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THE BUILDING BREATHES TOGETHER

by McKeever Donovan



THE BUILDING BREATHES TOGETHER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by McKeever Donovan
BFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2011

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THE BUILDING BREATHES TOGETHER

By McKeever Donovan, MFA

Abstract:

The Building Breathes Together presents a realm of speculative, industrial habitation and alchemical production. In my instillation, I look to raise questions surrounding romantic notions of production and utility. The work introduces a surreal and haunted space of decomposition and regeneration.



ANOTHER PAIR OF FEET

My eyes open to the glow of red numbers on my bedside table: 6:48. The creaking floorboards have jarred me awake an hour ahead of schedule. My neighbor's foot flexes around the shape of my skull, each toe pressing the wooden slats, squeaking into the corners of my half-conscious brain. I roll onto my back and stare up at my lofted ceiling—It stretches out above me like the belly of a drum, amplifying all the percussive steps and creaks of the occupants whose units are stacked above mine. Another pair of feet has joined in, and their collective weight hovers directly over the tip of my nose. A muddled conversation tickles the back of my molars and I close my eyes as they trod off past my outstretched left arm and towards the kitchen. Somewhere up and to the right of me, I hear the sound of water rushing through the network of pipes; likely the tenant two floors above, whose waterline also runs through my unit. I shower each night before bed, but from what I can hear most of my neighbors have a morning shower routine. I take comfort in knowing my sheets are always clean, but overhearing their habits often makes me reconsider my approach as I make a foggy descent into my day. I pause to listen longer. This time, the sloshing suggests something more active than the tub pooling up. Perhaps they've had a washing machine installed.

Above me, the stove clicks on and pots clang and skirt across the metal countertop. I

often see the couples' bowls strewn about the porch after they've rushed out the door for work in the morning: spoons half pressed with the palette of a final bite; cemented raisins and scraped mush swelling and baking in the afternoon sun. I can hear the spoon stirring, clinking against the pot. The clamor grows softer and duller with each turn as the water slowly thickens and the oats amalgamate into a glutinous mush.

I plant and lift each leg to swish the sleeve of my pant over each stock. Once outfitted, I head to the axis immediately below my neighbors' and decide to make my own bowl of oatmeal in solidarity. As I stir my concoction, the steam collects and ascends in a spreading column, warming my face as it's sucked up into the ventilation hood where my forehead rests. The two ingredients slouch into one. I sweeten my concoction with syrup and sliced apples and sit on the back porch to check my email while I eat.

Full from my breakfast, I slouch down on the floor to help my body digest. With my head resting against the wall, a sharp mix of high, treble notes crawls up the back of my neck. The song of another neighbor's alarm blends with the birds that roost in the crevasse along the brick façade of the building. I read once that this species of bird, the Starling, was brought to the area by a man who wanted to introduce every species of bird ever mentioned in Shakespeare, and that they are known for their powers of imitation. These birds can "warble, whistle, chatter, make smooth liquid sounds and harsh trills and rattles," leaving me to wonder which sound is the originator and which is the imitator in this alarm clock situation.¹ The phone's digitally translated bird calls are soon joined by a slowly building vibration, which crescendos to a violent buzz against the bedside table, resonating with the aggressive hum of the refrigerator inside my unit. The air is warm in this orchestral drone. If anything, the building feels pregnant, or bloated perhaps, in the way our reverberations build upon one another. When I notice the swelling gets too intense, I travel down my back fire escape and into the basement. I walk past my coffee, which has now filtered through my kidneys, passed through me and run into the drain in the next room that travels into the basement.

The basement of the building is a cavernous space where pipes and wires don't duct efficiently, but instead bleed out. The wooden beams and plaster that line the ceiling drink up their lost energies like leeches and slowly release a steady drip of fluid to the cement floor, forming a sort of septic pool in a particularly depressed space in the concrete. Newly aligned

¹ Medler, Matthew D. "European Starling Sounds, All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology." Photos and Videos, All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Macaulay Library, 3 May 2015.

microbes and foreign gases build and ferment over time.

The first time I travelled down here was when I noticed the drain in my kitchen sink spewing back up at me. A violent vomit bubbled from the basement with a deep timbered base. Inspecting the source of the splatter that coated my kitchen cabinets, I noticed that this sludge was comprised of our collective oatmeal and coffee that had been pooling in our buildings drainage system for months. I attempt to communicate to my neighbors the severity of this problem that worsens with each passing day. I slip scribbled notes in the bowls of oatmeal left on the back porch; I tap my keys on the waste pipes that suck the shower past my closet and ties us all together. After a few failed attempts of signaling my neighbors, it becomes clear that the only option is to wade through the source down below before the ignored sludge backs up into our beds.

Now below, I realize the problem is much more severe than I had imagined. I see now that this leakage has become our collective undoing. I stare into the swamp of our buildings drippings and get to work. I scoop and scrape the breakfast sludge from this expansive pool in the center of the concrete depression. I collect the amalgam of desaturated grey oatmeal and drained bath water and roll this material into soccer ball sized masses of doughy orbs. I lay these balls into a neat grid off to the side on the sweating concrete. After some hours of work, the matrix of balls builds so much that I begin to crowd out all the available space. I place these sopping masses into the cooking pans and pots from my kitchen and take them out in armfuls to the adjacent yard to dry in the sun. These grey sludge balls take days to evaporate. The evening seems to be its most productive time when the yard reaches its highest temperature. Eventually this building's drain sludge is cooked into mounds of septic bread and signs of sprouting bodies begin to emerge from their crust.

Small, stringy weeds with flowering tips and unidentifiable fruiting shrubs push through the crust of these aluminum basins. These flowers grow at an amazing rate throughout the night, and each day I notice their frail stocks thicken. One day, after these strange plants reach full bloom, I hear a rustling from my bed and the clanking of shoes on the fire escape outside my window. I try to ignore the commotion and do my best to fall back asleep with the starlings already beginning their predawn calls. In the morning, as I make my coffee, I look out the back window and see that this building's garden has been plucked clean. The pots and pans left spilled and overturned; a thin trail of grey dust and mashed oats leads up the fire escape and into the backdoors of my neighbors' homes.

THE BUILDING BREATHES TOGETHER



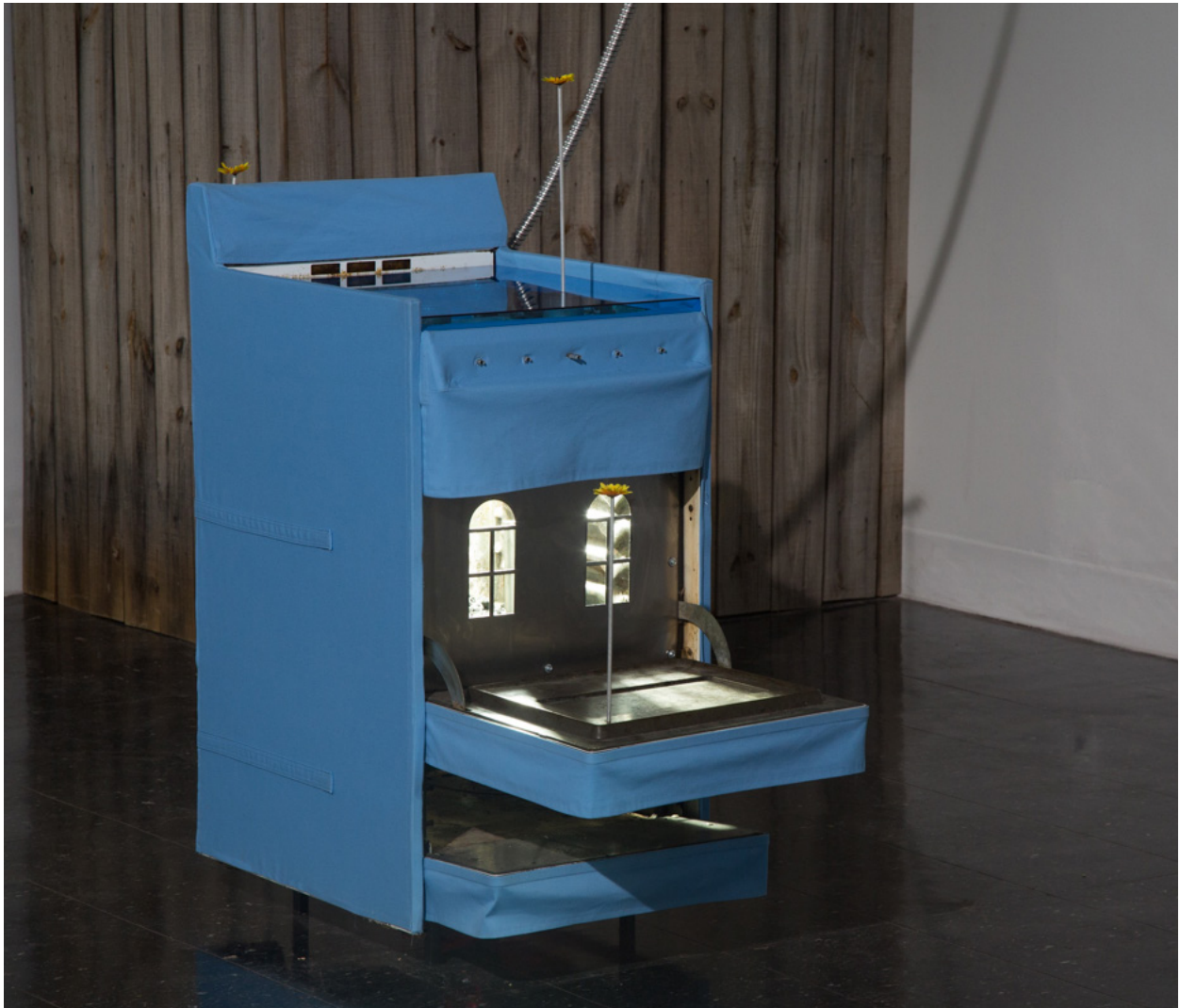
The Building Breathes Together presents a realm of speculative, industrial habitation and alchemical production. The gallery space frames four discarded consumer kitchen ovens laying in various positions with their doors ajar. The ovens have been outfitted with monochromatic slipcovers that are customized to shroud and articulate their facades as well as highlight unexpected curves and undulations. Certain angles of these works appear as blocky, minimal bodies; costumed geometries that don't betray their inner industrial forms. The ovens sit as ghosts of their bygone selves, forming silhouettes of new and unexpected bodies in the space. Like the rain covers of collector cars and expensive backyard barbeques, these shrouds generalize their objects forms like cartoonish puppets of the skeletons they protect.

All four of these sculptures sit on inset shallow metal frames creating the illusion of ascending beings, hovering just above the gallery floor. These works are further distanced from their expected functionality through the positions in which they sit: toppled onto their sides or splayed on their backs like laboratory specimens dressed for surgical operation. The slipcovers are hemmed back in various façades that are fitted with clear, acrylic windows. The windows expose cross sections of the ovens inner workings: soiled fiberglass, frayed rainbows of electrical wiring, and caked infrastructures. All of these elements operate as the guts of these dressed cadavers.



Sculptures made of clay embedded with ash, oil and resin sit in each oven's hearth. These inlaid forms look to extend, to a cartoonish degree, the char and oily history of their previous culinary life. The soiled clay forms mounded, melted, balled and rolled forms devoid of any specific articulation or rendering. The forms depict something between actual residue and provisional mounds that might be found in a child's sandbox. It's as though a lifetime of baking, dripping, crusting and rotting has congealed into a new landscape. One that feels molten and moldable into new future cycles of production.

Signs of life in these interior terrains come in the form of synthetic flowers connected to concealed electric motors. The bright flowers poke their faces up from the caked innards and sprout through their cloaked outer skin and spin in a meditative, perpetual twirl.







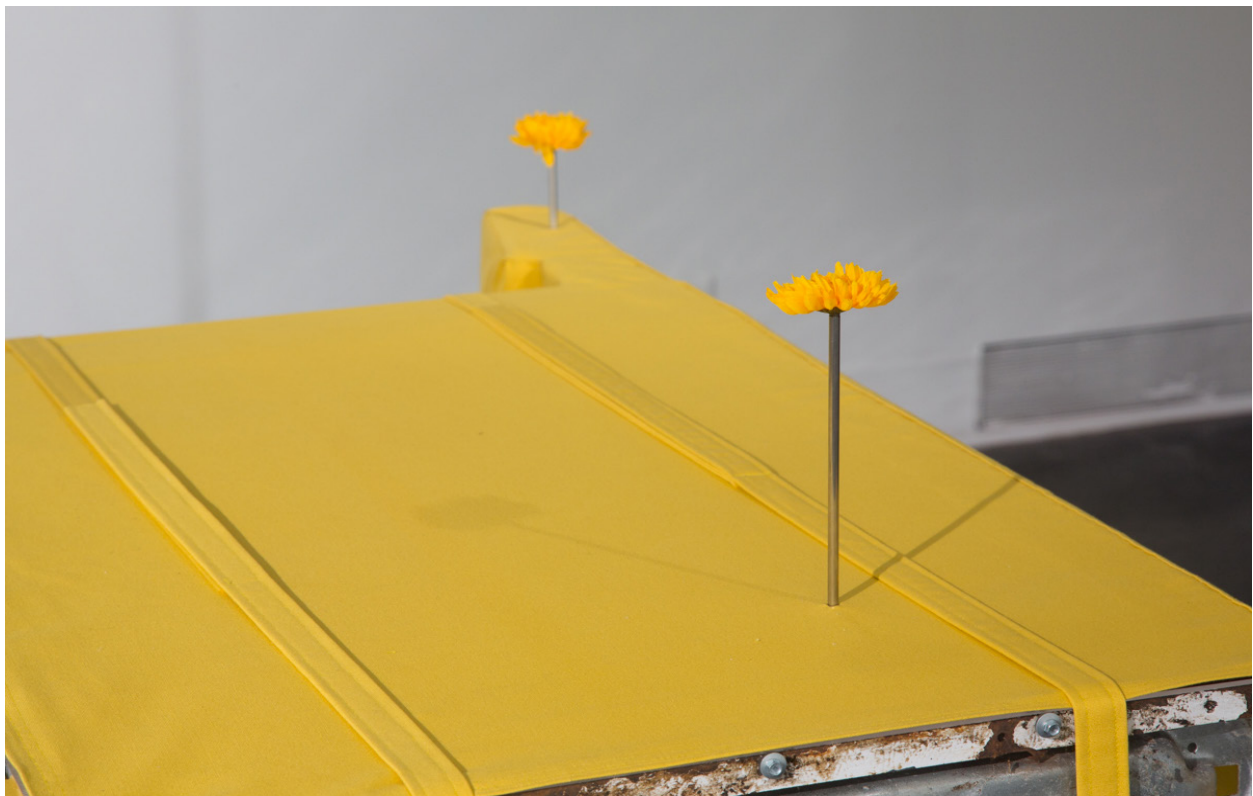


The walls of the gallery surrounding the ovens are inlaid with eight aluminum casts, titled *Flowers from the Yard*. These shallow reliefs depict tightly framed scenes of human hands plucking flowers from the earth. These melancholic, romantic gestures focus on the moment when a flower's life is taken for the pleasure of the hand that pulls it. These frozen instances immortalize the flowers on their threshold between life and decay. The frozen gestures were initially roughly rendered out of the muddied soot and clay that the adjacent sculptures house in their bellies. Prior to their translation to aluminum, these scenes were rendered in the shallow recesses of standard cooking pots and baking pans. As if cooked in the ovens themselves, these scenes are molded and replaced with solid aluminum replications aligning the malleable contents into the same metallic material of its vessel. By cutting and inlaying these works into the walls, they become integrated into the architecture of the gallery and the greater building as a whole. Like portholes, these scenes propose to transcend the bounding box of the room itself.





The Neighbor, a 30 minute audio loop in 4.0 surround sound, is played throughout the exhibition. The audio consists of ambient background noise of an imagined apartment building above the gallery space. Speakers hidden behind the walls of the gallery point upwards, bouncing sound off the concrete ceiling and washing the space with its din. Heavy footsteps stomp on floorboards and climb stairs; jangling keys unlock a series of endless doors; a washing machine rumbles; a bathtub bubbles for an imagined bather; a tea kettle comes to a boil; and an oscillating fan and humming refrigerator are layered with opaque squishes of liquids and clamors of machines. At first encounter, the ambient audio casts an eerie presence, a kind of confusing and anxiety inducing wash of shuffled sounds of indistinguishable commotion. As time is spent in the space, the feeling of a more specific ghostly presence is felt. Both haunting and oddly calming these sounds lull the viewer in the space while setting a mood of human presence devoid of any figure.



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