Dwelling on Things

Kirstie J. Tepper
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DWELLING ON THINGS

by

KIRSTIE TEPPER

Under the Direction of Jess Jones, MFA

ABSTRACT

_Dwelling on Things_ is an exhibition of fabricated and found material that embraces the world inside my head, my domestic life, and the world at large. As the title implies, I have been dwelling on things in every sense, which manifests as a non-linear and personal understanding of time and place and is presented within the context of spaces in the home. Derived from a number of contributing factors, though I am most conscious of the effects of trauma, grief, and the deep sadness associated with postpartum depression, the autobiographical content is an amalgamation of these coinciding experiences. The sum total of these life events has not created this work, but rather, it reflects being pulled in and out of different realities and placed into others simultaneously. I have come to think of these moments as existing in multiple geographic locations, emotional states, and different points in time at once.

INDEX WORDS: Art, Sculpture, Maternal, Vital Materialism, Memento Mori, Textiles
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KIRSTIE TEPPER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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2018
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Kirstie Jean Tepper
2018
DWELLING ON THINGS

by

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DEDICATION

For Mum, for giving us everything you had to give and providing us with every opportunity you could. To Cole and Amelia, I hope to provide you with all you need to feel loved and to be all that you can be.
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This thesis and the accompanying exhibition would not have been possible without my thesis committee: Jess Jones, Dr. Kathryn Wilson (Kate), Joe Peragine, and Pam Longobardi. Thank you for your support, insight, and constructive criticism these past three years and for the conversations that ultimately guided me to take risks and to keep going. You have each been so generous with the depth your own personal and research interests and have been integral to building my confidence as a maker and researcher. To other faculty, in particular Craig Drennen, Gabrielle Duggan, Nicole Benner, Jill Frank, Conne Thalken, Dr. Susan Richmond, William Downs, Dr. Kimberly Cleveland, Christina West, and Ruth Stanford: Thank you for contributing to my artistic wellbeing and helping me recalibrate my practice to one of making, especially asking the hard questions of me and helping me find a visual language in which to base my thinking. Thank you to Welch School Director Michael White for your unwavering support, your efforts behind the scenes are recognized and felt on a daily basis, and to Adrienne Gonzalez, for always keeping the plates spinning. To Tony Mangle and Jac Kuntz, whose energy and love for the Welch School has created a very real presence in the community. To my fellow graduate students and friends, especially Vanessa Jagodinsky, Amelia Carley, Rachel Ballard, Judy Parody, and Michelle Laxalt: I hope that I have given in return as much as you have each supported me. I am so grateful to each of you for your compassion, understanding, and generosity. I look forward to all the future has to offer and hope our paths continue to cross. To my old friends, fellow artists, and academic colleagues everywhere I have called home: I am grateful for all the life lessons, conversations, opportunities, and guidance. To my East, Tepper, Kennedy, and chosen families: thank you for being in my life even though we are separated by immense geographic distance. To my sister Hannah and nephews Etienne and Loïc: I miss you and hate that we live a different kind of family life. To my fellow Selvage Collective members, Teresa Bramlette Reeves and Julia Brock I look forward to our future endeavors and am thankful every day for your friendship and
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1 INTRODUCTION

Like the farmer who focuses on the canopy of the fruit tree in addition to the health of the roots and soil, *Dwelling on Things* is an exhibition of fabricated and found materials that embraces the world inside my head, my domestic life, and the world at large. As the title implies, I have been dwelling on things in every sense, which manifests as a non-linear and personal understanding of time and place that is presented as spaces within the home. Derived from a number of contributing factors, though I am most conscious of the effects of trauma, grief, and the anxiety and deep sadness associated with postpartum depression, the autobiographical aspect of this work is an amalgamation of coinciding experiences. These experiences could be explained or plotted along a linear timeline, yet somehow this method of organizing information fails to adequately convey how and why I feel the way I do in this moment. The sum total of these life events has not created this body of work, but rather, it reflects being pulled in and out of different realities and placed into others simultaneously. I have come to think of these moments as existing in multiple geographic locations, emotional states, and different points in time at once.

In many ways this work is embedded in the gendered experience of pregnancy, birth, and nursing. In other ways it is navigating territory associated with remaking the home environment and applying anthropomorphistic attributes to the house structure, home site, and the objects and materials that exist within it. These provide the initial context for the work. Bruno Latour asks this guiding question, can we devise an aesthetic of matters-of-concern, of Things?\(^1\) Where difference and similarity and place and time can coincide together.

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\(^1\) In his *From Objects to Things* Bruno Latour considers the difference between objects and things. The “Thing” for many centuries meant the issue that brings people together because it divides them. He says that we are programmed to read objects as matters-of-fact, indisputable even. Here Latour is providing a more nuanced intermingling or fluidity that I like. His “Things” can cross boundaries that objects can’t.
Grief happens to all of us at some time in our lives as a reaction to any form of loss. We each process it differently and it affects us in many different ways. We are challenged to adjust to a new reality of living. These life events are rarely something we recover from completely, but time usually tempers its intensity. My work re-contextualizes personal events surrounding a particular incident that occupies a larger-than-life space in my mind. *Dwelling on Things* looks to the scant physical evidence that remains from my childhood home in Australia combined with fragmented memories and lost information as a way of processing loss and allowing room for an alchemical process to occur. The sadness has always been there, for as long as I can remember (but then I don't remember much from before), it comes in waves which has become unbearable over the past two years. It is from this place that my thesis begins. The gallery and home become stacked and compressed in *Dwelling on Things*, exposing my attempts to process unsettling content while also performing my role as a parent, to nurture and protect my children from pain. This thesis allows for the combination of delight and disturbance to surface through the labors of textiles and making physical alterations to my home while coming to terms with the psychological effects of postpartum depression. *Dwelling on Things* manifests in this way precisely because of my inability to produce words. These *things* are not only related, but provide the basis of language for this work to be read.

2 THE GAP IN THE FLOOR | GRIEF

Using graphite, paper, oil paint sticks, and fabric interfacing I draw on *memento mori*—the medieval theory and practice tied to visual or symbolic reminders of mortality or transience. I utilize techniques such as rubbing, tracing, and embossing to record sites that are in-flux or in the process of repair or disrepair. I am interested in the ambiguity of whether things are getting better or degrading. This is evident in the work where I am physically recording the void created by the removal of a wall revealing the uneven edges of the floorboards beneath, a reference the practice of rubbing graves or burial markers (Fig. 2.1), as
in *On the Surface #2 from Memento Mori series*, 2017 (Fig. 2.2). This work doesn’t come from an overtly macabre place nor one directly associated with mourning—grief, yes, but not mourning. In December 1991 my family traveled to the United Kingdom, much of the trip was spent with family, though these experiences are not what I remember. I remember spending countless hours rubbing tomb markers, stone ruins, and engravings.

Earlier that same year, in September, our family woke up in the usual way, our modest home backed onto a single set of train-tracks and facing Australia's Great Dividing Range off our back deck. We lived in a small coastal town on the northeast coast of New South Wales; the terrain undulates down to the river and the hillsides supported cattle, bananas, and other produce. My mother recalls the sound of sirens in the distance while braiding my sister’s hair for school. We knew every first-responder in town and they were all on their way to whatever just happened. The most vivid memory I have from that day is my small triangular “Hot Tuna” pencil case and open notebook book laying on my shared desk; the objects of my presence remained after I had been removed from class. I had learned that my father was one of two survivors of the emergency in town. I don’t remember how much time passed before I returned to school. We lived in stasis in a hotel near the beach, though I don’t think we ever went in the water, while my father lay comatose in the regional hospital nearby. Each day family friends would take my sister and I to a plaster-painting studio, and life became a seemingly endless cycle of painting and repainting plaster figurines, sitting in a dark hospital chapel, and sitting in a blinding intensive care unit.

I equate this period as the genesis of my inclination towards detailed, repetitive techniques as represented by drawings from the *Memento Mori* series (Fig. 2.3) as well as fiber-based techniques such as basketry, weaving, smocking, embroidery, and quilting. I found myself returning to the practice of site-rubbing shortly after the birth of my daughter in 2016 and have continued the practice on a variety of previously hidden surfaces within my current home (Fig. 2.4) and from my childhood home in Australia (Fig. 2.5). In 2017, I traveled with my children back to Australia on a combined research and family trip. I felt the inexplicable
need to physically visit what remains of the hospital (a site where scant evidence remains other than bricks and the outline of foundations), my childhood home (which was vacant and on the market at the time), and the worksite where my father was injured (an abattoir that is all but derelict other than the refrigeration and preservation portion of the business). In trying to process the untreated trauma and grief associated with my father’s accident, which was occurring in tandem with symptoms of postpartum depression, I was convinced that going to these places would help me feel better. 2017 also marked twenty years since I had seen my father, who now lives in his family’s hometown in the United Kingdom in an assisted-living complex.

Rubbing the gaps, plaster walls, and hand-hewn cabinet ends revealed three-dimensional surfaces that were once hidden. They manifest the sadness I feel as tangible things. I felt the need to record the surface before the raw edges would be repaired or covered up by decorative trim. Do Ho Suh, who was born in South Korea and has moved and traveled throughout his career, discusses his itinerant home structures in a way that I relate to with regards to this work. Suh lived and worked out of his New York apartment for eighteen years prior to when the death of the building’s owner from Alzheimer’s forced him to leave. Suh was granted permission by his landlord and friend to do whatever he wanted with the space to create one final piece. Rubbing/Loving, 2014 (Fig. 2.6) is the resulting work that memorializes the emotional importance of Suh’s New York home and studio, which acts like a three-dimensional blue-print of the space.²

The process of rubbing reveals textural images, a text, that allows for meaning and value to be generated within the drawing rather than on it. Another piece in Dwelling on Things that embeds the record of action within it, if not through the surface, is Helping Hands (Fig. 2.7). The video installation is central to Dwelling on Things, it is a semi-private space in

the middle of the gallery that has been isolated by fabric interfacing, typically used to strengthen delicate fabrics in sewing applications. The fabric itself in non-woven, meaning that the synthetic threads are fused together and are going in all directions at once. The interface between different states of mind existing in close proximity are like a mixture of incompatible materials, which becomes a repeated metaphor throughout the exhibition. A projected video of my hands, unwinding bound rocks from fabric while my daughter (age six months) and son (age five) played, helped, and hindered the process, contributes to the notion of holding onto a moment in time. Helping Hands is navigating the complicated territory between play, repetitive domestic labor, and purposefulness. The piece created an artificial yet permeable space that is very much about living and about things felt too deeply or not felt enough. A subtitle for Helping Hands would be: I can’t think of you but I can feel you and that feeling enacts the connection between generations through a tactile memory encounter. The wrapped rocks are like the knots on a burial shroud; they are also part of a collection of things gathered during walks or playing in the garden. In this way I am intertwining the layers of surface and what’s beneath.

Helping Hands as a process-driven work is uncomfortably revealing. It is exposing not what I have written, what I was thinking or saying (I did not speak during filming), but the intimate gestures of our hands as communicable tools. It is difficult to decipher what my hands are doing, how they move within the frame, and the subtle ways in which having my children present effects how I perform the task. The projected video sinks into the crevices between the bound rocks and stitched nails, it is both on the surface, of the surface, and within it. The fabrics (synthetic felt, made from recycled plastic bottles and a common craft material, wool felt, and loosely handwoven fabric made from recycled cotton), are loosely wound into each other. The communication between my children and me is through fabric, rocks, and string and is about becoming completely entangled in gestures, touch, and trying to follow the path of the thread.
The artist Ann Hamilton, whose practice embodies the gestural experience, speaks to a form of knowledge that I am referencing in *Helping Hands* and with the *Memento Mori* series. “[Hamilton is] interested in the accretion of small gestures, in the way we build the world with them. Immersing people in a communal bonding experience is actually counterproductive. [She] want[s] people paying attention to how they take up space, to how they are doing something.”³ For me, these related pieces allow the process and actions to be evident even without an in-depth knowledge of the techniques or experiences, I want the questioning of “what’s going on?” to overshadow the narrative about “this will always be the place where ‘x’ happened,” or, “I lived here during this time.”

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Figure 2.1 Book Cover. *Early New England Gravestone Rubbings*, Edward Vincent Gillion, Jr. Published by Dover Pubns, Mineola, New York, 1981.
Figure 2.2 Kirstie Tepper. *On the Surface #1* from *Memento Mori* series, 2017. 54 x 48 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen.
Figure 2.3 Kirstie Tepper. *On the Surface #2* from *Memento Mori* series, 2017. 54 x 36 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen.
Figure 2.4 Kirstie Tepper. *On the Surface #4* from *Memento Mori* series (detail), 2017. 30 x 22 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen.

Figure 2.5 Kirstie Tepper. *On the Surface #10* from *Memento Mori* series (detail), 2017. 30 x 22 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen.
Figure 2.6 Do Ho Suh at work on Rubbing/Loving, 2014 in the New York apartment where he lived and worked for eighteen years. Production still from the series Art21 Exclusive. © Art 21, Inc. 2016. Cinematography: Ian Forster.

Figure 2.7 Kirstie Tepper. Helping Hands, 2016-18. Interfacing, lathe, synthetic felt, wool felt, rocks, cotton, nails, and plastic caps. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of Departure Studios.
Looking at artists who recast the role of mother and motherhood in art has become integral to the development of my practice. The ultimate goal is to create and maintain a sustainable practice that is inclusive rather than exclusive of mothering and parenthood. What began as the implementation of logistical solutions to balance a studio practice with motherhood has formed the core of work in *Dwelling on Things* as well as earlier pieces that were not included in the exhibition.

*Reverse Pedagogy 101*, 2016 (Fig. 3.1) is an example of several collaborative pieces with my son, then four. They also coincided with the late stages of my second pregnancy. Initially, our collaborative relationship existed as pre-planned studio sessions where we would each perform similar activities creating a process of pedagogical and artistic exchange. These exchanges created a series that have elements of mimicry, between him and me and vice versa, but remain an important evolutionary step in my thinking.

If it were possible to influence how *Dwelling on Things* is received, it would be for this work to be viewed within the ongoing debate and daily trials of reconciling art and mothering, to borrow from the title of Rachel Epp Buller’s book of edited essays on the subject. As I look on the bookshelf in my studio, other titles such as Rachel Power’s *Motherhood and Creativity*, Myrel Chernick’s catalogue for her *Maternal Metaphors* exhibition at the Rochester Contemporary, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* by Andrea Liss, *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts* by Rosemary Betterton, *How we do Both: Art and Motherhood*, edited and written by Michi Jigarjian and Qiana Mestich, among countless recent articles on Neo-Maternalism,⁴ and of course the 1983 book illustrating Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document*. I reference this research as it acts as a self-help resource for the answers I seek. From these many sources and influences this passage by Carol Armstrong directly reflects my own thinking, “… what I

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⁴ While trying avoid a sentimentalized affirmation of motherhood, Neo-Maternalism embraces motherhood as a specific experience, ideology, and identity.
am interested in here are echoes not sources, a haunting not a line of descent, eccentric coincidences not direct influences, a space of dim recollection and regression, not one of canonical progression."

Lenka Clayton’s ongoing Artist Residency in Motherhood has also been influential to my practice. Clayton created the project in 2016 as an expansion of her own “residency in motherhood” from 2012-2015. I became aware of Lenka’s conceptual framework at its inception (the same year my daughter was born), at the time it felt critical, not only for maintaining a creative practice but to my emotional wellbeing. The obstacles of suffering with postpartum depression, undiagnosed until early 2018, felt insurmountable. For approximately two years I have felt like I was living and experiencing a world devoid of color and on the brink of breakdown. The guiding principles of the residency are as follows:

“You don’t have to apply. It doesn’t cost anything, it’s fully customizable, and you can be in residence for as long as you choose. You don’t even have to travel, the residency takes place entirely inside your own home and everyday life. An Artist Residency in Motherhood is the reframing of parenthood as a valuable site for creative practice, rather than an obstruction to be overcome.”

There are currently hundreds of registered artists-in-residence on six continents.7

Within the context of this work I also cannot ignore how Mary Kelly’s Post-Partum Document (Fig. 3.2), and lesser-known Antepartum (Fig. 3.3) created a seismic shift on the landscape of contemporary art. Post-Partum Document found traction and critical acclaim (after its controversial launch) for the theoretical rigor, density, and commitment to the process that this work represents. This shift from the icon in Antepartum to the index is a trope that I employ to bridge the subjective/objective divide within my work. From Things

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*Found Within the Walls (ladies’ choice),* 2017 (Fig. 3.4) incorporates a handwoven textile sample with a wooden clothes peg. Ladies’ Choice is a weaving pattern that was reproduced in *The Handweaver’s Source Book,* \(^8\) which compiles a vast collection of colonial-era designs. The pattern has been magnified by adjusting the set on the loom to create large floats in the design, something that is not desirable in a functional piece of cloth. The woven pattern also repeats fewer times than the design intends, echoing rather than directly mirroring the original design. It consciously breaks a number of weaving rules. Embedding found objects and materials once hidden in the walls of my home, such as the wooden clothes peg in this piece, are ways that an unintentional collection manifests throughout *Dwelling on Things.* The found objects in the work are acquired, kept, and discarded for many different reasons, this clothes peg along with a drum stick, 1940s era powdered make-up, a bridge etiquette guide, among other things we found behind the plaster after removing a wall in our home, from the wall removal evolved a collection. I catalogued the objects and had them photographed in 2016 before incorporating them into other pieces.

*Out of body experience at 7 ½ months,* 2016 (Fig. 3.5), is a direct reference to Kelly’s *Antepartum* though it differs in the absence of the child beneath the skin as well as other important shifts in medium and process, however the minimalist approach not only mirrored my emotional state but reinserts “the future is female” into the conversation. It also is in reference to Kiki Smith’s *Shield,* 1988 (Fig. 3.6) as it slips between representation, icon, and index. As signified by the inclusion of objects found between the walls of my house, the house itself underwent changes in order to accommodate a new family member in the same way that my body was prioritizing and changing internal spaces through pregnancy. *Out of Body Experience (at 7 ½ months),* 2016 is made from hand spun, undyed Australian Merino wool. The resulting yarn is uneven, over-spun and under-spun to create irregularities in its twist,

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feel, and look. This yarn was then crocheted using my pregnant body like a mold. The resulting form is hung at my stomach height on the wall. Merino wool can be itchy and irritating when coarsely spun yet extremely warm and insulating; this dichotomy also extends to my conflicting emotional states.

*Heirloom Quilt (marigolds and milk)*, 2016-18 (Fig. 3.8) is an exploration of ways in which knowledge and experiences can be transmitted through objects and materials. Similar in approach to Margaret Morgan’s, *Untitled* (2005-06) (Fig. 3.7), breast milk drawings that utilize breastmilk as a material that will leave a trace and is bound to the substrate—in her case, paper. Morgan’s drawings combine representational renderings of a child’s body with abstracted stains, milk squirted directly from the artist’s breasts onto paper. I also draw parallels between these works as they each rely on the accompanying text to communicate the visceral material information. Breastmilk is a bodily fluid that we don’t necessarily come into contact with on a daily basis; it has a wide range of associations varying from the most natural mother/child connection to taboo or even disgust. I think of breastmilk as one of the most visceral fluids in the body. The source of taboo, fascination, repulsion, and stigmatization, it remains mostly hidden from view or at the very least, is a source for contested ground. It is highly valuable in terms of limited quantity, it has a black market, and is a commodity that has had implications of race and class for hundreds of years. For *Heirloom Quilt (marigolds and milk)*, I created an ombré in natural dye with breastmilk and homegrown marigolds (a Victorian era symbol for grief). As the marigold flowered my son and I picked the flowers and set them to dry on a series of racks. I prepared the cotton muslin for dyeing by soaking it in breastmilk that had been leftover in the bottom of several bottles—I couldn’t throw it away, but it was no longer safe to feed to an infant. Variations in value with natural dyeing is difficult to pre-determine, but through gradually decreasing the length of cooking time and occasionally adding in some copper pennies I was able to create a series of soft yellow tones in around eight different values. The fabric remained in my studio for over a year before I knew how to continue the piece. English paper piecing is a traditional hand-quilting
technique that utilizes scraps of fabric, most commonly in a hexagon pattern. Stitching hexagons together using a sewing machine is impossible, so for months I trained myself to overcome motion sickness to be able to stitch on trains and buses. I stitched while waiting at dance lessons and doctor’s offices, wherever a few moments could be dedicated to the task. With this piece I engage with my heritage through the use of one of the earliest quilting patterns handed down through Australian families. I am also interested in how the yellow tones resemble the internal honeycomb structure of a bee hive (a reference to ‘the birds and the bees’ and natural cycles). Coinciding with the completion of *Heirloom Quilt* was the return of my menstrual cycle due to weaning my daughter in December 2017, which marked an instantly perceptible change in my psyche. This piece literally spans much of the first two years of my daughter’s life, which coincides directly with the onset and subsiding of my worst psychological symptoms. Each step is labor intensive and is meant to evoke a sense of time. However, this piece is part of a larger question that I have about the ability of patterns, material, and familial-level connections to evoke human empathetic responses.

Figure 3.1 Kirstie Tepper (and Cole Tepper), *Reverse Pedagogy 101*, 2016. Handmade New Zealand Flax paper, paper, glue, and pink marker. 14 x 28 x 18 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen.
Figure 3.2 Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document: Documentation VI Pre-writing Alphabet, Exergue and Diary*, 1978. Installation View, Generali Foundation Perpsex units, white card, resin, and slate in 1 of the 18 units, 7.8 x 9.9 inches each. Collection, Arts Council of Great Britain.

Figure 3.3 Mary Kelly, Antepartum, 1973. Video loop transferred from Super 8 film, black-and-white, 1:30 minutes
Figure 3.4 Kirstie Tepper. *From Things Found Within the Walls (ladies’ choice)*, 2017. Cotton, bamboo, silk chiffon, lathe nails, found clothe’s peg. 10 x 14 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen
Figure 3.5 Kirstie Tepper, *Out of body experience at 7½ months*, 2016. Handspun and crocheted Merino wool. 15 x 13 x 6 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen.

Figure 3.6 Kiki Smith, *Shield*, 1988. Painted plaster. 17 x 17 1/4 x 7 5/8 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Tom Otterness, Accession number 92.33
Figure 3.7 Margaret Morgan, *UBMD#12 (untitled breast milk drawings)*, 2002. Pencil, gouache and human breast milk. 13 x 10 3/8” inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 3.8 Kirstie Tepper. *Heirloom Quilt (marigolds and milk)*, 2016-18. 48 x 42 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen.
4 WALLS AND FLOORS | LINES

Evolving out of the very real need to address the physical and psychological effects of childhood trauma and postpartum depression, I began to align affective states with interior spaces and voids in and around the home. The differences between things and people became less apparent. People became material and things developed agency. Though this process is one of self-preservation and of urgency in terms of my own well-being; it also developed into a practice that is accompanied by an invented taxonomy and way of ordering the work. With the small amount of perspective gained since experiencing the deepest depths of this kind of fugue state, a language and personal sense of world order developed that, on the surface, following ideas of Tim Ingold’s anthropological overview of lines. In the introduction to his comparative anthropology, Ingold begins by asking what walking, weaving, observing, storytelling, singing, drawing and writing have in common?

“The answer is that they all proceed along lines of one kind or another. Ingold imagines a world in which everyone and everything consists of interwoven or interconnected lines and lays the foundations for a completely new discipline: the anthropological archaeology of the line. Ingold considers how two kinds of line—threads and traces—can turn into one another as surfaces form or dissolve. He shows how, with the onset of modernity, the line left as the trace of a gesture was converted into a point-to-point connector, and how this has affected our understanding of travel, mapping, narrative and place. A brief exploration of the genealogical line leads into a discussion of the relation between drawing and writing, and of how these came historically to be differentiated. Ingold concludes by asking how, in the modern world, the line became straight, only to be ruptured and fragmented by the dislocations of postmodernity.”

Ingold’s research considers not only the lines themselves and the hands that produced them, but the relationship between lines and the surfaces on which they are drawn. These traces

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and threads have a way of shifting places and instead of being categorically different. Threads can turn into traces, and vice versa.

In considering the idea of interchangeable surfaces, I looked to the individual tiles on the bathroom floor, collected wall paper fragments, and woven samples. I imagined crawling into these spaces, despite the physical impossibility. I wanted to sink into the patterns and textures that surrounded me and become camouflaged within the surfaces that support my home. Things experienced and witnessed through close observation become reinterpreted in work such as Searching for Order, 2017-18 (Fig. 4.1 and Fig. 4.4), which layers a piece of handwoven cloth in a predictable pattern under a graphite rubbing of the tile on my bathroom floor. Numbers code each color of tile in an attempt to find the pattern; there is no repeat. I reference Non-linear cyclical aspects of progress and time in Plaster and Paint, 2018 (Fig. 4.2) where the passage of time is revealed in layers one on top of another—however the length of time that each color was in use is unknown.

There is a certain economy in the use of forms that echo patterns from the past and present. The installation and arrangement of pattern not only suggest an elevation to a position of personal value, but also the potential for such objects to be valued within the institutional setting of a museum. As curiosity, lost art, or direct representation of a specific kind of labor the utilization of the object mounted as artifact has roots in the display and interpretation of historical artifacts but also in representing various non-western cultures, or to differentiate between wall, case, and art object that is small in scale. The presentation of a very small, yet heavily detailed work such as the hand-sanded piece of wall, Plaster and Paint, is a quiet investigation into the fringe spaces of the home and reflects my instinct to forefront surfaces and objects that are easily overlooked.

Moving beyond the surface traces and threads become tangled knots and stitches that penetrate fabric. Lines and materials develop bodily qualities; which in turn allows them to develop agency. Motivated by a self-interested or conative concern for human survival and happiness Jane Bennett, author of Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things, states that
vibrant materiality as an idea that gives agency to the things and materials in our world and contextualizes our interactions between both people, objects, and non-human animals in a holistic approach. In his chapter, *Signs Are Not the Garb of Meaning: On the Social Analysis of Material Things*, Webb Keane formulates the following argument: “if social and cultural analysts still find it difficult to treat objects as no more than illustrations of something else, as say, communicating meanings or identities, it is because we remain heirs of a tradition that treats signs as if they were merely the garb of meaning—meaning that, it would seem, must be stripped bare. As this tradition dematerializes signs, it privileges meaning over actions, consequences, and possibilities.” Keane is suggesting alternatives that discourage the creation of new opposing structures. Whereas Ingold’s explanation of surfaces resonates with the lines within my work, Keane and Bennett are fostering an understanding of the materiality that does not separate us from the material world, we are in it and of it, not simply on it.

If Keane and Bennett’s theoretical argument is then applied to this idea, then *Gone Today, Here Tomorrow*, 2018 (Fig. 4.3 and Fig. 4.4) can be understood in a deeper, more intimate way. The tactility and permeability of surfaces throughout *Dwelling On Things* is suggestive of doorways. The liminal space is an impossibility in the practice of creating “things” that exist within the confines of our world. The made object is bound to the same gravitational forces and those that apply to the physical sciences; however, what I am trying to convey is a sense of touch that extends through the surface and into the inner space of the material. This aim is also why much of my work is addressed from both sides. *Plaster and Paint*, the Memento Mori drawings, and the individual components that make up *Gone Today, Here Tomorrow* all could be reversed and shown with the “fronts” facing the wall, leaving the “backs” available to our eyes. Even the underside of the Eucalyptus plank flooring, which is embossed with “MILLED IN Macon GA,” is significant to me. In this way, fabrics and fibers that are able to absorb smells, matter such as dye and breast milk, or encapsulated rocks bound within their surface also

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allude to the idea that the artworks have a vibrancy about them, that they can and do enact an effectual transformation within their existence.

This double sidedness is how I see a connection between the work of the contemporary artists referenced throughout this thesis, and in with Cornelia Parker in particular. Parker’s Blue Shift, 2001 (Fig. 4.5) exemplifies what I am trying to convey in words. The artwork is essentially a found piece of clothing that has not been manipulated or altered other than being placed within a framed light box. What helps us as viewers to get within the context of the work is all the “other” stuff. The autobiographical, intimate thoughts of Parker and what she experienced during her first pregnancy at the age of forty-five are revealed to us through the character’s nightgown of the 1968 Roman Polanski film, Rosemary’s Baby. The new mother, played by Mia Farrow, has just realized that she the mother of the child of the Devil. Among other things within the work it is these residual associative narratives and connections that get at the very fabric of Parker’s work and provide a framework within which my work could be examined.

I share her interest in themes of damage and repair. In an interview for her 2016 project at the Metropolitan Museum in New York Parker states, “I’m drawn to these tropes, these violent ends to things, but then I like the act of reconstruction, building something new that is quiet and contemplative. Remaking something so it reads in a different way.”

Formed from a collection of individual red bricks that have been eroded by the sea near the famous White Cliffs of Dover in the south of England, Cornelia Parker’s Neither from nor Towards, 1992 (Fig 4.5) takes the remnants of homes and their histories and reanimates them within the gallery space. Parker’s use of material, its vital materialist qualities, are accompanied by a set of aesthetic qualities that prioritizes the found object that has accrued wear, “that is no longer new and therefore unique.” She is interested in the meeting of both

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12 Galilee and Wagstaff, The Rooftop Garden, 36.
her identification of that found object and its transformation into an artwork as well as the subjective views, emotions, and past references that compose the viewer’s gaze. She frequently speaks of truth to materials, but what is notable is her ability to endow a new truth. “Nothing material is ever stable or permanent.

For me, the opaque nature of surface lines and deeper materiality speaks to the internal dialogue between artistic or creative practice and the ‘other’ demands of life. I am inquiring about what lies behind our facades, what is actually going on in our homes and communities?

Figure 4.1 Kirstie Tepper. *Searching for Order*, 2017-18. Tracing paper, graphite, Sharpie marker, and merino wool. 36 x 25 x 8 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen.

Figure 4.2 Kirstie Tepper. *Plaster and Paint* (front and back), 2018. Sanded plaster wall fragment. 13 x 8 x .75 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen.

Figure 4.3 Kirstie Tepper. *Installation view*. Image courtesy of Departure Studios.
Figure 4.4 Kirstie Tepper. Gone Today, Here Tomorrow, 2018. Wallpaper fragments, tracing paper, blue tape, T-pins, embroidery floss, marker, and Eucalyptus dyed fabric. 68 x 50 x 4 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen.

Figure 4.5 Cornelia Parker, Blue Shift, 2001. Lightbox containing original nightgown worn by Mia Farrow in the 1968 Roman Polanski film Rosemary’s Baby. 65 x 32 x 18 inches.
By utilizing *The House as a Mirror of Self*, the title of the psychological study and book by Clare Copper Marcus, as well as work by artist’s such as the mother and son collaboration of Zhao Xiangyan and Song Dong to explore extremes, I am considering how the evolution occurs from internal psychological struggle to outward production as art. Through the psychologically desperate act of hoarding, Song Dong reveals extremely personal and impersonal objects that literally surrounded his mother, Zhao Xiangyan, in *Waste Not*, 2009.
(Fig 5.1). The voice of Zhao Xiangyan is communicated through text that accompanies the installation; the viewer gleans enough subjective fragments to draw affect from the text and what they encounter. “The abandoned toys, clothes, and shoes of her grandchildren, which are alarmingly abundant compared to [Zhao Xiangyuan’s] own mere possessions sixty years ago, were carefully put away ... Pointing to a stuffed animal or pair of plastic sandals in the Waste Not installation, she could tell precisely who the owner was and what was special about it.” This tendency also extends to the salvaged building materials, including tiles, boards, window frames, and nails from when the family renovated the apartment. Zhao Xiangyuan’s writes in her memoir the following:

“All the many items are not merely specimens, rather they are lives that were lived. The months and years have left us with so many remnants, but those months and years have also taken many things with them. The reason I’ve tried, by every means possible, to hold on to these things is so as to extend their lives ...”

This interaction between people and their domestic contexts is a subject of overwhelming importance for me. For many years I researched and studied museum practice, especially those that relate to interventions into the institution of museums, the practice of creating and maintaining house museums, and museums dedicated to memorialization and memory. Of the museums whose mission is to reveal the past to prevent repetition in the future, I equate the experience of being in Waste Not to that of experiencing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in that my personal response to the emotionally charged yet curated experience triggers a level of affectual response that becomes almost unbearable. The visceral feeling and yet not feeling sensation, of feeling so much that the mind and body start to shut down as a defensive mechanism, plays into my work on many levels. Pieces like Mind and

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16 Hudek, The Object: Documents of Contemporary Art, 85.
Body (in five parts), 2018 (Fig. 5.2) are created using plaster bandages over different sites of pain within my own body that remain indeterminable as a fragment. I painted the plaster in layers of paint that matched the color of the tiles on my bathroom floor. Each layer dried before adding another color, which gradually built up a record of time spent on the bathroom floor. I proceeded to sand away some of the painted surface to allow the layers of paint to show through. The fragments are floating on the wall using long screws and small magnets.

Within the context of affect, Jane Bennett is advocating for the physiological over moral descriptions to raise the states of the materiality of which we are composed. “Each human is a heterogeneous compound of wonderfully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter. If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all this is elevated.” At its most impactful limits, the vital materialist approach “sets up a kind of safety net for those humans who are now, in a world where Kantian morality is standard, routinely made to suffer because they do not conform to a particular model of personhood.” I feel the pressure to conform to expectations on the outside while I’m tearing things apart on the inside in order to build pockets of space that feel like something familiar or at the very least in a veiled attempt to create something out of what’s already there.

(Dis)ease (Fig. 5.3) is a shelf of objects that are once-removed from their intended state or purpose. They signify an outer boundary, things that are at the outer-most periphery of the conceptual framework for Dwelling on Things. The brick seen in the installation photograph, is from the wall of my childhood home. It becomes a relic, but is also evidence of an ambiguous removal process. Was the building completely destroyed and reduced to rubble of which this becomes a potent symbol? Or, perhaps it was removed in order to widen a doorway? Formally, it is an interesting brick. It’s uncommon to find an orange-brick house

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18 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 13.
(with a bottle-green tile roof); it is not a color combination generally associated with romantic ideals, nostalgia, or sentiment. On the abject presence of bodily fluids, shit, piss, vomit, milk, sperm, and blood, in the work of artist Kiki Smith speaks of “reclaiming one’s own vehicle of being here ... [of] integrating the spirit and soul and physical and intellect in a kind of healing and nurturing way, even if it should mean attending to those things that the body won’t easily contain.”¹⁹ (Dis)ease contains the most abject references in Dwelling on Things, a dental molding of my blistered lip (Fig. 5.4) and a small terrarium of evaporated breast milk (Fig. 5.5). Located near the entrance to the gallery (Dis)ease becomes a shelf of references for the exhibition.

Working from remnants of the home as a site is suggestive of the concrete expectations and the assimilation of the American dream. Allowing my children to have a literal presence in my work forefronts fact that I am a mother in the very caregiving (responsibility)-heavy portion of this life decision (Fig. 5.6). Life is no longer about my personal sense of place and displacement, but about the daily experiences of childhood that will formulate the world view of my children. Examining personal and material interactions has a butterfly effect in the world around us. Relating to the migratory experience need not be one that involves crossing vast geographic distances, national boundaries, or cultural divides; seeking out and remaking of the home environment, changing schools, and following career opportunities often require relocation in some form or fashion. Within urban centers moving ten miles can introduce immeasurable changes to the experience of daily life, and I am cognizant of and interested in how these seemingly inconsequential shifts in geography contribute to our understanding of place, especially those that apply to how we relate to and personalize the structures that give us shelter. The remaking of a home becomes a map for the layout of the exhibition, referencing rooms, fragments of the body, and parts of the mind. This approach is based on

the idea that if one does not have a context for the work, it can be understood in terms of space, time, geography, or culture and, in this way, the personal impulses open into other conversations that break self-deprecating cycles and have the potential to effect change.

_Dwelling on Things_ is more than a commitment to place and to the idea of creating a home environment. It is, like Zhao Xiangyan, a commitment to the act of living, when all else seems lost. In order to recalibrate and regain a will to live, I had to invest heavily into the interior spaces of my mind, body, and my home.

![Figure 5.1 Song Dong. _Waste Not_. 2005. Courtesy of Tokyo Gallery + BTAP](image)
Figure 5.2 Kirstie Tepper, *Mind and Body (in five parts)*, 2018. Plaster bandage and house paint. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of Departure Studios.

Figure 5.3 Kirstie Tepper, *(Dis)ease* in *Dwelling on Things*, 2018. Exhibition installation view. Image courtesy of Departure Studios.
Figure 5.4 Kirstie Tepper, *Blistered Lip and Nuclear Driftwood*, 2018. Found wood fragment from the Yankee Nuclear Power Plant and dried dental cast. 1.5 x 2.75 x 2 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen.

Figure 5.5 Kirstie Tepper. *Evaporated Breastmilk Terrarium*, 2016. Evaporated breastmilk, glass, and brass. 1.5 x .75 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen.
The sensorial deprivation of postpartum depression and lapses into moments of sense-memory due to trauma I experience manifest as tactile objects that exist in real space and time. The tactility is paramount to my engagement with the work in *Dwelling on Things* even though, as a rule, touching is discouraged in the gallery setting. The viewer’s inability to touch what I have painstakingly manipulated is one of the ways in which this work is both painfully
intimate and yet deliberately at a distance, like a protective shield. However, like the permeable materials I use in my work, all shields are penetrable.

My inability to function without constantly breaking down in tears is a source of shame as well as strength. I can only assume how awkward or unfounded this feels to those around me, but my own recollection of these moments is clouded by feelings of utter despair, embarrassment, and desperately wanting to die. This sense of hitting rock bottom comes as a pair of disembodied legs, Untitled (legs), 2017 (Fig. 6.1), which are woven from English Ivy (an invasive species in the United States and Australia but native to my father’s place of birth) and traditional basketry reed. In Dwelling on Things the legs are laying on the floor in close proximity to the glass wall at the front of the gallery. There is not enough space to accommodate the rest of the body, if it existed, suggesting a level of violence or unrest. An image of the legs and Eucalyptus flooring that physically continues on the opposite side of the wall also reflect off the glass wall creating a double-vision effect. I wove freshly-cut ivy from my overgrown backyard to create the baskets which shrinks and loosens the form as it dries. The non-functional baskets now giggle and move like flesh, yet laying static on the floor they appear lifeless.

In an attempt to channel overwhelming emotions into productive and less dangerous outcomes I engage in work that shifts my focus towards simple tasks of hand-eye coordination such as stitching, rubbing, and sanding. These processes transform input energy into object form or at least things that evolve through a particular action. When my mind and body experience an episode of sense memory I feel vulnerable and unsteady. Here, the term sense memory is in reference to a catatonic-like state I experience that is associated with recalling and lapsing into traumatic memories. The psychological term is associated with trauma, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and postpartum depression. I want to replace the sense memory episode with a tactile sense memory that is triggered through the manipulation of material with my hands, and Brick Wall (Fig. 6.2) exemplifies this approach. The result is an aesthetic that is based on repetition, intersections, and materiality which act
like an interface between what I experience internally with what I produce. These acts attempt to transform material in the same way that I am trying to transform energy or emotional states. Jill Bennett, an Australian curator and author of Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art, seeks to identify how affect is conveyed through art. She writes,

“the kinds of “transcriptions” of experience one encounters in art do not usually invite us to extrapolate a subject, a persona, from them. Under these conditions, the affective response engendered by artworks are not born of emotional identification or sympathy; rather, they emerge from direct engagement with sensation as it is registered in the work.”

In describing the transactive rather than communicative qualities, Bennett goes on to say that the work of art “often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate the ‘secret’ of personal experience.” While I am not trying to communicate the source of my personal trauma the narrative or images, I am interested in imprinting a new set of paradigms onto the experiences for myself and to explore what, if any, affectual or empathic response the work can generate.

In the context of the post-minimal aesthetic in my work, I can relate the repetition of process and form with the late work of Eva Hesse. Shortly after the Whitney Museum’s Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials in 1969, Cindy Nemser conducted an interview with Hesse for ArtForum. At this time Hesse was acutely aware of her corporeal existence. Hesse explains how Expanding Expansion (Fig. 6.3) came about extremely quickly, due to the help of newly-acquired studio assistants. The work also relies on repetition, which Hesse says reduces preciousness and increases or “exaggerates” absurdity. Hesse identifies the work in this exhibition as the last pieces she created before she “got so ill.” In terms of absurdity, perhaps

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21 Ibid., 11.
this work is where her unconscious sense of mortality (materialized as haste in production) and her openness to accepting help allows for the affective response, despite her declining health. Hesse famously states that she wants her work to be “non-anthropomorphic, non-geometric, non-non,” and expresses a desire to go past formal considerations into another area entirely. I share these desires.

Within week so of my daughter’s birth my maternal grandfather passed away at 97. Unable to travel and having some complications meant that grieving for one of the most important male role models in my life occurred at an excruciating distance. This was all followed by undergoing an emergency MRI at 40-weeks pregnant. I became numb. By the time the 60-minute MRI was complete I couldn’t feel anything. In the later stages of pregnancy, you are advised not to lay on your back for any length of time. The baby and gravity puts added pressure on the major blood vessels and arteries that circulate blood to your lower extremities; it can also cause the baby to crush the umbilical cord.

I see myself in Rineke Dijkstra’s Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29 1994, 1994 (Fig. 6.4) as it portrays the image of new mother and reveals some of the hidden experiences of motherhood. As an artist who is interested in transitional states such as photographing awkward teenagers and Portugese bullfighters as soon as they come out of the ring, Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29 1994, 1994 is part of a series of new mothers, one hour (Julie), one day (Tecla) and one week (Saskia) after giving birth. “The raw immediacy of these images captures something of the contradictions inherent in this common and yet most singular of human experiences. The women appear at once vulnerable and invincible, traumatized and self-composed.”23 Through this body of work Dijsktra brings the experience and trauma of birth, and the time of drastic change to the mother’s mind and body into the context contemporary art, without it having to be through her own subjective experience,

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through which a kind of empathy is expressed. The erasure of modesty during birth is something that I find is difficult to regain; within my work it manifests as utter restraint and a reductive aesthetic approach. Rather than manifesting as pure affect or abject approaches to making. *Repair*, 2016-18 (Fig. 6.5) is a fragment of chair caning from the back of a loveseat. I picked up the abandoned piece of furniture off the side of the road shortly after my daughter’s birth. Understanding the significance that the loveseat’s transitional state represents came later. A once a high-quality piece of wooden and cane furniture in a state of disrepair, I preserved attempts made to repair the caning by cutting the section away and stitching it to a linen stretcher in a style similar to that of an artifact in a museum. In isolating and freezing this relic I hope to encapsulate this moment; this is my version of Dijsktra’s portrait of Julie one hour after giving birth.

The reflection of transient states is also echoed within the framework of the gallery. The doorway, as a liminal space which occupies a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold—in *Dwelling on Things* this idea is further contextualized by the glass wall and entrance to the gallery (Fig. 6.6). The glass wall allows for a voyeuristic experience of the work, whereas the two doorways located on either side of the glass wall both allow and deny access, one door is locked, the other open. Though the front wall of the gallery is not an artwork per se, I considered it conceptually as part of the exhibition as did I the walls and floors.

There is an exposure of unbearable truths in my work that represent what it feels like when there is so much to feel and not much to say. In going so far into feeling you end up back at the point where representation is lost and patterns, surfaces, and things remain. *Dwelling on Things* is about taking risks when you realize that you literally have nothing to lose.
Figure 6.1 *Untitled (legs)*, 2017. Installation view. Image courtesy of Departure studios.

Figure 6.2 Kirstie Tepper, *Dwelling on Things*, 2018. Exhibition installation view. Image courtesy of Departure Studios.

Figure 6.4 Rineke Dijkstra, *Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29 1994, 1994*. Photograph, C-print on paper. 46 x 37 inches. Tate Museum of Modern Art, Accession number P78097. Edition 5/6
Figure 6.5 Kirstie Tepper, *Dwelling on Things*, 2018. Exhibition installation view. Image courtesy of Departure Studios.

Figure 6.6 Kirstie Tepper. *Repair*, 2016-18. Linen, reed, and jute. 18 x 26 inches. Image courtesy of Mike Jensen.
Within *Dwelling on Things* I consciously engage and disengage with standard approaches to museum display as a mode of collapsing time and space between art and life. Informing decisions about form, display, order, and hierarchy are influences from the institutional settings of archives and museum curatorial practice as well as the study of material culture and public history. The adherence to certain standards of museum display is intended to bring a level of comfort and objectivity to a reality that is messy and representative of the definition of heterotopias in Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. As sites where categories collide and overlap heterotopias, says Foucault,

> Are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and opposite one another) to ‘hold together’.

Ernst Van Alphen, in his book *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media*, identifies the term as signifying a “kind of discursive (dis)order.” In the way that a house both is and is not a mirror for the body and how the gallery simultaneously houses and yet is not a house, heterotopias are sites “that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations designated, mirrored, or reflected by them.”

For me it is important that the gallery reflect the idea that it is permeable by time and outside influences. I avoid formal museum pedestals or other ‘invisible’ methods of display in

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26 Clare Cooper Marcus psychological/material study, *House As the Mirror of Self*, explores this idea through individuals and how they relate on an emotional level to their homes.
27 Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics*, XVI/1 (Spring 1986), 27.
the exhibition, instead I utilized repurposed materials from other sources and adapt them for the purpose of gallery display. Wooden tongue-and-groove flooring, sewing pins, fridge magnets, construction screws, insulation board, brad nails, fishing line, and lathe are all secondary, yet carefully considered supplements to the work. These materials are considered not only for their utilitarian function within the exhibition, but their previous intended purpose.

In addition to the exhibition title, the labels became a critical textual component and are part of each work in the exhibition. The label formatting (Complete exhibition labels are located in the Appendix) is a combination of standard gallery information, textiles-specific technical processes common in craft-oriented presentations, and information more commonly reserved for the display of objects in anthropological museums or the preservation field. The labels are also an extension of the exhibition beyond the confines of the gallery through references to construction workers, tilers, carpenters, chair caning and repair, along with geographic markers of sites as well as other collaborators who participated in process of making or collecting. This is one of the ways in which I can state, ‘I am not alone in this work, the labor is shared,’ and non-familial and familial contributors, places, and things can be acknowledged in text. This acknowledgment not only ties this work to outside places and other times, but also introduces the idea that these might be of significance despite their diminutive scale or ubiquitous nature. In some cases, the labels are literal references to places invested with considerable time, either working towards a particular goal or in less productive moments of despair and become an archival summary in and of themselves.

Contemporary craft scholar Glenn Adamson posits that in this digital age “physical artifacts have to have “a point,” a framed photograph, like a pot or a pen or a table, must serve its purpose, just as it is, without apps or upgrades.” This irreducible thing-ness seems to have drawbacks of not being interconnected through the internet, satellite, or cellular

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communication. For Adamson, it’s when we don’t engage with our material environment in a focused manner that we truly lose our way. As a culture we are in danger of falling out of touch, not only with objects, but with the intelligence they embody: the empathy that is bound up tangible things.\(^29\) Here he is arguing for a collective material intelligence in a way that is relatable and driven by tactile experiential interactions. The Thing for many centuries meant the issue that brings people together because it divides them. In *From Objects to Things*, Bruno Latour considers the Icelandic, as well as numerous other global roots, for the word *thing or ding*. He describes the apparent strangeness of the Icelandic *Althing*. The ‘thingmen’ (governing representatives) would convene in a “desolate and sublime” site that was also the meeting place of the Atlantic and European tectonic plates.\(^30\) Not only does this practice bring to light the analogy between nature and nurture, but also that of the disparate yet familiar within my practice. *Memento Mori (house paint and gallery wall)*, 2018 (Fig. 7.1) exemplifies this approach as an equitable scenario to the above mentioned Icelandic cultural tradition. In this piece I layer the public space of the academic gallery with the private space of the home, and my labor as an artist and mother are also conflated within the physical treatment of the material, paint. In layering things on things—paint on paint, drawing on drawing, abrasion on abrasion—I am placing as many fault lines from as many metaphorical tectonic plates as possible.

Revealing past layers of paint, both on the gallery wall and from the scraped layers from my home, through the abrasive act of sanding reveals layers of history and are in and of themselves acts of labor. People and places are made to co-exist, at least for a time. The slightly glossy yellow paint on the most recently painted layer of the house paint fragments is called Acacia, referencing the Latin name for the Australian national flower, Wattle. It was

\(^{29}\) Adamson, *Fewer Better Things*.

also the chosen color for my son's bedroom prior to my daughter’s birth. The peeling paint was removed as this room transferred between big brother to little sister.

Here, the gallery’s exhibition record is revealed through the chosen wall-paint that identified previous exhibitions. As an academic institution, the Welch School of Art and Design Galleries has exhibited work from a wide variety of geographic locations, artists, objects, and cultures. This history is uncovered as an intervention into the gallery site by me as a kind of reductive drawing, by sanding away areas of paint in a process that is as repetitive and labor intensive as other processes in my work. The darker side or hidden aspects of domestic life are literally represented by the darker values under the Acacia house paint fragments.

As an intervention into the institution of the gallery, the section of sanded wall is now a smoother texture that the surrounding gallery walls after repainting. The gallery floor is similarly uneven and holds evidence of it previous institutional purpose as the departmental administrative offices. 'Islands' of peeled house paint rest on the floor with a few fragments minimally pinned to the wall above in Memento Mori (house paint and gallery wall), hinting at the original orientation of the material as wall paint. Piles of eroded, torn, and separated layers of paint from my home’s plaster walls are an accrual of former inhabitant’s aesthetic choices—changing a wall paint color is one of the cheapest and most effective ways of ‘personalizing’ space. Memento Mori (house paint and gallery wall) pulls in all these references without revealing the identity of the people who chose these colors, though it is something that I have researched and recorded.

The above mentioned material interventions are ways in which I can subvert museum traditions while also employing and truly loving them.
Figure 7.1 Kirstie Tepper. *Memento Mori (house paint and gallery wall)*, 2018. Site specific installation of sanded wall and pealed paint. 108 x 132 x 72 inches overall. Image courtesy of Departure Studios.
8 CONCLUSION

Initially this work developed out of a personal need, as a way of acknowledging and processing a source of mental instability, personal trauma, and grief while also trying to be in our contemporary moment. I think of this moment as a shared space and time fraught with its own sources of anguish and instability. The repetition, craft, patterns of daily life, and learning styles represented in the work are associated with labor and compulsion. These repetitive processes are how I get through the lowest points and allow time for reflection and literally provide time in which to process. There is no easy way to separate the individual aspects of *Dwelling on Things* anymore; they become entangled in one another.

If presented in the context of vital materialism, where working through what, at its core, is subjective and unique the works may resonate on some ecological, psychological, geographic, or historic level. Then empathic behaviors can occur as a result of being in and around the work, that the space of the house overlaid with references to the body could create a conversation between the “people-materialities” and “thing-materialities,” as Jane Bennett describes them in a way that distinguishing between that of the body, that of the affective mind, and that of the domestic space which may morph, shift, collide, or congeal. This is not an end; it is a beginning.
REFERENCES


Margaret Morgan, “UBMD (untitled breast milk drawings),” *Studies in the Maternal,* https://www.mamsie.bb.k.ac.uk/articles/10.16995/sim.120/


APPENDIX

_Dwelling on Things_ Exhibition Labels

Window | left to right:

*On the Surface #2 from Memento Mori series, 2016*

**Rubbed**—Shiva oil stick on interfacing

**Sourced/found**—Plaster lathe

*On the Surface #3 from Memento Mori series, 2016*

**Rubbed**—Shiva oil stick on interfacing

**Sourced/found**—Plaster lathe

Window | floor:

*Untitled (legs), 2017*

**Sourced/found**—Milled Eucalyptus flooring, Macon, GA and English Ivy

**Labor**—Woven basket of reed and English Ivy

Left:

*Plaster and Paint, 2018*

**Labor**—Demolished plaster wall and sanded with 150 grit sanding block

**Collaborators**—Unknown builder c. 1940

Shelf:

*Dis-ease, 2016-18*

**Cast**—Blistered lips

**Sourced/found**—House brick, Macksville, Australia

c. 1970, object found within a wall c. 1940-2015, and construction debris collected from Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Plant dam, Hinsdale, NH

**Labor**—Evaporated breast milk, marigold and breastmilk dyed English hexagon pattern pieces

Rail:

*Towels from Objects found within the walls, 2016*

**Sourced**—Cotton, woven throw rug by Shutterfly
Left:

*Mind and Body (in five parts)*, 2018
Plaster bandage and house paint

Right:

*Heirloom Quilt (marigolds and milk)*, 2016-18
* Dyed*—Homegrown marigolds and breastmilk mordant
* Stitched*—Unbleached organic cotton muslin with hand-sewn English quilting hexagons on linen
* Labor*—Expressed breastmilk

Left:

*Gone Today, Here Tomorrow*, 2017-18
* Labor*—Hand-stitched embroidery on Eucalyptus-dyed organic cotton muslin, hand-stitched wallpaper on linen, and graphite on tracing paper
* Sourced*—Wallpaper, Bathurst, Australia c. 1950s
* Collaborators*—Hannah Legall and Cole Tepper (5)

Right:

*Memento Mori (house paint and gallery wall)*, 2018
* Labor*—Scraped and sanded house paint (1940-2015)
* Collaborators*—Unknown house painters and unknown gallery painters

Left:

*Searching for Order*, 2017-18
* Rubbed*—Graphite on tracing paper
* Labor*—Handwoven runner
* Sourced*—Bathroom floor, East Point, GA c. 1940, Sharpie, and Merino wool
* Collaborators*—Unknown tile installer and Maryam Palizgir (warp winding)

Right:

*On the Surface #8-9 from Memento Mori series*, 2017
* Rubbed*—Graphite on Arches paper
* Sourced*—Bathroom floor, Macksville, Australia c. 1970
* Collaborators*—Unknown tile installer

Left:

*Repair*, 2016-18
* Sourced/found*—Loveseat chair caning and cotton
* Labor*—Hand-stitched chair caning on linen
* Collaborators*—Unknown chair-caner and unknown caning repairer
Right:

*Out of Body Experience (at 7½ months)*, 2016

**Labor**—Handspun and crocheted merino wool

Video installation:

*Helping Hands*, 2017

**Sourced/found**—Recycled plastic felt, collected rocks, East Point, GA, cotton thread, interfacing, plaster lathe, and infant food caps

**Stitched**—Flooring nails

**Collaborators**—Justin Newton (videographer), Amelia (14 months), Cole (5), and unknown builder/carpenter c. 1940

**Labor**—Hand-pulled nails

Left:

*Brick Wall*, 2017

**Labor**—Hand-stitched Canadian smocking with recycled plastic felt

Right:

*On the Surface (cabinet)* from *Memento Mori* series, 2017

**Rubbed**—Graphite on vellum

**Sourced/found**—Kitchen hutch c. 1900

**Collaborators**—Cole (6)