

Nebularity: The Continuing Proliferation of the Abject in Contemporary Art

by

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Abstract

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This thesis investigates abject art why it has proliferated since gaining notoriety in the late 1980s/early 1990s. The exhibition, *Nebularity*, brings together non-traditional abject artworks in order to broaden develop abject theory for the 21st century. By employing Julia Kristeva's theory on the abject in conjunction with Georges Bataille's formlessness and Jean Paul Sartre's interpretation of the hole, *Nebularity* argues that abject art remains current in contemporary practice because of ability to unsettle the self through the encroachment of the other. Three contemporary artists – Louis Fortier, Jesika Joy, and Kim Stanford – utilize multiple mediums to demonstrate how varied and abstract artworks can have the same type of perturbing and unsettling potential as traditionally defined abject art. By confusing boundaries, imposing intimacy, and deteriorating conventional forms, *Nebularity* asserts that the abject is not just another genre of art but a means to continually challenge structures of subjectivity and knowledge.

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Curatorial Essay

Nebularity: The Continuing Proliferation of the Abject in Contemporary Art

The pervasiveness of the abject in contemporary art proves that transgression has more to offer than short-lived shock value. For thirty years the abject has continued in the mainstream art sphere as a perturbing thematic that threatens mortality and incorporates bodily fluids. While other types of transgressive art have become accepted and even institutionalized, the presence of contemporary abject art lacks criticism and remains undertheorized. The question endures: why is abject art still so provocative?

Nebularity presents an updated lens to reconsider the experience and display of abject art in the twenty-first century. Three contemporary artists – Louis Fortier, Jesika Joy, and Kim Stanford – employ abject tendencies that elicit emotional engagement and strong reactions. By confusing boundaries, imposing intimacy, and deteriorating conventional forms, the included works demonstrate that the abject is not just another genre of art but a practice of continually challenging structures of subjectivity and knowledge.

The term “nebularity” refers to a state of being where the other/object threatens to consume the self/subject. Nebularity conjoins two terms: existentialist philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ othering notion of “alterity” and the indistinctly homogenizing and consuming environment of a nebula. Choosing Levinas’ term was done to consciously focus on the separation between the self and a distinct other. While many cultural

theorists and philosophers have appropriated the term “other” to detail different socially subjective states of selfhood and the relationship to the Other, Levinas’ understanding concerned a radical otherness that existed outside the exteriority of the self.¹ Although his full interpretation suggested many nuanced and culturally specific uses, alterity’s re-appropriation here can be useful when understood as the distinctively separate positionality between the self and the other.² My use of *nebularity* requires Levinas’ interpretation to borrow the binary contrast between self and other and nuances the term by including the way in which the art-viewer is implicated in abject art.

Nebularity firstly expands the criteria that abject art has been traditionally confined to by broadening the focus on corporeal-centric transgressive practices to also include abstract and conceptual works. Secondly, *Nebularity* offers a more inclusive alternative explanation on why abject art has survived previous shock tactics and taboo subject matter; abject (and related) aesthetics continue to engage viewership due to the artwork’s alarming ability to prompt a threatening encroachment upon the viewer’s figurative and literal boundaries, continually reminding them of the self’s frailty. Thus, *nebularity* can be imagined as an invisible and engulfing environ of traumatic affect, radiated by abject artworks to prompt that self-state exists in a delicate fragility when threatened to become intimately blurred with the other.

The umbrella nature of *nebularity* combines three distinct but similar theoretical discourses – Julia Kristeva’s abject, Georges Bataille’s formlessness, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s holes – for a new artistic lens to see how certain artworks pervade and unnerve

viewership. The abject is one of the three primary theories that inform and clarify nebularity. Popularized by post-structuralist feminist scholar Julia Kristeva in her *Powers of Horror* (1980), the abject is something that “disturbs identity, system, and order” (4). Kristeva explains how the individual in society constantly needs to repel the other in order to re-establish safe (and distinct) boundaries between self and other. The abject continually and infinitely “oppose[s] the self” (1), suggesting the individual must incessantly separate – or abject – the other in order to remain wholesome. Kristeva’s philosophical detailing of the abject utilized examples of the corpse, vomit, urine/fecal matter, and blood as literal abject paradigms produced a number of open-ended interpretations on her theory. Art theorist Rina Arya contends that the abject is “unassimilable,” meaning “we have to contemplate its otherness in its proximity to us but without it being able to be incorporated” (4). Arya’s interpretation mirrors my suggestion that an environment such as the liminal setting of the art gallery may be the best place for abject reflection. Many modern and contemporary artists who incorporate the abject have understood the white cube’s ideal atmosphere for abject practices. Mona Hatoum, Mike Kelley, Jake and Dinos Chapman, and Paul McCarthy have created artworks involving anatomical carnality and transgressive content that have become regularly associated with the abject within art galleries. Although some taboo corporeality is included in *Nebularity*, the exhibition includes as well as expands the abject beyond Kristeva’s commonly cited examples.

Nebularity utilizes formlessness through symbolically jeopardizing the

boundaries between forms. Georges Bataille introduced the concept in *Documents 7* (1929) to collapse formal distinctions through systematically dissolving or disregarding forms, figures, and structures. However it was not enough to just homogenize things into one amorphous mass, Bataille wanted formlessness to also detrude everything, saying “formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world” (31). Therefore formlessness can signify a way to reorganize hierarchies onto a level field where all objects and systems become equal. In art, the post-minimalist works of Eva Hesse and Robert Morris are closely tied to this term through seemingly unending forms that infect spaces and confuse the (often literal) high/low art binary.³ With Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois’s *Formless: A User’s Guide* (1997) and accompanying exhibition, formlessness became a label for artworks that tried to rebel against traditional art formations and definitions. The curators used formlessness to attack modernist discourse with artworks that perverted closed-systems of representation and insisted on amorphous, fluid definitions of art and the capabilities of affect. When put in practice, Bataille’s term threatens contemporary societal structures by reducing all components to the same level, thus erasing hierarchical systems and modes. Formlessness strives to cause unnerving feelings that resemble abject reactions through making real the threat of collapsing all boundaries, distinctions, and forms to homogenize the self with the other.

The third theory integrated into *Nebularity* is holes and their consuming nature. Jean Paul Sartre outlines how the hole represents an opening without ending to engulf the

subject within an infinite other. The hole's setting is one absent of forms, signifying an environment that consumes and hides the subject – representing paradoxically both death and safety by possessing the ability to “protect oneself [...] but by annihilating oneself, by withdrawing into the hole” (150). The hole provides another angle to approach a contemporary understanding of the abject; Sartre's nothingness infringes upon the self by representing the location where all previously distinct forms becoming a fused entity, leaving no boundaries between subject and object. The hole's ability to “annihilat[e] oneself” (150) parallels abject and formless operations that both work at erasing borders between self and other. Although the hole is still prevalent in modern and contemporary art, Sartre's contextualization has little literature within art theory.⁴ The theory of “nebularity” incorporates the hole in order to signify Sartre's ideas on endless engulfment that can potentially perturb audiences. Artworks focusing on the hole connote ideas of nothingness and have the ability to evoke the same affective feelings as other abject and formless artworks.

Nebularity proposes that Kristeva's abject can be used in conjunction with Bataille's formless as well as Sartre's hole to formulate a different understanding to interpret the innate fear of and fascination with abject art. Instead of solely resigning to the traditional definitions of abject artworks that demonstrate disgust, turning the body inside out, and giving in to animalistic instincts, the notion of nebularity posits that through a conjoined, three-part theoretical understanding there is an opportunity to explain why the abject still proliferates in contemporary art. For the exhibition,

Nebularity, the three theories are integrated into my commentary on the artists, for each exemplifies differently how aesthetic forms can threaten to upset the self. The exhibited artworks have been deemed to emit “nebularity,” or an environment that amplifies viewer emotional engagement to artworks that can jeopardize the distinct self/other binary.

Nebularity is an independent analysis of abject art – with relevant guidance by the three aforementioned theories – that examines artworks’ ability to unsettle and encroach upon viewer boundaries. The art in *Nebularity* reveals how the abject maintains a continued artistic presence through the eternally transgressive operations. By conflating the subject and object, abject art can be thought of by exuding nebularity.

Kim Stanford: Taking Apart Formlessness

Kim Stanford is a Toronto-based artist who primarily employs textile materials to create tactile three-dimensional abstractions. Independent curator Tara Bursey describes her practice as one involving “common, often domestic objects (such as steel wool, socks, and tape) to construct absurd and beautifully abject installations and sculptural assemblages.”⁵ Stanford’s minimal aesthetic invites theoretical and conceptual inferences but unapologetically resists becoming fitted into a singular framework of explanation.

pick up your f---in sock (2014) obstructs the pathway at the entry to the exhibition.

A heap of multi-coloured socks greets visitors. Each sock stands frozen in a crumpled form, falling over and on top of others like a collapsing pyramid of detritus. Onlookers are invited to pick up and take a sock as a souvenir. The comparable mound-form and

take-away feature brings Felix Gonzales-Torres' *Untitled* candy pieces to mind. While Gonzales-Torres dedicated the metaphorical "body of Christ" readymade to his deceased partner, Stanford's piece invokes a more ambiguously repugnant esthetic. The crusted-over multiples of socks, rock-hardened with glue, make their familiar soft cotton transform into a stiff and rigid figurine. The apparent bodily emission harkens back to the adolescent male ritual of masturbating into a sock.

The substance saturating the socks recalls Kristeva examples of the abject, i.e., ejaculate, and elicits involuntary reactions of disgust because what was formerly interior becomes messily exterior. Through the title's imperative to take a repulsive sock from the seemingly formless and ever-replenished pile, comes a disconcerting interaction with the other and introduction into nebularity. In this case, nebularity provokes viewers to repel the other (in this case, foreign corporeal fluids) to maintain one's safe boundaries. Yet Stanford's work asks, demands, that visitors do the opposite. *pick up your f---ing sock* causes friction between the appeal to break the barrier with the other and not knowing if the act will cause unsettling affective responses. The title infers viewers' responsibility by ordering them to pick up their socks, insinuating that they are the reason for the socks' solidification and discard. The work exemplifies nebularity by testing the audience's tolerance when confronted by a repellent foreign object and their appetite for a free, if apparently vile, artist's multiple.

Like gigantic water drips that unexpectedly appear and leak overhead, Stanford's *Milkpod* (2008) and *WifeMother* (2012) seep through the ceiling of the exhibition.

Milkpod consist of a series of white pantyhose, hardened with glue and bursting at the ends. Three similar variations characterize the series: the first are stuffed with dried pine needles and have cut holes cut into them to allow a view into their interior, the second are drained of substance and pathetically crumpled over, and the third are ripped open with spikes that poke out as if to attack anyone in proximity. The *WifeMother* series is comprised of steel wool, plastic, and tape materials. Contrary to the small and white *Milkpod* series, these massive dark sacs have vacant interiors, causing some to collapse onto themselves. The immense womb-like sculptures hang from the ceiling and permit a 360-degree view in order to fully experience the work's shape and texture. The large holes invite voyeuristic looking. Clustering on the ceiling obscures *WifeMother*'s origins and adds an unsettlingly random element to the work's physical placement.

WifeMother and *Milkpod* suggest abject nebularity by embodying maternal wombs and their holes. While the mother's womb signifies the ultimate birthplace of subjectivity, it also represents the fear of reversion to pre-self/subjective form. The work's shape elucidates Kristeva's position of the mother originating at the root of the abject and her association with identity loss.⁶ Kristeva explains the constant struggle with creating identity from abjecting the mother, saying "The abject confronts us...with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her" (13). *WifeMother* and *Milkpod* summon nebularity by employing the maternal phallus to insinuate the subject's erasure. Each hanging artwork is a reminder of one's abject origin and jeopardizes the self.⁷ Deeply unsettling, Stanford's works exemplify how non-

traditional abject subject matter can still cause similar affective reactions through nebularity.

The work also incorporates the hole's titillating and intimidating nature to endanger the self by threatening to consume the subject. In Jean-Paul Sartre's 1939 *War Diaries*, he explains how holes can "[propose] *engulfment*. And engulfment always attracts, as a nihilation [that] would be its own foundation. Of course, attraction for the hole is accompanied by repulsion and anguish" (150). The holes of *WifeMother* are large and menacing, almost capable of swallowing anything that gets too close. However, their large openings also invite a voyeuristic investigation into what lies within, encapsulating Sartre's paradoxical beckoning and repelling. The holes within the *Milkpod* series are more overtly aggressive, with sharp wooden needles piercing through their exteriors into every direction. *WifeMother* and *Milkpod* include the "annihilating power" to become menacingly devouring objects that hint at the self's obliteration by each inviting void. Perfectly marrying the two elements of the holes and the abject mother, Stanford's work invokes nebularity through the careful juxtaposition of maternal origins and consuming holes.

An entire room in *Nebularity* is dedicated to conveying the power that holes can have when completely immersing an individual. Stanford's *Café Hesse* (2012) is a massive accumulation of used paper coffee bags that emanate menacing shadows and covers the four walls of a claustrophobic room. The lighting amplifies the black emptiness at the end of each bag. The brown crumpled sacks seem to tunnel into the void,

what Sartre would call “*black* nothingness, which causes another nature to intervene here, another cardinal category – Night. The nature of the hole is nocturnal” (150, emphasis in original). Each bag in *Café Hesse* thus is an entrance into the night, conveying a dark environment of unknown. The sheer multitude present in this work creates an engrossing spectacle of night, holes, and nebularity. By physically engrossing the subject, the work provides a reminder of the self’s fragility and exemplifies a contemporary version of vanitas.

Stanford’s *Unravelled* (2012) circulates through each room, sewing the exhibition together with thick grey threads. A steel wool trail weaves through the spaces and artworks to accumulate in the final room as a large raveled ball. There is a tactile element to the work as the prickly material tempts being touched. The dark grey colour coupled with the scratchy materiality makes the work ominously sinister, and flaccid pools of fiber collect in messy corners and piles. *Unravelled* reifies formlessness to perform the all-lowering of forms through the juxtaposition of the large ball formed beside the accumulated formless pools of steel wool. The placement on the floor, wall, and ceiling connects rooms and other artworks together in an effort to equalize each and destroy any hierarchal art structuring. The artwork’s (dis)organization parallels Krauss and Bois’ insistence that formlessness could not be defined solely as an aesthetic trait but, more appropriately, as an operation. They define the formless as “Nothing in and of itself, the formless has only an operational existence: it is a performative, like obscene words, the violence of which derives less from semantics than from the very act of their delivery”

(18). The work employs the formless to distill other artworks to the same level and signifies a negation of each work's autonomy. *Unravelled* performs this equalizing operation by integrating each element of the exhibition into the work's construction.

Unravelled infers nebularity by suggesting that forms and boundaries must always be implicated in an unsettling relationship with the formless. The work's formed ball of excess connecting to unformed pools of wool symbolizes two things: formlessness' encroachment and bond to form, and the inherent need for form to be defined against the formless. Paul Hegarty and Patrick Crowley, two art historians that have written much on Bataille's formlessness, also believe that Bataille's formlessness enigmatically requires its counterpart – form – to survive, two actors in a dialectical symbiotic relationship.

Ironically, though, Hegarty and Crowley contend that formlessness is “a process at work that resists being put to work. It wants to not come to form, and yet it does, as, if nothing else, (the) formless” (185). Stanford's *Unravelled* shows how this process becomes completed and undone. At first it defies being formed, as large pools of soft, malleable material lay spilled on the floor, until the steel wool eventually coalesces into a static object. At once pushing against and leading to form, *Unravelled* cyclically works to represent the form(less) state change. Without remaining on one restraining definition of form or formlessness, nebularity seeps through. Unwavering resistance to settling on a single form helps the work emit nebularity by making visible the indeterminate shape transformation that formlessness constantly produces. Nebularity is the area in which all forms are threatened, giving *Unravelled* a different analysis when understood through the

boundary collapsing nature of the work.

Each of Stanford's works exhibit nebularity through consistently confusing and perverting assumptions of the self's boundaries and distinctions by introducing a threatening "other." Through gaping holes, formless materials, enveloping walls, and maternal constructions, Stanford uses different aesthetic strategies to abstractly treat abject elements and convey nebularity. While the form of the hole uses its beckoning void to attract, encounters with formlessness perturb and push away with slippery ambiguity. These works present the power of withdrawal into this invisible void, a protecting but disquieting venture. The nebularity of each artwork permits a different perspective than a traditional reading of each, assisting in adding another interpretive model for contemporary abject art.

Jesika Joy: (Un)see me, Consume me

Jesika Joy is a video artist whose work provokes the viewer with confrontational content of filmed sexualized encounters and situations. With a PhD in social and political thought, Joy's practice addresses feminist issues and sexual politics with unapologetic subject matter. Her works are startling intimate video encounters that repel and attract. "Most of my work," she says, "is an aggravated sexual encounter with the viewer."⁸ The affecting images in her work resist passive viewership and can easily garner intense responses from audiences.

Pig Heart (2005) challenges the viewer with disconcerting content. The work

literally employs abject subject matter. Although short in length, the video of a woman performing coitus with a pig's heart is piercingly graphic. It begins with a woman's body against a backdrop of a brick wall. An animal's heart writhes and slip through two hands. The muted colours and soft saturation gives the video a homemade aesthetic and alludes to pre-HD video formats. Short, sharp cuts direct the camera downwards, where the outline of a vagina is distinguished. Just when the audience can identify the genital area, the camera cuts to a frontal picture of hands tearing off a piece of the heart to insert inside the performer. Sensual yet jarring, the scene proceeds for less than half a minute but feels like much longer. The entire encounter may sound overtly provocative at first, but Joy shapes the actions with her delicate movement and slow progression.

Pig Heart shows a graphic and transgressive sexual ritual that suggests a threat to the self by a foreign other. The conscious choice of a pig heart over a human heart infers that the body's copulation with the other occurs not only through necrophilia, but also bestiality. Surely the emotional charge the video sets off can be seen as deeply unsettling, and subsequently achieves the goal of provoking response. The pig heart heightens the abject terror towards the performer's copulation due to aversion of associating sexual acts with animals. Joy's choice of a pig heart adds an even more unsettling affect because of its connection to humans: pig hearts were historically the first (and continue to be used in medical procedures) transplanted animal organ into humans, as well as bearing close visual similarity to human hearts. Joy's sexual object could now appear more human than alien. The heart's origin from a pig may also symbolize a sexual encounter with a

chauvinistic “pig” (male) that she intimately rubs into herself. As well, the act may gesture the absorption of raw animal heart (and soul) to complete a sacrificial ritual of gaining power. Ultimately, the work emits nebularity via the other’s insertion into the self, symbolizing the frailty of the self’s boundaries.

The video begins and ends on the landscape of the female body, which has long been a place for abject examples to originate and flourish. In *Amending the Abject Body* (2004), Deborah Covino details the abject’s relationship to plastic surgery and body makeovers. She explains how the abject is always present in the body and operates as the continuously required separation of self and other: “The wasting body is an incessant reminder that the subject abides under her own radical splitting, into disruption, psychic disturbance, the dissolution of boundaries, limits, identity, and flesh.” Since the self cannot abject their own demise, “[they] [live] in a constant state of failed aversion from [their] own atrophy” (35). The intercourse the female performs with the pig heart undoubtedly generates a range of interpretations about feminism and sexuality,⁹ but my interest here is in relation to the abject’s friction between self and other, and the fragility of the mortal and subjective state. *Pig Heart*’s unabashed portrayal of a woman compellingly rubbing and inserting parts of a pig heart into her vagina embodies the constant failed separation of self/other that Covino described. *Pig Heart* agitates the viewer by cautioning that the ideal of true other/self separation can never be achieved. Ultimately, however, the visceral performance’s traumatizing potential, and therefore nebularity, is only heightened by the ambiguous reason for Joy’s intimate connection with

the heart.

While the content of the artwork underscores the abject, the video also exemplifies nebularity by exhibiting the reversal process of such abjection, transposing (expected) bodily separation with subject/object conflation. Through the introjection/invagination of the foreign object (the heart), the abject has been perverted and inverted. The body's consumption and involvement of autoeroticism with the other can trouble viewer reactions more than the sole act of abjection. Swallowing the heart object infers a swallowing of the subject, which is how *Pig Heart* demonstrates a nebularity that has the capability of deeply engaging potential. The audience assumes the place of the victim in this video because the aversion towards the subject matter parlays viewer discomfort into a state of *being consumed* instead of *consuming*. Even though the other does not engulf the subject, the protagonist of the video (Joy) acts as the other in relation to the viewer, and her enveloping of the heart suggests swallowing the viewer. If visual arts, over time and repetition, have normalized the abject by constantly depicting traditional rituals of expelling the other, then Joy's unexpected inversion of abjection has the capability to reinvigorate disturbing emotions.

Joy's second work, *Urine Fountain* (2015), is a five-minute video depicting a pyramid of martini glasses gradually being filled (from an off-camera source). The translucent green and gold tinted liquid can be deductively discerned as urine. As the liquid pours from the top of the frame, the top glass eventually overflows and it trickles down into lower levels of glasses. The slow build-up and soft-lit scene complements the

static image and invests it with a hypnotic unfolding.

The suggestion of bodily fluids being released into champagne glasses combines two conflicting viewings: on one hand it is a mesmerizing cinematic experience, on the other it provokes disgust and apprehension. The viewer's response hovers between repulsion and fascination because of the internal battle between aesthetically pleasing formal elements and transgressive contextualization. Even the off-white doily that eerily appears under the television unsettles because of its association with genteel culture. Art historians Kerstin Mey (36) and Nicholas Char (33, 2011) point out the art sphere has overtaken religion as the primary cultural institution to negate the abject from society by creating sanitized versions safely containing abjection (without actually interacting with the real thing). The reason for replacing faith with art is that artworks have the tendency to aestheticize abjection, dulling traumatic reactions. Just as Andres Serrano's *Ejaculate* (1989) series captured the moment of male sexual release but left its origin off-camera, *Urine Fountain* glamorizes abject subject matter in order to confuse directly repulsed reactions with attracting visuals. Why does piss belong in clean and clear martini glasses? The choice of glasses charges the image with connotations of high-class dining and cleanliness. Introducing urine into these glasses heightens the sharply affective contrast that confuses simple abject fluids with drinking elements. While the taboo content unapologetically shows carnal interiority to effectively unsettling viewership, Joy's insistence of having actual glasses filled with urine¹⁰ and the use of the martini glasses at the exhibition opening invites the ability to consume the liquid (the other) and charges the

abject act with unsettling potential.

Urine Fountain infers nebularity through the unseen origin of the urine that hauntingly refuses visibility. While *Pig Heart*'s abjection is carried out viscerally and without visual restriction, *Urine Fountain* provokes the viewer to imagine the abject process taking place just inches off screen. The concealed source of the urine compels one to imagine a figure towering over the glasses, releasing him or herself. With *Urine Fountain*'s defiance to show anything but the filling glasses, the viewer's consciousness of the character's presence increases as the video continues. Art historian Nicholas Chare relays the connection of the abject with an unseen creation point, stating that "Abjection mediates the subject's relationship with its impossible origin" (27, 2011). Although Chare was discussing the internal effort of negotiating the tumultuous self-other interaction, *Urine Fountain* expands the open concept of friction to imagine the representation of the other. The confrontation with the subconscious other is represented here through the implied unnerving act of consuming unknown bodily fluids. *Urine Fountain* signifies nebularity by pervading and disrupting the interstice between the self and other, food and excrement, celebration and humiliation.

While Joy's works employ the abject and abjection through time-based media, the sublimating approaches are different. Both can engage through their transgressive acts, but on distinct levels. *Pig Heart* offers an uncensored portrayal of the consumption process emulated by nebularity with unflinching visuals in order to bridge any gap or unclear part of the abjection process. *Urine Fountain*, by contrast, requires a conscious

imagining of the other to breed a personal nebularity. Acting in binary contrast to Pig Heart, the work slowly unveils the abject; the lack of bubbles and fizz, and the pure golden colour, both point to urine but requires a keen eye to distinguish. Joy's works approach abject reification by displaying abjection processes, subsequently conveying many shades of nebularity through saturating the works with unnerving and traumatic content.

Louis Fortier: Yearning Forms

Montreal-based Louis Fortier engages with synthetic, malleable materials to create collapsing somatic shapes. Describing the artist's practice requires exercising a complex vocabulary; "carnal", "sensual", "tactile", "vivid", "liminal", and "corporeal" all begin but never quite provide an adequate depiction of the types of sculptures he molds. Wax-like substances contour ambiguously human forms that resist being categorized as abject art in the traditional sense. Curator and artist Christof Migone, though, associates their aesthetic with abjection by arguing that "[t]he carnal is preeminent in these portraits, they forgo depiction in favour of a distortion close afield from the disgust associated with abject flesh".¹¹ Similar to snapshots of melting flesh, his crimson and flesh-coloured heads and other body parts portray indefinite human features like anomalous human studies.

Senate (2013) is an amalgam of ivory white faces, pressing onto each other as they drown in a crimson-blood sea. At 3' by 2', the sculpture is Fortier's largest and most imposing work in the exhibition, referencing and defying typical conventions that

characterized Greek and Roman sculpture. Faces are in different poses side by side, representing the process of changing from one into the other. The vivid two-tone colour palette sharply contrasts elements against each other, adding to the striking aesthetic. Two levels of portraits, one on top of the other, seem to poetically transmute from the left to right. Closed eyelids and lack of teeth add an even more bothering element to the meshed faces. The work's representation of impossible forms has a deeply unsettling affective response.

Louis's works – specifically *Senate* – exemplify the ease of slippage between the abject and formlessness through threatening normalized art figures and practices. Fortier's art contains similar conventions of traditional sculpture such as realistic human anatomical features in colourful poses, but departs from customary tendencies by depicting flawed abject forms and formless elements instead of romanticized and highly detailed portraits. Pieces like *Senate* typify the connection between the abject and formlessness. Paul Hegarty describes the relationship between the two terms as “function[ing] as sites of resistance, as threats to law, order, standards and both seem to be art that attacks art, or refuses to be art” (74). Fortier's relationship to Roman portraits, highlighted by his *Caesar et moi* (2009) exhibition, informs the current *Metamorphoses* and *Senate*. Specifically, the title of *Senate* is associated with the assembling of seniors in ancient Rome and relates to Fortier's practice of medieval portraiture aberration. Above just refusing to follow the traditional Greco-Roman sculptural conventions, Fortier

attacks established these artistic forms through both employing the abject and formlessness. He has remarked that his work is based on creating portraits based on his own face. The excessive manipulation, however, diminishes the connection to the artist as well as defuses the claim to narcissism. By replacing verisimilitude with the grotesque and indistinct, the artist attacks the tenets of established portraiture.

Metamorphoses (2012) is an accumulation of numerous small to medium-sized sculptures that infectiously gather on the walls in apparent chaos. While the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, each piece can stand alone as unnerving humanistic parts with frighteningly indistinct human features and uncanny approximations of flesh. Teeming, altered states-of-being are temporally frozen, the ruptured human fractions looking back at the viewer with gaudy colours. Each represents a stage in the process of change. While some works include hundreds of fingers seemingly dripping down the wall, others appropriate teeth, mouths, and eyes to form disfigured works that seemingly barely reference the body.

Metamorphoses conveys nebularity through the seamless merging of the abject and formlessness. Alluding to Ovid's 8 A.D. *Metamorphoses*, an epic poem containing many narratives instead of a single story, Fortier's *Metamorphoses* similarly appears multi-directional while also not offering an overriding grand plot. Ovid's character evolutions parallel Fortier's abject artistic practice in representing transformation processes. Various disfigured faces and body parts in Fortier's *Metamorphoses* abject their materiality and resonate formlessness to resist prescribed classification

and definability. The whole series is placed on the walls at different heights in order to signify the formlessness operation of disrupting hierarchies. The chaotic ordering acts to disrupt and deteriorate prescribed artwork positions and ultimately equalize the artwork with disorganization.

The abject is not only suggested through Fortier's bodily materiality (elements resembling blood and flesh), but also with the employment of formlessness in the disfigurement of corporeal segments that culminate into a series of medical curiosities. The series signals towards wax moulages and health oddities with their formless heads and hands, connoting the abject not through human resemblance, but anatomical disfigurement. Here, Fortier's works emit nebularity by exemplifying how the formless and abject work together to confuse the definition of the human self. However, some scholars resist any intrinsic attachment and reciprocal relationship between abjection and formlessness. Art historian Rosalind Krauss denies affiliation between the two by saying, "'abjection,' in producing a thematics of essences and substances, is in the strongest contradiction with the idea of the informe [formlessness]" (98). Krauss identifies joining of the abject and formlessness through operating in the interstices of the semantic realm but focuses too much on reifying the abject and clings to the non-literalization of formlessness. The problem of connection may lie in Kristeva's heavy use of examples (not to mention a much longer explication) versus Bataille's succinct definition and absence of examples. If each concept can be distilled into a root disturbance and not

viewed extensively through given (or not) examples, both primarily propose the process of subjectivity-loss, which can be explained through nebularity.¹² The abject achieves the other-ing through the primal fear of reverting to pre-subject form (identifying solely with the mother), while formlessness accomplishes it through eradication of distinctions between forms to blur everything together. Louis' works exhibits nebularity through the allusion to these conditions: the wax models of *Metamorphoses* wax models unsettle through resembling medical oddities of pre-subject and formless anatomy. These stunted development and distorted human forms that gesture failed lab experiments symbolize the erasure of selfhood, by both showcasing indefinable human subjects and confusing definitions as to what can be considered "human". *Metamorphoses* connects abjection and formlessness to suggest the constant danger between the burring the self and other.

Fortier's bust series *Journal des humeurs* (2003-2013) stand on thin black metal pikes at the end of the exhibition. These works, individually called *sans titre*, include three faces inhabiting different poses that continue the technique of *Metamorphoses* to incorporate shades of red, pink, and white. Each bust emphatically encapsulates different emotions with their molded forms and facial features; the exhausted look of one juxtaposes beside a thinking expression of another, nearby the wailing-form of the third silently cries out. The first of the tortured faces that focalizes with a gaping mouth hole and bone white colour sits beside the tongue out, languishing bust that seems just moments-ago deceased. The third's head is decidedly blunted, as if Louis has purposefully sliced off the top of the skull. Every one of them feels like the final

captured moments of agony. The busts' life-sized stature confronts viewers with abjected bodies that impossibly bend and contour. The vivid tactility of the wax imbues the pieces with a fascinating amount of detail, beckoning for close examination.

All three busts emblemize the reified idea of death, the corpse. Kristeva identifies the cadaver as the "utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (4). Fortier's busts encroach upon this ideal abjection, displaying formal characteristics that infer embodied death. The mouths, from the palpable tongue laying outside of one bust to the anguished facial cries of another, signify either the moment of life leaving the body or the instant afterward. The third has eyes shut and mouth tightly closed, as if to never open once again. Any harrowing reactions stem from the association of the busts to death. Seeing the abjected and depraved forms create the connection not to the ideal of life, but the circumstance of mortality. The reason for such perturbation is, in Kristeva's thought, that "It is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border?" (4). Viewing manifested fatality confuses and unsettles the self so intensely because it introduces the idea that the subject is abjected, thrust aside, and therefore becomes the other. The busts' signification of death provides a reminder that the abjection process can be reversed, that is, to consume the subject. Through nebularity, exterior forces that infringe upon established borders jeopardize the individual. The sculptures insist the delicateness of mortality while the nebularity emanates from the suggestion that our abjection process can easily reverse to abject ourselves.

The Brimming Nebularity

Nebularity encourages an opening of the abject-art terminology to become more inclusive of seemingly non-abject artworks. The three artists included here demonstrate how artistic practice can be married to nebularity. A number of dense terms have been associated with various exhibited artworks (i. e. graphic, grotesque, carnal, disfigured, foreign, etc), but these terms are utilized to help nuance aspects of the abject. Although the artists have definitive thematics included in their works separate from nebularity – Stanford includes elements of monstrous-feminist domesticity, Joy incorporates sexual-political themes, and Louis perverts of Greco-Roman conventions – the exhibition provides a polymorphic angle to interpret artwork through the context of nebularity. Although the artists traverse very different artistic paths, all have the ability to unsettle and engage viewership through nebularity.

The exhibition deliberately feels like a claustrophobic environment in order to amplify the unsettling nebularity. Placing gallery goers within an intimate setting of an over-abundance of abject artworks adds tension to viewing and deteriorates distances between the self and other. The two smaller rooms house one artwork each to strengthen the nebularity environment the works emulate; *Pig Heart*'s small and intimate unlit forces the viewer to be close to the screen's graphic content while *Café Hesse*'s space seems almost suffocating because of the surrounding and enveloping coffee bags' openings of black holes. The final room exhibits a large amount of artworks from each artist and uses

low and warm lighting to both visually and physically erase distances inside the gallery space. The resulting affect of perturbation originates from the conscious choice never allowing a large distance between viewer and work.

All three artists demonstrate the ability to introduce affective feelings of trauma, confusion, and disturbance within their respective art practices. As *Metamorphoses* infects the walls in almost random clusters and order, *WifeMother* pods seep through the ceiling in the same manner.¹³ Both works hint at contaminated exhibition spaces, unwilling to adhere to conservative display techniques. Their juxtaposition conveys the swarming and infecting potential that nebularity is founded upon. *Unravelled*, having travelled into each space, ends beside Louis' busts on the ground, contrasting erect black stands with flaccid and soft steel wool. The high/low dichotomy between the works does not symbolize an entrenched hierarchy, but the destabilization of one. Having *Unravelled* originate on the ground beside the raised bases of Louis' busts, all next to the hanging *WifeMother*, displays how different structural levels – the ceiling and floor – can also be an appropriate exhibition stage next to the vaunted plinth-ridden model for sculptural installation. As well, *WifeMother*'s drip-like forms are placed beside to Joy's *Urine Fountain* in the front corner of the room, thematically connecting the fixation of fluids apparent in the works. As slippery liquids constantly exist as in-between entity, the works relationship is predicated on conveying formlessness through aqueous forms. The final room juxtaposes each artist to show the open-ended connection of affect and perturbation inherent to all the works.

Nebularity reformulates the influences and similar theoretical discourses that relate to Kristeva's interpretation of the abject, while also providing multi-dimensional lens for abject art. While contemporary abject art discourse is content to just apply the abject to specific cultural examples, nebularity instead broadens the discussion of what the abject can become, to come to a distinctive interpretation for why the abject continues to survive. The classification of an artwork being primarily "abject" tends to essentialize and subsequently associate it with corporeality and transgressive acts, while nebularity operates in an open-ended effort to give greater mobility in understanding and investigating why works of art permeate unsettling reactions through disrupting the self/other binary. The significance of nebularity lies in the ability to offer the inclusion and justification of how non-traditional definitions of "abject-art" have the same type of perturbing and unsettling ability that historically known abject artworks contain. Nebularity in the larger field of contemporary art offers an approach that can present more nuanced interpretations of abject artworks, propelling the idle discourse into the twenty-first century.

EXHIBITION REPORT

The following document is the report for my exhibition *Nebularity*. The exhibition showcases uncomfortable artworks that offer an updated understanding of the abject. The show and text do not only focus on investigating traditional and entrenched definitions of the abject, they also offer a nuanced and open-ended meaning pertinent to the 21st century. The show and concept took guidance from three theoretical perspectives -- the abject, formlessness, and the hole -- and crafted them together in a new term, “nebularity”, that explained the proliferation of the abject in present day artistic practice.

The report also comments on various aspects of research and production: the theme of the exhibition; the organizational, curatorial, and installation process; related texts that informed the critical analysis; past similar exhibitions; the process of procuring artists; budget; and the launch. The report will act as an accompanying text to the curatorial essay in order to situate and contextualize the exhibition. A full bibliography and appendices of artist biographies, contracts, floor plans, exhibition poster, and documentation is included.

Theme

The thematic of nebularity joins three independent but similar concepts: Julia Kristeva’s abject, Georges Bataille’s formlessness, and Jean Paul Sartre’s explanation of the hole. The root of each theory is the threat of the self (or interior) being overcome by the other (or exterior). *Nebularity* curates three artists whose work each contains characteristics

relevant to the theories in order to address how the concept of “nebularity” – a pervading aura of the other’s potential to consume and confuse selfhood – can inform how abject artworks threaten boundaries between self and other. Thus, the exhibition’s theme is an attempt to explain how abject art can be understood beyond the conventions of transgression and taboo.

Object art has continued into the 21st century because it investigates the infinite and shared thematic concerning the questioning of and encroachment onto selfhood. In the 1980s, the abject began to be used to bring gender and sexuality issues to light through art, while the 1990s helped turn the abject into a more popular sensationalizing and shocking practice. However after the turn of the millennium, the rise of digital technologies made the issue of embodied experience an even more contested term, opening the discussion on how and why abject art could still stay relevant. Contemporary artists that engage with abject tendencies in art do so in the face of growing digital and new media art, often juxtaposing the technological with the body. The exhibition primarily focuses on investigating “the abject” without restricting interpretation to a specific contemporary cultural phenomenon (such as “the digital”). Nebularity explores how we can specifically employ the abject to interpret how certain art disrupts the notion of selfhood by the other’s unsettling aura.

Literature Review

Object art has been the focus of many publications and texts that scholars have interpreted

through various understandings, but the most common and accessible entry point is through texts that place the various transgressive practices and works within the 20th and early 21st century art history canon. Anthony Julius' *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* (2002) discusses transgressive art practices since early modernist times and arranges transgressive art chronologically; abject art appears around the late 1980s and continues through the 1990s. His compendium of taboo-breaking art outlines the arguments against and common defenses for deviant artistic products.¹⁴ Kerstin Mey's *Art and Obscenity* (2006) is another comprehensive text on artworks that offend, this time breaking up the categories by themes such as death, sexuality, and cyberspace. Mey takes a more critical stance when interpreting the artworks, denoting examples as strong/weak transgressive artworks. However both these instances historicize abject art by canonizing the movement with providing a clear beginning and definitive ending, eliminating the chance to expand the definition of the abject in contemporary art.

Transgressive acts and artworks have also been discussed in relation to the varying affective responses they provoke. Rachel Herz's *That's Disgusting: Unraveling the Mysteries of Repulsion* (2012) investigates the reactions that abject situations and experiences tend to provoke. Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka's edited essay collection *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics* (2013) investigates bodily transgression in contemporary art and offers nuanced interpretations of taboo-art and sensorial affect.¹⁵ Literature involving reactionary interpretations is predicated on specific viewer response and infers a specific reaction towards artworks

that may or may not be shared by all.

Abject discourse has rooted itself in transgressive corporeality to saturate the literature with body-centric interpretations. The proliferation and popularity of the abject within modern art has been traced back to Julia Kristeva's interpretation of the abject in her *Powers of Horror* (1980), a text exemplifying the abject's connection to the body, citing bodily materials, corporeal grotesquely, and mortality as paradigms of abjection. Christian Messham-Muir's *Toward an Understanding of Affect* (1991) tried to divorce affect and abject theory in order to de-essentialize reliance on the body and introduce cultural contingencies. Recently, Performance Research dedicated a special issue entitled *On Abjection* (2014), focusing on the abject's relationship to both performance art and the body. Although each entry in the journal breakdown the body's relationship with the abject, Lauren Deland's "Live Fast, Die Young, Leave a Useful Corpse" (2014) and Karen Gonzalez Rice's "No Pictures" (2014) specifically concern mortality through body art and abject states of being. Rina Arya discusses art produced in relation to body in "Taking Apart the Body" (2014) to contend that Mona Hatoum's artwork *Corps Etranger* (1994) exists closest to a true definition of abject art. However appropriate, this does little to expand abject art into the 21st century. Efforts must be attempted to expand abject discourse past being confined to the body in order to explore new possible non-corporeal artworks that also exemplify the abject's threat to the psychic and physical self.

There has been debate as to whether the abject can be displayed in any true capacity. Hal Foster also initiates a philosophical reading in his "Obscene, Abject,

Traumatic” (1996), questioning the abject’s ability for representation within art contexts.

¹⁶ Kristeva actually echoes Foster’s skepticism of abject reification in her *Semiotext(e)* interview “Julia Kristeva in conversation with Sylvère Lotringer” (1999). While the questioning of abject reification seems well-intentioned, these attempts can stagnate critical discourse and add more difficulty to nuancing and exploring the abject’s contemporary use.

Many scholars choose to explain the abject in art parallel to different rituals or cultural examples. Nicholas Chare’s *Auschwitz and Afterimages* (2011) gives an in-depth and convincing argument that art made inside Auschwitz and other death camps illustrate the ultimate literalization of the abject. Deborah Covino’s *Amending the Abject Body* (2004) and Chare’s *Literary Veins* (2014) also explore the thematic through female bodybuilding, explaining abjection through anatomical manipulation and mutilation. These scholars all posit that hyper-defined or drastically altered corporeal states signify the abjection process in Western society, a thematic much discussed in the last 30 years.¹⁷

Formlessness theory has more literature written around the debate between the separation and connection to abjection than of formlessness itself. Based on Georges Bataille’s entry into his *Documents 1* (1929) of *L’Informe* (formlessness), Rosalind Krauss and Yve. Alain-Bois’ text *Formless: A User’s Guide* (1997) overwhelms recent formless discourse due to the high-profile exhibition. The scholars designate large amounts of writing to distancing the abject and formlessness, something scholar Paul Hegarty has vehemently countered by detailing the similarities they share in Andrew

Hussey's edited *Beast at Heavens Gate* (2006) and Hegarty's own edited anthology *Formless: Ways in and Out of Form* (2005). Hegarty specifically critiques Krauss and Bois' text in *Review: Formal Insistence* (2003), again conjoining the abject and formlessness through their intrinsic similarities. eldritch Priest's *Boring Formless Nonsense* (2013) interestingly connects formlessness to muzak and experimental sounds/music, and again introduces definitions of formlessness in opposition to (but nonetheless is predicated on) Krauss and Yve. Alain-Bois' interpretation. Other noted art historians have questioned Krauss's insistence of distance between the two terms, notably in the table round discussion "The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the "Informe" and the Abject" in *October* (1994). Currently, there has been a revival in literature concerning the connection between abjection and formlessness. Rina Arya's *Abjection and Representation* (2014) identifies the dispute over formlessness's influence on abjection, however offers little criticism and mostly outlines the aforementioned Krauss exhibition and text. Jeremy Biles "A Story of Rats" (2014) experiments with producing a Bataille-style story that conflates abjection and formlessness through rats. The most innovative and progressive contemporary theory pertaining to abjection and formless is Konstantina Georgelou's "Abjection and Informe" (2014), providing a detailed and nuanced interpretation to identify how each theory acts and should be considered as operations of debasement in art historical discourse. The sheer amount of literature dedicated to this conversation results in interpretations needing to be explicit on which side they reside between the connection or division between abjection and

formlessness.

The hole is an attractive idea to include within *Nebularity* because it mimics formlessness and the abject's ability to upset the self's boundaries. Jean-Paul Sartre's *War Diaries* (1984) interpreted the hole as an infinite nothingness that could eradicate the self through its void.¹⁸ Nicholas Chare's *Auschwitz and Afterimages* (2011) connected both Sartre and Kristeva as theories to help explain abject art, but did not specifically center on the hole and the abject as two related concepts. The three theories are similar but distinct enough to add nuances and intricacies to "nebularity", helping to explain a different lens onto abject art.

Exhibition Review

There have been only a few art exhibitions specifically devoted to the abject. While a number of institutions have curated exhibitions that involve abject artworks, the specific thematic of abject art is somewhat absent in contemporary curating. Even when the subject is approached fully, the results are less than one might expect. The notable and influential exhibition *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (1993), for instance, which included 50+ artists that tackled abject art and many related subthemes, seemed like an unfocused amalgamation of transgressive artworks from the permanent collection instead of a pointed look at how/why the abject proliferated through artworks into viewership. *Into Me/Out of Me* (2007), curated by Klaus Biesenbach at MoMA P.S.1, took various ways into/out of entering/exiting orifices of the human body as the chief

connecting thematic, subsequently including many abject artworks and artists. *Into Me* smartly chose an easily accessible entrance (no pun intended) into abject art that connected many corporeal works through their disruption of the interior/exterior. Although the catalogue did begin with an excerpt from Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1928), the show did not elaborate on the larger connection between his concept of formlessness and abjection. By contrast, *Nebularity* refuses to simply present abject artworks in the traditional sense, or reduce the "abject" thematic in such artwork, instead actively trying to develop contemporary transgressive art discourse by offering a new interpretive model to examine and explain abject art.

Exhibitions on formlessness appear even less frequently than the abject. While many artworks have been given the mantra of formless, exhibitions centering around Bataille's concept have been few outside of the large scale *L'informe: mode d'emploi* (1996). The show, curated by Rosalind Krauss and Yve Alain-Bois at the Centre Pompidou, tried distancing formlessness and abjection due to the curators' strict belief that the former only existed as an operation (thus freed from literalization and thematic constraints) while the latter would always hypostatize through transgressive content (such as fecal matter, bodily fluids, urine, corpses, etc). Krauss and Alain-Bois' exhibition felt like a forced redefining of abject artworks into Bataille's formless lexicon instead of finding common ground between the abject and formlessness. *Nebularity*, instead, explores the innate characteristics that the two terms have through inquiry into their shared ability for perturbation.

In Canada, one exhibit at the University of Toronto campus attempted to exhibit certain particularities of abject art. *Subject, Object, Abject* (2014), curated by Emily Maple, included artworks that provoked contemplations of normalized bodies by confusing anatomical interiors and exteriors. Unfortunately, the exhibition essentialized the body by only including works that originated and ended within corporeality (a critique Krauss had of the abject) instead of offering progressive avenues on expanding abject theory beyond corporeal thematics. *Nebularity* includes the common origin of abjection but does not dwell on the body solely as the site for abjection, instead opening new interpretations for artworks not traditionally associated with abjection.

Nebularity alters the gallery space to amplify the artworks' potentially affective viewership engagement. The exhibition follows in the footsteps of *The International Surrealist Exhibition* (1936), the notable art show that radically transformed the gallery setting to suit the curatorial thematic. *Voire Dire* (2012) by Tammy McGrath at Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre displayed some of the potential for abject art in the gallery and how space could amplify affective emotions. While *Voire Dire* employed low lighting, *Nebularity* furthers experiments with the space by changing wall colour and having the warm lighting. As well, Tammy's exhibition provided an approach to amplifying affective potential for artworks by refraining from putting distinct boundaries where viewers should navigate in the space, but still disallowed viewer interaction with any artwork. Much like each exhibition, *Nebularity* experiments with gallery space to promote unexpected gallery-viewing instances that help undo the prescribed and

traditional exhibition setting.

Methodology

Researching the abject began in my third year at Queen's University in order to produce an essay on the link between abjection and body art. The first encounter with the overall concept of abjection was reading *Powers of Horror*. The text required many reads and continues to be a difficult text to fully grasp. Since Kristeva positions her theory outside of art practices, instead focusing on the psychological influences¹⁹, I looked into modern and contemporary artworks that involved abjection to ground my research in artistic production instead of psychoanalytic discourse. The first artists found were the Jake and Dinos Chapman and their *Fucking Hell* (2008).²⁰ During my third year at Queen's, I viewed artist Tammy McGrath's *Voire Dire* for the first time and began to theorize how different, less corporeal and more abstract artworks could successfully integrate abjection into thematic by understanding that the abject was predicated upon selfhood disruption rather than bodily transgression.

For *Nebularity*, I started with reviewing Kristeva's text and current critiques/interpretations of it. To get a good grasp on the how abject art operated, I also read over literature that surveyed all transgressive artwork in the last century. Doing this led me to research exhibition catalogues and reviews on exhibitions dealing with deviant, transgressive, taboo-breaking, and abject artworks. While larger exhibitions' texts were easy to locate at the OCADU and U of T libraries, smaller exhibits were investigated

through online documentation. As well, looking up different and experimental exhibitions helped with ideas about how I could influence the set up of *Nebularity* in a different way.

Travelling around Toronto, New York, and Stockholm all helped influence the exhibition design of *Nebularity*. Curator Philip Monk's exhibition *Is Toronto Burning?* (2014) at the Art Gallery of York University changed certain sections of the wall to a vibrant red, mirroring the aesthetic coloring found in much publication and artworks the exhibition displayed. He showed how altering the gallery space could successfully add different but complementary elements to an art show. In New York's Lower East Side appeared many bizarre and non-traditional gallery spaces that only strengthened my confidence that, if done correctly, changing the white cube aesthetic had the potential for amplifying viewer engagement. Per B Sundberg's 2015 exhibition at Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Stockholm showed how deeply unsettling and aesthetically attractive abject and formless artwork could be through grotesque but beautiful ceramic artworks.²¹ In order to gain exposure to the ever-expanding number of contemporary art shows and texts (especially in the cities I was inhabiting at specific times), exploring various art blog sites was vital. Looking up shows on contemporary art daily, akimbo, and Canadian art all led to potential exhibitions that either dealt with transgressive subject matter or altered the gallery space in a unique way.

In order to learn more about each potential artist, I initiated phone and in-person interviews about their work and collaboration with the exhibition. The first conversation was dedicated to explaining my curatorial vision and how each of their practices could

complement *Nebularity*'s thematic. Speaking over the phone with Joy in early October of 2014 resulted in learning about her past as an artist and specificities about her artistic practice. During my in-person meeting in early January 2015, Joy showed me her (then) unfinished *Urine Fountain* (2015), which I later decided to switch in and remove her video work *I Don't Even Fucking Love You* (2006). My dialogue with Kim Stanford in January included a studio visit to see her artwork as well as going over her artworks' placement inside the space. I later interviewed Stanford to learn of her domesticity-focused practice and the driving force behind the maximalist approach of materials she employs. I drove up to Montreal at the end of January to attend a studio visit with artist Louis Fortier and we talked about the number of artworks to include and the influencing thematics on his practice. During my visit to Montreal, I got to meet Fortier's gallerist Donald Browne, and he noted the different viewer reactions to Fortier's work.²² Each meeting with the artists yielded new angles about their work that could be integrated into the exhibition.

Artists

At the onset of the project, the plan was to include four artists. The first was Tammy McGrath, whose *Voire Dire* exhibit was a heavily influential show and prompted reaching out to include and restage her artwork. After getting in contact with Tammy, it was quickly learnt that her work had been in a warehouse fire and unfortunately was unavailable. Her new work, although continuing within the tradition of transgressive acts

such as book burnings, would not have been a good pairing with *Nebularity*'s thematic.

The second artist I approached was Andrea Graham, a Kingston-based multimedia and sculptural artist whose piece *Cleaning House* (2014) displayed many elements of formlessness and abjection. Having seen her show at Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre last year, I identified an appropriate connection to *Nebularity*'s thematic and communication started about her inclusion into the show. Although she had confirmed for the exhibition as late as early 2015, the artist had to drop out due to organizational and scheduling constraints, which would not allow her enough time to adequately rebuild and install the artwork.

The third artist that interested me was Kim Stanford, who was found from scouring the Toronto art scene on the Internet. After looking into various galleries and their previous shows, Stanford came into focus and became a part of the exhibition. She has been very open and amenable to the curatorial intent and continues to collaborate on artistic involvement.

Jesika Joy was found through searching V Tape's archives and their roster of artists for abject subject matter. Initially, the plan was to feature *Pig Heart* as well as *I Don't Even Fucking Love You* (2006). After being introduced to *Urine Fountain*, there was a curatorial decision to swap the pieces. Joy has been helpful in exploring new ways her artworks can be displayed through innovative and unique installation setups.

The final artist, Louis Fortier, was approached after Graham had dropped out by looking into gallery rosters near Ontario for artists that worked with abject materiality and

eventually stumbling onto the Donald Brown Gallery. In speaking to Fortier, he agreed to participate, as *Nebularity* would be his first Toronto exhibition. He also has been open to different ways of installing his artworks and helped with suggesting several variations.

Space

The Brinks Building at OCADU was chosen due to the large area of exhibition floor space, multiple rooms, and lack of windows. The atmosphere was an appropriate pairing to the themes in *Nebularity*. At first, I had planned to use the OCADU graduate gallery, but due to lack of communication between the gallery monitor/steward and the constraints of an open space with no divisions I decided to look elsewhere. Jennifer Rudder suggested the Brinks Building as she was negotiating to reserve the space for the first two weeks of March 2015 for graduate shows. After communication with Wrick Mead at OCADU, the space was booked for the exhibition.

Installation Concept and Design

The installation concept behind the exhibition was designed as a curatorial investigation and expansion of the gallery space. *Nebularity* was first dedicated to respectfully exhibiting the work, enhancing the artworks' ability for engagement, and testing viewership tactics to amplify the art's intrinsic nebularity. The intention was to disrupt the traditional white cube aesthetic in order to explore a more affective experience in the gallery. While most white cube galleries promote a minimalist aesthetic, *Nebularity*

strove to collaborate with the artists for interesting tactics to foreground the abject.

Fortunately, I had a long lead-time to install the exhibition and could explore how to transform the space. *Nebularity* presents non-conventional work placement and unique exhibition settings in order to destabilize viewership and amplify the potential for artwork engagement.

Nebularity challenged two traditional gallery conventions by placing works in unusual setups and replacing white fluorescent lighting with low-hanging warm illumination. Exhibiting Fortier's *Metamorphoses* in apparently random clusters on walls instead of standardized vertical lines sought to unsettle norms and intensify the artwork's affective engagement. The "disorganized" arrangement of *Metamorphoses* as well as familiarly comfortable off-white wall colour offered a different consideration of the space.

The other works also interact with the gallery space in unique ways. Stanford's *WifeMother*, *Milkpod*, and *Café Hesse*, and Joy's *Pig Heart*, do so in order to help shift complacent viewing into active involvement with the artworks. *Pig Heart* is put into an unlit room, requiring the viewer to navigate to invest in viewing the artwork. *Café Hesse* uses most of the walls in its room to place the coffee filters and surround the viewer in an intimidating and engulfing way. Both *WifeMother* and *Milkpod* play with unexpected points of origin for artworks, installed as they are in the ceiling above.

The lighting also creatively affects the potential for engagement *nebularity* is predicated on. Low hanging Edison bulbs create a different atmosphere than the common

fluorescent cold-lit gallery setting. The low lighting tries to blur the visible distinctions that the bright lighting so effectively establishes. Warm lighting performs the same operation as formlessness, helping blend together works and walls, darkening the holes and enveloping viewers into pockets of darkness. The lack of intense cold light helps the artworks occupy an eerie atmosphere that heightens an unsettling ambiance. Doing so results in a greater chance that viewers can inhabit nebularity that is conveyed through the artworks.

The walls were painted a crème colour in order to disrupt the traditional white-cube aesthetic as well as convey a sense of warm that would compliment but also unsettle through juxtaposition with *Nebularity* artworks. The crème/tan conveys a feeling similar to familiar domesticity, which adds another dimension to Stanford and Fortier's works. As well, the wall colour insinuates a feeling of comfortability when combined with the warm lighting, furthering the ability for amplified reactions to the abject-infused artworks within the exhibition.

Nebularity openly alters the gallery space in order to amplify the nebularity and affective potential of each artwork. There is little writing on the changing gallery environment for abject artworks and the effect on viewership. Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube* (1986) remains the inaugural text dedicated to dissecting strategies of gallery alteration for context and e/affect.²³ Unfortunately, more is written about augmented and virtual gallery space than the actual physical environment in contemporary art theory today. Combining new abject theory with gallery environment

discourse is an area that could use a thorough analysis.

Budget

The Show's budget was planned around OCADU's allocated 300\$ for Master's in Criticism and Curatorial Practice budget. The majority of that budget was devoted to purchasing external lighting. Edison light bulbs, single wire bulb fixtures, standing floodlights and extension cords were the primary need for lighting expenses. Food money was set aside to provide light refreshments at the opening. At the onset of the exhibition, funds were designated for eggshell paint to cover the gallery walls, in addition to painting rollers, drop cloth, painter's tape, and paper towel. In order to install Louis Fortier's works, screws and hangers needed to be purchased. Funds for a small publication will hopefully still be available after the exhibition. Part of the budget was designated to paying a modest artist fee. In order to publicize the show for foot traffic, a sandwich board was purchased.

Reception

The opening reception for the event is planned for March 5th. Due to financial restraints, no alcohol will be served. The expected turnout is estimated to be 30 – 40 people and light refreshments will be available. Joy had expressed an interest in performing *Urine Fountain* during the vernissage, but due to legal and institutional complications, the decision was made to forgo the event.

Conclusion

Overall, this exhibition intended to proffer a different experience of art-viewing. The show sought to push the boundaries of what could be considered abject art and supports a rationale of why abject art is significant to the contemporary context. Altering the gallery space in specific ways enchanted the atmosphere in order to create new strategies for viewer engagement. Although the show does not have the scope to delve into all of the subthemes and intricacies of the abject, *Nebularity* demonstrates that there is still territory to be discovered when discussing the topic. Although my premise is saturated in theory and tries to stir a stagnant theoretical discourse that seems stuck in the 1990s, the important thing to recognize is that the abject still maintains a powerful presence in artistic practice. This MFA thesis show is an opportunity to challenge, experiment, and create new understandings of the abject. *Nebularity* offers a contemporary way of understanding abject art in the 21st century using non-traditional art forms and models.

¹ See Gayatri Spivak's *Who Claims Alterity*, Jacques Lacan's *Ecrits: A Selection* (1977), and Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1953) for a more detailed analysis.

² Lévinas expands greatly on the "other", especially in *Alterity and Transcendence* (1999), but "nebularity" employs the term to only connote the binary between the self and other.

³ Hesse's *No Title* 1970 and Morris' *Untitled* of 1968 and 1967-68 both exemplify formlessness.

⁴ Tom Estes' 2012 performance/installation of *Portable Black Hole* (2012) at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art consisted of placing a large hole made from carbon-nano tubes that only reflected 0.045% light, making it 100x darker than other black materials. Sartre's absence of artists associated could have something to do with the lack of formal artists he identified in his write up, instead focusing his argument against Freudian notions that the hole's prowess solely lied in sexuality.

⁵ <http://www.kimstanford.com/cv>

⁶ Kristeva's treatise concerns the process of replacing Freud's phallogentric power structure with the mother-as-power figure in order to up-end misogynistic psychoanalytic theory.

⁷ Within Kristevian psychoanalytic thought, the infant's first encounter with abjection occurs when they must abject the mother (directly after the mirror phase, 6 months old) and therefore the mother – represented by the womb – can also represent the abject.

⁸ <http://yfile.news.yorku.ca/2006/08/25/york-graduate-student%E2%80%99s-show-offers-sex-along-with-politics/>

⁹ Judith Butler's ideas on the abject's submission to hetero-normativity is the most discussed item, concerning the separation of the maternal body with social and political influences to make it an untouchable and autonomous symbol for motherhood.

¹⁰ Joy was willing to stage a performance in which she pissed into a mountain of martini glasses at the exhibition opening, but the eventual conclusion was that it was not feasible to do so.

¹¹ Christof Migone's 2011 Blackwood exhibitions' catalogue

¹² Hegarty echoes this, saying "Kraus dissolves formlessness into "being a clearly defined way to produce 'what is other' – and this leads us precisely to the link with abjection they so strenuously deny" (76).

¹³ The gallery's ceiling was left open on top of *WifeMother*, displaying the inner guts of the building and further throwing off typical gallery conventions.

¹⁴ Kieran Cashell's *Aftershock: The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art* is a more comprehensive look at defending transgressive artworks.

¹⁵ Allan Lloyd-Smith's Abjection/objectivism delves into the physic reactions and implications of abject art.

¹⁶ (and if so, to what capacity?)

¹⁷ In the last year, Amy Stewart's "Witnessing Horror: Psychoanalysis and the Abject Stain of Lynching Photography" (2014) and Chloe M. Parton et al.'s "Women's Construction of Embodiment and the Abject Sexual Body After Cancer" (2015) also discuss different examples of the corporeal abject states in relation to specific cultural phenomena.

¹⁸ Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* expands on the "other" but not in relation to the hole

¹⁹ Reading Lacan's *Ecrits* helps provide a fuller and better understanding Kristeva's influences and references.

²⁰ In 2014, I produced and presented a paper at the Carleton/Ottawa Graduate Colloquium, "Under My Skin:" The Politics of Flesh on the simulacrum's connection to abjection through the *Fucking Hell*, which further added to my research into abjection.

²¹ This echoes Kristeva's idea on the how the abject is both repulsion and attraction.

²² He remarked how females tended to be averse while men reacted sympathetically.

²³ His text *Inside the White Cube* was essentially a collection of *Artforum* essays. Sharon Macdonald and Paul Basu's *Exhibition Experiments* also investigates different exhibition techniques.

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A. Appendices

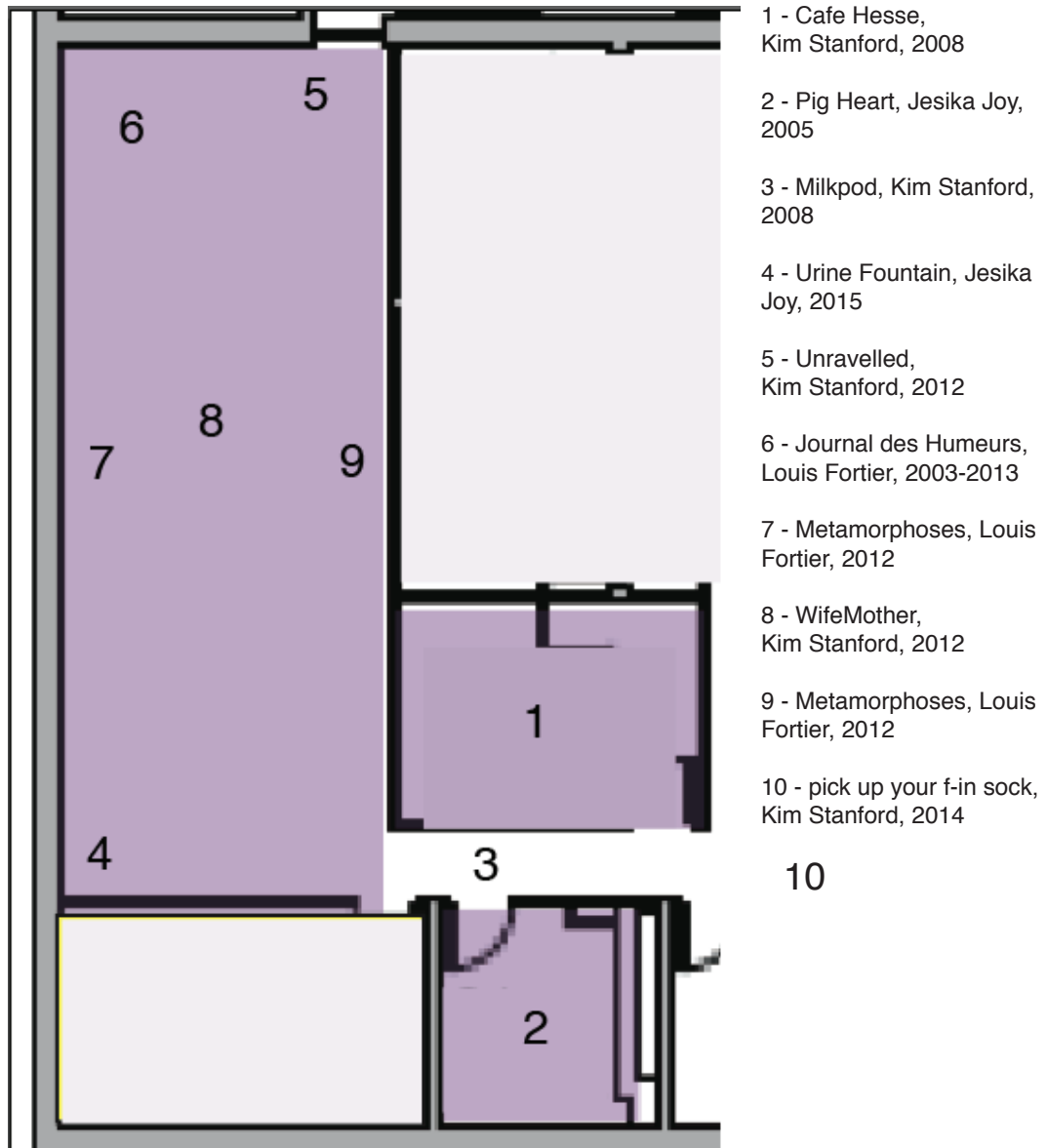
Artist Biographies

Jesika Joy is a Toronto-based video artist who works with deliberately confrontational sexualized scenarios. With a PhD in social and political thought, Joy addresses feminine issues and bodily politics in an unapologetic graphic manner. Her works both repel and attract by drawing viewers into aggressive portrayals of intimate, abject activities.

Montreal-based **Louis Fortier** engages with malleable wax-like materials to create abject sculptures of facial and body parts. While gesturing towards Greco-Roman portraiture, the mutated forms are at once sensual, tactile, carnal and grotesque. The morphing shapes hint at alien forces that play with human flesh in impossible and monstrous ways.

Kim Stanford is a Toronto-based artist who creates unnerving three-dimensional sculptures and engulfing installations. Though the materials bear a familiar domesticity, they typically are things used and discarded, and so become abject through unnatural accumulation. Her aesthetic carries undertones of ambiguity, vulnerability and the uncanny.

B. Floor Plan



C. Contract

EXHIBITION AGREEMENT: ARTIST/THE GALLERY

This agreement was made in duplicate on _____ between:

_____ (hereinafter called "the artist")
address

And

Matthew Kyba (hereinafter called "the Gallery")
Address 151 Craven Road, Toronto, ONT

The parties hereto agree as follows:

1. General Intent

The Gallery will present *Nebularity* a group exhibition in the OCADU Graduate Gallery from March 5th – March 14th.

2. Documentation

The artist willfully agrees to the photo-reproduction of work(s) in the exhibition publication; in the Gallery's newsletter; for educational and academic purposes; and on related promotion. For other representation, fee's will be paid separately and only with the artist's consent.

3. Reimbursed Expenses

The Gallery will reimburse the Artist only for expenses which have been authorized by the Gallery and which pertain to this contract. The Artist must provide the Gallery with receipts for all expenses. **The Artist has 3 months to provide the Gallery with the appropriate receipts.** After 3 months, the artist will no longer be able to claim expenses.

4. List of works

Insurance value:

5. Transportation of Art Work

The Gallery will arrange for and cover all costs associated with transportation of the Artist's work for the purposes of the exhibition. The Gallery will employ the services of a qualified carrier for such purpose unless specified/authorized otherwise by the Artist. The terms and conditions of this agreement will be in effect from the time the object(s) leave(s) the Artist's premises until their return after the loan period has ended. Return shipment of the works of art will take place within 30 days of the termination of the exhibition.

6. Care of Object(s)

The Gallery will maintain museum standards with respect to environmental conditions, handling, transportation, installation, display, and lighting. The Artist certifies that the object(s) provided are in condition to withstand ordinary strains of packing, transportation, and handling. No object(s) will be altered or examined by scientific method without the written permission from the Artist. The Gallery will complete a condition report for each work upon arrival and departure. Should any damage to the object(s) occur during handling, transportation, installation, or presentation of the object(s), the Gallery will immediately inform the Artist of such damage. If damage occurs during transit, the Gallery will notify the carrier and will save all packing materials for inspection; when possible, the waybill will be marked accordingly upon receipt of shipment. The Gallery will not undertake any repairs of damage without the permission of the Artist.

7. Security

A Gallery staff member regularly monitors the gallery during the when it is open to the public, and this is supplemented with closed-circuit security cameras.

8. Promotion

The Gallery will arrange, at its expense, announcements of the exhibition as it may consider appropriate.

The Gallery will sponsor a *vernissage* of the exhibition on March 5th at 7:00pm, and will send notices to a list of up to 25 persons provided by the Artist, as well as to the Gallery's regular mailing list of members, press, etc.

The Artist agrees to participate in media interviews (newspaper/magazine, radio, television and web) with a view to promoting the exhibition and the artist's work;

the gallery engages to provide to the artist newspaper and magazine clippings of the published material.

9. Installation

The Gallery shall be responsible for installations and for equipment rentals as mutually agreed upon at its expense. The Gallery shall be responsible for the dismantling of the work of art.

11. Copyright

The Gallery will not permit reproductions of the works of art in the exhibition for purposes of sale, rental, loan or distribution of any kind without the written permission of the Artist. However, photographs (as per item 3) may be used by the Gallery for publicity and academic purposes, including the Gallery's website.

12. Sales

The Gallery will not permit indication of sales or sale prices nor will it take commission on any future sales; purchase enquiries will be directed to the Artist or his designated agent.

13. Third-party Interest

In the circumstance of an exhibition to be sponsored jointly by the Gallery and another party, the engagement of the co-sponsor is with the full knowledge and mutual consent of the Artist and the Gallery.

14. Force Majeure

In the event that the performance of any part this agreement shall be delayed or prevented by an act of God or of the Queen's enemies, physical disability, the acts or regulations of duly constituted public authorities, strikes, civil tumult, epidemic, interruption or delay of transportation services or other causes beyond their respective control, the Artist and the Gallery shall be relieved of their respective obligations hereunder during the period such prevention or delay exists. It is understood and agreed that there shall be no claim for damages by either party hereto for any prevention or delay.

15. Credit Line

Unless instructed otherwise, the Gallery will credit the Artist with ownership of the object(s) on all labels, text panels, brochures, catalogues and other didactic materials published for the exhibition.

16. Breaches of Agreement — Gallery

Notwithstanding - In the event of the Gallery's canceling the exhibition, it will pay damages to the Artist according to the following schedule:

90-30 days' notice: 50% of full exhibition fee

less than 30 days' notice: the full exhibition fee

17. Breaches of Agreement — Artist

Notwithstanding - In the event of the Artist's failure to provide the works of art to be exhibited on the date above, thereby causing cancellation to the exhibition, the Artist will pay liquidation damages to the Gallery according to the following schedule:

90-30 days' notice: 50% of full exhibition fee

less than 30 days' notice: the full exhibition fee

18. Amendments

All amendments and modifications of this agreement will be by the mutual consent of both parties.

The Gallery: _____

Date: ____/____/____

The Artist: _____

Date: ____/____/____

D. Publicity

Nebularity

An OCADU Criticism and Curatorial Practice MFA Thesis Exhibition
Curated by Matthew Kyba

60 McCaul Street (Brinks Building), Toronto
March 5 — March 14, 12–5pm

Opening March 5, 7–9pm



The pervasiveness of the abject in contemporary art proves that transgression has more to offer than short-lived shock value. For thirty years the abject has continued in the mainstream art sphere as a perturbing thematic that threatens mortality and incorporates bodily fluids. While other types of transgressive art have become accepted and even institutionalized, the presence of abject art remains undertheorized.

The question endures: why is abject art still so provocative?

Nebularity presents an updated lens to reconsider the experience and display of abject art in the twenty-first century. Three contemporary artists — Louis Fortier, Jesika Joy, and Kim Stanford — employ abject tendencies that elicit emotional engagement and strong reactions. By confusing boundaries, imposing intimacy, and deteriorating conventional forms, these works demonstrate that the abject is not just another genre of art but a practice of continually challenging structures of subjectivity and knowledge.

Louis Fortier
Métamorphoses
2012

***Nebularity* Poster, 60 McCaul, March 4th-14th, 2015**

E. Documentation



Figure 1 Installation shot, *Nebularity*, 60 McCaul, OCAD University, March 4th – March 14th 2015



Figure 2 Installation shot, *Nebularity*, 60 McCaul, OCAD University, March 4th – March 14th 2015



Figure 3 Installation shot, *Nebularity*, 60 McCaul, OCAD University, March 4th – March 14th 2015



Figure 4 Louis Fortier, *Journal des humeurs*, 2003-2013, Synthetic wax



Figure 5 Louis Fortier, *Metamorphoses*, 2012, Synthetic wax



Figure 6 Kim Stanford, *Milkpod*, 2008, Pantyhose and pine needles

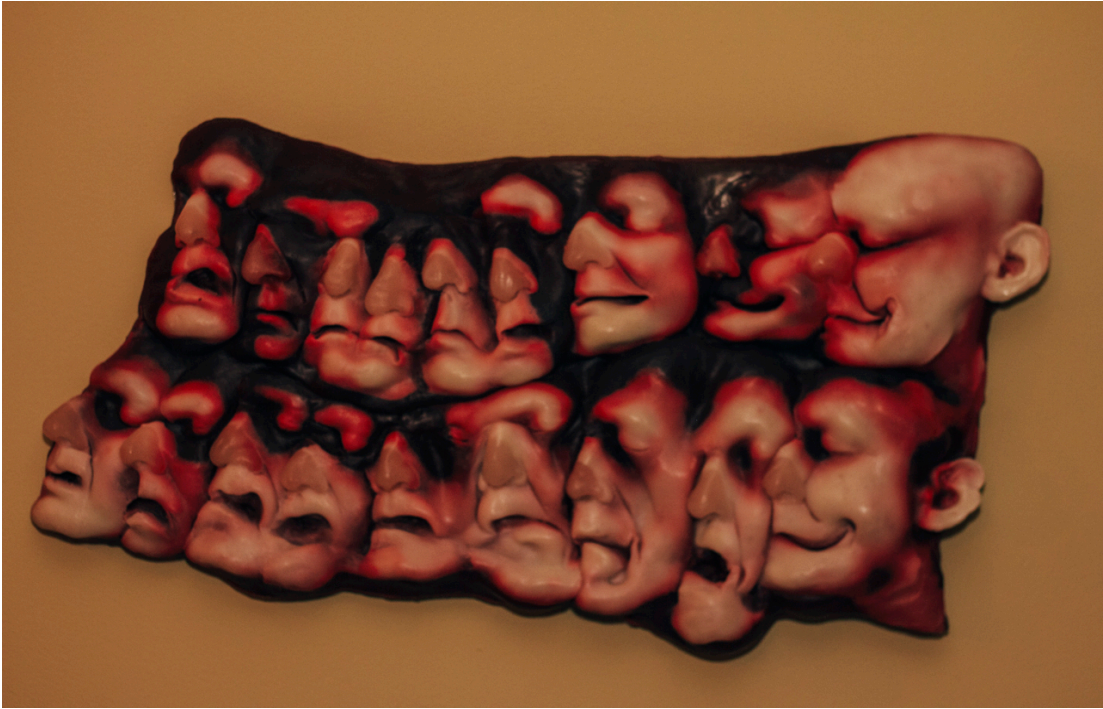


Figure 7 Louis Fortier, *Senate*, 2012, Synthetic wax



Figure 8 Louis Fortier, *Journal des humeurs*, 2003-2013, Synthetic wax

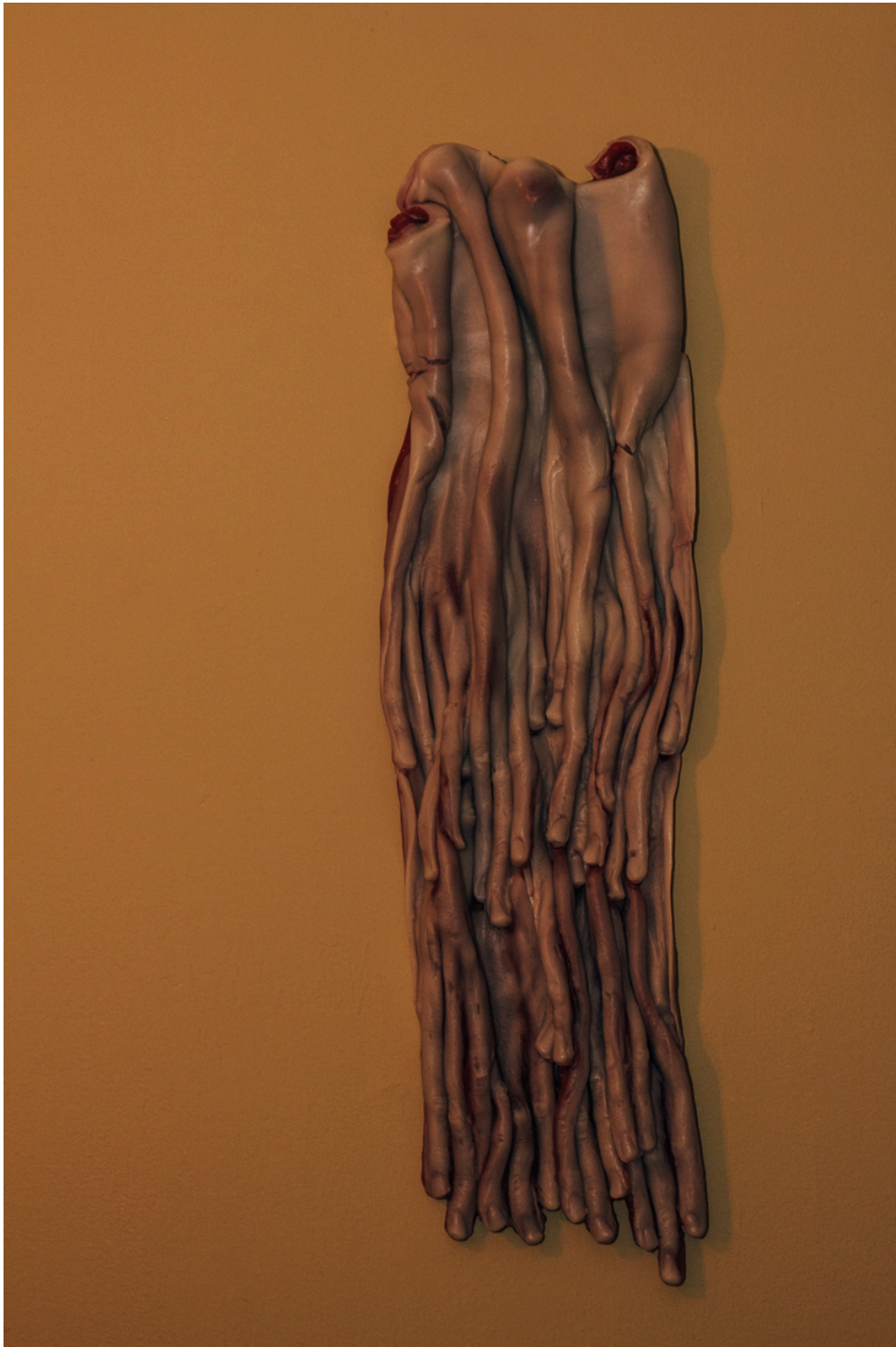


Figure 9 Louis Fortier, *Metamorphoses*, 2012, Synthetic wax



Figure 10 Kim Stanford, *Café Hesse*, 2012, Coffee bags and push pins



Figure 11 Kim Stanford, *WifeMother*, 2012, Steel wool and tape



Figure 12 Jesika Joy, *Pig Heart*, 2005, Pantyhose and pine needles

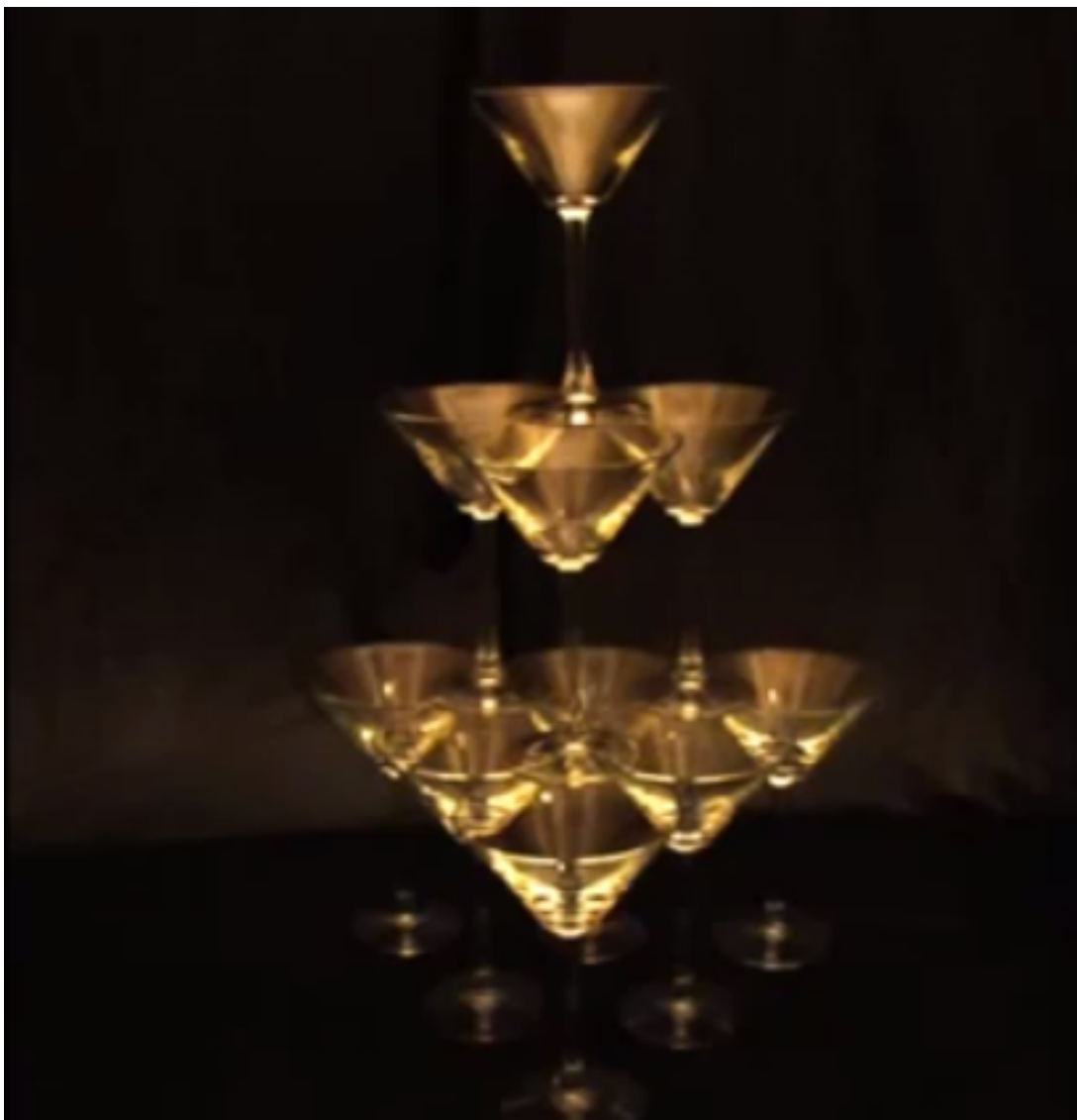


Figure 13 Jesika Joy, *Urine Fountain*, 2015, Video