

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: REGARDING THE NATURE OF THINGS

Kevin Hird, Master of Fine Arts, 2017

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The works discussed and shown herein are an investigation into the properties and possibilities of materials. Prompted by a sense of playfulness and exploration, these works build upon and combine the fields of Dadaism and Minimalism in a manner that explores the conceptual properties of material. This exploration takes places through destructive processes, exposing the interior of solid matter to a thoughtful consideration of its development, underlying structure, and the effect of forces being applied to the materials, both internally and externally.

REGARDING THE NATURE OF THINGS

by

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Related artists and influences

Before discussing the nature of materials, specific pieces, or anything else, perhaps it is best to begin by briefly discussing artists and movements which have parallels to the works developed in this thesis. The body of work which has been leading up to this thesis has consistently had a connection with Dada; the objects created often incorporate elements of the absurd or have a self defeating character, and beyond that Dada arose as an art movement during a time of war and political discord in reaction to the artists' perceived absurdity of this war and discord, which feels particularly relevant in the context of current events¹.

Minimalism is also becoming more relevant to this work, as the number of different elements incorporated in individual pieces has been consistently decreasing to the point that most of the pieces included in this thesis have two or less separate materials used, with the most recent piece consisting of just a single splintered piece of wood².

The works of Tara Donovan are particularly relevant as she also typically works through an accumulative process with common materials, which is done here as well although in a different manner. Donovan also uses this process in a transformative manner; the materials used build up to form a landscape or surface that as a whole has properties one would not expect from the objects used, such as forming terrains out of cups, or organic spires of notecards³.

A strong connection can be drawn to Tom Friedman's earlier works as these also deal with found or bought objects and include a strong sense of absurdity and playfulness while at the same time probing the essential characteristics and

understanding of objects. His Untitled 1992 Pencil shaving well illustrates this point, featuring a spiral pencil shaving which is formed by using the intended interaction of a wooden pencil- sharpening it- and continuing that interaction until the entire pencil has been sharpened, leaving nothing useable behind. Untitled 1995 toothpicks works in a similar fashion, assembling a large starburst sculpture by arranging the bevelled edges of toothpicks together, using the properties of the form of the objects to dictate what can be done with them⁴.

Daario Robleto is interesting to note as some of his works also deal with found objects, but in a way that very specifically deals with his own personal history with the objects and memories and associations he holds to those things, such as melting down albums which were significant to him growing up, or magnetic cassette tapes stretched into thread and presented on spools; no longer usable for their original purpose⁵.

Lastly a connection can be made to the Under Destruction exhibition, which similar to Dada is relevant as the entire show is developed around a theme of things which are made to break themselves apart. This focus on the destructive action is very much present in this thesis work as well, and even the method of creation of some of the works has an uncanny resemblance to pieces included in this show⁶. The attraction toward destruction in this thesis work is not fully understood, but perhaps the words of Kerry Brougher, curator at the Hirshhorn about this show have some bearing: "There is something about destruction right now, not only in art but in society in general, that is calling this back to attention. It may be the fact that, to some degree, destructive images now shoot across the

Internet at such incredible speeds that we see so much of this every day. It has become a part of our households.”⁷

Many other relevant artists and movements exist but these are perhaps the most pertinent, or the ones most present in the artist’s mind.

Prompt questions for the work

In my work particular pieces or series’ of investigation often begin with simple open ended prompts: ‘what would happen if...’ or ‘what would it look like if...’ This process is driven by a sense of exploration into the material and conceptual potentialities of objects. This process is encouraged by an attitude of playfulness and openness to the nature of the materials.

Frequently these actions or changes defeat the original purpose or intended use of those objects, often through masking the surface or outright destroying the objects. Curiously this approach of ruining the objects used to the extent that they can never fulfill their original purpose again seems to be the most forthright method of exploring the purpose and identity of those objects. This destructive interaction is oftentimes a willful misinterpretation of an interaction expected of the object itself.

Explanation of ‘identity of material’ concept

A moment ago the idea of objects having an identity was introduced. As this concept is central to the works produced by the author, it is worth taking a

moment to fully establish this. All objects intrinsically possess a set of information- dimensions, texture, surface qualities, interior structure, and functionality. As well as this intrinsic information there is further information which those who approach it lay onto objects- an understanding of how those objects function, where that function takes place, who most often interacts with it, personal history with the object. In the instance of a drill, which has been used as a found object in one earlier work, this additional information for the writer includes a knowledge that the object can be used to drill holes, or apply screws, requires electricity, is often found in sculpture departments, at work sites, in garages, carries connotations of work, labor, an immigrant work force, masculinity, wage relations, bodily effort, warm weather, a particular odor, a whole range of sounds, and the writer's father and grandfather, due to childhood memories of at first playing in their workshops as they built things, and upon growing older helping them with their work. Some of these associations are very personal, while others are attuned more to ideas and events that are currently prominent in social consciousness. Taken as a whole this set of intrinsic and overlaid properties and associations make up what is being expressed and referred to when discussing an object's *identity*. While the intrinsic qualities of an object are fixed, there is a degree of fluidity to an object's overlaid properties from one person to the next however the majority of these associations are shared by enough people that for better or worse it is most reasonable to consider the object bound to these mental connections.

Explanation of how the material is approached as found objects

While the materials used in this thesis body of work - 2x4 and 2x6 boards - are more primarily used in sculpture as a construction material, used to build up forms which are imbued with formal and conceptual meaning, this work rejects that approach and treats these materials as found objects, focusing on working with the identity of the boards. Specifically, these works are an examination into the formal qualities that result from how this specific material responds to catastrophic stress and reveals the interior structure of the wood-showing details of growth patterns, branches, knots, breaking uniformly to reveal a single growth layer, etc-, either from force applied to the length of the material through external means or a concentrated penetration of screws acting to apply stress and forcing the grains of the material apart and degrading its structural integrity to the point of non-existence. Interestingly, these grains and internal structures within the material can only be revealed through destructive methods, which at the same time negates the utility of the material as a structural building element.

This revelation of the internal structures brings to the forefront the double coded nature of the material- at the same time these boards exist as an organically grown thing containing in its structure a physical representation of its own history via the rings and knots and simultaneously existing as a manufactured product crafted to fit specific dimensions; to function as a purely interchangeable basic building block that is nominally 2" thick, 6" wide, 8' long, with smoothed exterior surfaces.

The specific boards used are 2x4s and 2x6s, selected specifically for its ubiquity in commercial applications. While these boards contain within themselves their organic nature, even that origin has been subverted into the manufactured, industrial process side of things as the wood used is now most commonly sourced from tree farms where they are planted and grown in unnaturally straight rows specifically to be harvested for this application years later.

In a way, the work functions as a time machine for the material, exposing previous points in its history as an object.

With this body of work the primary interest to me lies in the generative process of exposing and developing a greater understanding of the internal properties of the material than the final presentation aesthetics, although of course in terms of displaying the work that also becomes an important area in presenting the pieces in such a manner that these properties of the material that interest me in the process are readily apparent to viewers.

Description of methods of working with found objects

As outlined above the materials used in this body of work are employed as found objects via a specific approach. Observing the works of other artists dealing with found objects, a pattern emerges of three fairly distinct methods of creating sculpture with found objects; one can use the objects they find with no regard for those original objects to build up another recognizable form, the most common of which are human figures or animals- real or mythical. This tendency to most frequently use found objects to create human figures is likely driven by people's

innate tendency toward anthropomorphism; viewers already try to interpret things as figural so the artist merely has to meet them halfway. Of the three possible approaches, this one is most frequently employed by outsider artists. Within this category we can also include most found object artworks which involve stacking things, such as many works by Tony Cragg.

The second approach entails using the object as itself and employing it to build up a scene or sculptural narrative. This approach seems to be conceptually related to theater, setting up a display for viewers in which the narrative is driven by the relationship of the elements. Examples of this approach include the sound suits of Nick Cave, or works by Yinko Shonibare, particularly 'The age of enlightenment- Antoine Lavoisier.'

Lastly one can use found objects in a manner that deals with the previously discussed identity of the objects. This approach is employed by many prominent artists including Daario Robleto, Tom Friedman, and Ai Weiwei.

With some exceptions, these three methodologies are listed in order of increasing value of artistic expression.

Explanation of surface treatment

In this body of work, the surfaces of the materials are uniformly left as they were found as the interest in the work is rooted in the manufactured qualities of the work, which is best highlighted by not altering the original surface. Some of the

materials used were in fact *found* objects, and are left in the condition they were found in, displaying some further markers of its personal history and previous usage. Others were bought, and left in their original condition; this means that the surfaces are often clean and new- at least, as clean and new as they are in lumberyards- and several bear visible stamps from their manufacturer, reminding viewers of its mundane origin. Even within these bought materials there exists significant variation in coloration, patterning, and the level of preexisting damage. Tests were done introducing various stains to the wood, and while this helped in some cases to cast attention to particular areas of interest, it additionally raised questions about the particulars of the stain, and brought with it conceptual connections to flooring and other things that are not intended to be present in the work. Choosing to present the materials as found brings clarity of concept to the works by not introducing these non-supporting elements. Overall the works included are very minimal, some only using a single piece of a single material, which makes everything that is included incredibly important. Seurat once famously said his paintings would be ruined if a single dot of paint were removed- how much more so would that be the case if the artwork only included a single dot?

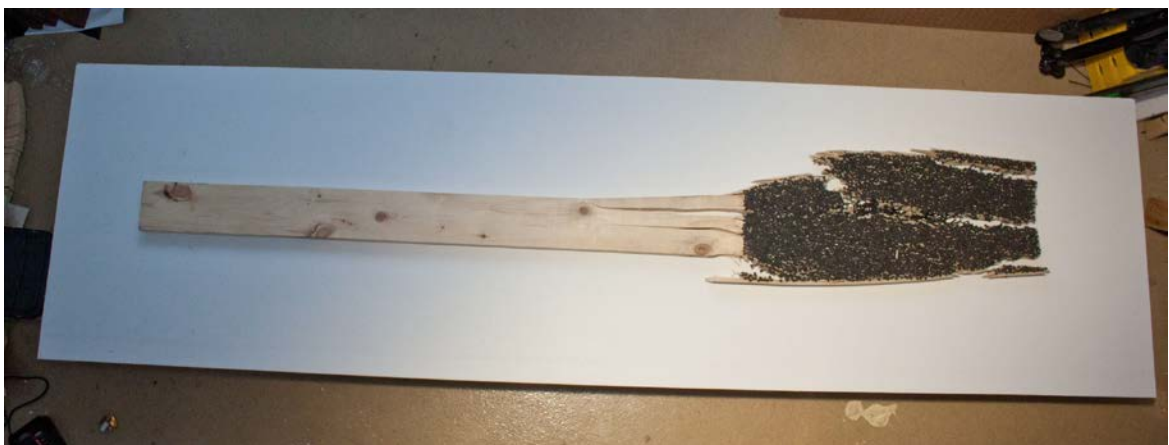
Discussion of individual pieces

While all of the pieces included within this thesis are closely related to one another and have stemmed from one another, there are two essentially different categories of works included: those that are comprised exclusively of wood which

have been subjected to external forces and broken, and pieces which have had screws added to subject the piece to internal force. Both pieces which follow the latter approach have the screws left in the material, punctuating a select area of the wood with a dense cluster of screws added until no further screws can be forced into the material. Multiple people have noted a visceral negative reaction to these solid black areas of densely packed screws, likening it to an infection or a solid covering of flies. As stated these pieces work through aggregating screws within the material to create internal pressure; these repeated penetrations destroy the fibers and structure of the material, leaving the altered section of wood quite flexible, which negates its use as a structural component. As well as rendering the material flexible, the additional material of the screws forces this section of the material to expand to as much as twice its initial width, changing the overall profile of the piece. Both of these pieces visually include a strong juxtaposition between the section destroyed by screws and the opposing end which remains a clean expanse of lumber, with a smaller third section between the two where the rifts caused in the wood by the expansion heal as they get further away. This approach of using screws to split apart and alter a length of wood was present in earlier works as well, and is firmly grounded in the identity-based approach, working with a pairing of objects that are expected to be used together, but willfully misinterpreting how that interaction is intended to take place. The common expectation of using these materials together is that one or two screws will be used to attach one piece of wood to something else. Instead here several thousand screws are used in one piece of wood, not attaching it to

anything else, just attacking the structure of the wood and overlapping one another and building up a rather complex surface.

The first of these pieces, *list of pilgrimages*: was created by affixing a section of an eight foot board between a pair of bounding boards on both sides which were held in place with pipe clamps. The segment of the board between these clamps was filled with screws on both the front and back with one initial pass of screws placed as densely as possible without overlapping then followed by subsequent passes overlapping the existing layer of screws until no more wood can be found to screw into. This piece is presented on a low pedestal; a common gallery presentation method but also with suggestions of an altar or coffin. These latter connotations bring to the piece a surprising element of anthropomorphism, suggesting a damaged or destroyed body placed atop the altar or coffin form. One might also use this altar interpretation to make sense of the screws as some manner of ritual torture or sacrifice, which also bears some relation to historic practices in Africa and elsewhere of a community driving nails or screws into a single piece of wood to bring luck or to pin down harmful spirits.



List of pilgrimages:, wood, screws,

92" x 2" x 13"

2016

Part of the decision process involved in this presentation method as opposed to the next piece is purely practical; this one must be presented in a prone position as it exploded into multiple fragments during the construction process, and is displayed as the remnants of the whole. Between this fragmentation and the expanding width of the piece during construction the resulting profile of this piece presents an interesting form that clearly contrasts the end which has been destroyed with the other end which is still in its original condition.

The second piece created in this method, *Walked out into the ocean dressed as Cthulu pouring a trail of gasoline behind me, was gonna go out in a blaze of glory but Noooo* was constructed in a similar fashion but with bounding boards that extend the full length of the board being screwed into, and only has screws being added to the front of the board.



Walked out into the ocean dressed as Cthulu pouring a trail of gasoline behind me, was gonna go out in a blaze of glory but

Nooooo, Wood, screws, pipe clamps 20" x 90" x 10" 2017

Visually, the density of screws is similar to the first piece apart from a segment of the board into which a first layer of screws was added but not filled to bursting due to the limitations of the material. This less dense region was part of the 'first pass,' but while putting in the second layer of increased density it became apparent that even if it were possible, adding more screws to this region would not further increase the expansion of the bounding boards. The expansion of the dense area of screws in the central board forces the two side boards to expand outward and away from the central board along the full eight feet of the sculpture, staying tight against the edge of the center board only along that section which has been densely screwed. As opposed to the first piece, in this case the screws don't start immediately at one end, but rather several inches down the board. This is both due to an interest in the splitting which occurs just outside the screwed section as well as due to the practical concerns which were discovered in the first piece; namely that expanding the board by several inches where it is clamped will make the clamps, the bounding system, and the whole sculpture explode. Also different from the first piece is the visual result of only inserting screws into one side of the material; the difference in the expansion force of the heads of the screws on the front side and the tips of the screws on the other causes the center of the piece to bow forward and the sides to arc back, which in turn also causes the bounding boards to bow apart further at the front than at the back. This curve described is not wholly unlike the form of a claymore, and the visible tension instills in the piece a sense of potential dramatic action which is quite at odds with the presentation method of leaning the piece casually against a

wall. Once again this method of presentation is partly to establish that juxtaposition but also practical; the section of dense screws is only slightly higher than an average person's height. While leaning it against a wall gives an appearance of casualty it also assures that should the piece succumb to the tensions present within it and explode, it will not do so directly in someone's face. From experience I feel mostly confident that Should something happen with this piece there will not be a dramatic forward projection of material, but better to be safe than sorry.

The other group of work is much more minimal; instead of creating tension within the material by putting anything into it, this series of investigation relies on subjecting wood to external force causing it to break along fault lines, flaws, and sections of growth within the material, revealing more detail of the internal structure of the wood. A great number of variables exist within this approach; while in some cases one can anticipate what a likely result will be based on the placement and application of force, more often the material will do something different and unexpected, frequently revealing new information about the manner in which the wood was formed- for instance breaking differently if large knots are near where force is being applied, if the wood has a large number of smaller knots along its length, if the core of the tree is present in the wood or not and where at, how densely the rings are placed, etc. In the first case, *Delivering the people's elbow to a movie star through a psychic barrier*, a series of boards were broken and arranged alongside one another to form a large rectangular panel.



Delivering the people's elbow to a movie star through a psychic barrier,

Wood, 92" x 40" x 4",

2016

The broken edges of the boards were aligned with the break on the neighboring boards implying the break was a single continuous event along the vertical length of a panel. This alignment is intended to cause in viewers some uncertainty about how this rift was formed, and implying that it was done by a single more catastrophic event which impacted the panel as a whole. By aligning the boards such that this rift appears continuous the ends of the boards did not align, so

some of the boards were cut shorter and additional pieces of board were added to keep the overall form a unified rectangle, keeping viewers' focus in the center.

The piece is raised from the surface of the wall it is placed upon to distance it somewhat from conventional wall-mounted artworks, as well as to cast shadows of the rift on the surface of the wall from an increased distance, creating a heightened sense of depth.

The next piece in this group of work is *They say the grass is greener on the other side, but that's stupid. I've seen them roll out sod.* This piece consists of a mixture of new and found boards arranged upright creating a line interrupting the space within the gallery, and creating an obstacle viewers have to navigate around.



They say the grass is greener on the other side, but that's stupid. I've seen them roll out sod.

Wood, 156" x 12"

x 78", 2017

While this piece creates an obstacle, it is entirely freestanding and doesn't actually impede access to anywhere in the gallery, yet still gives a clear sense of delineation of space dividing *this* side and *that* side. This idea of interrupting a space with a wall finds echoes in Richard Serra's work, as well as in the proposed border wall, and like both of those includes an element of absurdity as it is easily circumvented. The height of this wall is variable based on the length of the snapped wood, ranging from just eight inches to over six feet high, and creates an

overall pattern that is reminiscent of both EEG/EKG's and similar medical monitoring equipment as well as seismographic readings. Both of these similar patterns can be seen in relationship to this work as one relates to the material's history or 'life cycle' as well as the actual growth patterns and living characteristics of the wood, and the other has bearing on the broken wood as large scale natural events frequently result in creating broken wood with similar characteristics across an area, seen most pointedly after volcanic eruptions, hurricane windfalls, or meteor impacts. This presentation method sets up a contrast between the overall vertical profile created and the broken edges of the board with the straight sides created by the alignment of the boards, and the wall created is two boards thick, which shows in places a secondary flat layer within the middle of the piece highlighting the differences between the two sides, which is also exaggerated by a directional lighting. While the boards come together to create an overall movement, there are decisions within the work that encourage viewers toward a more prolonged investigation of each board within the series. At one side of the piece, both end pieces correspond with each other, allowing viewers to mentally put them back together and realize they resulted from the same break and have a positive/negative relationship to each other. In addition to these end pieces matching pairs are left adjacent to each other or in close proximity to their counterpart often within the series, encouraging viewers to engage in a 'scavenger hunt,' looking within the piece for corresponding parts and in the process paying closer attention to and noting the specifics of how each board within the group comes apart in unique ways, and the commonalities that emerge

from different properties within the work. With the works of Richard Serra in mind, particularly his more established works that confine or delineate an area and dictate how people use and move through that space, there are several other iterations of this work that are waiting to be realized that use this material in other ways to alter how a space is used, and how people are constrained within that space.

In addition to this larger freestanding wall of broken boards, there is a group of smaller pieces- *The soothing steady release of fibers (until it all goes to shit)*- which resulted from the creation process which are displayed in counterpoint to the larger movement on the walls around the previous piece. These are seen as single dramatic 'strokes' meant to visually interact with the larger piece.

Regarding titles

As has likely been noted by now, the titles of these works have a bit of a life of their own:

'The soothing steady release of fibers (until it all goes to shit)'

'They say the grass is greener on the other side, but that's stupid. I've seen them roll out sod.'

'Walked out into the ocean dressed as Cthulu pouring a trail of gasoline behind me, was gonna go out in a blaze of glory but noooooo'

'list of pilgrimages:'

'Delivering the people's elbow to a movie star through a psychic barrier'

These titles frequently have some mental association for the artist which connects them with the artwork and the titles in and of themselves are all statements which make sense to the artist and a very small number of other people; however no one but the artist is able to make sense of *all* of the statements presented. These titles which on their face are absurd or nonsensical appeal to the artist's sensibility, but are also a rebuttal to a more common trend in labelling art, that the title of a work must shed additional light on an artwork, or add an air of gravitas through serious prose or a reliance on antiquated languages such as titling pieces in Latin- or something an artist thinks sounds like it. While a title *can* shed additional light on an artwork or give viewers additional information about it, these titles are a rejection of the notion that they *must* or even *should* do so.

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