Passages Through the Ordinary: Human Pyramid

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A dumpster doubles as a hot tub next to an arrangement of plywood benches and white ceramic tubs, inviting the weary to bathe their feet in salubrious salts. Close by, a set of coal-black bowls nestles into itself, while dust motes dance in a glow of orange light. Ladders and levels, carefully stacked and precariously balanced, take on a life of their own, remote from practical purpose. Paintings lazily lean against walls, carefully blending into the surrounding space as if designed to be inconspicuous. At the same time, they insist on drawing attention to the habitually mundane. Emphatically anti-monumental, the work on view examines quotidian objects, habits, and relationships, transforming them into something eerily familiar that, at the same time, estranges what typically hovers right around the threshold of the noticed. While the direction toward the everyday, outside of the gallery, the artists create a threshold of the noticed. While the direction toward the everyday, outside of the gallery, the artists create a

Still, more is at stake than simply de-familiarizing what we may take for granted. The artists ask us to savor the delicate strangeness on display. By considering the body in movement, we can apprehend “the object as if it was unfamiliar, so that we can attend to the flow of perception itself.” Following Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, philosophers concerned with experience grounded in the body, “Human Pyramid” challenges the Cartesian hierarchy of mind over body and probe the flow of perception. The resulting work offers passages through the ordinary that are often poetic, sometimes gutsy, critical, and intimate.

Ben Moren

Ben Moren’s Walking Cycle (2013) immerses the viewer in a pentagonal arrangement of projection screens. The artist, the sole protagonist in the videos, navigates through different landscapes. The walking figure appears on only one screen at a time, creating the illusion of movement from screen to screen. Of course, viewers well versed in the visual grammar of Hollywood habitually suspend disbelief to enjoy cinematic adventures; editors routinely condense or slow down time, as storylines demand. Synchrony, the unity forged of image and sound, means to guarantee a seamless, perfectly calibrated experience. Moren breaks with the customary poetics of cinematic manipulation.

Instead, he relies on long shots in real time. At first, it seems like nothing much happens. Then, a certain oddity of movement and a discrepancy of sound and image become hard to ignore. Something is definitely off. As Moren leans toward a steep hillside on screen, the viewer is seduced by his reversal, draws attention to the body functions. I am able to pick up a pebble and throw it without reflecting on how I am to do it,” writes Elizabeth Grosz. Walking Cycle replaces such instinctive somatic knowledge with carefully complicated action dependent on a heightened degree of physical awareness. “By considering the body in movement, we can see better how it inhabits space and time, it actively assumes them, it takes them up in their basic significance which is obscured in the commonplace of established situations,” suggests Merleau-Ponty. Indeed, the conditions of human mobility, enabled by our two-leggedness and the position of the head at the top of the body, with two eyes pointed forward, have encouraged “the production of widespread analogies between a future ‘in front of us’ and the past ‘behind us.’” Rather than fade into the invisibility of the familiar, walking, in Moren’s reversal, draws attention to human embodiment, our relations to space, and perceptions of time, while actively challenging our trust in what we think we see.

River Suspension (2013) relies on a similarly simple poetic device. Arroting a jump in mid-air, the artist captures and loops the moments right before his body succumbs to gravity. Suspending his fall into the water, he seems to levitate. River Suspension points to Moren’s interest in tipping points: the moments right before something happens that divides the passage of time into a before and after.
Passages and thresholds play an equally prominent conceptual role in Kate Casanova’s art. Rather than revert and arrest time, Casanova inverts the relationship between spectator and landscape. Traditionally, “the idea of landscape is linked to notions of visual observation, detachment and objective knowledge. Landscape thereby becomes associated with an understanding of knowledge as something both produced by and located in a detached, observing subject, a subject who is able to stand aloof from the dramas and intricacies of a objective world positioned ‘beyond’ and ‘outside’.” In Casanova’s work, landscape comes closer. Much closer. Instead of detachment and separation, the artist emphasizes the importance of the body as “the condition and context” through which we are able to have a relation to objects, to the world.1

The video Rise & Fall (2012) showcases Casanova’s concerns. Lying flat on the ground, the camera resting on her chest, rising and falling with the rhythm of her breath, she recorded the sun. The resulting imagery is deceptively simple: we see the sun rise and fall, in a sequence not determined by celestial movement but the human body’s need for air. With each breath, a necessary connection is forged between the artist’s body and her environment, in this case Beijing, known for its poor air quality. Far from detached, the body is permeable, in constant change with its surroundings. Ornament (2011) suggests another way of re-figuring our relationship to landscape. On a carefully coiffed, blond head, hermit crabs claw their way across braided hair. In a curious reversal of agency, the human body becomes the landscape for the crustaceans. Since 2010, Casanova has collaborated with fungi in her sculptures. She inoculates the stuffing of upholstered chairs with spores that eventually sprout into mushrooms. The chairs, stand-ins for the human body, suggest the body itself as a site where categories become porous, and slippages occur. “My ‘own’ body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners. The crook of my elbow, for instance, is ‘a special ecosystem, a bountiful home to no fewer than six tribes of bacteria,”’ writes Jane Bennett.2 Simple divisions into observer and landscape do not hold in this world marked by multiplicity, not singularity.

In Vivarium Americana, the inside of a 1976 AMC Pacer, affectionately nicknamed “fish bowl” or “terrarium” for its generously sized windows, becomes a small ecosystem, a landscape that requires viewers to peer in rather than look out. The car’s promise of freedom and individuality is compromised. The interior becomes landscape, a metal-cased body harboring pale growth that feeds on decay and proliferates on the ruins of oil-fueled mobility.

Laura Bigger

Our relationship to land is of central concern in Laura Bigger’s creative practice, too. Landscapes do not appear as distant vistas, far removed from detached spectators, but as sources for foraging and cultivating food, intimately connected to human survival. Her work traces the kinds of deep knowledge that grow from interacting with the land, digging in the dirt, and learning the cycle of seasons. Rather than indulge nostalgic distortions, Provisions relies on Bigger’s experiences with subsistence farming and preserving food. Her first-hand knowledge informs and inspires Provisions.

In a room whose walls are covered in custom-made cotton wallpaper, a veritable visual encyclopedia of regionally available edibles unfolds: leafy greens, fungi, root-vegetables, fish, fruit, nuts. Far from merely decorative, the digitally manipulated and arranged drawings reference wall-hung medieval tapestries designed to display visual narratives central to the culture’s understanding of itself. But instead of relying on symbols of mythological weight to convey spiritual content, Bigger focuses on ordinary foods, as if to insist on the value of their humble presence and overlooked significance. Of course, two-dimensional representations make poor substitutes for the sheer aesthetic wealth of their real-life counterparts. But loss is a central motivation for Bigger’s work. The room’s emptiness, safe for a table with home-made benches, suggests an absence, reverting the almost-forgotten practices of farming and preserving food. Her first-hand knowledge informs and inspires Provisions.

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This is art that is distinctly staking out a moral position about the way life could and… should be lived without getting ham-handed about it,” says David A. Ross about the work of artists who, like Bigger, question the role art plays in life beyond museum and gallery walls. These artists, Ross elaborates, “are speaking about changes in the way we are supposed to look at things.”
rationality clashes with an ancient desire for mysticism and enchantment. Harnessing the allure of far-away places, the artist sculpts an experience for her audience meant to encourage questions about belief, faith, skepticism, and trust.

Stefanie Motta

Stefanie Motta shares Hirsch’s interest in the domestic sphere, relationships forged through art, and beliefs incompatible with strict rationality. Her practice is informed by what Eleanor Heartney calls the “contemporary search for alternate consciousness” that dispenses “with any direct link to traditional spiritualities or belief systems.” Motta cites meditation, Tarot divinations, and astrology as sources of inspiration and awakens an interest in gut feelings, which return us to the body as a site of inchoate knowing.

In the past, Motta’s photographs have explored intimate spaces of a domestic world and close relationships. In her recent deck of Tarot cards, for instance, Motta was not just interested in the symbolism possessed by things, a moment that must be there, histories are spectral. While the artist is careful in exploring the relationship of ‘things’ with bodies. But instead of naming their moment of independence, their provenance and the story of ‘things’ changing hands but of how things come to matter by taking shape through and in the labor of others. Such objects, whose familiarity borders on invisibility, expand the body’s capacities to the point where they have become absorbed, incorporated even, into perceptual faculties or body parts.

But rather than let objects hide behind their practical use value, over-determined by their functionality, Finlayson is eager to learn and uncover their histories. Not just their provenance and the story of ‘things’ changing hands but of how things come to matter by taking shape through and in the labor of others. Such histories are not simply available on the surface of the object, apart from the scratches that might be left behind... histories are spectral. While the artist is careful to point out that her work is not in itself narrative, the objects themselves bear their stories. Paradoxically, in order to get closer to these intangible, spectral histories, Finlayson relies on an aesthetic of the haptic, on touch...
**HUMAN PYRAMID**

*Jess Hirsch*

Blue Lagoon Hot Pot, 2013

dumpster, cedar, stainless steel, water, silica, epsom salt, calcium carbonate, and table salt

**HUMAN PYRAMID**

*Stefanie Motta*

Fog #1, 2013

black plastic bag, color negative film, square hole, dust, fluorescent light
Skeptical of the benefits promised by genetically modified and chemically treated food, Bigger's work suggests a profound re-orientation, a new cultural narrative that no longer privileges convenience over sustainability. At the very heart of her commitment to sustainable food politics lies the realization that narratives about the ways we "look at things" and understand our relation to them are ultimately performative. Jane Bennett explains, "cultural narratives that we use help to shape the world in which we will have to live." Mindful of what this future world might look like in light of the dominant narratives we rely on today, Bigger embraces an activist ethos with a distinct didactic edge to advocate for a return to more sustainable ways of producing and consuming food. The workshops on foraging, growing, and preparing food that Bigger plans to conduct in conjunction with the gallery exhibit aim to turn her audience into active participants, aware of their individual stakes in food practices and politics, as well as the intricacy of ecosystems that humans are but one part of.

Another project that extends beyond the gallery and invites participation from the audience comes from sculptor Jess Hirsch. With Hot Pot and Aquatic Reflexology, she explores the many centuries old belief in the healing power of water, questioning the desire to trust in such "powers" and open to considering experiences beyond the reach of medical science. Hirsch's research followed ancient travelers to the highly saline waters of the Dead Sea, to Turkey's hot springs and travertine terraces at Pamukkale, and to Iceland's Blue Lagoon, whose intensely colored, silica-rich water is a side effect of a thermal power plant. Seeking relief from a wide array of ailments, people still are willing to travel far to bask in the putatively healing waters. Their belief, of course, is profitable for the tourist industry. Yet the politics of marketing and capitalizing on belief appear only peripherally in Hirsch's Poached Elixir, in the labels of the plastic bottles purchased at each location. Her concern lies with the physical experience of bathing, the potentially transformative power of immersion in water, and the question of the reputed healing power of these extraordinary waters.

In the gallery, her work has a definite sculptural presence. A modified dumpster, as far from the precious locations of Hirsch's travels as possible, doubles as a hot tub. Plywood benches are conveniently positioned next to ceramic tubs designed for taking footbaths. Small stones, gathered at each location, physically represent the different sites Hirsch visited. The simplicity of her materials contrasts sharply with the promise of exclusive luxury associated with the tourist destinations. Making the experience accessible matters to Hirsch. In the past, she extended her practice beyond the gallery through gifts for her audience, trading old pillows for new ones.

In Powder Promise, too, she invites viewers to become participants by taking home a small bag of bath salts enhanced with mugwort, said to encourage vivid dreams. A modified dumpster, as far from the precious locations of Hirsch’s travels as possible, doubles as a hot tub. Plywood benches are conveniently positioned next to ceramic tubs designed for taking footbaths. Small stones, gathered at each location, physically represent the different sites Hirsch visited. The simplicity of her materials contrasts sharply with the promise of exclusive luxury associated with the tourist destinations. Making the experience accessible matters to Hirsch. In the past, she extended her practice beyond the gallery through gifts for her audience, trading old pillows for new ones.
As a modality of knowing borne by the body, touch allows the artist to experience the object’s history by making it, repeatedly and by hand. The object’s history thus “happens” in the very repetition of gestures, which lead to a kind of “sedimentation” of history in the body. Finlayson’s emphasis on manufacture suggests that touch and material interaction are crucial to understanding our relationships with objects. Touching is a way of slowly accumulating knowledge. “If every object and event is irreducible in its materiality,” argues Laura Marks, “then part of learning to touch it is to come to know its particularity, its strangeness, its precious and inimitable place in the world.” Hence, Finlayson often manufactures whole families of objects. In a series of ceramic bricks, fired to cracked shapes of ancient-looking black, she references their original purpose without abiding by its functional demands. Instead, she presents us with objects seemingly withered with age, a material story of their relationship to human dwelling. Her groupings of artifacts in the gallery defy the preciously isolated, putatively autonomous art object. They imply connections and affinities, both between the pieces on display and the human bodies they relate and respond to, suggesting that “the object is not reducible to itself, which means it does not ‘have’ an ‘itself’ that is apart from its contact with others.” Thus, while Finlayson invites us to appreciate the artifact itself, her quiet installation gestures to what has to remain intangible: the spectral histories of our relationships with everyday objects.

Rachel Longstreet

The peculiarities of perception, especially with regard to what we are trained not to notice, play an equally prominent part in Rachel Longstreet’s paintings. Her work investigates how we organize familiar spaces perceptually: what do we focus on and what, in contrast, is overlooked and filtered out? “Inhabiting the familiar makes ‘things’ into backgrounds for action: they are there, but they are there in such a way that I don’t see them,” explains Sara Ahmed. Invariably, Longstreet’s paintings zoom in on what we have been conditioned to not see. Thus her work questions perceptual priorities and habits, suggesting a subtle re-ordering of how we view the world. Painting, especially the tradition of the still life, has long been concerned with portraying a particular order in the world, stabilizing and regulating the proper place of objects in the world. Still life’s reassuring set of unspoken rules affirmed that there was order in the world, that the important could be clearly distinguished from the insignificant. Longstreet, while clearly engaging with the tradition of the still life, turns the regulatory function of its visual ideology upside down. Rather than reassure, she subverts the putatively implicit order of things by choosing to pay attention to the peripheral and preliminary.

Of course, artists have insisted on the value of the seemingly insignificant before. Sculptor Richard Wentworth, for instance, remembers growing up “in a world held together with string and brown paper and sealing wax, and that’s how it was. I slowly realized that this is the underlying condition of the world, and there’s nothing I like more than when, for example, there’s been a near-disaster at NASA and they say: ‘If it hadn’t been for the chewing gum…” Rather than simply representing them, Longstreet carefully finds inconspicuous features that are instrumental to the space’s overall functionality. The gallery floor’s unobtrusive shade of gray, the designed-to-blend-in thermostat, the masking tape used to mark the placement of art on the walls before an exhibition opens—those incidentals, as Longstreet refers to them, and the focal points of her work.

Rather than simply representing them, Longstreet carefully manipulates and layers her images. The construction of her paintings resembles Russian dolls: they are paintings of paintings of paintings. The issue in Longstreet’s art is not just representation per se but the perceptual processes we rely on to determine whether or not we trust what we see. Consistently, she undermines the putative certainties of perceptual convention. What passes as a background features prominently and refuses...
Daniel Dean

Daniel Dean's preoccupation with the everyday is similarly concerned with the threshold of the unnoticed but taken as us into a dramatically different direction. What could be more ordinary for the average 21st-century American consumer than sliding a rectangular piece of hard plastic through a credit card reader, signing a receipt, and completing yet another successful transaction? The small, quotidian rituals of capitalism support an economic system of global reach. Their very strangeness goes unnoticed, masked by their supposed normalcy. Yet not so long ago, people saved money before making a purchase; buying anything on credit was a rather suspect idea. Dean's current practice participates in the habits of contemporary consumerism but parodies, even parodies, them.

In his recent large-scale sculptures he arranges tools such as ladders and levels into precarious structures that seem on the cusp of tipping or falling apart. Their physical precarity, though arrested, imbues them with a discomfiting edge. The objects reference a system of manual labor, which points to skill sets currently overshadowed by the global spread of immaterial labor. Dean obtains his materials by making purchases on credit, returning them for a refund. Thus his sculptures have a limited life span. His practice depends and even capitalizes on the availability and accessibility of consumer goods. But Dean is no 'good' consumer, doing his part to revive the economy: in his process, shopping becomes a temporary, reversible exchange of no lasting economic value.

Besides drawing attention to how small, daily purchases participate in complex economic systems, Dean's objects come laden with figurative force. Climbing ladders to success and leveling the playing field for economic opportunity have long served as working metaphors for describing and understanding the conditions of individual achievement. Dean's precarious sculptures suggest that the metaphors, too, have become unreliable: levels are stacked into a looming tower, ladders from a tenuous circle through space. Language also enters into Dean's current work in the shape of fragments of legal disclaimers and lists of possible side effects products may cause. Typically overlooked, the cautionary phrases are prominently displayed on lightboxes that visually allude to the conventions of advertising. "May cause irritability, sleeplessness, or anxiety after prolonged use" sounds like a tongue-in-cheek diagnosis of the ever-accelerating pace of contemporary life, a piece of found concrete poetry.

Ultimately, Dean's practice hints at a complex inquiry into usefulness. By unhinging rhetorical and factual tools from their original context, they are effectively de-instrumentalized, no longer capable of fulfilling their intended purpose. Transferred to a gallery setting, they flaunt their new uselessness in a context where the absence of functionality and use value has long been lauded as art's prerequisite. Dean's process as a 'bad' consumer, too, flirts with uselessness, sabotage by futility. But the larger questions that resonate in his practice are curiously anything but useless, as they engage with the local, everyday repercussions of global capitalism, consumerism, and the possibility of imagining, if not an outside or alternative, ways of turning mindless participation into critical practice.

Conclusion

Rather than making art banal by embracing the everyday, as Frank Stella feared once upon a time, the artists in "Human Pyramid" open passages through the ordinary that allow access to experiences, sights, and insights that are anything but mundane. Their work oscillates between minute gestures and far-reaching philosophical questions, touching on phenomenology, ethics, and politics in the process. The artists are asking substantial questions about the world, our place in and perceptions of it, but remain more interested in speculation and inquiry than making definitive statements. Open to a degree of ambivalence, the work on view is refreshingly clear in its unwavering commitment to serious and sustained investigations in concept, process, and form. But while offering plenty of opportunities for intellectual engagement, "Human Pyramid" also importantly remembers art's affective power, catering to "those visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing."^25^ In a show concerned with the body, that seems only fitting. In between affect and intellect, the work on view inspires moments of genuine surprise and curiosity—and that, perhaps, is the greatest accomplishment for a group of newly minted Masters of Fine Arts.
Catalogue was published on the occasion of the 2013 University of Minnesota Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition: Human Pyramid.

Essay by Christina Schmid

Essay Notes


7 Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 86.


13 Jane Bennett, The Enchantment of Modern Life, 5.


15 Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 3.

16 Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 91.


23 In “Abundance,” Norman Bryson argues, “still life was able to provide its viewers with images in which the historically unprecedented instability and volatility of their material culture could appear as regulated and stabilized. In this work of visual ideology, the discourse of ethics is joined by a force no less stabilizing, that of craft labor. Amid the general uncertainty and anxiety surrounding consumption, still life affirms skilled labour as a kind of gold standard that will hold its own even through all the vicissitudes of (over) abundance.” (Looking at the Overlooked. Four Essays on Still Life Painting. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980. 132.)


Alternate Exhibition Titles:

When Nature Calls, Answer; Naughty By Natural Selection; Duck Duck Bruce; Ms. Steaks; Cabin Fever; SUMMER CAMP; Night shade; Bored Meating; sorry; High and Dry; Magic Marker; Vag of Honor; Invisible; The Hunch; Snack Time; Wheel of Function; Repaper; White Cube; Night shame; big money, big prizes; What meating, what thyme?; the shiznit; meetings; Live auction; Everything must go; All 4 sale; The Order of Things; the ben, daniel, kate, stef, jess, laura, maggie and rachel show. ; prince; sheena; gina; butter pad; brothers and sisters; silent whistle; silent letter; Fabulous; $32000; wheel of fortune; chicken of the woods; Two white turtles; My so called life; Days of Our Lives; My back, my neck; Birthday Suit; Cray Cray; Little Mama; State Fair; SELF HELP; Help yourself; dearly beloved; Kombucha and Cigarettes; Yoga and Cigarettes; Entitled; In trouble; The Troubles; Space Race, v.2; Third base; It’s depressing; thrift shop; Marble Madness; Snacks; Snax; Rainbow The Gathering; Waitlisted; Present Yogurt; Loofacris; Legends of the Fall; Triple Dek; Hypercolor Snap Bracelet; The Holograms; Someone, someone and the Something Somethings; Cry Baby; Wall Hole; Night Light; Full Stop; Hologramorama; Fist Fight; Wheel of Misfunction; Reading Rainbow; Sweater Show; Reunion; Land, Air, and Sea Burger; Bored Meeting; Salad Barmitzvah; Fresh Dropings; Ghostride the whip; The Faculty; Absentee Faculty; Boobie Trap; Reiki and Entering; Was it a car or a cat I saw; Ben Moren and the Elders; Tryouts; When Do We Get Paid?: Payday; Varicose Gangs; Right Angles; phonic; Mental Dam; Toll Booth; Nanny Cam; Family Pet; Knowing Nature