scavenge

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SCAVENGE

A Thesis

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The School of Art

By
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**Abstract**

*Scavenge* is an installment that blurs the boundaries of found and altered materials. What I define as "Left-overs" are abandoned materials taken from an enigmatic history. These Left-over objects are minimally altered, stacked or placed carefully pertaining to visual characteristics of the object, as well as the spatial relationship between each object inside the gallery. My work refuses to settle. Transporting an object from a large outdoor grouping into a gallery space changes our perception of the object. The newly created interior arrangement in the gallery space contrasts the arbitrariness of objects found in nature or discarded, inviting a viewer to interpret the material as an upcycled form, and not discarded material.
Collecting discarded materials from my every day surroundings, I log and repurpose these objects into artworks for the purpose that they question traditional gallery works. The process of collecting and arranging materials I have found outside into a different interior context is a large part of the installation process. Shifting the environment surrounding the object to the sheltered gallery changes how we perceive the object. Working with these pieces as a form of upcycling,¹ which replaces the term “recycling” with a creative outlook. Upcycling is a form of recycling, but it is considered a more creative reuse. The transformation of by-products and unwanted material produces more appealing results than that of an item of waste.

Pablo Helguera explained:

Artists given a duty to respond to an environment, become seen as ‘tourists or missionaries’” and “[t]he artists gradually decide to take an altruistic approach and start doing things for the community: fixing roads, volunteering in social services, etc. The community is very appreciative and the artist’s projects, in varied degrees, help improve the life of the town.²

My work serves the community in small ways. Initially, they were unintentional, but then the intent of the service-oriented facets of my process grew. Some days, I would find myself tossing more items into the recycling bin than bringing them to the studio. Collecting materials

¹ Upcycling (def): As quoted by Wikipedia: “Also known as creative reuse. The process of transforming by-products, waste materials, useless, or unwanted products into new materials or products of better quality or for better environmental value.”
from the mountain of construction leftovers and building components is a chore. The piles of unused materials offer me an unusual palette in which to work. Scavenging through the city of Baton Rouge proves to be quite challenging through the twisting roads, many potholes and roadwork the city does not have the money to fix. Each week, I find more material in different areas, and each week is a bumpier ride on the road.

Gaston Bachelard wrote, “When a dreamer can reconstruct the world from an object that [she] transforms magically through [her] care of it, we become convinced that everything in the life of a poet is germinal.” The same can be said of a visual artist. Perhaps the germinal notion derives from the ability to create itself. To create something daily is an attitude that is attentive to the material of an already composed physical object. My interpretation of the sentimentality, or lack thereof, of material possessions once owned and now discarded speaks levels to me.

Using intuition to merge color and shape provides multiple layers of framework that serve as a foundation toward the reuse of found materials. To create visual unity from the original chaos and disorder provides an alternate context for a discarded possession. Some of my largest works reveal that color is an important part of my work. My works create deliberate analogies between color and art practice, for example, the specific blue of artist tape, deliberate use of color relates to analogies of color within art practice, construction, and media or arrangements comprised of various objects found around Baton Rouge. I consider which objects to preserve and which need altering. Most gathered objects come from a stack of items that remind me of assemblage as seen in my “Left-overs” corner. Some materials are industrial items and some are taken as capitalistic material. Displaying these items in a singular format is a game I play that invites the viewer to spot the visual outcome. This visual outcome becomes

significant, as many of the pieces are neutral with bits of pop color or other alterations due to
texture in the material or other fabrics suggested. The viewer then sees a material possession as
an art form, and may look at discarded items in a different light.

An example would be *Loose-Cannon Prism*. This artwork is filled with many un-altered,
grouped components that are juxtaposed against copious amounts of twisted newspaper in an
interwoven fashion. By situating brightly colored elements alongside the twisted newspaper, I
am toying with notions of propaganda. Capitalistic materials often present an aspect of American
society that tricks the viewer into buying a product, and as a result, pop in my work against the
neutral tones as a visual criticism. The work is reminiscent of Arman’s “Small Bourgeois Trash,”
in which he assembles sculpture composed of massive accumulations of products, collecting like
objects, found in the garbage. *Loose-Cannon Prism* changes each time it is lodged into a
different area of my working space. The various materials of the art work become dismantled
and twisted in order to reconstruct the piece.

Much of my art before this series reflected concepts pertaining to the field of gender and
society. I am repurposing manufactured items that are generally recognized as society would
deem “masculine,” such as car parts or construction area items. Taking possession of these
discarded objects is a form of power in itself. I choose to take possession of these items to create
artworks, or not. For example, a female carrying car bumpers from the side of the interstate
screams, “Red Flag! What is HAPPENING?” to the people in their cars. One does not generally
see someone carrying bulky items on the roadside. I imagine them wondering why a small car’s
hazards are on in the middle of the day, while a young woman digs through a pile of discarded
bumpers on the side of a large road. By physically bending raw steel for my thesis work. The
physical exertion that runs through my body enhances my vivacity. At the end of a night of
bending steel, I would go home in the morning with all my joints aching, but accomplished and proud that I can mold this strong material.
Movement in Footprints

We live in an assemblage of American material culture. Baton Rouge is a primarily flat environment that holds mounds of compacted objects resembling an assemblage of sorts. Working with the limits of where I live is a large part of my artistic process. I like appearing to have a sponge-like quality about myself, so my work becomes defined by the influential environment and the people that surround me. People inspire my pieces one way or the other, and so do immediate factors, such as culture, weather, and current events. I find that the layout of the roads in specific areas defines a culture or city as well as how people work within those coordinates. As I drive my automobile across Baton Rouge’s perimeters, I find visually interesting objects from assembled piles left in front of houses and by the road. These are regular occurrences, particularly in abandoned houses and neighborhoods. I find a way to double back multiple times when heavy traffic is present and take note of the ways I should not go because of large potholes or dead-end roads. Later, at night, I drive back for the specific components if they are still there, toss them in my car, and make a log of the time acquired and the material excavated. During this time, I look for other objects stashed in pockets of the city. Each specific time I pick an item, it is logged onto a sticky note and taped to brown paper on my studio wall at the end of the day. Each week I ensure every object has been recorded.

A substantial portion of my work circulates around ideas of the DADA or Neo-DADA movements of the early to mid-20th Century. The Dada movement was characterized by its experimental, spontaneous and often provocative use of unorthodox materials and methods and according to Jean Hans Arp, "to destroy the hoaxes of reason and to discover an unreasoned
order.” Neo-Dada artists often worked with mundane subjects and introduced performance; for example, Allan Kaprow’s *Happenings* in which he became the piece himself at specific dates and locations. The performative aspects of my own work are noted through simple actions that are more private. They are recorded in a Wall Log.

The wall log tracks date, time, location and object confiscated. This wall log is not displayed during the exhibit, but was configured throughout the whole series in Baton Rouge. Baton Rouge is a fairly large city; some areas seem more poor, which is where some items were found. The bumpers were found on large roads that connect the city together. Other items were found by driving or in a bin late at night as well as the aforementioned studio walking habits.

Everyone performs in their life to a certain degree, and as such I believe life is performance itself. This is the reason why a large portion of my art practice stems from the unpredictability of found objects. The found objects are acceptable visually “as-is” and I log the components as found. Alterations to the objects remain minimal, though the reorganization process becomes one of the more crucial elements to the body of work. I try to find visual relationships and angles between the pieces to produce a compelling and thoughtful arrangement.

Spotting a hubcap at Chimes restaurant or a reflector in front of the local Jack in the Box is inviting. Sometimes, I see a Whacky-waving-inflatable-arm flailing-tube-man in front of Burger King. The juxtaposition of objects is quite comical when found in such instances. Each time a strange event takes place, I note the date, time, and event in my log along with the new possessions. Many small mass-produced objects can be recognized in *Loose-Cannon Prism*.

The collecting and gathering of unconventional materials and objects into a pile creates juxtapositions that force the items to interact with each other as one assemblage. Digging

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through large collections of material on Wednesdays, the day before garbage pick-up and recycle in parts of Baton Rouge, generally provides fragments of plastic tubing, raw steel, and metals. Stacks of newspaper nearest my working studio every Tuesday night are acquired just before the unused papers are tossed early Wednesday mornings. Piles of garbage visually appear as neon-colored junk at times, reminiscent of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s *Untitled* work in 1991.

Works such as the collages of Kurt Schwitters\(^5\), Alan Kaprow’s *Yard*\(^6\), and the Bourgeois Trash accumulations Arman produced in the late 1950s\(^7\) have been influential for me. Their works reflected the chaos, and wasteful, consumerist nature of the modern industrialized world, a state in which we still live. As stated by the poet Tristan Tzara “The beginnings of Dada were not the beginnings of art, but of disgust.”\(^8\)

Similarly, my works are a structured resemblance of the visual chaos encountered in our environment. After the original clutter is split into singular objects, I ungroup the objects to isolate or coil it on itself (ex: Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6) when displayed. My pieces are transported from the initial pinpointed location, to my studio. The final transformation occurs during the installation inside the gallery space.

I often adhere to a night time studio schedule. No one can see what I am looking for, not even me. Sometimes what I dig into is a surprise, which is a part of my process. Each piece is approached differently, tactics vary with each encounter. For instance, I have been adding materials to *Loose-Cannon Prism* since August 2017. This work will continue to be added to after the initial show opens. *Serpentine* (Figure 10), consisting of textured blue tubing arranged

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on the gallery floor, is considerate of space as a visual component. The various negative spaces within the loops of *Serpentine* allow the viewer to see the space contained within the gallery as an arrangement that incorporates the individuals walking on the other side of the piece. Conversely, *Chip*, a piece of metal with chipped paint originally found in a pile, is displayed on a pedestal. The arrangement of the installation is of the utmost importance, as each piece has a vastly different signature in color, material, and expression.
Ingenuity and Bumpers

Southerners have the reputation of being genuine in personality, or for being storytellers. (I am not sure which at this point, as I am from the south.) I have met individuals who can tell their whole life story in approximately forty minutes to a passerby. When I initially arrived in Baton Rouge, an automobile hit mine, so while waiting, the driver talked about his life to me for about forty minutes. The conversation was light and friendly as we discussed the places around the incident. This was my first conversation with a Baton Rouge native. Not being in a work environment, it seemed to be one of the most real and raw dialogues I had in the city. His raw attitude and willingness to expose his life was a genuine act. The bumpers that I later used remember this time as significant. I often correlate an experience with an accumulation of specific or bundles of material.

Minimal alterations are made to this piece. On the surface they would seem like the artist John Chamberlain’s sculptures that use auto body parts. However, it is importantly unlike John Chamberlain’s work. “Chamberlain’s works do not represent automobiles or anything of the kind. Cars have never been his medium. Rather, it is the scraps, found or made, from auto-bodies that, once crushed into new shapes, provide him with his raw material. These scraps become transformed into something new and unexpected by virtue of his fitting of the parts together.” With slight alterations the bumpers are already whole in my case and are then appropriately arranged within the gallery setting. John Chamberlain’s use of non-art materials, such as his use of auto bodies, exposes innovative ideas and modes of individual thinking. Chamberlain stated that “Tearing, cutting, burning, pasting, stapling, nailing, sewing, welding, and the use of heavy
plastic substances can do much more than separate or join.” I disagree with this statement. I believe that the innate qualities of the combination of space and specific materials provides a more powerful context than tearing, cutting, or fusing plastic substances together. Stacking is a natural act as opposed to fusing, and provides an unforced dynamic composition as seen in the automobile bumpers I use in Melvin. The precarious arrangement is a part of the piece itself, as is the shift in location from outside to inside. The underlying dialogue in Melvin combines the recognition of what these forms initially are, car parts from the roadside, to what they become. It is important that the viewer never loses sight of what the components are or where they come from.

Conclusion

Separating art from life is difficult to maintain. Once I asked a fellow artist, “How do [you] separate life from art?” The artist stated, “Impossible~Art will find a way.” Pondering this quote, the allowance of absorbing found materials and the surrounding culture influenced my works drastically. The correspondences between material relationships in one’s daily life becomes everything.

While this body of work may resemble Duchamp’s ready-mades as well as variants of minimalism, the pieces convey different intentions. Most of the works are assemblages that are derived from road material and clutter from specifically chosen locales. They stem from a female artist’s fingertips arduously spending time unraveling the different components into new forms through reconsiderations of context and environment. Controlling the point of separation between three different environments including the initial points of interest, the studio space, and the final gallery area proves to be a challenge, even when one becomes an expert at folding a piece upon itself to move it from location to location. One can foresee the gallery space, but one will never be able to spend enough time in the room to fully explore the visual and conceptual dynamics of the arrangement. This is impossible.

Wouldn’t it be nice if there was a movement in which artists use found objects, display them, and pass the items to the next artist to maneuver again to envision a new way of seeing and understanding these forms? Now, this would be a true “Left-overs” movement.
Appendix A

Loose-Cannon Prism
Wire, newspaper, paint, duck tape, wheel, plastic fan, ruler, other various Left-overs
Dimensions vary on location
2017-2018
If you want twisted rope and sandpaper, take a dragon!
Dimensions vary, approximately 74” x 74” x 44” (187.96 cm x 187.96 cm x 111.76 cm)
Wire, newspaper, plastic coated wire, conduit, pipes, ladder, red yarn wig, foam, other various materials & assorted “Left-overs”
2017-2018
The praying mantis is trying to eat my brain!
Steel frame
27” x 30” x 32” (68.58 cm x 76.2 cm x 81.28 cm)
2018
Line variation
Wire, ribbed tubing
40” x 44” x 29” (101.6 cm x 111.76 cm x 73.66 cm)
2018
Spine
Raw steel, bent
25” x 38” x 27” (63.5 cm x 96.52 cm x 68.58 cm)
2017-2018
Pirate
Found steel, rope
24” x 18” x 15” (60.96 cm x 45.72 cm x 38.1 cm)
2018
The crab trap has fake medallions and slide runners!
Crab net, Kodak vintage carousel slides tray, jute yarn, fake medallions, nylon, polyester mesh
51” x 47” x 35” (129.54 cm x 119.38 cm x 88.9 cm)
2018
Repel
Raw steel, bent
21” x 90” x 3” (53.34 cm x 228.6 cm x 7.62 cm)
2017-2018
*Repel*

Raw steel, bent

21” x 90” x 3” (53.34 cm x 228.6 cm x 7.62 cm)

2017-2018
Chip
Bent Metal
12” x 6” x 4.5” (30.48 cm x 15.24 cm x 11.43 cm)
2018
Paranoia: The one itself, with an anti-drop design
Anti-drop design bicycle chain
.5” H x 6.25” x 6.25” (1.27 cm x 15.875 cm x 15.875 cm)
2018
Guest book comprised of handmade blue jean paper in Masonite cover, no spine
Melvin hadn’t had a wreck in years!
Tempered plastic auto body bumpers
Dimensions vary on location
2018
Appendix B: Examples of Installment
SCAVENGE
by Jesse Tharnes
Bibliography

“Anatomy of an Umbrella,”


VITA
Jessica Thames is living in Baton Rouge, LA under pen name Jesse Thames. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Mississippi State University, Starkville, MS in December 2012 after assisting in galleries in Starkville, MS. She has experience in painting, ceramics, graphic design, as well as working for galleries. After Starkville, MS, she moved to Ocean Springs, MS and later to Baton Rouge, LA to obtain her Master of Fine Arts in May 2018. Her current work revolves around both three and two-dimensional forms, found objects, location, and arrangement based on current events and varying perspectives.