“C” IS FOR CERAMICS
It Also Stands For: Collecting, Community, Content, Confusion, and Clarity

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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Abstract

The goal of this thesis was to elucidate the artists’ motivations, inspirations, sources, and reasons for creating visual art. An additional aim was to clarify the themes and content with which the artist works. This document serves as a reflection on the processes the artist underwent to fulfill the requirements for obtaining a Master of Fine Arts Degree. After spending two years studying visual art, maintaining a vibrant studio practice, and through a self-reflexive process of writing the author has gained clarity on the aforementioned goals of this thesis. Furthermore, this document serves as a record of the artist’s trajectory and will aide in guiding the artist forward in the continued pursuit of creativity.
Dedication

Dedicated to Wanda Westcoast
Acknowledgments

I considered this school and ultimately came here because of Mary Jo Bole, Professor and Artiste Extraordinaire. Hubba-hubba!

I would not have made it (literally and figuratively) without Clare Fox, Florence Gouvrit Montaño, George T. Gregory Jr., April Hernandez, Ash and Seres Kyrie, Rebecca Mizhir, Heather Navratil, Tara Polansky, and Meris Powell. Period.

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Vita

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
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Chapter 1: Introduction

On the following page begins my story. I believe it is what is ultimately at the heart of all my work. The story speaks of longing and a desire to find a unique type of love and a place where I exist. It speaks of my relationships to others, both those specifically mentioned and ones not mentioned. The theme of this story speaks to the crux of where we all come from, and where we all start both our lives and our individuality. It is part of the foundation of what makes me believe, behave and act as I do. This foundation informs my work both consciously and subconsciously. It is not the full story of what and why I make what I do, but it is the start that continues to exist throughout all my work. It is at the root of the emotions that are examined through my work.

All my work speaks of placement—of the self, a thing, an object, a creature, and/or a sculpture—within a larger and yet very intimate scope. I look at my work as representations of an emotional state in an unparticular moment. My work explores conflicts of the self and the self amongst others. It searches for and tries to understand an identity of ones own and an identity defined by others. It seeks to answer questions of connectedness—where I and the other exist together. The following story expresses my primary experiences with all of these concepts which are the roots from where my work emerges.
Chapter 2: My Mothers

They’re older than me by far. They’re fiercely independent. They’re in control. They’re stubborn. They’re difficult. They’re complicated. They are my mothers and I have five.

I’m still looking for one though. I’m looking for the one that will love me without judgments, that will be there for me, that will hold me and help me when I’m in need.

The five I have, I love. They love me too, or so I think. They range in age from fifty-five to one-hundred-and-one. One is dead. One has dementia. One has fame and fortune. One is married to my father. And one can’t stop harping on my weight.

They are all collectors.

Daphne collects books and medication.

Joy collects authors and expensive things.

Wanda collects all things black-and-white, hearts, day-of-the-dead artifacts, dishes, towels, and, to some degree, alcohol. She even collected names: Mary Janet Hansen, Mary Kutila, Mary Brod, and lastly Wanda Westcoast. She is the one with dementia. She is my original mother, my first mother, the one who (along with my father) conceived me.
Adele, my paternal grandmother, collects things from the streets of New York City. She looks in dumpsters behind thrift-stores and takes things even they don’t want. She’ll take cushions off of thrown-out couches, and cut leather from them too. She picks up shoes, lamps, furniture, books, toasters, clothes, and anything else that she feels still has value. According to her, most things have at least some value, and even more after they are cleaned or repaired. She has found things in the trash that she returns to the original store for credit. She never seems to spend the credits though. A few years ago she offered me a $75 store credit, it was a paper slip dated 1996. Her house is not over-flowing though, but if you need something – like a bit of Velcro, some pillow-stuffing, a greeting card, or a vacuum – she probably has it and then some. She’d rather get rid of the things, than keep them. She opened two thrift stores at two different times when she was eighty-something. She sold the first for money, and closed the second because she needed to recover from heart surgery. She never had employees and her cash-register was a fanny-pack, which she found in the trash. Even though she’s one-hundred-and-one, if she could she’d open another thrift store. She still picks things up from the street to this day—she can’t resist. A few days ago she offered me golf shoes. I have never golfed.

As one friend says, “She can do whatever she wants,” and I would agree, but I long for the day she stops being so critical about everything, even her own amazingly cooked brisket. I long for the day she’ll want to make things easier for herself in every way possible, and there are many. I long for the day she no longer has to be in pain—emotional, physical, and historical—you name it and she suffers. From her toenails to her eyes, it’s all falling apart save her mind (that’s sharp and wicked). What I think is eating her up and killing her most of all, is her unresolved anger towards my Grandfather who was the only man she married and divorced, not once but twice. What breaks my heart most is that she also believes that she is now useless, a waste of space. And her heart is wounded because of the great disappointment she feels at not yet having great
grandchildren. Sadly (and with disbelief for she just keeps chugging along) these days might all come soon, she is, after all, one-hundred-and-one.

I hardly know where to begin with Hazel and all the things she collected. She doesn’t any longer though. Well, who really knows? She’s dead, as of December 2009, and I along with other family members were left picking up her pieces—her pieces of jewelry, dishes, fabric, and all the things of hers that had broken. I’m sorting through silverware, scarves, glasses, towels, sheets, blankets, handbags, clothing, papers, posters, prints, greeting-cards, candles, scissors, matches, and folk-art from Japan, China, Mexico, Africa, Europe and the Americas. She never had just one of anything. Never. She even collected cats and dogs in all forms including living. One short golden-lab-houndish-husky dog was named “Spants” by my father because he was “made” of spare parts. Oh parts…yes, parts. There were also parts of things long ago broken. She held onto these parts, all of them, with plans to do repairs. She never could dispose of anything – even those itty bitty teeny tiny broken parts. She loved things and she never let go.

Hazel was my Godmother and namesake. She was my mother Wanda’s teacher. They collected identical things. They loved patterns and colors and art. They stopped talking for over fifteen years. They only began speaking again after my mother forgot she was mad at Hazel. She forgot because of dementia. Their final conversations were about little things. My mom would ask what day it was and commented frequently on how nice many of the things were in Hazel’s house. Over the last ten years, my mother was always the one who would make the short walk (if someone led her) to Hazel’s house for visits, because Hazel rarely left her house during the last fifteen years of her life. Sadly, she died in a nursing home.

My father and I had been trying to figure out how to make it possible for her to...
live in her own house for the remainder of her years. We didn’t solve that problem soon enough though. Hazel’s house went into foreclosure. My sister has managed to keep it in the family. It’s the one house I’ve known my whole life. It’s a beautiful but dilapidated house. It needs so much work, from updating the old knob-and-tube wiring to cutting down trees that are growing into the roof. There are two of the city’s finest Black Locust tree specimens in the front of the house, at least that’s what the tree guy told us when Hazel paid him to save the trees. I hope they are never cut down. I also hope that the interior paint is never altered, because Hazel did most of it by hand. There are gold, purple, black, and white triangles of two different sizes in the entry way, up the stairs, and on one wall in the living/dining room; there are random shapes of varying colors formed into patterns on another wall in the living/dining room; every edge of the molding on the doors and windows are painted in different colors; and, one wall in the upstairs bathroom is painted with a geometric four-colored pattern. There used to be a giant bill-board sign pasted onto the entire area of one of the bedroom walls; unfortunately, a tenant painted over it without asking. I don’t know if Hazel ever knew about this; it made me so angry when I discovered the freshly painted boring white wall. I’m sure Hazel would have been furious over the loss and quite possibly could have ended the friendship. At one time that had been my room. The full length of the stairs used to have striped carpet runners; I would want to replace them with similarly striped carpet runners in order to keep the integrity of Hazel’s vision for her house. The three bedroom house with a full basement and detached garage is beyond unique and it contained most of Hazel’s collections. She did, however, also need a giant storage unit to contain the overflow of her things.

Daphne and Joy are my stepmothers. Daphne was the first and Joy is the current. I love them both, but my relationships with them, as all, are complex. I wanted them each to fulfill the role my mother never could; they can’t do that though. I will forever have this hole. The law defines a stepparent as a “legal
stranger.” I can’t really fathom what that means. I hate the term stepmother and I’ve begun to consider calling them bonus-moms.

Daphne and Joy love words and books. The words and books are literally endless. Daphne has books in her mind yet to be written (some of which are already in contract and for which she has been paid). Joy has books yet to be discovered. Writing and books are their professions. They are wicked smart. They are through-and-through, dyed-in-the-wool, New Yorkers. I love and respect them, but at times I had wished the bonuses were only temporary—for fleeting moments or, at times, even years. Although, without them I would not be who I am today, therefore they’re integral to my formation and who I am now.

My paternal grandmother, Adele, celebrated her one-hundredth birthday on June 21st, 2010. Of course she received gifts even though she didn’t want them, and all but one she hated. She says she doesn’t need anything. She says that everything is too expensive. She says she doesn’t want you to spend money on her. Five of the gifts were cards with one-hundred dollars in each of them; she hated these the most.

All of these women are incredible: incredibly smart, incredibly talented, incredibly achieved, incredibly loved, and incredibly complex. They helped form who I am today. I can’t imagine my life without any of them. They are my mothers, and I have five.

Addendum to My Mothers:
The story of my fathers, of which there are only two (or perhaps three if I am to include my paternal grandfather, who is a story unto himself), is just as colorful and complex. It is, after all, due to my original father that I have all these mothers in the first place.
Appendix A: Visuals
MY FAMILY

My mother: Wanda Westcoast

Membership meeting at Womanspace chaired by Wanda Westcoast (Fall 1972)
Figure 2. Slide 2
My mother working in our studio early 1970s, Venice Beach, CA
Figure 4. Slide 4
MY FAMILY


My father: Michael Brod
My family

**Whoever Emerges** (2009) Obituaries, stone, wood, Astroturf, military jacket, found objects & clay

My father: Michael Brod
At 101 years old, she's still kicking, gathering things off the street, guilt-tripping & cooking a damn good dinner!
Figure 8. Slide 8
MY FAMILY / MY HOMES

My godmother: Hazel Koenig in Seattle, WA

Hazel (1924-2009) was an Animal Lover, Artist, Collector, Educator, Democratic Activist, Traveler & Writer
Figure 10. Slide 10
Figure 14. Slide 14
Appendix B: The Thesis

I tend to ask a lot of questions (though some people would call that an understatement). When I began (the first quarter I got to OSU) thinking about this written requirement for earning my Master of Fine Arts degree I started in with the questions. I asked certain faculty what they thought a written thesis was supposed to be and how to go about writing one. I’m a visual artist and that is how I think and create. This writing part is much more difficult for me. It puts me way into my head and words can be so limiting and unclear, or rather too specific and concrete. I don’t work this way. I need to be in motion, literal and figurative motion. I need to be making with my hands. The following list contains some of the responses I received (paraphrased of course) to my questions about the thesis. I have it read over and over before and during the writing of this thesis:

Use language to inhabit the work.

Thinking + Making + Writing = Thesis

Write with the same voice that you make the work. (Ann Hamilton)

Description unlocks content. Intention is less important. (Malcolm Cochran)

Students feel pressure to justify work rather than express it. (Michael Mercil)

Prologue, introduction, appendix – where does “My Mothers” fit into your thesis, if at all? Potential answer: What are the through lines? (Ann Bremner)
Appendix C: Research

Research is something I heard about on my first day as an OSU MFA Candidate, or at least I for sure heard it the first week and on many other occasions. I had no idea what that meant: Research (said with a capital “R”). What? Me? How? Where? Why?

I thought, “I just do what I do and I do it because it’s what I know and it means something to me. What that is I don’t know exactly, but I do gain knowledge. I am led somewhere.”

I’m still left with not knowing exactly what that means. I work from intuition (although I hate that word and believe it to be too passive). I do know now that going to thrift stores, junk shops, trash bins, and wandering the halls of most craft, hobby, and home improvement stores are part of my Research—crucial parts. I also know that organizing and rearranging the things in the space around me is essential to what I do. That part of my process helps me clear my mind so I can “see” things out of the corners. It also helps me literally see and learn of new connections between objects, which are the materials with which I create. My Research is all around me. Research can be experiment and exploration, learning about something, traveling to see something, making, looking, fumbling, talking, thinking, and just being.

Perhaps my Research can be summed up by saying it’s what I do when I self-reflect and simultaneously look outside of myself. For me, Research is being in life and being curious about the life I’m in.
Appendix D: Questions

These questions are ones I’ve accumulated over the time I have been at OSU working towards my MFA. I came by these questions either on my own, via conversations with my peers, in lectures, or during studio visits with faculty. I consider these prompts to help me understand what it is I do and why exactly.

**Why do I make things? What motives me?**
- I do not know.
- Because this is what I know.
- I don’t know where it will lead me.
- To get lost sometimes.
- To know where I’m going sometimes.
- Because I know some of the steps and others I know nothing about.
- To follow my instinct.
- To use up time.
- To hold onto time.
- To be immortal.
- To show I’m human.
- To make a mark. Some mark? Any mark? Big mark? Small mark?
- To stay connected to my family.
- To find family.
- To clear my mind and become present.
- To occupy my mind and my hands, otherwise my brain will run (me) amuck.
- To create order around me.
- To use up the things I collect.
Where does your motivation come from?

My motivation for working comes from my desire to explore and experiment and play. I am motivated to piece things together as this helps me understand what it is I think about. I am motivated by having others look at my work. I am motivated by looking at others’ work and working methods. I’m motivated by color, texture, thought, feelings, and emotion. I am motivated by the notion that one day I won’t be here.

My inspiration comes from the everyday absurd – from seeing one person walk ten dogs to coming across what one person has deemed as trash. I am inspired by my family and their connection to art. I am inspired by my one-hundred-and-one year old grandmother who is still fiercely independent. My Godmother, whom I am partly named after, is a source of inspiration because of her years of collecting and creating, her blending of patterns and attention to details. I am
inspired by the stars which are so ethereal and yet real. I am inspired by science from new discoveries to simple mechanics. Creating a more thoughtful and compassionate world inspires me.

My artistic sources, (in no particular order and equally as vast) include:

Louise Bourgeois  
Laurie Anderson  
Sophie Calle  
Henry Darger  
Ed & Nancy Kienholz  
Robert Rauschenberg  
Tehching (Sam) Hsieh  
Jean Michel Basquiat  
Doug Jeck  
Latino Folk Artists  
Mimes  
Maria Montessori  
Alice Neel  
Vivian Paley  
My Peers  
Bruce Nauman  
Tony Oursler  
Hans Bellmer

What are my points of entry? What are the triggering experiences?

Figure 16. Point of Entry, Thrift Store Art
My points of entry are through my experiences with objects and through my desire to experiment. Right now in my life, if we count eighteen years and below childhood, I have lived half of my life as a child and half as an adult. Up until now, I would claim that most of my work revolved around childhood themes and the domestic because that is where most of my life experiences had been lived as a child. Now though, I think my entry points are inquisitiveness and my interest in claiming space, or more accurately leaving my handling of life visible.

I don’t think I’ve spent much time rationalizing my art making. Coming from a family of artists, I wasn’t questioned or challenged to figure something else out for a career. Making was just part of living. Every home I grew up in had space for creating. Every home had a studio and my toys included art supplies and collections of things (wood scraps, old magazines, boxes, paper, etc,) all at my disposal with which to play and create.

Everything we did as a family revolved around art in some way. Both my parents were professors of art and I had to go to many of their school functions including: art openings, lectures, school trips abroad, and even parties. I remember spending hours at openings, running around with the other children present. We would play amongst the art. We would run around the food tables, snatching bits of things here and there. We would ask over and over again, “Is it time to go yet?” We would speak with and be adored by their students. We would sit quietly in the back of lecture halls waiting, and usually drawing, until a class would end so we could leave. We went to Europe for a summer when I was about four or five with a group of my mother’s students. Germano Celant, who became a close family friend after my mother extended one of his first invitations to come to Los Angeles as a visiting scholar, took the group of us places. My mother bought my sister and me wooden clogs and French berets. We ran around art and art museums in Europe too.
I think it is only now, in graduate school, that I feel the pressure to rationalize my making.

**What are your primary issues?**
Primary issues include: narrative, childhood themes, domesticity, finding and playing with/on the “fine lines” between two worlds, issues, ideas, thoughts, opposites, etc.

**Are your memories a part of what you do?**
Most certainly. My experiences are the stuff my life is made up of and are then converted into my memories. My memories infiltrate my everyday doings, therefore I work indirectly with my memories thus they effect and affect the things I touch and make. My memories have shaped my life. My memories color what and how I see the world. Memories set the tone for how I work and why, they are what alter my present decisions and future ones whether I’m aware of how or not.

**In what ways do you translate the world in your art?**
“Translation is like kissing through a veil.” –Unknown

I take in the world through experience, observation, reading, writing, listening, taking classes, and communicating. Then stuff, ideas, images, thoughts, and words roll about in my head, sometimes coming out in discussions with others. Afterward I handle materials, I organize and reorganize, I catalog in groupings, I create displays, I examine what I have done, and then I make decisions. I eventually stop at a certain point dependent on my thinking and, perhaps at times, my mood. I am always evolving. When something stands out subtly, or
blaringly direct, I tend to take note.

Is art life or life art? Or neither? Does one have to exist in order for the other to be more meaningful?

**What materials do you use?**
I use what is necessary for me to make what it is I want to make. I am not timid when it comes to experimenting with materials.

My endless questions are materials.

**How do I make things? What are my processes, methods, and techniques?**
My process certainly includes repetition. I work in an obsessive manner and duplicate actions whether they be placing and working with clay coil upon coil, or cutting and applying surface material. I am interested in working with image upon image and image from image utilizing copies of an original or the original manipulated and reprinted.

I “play” and “experiment” in my studio. I take an object and manipulate it through and additive or rearranging process. I manipulate materials. I don’t follow “rules” or stay within the boundaries. I cross-contaminate and infiltrate. I look, see, and follow my desires. I start from a place of curiosity.

**Conceit of an object:**
A cup losing its place as a cup. When an object is visible but doesn’t or can’t meet its intended function is that conceit? Not paying attention to a chair while sitting in it, is that conceit of the chair?
Do I deny an object its reason for existing? Do I enhance an object through transformation and alteration? Does an object lose its genuineness?

As a product of a long line of collectors, objects were always around me. Not single objects, but rather multiples. In my childhood homes the objects all around were always accessible; nothing was off limits to the children. My mother Wanda believed that there was no substitute for the real thing (e.g. our toy tea sets were real tea sets, our art supplies quality ones, our dollhouses handmade, etc.) and we explored with abandon. Most objects in our homes (and even those of our family friends) came with stories of how they were acquired, where they were purchased, why they were loved, and who or what made them. Nothing was without history.

**How does process pertain to my content and interests?**

![Figure 17. Line Upon Line](image)

Process is directly related to my content and interests. I examine the world through a process of curiosity and questioning. My interests always leave me questioning and questioning even more. I work through ideas and come to conclusions through process. A piece isn’t fully known until I work on it, I must go through the process of asking questions and actually making to be able to make decisions.
Obsessiveness and working in an obsessive manner are part of the content. The quality of obsession is important in that my work has elements of being more about the maker than the result. I am interested in leading one to question things about the maker. And to be clear, the maker doesn’t necessarily mean me. I am a conduit of action, often times familiar action. Obsessiveness depicts action that has gone on for an extended time, or even a bit too long. My work speaks about compulsiveness, within which one can find care. My interests in obsession and compulsion drive the nature of my processes, bringing my interests, content and actions full-circle.

Why a specific format for particular content?

Hmmm…what about content following format?

How does my work look? Why does it look that way?

Figure 18. Reconstructing Childhood (2009)
Everything I touch is a little bit off or dangerous. Things are not the originals; rather they are a manipulated and/or altered form. I make a thing from a thing. I make things of things. There is precision with strange materials.

Adjectives others have used to describe my work, most of which I agree with:

- sardonic
- irreverent
- disdainful
- humorous
- reclaimed
- manipulate
- quirky
- eclectic
- perverse
- diverse
- playful
- unexpected
- creepy
- cuddly
- funny
- beautiful
- heart-breaking
- obsessive
- recontextualized
- transformative
- macabre
- morose
- disturbing

Where do I place my work?


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I place my work in the everyday. Occasionally something is made to be site specific, but I am very careful to not over label things as site specific. This term is so overused. I also struggle with putting work on a pedestal, and even more so when putting it behind or under glass. I do not like this level of apartness. It separates the work from the viewer and even from me. Museums and galleries bring in a level of display that takes away from my work – it becomes less human. I do want to see my work in those venues, because I am making work to be seen. Occasionally I want to make work that is happened upon, found in unexpected places. I like to make people pause; I like to get into ones routine in a roundabout way. I do not get much out of making work only for myself. It certainly is a process I enjoy and need to do, but a piece isn’t finished until it is seen by others. I am someone who wants to comment and reflect on contemporary culture. I want to influence others to think, not necessarily change their minds, but rather just to take pause and to wonder.

**How do I make sense of the varied veins I work in?**

“It’s as if you’re having a group show with yourself” –Rebecca Harvey

The above quote, which was spoken during a critique in my third quarter, calms my mind when I fear I’m working in too many different ways. The statement affirms that there are connections throughout my diverse bodies of work. I do have my hands and my mind in many different places in a given period of time. When I take the time to stand back and examine what I have done, I find similar and related themes across the series on which I had been working. I have found that writing about the work I make helps me to see the connections.

**Collections and What Defines Them:**

In my opinion a collection must contain more than two things grouped together
based on some predetermined element(s). A collection can contain anything from natural or manmade wonders or oddities to cultural treasures from early history up to the hot-out-of-the-factory. Something mass produced either by hand in small quantity or on a great scale coming out of industry. A collection can be housed anywhere from dusty old boxes in a person’s basement to protected under climate and light controlled cases in a great museum. Some collections are not discovered until a person dies, while some collections form naturally under particular conditions.

Malcolm Cochran stated that he sees me making collections rather than collecting. This illuminated something for me. I agree as it pertains to my art, however I can’t deny that I also collect in my other, non-art making life (if there is such a thing for an artist).

Morgues collect bodies and evidence. Cemeteries collect dead people and tears.

**Who collects?**

I imagine anyone can create a collection, and not only humans but other creatures as well. I bet even some collections are inadvertently created, without the doer intending to develop one. I think one even can create a collection of intangible things such as an athlete collecting wins, or a student acquiring honors. Or serial killers collecting victims. A few eccentric and unique collectors I admire, beyond family members, include: the Collyer Brothers, the Grey Garden ladies, and Pablo Neruda.

**Why are collections important?**

For a vast many reasons; I suspect endless really. They help define and describe a culture either in the past or a new one in the future. Reasons to collect include:
• to preserve
• to catalog
• to fetish-ize
• to honor
• to maintain
• to contain
• to educate
• to display
• to safe guard
• to accumulate
• to represent
• to focus attention to
• to fill a “hole”
• to memorialize
• to draw attention to

What’s the difference between a collector and a hoarder?
Does this have to do with someone else labeling a person? Does it have to do with value? Does it have to do with intent?

A collector is a title of pride, where hoarder is a label of psychological problems.

What is the difference between a collector and a curator?
I fancy myself both, so how are the two roles different? When I collect I gather, when I curate I organize and group that which I have collected.

Why do I collect?
I collect because I like objects. I collect because I find things intriguing. I collect to embellish my environment. I collect because I must have a collecting gene that has been passed along to me through my family. I collect because multiples help me understand a thing. I collect to find differences. I collect because I like to go to thrift stores. I collect, because I can’t not collect.

A deep and intimate connection to objects and things began for me at an early age. Beginning with my mother and her hunt for all things black and white checkered or striped (i.e. towels, plates, shoes, eyeglasses, coffee mugs, carpets, toothbrushes, candy, wrapping paper, sheet sets, etc.). My father and
his 40+ year focus in his art on the form and shape of a dome. My older sister and her deep connection to books and reading. My grandmother’s obsession with turning trash into treasures and making a dollar from nothing. My first stepmother’s obsession with depression. My younger sister’s obsession with television. And of course, all my own obsessions including the two that are commented on the most: my question asking and my obsession with order and organizing.

I don’t take any objects for granted.

I approach all objects as material.

Most people who have come to my studio have commented on how much stuff I have. Visitors also noted how cozy and comfortable my space was and that it seemed as if I had been there for much longer than I had been. My collections were a point of great discussion and questioning during my first quarter critique. Talk of what I collected preempted any discussion about work that I had up for display. This is when I began to think about what was important to me about collecting and why. The thought process didn’t go far as I got stumped by once again acknowledging that I was not only collecting things but also making things. Stuff—actual objects—and the amassing of things overwhelmed me. Why would I want more things? Why would I want to make more things? What becomes of things I make? Who would want these things?

Laura Lisbon brought up the point during one of our meetings that I’ve collected mothers. She came to this notion after I told her the story of the essay I wrote, My Mothers, which is my thesis. In one regard I suspect this is true, however did I really collect them or were they more-or-less “given” or presented to me? There is no doubt about it, I do seek out mothers.
Where does value reside?
Some argue that value is in the materials a work is made of (such as marble, bronze, etc.), others argue it's in the concept, content, or idea. Most of my materials are found in thrift stores and the trash so does that make them have little value?

An idea where I question value is in a yet to be realized piece I want to make that involves thrift stores. My idea is to photograph an item where I find it in a thrift store, purchase it, alter it or create something with it, then return it to the store by merely placing it back on the shelf where I originally found it with either its original price or a marked-up or discounted price, then re-photograph. Then leave it for whoever happens upon it and desires to purchase the item.

What has changed for me through graduate school?
I take the time to reflect on work I have created. I have learned to observe my own work more closely. I have come closer to understanding why I make art. I have come to understand I am an artist, even though that title isn’t always easy to define. I have come to understand that I have a unique way of looking at and taking in the world.
I work with common, domestic materials (tape, paper, fabric, house paint, fingernail polish, etc.), and with discarded items such as photographs, books, clothing, and manufactured objects. I look for and collect the detritus and refuse of anonymous people’s lives to use as raw material. I see these items as undesirables waiting for a fresh place to exist. Using these materials provides a layer of history and narrative that I react to, with, or against. Viewers are provided with an entryway into the work through their own connection to and experience with the found parts. The existing objects bring in trace evidence of another person, time, or experience. The history of an object or an anonymous person’s experience is co-opted for a new purpose, yet it isn’t completely taken over. I rescue history and memories to reconfigure them and to make them my own. I reconfigure the found objects and revive them with a new sense of purpose and context. In *Trophy Heads I, II, and III*, I used salvaged fur coats, which I found in an alley. No longer wearable, the fur coats were reworked into discernable animal forms. By combining new and old I attempt to bridge the gap from past to present, from real to imagined, and from the individual to the communal. Through the trophy heads I have brought life back to the coats. The simple, moribund, and unpretentious characteristics of the materials I use take my work away from preciousness and align it within the everyday realm. Placed in the milieu of the everyday, the works become increasingly accessible.

Another material I use quite often is clay, because of clay’s intrinsic quality of nothingness and its ability to replicate. Clay exists as nothing more than earth until it is intentionally formed. It is a material that is messy and humbling. It has
been used for thousands of years to create domestic and spiritual objects. This fact makes ceramics very accessible to people on both visceral and personal levels. I tap into this aspect further by creating representational forms that people can identify and label, and perhaps discover and/or uncover a personal relationship with the artwork. Creating an immediate connection is one of the reasons I use domestic and animal forms. I want to draw people in using images and objects that are recognizable, and which provide an “entryway” to begin to think about the work.

My art is improvisational and narrative. This is manifest in my work through elements of playfulness, whimsy, darkness, the grotesque, and a sense of history and purpose. These qualities intermingle, creating a push and pull. Severed heads and altered objects are things that feature prominently in my work. It is never quite clear if I have enhanced or hindered the subject, therefore my work balances between divergent qualities. Working with my hands to form clay connects to the child-like behavior of imaginative play. Rather than start from preliminary two-dimensional drawings, I direct my ideas and impulses immediately into the clay. My work combines both conscious and subconscious impulses. I have intention and ideas for pieces and I begin there, however, it is not until a work is finished that I can see, or someone else points out, that my deeply held personal beliefs are now exposed. Often I will have an image in mind of where I want to go, but I work in a non-scripted way. I experiment with materials and processes and often don’t follow the “rules” in order to be led without thinking. I work this way to still my mind, to stop my conscious questioning, and to be present.

I embellish some of my work with lush surface treatments. I use repetition and heavily layered applications of surface materials to draw out obsessive, friction-filled, and unsettled feelings. The juxtaposition of the simplicity of the materials and objects, with the complexity of content and surface, generates tension in the
work that parallels angst-riddled lives punctuated with moments of composure and harmony. I strive to create work that people will recognize, but I lay a heavier hand down and disrupt the viewer’s relationships with and their ideas about the familiar. My work interrupts the predictable.

I explore concepts of self-proclaimed and imposed identity, informed and fictionalized memory, and cataloguing via collecting and collections in several different veins. I examine and manipulate identity using animal, human, and childhood forms within the framework of dreams, fantasy, wonder, and loss. My work includes reworking domestic objects and found images, drawing on photographs, both my own and found images, and creating animal trophy heads. Themes of alteration, fragmentation, manipulation, transformation, coercion, compulsiveness, and creating the absurd cross between and inform each of these different series. My work suggests that the violence and vulnerability in our culture is not out in some imagined war zone, but rather at the very heart of our domestic lives’ chaos and disorder. I look at, examine, and reflect upon that which surrounds me and encroaches into my existence, and then rework and re-present my explorations and findings to give me a better understanding of our psyches at large.

I began my artistic explorations in graduate school in the two-dimensional realm. This was not predetermined; it merely came about out of my desire to catalog and organize my studio. I took photographs, printed the images, and overlaid them with drawing. The original images are photographs of the negative space inside plaster molds. What results is the illusion of a positive form created by light. Once the image is printed I draw over and throughout the image. In my *Mold Portraits* the lines I draw articulate a network. The lines wrap and protect the space, while they also penetrate and permeate space. Out of incompleteness I have created wholeness. Concealment plays a crucial role and in these images
the information is much more detailed. The lines are the residue of examination and manipulation. The lines define an object that is not present in the original mold. The lines make note of time passing. The original is still frozen but it clearly went on a journey.


A separate but materially related series of pieces consist of found images that I rework through drawing. I add to photographs to create absence. By blocking out and covering up parts of the original images I bring in more information while also taking away content through concealment. The originals are no longer completely legible and the remaining information illuminates an exquisite yet not fully readable picture, leaving only a partial story. The moments in time, originally captured through the photographs, are now, through masking and censorship, splintered remnants devoid of the original complete information. An alteration of
memory and history and the development of secrets is the result. I have added scale to the original images by scanning the photographs with my drawings and printing the images in larger sizes. The original altered photographs and the blown up versions become two separate pieces. The small ones, where the hand marking is visible, are intimate and speak of personal experience. The larger prints, in which my drawing becomes uniform and wed to the original image through the printing process, are extensions of the originals that result in monumental images of permanence.

Figure 23. *Home* (2010)

In these photogenic drawings I rework the images in an attempt to still my mind. I am drawn into the space that is a void, where there is stillness. I examine it in order to understand, follow, and “read” the space and the space between the
parts within the image, as if I’m trying to locate the space and put myself in it. I explore a space that has been made flat by traveling with my hand in literal space leaving marks of my path. I explore the space between one form and another, and from one side to the other. I am “looking” for meaning in the flattened space, and for meaning in the picture of an actual moment in time. I use a marker to take apart and decipher what the image represents and what is the image itself.

The actual physical tangible photograph is itself an object to be examined. I explore photographs that arouse emotion through the images they present, through the gestures expressed, via the memories each contain, and/or the nostalgia they evoke. I look for the non-verbal communication within a photograph through a simple nod, expression, ambiance, or setting that alludes to thought and anticipation of action. These images are literal voids that are locked into place and frozen in time.

When I would tire of drawing lines, I interspersed folding the pages of books origami style to create a series of pieces titled, *Quieting the Mind*. Fold, flip, repeat. Fold, flip, repeat. I didn’t have to think much. I just had to do, and then keep doing. The books were also portable (at least in the beginning) and I didn’t think much of them except that they quieted my mind. I did, however, realize that I had seen something similar and I began to fret over being a “copy cat.” My professor, Malcolm Cochran, reminded me that at times we learn by copying, he encouraged me to keep going. So I did. Many of the things I did at that time were acts of repetition.
Simultaneously to starting the Mold Portraits, I had an idea for something I wanted to create using stuffed toy animals. I spent time in thrift stores gathering up animals that I would then “skin”. I worked at this with the intention of installing the “carcasses” separated from their fluffy innards in a display case. I wanted them out of reach, protected and yet at the same time to have a spectator feel to them, somewhat with an old surgery observation room quality. The title, Fluff Educated, came to mind as I was developing the idea. The site specific aspect of this piece came by displaying the work in an educational institution. Exhibiting the piece in the building I was being educated in was important.

From this piece—the title actually—came the idea for the following piece, Educating Fluff. In this work, which was displayed in the case next to Fluff Educated, I placed an old small wood and metal child’s school chair alongside a small cheap plastic matte gold columnar pedestal about four inches tall with a
plastic tub of *Fluff* (the sugary sweet marshmallow spread) on top. The chair was turned three-quarters while the tub of *Fluff* was placed head-on to the viewer. I felt very uncertain about this piece as it was nothing more than three items I acquired and placed together behind glass in full view of anyone walking down the hallway of a building on the main campus of the country’s biggest university. After installing the works and hanging the title cards I realized I was directly commenting on my experience thus far in graduate school. About nine weeks into what is considered a “Terminal Degree” in the arts, there I was questioning its value and commenting on my experience to date.

For the winter quarter *2011 MFA Recent Arrivals* exhibition I had several ideas for pieces but none felt quite representative of my thinking and way of making. I finally settled on creating a display that I wanted placed on a pedestal and under a vitrine of a collection of objects I had acquired since my arrival in Columbus. Not all things made it into this collection. The following statement was displayed with the piece:

“Nothing that I have made here is finished.
(Except what’s in the cases by the woodshop.)
It has all been experiments thus far.
These are things I now own.
They all have a future,
that is yet to be.
Determined.
I am.”

After this piece, I started to think of the objects as a whole unit. I began to think of groups of objects and the objects themselves being the work rather than part of the work that I would manipulate.
I started with grouping manufactured unrelated objects, the mundane remnants of people’s interests. I unified disparate objects into indefinable groupings by applying an overlay of repetitive drawn marks. For one grouping I applied green lines that were fired onto manufactured pre-existing ceramic objects. On another group I painted the objects white and then applied black dots over them. This group was placed on a sewn mat in reverse patterning—white dots on a black background. The largest collection contains furniture and objects that I have drawn purple lines over. Now, the various objects each have a designated place within which they exist. The overlay of repetitive marks leads to emphasizing the overall shapes of the objects rather than their individual differences. Through the patterned surfaces I obliterated some of the objects’ original content and camouflaged the individual pieces amongst themselves. These objects are now forced to interact more directly within their groupings. The objects are no longer connected by their “object-ness” instead the repetitive marks transcend each piece’s physical uniqueness. There is no rhyme or reason to the groupings other than my gathering the various elements and embellishing their surfaces. The collections beg to be cataloged and codified; they are the same but not the same. They disrupt and contradict conventional methods used to catalog the world.

The culmination of these pieces led to a site-specific installation made in and of the closet in a vacant and dilapidated house. *Scrim Incomplete*, filled an entire walk-in closet with purple striped objects and whose actual architecture (the floor, walls, shelves, drawer fronts, and window) were also striped. This is an elaboration of the striped object collections and includes furniture that is striped. The work no longer seems to allude to collection, rather now it speaks more of obsession and the passing of time.

Reworking domestic objects includes my manipulations of stuffed animals. The toys are dismembered, altered, and framed. They have all been loved a little bit too much. The grouping contains multiple bears with bits of each animal in more than one frame. One can look over the gathered “portraits” and make connections within the group. As a whole they represent a family. Are these portraits of a moment in time or are they preserved remnants of a game gone wrong? Either way, they are fractured and dislocated and touch upon the experience of a contemporary culture that is not whole.

When taking breaks from sewing, I returned to clay and began hand-building smaller than life size animal heads that would hang on the wall like animal hunters’ mounted trophies. I am interested in these as elements of pride, however odd and ridiculous they might be. Hunters keep the heads as trophies, amassing a collection of conquests. What is important here? The collection of heads or the power and dominance they represent? And what happened to all the childhood innocent images of animals one grows up with?

The animal heads, *Trophy Head I, II, and III* are covered in cut up old worn salvaged fur coats, applying patch-work like swatches of the fur on the animal heads. Using real animal fur brought a quality of living to the heads and touched upon a past. These trophy heads are worn down, and on the edge of existence. They are tender, innocent victims of manipulation and alteration. Held against
their will, and out of context, they are now placed like ritual objects on exhibit. The “animals” call out for attention from their disturbed states. The “animals” I create have not lived, but have life. They are representations of an animal world where the rules are different. As in a child’s game, the rules are never clear, rather they are defined as one plays, recreated, and changed on the spot. The result is angst and unease expressed by each *Trophy Head* and stirred up within the viewer. These “animals” have a story, but it isn’t defined, consistent, or even known. The “animal” heads are fractured and dislocated, like the reworked stuffed animals, and touch upon the experience of a contemporary culture that is not whole.

My “animal” heads and manipulated stuffed animals have a sense of false reality. They are not true to the original source, they never were. They are symbols and representations of innocence and I stand at the point where the innocent becomes the manipulated, feared, and controlled.

![Figure 27. Trophy Head I, II, and III (2010)](image)
In an opposite perspective to making new things, I also worked at deconstructing pre-existing objects. I turned to items found in homes that have equally tender and precious qualities like the animal genre with which I worked. I had amassed a large collection of doilies that I used for raw material. The doilies I had were not limited to a specific type; I had ones that were handmade, machine made, old, new, all white, some colored, and even plastic ones. I began the doily pieces by creating various arrangements of them pinned to my wall. Some were painted, and others were coated with wax.

Out of my experimentations I created my Doily Series. The first piece, Not Quite Right, Oh So Pretty, is a stack of round doilies ranging from large to small that have all been permanently sewn and connected through one opening on each doily. This stack of doilies sits atop a three-leg table made of found wood parts. This table is not level to the floor; rather it has a subtle angle. Another piece, Two-by-Two, On a Parallel Path, is made of all similar doilies that were cut from one bed-spread, sewn together in the same opening on each doily. This stack of doilies is attached to two parallel birch dowels that are affixed at one end to the top of a two-tiered end table. The weight of the doilies bends the dowels in a gentle arc.

Figures 28 and 29. Not Quite Right, Oh So Pretty and detail (2011)
These deconstructed doily pieces question elements of the domestic. They address the passing of time through their connection to a former way of life and through the actual time, marked by the repetition of actions, to make each doily. The self-contained decorative objects originally made to function are now rendered functionless. Their individuality is hidden or blended with all the others. Through destruction they have been elevated.

My final series was the work for the 2011 Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition at the Urban Arts Space. What I produced is not a culmination of all I had worked with and through over the preceding five quarters, rather it is a new series that adds to my vernacular.

The show consisted of ten pieces: three small trophy heads from my third quarter, two pieces whose clay parts were made at Belden in the summer of 2010 and finished for this exhibition, one doily piece from the OAL show that Sarah Rogers, our exhibition curator, wanted to have on view, and, four leggy “animal” creatures made of brick clay and mixed media.

One piece, *My Brick Road Ain’t Yellow*, stands about two feet tall on a section of a brick path comprised of twelve staggered individual bricks. This “animal”, made of brick clay, has a bear like face, yet it is unidentifiable and could be considered a bit like a dog and a pig. The exposed clay face is slightly abstracted without eyes, but it has a clearly defined snout. It “looks” blankly straight ahead. It has a determined and solemn way about its stance and gesture. The “animal” has rounded ears that stick up and appear soft like stuffed animal toys. Starting behind its head there is fur from an old, worn, salvaged fur coat. The “animal’s” body is widest at the hind end and finishes off in a short, downward directed tail with an exposed seam from the fur coat. It ranges in color from dark brown and red to a lighter grey undercoat. There are several bald patches where only leather shows through. Other areas have scruffy jagged cut fur worn down and
close to the original pelt. The fur continues down the legs in an uneven shape leaving bare the transition material (wood putty) that connects the clay to its wooden legs. The underside is without fur and has remnants of creamy white drips from the putty. One of the legs tapers to an extended nub and is about six inches shy of the ground. Although it is only held up by three worn wooden rectangular legs, it does appear to stand stable and faces forward. These legs could be attachments, a sort of prosthetic, or perhaps even a mutation. The legs are cut off squarely and there are no defined feet. The gesture of his legs shows him in a slow forward motion. This “animal” is solidly built and substantial; although diminutive in scale it “claims” space.

Figure 30. *My Brick Road Ain’t Yellow* (2011)

*My Brick Road Ain’t Yellow* wears a cloak of sadness, yet he has not been
defeated. His gait is unique. I imagine a gimpiness to him rather than the hop-thrust-action of a three-legged dog. There is an ever-so-slight tilt to his head that could be the result of his strategy of walking. He’s quiet, still, and stealth like. He’s a survivor. A survivor of what, is unknown. His story is not clear. He may have just barely survived life or perhaps his worn down nature came from having been loved too much. Or is its humility a result of having loved to the point of self-destruction? *My Brick Road Ain’t Yellow* is a physical manifestation of an emotional state.

Similar in quality and emotion to *My Brick Road Ain’t Yellow*, is, *Bah Bah Black Sheep*. In this piece a sheep-like creature stands on four legs atop a table that has no true or clear origin. It is made of white wood pieced together from found painted plywood and several used white banister spindles. Three of its four legs extend above the table top to form what look like bed or fence posts. The legs of this “animal” are made of the same used white banister spindles as the legs of the table on which it stands. All but one of the legs touch the table top, the third is ever so slightly floating above this suggesting movement. The fur on this “animal” starts just behind the head and is made of four different types of used, whitish, stuffed animal fur. The fur is no longer plush, but worn, dirty, matted, and pieced together. The edge of the fur around the neck is held in place with a thick cream colored putty that resembles pus. It isn’t pleasant or repulsive. It just is. The red earthen color of the clay is exposed on the head. Over small raised points where eyes would be are downward streaks of white paint that seems to wipe out the eyes. The tail of this piece points out horizontally from the body’s back end. If you look close you will see that there is a patch of bare leather defining its hind end with a discernable anus. This piece is solidly built however its tall legs makes the “animal” appear precarious. *Bah, Bah Black Sheep* has a delicate and sensitive way about it.
Figure 31. *Bah Bah Black Sheep* (2011)
In *My Brick Road Ain't Yellow* and *Bah Bah Black Sheep* there is no deception of material content. What you see is what is there. There is a rough and immediate nature to the handling of the materials, and cohesion between the materials. The parts are unified to form an essence, a mood. Do the pieces draw the viewer in out of sympathy, or are they pushed away in fear? Do viewers empathize with the injured and desire to help, or does the distressed and handicapped nature of the pieces only make them gawk? These pieces embody the following qualities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distress</th>
<th>Dejection</th>
<th>Grief</th>
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<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
<td>Glumness</td>
<td>Anguish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain</td>
<td>Gloom</td>
<td>Tiresome</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sorrow</td>
<td>Desperation</td>
<td>Loved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Despair</td>
<td>Torture</td>
<td>Well worn</td>
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<td>Sadness</td>
<td>Misery</td>
<td>Well lived</td>
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<tr>
<td>Despondence</td>
<td>Woe</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
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Through all my work I try to find a way to understand what is around me in this world of oddities and awkwardness. I am fascinated and drawn to the bizarre and incongruous, which often involves a hidden story. In my art I attempt to raise questions about, and create conflicts in the regular order of life and the rational mind. I work to decipher and locate myself in the context of what surrounds me. I am intrigued with the imposition of rules and breaking those rules to find and define new boundaries.