

Aurora

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Abstract

This paper is in support of my artist-based thesis research entitled *Aurora*. My practice is interdisciplinary with a focus on installation and sculpture, consistently engaged in questions surrounding culturally inherited power structures and resulting modes of representation. This thesis research critically investigates what is understood as “traditional” in North American domestic ornamentation through considerations of complicated and intertwined histories, commerce, personal memory and taste. This paper provides an art historical and contemporary art context for this line of artistic investigation.

Focusing on contemporary artists, this paper seeks to highlight the current discourse around culturally inherited materials, in particular of those from hybridized cultural identities. Drawing from theorists engaged in Marxism, post-structuralism, post-modernism; a nuanced understanding of ornament as a commodity and social signifier is highlighted. An account for the breadth of my material research is outlined in this document, focusing on three major works that were exhibited in defense of this thesis, *Aurora*, *Secret Garden* and *Like Countless Men on Horseback*. A focus is emphasized around sets of gestural responses to materials; these are drawing, casting, tracing, folding, cutting, and staging. These gestures invite viewers to think through their own understanding of domestic ornamentation and inherited social structures, as they focus on perceptions of appropriation, nostalgia, monumentality and memory.

This paper concludes with implications of this research. That networks of associations to the self, class and history resound through the maintenance of domestic ornamentation. These networks are not static and fluctuate through trend, social norms and ideas surrounding domesticity. Thus it is paramount that in the creation of works invested in this dialogue that ambiguity is facilitated to gain entry into layered, and possibly contradictory associations to the

ornamentation of the home. The accumulation of my cultural identity, lived experience, influences and biases will continue to be investigated and articulated through my practice vis-à-vis symbolic socially constructed materials and beliefs.

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Dedicated to my Mom, Dad and Mordechai.

Aurora and Tithonus

The goddess of the Dawn, like her sister the Moon, was at times inspired with the love of mortals. Her greatest favorite was Tithonus, son of Laomedon, king of Troy. She stole him away, and prevailed on Jupiter to grant him immortality; but, forgetting to have youth joined in the gift, after some time she began to discern, to her great mortification, that he was growing old. When his hair was quite white she left his society; but he still had the range of her palace, lived on ambrosial food, and was clad in celestial raiment. At length he lost the power of using his limbs, and then she shut him up in his chamber, whence his feeble voice might at times be heard.

From Thomas Bulfinch (1796-1867).

Age of Fable: Vols. I & II: Stories of Gods and Heroes. 1913.

I thought it was up to me, the choice of what would adorn my walls. I picked a paper with tiny pale yellow butterflies evenly spread across an eggshell backdrop. Like the pinned butterflies my Bubbie kept behind glass. But, I was told, I would grow bored of it; instead three floral papers were selected. Over my bed and on the wall that slanted with the pitch of the roof blossomed peonies in pink and purple. Behind the armoire and desk was a textured paper painted dusty rose that echoed the patterns of a tin ceiling. Crowning the room in an eternal spring, a border of tiny pink flowers. It was all a bit much.

Introduction

My thesis research sets out to critically investigate domestic ornamentation through a material-based art practice. Manifested in works that use the formal properties (material, aesthetic codes, and structure) of domestic ornament, it seeks to highlight the intertwined implications of history, commerce, personal memory and taste. This work is particularly interested in inherited notions of *tradition* and how these impact individual ideas of beauty, home, and family. In the colloquial language of North American interior design, "traditional" is an umbrella term that refers to an amalgamation of styles taken from American Colonial Revival, 19th century Neo-classicism, 18th century French Country and 19th century British Country¹. My research employs personal experiences and references to create works that both highlight and cut across the connections and differences between these disparate periods and aesthetics.

In producing objects through material processes of tracing, drawing, folding, cutting and casting, I am simultaneously invested with metaphoric values of these gestures, emphasising perceptions of appropriation, nostalgia, monumentality and memory. Thus, my works seek to straddle the line between metaphorical and physical objects, which I feel is analogous to the way in which domestic ornamentation operates. As David Harvey states, "If a picture or map is worth a thousand words, then power in the realms of representation may end up being as important as power over the materiality of spatial organization itself (233)". This understanding that embedded associations to an object, motif, space or any other vessel of representation, becomes a conduit to ideas. This tight relationship suggests that to understand the social positioning of an object,

¹ I have chosen to footnote a populist style guide in light of the lack of academic sources on defining North American contemporary Traditional home décor aesthetics. There is a plethora of populist sources framing this style for the consumer. My understanding of traditional décor is informed through a relationship to my house (which will be expanded on below) and the constant trips to home decorating and improvement stores, keenly aware of the labels and categories the items fell under. Home decorating magazines such as "Traditional Style 101 from HGTV." HGTV. Web.
Traditional Home. Meredith Corporation, Web.

or in the case of this research, ornamental décor, its connotations must also be accounted for. As this thesis research developed, I moved from reproducing ornamental motifs through drawing and tracing into a direct handling of commercially produced or replicated forms of ornamentation resulting in sculptural and installation works. This was in a response to situate myself in a more direct and complicated relationship to this subject matter. Facing how my hybridized cultural position, allegiances and relationships to culturally produced materials are not binary. Alongside a direct handling of materials, I brought in theoretical works in conversation with social positioning of domestic décor. This method of working trusts that domestic ornamentation and its inherited connotations are a means of accessing more abstract and complicated social, domestic and personal systems.

Position

My family home, otherwise known by its historical designation², *The Lundy House*, was constructed in 1860 in Aurora, Ontario. It is a Gothic Revival Ontario Cottage³. The home is located just off of Yonge Street. Reputably the longest street in North America, Yonge St, connecting Lake Ontario to Lake Simcoe, was fundamental to the settlement of Western Upper Canada in the 1790s. My relationship to this house was coloured by my parent's aspirations to preserve, maintain and historicize it, which in turn has impacted and conditioned many of my own aesthetic ideals. Coming to terms with this experience is thus paramount to how I situate and unpack my creative research. Responding to

² The Aurora Historical Society recognizes the historical significance of the home. As well the house is situated in the historic center of Aurora, and has been a part of heritage walking tours.

³ Gothic Revival Cottage is a direct translation of British medieval architectural elements onto specific to Ontario and the most common type of architecture until the 1950's. Ornate in character, these domestic buildings are charming and picturesque. Frequent road trips throughout Southern Ontario solidify these homes as the architectural cannon of tradition in Ontario.

"Building Styles." *Gothic Revival*. Web

memories of growing up in the Lundy House through intuitive gestures and material explorations, I have sought to meditate instinctual responses that are the result of years and layers of interactions to domestic aesthetics. My reading of both theoretical and creative works aligned with post-colonial studies, Marxism and post-structuralism have helped to position my thesis work on the line between the social and the individual, historic and personal. Furthermore, contextualizing my experience and biases through this rigor continually resurfaces questions around why and how this work is important. How the production of artwork that strives to blur categorized associations towards domestic ornamentation can be relevant in making sense of recurrent social structures. Liz Magor articulates, "To make progress in knowing something means accumulating many "'takes'" as to what the thing is, or how it operates. Artworks are privileged in that they can entertain contradictions. They can remain inconclusive" ("An Interview with Liz Magor"). As well, I am challenged through this work to face how a mixed cultural identity can further confound allegiances to ideas around representations of domestic order and style.

My cultural makeup has mediated my reception to "British-ness," manifested in the traditional domestic décor that surrounded me as a child. I am of Ashkenazi Jewish and British/Western European decent. Being raised in a home that monumentalized only half of a heritage maintained a layer of distance and distrust in the traditional interior décor as family tradition. Grappling with understanding my cultural hybridity raises questions around how the concept of knowing is formed. In my experience my British/ Western European background is known through a direct material representation; this is countered by learning of my Jewish Ashkenazi heritage through an accumulation of, and often diffuse relationship to photographs, archives and oral histories. Through this research I have reached an expanded understanding; regarding the appropriation, or incorporation of Islamic and Eastern designs, a British ornamental décor

aesthetic is a desire to pick, choose and ultimately fetishize “the other”⁴. Though Eastern European Jewish heritage is not the same as Islamic, the parallels in representation through popular cultural⁵ are present. This not only provided a ground to understand the layer of distance to homogenous displays of culture through ornamental materials, simultaneously this research also brought light to the underlying tensions of attraction and glorification towards elements of floral domestic displays. Enabling attraction and fixation as starting points, I ritualized activities around my material investigations. Working repetitively and impulsively conceives a response that is encoded in my work; by resurfacing and examining memories and cultural difference, my practice resists the homogenizing momentums that are represented in traditional North American home décor.

⁴ From Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Stephanie Elizabeth Bancroft's masters thesis research *Livable Exoticism: William Morris and Islamic Art*, Oleg Grabar *The Mediation of Ornament*, Shanin Kuli Khan Khattak's *Islam and the Victorians: Nineteenth-Century Perceptions of Muslim Practices and Beliefs* to name a few—there is an constant restating of the West being fascinated by the décor and fantasy of the East, yet views of the East as being barbaric and needing Western control, mediation and domination persisted. These antiquated views are still relevant as we look at the current state of Islamophobia in the Western world. Ideas of orientalism perpetuate in the cultural world for example recently in 2015 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts an exhibition entitled *Marvels and Mirages of Orientalism: From Spain to Morocco, Benjamin-. Constant in His Time* perpetuated the 'exotic East'. Larbi-Aissa, Sonia. "Orientalism on Display | The McGill Daily." The McGill Daily. The McGill Daily, 09 Feb. 2015. Web. Green, Emma. "The Objectification of Muslims in America." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 22 Nov. 2015. Web.

⁵ This is one of many examples found discussing historical and contemporary representation and beliefs around Jewish and Islamic culture. Although not the focus of my research it is important to ground and give reference.

Gilman, Sander L. "The Parallels of Islam and Judaism in Diaspora." *Palestine - Israel Journal* 12.2&3 (2005): n. pag. Web.



Figure 1-19 Mosley St. Aurora, Ontario, Polaroid photograph, approximately late 1970's. Image used with permission of the Waxer Family

Provence Blue. The colour and depth of texture of the velvet love seat are imbedded in my mind and in the skin of my palms and the pads of my fingertips. I would sit neatly – as not to brush the velvet in the wrong direction – and make believe. The pile on the red, white, pink and yellow Chinese carpet was almost tall enough to graze the tips of my dangling toes. In front of me, a pair of red floral wing back chairs acted as pillars to the wash of light that flooded through the lace curtains, hanging behind the silk flowers forever blooming in the ceramic washing basin and jug on the bay window ledge. In this light the flowers of walls, furniture, ceiling, and floor became my secret garden.

Larger Context

This research is invested in histories of intercultural influence in relation to the development of early twentieth century North American notions of applied ornament. Stephanie Bancroft, in her research at Sotheby's Institute of Art, interrogates the appropriation and modification of pre-industrialized, non-Western pattern and motif. Bancroft discusses how certain patterns have been reframed into a Western aesthetic to be deemed suitable for a Western market (2). She argues that a generalization of origin was a result of this continual appropriation and reframing of motifs and shifts in aesthetic ideals. One important example of this interplay is the work of William Morris⁶, whose meticulous appropriation of Islamic motifs had considerable influence on the aesthetic sensibility of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century British Empire, including Canada (Bancroft 2).

"In fact the ornamental aspects of the exotic often rode on the back of such magical Eastern materials as silk, muslin, porcelain and lacquer, imported into a wealthy Europe. In many cases the local styles of these objects were adapted in the country of manufacture at the demand of the exporting merchants in order to fit them more closely to European taste (Snodin and Howard 162)".

According to Snowdin and Howard, the early twentieth century was characterized by internationalism and effort to record and classify all that was 'exotic' (213).

⁶ William Morris was an English textile designer, writer, artist, and socialist, associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as well as the English Arts and Crafts Movement. He was greatly influenced by his love of medieval Europe, nature and Persian ornamentation. He founded William Morris and Co, a company that produced home décor items such as wallpapers and textiles had considerable influence on interior design of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

"A Full History." *William Morris and Co*. Web.

Accepted as the most influential source book of global and historical decorative design, Owen Jones's⁷ *The Grammar of Ornament* categorizes and de-constructs the histories of ornament from around the world. "Although the Jones pattern designs which have been reproduced on the textiles and wallpapers of the Laura Ashley⁸ shops have included no Islamic interlace, the East has been represented by a Persian flower pattern which, minus the startling pink ground of Jones's original, has been stripped of most of its exotic message" (Snodin and Howard 200).

Ornament and Crime, a published lecture given by Adolf Loos in 1906 provides an important, albeit problematic stance on ornamentation. "Even greater is the damage done by ornament to the nation that produces it. Since ornament is no longer organically linked with our culture, is also no longer the expression of our culture. Published only 50 years after Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament*, in which as stated above provides a catalogue of global ornamentation, it is difficult to believe Loos's claims that "...ornament that is manufactured today has no connexion with us, has absolutely no human connexions, no connexion to world order. It is not capable of developing" (3). Loos's view privileges the aristocrat and discounts those following in cultural practices of ornamentation as inferior (5). Loos's linking ornament with criminality however sparked a moralist stance and many of his ideals were realised in the interiors exemplifying the Modern Movement (Snodin and Howard 151). Although, the Modern Movement did not eradicate ornamentation and over a century later where ornament is

⁷ Owen Jones, an English born Welsh architect was one of the most influential design theorists of the nineteenth century. He studied Islamic ornamentation and design, applying principals he learned into the teaching framework at the Government School of Design founded in 1837. The impetus behind this school was to improve the standard of British manufactures through design. The *Grammar of Ornament*, first published in 1856 is still in print and remains a seminal book on international decorative patterns and motifs. "Victoria and Albert Museum." *Digital Media Webmaster@vam.ac.uk*. Web.

⁸ Laura Ashley is a Welsh lifestyle, textile, clothing and home décor company that began in textiles in the 1950's. In the 1980's the company began expansion into wallpapers and other home ornamentations and other departments. The patterns of Laura Ashley are characterized as 19th century British Country revival and were widely popular in North America in the 1980's and 1990's. "Home at Laura Ashley." *Home at Laura Ashley*. Web.

continually reproduced it is difficult to ascribe to Loos's stance. Brought forward by Loos is an awareness, in which shifts in production and economy impact the social value of ornamentation. As well, a reminder, that ornament is tied to trend, and in a time that does not privilege the overly ornate offers unique a space to analyze the ebb and flow of how interiors are composed.

Artistic Influences

As a way of continuing to challenge my visual research, I am indebted to a number of artists. To following discussion of artist is not a fulsome critical or art historical discussion, but rather illuminating my creative context. These artists exemplify and problematize theoretical discussions of colonial home decoration and ornamentation. The prevalence of art that takes up ornamentation conflated with pop-culture and historical reference highlights this space of analysis that speaks to hybridity of culture, class, and location.

“The theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. It is the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (Bhabha 56)

Oversights and perhaps developments in thinking since Loos, there is a surge of contemporary artists whose work explores issues of cultural influence and cross-pollination. Through the work of these artists is a clear message that ornament continues to carry weight and influence across many cultures. Among these is Asian-Canadian ceramic artist Brendan Tang, whose series *Manga Ormolu* conflates eighteenth century French gilded ormolu; a practice of transforming Chinese Ming vessels into novelty pieces for aristocrats, with Japanese manga collectable figurines (Colclough 10).



Figure 2 - Brendan Tang, *Manga Ormolu Ver. 5.0-N*, ceramic, 2013, 16.5". Image used with permission of artist.

In each of these works the components of traditional vase and manga emerge, constrict or blend into one another. Tang expresses that this series is a practice that vehicles his self-understanding of his Asian-Canadian hybridized cultural identity; beyond the biographical element of *Manga Ormolu* are broader questions that deconstruct identity, and question the notion of 'origin' as something that instead is being confused through commerce. As manga and ormolu pieces are collectable specialty items; the associations to access, market and novelty are inescapable and must be addressed in relationship to the identities and social classes they each represent. The subject matter Tang focuses on elicits several, yet contradicting Asian stereotypes, methodologically weaving tension through all aspects of this work (Colclough 8). The work of Tang provides a challenge to deeply investigate the holistic history and function of the amalgamated and appropriated ornamentation I am researching and visually representing. Much of my artistic influences come from a racialized or a hybrid cultural identity. Witnessing how they unpack and challenge spaces of privilege and notions of cultural normativity instils a trust in allowing the complications of my position to factor into how and why I make artwork.

Nigerian-British artist Yinka Shonibare utilizes Dutch wax cloth extensively in his installation and video works.

“This bright and distinctive fabric was originally produced in Dutch Indonesia, where no market was found for it, and subsequently copied and produced by the English, who eventually sold it to West Africans, for whom it became a popular everyday item of clothing. It also, crucially, became a sign of identitarian “authenticity” both in Africa and, later, for Africans in England. A colonial invention, Dutch wax fabric offers itself as both a fake and yet “authentic” sign of Africanness, and Shonibare’s use of it in his paintings and sculptures accentuates a politics of

(in)authenticity by simultaneously presenting both the ideal of an “authentic” identity and identity as a “fabrication (Yinka Shonibare). Shonibare creates elaborate works drawing on the theatrical and staged, such as *Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball)*, 2004, color digital video, 32-minute loop and *Odile and Odette*, 2005, color film, using the wax fabric as material for costumes. The fabric combined with theatrical references of euro centricity challenges displays and structures of authority over notions of culture and class.

Shonibare states that the use of decoration is a “deliberate complicity with popular culture” and that the decorative speaks to continual shifts between high and low culture (“Yinka Shonibare”). As I am working with decorative materials that fluctuate between cultural states, this awareness of fluidity and influence Shonibare provides is important to account for, as it denies a linear and singular reading of culturally produced ornamental materials. Lace⁹ is an example of a material that I use with a history of fluctuating cultural status and is produced in an array of qualities and materials. Lace similarly to Dutch wax fabric is associated to specific places and cultures, holding not only functional value but also a social value. Thus, the use of these textiles elicits associations that span the complexities of place, time, taste, class and culture.

FIGURE 3 HAS BEEN REMOVED DUE TO COPY RIGHT RESTRICTIONS:

Figure 3 - Yinka Shonibare, *Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball)*, 2004, colour digital video, 32-minute loop.

I am influenced by artists who take up notions of cultural hybridity and representations of power structure that step beyond replicating ornamentation and rather take up the associated connotations of ornamentation. Artist Danh Võ (Vietnamese-Danish) explores personal and cultural conflict to place and

⁹ "The Lace Guild." - *The Origins & History of Lace*. Web. 20.

www.laceguild.org/craft/history.html This website offers a generous history of lace, types, hand made and mechanically produced. As well it offers information on countries in which lace is manufactured and part of a traditional material lexicon.

attachment. Vo focuses on displacement and constructed ideas of inherited cultural values, such as iconography that monumentalizes a Euro-centric Western worldview. ("Danh Võ: We The People (detail), 2010–2013"). *We The People* [fig. 11] reconstructs at 1:1 scale in several pieces the Statue of Liberty, a statue that is loaded with politics of land, sea, and national identity of the United States of America, and more widely the West. Vo has recreated the statue in thin copper to highlight the fragility of the ideology represented by monumentality. I am interested in how the domestic ornamental objects and architectural details can inhabit a symbolic space of the monument. Furthermore, understanding how the correlations between monumentalizing of cultural materials and the mythologizing of the self can access urges or impulses in the dressings of domestic space.

FIGURE 4 HAS BEEN REMOVED DUE TO COPY RIGHT RESTRICTIONS:

Figure 4 - Danh Võ, *We the People (detail)*, copper, 2010 – 2013.

Domestic objects, in particular the antique object perpetuate attachment to representations of history. In accounting for artistic works that I situate my investigations of domesticity, object hood and attachment; it is important to recognize the theoretical underpinnings in which these artistic investigations are in conversation with. The writings of philosopher, cultural theorist, and sociologist Jean Baudrillard are instrumental in exploring the mythologizing of the self and culture through associations to objects, in particular, the antique. Accumulated objects of power and antiques, which are material symbols of time (Baudrillard 77-78), outwardly represent and affirm positions of power, class and location. Witold Rybczynski, a Canadian-American architect and writer, has been useful in helping to further my investigations into the role of antique and nostalgic domestic items within a North American context. Rybczynski examines how nostalgia and a desire for history is articulated and located within the domestic space through decorative objects and applied ornament. "*This acute*

awareness for tradition is a modern phenomenon that reflects a desire for custom and routine in a world characterized by constant change and innovation. Reverence for the past has become so strong that when traditions do not exist, they are frequently invented" (Rybczynski 9).



Figure 5 - Liz Magor, *Tweed (neck)*, gypse polymerisé, 2008, 16"x16.5"x5.5', image used with permission of Catriona Jefferies

Much of the value of lived space is created through the network of memories and associations we carry, or so read the works of Canadian artist Liz Magor. Magor emphasizes symbolic attachment to objects through working extensively with the unspectacular and common (Bueti "No Fear, No Shame, No Confusion.>"). In Magor's work *Tweed (neck)* [fig. 12], a cast of tweed fabric, carefully 'draped' over a whiskey flask is playing on assumptions of softness and comfort. Yet, the transformation from this world into a representation of this

world subverts daily function, the 'fabric' is now symbolic of what its function represents. Enabling abstract and symbolic associations to object-hood to take priority in viewership. Magor's attention to common objects has influenced my thinking and material practice. In particular, her work exemplifies different ways of highlighting associated memories and ideas towards object, ornament and place.

"Generally, I prefer experience over reference. I like situations that proceed without a script or a guidebook, because they enlist my full attention and I feel uniquely employed. However, sculpture doesn't unfold over time the way other events do; so, if I want to make work that depends on that kind of active engagement, I have to overcome the static nature of the object. I find that conventional conceptual art, where the idea commissions and informs the image, is detrimental to the phenomenological condition that I value. So I work to keep the organizing idea or meaning at bay for as long as possible, by initiating a series of operations that grow into a process. Each step is determined by the one before it, in a meandering fashion. This isn't aimless wandering — I do have a subject in mind; I'm just wanting to stay fluid in terms of how I will cover it" ("An Interview with Liz Magor").

Memory weaves through my practice as a way to call up the symbolic resonance of space. As Baudrillard suggests, the power of objects is tied to the potency of memory. The memories and associations with the domestic family space are deeply engrained because of the psychological weight of the symbol that the home creates (Baudrillard 13). Esther da Costa Meyer writes that memory by its very nature is a construct; what is remembered is not 'what it was' but rather a network of elements and associations that serve the purpose of the memory (E.Treib 188). For me, this notion is brought to light in the art works of Latifa Echakhch through her material choices such as Moroccan tea cups,

playing cards to prayer rugs countered by methods of display where she breaks, tears, hides, or excessively works a material.

Latifa Echakhch employs a variety of materials and approaches, ranging from the handmade, sourced and found. *Fantôme (Jasmin)*, 2012, is comprised of a 'T' metal armature on which rests a cream coloured shirt and on either end several strung jasmine garlands [fig.13]. Using the materials of a childhood memory and the overarching symbols of clothing void of a body and garlands of flowers to draw associations to life, death, and the memorial, Echakhch addresses current political dynamics of fragility and resistance as seen through her multicultural/ national worldview ("Art Conversations - Latifa Echakhch."). The politics Echakhch engages with are in direct conversations with Western democracies and desire to create and display systems of order ("Discontinued Order – Latifa Echakhch"). I aspire towards this ability to activate objects that are located in my worldview and experience through gestures and interventions, with the effect of having a much broader social reach.



Figure 6 - Latifa Echakhch, *Fantôme (Jasmin)*, 2012 Steel, wood, shirt and jasmine necklaces, 141 x 61,5 x 30 cm. Exhibition view "Tkaf", kamel mennour, Paris, 2012 Collection : François Pinault Foundation © Latifa Echakhch, Photo. Fabrice Seixas. Image with permission of the artist and kamel mennour, Paris

We used to have two cast iron wood-burning stoves, one at the back of the house just past the kitchen, and the other in an alcove off of the first flight of stairs. The first five years of my life were scented with firewood. One day I was practicing ballet in front of the stove upstairs. Proud of my pli   I unwittingly backed up into stove, scalding my behind, which was in a flash dropped into a bath of ice. The stoves were soon traded for an upright piano, on whose bench I sat. My music room, which flowed from the parlour, was papered in a dark William Morris print of undulating birds and flowers on a black backdrop. To my back a large Qu  bec armoire and in the windowsill potted jade plants. On the wall a framed letter with wax seal, which I pretended was from Napol  on. Perhaps because he was the only commander whose name I knew off-hand.

Methodology

Using domestic ornamentation as both a material reference and source, I produced artworks using drawing, tracing, folding, cutting and casting. I see these as a set of gestures and material interventions to disrupt and contend with traditional domestic ornamentation. I have used materials such as carbon paper, domestic textiles, paper, wallpaper, polystyrene ceiling moulding, bronze, gold, marble, and plaster to explore the materials and metaphoric associations to the home. I see this interdisciplinary approach as integral to facilitate a fluid response that engages with the physical and metaphoric occupation of domestic ornamentation, rather than illustrative of an experience.



Figure 7- Meichen Waxer, *Untitled (Evenlode)*, carbon paper, 2014, 2'x8'. Photo: Meichen Waxer. Image used by permission of the artist.

Bird Of Paradise Tree of Life is a large-scale drawing and tracing work. This piece combines tracing paper and paper to explore relationships to ornamentation. The elements of the piece are the traced, evidence of the trace as well as hand drawn, emphasizing symbolic implications to ornamentation. The act of tracing involves my body as a conscious reproducer of an aesthetic, style, and social signifier. Displaying the remnants of the trace as an offset overlay is gesture pointing towards a wider territory of influence and process. Produced in the same time frame, as *Bird of Paradise Tree of Life* is *Vestige I + II*, through this work I explored notions of subtraction of representation. How, while maintaining aesthetic elements could removal alter the reading of ornamental motif? I relate this method of handling motif to a more abstract social representation of individuals. This work personally underlined the importance of recognizing my position through this artistic research.



Figure 8 - Meichen Waxer, *Bird of Paradise Tree of Life* (tr), carbon paper and paper, 2015, 3'x8'. *Vestige I + II* (tl), carbon paper, 2015, 2'x8' and 2'x6'. *Bird of Paradise Tree of Life* - detail (br), *Vestige II* - detail (bl). Photo: Meichen Waxer. Image used by permission of the artist.

A portion of this research was conducted in Istanbul, Turkey¹⁰ where I explored recurrent patterns and motifs found in domestic and public architecture through drawing and sculpture. Locating myself in Istanbul was an effort to explore the accumulation of cultural traditions that challenged my North American and Eurocentric sensibilities. Istanbul, the hub of the Ottoman Empire and a modern metropolis was an ideal city to situate my research.

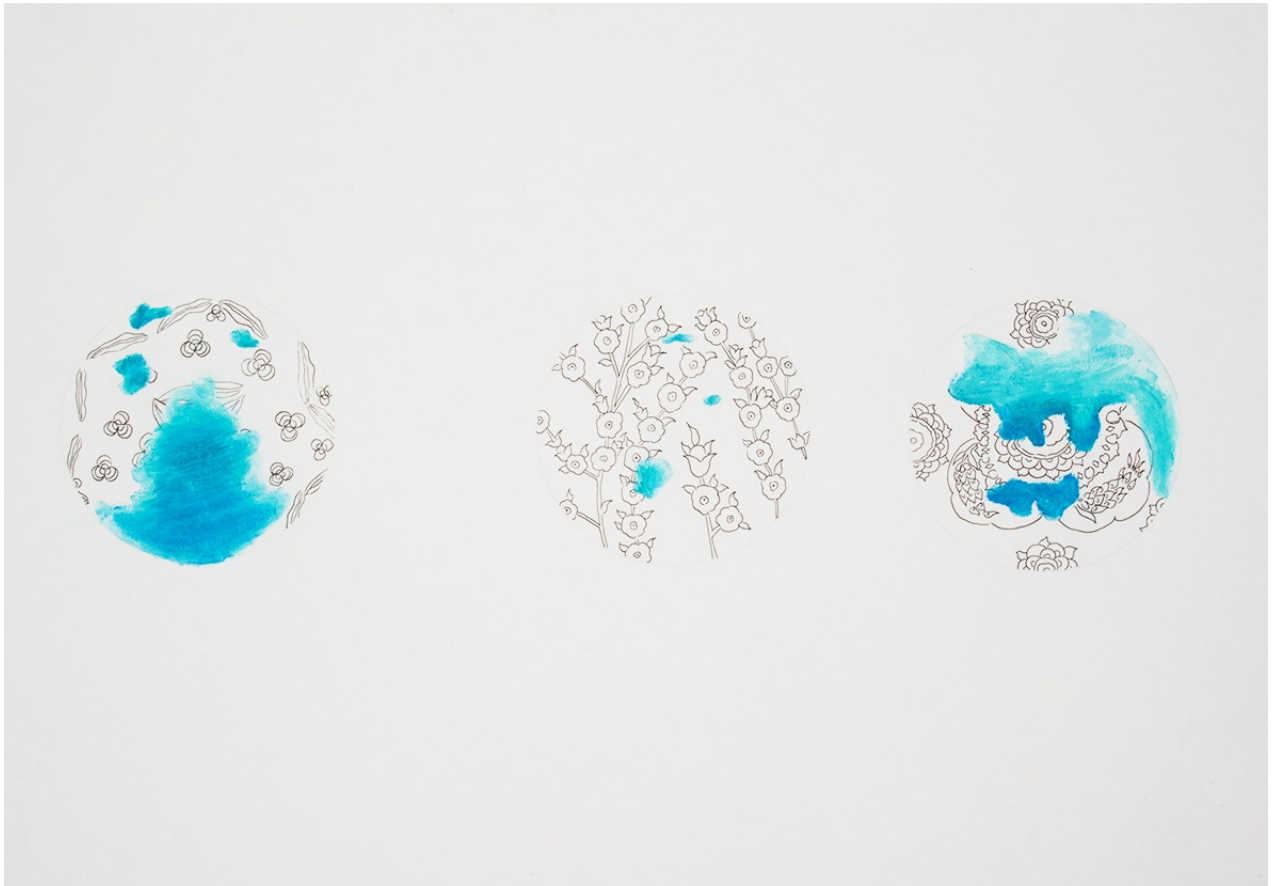


Figure 9 - Meichen Waxer, *Breakwater I*, pen, pastel and pencil, 2015, 10 ½" x.27 ¾". Photo: Meichen Waxer. Image used by permission of the artist.

¹⁰ During the summer of 2015, I was Artist in Residence at Halka Sanat, Istanbul, Turkey generously supported in part by the Turkish Cultural Foundation.

Pivotal to my thesis was an afternoon spent in the home improvement retailer Bauhaus (in Istanbul). Virtually indistinguishable from Home Depot¹¹, the store's aesthetic, signage and layout echoed the North American counterpart almost identically. What impacted me most in this "parallel universe" was the home décor section featuring modern reproductions of what is considered traditional Turkish home décor. During this residency period I produced several drawings and an installation work using imitation brick wallpaper, these works explored the structures and positioning of the ornamentation and décor choices I was, as an outsider, encountering.

This experience brought into focus the contemporary systems at play in the recurrence of traditional applied domestic ornamentation as a global phenomenon, where the players involved shift ever so slightly from place to place. In response, I embarked on several experimental works exploring commercially produced domestic ornamental materials. These experimental works responded to a desire to situate this work in a contemporary economy. Deconstructing, combining and altering the physical state of commercially produced materials complicated my subjectivity to a style in which I viewed as dated. I viewed traditional domestic ornamentation as a previous aesthetic and resonant social system. Recognizing the market for continued reproduction and the reasoning for shifts in material production confronted and muddled my beliefs. As influenced by Latifa Echakhch denying a tidy or singular stance to domestic ornamentation promoted an account and exploration of the personal, the political and historical affect of traditional domestic ornamentation.

¹¹ The Home Depot is an American retailer of home improvement and construction products and services. The Home Depot operates across the United States of America, Canada and Mexico. Founded in 1978 in Marietta, Georgia, USA, with over two thousand locations. Home Depot is a critical space for my research. It straddles both the home décor store, that reproduces materials tied to representations of class. Home Depot is also a store in which raw materials to produce many of these items.
The Home Depot. Retailer. USA, Canada, and Mexico.



Figure 10 - Meichen Waxer, *890 Non-Structural Bricks*, wallpaper and waxed thread, 2015, 13"x9"x1.5".
Photo: Meichen Waxer. Image used by permission of the artist.



Figure 11 - Meichen Waxer, *Provence Blue*, silk velvet and carrara marble, 2015, 7"x 4"x 12". Photo: Meichen Waxer. Image used by permission of the artist.



Figure 12- Meichen Waxer, Aurora Thesis Defense Installation. *Aurora (l)* upholstery fabric and nail, 2015. *Secret Garden (m)*, lace, diffusion fabric, fluorescent lights, wooden dowel, 2016. *Like Countless Men on Horseback (r)*, plaster and bronze, 2016. Photo: Meichen Waxer. Image used by permission of the artist.

This experience was also instrumental in formulating the basis for the three works that made up my thesis defense, *Like Countless Men on Horseback*, *Secret Garden* and *Aurora*. Understanding how I can articulate through materials and gestures a balance between the wider global implications of traditional ornamentation to my personal attachment with these forms and motifs.

*Like Countless Men on Horseback*¹² is a sculptural work consisting multiple casts from a singular ceiling rose; using the polystyrene rose that is to be installed in the home and the vacuum seal plastic packaging. Installed with whole discs piling high, with a cascade of cast and broken fragments of plaster and cast bronze. The ceiling rose¹³ moulding, purchased at Home Depot, is a piece of applied ornamentation that through its continual reproduction and classification of the traditional has lost its specificity and original function. Arjun Appaduari, contemporary social-cultural anthropologist who is a major theorist in globalization studies brings to light the difficulty in locating definitions of socialized objects and commodities.

Few will deny that a commodity is a thoroughly socialized thing. The definitional question is: in what does its sociality consist? The purist answer, routinely attributed to Marx, is that a commodity is a product intended principally for exchange, and that such products emerge, by definition, in the institutional, psychological, and economic conditions of capitalism.

Less purist definitions regard commodities as goods intended for

¹² This title is a response to encountering monuments that seem abstract and have no meaning. In Toronto, the city I grew up close to and in so many of the cities I have visited throughout Europe there are countless statues of men on horseback. These statues representative of a single man and explaining through the foot position of the horses his fate – seem general. In my mind they are a monument to conquest and control. I have given this title to a work of fragmented ceiling moulding since it is a working through ideas of monumentality in domesticity and not a specific monument.

¹³ Ceiling roses are decorative moulding that goes around light fixtures, traditionally chandeliers. The ceiling roses that are available at Home Depot range from simplistic to ornate, echoing modes of ornamentation rooted in a time when they were made of plaster and installed to protect the ceiling from candle smoke. As the function of the ceiling rose is no longer needed, and they are now purely ornamental, it is more practical and cost effective for them to be reproduced in polystyrene.

exchange, regardless of the form of the exchange. The purist definition forecloses the question prematurely. The looser definitions threaten to equate commodity with gift and many other kinds of thing. ... that commodities are things with a particular type of social potential, that they are distinguishable from "products," "objects," "goods," "artifacts," and other sorts of things -but only in certain respects and from a certain point of view. (Appaduari 5).

Like Countless Men on Horseback draws upon socialized material commodity. As Appaduari suggests commodities, which are often physical or tangible items are wrapped up in a network of meanings and a fluid social standing. Thus being socialized creates difference in value and position in relation to those who are exchanging the commodity at any given time or place. This fluidity of commodities is resisted through terminology such as *tradition*, *classic*, or *customary*. *Like Countless Men on Horseback* references continual reproduction resulting in a commodification of plaster discs countered with a desire for a fixed social position of this commodity as realised through the 'immortal' material of bronze. This work speaks to the ornamental domestic material as holding significance and symbolism beyond its immediate or commercial form.



Figure 13 - Meichen Waxer, *Like Countless Men on Horseback* - detail, 2016. Photo: Meichen Waxer. Image used by permission of the artist.

*Aurora*¹⁴ addresses inheritance through the passage of domestic materials. The work is pivoted on the question of: "what do we do with the materials of the past?" Counter to Vo's response of deconstructing representations of the past, as in the work *We The People*, *Aurora* asks if we can face materials of the past without mediation or alteration. *Aurora* consists of upholstery fabric hung on a single nail around five feet from the floor. The work is installed in this manner to present all sides of the material and to allow the materiality of the fabric to come forward. The swath of fabric comes from a specific aesthetic located in a tradition of British colonialism, although it just as easily could be a textile from the Middle East or India. I gather that this motif has gone through the system of

¹⁴ *Aurora* as well as being the name of town I grew up in, is also the name of the Greek goddess of dawn, the name of a cosmic light show as well as tied to ideas of the aura. This piece of fabric was given to me by my mother with a sentiment of perhaps I could do something nice with it. It is a scrap from furniture being reupholstered for the family room. I have named this work *Aurora* in reference to the essence or aura of objects manifested or realised through relationships to place, people, time and history.

colonization in order to be ambiguous and resonate with a "traditional" aesthetic. *Aurora* by its nature is wrapped up in a complex and layered past, the work being modest in scale and display points to a much more innocuous position in the domestic sphere. The work does not answer the question of "what to do"; rather it offers a space to meditate on the impossibility of this task.



Figure 14 - Meichen Waxer, *Aurora*, upholstery fabric and nail, 2015, 2'x5'. Photo: Meichen Waxer. Image used by permission of the artist.

*Secret Garden*¹⁵ is an installation work consisting of lace panels sewn to plastic diffusion fabric hung on long white wooden dowel in front of 8 sets of cold hue fluorescent lights. This work brings together several discrete codes around the staging of domestic space; the plastic speaks to preservation of possession and in extension ideas, the dated but still modern and mechanized lace is aligned with shifts in commerce and availability. The cold fluorescent lights bring to the work a dimension of commercial display and space. When conflated these codes are disharmonious with a singular reading or relationship to the installation. This inability to have a singular read on the work speaks to the complexity of relationships to domestic ornamentation that fuels my research. Isolating the key physical characteristics of a memory to a domestic site delineated the materials and scale for *Secret Garden*. Through appropriating tropes of commercial display I wish to activate a reflexive feedback loop into the devices of staging within and into domesticity. I liken this to how Liz Magor layers sculptural elements of fabricated and found without clear distinction in her presentation. In presenting partial elements outside of domesticity and in the gallery, my work seeks to step away from personal reflections on domesticity into a broader investigation of the prevalence and performance of traditional décor through time and space. Such as Echakhch's *Fantôme*, this work was conceived through recalling a memory of staring through the lace curtains in the parlour in my family home, the sun beaming through and obscuring the surface pattern of the floral lace. This memory, which is a composite of several instances over the years, is indicative of how associations to my family home reinforce that in large part I could not comprehend the home's impact while I occupied its walls. A

¹⁵ *The Secret Garden* is a novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett first published in 1910. I have multiple editions of this book and was fixated on being Mary Lennox as a child. Although Mary Lennox, the protagonist was unloved and neglected, I was fascinated on her journey from India to an English country manor. The play between the oppressive interiority she faced and the longing for an exterior world that was magic. Naming this work after the novel is a nod to a fixation and fictionalizing of space.

richly layered space of ornamentation that has deeply imprinted my psyche has also generated impetus to tease apart not only the specifics of my family home but to delve deeper into the systems of inherited ornamentation and structures present in domesticity more broadly.



Figure 15 - Meichen Waxer, *Secret Garden*, lace, diffusion fabric, fluorescent lights, and wooden dowel, 2016, 96"x84"x16". Photo: Meichen Waxer. Image used by permission of the artist.

Implications

The accumulation of materials, gestures and forms evident in the consumer culture of home decorating provides a point of departure for my thesis research.

The works included and percussing my thesis defense installation seek to address the layered and difficult nature of the traditionally ornamented domestic space. I am keenly interested in the network of associations to the self, class, and history that resonate through the maintenance of applied domestic ornamentation. Snodin and Howard state, "a chief arena of taste and social differentiation, the decoration of the interior, like bodily adornment, has often been a moral battleground" (147). As Yinka Shinobare points to shifts in fashion and art between high and low culture, and class based accessibility; problematizing the fluidic nature of moral associations to ornamentation allows for ambiguity to the works stance towards any one socially constructed ethos. Moving into this difficult terrain, my research and creative works seek to stage opportunities to consider the need to perpetuate and, perhaps unwittingly, preserve a traditional morality within the home. Though sculpture, drawing and installation, I pick apart the organizing structures of the traditional home décor and visual representations. My gestures invite viewers to think through their own understanding of domestic ornamentation as it relates to materiality. These works challenge the everyday aesthetics of ornamental production, reproduction and representation.

The colonial ornamentation and architecture associated with my family's traditional home, the dominant aesthetics I grew up with and learned to appreciate, provide opportunity to explore the breadth of influence and impact of an intimate subject matter. In some ways, it has helped me recognize the embodiment and transfer of countervailing traditions, non-visual understandings, perhaps even aesthetics. My own visual interrogations of how domesticity is staged and restaged borrow from the works of artists such as, Brendan Tang, Yinka Shonibare, Latifa Echakhch, Liz Magor and Danh Võ. In so doing, my research endeavours to situate material and political concerns that of time and place, but also between lived difference, visual codes, and dominant social

practices. Between the parlour and the gallery, Aurora and Vancouver, my home and Emily Carr, these pieces provide a means for re-examining the systems that perpetuate cosmopolitan aesthetics and the troubling globalization of taste and belief: British and Ashkenazi. Questioning how domestic materials, motifs, forms and patterns are handled, appropriated and restaged within domesticity is an integral part of a larger conversation of the maintenance and preservation social systems of power and access.



Figure 16- Katherine and Meichen Waxer, in the dining room of 19 Mosley St., Aurora, Ontario, 1983, image used with permission of the Waxer family

"Although our first encounter of any interior is the result of an entrance into it, a movement from outside to inside, our early and more fundamental experience is of movement from inside to outside, of a sheltered life before we knew an exposed one, for we were all—there can be few exceptions to this—born inside, were babies inside, because our recognizable selves inside a psychologically crucial container. Whatever the nature of this first environment, it was, by definition, residential; before we knew any other space we lived there. However strong our later interest in spaces for commerce or public affairs, for banking or sports or theatre, our feelings for these non-residential interiors will inevitably be colored by our first interior experience, the residential one, to which, in memory or in daydreams or even, often in our subconscious, we return all our lives"
(Abercrombie 5).

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