Pedestrian

Marissa Albrecht
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Pedestrian

Marissa Albrecht

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

Master of Fine Arts

Joseph Ostraff, Chair
Garold Barton
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ABSTRACT

Pedestrian

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Master of Fine Arts

My feet are my transportation while living in the college town of Provo, Utah. When walking, I am drawn to designs found at construction sites and office workplaces, methods of labor that are executed sequentially. These designs lead me to think about laborious jobs that I have had and time performing mundane, repetitive tasks.

Walking, photographing, gathering, and transporting used material to a workspace are the preliminary actions for my art practice. Creation emerges by relating material from varying environments through their inherent patterns, sizes, and shapes. I organize elements of the everyday in a new harmonious context with each other. At the core of my art practice, I present an altered way of looking at commonplace materials.

Keywords: art, assemblage, collage, collect, installation, man-made, mundane, object, pedestrian, photograph, photomontage, repetition, walking
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Introduction

In my childhood, when a little change in my daily routine was needed, I moved furniture around. My shared bedroom had a bunk bed, two desks and dressers, a small couch, and a couple of bookshelves. The furniture placement was never permanent, and the bedroom was large enough to allow freedom to experiment with multiple possibilities. Change allowed for a new path, a new mindset, a new perspective within my living quarters. Sometimes an entire Saturday was devoted to the anticipated transformation. Not only did I move the furniture, but I also sorted the books in the bookshelf, folded my clothes to make more space in the dresser, moved framed pictures to new walls, and rearranged the throw pillows on my bed.

As a child and teenager, I also remember wanting to hold on to things for sentimental reasons. This is irreplaceable, I told myself. My parents did not allow for an excess of junk in the bedroom, so little places were established for each memento. They were displayed as a bookend or hung from my lamp switch. The little trinkets had value only to me, so I brought them into the spotlight and made each one look intentional. Anything could be visually pleasant when it was orderly. As the curator of my bedroom, I easily noticed if a little brother decided to sneak in and take something; everything had its place. I still enjoy organizing spaces to create a more satisfying functional use. My living arrangements have become much smaller since leaving home; there is less to reposition in my quaint, square bedroom. Thus, my art studio is a dedicated place to gather, organize, compose, and rearrange.
Methodologies

Play

The first time I remember deliberately juxtaposing two environments was October 2018 when noticing a pattern of raised circles on the campus sidewalk. Already in my backpack were colored label stickers. Spontaneously, I placed red dots on top of the truncated domes (warning pavers for the visually impaired). It ended up being a performative action while a crowd of confused students walked past me. With simple label stickers and a slab of concrete, the ordinary discoveries along my path evoked a fun assembly of materials.

In a New York Times article, “Let Children Get Bored Again,” writer Pamela Paul states, With monotony, small differences begin to emerge…This is why so many useful ideas occur in the shower, when you’re held captive to a mundane activity. Of course, it’s not really the boredom itself that’s important; it’s what we do with it. When you reach your breaking point, boredom teaches you to respond constructively, to make something happen for yourself.¹

While watching my young nieces and nephews, I notice that they make use of all things around them and naturally incorporate nearby objects into their fictional narrative. The commonplace things I discover are a portion of my personal narrative. Just as children focus on play, there is enjoyment acting on my intuitive thoughts when placing random things together. It is difficult for me to be truly bored. Repetitious design elements can be found everywhere outside, like warning signs, painted street markings, dumpsters, orange construction cones, etc. Indoors, I take

interest in everyday items that fall under the category of office supplies, such as lined paper, dividing tabs, color labels, paper clips, tape, and push pins. These two distinct environments have recurrent connections in their man-made color, shapes, proportions, and coordinating grid patterns.

Collect

I collect discarded things that I see and like: old traffic signs, empty paint cans, PVC pipes, copper wiring, wood scraps, etc. Also included in my collection are office knick-knacks, such as bubble wrap from packages and graph paper from a sibling’s high school math class. On one occasion, I was walking through a market and accidentally tipped over an entire box of tiny red-striped hot cocoa straws. After picking them up to throw in the trash, I quickly realized their potential in my art.

Many treks to my studio are made throughout the week to store materials. Gathered objects, large and small, rest next to others with similar visual interest. Along with assembling physical materials, my art routine involves quick snapshots of man-made objects that draw my attention. These scenes may consist of stationary props like drinking fountains, trash cans, street construction, painted pedestrian markings, or pipes attached to a wall. The intention is to crop these functional sculptures from their immobile environment and showcase them in a new location. I print the photo and pin it to my studio wall. The image now lives alongside the collected objects and slowly begins a new dialogue within the space.

It is difficult to determine why I am drawn to certain arrangements or structures, but with any photo I take there is an urge to do something with it: add to it, edit it, transform it, or act on it. Accordingly, the photograph starts as my inspiration for an assemblage. Individual marks—collaging material—are put down to pursue a formal aesthetic. Painting and drawing made up
most of my undergraduate art training while my professors focused strongly on design elements and principles. In my art practice today, a brush and paint are no longer used to organize shapes and lines. I do, however, continue using painting methods when adding to my photographed scenes. Among the quotidian materials that sit in my studio, I reach for the next one that could add positively to my overall composition. The orange roll of tape is no longer a functional adhesive item, but simply an orange circle. Relational sizes, textures, shapes, lines, and color are all important to me as the designer. As is spontaneously responding to and playing with the material, which helps my assemblages come alive and stay visually active.

**Sketchbook**

A small sketchbook is always in my backpack and is pulled out many times during the week. My favorite marks are ones that are not planned. Introduced in the Surrealist movement from artist André-Aimé-René Masson, automatic drawing is the act of expressing the subconscious with no preconceived subject or composition in mind.² In this manner, one can imagine how a young child feels when they begin an illustration. They might just be excited to see how the texture of a black crayon runs across a white paper, or the magic that happens when paint spills onto a clean surface. Once the impulsive marks are made in my sketchbook, I will later add deliberate lines, patterns, and color groupings to make a finished piece.

My sketching habits have transferred to natural workings in my art studio. The intuitive system I perform has me floating to certain materials one day and other materials the next. Just as coming upon objects along my path, serendipity guides my actions when composing. Each step becomes a reaction to the prior, and if a placement does not feel right, I can easily retract

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items from the work later. However, if strategizing too much ahead, my compositions become stagnant and less fun to work with.

Layers

The final steps of my art practice generate the most changes to my assemblages. After collecting and composing materials together, I am left with three-dimensional artworks. A different perspective can be experienced from each angle. When first working in this method, a photograph would be taken for documentation, the assemblage would be de-installed, and then on to the next one. Realizing that my design configurations were a result of my mood or patience on a particular day, I was curious to discover alternative outcomes at later times.

Objects collected along my walking path excite me because of their arbitrary shapes, bright colors, and their satisfying oddness. Rather than quickly moving on to a new project, I focus on one and revise it repeatedly. After the assemblage is taken apart, I set the materials close by. Meanwhile, I print my photo documentation of the assemblage and tape it to my bare studio wall. The size of the colored print is determined by an inclination to upscale or downscale proportions.

Visual artist John Houck makes his pieces by photographing and rephotographing objects from his youth, paintings, and sheets of folded paper. He adds and removes elements with each iteration. In his final photograph, there is always one real fold and the rest are trompe-l'œil. As a software engineer, Houck integrates systematic coded grids of color combinations into his art. He could have written software to determine the colors and placements of folds; however, Houck
lets intuition guide his process by choosing those firsthand. He states that he is creating a dialog between repetition and desire.\(^3\)

Standing by the photograph on my wall, I look at the pile of objects intended for re-use to create a fresh composition. There is no preconceived outcome in mind. The visual height of my work tends to be only as far as I can reach up the wall, primarily for quick modifications as needed. Admittedly, I am focused more on the added items than on the initial photograph I took outside while walking. Although the scene in that photo is a very important start to my process, it is only that: a start. It slowly diminishes through each phase of the project as I document new arrangements on top of each other again and again, creating a graphic record of sequential decisions.

*Repetition with Variation*

As the designer, I choose to make each phase of the assemblage slightly different than the previous—positioning a piece of wood in a different direction than the last time or unwinding the string instead of keeping its original spherical form. One of my favorite steps near the end is including fine details with tiny remaining articles. Often unnoticed at first glance may be strips of clear tape over the photograph, or a yellow pin separated just far enough from the body of the composition. Combining repetition with variation can evoke discoveries each time it is viewed.

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Concepts

Observations

One cold Sunday afternoon in January 2018, I was walking home, and it began to snow. Still a few miles from my house, I was not happy and could only think of how wet my non-waterproof jacket would get. In urgency, my steps became faster. Eventually, I slowed down enough to glide my index finger across the top of a fence lined with fresh snow. Very cool, I thought, and began to notice other surfaces. I used my foot to mark the sidewalk, then stopped, leaned down, and collected snow with my bare hands. This magnificent pure white element that compressed like a Styrofoam ball put me in awe. Dropping it to the ground, I observed the way it broke apart on the wet surface. Have I not noticed snow like this before, I wondered, or just not taken the time to stop, look, and engage with it? My anxiousness to get home was no longer the objective, and I spent the next hour playing with the snow. I learned that even amongst cold and snow—which is not my favorite weather—I could joyfully embrace elements and materials around me and never be bored. That moment in the snow enhanced the trajectory of my art practice: to notice and participate in my environment.

Along my pedestrian path today, I pause at construction sites and envy the territory in which those workers participate. There are actual “sculptures” being built, whether this new sculpture is a half-finished parking structure, or the nearby scrap pile, or even a worker’s lunch box sitting on a mound of two-by-fours. Aesthetically, the place is perfect to find something to be inspired by, but the machines, tools, equipment, and scraps of junk are closed off to the public without the entry ticket of a hardhat and neon orange vest. Aspiring to take part in the difficult manual labor that happens on-site is not my desire, but I do wish to be an artist there, gathering up the miscellaneous pieces and building ongoing sculptures off to the side.
Mundane Jobs

Although I have not been admitted inside the fence of a large construction site to observe, I have had many jobs that took me into once unfamiliar environments: a grocery store cashier, an early morning custodian, a nursery/greenhouse stockgirl, a hostess at a Mexican restaurant, an art department secretary, a custom framer, a sign maker, and a campus painter for interior walls and traffic lines. No matter the job, there was laborious repetition for hours. As each assignment inevitably became a rote chore, various patterns became visible so as to perform a task with the same outcome. For example, painting all of the tops of a curb first, then returning for the sides, as opposed to painting top, side, top, side every six feet. Looking for prospective information within a space eventually made the job more tolerable, such as taking notice of changes in the environment since last present. Routine is continuous order, whereas diversity allows the mind to be engaged and entertained while creating different solutions to complete a single task. Artistic assemblages are developed in the same way: repetition with variation. The only limitation in completing each iteration is to use the original set of objects and materials.

The exhibition, Curiouser, was presented in the BYU Museum of Art in 2018. Nina Katchadourian’s work is focused on play. Using only a phone camera, she improvises with materials close at hand while in-flight. The results are simple, usually humorous, and genuine. One section of the exhibit, Seat Assignment, includes collages with SkyMall magazines and pretzels; Sweater Gorillas shows off the wrinkles in the artist’s sweater; Buckleheads is reflections of strangers on the artist’s seatbelt; Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style showcases music videos performed while in the airplane bathroom. Katchadourian’s exhibit was delightfully engaging for both artists and non-artists alike because the items she used are so common. The artist explains her work as “an investment of thinking on your feet, from optimism
about the artistic potential that lurks within the mundane, and from curiosity about the productive tension between freedom and constraint.”

Nina Katchadourian is a superb example of an artist who does not limit her creations to an art studio. Her engagement with the conventional is amusing while introducing new methods and challenges.

*Free Stuff*

Past and present jobs have redefined the idea of appropriateness of materials that may find their way into my art studio. Many things are inherited from discard piles in the campus paint shop where I currently work. The woodshop next door also provides free scraps daily. Large traffic signs come from my task to switch out the old for the new. Working with a cash register at several jobs introduced the appeal of brand new receipt rolls lined up in the drawer. Much later, when the college bookstore offered a free box of white receipt rolls in the employee break room, they contributed to an ongoing collection.

From a young age, my dad would invite me to run Saturday morning errands with him to Home Depot. I remember gazing at dowels compacted vertically in a bin and wondered what their different colored ends represented. Then I looked at the price and wondered why a little stick cost more money than an ice cream cone. Hardware store finds are not inexpensive—a fact which prompted me to begin collecting used stuff no longer wanted. I also did not mind the scrapes and bruises that each piece came with. The marks displayed a history that led me to wonder how it was originally used and why. My dad would explain the function of the funny forms he bought at the hardware store, but my curious mind always veered off into thinking what I might use them for instead. As an adult, I do not remember all that my dad tried to teach me,

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but in my art practice my imagination is continually used by joining odds and ends to give them a new function of aesthetics.

*Man-made*

On my walks, only man-made scenes are selected and photographed. Geometric shapes, patterns, grids and organized spaces are most pleasing to me. Math class was a difficult subject, trying to connect algebraic equations to real life. But analyzing geometry’s points, lines, surfaces, solids, and higher dimensional analogs kept me engaged. In other words, geometry became practical because it involved observing and interpreting shapes with angles.

I was that student ready with a three-ring binder on the first day of school. It was packed with a heavy stack of lined paper, colored-coded divider tabs for every subject, and a zippered pouch with various writing utensils. Today, there is still something satisfying with having things arranged in an orderly manner—not excessively organized, but comfortably structured.

*Visual History*

John Houck names his work “aggregate photographs”—emblems of the manner in which imagination and recollection alter and distort our views of our past lives.⁵ Photography is a truth mechanism, raw and candid. By following a system of re-documenting assemblages in my studio, much like John Houck, my actions are tapping into an acute perception of truth; time, memory, selection, and rigor are then embedded into the art. Progressively shifting scale speaks to the consequence of something. Small moments are past and larger ones are present.

During the creation process, no special thought is given to why a particular choice is made. If so, the authentic work ceases and real answers may never be uncovered in the end. Walking in the snow in January 2018 seemed insignificant at the time, as did placing red dots on

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the sidewalk later that year. But just like the photographs used, my art is the evidence of truth: my past, my likes and dislikes, my labors, my personality. Each year or phase of existence offers variations of repeated tendencies, curiosities, and behaviors.

New York artist Letha Wilson studied painting but now begins all of her works with a photograph. She admits, “I don’t consider myself a photographer,” but is interested in pushing the boundaries of the medium, particularly the presentation of a photograph and how it is expected to behave on a gallery wall. Wilson likes to break assumptions apart by demonstrating how a photograph can be made more dimensional instead of entirely flat and pristine. The artist considers how even a simple cliché object can have more movement as a sculpture in the space of the gallery. To Wilson, sculpture has the most possibilities. In contrast, photographs take a secondary role in my finished work. Unsophisticated images are simply the starting point for large sculptures. Nevertheless, watching how Wilson brings together two- and three-dimensional elements has given me a reference for possibilities in a gallery space.

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Exhibition

Outcome

In February 2020, my final thesis exhibition brought the prior three years of experiential learning together. The exhibition, *Pedestrian*, took place in Gallery 303 of the Harris Fine Arts Center at Brigham Young University. This gallery was chosen because of the expansive white walls and vacant flooring at the center. The room provided a total of 145 linear feet with eight-foot ceilings. Realized works included four large assemblage-installations, three smaller sculptural assemblages, and three two-dimensional photomontages. The latter two sets were made in my studio, de-installed, transferred to the new location, and similarly re-installed in the gallery without altering their original design or dimensions. However, the large assemblage-installations transformed quite a bit from my studio to the gallery. As previously described, each version of my assemblages took on new arrangements of the same objects. I chose to design my last iteration of the large pieces on-site in Gallery 303. This provided more freedom to work within the environment of the gallery.

The larger assemblages became the most dominant in the room, while the other works helped balance the remaining space. While walking and observing individual pieces, onlookers could engage with the rhythm of process, artifact, playfulness, diptych, and pattern found among the exhibited collection. The strongest works were, arguably, the first two assemblages I began. There were more phases of evolution that led up to the final outcome and thus they felt the most resolved. The two-dimensional collages were also successful pieces with their layers of visual progression.
Potential

One large assemblage was continually tweaked but never connected to entirely. Many have asked when a work is complete and ready to be revealed. Any piece could keep going with time; the further along a piece is, the more opportunities it has to harmonize. If the duration of the exhibit could extend from two weeks to two months, all the better. Daily physical interaction with the works would bring about an active performance of labor for my audience and my art. I also realized that the playfulness in my “safe space” studio created an edgier process and fluid practice. When installing in the gallery with the mindset that every action taken is terminal, the work has the possibility to become stagnant. Perhaps the most ideal location for my art to thrive would be an active construction site that brings about impromptu opportunities because of the ever-changing conditions.
Conclusion

The desire to magnify the seemingly insignificant is at the forefront of the exhibition, *Pedestrian*. As a child, small secondhand objects were found and given a new function in my living spaces. Now, each walking route and campus job naturally permit me to collect, play, and design with many other materials. Exercising a more curious mindset during monotonous tasks day-to-day has transformed ordinary locations into exciting opportunities to create from.

Themes of repetition with variation are not new for artists. Still, for my designs it is a pattern used to present altered compositions with the same supplies. Intuitive choices are placed along the way, thus sharing the evidence of the artist: her past, her likes and dislikes, her labors, and her personality. Both the found objects and the personal history that make the assemblages are simple, common, and perhaps even boring when standing alone. However, when organized harmoniously with a new context, they can be elevated and noticed for something other than their original function.
Images

Figure 1 - Exhibition View

Figure 2 - Exhibition View
Figure 3 - Large Assemblage

Figure 4 - Large Assemblage
Figure 5 - Large Assemblage

Figure 6 - Large Assemblage
Figure 7 - Photomontage

Figure 8 - Photomontage
Figure 9 - Photomontage
Figure 10 - Small Assemblage
Figure 11 - Small Assemblage

Figure 12 - Small Assemblage
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