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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Presence within Absence

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5/12/2011

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Abstract

Your grandparents' and parents' values do mark you and continue to mark you as you grow older, cause I think of a lot of things that, oh, I wouldn't do that because grandpa wouldn't do that. He was the neatest thing since sliced bread, as far as I was concerned. Marion Kesner

This remark was made by my grandmother in the summer of 2009. It was a closing statement to one of our many discussions revolving around her history. The conversation led me to realize that the connection to the past contributes deeply to our current identity.

Through time and experiences, people build on who they think they are. There is no discernible beginning nor foreseeable end, as our identity is influenced by previous and future generations, extending in both directions beyond those living. As an individual, I see myself constantly linked to my elders, peers, and those younger than me. Through this expanding network I continue to form my identity, as well as influence others as they form theirs.

I am interested in looking at past generations within my family, as well as my own evolving memory, to construct sculptural work that symbolizes the irreplaceable history that is forming my identity. I believe that memory is selective. Thus no two people can have the same memory. One's personal collection of memories forms one's identity. At the same time, memories are linked between individuals through a larger connected history, especially those linked by family or one's most intimate relations. This connection ties people together. By creating sculptural pieces associated with my personal past, I also aim to connect to the memories of the viewer. I wish to engage with a larger connected history, where the viewer reflects on their own past and current identity.

The work revolves around domestic objects that remind me of experiences from my past. By combining these found objects, of different materials, from generations past, with various objects that I create, I aim to conserve a presence of a family's history. Each object thus guides me towards various techniques within different media. A multitude of these techniques are derived from traditional craft processes, which hold the history and values that I want to portray in the work.

The installation of the work guides people through moments from my past, which is strongly connected to who I am today. I also aim for the altered objects to resonate within the positive and negative memories of others. No two people can have the same memory, but pieces can be shared. "From culture to culture and country to country, individual memories overlap like Venn diagrams. These overlaps are collective or communal memories, joint remembrances of

historical experiences that reinforce group membership and bind us together as tribes” (Rupp, 10). Through this connection, I want people to be comforted by the traces of time, knowing that it has helped create who we are and to prepare us for the future.

Introduction

“We assemble ourselves, piece by piece, from recollections. We are what we remember” (Rupp, 10). Our lives are filled with events, yet memory is selective and it is only the experiences that one finds memorable or traumatic, which become important. Good or bad, these are the moments that we learn from and live by.

This body of work was initially inspired by my personal history and concerns with retaining one’s memory. With age, people may lose their ability to conserve short term memories. It can be a time of confusion where the loss of the present goes unnoticed. Conversation calmly shifts to the stories of the past, where every detail of our selective memory, remains clear and unforgotten. I am thankful that these long term memories can be relayed, for it is these past experiences that form part of one’s identity. After listening to the gathered memories of a family member’s past, I became interested in collecting my own memories, as a way to preserve both our identities. This preservation is captured in the material object of the sculptures.

Editor Sherry Turkle cites Gaston Bachelard’s writing before beginning a story regarding salvaged photographs:

Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost. (216)

It is my belief that the past has a strong connection to our senses and emotions. Objects that we see, scents that we smell, or sounds that we hear can all draw upon stored memories. When recalling these moments, we connect to the emotions we feel in combination to the past, whether they be positive or negative.

When I began this body of work, my aim was to create strong links to the values found at home and the importance of human connection. I believe that the close connection I have with my family has greatly influenced who I was yesterday, who I am today, and who I will be tomorrow. This work also relates to my own family origins as a Midwesterner, the American emigrant experience, and the strong agrarian values that this entails.

As the work evolved, the pieces became less about my personal history and more about one’s connection to time past. With time, certain objects become very important in our life. They remind us of past events, which can create a feeling of loss, but that feeling is bittersweet.

Looking through old family recipe cards, one may remember with pleasure and sorrow, the dishes made and who had made them. This emotion may be felt when considering a person's former presence and current absence. It is a feeling that roots us in the past, but helps us continue to make decisions for the future. The objects are therefore very dear.

Process

I am drawn to objects that present their own history and purpose, for example a worn tool or an older piece of furniture. In addition, the objects that remind me of my own experiences, such as a small strawberry basket; as well as the ones I have imagined through hearing a family story, like a particular water jug. There are numerous occasions when rethinking through one's memory where it becomes enjoyable or important to relay the experience. This action is very similar to telling a story. The act of family storytelling is to recall one's memories of the family's past, often with some embellishment. I have always enjoyed hearing these tales and thinking through the past as if in a dream. The information is truthfully structured, but the emotion might be loosely relayed. From these relayed memories I choose what may be exaggerated and what could possibly be true.

After considering the memory that I associate with the object, I plan on how I may manipulate the form in hopes of projecting my memories. I tend to add a considerable amount of detail that closely relates to my family, such as word for word discussions or phrases. With most of the work, this detail embellishes the object, which I believe enhances the sculpture. I do not focus on one medium, nor on one technique within a medium. I analyze my thoughts and work methods to find reason in the materials I use and how I form them. In other words, much of this process is very intuitive.

The inclusion of glass, as a studio material, has constantly and consistently fed into my



work. I enjoy the material and various techniques which make it so unique. A majority of the glass work created is clear. The absence of color, in conjunction to other objects, causes the glass to appear vacant. This ghostly appearance is an important component for the installations because, for me, it symbolizes an absence. For example, a

grandmother's cookie tin will not always house her cookies, but the object will spark our memory to a point where our imagination will fill the void. The presence of the material object connects to our memory of what may be currently absent.

Other crafts have also played a significant role in the formation of my work. Quilting, tatting, and handwritten calligraphy are a few of the techniques which I have incorporated into the sculptures and sculptural installations. Though each technique continues to evolve and remain contemporary, I am extremely interested in their history and tradition.

Installation

Turkle cites Henri Bergson's discussion about the objects of a family's past:

But the truth is that we shall never reach the past unless we frankly place ourselves within it. Essentially virtual, it cannot be known as something past unless we follow and adopt the movement by which it expands into a present image, thus emerging from obscurity into the light of day. In vain do we seek its trace in anything actual and already realized: we might as well look for darkness beneath the light. (Turkle 232)

From the beginning, I believed it was important to have an intimate and perhaps less institutional setting for the work, one that would ensure a welcoming atmosphere. My solution was to exhibit in the upstairs of a two-storey house that also functions as a small private gallery.

The upstairs of the Joy Gallery house is formed of three separate rooms; three theatrical stages that would relate to one another. The format of each room guided me towards the creation and combination of different pieces and the architectural detail of cabinets, closets and windows provided additional space for interaction. The empty house became a space for me to move into, to furnish with objects bearing ideas of the past that relate to the present. As written by author Laura Fronty:

A house often shares characteristics with its owners, who have furnished it and decorated it with eclectic objects collected haphazardly over the years, with no regard for fashion or custom; this results in a sense of comfort and a palpable feeling of the rhythms of life within its four walls. (51)

Welcome

As you enter the pale yellow house adorned with red wooden shutters, you are greeted with a white staircase leading upstairs. At the top of these stairs, on a landing, you see a

window. Catching the afternoon sunbeams on this wide windowsill I placed three teacups. These “Cups of Comfort” portray a past conversation.

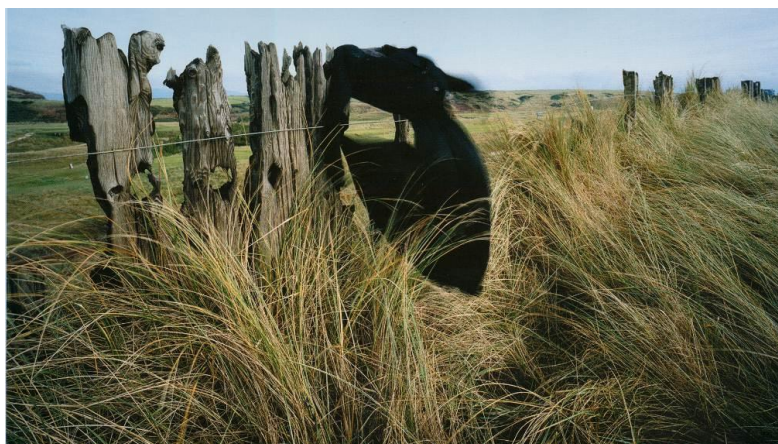
Two cups lay stacked on one side of the sill and one cup is alone on the other side. The positioning of the three tea cups suggest that the tea has been drunk and the cups will be picked



up later for cleaning. Their sugary glass formation appears to crystallize under the fragile rims as if growing into their whole form. This effect is how I visualize people thinking through past experiences. A familiarity of one of our senses awakens a memory, and our mind continues

to relive the past. Tatted lace ringlets lay at each of the cup’s base, giving the forms an innocent halo.

Each object I present projects a human presence even though there is no occupant of the house, much like Riitta Päiväläinen’s garments. For artist Riitta Päiväläinen, “clothes are the



Riitta Päiväläinen, *Northern Wind*, 2000

vestiges of human beings, symbolizing a person’s history, which in absence of the person, impregnates the discarded garments. Old and used garments therefore represent both the presence and the absence of their former owners” (Holzherr, 5).

Memory is very important in Riitta Päiväläinen’s work, but it is not focused on herself, nor on any one particular person. She is interested in the many people that are forgotten and her photographs aim to capture the evidence of their past. The tea cups and the lace ringlets upon the window sill, suggest a moment from the past and hopefully, a human connection.

Continuing up the staircase, the visitor is soon in the upstairs and is directed towards a small room on the left. This room is furnished with objects that strongly relate to the kitchen.

Room 1: Comforts of Kitchen Conversation

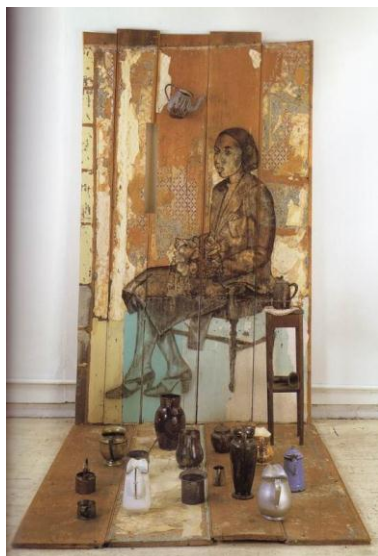
From generation to generation practical hints are handed down that are as useful today as they were in previous ages, allowing us to rediscover the pleasure of making, embellishing and cooking without hurrying: taking time simply to live... (Fronty 52)

To my family and friends, the kitchen has always been a room of family gathering; it is a ritual space for preparation, feasting, and being together. Memories created within this room tend to be reenacted throughout time, as family traditions are handed down from one generation to another.

On one of the four walls, there are three antique stove heat grates, symbolizing a stove. Beneath each grate are hand written words and a few smudged fingerprints. Reading through the phrases, one realizes that a recipe is being relayed orally. The dialogue underneath the aged heat grates is from a recording of my grandmother teaching me how to make dumplings, for a chicken and dumpling meal. By reading the preparation and process, you can hear her remembering and reciting how to make the meal, and it is through this presentation that I aim to capture the feeling of “Warmth” that I had felt during this experience.



Contemporary artist Whitefield Lovell also collects and reassembles objects to tell a historical narrative, as in his installation “Libation”. For him and other artists, “collecting



Whitfield Lovell, *Libations*, 1998

objects is a way not only of maintaining but creating them, since each object carries its own memories which spark the construction of other objects for other viewers in a spiraling journey” (Lippard, 11). In “Libations” the story of the portrait becomes immensely more powerful with the various water jugs scattered on the floor and the one blue jug which hangs above the woman’s head. These objects are clues to the woman’s identity, for they are the objects that project her past. The stove grates of “Warmth” relate to how Lovell utilizes found objects, as the grates are a recognizable object of the kitchen thus aid in visually constructing my memory.

Ordinary objects can in themselves tell a story with the support of a viewer. The viewer’s role is to study the objects before her or him and piece together clues from their own background in order to formulate a meaning. A combination of ordinary objects can be seen



when looking into the closet at the far corner of the room. One will notice a small lit shelf in the back of the space, housing a wooden box tied together with a strip of cloth and a small stack of aged cards leaning against its side. Through the grouping, positioning and context of the space, these objects hold a certain

spectrum of stories that the viewer may relate to, such as the possibility of this box storing family recipes with a few favorite recipes set on the outside of the container.

Within this same room, there are two tall windows. Their dark wood frames are a dominant feature relative to the bright white walls, which creates an optimal space to interact with objects of the past. Author Rosalind Krauss mentions in her essay, “Grids, Format and Image in 20th Century Art” that the grid of a window often appears in the work of Symbolist painters as they read the glass window as a mirror, “...something that freezes and locks the self into the space of its own reduplicated being”(5). Memories are captured in our minds, and like a mirror can only be represented.



Lightly flowing from these permanent frames are sheer curtains veiling a rain of broken eggshells. The broken shell symbolizes the fragility of what we remember and the idea that our memories are not whole, but pieces of the past. These “Shells of Remembrance” range from white to light brown and dangle in the window, creating delicate shadows on the sheer material.

In the corner of the room, between the two windows, I placed a dark wooden chair. On



top of the worn chair I placed a blue cookie tin. The tin has been deconstructed and woven together with silver metal strips, similar to the silver of the cherubs decorating the tin. The woven strips have been stamped with the repetitive saying, “One for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and four to go.” This quote has a direct connection to my other grandmother, who would visit her two grandchildren with this particular cookie tin filled with chocolate chip cookies. The opened tin is full of clear cast glass cookies as if she had just arrived. Outside the tin placed two bitten cast cookies and a few glass crumbs. The positioning of objects is very casual, making the piece inviting for closer observation.

Similar to meeting a new acquaintance, sculpture is often better understood after engaging in a closer look. This brings to mind the contemporary artist Doris Salcedo. “In contradistinction to the idea of a monument that restores or preserves memory as part of a



Doris Salcedo, *Untitled Furniture*, 1998

cultural heritage, the work of Doris Salcedo reveals through small details of individual memory the tears in the fabric of history and exposes the rupture about which history remains silent” (Merewether, 17). Salcedo’s ideas and research focuses around the violence that has occurred in her native Colombia. Starting with ordinary household furniture, she reconstructs the pieces and adds subtle detail components to form memorials. Salcedo’s method of illustrating people and their memories is very similar to my own. The use of objects is more important than any portrait, and it is through the layers of detail that the piece or memorial becomes successful. The violence behind her work stands in sharp contrast to mine, but like my work it shows that through objects we remember the positive and negative aspects of our history.

Along the east wall of this room, within the Joy Gallery, there is a slightly warped wooden shelf with decorative cast iron brackets. This slim shelf is holding twelve canning jars that have been stretched with various pieces of cutlery. Each fork, spoon, and knife takes its own direction and prominently stands in its jar; even though it can be easily removed, leaving its outline shape. The cutlery appears aggressive, but it is through the glass jar’s nesting form that I hope people will view a human connection to the object.

As stated in the Mason Jar Centennial 1858-1958 booklet:

Easy to clean and re-use, Mason jars could be effortlessly stored by the hundred. And it is not hard to imagine the joy and delight of having, for the first time throughout the winter, juicy peaches, pears, plums, berries, tomatoes, stringbeans, corn, and many other fruits and vegetables packed at the peak of their perfection.

The tradition of preserving the fruits of harvest for winter still occurs in many areas of the United States. Once the laborious work of preparation and canning are done there is a time of feasting. This particular installation, “Preserve” holds the memory of preserving five different types of

jellies in one summer. The vast amount of jars filling this shelf illustrates this summer activity when the kitchen was full of fruits, supplies, and family.



Passageway

Leaving the room, you find yourself in the hallway, just a step away from a cupboard.



The door is slightly ajar and the bottom shelf has a four pronged fork peeking out. Once completely opened, the viewer sees three deep wooden shelves with scattered canning jars. This “Pantry” contains a few jars that are accompanied with cutlery, while numerous others remained stacked and sealed.

Due to all the positive connections suggested by the Mason Jar Centennial 1858-1958 booklet, it is not a surprise that so many canning jars have been kept over the years, even if the family does not utilize them for preserving. This object can be used for multiple purposes, but shall always be linked to its strong history of preserving goods.

Room 2: Pleasure of Gardening Together

Continuing down the short hallway there is a small room to the left where two metal wire beds stand. These beds are positioned, towards the corner, in the formation of an “L”. Rustled on top of each bed is a quilt of two different tan burlaps and brightly colored wool. Though

crumpled, as if the sleepers just awoke, the pattern of the colored wool is laid out like a garden, as seen from a bird's eye perspective. This relation may be formed after noticing small glass pillows filled with vegetable seeds, as well as larger glass pillows filled with soil and sprouting plants. As with numerous traditional quilts, there is a titled stitched into one corner, "The Homeplace 1889".

The term "homeplace" was relayed to me as the common term my grandparents' generation used when talking about their grandparents' home. This particular homeplace resonates with my own memories of gardening with my parents and grandparents when I was younger. This plot of land was not connected to either of our homes, but it was the land that we gardened. Within this sculpture, I aim to gather information relating to my ancestors in hope of displaying the traditions and values that I understand and find important in my life. I have combined bedframes with gardening for numerous reasons, none being very direct. The current work was revolving around objects within the home, and I wanted indoor furnishings to be a consistent element. I have also known a small garden to be referred to as a bed, and I was interested with the idea of top soil being transformed into a quilt, which could be pulled back and used for warmth.



The main component of this piece is the two quilts whose design was influenced by the quilters of Gee's Bend in Alabama. These women created quilts that were "beyond the needs of mere survival, there was a spiritual dimension to these quilts. They recycled what were often the



Annie Mae Young, *Work-clothes quilt with center medallion of strips*, 1976

only surviving possessions of deceased spouses, parents, siblings, or children, thus holding the power, or at least the memory, of departed ancestors and loved ones” (Arnett, 60). These women were not interested in following traditional patterns, nor overly concerned with the material they were using. The quilts were a necessity for their families, and most of the women enjoyed the process.

The quilt to the left was designed and created by Annie Mae Young in 1976. This modern design is composed of denim and corduroy work clothes with a center medallion of colored strips. The quilt holds a powerful design and contains a strong past. In comparison to the quilts of Gees Bend, the “Homeplace” quilts are stitched with materials relating to the people and activities around me. They are nontraditional and from a distance have no apparent pattern.



Behind the two beds hang burlap curtains with a decorative dark green wool ruffle. These curtains were created to give “The Homeplace” a suggested setting that would create a more relaxing atmosphere. Threads have been pulled from the burlap to create a gentle striped pattern, which visually lightens the material. Gathering each curtain together in the center is a

twine wrap with dangling glass pea pods. These curtains also relate to family gardening, in particular the “Kitchen Garden”. A kitchen garden is a term used when referring to the garden whose goods were for the home, rather than for sale.

Before leaving the room you may notice a closet whose doorknob is adorned with tatted



lace. The decorative lace wrapped around the doorknob adds a subtle detail of home decoration. It is also an indicator that the closet door, left ajar, may be opened. Upon peering into the closet, the space can be identified as the linen closet. Aged wallpaper decorates the inside walls and the back wooden shelf holds extra burlap and wool, folded in the style of bed sheets.

Incorporating the closets within the two small rooms became an effective method to insure that the upstairs exhibit became more of a home. It was not important for these subtle additions to be noted at first glance, since the intent of these alterations was to blend

into their surroundings and assist in unifying the space.

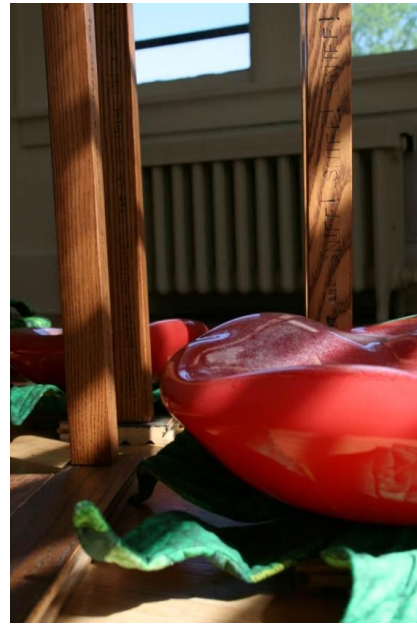
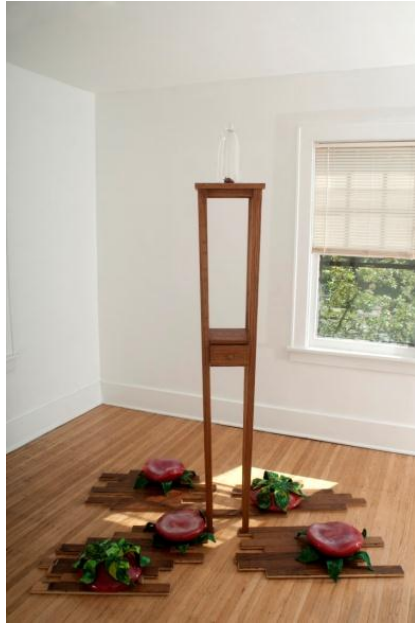
The sculptures presented in the past two rooms have a strong connection to my family. Continuing through the exhibition, the pieces will begin to become more influenced by the object and will contain less detail associated with an individual.

Room 3: Objects of Importance

Just before entering the last room, the viewer is mentally brought back to their childhood as they view a very tall, very narrow table. The viewer’s relation to the table has a similar feeling to the fictional character Alice, in the beginning of Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, where Alice drinks the bottle labeled “Drink Me” causing her to shrink to a very small size.

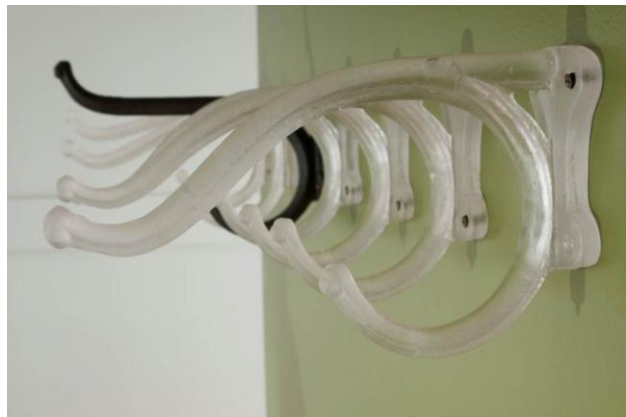
On top of the elongated table one finds a life size glass strawberry on the base of a vibrant green tatted piece of lace. There is a tall glass belljar that protects this object, which relates to the children’s story, The Little Mouse, The Red Ripe Strawberry, and The Big Hungry Bear, by Don and Audrey Wood, whose text is stamped along the legs of the table. At the base of the table are fragments of a wooden floor. Scattered throughout these wooden slates are

enlarged glass strawberries, which appear to have been eaten. Their curling stems are formed with crazy quilted leaves that bend with the help of copper wire veins. Dangling from the table's center is a single green thread leading to a drawer of cotton thread and fabric.



The play in scale and positioning of all these objects aids in illustrating a combination of stored childhood memories, which are all imaginative and vibrant. This piece is comparable to the “Homeplace” beds in the previous room, as the various components of each sculpture were drawn from childhood memories. The final representation is playful in these two pieces due to the organic glass forms in an enlarged scale.

The strawberry is one object that has grown with me over time, as I am able to link its image throughout numerous memories of the past. This “Nurtured Growth” is represented by the height markings that are stamped into the front left leg of the table. The top and last marking is 5’9”, which is my current height.



Another play with enlarging an object, in hopes to see the form through a child’s perspective, is the line of hooks on the far wall. There are six cast glass hooks and one cast iron hook positioned in a row. Being out of normal reach, you peer up at the hooks, noticing how the glass hooks droop in various depths.

This constructed coat rack, “Welcome Home”, displays one of the first objects you often tend to see when arriving in a house. A typical coat rack is usually buried under numerous coats, scarves, and hats. The gentle bend of these hooks symbolizes the weight each hook has endured over time. Walking in at the base of the installation, are a few muddy footprints. It appears that someone has arrived and stopped at the coat rack. This is yet another instance where the viewer may interpret a memory through the combination of objects.

When considering the objects of daily life within the home, I drew inspiration from the



Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993

contemporary British artist Rachel Whiteread. Whiteread casts various negative spaces, which frame architectural elements of the home, or the whole home itself, as seen in the piece to the left. The work created for “Presence within Absence” has similar traits with Whiteread’s work, but draws upon the human connection with the object presented. It is stated that her work triggers memory for “emptiness activates memory, or anyway the attempt to imagine what the memories of a space might be” (Noble, 67). People tend to not want to leave a space or object without explanation. If there is no truthful information at hand, the imagination will

form an explanation to fill the void. This mental activity is very interesting, and I believe the vacancy of the clear glass objects throughout the exhibit helps activate the viewer’s mind in a way that links them to their own past. For example, the glass cast hooks forming “Welcome Home” appear transparent, almost imaginary compared to the one cast iron hook. The viewer may fill this void, knowing the familiar form of the hook and their own connection to a coat rack inside their home.

Slightly to the right of the coat rack is a large expandable drying rack. Lying across a few of the lightly warped wooden rods are pieces of cloth adorned with white lace. These objects can be identified as “Delicate Heirlooms”. An heirloom is a valuable object that is handed down from generation to generation. It is perceived as being priceless, but may be of little monetary value. As stated by Irene Castle McLaughlin, in her essay *The Bracelet*, “there is another underlying narrative that is known only to me. In the context of that story – my life story

– these objects are heirlooms, gifts, invocations” (Turkle, 112). This remark was made in reference to a bracelet, but gives the deeper definition of any heirloom; it is an object that holds a part of your life story and is dear to you.



Though some of the wooden rods are missing, they have been replaced with glass rods, and though not physically present, they also hold pieces of lace as seen by the decorative etching on the glass.

These past three pieces hold a strong presence in the room, but are not the only objects of importance. “Resting” on one of the five windowsills is a glass, pale green spoon. The two resting points of the spoon sit upon small pieces of tatted lace. Similar to the teacups at the beginning of the exhibit, the spoon is casually placed on the sill, capturing the simple object while interacting with an architectural element of the home. The positioning of the spoon and effect of the sunlight suggest a sense of silence. For this reason, this piece closes the exhibit.



Conclusion

Through this body of work, and its carefully considered exhibition context, I aim to trigger the memories of the past, and present traditions and values that have formed my identity. From the various objects chosen, I am able to connect the past with numerous viewers, as people from various areas and backgrounds are still connected through the threads of history. In many instances, I believe that I succeeded. Throughout the exhibition, I noticed numerous people conversing about a moment in their own past. True to the diversity of the audience's backgrounds, it was clear from the various stories shared during and following the exhibit that various works resonated with different audience members.

Everyone's past is filled with events, which are not always hopeful. For this body of work I chose to focus on the memories, where I have found the most comfort. Through this comfort I enjoy the present and look forward to the future.

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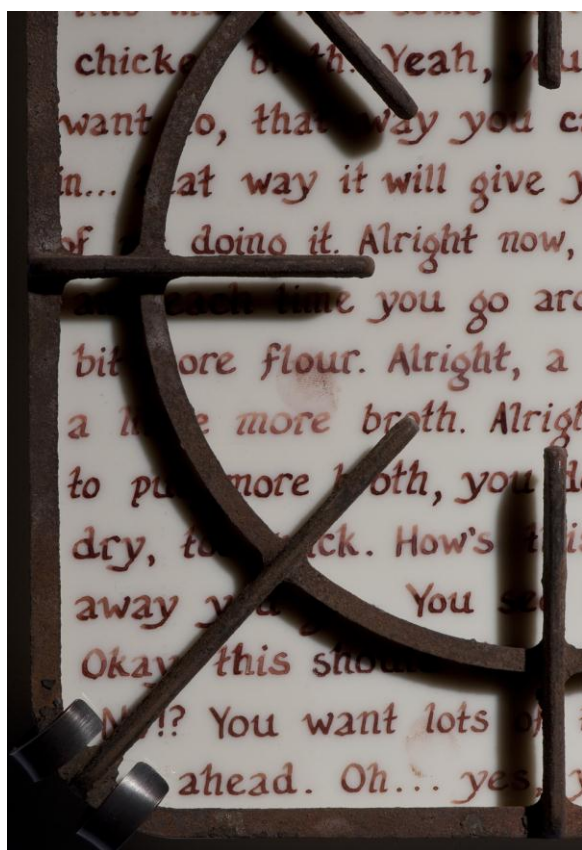
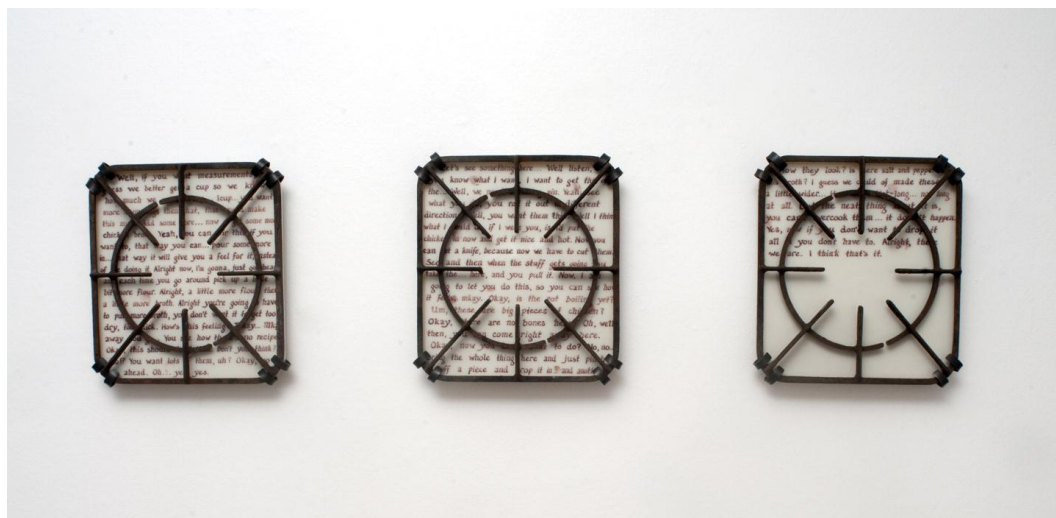
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Cups of Comfort
pate de verre cast glass, tatted lace
2" x 5.25" x 4"



Warmth
plate glass, enamel, stove grates,
copper
each grate, 22" x 20" x 2"



Recipes
found objects
shelf, 15" x 12"



Shells of Remembrance
fabric, eggshells
56" x 31"



"...and four to go."
cast glass, manipulated tin, wooden
chair
tin, 5" x 9" x 8.5"



Preserve
jelly jars, cutlery, wooden shelf
with cast iron brackets
15.5" x 29.5" x 5.5"



Pantry
jelly jars, cutlery



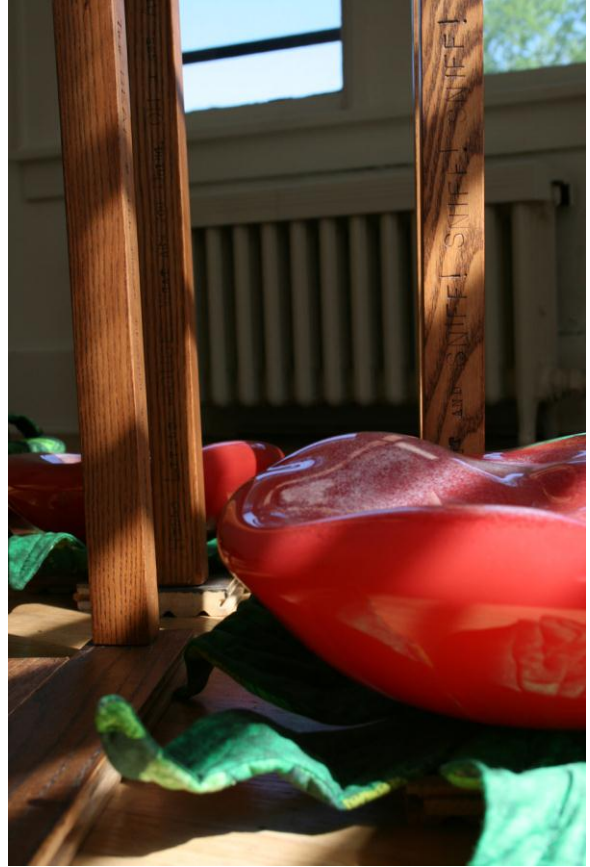
The Homeplace
blown glass, seeds, soil, quilts of
burlap and wool, metal beds
20" x 8' x 5'6"



Kitchen Garden
flameworked glass, burlap and wool
56" x 31"

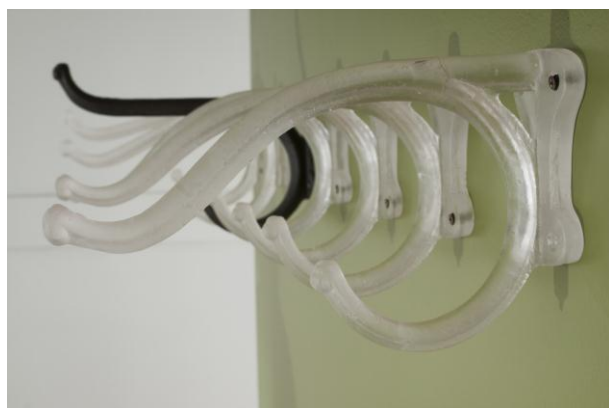
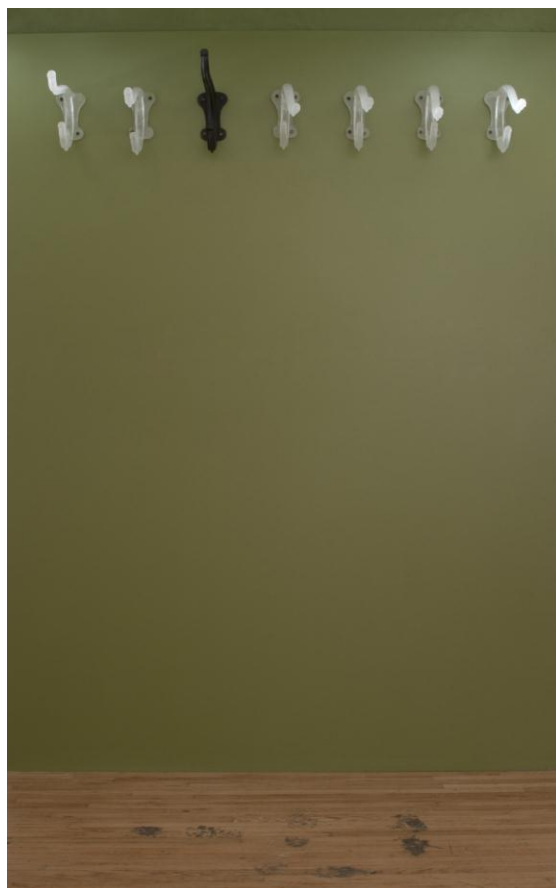


Linens
tatted lace



Nurtured Growth

blown and flameworked glass, quilted
fabric, tatted lace, stamped ash wood
6'8" x 5' x 4'6"



Welcome Home
cast glass, cast iron, soil
each hook, 5.5" x 3.25" x 14"



Delicate Heritage
hotworked and sandblasted glass,
tatted lace, drying rack
37" x 35" x 24"



Resting
cast glass, tatted lace
0.75" x 7.5" x 1.5"