

Where The Sofa Ends

“There is power in reconstructing the everyday lives of objects through memory and human presence. For every visible thing, there is an invisible context that needs to be evoked, or rescued from where it lies silently in human experience.”¹

It is both natural and strange to wonder about another person’s life. My work presents an opportunity to play outsider looking in. It is a passive and judgmental place to be. Turning a critical eye to the physical materials we use, how can we reinterpret ourselves and those around us? Where do our responsibilities to the environment, our families, friends, and the community lie?

I perform the role of watcher, documenting and categorizing what I interpret to be significant and overlooked cultural material. When the private life flows into the public sphere, there is a moment of vulnerability. With this in mind, I am interested in focusing on material value, and the wide range of objects that affect our relationships, memories, social and cultural status. The materials themselves, found on the curb, hold certain values because of what they are. There is the potential to re-use, re-purpose, give new purpose, or simply throw away. I take the time to represent what is categorized as abandoned resources. By applying oil paint, I give a renewed status and character to the objects I choose. When a painting hangs in a museum there is an intrinsic value that is greater than the cost of its materials. Conversely the forgotten cultural material I represent has often been deemed to have little or no value. At this moment of separation from its prior ownership the materials become their own character, breathing and embodying a history. Worn away fabrics leave physical evidence of the body. My canvas is a new fabric, not intended to preserve the material I found, but to preserve a stranger’s life, which is now connected to mine.

What gets changed, removed from and added to the final work is essential to my process. I vacillate between truth and imagination, believing that history has endured a similar process. Cleaning up the edges is like refining a memory. What may have actually happened doesn’t matter anymore, making the preserved memory equally, if not more important. Combining the accurate and the fictional allows for representation and abstraction to co-mingle in the biased realm of art.

“...We, humans, trade places with ordinary household objects and become surrogate hosts to them. They become living things, while we become objects, used by what we think are our own creations, our mastery over nature flipping into the irony of the final conquest of man by nature.”²

¹ David Carr, *The Personal Past in Public Space*, The Journal of Museum Education, Vol. 20, No. 2. 1995.

² Pil and Galia Kollektiv, *The Life of Objects*, <http://www.kollektiv.co.uk/Objects.html>.

Through my process, the furniture becomes like characters on a stage, interacting with the landscape around them and with one another. Because chairs and couches are intended for the body, it is easy to make associations that they have bodies of their own posing in gestural ways. I wonder about my relationships to objects that have come into my life. In the transition from modernism to postmodernism, household objects have gone through lots of scrutiny. For example, Doris Salcedo's "Space is the Place", created for the 2003 Istanbul Biennial, consisted of piled chairs stuffed into a gap between two residential city buildings. Her chairs aimed to represent the faceless immigrants who support the global economy.³ Inherently, the chairs become people: lonely, quiet, and cramped.

Process can take another angle, "Art and Labor", a collaborative text by Jessica Stockholder and Joe Scanlan, written for a panel discussion at Yale University School of Art in September, 2004, focuses on manufactured objects in comparison to the human need for making.

...Art was an object made by hand. Perhaps art was the repository of more eccentric impulses than those generated by the making of life's necessities—soap, toys, furniture, houses—all made by people locally and with available materials. Now we are aware of very little, if any, of the making of the things we need. It happens elsewhere, often overseas. We are able to have many things because they don't cost what they would if we ourselves were the makers....It is of course a great pleasure to have all these things and to be able to engage with such an enormous pool of significance and stimulation. But it is also painful and numbing to be so divorced from the making of things and from the people who make them for us.⁴

The relationship between object and maker is a complicated one, involving layers of class, social structure, and geographical location. Because we so infrequently make our own objects anymore, furniture, fabrics, etc., there is a disconnect between the maker and the things we use. Without this connection to the hand made object, it becomes easy to cast off and buy new. This phenomenon becomes even more evident with larger objects such as a couch. This leads to questioning who's hard work is being thrown away, and at what cost? How can paintings fit into this notion of labor and value? To create a painting is to be in conversation with its very long history. I make objects not out of necessity, but for an audience. Ultimately I want my audience to connect with the objects I paint through a reflection of their own past.

³ Doris Salcedo, *Lived Realities; Space is the Place*, <http://livedrealities.wordpress.com/2010/03/17/doris-salcedo-space-is-the-place/>.

⁴ Jessica Stockholder and Joe Scanlan, *Art & Labor: Some Introductory Ideas*, September 2004.

I come from the privileged role of watcher in a middle status neighborhood. Recognizing my position, and that of those around me, I aim to look closer at the cultural norms surrounding household furniture, consumption, memory, and loss. The couches I find remind me of family. Coming from a strong family background and moving out of my only childhood home, I still have yet to buy my own couch or start my own family memories. Couches seem to have calculated stories, but how much do we really know about their pasts or reason for being? A few particular couches come to mind.

The first is a personal connection. In the summer of 2012, it was tag sale season and my grandmother was taking a final step from her retirement home to a nursing home. Her house had been sold many years before, but at that time there was comfort in moving to a retirement home where she was able to keep most of her treasured furniture and valuables. She developed dementia, and over time, familiar things, places, and people could no longer jog her memory. She was an artist as long as I knew her, inspired by music, dance, and painting. In the end, it was the arts that were able to capture and keep her attention. My family kept what they thought was important, and it was decided that the rest would be recycled in a tag sale. Prices were less important than finding the objects new and proper homes. As the day went on, nearly every item left the front lawn. The last few stragglers got tossed to the curb with a sign that said "free". Within another twelve hours all that was left was my grandmother's couch. The couch was iconic. It was velvet and had thin stripes, with a kind of color pallet from the 60's ochers, forest greens, and deep crimson reds. The interesting point was how it was a four-person couch and always looked abnormally long. The next morning, all that was left was the frame. My brother joked about there being a "pillow pilferer". For me it was much stranger, and I couldn't shake the feeling that a piece of my family history had just been lost. I immediately wished we had kept the couch or at the very least, taken a picture. Stripped to the bones, it became blatantly obvious that time was moving on and another generation was fading into the background. My grandmother's connection to the arts in her last years was an astonishing and revealing message to me, reiterating the power art has to trigger memory and emotion. This experience became the seed for what has become a larger project and foundation for creating my own art.

Couches are settings. They play iconic roles in many pop culture arenas, but specifically television. A television series provides familiarity of people, place and time, which gives comfort and entertainment to their viewers. This repetition of context provides an experience common to many American shows. Couches figure predominantly in shows such as Seinfeld, Friends and every late night talk show. The orange couch featured in *The Wire*, an HBO series from 2002-2008, is a particularly interesting example. The couch is located outside in the middle of a

group of high-rise buildings in Baltimore and functions as the meeting point, or centralized location, for business to be discussed. The couch appears in almost every episode of the first season. In one scene the empty couch is the only character in the shot, surrounded by the quiet high rises at the conclusion of an episode. This moment aims to further emphasize the loss of a character, and impending change. The couch is functioning as a character, similar to the role each piece of furniture plays in my paintings. They are not meant to be specific or real people, but instead, their own living objects with many secrets making up who they have become.

An alternative perspective could be Sigmund Freud and his iconic couch. The couch allowed for a new system of relationships that would change the way people regarded patient-doctor associations. "Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, had the world's best-known couch, not because of any intrinsic beauty but because that piece of furniture has achieved iconic status over the years. The couch symbolizes the groundbreaking and controversial work Freud did as he studied the minds of his patients who lay on his sofa."⁵ What is interesting is how the couch, a relatively simple object, was able to facilitate and enhance a concept and idea far beyond its original intentions. Freud's work will always be regarded in relation to an object. He allowed the couch to be the center of attention, enabling his patients to focus on themselves. Pulled away from the wall, Freud's couch was able to function in a new capacity altering the power dynamic for his patients. Freud's couch became embedded with more power, while the couches I choose have been belittled. Through painting they gain some of their dignity back, while in a transitional phase of life.

While some would never dare to pick up furniture off the street, others make their livings from the discards. Even though these create an opposing but somewhat symbiotic relationship structure, I continue to wonder if there is a better way to understand this modern phenomenon, and if we are too easily leaving out the critically important role of maker? While art may be the highest form of culture, what are the risks and potential gains from representing lower culture in a fine arts context? This question is not new but continues to be pertinent to our time. I am endlessly intrigued by people's habits and the way cultural norms come to exist. It can be hard to recognize these normalities as oddities where there appears to be no other options. Art, in many cases, has the power to slow us down helping us to consider our role as makers, consumers, and members of society. Realizing the couch as object is just a single example of the complex interconnections we have with each other, our surroundings, and the world at large.

⁵ The Library of Congress, *He Had the Worlds Most Famous Couch*, <http://www.loc.gov/wiseguide/july03/freud.html>.