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Yours, mine, & ours

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YOURS, MINE, & OURS

A Thesis
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Louisiana State University and
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in partial fulfillment of the
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in

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by
Mallory Feltz
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ABSTRACT

Yours, Mine, & Ours utilizes found object assemblage, textiles, art multiples, and installation to present the theme of discovering personal identity through collecting, ownership, affiliations, cultural context, and transformation. This work presents to viewers a tactile experience to be investigated, touched, and transferred to their own lives.

Centered on domesticity, the familiar and ordinary becomes transformed through labor-intensive processes into unique and personal works of art. Viewer participation, in all aspects of the making process, emphasizes the universal human experience of searching for comprehension of our culture. Each artwork is a metaphor for this search and how we are constantly altering our surroundings and ourselves to better understand our identity. The objective of this work is to inspire the viewer to re-examine what comprises their self-concept and to bring new awareness to what we may take for granted.

INTRODUCTION

People, in general, and by nature, are collectors. We can be defined as collectors of information, collectors of memories, collectors of affiliations, and collectors of trinkets that embody our individuality. What we surround ourselves with and with whom we communicate on a regular basis help define our status or position in society and further our understanding of cultural relationships. *Yours, Mine, and Ours* explores themes of personal discovery, object and image transformation, and situational organization. Using found object assemblage and textiles, my work presents an experience to be investigated, touched, and transferred into viewers' lives. The sense of touch is one of the most direct methods for relating to something through comparing and contrasting with what we already know, our own bodies. Tactility allows viewers to gain knowledge of temperatures, textures, and weights of different objects, and provides evaluation of foreign objects in comparison to very familiar objects.

Everything in *Yours, Mine and Ours* can be touched, "as a material space, the home involves numerous potential tactile experiences."¹ It is from this tactile experience that viewers and I are able to gain self-awareness, as the art pushes the boundaries of "objecthood." Instead of creating typical three-dimensional, object-based works that stand solitary, my work utilizes process, the progression of time, the exchange of information, and collaboration with others to create visual art scenes. These scenes are works of art that fall somewhere between object and installation. Varying degrees of audience participation operate as catalysts for my alterations to traditional sculptural processes and manipulation of everyday materials. Obsessive and repetitive processes are central to my art making, and these processes culminate in creating art multiples.

¹ Pink, Sarah. Home Truths: Gender, Domestic Objects, and Everyday Life. Oxford: Berg, 2004.

These multiples show some of the many ways of considering and viewing themes of comfort and isolation found within a domestic space, the shift of ownership and authorship when collaborating, family and friend relationships examined through genealogical mapping, various interpretations of language, and personal feminine sensibility versus social stereotypes. The intentional use of outside influence from others is not only a challenge to my art making, but also key to the correlation between intent (what other people expect from me or for me) and my reality (who I am or believe to be at this moment, in this particular place).

The theme of domesticity can be seen as a metaphor for not only an architectural building, but also the body. I, in essence, am a vessel for my culture and individuality, and am able to exhibit my likes, dislikes, personal style, and knowledge through all of my belongings, actions, and connections with others. My immediate surroundings and my self are an accumulation of my unconscious collection: everything in which I instinctively gather into my personal sphere. My self-concept is created from objects, people, and places. Over time, I collect and analyze these tangible things, and then mentally categorize, organize, and arrange them to best suit my emotions at the present moment. My art processes visually parallel these internal acts. Through labor-intensive art processes and the incorporation of textiles in my work, I pay homage to traditional craft techniques and what can be interpreted as ritualistic “women’s work.” Although it is evident that feminine aesthetics are crucial to the artwork I produce, *Yours, Mine, and Ours* is a body of work that extends beyond gender roles to comment on the human experience. The desire to understanding our place in the constantly changing world is exclusive to the human condition; I am presenting this examination through sculptures and installations, filtered through the lens of a female artist.

CONVERSATION OF THE OTHERS

Yours, Mine, and Ours is comprised of five artworks, broken down into three sections, two interiors and one exterior. Upon entering the space, the first piece encountered is *Conversation of the Others*. On a large wooden dining room table, surrounded by four high-back chairs, lie close to sixty small objects. I have delicately wrapped all of the objects with various yarns in intricate linear patterns that hide their contents. Over the span of six months, I have requested that people (some I knew, some I did not know) donate domestic objects to me for use in my thesis show. The “rules” for these objects was that they had to reside in your home, and they must be able to fit in your hand. The owner provided me with one sentence as to why it is important to them. The donors were told nothing else about the project. These objects were collected and catalogued. “Collecting – and perhaps the drive to collect is inherent in all people living in culture – is about giving special significance to certain objects”². Each object was then wrapped in its own individual color and texture of yarn; the object retains a sense of uniqueness and individuality associated with each donor. Through this process of bundling, I am intentionally hiding the surface details of each object in order to enhance the mass and weight of each item. The intricacy of the wrapping highlights the time and attention I spent with each object, transforming it into a piece of art. A “second skin” protects these objects. They are presented to the viewer as items that are specifically important to one person, but universally interesting to all. I stress the role that human habits or personal rituals play within a home by carefully wrapping these objects in yarn in precise linear patterns. I am instinctively protecting them, but also suffocating them. For some people, the home environment can be nurturing and

² Godfrey, Tony. Conceptual Art. London: Phiadon Press, 1998. p.32.

comfortable, a place of solace, but for others, the home can seem stifling, overbearing, and a place of unrest.

The comically oversized, soft maple table tempts the viewer to sit and examine the objects: pick them up, move them, turn them over, and imagine what treasures these bundles may contain. The exchange of both visual and tactile information is similar to the feelings of anticipation and curiosity that are associated with giving or receiving a gift. These gracefully wrapped items indicate the preciousness of those small objects we display in our homes that reveal our individuality. Over time, these objects freely travel between artist and participant in order to generate a dialogue on ownership. At the table, the dialogue continues as viewers freely pass the objects around the table, constantly changing the spatial proximity of objects and thereby creating new object groups and associations.

A list of the sentences identifying the significance of these objects is handwritten on the gallery wall, adjacent to the table. No legend exists to identify which sentence belongs to which object. By keeping the specific object secret, I set up a game in which the viewer matches sentiment, emotion, and personal attachment with an object. This sparks communication with others, centering on the common compulsion to project our self-identity through possessions. “Objects cannot just be objects in our society: we overload them with instinctively with meanings and significance.”³ While involved in this complex matching game, the viewer may rely upon his or her own personal memories and emotions as guides through the confusion, creating new reasons of importance for each object. More significantly, *Conversation of the Others* brings awareness to our sentimental attachment to objects. The viewer is reminded of their own objects and the personal reasons for owning them.

³ Godfrey, Tony. p. 32

At the conclusion of my thesis show, each item will be returned to the donor in its wrapped state, once again becoming a gift. The donor is left with the ultimate decision to either accept the new art object and reintroduce it into their home environment, or to reclaim their original item by removing the yarn. This decision on the part of the donor raises many questions, one being: Which is more important, the visual aspects of the original object or the memories and emotions that the object embodies? Similar to the layers of yarn it takes to conceal each object, layers of trust are built and relationships are formed; one between myself and the donor, one between myself and the object, and one between the donor and the art community. Whether it is donor, viewer, creator (myself as artist), or combinations of these identity roles, all of the participants become affiliated with each other through one experience.

LINEAGE

Affiliation and identifying one's self within a group, in order to understand one's place in culture, is accentuated in the next piece of the exhibition. In the middle of my space, and dividing it into two quadrants, is a fixed wall measuring 10' x 8' x 18" that the viewer can circumnavigate. The bottom of this wall is covered in baby blue wainscoting, which measures 39" tall. The very top of the wall is capped in crown molding, also painted baby blue. Surrounding the wall, and creating the majority of the visual imagery, is custom designed wallpaper printed in stark black and white. *Lineage* is a design comprised of portraits of my family and friends, ranging in size from 0.5" to 1". The large, crest-like image centers on images of my family and soon-to-be-family members. Many of these family images are repeated to form smaller, internal patterns within the composition. Formed from portraits of my friends, all of the undulating connection lines between the "crests" create the feel of an extended family. Because my actual family members do not live near me, the people I surround myself with now have instinctively adopted the main roles of a family unit: mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers. At this point in my life, family and friends have begun to overlap and fuse, integrating true bloodlines with social and situational bloodlines. In this piece, one person does not seem more important than the other -- they are intertwined. Theories and strategies of genealogical mapping and social networking are compounded in this optical piece. "As genealogy mediates and is mediated by existing family relationships it is a practice through which new forms of relatedness are forged, sometimes with very distant relations or with people of no blood relation but bonded through a shared interest in genealogy."⁴ Standing back from *Lineage*, the viewer is only aware

⁴ Ahmed, Sarah, Claudia Castaneda, and Anne-Marie Fortie. Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration. Oxford: Berg, 2003. p. 195.

of the complex repetitious patterning commonly seen in French damask wallpaper. However, when the viewer comes closer and starts to examine the paper, the focal point changes from an overall composition to individual contemporary portraits and specific facial features bearing expressions. Only through intimate interactions and repeated exposures to the wallpaper design can the viewer find each unique portrait, reveal the original design, and explore the monument.

The people we decide to surround ourselves with reveals more than just the human experience at this moment; it speaks to the past and the future. Affiliations with others, good or bad, teach us something about our own character. We learn caution from others' mistakes and admire the successes and positive attributes of those around us. Whether the viewer understands who is family and who is not, is of little importance. What is essential to *Lineage* is that the understanding of our environment and our selves is heightened through evaluating ourselves against others and associating ourselves with a particular circle of people. The familiarity of domestic interior decorations, wainscoting and wallpaper, heightens the comfort level of the viewer and acts as a way to examine and recognize what makes up a familial and social sphere. Identifying our place within history and within our environment is an ongoing process. It is one that relies upon repeated questioning, examining, and sorting. It is a struggle and can become confining, restrictive, and confusing.

SEEK #1 - #15

Set inside the back quadrant of the gallery space hang fifteen panels titled *Seek #1 - #15*. These works highlight the frustration and uncertainty that can arise from this infinite search for understanding. Underneath the panels, which are hung salon style with a few inches separating each piece, is the same baby blue wainscoting seen in *Lineage*. The continuation of this decorative, yet essential, element transforms the space into a domestic interior and pushes this body of work into the realm of installation - everything working in unison to create a desired effect. The baby blue color becomes a neutral hue, adding awareness to the environment, but not competing for attention from the other pieces in the exhibition. The space feels warm and familiar; relaxing the viewer and relating the artwork back to a known environment.

Each of the fifteen panels contain a background image of textured wallpaper samples, either flocked, leathered, gilded, or embossed, that have drawings applied on top. These illustrations pull focus to particular visual aspects of the wallpaper. The paper designs range in historical motif, from Victorian to Pop Art, presenting the universal search for knowledge through different time periods. The frames are highly decorative and painted in colors to match or accentuate each unique paper. A hand is created from clusters of discarded children's toys and wrapped in yarn, and then it is fixed to each panel. The same process of wrapping that was utilized in *Conversation of the Others* is applied in *Seek #1 - #15*; yet in this instance, the grouped toy assemblages are not entirely covered. Spots are left unbound to reveal certain physical attributes of the toys themselves -- eyes, hands, mouths, etc. to accentuate the emotional struggle brought about by searching for self-identity. In *Conversation of the Others*, the wrapping becomes a metaphor for protection, care, and concealment; in *Seek #1 - #15*, the wrapping is a metaphor for binding, restriction, and struggle. The dual nature of this repetitious

process represents the conflicts of life, the complexity of our personalities, and the layers of self-discovery that are needed to comprehend these issues.

The discarded children's toys used in *Seek #1 - #15* form the various sized hands, showing the importance of touch as a vital experience to learning about our environment. Attachments to objects form at a very early age, and toys are fundamental tools for the enhancement of experience, creativity, and socialization. As we grow older we may shed our toys in exchange for games that involve groups of people, but our sense of touch continues to be relied upon to learn about who we are and how other people and places relate to and fit into our personal identity. The National Network for Child Care states that for early school-age children, "toys occupy less time because they spend more and more time playing with friends in groups."⁵ As children become older, the role of toys changes from objects that enhance tactile experience to tools for identifying social roles within a group. Extending from each hand are many singular yarn threads that spread out and disappear into the background wallpaper. Some of these lines extend over many panels, connecting separate "times" and "people." Although each panel is individual, they work in unison and connect with one another to portray the commonality of touch as experience over the course of personal development. These fifteen panels juxtapose attachment and detachment, as well as evoke independence and loneliness. From childhood through adulthood we are helped by others to navigate our world, usually by close family members or mentors showing us what they have learned along the way. However, it is with ourselves that we must ultimately answer to, and we must decide for ourselves what answers are satisfactory enough to assist in the progression of personal development and wisdom.

⁵ Johnson, Ed. D., Patricia A. "Good Times with Toys." National Network for Child Care. May 1996. Colorado State University. 14 April 2009. <<http://www.nncc.org/Series/good.time.toy.html#anchor161327>>.

LIVING DOLL

Immediately opposite to *Seek #1 - #15*, but still contained within the back interior quadrant, is the *Living Doll* series. Once again, others were asked to become the catalyst for a piece, and in this instance there were four participants: a male professor, a female professor, my mother, and my father. The rules and directions established for this work were fundamental, as is true for most of the works in this process-oriented exhibition. Establishing rules affords me an organizational system within which I am able to experiment. Similar to a scientific approach, these rules become the “controls” from which I was able to measure my results. The participants were only told that they would have a budget of forty dollars (provided by me), they had to purchase a complete outfit for me for a specific event, and they were not allowed to ask anyone for advice or assistance. Each person was given a chart illustrating my body measurements. Once each participant gave each outfit to me, I began to wear it. Alterations were made over time to transform each garment into something that felt completely comfortable, in line with my style, and represented the image I wanted to portray. At every stage of the alterations, I photographed myself wearing the outfit. Similar to how applying yarn around domestic objects (either partially or entirely) could reveal or conceal meaning within that object, clothing could be manipulated around my own form to expose or obscure my inner identity. Only through my personal and intimate treatment of the material could my authentic self - or a heightened version of the authentic - become visible. I was able to regain control over my identity through transforming the clothing.

The duration and final outcome of each garment were unknown to me at the beginning of the process. Only once I instinctively felt that the garments were complete, did the clothing manipulations end. The photographs were printed together in a long, horizontal format and

pinned directly to the gallery wall. These hung alongside the finished garments themselves, displayed on custom dress forms. These dress forms shed their stereotypical proportions and are instead made from body casts of myself covered in baby blue fabric that match the wainscoting found elsewhere throughout the exhibition. My intention to use my own body, not only as model, but also as display mechanism, reflected my need to challenge my self-esteem. I had to confront my own fears of physical imperfection and overcome my hesitancy to be photographed in an unfinished state. The photographs not only show the garment transformations through alterations, but also the progression of confidence and self-assurance that I am gaining over time. My poses become more stylized and playful, as the clothing becomes more fitted, comfortable, and contemporary.

For the *Living Doll* series, each participant was given a specific event to keep in mind while shopping -- a specific “uniform” to create for the appointed situation. The male professor was assigned a job interview, the female professor a dinner party, and my mother and father were both assigned my thesis reception. In the case of the male and female professor, the events were fictional. However, if they had actually taken place, the situations were such that I could get to know them better. At the time of asking for their help, we were only acquaintances and knew little about each other. Over the course of this project, our relationship grew because of the mystery and expectations that were placed before both the participants and myself.

With my mother and father, the situation was different. Instead of each receiving different events, each was given the same task: to select an outfit for me to wear during my thesis reception. Over time and many alterations, these two garments slowly merged into one complete outfit, which I actually wore during my thesis reception. This was an event where my parents could get to know me better, not only by what I was wearing, but also from seeing my artwork,

and meeting my friends (everything that constitutes my environment and self-concept at this time). For the last three years, I have been geographically separated from my family. Although I have always been close with my family, living in the south has altered me. Even though I recognized that, I wondered if my parents had acknowledged this change. Merging my mother's intentions for me with my father's intentions for me reinforces the ideas of heredity and genealogy, already seen in *Lineage*, but also introduces my ability to renovate those intentions into what I believe my self to be. For the piece to be successful I needed to reconcile my issues with familial expectations. Outside appearance and inside emotion must match in order for each project in the *Living Doll* series to feel complete, but it was only through wearing each outfit that I was able to understand what needed to be changed in order to progress. With each shift of material I noticed the slight shifts in the world around me: how other people addressed me, and what I felt comfortable doing throughout the day. Feminist author Rozsika Parker writes that art "exposes (the making of) femininity as socially constructed and unstable, signifying differently across class, cultures, and centuries... To think about women and 'woman' is to take into account social reality as well as social construction."⁶ Our identity, and especially mine as female, is one that needs constant maintenance, transformation, and renewal. I constantly alternate between social trends and personal comfort. This whole project became a micro version for how we all acclimate ourselves to our surroundings and how only through constant transformation and improvement are we able to ensure that we are exposing our inner self to our outer environment. *Living Doll* reveals the necessity for accessing multiple personalities and identities within a short duration of time. Our attitudes and emotions fluctuate on a daily basis,

⁶ Barnett, Pennina. "Afterthoughts on Curating 'The Subversive Stitch'". New Feminist Art Criticism. Ed. Katy Deepwell. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995. p.80.

and the photographs accompanying the garments in the *Living Doll* series accentuate the characters we personally create for ourselves – heightened expressions of our emotions.

Others earnestly attempted to find me outfits, but it was based upon their preferences and personal knowledge (or lack of) of me. My mother and father know me well, and produced many options to expand upon which actually seemed like “me” (my mother, to a lesser extent). The male and female professors were intuitively led by their own tastes and style ideas for cues on what clothing to purchase for someone in which they knew very little (only subjective, superficial knowledge). With the *Living Doll: Male Professor* and *Living Doll: Female Professor*, my style and taste was taken out of context. Only through my own interpretation and manipulation was I able to assert my preferences back into the context of life within my terms. Because someone else was purchasing me outfits, a deep personal growth developed over the course of transforming the clothing. If I had shopped for myself, the focus of the piece would be on how the manipulations were performed. With others shopping for me, I was able to focus on not only how I manipulated the clothing, but also why I changed each piece every day. This situation caused me to look critically at myself, and through comparisons, I am able to say *what I am not*, and I am getting closer to concretely answering *who I am*.

OVERHEARD AND OVERTAKEN

In the last piece of the exhibition, *Overheard and Overtaken*, it is the lack of insight that has fueled my interest in reclaiming language spoken from complete strangers. Throughout my life I have found the humor and mystery in eavesdropping on other people's uncontextualized conversations. As small creative exercises, I have used these borrowed phrases to generate narratives and characters that could be introduced into my artwork. Living and working within a large college campus environment, and overhearing random conversations on a daily basis, has introduced the larger possibilities that eavesdropping has as a method for navigating a confusing and strange, yet ultimately humorous world.

The only piece situated just outside of my domestic interior installation, *Overheard and Overtaken* is comprised of three hundred and eight buttons, pushed directly into the gallery wall and arranged in a grid formation (28 buttons across by 11 buttons tall). On each button is a one or two sentence remark I overheard. The buttons are black and white and each has a standard format of sans-serif type encased within a speech bubble. Each button is ambiguous and random in its statement. With no allusion to speech inflection or dialectical emphasis, some phrases could be interpreted as serious or humorous. It is this vagueness that reinforces the suggestion that these remarks were made by anonymous strangers.

The grid of buttons is organized according to the length of speech: the lowest right button offers a one-word, one-syllable phrase, and the highest left button contains the longest word-count and syllable-usage phrase. Arranged in this manner, the amount of time spent with each speaker becomes apparent. Some statements needed more intimate and longer listening than those heard quickly in passing. This arrangement creates a visually appealing gradation from

dark to light, an optical affect similarly seen in the *Lineage* wallpaper. From far away, a value scale is apparent, but up close, the words become the focal point and interest.

Each button is approached, read, and the viewer is asked to identify with a particular phrase. Just below this button grid is a porcelain slip cast speech bubble moneybox, glazed in the same baby blue motif seen throughout the show. It awaits the immediate exchange of money for buttons (“\$1 Each” is inscribed on the moneybox). It was my intention that the buttons would be bought, traded, and even dispersed throughout the community – expanding the reach of this uncontextualized speech. Context is invented by the viewer and reinterpreted by each individual reading, creating a fictional narrative that may explain each phrase. This speaks to the appropriation of language frequently seen in our culture. Due to the rise of advertising that connects with the everyday person, words and phrases have been taken by companies, reshaped by advertising agents to suit their agendas, and branded as identifiable to specific products. Words and phrases are transformed to become universal, many taken out of context and then put back into an invented narrative. Set just outside of the interior installation, *Overheard and Overtaken* comments on the necessity to understand, or even create understanding, for the culture immediately around us.

CONCLUSION

All of the works exhibited in my thesis show, *Yours, Mine, and Ours*, exhibit various ways for discovering meaning in our environment and our selves, using different metaphors as guides. This body of work challenged not only my skills as a maker, but also my conceptual and analytical abilities. Utilizing a small and familiar space, the home, as a starting point, provided the opportunity to expand upon material usage and metaphorical manipulation. Reflecting upon this work, it has become apparent that I thrive on diversity, change, and transformation. Altering the ordinary allowed me to view my world differently, and hopefully permitted others to do the same.

By intentionally focusing on aspects of life that we might take for granted, such as small objects, overheard phrase, childhood toys, and even clothing choices, I was able to emphasize the human need and desire to find significance in our self-concept and understanding of how our culture operates, using very direct and familiar materials. The labor-intensive applications that I employ evoke a clear respect for time, whether it be fleeting (as in *Overheard and Overtaken*) or enduring (as seen in *Seek #1 - #15*). *Yours, Mine, and Ours* captures these aspects of the human experience and presents them to the viewer so that we can all develop a deeper awareness of our selves and our surroundings.

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VITA

Mallory Lynn Feltz was born and raised in Dayton, Ohio, a small but vibrant mid-western city. The youngest of four creative children, Mallory was exposed to many forms of art at a very early age. Involved in anything she could get her hands on, from theater and dance to stop-motion animation, Mallory's love of art only intensified over the years. Gravitating toward art forms that were surprising, challenging, and extremely tactile, she found herself packing her belongings to move to Cincinnati, Ohio, to attend the sculpture department at the University of Cincinnati, in their esteemed Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning Program. Having realized her calling, Mallory delved headfirst into the competitive world of fine arts and took advantage of every opportunity presented to her. The thrill of winning juried art competitions and challenge of curating shows left her wanting more. After completing her Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree (B.F.A.) from the University of Cincinnati in 2006, Mallory moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where she is pursuing her Master of Fine Arts degree (M.F.A.) at Louisiana State University in studio art, with a focus on sculpture.