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Converging Objects of the Universe

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Abstract

CONVERGING OBJECTS OF THE UNIVERSE

By Everett Hoffman, MFA

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Reconfigured found objects shape scenes of everyday life, questioning the structural histories that go into defining an identity. Engaging in a multidisciplinary approach of making, my work reimagines the function of ornamentation and its relationship to the body. I approach new materials and found objects with the eye of a jeweler, highlighting and exploiting the subtle, and often invisible, links between material histories and their connection to identity. Material debris patinated with age like skillets, baseballs, and furniture are used to penetrate normative structures around identity, gender, and sexual desire. Using adornment as a support in my installations I propose a new lens for viewing function through the use of ornamentation. In doing so I highlight the body's impact on objects, and call into to question the role these objects play in

shaping our understanding of identity—An identity that is never singular, constantly evolving, and more often than not contradictory and confusing.

Introduction

I am an object maker plain and simple—it's been in my hands since I was a kid sewing quilts, knitting, and embroidering with my grandmother. It was the mid-90s, the white middle-class economy was strong, Bill Clinton was president, and everyone in the suburbs had the same yellow Labrador retriever (the most quintessential suburban dog meant to signal to neighbors and the world at large: *we belong, and we are a normal family*), just like the president. Under the trappings of the 'normal' suburban household I began to realize that part of what defined an identity was not people themselves but the objects, clothes, and styles that signaled a type of acceptance. Yet no matter my accumulation of 'things' from the baseball cards, clothes, to my PlayStation One, there was a consistent simmering undercurrent questioning that belonging. This belonging sought out the accumulation of more things sprinkled with prayers asking to be normal. But the difference between an imposed material culture that reinforces the feeling of being an outsider, is an understanding of material culture that allows for a personal self-definition. I learned to escape into a new world through making and imbuing my own objects with stories in order to create my own normal.

I think of a mini patchwork quilt that I hastily sewed together for our yellow lab Peppy to exemplify this idea. The quilt, which is only about one by two feet wide, does not serve its intended function, to act as a protective layer for my actual quilt made by my grandmother; much to her consternation. This queer little quilt meant to 'protect' the traditional quilt, points to the failure not only of the object itself but the normative institutions that it challenged. The mini-quilt sewn together with the unusable fabric scraps of floral patterns, and bright colors acted as a

signaling patch over my traditional checkerboard quilt made out of white and black fabrics. The bright colors and floral patterns signaled that this was not just a normal boys rooms. It was something more, it was my universe. That memory of the functionless quilt, and the semiotics present in the suburban ideal, point to an intangible drive to critique how normative behaviors and desires are codified by history and objects. Through creating objects and performances, I construct an idea of self that takes into account the societal norms that define who I am and the body politic that has gone into shaping what is held up as normal.

Attempting to Define...

“The adjectival mechanism of queer is turned outward to focus on the covertness of difference, but more politically and polemically, to call out and to target the camouflaged workings of power and normativity.”¹

-David Getsy, *Queer Introduction*

The research and creation of work over my first year of graduate school was centered on the idea of queer, not as a fixed identity somewhere on the binary spectrum, but a process and means for creating. My conception of queering grew out of the theoretical writings of authors Jonathan Wineberg, Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam, David Getsy and Niki Sullivan. In *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Sullivan summarizes Foucaultian theory as, “...there are no objective and universal truths, but that particular forms of knowledge, and ways of being that they engender, become ‘naturalized’, in culturally and historically specific ways.”² In particular Foucault, and later Butler, critiqued the perceived normalcy or naturalized idea of heterosexuality and gender. The core adjective of queer meant to challenge what is perceived as universal, essential or ‘normal’ and the hierarchy that it produces, such as heterosexuality vs. homosexuality or today homonormativity. The Queer theoretical discourse that I have found to be useful in my own practice is one that can be seen as an umbrella term full of contradictory ideas that are hard to define intersecting with ideas of sexuality, race, gender, and class. Michael Warner in *Fear of a Queer Planet* states “The preference for “queer” represents, among other things an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the

normal.”³ In describing queer, Warner articulates the use of generalization as a way to challenge power structures. The inherent fluidity of queer generalization comes from its continual redefinition, which is contradictory to hegemonic power’s ability to define, codify, and subjugate. The definition and use of queer will always be transitory and up for redefinition.

Thinking about what it means “to queer” and to categorize, I turn to Judith Butler's proposals on gender and sexuality imitations outlined in her essay *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*. Butler identifies issues surrounding categorization and articulates a set of processes to question and subvert normative power structures in a queer fashion. Butler argues that it is through the use of ‘drag’ and ‘psychic mimesis’ that one can hope to participate and fail at natural heterosexuality and gender.⁴ The objects I create with their new and altered function act as mimetic devices living within their natural roles—only with a twist. They mirror back to the viewer what is expected of them, but are always slightly off, questioning what it means to define oneself as gay, straight, or queer. There is never one true way of being, there are only approximations of what those essentialized ideas are. In this sense, I acknowledge my identity and the identity of my objects as an ever-evolving form of role playing. What I bring to queerness is not an essentialist structure of what it means to be a gay white cis man in America, but what it means to be a person with many intersecting and complex lived experiences.

Intimate Transfer Study

“There is no true self that exists prior to its immersion in culture. Rather the self is constructed in and through its relations with others, and with systems of power/knowledge”⁵

-Niki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*

In my attempts to queer material I went to one of the most prominent places where gender and sexuality is enforced in our country; the public bathroom. For women and trans individuals, this site acts as a gender enforcement tool through the use of violence, intimidation, and ridicule.⁶ Today the public bathroom is a battleground for the culture wars conservatives have chosen to fight in order to make their last stand attempting to legislate gender against the trans community. Along with gender enforcement, the men’s room tends to be a site for “sexual deviation.”⁷ For that reason, the men’s room has historically been a location in constant in need of enforcement to guarantee the delicate fabric of heterosexuality is not violated. In 2016, a California ruled that police officers were illegally profiling, enticing, and arresting gay men looking for consensual sex in public bathrooms.⁸ These illegal enforcement tactics and the cultural constructions that they are meant to enforce are part of what drew me to the site of the men’s bathroom.

It is in this charged atmosphere that I chose to use urinal cakes as my material, specifically the Genuine Joe Apple Fragrance Non-Para Urinal Screen and Deodorizer Block (a.k.a. the urinal cake). For those who do not know, the urinal cake is a hockey puck-sized chunk of chemicals and fragrance that adorns the base of men’s urinals generally pink or blue in color. I chose this material because it goes to the heart of what many see as an object with one purpose, to clean

and sanitize the men's room. Taking it out of that one life or essential use, I placed it within a queer narrative of erotic pleasure. In taking on the urinal and men's room as a site for sexual expression, I situated my work within a historical queer art context exploring urination as a process. For example, Andy Warhol's oxidation paintings or Robert Mapplethorpe's X Portfolio photographs, particularly his image *Jim and Tom, Sausalito* where Mapplethorpe photographed individuals within the kink and fetish community urinating on each other.⁹ In my own work, I wanted to connect to earlier queer artists, expanding upon their work questioning the ways certain sexual behaviors are coded as permissible through the queering of material.

“How does creating an object of adornment publicize an act of intimacy, between my partner and I?”

This question led to four different pieces. In *Intimate Transfer Study #1* I created a 21st century version of an Elizabethan ruff out of urinal screens and sanitary blocks. I was zip tied into the ruff and peed on to see how the blue cleaning sanitary block would transfer and subsequently stain my skin. This set of images and objects is loaded with questions about historical adornment, particularly the Elizabethan Ruff and its link to royalty, cleanliness, extravagance, and godliness. In queering the material, I am also queering history by questioning heteronormative societal structures around kink, sexuality, and intimacy.



Figure 1: *Intimate Transfer Study #1*, 2016

The exploration of the urinal cake as a tool to mark the skin lead me to *Intimate Study #4*. I was particularly interested in the material transfer of an intimate act onto another object. I sat at my workbench cutting the urinal cakes into cubes and balling them into ‘pearls’ which was both disgusting and meditative. Using the framework for queer theory, I attempted to break down the material, and reconstruct it in a way to challenging normative structures. The pearls allude to the dichotomy of wholesome pure femininity and the sexual act of a pearl necklace. Both of those

are flipped by the act of urination creating a new mark of intimacy. In all of these pieces, I challenge not only the normative use of the object, but the constructs surrounding where those objects are traditionally used and the types of allowable expressions of sexuality permitted within those spaces.

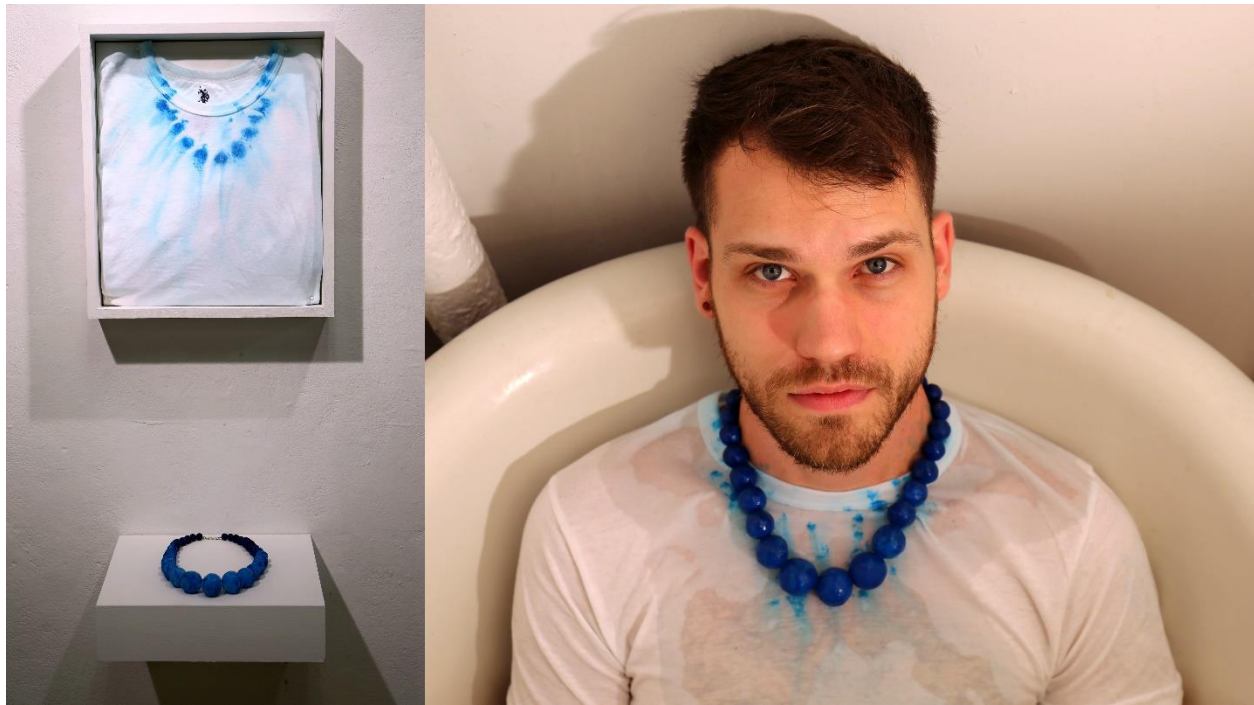


Figure 2: *Intimate Transfer Study #4*, 2016

Beef Cake(s)... and Skillets

“What is a man anyhow? what am I? what are you?”¹⁰

-Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Much of the work I created for my candidacy exhibition was focused on dissecting one object...the cast iron skillet. The skillets I used acted as tools to explore my own ideas of gay masculinity through the image of the gay male beefcake. Which is defined by the Adonis models—generally young overly muscular, hairless, and blemish free—that adorn gay clubs, advertisements, and pornography. I am interested in the life that everyday objects have and the histories embedded within them. Cast iron skillets, which are one of the oldest cooking devices, hold an interesting place in our culture as an object that can be seen as both masculine and feminine. It has the ability to be placed directly into fire by the lonesome cowboy cooking supper on the desert plains; or used with finesse to sauté, fry, or bake any number of hearty meals in grandma’s kitchen. In exploring the skillet as an object, I’m drawn to a quote in the book *The Gendered Object* by Pat Kirkham and Judy Attfield. They state, “relationships between objects and gender are formed and take place in ways that are so accepted as ‘normal’ to become invisible.”¹¹ By altering the skillets, I illuminate the gendered relationship existing within them. My breast plate *Plug Me Up!* acts as a queer object of projection and ornamentation taking on the role of penetrator and protector, questioning who and what ultimately has the power.



Figure 3: *Plug Me Up!*, 2017

I explore ideas around the construction of my own identity and desire to embody the ideal gay male physique. Taking vintage skillets, scrubbing off the layers of seasoning, embedding objects, or etching images, I connect to my own history of growing up as a confused gay kid in Idaho. The imagery and objects selected point to memories when the structures of the dominant heterosexual culture attempted to ‘correct’ what was not seen as normal: when my cousins told my Mom that me spending so much time with my grandmother sewing and crocheting was going to “turn me gay”; the realization as an altar boy that Jesus’ rippling body, up on the cross was titillating; the stolen belt buckle from Bryce commemorating the confused drunken make out sessions leading nowhere. All of these personal memories are etched or imbedded into the

skillets, which are then re-seasoned, constructing a queer self-portrait. This alludes to Judith Butler's argument that the performing of a gendered body is not a set of facts but a "sediment of acts" that over time have come to define what is woman or man.¹² I strip the "sedimentary layers" of seasoning on the skillet to bare the iron structure, only to build up again, in an attempt to examine and reconstruct my own identity.



Figure 4: *Fry Me Up!*, 2017

Further exploring the layers of fatty seasoning held in the skillets, I fabricated a 'pearl necklace' out of butter and let it melt over my body, creating an oily sheen perfect for photographing the

oiled-up beefcake. I wore the pearls flexing what muscles I have, recreating traditional beefcake poses in an attempt to explore what is both masculine and the gay male ideal. Alluding to Felix Gonzales Torres *Untitled Go Go Dancer*, I attempted to embody the idea of beefcake performing a photoshoot, inserting myself into the history of gay male physique images. Judith Butler asserts, that to break from the historical constructions we need social action requiring performance which is repeated.¹³ In my performance failing to reach that idealized state of beefcake, I was able to create a new ideal of what beefcake means to me.



Figure 5: *Butter Pearl*, 2017

Converging Objects of the Universe

“As subjects participating in increasingly dense and volatile networks of object, we seem ready to turn to them for lessons on how to live, socialize and organize publicly and privately. We may be ready in other words to accept that objects define us.”¹⁴

-Anthony Hudek, *The Objects*

In the 4th or maybe 5th grade, my grandma Alice, gave me two small oval garnets from an old ring of hers. I don't remember what the ring was for or why she gave them to me, but I kept the stones hidden in my room tucked away in a box on my headboard. No one knew that I had them, and in my mind, it became a secret between the two of us, causing the gemstones to take on a totemic role in my life.

At night under the yellow glow of my lamp, I would carefully pull out the garnets and examining them under the magnification of a jeweler's loupe that I took from my dad. Under the loupe I could see the facets of the stone, all of their subtle imperfections and flaws. These imperfections under the magnification became yet another secret that I had. I would sit up imagining what I would do with the two imperfect dark red stones, creating a new world in my mind where they had power that only I knew about...and then I lost them.

I've come to realize that the objects that come in and out of our lives have an autonomous life of their own. They don't care about the person who once owned them or even made them. Once out of our possession objects are free to create their own histories. I'm interested in how we define a

history that might not be seen but felt. What draws people to certain things in the flea market, or thrift shop? For me, it's the energy that over time becomes imbued in objects, for example the two garnets I was drawn to as a kid. What is it that drew me to these banal stones in the first place? It was drawn to the history and secrets they contained, the time they spent underground forming in the sedimentary shale, the excavation and subsequent imperfect faceting by a gemstone cutter, the home in my grandmother's ring where they gained the most power of all, and finally the small box on my head board where they gained another meaning. All of the human and nonhuman traces that are contained on these two small rocks unknown to the future person who finds them. It's my belief that the seemingly innocuous energy that lies dormant in all the objects we surround ourselves with can be a powerful tool for recycling and re-imaging new spaces.

What stands out to me when thinking about this energy is the role that sentimentality plays in our attraction to objects. The world that I create is painfully sentimental, its outdated, it's kitsch, it's homey, it's all the things I remember and hate...and love. In the end it's complicated like the objects I collect and create. Samuel Jacobs in his article "Life Amongst Things" states.

The power of objects over us is not an unfamiliar experience. It's central to the way psychoanalysis describes our internal psychic structure: love objects, hate objects, phobic objects, fetish objects, internal objects, part objects and so on that we direct our actions or feelings towards. Or should we see it the other way around, that objects project their power and control over us?¹⁵

My objects project, they look back, and most of all they challenge by creating a new space where they insinuate another possibility of use, creating their own world. A world in which we are only passersby and they are here to stay.

A Critique of Objects

“Ultimately it is a question of the function of art beyond the personal. It’s is not merely a matter of doing work that does not oppress others but also doing work that pushes further towards a redefinition and transformation of culture”¹⁶

-Harmony Hammond, *Class Notes*

By laying out a theoretical framework, I hope to illuminate the underlying concepts and discourses that have helped shape my current series of work *Converging Objects of the Universe*. Viewing my work through the lens of critique laid out by theorist Michel Foucault, and later Judith Butler, I point to underlying systems of both hetero and homo normativity that my work seeks to critique and reorganize. In reorganizing the normative function of objects, I enable a new queer idea of use through ideas of ornamentation, collection, disidentification, and locating bodies within time/space. In doing so, I create my own world full of odd objects, furniture, photographs, all pointing to a different more complex possibility.



Figure 6: *Converging Objects of the Universe*, 2018

In his book *Archeology of Knowledge* Foucault lays out a theory of discourse that sees the structural origin of science, books, and the oeuvre as socially constructed apparatuses used to control the subject. He argues that through the discourse of critique, the structures and connections that each discourse is built upon can be understood and called into question. Foucault states, “what we must do, in fact is to tear away from them their virtual self-evident, and to free the problems that they pose; to recognize that they are not the tranquil locus on the basis of which others question (concerning their structure, coherence, systematicity, transformations) may be posed, but that they themselves post a whole cluster of questions...”¹⁷

Calling into question the historical and social constructions of discourse, Foucault does not do away with each discourse but illuminates their history as non-definite and approximate. In doing

so, he points out intersecting connections that pose more questions than answers. These connections and questions reveal the hidden relations of structures, ideas, and objects, making it possible to use critique as a tool to reveal more complex present-day narratives that work to normalize, categorize, and subjugate.

Expanding on his idea of critique, Foucault states “Words are deliberately absent as things themselves, any description of a vocabulary is lacking as any reference to the living plentitude of existence.”¹⁸ This points to one of the problems in describing and critiquing discourse: words can only go so far; we live in a material world filled with things. To only use words as tools to describe and critique runs the risk of reifying and flattening the discourse one is trying to problematize. However, this also points to a possible solution: visual art and performance opens up the ability to critique, reordering narratives and proposing a new and more complex discourse that does take into account “the living plentitude of existence.”¹⁹ Turning to my installation *Converging Objects of the Universe*, it is through creating a queer space that objects act as critical tools to question their normative use. As the viewers enter the space and peer at the objects, and furnishings on display they start to question their predefined function. The cabinets, and shelves which were once houses for memories, take on the role of bodies layered with adornment that is both seen and unseen. The objects they contain, like the lipstick made from an old baptismal candle, or the cast bronze acorns from Boise Idaho point to personal memories, questioning the rules for how and what we collect.



Figure 7: *Altar*, 2018

To solidify my definition of critique, it is important to recognize that it has its limits, and to find ways to utilize those limits as a productive tool. In her analysis of Foucault's ideas of critique, Judith Butler argues that while Foucault attempts to distance himself from the analysis of critique. His critique of both the self and aesthetic, are deeply connected to his own ethics and politics. Butler states, "Foucault seeks to define critique, but finds that only a series of approximations are possible. Critique will be dependent on its objects, but it's subjects will in turn define the very meaning of critique."²⁰ She points to a central aspect in critique, which is that the person doing the critique will always be influenced and constrained by their own histories and constructions of self. To paraphrase Ru Paul "the call is coming from inside the house." This is important because for Foucault, critique needs to be separated from the domain of moral judgement and connected to what he considered to be virtue. Virtue, according to Foucault, is seen as a continual questioning of authoritative structures. In using critique to question authority the subjects finds themselves questioning their own formation of self, based on those defining structures. Butler goes on to claim, "to gain a critical distance from established authority means for Foucault not only to recognize the ways in which the coercive effect of knowledge is at work in subject-formation itself, but to risk one's very formation as a subject."²¹ She argues that Foucault imagines critique as an action meant to question authoritative discourses that seeks to categorize and normalize, but in doing so he also calls into question his own formation of self.

It is here that I again insert my own thesis; through the creation of objects one can examine their own constructed identity, using these objects as tools to critique historical systems and

discourses. For example, *Our First Jockstrap* a sculpture consisting of a copper plated Nasty Pig Jockstrap mounted to a nightstand drawer that sits inches above the ground, on legs made out of glass corn cobs. Through questioning its relationship to the body, the queer object radically reimagines the site of the night stand allowing for a new possible use. Copper plating a jock strap I gave to my partner on one of our first Valentine's Days connects to a history of preserving memories by copper plating babies first booties. This act not only preserves that memory of a Valentines in a new city, but a personal evolution of gay identity. By exploiting a personal history of self-exploration, its critique of normative ideas around functionality and identity are made apparent.



Figure 8: *Our First Jockstrap*, 2017

While examining the construction of self, I look to Elizabeth Grosz's ideas of space and time in locating an identity. For Grosz, the subject formulates their identity based on their physical relationships with others.²² Building off Jacques Lacan's idea of the mirror stage where the subject as a child views themselves in a mirror and becomes self-aware, she states "The mirror Gestalt not only presents the subjects with an image of its own body in a visualized exteriority, but also duplicates the environment, placing real and virtual space in contiguous relations."²³ For Grosz the subject becomes self-aware through seeing their own body in the mirror, as well as the reflected space around the body. Everything reflected in the space of the mirror, even the physical objects, help create the idea of an individualized self. Connecting this back to my own work, I see my pieces as mirror objects reflecting back a personal history of complex self-awareness.



Figure 9: *Converging Objects of the Universe, 2018*

Building off of the foundation of critique and subject formation. I turn to the ideas of disidentification proposed by José Esteban Muñoz. For Muñoz disidentification is a tool used by queer people particularly queer people of color, to negotiate what he calls a “phobic majoritarian sphere.” According to Muñoz, disidentification happens when a set of different identities are performed or articulated that go against normative expectations.²⁴ There are many ways for disidentification to appear, one being Judith Butler’s idea of slippage. He states, “to disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object or subject that is not currently coded to “connect” with the disidentifying subject.”²⁵ The act of disidentifying, according to Muñoz is to neither identify with the “good subject” who is connected to dominate culture, or the “bad subject” who is considered outside dominate culture. The disidentifying subject is somewhere in-between, and it is in that in-between space they are able to claim social agency.

Looking at how social agency is claimed though different environments I turn to my piece *Jock Strap Rack*. Using the lens of disidentification, this piece consists of garments meant to be worn in-between queer and normative spaces. Fed up with the traditional jockstraps and the Adonis models that they adorn in queer clubs throughout the country, I took it upon myself to create a set of jockstraps complicating a defined queer space. This piece takes cues from Muñoz, as he states disidentification is about “recycling and rethinking encoded meaning.”²⁶



Figure 10: *Jockstrap Rack*, 2017

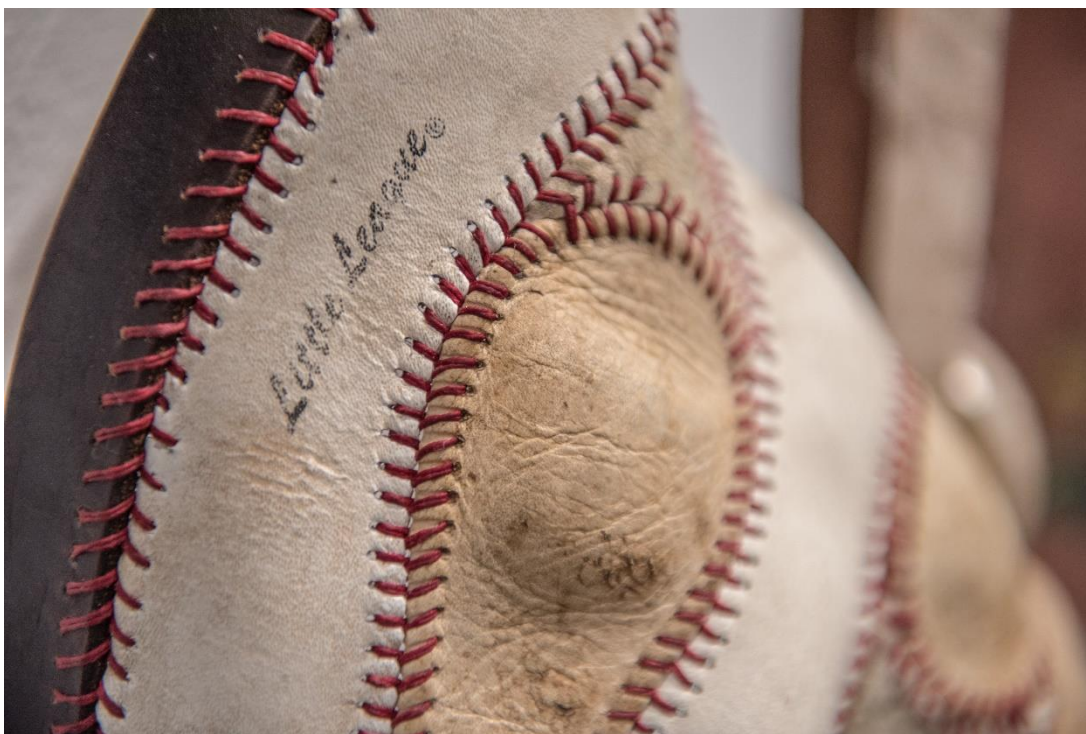


Figure 11: *Jockstrap Rack* (Detail), 2017

Materials from childhood memories like baseballs and an unfinished needlepoint are re-contextualizing in a new functional object. I challenge the viewer and wearer to rethink the encoded meaning they contain. The baseballs,—which as a kid meant Little League practice, taunting, and an outright aversion to any group sports,—become an object of kink and desire. By recycling the baseballs to form a jockstrap, I critique their encoded meaning as a masculine object. Taking it one step further, they work to question a personal history that has allowed me to see the bodies of athletes and jocks as an ideal to strive for. By taking the jockstrap off the wall to wear they helped to challenge those assumptions becoming a disidentificatory device sitting somewhere in-between the ideal, and the nonconforming. “Disidentificatory performances and readings require an active kernel of utopian possibility. Although utopianism has become the bad object of much contemporary political thinking, we nonetheless need to hold on to and even risk

utopianism if we are to engage in the labor of making a queer world”²⁷ In examining the idea of a queer utopia, I’m drawn to another book from Muñoz. In *Cruising Utopia*, he lays out a framework for viewing queerness as an ideal utopia that is always just out of reach but can be seen in everyday objects and the excesses of ornamentation.²⁸ I use objects like baseballs, nightstands, chandelier crystals, and hobnail glass lamps to construct queer hybrid objects with non-normative uses. I view the objects I make as a form of world making. This is done through the augmentation of objects creating differing points of use, where a queer futurity can be formulated.



Figure 12: *After 9 Years*, 2018

Through critique it is possible to articulate a future that is not bound to the history of exclusion, marginalization, and hierarchy. As an object maker, that possibility lies in the function of objects. By questioning and critiquing ideas of normativity through the supplemental nature of adornment and ornamentation in functional objects, I point to a new and divergent use challenging that history. The queer future I point to takes into account the historical discourses that have helped to create it. This includes discourses and assumptions that have helped define specifically gay spaces, where homonormativity runs rampant. By taking a multilayered view critiquing discourses like gender, masculinity, sexuality, and desire I challenge and reorder these assumptions. In doing so I create a queer world where recognition of our own self-constructions is the beginning not the end.

Photographs

“Wings, Michael. You grow wings and become a fairy.”²⁹

-My Own Private Idaho

Most of my high school years were spent finding any possible way to escape the tedium of rural suburban life in Idaho. Much of that escapism took the form of ditching public school to drink and do as many drugs as my friends and I could get our hands on. Most of those days were spent at drum circles held at Farmer Brown’s in Star Idaho, or up the in foothills trying to escape the omnipresent adult and authority figures that we were rebelling against. During this time, I found solace in photography, taking my 35mm camera with me on our adventures, trying to depict a different view of our quaint Idaho town. The photographs, which I developed in the stifling hot or freezing cold darkroom located in a portable classroom in the parking lot of my high school, were broody, moody, and confusing. But there was a sense of honesty in trying to depict and locate figures in what I saw as a desolate, and stifling environment. I’ve come a long way from then, finding comfort and recognition in my hometown that I tried for so long to escape. I look back at those photographic depictions of friends and places as another genesis of my queer world making—Trying to figure out where I fit as a confused gay kid in a place that I saw as confining and oppressive.



Figure 13: Black and White Photo Print, taken 2015-2016

Photography has become an important tool in my current work, as it challenges the function of an object by depicting them within a new narrative. In a way it is a continuation of the world making I started as a 15-year-old. As an object maker and photographer, I want my objects to have a history and tell a story. To achieve this, they need to have multiple points of access, taking on a hybrid role that is at once a sculptural object in space, a photograph, and a wearable object. The photography works less to activate the objects being worn or depicted, than to give another glimpse into this queer world. The photos act as portals that reveal the evolving relationship between my partner Adam and I. Describing Marcel Proust's take on the reality of photographs Susan Sontag writes: "Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out perishable, remote."³⁰ According to Sontag, these two ideas as not so

different. Similarly, my photographs simultaneously frame the reality of Adam and I in the intimacy of our home, and separate it. They don't depict the activated object as much as they depict an intimate expression accessing my world.

Ornamentist

“Ornament is both functional and contextual; it serves to relate one thing to another”³¹

-Michael Snodin and Maurie Howard, *Ornament a Social History Since 1450*

Ornamentation has continually played a large role in the way I create and think about objects. The types of ornamentation that frequently appear throughout my work is the western antiquity style taken from ancient Greece and Rome, popularized during the renaissance and subsequent revivals. When thinking about Western European ornamentation, it is impossible to separate the history and ideas around the human body and ornamentation from Christianity—particularly the idea that ornamentation was sinful: to ornament one’s body was a self-indulgent attempt to sexualize oneself.³² Many of the wearable objects I make flirt with this boundary, particularly my crystal prism bro tank made out of over 1,200 crystals, and the chandelier jockstrap. The tank top acts as a sexy mesh top to wear. It points to the mesh tank tops popularized at gay clubs in the 90s and early 2000s, while simultaneously referencing chainmail, and body armor. The jockstrap which has been popularized in the gay community, has seen a transformation from an object of protection, to sexy lingerie meant to frame one’s ass, torso, and genitals.

Describing the function of ornamentation and the body, Michael Snodin, and Mauri Howard write: “History of Ornament and its application to the human body in Europe and America during the past 500 years was, as a result one of constant flirtation with the boundaries of excess, of hinting at the erotic without actually revealing the objects of desire.”³³ Both the tank top and jockstraps I’ve created connect back to the history of obscuring ornamentation; the tank top, and

jockstrap allow the skin of the body to be seen yet, pixelated and obscured. The obscurity creates a titillating moment of seeing the object of desire, and the denial of that fulfillment.



Figure 14: *Bro-tank*, 2018



Figure 15: *A Wild Country*, 2018

When discussing ornamentation, it is impossible not to mention Adolf Loos who wrote the seminal text *Ornament and Crime* in 1929, which has shaped contemporary perceptions of

ornamentation and spurred a lot of the thinking in modern design. Loos argues “Evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornamentation from objects of everyday use.”³⁴ He uses this argument through the extremely racist comparisons of the indigenous people of New Guinea to Europeans arguing that the desire to ornament oneself is primitive pointing out that in New Guinea it is ok to ornament oneself with tattoos, whereas in European culture it is “criminal and degenerate”³⁵

This idea becomes important in my exploration of ornamentation in the contemporary sense. The arguments against ornamentation no longer have an overtly racist slant, the arguments used against it still deploy the same dismissive language which sees ornamentation as completely useless and invalid. As someone who is interested in the history of objects, this points to one of the lasting effects regarding conversations around functionality, ornament, and decoration. Lisbeth den Besten lays out an alternative view of ornamentation from the theorist Mihaela Citicos, who states that “ornamentation as a symbolic function is very important because humans cannot live without symbols”³⁶ She points out that architectural ornamentation on doors, pillars, bridges etc. mark the load bearing part, and in doing so highlights its function. When I think about ornamentation within my own work, I see the way that my door pulls, brass mantel pieces, or faux carved designs can function by pointing to different uses. For example, the door knob which functions as a tool to open the cabinet, but also an object for ornamenting one’s body challenging how we view objects around us.

Cabinets

“America, that surreal country is, full of found objects. Our junk has become art. Our junk has become history”³⁷

-Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

Growing up, my parents had an old china cabinet that displayed pristine china printed with cherry blossoms, and a crystal set given to them as a wedding gift, only to be brought out on holidays and special occasions. This, cabinet and later the bulky midcentury buffet handed down from my grandmother were endlessly fascinating to me. They were a place of prestige for the objects that delineated our status as a middle-class family with the economic means to afford proper china. Of course, they also housed knickknacks, random tchotchkes, and any assortment of handmade thing from my sister or me. These cabinets, and the shelves at my grandmother's apartment became a sort of stage. I would give life to the random objects and souvenirs creating complex stories between the silver fork and candle stick enacting all kinds of dramas leading to love, loss, and heartbreak. The 16th century Flemish physician Samuel Quiccheberg once described “Wunderkammern were a ‘universal theater’, and the cabinet was its stage.”³⁸ Following in that tradition much like the stages of my childhood my cabinets act as a stage for my objects to be peered at and observed.



Figure 16: *Objects for Display*, 2018



Figure 17: *Objects for Display* (Detail), 2018

In their introduction to the Spring 2018 magazine MacGuffin *The Life of Things*, Kristen Algear and Ernst van der Hoven describe Walter Benjamin's autobiography *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, as an "Adventure novel with cupboards." They go on to discuss "what makes cupboards so interesting is that; they are not just containers but mirrors of our culture, both veil and what is veiled."³⁹ The containers and cupboards used in my installation were found either on walks in my neighborhood, or at the local thrift store. They act not only as tools to hold, but disclose and

obfuscate, becoming bodies themselves. Fabricated out of a number of different furniture parts, they act as hybrid bodies inviting viewers to investigate and get to know them. They contain objects and memories given to them by me, dictating a complex history and understanding of the world. Like the glass piggy bank filled with 217 copper pennies from before 1982, and one 1989 penny (the year of my birth) polished to its sparkling base metal of Zinc. The act of polishing off the layer of copper symbolizes the othering from the 'pure' copper pennies that came before it. It is at once the sediment of the prior pennies, and at the same time something different. It is still trapped in the glass piggy bank unable to escape, contained literally and metaphorically by the structures that help to define and give it value. The cabinet that houses it allows the viewer to create their own history and story about the lonesome silver penny in the piggy bank with all the others acting as a stage for this evolving drama.

Conclusion

“More specifically, I see world-making here as functioning and coming into play through the performance of queer utopian memory, that is a utopia that understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated—a utopia in the present.”⁴⁰

-Jose Esteban Munoz, *Cruising Utopia*

Looking back, I now see my first ‘functional’ queer object as the quilt I made as a young grandma’s boy for my dog Peppy—which perhaps sparked my interest in being a maker. Its shoddily sewn squares of fabric, pulled out of my grandmother's scrap bin, literally recycle the encoded meaning of a quilt. By questioning craftsmanship, its excess thread and crooked stitches seek to critique and highlight the notion of the handmade. At the same time its small size calls into question the functionality of a quilt to keep us warm and cozy. This queer object meant to question our relationship with the wholesome, and handmade, has become a tool to point to a queer reimagining that the maker—a 7-year-old gay kid in Idaho could never have foreseen. As my practice has grown from the queer little quilt I made 22 years ago, I think about what it means to be a sentimental maker in 2018. It’s easy to see the desire to reimagine the past through the rose-colored glasses of sentimentality, and it’s even easier to forget the brutal reality that many marginalized people faced, and still do. My work, which I see as a reflection of personal experiences, does not use sentimentality for sentimentality’s sake, but as a tool to construct a world that looks forward to a future that is great because it is queer and complex.

End Notes

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- ²Nikki Sullivan, 2007. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. (New York: New York University Press, 2007). 39
- ³Jonathan Weinberg, "Things are Queer ." *Art Journal*, 1996), 26.
- ⁴Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge, 1993), 316.
- ⁵Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 41.
- ⁶Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* . (Durham : Duke Press, 1998), 24.
- ⁷Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* . (Durham :Duke Press, 1998), 28.
- ⁸Mark Joseph Stern, 2016. "News: The Stingers Get Stung." *Slate* May 4, 2015.
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2016/05/long_beach_police_rebuked_for_illegal_anti_gay_stings.html.
- ⁹Jonathan Weinberg, 1994. "Urination and Its Discontents." *Journal of Homosexuality* (1994), 41.
- ¹⁰Walt Whitman, 1922. *Leaves of Grass (1850-1881)*. New York : Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1922), 23.
- ¹¹Pat Kirkham, and Judy Attfield, *The Gendered Object*. Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 1.
- ¹²Judith Butler, "Performative Act and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* no. 40 (1988), 523.
- ¹³Judith, Butler, "Performative Act and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* no. 40 (1988), 525.
- ¹⁴Antony Hudek, *The Object, Documents of Contemporary Art Series* .(Cambridge, MA; London : MIT Press, 2014), 24.
- ¹⁵Sam Jacobs, "Life Amongst Things." *MacGuffin The Life of Things*, no. 5, Winter (2017), 185
- ¹⁶Harmony Hammond, "Class Notes." *Heresies* no. 3 (1977), 36.
- ¹⁷Michel Foucault, and Alan Sherida, *Archaeology of Knowledge*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 26.
- ¹⁸Michel, Foucault, and Alan Sherida, *Archaeology of Knowledge*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 48.
- ¹⁹Michel Foucault, and Alan Sherida, *Archaeology of Knowledge*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 48-49.
- ²⁰Judith Butler, "What is Critique: An Essay on Foucault's Virtue"." In *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy* , ed. David Ingram, (London: Basil Blackwell 2002), 4.
- ²¹Judith Butler, "What is Critique: An Essay on Foucault's Virtue"." In *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy* , ed. David Ingram, (London: Basil Blackwell 2002), 18.
- ²²Elizabth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion : Essays on the Politics of Bodies*.(New York : Routledge, 1995), 84.
- ²³Elizabth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion : Essays on the Politics of Bodies*.(New

York : Routledge, 1995), 87.

²⁴José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999), 8.

²⁵José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999), 9.

²⁶José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999), 31.

²⁷José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999), 25.

²⁸José Esteban Muñoz, *Crusing Utopia, The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York : New York University Press, 2009),1.

²⁹*My Own Private Idaho*, Directed by Gus Van Sant. Performed by Keanu Reeves (1991, Los Angeles, Criterion, 2005), DVD

³⁰Susan Sontag, *On Photography*. (London : Picador, 2001), 165

³¹Michael Snodin, Maurice Howard, *Ornament A Social History Since 1450*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1996), 11.

³²Michael Snodin, Maurice Howard, *Ornament A Social History Since 1450*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1996), 93.

³³Michael Snodin, Maurice Howard, *Ornament A Social History Since 1450*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1996), 94.

³⁴Adolf Loos, and Adolf Opel. 1998. *Adolph Loose Ornament and Crime* (Riverside : Aridne Press, 1998), 168.

³⁵Adolf Loos, and Adolf Opel. 1998. *Adolph Loose Ornament and Crime* (Riverside : Aridne Press, 1998), 167.

³⁶Lisbeth den Besten, *On Jewellery a Compendium of International Contemporary Art Jewellery*. (Stuggart : Arnoldsche, 2011), 146-146.

³⁷Susan Sontag, *On Photography*. (London : Picador, 2001), 69.

³⁸Eliot Haworth, "Chamers of Wonder, " *MacGuffin The Life of Things* no. 5, Winter (2017), 34

³⁹Kristen Algera, Ernst van der Hoeven, "The Cabinet ." *MacGuffin The Life of Thing*, no. 5, Winter (2017), 8.

⁴⁰José Esteban Muñoz, *Crusing Utopia, The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York : New York University Press, 2009),37.

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Vita

Education

- 2016 Master of Fine Art, Candidate Anticipated Completion 2018, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
- 2013 BFA Studio Art, Emphasis Art Metals, *Cum Laude*, Boise State University, Boise ID

Exhibitions

- 2018
- Transformation 10: Contemporary Works in Found Materials*, Elizabeth R. Raphael Founder's Prize Finalists, (Upcoming) Contemporary Craft, Pittsburgh PA
- Athens Jewelry Week, Art + Jewelry: Intersecting Spaces* Benaki Museum, Athens Greece
- New Waves*, Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, Virginia Beach VA, (Juror Cay Sophie Rabinowitz)
- Ripple Effect 169*, Wellington B. Gray Gallery, East Carolina University, Greenville NC, Adorned Spaces, Society of North American Goldsmiths Conference, Portland OR
- All That Glitters*, Gallery One, Ellensburg WA, (Juror Keith Lewis)
- 2017
- National Juried Exhibition*, Rawls Museum, Franklin VA, (Juror Angela Meron)
- Critical*, Homan Designs, Richmond VA
- Tiny Shiny*, Quirk Gallery, Richmond VA, (Juror Maggie Smith, Caitie Sellers)
- Artifact and Interpretation*, North Seattle College Art Gallery, Seattle WA, (Curator Amanda Knowles)
- 2016
- Toast*, Depot Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond VA
- 59th National Juried Art Show*, Maria V. Howard Arts Center, Rocky Mount NC, (Juror Rodger Manley, Director of Gregg Museum at North Carolina State University)
- Heptadecagon: Soil Invites 17*, Soil Art Gallery, Seattle WA
- Refined IX: Humor*, Cole Arts Center, Stephen F. Austin University, Nacogdoches TX, (Juror Andy Cooperman)
- Home Ties: An Intimate Study of Adornment for the Body and Home*, Capitol Hill neighborhood residence, Seattle, WA
- 2015
- International Chasing and Repoussé Exhibition: A Survey 2000 thru 2015*, Outnumbered Gallery, Denver CO (Jurors Frenze Acquafrasca, and Nancy Meli Walker)
- Seattle Metals Guild Biennial*, Washington State Convention Center, Seattle WA
- 2014
- Impractical Magic*, Tacoma Metal Arts Center, Tacoma WA

- 2013 3 x 3, Facere Art Gallery, Seattle WA
Varia, BFA Exhibition, Visual Arts Center, Boise State University, Boise ID
Catalyst, Boise State Art Metals Club, Student Union Fine Arts Gallery.
 Boise State University, Boise ID
Faktura International Juried Student Exhibition, Lawandowski Student
 Gallery, Winthrop University Rock Hill, SC (Juror Susie Ganch)
 2012 *Emergent Student Juried Exhibition*, Visual Art Gallery, Boise State
 University, Boise ID (Juror Cynthia Camlind)
 2011 *Transit, BSU and NZU Student Works*, Gallery 1, Nagoya Zokei University
 of Art and Design, Nagoya Japan

Awards/Residencies

- 2018-2019 Artist in Resident, Arrowmont School of Art and Craft, Gatlinburg TN
 2018 Elizabeth R. Raphael Founder's Prize Finalist, Contemporary Craft,
 Pittsburgh PA
 Virginia Commonwealth University, Graduate Travel Grant, to Attend Material
 Topics Symposium. Greenville NC
 2017 Haystack's Summer Conference Scholarship, Haystack Mountain School
 of Crafts, Deer Isle ME
 Covington Scholarship, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond VA
 Graduate Travel Grant, to Attend 2017 SNAG Conference, New Orleans LA
 Pentaculum Residency (Metals Area), Arrowmont School of Art and Craft,
 Gatlinburg TN
 2016 Graduate Fellowship, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond VA
 2012 Art Department Scholarship, Boise State University, Boise ID

Exhibitions Curated/Organized

- 2017 *Ripple Effect 169*, (Forthcoming) Gray Gallery, East Carolina University
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 2016 *Home Ties: An Intimate Study of Adornment for the Body and Home*, Capitol Hill
 neighborhood residence, Seattle, WA
 2013 *Catalyst*, Boise State Art Metals Club, Student Union Fine Arts Gallery.
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Presentations/Workshops

- 2017 "How to Craft in an Epidemic" *Gender, HIV/AIDS and Cultural Production*,
 Panelist Works in Progress 2017, Old Dominion University Norfolk, VA,
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 2016 Chasing and Repoussé Demonstration, VCU/ECU Retreat, East Carolina
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Teaching Experience

- 2018 Teaching Assistant, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond VA
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2017	Instructor of Record Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond VA (Intermediate Mechanisms, Jewelry/Metals)
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Professional Experience

2014-2016	Gold/Platinumsmith, Green Lake Jewelry Works, Seattle WA
2014-2016	Contractor, Stone Setting for White Space Jewelry, Seattle WA
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2017-Present	Ethical Metalsmiths Student Committee Committee Member
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2012-2013	Boise State Art Metals Guild Vice President President