

FROM AFAR IT IS AN ISLAND

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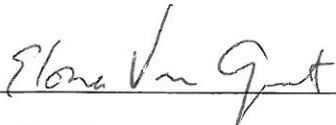
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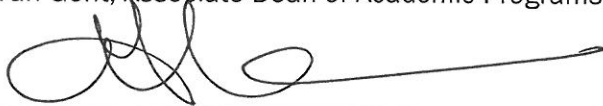
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Abstract

From Afar It Is an Island is an art exhibition that explores the indeterminate ontological realm of objects, their narrative potential, and taxonomic slippage. In this MFA thesis project, exhibited in the University of Michigan's Kelsey Museum of Archaeology (2013), the visitor encounters a range of fabricated, found, and hybrid objects that resist classification; these objects, with their blurred edges, appear at once familiar and uncertain, obscure and associative. This MFA thesis documents the act of collecting, material experimentation and creative process that went into the creation of this particular body of work. In addition, this document discusses the artistic and textual references that informed the project—ranging from 17th century wunderkammer to the 19th century pseudoscience of psychometry.

Keywords

Objects, things, collections, museum, archaeology, wonder, curiosity, psychometry, wunderkammer, display, curiosity, classification, taxonomy, perception

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**PART I:
ON PRACTICE AND PROCESS**

You enter the museum of archaeology. You walk past the cases of antiquities—statuettes with broken noses, pitch painted mummies, small artifacts on pedestals of varying heights. You climb the stairs, turn left, pass more antiquities, and enter a little room on your right. This space looks like the rest of the museum with its dim lighting and vitrines full of small objects—and yet, something here is decidedly strange. This exhibition is devoid of signage or explanatory text, nothing to situate the uncanny objects on display. To which past do these things belong? What was their original purpose, if there was one at all? The objects remind you of things you have experienced before, somewhere at the edge of memory, and, at the same time, they are wholly unfamiliar.



From Afar It Is an Island beckons the viewer to stay longer and look closer. Situated inside the University of Michigan’s Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, my exhibition uses the framework of the museum to display objects that occupy the indeterminate realm between dream and reality, nature and artifice. The visitor encounters a range of fabricated, found, and hybrid objects that resist classification; these objects, with their blurred edges, appear at once familiar and uncertain, obscure and associative.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Ranging from miniature objects carved from sea-reed (fig. 1), to fist-sized sculptures made of wax and crystallized salt (fig. 2), to various-sized masks sewn from cloth and anointed with mud (fig. 3), the small sculptures in the exhibit resemble the types of artifacts one encounters at the Kelsey Museum: a wooden winnowing fork excavated from Karanis, a doll (made of wool cloth, mud, and human hair) from Roman Egypt, a clay head of a “Male ‘Grotesque’ with Pointed Parthian Cap” from Seleucia¹—vessels, toys, charms, masks, and the curious remnants of objects that evoke stories of the past (fig. 4-6). Like the *genuine* artifacts in the archaeology museum, my objects are also plucked out of their original contexts and given new, ever-shifting identities inside the framework of the museum. It is undeniable that the setting of the archaeology museum changes the way in which we look at things. I chose this particular context because of the opportunity and challenge it presented: could I make an exhibition that was both ‘believable’ and ‘unbelievable’ at the same time? Could I create a situation in which visitors might experience both resonance and wonder? What follows is an impression of the various influences and references that went into shaping the work, as well as a view into my artistic practice.

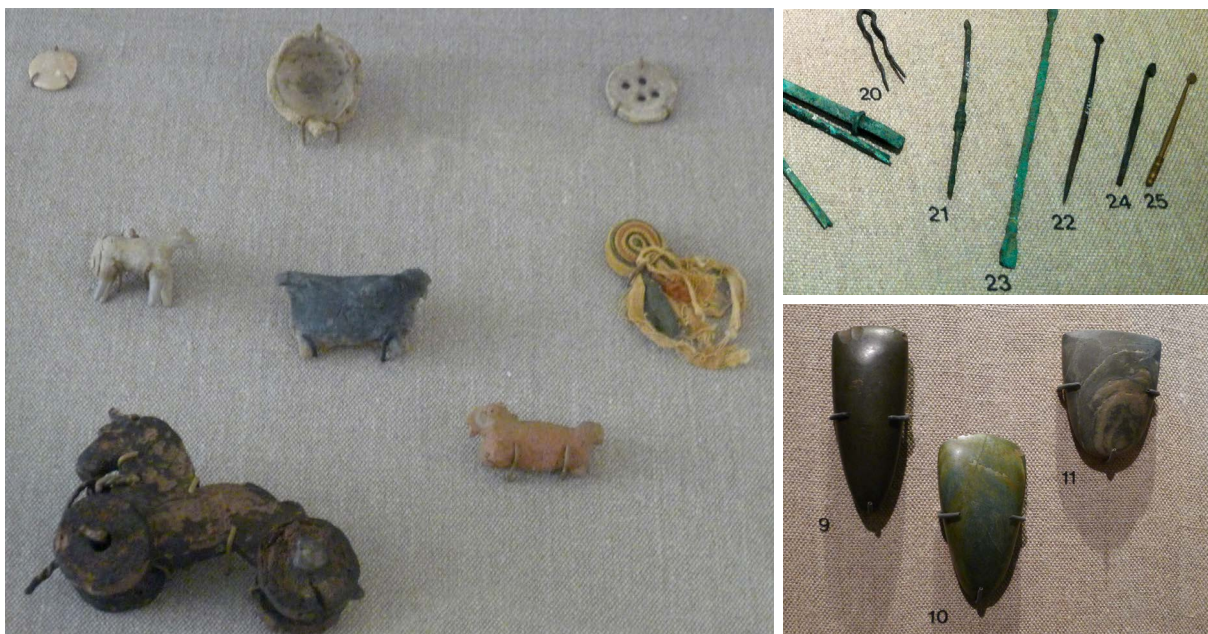


Fig. 4-6

1 Information gathered from labels at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, Ann Arbor, Michigan.



Fig. 7

My studio practice relies on time, chance, and material experimentation: the objects I make evolve gradually, often over the course of several months, with various materials added in layers and then later scraped back to expose the strata of its materiality. Sometimes the transformations are subtle—the addition of a tiny thread, for instance, or the sanding of a sharp edge—while in other instances the new form that emerges is wholly unrecognizable from its original parts. *Of Calcarious Sinter* (fig. 7), occupies this latter category. It was originally a tower-like structure built from cardboard and resin but was abandoned, crushed into smaller sections, and later put in a brine-filled aquarium atop my radiator (fig. 8). As the brine evaporated, crystals began to form both inside and outside the structure, altering its form and appearance. “The real magic is in the physical contact with materials—to change one thing into another,” artist Charles LeDray has said of his own practice.² I think of LeDray as a modern-day alchemist, carving human bone into such delicate objects as cricket cages and miniature rocking chairs. I agree that it is the working with and the reworking of materials that yields this particular magic. But the materials themselves and the act of procuring them is also an important part of the process.

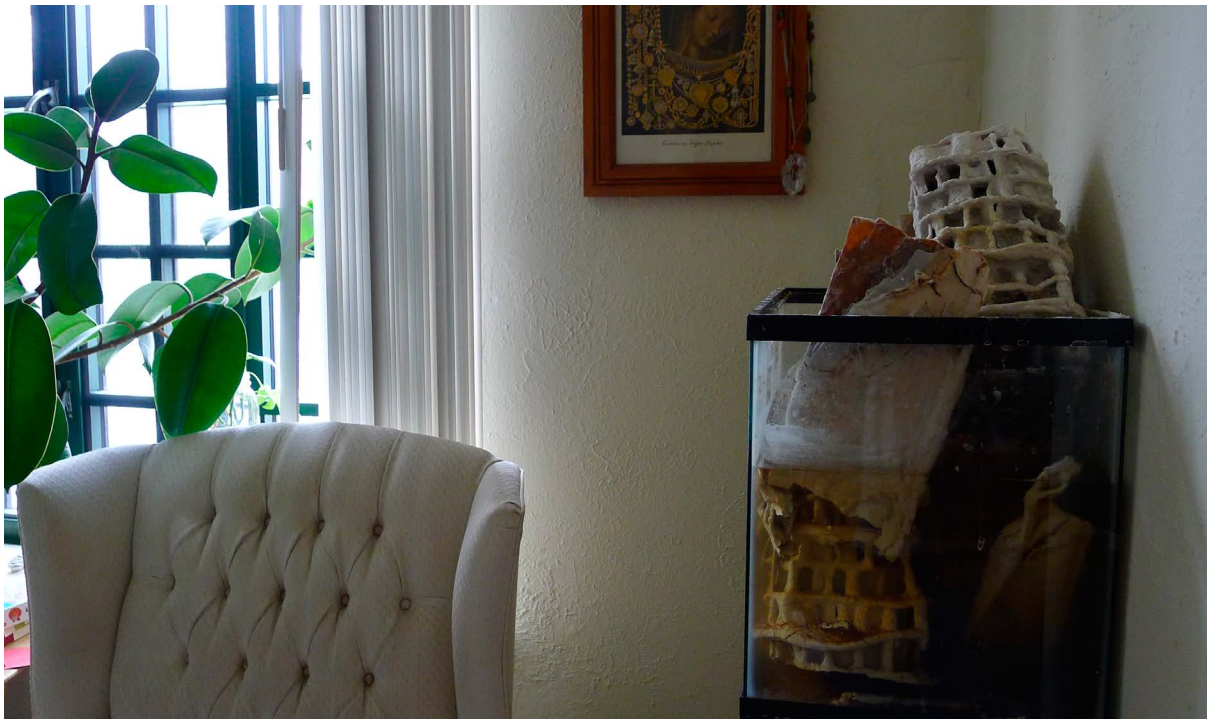


Fig. 8

² Claudia Gould and Charles LeDray, *Charles LeDray*, (Philadelphia: ICA Philadelphia, 2002), 31.



My artistic practice stems from (and responds to) the act of collecting. Over the past two years I collected a wide range of materials: some components originated from my kitchen, such as discarded elements from vegetables and fruit (peels, stems, roots), while others were gathered from city streets, flea markets, and the natural world. A piece of kelp collected from the Pacific Ocean has as much (or as little) potential as an iron hook-weight purchased from an antiquary shop. I consider these components on equal terms; both exist in a state of dormancy and readiness, waiting in preparation for the next stage to arrive. For many months the hook-weight rests on a shelf; meanwhile, I dry the gelatinous kelp in the August sun until it becomes a brittle, hollow shell. In December, I pour a stream of resin into the void of its form, infusing its fragile membrane with liquid. For a moment it teeters on the edge of several states: of being made/found, artificial/natural, liquid/solid, upright/collapsed. It gradually solidifies, the two materials fusing as one. I carefully sand the delicate form into a smooth, round shape before allowing it to finally rest. In its new state, the object has a weight uncharacteristic of its original body—it sits solid, heavy, and cold in the palm of one's hand. And yet, the memory of the ocean, of its past vegetal life, is entombed in its present form.





PART II: ON PERCEPTION AND WONDER

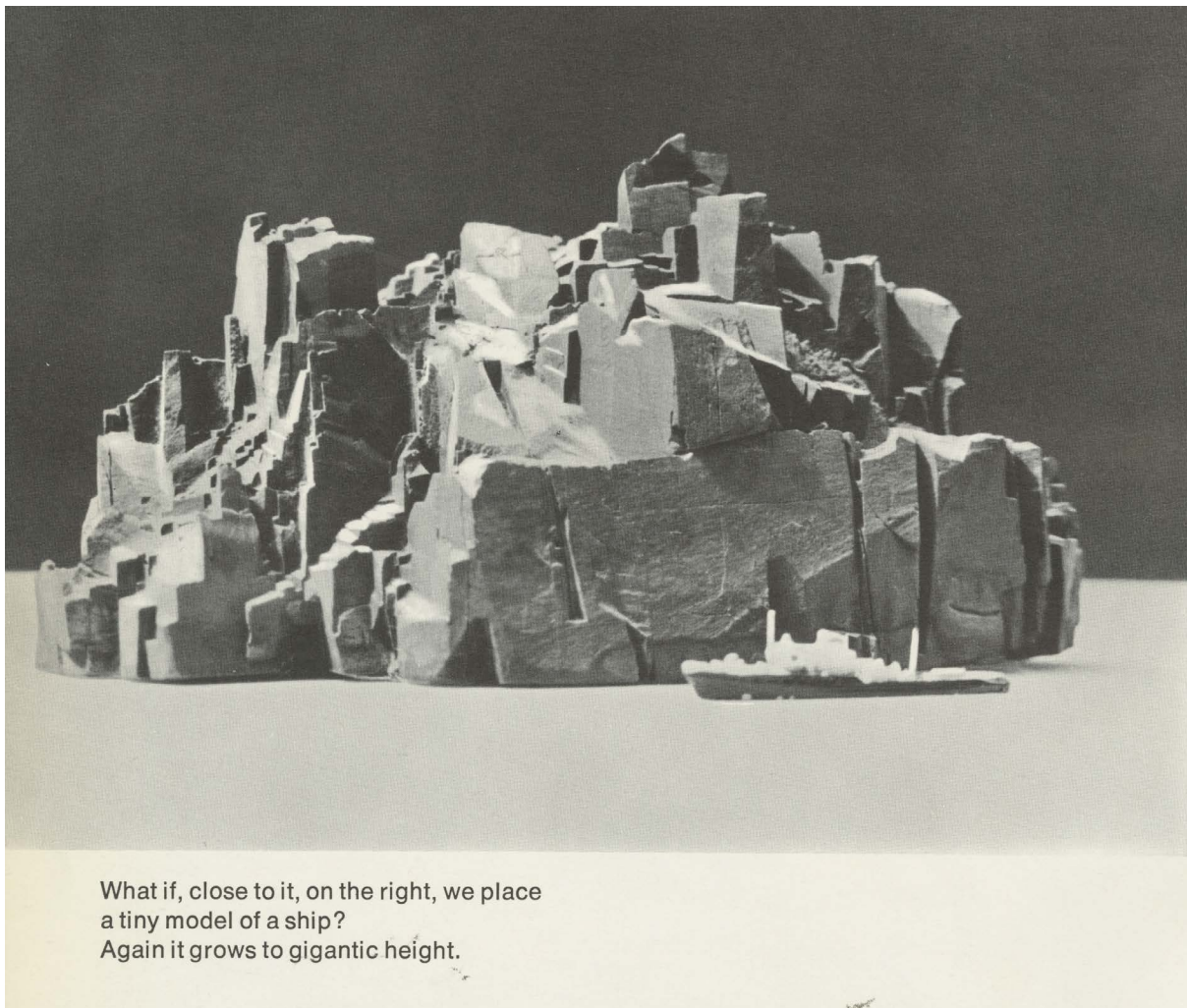
You notice a multi-colored banded object on the sidewalk of a busy foreign city. Having no idea what it is, you stoop to pick it up—realizing upon contact that it is merely an eraser, well used, very dirty. You know it to be an eraser from prior experience with other erasers: the recognizable weight in your hand, the way in which your fingernails effortlessly gouge away at its rubber surface.

The act of perception relies on the senses as much as on previous knowledge. The things that we experienced before have a tendency to influence how we understand objects in the present—the thing now close at hand. An object can be identical to another object, or we might judge it to be similar in nature. And how marvelous it is when we come across something that we cannot quite make sense of, that doesn't quite fit into our field of expectations. It is in these moments of uncertainty that an object is ripe with potential.



I called the exhibition *From Afar It Is an Island* after designer Bruno Munari's book of the same title, which explores perception of and possibilities with small objects. "Stones are like small worlds," reads a caption accompanying a crisp black and white photograph of a stone resembling a speckled planet, "If you look at them well, you discover many things: images, stories, strange markings."³ It is a book for children, complex in its scope and imagination. Viewed from a certain perspective, and with this kind of enchanted looking, a craggy stone morphs into an island:

What if, close to it, on the right, we place a tiny model of a ship?
Again it grows to gigantic height.⁴



What if, close to it, on the right, we place
a tiny model of a ship?
Again it grows to gigantic height.

3 Bruno Munari, *From Afar It Is an Island*, (New York: World Publishing, 1972), 1.

4 *Ibid.*, 30.

Munari invites the reader to consider scale and perception, namely our own bodies in relation to things we find around us. All things—the known and the enigmatic alike—can be better understood through the faculty of our senses. When we encounter an object in the world, we move around it in order to better understand what it is, we might pick it up, smell it, we might even be compelled to taste it. In *The Imperative*, philosopher Alphonso Lingis explores objects in terms of sensory engagement, how we make sense of things in relation to our bodies:

The weight a thing has is felt to be constant whether it is laid on top of our hand or lifted with one finger, whether we lift it with one hand or both, whether we lift it with our hands or feet or teeth, and whether it is laid on our stomach or our forehead which we normally rarely or never use to feel the weights of things.⁵

Many of the things I have made and collected rely on previous experience and sensory engagement to be fully understood. For instance, the petrified kelp and stub of eraser (fig. 9) both necessitate handling and knowledge of those specific materials to comprehend the materiality of those objects. Viewed at a distance, they are unknown, mysterious. When the haptic connection is severed, objects cease to be recognized and return to the moment of initial discovery, out of their original contexts, enigmatic fragments with open possibilities.

I attempted to preserve this elusive moment of discovery by cloistering my objects away from haptic recognition, behind museum vitrines. In this situation, the visitor encounters objects with a distance that never allows for full sensory engagement to occur. Like my initial sighting of the banded eraser in the street, the viewer is invited to have a first encounter with objects that could be anything, full of potential, open to interpretation. In my own experience, encounters with the unknown have the power to elicit wonder and curiosity, a thirst to keep looking. It was my intention to trigger such a response through my work.

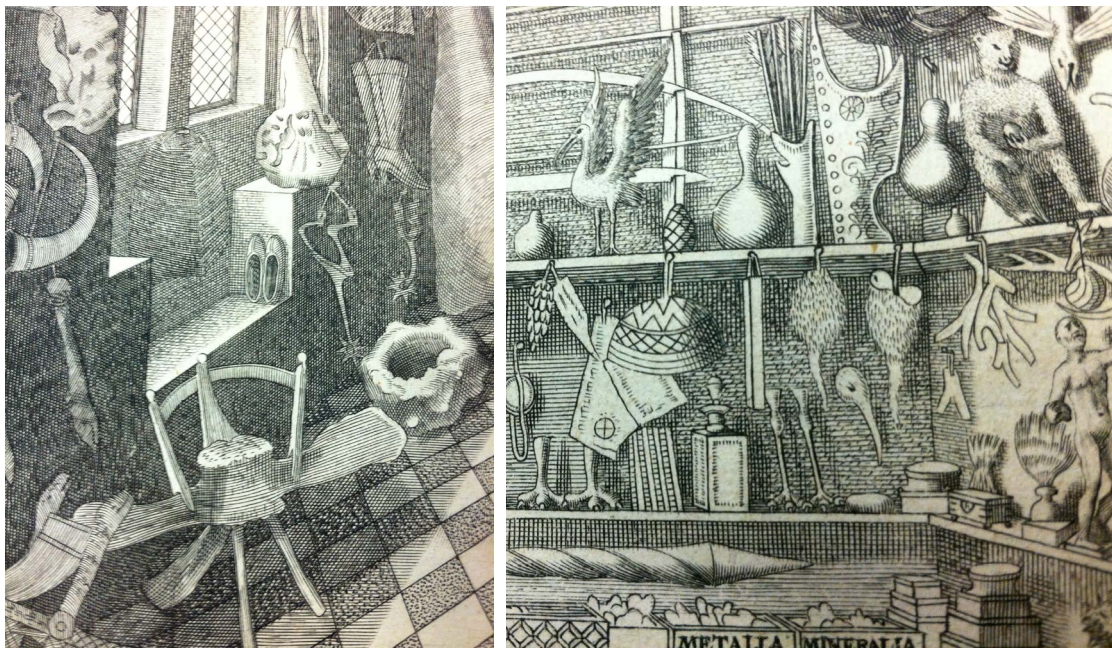
5 Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 51.



In his essay “Resonance and Wonder,” theorist and scholar Stephen Greenblatt writes about the moment of encounter inside a museum, when an object takes full command of one’s attention:

Looking may be called enchanted when the act of attention draws a circle around itself from which everything but the object is excluded, when intensity of regard blocks out all circumambient images, stills all murmuring voices.⁶

Greenblatt’s description of enchanted viewing is reminiscent of sixteenth and seventeenth century *wunderkammern*,⁷ private collections where a visitor could experience “the world within a room”⁸ through a vast and varied array of objects. Juxtaposing *artificialia* and *naturalia* (as well as blending the two categories into works of art), these early museums invited the gaze to survey the room as a whole while simultaneously focusing in on particular specimens of interest. There are many aspects of the *wunderkammer* that have been explored elegantly and at length. What interests me most in these curiosity cabinets is the slippery nature of the categories and the hybrid qualities of the things themselves.



6 Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. I. Karp and S.D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 49.

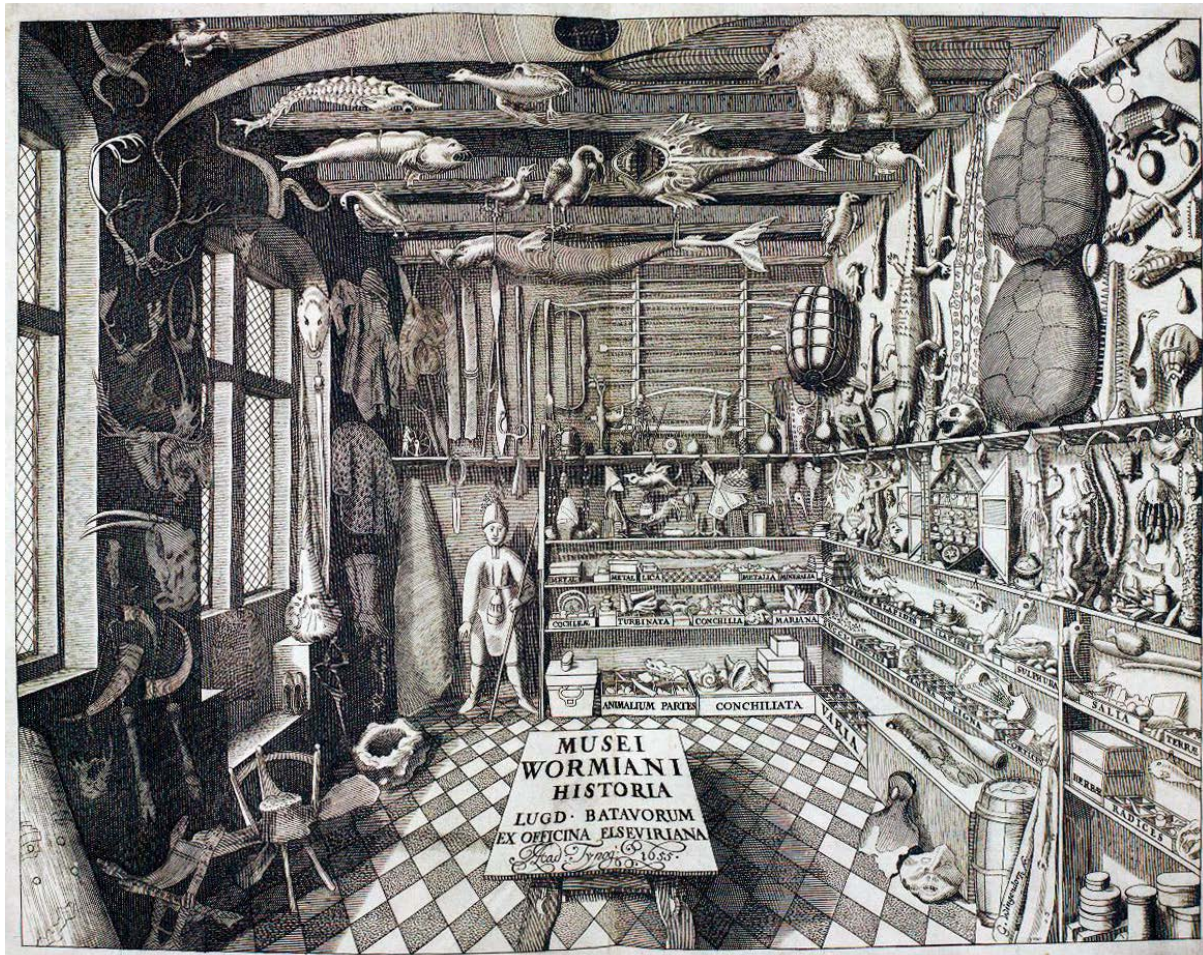
7 *Wunderkammer*: literally ‘wonder chamber’ in German.

8 Daniela Bleichmar, “Seeing the World in a Room: Looking at Exotica in Early Modern Collections,” in *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, ed. D. Bleichmar and P.C. Mancall (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 19.

Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park's book, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*, explores this subject in great detail:

The strategy of display piled one exception upon another, provocatively subverting or straddling the boundaries of familiar categories. Was a winged cat bird or animal? Was coral vegetable or mineral? Was gilded coconut shell nature or art? Distraction as well as disorientation amplified the onlooker's wonder. Not only did individual objects subvert commonplaces or shatter categories: from every nook and cranny uncountable rarities clamored simultaneously for attention.⁹

In such collections, hybrid objects of juxtaposed parts were set in direct juxtaposition with objects of equal slippage; it is little wonder that accounts of these collections were identified inconsistently and with a wide range of categories.¹⁰



9 Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*, (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 273

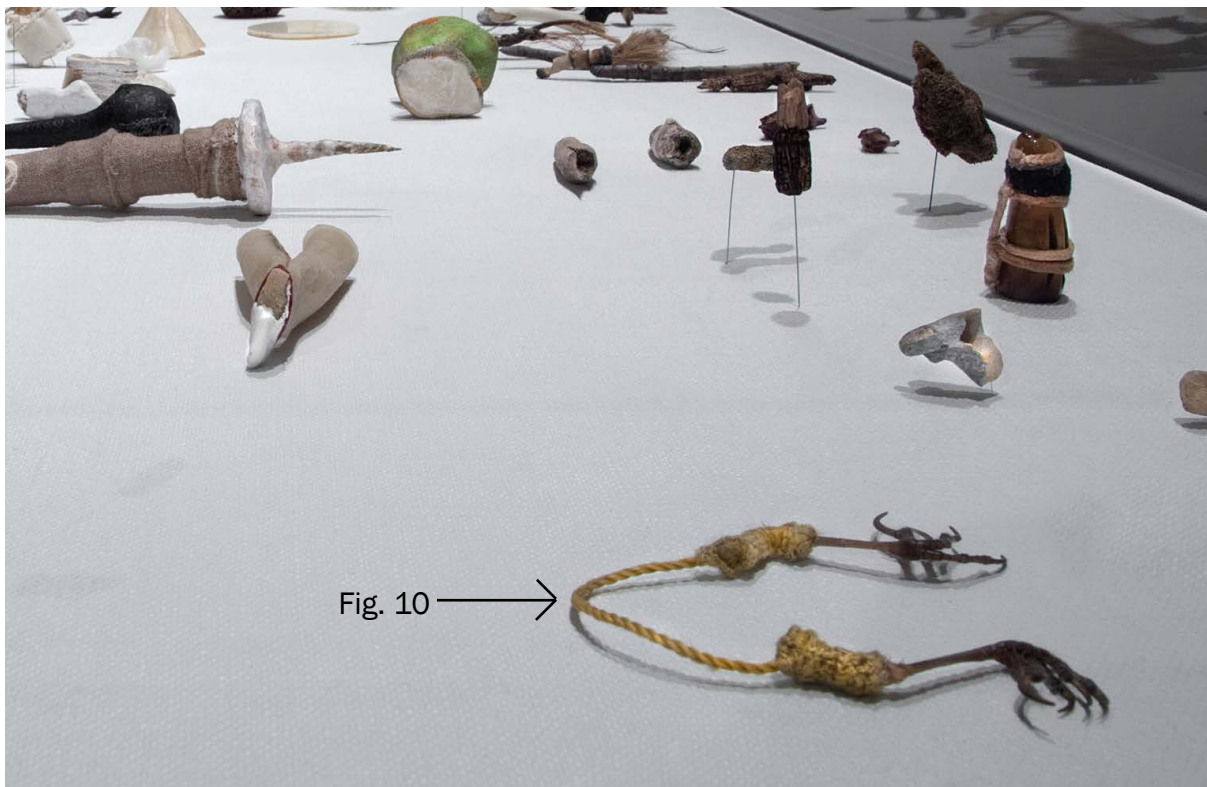
10 Bleichmar, "Seeing the World in a Room: Looking at Exotica in Early Modern Collections," 19-20.

PART III:

Possible Categories

The Things That Remind You of Other Things
The Thing Itself
Objects Appearing to Be Made
Objects Appearing to Be Found
Models of Real Places or Things
Dangerous Objects
Objects for Safe Keeping or Safe Crossing
Objects That Transport
Objects That Take Time
Objects for Passing the Time
Objects to Remember
Objects to Be Reckoned With
Objects to Be Overlooked
Objects to Be Held in the Palm of One's Hand
Objects That Have Stood the Ravages of Time
Objects That Mirror the Human Image
Objects That Use the Animal
Sweeping Devices/Implements for Sweeping
Shrinking Objects or Ones That Disappear
Petrified or Preserved Objects
Disputed Objects
Necessary Objects (practical)
Objects for Gaining Wisdom
Objects for Wielding Power
Objects for Averting One's Attention
Objects for Causing Doubt
Objects for Holding Back
Objects for Occupying Oneself With
Objects for Distracting Others
Objects for Adorning the Body
Objects for Marking Territory

What happens to our experience within a museum when we encounter an object without a corresponding label, without an ascribed category? Can the viewer “read” an object without the assistance of the institution? For *From Afar It Is an Island* I created a list of “Possible Categories” that the visitor is invited to pick up before entering the exhibition space and can be used (or abandoned) as a guide to understanding the objects. The list presents an alternative system of classification: one that holds recognizable imagery and, at the same time, is an alien method of organization. Each object within the collection might be imagined to fit under the umbrella of a different category, and at the same time, every category on the list might house an invariable number of objects. For instance, a piece made from bird’s feet and rope (fig. 10) might be imagined to exist under the following categories: “Objects That Use The Animal,” “Objects Appearing To Be Made,” “Objects Appearing To Be Found,” “Petrified or Preserved Objects,” “Dangerous Objects” and so on. In addition, there is the implication that the visitor might expand this list to include whatever categories he or she desires to exist—the categories that are not included on the list but located somewhere very far off the page.



Traditionally, our experiences looking at objects in museums are mediated by the presence of labels and explanatory wall text. These bodies of text might include where the object was found or made, what its purpose or significance was, who used or made it. Locating it within the expansive timeline of history, we attempt to make linear sense of the otherwise mysterious fragment before us. The “voice” in a label gives clear indication of the category to which the object belongs and how one should understand and contextualize the object in question. These museum texts have an influential presence, affecting the way that we look at objects and reinforcing our expectations for guidance within the museum. In *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill argues that, “taxonomies within the museum have not been considered in relation to the rational possibilities that they might enable or prevent. Classification in the museum has taken place within an ethos of obviousness.”¹¹

My list of Possible Categories is based upon the notion that every system of classification is arbitrary, and in equal terms, wondrous. In “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” by Jorge Luis Borges, “a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled *Celestial Empire of Benevolent Knowledge*,”¹² is fabled to exist. “On those remote pages it is written that animals are divided into:

- (a) those that belong to the Emperor
- (b) embalmed ones
- (c) those that are trained
- (d) suckling pigs
- (e) sirens
- (f) fabulous ones
- (g) stray dogs
- (h) those that are included in the present classification
- (i) frenzied
- (j) innumerable
- (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush
- (l) *et cetera*
- (m) having just broken the water pitcher
- (n) that from a long way off look like flies¹³

11 Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 5.

12 Jorge Luis Borges, “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” in *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, trans. by Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 103.

13 *Ibid.*, 103.

Elaborating on this taxonomy, Borges comes to the conclusion that “there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural. The reason for this is very simple: we do not know what thing the universe is.”¹⁴ Here, he conveys the importance of wonder, which is so often eradicated by ‘rational’ systems of classification. His list of categories seduces the reader under a spell of childlike curiosity, one in which it is impossible to untangle truth from fiction. In the introduction to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault famously quotes the list of categories from Borges and remarks:

In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of this fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.¹⁵

As Foucault’s reading suggests, in the wake of encountering Borges’ list, we are suddenly made aware of our own inability to believe in systems outside of the narrow set of possibilities of which we are accustomed. The world that Borges reveals to us is unsettling but expansive; it reminds us that other systems of thought can and do exist. It is my hope that my exhibition, with its slippery objects and blurred system of categories, might also allow the viewer the “possibility of thinking *that*.”

14 Ibid., 104

15 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), xv.

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PART IV: COLLECTIONS OF OTHER KINDS

Late into the evening, on a busy street in Belgrade, the Brush Master's window glowed from within, beckoning all users of brushes. Brushes for sweeping floors and tabletops, brushes for clearing all forms of dust and debris; shaving brushes made of fine furs—beaver and mink—promising to generate the richest of lathers; there were ordinary paint-brushes, rough and uncouth and ones for fine details; nail brushes, back brushes and bottle brushes, handles extra long for hard-to-reach places.

Enticing qualities of display are evident both in museums and shop windows, but they are often the most beguiling when encountered in unlikely places. In this section, I introduce and discuss different examples of unusual and notable collections: the brush shop (as mentioned above), the Museum of Jurassic Technology, the Pitt Rivers Museum, and the Roger Brown Study Collection.

Brush Shop

The window display of the Belgrade Brush Master¹⁶ was of particular interest to me because of its sharply focused theme (brushes) and the seemingly endless variations on this theme. The brushes may have been haphazardly placed or simply practical in their arrangement; regardless of intention, the display of the brushes was visually marvelous. Here, the items in this collection were displayed as commodities, each article handmade, each with their own specific purpose. No need for labels or explanation. It is assumed that everyone understands the implications of a broom or a potato brush. In *From Afar It Is an Island*, I created a category called “Sweeping Devices/Implements for Sweeping,” inspired from this encounter with the Brush Master’s window display. In my collection, none of the “Sweeping Devices” are brushes in the practical sense. Rather, these miniature objects hint at a brushing motion, echoing something that might be described as vaguely “sweeping.”

¹⁶ The majstor (master of a particular trade) is a dying occupation in Serbia (as it is in the United States), as indicated by the growing number of stores selling a wide range of inexpensive commodities manufactured in China.

Flea Market

The display of a flea market vendor presents another type of unintentional collection—constantly in flux, an ever growing and diminishing collection of objects. Here, it is the vendor who plays the role of curator: he or she decides the value and narrative attributed to each object. In one such display, we encounter a myriad of seemingly disconnected objects—the sheer number of them fills us with amazement. They differ greatly in their monetary values, use-functions, and historical contexts, the only connective tissue being the fact that they are all here, on this blanket, together. The flea market fills us with desire, reminds us that there is always something more to acquire. In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart notes, “To play with series is to play with the fire of infinity. In the collection the threat of infinity is always met with the articulation of boundary.”¹⁷



17 Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 158.



Museum of Jurassic Technology

Located at 9341 Venice Boulevard inside an unassuming Los Angeles storefront, The Museum of Jurassic Technology contains a modern-day *wunderkammer*: “a museum, a critique of museums, and a celebration of museums—all rolled into one.”¹⁸ Founded by David Hildebrand Wilson and Diana Drake Wilson in 1988, the museum’s collections recall Borges and early *wunderkammern*; they occupy an indeterminate space between realities, one where fact and fiction is blended so well that it is impossible to discern where the “truth” actually exists. Exhibits at the Museum of Jurassic Technology include phenomena of all kinds: South American bats that can fly through solid walls, micro-miniature sculptures fitting inside the eyes of a needles (fig. 11), a horn found growing from a woman’s head. Lawrence Weschler’s book on the subject (*Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology*) takes the reader on a tour of Wilson’s museum and back into the history of curiosity cabinets. More importantly, Weschler explores how a trip to the MIJ has the power to open our eyes to strange and wonderful occurrences in the world at large. In an introductory slideshow about Hagop Sandaldjian’s micro-miniature sculptures (rumored to have been carved from single strands of hair and worked on in between heartbeats), a somber and official-sounding narrator describes such experiences:

“Whenever we encounter some truly novel phenomenon, one that reinvents the margins of our world, an old hankering is awakened. At such moments we are like explorers of an unknown dimension: everything appears fresh to our eyes, each idea seems unprecedented, virgin, strange. In the face of this newly made universe, we may be tempted to exclaim, ‘It cannot be!’ yet our protests soon lie buried under an avalanche of wonder.”¹⁹

18 Lawrence Weschler, *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 40.

19 Edward Rothstein, “Where Outlandish Meets Landish,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2012.



Fig. 11

Pitt Rivers Museum/Lothar Baumgarten

The Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford, UK) is an example of a museum as time capsule: its displayed archaeological and anthropological collections have remained in tact, appearing now just as they looked when General Augustus Pitt Rivers founded the museum in 1874. The Pitt-Rivers Museum was notable in their use of classification, being among the first of institutions to arrange artifacts thematically rather than by age or origin. Almost a century later, German conceptual artist Lothar Baumgarten responded to the Pitt-Rivers Museum in his installation *Unsettled Objects, 1968-9*, a projection piece featuring eighty-one Ektachrome slides of the artifacts from the original ethnographic collections. In a statement reflecting on the nature of the Pitt-Rivers (and perhaps on the museums in general), Baumgarten declares, “this claim and desire to possess the objects have caused them to be:

displayed imagined classified reinvented generalized celebrated lost protected consumed climatized confined collected forgotten evaluated questioned mythologized politicized admired analysed negotiated patronized salvaged disposed claimed accumulated decoded composed disciplined named transformed neutralized simulated photographed restored neglected studied subtitled rationalized narrated valued typified framed obfuscated selected fetishized registered juxtaposed owned moved counted treasured polished ignored traded stored taxed sold...²⁰



²⁰ Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 94.

Roger Brown Study Collection

The Roger Brown Study Collection (Chicago, IL) is another example of a collection stilled in time. This collection, displayed within a historic artist's house museum, contains a surprising array of objects and art, displayed precisely as the original owner had left them while he was alive. Without wall text or labels, all of the objects are to be viewed as integral parts of the collection: equitable consideration given to the rare Henry Darger painting as to a pair of Ronald and Nancy Reagan bedroom slippers. Here, as in the flea market or in early wunderkammer, the hierarchies are blurred as the viewer takes in the entire collection; the gaze restlessly wanders from object to object, filling the viewer with wonder.



**PART V:
INVISIBLE BUT EMBEDDED HISTORIES**

If a sheet of paper on which a key has been laid, be exposed for some minutes to the sunshine, and then instantaneously viewed in the dark, the key being removed, a fading spectre of the key will be visible. Let this paper be put aside for many months where nothing can disturb it, and then in darkness be laid upon a plate of hot metal, the spectre of the key will again appear.²¹

Every object contains layers of invisible histories. Not only the individuals who have come into contact with it over the duration of its existence, but also the source materials and the histories of those source materials of which it is composed. In my working process, I attempt to tap into these layers, both physically and symbolically. The above analogy, found in a nineteenth-century text about the spiritualism-based science *psychometry*, describes how images are retained in the surface of objects, even when they cannot be accessed immediately. The sleeping key reminds me of my own processes, the parts that cannot be observed in the final result, but that were integral to its creation. Take, for example, a cast-iron hook-weight of unknown origin, mentioned earlier. We can surmise that this object already has several different existing histories: its mineral past and its untold past interactions with humans (its fabrication, its use thereafter, its neglect, and eventual purchase). Next, imagine that I add black polymer to the surface of the iron hook. I shape this synthetic material into two faces on either end of the object, blending the surface so it appears to belong to the original object. After heating, this new façade becomes chemically fused to the iron, becoming one with the object—the two parts are now indistinct from one another. Most likely, the new object that emerges will only be considered by its outer appearance, the faces that are immediately recognizable on the exterior of its form. It seems dubious that someone looking at this object would consider the past lives of this object, the layers of what came before—unless that person happens to be a psychometer.

²¹ William and Elizabeth M.F. Denton, *The Soul of Things, Or, Psychometric Researches And Discoveries* (Boston: Walker, Wise, and Co., 1863), 27

*The Past is entombed in the Present!*²²

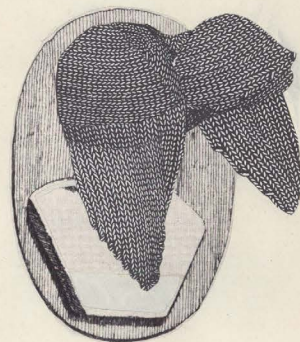
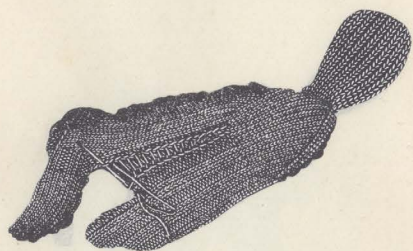
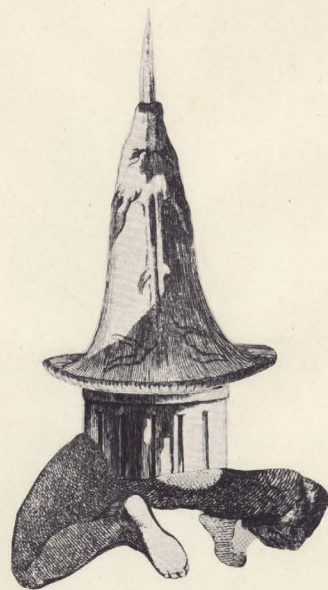
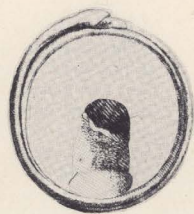
Joseph Rhodes Buchanan (1814-1899), a physician and professor of physiology from Kentucky, was the first to formally explore psychometry—the belief that all objects contain a complete record of their pasts and that these pasts can be revealed psychically through physical contact with the objects themselves. Rising to popularity in the 1840s, Buchanan belonged to “a curious group”²³ of scientists whose theories were grounded in spiritualism and mesmerism. William Denton (1823-1883), a professor of geology, was a prominent member of this group and wrote volumes on the subject of psychometry. Both Buchanan and Denton were convinced that psychometry would change the future of the sciences, bypassing the need for field-research or complicated trials. The key, however, was in finding sensitive individuals to read the objects. Denton began to conduct psychometric experiments on his wife, Elizabeth, and his sister, Anne. The women were given various geological and archaeological samples, shrouded and concealed from view and placed in their hands or even pressed against their foreheads. Through these haptic interactions, the women began to narrate the panoramic visions they experienced passing before their eyes—visions of the past as witnessed by the objects—or even reenact the original possessor of the object. When given a mastodon tooth, for example, Mrs. Denton describes herself as “some monstrous animal” with “large and leathery”²⁴ ears and a flapping upper lip. While holding a piece of volcanic tufa from Pompeii, she gives a detailed report of the eruption and ensuing chaos: “There it goes, pouring, spreading, foaming, as it rolls down the mountain-side in great black waves.”²⁵ Uncanny in their outcome, these experiments yield layered visions of the re-imagined past.

22 Joseph R. Buchanan, *Manual of Psychometry: the Dawn of a New Civilization* (Boston: Holman Brothers Press, 1885), 73.

23 *New York Times*, “Psychometry in Brooklyn: Dr. J. R. Buchanan Speaks Before Some Spiritualists—A Little About Miss Mollie Fancher and a Great Deal About Dr. Buchanan,” December 29, 1878, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F40E1FF73E5A127B93CBAB1789D95F4C8784F9>.

24 Denton, *The Soul of Things*, 55.

25 *ibid.*, 181.



For some time I regarded these views as merely fragmentary; and it was not until I learned that, by a powerful effort of the will, these flying scenes could be made to pause, that I discovered they were not fragmentary, as I had heretofore supposed, but many, perhaps all of them, objects, or their representatives, entire in their outline, and as real, apparently, as are any with which we come in contact in this every-day world. ²⁶

The theme of psychometry, and more specifically, the writings of Elizabeth Denton (found in Part II of *The Soul of Things*), served as a departure point for the small book of drawings and collages that accompanied the exhibition. The title, *Pictures on Surrounding Objects*, describes the psychometrical process of images being imprinted on the surface of objects everywhere, throughout time—a scrolling, seemingly endless collection of visions. The text in the book was borrowed from the questions asked by Elizabeth Denton:

“Are these objects seen in daylight, or in darkness?”

“Are the eyes open or closed?”

“Is the gaze directed into space, or is it directed upon some object...?”

“Are you that psychometer?”

In response, I made detailed pen and ink drawings of “these flying scenes” inside the blank pages of an antiquated notebook found at a flea market in Prague. This was a book with a history unknown to me, and indeed, the drawings seemed to spring forth from the pages, almost as if there had been images imprinted on its pages by some unseen hand. A line of ink would trace the textured marks in the paper, giving way to a ghostly figure. In addition to the drawings, I assembled collages of unidentifiable objects, made from cut fragments of photographs of excavation sites.²⁷ I made drawings in the spaces directly behind these collaged images, where the paper puckered and showed traces of the reverse image.

²⁶ Ibid., 313.

²⁷ Sourced from back issues of *ARCHAEOLOGY*, issues March 1949 through December 1950.

CONCLUSION

“The expression of wonder stands for all that cannot be understood, that can scarcely be believed. It calls attention to the problem of credibility and at the same time insists upon the undeniability, the exigency of the experience.”²⁸

It is natural to interpret and explain the unknown through known terms. Returning once more to the psychometric analogy of the image of the sleeping key preserved in the surface of the sensitized plate, Denton uses known terms (early photographic processes) to describe the phenomena of psychometric visions. Denton writes of “one great difficulty in these archaeological investigations” which is the quandary presented when the psychometer encounters visions that she is unfamiliar with and does not yet possess verbal language “needed by which to describe the objects seen to those who cannot behold them.”²⁹ Indeed, the difficulty in finding a common language to articulate objects and their corresponding visions is not unlike the problem of recounting our dreams. Within the dream world, the object or scene appears familiar and yet, upon waking, we cannot locate the words to convey what we experienced. In *From Afar It Is an Island* I attempted to mirror the reality of a dream, a place where the objects teeter on the edge of states—real and imagined, artificial and natural—continually evading our grasp. It is in this environment that the viewer is invited to shrug off the ordinary terms usually ascribed to objects, and invited to make their own.

28 Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 20.

29 Denton, *The Soul of Things*, 155

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