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Found While Walking

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Found While Walking

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2019

Dedication

For my dad, Kirk Fagan (1952-2004), for being my first best friend and artistic supporter.

Abstract

Found While Walking

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2019

Supervisor: John Risley

My work is a meditation on the potential, beauty, surprise, and pathos inherent in inanimate objects — particularly those objects that are normally overlooked. In my work, refuse is reorganized. Broken things become absurd tools. The resulting multi-media pieces ask us to consider our relationships with ourselves, each other, and disposable objects in the 21st century.

In three sections, this paper outlines the ways I employ the tactics of display, animism, and misuse to subvert the expected utilities of found objects. These items can produce undertones that may be environmental, playful, humorous, or provocative, all depending on how we encounter them.

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Introduction

"Hand me that thing over there."

We hope, when we say this to someone across the room, they know what we mean by this filler for a more precise noun. Colloquially, at least in the English language, the word *thing* has gained the role of eraser and identifier in one. It is a big "Hello my name is" sticker without the name filled in.

It can stand in for a temporarily forgotten term: "That art thing was neat."

It can define the unknown: "What is that thing?"

It can refer to an object, an event, or a phenomenon. It has even become a handful of all-encompassing compound words: *Something. Anything. Everything. Nothing.*

When the word refers to an object, it is an object stripped of its social identity: in a sense, an object freed. I consider my focus, and often medium, to be this definition of *thing*. I am interested in using objects, generally found, in ways in which they refuse expected function and defy man-made labels. I have spent my two years at the University of Texas at Austin exploring the merits of the utter uselessness of *things*, from roadside bottle caps to rusted paperclips. Through assemblage, video, and museum-like displays, the inanimate misfits I collect take on new lives and new utilities beyond those projected by their manufacturers.

For all of my appreciation of things, I am aware of the inescapability of things to remain as such after human intervention. Through interaction, humans give things meaning. We project our needs, thoughts, personalities, desires, and insecurities on the non-living. Even when they are not obviously utilitarian, we own them, we want them, or

they are in our way. They have names, purposes, and are good or bad. Their identities, however, can be malleable and orchestrated, and this is where my interest lies.

I. *500 Washers and One Butterfly*, or, Collections of Things

i

In his seminal text, a collection of essays simply titled *Things*, theorist Bill Brown introduces Thing Theory, an object-centric branch of critical theory. Brown mentions that we take many objects for granted until they have broken or lost their functions — become things. We look through a window without giving it much thought, he claims, but we stop and take notice when that window is too dirty to see through. [1] I would argue that we can be just as likely to *overlook* things that have lost their utility.

Our world is more full of objects than it has ever been. By default, broken, discarded, and out-of-date objects litter our homes and sidewalks, streets and beaches. I look to these omnipresent but nearly invisible things in peopled places. The molecules of amorphous plastic, electrical wire caps, round metal washers, and bread "best by" tags I encounter daily give a pulse on society and point to a number of truths of everyday city life. Products fall apart. Many commodities are single-use and disposable. Bits and pieces of objects are mass-produced, interchangeable, and replaceable. We have largely learned to turn a blind eye, especially if each individual piece is small. I pick them up.

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Brown bases some of his ideas on Martin Heidegger's 1950 essay "The Thing." In it, Heidegger succinctly posits the difference between an object and a thing. To the German philosopher, an object is by definition purposeful. A jug holds liquid. A jug that is broken or poorly made fails at its function. A failed object becomes a thing. It exists and takes up

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[1] Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," in *Things*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 8.

space, but its definition has changed: it has become more open. It fits less placably in our world. [2]

While many, myself included, continue to use *object* and *thing* interchangeably in writing, I feel it is important to point out this distinction between utility and non-utility, regardless of the word used. The inanimate can live in these two phases in relation to humans. I find it fascinating to think of this transformation, of something defined by its utility suddenly escaping definition when that utility has ceased.

A large part of my practice is controlling the experience of the encounter with these ubiquitous things. At times it is as direct as displaying the objects themselves as a collection. At others, they are the subject of a drawing or painting, with visible time and labor spent extolling the mundane. These presentations offer direct confrontation with the overlooked. I want to both reveal a particular beauty in detritus and simultaneously question our own habits and relationships with everyday materials.

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[2] Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1971), 69-70.

Figure 1: *500 Washers and One Butterfly*, Installation of found objects from sidewalks in fifteen cities across the U.S., dimensions variable, 2019

For the amorphous thing to be an object again, it must function. This is not difficult given a broad enough definition. "Any given object can have two functions: it can be utilized, or it can be possessed." This is what Jean Baudrillard claims in the essay "The System of Collecting." [3]

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[3] Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting," trans. Roger Cardinal, in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 8.

A group of possessions, Baudrillard explains, is a collection. Parts of my practice are dedicated to utilizing objects, while a portion deals with the display of collections. With the latter comes a conversation about creation, control, and the subject of the objects: the human collector.

One archetype for the modern collection is the curiosity cabinet, or *Wunderkammer*, at its heyday in 17-century Europe. These collections, often filling whole rooms, might focus on natural objects or manmade objects, like art or antiquities. They spoke of the collector reigning over time and place. An extensive collection was a microcosm for the whole word. Different *Wunderkammern* took on different personalities and narratives. Some placed objects with superficial traits near one another. Others attempted to be the height of scientific accuracy, while others still created fantastical narratives about the origins of the objects. [4] I consider the different ways the hand behind the *Wunderkammer* might arrange to make sense of the world — or play with it — with my own personally meaningful juxtapositions.

500 Washers and One Butterfly is a changeable installation of minuscule objects or parts of objects found on my daily walks. To label these things as *trash* is too specific. This is material that has not been given a final resting place. It is not found in a dumpster, garbage bin, or landfill. *Litter* may be a more appropriate term — they are strewn, littered, on the ground. The walls of the installation are grey. It is an in-between color, a neutral between the polarities and black and white. It is the color of sidewalks between places, the liminal space where my collected things were lost and found.

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[4] Werner Muensterberger, "The Age of Curiosity," in *Collecting: An Unruly Passion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 183-203.

This curated and ever-growing contemporary *Wunderkammer* is organized and attached to walls, panels, and plinths with straight pins. At times, the pinned material flocks in organic clusters, at others, it lines up along an invisible grid. Like in any *Wunderkammer*, the logic of the collector prevails, whether fully knowable or not.

I think of changes that came about in Western painting during the height of the *Wunderkammer's* popularity. A typical seventeenth-century painting — a Vermeer, for example — may draw the viewer into an interior of a common house. But this interior also alludes to the outside world, all the wider with new trade routes and access to points around the globe. Maps, mirrors and windows lining walls are oft-used tropes in such scenes. *500 Washers and One Butterfly* nods at the outside world in a similar fashion. Penciled grids along the edges of the walls resemble the most basic urban cartography. Mirrors serve as surface treatments. In some places, small windows or holes are cut directly through the wall. Bits and pieces of collected from across the continent line shelves, many exactly the same. The installation offers curiosity and possibility while also nodding tongue-in-cheek at the homogenization of this contemporary outside world. The items in this iteration of the piece were found across fifteen cities in the United States. The same e-cigarette caps can be found on the ground in New York, Austin, Chicago, and Seattle — identical but for the grit they've accumulated.

Pieces of litter become miniature monuments: both are humanity's creations and both meant to outlast the maker. The display and also recalls insects pinned to a board by an entomologist (with at least one real found insect, as the title implies), some of the sinuous wires or symmetrical plastics recalling crickets or butterflies. We may also be

reminded of an archaeological display, a museum's catalogued collection of artifacts, in which viewers are meant to consider the age of such objects.

These geographical, taxonomical, and museological connotations all touch on the concept of time. Our short attachment to each pinned bit is often inverse to the length of time it exists: the cap from a one-time use water bottle, a plastic straw. It questions the viewer. What do we try to make last? What happens when the human maker makes a thing that will outlast herself? What kind of responsibility lies in that kind of longevity? What kind of importance is placed on that object?
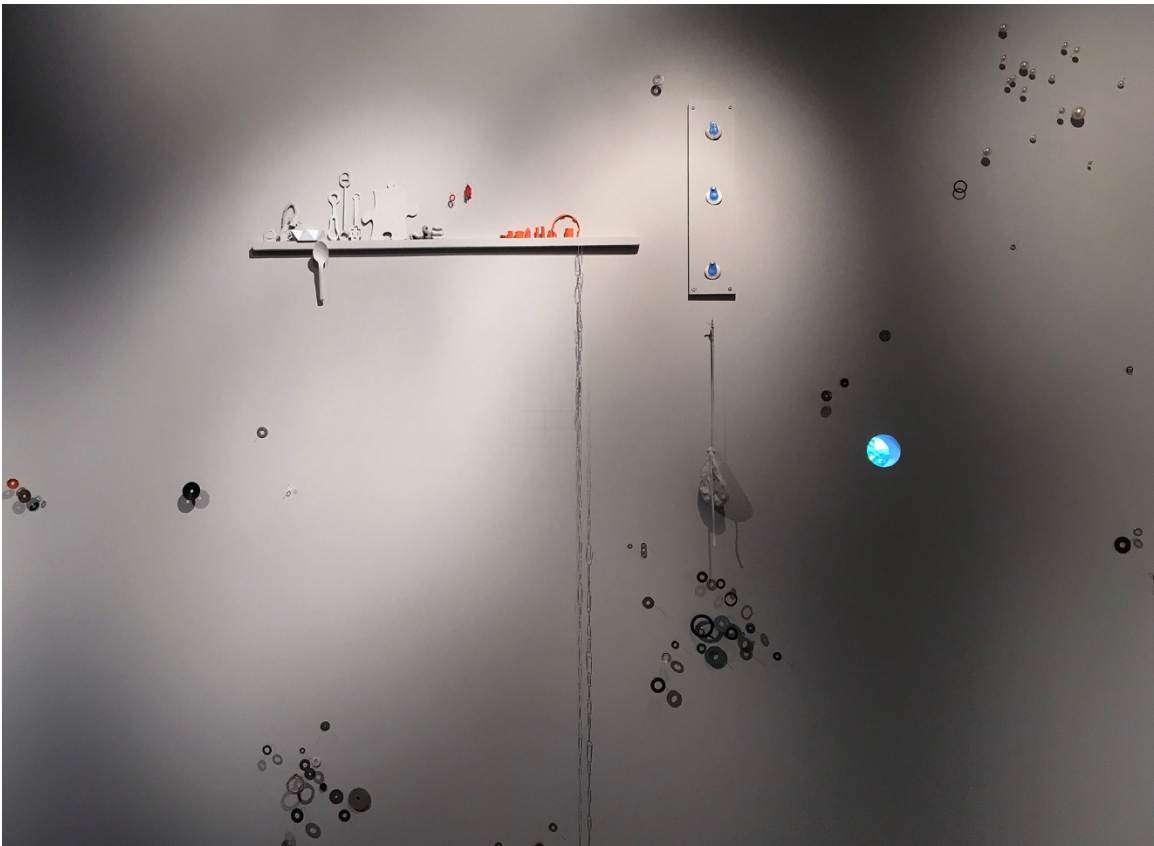
Figure 2: *500 Washers and One Butterfly* (detail), Installation of found objects from sidewalks in fifteen cities across the U.S., dimensions variable, 2019
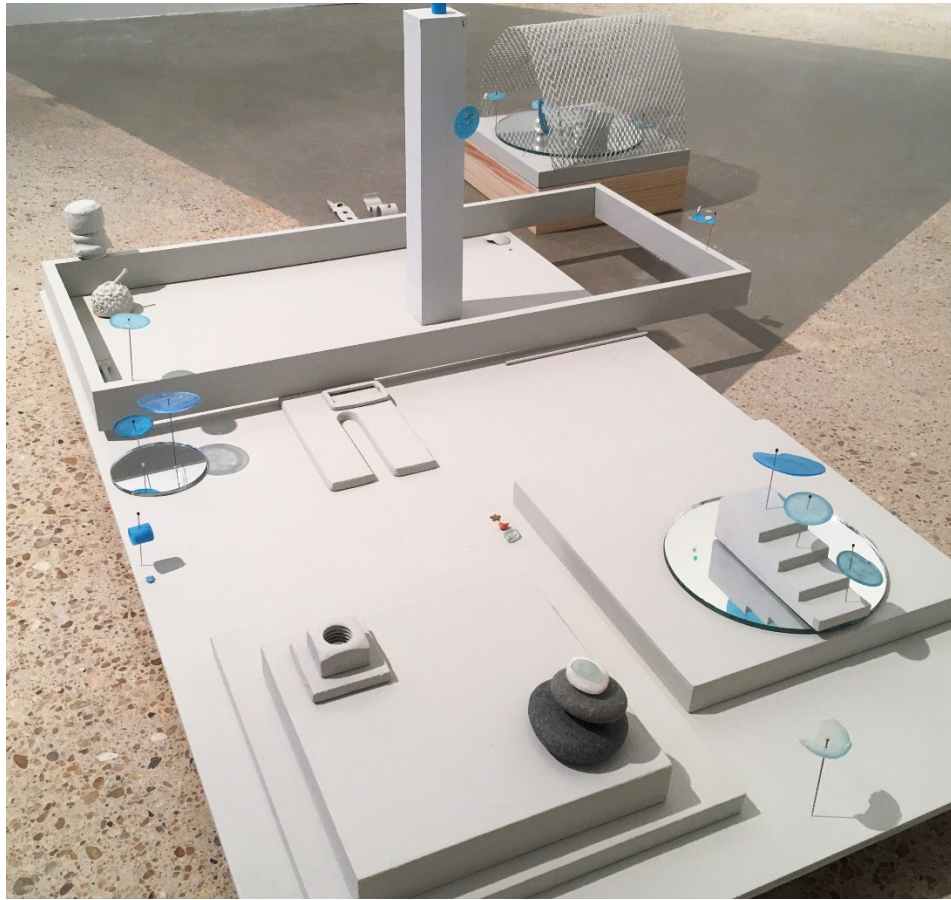
Figure 3: *500 Washers and One Butterfly* (detail), Installation of found objects from sidewalks in fifteen cities across the U.S., dimensions variable, 2019

500 Washers and One Butterfly arranges raw material so it can be seen in a new light, or perhaps seen for the first time, given the size of the objects. Large things are hard to miss, whether a sculpture that looms over the viewer or a broken refrigerator on the side of the road. Small things can invite viewers to move their bodies and participate in the encounter. They have the power to provide intimate, one-on-one experiences. They have the power to become a particular kind of small: miniature.

Miniatures, like collections, are about the semblance of control. In *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart discusses the miniature at length, emphasizing control. Through scaled models, the hand to act out something that might not be possible in the human sized world. In this case, the implied hand is that of the collector, the arranger. [5]

In *Poetics of Space*, a phenomenological treatise on lived spaces, Gaston Bachelard describes the miniature as a small world seen through a magnifying glass. [6] It is not just tiny, but a kind of tiny that becomes larger than life in our mental space. Bachelard explains our inner capacity to play with scale with the term *intimate immensity*: our capability for an internal grandeur via memory, imagination, and mind that is comparable to the vastness of the outer universe. [7] Taking a page from Stewart and Bachelard when I go about arranging, I think of my found things as miniatures rather than just small.

Along these lines, I merge the ideas of large and small by making work that harnesses the power of accumulation. When small components come together to take over a large space, we are reminded of the power of the individually insignificant when *en masse.* The mix of small and large creates scale shifts, and, concurrently, shifts in perception. The amassment of things that could fit in the palm of the hand can make the viewer feel small, an explorer in a miniature world. She is Gulliver amongst the giants of Brobdingnag, Alice shrinking after sipping the "Drink Me" potion. The next moment,

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[5] Susan Stewart, "Miniature," in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 37-69.

[6] Gaston Bachelard, "Miniature," in *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 155.

[7] --- "Intimate Immensity," in *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 185.

however, the viewer's perspective could shift (Gulliver in Lilliput, Alice a giant after eating the tarts that are the potion's foil) to tower over the small objects.

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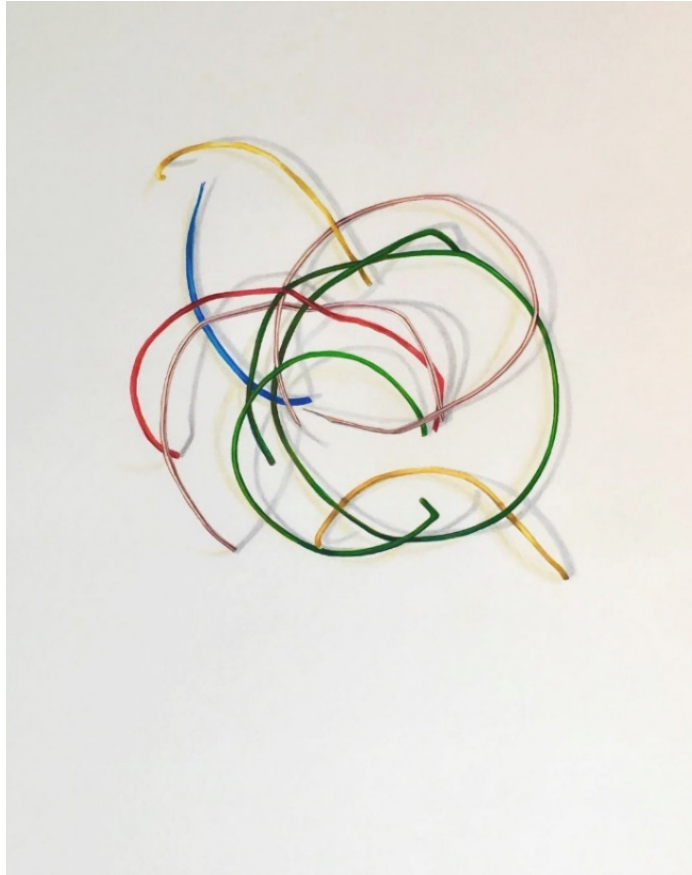Figure 4: *Weed Whacker Wires, Arranged by Chance*, Colored pencil on paper, 30×22", 2018

Another way I display my material findings is by drawing or painting them. The series of drawings *Weed Whacker Wires, Arranged by Chance* is a deadpan depiction of bits of plastic feeder that break off of weed trimmers while in use. These strings can be found all over parks or sidewalks near manicured land, in a rainbow variety of colors.

A traditional *vanitas* still life points out temporality and mortality by including natural objects with fleeting lifespans. Though newer brands boast biodegradability, most weed trimmer line is some form of long-lasting nylon monofilament. Even as the plastics start to break down visibly, the material can do lasting harm. There is an irony that my drawings preserve what doesn't need preserving, but they also a coerced rumination on something most of us don't spend time looking at. They are my homage to the casualties of well-kept green spaces, the fallen soldiers in the battle of taming the environment.

Many non-compostable items come in a similar variety of colors, hinting at some collectible quality. Other compositions of drawings and paintings include a full colorful spectrum of packing peanuts, pushpins, rubber bands, and bread tags. In these pieces, it is the hand wielding the pencil or brush that controls what and how the viewer sees, playing with the expected hierarchy of subject matter.

II. *Adventures of a Blue Marble*, or, A History of Object Narrators

i

Stories narrated by nonhumans might remind us of children's books or fairy tales. But before Beatrix Potter and the Brothers Grimm came an 18th-century English literary genre known as the *it narrative*. Existing as both long and short novels, it narratives (or object narratives) featured inanimate or sometimes animal subjects. These told of their existence and adventures at the hands of humans. Whether proselytizing through cautionary tales or entertaining through blatant sexual references, these narratives were very much for an adult audience. [8]

In their prime, items like currency and clothing told stories of class, value, and status symbols in an increasingly global society. Shillings and top hats masqueraded as bipartisan narrators, touching on human truths and shortcomings better than humans could. These objects had distinct personalities at a time when objects *had* distinct personalities. As the ubiquity of objects grew with the Industrial Revolution, it narratives fell out of fashion.

Today, the lives of many objects are "measured in months, rather than decades," to quote design scholar Deyan Sudjic in his 1994 treatise on objects, *The Language of Things*. Sudjic discusses the firm line between human and object brought about by post-industrial

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[8] Bonnie Blackwell, "Corkscrews and Courtesans: Sex and Death in Circulation Novels," in *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Mark Blackwell (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2007), 265.

planned obsolescence: "Each new generation is superseded so fast that there is never time to develop a relationship between owner and objects." [9]

The it narrative genre lived on in the guise of children's literature. [10] This new life feels appropriate: to children, objects often remain singular and irreplaceable, an increasing rarity in the adult world. It would be difficult to not see a story with talking, thinking objects through the lens of childhood. I have chosen to embrace this lens by storytelling with found objects through stop-motion animation, a medium itself reminiscent of youth-centric entertainment. These short animations may appear superficially as lighthearted stories, but true to the more mature roots of object narration, they contain messages and allusions best gleaned by adults.

I create my own object narratives with the 21st-century twist of casting my heroes as discarded, mass-produced objects. Unlike the unique items from the 18-century tales, the existence of these objects points to a culture of replicability. They have been lost by one hand to be discovered by mine. I choose to give them an imagined existence without either hand, a freedom of movement through the camera and computer software. A marble becomes a hero. Two washers, a couple. I enjoy telling stories with limited information, trusting the viewer to fill in the blanks.

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[9] Deyan Sudjic. *The Language of Things* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 23.

[10] Bonnie Blackwell, "Corkscrews and Courtesans: Sex and Death in Circulation Novels," in *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Mark Blackwell (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2007), 280.
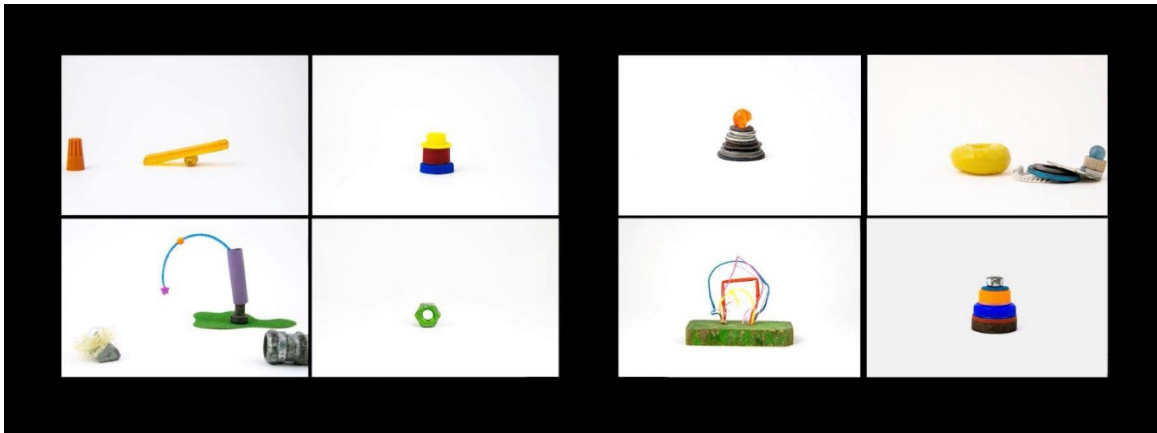
Figure 5: *Adventures of a Blue Marble*, Video still, dimensions variable, 2018

The stop-motion animation *Adventures of a Blue Marble* stars a glass marble found on a New England beach. Over the course of one minute, the marble rolls through space, making its way across seven of eight frames visible on the screen at one time. It pauses briefly to interact with other discarded bits, as well as small sculptures created from these bits, activating them into movement when it does so. Unlike a second, orange marble, which is constantly moving in sync with a stack of metal washers on an eighth screen, the blue marble doesn't stay in any space or with any entity for long. Driven either by wanderlust or lack of belonging, the blue marble continues on its way. In this video I also explore the auditory possibilities of found objects. I created Foley effects by recording the noises that various things made when struck together, rolled, or dropped. These sounds were synchronized with the movement of different actions within the animation.

The blue marble's journey throughout different screens is reminiscent of a Rube Goldberg machine. In these playful devices, one movement of an object activates another

and another until inanimate objects have performed a task mechanically. The task is usually one that a human could have done simply, the humor lying in its overly complicated execution. *Adventures of a Blue Marble i*s an absurd journey where the goal is self-discovery.

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Figure 6: *Fifteen Couples*, Three video stills, dimesnions variable, 2018

In another stop-motion animation, *Fifteen Couples,* discarded objects like screws and beads stand in for humans. Drawing conclusions entirely on form, movement, and sound, the viewer looks at different types of relationships and repeating patterns within them. Though there is an allusion to sexuality with the reduction of gender to shape, the reference is never made explicit. Rather, we look at power struggles, abandonment issues, indecision, romance, and cycles of argument and compromise through interludes of a few seconds. Each scene is partitioned by sudden cuts to black. A simple musical score composed on the keyboard and recorded on the software GarageBand accompanies, helping to set the tone for each tableau.

Figure 7: Three found object assemblages, Found objects, largest 4×3×1.5", 2018

Sometimes found items are fully formed characters, and other times characters and props are created through arrangement and assemblage. These small sculptures are meant to be uncanny miniatures. Each carries a resemblance to something nearly known, an item typically recognized for its beauty, prestige, or significance. It is, however, an imprecise, failed version. One looks like a small toy, its parts permanently scuffed from its time on the street. Another resembles a rather pathetic vase of flowers. A third is a wobbly attempt at a rainbow made with imperfectly arced wires.

These futile attempts at pleasant things are optimistic, farcical, and a bit sad. They periodically come to life with quirky movements as stars or co-stars in various animated vignettes.

My stop-motion videos anthropomorphize objects through movement. They tell stories through visual games and interactions rather than narrated words. They tell of our world, where a thin veil of prettiness masks a truth of broken plastic. Though they may

mirror human relationships, they maintain a level of agency in their silence, without falling

into the trope of using our language to be understood.

III. Surface Tension, or, Things with Holes

i

"Misuse frees the object from the systems to which they've been beholden" states Bill Brown in *Other Things,* the 2015 sequel to the aforementioned *Things*. [11] I explore misuse and new utility in my videos by creating new tools from found, broken items. I intuit utility based on the shapes of the things I find.

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Figure 8: *Surface Tension* props, found objects, largest 7×1.5×.5", 2018

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[11] Bill Brown, "How to Do Things with Things: A Toy Story," in *Other Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 221.

I went to summer camp when I was seven. One of our science activities asked the question: "Can you blow a heart-shaped bubble?" My fellow campers and I spent the morning excitedly bending our own bubble wands out of pipe cleaners, without a peep from the counselors on whether our square-, star-, or heart-shaped contraptions would indeed create matching bubble forms when tested in the soapy solution. The outcome of the activity, of course, was a group of collectively disappointed kids. "No," was the answer, "one could not blow a heart-shaped bubble." Experiments sometimes fail. (It was an especially harsh blow after the seemingly magical success of the previous day's experiment, in which we turned white carnations blue by placing their cut stems in a vase of water dyed with food coloring.) We were learning how the world worked, the reasons, physics, logic and rules which allowed some things to happen and made others impossible. It was one step toward the end of childhood.

Figure 9: *Surface Tension*, Video still, dimesnions variable, 2018

Childhood is filled with the surprise that comes with learning about the world through our immediate surroundings. This is one impetus behind my video pieces, where I give the new utility of tools and toys to found objects.

These videos include my hands performing tasks with various objects that have been found on the ground. One, *Surface Tension*, recreates the anticipation of blowing bubbles — through the oddly shaped apertures of bubble wands made from discarded items.

The piece is a coming-of-age tale in which there is both expectation and disappointment. Whatever hopes we have for a heart-shaped bubble are shattered. There is, however, still a magic in the nostalgic activity, as well as real surprise as to what shapes might be created at the moment off the bubble's birth. The wands have been created from found objects and all contain two basic elements: a handle and a hole. The objects themselves mirror the most basic tools, containing a part for the hand and a part for its intended task. The task here, however, is absurd: a childhood pastime of questionable usefulness.

I have found a handful of actual plastic bubble wands on my walks. Two in particular hold places of honor in my collection. One was found on the sidewalk near the shores of the Atlantic Ocean in Eastport, Maine, the easternmost city of the Continental United States. Another was found in a park in Seattle, Washington, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The bubble wands are identical, presumably from the same brand of bubble solution. I thought of the irony of assembling a *Wunderkammer* in the age of globalism, where my travels brought me to as many cookie cutter plastic objects as unique ones. I thought of identical bubbles being blown on the east coast, the west coast, and everywhere in between. The notion of a collective childhood was part amusing and part alarming. This thought was one driving force behind *Surface Tension*. If all bubbles wanted to be round, at least the apparatuses used to make them could be one of a kind.

Figure 10: *Measuring the Sun*, Three video stills, dimensions variable, 2018

In the three-minute video *Measuring the Sun*, the viewer faces a forced perspective of wonder and naivety. In it, I hold objects found on the ground up to the sky and pass them across the sun — for a moment, eclipsing or capturing it. The first-person point of view creates a sense of learning something for the first time. The viewer fluctuates between a return to childhood and a walk through a post-apocalyptic world explored through the things at her fingertips.

In this video, only my hands appear: a metonym for a person, a symbol of human curiosity. As with *Surface Tension*, the overarching gesture reads as a pseudo-scientific experiment as I repeat an action with various versions of the same tool. This new function involves interaction with the natural world. Here, littered objects help us see the world more clearly but also reveal how foreign it has become. The atypical juxtaposition of litter and nature might make us feel uncomfortable. The things our eyes pass over are forced into view, not only on a wall, as in *500 Washers*, or in a world all their own, as in *Adventures of a Blue Marble*, but situated firmly in our world.

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My videos make use of voids. Many utilitarian objects are made functional by what is not there. Bowls and spoons, windows and doors, rooms and houses, umbrellas and shoes, trashcans and chairs, empty sketchbooks, unaddressed envelopes — all of these are vessels, blank slates relying on a quality of emptiness prepared for a particular use. Their openness implies one utility, but I am interested in using this open quality in new ways.

I think again of Martin Heidegger's essay "The Thing." In his example of a jug made to hold liquid, Heidegger speaks of the emptiness, the openness, "the nothing of the jug" that is key to this object's use: "The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel's holding." [12] The vessel *qua* tool is an eyepiece, a container, and a helper. It rearranges the world by focusing and refocusing our attention.

In a sense, I appreciate working with found *things* because they are all vessels, blank slates, raw material. They carry an innate ambiguity, ready for reuse and reprocessing. The material world is at its purest self when devoid of human interaction. Yet like the tree falling in the forest with no one around to hear, can we grasp the inanimate world without it serving some function?

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[12] Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1971), 167.

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