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ALTERED INTERACTIONS 2008-2010: A THESIS

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

by

KRISTEN ELIZABETH REGO
BFA, The Ohio State University, 2007

Directors: Ron Johnson, Assistant Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking
and
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Virginia Commonwealth University
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Abstract

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Surrounding materials, signage, and detritus on the daily path offer plenty to look at, if not too much. The eye seeks comfort in its passive vision by ignoring its peripheries. Identification of my personal vision reveals itself through the manipulation of ignored material. I consider hand-made vs. machine made, singular vs. the multiple particularly in plastics, packaging and other utilitarian objects. Industrial processes influence my one-person operation. Understanding the way objects are made allows for an opportunity to connect with them. I'm already surrounded by them, the least I can do is get to know them better.

Quick to Judge Slowness

The pace of our existence is speeding up. Our lives are bombarded with a flow of media fostering instant gratification. Not to say this is a bad thing. Technology has given us new forms of communication so advanced that it makes it hard to imagine how it was ever possible to live without a cell phone. But the speed of life has taken us over. Aspects of the media cannot get processed in our minds as we prepare to intercept the next thing to come along. We live as though we are traveling on a highway, unable to see every detail in our periphery. Exit signs and mile markers are the only indicators of where we are.

Slowness is urgent. An artist's duty is to identify a certain slowness when engaging in the investigation part of making work. To grasp as much as possible about surrounding objects allows the opportunity to consider particular characteristics beyond what we think we may know. Observation allows us to see a hidden potential in objects, particularly in those existing just under our radar. Instead of denying the consumer world, I embrace it. As much as I can defend nature and speak romantically about it, the world I inhabit is human made and product based. I observe and identify materials that I touch, use and throw away. This slowness brings out characteristics in objects that relate to me. A material worth exploring has some relationship to the body, whether it is the way something relates to the hand in order to function, or the way a material addresses positive or negative space through color and form. My work addresses casting, stacking, pouring, chopping and an overall breakdown of material to get to its root.

Color in the Collection: Specifically Arbitrary

Collecting is an act that supports my work. The collected is evidence of consumer culture. Twist ties, plastic bottle caps, packing materials, cardboard and endless contents come into our lives, play a role and a function, and end up in our recycle bin. The collection removes these items from their lifecycle, creating a new context, a metaphorical relation to everyday life. It becomes something beyond a group of arbitrary objects.

My interest in the collection was a significant part of my first year in graduate school. In a studio visit with Jill Moser, she recommended a book that related to what I was interested in titled, On Longing. It dealt with the miniature, the gigantic, collections, souvenirs, and other aspects relating to human scale. Defining what a collection is helps me clarify the reasons for doing it in the first place.

A collection is a grouping of “similar” objects. Flexible plastic ties removed from milk and juice containers are found objects with specific color characteristics. These color-coated tabs straighten out with a pull and return to their natural curl when at rest. This motion is a one-time function that is utterly common and mundane, a joy that will not present itself until the next container comes along. A secured plastic tie offers a great deal of comfort before removal: we know the milk is safe, uncontaminated, for the tie protects the opening until we are ready for consumption.

The tab’s only function is completed in an instant and becomes just another piece of plastic. Pale blue, navy, yellow, red, orange, violet, all colors used to represent 1% or whole milk, orange or carrot juice, went from specific to arbitrary. In the state of “specific” labeling, when pale blue is representative of skim milk for example, this color plays an important role for

the customer. We don't have time to read labels. The grocery store is an errand, a stop off on the way to doing more important tasks. If we know that Pale blue is our color, we can grab it quickly and be on our way. The role of these particular colors is practical, convenient, and was invented to assist the masses.



Milk Ties, 2010 Digital Print

In a grouping, after the tabs have done their job, the colors do not represent anything. They sit together as arbitrary manufactured nothings that have completed their main purpose. In the collection, the tabs become a formal grouping of found color where one observes the distinguishing qualities between the collected objects. "To group objects in a series because they

are the 'same' is to simultaneously signify their difference. In the collection, the more the objects are similar, the more imperative it is that we make gestures to distinguish them” (pg 155 On Longing). Soon I find myself searching for new characteristics within the same old plastic tab. The exciting thing is to discover a shift in manufactured object. If a cap is redesigned, the tab will be altered to fit. This “nothing” that occurs in a plastic tab doesn't mean a thing to most, but these changes exist around us. The temporary nature of objects becomes apparent with extended observation. Even the most seemingly consistent product evolves through time due to manufacturing, advertising, value, demographic, change in technology, or a shift in oversight or management. The mundane becomes a formal wonder. The act of removing a plastic tab from the milk becomes extraordinary.

Plastic shopping bags are another example of universally manufactured, practical, ubiquitous objects. This was an accidental collection that emerged. I noticed a palette developing that was gradual but consistent: The bags, mostly from grocery stores, were either white or flesh toned. Bags vary from store to store which is expected, but when the same store started to put out varieties of colors overtime, it became about the search for new mixtures. The Kroger near VCU campus receives a new shipment of plastic bags that is slightly different than the one before; the color may have a touch more yellow in the mixture, the text slightly off. The shift is not dramatic. No mood or life altering events going on. But I have a little celebration as I wait in the checkout isle.



Polyethylene Bags 2010

Overdose on Color

Josef Albers asked his students to “see in situations” and to be aware of contextual influences with color. This allows us to see what is around us: more than facts, more than an initial glance. We rarely see a true color because its identity is always relative to its surroundings. Color defines our surroundings and light defines the color, therefore it is always changing. Color is local the environment, time of day, and varies from person to person, so the true color identity of an object is lost, making even specific colors truly arbitrary. Since color is always in a state of flux, my job is to come as close as I can to identification. I am going to get to know it.

Albers’ practice encompasses color through the elimination of representational painting in order to truly examine color relationships. Color recognition is rarely stored in our memory. We must continuously look again and again at found color to understand how it functions in relation to its surroundings.

Even the color white is incredibly complex and contains characteristics within the monochrome. Le Corbusier, via the text, Chromophobia by David Batchelor, describes the complexities of the Parthenon in Athens, Greece. Initially, it is not an all-encompassing white as one would expect from the great structure: “Next to the form, volume, mass and space of the architecture, color begins to give way; color no longer appears to be such a significant force; it no longer has the power to intoxicate. And yet in this reflected color there is still something awesome: ‘Never in my life have I experienced the subtleties of such monochromy.’ Only Later, during a storm does the Parthenon whiten. [It] absorbs and reflects the colors of its surroundings and atmosphere, but it does not seem to have a color of its own; the Parthenon is somehow

beyond color” (pg. 44, Chromophobia). With extended observation, this occurrence is prevalent to almost anything in its inconsistent environment; observed color loses its identity.

Recall a Recall

Saturday April 10, 2010, four weeks before I received my MFA, the Ukrops grocery store chain sold their business. It is an event that made me recall a chapter of my family history that ended a long time ago. The store closure was a reminder of what we encounter, what something used to be, and what will never be again.

Ukrops sold their 25 Virginia stores to a larger grocery store chain called Martin's. I walked into the Carytown location two days before closing and saw the depleted shelves, clearance items, and the beginnings of spackle touch ups emerging. I came back the next day with a camera. I documented barren shelves, blue uniforms worn by cashiers, and pre-assembled boxes ready to haul off leftover merchandise. This act of documentation was a tool used not to remember Ukrop's, but to remember a grocery store chain that closed twelve years ago, and was much more familiar and personal.

Giant Eagle bought out Rini-Rego, my family's grocery store business, in 1998 in Cleveland, OH. Like Ukrops, Rego's had a long history that started as a small market in the 1940's by my grandfather and his brothers. The concept of the grocery store on the big box scale emerged in the 1950's. It was known as one stop shopping. Meats, produce, dry foods and beauty products lived together in one convenient place. The closing of Rego's and the selling of the business is not a sad event; it was a progressive move that is common in business. It allows business to be more efficient and keep up with current economy and continue to serve the customer. Just as was done in the 50's with the big box store.

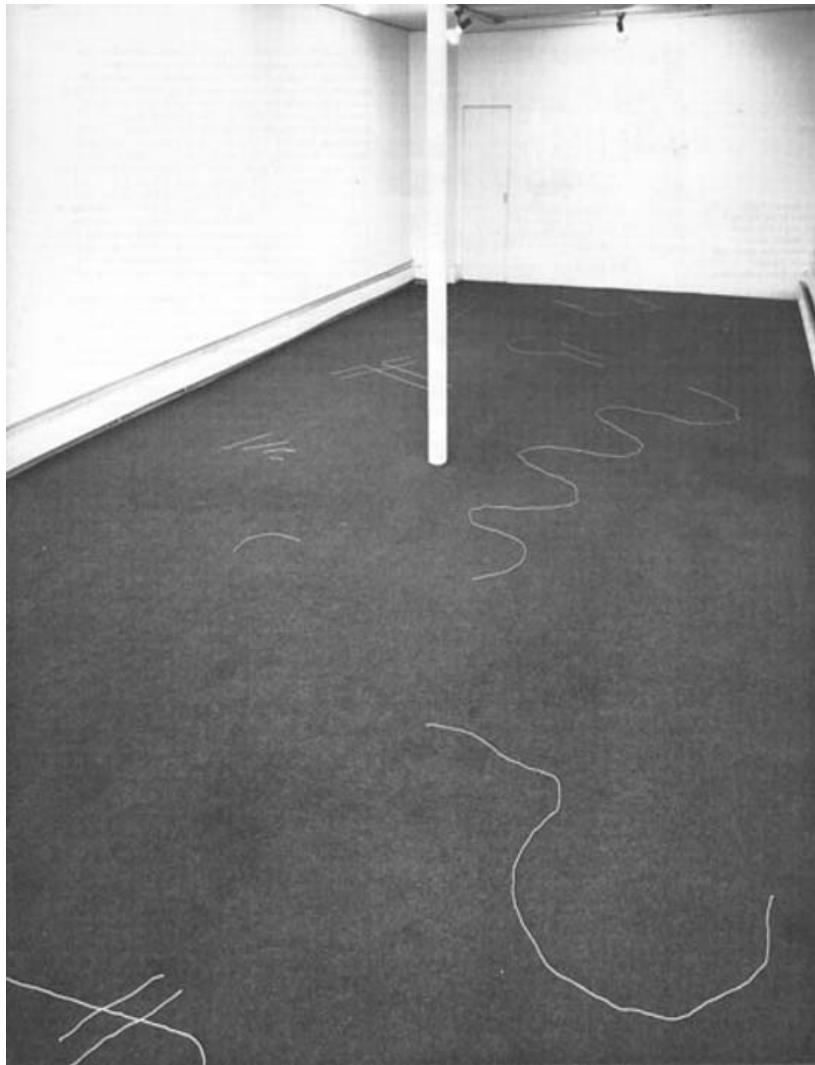


Ukrops, Richmond Virginia

The loss lies within the shift in family history. My Grandfather's generation contained traditions, like family dinners every Sunday that consisted of endless servings of pasta and Catholic guilt. Afterwards, the ladies would have coffee and a single Sweet and Low. My Great Grandmother was the cook in the family. She never shared recipes with her children, or anyone else. The theory is that if you shared your recipes, your children could cook for themselves, and would no longer need you. Her family secrets were stored in her head, leaving the rest of the family clueless about traditional Italian dishes. This aspect of family history can never be retrieved. The grocery store business was a reminder of the grandfather whom I never met. The store was a link into what he had started for his family. My experience of going to Ukrops once every couple of weeks in the past two years never reminded me of my own family until it was gone.

Drawing From Recall

Richard Tuttle addressed memory and mortality in the piece: *Ten Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself* (ca. 1973). It consisted of a reconstruction of a previous wire piece using string. Tuttle recalled the distance, placement, and characteristics of this work from memory. He remembered using the eye, the mind, the body.



Richard Tuttle, *Ten Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself* (ca. 1973)

Drawing from observation is a basic lesson in art. We practice, again and again, how to see, training the eye, observing form, and avoiding symbols by allowing the right side of the

brain to work freely. Tuttle approaches this concept in a way that embraces memory. He recalls a motion performed at an earlier time, mimicking the movement and placement of a string. This is comparable to the act of drawing from observation and is the ultimate example of creating work based on mimesis. It is impossible to do exactly what was done before. The time, location, and material have all changed. The realization that it could never be done exactly as it was is a strong metaphor concerned with mortality and the temporary nature of our surroundings. It is a reenactment, a performance, and a tribute to something that will never happen again. Adam D. Weinberg observes: “Recollection, the process of reminding oneself of something temporarily forgotten is the accretion of many factors, including associations, rumors, legends, discussion, and consideration of critical responses” (pg. 122, The Art of Richard Tuttle). By duplicating an action that has been done is to recall the things we do everyday without consideration. We become more self-aware of our actions to the point where there’s little differentiation between what we do and what we make as art objects.

Tuttle’s piece has influenced my own work serving as a simple reminder of what happens around what is happening, the stuff that I do and am familiar with. Tuttle’s practice and other artists from that time explored beauty in the mundane, a topic still widely used in the post-modern world. I remain grounded in my work by observing the existing and staying true to everyday observations and occurrences.

Two Steps Away From Garbage

A stack of bags is a painting. Airy layers of plastics barely touch and blend optically, and reveal each other like strokes of paint. It is hard to explain why polyethylene shopping bags are so mesmerizing for me. The material excites me. The bags are the color of flesh. It reminds us that the materials around us are made for the body and look like the body. Something so simple, available, and affordable can have complexities on the same level as a Netherlandish painting or natural rock formation. Each bag color is its own mixture: Variations of alizarin crimson, lemon yellow, viridian, ochre and titanium white. All the mixtures needed for a yummy, fleshy oil painting. But I do not use them in this way. If I mix a color, I struggle with what to do with it. Paint a bag? I don't need to paint a bag if I have a bag. The color is however, a celebration. It is a celebration of the palette that exists just under our radar.

Before the bags cross our path someone mixes these colors, combines that with the plastic before the molecules set up. Does a neutral semi-transparent material soothe the common shopper? The manufacturing, shipping and distribution of them are more interesting to me than anything I could do with them after I collect them. Non-art objects already exist and do interesting things, why would I need to do anything to them?

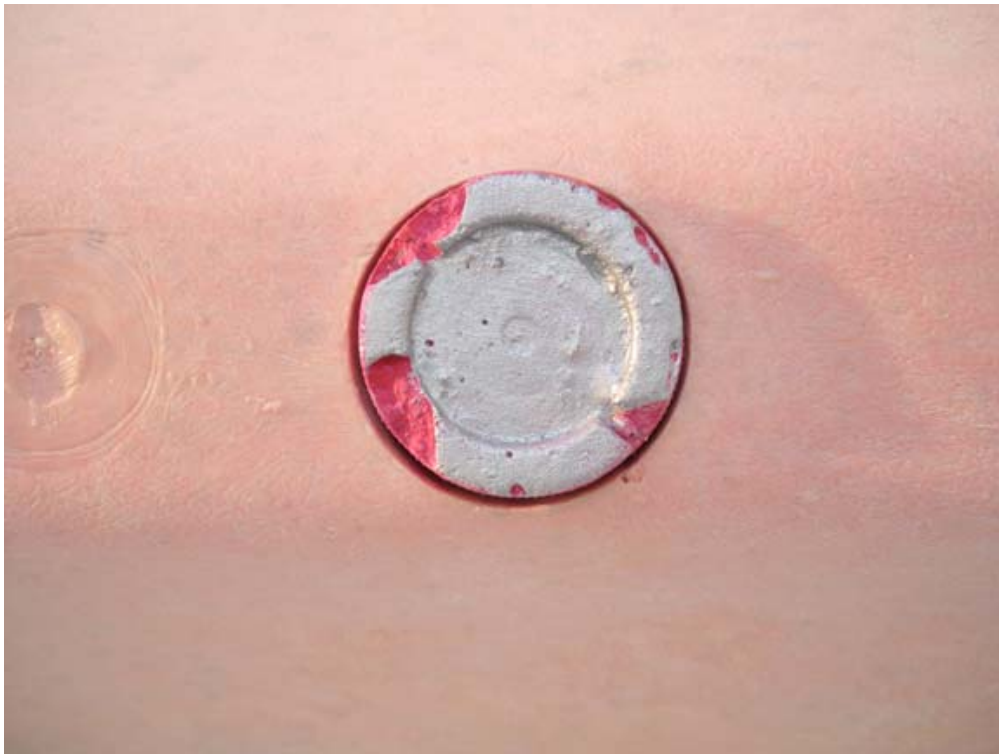
When I do collect recycled material, it is brought into a state where it is removed from garbage, but still remains true to what it is. The collection is a detour for the material that eventually ends up as garbage. The lineage of the plastic bag goes from manufactured object, to distribution, to discarded object, is now described as an object with a specific palette that operates on a level connected to the body.

Mold Making

Mold making has been a process I look to on a factory-made level and experience hands on in the studio. Machine made processes including plastic injection molding, symmetrical rotomolds and thermoforming create plastic wonders that we encounter and use everyday: symmetrical mouthwash bottles, car parts, bottle caps, and playground slides. Mold making makes an instant replica of anything. It is the stuff we all know and experience daily. Mass production is unavoidable.

In the studio however, it is a one-person operation: hand-made mold making, messy pours, and seams that do not quite line up. This introduces a contrast between hand-made objects verses machine-made objects. The stuff I create in the studio is altered through the casting material and the molds themselves.

Parking blocks are heavy, concrete, stubborn, and far below eye level. The piece, “Scab” is a parking block cast out of polyurethane, tinted pink and hung horizontally on the wall, eye level with the viewer. This creates a shift in placement. Viewers experience an object they know and have encountered from a car, or perhaps they’ve walked on one, as if mimicking a balance beam. But the placement allows the viewer to experience this object up close, the color and texture of skin.



Scab 2009 Polyurethane, concrete and paint

The object hangs at the level that has a relationship to painting. The palette of pinks and oranges were chosen to radically shift from what we normally think of as a parking block palette. Plastic caps were cast out of concrete to fit precisely into the three openings on the block creating a connection between functioning objects of different purposes. The silver and pink painted on the concrete are reminiscent of spray paint, mark making made to look unintentional as commonly seen on sewers, sidewalks and construction zones.

“Boneless Wing” was the result of several trial and error casting attempts of plastic flamingos. This kitsch, suburban lawn ornament is created by a symmetrical roto-mold. Bright pink liquid plastic coats the surface of the mold of a bird and sets up in a matter of minutes. The plastic flamingo was invented in the 1950’s and represents the first signs of pop art. Before the distinction of art and life, art objects and regular objects, the mass-produced bird is a comment on the nature of the species and the emphasis on that unmistakable pink.

Like many artists, I obsess over process and the time spent laboring over an idea, when most consistently, the best work I make is the result of an accident. After understanding how something is made I will find my own way to create objects to see how they can be altered. “Boneless Wing” was created by a mold made of linen soaked and draped over the body of a plastic flamingo. A pour of Urethane resin happened to be less than I planned for, so the result was the lowest dip of the wing of the bird about five inches wide. The pure white plastic captured the texture of the wing and the linen, resembling a decorative bar of soap. On the wall, I measure the piece to the level of my hand. The work is a quiet moment that falls away and is comparable to the proportion appropriate for the body.



Boneless Wing 2009, Polyurethane Plastic

This piece launched the next prominent material in the studio: soap. Soap From a mold on display transforms nature into décor: Flowers, tiny animals and pure white doves. It is a collection of objects meant to be admired and not used. What is the point?! Why do people display these in their bathrooms? I remember Christmas soaps displayed annually in our house that were dyed red and green. Their condition deteriorated and dust became imbedded in the material after about 20 years. The function of the material was not addressed, placing these items into a precious but still temporary state. Why not make decorative soap out of something archival?

Subtractive Mixtures

Ultra clear glycerin soap base melts down and is tinted with partial drops of colorant. Wall pieces of mine made of glycerin soap do not address the function. It is used as casting material for molds that are unstable yet impermeable. Plastic shower caps, gloves, bags left over kool-aid packets offer spaces that are constantly being altered. A shower cap is opened, stretched across a surface and is removed, crumbled and discarded. A pour into that space is filled to capacity and stands in where there is usually air, or hair. I am interested in these temporary spaces that serve a purpose within objects.

“Full/Form” is a series of soap that solidifies in plastic shopping bags, and are tinted to match specifically to the bags that are shifting over time. Two variations of Kroger bags are distinguished by varying amounts of yellow, red and green drops of colorant. The plastic is removed from the undercuts after solidification, and the transparent soap reveals the gentle folds and creases that describe the material. The forms arranged on the wall sit somewhere between a sconce wall-fixture and an ambiguous body part. The colors achieved are ones that are insignificant in context with their surroundings. The two Kroger “yellows” are barely noticeable until compared with each other in a clean white space. The achievement of these colors relies on the correct proportion of clear soap and partial drops of liquid colorant; one mixture containing more red, the other, more green. Placing importance on this overlooked palette and material is absurd but is an opportunity to examine our surroundings outside of their usual context.



Full/Form 2010 Soap and colorant

Liquid pours disperse evenly over a non-stick surface to reveal an even coated semi-transparent layer that behaves like polyethylene. In the piece, “Subtractive Stacking,” pours of soap are cut into strips and stacked together. This activity is reminiscent of plastic bags that stack together to blend and behave like paint. The function of the soap is addressed in this piece. Layers are soaked in water allowing them to weaken and conform other layers to eventually become one strong structure. The strips of soap soften in hot water and are comparable to al

dente pasta. The long line of stacked soap reveals subtractive mixtures that vary between color and thickness of the soap. The line faces an obstruction of four concrete blocks that simultaneously challenge the nature of the piece and balance it out. The neutral grey of concrete serves as a reminder of a middle ground color while the palette of the soap lies on either end. The concrete against the soap feels like an unlikely pair, but the concrete holds the quality of a man-made object, reminiscent of the polyethylene bags.



Subtractive Stacking, 2010 Soap, colorant and concrete

Knee/Knuckle

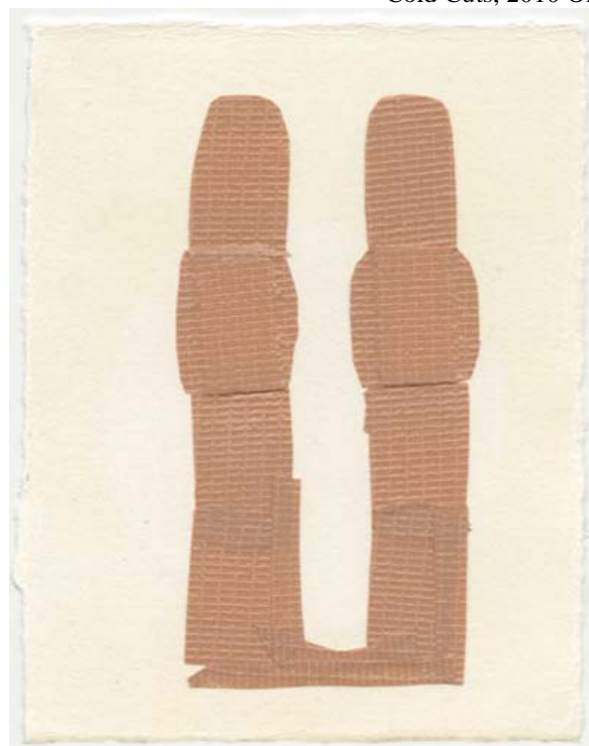
After several trial and errors and failed projects over the first three semesters, I returned to drawing. Works on paper are free space. I use thinned out layers of oil paint on paper in order to rediscover composition on a two-dimensional plane. Drawings the size of playing cards served as spaces where free thoughts could roam. Perfection, theory, or any sort of analyzing were not factors in the works. With polyethylene palette colors in mind I explored the transparencies of the found material to address the dualities within them including: negative space verses positive space, and manufactured toughness verses delicacy and subtlety. Making drawings based on this found palette pushed the investigation by introducing new materials that behaved more like skin.

The work, “Cold Cuts” explores overlapping transparent layers that resemble manufactured characteristics within plastics and comparing that to processed cuts of meat. I imagine these two items being manufactured in a similar manner: both containing complex chemical ingredients, that result in semi transparent uniform abstraction. The layers stack on one another to emphasize an implied weight, increasing the strength of the material. The transparent layers balance and rely on each other forming an implied internal structure.

Layers of Shellac became a staple for the drawings. Heavy layers soak and subtly tint BFK Rives paper. The layers behave like transparencies of plastic. Three coats on neutral gray paper pop with shine and saturation. This allows the background and the content on the paper to operate at the same level and play between positive and negative space.



Cold Cuts, 2010 Oil and Shellac on paper 12" x 8"



Thicker Skin, 2010 Bandages and Shellac on paper 4" x 5"

In the piece, “Thicker Skin”, bandages serve as collage material that explores the body in terms of tone, texture and connotation. The double line of bandage sits ambiguously as legs or fingers. The form activates the negative space allowing the color of the bandage to stand out as it recedes. The texture is uniformly smooth but tough like a scab, and strong and protective, and the pad of the bandage protrudes to resemble a knee or knuckle.

In a less striking way, the work titled, “Mild Transparencies,” is a composition and color palette that compares two white polyethylene bags of slightly different tones. The subtlety of the layers of paint is barely existent; thinned out with minimal paint. The work displays a delicate moment between industrial materials such as plastic bags. A tough, unnatural, throwaway material has the ability to become a quiet, soft example of equal light intensity.



Mild Transparencies, 2010 Oil on paper 4” x 2 ½”

Found material relating to the body brings out a delicate or intimate quality that slows down an idea and allows it to live quietly. Ludwig Wittgenstein describes silence as an extension of the body and language, something that goes beyond what we can say. He compares personal expression with that of color. It is often easy to describe by means of examples: pointing, sampling, picking up and laying down. He describes the body as having the ability to expand beyond what words can say: “Silence is spoken by the body, through our gestures and postures. The body is one of the means by which we express ourselves when we run out of words. Color is thus connected to the body in at least two ways: it is applied to the body as make-up, and it is allied with the body in its resistance to verbalization. Moreover, with make-up we not only make our bodies more visible and vivid, we also make them more expressive and articulate” (Chromophobia, Pg. 83). Make-up too is a source used to cover up, conceal and hide. As bandages do for the body; protect, cover and camouflage. This duality is the underlying force behind my drawings.

Closing Statement

My graduate experience has opened my work up to new territories and discoveries. I will always search for new ways to identify my personal vision and translate it to my work. I know now that the best I can do is let the work flow. Through chance and play in the studio, the work is at its high point. My biggest realization is that my work *is* personal to me, where before I thought my work existed as a universal type of work. Self-expression was the most difficult for me to achieve, but embracing it has given new life to my practice.

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Vita

Kristen Rego was born March 3, 1984 at St. John West Shore Hospital in Westlake, OH. She grew up and attended school in North Olmsted, OH. She earned her BFA from The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH in 2007. During this time she received the Robert Marion Gattrell Undergraduate Scholarship and worked as a gallery assistant for the Ohio Art League. The following year was spent in Columbus making art in a converted warehouse called Junctionview Studios, working as a line cook for Northstar Café, and teaching summer camp for Gallery 202 in Westerville, OH. During her time in Graduate School at Virginia Commonwealth University she taught *Perceiving and Using Color* to fourteen amazing undergraduate students. She was honored with the opportunity to pass on the teachings of Josef Albers. The future is wide open with many paths waiting to be traveled.