A State in Which The Opposing Forces Are Not Equal And Don’t Cancel Out Each Other

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

In my thesis work, I analyze the effects that displacement and transitory circumstances of life have on one’s sense of home and belonging. My work grows from the tension between my preconceptions of home from my stable childhood and the transient reality of my adult life as an emigrant. The form of a vessel, synonymous with ideas of nourishment, containment, domesticity, and the body, is central to my work. I abstract memories of familiar forms from my Granny’s kitchen in Poland in clay or paper. The clay is pinched one fingertip at a time and the paper meticulously pieced together or manipulated in an intense process of remembering. The original function of the vessels is challenged and subverted by my formal decisions about scale, repetition, the use of materials and placement in space. They exist somewhere between the real and the imagined speaking of issues of fragmentation, loss of the center of gravity, re-defining, adaptation, and a simultaneous sense of strangeness and familiarity.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents for their continuous support.
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Chapter 1: Background

During the last ten years of my life I have lived in four different countries, in nine different houses, and with thirty-one different people. The idea of home as a permanent, stable entity that I had when I left Poland ten years ago has been in constant conflict with the reality of my adult life, causing me to question and reevaluate what the word “home” stands for. The physical and mental decentralization of the place of my being has complicated my idea of belonging and the sense of fragmentation, resulting from multiple simultaneous identities, has been a continuous element of my life and an inescapable subject in my work. Through the intimate process of hand building with clay, I deconstruct ideas I once took for granted to slowly piece them together in a new context.

Objects I associate with home became the visual reference for my work. My original focus was on the people who were synonymous for me with what home was and the physical distance between us. The body of work titled Closeness (2008) grew out of such “defect of distance” and utilized textile objects associated with those I love as extensions of closeness. At that stage I had been living “away from home” for four years and started realizing that I would not be going back anytime soon. While my focus had gradually shifted from specific persons to specific places and objects from
the domestic realm took place of the items of clothing, notions of closeness/ distance and presence/ absence have been recurring elements in my work.

I continued to explore those concepts in the piece titled *Becoming* (2009). It consisted of about forty ladles, all cast in clay from the same mold and then manipulated by hand. Six of the ladles had simple line drawings based on images from my past that served as a stream of consciousness of seemingly random childhood memories that for some reason stuck with me to create the frame of reference for who I was and a platform for belonging. The ladles in the installations opened and closed rhythmically and were a testament to my growing awareness of the continuous process of becoming, an awareness triggered by the reevaluation of the sense of belonging and home caused by the transient circumstances of my life at the time.

The object itself came from my granny’s kitchen. I grew up next door to her in a small village in Poland, where she lived most of her life and where she passed away about a year before I started working on the project. The notions of removal and displacement started becoming apparent in the work: the object of the ladle was removed from its natural environment of the kitchen and its original function was subverted to investigate the relationships we have with objects and their role in forming attachment to places; it spoke of my situation as an emigrant displaced from my familiar environment, culture, and people causing me to question concepts I had once taken for granted; it also referenced how my Granny’s passing away and her
absence caused my family to lose its center of gravity and challenged the idea of home and belonging on yet another level.

Two quotes that I keep coming back to are noteworthy. The first citation comes from John Berger’s book Berger on Drawing: “Art gives us ‘real metaphors,’ concrete instances of absent people and distant places [and] is therefore (...) the most fundamental reminder of one’s capacity to find what is lost and bring it back where we can – almost – touch it.”\(^1\) The second excerpt comes from Moira Vincentelli’s Women and Ceramics: Gendered Vessels and reads: “Objects hang before the eyes of imagination, continuously re-presenting ourselves to ourselves, and telling the stories of our lives in ways which would be impossible otherwise.”\(^2\) The heart of home has always been for me in the kitchen and it is the objects from that realm that I am drawn to. Simple, cheap utensils, strainers, pots and pans carrying the residue of decades of dinners made for the loved ones, are the objects I associate with my earliest memories of family life and home. They serve as “real metaphors…of absent people and distant places”. The building where my granny lived and where I grew up is still where it has always been, but that home is no longer there. The humble objects became an extension of the “oneiric home” that Gaston Bachelard’s talks about in Poetics of Space, the place that does not exist and that I forever long for. They are a comfort zone, a foundation built on feelings of protection and stability as well as an awkward mental cargo I lug around wherever I go.

\(^1\) Berger, J. Berger on Drawing
\(^2\) Vincentelli, M. Women and Ceramics: Gendered Vessel. 106
Chapter 2: Current Work

The contradicting feelings of permanence and transience, stability and change, belonging and displacement, have been at the core of my recent work. “A state in which the opposing forces are not equal and don’t cancel out each other” is the title of the central piece of my thesis exhibition.

![Image of five white clay vessels spilling from the wall across a corner of the gallery space. The smallest of the five forms hangs precariously on a wooden peg, while the remaining four are scattered, balancing on the grey concrete floor. They seem out of place, in transit, as if whoever was carrying them dropped them, one by one, or let them roll off of a truck on a bumpy road. Each individual vessel has a]

Fig. 1

The piece, consisting of five white clay vessels, spills from the wall across a corner of the gallery space. The smallest of the five forms hangs precariously on a wooden peg, while the remaining four are scattered, balancing on the grey concrete floor. They seem out of place, in transit, as if whoever was carrying them dropped them, one by one, or let them roll off of a truck on a bumpy road. Each individual vessel has a
circular pattern of holes inside it, most of them fragmentary, seemingly spilling out of the form, and all of them off-centered.

Fig. 2 & 3

The vocabulary of the forms is utilitarian: they are clay vessels, bringing to mind colanders, bowls, or cups, but they are at once familiar and strange. Their scale is too
big for their likely environment or to comfortably handle them, the existing handles are either too few or too small, the holes are displaced, not where they should be, and the surface is uneven, doughy and raw-looking, making them look fragile, as if they could crumble under touch. They suggest familiar objects yet confuse the senses and escape categorization.

The surface of the forms, as well as the patterns of holes, carry remnants of intimate contact, of time and attention, even obsession, and are an evidence of the manner of their making.

Fig. 4
The slow process of working with porcelain provided me with a space for meditation. One fingertip at a time, I reconstituted and pieced back together what I had absorbed and digested over the years. Rather than reconstruction, the process was one of translation in which the crispness of lines, functions, and meanings was lost. The ambiguous familiarity of the vessels makes them seem at the same time recreated and invented. They were made not with the intention of function but with the intention of a search for something. Though always in multiples, no two forms are ever the same. Each next one is a version of itself and yet another attempt at trying to pin down something that escapes definition.

The shift of the holes in the interiors of the forms suggests loss of a center of gravity, as if the circular patterns had nothing to revolve around, nothing to center them. They are spilling out of the bowls, freed from whatever might have been holding them but
also potentially lost when not contained. While the subject of the work might be ‘home,’ its content moves away from domesticity, asking questions about contemporary human condition.

These hard to pin down forms, lacking fixity and a place to belong, not only comment on the reality of my life but also empathize with the continuous displacement of unprecedented numbers of people. In her book, _Lure of the Local_, Lucy Lippard argues that “most of us are separated from organic geographical communities; even fewer can rely on blood ties.” ³ We live in created communities with people who are

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³ Lippard, L. _Lure of the Local_, 24
brought together either by similarities or formed through arbitrary means, such as location, workplace or school. Lippard goes on to say that “most of us live such fragmented lives and have so many minicommunities that no one knows us as a whole. The incomplete self longs for the fragments to be brought together.” If the 17th century marked the development of home in terms of comfort, centralized nuclear family life, and self-expression, as Witold Rybczynski shows in Home: a Short Story of an Idea, the 20th century brought its fragmentation and prevailing lack of permanence. After some three centuries of refining relatively stable, cherished loci of domesticity, most of us now move a lot, more or less willingly, sharing our lives between many places and with many people, who, likely, do not know each other.

The idea of home is comprised of innumerable various circumstances for various people and is constantly being negotiated. Consequently, more and more of us live in what Edward Said has called “a generalized condition of homelessness.” The lack of familiarity of the place and stability of home in time result in communities in which the sense of temporariness prevents development of lasting, meaningful bonds, not only with the place itself but also with the people we share that place with. What is perhaps the biggest difference between the human condition in the 20th and 21st centuries and the previous periods of our history, is that the house is no longer reliable as a lasting locus of home and the sense of belonging no longer relies on physical contact with others in a shared physical space.

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4 ibid., 25
5 Rybczynski, W. Home. A Short History of an Idea
6 Lippard, L. Lure of the Local, 37
In that context, domestic objects, like people, become homeless too. We try to carry them with us to each next temporary dwelling but end up gradually leaving them behind. In *The Meaning of Things. Domestic Symbols and The Self*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton argue that things are not merely a reflection of their owner’s personality but an integral part of the self. By leaving things behind we leave behind parts of self, experiencing loss and fragmentation. The objects that don’t fit in the nomadic life are those speaking of stability and permanence, of a settled locatedness. In that sense, the forms in “A state in which the opposing forces are not equal and don’t cancel out each other” are stories of the past and the future, of what was left behind and what we long for. They are fragile and uncertain, like our fleeting memories, yet persistent, even weighting us down, in their rootedness in a time and place that is not.

The clay forms were accompanied by a series of works on paper titled *Offset*. The large, off-white drawings have a three-dimensional quality and no pigment marks. While derived directly from the process of making the vessels, they do not seem derivative but rather add to the conversation when in proximity of the clay pieces. Not unlike the clay forms, the protruding circular textures, created with either wet clay rings put on the paper or by drawing on sheets of paper spread out on wet slabs of clay, are very tactile. Moreover, even though corresponding to the scale and patterns of the clay works and conceptually playing off similar ideas, they move away from the domestic object.

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They are abstracted, formally cut off of the emotionally loaded subject of home and freed from the potentially sentimental baggage of the charged domestic form. In that sense, they are to me a significant leap forward. The paper is pushed in or out, wrinkled, and coming off the wall. They too allude to touch, manipulation, time, and careful but straightforward handling. The parts of the drawings with no textures were glued to the wall, making the textured elements pop out even more and fixing the sheets to the architecture of the particular space. Like the patterns on the vessels, the marks of circles or rings on paper are off-centered and not contained on the sheets, suggesting fragmentation and displacement. There is a play of the positive versus the negative between the clay and the paper forms. Unlike the vessels, the drawings are neither perforated nor open and hollow. They are rather enclosing the space behind them, coming off of the wall surface, reminiscent of blisters. Despite the shift from
the representational qualities, through their membrane or skin-like, blistered surface as well as the scale, the paper forms relate to the body.

Because of that, as well as the evident play of contradicting notions of impermanence and permanence, displacement and fixity, they engage in the same discourse as the clay vessels, while remaining perhaps more open-ended, allowing room for continuation and expansion in new directions.
Chapter 3: Conclusion

My life continues to be transient. Once again I am moving to a new place not knowing where life will take me the following year. I am leaving behind objects, places, and people that have come to constitute my home over the last two years. I am experiencing a deep sense of loss and I can’t help mourning. Soon, however, new objects, places, and people will fill that void, providing new structures for belonging and a new home. Most likely I will have to leave those too. The strongest of the relationships I established in each of the places I have lived in will survive the physical distance. They will add to the emotional and mental cargo I have carried with me for the last ten years or so, further complicating ideas that once seemed so straightforward: home was in a specific place and I belonged there. Now home is more decentralized than ever, dispersed across several countries on two continents. My work continues to be fueled by the dynamics of permanence and temporariness, weighty connections to specific places and the necessity of movement. The interplay of my two-dimensional and three-dimensional work is becoming an exciting outlet for further investigation of the distress of continuous displacement. While still rooted in the domestic realm, the forms are starting to gain a more bodily dimension, inspiring new possibilities.
References


