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Beyond the Look of Representation: Defamiliarization, Décor, and the Latin Feel

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Abstract

This intergraded article thesis has three distinct chapters. Chapter one is an extended artist’s statement that begins with a brief overview of my artistic interests. I present the theories and frameworks that have informed my thinking in the development of my MFA project. I explain how I have undertaken a material exploration of a vinyl product, and a conceptual exploration of its use as décor to emphasize what I refer to as the ‘Latin Feel.’ The following questions are extrapolated: What is the Latin American relationship with this material? And further, what meaning does this object generate in this context? Descriptions and analyses of two artists whose works have influenced my project are provided. Chapter two is a comparative case study two artists, David Altmejd and Doris Salcedo, framed using the theory of defamiliarization as a means to assess the complexities and meanings of a type of abstraction. I examine the work of each artist in order to understand the intersection and interdependencies of art and culture. I propose that each artist’s interactions with narratives of broader social import challenge the autonomous state in which art is often placed in contemporary discourse. Chapter three is comprised of visual representation of body of work I have made during my MFA candidacy.

Keywords:
Defamiliarization, Decor, Latino, Identity, Art, Visual Culture, Doris Salcedo, David Altmejd, Sculpture
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Introduction:

This Masters of Fine Art thesis dossier consists of three parts that complement my thesis exhibition El Paradise, taking place at DNA Artspace in London Ontario from August 24 to October 2, 2016. This intergraded article dossier is comprised of: a Comprehensive Artist Statement, a Writing Practice Component in the form of a Case Study, and Practice Documentation. Together, this is the research I have conducted during my MFA candidacy.

My Comprehensive Artists statement begins with a brief overview of my artistic interests. I then present the theories and frameworks that have informed my thinking in the development of this project. Following that, I describe and analyze two artists whose works have influenced my project. Finally, to describe my thought process in the development of my project, I provide an overview of the methodology, process, and the body of work I have produced for my MFA thesis exhibition.

The Writing Component compares the artwork of David Altmejd and Doris Salcedo. The comparison of both these artists’ artworks will be framed using the theory of defamiliarization as a means to assess the layers of a type of abstraction. Despite their apparent aesthetic differences, I am interested in these artists’ related intentions, specifically as these intentions may be understood through each artist’s participation in the 8th Istanbul Biennial exhibition of 2003 titled Poetic Justice.

Lastly, I provide a visual documentation of the studio practice completed during my MFA candidacy.
COMPREHENSIVE ARTIST STATEMENT

Art and Biography:

My studio-based research stems from a deep-rooted interest in the consumption of culture. During my MFA candidacy I have undertaken a material exploration of a vinyl textile, and a conceptual exploration of the use of décor to emphasize what I refer to as the ‘Latino vibes or ‘Latin Feel’.¹/² My studio-based research and artwork is not specifically autobiographical, yet there is a clear influence from my experience of being an immigrant of Latin American origin to Canada and the United States negotiating with archetypes of Latino identity. In the pages that follow, my aim is to provide a thorough understanding of what my studio-based research entails, how it originated, and its purpose. In the following, I initially provide a brief overview of my self and my artistic interests. I then provide a description and analysis of two artists whose work is influential to this specific project. Finally, to crystalize my thoughts and provide a transparent and intelligible reading of my work, I describe my methodology, process, and the body of work I have produced for my MFA thesis exhibition.

¹This is term that I have developed to describe the visual vibes of the spaces that inform my studio-based research. This term evolved from various sources that consider the “invention” of Latin America. For more on the subject read Daphne V. Taylor-Garcia, Decolonial Historiography: Thinking about Land and Race in a Transcolonial Context, InTensions Journal, York University Issue 5 (Fall/Winter 2011), and Juan Flores and George Yudice, Living Boarders/Buscando America: Language of Latin Self-Formation, Social Text, Duke University Press, No. 24 (1990) pp. 57-84.

²I have used oilclothbytheyard.com as my wholesale vinyl cloth supplier. I contacted the owners of the restaurant Caracas located on 93 1/2 E 7th St, New York, NY 10009, United States, to source the material. This was one of the many restaurants where I encountered the vinyl tablecloth. My supplier describes their product as a “utilitarian fabric that is durable, vibrant, reusable, wipe able, long lasting, fade resistant and water proof.” They also pride themselves on producing “genuine oilcloth” which contains began to be manufactured by the company in 1952. The material needs be aired due to the off-gassing from level of phthalates (a softener present in all vinyl) in the PVC coating. Upon further research on the material was originally known an enamel cloth in England. Made from linseed oils and metal salts the material was produces as cost effective waterproof covering and gained popularity in the 1950s. The historical timeline of the material is of importance to me. For the purpose of this paper, this brief introduction will suffice. Yet, it is evident that my interest in the material calls for a more extensive analysis and profundity in research for any attempt to understand how it has been used over time and I will continue to explore this in my research-based studio practice.
My early memories and experience relate to being born and raised Bogotá, Colombia. At the age of nine, due to the political instability of the country, my family migrated to the United States. When I was sixteen, my family continued our journey to settle in Ottawa, Canada. Having been exposed to economic and social disparities amongst different cultural groups has affected the way in which I now perceive visual signifiers and symbolism pertaining to culture. As a visually aware person, I attempt to make sense of the various worlds in which I find myself. The various stages of migration I experienced were also accompanied by ideas of assimilation, class, race, and ultimately a provisional view of culture. My hyper-awareness of cultural signifiers and my interest in décor dominates my studio research. In order to develop a focused study and context for my production, I have limited my MFA explorations to the aesthetics of consumer spaces, specifically Latin American restaurants across Canadian and American cities.

I believe that these spaces are the ideal platform for an analysis of visual décor that emphasizes the notion of *culture* as a product. The autobiographical source of my practice manifests in a material exploration and in how I relate to the idea of identity-formation mediated by stylized hegemonic *culture*: Latino.³ In this project I have become engrossed with the idea that décor imposes signifiers and colonizes spaces with visual archetypes and stylized symbols that emphasize superficial elements of cultural identities. I believe it to be my artistic responsibility to reconstruct these cultural caricatures as art so that they are seen anew. Early on in my MFA project I found myself in New York City. It was there that I encountered the visually complex problem of the vinyl tablecloth; it was as if a consensus existed amongst the city’s many Latin-origin based restaurants. From Argentinian, to Mexican, to Cuban, to Colombian, the

³ For more on Latino-identity formation *Living Borders/Buscando America: Languages of Latino Self-Formation* by Juan Flores and George Yudice explores how Latino identity is mediated and constructed through the struggle over language under such" postmodern" conditions. 2 beginning with an exploration of the name, "America." Extrapolating from Edmundo O'Gorman's meditation on the" invention of America."
décor for the restaurant spaces was one that consistently exuded the Latin Feel. The glossy, shiny, and colourful tablecloths were the most prominent and consistent decorative product to be found across these consumer spaces. I asked myself, what is the Latin(o), or Latin American relationship with this material? And further, what meaning does it generate in this context?

My curiosity in respect of the specific decorative choices pertaining to these spaces has manifest in many ways. This curiosity has allowed to me to develop and explore both artistic and self-reflective questions. Conceptually, an exploration of the making of meaning through commercial décor unfolds throughout various works in my project. I understand my studio practice as a process-based visual-study that involves abstraction through the act of deconstructing existing materials and imagery. I believe that much of my knowledge of art making follows the twentieth-century logic of avant-garde movements. Two artists stand out as influences on my interest in identity formation through décor, alongside art making practices, and theory. Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, whose works place experimentation above representation, specifically in the exhibition Tropicalia, are two ‘influencers’ that are described in my studio methodology discussed below. Given their focus on experimentation above representation, their artworks are placed within a framework that reveals the way in which symbols and signs can be misused to misrepresent culture. In light of such strategies stylized, the stylized imagery imprinted on the tablecloths contributes to the construction of ‘tropical’ or ‘exotic’ settings that become symbolic within commercial spaces that promote the consumption of this ‘Latin Feel.’

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4 The Tropicalia exhibition surveys the movement of Tropicalism in Brazil from 1967 to 1972. The movement includes the work of artists, poets, critics, filmmakers, journalist, intellectuals and other cultural figures in Brazil. Nelson Motta’s article “A Cruzada Tropicalista” is seen as a manifesto of that qualified it as basically inclusive; accepting of the kitsch without prejudice; kitsch a visceral element of “tropicality” pop formation; a certain level of folkloricization by making reference to a topical attitude.
A discussion around my work involves the need to reconcile my internal reflection on my own experience of migration that led to me to question the meaning of cultural identity, and my interest and analysis of visual representations of Latino culture found in public spaces. In my studio-research I think of the dichotomy between the use of ordinary objects as a reflection of the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) nature of non-industrial developing and craft economies. This is a terrain that I explored in sculptural installations during the first year of my MFA. At first, I was hesitant to use the vinyl material directly in my practice due to its blatant associations to the kitsch. Therefore, I began to explore my topic of interest through other materials I associated with the representational space of a DIY low-economy. *Stacked Tables, 2015*, for example, is representational of the space of a DIY, socio-economically lower-strata market environment that points to a location of trade and exchange. It is an ‘awkward’ place, as each table is dependent on the one it stands on, and at any moment the whole structure could collapse. Indeed, it is evident that there is a risk in even approaching the structure. I saw this structure to be similar to the market place that serves both as location of trade and exchange, one that is awkward as each table is dependent on the one it stands on, and at any moment the structure could collapse, making it evident that there is a risk factor in approaching it.

At the early stages of my project, plywood was my entry point into seeing the vinyl cloth for what it is. While rejecting the utilitarian purpose of the objects presented, my project favours unpacking the material’s symbolic associations. I acknowledge that the viewer’s associations with the material vary. Despite this, I argue that the material, while not always signifying otherness, frequently seduces the viewer into an experience akin to ‘the consumption of otherness.’ Ultimately, in making work that is elusive from a distance based on its materiality, I ask the viewer to approach the object and to look at it closely beyond the superficiality of the
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surface to seek its potential signified meanings, or to speculate on the tropes it represents.

Beyond looking at representation and symbolism in my research-based studio practice, I am also interested in specific of the aesthetic langue of the spaces or environments I invoke. In the essay titled From Neo-Baroque to Neo-Baroques? Australian scholar Angela Ndalianis argues that the baroque can be understood as a trans-historic state that extends beyond the Seventeenth century. Her primary example of a Baroque space in contemporary society is the tourist capital of New York City: Times Square. Ndalianis claims that Times Square has undergone “Disneyfication.” She relies on Disney™ as a verb where, through a series of processes, an object, space, or concept is turned into or treated as an exaggerated and enhanced element of the global capitalist environment. Disneyfication is “part of the larger phenomenon that manifest itself in contemporary urban culture, one that reveals the New Baroque logic,” which equates with excess, stylization, and commercial trade. These factors are highly prevalent in my research of the representation of the Latino, as tropical and exotic, through stylized imagery of botany.

In relation to my studio research I am interested in how the traits of this so-called Neo-Baroque logic, which include self-reflexivity, virtuosity, theatricality, spectacle, and excess of display, participate in the culture of décor I examine. I interpret “Disneyfication,” as the process of stylizing aesthetic responses to social narratives within a system of mass consumption and capitalism such that the objects that result become emblematic of a larger construct. Taking Ndalianis’ term, I want to highlight the degree to which the homogenization of Latin-origin


6 Ibid. 266.
cultures and peoples through a delegated aesthetic has undergone the process of “Disneyfication.” A ‘Disney-fied’ décor references the economic, stylized, socio-cultural, superficial environment that contributes to a synesthetic experience of consumption.

In the body of work that I have created for my MFA thesis exhibition, I have chosen to create an environment inspired by synesthetic experiences of consumption regarding a seeming Latino culture. An ostensibly public space that offers any ethnic product provides visual cues to transport both the body and memory, in time and space. And, as such, the “Disneyfication” of these spaces manifests in what I refer to as the Latin Feel. I am therefore intent on mobilizing a kind of thematic coherence, the use of generic and familiar imagery, and the possibility of simultaneously using expression and conformity to stereotypes in an attempt to make meaning through spaces I create.

In the studio, the following questions inform my practice: How does an image come to reflect a specific idea in a global context? How do images effect collective constructions of culture? How can artists explore the contemporary role of images and objects embedded in the quilt of society? How can dynamic and contrasting aesthetic approaches coexist, and what do they convey about contemporary Western society? Ultimately, in my investigation into the effect of the spread of tropes and typologies through time and space I question why and how this vinyl material became a symbol that is commonly found in spaces to represent the Latino identity and therefore promote the 'Latin feel.' In an essay written by Miami curator Gean Moreno and artist Ernesto Oroza, titled La Ville Souvenir, 2015, a ‘malefic mass’ invades souvenir shops and the local markets; it is a pollutant. The rhetorical prose was written to complement their exhibition Orange Tsunami in 2013. They ask readers to imagine…

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7 Orange Tsunami is an exhibition that took place in Los Angeles at Wharton and Espinosa Gallery in 2013. The installation included beach towels and beach balls with stylized images of the city.
“Hundreds of thousands of malefic and possibly animated masses, with a range of physiognomic variations, of course, as souvenir economies demand, cast in plastic and polychrome clay, produced in blown glass and in treated and pressed metal, all taking over the shelves and pushing past the doors of the establishments where they are housed and sold, leaving mucus trails behind them, climbing over Mexican sombreros and sliming rows of postcards, sulllying flamingo towels and defiling squeaky rubber sharks, altering the temperature registered by map thermometers, and rendering inconclusive the deadness of the alligator-paw bottle openers.”

The mass, the object, and the material is capitalism. Capitalism is this every generic object; it is the public symbols that have come to represent identities and places. For me, La Ville Souvenir allowed a contextualizing of my thinking around the vinyl cloth, its socio-economic significance and stylized nature. It also allowed me to rethink it as another material souvenir; as a malefic mass whose ubiquitous placement causes it to become absorbed within an urban context rife with decorative representation. Slowly infiltrating the consciousness of all of those who consume it, I argue that such representation becomes a way of not only consuming, but of understanding other cultures.

Alongside this, Rosalind Krauss’s view explicated in her essay Sculpture in the Expanded Field, indicates “the new is made comfortable by being made familiar, since it is seen as having gradually evolved from the forms of the past.” This forced me to consider the material’s relationship to the past in terms of nostalgia and symbolism, and also the significance of placing it in the gallery space. Krauss explains: “Historicism works on the new and different to diminish newness and mitigate difference...And we are comforted by this perception of sameness, this strategy for reducing anything foreign in either time or space, to what we already know and

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8 Ernesto Oroza and Gean Moreno. La Ville Souvenir. e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY (May/August) 2015:1.

In light of this, it can be suggested that as we are comforted by sameness, we are confronted by difference. Therefore when creating a space that comes from difference, there are no arbitrary choices, but rather specific ones that mediate the thin line between comfort and confrontation. The pre-existing material, the tablecloth, asks the viewer to look beyond the simulacra and decorative sensory experiences of the consumer culture to which we are constantly exposed.

Aligning Krauss’s thinking alongside cultural critic George Yudice’s definition of culture as “an epistemic framework that is both a socio-political and economic expediency,” I have come to understand that an accumulation of symbols and signs determines our everyday experiences. I want to acknowledge that as an artist, I am a participant in modern capitalism. So, while my project acknowledges decolonizing theories that focus on the tensions that co-exist in one place or one body between different memories and opposing mindsets, I also grapple with the realization that my work is fully situated within a capitalist system. Yet, I have also come to realize that modern capitalism provides us with the need to imagine difference: a powerful means of both constructing and critiquing representation.

**Artistic Influences:**

Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark have made a contribution to my understanding of exploring constructs of culture and identity though art. In an authentic search to challenge archetypes and materiality, two works by Oiticica played a particular role in my studio research. In his installation and exhibition titled *Tropicália*, 1967, for example, Oiticica playfully

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10 Ibid. 33.

asserts ideas of Brazilian archetypes in a quest to rethink national identity. In the exhibition’s accompanying text, *General Scheme of the New Brazilian Objectivity*, he explores how foreign cultural influences and gazes were internalized, and then redeployed by cultural producers in Brazil. To help unravel my interest and connection to *Tropicália*, I quote a substantial section from scholar and historian Serguio Bruno Martin’s analysis:

As the spectator penetrates *Tropicália*, a number of different elements come into view, but they lack any clear sense of articulation with one another. They are, rather, experienced as an accumulation – as if the spectator has no time to make sense of each element, as new ones pile up before that can be done. The disconnectedness of accumulation comes before one can make any sense of thematic coherence, and is further enhanced in the vertiginous dive into the Imagetical labyrinth, which keeps narrowing as one advances, urging a rhythmic pace against the possibility of assimilation. The images in *Tropicália* are stereotypical icons of ‘brazilianness’, but paradoxically presented ones: an accumulation of ‘Brazilian’ images that fail to cohere into a smooth sense of identity. The viewer is now drawn into making a whole array of supposedly familiar images into a nonsense.12

There is an evident sense of romanticism associated with Oiticica’s work in his folkloric, or craft-like, improvisational use of a counter-cultural industry against mass representation by re-appropriating the tropes that had been assigned to Brazilian culture. I associate with this playful romanticism in my own practice through appropriation, repletion and repurposing. The references to accumulation and theatricality, familiarity turned into nonsense simultaneous with invoking specific tropes and aesthetic references regarding identity and encountering ideas about identity politics are the characteristics of Oiticica’s work that are of greatest interest to me conceptually and aesthetically. These same characteristics are ones that I strive to emulate in my own work.

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In another project, a thirty-object body of work all titled Prangolé,¹³ Oiticica uses existing consumer materials and images. The word Prangolé in Brazil refers to a range of events or states, including: idleness, a sudden agitation, unexpected situation, or a dance party. Conceptually these artworks extend into Oiticica’s sensory politics. In a Prangole dance performance; Oiticica uses textiles to cover the body. The fabric is a costume of identity. Movement and tactility are transformed into sensual acts of enjoyment transmitted from both the fabric to the body. Although in my practice I use a vinyl fabric or the imagery found within it, I also seek to achieve a sense of movement and sensuality. Nonetheless, my works rely heavily on their formal characteristics and their quality as objects, so that ideas of the folkloric and enactments are not only prevalent but are the forefront of the work. For example, the works rely on the wall as the site of display rather than being used as props in performance.

A participant in Oiticica’s exhibition, Tropicalia, 1967, Lygia Clark is another artist who is a point of reference within my research. Clark’s disdain for romanticism towards materiality stems from her self-understanding as a classical artists concerned with the persistence of art over time, as it is evident in the act of making an artwork. The object is secondary to the act of making, and this notion extends through her work’s formal qualities. In my studio-practice I have sought equilibrium between the act of making and the art object, neither of which exist independently and which I therefore value equally. A close analysis of Clark’s “specific nexus of socio-economic unpredictability, political adversity, and existential precariousness,”¹⁴ which

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operate in her acts of making to produce the experience of art have been insightful to guide my own exploration of process versus product. When looking at an artwork the making of the object and its autonomous stance as an object become intertwined rather than existing as mutually exclusively elements.

In her art practice Clark also sought to abolish the distance between art and the viewer. In the latter years of her artistic career she completely abolished this line, encouraging the viewer to be a participant in the making of the work. This is evident in her performance *Meditation*. Such experimentation with viewership is also evident in her earlier work; in *Superficies moduladas* and *Planos em superfície modulada* 1958, for example she uses technical strategies to invite the viewer to approach the work, to stand close to it. What she asks of the audience is to contemplate the process and the materiality. This strategy of eliciting contemplation may focus on the lines incised in the aforementioned works. Scholar Anna Dezeuze describes the strategy of drawing attention to incised lines as ones that “cannot be distinguished from the lines traced on the support until the viewer looks at the works closely, both frontally and laterally.” Regarding Clark’s 1959 *Contra-relevos* (Counter-reliefs) and *Casulos* (Cocoons) works, Dezeuze continues to describe how the spectators are invited to approach the work and “to peer even more intimately into small folded spaces in front or even behind the surface of the work.”

Such acts of intimate looking and even of contemplation inherent to an encounter with Clark’s work are qualities that I consider in my developing my studio methodology.

Studying Oiticica and Clark’s work in the *Tropicalia* exhibition, and their extensive practices in general have given me insight into a viewer’s participation in and access to the work.

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15 Dezeuze, A. 231.

16 Ibid. 231.
In my own work, I have developed an interest in the visual experience and viewer’s expectations of familiarity and discomfort with art, including within theatrical environments that express an artificial thematic coherence. Combining ideas of both sensory and identity politics, for example, Juanita Lee Garcia Oiticica analyzes the often overlooked motif within the image, its materiality, and thus establishes its significance. Further, although there are dramatic differences between Clark’s aesthetic sensibilities and my own, I believe her influence is significant to me through our respective usages of simple gestures to finalize a work: acts of folding, slicing, or pinning.

**Process Materiality, Abstraction, and Mediation:**

Gloriously tacky – I think when I look at the vinyl tablecloths laying in my studio. Others would describe it as distasteful or kitsch. Its smooth plastic brightly coloured surface off-gasses, releasing the potent smell of toxicity. The material is almost impenetrable, but not quite. I take a small knife and begin to slice it. Strand by strand, shred by shred, the vinyl turns into a gesture — into a line. Ultimately, it becomes a medium. The medium in many ways is the message: mass production, consumer intervention, a generic descriptor of information, and a propagator of the ‘Latin feel.

I began my ongoing project by tracing the imagery of the material in an attempt to understand it. I explored the layers and patterns and the poor registration of the printed colours. I wanted to understand the meaning embedded between the cheap materiality and stylized imagery. Moreno and Oroza write about “the unstoppable invasion of the malefic mass [that] happens slowly, as slowly as the invasion of Mexican sombreros in Barcelona, Sevillian castanets in the Bahamas, and Sphinxes in Las Vegas.” This slow invasion is what I imagine is

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17 Oroza, E. 6.
happening in the commercial spaces that house vinyl cloths. The vinyl cloth, the souvenir, and the generic object are all emblems that have spread throughout time and space, across borders and boundaries, to represent specific peoples and places. In the vinyl cloth’s particular case, its generic essence may be interpreted as the tropical and exotic moving towards the mainstreamed aesthetics of the ‘Latin feel.’

When I make my work, I explore the material by interfering with its existing form. The manual act of shredding it is important because it allows me to have intimate contact with the material. Establishing its broken state, I use the simple gesture of cutting to create a greater complex whole. Once I had developed this way of reworking the plastic cloth, I decided to individually insert thousands of shreds into pin-sized holes that I drilled into a wooden plank or panel. This process resonates with the synthetic process of wig making, or the art of rug-hooking, or other insertion methods that begin with puncturing. The act of cutting and assembling is an intricate, meditative, and intimate process that invokes other processes.

Other simple gestures and evidence of process are present in my work in the areas where wood is left uncovered, in the series of artworks titled *Folded Table (composition)* for example, to offer a legible reading of the original surface. In *Folded Table (composition 1)*, 2015, I decided to leave areas of drilled holes on the surface uncovered and uncoated. Emphasizing the porous nature of wood, in the piece the vinyl shreds that resemble hair, appear to be ejecting from the surface rather than being inserted into it. Further, in *The Folded Table (composition)* series, I also made the active choice to alternate between the coloured side of the cloth in each strand and its reverse, revealing the plastic threaded material. Through this simple gesture of alternating it was my intention through this action to reveal the poor material-quality of the cloth as a textile covering.
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My commitment to process often results in a seemingly un-finished aesthetic. For me, this accomplishes three things. The first is that an “un-finished” aesthetics provides the viewer with insight into how a work is made, placing importance on the act of making. The second is that its “un-finished” quality, a form of abstraction, offers ambiguity that opens up the work to multiple interpretations and even a viewer’s skepticism. The third is that it serves as a strategy for involving the viewer; the sense of ‘completeness’ is subjective as each individual attempts to ‘fill in the gaps’ in the act of viewing. I associate this methodology with Oiticica’s aspiration “to create new experimental conditions where the artist takes on the role of ‘proposer,’ ‘impresario,’ or even ‘educator.’”¹⁸ The artwork is essentially a proposal, or a platform for contemplation that emphasizes an act, a form of materiality, and offers temporal, bodily visual encounters.

Recursive motifs appear in my work, suggesting both cyclical narratives of time, and point to the manner in which images come to appear as generic within patterns. In a particular body of work, I repurpose imagery found within the vinyl cloth. For me, through repetition, an image’s importance is emphasized while its commonplace use is transformed into a symbol. Repetition also creates the risk of the imagery and/or the material itself being overlooked. In order to begin to generate a new image ‘format,’ I initially made a collage by cutting out and reassembling the stylized botanical forms from the material, and placed the cloth collage onto a scanning bed. The new image I created from my ‘reassembled’ material was then repurposed in new works, as the pattern within a sculpture, in another kind of textile, or wallpaper, and as a new surface for my work. This system of making follows a Baroque logic celebrating excess: forms that arise in one work, including from the negative spaces, are repeated throughout various

compositions. And interestingly, the folded edges of the cloth on the scanning bed give the impression of an edge, and create a new reading of the imagery. So, the illusion of shifting viewpoints, and the perception of depth that counters the flat image, also contribute to aesthetic characteristics reminiscent of the Baroque.

In closing, I think it is important to refer to the ways the idea of ‘culture’ operates in my research, since conceptually my project unfolded from a particular focus on visual forms of cultural and ethnic representation. As previously mentioned, Gorge Yudice claims that, “some have even argued that culture has transformed into the very logic of contemporary capitalism.” This definition of culture serves as a paradigm that emphasizes how certain characteristics from politics, economics and the arts have begun to merge. My research is thus contextualized within an inherently interdisciplinary scope. Just as it takes from cultural critics such as Yudice, it also takes from literary theorists, as will be seen in my application of Viktor Shklovsky’s theory of defamiliarization in the following case study. It is through the integration of these various analytic lenses that I inform my art-making practice, and I have come to regard art’s significant contribution to society.

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Ernesto Oroza and Gean Moreno. La Ville Souvenir. e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY (May/August) 2015

WRITING COMPONENT: CASE STUDY

David Altmejd and Doris Salcedo

My interest in David Altmejd (Canada, b. 1978) and Doris Salcedo (Colombia, b. 1958) has developed throughout my artistic endeavours both inside and outside of academia. Altmejd’s Neo-Baroque aesthetic and his use of Romanticism have greatly influenced my art education. For me, Doris Salcedo’s work has had a significant influence on explorations of the complexities of conceptual art. As a prominent Colombian female artist, Salcedo has influenced a variety of artists whose work has contributed to my own. Further, at the time of writing this case study, Salcedo’s eponymous retrospective Doris Salcedo ¹ was showing at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (MCA Chicago), and Altmejd’s first Quebec-initiated retrospective Flux ² was on exhibit at the Musée d’art Contemporain de Montréal. Both these exhibitions demonstrate the artists’ current relevance to, and respective influence on, the contemporary art world.

Altmejd’s and Salcedo’s approaches to art are brilliant but, at first glance, divergent. Altmejd’s sculptures and installations are grand in scale and intricate in detail. Made of plaster, a figure with wings takes the form of an angel; a sculptural drawing is made from gold chains activating the space within a glass case elevating the drawing to a museological status. ³ Exquisite and overwhelming in its various formal constructions, Altmejd’s practice makes references to fantasy, art history, and contemporary (Western) culture. In contrast to Altmejd’s extravagant

¹ Doris Salcedo is an exhibition that took place from February 21, 2015 to May 24, 2015 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (MAC Chicago) in Chicago, Illinois, USA and was on display at the Guggenheim from June 26, 2015 to October 12, 2015 in New York, New York, USA.

² Flux is an exhibition that took place from October 10, 2014 to February 1, 2015 at Musée d’Art de la Ville de Paris in Paris, France and at MUDAM Luxembourg in Luxembourg City, Luxembourg from March 7, 2015 to March 31, 2015, and Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal from June 20, 2015 to September 13, 2015 in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

³ Refer to Image Bank, Figure 8.
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pieces, Salcedo’s body of work has a sense of intimacy, immediately connected to experiences of living. The familiar household object, imbued with a feeling of warmth, is decontextualized from the everyday with notable distortions. For example, she ruptures the floor of a grand foyer at the Tate Modern, by creating a simple but deep crack. The art piece remains, after the fact, when filled with concrete. The permanent scar on the Tate’s floor reveals the essence and fragility of a surface. 4 The floor invokes skin-like tissue and mimics the ripping of flesh. At other times, a labyrinth of desks upturned on top of other desks fills the room. A layer of soil is sandwiched between the two surfaces where sprigs of grass begin to sprout through miniscule holes punctured through the bottom of an upturned desk. 5 Salcedo is “interested in showing that where there is violence, inner life is not possible,” pointing to the vulnerability and complexity of life. 6

In presenting a comparison of Altmejd’s and Salcedo’s works, I am reminded that the art world is uniquely positioned to facilitate global encounters regarding wider sociocultural concerns. In order to consider key pieces that demonstrate my thematic interest of defamiliarization and the re-authentication of the artist’s voice, I will first provide an analysis of the 8th Istanbul Biennial in 2003. On this international art stage, Salcedo and Altmejd presented work that asserted that the role of the artist is equal to that of the poet: it expresses the evolution of human consciousness as the principle action of empowerment. 7 Notably, this idea is contrary

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4 Refer to Image Bank, Figure 9.

5 Refer to Image Bank, Figure 10.


7 Ibid. 25.
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to the views of authors like Roland Barthes, who assert the ‘death of the author.’ I will then analyze the sculptures of Altmejd as shown in *Barroco Nova: Neo-Baroque Moves in Contemporary Art*, in London, Ontario. I look examine his work in the context of this exhibition due to my interest in the Neo-Baroque aesthetic. Next, I will provide an analysis of Salcedo’s sculpture *Noviembre 6, 2001* (2001) in the context of *Cuentos Cantos Colombianos*, an exhibition that assembled a group of fourteen Colombian artists at the Daros Latinamerica institution in Zurich, Switzerland in 2005. The context of this exhibition places an emphasis on the influence that Salcedo’s nationality and socio-cultural upbringing has had on her practice, an influence that I, as a Colombian born artist, can deeply relate to. Ultimately, I argue that despite using seemingly disparate aesthetics, these two artists provide similar critical insights and forms of witness regarding contemporary human experience through the underlying framework of defamiliarization.

**Defamiliarization: The Artist and The Author**

A distorted form: fragmented, layered, and complex. Altmejd's *Le Dentiste* (2008) is a distorted representation of society, and ultimately of the self. Larger than life-size, the sculpture signals power and strength. Resembling a mythical giant, the piece appears “to surge out of the memory of the world.” Its conception reflects the result of a destructive catalyzed action. In contrast with its apparent ‘gravitas’, one can imagine comparing this behemoth to a child’s

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8 For more information on Roland Barthes refer to: Roland Barthes, *The Death of The Author*, 1997.

9 *Barroco Nova: Neo-Baroque Moves in Contemporary Art* took place from October 8, 2011 to January 1, 2012 at Museum London, McIntosh Gallery, and Western University’s ArtLab Gallery’s three locations in London, Ontario, Canada.

10 The exhibition *Cantos Cuentos Colombianos* was first presented in Zurich, Switzerland at the Daros Latinamerica Institute in two parts — first from October 2004 to January 2005 and later from January 2005 to April 2005. It was the largest display of contemporary Colombian art shown in Europe to date. It was shown again in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil at Casa Daros, the sister institution, from March 3, 2013 to September 8, 2013.

elaborate Transformer toy.\textsuperscript{12} Thrusting upward, the structure alludes to modernist architecture, masculinity, excess, and yet it also reflects decay. Due to the reflections of the gallery’s gleaming bulbs bouncing off the mirrored surface, the structure also exudes material fragility and restraint. The complexity of its material dichotomy and its multiple allusions within the single object point to disconnects between reality and illusion. \textit{Le Dentiste} (2008) is both figurative through its human presence and industrial through its reference to modern architectural archetypes; an anthropomorphic figure becomes a grand object. The use of reflective surfaces emphasizes the presence of the viewer’s body. Lured by the image of oneself, the mirrors absorb the viewer into its composition, hinting at ideas readily associated with narcissism.

A chair. A sculpture. The distorted object stimulates disorientation. Two metal legs rise from a flat square surface and fold over the sides, suggesting pain. This chair-like structure is, in the abstract, a living creature; its gesture of pain becomes a deeply felt violence. In this unnaturally painful state, a quest towards beautiful imperfection is evident in the elegant stance of the object. Through its obscure scale and formation, the object immediately negates its utilitarian purpose: offering a place to sit. As the formal artistic elements and conceptual investigations of Salcedo are encountered, the artwork transmits a sense of confusion to the viewer. Disorientation is asserted by \textit{Noviembre 6, 2001} (2001), as the seemingly familiar object, the chair, is questioned when it is presented as an artwork.\textsuperscript{13} Stainless steel, lead, and resin conjure a sense of the warmth found in wood. An object becomes anthropomorphized. The elusive hyper-representational grain texture of wood, which the metal sculpture assimilates, is simulacra.

\textsuperscript{12} Transformers are a line of toys produced by a Japanese company called Takara Tomy. These automobile machine robot toys have inspired a comic book series as well as a feature Hollywood film.

\textsuperscript{13} Refer to Image Bank, Image 4. Dimensions variable, estimated 118.5x75x45cm; 112.5x 78x41cm; 61.5x388x43cm.
Salcedo and Altmejd each employ defamiliarization as a technique to achieve their respective ideological and aesthetic ends. In 1971, Russian Formalist and scholar Viktor Shklovsky coined the term *ostranenie*.14 In literary theory, *ostranenie*—estrangement or defamiliarization—is defined as the process of re-situating actions that have become habitual or objects that are intrinsic to social structures, to re-consider their often hidden meaning suggested within certain apparently benign contexts. Defamiliarization re-introduces an action or object to be seen anew. In his essay “Art as Technique,” Shklovsky explains, “The purpose of art is to impart sensation to an object as something seen rather than ‘merely’ recognized; the device of art is the device of the ‘estrangement’ of things and the device for the facilitated form.”15 Objects contain and exude sensations in their form. For Shklovsky, art is a means of experiencing the making of things, and things make meaning. I agree with this argument, and align it with the thinking that art is a means of experiencing meaning.

Applying the theory of *ostranenie* to contemporary art discourse allows me to make a unique comparison between Salcedo’s and Altmejd’s respective explorations of the displacement of self-experience in society. Involved with notions of identity and formation of the self, their work addresses the larger cultural implications of those concerns. Through this theory, and alongside the thematic approach of the 8th Istanbul Biennial in 2003 titled *Poetic Justice*, which I explain below, I adopt an understanding of the artist as an author. Through making a familiar object strange, the artist fulfills the role of storyteller in ways similar to the author in the framework of *ostranenie*. I argue this in part to align with the belief that the work extends beyond the object so that, “in the estrangement of things and the device of the de-facilitated form


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[it is] the perpetual process in art that in itself [is] prolonged.”¹⁶ Through the act of continuously making the familiar strange, each artist re-interprets both factual and mythical narratives as a strategy for allowing an affective response by their audience. This is an approach that I aspire to in my artistic development.

International Scene: Istanbul Biennial 2003, Poetic Justice

In his curatorial essay for the 8th Istanbul Biennial in 2003, Dan Cameron asks, “What is justice?”¹⁷ At that moment in time, an international art forum entitled Poetic Justice was focusing on ‘the evolution of human consciousness’ in the form of global citizenship while expressing concerns for the global economic downfall, the reinforcement of borders, and refugee crises. Today, these concerns continue to be present in contemporary art. Founded on an idealism that the removal of borders will lead to a “continuous and integrated flow of pure humanity throughout the world united in its shared desire for peace, stability and communication,”¹⁸ global citizenship is both idealistic and contested. One could even go as far as to say that it is also highly romanticized in the temporal context of modern capitalism.

The underlying theme and title of the Biennial Poetic Justice asserts the role of the artist to be that of a poet: to express the evolution of human consciousness as the principle action of empowerment.¹⁹ By this, I believe that Cameron refers to both self-empowerment and social

¹⁶ Carly Emerson. Shklovsky’s ostranenie, Bakhtin’s vnenakhodimost’: (How Distance Serves an Aesthetics of Arousal Differently from an Aesthetics Based on Pain), Poetics Today 26:4 (Winter 2005), Copyright © 2005 by the Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, pp. 637-661. 640.


¹⁸ Ibid. 21.

¹⁹ Ibid. 25.
empowerment through art. In the present day art world, and the larger global context in which it exists, the question here is whether it is through the artist’s object, the poet’s verse, or an author’s prose that subjects exert ideas of their identity in relation to their expression. If art can be also seen as a common language used across diverse cultural and social contexts, perhaps my view is also romanticized.

Altmejd uses defamiliarization to force introspection within individuals. His Delicate Men in Positions of Power (2003) was first exhibited at the Istanbul Biennial. Cameron explains that “the crystallized skull of a sabre-toothed tiger nestles in close proximity to a jumble of cheap necklace chains, each suggesting a private symbolism grounded in an iconography that finds camp and cosmology to be contrasting faces of the same coin.”\(^\text{20}\) The viewer is invited to search for symbolism and significance in the objects. Beyond what is encountered on the surface, viewers are encouraged to decipher tropes that belong to the artist. In the sculptural environment that Altmejd creates, time and space are compressed. Anthropologist David Harvey argues that the disorienting compression of time and space is a crucial result of “the idealization of nature.”\(^\text{21}\) I argue that this is a form of defamiliarization. Through Altmejd’s allusions to social concepts, such as capitalism and narrative, and through Altmejd’s material investigations he is setting up ‘environments’ that reflect the “invention of the world-picture (concept) in our time.”\(^\text{22}\) In applying Harvey’s thinking to Altmejd’s work it becomes lucid that the viewer is asked to reflect on an idealized form of nature. I propose that this idealization continues as far as a human’s

\(^{20}\) Ibid. 65.


\(^{22}\) Ibid. 110.
internal quest to discover new relations presented by the artworks’ forced examination of one self and its relation to ‘reality.’

In comparison, Salcedo employs defamiliarization through introspection towards the collective. At the Istanbul Biennial, her work uses the motif of the chair for her ephemeral, site-specific public project. Worn wooden chairs were tightly enmeshed in a vacant lot between two buildings in the city’s centre. On its profile, the installation offers the illusion of a flush façade. The installation, *Untitled (One thousand one hundred and fifty wooden chairs)* (2003), contains tunnels of vacant spaces creating a maze as it consumes the length, width, and height of the space.\(^{23}\) This topography of conflict is “a mapping of life turned upside-down, with people caught in violent crosshairs of opposing viewpoints.”\(^{24}\) The mound of chairs replaces masses of faceless immigrants and the lack of global concern for human lives. The piece represents the notion of non-belonging as well as the loss of ideologies and cultural ties to a specific geopolitical construct.\(^{25}\) Her conceptual interest in minimalist aesthetics is here seen through the repetition of a single object. Yet there is an overwhelming sense that follows a Baroque logic through her complex arrangement of the objects, and the physical and psychological affect present in the consumption of space and illusions. Consistent with the characteristics of defamiliarization as in Altmejd’s work, the audience of Salcedo’s work is seduced by the

\(^{23}\) Refer to Image Bank, Image 5. Approx. 10.1 x 6.1 x 6.1 m.


familiarity of a form only to be exposed to a tangled composition, with violent connotations and darkness, in an unexpected space that produces a claustrophobic sensation.

Both artists, contending with key predispositions of the 21st century, challenge audiences to question “our predetermined notions of identity . . . and our ability to create new thought-formations out of the remnants of an increasingly obsolete system.” Working with these ideas, Salcedo and Altmejd locate themselves within those obsolete systems, which include the predominant ideas of ‘culture’ and society. Making the familiar strange is way for each to understand this obsolescence. It can be argued that Biennials are vehicles for “defusing the idea that cultural identity serves as a kind of predetermined artistic destiny,” as they often function under ambiguous themes (e.g. nationality, artistic style, or history). In the case of Poetic Justice, for example, both Salcedo and Altmejd make the case for the extension of self-formation influenced by cultural and social predispositions. Their art entails layered narratives, whether based on historical facts, cultural memory, or mythology. Deleuze writes that in storytelling “the author,” and by the same token, the artist, “must not make himself into the ethnologist of his people,” an ideal that Altmejd and Salcedo both achieve. While the works exist autonomously, they are also an extension of the artists themselves and serve as “speech-acts through which the [object] continually crosses the boundary which would separate private business from politics, and which produces collective utterances.”

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26 Cameron, D. 27.

27 Ibid. 21.


29 Ibid.
Within their artistic practice, each artist creates complex multi-layered narratives. For Altmejd, these narratives may be part of an exploration of a resurgence of the stylistic aesthetic of the Neo-Baroque in contemporary society, especially in relation to capitalism and socio-cultural myth constructs. For Salcedo, these narratives include the socio-political reality embedded in the guilt of her nation’s colonial and modern history. Therefore, via the conscious inception of the self set alongside abstraction to achieve a sense of defamiliarization – placed on an international stage – they each engage in the larger dialogue about the shrinking globe and how it inflects the vision of the individual versus the collective. Through their works, they achieve a compression of time and space and therefore modify “the difference of the inside and outside and of the public and private.”

David Altmejd

Altmejd’s work appears to be on the brink of representing an introspective fictional narrative of the artist’s own making and being a reflection of its reality. Taking on the role of a storyteller, he attempts to convey larger contemporary concerns. These are constructed using alluring sculptures that at once reference mythology, religion, popular culture, and ecological systems of life. “The transformation of fantasy into reality is at the core of David Altmejd’s work,” claims writer and curator Josée Drouin-Brisebois in a catalogue essay for the exhibition Barroco Nova: Neo-Baroque Moves in Contemporary Art. In my interpretation, his sculptures do not seek ‘perfection’ as fantasy; instead, they reflect reality’s imperfection with distortions


that allude to make-believe and utopic social structures. The werewolf, a Gothic Romantic legendary figure believed possessed with the ability to change shape as a result of curses and affliction, is Altmejd’s way of immersing his work into the larger movements of popular culture.\textsuperscript{32} While his sculptures of werewolf-like creatures mimic the practice of taxidermy in contemporary art, the artist also references the relation between the human creature and the broader animal world.

In the context of Barroco Nova, the characteristic of discomfort is made ever so present. For example, \textit{Le Dentist} (2008) elevates from the floor of the gallery space opposite of \textit{Le Berge} (2008), a Sasquatch-like monster coated in white fur.\textsuperscript{33} With human-like hands made of pastel-coloured plaster, an arm extends forward signalling “HALT!” A small mirror-covered staircase structure circles up and around the figure. Its head is wrapped in wire, and its face is replaced by a void. Featureless, \textit{Le Berge} (2008) gives the viewer a sense of discomfort due to its intimidating scale and the peculiar and contrasting combination of materials within one object. This mammoth is also discomforting, as it is a troubling reminder of popular culture ideas regarding mythical and spiritual creatures that are imaginary threats to humanity.\textsuperscript{34} In contrast, \textit{Le Dentiste} (2008) is composed of geometric forms. The sculpture appears as both a monumental structure and an androgynous figure. In its phallic stance it is reminiscent of Brancusi’s \textit{Bird in

\textsuperscript{32} Refer to Image Bank, Image 5.

\textsuperscript{33} Refer to Image Bank, Image 6.

\textsuperscript{34} Artist Allyson Mitchell is known for her giant Sasquatch. She explains that buried in the memory banks of collective popular culture is the mythical and spiritual creature called Sasquatch. Aboriginal ideas about Sasquatch (or “Wildman of the Forest” as he is called in the US and Sabe or Big Foot in Ojibwe cultural terms) have been appropriated by the white Canadian mainstream settler culture, arguably as an expression of racist fears around the “otherness” of native culture and nature in general. For more: \url{http://www.allysonmitchell.com/html/lady_sasquatch.html}, Accessed on September 20, 2015.
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*Space* (1928), swelling upwards from the ground. Concaved compartments contain a hidden gem, and a cracked egg is encased in a glass box. Cracks on the glass surface like a broken eggshell give the sense of transmutation, of something becoming. Seductive through its material surface and human-like presence, the sculpture reveals an intrinsic human fascination with the image of the self, which deliberately hints at the myth of Narcissus. Altmejd asserts, “If you cover an object with mirrors, it becomes invisible, totally transparent seeming. But if you walk around it, all of a sudden it takes shape, it becomes real.” Incorporating familiar narratives such as from mythology and popular culture is Altmejd’s way of continuing to ‘make up fiction’ from reality.

Extracting ideologies from both art history and popular culture, dualities invoking both the aesthetic and the conceptual are made available in *Le Dentiste* (2008) and *Berger* (2008). The pluralistic dualities within each piece, and amongst Altmejd’s various bodies of work, point to the deprivations and the possibilities of life by suggesting obscure realities. Occupying the same physical space, the sculptures of similar dimensions have been curated as if in a duelling stance. Facing each other, the grand sculptures create a tense and discomfiting atmosphere as the

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35 Refer to Image Bank, Image 7.

36 In Greek mythology, Narcissus is prophesied to have a long life if he “never knew himself.” Narcissus was condemned by Nemesis to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool due to his own cruelty towards many lovers and admirers. The more he looked at his reflection the more he fell in love with himself, until he wasted away and died, or as another legend goes, kills himself from the lack of response from his own image. For more see Micheal Grant and John Hazel, *Who’s Who in Classical Mythology*, Rutledge, London, 1994 p. 227; Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology*, ABD-CLIO Inc., Santa Barabara, 1998. p. 215; Anthony S. Mercante and James R. Dow, *World Mythology and Legend*, E3, Facts of File Inc. USA Vol. 2 M-Z, 2009 pp. 703-4.


38 Gilles Deleuze speaks about the possibility of the author providing himself with ‘intercessors’, meaning taking non-fictional characters and placing them in the condition of “making up fiction,” creating greater versions of themselves or of these characters as ‘legends’ in stories worth telling. (1985).
worlds that each represent—the mythical and traditional and the capitalist and industrial—confront one another. The unrestrained and opulent material exploration of each is analogous to a Baroque, yet Modernist, aesthetic. In mobilizing what has been described as a Neo-Baroque aesthetic, the work of Altmejd can be further linked to ideas of excess and capitalism. This is because it has been associated with “a crisis of property, a crisis that appears at once with the growth of new machines in the social field and discovery of new beings in the organism.” One could even go as far as to say that the tension between the fixity in *Le Dentiste* (2008) and the notion of chaos or threat to humanity that *Le Berge* (2008) fictitiously offers is a reflection of social regulation and the flow of capital; a postmodern condition that points to the “crucial problem for the social and political organization of capitalism.” Through an aesthetic of beauty and monstrosity, set in opposition yet operating simultaneously, Altmejd explores fictitious narratives that reflect the contemporary capitalist reality and presumably seek the possibility of life outside it.

As a self-proclaimed process-based artist, Altmejd investigates the possibilities that arise from the combination of materials and processes, establishing himself as a conscious decision maker. The seemingly empirical nature of his work is most evident through his series of sculptures named *Watchers* (2011). Angel-like figures made of plaster seem to construct themselves with multiple hands that protrude from the object made from plaster casts of Altmejd’s own hands, making the artist’s body present. These plaster sculptures are an explicit

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39 Deleuze, G. 1993, 110.


41 Refer to Image Bank, Image 8.
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Reference to the use of the sculpted male hand, most apparent in Roman and Greek Classical Art. The impression of the work’s self-making and its perpetual sense of touch parallels the sensual view of sculpture in Classical Art, in which the artist’s hand is the tool through which new life is created.\(^\text{42}\) Comparing Altmejd’s sculpture to ‘monstrous characters’ in literature, such as Frankenstein’s monster, helps us to see Altmejd’s work as an analogy: although having an independent existence, the objects’ origins cannot be removed from the experiences of its creators. Behind every Frankenstein’s monster is a creator, and beyond every fictional character there is an author.\(^\text{43}\) Often incorporating mythological and religious references in his work, it can be said that Altmejd astutely adopts a creative role similar to that of Prometheus, playing on ideas of the myth and the Romantic ideal of “seeing himself as the work’s collaborator.”\(^\text{44}\)

**Doris Salcedo**

It is important to recognize that participation in an exhibition suggests a sense of national representation and proposes that artists have a predetermined role as representatives (presumably making their art intrinsically linked to national identity.) Salcedo explicitly states that had she been born elsewhere, she would have preferred to be an abstract painter.\(^\text{45}\) To her, there is no choice but to make work that responds to her reality. Seemingly, the socio-cultural and geopolitical circumstances of Colombia have stimulated her art practice, a notion emphasized in the

\(^{42}\) Meeka Walsh, Bordercrossings, V. 44 N.1, Issue N.133. 61.

\(^{43}\) Written by English author Mary Wollstonecraft Shelly, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* was published in 1818.

\(^{44}\) Meeka Walsh, 52. In Greek mythology, Prometheus, one of the Titans, is believed to have created the first man from clay.

\(^{45}\) Herzog, HM. 158.
exhibition *Cantos Cuentos Colombianos* that situates the hymns (*cantos*) and stories (*cuentos*) of a nation, as expressed by its artist, at the forefront of its curatorial purpose. National identity, and its influence, is further emphasized in the context of the all-Colombian cohort of artists amongst which she has regularly shown with abroad.\footnote{An analysis and discussion of the exhibition *Cantos Cuentos Colombianos* (2005) would require an extensive paper. Although I briefly mention it in the Introduction to explain how Salcedo’s work is seen internationally, I do not provide a description of the exhibition or the other artists it included. Rather, it becomes important later when I touch on the Istanbul Biennial of 2003, and how the work emphasizes nationality and identity shifts in context.}

Merging the space between a conceptual and sculptural practice, Salcedo is a self-proclaimed political artist. Salcedo’s practice is inevitably political, in the sense that it proposes a response to the political climate and state of the country in which she was born.

On November 6th, 1985 at 11:35 AM in Bogotá, thirty-five Left guerrilla rebels by the name of “M-19” forcefully occupied the Palace of Justice.\footnote{Doris Salcedo, Julie Rodrigues Widholm, and Madeline Grynsztejn, *Doris Salcedo: Work, Selections*, The University of Chicago Press: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA, 2015.} Eleven Supreme Court Justices were executed in addition to the one hundred other deaths of both military and guerrilla fighters that occurred.\footnote{Herzog, H.M. 158.} This event marked an era of political instability in Colombia. Salcedo’s sculpture, *Noviembre 6, 2001* (2001), is an embodiment of the event; as art, it is a critical commemoration. Taking on the role of commemorator, Salcedo addresses the tensions that exist between memory, fiction making, and reality. Additionally, she is embodying a society affected by the trauma of violence with an object. Rather than participating in the performance of commemorative ceremonies that foster a singular national narrative and affirm historical continuity, Salcedo emphasizes the specific lived experiences of these events. She asks: How does such an event affect the individual? How do mediated facts affect how the event is interpreted? Incarnating a
“historical fact” as an artwork, she brings forth notions of social and personal acts of remembrance that become conducive to social interactions and collective memory. The notion of time, the effects of violence, the recollection of lived events, as well as historical and national memory, are ideas that are exuded by Salcedo’s artistic expressions.

_Cantos Cuentos Colombianos_’ curator, Michael Herzog, describes _Noviembre 6, 2001_ (2001) as displaying “antagonistic forms, hard and soft, crisscrossing over each other to finally combine, pieces which confront then unify, are virile and warlike and yet full of an immense tenderness . . . these shapes have everything and yet are almost nothing . . . in those few metal forms [are] a whole universe of possibilities and ways of reading the work.”

49 Antagonism emphasizes the opposition that lies within the form and its materiality. A significant possibility in reading the work is that the chair is a symbol of the body. A domestic object, the chair’s purpose is to accommodate the body. A chair bends at its hinges just as the body folds at the joints. The work is easily associated with Deleuze’s term, “the fold,” introduced in his 1993 publication of the same title, where he describes how a form, idea, or unit has the potential to take infinite paths. Thinking through this term, the literal bending and twisting of the sculpture in its construction projects new and endless forms of transformation, suggesting physical discomfort. In its elastic and malleable form, the body creases and folds “such that [it is] not separated into parts of parts, but rather divided into infinity and namely smaller folds that always retain a certain cohesion.”

50 In effect _Noviembre 6, 2001_ (2001), conveys the quality of having lived through choreographed acts of violence from the time of its conception. As a stand-in for

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49 Herzog, H.M. 159

the body, the seemingly aggressive gestures within Salcedo’s sculpture represent the infinite trauma of physical contortion that the body experiences in violent situations.

A non-linear exploration of time and disorientation contribute to a sense of discomfort. In the past three decades, Salcedo has undertaken an exploration of the relationship between victims of violence, such as hostages, and the physical spaces in which they are captive, as well as invoking refugees and the spaces to which they relocate. There is a robust understanding of the politics of space in her work. Salcedo explains that uncontrolled accelerations contrasted with pauses in time become common sensations in spaces with histories of violence.\(^51\) Her practice involves research on the subject of forceful detainment, including the origin of concentration camps in Cuba in 1896, modern day refugee camps, Guantanamo prison, and literature on the Holocaust.\(^52\) These references contribute to her understanding of genocide and the psychological effects of violence. Frequently she asks: How does time pass in captivity? Given her pressing concern for the fragility of the human body and mind, Salcedo takes on others’ experiences in order to manifest larger narratives of violence and conflict. In doing so, she draws attention to the site of violent acts and the relations among the subjects and the objects within that space. Static in its commemorational spirit, *Noviembre 6, 2001* (2001) is vibrant in intent, as if shouting a message. In this instance, the sculpture functions as a collective utterance for the human experience of loss.\(^53\) In the gallery, the permanence of the artwork confronts the viewer with a discomforting familiarity lived across boundaries.

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51 Herzog, H.M. 161.

52 Ibid. 161.

The multiple dualities located within this one sculpture extend outward from its familiar yet distorted form. Psychiatrist Sigmund Freud developed the theory of the *heimlich* and *unheimlich* (the familiar and unfamiliar).  

Perhaps the most evident duality here is in the fact that Salcedo purposely employs this theory as a framework for her practice. In “The Uncanny” (1919), Freud asserts that an object belonging to a familiar environment, such as the home, may be perceived as ‘distorted’ outside of this space. The *heimlich* is the familiar and the hospitable. It references a place of comfort or a private space. The *unheimlich* by contrast, negates that familiarity. In an ‘*unheimlich* state’, a viewing subject develops a sensation of uneasiness that may also be surprisingly seductive. German philosopher Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling refers to the *unheimlich* as “the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light.” This reflects what I suggest is the result of defamiliarizing an object; the acts of violence and physical trauma that perpetually resurface in Salcedo’s artistic practice are the *unheimlich*. Art historian Claudette Lauzon examines how Salcedo’s abstract and conceptual approach reveals her increasingly urgent commitment to showing that “just as violence in the public sphere infiltrates the presumably safe realm of the domestic, so too must the intimately felt consequences of violence be attended to publicly.” Salcedo’s installations function as public archives of loss for all of humanity to interpret individually. Inserting forms in abstraction...  

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54 Herzog, H.M. 160.  
57 Ibid. 229.
in the gallery that are often housed within the space of the home, and applying the theory of
heimlich and unheimlich, is an act of defamiliarization.

The seemingly ‘empirical’ nature of Salcedo’s work is therefore validated both through
the personal—her interpretation of research and interviews with victims of violence—and the
impersonal—mediating these experiences through an artistic means. Julie Rodriquez Widholm,
the curator of Salcedo’s retrospective at MCA Chicago elaborates on this idea, explaining that
“Salcedo considers her own work to be a literal embodiment of actual mourning experiences.”

By defamiliarizing objects that are understood as comforting or familiar, like a chair, she disrupts
the possible sense of ease about the form, and the reality it represents.

Conclusion

I analyzed Altmejd’s and Salcedo’s work within similar contexts and explored their
aesthetic and ideological affinities and differences based on three features that identify
defamiliarization. First, I examined the prevalence of dualities in their art: life and death, time
and timelessness, beauty and the grotesque, and expansive consumption and complete
abstinence. The artworks of Salcedo and Altmejd deal with multiple dualities alluding to the
tension between the personal and impersonal, the object and the subject. These dualities are
embodied in both the overwhelming physicality of each artist’s production, as well as the layered
narratives embedded within their conceptual formation.

The second feature that I discussed is that of discomfort. Ideas of physical displacement
and the act of deconstructing objects and spaces are at the core of both artists’ sculptures and
installations. The artworks, I would argue, are representations of shared discomfort amongst
viewers. Approachable yet subtly skewed, the discomforting materiality of the sculptures is
reflected in both the assertion of the object as one embodied with both sensations and ideas.

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The third feature that interested me, and perhaps the most elusive, is the achievement of social criticism via the inclusion of the artist’s self in their work. These authors are crucial characters in the dialogue of the larger concerns they address. I show that Salcedo inserts her self into the work through the production of a politically charged art practice that presupposes her sociocultural reality and biographical experience. Altmejd achieves the same by adapting the stylistic sensibilities of the Neo-Baroque through a romanticized “lens” when viewing Western culture. His aesthetic of excess is an exploration of capitalism and cultural symbols and signs, including religious iconography, to which he was exposed during his Catholic upbringing. In turn, his artistic production addresses ideas of identity, history, and society as critical points of departure through an extrinsic exploration of self. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze proposes that for the purpose of advancing a personal narrative, like for advancing every impersonal myth, the author is always situated in between the space of creation in order to deliver a larger message via storytelling and the inescapable representation of their self within a specific social and cultural ‘narrative’; this is clearly similar in the production of art.  

Cited Bibliography:


PRACTICE DOCUMENTATION

The following images are visual documentation of the work that I have completed during my MFA candidacy from September 2104 to August 2016, at Western University. The interrelated projects that I have previously described in the Comprehensive Artist’s statement portion of this dossier have been documented in order to show the progression and development of the project. My MFA thesis exhibition, *El Paradise*, shown at DNA Artspace in London, Ontario, from August 24, 2016 to October 1, 2016, is an accumulation of various projects with a focus on the most significant moments of my studio-based research. The constellation of work shown at DNA speaks to the ideas of the ‘Latin Feel’ that I wish foreground most extensively.
Folded Table (composition 1), birch plywood, vinyl, 56.5in x 33in, 2016

I decided to leave areas of drilled holes on the surface uncovered and uncoated. Emphasizing the porous nature of wood, in this piece the vinyl shreds that resemble hair, appear to be ejecting from the surface rather than being inserted into it.
This composition is my interpretation of a figure. The work replies on the wall for support as it placed on the floor.
The printed imagery of the vinyl was made through a collaging and scanning process. I cut out pieces of the original vinyl cloth that I sourced from a supplier in California. This is the same supplier that many restaurants in New York City use. I then sewed the pieces by hand to create my own botanical print collage-sculpture. I placed the new cut out composition on a scanning bed flattening the cloth to an image. The image was then tiled on Photoshop to create a new pattern and the new pattern was printed on a vinyl material.
The Tropical Formation series is printed on a plastic mesh material that is often used for weatherproof advertisements. The mesh has a porous quality to it that resembles the woven back of the original vinyl tablecloth. I have placed the imagery in the centre of the print, as a stand in for a sign. This ‘sign’ is an enlarged cut-out area from the collage-sculpture I placed on the scanning bed.
I began this series of drawings during the second semester of my first year. These compositions of vinyl shreds were made by applying Japanese rice glue onto the back of each stand and were then placed on the paper. The drawings resulted were the first experiments in using the individually shredded strands of cloth.
Thinking through the combination of sculpture and installation, I cut curved lines into a sheet of Mylar. The “shutter” structure for me represents the space where the private and the public is made available. The long strands of vinyl are attached to the Mylar with a stitch.
This installation shot of the Stacked Tables project depicts Do-It-Yourself (DIY) quality of the beginning of the project that was a method for investigating non-industrial and craft economies. This specific installation is representational of the space of a DIY, socio-economically lower strata market environment that points to a location of trade and exchange. It is an ‘awkward’ place, as each table is dependent on the one it stands on, and at any moment the whole structure could collapse. A single corner of the table that touches the wall supports the structure. Both the angles of the tableaus and the legs are less than 23 degrees giving a sense of disorientation. The pieces have been perfectly measured to seamlessly fit together making the structure appear to be one whole rather than multiples pieces placed together.
Beyond the Look of Representation
Juanita Lee Garcia

_Air Dry_, vinyl oilcloth, push pin, 16in x 48in, 2015

This installation image shows the original oilcloth. I have gone into to cloth and cut out specific areas. The holes remain uncovered. The simple gesture of pining it onto the wall and allowing the natural fall of the vinyl cloth was a way for me to explore the cloths relationship to the figure and the initial gesture where I realized the potential of the fold.
CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION
2019. MEd Candidate in Adult Education and Community Development. OISE, University of Toronto, Toronto
2016. MFA Candidate. Western University, Department of Visual Arts, London, Ontario, Canada.
2014. BFAH with Distinction. Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada
Major in Printmaking
Minor in Art History

SCHOLARSHIPS AND AWARDS
2015-2016 Ontario Graduate Student Scholarship (OGS) Western University
2015-2016 Canada Graduate Student Research Scholarship Western University
2014-2015 Canada Graduate Student Research Scholarship Western University
2014 Western University Chair Entrance Scholarship
2013-2014 Queen Elizabeth Aiming for the Top Scholarship, Ontario Government
2012 Queen’s University Kathleen Ryan International Exchange Bursary
2012 Queen’s University Exchange Study Award-Domestic Students
2012-2013 Queen Elizabeth Aiming for the Top Scholarship, Ontario Government
2011-2012 Queen Elizabeth Aiming for the Top Scholarship, Ontario Government
2010 Queen’s University Entrance Scholarship

RELEVANT PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

2015-2016. Teaching Assistant, VAS1020 Foundations Art for Professor. Tricia Johnson, Western University Visual Arts Department, London, Ontario

2015. Art Educator and Summer Camp Co-Director at Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario


2014. Carleton Art Gallery Summer Camp Coordinator and Co-Director at Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario

SOLO EXHIBITIONS / PERFORMANCES:
Beyond the Look of Representation  
Juanita Lee Garcia


FEATURED WORKS, G R O U P E X H I B I T I O N S:


2014. Cézanne’s Closet, Union Gallery at Ban Righ Hall, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario. February.

2013. Woman Recreated Mosaic, Tile E6, Permanent display at Queen’s University Human Rights Department, Mackintosh-Corry Hall, Kingston, Ontario. August.

2013. Cézanne’s Closet, Union Gallery at Ban Righ Hall, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario. February.


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