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ANIMATING THE INERT

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## ANIMATING THE INERT

Nathan McKay

Throughout my artistic practice, my work has been imbued with religious themes, where I have strived to capture sacred imagery through my sculptures. As I delve deeper into this exploration of religious symbolism, I have begun to contemplate the qualities and spiritual energy of the materials themselves. This has led me to consider the history of these materials and the significance of reusing discarded items. This approach has its origins in using found materials from my own childhood, as they hold a special importance and emotional resonance for me. Growing up in a family of hoarders, I have inherited a trove of materials that have been stashed away and forgotten. By incorporating these materials into my work, I am able to breathe new life into them and share their stories with others, something which brings me immense joy.

Reflecting on the evolution of my project, I initially experimented with materials like plates and phones, being conscious of religious themes centred on the melding of the sacred and profane. This led me to Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*,<sup>1</sup> with its amalgamation of divinity and original sin. I also found Steve Baker's essay "Botched Taxidermy,"<sup>2</sup> with its discussion of anthropomorphism similar to the symbolic imagery in Bosch's painting, with its strange creatures and hybrid beings. With these ideas in mind, it felt natural to pursue research on comedic horror and phenomenology, with French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*<sup>3</sup> as a guide to my work. This approach also directed my attention to holy objects that transcend materiality.



Figure 1. Nathan McKay, *Two Legged Four Legged*, 2023.

In my 2023 project, *Animating the Inert*, I sought to transform found materials into visually captivating pieces that would engage viewers on a personal level. One of my artworks, *Two Legged Four Legged*, was created using a variety of found objects. These lifeless objects were imbued with lifelike qualities and placed in carefully crafted environments using found materials like acorns, rocks, sand, bark and pinecones to create a semiotic artwork. This approach aligns with the semiotic theories of Roland Barthes, where the meaning of symbols is not fixed, but is constantly interpreted and reinterpreted by different cultural contexts.<sup>4</sup> Using his ideas of semiotics, the images become a prompt and the word or feeling associated with the image accompanies it. By repurposing found materials, I breathed new life and meaning into them, crafting immersive experiences where these objects appeared to possess human-like traits and cultural significance. This approach encouraged viewers to engage deeply and reflect on their own roles and relationships with the artworks.

To enhance the immersive experience, I created a soundtrack that used directional sound to fully occupy the viewer's senses when inside the exhibition space. The environment featured black walls, dark carpeting and boxes with black legs and exteriors, while lights inside the boxes glowed in the darkness, illuminating the artwork within and drawing viewers in like moths. Once inside, viewers became part of the creation themselves.

I used anthropomorphism to give objects human-like traits and forms, exploring the 'uncanny valley'<sup>5</sup> I had created to establish a connection between the object and humanoid likenesses. These objects were given expressive features, intensifying the subjective human connection. Inspired by automata, the objects not only observed the viewer, but also engaged with their surroundings. This approach aimed to connect the inanimate and the living, creating an immersive experience where the audience becomes an integral part of the art.

The commodification of objects as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution has changed how we observe and interact with them, raising critical questions about their intrinsic value and the role of art. Is the significance of objects limited to their marketability, or can they transcend human consumption to have a more meaningful existence? This transformation of objects into commodities not only severs emotional bonds, but also diminishes our sense of personal responsibility towards them, reflecting the broader impacts of a post-industrial society.

In a world where mass production has become the norm, the unique qualities of handmade objects are often overshadowed by the ubiquity and uniformity of factory-produced items. This mass production leads to a proliferation of kitsch – objects that are gaudy or overly sentimental, lacking genuine artistic value.<sup>6</sup> My work aims to challenge this norm by reinventing the handmade, breathing new life into materials that are typically dismissed as kitsch or purely functional.

By repurposing and transforming found materials, I strive to restore the emotional and aesthetic connections that have been lost in the age of commodification. This process not only emphasises the value of craftsmanship, but also reintroduces a sense of individuality and significance to each piece. Through my art, I seek to demonstrate that objects can possess a meaning beyond their market value, creating a deeper appreciation for the handmade and the personal narratives that these objects can convey.

The artists I studied for this project, Edward and Nancy Kienholz, use discarded materials to emphasise the semiotic potential within the objects (such as Edward Kienholz, *The Beanery*, 1965, assemblage, 253 × 670 × 190cm). Their works align with my own artistic style, as I draw inspiration from their distinctive approach. Notably, their use of discarded materials from junkyards has influenced my own artistic practice, facilitating the embodiment of semiotic significance within my creations. For instance, the Kienholz's installation *The Beanery* uses a variety of found objects to recreate a bar scene, imbuing the mundane setting with layers of social commentary and human emotion.

By repurposing discarded objects and integrating them into their artworks, they imbue these materials with a renewed sense of purpose and semiotic depth. This act challenges traditional ideas of artistic creation and elevates the status of the insignificant and forgotten materials of our world.



Figure 2. Nathan McKay, *Hoarding Rodent*, 2023, assemblage.

Similarly, I have incorporated the practice of using found materials in my own artistic process, drawn by the semiotic elements that are in the discarded objects. The Kienholz's approach to using materials from junkyards aligns closely with my own method of incorporating found objects into my works, such as *Hoarding Rodent*, which was created from various found materials like pinecones, shoe leather; doll hair and jewellery. My process of making involves grabbing whatever materials I have in front of me and piecing them together randomly, experimenting with the materials and seeing what works until I create something visually striking. As with the Kienholz duo, these materials are transformed from their original, often mundane contexts into components of impactful artworks. By repurposing and recontextualising these materials, I grant the objects a sense of life, allowing them to transcend their original purpose and assume a renewed significance within my art. This act of repurposing serves as a testament to the semiotic potential embedded within these materials as they acquire new narratives and evoke a sense of vitality that resonates with the viewer. The concept of semiotics in art extends beyond the selection of materials; it encompasses the broader notion of empowering the artwork itself to communicate and engage with its audience on a deeper, more meaningful level.

In addition to the Kienholz's, the Chapman Brothers (Jake and Dinos Chapman) have significantly influenced my artistic practice. Their exploration of consumerism using religious iconography has deepened my understanding of religious psychology and its role in consumer culture. The Chapman Brothers' *Insult to Injury* series, which repurposes Goya's prints from his *Disasters of War* series with their grotesque and satirical elements, resonates with my own practice of using found materials to create new narratives. The *Insult to Injury* series critiques the commodification of violence and suffering, mirroring my interest in how consumer goods and capitalism dominate human experience and nature. The concept of deodand—objects that cause harm being forfeit to the Crown or state—also informs my work.<sup>7</sup> By repurposing found materials, I draw a parallel to this idea, imbuing discarded objects with a renewed significance and semiotic potential. This transformation challenges viewers to reconsider the value of these objects, much like the Chapman Brothers' process of defamiliarising Goya's prints.

*Angel Baby* relates closely to the Chapman Brothers' art, particularly their *Insult to Injury* series, through its critical examination of consumerism, commodification and the grotesque by repurposing existing materials. Like the Chapman Brothers, who transform familiar objects to create new meanings, *Angel Baby* reconfigures a baby doll's head and multiple limbs from other Victorian dolls to resemble a biblically accurate angel. This use of found materials critiques consumer culture by reclaiming and transforming mass-produced items. The grotesque nature of *Angel Baby* mirrors the unsettling and provocative imagery in the Chapmans' work, challenging traditional aesthetic norms and evoking the uncanny. By employing religious iconography, *Angel Baby* satirises the commercialisation of religious symbols. The semiotic transformation of doll parts into a multi-limbed angel relates to the Chapmans' method of reinterpreting elements to generate new narratives. Additionally, the concept of deodand, where objects are given new significance, is reflected in the way *Angel Baby* utilises discarded materials, granting them new life and purpose. Through these shared techniques and themes, *Angel Baby* aligns with the Chapman Brothers' distinctive approach, contributing to the broader dialogue on consumerism, commodification and the deeper meanings embedded in everyday objects.

Another relevant artist for my work is Joseph Cornell, whose 'cabinets of curiosities' have greatly influenced my practice. Cornell's work involved creating intricate assemblages within handmade wooden boxes, a process that was both meticulous and imaginative, such as in Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Palais de Cristal)*, ca. 1953. He would collect a wide variety of found objects – everything from photographs and prints to trinkets and natural specimens – and carefully arrange them within these boxes to create evocative, dreamlike tableaux. His process was akin to that of a collector or archivist, meticulously selecting and organising items to build new narratives and meanings. Cornell's 'cabinets of curiosities' draw on the historical concept of *Wunderkammern*, or 'wonder cabinets,' which were early forms of museums that displayed a wide range of objects intended to inspire awe and curiosity. By placing his assemblages in these confined spaces, Cornell was able to frame each object in a context that enhanced its significance and prompted viewers to explore the connections between the items. The effect was both intimate and immersive, encouraging a sense of discovery and personal engagement with the art.

Inspired by Cornell's method, I have integrated my own work into found wooden boxes. I built my own display boxes using wood donated to me, as well as painting the exterior black and having the interior walls painted in a patchy manner using different contrasting colours. This technique allows me to create contained, focused environments where the repurposed objects within can be appreciated in a curated, almost reverential manner. The handmade boxes not only provide a physical frame, but also contribute to the narrative



Figure 3. Nathan McKay, *Angel Baby*, 2023.



Figure 4. Nathan McKay, *Praise the Sun*, 2023, assemblage.

and emotional impact of the artworks. By housing my assemblages in these boxes, I aim to evoke a sense of wonder and contemplation, much like Cornell's creations, inviting viewers to delve deeper into the stories and meanings embedded in these ordinary and discarded objects.

Cornell's influence on my work is evident in the way these boxes transform the presentation of my assemblages. The enclosed spaces serve to elevate the found objects, encouraging a more profound engagement with their semiotic potential. This approach aligns with my goal of challenging traditional notions of value and significance in art, highlighting the beauty and complexity of materials that might otherwise be overlooked. Through this method, my work continues the legacy of Cornell's 'cabinets of curiosities,' offering viewers a curated experience that invites exploration and reflection on the interconnectedness of art, history and everyday life.

**Nathan McKay** is a Dunedin-based artist specialising in contemporary sculpture, known for his use of found materials. His work often explores themes of disregarded material and semiotics. Growing up in a family of hoarders, Nathan has always been fascinated by the stories objects can tell. By incorporating items from his childhood, he seeks to create pieces that resonate with viewers on a personal and emotional level. Through his work, Nathan aims to highlight the significance of the overlooked and forgotten.

- 1 Michael Meinhard, *Hieronymus Bosch's The Garden of Earthly Delights: The Senses and the Soul* (PubliQation, 2018).
- 2 Steve Baker, "Botched Taxidermy," *Antennae*, 7 (2008).
- 3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1945).
- 4 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1973).
- 5 Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
- 6 Winfried Menninghaus, "On the Vital Significance of 'Kitsch': Walter Benjamin's Politics of 'Bad Taste,'" in *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*, eds Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 39–58.
- 7 Susan Ballard, *The Chair Did it: The Agency of Nonhuman Objects* (2012); Anna Pervukhin, "Deodands: A Study in the Creation of Common Law Rules," *The American Journal of Legal History*, 47:3 (2005), 237–56.