

AERIAL ROOT

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts

by

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Abstract

My work involves multiple mediums and pursues an exploratory approach to object making and time-based media. Language figures throughout my practice, if not carved into clay or paper, then applied in video, probing interior spaces and lines of thought. Objects are volatile, liable for a kind of unravelling based on how they are constructed, weighted by one or more supporting apparatus. There is a desire to access the gap between the corporeal and the digital. This dialogue generates anthropomorphic forms, clunky digital figures and surreal combinations of both. I am interested in the fragment, the isolated form, the nugget of prose, a disarticulated but voiced subjectivity. There is an ongoing reconciliation between somewhat literary attempts to *write* a blunt experience and the awkward translation this has in material form. The desire to expose the innate possibilities and hilarious shortfalls of both and to exceed this somehow is what drives my making, building, writing, etc.

I



1. *A Lie is Liquid PVA Glue*, 2019. Plaster, steel, enamel. 53 x 6 x 84".



2. *How to Remain Tender*, 2019. Plaster, rope, plastic ties, paper, wood, steel, acrylic. 54 x 138 x 60".



3. *Bend, Bend, Bend, Crack - If Only Tyrants Stretched More*, 2019. Wax, 38 x 62", digital video, 12 min. 50 sec. Still I.



4. *Bend, Bend, Bend, Crack - If Only Tyrants Stretched More*, 2019. Wax, 38 x 62", digital video, 12 min. 50 sec. Still II.



5. *When Your Breath Just Can't Keep Up*, 2019. Steel, rubber tire, plastic ties, unfired clay, enamel. 56 x 21 x 19".

Remember to write about what it must feel like for my father to exist on this planet..

dimensionality in terms of words around the work, the way language can move in and around the surface of the piece and space between it and the viewer, anything can happen in this space, it's a charged and active zone..i imagine language here as an electric conduit, a line wafting and wasping in between two parameters, it's a glowing line that changes colour often, sometimes forgets where its been and travels around another way, forming a new configuration of messages, but it doesn't stop moving, around the work is a wall of language

teenage boy and old woman, are these my spirit personas, I'm awkward.. I'm stubborn, but in terms of experience something about my life resonates with both of these people, I don't feel fully formed and yet I feel like I've seen a lot, been

6. *Each Word Like a Popcorn*, 2019. Digital video, 17 min. 59 sec. Still.



7. *Multicolor Optional*, 2019. Plant, wood stand, printed images on adhesive. 38 x 30 x 22”.



8. *Look at What You're Facing Into*, 2019. Unfired clay, acrylic, wood, enamel. 65 x 22 x 22".



9. *First Knees, Then Hips, Then Feet*, 2019. Ceramic, acrylic, metal eyelets and chain. 64 x 36 x 11" (dimensions variable).



10. *We Know Each Other*, 2018. Bent plexiglass, acrylic airbrush, watercolor. 3 x 14 x 12".



11. *So Baroque*, 2019. Papier-mâché, acrylic, aluminum, engraved text. 6 x 28 x 36".



12. *A Lung That is a Taut Basket*, 2019. Unfired clay, papier-mâché, cyanotype, acrylic, steel, Rustoleum. 54 x 28 x 9".



13. *Minor Collision*, 2019. Digital video, 1 min. 19 sec. Still.



14. "T" as in *the Tyranny of Harmony*, 2019. Unfired clay, oil, acrylic. 10.5 x 11 x 3".



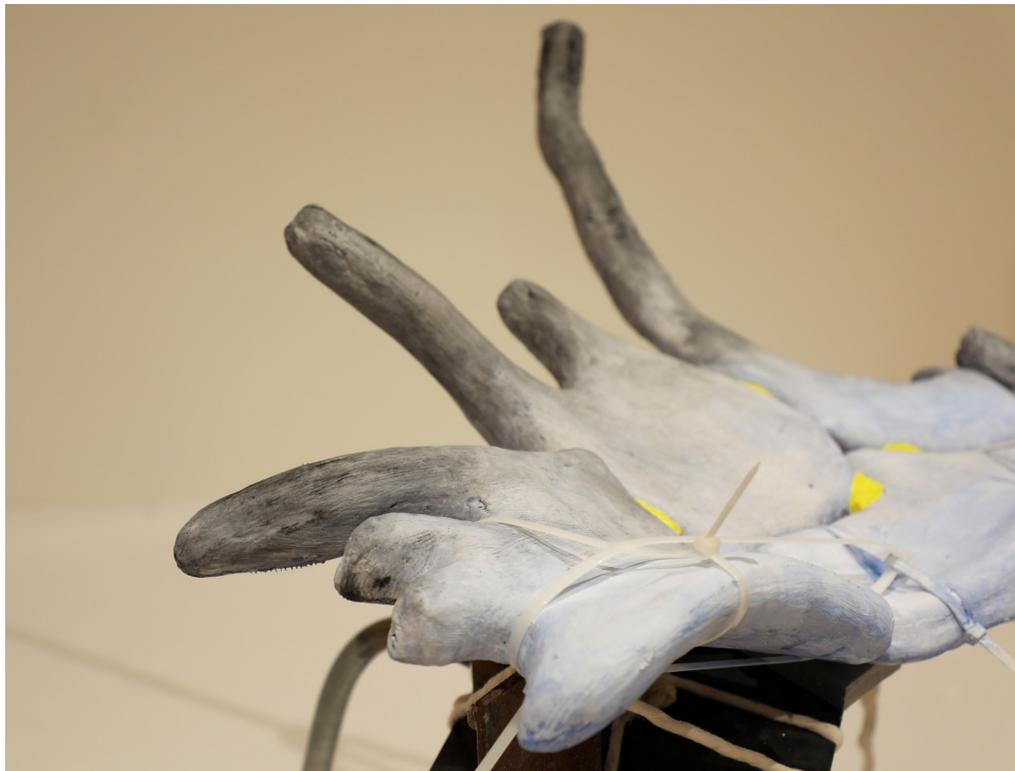
15. (detail) *First Knees, Then Hips, Then Feet*, 2019. Ceramic, acrylic, metal eyelets and chain. 64 x 36 x 11" (dimensions variable).



16. (detail) *So Baroque*, 2019. Papier-mâché, acrylic, aluminum, engraved text.
6 x 28 x 36".



17. (detail) *A Lie is Liquid PVA Glue*, 2019. Plaster, steel, enamel. 53 x 6 x 84".



18. (detail) *How to Remain Tender*, 2019. Plaster, rope, plastic ties, paper, wood, steel, acrylic. 54 x 138 x 60".

this is the universe we are oscillating within, the one of cushioned walls,
drowning sound, echoes falling asunder on your lap, the land of 2 x 4 dreams,
the town of muffled screams and the zone of slippage and curbside leaks, the
lawn of rotten dishes and easy strife, of never-ending and no wife, of harnessed
breakage and levitated pain, suspended truth and lettered forgetting,
languishing reverb and holy screams, the angels in your father's dreams,
crack the jackpot, jack in the box, yellow fingers, too-wide-smile, etc.



Various states of “in-between” or precarity precede much of my sculpture. I think of my work as existing between the languages of hardware and poetry. I use iconic forms and images as a ground to set up relationships between digital spaces, crafted objects and industrial materials. My work documents objects in transition from something recognizable to a strange state of creation or destruction.

Having a background in literature, and in the vein of feminist artistic practices like that of Ree Morton, I involve language as a material in my work. Mining the visualization of a kind of sci-fi dystopic future, my work aims to give agency to emotional states - states produced by extreme external forces that trespass upon our interior, intimate and imaginative spaces.

To varying degrees, humor is present in my art as a critique of patriarchal systems and escapist cultural models. The “slapstick” and the specific gesture of cartoon in my work act as an important entry point to meditate on desperation, failure, an unknowable future and pleasure in the mix.

The conditions of my work speak to the ironic and emotional potential of materials. Jolting between slick and hand-crafted, my work also slides between the identifiable and the fictional. The work plays in this overlap, using the muscle of curiosity driven decision making.

Galvanizing an emotional and physical connection with the viewer is a necessary part of how my sculpture operates. Many pieces have a support or structural element that prompts a sense of waiting - waiting for collapse or survival or some shift around the environment of the sculpture.

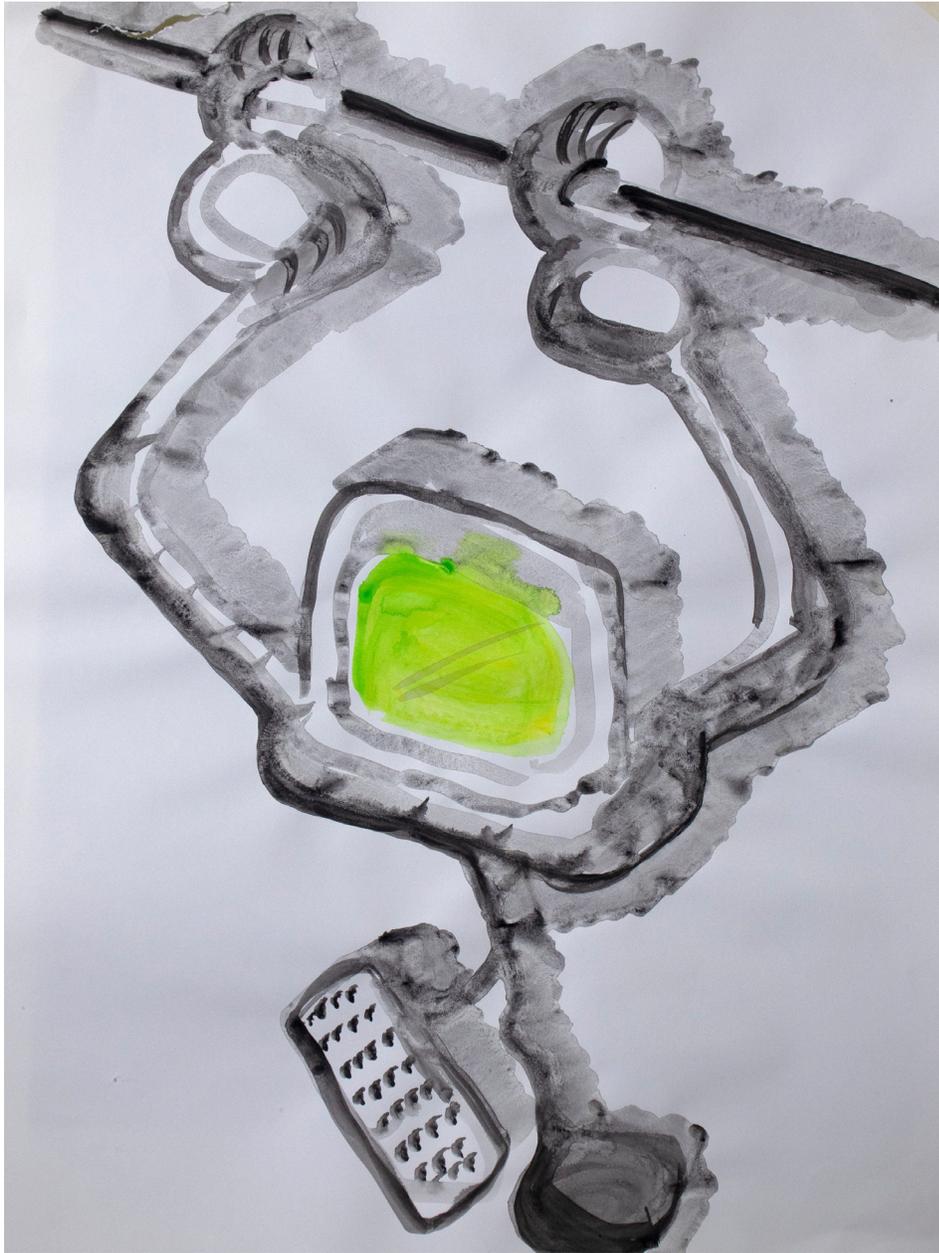
There is a tension between provisional, fast ways of making and more labored processes. Using sculpture, video, performance and writing allows me to explore medium-specific boundaries and to create inventive linkages between them. This opens up and invigorates how I approach producing work and the processes involved. Along this line, I am making sculptural works that have a performative element, i.e., an engineered aura of balance, wobble or spontaneity.



II



19. Untitled, 2020. Acrylic and marker on paper. 18 x 24".



20. Untitled, 2020. Acrylic on paper. 18 x 24".



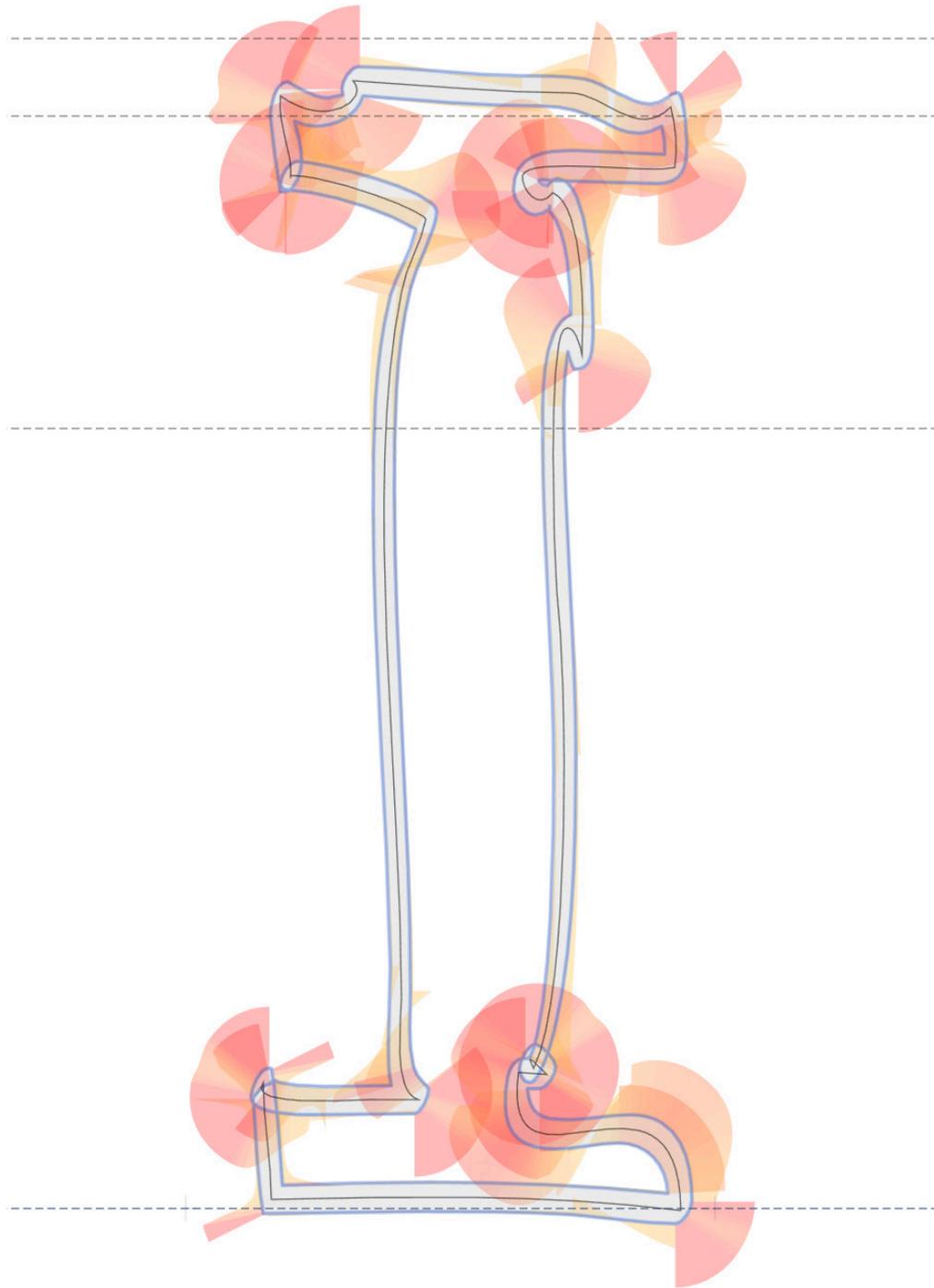
21. Untitled, 2020. Acrylic on paper. 18 x 24".



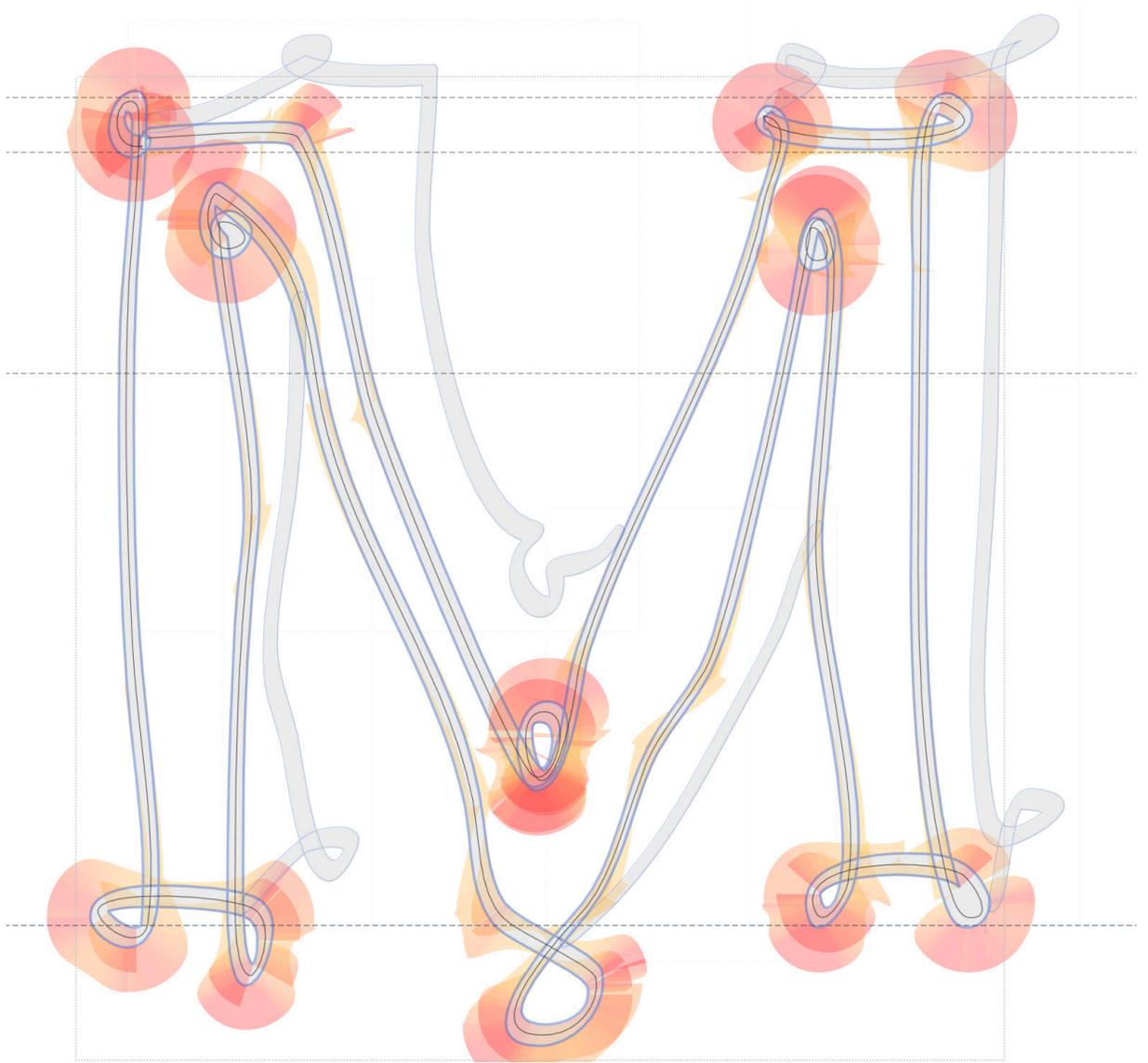
22. Untitled, 2020. Acrylic on paper. 18 x 24".



23. Untitled, 2020. Acrylic pen on paper. 8 x 5".



24. Untitled, 2020. Digital image.



25. Untitled, 2020. Digital image.



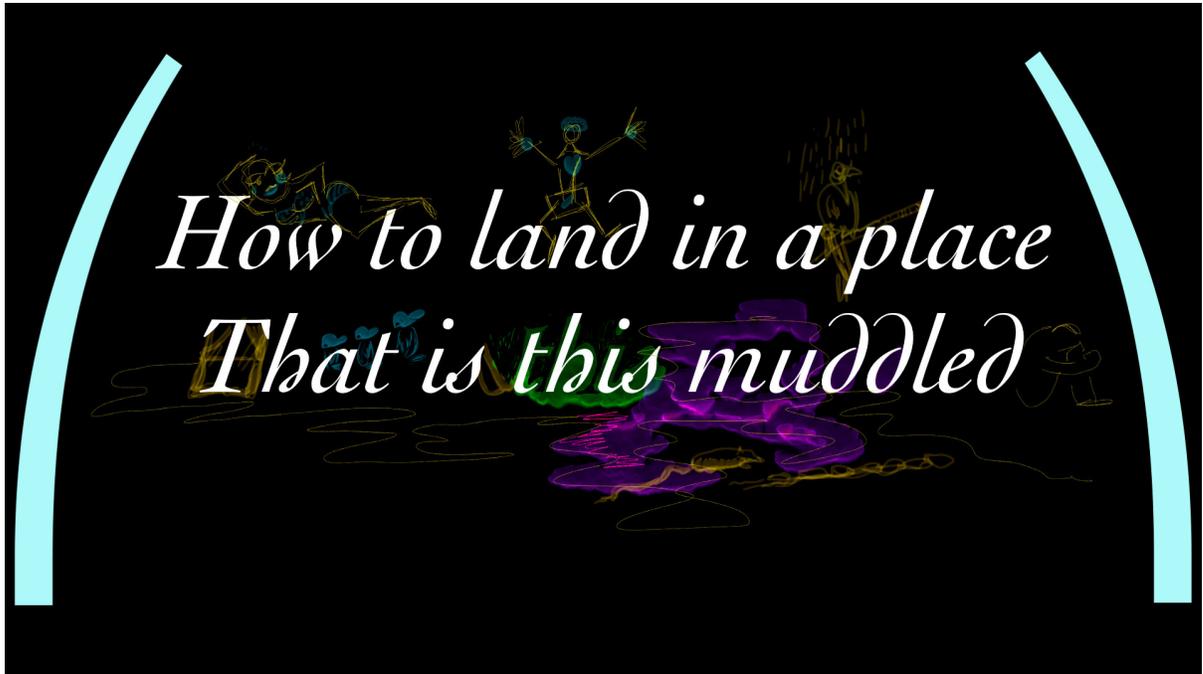
26. Untitled, 2020. Wax. 27 x 27 x 3".



27. Process view.



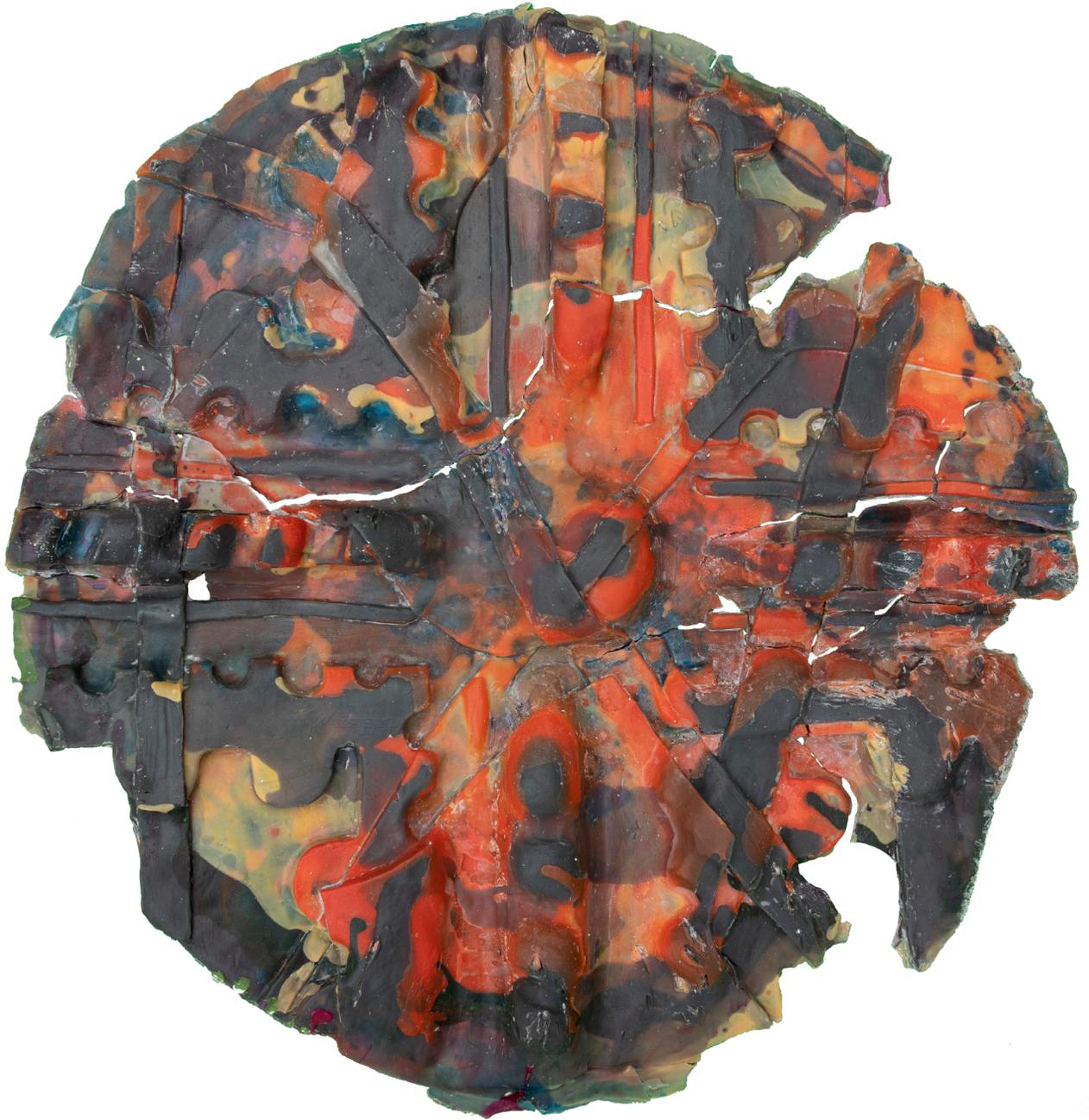
28. *Aerial Root*, 2020. Digital video, 9 min. 6 sec. Still I.



29. *Aerial Root*, 2020. Digital video, 9 min. 6 sec. Still II.



30. *Aerial Root*, 2020. Digital video, 9 min. 6 sec. Still III.



31. *Psychedelic Sister*, 2020. Wax. 27 x 27 x 3".



32. *Aerial Root*, 2020. Digital video, 9 min. 6 sec. Still IV.



33. *Aerial Root*, 2020. Digital video, 9 min. 6 sec. Still V.



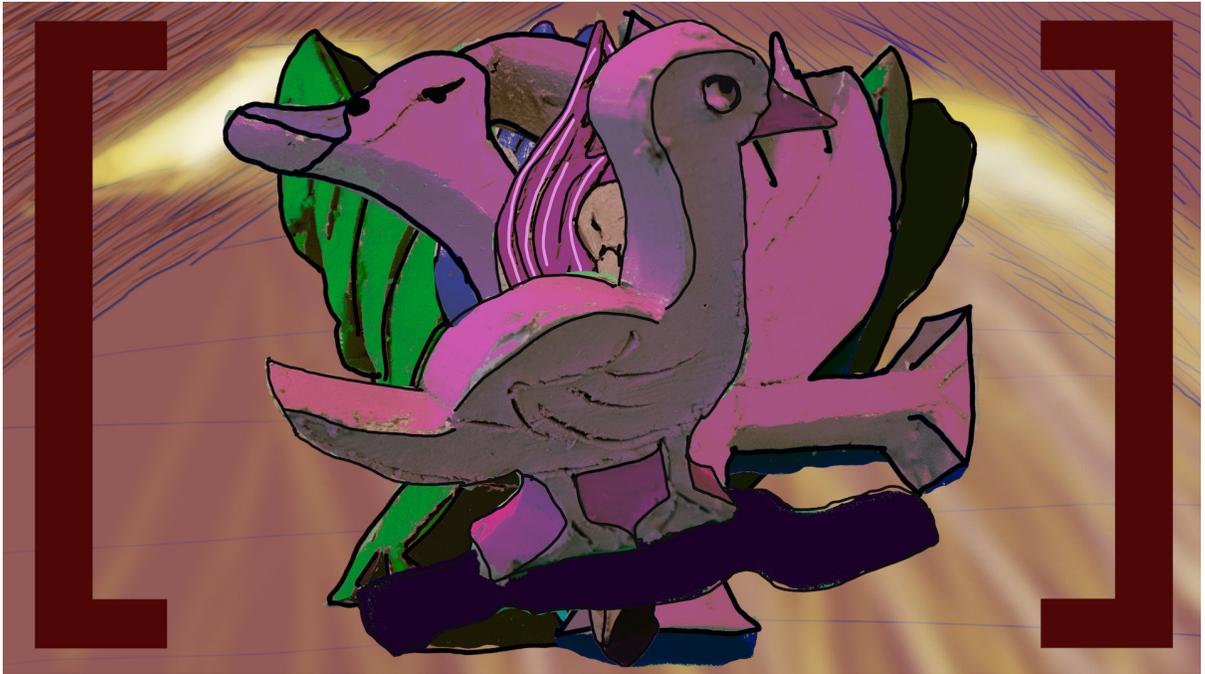
34. Untitled, 2020. Acrylic and wood. 2 x 4". Dimensions variable.



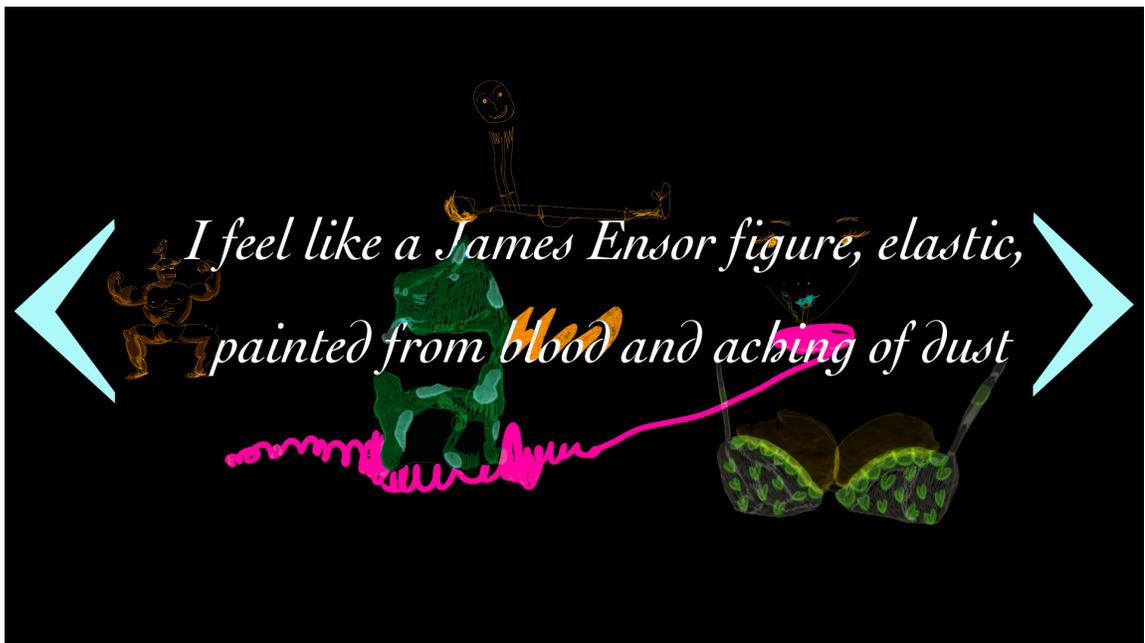
35. *Aerial Root*, 2020. Digital video, 9 min. 6 sec. Still VI.



36. Process view.



37. *Aerial Root*, 2020. Digital video, 9 min. 6 sec. Still VII.



38. *Aerial Root*, 2020. Digital video, 9 min. 6 sec. Still VIII.

Writing and language are important parts of my studio practice. Interweaving of the visual and the verbal ranges from informational text to cultural commentary and the appropriation of familiar narrative experiences such as yoga instruction. This polyvocal approach allows different registers of fictional and non-fictional voice. Text and voice-over in the videos pan between aphoristic statements and personal monologue. Although a narrative voice asserts itself in video, there is a suspension of *story* as such. The authored yet decontextualized voice works to anchor a synchronous visual exploration.



Video is engaged as a fluid medium to include raw material such as home movies, gathered footage, performance and found YouTube videos. Dimensional objects, including past or current sculptures, fragments of sculptures, etc. waft throughout, adjusting and commenting on one another, shapeshifting.

I interact with the material changeability of objects, as they are lifted from a studio context into video, becoming animated phenomena, analogous to having multiple lives. The black wax disc transforms from being a leathery archetypal form in person to a cosmic rotating shield in video (fig. 28). I can direct an orchestra of multiple objects moving through space, having the sculptures “act out” on stage. In video editing and through imposing artificial structures I am finding a syntax that accesses the absurd and reinforces the collision between finish and unease. This space is fraught, intuitive and has the feeling of improvisation, an aesthetic that is the opposite of seamlessness or fluency.



Many of the sculptures exist in a form of low relief. There is often a front or a particular way to navigate the piece that is linked to its display (fig. 1 - anchored tensely to the wall). An imaginative extrusion happens, as in the protruding graphic of the letter T, growing intestinal hardware (fig. 14). The car seat headrests display the open space of the found object as well as its fragile ceramic mirror (fig. 9). Sculptures look like they are making a slow-motion leap from conception to execution, arrested and staggering, hovering on an extended moment of growing into form, toggling between silhouette and physicality. They prop, rest, hang, lean, flatten, sit and brace themselves to sustain some kind of verticality.



The black wax disk has a topography of machinery fragments (fig. 26). It approaches symmetry but veers left or right. Blankets of wax rest on top of a toothy substructure. This piece has a marbled psychedelic sister-sculpture (fig. 31). Here, multiple fractures that happened during making tell of a beleaguered state, but also of the generative idea of “staying with the trouble,” to borrow Donna Haraway’s words.¹ The surface ruptures offer a way to re-enter a dialogue with the object, a way of having the sculpture make its meaning through a sustained and attentive relationship to its infrastructural demands. The fluorescent “binder” that I plan on using will riff on the aesthetics of restoration and surface fetishization. The piece will be composed of its original form plus a gesture to its making, becoming undone and being remade.

Foregrounding this kind of engagement with making, responding to the turns and flexes of process, allows a kind of mirroring to happen – of culture, nature, psychological states and language, all finding form in the studio.

¹ Donna Haraway, “On Staying with the Trouble.” *ForTheWild.world*, 7 Aug 2019. [<https://forthewild.world/listen/donna-haraway-on-staying-with-the-trouble-131>]. Accessed 2020.



As a material omnivore, I engage various modes of working that are grounded in experimentation. Dancing the line between expert technique and amateur luck, I proceed, asking the material to divulge to me what direction to move in. This characterization of my working method is to say I engage with the cerebral and the haptic in one gesture. Form-building with clay touches painting with enamel touches layering in Photoshop. I employ an exploratory sensibility to comment on the ways it is possible to relate to an ever-morphing experience of our world, ranging from being infatuated with a certain surface to wanting to say something critical about a music video I saw online. The ebb and flow of daily observation, the resistance to and assimilation of the textured cultural landscape is brought into my work, anchoring my relation to these things somewhere between a side-eyed glance and a tentative fishing line to hook the next catch. Commitment to bringing whatever resonates poetically, visually or materially to play, allows my work to tease out a command of belonging.



Communicating with an economy of effort locates my work in its particular aesthetic. Objects reach for a sense of voice or an auratic presence. Having an attitude toward material production that solicits alternative, rude or clunky expressions, speaks about the idea of fitting; ill-fitting, mis-fitting, un-fit etc.

Emotion resonates through objects that are marked, invented and touched (fig. 1), slathering the yellow form in gloss paint. Pieces announce their made-ness. Even if it means works edge closer to a folksy or amateurish aesthetic, this transgression from certain standards of finish holds meaning about what can be sensed and constituted when the beginning and end points of a piece reflect an interaction between the staged and the accidental.



...enter global pandemic.



The disruption to what would have continued as a studio-oriented activity conversely presented a path forward – to work found footage and dimensional objects together. This collaboration among the elements of my work has currently taken precedence. Being pushed into a position of reconciling desire with less-than-typical studio conditions has brought about an urgency to make pieces in any way possible. In a context that is more fragile than ever, collapse and reemergence are tightly wound around one another.



I see my work as a body engaged in persistent transfiguration, folding in and out of itself,
parading with safety pins to attach a banner.



39. *Let It Be Known*, 2020. Handmade paper and acrylic. 9 x 11.5".