

LIVING ORGANISMS FOR LIVING SPACES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of materiality and how my work engages it. In line with art historian Edward J. Sullivan, I approach materials as potential objects functioning as cultural signifiers. I explore the idea of material through Monika Wagner's approaches as active matter that is full of energy. That means that materials do not need to be handled by human hands in order to be activated; they have the power to speak by themselves. The selection of materials I make to develop the project focuses on fabrics and garments used in the language of decoration. This decision is driven by my interest and observation of ornamentation in architecture and home decoration.

Through ornamentation I explore the tension I find in the relationship that we have as subjects with culture and nature. In this tension, I scrutinize the need of humans to control almost everything around them. I inspect the actions and signs imbed in ornamentation to exert control. In order to narrow the point of reflection I bring up memories from my Catholic childhood to exemplify the sources of nourishment and support the visual language that I develop.

I draw on Sir Ernst Gombrich in order to illuminate the psychology of the ornamentation and problematize nature-culture dualities. Gombrich remarks that the need for ornamentation is connected with our biological inheritance. Our cognitive system requires ways to order and systematize so as to create states of comfort and tranquility. This *modus operandi* is applied to every aspect of our life. I parallel this need to control with colonialism.

Along with the material exploration and the attempt to disrupt the tendency to order and control, I study Gretchen E. Henderson's approach to the idea of ugliness as "matter out of place", and also to Ernst Jensch's understanding of "the uncanny" as something unusual that causes confusion. These are the strategies and methods I apply to the materials to create uneasiness and alter viewer's perception. Ultimately, my intention is to provoke viewers' curiosity to explore ways of seeing outside of the paradigm that controls them.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The materialization of my work has close ties with my experiences growing up in a culture that emanates visual and material excess. This excess in Colombia can be experienced in the vibrant sights, sounds, and interactions of daily life. I distinguish this experience from the common understanding of excess as material abundance; the excess that I refer to goes beyond a twenty-first-century global context. By taking elements and materials from popular culture in Colombia, I weave together fabrics and garments to visualize this excess.

As I build my inventory of images, I am especially drawn to religious imagery (which is very common, perhaps even ubiquitous in the home decoration culture of Colombia). I am also intrigued by the architecture of Latin American churches built during the colonial period in Latin American Baroque style¹ (fig.2). My fascination with Baroque art and architecture and its appropriation in Latin America directs me to the idea of “ugliness” and its associations with “the grotesque” and “the Uncanny”. Umberto Eco explains:

The baroque period witnessed a growing taste for the extraordinary, for those things that arouse wonder and, in this cultural climate, artists explored the world of violence, death and horror... In this way, Mannerism and the baroque had not fear of using elements that classical aesthetic found irregular (169).

¹ The name “Latin America” is problematic for the reason that it is a vast region with different cultures and traditions. In other words, the regions that make up Latin America cannot be reduced to that name as a whole. For further discussion, see Pablo León De La Barra, “Under De Same Sun: Art from Latin American Today,” (n.d.): n. pag. Web. 28 Apr. 2016. In terms of art, the Latin American Baroque style was developed in the 17th and 18th centuries. Architecture from this period was derived from the European Baroque. There were variations among regions, and many aspects had an effect on the development of the style, such as the colony under influence (e.g., Spanish or Portuguese), the style developed (e.g., Central or South America), the type of materials available, and the aesthetic notions of indigenous tribes that executed the construction.

Baroque art is grounded on the aesthetics of the excess, grotesque, and the asymmetrical break from the classical tradition. My current art practice develops from these principles of rupture, with particular attention to allegorical depictions of fear and vulnerability, the idea of vulnerability affected by not knowing our own nature, the question of ornamentation as a cultural strategy or a biological consequence, and the question of ornamentation as means to reach places of comfort.

I seek to problematize the tensions between culture and nature, particularly in looking at everyday objects. Through the examination of these relationships, I investigate the construction of the often messy matrix of culture-nature.

Artist and designer Koert van Mensvoort writes about the etymology of the word nature and its distinction from culture.² He explains:

The word nature stems from the Latin term, *natura*, which for the Romans *natura* was associated with the notion of 'everything born'. For the past few centuries, our notion of nature has been in line with nature is born, while culture is everything made by man. (12).

² This book is a result of the interdisciplinary project *The Next Nature Network* which explore the changing relation between people, nature and technology. They function as a global think – and design tank that aims to visualize, research and understand the implications of the nature cause by people.

It was the basic understanding and division of born and made that regulated the perception of culture and nature. Today, this dualism has become less significant because of genetic modification, climate control, and other scientific achievements now part of the shift in our perception of “born and made”. “At the same time, man-made systems become so complex and autonomous that we start to perceive them as nature. Hence, our notion of nature and culture seem to be shifting from a distinction between born and made to a distinction between controlled and beyond control” (12). Mensvoort is suggesting that now we are not able to control what we made because these systems that we are creating become as complex as nature. However, the question about our ability to control nature is still open.

I seek to interweave the ideas of excess, ugliness, “the uncanny”, culture, ornament, nature, domestication, and colonialism through the exploration of materiality using decorative daily life objects as material, such as fabrics and garments. These ideas evidence the tensions and ambiguities that I find in the relationship that we have as subjects with culture and nature. I mainly investigate the intrinsic need of human beings to control. This project is an intricate connection between ornamentation, ugliness and domestication as metaphors of colonialism. That connection is translated to the materials to generate an uncanny experience in the viewer.

II. SOURCES OF NOURISHMENT



Fig.1: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Collection of Images from personal inventory*.

My art projects consistently begin with a disarticulated collection of images of objects and non-human living organisms (fig.1). I categorize them into two groups, culture and nature. Rarely do I begin from a preconceived idea or concept, but I have suspicions and intuitions based on my observations. The starting point is a broad inventory of images and experiences that come from the popular culture of my upbringing. These include images of people's clothing and distinctive ornaments, house facades, home decorations, churches, gardens, wildlife and living microorganisms, and images culled from art history, often from Medieval, Baroque and Latin American Baroque.

a. Ugliness and the Uncanny



Fig.2: Juliana Silva Díaz, *La enseñanza church 1772-1778*. Mexico City, 2015.

I remember when I was a child how terrified I felt with the religious iconography that surrounded me—depictions of Jesus in the Passion narrative, the anthropomorphic figures carved in wood and covered with gold, gargoyles carved on stone facades, the disturbing glass eyes and the real human hair used for the Virgin Mary statues, the processions of penitents wearing purple robes and conical purple hats that covered their faces, among other symbolic representations embedded in the culture. All these images were the echo of a culture of excess, and the characteristics of this cultural excess turned from my childhood terror into a visual and material fascination for my artistic investigations. This experience of terror and representation of death in Catholic imagery arouses my curiosity around notions of ugliness.

Novelist, philosopher and semiotician Umberto Eco writes:

It is not accident, in the Late Classical period and above all in the Christian period, that the problem of ugliness become more complex. Hegel puts this very well when remarks

that, with the advent of the Christian sensibility and of the art that conveyed it, central importance is reserved (especially as far as Christ and his persecutors are concerned) for pain, suffering, death, torture, Hell, and the physical deformations suffered both by victims and their tormentors. (History of Beauty 133)

The understanding of pain, suffering and death for the Christian sensibility complicated the traditional reading of “ugliness”; they became virtues and punishments at the same time. The allegorical representations of suffering through physical deformations connoted power and hostility towards God through symbolic means.

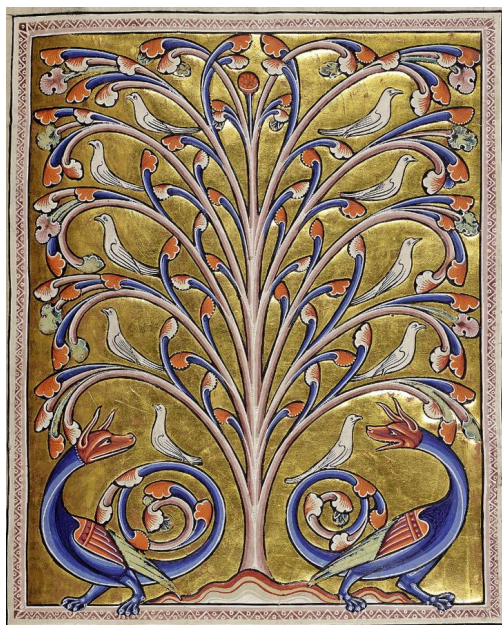


Fig. 3: *The Peridens Tree*. The Oxford Bestiary, Circa, 1220.

My interest in anthropomorphous figures drove me to research the Medieval bestiaries (Fig.3,4) written between the second and fifth centuries AD. The first bestiary was the *Physiologus* that contained a taxonomy of mythical and fantastical creatures, such as Fauns, Androgynies, and Astomori. Some of these hybrid figures looked like snakes with two heads,

half dragon and half goat, half horse and half human, and so on. The representation of monsters, hybrids and anomalies was a mean to represent amorality. These depictions produced discomfort for the unknown and curiosity at the same time.



Fig.4: *Monoceros*. The Ashmole Bestiary, Early 13th century.

Eco remarks that notions of ugliness and beauty are subjective, and may vary depending on the aesthetic notions of the culture and period. Additionally, he claims that “ugliness” is not the opposite of beauty for the reason that aesthetic paradigms are relatives among cultures and time. For example, some Westerners may experience an African ritual mask as unpleasant while an African may interpret it as a compassionate divinity. Similarly, an observer from a non-European religion may be disgusted by an image of Christ bleeding and suffering, while it might induce sympathy and compassion for a Christian. I find this perspective fascinating because it upholds “ugliness” as an ambiguous term. It invites me to explore and question the dominant

discourses of beauty, aesthetic and taste that we have had to negotiate adapting Colombian traditional cultures to the western paradigms. Gretchen E. Henderson writes:

If we follow Aristotle's or Alberti's belief that a beautiful object bears coherence in totality (a sense of ideal form with a distinct boundary between itself and the world), then ugliness and its ilk carry something more ambiguous and less coherent, excessive or in a state of ruin. *Deformed, grotesque, monstrous, degenerate, asymmetric, crooked, bestial, freakish, unruly, disproportionate, handicapped, hybrid*: a litany of related terms have accompanied the evolution of *ugly*, growing in and out of different terms, eras and cultures, left the eye of each beholder. (10)

Taking into account Henderson's quote, ugliness is an ambiguous place. Adjectives like deformed, asymmetric, and hybrid bring to mind ideas like displacement and paradigmatic change. Additionally, Henderson observes that "ugliness" interrupts perception in relation to something else. In short, "ugliness is relational. Constantly reworking the space between subject and object, ugliness resists static configuration and helps us to re-evaluate our shifting perceptions" (13). Henderson's "matter out of place" describes what I want to seek in my work. I put together materials and forms that seem to be out of place. As a result, they both interrupt and provoke curiosity towards abnormality. Ultimately, I aim to make the viewer pause and wonder about that which lies outside of what is perceived as normal.

There is a conscious decision about choosing materials that have a colonial legacy, such as velvet, gold threads and tassels. They were signs of power and wealth, but today these materials speak about decay under the dominant Western paradigm. In the present day, these materials are mass-produced and speak about cultural hybridity. Also, they have a recognizable texture and form that produces certain familiarity. My intention is to interrupt that perception of familiarity, to create a displacement of that matter and produce uncertainty.

“The uncanny” is the term that best fit to what I seek in my work, for it develops a level of curiosity instead of endorsing rejection. On “uncanny,” Eco quotes Ernst Jensch

From a *Psychology of the Uncanny*, defining it as something unusual, which causes ‘intellectual uncertainty’ and which we can’t ‘figure out’. Freud agreed with Jensch that the uncanny was the antithesis of all that is comfortable and tranquil, but remarked that not everything that is unusual is uncanny. (On Ugliness 311)

In that line of thought, the uncanny embodies both the familiar and unfamiliar. This unfamiliarity produces uneasiness and can instill fear in general. What interests me about the uncanny is the ambiguous interpretation that can produce rejection and attraction at the same time, and invite to see from different points of view. This ambiguity is where I want to position my practice and my interest as an artist. I am interested in the liminal spaces, in the borders where it is hard to categorize, name and order.

Umberto Eco gives an example of an uncanny experience, which helps me to explain what kind of experience I seek in my work:

A history of ugliness cannot avoid tackling that form of ugliness we shall call situational. Let’s imagine we find ourselves in a familiar room, with a nice lamp sitting on the table: suddenly, the lamp floats upward into mid-air. The lamp, the table and the room are still the same, none of them has become ugly, but the situation has become disturbing. (On Ugliness 311)

I wish to capture the attention of my audience creating a troubling experience for them that is close to what I experienced in my daily life in Colombia, which sometimes is disturbing. It is a mix of fear and fascination. It is the edge of what is known and unknown, familiar and unfamiliar. It is beyond the notion of coherence and totality that Aristotle and Alberti located notions of the beautiful. This experience of “the Uncanny” speaks to my own struggle in

negotiating paradigms of popular culture in Latin America and Western. Gretchen E. Henderson, explains: “Ugliness provoke us to re-evaluate cultural borders, including bodies that have been included and excluded, to question our own place in the mix”. (Henderson 13) I speak in terms of this conflictive binary relationship between West/Latin America for the reason that Colombia was built in relation to a Western paradigm. My intention is to unveil subtle acts of domination, resistance, and ultimately negotiation embedded in culture. I decided to give voice to the materials—they are artefacts that become witnesses, and they are present in our daily lives and in our domesticity. Materials are observers of the exchange between subjects and objects; they allow me to speak about what is unnoticed because they are deeply rooted, silent, and potent. They spread and proliferate like bacteria.

b. Materiality

Materiality is the entry point of my work. There is a fascination with the tactility of the material and the experience of that tactility through a visual sense. In my work, I deliberately use materials that are designed for functional purposes in our daily life. These materials have the potential to function within culture as objects. I understand objects as operating on two levels that are not necessarily hierarchical: 1) the objects placed in a symbolic level and 2) the objects as elements that are made by active matter.

When I speak about objects on a symbolic level, I mean that objects have a cultural role, function and meaning. Art historian Edward J. Sullivan asserts:

My own approach to the study of art history has always been rooted in a deep interest in a reverence for 'the object'. Studying, analyzing, and understanding things, and using them as starting points for discussion of social, political, religious, or theoretical reading of their meaning, in one of the basic tenets of the discipline of art history³. (XVI)

In other words, Sullivan claims that examining the meaning of material things offers information that allows us to penetrate and understand cultural transmissions, values and beliefs.

I have come to understand materiality as an essential element in my work that is activated not only by my manipulation of it, but by its inherent physical properties. Each material has its structure and components that change in appearance, form, and function in shifting cultural paradigms. Monika Wagner writes:

In general, material, unlike matter, refers only to natural and artificial substances intended for further treatment. The substances and objects that constitute material are subject to transformation through processing, and hence they reveal information about the forces of production at the time, or a specific historical technique." (26)

Wagner points to the emergence of "material" as beyond unformed and elemental substance, as an entity that has inherent value and potential without human technological intervention. Wagner distinguishes "matter" from "material", where material becomes a (relatively recent) aesthetic category. She states:

³ For further discussion about the analysis of objects within culture, see Sullivan, Edward J. *The Language of Objects in the Art of the Americas*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2007. Print.

The current debate about material in cultural studies derived momentum from Jean-François Lyotard's Paris exhibition "Les immatériaux" in 1985... It asks questions about how the technical development of information systems changed perceptions about the materiality of things. The affected interests reach deep into everyday life and popular culture, because as a consequence of these advances in media technology, hand in hand with widely discussed ideas about extensions to the physical body and ubiquitous surveillance the world appears to have forfeited its material differences... (26)

What directed my attention to this quote is the recent change of perception towards materiality, which explains my decisions to choose daily life and popular culture objects as material.

Petra Lange-Berndt points to a new materialism that was not explored before and invites a re-think of the material not as inert matter placed in a low hierarchy, rather as full of energy and life.⁴ This re-thinking of the category of material informs my understanding of our material existence as a species as well as hierarchical relationships established between matter, materials, objects, and organisms. When applied to my research, this reconsideration of materiality directs me to explore objects at both macro and micro levels, with a particular awareness towards the elemental compositions and microstructures hidden to passive observers. In works such as *Specimens* (Fig.8,9,10), *Fungi* (Fig.11), and *Anomalies* (Fig. 15), I employ velvet or lace in order to comment on the implications of materials made with polyester. More specifically, I bring these materials into dialogue with the symbolic meanings that those fabrics already have. I pause to reflect on the mismatching perception of an ordinary object when moving from a macro to a micro visualization. It makes me question how our self-

⁴For further discussion about new materialism, see Lange-Berndt, Petra. *Materiality*. London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015. Print.

perceptions change. Does it affect our *sense* of vulnerability? Does it challenge other systems of thought and hierarchies?

While I was immersed in my research, I was captivated by the colors red, purple and green. These colors reminded me of the statues of the Virgin Mary, furniture upholstery in working class homes, and evening gown dresses popular among girls in Colombia. Historically, velvet's high cost made it accessible only to nobility and the ecclesiastical community⁵. If velvet once signified royal and religious power—and it still has some residual meaning—it has increasingly come to signify power in decay⁶.

J. Sullivan, in *The language of objects in the art of the Americas*, analyzes material culture of the Latin American society during the Colonial Period to understand its circumstances and aspirations. Specifically, he analyzes paintings from this period that represent everyday objects and commodities (including textiles and ornaments) – objects that are “fashioned by American hands and used in the context of the Americas⁷” (Sullivan 57). Among the artifacts that Sullivan looks at, I am particularly struck by Andean paintings that depict wooden statues of the Virgin Mary⁸.

⁵ For more information about the introduction of velvet in Latin America during colonial period (1500-1800) see Peck, Amelia, and Amy Elizabeth Bogansky. *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500-1800*. n.p.: New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, [2013], 2013.

⁶ Velvet is a mass-produced material, largely due to the introduction of synthetic fibres, and has lost its symbol of exclusivity.

⁷ When J. Sullivan writes American hands, he refers to people from Central and South America.

⁸ Andean painting refers to paintings made in the region which is today Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia.

The introduction of velvet fabric in Latin America began with the exposure of indigenous people to Catholicism. The Catholic Church was one of the most important consumers of sumptuary objects, and velvet was highly sought. The collection of these sumptuary objects was in full display and in excess, especially during the ritual processions of Easter. People carried statues of the Virgin Mary adorned not only with clothing made with velvet and threads of gold, but also with human hair and glass eyes to enhance their physicality.

From these wooden statues were derived paintings, which became inspiring images to my work. One of those images is *The Virgin Mary of the Cerro Rico of Potosi*, (Unknown artist, oil on canvas, Bolivia, 18th) which is a representation of those wooden statues of the Virgin Mary. The image combines a representation of the Cerro Rico in Potosi, Bolivia with the face of the Virgin Mary and the dress hides the mountain (Cerro Rico) that the native people used to worship. There are several aspects that move me to hold that image as an inspiring referent. First, the dress of the Virgin seems to be velvet which works as evidence of a sign of power. Second, the dress of the Virgin Mary depicts both dress and mountain at the same time, an example of syncretism⁹. *Our Lady of the Victory of Malaga*, (Luis Niño, Oil on canvas, 1735) is another depiction of wooden statues rich in patterning and ornamentation. In his discussion of syncretism, Sullivan says “we could also describe these images as representing devotion of resistance, a statement of affirmation and persistence of the old rituals while conforming, at least nominally, to the tenets of the new faith” (66). I am intrigued by syncretism because it is understood by some scholars as a subtle act of resistance. These negotiations are often seen

⁹ Syncretism: the combination of different forms of belief or practice. "Syncretism." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 29 Jan. 2017.

inside the culture I come from, but I continue to observe echoes of them in the objects of daily life. I choose materials that convey these ambiguities such as class and tensions between high and low culture. The contradiction of logic and the layered resonance of these syncretic moments in the culture of my childhood continue to fuel my investigations of common materials.

Many contemporary Latin American artists comment on the complex social and political realities resulting from both colonial and contemporary histories. Some of them speak directly about traumatic political and social situations in which countries such as Colombia have been involved for an extended period. Though my work is not overtly political, the post-colonial context is a backdrop. I attempt to magnify particular actions where the encounter of two forces merge. Cuban art historian and critic Gerardo Mosquera¹⁰ remarks:

The postmodern tendency to break down the divisions between “cultured” and popular has opened the doors to a re-evaluation of indigenous cultures, and to the vernacular in general. (...) Several artists and critics have expressed their astonishment at the syncretism and spontaneity of urban popular culture, which has become an icon for the new paradigms of appropriation, resignification and hybridization. (14)

I am interested in syncretic forms in my daily experience at a micro level. I find them significant and elusive acts of resistance, as well as indications of resilience.

¹⁰ For more information about Mosquera, Gerardo. *Beyond The Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism From Latin America*. n.p.: London: The Institute of International Visual Arts; Cambridge, Mass. : The MIT Press, 1996., 1996.

c. Ornamentation and our biological inheritance

I am interested in decorative objects made from fabrics, patterns used to decorate fabrics, and fabric as object (fig.6,7). I recognize that there is a tendency for human beings to seek order and it is revealed in our inclination towards the ornamentation. This idea is explained by Sir Ernst Gombrich in his book *The Sense of Order: A Study of the Psychology of the Decorative Arts*. Gombrich is an art historian well known for his major work *Art and Illusion*, a research in the psychology of perception.

I was intrigued by the logic of the ornamentation and the relationship of ornament with culture and nature. Historically, human beings have used ornament for ritual, differentiation of class, and seduction. Gombrich explains that ornaments that we can find in nature, such as camouflage patterns and conspicuous marks in animals and plants, accomplish a specific function rooted in biology and evolutionary forces(fig.5) (e.g. protection and reproduction). He notes that a sense of order exists in nature which also applies to human beings. Humans need to create certain regularity and that is why we create systems. The tendency of our brain is to order and to optimize work.¹¹ The organism needs to determine whether a thing is a source of nourishment or danger, and take the correct action.

¹¹ Gombrich connects order with perception. He goes on to claim that humans require a minimum sense of order and create rhythms and cycles in order to achieve tranquility. (Gombrich 6) The author adds that organisms with the purpose of surviving should be equipped to solve two basic problems. They must answer What? and Where?



Fig.5: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Anemone*, personal inventory, 2013.



Fig. 6: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Wrapping paper*, laser print on bond paper, dimensions variable, 2015.

In order to react they must have already a cognitive system that helps them. (Gombrich 3). In other words, he is suggesting that humans find in decoration solutions to their inherent sense of order. Gombrich argues that a sense of order exists which is expressed in every design style, which he thinks is rooted in our biological inheritance and that is why our perception tends to order.



Fig.7: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Cushion*, inkjet print on metallic paper, 12"x20",2015.

I find it intriguing that the appropriation of images from nature to create patterns and ornaments follows the logic of the sense of order that Gombrich proposes. That is to say, the cultural interpretation of nature is a response to a biological demand. As Gombrich puts it:

The arrangement of elements according to similarity and difference and the enjoyment of repetitions and symmetry extend from the string of beads to the layout of the page in front of the reader, and, of course, beyond to the rhythms of movement, speech and music, not to mention the structures of society and the systems of thought. (X).

This suggests that the tendency to order is reflected in many levels of our lives, even in those that are not tangible. Moreover, Gombrich points out that “the world which man has made for himself is, as a rule, a world of simple geometric shapes, from the book my reader holds in his hand to nearly all the features of our artificial environment”. (5) To understand some aspects about the psychology of ornament gives me clues to materialize my intention of disrupting and challenging my own tendency to order.

III. DISRUPTING DECORATIVE FUNCTIONS

One experimental process in this project was to find ways to disrupt the decorative functions of the materials (fabrics and garments) that were used. The treatment I give to works like *Fungi* (Fig.11) seeks to create a “misbehavior” of the material; to make the material function in unexpected ways. The misbehavior I refer to might be interpreted as a symbolic act of resistance. These acts proliferate along with my work and become more conscious.

a. Specimens

“Each creature is an organic entity which only reveals itself completely in its interior time of expression”.

*Lygia Clark, Creatures, 1960*¹²

These aforementioned fields of inquiry come together to inform my body of work titled *Specimens* (Fig.8,9,10). This photographic work was produced at a residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity during the summer of 2016. *Specimens* are photographs of hand-made “stuffed” objects, covered with polyester velvet, lamé gold and drapery mesh. These objects are inspired by the microbiological shapes found in electron microphotography that magnify and reveal detailed structures of smaller organisms. I made three kinds of velvet spheres, red, gold and purple, all of them are wrapped by a grid green mesh. Gold threads grow from some of the spheres giving the appearance of hair follicles. My goal was to mimic microbial forms using a language of decoration and embellishment that comes from memories of my

¹² For more information see Ramos, Filipa. *Animals*. London: Whitechapel Gallery, The MIT, 2016. Print.



Fig. 8: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Specimens (image 1)*, inkjet print on enhance matte paper, 32" x 32" 2016

Catholic childhood. I sought to imbue a certain oddity in the images; to achieve this, it was important to magnify the details of these “microscopic” images, and to choose to print them at larger-than-actual size. The details of the fabric and decorative elements of these objects were intended to produce a feeling of ambiguity for the viewer.

Some of the intentions I pursue in *Specimens* are close to the *Gothic Works* of Wim Delvoye. This body of work focused on the artist’s fascination with decoration and patterns, but his strategy is to disrupt the comfortable expectation of order and everyday perception. *Days of the week* is a set of seven pieces made with steel, x-rays photographs, lead and glass. They have the appearance of traditional gothic stained glass windows, but the imbedded images are x-ray photographs of human skeleton and intestines. Art critic Gerardo Mosquera writes about Delvoye’s work: “If Andy Warhol legitimated objects and images from popular culture into “high art”, Delvoye symbolically “elevates” plebeian objects by applying “high” culture ornaments on them¹³.” (Subversive Beauty 19) With *Specimens*, I seek to alter the perception of the viewer, inviting them to contemplate the function and nature of the objects represented in the images. *Specimens* appear ambiguous because they do not seem to be clearly functional or decorative objects. I intend to dislocate their function in order to produce uncertainty and unease in the viewer. Mosquera remarks, “Ornaments are supposed to enhance objects, but their overabundance and incongruence can parasite objects to the point of nullifying their identity...”

¹³ Mosquera, Gerardo. "Subversive Beauty." *Wim Delvoye*. N.p., n.d. Web

(Subversive Beauty 20) I am interested in the loss of the functional purpose as well as the decorative function of objects in order to create an enigmatic piece.



Fig. 9: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Specimens (image 2)*, inkjet print on enhance matte paper, 32" x 32" 2016.



Fig. 10: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Specimens (image 3)*, inkjet print on enhance matte paper, 32" x 32" 2016.

b. Fungi

“The dividing line between nature and culture is difficult to draw. When a bird builds a nest, we call it nature, but when a human puts up an apartment building, suddenly it's culture. Some try to sidestep the problem by claiming that everything is nature, while others claim that nature is only a cultural construction”

Koert Van Mensvoort, *Next Nature*.

Prior to the process of making *Fungi* (Fig. 11,12, 13), my initial interest in ornament and pattern began with aesthetics. Once I considered the potential connection between ornamentation and human tendency to seek order, I began exploring ways to disrupt the conventional function of ornamentation. I now explore the question of ornamentation as a cultural strategy or a biological consequence.

The name of the piece makes reference to the category of microbes called fungi. The process to make the piece mimics the growth of mold – a type of fungus. I aim to create a dialogue among the wide array of elements that inform my work: ornamentation, excess, Catholic imagery, Latin American Baroque, our human tendency to seek order, and my intent to disrupt the code of domesticity that these fabrics suggest.



Fig.11: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Fungi*, drapery lace and lamé, dimensions variable, 2017. Installation view, Thesis Exhibition, Emily Carr University, Concourse Gallery, 2017.



Fig.12: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Fungi*, drapery lace and lamé, dimensions variable, 2017. (Detail).

Fungi is a piece that looks like a curtain with two layers of fabric – one in lace, the other in lamé – installed in the middle of the space hanging from the ceiling, that allows the viewer to walk around it. The lace has a floral pattern and its formation is based on geometric shapes. I pull the gold lamé through the tiny holes of the lace, using the fabrics in unexpected ways, and perhaps enabling the two fabrics to “misbehave.”



Fig.13: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Fungi*, drapery lace and lamé, dimensions variable, 2017. (Detail).

Fungi, is made with white polyester drapery lace and gold lamé. This kind of fabric is commonly used for curtains or tablecloths, very popular in Colombia for being inexpensive and resilient; it is also prevalent in working class home decoration (Fig.14). Polyester lace is a resilient and

affordable fabric, and even though the material doesn't have the status of more expensive fabrics, visually it performs the same job that a more expensive one does.



Fig. 14: Juliana Silva Diaz, Polyester lace tablecloth in Buenaventura's Public Market, Colombia, 2013.

The idea of ornament as an indicator of class has been explored in the works of Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão. In her paintings, she has represented highly ornamented Portuguese tiles. These tiles were commonly used to decorate bourgeois houses during the colonial period in Brazil. In her piece *Ruins*, she paints a fake ruin wall with beautiful tiles, but on the sides of the wall there is a volume that emerges and appears to be flesh. According to Varejão "Flesh serve as a metaphor for unfinished time... and represent the imminent time of the decomposition"¹⁴ (Frerot 104).

My research is about material and its potential for transformation, instead of being about sculpture as a medium. I am attracted to fabric because of its intrinsic qualities of transformation. Fabric exists in one state, but always becomes something else. It is flat, but it

¹⁴ For more information see Frérot, Christine. "Adriana Varejão: Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art." *Art Nexus* 3.57 (2005): 104-105.

can acquire multiple forms. The latent state of fabrics makes me feel an impulse for transforming them into something else. They accomplish many functions such as clothing and household decoration (curtains, tablecloths, blankets, upholstery among others), but primarily they are used for covering and protecting objects or the body. I challenge that function in my work.

c. Anomalies

My work *Anomalies* (fig.15,16,18), which I presented in my thesis defense, is a result of my research on the ideas of control and vulnerability. I approach these topics from three perspectives. These are the cultural and symbolic object, materiality, and self-reflection on our existence and behavior as humans.

Anomalies is a set of two boxes wrapped with drapery lace positioned on the wall. The boxes contain objects made with both fabrics and garments. The first box contains objects made with red velvet and gold threads that hang from the box; the second box contains pieces made with green fringe and tassels pulled through the mesh of the lace. In both boxes the objects suggest that they want to grow and exceed the limits of their containers, producing a deformation of their containers.



Fig.15: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Anomalies*, drapery lace, velvet, gold threads, fringe, 21"x17"x8", 2017.

My intention was to create pieces that generate certain familiarity because the treatment of the materials still allows the viewer to recognize them, although the final form produces confusion. The lace was placed intentionally to make the observation of what is inside more challenging. Additionally, in order to complicate the experience, I made forms that suggest organic shapes to reference nature. These include plants, sea creatures, living microorganisms, and organs.



Fig.16: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Anomalies*, drapery lace, velvet, gold threads, fringe, 21"x17"x8", 2017.

Gestures that I applied to the pieces, such as the tumors that deform the boxes or the material that was pulled out through the mesh, became gestures to alter perception. These gestures are an invitation to re-evaluate the cultural borders and to re-think our bodies in terms of the included and the excluded.



Fig.17: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Anomalies*, drapery lace, velvet, gold threads, fringe, 21"x17"x8", 2017. (Detail)

The decisions about materials also play an important role. Materials are cultural signifiers that speak about cultural borders, crosses, appropriation and hybridity. The materials are familiar to us, commonly used in domestic spaces, but they are doing a different job than what they were designed for.

In this work, the experience of the uncanny that I want to translate to the viewer aligns with Eco's position on the concept:

The intellectual uncertainty between the real and the imaginary dominates throughout. Callois wrote the uncanny aspect of the fantastic appears in a culture in which people no longer believe in miracles, and everything should be explainable according to the laws of nature, and so time cannot be turned back, and individual cannot be in two places at the same time, objects cannot come to life, people and animals have different characteristics, and so on. (On Ugliness 320)

The uncanny in my work can be experienced by the way I challenge the viewer's perception, which increasingly relies on an understanding of the laws of nature and the access we have to scientific knowledge. Therefore, *Anomalies* plays with the idea of both natural and cultural curiosity. This work was also inspired by the cabinets of curiosities that proliferated in the 16th and 17th centuries when people was fascinated by peculiar shapes and patterns from nature. Marion Endt-Jones, in her Essay *Coral in Art and Culture: A monstrous Transformation*, gives us an example of the Medici Cabinet of curiosities: "According to its inventory, the Medici collection in Florence contained a branch of coral that continued to grow a potentially ever-expanding, excessive, infinite object that eternally defied categorization and aroused both fear and fascination"¹⁵. (29) The intrigue I felt in encountering images of the cabinets of curiosities of the 16th and 17th century and bestiary images of the 14th century interweaved with the notion of ugliness of different eras as the materialization of the unknown. The two influences dovetail in my own imagination, and I see in them a parallel to the present day unknown world of microscopic imagery.

¹⁵ For more info see Marion Endt-Jones. *Coral in Art and Culture: A monstrous Transformation*. In Wertheim, Margaret, and Christine Wertheim. *Crochet Coral Reef: A Project*. Los Angeles: Institute for Figuring, 2015. Print.



Fig.18: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Anomalies*, drapery lace, velvet, gold threads, fringe, 21"x17"x8", 2017.



Fig.19: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Anomalies*, drapery lace, velvet, gold threads, fringe, 21"x17"x8", 2017. (Detail)

Anomalies is a poetic commentary about containment, control, domestication and human vulnerability. The creatures inside the boxes are expanding beyond the limits of the containers that house them. Although there is not a direct violence between the content and the container, forces are colliding and merging. For example, the lace that establishes the limits of the box is both stretching and resisting—the pieces inside are coming out and pushing the border of the container. *Anomalies*, like the cabinet of curiosities, denotes a desire of having nature under control, a piece of wilderness or a taste of abnormality in the safe surrounding of our living room.



Fig.20: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Project Living organisms for living spaces*, Thesis Exhibition Installation Shot, Emily Carr University Concourse Gallery 2017.



Fig.21: Juliana Silva Diaz, *Project Living organisms for living spaces*, Thesis Exhibition Installation Shot, Emily Carr University Concourse Gallery 2017.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This project has lead me to places I could have never anticipated. One of the most important discoveries of my practice was my engagement of materiality. A significant outcome was the realization that my practice is led by an inner dialogue with the materials. I explored them from different perspectives: cultural signifiers, links to human use, and organic processes.

I approach materiality using quiet materials and gestures embedded within culture. As a matter that shares the same raw materials as human beings. The small things that I make are material evidence of my belonging to this world. The organic processes to which living organisms are subjected (birth, growth and decay) are represented in my work. Specifically, they are a reminder of our own vulnerability as humans. The materials I choose to work with are intimately connected to personal responses to materiality in the contemporary world.

One of the intentions of my work is to alter viewer perception by placing the viewer intentionally in a position of unease and thereby provoking an experience of not knowing. The interplay of familiarity and unfamiliarity that I apply to fabrics and garments is the strategy I use to approach the uncanny. This uncanniness and awkwardness I achieve in my art pieces become the disrupting gesture of viewer's perception. The embodiment of the uncanny is a way to present the experience of growing up in a place like Colombia that has been marginal in the construction of western dominant discourses but shaped by them. However, I do not intend to create a discourse of victims and villains. I seek to problematize the experience of daily life, in its subtleties and nuances. My goal is to confront viewers with other experiences of

life, to question their own borders and to open their curiosity to explore ways of seeing outside of the paradigm that controls them.

In that sense, the gestures I make to materialize this project such as the entanglement between fabrics, the wrapping of the pieces with lace, the suggestion of alive organisms trying to grow and come out, the repetitive actions of pulling out fabric through tiny holes of a decorative mesh, the creatures I make with gold threads and gold fabrics attempting to hide their anomalies, among other gestures, are poetic actions that generate for viewers a confrontation with their own nature.

Additionally, these gestures are inspired by the allegorical depictions of fear and vulnerability of the Baroque Period. I entangle them with my work to draw a parallel with the present and also to make a poetic commentary about our contemporary fears hidden in the ornamental function of drapery lace, velvet, upholstery tassels and gold threads.

The uncanny, excess, and ugliness are the influences and the visual strategies I approach to develop my project. I am engaged with them because they reflect my intentions and are in line with Henderson's concept of ugliness as "matter out of place". My intention to alter viewer perception is an invitation to occupy a marginal space and confront the complexities of other social realities and other aesthetics. My process of thinking is mainly focused on finding tension and ambiguities, I am invested in questions that do not have an straight forward answer. I take advantage of my position as artist and my privilege and ability to doubt, to negotiate and to

problematize the ambiguities of complex cultural fields. Fundamentally, I examine the human need to control.

I turned to my personal narrative to understand the legacy of the colonial past. I took cultural objects related with that legacy I analyzed them and from there I chose to work with fabrics and garments. These materials were associated with a language of ornamentation, then I observed ornamentation played an important role to establish power and domination in that colonial past. My investigation of ornamentation raises questions about the ornament as both a cultural strategy and biological consequence. This research gave me the tools to intertwine implicit signifiers of materials used in domestic decoration as old signs of power and pushed me to develop the idea of creating a hypothetical ecosystem of cultural signifiers. I used the sense of domestication of nature as the metaphor to speak about control. Works such as *Fungi* and *Anomalies* are my gestures to navigate among ambiguities and tensions. I am challenged by ornamentation as an opportunity to investigate the tension between aesthetic strategy and biological response.

Today's laws of nature are well explained by science, but still we have a lot to discover that can change our perceptions and paradigms. When I try to unpack how culture operates I cannot separate it from behaviors that seem to be embedded in our own nature. I still find the relationship between culture and nature a messy one that keeps me interested in continuing to problematize our human condition.

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