

CONCEPTS IN MATERIAL INVESTIGATION

By

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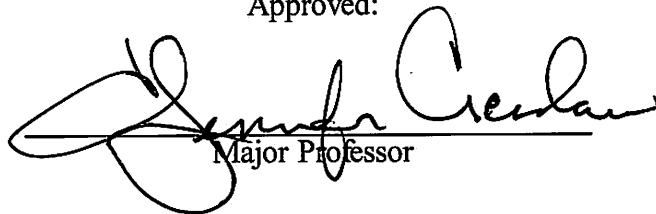
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Approved:



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My art practice and concept has drastically evolved from my first weeks at the Lamar Dodd School of Art. Initially, I was interested in using rubble and landfills as an image source to create patterns, but in the second half of the year I focused on recreating the texture and atmosphere of these toxic environments. I began my study with screen printing, again using the imagery of waste as a visual source to show a literal interpretation of this idea of waste. Towards the second half of the year I began using the scraps of printed fabric to make three dimensional works. From there I was able to consider making fabric from unconventional materials.

My first year I worked with materials that I didn't expect to use. Since I normally use traditional resources and techniques I was surprised with what I made as I explored repurposed materials in the beginning of my second year. I created sculptures and objects with stuffed animals, wires, clothing, and scraps. Probably the most unusual of these experiments is the works with toys painted over with gesso and spray paint. I believe it was important to have smaller, experimental works to develop ideas, instead of just focusing on a specific concept, or making larger, finished works at that point of my study.

There were also elective classes I took that broadened my perspective. Drawing helped me develop gestural qualities for my screen prints by drawing out my designs in charcoal or paint. In my Teaching Practicum course I was able to relearn design principles and color choices in the Color and Composition class I observed. In Imi Hwangbo's Sculptural Spaces class I was forced to work with time restraints and consider the installation site and how it could affect my work. From the experiences in my first two years I developed my ideas, materials, and sources to establish the work for my thesis.

Through my time here, I developed interests in the issues of material consumption and its effects on society, how it changes the environment and the way people live. Words like consuming, all consumed can bring up feelings of avarice and obsession. Consumption is defined as: the act of consuming, as by use, decay or destruction. Knowing this I wonder, what does it mean to buy and throw away blindly with no regard to the resources behind the production of things? And what is the legacy we leave to future generation with the creation of garbage and the depletion of resources?

In Gillian Pye's *Trash Culture* he states, "We ask what role trash might play in the representation of memory and forgetting, functioning as it does as the point of intersection between institutionalized and private memory, between the forgotten and retained, the visible and invisible"<sup>1</sup>. This is another issue that makes me reflect on the obsolescence of these items that are thrown out. I think it's interesting that there are products made for a single use and essentially designed to end up in a landfill somewhere, often without considering the negative repercussions of this act.

From an environmental standpoint, my work is about finding a way to make these obsolete objects useful again, especially if it has a more permanent maybe construction related use that keeps what is considered waste out of landfills. I'm also attracted to the way the trash is handled, what is reused or considered valuable, where it accumulates etc. In addition, there are products like PVC and other hazardous materials that are harmful to the environment but not biodegradable so I have experimented with different techniques to handle these materials, both in a creative and ethical fashion.

Essentially my intent is showing how trash affects society, both the environment and the people inhabiting it, while utilizing materials that could do harm to them if left alone. In my work I aspire to show the mass of waste in our surroundings by compacting and crushing materials together. However, I don't want the work to be strictly environmental and would like the materials to be visually unrecognizable, yet essentially relevant to the material in order to make the viewer more curious about the work itself, rather than the idea of waste and mass consumption alone.

Thinking about the impact these objects have on our lives, I am attracted to objects that are influential to people in general or a certain culture. Referring to the idea of memory and personal experiences in Pyre's quote, I at times have used discarded objects that have a stronger sentimental value like gifts, toys, holiday decorations, cards, etc. in a work. These items are more iconic because of their connection to a certain individual, yet they eventually become trash, just as everything else.

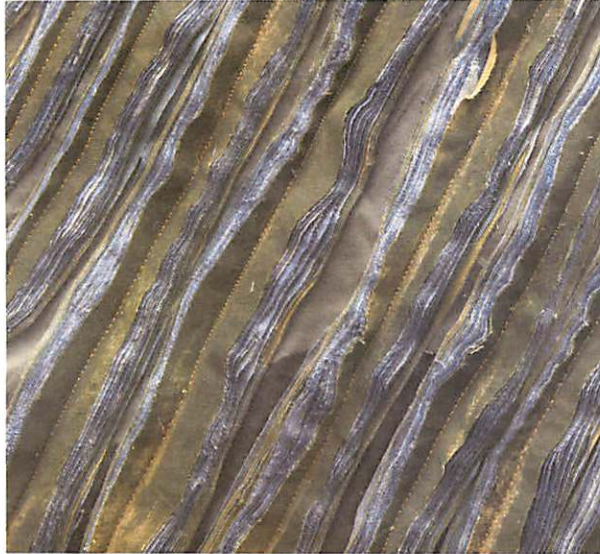


*Compact*, telephone wire, chair frame, 2012.

Considering my views on waste and consumption, I was able to develop a series of chairs, one of which was titled, *Compact*. I feel that this chair is the most strongly related to the concepts in my final year, since the material relates the chair to a past life and has a certain purpose to provide comfort and stability for an individual. However the material relates to an industrial, working class society since the imagery was drawn from an old tire lot. Visually, these landfills of tires gave a sense of abandonment. These items that were once someone's form of livelihood or a tool for transportation had become useless and lifeless. Part of the reason I decided to use recycled materials to make chairs was to make the items relevant again, and remind the user of its original purpose, as well as how much of it is often discarded. By using the form of the chair, the viewer is forced to interact with it and consider the material, with its relationships to themselves and the space around them.

I used telephone wire, which had a similar rubber-like appearance to the tires. I bought an old office chair that I stripped down to the basic frame. From there I wrapped the wires around the chair frame and wove the wire into one another to create an uneven structure. The woven material is very stiff and rough to the touch. As a chair the wire is out of the context of its original use, however aesthetically, it is very substantial. In the end replacing the fabric with wire created a chair that's weighted and strong.

In addition, there is a sense of obsolescence created by expanded technology, and the resulting waste from that change. Telephone wires are hardly used in homes since most people prefer to use their cell phones exclusively or, use wireless phones and machines. Accumulating this amount of wire shows how drastically technology has displaced traditional telephones in our society today.



Sewing Sample #1 (2012)  
Stitch and Slash technique with printed fabric remnants from 1<sup>st</sup> year work.



Sewing Sample #2 (2012)  
Stitch and Slash technique with discarded men's work shirts.



Sewing Sample #3 (2012)  
Stitch and Slash technique with found and printed fabric remnants from 1<sup>st</sup> year work.



I began to return to fabric so I could have more control of the material, physically and creatively. I started with sewing samples which were built around the idea of density and wear. I used fabric that I had dyed and collected, working with an organic collection of colors. The colors and tactile quality of the fabric gave an earthy feel that I wasn't sure how to incorporate in my thesis work. I used the stitch and slash technique by sewing on top of several layers of fabric and cutting or removing pieces to imitate depth. Using this technique I was able to create density with the materials, but the work was still lacking theoretically for me.

It was then that I started to consider gender and the associations that come with worn materials; rough, overworked, and, masculine. However, I used the stitch and slash technique specifically to create this aesthetic, since the fraying of cut fabric highlights the wear of the material in a literal sense. I was playing with these ideas as studies but it didn't fully develop since the material was still an after-thought for me other than the idea of working with used clothing and building layers.

Considering the Athens area with its large blue collar working base, it's no surprise that a lot of the discarded clothing I found was of men's work wear. Due to the abundance of this material I could easily gather and its association in society and even Athens itself, I chose to use men's work shirts as my material since it's an object with the relevant historical and cultural background that I was seeking to advance my work.

The cultural ties to the work shirts, extends to earlier periods and countries. The pattern itself holds a sense of nobility, as within Scotland, many plaids or tartans are associated with specific clans and families, and some of them have been worn for centuries. And, of course, plaids are used to make kilts, garments which are closely associated with Scottish culture and heritage. In the UK plaid patterns are commonly used in school uniforms, product labeling, and military uniforms across the United Kingdom. In addition there are companies like Burberry that sell high end clothing in plaid patterns, so it has a luxurious quality, while denoting skill and obedience as a uniform.

In North America, plaid is associated with some specific subgroups in American culture; many loggers, for example, wear plaid flannel to stay warm in the woods, and plaid has been adopted by the grunge and punk movements as well. The American perception of plaid, specifically involving general or skilled labor and plaid as a type of workers uniform is what I decided to focus on conceptually. I also felt that I could include the issue of labor and working manually to the techniques of my thesis work.

I collected bold and simple plaid shirts from thrifts stores and family members, and cut them into strips of varying widths. Then I began to bleach them to increase the appearance of wear among the material. This also allowed me to control some of the colors as the shirts were usually in very casual, traditional, gender specific colors like blue, red, black and brown. After washing out the bleach I was left with fabric that varied from solid colors, slightly bleached, and fading into the heavily whitened tones. After I dried the fabric, it was further transformed from the dryer, which left the strips frayed on the cut edges.

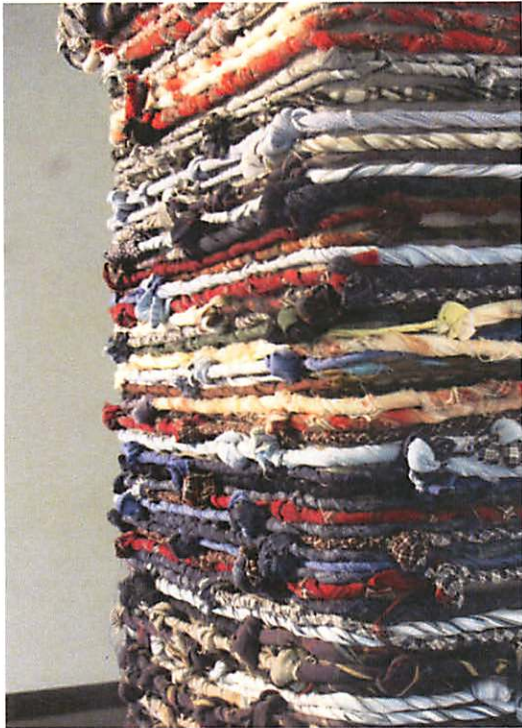
From then I started to knot the fabric, which was a technique that went on from the beginning of 2013 and continued into the fall. As I was started to move away from my more formal approach to repurposed materials and into my abstract ideas, I wanted to find a way to make my work three-dimensional, and less representational than earlier work like the chairs.



Knotting Sample (2013)  
chicken wire, discarded men's work shirts.

For my next study, I wrapped the plaid fabric around chicken wire so I could alter its shape, while the knotting became a way to add the bulk that I've been drawn to in the landfills from my previous work. It was also an attempt to take my two-dimensional work off the wall. At the time, I was interested in creating work that was more organic and dimensional, while giving the illusion that the objects were extensions of the wall. Thinking back to my interest in this vast amount of waste entering the earth and our communities, I thought of replicating this event by having the scraps of discarded clothing appearing to burst out of the wall.

However the shape and size of the small knotted sculptures wasn't convincing enough to achieve this illusion. I decided that I enjoyed the knot because of its repetitive nature and the connection to blue-collar work as a means of expressing physical labor.



*Ascension*, discarded men's work shirts, 2013.

In the Fall of 2013, I applied my ideas of working three dimensionally and interacting with the gallery space by wrapping the knotted material around one of the columns in the atrium of the Lamar Dodd school of art. This piece titled, *Ascension* helped me make concrete decisions about my thesis, as my work began to relate with the space in a more direct way. By wrapping the knotted fabric around a supportive part of the building, the material itself became just as significant to the structure of the building. The knotting method also relates to construction as it used to withold weight, and carry heavy material.

It involves working from hand like a lot of workers, yet this practice is becoming less substantial in construction with the efficiency of machines.

The idea of the working class representing this material and subconsciously supporting the building, refers to the laborer creating a stable building, which is the construction worker's main objective. From then on, I decided to incorporate other blue collar fields in my work especially ones that were important in changing the community and history of the country.



*Founding study, discarded men's work shirts, 2014.*

I wanted the work to be able to stand on its own like my previous work *Compact*, but for me this could not be achieved if this work was supported by another object, like the chair frame. Because of this I figured the knots would need to form their own fabric, without wrapping or weaving it into another object. I continued to use the bleached plaid strips, but this time combining a series of connected knots into one large piece.

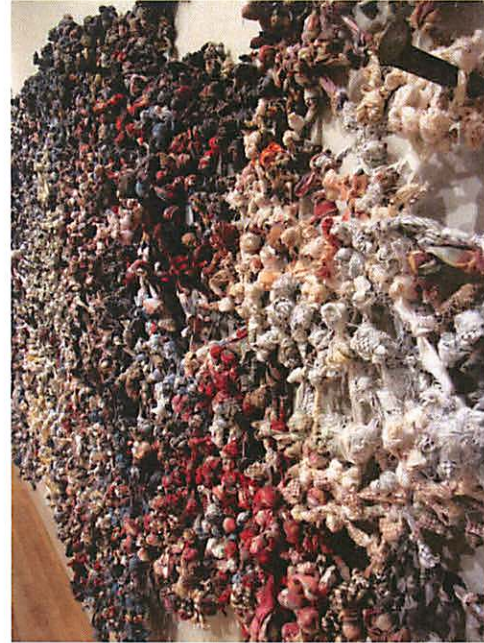
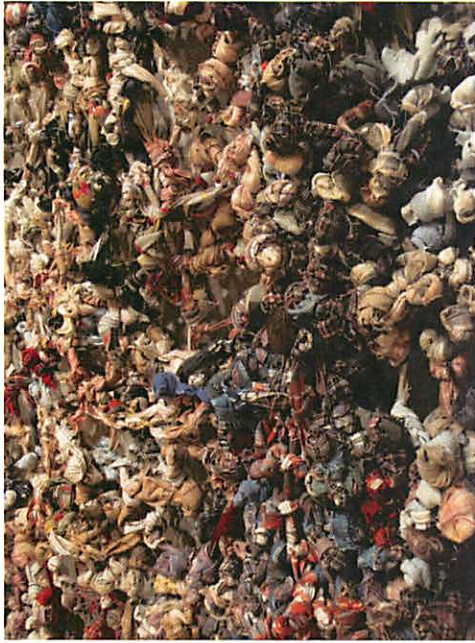
Referring back to my ideas of the working class, I focused on the construction and railroad worker as I see these two as representatives of some of the most influential types of laborers from the present and past. In 1869, the First Transcontinental Railroad opened up

the far-west mining and ranching regions. Travel from New York to San Francisco now took six days instead of six months. Railroad construction also opened up formerly isolated areas with larger markets and allowed for the rise of commercial farming, ranching and mining, creating a truly national marketplace. This railroad industry, once prosperous in creating a national market and optimizing travel has now become a forgotten or neglected industry, used for transporting goods that are too heavy and considered one of the slowest forms of transportation.

By incorporating the railroad ties into my work, I was attempting to reference this history. Since the final knotted piece resembles a topographical map, the ties sort of serve as highlighted destinations, with the strips of knotted fabric connecting the different “routes”.



*Founding*, discarded men's shirts, 2014.



*Founding (details)*

I see the work relating to construction through the process of creating it. The knots serve as small units that are built upon to become something sufficient. In a sense, it becomes an extension of the wall because of the relation of the size of the work to the space it inhabits, and the size itself implies that it is a supportive structure to the building. The grid-like pattern of the knots creates stability and the interaction between the construction of the building relates to the previous use of the shirts.

There is also the nature of making the hundreds of knots which was very labor intensive and methodical. There's a certain way of constructing the piece that creates efficient yet substantial results. I found it more beneficial to follow a specific process by gathering the materials, bleaching, cutting, washing, drying, organizing, knotting the fabric into short strips, and finally joining those strips to make large sections for the final result.

In regards to recycling, by overtaking a large part of the wall the work references the effects of waste on society.

I also made a lot of aesthetic choices in the work in reference to blue collar jobs and the conception of my earlier work, creating beauty from trash. I wanted to create subtle shifts in color to reference the overhead map that was once covered by railways, as well as uniting differing colors of the shirts, to highlight the different personas and workers that were embodied by the them.

Finally, I chose the title, *Founding* as these workers were settling unknown territory to create a more sustainable livelihood for this country. It was also about finding new uses for the materials I chose, and what techniques would effectively showcase their past and present impact on society.

Using discarded materials leaves room for experimentation as I never know exactly what I will be able to find. Though there is a variety of materials and processes for each project my methodology remains consistent. There may not always be material similarities between the different projects, but they are linked by recurring formal concerns and through the subject matter. The subject matter of each body of work determines the materials and the forms of the work. However the items used are often based on what I am able to find and what inspires or interests me.

In *Founding* the knotted technique is a reference to labor force as the plaid shirts relate to a working class. There is also a quaintness to the technique as it is all done by hand and the fatigue that results from making such a fabric is reflected in the work. The disjointed pieces display a breakdown of the material as it wears over time and hard use. The tension created by the knots, pulls the fabric in different directions, and the colors fading into one another creates a sense of unity.

Overall, the piece is a reflection of the process of using these unconventional materials that forces ingenuity in order to create it. The work can also be viewed with different conceptual functions of the work including disposable culture, working by hand, class, and labor. Alongside the history of the plaid work shirt, the knotting technique alludes to preservation, protection, and healing allowing the discarded materials to serve a new purpose.

## Bibliography

1. Gillian Pye and Simone Schroth, *Trash culture: objects and obsolescence in cultural perspective* (New York: Oxford, 2010); 3.