

OBJECTS OF AFFECTION

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by
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OBJECTS OF AFFECTION

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

In memory of Aunt Kanneth, Aunt Mildred, Aunt Mary, Great-Grandma Boehne, and Grandma and Grandpa Forys, who made my childhood experience rich with family history and sparked my love for imagination and admiration of “old things.”

I also dedicate this research to all of my art faculty and mentors over the years: for their encouragement, constructive criticism, and technical guidance. They have fed my mind and heart with the joy and struggle that it takes to be a successful artist.

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ABSTRACT

I have always been fascinated by the mystery in old things and the relationships that we form with the inanimate. Many people project emotional and psychological importance onto personal possessions. They are a source of reminiscence, help us cope with mortality, and inspire us to care for them.

My work simultaneously represents the beauty and ugliness that is an inherent part of life. Influenced by personal collections and idealized childhood memories, my paintings and sculptures are at once sweet and disturbing. I deal with concerns specific to the human condition, which is an emotional struggle of love and loss, nostalgia and sadness, and hope and tragedy. Full of contradiction, the work represents a bittersweet longing. I find old things both alluring and sad, so I seek to create a world that embraces comforting, romantic notions of nostalgia while at the same time exposes loss of innocence and childhood security.

This work encourages us to conjure the memories and feelings that we associate with our own objects of affection. As a result, we are inspired to look within our emotional selves and reflect on what brings magic into our lives. In so doing, we can reclaim the awe and compassion for the world that we forget with age. When we step back from our fast-paced lives to appreciate what is simple, we can rekindle suppressed memories and feelings through the power of objects.

Chapter 1

Introduction

“When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object.”

-Milan Kundera, Czech novelist (Capasso, 2005, p.2)

My work in painting and fiber art developed out of a personal fascination with the mystery of old things. I conclude this because when I was young, I had the wonderful opportunity to be close to many aged aunts and grandmothers. I would show up at their doorsteps to be regaled with stories from their pasts. While other kids were playing outside, I was lingering over delicate porcelain figurines and rummaging through boxes full of miscellaneous “treasures.” I loved peering into my great-aunt’s wooden hutch stuffed with souvenirs from all over the world. On special occasion, my sisters and I would try on starched bonnets and old feed sack dresses. Just as thrilling was a peek at my grandmother’s handmade square dance costumes and my grandfather’s naval uniforms. They were casually stuffed in a massive steamer trunk that had once delivered my earlier ancestors’ belongings to America. Reluctantly leaving their homes after an afternoon filled with reminiscence and childhood imaginations, I recalled blinking back to reality, similar to the feeling when leaving the theater at the end of a movie. It was all so magical.

As time passed, I became a woman, these grandparents and aunts passed away, and the memories faded. Dormant in my mind’s childhood storage space, these memories are forgotten until I come across an item in an antique store or thrift shop that sparks a longing for those times. Therein lies the power of objects.

I have always been intrigued by how a simple object can trigger memories like the personal ones I previously mention. This creative research in painting and sculpture elicits the numerous and incommensurable facets of the power of objects. Most people project emotional and psychological importance onto personal possessions. Objects are powerful in their abilities to spark our imaginations. They are a source of reminiscence, help us cope with loss, and inspire us to care for them.

This creative research encourages us to conjure the memories and feelings that we associate with our own objects of affection. As a result, we are inspired to look within our emotional selves and reflect on what brings magic into our lives. In so doing, we can reclaim the awe and compassion for the material world that we forget with age. When we step back from our fast-paced lives to appreciate what is simple, we can rekindle suppressed memories and feelings through the power of objects.

The human condition is an emotionally bittersweet struggle of love and loss, nostalgia and sadness, as well as hope and tragedy. My goal is to investigate the power of the old, handmade object as a primary trigger for emotional longing, as well as its use as a coping mechanism for loss and emotional detachment. I address these issues in my work through formal and psychological constructs of nostalgic imagery, the memorialized toy, and dualities of time.

This accumulation of emotional issues is externalized in the form of paintings and sculptures, which I examine within the following chapters. (From this point on, I will reference the sculptures as “unmades”). First, Chapter 2 introduces the power of the magical fetish through the charming and unique nature of handmade objects. In addition, I elaborate on the magic of “old” things as purveyors of my personal fetishes. In Chapter

3, I investigate the personal, sentimental object as a trigger for personal longing for comfort and security in the attempt to deal with emotional isolation. I showcase these issues through themes of nostalgia and discontent in romanticized imagery and references to the memorialized toy. Lastly, Chapter 4 elaborates on the bittersweet dualities of time through the representation of emotionally powerful, but physically vulnerable objects. I examine time that “gives” in the form of care and compassion and time that “takes away” through destruction.

Ultimately, I hope to reveal through this work that a world devoid of the imagination, the soul within the thing made, or the sentimental belonging is like a world without memory, language, or meaning. Objects play a role in how we communicate with the world, connect with the past, and express our feelings. As Salman Akhtar (2005) tells us, “We speak to things and things speak to us”(p.18).

Chapter 2

The Fetish Object : Old, Handmade Things

We love the things we love for what they are.-Robert Frost

The notion of the fetish suggests that objects contain more than their outward function. Human imagination allows us to imbue objects with ethereal qualities, giving life to otherwise inanimate forms. Contrary to its association with obsessive behavior, the fetish can also be viewed as a necessity to cope with the mysteries of life. Handmade objects and old things that exude a history are two types of fetish objects that I focus on in my artwork to demonstrate this alternative view.

This is no new concept. Throughout history, humans believed that objects could act as vehicles for spirits, receivers of worship, and even perceived as alive. Today, deities are still worshiped as symbols of superior power, amulets are worn to ward off evil spirits, and vessels are shaped in the likeness of humans and animals to intensify their life force. *Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* (2000) defines “fetish” as an “object (as a small stone carving of an animal) believed to have magical power to protect or aid its owner; *broadly* : a material object regarded with superstitious or extravagant trust or reverence ;an object of irrational reverence or obsessive devotion.” In other words, we know that the inanimate cannot come to life, but that knowledge does not hinder us from exploring the possibilities in our minds.

These associations with the things around us are universally treated as an outlet to connect with the mysteries of life. One of the things that make us human is our imaginative ability to use objects to deal with inevitable life contradictions such as love and loss or hope and tragedy. Objects feed our emotional lives and can help us cope with

the reality of the present world, if we just let them. Therefore, the fetish serves in the same capacity as the proverbial comfort zone, providing feelings of security. In this mental state we feel the most confident about ourselves and safe from harsh reality. Cynics might protest that this kind of thinking is naïve or primitive. On the contrary, what is more powerful, "...than a heightened kind of recognition: it [the fetish] betrays an awareness of the incomprehensible, and an effort to commune with it. What could be more sophisticated, more advanced, than to admit a sense of wonder into daily life?"(Cohen, 1997, p.204). In short, in a world without the fetish we cut ourselves off from the universal spirit of humanity, where we find magic in unlikely sources.

Unfortunately, our current society is most familiar with the negative connotations of the term fetish as a character flaw or weakness. The version that psychologist Sigmund Freud popularized is usually what first comes to mind. *Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* (2000) defines this "fetish" as a "fixation on an object or bodily part whose real or fantasied presence is psychologically necessary for sexual gratification." Another well-known definition is the commodity fetish. This is an attachment to something that can be seen only in terms of value exchange or material greed (Cohen, 1997, p.207). In this case, we tend to look to the thing's price or the name brand to gauge its meaning. For instance, someone buys expensive shoes instead of a more affordable, identical pair simply because they are a popular label. The result of these fetishes is that our greatest expression of adoration for an object comes in the form of material comparison and sexual stimulation.

Due to the widespread, casual acceptance of these off-putting fetishes, I reinforce the unique occurrence of the original version of the fetish. We take part in an impulse

generation wherein we buy what we want and throw it away when it is broken or no longer holds our interest. Being immersed in a culture that takes things for granted, we tend to forget the emotional value of an object. For this reason, my work is a contemporary investigation of the charm and mystery of old, handmade things that have seemingly lost their luster in the midst of flashy, unreal things like video games, TV, and the Internet. We forget that objects were once made to last a lifetime and were cherished because of their unique and singular functions.

Old Things

I can recall the musty smell of decay and the feel of the dry, brittle paper under my fingertips. I meticulously sort through piles of *Saturday Evening Posts* and scrapbooks stuffed with newspaper clippings and other ephemera. I am in my grandparents' basement on some forgotten holiday of my youth. Instead of watching T.V. or playing with my young relatives, I sit contentedly on the cold floor, lost in a pile of the past. Others around me loiter for a moment; interests piqued and then continue on with their games. I persevere, intent on making it through all the stacks so as not to miss out on any of the wonder. When I leave and return upstairs to the gathering, I softly rub my fingertips against my palms. Remnants of the delicate objects linger there.

The preceding account exemplifies our ability to find significant meaning in inanimate objects taken from personal, intimate spaces. This powerful recollection is also an example of the magical fetish that exists in the comforting form of the personalized, handmade object and the lure of an old thing.

Old, vintage, and antique belongings are magical because they are something from another time. Imbued with another person's history, they contain endless

possibilities for the human imagination. For example, the hypnotizing allure of antique collecting is fed by the pleasure of surrounding oneself with objects that we emotionally value and not for their monetary worth. We have no previous perception of this history, except for the stories told and the material objects left behind. Even though we lack the personal experience of this time, we must still appreciate how magical qualities of old things survive in the embedded memory and personal meaning that exists within them. In other words, objects are personified by their history. “New” items lack historical patina, charming character, and personal touch distinctly obvious in the old and the handmade.

I fabricate the unmades and make nostalgic references in the paintings to conjure the distant past of contemporary society. In order to develop work that showcases such a timeless theme, I concoct a recipe of the old, the found, and the machine-made evident in *Unmade 1, 2, 3, and 4* (Figures 12, 13, 14, and 15). *Unmade* is a collective name for the series of three-dimensional sculptures that I make in combination with the paintings. The word suggests the forms are made for the purpose of continuous destruction and preservation as metaphors for old “loved to death” toys and are thus “un” made. To elaborate, each unmade is hand built from scraps of fabric that form a shell of cloth. The shell is then put through a rigorous stuffing process that destructs and expands the original design, requiring rips to be repaired and more surface area of cloth to be added.

One of the most defining characteristics of old things is their worn quality. Prime examples are utilitarian objects and things from in and around the home like quilts, toys, and anything with great potential for extreme usage. The collective unmades are representations of these objects that are new at one time, but now appear to be much

admired and overly loved. The phrase “loved to death” is a bittersweet implication of how we destroy the outward appearance of an object, while adding to our fondness of it. In other words, the physical qualities are diminished but not the emotional. The unmades, especially *Unmade 5-Vignette* (Figure 16), help us conjure the illusion of something being handled from day to day, such as a child’s favorite blanket or a rocking horse depicted in *Unmade 5-Vignette*.

One artist who admired old things and recognized the mystery in an inanimate object was Antoni Tapiés. His work often incorporated lowly, perishable things like towels, chairs, newspaper, and bottles directly onto the canvas or in object-assemblages. Items casually found around his studio take on new meaning in his artwork, becoming reflections of his personal history and the subsequent association he has with these things in his environment. Specifically, Tapiés noticed these ideas within a basic chair. He once stated,

“Let us take, for example, an old chair. Although it seems to be nothing in particular, think of the whole universe it contains: the hands and sweat involved in cutting the wood of what was once a robust tree...the toil of the carpenter who lovingly made it, the thrill of the purchaser, the weariness it has relieved...All, all of this is part of life and has its own importance. Even the oldest chair carries inside it the initial force of the sap that rose from the ground”
(Borja-Villel, 2004, p.199).

This is an endearing response to a poor, simple item found in everyone’s home. And yet, he makes it appear extremely precious and inspirational. Like Antoni Tapiés, I am fascinated by how even the most inanimate item has its own unique qualities that contribute to our lives. I share his admiration for the living history within something inanimate. My work expresses that fascination in order to encourage the viewer’s own obsessions and magical experiences brought on by treasured possessions.

While Tapiés uses found things in their original form, I fashion “new” objects out of odds and ends of found materials and proceed to make the new look old. As in *Out on a Limb* (Figure 3), a baby’s high chair seat is taken from its frame and suspended from a paper towel holder attached to the surface of the painting. The new construction is now reminiscent of a toy swing. Gnarled sticks replace the back of the fabricated swing, subtly referencing Tapiés’ symbolic chair and its previous existence as a tree. Essentially, I create ambiguous references to material objects versus Tapiés’ more literal approach.

Just as Tapiés uses found objects to make a statement, I go one step further. I utilize materials that are old and processes that invoke the sense of the old evident in *Unmade 1, 2, and 3*. Battered, faded, stained, and yellowed in places, my materials are collected specifically for these defining characteristics. In turn, new items are altered to obtain these effects. I “age” them with processes that include tea-stain, dye, paint, and sanding. In *Unmade 1* (Figure 12), The surface of the figure’s body is covered mostly with a bleached, checkered fabric that softens and disrupts its original bold yellow tones and patterning. On the right appendage, the orange doily and new silk cloth underneath are tea-stained to denote how time adds new patinas. There is also damage to the surface. Holes forced into the cloth most noticeably trail over the torso into the doily on the arm.

The destructed qualities of old materials lend an additional layer of meaning to the work. Even though I can elicit the “sense” of age through various surface processes, I also choose materials naturally aged with time. The materials themselves already have a worn-in history visible on the surfaces as well as within the memories attached to each scrap or fragment. I incorporate elements such as vintage fabric scraps, spindles from

baby beds, and insides of feather pillows in the sculptural aspects evident in a detail of *Rest Easy* (Figure 5). Specifically, I allude to old feather pillows that are in reality disgusting and condensed with years of invisible decay, yet the fabric is soft and comforting. The imagery combined in *Rest Easy* comes together to function as significant purveyors for the contradictory qualities of the sometimes dirty but appealing nature of old things.

Personalized by Hand

When we consider something old, our thoughts also turn to hand-craft processes that are continuously renewed and refined over the centuries. Processes that involve personal embellishment and progressive attention make the object seem “alive” through the attributes of personification. Personalization is one of the defining characteristics in a unique and emotionally valuable object.

Out of all the objects in the world, something crafted by human hand strikes me as one of the most powerful. Handmade things bear the mark of the creator. As Susan Stewart (1993) points out, “the labor was the labor of the hand, of the body, and the product, in its uniqueness, was a stay against repetition and inauthenticity”(p.39). In this respect, the product of human labor is superior in its unique and personal value. It invokes the spirit of the maker and displays the evidence of human flaw and imperfection. For these reasons, most of us regard handmade objects as rare, authentic, and distinctly personalized.

For the collective unmade, I expose unique and imperfect qualities distinguished by handcrafting each shell of collaged fabric that I later stuff. The process is reminiscent of quilting. I slowly sew them into being through my rudimentary skills with the sewing

machine and needlecraft arts. I have taught myself these skills through trial and error, handcraft books, and tips from peers. The naïve and often awkward stitching is distinctly noticeable in the unmade seated on a stool in *Woebegone* (Figure 7). The awkwardness is shown through the uneven lengths and rows and the mismatched, alternating stitches that collide with one another. I prefer these methods as opposed to rigorously learning every stitch and fanciful sewing application. To expose the ideas I express in this research, I am more interested in maintaining the unique and somewhat primitive quality of the unrefined development of the unmade. In addition, no patterns are involved, so the forms develop naturally. I rely on the shapes of the fabric scraps and deliberately cut the fabric without method or expectation to guarantee that each unmade is different. This ensures a unique product.

Rather than admiring the luster and efficiency of consumer goods, I cull artifacts and salvaged ephemera from our collective past and develop them into works of art. Each piece is meant to be a unique specimen on display. “Unique” is defined as a “feeling or perception that can be aroused by a number of different experiences, including, but not restricted to, that of authenticity” (Olalquiaga, 1998, p.16).

We live in a time where authenticity is replaced with reproduction. Objects are labeled with a bar-code, pre-packaged, sanitized, and continuously improved upon or upgraded. Everything is comparable, exchangeable and reducible to its materialistic value. Even though this picture I put together appears to denote a loss of the handmade, the presence of mass production helps us realize the value of the one-of-a-kind. It revives preciousness and uniqueness as rare positive attributes, rather than flaws. In this atmosphere, the “original” becomes the commodity.

In response to a culture that is increasingly digital and impersonal, other artists such as Kiki Smith and Annette Messager have been known to cull craft culture for handmade processes and materials to use in their art. They cross the boundaries between high and low art. Specifically, Messager works with various media and is known to “liken her work to the hybrid acts of rummaging and mending”(Liss, 1996, ¶ 4). They too recognize the power and charm in evidence of human imperfection. Messager’s *The Boarders at Rest* (1971-1972) displays an unlikely tenderness toward a somewhat grotesque medium (Liss, 1996, ¶ 6). Dozens of bird carcasses are lined up in rows on a canvas, each one boasts a lovingly knitted and colorful sweater. We can relate to Messager’s morbid collection of taxidermied birds. When we see dead birds on the side of the road our response is usually “awww,” brought on by emotions of sympathy and recognition of the sadness and mortality of the bird. She employs the object of the sweater as a signifier for compassion, investing a charm into the piece. The result is a concealment of death.

Like Messager’s attempts to salvage the bird’s body, the artwork that I make helps us cope with our own sense of loss for objects that remind us of our youth or a better time in our lives. Similar to Messager, I develop visual signifiers for preciousness and compassion evident in *Unmade 2 and 3* (Figures 13 and 14). I too elevate the charm value of the handmade in the creation process, utilizing handcraft processes like embroidery, stuffing, and decoration. Just as her knitted sweaters act as evidence of compassion, so do my attentions of repair, salvage, and adornment that will be described in depth in Chapter 4.

The importance and personification that people project onto objects of personal possession is a fascinating subject. From early on, strong beliefs upheld that the handmade fetish was imbued with the creator's spirit. Personification is defined as "an attribution of personal qualities; *especially* : representation of a thing or abstraction as a person or by the human form" (*Merriam-Webster Unabridged*, 2000). It is human nature to characterize something inanimate. We attribute human qualities to things around us, offering them a powerful appointment. Objects we surround ourselves with help us maintain a sense of self by representing our personalities to other human beings.

As we age, we often lose our ability to conjure the magic and joy from objects that comes so easily during our childhood. Due to social pressures, loss of innocence, and our fast-paced lives, we become detached from the magic of the naïve childhood experience. However, when we see an object from childhood, we are once again reminded of the embedded memories lying dormant within those items.

The unmades are reminders of our tendencies to personify objects. Since we project so much emotion onto objects, they serve as substitutes for ourselves. In order to display this concept in my work, I draw inspiration from toys. Toys are one of the first possessions that we perceive as alive. They are powerful because they are universally linked to childhood imaginations that are renewed when we revisit our old toys. These encounters remind us of their charm and fetish quality. Studies show that as early as six months of age, children develop the ability to differentiate between a person and an object. At this point, our imaginations take over. Because even though we know better, we still tend to think of inanimate things as being alive (Akhtar, 2005, p.22). For example, we often unconsciously assign gender to our possessions. We tend to think

things move by themselves and we scold items for hiding or “walking” away from us. Sometimes we might even feel lonely without a favorite possession nearby. The freestanding unmades like *Unmade 3 and Unmade 4* (Figures 14 and 15) demonstrate the aforementioned sensibilities. This characterization of objects is intriguing, and it lends great support in allowing us to accept the psychological power objects maintain over us.

In our childhood culture we eagerly and wholeheartedly believe objects can perform the aforementioned actions. We are inundated with stories and folklore that detail accounts of toys and other lifeless forms coming to life. Perhaps the most memorable stories in this genre that I reference in my artwork are *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams and the original version of *Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi. I use these popular narratives to support the aspects of love and personification in the artwork.

We are all familiar with the wooden puppet Pinocchio who is brought to life by a lonely toymaker. His desire for a child has the power to breathe life into his handmade creation. Likewise, I “breathe life” into the unmades through the stuffing process and portrayal of animal and human characteristics. In a way, my work references the spirit of Pinocchio’s growth into existence through the maker’s hand. In *Unmade 4* (Figure 15), small appendages attached to the body of the piece are descriptive of arms and legs, adding to the potential for a life-like form. To display even more “personality” I make it stand and appear to hold a streamer of ribbons in which smaller unmades serve as its playthings.

Even more powerful is the connection between the physical appearance of the collective unmades and Williams’ velveteen rabbit and skin horse characters. In an excerpt from *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922), Williams writes,

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day... "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real." The Rabbit sighed. He thought it would be a long time before this magic called Real happened to him. He longed to become Real, to know what it felt like; and yet the idea of growing shabby and losing his eyes and whiskers was rather sad. He wished that he could become it without these uncomfortable things happening to him (p 2-3).

The rabbit wants to be real, but is sad that it has to grow shabby in order to achieve real life. This scenario is contextualized in the vignette piece of *Woebegone* (Figure 7). Like the velveteen rabbit in its last stages of being loved into a real animal, the unmades in *Woebegone* symbolize the forgotten toys that come alive from the magic of the childhood nursery. The vignette is reminiscent of a child's bedroom. One unmade rests in the foreground of the quilt-like painting on a ruffled bedskirt. The bedskirt is made from a salvaged pink sateen bedspread that I cut into strips and hand-pleated to create rows of ruffles.

Just as the carving of Pinocchio makes him into a real boy, the stuffing process for pieces like *Unmade 1, 2, and 3* (Figures 12, 13, and 14) causes the shells of cloth to take a three-dimensional, more life-like form. This is an important element in terms of representing personification in the work. For artist Antoni Tapies, the significance of similar materials is evident in his piece *Taula de despatx amb palla* (1970). An object-assemblage of a battered wooden desk is piled with mounds of deteriorating straw. In Manuel J. Borja-Villel's (2004) essay, he explains that Tapies' usage of the straw "alludes to the humble aspects of existence such as stables and straw or manure bedding..."(p. 200).

My creation process is reminiscent of the crafting of handmade toys and dolls from the past. These precious objects were lovingly made from items found around the

home, such as worn out clothing and generally stuffed with wool or straw. Creating within this genre and using old materials adds to the layers of meaning in each piece as I draw from the history of the handmade toy, childhood literature, and a generally nostalgic past. Beyond Tapiés' reasoning for using straw, my approach conveys multiple meanings.

First, I stuff these materials into the cloth shells in order to fabricate guts or suggest an inner soul of the unmade. The unmades appear to be bursting at the seams with life because I stuff and mold the forms with natural materials. I enhance the "life" qualities of each unmade using common materials available in a rural environment such as wood shavings, sticks, straw, sand, and feathers. I do not use new, synthetic stuffing or batting because such items are not as vulnerable to decay. *Unmade 1* (Figure 12) is a good example. The "innards" protrude from holes the piece in several places. I choose to use straw as support for the old, handmade things I am referencing.

Secondly, these innards also add to the physical and emotional weight of each piece. I make it seem like the innards have compacted over many years. When handling the unmades, they feel heavy and dense as if burdened with an accumulation of memories attributed to the meaningful objects they signify. Soft objects like the velveteen rabbit achieve this physical attribute after much abuse.

Third, each unmade takes on personal characteristics when stuffed. Personification is an idea that has long been part of many cultures and belief systems around the world. It suggests that everything has a "soul" however minimal or inanimate the object. With that idea in mind, my fabricated collection of unmades magnifies the importance of the handmade, unique object imbued with the spirit of the creator. Even

after the fabric shell is complete the piece is still in flux. Through the entire creation process, the unmades are constantly fluctuating in size and shape. This is due to the nature of the forgiving fabric shells and the natural materials inside that tend to shift under weight and movement. The results are evident in *Unmade 4* (Figure 15), in which the legs barely support the weight of the torso. It is necessary to mold and coax the appendages to settle into position, forcing fabric and seams beyond their limits.

The stuffing process results in ambiguous bodies stripped of commercial association. The unmades are nothing like anything we can buy in the toy stores today. I do not appropriate mass-produced toys or dolls directly from material culture because they lack the character and personalization for which I strive. Too culturally isolated, icons like Barbie, Elmo, and Cabbage Patch dolls are a dime-a-dozen and forgettable. Instead, I elicit how scraps of cloth, paint, and thread interact to create an art object that appears universally nostalgic.

With the intent of creating ambiguous art objects, I also allow the viewer to concentrate on the distinct details of each unmade or painting. I trigger remote memories through the mystery in the ambiguous forms in the hopes of connecting with a broad range of viewers. To elaborate, I believe a dress made for a Barbie doll by a great-aunt contains more valuable sentiment than the doll itself. This concept is made visible in the unmade in *Out on a Limb*, detail (Figure 2). It is vaguely reminiscent of the familiar nursery rhyme character Humpty Dumpty. With its legs dangling as if just pausing for a moment from the act of swinging, the unmade seems to be ready to tumble from its precarious perch. Its surface is ripped and frayed so the stuffing is exposed. The bow at the top of the piece barely contains the protruding feather stuffing. Lonely and

disheveled, its ambiguity and threatening situation on the chair enhances its appeal to the viewer as a creature who has lost its way, perhaps longing to secure a comfortable spot on the worn, painted armchair depicted close by.

As a result of creating the unmades completely by hand, I hope to inspire others to find the character and comfort obtained from objects of our past. We can renew connections to people we have lost, and the objects that remind us of them. These findings result in a heightened awareness of a nostalgic longing for another time. It is an idealized past defined by a secure and comforting environment that we have emotionally detached from and yearn to revisit.

Chapter 3

The Sentimental Object: Bittersweet Longing

“The vault of amnesia enlists things in the external world as its messengers.”

-Professor of psychiatry Salman Akhtar (2005, p.59).

Old objects silently call us to rescue them and invest them with a new, personal meaning and sentimental value as a way of connecting with our personal and cultural histories. There is a certain kind of person who loves the look of old homes, who prefers the character of a quirky, hand-stitched pillowcase, and who has a passion for what other people have thrown away. All these fascinations contain the allure of something imbued with a personal narrative. Again, I assert that such fragments from past material cultures contain a mysterious appeal. We are powerfully pulled toward them because of their ability to soothe our discontent with current culture. For the purpose of this creative research, I enlist the appeal of early childhood relationships with now deceased loved ones.

The old, handmade object is a sentimental reminder of an idyllic and innocent time. I contemplate how and why emotionally meaningful objects, such as old toys, serve as conductors for coping with a bittersweet longing to connect with the past and escape current reality. The paintings’ narratives and the collective unmades are symbols of nostalgia and emotional isolation. Emotional isolation is a term I use to describe a state of psychological isolation from our personal belongings. Such a state is reflected in the work. It is embedded with contradictions like the comfort gained from the presence of nostalgic imagery and the disturbing sense of loss presented in the form of aged and dilapidated unmades. These bittersweet tendencies are not to be taken lightly. Artwork is

a powerful outlet for linking meaningful objects and the sentimental emotions that we associate with them.

In the past, especially throughout Modernism, art associated with sentimental emotions has been harshly criticized for its employment of excessive and false passion. And even today, when someone says “sentimental art” most people conjure images of Thomas Kinkade’s mass-marketed cottage paintings or the kitsch appeal of pretty Precious Moments and meaningless garden gnomes. These are examples of inauthentic associations that prevent people from understanding the true emotional value of objects.

Undeniably, artwork devoid of any reference to sentimental emotion is a rejection of human nature. Emotions like love, happiness, loss, comfort, and innocence feed our experiences and must not be undervalued or accused of fallacy. Philosopher Robert C. Solomon (1991) shares a similar opinion on this sentimentality issue,

“There is something charming, even virtuous about an adult who is capable of childlike feelings... To be sure, we outgrow some of our emotions, but one of the purposes of art is to remind us of just those tender, outgrown sentiments, perhaps even to disturb us regarding their loss. Better yet, art can help us feel them again, and move us to action on their behalf” (p.6).

It is true, modern thinking demands a more mature way of navigating the world. We are environmentally trained to “grow up” and take on responsibilities that require us to break away from our childhood imaginations. Lauren Berlant, a professor of English and Gender Studies at the University of Chicago, studies the importance of sentimentality in our culture. Berlant is quoted by *Boston Globe* columnist Louise Kennedy (2005) suggesting that people create emotional barriers in the display of sentiment and are outwardly cynical about it because, “the bourgeois aversion to sentimentality is all about the aversion to becoming exposed as simple”(¶ 15). Even though it might be a cultural

faux pas, there are those who still inwardly yearn for that simple feeling of security. Therefore, I make work that celebrates our sentimental tendencies in life.

One coping method for the aforementioned sense of longing is to use objects to maintain a connection with our emotions, memories, and loved ones. Susan Stewart presents several types of longing in the preface of her book *On Longing* (1993). I focus my attention on her third definition, in which she describes belongings as appendages of the body. She suggests that even though objects are detached from the owner by space and time, there remains a psychological connection (p. xi). This unseen, but deeply felt connection between the owner and the object is descriptive of communicating the effects of longing. Stewart's (1993) "appendage" concept proposes an outlet for making connections with our own objects, even if our only need for them is subconscious (p. xii).

At the heart of a "belonging" longing inspired by Stewart's (1993) theory, we feel emotionally isolated from something in the past for which we still pine. Many of us may experience this sensation. This occurs when we physically belong within a contemporary society while we mentally feel isolated and misplaced. To convey this idea, my work depicts imagery out of step with current consumer culture. I cultivate notions of nostalgia and discontent by referencing objects from the past. Nostalgia is a longing for something past while discontent is a longing for something better than the present situation. Together, these emotions produce a strong and persistent yearning to belong to another time or place.

Within the confines of a nostalgic longing, my work also explores a personal, emotional isolation from things that remind us of the past. In the following paragraphs, I

describe four paintings that employ constructs of illusion versus reality, separation, and fragmentation to convey the longing concept.

Out on a Limb (Figure 3) combines visual expressions of belonging to one time and longing for rekindling a connection with another. The combination of the floating imagery on the canvas and the precariously perched unmade on a fabricated swing highlights the fact that they are a part of two different worlds: one in the flat plane of the canvas and one in dimensional reality. The swing holding the unmade extends from the canvas, but remains separate from the illusionist space. On the verge of tumbling out of the chair, the unmade looks as though it already had a few tumbles. The unmade exists beyond the boundaries of the painted, sentimental realm and therefore signifies an emotional interaction not unlike our own contact with objects. For example, the unmade is physically vulnerable, which is in turn reflected in scenario of the painted figure in the upper left corner floating into a foreboding, recessed area of stained fabric. Imagery of two mischievous boys playing in a tree house visually interact with the unmade as they attempt to knock the unmade out of its swing. These narratives link the desire to be a part of one world, but remain isolated by space and time.

For *Out on a Limb*, the painting and the attached unmade convey old qualities. They are worn in places and seem aged from layers of paint and stained fabric. This intentional appearance causes us to view the art as objects salvaged from a thrift shop. By incorporating fragments of humble and domestic material culture from a romanticized time in the past, I associate nostalgic elements that I use in the artwork with our society's preceding generations. In similar spirit to early collectors filling their cabinets of curiosities, I scour thrift stores and accumulate a variety of visual debris that reflect the

recent past. I gather an assortment of textiles from feedsack pillows, scraps of lace trim, and entire bedspreads. In addition, I scrounge up paper ephemera rich with nostalgic content such as vintage *Readers Digests*, wallpaper, and cross-stitch patterns. Simple wooden furniture made in the mid-20th century also attributes to the collection. All of these odds and ends are a mix of periods, materials, and styles from the last few centuries. In my work, the hodgepodge collecting habits translate into a collage format, creating a scrapbook of ideas and materials. These collections are regional, isolated to the area in which I procure the items. Therefore, a Midwest, rural aesthetic inundates this work.

I resurrect collective memories and humble materials from regional sources in paintings like *Woebegone* (Figure 7) and *Embellished Regrets* (Figure 8). The process I employ in these works is like an internal scrapbook made visible through fragmentation of imagery. Fragments of past paintings are sewn together in a quilt-like fashion for *Woebegone*. Quilts are historically made from scraps of cloth that are salvaged from everyday clothes and other utilitarian objects.

Embellished Regrets consists of layers of paint and thread that enhance or cover up nostalgic images of birds and flowers. The imagery is deliberately separated in a random fashion to depict emotional isolation, eliciting to the viewer a sense of being alone and forgotten. I document things from within and around an imagined home from the past. This painting includes depictions of birds, various cross-stitch flowers, a mantle clock, and embroidery. In front of the painting, two unmade rest on a fabricated high chair, physically detached from the scene depicted on the canvas. Lines drawn by paint and thread signify our longing in the attempt to visually connect the birds, the flower

forms, and the unmades. In turn, the unmades in *Embellished Regrets* are especially set apart. However, the chair props one unmade at a height that creates a connection between the illusions of the painted surface and the transposed unmade. Similar to our attempts to connect with an imagined world of the past, image placement suggests an effort to decrease the physical distance between it and the imaginary world of the painting.

By longing for a comfortable and secure environment, we inadvertently search for tangible things that help us fulfill that need. However, we can never return to that comforting time. It is only found in the memories often conjured by objects. In *Rest Easy* (Figure 4), I employ a stage like setting that plays out this heartbreaking reality. The narrative within the painting serves as the idyllic birthplace of the chicken-like unmade presented on a dilapidated bed in front of the painting. The painted form suspended in the sky area of the painting is a representation of the unmade. This image appears to be disintegrating, falling to the striped ground in the form of holes and painted patches. A faded image of a young boy balancing on a clothesline appears to attempt and fail to pluck something from a tree. The “ground” area at the base of the painting also alludes to the unmade. The surface contains strips of paint and collage mimicking the unmade’s gingham patterns. I setup a narrative of how the unmade transfers from the illusion of the painting to reality. Battered, scuffed, faded, and mended, this unmade serves as a survivor similar to our most beloved possessions that last through the years. Obviously scarred by its journey, I invite the viewer to empathize with its isolated situation.

In the case of the unmade in *Rest Easy* (detail, Figure 5), the object evokes suffering in its loneliness, brokenness, and apparent disrepair. The piece densely rests on

fabric strips that appear to be giving away under the unmade's weight. The fragile perch is made from scraps of baby beds. Feathers from old pillows are piled under and around the unmade, seemingly preventing the creature from falling through the hole that has formed underneath.

In addition to other formal depictions of emotional isolation, color plays an important role in triggering nostalgia and feelings of bittersweet longing in the viewer. I take visual cues from collections such as old milk glass, pastel-glazed early American pottery, and faded vintage textiles since they are descriptive of popular color found in mid 20th century homes. These items inspire a muted palette of pastel tones in the paintings. These choices are also inspired from research of historical domestic interiors from Western culture. *Rest Easy* (Figure 4) is a perfect illustration of my use of washed out pinks, blues, greens, and milky, dingy whites mixed with aged sepia tones. The palette is subdued and dreamlike as seen on the left side where green and ochre blend with one another. All throughout the painting there are no sudden changes in color value to cause visual disruption or tension for the viewers. This attention to detail keeps the viewer feeling pleasantly comfortable. In terms of inspiring comfort, old homes make us think of well-worn, inviting spaces. These connotations show through in the paintings evident in an installation view of the thesis exhibition *Objects of Affection* (Figure 10). Panels of paint like the ivory color in *Embellished Regrets* and the strips of cloth and paint in the lower portion of *Rest Easy* are reminiscent of wallpaper. In addition, the fabricated furniture that I build to accompany the artwork mimics a historical paint application known as *soft distemper*, in which white chalk is mixed with pigment to create delicate hues. The layers of paint are heavily applied causing drip, pooling, and

cracking. I then cover the paint with stains and washes that seeps into the cracks and stains the white surface a muddy brown. This process adds to the contradictory sweet lure of the pastel colors and the unpleasant repulsion of the dirty surface.

Furthermore, pastel colors are employed to entice the viewer with positive connotations of pastel color. It is well known that pastels are considered more calming and soothing to people in comparison to vibrant colors. People more often than not have positive reactions to pastels. Just the name “pastel” conjures images of idyllic settings with an inviting appeal.

The psychologically effective palette in the paintings is also employed in the unmades. Gingham, disintegrating lace from dresses, stained and faded bedspreads, pillow coverings, and curtains all become enmeshed in the creation of each unmade. All these things are “worn” literally and emotionally. For example, the unmade in *Rest Easy* (detail, Figure 5) is almost completely covered with patches from bits and pieces of all these sources. The varied materials in this piece are related to one another in terms of the distinct color usage. Once again, pastel pink, along with hues of light green and yellow, and varying shades of white cover the surface. Overall, the color choices serve a meaningful function in representing an inviting, comforting environment.

In addition to the influential color and old imagery content in the paintings, the unmades representing the memorialized toy are an additional source for instigating a nostalgic longing in the viewer. Toys are universal signifiers for comfort and security. We can easily imagine a well-loved object from childhood, whether a favorite blanket or cherished teddy bear. For some of us, this object has the power to trigger memories of protection and contentment. When we see one that reminds us of our own, we tend to feel

a longing for the feelings that our precious object conjures. It may even speak to our lost innocence every time we see it. Even though we may be detached from the object, either out of sight or mentally forgotten, the remembrance of a treasured belonging never disappears completely. For instance, the intangible strength of the emotions that we attach to a sentimental object can be as strong as a scent, or the feel of something against our cheek. Those senses can transport us back in time.

We are often separated from cherished possessions as we grow up. We discard them because human relationships begin to replace our object associations. This situation coerces bittersweet nostalgia to take hold. In his book, *Objects of Desire*, Salman Akhtar (2005) queries,

“We caress these lost objects with the soft flannel of process. The pain of our loss feeds our love of the items. This sense of loss, and yet of gain, explains nostalgia’s bittersweetness. It is bitter because it reminds us of our loss. It is sweet because it emanates from a mental reunion, as it were, with an idealized version of lost possessions and places” (p.57).

Therefore, if our lives were never affected by loss, we would not be able to apply strong feelings of love in the way we do with our treasured possessions. For instance, *Unmade 2 and 3* (Figures 13 and 14) roughly mimic stuffed animals, particularly teddy bears. They have lump-like torsos and appendages coming out from all angles. The viewer can see all the patching and stitching that goes into creating each piece, which translates to time and care. It is evidence that a personal connection is made between the maker and the creation. The unmades even have a familiar scent from pouring old *Avon* perfume on their surfaces. Other pieces have potpourri inside them, so they exude a sweet aroma. With these olfactory qualities of the unmades, the viewers experience an enhanced opportunity to prompt a memory. Also, since they are stand-ins for the

memorialized toy, they exist within the confines of an intimate scale. I exaggerate this by placing some of the unmades low to the ground in the thesis exhibition. Therefore, the unmades seem approachable and comparable to toys.

By depicting references to objects and sensibilities from homes of the past, viewers can conjure their own memories of items that spark a wishfulness. This instigates a chance for them to reconnect with their pasts. I find old things both alluring and sad, so I seek to create a world that embraces comforting, romantic notions of nostalgia while at the same time exposes loss of innocence and childhood security. In the next chapter, I will discuss how I use formal devices and materials that I relate with processes of time to further illustrate bittersweet notions of loss and hope.

Chapter 4

The Vulnerable Object: Destruction, Repair, and Hope

“Compassion and its kindred emotions focus our attention on the world, the person or creature who is suffering, and move us to do something” (Solomon, 2004, p. 59).

Since my work articulates the idea of nostalgia as a yearning for the past, I appropriately convey the passage of time. Within this creative research, I also allude to contradictions in life. We make choices that are destructive to ourselves and to others. As a result, we try to recover by attempting to repair the damage we cause. Damage also happens to old things, either in the sense of physical aging apparent on the surface, or in our psychological isolation from sentimental things from our childhood as we age. We become nostalgic for the feelings of security and comfort that they instigate. To address this concept in my work and to trigger emotions and memories in the viewer, I exaggerate the vulnerable state of the paintings and unmades through evidence of simultaneous caring and destroying.

The concept of time has dual meaning. Objects are vulnerable to destruction by time and human wear and tear. Moisture, bacteria, and sun damage physically alter things. Hands rub surfaces, color fades, and pieces go missing. On the other hand, objects potentially survive with proper care over years, decades, and even centuries.

Time also adds psychological and physical character, as I suggest in Chapter 2 in the discussion of the charm of personification and the allure of old things. More importantly, I assert that memories and remnants of human usage give objects a history, documenting their growth and struggle to survive. Time also takes away from an object, feeding on its physical vulnerability and the owner’s emotional attachment.

Destruction

Objects have the power to remind us of our own mortality. Physical destruction represents tragedy, loss, and sadness. To illustrate, I make vulnerable artwork. In *Embellished Regrets* (Figure 8), the sculptural portion features a flimsy chair supporting the faded and browned unmades. Even more evident are the gaping holes forced through the canvas surface. Also, the imagery of the clock is a tiny reminder of the passage of time.

Despite their vulnerability and distress, the things we keep, collect, inherit, and ultimately surround ourselves with are powerful. These paintings and unmades speak to a world where consumption by moth, rust, theft, and fire is inevitable. And yet, objects still survive in reality and memory. Their potential for ruin and disregard makes them metaphors for our own mortality. Vulnerability reigns over our lives. Our physical bodies and mental capacity are susceptible to time and decay.

I intentionally destruct these works by processes of ripping, cutting, sanding, and staining in order to require repairs. In *Unmade 1* (Figure 12), I stuff the piece until seems start to rip and the yellow gingham starts tearing apart, exposing layers of fabric underneath. Ultimately, the piece is so overstuffed that the surface is visibly taut and seemingly ready to burst open at the slightest touch. As a result of the physically damaging stuffing procedures, I also allude to time overtaking the body of the unmade. The straw and sticks from within protrude outward through the holes in the torso. By making them appear damaged and having growth from within, I ensure that these things will be seen as something worth caring for and display hope against inevitable decay.

On the surfaces of the unmades, I make the fabric look old and deteriorating through destructive surface design techniques. Such processes include the use of a bleaching agent called thiox, burning or destroying natural fibers through a process called *devoré*, and a potato dextrin and dye application that creates a crackled surface.

I also use more direct techniques like sanding the pieces in order to thin fabric and create a ragged, worn out effect. In this fashion, I make the images appear to have been on the surface for a long time and have undergone many cleanings and abuse. In *Rest Easy* (Figure 4), the reality of the unforgiving effects of time is recreated through the destruction of the surface: the pretty picture reflects a feeling of slow deterioration. Holes are cut into the canvas through repetitive sanding. In addition, I use carving tools to pierce the taught surface and roughen up the exposed wooden frame under the canvas. These processes exaggerate the natural wear over time that might afflict the corners, the frame, and even within the composition. For example, the faint image of the boy and the fading clothesline are both sanded and scraped to take the paint away that I originally painstakingly applied.

In all the work, the state of disrepair initially portrays a noticeable physical vulnerability. However, upon close inspection, this situation is not completely hopeless. The evidence of new patches and mending on the surface of the objects displays that they have been “loved.” For example, the unmades in the foreground of *Woebegone* (Figure 7) display rows of blue and neon green thread that pull together ripped seams and hold disintegrating fabric to keep it from falling away. The unmades also contain new layers of patched cloth and thus display attempts at preservation. Without the layers of fabric

that represent the passage of time or the ragged appearances, I would not be able to substantiate the importance of the psychological strength of a sentimental object.

Care

Positive effects of time involving human care counteract the previous sequence of destructive elements. The evidence of care through applications of paint, cloth, and thread redeems the ongoing destructive elements in the work. Caring is made visible through three specific processes: salvage of discarded materials; repair in the form of mending, patching, and darning; and strengthening personification and character with adornment and embellishment. The application of these elements onto the paintings and unmades visually attempts to deny the reality of the destruction of time. I literally fix what I destruct in order to externalize the “hope” that with our attention, our own vulnerable objects will be survivors over years, decades, and centuries.

In contrast to artist Annette Messenger’s taxidermied bird art piece I discuss in Chapter 2, I bring a feeling of hope to the work through the evidence of care. *Unmade 2 and 3* (Figures 13 and 14) continue to change in their form because they are repeatedly altered through additive and subtractive methods. They also offer the viewer a sense of hope in the form of thoughtful embellishments like the orange pom-poms placed atop *Unmade 4* (Figure 15). In the meantime, Messenger’s birds remain sad and dead. The viewer is mildly comforted by the attention she bestows on them but it ends there. On the other hand, my unmades show evidence of long-term care. As if picked up, “awwwed” over, and taken in to be revived and personalized, they survive. The unmades evolve over time because they continue to be kept “alive,” through the evidence of appreciation and love.

Cynics may argue these actions are futile and a waste of time and energy on material things. These doubts are what fuel the loss of appreciation for the things around us. Robert C. Solomon (2004) asserts that compassion is “suffering with” the other. Safely detached from the misery of the other, one affords the luxury of commiseration (p.58). Solomon’s thoughts speak volumes in terms of the artwork I produce. Since I deconstruct the unmades and the framework of the canvases, they need mending and reconstruction. Otherwise, they will not survive on their own. Unfortunately, we often do not care for things *unless* they are meaningful to us at an emotional, psychological, or even monetary level. I strive to illustrate that hope in laboring over this artwork, similar to the spirit that keeps us continually protecting our beloved belongings.

In terms of care, I once again emphasize how I feel drawn to what society has deemed to be worthless in value. I find scraps and discarded objects from flea markets to city streets. I take the unwanted, what has lost its preciousness to someone who has thrown it out and give it value within the confines of artwork.

In addition to salvaging from material culture at large, I also recycled discarded remnants of earlier paintings and fabric assemblages for *Woebegone* (Figure 7). I approach this painting in a less traditional manner by bypassing the stretcher bars. Instead, I collage the scraps of canvas in tune with my procedure in fabricating the unmades. As this piece progressed, I realized that I was piecing and patching just as my grandmother did on her quilts. My intention was to showcase compassion for what I have forgotten lying around my studio. The word *woebegone* is synonymous with sadness. It derives from the idea that objects get battered and beat up, yet they persevere through the people who give them new life.

Although the unmades magnify the appearance of something forgotten and left behind to decay, close inspection reveals compassion in the form of repair. The viewer can see the compassion that I bestow on these objects and identify with them. Compassion is made visible through mending and patching in each piece. I lovingly patch holes where the straw is coming through, and I add new cloth to cover the old worn out spots, as in the blue fabric covering the left arm of *Unmade 1* (Figure 12). Each piece is continually going through a metamorphosis each time I add another layer or stitch mark.

A close look at *Unmade 2* (detail, Figure 13a) shows areas of intense stitching, and new embroidery thread around the center hole to prevent it from expanding. Within the mending process, I use numerous types of stitches that are reminiscent of quilting, doll making, and dressmaking. The blanket stitch, stem stitch, cross stitch, and the pinch stitch are used in varying degrees. In the worm-like unmade sitting on the floor in front of *Woebegone* (Figure 7), the pinch stitch is employed to “pinch” up the fabric to reveal the sticks underneath the “skin” that are stuffed within the body. This procedure accentuates the appearance of growth from within which maintains the life qualities.

Adornment with embellishments and trimmings is another step that I take to display care in the artwork. Garnishing the surfaces with a variety of textures encourages close inspection. One painting that encourages a closer look is *Embellished Regrets* (Figure 8). Viewed from a distance, the piece appears to be entirely painted. On the contrary, I have stitched patches of French knots around a low-relief flower impression and a fabric appliqué. In that same area, holes punched into the canvas are surrounded by rows of hand-embroidery while daisy petals are layered with soft embroidery thread.

This collage of elements litters the surface with seductive textures and offers the viewer a sampling of details inspired by old textiles. Creativity centered on fine, detailed, and textural applications continue to be an important element in this research. Most people can conjure memories when presented with details or fragments that remind them of the actual object connected to a personal memory. These sensibilities are what I strive to achieve so that viewers can make those connections.

The combination of the old, worn out surfaces and the new thread and embellishments keeps adding to the personification of the artwork. In this case, life alludes to growth in a positive way. These applications are not entirely superficial. In fact, they offer concealment from the effects of destructive time. Other additions like the pink pleated bed skirt and the craft-inspired fabric scrap branches incorporated into the vignette of *Woebegone* (Figure 7) intensify the richness of the narrative.

When objects are embellished they are meant to be experienced at close range. As for the unmade, we can handle them and sense the remnants of human presence through the details, the handmade quality and obvious characterization discussed in Chapter 2. *Unmade 1, 2, and 3* (Figures 12, 13, and 14) flaunt appendages, ribbons, buttons, and other found ephemera purposefully making each one distinctly unique. *Unmade 1* boasts a pleated ruffle along its shoulders, while *Unmade 2* has millinery flower pistil growing out of its head and dark feathers peeking from behind an oversized pink and white-checked bow tie.

Synonymous with care, the term “loved” denotes an object’s history of usage, repair, and reconstruction by the owner(s). A “loved” object is a signifier for time, denoting something devoid of shiny newness. When we think of care, the phrase “loved

to death,” infers that an object is also psychologically filled or weighed down by the memories that are stored within them. Since they are frequently “loved to death” toys naturally have the greatest potential for disintegration and disrepair. Therefore, they have the greatest need for constant care. Often used until they are no longer distinguishable or even sanitary, toys are something we rescue and take care of again and again because of the emotional attachment that is formed between the owner and the object.

These contradictory attributes of toys are inspiration for the unmades. I exaggerate the history of the “loved to death” object. *Unmade 1,2,and 3* (Figures 12, 13, and 14) are discombobulated forms boasting awkwardly positioned appendages. Comprised of multiple fabric swatches, they appear as if some distant toy from the past melded with others as it passed through time, and these unmades represent the outcome. Upon close inspection of the collective unmades, it is apparent that they show various degrees of dirtiness and are missing appendages where we expect them to be. We can also compare them to the condition of the skin horse in *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922). He is proud of his shabby appearance. The age and love that he has accumulated endows him with hope of becoming “real” someday.

The physical evidence of care ensures the art does not appear to be overtaken by signs of inevitable destruction. The constant push and pull of destroying and repairing is a reminder of our bittersweet lives. We will never be a part of the past that I reference, nor can I have one more afternoon with my aunt. What we can do is value those objects that help us cope with our losses and keep powerful memories fresh in our minds.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Most of our objects are not immortal or monumental landmarks that will leave a substantial mark on history. However, they feed our emotional lives with their place in our personal history. As souvenirs of our collective past, old things are worth caring for and treasuring for the emotions and memories they represent. We must make time to find, restore, reuse, and reinterpret objects that give us so much and ask for nothing in return. For these reasons, I make work that acknowledges the power of the lowly object in terms of its magical qualities, sentimental appeal, and ultimately vulnerable situation.

I make this work in light of our own vulnerable situation. The 21st Century contemporary society is increasingly becoming a longing culture in response to the turmoil in our present world. We are yearning for a better time and for a sense of permanence. The post-9/11 mentality coupled with the War on Terrorism has created uncertainty and discontent in our lives. It is no wonder that people spend more time in their homes to find refuge against an uncontrollable environment. Art critic Michael Kimmelman of the *New York Times* also considers the impact of these opinions. He has written many criticisms about contemporary artwork addressing sentimental emotions, including, “It suggests a longing for something big, genuine, and heartfelt...it implies something unattainable, except perhaps in a hand-me-down form, and therefore smaller in scope and inherently poignant.” (Capasso, 2005, p.13). Something big is certainly happening. The sentimental phenomenon impacting our culture is evident in the outpouring of nostalgic sensibilities and a return to traditional values. It has affected Internet sites like *Etsy* and *PoppyTalk Handmade* dedicated to a “handmade pledge” of

buying and selling unique, handmade goods. People are utilizing the technology of our culture creating global communities to discuss the love of objects. With outlets like blogs readily available, fellow artists and crafters share their new creations and found inspirations from the comfort of their homes. This mentality has permeated advertising and fashion in which stores like *Anthropologie* sell new clothes and home furnishings saturated with a romantic, vintage appeal. Even magazines dedicate whole sections to flea market finds, “do it yourself” projects, and promise to add character to our homes with the inspiration of vintage and antique goods. By honoring the unique and the handmade, this alternative also rejects the sameness of cookie-cutter living so that we may define ourselves by the unique and cherished objects with which we surround ourselves. Thus, all this cultural evidence supports a hope for simple feelings of comfort, hope, and joy to saturate our lives.

In the end, these works come together to embrace all the complexities that reside within even the most humble objects. Through the sentimental paintings and nostalgic toy pieces that exert power over me to alternately create, destruct, and care for, I offer contemporary culture a reminder to contemplate the meaningfulness of objects with which we surround ourselves. We are accustomed to understanding object fetishes in terms of monetary value, but we cannot dismiss what we imbue with so much meaning. It is human nature to project our feelings and memories onto things. What we tend to forget is that they help us admit a sense of wonder into everyday life. They help us cope, give us hope, and make this life a little sweeter and not so bitter after all.



Figure 1. *Out on a Limb*, detail I, 2008



Figure 2. *Out on a Limb*, detail II, 2008



Figure 3. *Out on a Limb*, acrylic, thread, fabric on canvas and fabricated swing, *unmade*, 2008



Figure 4. *Rest Easy*, acrylic, thread, fabric on canvas with fabricated bed, feathers, *unmade*, 2008



Figure 5. *Rest Easy*, detail, 2008



Figure 6. *Woebegone*, detail, 2008



Figure 7. *Woebegone*, acrylic, canvas, thread, stuffing with vignette of *unmades* and furniture, 2008



Figure 8. *Embellished Regrets*, acrylic, thread, fabric on canvas with fabricated high chair, unmades, 2008

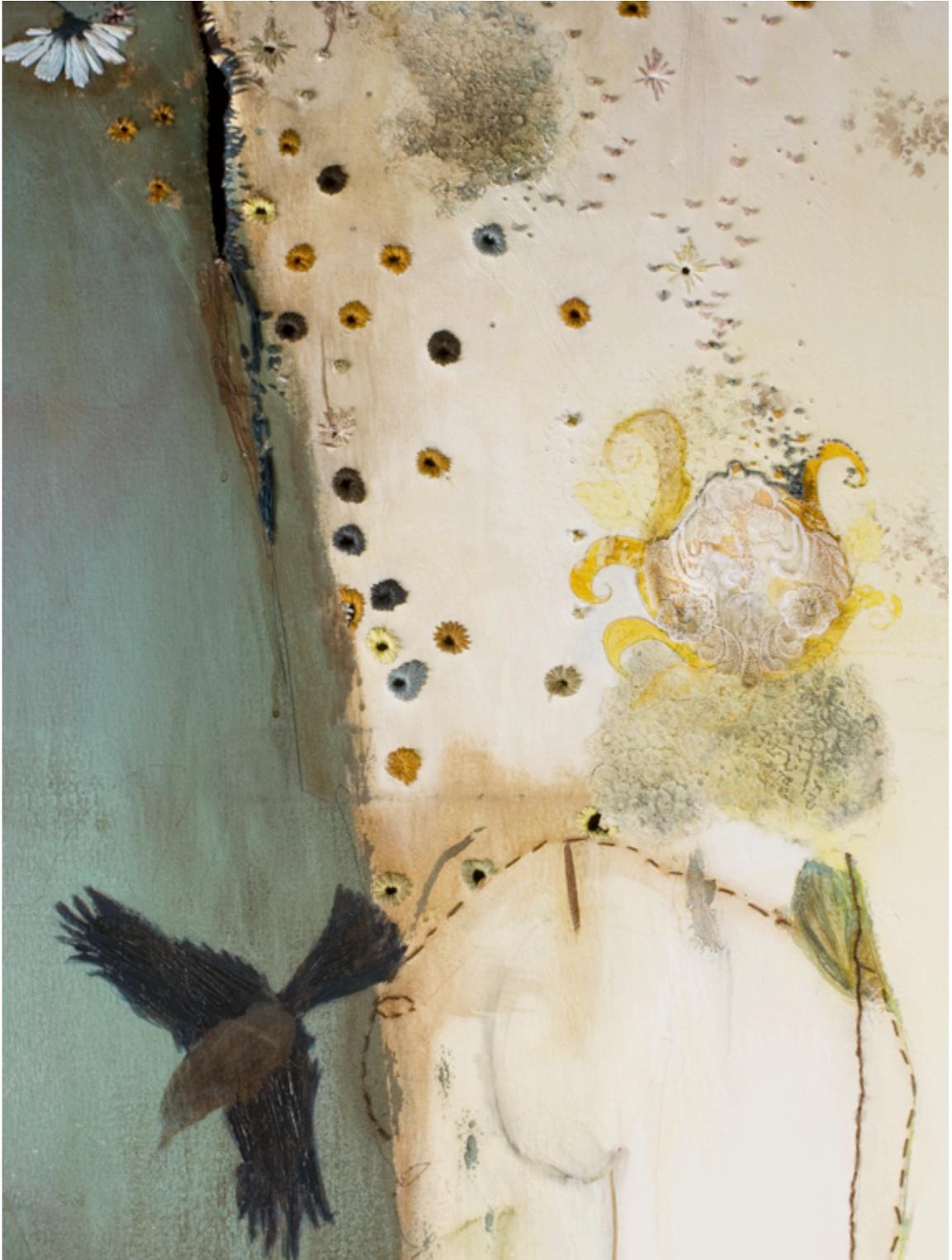


Figure 9. *Embellished Regrets*, detail, 2008



Figure 10. *Objects of Affection*, Installation View II, 2008



Figure 11. *Unmade Vignette I*, fabric, thread, straw, potpourri, sticks, wood, mixed media embellishments 2008



Figure 12. *Unmade I*, fabric, thread, straw, potpourri, sticks, wood, mixed media embellishments, 2008



Figure 13. *Unmade 2*, fabric, thread, straw, sand, potpourri, sticks, mixed media embellishments, 2008

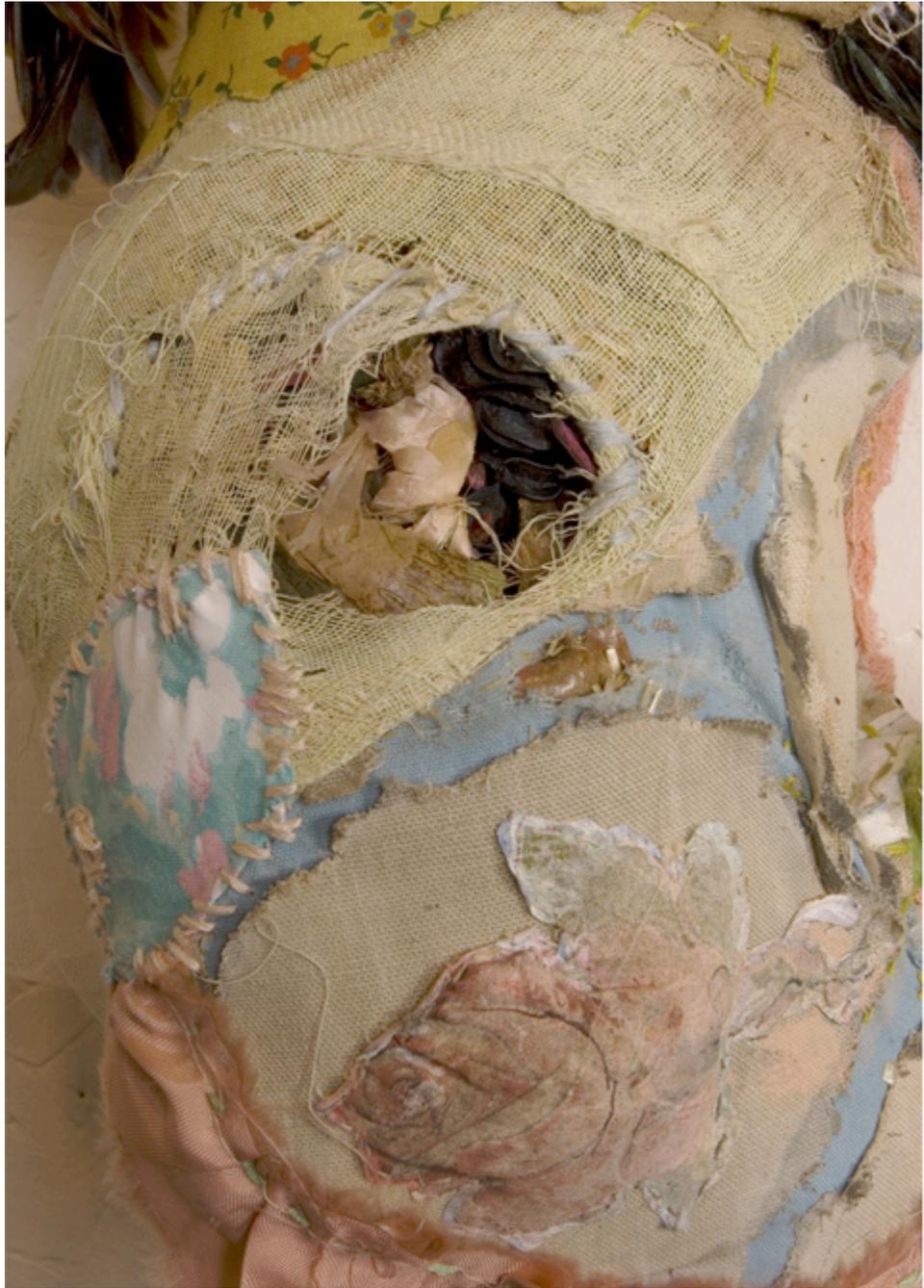


Figure 13(a). *Unmade 2*, detail, fabric, thread, straw, sand, potpourri, sticks, mixed media embellishments, 2008



Figure 14. *Unmade 3*, fabric, thread, straw, sand, potpourri, sticks, mixed media embellishments, 2008



Figure 15. *Unmade 4*, fabric, thread, straw, sand, potpourri, sticks, mixed media embellishments, 2008



Figure 16. *Unmade 5-Vignette II*, fabric, thread, straw, sand, potpourri, sticks, mixed media embellishments, 2008

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