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School of the Arts  
Virginia Commonwealth University

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May 12, 2006

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FACTS OF THE IMAGINATION (FROM THE INSIDE OUT)

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
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Abstract

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By Janelle Iglesias

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

Major Director: Kendall Buster  
Professor of Sculpture, Sculpture and Extended Media

Growing up in a bicultural household, navigating the F train as well as mountain creeks, studying culture and then participating in its production, these are some of the idiosyncrasies that I bring to my work. My investigations are rooted in combining a rediscovery of the sensuousness of the natural world and an investigation of the poetics of everyday life. Choosing materials and situations within the realm of the everyday, I'm interested in a transformation that suggests the infinite potential and worth in all things. The resulting objects have identities as complex as my own. They are ridiculous and

serious, normal and magical, and confident in their awkwardness. This document was created in Microsoft Word X for mac.

## **The Igloo and The Intersection of Anthropology and Art**

If I trace back my interest to the intersection of Art and Anthropology, the two meet in an obscure documentary I saw when I was 17 of a native Inuit man building an igloo. I was completely amazed as the snow was transformed, almost magically, right before my eyes. He only needed one tool, a knife that he licked to create a sharper edge, which was then used to cut blocks of frozen snow. The blocks were placed side by side and then packed tightly together. This repetitive pattern generated a rhythm and eventually one slight alteration was made- a hole was left near the top and another block placed perpendicular to it, allowing sunrays to bounce inside for warmth and light. I immediately thought that I wanted to be an Anthropologist. I now look back to that film and realize I was equally excited about the form and the process of formation of the igloo, not just learning more about the Inuit people. Where the two disciplines intersect is my interest regarding what the form and process reveal about the culture of its maker.

My intrigue with Anthropology was that it provided a lens to look at any culture- (especially my own) and isolate, observe and analyze different aspects such that the most assumed, the most everyday, could suddenly seem strange. One of the first texts given out in an introductory courses is about a people called the *Nacirema*, which goes into great detail describing their obsessive ritual hygiene habits. Eventually, you realize that this tribe

is actually *Americans* spelled backwards, and that this text is a critical analysis of our own culture. The lens of Anthropology is one that enables us to step outside of ourselves and look back with objectivity. As Cultural Theorist Ben Highmore writes, “Popular anthropology renders daily practices... at once both strange and mastered”. (4)

## **Rendering the Everyday Strange**

When I started studying Art I realized that it provided a similar lens for reconsidering our basic cultural assumptions. This interest of the everyday becoming strange has translated into a sculptural practice where I find potential in an everyday phenomena or material and a kind of formal investigation is undertaken to transform it. While most of the materials I use are manmade and readily available, a twist of strangeness occurs when a mass-produced industrial language is transposed to that of the handmade and the organically formed. My interest in art making began with ceramics where my only tools were my hands. There was a kind of intimacy and closeness with the material that I then have since strived to apply to other materials after moving into a more sculptural conversation.

I came to VCU after starting a body of work completely made out of masking tape. I loved taking the wrapper off of a new roll of tape, something that had no life or language and creating a composition with an entirely new feeling and energy. It was about developing an understanding of the inherent qualities of the material. This kind of approach has threaded throughout all of my work, extending to materials such as lampshades, fake nails, rag rugs, plastic, and in the case of this exhibition receipt tape, strawberry baskets, packaging foam and balloons. The collection or accumulation of

materials has been the means to achieve a language of the organic, a language of repetition with variation.

## **Repetition**

Most of my work has a repeated gesture involved in it because I'm interested in the slight differences that occur with human repetition versus mechanical repetition. In ritual studies such repetition is understood to accumulate meaning rather than loose meaning, the latter I would argue is what happens with mechanical repetition. With a repetition of the hand each time is slightly different. *In Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram writes about the sensorial difference when encountering these kinds of repetition:

“When we begin to consciously frequent the wordless dimension of our sensory participations, certain phenomena that have habitually commanded our focus begin to lose their distinctive fascination and to slip toward the background, while hitherto unnoticed or overlooked presences begin to stand forth from the periphery and to engage our awareness. The countless human artifacts with which we are commonly involved—the asphalt roads, chain-link fences, telephone wires, buildings, light bulbs, ballpoint pens, automobiles, street signs, plastic containers, newspapers, radios, television screens—all begin to exhibit a common style, and so to lose some of their distinctiveness; meanwhile, organic entities—crows, squirrels, the trees and the wild weeds that surround our house, humming insects, streambeds, clouds and rainfalls—all these begin to display a new vitality, each coaxing the breathing body into a unique dance... In contact with the native forms of the earth, one's senses are slowly energized and awakened, combining and recombining in ever-shifting patterns.

For these other shapes and species have coevolved, like ourselves. With the rest of the shifting earth; their rhythms and forms are composed of layers upon layers of earlier rhythms, and in engaging them our senses are led into an inexhaustible depth that echoes that of our own flesh. The patters on the stream's surface as it ripples over the rocks, or on the bark of an elm tree, or in a cluster of weeds, are composed of repetitive figures that *never exactly repeat themselves*, of iterated shapes to which our sense may attune themselves even while the gradual drift and metamorphosis of those shapes draws our awesomeness in unexpected and unpredictable directions...(64).

All this being said, one of my questions throughout this practice has been: What does it mean to take a visual language of civilization, of industrial products and transpose it to one of the natural world? To turn our thoughts back to the sensuousness of a landscape?

### **Activism**

In many ways I am using industry's language against itself, trying to produce an intense sensorial experience that suggests a place unscathed by our exploitation of its resources. I see rediscovering the sensuousness of the natural world at the root of understanding, valuing and respecting it. If the conversation is steered towards celebrating its sensuousness, we in turn start engaging with the environment's intrinsic value. In many ways I see most social justice issues of today directly related to our ability to exploit our environment (extending to then exploiting each other). If artists have the ability steer society's gaze and raise questions important to our time, we can be activists. To do so, we don't need to make political work, but we need to think of making work politically, with an engagement critical to our own assumptions about making art.

If I was interested in any kind of conversation relating to issues of environmentalism, I too was exploiting materials for my own particular needs, participating in what I was trying to speak about. I felt that I needed a new approach to realign my philosophies and my practice. How could my material interests enter into ideas about recycling, reuse and sustainability? One of the ways my work has dealt with this issue in the past has been with using organic materials such as clay, beeswax, hair and eggshells as well as using materials, such as particular plastics, that can be recycled. Another way has been to use all parts of a material, and reusing them for new projects over

and over again whenever possible. The foam and berry baskets in the show can be disassembled from their sculptural form and sent back into the world to live the rest of their lives as they were originally intended for. I will return to this issue at a later point.

Getting down to the core of my intention, there is something about inserting imagination and humanness back into the objects that surround us in our contemporary world. If alchemists of old would turn lead into gold, my own alchemic challenge has been turning plastic into a leaf, foam into a glacier.

### **Returning to (what never was)**

These are experiments in impossibility, a theme that has threaded throughout much of my previous work. I relate this to a kind of nostalgia, or longing for something that never was, but I have imagined *has been*. Having grown up in New York City, I have a romantic attachment to hearing about my mother's childhood adventures on a farm in rural Norway. Many of my own experiences traveling have included both strikingly poverty ridden urban areas as well as natural wonders. Talking with youth about the harshness of living conditions in the townships in South Africa and then standing on the edge of a cliff on the Cape of Good Hope where two oceans meet. Driving past the garbage filled barrios in the Dominican Republic to get to the tri colored underground lakes in the caves of Santo Domingo. Walking through parts of my own neighborhood in Queens and hiking in the Catskill mountains of upstate NY. In many ways, being in a pristine place is the opposite of an everyday experience for most of the world today.

I feel a kinship to these moments of calm and wonder when observing phenomena that happens serendipitously throughout my day to day routine- watching a spider build its

web, the way ice freezes on tree limbs and sparkles from a streetlight, the manner in which the dog burrows under the covers, discovering the passion flower vines have grown through a crack in the door and have bloomed in the hallway one morning. These moments are filled with a similar amazement. This connection between the wonder of both kinds of experience has lead me into researching different artistic approaches regarding the poetics of everyday life, and further extending the investigation to *everyday life theory*, now a topic within cultural theory.

### **Everyday life**

In *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory, an Introduction*, Ben Highmore writes, “It is the ability of ‘making strange’ within a culture of rationalism and of finding the strange within everyday life that is central to this study of everyday life and cultural theory”(12) later remarking, “If the culture of everyday modernity does evidence the process of making the unfamiliar familiar, the group of writers that I am concerned with work to defamiliarize this condition. In attempting to make the everyday vivid, phantasmagoric representation is replaced by practical, poetic and critical operations... much more stress is placed on the everyday as a site of resistance, revolution and transformation.”(16-17) I related my work to literature of a similar sensibility-such as Pablo Neruda’s *Ode to Objects* and George Perec’s *Species of Spaces*, which start with simple objects and spaces and open a world of imagination.

Writing about other kinds of cultural producers, specifically Durkeim, Marx and Freud, Nancy Bently remarks:

“It is hard to overlook the fact that the writings of these three thinkers, for all their rational mastery, helped to make strange and almost unfathomable the territories of

self and society that are usually the most familiar to us from everyday life. A certain irony obtains: ethnological analysis always makes partly alien what it masters.” (77)

To make alien is to transform. That was the source of my amazement with the construction of the igloo. But it was not in seeing the image of the igloo, I was captivated specifically with the process-the way that it seemed to grow with each block added on.

### **Animal Architecture**

I’ve always been interested in the kind of architecture made by a repetitive gesture whether it be human, animal or insect. Bower birds, termites, silk worms, wasps, and mollusks make some of my favorite sculpture. I am again and again surprised and awed by the creativity of nature. When I go back to where my imagination springs from-it is to these types of growths- particularly those that speak to their process of formation as much as their form. *In The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard speaks to this attribute when writing about the poetics of shells, “The created object itself is highly intelligible; and it is the formation, not the form, that remains mysterious”(106).

The past 2 summers I have spent some times on Ossabaw Island, a nature preserve off the coast of Georgia. My experiences there have been so full of the wonder of natural forms, in particular shells. These kinds of forms have had a heavy influence on my work ever since.



*shell stack, Ossabaw Island, 2005*

*tape object and porcelain shell, 2005*

This kind of mystery is due to the transformation of a material into a formal structure or gesture that carries a new meaning. Turning something into something else with aesthetic value. So circling back to the idea of alchemy, as well as to ethnography, I now turn to magic.

## The Artist as Magician

The following excerpt is taken from *The Spell of the Sensuous* by David Abrams

“The most sophisticated definition of ‘magic’ that now circulates through the American counterculture is “the ability or power to alter one’s consciousness at will”. No mention is made of any reason for altering one’s consciousness. Yet in tribal cultures that which we call “magic” takes its meaning from the fact that humans, in an indigenous and oral context, experience their own consciousness as simply one form of awareness among others. The traditional magician cultivates an ability to shift out of his or her common state of consciousness precisely in order to make contact with the other organic forms of sensitivity and awareness with which human existence is entwined. Only by temporarily shedding the accepted perceptual logic of his culture can the sorcerer hope to enter into relation with other species on their own terms; only by altering the common organization of his senses will he be able to enter into a rapport with the multiple nonhuman sensibilities that animate the local landscape. It is this, we might say, that defines a shaman: the ability to readily slip out of the perceptual boundaries reinforced by social customs, taboos, and most importantly, the common speech or language—in order to make contact with, and learn from, the other powers in the land. His magic is precisely this heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations—songs, cries, gestures—of the larger, more-than-human field. Magic, then, in perhaps its most primordial sense, is the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences, the intuition that every form one perceives...is an experiencing form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own...”

The idea of the artist in contemporary culture is one that has evolved to include many different roles. After reading this passage by David Abrams I began to think about the idea of one of those as a kind of urban magician. Artists are creative problem solvers who have a different lens through which they focus their awareness. They are trained and encouraged

to think outside the box, to engage in intimate relationships with their surroundings and materials and deeply observe the world around them. They shed their own cultural assumptions and logic to come up with new ideas, questions and creations. They are sensitive to their own intuitions and to the potential awareness as human beings. Artistic transformations turn one thing into another and instill objects with spells of intention. One could argue that magic is at the very core of the history of painting and sculpture: flat surfaces that create the illusion of reality, objects instilled with symbolic value for ritual purposes.

The effect of Magic involves enchantment: to enchant meaning “to attract and move deeply, sometimes to ecstatic admiration”. A magician’s ability to predict the audience’s expectations is what enables them to pull off different illusions. As an artist I am playing with our expectations of the materials I employ. I find the results the most surprising when there is the greatest distance between the economy of their means vs. the visual seduction, phenomena or poetic absurdity of the results.

The busier we get, the less aware and focused we are on the moment and the more our minds live in the future, running through lists of things to do and what comes next. Efficiency becomes prioritized and we favor disposable, mediated and prepackaged objects and moments because of their immediacy and comfort. While technology has made our lives ‘easier’ and capable of multi-tasking, it has been at the expense of an increasingly mediated and dehumanizing experience-where we spend more time with machines than with people, where we have more stuff but don’t understand how much of it actually works.

I find my work taking a stance against this. I want it to be *re-humanizing*. We know how the images, objects and effects are created yet they succeed in surprising us because of the imagination behind them rather than the manipulation. I have resisted certain sculptural approaches and methods because of this kind of feeling of manipulation or control over materials.

### **Exercises in recognizing potential**

Circling back to my background in clay, I feel that learning methods of working with, rather than against, the inherent qualities of a material is an important distinction in my practice. I do not try not to use tools that are not readily available. The work does not require a special studio; it could just as easily be made in someone's kitchen. It is not require a mastery of technique or craft but rather a kind of ability to take a playful intimacy with a material to a point where there is some sort of transformation. I am most interested in mastering a kind of ability to recognize potential, a kind of seeing, a kind of understanding, rather than a kind of manipulation.

At its best, my work strives to be illogical, humble and honest- the very antithesis of most images of seduction we come upon in our commercial society. Upon encountering it, I want to the viewer to have a similar experience to those magical moments of the everyday- when one is carried back to the moment, reminded to breath, look around and experience it with a kind of *curiosity of the heart* as Chuck Henry likes to say.

The transformations that my work celebrates are humble gestures. They are spectacles with humility, spectacles with a small s that surpass the Spectacle with a big S. While almost all exhibitions are public experiences, this work speaks to a private kind of

engagement. Above all I am trying to pass on the intimacy of my interaction with an object to offer a similar experience to the viewer.

## **Thesis Exhibition**

My latest work circles back to a similar repetition and transformation that my earlier work had embraced. After a period of rejecting the repetition that was happening in my work, I returned to it because I realized how important it was. Repetitive gestures afford a different kind of mindset. Perhaps they feel like another kind of intelligence taking over, another way of knowing or tapping into ones instincts. But there needed to be more to the work, or else, it was finished before it was begun. An unexpected, unsafe, improvisational quality that I had experimented with for my candidacy exhibition had to remain. What did I learn from the work of the past two years? What felt right and what didn't? I knew I was looking for materials that were not at odds with the ecological concerns underlying the work. But I also did not want to discourage creative impulses that I was having. One of the solutions that I came up with was using industrial materials that I could reuse, that could be dismantled after the installation was over and retain their original use value. This is one possible solution that I have found to align the work with a sensitivity and open acknowledgement to these issues. It is in the fact that they can be taken apart and reused that they question their own existence. I also knew that I needed to

include the kinds of transformations and magic that were happening in my studio practice into the gallery.

**If I were a mollusk and haystacks had dreams...**

The foam piece was a haystack size roll that I created through attaching and recombining rolls of packaging foam until the roll is bigger than myself. At its core is process that I was exploring at a handheld scale my first year with a piece called *wonder knobs*. These were rolls of crepe paper in which I would push my finger through their center to make a shape. The gesture was then frozen after being dipped in a pot of hot wax and left to harden.



*wonder knobs, 2005 (each about 3 inches wide and tall)*

One of the observations I had received from my faculty was that all of my processes involved very small gestures of the hands. They were asking *what happened if I started to include my whole body? What if I was dancing with the material?* In order for this to

happen, I needed a gigantic wonder knob. I dreamed of one that I could crawl into. As Bachelard puts it, “I have followed the imagination to a point well beyond reality, in its task of enlargement, for in order to surpass, one must first enlarge... On the level of ideas too, it tends toward extremes, and there are ideas that dream.” (112)

In order to make the sculpture, I have to move my body through it and it becomes a kind of record of that moment. The materials are brought into the gallery and the sculpture is made in the space.



*video still from if I were a mollusk...(process image)*

In this way, I'm combining a sort of repetitive gesture with also an impulse to improvise. The moments of discovery in the making are captured through video but in this case the sculptural result from this action surpassed the wonder of its making.

Stepping back from the sculpture it combines the feel of previous work into one- it is an autonomous object, yet also a landscape or glacier- it resembles a geologic form but also one that is perhaps animate. It is a shell and a slug at the same time.



*if I were a mollusk and haystacks had dreams...(variable dimensions)*

Upon this realization I returned to Bachelard's chapter on shells and found that his writings spoke to the kind space and sculpting that I was most interested in. He writes about shells being a kind of tangible embodiment of intimacy with a material "...a house built by and for the body, taking form from the inside, like a shell, in an intimacy that works physically."(112). He speaks about this intimate process being at the core of what

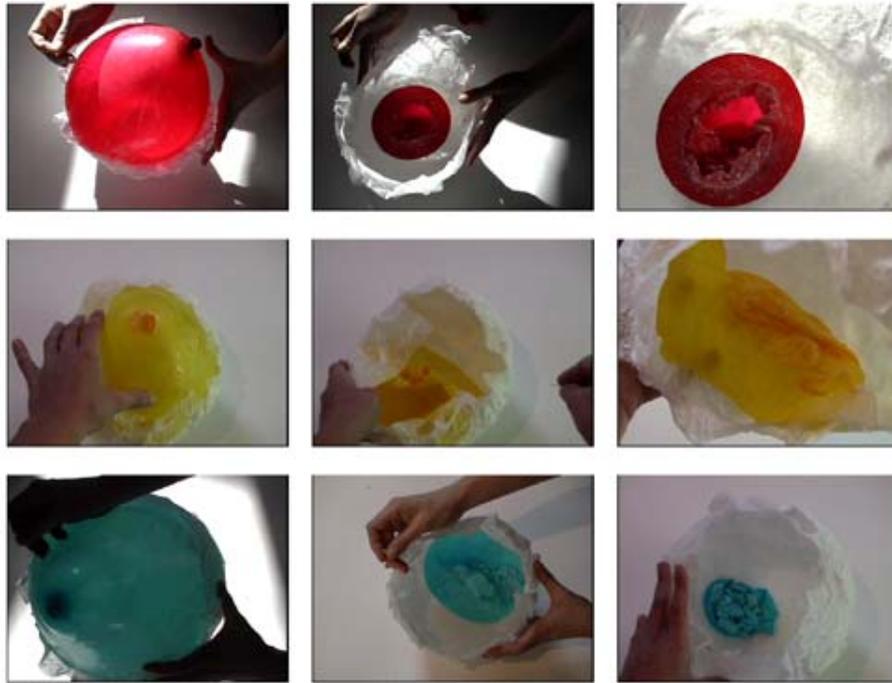
opens our imagination, writing, “I am the animal inside the shell creating the shell form...dreaming of a construction from within”(128).

At some point I realized that my interest all along has tended toward illustrations of growth as opposed to form-The distinction is that one is animate . Growth speaks to its formation rather than the final result.

**from the inside out, (pop) and unroll...**

Wanting to speak to the process I decided to include video. The videos were made as autonomous art works that simultaneously functioned as a record of the surprises and discoveries while working with different materials in the studio. They are about the wonder of the moment of making.

One of the major questions that I have asked myself over and over is at what point in my studio practice the *art lies*. I move through ideals exploring many different aspects of potential- what kind of sound does it make? What do the drawings of its shadows look like? What is the most fertile place to concentrate my focus? I felt that sometimes the final objects fell short of the intimacy that I was experiencing directly with the materials. Recording them was a way for me to capture these moments and pass them on.



*stills from pop*

And through collecting many short recordings I have begun to see patterns and found ways of putting them into categories. The ones chosen for this exhibition are all from making sculptures and are all about a kind of issuance, and about working from the inside, out. They all entail a kind of burst or issuance of something else, a moment of anticipation of that issuance and a continual loop of activity.

When I watched these videos it was often on my computer at a very small scale. Because of their handheld size there was a kind of intimacy while looking at them, much like the feel of holding a book. I wanted to retain that kind of feeling as well as to emphasize a kind of deep observation of looking at the phenomena. Embedding the video

in the wall was a way for me to isolate the image minus the technology, and scale down the size to a view that only one person could experience at a time.



*watching unroll*

This also provided a kind of magic of a world beyond the gallery wall, suggesting a look into another world of studio practice/the lives of the materials.



*from the inside out (4 x 7 inch hole)*

*pop (3 inch diameter hole)*

### The narwhal forest

“...one of the powers of attraction of smallness lies in the fact that large things can issue from small ones”(Bachelard, 108). The tall tusks made from receipt tape are the objects that relate to the unrolling video. In the exhibition they serve almost like hedges



*narwhal forest (variable dimensions)*

*detail*

It was important for me to see what happens when the sculptural objects and corresponding video are included in the same space and how the two affected the reading of each other. I am interested in the fine line one walks when making them: a line between

trying too hard, and not trying hard enough. When they are carefully pulled out into a shape from their center all that remains to keep them a solid object is their own tension- but if they are pulled too hard or too fast, the whole object unwinds. If they stop short of this breaking point however, they lose their teeter-tottering sensibility. I have to approach the fine line of going too far to achieve the maximum visual result. My other questions concerned the amount of objects needed for them to have a real physical presence in the room yet also have the suggestion of more than actually were in the space. Did there have to be hundreds of objects in order to attain the same feeling as having twenty? I am suspicious of my own tactics of accumulation and I do not want the work to only reside within the world of spectacle. Regardless, I have come to understand that I privilege the overall visual affect and that this question will be different with every object, with every space.

### **Untitled (for the love of green)**

Green has reappeared throughout my studio in different objects, so much so, that one of my pieces this year was to remove all of the green items from my studio and build a sculptural assemblage from them. When I lived in rural Denmark, I was surrounded by the green fields and windmills. They were amazing. The wind ripped through them like waves in an ocean. For me, green brings back a reference to being outside, to the natural world, to spring, to growth. The wave of green strawberry baskets extending down from behind the wall is a gesture to add a kind of lightness to the space and attend to its verticality (see image). In some ways, it is a nod to one of the ways in which I work, it is a single gesture repeated with variation creating a fragment or suggestion of a landscape or tidal wave.



*for the love of green (as seen from below)*  
*(variable dimensions)*

### **Facts of the Imagination (from the inside out)**

All of the objects in the space, including the video portals, were placed in different orientations such that one had to move around the entire space in order to look at all the work. In turn, one had to witness the foam sculpture in the round by default of seeing all the work. In many ways this exhibition is a cross-section of my practice as a sculptor.



*Thesis Exhibition (Installation view)*

*From the inside out* refers to the literal process of how much of the work is made and it is within this framework that decisions were made concerning what was taken out of the studio and brought to the gallery. While my transformations of materials might start a conversation with various contemporary artists such as Tara Donovan, I see my work in the spirit of an artist like Gabriel Orozco whose poetic absurdity is rooted in a simple gesture. Curator Francesco Bonami wrote of Orozco, “He is an activist in the sense that his daily activity confronts the short comings of our perceptions of reality.” Works like *Long Yellow Hose* (1992), *My Hands are My Heart* (1991) and *Toilet Ventilator* (1997) speak to this kind of small gesture revealing another kind of perception of potentiality. Perhaps Bachelard might have called him a *phenomenologist of the imagination*. He writes:

And what is more, the imagination, by virtue of its freshness and its own peculiar activity, can make what is familiar into what is strange. With a simple poetic detail, the imagination confronts us with a whole new world. From then on, the detail takes precedence over the panorama, and a simple image, if it is new, will open up an entire world. If it is looked at through the thousand windows of fancy, the world is in a state of constant change. It therefore gives fresh stimulus to the problem of phenomenology. By solving small problems, we teach ourselves to solve large ones...”(135)

And perhaps these kinds of dreamers, of which I aspire to join the ranks, offer magic that one can apply long after leaving the exhibition space. For what we have to offer is an example of kind of intimacy, curiosity and poetic engagement with the increasingly mediated experience of the world around us. Writing about those who engage with the everyday, Ben Highmore also comments on this sense of activism.

“In their searching for a form of attention that can offer some kind of productive hold on modernity, ‘the everyday’ begins to emerge as a critical concept and as an imaginative fiction for approaching social life. In the cultural theory that such projects generate, the everyday is linked to an experience of modernity that privileges the urban and the unconscious...The ‘imaginative fiction’ of the everyday points to something unavoidable and inescapable, but it also points to something that in crucial ways is unformed. Perhaps then the tradition of theory...” (referring to that of everyday life) “... evidences an approach to social and cultural life that in both theory and practice is radically (and literally) *reformist*.”(32)

The ‘imaginative fictions’ of the everyday –these are the facts of my imagination. From the inside, out.

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VITA

Janelle Iglesias was born in Queens, NYC, the youngest of 4 daughters to a Dominican father and Norwegian mother. After receiving a Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Anthropology from Emory University and minoring in Studio Art she spent a year at the University of Georgia studying Ceramics before attending VCU. She was awarded a Phi Kappa Phi School of the Arts Graduate Scholarship in 2005 and a Graduate School Thesis/Dissertation Fellowship for 2005-2006.