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The Great Unlearning

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THE GREAT UNLEARNING

By

CATHERINE MCCRORY PEARS, Bachelor of Fine Art, Master of Art

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ART

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN UNIVERSITY

May 2023

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ABSTRACT

The Great Unlearning is a conceptual exploration: sifting through experiences and objects to overcome psychological pain, expectations of society, individual upbringing, and outside influences in an ongoing quest for authenticity. To both embrace personal history and honor loved ones while letting go of lingering negativity is challenging. Using objects culled from my life, examining the past, and incorporating items gathered along my path through nature, the work seeks personal healing while promoting the power of all people to break from indoctrination, group think, and mob mentality to make better choices to live a satisfying and peaceful existence...hopefully in a democratic free society.

PREFACE

In 2005, after a particularly painful divorce and sudden responsibility as head of household with two young daughters, I chose to return to school. My MA studies in painting from the University of Northwestern Louisiana primarily focused on escapism in nature creating large atmospheric landscapes while studying practices of underpainting. The work was informed by researching the effects of painting on a colored ground, both historically and in contemporary usage. While I am chiefly a painter, I have always built things, from forts in the woods near my neighborhood as a child, to theatre sets and Mardi Gras floats as a professional. After graduate school, I continued painting landscapes, public and private murals, as well as theater set design and construction.

From 2007 through 2009, I was employed by Louisiana State University at Alexandria as an Instructor, Technical Director of Theater, and part time curator at the newly acquired art museum. In 2010, I took on leadership of the art museum, and my art practice suffered as I immersed myself in rebuilding the institution. During this time, while not making art, I collected many natural objects and family heirlooms (while losing grandparents) with the idea of later creating sculptures. Using assemblage and installation, I began this work in the fall of

2019 at Stephen F. Austin State University, commuting from my home in Alexandria, Louisiana, while continuing to work fulltime. My current practice emerges from the liminal tunnel between where I work for a living and where I study art for my own fulfillment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the graduate school and the School of Art for allowing me to pursue this degree on a part time basis. I am especially grateful to the professors who have worked with me, my committee: Dr. David A. Lewis, Dr. William Nieberding, CC Conn, and especially Eden Collins, who arrived at SFA the same week I did in the Fall of 2019. Additionally, it is important to recognize my fellow employees at the Alexandria Museum of Art (AMoA) whose dedication allowed me to take time off as necessary, the AMoA Board of Managers who have shifted meetings as dictated by my school schedule, and the support of my colleagues at Louisiana State University at Alexandria. Finally, this would not have been possible without the love and support of my life partner John Faulk.

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INTRODUCTION

The Great Unlearning is a conceptual exploration: sifting through experiences and objects to overcome psychological pain, expectations of society, individual upbringing, and outside influences in an ongoing quest for authenticity. To still embrace personal history and honor loved ones while letting go of lingering negativity is challenging. The work seeks personal healing while promoting the power of all people to break from indoctrination, group think, and mob mentality to make better choices to live a satisfying and peaceful existence...hopefully in a democratic free society.

With a background in photography, graphic design, children's theater, set design, painting, exhibition curating, and arts administration, I come to this work at a time of transition and desired change. I often use my art to observe and critique, heal, and move through life to alleviate stress or confront challenges. Inspired by conceptualism, I set out to study issues and themes that have informed my life. Exploring ideas surrounding identity, change, privilege, and personal experiences, I use objects culled from my life, examining the past. I also incorporate items gathered along my healing path through nature saved for this specific purpose. Being present and immersed in the environment not only brings

me peace, but also a sense of adventure, taking me away from the everyday responsibilities and creating space for contemplation.

As a nature lover, I am also interested reducing waste through repurposing. Creating art with existing objects makes good use of unwanted and unneeded family heirlooms, giving them new life and meaning. Becoming art objects honors their past and represents personal memory in the works. My children have little interest in taking ownership of the plethora of items and inherited furniture in my possession. Making art with them is satisfying.

To inform the new direction of my work, I began to study the long history of art built upon the use of found objects. From its beginnings in the early 1900s with Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp inspiring the Dada movement, to the Surrealists of the 1930s (when objects also appeared in Joseph Cornell's boxes) through the 1940s when Jackson Pollock introduced small, objects into his paintings, to Robert Rauschenberg's combines of the 1950s, continuing into the 60s with Andy Warhol and Marisol in the Pop Movement and minimalists like John Chamberlain, as well as Arman and New Realism. The 1960s and 70s brought Ed and Nancy Kienholz in America, and internationally, the Fluxus artists, and in the 1980s and 90s, the Young British Artists. Many Conceptual and Postmodern artists continue the tradition that began with the readymade,

assemblage, and collage, with installations, intermedia, and multimedia works, often employing objects either for their history or to challenge that history. Such objects can be used either as part of a composition with no apparent connection to the meaning of the piece, or its history can be integral. The objects might be universal, relating to everyone, or be highly personal to the artist. Work incorporating objects ranges from minimalist to expansive, orderly to chaotic, introspective to confrontational. The artists I found intriguing are diverse and numerous.

ARTISTIC INSPIRATIONS

Many artists have informed the thought and processes involved in creating this body of work, starting with Marcel Duchamp's audacious challenge to the status quo, forcing the definition of art to change over 100 years ago. Joseph Cornell's boxes influenced my process of culling through the objects I had collected and inherited. Robert Rauschenberg's combines provoked contemplation of juxtaposition and relationships between objects. Jasper Johns once observed that "Rauschenberg was the man who in this century had invented the most since Picasso. What he invented above all was, I think, a pictorial surface that let the world in again."¹ Schimmel goes on to say that "as one of American's greatest artists of the 20th century—not a painter, not a sculptor, not performance artist, but artist—his importance has been widely acknowledged and felt and his legacy continues to reverberate."² The idea of not being defined as a *type* of artist appeals to me as I work across mediums. Mark Dion, Doris Salcedo, and Betye Saar informed my thinking about using furniture and objects as commentary. "Mark Dion's elaborate sculptures and installations use the methods and conventions of the natural-history museum display, the

¹ Paul Schimmel, "Preface and Acknowledgments", *Robert Rauschenberg Combines*, (Los Angeles, California, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and Steidl Verlag, 2005), 9.

² Ibid.

scientific field trip, and the archaeological dig. But they do so to question the authority of our institutions and to examine our complicated—and conflicted—relationship with the natural world.”³ Doris Salcedo employs used furniture and clothes to bring attention to oppression, civil violence, and mourning. Her work informs my contemplation about ways furniture can be used effectively as activism. Her “sculptural process involves juxtaposition and effacement of their defining features, and the changes she effects render them dysfunctional, denying them the particular traces of humanity that are the result of their ergonomic characteristics in relation with the body”.⁴ “Saar’s constructions range from the intimate architecture of altars to immersive installations. She favors materials worn on the body, such as handkerchiefs and gloves, or activated by it, especially tools of domestic labor like washboards and irons. Saar has incorporated birdcages, photographs and fabrics, clocks, and ladders, globes, and scales into works steeped in remembrance, grief, rage, humor, and tenderness.”⁵ While my life experiences greatly differ from Saar’s, she remains an inspiration in the way she uses objects to confront and console.

My ideas about using text are informed by Barbara Kruger’s posters and

³ Louisa Buck, *Mark Dion: "Welcome to my Wunderkammer,"* *The Art Newspaper* February 9, 2018, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2018/02/09/mark-dion-welcome-to-my-wunderkammer> (accessed February 28, 2023).

⁴ Jose Roca, “Untitled Contemporary: Modern Art since 1970: Doris Salcedo,” *Modern Painting and Sculpture 1880 to the Present at the Modern Museum of Art*, Edited by John Elderfield. New York: The Modern Museum of Art, 2004, 455.

⁵ Leah Ollman, "Betye Saar: In the Studio," *Art in America*, June/July 2019, 86.

billboards, as well as Jenny Holzer's work using typography in unexpected places for a feminist social critique. Also, my own training in graphic design in the 1980s influences this part of my work. Cornelia Parker, Judy Pfaff, and Sara Sze's sculptural installations demonstrate innovative ways of combining objects and spatial presentation. In preparation for using performance, Cindy Sherman, who immersed herself theatrically into images drawn from pop culture, was a starting point. More artists whose work influenced my performance include: The Fluxus group, Kalup Linzy, Jamie Warren and Matt Roche of Whoop Dee Doo, and comedians Pee-wee Herman, Lilly Tomlin, and Whoopie Goldberg whose characters make me laugh and cry.

When I was a scenic designer in theatre, I would resist looking at images of other designers' interpretations, relying on the script as my main source of inspiration. After determining the direction my design would take, I would review other iterations to compare ideas. While discussions of vision for the production between designer and director always informs the collaborative process of theatre, I wanted to avoid relying on or copying other designers' work. My own interpretation should take precedent. I wanted to approach my sculpture in a similar way. When I would see an artist's work that I really loved, I would look for others doing something similar and those doing something entirely different. These observations provided options: a seeing of what is possible to inform my own process.

DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

Concepts

This work is primarily object-driven, exploring meaning of and between the items and selected materials both personal and universal. At first, I struggled to find balance between minimalist understated commentary and more chaotic, overwhelming installations. Drawing on ideas from both and focusing on generating thought and response, I sought to create commentary on the struggles and expectations of exponentially changing contemporary life—sometimes from a specifically female point of view.

Using art as exploration of self, art as therapy, art as exorcism, I continued to create works related to emotional and psychological obstacles that arise in the process of seeking and maintaining my true self while also reacting to current events. Material and object selection increasingly would address learned and taught behavior and language, as well as the evolution of thought arising from examining past experiences. As my work progressed, the theme of *transformation* emerged. The objects from my own life and outdoor experiences led me to consider their origins, meanings, imbedded memory, history, and

ancestry. The relationship between the items used in the work is important, both compositionally and psychologically. Impacted by current events, I began to explore ways for humanity to move beyond the restraints of heritage and individual experience that breed complacency or divide us. Indoctrination makes us intransigent and resistant to change. Current polarized politics commands the airwaves, stoking fear of differences. We can choose otherwise when we see other possibilities. We can unlearn.

In life, we are compelled and sometimes required to play roles – to achieve, get along, feel accepted, seek love, to survive... the list goes on. Whether child, parent, patient, healer, protector, tormentor, or victim, our lives can stagnate, wallowing in that role to our detriment. Also, our background and geographical locations exert influence over us. What is taught is also not always right, or just, or true. The innocent have no control over indoctrination to a belief system they are born into. Thereafter, they remain ignorant of *other realities*, until as individuals, their psyche is fed through exposure and study. Experiences influence character both positively and negatively, as we use intellect and taught values to understand—or misunderstand—the world we move through and define ourselves in the process. The roles we are assigned, or unwisely choose, can keep us from living our lives authentically.

The question remains. How do you escape the negative past and still embrace the positive past? Every few years, my art asks me to reassess. To explore the self, the essence of who I am and who I choose to be. Now, exponential change in the world demands it. Exploration of self through detachment allows one to see things from a different point of view and can add another dimension to life and work. Seeking this type of detachment led me to further develop performative characters based on my ancestors and people I have known.

Everyday thoughts that current professional roles preclude me from saying tend to come out in voices that have long been with me. Comments in the accents and vernacular of alter egos that I have long used to poke fun at us all. The hodgepodge of individual characters reminiscent of the collective that make up the American South—these characters will materialize in my performative series *Ghosts of the Past*.

The first of these *Ghosts of the Past* is *Virginia Lee Sutherlin*, inspired by my grandmother and her friends who lived during a time of great technological and cultural change that so many resisted, just as we do today. *Virginia Lee* reaches out from the afterlife with warnings, advice, and musings. I have further developed and explored this character through video and live performance since

matriculating at SFA. The exhibition will include a performance of *Virginia Lee as Docent*. As she has been in my consciousness, she will serve as our guide through the exhibition. Created over four and a half years filled with disruption, change, uncertainty, fear, and political upheaval—this group of works constitute *The Great Unlearning*. *Virginia Lee* will share her opinions, seek comments from the audience, and give advice as she is wont to do.

When first proposed, this thesis exhibition was titled *Hindsight...or lessons I should have learned by now*. As I began to revisit, study, and write about these works, I realized that looking into the past alone would not enable me to work through deep seeded injuries that haunted me—I needed also to unlearn old habits and beliefs to move forward, continue to grow, and maneuver through a rapidly changing world. Just as the themes and works changed over four years, so did their purpose. First, looking to the past to examine and recognize barriers to forward movement, but then to also realize changes in the world that require changes in ourselves. This realization led me to rename this exhibition of interdisciplinary sculpture *The Great Unlearning*—asking us to look back, consider the present, and move forward, both individually and collectively while maneuvering through a world changing daily.

Process

From the works created during my time at SFA I have selected 10 pieces that best represent the progression of my art while navigating a world in crises. Facing my own demons, doing challenging arts administrative work, and beginning to care for my mother, I shifted my practice from painting to sculpture to include a wide variety of approaches. These sculptural works are created from antiquated, inherited, and found objects, and include items from nature, the written word, electricity, light, and performance vary in presentation from wall mounted, to free standing, to installation.

The processes used to create each work depend on the respective objects and how they might be combined to create the desired outcome. Manipulation of wood, metal, and other materials variously employed methods of cutting, adhering, and layering. Some surfaces and finishes are altered abrasively, chemically, or with paint. Art objects include business and domestic furniture, functional and decorative personal possessions, and items scavenged from nature. Language is used (both handwritten and typographical) as titles, instructions, embellishment, and messaging. A performance of *Virginia Lee Sutherland* in the form of an exhibition tour will be presented live.

The quotidian materials and other ephemera used to make the works

come with a history and meaning both universal and personal. The selection of objects is essential to the work, involving personal memory and research of their history and usage. These objects are then combined, or juxtaposed, or amended to convey intent.

The sculptures start with an object and an idea that grows and undulates as I read, research, and contemplate. I usually have several pieces in progress based on ideas that are ruminating. I tend to jump between them—spending time for thought between the hands-on work. Forcing myself to focus on completion of the piece most compelling to me, I devote sufficient time researching, sketching, and experimenting with materials and techniques needed to reach the desired results. Since each piece often requires a new set of skills, much time is spent in study, experimentation, and problem solving. Because of my background in technical theatre, graphic design, and painting, I have an array of resources to draw upon from past experiences along with new skills learned while creating this work. Eventually, the process becomes easier as each succeeding portion reaches fruition and things come into focus and find resolution.

THE WORKS

Geode, Burl, and Fools Gold

Surveying the objects collected on wilderness excursions and sifting through a selection of inherited objects, I began to make associations and combine objects for a series of works resembling altar pieces. I acquired some beautiful scraps of wood for the bases and incorporated candlesticks, vessels, and bells with nature objects to symbolically pay homage, but also issue warning. Bells celebrate, summon, and warn. The presence of half-eaten, half burned pinecones, displayed like burnt candles, speaks to resilience and renewal through fire. The inclusion of land and water, along with fire, brings awareness of the classical elements. In *Geode* (fig. 1) and *Burl*, (fig. 2) the focal points are nature objects that have unexpected beauty hidden beneath a surface that is rough and unappealing. *Fool's Gold* (fig. 3) includes pyrite, a mineral that is often mistaken for gold. The idea of appearances and the difference between inside and outside continues in other works.



Figure 1. *Geode*, 2020, scrap wood, vase, candlesticks
rock, bell, pinecones, geode 20x21x6 inches



Figure 2. *Burl*, 2020, Scrap wood, candlesticks, rock, bell, ceramic vessels, dirt, water, pinecones, stick with polished burl end, antique table, 52x16x15 inches



Figure 3. *Fool's Gold*, 2020, scrap wood, mirror, candelabra, rocks, bells, pinecones, 17x24x7 inches

The Hypnotizer

When creating *The Hypnotizer* (fig. 4), the idea of learning and unlearning on an individual level was my focus. Whether aware or not, individuals bring along all they have learned or were taught in life. At certain times, opportunities for discernment and openness to ideas and worldviews outside of previous personal experiences do arise. This is when people can choose to change. Their new life experiences can both validate and conflict with their formative understandings and present opportunities for personal growth and self-actualization. Some people never open themselves up to change remaining indoctrinated by their upbringing. Text is used in two ways; first, it embellishes the piece with rants about words that harm and second, to provide metal embossed labels. After research into “how to slow the speed of the vintage fan” (which was incredibly fast even on the low setting), I installed a Variac variable transformer (hidden in the drawer of the filing cabinet that forms the base of the piece). This allows for interaction as well as the ability to set the fan at a speed that offers a hypnotic spinning of the spiral image painted on the blades with clay slip from my family property.



Figure 4. *The Hypnotizer*, 2021, antique fan, clay slip, embossed metal labels, variable transformer, switch, 57x18x29 inches

Enlightenment Emergency

Enlightenment Emergency (fig. 5) hopes to inform how to be an authentic individual in the face of group think. I am frightened by the growing division in our country and want to focus on individuality apart from a political or religious group. When humans seek personal insight, they are more fortified against the powers of propaganda and persuasion. They have a greater sense of self and are grounded in their integrity. Seemingly, it has become a world of group think, *us versus them*, rather than each working toward an individual call to impact humanity's greater good. Hypocrisy, greed, and an attitude of "the end justifies the means" keeps people from achieving the community we crave. We need to send an urgent message that mob mentality and elites masquerading as populists is dangerous deception. To have real *community* we must value each individual and unlearn hatred and vilification of those different from ourselves. In this piece, vintage lamps become illuminated signs encouraging us to become more enlightened. I used typography to design sign fronts for discarded lamps using metal sheets selected to enhance each lamp. The letters were hand-sawed, and lighting gels were used to create the colored illuminated letters. The lamps are displayed on an old writing desk from a room in a historic hotel in my hometown. The loose wires from the lamps bring a chaotic feeling, reflecting the world we live in on this piece that asks us to seek enlightenment.



Figure 5. *Enlightenment Emergency (unplugged)*, 2022, lamps, cut out metal faces, colored gels, writing desk, electric cords, 61x54x22 inches

Silver Spoon Crybaby

Acceptance and rejection of teachings from our upbringing presents a theme in which to explore individual identity. *Silver Spoon Crybaby (fig. 6)*, for example, considers the impact of privilege and taught narcissism. Discernment is needed when considering how you move forward in life. Often, those who have been taught they are elite, while also harboring significant pain, tend to rage through life with little repercussions, eventually leading to pain and destruction. In its wake, this path can take down many around the self-destructive individual. While some individuals can turn away or rise above it before irreparable damage is done, some must do the work to come through to the other side of dangerous situations, and others become lost. Privilege combined with narcissism can fuel the intensity of damage to self and others. Recognizing privilege is part of unlearning. This piece employs an antiquated tarnished silver service piece; it is filled with objects symbolizing wealth and destruction and embellished with a porcelain crying baby-doll head donning a napkin ring crown.



Figure 6. *Silver Spoon Crybaby*, 2021-22, silver service piece, crystal, silver spoon, golden metal scraps, dirt, car keys, cut up credit cards, pipes, plastic baggie, bottle caps, poker chip, fake snow, silver sugar bowl, doily marble top antique coffee table, 43x24x36 inches

Insidious

Insidious (fig. 7) similarly uses an archaic, tarnished silver service piece as its primary inspiration. Biscuit boxes became popular when sugar became more affordable, and the bourgeoisie used them to serve their sweet biscuits or cookies at afternoon tea—a show of status made possible by slavery in the West Indies. Now, sugar (and its chemical substitutes) has infiltrated nearly every food we eat causing the population to suffer from obesity, diabetes, and other deadly health issues. In addition to the silver biscuit box, crushed and sifted recycled glass is used to emulate sugar, air dry clay is used to form the biscuits and base of the spilling sugar and blood drop. Patinated copper wire entwines antique silver sugar spoons as they reach out, with one cocktail fork rising in the midst resembling a pitchfork or trident. The embossing on the middle of the inside of the lid suggests the evil eye. Eliminating sugar from our diet is challenging, our bodies must unlearn dependence on seductive sweetness of easily available foods.



Figure 7. *Insidious*, 2022, silver biscuit box, crystal, silver sugar spoons, silver relish fork, crushed glass, air-dry clay, acrylic paint, copper wire, antique plant stand, fishing line, resin, 56x26x15 inches

Fractured

Fractured (fig. 8) employs an old light box used for viewing x-rays in hospitals. The composition builds with multiple layers of actual x-rays of myself taken over several years in my younger life. Color enhances it using lighting gels. The imagery softens with a sheet of transparent paper creating a *skin* over the top held in place with a metal strip finished to match the light box. In this piece, I explore what we hide from others. Really knowing someone can be elusive. People protect themselves by learning what to expect from a person and then not expecting something different. But to know someone more than superficially you must take risks. If we avoid conflict altogether, we never get beyond the surface of anyone or anything. Being curious, open, and non-judgmental allows us to offer grace to others as well as ourselves when healing from trauma. Alternately, we need to be courageous about recognizing our own shortcomings. During the year it took to finalize my divorce as more humiliating and painful details came to light, my Mimi said, "just don't let him break your back!" She knew I was already heartbroken. I lost her shortly after that. I have managed to carry the weight and to survive that season of my life, but I want to thrive. Letting go of the weight is the key. We never know what pain others are carrying inside and should be open to unlearning some formed opinions of others we based on incomplete information.



Figure 8. *Fractured*, 2022, X-ray light box, X-rays, colored lighting gels, vellum, metal, spray paint, 24x46x6 inches

Beacon

Beacon (fig. 9) also relates to inner and outer appearances and expectations. The perception of beauty is in question also. What is seen on the outside does not always reveal the inner reality and vice versa. We need reminders daily—beacons to guide us and warn us. There is much to unlearn and learn surrounding beauty. This driftwood hollow log was salvaged from under the dock at our property. I found it beautiful. I am a believer that hardship and fortitude create extraordinary beauty in natural objects and in people—when we choose to see it. I felt compelled to fill the inside with objects more commonly considered beautiful. First, I meticulously taped off the edges of all the openings and painted the inside silver and rubbed in some gold tones. Then I selected

items from the large collection of inherited jewelry to embellish the interior. The pieces range from mostly gold tone (near the bottom) to primarily silver tones (toward the top). Wanting light to shine up from through the log, I made a wood base that mirrored the shape of the log with a light embedded. This was then mounted on an antique table pedestal that was extended by adding part of a bed post to reach the desired height. To increase the impact of the illumination as it moved up through the log, mirrors and optical lenses were added to reflect and refract the light. (fig. 10)



Figure 10. *Beacon*, detail



Figure 9. *Beacon*, 2022-23, hollow driftwood log, spray-paint, wood scraps, antique table base and bedpost, lamp, antique jewelry 81x21x21 inches

Wrangling Wrinkles

Consumer culture has grown so intense that it threatens to devour us. Media dangles all the luxuries of life before us creating desire for things mostly out of reach. People live in constant longing and dissatisfaction, lost in desire, and distracted by constant media consumption, while many hard-earned rights have begun to disappear. Most of us seem to be oblivious to the consequences. Generations that have benefited from the fight for equal rights, but did not actually fight, can't know the struggle or past experiences. To forget or deny the importance of equal rights dooms us to struggle again. The challenges and sacrifices of those who fought for human rights must be remembered and should not be taken for granted. We must not be distracted. Much can be lost when we look away or choose to ignore. We don't have to be victims; we must not go willingly to undermine progress. Partial dismantling of the Voters Rights Act, overturning Roe vs. Wade, and threats of removing marriage equality rights are just a few examples of how powerful people have rolled back rights that impact everyday lives and safety of individuals who gained civil rights in the past.

Wrangling Wrinkles (fig.11) looks specifically at the long fight for equal rights for women and the current battle to retain existing hard-earned rights. Using irons from cast iron to modern, the cords act as rope to keep the modern iron from falling over the edge. The wooden ironing board appears scorched by the irons

resisting and fighting the pull over the edge. I hope to not have to unlearn rights I have had my entire adult life; I fear for the rights of my daughters.



Figure 11. *Wrangling Wrinkles*, 2022-23, Antique ironing board - scorched, 2 electric irons, 4 antique irons, 49x68x20 inches

Virginia Lee Sutherlin

When developing the character of *Virginia Lee Sutherlin*, (who grew up in the early 20th century) I was exploring how media acts as a distraction and

pacifying tool for the masses today just as media and new forms of entertainment concerned the philosophers of the pre-World War II era, as they witnessed the rise of authoritarianism. Walter Benjamin suggests in 1936 that “Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves.... The logical result of fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Fuhrer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values. All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.”⁶ Concerns in these texts seem very timely for humanity today. Is the rise of *infotainment* and social media no less distracting to current generations than movies were at that time? Propaganda is powerful, and this form of persuasion has been mastered by advertising, marketing, entertainment, and political organizations alike, and weaponized all-too-often. Humankind is manipulated, coaxed, and convinced by more entities than they can imagine every day – both subtle and obvious. We should recognize these past events as relevant to our circumstances now. As propaganda takes hold it is difficult to unlearn.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Art in Theory 1900-2000 An Anthology of Changin Ideas*, by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003, 526.

“We must learn from history lest we repeat it” is a well-known phrase that today exposes the failure of our educational system and distraction of our citizens—better known as consumers. The utter lack of historical knowledge combined with constant engagement in a consumer-centered society leaves the population highly vulnerable to propaganda. More importantly, when the mistakes of our inhumane past are rejected as lies and failures at all levels are not admitted (as is prevalent in the current political environment), there is no growth—no lessons learned. When looking to the past there is, in fact, much to learn, but also plenty to *unlearn* as histories are often written from only one point of view. Artists and authors often fill the gaps. We need to be aware of our past so that we can choose the good and actively confront the bad, so that humanity can thrive....at least our own. *Virginia Lee Sutherland* tries to help us to recognize this idea.



Figure 12. *Virginia Lee Sutherland*, 2020 - present, make-up, wig, dress, hat, glove, jewelry, glasses, shoes, purse

EXHIBITION INSTALLATION

Prior to installation, I took careful measurements of the gallery space, including the door between gallery one and gallery two in the lower art building, where my exhibition was to be installed. I mapped out the placement of the pieces and enhanced the doorway between the galleries where *Virginia Lee* would make her entrance for the docent performance. Once the works were in the space, I made several changes in placement to achieve better flow. For example, I placed the free-standing pieces around the perimeter, but away from the wall leaving the center of the gallery empty. This would allow space for the audience to participate in the performance without having to maneuver around works to avoid accidental collisions.

Since the works that do not mount on the wall are furniture based, I had not used pedestals. For the entrance and signage, I installed a brass letter drop on the side of a secretary and provided cards instructing visitors to leave me a note rather than using a sign-in book. This helped to maintain the look desired for presentation while also offering a more experiential interaction. Fountain pens for writing the notes and other writing paraphernalia filled the tiny drawers and hidden slots in the desk to entice inquisitive viewers. It was fun and interesting to

read the notes when the exhibition came down.

Lighting the exhibition was the most challenging. Several of the works incorporated light and required less gallery lighting for the best impact, while others required more. Without dimmers in the lighting system, creating balance proved challenging. I achieved the desired presentation and mood by physically blocking the amount of light emitting from the fixtures. Because of the luminosity of some of the pieces, as well as stark contrast between dark wood and lighter surfaces in several works, photographing the installation was also difficult. Ultimately, these issues were resolved, and the exhibition met my expectations.



Figure 13. Installation view 1: left side wall when entering the gallery



Figure 14. Installation View 2: left back corner

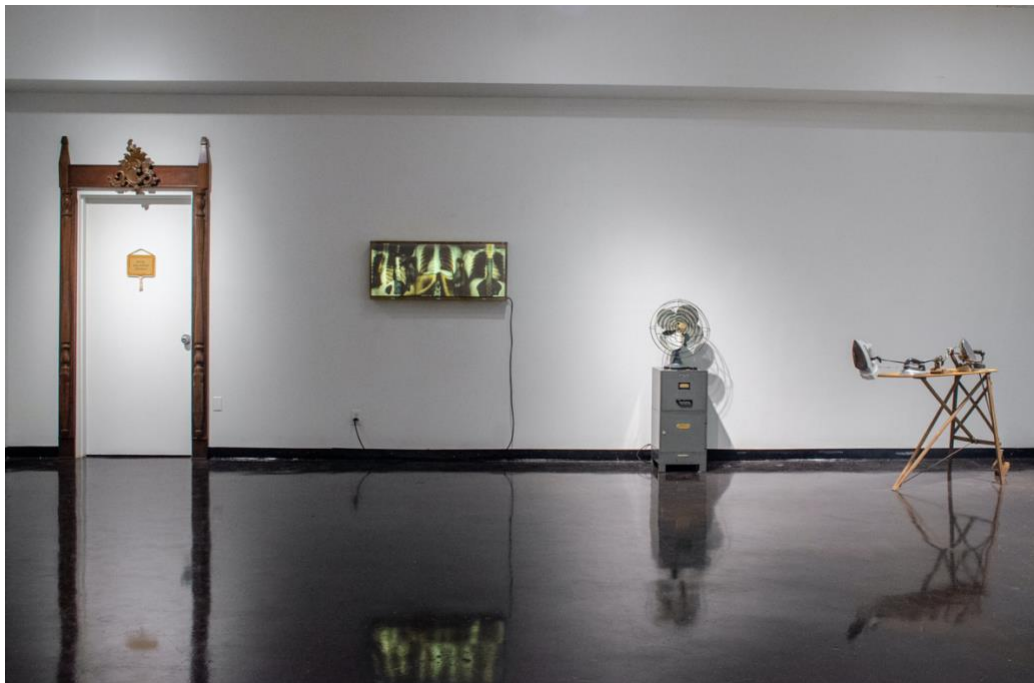


Figure 15. Installation View 3: back wall



Figure 16. Installation View 4: back left corner



Figure 16. Installation View 5: front left corner

WHAT NEXT?

While *Virginia Lee Sutherlin* is ultimately performance, video is currently a powerful vehicle informing and misinforming the world, and *Virginia Lee* wants to try it. She has begun to learn the medium to reach a wider audience. The virtual world masquerades as experience (the view is always through the content creator's vision), often leading viewers away from seeking their own real experiences and forming their own thoughts. Mass media often distracts us from *true tactile experiences*; but ironically, that same media can be used to convey *this* message. However, we must speak out in voices loud enough to break through the cacophony of false gods bent on stealing our wealth and souls. *Virginia Lee* wishes to reach out from the afterlife with warnings, advice, and musings.

Because this body of work has been created over a 4-year period and because my method of work involves bouncing between several pieces at once, there are several works waiting for completion. Since I began to really focus on completing work for this thesis, I have set aside work on other projects that did not fit squarely within its program. With so much going on, I often got distracted—getting sidetracked in works reacting to climate change and storms, or

overpopulation of certain species that harm the environment. Soon, I will return to these pieces waiting for attention in my home studio.

The key challenge will be to maintain focus on my studio practice while continuing work as director of an arts institution at least a few more years. To free my artistic voice from the restraints of powerful donors and expectations surrounding my position—one of the primary motivations for pursuing this MFA in studio art. In this last quarter of my life, I want to be authentic and shout out in my artist voice that which, for too-long has been silenced.

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VITA

Catherine McCrory Pears is an artist and designer serving as the Executive Director of the Alexandria Museum of Art in Alexandria Louisiana since 2010 and currently attending Stephen F. Austin State University seeking an MFA in Sculpture. In 1983, she received a BFA in Graphic Design from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, LA, and an MA in Painting from Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, LA in 2006. She served as Technical Director of Theater at LSUA (Alexandria) from 2007-2009 and prior to that designed and built theater sets for numerous theatrical groups. She painted murals in public and private settings and created Mardi Gras floats for several krewes in Alexandria Louisiana. Her work has been displayed in numerous exhibitions and can be found in several private collections. Photography has always been part of her practice. Currently, Catherine works across a variety of mediums, including performance, to create sculptures and installations.

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This thesis was typed by Catherine McCrory Pears