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The Materials of Traditions

Victoria Jensen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Daniel Everett, Chair
Jen Watson
Collin Bradford

Department of Art
Brigham Young University

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The homes we grow up in have a great impact on the homes we create as adults. Many of the traditions I saw in my childhood home were expressions of love within our family. These everyday traditions helped not only to build bonds within my nuclear family, but also with the chosen family I have formed as an adult.

Repeating these traditions, or at least my best memory of them, has helped me in building my own home now. The ways I interact with my friends often reflects those same traditions I learned from home. I brought a few of these traditions to the gallery for my show, making the space an extension of my home and the traditions shared there.

Keywords: art, sculpture, installation, video art, performance art, materials, quotidian, memory, work, interaction, salt, home, family
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**Introduction**

I am grateful to have been raised in a loving family. As I reflect on certain ways my family sacrificed for each other, I am filled with gratitude and the desire to continue this attitude of connection to people through service and communication. Much of the way this is expressed has changed as I have grown up, in part because I am geographically distanced from my immediate family. Much of what I do is still influenced by the longing I have for memories of home.

I often make bread, dinner, or create other homemade things to express the love I feel, similar to the love expressed in my home growing up. Artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija have used food to bring people of differing backgrounds together, and many of the participants tell tales of unexpected communion with others involved.¹ In my adult life, I have spent a lot of time bonding with my friends, creating a family-type dynamic since I am far from my own. The connections we have made turn friends into family and a house into a home. I have thrown several parties, made clothes for people to wear to these parties, and baked bread for these people. They are those from whom I have gained support, and are now in essence, my chosen family.

Home then, simply put, is a place where love is shared between family members. Family members can either refer to blood relatives or a “chosen” family of close friends. While these qualifiers for a “home” may change day by day or household by household, a home generally includes both family and love in one way or another. Looking back on my home, certain

memories can add to this idea. These memories, imperfect as they are, connect us to these ideas of home. Certain traditions can fill us with love and are often carried from a childhood home to one’s adult home. For me, some of these traditions are stunningly ordinary and everyday in nature, such as baking bread, sewing clothes, and gathering people to share in the traditions. The cliché “labor of love” can apply fairly directly to such situations, as they extend love through work. The work put in then becomes a way of preserving the past home by celebrating it in the present.
Methodologies

Interaction

Relational Aesthetics, also known as Social Practice, often revolves around building a
community. As the family is a small, foundational unit of communities, the home becomes a
powerfully effective place for interaction. French social philosopher Jacques Rancière suggests,
“Relational art [. . .] intends to create not only objects but situations and encounters.”² A
situation is often more impactful than an object in strengthening connections within a
community. It is easy as the viewer to act passively towards a stationary object. Situations tempt
more engagement from the viewer, turning the experience to a more active than passive one.
That does not always mean the participant is comfortable with the added interaction, but this
added attention usually leaves a stronger impact than a passively placed object. As an artist, I see
no reason to deny the viewer, or in this case the participant, the opportunity to engage in a more
meaningful way than just looking at an object like a painting or sculpture. Nicolas Bourriaud
defends the position that all art today must be inclusive of the viewer, or it is obsolete. In his
book “Relational Aesthetics,” Bourriaud says that art “create[s] free spaces and periods of time
whose rhythms are not the same as those that organize everyday life, and they encourage an
inter-human intercourse.”³

In today’s super-connected world because of the ease of travel and technology like the
internet, we have access to an abundance of art. With such a pool of art to choose from, we can

only pay attention to a certain portion of it. Because of this, often art that does not ask for interaction is often dismissed. By using the home as the center for such interaction, the connections made become more important than the label “art.” Similar to Rirkrit Tirivanija, I prefer to let a situation evolve naturally, rather than be restricted by pre-established guidelines. Even though setting up opportunities for connection is fabricating a situation, pieces like his pivot around the people, not the act of creating a situation. They focus on the opportunities to bring people together for the sake of meeting and conversing with new individuals rather than making a simple statement about the viewer being performatively involved in the art. It is more than art for art’s sake: it is art for connection’s sake. It then becomes more about utilizing the everyday than manipulating it. While all art is a manipulation of ideas and materials the artist encounters, shifting the purpose from creating objects to facilitating human interactions can be a powerful way to bring art into the everyday.

The Quotidian

For me, there is a sort of magic in capturing the ordinary in its glory. It is normal for people to think of a sunset as the beautiful ordinary, but the simple beauty found in other things like grass or the panes of a window can also be unexpectedly spectacular. The sweet calm of making dinner for loved ones or even the joy of a fresh coat of paint on a room that needed a change. My mom always told us that she raised us to “appreciate the finer things in life,” but I have come to see that not only did she teach us to appreciate the finer things, but also elevate the ordinary to this level, finding joy and beauty in every corner of the world.

Perhaps that is the appeal of everyday materials I have explored in my thesis show. The opportunity to elevate the mundane has in some ways, been the objective of many artists. Artist Robert Barry, who works with materials often invisible to the human eye, reminds us that “our
connection to the real world is always important because we live in this world day to day. Understanding and accepting the world can be awe inspiring, motivating, or calming. Maybe that is the underlying truth of the fascination. Materials physically connect us with the world around us, and what better connection than through ordinary aspects of the world. Finding beauty and hope in quotidian materials and situations reinforces the idea that art can be found in ordinary interactions and materials. Born to make connections, members of the human race seek for understanding while interpreting the world around them. These associations then help to both deepen and expand the meaning or interpretation of a work of art. Not everyone knows the symbolic associations of color, types of lines, or forms, but substance and materials that grow from everyday life can be relatable to more people.

Because some “non-artists” have little significant experience with high-quality art materials, some artists turn to other means of expression. Materials can vary far from the expected to things such as the human body, air, or even ideas. Historically, artists used tried and true materials, such as oil paint or clay. For the Dadaists and early conceptual artists, especially Joseph Beuys and Marcel Duchamp, the unimaginable was used to create art. The fascination with readymades and industrialization lead artists to look beyond the traditional. This can lead to far more affordable materials, not only to help the artist’s budget, but also helping the general public to recognize them.

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Artist Tara Donovan is known for her use of everyday objects as art materials. Transforming ordinary, affordable materials into mesmerizing sculptural installations, she elevates the mundane. Starting with humble materials such as plastic straws or playing cards, Donovan carefully arranges them into mesmerizing installation-like sculptures. Initially, I would have never thought that Styrofoam cups could make a formally stunning work of art, but Donovan engages with the material in such unexpected ways. This type of material use is mesmerizing and opens the door to any number of materials in a fine art setting. By manipulating ordinary objects, a viewer can easily become captivated by the beauty she finds in something as ordinary as a playing card. Since Donovan uses materials people are generally familiar with, the viewer can hopefully consider their humble beauty upon re-encountering these materials in the real world.

Memory

For us to recognize anything and know what an item or event is, we must first have a memory associated with that thing. Artists can choose to either capture that everyday aspect of the object or transform it through something else. In the words of Lygia Clark, “The process of transfiguration of an object is limited by the fact that it is grounded not so much in the formal qualities of the object but in its connection with the object’s quotidian use.”\(^6\) This suggests that try as they might, artists can only bring a transformation so far. The material of the art will shine through inherently because of the associations we have with it. Art can only hide so much of the material’s quotidian purpose and our association with that.

Our mind’s ability to store memories holds a crucial role in our understanding events and other things. Long-term memory can sink in better when we interpret it.\(^7\) Interpreting an event (or any visual, audio, or other information for that matter) is more than anything else putting it in our own perspective. Cognitive psychologist Michael J. A. Howe has observed that “A person perceives events in terms of his personal frame of reference, and this considerably influences what he later recalls.”\(^8\) Without digesting the information that we experience, it holds no place in our minds, and slips away as quickly as it came. What is important, and ultimately what is engrained in our memory, is entirely dependent on ourselves and our view of the world. It is not just about what happens, but about how we see it. Even once the noticed and interpreted information has been stored, it does not always stay.

Memory is frequently altered because of our perception (interpretation) of an experience and because of the neuroplasticity of our brains. Interestingly enough, recording in any form a memory only solidifies our interpretation instead of the truth of the event.\(^9\) Even though memory is then unreliable, there is beauty in the way we perceive the past and the joy that it can bring us. This is one reason recording memory is so crucial in maintaining accuracy of information. Photographs, home videos, journals, can all be ways for individuals to record the purest form of the experience. I have not personally been very good at keeping personal records like a journal or taking pictures, but some things are precious enough to maintain in a form beyond memory alone. Some memories of everyday rituals often get forgotten, but I have worked to record some


\(^8\) Howe, *Introduction to Human Memory*, 80.

\(^9\) Howe, *Introduction to Human Memory*, 82.
through video documentation. The show has two video pieces, one of me folding laundry, and another of me making bread. These are both such ordinary tasks, one nurturing and one maintenance related, but both now documents of a re-performance of my home memories.

Work as Art

Many of the interactions I remember growing up are of my mom performing acts of service for us or teaching us to work. I remember vacuuming the family room every Tuesday and Thursday before school when I was in second grade. I remember begging my mom for her homemade bread recipe after sitting across the counter from her making bread over and over again. While tasks like this are incredibly mundane, there is a certain beauty in them. Mierle Laderman Ukeles is possibly the best example of domestic labor-based art. In her *Maintenance Art Performances*, Ukeles elevated tasks such as dusting and mopping. While her performances were done with the idea of them being an institutional critique, they also elevated not just the actions of her performances, but also brought importance to the area she worked in and the people normally performing those tasks.¹⁰ She helped to make the invisible important and acknowledged where it was likely overlooked before.

In performing similar tasks in my own work, the focus is different. The tasks are not a critique of feminine expectations or domesticity, but rather a celebration of the love I was shown. Such tasks while historically gendered do not need to be. Approaching such tasks could be seen as a commentary on feminism and gender roles, but this is not the purpose for performing these tasks in my work. My dad makes dinner more often than my mom now that we are all grown up.

This does not demean either of their efforts and does not feel out of place in the slightest. The roles of such work have never been gendered in my mind, and I am grateful to have grown up believing that. When I vacuumed our family room before school, my brother was cleaning the powder bathroom down the hall. Housework was not, and still is not to me, a mark of feminine domesticity. Sewing clothes does not make me feel like I am fulfilling a social expectation. It is rather something that I thoroughly enjoy, and as a woman can use my efforts to do them. There is a sweet power in the traditions I carry on, and they provide relief for me. There is no burden in service in my home. When life is stressful and my anxiety is out of control, performing these tasks bring solace instead of shame or stress. This is a very different reason than many female artists have for such types of work and I accept that. Rirkrit Tiravanija brings people together for a meal without it being a gendered work, and I approach it the same way. Joy can come from working as a means of connecting. Labor, however mundane it may be, can extend beyond struggle and into the realm of beauty.
Concept

Salt

As artist Robert Barry reminds us, “ideas come out of objects,” and to me such objects or materials are where my ideas stem from. Looking at some material or other sparks ideas of what to do with it, rather than getting an idea and searching for the materials to accomplish it. I first started using salt because I was looking for color-less materials that would lend themselves to color manipulation through light. The more time I spent with it, the more ideas came. The first idea that became art was a piece encapsulating a large pile of salt that created a sandbox of sorts. The salt here in relation to the wooden beams around the box referred to the salt water on boats and ports that my great-great grandfather would have been familiar with. He worked in the ports of Liverpool to save money for passage to the United States. Since I was named after him, this piece was an attempt to begin to connect with his life story. From there, salt continued to fascinate me as I learned more about his connection with it.

This great-great grandfather, Victor Lesamiz Sr., was from the Basque country of Spain. This region has a strong history of salted cod. Its contribution to the development of Europe and trade among those nations was economically advantageous for the Basque. With Catholicism being the dominating religious practice throughout Europe, fish was incredibly important. Meat was not to be eaten on Fridays or during Lent. The Basques were located in an advantageous position geographically and were able to access both the cod and the salt necessary to preserve and ship throughout Europe.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} Copeland, \textit{Voids: A Retrospective}, 79–87.

\textsuperscript{12} Mark Kurlansky, \textit{Salt} (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 109–110.
While the origins of this trade date back to the Middle Ages, its traditions continue today. My grandmother, the granddaughter of Victor Sr., remembers eating salted cod every year for Christmas dinner. This Basque tradition remained in my family even after they emigrated to the United States from Spain, reinforcing the power of this tradition. While I do not have any memory of eating salted cod with my family, I saw it in nearly every market in Brazil, showing its continued global influence. While I did not live in Brazil for very long, my time there as a missionary still required me to do everyday things like grocery shopping. I grew to know the customs of the markets there, and eventually became accustomed to the differences between those markets and those I grew up with in the United States. Even when I saw the salted cod in these markets, it was sitting out on a table without refrigeration or any other means of preservation. The salt itself was the only necessary preservation. You could smell it from a mile away, but it was still perfectly stable and safe. Salt’s preservative qualities are thus such that even fish, which generally spoils very quickly, is kept free of rot and bacteria. There are countless examples throughout time, and in cooking today, where salt is used as the main preservative. Even outside of cooking, salt has been used as a preservative in cases like Egyptian mummies in their embalming ceremonies.\textsuperscript{13} This idea of preservation, which is possible because salt kills the harmful bacteria without harming the good aspects of the preserved.

Our minds’ memory preservation has ideological parallels to salt’s preservation. We sacrifice attention to some information in order to pay attention to something else. For example, we constantly see our nose, but our mind knows it is insignificant to our view of the world. We can change this by merely choosing to see our nose. This widely accepted idea is called selective

\textsuperscript{13} Kurlansky, \textit{Salt}, 42–43.
disregard or selective attention, and it plays a part in our memory. Inspired by the idea of preservation, the pieces in my show that refer to the history of my home and family are covered in salt crystals. The salt then becomes a visual metaphor for my attempt to preserve the good I remember experiencing in my childhood home.

Home

Home for me has had to become more than a place. My family moved around quite a bit while I was growing up. Even since I turned 18 and left home, my parents have moved a couple of times. It is funny to give an answer when someone asks me where home is. I have had to grapple a bit with the idea of home and helping it to mean something more than the location of my family house. Even with that, the various houses I grew up in have overarching memories that make them feel like a single home. I believe that the home one grows up in shapes the home one will create as an adult. Good traditions are often carried on, or at least remembered fondly. These traditions and memories are ways that people were brought together and love was shared. That then is what home is to me. Home has become the idea of loving those close to us, and we feel their love in return. It is not a place, but a mindset.

In my adult life I have also moved around a lot, so this new idea of home has been quite valuable. Friends become the family, and traditions I grew up with are ways I can show them love. In my home growing up, the bread my mom made us was such a powerful expression of her love. I now follow in her footsteps and have been making bread in my own home since I was barely 18 years old. As a young and poor college student, it was an affordable way that I could give to others. It might take an unnecessary amount of time, but that time is imbued with love through the labor involved. Even the time it took to learn to make various types of bread as a teenager always was spent with love. My mom taught me her basic whole wheat bread, focaccia,
pizza dough, cinnamon rolls, and more. Her mom taught me artisanal sourdough, pie crust, and more. These memories not only taught me to create in my own kitchen now, but also provided bonding experiences with these important women in my life.

Another tradition of love in my childhood home was sewing. My mom sewed many of my clothes when I was a very young girl out of financial necessity. She sewed less for me as I grew up, but the tradition continued. Any time I concocted some strange idea for a Halloween costume or for a school project, my mom patiently figured out a way to carry out my design. This trend continued in high school when she made gowns for all my formal dances, a few of which are included in the piece Love, Mom. Love, Victoria. At this point, it was again out of financial necessity, and many late nights were spent to get the dresses done in time. By this point I was technically skilled enough to help some, but as a high schooler my desire to help was limited. As I graduated from high school and moved out for college, I started sewing more on my own because it was a skill I could do for myself, and could help my friends when they needed it.

While this tradition of sewing in my adult home started with mending and altering clothes for myself and others, my skills have grown to making clothes for myself and others. I have been able to return the favor my mom granted by helping others make their Halloween costumes, no matter how silly or last minute. My friends also have a fun tradition of attending murder mystery parties with extravagant costumes. Since such thematically specific clothing is hard to come by, especially on college budgets, I have helped several people make their clothes for these events. Many of the dresses in the piece Love, Mom. Love, Victoria. are from these parties. Each cut of fabric, each stitch on my machine, each design decision in the pattern making are done with the utmost care and love. It takes a lot of time to make something like a formal gown and would be
beyond my skill to make one in a carefree way for just any stranger. Expressions of love like this are what connect people into an idea of home.

Family

I was raised in a standard nuclear family. My dad, mom, myself, and two younger brothers and two younger sisters. While the number of children might be higher than the national average, it was still a standard nuclear family. We were middle class, usually single income, and my dad is a college graduate. Most of our homes were in suburban communities, we went to church every Sunday, had family dinner every night, and did our homework at the kitchen table after school. It seems ideal, and in many ways it was. We still had sibling squabbles, money problems, and other imperfections, but no family unit is perfect. Most of my growing up, we had little to no extended family living nearby, but we still had a relationship with all our extended family members. This picture of family is often viewed as the “ideal” despite its infrequency in our current culture.¹⁴ This home was loving, and my family is still important even though I live on my own now.

Seeing as I am not married with my own nuclear family, my current “family,” outside the nuclear family I still associate with, is less-than traditional. Those I consider to be the family that are regularly in my home are close friends with which I share memories, love, and support. We are all single college students, yearning to make a support system away from the homes we grew up in. This is, while expected for people in our position, a good example of kinship. Writer

David Brooks writes that such a “family” is becoming more and more common. This communal, chosen family can extend beyond the home, or into it. While many people in my current chosen family live in different apartments, any of those can feel like home when we are all together. We show up to each other’s important life events, celebrate each other’s birthdays, answer middle-of-the-night phone calls for help, and much more. There is support and love similar to that of the nuclear family I had growing up. The communion I have with them brings stability as we love and serve each other.

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15 Brooks, “The Nuclear Family was a Mistake.”
Exhibition

My final thesis exhibition, *Home*, was on display in January 2022 in the B.F. Larsen gallery in the Harris Fine Arts Center at Brigham Young University. This exhibit was a culmination of three years working at BYU, with works spanning the course of two of those years. The gallery space opens at the base of an atrium in the center of the building, with ceilings extending up three floors to the top of the building. The gallery space is constrained by a lighting grid, creating a 16.5 × 35 ft. space for the exhibition. I created a linear progression of the art, reinforcing the idea of a progression from my past home to the present one. The show starts with a salt-encrusted sculpture and antique embroidery (figure 1) paired with a sound piece. This grouping was followed by an installation of salt-encrusted clothes folded neatly on a couch (figure 2) facing a video piece (figure 3) of me folding clothes in my home. Hanging above the couch is another embroidery (figure 4), this one made from wool yarn I spun and embroidered on a black mesh. After that, laid out on the ground in a 5 × 8 ft. grid spanning 3.5 × 5 ft. are hand-made papers (figure 5) made from denim with the word “home” printed on each piece. Following this is a collection of ten handmade dresses displayed on a garment rack (figure 6). Behind the garment rack is a kitchen table with four loaves of homemade bread sitting in front of a video (figure 7) of me baking bread. At the very end of the line is a space for two performance pieces (figure 8). One is a table set up for bread kneading and the other a chair for sewing a coat progressively each day of the show.

The table at the front saw the most interaction from viewers. With the sound piece playing from the table, there is an extra level of enticement beyond the visual fascination of the salt. From doing daily performances, I was able to witness much of the viewer interaction and talk with a few people. Initially, I was planning on not interacting with the viewers during the
performances, but after thinking of the reason behind the performances, I decided against this approach. So many of my memories with my mom baking bread and sewing for me included me sitting in the room and talking with her. Allowing people to talk to me felt only appropriate to continue this portion of the tradition. The gallery became an extension of my home, so inviting people to interact with me as I performed work I would do at home was a genuine reaction. With my home as a place to connect with a chosen family, extending that love and community to the viewer reinforces the ideas of home displayed in the show.
Conclusion

After creating a home for my chosen family after having left my childhood home, this show provided me an opportunity to share these memories with others. While I know that these viewers likely did not share the same experiences in their homes as I did, I hope the feeling of home would help them connect with memories of their home and thoughts of the traditions they have carried on or ways they might express love in their homes. The caring, nurturing experiences I had have helped me to connect with others in my home, now extending to those I meet in the gallery space. While I was not able to physically invite any of the viewers into my childhood home or my current one, several elements and memories bring those spaces into the gallery, making it an extension of my various homes.

Our relationship with and response to our homes changes over time. For many children, a home holds certain safeties, memories, and ideals. As we grow older, some of these things are fondly remembered. It then becomes our place to build a new home. Many elements from our past often carry through to the homes we create as adults. I have fond memories of baking bread and sewing during my childhood. These are now a couple of the things I have carried through to my adult home. They helped me feel love growing up, and now have become a way I show love to others in my home.
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