



NEVER "THE BODY" BUT
ALWAYS YOURS AND MINE

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I acknowledge that this document and all of the artistic work it describes were created on the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Selilwítlh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations where I live and study as an uninvited guest. I wish also to acknowledge that as an educated, able-bodied, cis-gendered, white woman from the United States I exist inside a network of societal privileges. Even as I critique, question, and reject the systems that create hierarchy and privilege in this world I recognize that I continue to benefit from them. I acknowledge also that acknowledgement is not enough and I must actively deprogram the colonial, capitalist and white-centric narratives that I have been taught and seek to do the work of this undoing in the world. This is ongoing work that I know I will do imperfectly but through making, writing and thinking *otherwise* I will continue in my attempt to be part of a future that is more equitable and thoughtful than our present.

“If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it’s useful, edible or beautiful, into a bag or a basket or a bit of rolled bark or leaf or a net woven of your own hair or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solid container or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place, the area that contains that which is sacred, and then next day you probably do much the same again — if to do that is human, if that’s what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time.”

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*

ENTRY POINT

“And it is the defense of art which gives birth to the odd vision by which something we have learned to call “form” is separated off from what we have learned to call “content” and to the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and form accessory.”

Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*

My visual art practice and the written word have long been entangled. I have described my visual art practice as *non-language*, as a way to quiet my inner-narrator which has been a fixture in my life since I started journaling at age ten. I have also described my sculptures as “poems of material language” and to call particularly well-crafted sentences “language sculptures.” At times I have thought of myself as a writer that just happens to work mostly in physical forms. Sometimes I am overcome by the shortcomings of language, turning to sculpture as a form of silent, embodied communication. Despite the various ways language serves and fails my art practice, the reality remains: the two are inextricably linked.

This piece of writing is not an explanation, interruption or analysis of the body of work it exists alongside. Rather, I think of it as a supportive creature that nuzzles its head against the leg of the work, grounding it. It is a document that bears witness to the creation of a family of abstract sculptures; it tells the story of how they came to be and of how they occupy space, how I think *about*, *with* and *through* these physical forms. This body of work is sustained by separate but interconnected veins of research. The first is the stuff of everyday life— observations, mundane occurrences— courses through one vein. The second is comprised of the material experimentation that takes place when I am actually producing the work. The third vein is the ingestion of written works of theory and references from other artists, which create the conceptual underpinnings and contextualization of the physical works. I do not ascribe any sort of hierarchical value to each, rather they are a cooperative, mutualistic system and are woven together throughout my making and writing¹.

Within this paper I will rub up against concepts of feminist new-materialism, queer theory and affect theory, pulling out the pieces and parts that are in dialogue with my work. I will engage with the voices of writers, theorists and artists, both contemporary and historical, but will also insist on leaving enough room for the objects to speak for themselves. My aim is to peel back layers of the works, exposing embedded intent and possibilities for meaning-making, thereby providing additional ways to enter into a relationship with the work.

¹This writing style is informed by the creative non-fiction and essay work of Rebecca Solnit, Zadie Smith, Maggie Nelson and Sheila Heti. Tending to be a hybridization of the personal and public, rooted in specificity while also reaching towards universals, these writers draw from intimate experience, poetry, theory, philosophy and current events to create work that often rejects easy classification, which is something I seek in my visual and written work.

A symbiosis exists between what happens in the studio and what happens on the page. Throughout these past two years I have become increasingly aware of the moments when one leads and the other follows. After many months of grappling with what felt like a rigid framework of research-based-art practice—of trying to concoct the right research questions that would provide the impetus for conceptually-potent work—I realized that for me, the work has to come first. It was only when I reflected on my artistic process and the sculptures themselves, that I understood which research questions the sculptures were engaging. These questions included:

How can abstract sculptures evoke ideas of ambiguous embodied identity? Can physical abstraction work in opposition to rigid and categorical ways of understanding both things and people?

Can relationships developed between objects (non-human bodies) in space be analogous to relationships between human bodies? Simultaneously, how does an abstract sculpture function as a stand-in for a body without being overtly figurative?

What is the significance of the handmade, the three-dimensional and the tactile in an increasingly digital world?

These queries hint at what is to follow, although I make no promises that definitive answers will be provided. I can only guarantee possibilities, propositions, potentialities. Through providing insight into my position as an artist, sharing the works of art and language that I have consumed in this process and reflecting on the set of actions that generated these sculptures, I hope to create a window, a hole, a permeable surface that allows the reader to enter into and move through this body of work.



Figure 1, Melina Bishop, *Coming Is Also Going* (detail) 2020.

THE FORMATION OF MALLEABLE SELFHOOD

“The personal is theoretical. It is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life... We might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life.”

Sarah Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*.

While on a macro-scale I am a woman² living within patriarchy, the microcosms of my life have been largely composed of powerful women and feminist men. I was brought up in Louisville, Kentucky³, by a mother and father, neither of whom adhered to or enforced gender norms, rearing my older brother and me much the same. The network of people that formed me as an individual, predominantly found through my early education at the Waldorf School of Louisville, are a collection of eccentric, socially and politically liberal people, some of whom drove me to school in the same bumper-sticker covered VW van that drove women to the abortion clinic. After my parents’ divorce, my mother started dating women and years later, I officiated her marriage to my stepmother in the living room of their shared home.

This upbringing and family laid the groundwork for my positionality, as did the body and circumstance I was born into. Much like my mother, I find my sexuality hard to categorize so I seldom have tried to do so. I’ve sometimes, tentatively, used terms like bisexual or pansexual or queer⁴ although I feel unsure of my place inside any of them. What I know is this: I have fallen in love three times, once with a man, once with a woman and once with a nonbinary person. My attractions and attachments were born of specificity, lived experience, and remaining open to the reality of what was occurring within and around me rather than relying on any theoretical notion I held in my mind about myself. Each of these relationships shifted my understanding of myself and by extension the work I make as an artist.

My formal education also naturally informs my subjectivity. I have a BFA in Craft with a concentration in Fibers from a tiny, private fine art school. Within that community, and specifically the Fibers department, I was once again surrounded predominantly by women. We studied the role of textile practices in Feminist Art practices, interrogated the “hierarchy of art and craft,” the ways the western canon sought to bifurcate these practices, subjugating the latter. There I was taught to question these

² anytime I use the terms *woman* or *feminine* they are always used as trans-inclusionary terms that do not refer to biological sex.

³ The place we refer to as Kentucky is primarily Shawnee, Cherokee, Chickasaw and Osage land.

⁴ Gordon Hall defines queerness as “an orientation toward ourselves and one another in which we make the bare minimum of assumptions about the uses and definitions of our own and one another’s bodies and body parts.” (27) This is the definition I most identify with myself and most closely relates to the way I think through “queerness” in relationship to my sculptures.

distinctions and to question the gendering of process and medium. I developed a deep-seated appreciation for functional objects and for the significance of making things by hand. The faculty emphasized the importance of honoring the history of traditional processes and the wide range of cultures that have employed them for millennia. At the same time we were encouraged to push back against the idea that their legacy doesn't course through the veins of "contemporary art." Material and process produce meaning, they are a language of their own that I am inclined to "speak."

When I was studying Fibers I was introduced to an essay entitled *Textures of Memory: The Poetics of Cloth* by curator Pennina Barnett. This piece of writing shifted my way of thinking about the symbolic power of cloth and how it relates to non-binary modes of thinking. Barnett writes:

What if the poetics of cloth were composed of 'soft logics', modes of thought that twist and turn and stretch and fold? And in this movement new encounters were made, beyond the constraints of binaries? The binary offers two possibilities, 'either/or'; 'soft logics' offer multiple possibilities. They are the realm of the "and/and", where anything can happen. Binaries exclude; 'soft logics' are 'to think without excluding'— yet one is not set against the other, (that would miss the point). And if 'soft' suggests an elastic surface, a tensile quality that yields to pressure, this is not a weakness; for 'an object that *gives in* is actually stronger than one that resists, because it also permits the opportunity to be oneself in a new way. (26)

Barnett's concept of "soft logics" resonated so deeply that I felt a sudden clarity around what I was seeking through my own artistic practice: to physically manifest these malleable modes of thought, to make objects and spaces that were ripe with "and/and" thinking.

Central to my practice is the soft, the fluid and the undefined. I author objects that are intentionally difficult to categorize, that make someone think twice, perhaps settling finally for an "and/and" when an "either/or" is refused. The work asks for people to think with their bodies, feel with their minds, converse in silent languages. Sometimes the work is slippery. It wants to be felt as it slides through fingers rather than caught and analyzed. It often pushes up against utilitarianism but then, through unorthodox material choices and abstraction of form, doesn't meet expectations.

In this thesis body of work I employ a specific kind of abstraction, tied to a history of female sculptors, which Jenni Sorkin describes in her essay *Five Propositions on Abstract Sculpture* as "a sensitivity to the texture and tactility of objects and a disquieting intensity devoted to the process of making them." (141) Sorkin's essay traces a lineage of female artists working with material and process in a specific way that was often overlooked, as attention was being drawn to the more overtly-conceptual

forms of critical feminist art. She cites the practices of artists including Lara Schnitger, Jessica Stockholder and Phyllida Barlow as part of this history of sculptural abstraction and asserts that “its signature qualities include biomorphism, a roundness that rejects the hard geometries of traditional minimalism” and “open work—holes, gaps, fissures, loops.” (151) The qualities of my work— including use of organic shapes, the visual motif of the hole, and the transformation of everyday materials— align with these characteristics and concerns. I contextualize my own practice as part of this lineage of female artists.

In my practice I use abstraction to deny literalism and ask for alternative methods of understanding objects, materials and their relationship to the human. The work encourages the rejection of assumptions about what an object *is* or *does*. Extended further, I strive to create forms that can serve as tools for fostering the kind of thinking that challenges hierarchical, exclusionary “norms” within society and culture.

NEVER “THE BODY” BUT ALWAYS YOURS AND MINE

“What would it be to allow a body to be silent, fully present without telling us anything? Abstraction may be a valuable resource in thinking beyond the terms that are readily available to us in the present...”

Gordon Hall, *Object Lessons*

As I turned my attention to understanding how abstract objects can be catalysts for opened-ended and non-binary modes of thinking, I found my most significant ally and inspiration in Gordon Hall. They are a sculptor, performer and writer based in New York. Hall is interested in the ways furniture implies a body, even when one is absent. Therefore their sculptural work tends to reference these functional forms. To make these sculptures, Hall employs a wide material vocabulary including wood, joint compound, dyed fabric, colored pencil, carved brick, and cement. They also write extensively about their own material practice, furniture, minimalist sculpture and gender. Hall, like myself, is invested in the creation of objects that function as tools for seeing differently and challenging preconceived notions around embodied identity, including ideas of gender and sexuality.

Often an exhibition of Hall’s sculptural objects, such as *The Number of Inches Between Them* at MIT List Visual Arts Center (Figure 2), is also accompanied by several performances in which the sculptures are activated by bodies. Hall explains this process as the opposite of the traditional performer/prop relationship: the physical work comes first and the actions and interactions are made in response to the object. Hall describes their sculptures as

“extremely precise objects of ambiguous use” (“Object Lessons” 15) and these interactions serve as opportunities for offering possible, perhaps unconventional “uses.” While I do not perform with the objects I make, I am interested in the ways my sculptures choreograph people’s movements through space and, like Hall, my work often implies a possible utility that is unclear or unassigned.

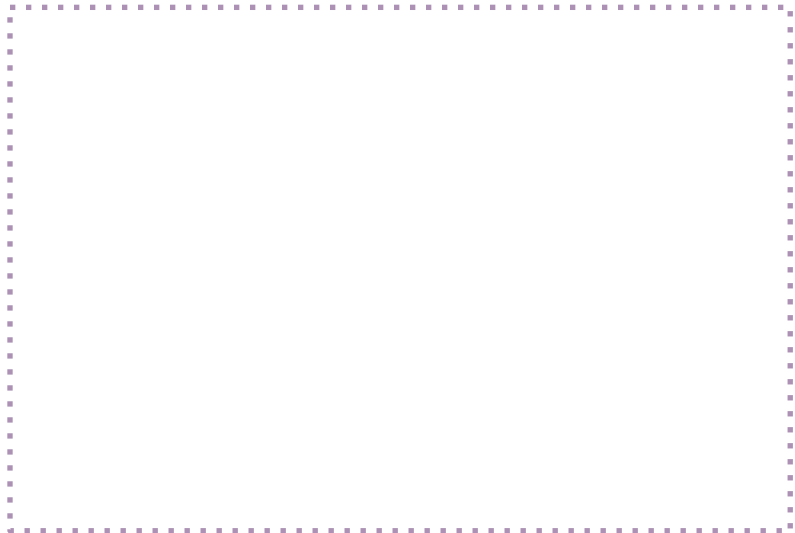


Figure 2, Gordon Hall, *The Number of Inches Between Them*, 2017.
Image removed due to copyright restrictions



Figure 3, Melina Bishop, *What Are You If You Are Not Holding?* (side 1), 2020



Figure 4, Melina Bishop, *What Are You If You Are Not Holding?* (side 2), 2020

One of the works from my thesis which possesses distinct furniture-like qualities and strives to encourage movement from its audience is *What Are You If You Are Not Holding?* (Figure 3-4). Formally, the piece has a clear relationship to a shelf. I constructed this work from insulation foam, papier-mâché, Hydrocal, cotton bed sheets and house paint⁵. When building the form, I placed two sheets of four-foot tall foam beside one another and cut three circles along the line where they met. Standing the sheets upright, I connected them at a ninety-degree angle to create a corner. I then attached the six half-circles that I had cut out to each side of the structure, four protruding from one side and two from the other. Using a light purple house paint with a semi-gloss finish, I gave one side of the structure a thick skin. On the other side I applied the same pigment mixed with Hydrocal, creating a chalky finish. The slick, shiny side of the form functions as a *shell* while the soft side is a vulnerable underbelly—a creature standing on its hind-legs. Although the changes in hue and texture are subtle, they are meant to create a relationship between interiority and exteriority. As the form appears different depending on the angle from which it is

⁵ See *DEFINING A MATERIAL VOCABULARY* section for further discussion of material choices.

seen, it invites those who encounter it to circle around it, getting close to look through the windows, crouching down to see the texture-variance in the object's feet.

The title of this work, *What Are You If You Are Not Holding?*, references the assumed utility of this structure and the pervasive desire to assign it to the category of *shelf*. With this piece I seek to trouble an instinct to project our own assumptions onto objects. I have repeatedly been told by audience members that they *want* objects on the “shelves” or that the link between this structure and something found in a domestic space makes them less inclined to spend time with it as a sculpture. This reaction and set of expectations is precisely what intrigues me. When an object is mentally assigned to the role of “support structure” it calls into question its value, meaning and agency. By placing this object “empty,” in a gallery space I am attempting to push back against hierarchical ways of thinking. While I do not reject the idea that this form *could* live another life as a shelf in a domestic space⁶ here it exists as a sculpture. I am asking the audience to see it for what it *is*. Extending this logic from the non-human to the human, I intend it to serve as a reminder to viewers to interact with other human beings not based on our assumptions or preconceived notions but with an open-minded understanding of their specificity.

This determination to assert the value and intellectually-potent potential of the undefinable, impractical or hard-to-place thing is as essential to Hall as it is to me. In “Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture,” Hall makes a clear argument for how abstract sculptures can be used as tools for reforming the way we experience and understand gender, “not primarily because of what we see in the sculptures, but because of how they might enable us to see *everything* else.” (23) Within this essay Hall pushes back against the notion that *queer* art must have a certain representational and/or explicit quality. They refer to the idea of *blankness* in minimalist art, relating it to a denial of “legible self-identification.” (23)

While writing about objects that do not have to justify or explain themselves, Hall quotes Jan Verwoert's “Exhaustion and Exuberance”, stating that “the insistence to speak—or make work in any other way—about that which is neither readily understandable nor immediately useful is in itself a strong claim to agency: I Can speak or make work about what I Can't speak or make work about.” (24) This reinforces the idea that a meaningful kind of assertion is made when an art work doesn't comply or conform to external expectations of it. It also emphasizes the significance of the non-literal and the moments where what needs to be *said* extends beyond the limits of language.

⁶ to have a fixed conception of this object as “non-utilitarian” runs contrary to the idea of flexible, non-binary modes of thinking.

After years of speaking of my work as related to “the body,” it was only through reading Hall’s text “Why I Don’t Talk About ‘The Body’: A Polemic” that I realized the problematic nature of the term, used widely in artistic contexts. Hall explains that they have intentionally rejected this wording for reasons including that “it generalizes across bodily difference” and implies that there could exist “one body as a stand-in for all of us.” (96) The consequence of attempting to construct, through language, some sort of “neutral” body is that an automatic set of assumptions around that body’s abilities, shape, gender, sexuality, race, class are likely to occur. Hall writes: “This body is not in a wheelchair, not deaf, not blind, not autistic, not ill, not high, not any of the other endless ways that our bodies and senses deviate from a normalizing standard,” (96). Offered as an alternative, the term *bodies*, unlike *the body*, is a plural that has space within it for both specificity and multiplicity.

This piece of writing led me to change the language I use, eliminating “the body” from my vocabulary. It also made me ask myself: when I talk about “bodies,”⁷ in the context of my own practice, whose “bodies” am I actually referring to? I posed this question to myself not to solve the issues Hall critiques in their polemic, but rather to gain clarity about the specific bodily relationships that my work evokes. The answer I came up with was: *yours* and *mine*. By *yours*, I refer to a viewer, someone who sensorily encounters the sculptures, the embodied consciousnesses that these physical objects come into contact with⁸. It is specific in that it is speaking only of *you* and whatever uniquely beautiful flesh-vessel you inhabit. Yet it is general in that there are so many possible *yous*. I may not know who *you* are and indeed we might only know each other through the work that serves as mediator, a conduit that somehow connects us. *You* might find the work beautiful or repulsive, engaging or trite. Regardless, *you* enter into an engagement with the work and now the work is about *you*, for *you*.

By *mine*, I refer to my own body because all the sculptures were made with my body, and therefore they will always be entangled with my physical self. There are traces of my body on the used bedsheets that were made into plaster cloth. Hardened evidence of my hands smearing one material onto another, fingerprints in clay, can be seen on their surfaces. Throughout the making process I was on, in, under, beside these sculptures, understanding them through touch and feel before attempting to even approach them with language or reason. Some I’ve cradled and caressed like precious young creatures. Some I have draped my body over, slipped my limbs into, felt myself embraced by.

⁷ It is important to note that I do not subscribe to Cartesian dualism or believe in a mind-body split, therefore when I make reference to “bodies” this in no way excludes consciousness, personality, affect or spirit, it simply refers to them as embodied within materiality.

⁸ I recognize that when the work is installed in this institutional context that the viewership is limited and that the art still remains largely inaccessible to a varied audience. This is an ongoing issue that limits the sorts of “bodies” that constitute the “you” I write of here but I hope that in future contexts a wider viewership will be possible.

I produced these objects and poured into them all the physical affection, maternal energy and longing that I had built up inside of me. Their forms are care-full⁹ and the actions required of my body to make them kept me grounded in a time of profound loneliness. In the physical absence of a partner, a lover, a family, a child or a pet, these inanimate objects were given all of my displaced tenderness. By sharing them with an audience it is my intention to bring viewers into relationship with myself and these non-human bodies. The affect the objects are imbued with functions as a bridge between *you* and *me*.

This interdependent and non-hierarchical way of relating artist, audience and object places each one *beside* the other. *Besides*, as Eve Sedgwick states in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, “permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that encore dualistic thinking.” This makes *beside* a preposition that is consistent with the intentions of the work. Each element, human or non-human, is part of a system of relations. Meaning is not made by any one entity alone but rather it is generated by the convergence of actants. Therefore, as this work engages with bodies — *yours* and *mine*—an ever-growing, ever-shifting mesh of encounters and entanglements emerges.

⁹ term borrowed from Cathy Wilkes' *care-full matter-scapes: female affects of care, feminist materiality and vibrant things* by Basia Sliwinska

*THREE ROOMS CAN BE A UNIVERSE:
DOMESTIC SPACE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION*

“The “here” of the body does not simply refer to the body, but to “where” the body dwells. The “here” of bodily dwelling is thus what takes the body outside of itself, as it is affected and shaped by its surroundings: the skin that seems to contain the body is also where the atmosphere creates an impression.”

Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

Works of art have a way of marking time, of bearing witness to a specific moment and of betraying little truths about an artist’s life that sometimes they themselves don’t realize the pieces knew. This collection of sculptures was produced almost entirely in the year 2020 and while they are not “about” the global events that were taking place and the reverberations felt inside my own life, the consequences—material, psychological, philosophical— of being made in this time are present in the objects. The artworks were made not “about” but “through” a global pandemic, Black Lives Matter protests, an American presidential election, periods of complete social isolation, and myriad small personal crises. These conditions informed what I made, how I lived and how I thought so completely that all physical byproducts of this time are informed by this context and the personal and observational research that took place.

In March of 2020, as the first of the COVID-19 lockdowns began, I wrote in my journal:

“I say I live alone but I am reconsidering. Fruit, flowers, objects, plants. They are my company and my muses these days. I am not the first to realize that three rooms can be a universe but how many of us forgot? Small things are amplified and I am paying close attention,” followed by a list of things that I was thinking about which included:

Images of connective tissue

A reimagining of what the term “Still Life” means right now

A photo I took 11 months ago of a marble statue’s hand on its own arm

The outline of a body in the fetal position

The way the line between cooking and making art starts to blur

when your kitchen is used as a studio

The idea of nourishment, the idea of what is “essential”

The sensation of touching something through latex gloves: mediated touch

A quiet sense of resolve to be very gentle with oneself



Figure 5, *Kitchen-Studio*, April 2020.



Figure 6, *Kitchen-Studio*, February 2021.

That quiet sense of resolve to be very gentle with myself remained intact in the weeks and months that followed that initial *halt* which had suddenly shaken all sense of “normalcy” and drastically shifted my lifestyle. After a year of driving back and forth to Portland twice a month, trying to sustain a long distance relationship that had just ended, after the two years of constant work-travel that had come before beginning graduate school, I was all in one place. Being constantly in motion, spread across the United States, sleeping in more than 50 different beds a year, and then split between two cities, always feeling the need to be somewhere else, had bound me up in some invisible knots that I only really became aware of when they were released.

Less than a month before the first period of social isolation began here in Vancouver I had moved from the most dismal place I had ever lived— a small, tan room that hardly saw the light of day, had kitchen appliances along one wall and a shared bathroom that always smelled like artificial raspberry body-spray and marijuana— to the first place that has ever felt like a true home of my own. My new apartment was light-filled, with six bay windows, and a sky light above the shower. After many years of living with roommates I finally had a bathroom and a kitchen all my own and it felt like a much appreciated luxury. I spent that February painting every room in a fresh coat of white and cleaning the space, transforming it into a personal sanctuary. My sensitivity towards and concern for interior spaces has always been strong, for, as Sara Ahmed states in her book *Queer Phenomenology* “spaces are not

exterior to bodies; instead spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body.” (9) The more I feel at home in a space, the clearer my mind, the more at ease I am in my body.

This change in residence and the subsequent *pause* that took place in response to the pandemic impacted my personal, emotional life and therefore, my art practice. In fact, this shift acted as a pivotal moment for the development of this thesis body of work. While the outside world began to make less sense to me and uncertainty seemed to reign supreme, art making started to come more naturally. I felt the obligation for the work *to make sense* had lifted and therefore it was given the freedom to emerge, using it as a method of processing my experience. For me, the act of making work functions as a coping mechanism and a mental release. In Ann Cvetkovich’s book *Depression: A Public Feeling* she describes the way that making things with one’s hands “fosters ways of being in the world in which the body moves the mind rather than the other way around, or in which, echoing neurobiological views in another register, body and mind are deeply enmeshed or holistically connected” which reinforces my own experience of the significance of making (168). The author goes further to frame the positive feelings that are generated by acts of creation as an antidote to depression and anxiety.

Cvetkovich defines domestic spaces as the “humble material locations” where negative affect “can be transformed through practices that can become the microclimate of hope” (155). While working from home, I felt the lines between my domestic life and my studio practice blur, so much so that even after regaining access to my studio on campus in late August, my apartment’s kitchen remained my primary site of production. Materials and tools are stored in cabinets beside pots and pans. The cutting of foam, the cutting of fruit, the mixing of plaster, the mixing of batter: each process is as valid and meaningful as the next, each with its own sensory responses. They all serve as part of this “art of daily living” that Cvetkovich cites in this text as one possible “cure” for negative feelings (161). My sculptural works have taken up residence with me, keeping my body and mind active, providing me company in a season of solitude. Inevitably, feelings of anxiety, sadness and fear, caused by what is happening in the world beyond, have seeped in. Yet in the microcosm of these three rooms, a *utopia of everyday habit* (159) of my own construction, I find solace in the processes that make something out of them, providing me with the means to work *through* this time in human history.

DEFINING A MATERIAL VOCABULARY

“If agency is not a property solely invested in human-subjects but an action whose effects yield whatever sense we have of subjects and objects (human and otherwise) then, arguably, both subjects and objects are vital and redolent with potential, but to neither can be ascribed a fixed identity or intention (beyond the sense of intentionality as ‘being directed towards’).

Marsha Meskimmon, *Art Matters*.

The fact that my thesis body of work began to unfurl during this time of confinement and that the works originated in my domestic space informed the specific material vocabulary used for these sculptures. As artist Nancy Lupo states in an interview for the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego blog, “material is a way of making sense. It is language, although it unfolds differently and has color and weight and texture.” The way I employ and manipulate specific materials throughout this collection of work has an internal logic and these decisions have specific meanings for me as an artist, but, as Lupo says “let’s not take meaning for granted. Let’s not pretend it’s shared.” Lupo reminds us that meaning is mutable and subjective. What means something quite specific to me might be evocative of something quite different to another. So while it is helpful to share the ideas I associate with these materials, I recognize the fact that these “meanings” are not fixed and will not always be fully legible. I think of materials as their own *language* which communicates differently depending on the viewer and can never be fully translated into *verbal language*. Therefore I provide these *definitions* not to ascribe meaning but to speak to my associations and intentions.

From a practical perspective, working from the limited space of my apartment’s kitchen, meant that I turned to materials that fit within that sphere, not only in terms of scale but also toxicity and accessibility. A certain attitude of resourcefulness and self-sufficiency, a central tenet of feminist art practice which already existed within my practice, became heightened. I worked with what I had and what I could find, seeking to do what Lucy Lippard refers to as “making something out of nothing.” (97) Prior to the pandemic I had been convinced I needed to find ways to work with cutting-edge technologies and new digital tools to keep my artistic practice relevant in an increasingly digital world. When I was limited by a lack of access to these resources I felt profound relief. Simple hand tools, similar to what already exist in a kitchen, and a humble assortment of materials was all that I needed for this body of work.

Plaster is a key component in many of my sculptures. It has connections to architecture and the construction of domestic spaces as well as to the provisional maquette used in sculpture. Commonly, plaster is a step in a process: a mold for casting, a model for something that will be carved from stone. Often it plays its role yet never shows up in a finished product. It is cheap, light and fragile. These qualities are precisely what made it ideal for this work. I was striving to use materials that are accessible

and that have peripheral roles in sculpture history. Also, I am compelled by the poetics of the way that plaster transforms as it sets: the fluid and malleable giving way to the stable and strong. I intentionally use the plaster in multiple stages of its “life,” sometimes casting it while it’s still liquid or pouring it over a surface, sometimes rubbing it onto a form when it’s thicker, the consistency of joint compound, then building with it when it gets thick and lumpy. Even the dried-up remnants are saved and reintegrated into future works.

When I use plaster-cloth— which I make by soaking strips of cotton bedsheets in plaster—I associate it with casts applied to broken bones. I think of applying the cloth as “setting the bones” of the sculptural form, giving it strength. I broke my arm for the first time at 14 months old, falling off a chair. My mother still has the tiny cast that helped me heal, tucked away with other sentimental objects. I have thought about this specific chunk of plaster-cloth, yellowed and old, with an intimate knowledge of my body, many times as I have wrapped my forms. Yet while a cast on a human is a temporary shell, for my sculptures it’s a lasting part of the body, a protection that is never removed, always holding the thing together.

The use of bedsheets is significant to me because it imbues my objects with traces of the relationship between cloth and body. The “soft logics” (Barnett 25) of fabric remain essential to my practice, even as I have moved away from traditional textile techniques. By including this material these concepts are still embedded into my sculptures’ rigid structures. When my sheets (or sometimes pillowcases or duvet covers) become threadbare, ripped or extremely stained, they get cut up into strips and used for sculptures. This decision also relates to a general commitment to reuse and a desire to transform what might be defined as “trash” into something new with its own worth and is connected to a long history of mending and repair practiced by female textile artists and artisans for generations.



Figure 7, *Collected Materials*, 2020.

Foam is also an essential element of my material vocabulary. I am fascinated with its contradictory qualities. It is thought of as temporal and disposable but in actuality its inability to biodegrade renders it eternal, in its own problematic way. Throughout sculpture history, materials like stone and bronze have occupied a primary position, in part because their inherent weight and strength allows them to withstand time. In contrast, expanded polystyrene¹⁰ is most often used temporarily: as packing peanuts, as “disposable” plates, as egg cartons. Foam is light, cheap and therefore has little monetary “value” which has led to it being used in these short-lived applications and then rapidly discarded. It ends up in landfills and waterways where it continues to exist, broken and weathered yet still unable to decompose. While I do not think that I am “solving the problem” of foam polluting our planet by repurposing discarded pieces of it in my sculptures¹¹, I do strive to reframe the material and accentuate its potential. By using foam in my sculptures, I am assigning it value and giving it a new life where its *lastingness* has new meaning.

I use the process of papier-mâché as another method of transforming everyday materials into objects with personality and agency. While the process has many applications, it is commonly associated with children’s crafts, costume making and DIY home-decor projects. I employ papier-mâché precisely because of these associations and use it to create abstract fine-art objects that function in the gallery much like a marble carving or chunk of cast bronze. This is not meant as a way of emulating another material, but rather a way to assert the agency and potency of papier-mâché, giving it a seat at the proverbial table. I use many layers of papier-mâché to coat the exterior of a mesh form and then extract the mesh, leaving a hollow shell. I think of this method as creating a *thick skin*, a membrane that can function on its own. The *thick skin* I create is connected to themes of resilience and unexpected strength which reoccur throughout this body of work.

I introduced house paint into my material repertoire after a struggle to understand the role of color in my practice. Prior to graduate school I had been using a predominately “neutral”¹² color-palette for many years. While I had conceptual rationales for this in the past, it was clear to me that they no longer applied and that redefining my relationship to pigment was necessary. I settled on using pastel colors for this body of work because of their predominant cultural connotations. Light tints are often associated with softness, femininity and infancy. Many of the colors have been culturally gendered: light greens and blues

¹⁰ often incorrectly called Styrofoam which actually refers to a trademarked version of extruded polystyrene. Some of the larger pieces in this body of work were made from insulation foam which is extruded polystyrene (which I associate with interiority, domestic space and architecture).

¹¹ I understand that as an artist and as a human being in Western society I am constantly participating in systems of consumption and use that are causing ecological harm.

¹² I used this term to as it commonly refers to colors including white, black, grey and tan. Yet I put it in quotes to acknowledge that, culturally speaking, colors are never actually “neutral.”

as *male*, light pinks and purples as *female*. I use these colors not to perpetuate gendered associations but rather to challenge them. By applying them to un-gendered objects that celebrate *and/and* thinking and ambiguity, I seek to free the colors from binaries. Additionally, I paid attention to all the places in everyday life where these colors appear in ways unrelated to imposed cultural constraints— the pale pink of oyster mushrooms, the minty green of toothpaste— and allowed these to inform my choices.

House paint made the most sense to me as a method of applying these pigments because of its connection to domestic space. Given that these works emerged from the home, choosing a material readily associated with refreshing a grimy bathroom felt conceptually potent. Practically speaking, I use the semi-gloss house paint to seal the plaster and sculpting compound in, creating a skin for the sculpture. The subtle shine of the paint contrasts the gloppy and unrefined textures in the plaster work. In several pieces I applied the paint thickly and allowed it to drip or ooze over a surface. I associate this with bodily excretions and the material manifestation of *fluidity*.

This material vocabulary is also informed by researching other artists' practices. I have learned from the way contemporary and historical figures in the field work with specific materials. Phyllida Barlow, who Robert Enright describes as “a material magician, the consummate alchemist of stuff,” (Enright) helped set a precedent for the kind of sculptural practice that I have today. Barlow uses humble materials including (but not at all limited to) foam, plaster, papier-mâché, and discarded textiles to make both discrete sculptures and massive, experiential installations. Her work is concerned with the lively relationship between object and viewer, creating bodily engagement with her audience members and reimagining everyday materials in compelling yet playful ways. These conceptual concerns, which are tied up in her material choices, are closely aligned with my own and I contextualize my practice within her artistic lineage.



Figure 8, Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: badplace*; 2020 lockdown 4, 2020. *Image removed due to copyright restrictions*

REMAINING IN DIALOGUE: WHAT DOES THE WORK ASK FOR?

*“Only joyful discoveries count.
If you are not making them you are not moving.”*

Agnes Martin, *Writings*

Many months ago, while working in the kitchen-studio, halfway through a process, I stopped to scribble down in all caps on a messy scrap of paper: *THE WORK WILL ALWAYS SERVE THE WORK*. I meant this as a declarative reminder to myself that every new piece is born from the remnants and lessons of its predecessors. When I start a piece and enter a dialogue with a material—whether it is foam, fabric, papier-mâché, clay — I am building on previous experiential knowledge of the material and building towards an even more thorough understanding of its formal and conceptual potentials. Often elements of previously “finished”¹³ work becomes incorporated into current projects as new potential is realized. This rejection of fixed roles or definitions is, as Barnett writes, “the opportunity to become oneself in a new way.”

I have accumulated certain abilities and sensibilities over time that I store somewhere between my hands and my brain which I rely on to conduct studio-based research. I start a piece with very little preconceived notion or plan and instead allow my intuition to lead. This is a way of working that Rachel Jones, in her essay *On Not Knowing*, correlates with the Kantian conception of artistic “genius.” While I am not making an argument in favor of the term “genius,” the relationship between knowing and not knowing, articulated here by Jones, is very much related to how I conduct process-based research.

Jones explains further that “while the artist is unable to use concepts or rules to fully determine what will emerge from their creative activities, for these to be productive of more than mere nonsense, they must nonetheless draw on other kinds of knowledge. This includes the technical knowledge or skills required to work with their materials as well as knowledge of preceding aesthetic traditions” (2). My intuitive and often playful process relies on a form of tacit knowledge that has been absorbed by my body and consciousness; a way of knowing that cooperates with “not knowing.”

In her essay *Art Matters: Feminist Corporeal-Materialist Aesthetics*, Marsha Meskimmon emphasizes the significant interdependence of artist and materials and the emergent nature of meaning-making within an art practice. While the author broadly addresses relationships between corporeal feminisms and “new” materialisms, she also writes specifically of artistic production stating:

¹³ I don’t believe that anything is ever truly finished

making art, therefore, need not be understood as the activity of a fully intentional ‘artist–subject’ expressing pre-formed meanings in and through a selection of mute materials with pre-given properties but instead as one kind of intra–action through which the ‘artwork’ and the ‘artist’ *both* emerge as entities by means of effecting a specific (local) agential cut – by the act or process of ‘making art.’ (364)

In this excerpt, Meskimmon proposes that art exists at an intersection between artist and material with neither superseding the other in terms of agency.



Figure 9, Melina Bishop, *Outside My Window Two Pigeons Were Born*, 2020.



Figure 10, Melina Bishop, *Outside My Window Two Pigeons Were Born (detail)*, 2020.

My sculpture *Outside My Window Two Pigeons Were Born* (Figure 8) is an example of how I work with the unknown and remain in conversation with my materials. This piece is composed of organic shapes and protrusions, compiled into a singular form with a base that sits atop a sculptural plinth. Depending on the angle from which it is viewed the piece appears different and new shapes are revealed (Figure 9). Wires, wrapped in cloth, come out from the solid form in several places, creating lines in space

that then connect back to the body of the sculpture. The internal structure of the work was made with wooden dowel, foam, and caulk and the surfaces were coated in plaster, paper clay or sculpting compound. While I left most of the surfaces raw and untreated, I treated some portions, including the wire portions, with a grey, semi-gloss house paint.

This work is a manifestation of material experimentation and “formal play.” While using plaster for a previous piece, the material started to set. Rather than waste it, I used it to stand a dowel upright. I then took a pile of off-cut pieces of foam, left from other works, and started attaching them provisionally to the upright dowel, responding to the shapes and the way they integrated with one another. When I was satisfied with the arrangement, I attached the pieces and began covering the surfaces to conceal the foam, provide textual variance and give the piece structural integrity. Finally, I used the paint to highlight select portions of the form and provide subtle variety in coloration.



Figure 11, Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 2009. *Image removed due to copyright restrictions*



Figure 12, Constantin Brâncuși *Maiastrea*. 1910-12. *Image removed due to copyright restrictions*

Figuring out what a work is asking for once it is made and responding accordingly is central to my studio process. Once *Outside My Window Two Pigeons Were Born* had lived on many surfaces, including a kitchen countertop, a desk, a bookshelf and a standard plinth it became clear that it needed its own support system. I set out to construct a display mechanism that functioned as a continuation of the sculpture itself, following in the foot-steps of sculptors including Cy Twombly (Figure 10) and Constantin Brâncuși (Figure 11). Both of these major figures in sculpture history played a role in shifting the relationship between an art object and its support. So, while the decision to create this structure was based on what I felt the work was “asking for” it is also informed by this art historical precedent.

The construction of the “plinth” was a material experiment and technical challenge. I sought to make something with the capabilities of furniture but using easily-accessible materials and processes. I adhered two cardboard boxes to each other, slightly askew. I lined the inside of the top box with insulation foam to make it more structurally sound and then coated both in several coats of papier-mâché and plaster cloth. I cut soft rectangles into the bottom box and oblong “windows” into several sides. Then I worked additively, adhering foam shapes to the exterior of the form and covering their surfaces in plaster of various consistencies. Finally, I created a small plateau on the top of the plinth for the sculpture to rest on and added little plaster feet which I had cast from a Styrofoam egg carton.

While the two components of this work were conceived separately, they have become two parts of one whole. They were produced using many of the same processes and speak the same material language. Therefore their formal relationship and physical reliance on each other creates a self-contained system. I titled the piece *Outside My Window Two Pigeons Were Born*, upon completion. It is a literal statement of fact: at the time this sculpture was being made, in a nest on the ledge outside my bedroom window, two pigeons hatched. As small, domestic realities are often embedded into my work, it made sense to me that this sculpture would serve as a micro-monument for a seemingly-



Figure 13, Arlene Shechet *Above and Beyond*, 2015. *Image removed due to copyright restrictions*

mundane occurrence that involved birthing (the maternal), the growth of non-human bodies and the relationship between the interior and exterior of a domestic space. Suddenly, after being named, the grey details alluded to a pigeon's coloration, the arching forms to wings, the knobby protrusions to beaks. To me, the two interdependent parts of the work felt akin to the avian siblings: caring for each other, keeping one another company, becoming themselves in tandem.

In addition to being informed by Constantin Brâncuși and Cy Twombly, this work also relates to the practice of New York-based artist, Arlene Shechet. Shechet is invested in employing the plinth or support system as a portion of the overall sculpture, as can be seen in her piece *Above and Beyond* (Figure 13). She employs forms that evoke ideas of both the bodily and the architectural, pairing materials with contrasting characteristics within singular works.

Although it is these formal qualities of her finished work that I connect most strongly to my own work, it is the way she articulates her process that makes me feel the strongest kinship with her. In an interview with Merrell Hambleton in *New York Times Magazine*, she described her creative work as something that doesn't start or stop: "it's a river or a lake and I swim in it" (qtd. in Hambleton). She uses the words "play," "dialogue," "listening," and "paying attention" to describe the way that she relates to her own sculptures as she makes them. These are all words central to how I describe the forces animating my own practice. Shechet explains that for her work there is "absolutely no formula" and that she starts a piece without knowing where it will go, working and playing with it until it "speaks to" her.

The way Shechet describes her process and being in conversation with lively-thought-inanimate materials is significant and ties into my own method of making. Within my studio I use *formal play*, working *with* and *through* the unknown, and listening to what the work is asking for as tools for experimental knowledge creation. All the byproducts form a system of relations: they are descendants of the works that came before and ancestors of the works yet to be made.

NEVER ALONE: OBJECT KINSHIP

“Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations.”

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*



Figure 14, Melina Bishop, *Never Alone (install)*, 2020.

The fact that I habitually think of my works as related to one another in a familial way— as descendants and ancestors— led me to conceptualize my ever-growing collection of related sculpture as an inanimate “family.”¹⁴ I produced individual works with a shared formal and material vocabulary over the duration of the last nine months, without preconceived notions of their final presentation. *Never Alone* (Figure 14) is an installation of seven of these sculptures, arranged together as an *assemblage*¹⁵.

¹⁴ My use of the term “family” doesn’t refer to heteronormative, genetic or biological relations. As Maggie Nelson writes in her book *The Argonauts* there is a “long history of queers constructing their own families” and that “nothing we do in life need have a lid crammed on it, that no one set of practices or relations has the monopoly on the so-called radical or the so-called normative.” (72-73)

¹⁵ While I acknowledge that “assemblage” has a separate definition within art, here I am using this word in the specific way Jane Bennett employs it in *Vibrant Matter*: “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts.”

While the sculptures might be central to the *assemblage*, the human bodies that encounter the works and move through the space, the architecture, the light filtered through the surrounding windows, the air contained within the walls are all also actants, part of the collaborative whole of the experience. As Jane Bennett articulates in her book *Vibrant Matter*, “an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces.” I intend *Never Alone* to draw attention to the relationships that exist between the animate and inanimate¹⁶

The title of the installation— *Never Alone*— makes reference to the Jane Bennett excerpt and to the dire need for connectivity, mutual-aid and care within a historical moment that is largely defined by physical distance, social isolation and political turmoil. It also refers to the idea that even when geographically separated from those we are emotionally intertwined with, we never cease belonging to an invisible mesh of connection and support. While each individual piece occupies its own space, I carefully oriented the works to be in conversation, engaging one another from different parts of the room. This



Figure 15, Melina Bishop, *Never Alone*, 2020.



Figure 16, Melina Bishop, *Self-Support*, 2020.

¹⁶ this includes: human to human, object to object, human to object

positioning allows the works to be self-sufficient yet in relationship; standing on their own and yet longing for one another.

Several individual pieces are themselves comprised of multiple interdependent parts. *Self-Support* (Figure 16) is a pair of papier-mâché amorphous lumps, one of which is perched atop the other. They are both created using the same internal form and are nearly the same shape but with subtle variations. I think of these as symbols of two different versions of a “self.” They are each painted with layers of semi-gloss acrylic house paint—light purple-grey on the bottom, light pink on top— which obscures their materiality and renders their weight and strength ambiguous. I consider these lumps (which appear elsewhere in the overall collection of thesis works) as non-figurative *bodies*. In the specific iteration of these forms that is *Self-Support*, one version of the “self” props up or holds the other up, physically mimicking the mental and emotional mechanisms of care and coping that can take place *within* someone during extended periods of isolation.

Hold Up, Cling To (Figure 17) is another work from the installation that is a system of contingent parts. This piece alludes to a table in form and scale. It is made of a sheet of perforated steel held up by two free-standing “legs,” and a sculptural support. The legs are constructed from cardboard tubing, plaster-cloth and plaster while the base is made of insulation form, coated in joint compound. On one edge of the metal surface there is a pink and white sculptural object half resting-on and half falling-off the



Figure 17, Melina Bishop, *Hold Up, Cling To*, 2020.

“table.” The object itself has six large holes in its surface and one half-circular lump protruding from the center of the portion that rests on the steel. On the other side of the “table” is another imperfect and textured half-orb from the bottom of which runs a long, white, cloth-wrapped wire ending in a small “foot” on the sculptural base.

An *assemblage* of its own, *Hold Up, Cling To*, uses the language of contingency, reliance and interconnectivity to speak of objects existing in a network of relations. The steel sheet depends on the legs to hold it, the legs depend on one another, the objects on the surface depend on the support-structure as a whole. The cord that connects the base to the object on the surface is meant to symbolize an umbilical cord or a power cord: something bringing life-force or energy from one thing to another. The relationship between the two lumpy half-orbs on the surface of the “table” gives the impression that the white form is trying to traverse the table to get back to its pink sibling.

I see a connection between *Hold Up, Cling To* and Eva Hesse’s earlier works in my use of bodily, textured lumps and cloth-wrapped cords. Hesse is a foundational influence for my practice. Early on in my undergraduate education I experienced an exhibition of her Studio Works which contributed to my desire to work in sculpture. Often, when reflecting on my work, I can see her impact on me, even if only in subtle material decisions. This functions as a reminder that as an artist I am also interdependent and enmeshed in a “family” of artists that paved the way for my practice, teaching me through their work.

In addition, one of the most prominent influences for *Never Alone* was contemporary artist Nairy Baghramian. Iranian-born but living in Berlin, Baghramian works in sculpture, drawing and photography. Broadly speaking, her work relates to relationships between architecture, everyday objects and the human body. Many of the works have an abstracted relationship with human anatomy. Yet, as Paulina Pobocha observes in an interview for Ocula Magazine Baghramian’s sculptures “not only resemble bodies, however—they also behave like bodies. Their individual elements work together like anatomical systems—propping up, supporting, and sustaining each other.” This interconnectivity present in Baghramian’s work is one of the aspects that has informed my own practice and specifically *Never Alone*.

I first encountered Baghramian work at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2017 during the run of her exhibition *Déformation Professionnelle* (Figure 18). I had a strong visceral and emotional response to these sculptures, feeling their presence as abstract figures occupying physical space with me. I felt both confronted and comforted by these inanimate bodies. The way some of her forms held each other created a sense of intimacy. The way some seemed to be reaching out inspired a feeling of longing. Upon reflecting on Baghramian’s exhibition and my encounter with it, I realized then that I

wanted to redefine the scale and installation of my work so that I could create similar embodied experiences for viewers.

As my collection of sculptures continues to grow, I will create other *assemblage*-style installations akin to *Never Alone*. For my final exhibition of thesis works, I intend to employ a similar logic to curate and arrange a portion of the overall “family” of sculptures within the space of the gallery. While specific characters included in *Never Alone* will make an appearance, their relations and orientations will be different, thereby creating new dialogues. In many ways, I consider this project not to be fixed. I think of my creative production as a run-on sentence: ongoing without an end in sight. Therefore these moments of exhibition are not periods, denoting finality, but commas. In other words, moments of breath that always lead to something more.

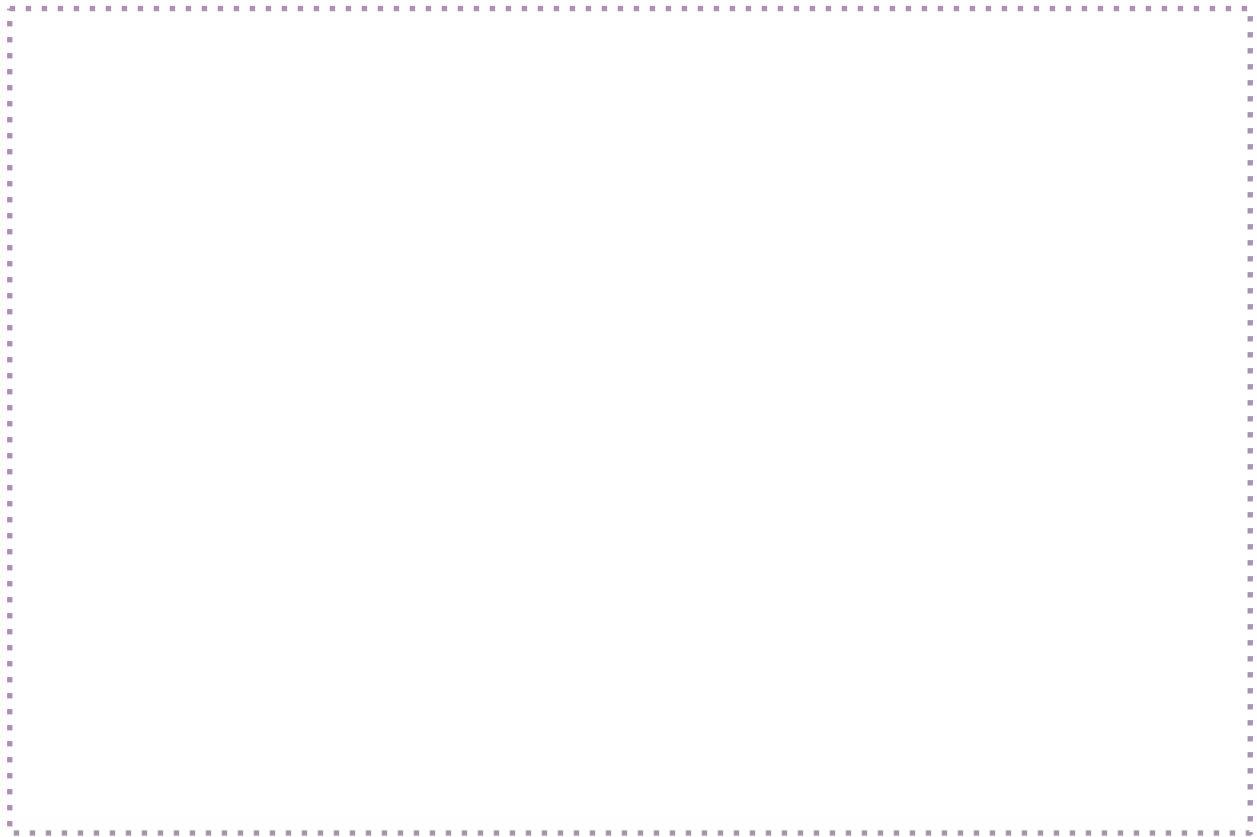


Figure 18, Nairy Baghramian, *Déformation Professionnelle*, 2017. *Image removed due to copyright restrictions*

EXIT POINT

At the onset of this paper I said that likely no definitive answers would be found within these pages, but you were promised possibilities, propositions, potentialities. I hope that through the sharing of my personal context, the nature of my artistic process, and the multiple veins of research that maintain this body of work, that I have delivered on that promise. Yet it is also my hope that within the dialogue between the sculptures and this text, I have left space for the physical pieces to have their own voice.

Sometimes the exit point is the same as the entrance: we loop our way around and crawl back out the same window we came in through. This may leave us ready to enter something new, to slip in through a different hole. I believe there is always more than one way to come and go, countless ways to be inside of something. Like my sculptures, I intend for my writing to be porous, to have space inside of it for us to move and breathe. I like to think, whether built with material or with words, that a work is never truly finished, just resting. Ideas grow, morph, reproduce or swallow themselves whole. Therefore even as I close this document I assure you, there are other openings.

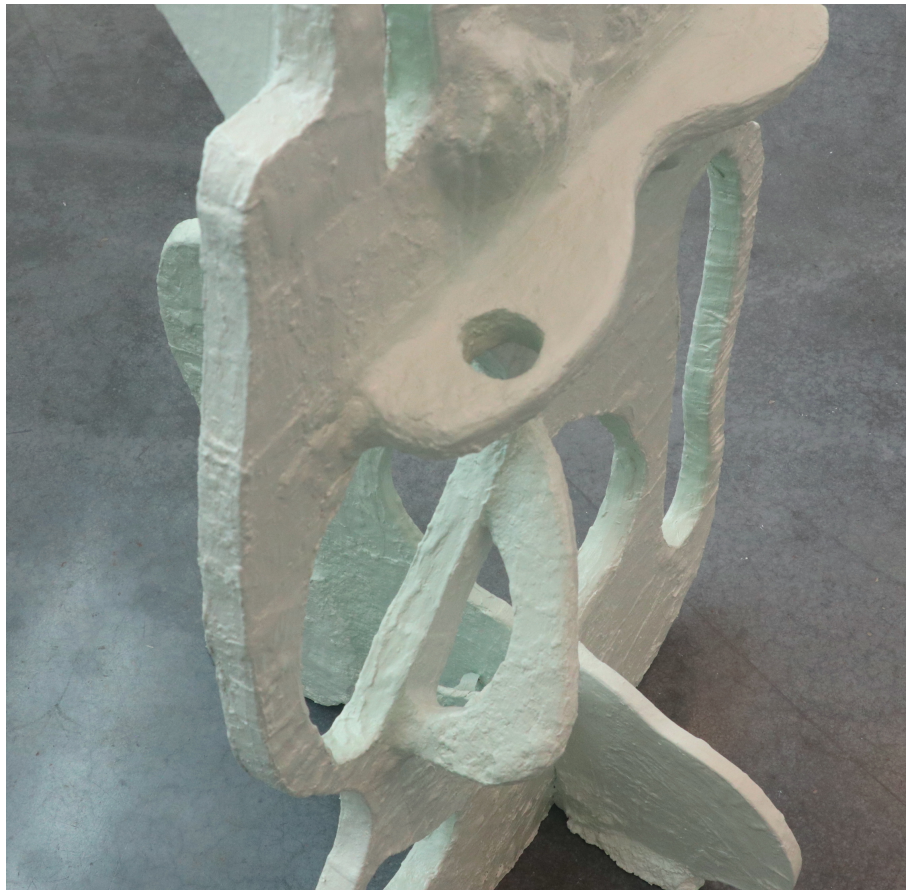


Figure 19, Melina Bishop, *Coming Is Also Going* (detail) 2020.

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