

FOOL'S GOLD

by

WINNIE GIER

B.F.A. UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA 2012

A Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art
of the University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Requirement for the Degree

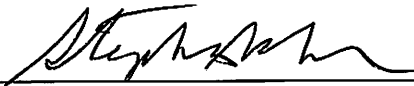
MASTER OF FINE ART

FOOL'S GOLD

by

WINNIE GIER

Approved:



Stephen Scheer, Major Professor

May 1, 2015

Date

"Art is the elimination of the unnecessary." - Pablo Picasso

I. Introduction

Every fall when I was growing up, my family spent somewhere in the mountains. We left the heat and season-less weather of Florida to go 500 miles north to see the leaves changing colors. On one of these trips, I came to possess a chunk of fool's gold. My parents bought it for me from the gift shop of some state or national park somewhere in the southeast. I think those details might make this story better, but I honestly cannot remember.

It took me a long while to select my piece from the hundreds of other nuggets that were piled in a large wooden crate. I watched as the other kids would hurriedly grab one and hand it off to their parents without inspection or consideration. Those kids did not take into consideration the luster, the weight, the number of faceted sides or how it felt in their little hands. I thought they were foolish for making such a quick and frivolous choice. How could they possibly expect to get the perfect piece if they did not even look at it, or at least comb through a few inches of rocks to see if there was anything better; I'm very thankful I have patient parents.

I chose one that looked like a tiny boulder. It was lumpy and jagged with a flat shiny bottom and a dull, greenish-gold sheen. This meager description probably sounds like every other piece of fool's gold in every mountain gift shop out there, but I am certain that I picked out the best and most perfect one. I loved my piece of gold even though I knew it was an

imposter. This mineral is something that looks and feels like something else- something more rare and valuable. But I did not care that it was not real. All I cared about was that I owned the most perfect and most convincing fake.

~

The culmination of my time spent in my graduate studies has resulted in highly manipulated, controlled, constructed and perfected pieces that are reproductions of photographs I made in 2013. The photographs encompassed within my final series are the documentations and evidence of a personal relationship that was becoming increasingly invisible. Uprturned sofa cushions, notes left on the kitchen counter, an unmade bed, and decorations for a holiday that was largely spent alone were a few of the artifacts I collected through photography.

The only way I could connect with my life at that time was through taking pictures of it. And I *loved* those pictures. It was the light at the end of the tunnel. They were the beautiful moments in a miserable experience. It was *real* gold. I began to remake those pictures over and over, trying to recreate the way they made me feel. But it was not working. I was not satisfied. They were not perfect.

I began to build sets and stages; began fabricating objects and props; making each element of the scene the most perfect version of its original self. The appropriation of my own photographs allowed me to use them as a model to reconstruct a physical and emotional space. I built a stage where I could control everything that was happening.

This self-appropriation was born from the sense that I lost control of my life and my feelings. I felt as if I possessed no ownership over anything in my life, or at least that was my

perception when I began to document the evidence of my relationship that was disappearing. Anytime I wanted to possess something, I incorporated it into my art. If I saw amazing photographs in a magazine, I tore them out and made them into my art. If I saw interesting Google technologies being used on television, I would use those same methods to produce my own work. If I saw it and I wanted it, I used it and I owned it.

Because I did not feel like I was living a life that was mine, it was easy to consider this its own type of appropriation. The photographs I was making became source materials for other projects, just as the magazine pages did before. I wanted to feel like I had control and ownership over my life again, so I began to photograph it.

In its own destructive way, the quest for perfection (or most often, constantly being dissatisfied) can be a wonderful location and an endless source for fruitful art making. My own dissatisfaction in art making (and more specifically, photography) is not necessarily a negative thing. It is more about exploring the evolution of an image or ways an image may change, to be made better or different or more perfect.

I find an enjoyable working space in this sort of dissatisfaction: by using existing materials, images, and technologies and exploiting them to my own ends. I am an image/idea salvager—not only appropriating a visual language but a technological one as well. My appropriation began with the use of outside source materials; National Geographic magazine and technology Google had in place, but quickly moved to a more introspective appropriation. I began using my own images as source material that I would then manipulate and transform by physically altering the printed image or restaging the scene completely. This process then

evolved into building sets and stages to entirely reconstruct the source image in order to make the most perfect and complete fake.

II.

When I moved to Georgia for graduate school, it was the first time I ever lived more than three miles away from my parents. I began to reassemble parts of my childhood home and possessions that I once knew growing up. At first, the collecting was subconscious. It began with floral cotton linens, the kind my mother would make my bed with when I was little. I began buying nearly every old cotton sheet, blanket, and pillowcase that I found at various thrift stores. I now have a closet full of old linens, folded and stacked, just as my mother's closet was.

It was not long before I branched out to other items; a set of decorative kitchen tiles that depict the four seasons (the same exact ones that hung in my parents' kitchen when I was growing up), a little metal coin bank that looks like a snowman with a clown's face (I remember this on my father's dresser), and a set of primary colored Pyrex nesting bowls. Predictably, when I found an enormous stack of old National Geographic magazines, I felt obliged to own them. At first just because it was another artifact of my childhood (my mother bought me a complete set of the magazine from 1984, all twelve months) so when I saw the opportunity to start the collection over, I did. And why stop at 12 when I could have nearly 100?

In order to justify this obsessive collecting, I gave myself the rule that I would have to find a use for these items outside of being purely decorative. The linens I use often- changing out

the sheets on the beds in my home to suit the season, weather, or simply a change in mood. The bowls are used regularly to prepare meals, make salads, and hold fruit. The decorative tiles live on the sill above the kitchen window, propping it open, as it tends to want to slam shut. And it was not long before I was able to find a use for those magazines.

I piled them on the floor in my living room, 82 in all, and went through them page by page, putting sticky notes on anything that caught my attention so that I could go back and reference or use the images at a later time. The distinctive Kodachrome color, the fuzziness of the image, the chunky “grain” from the dot matrix printing process, the slick page, the smell of old cigarettes and mildew that permeated the room every time I opened a magazine, were all sensations that made me drunk with nostalgia. I wanted to take those images- the pictures in the magazine pages, and make them mine. I wanted to own them. I saw their potential to become pieces of art and not just reportage. They were beautiful, but I knew I could make them *more* than they were by taking those found images and manipulating them somehow to suggest larger ideas.

The images I was drawn to were innocuous: tourists standing next to monuments, boys playing on rocks, scientists researching in the field. But there was also something more mysterious and dangerous about the vastness. I wanted to exploit their potentials, to make them bigger (literally) than what they were. There was this amazing effect that occurred when I enlarged the image; the strange dot-matrix-like print structure of the original page was exaggerated. The image broke apart and I could see each individual color that comprised the picture.



Out to Sea #743, 40" x 28" From the series *The Lookers*, 2012

In the image *Out to Sea #743*, three people stand at a safe distance to something that is transpiring in front of them. The strange blue amorphous blob comes in from the right side of the frame, swelling as it creeps across the ground. The two women are standing close to one another with their bodies slightly turned inward, as if they are about to speak. The woman on the right is pointing to the object with her right hand as the woman to her left looks on.

Their long trench coats are pressed against their backs and flow out in the opposite direction, signaling a strong wind. There is a man standing to their right, dressed in all black with a satchel or case strapped across his chest. He is using binoculars to gain a sharpened, augmented view of the form. There they are, standing somewhere looking at something, with their backs to the viewer. We are looking at them looking at the landscape. The woman

is physically pointing at some object or form, while I do my own kind of pointing by masking it with a field of color. I enjoy using this kind of push-pull with my audience. Masking the objects with color is a way of pointing to it, but it also is used to deny the viewer access to it. This is my way of not just claiming ownership of a found image, but exerting control over it, and therefore exerting control over my audience.

Pointing and concealing is a constructive tool to start a conversation about something without directly showing or stating what it is. It allows the viewer to form their own narrative about an image, and not just think about what I tell them to think about, or feel what I tell them they should be feeling. The object of the gaze of the people in the magazine pages has been obstructed with a field of a single pantone color. The subject of the image is directing the viewer to look with their gaze like an invisible finger pointing to a form.

Most of the images in this series function this way. They involve people standing in a landscape looking, or looking and pointing at things that we cannot see. In this day and age, no image is off limits. We are able to experience any place in the world through a simple Google search (one can take a virtual tour of the Grand Canyon from your living room in Georgia). In the time from which these images were taken, the only way to experience a place was to actually go there, or experience it vicariously through the pages of National Geographic and similar publications. Actual excursions to the Great West were afforded to a small percentage of Americans with vacation budgets. In this series, I painted over the part of the image that the figures are looking at, drawing attention to the object yet refusing my audience access to it. We are looking at people looking at things, yet neither of us know exactly what that is, just a vague silhouette of flattened color space. The work shows a

removal or erasure of the natural subject, the object of wonder, yet we are still left in suspended awe at the curious colored spectacle before us.

III.

In 2012, a reality television show aired on MTV called *Catfish*. It was based on a movie that came out a few years prior to that with the same name. The premise of the show was to uncover imposters on the internet who would create fraudulent profiles in effort to get other people to fall in love with them. The 'catfish' would assume a new identity by stealing photos of strangers from the internet and start 'dating' an unsuspecting victim by reaching out to them on Facebook or other social media.

The way that the filmmakers would catch the liar was to take their profile picture and load it into Google's *search-by-image* feature. If the image appeared on other web pages or dating sites, they could easily track it to its source and have proof that the person was lying about who they said they were. Google uses an algorithm that takes the uploaded picture to find the closest match, sampling hundreds of millions of images that exist on the internet.

It was around this same time that I came across the work of Michael Wolf. He also was using the internet, and more specifically Google Maps, to produce images that he would then cull through and curate to produce a strange collection of related images. He was a pseudo-street photographer. Instead of walking around city streets to capture images of the bizarre, he used Google street-view to navigate the streets of the United States and Europe. He would take a screen shot whenever he saw something interesting that the Google street-view camera would capture (the Google car drives up and down every street in the country recording everything that it sees with its 360-top-mounted bubble cam).



Michael Wolf, image from *A Series of Unfortunate Events* 2011

MTV inspired the idea, and Michael Wolf's work granted the permission to do the *Instagram Project*. I uploaded photographs from my Instagram account on Google's *search-by-image* feature and the algorithm did the rest. The diptychs I assembled were weird and strange and unexpected. I pulled hundred of images from my Instagram account and made Google find the closest match. I uploaded a picture of a dried rose hanging on a wall, and it returned to me a picture of a woman standing on a stage in front of a curtain holding a microphone. I uploaded a picture of a shirtless kid with dirt on his back, and Google offered a picture of a stripper with a dollar bill in her mouth.



Untitled from the series Instagram Project, 2013

Google generated hundreds of possible matches for my images. They were all generally the same color palette and pixel structure as the image I would input, so I would then go through the possible matches and pick out the one I responded to the most. Google was the first step, generating hundred of visual equivalents, but it is not as discriminating as the human eye; it could not find the perfect match- that was up to me.

There were several aspects of this project that were attractive to me. The first being the sheer number of pieces I could create in just a few weeks. I have always appreciated having an enormous source catalog from which I could pull from to make artwork. Similar to the *Lookers* project, where all I needed to do was page through any of the 82 magazines containing thousands of images to be able to make the next piece for the series, using Google and Instagram gave me the freedom and speed to be able to produce a lot of work quickly. I could make hundreds of these diptychs and then edit down to the perfectly matched twenty or so that would make it into the final edit.

Secondly, I liked the idea of using Google as a collaborator. I gave Google an image, Google gave me an image, and the marriage of the two made for a wonderfully strange pairing.

Before this project, my interaction with Google was heavily utilitarian- checking emails and bank statements, paying bills, ordering books, looking up recipes, etc. I liked employing a technology that I use everyday (for non-creative reasons) in a new creative way. I

manipulated Google to do my work for me and to facilitate an artistic function for which it was not designed.

And finally, it was new and exciting to use a recreational and *low* art form such as Instagram to produce conceptual photographic artwork. In 2013 when I was working on this project, the application was primarily used for sharing pictures with your *followers* of quirky things you observed, or what you may have eaten dinner. It was a technology (like Google) that I used everyday but had not, until this point, thought to use it as something more than its intended purpose.

This was also the first time in my graduate studies that I began using my own original photographs (in addition to appropriated ones) as a part of my artistic practice. I remember being asked how the Google images were chosen, or the formula I used to make the diptych. And the truth is, there was not one. I did not chose the first image that Google provided me. It did not correspond to the date the two images were created. I chose the images because of how they made me feel. I chose the one that would be a perfect companion to my own. Sometimes it was about aesthetics, or the oddness of the pairing, or that one image could completely change the context of the other.

IV. Stranger in a Strange Land

There are parts of my yard that I rarely frequent. They seem like some other place, like the yard of someone who lives on your street; one that you only enter because your Frisbee wandered over the fence. You look around, and it is familiar- but not yours. You linger too long in that place. Standing there, knowing you recognize it but having no idea how you got there or if you have overstayed your welcome. For nine months I lived in this sort of uncomfortable, unfamiliar fog.

During my second year of study in the program, my life was changing. My emotional stability was faltering, self-doubt seeped in and laid roots in my brain. I lost my sense of self. It was only a matter of time before my work began to manifest these changes as well. Instead of looking out and examining and trying to dissect the world around me, I turned my gaze inward and began to photograph my life as a way to understand what was happening to me. I made images in and around my house. From an outsider's perspective, I am sure the images seemed ordinary and mundane. Pictures of my house plants, an open window, an unmade bed, stippled light cast on the wall from the sun passing through a lamp repeated themselves over and over on my contact sheets.



It was as if I was an intruder in my own home. I could not recognize my possessions as things belonging to me; they were merely artifacts of a life that seemed vaguely familiar. We were separated by necessity.

I continued to make and show the straight photographs, in hope they would act as a kind of therapy- that if I could make something beautiful out of an unfortunate and lonely experience, I could begin to accept and understand my new life. But it did not work- in the end I did not feel better at all.

Producing these photographs was only partially satisfying, or rather, it only delighted one part of my art making. Manufacturing the images (taking the photographs, processing the film, scanning the negatives and rendering them as digital prints) was a new and pleasing process. But the images lacked something in their translation from a three-dimensional space that existed in real time to a flat two-dimensional paper object. I am not sure if it was the fact that I have never been satisfied with the way my observational photography could capture the complexity of the scene, or if the emotion and my mind set was irrevocably lost in the moment of the snap of the shutter. I use photography as something more than a tool to look out into the world and observe what is happening. I use it to forge my reality.

The original straight photographs are so important to me because they were my grip on reality. They kept me sane. But eventually, as most things do, the hard times passed. But yet those images still weighed heavy on my mind. Because they were so meaningful to me, I could not let them go until I felt like the project was finished and I was being understood by

my audience. Self-appropriation seemed like the only resolution. It was not my life anyway. I wandered around like a ghost in an empty house, looking for signs of life- of my life.



Front Yard, Back Home from *Here's a Map, Dummy* 2014

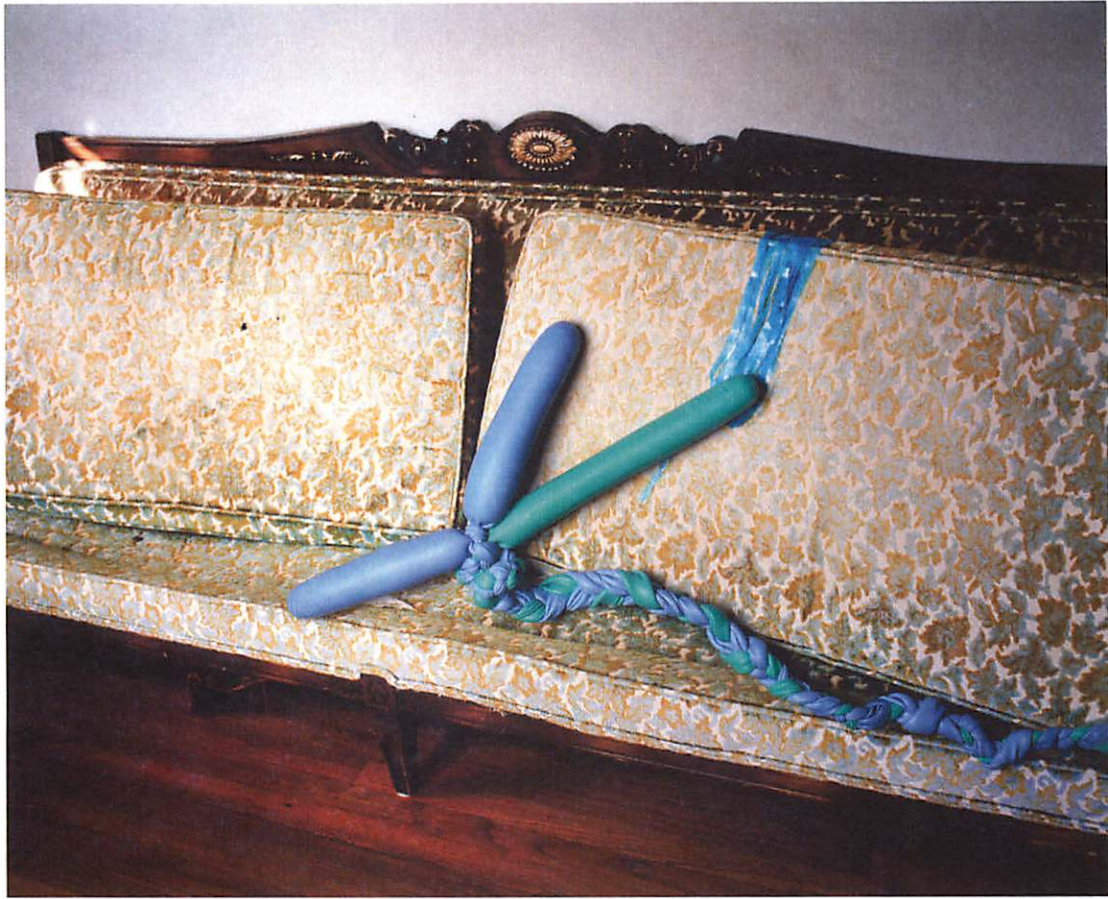
There were stacks of tiny Polaroid sized photographs of all the images I printed and displayed over the previous eight months. Out of sheer frustration I began to use conscious tactics to destroy and cover the images with things that I thought might make them better; I tried to perfect them with destruction. The piece *Front Yard, Back Home* is a photograph of moss hanging from a tree at my parents' house in Florida. I took the little print and stapled flowering weeds from my yard onto it. I made it better. But I also covered the printed image, a picture that I really loved, with something that was more real, but also more fake. I scanned the little pictures with the stapled flowers and printed it again, re-flattening the sculpture I built. I did this process over and over again with all of my pictures, each one with a different beautification intervention.



Untitled from Here's a Map, Dummy 2014

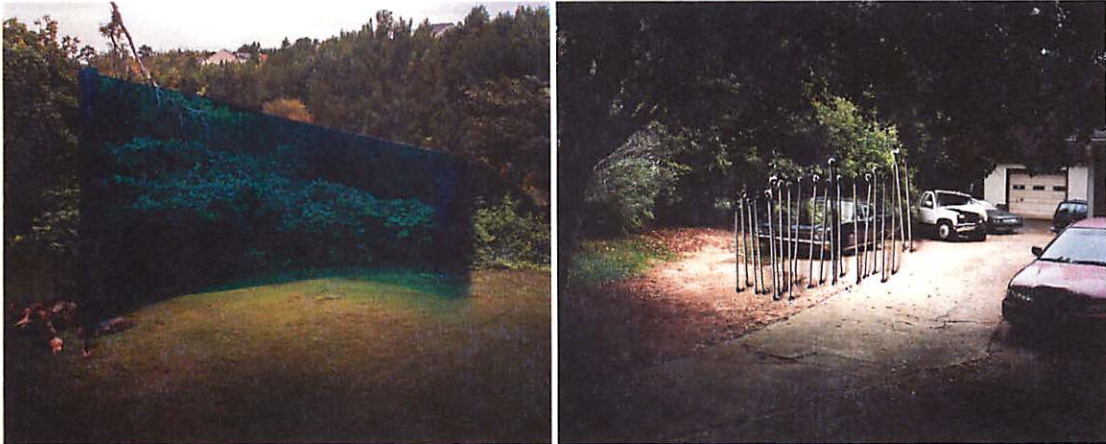
I covered the part of the image that I loved the most, the part that I thought the viewer could not appreciate as much as I did. I made it a more beautiful and perfect version of itself, while simultaneously destroying the original picture that I loved so much.

This project quickly evolved. The size I was working with limited the types of materials I could use. When I printed the images large, I was able to get more detail in the photograph and use larger and more complex interventions on the surface of the photograph.



Party Balloon, 2014

I made a photograph of my sofa. There was a blue plastic kite tail dangling over the top of an upturned cushion. *Party Balloon* was my most convincing fake from this series. The balloon sculpture is only about six inches long. I laid the deflated, braided balloon on top of the printed image and photographed it, matching the light source to the original photograph. I really believe this image could not be any more perfect. The color and material of the balloon/kite tail, the angle of the couch image, and positioning of the balloon and the seemingly common light source are all what make this image so successful.



A lot of the work that came from this series were direct remakes from pieces in the *Here's a Map, Dummy* project. It was at this time that I realized that I was on the path of remaking an image, or several images, over and over in attempt to find the perfect picture. I worked with the same images for months. And then months turned into years.

My working process was never really a problem before. I would find a material I wanted to use, or an aesthetic I wanted to try out, or a technology I wanted to explore, and I built a project around it. I thought of it as a kind of math problem or formula for making artwork. *This process plus that aesthetic equals an image- do that twenty times and you have got a series.* I was very comfortable and easy working in that space.

With the straight photographs, the work was the problem and I could not see a solution. I did not know how I wanted them to look, or what I wanted the dialogue to be, or how I wanted them to function (outside of the purely selfish act of making these photographs because I wanted to love my life again).

My relationship with my partner was becoming invisible. I started to photograph a reptile tank whose inhabitant had long ago been released to the wild, houseplants half-dead from neglect, couch-beds and decorations from a holiday that would all too quickly pass with minimal companionship. The only way I could connect with my life was through taking pictures of it. My objective was somewhat of an experiment. I wanted to see if I could love the remake as much as I loved the original photograph- the one that it was based upon. I am not sure if there is a way to fail at this because I could simply keep remaking it over and over again until I was satisfied.

I worked with these same images for over a year, without ever having the feeling that I completed a project, or gained any kind of resolution. Every time I used an image to make a new and different piece I asked myself (and others), “Well, do you like it now? What about now? *Now* do you like it?”

I considered that if I could reconstruct the physical space, and thereby the emotional space of the original snapshot, I could gain a sense of total control over the image, bending it to my will. And with this control and power I could finally have closure because I could make it the best possible version of itself.

Holiday was the first piece for which I constructed a stage. I first built the environment and then the objects. I built a roughly 2' x 2' x 3' tall corner modeled after my living room. I installed drywall, plastered over the surface, sanded it smooth and applied the same color paint that is in my house. I cut and laid tongue-and-groove flooring, stained it the same color as my floor and sealed it with polyurethane.

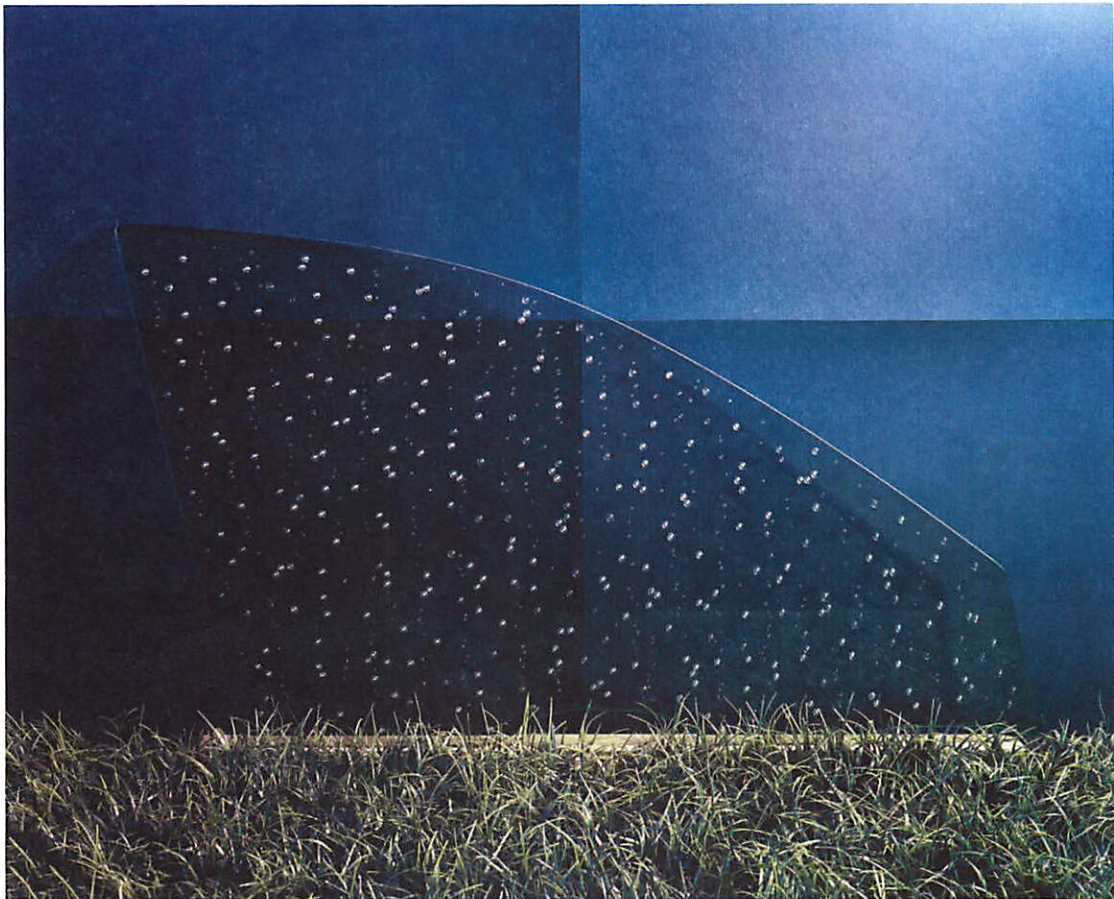


Holiday, 2015

After the stage was designed and built, I started fabricating the props. I constructed the bow and lampshade the same way: a paper armature underneath with red and white vinyl as the skin. I made and bought a variety of bows, different shapes, sizes and shades of red. Some were small and lean, others fat and round. Some were fuzzy and were constructed from a more papery material, but when I made this bow I knew it was the perfect one. The original bow that this bow is based on was soft and supple, fuzzy and asymmetrical. I wanted to make it the most heightened version of itself. Glossy vinyl replaces the diffused fuzz of the

velvet and a perfectly measured, cut, assembled and hung bow replaced its lop-sided predecessor.

I made the most perfect bow the perfect shade of red. I hung it on a perfectly white pleated lampshade with the most perfect proportions. Matched with perfect lighting and a perfectly reconstructed living room I made the most perfect fake.



Last Summer, 2015

Many nights were spent staring out my window or on the front steps waiting for the sun to set, so I could go to sleep, because I knew that when I woke up he would be there. I remember one evening in the summer watching rainwater evaporate from a car window while the last few rays of sunlight made it warm enough to do so. This image was stuck in my mind and repeated over and over on my contact sheets. Every time it rained or a

sprinkler was placed too close to a car, I took a photograph of the window. The evaporation of water made the passing time visible and more understandable. It was one of the markers I would use to know that time was passing and that I was in fact moving forward.

When I went to a junkyard to find a car window for the piece *Last Summer*, I asked for the most “car-window-like car window”. I told them I wanted it to be longer than it was tall with a nice taper at the end. The guy behind the desk was a little suspicious, but very polite. He thought I was going to use it for target practice. When I told him it was for an “art project”, he nodded his head with understanding and said, “Yeah, my niece is a photographer. I get it.”

I spent a long time trying to find the material that would make the most perfect raindrops. I tried a few different kinds of glue, but those turned from a nice bead to a flat disk when they dried. Resins, acrylics, and polyurethanes were all failures as well. I found a bag of clear “filler beads” at a craft store (I’m not sure what their intended purpose is) and gave those a try. Because they were already hardened plastic there was no way they would flatten out. And they already had a flat bottom, so they sat nicely on the surface of the window. There were also these little tiny rounded beads in the bottom of the bag that were cast-offs from the molding process. I liked that they were different shapes and sizes, and added those to the window to accompany the uniform filler beads. I then found my perfect shade of blue paper and placed the lights to get the perfect gradient.

This photograph really crystallized that moment for me (the moment of looking at the rain on all the car windows and photographing it). I created my own window, where I could

control the pattern and heaviness of the drops. I could make the sky as blue as I wanted it to be and the grass the perfect manicured length.



Inside, 2015

These remakes are the complete destruction of the photograph from which they came. I took the image apart like a kid dissecting a VCR to see how it works. Once I had all the pieces laid out I took the most essential elements and began to put it back together. Distilling the image down to eliminate the unnecessary makes it into a stage, complete with props and lighting, for the viewer to project their own story into. It is not just about my experience anymore, but one that is shared. These pieces I have constructed are perfect imposters, but I still love them, just as much as my perfect little fake piece of gold from a place I can't remember.