Hidden Narrative: A Family of Objects

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HIDDEN NARRATIVE:
A FAMILY OF OBJECTS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

My artwork aims to create an ephemeral world filled with metaphorical materials. I examine and use my own experiences and perspectives, presenting fluctuations between childhood and adulthood. The personal objects that represent these times frame an implied sentience. The objects, gathered and installed in specific groupings, connote familial relationships.
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INTRODUCTION

My artwork strives for the creation of an ephemeral world. Inherently feminine, this world engages my own experiences and uses them as foundations. The transition from childhood to adulthood is of particular importance to me. I engage child-like imagery to pursue themes of empathy and nostalgia. I attempt to provoke the realization that all things are transitory. The child grows up, and innocence is lost.

The materiality and process of making are forefront concerns. I choose homey, domestic materials to suggest delicacy and vulnerability. These materials and processes reference traditional “woman’s work” and art historical contexts. Using found personal objects, I recreate them as mutable facsimiles. This material change simulates skin or other organic matter. As such, the remade objects appear alive, implying a sentience exists within each piece. This feeling of sentience is meant to reference familial relationships.
PART I: EMPATHY OTHER

Run Your Fingers Through It

I have always wanted to collect, gather, preserve and present that which is precious. Placing such things in containers has long appealed to me. I have attributed a signifying value to hair and its perceived femininity, and I am convinced of its preciousness. My mother, along with other women, keep clippings of their babies’ first haircut. I have examined the historical beliefs about hair and its links to a woman’s sexuality. One such reference is Alexander Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock.” In the poem, Belinda, a socialite with many suitors, is envied by all for her gorgeous locks. Pope’s language gives hair seductive power, “Slight lines of hair surprise the finny prey, / Fair tresses man’s imperial race ensnare, / And beauty draws us with a single hair.” (Pope 2518-2519). The entire poem, prompted by a similar incident, tells the conquest of Belinda’s hair by a lusting and unsatisfied suitor, the Baron. Given this precedence, I wanted my preserved amount of hair to suggest a mature woman, but with all the sentimentality of a mother’s carefulness.

I have often kept my own hair very short because I could not give proper time and attention to maintaining long hair. I lacked patience with long hair as well. Despite the ease of short hair, I came to regret it, wondering if I had lost my femininity. Short hair began to signify not “settling down” and “starting a family.” Until recently, generations of women in my family got married and became housewives. I did not follow that course, but I wanted to memorialize that alternative.

I selected a mutable hair material for my purposes and made accessories to accompany it, such as an overlarge walnut comb, a hair-stuffed blanket, and a tiny accordion book to detail the acts of hair play. Finally, I made a box to house all these materials.
The box is an interactive piece of sculptural book art. It allows me to pull out all the pieces and arrange them according to their relationship to one another. I can brush the hair with the comb, lay the hair out on the blanket, and unfold the accordion to see the potential bobby pin placement.

I want the viewer/reader to wonder who would gather and make this keepsake box for hair. For people with similar experiences, this could become their surrogate keepsake box. To others it provides a chance to consider the preciousness assigned to a piece of the body.

I continue to generate art from a secret biography where I am the primary character. Empathy is a prime consideration and overall theme of my artwork.

Biological Clock

To give life to inanimate objects, I change their physicality. I depict recognizable objects in unexpected materials. I first considered what could work as a metaphorical stand-in for skin. Ephemeral
materials reinforce the idea of fragility and mimics human frailty. Wax became my material of choice. I use the different physical properties of paraffin and beeswax to affect the content. Paraffin is fragile and brittle, creating flaky layers of form that are as thin as dead skin. Beeswax is more forgiving, remaining malleable long after cooling, thus mimicking the elasticity of healthy skin. An added benefit of beeswax is its scent: an intoxicating richness full of pollen and intimacy.

Thinking about skin and empty objects suggesting absent bodies, I turned to shoes. Like hair, high heel shoes are another iconic feminine object. And like long hair, heels are another thing that I had mostly given up on.

Before using wax, another material had caught my attention: latex. I employ latex as a metaphorical stand-in, similar to works by Eva Hesse or Heidi Bucher. I use brush-on-latex to apply a skin encasing. After peeling the dry latex away, I had an empty pair of limp, latex shoes. They bent and fell in a struggle to preserve their original shape. It was a satisfying experiment, but the process was not conductive to producing multiples, which was my goal. I made a plaster mold of the shoes and began to cast in wax.

Rather than use the ghostly white of paraffin, I worked with the varying colors of beeswax. Raw and minimally filtered gives a rich golden color, whereas refine-filtered beeswax is a creamy ivory. I worked with the purity of each color for a time before combining each in specific doses. The result was a luscious, lemony-butter color. The pairs of shoes were arranged in an installation with two plaster rabbit statuettes. One rabbit was placed on the floor. I walked around the rabbit, wearing the original shoes, placing a pair of wax shoes wherever I stopped. The paired shoes appeared to approach, draw away, confront, and turn from the rabbit. The repetition in color and shape suggests the same individual. And
the object the individual is considering, the rabbit, is a layered symbol that I continue to employ in my work.

The rabbit is a prey animal, innocent and prolific. The statuette was cast from a decorative knick-knack. As such, it does not appear realistic, but instead more toy-like as an embodiment of “cuteness” of the animal. Like the lost femininity of the shorn hair, this rabbit figure invites symbolic interpretations. It is a fertility statue and a childhood totem. The absent woman in the shoes approaches, turns away, sneaks up on, and confronts this icon. However, unbeknownst to the woman
signified by the shoes, another rabbit statuette watches the whole process. The shoes and the rabbits operate as a biological clock.
As a child I had many stuffed animals. Each had a name. I would act out their lives with marriages and banquets. When one was ripped or damaged, I would sew it in mock surgery play. As an adult artist, I decided to re-examine that assignment of sentience to an inanimate object.

I designed pillow figures sewn from intricately printed fabric. These figures lack facial features making it impossible to tell front from back. They are defined by abnormal body shapes: six arms, extra-long arms, no arms, stubby feet, or long legs. These pillow people, which I named the Soft Family, are all related by material (cheap calico) and technique (quick machine-made seams). The apparent lack of craft mastery coupled with their simple and unrefined exteriors shifts attention onto the reflective act of their making. This aesthetic was a follow up to the devotional hair box with its roughly sewn hank of hair and hair blanket.

Other contemporary artists, such as Mike Kelley used found plush toys to subvert childhood tropes. Engaged in perverse actions, Kelley’s stuffed animal, “...is a pseudo-child, a cutified sexless being which represents the adult’s perfect model of a child – a neutered pet.” (Eviscerated Corpse).

Additionally, Kelley’s titles, such as Eviscerated Corpse speak to his violent interpretations of the icon.
My *Soft Family* aims for a gentler approach. Like Kelley, I speak to the innocence lost by adult viewers. The *Soft Family* are not toys to them. They are remnants, reminders, and signifiers. Like my hair box, I want my viewer to question why such creatures are made. My goals are similar to writer Ken Liu in his powerful short story, “The Algorithms for Love.” His character, a female inventor for a toy company, designs computerized talking dolls that learn and repeatedly mimic human speech. Lui’s inventor becomes obsessed with perfecting the human qualities of her dolls after her own miscarriage. The protagonist succeeds in making Aimée, named after her lost child. This new doll is not created for children. The protagonist explains, “It was a way to comfort the grieving mothers. If you needed Aimée, you would know.” (Liu). The idea of an adult still assigning sentience to a doll, of play-acting that companionship fascinates me.

I began to consider how to exhibit the *Soft Family*. I wrote a children’s story for adults, titled *The Soft Family*¹. The first three members I created had to overcome a monster and sacrifice something. It was inspired by O. Henry’s “Gift of the Magi,” and my narrator is never named, similar to Liu’s story. Context is provided by the narrator through their speech and interactions with the *Soft Family* members in the story. The “monster” might be a little brother, and the “Saint” might be a parent. The reliability of the narrator is intentionally ambiguous. Within the story, the *Soft Family* members are animate and supply their own thoughts and feelings. The personification by the narrator transfers to the physical pieces. This allows the reader-now-viewer to empathize with the narrator.

¹ This narrative has been included within the Appendix: Writings.
The drawings in the book are small and delicate, with black ink contours across vast white spaces. The text is small and follows a pattern that is violated for dramatic effect, such as a single line, alone on the page. The book is small and can be cupped perfectly by a pair of hands. The nature of book arts allows for an intimacy in experience with the story.

I also drew certain *Soft Family* members on huge sheets of paper and incorporated color. The largest of these is 81 inches tall by 50 inches wide. Unlike the intimate experience of reading/viewing the book, these compositions loom over the viewer. When these figures are monumentalized, they become more realistic with my ability to draw them in more detail. They become people sized beings as opposed to merely toys. They seem to be imbued with more personality, having more human characteristics in pose and posture. This depiction imparts the illusion that they are living character studies.
Figure 6: Soft Twins, photo by the author, white rag paper, acrylic, pastel, ebony pencil, 60 in. x 50 in., 2015
I developed this family through each new iteration. Despite the variance in compositions, from soft sculptures to books to large drawings, my goal has been unchanging: provide a means of empathy. The *Soft Family* in all its different iterations examine the attachment of sentience to the inanimate.

**Lace Skin**

While working with the *Soft Family*, I was inspired to work with fabric in other ways. I pulped two old shirts, a pair of jeans, and a nightgown in a paper beater. The colors muddled together as I cast sheets of blue-teal paper with fiber flecks of black and white. I had no particular purpose for it at the time other than the process of *making*. Transfiguring materials is a powerful process for me. Its similar in nature to remaking objects out of foreign materials. I was giving new life to these old clothes, changing them. Once I cast the sheets of paper I began to search for the next step in the life of this new material. This blue, handmade paper was tough and soft all at once. The color made me think of wash-water, laundry, and domestic practices. But what would work with that color and the irregular texture? My mother’s house is filled with white doilies. I took them all.

As I began to anthropomorphize the doilies, I saw cells, arteries, and veins. Kiki Smith had similar imaginings in the personification of doilies. Cast in bronze, she has likened them to orifices or cellular mandalas. The doilies from my mother’s house had aged, making them more organic as they faded, stretched and unraveled. This intimate, micro world of lace would only fit into a book. I titled the book *Lace Skin*, and bound it in a long-stitch style as a nod to the complicated patterns of the doilies.
The dolly as icon carries loaded symbolism: domesticity, purity, protection and so on. I wanted a narrative context to undermine the demure beauty of the imagery. I wrote a three part narrative: food related objects personified, an authoritative voice, and a girl’s experiences\(^2\). The girl in my poem is curious and sensual, breaking the “rules” of the authoritative voice. She is very focused on the actions and sensations of the body. The text juxtaposes and compliments the imagery. The doilies at the beginning of the book are small and contained. They are small explorations of space. As the girl goes further and further in her search for bodily experiences, the print registration breaks down, and the doilies grow larger, pushing outward against the boundaries of the paper. At the end of the book the largest doily is only partially visible, as a chaotic final push to cover up the girl’s actions. And in the last

\(^2\) This narrative has been included within the Appendix: Writings.
stanza, the girl has pushed beyond the regulations of the authoritative voice, finding pleasure in her own body.

Figure 8: *Lace Skin* (detail), photo by the author
PART II: MATERIALITY METAPHOR

Dresses

Still thinking about feminine iconography, I set my sights on dresses. I admire dresses as objects, but I never felt comfortable wearing them. As a child, I played “dress up” with the delicate and vintage pieces from my mother’s wardrobe. I gathered my mother’s dresses and my own rarely worn ones.

Figure 9: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Saint Cecilia Playing a Lute*, Oil on canvas, 42 in. x 31 in., c.1610-1612


*Saint Cecilia Playing a Lute* by Artemisia Gentileschi struck me powerfully. The woman in the painting extends beyond the frame and her dress is voluminous. I wanted my dresses to have a similar
overwhelming presence. There was something so captivating imagining a giantess wearing a delicate silk dress.

I selected drawing as my medium. Paper from rolls would not limit me with predetermined dimensions. Furthermore, drawing is rooted in observation, careful rendering, and enforcing a transition from three-dimensional to two-dimensional space. The process of drawing is very personal for me. Still life drawing in particular is a translation from reality to the vagaries of perception.

At first, the activity of setting up a still life and drawing it was merely a task to complete. Depicting an empty dress via illustrative mark-making was easy enough with pastels and ebony pencils on toned-gray paper but it was merely a drawing of a dress. Consequently, I began to approach the gray paper as a void. The dresses needed to be in limbo and I needed to remove the hanger. I incrementally added elements that would paradoxically still allow me to leave the drawing seemingly unfinished. This way the drawings began to express subtlety and softness.

Figure 10: Nightgown, photo by the author, soft pastel and paper, 77 in. x 42 in., 2014
I filled the dress with a body, then took it away. I selected the nightgown that had been my mother’s. I depicted it with a fullness in the bust and curves hugging the hips. My artwork was now conceptually focused. The dresses had become metaphorical, tuning the audience to the unseen beyond the piece. Much like the Protestant cross, the body may be departed, but there is a signifier of presence in that absence. Hung on the wall, these dresses loom over the viewer, eye level resting on the knees. It is a child-like perspective. Like the fleeting warmth left behind in clothes removed from a body, these drawings aim to capture the ephemerality of a lost essence.

Necks (bottles)

The bottle form became my next focus. A bottle is a universal container with linkages to anthropomorphic language. Bottles have necks, and their figure suggest human symmetry: necks settling onto shoulders, cavernous middles resting on a bottom. Like the dresses, bottles for me became containers substituting a lost body. And like the shoes, my bottles had to be re-made with a suitable metaphorical material. Wax was once again my material of choice. This time I used paraffin because of its fragility and translucency. Using paraffin allowed me to transform a glass bottle into a more delicate form. I made over a hundred wine bottles with paraffin wax. The process was slow and involved. Each bottle was poured and cooled one at a time within a plaster mold. Each bottle was cast the same way, but each cast yielded an imperfect individual. Some wax bottles came out thick and opaque, but some were thin and brittle, twisting under their own weight. Still others oozed phalanges from their seams where wax had leaked from cracks in the mold. Individualization persisted in the group. They became another family of misfits, similar to the Soft Family. They were empty like the dresses, but contained a presence within their empty insides. An array of empty wax wine bottles could signify past social interactions – echoes of a dinner party, for example.
All these bottles would eventually decay. Their mutability was plain to see. Lighting melted them further, making them thinner and more transparent. Some toppled and cracked. These changes became visualizations of age. It is a mimicry, albeit sped up by the mutability of wax, of human aging.

Legs (stools)

The psychological implications of latex as skin compelled me to recreate a new latex object. Heidi Bucher’s latex house skins were particularly inspirational to me. It made sense to “skin” the walls of a house. The common phrase, “if these walls could talk,” came to mind often whenever I viewed
these pieces. Bucher personifies the object of the house. Moreover, her latex houses continue to wither and age, mimicking human skin’s aging process.

A chair seemed like another object to personify. Like the shoes, a chair can simultaneously hold and cradle a body. And like the bottles, chairs have already been assigned personification through language: they have legs, arms, and backs. What would a chair look like when formed by latex? Skin-like and rubbery, I supposed. Would it stand up, or be pitiable like the gawky forms of the Soft Family?

I didn’t quite use a chair. The stool I selected came from my house. It, like the rest of the objects I used are always personal or specially found. This stool original was small and child-like. I felt it would fit right in with soft and small things that came before it.

It was a long process painting the necessary eight layers of liquid latex onto the stool. After the layers had set, I sliced and peeled the latex off. Then I carefully “stitched” the slices back together with more latex. Once finished, I had a faithful but floppy re-creation. I was correct that they would be pitiable-looking caricatures.

Figure 12: Legs (stools) in process, photo by the author, 2015
At first, I tried to hang the stools, but I did not like the effect. It made them appear “dead.” I experimented with armatures, wanting to give the chairs a way to stand on their own without losing their limpness. With the armature inside the hollow skin, the chairs now stood. Much like the bottles and the *Soft Family*, they had a sense of presence, almost as if they could move while one was not looking at them. I made three, wanting them to represent the smallest plausible group. And while the three were made of the same material and from the same base mold, each had a distinct appearance based upon its particular body language. They were unique children cast from a parent mold. One was sturdier and surer than the others, tall and spread legged. Another leaned toward this certain one in an act of concern or conspiratorial whispering. The third, given the slight alteration in its armature stood limp with an impotent leg. The fleshy group stood together. These latex stools were resolutely physical, but the obvious inferences were mental or metaphysical.

Figure 13: *Legs* (stools), photo by the author, latex, 45 in. x 60 in. x 20 in., 2015-2016
CONCLUSION

My artwork aims to create a metaphorical world. I engage a push and pull between childhood and adulthood. An absent woman circles a rabbit statuette while another watches her struggle. A host of wax wine bottles mingle amid ghost dresses. In the childhood realm, objects still have personalities and can be counted as family.

My artistic processes guide these narratives. I focus on the development of the physical within my artwork, seeking metaphorical materials. My personal objects are remade out of wax and latex, or drawn in a vague and soft manner. The selected objects are always containers or holders of some kind. Their positive shapes bring attention to their negative spaces. I attempt to capture the presence within the absence because the unseen is as important as the seen.
The Soft Family

Oswald was the first to show up. He didn’t have a face, which made telling his front from his back difficult. His long arms had the strength to open a thousand pickle jars. Curious and protective, Oswald explored every corner of my room.

Ophelia arrived next. Small and delicate. I always wondered how she grew such long, beautiful hair. Her favorite hobby was people-watching. Hour by hour sitting on the marble sill she committed each face to memory.

Lastly, Olive. Six-armed Olive. Despite reassurances, the oddity of extra arms became a sticky self-confidence buster for timid Olive. However, her arms were useful for our daily tea parties.

Life for Oswald, Ophelia, and Olive was almost perfect. Their only problem was the Monster that shared the house with them. The Monster had long, twitchy fingers always slightly gummy from rubbing its drippy nose. Its breath stank and whistled from its perpetually grinning mouth. I warned the Three, never to engage the Monster. But I couldn’t be there to protect them all the time. As a precaution, they all stayed confined to my room. The door always remained shut. Oswald checked it twice a day.

But one day absent minds forgot their promises. The door was left open. Oswald was exploring the deep recesses of my closet. Olive was asleep under my bed. Ophelia was at her usual post, people-watching.

No one heard the wheezy breath.

Ophelia was never the same. It was as if Ophelia had fallen into a deep sleep, unresponsive to anyone or anything. Oswald blamed himself. He couldn’t take confinement anymore. He left to go after the Monster. He never came back.

Olive hid Ophelia under the bed for safekeeping. Alone, Olive made a choice: Find Oswald and bring him back. For Ophelia. The exploration was nerve wracking. She’d never been outside of my room before.

Olive wanted to do nothing but run back to the safety of my room. But she pressed on. And her perseverance was rewarded. Olive spotted Oswald tucked in a nook by the couch. Olive rushed over, but hope crumbled.
Oswald was too injured to make it back on his own. He was glad to see Olive. Supporting one another, they could have made it. If only the Monster hadn’t found them.

The Monster was cruel. Soon, Olive only had four arms left. It was the end for both of them.

But the Saint arrived. She was everything warm and soft. She kept the house smelling clean. The Saint rebuked the Monster. Ashamed, the Monster promised never to trouble Oswald, Ophelia, and Olive ever again.

The Saint tended to Oswald and Olive. Olive gave two more arms for Oswald’s sake. Mended, Olive and Oswald were returned to my room. Ophelia came out of her sleep. She had the strength to go on with Oswald’s and Olive’s support.

Strangely, now that they were gone, Olive missed her extra arms. But having both Oswald and Ophelia back made the loss worthwhile.

They had each other. And their endless days went on.
Lace Skin

Stoneware pitcher, belly filled with milk
rough bottom scratching the table

“Don’t chew your hair.”
“Don’t chew your hair.”
“Don’t chew your hair.”

Braids pulled so tight
her scalp itched and tingled

Chair’s splintery legs
pricked at pantyhose

“Ladies don’t---”
“Ladies don’t---”
“Ladies don’t---”

She snuck mouthfuls of honey,
dirty spoon back into the drawer

Little bread bodies
turned golden brown

“Little girls shouldn’t---”
“Little girls shouldn’t---”
“Little girls shouldn’t---”

Her hands were between her legs
beneath the table, no one saw
< http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/146512 >


< https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Artemisia_Gentileschi_-_St_Cecilia_Playing_a_Lute_-_WGA08561.jpg >