

WHEN MORE IS MORE BECOMES TOO MUCH

by

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Colleen Ann Fuhringer

April 2012

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ABSTRACT

Though we live in an age of uncertainty, we are constantly surrounded by what is predictable and routine. What happens when the comfort of our understanding is questioned? This body of work developed out of my experimental curiosity and desire to merge the familiar with the unexpected. Incorporating furniture and found objects brings a level of familiarity to the viewer, but manipulating the usual and adding strange elements causes inquiry. All of the components are set up into narrative tableaux and every part is considerably important to the whole. The installation explores humor and fear related to the grotesque and the uncanny, exploring contradictory elements such as: anthropomorphic and foreign, vibrant and static, seductive and repulsive. Each scene reveals no answers but poses only questions, inviting the viewer to fully experience their surroundings and come up with their own conclusions. We often exist between the margins of the known and the unknown but our understanding of this existence is purely individual.

Though we live in an age of uncertainty, we are constantly surrounded by what is predictable and routine. What happens when the comfort of our understanding is questioned? This body of work developed out of my experimental curiosity and desire to merge the familiar with the unexpected. Incorporating furniture and found objects brings a level of familiarity to the viewer, but manipulating the usual and adding strange elements causes inquiry. All of these components are set up into narrative tableaux and every part is considerably important to the whole. Each scene reveals no answers but poses only questions, inviting the viewer to fully experience their surroundings and come up with their own conclusions.

Within the narratives, the relationships between the pieces create a balance of contradictions, such as: anthropomorphic and foreign, vibrant and static, seductive and repulsive. This balance is the middle ground, the in-between nature that can best be described as “grotesque.” The true definition of the grotesque lies far beyond what is considered disgusting and repulsive. It is recognizing the importance of contradiction and the undeniable presence of the unknown. As described by Geoffrey Galt Harpham in his book On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature (1982):

When we use the word “grotesque” we record, among other things, the sense that though our attention has been arrested, our understanding is unsatisfied. Grotesqueries both require and defeat definition: they are neither so regular and rhythmical that they settle easily into our categories, nor so unprecedented that we do not recognize them at all. They stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles. (Harpham 3)

On the basis of stored knowledge, our thought processes are able to turn in specific directions. But when confronted with unknown elements, those thought processes are suddenly confused. Multiple meanings and interpretations exist but no single answer may be found. One is left with their own imagination to try, or try not, to make sense of it all.

It could be said that within this margin of uncertainty there exists no definition, no words fitting to describe. Perhaps the word grotesque “accommodates the things left over when the categories of language are exhausted.” (Harpham 3) In that case, even the word grotesque is contradictory, a description to the indescribable. In his essay for the fifth international SITE Santa Fe Biennial (July 18, 2004 – January 9, 2005), curator Robert Storr introduces his writing on the grotesque with the idea of corruption of language. As stated by Storr:

“The assumption is that words say what they mean but must be kept under watch for fear that they might express something slightly more, slightly other than, or even something contrary to what we intend... Thus, we aspire to absolute clarity but live with ambiguity.” (Storr 10)

There are many who seek answers to all questions, who are frightened by the thought of living with uncertainty. After all, the purpose of language is to communicate and to explain. But what happens when language fails itself? Then we are left with sensation.

Often there are experiences to which words do no justice. When descriptions become “sort of like” something else that is relatable. There is power in leaving language behind. Without the worry of putting words to an event, one is left only to feel. Words are fleeting and physical resonance can be much more powerful. With my work, I invite the experience to go beyond visual. The senses of touch and smell heighten awareness

and leave more of an impact on the viewer. This type of encounter is based on multiple senses and becomes very difficult to fully put into words. It is the “left over” area that Harpham describes, that which holds combinations of contradictions.

While contradictory experience and sensation can be described as grotesque, the term “uncanny” is closely related. First undertaken by Dr. Ernst Jentsch in his essay On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906), the word uncanny “suggests that a lack of orientation is bound up with the impression of the uncanniness of a thing or incident.” (Jentsch 2) Lack of familiarity with one’s surroundings can result in the uncanny. However, as Jentsch states “the same impression does not necessarily exert an uncanny effect on everybody.” (Jentsch 2) With each daily occurrence, the individual brings with them their own past experience and personal memory. Response to each occurrence is directly related to this experience and memory. The same goes with viewing a work of art. While similarities exist within the basic knowledge of a culture, causing many to have a response that is somewhat alike, no two personal experiences will be identical.

As Jentsch attempts to come closer to the essence of the uncanny, he speaks of our desire to make connections, “the intellectual mastery of the new thing.” (Jentsch 4) Even in our age of technology, there are things that cannot be explained. We often discount the unexplainable or try to rationalize to the best of our abilities. What if something is best described as odd or strange? Making connections is human nature but there are many instances where conceptual connections will never be complete. Jentsch goes on to describe the familiar “not only as welcome, but – however remarkable and inexplicable it may be – as straightforwardly self-evident.” (Jentsch 4) Objects and

events of the everyday become so commonplace that their true appearance is often overlooked. We become conditioned by repetition. Simply changing one's perception of the usual can result in the uncanny. The gallery space is the perfect opportunity for this. Removing objects, such as furniture, from their regular environments and placing them within the white cube of the gallery automatically changes the context, thus increasing the possibility of an uncanny occurrence.

While Jentsch's essay was well received, perhaps the most popular writing on the subject of the uncanny has come from Sigmund Freud. In his essay The Uncanny (1919), Freud uses Jentsch's writing as largely the basis for further research. While Jentsch connects feelings of the uncanny with lack of orientation, Freud says the uncanny "belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread." (Freud 123) Freud goes on to say: "It is equally beyond doubt that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, and so it commonly merges with what arouses fear in general." (Freud 123) Being uncertain about one's surroundings can certainly cause fear, but where Jentsch is more concerned about disorientation, Freud stresses the aspect of fear. Along with one's surroundings, being uncertain about anything can be fearful. It is characteristically human to want to figure things out and have an answer and a place for everything. As we search for answers, there is definitely a place for fear of the unknown.

Both Jentsch and Freud speak of the German word "unheimlich" as being closely related to the evolution of the word uncanny. While "heimlich" is 'belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, dear and intimate, homely, etc.' then unheimlich would be the opposite. Freud describes the uncanny as "that species of the frightening

that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.” (Freud 124) In Freud’s research, what were once heimlich surroundings had been repressed only to reappear in a frightening manner. The passing of time would be the catalyst for repression of what were once familiar surroundings. There are even more opportunities for this type of uncanny experience to occur in the present day. With our visual culture, computers, movies and television are constantly in our line of sight. Many of these visuals, such as a particularly powerful movie scene, stay with us only to lessen as time goes on. While real life experience holds the most strength in repression and reemergence as the uncanny, other types of visual material have the ability to resurface given the opportunity.

The grotesque and the uncanny have a close relation. Both concepts delve heavily into unknown territory, leaving the imagination of the subject to reach individual conclusions. These potential conclusions, or rationalizations, can only be met with access to memory and personal experience. This unknown territory is Harpham’s description of the grotesque as being “at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown.” (Harpham 3) Also for an experience to be uncanny, one must recognize the familiar elements through access to personal memory. While the unknown part of the uncanny directly relates to Jentsch’s lack of orientation, Freud pushes the idea further with repression of memory. There is a push-pull that happens with an uncanny incident. While one feels out of their element (disorientation), there is that strange familiarity (repression of memory) that brings one back. A related description is the seductive and repulsive mechanism that directly correlates with the grotesque.

With this installation, my intention is to access those sensations of the grotesque and the uncanny within the viewer. The narratives of “When More is More Becomes Too Much” contain the familiar and the unfamiliar, to each tell a story that falls in the margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown. The objects of everyday life bring a level of familiarity to the viewer, but they are composed and altered in such a way that is not customary. Taking these things out of their normal environment shifts the context immediately, and the interaction between reality and abstraction pushes the boundaries of the setting even further. Often we take for granted the predictability of our situations and choose to ignore what is out of our comfort zone. But a monotonous environment hinders growth and imagination while supporting stagnation. Examining a range of possibilities will access past experience and memory within the mind. Letting go of control and accepting the vulnerability of our existence will access those memories that are fully repressed.

To be mentally and emotionally vulnerable can also expose that side to our physicality. When the logical assessment tools of the brain fail, we resort to explanations based on the many sensations felt in the body. As Geoffrey Galt Harpham states, “the sense of the grotesque arises with the perception that something is illegitimately in something else.” (Harpham 11) Combining elements not typically found together causes a co-presence that can be imagined within the body, especially when some of the components relate to the human form. Inanimate objects become people with individual personalities when swelled into shapes reminiscent of human forms. Flexible latex skins cover or protrude out of normally tame household items. Combinations such as these

have potential to seduce the witness through texture and slight familiarity, but at the same time repulse with the thought of invasion in their own body.

In all of the narratives, the underlying humor is an important part. But along with this humor there is an element of fear and these two contradictory feelings lie on opposite sides of the spectrum. They both have the ability to heighten the awareness of the other through a push-pull experience similar to what is uncanny. While humor tends to relax the viewer, an inclination of fear causes tension. For example, to imagine a chair becoming human is ludicrous; to imagine oneself pulled in and transformed into a lifeless inanimate object is terrifying. This type of contradictory situation brings together understanding, disbelief and astonishment, and bounces the viewer back and forth between their surroundings seeming *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. While it is human nature to fear what has no explanation, it is also important to ask why those feelings occur.

In his essay on the grotesque, Robert Storr goes on to mention “one might reasonably conclude that the present era is somehow inherently grotesque. I will not dispute that, except to note that in Dickensian logic the best of times is always accompanied by the worst.” (Storr 12) Following the notion of Dickensian logic, all of the marvels and advancements of modern technology receive a direct counterpoint with the broadcast of fear and mass destruction. But this logic can also make its way into everyday life. We seek safety and comfort but yearn for exhilarating experiences to make us feel more alive. The grotesque and uncanny can lead the imagination to undiscovered territory, and potentially hold answers to questions unknown. Whether one is delving into unknown territory on a quest for answers or searching for meaning within

a grotesque narrative, the interpretation is subject to memory and personal experience.

We often exist between the margins of the known and the unknown but our understanding of this existence is purely individual.

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Image 1 – The Fairest One of All



Image 2 – The Fairest One of All (detail)



Image 3 – The Fairest One of All (installation detail)



Image 4 – Take Matters Into Your Own Hands



Image 5 – Take Matters Into Your Own Hands (detail)



Image 6 – Take Matters Into Your Own Hands (detail)



Image 7 – Take Matters Into Your Own Hands (detail)



Image 8 – Take Matters Into Your Own Hands (installation detail)



Image 9 – Transform Me Into What You Like



Image 10 – Transform Me Into What You Like (detail)



Image 11 – Transform Me Into What You Like (detail)



Image 12 – Transform Me Into What You Like (detail)



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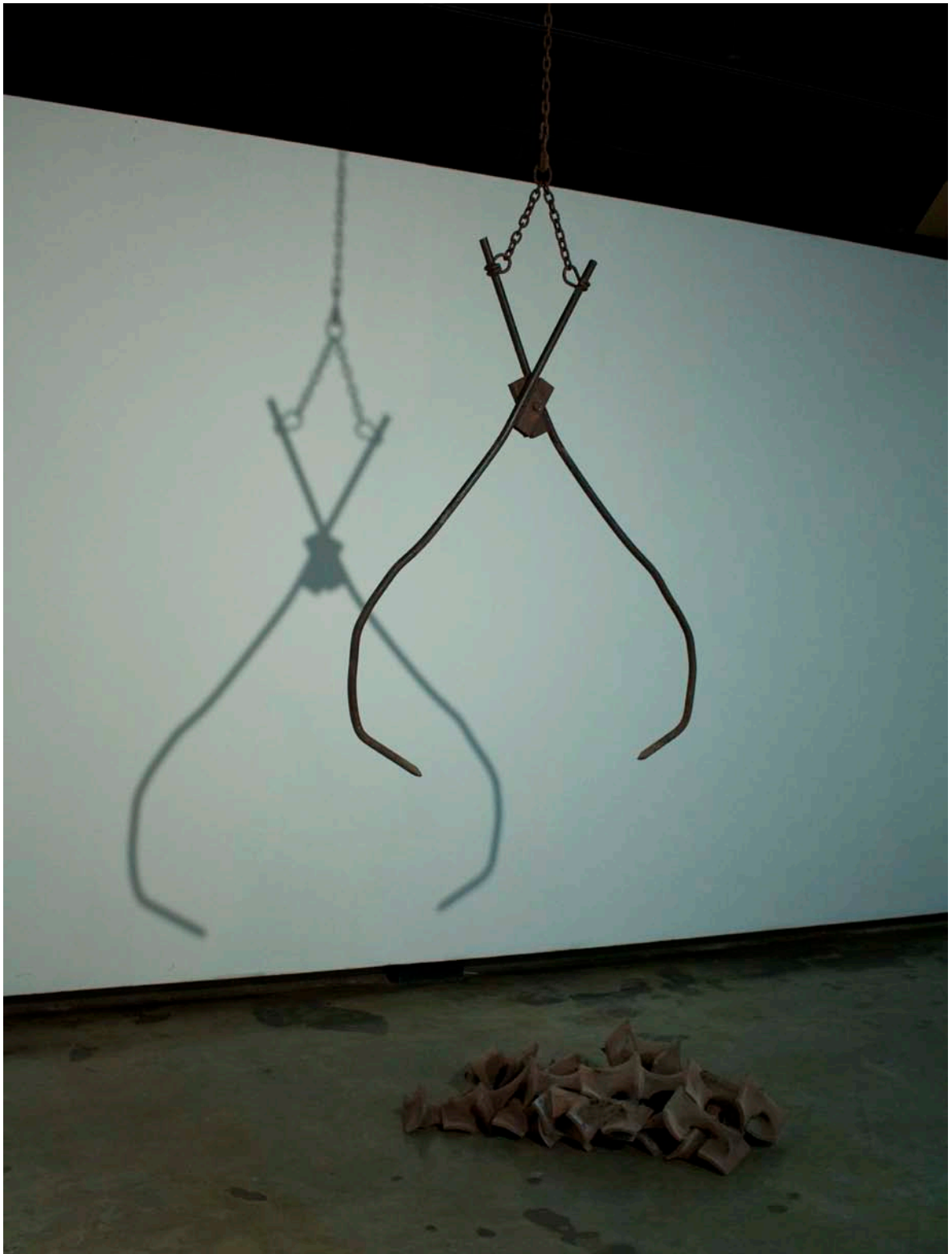


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Image 28 – Turned On and No One’s Home (detail)



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