

MISGIVING: THE TENSION BETWEEN THE REAL AND IDEAL

A THESIS

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TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FINE ART

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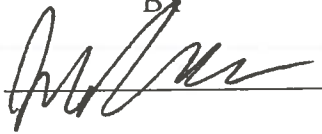
OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

OF TULANE UNIVERSITY

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY



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The farms, towns, and Canadian prairies surrounding the city where I was raised have always fascinated me and are at the root of my interest in domestic life, families, and nostalgia. As an artist and a female, the materials I choose to work with are often associated with the home and traditional roles that women and craft have maintained within them. Composed primarily of clay, fabric, and bread, the six sculptural installations featured in my final thesis exhibition *Misgiving*, question my conservative background and how I identify myself as a female contemporary artist.

Within my family our mother and father maintained traditional roles and provided my siblings and I with a comfortable and pleasant childhood. As a young woman approaching her thirties, I am very conscious of the potential sacrifices and challenges some women face in order to balance personal, familial, and career-oriented goals. As a result of this, the feelings of uncertainty and doubt that I experience are most accurately reflected in the wallpaper installation I created for *Subversion*. At a glance, the floral print appears welcoming and feminine, but upon closer inspection the subtle inclusion of ceramic flowers and baked bread add a layer of confusion and absurdity.

As an individual raised within the walls of a well-decorated house, I find aspects of the home such as wallpaper to be comforting, beautiful, and simultaneously bizarre. In many homes, the decision to decorate is often completed by women and has resulted in a long history of companies, products, and magazines targeting women and their desire to beautify one's home in a specific style or manner. In *Subversion*, I have taken an antique wallpaper pattern and have manipulated it using ceramics, photography, and Photoshop in an attempt to give it an authority that both embraces and questions the standardization of

beauty and happiness.

As an artist working from a personal background, the materials and content I employ are chosen for their relationship to women and the domestic space, but also for their long tradition in many women's contemporary art practices. Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* and Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* are examples of contemporary artists that have influenced me by way of their ability to create critical and provocative work that speaks to the female identity within and outside of the home. The tension I find between the humor and elegance of *Buffer* and its comfy yet repulsive quality are comparable to those I find within *The Dinner Party* and *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. In the case of Chicago and Rosler's work, they will often use pleasant characteristics associated with women and the home in order to contrast the darker realities behind socially constructed gender roles and expectations. As illustrated in *Buffer*, the unusual, but pleasant sight of the bread is at once grotesque and tempting. It may instill in the viewer thoughts about whether or not the chair and its "cushion" are comfortable and appetizing, or in fact fail within a conventional sense; and it is for this reason that the chair embraces its failure and presents to the viewer an imperfect reality.

Continuing to investigate the relationship between constructed ideals and their realities, *Impressions* explores the home as a container concealing its inner contents from the public eye. Composed of twenty ceramic house-shaped pans, filled and baked in with bread then arranged in rows, the display is reminiscent of a pre-planned neighborhood or a suburban landscape. Each loaf of bread, unlike their generic containers and its structured presentation, balloon up, over, and out of the top of the pans forming a variety

of misshapen roofs. Through the repetition and an emphasis on the inconsistencies of each loaf, I aim to reflect a desire people may have to achieve the “perfect” life while embracing the shortcomings we experience when failing to do so.

In addition to its formal qualities, the repetitive actions I employ harkens back to my childhood and the sense of hard work and gender-oriented tasks like baking and cooking that women such as my mother and grandmothers completed. Even though having homemade bread was a treat and rarity within my family, it was a weekly chore for my maternal and paternal grandmothers. According to my father, he alone would eat half a loaf of bread everyday, and to think about the speed in which his family would consume a loaf of bread in one sitting always seems to contradict the amount of time it would have taken for his mother to mix and prepare bread for each week.

In the textile installation *Habitual*, repetition found within tasks or activities such as baking also appears, but coincides with my attraction to patterns and routines in daily life and within the decorative arts. As an artist and maker I enjoy the satisfaction and focus I gain from completing monotonous and routine work. Consisting of sixty-three large fabric squares all stamped with a stained ring and sewn together, *Habitual* relates to the repetitive nature of quilting both in its creation and display, but also to the routines people throughout their daily life. The ring stain left from the bottom of a drinking vessel becomes an artifact or tracing from another time or life lived.

A cup stain in general is a marking that one often tries to prevent through the use of a coaster or tablecloth. In this particular piece the coffee ring demands attention through a dramatic shift in scale and repetition. *Habitual*, is ultimately elevating an overlooked

aspect of the home and highlighting the beauty I see within objects and routines of domestic life. Reflecting further upon my choices of materials and modes of display, *Habitual*, draws connections to traditional tasks women in the home were often responsible for such as baking, laundry and cleaning. In this particular piece, I am intentionally “staining” and ruining each square of fabric to create an image that evokes power and grace.

In the piece *Traces*, a similar use of stains and fabric is used to illustrate a moment experienced. However, rather than stains being static and controlled, *Traces* is an active piece that changes throughout the course of the ten-day exhibition. Consisting of a round white table and tablecloth, two cast ceramic coffee cups are placed opposite each other and filled with water. As water seeps through the porous bottoms, two stains begin to form and expand outwards. The aspect and narrative of time that is present within this piece suggests an experience that two people are having or have already shared. Once the cups have emptied, the stains are the only thing that remain and become records of time. In the essay *The Pleasure of Not Knowing* by John Elderfield, it is noted that artist Helen Frankenthaler sometimes created her stained paintings from memory or from memories of landscapes she saw during vacations or country weekends. Though some critics viewed her act of staining as an explicitly feminine action, I see the stains more as tool in which she could capture the ephemeral nature of time, memory, and space. The slow absorption and uncontrolled nature of each stain allow her to create “indexical records of something other than the artist’s hand.”(29) In *Traces*, I control the making of each cup and the choice of which fabric and dye to use, but like Frankenthaler, each stain is created

from elements beyond my control. I realize that stains are evocative markings and will almost always remind one of the human body, however it is through the absence of the body that I see the stain as a symbol or an artifact from a life lived. I believe it is also through the absence of the body and its ephemeral nature that helps *Traces* to evoke a somber and pensive mood. This somewhat melancholic feeling created in *Traces* can also be felt within the sixth and final piece, *Cast*.

Consisting of an overall uniformly white glazed ceramic house and pedestal nearly fifteen times its size, *Cast* can evoke a sense of isolation and loneliness. Through its drastic difference in scale, the miniature house appears to be surrounded by a vast and empty landscape. As an artist coming from the vast prairies of Canada and working with traditional craft based mediums, I wanted to create a poignant and simple piece that contrasted the complex history between fine art and craft. Unlike the decorative arts and history of kitsch ornaments, *Cast* bears no color, fine details, or patterns on its surfaces. Apart from the slight glow given by the gallery lighting and the crackled glazed surface, the overall impersonal and minimalist nature of the house are qualities I associate with the appearance and role of the pedestal within a traditional gallery space. The combined use of scale, medium, and integration of the pedestal is ultimately a metaphor for the exclusion many artists have experienced from historical and contemporary art institutions based upon their gender, race, and artistic medium.

As a young artist interested in nuclear families, gender identity, and the domestic space I often wonder how different my beliefs, values, and identity may have been had my parents adopted fewer domestic conventions. Although the entirety of *Misgiving* is

comprised of six individual pieces, the overarching themes present within my work unapologetically arise from personal experiences and a life of growing up on the prairies. Through the use of materials, objects, and themes relating to the home *Misgiving* aims to present a general overview of a desire among many to achieve the perfect life, but ultimately reaching an acceptance of its many flaws and imperfections.

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Biography

In 2006, Jenna Turner enrolled at a local college in her hometown Red Deer, Alberta where she stumbled across a clay class that eventually lead to her degree from the Alberta College of Art and Design. After graduation in 2011, Jenna completed two artist residencies, a solo exhibition, participated in numerous group exhibitions, and worked to digitally catalogue over 700 works with the Red Deer College Permanent Art Collection. In 2012, Jenna moved to New Orleans, LA to complete her Master of Fine Arts at Tulane University and will be returning to Canada in the near future to establish a life and career within the fine arts.



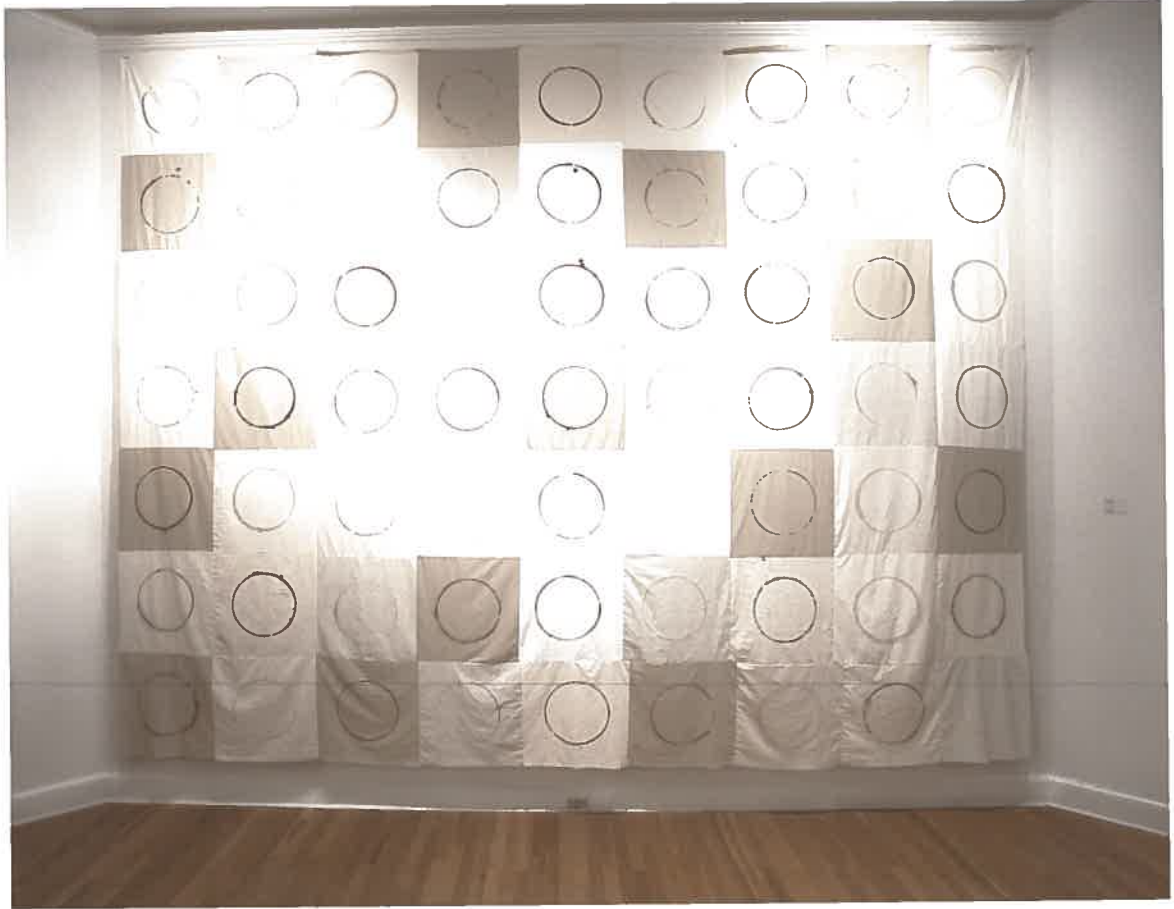
Misgiving, (2014), Installation view.



Cast, (2014), Glazed ceramic, wood, and latex paint. 54" x 24" x 32"



Cast (detail), (2014), Glazed ceramic, wood, and latex paint. 54" x 24" x 32"



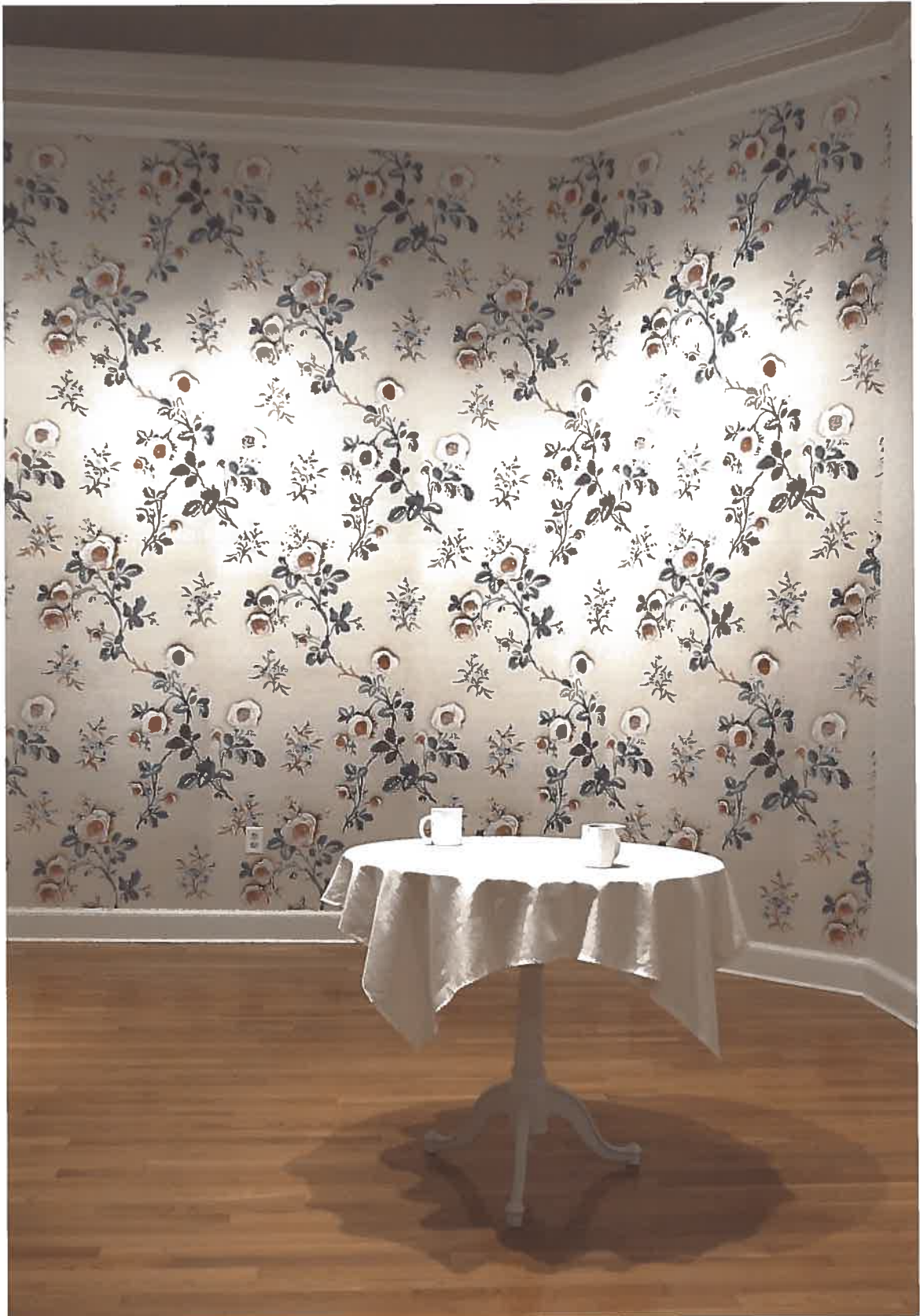
Habitual, (2014), Fabric and dye. 137" x 178"



Impressions, (2014), Glazed ceramics and bread. 44" x 42" x 10"



Buffer, (2014), Glazed ceramic, bread, steel, and chair. 34" x 17" x 17"



Traces, (2014), Ceramic, dye, paint, water, cloth, and table. 30" x 36" x 36"



Traces (detail), (2014), Ceramic, dye, paint, water, cloth, and table. 30" x 36" x 36"