

**QUOTIDIAN BLINDNESS: FINDING COMMONALITIES THROUGH THE
OVERLOOKED**

By

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I outline my research project that investigates how everyday materials and consumables from the quotidian help us to understand who we are and how we fit into the communities we are a part of. My thesis questions include: As an Indigenous woman how can I unpack how subjectivity and identity are constructed through understanding my own identity as well as others? Why are objects and the things that we consume in our lives often overlooked? How can we interpret what they signify, and what commonalities do they reveal between us?

Throughout this paper I consider my own identity as an adopted Indigenous woman and discuss the intricacies of identity and subjectivity and how these topics are continually being pieced together throughout our lives. I delve into contemporary artists and writers who explore concepts around identity and how we relate to others as a means to support this discussion.

Through referencing writers and artists from the past and present, I discuss the significance of serendipitous moments that occur around us on a day-to-day basis. I define the everyday in relationship to my process, and consider what it means to concentrate on unnoticed items and how this informs my practice.

I follow with a section about storytelling and how it is tied to my research and my completed artworks. Writing informs every step of my practice and helps me to contextualize the environments that I occupy and critically question how they operate socially.

This thesis defines a practice that strives to learn how the communities that we occupy collectively share more than just the landscape. We hold connections together through our own subjectivity and identity that is assembled through commonplace objects and consumable items from our everyday environments. I am advocating for the power of these overlooked ties in society as they transcend the power structures and social positions we hold.

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my late Poppa, Bernard Cordingley, who always supported and cheered on my interest in the arts.

INTRODUCTION: Everyday Objects

As an artist, I am interested in quotidian objects from daily life – things that we interact with, use and consume that are often unnoticed. These things are place-markers; they hold value that others have put onto them, and they give us insight into our own identity and the communities that we take part in. These are items such as a set of keys, a lone Doritos chip, a soiled empty cardboard box, a moving blanket, a plaid shirt, a fried chicken drumstick, or a bottle cap. Through my work, I examine and re-articulate everyday objects¹, routines and communities, considering ways in which we can find common ground regardless of who we are and where we come from.

In creating my artwork, I observe, collect and analyze how and why we interact with everyday things. I wonder how leftover pizza in a Ziploc bag can be representational of the person who carries and consumes it. From my point of view, a plaid shirt points to physical labour and outdoor activities. I am interested in analyzing my experiences at places like a local curling rink, so I can get a better understanding of the cultural norms of the area and how gender roles are at play with this. These examples demonstrate the importance of understanding the mundane and how it is crucial to my research in how we build onto our own subjectivity and identity. The consideration of food is also key to my work; we interact with it on a daily basis and it is central to bringing people together and understanding one another. Through my own research, items and consumables from the quotidian help us to understand more intricate issues: societal norms, social positions, class structure, race politics and gender roles. Banal objects are an extension of us and we give them agency – they are the building blocks of who we are and how we relate to others.

¹ I recognize that this term has ties to Marxism but I am using it throughout this paper to speak to mundane items, materials and consumables that we interact with on a day-to-day basis.

I feel that it is through our own constructed language with everyday items that we discover how entangled we are with them. From when we are young, we interact with objects and start to build our own language with them. After many collected experiences we understand ourselves and the world around us through these things. The items, foods, and fabrics we choose to use, consume and wear signify things in our lives that are important in contributing to our perspective and constitutive to our identity. My paper will begin by exploring my own identity as an Indigenous woman in relationship to the complexities of identity as a whole, and will consider how objects and certain materials act as a reflection of our own unique point of view. I will then focus on the quotidian and how it is shown in my artwork in order to consider the importance of not overlooking common banal objects and happenings. I will follow with a dialogue about how my written stories are used as a tool and how it is significant to all stages of my process, including a discussion of artists and writers that influence my process and practice. I conclude with a reflection about my graduate exhibition/defense on my thesis topic, and a speculation of where I will head in the future while still holding onto my interest in mundane items, identity, the quotidian and storytelling.

CHAPTER 1

Subjectivity + Identity: Occupying the Grey Area

Identity is complex, ever changing and often troubling, particularly from my subject position as an adopted Indigenous woman. In both research and practice, I focus on how identity cannot easily be pinpointed, and how this is formed through intersubjective relations and experiences. The area we live in, the people we interact with, and the things we use are all aspects that contribute to our identity and how we understand ourselves within the world. As a First Nations woman adopted into a Caucasian family, I have been exploring my own perspective and identity throughout my practice and academic journey. I chose to exist in an in-between space in the world because I need to understand how identity is often muddied and cannot be clearly located. I feel it is important to state this because my own subjective position informs the artwork I make and how I understand those around me. I have purposely chosen to stand in this 'grey area' to show my audience that identity is not defined easily and is in a constant state of change.

In Marcia Crosby's essay, *Construction of the Imaginary Indian* she explains the concepts of the 'Imaginary Indian' and 'otherness'. Crosby expands on how indigeneity was constructed through a complex history within Canada. Her essay starts by explaining how 'difference' is viewed within academia and the hardships she faced while in university which further complicated her own understanding of her identity (278). Crosby paints a picture of the 'Imaginary Indian' built through Colonialist discourse to explain First Nations people within arts and social sciences:

"I was beginning to question what I would later identify as the construction of 'nature' and its place in the order of Western colonial patriarchy. At the time, I felt only the discomfort of being

wedged between the limits of who my professor thought I was and what that person was capable of accomplishing” (279).

Crosby writes that people in society had a renewed interest in Aboriginal culture that in turn helped to propel certain First Nations people to enter the arena of art². This essay has been vital for my research in understanding the history around Indigenous identity within western Canada, and it is through my art making that I want to show that our own identity does not need to be tied down so tightly. I want to intentionally blur boundaries, or shift how people consider who they are and how they understand others, causing them to enter into a ‘grey area’ where binaries do not exist. I believe that it is important to be fluid in how subjectivity and the world around us can evolve over time. Through my artwork I want to inspire my audience to look beyond ‘otherness’ and stereotypes to appreciate that there is more underneath the surface when understanding who someone else is. There are other uncontrollable factors at play when constructing subjectivity and identity, things such as the country we were born into, the government and laws put into place, and the culture norms of our society. I would like my audience to recognize the unnoticed items that surround us in our day-to-day lives because they echo who we are and how we situate ourselves within our own communities.

In Sherry Turkle’s *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* she explores our obsession and love of objects through various non-fiction stories. Each author tells a story about an item that affected them with a deeper personal meaning. In the forward written by Turkle she describes the practice of bricolage in relation to objects – combining a set of materials to produce new ideas (4). Bricolage is used in my creative practice by writing my own stories and combining different objects together to pursue new ideas in my artwork. Turkle was also concerned with how deeply connected we are to objects and what they can do for us:

² During her time at university, Crosby researched artists who presented positive images of Aboriginal people, including: Paul Kane, Emily Carr, and Bill Reid. Through critiquing these different artists, Crosby exposes their troubling points of view and subject matter they chose by depicting First Nations people and their culture (296).

“We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought. The notion evocative objects brings together these two less familiar ideas, underscoring the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things. We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with” (Turkle 5).

There is an ease and familiarity in the things we interact with and consume on a day-to-day basis, and I want to highlight these in my artwork. Through my ongoing research, I want to showcase the creature comforts that we use or consume while in private and public spaces. I strive to explore how certain materials are put onto a pedestal and others become disposable; this line exists haphazardly and can also become easily blurred.

As an interdisciplinary artist, my medium of choice is textiles, and more specifically, found fabrics³. I also dry-needle felt, paint, draw, write stories, and use ready-made objects throughout my process and in my finished works. The intersection between the found materials and text that I use in my art helps to push my concepts to the forefront. My fabrics are usually found at second hand stores because I am invested in what ‘found’ materials can embody. From my own perspective, a blue and green plaid shirt helps me to reference a working class man, whereas a Pepto Bismal pink cotton knit is a reminder of times past as it is a dated colour. I chose to use certain textiles in my practice because I believe that they include their own language of tactility and are useful in representing an emotion, feeling or mood. For example, a bright orange faux-fur fabric reminds me of childhood comforts – maybe a Halloween costume or a favourite stuffed animal. From when we are young, we grow up developing a language with fabric as it interacts with our body. I want to begin translating this language within my artwork, testing it for further appreciation of its power.

³ Found fabric is a term I use to describe fabrics that are recycled or found in a second-hand store.



Fig. 1: Vaughan McMillan, *In the basement of a bungalow*, 2017. Recliner is life-size, text is roughly 3 by 2 feet. La-Z-Boy recliner and found green and white striped cotton knit. Used by permission of artist.

In the basement of a bungalow consists of the plush text “salty fingers” seated on top of a second-hand La-Z-Boy recliner. In this work, “salty fingers” relates to our haptic⁴ knowledge, and I would like my audience to consider how our fingers can get salty and what memories we have to support this. We can imagine the sensory feeling of having salt on our fingers and how it is comforting (food) but also discomforting (dirty). Although my artwork exists within the contemporary art world, at the moment, I would like the general public to also have access to it

⁴ Relating to the sense of touch.

in the future. Through my use of recognizable materials and objects, I would like my audience to draw on their own memories attached to these things, consider the text I have chosen in direct juxtaposition to the objects, and think about what further inquiries could take place. The text itself is made from a green and white striped cotton knit fabric and, from my own point of view, the recliner is the embodiment or stand-in for an era, type of person, or place. It was chosen to represent the epitome of comfort within the domestic space. In this work, both materials need to activate each other to build an image or feeling from the past. The reworking of found materials and ready-mades in my practice can have transformative qualities that are able to build connections to other topics. *In the basement of a bungalow* was part of my completed installation in our Interim Thesis Exhibition, and it illustrates how banal items function in my artwork. Overall, *In the basement of a bungalow* is a positive example of how I would like my audience to interact with and interpret my artwork in the gallery setting.



Fig. 2: Brian Jungen, *Mother Tongue*, 2013. 100 by 51 by 28 inches. Steel, deer hide, VW fenders, freezer. Used by permission of Catriona Jeffries.

Contemporary Indigenous artist Brian Jungen creates artwork about everyday objects through his own formal transformations. His work focuses on the complexity of identity and what it means to be an Indigenous person in the 21st century. It is through his juxtaposition of traditional First Nations imagery and quotidian 'fetish' items that he speaks to ideas around identity and

consumption in western Canadian culture. I appreciate how Jungen operates in an in-between space within his practice as I strive to do the same within my own; he is not only making artwork from his own subjective position but also offering insight into those around him. In Fig. 2, *Mother Tongue*, Jungen apposes freezer and car parts with a stretched deer hide to reference his own Indigenous identity growing up in Fort St. John, B.C. In Art21's film, *Vancouver*, Jungen discusses how he wanted to give a 'voice' to the found materials that he uses. He states in this film that the freezer is a direct reference to his relatives who have freezers outside of their homes to store moose meat in. He also states that the freezer was the 'perfect' pedestal for his artwork and people either became confused or excited by his use of objects. In *Art 21*, Jungen states, "I like using things people can recognize – that they see around them every day". Through my artwork, I am committed to revealing what is often overlooked because of quotidian blindness, and I am invested in transforming everyday materials to unveil the confusing qualities of how identity can be constructed. Jungen's sense of materiality inspires me as he has famously transformed many different materials into finished works of art. These transformations allow his audience to contemplate their own subjectivity around heavier issues like cultural identity and capitalism. Jungen's practice shows that items that are often disregarded can successfully be used in artwork to point to cultural issues within various communities in Canada. In my practice, I will continue exploring and experimenting with quotidian materials to echo who we are and the culture we are a part of.

CHAPTER 2

The Quotidian: Interpreting my Environment

“How are we to speak of these ‘common things’, how to track them down rather, flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they remain mired, how to give them a meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what is, of what we are.” (Perec 210).

French Situationist writer Georges Perec (1936-82) wrote his concerns about overlooked everyday happenings in his 1974 book *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. He argued for the importance of understanding the quotidian and what it can disclose about us. Perec’s idea of the quotidian reveals things like food preferences based on trends or tastes, popular objects that are signifiers of social status, and the cultural norms of what is socially acceptable and who adheres to them:

“We don’t question it, it doesn’t question us, it doesn’t seem to pose a problem, we live it without thinking, as if it carried within it neither questions nor answers, as if it weren’t the bearer of any information. This is no longer even conditioning, it’s anaesthesia. We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep. But where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space?” (210).

Observing, considering the cultural context and then reframing it in my artistic process helps me to examine the overlooked within the quotidian. Banal items and consumables help to frame my main concepts in my artwork, and found fabrics (textiles) communicate ideas, reference memories, and offer complexity because they already have an existing relationship to the body. Like Perec, take notice during a quick walk around the block, take an unplanned trip to the grocery store, or even listen in on a conversation occurring nearby. What comes out of these observed, mundane experiences informs my practice and is further unpacked to help me to understand the intricate topic of subjectivity.

During my artistic process, a conscious effort is made to be aware of what is going on around me during my day-to-day routines, and I actively spend time searching, listening, and waiting for something to take my attention. By regaining awareness while outside, I am able to take in more of my surroundings, understand how my community functions and note how my own subjectivity and identity relates to it.



Fig. 3: Vaughan McMillan, *Objects I recalled*, 2016. Each painting is 12 by 12 inches. Gouache on paper. Used by permission of artist.

Mundane items and consumables have been asking me to decipher how they hold more than space - as owners and users of objects, we dwell inside of them and give them agency. For example, a take-away container in a rural gas station parking lot can comment on the taste of the locals in the area, or while travelling in a different country, a chicken wing bone in an ashtray

can reveal a good amount about the locals in the area that is not included in a tourist pamphlet. Fig. 1, *Objects I recalled*⁵, consists of four paintings: a bag of 'cool ranch' Doritos, a vintage airplane seat, a cement barricade (with moss) and a 6-piece chicken nugget pack. I want to find the objects and spaces that are often disregarded and understand how they function in relation to our own subjectivity.



Fig. 4: Annie Pootoogook, *Cape Dorset Freezer*, 2005. 44 by 94 inches. Pencil-crayon, black pen and graphite on wove paper. Used by permission of The National Gallery of Canada.

Canadian Inuk artist Annie Pootoogook (1969-2016) was most famous for her pencil-crayon drawings that depicted her daily life in Cape Dorset, Nunavut. Her artwork is autobiographical and she draws inspiration from her quotidian experiences in her small northern community. Similar to my practice, Pootoogook's artwork has a certain level of intimacy within it as she honestly depicts her own daily life. My *Objects I recalled* paintings have a material resemblance to Pootoogook's pencil crayon drawings; we both made similar stylistic decisions in keeping our drawings simple, coloured, and with bold outlines. Pootoogook's artwork evokes a sense of

⁵ *Objects I recalled* is an ongoing series of paintings I have been making since my undergrad that depict quotidian objects that I somehow interacted with in the past.

emotion and it carries a personal narrative of her own family, their struggles and their experiences together. Fig. 4, *Cape Dorset Freezer*, took place in her local grocery store where shoppers are seen dressed in traditional and contemporary clothing; there are many recognizable processed food items depicted in the freezer available for purchase. We both share an interest in making artwork about our local communities and how they operate beneath the surface. The local grocery store is a good example of this because it can reveal a lot about the people who shop there, consume its food and show that there are deeper connections and meanings that can be found through local gathering spaces.

Around this time in my practice, I started rendering the items from my *Objects I recalled* series into three-dimensional soft sculptures. I became interested in how would they act as actual objects in the world, instead of living on paper, and how they would inform the human body further. Throughout my next series, I created 3D plush objects, such as 6-piece nuggets, pizza slices, a jar of sweet and sour sauce, Doritos, and egg rolls. This body of work focuses on comforting consumables and processed food items and the things we share between them in our culture. By researching the food that people often consume out of emotional need, there is an understanding of how it operates within our daily lives and can be a signifier for the connections we hold with one another. We gather together around food in social settings, and it can support the explanation of a feeling, lifestyle, or a way of identifying as a person.



Fig. 5: Vaughan McMillan, *Pit-stop-pizza*, 2016. Each slice is roughly 4 by 3 inches. Found plaid tablecloth and hand-dyed cotton. Other materials found on site. Used by permission of artist.

After many visits to the local grocery store in Fort Vermilion⁶, Alberta, I began focusing on what people were buying and how class, accessibility, and taste could potentially affect their purchases. *Pit-stop-pizza* was created in the beginning stages of this exploration when I started mentally taking note of how much processed food was being purchased compared to fresh produce. At this time, I tried to occupy an in-between space within my own subjective position in an attempt to understand multiple groups of people, and the grocery store was a stepping-stone in this research. In this process, and through my own subjectivity, I noticed that local Indigenous people had their shopping carts full to the brim with processed food items from the dry or freezer section, whereas the local town people would carry a small basket with only a few dinner ingredients of fresh produce and meat. Access to food in northern Alberta is an issue in and of

⁶ I lived in Fort Vermilion, Alberta with my husband from September 2016 – March 2017.

itself, and it is definitely easier to buy in bulk if one does not live close to town, but with that said, I still witnessed a major difference between the fresh items and processed items being purchased based on my own perception of each person's social status and class within the area. I discovered that there was a common thread with everyone as they were all inclined to purchase comfort food items of some sort, like junk foods or 'fast foods' that were easy to prepare; things such as 'ready-to-bake' frozen wedges, frozen pizzas, potato chips, Eggo waffles and ice cream. Research on junk and processed foods took over my practice, and I began trying to comprehend how they wedged themselves into our households and latched onto our identity.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1930-2002) *Distinction*⁷ (1979) is based on the idea that class defines taste in society and has helped me to understand my interest in food within my practice. Whether it is furniture, clothing, food or sports, there is logic behind why people spend money on certain things and not others. Bourdieu states: "Taste is *amor fati*, the choice of destiny, but a forced choice, produced by conditions of experience which rule out all alternatives as mere daydreams and leave no choice but the taste for the necessary" (178). Everyone has their own subjective sense of taste, and it is a reflection of who we are, as well as the social positions and cultural norms in the community that we are a part of. Unfortunately, often taste of the necessary is pushed onto certain minorities based on where they live or how much money they make. Taste within a community is complicated and in a constant state of transition to fit into the people who are building on it.

⁷ I recognize that *Distinction* is a Eurocentric reference but I appreciate how it has its own colonial language within it. By understanding consumables I am criticizing and exposing colonial assumptions in western Canada and how they affect minorities. Although Bourdieu's ideas around taste and class are about a different time in capitalist history they still help to reinforce my ideas around subjective food choices in western Canada.

While living in Fort Vermilion last winter, I became a member of the 'La Crete⁸ Buy and Sell' page on Facebook, and right away I became hooked, as people were selling items that seemed very distinct from the previous communities I had lived in. Items such as birthday cakes that never got picked up, a hand-made office chair made completely out of wood, clothing with rips and/or stains, beauty items that were half used, and items that were broken and needed to be repaired. This page enabled me to use my own perspective to gain insight into the community I was situated in within northern Alberta and understand the people around me better. From my own subjective position, the demographic make-up of this area consists largely of First Nations and Mennonite people among other demographics. This page became part of my artistic research and was inserted into my process while making. I was isolated in my small northern house because it was often -35 outside, but I still felt a connection to the community as I could connect online through the buy and sell forum. It allowed me to view many mundane but also fascinating items that were seen to hold value in the local area.

⁸ La Crete is a 30-minute drive from Fort Vermilion where I was living.

CHAPTER 3

Storytelling: Sharing my Approach

Engaging in my own storytelling is imperative to my process and helps me to interpret my daily observations. This process is started by writing about a mundane experience that somehow holds value – it can be anything from a conversation with someone, to an ordinary item that I remembered from my routine. In my practice, it is a way for me to understand and analyze a situation in order to make art about it. I do not include my stories alongside my artwork; instead, I pick out small excerpts⁹ of text that point to larger narratives from my past.

The writer/activist Lisa Betasamosake Simpson has been a huge influence when it comes to writing more about my quotidian experiences. Her writing has shown me that it does not matter how mundane a past occurrence is, it is always an occurrence worth writing about it. *Islands of Decolonial Love* is a series of short stories and songs in which Simpson explores the lives and communities of contemporary First Nations people. The stories mostly reference those who are from her own nation of Nishnabeg (Mississauga) but also include stories from the Greater Toronto area. Simpson's writing is raw, real and emotional; she chooses to depict the lives of contemporary Indigenous people who are subjected to racism and colonialism. I appreciate her ability to evoke emotional response through writing about the quotidian, and it is through the juxtaposition of everyday environments and real life experiences that her stories make you feel like you are experiencing them yourself.

ishpadinaa, a short story from *Islands of Decolonial Love*, is about the narrator's grandmother dying on a picnic table in a public park in Toronto. The narrator explains that her grandmother has passed away and a spiritual conversation takes place between them. She also mentions

⁹ Excerpts of text are usually three to five words in length.

that some people come by and are concerned but not concerned enough to call 9-1-1, which seems to be the premise of the story; people are uncomfortable but not willing to actually go as far as to help.

“i tell myself that this is a good place to die, even though there are hot dogs and cake and balloons. it’s outside, there are no fluorescent lights, there’s no one trying to fix the damage that can’t be fixed. she doesn’t want death to be like a math test, i tell myself.
she says to me “all husbands are boring, so pick one that lets you do whatever you want.” (96).

I value this story for its authenticity both in its content and description of the environment. It is emotionally upsetting and shows the situation of the narrator as well as the onlooker. The stories I write in my practice are about my day-to-day life, and I am hoping to point to the intricacy of identity and how it can be formed through the places we occupy and the people and materials we interact with. Items such as enamel pins, a favourite sweater or a branded take-away container contribute to how we see ourselves and also how we want to be understood in the world.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*¹⁰ (1984), Michel de Certeau (1925-86) examines the ways in which individuals re-classify things such as mass culture, utilitarian objects and rituals from everyday life in order to make them their own. Through our own agency and ownership of certain items, we contribute to who we are and how we are positioned within society. Which items do we choose to interact with and consume? How can we define and unearth the crossover between the things we use and how they contribute to our subjectivity? According to de Certeau, “These operations of marking out boundaries, consisting in narrative contracts and complications of stories, are composed of fragments drawn from earlier stories and fitted

¹⁰ I am aware that this reference is related to Eurocentric society but it still has merit in exploring and understanding the quotidian.

together in a makeshift fashion (*bricolés*)” (122). Along the same line, our own perspective is built from our past stories and fits together in a makeshift way.



Fig. 6: Liz Magor, *Humidor*, 2004. 11 by 6 by 4 inches. Polymerized gypsum and tobacco. Used by permission of Catriona Jeffries.

The work of Liz Magor conjures up ideas around comfort and how it can lie within objects which we have our own relationships and language with. Magor is of inspiration to my practice as I appreciate how she focuses on the space between ease and unease in her artwork. Magor produced *Humidor* by casting a pair of well-worn mittens, then recreating them in polymerized gypsum and finished by stuffing them with tobacco cigarettes. The mittens show their own history of wear as we consider who the owner of these could have been and the cigarettes speak to the comforting routine of a repetitive habit. Magor’s artwork transforms recognizable

commonplace items that juxtapose each other through her choice of materiality to question larger issues of our own subjectivity within society.

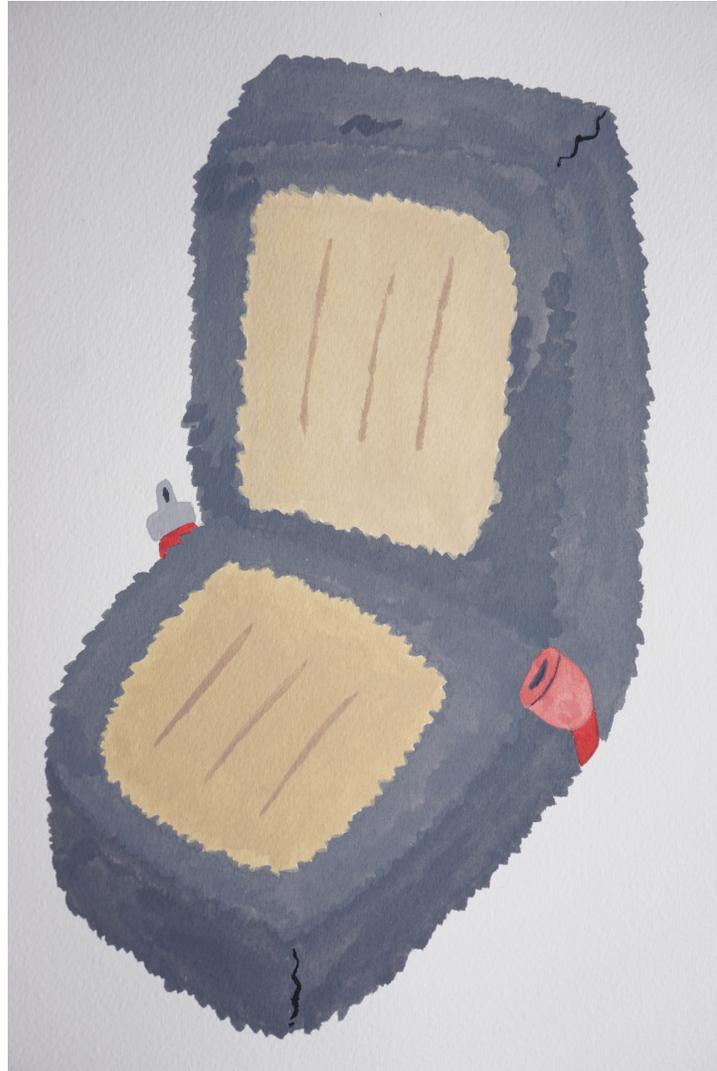


Fig. 7: Vaughan McMillan, *Objects I recalled*, 2017. 12 by 14 inches. Gouache on paper. Used by permission of artist.

During my recent artist residency in Hobart¹¹, Tasmania I returned to my *Objects I recalled* series (Fig. 3 & Fig. 7) as an initial starting point in making artwork. As part of my research, I became preoccupied with collecting anything of significance to me. As my collection started to

¹¹ I went on a month long artist residency this past November (2017) to The Salamanca Arts Centre in Tasmania, Hobart, Australia. This experience is what my latest body of work is based on.

grow, I looked to my previous journal entries/sketches to learn which quotidian items should be painted and were significant to me within Australian culture. It became important for me to understand my own cultural displacement through the artwork I created from this residency and I painted items such as fish & chips, 'Aussie' meat pies, 'yo-yo' cookies, boxed wine, 'choc-top' ice cream cones, fuzzy car seat covers, a pavlova and even a pair of brown slippers. For example, Fig. 7 from this series depicts a fuzzy seat cover that I saw in many cars during my stay in Hobart. It was an unexpected item that I did not know was popular until I walked past one every block or so. From my own perspective the fuzzy chair cover was a signifier of comfort among the cold weather and rain that was so common year-round in Hobart. Also while away on this residency, I made it a priority to research and understand Australian Indigenous culture as best as I could and also placed importance upon studying how minorities are treated. I discovered that similar to Canadian history, there is a horrible colonial past of destruction and oppression that remains absent from the quotidian and tourist industry. A compiling of souvenirs¹² from my residency began to grow as I strived to explain what it was like to be immersed in Australian culture. When an item is taken away as a souvenir or part of a collection, it gains something more than it initially consisted of. It is able to hold value because of the emotional response it gave us in relation to an event, experience, or feeling that it was connected to.

Susan Stewart wrote, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993), as an investigation of the ways in which everyday objects are narrated as maquettes for certain versions of the world that we live in. Stewart explores our relationship to the body/scale and the language of experience through narratives and objects. She has two ideas that are a common thread throughout my practice: the souvenir and the collection. Most of

¹² My use of the term 'souvenir' differs from others because I am often using it not only to describe objects but also items that can be consumed such as food or drink.

the materials I focus on in my artwork are souvenirs of a remembered experience and are added into my own artistic collection. By compiling a collection of materials, it allows me to reference them in my artwork when I am trying to accurately explain a memory, person, place or feeling. Stewart's ideas around the souvenir fit in with my perception of junk food and its importance beyond flavour within society. Junk food items are often devalued and demonized, but in some cases they are put onto a pedestal like a souvenir of an experience or place. For example, a travelling carnival only offers certain food items when it is in town, things such as: deep-fried cola and foot-long corndogs. These foods are not sought after for nutritional value but for the confirmation of a cherished experience. Stewart states, "The souvenir both offers a measurement for the normal and authenticates the experience of the viewer" (134). Although foods have a shelf life, I believe that they can fulfill the definition of a souvenir because they are place-markers of a special experience that can later be called upon. Eating certain foods can confirm our surroundings and put meaning onto situations we see as significant.

"What is this narrative origins? It is a narrative of interiority and authenticity. It is not a narrative of the objects; it is a narrative of the possessor. The souvenir as bibelot or curiosity has little if any value attached to its materiality. Furthermore, the souvenir is often attached to locations and experiences that are not for sale" (Stewart 136).

Stewart's ideas around the collection have become more significant to my practice after my experience of collecting items Hobart for later contemplation. Stewart explains the collection as, "... a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context" (151). While away in Hobart, I focused my energy on collecting because I knew the more I gathered, the easier it would be for me to explain the environment that I inhabited. My collecting took on many different forms – at times I sought after actual physical items such as sea glass and business cards/receipts, and other times collecting took on less obvious forms like writing, collecting stories, walking, taking photographs, painting, and

even having conversations with people that I could later call on from memory. All of these things are part of my collection of my experience in Hobart, and I consider them to be a 'reframing' of objects in an attempt to gain knowledge:

"The collection is often about containment on the level of its content and on the level of the series, but it is also about containment in a more abstract sense... One cannot know everything about the world, but one can at least approach closed knowledge through collection" (Stewart 161).

During my residency I also had a daily walking routine that helped me to absorb the environments around me – I saw the same people, consumed the same foods, and went to the same places. *Outside the Courthouse* is about an experience I had of finding one lone chicken wing bone outside of the Tasmanian Supreme Court while walking to my studio. I am including an excerpt from a story that I wrote about my daily walks in Hobart, and it provides an insider view of how my methods and process unfolded around the lone chicken wing bone artwork that I later made for our graduate exhibition:

"Around the bend is the Supreme Court of Tasmania – one of my favourite spots to observe on my daily walk. While walking through this general area, I need to navigate in and around younger men and women that are wearing business suits and always seem to be in a hurry. Move left, move right, and speed up! They carry takeaway coffees and briefcases; they are lively talkers and have their hair well groomed and in place. Straight ahead of me I come face-to-face with a long, grimy wooden bench. I find that when there are people seated here they are usually middle-aged men who are often wearing casual (sports) clothing, have facial hair, and are smoking.

I also sometimes see mothers with their sons waiting here as well. The bench is encased by a cement structure that is filled with gravel and has a tree planted behind it. On one side of the bench there is a small square opening with gravel in it that appears to be an ashtray... or maybe it is used as an ashtray now? Today when I walk by the bench there are two middle-aged men sitting on it and having an animated conversation while smoking. I carefully avoid eye contact as I normally do and focus on the ashtray I am about to pass. There are the usual suspects in there – cigarette butts, bottle caps, broken glass and garbage. But – also on top of all of that there is a single flat chicken wing bone – just the leftover bone – not a scrap of meat to be found. For an instant I stop, focusing on it, taking it in. But I don't want to seem out of place taking a photo of it as there are 'witnesses' around, so I continue walking towards my studio. If I was to stop and take a photo, I would likely have to engage in conversation which is something I do not want at the moment. I find that I am completely consumed by the chicken wing bone in my thoughts and further observations do not take place. Why is it there? Who had

a single chicken wing to go? I decided that on my way back home from my studio it would be necessary to photograph it. I needed more private viewing time for further contemplation of an object that I needed to understand.”



Fig. 8: Vaughan McMillan, *Outside the Courthouse*, 2018. Each wing roughly 2 by 1 inch. Felted wool and found fabric plush ashtray. Used by permission of artist.

After this experience, I became fixated on the remaking and reworking of a scrap of food that is often thrown away because I needed to understand what a lone chicken wing bone could disclose about the people and the cultural norms of the area. I felt the need to try to define the local community I inhabited while travelling, and learn more about how I could blur my own understanding of identity in order to absorb more of my environment around me. I created *Outside the Courthouse* by dry needle-felting colourful wool pieces together to create chicken wing bones – allowing the bones to stand out similarly to how the original bone had. From my

own situated knowledge, I created a 'cement' plush ashtray made out of found fabric, in reference to the middle-aged men who often occupied the bench near the courthouse. The ashtray is stuffed with Poly-Fil and has taken on the shape of a human form that appears to be wearing clothing. As I continue with this series in my practice, I will be looking into other ways that I can show this work in the gallery space. My own written narratives contributed to this series and enabled me to gain context into my own experiences and the things I was surrounded by. The artwork created from my journal entries while in Australia reveal what it was like to be among a different culture and how I felt that I fit in to my new environment. My hope is that my audience will consider the space that I occupied while making this work and the people and things that I interacted with. I want them to further dig into how the materials and text might relate to larger topics around subjectivity and how it is molded through the areas we inhabit.

CONCLUSION: Reflect + Advocate

Throughout our graduate exhibition, I discovered that I had been operating with blind spots and was unable to see certain problems arise at the time of my installation, and this posed complications with the overall showcase and reading of my work. I normally consider how my artwork will inhabit the gallery space and how my audience will understand it, and I should have spent more time experimenting and asking for other opinions before making final decisions. My defense presentation was stronger and more accurate in how I want to represent myself as an artist; it was conversational but still formally hit on the right points. It helped that I decided to include one of my stories in my presentation to shed light on my process in art making and how I understand the world around me. The experience of our graduate exhibition and my defense has taught me that I should spend as much time considering the installation of my artwork as I spend making in the studio and preparing how I am going to talk about it. Moving forward I will state my own subjective position with confidence and share with others how it informs my finished artwork and making process.

In my practice I rely on my intuition and try to slow down my process – to observe, to reflect, and contemplate how others will interact with my artwork. My artwork is shaped out of the materials and foods from daily life, an understanding of my own subjectivity and how identity is formed, through my written stories and by recalling own my experiences. Moving forward, I plan to participate in artist residencies that allow me to enter a new environment that is different from my own. I also plan to focus on my own community in Calgary, Alberta and re-spark my love and understanding of it. In my practice I am drawn to the commonalities that transcend through different cultures/classes in society because I am often left wondering how identity is built and why some people are more fortunate than others. As an artist I feel a strong responsibility to

expose the connections we have with one another through everyday materials that often go unnoticed. Through my artwork, I believe that in understanding simple items such as frozen pizza, boxed wine or a pair of communal slippers, we can discover common ties that run through us – even if we appear to be different from one another. Identity, and our own perspective, is built up in layers, and the materials and consumables that we interact with are symbolic of what we share together as a community. We need to be willing to interpret these ties and advocate for their power within society.

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