

The Past is Today

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Abstract:

Process is a vital element to construction and deconstruction. Yet, materiality serves as a vehicle to expose the aesthetics developed by the process. However, without memories, the construction of these bodies of work would have never been conceived. Rapid change was the initial experience that formed memories in the first place, it was inevitable. Hence, an adaptation method had to be examined. The trees had proven to be worthy of the investigation. The trees required materials and the materials demanded a process. Process developed the work and the work had to have context. Context evolved from memory and required more materials, so the composition of all these elements together blossomed into an aesthetic. These are the essential tools in my practice: one leads to the next, yet one is contingent on the other.



Library of Memory

Memory is the mind's capacity to retain, recall, and recollect one's previous experiences and encounters. It is an essential part of a human being's existence. Without it we wouldn't be able to learn a language, build relationships, or even develop our personal identities. Though memory is clearly a crucial part of our bodies, it is not really a physical "thing." Memory is not like any other body part; it is more of a concept that suggests the process of remembering. Wikipedia describes memory as "the faculty of the mind by which information is encoded, stored, and retrieved."¹ It sounds very systematic and process-based: encoded once received by the brain, then stored, and finally retrieved. It makes me imagine the brain as a bookshelf in an old library that is jam-packed with books to the ceiling. Yet, they are all organized categorically, top to bottom, left to right. Can you imagine too? You dig through your memory by inserting yourself into your brain and getting on a rolling ladder, scrolling right and left climbing up and down just to find that precious moment that you have stored in your archive of memories. If you blink for a second and look at yourself from outside of your head, you're pausing, gazing, trying to hold still so you don't fall off the ladder when you're in the inside. Then you scratch your head and fall off the ladder inside your brain and forget that you were even searching, because you're distracted by something else that is happening in front of you. And before you head to bed, you start thinking, was I looking for something today? What was I thinking about? You enter a battle of thought with your own self, and before you win, you lose as you doze off into sleep.

"This is also true in life. But it is truer still in daydreams. For the real houses of memory, the houses to which we return in dreams, the houses that are rich in unalterable oneirism, do not readily lend themselves to description. To describe them would be like showing them to visitors. We can perhaps tell everything about the present, but about the past!"²



I couldn't help but fantasize about Wikipedia's generic description of memory, turning it into a scene revived by a daydream.

A daydream I know Gaston Bachelard would believe. How beautiful is it to house our memories? We return to our homes after the long days of studio labor to comfort our exhaustion, as our endless thoughts return to their house of memories to rest in a dream.

A friend of mine who was very much invested in research about memory once asked me, Did you know that, as I'm speaking to you right now, this moment is being encoded into memory? That question became engraved in my thought, and I was constantly revisiting this concept, as it slowly made its way into my studio practice.

Materials have always been like candy land for a kid to me. I've never thought about constraining myself with a specific medium because I want to explore them all.

I'm always looking for new materials to explore in my bodies of work. So in relation to the memory concept, I found myself endlessly fascinated by materials that convey a process of memory, or even have a sense of memory in their qualities.

A variety of examples from my studio would be glass, plaster, cement, and recently clay. Glass casting, for instance, has a very interesting working time. It is relatively a fast-paced process; you have to show up at the hot shop with a plan, knowing primarily what you are interested in making. But then, as you pursue the process of hot casting, you need to be open to chance and alternative possibilities. In the glass-making community they like to think that the glass has a mind of its own sometimes.

To make this easier to understand, I'll take one of my projects as an example: "Disrupted patience". I wanted to pour hot glass into a regular, off-the-shelf, glass teacup. This process took more cups than I anticipated, because of the various ways the hot glass responded to these industrially manufactured pieces. So when I say the glass has a mind of its own, I mean for instance that I was pouring hot glass into my teacup, thinking it would work fine, but the

hot glass was not very compatible with the tea

cup—causing it to shatter into pieces. Yet, at other times, using a porcelain teacup, the hot glass settled smoothly at the bottom of the cup, eventually filling it up. The accumulated heat inside the teacup caused it to crack, but not shatter. When the hot glass cools, it serves as an adhesive agent to the cracked tea cup, pausing that moment of rupture. In my mind, this whole process demonstrates that of encoding a memory. Being able to perform a destructive form of making and then pausing that moment of disruption is, in an abstract way, sealing memories.

Another body of work also touches on perceptions of memory, yet from another perspective: by depicting memory as a state itself and not as the process of collecting memory or storing it. This is more like when memory is described as a concept and not a body part, or as written in The Poetics of Space: "Memory - what a strange thing it is! -doesn't record concrete duration, in the Bergsonian sense of the word. We are unable to relive duration that has been destroyed. We can only think of it, in the line of an abstract time that is deprived of all thickness." ³

I started a series of mixed media drawings/paintings: "Thoughts on fabric"; I don't believe that I can identify them as a singular category, as I feel that they serve as drawings as much as they serve as paintings. This body of work embodies layers of abstract geometric and architectonic forms on the surface of the painting in various mediums, such as cement and acrylic medium, wax and charcoal, graphite and acrylic paint, and finally oil paint and sharpies.

The surface of the work was cheesecloth in all of them, stiffened in some and unstiffened in others, where it was stretched like a canvas on stretcher bars. Those works evoke the idea of time, and the thin wall between ourselves and our past; what we have and what we had. What would our memories look like if our moments were as long as snapping a picture? The work is in an inconclusive state of a moment or rather a memory that is interrupted by the present constantly becoming a memory. The unpredictable weight of materials hovering over the surface enforces the ephemerality of the moment, pinned by ideas of shedding skin as

a result of moving on and a connotation of change and new beginnings. There are references to construction and deconstruction. The fact that you can see the construction of the canvas itself is a transparency through our time, and the support we lean on in order to adapt. This is a partial reflection of our lives, an impression of my experience living through constant change, and an attempt to depict the floating concept of memory in a solid form.



Nostalgia

As I think about memory, I cannot help being pulled into my own archive of memories. Memories of home are the strongest, ones that constantly urge me to develop connections between encounters here and there. But where is here and where is there? The difference often blurs. Here is the US, here is my studio, here is my independent solitary time, here is where I developed these thoughts. But, there is the UAE, there is where I grew up, there is the place I left to be here. There is never the same when you come back after you leave, yet there is family, home, and a place always to belong to and long for. I grew up in a small neighborhood in the heart of the capital, Abu Dhabi. Small enough that I would walk to my grandparents' house; the area between our house and theirs was my playground. All the kids from the neighborhood would come outside to play in the late afternoons. This was in the mid-1990s, when most of Abu Dhabi was flat empty areas that we as kids turned into our playgrounds. Not for long though: in the late 90s we had to move to a new home on the outskirts of the city, and that was not the last time. We moved about seven times, moving outwards as development and construction took place rapidly, turning our playgrounds into high-rise structures, quickly occupying all the negative space available. Soon the sounds of kids playing in the afternoons was replaced by hammering, pulling, and pushing of construction materials at construction sites. The disturbing noise and unfriendly environment sent most of the city's residents to the outlying districts. As soon as that phenomenon of rapid change and development started taking place, more and more things started to become ephemeral.

I remember going back into the city during the weekends. My parents would take me and my sisters to play in arcades. It is challenging to try and remember those arcades in detail now, they were only there temporarily available, just like one would remember the circus. There was never a permanent amusement or entertainment venue until today, the ones available in malls and friendly neighborhood parks. I can't forget the trees that lined the corniche of Abu Dhabi; they had speakers installed in them, and as we walked by them with my dad we would hear Egyptian music interrupting the sound of the waves hitting the rocks. As we walked

Disrupting patience, 2016, Glass, porcelain, cement, fabric, and cinderblock

further we would only hear echoing tunes from the trees, those are now replaced with extended roads.

By the time I left the UAE two years ago, in 2015, it was already significantly transformed from what I remember it to be in the '90s. When I came back a year later after moving to the states, it was hard for me to comprehend the amount of change that had taken place. The drastic changes developed my senses to realize the precious things we lose in change. I grew more curious and interested in this moment of in betweenness, as if I had a new perspective of the place I grew up in. What do we lose in between? When moving from -> to? What's between old and new? Do we have time to process losing the old and welcoming the new? We have a saying in the Emirates: "The New is deeply loved" but does that mean we disregard what we had for what we have? New and old have very different interpretations here and there. I could say old in the US and refer to something that is 50-100 years old, while saying old in the UAE could reference as little as a few months. It makes sense though; the UAE is only 45 years old, established in 1971. The experience of growing up in an ever-changing city lies as a backbone for my obsession with change and ephemerality in art. Underlining change and ephemerality as crucial vocabularies in my practice.

I have found it hard for me to detach myself from my homeland. I constantly find myself subconsciously forming relationships between encounters here and there. I am relentlessly haunted by culture and tradition that I am clearly nostalgic for. But, I also ask myself: does that mean I will be less interested in culture and tradition once I return? I do not believe that is true. On the contrary, I believe that the distance helped me clarify my interests.

I think culture and traditions are endangered at this time by globalization and drastic change. My most recent works and experiments revolve around restaging daily past rituals from memory that have cultural references, such as teatime and a traditional weaving method practiced by my grandmother's generation. The work "I Didn't Mean to Break It,

It Happened Fast" took the form of an installation, depicting the Arabic floor mat with two pillows against

the wall in the corner of a room. The pillows were hand stitched using cheesecloth to encapsulate the simplicity of the object. Traditional flower patterns were then applied on the surface of the pillow using cement as a paste scraped through a stencil. The corner setting is opposed by a cinderblock as a coffee table, topped with "Disrupted patience" a series of traditional porcelain tea and coffee cups that I had poured hot glass into—causing them to break and maintain that state of breakage. I'm interested in the idea of the duality between the simple cultural rituals and the heavy construction materials that connote the major developments disrupting culture and tradition. The piece is very minimalistic and the ephemeral qualities of the materials stage a poetic environment for the installation that touches on notions of nostalgia.

Change is happening all around the world; I cannot say we are the only ones going through it. I also believe that the intentions of these changes and development where I come from is mainly to enhance living circumstances and offer the best services available in the world to our citizens. Obviously that doesn't mean that change does not come without consequences.

My Urban Desert

The question here is; how do we adapt to change? What is adaptability and how can we develop a relationship with it? If you pursue a little research on adaptability as a formal term in a google search, you will realize that the most common use of this topic is referencing adaptability in the world of business and economy. Although most articles and essays written on the topic seem to be easily relatable or equivalent to the issues of our current world, I am not interested in the topic from that perspective. I'm more interested in the existing forms of adaptability in our nature.

In 2013 I was accompanying a group of artists on a small trekking trip, visiting the oldest residential area in Abu Dhabi, which was scheduled to be demolished soon after. We entered a neighborhood that wasn't in a very good shape, and probably unlivable due to lack of maintenance and age, yet still filled with life. You might ask, how can an unlivable area be full of life? Well, there was another type of life taking over the area: trees! Trees were growing around the houses, emerging from cracks, surviving on water leakage, more lively and vibrant than if I had grown them in my own garden. This phenomenon of trees and plants growing in such inhospitable areas is the ideal example of the kind of adaptability that I am interested in. I continuously challenge myself and my work using this instance of adaptability. Our development and urban planning of taking land and turning it into residential spaces is an intrusive act towards trees, just as intrusive as constantly constructing and deconstructing temporal spaces in my childhood memories. Yet, the persistent nature of these plants allowed them to force their presence within our man-made structures, emerging from architecture itself, reflecting a strong form of adaptability. In my case, as an artist from an ever-changing city, I have come to understand that when change is inevitable, adaptability is a necessary trait that you want to own.

Utilizing our basic way of thinking and nature's way of adapting to change, I've constructed a body of work: "My urban desert", combining two materials: cement and found tree stems. For these works, I first cast small blocks of cement and planted the stems into the cement shortly after pouring



I didn't mean to break it, it happened fast!, 2016, Glass, porcelain, and metal, (25"x25")

in the block mold. When the cast sets, the end result is a tree stem emerging from a cement block. The gesture was mainly focused on emphasizing the importance of the tree by planting it in a small base that connotes architecture. After repeating the process with 6 trees, I then installed them in an empty room. I focused on their placement in the space by connecting them to the white walls of the room through straight black wires that extended from various points on each stem. The wires served as lines of drawing in space as well as form of connection between the tree structures and the environment it was staged in.

The way that the viewers confronted these structures motivated me to continue building more trees. The installation instantly slowed viewers down as soon as they entered the space, worried that they would break one or hit the wires and disrupt the piece. It seemed like the installation was indirectly forcing the viewer to adapt to her environment, and that became a goal to me: gaining the viewer's attention and getting her to slow down and process what is happening in her surroundings. Shedding light on moments that we often do not pay attention to.





My urban desert, 2016, Found wood, music wire, cement, tallest (65"x25"), shortest (45"x15")

Process

What role does process play in manifesting the ideas of my work? I've always known that my studio practice is intensely process-driven. It is a generative method; one process develops the next. Process art mainly emphasizes the process of a body of work. This type of art movement is about the journey of making as oppose to the deliverable end product. In my studio, process always drives the work, but the end product is just as important. I believe that is where materiality is celebrated in my work. What intrigues me about process-based art is the intimacy developed between the artist as a maker and the materials that construct the work. There is a thin line that connects process-based art and materiality art, and I am invested in both categories. The process of my making is just as important as the material I am using.

Process in my studio takes the form of a ritualistic act; not a religious one, but more of a sequence of activities involving gestures and objects that I construct, form, and build to be situated in a body of work. The gestures are embodied in decisions made in regards to placement of objects in relation to others. The work that best references this from of process is the installation I developed that alludes a fictional teatime setup "Dining east or west?".

I was interested in further developing "I Didn't Mean to Break It, It Happened Fast" installation, and the more I produced the tea and coffee cup pieces in the glass hotshop, the more I felt the urgency to develop an environment for these pieces. When I poured the hot glass into these utensils, causing them to break but yet operating as an adhesive agent for this moment, occurred to reference teatime interrupted by impatience. Like Janine Antoni's work "Too Long" where she restaged a moment of listening to someone's heart by putting one's head on their chest. The sculpture depicts a ribcage with a head on it, attempting to listen to the heart. If you look at the ribcage from the inside, you can see the person's ear emerging into the internal part of the ribcage. ⁴



In parallel to my process of making the tea cups piece, I was producing objects that responded to the current hybridity evolving in my culture. Since the western world evidently affected our lifestyle after globalization, the teatime table or dining table developed into a hybrid setting consisting of both objects influenced by the local tradition of the UAE, as well as western culture.

“Dining east or west?” took the form of a western dining table setup, yet the height of the table was in between floor seating height and chair seating height. I want you to imagine how uncomfortable this dining set up would be to utilize. The table top is a thick sheet of acrylic glass sitting on top of two cinderblocks that form the base of the table. Positioning the acrylic sheet on the cinderblocks is already uncomfortable, as the concrete scratches the smooth bottom surface of the sheet. Surrounding the table are four cinderblocks functioning as chairs. Yet, in between these cinderblocks are casts of glass feet bottoms positioned in a floor seated gesture, referring to individuals seated on the floor among others occupying the cinderblocks. Some of the cinderblocks are opposed with crossed feet casted in cement. In the center of the table is a glass cast vase with an abstract form topping the vase suggesting flowers. The vase is surrounded by a chaotic scene of broken tea and coffee cups filled with molten glass. Glass casts of hands were positioned in some areas suggesting an attempt of trying to hold the cups from falling as they were positioned at various edges of the table.

The installation is pretty chaotic and hard to describe, but as you can imagine it is not something you would normally think of having in your home.

It encouraged the viewers to develop a narrative, in attempt to understand the situation. But this piece was explicitly formed through process; it was never an intention to stage this whole scene. It started with the tea cups and the tea cups required someone to save them from their falling-apart gesture. But in order for someone to save them they had to be part of a set-up, and what would that be other than a teatime gathering. Yet, gatherings are not as simple as they used to be; it's a maximalist society so I have to set the table with flowers and the table needed seats, but I only had cinderblocks. I'm interested in a

minimalistic approach, so I felt as if I was in a battle between my interests and what my work is trying to be. It continues: since sitting on the floor is part of the Emirati culture, someone had to occupy that space. And so one gesture led to the next, I was more of a listener and observer of these objects than the agent that positioned them where they wanted to be. The process of placement was very important as it invoked the viewer to question when, where, and how this installation came to place. Or even what is happening in this set up?

To Repair Not to Restore

Melted glass, broken porcelain, abandoned homes, adapting trees, and fragmented castings—they all share common aesthetic qualities. I've always been drawn to raw materials, to the satisfying beauty in the imperfection, to construction and deconstruction, the attempt to repair, but not restore. Wabi-sabi is a representation of Japanese aesthetics that is centered around the ideas of accepting imperfection and transience. Its characteristics mostly revolve around asymmetry, roughness, simplicity, economy, austerity, modesty, intimacy, and an appreciation of the ingenious integrity of natural objects along with their processes. Everything I have talked about in the previous pages brings me to this aesthetic.

I am not interested in the machine-made or the “perfectly proportional” work of art. But, constantly captivated by the natural deterioration of objects over time, and the reaction of materials in response to forced dualities. Being constantly surrounded by construction and deconstruction in my city, I grew more interested in the demolished opposed to the newly developed. We long for what we lose as humans, but as Emiratis, do we have time to yearn with understanding for those things we've lost?

Because my practice is heavily influenced by materiality, I had to be patient, observant, and experimental in order to develop a strong relation with the material examined, allowing unexpected possibilities. Cement, plaster, glass, fabric, threads, and clay have become essential mediums in my studio. Each of those materials come in handy for different purposes depending on the subject of the work. But, what they all have in common is their fragile, yet strong qualities depending on the method they are constructed in or produced.

You might question why are we talking about materials and materiality of a body of work when we are supposed to be discussing the aesthetics that tie my work to wabi-sabi. I believe that the materials I use in my work are the crucial aspect to wabi-sabi aesthetics, since their physical qualities in the way I use them tends to make the material imperfect, incomplete, and almost transient.

For instance, when I decided to create “My urban desert”,

I wasn't worried about how to make a perfect piece. I was more concerned about how to translate a thought and an essence of a tree with wires suggesting construction ideas of construction. The ephemeral quality of the installation was completely intentional; I wanted the viewer to feel like they are walking around a very fragile body of work. For that particular reason I decided to take this project further and produce more trees, yet this time I aspired to sculpt my own instead of using found stems and twigs. I needed to immerse myself in this intimate process of clay sculpting. Clay is also a raw material that is derived from earth like sand and dirt. The material is at its most fragile state prior to firing, yet, turns stone-hard by the time it is taken out of the kiln. The beauty that I am driven towards in this process is allowing the clay to respond to my gestures. For instance, If I push a dent in an area, then pull it back to the way it was, it often comes back after firing; they say clay has memory. I would bend the tree in multiple areas as I form it, carve holes, slit open areas, pushing the strength of the stem to a vulnerable state. Some of the stems make it in one piece after they are fired, others break into random sections and I accept it. I work with the broken pieces as they are; I attempt to reconnect them by stitching them together, a form of bond or repair that I find aesthetically pleasing. It also completely falls in line with the wabi-sabi state of mind: “Acceptance of the inevitable. Wabi-sabi is an aesthetic of the evanescence of life. The Luxuriant tree of summer is now only withered branches under a winter sky. All that remains of a splendid mansion is a crumbled foundation overgrown with weeds and moss. Wabi-sabi images force us to contemplate our own mortality, and they evoke an existential loneliness and tender sadness. They also stir a mingled bittersweet comfort, since we know all existence share the same fate.”⁵

Glazing is another form of applying a skin of color to the tree sculptures and allowing the material to develop its own character. I chose a glaze that reacts to the heat of the kiln randomly creating a decayed or burned and worn-out skin. By mixing this recipe of glaze with different neutral colors and applying each recipe in different areas, I never know what the final will look like, but again I accept it.

The description of wabi-sabi was never explained in depth and it is always defined more as an essence of something than a concrete object. The aesthetics in my work and the kind of beauty I find in objects and their materiality are the same; I cannot fully describe them, but I can always attempt to convey the essence of that depiction.

Through materiality occurs the aesthetic and through construction and deconstruction revives the process. Without memories, the construction of these bodies of work would have never been conceived. Yet, rapid change was the initial cause that formed memories. Without change I wouldn't have been able to access my jam-packed library of the brain. Change was inevitable, but I had to adapt, I had to learn from the trees. The trees required materials and the materials demanded a process. Process developed the work and the work had to have context. Context evolved from memory and required more materials, so the composition of all these elements together blossomed into an aesthetic. These are the essential tools in my practice: one leads to the next, yet one is contingent on the other.





Untitled, 2017, ceramic, plexi
tube, copper, twine (1'x 1')

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