Then Again, Maybe I Won't

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Abstract

This dossier and accompanying exhibition at MKG (Toronto, Ontario) both titled *Then again, maybe I won’t*, constitutes my Master of Fine Arts Degree at the University of Western Ontario. Within this dossier are a comprehensive artist statement, an interview with artist Jennifer Rubell and documentation of my art production over the course of my degree. These components contextualize my practice within the contemporary art world and outline the motivations and theoretical research that drives my work. Specifically, I look at affect theory, femmage, the burden of ownership and art theorist Jennifer Gonzalez’s notion of autotopography and how they are all linked through an underlying focus on sentimentality.

Keywords

Sentimentality, femmage, autotopography, affect theory, soft sculpture, textiles, art, assisted readymade, found art, craft.
Acknowledgments

Thank you David, Tyler and Joy. Thank you Jethro, Elly and Gordie. And the biggest thank you to Matt.
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Introduction

Combined with a solo exhibition that will take place from August 30th to September 8th 2018 at MKG127 in Toronto, Ontario, this thesis dossier represents the research I have completed as part of my Master’s Degree of Fine Arts. This dossier is comprised of three chapters: a comprehensive artist statement, an interview with artist Jennifer Rubell and documentation of my art production over the course of my degree.

The comprehensive artist statement seeks to contextualize my practice within the contemporary art world and outline the motivations and theoretical research that drives my work. Specifically, I am looking at affect theory, femmage and autotopography within craft culture and how they are all linked by sentimentality. The artist statement starts with an introduction followed by a section that that defines sentimentality in relationship to my practice and a discussion of my material practice. The following subsections, (Affect Theory, Femmage, and the Burden of Ownership), are considered through the lens of sentimentality. The chapter on affect theory considers some feminist scholars on the topic and examines the relationship between power and feelings. It negotiates the unfinished artwork as a feminist gesture and thinks through the connection between embodied knowledge, sentimentality and craft. The second section, Femmage, revisits the 1978 article, Waste Not, Want Not: An Inquiry into what Women Saved and Assembled – Femmage by artists Melissa Meyer and Miriam Shapiro. This article, which I encountered during my undergrad, actually generated much of the impetus for this body of work. I explore how my contemporary collage and assemblage artworks both encompass the term femmage, but also contemporize it. In the final section, I seek to understand what it means to take on ownership and value the unfinished projects that have been given to me. I consider how my personal history plays into my practice and that in accepting these abandoned projects they enter into my autotopographical narrative. Coined by art theorist Jennifer Gonzalez, autotopography describes personal objects such as souvenirs, keepsakes or gifts that are kept and cherished because they have ties to specific memories, people and places. As a result, the objects become an extension of the person’s body through its associated sentimental and symbolical value. Finally, I explore the 1987 artwork by Mike Kelley, More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and the connections to my practice.
In the second chapter I present a selection of work completed during my MFA candidacy. The work is documented in chronological order with the intent to provide insight into the evolution and process of this body of work.

The last chapter is an edited interview with artist Jennifer Rubell. I was originally attracted to Rubell’s work for its participatory nature, and its playful and humorous tone. While the work represented in this dossier does not emphasize audience interaction, I nonetheless found several connections between our practices, including an interdisciplinary approach that is driven by personal beliefs, emotions and feelings. Our discussion illuminated Rubell’s complex relationship with vulnerability, feminism and femininity. I was particularly interested in Rubell’s relationship to craft and collaboration as it helped me consider my relationship to the crafters who are donating their unfinished objects.
Chapter One: Comprehensive Artist Statement

Introduction

The year I started painting was around the same time I stopped knitting. At the time, I was meeting my mom regularly for a “stitch and bitch” and to work on an Afghan blanket. Of the thirty-five square blanket I was less than five squares in when the project waned. For the next fifteen years I moved from apartment to apartment and city to city; but I kept those five squares. The unique box my mom had given me to store my knitting paraphernalia was eventually converted into a paint storage box; but I kept those five squares. The balls of unused yarn bought to make the blanket eventually got used for something else; but I kept those five squares. As my art practice shifted from painting towards textiles, I started to wonder why I held onto this knitting project, which I knew deep down I would never complete?

My practice involves collecting unfinished or abandoned textile-based craft projects and recontextualizes them within the contemporary art world. Finishing the cast-off crafts started as a means to uncover, display and celebrate the many abandoned projects that sit in crafter’s closets, such as the knitted sock that never got its partner, the baby hat that wasn’t made in time, the sweater that didn’t get sewn together. My original intent was to monumentalize textile objects and skills that are still often unacknowledged and undervalued in contemporary art. However, as the project unfolded, I came to understand a relationship between sentimentality and the craft based objects I am working with. While not inherent in the objects themselves, sentimentality is a lens through which to negotiate the disparate themes and ideas that arose through my work. As a result, it is through this lens that I consider affect theory, femmage, autotopography, and the burden of ownership. First, I examine the affective turn, the unfinished artwork as a feminist gesture and the affective qualities of the material I work with. Next, I consider how this body of work has a contemporary relationship to the 1970’s theory of femmage and how these ideas play out in a contemporary context. Finally, I think through how labour, autobiography and sentimentality work to create value in objects and result in a burden of ownership. In particular, how an object becomes part of one’s own
autotopographical narrative. Defined by art theorist Jennifer Gonzalez, autotopography refers to personal objects that have become an extension of the self. They are objects that are treasured because of their ties to specific memories, people and places and thus hold sentimental and symbolical value. The intent of exploring these topics via sentimentality was to consider them from a more phenomenological perspective, as opposed to an epistemological one; to be able to say, “I care”, as well as “I know”. As such, I look to understand, learn about and experience theories and ideas rather than find answers, present concrete opinions or demonstrate knowledge. It is as author and editor Maria Elena Buszek states in her book *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, “to craft is to care.”

**Material**

My choice to work with found objects and assisted readymades is not new to my practice. Prior to this body of work, I worked with discarded paintings, tearing them apart in order to re-weave or rebuild them back together. I am drawn to the fact that found objects have a lived history, limitation as a material and a relationship to obsolescence that I have to respond to. As artist Saya Kajta Ganz states in the book *Raw + Material= Art*, “the difference between molding your own forms and working with pre-existing forms is that in the former the artist is acting, deciding what the materials do, and in the latter the artist is reacting to the objects, the forms they provide, and the physical limitations.” However, what was missing in the discarded paintings was that they were, in fact, discarded and unwanted, effectively garbage. Shifting to working unfinished textile projects allowed me to work with a material that held some meaning to the previous owner; an object that was kept, sometimes for decades, and not reused or thrown out. In her book, *On Longing*, Susan Stewart notes how objects that we hold on to have

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the capacity to “serve as traces of authentic experience.”³ As such, the shift from the discarded painting found on the side of the street, to the abandoned (but kept) textile project pertains to my interest in the psychological attachment to certain objects. As Stewart points out, “even though objects are detached from the owner by space and time, there remains a psychological connection,” which results in objects becoming like appendages to the body.⁴ Part of this intense attachment comes from the “capacity of narrative to generate significant objects” and in particular the narrative of the self.⁵

Applying Stewart’s theories to my situation, I built a narrative around the five knitted squares I held on to: they came to represent a (perhaps false or exaggerated) narrative of strong mother/daughter relationships; of knowledge sharing between generations; of making with love. And these appendages, I couldn’t throw out. In short, the granny squares became like a souvenir of a specific time and place that I have positioned as sentimental. As a result, the material that I work with (the unfinished and abandoned textile projects of others) have become an extension of those five knitted squares and projected upon them is this notion of sentimentality.

While the projection of sentimentality onto the unfinished craft object developed from a personal narrative, the conflation isn’t all that far-fetched. According to June Howard in her article “What Is Sentimentality?” the key elements of sentimentality are its association with the feminine, the domestic, humanitarian reform, convention and commodification.⁶ In reading The Subversive Stitch (Rozsika Parker) and Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art (ed. Maria Elena Buszek), it is clear that many of the elements linked to sentimentality are also stereotypically connected to traditional and contemporary textiles. It could be argued that by connecting sentimentality and textiles, I am further essentializing them. However, here I take a cue from Susan Best in her book Visualizing Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-garde

⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
where the author speaks of “strategic essentialism.” Best describes this tactic as “an approach that has sought to illuminate the terms neglected or denigrated as feminine.” As such, I am working within the stereotypically “feminine” sphere of sentimentality and textiles, but with the goal of looking at it critically. The idea isn’t to perpetuate these stereotypes, but consider how they work within the craft and art worlds.

Definition

In the *Continuum Encyclopedia of American Literature* sentimentality is defined as “an appeal to shallow, uncomplicated emotions at the expense of reason.” Sentimentality is often associated with tender feelings of love, pity or nostalgia. It is not widely discussed in the art world and is often considered as a cheap manipulation, irrational and illogical. In fact, there has been—at least—a century old prejudice against sentimentalism and understood as cheap, kitsch, shallow and “presents emotions that are false, manipulative, superficial, distorted, excessive, [and] self-indulgent.” Oscar Wilde’s negative opinions on sentimentality are often quoted. He believed that “a sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it.” Within the art world, sentimentality has been stigmatized at least since Modernism as shallow, excessive and inauthentic. Alexandra Novina explains in the article *A Swell of Sentiment*: “After Modernism stamped out the sentimental image as

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8 It could be said that by using craft as a vehicle to create art I am perpetuating hierarchical and problematic divide between art and craft. This debate of craft versus art has a complex history that I don’t directly address in my thesis, in part because my intention in seamlessly integrating the expert craftsperson’s hand with mine was to mark the false dichotomy between the two.
13 June Howard, “What is Sentimentality?,” 65.
anti-intellectual, irrational, inordinate, and bourgeois, acknowledging (not to mention being moved or inspired by) sentimental art has been a ‘closet indulgence’.”

Much of my understanding of sentimentality has come from the literary history of the word, and in particular the previously mentioned “What Is Sentimentality?” text by June Howard. This article explores sentimentality through the interdisciplinary lens of anthropology, neurobiology, history, literature and psychology. The article’s aim is not to determine a categorical definition of sentimentality, but to look at the topic as something that should “open not close a conversation.” The article points to the one element always associated with sentimentality: emotion and/or feelings. While Howard tends to use the two terms interchangeably, I think it is important to define them independently. If we look to psychology, emotion is defined as a physical state that is a response to something external, whereas a feeling is a mental reaction to an emotion; emotions cater to the body and feelings serve the mind. While avoiding a concrete definition, Howard believes that sentimentality is “a socially constructed pattern of sensations, expressive gestures, and cultural meanings organized around a relationship to a social objects.”

In her recent book *Motherhood*, author Sheila Heti defines sentimentality in a similar but simpler manner: for Heti it is “as a feeling about the idea of a feeling”. For both Howard and Heti, the sentimental is simultaneously a physical reaction and a mental feeling. Relying on these theories, I define the sentimental as an embodied thought. It is both epistemological and ontological, a feeling and an emotion, an action and a reaction. The sentimental is the conscious creation of a handmade object that is gifted to another combined with the pull of heartstrings when seeing the tag that reads “made with love.” As a result, for me sentimentality is often a negotiation between two people, and as Joanne Dobson states in “What is Sentimentality?” it is a form of “human

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15 June Howard, “What is Sentimentality?,” 69.
16 Ibid., 65.
18 June Howard, “What is Sentimentality?,” 66.
connectedness.” Theorist Lauren Berlant elaborates how sentimentality is about human connection:

Sentimentality is not just the mawkish, nostalgic, and simpleminded mode with which it’s conventionally associated, where people identify with wounds of saturated longing and suffering, and it’s not just a synonym for a theatre of empathy: it is a mode of relationality in which people take emotions to express something authentic about themselves that they think the world should welcome and respect; a mode constituted by affective and emotional intelligibility and a kind of generosity, recognition, and solidarity among strangers.

**Affect Theory**

I am interested in the potential of art based in sentimentality to provide a space in which we can experience it without irony, critical distance, guilt or a need for action. As such, I am looking at the affective relationship to craft, textiles and the handmade in my practice and specifically the affective turn, embodied knowledge and the affective quality of the material objects I work with.

The *Affect Theory Reader* states, “there is no single, generalizable theory of affect.” What interests me is the “affective turn”, which is the shift away from an emphasis on discourse, epistemology and culture towards thought, ontology and materiality. The affective turn validated feelings and emotions as subjects of academic inquiry and challenged the idea that reason and objectivity are scientifically superior to the emotional and subjective. As such, the phenomenological experience of the body becomes as important as theoretical discourse. Several feminist theorists argues that this turn isn’t new, but has been a concern since early feminism and is the culmination of feminist politics and thought, stemming from the core mantra of ‘the personal is the

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20 June Howard, “What is Sentimentality?,” 72.
24 Ibid., 116.
political.\textsuperscript{25} A reason the affective turn is important is that it investigated “how power circulates through feeling and how politically salient ways of being and knowing are produced through affective relations and discourses.”\textsuperscript{26} In their article “Affecting Feminism”, authors Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead demonstrate that in patriarchal culture we learn affective and emotional rules specific to our gender, race and class.\textsuperscript{27} These affects shape our social bodies and perpetuate hierarchical power. According to Sarah Ahmed in Pedwell and Whitehead’s article, “one of the reasons social transformation is so difficult to achieve […] is the strength of our attachments to social norms.”\textsuperscript{28} The gendered expectation of male as rational and female as emotional is an example of how power has circulated through feeling.\textsuperscript{29} As labor and politics supposedly demanded reason, it presumed that women, and other marginalized bodies, couldn’t participate. This reason/emotion binary thus excluded women, and any non-white male body, from any “legitimate knowledge production.”\textsuperscript{30} With the affective turn, is thus argued that objective and embodied knowledge are indivisible and that affect has the potential to produce different and transformative ways of knowing. If sentimentality continues to be defined as anti-intellectual, private and feminine, it upholds this reason/emotion binary. It maintains that the academic/intellectual, and by extension artistic, sphere is public and masculine and has no room for knowledge derived from the bodily experience of sentimentality.

Craft theorist Richard Sennett believes that craftsmanship is important because “making something that is separate from us and stands on its own like an object is a way of saying ‘I made this. I exist.’ Sennett twits Descarte’s ‘I think, therefore I am’ and shifts it to ‘I make therefore I am.’\textsuperscript{31} This line of thinking is reminiscent of the machismo

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 118.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 116.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 120.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 120.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
of Modernism, where the paintbrush was a metaphoric extension of the penis.\textsuperscript{32} Perhaps we can consider the concern, ‘I made this. I exist.’ as a masculinist privilege and one that denies process, incompletion, failure and the notion of making within or as a community. Ultimately, it is a concern that denies affect. In this vein, I can consider this body of work as a testament to the incomplete; the goal is not to complete any of the projects that have been donated to me, but to embrace and respond to their incompleteness. \textit{Twice Taken: Mother Heap}, in particular embodies the incomplete as it will never be fully finished.

Made from a collection of unfinished knitted and crochet projects and connected with sparkly copper colored yarn, the work continues to grow as I collect more abandoned projects from crafters. As a result, as the body of \textit{Mother Heap} grows, the audience’s experience, or affect, to her shifts. As opposed to saying: “I made this” so “I matter”, I am looking say “we make these things” and therefore matter, as a community of makers. Ultimately, whether the object gets completed or not, it is the notion of making, of gifting and the community that matters.

In “Loving Attention: An Outburst of Craft in Contemporary Art”, author Janis Jefferies prescribes the handmade craft object as emotionally charged; one that can act “so powerful to trigger memories, affections, and stories.”\textsuperscript{33} She describes these objects as being able seduce and inspire, heighten senses and enhance experiences. In effect, Jefferies is pointing to the handmade craft object as having an affective quality. The affect isn’t in the act of knitting, crocheting or quilting itself. Instead, it is in the sentimental nature of the personal handmade object that has this affective capacity to trigger memories and enhance senses. As Jefferies explains, “making something ‘with love’ represents the highly personal and emotionally charged. It is this quality of exchange that can act so powerfully.”\textsuperscript{34} This is what makes using the unfinished projects from other crafters as my material so important. By appropriating the crafter’s labour, it brings with it an affective quality. And so, I am responding to the object’s potential to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Carol Duncan, “The Esthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art,” \textit{Heresies} 1 (1997): 46.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
have been made for someone else, as well as the objects capacity to trigger memories, stories and affects within myself and potentially in the audience. In reframing the familiar and personal handmade object within the white cube, I am playing with and questioning the relationship between affect, art and craft.

My intent is to provide an opportunity to consider intimacy and the handmade through the affective experience of shrouded and weighted bodies, enlarged and miniaturized bodies, and the presence of time-consuming handiwork contrasted by bodies with no actual hands. I am working within a lineage of artists dealing with the affective side of the figure such as Louise Bourgeois, Allyson Mitchell, and Nick Cave. Like them, I am not looking for just simplistic celebration of the female (or marginalized) body, but also how feelings (of motherhood, queer identity, femininity, history and race) are experienced through the body and embodied in the figurative sculptures. On the one hand I shroud or hide figures, extenuate limbs or assemble bodies to think through female body politics (hidden bodies, aging bodies, body expectations). On the other hand, I emphasize the embodied knowledge of the maker’s hand by highlighting repetitions skills and calling attention to the amount of time involved in performing these skills in order to consider labour (value of the handmade, emotional labour, textile labour exploitation).

**Femmage**

The use of the handmade craft to consider social, personal and cultural issues is very much a manifestation of the 1970’s feminist mantra “the personal is political”. Maintaining an open, questioning and critical dialogue with the history of textiles and craft in art is of particular importance to me. I have been particularly drawn to the second wave feminist text, “Waste Not, Want Not: An Inquiry into what Women Saved and Assembled-Femmage,” by artists Miriam Shapiro and Melissa Meyer. Written in 1978, this article is a reflection on centuries of collage-based handiwork practiced by women as their artistic medium. The term femmage, coined by the authors, was a reclamation of the term collage, historically attributed to Picasso and Braque as an inventive shift in high
Shapiro and Meyer trace collage to the history of women practicing certain techniques (cutting and pasting, sewing, appliqueing, patchwork quilting, piecing, scrapbooking) as their unique modes of expression.

First published in *Heresies: Women’s Traditional Arts: The Politics of Aesthetics*, Shapiro and Meyer wrote this article in the context of early western feminist art, which sought to acknowledge the past contributions of women to the male dominated art world, as well as reinforce the value of traditionally feminine and female materials and techniques that were conventionally disregarded in western art. As the article explains, “now that we women are beginning to document our culture, redressing our trivialization and adding our information to the recorded male facts and insights, it is necessary to point out the extraordinary works of art by women which despite their beauty are seen as leftovers of history.”

It is important to note that several artists and scholars have called attention to some issues with this early feminist art and second-wave feminism in general, including the fact that it was essentializing and primarily championed by white, privileged and western women. Acknowledging this problematic, I have still chosen to work with some of the concepts from the article for several reasons. As a white, middle-class woman the history Meyer and Shapiro outline is, in fact, related to my own history. The craft techniques and tactics the authors discuss come from the same background of domestic crafting that I learned from my mother at a young age and have brought into my art practice. That said, my mother didn’t teach me to knit, sew or stitch in order to raise an obedient and domestic woman that was expected in earlier generations, as outlined by Roszika Parker in *The Subversive Stitch*. In fact, in her mid-forties my mother returned to college to study fashion design; something she wanted to do as a teen, but was instead forced to attend secretarial school. As such, for my mother, sewing and textiles wasn’t only a domestic craft, but a feminist statement of ceasing to be a stay-at-home mom in

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36 Ibid.
order to follow her dreams.

Shapiro and Meyer delineate specific criteria, of which the work should have at least half, for art to be considered femmage: women make it; it uses traditionally female techniques (weaving, sewing, applique, collage) and materials (scraps, recycled materials, fabric, photos); the work speaks in symbols or metaphors, is narrative, autobiographical, reflects on the female experience and is celebratory in nature. In this body of work, I appropriate, rethink, and contemporize the theory of femmage. I literally create symbolic, narrative and autobiographical artwork from the fabric of other women’s lives recycling their abandoned textiles projects. I use traditionally female craft techniques to create soft assemblage sculptures and textile collages. For example, I evoke symbols and metaphors of time, motherhood and home respectively in Cutting the Ties, Twice Taken: Mother Heap and Places I never meant to be. Simultaneously these works have autobiographical facets, as does P.S. Longer Letter Later, No More Saturday Nights and The Personal Touch. In some works I look to specific stories or narratives, such as the mythology of Sisyphus in the work The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-In-The-Moon Marigolds. Narrative also plays a role in how I negotiate the crafts projects I have been given. Most of the time I don’t know the background story of the objects being donated: why have they been abandoned, whom do they belong to, who were they being made for etc. However, while working with the materials, I often imagine and create complex background stories for each of the objects in order to engage with them beyond their materiality.

In “Waste Not, Want Not”, the authors also discuss the value of these crafts in relationship to sentimentality; femmage was work that was made for an audience of intimates, such as the scrapbook, valentine, baby quilt or collaged greeting card. Appropriating femmage in a contemporary context I am trying to emphasize the

41 Melissa Meyer and Miriam Shapiro, 67-69.
sentimentalism, personal symbolism and private metaphors inherent in craft objects, which is often derided as kitsch in contemporary art.\textsuperscript{42} As Robert Solomon argues in his article \textit{In Defense of Sentimentality}, “It is no secret that the charge of sentimentalism has long had sexist implications as a ‘weakness’ which is both more common (even natural) and more forgivable in women than in men.”\textsuperscript{43} Femmage is a way to acknowledge the notion of sentimentalism in art and bring the personal into the public. It is a means through which to negotiate my own history and relationship with the material, medium and techniques of craft.

\textbf{The Burden of Ownership}

Femmage has influenced the importance of collage as an approach to art making. In \textit{Waste Not Want Not}, Shapiro and Meyer state that “leftovers yielded nourishment in new forms.”\textsuperscript{44} In an interview theorist Lauren Berlant answers, “why do people stay attached to lives that don’t work?” with “what doesn’t work, makes no sense or is ungainly always accompanies fantasies about the good life.”\textsuperscript{45} If the holding on to unfinished projects is akin to staying attached to unproductive situations, then is transforming or completing them an act of optimism?

The abandoned projects come to me with a lived history and I thus embed them with meanings, memories, metaphors and narratives. In general, they are personal objects that have histories of learning, sampling, failing, moving on and/or giving up. That crafters keep—sometimes for decades— the unfinished projects points to an attachment to the crafts and hence it is difficult to let go of an object even in its unfinished state. The reason for using unfinished projects is more than just looking for a material source or an act of optimism. It is a reflection of my own history and my own origin story as an artist. The story I tell is this: My mother is a seamstress and knitter and I learned these skills as a child, but I only ever considered them a hobby. I always wanted to make art, but never
had the opportunity to learn it and so at college I studied art history. In my early twenties I finally decided to teach myself to paint and in my mid-twenties went to art school to pursue painting. Despite this desire to be a “painter”, my practice always came back to textiles. And so textiles, and in particular the unfinished projects, are a physical manifestation of my origin story. They point to the stunted skills I have in the discipline, the unresolved nature of my relationship with my mother, my restless personality as a maker and my continued desire to be the so-called “painter”. And so, as the materials come embedded with their own history, I also project my own narrative on them and read the objects as holding autobiographical matter.

As I take these objects on they become not only part of my autobiography, but also my own autotopographical narrative. Art theorist Jennifer Gonzalez coined the term autotopography to illustrate these types of personal objects that are held onto. Autotopography describes “how a person’s integral objects become, over time, so intrinsic to the ‘psychic body’ that they serve as autobiographical matter.”

Gonzalez is generally referring to objects, such as souvenirs, keepsakes or gifts that are displayed on mantles and in cabinets and symbolically represent personal ties to memories, people and places. For Gonzalez, these objects are a material manifestation of the self that differentiates from narrative and textual biography or autobiography and draws from life events and cultural identity to build self-representation as a material and tactical act of personal reflection. It is this notion of autotopography that gives the abandoned or unfinished projects power. They are objects of memory which refer to specific times, places and moments, such as the hat that was going to be made for someone’s birthday, the crafts that were handed down after a grandmother passed, or the half finished sweater that got packed during a move.

Most of these objects have been acquired through online craft and knitting
communities and so they are collected from strangers. Many have told me they are happy to see their unfinished projects go to something “useful” or to a “good home”. All of the objects I collected could have been reused for another project, recycled, thrown out or frogged. But for whatever reason, the objects were held onto and tucked into drawers, folded in boxes or hidden in the back of a closet. Sometimes the projects remain unfinished because the owner has inherited the objects and doesn’t have the skill to complete them. Sometimes the owner thinks they will eventually finish them. Sometimes it's because so much time has been put in, they feel sad ripping it apart. Sometimes they get bored, or frustrated, or fed up. Sometimes they get busy. But whatever the reason, the abandoned projects are kept and often with a sense of guilt for not completing them. And so, when they are passed on, I believe I provide a sense of relief and closure for the owners of the objects. In one instance, a knitter felt the need to meet for coffee and describe the story of an unfinished sweater that was going to be made for a sick friend – I felt like I was playing the role of therapist, priest or mother and absolving her of the guilt for not finishing the project. As a result, I feel that in taking these objects on, I am also taking on a burden of ownership. I have my own guilt and question whether I am making “good use” of these donated items. Would it be socially more beneficial if I completed the objects into functional items as opposed to artworks? There are also projects that have been given to me, but I have yet to transform into an artwork. In fact, the half finished sweater from the woman above has yet to be worked with because I feel the need to make something particularly special with it. While my therapist claims that guilt is the only emotion that serves no purpose, I believe that it is partly the associated guilt that draws me to use these abandoned projects as my material.

In considering this burden of ownership, I look to Mike Kelley’s 1987 work More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid as inspiration to consider the value of my intervention to the cast-off projects. Kelley’s work is an assemblage of homemade blankets and stuffed toys that he found in thrift stores and mounted much like an abstract expressionist painting. The work asks the viewers to consider the condition of love

49 The craft world’s term for ripping out the stitches of a crochet or knit piece.
through the handmade object and what labour and gift giving mean in relationship to craft. Bringing these abandoned handmade objects into the art gallery forced a distance from their original context and encouraged this critical reading. In a review of the work, critic Jerry Saltz states that “in this one work Kelley does a dervish dance in Rauschenberg’s famed gap between art and life, creating an abstract composition transmuting the emotions poured into these objects by their many former owners into a new language […]” 50 This idea of “transmuting” prior emotion into a new language is of interest to me, as I believe that in bringing the private language of sentimentality into the public art gallery, it complicates its reading and thus can be experienced as Heti describes it: as both an idea and a feeling. By transforming the objects into artworks, Kelley is able to retain the affect attached to the toy, while simultaneously asking questions about this attachment. This is explained in an article from the Hammer Museum on the artist:

[…] in many of Kelley’s works what may previously have seemed like a simple toy becomes a marker of social context and exchange. It is not that the sweetness of these objects is vacated altogether but that “love” in Kelley’s treatment is not allowed to exist as a simple altruistic emotion but is shown to carry its own economic and symbolic currency. The toys are stuffed, knotted systems of emotion, labor, ideology and aesthetics. 51

Kelley, like me, takes on the burden of ownership in order to consider the systems of which these objects belong. 52

Conclusion

Early on while creating this body of work, I took on sentimentality as a lens through which to investigate the various ideas that were apparent in my work, such as body politics, value, labour, affect theory, femmage, autotopography, gift giving and the burden of ownership. Sentimentality was an overarching lens that allowed me to consider an ontological perspective and give room for feeling in an academic environment.

52 More contemporary artists that I am looking at are Freddie Robbins, Janet Morton, Barb Hunt, Allyson Mitchell, and Ginette Legare.
Originally, I turned to sentimentality in order to concretize these nebulous ideas and collate diverse research interests. However, it was not surprising that creating this body of work and pursuing this research has resulted in more questions than answers. I encountered research yet to be explored in depth, such as body politics, the intimate public, phenomenology and authenticity. This body of work has opened up avenues to explore familial relationships, in particular the mother-daughter relationship. In looking at Mike Kelley and working with unfinished doll and doll clothes, I have questions about the nature of gender, craft and toys. In particular, I am drawn to the meaning of the autotopographical and sentimental object.

I started this project with five knitted squares, which got inserted into Twice Taken: Mother Heap early on. However, I recently removed those squares fearing that they seemed lost among the heap of unfinished projects – I have yet to decide what I will do with them. Until I started this body of work, I hadn’t considered those knitted pieces as particularly important. But upon reflection they have accrued autotopographic power, like the other unfinished projects I work with. As well, I have projected on to them sentimental meaning and subsequently taken on the burden of ownership to all abandoned projects donated to me. And so, the question remains, what happens when these objects shift hands to become art material? Does autotopography lose its meaning once an object is separated from its owner? Can sentimental value be transferred? I still have no straight answer. I don’t believe that the sentimentality I project on to my material is apparent in the final artworks. Yet, sentimentality and autotopography must be transferable if I develop a sense of guilt and burden of ownership upon acquiring the objects. And so, there is no resolution, only more questions. In the end, it is apparent that this is the crux, and perhaps importance, of this body of work.
Bibliography


Chapter Two: Practice Documentation

*Just Between Us.* 2017. Oil and acrylic on panel with otton, polyester, wood and aluminum. 38" x 11"x 4".

*I'm not your other half.* 2017. Oil and Acrylic on panel. 9" x 12"
Candy/Amelie. 2017. Cotton, polyester, wood, steel, Styrofoam balls, caster wheels, and plastic grapes. 19” x 15” x 93”

The Banana Split Affair. 2017. Donated unfinished felted sweaters. Polyester filling, and, cotton thread. Approximately 29” x 18” x 21”.
The Personal Touch. 2017. Donated unfinished winter coat, polyester filling and cotton fringes. Approximately 24" x 38" x 8".
**No Such Person.** 2017. Donated unfinished felted sweater projects and, polyester filling, wood, and metallic thread. 38” x 7” diameter.
Brown Betty. 2017. Anonymously donated unfinished knitted project, metallic thread and ceramic teapot. 13” x diameter x 4.5”.

P.S. Longer Letter Later. 2017. Anonymously donated unfinished knitted project and metallic thread. 7” x 3” x 5”.

Life as we knew it. 2017. Anonymous donated needlepoint project and metallic embroidery thread. 20” x 13”.
Twice Taken: Mother Heap. 2018. Donated unfinished knit and crochet pieces, polyester filling, metallic thread and armature. Various dimensions.
Places I never meant to be. 2018. Donated unfinished socks. Synthetic and natural yarn, polyester filling, t-shirt and metal. Approximately 28” x 28” x 43”.
The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-In-The-Moon

Marigolds. 2018. Donated unfinished doll, quilt and rug. Metallic thread, cotton thread and polyester filling. 41" x 33" x 11".
A million little pieces. 2018. Donated unfinished quilt pieces. Plastic, copper wire, metallic thread and wooden sewing table. 31" x 24" x 43".
Cutting the Ties. 2018. Donated unfinished quilt. Plastic, synthetic fabric, polystyrene foam, and broken down tomato pin cushions. 12" x 12" x 29".
Chapter Three: Interview with Jennifer Rubell

Introduction

Jennifer Rubell grew up in an art family. Her parents, Mera and Don Rubell have been collecting art since the mid-sixties and now hold one of the largest private contemporary art collections in North America. Her uncle was a friend of Andy Warhol and her parents are friends with the likes of Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince. At nineteen Rubell interned for Jeff Koons. Despite having grown up surrounded by art stars, the artist didn’t start making art until late in her life, partly because she was intimidated by the art world that surrounded her.

Jennifer Rubell is a conceptual artist who works in a range of mediums including food, sculpture, painting, installation and video. The works often encourage a level of audience participation, from cracking a walnut between a mannequin’s legs to catching cheese on a cracker from a melting cheese head. Her works are whimsical and occasionally tongue-in-cheek, but speak sincerely to themes of vulnerability, the feminine, motherhood and feminism.

What struck me most from our interview was how she could simultaneously speak poetically and pragmatically, romantically and realistically about art. On the on hand she spoke of desire, fear, femininity and emotions in making art. Then, she would speak matter-of-factly of the “pain in the ass” of working with food art or the “I don’t give a shit” attitude she has about being a woman and single mother in the art world. Jennifer graciously started the interview by asking me about my practice. Which brought us discuss how to negotiate being artists who work in a wide range of mediums.

Interview Transcript

Jennifer Rubell: People are always worried about through-threads, but you have to have faith that your work is as individual as you. The through-thread is whatever interests you and your practice has to suit you. I could never only make paintings; I could never only do large-scale performances; I could never only do sculptural works that I never really
touch. Those three elements are exactly the work that I need to make. And I see them all as exactly the same thing even though they are completely different mediums.

**Claire Bartleman:** Why do you see them as exactly the same thing?

**JR:** To work in painting, sculpture, performance, food or video is like saying the same thing in a lot of different languages. My work is so much about the audience and people take meaning in differently. For some people a painting is the thing that unlocks the poetry of human existence, and for some people that’s cracking a walnut between a mannequin’s legs. But they’re really all the same thing; they all speak to extreme vulnerability, to an acceptance of and yearning for femininity and a feminist existence.

**CB:** Do these things you are trying to say exist in the object or the interaction between the viewer and the work?

**JR:** The piece is the interaction between the person and the object.

**CB:** So, ultimately it’s the moment between the viewer and object that is most important?

**JR:** Well, it’s all important, because the object is the only part of the interaction that I have any control over. I can only offer a prompt to that interaction.

**CB:** Do you think that is true for all art?

**JR:** Yes. I make what you might call participatory art, but really all art is participatory art.

**CB:** What happens when the audience doesn’t interact with one of your participatory works?

**JR:** That lack of participation, it is still in fact a type of engagement. In terms of participating, I don’t want to be the person picked out of the audience to sit on the elephant. That’s not who I am and since I am not that way, my work is pretty irresistible because the threshold for participation is my threshold for participation. I am very patient and am happy to wait an hour for someone to take the first egg. To me, that moment
before that boundary is broken is really exciting. I think the feeling of transgression is my gift to the viewer.

CB: You have worked a lot with food as a medium. You said that you see all your mediums equals, but I see food as different because it is something that we engage with daily.

JR: I think food performance is a complicated medium that has a tremendous effect on the human soul. My ability to engage with the institution, with history, with art history, with the viewer and with the senses (audio, video, sensual, smell) needs a grand medium like food to get people in their heart.

CB: I read an article where you spoke of your food performances as tenderness and love. But for me it speaks to gluttony and consumption as well. And when food is transplanted into the art world, especially with the extravagance and size you use, I read it as institutional critique.

JR: For me institutional critique is much more about institutional dialogue or engagement. I grew up in a family that collected art and opened a museum, so the art institution is also my own personal, psychological mind. It comes from my own personal history and that’s the place that I am really digging at, much more than a general institutional critique. The kind of gluttony as a simple portrait of institutions, I wouldn’t say that is an accurate reading of my work. I accept and don’t mind that it’s a read of my work, but it’s not what I am thinking about when I am making. For me, the scale, volume and so-called gluttony come more from a dialogue with minimalism.

CB: Is all of your work in clear dialogue with art history?

JR: Yes, some of it is very explicit, but it’s more just a part of the language that I know. Because of the family I grew up in, art history is built into my language.

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CB: In a 2011 New York Magazine article, you were quoted as saying “I’m interested in making art that people want to see and can use to understand what’s happening inside contemporary art. The minute you give people something they can participate with it gives them access to it because they’re part of it.” Do you think contemporary art is inaccessible?

JR: People are very intimidated by all art and don’t know how to look at it. They feel like there is something about it they should know, but they don’t. Most people feel very comfortable saying whether they like a movie or a dish in restaurant. But, when they look at contemporary art they feel like they are not allowed to have an opinion. Once they’re allowed to participate with it, they’re let in and literally become a part of the piece. They’re no longer standing in the critic’s shoes, with none of the equipment the critic has. By allowing the viewer to touch the artwork, it’s literally like “Oh, who me? I can vote, I can have an opinion.” And once you crack that open, it’s like “Oh, maybe I can have feelings”. Which, of course, is something nobody talks about feelings when a docent gives an art tour. Nobody tells the viewer they can just stand in front of a painting and question how they feel. Do you feel like crying? Do you feel like laughing? Do you feel mad? And isn’t that kind of the whole point of art.

CB: You often collaborate with other people for your works. How to you think about this process of collaboration?

JR: First of all, I collaborate with people who are mostly craftspeople and at the absolute highest level in their craft. They are thrilled when they get my phone call, because I am asking them to push the boundaries of their craft, it deeply honors what they do and places their craft in the context of art. The craftspeople I work with have spent their lives honing their craft and have very little opportunity to execute it at a conceptual level. The chef in Toronto that I worked with, Grant Van Gameren, was stuck inside a box with his

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hands sticking out and handing out these little things he was making for hours…he was so deep in. And that’s typical. And they’re not doing it for me; they’re doing it for the pleasure of executing their craft.

CB: For the same reason we make art…

JR: Exactly, for the same reason we make art. And for a moment they get to do it. The difference is, and the reason why being an artist is the greatest thing there is on earth, is that we get to do that all the time.

CB: When I was in my undergrad, I had a female professor tell me never to have kids. I see a lot of your works as speaking to issues of femininity, feminism and motherhood. What reception have you gotten about exploring those themes?

JR: That’s the classic: you want to be a good artist, don’t have a kid. A lot of my work has to do with that. I think that every really great artist figures out how to craft their life in a way that has never existed before and that completely works for them. And every mediocre artist thinks that they need to follow in either the cliché of an artist or in the path of an artist who has come before. First, I don’t really care whether the great female artists had children or not, it was a different time and different generation. Secondly, there have been so few successful female artists, that you cannot draw any conclusions from the few that there have been. I have no intention of learning how to be a successful female artist from the maybe twenty successful female artists. I would rather learn it from the thousand successful male artists, and almost all of them have children.

CB: But do you find that you have gotten pushback from the contemporary art world for making work about motherhood and femininity?

JR: I don’t really give a shit. I so completely don’t care that I am not even tuned into whether it’s happening or not. Art making is very competitive and most pushback has to do with competition. If someone can psych you out of using the material and ideas that you know best and are most interested in then they win. And then with the issue of making work about motherhood; you are literally exploring human being from the ground
up so how is that not good for art making? How is it possible that it is not good for art making?

**CB:** Do you see your art as political?

**JR:** The problem for me with politics is that it’s very black and white and I really think that my work has nothing to do with that. The way in which it is political is to expose qualities that are often minimized as qualities of strength. It is intentional that when you ask me about female artists having kids, there is a strong decision on my part to say “fuck them”… well you could say that’s political.

**CB:** Last question, when did you consider yourself an artist?

**JR:** Growing up inside a family that collected art, I was so intimidated by the idea of being an artist that I would never have thought that or accepted it inside myself. But at a certain point the word artist was there in my mind, but I was so scared to share it with anybody. At an opening, Roberta Smith, an art critic from the New York Times asked me point blank, “Do you consider yourself an artist?” First of all, when the art critic of the New York Times is coming to some food performance thing you did and is asking you that question, the answer is very clear. However, I said, “Well, I don’t really think it’s up to me…” I gave some completely loser answer and literally the moment the words had come out of my mouth, was the moment I knew with absolute certainty I would never again say anything other than “Yes, I am an artist”.

**Reflection**

What has struck me most about Jennifer Rubbell’s practice in relationship to mine, is her commitment to craftsmanship. Invested in a conceptual and participatory practice, Rubell isn’t usually characterized as a craft-based artist. However, she often collaborates with expert craftspeople (bakers, glassblowers, chocolatiers, fromagers, and chefs etc.) in order to create her own artworks. According to the artist, Rubell likes to work with experts who are at the highest level of their craft to provide an opportunity to
push the boundaries of their craft. I believe that Rubell is also making a feminist gesture. The artist is collaborating with craftspeople who are working in traditionally “female” domains (cooking, baking, ceramics and chocolate) and are generally excluded from the contemporary art world. What is interesting here is that because she works with professionals, not amateurs, most of the craftspeople are men. I point to this slight contradiction and feminist gesture because it reflects a sentiment she shared with me during our interview: the internal conflict between yearning for femininity while also living a feminist existence. This conflict is explored in the work Us. The artwork is a life-sized handblown glass sculpture of a baby which viewers are encouraged to hold. In an article for Studio International, author Harriet Thorpe says the following about Us: “I'm interested in its conceptual meaning. In the same way that children are given dolls to cultivate feelings of responsibility and care, Rubell gives the art world an object, to test the trust of their relationship.” I read this artwork as an object of care, vulnerability, love and an invitation into the intimate role of motherhood. Unlike her work Engagement (with Prince William sculpted by Daniel Druet), where audience members can slip their finger into a diamond ring on the arm of a life size sculpture of Prince William, there is nothing ironic, cynical or kitsch about Us. Holding the glass baby, in awe of its craftsmanship while simultaneously fearful of its fragility creates an embodied experience that explores the power of affect. While my work doesn’t involve physical engagement, there are similar themes of care, vulnerability and love with an attention to craftsmanship.

Ibid.
Bibliography


Supplementary Bibliography


Curriculum Vitae

Education
2016-2018 Master of Fine Arts Studio Art, Western University (in progress)
2010-2015 Bachelor of Fine Arts Drawing & Painting, OCAD University
2004-2007 Bachelor of Fine Arts Art History, Concordia University

Selected Exhibition History
2018 (forthcoming solo exhibition) Then Again Maybe I Won’t MKG Toronto ON
Mother Heap (Juried Installation) The Artist Project Toronto, ON
Inward Outward Artlab London ON
Twice Taken (Solo Exhibition) Gallery Stratford Steelbox Art Lab Stratford
2017 Common Goods Forest City Gallery London, ON
Sleight of Hands ArtLab London, Ontario
The last to go will see the first three go before SATELlITE Gallery London, ON
2016 Plexus DNA London, ON
Hard Twist (Juried) Gladstone Hotel Toronto, ON
Traces Ryerson Art Space Toronto, ON
2015 The Big Draw (Juried) OCAD University Art Auction Toronto, ON
Pattern Makers XPACE Toronto, ON
Lacis Student Gallery, OCAD University Toronto, ON
Pattern Makers Xpace Toronto ON
This is Not a Craft Fair Transit Space Toronto, ON
2014 Summer Emerging Artist Exhibition Gallery 1313 Toronto, ON
Fresh Paint Art Mur Montreal, QC
Salon VIII Propeller Gallery Toronto, ON
Grad Ex OCAD University Graduation Exhibition Toronto, ON
The Big Draw OCAD University Toronto, ON
2013 Salon VII Propeller Gallery Toronto, ON
2012 themomentwhenanappleistooheavyandhastofalldown Truck Gallery Calgary AB
Salon VI Propeller Gallery Toronto, ON
2011 First Impressions Great Hall, OCAD University Toronto, ON
Body and Mind Transit Space OCAD University Toronto, ON
Fly by Night Gladstone Toronto, ON
Salon V Propeller Gallery Toronto, ON
The Next Big Thing Art Auction Student Gallery, OCAD University, Toronto, ON
Caviar Auction Studio Beluga Montreal, QC
Awards
2018 Ontario Graduate Scholarship Western University
2018 Travel Grant Western University
2017 Canada Graduate Scholarship Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
2017 Nominee: Graduate Student Teaching Assistant Award Western University
2017 Jose Barrio-Garay Bursary Western University
2016 Dean’s Entrance scholarship Western University
2016 Chair’s Entrance scholarship Western University
2015 Mrs. W.O. Forsyth Award for women painters, OCAD University
2014 Gallery 76 Student Gallery Award OCAD University
2013 Project 31 Scholarship for Academic Excellence OCAD University

Artist Talks and Presentations
2018 Guest Critic OCAD University Material Art and Design Faculty
2018 Guest Lecture OCAD University, Cross Cultural Issues in Craft
2018 Guest Critic Hamilton Artist Inc., Critique workshop
2016 Artist Talk OCAD University Material Art and Design Faculty
2014 Artist Talk Windsor University

Residencies
2017 Harbourfront Center Textile Residency Toronto Ontario
2016 Ryerson University and OCADU Art Camp Toronto, Ontario
2014 Emerging Artist Research Residency Windsor University, Ontario
2012 Performance Art Studies/MS:T Performance Art Festival Calgary, Alberta

Related Work Experience
2018 Guest Lecture OCAD University
2018 Instructor OCAD University Continuing Studies
2016-2018 Teaching Assistant Western University
2017-2018 Adult Course Instructor Art Gallery of Ontario
2017 Graduate Research Assistant Craft Pedagogy and the Digital Challenge OCAD University
2014-2016 Program Assistant, First-Year Initiatives OCAD University Writing & Learning Centre
2014 Research Assistant Feminist Art Collective, OCAD University
2012-2014 Peer Tutor OCAD University Writing & Learning Centre
2011-2014 Supplemental Instruction and Workshop Leader OCAD University Writing & Learning Centre
2011-2012 Research Assistant Inclusive Design Research Centre, OCAD University
2010-2014 Student Gallery Assistant OCAD University Student Gallery