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Since birth I have lived in a world occupied by trinkets, doo-dahs, thingies, collectibles, decorations, souvenirs, tokens, and tangible remnants of people and places. As an only child I spent a lot of time alone, left to my own imaginative devices. Many childhood memories consist of specific series of toys and objects in my home and the ways in which they appeared magical. This magic included hearing sounds from inanimate materials, communicating with said materials, and forming bonds to things in ways that were only logical through my pre-adolescent perception. Objects in my life, just like those in others', have served as markers, placeholders, trophies, reminders, friends, symbols, warnings, and metaphors for nonverbal gestures. What began as a childhood relationship has evolved with me throughout my growth and movement in life, manifesting in multiple arenas, including my artistic practice.

THE THING IS

by

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THE THING IS

Since birth I have lived in a world occupied by trinkets, doo-dahs, thingies, collectibles, decorations, souvenirs, tokens, and tangible remnants of people and places. As an only child I spent a lot of time alone, left to my own imaginative devices. Many childhood memories consist of specific toys and objects in my home and the ways in which they appeared magical. This magic included hearing sounds from inanimate materials, communicating with said materials, and forming bonds to things in ways that were only logical through my pre-adolescent perception. As with many people, objects in my life have served as markers, placeholders, trophies, reminders, friends, symbols, warnings, and metaphors for nonverbal gestures, and what began as a childhood relationship has evolved with me throughout my growth and movement in life, manifesting in multiple arenas, including my artistic practice. Graduate research and investigation has led me down a path beginning with painting, that veered in multiple other directions for twelve months, only to bring me back to canvas and pigment. However, the truth is, my endeavors never strayed far from this beginning. Recognizing that my compulsion has always geared towards processes of collecting and accumulating, now clearly connects every action along the way.

My first jarring artistic inspirations came from female artists such as Cecily Brown, Ghada Amer, and Louise Bourgeois. I felt empowered by their honesty and unapologetic inclusions of the female form. Cecily Brown's fleshy paintings simultaneously depict erotic desire, violence, and vulnerability; while Ghada Amer's work juxtaposes the stereotypically domestic process of sewing with explicit imagery from pornography, using thread to simulate fluid movement of paint on canvas. Louise Bourgeois explores nuances of intimacy involving the human figure through a wide range of materials and processes, including metal, soft sculpture, and drawing, among many others. Viewing all of their works gave me permission to delve into similar subject matter and to deal with explicit details of the figure.

From the start I was curious about evaluating culturally produced projections of female sexuality versus ways in which women in their personal lives perceived their own sexuality. With so many conflicting representations of what both empowerment and exploitation looked like, I treated my work as a space in which a type of deconstruction and contemplation could occur. Similar to Wangetchi Mutu, I extracted elements from advertisements and pornography. While a reference still existed of what the amputated body parts were once a part of, the poses and limbs became completely decontextualized. These earlier works incorporated collage, screen printing, painting, and drawing, with all of the layers compositionally overlapping and intertwining. In retrospect, I understand more clearly how collecting imagery from a variety of sources to be re-appropriated was such a significant part of my methodology.

The overwhelming flood of pornographic imagery I was exposed to through research for this body of work created a need for academic research alongside the visual investigations. With the increasing availability of texts and documentaries centered around sex-positive feminism over the past few decades, it seemed to be almost a requirement that I tap into the philosophical, political, and cultural ideas circulating. I believed that with the armor of information these sources could provide, I would be better equipped to avoid merely mimicking or re-circulating outdated and essentially misogynistic ideas through my work. Here I formed connections with feminist theory, delving into Bell Hooks, Simone de Beauvoir, and Camille Paglia. I picked up texts exploring in detail the logistics of sex work and the porn industry; such as Whores and Other Feminists, by Jill Nagle, Prostitution and Pornography, edited by Jessica Spector, and the collection of essays housed in The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure. My investment in the subject matter, despite consistently being intellectually rewarded and engaged, became almost burdensome to my artistic practice at a certain point. On some level I convinced myself that I had a certain responsibility to translate accurately all of the diverse experiences and opinions of women with narratives very much outside my realm of personal familiarity. When I finally released this self imposed accountability, new struggles surfaced in my practice. If the images I produced were not overtly part of a politically relevant conversation, then how were they significant? Did I not have a responsibility to create work directly about the marginalized parts of my identity? If my artwork is not visually addressing my womanhood, black-ness, or even more specifically – my black womanhood, am I being naïve? A sellout? Neglectful?

Trivial? Really the question I was forced to ask next was, “What exists in my work beyond content?”.

When I truly freed myself from all of these other expectations and began a serious evaluation of what I valued most about materials and mediums, the work started to take its most honest forms. Exploring pure formalism in painting made clear that my choices have always been about the accumulation of individual marks as opposed to blended and layered paint to create a soft, modeled image. I have begun to view each of those marks, strokes, smushes, and splatters as unique characters captured in a moment on canvas. Each character plays a specific role, as if it were the lead flute player in the orchestra, or supporting actress in the play. Recognizing the marks in this manner, in connection with my life long obsessions with collecting, led to a strong desire to possess each of them in other ways. The nearly year long hiatus I took from painting was dedicated to finding ways to bring my gestures into three dimensional space. Polymer clay was my first entrance into a series of object making, because it felt the most linked with the painting process. A plethora of colors can be easily found, as well as mixed to build a customized palette. The material is extremely malleable and can also be re-molded an unlimited number of times before it is cured. Using the clay to translate or re-interpret characters from the paintings was a logical step. However, the limitation of working predominately on a small scale with objects that did not extend beyond in the palm of my hand, produced another challenge. Each object seemed to beg for a more impacting presence.

Forming three-dimensional versions of my cast of characters, through soft sculpture, clays and plaster, my objects became containable and collectable in new,

satisfying ways. I could more tangibly obsess over them, grouping them and creating paintings in real space. Each new composition became another way to display my collection, and I formed a bond with every new large scale character created. The plaster versions individually weigh anywhere between 10-20 pounds, carrying a similar presence to that of a small child's body. Naturally, it became immediately apparent with each one's conception that a name and personality be identified. Thus Simon, Sheila, Deborah, Charlie, Murphey, Tina, Tim, and Bianca were all born. Though I never lost sight of their object-ness, distinguishing them clearly from being like real people, I did always refer to them as "friends".

Some of these friends made physical sacrifices to become incorporated into installations, which permanently changed their physical state. The feelings of loss I experienced following these alterations then became new hurdles to overcome, and though embarrassing, they were genuine. To resolve the issue, it seemed obvious that I would simply invent another way to possess the characters, or to at least, hold on to them in their original, autonomous forms. There is truth in Jean Baudrillard's assertion in The System of Objects, that "the fulfilment of the project of possession always means a succession or even a complete series of objects... [which] is why owning absolutely any object is always so satisfying and so disappointing at the same time: a whole series lies behind any single object, and makes it into a source of anxiety." (Baudrillard 92). All of the anxieties I felt in relation to these things, were in correlation with my view of them as extensions of myself. Desire to claim ownership over material things and surround ourselves with items we consider self reflective, is often understood to be solely capitalist

materialism manifested in our culture. While this relationship does have relevance, human interaction with functional and non-functional objects has proven to be much more layered and complex than what this simple analysis underscores. Daniel Miller, for example, has done extensive anthropological research on materiality and the roles objects play in various cultures and locations all over the world. In his 2010 book entitled, Stuff, he writes, "... whatever our environmental fears or concerns over materialism, we will not be helped by either a theory of stuff, or an attitude to stuff, that simply tries to oppose ourselves to it; as though the more we think of things as alien, the more we keep ourselves sacrosanct and pure." (Miller 5).

After forming close ties to the small sculptures and large objects I made, though producing replicas in multiple materials, collecting photographs of them, and producing paraphernalia around them, I began to realize how much my fetishization of these things also reflected fetishization in discourse around painting. The history of painting in western art is fraught with mythologies centered around the gestural mark. Many of the dominant white, male figures I have been raised with as a student of art history in the U.S., pledge allegiance to its significance as the purest form of inspired expression. Cy Twombly's lines and Robert Motherwell's shapes, for example, fit the profile. In determining how I would return to painting in my own practice with this new awareness and relationship to materiality, I recognized a major flaw in my previous thinking. Before delving into sculpture, I was preventing myself from working based exclusively off of personal narratives or intuitive mark making in painting. Despite being largely influenced by painters who completely rely on these elements, I would not allow myself

to make the same decisions. Subliminally I must have believed that if my responsibility, was to make work centered around political content, on some level I had to have accepted that I did not possess the same privilege as other painters I admired. Acknowledging this has become extremely liberating. With a new approach to painting, during the final semesters in the graduate program, I embraced the freedom to tell personal stories in my work and not feel guilty about creating imagery derived from experiences in my life as opposed to heavy handed illustrations of other people's theories. I have found that operating this way actually allows me to be more specific and dynamic than ever before. As I paint and layer objects on the surface, every material, color, texture, mark, and formal relationship tells the story. Events and people are embodied in the way the images are held together, not through literal depictions of moments. Cy Twombly very eloquently described working in a similar manner when he wrote, "To paint involves a certain crisis, or at least a crucial moment of sensation or release; and by crisis it should by no means be limited to a morbid state, but could just as well be one ecstatic impulse, or in the process of a painting, run a gamut of states... Each line is now the actual experience with its own innate history. It does not illustrate – it is the sensation of its own realization. The imagery is one of the private or separate indulgences rather than an abstract totality of visual perception" (Roscio 67).

Every element of my practice is connected and somehow relies on the original spontaneous gestures made in the paintings. They create the visual narrative, which is then broken down into specific characters. The characters are given life through sculpture, and documented to become memorialized as photographs. The photographs

can then be translated into various paraphernalia, allowing each gesture and object to experience multiple lives and potentially be possessed in endless ways. I make these objects out of both a painterly compulsion to obsess over gesture, as well as an uncomfortable need derived from the lens of cultural materialism my generation views the world through. As a young, black female inserting herself into a historical conversation about signification in painterly abstraction, I also see these quirky little forms as subversive in their own right. They exist in multiple formats. They are art objects. They are collectibles. They are toys. They are action figures. They are paint. They are images. They are portraits. They are replicas. They are idiosyncratic. And through every iteration that exists, they are reflections of those original gestures. Despite what the objects in your collection actually are, as Baudrillard says, “what you always collect is yourself.” (Baudrillard 93).

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