Grocery Store Condolences

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Barefoot on the hard concrete, my feet are cold, but all I have to do is take out the garbage, so I don’t think I need shoes. I glance down next to the gate to see a beautiful orange petal on the ground. A monarch butterfly had died and lay on the ground perfectly splayed but lifeless. Like a forager collecting ingredients, I pick up the dead exoskeleton to later preserve in plastic. Polyurethane slows decay and transforms any lonely object into a petrified shell of itself.

I saw my father lay cold in the hospital bed after his passing. The first question they ask is, “What would you like to do with the body?” He wanted to be cremated. The next question, “Would you prefer a cardboard or wood box to be burned with his body?” My father’s ashes were mailed to me in a clear plastic bag placed in a cardboard box. Holding the remains of what was once a living breathing human, who loved and was loved by others, it was given the same dignity as a package from Amazon. The moment
of receiving my father’s cremated remains catalyzed a change in my perspective of life and death: life is beautiful and fleeting; death is undignified and uncertain.

My sculptural practice revealed itself through this experience as a way to explore the material of loss and was deeply shaped by my father, who was a skilled carpenter and folk artist. I find myself drawn to the tactile and physical nature of sculpture, using layers of industrial adhesives and house paint layered over found objects. Through the collection and accumulation of found, organic objects, the work is comprised of materials frozen in time. Arresting the process of gravity and decay transforms each piece into a tangible, poignant memory, an invitation to celebrate the profound beauty found in the temporal nature of existence.
Chapter One: Introduction to the dead and dying

Since the passing of my father last year and the grief that comes with his death, I wonder why make art at all? This question I anxiously mull over as I begin each studio day. To survive, I quickly drown out the need to reason how to or why make art. My father was a carpenter, a man who painted public schools for 30 years with no promotion, but in his treasured free time, he built things out of wood. I grew up watching him, asking him if he could teach me, or at least let me drill that in or saw that off. I never got to, not because he didn’t want me to or didn’t trust me, but because of how much he wanted to do the making himself. This led me to my own relationship with art. I am pursuing a sculpture practice because I use the instruments my dad adored, and if I work with tools or paint with brushes, we would have something to bond over. It gave me something to talk to him about while he was in the hospital. Up until he died, the hope he held on to was going home to his tools and his dogs and to begin carving again. He never went home.

The previous spring, I became obsessed with planting California Milkweeds in my backyard. I planted four of them and watched as caterpillars gorged themselves on the leaves. Monarch butterflies frequented my plants to lay eggs, and it filled my heart every time one visited. The milkweeds were planted in the San Fernando Valley, which gets upwards of one-hundred degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. I came home from the funeral that summer to find my milkweeds fried and dead.

In the following weeks, I noticed a hummingbird had made a nest in my orange tree. Every day I spent hours watching as the mother went back and forth feeding her baby. One morning before work, I noticed the baby bird was no longer in its nest; on the ground was a desperate baby bird crying for its mother. The mother hummingbird was not around. I frantically put the baby back in its nest only for it to fall out again. Once more, I put the baby hummingbird back in its nest and left for work. I came home to the baby bird dead in the dirt.
All of these moments of dying, though different in their gravity, catalyzed a change in my practice. I collect what was found dead in order to mummify, calcify, and encapsulate its memory. Plaster, epoxy glue, silicones, and resins all have the potential to create a shell around an item when cured. These methods of preservation are desperate attempts at conservation. The materials cure over each piece to freeze its form. Over the course of many pours on each subject, the objects become mostly unrecognizable. Lost, but not forgotten in the soup of material, these frozen bodies of plants, hair, toys, and trash defy time and in doing so become shells of their former existence. Together they create reliquaries of the past, memories made physical.
Chapter Two: Cherished Detritus

Home and Garden supply stores used to always intimidate me. I went through the dusty aisles with my father to buy cheap, raw materials for whatever project he was working on around the house. Caulking, spray foam, wood, and house paint were frequently in the shopping cart. In this way I always felt curious about these materials and their function outside of suburbia. When I considered a sculptural practice, I remember asking my dad to take me to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles to see Urs Fischer’s exhibition (URS FISCHER, 2013). My dad was a quiet and reserved man, and I was always trying to seek his love and affection. That day became one of my most cherished memories of my dad; it gave us something to talk about, and we “talked shop” on materials. Fischer’s mediums varied from a house made out of baguettes to pourable resins and silicones enveloping mysterious forms (Figure 1). Silicones and resins poured over objects became influential mediums for me and processes I would employ in my own work.

“Materials of the times” is a concept that informs my practice. As artists use clay, molten metal, or any other materials available to them, I play with the materials of contemporary industrial culture. Living in post-consumer United States, I see a glut of plastic toys, litter, and dying plants. I collect what I perceive to be lost or forgotten from places I go. I attach and render these objects together with pourable epoxies and glue concoctions. The final piece often either conceals the objects’ details or amplifies those that were not apparent to me before. British artist Phyllida Barlow spoke about her practice as a new mother. When her children slept, she turned off the lights in her studio and challenged herself to create in the dark, allowing touch and feel to guide her hands; she describes the magnificence of this gesture and the perception of labor as form or a brush stroke. In this way the work describes memory, the destruction of time, and poetics of the materials put together.

One of my works that describes this is No Sweat (Figure 2). The work features a shower curtain that was used in my bathroom for ten years. I constructed an armature that imitates a
single shower stall. I covered the bottom of the form with bits of my own hair and hair extensions to describe a hair obstructing and enveloping this “shower.” The top of the dilapidated curtain proffers fake flowers, suggesting that everything is okay. Upon further investigation are miniature critters, such as birds, caterpillars, and butterflies, hidden within the work, which acknowledge earth’s survival despite human detritus and interventions. The shower is a loaded symbol; it’s a place for cleansing, crying, or singing, and my shower offers up fake flowers hoping its water and privacy will bring comfort. The finished work looks frozen in time, painted the color of stone, and it appears as if it might fall over at any moment. The work invokes concepts of grief and relief, using globs of glues and paint over found material in poetic form.

The preservation of dying plant matter is another part of my practice. When a relative dies, when an award is won, when a party is hosted, a bouquet of flowers is given to acknowledge the event. The human gesture of cut flowers has existed for centuries. Longing for their beauty or the joy they bring, people cut and save flowers to delight the recipient and viewer. As days pass, their original youth bows its petals to time and gravity. The curled stem of a flower embodies aging and gravity’s effect. As a desperate attempt to preserve the sweetness of the original gesture, I epoxy and tether decaying stems and blooms to my pieces in order to be found and delighted in again.

Not only do I epoxy and preserve dead flowers, but I draw on the form of a dying plant to construct my welded structures so they seem to be on the brink of collapse. As a material, gravity dictates my work’s balance and gesture, as I cantilever its heavier parts to convey the appearance of being top heavy. The forms are precarious in their stances but remain erect in situ.

The poetics of these contrasting gestures describe quiet strength and endurance, and an example of this in my work is Pity (Figure 3). This work took inspiration from Michelangelo’s Pieta (Figure 4), which features a butter-yellow dead Christ lying on Mary’s lap. Reinterpreting this iconic work of from the Renaissance, I considered the “materials of the times” in sculpture
and the phenomenon of levitation and researched common solutions used by magicians. The “levitating man trick” employs a welded structure, including a heavy base and different angled poles leading to a platform that the magician sits on. The structure is hidden in the magician’s clothing and under the rug beneath to give the illusion of floating. For Pity, I constructed this model using steel to hold an abstracted yellow body floating over a pool of stainless steel. Inside the papier-mâché body, I embedded my hair, gloves stolen from my father’s hospital room, and his funeral flowers. The piece functions as a memorial to my father and as a place I can go to and pay my respects, as he does not have a final resting place beyond the shelf on which his boxed cremains rest.
Chapter Three: Contemporary Context

I look to contemporary artists Rachel Harrison and Anya Gallachio who explore concepts of preservation and time. American artist Rachel Harrison’s ideas of conveyed meaning and her works’ transcending a single meaning to have evolving connections resonate with me. Harrison is a maker who creates sculptural experiences with wood off-cuts, papier-mâché, and found objects (Figure 5). Her work is described as a “materialization of the imagination” by art writer and critic Ottessa Moshfegh (The Whitney Museum of Art). Often the compositions of her sculptures are combinations of a solid-colored form made from found or ready-made objects interacting with a dynamic shape at human-scale. Each form in her work operates separately yet function together, using abstraction and representation to refuse literal or “right” narratives.

In her interview with art writer and historian Darby English, Harrison describes her interest in the experience of art and walking around an object, and that is why her shape language shifts and vacillates (Hirshhorn). Two key components in her work are the personal archiving of readymade, domestic objects and the identity of a form’s visual language. I relate to Harrison’s ideas about meaning and its ever-shifting quality in an artwork.

British artist Anya Gallaccio also explores time in her work. Gallaccio frequently uses dying plant matter or imitation fauna to describe the beauty and bountifulness on earth. She displays natural materials, such as flowers, fruits, and dying trees, in gallery spaces to for slow decay while the show is up (Figure 6). In this way the work becomes a daily experience because it changes over time. My work is deeply influenced by ideas of decay and its preservation to convey strength. Gallaccio’s body of work illuminate time’s materiality in art. In her interview with Jupiter Artland, a gallery just outside of Edinburgh, Gallaccio speaks about her installation of a bed of roses on the floor, titled Red on Green (Figure 7). She describes her love for nature’s bountifulness in spring and of a garden she researched that had different roses for different representations of love (Jupiter Artland). The carpet of thousands of red roses on the floor at the beginning of the exhibition is seductive and sensual, but during the run of the
show the work withers, and what is left are perfectly dried dead roses which shrink as they die and reveal their thorns. Gallaccio speaks to the poetics that hidden underneath these sumptuous petals are thorns that will prick any zealous flower picker. She describes her rejection of the notion that dried flowers are sentimental and should be made into potpourri. After the exhibition closes, she purees the flowers in a blender, so their fate is to never be horded or cherished. This concept is in interesting contrast to my work; as I seek to desperately preserve a dying flower, she allows nature to run its course and accepts death as the final piece.
Conclusion

Grappling with construction and gravity's effect on balance, I think of my dad. I remember the stools, sawhorses, and tables he crafted. In his stead I carry the torch of his practice. In his place, I carve into wood and reconstruct off-cuts from my studio to retranslate memories, using keepsakes, discarded wood, and steel. In this way I embrace that I am not as proficient as my craftsman father and often will combine a smattering of industrial glues, caulking, epoxy dough, and spray foam to keep my works sturdy. Sometimes I wonder what my dad would think if he saw the seemingly irreverent way I use the same materials he did.

Personal history influences the found objects I choose to use in my work and the identities they assume. This flame beneath me to continue making will keep my dad nearby the rest of my life, even though he is no longer here. In this way I rediscover my dad as a maker, what he valued and how he used material. In this way I realize my father influenced my current studio practice today, and though my work will not always directly concern his death, it will always acknowledge his impact. And I think that's beautiful.
Bibliography


Appendix

Figure 1
Installation view of *URS FISCHER*, April 21 – August 19, 2013 at MOCA Grand Avenue, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, photo by Brian Forrest
Figure 2
Emily Polanco, No Sweat, steel, shower curtain, plaster bandages, hair, and found objects with epoxy and house paint, 65" x 25" x 15", 2023
Figure 3
Emily Polanco, *Pity*, steel, plaster bandages, paper, hair, and found objects, with epoxy, caulk, and plaster, 84”x50”x64”, 2022
Michelangelo Buonarroti, *La Madonna della Pietà*, Marble, 68” x 76”, 1498-1499
Figure 5
Rachel Harrison, *All in the Family*, wood, polystyrene, chicken wire, cement, acrylic, and Hoover Vacuum Cleaner, 93” x 34” x 34”, 2012
Figure 6
Anya Gallachio, *preserve ‘beauty’*, 2000 gerberas, glass, metal, and rubber, 121” x 210” x 1”, 2004
Figure 7
Anya Gallaccio, *Red on Green*, 10,000 red roses, dimensions variable, 2012