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Another Failed Attempt

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ANOTHER FAILED ATTEMPT

by

AARON KAGAN PUTT

Under the Direction of Craig Dongoski, MFA

ABSTRACT

Another Failed Attempt is an exhibition of sculptures and paintings, exploring the desire for utopic plentitude through material and formal exploration. Adopting a hybrid strategy, various materials, processes and forms are combined as a means to satisfy an aspirational longing for positive transformation, both personal and societal. Architectural structures serve as symbols for the deterministic forces of history and ideas of the self which are shaped by these forces. This work functions as a site for a personal exploration of form and material, Although often failing to offer transcendence, they express my aesthetic interests and contain externalized anxieties, utopic fantasies, the promise of self-discovery and the possibility for transformative potential.

INDEX WORDS: Failure, Hybridity, Materiality, Monument, Ruin, Self-discovery, Utopia,
ANOTHER FAILED ATTEMPT

by

AARON KAGAN PUTT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MFA

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2018
ANOTHER FAILED ATTEMPT

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, David and Jill Putt. I have benefitted immeasurably from your unwavering support, continued guidance, and your truly exceptional parenting. Thank you and I love you.
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This thesis and the accompanying exhibition would not have been possible without my thesis committee: Joe Peragine, Susan Richmond, Craig Drennen and Craig Dongoski. Thank you very much for your support, insight, encouragement, and constructive criticism these past three years. I have benefitted immensely from your guidance and critical dialogue. To other faculty, in particular, Kimberly Cleveland, Christina West, as well as, Maria Gindhart, Jill Frank and William Downs: thank you for sharing your time, knowledge, and insight. You have all contributed positively and helped me advance in my art practice. Thank you to Welch School Director Michael White for your generosity and support over the years. I am fortunate to have had such a supportive and effective director. I also owe much of my success to Adrienne Gonzalez, for her constant willingness to offer advice and help navigating an occasionally Kafkaesque university bureaucracy. To my fellow graduate students and friends, especially Michelle Laxalt, Larkin Ford, Joe Hadden, Amelia Carley, Kelly Couch, Nuni Lee, Maryam Palizgir, Andy Adamson, Kirstie Tepper, Derek Faust, Nick Adams, Ion Yamazaki, Vanessa Jagodinsky, Travis Lindquist, Ana Meza, Nathan Mondragon and Jessica Caldas: your critical dialogue and active engagement in my work has contributed immeasurably to my growth, both in my artistic endeavors, as well as personally. I am incredibly grateful to have worked and studied alongside all of you these past years and feel sincerely fortunate to have had you all as a part of my cohort.
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1 INTRODUCTION

My thesis show, Another Failed Attempt, adopts a hybrid strategy, combining various materials, processes, and forms to satisfy an aspirational desire for positive transformation, both personal and societal. This exhibition of sculptures and paintings explores the desire for utopic plentitude through material and formal exploration, pitting artistic strategies against each other, each piece operating as a testing ground for individual impulses. This process of art making allows for experimentation and works as a method of artistic inquiry, testing out material and aesthetic combinations in an effort to discover a mode that satisfies competing artistic and ideological aspirations. Architectural structures function as symbols for the deterministic forces of history and ideas of the self which are shaped by these forces. These works embody the historic notion of and human impulse towards memorialization, that through the right combination or accumulation of forms, materials or ideas something of value might be achieved, harnessed and communicated. Although failure is an essential aspect of this work, the promise of self-discovery and the possibility for transformative potential remain.

My interest in hybridity is born from my experiences of travel, anthropological interests, as well as my experiences growing up in Tucson, Arizona, a short distance from the border with Mexico. The influence of border culture on my mode of thinking, as well as my aesthetic inclinations is undeniable. Equally, I have also been influenced by my grandfather’s history. He emigrated to Mexico from Poland when he was 15 to escape the pogroms and impending Holocaust, eventually settling 21 years later in Arizona. I grew up listening to his stories, though it was not until I became fluent in Spanish that I could more fully communicate with him. I was educated in the barrio district of Tucson, as part of the magnet school program. As such, I spent my days with Catholic friends of Mexican descent, playing in mariachi bands and making
piñatas. During the weekends, I spent time with friends from the Jewish community. This upbringing made it so I often feel more comfortable existing on the margins, between different cultural milieus, observing from the outside and experiencing a combination of cultural stimuli. Due to these experiences, I have developed a suspicion of permanent categories and an intimate understanding that all classifications are culturally derived. Working in a mode of artistic production that allows for the manipulation of multiple materials and imagery, I am able to test perceived aesthetic categorical boundaries. In this way, I can engage conflicting desires for both order and confusion, the predictable and the wacky and, in doing so, examine the intersection between personal compulsions and cultural impulses.

2 TRAVEL AND ART

For almost 10 years, my aspirational impulse to affect positive change took the form of social practice projects involving sustainable development and community art projects, in many different parts of the world as well as in the U.S. I worked on projects in South America (where I traveled for close to two years) and in West Africa, first volunteering with the UN and the European Union in Togo. In subsequent years, I worked on sustainable development projects designed with a French friend, driving from France through Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Guinea Bissau, The Gambia, and Guinea, two years in a row. I also traveled across Europe, the Middle East, Central America, and the Caribbean during this time. These efforts were intensely immersive in nature: they involved living and working in remote communities, often driving through underdeveloped regions, and each project could last anywhere between three and eight months. In several occasions, such as a project in West Africa incorporating wood-conserving stoves and sustainable electrical systems,
I worked in partnership with other sustainable development organizations such as, the UN, the European Union and Electricians Without Borders.

These experiences were profoundly impactful. The more I encountered unfamiliar cultural circumstances, the more I became convinced that all values are culturally determined and create a context for viewing and experiencing the world. I realized that hand gestures, body language and symbolic representations work within a cultural framework that gives them meaning. However, while working on the artistic as well as the sustainable development projects, I also began to doubt the efficacy of such humanitarian activities. I perceived elements of neo-colonial conditioning, and more disconcertingly, I began to question my own complicity within these systems and the questionable behaviors and attitudes that I myself was engaging in without full acknowledgment. Much of my work in the studio during this time was directly connected to these experiences of travel and projects abroad, often involving hyper-realistically rendered portraits of the people I met (see Figure 2.1). In these works, I would employ their image as a lens to examine larger themes, focusing on the relationship between shifting cultural narratives and changes on the landscape.

Since starting the MFA program at the Ernest G. Welch School of Art and Design at Georgia State University, my art practice, like my predilection for travel, has been somewhat nomadic, spanning an array of media, styles and subject matter. The first major shift occurred while in preparation for a solo exhibition at the University of Pittsburgh-Bradford. I had come to doubt that my previous work functioned in the ways that I intended. Instead of contributing to the betterment of the world, I began to suspect that this work—including the sustainable development projects and associated artistic endeavors—might be unwittingly reproducing the
same negative effects I had sought to change. However well-intentioned, I was increasingly aware of the power dynamics which shaped the production and reception of this work.

Figure 2.1. Lo Mejor. 2012, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches
In reaction to concerns related to the problematic power dynamics of figurative representation and representations of the “other,” I shifted my focus away from living subjects to an examination of monumental architecture. I became interested in architectural forms as a mode of cultural production and as aesthetic manifestations of cultural ideologies. Intrigued by the aspirational as well as the ideological component of monumental architectural production, I was also interested in a key function of monumental architecture: the effort to control history, fixing it within a stone container. This artistic shift in focus served as a means to analyze the external manifestations of cultural ideologies, incorporating a more scholarly approach, while also functioning as a means to examine the intersection between my own aesthetic production and the imbedded cultural codes (sometimes unwittingly) being expressed. I was able to better understand the ideological implications of particular representations of subjects, styles and the political attributes that were communicated, however overt. I first began with straightforward paintings of these structures, as a means to catalogue and identify the complex narratives embedded within. I studied the formal language of monuments I had observed and documented from disparate parts of the world and attempted to understand the overlapping cultural, historical, political, and colonial narratives they contained. I introduced simple forms and colors, attempting to dislocate and rearrange these meanings through modest formal gestures. Using basic colors and shapes as aesthetic interventions, I hoped to obscure and simultaneously emphasize complex narrative associations.

*La Cautiva* (Figure 2.2) was one of the first paintings that focused on monument sites as representations of complex cultural and political systems. Painted with acrylic on wood panel, this painting depicts a monument installed next to the School of Architecture in Buenos Aires,
Argentina, in which an indigenous woman sits with her children draped across her, in a pose reminiscent of the Virgin Mary and child, or Michelangelo’s *Pieta*. The indigenous form is therefore already laced into a western European aesthetic framework. The head of a dog peers from behind, perhaps as a classical symbol of devotion or as a pejorative reference to “savage” domestication. In my painted composition, much of the context is stripped from the scene, leaving only the memorial itself in stark black and white. The subjects of the memorial and the neoclassical style in which they are represented are apparent through this austere depiction. One light blue square floats in the upper left and another yellow rectangle overlaps the head of the indigenous women. In my work, through the addition of somewhat neutral elements like colored squares and a barely visible pink oval, I attempt to mirror and emphasize an oft ignored function of monumental architecture: through aestheticization, history is rendered more manageable and easy to consume.
Figure 2.2. *La Cautiva*. 2015, acrylic on panel, 18 x 18 inches
This is particularly the case with troubling historical events, such as the events this memorial was constructed to commemorate, that being the “conquest of the desert,” in which the indigenous people of Patagonia were massacred. The colored squares act to simultaneously conceal and highlight these troubling elements of monumental forms. Through aestheticization, they perform the function of anesthetizing this history, while also calling attention to this action. As the historian James E. Young suggests, monuments may in fact encourage us to forget and disregard the past, transforming cultural memory into inert aesthetic elements on the landscape.¹

When the paintings are exhibited alongside one another, additional problematic themes appear, such as the influence of a European visual language applied to colonial narratives and other conditional narratives contained within these monumental forms (installation shot, Figure 2.3). These paintings form a sort of catalogue of monuments which mark a larger historical narrative as well as trace a more personal timeline and geography.

¹ Young, James E. "Memory and Counter-Memory." Harvard Design Magazine, no 9 (Fall 1999). Accessed September 28, 2017
Figure 2.3. Installation view, 2015-16
3 BLOB VERNACULAR

Through travel, as well as my cross-cultural upbringing, I have often questioned my place in the world, analyzing my own actions as a product of particular cultural and political forces. The hierarchies of value related to aesthetic judgement are the products of this same conditioning, and as such, I have become increasingly distrustful of imagery with overt associations. Thus, I began to search for a visual language and aesthetic strategy that was less overt and that might accurately reflect a more personal ideology, one that fit with my aspirational ideals. Although I felt constricted by representation, I remained wary of pure abstraction’s preoccupation with its own materiality and seemingly tenuous connection with objects in the world. Putting these concerns aside, I decided to avoid representational imagery for a period of months. Eventually, a language of blob forms emerged. These blobs referenced objects in the world and other modes of art-making, yet did not conform to easy definitions. In Blob Stack 1 (Figure 3.1), the forms, painted with acrylic and sparkly ink, are stacked, acknowledging a hierarchal though seemingly arbitrary arrangement. The shapes of the blobs and surface treatment appear hard in some cases, while other blobs have a soft or shiny appearance. Some of the blobs even display animal-like attributes with tentacles sprouting out, hinting at the possibility of agency. The soft pink gradient background positions these objects in a beatific space outside of reality.
Figure 3.1. Blob Stack 1. 2016, Acrylic on paper, 6 x 8 inches.
This painting and others like it (see Blob Stack 3, Figure 3.2), satisfied long-suppressed urges. It freed me from the restrictions of representational imagery, avoiding the explicit connotations of recognizable forms and permitting the use of more expressive color and the construction of an imaginary space. This allowed me to explore an abstract language, which could express sentiments without being didactic and could accommodate elements of humor.
Eventually, I began pairing the blob forms with representational imagery, situated in more surreal environments.

In *Moses’s Rod* (Figure 3.3), I continued in this vein, stacking combinations of objects in a surreal space, referencing a variety of materials and playing with the idea that abstracted forms can reference external scenarios. The hotdog’s penetration of the blue blob indicates a new-found willingness to inject humor into the scenes. There is even the occasional artistic quotation, such as the pink blob which employs a similar technique to that of Peter Saul (Figure 3.4). I am drawn to Saul’s irreverent use of color and subject matter. In his work, everything is fair game for depiction, however unsettling or offensive. I find this attitude fascinating and reflective of an ideology that I at once wish to adopt and find problematic. Although I consider my blob paintings to be somewhat unfinished, they proved formative in their attempt to combine incongruous objects in a permissive space. Appearing as stacked objects, and with the focus on surface qualities, they also foretold the sculptural approach I would eventually employ.
Figure 3.3 Moses’s Rod. 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 30 inches.
Figure 3.4. Peter Saul, *Ronald Reagan (Abortion)*. 1984, acrylic, colored pencil on paper
4 THE PERSONAL AND THE ARBITRARY

The acrylic and oil painting, *Cloistered Ego* (Figure 4.1) pictures a hallway crammed with objects that seem to spill out from a closet, including architectural models such as Le Corbusier’s *Ronchamp Chapel*, a heart, a javelina skull, water slides, a cholla cactus, an eggplant, a piñata, a plumb bob, a gold geodesic ball, and other colored forms mashed together. Some of these objects have more personal meaning, such as the plumb bob (I spent many summers working alongside my father as a land-surveyor), while others operate as stand-ins for the psychological debris which remains suppressed or intentionally concealed, their indeterminate forms filling the space, and adding to the sense of disorder and crowding. These abstract forms may function as camouflage for the more personal objects. On a small side table, there sits a colorful, ambiguously formed sculpture. On one wall hangs a vibrant orange and floral-patterned cloth, on the other a self-portrait stares in from a picture or from a window (it is unclear), looking disturbed and slightly panicked. At the end of the hall, there is a window that looks out onto a desert scene of barren sand dunes. The claustrophobic painted scene feels chaotic and threatens to spill out, while the colors and the objects project an odd sense of exuberance. In a sense, this work functions as a sort of psychic snap-shot or self-portrait.

Through the combination of assorted objects and the way objects are painted—whether they are abstracted or more representational—reveals a desire to assess the material world (and myself) through the manipulation of forms and objects.
Figure 4.1. *Cloistered Ego*. 2017, acrylic and oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches
As I continued to develop this visual vocabulary, incorporating abstracted, amorphous forms with recognizable imagery, I also began to add elements of sculpture into my work. The 3-dimensional elements in PELIGRO (Figure 4.2) reflect an increasing interest in using the paintings as testing grounds for different artistic impulses, and the incorporation of playfulness. This painting is representative of a series of works which attempt to push these ideas further. Combining elements of painting and sculpture, this work pushed the development of a symbolic vocabulary into more sculptural terrain. Although the subject matter I referenced was sometimes serious, I was also having fun in the studio again, finding novelty and excitement in the placement of found objects alongside painted elements, such as flags jutting out from the painted surface.
Figure 4.2. *PELIGRO*. 2016, acrylic and mixed media on panel, 16 x 20 inches.
5 HYBRID AESTHETIC AS A TESTING GROUND FOR IMPULSE

My recent work continues to move toward the hybrid aesthetic and an acceptance of formal exploration as its own mode of utopic inquiry. In other words, the work is a means to test how well different modes of working satisfy my need for novel stimuli, artistic mastery or order. The idea of simultaneity has also become an important aspect of my work. Through an aesthetic of ahistorical mash-ups, I reflect a core belief in simultaneous accumulated meanings, that resist permanent categorical assignments.

La Mierda (Figure 5.1), which incorporates sculpture and painting, reflects these circumstances. This sculptural painting also functions as a way to test out differing and sometimes competing aesthetic methods against each other, in an effort to determine their personal value while also satisfying an associated desire for novelty. There is an emphasis on surface in this work. The foam base, layered with aqua resin and plaster, creates planes that tilt and pitch forward with other shapes extending out. The surface is rendered in differing applications of paint, ranging from photo-realism to geometric shapes and textile patterns. Flags jut out from the surface, intended to simultaneously reference leisure and labor activities such as miniature (Putt-Putt) golf, land-surveying, and even more problematic connotations related to geographic conquest and nationalism. Within the crevices, soft sculptures bulge out and in a rectangular compartment, a cast orange rubber blob sits. This work was a breakthrough piece for me. It is the first to more fully embrace the sculptural form yet still exist within the realm of painting through its display on the wall. Able to be indulgent and excessive, provisional or minimalist, testing out many aesthetic and formal strategies simultaneously, I was able to satisfy a number of personal artistic impulses in this work.
Figure 5.1. *La Mierda*. 2017, foam, resin, wood, mixed media, 37 x 31 x 27 inches.
Continuing this artistic approach, I began to cut apart and reassemble previous sculptures into new sculptural forms. This mode of working is much less about surface or distractive elements and more about an honest exposure of the material treatments, as well as my own underlying impulses. At the center of this practice is an urge towards reinvigoration and recuperation, reflecting my aspirational longings. I am interested in deconstructing materials and forms as a means to search within existing structures for those parts which are still viable and contain possibilities and potentialities. As such, I reclaim found and used materials, incorporate architectural elements, insert parts removed from my older artworks, and use random studio fragments to reconfigure into new compositions (see Figure 5.2). This process replicates many of the sensations I associate with travel, offering novelty, excitement, self-discovery, and the potential for wholeness.

Increasingly, I have dispensed with the bright colors and audacious designs of previous work, instead, favoring more austere arrangements, with more of an emphasis on materiality and less on highly rendered painterly effects. While I begin each piece with a guiding idea, these works are much more improvisational and the inertia of the work is born from the process of reconfiguration. An important part of these sculptures is their hybrid forms and their resistance to easy categorization. My suspicion of categories, both ideological and aesthetic, and their purported permanence endures and is further articulated in this work.
The wall sculpture, *Baroque Encounter* (Figure 5.3), exemplifies this impulse to combine and rearrange. Discarded purple foam and parts from previous projects, are layered along with other household materials, such as cardboard packaging and boxes, personal notes, as well as other studio detritus and a 3D printed baroque ornamental adornment. Sharp geometrical architectural forms overlap with more organic forms and points protrude and jut out towards the viewer. Highly reflective resin surfaces are embedded within the opaque off-white forms. A wave of chicken wire emerges, appearing to wave like a flag, on top of which sits a lightning bolt sculpture, painted a light teal. From some angles the forms mimic stronger materials and from other points of view, the humble materials which make up the sculpture can be seen, undermining this implied strength. This piece, like the other sculptural collages allowed me to
test out various aesthetic and material processes in an intuitive process, in some cases pitting them against each other. Unsure of the outcome, and courting the potential for failure, this process satisfied my deep impulse to explore and the possibility of creating something of (personal) meaning out of the discarded remnants of previous schemes, both literal and symbolic.

Figure 5.3. Baroque Encounter. 2018, foam, resin, wood, mixed media, 22 x 18 x 14 inches
Collage has become an effective approach, as it allows me to sample from history and forms and deploy the symbolic authority of monumental architecture for my own, more humble purposes. The sculptures’ material weakness undermines the power and authority of these formal references, while also deploying that same power as a means of assembling a more personal and satisfactory organizational system. In many ways, this process functions to index my own impulses and desires through aesthetic references. The combining of forms, somewhat intuitively, allows me to better understand myself and how these structures impact, shape and organize the physical, cultural, and personal space.

Referencing architectural forms and forms found within the sculptural work, I have begun to apply a similar approach to painting. Frustrated by the flatness of the surface and my own preoccupation with painterly mimesis, I opted to cut into the canvas to reveal not only the substrate, but also the gallery wall. This had the aesthetic effect of creating shapes that appeared more structural and deceptive. In the Painting, *Untitled (Jumbled Structures 2)* (Figure 5.4), I have painted overlapping and combining architectural and geometric forms. In the bottom left corner, I reference the *Baroque Encounter* sculpture, with the waving wire form and floating lightning bolt. There are a number of cut out shapes in the canvas. Some of these shapes were cut out halfway through working on the painting, while others were cut out after I had almost finished it. Aside from disrupting basic figure/ground rules, they also operate as deceptive aesthetic elements. These shaped holes create voids in the painted surface that are not immediately noticeable, as they create an illusionistic space which appears architectural and part of the painting. The visible stretcher bars also become compositional elements and create illusionistic aesthetic effects. Upon approach, the cut-out shapes become perceptible and produce
odd visual deceptions, such as the steps. At first, the cut out area appears as the staircase, then it becomes abruptly clear that it is actually negative space.

Figure 5.4. *Untitled (Jumbled Structures 2).* 2018, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

6 RUINS, MONUMENTS AND MEMORIALS

I am interested in the ideological intentions of architectural structures as a means of organizing the world into a perceived rational order. Influenced by previous work with monuments, and my more recent research into the modernist monuments of former Yugoslavia, I have remained fascinated by the idea of these structures as material manifestations of cultural and individual impulses. Although I am critical of the authoritarian impulses which propel and
give them form on the landscape, I continue to be attracted to the idea that through the manipulation and combination of form and materials, a utopic or transformative effect may be achieved. This has become an underlying assumption in much of my recent work. Adopting this historic desire, materials and forms are assembled in an effort to give form to a personal philosophy. In many cases the forms that emerge appear almost as ruins from the outset. As Brian Dillon has written, ruins can function not only as a site “of melancholy or mourning but of radical potential.” The formal references to architecture, therefore, function as a metaphor for other immaterial ideological structures, both personal and cultural, and the desire to arrange and recover ideological positions which offer possibility and hope. In a sense, I am attempting to recover the “lost wholeness or perfection” found in the ruined remnants of the past. I am drawn to ruins and monuments because they are also reminders not only of past ideological assumptions, but of the inevitable failure of current structures—architectural structures, as well as the cultural and political systems they represent. Ruins remind us that our desire to erect monuments and memorials is an impulse driven by fear, mortality, and existential anxiety. The lifespan of a human appears insignificant in comparison with the ostensible permanence of a stone monument. I find myself compelled to create structures which exhibit these anxieties and my own mortal awareness. The ephemeral exposed materials in which my sculptures are constructed serve to highlight and give material form to these existential apprehensions and express a desire to find meaning in materials which hint at their own impending failure.

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3 Ibid., 11.
According to Georg Simmel, architectural ruins “fuse the contrast of present and past into one united form.” The title of the exhibition and the largest of the wall sculptures, Another Failed Attempt (Figure 6.1), employs these ideas, combining diverse modes of working and formal references into a united arrangement. Pointed and geometric shapes merge with more organic structures. The various surface treatments on each element utilizes and emphasizes the textures and formal attributes of the materials in which it is constructed. Cardboard surfaces covered in plaster have been sanded to reveal a patterned, decorative texture. From inside some of the forms, soft sculptures emerge. Concealed and only partially visible, they provide some of the only elements of color, aside from the color of the materials. In the vein of Frank Stella, the work hangs on the wall, testing aesthetic divisions between painting and sculpture. Similar to the wall works of Stella, the shadows cast by the forms become an element of the work and composition. However, unlike Stella, I am interested in the possibility of imbuing materials and forms with transformative potential.

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4 Ibid., 24.
Figure 6.1. *Another Failed Attempt*. 2018, mixed media, 60 x 39 x 18 inches
6. Failure

Weakness and failure are prevalent in this series of works, particularly the sculptures. What appears strong and dominant from a distance, or from certain angles, upon closer inspection becomes weaker. The artifice of strength is diminished as the lowly materials of construction become visible. Unlike the concrete and monumental scale of architectural structures, these forms only gesture at the heroic and are subject to more immediate entropy. As Boris Groys has suggested, this “weak gesture” may be where some of the strength and potential lies.⁵ They are weak, mock-heroic, born almost as ruins already. Their exposed materiality and humble materials (foam, cardboard, paper, hot glue, plaster…) hint at their own inadequacy and impermanence. The forms reference the strength and rigidity of built structures, though they

include elements of the organic and a freedom of form that is less restrictive and attempts to avoid the same ideological purity. *Pillow Block* (see Figure 7.1) is work that employs the weak gesture to maximal effect. Sitting on the floor, this diminutive sculpture is formed from a light blue soft sculpture pillow tied to a white block. It is as if the block and the pillow are attempting to absorb the material properties (soft and hard) and gain strength from the other through their proximity.

![Pillow Block](image)

*Figure 7.1. Pillow Block. 2018, mixed media, 12 x 3.5 x 6 inches*

The work of Phyllida Barlow employs many of these same strategies, but on a monumental scale (see Figure 7.2). Her installation of works, *Folly*, which I visited at the British Pavilion during the 2017 Venice Biennale was remarkable. Constructed of everyday materials,
similar to what I use in my own work, large painted and concrete coated columns extended into the ceiling, while boulders and other seemingly monumental detritus filled the space. Large walls covered in wood, cement, fabric/canvas and paint, pitched and tilted. She seemed to sample from historic sources, as well as materials and forms which are not immediately recognized or categorized. Through its enormous scale, she was able to move this atemporal vernacular of architecture into the monumental. Wandering and ducking through the space and structures, I had the sense of exploring a ruin which resisted a fixed temporal period, existing only in the present. I was struck by the sense of simultaneous melancholy and hopeful promise. All throughout, the sculptures revealed themselves to be materials which would not last into perpetuity, their materiality ever-present and hinting at its own demise.
Figure 7.2. Phyllida Barlow, *Folly*, British Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2017
The element of failure in my work is not only one of societal failure, but also one connected with the failure of the self: the failure to achieve perfection, satisfaction and improvement. The sculptural installation, *Off Base*, is the most direct expression of this idea. This work is a large head constructed of cardboard, foam, plaster, and paper. From the front, it appears partially finished, with some parts of the face sanded smooth, mimicking the appearance of marble statues or concrete monuments, while other portions are unfinished and reveal the underlying materials. Seen from the back, images sourced from newspapers and magazines, and fabrics I have collected during my travels, are visible on the interior. The head, which mimics figurative architectural forms, is also a self-portrait, sporting glasses and a beard. Instead of being placed upon the plinth, the conventional location for most monumental sculptural works, it sits beside it, leaning at an angle against the edge. It is as if the head has fallen off the plinth or positioned itself alongside, mistrusting and denying its place on the platform. This work most clearly reflects my suspicion and mistrust of ambition, even my own, especially ambition that strives for historical importance. While I detect these impulses within myself, there is something I find morally suspect and destructive in this compulsion.
Figure 7.3. *Off Base*. 2018, mixed media, 28 x 42 x 26 inches
Figure 7.4. *Off Base*. Back view, 2018, mixed media, 28 x 42 x 26 inches
8 ANOTHER FAILED ATTEMPT

When hanging the work for the exhibition, *Another Failed Attempt*, I positioned the wall sculptures at different heights so they would interact with the architectural surroundings of the gallery space. The large windows also let in a lot of light which, in combination with the white austerity of the walls and blond wood floors, made the work feel more reverential and somewhat more formal than I had imagined beforehand. Hanging the sculptures at different heights helped to counter the serious tone of the space. The paintings were placed alongside the sculptural work so their sculptural and architectural elements would be emphasized.

The large self-portrait head sculpture (*Off-Base*) was positioned on the floor of the space, looking out of the large windows and leaning at an angle against the plinth-like pedestal (see Figures 8.1-8.3). Viewers entering the gallery saw only the materials and collaged elements on the interior of the sculpture and had to walk around to see the face. Positioning the head was more of a challenge than I anticipated. Depending on the angle, the facial expression went from melancholic to idiotic. It took some maneuvering for it to look somewhat pathetic, but also humorous.

Lighting was also important, being that the shadows cast by the sculptures as well as the cut-out spaces of the paintings were significant aspects of the installation. The jutting forms of the sculptures created shadows which expanded their size on the wall and created more dynamic compositions. The effect of the shadows created by the cut-out voids in the paintings made the forms look more architectural and resulted in an interesting aesthetic effect as well as an illusionistic impression.
Figure 8.1. Installation View of *Another Failed Attempt* exhibition
Figure 8.2. Installation View of *Another Failed Attempt* exhibition
Figure 8.3. Installation View of *Another Failed Attempt* exhibition
9 CONCLUSION

Architectural imagery and abstracted and reassembled sculptural forms have come to operate as stand-ins for my own ideological compulsions and suspicions. This allows me to describe relationships and systems in a language that resists permanent assignments of meaning. Combining different elements, I attempt to locate the personal utopic value of references, modes of working and material processes. I am able to bundle an assortment of elements in ways that allow a fetishistic indulgence in material process and formal expression. Although often failing to offer transcendence, they express my aesthetic interests and contain externalized anxieties, utopic fantasies, and signify those parts of myself which are not easily accessed or known. This work functions as a site for a personal exploration of form and material, offering possibilities of self-discovery and the potential for self-improvement, which currently feels like the best path towards future societal improvement and the promise of utopic salvation.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


