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Classically Formal, Biotic Subjectivity: Moderating Plastic's Relation to the Viewer

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CLASSICALLY FORMAL, BIOTIC SUBJECTIVITY: MODERATING PLASTIC'S RELATION TO THE VIEWER

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CLASSICALLY FORMAL, BIOTIC SUBJECTIVITY: MODERATING PLASTIC'S RELATION TO THE VIEWER

Introduction

Due to its cheap, pervasive, and disposable nature, post-consumer plastic has no subjectivity in its relation to the consumer. My thesis project examines the material's inherent destructive narrative and question its ability to have extrinsic value beyond the assumptions of trash. In my research, I found that humans instinctually seek to conserve and treat biotic material with care. This fact has become a catalyst for the works in this project, which aim to not only increase the material's value through animate biomorphic transformation, but also counter our disposable tendencies.

At the onset of this project, I was fixated solely on the physical potential of plastic, but in researching cultural narratives, I became more aware of the social significance that post-disposal plastic material holds. Artistic works by Mark Bradford and El Anatsui helped me understand the potential for re-inscribing new meaning into materials that have had a prior existence, and the art of Lynda Benglis and Tim Hawkinson inspired my technical application. From there, I applied the aesthetics of biomorphism, which resulted in a culminating piece that utilizes melted and deformed bubble wrap to evoke reptilian skin or a micro-biotic cell community.

Theoretical Framework

Material Narratives: Refuse and Plastic

Materials gather meaning through the typical context of their use in society. The usage of the material, and the ways that members of society are likely to interact with it, create a common evaluation of the material. Artist, Ilya Kabakov refers to this common evaluation as the

material's "narrative."[1] According to Petra Lange-Berndt, to understand a material the artist must "follow the material."[2] She further explains that this investigation is, "not linear, not clearly divisible," and that the artists can expect to encounter, "entangled, anachronistic layers, incorporating references that point beyond canonical art-historical boundaries."[3] Understanding a material's narrative requires investigation into the totality of the possible conceptions of the medium.

The materials of my thesis works are specifically post-disposal. Many artists and critics have investigated how this material narrative functions in artwork. Kabakov, whose practice relies heavily on scavenged material, described an automatic recognition viewers had in response to his work. This response revolved around a particularly strong narrative that the scavenged objects he employed were garbage.[4] This effect is also recognized by Gillian Whitley of Leeds University. She explains that, "attempts to define trash lead back to a fundamental link to systems of value which are time and place specific. There is no material which is intrinsically trash. Indeed, it is a social and culturally constructed concept…"[5] Whitley's statement aligns with Lange-Berndt's precept of following the material, and asserts that a "trash" material narrative should hold true for all socially similar viewers. The question is then, what can the artist do with a "trash" material? Georges Bataille, theorist of the 1930s, presented a concept of base materials, those which have been left to deteriorate.[6] According to Bataille, these materials

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[1] Ilya Kabakov, *Materiality: Documents of Contemporary Art,* "On Garbage: In Conversation with Boris Groys," London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015, 112.
[2] Petra Lange-Berndt, ed. *Materiality*: *Documents of Contemporary Art*, "Introduction," London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015.
[3] Lange-Berndt, ed. *Materiality…,* "Introduction," 16
[4] Kabakov, *Materiality…,* "On Garbage…," 112.
[5] Gillian Whitley, *Materiality: Documents of Contemporary Art,* "Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash," London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015, 109.
[6] Lange-Berndt, ed. *Materiality…,* "Introduction," 19

operated with a 'stickiness' that destroys the barrier between subject and object.[7] In combination these observations illustrate that "trash" is a narrative recognizable to the viewer and that artists can use "trash" materials to destabilize the subjectivity of the viewer.

Unlike the narrative of trash, which has been explored, there has not been comprehensive investigation into the narratives that plastic holds. Therefore, it is crucial that I uncover how plastic is socially interpreted. Plastic's narratives have developed over time and there are three particular periods where plastics reception and evaluation have significant development. The first period of valuation begins before plastics become tied to consumption or disposal. During this period, plastic's physical properties and life span were just being tested. Theorist, Roland Barthes best explains the ethos of this period. He described plastic as a "magical material"[8] because it was capable of becoming a multitude of objects. He felt that plastic produced a, "reverie of man at the sight of the proliferation of matter," because of the difference, "between the singular origins and the plural effects."[9] Plastic seemed to be able to become infinite things, and captivated society with its potential. Barthes summed up plastic's first material narrative when he wrote, "the whole world can be plasticized, even life itself…"[10]

In the second period plastic became ubiquitous. Plastics were easier to manufacture and had a place in the home of the average consumer. Barthes recognized that this moment would arrive. He noted that with plastic, for the first time, a material was being developed as an imitation product, not of precious material objects, but of other common ones.[11] Architect,

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Roland Barthes, *Materiality: Documents of Contemporary Art,* "Plastic," London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015, 173-174.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.

Anthony Walker best summed up this moment is his assertion, that plastic products had "ubiquitous ordinariness" and the material's power was its, "chameleon like ability to assume the appearance of surroundings."[12] This is reiterated in the more recent writing of Dietmar Rubel who typifies the moment as approaching a "plastification of the world in general"[13] Rubel also explains how this mentality leads into the current period of valuation. He explains that the proliferation of plastic objects created a sense that, "materiality is intended for consumption, for being used up…"[14] Plastic shifted from a magic material, to a ubiquitous one, and it will finally become marked as disposable and dangerous.

This last period continues through the present day. The narrative of disposable and dangerous solidified in the 1980s and 90s when public opinion of cheap consumer plastics shifted from neutral to wary.[15] In this era, scientific understanding of the dangers of plastic is ever increasing and consumers react to plastic in light of these dangers. Recent research conducted by Tom Fisher interrogates how this fear manifests in consumers' reactions to plastic objects. He found that consumers see plastics as possessing a "dubious nature" which manifests as a fear that plastics may, "pollute with invisible chemical components and absorb disorderly matter."[16] Consumers cannot empirically evaluate the safety of plastic, so any sign of

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[12] Anthony Walker, "Plastics: The Building Blocks of the Twentieth Century," *Construction History* 10, (1994): 82, http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/864046744?accountid=10141.
[13] Dietmar Rübel, *Materiality: Documents of Contemporary Art,* "Plasticity: An Art History of the Mutable," London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015, 96.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Eileen Boris, "American Plastic: A Cultural History," *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 2 (04, 1997): 562, http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/199906889?accountid=10141.
[16] Tom Fisher, "What We Touch Touches Us: Materials, Affects, and Affordances," *Design Issues* 20 no. 4 (Fall 2004): 30, http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=d4a09d08-4f65-4f00-b383-

imperfection becomes evidence of danger.[17] Fisher asserts that, "an obvious consequence of a negative reaction to plastic objects… as potentially contaminating is that they are reclassified as waste."[18] In this period plastic takes on a narrative of danger and in turn this links the material to the previously discussed "trash" narrative.

In this current period, the consumer has particularly come to see plastics as dangerous post-disposal. A key material property produces this evaluation. Plastics do not decompose. They instead experience biodegradation, "the transition of plastic from solid pieces into tiny particles, rather than the complete breakdown of the individual molecules."[19] The public also recognizes that plastic objects compose the majority of the floating and particulate ocean pollution.[20] Plastic's narrative of danger depends on a co-occurring understanding of the material as trash. The physical properties of plastic only become a threat to the environment as the material proliferates as refuse. Because plastic does not molecularly decompose but only breaks into smaller pieces, it has incredible ability to spread across vast areas after it is disposed.[21] Due to its material qualities plastic can dissemble into particulate without losing its defining physical nature. Society identifies that plastics have a dangerous power to invade, which begins with their

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0c7afdfc6db0%40sessionmgr104&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=505113964&db=aft.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Justin Leous and Neal Parry, "Who is Responsible for Marine Debris? The International Politics of Cleaning our Oceans," *Journal of International Affairs* 59, no. 1 (Fall, 2005): 261, http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/220715584?accountid=10141.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Heather Davis, "Imperceptibility and Accumulation: Political Strategies of Plastic," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 31, no. 92 (2016): 190, http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=18881d1f-35c6-431a-8aeb-841aab7f0431%40pdc-v-sessmgr02&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=118116543&db=aft.

disposal. My thesis project forces a re-narration of plastic which maintains understanding of the material's danger, but complicates its disposability through both manipulating the material to approach biotic form and employing it to create classically formal artwork.

Biomorphism

Geoffrey Grigson coined the term biomorphic in 1935. He was an English poet, who wanted to distinguish organic abstraction from geometric abstraction.[22,23] Biomorphism quickly became a formal inclination in art, and it can be most simply explained as, "abstraction based on nature."[24] As opposed to the geometric forms, which had previously dominated abstraction, biomorphic forms were, "guided by emotion and intuition and leaned towards flowing, curved silhouettes."[25] Artists' fascination with biomorphism was not simply one of formal reproduction. The "emotion" and "intuition" in creating biomorphic works led to an expansion of possible artistic practice. Biomorphism prioritized the changeability inherent to the natural world.[26] Artists felt encouraged to model their production after growth and decay and produce new life-like forms. In the words of sculptor Hans Arp, early biomorphic artists did, "not want to reproduce," they wanted, "to produce directly and not through interpretation."[27]

More recent developments in biomorphism center on the effect that life-like forms and ideas have on the viewer. Early biomorphic artists, like Arp, were focusing on exploring "the

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[22] Cynthia Messenger, "Their Small-Toothed Interlock: Biomorphism and Mystical Quest in the Art of P.K. Page and John Vanderpant," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2004): 76-96, doi:10.3138/jcs.38.1.76.
[23] Jean Arp et al, *Biomorph! Hans Arp in a Dialogue with Current Positions in Art* (Köln: Snoeck, 2011), 12.
[24] Messenger, "Their Small-Toothed Interlock..."
[25] Jean Arp et al, *Biomorph!...,* 12.
[26] Jean Arp et al, *Biomorph!...,* 13.
[27] Hans Arp, "Konkrete Kunst", in: *Unsern täglichen Traum,* op. cit., S. 79. quoted in Jean Arp et al, *Biomorph!...,* 18.

natural laws, the inner vigor of vegetation," and, "the cycles of growth and decay."[28] Artists today are focused on how biomorphism can be used as a tool to achieve specific communication with the viewer. Steven Luecking of DePaul University explains that, "though biologic notions may influence, directly or indirectly, the processes of [artists'] construction or their pursuit of form, their élan vital dwells in… aesthetic, symbolic, and personal goals."[29] Artists today most notably use biomorphism to forge connection to the viewer and to build interplay between technology and nature.

Often, biomorphic art operates through the automatic intimate connection that viewers have with biotic forms. Biotic forms evoke life, which makes them immediately more sympathetic and gives them a subject relation to the viewer. Researchers at Sabanci University of Istanbul have recently completed a project designed to push, "the boundary between structure and creature, material and flesh, breathing and life," with the intention of confronting, "what it is to be human and how we feel or recognize our surroundings."[30] Art critic, Marina Vaizey identifies a similar strategy in Peter Chang's jewelry works. She explains that by, "invoking both art and natural history," Chang's goal is to, "create something that never was, and to persuade us to recognize something we have never seen."[31] Employing biotic forms convinces the viewer that

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[28] Jean Arp et al, *Biomorph!...,* 21.
[29] Steven Luecking, "Biomorphs: Organic Abstraction and the Mechanics of Life," *Scultpure* 19, 1 (2000): 38-43, http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=1&sid=9f26834c-4c72-4f5d-a84e-955f29b03982%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl
[30] Ece Polen Budak et al, "The Breathing Wall (Brall)—Triggering Life (in) Animate Surfaces," *Leonardo* 49, 2 (2016): 162-163, http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=857606fc-f040-4a31-a131-028c419ac91c%40pdc-v-sessmgr03
[31] Marina Vaizey, "Beyond Nature," *Crafts* 207 (2007): 48-53, http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=fd0f2d71-2d72-4110-8b7f-ffc002f88889%40sessionmgr4010

they are more familiar with and connected to an artwork that they have otherwise never interacted with.

Biomorphic forms are also utilized as a foil to geometric ones to produce a play between technology and nature. In the last two decades the rate of experimentation and development in the field of biological sciences has overtaken the rate of that in the physical sciences.[32] Artists have taken note and interest in technological interaction with nature has been on the rise.[33] Artists have turned to biomorphic forms to comment on the relationship between nature and technology in this new era. Writing on modernist architecture, Francesco Manacorda theorizes that, "endless biomorphic forms work together with technologically advanced approaches to impersonate a conflict…"[34] He describes the conceptual result of the use of biotic and technologic forms as a, "path from the artificial to the primordial."[35] In this case, biomorphism is serving as a tool to transport the viewer from one experience to another. Biomorphism is an instrument in manipulating notions of the world. In an article on Susan Beiner, art historian Glen Brown describes the artist's installation pieces as a coexistence of, "the anonymity of nature and the impersonal character of technology."[36] This coexistence produced a new "synthetic reality."[37]

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[32] Leucking, "Biomorphs: Organic Abstraction…"
[33] Ibid.
[34] Francesco Manacorda, "The Dark Side of Modernism: Architecture, Science Fiction, and the Organic," *Flash Art International* 37 (2004): 91, http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=fa99d082-5239-49d9-97ad-4c1382f2d619%40sdc-v-sessmgr04
[35]Manacorda, "The Dark Side…" 92
[36] Glen Brown, "Susan Beiner's Synthetic Reality Biotechnology, Nature and Creativity," *Ceramics, Art and Perception* 78 (2009): 23-27, https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/artshumanities/docview/211570513/fulltextPDF/4051F1E4DE9D4F6CPQ/1?accountid=10141.
[37] Ibid.

This, again demonstrates the potential of biomorphism to communicate with the viewer as it impersonates a conflict of nature and technology.

Artists Interpretations

I incorporated material narratives and biomorphism into my thesis project, but I did not do so without guidance. I looked through the work and practice of many artists for instruction. The work of Mark Bradford and El Anatsui best helped me understand how artists can leverage and complicate the exiting narratives of materials. They both work similarly, repurposing pre-existing material, which is the same method I employed for this project. For guidance in using biomorphism as a tool, the disparate work of Lynda Benglis and Tim Hawkinson helped me conceptualize how to create life-like forms that fall between aggressive animation and corpse like deadness.

Material Narratives: Mark Bradford and El Anatsui

"Fluidity, juxtapositions… they've all been going on for centuries. The only authenticity there is what I put together." —Mark Bradford[38]

IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT

Fig. 1 Mark Bradford *James Brown is Dead* (2007) mixed media paper collage

Mark Bradford's practice is uniquely built on pulling materials directly from the location where he is creating work. He is most known for his collaged wall pieces, where he builds up a surface of found paper media materials (Fig 1).[39] He then attacks the

[38]Mark Bradford, "Politics, Process, and Postmodernism," Interview, Art21, PBS, November 2011, https://art21.org/read/mark-bradford-politics-process-and-postmodernism/.
[39] Mark Bradford, "Mark Bradford," Interview by Barry Jenkins, Interview Magazine, June 12, 2017, https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/mark-bradford.

built up surface with various methods of weathering to uncover hidden layers and play with levels of legibility.[40] Bradford conducts further manipulation by outlining words underneath the collage which become legible only through sanding down. In this way he creates a confluence of textual content. For example, in the detail image of *James Brown is Dead* the "a" and the "d" come from an outline below, while the much smaller "t" and "s" come from the scavenged material (Fig 2). In his Los Angles based works, Bradford begins with both posters advertising fast cash and transition housing which evidence the neighborhoods' lack of proper government support and also posters advertising salons and barber shops which indicate local commercial success[41]. Bradford chooses to what extent he wants to incorporate this specific content in each work to best support his desired concept. Bradford takes existing material from an active purpose and uses both its general and very specific content to create new meaning.

IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT

Fig. 2 Mark Bradford *James Brown is Dead* (Detail) (2007) mixed media paper collage

El Anatsui works in a somewhat similar method. However, his materials are all post-disposal and sourced from manufacturers. His most recognizable pieces are constructed from bottle caps which are linked together to produce a flat plane (Fig 3). The resulting surface is then hung and gathered in a manner which evokes tapestry. Anatsui works very formally with his materials. In *Depletion* he has created intermingling sections of differing color by varying the brand of bottle cap and the face that is oriented to the viewer (Fig 3). Anatsui also works with other post-disposal materials, including broken pottery and reclaimed wood, in similar ways. Anatsui takes post-disposal

IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT

Fig. 3 El Anatsui, *Depletion* (2009) aluminum and copper wire

[40] Ibid.
[41] Bradford, "Politics, Process…"

materials and uses them in a very formally aesthetic manner to create a new, beautiful life for the material.

Materials gather meaning through their overall context. Bradford's work, in particular, exemplifies this. Bradford explains that he was looking to make abstraction which, "looked out at the social and political landscape."[42] He achieved this by employing materials with intrinsic contextual meaning, and quite literally, many of his materials bring their own text to Bradford's pieces. By amassing media, Bradford interrupts the material's otherwise singular purpose and message. He is fascinated by the power of juxtaposition this allows. Bradford states, "It was revolutionary for me that you could put things together based on your desire for them to be together… they're together because you say so."[43] Because the media material has very particular encoded meaning, Bradford has a lot of power in the way he brings the material together.

El Anatsui also focuses on bringing material together, although unlike Bradford, he is not interested in juxtaposition. Anatsui is more invested in bringing the material's prior specific experience, as an individual thing, into the work. Critic, Laura James describes this as an approach focused on the material's prior, "connection to the human hand," and notes that this can, "carry the deposits of the object's user," which allows Anatsui to, "explore unseen human connections."[44] Unlike Bradford's media materials which belonged generally to the society that they were posted within, Anatsui's materials belonged to and were handled by individuals.

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Laura James, "Convergence: History, Materials, and the Human Hand—An Interview with El Anatsui," *Art Journal* 67 no. 2 (2008): 37, http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=34bef979-2d08-405a-b0e1-dc88b96fb23b%40sessionmgr4009.

Bringing all of these objects together forms a material narrative of personal use and value. The viewer can assume intimate stories behind each bottle cap or broken pot, but because the material has been amassed what is created is a broad sense of human interaction. Anatsui describes creating, "the non-fixed form, the versatile form, the form that is shaped and reshaped from the same data…"[45] Unlike Bradford who has to very consciously handle the media material, so that it shares only the relevant specific detail, Anatsui can depend on his material's narratives of individual use, no matter how he works with their forms.

Because the media Bradford uses is all pulled out of an individual location it holds a narrative of the incredible proliferation and the relative inconsequence of any one single advertisement. This is very similar to the narratives around the post-disposal materials that I am employing in my work. Each thing is inconsequential, but their presence together points to proliferation, which in the case of plastic invokes the narrative of danger. Bradford does some of the same re-narration that I am striving to achieve in my work. He re-contextualizes his materials through the introduction of his own message, like "JAMES BROWN IS DEAD" (Fig 1). He takes the content that the material already has, language, and replaces it to serve his purposes. El Anatsui is also working with material narratives, but he is not trying to so completely replace existing content in the same way that Bradford does.

Anatsui is much more invested in maintaining physical evidence of the original narrative of his materials. Across his practice, his materials share a common narrative that he seeks out. He explains, "They all have something to do with the nurturing nature of food—the trays, the

[45] Brendon Bell-Roberts, "In Conversation with El Anatsui," *ARTsouthAfrica* 13 no. 3 (2015), http://artafricamagazine.org/the-innovation-issue-13-3-a-journey-of-materiality-and-art-practice-in-conversation-with-el-anatsui/.

pots, the mortars, and the bottle caps."[46] He does not try to distort or rewrite this narrative of sustenance. For example, in *Depletion,* manipulation of the bottle caps does not obfuscate their original identity (Fig 3). In my work I am more aligned with El Anatsui's strategy. I seek to maintain a significant amount of my material's existing visual identity. However, I am combining my material more completely, like Bradford's approach, where individual units become unclear and the material loses any sense of being connected to a specific, single individual.

The work of Bradford and Anatsui helped me determine the effect of maintaining and destroying certain aspects of my material's prior form. Their pieces also serve as a guide in how to recombine altered material in a manner that actually resonates with the viewer. Something that I struggled with in my early pieces was how to incorporate a mass amount of material into a work without producing something visually messy and inadvertently unpleasant. I first ran across the solution in an essay by Marty Carlock which looked at the found object based works of Sarah Sze. Carlock uses the term "classical formality" to refer to how Sze creates visual organization out of, "incoherence and ostensible disorder."[47] Bradford and Anatsui's works utilize a very similar overall "classical formality," to visually control materials. Both artists make their scavenged material approach the visual sensibility of an established field of art, which gives their materials a new elevated value. Bradford's combined media pieces evoke paintings. They are wall mounted, the overall shape is rectangular, and the colors exist in small inexact pieces almost like the mark of brush strokes (Fig 1, 2). Anatsui's works are nearly tapestries. They hang from

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Marty Carlock, "Sarah Sze's Organized Chaos," *Sculpture* 22 no. 9 (November 2003): 24-29, http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=9fa6d70b-f9d1-4e82-8ec7-c9457a0e8608%40pdc-v-sessmgr01.

the wall, cascading and folding like fabric. The patches of color are defined by the shape of the bottle cap unit, the same effect as when weaving (Fig 3). Not only does "classical formality" help make the materials visually approachable, it also achieves some of the re-narration in the pieces.

When scavenged materials are elevated to the level of fine art they are given new value. Laura James explains how this effect functions in Anatsui's work. She writes, "when you look at the bottle cap works these are transformed. Because they are so beautiful, because they are so elegant and eye catching, it makes them conspicuous objects in themselves."[48] Bradford's scavenged media and Anatsui's sourced refuse are worthless, but because they are made into something classically artistic they gain value. I sought to achieve this effect in my work as another way to disrupt the narrative of disposability that plastic typically holds. By approaching classical formality in my final piece, my worthless bubble wrap material was elevated in value. The other strategy I employed to revalue my material was creating biotic form. The practice of Lynda Benglis and Tim Hawkinson was instructional for my understanding of how to do so.

Biomorphism: Lynda Benglis and Tim Hawkinson

"…I was thinking materials could flow—that they're alive."—Lynda Benglis[49]

Lynda Benglis became interested in plastics when she discovered their strength in masquerading as other materials.[50] Benglis made a series of works around 1970 which explored poured form in latex and polyurethane.[51] In these works she used plastic to achieve oozing

[48] James, "Convergence: History, Materials…," 42.
[49] Lynda Benglis, "Lynda Benglis," Interview by John Baldessari, *Interview Magazine,* March 22, 2015, https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/lynda-benglis.
[50] Anna Chave, "*Lynda Benglis : Everything Flows (1980 - 2013)*," Philadelphia, PA (US): Locks Gallery, 2013.
[51] Ibid.

forms. Critic, Anna Chave asserts that these works "threaten entrapment," meaning they evoke the disorderly, fluid feminine which challenges the existing social order of the viewer.[52] Benglis gives plastics an aggressive animation. Her plastic works are not directly representative of animate form, but they reference the fluid production of the disorderly animate.

IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT

Fig. 4 Lynda Benglis *Contraband* (1969) latex

Benglis uses strategies to give the plastic a dangerous activity. In her works the plastics are opaque, and irregular. They lack the controlled form that is typical of manufactured plastic goods, which is destabilizing for the viewer. For example in *Contraband* (Fig 4), the irregularity of the edges of the pour and the uneven mix of color produce an effect reminiscent of evacuated biotic fluid and a feeling of uncontrollable action. This is reminiscent of Bataille's concept of the "stickiness" of base materials. He found that base materials destroyed the barrier between subject and object, destabilizing the subject.[53] Benglis wants these works to be aggressive in this way, so the form of the plastic is fluid, irregular, and imperfect.

IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT

Fig. 5 Lynda Benglis *Phantom* (1971) polyurethane foam with phosphorescent pigments

This is achieved in another way in *Phantom* (Fig. 5) which relies less on the power of implying the danger of body effluvia and more on the idea of an animate toxic plastic. *Phantom* flows similarly to *Contraband* in a three dimensional manner, producing the same kind of active biotic form. However, the flows are uniform in color, so they appear more manufactured. What disrupts the inanimate nature of this synthetic effect is the glow the forms produce. Their color literally leaches out into the space

[52] Anna Chave, "*Lynda Benglis…,"* 17.
[53] Lange-Berndt, ed. *Materiality…,* "Introduction."

around them. This builds off Tom Fisher's theory that plastic is dubious when it is seen as contaminating.[54] In this piece Benglis' treatment of the plastic presents it as less biotic, but she pushes its material quality to achieve the same kind of active aggression towards the viewer.

My work has been informed by evaluating the effects of the different formal choices that Benglis made. In her works the material very effectively pressures the viewer into relating to it as a dangerous animate being. This is achieved through the fluid movement of the forms, and the way the works contaminate the gallery space. The function of my work is not to engender fear, so I have not repeated these formal choices to the extent that Benglis does. However, I do seek to destabilize the viewer's relation to my materials, so I have incorporated similar flowing forms. The implication of toxicity that Benglis uses is far too hostile for what I am trying to achieve. However, the overall use of irregularity and imperfection, to convey a biotic origin is something that I have strived to channel into this project. Benglis' practice informed me how to achieve active animation, but I needed guidance about making animate forms approachable.

In comparison to Benglis, Tim Hawkinson's work is much more about the agency of the viewer. His abstract biotic forms are disjointed and inanimate. They relate to the viewer, but they do not have the ability for action themselves. The forms are suspended, trapped in the air. They are inviting because they are non-threatening. In dealing with the plastic material Hawkinson works to remove all connotations of physical threat or contagion. He describes using transparent materials because he likes, "to be able to see what's going on and keep everything light and visible."[55] He uses plastic for the trustworthiness of its synthetic cleanliness and manufactured

[54] Tom Fisher, "What We Touch…"
[55] Hawkinson, Tim, "Überorgan," Interview, Art21, PBS, November 2011, 5, https://art21.org/read/tim-hawkinson-uberorgan/.

exactness. His works very obviously resemble biotic forms, but the plastic material makes the forms less alive.

In *Drip* (Fig 6), Hawkinson created a very clear cephalopod form. However, it lacks animation. The piece hangs heavily and its positioning is completely produced by the tension of the figure against its hanging apparatus. There is no sense that the figure could act. Its interaction with the viewer is very contained. Hawkinson wanted this piece to produce a sound sequence that, "felt almost danceable".[56] This sound sequence might animate the figure, however the installation of *Drip* includes massive technical control pieces, which the central figure is clearly connected to. The aquatic animal form is decoration for the obvious technologic action. So what is Hawkinson doing, if his biomorphic forms are not intended to evoke action?

IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT

Fig. 6 Tim Hawkinson *Drip* (2002) polyethylene, mechanical components, and water (photo Larry Qualls 2005)

Hawkinson's pieces work in a manner similar to something that Marina Vaizey identifies in the work of Peter Chang. Vaizey explains the biotic form was meant to, "persuade us to recognize something we have never seen."[57] In Hawkinson's work the biotic resemblance eases the viewer into the piece. The vast and complex technical mechanics of his works, which are hard to understand, can fall back behind familiar, controlled biotic forms. This is complicated, but maintained, in *Überorgan* (Fig 7) where the

IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT

Fig. 7 Tim Hawkinson *Uberorgan* (2000) polyethylene balloons, nylon, cardboard tubing, mechanical components, and air (photo Larry Qualls)

[56] George Howell, "As You Spend Time with It: A Conversation with Tim Hawkinson," *Conversations on Sculpture* 23 no. 3 (2007): 53, http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=86fbde67-1ed0-47e8-bfe3-c611b498e321%40pdc-v-sessmgr05.
[57] Vaizey, "Beyond Nature."

biotic forms do have a sense of life to them. They have action because of the air flow through them, which gives them a breath like movement. Hawkinson argues the piece resembles an "extrapolated digestive track" in one installation and lungs in another.[58] In this piece the biotic still remains unable to act because it is so completely trussed up. The flexing plastic forms are constrained tightly inside fishing net, which is then rigged to hold them in stasis. The piece is familiar to the viewer because it echoes the human body. Any of the discomfort of encountering the inside without, on a grand scale, is reduced through complete physical control of the material.

In my project it was critical that the biotic forms did have animation, but not to the extent that they seemed actively dangerous. I wanted the plastic in my works to have some of the approachability of that in Hawkinson's. The totally sterile effect of his use of clear unblemished plastic was too devoid of biotic imperfection for my work. However, I have adopted a level of translucence, which Hawkinson exploits to create a trust in the material. Hawkinson's work also helped me conceptualize what kind of physical movement would create an unaggressive activity. I liked how he used air to create a kind of autonomic movement, but I wanted to avoid the restraints that demobilize his pieces. My final piece implemented the activation via air that *Überorgan* depends on, but to a much lower level. The piece hung suspended several inches off the wall so that the approach of the viewer caused soft shifting in space.

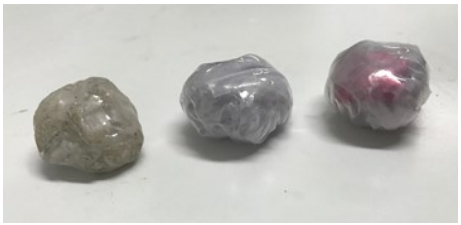
[58] Howell, "As You Spend…," 51.

Thesis Project Design

(Fig. 8) Tirza Ochrach-Konradi, Sheet Tests (2018) scavenged plastic.

The guidance in biotic form from Benglis and Hawkinson and the guidance in how to handle scavenged material from Bradford and Anatsui was instrumental in creating my culminating piece. However, there was a lot of experimentation before my work was in a place where their ideas could be applied. I began my project with a simple interest in plastic. It could take any form, be anywhere from opaque to translucent, and have both rigidity and flexibility. My first explorations were clashing conglomerates of various plastics welded together with little sense of overall form (Fig. 8). Through these tests I found that my best option for transforming form was to find plastics that I could mold at low heat. My best options for transforming color and opacity were surface treatment with paint and layering of the materials.

When I began this project I immediately started gathering scrap plastic from the environment around me, to have test material. This led to much of the conceptual content of the project. The scavenging process flipped the material's common narrative of disposability on its head. Because I set myself parameters that I would not buy plastic, but instead gather pre-existing materials, I experienced plastic as scarce and of high value. This gave the material a new significance for me, and I wanted to capture that in the work I created. I experimented to find what kind of form best reframed the material so that it lost its "disposable" narrative and gained a new one which elevated its status. Giving plastic materials the guise of coming from the

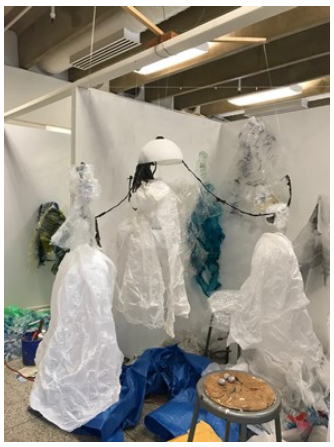


(Fig. 9) Tirza Ochrach-Konradi, Rock Tests (2018) scavenged compostable plastic.

natural world instantly realigned the viewer-material relationship. I explored different versions of pushing the scavenged plastic to look like natural forms. These included some faux rocks out of biodegradable solid plastic which would become flexible in heat (Fig. 9) and a collection of skin and wing like pieces which were configurations of flat plastics and heavy usage of paint.

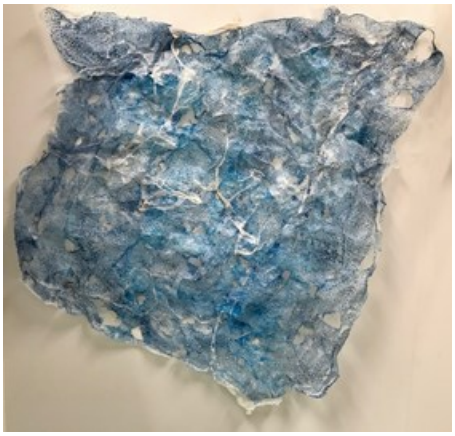
I found that the biotic forms were more compelling than the rocks. They gave the material the sense of being animate and having the ability to act in relation to the viewer. I again explored different options of how this could be achieved. Two attempts were more literal animal figures and one was a continuation of the skin like approach on a larger scale. The first animal creation (Fig 10) was far too hostile. It has the same dense color of Lynda Benglis' work and this makes the form seem dubious and dangerous. The second literal animal piece (Fig. 11) was much larger, multipart, and uncolored. I never completed it because it had an affable presence that was too far in the other direction. It was also suffering from too many obvious restraints, which works well in Hawkinson's pieces to convey the viewer's safety, but served to make this figure look tied up or dead in a conceptually unhelpful way. This piece also struggled because without the paint, the prior identity of the plastic was less transformed.

(Fig. 10) Tirza Ochrach-Konradi, Untitled (hanging form I) (2018) scavenged plastic.



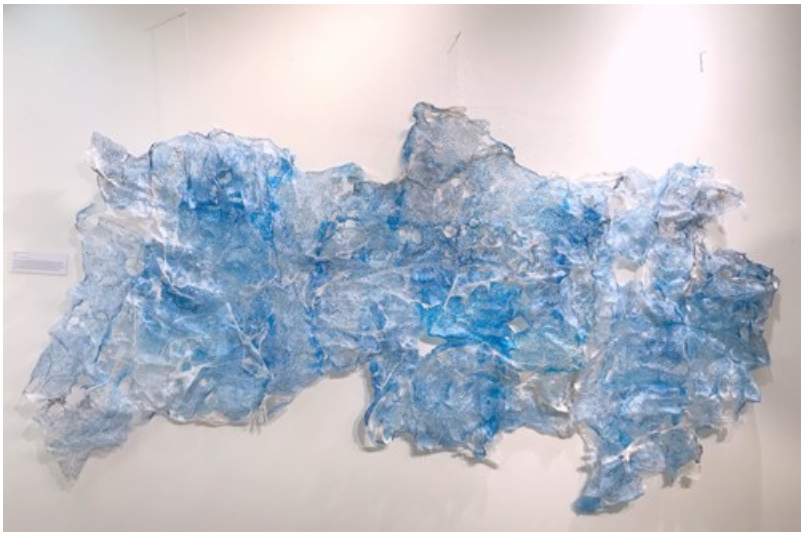
(Fig. 11) Tirza Ochrach-Konradi, Untitled (hanging form II) (2018) scavenged plastic, wire, wood, and fishing line armature.

What I found worked the best was the piece that resembled a reptilian skin or cell tessellation surface (Fig 7). The key success of this piece is that it looks like it has and will continue to proliferate and grow. It does not have set bounds and the viewer can imagine more of the same expanding out from the piece. This is when Bradford and Anatsui's influence became significant. This biomorphism allowed for a more classical handling of the material. This piece, compared to the others, has a more beautiful aesthetic and it rides the line between painting and tapestry.



(Fig. 12) Tirza Ochrach-Konradi, Plasticate Test (2018) Scavenged bubble wrap and garbage bags.

This piece also fit into the more specific thought process I was developing about the materials I had collected. I had plastic from a bunch of sources and had multitude of different kinds of objects. I realized I needed to find a specific angle to attack all this material to achieve a concise concept. The material narratives of plastic I researched guided my decision. I wanted to focus on plastic that most embodied the disposable narrative and was thus also the most dangerous. A sector of the plastic I collected was packaging products including bubble wrap, air pouches, vacuum seal film, and other plastic wraps for shipping. Unlike the many bottles, cups, rubber gloves, and other objects I collected the packaging materials have a concise narrative. The actual contact the plastics have with the



(Fig. 13) Tirza Ochrach-Konradi, *Plasticate I* (2018) Scavenged bubble wrap and garbage bags.

consumer is mere seconds, the time it takes to retrieve the packaged item. This one-time, short usage meant the material had very little time to build other narratives, and its primary association would be disposability. I also felt the re-presentation of these materials to the viewer was most relevant because the consumer typically spends so little time relating to this category of plastic.

I set out to complete a larger scale version of this work, with a few tweaks to better support the conceptual intent (Fig 13). I increased the prevalence of the white tendon like elements that crisscross the form. This activated more of a visually stretchy effect which increased the sense of potential movement, much like the precarious flows of Lynda Benglis' pieces, which threaten movement. I also moved the work off of the face of the wall and suspended it from line so that it had more movement, similar to the "breathing" in Hawkinson's *Überorgan*. Both of these changes were designed to push the visual content to imply the potential for proliferation. The proliferation of disposed plastic is the element that makes the material so dangerous. The proliferation in this piece is also connected to the growth of the animate. The plastic takes on an active role which encourages the viewer to reconsider their relation to the material.

My final piece for this thesis project, *Plasticate I,* transforms scavenged plastic into classically formal artwork, which elevates the material's value. The single use bubble wrap is returned to the viewer's consideration as an aesthetically beautiful art object. The once worthless material is now a valued commodity. The work further manipulates plastic's material narratives of disposability and danger by making the material look alive. The biotic form of the work brings life to the material and changes the viewer's relation to it. The newly animated material demands care and conservation. The plastic gains value and subjectivity in the eyes of the viewer, undermining its disposability and, in this instance, mitigating the associated danger.

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