

Cordial

by

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Cordial: Thesis Supporting Document
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Abstract

Cordial is an invitation to encounter contemporary artworks created from materials rooted in Euro-American homes of the last century. Decorative components (wallpaper, frames, cabinets) and functional items (vases, stemware, platters) are stacked, fractured, layered and otherwise arranged for display in a site-specific installation comprised of suites of individual works. *Cordial* explores transitions in the value and use of objects through the passage of time and contexts. Associated with home display, these materials have been identified with modes of female subjugation or reified by feminist aesthetic reclamation. They also echo the Victorian passion for scientific collecting, classification and display. Grounded in discovery-based processes of creation, the theoretical framework draws from discourses within feminism, deconstruction, performance, material culture, and the ontology of the object. Through a series of projects and culminating installation, this thesis investigates ways in which subjectivities are constructed and enacted through relationships with aesthetic, material things.

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I dedicate ***Cordial*** to the memory of my grandmothers,

Marielle Ruth (Shehyn) Nicol

and

Beatrice Catherine (Harvey) Robertson.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Author's Declaration.....	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Dedication	v
List of Illustrations	vii
1. PREFACE	1
2. INTRODUCTION.....	10
Questions	12
2. METHODS	13
Practical Working Methods (meta, macro, meta).....	17
3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	20
4. CASE STUDIES	39
Historical Influences	39
Makers	41
Artist-Curators	43
5. SCOPE OF WORK	44
Project 1: <i>Under the Radar</i>	44
Project 2: <i>Talk Back</i>	46
Project 3: <i>A Fine Specimen</i>	47
Project 4: <i>The Studio – Parlour</i>	49
6. THESIS EXHIBITION: <i>Cordial</i>	50
7. CONCLUSION	54
8. BIBLIOGRAPHY	77

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Medley of images of <i>Cordial</i>	8
Figure 2. Materials in the studio of Heather Nicol (2012)	18
Figure 3. Joseph Cornell. <i>Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)</i> (1936).....	41
Figure 4. Jessica Stockholder. Installation view, Weatherspoon Museum (2003)..	42
Figure 5. Heather Nicol. <i>Under The Radar</i> (2012)	45
Figure 6. Heather Nicol. <i>Talk Back</i> Gladstone Hotel (2012)	46
Figure 7. Heather Nicol. <i>A Fine Speciman</i> Harbourfront Centre (2012)	48
Figure 8. Heather Nicol <i>A Fine Specimen</i> details	48
Figure 9. Heather Nicol. <i>Studio Parlour</i> (2013).....	49
Figure 10. Heather Nicol. Installation shots <i>Cordial</i> (2013).....	50
Figure 11. Heather Nicol. Invitataion to <i>Cordial</i> (2013)	51
Figure 12. Heather Nicol. Two window interventions and view of Butterfly Tower, <i>Cordial</i>	53
Figure 13. Heather Nicol. <i>Cordial</i> installation view	56

Please also see www.heathernicol.ca for further information and documentation

PREFACE

My interdisciplinary practice takes on a variety of creative forms. The body of this thesis document is primarily concerned with historicizing and theorizing the final thesis exhibition, *Cordial*. In this preface I reflect on areas of connection within the scope of my creative production at OCAD University, projects that I will herein identify as part of the overarching project, including prior works and the threads of their manifestation in *Cordial*. The aim is to situate *Cordial* as part of a fluid and ongoing process.

The first large project I did at OCAD University, *Under the Radar*, was a curatorial intervention that focused on sharing – of company and experiences in real time, as well as of precious objects in the form of the trading of artworks between faculty and graduate student artists. Part of this was an examination of social connection, part a reflection on artwork as object of desire.

My second project was an immersive audio installation, *Talk Back*, another work with a strong social dimension, and that also investigated the value of art objects.

While these projects were multifaceted, what is salient to my overarching work is my interest in the ways in which objects are agents in human relationships. These projects played with the sociality of these encounters, with a focus on the communications that art objects might trigger in viewers. In *Under the Radar* the desire to own a piece of art, the willingness to part with a work, and considerations of the value of artworks found form in written negotiations. In *Talk Back* the social

dimensions of the gallery going experience, and the desire to understand objects, were at play through the sounds of verbal reactions and expressions.

Under the Radar was about long term relationships to objects; what one might want to acquire, display, collect. The flip side of that is what one was willing to let go of, part with. It considered how objects hold value. *Talk Back* featured an illuminated and cordoned off *absent* object of display presented within an art-viewing arena. Both of these projects looked at the pleasure of encounters with art objects, as well as the possible things they may trigger, including the desire to possess, understand, name, and socialize surrounding artworks. *Cordial* featured the display of many component parts in relationship to each other, and that hold traces of social encounters. Their roles as objects of desire and reflection continue threads from the first two projects, one that focused more on collecting, the other more on the viewing experience.

Absence, so directly manifest in *Talk Back*, continued as an interest to me over my time of study. In *Cordial's* front window display *What You Are Served* dozens of wine glasses were placed together in a celebration of group gatherings, yet each individual was separated in it's own cell, and empty spots perhaps called into question the uninvited, departed, late, or otherwise missing members of this group. On the large wall display of stemware (also named *Cordial*), ideas of social gatherings, and their demarcations through shared toasts and celebratory beverages, included a shelf with a single martini glass, as well as groups of three glasses. Some pairs were touching and some apart, some glasses more than "half

full” while others were mismatched, nearly empty. These works use form and colour to reflect on aloneness and isolation – as a single, or within a group, as well as the pleasure and meaning of connection to others.

My stacked sculptural object *Butterflies* includes gaps, and the brief lifespan of a butterfly and it’s intense fragility as an artifact continued my thoughts on temporality and loss. For me, absence and loss are connected with the passing of time. The work on the rear wall of the gallery – a pair of panels with paisley patterned wallpaper – envision the aftermath of removal, of a picture on the wall, of a mirror on a shelf, a lone nail and unstained wall paper evidence of a prior presence. These are seen with two fine glass goblets into one of which a large dead insect –a discolored and rather grotesque butterfly – has crashed, ruining the moment, perhaps envisioning or foretelling death.

On a panel hung over the mantle, some sort of spill or accident seems to have occurred behind what might have been a cabinet, picture or shelf – the hooks remain, but what they are for is unknown, absent, and this absence has revealed something perhaps shameful or distasteful in its place.

These descriptions may evidence my engagement with notions of enactment, or even the dramatizations of real or imagined events. *Talk Back* directly borrowed devices and methodologies from the theatre; I was a top-hatted MC during the trading event of *Under the Radar*. My interest in theatricality was again evidenced in *Cordial* in these above mentioned ways, through the manipulation of materials.. Set design is an important theatrical component in creating mood and a sense of place.

For *Cordial*, subtly distressed, hand-painted curtains were hung along the entire north side of the gallery. I do not consider them as discrete artworks; rather, they were made in the spirit of set design, bringing a sense of home, handwork, pattern, and diminishing the exterior world from the interior gallery, creating a sense of privacy as well as containment.

These curtains also functioned acoustically, dampening the reverberant qualities of the room by covering the hard glass surface. *Talk Back* used audio as a central device, and an audio element was also featured in *Cordial*. One of the prime characteristics of sound is its inherent leakage, its spread, its immateriality. In choosing to have the sounds emanate from objects that featured multitudes of stacked frames, I was thinking about the desire to capture, define, separate, and solidify that which is always already subject to change and slippage. These inherent properties of sound were my vehicle for this notion, situated in juxtaposition with the containing aspect of frames.

The *Cordial* audio score was a departure from my longstanding interest in voice, as was heard in *Talk Back*. Here, one side of the room featured sounds of interior space, while the other, the outside sounds of a storm and passing siren. The sounds again brought in reference to time – a passing storm or siren, and breath - the labored breathing of an animal, my aging dog. For the inside sounds, even in the face of struggle and interruption my desire was to evoke the sounds of thinking, working, continuation, and tolerance. The sound of typing blended with the possibly annoying snoring breath was chosen for this reason, and are sounds that evoke home to me. A

couch was placed midway between the two audio works, and over the duration of the exhibition visitors sat there, allowing a gentle mixture of interior and exterior sounds to interact with the visual display.

These two initial projects, *Under the Radar* and *Talk Back*, broadly examined the display of aesthetic objects in relationships to people, and this concern with display culture carried forward in a different form with *A Fine Specimen*. Invited to create a work for a large public display case as part of a summer exhibition at Harbourfront Centre under the theme of “Cross Roads” I chose to work with a precious object I have been given years ago– the 1950s wedding gown of the mother of a Canadian artist who died of AIDS. Some of the issues I examined in this installation became springboards for the work seen in *Cordial*. These include entomological display, the use of memorabilia and artifacts, and the passage of time. It was also both a celebration of traditional women’s roles, in this case a bride, with the beautiful beaded gown, as well as a reflection on feminist discourses surrounding the confines of these roles, evidenced in thousands of pins affixing it to a wall, a second shimmering effect on the surface of the fabric. It spoke to these issues in ways that differ from the breakout work of feminist artists of the 1970s with the inclusion of a nostalgic, time frozen sense which sought to both honour as well as critique gendered identity.

Over the summer of my study I did a residency at *Full Tilt*, an artist retreat centre in Newfoundland. While there, I began to dig into issues that are central to my final project, which include display, preservation and loss, and domesticity. Working

in tactile relationship to materials at hand, as evidenced in *A Fine Specimen* (and that has been at the core of my practice for decades), materials took centre stage in my practice as I moved forward from that point of my studies. I began to focus on the ways in which objects of the home function in similar ways to the gestures and accessories of the body in the enactment of identity. I considered how home display tactics bring form to culturally prescribed roles through physical manifestations and actions, and what that might mean to notions of the home at this time. I mounted an exhibition at the end of my residency at *Full Tilt* called *For When Company Comes*, in which objects of the home, and particularly those that reference hospitality, became an area of focus, a theme that has continues to hold interest for me.

Performative gestures, such as entertaining, were an area of increased investigation once I returned from the period of intense production at *Full Tilt*. This lead to my winter-time week-long residency of the OCAD University Graduate Gallery, where I served tea to visitors while publically engaging in my creative studio based production. The conflation of roles – hostess, artist, curator, student, and teacher –was perhaps the first concrete step to what may, in the end, represent my deepest reflections on *Cordial*. These involve my own life as a mother and caregiver struggling to create through tactile manifestations, gestures large and small, visible and invisible, public and private. The juggling of many roles, and the conflation of activities that foster spaces for the habitation and comfort of others, and the effort to keep things ever moving forward in the face of hardship is subtly, but powerfully operative for me in *Cordial*.

Tea cups and other artifacts from my family have been grouped with items gleaned in thrift stores, or with items I have found that imitate past eras. The wallpaper upon which the majority of my panels are based is from a Ralph Lauren sample collection. What is real and what is fake, and what lies at the heart of the desire for authenticity? These were questions that I posed to an invited group of faculty and peers who joined me for a luncheon I served at *The Studio Parlour*, and these questions remained salient to me in *Cordial*.

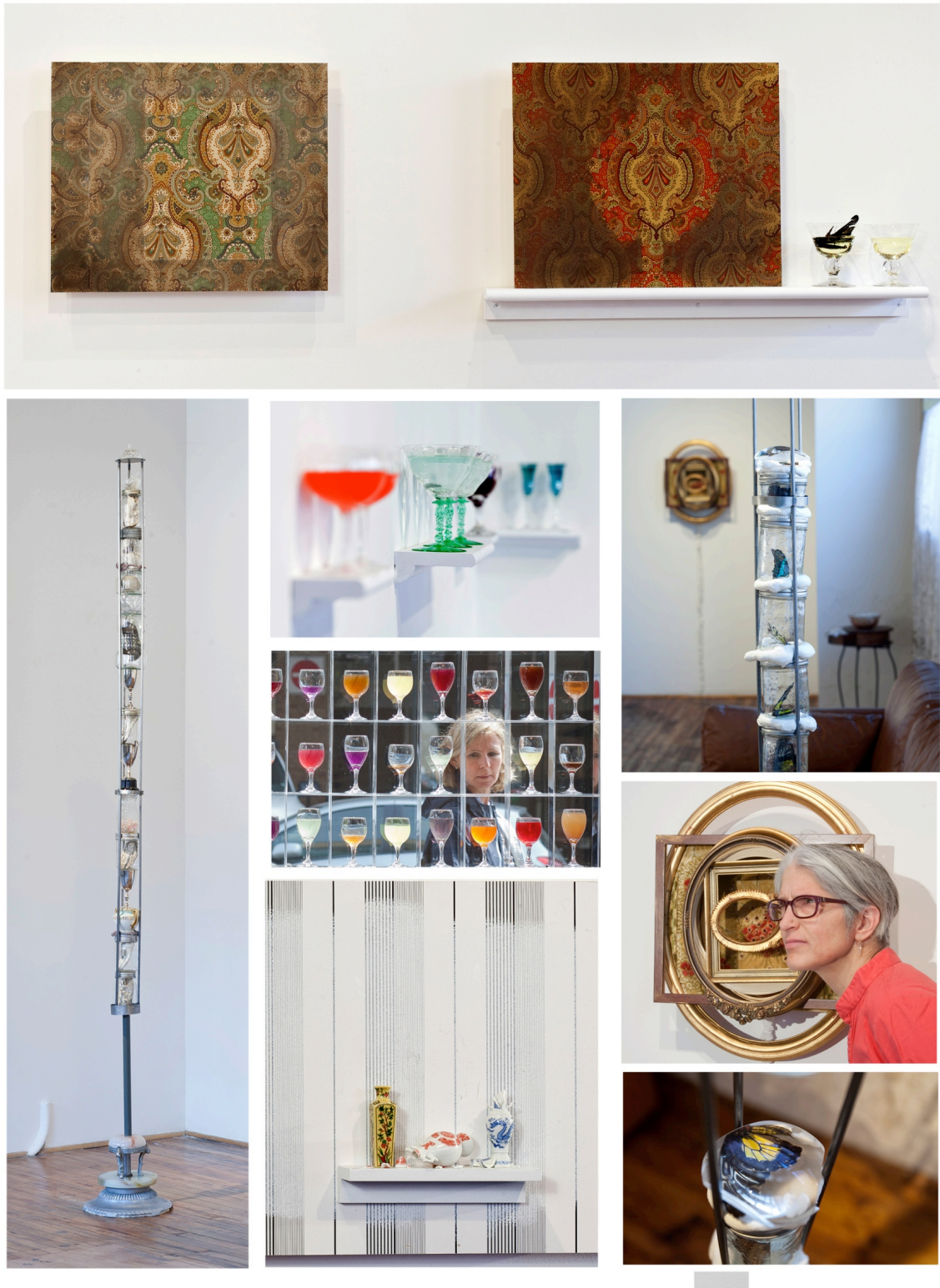


Figure 1 - Medley of images of *Cordial*. Additional documentation www.heathernicol.ca

Loss, decay, collecting, the separation of parts, replacement and replication, the desire to possess, understand and present beautiful things, the desire to create order, equanimity and stability, the urge to memorialize, and the pleasures and provocations of social encounters– these are areas of interest to me across my scope of work. They fall loosely into two areas: the first is performative in nature, as seen in reference to, or through enactments of, a toast, luncheon, a tea party, visit to art galleries with a friend or class, or a quiet conversation on a comfy couch. The second is display practice, such as occurs through material choices at moments of public presentation, like a wedding, or in the selection of an artwork for large group show. This area also includes curation, or the selection of objects for placement – from treasured items on a mantle, shelf, or in the window of a home, to display cases, shop windows, or hanging in a gallery.

Cordial can be understood as an iteration, one in a series of projects that engage with processes of choosing, positioning, manipulating, making, and displaying, rather than as a 'culmination' of these ideas.

1. INTRODUCTION

My artistic practice is fundamentally situated in two overlapping arenas: the making of things (that is, the concrete, operational, practical, and physical aspects of producing art-objects), and the exhibiting of things (that is, creating installations comprised of my own material as well as in curating independent exhibitions involving scores of other artists). My MFA project comprises four preliminary investigations: a curatorial event, an immersive audio installation, an installation in a display window, and a performative action/public residency. The final exhibition, *Cordial*, features discrete objects that I have made over the course of these activities, assembled and displayed as an installation that has been informed by each of these prior phases.

My work investigates objects and their display. I reflect upon encounters between people and things — in the everyday, as well as in rarified contexts, such as art galleries, or in the viewing of memorabilia or treasured domestic objects.

Central to each aspect of this thesis is an investigation of the aesthetic object. Things for viewing. Knick knacks and memorabilia. Collections. Pictures hung on gallery or living room walls. Sculptural objects. Earrings, necklaces, wedding gowns. Curios, such as dead butterflies. I am particularly fascinated by things gleaned from the domestic environment — china, wallpaper, curtains, picture frames, or elements possibly associated with entertaining, such as stemware and silverware platters. These materials are reassembled, repurposed, transformed and displayed to

investigate nostalgia, collecting, manners, taste, and the grammar of curatorial choice.

An organizational strategy for writing about this body of work is situating my process along a continuum of scale, from micro through macro to meta. My thesis evidences the primacy within my methodological framework of *doing* as a means of *knowing*. It is through the enactment of my artistic visions/desires/projects that I come to understand my impulses and inspirations.

My theoretical framework will address the lineage of feminist critical discourse that has influenced my practice. Many of the objects and materials that I use can be situated as gendered female because of their links to domesticity, housewifery, and feminine adornment.

The transposition of context is also an important part of my discussion; both the use-value¹ that one can argue has been culturally established at the time of the creation of the materials that I employ, which are gleaned from the every day and carry histories with them, but then also the shifts from those initial markers of time, place, and value. My work plays with what might be gained and lost within the layers of cultural and material meaning of objects through shifting and fluid contextualization. Objects function in different ways over time; I question the

¹ Use-value has a long history in political and economic thought. The term is linked with Karl Marx's "analysis of the commodity, defined as an object that satisfies a human need, or as having use-value" (Macy, 241). Commodities also have an exchange-value, most often expressed in financial terms. My consideration focuses on how these use-values become, and also undo, dependent on an object's context, as addressed in the writings of Susan Stewart.

processes and methods that initiate these changes, and how, in particular, they transform once they are included and extended into an artwork. The entire project, in both the developmental and final phases, explores ideas surrounding the value(s) objects may hold at different times, and the ways these are constantly subject to shift and change over time and context.

My theoretical framework will also address ideas regarding the separation of the author from the language she writes, as drawn from the work of Jacques Derrida. I situate this in how the initial maker of an object (similarly to a text), situated in a generative use site, is both occluded and inseparable from the ways in which that object/text travels through time and space. Both language and objects are constantly subject to citation, and recontextualization. Judith Butler extends and transforms this thinking through the lens of performed gender construction, and I contemplate Susan Stewart's examination of longing and nostalgia in relationship to objects. I use the lens of material culture to consider the social histories of objects, and reflect on Heidegger's concept of withdrawal.

Questions

Over the course of my studio work and reading, questions have come up, been worked through or have faded from focus, and new questions have emerged. This way of questioning is deeply woven into my ongoing process of discovery-based production. While inherently provisional in nature, these questions are useful

in the unfolding of my work. I present some areas of inquiry, now embedded in the artworks, that have driven the creation of this body of work:

In what ways do my creative works spring from underlying drives and impulses toward adornment and display? In what ways are material interactions interwoven into rituals and actions that construct subjectivities?

In what ways do the uses and values of materials and objects change and evolve over time, particularly as they are drawn into my artwork(s)? In what ways does the passage of time influence our relationships to objects, particularly those intended to survive longer than we do, such as artworks or valued possessions?

How do past traditions, struggles and perspectives on domestic and gender roles linger and impact my artistic production?

2. METHODS

My creative projects span a range of activities, each with specific methods that are employed on an as-needed basis; the prime and overarching methodology in all my work is practice-led research.

For me, the word practice is useful in its evocation of a repetitive activity, such as practicing the piano. From my experience, it is through regular engagement that a gradual accumulation of skill, rhythm, confidence, familiarity, and the bravery needed to take risks is developed. To practice is an inherently self-reflexive endeavor; it is through this repetitive process that frequent micro-adjustments unfold, a series of small-scale and intuitive investigations: impulses and refusals,

attempts and corrections, satisfactions and pains. The act of unscripted, spontaneous problem creation and resolution is given primacy over the more efficient strategy of working from a set plan as a means to an end. Instead, the openness to unforeseen outcomes by experimentation outside the realm of certainty leads to new possibilities, and therefore new ways of knowing.

The continual challenging of techniques and manifestations that have already been subject to interrogation (past success/completed work) by those that are unfamiliar or shaky (new territory) is extremely exciting to me, and is perhaps the prime motivating factor in my life as an artist. The “what ifs”, the surprise and delight that results when something is discovered, the emergence of something previously not known – these moments give me pleasure and satisfaction. These glimmering instances open doors, and drive my motivation to see what else can happen.

Eliot Eisner (1997) argues that artistic research is differentiated from other modes of research in this process-based approach, yet has the potential to positively impact other fields through the openness to risk, play, and chance. “There is a growing recognition within the field of science that restricting enquiry to those things that can be exactly measured would mean denying many of the benefits of alternative modes of enquiry” (Eisner, 260). For me this means allowing and forgiving inefficiency. It requires taming the nasty inner voices of self-doubt, criticism, and shame.

In her analysis of practice-led research, Estelle Barrett has stated that this approach is always rooted in *context*, in specific situations. She contends that the creative process is motivated by emotional, personal and subjective concerns (2007, 115). Framed as research, she further states that it is through an intensification of everyday experiences that new knowledge or 'knowing' emerges (120).

The philosopher Alexander Garcia Düttmann brings insights from film criticism into the realm of creative methodologies that resonate with me. He has stated that artworks cannot serve a particular purpose, and should not be bound to scientific treatise or particular items of knowledge (2008, 11). He further posits that the artist does not know *what* he or she is making, rather that they know *how* to engage. He questions how much knowledge the will to representation requires, and "what exactly that knowledge must know about" (5). He argues that the artist is rooted in what is at hand, and "makes what happens, something real and not something possible" (14). Garcia Düttmann continues "

[...] the artist who thinks he knows perfectly well what he is making, whose aesthetic seriousness does *not* advance to the boundary where intention breaks off, misses the real and remains trapped in the realm of mere possibilities" (15).

The making of that which is unknown instead binds the artist to the emerging work itself – the artist cannot isolate him or herself from the work, nor exert control over it on the basis of prior knowledge and standing reserve. Instead, knowledge is created over the course of the making, which Garcia Düttmann likens to the peeling away of an onion, revealing more with each layer. "[T]he provisionality of every

decision is a predicate that is as much a part of its [the artwork's] concept as that of its finality; more precisely, that from a structural or logical point of view, every decision can be final only to the degree that it makes way for another decision, and that a final decision which did not make way for another decision would cancel itself out" (32). My method is to prod and probe the boundaries between what I think I am attempting – how I initiate and structure my activities – and that which changes and redirects me as I move forward.

Garcia Düttmann continues: "[...] when describing what an artist has produced, one can make use of concepts which the artist himself would perhaps never think of using or which may even be unfamiliar to him" (50). Overlooking, for the moment, his identification of the every-artist as male, it holds great relevance to the practical realities of my (female) artistic enterprise which seeks to find meaning in the frictions and harmonies between materials, using a discovery-based process. This is attempted through present engagement, in line with Garcia Düttmann's provocations with regard to the "real" versus the "merely possible".

Practical Working Methods (micro, macro, and meta)

My primary discipline is sculpture. Within the language of this form, my primary techniques are additive. That is to say, I bring things together (as opposed to carve a thing away, or model with a pliable material, or cast a thing from a mold). A cumulative, assemblage approach, it fosters the opened-ended, discovery-based methodological framework outlined above, in its layered fungibility. This additive

methodology, with its roots in sculpture, impacts my entire scope-of-work. In assessing the rigor of practice-based research Biggs and Buchler have written: “The validity of a method is the appropriateness of the process to provide a solution to the problem at hand” (67). Assemblage feels like the perfect *modus operandi* for my purpose because of its structure of inclusivity. As a structural concept, assemblage is neither a set of pre-determined parts for assembly, nor a random collection of things (Wise, 77). Drawing from the writing of Deleuze and Guattari, Wise suggests that assemblages use elements that share some sort of heterogeneous quality to create territories which are not fixed for all time, but that are always being made and unmade, territorializing and deterritorializing. He uses home as an example, defined as a space that is (temporarily) created for comfort—possibly while on a train, at a desk, on a beach—a space not necessarily tied to a house. It is through the “arrangement of objects, practices and feelings” (79) that home-space is defined.

A lone, single-faceted element is not typical of my production. From the selection of objects for juxtaposition within a small-scale work, to the creation of suites of works, to the assembling of multiple parts for large-scale installation, audio, or curatorial events, all of these modes of expression contain multiplicities of parts coming together. They reference the process of their own making. These related scales of grouping form a kind of pendulum wherein I swing from intimate and replenishing experiences of distillation and compression found in small-scale activity, to invigorating and expansive experience when realizing large-scale projects. Situating this from **micro** to **meta** is useful for threading a line through my

processes and thoughts.

On the **micro** level of my practice, *Cordial* begins with my seeking out materials to work with. I respond to these in an immediate way, and this task is often interwoven into my daily life outside of the studio; gathering, collecting, sorting, storing, as well as cutting up, layering, and discarding materials gleaned from the world. These accumulate in my studio in informal, temporary piles and arrangements, where past or unresolved works are also considered as raw material.



Figure 2: Material play on my studio work table, 2012

Initial and prior uses afford certain materials histories — an “evocative” status (Stewart, Turkle, et al, use this word in ways addressed in more detail later in my thesis). For the sake of a methodological assessment, I will call what I work with *my* evocative objects, which I use for the construction of discrete works of art. In this, (my **mid** level), I make selections out of my assembled stashes of goods, and employ collage, built and assemblage methods, and an array of sculptural techniques, such as plastic vacuum pressing and pouring, wood and metal working,

or sewing, to explore form, structure, texture and colour in the construction of new objects. Some of these happen all at once, but most object-works form over a period of time, with rest and slow-boil periods between moments of “nailing down” choices (gluing, screwing, welding, etc.).

This additive, assemblage methodology extends outside of my discrete art-object making. At the **macro** level of my project, I explore the ways in which individual works comingle, each piece informing the next, laying in wait for the potential to morph into unified suites of works. Just as juxtaposition is central within the domain of my discrete works of art, so does this method foster intersection, overlap, the emergence of pattern and rhythm, and the spark of connection in my installations, as well as in my curatorial work.

At the **meta**, large scale level, multiple elements made by me, or many works by a wide range of artists, are brought together through interfacing platforms that foster encounter. Suites of work are grouped, and overarching, umbrella strategies create connections. This is seen in installations, such as *Cordial*, as well as in curatorial projects, such as *Under the Radar*. All of these scales of operation reference the processes of their creation.

In summary of my methods, additive processes are interwoven into my artistic work from the micro to the meta, and across disciplines, with a primacy afforded to a practice-led approach. An interest in sites of connection between materials, as well as between people and aesthetic objects, form the interdisciplinary matrix of my work.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I am interested in moments of connection between humans and things, and in particular how people invoke materials in order to interact with, around and about their embodied, lived experiences. I am curious about the ways in which materials exist in time, through and outside of these human encounters.

Cordial pays particular attention to the passage of time, and to domestic concerns. Specific feminist discourses and attending Euro-American developments in women's roles in the realm of domesticity are necessarily important in this project. Built upon materials gleaned from the home in ways that refer to, and expand upon, ideas of women's work that were defined during the Victorian age (the 1800s) as characterized by the emergence of the delimited role (and job) of the housewife (McKeon, 177), my theoretical framework includes historical considerations.

I am interested in two areas of domesticity: the first is feminine crafting and home decorating as a pastime of bourgeois women over the past 150 years. Although often undervalued as busywork, handwork and domestic display have resulted in objects and environments created with great skill and beauty. The second is domestic labor, including repetitive tasks such as cleaning and mending, as well as domestic chores such as repurposing, recycling, "making do", and transforming objects to fulfill a need. Traces of both streams of domestic activity are at play in my work in the forms of platters and goblets, dryer lint, or dressmaker's pins.

I speculate that the term “curate” can be used with respect to the ways that women have interacted with materials, through both labour and leisure, within the domestic sphere. I investigate how these delimiting roles have been enacted, and challenged, through the creation – *and display* – of works that consider the material significance of the domestic arena. Although a place where the limited power of women has been situated, and therefore constrained by circumstances, the domestic environment has also functioned as an avenue for creative agency within those same constraints.

McKeon has argued that during the 1800s the home became the prime domain of, and showplace for, women’s decorative taste. Displays in parlours, from the grand spaces of the wealthy to the more modestly scaled rooms of the middle class, were carefully arranged by women. I link this to the role of a curator, who also positions objects and employs display tactics to construct meaning and beauty. Undertaken within the role of the housewife, these display activities stabilized, or even buoyed, the family’s class status. It was the (usually sole) arena where a woman could showcase her craft skills, as well as enact her carefully delimited agency. Traditions of home display by women, as learned in the homes of my grandmothers and mother, coupled with the passing down of family memorabilia and treasures, hold legacies that have extended through generations and well into the era of my own childhood, and that persist today in ways that influence my relationship to notions of manners, taste, and value.

During the Victorian era the aesthetics of cabinets of curiosity and Curio Museums influenced parlour decorating². Typically not the ones who returned from collecting safaris or oriental³ voyages, women were nevertheless engaged in the display of these collectables, however modest a family's treasures may have been. Living and dining room displays created a portrait of a family's narratives, talents, wealth, and worldliness, and served as a transitional zone between the privacy of the bedroom, bathroom or kitchen, and the world of outsiders. The vestiges of these practices in the homes of my family and friends inform *Cordial*.

Feminine confines in the 18th Century were in sharp contrast to the experiences of men. In cities like Paris, bourgeois men, such as the character the flaneur, could move about freely, by day or by night, seeing without reciprocally being seen, while "[...] the wives and daughters of such men; bourgeois women [...] were confined (socially, visually, physically) to domestic settings and certain 'protected' public spaces and situations, lest they see things (including certain women of other classes, such as prostitutes) or be themselves seen in ways which would call into question their own respectability" (McKeon, 233).

These histories inform the way I play with materials that carry traces that might suggest a pride in decorating, as well as evoke tensions, or even anxieties that

² Curio Museums were an extension of Cabinets of Curiosity, a European phenomenon born in the 16th Century during the age of the voyages of discovery, which featured novelty biological and ethnographic materials. This is discussed further in my case studies.

³ I use this word to reference nineteenth century "Orientalism", a movement that was fascinated with the Middle East and Asia, and which resulted in the collection, imitation and depiction of art and artifacts from these vast regions. This term has been further defined through the work of Dr. Edward Said who's book *Orientalism* (1978), critically assessed the inaccuracies of these representations, and linked them with colonial and imperialist European histories.

fulfilling prescribed roles may have, and may still evoke for women. Living and dining rooms are often charged environments in my own experience, triggering childhood memories of playing house, preparing for holidays, and receiving guests, as well as the excitement of visits to relatives' and strangers' homes. As an adult, and as an artist, what I chose to do with treasured objects that I have collected, inherited or been given is both a vexing and delightful conundrum. It is influenced by both the pleasures I associate with home, as well as my feminist anxieties about women's roles within these environments that were born of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, when I was approaching my teenage years. It was then that domesticity was overtly and collectively scrutinized as a mechanism of oppression. The suburban single-family dwelling (a setting which for many epitomizes the mid-20th century women's experience of isolation, alienation, and subjugation) was founded upon socially prescribed roles that came into clear delineation during the 18th century. It was the Second Wave feminists who finally identified the home as a prime site of women's devaluation, diminution, and captivity.⁴

In reaction to male dominance in the art world, women artists, such as Harmony Hammond and Faith Wilding, began seizing upon textile processes like weaving, quilting, sewing, and macramé (in the forms of tablecloths, bedding,

⁴ Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is often credited with initiating the Second Wave Feminist Movement. Her writing on women's lives began with articles she grouped under the title "The Problem With No Name"; in them she focused attention on the struggles of women with the role of full-time homemaker.

clothing, tapestry, etc.). They found “new artistic inspiration and self-validation in women’s needlework” (Showalter, 161), as well as items from the home, such the table-setting, as seen in Judy Chicago’s famous *Dinner Party* (1979). Lippard has noted that painful social roles were exposed, parodied, and explored (22). These artists chose their media for their cultural associations, which then became embedded within the newly emerging female / feminine vocabulary of the project of emancipation. It was through artistic reclamation of craft and domestic methodologies, (as well as through representations of the female body, and the inclusion of personal narrative content – influenced by the emerging activist climate where “the personal was the political”) that the hegemony of formalism and the male domination of the art world was challenged.⁵

From the perspective of curatorial influence, a group of women artists based in California, including Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago, were enraged by the total exclusion of women from exhibitions such as *Art and Technology*, held at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 1970. They discovered that of “eighty-one one-person exhibitions at LACMA over a ten year period, only one had featured the work of a woman artist” (Wolverton, 20). In reaction to the exclusion of women

⁵ Linda Nochlin’s famous essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971), explored the reasons why women were precluded, with a focus on the social conditions that constrained women’s access to production. Griselda Pollack and Rozsika Parker made a significant contribution to the analysis of the status of women artists in their book “Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology” (1981) by building upon as well as challenging the criteria used in earlier feminist historical assessments and reclamations of the “hidden history” of women artists. They argued that art represents social conventions, and in so doing depicted the vast patriarchal structure which created the conditions of reception, not just production, and that new criteria and new ideologies were needed to frame women’s work.

artists from the dominant discourse, these women, and others with them, seized control of presentational opportunities and contexts through projects like Womanhouse, in 1971, and later the Women's Building, both in LA. They challenged the binary opposites that structured the reception of craft, such as high/low, masculine/feminine, and they reacted against the perceived need to be sanctioned by exclusionary institutions, instead focusing their energy toward the creation of new venues. This marks a shift from alternative exhibitions practices that can be traced to the *Salon de Refusés*⁶, where the work of rejected artists was exhibited in direct relationship to those that were endorsed (Altshuler, 23). The women artists in the 1970s operated in a do-it-yourself spirit that has been inspirational to my practice by reinventing and expanding exhibition contexts. Inserting their work for display, on their own terms, is significant to my study in that it evidences an impulse to *show*, to extend outside the consciousness-raising and other social practices of the time, signaling the importance of materially based representation and presentation in the construction and enactment of identity.

As early as the first issue of *Ms. Magazine*, in 1972, Anne Krittendale Scott suggested that domestic work was suitable for men or women as long as it was treated with respect both socially and economically (59); this signaled an early attempt at delinking women and domesticity. Radical feminists tended to focus on

⁶ Based on protests from artists rejected from the Paris Salon of 1863, Emperor Napoleon III declared that their work would be displayed in an adjacent exhibition. The controversy and critical acclaim attending the "Salon des Refusés" prompted artists, such as Édouard Manet, to become leaders of young, independent artists, and set the stage for artist-organized exhibitions for the next one hundred years and beyond. See Altshuler.

housework as a *problem*, not a territory for pride or reclamation, and likened it to a kind of slavery. They advocated that domestic activity, if left in the realm of women, should be paid work.⁷

By the 1980s, (re)valuing women's histories within fiber arts, crafts, and domesticity had largely fallen out of favor among feminist artists working in Europe and North America. To disrupt gendered roles and the power structures that enforced them, many moved toward the mediums of photography, performance, film and video, which were, according to Mary Kelly, "considered more progressive" (1998, 198). She stated that "In the mid 1970s, a number of women used their own bodies, textiles or imagery to raise questions about gender, but it was not that effective, in part because this was what women were expected to do" (199). Exhibitions such as *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* (1985), held at the New Museum of Contemporary Art), in New York and travelling to the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, and ICA in London, featured artists such as Silvia Kolbowski, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Yve Lomax and Mary Kelly. It signaled an interest in the ways that time-based and mass media was used, and could be challenged, as a platform for representations of gendered roles, norms, and expectations.

In this century, historical survey exhibitions, such as *Wack! Art and the*

⁷ Radical Feminists sought to challenge patriarchy's fundamental belief in male superiority, and considered gendered roles the prime site of inequity (Daly, 1978). Key figures include Ti-Grace Atkinson, Andrea Dworkin, and Mary Daly. Group activity was central, and political actions were leveled against *Miss America*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and other institutions that defined women's roles, by women's groups in NYC, LA, and other American cities.

Feminist Revolution at the Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art in 2008, and *Global Feminisms*, held at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007, have fostered deeper understanding of feminist lineages concerned with domesticity for contemporary audiences and practitioners. Bruszek noted that "From the confessional quilting of Tracey Emin to the public "knit-in" protests of the Revolutionary Knitting Circle collective, from the gender-bending narratives of Grayson Perry's pottery to Janine Antoni's weaving performances, the work on display in WACK! reveals the ground broken for this diverse range of contemporary artists working in craft media, as well as the (often surprising, or even carefully obscured) feminist origins of these strategies" (297).

A continued consideration of what Harmony Hammond has referred to as "women's materials" (Bruszek, 296) remains salient to me. For the purpose of situating these issues within my own practice, I am conscious of ways I attempt to deploy objects associated with women and home in ways that might disembrace or escape the exclusions that self-definition as other (Other) can invoke, and which have been subject to criticism as "essentialist"⁸. At the same time, I revisit historical and current narratives of domesticity, both oppressive and pastoral. I consider how to navigate this territory with these histories in mind – how to avoid or extend upon entrenched (or habituated) language that defines women, women's work, and

⁸ I use this term in reference to a contentious thread within feminist discourse. *Cultural* and other early feminist movements celebrated a woman's experiences as distinct and different, as *essential* to her unique biological capacities, such as childbirth. Radical and other feminisms critiqued this position as carrying threads of patriarchal oppression, and considered any *essentialist* attributes or roles with great suspicion.

domesticity as overarching, totalizing concepts.

Is it possible for me to formulate a rhizomatic and heterarchical reading of the materials that are at play here? My work investigates the collision of Second Wave feminism's discursive project of liberating women through the identification and celebration of women's unique contributions, histories, and stories with the provocation interjected through readings of gendered identity as performed and temporal.

In this regard, Judith Butler's work is influential because, for her, simply identifying and historicizing gender difference is meaningless without investigating the power structures that have constructed the attending ideas of that difference. She launches her critique based on Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Butler, 1988, 526). Building upon this, Butler situates gender as a historical condition, neither stable nor fixed as a biological condition. She recognizes that the repeated *acts* which constitute gender identity are not isolated, or even individual, but rather that they are performed in regulation with sanctions and prescriptions that have, in a sense, begun before the 'actor' is even situated. "Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again" (526). Just as a script can be enacted in a multitude of ways, the gendered body interprets and reenacts culturally prescribed directives. Gender identity is identified as performative, which means that it is only recognizable to the extent that it can be

enacted over sustained social performances.

Butler's work, therefore, situates identity as fluid. It is a productive, constitutive, performative effect of signification that occurs through an engagement with materiality – with the body. For Butler, this is most explicitly evidenced with regard to gender – the gendering of sexual difference which we reiteratively act out on, and through, bodies and materials. The link to my research is the idea that it is through our actions with and upon materials that we situate and also interrogate expressions of identity – how we seek to stabilize that which is in constant flux. I extend this argument to contend that it is through our relationship with objects – the question of what we might desire, collect, keep, and show – that we also construct identities related to normative gendered cultural behaviors.

While there are obvious implications for the *body* in her writing, with its constantly shifting gestures, I am very interested in what it suggests about the contingent ways in which we act upon *objects*. Just as gestural engagement with bodily adornment and accessory can be understood as performative demarcations of gender, choices made in regard to a broader range of objects can also be understood as enacted embodiments of the same iterative, constitutive acts.

Inasmuch as domesticated objects of display have been a clear and sanctioned conduit for the construction/stabilization of female identity within my own cultural history and life, I am interested in (re)presenting and repositioning them as invitations for reflection/engagement with dialogues surrounding

preciousness, beauty, desire, and the reifying impulse to save, collect, and memorialize moments as markers of gendered performance and identity. This is enacted, in my own practice, through my observations of my impulses to have, hold, touch, play with, rearrange, and make art with things.

For me, objects of desire and display hold the potential to be potent props in the enactment of gendered identity. In a certain sense I displace myself through my commitment to a discovery-based methodology where the norms of these objects meet and mix, spark and fold into each other in ways I can't anticipate fully. My choice of layered and overlapping assemblage, and the presentation of objects within display constructions, such as on shelves or a mantle, suggest rearrangement and flux. This links with Butler's evocations of reconfigurable and ongoing enactments of gendered identity through the tactile agency of materiality.

Feminism is only one of many potential lenses for reading domestic objects. There is an entire canon of anthropological, ethnographic, economic, art historical and philosophical bodies of knowledge to draw upon as a means to understand the "knowledge" objects may hold. A full analysis of the scope of these fields of research is outside the purview of this paper, but I will attempt to demonstrate some of the other discourses that can be traced in my artistic practice; lenses through which I have attempted to understand the *objectness* of my creative work.

Bogost (2012) situates two streams of thought that have dominated our relationship with things since the time of Kant: scientific naturalism (through which

all things can be scientifically discovered, documented, and studied) and social relativism (through which all things are explained through the contextual lens of human culture, language and society). Although they have been at odds in many ways, both situate the needs of humanity as prime (8-10).

From a social relativist perspective, Baxandall has outlined two major, longstanding methodological frameworks historians have used for understanding man-made objects: nomological and teleological (13).⁹ In both of these instances, the finished product is understood as a concrete solution to a problem or need, and the historian aims to reconstruct the circumstances out of which it was made. Baxandall asserts that all constructed objects, spanning from the functional to the aesthetic, are the result of a series of “charge” and “brief” actions,¹⁰ or problems and solutions, which an astute historian can later unpack (35). In his essay “The Historical Object: Benjamin Baker’s Forth Bridge” (1982) he assesses the bridge’s construction in 1890, which, even though vast and complex, is nevertheless recoverable, and therefore, a portal to understand the circumstances of its making, makers, and site. However, in assessing Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1907), he recognizes that full recovery, as a means of reception of an art object such as a painting, is limited by the exponentially larger number of charges and briefs a painter makes, many of which are covered over and altered throughout the making. The traces of intention,

⁹ Of note in all four areas just outlined, scientific naturalism, social relativism, nomological and teleological analysis: a correlationist conceit dominates. See Bogost.

¹⁰ See Baxandall’s article for a full explanation: the “charge” is a problem; the “brief” is its solution, as linked to design methodologies.

which may be microscopic, gestural, or tentative, disappear through the process of creation.

His identification of this salient difference evidences to me an important letting go of, or shifting away from a single-minded and authoritative reception of the object. It has clear links with my own creative framework, as outlined above, where during the process of making - and ensconced within the multitudinous charge/brief cycles - the identity, or “knowing”, of the object gradually emerges and recedes. For me, these are in perfect sync with Butler’s performative actions, where *being-with* and *doing* are inexorably linked. Actions and the material circumstances of their enactment are in a dynamic relationship of *becoming*.

In my attraction to domestic and gendered objects, I am fascinated by traces of the actions of their making, as well as any or all other residues of their histories that might be either perceptible, or projected onto them, and that point toward their relationships with people. This is evidenced in works that include detritus of domestic tasks, such as those displayed in my curio cabinet, and in the various screws and hooks that appear in a way that might suggest that a picture or shelf was once hung from it, but is no longer present.

I will leap forward to the present (and go back to do some filling in later). In her 2011 publication *Evocative Objects*, Sherry Turkle states that we are on comfortable ground when considering objects as useful or aesthetic, but when we consider objects as companions, or as provocations to think or feel, we are in less familiar, and less comfortable territory (5). Her research underscores the

inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things. An excellent example is textiles as objectifications of social relations (in the form of clothes, soft furnishings, etc.) (Attfield, 123). These materials have a particularly potent capacity to serve as “transitional objects” as in Winnicott’s study of the “blanket-object” substituting for the “mother-object”, or what he calls the “not-me” artifact (Phillips, 120). Here material-culture studies signal a shift from the more literal object analysis as outlined by Baxandall, as well as away from Marxist perspectives, which focus on the physical and technological aspects of objects as well as their provenance, exchange value, use-value, and distribution (Attfield, 125).

In 1986, Appadurai’s edited volume *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* examined the role of material culture in human social life. This signaled a change in perspective on the study of material things by focusing on the ways objects circulate culturally; it is through their shifting social conceptualizations that they have, what he called, “lives” (44). Redirecting the focus from taxonomical and purely economic lenses, he narratively approaches this social dimension through an anthropological framework, introducing a fresh interdisciplinarity to a range of fields that study material culture.

Within that same influential volume Igor Kopytoff presents a biological approach, wherein the life cycle of things, from creation to final demise (often a burial, post disposal) parallels a human trajectory (66). The prospect he presents of assessing an object’s life-history like a career, with concomitant notions of status, particularly in terms of aging, and the shame and attempts at resurrection that so

often accompany losses of success, can be traced to my own attractions to things that have been broken, possibly repaired, and things that no longer (or perhaps never did) represent “good” taste.

My creative work of resituating and reconfiguring objects as constructions which offer invitations for new consideration and interpretation by the spectator is, at its core, a process of *deconstruction*. Deconstruction, in this context, is an analytical tool directed toward exposing unquestioned assumptions and internal contradictions within readings, and is useful to me in terms of contemplation of performance and materiality. Jacques Derrida identifies the haunting by a non-present-remainder - a Derridian ghost – which exists as a trace within every object or body (42). These lateral reminders, which bleed towards the edges of every socially-coded object, destabilize epistemological sense-making, the specific ‘nailing down’ of knowledge about any material’s form and meaning; but they foreground the artist’s work as an imaginative creator and germinator of new kinds of associations and syntheses. As Derrida writes in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other* (1989): “Deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all; it does not settle for methodical procedures, it opens up a passageway, it marches ahead and leaves a trail [...]”. These concepts — of passageway and trail — potentially give birth to multiple and overlapping readings that bleed through specific connotations which at first glance may appear to be solidly embedded in the objects which I reconfigure, and re-display.

With this in mind, my materials — stitched and sutured together — are construed as an invitation to look. The initial appearance may gesture toward a distinct, particular set of directives, but more deeply they are presented in *relationships* — juxtapositions that represent connotational differences and effects, invitational conflations and wrappings that offer opportunities for slippage and (re)integration. So, in this sense, they are not about something (i.e. a particular narration, a true story), but rather about conditions of co-existence, multivocality, crossovers and connections. This is seen both within, as well across, the individual pieces, or elements.

Susan Stewart (1993) has written about the transformations in the use-value of objects as they move from function (for example, a tea cup) to a signifier (a tea cup within a collection, situated as a souvenir, or saved as memorabilia). She asserts that in an exchange economy we seek value, which translates into a search for authentic experience. This in turn leads to a critical search, and longing, for authentic objects. She examines how objects carry traces of their (social) pasts, which substitute for their contexts of origin, representing both the lived experience of the maker, as well as referencing the “second-hand” experience of its owner(s) 133).

Stewart situates the transformational shift as occurring at the moment an object has been chosen, removed, and recontextualized by means of collection and display. Often it is the memory of the moment it was collected that holds new meaning, as well its relationship in the new context, i.e., within a larger collection of

some sort — a collection of same types, a chronological collection, or a narrative collection, such as memorabilia. Addressing the souvenir, she says they “[...]speak to their context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of a need...; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia” (123). The experience of the object lies outside the body’s experience, and it is saturated with meaning that never can or will be fully revealed. I sense that this is precisely where longing and desire — the desire to repeat that which can never be repeated — are located: objects are perceived to be holding traces of embodied acts that are forever out of reach. They become substitutes, call on nostalgia as a longing for a thing that is forever porous, that never was. Yet it is by association to an “authentic” past that objects gain value (135). The object cannot stand in for the memory, but exists as part of the whole in evocation of the experience. The souvenir’s partiality, Stewart asserts, is the source of its potency: “The souvenir must remain impoverished and partial so that it can be supplemented by a narrative discourse, a narrative discourse which articulates the play of desire” (136).

In reflecting upon my work, the notion Stewart identifies as a lack of completion is a portal to unpacking what may underlie an aspect in my attractions to certain objects – the uncertainty of the past life of an object or repurposed material leaves room for imaginative play. What may hold great importance to one is humble and forgettable to the next; the status of materials is unstable and contextual. The unknown and inevitably unstable cultural biography of a thing, before being taken up as material for an artwork, allows space for creative intervention. Once a

treasured bowl is chipped, what is its value? Once an earring's pair is lost, then what? I like to work with items with values that evade 'pinning down', that suggest this flux in terms of their (potentially wobbly) identifiable status: economic, functional, fashion, or other. The uses and symbolic values of objects are qualitatively different, which is why they can feed back with one another in ways that impact how they operate within artworks.

In discussing Heidegger's influential essay *What Calls For Thinking* (1954), Graham Harman (2002) identifies a phenomenon that proposes that as soon as we start to think about something, the thing that calls for our thinking *withdraws* from us. The thing itself, before the application of our thought, is infinite in its potential as an object of thought. Once we apply our conscientious rigor, and scientific method of thinking, and/or our creative energies to the object of thought, its multiplicity withdraws from us. It becomes localized as only one thing, with one objective, purpose, or ideation (4-6).

I am sparked by this suggestion of withdrawn aspects of use-oriented, gender-defined, decorative and domestic objects, and what happens to these qualities as they continue to exist through time. For instance, while it was important to the Second Wave feminist project to decontextualize certain objects that originated in the domestic sphere in order to exemplify and denote a delimiting and oppressive condition, those identified usages do not exhaust the potential for these objects to be present, and to be ready for other uses. Indeed, I have carried the memory of a statement I thought had been made by Mary Kelly, but which I cannot

now source definitively, but that has been important to my understanding of practitioners working at this time. It is that Second Wave feminist artists made these specific object-identifications so that future generations would not need to, in a sense “liberating” the objects as well as themselves.

What comes to my mind when I consider this withdrawal are the notions of revealing and concealing, long associated with seduction. The imagining of what is obscured beckons toward deeper connection. My employment of curtains, veils and boxes might invite reflection on the idea of secrets and sub-narratives that things may hold, as well as the opposite in terms of things that are placed plainly on view. For instance, in a living room, it would have been the woman's job to select and display items from the family's history, perhaps things that were indicators of their status, or that were deemed important in the family's narrative. Yet these displays can also reveal a ‘withdrawn’ narrative. What is, and what is not, placed on view? Where and how are things presented? What items are stored in the attic or basement?

These hidden histories may be evocative of those things which cannot be spoken of, or defined, and may even actualize those things which withdraw from us as we look at them. Personal or family secrets come to mind, and objects that may both hold and hide (or deflect from) them.

In my work, I attempt to denude objects of explicit meanings, without burying or denying these important histories. I think I'm involved in an expansionist enterprise more than an explicitly interpretive one. My goal is not to strip objects of

their historical associations but rather to try to explore both the impulse to situate/contextualize and “know” an object, together with its inevitable withdrawal; to question what is lost, what is excluded in the definitions that they have been given, and where else they can go. It is not a bleak archaeological dig for me. It is a playful encounter.

Returning, then, to Harman,¹¹ a resonant chord for me in his reading of Heidegger's object paradigm is his emphasis that we engage more specifically with objects *themselves* as opposed to inventing and extending arguments regarding the abstract reasons why objects are essentially unknowable. He argues that it is their very unknowability that requires our attention (80).

My theoretical framework serves to contextualize choices that I make in my material practice through the study of delimited aspects of the historic and current discourses of feminism, material culture, object ontology, and contemporary art.

4. CASE STUDIES

Historical Influences

The Victorian love of preservation, categorization, and display is a notable influence in *Cordial*, especially in terms of the expanding ideas of what has been

¹¹ Harman is one of a group of theorists currently investigating objects from a perspective that has been dubbed “Object Oriented Ontology”, which posits a challenge to an anthropocentric view of the material world. Addressing the scope of this thinking is outside the purview of this paper, but I will say that the “OOO” detachment of objects from people is provocative, if not to say startling in its unhinging of humans from material agency. A Bogost blog post summary is helpful: “OOO is primarily concerned with two things: first, a rejection of ... “correlationism,” the assumption that all philosophy involves the interplay (or correlation) of human and world; and second a focus on individual entities as the fundamental material of being.”

considered beautiful and valuable. Of particular interest is the phenomenon of the Cabinet of Curiosity, or *Wunderkammer*, which arose in mid-sixteenth-century Europe as repositories for all manner of wondrous and exotic objects, and which gained wide audience and influence during the 1800s through the emergence of small museums and semi-public private collections. The (Victorian era) Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University is my primary case study. Born of General Augustus Pitt Rivers stated desire “to prove and demonstrate the principles of ...evolution” (Van Keuren, 175) through amassing large numbers of artifacts, the display of his collection also served to demonstrate his worldly travels, taste, and wealth. Items were stripped of traces of their contexts of origin, and displayed within groups that were made to categorize, study, and preserve them, often based on their size, shape, scientific type, or other physical property unrelated to where and how they were collected. Their formal properties indexed their status within their new collected domain.

The Aesthetic Movement in Victorian England has also served as a reference point in my work, with its “cult of beauty” and desire to transform everyday living through self-expression via material goods. I am drawn toward how both of these impacted Victorian domestic display strategies in their valuation of the exotic, as well as ceramics and textiles brought to Europe from “the orient” (Calloway, 33).

Makers

A prime artist to consider in relationship to *Cordial* is Joseph Cornell (1903-1979). His work was informed by the cubists' formal considerations of the insertion of objects into pictorial space, as well as the cultural references of found imagery, either historic or political, as initiated by the Dadaists and Surrealists, yet his vocabulary and imagery were singular, and rooted in the imaginary. He had a keen eye for the formal properties of his materials, using shape, repetition, and texture to guide his compositions.



Figure 3: Joseph Cornell. *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)*, 1936.

Eschewing the manifestos and movements prevalent in early 20th Century Europe, Cornell has been described as evidencing an idiosyncratic, open, and distinctly American melting pot position in his individualism (Ashton, 32). He opened new pathways in assemblage with his whimsical, playful and dreamlike compositions, transforming recognizable things by including them in his miniature

worlds. His constructions suggest some sort of action or activity, like playing an unknown game, or the collecting of similar things; the work's implication of its own making has informed my work. His use of distressed, historical-looking objects has a powerful ability to fracture our sense of time.

I am attracted to materials for both their formal and associative qualities. Jessica Stockholder's work has served to loosen everyday materials and objects from their initial uses and values, as well as their particular art historical references, without disregarding these histories altogether. In an interview with Lynne Tillman she stated, "I like there to be places where material is forgotten; but I also love to force a meeting of abstraction with material or stuff. Color is very good at this, always very ready to assert itself as an independent force" (qtd. in Tillman, 587).



Figure 4: Jessica Stockholder. Installation, Weatherspoon Museum, 2003.

She does not deny the "literary" content of her materials, but states that she does not think about them (consciously) while working but rather aims for a "random" approach wherein she trusts that the materials will speak for her. "I never know

exactly why I choose materials. ...part of my interest is to work with materials that are in some way randomly selected – to put them together so that they speak for me. I have some faith that I will be able to speak through what is at hand” (596).

Artist-Curators

Stockholder has extended her large-scale transformations of space by including the works of many artists together with her own constructions in hybrid curatorial-installation projects where the blurring of the boundaries of these two disciplines is evident through curatorial choices deeply entrenched in sculptural practice. *The Jewel Thief* (2011, The Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College, New York), co-curated with Ian Berry, was a project wherein nearly one hundred works of art were exhibited together with Stockholder's, envisioning fresh form for her longstanding love of abstraction through the colourful exhibition design and the close approximation of the selected works. Nancy Princenthal wrote: “Assembled from unlike parts—just like Stockholder's own sculptures—“The Jewel Thief” is a sharply faceted and deeply luminous whole” (121).

New York-based Robin Kahn combines her art and curatorial practices in ways that are similar to my working methods. Her discrete studio works and large-scale curatorial initiatives are distinct and different in many respects, but they are informed by each other, and her process of shifting between them, from micro to macro, from private to public, from solo to social, demonstrates the ways these two

disciplines complement each other, fostering different forums for her creative self-expression.

All of Kahn's work synthesizes her investment in political and feminist issues, and her love of creating community. Her interactive installation *The Art of Sahrawi Cooking* (2012, dOCUMENTA 13), was comprised of a labyrinth leading to a large tent where couscous was served by the artist and women from the Western Sahara, who have been living in exile for over forty years. Called "an oasis for education and entertainment" (Robecchi, 87), over the duration of the exhibition Kahn met with people on site, enacting a mixture of activism and hospitality. In the aftermath of that intensely public project Kahn is back in her studio, creating small-scale collage works made, in part, of patterns and textures inspired by the North African interior of the tent, and of images of women serving food.

5. SCOPE OF WORK:

Project 1: *Under the Radar*, OCAD University Graduate Gallery, January 2012.

Fifty participating artists, who study or teach at OCAD University, selected a (small) work to include in a barter exhibition, affording an opportunity for reflection on the value of artworks both in terms of what an artist was willing to part with, and what that work might hold as currency. Assembling many parts (both objects as well makers/ collectors), I merged the methods of art auction houses and speed dating events to investigate grey market (cashless) economic activity. Participants



Figure 5: *Under the Radar*, 2012. Left: Nicol explaining how to receive notes. Right: note delivery.

simultaneously held a variety of roles (artist, dealmaker and collector) in a project that was part small-works show, part relational encounter between participants and a “mail-delivery-system” sculptural object devised for negotiating trades, and part performance. It investigated themes of exchange, desire, value, risk, exposure, and community. This project employed a quasi-curatorial platform to realize a performance-artwork.

Ydessa Hendeles has used the term “curatorial composition” for her exhibitions, and situates them as an outgrowth of her practice-based artistic approach, of which she states [that she does not...] “use artworks to illustrate a trend or theme.... But (to) reveal their own truths in the creation of parallel worlds through the arrangement of artworks and artifacts” (2012, 4). The roles of artist and curator in the production of exhibitions has been under interrogation for decades; the curation of shows that are explicitly considered to be works of art *in themselves* is territory that is particularly murky. The blurring of definitions of exhibitions as meaning-making attractions is evidenced in the work of Hendeles, and is a boundary

that I investigate in projects like *Under the Radar*.

Project 2: *Talk Back*, Gladstone Hotel, September 2012

In this immersive audio installation the focus is directed upon the experiences of spectators relating to an object (or the lack of an object!) within a gallery context. Intersecting the disciplines of curating, theatre and sound art, this multi-track sound collage features the fragmented and layered voices of dozens of actors improvising their verbal responses to an imagined art experience - a cordoned-off, illuminated, and vacant space within a gallery.

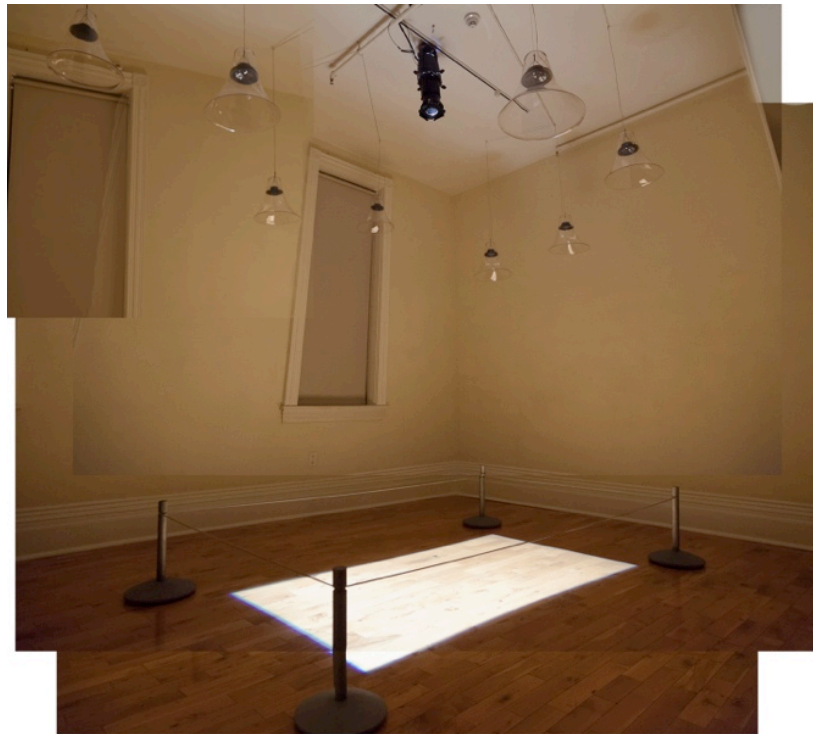


Figure 6: *Talk Back*, 2012. Audio Installation, The Gladstone Hotel, Toronto.

Envisioned as an eight channel audio work with the sounds of these voices emanating from overhead speakers, the work navigates time-based concerns with the conflation of the present and past, fact and fiction. The installation playfully interrogates the pleasures, provocations, and pretenses, as well as the sociability of encounters with art objects, and uses irony to look at what constitutes an art object.

Project 3: *A Fine Specimen*, The Window Gallery at Queens Quay, Harbourfront Centre, Summer 2012.

This window display features a 1950s-era wedding gown affixed to the wall with hundreds of “T” pins, its storage box and tissue papers on the floor. It considers the selection of materials used to manifest celebrations, and how social, transitional moments are defined, in part, through adornment and constraint. Saved as artifacts imbued with personal and cultural history, the unpacking of memorabilia, in turn, (re)constructs and informs knowledge and beliefs about the past.

The gown’s pearls, its stains, and the use of the pins pay homage to the beauty and struggles of the brides, mothers and artists of generations past. Presented as one of a collection of exhibitions at Harbourfront Centre, curated by Patrick McCaulay under the banner title “Crossroads”, this was the special text on view for children:



Figure 7: *A Fine Specimen*, 2012. Harbourfront Centre, Toronto

“Brides love to remember their weddings, and often save items from that day – like their wedding gowns. After a long time these things become like the objects in museums. When we look at displays we learn about the past, and about the present, too. What are the differences between a pinned-up insect at the Science Centre and a real-life person getting dressed up to be seen?”

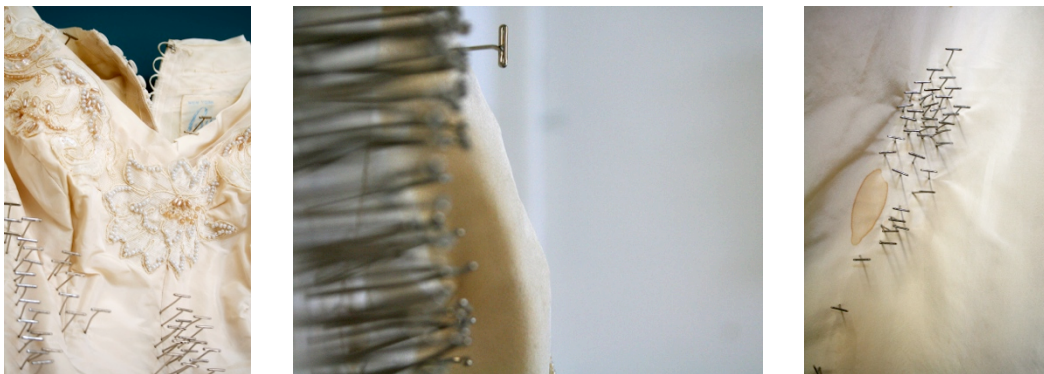


Figure 8 Details of *A Fine Specimen*, 2012. 1950s wedding gown, “T” pins, packing materials.

Project 4: *The Studio – Parlour*, OCAD University Graduate Gallery, January 2013.

An interdisciplinary crossover of methodologies was evident during a weeklong hybrid occupation of a university campus gallery. The exhibition space became part studio, (tools, materials and worktables enabled ongoing creative production), part white cube (for deploying evolving exhibition designs) and part domestic environment (for receiving and serving tea to guests). Housed in a school, it was also part classroom.



Figure 9 *A Fine Specimen*, 2013. OCAD University Graduate Gallery.

This blurring of multiple functions was evidenced by the simultaneous presentation of what appeared to be finished artworks with what appeared to be works in progress, as well as the display and manipulation of the materials for their making, a scenario wherein all of these elements held agency when encountered within a gallery context. The domestic content of the work was underlined through the performative tasks of hand-work and hosting. The project was an outgrowth of additive, assemblage processes developed in the studio.

6: THESIS EXHIBITION: *Cordial*, OCAD Student Gallery, May 1-5, 2012

Cordial was a transformation of context for the multiple discrete artworks under construction during the performative *Studio Parlour*, a move into the fixed environment of an art gallery exhibition.



Figure 10 Installation shots, *Cordial* 2013

The show was the tactile result of my materially-based explorations of form, structure, texture, colour and pattern, born of my reflections on the passage of time — for people, as well as for material things — at this particular stage of my life.

Some things are treasured and saved, others are broken, lost or discarded. We are born, we age, and then pass away. Following this, we have forever sought to exist in remembrance both during, and after, our lives, and in this regard seek to construct how we are seen, and indeed how we see ourselves, by acquiring, for use and display, certain kinds of objects. These may then become part of a legacy, or they help in the establishment of a sense of the present tense. The impulse to have, hold and display is often informed in relationship to things that have been passed down to us, or that have been collected from the past. The project is also a reflection on some of the ways in which a sense of home is created through material choices, both in the present, as well as in memory.

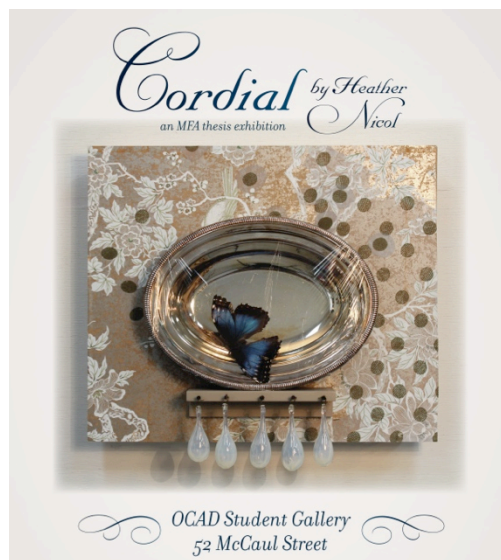


Figure 11 Invitation to *Cordial* (cropped)

These decorative gestures may be understood as attempts to stabilize that which is, in fact, in constant flux (identity, status, home). The passage of time is enacted through rituals large and small, from toasts to weddings and funerals, and

also through the impulse to save and display objects that mark these occasions or are special to us in other ways.

In *Cordial* I manipulate objects that may or may not be gleaned from my own memorabilia, souvenirs or personal collections. My relationship to the objects that comprise these works is unknown to my viewers; their inclusions are not meant to posit a specific autobiographical narrative, or to testify to my own particular experiences. Rather, they gesture towards the origins and histories of the materials themselves, and to the social relationships that materials of this kind may hold over time and generations. I have taken inspiration from my upbringing, especially time spent in the homes of my grandmothers and their very different enactments of domesticity, one French Canadian, the other of British ancestry.

The series of shelves that house small collections of altered stemware has been called the “verb” section of this body of work (by artist and writer Andy Fabo), with its reference to social activity and enactments, while the wall panels and sculptures have been situated as the “nouns” in their comparative stasis as objects that call for observation. He has linked one type of grammar with the dining room, where we may meet and interact; the other, with the living room, where we may rest, digest, and reflect.

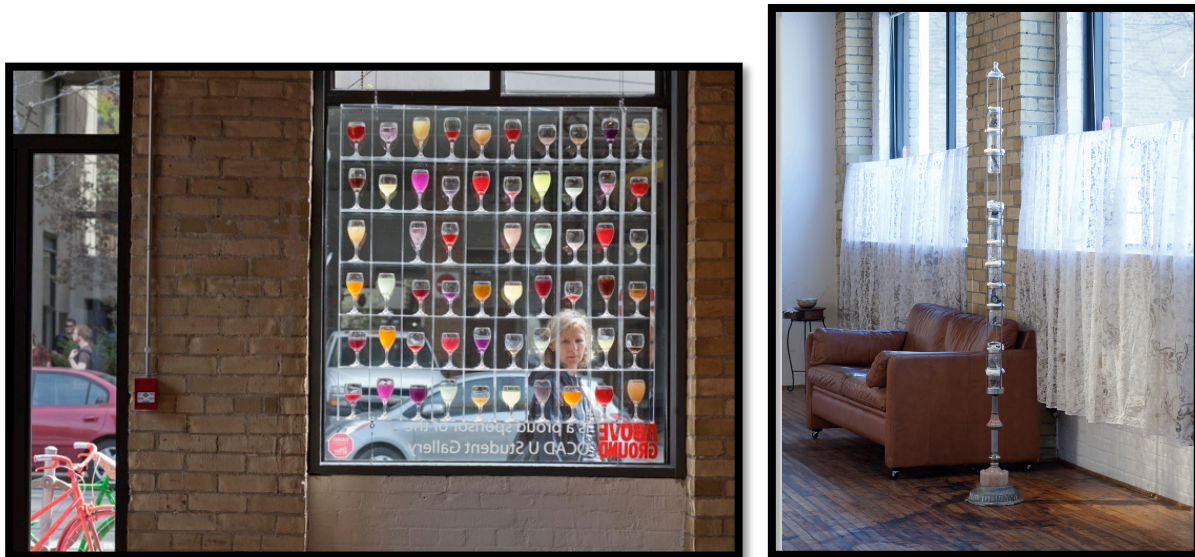


Figure 12 Heather Nicol. Two window interventions, and view of Butterfly Tower Cordial

Two interventions were created for the particular conditions of the gallery windows to address the threshold between the interior and exterior of the space. The front window, facing out onto a busy pedestrian street, featured “What You Are Served”, comprised of dozens of colourful wine glasses, perhaps like the seductive beckoning of the exterior of a shop, or a stained glass window. With it I hoped to evoke group ritualized gatherings such as a baptism, or festive receptions. The random assortment of liquids filling the glasses, from Kool-Aid to Dimetapp to “hooch”, playfully acknowledged the range of liquids we are served. Five large industrial windows span the north wall, looking out onto an ugly parking lot. An “Untitled” curtain-like work buffered the ugly windows and their view with partial covering, allowing in translucent light in while quieting the space both visually and acoustically. The Victorian patterns painted onto the gallery walls extend onto the lacey fabric bringing textile design from panels to walls to

windows. This piece served to unify the room, just as curtains may do in a home, and evoked the visibility and invisibility of domestic space, labour and materials.

I grapple with my own upbringing in terms of aversion to dirty dishes and broken things. The impulse to tidy and to fix, so brilliantly expressed in the home of my mother, has led to my equation of order with equanimity, yet an element of chaos is ever lurking in my life. A shattered bowl on the floor, chipped stemware, broken china, or faded painting on the walls of the gallery are some of the ways I have addressed these issues. *Cordial* featured the tall sculptural tower work *Stacked, (for and against)*, which included baby booties in jars, a fleetingly useful item. This sculpture is barely stable, looming, yet it is also delicate and fragile.

The exhibition featured works that range from the celebratory experiences of connection at social gatherings, as seen in the colorful stemware works, to the isolation and absence of loss or death, as expressed in the forms of butterfly corpses, bones, and shattered treasures. In between lay a range of details, patterns, layers, structures and textures.

7. CONCLUSION

In all of the phases of my MFA thesis I have attempted explore a variety of interactions between viewers and aesthetic objects. The works bring into play some ways in which objects are valued. Holding on to memories, constructing celebrations, solidifying personal narratives, assembling a home; this range of

activity is performed materially through the collection, admiration, arrangement and display objects that have been deemed important in some capacity.

Our lives are short, shorter than many of the objects we touch, which are used, gifted, possessed, passed down in families, or end up for sale someplace. Materials themselves are subject to change, recontextualization, decay, and loss. These intersections have informed my work as I have come to recognize, through the process of creation, the emotional resonance that objects hold through our capacity to project on them, bond with them.

Some materials may have primary connotations to domestic craft, home decorating, personal adornment, and may evoke narrative, but such claims to primacy are always themselves reiterative, contingent and incomplete. They may suggest the ways in which objects are used socially, especially surrounding moments of domestic ritual, transition or celebration. Others are invitations to look, possibly to listen, and through these actions, to perform. It is as these material manifestations are engaged by me as a maker and then by an active spectator that they come into being as artworks, as the origin for new thought, memory or presence. Being with the art object initiates the becoming of the art object — this is the site where meaning and communication takes place.

In conjuring the domestic at this historical juncture, so many years after the important break-out works by feminist artists of the seventies, after the expanding influences of performative readings of identity, and within a continued unhinging of objectness from ontological constraint, and as a mid-life woman grappling with my

aging parents and my children's imminent adulthoods, I have attempted to imagine a new domesticity. In *Cordial* I envision a house wherein the tether of predetermined domestic roles have been loosened to allow for co-extensive explorations of its many rooms. Neither the sole expression of a suppressed *home*, or any other singular

My (re)using of domestic materials carries on their aesthetic traditions through their transformation into art. Many of the material choices I make challenge my own assumptions about good and bad taste, and express my ambivalence towards beauty, decoration, and traditional domestic roles. The shifting uses and values of objects, and especially the ways they transform through additive processes of assemblage, collage and juxtaposition is at play within and across the discrete works seen in *Cordial*, within the room where they are displayed, as well as across the broader scope of my work as an artist.



Figure 13 *Cordial* installation image

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