Spring 5-7-2021

So It Seems

Kourtney Stone

SO IT SEEMS

by

KOURTNEY STONE

Under the Direction of Christina A. West, MFA

ABSTRACT

Memory is powerful, yet paradoxical. Fragmented and mutable, its pliability causes us to question the truthfulness of personal narratives and family mythologies. The assemblage sculptures in *So It Seems* are meditations on the nature of memory and how we construct stories about our lived experiences. By intertwining found and sculpted objects, I invite viewers to indulge in the human tendency to seek relationships between disparate elements. Each work includes figurative sculpture, employed for its historical function in constructing social narratives, as well as pre-made items that operate indexically and nostalgically, invoking time periods in twentieth and twenty-first century America. Relationships among the objects are idiosyncratically built in each viewer's mind. These individualized constructions mirror the plurality of truths embedded within a single memory.

INDEX WORDS: Sculpture, Ceramics, Assemblage, Memory, Perception, Narrative, Psychology, Family, Phenomenology, Figure Sculpture, Body, Time

SO IT SEEMS

by

KOURTNEY STONE

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

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art, Specialization in Ceramics

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2021

SO IT SEEMS

by

KOURTNEY STONE

Committee Chair: Christina A. West

Committee: Darien Arikoski-Johnson

Jill Frank

Electronic Version Approved: April 23, 2021

Office of Academic Assistance

College of the Arts

Georgia State University

May 2021

DEDICATION

In this body of work, I explore the stories we tell ourselves, so I am dedicating it to the people who have been integral to my own narrative.

To Jonas- Your belief in me makes me a stronger person, a better artist, and a bigger dreamer. Because of you, I am able to write my story with greater clarity and fullness. Thank you for your sacrifices, love, and support over the past four years.

To my family- My story is possible because of you and your unwavering support. You are my inspiration for this body work.

To my friends and MFA cohort- I will be forever grateful that our stories intertwined over the last four years. I have walked further because I have walked with you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to my thesis committee for their support and guidance throughout the development of this paper and accompanying exhibition. During a difficult year, you all found the right balance between encouraging and challenging me. Thank you, Christina West, Jill Frank, and Darien Arikoski-Johnson. I want to acknowledge Christina for her support even before I came to GSU. You saw my potential and welcomed me to the program, even when I took the longer route to get here. Since then, you have helped me grow into a more confident and thoughtful artist through your insightful questions and observations. Your trust in me taught me to trust myself. Jill, with your poignant questions and deep thinking, you have taught me to embrace doubt. Darien, your blend of playfulness and practicality helped me to ask more imaginative questions of my work.

I recognize all the teachers and mentors who have guided me throughout my career as an artist and educator. Wesley Harvey, I admire your drive and your honesty, and I am grateful for how generously you share your own experiences as you guide your students along their own professional goals. Thank you to Joe Peragine, our Welch School director, for your support, which has enabled me to exhibit nationally. I am thankful for your compassionate leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ryan Rasmussen, thank you for being generous with your insights and questions. You often saw my work clearer than I did. Learning from you has made me a more complex thinker and artist.

I also want to share my gratitude for my first ceramics instructors at Maryland Institute College of Art. Thank you, David East, for welcoming me into the ceramics community, helping me see the artistic possibilities in clay, and for your continued mentorship. Thank you, Sarah Barnes, for teaching me the skills that enable me to be a productive community member and

maintain my studio. Thank you, Adelaide Paul, for teaching me the importance of craftsmanship and how to hold myself to higher standards.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

1 INTRODUCTION

In my childhood home, we had a sign with the Golden Rule hanging in our kitchen. “Do unto others as you would have done unto you.” I took this to heart, and to this day I recognize empathy to be a central pillar to my worldview. My natural reflex is to ask about how other people are feeling and to learn why they feel that way. I don’t think it is a stretch to say that this, at least in part, has led to my affinity for questions. Questions are central to my practice as both an artist and an educator. I use them to help my students learn to see new perspectives and continue growing. My artwork helps me ask questions and dwell with them. Inquiry makes connections and opens possibilities. As an artist I have learned that not every query is asked with words, and not every answer can be spoken. Questions certainly are not always asked or answered in straight lines.

I began my graduate studies knowing I wanted to make art about memory. I recognized it as an important part of identity, and I turned that lens on my own recollections. I wondered about how my memories affected my understanding of the present and the way I experienced the world. Through making and research, I found theories and themes that helped structure the questions I was asking in my art. Using the functional approach in psychology, I understood that memories help to form our autobiographical narratives and our relationships with others. The body is central to how we experience the world, and phenomenology framed my conception of how we perceive and internalize information. Through assemblage and materiality, sculpted forms and found objects helped speak to memory and recollection processes.

With my artwork, I am interweaving these threads from my research and experience to reflect inward and ask questions for and of myself. The assemblage sculptures in *So It Seems* are meditations on the nature of memory and how we construct stories about our lived experiences.

These sculptures are rooted in personal memories, yet within each sculpture there are opportunities for viewers to discover information, build narratives, and ask their own questions.

2 FAMILY COMES FIRST

Growing up, I often heard my parents say, “Family comes first.” This would be said in response to any scheduling conflict or any gripe about a car trip. They exemplified this axiom when they remodeled our house so that my grandparents could live with us. My grandfather suffered from Alzheimer’s disease, and this arrangement made it possible for us, particularly my mom, to help my grandmother with his care. As a nine-year-old, witnessing my grandfather’s symptoms was perhaps my first true cognizance of memory’s power and fragility. At the very least, I recognized that this disease was why our relationship would not mirror the one Heidi and her grandfather had in the 1968 film we watched and re-watched on my grandparents’ old VCR.

Family and traditions formed the core of our values. Telling stories about our members was often part of family gatherings. I know these stories by heart. Grandparents and parents would reminisce about summers working at my great-grandparents’ church camp. My aunt and uncle would tease my dad about the trouble they got into as children. Nostalgia infused these tales, and I too felt a longing for that camp, even though I had never actually gone there. I knew these stories were important to my family, and I appreciated the connection I felt to my elder family members. I understood them as truth and tried to be like the people in the stories. I wanted to help in the kitchen like my aunt did. I wanted to be tough like my dad and gentle like my great-grandmother. These stories were instrumental in the formation of my values and personal characteristics.

At some point in my middle school years, I noticed that we did not see my mom's side of the family nearly as much as my dad's. This discrepancy often led me to wonder if I was missing part of my identity. I wondered how my paternal family came to spend so much time together, while my maternal family felt so distant. My mom did not seem to want to talk about them. In this light, living with my maternal grandparents was a gift. My grandmother loved to tell stories about her childhood, and I recognize now that was her way of connecting with her grandchildren. These gaps in knowledge about my maternal family led me to seek other ways to connect with that heritage. I asked my mom to teach me how to make the family recipe for *makoweic*, a Polish poppyseed sweet bread. I looked at my Morton's toe (a long second toe) and my big nose, imagining which genetic traits I inherited from them. I wondered what memories came to me through their genes.

My family also values hard work, and traditions of labor and making are woven throughout our collective identity. From my dad's side, we heard stories of arduous chores and children working odd jobs as we sat next to the macramé hanger Great-Grandma made and the paper stars Great-Grandpa folded (Fig 1). From my mom's side, my grandma crocheted blankets for each of her grandchildren, and after she moved in with us, she taught me how to knit and crochet. While we worked the yarn, she talked about learning to crochet from her mother and grandmother.

Figure 1. Moravian star by my great-grandfather Darrell Stone and macramé hanger by my great-grandmother Louetta Stone.
Hanging in my parent's house. Mid to late 20th Century. Photo by Kourtney Stone.

My parents do not think of themselves as makers. However, I have always thought of them this way, and I admire their skills and ingenuity. Growing up, we had some of the most creative Halloween costumes on the block. To this day, they always have projects going on around the house. My mom gardens and makes handicrafts, like cards and small gifts. I spent a lot of time at her project table, absorbed in making alongside her. She also taught me how to sew. First, I learned hand stitching and embroidery by making little clothes for my dolls. Then when I was twelve or thirteen, we picked out a pattern and fabric for a skirt, and she walked me through the process of cutting, basting, and sewing on her sewing machine. My dad is the quintessential handyman. After some tinkering, he can come up with a fix for nearly anything. He is usually in the middle of a building project, which can be anything from a birdhouse to a deck. My introduction to power tools came when he built an articulated wooden koala bear for me as part of a school project. I find meaning and poetry in the idea that my parents' skills have contributed to every sculpture in this body of work.

3 MEMORY AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF NARRATIVE

In 2017 and 2018, I studied at the University of Florida where I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Susan Bluck, Professor of Psychology and Director of Life Story Lab. My conversations with her informed and structured how I think about memory. During one of our early conversations, Dr. Bluck explained two general methodologies for studying autobiographical memory. The cognitive approach asks how we remember things, whereas the functional asks why we remember things. According to the functional approach, which is what Dr. Bluck uses, there are three major purposes of autobiographical memory: self-continuity,

directive, and social.[1] Self-continuity refers to an individual's sense of being a coherent person over time. The directive function helps an individual learn from the past and use the past to inform their preparations for the future. The social function helps to develop intimacy with others, teach others, and create empathy with others.[2]

To better understand these concepts, I applied this lens of functional psychology to my own autobiography, which of course includes my family. Initially, this led me to focus on how the social function influenced my familial relationships. I wondered how past experiences affected how I see my relatives today. For example, in *Which Slope* (fig 2), I puzzled over how to reconcile my memories of a loving, supportive aunt with the same person who now tells me that any new gun control measures threaten the Second Amendment and invokes the populist notion about these proposed laws being a slippery slope. This discussion arose after I described the heartache and dismay I felt while hiding my high school students during an active shooter drill, shortly after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012. Sandy Hook truly shook me as an educator. Memories of these events also led me to wonder how my childhood of playing with toys like Nerf guns, super-soakers, and airsoft guns fit into the conversation.

In crafting *Which Slope*, I determined that the bust format spoke to the deference I held for my aunt as both an authority figure in my life and as a beloved caregiver. The weighty figure seems to balance precariously atop a haphazard pile of ceramic replica Nerf darts and .22 caliber rifle bullets, which was the type of bullet used in the Sandy Hook shooting. The hairstyle and color choices refer directly to fashions worn during the American Civil War. I used these

[1] Susan Bluck and Nicole Alea, "Exploring the Functions of Autobiographical Memory: Why Do I Remember the Autumn?" *Critical Advances in Reminiscence: From Theory to Application* (New York: Springer, 2002), 8.

[2] Nicole Alea and Susan Bluck, "Why Are You Telling Me That? A Conceptual Model of the Social Function of Autobiographical Memory," *Memory* 11, no. 2 (The T2003): 165, https://doi.org/10.1080/741938207.

references from another time when American society was bifurcated to signify to the deep divisions I feel between me and my family members on the topic of gun violence. Using glass inserts over the mouth and heart speaks to the remove I felt between the words and feelings during that conversation. The thickness of the glass elements reduces the transparency often associated with this material. This lack of clarity, along with the fragility of the material, represents the complexity and delicate nature of the conversation on gun control in my family.

Figure 2. Kourtney Stone. *Which Slope.*
Stoneware, slips, underglaze, glaze, glass. 22 x 18 x 16 inches. 2017.

As my work evolved in graduate school, I began to focus more on how an event is interpreted in the memory-making and memory-recall processes, and I connected this line of

inquiry to the concept in functional psychology of a life-story. During our conversations, Dr. Bluck and her student Masje Lind introduced me to this concept. A life-story is the constantly evolving autobiographical narrative we tell ourselves.[3] These stories provide the framework a person uses to understand events and answer questions about what happened and why it happened. Through the process of reminiscing, that framework is reinforced, and the narrative continues to be built. Remembering a story physically strengthens the neural pathways that recall that information and emotionally connects the teller to the listener. These social interactions also help individuals self-reflect. In this way, remembering involves the construction of an autobiography that describes who we are and how we came to be that way.[4]

This process strongly correlates to the self-continuity function of memory, though much of its construction does involve the social function. Autobiographical memory combines the individual experience with a cultural framework for identity.[5] Language plays an important role in how individuals describe their feelings and see the event from different perspectives. Cultural context also informs an individual's perspective in relationship to identifiers like gender, race, and class.[6] Fivush and his fellow researchers refer to multiple studies that demonstrate the tendency for Euro- and Afro- American girls to tell stories from more with more emotional and relational focuses, whereas boys from the same demographics tell stories with more autonomous focus.[7]

---

[3] Robyn Fivush and Natalie Merrill, "The Personal Past as Historically, Culturally and Socially Constructed," *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 28, no 3 (2014): 301, https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3017.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Robyn Fivush, Tilmann Habermas, Theodore E.A. Waters, and Widaad Zaman, "The Making of Autobiographical Memory: Intersections of Culture, Narratives and Identity," *International Journal of Psychology* 46, no. 5 (2011): 339, https://doi.org/10.1080/00207594.2011.596541.

[6] Fivush and Merrill, 302.

[7] Fivush, Habermas, Waters, and Zaman, 328.

An individual's upbringing affects how they tell their life-story. Children learn how to interpret their experiences, or "chapters" of their life stories, from their caregivers.[8] By telling stories and helping children tell stories, caregivers convey cultural values and guide individuals to develop their own identities. For example, children's fairytales carry underlying messages about what characteristics are acceptable in a society. Such culturally driven stories are often used to build "master narratives." Psychology's "master narratives" are akin to Lyotard's philosophical "metanarratives." These tales contribute to the structure of personal stories, like the "rags to riches" framework.[9]

Similarly, the stories we hear others choose to tell (or not tell) about themselves communicates what experiences should be used to shape our life-stories. We learn who we are through the accounts our parents tell us about ourselves and stories we tell with them.[10] For example, as a parent coaches a young person through talking about their day, the parent is also communicating how much and what kinds of details one should include in an anecdote. These subtle lessons affect how the child narrates stories in the future both to others and to themselves.

During one of our discussions, Lind described how life-stories are ongoing and changing. As people enter and leave our lives, our life-stories become intertwined. With this thought, I began to imagine how my life-story was woven with those of my family members. My story began with my parents. Of course, their life-stories began with their parents, so I pictured how my life-story also drew on threads from my parents,' grandparents,' and great-grandparents' life-stories, and so on.

---

[8] Dorothe Kirkegaard Thomsen, Kristina Steiner, and David Pillemer, "Life Story Chapters: Past and Future, You and Me," *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 5, no. 2 (June 2016): 114.

[9] Fivush and Merrill, 302.

[10] Britt Peterson, "The Stories Our Parents Tell Us," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 23, 2014, https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-stories-our-parents-tell-us/.

I began to more closely examine the ways my identity was rooted in my connection to the family that came before me. I wondered, what do I really know about these people who are foundational to my identity? I began to realize I was relying heavily on the recollections of previous generations. My family prides itself on being hard-working, independent people. These values came to me, at least in part, from the stories we were told over and over again about my grandparents and great-grandparents. These tales were steeped in nostalgia. For example, they touted my great-grandparents as paragons of goodness. I know no one is perfect, but their flaws were never recounted. The worshipful tones went well beyond the basic courtesy of not speaking ill of the dead. I began to recognize our family mythology: repeated stories about incredible beings that explain our origins and reinforce the qualities our family values.

In my early graduate work, I thought about this family mythology and the truth I could not know about people who have passed away. For example, stories about my great-grandfather characterize him as a beloved, gentle reverend who worked tirelessly to serve other people in the name of God. In *Great-Grandpa Darrell the Magnanimous,* I sculpted a portrait of my great-grandfather based on photographs from family albums (fig 3). I then combined this sculpture with an old brass lamp base and forms made from kiln-cast glass. The lamp base points to the metaphorical light and guidance this myth is meant to provide to my family. It also refers to the bust format often used in our culture to memorialize important figures. The glass elements reference halos, but I arranged them over the face and around the head. In this way, the glass obscures the facial details, much like the fixation on my great-grandfather's goodness obscured the nuances of his personality. I included a cast of my dad's hand in one of the halos to reference whose perspective was influencing what I knew about my great-grandfather. The dripped

beeswax and resin further obfuscate my great-grandfather's likeness and signal the mutability of the information I knew.

Figure 3. Kourtney Stone. *Great-Grandpa Darrell the Magnanimous*.
Earthenware, glass, found object, underglaze, wax, resin. 36 x 14 x 13 inches. 2019.

4 MEMORY AND BODY

I was fascinated by the idea that what I know about my heritage is colored and filtered through the perspectives and biases of my grandparents and parents. How did their own feelings and experiences influence what they remembered and how they told me about it? Historically, humans have perceived memory as an objective tool, with memories stored and recalled like files in a cabinet. More recently, researchers have acknowledged the subjectivity of memory, and developments in neuroscience have taught us that memories are actually stored as fragments of information. Memory is encoded through a variety of processes into constellations of neural structures called engrams.[11] When we recall a memory, our brains are actually pulling on these patterns of neurons and reassembling them. During recall, these engrams are encoded again and become stronger.[12]

By nature, this process of reassembling neurons is variable and susceptible to change, which makes the memories they store malleable too. Memory involves both encoded information and inferences based on knowledge, expectations, and beliefs. If feelings and information have changed at the time of recall, they can affect how a memory is re-encoded in the brain.[13] This information also led me to consider the moment of recollection. Who is experiencing the memory: the little girl I was when the event happened or the adult woman remembering it now? If a memory is re-encoded differently, does that mean a memory is remembered inaccurately the next time I recall it? Does the new information that affects my perception change the truth of the memory?

---

[11] Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 59.
[12] Ibid., 66.
[13] Charles Fernyhough, *Pieces of Light: How the New Science of Memory Illuminates the Stories We Tell about Our Pasts* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 117.

Perspective is integral to visualizations, and what is seen in the mind's eye plays an important role in memory. In our anatomy, visual imagery and visual perception both use the frontal and parietal brain regions, which may partially explain why retrieving visual imagery can enhance the remembrance.[14] In recollection, some imagery can be unclear or fuzzy, as if it is just on the edge of our mental periphery. I have often wondered why some details can be so clear, and others not. For example, in one of my earliest recollections, I can clearly see the yellow skin of the apples we had just picked, but I cannot remember my friend's face, although she was sitting right next to me on the floor.

Mental pictures are central to the development of our autobiography, and the role of perspective is one way we observe this relationship. There are numerous possibilities for why a memory might shift from being recalled in first person to being recalled in third person. One of the major influences on perspective is the amount of visual imagery present in the recollection. Older memories are more likely to be viewed in third person due to a lack of details in visual imagery.[15] However, repeated recollection can both strengthen the mental picture of the memory and change the memory through the integration of new information or selective retrieval of certain details.[16]

Visual perspective and clarity of vision are important aspects in my sculptures. When the viewer moves around a sculpture, I think about what information is revealed and what information is concealed in those points of view. This shifting information requires the viewer to engage in the process of remembering what they just saw and relating that to the information

---

[14] Schacter, 47.

[15] Andrew C. Butler, Heather J. Rice, Cynthia L. Wooldridge, and David C. Rubin, "Visual Imagery in Autobiographical Memory: The Role of Repeated Retrieval in Shifting Perspective," *Consciousness & Cognition* 42 (2016): 247, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2016.03.018.

[16] Ibid., 248.

they are now accessing. Artist Bonnie Collura considers similar effects in her work. Collura's mixed-media figurative sculptures combine materiality with historical, pop cultural, and political references in order to ask larger questions about our culture. In her sculpture *Golden Droid/Scout/C3PO*, Collura presents unpredictable changes in form from each viewpoint (fig 4). What looks like a head with a nose from one point of view is unexpectedly indiscernible from another point of view. She says her work is meant to elicit new questions as the viewer's perspective changes,[17] which creates opportunities for the same information to be interpreted in different ways. I aim for similar experiences with my own sculptures.

[17] Bonnie Collura, "About," Bonnie Collura Studio, accessed October 23, 2020, https://www.bonniecollura.com/about.

Figure 4. Bonnie Collura. *Golden Droid/Scout/C3PO*.
Steel, wood, foam, hydrostone, fiberglass cloth, machine plastic, fabric, bracelet, paint, casters. 2018. (In Bonnie Collura Studio. "Forms". October 22, 2020. https://www.bonniecollura.com/form?lightbox=dataItem-js4tdjnu)

Another way the body and memory relate can be seen in epigenetics, which is the field that studies changes in gene expression not involving the DNA.[18] I first learned about epigenetics from a Radiolab podcast. In the episode, a researcher from Sweden named Lars Olov Bygren discusses his research into how the effects of famine and hard winters in a Swedish town showed in the bodies of successive generations.[19] In response to certain experiences, like a famine or

[18] Asad Meymandi, "The Science of Epigenetics," *Psychiatry: Edgemont* 7, no. 3 (March 2010): 40, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2861525.

[19] Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwhich, "You Are What Your Grandpa Eats," *Radiolab*. Podcast, November 19, 2012, https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/segments/251885-you-are-what-your-grandpa-eats.

exposure to a virus, cells can use particular types of molecules to silence or activate genes. These changes can then be passed on to offspring.[20]

I wondered about what I could have inherited both through genetics and epigenetics from my family, particularly from my mom's side. I know some of the health history, and that I have both the family nose and long second toe. How else could I physically connect with that family, back through time? My grandfather's family moved to the United States from Poland in the early twentieth century. Did my great-parents' bodies change in response to the trauma of World War I? Did those changes pass through the generations, and is that genetic memory now in my body?

In *Bodily Memories from My Mom's Side*, I imagined what other experiences might change a body and then be passed down through gene inheritance (fig 5). I touch on the genetic links with a ceramic cast of my mom's foot. I also reference genetic inheritance by sculpting the family nose and recreating that form through a series of translations: from clay model, to 3D scan, to 3D printing, to silicone mold, to wax cast, to glass cast. I see these translations as visualizations of how genes might be passed from body to body. I packed the base of the sculpture with hand-crocheted doilies, making it appear as if they were bulging out from the inside of the body. I thought about how naturally I learned to crochet; it was as if my hands had done it before my grandma taught me. Indulging my poetic license, I imagined perhaps the genes in my great-grandmother's hands were present in my body, outwardly expressing themselves through my hands.

[20] Carl Zimmer, "The Famine Ended 70 Years Ago, but Dutch Genes Still Bear Scars." *New York Times*, January 31, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/31/science/dutch-famine-genes.html.

Figure 5. Kourtney Stone. *Bodily Memories from My Mom's Side*.
Earthenware, glass, found objects, textiles, underglaze, wax. 52 x 16 x 22 inches. 2019.

5 MEMORY AND SCENT

Bodily senses play a crucial role in perception and recollection. In my sculptures, I tend to prioritize sight. However, in my effort to understand different perceptive possibilities, I am beginning to consider the other senses, particularly smell. Scent can be a powerful stimulus for recollection. We can see this connection physically in our anatomy. Through neuroscience, we know smells activate the limbic system, which is also thought of as the "primal" part of the brain because it helps control endocrine and nervous systems (fig 6). The limbic system also helps

regulate emotion and long-term memory.[21] These connections give scent a great deal of potential power. In our evolutionary history, our sense of smell has been important to survival, yet in our modern society we have dedicated very little attention to olfactory experience.[22] Our vocabulary for describing scent is often limited. I see this limitation as an opportunity to introduce more nuance and abstraction into the work.

Scent is an abstract experience. It is intangible and non-visual, removing the authority of those two heavily relied upon senses.[23] Depending on how scent is made or applied, it can also be ephemeral or its qualities can change. This ethereality introduces the passage of time into the work and reminds me of the way time can feel in a memory and the way some memories are affected by time. I also think about intangibility in terms of how some recollections feel incredibly vivid and others can barely hover on the periphery of our mind's eye.

In artwork, I am interested in how scent affects the experience of an object for the viewer. Our minds shift when a new or unexpected sense is engaged, causing a change in the relationship between mind and body, as well as body and environment.[24] One of the first examples in modern art of artists exploiting this phenomenon came during the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in 1938 (fig 6). In this surrealist approach to the exhibition as an experience, Benjamin Péret roasted coffee beans behind a screen in the gallery, using the unexpected smell to disorient viewers.[25]

---

[21] Anthony Wright, "Limbic System: Amygdala," in *Neuroscience Online: An Electronic Textbook for the Neurosciences*, Department of Neurobiology and Anatomy, The University of Texas Medical School at Houston, Article updated October 10, 2020, http://nba.uth.tmc.edu/neuroscience/s4/chapter06.html.

[22] Catherine Haley Epstein, *Nose Dive*, (Independent Publisher, 2019), 21.

[23] Ibid., 117.

[24] Ibid., 36.

[25] Ibid., 117.

Figure 6. Exhibition view of the central grotto with a view toward the Rue Surréaliste in *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme.*
January 18 - February 22, 1938. Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris, France. Photo by Josef Breitenbach. (in *Marcel Duchamp: Étant Donnés*. By Michael R. Taylor. October 22, 2020. http://www.golob-gm.si/34-Games-in-exile-of-Breton-Duchamp-Etant-donnes-mannequin.htm)

With my sculpture *Great-Grandma Louetta the Steward, version 2* (fig 7), I incorporate scent as a way to talk about both time and perception. The sculpture includes a ceramic bust of my great-grandmother. However, I have only sculpted the parts of her face and neck that are visible in a photographic portrait of her, leaving the back of her head and head as negative space. In the back of her face, I have sculpted a structural grid. This scaffolding represents the idea that the only information I can actually know from a photograph is just a thin façade. A wax cast of

the interior space of a kitchen cabinet serves as a plinth for the bust. This gesture of filling empty space further emphasizes the limited information gleaned from the photograph.

Scented wax fills the grid in the back of her head. The objects I incorporate into my sculptures act as approximations of objects from my memories, so I crafted the scent to approximate a smell I recollect, which in this case is a smell from a trip to my great-grandmother's house. The scent, named Hot Neon Strawberry, mimics the smell of a Caboodles make-up case with melted strawberry Lip Smackers lip balm inside. It combines the jammy smell of artificial strawberry, the antiseptic chemical smell of plastic, and dry undertones of heat, like plastic that has been heated almost to its smoke point. As viewers walk around the sculpture, this smell confronts them. The scent is recognizable, but not fully identifiable. In its existence on this edge, the scent layers a different method of knowing and unknowing within the experience of this sculpture.

Figure 7. Kourtney Stone. *Great-Grandma Louetta the Steward, version 2*.
Earthenware, living room lamp, wax, placemat, scent of Lip Smackers and Caboodles melting in the back window of the family sedan. 22 x 12 x 12 inches. 2021.

6 MEMORY AND PHENOMENOLOGY

In her 1961 novel *Seduction of the Minotaur,* author Anaïs Nin paraphrased a Talmudic text writing, "We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are." This sentiment describes the anchoring values of my worldview and what continues to interest me about memory. Along those lines, research into phenomenology has been constructive for understanding the relationship between memory and perception. Phenomenology examines how consciousness is structured and experienced from a subjective, first-person point of view. The phenomenological lens informs my thinking on how people understand their experiences, and how they interpret and recall those experiences in their memories.

For Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, it was crucial to examine the lens through which we see objects. For him, this was the "lived body," the center of experience. He structured experience with his theory of intentionality. This means the directedness of mind—the awareness of an object or thought. Husserl developed a sort of logic between intentionality and the object as it appears. Objects have shadowy contours, and we can't know them in their entirety.[26] There is no way to hold an object in your mind that is truly separate from your experience of that object. An example of this idea: two artists who draw the same object will inevitably have two very different versions of it, because they have two different experiences of the object. [27] The same thing is true about two people living through an event or a conversation; they will both remember different versions of it, based on where their awareness was directed. Husserl also theorized about time in relationship to phenomenology. He viewed time as a mode

[26] Graham Harman, *Art and Objects*, (Polity, 2020), 10.

[27] James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back : On the Nature of Seeing* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 41.

of experience, where time is a metaphysical placeholder for events [28] This nonlinear interpretation of time is helpful to understanding how people experience the passage of time in memories, and I discuss this further in a later section.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was influenced by Husserl and Husserl's protégé Martin Heidegger as he continued the development of phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty's focus was on the role of the body in human experience. He extends Husserl's notion of the lived body, and he uses the term "body image" to describe the experience of the body and the influence of the body on activities in the world. In this sense, the body is the person in action with other things and bodies perceived in the world. I hear echoes of Husserl in Merleau-Ponty's description of the connection between body, consciousness, and the world. Essentially, a person cannot know the body separate from the world, and they cannot know the world without knowing it through their body.[29]

I mentally circle back to Bonnie Collura's sculpture (fig 4) and the importance of the physical location of the viewer's eyes when encountering her sculpture. What a viewer understands the sculpture to be depends upon where their body is in relation to the sculpture. I also think about Merleau-Ponty's theory in terms of memory. It is understood that the emotionality of a memory can influence what information about the event is stored and recollected. The emotional state of a person when they recall a memory can further alter the memory and how it is subsequently stored. The memory does not exist separately from the rememberer's thoughts and feelings.

---

[28] David Woodruff Smith, "Phenomenology," In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, updated December 16, 2013, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/.

[29] Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Donald A. Landes, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 84.

Many of these ideas are synthesized in *She/I, From my stories about me* (fig 8). Through this life-size figure sculpture, I asked questions about myself and my body's role in my recollections. The torso is sewn from fabrics that touch the body and that I associate with specific haptic memories: couch upholstery, bed sheets, and a child's fleece jacket. If I know the world through the things my body encounters, and I cannot separate those experiences from my body, then it seems logical to sculpt a body from those materials. The head is a self-portrait. In the head, I have embedded carpet to describe the perceptual process. Although my feet touch the carpet, the recognition of that touch is registered in my head. Through these activated confederations of nerves, my experience of the world, in this case carpet, is integrated throughout my body and within my brain. That carpet, and the feeling of that carpet, is specific to my body in that moment. In the future, that carpet might feel different depending on how well my body is able to sense it in the future, or how accurately my brain replicates the collection of neurons that hold the memory of the carpet.

The plaster mold of my leg is another way I denote the nature of the body in memory and perceptual processes. This mold references life-casting, a process that preserves the surface details of a body at a specific moment in time. Casting my leg demonstrates the singularity of my body. The empty mold also implies that a body which was once present is now absent. In memory, the body that lived through the experience might be gone, as bodies change over time. Today, the leg that made the mold is different—perhaps with a few more wrinkles.

Figure 8. Kourtney Stone. *She/I, From my stories about me*.
Earthenware, couch fabric, sweater fabric, bedsheet, plaster, lightning cable, carpet, kitchen ceiling light cover, dining room chair arm. 28 x 36 x 18 inches. 2021.

7 HISTORICAL USES OF FIGURE SCULPTURE

For as far back as I can recall, I have been conscious that my body affects the way I experience the world and the way others perceive me. I suspect this self-knowledge is, at least in part, why I have always been drawn to incorporate the human figure in my art. As I suggested previously, bodily experience does factor into our memories, and this idea does have a role in my artworks. In this exhibition my use of the figure also goes beyond depicting personal experiences. Artists have used figural artworks to convey cultural messages since the dawn of human artistic endeavors, and I consider this function in my own work.

Ancient Roman marble sculptures are a good example of embedded cultural messaging. Though archeological evidence shows that these sculptures were once brightly painted, the fallacy that they were meant to be pristine white marble has persisted since the 19th century (fig 9). This reverence for purity and whiteness served the dominant narrative of white supremacy, and the retroactive editing was reinforced by the neoclassical sculpture movement.[30] If we consider the current disputes over Confederate memorials and monuments, we see figure sculpture still being used in public messaging, and how these depictions favor the goals and needs of the dominant social classes of the time. This cultural omission of uncomfortable truths is much like when an individual recalls only the particular aspects of an experience that will suit their autobiographical narrative or put them in a favorable light.

[30] Kim Hart, "Why Do People Still Think That Classical Sculptures Were Meant to Be White?" Artsy, April 10, 2018, accessed October 23, 2020, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-people-classical-sculptures-meant-white.

Figure 9. *Cuirassed Torso* and *Cuirassed Torso* reconstruction.
Left: *Cuirassed Torso*. Uncovered in 1886. Right: *Cuirassed Torso.* 2005 reconstruction in color based on trace analysis. (In *Gods in Color: Polychromy in the Ancient World.* Legion of Honor. San Francisco, California, USA. Photo by Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. October 22, 2020. https://allthatsinteresting.com/gods-in-color#3)

Busts are a particular genre of sculpture often used to memorialize important political or cultural figures. These likenesses are then displayed in prominent, often public locations. The decisions about who is memorialized through sculpture, or not, communicates our society's values. My rendering techniques often draw from my training in traditional figure sculpture, which included studies of historical busts. When I use these techniques and the bust format in my sculpture, I am sometimes drawing on the memorialization function, like with *Great-Grandpa Darrell the Magnanimous* (fig 3). In other cases, I choose to deconstruct the bust format, like with a group of works from 2019 (fig 10-12). Through these works, I broke down the idea of a traditional bust of my grandfather, which would convey reverence and authority. I rebuilt the sculptures as assemblage "busts" that better reflected my relationship with him. I incorporated a

fragmented likeness with objects that held significance to our relationship. In this series, I started considering the scale of the figurative elements. In *When Grandpa Lived with Us, Recollection 2* (fig 10) and *When Grandpa Lived with Us, Recollection 3* (fig 11), the faces are smaller than life-size, and result in sculptures that point to the sparseness of my memories. In *When Grandpa Lived with Us, Recollection 4* (fig 12), the fragment is from a face that would have been much larger than life-size, suggesting how small I physically felt in my memories of my grandfather.

Figure 10. Kourtney Stone. *When Grandpa Lived with Us, Recollection 2.*
Earthenware, vase, wax, trim from dining room, VHS cassette of *Heidi*, blanket fabric, doily, power beads bracelet, rosary, glass cast of my mother's foot. 13 x 8 x 9 inches. 2019.

Figure 11. Kourtney Stone. *When Grandpa Lived with Us, Recollection 3*.
Earthenware, wooden couch foot, wax, couch fabrics, windbreaker jacket, hospital gown, teddy bear, oxygen tubing, glass. 12 x 7 x 11 inches. 2019.

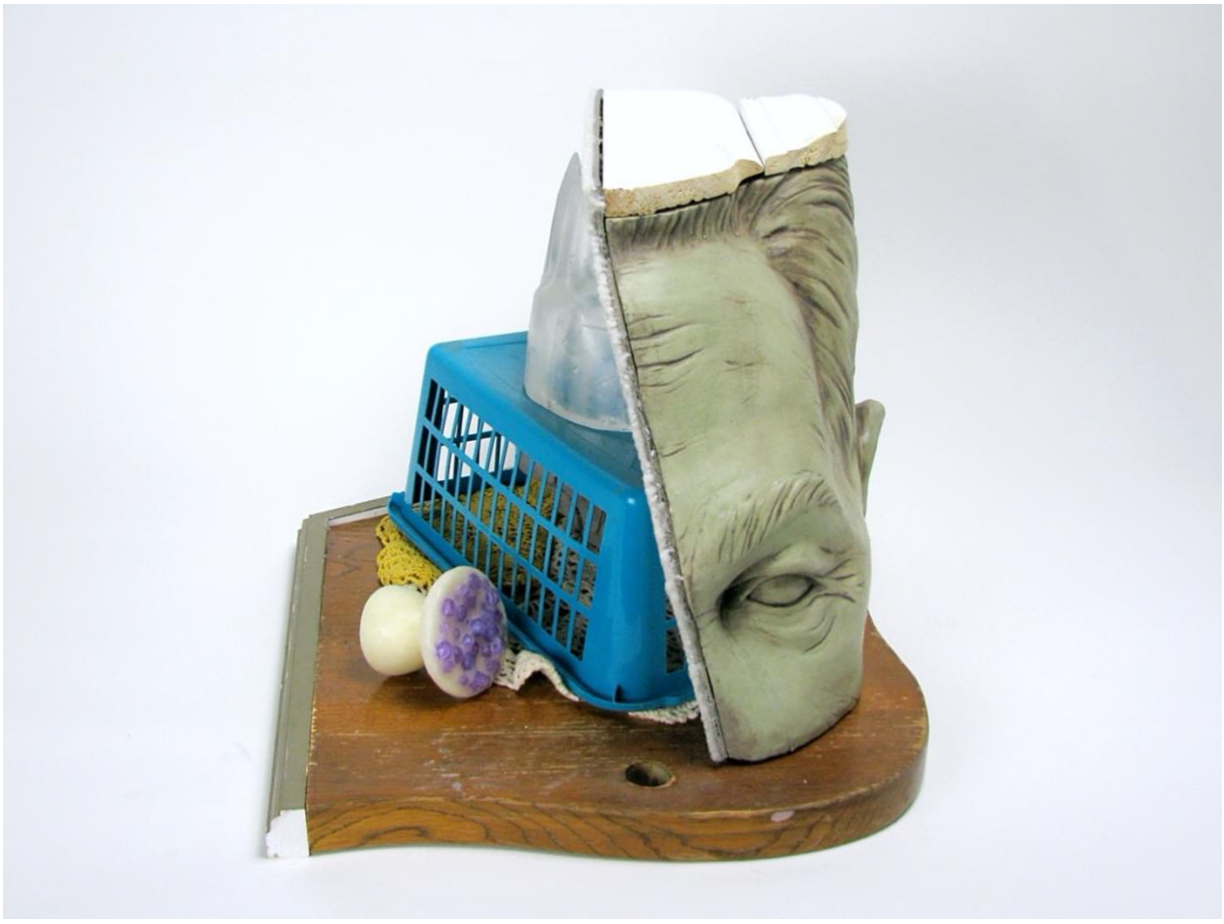

Figure 12. Kourtney Stone. *When Grandpa Lived with Us, Recollection 4.*
Earthenware, wood from dining room chairs, wax, trim from dining room, carpet, plastic basket, plastic necklace, glass. 12 x 13 x 20 inches. 2019.

Dolls are also a type of figure sculpture used to convey cultural messages. They are toys, but their ubiquity and relatability make them useful tools. Cultures around the world use dolls to help teach children certain values and practice social skills.[31] The ongoing feminist debate over Barbie dolls is one example of people questioning the cultural gender norms the doll represents. Some argue that these dolls communicate unnatural beauty standards to young girls. This concern is not new. In 1997, The Body Shop introduced an ad campaign featuring Ruby, a doll

[31] Miriam Forman-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 19.

with curvy proportions meant to promote body neutrality (fig. 13). Mattel, Barbie's manufacturer, sent a cease-and-desist order to stop ads featuring Ruby. After continued pressure from the public, in 2016 Mattel introduced several new Barbie dolls designed with different bodily proportions (fig 14).[32] I remember using dolls to reenact scenes from real life, including situations when I didn't know what to do or to work through questions I didn't know how to ask someone else. Through the dolls, I made space for wondering and uncertainty. In my sculptures, I am interested in how the doll format can suggest an instructive possibility or a space for exploration. For example, what might a doll look like if it was designed to teach me about my relationship with my grandmother? This question influenced the composition for *Bodily Memories from My Mom's Side* (fig 5).

[32] Eliana Dockterman, "Barbie Has a New Body Cover Story," *Time*, February 8, 2016, https://time.com/barbie-new-body-cover-story/.

Figure 13. The Body Shop advertisement featuring Ruby. 1998.
(In Kathy Scott, "The Body Shop's Honest Ad Campaign." *Print*, September 16, 2020, https://www.printmag.com/post/the-body-shops-honest-ad-campaign.)

Figure 14. Barbie, original proportions and Barbie, curvy proportions.
Left: Barbie, original proportions. Right: Barbie, curvy proportions released in 2016. (In *Time*, February 8, 2016, https://time.com/barbie-new-body-cover-story/)

My interest in dolls includes their construction and materiality. With a doll, the body is often made in separate parts and assembled later, and multiple materials are used to create one unified whole. They can be made of fabric, plastic, and ceramic, and we accept, even expect, the combination. Hard materials align with soft materials, and we read it as a body. For example, in Figure 15, there are four dolls, and each one is composed of at least three different materials including composite, plastic, vinyl, ceramic, glass, and fabric. The second doll from the left is composed of at least four different materials: fabric body, plastic hair, glass eyes, ceramic face,

and ceramic hands and feet. These fragments of the body, made in very different materials, are experienced and regarded as a complete whole. The doll format therefore lends itself to the assemblage process, which is discussed later.

Figure 15. Example of dolls made of various materials.
Four dolls in my possession. 2020. Photo by Kourtney Stone.

8 THE FRAGMENTED FIGURE

In both busts and dolls, I am sculpting fragments of the body. This fragmentation is faithful to the experience of memory. I treat these body fragments as complete objects with their own identity and agency. I think about this through the modernist approach to the fragmented

figure. According to the Lacanian notion that the body is experienced as fragments, viewing the body as a whole is actually a hallucination.[33] This concept is exemplified the art of Augste Rodin (fig 16). Rodin considered each part as a whole being in itself, without any need of the parent body.[34] Lacan complicates the sense of the body, similar to how Deleuze and Guatarri complicate the world in their schizoanalysis technique, which is a philosophical approach that moves towards a more complex understanding of the world and an embrace of heterogeneity in being.[35] With this approach, the body might be thought of as an assemblage, invoking Deleuze and Guatarri's sense of the word. When the distinct and unique parts are put together, there is a greater whole, but each part retains its own identity.

An example of my approach to fragmentation is seen in *Through Family Lines* (fig 17). The glass hands are life casts from my father and grandfather and represent each of them. These hands, though they are not attached to their full bodies, are singular and identifiable; they are aged and calloused. They do not require the additional information of arms, shoulders, chest, etc., for the viewer to recognize they come from two individuals. In this sense they function as a whole. When they are placed within this sculpture, the hands become part of a bigger narrative about generational legacy. The hands have not changed, but their context has. In this way, the sculpture speaks to Deleuze and Guatarri's meaning of assemblage.

[33] Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 138.
[34] Mike Kelley, "Playing with Dead Things," in *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 83.
[35] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Athlone, 1988), 18.

Figure 16. Auguste Rodin. *Assemblage: Mask of Camille Claudel and Left Hand of Pierre de Wissant.*
Plaster. 32.1 x 26.5 x 27.7 cm. circa 1895. Rodin Musée Rodin, Paris, France. S.349. (In "Assemblage: Mask of Camille Claudel and Left Hand of Pierre De Wissant." Obelisk Art History. Accessed December 13, 2020. https://arthistoryproject.com/artists/francois-auguste-rene-rodin/assemblage-mask-of-camille-claudel-and-left-hand-of-pierre-de-wissant/)

Figure 17. Kourtney Stone. *Through Family Lines*.
Glass casts of Grandpa, Dad, and my Brother's hands, kiln cast glass, artificial turf, kitchen chair back, lightning cable, phone cord, macramé hanger, dining room chandelier chain, wax. 88 x 19 x 10 inches. 2021

When considering fragmentation, assemblage, and the use of figure sculpture in building cultural narratives, I find parallels in the nature of memory. Memories are often incomplete constructions. Just as some details are recalled, other pieces are forgotten. Still, we rely on the memories, accepting them for what they are.

These interests draw me to the work of Doug Jeck (fig 18). While Jeck is not necessarily working directly with memory, he is a student of history. His work borrows from classical statuary, often referencing ancient Greek and Roman stylization and strategies. Jeck's work demonstrates the Lacanian fragmented experience of the body, and his sculptural compositions are assemblages of many unique forms to make what he calls a "human object." He works intuitively, allowing each piece to become or reveal itself to him. As he sculpts, Jeck believes a bit of his psyche is embedded within the form. Jeck says his work is seeking what it means to be human.[36]

When Jeck describes the fragmentation in his work, he speaks about it in terms of time. In an artist talk, Jeck said that by breaking up the figure, he is exercising some control over the inevitable effects of time.[37] In a personal conversation, he referenced a quote by his mentor Stephen de Staebler, who said that fragmentation is "about having time in your hands." The assertion here is that the fragmentation of the figure is timeless. The pieces could be missing from a whole that once was (past), they could be a whole on their own (present), or they could be in the process of becoming, a vacancy waiting to be filled (future). In order to point to the sense of time within a sculpture, Jeck will sometimes leave a direct indication of the absence of pieces

[36] Zev Guber, "Doug Jeck's Everyman and 'Finding Strength in Fragility,'" *CFile*, March 03, 2017, https://cfileonline.org/exhibition-doug-jecks-everyman-and-exploring-strength-in-fragility/.

[37] Doug Jeck, "Cheating Time," *Interpreting Ceramics*, no. 8 (June 2005), http://www.interpretingceramics.com/issue008/articles/13.htm.

in the sculpture. For example, at the site of a missing limb, he might use saw marks, a smooth surface, or a knob to imply the state of the fragmentation. Depending on the mark, the viewer is free to infer whether a piece was removed, meant to be added, or never part of the body at all.

I'm interested in how absence can suggest both something lost and something becoming. This correlation between time and fragmentation of the figure helps to further relate to the construction of memory. Memory is an ongoing process where the past, present, and future meet. Information is added and lost each time an experience is remembered. The idea that sculptures and memory are in dynamic states of being guides my understanding of assemblage, which is the process I use to create the sculptures in *So It Seems*.

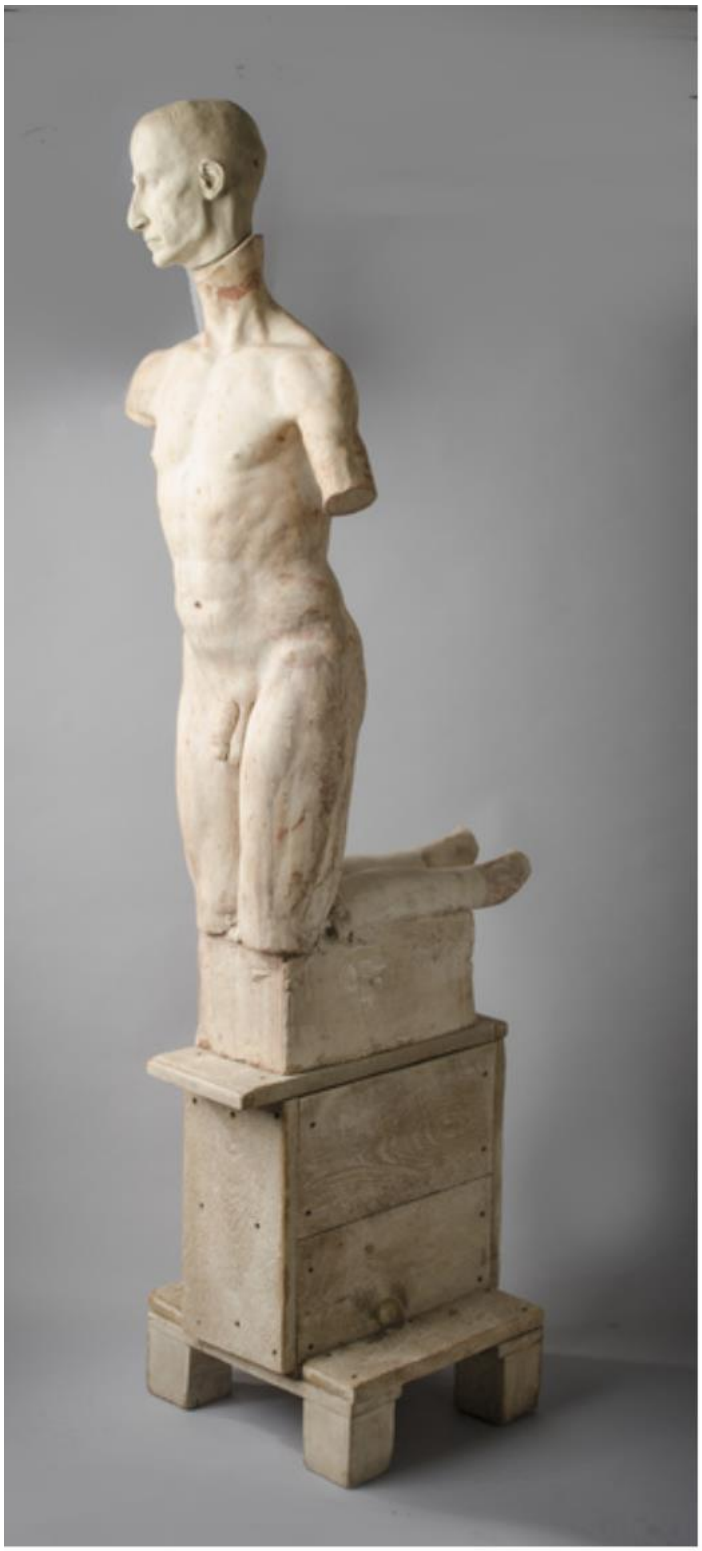

Figure 18. Doug Jeck. *Examples.*
Ceramic and wood. 70 × 13 × 22 in. 177.8 × 33 × 55.9 cm. 1997. (In *Artsy*. October 22, 2020. https://www.artsy.net/artwork/doug-jeck-examples)

9 ASSEMBLAGE AS PROCESS

My interest in assemblage stems from make-do repairs, more than it is inspired by the anti-art gestures of modernism. Make-do repairs, or inventive repairs, are about mending something valuable, and out of necessity those repairs often involve incorporation of materials at hand. I think about my process as piecing valuable information together. However, I have also come to draw on the thinking that came out of assemblage art in the mid-twentieth century, particularly from discussions on the 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* curated by William Seitz (fig 19).

Seitz sought to establish a lineage for artworks made with found objects and materials. In doing so, he emphasized the process or act of juxtaposition, rather than on the finished product.[38] Seitz' perspective represents a shift from a focus on objects to a focus on systems. The artists in the exhibition were speaking both through and with the items. The objects they put together carried particular associations for the artists. However, the act of putting them together created new relationships, new agency, which carried connotations beyond those the artist intended. Art historian Julia Kelly describes, "Assemblage carries a charge […], serving as the basis for imaginative projection in the absence of knowledge about it."[39]

[38] Anna Dezeuze, "Assemblage, Bricolage, and the Practice of Everyday Life," *Art Journal* 67, no. 1 (2008): 31, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20068580.

[39] Julia Kelly, "The Anthropology of Assemblage," *Art Journal* 67, no. 1 (2008): 27, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20068579.

Figure 19. Exhibition view of *The Art of Assemblage*, curated by William Seitz.
On view at the Museum of Modern Art during October 4, 1961‑November 12, 1961.
Photograph by Soichi Sunami. (In The Museum of Modern Art Archives. New York, New York, USA. IN695.6. October 22, 2020. https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1880?)

I hear this spontaneity echoed in discussions of object-oriented ontology (OOO). OOO is helpful in thinking about assemblage because this theory shifts our subject/object mode of thinking. OOO provides a structure for a more democratic understanding of objects wherein they have their own agency. All bodies express a conatus, or persistence in existing, but their agency also depends on the interaction of other forces and bodies.[40] In this sense, an assemblage is a distribution of agency. Each member of the confederation has an individual energy that

[40] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 21.

contributes to the whole energy. Assemblages are also dynamic, with membership and the members themselves changing.[41] This theory aligns with Seitz's descriptions of assemblage as a process and having charge that comes from the juxtaposition of objects.

I do not work with a formula or a set "vocabulary" with the objects or fabrication strategies I use. My decisions are based on how the relationships in the assemblage come together. Objects are matter with agency, and I am putting them together to compound that agency, directing it in a way that is meaningful to me and hopefully someone else.

In our autobiographical narratives, we make connections between memories, stringing them together to create meaning. Similarly, the work of assemblage is in the relationship between the objects. Consciously or not, we understand what each object is through its associations with the others in the assemblage. Without each other, the objects as we see them would be different. According to Deleuze and Guattari, these relationships could be thought of as a rhizome.[42] This rhizome is a series of decentralized connections that collapse the reality of the world, the representation in the art, and the subjectivity of the viewer. When we consider the multitudes of connections in rhizomes, and the idea that each connection has an effect on the things connected, then we see that "the beholder is many beholders, and the object is many objects […]."[43]

If we think of *Great-Grandpa Darrell the Magnanimous* as a rhizome (fig 3), then how the viewer understands the glass elements must be influenced by the bust and the lamp base, and vice versa. The translucency of the glass is seen in relationship to the opacity of the ceramics and the luster of the brass lamp. We identify the lamp as a found object because of its adjacency to

[41] Ibid., 33.
[42] Deleuze and Guattari, 23.
[43] Elkins, 43.

the sculpted bust and the cast glass planes. The viewer understands the smaller-than-life-size bust, the life-cast of the hand, and the size of the lamp relative to the scale of their own body. What the viewer knows about brass as a material or about interior design might influence how they interpret the lamp base. If the viewer sees the piece again, say in five minutes or five days, they are changed by time and the experiences they have had in that time, and so the beholder becomes many beholders. The connections continue to multiply, and in this confluence of connections, the assemblage has artistic meaning.

Sarah Sze describes similar notions about assemblage in her work saying, "The holding of things in balance in the work is important (fig 20). For me, when something is working, it's doing at least two, if not three things at once. A work should be constantly in a state of flux in terms of how it exists in space, how it exists in time; it should be unclear whether it's in a process of becoming or a process of entropy."[44] In Sze's often immersive installations, the exhibition space becomes the frame for her arrangements of mundane objects and images. These objects are often small, so that there are many pieces of information in the viewer's sightline, and the eye can easily move among them. For Sze, it is important for the viewer to see these objects within a plethora of information. She describes this immersive setting as context, which has parallels with the notion of a rhizome, where all of these objects are visually informing each other. Sze talks about the viewer actively putting together information as they examine her works; the viewer is discovering objects and recognizing relationships. [45]In this way her works are constantly changing, much like an assemblage in OOO.

---

[44] "Interview: Sarah Sze on the Changing Pace of Time and Space, the Ebb and Flow of Information, and How All Art Is Essentially Sculpture," interview by Okwui Enwezor, *Artspace*, May 13, 2020, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/meet_the_artist/interview-sarah-sze-on-the-ebb-and-flow-of-information-the-changing-pace-of-time-and-space-and-56568.

[45] Sarah Sze, "Anything Times Zero Is Zero," Produced by Pushpin Films, *Gagosian Quarterly*, April 7, 2020, Video, 4:34, https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2020/04/07/video-sarah-sze-anything-times-zero-is-zero/.

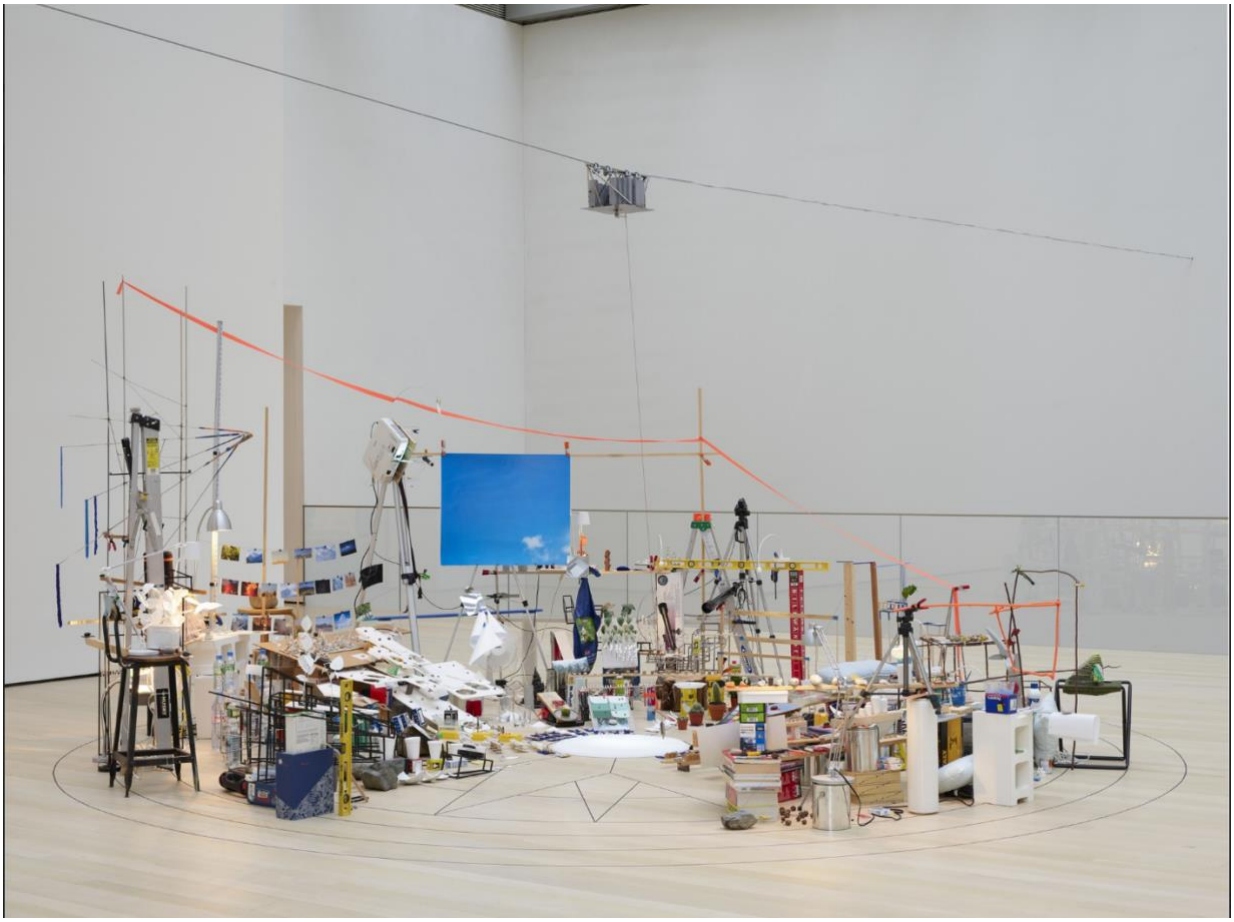

Figure 20. Sarah Sze. *Triple Point (Pendulum).*
Installation. 2013 *(In Museum of Modern Art. "Art and Artists".* October 22, 2020.
https://www.moma.org/collection/works/177636)

Along the same lines of Julia Kelly's assertion that assemblage is a stage for "imaginative projection in the absence of knowledge," the process of assemblage works as a visual metaphor for narrative construction. As parts or events are set next to each other, new connections become apparent and the story line grows. Each new chapter of the story has its own energy, and it works to inform the other chapters. In an interview Mike Kelley once said, "I was playing with our desire to get lost in narrative space/time. We love a story so much that we will breathe life into it

no matter how much it is degraded."[46] Through assemblage, I am able to build on this love for a story, or what might be described as the human predisposition to seek patterns or connections, in how I combine found objects and sculpted forms.

In a conversation on December 11, 2020, Bonnie Collura described to me this predisposition in how she uses the illusory qualities of her work. She said she intentionally positions the figurative elements in relationship to the viewer's bias. How does one make sense of the disappearance of the face and the appearance of an arm as they walk around *Golden Droid/Scout/C3PO* (fig 4)? That answer might change from one person to another. To Collura, the assumptions the viewer makes about what an object or material is (or isn't), says more about the viewer than about the sculpture or her as an artist. Collura describes her figurative sculptures as being in a state of becoming. They are in a state of flux, a notion which is echoed Sze's description of her installations and Seitz's concept of assemblage.

I think of *Family Mythologies II* (fig 21) as an assemblage that is in a constant state of becoming. From different points of view, it is not necessarily clear whether this piece is in a state of coming together, as the added trim and textiles imply, or if it is coming apart, as the unfinished edges and faded outlines would imply. The Ikea brand coffee table has been built into the heirloom hutch, referencing settings in the home where memories are made and where memories are preserved. As the viewer moves around the piece, discovering new details, they contemplate the relationships between these objects and actions. In doing so, the viewer naturally interweaves their own associations and assumptions. Those associations will change depending on the time and place where this sculpture is observed. This everchanging web of connections is the ongoing process of assemblage.

---

[46] Johanna Malt, "The Blob and the Magic Lantern: On Subjectivity, Faciality and Projection," *Paragraph* 36, no. 3 (2013): 309.

Figure 21. Kourtney Stone. *Family Mythologies II*.
Dining room hutch, plaster, found furniture, found textiles. 42 x 72 x 19. 2021

10 NOSTALGIA AND TIME

Nostalgia is a useful tool for examining time and perception. When the term nostalgia was first coined, it was a medical diagnosis, thought of as a disease. The longing for a place, specifically a homeland, affected the mind and incapacitated the body.[47] As European civilizations grew, so did epidemics of nostalgia. The public nature of these outbreaks suggested that the sense of loss might extend beyond the personal sphere of experience and that people missed something they did not remember. Writer Svetlana Boym argues this spread of nostalgia correlates to increased geographic movement between the seventeenth and nineteenth century, as well as to the changing views on time. As the idea of progress spread with political and industrial revolutions, so did the commodification of time and the expression of time with the coldness of numbers.[48] This disconnect led to a collective sense of nostalgia, not that anyone remembered just what was lost or where to find it. Nostalgia now included temporality.

If the feeling of nostalgia is present in my finished work, I see it as an indicator that loss, imagination, and a sense of time are all present. In memory, time is relative to our perceptions. Time can feel fast or slow. We commonly say, "It seemed like yesterday," or "that felt like ages ago." Time-consciousness is central to Husserl's work on phenomenology. For Husserl, consciousness of internal time is the primary basis of lived experience, as opposed to Newtonian time, which is prioritized in the modernized world. Past, present, and future are modes of experience, rather than strategies to separate one moment from another.[49]

---

[47] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2016), 1.
[48] Ibid., 9.
[49] Smith, "Phenomenology."

Bruno Latour expands on Husserl's assertions by suggesting that modernity is defined by the linear progression of time, that we are constantly leaving an age for a new one**.** He argues that we have never been modern in this sense though, and we should consider the coexistences of different temporalities.[50] With this framework, the divide between object and subject softens, and with the dismantling of linear time, we can better understand the hybrids of nature and culture, or past and present, in our contemporary experience. With Latour, we might reframe nostalgia, and instead of seeing it as sentimentality, recognize it as a symptom of resistance to the linear notion of the present. To this end, I complicate the nostalgia elicited from my work by including objects and materials that disarrange one's sense of time.

11 MATERIALS AND AGENCY

Growing up, our house was filled with heirlooms and hand-me-downs, which may help explain why I think of objects as having a life of their own. I knew these objects had a history, a life lived in another home, before they came to our home. They held emotional significance, which I imagined as a special charge or power within them. This fantastical notion was reinforced by movies like *The Brave Little Toaster*, *Beauty and the Beast,* and *Toy Story*. While I no longer subscribe to the belief that appliances go on adventures when people are not around, I am still interested in the agency of objects.

Objects have the ability to trigger a sense of time or place, based on our personal associations with them. At first, I was frustrated by criticism that the work I was making about my childhood memories looked like it was referencing the mid-1900s, a time period which

[50] Roger Luckhurst, "Bruno Latour's Scientifiction: Networks, Assemblages, and Tangled Objects," *Science Fiction Studies* 33, no. 1 (2006): 11, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4241405.

predates me by several decades. I realized that growing up around these heirlooms and hand-me-downs, objects reminded me of my childhood, actually reminded other people my age of their grandparents. Understanding these associations allowed me to complicate the sense of time and place within my sculptures. Memory can be described as a moment from the past relived in the present, and I elicit that sense of layered time through the objects I include.

Found objects can suggest a time period, but I also think about how time is evident in other materials I use. If we consider longevity or archival qualities, the ceramics and plastic will outlast the wood and wax. Time is also present in the processes I employ. The clay, glass, and wax can capture indexical marks and actions. The casting process is like a photograph, recording the form of an object at a particular moment in time. While these qualities might not necessarily be obvious in the final sculptures, they are part of my considerations when choosing materials.

Time and material are integral to Kristen Morgin's sculptures. In *Horror of the 20th Century*, Morgin created unfired, clay facsimiles of worn mundane objects, like toys and books (fig 22). Her use of clay capitalizes on the material's ability to morph and change, mimicking nearly any other material, but only on the surface. She memorializes the object with the meticulous care she takes to replicate it, and then she allows the fragile nature of the unfired clay to destroy the memorialization. Morgin uses nostalgia as an entry point, drawing users in with the familiarity and suggested innocence of the objects.[51] Then she complicates the attraction by rendering the objects as non-functional and nearly untouchable because of their brittle fabrication. A new preciousness arises as the viewer is confronted with the inevitability of decay and the impossibility of possessing objects that will soon disintegrate into dust.

[51] Lopez, Linda. "Kristen Morgin Interviewed by Brant Weiland," *UARK / Ceramics*. April 9, 2018. http://uarkceramics.org/university-of-arkansas-ceramics-blog/2018/4/9/kristin-morgin-interviewed-by-brant-weiland.

Figure 22. Kristen Morgin. *Horror of the 20th Century.*
Unfired clay, wood, string, cloth, paint, graphite, and ink. 33 x 34 x 33 inches. 2014. (In *Marc Selwyn Fine Art*. October 22, 2020. http://origin.www.marcselwynfineart.com/artists/kristen-morgin#tab:slideshow;slide:2)

Like Morgin, I see clay as a material with a tremendous amount of agency, although I approach it differently. Clay comes from minerals in the earth, eroded over thousands of years. I think about this previous existence of the material when it's under my fingers. I am also aware of its durability after it has been fired. I imagine the ceramic parts of my sculptures outliving me and the rest of the sculpture. Ceramic pieces provide both physical and perceived weight. We give memories power and rely on them as strong foundations for identity. For me this power also translates through the weight and physicality of the ceramic elements in my sculptures.

Ceramics has been used throughout human history to make functional and artistic objects. The maker's fingerprints are still visible in the surface of ceramic objects made many generations ago. In the Euro-American canon of art, clay was relegated as a utilitarian material for making small models in the process of making sculptures in other materials. Regardless of the value placed on it, clay has been part of the development of Euro-American art. I can see the fingerprint of a Roman potter on an ancient oil lamp, and I can see Bernini's fingerprint in one of his terra cotta bozzetti, as clearly as I can see my own print in the clay.

I am usually only making the figurative elements with clay. A human figure, whether based on my body or another person's, is central to the formation of memory. Our relationships influence what we remember, how we remember it, and what narratives we build around that memory. In sculpting the figurative elements out of clay, I am giving the person the same three-dimensional presence as the other objects. The sculpted human is my representation of a person, the way I see them in my mind. By making the figure with a material that carries both historical and psychological weight, and that carries the quality of my own psyche, I imbue these fragments with a sense of energy that reflects the incredible power memory has in our lives.

It is important that the materials and processes I use have a relationship to craft—meaning material-based traditions, knowledge, and skills. Ceramics, glass, wax, and textiles are all such materials. Craft objects have a specific relationship to purpose. Throughout human history, these objects have been made to be useful in everyday life. Craft's association with function aligns with other threads previously discussed, such as the notion of dolls as teaching tools and Seitz's suggestion that assemblage artworks are tools rather than objects of contemplation. This association with the utilitarian helps me conjure notions of domestic spaces, even though my pieces are often viewed in gallery settings.

As I explained earlier, my family prides itself on its strong work ethic. With this ethos in mind, the association between craft materials and labor is significant to the sentiment of my sculptures. The skills I have learned from my family, like crocheting, sewing, and wood-working, are all craft-based. Craft knowledge passes from generation to generation, whether taught by a parent to a child or a mentor to an apprentice. The skills are co-constructed, much like how memories are co-constructed.

12 SO IT SEEMS

Taken together, these sculptures tell a nonlinear story about the research that informs their making. I regard my sculptures as physical manifestations of the questions I have about memory and perception. As such, the exhibition that accompanies this paper is a space where I (or the viewer) can dwell with those questions. In the gallery, I physically confront the sculptures and experience how they feel as I walk around them, with the information they offer building in my mind.

In order to create this viewing experience, my initial curatorial concerns regard space and how the viewer moves through the gallery. It is necessary to see my sculptures from different angles so that the viewer has an opportunity to encounter the changing visual information. This requirement dictates the number and placement of pieces in the gallery space. Similarly, when thinking about the viewer moving through the exhibition, the scale of the works is another important consideration.

Some memories are like a sliver of light illuminating one small detail of a room. These memories are often flashing moments of recognition, perhaps of one specific feeling or object. Other memories are much more encompassing, like a flood light illuminating the entire room. These memories are longer recollections, full of detail and sensations. The physical scale of the pieces included in this exhibition reflect this spectrum of scale in memory. I include several small assemblages, which are the size of miniatures or figurines. The three busts are larger in scale, as the figurative elements are life-sized. Two full figure sculptures hold a space equivalent to that of the viewer. The largest piece in the show, *Family Mythologies II* (fig 21), is taller than the viewer. As a viewer moves through the space, the expansion and contraction of scale will affect their progression because some pieces require a step back to fully apprehend while others draw the viewer in closer.

Much like the way parts of an assemblage are changed by their relationships to each other, I consider how my sculptures are informed by the other pieces within the exhibition. For example, all the pieces in the show contain figurative elements with the exception of *Family Mythologies II* (fig 21) and some of the smallest assmblages. Consistency across the other pieces gives more weight to the absence of the figure in this piece, bringing more focus to the sense of time and place implied within the sculpture. In turn, these thoughts linger in the viewer's mind as

they move on to look at the figurative works, which add complexity to how the viewer reads the other pieces. I use domestic furniture to stage the busts and small sculptures rather than the traditional white gallery pedestals and white floating shelves. The furniture-as-pedestal works to frame the sculptures within the same context as *Family Mythologies II* (fig 21).

As a viewer moves through the gallery, they experience my research on the nature of memory and the processes of perception both in the works themselves and in the exhibition as a whole. My works pull objects together in one composition. In a similar way, these sculptures are pulled together into one space, like the reconstructed details in a memory. With every new point of view, information changes on minute and room-size scales. The show acts as an assemblage, where the sculptures shift in meaning as they align in the viewer's eye and mind.

13 CONCLUSION

"Human genius lies in the geography of the body and its conversation with the world, the meeting between inheritance and horizon."[52]

-- David Whyte, poet and philosopher

In the conversation around this quote, Whyte explained that in its origins, the word *genius* was used to describe places. *Genius loci* refers the spirit of a place, or the way many qualities (such as weather, flora, light, topography, etc.) meet in one geographic location and make it unique. For a person, genius is the way everything is met in them: their inheritance – meaning culture, genetics, family history – and their horizon – meaning the bounds of the world

[52] Krista Tippet, "David Whyte: The Conversational Nature of Reality," *On Being with Krista Tippett*, April 7, 2016, Podcast, 51:34, https://onbeing.org/programs/david-whyte-the-conversational-nature-of-reality/.

around them, their current context. Whyte's description of a person as a dynamic confluence of physicality and being is a poetic encapsulation of the underlying ideas in *So It Seems.*

This body of work is the meeting of sculpture with my questions about memory and perception. Each piece is informed by a confluence of ideas and principles from psychology, biology, and philosophy. We use autobiographical narratives to structure our memories and relationships. Because of the way our brains store and reconstruct information, our memories are ever-changing. Our bodies are central to how we perceive and internalize our experiences. Assemblage is a process based on objects meeting and changing as a result of juxtaposition and the passage of time. All of these factors guided my choices in making the figurative assemblage sculptures in *So It Seems*. The choice of materials and techniques is also significant and intentional. This body of work incorporates technical skills I learned in childhood like sewing and wood-working as well as materials that are significant to my artistic vision, like ceramics, glass, and found objects.

As these ideas and materials come together through assemblage; they affect each other. These changes complicate the questions I am asking. The goal was never to to find answers, but rather to see, experience, and live the questions. As my recollections and research intertwine through the sculpting process, I am learning about my own memory and how I have constructed my autobiographical narrative. When viewers experience these works for themselves, they continue the assemblage process: forging their own connections, shifting and remixing old and new information, reimagining their own narratives, and finding meaning in my work that I could never predict.

REFERENCES

Abumrad, Jad, and Robert Krulwhich. "You Are What Your Grandpa Eats." *Radiolab*. Podcast, November 19, 2012. https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/segments/251885-you-are-what-your-grandpa-eats.

Alea, Nicole and Susan Bluck. "Why Are You Telling Me That? A Conceptual Model of the Social Function of Autobiographical Memory." *Memory* 11, no. 2 (2003): 165-178. https://doi.org/10.1080/741938207.

Baker, George. "Mike Kelley: Death and Transfiguration." *October* 139 (2012): 183-91. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41417924.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Bluck, Susan, and Nicole Alea. "Exploring the Functions of Autobiographical Memory: Why Do I Remember the Autumn?" In *Critical Advances in Reminiscence: From Theory to Application*, edited by Jeffrey Dean Webster and Barbara K. Haight, 61-75. New York: Springer, 2002.

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.

Butler, Andrew C., Heather J. Rice, Cynthia L. Wooldridge, and David C. Rubin. "Visual Imagery in Autobiographical Memory: The Role of Repeated Retrieval in Shifting Perspective." *Consciousness & Cognition: An International Journal* 42 (May 2016): 237–253. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2016.03.018.

Collura, Bonnie. "About." Bonnie Collura Studio. Accessed October 23, 2020. https://www.bonniecollura.com/about.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Athlone, 1988.

Dezeuze, Anna. "Assemblage, Bricolage, and the Practice of Everyday Life." *Art Journal* 67, no. 1 (2008): 31-37. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20068580.

Dockterman, Eliana. "Barbie Has a New Body." *Time*, February 8, 2016. https://time.com/barbie-new-body-cover-story/.

Davis, Lennard. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. London: Verso, 1995.

Elkins, James. *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Epstein, Catherine Haley. *Nose Dive*. Independent Publisher, 2019.

Fernyhough, Charles. *Pieces of Light: How the New Science of Memory Illuminates the Stories We Tell about Our Pasts*. New York: HarperCollins, 2013.

Fivush, Robyn, Tilmann Habermas, Theodore E.A. Waters, and Widaad Zaman. "The Making of Autobiographical Memory: Intersections of Culture, Narratives and Identity." *International Journal of Psychology* 46, no. 5 (2011): 321–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/00207594.2011.596541.

Fivush, Robyn, and Natalie Merrill. "The Personal Past as Historically, Culturally and Socially Constructed." *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 28, no. 3 (2014): 301–303. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3017.

Forman-Brunell, Miriam. *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Guber, Zev. "Doug Jeck's Everyman and 'Finding Strength in Fragility.'" *CFile*. March 3, 2017. https://cfileonline.org/exhibition-doug-jecks-everyman-and-exploring-strength-in-fragility/.

Harman, Graham. *Art and Objects*. New York: Polity, 2020.

Hart, Kim. "Why Do People Still Think That Classical Sculptures Were Meant to Be White?" *Artsy*. April 10, 2018. https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-people-classical-sculptures-meant-white.

"Interview: Sarah Sze on the Changing Pace of Time and Space, the Ebb and Flow of Information, and How All Art Is Essentially Sculpture." Interview by Okwui Enwezor. *Artspace*. May 13, 2020. https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/meet_the_artist/interview-sarah-sze-on-the-ebb-and-flow-of-information-the-changing-pace-of-time-and-space-and-56568.

Jackson, Robert. "The Anxiousness of Objects and Artworks: Michael Fried, Object Oriented Ontology and Aesthetic Absorption." In *Speculations II*, edited by Michael Austin et al. Punctum Books, 2011: 135-68. https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/2712415

Jeck, Doug. "Cheating Time." *Interpreting Ceramics*, no. 8 (June 2005). http://www.interpretingceramics.com/issue008/articles/13.htm.

Kelley, Mike. "Playing with Dead Things." In *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, edited by John C. Welchman, 70-99. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003.

Kelly, Julia. "The Anthropology of Assemblage." *Art Journal* 67, no. 1 (2008): 24-30. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20068579.

Kirkegaard Thomsen, Dorothe, Kristina Steiner, and David Pillemer. “Life Story Chapters: Past and Future, You and Me.” *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 5, no. 2 (June 2016): 143-49.

Lopez, Linda. “Kristen Morgin Interviewed by Brant Weiland.” *UARK / Ceramics*. April 09, 2018. http://uarkceramics.org/university-of-arkansas-ceramics-blog/2018/4/9/kristin-morgin-interviewed-by-brant-weiland.

Luckhurst, Roger. “Bruno Latour's Scientifiction: Networks, Assemblages, and Tangled Objects.” *Science Fiction Studies* 33, no. 1 (2006): 4-17. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4241405.

Malt, Johanna. “The Blob and the Magic Lantern: On Subjectivity, Faciality and Projection.” *Paragraph* 36, no. 3 (2013): 305-23.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, and Donald A. Landes. *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Meymandi, Asad. “The Science of Epigenetics.” *Psychiatry: Edgmont* 7, no. 3 (March 2010): 40-41. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2861525/.

Peterson, Britt. “The Stories Our Parents Tell Us.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 23, 2014. https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-stories-our-parents-tell-us/

Saltzman, Lisa. *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Schacter, Daniel L. *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past.* New York: Basic Books, 1996.

Smith, David Woodruff. “Phenomenology.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, 1997-. Article published November 16, 2003; updated December 16, 2013. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/.

Sze, Sarah. “Anything Times Zero Is Zero.” Produced by Pushpin Films. *Gagosian Quarterly*, April 7, 2020. Video, 4:34. https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2020/04/07/video-sarah-sze-anything-times-zero-is-zero/.

Tippett, Krista. “David Whyte: The Conversational Nature of Reality.” *On Being with Krista Tippett*, April 7, 2016. Podcast, 51:34. https://onbeing.org/programs/david-whyte-the-conversational-nature-of-reality/.

Thomsen, Dorthe Kirkegaard, Kristina L. Steiner, and David B. Pillemer. “Life Story Chapters: Past and Future, You and Me.” *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 5, no. 2 (2016): 143-49. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2016.03.003.

Wright, Anthony. “Limbic System: Amygdala.” In *Neuroscience Online: An Electronic Textbook for the Neurosciences*. Department of Neurobiology and Anatomy, The University of Texas Medical School at Houston. Article updated October 10, 2020. https://nba.uth.tmc.edu/neuroscience/m/s4/chapter06.html.

Zimmer, Carl. “The Famine Ended 70 Years Ago, but Dutch Genes Still Bear Scars.” *New York Times*. January 31, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/31/science/dutch-famine-genes.html.

APPENDIX

It is important to recognize this significant moment in American history, and the context in which I am writing this paper and making this exhibition. Our planet is changing. The ice caps are melting, the coasts are flooding, and our forests are burning. As all this is happening, the world is suffering from the Covid-19 pandemic. In the United States, the pandemic has exposed the deep fault lines in our society. Our loyalty to the notion of American exceptionalism has resulted the inability of our country to protect its most vulnerable citizens and the death of hundreds of thousands of people. The stay-at-home orders have allowed us to look up from the grind of survival in late capitalism and witness a few of the many instances of police murdering Black people. We could not look away this time, and now the United States is wrestling with its violent history and the recognition that not everyone has the same lived experience of our country. The Black Lives Matter movement is forcing Americans to hear the truth that systematic racism continues to deny Black, Indigenous, and people of color their lives, basic rights, and dignity.

With both “Black Lives Matter” and “alternative facts” in our common vernacular, it is clear to me that this is a time in which we as a society are seeing binary extremes, not seeing our shared humanity, and doubting truth. I feel this strain on the few bridges that span the widening political divides in my family. This amplifies the relevance of the questions I am asking in my art about the nature of memory, how we perceive our experiences, and the truth in the narratives we construct. I feel I need to continue this work, asking the deep questions that will complicate the nostalgic certainty of our past and its relationship to how we understand the present. I am not trying to create false pretenses that my art has anything to say specifically about this moment or suggest that it is made to affect our world in any way. In the face of so much injustice and fear,

my artmaking often feels like a selfish endeavor. I continue with it, though, because making art is helping me cope. Through my work, I can dwell in questions and observe uncertainty, both of which have consumed our day-to-day lives. My best hope is that despite my selfishness, my art might allow someone else to recognize their doubts and sit in their own space of unknowing. In that space, the issues can be less binary and less polarizing. We might better see the humanity, limitations, and nuances of our lived experience. Then there can be an opportunity for humility and empathy to take hold.