

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

THE STRANGELY FAMILIAR DOMESTIC SPACE

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in Visual Arts

By

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To my mother and father, for raking the path

and

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## ABSTRACT

### THE STRANGELY FAMILIAR DOMESTIC SPACE

By

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Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

The intimacy of domestic spaces, the objects that people accumulate over time, and the memories associated with these spaces and objects inform my work. The home becomes a concept as well as a space that is invested with privacy, secrecy, and objects that carry layers of meaning hoarded through generations. I photograph domestic interiors through a conceptually dangerous, nostalgic lens, in order to capture remnants of memory. Long exposures allow me to capture provocative shadows, subtle lighting, and ghostly figures within the square frame. I react to specific sites and create installations that reconfigure domestic symbols; distorted furniture and large-scale photographs bring the complexity of the domestic experience into the gallery space. These objects, as well as the absurdity of applying hundreds of layers of paint and

spackle to furniture recall the emotional and labor-intensive process of home repair and the elements that comprise it.

## The Indelible Presence of Insignificant Moments

*“And thus, as a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit, the more bitterly did I perceive the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom.”*

*The Murders in the Rue Morgue, Edgar Allan Poe*

The research I have undertaken during the last three years as a graduate student began with photographs of homes in foreclosure. I photographed seventy-three houses using both digital and film cameras. From these I chose eight photographs that apprehend my conceptual inquiry.



Figures 1 and 2: *House Study #09, House Study #13*, silver gelatin prints, 5”x5”, 11/2010

After a semester of photographing these homes, I realized that I was not interested in the socioeconomic undertones or statistics of foreclosed homes, but I am drawn to the possible realities and fictions of their inhabitants. I tried to imagine the lives of the families who live in these homes, and in the process the homes became mirrors of my own suburban experience. This

led me to investigate my own relationship to the home and the intricacies and repressed nuances of family dynamics. The work was informed by my role as a daughter living in my childhood home. I photographed my mother and my family home as well as my father's attempts to repair it.



Figures 3, 4, 5, 6: from series *Sinking Irrevocably into the Quicksand of Forgetfulness*, chromogenic prints, 12"x12", 2012



My thesis project, *The Strangely Familiar Domestic Space*, addresses the domestic experience in general.

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This discussion follows with another about the writings that influence my work. But first I will address the idea of the symbolic and provide a related anecdote about a door. I will analyze the home and its psychological implications as depicted in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature and theory. Then I will discuss the meaning of objects and the meaningful relationships people have with objects. Lastly, I will describe how these ideas inform the work.

The presence of the symbolic concerns me. My academic experience has taught me that art is a process of deciphering symbols in the work; the ultimate goal seems to be the creation of a work that the audience can translate into language. What sets art apart from language is the actual object or performance that stands between the viewer and the words generated by the experience. Language involves the words themselves, while art delays the words. Thus, I think of

the visual art experience as deferment of meaning. I am interested in the choice an artist makes to create *something* as opposed to saying or writing about it. Talking about the work becomes a version of the work, separate from the work itself. My research stems from both theoretical and fictional writings; and, while writing about the work from a theoretical stance is an alternative process of experiencing the work, so is writing a fiction that gets closer to the work itself. I have weaved a fictional story into this paper that presents an alternative experience of the work that theory or a direct verbal or written description of the work cannot offer.

Each home possesses a level of detail that is specific to the psychological climate of its inhabitants. These details fascinate me because they accumulate over time and allude to the inhabitants' secrets. A door has different life paths depending on its owner, and a person's secrets might be revealed by the story of a door...

"I do not know what is true, or real, anymore. I feel as if my sanity is slowly slipping through the cracks. I have moments of awareness, but they are heavily contrasted by a foggy mind..." These are the opening words of a letter I received from a friend on a cold afternoon in the winter of 1972.

After completing high school, she had tried college in America for a semester, but found the environment difficult to navigate socially and academically. They say that as people become adults, they turn into their parents, sometimes a fortunate outcome, sometimes not, but complicated nonetheless. After a semester in school of failure and social awkwardness, she decided to find something more suitable to learn in a different country.

As she stepped off the airplane and set foot on foreign ground, she took a deep breath and inhaled the freedom that comes with leaving behind one's home. This escape might be experienced twice in a lifetime: once, when physically leaving the childhood home, and again,

when psychologically leaving. At that moment, my friend physically let go and became keenly aware of the new sounds, the native and foreign voices as well as the sound of the wind as she left the airport and got into a taxicab.

Standing in the middle of a field of açai palms, the hotel was small and cheap, but it had character. It had been built in 1851 by the innkeeper's great-grandfather, and as she walked up the creaky, wooden staircase, she felt the presence of the hundreds of hands that had touched the same handrail. She looked at the walls and the layers of paint that had accumulated over the last century. At the upstairs landing, the hallway was long and narrow, but she could hardly see the end of it because the lights were dim. Distracted by the distinct presence of the place, she only heard fragments of the innkeeper's soft, baritone voice, describing the history of the room she was assigned. The innkeeper's mother had recently passed away, and in her last days she was delirious with fever, had night terrors, and spoke of events that had occurred in the house and in that very room. Having taken note of one particular illness-induced outburst, the innkeeper told the following story as they made their way to the door of her room.

“My mother was a gentle and kind woman. She was born here and died here. She was the second oldest of eleven siblings raised by a strangely religious grandmother. The house has remained unchanged since the day it was built. The same cold, concrete floors, wooden walls, and clay tile roof have been keeping the rain and dust out for decades. As a child, she walked to school barefoot until the day her grandmother sewed a pair of shoes for her to wear. Her notebooks were made from found pieces of paper and sewn together. Her grandmother used to gather the siblings around the bed each night, where they kneeled and prayed before going to sleep. They made themselves comfortable in this room, while her husband, an aunt, and Mama Peta, their grandmother, slept in another. Her mother and father slept in a third room. In the

mornings, her oldest sister would wake them and cook breakfast, which usually consisted of fresh fruit from the tropical trees that lined the backyard, a piece of bread, sometimes milk, and other times fresh water from the cold ceramic pot kept in a hole dug into the dirt kitchen floor. My mother helped raise her sisters and brothers. Although her parents were physically present, her father was consumed by alcohol and her mother almost invisible, trapped in the dark tale of her own past and a fearful submission to an abusive husband.

Nonetheless, the days passed as happy days did for the children of her time, playing, running, and climbing trees. Her grandfather had left the house close to being finished before he fell ill with cholera, and my mother, aunts, and uncles set to finishing it. My mother and her older sister earned some money doing laundry and babysitting the neighborhood kids, while the older brothers delivered milk, or newspapers. With this money they bought concrete to seal the kitchen floor, and metal bars to replace the pieces of cloth that hung over the house's many windows.

Their bedroom became a sanctuary; it was their temple, their castle, a hiding place from the many possible outcomes that permeate the walls of a home dictated by the presence of perversions, alcoholism, and the inability of damaged individuals to cope with the demands of existence. They wanted their bedroom to have a marvelous entrance with a magnificent door, but the rooms in the house had no doors; makeshift portals cut into wooden partitions and covered with curtains provided some sense of privacy. One of the brothers set to sanding a 9' x 3' x 8" block of wood to create a frame and door. Using a handsaw, he cut a 7' x 2' rectangle from the interior of the block, leaving an eight-inch thick frame. This task took four years, eight months, and seven days of sanding to transform the block into an intricate, eight-inch thick frame of grooves and ridges that meticulously curved inward and out, as well as an equally intricate door

to fit. The years of sanding left the frame and door as smooth as pearl, and when the door was finished, he bolted a pair of centuries-old, palladium hinges (stolen from the grave of an affluent landowner) to the door and frame, and the frame to the wooden wall. The door was thicker than the walls, and standing at the end of the hallway, it had a dynamic and unusual presence.

One Sunday after mass, Mama Peta walked excitedly up the stairs, through the hallway, and to the door, carrying a handful of branches and reciting a series of prayers to protect the entryway from harm.

That bedroom had witnessed many unfortunate events throughout the years, but after the door was hung, nothing unfavorable made its way through the portal. Perhaps this was a coincidence, but as the physical and psychological balance of the house shattered, the door stood grand and secure. My mother and her siblings sheltered themselves from the dangers within the house by running through the door when misery struck. Once inside, the wooden walls turned to thirty-foot high, ten-inch thick, sound-resistant marshmallow borders from which they ate, and the floors became puffy, white clouds that hung high above the house. They played games of kings and queens, knights and princesses, pirates and dragons.

This continued until the day the door-maker was killed. He was only fourteen and a citizen of the destitute population of the country that entered a war to secure a falsely promised share of the nation's wealth. Shot by a gunman in the conflict, the door-maker's existence vanished from the house, and unfortunate events began to permeate the heavy, ridiculous door, like heavy rain through tissue paper.

Though my mother rarely spoke of him during the years our lives intersected, her final, lucid moments were filled with his name and presence. Seemingly feverish, she spoke of his presence in that room even after his death, and she talked to him as she slipped into her last

sleep. I was next to her in those last moments, and I cannot forget the lost and hopeless look in her eyes. To this day, I am haunted by the anxiety of an unanswered question: Was that look in her eyes inspired by endless fear or eternal joy?”

Her letter ended with the following words:

“I think I should probably leave this place, but I have a strange connection to this room; I know that if I repair the door to its original condition, the house will regain its proper balance.”

### **Agency of Thought**

Edgar Allen Poe’s *The House of Usher* embodies the idea of fiction as apprehending the experience itself. He writes, “The site was desolate; the walls were blank and almost literally ‘faceless,’ its windows ‘eye-like’ but without life – ‘vacant.’ It was, besides, a repository of centuries of memory and tradition, embodied in its walls and objects; the walls were marked by the ‘discoloration of ages’ and crumbling stones; the furnishings were dark, the rooms vaulted and gloomy; it was, in fact, already a museum...here preserved in memory of a family.”

The western understanding of environment begins with the bonds families create within the home. Beyond the carnal relationships people create, a fundamental relationship forms with the architecture of the environment. These spaces define individuals, and as people grow into adulthood and become self-sufficient, they go on to define their own spaces. The physical and psychological nuances in these places allude to a certain state of mind. Writing about German author and composer Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann, architectural historian Anthony Vidler states, “It was in no way accidental that Hoffmann’s almost systematic exploration of the relations between the homely and the unhomely, the familiar and the strange, extended to an equally subtle examination of the role of architecture in staging the sensation in acting as an

instrument of its narrative and spatial manifestations” (The Architectural Uncanny, Pg. 27). He goes on to describe Hoffman’s tale of “Councillor Krespel,”

“The story opens with an apparently incidental description of the building of a house; on the surface, indeed, as the narrator notes, this is no more than an illustration of one of the ‘craziest schemes’ of this councillor, himself, ‘one of the most eccentric men’ (K80). The house, described as having been the gift of a local lord in payment for legal service, was built at the bottom of the Councillor’s garden according to his own somewhat peculiar specifications. Having bought and assembled all the building materials, stacked and cut the stones, mixed the lime, and sifted the sand, the Councillor had proceeded to amaze the neighbors by refusing all architectural help, directly employing a master mason, journeymen, and apprentices on the work. What was more extraordinary, he had neither commissioned nor drawn up a plan for the house, but had simply excavated a perfectly square foundation for the four walls. These, following his instructions, were built up by the masons, without windows or doors, just as high as the Councillor indicated. Despite the evident madness of this procedure, the builders seemed happy enough, plentifully supplied with food and drink. One day Krespel shouted “Stop!” and the walls were complete (K80-81). Then the Councillor began a most strange activity, pacing up and down the garden, moving toward the house in every direction, until, by means of this complex triangulation, he ‘found’ the right place for the door and ordered a cut in the stone; similarly, walking into the house, he performed the same method to determine each window and partition, deciding, seemingly spontaneously, their position and size. The house was then finished. To celebrate his new home, Krespel invited the builders and their families, but no friends, to a feast at which he played the violin. The result of his maneuvers was a home ‘presenting a most unusual appearance from the outside — no two windows being alike and so on — but whose interior arrangement aroused a very special feeling of ease.’”

This description of Krespel’s home elucidates his character as a musician, lawyer, and violin-maker.

Not only do architectural spaces give insight into the mind of the inhabitants, but also the objects within them provide an understanding of people. In their book *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton state, “To understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things. What things are cherished, and why, should become part of our knowledge of human beings” (Pg. 42).

As I walk through a home and discover the overwhelming presence of the objects that live within its walls, I realize that these objects have become part of the architecture and stand-ins for the inhabitants; the objects have distinct personalities and dictate the psychological experience in the space. My reconfigurations of domestic objects stem from an interest in the object's transformation from inanimate to cognizant and overpowering. In *Art and Objecthood*, Michael Fried writes, "I am suggesting that, then, a kind of latent or hidden naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism, lies at the core of literalist theory and practice. The concept of presence all but says as much, though rarely so nakedly as in Tony Smith's statement, 'I didn't think of them (i.e. the sculptures he made) as sculptures but as presences of a sort'" (Pg. 52).

These presences dictate the experience of a place, and how one engages with a space is largely determined by the presence of these corporeal entities. In a home, as time passes, especially in a materialist society, these entities begin to dominate the space, further minimizing the human existence. In *People and Things*, Rochberg-Halton writes, "...the furnishings of one's home, all are expressions of one's self, even when they act as disguises rather than as reflections. But it is more difficult to admit that the things one uses are in fact part of one's self; not in any mystical or metaphorical sense but in cold, concrete actuality. My old living-room chair with its worn velvet fabric, musty smell, creaking springs, and warm support has often shaped signs in my awareness. These signs are part of what organizes my consciousness, and because my self is inseparable from the sign process that constitutes consciousness, that chair is as much a part of myself as anything can possibly be" (Pg. 24).

*Walking Table and Severed Photos* was an installation comprised of photographs cut with a band saw and a dinner table cut with a Sawsall. The photographs were scattered throughout the gallery while the table was simultaneously nailed back together and scattered. The table had been



used for family Christmas dinners for many years. After becoming trash, it found a new purpose and “walked” into the gallery space, where it stood with the seeming potential to rotate on its own.



Figure 7. *Walking Table and Severed Photos*, media and dimensions variable, 04/2012

The home and the objects contained within are a manifestation of self. Memory and the passing of time physically reveal themselves in the materials that define domesticity. Peoples’ lives are determined by these manifestations, and human existence, as well as an understanding of the experiential world, are defined by the very bones of the place called home.

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Appendix



*House Study #09, House Study #13*  
Silver Gelatin Prints  
5"x5", 11/2010





*From Series: Sinking Irrevocably into the Quicksand of Forgetfulness*  
Chromogenic Prints  
12"x12", 2012



*Walking Table and Severed Photos*  
Chromogenic Prints  
Dimensions Variable, 2012