

## ABSTRACT

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Stephen Allan Williams, MFA 2015

Directed By: Professor Richard Klank, Department of Art

There is a separation between the seen and the unseen, material and immaterial, sacred and mundane. My creative work explores this divide. It begins with the found object; from there my interest focuses on the transformation that occurs when object becomes image. Through the use of photography, combining of images and shift in scale, these objects become decontextualized and dematerialized, furthering the ambiguity around prior function, material and value. The camera is both microscope and paintbrush in the way in which the resulting works expose levels of details that, when enlarged beyond life-size, begin to take on characteristics of a painted image.

MUTATIO

By

Stephen Allan Williams

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Advisory Committee:  
Professor [Richard Klank], Chair  
[W.C. Richardson]  
[Foon Sham]

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

I began walking as a way to integrate art and life. It allowed me to be in the moment and to approach my work in a different context outside of the white studio cube. Walking to and from school, I found myself picking up bits and pieces of refuse along the sidewalks and streets of Langley Park, Maryland. This was nothing new for me; I've been a hunter-gatherer all my life. Intuitively, I was drawn to line; color, form and imagery in the objects I chose to collect and bring back to the studio. Each one was then studied more in depth and either hung on the wall, placed on a table in similar groups, or combined with other found objects. Out of this collection I would choose ones to photograph. As time went on, the work became less about the actual physical object as art and more about the de-contextualization and de-materialization of the object as photographic image and the camera's ability to make the invisible visible.

## Chapter 2: The Camera as Microscope

My interest does not lie solely in the physical objects, although they are certainly interesting, but rather, expands metaphysically to what lies beneath their tattered, torn and broken surfaces. These objects are gateways to an unfamiliar and mysterious layer of existence that lies beyond the known and familiar. This willingness to explore these layers is a defiant act against a surface perception of reality in favor of a more fluid and exploratory approach to life. This act is meant to redeem these objects from imposed identities.

By removing these found objects from the context in which they are found, they lose their context. In this state, the object is free to be re-imagined and re-interpreted to reveal a more poetic connection to the world. This is accomplished through exploration and experimentation. The camera, as microscope, is an extension of self. These images are like images from a dream, not to be taken literally but rather metaphorically, and symbolically. When these objects are transformed into images and their scale shifted, they often reveal what was previously hidden. The supposed image of the crucified Jesus on the Shroud of Turin, seen in (Fig. 2) "*Appareo*" is not visible to the naked eye on the actual shroud. The clear image of the figure was only discovered after the shroud was photographed.

## Chapter 3: Perception

Photographing these objects amplifies the ambiguity concerning their material, function and context. In response, the viewer's interaction shifts from an unconscious surface perception, "it's just a broken piece of plastic", to one that invites the viewer to reconsider his or her conditioned perceptions concerning material, value, and beliefs.

These images are the result of an improvisational approach; the work comes entirely from what is found. The exploratory phase of the process involves interacting with the object from multiple angles both physically and conceptually. There is a listening and an awareness required to discern what emerges.

The camera is both microscope and paintbrush in the way in which the resulting works expose levels of details that, when enlarged beyond life-size, begin to take on characteristics of a painted image.

The first images created from this project, "*In rerum natura*", and "*Appareo*" retain a more photographic image quality. "*Tego*" is the first work in the group that begins to cross the line between photographic and painted image. In later works such as, "*Circumlino*", "*Nanos gigantium humeris insidentes*" and "*Ex umbra in solem*" they move even further towards the painterly.



## Chapter 4: Titles

The titles of these works are in Latin, a dead language but one that has a long and rich history. I chose Latin because of its use in both religious and scientific contexts. These two institutions, religion and science, have historically epitomized the sacred and profane dichotomy that I am addressing in my work. The way in which I use my camera as a scientific tool (microscope) is another reason I chose Latin titles. Each of these words have multiple, yet closely related, meanings. Each image and its corresponding Latin title, were paired based on words that came to mind as I meditated on each image.

## Chapter 5: The Sacred

There is a palpable sense of the sacred, the symbolic and the ceremonial present in these images. "*In rerum natura*", and "*Appareo*" were in response to a more literal and figurative representation of the sacred found on the numerous Botanica cards found in Langley Park. Later images such as "*Circumlino*", "Standing on the shoulders of giants" and "*Ex umbra in solem*" are more symbolic and abstract yet retain that sense of sacredness and mystery in a more inclusive, universal and expansive way.

In addition to a defiant stand against a conditioned belief in a sacred-profane dichotomy, there is compassion in the act of picking up these pieces of detritus. I engage and embrace the mystery inherent in the process of listening, searching, and uncovering the sacred and profound in the mundane.

## Chapter 6: The Park in the Middle

The images of work in the show come from the process of walking, collecting, enlarging and photographing urban detritus. These journal entries are from a series of walks titled collectively as “The Park in the Middle”

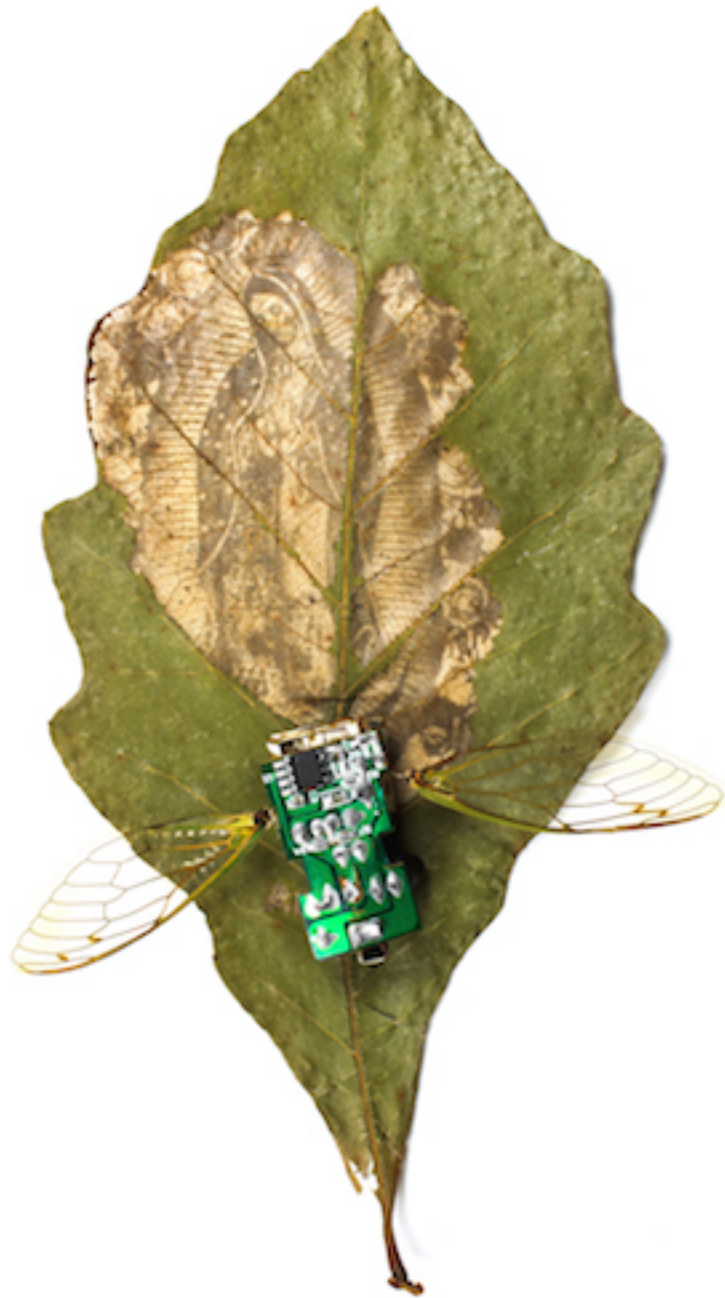


Fig. 1- *In rerum natura*: “In the nature of things”

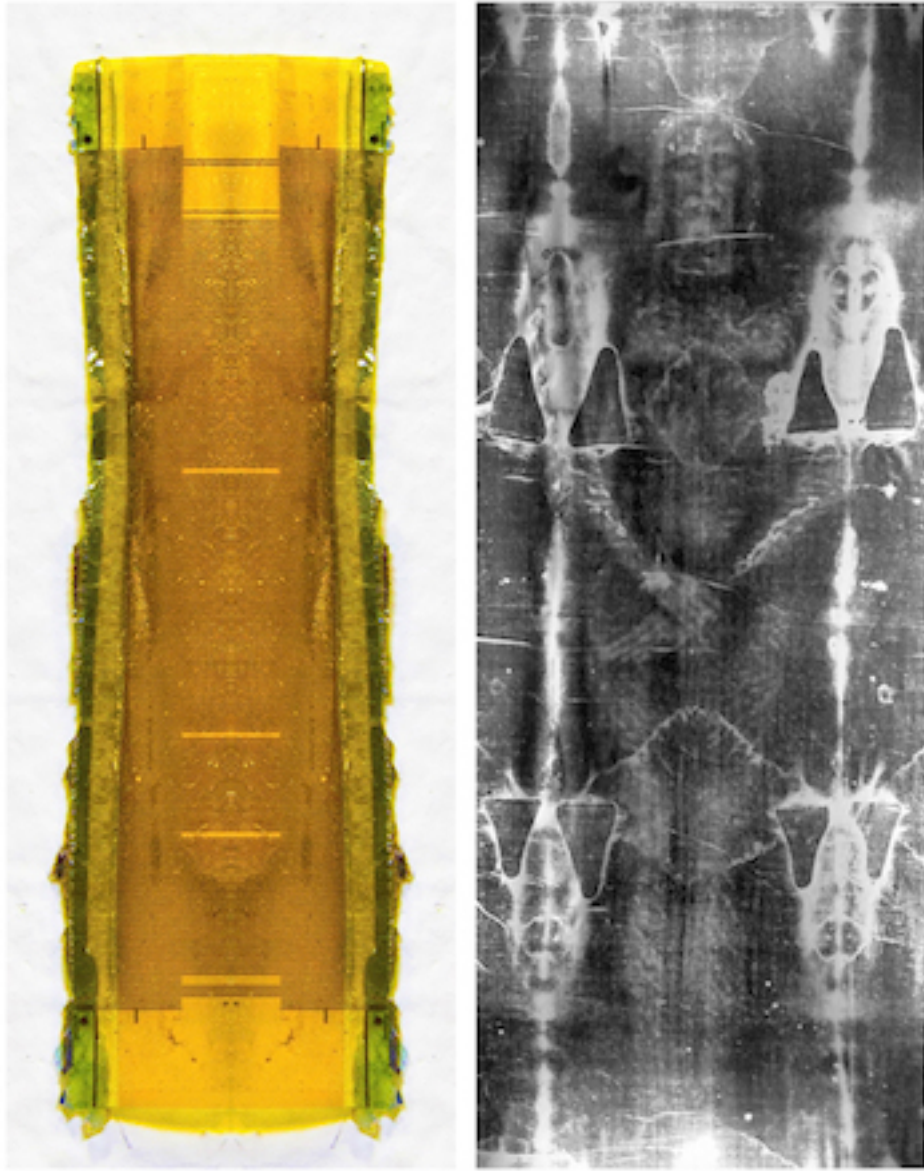


Fig. 2 - *“Appareo”*

(app-pod-e-o) appear, show, manifest, come in sight, become visible



Fig. 3 - “Tego”(tay-go)

cover, cloak, hide, conceal, bury, protect



Fig. 4 - "*Circumlino*"

(seer-coom-lean-yo) smear all over, besmear, anoint, dab, bedaub, cover



Fig. 5 -*Nanos gigantium humeris insidentes*: “standing on the shoulders of giants





Fig. 6 - *Ex umbra in solem*: “from the shadow into the light”

## The Park in the Middle

This project, and the work that was generated from it, came about in response to occasional walks to and from the University of Maryland, College Park, through Langley Park to my home in Takoma Park. The walk is about 4.5 miles and follows mostly along State Route 650 and Route 193/University Blvd.

I noticed that when I walked was when I felt most alive. All of my senses seemed to be engaged. My eyes were constantly processing all the hustle and bustle around me as I was searching for discarded objects along the sidewalks and roads. I could smell the chickens roasting at *Pollo Campero* and the acrid scent of exhaust fumes from cars as I walked along the street. I could feel the hard concrete sidewalk beneath my feet and the cold air smacking me in the face as the cars and buses, inches from my head, whizzed by. I could hear the sounds of honking horns, screeching brakes, police cars, fire engines and ambulances, muffled Latin music coming from the insides of cars idling at stop lights and bits and pieces of conversations in Spanish from people passing by as I made my way through Langley Park.

The following excerpts are a weeks worth of journal entries. Each one was written immediately after the walk.

### **Day 1**

Today it was sunny and thirty degrees. Lots of snow along the edge of the road but still found some good stuff. I found ten lead wheel weights, two metal wire hub cap rings, a couple of bent road flare wires, an "ancient" looking reed "bow-like" thing with black string attached to it, an interesting shaped piece of cardboard, a piece of bright pink yarn, a big black rubber object with a hole in it, a great switch comb that looks like a menacing mouth full of teeth, some little rubber and plastic odds and ends and a bunch of really great advertising cards for a Botanica in Langley Park with various Christian/Santeria saints and religious figures printed on them. The Spanish text on the back of the cards advertises consultations for everything from impotence to money problems. It's advertised as 100% effective. These cards are interesting to me; they remind me of my Catholic roots as well as my undergraduate body of work that touched on ceremonies and rituals.

### **Day 2**

Brrrrrr! It was super cold today, 15 degrees and breezy! It was great though; I enjoyed the challenge.

Found a bunch of good stuff. The highlight was a small photograph of a scary looking guy found lying face up on the side of the road. The weird thing is that only a few steps away I found a large black handled knife...hmmm.... coincidence? I found four more lead wheel weights, some more road flare wire's, a five of clubs playing card, a curiously bent railroad spike, a smashed rusty muffler like piece of metal, some great black rubber pieces, a few shiny objects to add to my shiny object collection, a neon orange Seven Eleven pizza box, a tattered yellow and green balloon tied together, a piece of duct tape, a little green and white plastic piece, a *San Lazaro* (yes, the same guy that Jesus supposedly rose from the dead) Botanica card and the best find of the day, a little shiny metal pendant with an image of Mary stamped on it.

### **Day 3**

The word of the day today is DISPLACEMENT. A good word to describe the large immigrant population of Langley Park, the objects I find, and my personal sense of displacement.

#### DISPLACEMENT

I walk through Langley Park unaware that I'm walking on M-13 gang turf. I find bits and pieces of detritus on the sidewalks and streets and take them with me to my little

white cube on the third floor of the art/sociology building at UMD and make art out of these discarded and displaced objects.

When I walk through Langley Park, I feel displaced. I don't feel like I belong. I feel like an outsider, I feel self-conscious. I feel hardened. I can feel the tension in the air. I can sense the hardship. I keep walking and collecting bits and pieces of this and that, whatever resonates with me. I pick up the yellow grungy smashed 7-Eleven cup because it reminds me of the displaced men who gather every day outside the 7-Eleven waiting for a job to come along. I think of the immigration officer I saw standing there in the parking lot by his car intimidating them. I could feel the tension in the air, the averted eyes, the anger, and the fear.

I walk by with my head down my eyes averted so as not to make eye contact. I toughen up inside so I don't feel different.

My walk through Langley Park is alive and in the moment. It is a living experience. I want my art to reflect this living experience. I walk in the cold, the rain, the heat and the wind so that I can feel something, so that the work I make from these objects is imbued with the life and the

energy of my walk.

#### **Day 4**

On today's walk I was very aware of how my body was reacting to the walk, or more precisely, how it was reacting to the act of collecting trash. Maybe because I had been reading about the MS-13 gang, one of the most dangerous gangs in the country, centered in LA; they are also in Langley Park. I could really feel how tense and nervous I was. I put my head down and searched trying not to make eye contact or let anyone see me picking up stuff. I had this sense that I did not belong there. It's not a new awareness, I've felt this since the first time I walked through Langley Park. It's funny how it's only a few miles from Takoma Park but feels like a different country. Then again, I don't really fit in Takoma Park either, hence, the day three "word of the day" DISPLACEMENT. I think a big part of it is that I'm picking up trash. I can't help wondering what people are thinking of me as they pass by in their cars or follow behind me on the sidewalk. Probably no one cares, but it does make me think about the concepts of value and power and how it reflects in the way we identify with others and ourselves. I feel uncomfortable because I subconsciously identify the

act of picking up other people's trash with homelessness or "poorness". In a way, my art is part of that conversation, the sacred and the profane, value and non-value. I'm interested in the things we as a society throw away. It reflects what our society deems "valuable" and "invaluable". My work questions those beliefs. I've always wanted to be an archeologist, funny how life works.

Today was a good collecting day. I found a big shiny smashed aluminum tray, a couple more flare wires, another 7/11 neon orange pizza box, a great smashed side view car mirror with a very graphic black pattern on the back, a silver soup spoon, two wood pieces with white and brown paint on them, a broken wood umbrella handle, a couple of lead tire weights to add to the growing collection, a black rubber flip flop sole, some odds and ends plastic pieces, one lonely blue puzzle piece that made me think of my Grandma, she loved putting puzzles together. A lost puzzle piece is a good metaphor for displacement.

On my walk today, I saw a lot of those "pine" scented, pine tree shaped, car air fresheners, in varying degrees of decay, along the sidewalks. I thought how ironic it is that these "pine tree" "air fresheners" are tossed into nature and pollute the very thing that they are meant to fondly

remind us of.

I took a photo of a pile of decayed cat on the sidewalk in front of Value Village. All that was left was a pile of bones and black fur. I had seen this cat the day it was killed, about three weeks or so ago, it was lying along the road, it looked like it had just been hit, it was pure black lying on the pure black tar of the road. I remember thinking how strange it was to see a dead kitten just lying there in full view as people walked and drove by. It's something you see all the time in your car and don't really think much of it, but it's different when you walk, there's nothing to "protect" you from it, it's right there in your face. When I walked home that afternoon, it had been run over again and it's bright pink guts were lying there alongside it. The colors were shocking and strangely beautiful the way the bright pink guts were contrasting with the black fur and the black tar on the road.

## **Day 5**

On today's walk I found a strand of thirteen air nailer nails. The funny thing is, today is 1/13/14. Thirteen nails on the thirteenth. That is either really bad luck or really good luck. Time will tell.

I found someone's grocery list today. It was hand written on a piece of lined yellow paper. Some of the foods were



crossed off others weren't. The surprising thing about this grocery list was the feelings that it elicited in me. It felt very personal, like I was snooping on someone's personal stuff. I could connect with the person. There was humanity in it. Most of the objects I find are parts and pieces of manufactured objects. This one was different. It had a human presence and I could feel it.