

# DREAM SEQUINS

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts  
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by

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## INTRODUCTION

While I was in the mountains of Mexico last summer, I marveled at the altars to the Virgin Mary and Christ's Sacred Heart erected on virtually every street corner. The people who live in these small mountain communities deeply revere these alters even though the Virgins are plastic and the flowers are fake. These ordinary objects become sacred relics. James Elkins describes a similar experience in his book, *The Object Stares Back*. While in Italy he visited a church that housed a masterpiece of Western art and less than 20 feet away worshipers were praying to a glowing, plastic figurine of Jesus.

“On the afternoon I was there, the worshipers ignored the painting as completely as the tourists ignored the plastic doll. How can I begin to understand the people who would rather worship a novelty light? What do they see? And for my part, could I ever worship the painting?”<sup>1</sup>

I, like Elkins, had to acknowledge that the devout people of Mexico looked at the plastic altars with different eyes than I did. They saw with eyes that believed in miracles and through a cultural perspective that was completely different from my own. This moment was pivotal for me because it allowed me to consider the transcendent qualities of ordinary materials when placed in a context that attributes meaning to them. James Elkins goes on to describe the transformative act of looking, “And so looking has force: it tears, it is sharp, it is an acid. In the end, it corrodes the object and observer until they are lost in the field of vision.” As I imbue my own longings, beliefs, and secrets into the paintings that compose my thesis exhibition, I breathe life into objects intended for greedy consumption and speedy rejection.

I build the initial foundations of my paintings out of party favors, discarded

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1 Elkins, James. *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1997.

clothing, sequins, silk flowers, human hair, chicken bones, and whatever else I can get my hands on. I collect those objects and obsessively stitch them together into jam-packed assemblages that hang from the wall. I then coat the constructions with resin, syrup, and plastic, allowing those materials to further transform the paintings. Through this slow process of accumulation I create pieces that exist somewhere between painting, drawing and sculpture.

I am interested in making work that challenges those boundaries while exploring consumption, excess, and the strange relationship between attraction and repulsion. I am influenced by commercials from the 90s, *Toddlers in Tiarras*<sup>2</sup>, dollar stores, and county fairs. It is my hope that this work, with its oozing, fleshy surface and shiny, pointy bits of plastic, hair, and bone seduces viewers into feeling that they are looking at something they shouldn't.

## DEVELOPMENT

My academic and artistic development has led me down many different paths. As an undergraduate printmaker, I printed on fabric, cutting it and restitching it together. I was curious about the construction of fabric and have a insatiable thirst for learning new things which lead me to the textiles program here at Kent State. The program provided an opportunity to experiment with many different techniques and materials. I was seduced by sumptuous fibers and the inherent beauty of weaving and dyeing and the hundreds of possibilities that each process has to offer. My work progressed and I began incorporating found fabrics and quilt fragments in collaged wall pieces. While I was

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<sup>2</sup> *Toddlers in Tiarras* is a reality based television show produced by the Tahree Hunt company and can be viewed on TLC. The show follows the lives of young girls as they compete in beauty pageants throughout this great nation.



mesmerized by all that I was learning, I struggled to integrate these new processes into the work I was making. I continued to explore line, form, texture, and color in the small fabric collages and began to consider the language of painting as a context for my work. My eventual transition into the painting department allowed me to approach ideas in a way that was not confined to exploration in fiber and textiles. I am extremely grateful for the ways my work has been challenged and influenced by both departments though I feel confident that my thesis work is painting and seeing the work in that context is essential to reading its meaning.

Throughout my graduate school career I have been shaped by many different art historical influences and voices. Early in my time here I was exposed to Shelia Hicks, Eva Hesse, Judy Chicago, Magdalena Abakanowicz and others who deal with issues of the body and female identity in a poetic and powerful way. Their work challenged me to consider what being female and an artist meant and how that might influence my art making. Their fearlessness allowed me to explore subjects like sexuality and personal narrative in my thesis work that I may have otherwise neglected.

I was also very influenced by the Collage and Collage Effect course I took in the fall of 2011. Through that course I was exposed to mixed media artists who fall under the umbrella of painting, such as Kurt Schwitters and Richard Tuttle. The class enabled me to expand my understanding of painting that is not confined to paint on canvas. This allowed me the freedom to explore my natural inclination to combine many different materials in ways I might have never explored.

## PROCESS

The body of work in my thesis show is the product of slow accumulation. I build forms by piling objects and pouring layer upon layer of syrup and plastic on them. Before I begin construction, I gather hundreds of objects that vary in scale, surface, and material. Shinique Smith's monumental discarded clothing and object piles are a source of inspiration as I scour discount outlets, craft stores, party suppliers, and second hand shops on my quest for the perfect ingredients. I select objects that have potential to be deconstructed in a visually interesting way. I am drawn to shiny surfaces, bright plastics, and other things that the thirteen-year-old me would crave.

I also gather materials that would illicit a different response from my young self. I collect hair from my head and body, fingernails, chicken bones, and feathers. The juxtaposition of these objects and the other brightly colored, celebratory materials creates tension in work that fosters the push and pull of attraction and repulsion.

I begin the construction of the underlying form with a section of fabric cut at random. I stitch and gather the fabric, creating a form intuitively. I then stuff the forms with discarded pillow batting. The pillow batting itself is an essential ingredient because it is such an intimate object. A pillow contains skin cells, hairs, dreams and nightmares. Few things are such a constant companion. By taking that cherished object and disemboweling it, I impart vulnerability into the work. This intimate, fragile ground becomes the initial form I build onto, raiding my collection of trinkets, stitching and wrapping them until each element is secure.

Each piece in this show relies on the wall for structure, stability, and context. I approach the final stage of making with that relationship in mind. In the last stage of

production I introduce a coating of urethane plastic or corn syrup, tinted with either acrylic or oil paint. Through the coating, the pieces appear to be wet and shiny, like an eyeball or gooey fluids. Up until this point, I build the forms on my work table. In this stage I transfer the uncoated forms to the wall. When I apply color and texture, in the form of the syrup coating, to my built “canvases” this process really feels like painting. Sometimes I even use a brush.

As I make choices about the color, texture and amount of coating, I consider how all of the elements will work together to create a painting that is simultaneously alluring and grotesque. Petah Coyne's hauntingly beautiful wax covered chandeliers are a constant inspiration as I pour material on built forms. The coating also further binds the piece together, acting as a glue of sorts, solidifying and unifying the construction. Drips are preserved in a state of perpetual stasis, seemingly able to fall at any moment. The piece appears to ooze and drip in a seductively terrifying way.

Discovering a stable coating process has been a challenge. When I first developed this body of work, I used corn syrup to achieve the drips and a glossy, sticky surface. This worked very well until there was any moisture in the atmosphere. In a dry environment the corn syrup hardens and seems to cure. However, it remains in a state of flux and reconstitutes as soon as heat or moisture is introduced. This sensitivity to heat and moisture makes storing and shipping the work virtually impossible.

Initially, the sensory experience of smelling the sugar and the conceptual weight of a candy coating was extremely important. Corn syrup as a material interested me because it is such an ordinary ingredient, found in many of the foods we eat. I loved that I could handle it without fear of toxicity or harmful fumes. As time passed and the

pieces went through various states of viscosity and stickiness, it became very apparent that I would need to stabilize these elements. After much research and frustration it was clear that the corn syrup would simply need to be replaced if I wanted the pieces to last for more than a few months.

I was initially devastated that I could not use the sticky sweet syrup and experimented with many different synthetic materials hoping but doubting they would achieve the same results. I tried many things, from polyurethane to silicone calking, but it was not until I tried a two part pourable urethane plastic that I found the right solution to this dilemma. Through much experimentation I discovered that I could do so much more with a synthetic material than I could have ever done with the syrup. Corn syrup is always able to be reactivated and takes days to become relatively hard so the colors muddy and mix very quickly. The plastic is stable so I can pour layer upon layer of coating without fear of muddying the colors. The all important drips were preserved and it cured to a transparent glossy surface. It does not have the same smell that the syrup did but the visual effect is so much more compelling that at times they still seem to emit a sweet aroma. In the future I may experiment with adding essential oils to the plastic but for now I will continue to attempt to evoke a complete sensory experience through visual effect alone.

## MATERIAL

I have become a ravenous consumer. I stuff these pieces to the point of bursting. Each form is saturated with color and texture, creating a visual experience that lies somewhere between delight and disgust. Viewers are lulled into a false sense of security

as they are seduced by the glitter, the sparkle, and the shine of the plastic, only to discover tokens of consumption of a different kind. The paintings drip and ooze onto the floor. Seams are bursting, surfaces are covered in hair, bones and remains.

As I construct these organ-like pieces, I ruminate on skin folding over skin, of membranes stretched over bulbous innards which explode like a popped zit. Streamers, plastic cord, pillow guts, and trinkets refuse to submit as they pour out of confinement, like the stuffing of flesh into too-tight jeans. This bulimic overindulgence and eruption is emphasized by the candy-coated veneer that envelopes the pieces.

The materials I choose to exploit are essential in the reading of this work. Each element works together to create a piece that is greater than the sum of its parts. It is essential that the objects I use in my paintings are familiar to many people. In 1966, Lucy Lippard organized an exhibition called *Eccentric Abstraction* featuring work by artists who used non-traditional materials. In an essay of the same title written in 1971, she writes this about the importance of material.

“The materials used in eccentric abstraction are obviously of distinct importance. Unexpected surfaces separate the work still more radically from any sculptural context, and even if they are not supposed to be touched, they are supposed to evoke a sensuous response. If the surfaces are familiar to one's sense of touch, if one can tell by looking how touching them would feel, they are all the more effective.”<sup>3</sup>

## INSTALLATION

The installation of the show is an essential component of the execution. Because

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3 Lippard, Lucy. "Eccentric Abstraction." *Changing : Essays in Art Criticism*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971.

each piece is so packed with texture, color and information, it is imperative that I allow each piece plenty of wall space to breathe. Though I see each painting as an individual piece, certain pieces hung together create an interesting dialogue. I have chosen to hang the show accordingly, therefore some pieces are hung in clusters and some are given entire walls.

To protect the mystery of exactly how each piece is made, all hardware for hanging is concealed. This was a struggle for me to decide because when I make them I simply attach them to the wall with a wire or scrap of cloth. This allows me to change the orientation of the piece during construction and allows me to take them on and off the wall very quickly. This is not a permanent hanging solution so another had to be discovered. I end up embedding the hardware in a final plastic coating so it becomes a permanent fixture of the work.

## CONCLUSION

*Dream Sequins* is the product of experimentation and a myriad of experiences. Each component of the ideation, construction and presentation calls on countless memories, moments in time, and my own understanding of the world around me. I sought to create a show that is both personal and accessible to others, while experimenting with materials in a sensually provocative way.

Using a play on words for my title allows me to draw attention to the layers of meaning in my work. The title nods to the materials used in the construction of the pieces in the pillows and sequins and alludes to the process or sequence of making the work. It also acknowledges the occasional playful qualities of the pieces.

In this show I set out to make a body of work that displays the research and investigation that has marked my time in graduate school. Through widening my scope of material possibilities, filtered through my own narrative of experiences, I have created assemblages that speak to a culture inundated with stimulation of all kinds. Like the Mexican alters that influenced this work, these saturated assemblage are built flower by flower, bone by bone into little alters. These however, are alters to attraction and repulsion, drawing viewers in and revealing hidden mementos of consumption. It is my hope that viewing this work inspires questions about beauty and ugliness and compels a viewer to challenge his or her own ideas about what that means. As I continue to push the boundaries of my studio practice, I am seeking a language of making where there is room for the truth of both the beauty and the ugliness of life and perhaps room for a little humor as well.



**Figure 1.1** *Mega Moon Jump. Lunar Descent*, oil tinted urethane plastic on found objects, 18.5x8x8.5 inches, 2012



**Figure 1.2** *Mega Moon Jump. Lunar Descent*, (detail)





**Figure 2.1** *Rain Bones*, oil and enamel tinted urethane plastic on found objects, 40x22x11.5 inches. 2012



**Figure 2.2** *Rain Bones*, (detail)



**Figure 3.1** *Sponge Bath*, oil tinted urethane plastic on found objects, 16.5x12x7 inches, 2012



**Figure 3.2** *Sponge Bath*, (detail)





**Figure 4.1** *I Think I Broke Your Pearl Necklace*, oil tinted urethane plastic on found objects, 18.5x14x9 inches, 2012



**Figure 4.1** *I Think I Broke Your Pearl Necklace*, (detail)



**Figure 5.1** *Grave Jelly*, oil tinted urethane plastic on found objects, 24x13.5x7 inches, 2012



**Figure 5.2** *Grave Jelly*, (detail)

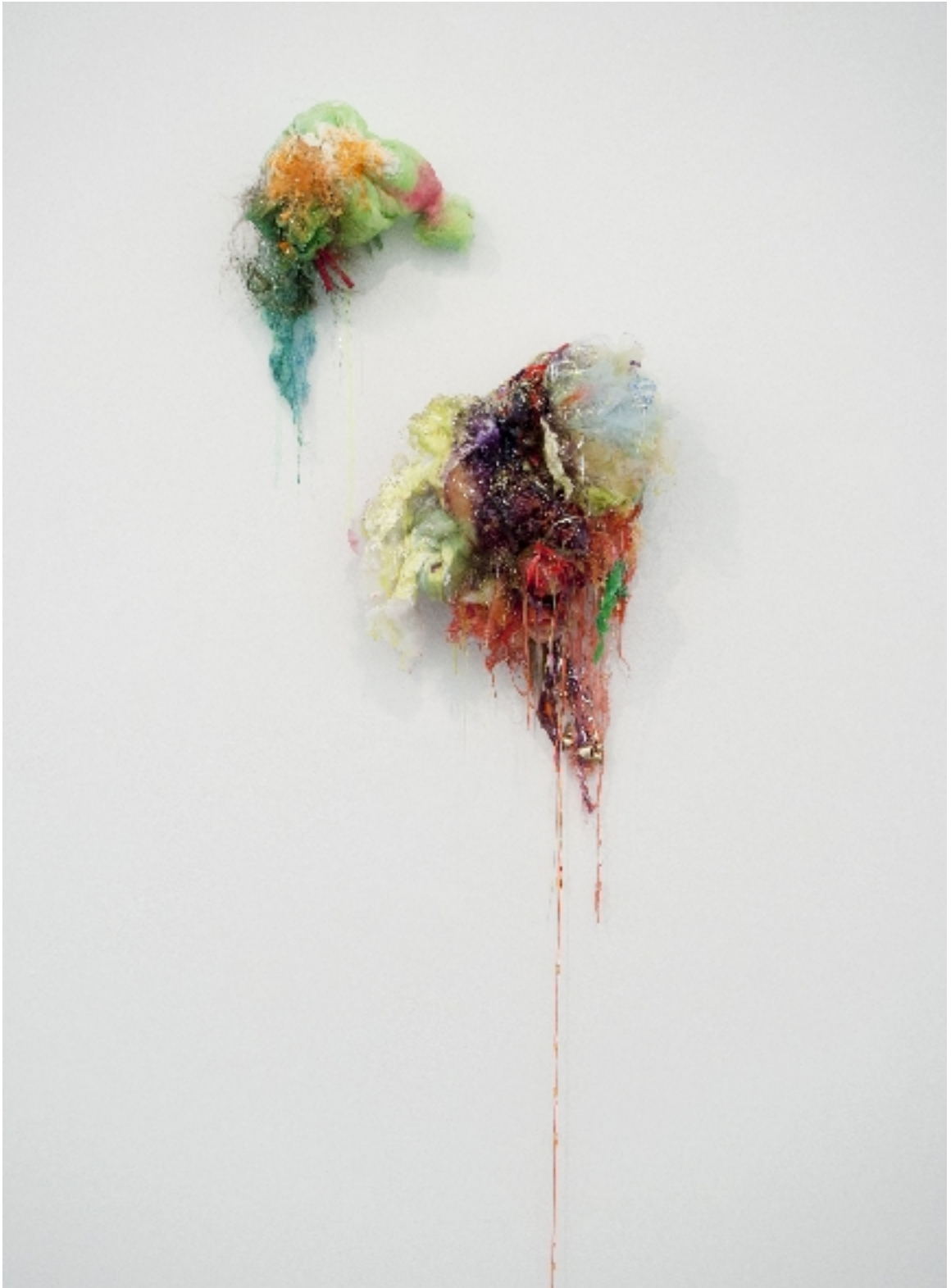




**Figure 6.1** *Decapitated Manatee*, acrylic tinted corn syrup on found objects, 15x9x6 inches, 2012



**Figure 6.2** *Decapitated Manatee*, (detail)



**Figure 7.1** *Decapitated Manatee, Grave Jelly*, (installation view)



**Figure 8.1** *More like Profetti*, acrylic tinted corn syrup on found objects, 22.5x6x8.5 inches, 2012



**Figure 8.2** *More like Profetti*, (detail)





**Figure 9.1** *That Bird Has Blossomed*, oil tinted urethane plastic on found objects, 20x13x8.5 inches, 2012



**Figure 9.2** *That Bird Has Blossomed*, (detail)





**Figure 10.1** *Disco (meat)Ball*, oil tinted urethane plastic on found objects, 22x12x10.5 inches, 2012



**Figure 10.2** *Disco (meat)Ball*, (detail)



**Figure 11.1** *YOLO*, acrylic tinted corn syrup on found objects, 22x8x4.5 inches, 2012



**Figure 11.2** *YOLO*, *Disco (meat)Ball*, (installation view)



**Figure 12.1** *Mini Baby Grand Supreme*, oil tinted urethane plastic on found objects, 32x18x10 inches, 2012



**Figure 12.2** *Mini Baby Grand Supreme*, oil





**Figure 13.1** *Prom Night Soft Serve*, oil tinted urethane plastic on found objects, 17x12x7.5 inches, 2012



**Figure 14.1** *Party Fowl*, oil tinted urethane plastic on found objects, 21x13.5x7, 2012



**Figure 14.2** *Party Fowl*, (detail)



**Figure 15.1** *Tiny Candy Mountain*, acrylic tinted corn syrup on found objects, 10x8x5.5 inches, 2012



**Figure 15.2** *Tiny Candy Mountain, Party Fowl*, (installation view)

## REFERENCES

Elkins, James. *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1997.

Lippard, Lucy. "Eccentric Abstraction." *Changing : Essays in Art Criticism*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971.