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## Transformation, Transduction and Prolonged Formation

Laura E. Mitrow, *The University of Western Ontario*

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Art and Visual Culture

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**TRANSFORMATION, TRANSDUCTION AND PROLONGED FORMATION**

(Thesis format: Dossier)

by

Laura Elizabeth Mitrow

Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

This dossier is an accompanying document to my MFA thesis exhibition, *Transformation, Transduction and Prolonged Formation*. Within the dossier is a case study that undertakes a close reading of the material choices and processes present in two works by Canadian sculptor Luanne Martineau, *Parasite Buttress* and *Brickmaker*. Here I propose that a visual encounter between industrial and needle felt achieves the polarity that is necessary in her work for “double-coding”---the embedment of recognizable but contradictory codes--- to occur. Martineau is interested in a historical moment where fiber-based artists working with traditional materials and processes struggled to be recognized on the same level as other artists. By using industrial felt as a code for references to abstract avant-garde artworks, such as Robert Morris’s *Felts* series, alongside eccentric felted forms that refer to craft’s connotations of the decorative, feminine and bodily, Martineau uses craft as a tool to question the historical ideals and canon of modern art.

Accompanying this case study is an expanded Artist Statement of my sculptural practice, wherein I undertake a close reading of my chosen materials and processes in order to provide insight into the artwork’s operation and potential reception.

Dedicated to

My parents, Barbara and Victor Mitrow

*For their love and support through every step of this process*

*and*

My Sisters, Natalie and Kathryn

*For their friendship and encouragement*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Expressing my sincerest thanks to Professor Kelly Jazvac for the support and guidance she has provided as an advisor throughout the duration of this program.

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I would also like to acknowledge with much appreciation the work done by the excellent staff and faculty of the Department of Visual Arts at Western University, without whom the realization of this Master's work not have been possible.

Finally, thanks to my classmates for being good friends, inspiring colleagues and memorable people.

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# INTRODUCTION

## PART I: ARTIST STATEMENT

My practice is heavily based in materials: it is through the process of material exploration that the work takes form, and possible meanings and associations emerge. I have therefore chosen to approach my artist's statement in the form of a close reading of the materials that I work with and their associative processes, focusing on how the materials of my practice contribute to my research interests.

My intuitive and process-based practice gives way to writhing, interlacing, three-dimensional structures of bodily, disjointed forms swathed in materials like papier-mâché, cloth and rolled, torn and frayed paper. The paper elements collect in crevices and seep onto the surfaces of the forms like fungal growth or human hair, suggesting various states of transformation. Through both their relationship to craft (and its connotations of "low" art), and in their ability to evoke the haptic and the bodily, the paper elements are an integral part of my practice. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of them is a key portion of my statement.

In the statement I also focus on how materials are used to juxtapose bodily references alongside references of the abject, therefore engaging notions of monstrosity, toxicity and disembodiment. Crudely carved, organ-like fragments of foam are inter-connected through sprawling, open, wire structures. Cumbersome mounds and casual huddles of Polyurethane casted forms rest on the floor next to the drooping tangles of these hanging forms, tapping into our anxieties through evoking a sense of "otherness".

## **PART II: DOCUMENTATION of WORK**

The photographic documentation of my work demonstrates my evolving practice over the past two years of production and research in the Master of Fine Art Program. Beginning with images from my earliest work, the documentation records the progression of my material interests and sculptural language, illustrating the transition of my initial object-based work to a practice more rooted in installation. This manner of documentation helps to inform my statement through depicting the shifts and progress in the materials that I use.

## **PART III: CASE STUDY**

The case study component of this dossier focuses on the sculptural work of contemporary artist Luanne Martineau. In the study, I present an in-depth analysis of two of her prominent works, *Brickmaker* (2009) and *Parasite Buttress* (2005), focusing on the techniques and strategies of her innovative felting process and how, through this process, she imbues these forms with a multitude of internal and external readings, speaking to both aesthetic and conceptual concerns.

Given my practice of inscribing my work with contravening visual references, such as the haptic alongside the toxic, for instance, Luanne Martineau's critical project of double coding is of particular relevance to my research. Articulated in both internal and external readings of her work, double codes, as identified by writer Lesley Johnstone, first reveal themselves on surfaces in Martineau's work, projecting connotations of the beautiful and the grotesque, vitality and decay and

figure and abstraction. These conflicting qualities of seduction and repulsion evoked in her work create an atmosphere of polarity that serves as the basis for the more critical side of her double coding process. This is executed through positioning abstract avant-garde art alongside handcrafted felted forms. My analysis of this confrontation is that Martineau intends to use handicraft references to question the ideologies of avant-garde art, and she emphasizes the thinking that has been historically used to marginalize fiber artists.

Materially, my own work presents a connection to craft, particularly through my use of paper, which, through the detailed handwork that is necessary in their production, draw references to fiber art and its associative connotations of the decorative and the “feminine.” These paper elements are integrated amongst more traditional sculpture-making materials, the opposition between the two speaking to the division of art and craft.

What interests me most about Martineau’s practice is her use of craft as a means to question the ideologies from which the hierarchy of art media stems. In her practice, felt is the vehicle by which she engages the discourses, both past and present, that surround the divide between craft and art and is the focus of my case study, titled “Felted Disruption: An analysis of Double Coding in the Felt Works of Luanne Martineau”.



## Transformation, Transduction and Prolonged Formation:

### Artist Statement

Laura Mitrow

In my sculptural work, deep pockets of space and lumpy protrusions provide undulating surfaces of declivities and concavities. Imposing mounds of floor-bound foam sit alongside drooping tangles of hanging sculptural material. The surfaces of these forms are inscribed with suggestions of the bodily, the toxic, the beautiful and the offsetting.

Alternating between intuition, experimentation and traditional methods of working, I use the materials of paper, plaster, papier-mâché and both industrial and expandable foam to create an interconnecting network of sculptures. The following Artist Statement is in the form of a close reading of the materials I've chosen, and how I see them operating in the work.

The paper elements hold a commanding presence in this body of work and are significant to my research interests in two ways: first, through their relationship to craft, and second, through their organic qualities which can be used to replicate facets of the bodily realm, such as skin and hair.

Paper is selected as a material due to its expressive potential and responsiveness to hand-manipulation. This technique-focused approach to material selection aligns with a conception of craft wherein materials are selected for the purpose of their expected finish. The laborious and detailed handwork that goes into the productions of the paper elements are referential of traditional fiber techniques such as braiding, coiling, linking, knotting and weaving.



Figure1: Example of paper elements in work.

The connection to craft, as well as these references to fiber techniques, brings with it connotations of utility, femininity, domesticity and decoration. These are terms that have been used historically to subordinate craft within the history of modern art. In the critical writings of significant Modernist theorists such as Clement Greenberg, for example, the decorative is associated with “superficial surface embellishment, skilled labor,

derivativeness, and precision in a mechanical, rather than “felt out” way of working”.<sup>1</sup>

The rolled, torn, folded and frayed bits of paper in the earlier work give the forms an individualized, hand-made quality that privileges mechanical precision, harkening Greenberg’s definition of the decorative, as stated above.

Most significant amongst the craft connotations that I aim to conjure with the paper is that of “femininity,” a notion that I explore not only through the paper’s direct references to fiber techniques, but also through its expressive qualities that allude abstractly to the female body. I am interested in using the paper as a means to reference stereotypes of femininity. For example, an archetypal “feminine” concern for outward decoration and adornment is implied in the tubular rolls of paper that are dispersed across the surfaces of the forms, adorning them with their neat, uniform shapes reminiscent of beads and jewels.

Most significant, however, is the manner in which the paper articulates the bodily realm of hair, speaking to the ritual of grooming—growing, trimming, styling—a ritual that is echoed through my studio process of tearing, cutting, twisting, rolling, flattening and folding. The “paper hair” merges onto, and sometimes engulfs, the surfaces of the sculptural forms. It collects into crevices and seeps onto expansive spaces. In some places it is coiffed and tidy; in others it grows uncontrollably into a tangled mass. Sometimes it is barely there and discreetly surfaces as sparse patches. The distinction between tidy and

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, xvi

untidy is important in that it speaks to the anxieties of hair growing (or not growing) from wrong places and the associative concern to keep it groomed.

The paper's articulation of human hair connotes qualities of the sensuous, haptic, visceral and offsetting: qualities that are further enforced through the use of foam and plaster. Rigid insulating and polyurethane foam serve as a counterpoint to the pliability of the paper. Unlike the paper, the foam carries strong synthetic and industrial connotations. In the work from the first summer term of my MFA program, *Residual Continuum*, crudely carved, bulbous fragments of foam are inter-connected through sprawling, open, wire structures. In some areas, the arrangement of foam is dense and rigid, whereas in others it is open and formless. The wire, which operates overall as an armature for the structure, functions as a device to both separate the forms and hold them together.



Figure 2: Detail of *Residual Continuum*, work from summer 2012.

Similar to the paper, and despite its industrial connections, the properties of the foam material are exploited for their expressive potential and have been used to create unlikely shapes. The foam, which is very respondent to manipulation by hand and tools, is carved into irregular shaped organic-like chunks that dangle like disembodied organs. The material condition of the foam, and the process that was inflicted onto it, is fully exposed. Tool marks from cutting, carving and sanding are imposed onto its surface, and the accumulated powdery residue from these manual processes falls onto other forms in the structure, contaminating their material with its untidy purple patina.

In the creation of these wire/foam works, chance and indeterminacy are employed to create structures that are compositionally complicated. The work is determined through the process of making, as opposed to a pre-determined formula or plan. As such, it allows for an accumulation of incidental marks to occur, resulting in forms that embody energy and spontaneity. Throughout the entirety of the process of creation, the work remains loose and open, lacking a static structure. Gravity plays a role in determining the shape that these structures take, particularly in the structures that are built in from a hanging, vertical orientation. The sculptures, while largely shaped through my own interaction, remain free to settle into their own form through gravitational push, pull and warp.

In the work from the fall 2012 semester, explorations with the foam materials lead to a more hands-off approach of working with the material. Foam offshoots from other projects were used to build dense, layered formations that retain more of the manufactured appearance of un-manipulated insulation board than previous sculptural attempts. This is a

departure from the organic, hand-made quality of the work from the summer and its limp, pliable aesthetic. Through limiting the amount of manual handwork that I impose onto the material, the shapes preserve much of their rigid, geometric contours. I was interested in the formation of compressed layers, layering the material sheets onto one another to create a substantial and compacted volume.

Figure 3: Compressed layers of industrial foam.



In the work from last summer, plaster cloth acts as a soft, woven padding around the coarse rigidity of the foam. In the structures, foam segments dangle like disembodied organs wrapped in cloth cocoons. Tension exists between the warmth of the paper and cloth and the cold industrial feel of the insulation board. The plaster cloth coats the wire, transforming it from a flexible material into dense, finger-like appendages that emerge from the foam shapes; their spindly bodies entangled into the wire armature, pushing, pulling and warping its structure. Bits of wire function as lifts that separate the sheets of foam while also holding them together. Crumbling white fallout material from the plaster cloth seeps onto the paper material, encrusting its surfaces and solidifying its soft textures.

The most recent works cohesively meld the paper, foam and plaster together. Instead of using industrially formed sheets of foam, I currently use a liquid expandable

foam (purchased from a sculpture supply store) that I pour into a waste mold that has been lined with paper or cloth. The foam acts as a memory that records the material properties of the cavity that pre-lives it. Small wires are embedded and extended from the casted forms: they operate as both points of connection and points of disconnection. In some instances the wires function to join two forms together; in other instances they simply protrude and are imbedded with the function of repair, implying an act of dislodgement wherein forms are torn apart and the wires suggest a call for their reassembling. This visual detail relates to the idea of disembodiment, wherein these forms take on the nature of something that has been dislodged from a larger entity.

During the casting process, the organic paper elements are implanted into the mold and are subsequently transferred into the casted foam's form. The paper elements act as seams that run across the corners of the forms, conjuring an idea of objects, pieces or body parts that have been stretched and stitched together. The overall impression, in contrast to my earlier work, is that of sculptures that are more integrated and streamlined into a process where the form is determined through setting up circumstances within the mold: as one can imagine, this new process allows for a greater degree of chance in the final outcome as the liquid foam reacts differently to each mold's form, as well as the amount of paper and other materials added in.

As already mentioned, the paper is embedded into the surfaces of the forms via the casting process and appears to grow out from within. This is distinct from my earlier work where paper was applied at the end of the process as a surface treatment. In many instances, it has been completely sucked into the foam and only the slightest evidence of

its presence is known. The paper is embedded amongst the wire and the roughness of the casted foam forms. This new casting process complicates the work and removes a “fussiness” I found present in my previous work that was created slowly through additive and reductive gestures.

In the new work, I am interested in how the manipulated paper can still connote ideas of craft, yet loosens my control on the final outcome. Rather than a polished, refined final object, my new work is messy, bodily and organic looking. The mold allows for the work to be created as a cohesive form from the singular action of pouring. I see this one-shot pouring method as a way of pushing the inscrutability of the work: it creates an encounter between the work and the viewer that pushes him or her to experience something outside of their frame of reference. Unlike my earlier work, that was more visually more familiar in terms of a language of “craft,” my new work borders on the grotesque and monsterly. Here unknown body parts appear to have merged with other organic forms and building materials. I am interested in creating an encounter between the viewer and something that is of the body, but not necessarily the body. This encounter was described well by a colleague who found that his experience of the work reminded him of a finding a tumor or lump in the body: “it’s me, but it’s not me.”



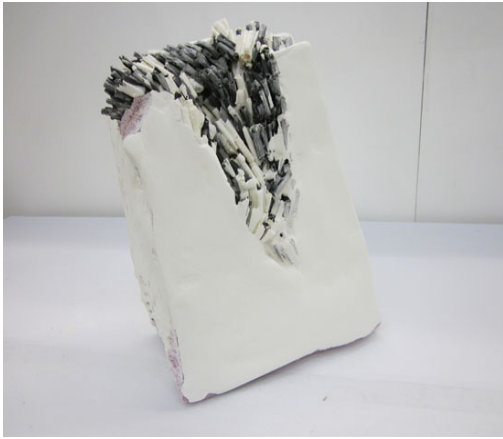


Figure 3. Image of untitled work

from 2012, made with industrial foam, plaster and paper.



Figure 4. Image of

untitled work from 2013, made from expandable foam using the casting process.

The idea of something being “wrong” in the work has carried through from old work to new. In the past, this was evident through a misuse of materials, such as the chicken wire and insulation foam, which were used in ways that appeared unproductive to the realization of the work. In this new work, the idea of misuse, or “wrongness” is present in the manner in which the casting has been done. Although they are casts, they don’t

necessarily read as casts: they look more like fragments that have broken off something larger, rather than an object that was created anew. Mold materials are not selected for their practicality as casting materials; rather, the molds are designed to warp under the weight and heat of the curing form. The walls are created to allow for sagging and overflow, and the inner surface, which is the first point of contact with the foam, was designed to transfer onto the casted form. Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French philosopher and literary critic, has developed a theory about the abject of the self, which is here relevant. Author Shirley Mandill, has paraphrased Kristeva's ideas in the MAC's exhibition catalogue for Luanne Martineau, citing that we,

Feel repulsion and horror when confronted by images of the abject because of their ambiguity—whether the other is external or internal, in the world or a part of ourselves. We define ourselves in opposition to the body that disgusts us, and it is this slippage between it and us that threatens to dehumanize us, because it is so narrow<sup>2</sup>.

These ideas by Kristeva speak to my interest in abject as it relates to the self. In her work *The Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes “the abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being”<sup>3</sup>. Through its offsetting ambiguity, the abject has the power to create an encounter between the viewer and something that is “of the body”, but not necessarily the body, therefore triggering anxiety surrounding the idea of “otherness”. My recent sculptures present

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<sup>2</sup> Mandill, Shirley, in collab. With Dan Adler and Lesley Johnstone, "Luanne Martineau" (Catalogue for show named "Luanne Martineau", Musee d'art contemporain de Montreal, Montreal, Quebec, 2010), Mandill, "Luanne Martineau", 51

<sup>3</sup> Kristeva, Julia, *An Essay on Abjection*, Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, 5

themselves as messy continuums of different bodily references in one form: a result I achieve through careful selection and experimentation with materials and processes, with the goal of finding unexpected and abject results. Through positioning qualities of the abject, such as references to decay and monstrosity, alongside the seductive qualities of paper, for instance, I imbue these forms with a sense of polarity. I consider the work's strength to lay in its inscrutability, which is most pronounced through its plurality of contradictory qualities, such as horror, beauty, internal, external, decoration, decay, monstrosity and disembodiment.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION OF ART PRACTICE



Figure 1



Figure2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5





Figure 6



Figure 7

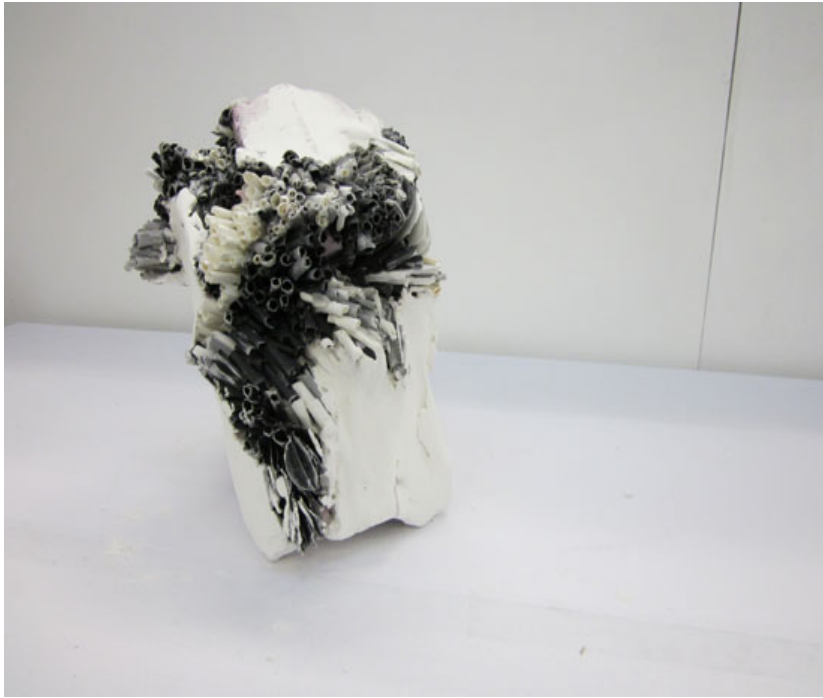


Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

Figure 11



Figure 12





Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15

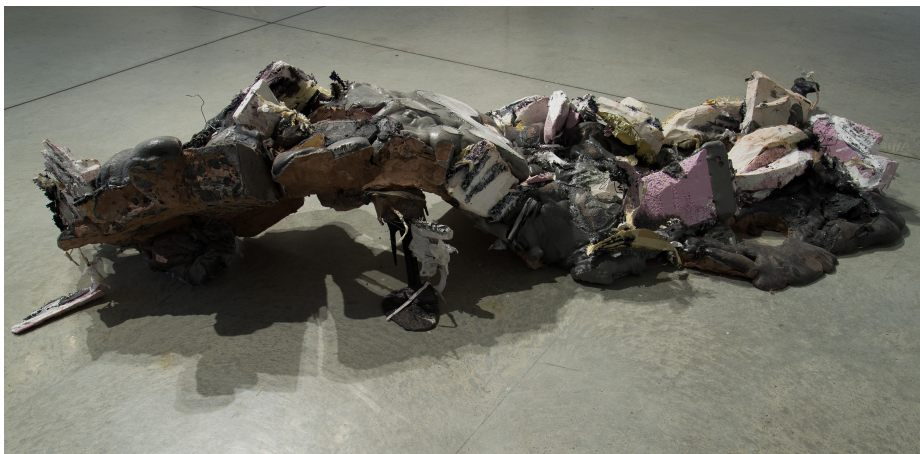






Figure 16

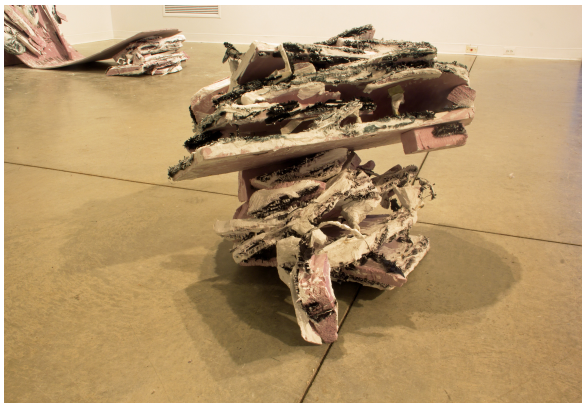




Figure 17



Figure 18

Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21





## ART PRACTICE DOCUMENTATION INFORMATION LIST

### **Figure 1:**

Installation image

2011

### **Figure 2:**

*Untitled*

Plaster, industrial form, paper, aluminum, glue.

2 ft (w) x 1.5 ft (l)

2011

### **Figure 3:**

Detail

### **Figure 4:**

Installation image.

### **Figure 5:**

*Untitled*

2 ft (w) x 11 inches (l)

Paper, plaster, industrial foam.

2012

### **Figure 6:**

*Untitled*

1 ft (w) x 1 ft 4 inches (l)

Paper, plaster, industrial foam.

2012

**Figure 7:**

*Untitled*

1 ft 4 inches (w) x 1 ft (l)

Paper, plaster, industrial foam.

2012

**Figure 8:**

*Untitled*

1 ft 4 inches (w) x 1 ft (l)

Paper, plaster, industrial foam.

2012

**Figure 9:**

*Untitled*

2 ft 6 inches (w) x 1 ft 4 inches (l)

Plaster, paper, wire, industrial foam.

2012

**Figure 10:**

*Untitled*

1 ft 6 inches (w) x 1 ft 4 inches (l) x 1 ft (height)

Plaster, paper, wire, industrial foam.

2012

**Figure 11:**

*Residual Continuum*

5 ft (w) x 19 ft (l)

Plaster, paper, wire, industrial foam.

2012

**Figure 12:**

Detail

**Figure 13:**

Detail

**Figure 14:**

*Untitled*

3.4 ft (w) x 7.5 ft (l)

Industrial foam, paper, plaster.

**2012**

Figure 15:

*Untitled*

1 ft 3 inches (w) x 1 ft 4 inches (l) x 1 ft (height)

Industrial foam, paper, plaster.

2012

**Figure 16:**

*Untitled*

1 ft 6 inches (w) x 1 ft 3 inches (l) x 1 ft 3 inches (height)



Industrial foam, paper, plaster.

2012

**Figure 17:**

Detail

**Figure 18:**

*Untitled*

1 ft 5 inches (w) x 8 inches (l) x 1.5 inches (height)

Industrial foam, paper, plaster.

2012

**Figure 19:**

*Untitled*

2 ft (w) x 5 ft (l) x 8 inches (height)

Expandable foam, paper, wire, plastic.

2013

**Figure 20:**

*Untitled*

2 ft (w) x 2 ft (l) x 8 inches (height)

Expandable foam, paper, wire, plastic.

2013

**Figure 21**

Detail

## Felted Disruption:

### An Analysis of Double Coding in the Felt Works of Luanne Martineau

Luanne Martineau is currently an associate professor of painting and drawing in the department of Studio Arts at Concordia University. She was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in 1970, and studied at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the Alberta College of Art and Design. She completed her MFA at the University of British Columbia in 1995. She was shortlisted for the 2009 Sobey Art Award, and a solo exhibition of her works was recently mounted at Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in 2010.

Martineau started her exploration with textiles while she was an undergraduate student in the painting department of the Alberta College of Art and Design, stating that she, “went into textiles early as a way of talking about painting”.<sup>4</sup> In a 2011 interview with *Canadian Art Magazine*, she asserts that her “initial interest in textiles was in the subservience of craft, the use-value of craft and the fact that craft has fought for legitimacy within the visual-arts realm”<sup>5</sup>. Martineau’s contestation of craft’s second-rate

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<sup>4</sup> Becker, Noah "Luanne Martineau: Handmade", *Canadian Art Magazine*, May 5, 2011 accessed June 22, 2013, [www.canadianart.ca](http://www.canadianart.ca)

<sup>5</sup> Becker, "Luanne Martineau: Handmade"

status will serve as one of the main focus points of the following case study of two of her major works.

Luanne Martineau's artistic process employs obsessive levels of handiwork, using layers of felt to produce abstracted and figurative forms that are both seductive and unsettling. The highly engaging forms pull together references from a broad context of art, and simultaneously take on a plurality of meanings that reach beyond their reading as fiber art or "craft".

The juxtaposition between interior and exterior, beautiful and grotesque, alive and dead, human and un-human, sensual and visceral, abstract and figurative and horizontal and vertical are characteristic of Martineau's fiber-based work and imbue her forms with a sense of polarity. These competing divisions manifest in Martineau's work and speak to her interest in "moments where conflict was believed and strongly felt" within the history of modern art<sup>6</sup>. In her work, she evokes tension by presenting references of abstract avant-garde art alongside eccentric felted forms that refer to craft's connotations of the decorative, feminine and bodily. In other words, her work "bounces back and forth between historically polarized forms in modernist history".<sup>7</sup>

Martineau's practice of embedding contradictory visual codes into her work is an integral part of her conceptual project, a project that is succinctly summarized by Lesley Johnstone in his essay "Of Craft and Codes". In this essay, Johnstone writes:

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<sup>6</sup> Becker, "Luanne Martineau: Handmade"

<sup>7</sup> Becker, "Luanne Martineau: Handmade"

In Martineau's work, she identifies formal languages that appear to have fixed ideological content and attempts to create contravening formal situations that undermine that content...craft functions in her work as a useful disturbing or a disruptive process-the means by which the operation of double coding is achieved.<sup>8</sup>

"Double coding", a term coined by Charles Jencks in his texts on postmodern architecture, means to convey "many meanings simultaneously."<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of this case study, I will further Johnstone's observation of double-coding in Martineau's work by undertaking a close reading of the material choices and processes present in two of her coded artworks.

Luanne Martineau embeds recognizable but contradictory codes, here cited as double codes, into her work in order to create powerful contravening formal situations. For the artist, craft is, as she has stated, "a way of questioning, from a distance, American avant-garde art since the 1950s"<sup>10</sup>. What is remarkable about Martineau's work is that she achieves the objective of double coding through the exclusive use of felt.

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<sup>8</sup> Johnstone, Lesley, in collab. With Dan Adler and Shirely Madill, "Luanne Martineau" (Catalogue for show named "Luanne Martineau", Musee d'art contemporain de Montreal, Montreal, Quebec, 2010), 44

<sup>9</sup> Johnstone, "Luanne Martineau", 44

<sup>10</sup> Gagnon, Paulette, forward to "Luanne Martineau" by Johnstone, Lesley, in collab. With Dan Adler and Shirely Madill, (Catalogue for show named "Luanne Martineau", Musee d'art contemporain de Montreal, Montreal, Quebec, 2010), 43

In an in-depth analysis of two of Martineau's sculptures, *Brickmaker* and *Parasite Butress*, I will demonstrate how through the encounter of hand-needled felt alongside industrial felt, Martineau achieves the polarity that is required for Johnstone's "double coding" to occur in her work.

#### Brickmaker:

Hoisted up in partial suspension, we are uncertain if *Brickmaker* is in the process of careful levitation, or if it is in the midst of descending to the floor. An industrial felted chain holds upright the earth-toned, needle-felted head of *Brickmaker*, which has two small horns protruding from its opposite sides. This bull-like head is the part of the work that most strongly suggests a creature; extending from opposite sides of its base are two thick grey bands of industrial felt that function to provide a minimal articulation of the creature's body.

These dense felt bands pass from the head down to the floor where they abruptly intersect into a chaotic mass of lumpy, brightly colored needle felt. In this expanse of floor-bound material that comprises the base of *Brickmaker*, we find needle-felted hearts and bladder-like shapes alongside representations of rope, knitted sweater motifs and carpet-like patterns. Blurring lines between dead and alive, this ambiguous creature speaks to the warm vitality of life and the cold vacancy of death, referencing both hollow drooping skin and engorged bodily organs.

In contrast to the seamless melding of needle-felt and industrial felt that characterize many of Martineau's other works, here the two felts are distinctly separate

from one another. Produced by piercing strands of dyed, raw sheep's wool over and over with a long needle, the needle-felt is realized through a laborious process and imbues Martineau's forms with rich expressivity, in terms of both color and texture, that serve as a counterpoint to the utilitarian aesthetic of the industrial felt. Industrial felt, which is produced as long slabs, is a material that is traditionally used for commercial purposes, such as insulation and packaging. It possesses the uniform shape, even texture and static color of a machine manufactured fiber.

Unmarked by the artist's hands, the industrial felt bands in *Brickmaker* contrast starkly to the highly crafted sections of needle-felt that loom above and below them. Through their teepee-like composition, distinct lack of evidence of the hand and their strong assertion of gravity, the industrial felted body of *Brickmaker* refers clearly to American sculptor Robert Morris's *Felts* series from the late 1960s into the late 1970s, a highly influential body of work built entirely from slabs of industrial felt. Described thoroughly in Elissa Auther's text, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Craft in American Art*, these works uprooted fiber from its utilitarian, every-day context and re-conceived it as a process-motivated material that gave way to a new manner of making, one in which the "limits and possibilities of action and material"<sup>11</sup> were of the utmost importance.

Presenting felt as a raw and non-precious material, *Felts* were often comprised of little more than, "slits in a sheet of felt, hung from the wall from two fixed points, flopping

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<sup>11</sup> Auther, Elissa. *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 59

in a tumbled skein to the floor”<sup>12</sup>. By allowing felt’s specific material properties, such as its pliability, in addition to environmental conditions, such as gravity, as means to dictate form, this work challenged modernism’s “formalist ideal of art as non-contingent and free from reference to its own material condition.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, by acknowledging and employing physical forces beyond the conventional picture frame, Morris was able to directly challenge the modernist premise of autonomous art and its pressures to achieve a strictly visual effect.

The two sloping bands of industrial felt that drape from the head of *Brickmaker* are at first unassuming in their suggestions of an unfinished body, but upon deeper consideration, they reveal themselves as codes for Robert Morris’s *Felts*. The reference is significant, especially considering Martineau’s interest in “moments of conflict within the history of modern art”<sup>14</sup>. Morris’ *Felts*, through both its production and subsequent critical reception, made visible the ideologies that were central to the subordination of craft to art during a period of conflict when fiber art was making an impactful push for art-world acceptance. *Felts* was imperative in helping to elevate not only fiber, but craft itself, as a medium of avant-garde art through using the procedures of craft, both in terms of materials and process, to challenge the ambitions of modern art.

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<sup>12</sup> Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 59

<sup>13</sup> Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 58

<sup>14</sup> Becker, "Luanne Martineau: Handmade"

In an interview from 1983, Morris remarked that, “felt has anatomical associations; it relates to the body—it’s skin like, the way it takes form, with gravity, stress, balance and kinesthetic sense”<sup>15</sup>. Morris’s researched understanding of the nature of felt, which includes the subtleties of how it responds to different external conditions, aligns with certain definitions of craft. For example, craft theorist Glenn Adamson in his book *Thinking Through Craft* defines craft as, “the knowledge and exploitation of specific materials.”<sup>16</sup> Adamson also states in this book that, “craft’s grounding in material specificity is oppositional to the ambition of modern art to achieve a purely visual effect.”<sup>17</sup> This statement resonates with the critical reception of Morris’s *Felts* in that, through their privileging of process and the exploitation of material properties, the work was “participating in a larger intellectual conversation in reaction to Formalism’s emphasis on opticality”<sup>18</sup>.

While *Felts* was embraced by the art world as, “the current, most important projection of American sculpture into the future,”<sup>19</sup> its critical reception, in many ways, reinforced the longstanding perceptions of “craft as a practice of the hands” and “art as a practice of the mind”. In critical reviews, writers sought to justify the craft-associative aspects of Morris’s work—such as its haptic qualities—as being driven by ideas instead of

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 55

<sup>16</sup> Adamson, Glenn. *Thinking Through Craft*. New York: Oxford International Publishers, 2007, 40

<sup>17</sup> Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 38

<sup>18</sup> Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 58

<sup>19</sup> Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 65



an intuitive interaction with the materials. Conscious of the negative impact that affiliations to craft held in the art world at the time, there was also an effort from Morris to intellectualize *Felts*. In an essay for *Critical Inquiry* that was published in 2000, Morris confirmed the “the great anxiety” that artists of the 1960s had in having their work fall into the “decorative, the feminine, the beautiful, in short, the minor”<sup>20</sup>.

Another item of significance within this vein is that the properties of the material that Morris exploited, such as its sensuality, tactility and relation to the everyday, “were not subject to the typical readings applied to the use of fiber in art in the 1960s and 1970s, which generally judged these attributes as non-intellectual, too ordinary, decorative or feminine”<sup>21</sup>. The reason for the atypical reading of *Felts* is that by the time of his first works in felt in the late 1960’s, Morris already had a respected career as sculptor in the avant-garde art movement of Minimalism. Through its emphasis on “a unified form that achieves singular presence through the sheer integrity of its composition”,<sup>22</sup> Minimalism embraced the physicality of materials in terms of how they could service the well built, arguing that the well built could be sublime in itself. Further to this, embracing the *physicality* of materials once again set Minimalism apart from the modernist art work: rather than art being separated from life, as in Modernism, art was made from the stuff of life, and subject to the same physical forces.

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 58

<sup>21</sup> Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 57

<sup>22</sup> Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 39

Therefore, through the theoretical underpinnings that Morris had developed as a minimalist sculptor, he, along with critics, were able to intellectualize *Felts*, thus affording the work full legitimacy within the realm of avant-garde art. However, art world acceptance was not as easily attained by other fiber artists of this time.<sup>23</sup> Without a similar advantage of having an already-established place in the art-world, as Morris had, those same terms of “haptic” and “sensual”, that had benefited the intellectualization *Felts*, were, in the case of other fiber artists, used to dismiss their work as non-art through the labels of *fiber* and *craft*.

The “high” art world’s criticism of craft and marginalization of fiber artists, who were unable to have their work recognized in the same manner as *Felts*, is communicated through the codes that are embedded in the needle-felted sections of *Brickmaker*. The muddled expanse of material that constitutes the base of the work reveals itself as an amalgamation of needle-felted segments of knitted-sweater patterns, matted rugs, decorative doily-like motifs and protruding, knotted rope. Melded underneath the traditional fiber references are bulging organs and flesh-like forms with the fragments of clothing, cloth and rug tightly intertwining overtop them, as if to contain these innards from spilling out.

Coded in the needle felt of *Brickmaker* are references to the traditional techniques of fiber construction, such as braiding, weaving, knotting and threading and their relationship to the purposeful production of bodily-related objects such as sweaters, rugs,

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<sup>23</sup> Author, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 47

mats and rope. Here industrial felt typical of minimalism runs alongside handcrafted felt typical of fiber art labeled as “craft.”

Martineau harkens the subordinating connotations of domesticity, utility and decoration that are associated with these traditional fiber techniques through having them appear as a jumbled, needle-felted mass of discarded material waste at the base of the sculpture. Through the installation of *Brickmaker*, Martineau speaks to how the connotations associated with fiber technique were used to subordinate it as “low media” in the hierarchy of modern art.

The needle-felt base, comprised of squashed, tangled and fragmented representations of domestic fiber craft, functions as a podium for the bands of industrial felt. Coded as Morris’s iconic avant-garde *Felts* series, the felt bands, composed in a tepee-like form, are hoisted heroically into vertical space as they seemingly attempt to lift away from the “purposeful craft” associations embedded in the needle-felt, which threaten to, at any moment, haul them down from their elevated status.

Parasite Buttress:

As introduced in *Brickmaker*, the encounter between industrial and needle felt achieves a polarity that facilitates the process of double-coding---the embedment of recognizable but contradictory codes--- to occur in Martineau’s work and therefore helps

to realize her intentions of using craft to “question American avant-garde art since the 1950s.”<sup>24</sup>

Beginning by “identifying formal languages that appear to have fixed ideological content”,<sup>25</sup> Martineau creates contradictory visual references to question these ideologies and their status. Like the Robert Morris references present in *Brickmaker*, the slabs of industrial felt are embedded with visual codes of canonical avant-garde art. However, when these codes are encountered side-by-side with hand -needled felt, the ideologies of the avant-garde are questioned, challenged, disrupted—threatened even—by aggressive displays of handicraft and their traditionally subordinated connotations of utility, domesticity, decoration and femininity.

In Luanne Martineau’s striking, large-scale work *Parasite Buttress*, references to the stripes of iconic Modernist painter Barnett Newman’s controversial painting *Voice of Fire* (1967) are positioned against depictions of the internal and external figure as visceral, abstracted organic matter. Needle-felted labia-like folds, bulging tumorous growths and spindly finger-like appendages envelope the surface of *Parasite Buttress*, threatening to invade the cleanliness of the centered, white band. An encounter is provoked between the sensuality of the needle-felt, whose forms reference its own pliability, and the static flatness of industrial felt, which operates as a canvas for the vertical white band that transcends through its center. The result is a powerful confrontation between two ends of

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<sup>24</sup> Gagnon, forward, 43

<sup>25</sup> Johnstone, “Luanne Martineau”

art hierarchies: a positioning of the prestige of modernism against the subordination of handicraft. This power is further asserted through the acquisition of both works: The National Gallery of Canada purchased *Voice of Fire* in 1989, and subsequently, Martineau's *Parasite Buttress* in 2007.

*Parasite Buttress*'s form hovers indecisively between two types of implied movement: one ascending the wall and the other descending and unraveling onto the floor. The work is supported in a vertical orientation through the rigidity of the wall. The heavy sagging of the felted material, which folds over the top of the piece and then rolls across the floor, disrupts the modernist vertical stripe, reminding us of the materiality of the felt, susceptible to the forces of gravity and the pull of its own weight. Ultimately, gravity proves to be the determining factor in the final configuration of the form, a disruption of the transcendental objectives of the modernist vertical line, as embodied in Newmans's *Voice of Fire*. This again brings to mind the felt forms of Robert Morris, in which he would cut slits in a sheet of felt, hang it from the wall at two fixed points, and allow the natural drape of the thick, soft material to tumble to the floor; the final form being nothing more than the direct results of the acts of slicing, hanging and gravity.<sup>26</sup>

*Parasite Buttress* contains a soft and "feminine" pink and white color scheme alongside delicately overlapping edges that are visually referential of the labia. Both of these qualities can serve to undermine the "heroic" (and predominantly male) legacy of

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<sup>26</sup> Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 60

the high-art painting history that she directly references in this work.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Newman's *Voice of Fire*, this work speaks directly to the decorative and the organic. On one level, the details resemble muscle tissue or flesh on which diseases and unnatural growths are rotting away its pink and vital surface. On another level, the organic -looking layers of textile accumulation resemble natural foliage that is in the process of decomposing. There exists in the work a characteristic duality between beauty and grotesque, in that certain parts of the form appear to be in a state of decomposition, whereas other parts appear to be thriving off said decay.

#### Martineau, Saskatchewan Craft and Greenberg's Modernism

Martineau uses craft as a tool to question the historical ideals and canon of modern art. Craft has had a function-oriented role within art history, and consequently has struggled to gain legitimacy within contemporary art: a struggle which Martineau personally experienced while growing up in Saskatchewan. Elissa Auther outlines the history of this division, tracing the tendency from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* to the writings of Clement Greenberg. Kant states that fine art "is characterized by a self sufficiency or purposiveness without purpose," and craft, by contrast, is "characterized by a connection to an interest or a purpose."<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, the theoretical writings of modernist art critic Clement Greenberg played a crucial role in the maintenance of the hierarchy of art and craft during the first two-thirds

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<sup>27</sup> Johnstone, "Luanne Martineau"

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, xv

of the twentieth century<sup>29</sup>. According to Greenberg, works of art failing to live up to the imperatives of modernism (as he defined it) were rejected as non-art through an application of the label *decorative* or *decoration*<sup>30</sup>. Gathered under these terms were attributes traditionally associated with craft, including neatness, precision, attention to detail, surface finish, and femininity<sup>31</sup>.

Greenberg attributed the characteristics of “polished” and “finished” to handicrafts rather than fine art. These ideas are essential to the construction of craft as basically about technique, skill, and the adherence to standards.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, Greenberg stated repeatedly, art “is a matter of conception and intuition, not of physical finish”<sup>33</sup>. In a passage regarding a 1948 exhibition of Russian artist Naum Gabo’s work, Greenberg attempted to discredit the artist’s work through the aligning it with qualities of the decorative, stating that “Gabo’s objects, small in format and excessively limited by the notion of neatness, exhaust themselves too often in the point they make of symmetry; and their lightness, fragility, and transience tend to be mechanical rather than felt out, the result of an aesthetic code”<sup>34</sup>, he goes on to say “these weaknesses of decoration, are

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<sup>29</sup> Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, xvii

<sup>30</sup> Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 34

<sup>31</sup> Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 34

<sup>32</sup> Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 35

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 35

<sup>34</sup> Greenberg, *Art*, Naum Gabo, *Nation* 166, April 17, 1948: 423

made evident in some small paintings by Gabo”<sup>35</sup>. Through the work of Robert Morris, however, artists began to challenge the hierarchy subordinating craft to art in the mid-to-late 1960s.

Growing up in Saskatchewan, Martineau was aware of the Emma Lake Artists’ Workshop, which was an annual series of seminars hosted at the University of Saskatchewan. In 1962, the critic Clement Greenberg and the painter Barnett Newman intersected with important Regina artists; Martineau states that the local community began to “position itself as oppositional to what was happening at Emma Lake, and that oppositional position was one that tended to be craft-heavy.”<sup>36</sup> As discussed, this interest of Martineau’s in conflicting positions can clearly be seen in the contradictory visual references present in both *Brickmaker* and *Parasite Buttress*.

Through its multiplicity of contradictory formal codes, *Parasite Buttress* creates an encounter between craft and modernism. The white band that occupies the center of the *Parasite Buttress* and transcends vertically across the wall harkens the “transcendental opticality” of modernist ideology. However, Martineau’s straight line is crudely ruptured by the thick, heavy mass of felted material that expands onto the floor, declaring its alliance to its physical surroundings through its limitation at the capacity of gravity. Additionally, this floor-bound section of felt refers to the affiliation that fiber has in the

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<sup>35</sup> Greenberg, *Art*, Naum Gabo, *Nation* 166, April 17, 1948: 423

<sup>36</sup> Becker, "Luanne Martineau: Handmade"



production of carpets and rugs, and how, through this connection to function-based production, fiber has been dismissed as a material of domestic craft and therefore voided of artistic merit.

### Conclusion

Luanne Martineau has stated about her work “I take ideas of social art history and I manifest them into bodily forms. When I do that, the bodies tend to break apart. They get flayed open, because I am talking about these insertions of different interests, different moments of battle, different ideologies.”<sup>37</sup> In this statement, Martineau conceives of her forms as material embodiments of moments of polarity in the history of modern art, in which, through using a process of double coding, she inserts contravening art ideologies. In the works *Brickmaker* and *Parasite Buttress*, Martineau embeds industrial felt with codes for canonical works of avant-garde art, positioning it alongside needle-felt, which refers to traditional handcraft. Through this confrontation, Martineau refers to the division between art and craft, speaking particularly to the “subservience of craft, the use-value of craft and the fact that craft has fought for legitimacy within the visual-arts realm”<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Becker, "Luanne Martineau: Handmade"

<sup>38</sup> Becker, "Luanne Martineau: Handmade"

Martineau was particularly interested in a historical moment where fiber-based artists working with traditional materials and processes struggled to be recognized on the same level as other artists. In *Brickmaker*, the persistent prejudices towards craft are made visible through felt's ability to be both accepted, as in industrial felt, and not accepted, as in hand-needled felt, as "art." Through Martineau's material choice of felting and the different ways in which they are used, the double code is clear. The industrial felt, embedded with codes of avant-garde art, is hoisted into vertical space only to be weighed down by the needle felt and its craft connotations, which serve to disrupt both its status and the ideologies that placed it there.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

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#### Education

2011- 2013    University of Western Ontario    Master of Fine Arts Degree

2008-2010    NSCAD University    Bachelor of Fine Arts

2005-2008    Fanshawe College    Fine Art Diploma

#### Related Experience

**2011-2013            The University of Western Ontario**

Graduate Teaching Assistant

**2013                Museum London**

*Sculpture Instructor*

**2010                McIntosh Art Gallery, University of Western Ontario**

*Research Assistant*

**2008- 2010                    Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax NS**

*Gallery guide and Art Interpreter*

**2009                            Saint Mary's University Art Gallery**

*Gallery Intern*

### **Awards and Recognition**

**2011-2013            University of Western Ontario**

*Graduate Research Scholarship*

**2011                    Emerging Artist Research Residency, University of Windsor**

**2010                    David Lanier Big Hat, No Cattle Sculpture Scholarship, NSCAD  
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### **Selected Exhibitions:**

**2012                    Make/Shift**

*Group Exhibition*

*Artlab Gallery, University of Western Ontario*

**2012                    Fresh Paint**

*Group Exhibition, Art Mur Gallery, Montréal, Quebec*

**2010                    Hybrids**

*Solo Exhibition,*

*Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia*