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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Heavy Booted and Wild Eyed

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Michaela Rae Mackenna Arroyave

June 2022

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Charles Long, Chairperson
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2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Heavy Booted and Wild Eyed

by

Michaela Rae Mackenna Arroyave

Masters of Fine Arts, Graduate Program in Visual Art

University of California, Riverside, June 2022

Charles Long, Chairperson

We live in fluctuating entanglement with our surroundings both natural and constructed. As material knowledge accumulates a language is built between our interior and exterior worlds becoming ever transferent. Through an investigation into intuitive familiarity and human hybridity with the inanimate these works were formed.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
List of Figures	vi
Main Body of Thesis	1

List of Figures

1. Portion of an editorial from the Spring issue of House and Home, (1989) ...	2
2. Fruits and vegetables cut and ready to be juiced, (2022)	3
3. Giselle Act II, (2020)	4
4. Still from a recording of the Bolshoi Ballet's Giselle, (2012).....	6
5. Together in Tow, (2020).....	8
6. Together in Tow (detail).....	8
7. Build, Bridge, Burn, (2021).....	10
8. Build, Bridge, Burn (detail).....	11
9. Asleep In The Sheath, (2021)	12
10. On The Beach On The Land Of You, (2022)	14
11. windwaterwaterwind, (2022)	15
12. by the by baby, (2019).....	15
13. Leftover escargot dish filled with butter, (2021).....	16
14. Poised to Perish, (2021)	17
15. Joan Didion's kitchen photographed for the Autumn issue of Vogue, (1972)	19

An artwork is no different from a name carved on a tree. It's an anchor amidst mortality. A gesture in protest against the pending void from which we come and to which we return. Moments distilled and preserved to prompt projection and reflection shifting each time we visit them like rereading a good book. A porous endeavor. Sculpture especially feels almost confrontational in this way. Confrontation with the facts of physics while sharing space and blending inanimate and animate entities. The impermanence of our existence is accentuated in the temporality of the sculptural world. I like to play in the apparatus of this exchange.

I think in phrases informed by my upbringing in dance. Steps that link together supporting larger movements. Carving through space and finding rhythm. I used to choreograph pieces featuring dozens of dancers and I can track that mind set's transference into my practice with this thesis body of work. Each sculpture and painting plays a role. The forms themselves are intuitively guided. The shape of the sculptures come to me through drawing and dream while the paintings take their composition only when I approach the canvas. Working this way allows me to access a language of exchange that I'm investigating between interior and exterior states. I'm interested in the kinship between ourselves and our inanimate counterparts, where and when we cross over into each other, how the inanimate absorbs us and the influence of our surroundings on our thoughts >>>> the influence of our thoughts on our surroundings.

There is undoubtedly a vocabulary of semiotic associations in varying localities built into and upon their contexts and histories. This constructed landscape tells a story that we learn to understand through accumulation. I call this language the constructed unconscious because our associations with certain forms and colors inform our action and behavior in a way that often doesn't fully register in our conscious experiences of the physical world. The contours of a hand railing or the patterning of floor tiles for example. I take note of infrastructural supports and the quieter moments of urban planning when I want to get to know a place. For the same reason that I don't over-scrutinize the forms in in my paintings and sculptures I look to the understated communicative shapes in the landscape. It's a principle of a kind of portraiture that assumes an inherent contortion of content when overly determined. The true slippage between our interior and exterior worlds occurs when we're barely cognizant twisting the corner of a napkin thinking about someone else.



House and Home, 1989

Through my research which takes the form of observational notes, screenshots from algorithmic presumptions of need, architectural and interior design magazines, dried flowers, found notes and film stills I'm studying relationships to space and associations with form. I'm drawn to objects and scenarios that underscore interior

dynamics such as a bowl of lemons on the table. The symbol of the lemons to feed/embellish is a comfort that those displaying such lemons would like to be in association in the eyes of those who glance upon them. The affirmation of sustenance and life affirming messages that echo and sometimes reinforce the essentialist archetype of a woman as provider and sustainer of life. Floral arrangements, cooking apparatus, vessels of varying purposes, plant stands and vine guides are some of the objects that crystalize a pressure to be life affirmative placed on women. I see this consume a lot of women including myself. The omnipresence of maternal inclinations swirling and whispering to you to your mise en place before juicing the I notice this instinct manifest itself in me through an irrational extension of responsibility towards inanimate materials.



My kitchen counter before I pressed the juice, 2022

The instinct to perform fecundity rendered in object confrontation. When I was younger and still living in Toronto the language I was noting and connecting to was of a wounded scope. I felt a physiological kinship with the metal gate crushed from a truck left dented for years hanging on by a single rusted bar. I was put in a difficult position at an early age. I had urgent responsibilities beyond my years. Taking care extended in all directions living in a prolonged survival

3



Giselle Act II, 2020

state. This link between how I felt and the forms I was observing resulted in a lot of sculptures that echoed familial dynamics of support, devastation and one entity determining the shape of another. A question I had when moving here was how my formal language would change after being absorbed in California's sun, vibrancy and open skies in contrast to the grey,

crowded and harsh climate of home. I can see the effect now in this body of new work. I needed the open skies to imagine forms that extend freely into space. I've stepped away from dependency and toward curiosity both in my practice as well as my personal life. To embark on a journey towards joy feels rebellious and exciting.

absence stone insect flower animal person energy virility/fecundity
death passive non-threatening semi-active of consequence and impact life

The act of making artworks but particularly sculpture is simultaneously life affirming and funerary. It is homage as well as fusion between oneself and the inanimate and therefore the immortal world. We value people, animals and objects based on their placement along what Mel Y. Chen's describes as the animacy hierarchy. We see this power spectrum with death/decay at one end and life/fecundity at the other. Anxiety surrounding one's position along the animacy hierarchy is palpable but perhaps most overt when looking at language. The politics of language and the agency we grant ourselves and others crystalizes in vocabulary. Terms of phrase such as women being called "birds", gay men being called "pansies", someone being "dumb as rocks" or a "doorknob" are examples of how people are placed lower on the animacy hierarchy as an attempt to take their power away while simultaneously the speaker affirms their own sense of placement by establishing aloud distance between themselves and those that they wish to denigrate. This fear based approach to otherhood can also be interpreted as a fear of the unknown. The potential for nothingness with which we as a species have always been aware.

Giselle Act II takes its title from an early romantic German ballet set in the black forest. The black forest has come up repeatedly in my work as it's the only

ground I've touched where I have heritage. On my runs through the forest when I stayed there I'd hear the screams of people residing in the rehabilitation and psychiatric centers that are hidden in the dense thickets of those pines. The first time I landed in Germany I couldn't stop thinking about all the horrors those trees have witnessed. Trying to engage with time the way the trees do. Giselle (first performed in Paris 1841) is the story of a woman engaged to be married but who learns of her



Giselle Act II performed by the Bolshoi Theatre ballet, 2012

fiancé's adulterous deceit on the night of their wedding and dies of heartbreak. The second act is Giselle's life as a *Willis* - a corps of similarly betrayed brides who live and dance in purgatory in the black forest haunting deceitful men. The base is a plant stand, the ring sitting within is phenolic foam used by florists to stabilize their

constructions (constructions that are at once pledges towards life's bounty bound within the parameters of a death defying infrastructure >> climate controlled transport and steroid ridden water), embedded into the foam is dried yew fern which in druidic herbalism is believed to have protective and benevolent affects on those in whose home it grows and guards. This particular branch I gathered in my garden. Blended together these components amplify and nullify their respective life affirming connotations by disallowing them to function as designed. I want to see what is left of the signifier when compressed against its use value. The purgatory of distillation and suspension within which artworks reside is an aspect I try to account for in the construction of my work. It has become important how the objects I collaborate with function or refute their function. This theme has swelled up from a personal place in recent years as I have become ripe with agency and discernment as to what functions I will and will not perform for who and when. This autonomy is echoed in the singularity of each sculpture and painting. The reality of the ways in which a woman is expected to perform in regards to absorption of excess - as the emotional catch all full of keys to forgotten doors is something I find myself fighting in and out of my practice.



Together in Tow, 2020

Together In Tow (2021) is comprised of an upside down tomato vine guide, rope and four casts of the same bottle - one with a single butterfly wing stuck inside. Function and dysfunction is a generative focus. Subverting use value in order to point towards the signifiers that remain in the object when devoid of their normative role mirrors my frustration with essentialist feminism and outdated pressures on bodies that persist. In this case I was

focused on the symbol of the vessel and objects that embody the supportive life giving archetype associated with women. The bottle/vessel formally, art historically and alchemically symbolizes fertility and transformation.

As I approach 30 years old I notice the pressure for motherhood increasing societally/algorithmically and my awareness



Together in Tow (detail)

of my future motherhood internally. I find myself towing the line between a confrontation with the functionality of the womb and the need to mother myself first. These objects are enmeshed with the rope (one of the most succinct examples of a material whose hyper-functionality to bind, secure, protect and control links the formal with the parental) in limbo disconnected from practicality. Through subversion and deviation I am trying to map out potentiality in sculptural surrogacy. The withholding of the unfilled vessel negating use value while heightening one's awareness of that value. To escape. To escape it because being filled means being emptied and one that is not filled cannot be emptied. Permanence is romantic as are sculptures which is perhaps why my love and openness is safe here. Giving these fleeting feelings a place to rest outside of my head and outside of their metaphysical evasiveness. Becoming passive like the wet sand on the beach not trying to hold a wave. It's not without tension or plight. Maintaining this balance - resisting the buckling collapse into heteronormativity. Pushing forward into cronehood while peers drop from the flock and into belly cupping portraits.

The silhouette of Build Bridge Burn (2021) came as I was working in my sketchbook and took some troubleshooting to complete. Initially I had drawn multiple fortunes strung along the wire but during construction they desaturated one another so I opted

7



Build, Bridge, Burn, 2021

to

use only the one that felt most potently connected to the theme of the piece which states "YOU WILL DO BETTER TO INVEST IN REAL ESTATE THAN STOCKS". My interest in fortunes/fortune cookies and their place in this piece comes from their role within our colonial and capitalist system. The contemporary fortune cookie is based on a sesame and miso cookie made in Kyoto in the 1800's with multiple claims pertaining to the origin of its American vanilla and butter iteration still in debate between LA and San Francisco. San Francisco being home to North America's first Chinatown and LA being the second the fortune cookie served to render Asian businesses welcoming that were suffering from racism after WWII and the Korean War. The exoticization of Asian peoples and the experience economy of California are both histories embedded in the fortune cookie furthering a colonial agenda of extraction and otherdom in service of capital expansion. The flag like structure made from garden supply bamboo and a Steely Dan t-shirt planted into an overflowing foaming milk bottle recites impulses of domination and fetishization of natural resources that largely define the paradigm we live in - the milk bottle reading "Milk so fresh...the cow doesn't know it's missing!" emblemizes the colonial desire of control and access to the land that the cows



Build Bridge Burn (detail)

graze. Steely Dan gets its name from Alan Ginsberg's *Naked Lunch*. In the novel Steely Dan is a steam powered steel dildo designed to never stop fucking. The origin of this band and its name are examples of a disconnected male relationship to the conflation of women and land focused on conquering in this case with their world tour 94'.

Asleep in the Sheath came from a recurring form in my mind. This is where the



Asleep in the Sheath, 2021

compositions of my sculptures originate. The forms persist and keep me up at night until the sculpture is actualized and only then can the next form claim it's place at the forefront. I see allegorical kinship between broken pieces of shell seeking shelter in a discarded bamboo leaf and parts of me that still

need and can provide protection, tenderness and care. A bandaging of old wounds. Precarity plays an important role in my practice as it is the physical reflection of the intangibility of our thoughts. I'm continuously fascinated with how sculpture presses fleeting moments into the realm of the immortal. The purpose of a shell is to protect the vulnerable flesh of a mollusk or oyster. The yonic association with the sea in all it's slippery mystery in addition to the function of seashells mimics the biological function of the womb. The bamboo functions in a similar maternal way in that it protects the delicate deep interior of the plant until it is taken by the wind. What becomes of these objects when they cease to exist within the framework of their function? The tension between the life preserver state and the discarded shell/sheath state bring us back to Chen's animacy hierarchy and our anxious occupation of assuring our proximity to life rather than death. The main form of this piece comes from the plaster bandaged enclosed circle anchored in a single stem base. The form reinforces the notion of the womb in its roundness while acting as a portal within which the braided kitchen twine swings.

The two newest works in the show titled *on the beach of the land of you* and *windwaterwaterwind* (both 2022) incorporate my instinctual scavenging and the intuitive forms I've come to harvest. The sculptures are in some ways inverses of each other in that *windwaterwaterwind* is made from a found surfboard layered with paint and polyurethane and adapted to an imposed form whereas *on the beach of the land*

of you has a base form derived from intuitive drawing then coated in sand, oyster shells from my own dinners, dried flowers from my garden, bouquets and fallen blooms from around UCR campus and our studios. Both of these works poke at opposite points of the spectrum within which I work arriving in a hybrid space between found object narrative and intuitive form.

10



On The Beach On The Land Of You, 2022

A small wall mounted work titled *by the baby* (2019) combines an abalone shell and a chamomile tea bag. The mint blossom pictured here disintegrated into dust in the studio which I don't mind and have not replaced. Abalone shells are used in pagan and witchcraft rituals to represent the element of water when burning sage and other herbs combining the elements of earth, fire, water and wind. The shell as a vessel

and a facilitator for healing along with the calming indication of a chamomile tea

makes this one of the more maternal and herbal focused works. It's quiet and small in scale to further encourage a sense of respite in the viewer.

I appreciate slowing down.

Similarly to how I used to choreograph dances I observe tempo. Breaking up the rhythm of visual engagement with a gesture small enough or a material delicate enough to remind us of our bodily presence in space. These acts are perhaps decisions positioned against the sensationalized gimmickry of digitization and a push towards being in our bodies aware of how we occupy the only world we know.



windwaterwaterwind, 2022

12



by the by baby, 2019

The distillation and transformation assigned to the alchemical vessel is an allegory I look often look to. Sculpture performs a distillation. Time, space and sustainability are pillars to be examined. Locating connection between both unconscious and constructed realities. I am a scavenger along all

paths encountered. Always a leaf or stone in the pocket, motifs repeating in the dream world and real world brought together in sculpture.



escargot dish leftovers filled with butter, 2022



Poised to Perish, 2021

I used to think of my ways of gathering materials as more linear - like a ping pong match between opposing methodologies but I realize now it's circular. One big loop

that picks up speed when you focus in on it. In this circular realm each idea pushes the cycle round and is informed by its predecessor rather than opposing points in an argument. Like the development of a pearl - aggregate forces meant to stew - pressure and refinement - taking these actions out of their material reality and into consideration of their poetic connotations only to reapply them to a different set of materials. Portals.

Where I was previously passive, I now feel activated. As Yi-Fu Tuan writes about being shaped by our environments both constructed and otherwise these spaces respond to us as well. They want to dance and shift and grow as Goethe would have designed. Joan Didion died, and LA is crying rain and silent. There is a membrane and I want to touch it. The membrane that is the swinging fence between concretism and intuition. Between our imagined and physical realities. Between our conscious and unconscious selves in all their pluralistic delight. This is maybe why I focus on the collected, the accumulated, the physical ramifications and records reflecting interiority in exteriority. Letting oneself become less static, less confined, more amorphous, more affected. In swing with the curiosities that decorate the path. We feel ourselves come



15

Joan Didion's kitchen in *Vogue*, 1972

in and out of
congruency with
each other and
places all the time.
We maneuver
ourselves
instinctively
towards some semi
constant semblance
of equilibrium.