

In Process

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BFA Concordia University 2017

A Thesis Support Paper Submitted In Partial Fulfillment Of The
Requirements For The Degree Of
Master Of Fine Arts

Emily Carr University of Art + Design 2022

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To me the making process is an intimate affair, intimate with my body, my hands and my time. Something that I don't know yet and that takes place and imposes itself under my hands and before my eyes. In retrospect, I remember a time full of pleasant contact. During the work, a lot of things are not clear, but that's alright, because later I can see where I was in my thoughts and then I can see the work. Then I can think about it, whatever I want, because in retrospect everything is possible and allowed. There is never just one version of something; every story becomes part of the work of art.

Henk Visch

Introduction

Over the course of my time in the MFA program at Emily Carr University, I have been motivated by an interest in my material surroundings. This began as an inquiry into synthetics and veneer, moved into a concern over the material makeup of mass-produced furniture and has morphed into a more general interest in aesthetic and form. My desire is for a continuous and deepening relationship between myself and the material world through process-based exploration. The resting periods between “sets” of work are necessary for me to absorb what’s come before and expand upon it, however there can be wisdom in looking back and not charging blindly forward.

My thesis is therefore an inquiry into my process of material engagement throughout the MFA program. During this time, I haven’t considered any set of sculptures as complete but rather as a movement into whatever came next. I’m curious about finding through lines in the work, and in considering past methods of creation. In so doing, I hope to reaffirm to the reader, and to myself, the importance of patience, of attending and responding to one’s surroundings while knowing that the movement of process will be towards ever more resonant forms of making.

I begin by outlining my background and interests, and how they have shaped my engagement with methodology and making. Through case studies of five sets of work created over my time at Emily Carr, I then describe a process of experimentation that has evolved and expanded through different forms of material engagement, which is still ongoing. These case studies make apparent that my apparatus of making is reliant on chance, accident, and failure, and that the making is inextricably tied to a larger process of living, conversing, and attending to the world. To be clear the thesis project is not a single, fully realized work but rather is made up of the accumulation and accretion of a number of singular works.

Acknowledgments

This thesis support document has come about consonant to my material practice. It has had many iterations. Its structure, material, and philosophical form would not have taken shape without a diverse community of friends, objects, and physical encounters. I would first like to acknowledge that the research and work that have gone into the thesis have been conducted on the unceded land of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh nations. I'm very grateful to currently be placed here.

Thank you to everyone who had a conversation with me that prompted inspiration; to everyone who helped me carry something heavy, who drove me to pick up an item from the Craigslist free section, who held the door as I shuffled past with a bulky object or sent me artist and image recommendations. I'm in large part made up of all that I take in and have been lucky to be part of such a rich and diverse community here at Emily Carr for the past two years.

Thank you to Randy Lee Cutler, for your honesty and commitment to guiding me so that the form of my writing could be reflective of the form of my making.

Thank you to Alla Gadassik and Gina Adams for guiding me in my teaching tangential to my own learning (of which there was quite a bit of cross over).

Thank you to Ruth Beer, for providing inspiration on how to engage critically and affectionately with sculpture.

Thank you to Emily Hermant for providing an outlet for all the sorts of making I love but don't fit into my own practice.

Methodological Context

The Scientific Method

My first area of study was Environmental and Wildlife Management. My primary role as an environmental and wildlife manager was to “survey” water, trees, mammals, aquatic plant life etc. I found the constant naming, categorizing, numbering, and explaining problematic, never mind the cutting, prodding, and snatching required for field work. What complicated this was that I in fact excelled at organizing data, memorizing names, and listing off parts. However, in doing so, I felt profoundly distanced from the “things” themselves. What I desired was to see the world as real as myself, to see its intricacy as subject rather than object.

My method of making still tends towards certain associations with scientific analysis. I dissect a mass-produced object. I categorize materials. I test different combinations and strive for a certain amount of order in these actions. In a visual arts context, this could tend towards classicism. However, coming from a non-plastic arts background, my level of craftsmanship and the wonkiness of the found materials I work with won't allow for it. I must celebrate and accept that things will go awry and that there is much out of my control.

Sculptor Thea Djordjadze (fig. 1) expresses a method of making in which accident and intervention play a large part in the process:

What I was saying about mastering each situation is more about taking things as they are, and then in accepting the freakness of accidents somehow gaining control over it as well. It's ambiguity: we are the owners of our ambiguity. When you are young you think that if you are one thing, then you cannot be another, but after a while you understand you have to allow for both possibilities, or that you are sometimes more one way or more the other depending on the circumstances (Maerkle).

Djordjadze's method is inspiring in that it leaves room for ambiguity and breakage. My material experimentation come from a desire for clarity that relies on failure. I begin with a visual proposition and the materials speak back, showing me the ways in which I'm wrong. The final piece is a record of that dialogue rather than an expression of any preconceived notion of the truth that I might hold.

(Without) Losing Oneself

Leaving the world of science in search of a more poetic form of expression, I gravitated towards performance. I began a theatre program with the intention of pursuing acting

but found myself drawn towards puppetry. Object performance requires an engagement in the scene while remaining technically distanced from it, participating while observing one's own movements to adjust the effect. I became curious about increasing the attention on the object and removing myself completely, which is what ultimately led me to sculpture.

Some of my performer's habits still linger. I can't help but put my body into the process, both in the making (rolling office chairs miles back to school to take them apart, carrying 8' x 8' metal structures up four flights of stairs) and in my approach to the sculptures themselves (lifting them, lying on them, crawling through them). My body is always in relationship to the objects' physical bodies. In some ways I'm creating a performance between viewer and object. Sculptor Gordon Hall (fig. 2) describes creating objects that can "activate themselves ... through the way they are made combined with a highly engaged mode of viewership...they suggest possible physical uses, whether or not these uses ever occur" (13). I'm inspired by Hall's egalitarian treatment of object bodies and human bodies. In directing bodies through space, I'm facilitating a physical mirroring with the objects and a visually tactile experience.



Fig. 1 *Brothers and Sisters*, Gordon Hall, 2018
Courtesy of the artist

Studio

The studio can be a refuge. Having gone through the MFA program in tandem with the pandemic, it provided a space to inhabit outside of home, a zone of productivity when things were feeling small. My studio goes through frequent transformations based on the projects I'm working on. Sometimes it's a laboratory, a factory, or a living room. It has also functioned as a container for a variety of psychological states. In my first year, going to the studio acted as a form of escape from personal anxiety. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard stresses that spaces "house" our psychic states while affecting them in turn (8). My studio, which during that first year was configured into a chaotic workshop of toxic synthetic materials, both reflected my feelings of claustrophobia and confusion, while fueling them.

Towards the end of the first year of study, and into the next, I spread into other areas. The hall outside my studio, two storage spaces and an empty studio, the ventilation booth, the metal shop, the flexible materials lab, all became depositories for my objects, little pieces of me that I needed to travel to, to check up on and rearrange. This method of working had a few affects. It encouraged me to remain in motion, which made it easier to engage physically while making. It also allowed for unexpected combinations. In bringing a piece of fabric from storage into my studio, or a piece of metal into the flexible materials lab, new material links and groupings could occur.

I'm drawn to the adventure inherent in moving heavy or unwieldy objects. I rely on the kindness of strangers who open doors or offer a hand in lifting pieces onto dollies. I run into professors or students of my own while carrying items larger than myself and have conversations about what I'm holding. All of this feels like relationship and association building between myself and the objects and a way of testing or measuring them with my body.

Writer Sara Ahmed writes about the positionality inherent in relationships with objects:

We are turned toward things. Such things make an impression upon us. We perceive them as things insofar as they are near to us, insofar as we share a residence with them. Perception hence involves orientation; what is perceived depends on where we are located, which gives us a certain take on things (27).

The objects in our lives have habitual functions and placements which become imperceptible, or at the very least implicit. In taking objects into different spaces, observing them from different angles (low, high, on the wall, on their side) and in finding different ways of perceiving them physically (resting on my hip, close to my face

so that I can smell the plaster or concrete) I develop a more expansive view of those objects and their material possibilities.

In some ways my studio extends beyond the social fabric of the Emily Carr building and into the city. Gathering materials from Home Depot or Craigslist takes on an importance through its physical challenges. I don't have a car and so will walk lengths of two by four, bags of plaster, and scrap materials I find in alleyways back to my studio. This allows me to bring my art practice into the world and to imbue my art practice with it. I create materially as a way of engaging with my lived experience, and as a frame through which to make sense of the precariousness and uncertainty that I often feel. In manipulating materials, things inevitably fall apart, which can lead to more exciting iterations. In becoming comfortable with a process of destabilization and transformation in the studio, I create a roadmap for approaching similar conditions in my life. The constraints I set for myself in making act as boundaries on the world, and allow me to focus on immediate, tangible forms of experience, which can be expanded outwards.

A Note on Presentation

In the next section, I present case studies of five collections of work created during the MFA program. Each collection tackles a different topic of experimentation. This style of presentation reflects my desire for delineation.

Each section consists of the following:

Leading Question: Topic of study

Materials: Materials used to create the work

Background: Any information that was relevant preceding the material process

Method: A personal account of my process of making

Discussion: Thoughts on the work after the fact

Culmination: What I took forward into the next set of work

Case Study 1: Fall 2020
Experiment: Consumption



Fig. 2 *Untitled (Peeling)*, 2020



Fig. 3 *The Bones of My Enemies*, 2020



Fig. 4 *Untitled (Scraping)*, 2020

Leading Question

How can the materiality of synthetics relate to ideas surrounding consumption?

Materials

The Bones of My Enemies
PVC Leather

Untitled (Peeling)
PVC Tubing

Untitled (Scraping)
IKEA Tarendo table

Background

I began my first semester of the MFA program with an interest in plastic. I was drawn to the leaching of synthetics into bodies and biospheres. Heather Davis' writing on the intimacy of synthetics, how they have shapeshifted their way into the most vulnerable human acts (eating, clothing, sex) was especially intriguing to me. I was uncertain how to tackle this issue through a visual medium and therefore gave myself free reign to buy as many materials as needed. However, I had trouble engaging with the materials in a sustained way. Midway through the semester, I took stock of my studio. It was filled with unused plastics, which felt both financially and materially wasteful. And so, I decided to delve into the materiality of the objects already in my possession and my own relationship to consumption.

Method

The Bones of My Enemies was the piece that incited a transition in my material process. I had been constructing an armature made of PVC and PVC cement, which I planned on shaping into a human form covered in PVC leather. Midway through the process, the frame began to collapse. I felt defeated and pulled what remained of it to pieces. On my walk home that evening, I thought about that pile of PVC. What was it really? Not a human body or a representation of one. It was a pile of white, broken structural elements. It is "The Bones of my Enemies", I thought to myself. This title felt like a clear representation of the object I had accidentally created.

Untitled (Peeling) began as an idea to carve text into a sheet of PVC leather (initially intended to wrap around the PVC armature). I wanted a straight line, which almost immediately became crooked, and so decided to peel the whole surface. I was intrigued by the gesture of "skinning" a piece of fake leather. In so doing, I could treat the

material in a way that reflected its veneer (of skin), while revealing what it was made of (PVC).

For *Untitled (Scraping)*, I had first thought to mold the melamine overlay on the tabletop and cast it in resin. Realizing that this idea was a bit convoluted, I began to chip away at the veneer to reveal the particleboard beneath. Once again, I was left with the object laid bare (a functional table whose surface was now particleboard) and the multitudinous pieces of its surface. The markings made from the chisel on the surface of the table were visible, indicating the physical action.

Discussion

I presented these works as process explorations, however *The Bones of My Enemies* felt like it had reached its culmination point. It relied on a title as a way of framing or enhancing a simple physical gesture.

I was more intrigued by the act of peeling and scraping, revealing what lay beneath the surface. I was curious about exploring traces, in the manner of Elana Herzog's staple pieces (fig. 5). Both focus on a physical gesture and the traces it leaves behind. Whereas Herzog's attention is on the unified whole of staples and fabric, my pieces were a dialogue between the objects and the remains of their veneer.

Fig. 5 *Untitled 2*, Elana Herzog, 2001
Courtesy of the artist



In thinking through veneer, I was drawn to French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writing on the power of visual information to shape our worldview:

When we perceive a table, or a lamp on this table, we already interpret our visual sensations to a large extent. We associate them with other possible

sensations, tactile or visual—for example, of the underside of the table, its solidity, or of the other side of the lamp. We thus make a synthesis; we enunciate an invariable connection between certain actual sensations and other virtual sensations. (33)

The tendency is to see false leather and make the connection to real leather, to see a table, no matter its material makeup, as a table. In some ways the virtual sensation of a table with a melamine foil is no different than one made of wood. But the felt sensation of placing one's hands upon that table, of sitting before it and spending time with it, is very different. Peeling and scraping the veneer from these objects allowed them to remain functional while revealing their more materially unpleasant interiors (thin cotton and particleboard).

Culmination

My desire in moving forward from these experiments was to focus on physical gestures that would play with veneer while revealing the material makeup of mass-produced furniture. I was drawn to the physical labour involved in uncovering objects in this way. I transitioned into the next semester with a sense of certainty in how I would spend my time.

Case Study 2: Spring 2021
Experiment: Singularity



Fig. 6 *Sealy*, 2021



Fig. 7 *Single Seat*, 2021



Fig. 8 *Tarendo*, 2021

Leading Question

How can I give generic objects a sense of individuality which reflects their materiality?

Materials

Sealy
Sealy Mattress

Single Seat
PVC Armchair

Tarendo
IKEA Tarendo Table

Background

The objects I worked with throughout the spring of 2021 came into my life randomly. I was given a Sealy mattress by a friend who was moving, found the PVC leather chair on the Craigslist free section, and had bought the Tarendo table the semester before. I was interested in how nondescript the chair and table were. I began to research the designed palatability of IKEA. Given that low prices rely on volume, and that there is a brand expectation walking into an IKEA store, the company stocks the same items internationally, necessitating a flattening of culturally specific objects (Bell). I became interested in bringing out some sort of individuality from these generic objects and showing that their destiny wasn't necessarily to move from the factory to the warehouse to the home and (very quickly) to a garbage dump.

Methodology

I began by “skinning” the “leather” from the PVC armchair. I spent many hours with the chair, working small pieces off with my hands and a butter knife. Part of the appeal of this process was the certainty of having a material task, of feeling like I had something to do that didn't require questioning or decision making. At the same time, I began taking apart the mattress, layer by layer, categorizing each of the eight layers of foam and coil. This felt very much in my comfort zone, akin to a dissection for a scientific experiment. It allowed me to see each part in relation to the whole, and how those parts could be recombined.

I had already molded the wood veneer of the Tarendo table and cast it in resin the previous semester, then peeled the veneer to reveal the particleboard beneath. I had had some notion that once the objects were disassembled, the work would be done, mistaking my own sense of discovery and fascination with surface and interior for a transformative gesture. But the initial excitement of seeing a denuded piece of fabric such as *Untitled (Skinning)* didn't translate to the armchair. It was still just a chair. I felt

quite lost and spent most of the semester struggling to figure out what these objects meant, what gesture and form would allow me to bring out their individual character.

Many of the gestures I chose were purely representational (look, here are all the parts of a mattress) or too removed from the object itself (a cut-out of my body made up of all the layers of mattress). The whole process was incredibly laboured (metaphorically and physically) and involved multiple iterations, putting things together, taking them apart, setting up and tearing down. The objects began to feel like extensions of myself and my mental state, which was devolving into misgivings and irritation. British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott has written about transitional objects, possessions which allow the owner the illusion that they control reality (through manipulating the object to their will). I was treating my pieces as reflections of myself but was unable to manipulate them in a way that was pleasing to me, causing frustration and turmoil for my psyche, which couldn't find the answer it desired. I realized that I needed to allow for some space between myself and my materials so that I could see them clearly.

Single Seat was the first to come together. I took inspiration from a suggestion that I use the material language of the object to expand upon it. The foam and plywood piece was made using materials from the chair held together by staples in the manner of its original construction. These were fastened to it using its inner support straps. In creating this extension, I let myself experiment with forms that felt exciting to me and reflected some of the chair's structure, rounded pieces, and tufted bits of foam. I returned the chair's covering, so that it still held its original shape but spilled outward into its new appendage.

Sealy emerged out of a combination of material experimentation (taking the coils out of their packaging and filling them with foam), association (mattresses and reclining nudes), research (the packaging is meant to keep the coils from mingling and affecting one another) and artistic inspiration (Jessi Reaves' foam pieces [fig. 9]).



Fig. 9 *You're There Again Armchair*, Jessi Reaves, 2015
 Courtesy of the artist, Herald St and Bridget Donahue
 Photo by Andy Keate

Tarendo was inspired by Reaves' particleboard made from glue and leftover sawdust in her studio (fig. 10). I had the idea of grinding up the *Tarendo* tabletop and mixing it with glue to make new shapes. The idea of table legs came up in conversation with a friend, and I decided that the new "particleboard" should be used to fill out the table's legs.



Fig. 10 *Shelf for a Log*, Jessi Reaves, 2016
 Courtesy of the artist, Herald St and Bridget Donahue
 Photo by Constance Mensch

It felt like a relief to be done, to put these objects to rest. I installed them in a classroom with low ceilings and fluorescent lighting, hiding them behind pillars and in corners to be stumbled upon, like tepid office workers who had given up on fresh air and sunlight.

Discussion

Although I had begun the semester with the intention of focusing on the materiality of the objects, I found that the constraints I'd set for myself (to only use the materials contained within the object) and my goal (to provide an individual character to each of the objects) meant that I was physically limited and that the process became more about

my own projection onto the pieces. The iteration I found for *Sealy* felt more conclusive and reflected more extensive research (material, contextual and art historical) while *Single Seat* and *Tarendo* were more provisional (and in fact *Tarendo* kept changing forms [fig. 11]).

This semester also saw a movement through deconstruction into choice-making and reconstruction. I was more implicated in the final pieces, these iterations being reflections of choices I had made in form and representation. This method of making took on the form of Derrida's deconstruction. I was dismantling the original associations held in the furniture objects and recombining them into new ones. Derrida writes about the "presence-absence of the trace", that which was always inherent but invisible and is now made visible (71). Given my limited material palette, the iterations I chose were always intrinsic to the original, while remaining only one of myriads of possibilities I could have brought out of them. Coming from an initial dissatisfaction with the original form of these objects, this form of making felt quite ruthless and analytical, reliant on rules and an almost violent destruction of old connections. It felt exhaustive and exhausting and was therefore not a form of making I wanted to continue in the future.



Fig. 11 *Tarendo*, 2021

Addendum

I showed this work during the *State of Practice (SOP)* interim show in September 2021 in a large open area with lots of natural light. I realized in watching reactions to the work in this space that it had become dense and abstruse. Without having observed the initial objects and my process in deconstructing them, removed from the setting I had chosen for them (the dim lighting, the partially obscured view) the sculptures were indecipherable. I had been attempting to create work that was accessible and allowed for an entrance point into a conversation around mass manufactured objects. Instead, I had embroiled myself in a convoluted process which left no space for the viewer. It also brought home that sculptural objects must be made in dialogue with the space in which they're being shown. I hadn't made those pieces for a large sunlit area, and so additional intervention would have been needed to make sense of the pieces there. The space acts as a frame and a container both for the viewer and the work and requires as much attention as the work itself.

Culmination

In *Generic Objects*, Moreno and Oroza outline how cultural and design spaces often transform mass-produced objects minimally using superficial free association (a bucket becomes a lampshade). They argue that this compounds the placement of these objects within their original systems of production. My own initial impulse was to create anthropomorphic pieces, a holdover from my background as a puppeteer. These forms also emerged from the copious amounts of foam (which has associations with puppetry) making up a large part of this work. Moving forward, I decided to allow myself more formal and material freedom.

Case Study 3: Fall 2021
Experiment: Assemblage



Fig. 12 *Variations on a Theme*, 2021



Fig. 13 *Variations on a Theme*, 2021



Fig. 14 *Variations on a Theme*, 2021



Fig. 15 *Variations on a Theme*, 2021

Leading Question

Can a furniture item serve as a jumping off point for material inspiration while moving away from its initial associations?

Materials

IKEA chair
Steel Rod
Mortar
Cement
Sawdust
Glue

Background

Variations on a Theme came from a desire to break out of the material limitations I'd imposed on myself with previous work. I had accumulated furniture before deciding that I wanted to pivot my style of making and subject matter, and so decided to approach the furniture more as a source of materials from which I could stray and follow outside impulses.

Methodology

I started with a chair. My first inclination was to cut the chair in half (which I did). Then for a while I had two halves of a chair. I decided to take it apart and let it become not a chair. For a while, the materials from the chair sat in piles in my studio.

Looking through Lisa Robertson's book *Occasional Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, I came upon images of a few sculptures by Elspeth Pratt from her exhibition *Doubt* (fig. 15). In the section following, Robertson writes, "We believe that the object of architecture is to give happiness. For us this would mean the return of entropy and dissolution to the ephemeral" (162). This seemed like an apt companion piece to Pratt's provisional yet fanciful sculptures; accessible, cheap materials like cardboard and plywood shaped into simple forms and tacked on the wall. I admired Pratt's confidence and fearlessness in creating simple, legible, and precarious assemblages. Maintaining negative space in sculpture feels like a way of acknowledging that the work was constructed, that at one time the materials were elsewhere, in another form, and now they are here, in this form. There is a precarity in letting things remain slight or small, not overwhelming a space but simply existing within it. Leaving room around and within a sculpture allows it to be fully taken in, gives it the vulnerability of

being seen. Pratt's sculptures are joyful to behold, and "naïve" in a way that manages to translate into a tactile viewing.

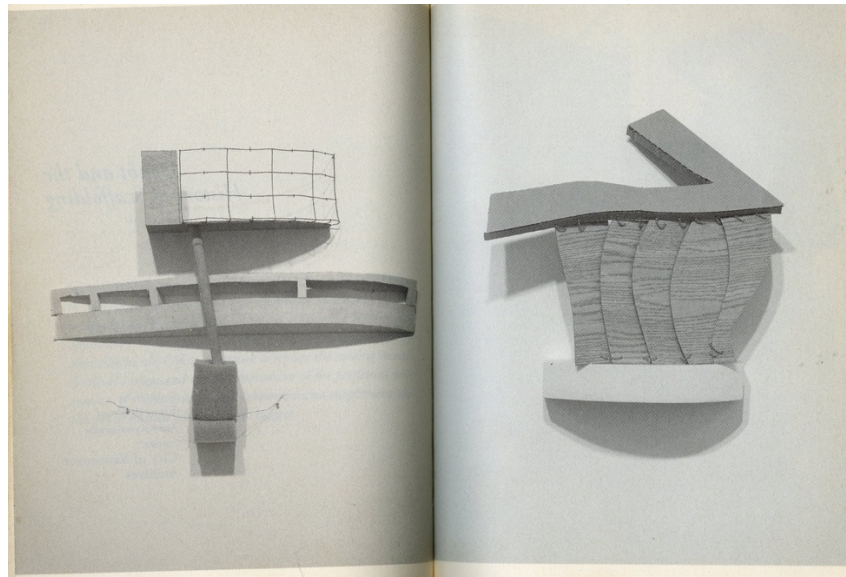


Fig. 16 Elspeth Pratt, *Doubt*, 2002
Courtesy of the artist and Artspeak

Photo from *Occasional Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*

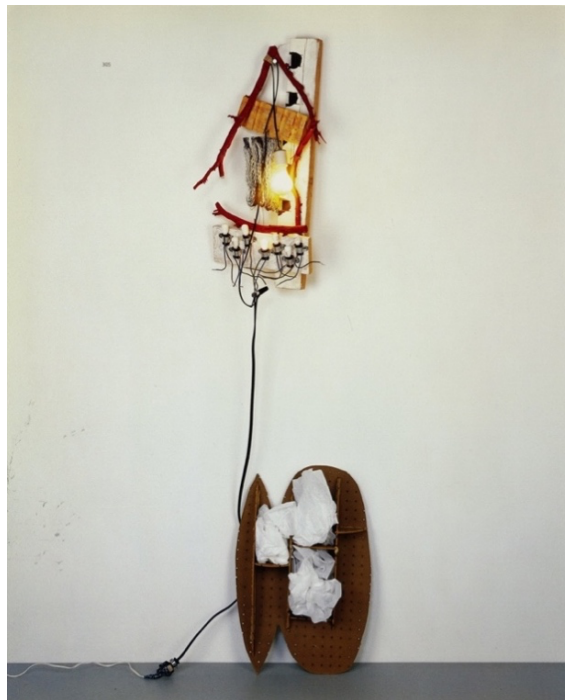
I was inspired to begin playing with the materials in my studio, and to think about ways of creating off the floor. Motivated by the language of IKEA furniture assembly, I used dowel pieces inserted into the chair pieces to fit them directly into the wall. I experimented by covering the chair foam in mortar to undercut the foam's softness and provide the illusion of its opposite. Moments that piqued my interest (the glue designs on the cardboard) were displayed, as well as resonances in form, such as a triangular concrete chunk from a cast concrete experiment, and a piece of triangular foam/mortar. I gave myself permission to maintain lots of negative space, and to be quite fearless in my experimentation, without the need to justify my decisions conceptually.

Discussion

The process of creating *Variations on a Theme* was a transition away from a more constrained and literal use of furniture items into more material and form-based exploration. The chair acted as a starting off point or anchor for assemblage, "a stabilizing and precisely constructed structure upon which unexpected and even chaotic accumulations of objects reside" (Ellegood 25). These additional materials ranged from found to constructed, organic and synthetic, colourful, and monochrome.

Assemblage, “The fitting together of parts and pieces”, was coined by William Seitz during his 1961 *Art of Assemblage* exhibition at the MOMA in New York (Dezeuze 31). I’m interested in the potential for material conversation created through combination and alteration, one which relies on balance but can’t easily be contained in a single narrative. There is an element of improvisation in this method of making, and a knowledge that the equilibrium one finds in assortment is precarious. Richard Tuttle’s work feels exemplary of the capacity for assemblage to hold multiple meanings in a harmonious but delicate balance.

Fig. 17 *Rose Long*, Richard Tuttle, 1989
 © Richard Tuttle, courtesy Pace Gallery
 Photo from *The Art of Richard Tuttle*.



What I’m drawn to in Tuttle’s work is his defined sense of flowing energetic imagination. His pieces are attempts to embody fundamental aesthetic experiences, and are both materially readable, in the sense that I can look at one of his sculptures and identify all the materials used, while being multilayered, unexpected, and formally balanced. In my own work, I desire to attune myself to a language of materials that is my own but translates into a physically and visually legible presentation.

Culmination

The fall semester was an exciting time for formal and material exploration. Working on the wall allowed me to incorporate balance and negative space in my work in a way that hadn’t been present before. Moving forward, I decided to abandon furniture as a starting point, and to focus my attention on the material combinations I’d found the most compelling.

Case Study 4: Winter 2021
Experimentation: Weight



Fig. 18 *Support Systems*, 2021



Fig. 19 *Support Systems*, 2021



Fig. 20 *Support Systems*, 2021.



Fig. 21 *Support Systems*, 2021.



Fig. 22 *Support Systems*, 2021.

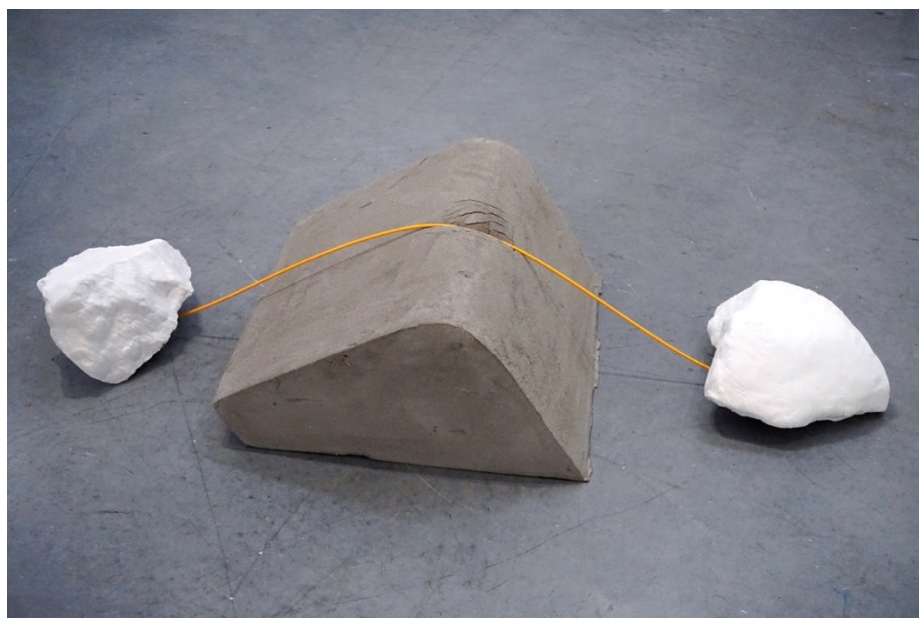


Fig. 23 *Support Systems*, 2021

Leading Question

How do I introduce levity into heavy infrastructural materials?

Materials

Foam
Mortar
Steel Rod
Spray Paint
Rocks
Plaster

Background

In creating *Support Systems*, I took what was successful from *Variations on a Theme*, the activation of the “concrete foam” by the steel rod and expanded upon that.

Methodology

My first impulse, at the suggestion of a friend, was to explore the scale of the previous iteration of the “concrete foam” and steel rod piece. I found a cheap foam mattress on Facebook marketplace, and had a friend pick it up with me in her car (it barely fit in the back seat). I wanted to contrast the bigger foam piece with more delicate rod, and so sized down from 1/4” to 1/8” rod. I welded together an 8’ x 8’ grid (the maximum width of the doorways at Emily Carr), choosing to skew some of the right angles. I carried the grid up four flights of stairs from the basement metal shop to my studio, hoping for helping hands at each doorway, and found a spare studio in the grad area where I could insert the foam into the grid and cover it in mortar.

I was enamored by how foam absorbs mortar, the ability to smooth it into a perfect thin crusty surface. I found more foam pieces on Marketplace and covered them all. Some were reminiscent of bricks, others of sections of a wall, or structural supports.

I wanted to experiment with different ways of showing their weight. The grid both crushed and lifted the foam, while a straight rod balanced a foam brick in the air, a playful and irreverent take on the serious masculinity of Carl Andre’s *Equivalent* series (fig. 22). Andre’s intention was to define space with the matter-of-fact materiality of his firebrick piles, removing the plinth as a way of incorporating them into the surrounding environment (Tate). My bricks defied their materiality, sitting precariously held against the wall. Rather than evoking solidity and “reality”, they were meant to draw the viewer

into a space of imagination, and to provide a whimsical contrast to the white cleanliness of the gallery with the primary-red rod.



Fig. 24 *Equivalent VIII*, Carl Andre, 1966
 © Carl Andre/VAGA, New York and DACS, London 2022
 Photo from the Tate.

I used rocks in my studio to weigh down a piece of rod crushing another foam piece, but the rocks felt too elemental within the context of the rest of the work. I had been experimenting with painting plaster in the same way that I was painting concrete and decided to try painting the rocks. I was attracted to the texture that came from painting with plaster, a wave-like quality that masked the stone underneath. Were these rocks plaster cast, slip cast or just rocks covered in plaster? In contrast to the light foam that I was offering as heavy concrete, it was exciting to cast doubt on the weight of heavy rocks and give the illusion that they might be made of a lighter material.

Discussion

Support Systems was presented in such a way that viewers were directed on a pathway through the work, with the possibility of approaching and “measuring” themselves

physically against each piece. Merleau-Ponty writes that “The body is in the world, gravity operates on it as we sense it operating on objects” (90). What does it do to a body to see a piece of solid concrete, the building block of our infrastructure and architecture, suspended by a small amount of steel rod, or cracking under the pressure of rod and two cast plaster rocks? There is a disorientation that occurs, an opening up of the possibility of one’s own physical frame suddenly lifting and taking flight.

In working with stereotypically heavy, dirty materials, I was interested in lifting them out of entropy and towards a sort of incorporeality. There is a sense of inevitability or neutrality attached to infrastructure, even as it continues to change and push certain agendas and ideologies. I was interested in how whimsy and levity could act as forms of insurrection. The primary colour of the steel rod, and the placement of the one block against the light switches, served to combat any self-seriousness that the materials might hold. In the sculptural tradition of “truth to materials”, colour is discouraged as it “emphasizes the optical and in so doing subverts the physical” (Smithson 5). The focus becomes more on surface than on composition or form. As these pieces were based on the paradox of surface/interior, colour could be used as an additional “ruse”, masking the solidity of the steel with bright cheap spray paint.

Culmination

Support Systems was an opportunity to experiment with scale, surface texture, and the displacement of weight. As I moved forward, my goal was to add to my material language and experiment more with colour.

Case Study 5: Spring 2022
Experiment: Precariousness

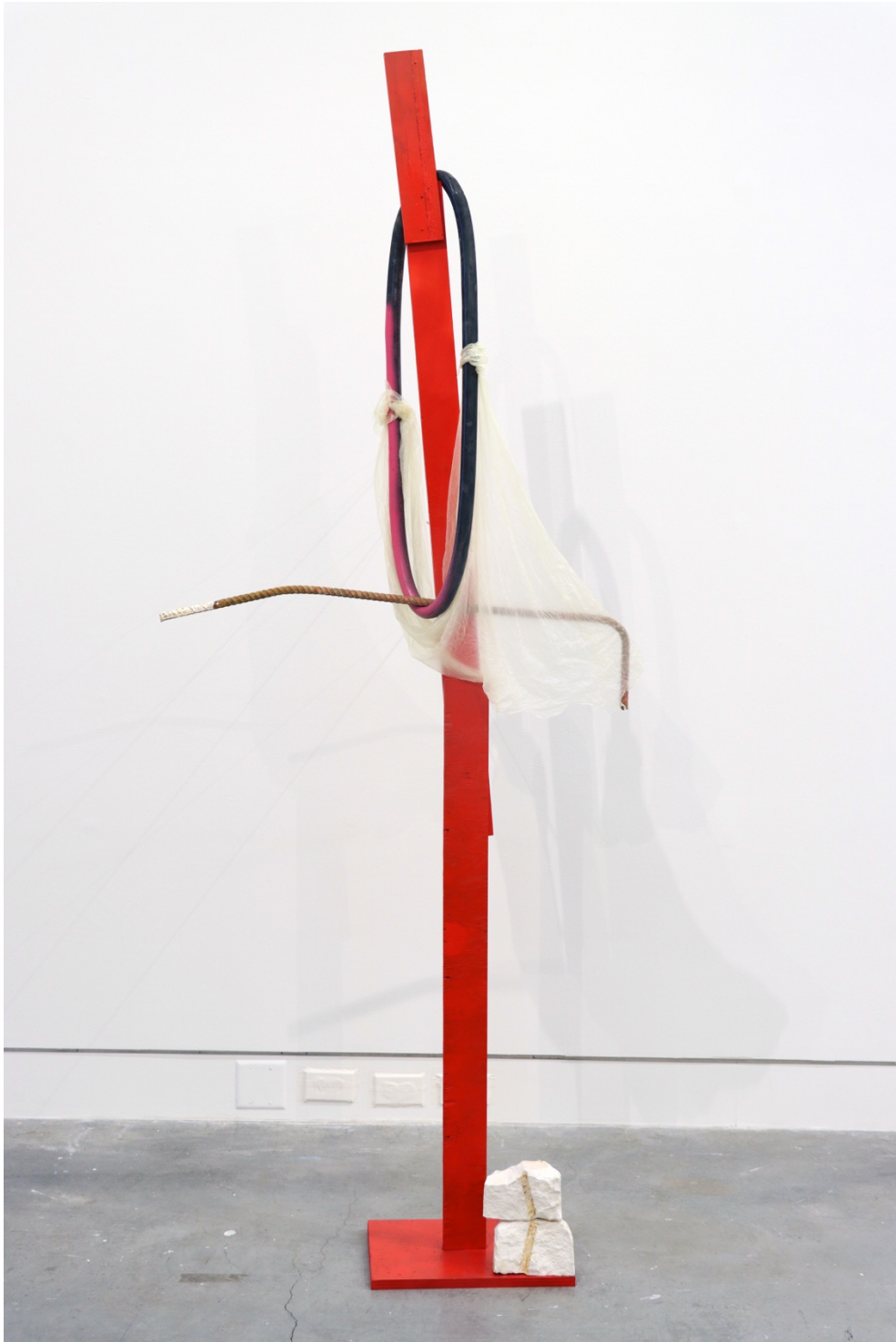


Fig. 25 *Construction 5*, 2022



Fig. 26 *Construction 1*, 2022



Fig. 27 *Construction 2*, 2022



Fig. 28 *Construction 3*, 2022



Fig. 29 *Construction 4*, 2022



Fig. 30 *Construction 6*, 2022



Fig. 31 *Construction 7*, 2022

Leading Question

Can sculpture hold objects in a state of precarity (the moment before collapse)?

Materials

Wood	Metal Rod
Rubber Tubing	Plaster
Concrete	Brick
Foam	Fabric
Mortar	Spray Paint

Background

I was satisfied with the work I had created in the fall of 2021 and granted myself quite a bit of time over the holidays to recalibrate. This allowed me to return to the studio in early 2022 with new ideas, eager to get to work and create new pieces for the final semester.

Methodology

My focus entering the final semester of the MFA was on free experimentation, form, and colour. I was inspired by Richard Tuttle's piece *Village II, Sculpture* (fig. 24) to try creating red "glitter" bricks. My roommate had received a package sealed in Styrofoam blocks, and I first tried spray painting those. They did not look like bricks, and so I decided to spray paint actual bricks.

I had the idea of balancing a broken wood 2 x 4 and a large piece of rubber from a construction site. I nailed the rubber into the wall and found the balancing point that would allow it to hang unimpeded. Because the rubber was heavier than the wood, it sagged in the middle and then lifted upwards.

Fig. 32 *Village II, Sculpture*, Richard Tuttle, 2003
 © Richard Tuttle, courtesy Pace Gallery
 Photo from *The Art of Richard Tuttle*.



In discussing *Support Systems* with a friend, they suggested I combine the rod and the foam, so that they become one assemblage rather than two entities existing in dichotomy. This type of experimentation had varying levels of success. I found that having them as a unitary entity in some ways removed the activation of the pieces and left them a bit static. It did, however, allow me to think about different ways that the foam and rod could exist together.



Fig. 33 *Stabilized Structure*, 2022

This also freed up use of the plaster rocks which had been a part of *Support Systems*. I had the idea of suspending grids on the rocks so that they appeared to bisect them, and to be floating mid-air.

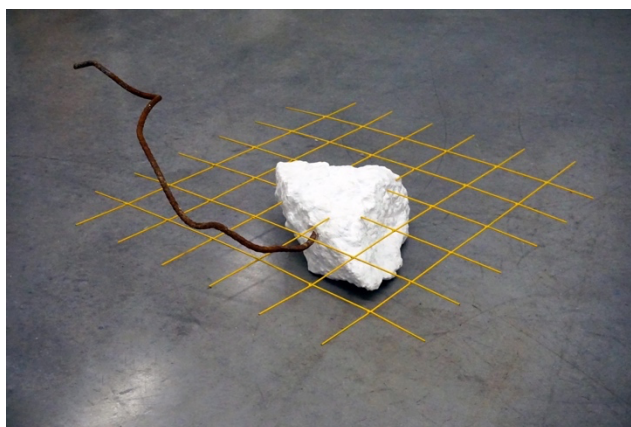


Fig. 34 *Extended Armature*, 2022

Although I did like this iteration, it ended by disappearing into the ground when placed there, and risking getting stepped on. I decided to experiment with height and make a false “rock” out of insulation foam that could be painted in the same way as the cement and fitted onto the end of the rebar. The cement section was then balanced on one of the “glitter bricks”.

In the last few weeks before the thesis exhibition, I set my work up in the grad gallery space and realized that some forms felt repetitive, or just weren’t working. It was humbling to feel the same sense of doubt so late in the program, and to have to dig deeper so close to showing the work. I went back to the materials in my studio once more and tried different combinations. Each one began with an idea for a material gesture and at some point, failed, forcing me to rethink and expand my idea.

Construction 3 remained the closest to my original concept. I had intended for it to be one shade of yellow, but in leaving it around the studio, it picked up dirt and stains and looked quite messy. I decided to paint over it but only had a darker shade of yellow

available. I painted one side, during which time the spray paint can malfunctioned and started spurting out gobs of colour. In looking at it after it dried, I quite liked the staining on the original side and decided to leave it coloured two shades of yellow.

My initial idea for *Construction 7* was to create a hanging blue foam and plaster piece that would be pinned against the wall. After the foam repeatedly cracked, I gave up on that section but still quite liked the orange and black wood piece. I had *Stabilized Structure* lying around my studio and decided to try pinning it against the wall. I ended up being much more satisfied with this iteration.

In discussing the work with a friend, they mentioned that weathered plywood would fit well with the materials I already had in production. I asked them to help find some to bring to the studio with me. A house near mine was under construction, and so I grabbed a piece from their bin. My initial idea was to cut holes in it like windows and drape old plastic wrap in them, with a stack of plaster rocks in front. I tried cutting a hole with a jigsaw, which made a crooked line. I tried again and got the same result but liked the double frame I'd created. I decided to paint them contrasting colours. Initially I was going to paint the entire board but decided to keep the detail beneath and lacquer it well to give it a plastic-like sheen. I tried stacking the plaster rocks behind it, but they kept falling. Piling them beneath allowed the board to be balanced precariously, a position which became even more tenuous when I placed the piece against a column in my installation space. This allowed the raw back side of the board to be seen.

During open studios, I'd thrown together some of the materials in my studio to demonstrate the type of work I was making. I balanced a rebar on an inner tube spray painted pink. I quite liked this combination and decided to create a piece around it. My first idea was to cast the rebar in plaster as a sort of stand. This felt too simple, and so I broke the plaster apart. I then wanted to create a large wooden structure from which the inner tube would hang. It consisted of two tall precarious wooden structures with stands, and one long thin piece joining them at the top. I brought them up to my studio disassembled, and quite liked the look of them in that state. I decided to use just one of the wooden pieces. I painted it bright red and hung the inner tube from a nook near the top, balancing the rebar against it. I had some fabric I had dyed red earlier in the spring and attached a small square to the bottom. I then had the idea of wrapping some yellowed plastic from storage around the rebar and inner tube as a sort of cradle and placing the broken plaster on the stand. Because I hadn't intended for this wooden structure to stand on its own, it was quite unstable. I decided to attach it to the wall using three metal rods, all painted red.

I wanted the final exhibition to be a chaotic jumble of brightly coloured, precariously balanced objects. These assortments wouldn't easily relate to one another, but rather

live as layers of complementary form and colour. In the rush to complete all this work, there was no time to second guess myself, and I had to go off impulse. Working in this way, there's a high probability of failure, but also of big leaps in material understanding. Only in going through the process can I see what will come out of it on the other side.

Discussion

While I identify with Robert Smithson's writing on the entropy and banality of modern infrastructure, I would argue that precarity is the defining physical identifier of our moment. In my current work, I'm hoping to evoke a sense of sustained weightlessness, the moment before collapse in which physical objects seem to defy gravity and remain held in place. Curator Anne Ellegood writes about the reflection of social precarity in contemporary sculpture:

'These are uncertain times - full of conflict, innovation, suffering, and prosperity - and a feeling that beliefs and meanings are continuously unmoored and in flux influences the way we perceive and operate in the world. It is this sense of uncertainty' - in relationship to geopolitics, nationhood, culture, economics, and even our ecosystem, all of which seem to be in a state of unrest - that the artists...reflect upon and mirror in their sculpture, which asks us, broadly, to consider the social implications of this ambiguous condition and, specifically, how sculpture can wrestle with such a position. (19)

As I mentioned towards the beginning of this text, making for me is a method of framing the world as I experience it and translating it into material form. And so, my current work has focused on the precarity I feel personally in leaving the MFA program, and in living in a world still reeling from the pandemic, facing the catastrophe of climate crisis, and political unrest. Within this precarity, there is also an openness, a sense of possibility as yet undefined. And so, within my assemblages, there is instability but also a joyous reaching. Their fate is yet to be decided and held in motion.

Addendum

When first installing the work in the thesis exhibition show, I placed tread tape around each piece. I'd intended to keep it throughout to dissuade viewers from touching the work (which had happened in an earlier exhibition). However, the tape became the focal point of all the discussions about the installation. It was very divisive, with some viewers taking to it and others insisting that it was distracting. As the focus was on the tape and not the work, I decided to remove it.



Fig. 35 MFA Thesis Installation

Once the tape was gone, I realized it had acted as a kind of buffer for the work. It justified where I had placed each piece and acted as a unifier while allowing each piece its space. In removing it, the placement of the pieces felt less certain. In the future, I would like to give this work more breathing room, so that each piece can be taken on its own, and not in combination with the others.



Fig. 36 MFA Thesis Installation

Culmination

As I was de-installing the work, I was able to envision different possibilities for the materials. For example, in moving each of the stacked rocks back to the storage area in the MFA studios and laying them down separately, I saw potential for them to be spread or balanced in ways that highlighted their sheer number. Although there may be pauses in the process, such as an exhibition, it is continuous. The materials can move and develop into new forms.

Conclusion (and continuation)

In coming to the close of the MFA program, I can't help but feel that there is an instability in conclusions. Much like Derrida's "trace", the absence of other potentials inherent in the work will always be felt. This ending feels more like the beginning of a lifelong process of exploration, of circuitously increasing clarity. Merleau-Ponty writes that:

The idea of going straight to the essence of things is an inconsistent idea if one thinks about it. What is given is a route, an experience which gradually clarifies itself, which gradually rectifies itself and proceeds by dialogue with itself and with others (Merleau-Ponty 21).

If I have learned anything during this time, it's that I can't predict how my work will evolve, how long it will take or what routes will get me there. I can only try to make myself available to the inspiration that comes through living and try to find some comfort in the unknown or as Amy Sillman describes it, "the intimate and discomfoting process of things changing as they go awry, look uncomfortable, have to be confronted, repaired, or risked, i.e., the process of trying to figure something out while doing it". In working with materials, things will always go counter to planned. Holding those moments with grace, learning to incorporate them into the process, and allowing them to transform, feels like a microcosm of the experience of working as an artist. Facing rejection, failure, and doubt, and learning to integrate them rather than resisting is a lifelong process. Each moment of resilience, of rebuilding something that feels broken, is an opportunity to travel in a yet uncharted direction.

Moving forward, I am interested in folding new inspirations, such as colour, into this method of making. As my work tends to contain threads of what came before, I see this research continuing in different forms, with new materials and artist influences. In working with assemblages, I am drawn to the aesthetics and colour of minimalist painting. Looking at work by contemporary female painters such as Amy Sillman, Brenda Draney and Erica Mendritzki had been inspiring in thinking through form, colour, and negative space.

I am interested in how covering old or decaying objects in bright colours can change the way that we interact with them. In some ways, the paint holds them in a moment of decay, preventing them from flaking or rusting further. These types of questions will provide a roadmap forward as I move out of the MFA program and into whatever comes next.

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