

Capstone Alternative Outcome

Marielle Bossio

ENVS 400 Spring, 2017

Prof. Liz Safran

Art and Research— A Reflection on Practice

This reflection serves to pull together the art practice which I engaged in for the past school year with research spanning the same amount of time for this environmental studies capstone project. Before reading this reflection, it is recommended that the reader first read my scholarly essay: *Grounding in Uncertain Geology: How art will help us learn to live in the Anthropocene epoch*. As established in the scholarly essay, the Anthropocene is a place of hybridity, yet demonstrates a potential disconnect between the scholarly humanities work on the subject and the art that is being produced. With art as a method of research, this reflection hopes to describe my process of working through an issue— what information informed me, how that research as well as other things inspired my actions, and what I ended up learning through the process. As I double major I have often struggled over the course of the past four years— first trying to decide which major to chose, ultimately deciding to do both, and then through the many attempts to relate them back to each other and to find places of connection that made sense to me. In many ways I see this as one project, though it is turned in to two separate professors and in two different buildings, with specific parts that must be met and submitted for each. This project in all of its parts has aligned most closely with my own interests and feels as though it is the start of a longer process work that I will engage with.

Both of my senior seminar classes began with similar assignments: introduce yourself and your topic. It was the first week of school and I had no idea what I wanted to do, and the weight of the importance of this decision did not rest lightly on my shoulders. I tentatively proposed a topic I had barely discovered at the end of my junior year— art about the Anthropocene. In senior seminar for art majors, I had no idea where to go, but settled on painting a watercolor of myself and a large rock (figure 1), referencing my training as a landscape painter, yet also with a desire to represent the conflicts I feel as I approach the concepts of Nature and culture with a view that is more relatable to that of contemporary environmentalism. Common understandings in contemporary environmentalism often problematize romanticization of the natural world, and promote an understanding that sees the world as mixed, messy and hybrid. Though I introduced the Anthropocene concept along with my work, it was unclear to me as to how this painting and the Anthropocene were related.

After a week of readings on the Anthropocene both as a concept and in its relationship to art, I had come to a couple of conclusions. I did not believe that art about the Anthropocene was helpful when it cited apocalyptic themes (Lotringer 2015), or promoted images that essentially “just” point to problematic conditions or instances. Similarly, I was uninterested and uninspired by images that that idealize or romanticize a “pristine” Nature. Photographs of giant landfills, or ice burgs, entered as parts of shows that had the Anthropocene in their title or theme, seemed to reduce important conversations to symbolic elements. Seemingly these images only perpetuated a narrative of “bad” situations from human impacts.

This was particularly apparent in an article from the Smithsonian, which is a part of a larger project titled “The Age of Humans: Living in the Anthropocene”. In this particular piece titled: *This Stunning Contemporary Art Captures Terror, Wonder and Wit in the Anthropocene*, art historian Joanna Marsh of the Smithsonian put together a selection of nine pieces (figures 2, 3 and 4) which she feels articulate this particular topic. I found the article to be not much different from other narratives which just perpetuate fear rhetorics. I wondered what was truly different about the Anthropocene, as opposed to a word that is slapped onto a story about climate change, oil spills, island landfills or the apocalypse. I was inspired to learn about the Anthropocene from those who were really taking time to study and define it.

Additionally, I wondered how artists might think about the Anthropocene in ways which offered constructive approaches to understanding fuller situations or themes without apocalyptic undertones. In her 2015 article that I read early on in my process, *Ethics, Ecology and the Future: Art and Design Face the Anthropocene*, author Kayla Anderson states that,

“Anthropocene narratives coming from the art world seem to be most potentially destructive when they propose to do something, further reinforcing an attitude of human dominance over the planet. Paradoxically, art initiatives that stimulate critical thinking rather than simulate action have the potential to be the most constructive.” (339)

My response to the above questions and problems led me to a few realizations about my own works. First, the watercolor painting, (while very beautiful if I may say so), seemed

to lack a certain quality to discuss such grand issues¹. Though trained almost exclusively as a painter and drawer, I realized that I felt a need to turn towards 3D mediums. Its hard to explain how I knew this, but something about the flatness of the image on paper seemed nostalgic, rather than provocative. While I recognized that there are definitely ways in which to use painting to elicit these responses, I hadn't the slightest clue how to go about this. The flat painting felt more in line with the very images that I found problematic above — descriptive of a romantic setting or a reduction of a complex topic to symbols. Initially, I was obsessed with the notion of the viewer. How was I going to use my work to send them a message? How would I be able to explain all the complexities of the Anthropocene through one piece of work? What would this narrative look like? This didactic theme was central to my practice².

With an influential background in landscape painting, I decided to think closely about what was being represented in such images. I decided that though there are often additions, the three main components are terrain, sky and foliage/plants.³

This led to a piece titled *Landscape Painting* (figure 5), which consisted of the above elements—soil, foliage and sky—brought into the gallery. Soil arranged in a pile on the floor, cut branches suspended by fishing line from the ceiling, and a gridded background of photographic prints of the sky. Working with materials and in three-dimension felt good

¹ *In retrospect, I understand this piece to primarily have been representative through symbols, which does not perhaps offer much experience of the topic to the viewer.*

² *However, it was only after months of the practice that I came to understand the importance of these pieces not only in their final physicality or their aesthetic qualities in the gallery, but how I as an artist was beginning to navigate and process these ideas and questions, and, most importantly, the research and process behind and embedded within the pieces.*

³ *Though I did have some research under my belt at this point as influence, it is important to note that much of this only subconsciously impacted my artistic decisions— many of my actions and directional shifts came and still come randomly or without clear reasons that I could point to.*

and right. There was something here that wasn't in the previous work. My feedback mostly regarded how could I continue to work with these materials in a way that was less “found and placed” and demonstrated more of the artist’s hand.

For my next critique, I tried to engage with the feedback from above. *Landscape Painting* had demonstrated a clear interest in bringing the landscape into the gallery in a way which dealt with materials and physicality⁴ I chose to work with materials that interested me, various plastics that I found at a second-hand store. I chose large rocks from the property around my house which I intended to wrap in the plastics. However, as it was Autumn in Portland, I forgot to account for the fact that the rocks would be drenched. This resulted in a routine of care which I performed for the rocks in order to dry them, first, wrapped in a towel, then into the oven, and lastly, into a makeshift blanket fort that I set up with a heater inside. After they were dry, I wrapped and swaddled them, and displayed them in a row on separate pedestals, where they appeared almost like specimens of some sort (figures 6, 7 and 8). My wish for this project is that I had somehow documented the process of care which they went through, as for me, that became a large part of their meaning⁵.

Feedback from this piece recommended that I take my process outdoors. Though I had been avoiding working outdoors as I felt that this might lend itself too well to nature/culture tropes, I did so anyway. I played around with various studies, some of which can be

⁴ *In many ways, I think that this was my attempt to avoid an “othering” of the landscape, not something “out there” that I was representing, but something tangible and which could be manipulated (much as a painting can be) by myself.*

⁵ *Without realizing it at the time, this unpredictability and adaptable practice was very much related to my final pieces, and is also quite important for an art that deals with “living in the Anthropocene”.*

seen in figures 9 and 10. The final product of this ended up in the form of two photographs that were simultaneously photographs as well as a documentation of a process (figures 11, 12). These pieces were important regarding their play with light in the way the rocks, covered in cellophane, began to reflect their environment. Retrospectively, I believe these pieces to be very successful especially in a metaphorical quality— though they clearly utilize symbols for nature, the placement and wrapping of the plastic over the rocks causes them to shift in the ways in which they now relate to and in their environment. Additionally, rocks have a more direct relationship to the term “geology” than other nature symbols may, and this causes them to have a different and perhaps more relevant connection to the Anthropocene as a concept. In this way, the metaphorical quality deepens— my placement of the plastics causes geologic changes which affect the way in which the environment around them is portrayed and interpreted.

During following pieces, I went back and forth many times between 2D and 3D, which helped me realize that I would like to keep some element of my training as a painter in the work which I produced. One painting which I made at the end of fall semester was helpful for me as I received feedback on it that it was both a painting of an object as well as of a landscape. This resonated with me as I was interested in how I could make something that was an object but which still talked about the landscape, which, as noted above had been so influential in my training as a painter, prior to Lewis and Clark.

The second semester I dove into working with materials. I was inspired by sculptural forms and objects as well as the way things felt, creased and took up space. I was inspired by the works of artists such as Rachel Harrison (figures 13, 14) and Karla Black (15, 16), for both their use of materials, structure and form but also color and their

command of space. One piece I had made as a practice or study seemed very similar to some of the pieces that I found from Karla Black and I was interested in exploring this further (figure 17). Playing with this, I used canvas and cellophane in different spaces throughout the building to create mini-installations or forms, trying to think about light, space and materials. I also included frames in several of these as a reference to painting, but in a way which broke off and out of the rectangle. (Figures 18, 19, 20)

After great struggle, I eventually came to the realization that however I began, important elements of the project would show through. As I now had SO much information, I needed to stop trying to find more, and “Just DO!”⁶ Additionally, rather than using my pieces as opportunities to tell the viewer, I could use them as a way in which to work through the ideas myself⁷.

Given the mixed and messy qualities of the Anthropocene, I realized that I was trying very hard to constrain and structure my project. I realized that the piece would be most authentic if I was to create from exactly where I was at, offering up the ideas that I was most currently working with, rather than constantly berating myself to find new ways of expression. Unlike Jeremijenko, Mattingly or Saraceno, I didn't have one central issue that I was dealing with. Though these three artists choose issues or topics to situate in, they still refrain from making work that gives a “solution”, rather, these pieces act as playful proposals for specific things, which can more largely be associated with working with the Anthropocene. Instead, I was attempting a broad conversation about the Anthropocene and

⁶ Famous quote from artist Sol Lewitt to artist Eva Hesse in a 1965 that he wrote her, referenced often in the art world.

⁷Though this may seem obvious, it was quite a relief and a breakthrough for my artistic self and practice!

all the many themes I had learned over the past several months. In retrospect, this most likely made my process more challenging and the outcome less successful than it may have been, had I chosen some way in which to situate. In some ways, situating within the Anthropocene was helpful, but once there, I should have found something smaller to focus on.

After meeting with my sculpture professor, Cara Levine in early March, I realized that I could be a painter or make “paintings” without actually painting a rectangle with oil colors. After looking at my work, she noted a minimalistic style to many of my preferred pieces⁸. She showed me the work of artists Liam Everett (figures 21, 22) and Teresa Baker (figure 23) who work in ways which combine painting and sculpture. Also, instead of trying to create something that stood for the Anthropocene, she recommended that I continue to engage with the outdoor world in a physical way, like I had done with *Landscape Painting*, or even more, with the wrapped rocks. This proved helpful and I decided on a collaborative piece— I wanted not only to be placing my own desires upon the elements with which I collaborated, but for them in turn to affect the pieces.

This manifested in my final project to work with the processes of rain, a stream, burial and sunlight. Once I had decided upon this, I felt relief. I knew that this piece was in many ways the most genuine of all I had done, there was something about it that no longer felt forced, stemming from my ability to let non-human actors influence both the pieces as well as my own process and understanding of working through. Each piece brought unexpected turns of events, forcing me to adapt.

⁸ This feedback as it helped me figure out where to go, and in some ways, how to narrow down my ideas, by deciding to focus on minimalistic techniques.

As I wished to still reference my training as a painter, I decided upon materials that referenced painting. Linen, and wood supports. When constructing a canvas, the wood frame is built and then linen or canvas is stretched over it, obscuring the frame. In this case, I affected the pieces of linen in various ways, and instead of building basic rectangle frames, I used the same common board⁹ to create structures that were free-standing, and over which, I could drape or hang the linen pieces.

Stream was the first piece that I worked on. Working with help from my friends, Lex Shapiro and Becky Friedman, I released cut up pieces of pure white linen into a neighborhood creek (figure 24, 25). Lex offered her talented photography skills to help document the process. Though I had stationed Becky about 40 yards down the creek, most of the pieces found their ways into crevices behind rocks and fallen branches after less than 15 yards. A couple of pieces made it down a small waterfall. Altogether, none of the pieces were in the water for more than 10 minutes. I numbered each piece as I collected it out of the creek, and hung them to dry. Once dry, I stitched them back together by hand, in a pattern that somewhat reflected the order in which they had been collected, which was also the distance they had traveled. The white linen appeared muddy when pulled wet, from the creek, but after drying I found that the mossy rocks had battered the linen to leave a greenish pattern resemblant of tie-dye. I was surprised with how much coloring this piece received just from being in the creek. This cloth was around the art building for several weeks before it went into the gallery, all the while retaining its green pattern (figure 26). However, after less than 24 hours in the Hoffman gallery, this piece turned brown! This I have attributed to the air in the gallery which is highly regulated for humidity, unlike

⁹ cheap wood, usually the type usually available in the painting studio for art students at Lewis and Clark.

Portland's air which tends to be very moist. Even after I believed it to be done, this piece was still highly sensitive and respondent to its environment. (Installation image, Figure 27)

Soil is a burial piece and the second which I worked on. I gathered and tied the piece of linen in several places, hoping that this may allow for stripes to form, or basically, for anything other than the entire piece turning a solid brown. I then dug a shallow depression for the cloth, and laid it inside (figure 28). The soil was moist and soft, and after covering the piece back up I watered it hoping to get the soil in and around the piece. The piece was out for 8 days, most of which saw a significant amount of rain. After uncovering and removing it, I was surprised with the lack of dirt that the cloth had picked up. I rinsed the piece and hung it to dry. Once dry, I cut it in half and sewed it end to end to create a longer piece. Faint coloration from the burial remains. (figure 29)

Sun is the only piece in this series for which the structure also played a part in the process. (figure 30) This piece of linen was cut lengthwise and sewn end to end, in order to create a larger banner-shaped piece. This piece was then draped over the support, and the structure was placed in various locations where it could receive direct light. This piece is a bit amusing as Portland is notorious for its rain clouds and thus, the piece does not have much to show for its process. However, there were several instances when I did actually catch the work bathed in full sunlight. This piece was exposed for 6 days, and on the 4th day it spent a half hour outside in the sun (figure 31), before grey clouds moved in and threatened rain.

For *Rain*, I hung the cloth up from a branch on a hillside using a safety pin and clothesline (figure 32). After 3 days, during which all saw rain for at least a couple of hours, I removed the piece and dried it in the same hanging position. Though after drying I cut the

piece in half and sewed it end to end, I chose to feature the drying patterns caused from the wetness of the rainwater (figure 33, installation view of whole piece in gallery, figure 34).

When I think about my own pieces in their relationship to the Anthropocene framework that I have established, I find myself overly critical. However, some of this critique is informative and interesting as it offers further questions and learning from the piece.

My first thought in this work is my own relationship to understanding of the Nature/Culture binary. This is obvious in my choices throughout my pieces to use and gravitate towards symbols such as plants, soil, rocks, rain and the creek in my work. These symbols seemingly operate as placeholders to reference Nature, and remind me that even though I have spent so much time researching and learning these things, I am not yet able to fully feel the hybridity that I talk about. As most notions of environmentalism are built on some structure which talks about Nature, I demonstrate even further these same foundations in my own understanding—even as someone who works consciously to relearn and work through these understandings. This demonstrates the great effort that will need to be undertaken in order to reshape a collective understanding!

On the other hand, I did not make these pieces with the assumption that I would be collaborating with “the Wild”. Each of the processes these pieces underwent can be elaborated upon to understand some of these places and non-human actors as hybrid objects. For example, though the stream may be symbolic of “Nature”, we also must understand the specifics of this stream. Where I worked on this piece, Tryon Creek runs through Marshall Park, a 25 acre park in SW portland. This park is located in a residential neighborhood, and Tryon Creek enters the park some 50 yards from where I worked, from

a metal pipe which directs it under housing developments. Marshall Park was acquired by Portland in the 1950s, after a local resident had spent time rehabilitating an abandoned quarry with the hope that it may someday serve as a park¹⁰. Today, though Marshall Park may seem to be an untouched area, it carries both its history as well as constant susceptibility to impacts from the neighborhood around it, as well as from the city and state. Marshall Park is maintained by rangers via the Parks and Recreation Department, and a play structure, picnic area, and hiking trails attract recreating Portlanders to the area. Further, this creek again enters a pipe to navigate under Maplecrest Drive (which splits the part land into two segments), and then again to be channeled under Boones Ferry Rd. so that it may enter the larger Tryon Creek State Park. Further along the line, this creek enters into the Willamette, which flows through the center of Portland and serves as a path for cargo ships as well as recreational kayakers. Historically, the Willamette was highly polluted due to industrial dumping and landfills along it, and even now still experiences annual sewage contamination events during larger storms.

Additionally, as with the work of Saraceno, though I engage with these non-human actors, I do not directly use them as symbols in the final piece. They have made their mark, and true, their names are on the wall behind them, yet the actual pieces do not appear at first as symbolic of “Nature”.

When thought of this way, these pieces also engages with various scales. In one sense, these pieces can be thought of as a part of an artistic tradition from the 1960s and

¹⁰ This information is publicly available on the Portland Parks and Recreation website

1970s of land art, really dealing with the land and the place¹¹. However, as noted above these places are hybrid themselves, influenced by a variety of factors that play out just so, all of which to some extent are a part of my work. Additionally, climatic factors such as rainfall, or sunlight had impact on the process of the piece.

These pieces were not sad to me. I did not create these pieces as an attempt to make some statement about conservation, or through attempts to romanticize the landscape, to talk about Nature as some other which must be protected. Visually, these pieces do not make any statements about any particular form of ecological destruction either. In fact, these pieces give the viewer almost nothing, without knowing their context. In some senses, this may be problematic or frustrating. However, they do serve as objects remnant of a process full of meaning and thought. I received feedback from peers that these pieces act in a very interesting way— though they do not appear to be much to the eye at first glance, they almost burst with meaning embedded in their background and process. Personally, this dichotomy works as I did not want to tell with these pieces, but hoped instead that they would show and interest others to look more closely, to learn, to really think about the process and reasons behind them. If they had been overly visually stimulating, I think they would have lost some of this quality.

Lastly, these pieces are of course, interdisciplinary! Though this could be pushed further, or manifested in any variety of ways, these pieces arose from a desire to most fully connect my two majors. To this extent, I believe I have succeeded.

¹¹ *Land art was a part of a larger conceptual art movement, often thought of as a precursor or foundation for (later) “environmental art” Land art often worked directly with elements such as soil, water, trees, etc. outdoors, or, without being moved into a gallery. Generally these pieces use symbols and elements that we may associate with “Nature” Robert Smithson’s “Spiral Jetty” is a great example of this!*

Here, I have played the part of the artist as researcher. I have engaged in a practice that took one question, and asked it of different disciplines, with different approaches to working through, and to creating a product. While there are inevitable separations due to classes, credits, teachers, etc., this project was honest and real, much as with the time of the Anthropocene, humans represent places of hybridity— our interests are not one, not two separate things, but all unique combinations of factors and interests that come together to shape our thinking, and to shape who we are.

Having recognized that we ourselves—embodied as we are—are the ultimate hybrids of the cultural and the natural, how do we understand ourselves and the world that we shape? On one hand, we cannot deny either the social horrors that come from deep confusions of the social and the natural, or the problems that we have created by our increasingly powerful interventions into the natural world. On the other hand, we cannot deny that the social and the natural are inextricably mixed and that the natural world is, for better or worse, already a result of our past actions. (White, 2000)

Richard White offers this quote from a 2000 paper titled “The Problem With Purity”, yet keep in mind, this was before the term Anthropocene had emerged! Though of course, his reference to the “natural world” and his language which maintains a duality might be a bit cliché, the overall ideas resonate with the retrospective understanding I come to with my work. Further, I believe this quote to be somewhat indicative of a feeling behind the works of other artist’s who’s work I looked at in my scholarly essay, and even a mindset of many people as they begin to approach learning to live within the Anthropocene.

References

Anderson, Kayla. "Ethics, Ecology, and the Future: Art and Design Face the Anthropocene." *Leonardo* 48, no. 4 (August 2015): 338-347. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost

Lotringer, Sylvère, Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, "The Last Political Scene", in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, 2015, Edited by Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin. Open Humanities Press.

White, Richard. "The problem with purity." *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 21 (2000): 211-228.



Figure 1
Untitled (2016)
Marielle Bossio

Figure 2 (Left)
 Robert Longo
 Untitled (Hercules), 2008
 charcoal on paper, 96 x 70 in.
 Smithsonian American Art Museum



Figure 3 (right)
 Edward Burtynsky
 Oil Spill #10 Oil Slick at Rip Tide, Gulf of Mexico,
 June 24, 2010
 chromogenic print

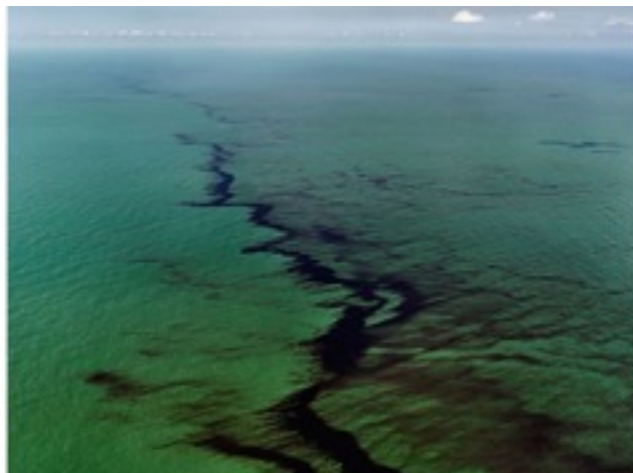


Figure 4
 Chris Jordan
 Cell phones #2, Atlanta from
 "Intolerable Beauty" series,
 2005
 Chromogenic print, 44 x 90 in

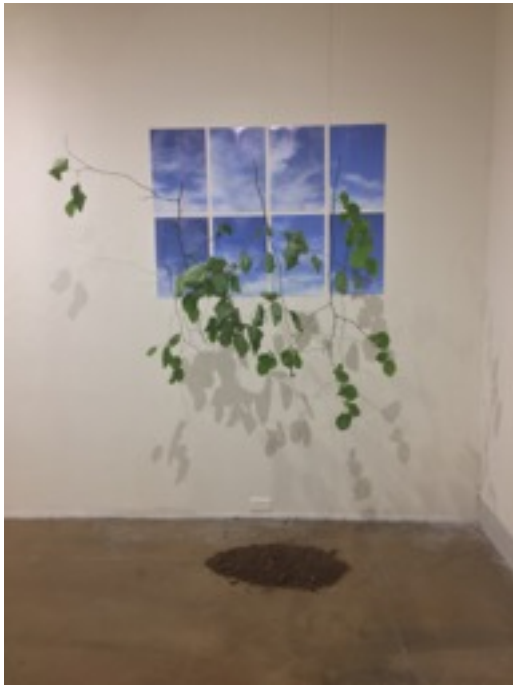


Figure 5
Marielle Bossio
Landscape Painting (2016)



Figures 6, 7 and 8
Marielle Bossio
Untitled (2016)
rocks in various plastics





Figures 9 and 10
Marielle Bossio
random studies (2016)



Figures 11 and 12
Marielle Bossio
Untitled (2016)





Figure 13
Huffy Howler, 2004
Rachel Harrison

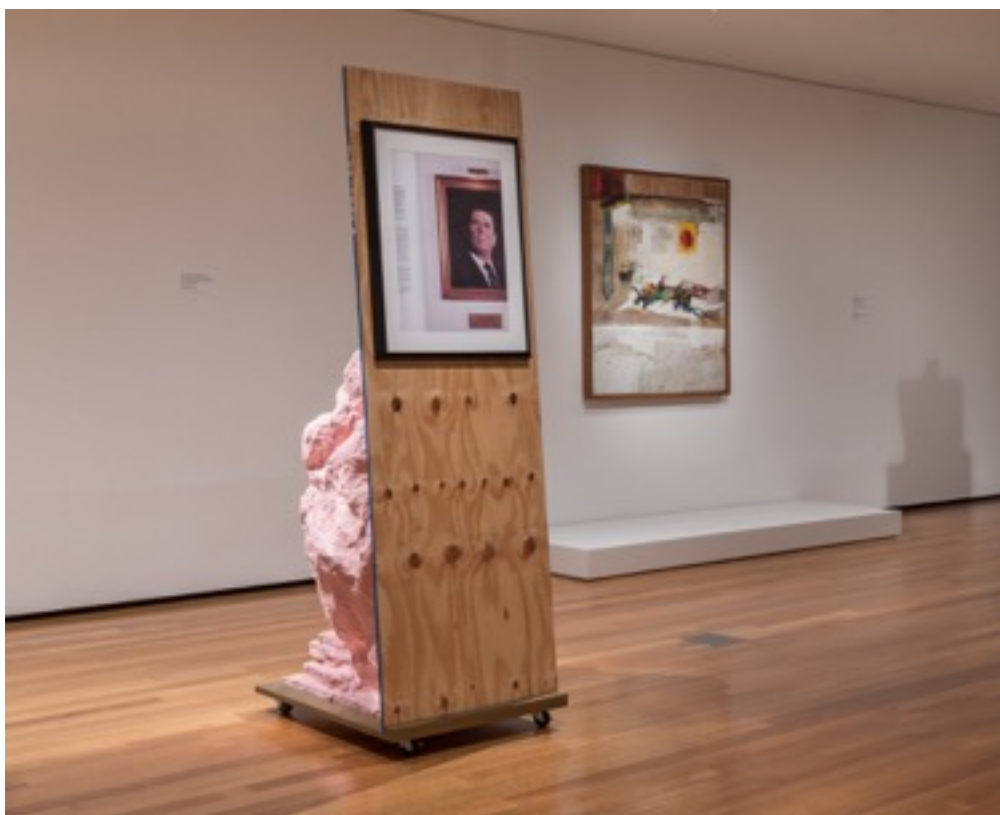


Figure 14
Hans Haacke with Sculpture, 2005.
Rachel Harrison



Figure 15 (above)
Nothing Is a Must (2009)
Karla Black



Figure 16 (left)
Pleaser (2009)
Karla Black



Figure 17 (left)
Untitled (2017)
Marielle Bossio

Figures 18, 19, 20 (below)
untitled studies (2017)
Marielle Bossio





Figures 21, 22
Liam Everett

If I could sleep I might make love.
I'd go into the woods. My eyes
would see... the sky,
the earth. I'd run, run, they
wouldn't catch me.

Installation view





Figure 23
Teresa Baker
Gnaw, 2015



Figures 24, 25
Stream 2017
Process

Figure 26 (left)
Stream 2017
Finished linen before gallery

Figure 27 (bottom)
Stream 2017
(installation view)





Figure 28 (above)
Soil 2017
process documentation

Figure 29 (left)
Soil 2017
installation view



Figures 30 and 31
Sun 2017
process documentation





Figure 32
Rain 2017
process piece



Figure 33
Rain 2017
installation view



Figure 34
Stream, Sun, Soil, Rain 2017
Marielle Bossio
Installation view

