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Collage: Building a World

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“Collage is the noble conquest of the irrational, the coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them.”
-Max Ernst

"To live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself."
-Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces*

I entered graduate school as a still life painter, but my first collage blew open my artistic practice. The process of collage seemed to align with my own way of thinking and living in such a strong way that I felt I had artistically come home. The work of bringing diverse fragments or pieces together—people at a party, components of a salad, or songs on a playlist—seemed so natural to me that for the first time going to my studio felt like a real continuation of my life. This groundwork allowed me to expand into my current practice, which embraces physical construction of models, photography, and word drawing as well as painting and collage.

Although much of my current work is not collage in material terms, the sensibility remains the same. The process itself has become a metaphor for everything I do in the studio; words become a collage element, as do pieces of cardboard and wire, wood and glue. The space of the studio plays its own part, coming in and out of my work as another collage component. Since origins, sources, and home are at the root of my work, I want to begin by delving into collage's past, exploring its formal and critical potential through time before speaking to my own practice.

From its point of origin in 1912 when Picasso first glued a printed trompe l'oeil image of a chair caning pattern onto a painted still life canvas and encircled it with upholstery rope (*Still Life With Chair Caning*, fig. 1), the history of collage can be seen as one of defiance, of formal deviation from previous standards and assumptions attached to the making of art objects. Introducing objects from

everyday life—things that do not declare themselves to be ‘art materials’—into the realm of fine art shook up the hitherto autonomous, privileged, self-enclosed domain of painting. The first challenge to the hierarchical distinctions between high art and mass culture, which has become the bread and butter of much of contemporary installation, performance, and video art, thus locates itself in the first collages of the Cubists.

The largely distasteful public reception of Picasso and Braque’s first experiments with collage attest to the potency of their innovations; when Guillaume Apollinaire published four of Picasso’s constructions in his avant-garde publication *Les Soirées de Paris* in November 1913, thirty-four out of forty subscribers cancelled their subscriptions in protest (Poggi 125). Because of poor public reception, most of Picasso and Braque’s collages and assemblages went into the private collections of their friends, many of whom were poets, critics, and other artists.

Apart from the basic challenge to the conventions of oil painting that the Cubists’ introduction of everyday material elements into their work represented, another important innovation, specifically in the first series of collages that Picasso made, was the near absence of hand-drawn elements. By not using his ‘signature’ hand-drawn marks, Picasso refused to his viewers a revelation of artistic temperament through the hand, which had traditionally been seen as the highest aim of a work of art. In this way, his compositions became a series of decisions that drew upon his formal intelligence and wit rather than on traditional ideas of technical mastery and gestural expression. Some suggest that Duchamp’s

readymades, which critique the Romantic conception of the artist's originality, find their inspiration in this way of thinking represented by the early Cubist collages and constructions (Poggi 12).

The first collages and constructions of the Cubists interacted in provocative ways with the growing culture of commodity in the first half of the 20th century. Picasso, Braque, and Juan Gris among others incorporated printed materials like brand labels and advertising logos from the developing consumer society into their collages. Some of these were directly stamped onto the products in question and then integrated wholesale into the artwork. Others were painted on by the artist as hand drawn, copied designs.

The use of pattern was more politically, socially charged for these Cubists than it was for the Symbolists and other late nineteenth/ early twentieth century artists who had also adopted decorative styles and flat patterns in reaction to academic style painting. These artists, among who were Maurice Denis, Paul Gauguin, and Henri Matisse, thought that art had declined with the sixteenth century's attempt to deny the picture plane and the related development of trompe l'oeil painting. They wanted to reinvigorate the surfaces of their pictures using simplified drawing and an avoidance of modeling, believing that an embrace of color and form for decorative ends would allow their works to express subjective emotions or states of mind rather than the pure, rendered form of the academic. These artists looked to non-Western artistic traditions for inspiration, including Japanese hanging scrolls, Egyptian wall paintings, stained glass, and Byzantine mosaics (Poggi 138).

Picasso and Braque's use of pattern, on the other hand, highlights the resemblance between the decorative motifs of fine artists and the mundane, overproduced material artifacts of commodity culture (Poggi 140). Their use of these materials critiques the requirement that decorative techniques must express the deeper subjective reality of the artist, pointing to the paradox of trying to express private emotions and realities with the public language of signs.

A related distinction between the Cubists and the preceding Symbolist generation had to do with their respective attitudes towards the negative impacts of industrial society and the growing culture of commodity consumption. The Symbolists held that in order to maintain artistic and moral integrity, artists needed to separate themselves completely from the prevailing commercial culture, effectively ignoring its impact on their lives in their work. The Cubists on the other hand took a head-on look at the changing world of images and language as it was evolving in mass commodity culture. The incorporation of elements like newspapers and other extremely fragile, degradable elements directly defies the process of commodification by which art works are seen as economically valuable, durable objects designed to enter the art market. Through an incorporation of industrial materials that had been debased by the sensibility of the *fin de siècle*—discarded scraps of newspaper, upholstery fabric, dirty drink labels etc.—Picasso and the other Cubists *took in* those elements of commercial culture in order to both document and critique prevailing market conditions (Poggi 153). The work also functions on another level as a critique of the Symbolist retreat from responding to the developments in mass culture.

Clement Greenberg championed cubist collage as a prime example of modernist principles in his essay “Collage,” its revised version published in 1959. Under his definition of modernism, proposed in 1961, “The essence of modernism lies...in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it, but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence” (Greenberg, *Modernist Painting*, 103). In his view the medium of collage did just this—the pasting of paper and other materials to the flat surface, he thought, reaffirmed the flatness of painting just as his other Modernist darlings, the Abstract Expressionists, did with their paintings. Christine Poggi argues in her essay “Collage and the Modernist Tradition,” though that the ‘flatness’ created by cubist collages is so expanded and ambiguous (by virtue of the different shifting relations of depth between the collaged, drawn and painted elements and with the picture plane) as to render it a kind of illusion itself (Poggi 257). Greenberg also fails to acknowledge the way in which Cubist collages and constructions occupy the boundary between painting and sculpture, thus undermining Modernism’s strict media-based division of art.

Other critical readings of collage, such as that of Rosalind Krauss, are based on post-modern theories of representation and emphasize the way Cubist collage obscured or problematized the two dimensional surface. The collaged pieces, Krauss argues, become mirrors of the ground in themselves, thus creating a second structurally similar field of representation. The collage draws to attention the constant oscillation and ambiguity between figure and ground, in that what is collaged is just as much ground as the structural support, and the flat picture plane

is just as much figure as the collaged piece. This undermining of the distinction between figure and ground, which forms the basis of classical representation, adds to the revolutionary formal possibilities that Cubist collage opened up (Poggi 256).

The theme of rupture runs both formally and conceptually through early Cubist / Futurist collages, as well as among more contemporary collage artists. Whereas the trajectory of modernist art can be seen as a search for 'essence,' for linearity, wholeness, and certainty, the Cubists sought something very different; theirs was an art of fractured pieces, surprising and fresh juxtapositions, and formal paradoxes. They took the unified, homogeneous field of representation embodied by the Renaissance concept of the painting as a window and disrupted it entirely, opening the picture plane up to a series of abuses, alterations, and transformations, and bringing the signs of popular culture into the hitherto sanctified realm of fine art.

The dialectic of rupture and synthesis is contained within the very act of collage, of ripping and cutting and then putting things back together in new ways. At the beginning of the 20th century, the development of collage participated in the multi-dimensional explosion of collective, public city life and the urban environment as well as responding to the catastrophe of war and genocide. The urge to both destroy and recuperate reflected the underlying cultural dynamic in Europe at that time, when the world wars seemed to swing human society back and forth between the poles of self destruction and a rebuilding and preservation of its parts (Flood 12). Collage—the act of ripping apart and re-synthesizing—was and is still in some ways an attempt to make sense of our often seemingly senseless world

while simultaneously asserting its contradictions and plurality. This characteristic of the medium helps to explain why it has become again so central and necessary in the early 21st century; by its nature connected with trauma and violation, collage flourishes in the tumultuous contemporary age of globalization, cultural dilution, terrorism, economic and political violence, and gaping inequalities in wealth, class and access to cultural resources.

Contemporary practices of collage are necessarily fed by the constant glut of images and information that wash over us as participants in a capitalist culture of consumption. Artists mine the cultural overproduction of images for varying purposes with a range of effects; in order to understand the space that many contemporary collages occupy and the way in which they juxtapose images to both structure and obscure meaning, it is helpful to first think of the relationship between meaning and image in general in contemporary culture. The 21st century, especially in a developed urban context, is a world of jarring, clamoring, mind numbing noise, both visual and auditory. From sitting down at our computers when we wake up in the morning to walking to work or school amidst a flood of screaming billboards and advertisements, to flipping on the television to the pundits that populate the news channels, our everyday lives require constant, largely unconscious sifting through massive amounts of information.

In his essay “Implosion of Meaning in the Media,” Baudrillard hypothesizes that the increase in the circulation of information through the mass media is “directly destructive of meaning and signification, or neutralizes it” (Baudrillard 96). There are dual myths that more forums for the communication of information

and more material production of goods in a society result in a higher level of wealth and happiness for its citizens. Just as we are taught to consume goods, to buy more things in order to support our capitalist economic system, we are also taught to consume more and more information—to drink it in and thirst for more. These myths are ‘essential to our modernity,’ as he puts it, and we all buy into and thereby perpetuate them, fearing that our social order would collapse if we stopped believing. Baudrillard contends, on the contrary, that the proliferation of information is itself eating away at our social structure, in its destruction of our access to meaning and its prevention of our ability to genuinely connect with each other on a human level. I would argue that the practice of collage has the potential to reinvigorate critical questioning and open up the possibility of multiple meanings within our image-saturated culture.

There is the argument that the whole process of trolling the web is an elaborate sensory collage in itself; a simple search on Google lasting ten or fifteen minutes subjects us to a constant stream of images that can overwhelm our visual imaginations. Starting with an initial question or idea we click on a link and are led from one realm to a separate, tangentially related one on a path that alternately informs and obfuscates meaning; images are juxtaposed with texts and sometimes sounds in a multi-faceted, hybrid experience. The chain reaction can take us to unexpected, seemingly irrelevant places and lead to new and surprising questions. If we think of the ubiquitous Internet search as a contemporary collage mode, one might question the utility of actually making a collage by hand. Why enact this ‘archaic’ process anymore when most people do something approximating it

everyday, and when digital collage is in effect one of our main form of mediation with the outside world? Mark Alice Durant makes the point that although the method, system, and structure of hypertext resemble the processes of Cubist collage, it is fundamentally different in that it exists in a virtual rather than a physical realm. In this way it is *safer* and has infinitely less critical potential than actual material collages do. As he says, “The violence of the cut, the tear, the incision, the excision, and the reassembling of fragments is muted if not rendered utterly benign by the ease, invisibility, and non-physicalness of digital process and product.” (Durant 26). This brings us back to the importance of the idea of rupture in its physical dimension—the “violence of the cut, the tear, the incision, the excision” that distinguishes material collages from virtual, digital ones. Practicing collage in a contemporary context can represent an insistence on material, messy, bodily reality as an alternative to the prevailing trend of dematerialization in art and culture. Collage draws us away from the easy slippage into alternate realities of our online personas, reviving the importance of feeling oneself as a body interacting with others in time and space.

Stepping back a bit from the contemporary technological context, we can look at the work of Robert Rauschenberg whose work exemplifies the importance of a fundamental rupture or interruption in both form and content. As Lisa Hoptman writes in her introductory essay for the New Museum’s 2007 exhibition on Collage, his Combines “formed a painting / sculpture hybrid out of the chaos of war, planned obsolescence, American exceptionalism, supermarkets, films, television, and tabloid news” (Hoptman 10). Leo Steinberg saw in the combine the

invention of “a pictorial surface that let the world in again.” Despite their compositional, formal sophistication, we read Rauschenberg’s Combines in terms of their different elements, like drawers or compartments displaying a variety of contents. One reads them not just as a selection of found objects that have been attached to a painterly matrix, however, but rather the attractions and repulsions between the different elements making up the piece (Hoptman 10). The pieces can be read both together and separately, a phenomenon that Steinberg refers to as an ‘alienating togetherness.’ (Steinberg 67) We can use Duchamp’s concept of the *infra-slim* (*infra-mince*), the infinitely small space fated to exist between components, as a way to think about the territory Rauschenberg occupies, in particular with his combines—that is the gap between art and life (Hoptman 10).

A byproduct of Modernism, this gap can be traced back to the pre-World War II period where intellectuals and artists wanted to find any and every way of distancing art from the impending ethical and moral catastrophes of the rise of fascism and the Holocaust. They wanted to keep art in a safe, innocent bubble, protecting it from the stain of war and terror. Hoptman suggests that the collages and constructions made in the post-war period addressed artists’ frustration with this bubble effect, and embodied the anxiety of striving but never achieving a synthesis between art and life. Rauschenberg’s work in particular exemplifies this struggle; the ‘alienating togetherness’ of the found elements in his pieces demonstrates the angst of being unable to make art into life and vice versa.

Another way in which Rauschenberg defied the Modernist tyranny of medium specificity and artistic essence was through his interdisciplinary work,

particularly with his friends, musician John Cage and dancer/choreographer Merce Cunningham. One of his first major combines, *Minutiae*, was designed for the Cunningham performance by the same name, first performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on December 8, 1954. Rauschenberg's *Minutiae* is a freestanding combine with a furniture leg, constructed so that the dancers could move through and interact with it collaboratively during the piece. The bottom is open, and hung with gauzy fabric so that bodies can move underneath the piece and come out the other side. The round mirror reflects both the dancers and the audience, and before the performance of the dance, Rauschenberg would give it a spin to provide what Cunningham called "visual action." (*Robert Rauschenberg: Combines*) The dancers' costumes were painted in similar colors and shapes to those found in the construction of *Minutiae*, so that as they move the whole performance becomes like a living, breathing collage. The furniture leg on which it stands makes the piece a hybrid furniture/sculpture, blurring the boundaries between craft and fine art. By designing set pieces for dances and working collaboratively to complete multi-dimensional, multi-media projects Rauschenberg defies the idea that 'real' art has to be a self-contained, singular oil painting on canvas.

Along with providing an alternative to often constricting modernist narratives, collage especially in the post-1960's context has been taken up as a tool to critique consumer culture and traditional hegemonic power structures (Phillips 15). Artists who are traditionally marginalized by these structures (women, members of the LGBT community, and ethnic and racial minorities) have focused

on a politics of representation through collage, and with humor, irony and subversion have infiltrated alternative experiences into mainstream art. These political strategies can be looked at in terms of form; although the process of collage in one way imposes coherence on a set of selected, diverse objects, putting them in relationship with each other and with a common structure, it also allows individual parts to retain their identities. Seams remain extremely important; forces of integration and assertion of difference thus operate a complex formal play in collage.

This play of hybrid identity and the assertion of radical difference or alterity can be seen particularly in the work of contemporary photcollage artists, many of whom explore issues of gender and racial identity. The artists James Gallagher and Wangechi Mutu work with erotic imagery—gathered from magazines, sex manuals, and found photographs, each in his/her own way exploding the notion of a singular embodied subjectivity.

Gallagher takes found images from discarded books and sex manuals and combines them into hybrid, expressive human forms that question the idea of a stable personal, sexual identity. His figures often blur lines of gender and race, occupying a space of their own that is both generalized, in that the faces of most of his figures are blotted out, and intimate. His ambiguous, hybrid human twins and groupings often focus in on moments of touch and vulnerability, leading to a sense of embodiment that is both erotically charged and tender.

Wangeshi Mutu takes as her subject the female body, combining limbs and other corporeal fragments with colorful organic forms and patterns to create new

complex organisms. When asked in an interview “What happens between two images when they are joined or juxtaposed in your work?” Mutu responded that “...they participate in a raucous mating dance producing a stinky, sinister, gorgeous, little transgender fruit” [May 2007]. Her critical aim, she says at another point in the interview, is to “eradicate that profane notion that beauty is singular or objective” (Piché 74). In this way Mutu explodes the assumptions of Modernist thought that art’s highest aim is to create the beautiful, autonomous, pure work. Her assertion of hybridity as a cultural paradigm, and as something to be embraced, continues to challenge those who believe in the concepts of seamless truth, narrative, and beauty. Mutu’s images are cut out of fashion, travel, and porn magazines. Her work investigates the politics of gender roles and sexual norms, critiquing in particular the sexist and racist exoticization of women of color in the media.

Both Gallagher and Mutu’s work affirms the corporeal, multifaceted experience of being a sexually active body in the world. Their forms of collage rely particularly on the play between difference and sameness between human bodies. A new form is created, but this whole is always infiltrated by recognizable, distinct partial elements. The viewer is implicated in the process of putting these parts together, exposed not only to the new hybrid whole, but also made to see its component fragments. Gallagher and Mutu use their erotic imagery of multiple body parts and objects to construct alternative models of sexual interaction and desire, resisting normative ideas of a singular, restricted sexual identity.

The critical possibilities attached to hybrid, collaged bodies can be traced

back to the work of Hannah Höch, the most well known female member of Berlin Dada. Her composite images are loud, disfigured, truncated forms often imbued with a sharp sense of humor. Through her work Höch lampoons the binary mindset that divided the ‘civilized’ from the ‘primitive’ and formed the basis for European self-definition during her time. Höch’s collages can be seen as acts of resistance to fascism, which abhorred all of the aspects of modern culture that Hoch’s collaged entities embodied, namely fragmentation, racial mixing, gender confusion, and cultural hybridity (Piché 21). In her later work (made in the late 1950’s through the late 1970’s), she shredded up colored magazine pages to the point of unrecognizability and then recombined them, often focusing in on a figurative fragment that commented on feminine glamour or fantasies put into motion by the female gaze (Taylor 196).

Other women collage artists have reclaimed forms of aesthetic production that had historically been considered ‘overly feminine’ and thus not taken seriously. Anne Ryan, who was heavily inspired by a Kurt Schwitters show of *Merz* collages in 1948, created small, delicate but intense collages in 1950s New York. Her source material was gleaned from a variety of everyday places, like Schwitters, and she was known for using a variety of fragile handmade papers and fabrics in carefully considered, subtle abstract compositions. John Ashbery makes the point that for Ryan, materials as distinct entities were more important than they were for Schwitters, who tended to subordinate individual pieces and parts to the greater whole (Taylor 114). Critics at the time praised Ryan’s collages for their ‘feminine delicacy’ and there is an implicit condescension, if not dismissal of her work as a

serious collage artist (Seitz, 85).

Miriam Shapiro, working in the midst of the second wave feminist movement in the early 1970's, took up Ryan's mantle, this time deliberately and self-consciously using traditional women's crafts like sewing, quilting, and appliqué to create large-scale abstract collage works, sometimes referred to as 'femmage' (Piché 15). Shapiro's work demonstrates how collage allows materials to speak, conveying an artist's viewpoint by their very presence in a piece. Her compositions are informed by her studies of the male dominated tradition of Abstract Expressionism, but she has found a way to assert and affirm feminist content in appropriating this existing structure.

Surface and Substance

My own interest in materials—the accumulation of different textures, translucencies, and sensibilities in the same piece—relates to an interest I have had all my life in the interactions between different people: the dynamics of a group or a friendship that requires some sort of mediation, a process of transition between diverse elements. Transitions in general, and edges in particular interest me in relation to both form and content. The medium of collage allows for a huge range of formal possibilities in terms of transitions and edges—in short, in terms of relationships. As Mark Alice Durant says in his introductory essay for *Collage Culture in Post-War America*, “we rely on relationships between things to know where we stand” (Durant 19). I am drawn to use fragile materials, following in the tradition of a number of female / feminist artists who have worked with collage. I

am interested in translucency and the layering of materials, of seeing through one surface to another one, in slowly coming to see complexity within a single form or space. I have also recently begun to explore this theme of layered spaces and surfaces in my three dimensional models.

This complexity of layering and occlusion parallels the way humans experience the spaces we move through every day, seeing one room or corner through a series of doorway, windows, or curtains. Although our domestic contexts become familiar to us through repetition, particular moments or views can continuously surprise us with their strangeness, creating a sense of disorientation. The experience of seeing through one material partly to another can also be connected to getting to know a person—the way it often takes a long time to become acquainted with someone, and the way we do it over a period of time, getting partial views and clues as to the layers and histories beneath outside surfaces.

Collage also speaks to me because of its association with poetry. It is, like poetry, a metaphorically based art. Something comes to stand for something else approximately, retaining something of its original character, rather than attempting a seamless illusion or absolute transformation of the world onto the two-dimensional surface. Both collages and poems construct new meanings through physical placement of different parts in relationship to one other over time. In each, the fragment (word, piece of paper, or fabric) maintains its separateness to a certain extent, but is also conditioned by its position within a larger structure. Words and language have always been important to me; my father is a poet and I grew up in a

world where expression meant cobbling together words, images, and associations to form an approximation of what was meant. The search was that of understanding and finding form for what was inside of the self through articulating our perceptions of the outside world.

Intimate Spaces

Besides the play of materials and the poetic process of creating relationships, I desire in my collages to explore a space of home, whether that be the recollection of a domestic space, an arrangement of cared for objects, or the memory of a dream where some part of the self felt it had come home. My desire to create a space for memory is related to something I have always struggled with in my work. Ever since beginning to make art in the context of a self-conscious, self-critical school environment, I have worried about balancing a faithful observation of the world around me with conveying a sense of my particular, idiosyncratic way of seeing the world. This worry comes out clearly in my final paper for my undergraduate program, where I was mainly painting still lifes:

I came to painting this year a little timidly with a fair amount of anxiety. I wanted to make paintings that felt alive and exciting. I constantly felt the question circulating in my head: at what moment does one stop looking at the subject and start looking at the painting one is making? How do you balance close observation of the world and consciousness of what you are creating on the canvas?

This issue continued to preoccupy me at PAFA; a recurring question in my practice has been how to be true both to my subject and myself, how to take in information from the outside world and also convey something of what matters to me internally. I searched to find strategies to free myself from my dutiful observation and transcription at the point where it began to feel heavy or lifeless. This effort spurred on my impulse last year to build and work from my own models of spaces, which became my visual anchors in the studio. Constructing these models forces me to be inventive from the beginning, to work from my own memory and imagination in the preliminary processes of making an image, and then use that made reality as a source for my photographs, collages, drawings and paintings.

The push and pull between referencing the outside world and inventing a world makes me struggle against being too literal or predictable in the images I present. I want for my spaces to leave room for the imagination—for internal and unspoken realities as well as physical ones. My models, the photographs of them and the paintings I make evoke rather than describe a sense of place. However I have come to realize more and more through experimenting with degrees of abstraction and occluding a recognizable subject that some familiar, nameable element has to be present to act as a conduit for the viewer, a stepping stone to allow him / her into my pictures, my world. The challenge then becomes to synthesize the two modes of image making—the nameable and the un-nameable, so that neither feels isolated. I am interested in treading the boundary between

representation and abstraction, between an image one can look at and a space or corner one can sense.

My spaces do not follow the rules of optical, linear perspective. Meant to encompass more than a first person point of view and thus to allow for multiple viewpoints and feelings to exist in a space, these distortions find affinity with depictions of spaces in Indian miniature paintings and in Japanese Ukiyo-e ‘floating world’ prints and paintings (figs 2 and 3). Indian miniatures make a space for the imagination within a strict, stylized formal language. Decorative borders become architectural elements, areas of pattern construct or interrupt a space, and flat structures are juxtaposed with mysterious, expansive voids and planes of color. These paintings are “representational of certain forms or images as the artist perceives and imagines them” rather than the system of linear perspective that we are familiar with through photography, film, and the Western tradition of painting (Vaidya 13). I find that this combination of the seen and the imagined, of logical and illogical spaces excites my visual imagination in a way that a more conventional representation of space cannot.

Ukiyo-e, literally translated as ‘pictures of the floating world’ is a genre of Japanese woodblock prints and paintings produced from the late seventeen through the late nineteenth century. These pieces picture the pleasure-seeking culture of the time, which took place mainly in the theater district and the brothels of the licensed prostitution quarter, the Yoshiwara (Meech 15). The ethos of this culture is described by Asai Ryoi in the preface to his book *Ukiyo monogatari* (‘Tales of the Floating World’) of 1661:

Living only for the moment, turning our full attention to the pleasures of the moon, the snow, the cherry blossoms and the maple leaves; singing songs, drinking wine, diverting ourselves in just floating, floating; caring not a whit for the pauperism staring us in the face, refusing to be disheartened, like a gourd floating along with the river current : this is what we call the *floating world*...(Clark 9).

The spaces of ukiyo-e reflect this unmoored, dreamlike quality. Floating worlds juxtapose interior spaces with exterior ones in surprising ways, intermeshing private and public realities. Screens become windows that become mirrors, and enclosed spaces melt into open ones. These departures from purely optical perspective allow for an accumulation of less tangible, psychological undercurrents of the physical world.

The richness of these spaces—both in terms of form and content—is what I strive for in my own work. I have always found myself preoccupied with the way in which memories, emotions, and implications are embedded in physical places and beneath the surfaces of the people we meet and know: the way in which we can wake up in a bed, walk down a street, sit in a room as a physical body and be simultaneously conscious of a dizzying array of memories, associations, details and feelings about those physical spaces and experiences. The question of how to function as a body in a world where these two realities—internal and external—are in constant flux is endlessly absorbing.

My word drawings are another way of speaking to these unspoken, mental realities and become a different kind of space. As Georges Perec says, “This is how

space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page” (Perec 13). The drawings began when the thoughts in my head were getting in the way of my process of making images. I felt crippled by obsession, by needing to deal with life events that I could not seem to relate to the other work I was doing in studio. So I began writing these repeated words as transcriptions of a mental space—that of myself and of those close to me. In their abstraction, the accumulation of text evokes expansive landscape space, the felt, tactile experience of a woven textile, or the grain in a weathered piece of driftwood. They are the subterranean content of the physical spaces and bodies we negotiate in our day-to-day realities.

Presence and Absence

I am conscious of working in a realm where the ideas of presence and embodiment are entangled with those of absence and loss. Paradoxically we do not see a space or a condition of life in all of its fullness until we depart from it or it changes. One danger in dealing with these themes is that of entering into the realm of nostalgia. Work surrounding the idea of home and memory risks becoming too sweet or benign, and thus losing its potential power. As a result it is important in my practice to keep hold of the play between presence and absence, to retain the darker side of connection that has to do with breaking bonds and imagining loss. Home is a loaded, complicated concept for the great majority of us, both personally and culturally. We have only to look to the many global political conflicts based on which group of people occupy a space and have the right to call it home and which will be evicted, turned into rootless refugees, to see that the space of the domestic

and a sense of roots, family and culture are both imminently relevant and weighty subjects with which to engage.

For the necessary entanglement of presence and absence, I have looked to philosophical texts surrounding memory and the act of making art. One passage from Jean-Luc Nancy's essay "In the Grotto" in the larger work *The Muses* goes back to the origins of human inscription of experience and remembrance through visual strategies. The prehistoric cave paintings, are described by Jean-Luc Nancy here:

Man began in the calmly violent silence of a gesture: here, on the wall, the continuity of being was interrupted by the birth of a form, and this form, detached from everything, even detaching the wall from its opaque thickness, gave one to see the strangeness of the being, substance or animals that traced it, and the strangeness of all being in him. (Nancy 74)

In talking of these drawings of animals, hands, and full human figures in prehistoric caves like Lascaux, Chauvet, and Cosquer, Nancy speaks of an issue of 'presentation' rather than representation. With the drawing of their own bodies, and the bodies of the world around them on a cave wall, we see humans presenting, and in a way externalizing themselves. Nancy reads the paintings as evidence of the slippage of the mobile, unfixable subject to which Derrida also refers. In the caves, he says, we see "an identity that alters itself from birth, thirsting after a self that has never yet been self, and whose birth is already alteration, and who appropriates itself as this very alteration." (Nancy 70). Through these marks, these traces of the

individual unmoored self, we witness humans coming to terms with themselves, with the strangeness of their own humanity and mortality. The dance between presence and absence is fully at play in these cave paintings; Nancy says at one point, “for what is properly monstrous, the monstrosity of the proper, is that there is no end to the finiteness of the figure.” (Nancy 71). Throughout the chapter, we see the word play between ‘monstrous’ and ‘monstrosity,’ words describing something horrible to behold, and which in a way resist apprehension, with the terms ‘monstrate’ and ‘monstration’, which connote the act of showing, demonstration or proof. The very self-presentation that the human presence enacts on a wall is simultaneously a testament to her/his non-presence, or absence.

An artist whose ideas and methods I very much admire in the realm of marking absence within a living space is British artist Rachel Whiteread. Whiteread’s *House* was a site-specific temporary installation in the working class industrial Bow neighborhood of London. By the time Whiteread formally began her project in 1992, the terraced housing of Bow had been slated for demolition, as a wave of urban renewal and gentrification pushed out its blue collar residents. 193 Grove Road was the only one left standing as the former dock leader Sidney Gale and his family had refused to leave the premises. In the midst of this eviction and destruction, Whiteread poured a concrete ‘negative cast’ of the house’s interior, performing a temporary act of commemoration and remembrance for the house and its surrounding community on the eve of its dissipation. The concrete form becomes a pure materialization of absence, the interior space of a house that no longer exists.

As well as being a commemoration for the fading form of the terrace house and the lives lived in it, *House* also acts as a sacrificial gesture; the casting of the negative interior space necessitates the eventual dismantling of the house's exterior walls. This creates a strange kind of object, whose existence depends on the destruction of its original source. *House* also affects the relationship of the viewer to his/her own body and to the environment, creating a slippage between these distinct concepts. In her article *The Trace and the Body*, Susan Best suggests that having a domestic structure presented solid and inside out causes a particular bodily unease in viewers. "We expect accommodation from *House* and we are disturbed when it is denied. We are willing to take up its inside-out view as part of our bodily constitution and feel that its spatial dislocation is a problem with our body rather than with the work" (Cvoro 61). Whiteread's work is poetic and weighty in a way that I aspire to attain. She manages to combine the personal and the political, using elements of the domestic to comment powerfully on both personal memory and societal issues of home and homelessness.

The Richness of a Life I Know

Romare Bearden is another artist I look to in terms of his rich content related to home and memory as well as his formal mastery of collage. Working within the milieu of the burgeoning civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960's, Bearden was drawn to the critical, expressive potential of collage and assemblage. He first studied at the Art Student's League with George Grosz from 1936-37, a time when he was creating biting political cartoons protesting against

white supremacy and poverty and unemployment among African Americans.

After the war, he had a career as an abstract painter in New York, only starting to make collages in 1964.

Throughout his artistic life Bearden was fully committed to expressing his socially engaged position without sacrificing a set of strong convictions about the formal values of visual art. His balance between content and design is something that I admire immensely and aspire to attain. As a formalist, he studied composition from the Dutch interiors of DeHooch and Vermeer, as well as learning modernist structure from Cubism. He took these influences and developed a style that was inimitably his own, opening out the structured, crowded space of Cubist pictures to include more expansive, empty or lightly patterned areas. His self-professed aim was “to reveal through pictorial complexities the richness of a life I know” (Taylor 199). His street scenes of black life in 1960’s New York as well as his pieces inspired by his memories of his childhood in the South are formally tight but also inventive and expressive of the complex pleasures and pains of home.

I draw strength from the incredible wealth of artists who have used collage and assemblage in their own distinct contexts in order to assert a different way of doing things, and to free themselves from the strictures of limiting hierarchies and pre-existing structures. The basic action of collage—the ripping up of materials of origin and then reassembling the fragments—represents a transgressive impulse to destroy and disorient oneself and one’s work in order to create something new. Although my work is much less overtly political than many of the artists I have mentioned, I learn from them that my goal must be, in the words of Bearden, “to

reveal through pictorial complexities the richness of a life I know.” For me this means engaging with space--the space of the home and the relationships formed within it—through invention and play. I must try, through a growing sensitivity to the way my materials interact and a willingness to fail, to give my evolving inner life form through the simple acts of ripping, cutting, and pasting back together.

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Figure 1
Pablo Picasso
Still Life With Chair Caning
 1912



Figure 2
Unknown Artist
Maharaja Bakhat Singh Rejoices during Holi
 Nagaur c. 1748-50



Figure 3
Kitao Shigemasa
Girl with Insect Cage and Girl Reading a Letter
 pre-1820