and perhaps a shrine. I am fascinated by the ways that we choose to corral nature into manmade spaces that reference natural ones, and I have used grottoes as a reference for several of the works that I made in artists' homes between 2008 and 2012. The grotto, for me, is another inside/outside space, another one of Foucault's heterotopias.

When built into a home, a grotto is a structure for drawing accumulated nature into a domestic space. At the Neues Palais in Potsdam, the Grottensaal was a repository for seashell and gem collections for several generations of kings (Friederisiko). The indoor grotto room served as a portal for a jaw dropping representation of man's domination over nature.

When the grotto is a discrete structure, built into a garden, like the Venusgrotte at Schloss Linderhof in Bavaria, it becomes a fantasy space that integrates exotic rock formations with cave-like architecture and natural stone, also images from a narrative (Wagner's *Tannhauser*). The Venusgrotte became the touchstone for another project of mine that integrated abstract atmospheric space with representational picture planes, 8 ROWS BACK, which was collaboratively installed with Morgan Mandalay last spring at Helmuth Projects. The grotto, as an all encompassing space in which the impulse to collect and control is set up against natural transformations, will continue to impact my work as I proceed with my work as an artist. This is an area for further exploration.

5.1 Contextualizing *The Wet Chaparral* Among Other Recent Projects

Let's take a step back to constellate the thesis exhibition amongst other shows from the past year. These shows functioned both as their own discrete collections of work, and as test spaces for the ideas and processes that now comprise the thesis show. A show at kijidome in Boston presents a model miniature for the thesis work. *Horror vacui* in the Commons Gallery at UCSD was a display of singular panels that condense my thinking about surface and femininity. And 8 ROWS BACK, collaboratively installed at Helmuth Projects with Morgan Mandalay, was an attempt to create an abstract atmospheric installation without building a totalizing space, as I had done with *Pussyland* in January 2016 in the Commons Gallery. I've drawn on lessons about space, form, and material gleaned from these shows and others to develop the methodology with which I approached *The Wet Chaparral*.

In June of 2016 I participated in a show at an artist-run space in Boston called kijidome. The ideas that the curator and I discussed have continued to be important to my thinking, and that show served as a scaled down model for my current exhibition. My contribution to this two person show was two wall-mounted panels, lumpy pillow-like photo objects installed on the floor, and a stiff sheet of punctured fabric with a few of the lump objects on and under it. These works were exhibited alongside photographs that had been collaged in-camera and then printed on banner fabric by Dan Boardman.

Sean Downey, the curator for the show at kijidome, used an excerpt from "Solaris" by Stanislaw Lem as a starting point for the show. The quotation describes a sighting of an oozing life-sized underwater artificial garden. The images that Lem describes resonated with my work. This other space, visible only through fog and water, that glistens and might be a representation of cultivated nature, connects to my longstanding interest in artificial grottoes as garden forms. For the show at kijidome, Lem's description, which was included in the press release, conjured an image of something like a natural grotto, soaked by the tides, but with the

artificial overlay of some man made ill.

At that time I noticed a change in the surface of the ocean. The waves had almost completely disappeared, and the top of the fluid—the stuff the ocean is made of—had become semi-transparent, with smoky spots that faded away until, after a very short time, the whole thing was completely clear and I could see several yards, I believe, into the depths. Deep down there was a kind of gold-colored ooze that was gathering and sending thin streaks upwards. When it emerged onto the surface it became glassy and shining, it started seething and foaming, and solidifying. At this point it looked like dense burned caramel. This ooze or sludge collected into thick knots, rose up out of the ocean, it formed cauliflower-like swellings and slowly made various shapes. I started being pulled towards the wall of fog, so for a few minutes I had to counter the drift with the engine and the rudder. When I was able to look out again, down below, underneath me, I saw something that resembled a garden. Thats right, a garden. I saw dwarf trees and hedges, paths, none of it real—it was all made of the same substance, which by now had completely hardened, like yellowish plaster. That was how it appeared. The surface glistened brightly. I descended as low as I could to get a closer look.

Question: Did the trees and other plants you saw have leaves?

Berton: No. It was just a general shape—like a model of a garden. Yes, thats it—a model. That was what it looked like. A model, but a life-sized one, I guess. After a while it all began to crack and break apart. Through gaps that were completely black, a dense sludge rose to the surface in waves and congealed, part trickled down, part remained, and the whole thing began swirling and getting covered in foam, so that now I couldnt see anything else but it

In our artificial grotto of an exhibition at kijidome, *Kitty Rock III* floated on the concrete alongside a softer pillow rock which had been bound with ropes and rolled down a hillside. It had collected burrs in its exposed raw cotton tufts. A black tar covered fur ball rested on the blue cotton surface in the middle of the room, representing Lem's gassy emissions, the white bleached spots on the fabric referenced the ocean's foam, and the holes a porous but semi opaque surface, water. The photograph under the hole-punched blue fabric screen was of a man standing on a tiny green chair. He is surrounded by bougainvillea in the garden lounge zone in between two reflective green-glassed plastic surgery offices in La Jolla.

This work, titled *Tobin Ocean*, was produced for the exhibition that Monique van Genderen curated at UCSD, *Object Type*, for which I recreated a performance work by Allan Kaprow and experimented with sculpture as performance documentation. The Lem text offered an entry point for my works, which referenced a memory vision, wetness, sticky dryness, and a gaseous salty artificial nightmare.

The discrete works at kijidome added up to a unified whole. Each sculpture built the narrative. The dense grimey works on panel became a counterpoint to the sparser image and fabric constructions. The arrangement seemed to successfully integrate my ways of working into something coherent. I appreciated that the work was well interpreted in a Big Red and Shiny review by Sarah Rushford. I was satisfied to read that a stranger had experienced my work as I had intended it. She writes about the bricolage on panel “The piece is not deploying feminine adornment, it’s making a true and resonant beauty using flotsam and jetsam. It tells viewers that their keenness of vision is crucial to the beauty of this work,” and of the sculptures, “Through strange ritual processes, the base material is made into a magical thing.” Her assessments of the show gave me the feeling of being on the right track, and the confidence to push further. I would scale up the photo sculptures, the panels, and the piece of blue fabric. The work at kijidome had been sparse in a way that scared me. The show was not an installation as I had built for Pussyland, and the works weren’t integrated using Mandalay’s cloud paintings, as they had been in 8 ROWS BACK. The objects had to live on their own, arranged amongst Boardman’s photo-collages in a traditional white cube space. As I considered how this exhibition might be reimagined and scaled up for my thesis exhibition, I also saw the Lem text as an effective through line for the show. It allowed both artists’ works to be as they were, and it offered a textual counterpoint for audiences to read and imagine in relationship to their experiences of our work.

I continued to think about how to use a description of a space as a starting point for a set of artworks. In 8 ROWS BACK, this had been the Venusgrotte, and for my thesis exhibition, this would be the poem that Barbara Dane recites at the opening of her song “You can’t make it by yourself.” The poem was published in an

SNCC Newsletter, and while in Dane's liner notes it is listed as having an unknown author, it was written by the poet and civil rights activist Jane Stembridge. Her poem, composed in a very different social context and included in her collection *i play flute*, contains a remarkable vision of the "out there" and a sense of dedication to the welfare of others sought through both poetry and action, something that I aspire towards in my art and my work as an educator.

The man-made cave that my work for 8 ROWS BACK referred to was simultaneously wet and dry. In my abstracted interpretation of the Venusgrotte at Schloss Linderhof, the spray paint made very dry marks on the unprimed fabric. The bucket ponds full of floaties were wet, but set apart. The floating forms were another type of surface to experiment with – a punctuation mark within the language of the show, a surprise to ground the viewer, art for the children.

Thirty years, thirty moves. Packing up and moving play into the connection between decay and accumulation in my relationships to materials. The materials age through moves, and I lose things in ways I cannot control. Moving is a system for moving on. In terms of where my materials come from, they are often drawn from piles of already decaying stuff: flowers tied to dead bicycles on the side of the road, dusty plastic leaves collected in other people's garages, old bed sheets from the thrift store. These materials point to transition and change in their decaying states. They are wrested from their swirling motion for the moment of exhibition, before moving on to other states of being.

In 8 ROWS BACK, which used ideas about theatrical space as a starting point, the missing action of the person who made the art—the withdrawn performer who marked the fabric with paint, dragged it around, was significant. However, as I was thinking about the show, I was interested in the way that action is dealt with in the Venusgrotte at Schloss Linderhof. A painting depicting a scene from Wagner's opera "Tannhauser" is the central feature of the Venus Grotto. Rather than a stage for action, the Grotto frames a painting depicting action. I envisioned Mandalay's paintings as the space for action in the show. When people at the opening asked how to determine which works were mine and which were Mandalay's, I responded that anything with representational painting in or on it could be assumed to be

his, whereas abstraction and found materials were probably mine.

The Wet Chaparral, like 8 ROWS BACK, is an atmospheric space for an audience to explore, which includes moments of representation. In this case my own photographs replace Mandalay's canvases. The photographs form a narrative for the audience to project into, while being surrounded by the dusty, disturbing warmth of patchwork bed sheets.

In *Horror vacui*, the world is full of toxic plastic. I see violence in the cuteness that is pushed onto women, and feel crushed and nauseated by the ugly glut of stuff. The panels catch the feminine ooze that seeps out around the edges of this saturated and misogynistic society. I use excessive ornamentation to create a visual experience of overload. These material practices begin intuitively, as a response to desire and anxiety. These visual impulses are rooted in resistance to traditional artistic hierarchies of order and restraint, and respond to the surfeit of material goods with their own kind of cruelty.

In addition to glut, these panels are also a response to scarcity and hunger. I am always afraid that there won't be enough—enough of the sweet treasure that I rescue from the ground, enough gorgeous copper leaf. On the panels I squirrel stuff away, store it up, and try to give the viewer as much as she needs. Even as they refract and amplify the contradictions of consumer culture, the accumulations in these pieces try to be generous and friendly. The panels draw on materials gathered during walks. On these walks, I collect objects like broken jewelry, photographs, tufts of fur, blankets, and sunbleached snail shells – things that, in the context of my art, confront the viewer with a strange kind of familiarity. I use walks to change my own way of thinking, and view walking as a way to “get free,” to defamiliarize both my own process and the objects I gather. The fabrics, foam bits, and bone fragments that figure in my work are also often gifts from friends. In building these gifts into grimy surfaces, the works become a diary of artifacts.

I get a crunchy sound in my head when I see something great, like James “Son” Thomas's “Skull.” There's something creepy cute and textural that generates the visceral experience I'm looking for. I sought the sound in the works on panel that I produced for *Horror vacui*. When I am looking for a “finished” state, I consult the

crunchy sound. When I am trying to determine whether to incorporate a material into my work, I ask the crunchy breathy sound. It usually tells me that whatever I have got in my hand needs to be wrapped in curly green doll hair or smashed.

In order to free myself up to create an installation as my thesis show, I wanted to exhibit a solo show of the works on panel. The relationships between the panel-based works and my sculptural installation practice are complicated, and I hoped that *Horror vacui* would give me the chance to deal with the panels on their own terms. The panels condense many of my artistic concerns, but they deal with them on a flat surface.

Chapter 6

Future Directions

Back to dad stuff: last night as I was finishing up this document, trying to decide whether and when to “declare victory,” Bruce Hope had an ending to suggest, “and then she lived happily ever after.”

The next moves for my art are to try and get these sculptures exhibited in the Geisel atriums. Pieces of blue will travel with me to Oaxaca for a show at an old textile mill. Intellectually, I want to further theorize the role of the crunchy sound in the sense of completion in my work. I hope to reconsider and tighten the connections between my ethical concerns and my artwork through my FISP work this summer. Additionally, I plan to make new works that explore the relationships between my panels and my installations, perhaps using the form of the scroll. For now, *The Wet Chaparral* leaves us in a soft scary bowl, a thin and crunchy surface suspended from the ceiling, a basket of memories of out there, pleading for an embrace.

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