Haunt and Hold

Michelle Laxalt

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HAUNT AND HOLD

by

MICHELLE LAXALT

Under the Direction of Christina A. West, MFA

ABSTRACT

In my experiences with caregiving, I was confronted with the vulnerable physicality of infant and elderly bodies. In *Haunt and Hold*, I draw on two memories in which I observed the physical weakening of my grandparents’ bodies. Intensely visceral and existentially overwhelming, these moments compelled me to reevaluate my material existence as well as a number of family traditions that have complicated my spiritual assumptions.

Using the “Catholic Imagination,” the Medieval memory palace, the uncanny, and the abject as theoretical and conceptual frameworks, I make sense of these experiences and narratives. I create sculptural works that serve as reminders of the body, reflect on the sensations I experienced while caregiving, and re-contextualize personal family traditions involving the body. While the work is deeply rooted in my subjective experience, I intend to create uncanny
encounters for viewers by presenting them with materials and scenarios that are visceral, unusual, and evocatively familiar.

INDEX WORDS: Art, Sculpture, Ceramics, Textiles, Figurative, Uncanny, Abject, Memory Palace
DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my parents, Katie Raymond and Richard Laxalt. Mom, your unwavering compassion and ability to make the everyday extraordinary are admirable and inspiring, to say the least. And Dad, time and again, you have shown me what it means to truly embody and enact empathy. Thank you both for believing in me. I love you.
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1 INTRODUCTION

In my experiences with caregiving, I was confronted with the vulnerable physicality of both the very young and the very old. In this body of work, I draw on two memories in particular, in which I observed the physical weakening of my grandparents’ bodies. Intensely visceral and existentially overwhelming, these moments compelled me to reevaluate my material existence as well as a number of family traditions that have complicated my spiritual assumptions. In *Haunt and Hold*, I ruminate on these memories with vulnerable bodies and the mythical rituals from my upbringing that caregiving prompted me to reconsider.

In making sense of these experiences and narratives, I have come across several theories and themes that have provided both framework and language with which to discuss my work: the “Catholic Imagination,” the uncanny, and the abject, all of which relate to the body in a specific way. As an exhibition, *Haunt and Hold* adapts the format of the Medieval memory palace, an imagined space in which striking and unusual images and objects are arranged in a particular order to prompt a memory. Memory palaces were full of strange and often fragmented figurative objects and imagery, which I mimic in the exhibition.¹ My use of realism exists on a spectrum: all of the pieces allude to the body, and while some are highly referential and rendered, others are less explicit.

Using specific materials like spun hair, feathers, and soap, I narrate and reimagine personal family rituals and stories involving the body. In other works, like the fleshy ceramic sculptures and the silk pieces felted with hair, I reference the body without narrating it literally, and reflect on the sensations I experienced while caregiving. While the work is deeply rooted in

¹ Francis A Yates, *The Art of Memory*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 16. According to Yates, the medieval memory palace was one “full of human imagery of a very personal kind…strikingly beautiful or grotesque…[the images] appear to be completely amoral, their function being solely to give an emotional impetus to memory by their personal idiosyncrasy or their strangeness.”
my subjective memory, I intend to create engaging and uncanny encounters for viewers by presenting them with forms, materials, and scenarios that are visceral and unusual, but also evocatively familiar.

2 CAREGIVING

My parents and I have all been caregivers. The experiences we shared while caregiving, as well as the overarching notion of nurturing bodies that can’t nurture themselves, form the core of my artistic inspiration and direction.

During the time that I was working at a daycare in the infant and toddler room, my father was living with his father, and caring for him during the last year of his life. Shortly after that, my mother moved in with her mother to care for her during the last three years of her life. In each of these situations, my parents and I had to perform the inverse of our usual roles. While my grandparents slowly regressed into almost infant-like states, essentially becoming the children of my parents, I became a surrogate mother to children who were not my own.

Caregiving was formative for me in that it allowed me to hesitate and stumble through learning how to negotiate fragile, infant bodies; it allowed me to observe the awkward frailty of elderly bodies from an intimate proximity; and it allowed me to question and test the strength and vitality of my own body. It also allowed me to embody and enact empathy, and to experience exhaustion like I never had before.

Caregiving taught me that my grandfather loved to hold hands in silence. “See, he’s just like a baby,” I’ll always remember my father saying, as he trailed his hand across the soft, papery skin of my grandfather’s swollen belly. My father told me my uncle’s belly swelled up like that before he died, too. It was with my grandfather that I experienced death first-hand, holding my own breath while he took his last. Caregiving allowed me the opportunity to dress
my grandmother, and to learn about her body in a way that was both uncomfortable and humbling. In doing so, I imagined what it will be like to care for my own mother and father one day.

It is equally troubling and consoling to compare the crib spaces of the daycare with the bed spaces of my grandparents’ homes. In each setting, exhaustion seeped. While the ones we cared for were often exhausted themselves, my parents and I were consistently emotionally and physically exhausted from the requirements of caregiving.

Theorist Sianne Ngai writes of caregiving as a gendered and affective immaterial labor, and refers to it as “soft work.” Ngai also writes about the principles behind the aesthetic of “maternal materialism,” an aesthetic that Louise Bourgeois echoes in her soft sculptures that narrate motherhood and female sexuality.

Figure 1. Louise Bourgeois. *The Woven Child* (detail). Fabric, vitrine. 70” x 35” x 21” (with vitrine). 2002.

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3 Ibid., 76. Ngai notes how female Progressive Era doll makers advocated for maternal materialism in their making by reintroducing “‘softness, portability, and safety’ as values into the American toy market through the mass manufacturing of cloth and stockinette dolls.”
Bourgeois and Ngai very much influenced the formal and conceptual components of the series of soft sculptures I made leading up to *Haunt and Hold*. In this series, I reference the bed space as a significant space not only for caregiving, but for the body. In my mind, the bed marks a transcendent space for the body, and is a space where reality is heightened and has the potential to become foreign, forgotten, or reimagined. The bed is a revisited space in which we are confronted with our physicality, our sexuality, and our mortality. It is the space of conception, breath, dreams, fevers, sex, euphoria, exhaustion, and death. Our bodies mark and imprint the bed with stains and impressions, while the bed marks us in return with imprints of folded sheets on our skin and feathers in our shirts and hair. Like a womb, the bed envelops and it swaddles; it cradles many versions of our selves.

Each of the soft sculptures in this series are made from used bed sheets, materials that have previously enfolded bodies. The figures are constructed from several distinct parts, allowing for varying degrees of realism to exist in each piece simultaneously. 4 My piece *Bed*, for example, is unrecognizable as a figure in some areas, and jarringly realistic in others. The figure’s body, made from my grandmother’s bedsheets, is soft and simplified, while the legs are highly rendered in ceramic, allowing the form to oscillate between the aesthetics of the cute and the uncanny. 5 In *Bed*, proportions are ignored and exaggerated. Areas of the genital organs are rendered with greater detail than the rest of the figure, emphasizing the bed as a space where we embody our sexuality. *Bed* also appears to be ambiguously pregnant yet fetal, alluding to the range of experiences we undergo in the bed space. And like other sculptures in the series, the figure is in a horizontal position, implying relaxation or sleep, or ambiguously, the weaker states

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4 While the concept hasn’t been introduced in depth to this thesis as of yet, the imprecision of the figure’s body aligns with the memory palace guidelines of using unusual bodily forms as memory prompts. In this way this figure, formally and materially, is a memory prompt for the bed space.

5 Ibid., 91. Ngai has contributed to my use and understanding of these aesthetics.
of exhaustion or collapse. As if the figures have collapsed under the weight of the emotionally tolling experiences of the bed space, they are not only in congruence with the bed, they become the bed.

Figure 2. Michelle Laxalt. Bed. Grandmother's bedsheets, polyester fiberfill, ceramic. 12" x 48" x 16." 2015

In this series of soft sculptures, I adhere to my memories of caregiving with affection, remorse, and respect. While the experiences weren’t necessarily easy or pleasing, caregiving instilled in me a curiosity and respect for our corporeality.

In one caregiving encounter in particular, I was compelled to reconsider both my material existence and my assumptions about the nonphysical world. I was confronted not only with the looming vulnerability of the physical body, but an unusual and magical remedy used to alleviate this vulnerability. Two entities were at stake in this experience: my grandmother’s corporeal body, and my own latent awareness of a superstitious rationale that has trickled through our family in the form of tradition and myth.
3 THE QUIVS

While my mother and I were untangling my grandmother’s bedding for laundering, a bar of soap landed with a thud on the floor. Perplexed, I asked my mother why this would be found in my grandmother’s sheets. To my surprise, I learned that my grandmother would sleep with soap at the foot of her bed to relieve what she called “the quivs,” or leg spasms. The discovery was initially strange and unnerving, but in an inexplicable way, it made so much sense. Of course that’s why she sleeps with soap in her bed, I thought to myself. Uncannily, it was as if this was something I knew, but I didn’t know how I knew it.

In this ritual adapted from folk medicine, my grandmother was rendering the soap as a talisman, and placing her faith in this object to protect her body from its own vulnerability. Materially the soap is compelling in that it is made from a body (the animal body), and used to protect a body. While I do not see the soap functioning as a literal talisman in The Quivs—the piece in which I reimagine this narrative—research into talismans, amulets, and other magical objects influenced the decisions I made with this piece. Taking cues from medieval historian Richard Kieckhefer’s mapping of sympathetic magic, in casting soap in the form of feet, I make the afflicted body part synonymous with the medicinal material.6

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Learning about the quivs was transformative. This experience convinced me of the symbolic potential of objects and materials to reference concepts beyond their own physicality. Artistically, the quivs has contributed to how I choose and group materials to generate imagery and construct narrative, and has since served as a conceptual touchstone. Furthermore, learning about the quivs was like loosening a pressure valve: slowly but surely, in the weeks following this experience, other unusual family traditions and myths involving the body and its relation to certain materials, objects, and ideas leaked back into my memory. In recounting these stories, I realized that many of these tales have convoluted and complicated my understanding of the permeable boundary that separates myth and superstition from faith in the divine.

For example, I learned from my mother to always shake your wallet for good fortune when you see a robin, but if you don’t have your wallet then shake your body. After a haircut, put your hair and lint in an onion bag and hang it in a tree so that birds may make a nest from it. And if you’re lost, or if you ever lose something, pray to Saint Anthony. I learned from my grandmother that closed doors hide sins, and that if you like
a present you’ve received, put it on your head to show others your approval. Growing up, my brother and I equally feared and anticipated the guardians that lurked around our house. When we were in our beds at night, we reminded ourselves that we would wake up to pennies and other treasures in the crack between our door and the wall, and candy in our shoes if it was the first week in December. I also believed that the giant scar across my father’s side was from a mountain lion, and that a man with a dragging foot haunted our family campsite. These narratives have shaped and continue to shape my personal understandings of the magical and the sacred, especially in relation to the body.

4 CATHOLIC IMAGINATION / NOTIONS OF THE SACRED

Eleanor Heartney’s understanding of the “Catholic Imagination” has contributed to how I have come to understand these mythic narratives. The concept of the Catholic Imagination was cultivated by theologian David Tracy and sociologist Andrew Greeley. Greeley positions the Catholic imagination, one that is analogic and concerned with creation and metaphor, against what he terms “the Protestant imagination,” one that is dialectic, wholly separate from the language and characteristics of the divine, and ultimately “very uneasy with the idea of metaphor.”

In “Postmodern Heretics” Heartney states the importance of the physical body’s role in the Catholic belief system: “Catholicism stresses the continuity of the divine and […] the role of the human body as a vessel of divine spirit.” Examples of this thought process are illustrated time and again in Catholicism: body parts of saints are housed in reliquaries and are worshipped long after the saints are deceased; the Transubstantiation

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of the Host involves Christ’s blood and body miraculously becoming bread and wine, which are consumed during Holy Communion; and marks, wounds and other stigmata are revealed on worshippers’ bodies and mirror the holy wounds Christ underwent during the Crucifixion.

I am interested in the framework of the Catholic Imagination because I was raised “kind of” Catholic. Although I was baptized, went to catechism class, and received First Communion, I never went through Confirmation. My upbringing wasn’t strict, and I barely remember any Bible stories. While my mother’s family is relatively traditional in their Catholic customs, they’ve also created what I see as a “family religion” that is its own special blend of religion, adapted pagan tradition, and superstition. Growing up, my understanding of religion and the family traditions I recalled earlier were one in the same, which made for a rather convoluted, albeit colorful, understanding of the “divine.” These traditions are complex in the sense that in many of these examples, the body and objects are implicated in hopes to aid or improve the wellbeing of the person at stake. In this way, many of these scenarios illustrate the metaphorical “continuity between the corporeal and the divine.” In the quivs and in praying to Saint Anthony, the failure and vulnerability of the corporeal body are prompts for one to call on the divine or magical forces for relief and assistance.

As such, my upbringing has deeply influenced the ways in which I consider certain materials and their meanings, especially in their relation to the body. In this way, my experiences and thought process align with Heartney’s description of the artist Kiki Smith, who was raised Catholic. She traces the ways in which Smith probes “corporeal concerns so central to the Catholic imagination” through her use of metaphor, specific

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9 Ibid., 37.
materials, and a repositioning of the sacred, and in doing so, how she addresses abjection and the female body.¹⁰

Heartney states,

Smith also draws upon what she calls the “pagan side” of Catholicism: modern survivals of belief in the magical power of faith such as the wearing of medals and scapulars to ward off evil, votive candles lit for the dead, money left on the statues of saints as a plea for heavenly intercession, crutches thrown away at pilgrimage sites […] “I’m an idol worshiper,” Smith says; “I believe objects hold power, that they retain the energy you put into making them. That’s why I’m an artist.”¹¹

Like Kiki Smith, I too am interested in the symbolic power and personal connotations of objects and materials, even if their capabilities for transformation are implied rather than actual. To be clear, while I am interested in thinking about this religion, I do not believe

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¹¹ Heartney, “Postmodern Heretics,” 36.
in or adhere to Catholicism in the dogmatic sense. Rather, I am interested in the ways that my creative process aligns with Heartney’s understanding of the Catholic Imagination as a means of constructing narrative, generating imagery, and imbuing materials with meaning.

5 MEMORY PALACE

_Simple and spiritual intentions slip easily from the soul unless they are linked with corporeal similitudes._ – Saint Thomas Aquinas

Artistically re-contextualizing these mythic family narratives involves sifting through and cataloging these stories and accompanying materials through memory. The Medieval concept of the memory palace has influenced the ways in which I make sense of this process.

Historian Frances Yates charts the importance of the art of memory in the Middle Ages, specifically in relation to the medieval formation of imagery and the understanding of the soul. To briefly summarize, the art of artificial memory has its roots in antiquity, and was practiced primarily to improve one’s oratory skills. There are several contributors that influenced the medieval conception of the art of memory, and while specific rules for the art of memory vary slightly depending on historical moment and author, the basic idea remains the same: practitioners conceptualize artificial memory as an architectural setting (_locus_) in the mind, in which images (_formae, notae, or simulacra_) are placed in a specific location and order.\(^{12}\) Once these images are arranged, one can navigate the _locus_ in a particular way and encounter the images in just the right sequence, stringing these images together to recall a memory.

Figure 5. Human Image on a Memory Locus. From Romberch, Congestorium artificiose memorie, ed. of 1533. This print illustrates how memory loci should be proportional in size to the human figure.13

*Ad Herennium*, a text from antiquity with an unknown author, describes how these images or simulacra ought to be “active…as striking as possible,” displaying “exceptional beauty or singular ugliness” in order to remember the chosen signs more effectively.14 The author of *Ad Herennium* describes how to make images more memorable by somehow disfiguring them, as by introducing one stained with blood or soiled with mud or smeared with red paint, so that its form is more striking…The things we easily remember when they are real we likewise remember without difficulty when they are figments.15

Saint Thomas Aquinas builds upon these guidelines decades later by advising, “Simple and spiritual intentions slip easily from the soul unless they are linked with corporeal similitudes.”16

In this model, the body serves as an important site for prompting memory. We remember

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13 Ibid., 117-118. Yates notes how this illustration was used to advise that “A memory locus which is to contain a memory image must not be larger than a man can reach; this is illustrated by cut of a human image on a locus, reaching upwards and sideways to demonstrate the right proportions of the of the locus in relation to the image. This rule grows out of the artistic feeling for space, lighting, distance, in memory in the classical place rules…”
14 Ibid., 6
15 Ibid., 10.
16 Ibid., 83.
things—occurrences, stories, phenomena, moral lessons, however banal or however important—when we associate them with bodily images and objects.¹⁷

While Medieval practitioners of the art of memory were making these associations in their mind, they were also visualizing these associations in writing and in illustrative artworks. And thus, memory became a means for generating unusual and idiosyncratic (memorable) images. The importance of this methodology for image-making cannot be overstated, as it allowed Medieval artists opportunities to explore grotesquerie, pastiche, and subjective semiology centuries before these became celebrated artistic tropes.¹⁸ While I do not literally practice the art of memory as outlined in the text, the Medieval concept of the memory place—and contemporary artists such as Michael Jones McKean, whose installations reference what an adapted memory palace could look like—have influenced the decisions I made in staging my thesis exhibition.


¹⁷ Mary J. Carruthers, The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture, 2nd ed., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 73. Carruthers notes how “The bodily matrix of memory is also clear in Thomas Aquinas’s belief that sensory memory does not survive death, for it has “no activity apart from the corporeal organ,” […]and thus[…] “memory requires a body.”

¹⁸ Yates, The Art of Memory, 104. Yates notes that it is very likely that the use of the art of memory contributed to the “medieval love of the grotesque [and] idiosyncratic.”
In *Haunt and Hold*, I treat the gallery as a memory palace in which I’ve placed a combination of “striking images” alongside less specific “unusual corporeal similitudes.”¹⁹ In my reasoning, the “unusual corporeal similitudes” are the bodily ceramic sculptures and the silk sheets felted with hair, which serve as imprecise reminders of the body. Comparatively, the “striking images” are the conceptually specific objects and materials that link directly to the myths and traditions of my upbringing, like the soap feet in *The Quivs*.

Similar to *The Quivs*, my sculpture *shed, nest* can be read according to the memory palace guidelines. Conceptually, the sculpture references my family tradition of hanging bags of cut hair in trees for birds to make nests with. Formally, *shed, nest* consists of three elements: a severed branch with its bark removed, a long cord of spun hair that entangles the branches and drops to the floor, and a shelf bearing a pile of loose down feathers. In reimagining this narrative, I have simplified the story into its major material components—the hair, the tree, and the birds—and have staged these objects in a way that references this narrative without deciphering it didactically. Consistent with the *formae* of the medieval memory palaces, these materials are only “figments” of their original source; each is a segment of a whole that makes its original source uncannily present and absent simultaneously.²⁰

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¹⁹ Ibid., 82.
²⁰ Ibid., 10.
6 THE UNCANNY

This notion of fragmentation, and the phenomena in which something can be made present through its absence, is not only important to the concept of the memory palace, but to the concepts of the abject and the uncanny. Sigmund Freud’s notion of the uncanny, in all of its complexities, can be used to illustrate this ambiguity, as well as the sensation I experienced when recalling other family traditions involving the body after learning about the quivs.

The most basic understanding the Freudian uncanny—which is both a sensation as well as an entity that causes this sensation—is that the uncanny is “that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.”21 It makes the unfamiliar oddly

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21 Freud, Sigmund; “The Uncanny,” in An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works (London: Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1919), 2. Freud begins by mapping the important relationship between the uncanny and the familiar by spending
familiar, and involves the repression and the eventual resurgence of something once well-known, homely, or comfortable. Once this resurgence occurs, there is a complex sensation consisting of a “creeping” recognition coupled with a helpless repulsion.²²

However, the uncanny is not as simple as a resurgence of the repressed. Experiences of déjá vu, recurring dreams, and situations that feel to be more than coincidental can also be described as uncanny.²³ For example, if a magical charm, divine object, or ritual incantation functions as intended, or, when “something actually happens in our lives which seems to support the old, discarded beliefs,” we may experience the uncanny.²⁴

Furthermore, people may experience the uncanny when they encounter reproductions of the figure and it is unclear whether or not it is alive.²⁵ Artist Mike Kelley, who curated an exhibition in 1993 titled The Uncanny, expands on this, noting that “wax-work figures, artificial dolls, and automatons, as well as epileptic seizures and the manifestations of insanity” may produce uncanny sensations.²⁶

And thus, the uncanny weaves together the following threads: it involves a repression and resurgence of the familiar; it calls into question notions of the body, especially its cognizance, physical liveliness, or representation through simulacra; and it provokes a reconsideration of some time with the word heimlich, a German adjective meaning “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, comfortable, homely, etc.” Heimlich has a spectrum of ambiguous definitions. While heimlich may refer to the familiar or the homely, it also has a contradictory definition when used to describe that which is “concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know about it, withheld from others.” This is interesting, because unheimlich, the opposite of heimlich, is described as “the name for everything that ought to have remained [...] hidden and secret and [which] has become visible.” As Freud notes, here we see heimlich and unheimlich functioning synonymously. Like the word heimlich, the uncanny is inherently ambiguous.

²² Ibid., 1.
²³ Ibid., 17. Freud illustrates this by outlining how the empirical thought process and rationality that developed in the modern age repressed—or rather, “surmounted”—the ancient and animistic view of the world. He states that the uncanny may provoke us to reconsider our pragmatic and logical understanding of the world by confronting us with the potential value of a repressed and typically illogical or superstitious attitude toward the world.
²⁴ Ibid.
²⁵ Masahiro Mori, a robotics professor, elaborated upon this aspect in 1970 in his development of the concept of the “uncanny valley.” Crucial to the uncanny valley is the concept of “the double,” the stand-in or reproduction of the body. According to Freud, in ancient times, doubles of the body were hopeful and positive, functioning as “an assurance of immortality.” Comparatively, it can be argued that contemporary onlookers position these doubles of the body as “ghastly harbinger[s] of death.” ⁹
modern rational thought by suggesting that primal and suppressed mystical beliefs could in fact carry weight.

Discovering my grandmother’s ritual to relieve the quivs provoked multifaceted sensations and questions about the vulnerability of the body, the familiar, and the mystical simultaneously. The strange and unnerving ritual was ambiguously and inexplicably unfamiliar and familiar, illogical yet sensible. This experience was the uncanny through and through, and I was overwhelmed by the creeping sensation that this experience produced. Again, Kelley has contributed to my understanding of this complex response, and in particular how the uncanny is linked to subjective memory. He notes,

> this sensation is tied to the act of remembering […] the uncanny is a somewhat muted sense of horror, horror tinged with confusion […] All of these feelings are provoked by an object, a dead object that has a life of its own, a life which is somehow dependent on you, intimately connected in some secret manner to your life.\(^\text{27}\)

With this in mind, I have artistically situated “the quivs” as a central experience—both conceptually and physically in the exhibition—and personal notions of memory, the sacred, the body, and the abject radiate from this uncanny core.

In *The Quivs*, I reimagine this narrative and intend to create a similar uncanny experience for viewers. The piece consists of a pair of cast soap feet, lying on a wrinkled and messed sack of translucent silk filled with down feathers that are just barely visible. The feet are cropped at the ankles, segments of a whole that suggest the presence of their “parent body” despite its absence.\(^\text{28}\) As life-casts, the feet are made through a process in which the soap literally fills a

\(^{27}\) Ibid.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 14.
void once occupied by another body. This process amplifies the absence of the body, and the resulting casts function not only as a “pseudo presence,” but more aptly, “token[s] of absence.”


For my practice, Artist Berlindé de Bruyckere’s work has served as an influential example in how life-casts can “drag the absence of the living subject…uncannily into the viewer’s presence.” Viscerally severe in their coloration and materiality, de Bruyckere’s wax casts of anthropomorphic forms, tree limbs, and antlers chillingly embody death, and evocatively reflect the vulnerability and ephemerality of living beings from which they came.

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29 Robert Taplin, “Dead or Alive: Molds, Modeling and Mimesis in Representational Sculpture,” *Sculpture Magazine*, May 1994, 27. Taplin writes that Sontag insists that “to take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.” To which he responds, “So too does a life cast.”

30 Ibid.
In de Bruyckere’s casts as well as my own, and in other sculptural doubles of the body, the uncanny exists in that distance between the real and the represented: the closer the simulation is to actual life, the more uncanny it is. As artist and writer Robert Taplin observes, “the strangest thing about a life cast is that the person depicted is not there […] it is quite difficult to break the association between the life cast and the corpse.”31 A corpse, a human body that is one crucial step removed from being animate and alive, is perhaps the most uncanny object of all. Freud is one who stresses the complexities of encountering a dead body, and the intensity of our immediate reaction and initial incapacity to fully grasp the difference between a corpse and a living being.32 Equally the most familiar and unfamiliar object we could possibly encounter, the corpse is so much like ourselves, but so deeply and terrifyingly other.

31 Ibid., 28.
32 Freud, The Uncanny, 13.
7 THE ABJECT

Death is a hole we fill. – Jeremy Earl

Not only is the corpse uncanny, it is abject, as theorized by Julia Kristeva. In the beginning of Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, Kristeva notes the significant role that borders play in the understanding of the self from that which is other than the self. She questions, “How can I be without border?”33 Put simply, the abject can be defined as something “other” that ignores and complicates the comforting borders one holds precious.34

Like the uncanny, the abject is ambiguous: the abject is both familiar and unfamiliar, recognizable and repulsive. It is that which muddles the crucial boundary that separates us from other. Kristeva notes how bodily fluids and cast-off matter—like pus and excreta—pull that border by which one defines oneself into sharp focus. In these materials, the body is made present despite its absence, and the revulsion these materials elicit depends on this ambiguity.

In my felted textile pieces, I reference the abject through my use of human hair. I am interested in hair as a material not only because of the family tradition mentioned previously, but because as a cast-off material, it embodies abjection, and literally makes the subject into an object. Like excreta, hair as a material is inherently ambiguous: in the words of Kristeva, it is of “I” but signifies “the place where I am not and which permits me to be.”35

In my Derma series, I build on my interest in the bed space, but shift the focus from the bed to the body. The body is referenced primarily in the materials of these pieces, which are

34 In no way am I an expert on Kristeva, or the complexities of her philosophical use of the abject. However, this simplified definition and understanding of the abject has been useful in my conceptual development toward the materials I use, like hair, life casts, and more recently, feathers.
35 Ibid., 3. In this way, hair is similar to life casts, in that it embodies the presence of absence.
sourced from both animals and humans (wool, silk, and hair). Similar in scale to a hide or blanket, these pieces could potentially envelop a body, cloaking it in its own shed materials. While the accumulated areas of hair seem to suggest the pubic region when viewed from a distance, when viewed at a closer proximity, they recall the vast expanses of hair typically found on the chests or backs of male bodies. Also rewarding from a close distance is the puckered, ruching texture that alludes to stretchmarks. When animal hair or down feathers become laced into our clothing, we can carry these beings and spaces with us. In a similar manner, the wool and hair weave themselves in and out of the silk sheets, abjectly referencing the bodies from which they came.

*Figure 10. Left: Derma (fester). Silk, wool, hair. 58” x 30.” 2016. Right: Derma (mute) (detail). Silk, wool, hair. 40” x 30.” 2017.*
While hair embodies abjection, for Kristeva, the corpse is the object that most aptly signifies the ambiguity upon which abjection depends. She states,

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.  

Sally Mann’s series *Matter Lent* illustrates the quiet and looming threat the corpse poses. The photographs were made at the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Center, also called the Body Farm, a research center that studies the decomposition of the body. Undoubtedly transgressive, these detailed images of corpses in various stages of decomposition evoke a spectrum of responses. For a number of viewers, the images ignite disgust and horror, and even outrage. For other viewers, like myself, the images spark empathy, curiosity, and self-reflection. While *Matter Lent* as a series is challenging, the work does not rely on shock or sensationalism. Akin to most of Mann’s work, a quiet, powerful, and humble respect trembles throughout the series. I seek to set a similar tone in my own work that addresses death as a subject matter.

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36 Ibid., 4
In my experiences with caregiving, I was confronted with the abject when I watched my grandfather transform, in one second’s time, from an animate being into a corpse. In Kristeva’s words, when my grandfather died, he literally and dually became “a weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me.”

I reflect on this existentially overwhelming encounter in my ceramic piece *Weight (death is a hole we fill)*. Imbued with marks, textures, colors, and features that recall specific areas of the body, such as the belly, the form suggests the body without illustrating it literally. There is little that is pleasing about its shape: comparable in scale to an adult’s trunk, and corpse-like and cumbersome in its horizontal orientation, the form ambiguously alludes to a fragmented torso or an animal carcass. The hints of a navel or tailbone pull it into the realm of the human, while the

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luscious glazed surface and rigidity of the material cement it in the realm of the object. We want it to be a body; it is and it isn’t. Like the abject, it is neither here nor there.

In his discussion of figuration, Mike Kelley states, “the aura of death surrounds statues. The origin of sculpture is said to be in the grave; the first corpse was the first statue. That was the first object that the aura of life clung to.” In Weight, I meditate on these words and my intimate observation of death and the abject.

Figure 12. Michelle Laxalt. Weight (death is a hole we fill). Ceramic, underglaze, glaze. 14” x 30” x 16.” 2017.

Kelley’s rationale speaks to my use of clay in general. In Weight and in other ceramic works such as Lineage, I use clay and abstraction as a means of transposing my memories and observations of vulnerable bodies. Searching plays a large role in this process. Rarely beginning with a specific form in mind, I start by manipulating the clay into forms that loosely imply the body’s structure and contours. I continue by responding to previous marks and the malleability of the material. Through modeling bodily textures and in using a fecund palette of waxy and milky glazes that suggest bodily fluids, I “find” forms that evoke visceral sensations similar to

those I experienced while caregiving, which ranged from curiosity to empathy to repulsion. Some figurative decisions are rooted in direct experience. For example, the single breast in *Lineage* references a family member’s experience with breast cancer, and the anxiety I have about experiencing this myself. However, I am more interested in creating forms that are redolent of the body and recognizable to viewers as a body, but ultimately nonspecific and unidentifiable. In keeping consistent with the Medieval memory palace guidelines, because of their imprecision, these “unusual corporeal similitudes” serve as reminders of the body and its elusiveness.

![Figure 13. Michelle Laxalt. *Lineage*. Ceramic, underglaze, glaze, encaustic. 21” x 16” x 12.” 2017.](image)

While clay can be manipulated to recreate the body, in its vitrified state, it is ultimately lifeless. In this way, my ceramic forms are not only reminders of the body, but memorials to the body. The forms echo Kelley’s observation that “the statue, because of its construction in

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40 James Elkins, *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1999). While not quoted directly in this thesis, Elkins has contributed greatly to my understanding of figuration. Although used in a different context, he introduced me to the term “reminders of the body,” a term that has been useful in how I think about my sculptures, in general and in relation to the concept of the memory palace.
permanent material, constantly evokes in the viewer its own mortality.” For my work, especially in pieces such as *Weight* that directly reference mortality, this quality of figurative sculpture is not only inevitable, but desirable.

8 CONCLUSION: HAUNT AND HOLD

This subtle evocation of vulnerability and death hums throughout the work in *Haunt and Hold*. From ceramic to soap to hair to feathers, these materials tenderly imply the degradation of the body, while also making the body uncannily present despite its absence. Referencing a specific personal mythology of traditions and rituals involving the body, and reminiscent of the body in general, these sculptures serve as memory prompts and reminders. The sculptures populate a space that functions as a memory palace, one that is ethereal and mysterious, but full of familiar and unfamiliar visceral imagery.

41 Kelley, “Playing with Dead Things,” 19.
The memories these works recall are deeply subjective, and rooted in my experiences with caregiving, especially the two experiences with my grandparents. Threatening and humbling, these intimate moments were coupled with more nuanced sensations. In the case of my grandfather, I was confronted by the abject. He was alive, and then, just a body. Immediately, this made me question the notion of the soul. *Do we have one? Where did that “part” of him go when he died? How is this body different than my grandfather?* In the case of my grandmother, I encountered the uncanny. *What exactly was she placing her faith in to relieve the quivs? Was the soap itself a magical material? Or was the soap merely an intermediary between her and a more transcendent force? Is this spirit behind the other mythical traditions we grew up with?*

If anything, these experiences have provided more questions than explanations, but not to a fault. I do not have answers to these questions, nor am I intending to convey any sort of solution in my work. However, I do find it significant that I was prompted to reconsider my understanding of these larger, more nebulous notions of the spiritual, the sacred, and the superstitious while caring for vulnerable bodies. While I am haunted by these memories, I also hold them close in my heart.
REFERENCES


