

SIGHTS-OF-INTEREST: DENIAL OF DANGER IN LIVING SPACES

by

Rachel Lambert

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts
Boise State University

May 2015

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BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE COLLEGE

DEFENSE COMMITTEE AND FINAL READING APPROVALS

of the thesis submitted by

Rachel Lambert

Thesis Title: Sights-of-Interest: Denial of Danger in Living Spaces

Date of Final Oral Examination: 03 March 2015

The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by student Rachel Lambert, and they evaluated her presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

Stephanie Bacon, M.F.A.

Chair, Supervisory Committee

Janice L. Neri, Ph.D.

Member, Supervisory Committee

Francis Fox, M.F.A.

Member, Supervisory Committee

The final reading approval of the thesis was granted by Stephanie Bacon, M.F.A., Chair of the Supervisory Committee. The thesis was approved for the Graduate College by John R. Pelton, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College.

TO MY DAD

I dedicate this thesis to my dad. His overwhelming generosity, love, and support enabled me to make this academic achievement. I am so very grateful for all the time and energy he poured into helping refine my practice. Even though it was trying at some moments, he always put his feelings and biases aside to help me plan, build, and finish countless “weird” art projects. His influential ideas, skills, and efforts have truly allowed me to accomplish my dream. Thank you Dad, I love you!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to give my deepest appreciation to my thesis committee—Stephanie Bacon, M.F.A., Francis Fox, M.F.A., and Janice Neri, Ph.D. Your vast knowledge and support through this intense scholastic journey has inspired me to aim high and shoot big! Stephanie, thank you for your extraordinary wisdom, for sincerely considering all of my strange ideas and endeavors, and for being a tremendous mentor. Francis, thank you for all the profound conversations on death, objects, and the human context. I never could have imagined working in such complex concepts, materials, or frameworks without your insight. Janice, thank you for giving me the tools to contemplate and interrogate large ideas like Nature. You have given me the gumption to question how I see and reflect on my surroundings, and have pushed me to dig into and inspect the details beyond shallow generalizations. Thank you!

Graduate faculty professors, thank you for all of the criticism and assistance you have given throughout the MFA program. Even though it has been challenging at times, I gained an extensive knowledge about art, myself, and how my productions impact my audience.

Ryan, thank you for being a remarkable, supporting partner for the last 9 years. Thank you for having faith in my abilities, for staying up with me countless nights, for travelling the land to help find photographing opportunities, for understanding that I have an art habit, and for listening to me read this paper aloud dozens of times. Lastly, thanks

to my mom, brother, family, peers, and friends. Your thoughts, cheers, and confidences are, and have always been greatly cherished.

ABSTRACT

Exploring the illusion of protection, I constructed a fiber-based installation to recreate the experience of photographing outside and inside living spaces. This body of work is about the allure of the photographic experience. It is about the experience of seeing, noticing, and thinking that occurs while looking through the camera's viewfinder. It is about unconsciously ignoring the physical dangers that live in the picturesque land photographed.

In response, I created a two room installation. Two household living rooms are staged as conceptual "living spaces." One room simulates a damp swamp floor; and the other, the interior of a warm-blooded body. Because the living room is a semi-public/private space, the uncertainty of visual invitation is instigated through the fabrication and manipulation of second-hand, domestic materials. The familiar receptivity of seating, tables, and rugs, found in both installations has been re-contextualized into vibrant objects of experience. The scope of this project questions the allure of photographic experience by examining life and death through the idea of the "optical orgasm" and the "optical snatch."

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It would not be wrong to speak of people having a compulsion to photograph: to turn experience itself into a way of seeing.¹

As Spectator, I was interested in Photography only for 'sentimental' reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think.²

¹ Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador USA : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, 24.
² Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. 1st American ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, 21.

CHAPTER ONE: PHOTOGRAPHING AS EXPERIENCE

Exploring the illusion of protection, I constructed a fiber-based installation to recreate the experience of photographing outside and inside living spaces. This body of work is about the allure of the photographic experience. It is about the experience of seeing, noticing, and thinking that occurs while looking through the camera's viewfinder. It is about unconsciously ignoring the physical dangers that live in the picturesque land photographed.

After years of photographing, I have collected experiential sights, feelings, and thoughts regarding the presence of my body as I explore seemingly benign lands. After spending the past two summers living on the Yellowstone volcano, I developed a photo-frenzied ambition to discover and record strange, body-like formations dappled throughout that area. After various life-threatening encounters and deep consideration, I recognize that the volcano's physicality isn't much different than that of my own warm-blooded body – they are both living spaces that have the potential to erupt violently. That eruption can happen at any given time.

The Installation



Figure 1: Rachel Lambert, *Sights-of-Interest, The Outside Living Room*, 2015, Mixed Media, 10x15', Installation View



Figure 2: Rachel Lambert, *Sights-of-Interest, The Inside Living Room*, 2015, Mixed Media, 10x15', Installation View

Because experience is an invisible, practical observation, it can only be partially recorded in a photograph. In response, I have chosen to create a two-room fiber-based installation filled with the sights-of-interests that were inspired by my photographic explorations. The installation's rooms act as conceptual "living spaces," compared by color and form, volcanic land and body. Both living rooms, filled with found and fabricated objects, are decorated with familiar, yet seductively manipulated woven blankets, rugs, doilies, and curtains to confront the false sense of protection I had while photographing the Greater Yellowstone Area. One room simulates a damp swamp floor (Fig. 1), and the other, the interior of a warm-blooded body (Fig. 2). The familiar receptivity of seating, tables, and rugs, found in both installations has been re-contextualized into vibrant objects of visual experience.

Upon entering the space, the visitor will first see *The Outside Living Room*. Its cohesive color palette evokes the outdoors: sage green, rust orange, bear brown. Light yellow knitted blankets line the ceiling like a gentle morning sky. Hovering over all of the room's fixtures is a furry brown animal-like chandelier. Like that of a winding river, a green, floral-print curtain cascades down the wall and across the floor. The lumpy gray end table hides in the corner with an upholstered cat perched on its top. The wall is freckled with knitted bulges protruding red phallic centers. A little further over is the hot spring area rug. Huddling around the rug is an upholstered deer mount and two bulbous chairs. Each chair is capped with a mushroom-like canopy. One chair is occupied by a green plant-like figure, the other is left open.

After experiencing the first living room, one must travel around the corner to see the second space. *The Inside Living Room* is hidden behind the first living room's wall.

Its cohesive color palette evokes flesh: pastel pinks and blues, soft peaches, and intense reds. The ceiling is lined with pink knitted blankets, like a visceral cavity. A squishy, burgundy, organ-like chandelier hangs from the ceiling. A deep red curtain pours down the wall and wiggles across the floor like blood. A penis-footed, fur-bellied table rests with a bony creature perched on its top. Various scales of rawhide surfaced, fur-blossoming nuggets scatter over the floor and wall. Cream-colored doilies ruptured with red fuzz spot the walls. One veiny, cocoon-like chair, occupied by a white figure watches over a glittery flesh rug. The one seat present is taken.

In the next section, I will contextualize my background to help clarify the foundational perspective and intent of this work.

Avoiding Risk in the Name of God

Like many children, my parents protected me from physical danger. Born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, I grew up in an area of high crime. My parents sent me to a private Christian school attempting to protect me from constant danger. Shootings, stabbings, and rapes were frequently announced on the 6 o'clock news. Danger was very visible. I would go to bed many nights hearing the neighbors screaming and shooting at each other. Because it was so threatening, my parents discouraged me from exploring the area beyond the perimeters of our property.

From preschool through my sophomore year in high school, I attended a private, Christian school. During those years, I was taught to observe most everything as polar opposites: good and evil. The good were “saved” and the evil would eternally burn in hell. This logic placed a lot of rules and regulations on my body. The body housed the

Holy Spirit, acted as the temple of God, and was to be treated with the utmost respect. I was also taught that a good Christian's skin remained fully covered by clothing and unaltered by tattoos and piercings. Those who followed these rules were good in God's eyes. Those who decided to disrespect their body faced judgment. All of these rules were confusing and stifling, but because I was afraid and chose to have faith, I knew that my soul would live eternally in heaven based on my Christian childhood beliefs.

In my first year of college, I realized that my Christian upbringing was created to comfort the fear of dying. Anthropologist Ernest Becker states that "religion solves the problem of death."³ For most of my life, I had been following a set of social norms or rules that were designed to protect me from mortality. After reading Becker, I became conscious of all the weird beliefs I had been following as truth. The real truth was that I was going to die no matter what I believed.

³ Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997, 203.

New Found Love for the American West



Figure 3: Ansel Adams, *Half Dome, Apple Orchard*, Yosemite National Park, 1933, Photograph

During my adolescence, my grandfather took me skiing in the American West every Christmas break. The Rocky Mountains were so picturesque. The jagged peaks, the winding rivers, the pure, fluffy snow was irresistible. I never wanted to leave – every plane ride back to Atlanta was depressing. About the time I was 13 years old, I discovered legendary photographer Ansel Adams. He shot the most amazing photographs of the American West. I bought his *Half Dome, Apple Orchard* (Fig. 3) poster and hung it in my bathroom as an inspirational reminder that one day I would leave the dangers of Atlanta and move to God’s country. This was also the time when I decided that I would have a career as a fine art photographer. I wanted to experience and photograph the same picturesque landscapes that Adams so elegantly captured.

After receiving a degree in photography, I moved from Atlanta to the American West. I was motivated to experience the picturesque land through photography and various other art mediums. I not only wanted to see it, I wanted to immerse myself in it, I wanted to live in it! My school years are spent in Boise, Idaho and the summers in the Greater Yellowstone Area. Every time I go outside to hike or fish, I take my camera. Most of the time, I catch myself photographing oozy river foam, bugs, the sky, plants and rocks. Then there is the occasional dead thing. It surprises me, but I always have the compulsion to photograph the hell out of whatever it may be – deer (Fig. 4), pelican (Fig. 5), dogs, trout, squirrels. I excitedly go home, print the photograph and unashamedly show everybody. But there seems to be something missing when presenting my discovery – the experience. So I usually follow up my photographs with an explanative story on where and how I found the dead thing.



Figure 4: Rachel Lambert, *Found Deer*, 2013, Photograph



Figure 5: Rachel Lambert, *Found Pelican*, 2013, Photograph

When I photograph, I usually don't have a plan for my images. I just keep collecting them – it's like a diary of experiences. This photographic journal is my sketchbook. These “sketches” are usually abstracted studies of textures and forms. Because the character of a photograph is cropped and flattened, a sense of scale and atmosphere cannot be perceived. So I use them as inspiration in conjunction with my stories, as a catalyst to conceptualize a meaningful, visual experience beyond the limitations of static images.

I began looking at other mediums to express my collection of sights-of-interest taken from the Greater Yellowstone Area. I cannot physically take a chunk of land, the river, or fallen trees, because it wouldn't be the same if placed in another location. It would disrupt the discovery, physicality, and visualization of that site. The moved findings would no longer be set-aside or preserved in the state I found them. Therefore, I began assembling found objects and considering the relationships I could create with them. By manipulating arrangement and perspective, I could construct a similar

experience of looking, discovery, or feeling—something deeper than the surface photographed or the story told.

Brief Overview

In this paper, I will navigate through a series of histories, concepts, artists, and personal narratives to examine the compulsion to photograph as a way to experience seeing and feeling, in order to observe, think, and create. In Chapter 2, I will examine how my Christian schooling defined life and death through the idea of the soul. Through the Christian lens, I allowed myself to deny death to ease my fear of dying. I will also survey the modern living room, a space full of memory inducing, protective decorations that comfort its residents and welcome its visitors. In Chapter 3, I will offer a series of narratives about my perilous encounters on the Yellowstone volcano. I was welcome to explore the landscape with caution, but became distracted by the “optical orgasm” while photographing its glorious sights. I will also examine the influence of Ansel Adams to demonstrate my compulsion to experience what he saw in the land. In Chapter 4, I will investigate the warm-blooded body and the complex social norms attached to keeping it covered. I will discuss my idea of the “optical snatch”, or the uninvited quick glance obtained upon the body’s exposure, that leads to a self-reflexive realization of mortality. Lastly in Chapter 5, I will recap how my perilous experience of photographing volcanic land and how the construction of a fiber-based installation has changed my perspective on life, danger, and the fear of dying.

CHAPTER TWO: DEATH AND THE LIVING SPACE

In this chapter, I examine my understanding of life, death, and the living room. I will consider what life is and how my life was maintained through the lens of Christianity. Later, I will review the house, its contents, and how the living room functions as a protective barrier for its residents. My installation, *Sights-of-Interest* teases the line that separates the visualization of life and death. Lastly, I will compare my foundational concepts of the living space to Sandy Skoglund's installation-based photographs.

With Life, Comes Death

What does the act of living entail? Becker suggests that “to live is to engage in experience at least partly on the terms of the experience itself. One has to stick his neck out in the action without any guarantees about satisfaction or safety.”⁴ I think that living requires a constant state of risk because the inside and outside spaces are always trying to collapse, merge, or escape each other. “Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living.”⁵ The battle to maintain this separation of life and death is what creates everyday experience.

⁴ Ibid., 183.

⁵ Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Berkley Pub. Group, 2005, 36.

Freud notes that “Life is impoverished, it loses in interest, when the highest stake in the game of living, life itself, may not be at risk.”⁶ Life competes against itself; it relies on death to create more life. Leaving the house is dangerous – something outside can harm you. Staying inside the house is dangerous – something inside can harm you. Danger lurks everywhere – the degree of risk correlates with consciousness. To me, photographing a picturesque landscape and an open wound are two different viewing experiences but involve similar exposures to mortality. The flattening experiential factor is death, life’s partner. To face or see such experiences is a reminder of the body’s ephemerality.

Death: The Collapse of Life

My installation explores this partnership. Life hasn’t always been guided by risk management. Before the rise of Christianity, death was an everyday event. Sociologist Zygmunt Brauman suggests that:

Death was ‘tame’ because it was not a challenge in the same sense in which all other elements of the life-process were not challenges in a world in which identities were given, everything was stuck in its place in the great chain of being and things ran their course by themselves.⁷

In Bauman’s view, death was not recognized. It had not moved into the self-conscious to be feared. It was just present. Everybody was killing everybody – it was just a method of survival for both humans and animals. Nomadic lifestyles were the norm; there was no

⁶ Freud, Sigmund. "Thoughts for the times on war and death." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, pp. 273-300. 1957, 290.

⁷ Bauman, Zygmunt. *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992, 97.

system or order to be followed or regulated. Everyday goals were to find food and shelter. Visualizing the decaying process was not a problem because no one stayed in a single place long enough to experience it.

With the increase in population, the decaying body became disgusting because it couldn't be left behind or casually discarded. Rotting flesh and disease began encroaching on the living. Not only did it stink, but the corpse also became visually terrifying. Seeing a body decay was a self-reflexive experience. Even though life had left the body, no one ever wanted to consider their own post-mortem flesh. Becker notes that with the rise of Christianity, and the judgment of man, God assures the living that “‘thou shalt surely die.’ In other words, the final terror of self-conscious is the knowledge of one's death.”⁸ God's almighty harsh judgment pushed the rationalization that the decaying flesh of the recently dead was unwantedly repulsive. So in attempt to live eternally, systematic goals were established and put into practice so eternal life could be achieved.

Life and death were subjected to the confines of Christianity during my adolescence. As part of my Christian education, I was taught a basic perspective of life and death. Ecclesiastes 12:7 states: “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”⁹ This verse implies that my life came with a spirit or soul. The soul is life's aura – it is the invisible spark that generates and maintains the physical, material body. My soul is controlled by the coming into and one day leaving my physical body. When housed in a physical form, my soul was given a choice, to

⁸ Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997, 69-70.

⁹ KJV

believe in God and gain the protection of a heavenly afterlife, or reject God and burn in hell forever. The latter further dramatized the terror of death, so I chose to believe.

The physical body is a shell that houses the soul. The physical change a fresh corpse underwent is evidence of the soul's presence and existence.¹⁰ Upon death, the Christian corpse's soul departs from the body and rises to heaven. The soul is free from the worrisome burden of dread, terror, and anxiety. It is broken from the terrifying shackles of decay. It doesn't matter if the body rotted because the spark that animates the physical has moved on to heaven. Life, with a 'saved' soul, can be lived without the constant dread of death. Living without dread means to live in a state of denial. Freud coined this blissful oblivion as the "Denial of Death" in his 1918 essay "Our Attitudes Towards Death." He noted that "no one believes in his own death,... in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality."¹¹ This denial is the coping mechanism that lowers death down into the furthest depths of the brain. It is the peripheral blinder that blocks death from the center of life's focus. With this introduction of Christianity and desire to not experience the anxiety or terror of exposure, Anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer notes that "...natural death and physical decomposition have become too horrible to contemplate or to discuss."¹² Not only is the material body physically pushed away, but the conversation is also eliminated from everyday exchange.

¹⁰ Freud, Sigmund. "Thoughts for the times on war and death." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, pp. 273-300. 1957, 294.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 289.

¹² Gorer, Geoffrey. "The Pornography of Death." *Panton House, Encounter*, Vol. V, no. 4 (October 1955): 49-52, 51.

Coping With Mortality

As an adolescent, coping with mortality was difficult. “The fall into self-consciousness, the emergence from comfortable ignorance in nature, had one great penalty for man: it gave him dread, or anxiety.”¹³ The struggle to take risks or consciously engage in dangerous activities became all the more dreadful (because God was judging my soul). Preparing for the afterlife appeared more important because the thought of eternally burning in hell was terrifying. Christianity distracted me from the dread of death. It was complicated but it seemed like an easier way out!¹⁴

Denial Changed Death’s Exposure

This elimination of death from the everyday meant that I didn’t have to think about death anymore. Gorer further states that “...death has become more and more ‘unmentionable’ as a natural process.”¹⁵ Prior to the Enlightenment, funerals took place in personal living spaces or houses, and bodies were buried in the city center’s graveyard. “The cemetery was the centre of every old-established village, and they were prominent in most towns. It was fairly late in the 19th century when the execution of criminals ceased to be a public holiday as well as a public warning.”¹⁶ Before long, for various reasons such as disease, available space, and dread, cemeteries were relocated.

Sociologist Jonathan Dollimore states:

It is in the eighteenth century, during the so-called Enlightenment, that death comes to be denied; an ostensibly rational attitude to the subject is then in fact

¹³ Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997, 69.

¹⁴ I did not explore/was not aware of the attitude toward death in other religions.

¹⁵ Gorer, Geoffrey. “The Pornography of Death.” *Panton House, Encounter*, Vol. V, no. 4 (October 1955): 49–52, 50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

motivated by avoidance. For example, early health reformers wanted graveyards removed from city centres, and this is seen to reflect a ‘removal’ of death from the realm of living.¹⁷

Removing the corpse from the house and the city center allowed death to become invisible. Bodies were moved from the privacy of a house to the outdoors. It no longer confronted the living with an eyesore. Why did the house reject death if death is life’s partner? My installation acts as a living space that confuses this denial of death.

House and Living Space

The living space is the designated area where life dwells. Living spaces come in many different shapes, forms, and sizes. They can be any type of container: a house, a swamp, a body or anything that shelters, sets-aside, or conceals. My installation considers how the domestic living room acts as a multi-comparative container for these various living spaces.

The house, a space designed by and lived in by humans, was created to protect its inhabitants from the outside elements. Within the modern house lies a series of chambers that usually include bedroom(s), bathroom(s), a kitchen, a dining room and a living room. Each sectioned off space is associated with various degrees of privacy. Bedrooms and bathrooms are the most private spaces; those are the spaces where rest, sex, and hygiene are performed. This structure reflects vulnerability; when a body is at rest, disrobed, or excreting, one is at one’s most vulnerable state. Alternately, the kitchen, dining room and living room are semi-public/private spaces. Even though they are on the inside of the house, outside visitors are more frequently invited in those rooms to socialize.

¹⁷ Dollimore, Jonathan. *Death, Desire, and Loss in Western Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1998, 121.

The design and function of the living room is often a designated area usually found near the front entrance of the house. It is a welcoming space that contains seating, tables, rugs, and is decorated with wall hangings, tapestries, blankets, and doilies. It is a comfortable space lined with both personalized and generic gifts and memories.

Comfortable Decorations

Why is the modern living room filled with comfortable, memory-inducing objects? Does it give the resident something to talk about with visitors? Does it make the visitor feel warm and welcomed upon the transition from the outside to the house's interior? The living room's objects of decoration are collected over time and displayed as records of experience. They also certainly demonstrate social class, taste, "habitus," etc...

Good objects of art give a room its crowning touch of distinction... Any work of art, regardless of its intrinsic merit, must justify its presence in a room by being more valuable than the space it occupies – more valuable, that is, to the general scheme of decoration...¹⁸

These ornaments become more important than the room itself. They act as a collection of memories, sights, and encounters. For instance, when traveling, one often returns home with a souvenir to display in the living room. That souvenir acts as both a continuous reminder of the site visited, and as a conversation piece for when others enter the living space. Having worked in a souvenir shop, my customers were always mentioning that they were buying for living room keepsakes or gifts to share their memory of the location visited. Many times, they would ask about particular sizes, or colors (pink instead of brown), or picturesque scenes on souvenirs because they wanted to maintain a consistent

¹⁸ Mezei, Kathy, and Chiara Briganti. *The Domestic Space Reader*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10649002>, 216-7.

theme in their living room. The compulsion for maintaining an ordered theme was usually attached to their keepsake.

Another type of order can be found in the presence of the living room's textiles. A textile is a woven piece of fabric like a blanket, curtain, or doily. These objects are usually constructed out some type of cotton, wool, or acrylic fibers. "The textiles are not simply placed within space to define a certain interiority. Rather, they are the production of space itself."¹⁹ Textiles turn liminal space into the physical—they are the delicate, soothing barriers that protect. Blankets warm the body, curtains block the sun, and doilies line the furniture. They are the membranes that divide the inside from the outside, that prevent the spatial collapse.

Living Rooms of Protection

Many of my ideas regarding life and death inside the living room have been influenced by artist Sandy Skoglund's installation-based photographs. Skoglund uses the concept of the living space in her work and creates theatrical sets, usually lines walls with multiples, and photographs them. She presents both her sets and photographs as art. Many of her sets examine the complexities of social interaction by using some combination of animals and/or humans. One or two colors dominate her installations by simplifying and exaggerating the contained scenario. *The Green House* and *The Cocktail Party* are two of Skoglund's works I'd like to examine in three ways: what is present, hidden, and denied.

¹⁹ Colomina, Beatriz, and Jennifer Bloomer, eds. *Sexuality & Space*. Princeton Papers on Architecture 1. New York, N.Y: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, 367.



Figure 6: Sandy Skoglund, *The Green House*, 1990, Photograph

The Green House is a photograph of a green living room (Fig. 6). Plaster-cast periwinkle and green dogs accompany two living humans. The entire room is lined with plastic indoor/outdoor grass carpeting – “...the kind of green grass mats often used to line graves at funerals.”²⁰ The figures in the room appear to be oblivious to their strange living space. Comforted by soft, simple surroundings, the faux grass carpet safeguards the space – life perseveres on top of the grass. What lies beyond the grass or behind the wall is dangerous and ignored.

²⁰ Qualls, Larry. 1994. "Sandy Skoglund". *Performing Arts Journal*. 16 (1), 103.

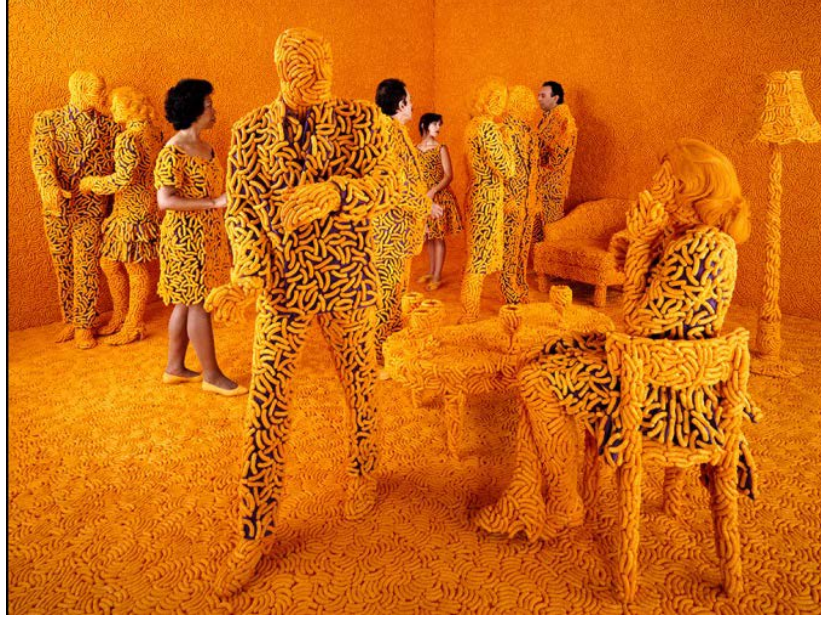


Figure 7: Sandy Skoglund, *The Cocktail Party*, 1992, Photograph

The other image I would like to discuss Skoglund's *The Cocktail Party* (Fig. 7). Similar to *The Green House*, the photographed installation contains a bright orange living room. Mannequins and living humans are socializing together at a party, yet they don't seem to notice that the entire room and their bodies are covered in puffed cheese crisps. Even though a little stiff and awkward, the party attendees continue to pay attention to themselves and not their surroundings. Visitors to this staged event "...can savor the [comfort of] garish aesthetic pleasures of selective color, shape, and repetition signaling the orderly world," forgetting the fatal danger of consuming too many crisps.²¹ The figures are covered, concealed in order, holding up the boundaries of protection from the dangers beyond the living room walls.

²¹ Todd, Ellen Wiley. 2001. "Troubling Taste and Fearful Food. Sandy Skoglund's Cocktail Party". *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*. 1 (4): 12-15, 15.

In both *The Green Room* and *The Cocktail Party*, figures interacting in the installation are oblivious to external hazards. Wrapped in soft, textural materials, I see them maintaining their denial of death. In the next two sections, I will discuss the two different parts of my installation, *The Outside-* and *The Inside Living Room*, and explore the illusion of protection I had while photographing and visualizing my experiences inside those types of living spaces.

HAPTER THREE: THE OPTICAL ORGASM



Figure 8: Rachel Lambert, *The Outside Living Room*, 2015, Mixed Media, Installation Detail

In this chapter, I will discuss a series of narratives about my perilous encounters on the Yellowstone volcano. I was welcome to explore the landscape with caution, but became distracted by the “optical orgasm” and lost all inhibition while photographing the land. Later, I will discuss the influence of Ansel Adams to demonstrate my compulsion to experience what he saw in the land. *The Outside Living Room* (Fig. 8) visualizes the strange, body-like formations I encountered in the Greater Yellowstone Area.

Entering the Gates: Yellowstone National Park

The Outside Living Room was inspired by Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. These connected parks comprise the caldera and fault lines of North America's famous supervolcano. This area lies in the northwest corner of Wyoming, overlapping small portions of Montana and Idaho. I refer to this living room as the "outside" in reference to an "outdoor" space that expands across a plot of land not contained by a physical wall or boundary. However, this space is also a type of private space because it has been "set aside" and preserved by the National Park Service for public viewing.

National park areas are set aside to preserve nationally significant resources of natural, historical, cultural, and scientific interest... [permitting it to be] designated as special, and what makes that happen is the act of setting it aside, placing it... beyond the realm of everyday environments as well as everyday meanings.²²

Even though it is a private, regulated space, both Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks are open to the general public, currently generating 3+ million curious visitors every year.²³

Yellowstone National Park was founded in 1872 as the United States' first national park. In 1929, the Grand Teton National Park was added on to Yellowstone's southern border. An invisible perimeter defines these parks allowing for open travel anywhere along its edges. The roadway gates are the only portals that regulate entering and exiting vehicles for a monetary fee. Upon entering the gate, park rangers issue pamphlets and maps regarding general information about the sites of interest, regulations, and precautions. Unconsciously, however, visitors often put on their peripheral blinders when they enter.

²² Patin, Thomas, ed. *Observation Points: The Visual Poetics of National Parks*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012, 8.

²³ Visitation statistics can be found at <http://www.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/visitationstats.htm>

Many visitors to Yellowstone and other national parks enter the gates with a false sense of security. These persons wrongly believe that the animals are tame and that the place surely is a lot like a city park... But national parks are not like that; they are places where nature and history are preserved intact. And intact nature includes dangers.²⁴

The visitors, or sightseers, who enter my installation, will be free to navigate and look at the sights with a similarly false sense of security. They are presented with various temptations to participate in the soft, seductive features that the room has to offer.

Warning Signs Tempt

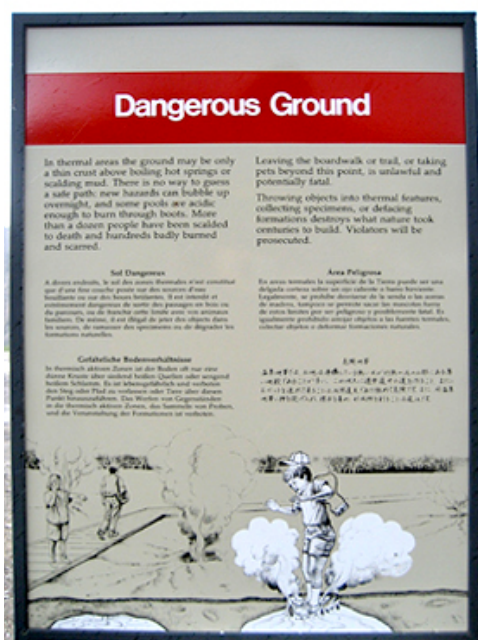


Figure 9 (left): Rachel Lambert, *Dangerous Ground*, Yellowstone National Park, 2014, Photograph

Figure 10 (right): Rachel Lambert, *Warning Sign at Devil's Thumb*, Yellowstone National Park, 2014, Photograph

²⁴ Whittlesey, Lee H. *Death in Yellowstone: Accidents and Foolhardiness in the First National Park*. Second edition. Lanham: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, an imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc, 2013, xx.

Once inside Yellowstone National Park, visitors are free to navigate anywhere they wish, but they are strongly encouraged to consider the dangers of the warning signs found throughout the park (Fig. 9, 10). Many of these signs warn about the earth's thin crust that surrounds the geysers and hot springs. The surface looks like solid ground, especially when the boardwalk is firmly planted in the spring's surrounding soil (Fig. 11). The danger lies in not being able to see exactly how thin the crust really is and wanting to closely experience the warm water-filled holes bubbling out of the earth. Art theorist Chris Townsend notes that "the coherence of the individual subject depends upon a stable relation of interiority and exteriority in which the interior is withheld from vision."²⁵ If the individual subject or the earth's surface were visible on both the inside and outside, greater caution could be rationalized just by the act of looking.



Figure 11: Rachel Lambert, *Boardwalk at Mammoth Hot Spring*, Yellowstone National Park, 2013, Photograph

²⁵ Townsend, Chris, and Channel Four (Great Britain). *Vile Bodies: Photography and the Crisis of Looking*. Munich, Germany ; New York, NY: Prestel in association with Channel Four Television Corp, 1998, 68.

Just like many features of my installation, there is an irresistible urge to touch the hot spring's crust. Because the outside wet surface looks safe and soft, park visitors desire to touch, attempting to experience what is hidden. Art theorist Ron Broglio notes that "if nature hides, it is not infinitely unknowable; rather hiding implie[s] its opposite: finding."²⁶ Visitors want to interact and participate. They are eager to gain a sense of satisfaction or discovery, even if it means getting burned via heat or acid.

Am I Invited?

Because the park is open to the public, issues regarding invitation etiquette arise. An invitation is a request for an action, issued to another body to enter, attend, or occupy a different space. Sometimes invitation is understood or unspoken. Etiquette, furthermore, is a customary code of polite behavior. But the problem is—not everyone knows or follows the same customary codes. How is one to know proper behavior when the exploration of a liminal space (neither inside or outside) is offered or tempted? *The Outside Living Room* tempts this unspoken or understood etiquette.

Intimately Touching the Surface

Performance artist Anya Liftig engages with notions of invitation etiquette among liminal spaces in her *Amor Y Problemas* work. She describes how "viewers were invited to pour glue over my naked body while I remain passive and still (Fig. 12, 13). After my entire body has been covered, including genitals, eyelids, armpits, toes, earlobes, etc.—I

²⁶ Broglio, Ron. *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art*. Posthumanities 17. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 3.

am left to dry (Fig. 14)...”²⁷ Later the viewers peeled off the glue. Her participating audience was given permission to put glue anywhere they wished on her body. Most participants avoided applying glue to her orifices, because, I’m assuming, it is bad etiquette. Damaging the portals of her body could cause serious physical, mental, and emotional harm to Liftig. But some participants were either unaware of this unspoken politeness, or they did not care, taking the opportunity to intrude.



Figure 12: Anya Liftig, *Amor Y Problemas*, Detail, 2009, Performance



Figure 13: Anya Liftig, *Amor Y Problemas*, Detail, 2009, Performance

²⁷ Statement found on website artist’s website - <http://anyaliftig.com/>



Figure 14: Anya Liftig, *Amor Y Problemas*, Detail, 2009, Performance

Even though the Yellowstone volcano is not a human, the land and *The Outside Living Room* perform a lot like Anya Liftig's passive body. Its crust/skin is available, and its orifices or hot springs are often touched by an eagerly participatory audience. However the park/body comparison does bring into question the consideration of invitation etiquette. I assume that more visitors have a greater consciousness about touching a human body. But, does that same invitation etiquette cross over to *The Outside Living Room*?



Figure 15 (left): Rachel Lambert, *Hot Spring Algae*, Yellowstone National Park, 2013, Photograph

Figure 16 (right): Rachel Lambert, *Hot Spring Area Rug*, 2014, Fibers, Fabric, Glue, Faux Fur, Installation Detail

Reflecting back on my experience, I strongly desired to touch the wet areas around Yellowstone’s hot springs. However, I decided to snap photographs instead (Fig. 15), as another way of taking or experiencing the Park. Photographing these features seemed to be less dangerous and equally satisfying as making physical contact with the soil. Susan Sontag suggests that “...having a *compulsion* to photograph: [is] to turn experience itself into a way of seeing.”²⁸ I found myself abiding by the Park’s “dangerous ground” signs, but was my urge to photograph a comparably dangerous experience? The landscape was picturesque. Just like the fleshy textures, colors, liquids found in my

²⁸ Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador USA : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, 24.

installation (Fig. 16), the sights were omnipresent and ready to be touched by my camera's lens.

Awestruck Sightseers



Figure 17: Roger Minick, *Photographing Old Faithful Geysers*, 1980, Photograph

I became one of them – a sightseer! A sightseer is someone who looks at a sight- or site-of-interest. Photographer Roger Minick documented the strangeness of sightseers, like myself, experiencing America's national parks' premier sites-of-interest for the first time (Fig. 17). In his artist statement, Minick recalls that:

I would witness this most dramatically when I watched first-timers arrive at a particularly spectacular overlook and see their expressions become instantly awestruck at their first sighting of some iconic beauty or curiosity or wonder... simply to return home with some tangible piece of evidence that they were there –

the snapshot- they have instead come seeking something deeper, beyond themselves, and are finding it in this moment of visitation.²⁹

The Optical Orgasm: The Day I Almost Got Trampled

I felt like one of the park visitors that enamored Roger Minick. Every time I entered the park, I raced from one site to the next excitedly photographing seductive visual experiences. It wasn't just the land that mesmerized me; it was the animals too! Bison, elk, bears, and many other animals walk in or along the road. Many times the animals would even congregate near the walkways, close enough to reach out and touch, if one wished. One day in the summer of 2013, while shooting seductive, fleshy hot spring textures, I encountered a cow elk. I began shooting as many pictures as I could, gorging myself on every visual moment of her presence through my camera's lens. The allure of her presence drew me in (Fig. 18) – I wanted to experience her, to see what her life entailed, and to imagine her living space and everyday narrative (Fig. 19).



Figure 18: Rachel Lambert, *Cow Elk*, 2013, Photograph

²⁹ Statement found on artist's website - http://sightseerseries.com/?page_id=7



Figure 19: Rachel Lambert, *Elkilingus*, 2013, Upholstery Fabric, Ceramic, Faux Fur, Antlers, Taxidermy Deer Tail, Installation Detail

Pretty soon, I grew comfortable being in her presence and crept too close. The cow elk bluff charged to scare me out of her living space (Fig. 20). I felt that I was rude and had over-stepped her unspoken invitation. Losing all inhibition and disregarding all sense of danger, I put myself in what could have been a fatal situation. Shaken by the encounter, I stepped back to find that I was not alone in the photo-fest. Many others continued to stand in the cow elk's space, shooting every picture possible. Just like Roger Minick, I photographed them in the blissful moments of their first encounter (Fig. 21).



Figure 20: Rachel Lambert, *Almost Trampled by Cow Elk*, 2013, Photograph



Figure 21: Rachel Lambert, *Elk and Sightseers*, 2013, Photograph

Mount Washburn: The Day I Almost Got Struck by Lightning

This erratic behavior not only happens when viewing the animals, but it also occurs in the landscape as well. The following summer of 2014, I decided to hike Mount Washburn, one of Yellowstone's highest peaks (elevation 10,223'). When I arrived at Dunraven Pass, the trailhead, the sky looked a little stormy, but since I had just driven two hours to begin my hike, I decided to take the risk. Once again, with camera in hand, I was on the hunt to snap more texturally seductive images. That day, my photographing interest was focused on genitalia-like formations in tree bark (Fig. 22) that became a distracting detail of my installation (Fig. 23).



Figure 22 (left): Rachel Lambert, *Wood*, 2014, Photograph

Figure 23 (Right): Rachel Lambert, *Dangle*, 2015, Found Objects, Nylon Tights, Installation View

Counting the time from when I saw the lightning and heard the thunder, I calculated the storm being about ten miles away. The first mile of my hike was windy, but I didn't feel like I was in imminent danger – after all, I knew the view of the storm from the peak would be another perk of my photographing experience. I casually photographed the distant storm at the beginning of my hike (Fig. 24). One side of the trail was dark in the distance while the other side shined with blue skies (Fig. 25).



Figure 24: Rachel Lambert, *Mount Washburn Hike #1*, 2014, Photograph



Figure 25: Rachel Lambert, *Mount Washburn Hike #2*, 2014, Photograph



Figure 26 (left): Rachel Lambert, *Butthole Treebark*, 2014, Photograph
 Figure 27 (right): Rachel Lambert, *Butthole Doily*, 2014, Found Doily, Unspun Wool, Installation Detail



Figure 28: Rachel Lambert, *Almost Touching the Lightning*, 2014, Photograph

After walking half the trail's distance, the flashes of lightning and the crashes of thunder kept getting closer together. But I kept photographing orifice-like formations anyway (Fig. 26).

Figure 28 was the last photograph I shot that day, moments before feeling the electrical tinge of lightning on the back of my neck. Fearing that I was about to die, I instantly stopped in my tracks, turned around and began to rush down the mountain. The tree-bark buttholes were NOT worth dying for! I had entered too far into the land's living space. However, a nearby family maintained their denial of death and continued hiking with a baby in an aluminum hiker pack despite the storm crashing down from above. In the pouring rain, I ran down the mountain, cowering with my head practically between my legs, praying to Jesus that I would not die by lightning strike.

The Optical Orgasm

Every year, several park visitors lose their lives attempting to gain a better view of the sites.³⁰ The splendid landscape acts as a visual tranquilizer by sedating logic and reason. Sightseers fall off cliffs and waterfalls, get swept away by swift river currents, and even attacked by the seemingly “tame” wild animals. Could it be that experiencing the park is like an optical orgasm? Photographing such picturesque scenarios is a climax of pleasure-inducing excitement sweeping over the body like a warm bath. It momentarily paralyzes the brain’s ability to rationalize anything beyond the source of stimulation (the outdoors and all the stuff that lives in it). It is a loss of inhibition. Why do I, and many other sightseers, continuously put our lives in danger to reproduce Yellowstone’s already overly-photographed landscape and animals? My installation is designed to recreate this distracting experience.

The Legend of Seduction

There is a history of photographing while having an optically orgasmic experience. Next, I’d like to examine legendary photographer Ansel Adams. He set a high bar for capturing the unusually picturesque landscape. Upon his first experience of Yellowstone National Park, Adams’ noted that he:

...quickly became enamored by the geysers of Yellowstone (Fig. 29). It is difficult to conceive of any substance in nature more impressively brilliant than the spurting plumes of white waters in sunlight against a deep blue sky. I was delighted photographically with the geysers at dawn, as well as at sunset.³¹

³⁰ For more information, Lee H. Whittlesey’s book *Death In Yellowstone* is filled with historical accounts of “accidents and foolhardiness in the First National Park.

³¹ Adams, Ansel, and Mary Street Alinder. *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1996, 235.



Figure 29: Ansel Adams, *Castle Geysir Cove*, Yellowstone National Park, 1942, Photograph

Adams was the first distinguished photographer of the American West. His life-long, mass-produced portfolio overflows with iconic black and white images of Western national parks. Susan Sontag suggests that “[b]y furnishing this already crowded world with a duplicate one of images, photography makes us feel that the world is more available than it really is.”³² The ubiquity of Adams’ photographs encourages the prospective visitors to see and feel as if the picturesque landscape is tame and approachable. Just like my experience in Yellowstone, I think that this overwhelming deception gives a false sense of security for those who want to physically and visually experience the sights captured inside his photographs. His photographs whisk the viewer away to a magical, picturesque world where the horizons maintain an open invitation. A sense of danger is not anywhere to be found inside his images. Art critic Andy Grundberg also notes Adams’ easy depiction of dangerous ground.

³² Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador USA : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, 24.

...Adams pictured nature as scenery. In his landscape images, the natural world presents itself for human delectation; whatever threatening quality its sharp cliffs, precipitous gorges, and compacted thunderheads may have had is by and large neutralized and neutered...it shows us a natural world so precisely ordered and so cleansed of ills that we might suspect it had been sanitized by a cosmic disinfecting agent in advance of the photographer's appearance on the scene. This fundamentally hygienic conception of the world is apparent not only in Adams's pictures but also in the ways in which he discussed the particular style of photography to which he was devoted.³³

Even though Adams prided himself on being a "straight" photographer, who offered unmanipulated representations of his visual experience, his prints are actually dramatic and theatrical. Grundberg further comments that "...Adams went in his time to avoid quotidian reality both in his choice of subject matter and in his printing style, which became increasingly theatrical and hyperbolic over the course of his career."³⁴ The ubiquitous presence of Adams' prints act as an unspoken invitation—encouraging first-time visitors to search and participate in photographing the optical orgasm.

³³ Grundberg, Andy. *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography, 1974-1989*. Writers and Artists on Photography. New York: Aperture, 1990, 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

Death on the Snake River



Figure 30 (left): Ansel Adams, *The Tetons and the Snake River*, 1942, Photograph
 Figure 31 (right): Rachel Lambert, *Curtain River*, 2014, Printed Fabric, Tule, River
 Rocks, Feathers, Installation View

One of Ansel Adams's most famous photographs is *The Tetons and Snake River* (Fig. 30). The gentle, silver sparkle of the curving river and the dramatic lighting behind the premier mountain range once again ignite a desire to visit this designated, special area. Thirty-two years after Adams shot this image, he lost his good friend Nancy Newhall to a falling-tree accident in this very location. Adams recalls:

The next evening Beaumont called and told me of Nancy's accident. It was during the last afternoon trip; they were gliding along the sound bank of the river (the area can be seen in my photograph *The Tetons and the Snake River*). A large tree, its roots weakened by severe winter storms, fell without warning into the river, directly on the inflated raft, striking Nancy. They had lost their guide and had no radio communication. It was hours before a helicopter could be summoned for transport to the Jackson Hole hospital... On July 7, 1974, Beaumont called to tell me Nancy had died.³⁵

³⁵ Adams, Ansel, and Mary Street Alinder. *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1996, 185.

How could anyone anticipate such a freak accident? Nancy was on vacation, enjoying the picturesque sites of the Snake River when she was struck.³⁶ She was Adams' personal editor and writer who regularly interacted with his photography. I'm sure she had no idea that the location of the images she so closely worked with would one day kill her. Maybe she was aware of the danger but chose to immerse herself in the landscape anyway. Inspired by this incident, I recreated this winding river as a curtain in my installation (Fig. 31).

Inspiration Point: The Day I Discovered Death



Figure 32: Rachel Lambert, *The Day I Discovered Death*, Grand Teton National Park, 2014, Photograph

³⁶ Ibid., 185.

Summer 2014, I went on a day hike with a friend in Cascade Canyon, a trail on the Grand Teton mountain range. We stopped on the trail to have lunch when a helicopter arrived, continuously circling the tops of the trees where we were eating. A few comments were exchanged regarding the impoliteness of helicopter tours, because they kept interrupting our ability to enjoy the scenery. Moments after lunch, we overheard someone say they found the body. Still in denial, my friend and I convinced ourselves that the passersby were referring to a television drama. Once we reached the top, we saw the rescue team and cadaver dog had located a body 100 feet away from where we were standing. Reaching Inspiration Point, the lookout platform at the top of the trail was more inspiring than I could have ever anticipated! Not knowing how to react or what to say, my friend and I just stood there in silence. The seductive landscape betrayed my expectation of the perfect viewpoint. With camera in hand, I felt like it was bad etiquette to shoot images of the found corpse. Instead, I took one image (Fig. 32) overlooking Jenny Lake. I was standing on the point-of-interest, the grand mountain range that draws 2.8+ million visitors every year.³⁷ This photograph documented the dangerous outlook that visitors yearn to experience.³⁸

The Outside Living Room was inspired by *The Day I Discovered Death* (Fig. 32). It was a journey bursting with sights-of-interest. I witnessed the distraction of fleshy hot springs, crinkly buttoles, and a winding river in the comfort of an outdoor living space or room. I navigated the space to gain a better view. I climbed to see another kind of living space, a space that acts similar to my installed living room. The lifeless body found at the summit of my hike was whisked away, so that it would not be encountered by

³⁷ For more information on visitor statistics, <https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/Reports/Park>

³⁸ Link to the news report <http://www.nps.gov/grte/parknews/news-release-14-50.htm>

future sightseers. *The Outside Living Room* perpetuates the denial of death. The sights I discovered repeatedly invite and offer few warning signs about terror or potential harm.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE OPTICAL SNATCH



Figure 33: Rachel Lambert, *The Inside Living Room*, 2015, Mixed Media, Installation Detail

In this chapter, I will examine my understanding of what the warm-blooded body is, and how complex social norms determine to keeping it covered. I will investigate the “optical snatch,” or the uninvited quick glance obtained upon the body’s exposure that leads to a self-reflexive realization of mortality. *The Inside Living Room* visualizes the pink flesh that hides behind a body’s skin (Fig. 33). Later, I will discuss a variety of artists who use the abject as a way to create similar seductive and repulsive experiences.

The Contained Body

The Inside Living Room was inspired by the inside, or the pink flesh, of the warm-blooded body. The body is a type of contained living room consisting of an outside and an inside space. To differentiate the two spaces, I will begin with the exterior of the body. The “outside” surface forms “the exterior of the body define[ing] the limit of the human subject in space.”³⁹ Whether fur or skin, the outside is exposed, accessible to look at, and has a surface that allows for immediate speculation. Orifices or holes “are access from one space to another – outside to inside – inside to outside – inside to inside.”⁴⁰ They connect the outside to the inside, act as a channel to be navigated, a gateway to be explored. Under the exterior surface lies the interior of the body. The “inside” of the body is the fragile, visceral contents, fully wrapped and sealed in the exterior skin or fur securely hidden from sight. The “inside” flesh is a private space not to be viewed or visited by outsiders. It is “the stuff of the interior – that which is imagined, in its unseen condition, as conforming to the internalized form of its exterior representation...”⁴¹ The body’s maintained closure of skin relies on protection from outside harm. Organs, blood, and muscles need to be sealed inside the body to sustain the functions of life. If the insides become visible, fluids can seep out risking the ultimate danger, death.

³⁹ Townsend, Chris, and Channel Four (Great Britain). *Vile Bodies: Photography and the Crisis of Looking*. Munich, Germany ; New York, NY: Prestel in association with Channel Four Television Corp, 1998, 67.

⁴⁰ Weissman, Benjamin, and Paul McCarthy. 2003. "Paul McCarthy". *BOMB*. (84): 32-37, 36.

⁴¹ Townsend, Chris, and Channel Four (Great Britain). *Vile Bodies: Photography and the Crisis of Looking*. Munich, Germany ; New York, NY: Prestel in association with Channel Four Television Corp, 1998, 69.

Genital Correctness



Figure 34: Rachel Lambert, *Penis-Foot Table*, 2015, Found Object, Faux Fur, Ceramic, Fabric, Acrylic Paint, Installation Detail

I will begin with the “outside.” When referring to the body’s exterior, I was taught that there are various degrees of when and to whom certain parts should be exposed. Typically, the body is concealed in hair and clothes for social and thermal reasons. The extremities, such as the arms, hands, and feet, are socially acceptable to be exposed and looked at by the public. But, once parts begin to move inward, towards the core of the body, they enter into a questionable gray area. Legs, stomach, chest, and back are generally covered but not shocking if exposed. Lastly, the genitals are set aside, designated as special; they should be kept covered and protected from public viewing. I would like to call this social norm “genital correctness.” Genitals are the portals to reproduction. One could argue reasons like population control, child-rearing, religion, etc... on why the genitals should be kept concealed. It is an orifice or gateway into an imagined, private space. An orifice can be an ear canal, nostril, mouth, anus, vagina, or

urethra. Visiting or entering the orificial gate to that private space requires a fee or a special type of invitation—otherwise it can be embarrassingly shocking if encountered on accident or through forceful violation. For me, Christianity established strict guidelines to protect my body from potential danger; therefore, I have been over-sensitized to experiencing exposed genitalia. For example, the exposure of the penis-foot table in Figure 34 breaks the code of “genital correctness.” The spread of a hot blush, a feeling of embarrassment, and a burst of joyous curiosity envelops the sightseer’s body upon witnessing exposure. Unlike while viewing Yellowstone, I am highly aware that I am observing a once imagined space. Even if a quick flash of a “private” part occurs, I have been trained to snatch a quick look.

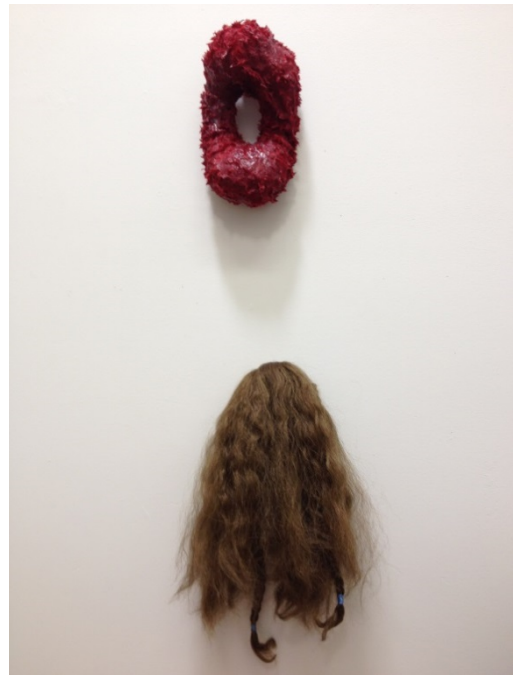


Figure 35: Rachel Lambert, *Insert*, 2015, Found Doilies, Plastic Furniture, Installation Detail

Figure 36: Rachel Lambert, *Hole and Hair*, 2015, Faux Fur, Silicone, Acrylic Wig, Installation Detail

Even though Figures 35 and 36 are abstracted genitalia, the objects still hold enough reference to make viewing uncomfortable. This quick glance or “optical snatch” is a lot like Susan Sontag’s reference to the compulsion to photograph – it turns experience into a way of seeing.⁴² The instant grab or poaching of what should have remained concealed is experienced as a dangerous intrusion into a once imagined space. Sontag further comments that “...photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.”⁴³ The body has been violated of its privacy, exposed to uncontrollable dangerous manifestations and interpretations into my imagination. Barthes suggests that “the Photograph [or Sontag’s experience of seeing] is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed...”⁴⁴ I visualized a “private” sight-of-interest, but now that sight is dangerous because I am free to recreate an experience with my imagination.

⁴² Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador USA : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, 24.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁴ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. 1st American ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, 91.

Are 'YOU' Invited?



Figure 37: Sophie Calle, *The Hotel*, 1981, Photograph

Photographer Sophie Calle recreates private experience similar to *The Inside Living Room*. Calle pushes back on the concept of “genital correctness” by exposing private spaces for viewers to lead with their imaginations in her work *The Hotel*. She worked as a hotel housekeeper in Venice, Italy in the late 1970s and early 80s.

During her daily cleaning of the bedrooms, she photographed the personal items of their temporary inhabitants, discovering and imagining who they might be. She opened suitcases, read diaries and paperwork, inspected laundry and rubbish bins, systematically photographing each intrusion and making notes that were then published and exhibited. Calle’s art works conflate fact and fiction, exhibitionism and voyeurism, and performance and spectatorship. She creates scenarios that consume her, border on being out of control, fail, remain unfinished or take unexpected turns.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Cotton, Charlotte. *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*. World of Art. London ; New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2004, 23.

Many hotels offer a service of “refreshing” occupied rooms which consists of removing trash, making the beds, and refilling toiletries. The guests or visitors are aware that the hotel staff will enter their room sometime during the day, but trust that their belongings will not be touched, opened, and speculated upon. They leave their room with a false sense of security. Belongings, such as luggage and diaries, are vulnerable “sites-of-interest.” Such items often contain private narratives of embarrassing or violent performances (like drugs or logged confessions) that, if revealed, could destroy the reputation of the visitor. Or, they could contain nothing-of-interest at all. The hotel staff is permitted access to the rooms, yet management applies strict rules and regulations on how the visitors’ property is handled. Sometimes, in bad etiquette, housekeepers uninvitedly sightsee to experience the mysteries behind the barrier of the suitcase or diary cover. Having witnessed this behavior in the hospitality industry, I would like to refer to the violation/uninvited touching of personal space by housekeepers as “house-creeping,” a type of snooping.

Leaving personal items behind in the hotel room automatically puts them in danger of being molested. Sophie Calle was a “house-creeper,” she both touched and opened what she could not immediately see. Upon returning to their rooms, the visitors did not know that their possessions had been opened and fantasized about, or that the “housecreeper’s” experience of seeing their property had been captured in a photograph. Many of Calle’s *The Hotel* works are exhibited by room number and gridded 9 photographs together to make one image (Fig. 37). Each collage usually includes the contents of a trashcan, tossed blankets on a bed, a clump of personal toiletries, and a pile of luggage cueing the construction for various interpretations. The moment the camera

captured their belongings, the illusive protective barrier is snatched, reconstructed, and given to more sightseers or gallery goers. The act of photographing the hotel visitors' belongings publicized Calle's experience of seeing, discovering, and intruding a falsely private space. Like my installation, I have captured a private space and put it on display for others to see.

Disturbing Order

What is the thrill about invading a private space? Does the response change when the hotel room changes to a living body? What makes the experience of seeing a hidden interior so seductive and repulsive for sightseers? Julia Kristeva coined a term for this type of push/pull relationship – the abject. She notes that “the abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I.”⁴⁶ *The Inside Living Room* is not me or you; it is an understood separation between viewer and room viewed. I would like to think of “opposed” as being a differentiating conflict or a preventative curiosity – (i.e. I know that it, *The Inside Living Room*, is different, so I must cautiously inspect). The abject is the place:

...where meaning collapses,' the place where 'I' am not. The abject threatens life, it must be 'radically excluded' from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self.⁴⁷

That place uses the body to distinguish life and death. “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not

⁴⁶ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. European Perspectives.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, 1.

⁴⁷ Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis. Popular Fiction Series.* London ; New York: Routledge, 1993, 9.

respect borders, positions, rules.”⁴⁸ The unaltered body deceives and protects from equating one’s self to the lifeless body.

Alive or Not Sleeping



Figure 38: Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Fetal Meningitis II)*, 1992, Photograph

Like *The Inside Living Room*, photographer Andres Serrano’s works disturb anticipated order. He produces gentle photographs of easy subjects, like a sleeping baby (Fig. 38), or the Virgin Mary. However, there is always something off about his images. “What it shows involves what is not shown.”⁴⁹ Upon initial viewing, the viewer sees what is on the surface—a soft, light skinned baby folded in a white sheet. Because the baby’s eyes are closed, the viewer assumes that the baby is sleeping. Then, the

⁴⁸ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. European Perspectives. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, 4.

⁴⁹ Trachtenberg, Alan, ed. *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven, Conn: Leete’s Island Books, 1980, 293.

photograph's title is read—*The Morgue (Fetal Meningitis II)*. This image follows Kristeva's description of revelation:

Then forgotten time crops up suddenly and condenses into a flash of lightning an operation that, if it were thought out, would involve bringing together the two opposite terms but, on account of that flash, is discharged like thunder. The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth.⁵⁰

Because the baby's skin is sealed, and its flesh isn't rotting, there is no reason for the viewer to conclude at first glance that the baby is dead. The baby is seductive because it looks soft, comfortable, and asleep; however the image explodes upon the realization that its young, delicate soul left its body. This image challenges assumptions because it visually says nothing about the loss of order. The site-of-interest isn't the presumed baby's body; it is the work's title, *The Morgue*. The morgue is where bodies are refrigerated/preserved after passing so viewing and identification can later be made. Reading the title "snatches" the viewer from the comforts of benign looking and takes them down a path of unexpected shock. Assumption is shattered the moment the title is read. Now the sightseer is compelled to search for identifying marks on the baby's body. That is when the faint purple spots dappled across the baby's forehead jumps to the skin's surface, and the sheet draped across the face's lower half questioned, and the black background pushed forward. All of these clues were present upon first glance, but because dead bodies are kept hidden, it is not on the initial plate of interpretative possibilities (as discussed in Chapter 2). The camera documented the presence of the

⁵⁰ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. European Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, 8-9.

baby's physical body. But because it is a still image, there is no way to know if life or a soul resided in its body, or if the body is real or fake unless offered by an outside source.

In some of my works of art, I use silicone to produce various surfaces to give the illusion of wetness. The living state of these sights are ambiguous. Abjection stands on ambiguity's summit by crowning the liminal space between the interior and exterior. "We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger."⁵¹ Abjection blurs seduction and repulsion. That blur arouses fear.

⁵¹ Ibid., 9.

Fearing the Optical Snatch



Figure 39: Rachel Lambert, *Blood River*, 2015, Fabric, Acrylic Yarn, Tulle, Installation Detail

When I am afraid of something, I try to avoid it, because I know it can harm me. I intentionally avoid putting my body in physical harm's way out of the ultimate fear, death. Kristeva defines "fear" as "a fluid haze, an elusive clamminess – no sooner has it cropped up than it shades off like a mirage and permeates all words of the language with nonexistence, with a hallucinatory, ghostly glimmer."⁵² Fear is an unavoidable memory that repels. If an incidental optical snatch occurs, it is deposited in my memory bank

⁵² Ibid., 6.

forever, waiting to bubble up at any subtle reminder of the initial confrontation. “The threat [or fear] that the ugly, abject condition poses to the maintenance of the category of the body means that it is always made the object of confinement and containment.”⁵³ Once danger is tasted, fear engaged, the body (and mind) loses control and has two choices: to *dread* or to *deny* death. As discussed in Chapter Two, many reject dread and choose denial. As a Christian adolescent, I chose denial. This choice allowed me to participate in a protective illusion by alienating myself from the thing that triggered fear. “Saving” my soul protected me from the uncertain fear of dying. *The Inside Living Room* confronts the safety of illusion. Seeing a river of blood is a warning of death’s potentiality (Fig. 38).

Entrails and Experience



Figure 40: Rachel Lambert, *Smearred Flesh Area Rug*, 2015, Fabric, Silicone, Nylon Tights, Faux Fur, Installation Detail

⁵³ Townsend, Chris, and Channel Four (Great Britain). *Vile Bodies: Photography and the Crisis of Looking*. Munich, Germany ; New York, NY: Prestel in association with Channel Four Television Corp, 1998, 71.

One never has complete control; danger always lurks. One morning, in the late summer of 2013, it was about 8:30 in the morning when I watched a deer die a violent death. I was driving in the Greater Yellowstone Area when I collided with a deer frantically crossing the road. Deliriously exiting the airbag deployed truck, I witnessed the struggling deer twitching and squirming on the asphalt. Still alive and breathing, its insides had ruptured out, smeared and skidded down the road. Because its body was beyond repair, I wanted to end its life, so it wouldn't have to suffer but was ill-prepared both mentally and physically to do so. Even though I have unintentionally hit several other deer with my vehicles over the years, there was something different about this particular experience—I hadn't watched the struggle of the dying process. I had an empathetic connection with this deer. Watching the life leave its gaped-open body was an abject experience. Its insides were pink, just like my own. The deer didn't invite me to see them; the "optical snatch" just happened. Seeing the deer's opened body, as opposed to my own, was an unspoken reminder that I am just as fragile and vulnerable to unexpected danger. The deer darted across the road fearing the noise of the oncoming vehicle. Neither party was showing aggression or dominance. It was just a moment of mutual confusion that ended in terror. Unlike the other fatally attractive scenarios, I wasn't with camera in hand. The only record I have of this experience is a \$14k repair bill and the inspiration that encouraged the flesh rug (Fig. 40). It is the skid mark on the floor of the living space, just like the body discovered at Inspiration Point in Grand Teton National Park.

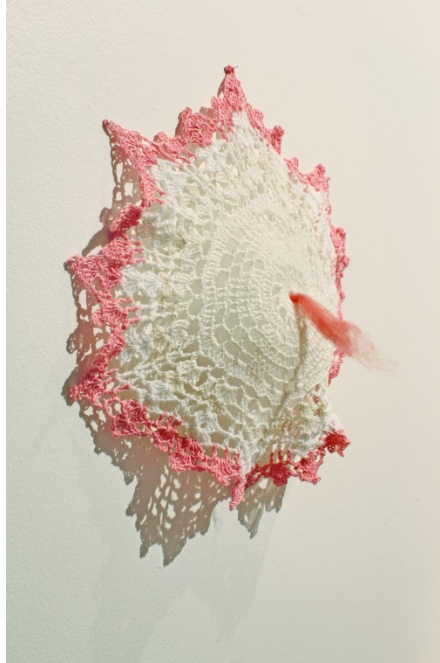


Figure 41: Rachel Lambert, *Burst*, 2015, Found Doily, Unspun Wool, Installation Detail

Just like a photograph, that shocking moment was imprinted in my memory. I can still smell the burned rubber tires, the leaking coolant, and the coffee that splashed all over my body upon impact. “*Life/Death*: the paradigm [was] reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print.”⁵⁴ The simple click happened when the deer’s body made contact with the truck. Its body was the “explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private...”⁵⁵ Envisioning the rupture of pink flesh (Fig. 41) created a new social value – fear of death. I could no longer maintain a learned state of denial. There was no choice through the empathetic connection but to come to terms with my own mortality.

⁵⁴ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. 1st American ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, 92.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

Looking at the Inside



Figure 42: Rachel Lambert, *Flesh Lining*, 2015, Found Doilies, Unspun Wool, Installation Detail

Uncovering the sub-surface of visceral tissue and fluids is a shocking, eye-full experience for me, a sightseer. When the exterior skin ruptured, I could see blood and other fluids leak out. Sparkling red, fluffy pink, stretchy whites rise to the surface unprotected from the “optical snatch.” The mystery of the interior was over; the living space was breached for life to escape. However, the seduction and repulsion of witnessing an open wound was and continues to be intense. Artist Paul McCarthy proposes that this shock may be “...a conditioned response: we’re taught to be disgusted by our fluids. Maybe it’s related to the fear of death.”⁵⁶ When I saw the deer’s interior, I

⁵⁶ Weissman, Benjamin, and Paul McCarthy. 2003. "Paul McCarthy". BOMB. (84): 32-37, 36.

immediately grew weak in the knees because I realized that I am filled with the same flesh and have the potential to fall into the same physical state. It is an imagined experience that simultaneously disgusts and deters me. Visualizing the viscera demonstrated the ultimate chaos, forcing me to come to terms with my own physical end. But that encounter was with a deer's body. Is the opposed revelation similar when viewing a human body? Chris Townsend states that:

If we see our own interiors it is a mark not of some enhanced scopic power, but of wounding and imminent death... This imagery of the organs – visual and textual – often figures a mapping of abstract concepts onto those parts of our selves we can't see and can't imagine. To know someone's heart is to know their thoughts, their innermost selves.⁵⁷

Seeing the inside of a human body can be a similarly shocking experience, but I think there are varying degrees of affect controlled by the freshness of the encounter. *The Inside Living Room* is a fantasy of a freshly opened body. But what reaction occurs when looking at preserved remains?

⁵⁷ Townsend, Chris, and Channel Four (Great Britain). *Vile Bodies: Photography and the Crisis of Looking*. Munich, Germany ; New York, NY: Prestel in association with Channel Four Television Corp, 1998, 67.

The Bodies Exhibit and Body Image



Figure 43: *Bodies, The Exhibition*, Plastinated Human Body, Exhibition Detail

I witnessed the moment of a deer's death, and it was extraordinarily shocking. Next, I will examine *Bodies, The Exhibition*, a display where humans are invited to inspect another human's insides (Fig. 43). Roughly 8 years ago, I visited *Bodies, The Exhibition* in Atlanta, Georgia. This show was a compilation of 30+ bodies placed on visual display. These "dead human bodies [were] preserved by a virtue of a technical process called 'plastination.'"⁵⁸ When I first heard about the exhibition, I remember being uncertain about whether or not I wanted to see exposed bodies for emotional and ethical reasons, but I went anyway. Upon entering the space, I was a little wary about the encounter. The displayed bodies' skin was either peeled back or completely pulled off,

⁵⁸ vom Lehn, Dirk. 2006. "The body as interactive display: examining bodies in a public exhibition". *Sociology of Health and Illness*. 28 (2): 223-251, 223.

revealing inside muscles, organs, tissues, and bones on all the figures. “The plastinates allow people to discover and make visible aspects of their body that otherwise would remain hidden under their skin...”⁵⁹ The bodies were positioned in performative, life-like poses and were given ample space for visitors to walk around and look from various angles. The more I looked, the more fascinated and aggressive inspection became. Eventually I wanted to touch, even though visitors were asked to keep their hand to themselves. Due to how the preparators positioned the figures’ insides, the viewer could see how organs and muscles reside underneath the skin. Some parts were pulled out, severed, and eliminated so that the sightseers could see how they fit together inside the body.

After visiting *Bodies, The Exhibition*, I was surprised at how my anticipated repulsion to the bodies didn’t match the seduction experienced. I was not alone in this detached feeling.

The displays allow the general public to examine the inner structure of the body with a detached and unemotional attitude.... Observations in the exhibition rarely find ‘inappropriate behavior.’ People generally do not display an emotional response to the exhibitions, despite the exhibition management’s claim that visitors regularly faint when facing the plastinates.⁶⁰

For me, the anticipated disconnect lies in the staleness of the display. The bodies are not warm; they are cold. The bodies had been dead, treated, and manipulated many months (or years) prior to the installation. The red and pink insides have faded to a dull brown. If the exhibition revolved around the moments of life leaving the body, I hypothesize that the visitors would have been more disturbed and reactive to the presented sites-of-interest. However, because the construction of the displays took place elsewhere at

⁵⁹ Ibid., 245.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 235.

another time, sightseers can detach themselves from death occurring as part of their visual enjoyment.

Uncontrolled Exposure

I think visualizing a violent death is an abject moment. On one hand, pink flesh exploding from a private space into a public space is seductive. The colors, textures, fluids are all soft, supple, and full of life, just like the sites of Yellowstone. On the other, it is the repulsive knowledge that the exposed flesh can no longer be contained and sustained that will eventually lead to physical death. The same captivating transaction is exemplified in photographing sites-of-interest. Sontag suggests that photographing violates the subject photographed.

...by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turned people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.⁶¹

The instant that the dying body loses control to those viewing, it can do nothing to stop or alter the last, lived perception. The seeing experience, the click of the camera the “optical snatch,” all capture, freeze, and forever record, through the reproduction of a photograph or the recollection of fear, an absolute vulnerability that will be relived over and over again. My installation is a captured and frozen recreation of these experienced moments. The false sense of security realized separates and collapses controlled meaning—an explosion from inside imagined protection to an outside, uncontrolled exposure.

⁶¹ Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador USA : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, 14-5.

Visualizing the Self



Figure 44: Kate Clark, *Tale*, 2013, Big Horn sheep hide, resin, foam, epoxy, clay, thread, pins, rubber eyes, 29 x 53 x 27"



Figure 45: Rachel Lambert, *Fur Bodies*, 2015, Faux Fur, Nylon Tights, Thread, Unspun Wool, Installation Detail

The Inside Living Room contains a series of abstracted, stuffed fur bodies. I think of them in similar terms as those of sculptor Kate Clark's work (Fig. 44). Sculptor Kate Clark's offers an unusual combination of animals and humans to question categories of corporeal identity. Through the simple combination of taxidermy animal bodies and

human faces, she problematizes notions of preservation and separation. Her body of work titled *They are Us: Animal Identity and the Anthropomorphic Urge* suggests that humans impose their identities on animals in order to maintain an elusive differentiation; however, we (humans) really aren't all that different. Clark uses real animal skins signifying that a death occurred to collect and construct her works.



Figure 46 (left): Rachel Lambert, *Inside-Out*, 2013, Faux Fur, Plastic Wrap, Silicone, Pigment, Installation Detail

Figure 47 (right): Rachel Lambert, *Inside-Out* [detail], 2013, Faux Fur, Plastic Wrap, Silicone, Pigment, Installation Detail

Death is the ultimate flattening factor for every experience. It doesn't decide who is superior or inferior. As with Clark's sculptures, my installation fights to maintain the separation of life and death. Viewers can see themselves inside these fur bodies, Clark's with a face, mine without (Fig. 45, 46, 47), by essentially trying on their skins. The viewer's body becomes the filler that holds up the animal's skin, that keeps it alive. The fur body is no longer allowed to collapse in on itself through physical decay. The human

viewer carries and maintains the denial of death, or immortality, for both. This denial avoids the instant realization that somewhere lies a discarded, naked animal corpse, and that death never occurred to create the sculpture on display. The escaped confrontation is urged by fear because it "...ruptures the screen of the body to reveal a space or surface so traumatic that it is an encounter with what is beyond metaphor, beyond the capacity of language to describe or contain."⁶² To me, this avoidance is rooted in the idea of death becoming visually and verbally unmentionable, as discussed in Chapter 2. The seductive qualities held within Clark's sculptures deny death to connect corporeal identities, yet they repulse once the materials are conceptualized.

Something must die to see death. The body is contained, but, once opened, the self can be inserted. *The Inside Living Room* is open to sightseers, it is already ready occupied by one (given that there is only one chair), visitors cannot stay long, leaving with only a memory of the sight.

⁶² Townsend, Chris, and Channel Four (Great Britain). *Vile Bodies: Photography and the Crisis of Looking*. Munich, Germany ; New York, NY: Prestel in association with Channel Four Television Corp, 1998, 68.

CHAPTER FIVE: PHOTOGRAPHING LIVING SPACES: GAINING THE COURAGE TO DIE

In this final chapter, I will discuss my ideas about life, death, and the living space in connection with my *Sights-of-Interest* installation. One may ask, “If this conversation is focused on photography, why not show photographs?” I think John Berger says it best: “What it [the photograph] shows involves what is not shown.”⁶³ I am not interested in what is shown; I am more interested in what is not shown. The printed photograph is what is shown; the experience of seeing and photographing is beyond what is shown. “As *Spectator*, I was interested in Photography only for ‘sentimental’ reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think.”⁶⁴ My installation attempts to recreate the distraction of discovering fatal attraction. I saw, experienced, and thought; thus, I created.

Sight as Experience

I constructed *Sights-of-Interest* to recreate my experience of sightseeing. I wanted to explore the landscape and open myself to inspiration, but I cannot physically take any of it with me. Photographing the Greater Yellowstone Area allowed me to experience the picturesque seduction while keeping a distance from the obvious dangers of preserved

⁶³ Trachtenberg, Alan, ed. *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven, Conn: Leete’s Island Books, 1980, 293.

⁶⁴ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. 1st American ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, 21.

land. Instead of reaching out to touch the unpredictable soil or animals with my hand, I indirectly touch with my optic nerve via the camera lens. “[Photography] offers, in one easy, habit-forming activity, both participation and alienation in our own lives and those of others – allowing us to participate, while confirming alienation.”⁶⁵ By tricking myself into thinking that I’m keeping a safe distance, I can still participate on the sidelines of danger. As witnessed, I think many other sightseeing photographers participate and alienate in the same way.

Digesting Thought

As I photograph, I always ask myself, “What does this mean beyond documentation?” The surfaces I focus on are seductive details. Through passive observation, I snap images like whipped river froth that oozes over rocks (Fig. 47). Other times I seek out fleshy rust orange and green algae laced in and around hot springs (Fig. 48). Many times these sights-of-interest allude to genitalia (Fig. 50) or cracked skin (Fig. 51).

⁶⁵ Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador USA : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, 167.



Figure 48 (left):

Rachel Lambert, *Froth*, 2012, Photograph

Figure 49 (middle):

Rachel Lambert, *Crust*, 2014, Photograph

Figure 50 (right):

Rachel Lambert, *Wood*, 2014, Photograph



Figure 51: Rachel Lambert, *Crack*, 2014, Photograph

The camera is a tool that provokes conceptual observation through a series of experiences encountered over an extended period of time. Many of the images I snap at Yellowstone's sights-of-interest can only visualize so much. "The true content of a

photograph is invisible, for it derives from a play, not with form, but with time... a photograph bears witness to a human choice being exercised.”⁶⁶ I dig around, uncover rocks, and decide what’s worth recording. It’s not until later that I am able to digest the experience, study the observations, and visually articulate the invisible experience encountered throughout the day of photographing in the field. That unpacking, digestive process happens when the images are downloaded to my laptop computer in the comfort of my living room chair.

I find the conceptual process of seeing, experiencing, and thinking disjointed. The gathering of specimens through dangerous situations is then safely archived at home in my computer. My photographs say nothing of the experience endured for their collection. “But photography does not deal in constructs. There is no transforming in photography. There is only decision, only focus.”⁶⁷ They are well-framed, aesthetically conceived photographs that soothe, inspire, and sometimes challenge. No record of atmospheric factors like sulfuric acid fumes or even the view behind the camera can be documented or re-presented. The soul, or glittery life aura present in the open living space, is and will always remain invisible, un snatchable – it is free! The visible surface is always recorded. My images may contain challenging textures or illusions to body parts, but by no means does the photograph say that I, the sightseer, put myself in danger to obtain them. For this project, I challenged myself to construct the theatrical sensation of the “optical orgasm” and “optical snatch” encountered at various dangerous sights-of-interest.

⁶⁶ Trachtenberg, Alan, ed. *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven, Conn: Leete’s Island Books, 1980, 293.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

Recreating the Illusion

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I use my photographs as a referential sketchbook. The installation is a complex compilation of the sites I visited and experienced over the past two summers living on the Yellowstone volcano. Each visualized space acts as a type of living room, a plot of protected land and a warm-blooded body. Both spaces house like shelters or safe havens. The distinguishing factor is that the “outside” living space contains room for many residents (Fig. 52), and the “inside” living space can only contain one (Fig. 53), as demonstrated in each installation’s available seating.



Figure 52: Rachel Lambert, *Outside Chairs*, 2015, Found Objects, Fabric, Faux Fur, Installation Detail



Figure 53: Rachel Lambert, *Inside Chair*, 2015, Found Objects, Fabric, Acrylic Fibers Plastic, Silicone, Yarn, Installation Detail

So, why did I make an installation rather than a series of individual drawings, paintings, or sculptures? I wanted to recreate a space so that visitors or sightseers could be immersed in visuals. I didn't want them to be able to see everything from one angle. They physically have to travel to observe, heightening their ability to experience. Claire Bishop suggests that:

Visualization of a work as a three-dimensional image, and the need to be physically inside an installation renders photographic documentation even less satisfactory than when it is used to reproduce painting and sculpture. It is worth bearing in mind that many artists turn to installation art precisely through the desire to expand visual experience beyond the two-dimensional, to provide a more vivid alternative to it.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art: A Critical History*. London: Tate, 2005, 11.

I use these tools of the installation to my advantage. “This need to move around and through the work in order to experience it activates the viewer, in contrast to art that simply requires optical contemplation (which is considered to be passive and detached).”⁶⁹ The photographic process is my optical contemplation; the installation is my production of visual experience.

The Viewfinder is my Peripheral Blinder

When photographing, my eye can only see what is framed in the viewfinder. The camera’s viewfinder acts as a peephole or peripheral blinder so that vision only travels through the lens. Because attention can only be focused in one direction, I, the sightseeing photographer, was left exposed to all of the various unseen angles of danger. For my installation, I decided that the inability to see beyond the focus or “site-of-interest” was dangerous, so I utilize partially walled living rooms. Each room is conjoined by one corner, iterating them both as semi-public/private spaces. Both rooms are open to invited and uninvited visitors. I am leaving up to the visitor/sightseer to decide if they have or haven’t been invited to look, discover, or think. No matter the type of boundary, the invisible walls of the national parks, or the orifices in the body, the gates or entryways cannot be blocked. The security of the space can never be guaranteed a designated safe haven or refuge.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 11.

Activating Materials

I respond to the French coined practice Bric-a-Brac, bricolage and braconnage, by assembling and poaching to create the objects contained in my installation. Braconnage means poaching. “Poaching is an everyday form of theft – of working with what is ‘not mine’...”⁷⁰ I used it as a type of appropriation by combining visual elements photographed and ready-mades poached or “snatched” from other locations. “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed.”⁷¹ I capture the landscape with my camera and also *take* rejected handmade and manufactured goods from the thrift store. When shopping for materials, I select fabrics and home décor items that correlate to similar colors or textures cataloged in my photo archives. Many times, I end up choosing materials like transparent tulle netting, dated upholstery fabrics, luxurious faux furs, tangled synthetic wigs, and flashy decorative ornaments. This reciprocal poaching process allows me to work intuitively, giving room for meditation and recollection of my dangerous sightseeing experiences.

After deciding on materials, bricolage, “an intuitive, day-to-day compilation and recycling of materials, objects, tools, ideas – whatever is at hand,”⁷² I then activate them through a practical assemblage process. I grab from a pile of the previously picked items stored in my studio and assemble them into visual objects of self-reflexivity. Loaded with familiarity, the objects are packed into the installation presenting an array of living space signifiers: living rooms, landscape, and warm-blooded body. Through poaching and

⁷⁰ Applin, Jo. 2014. "Bric-a-Brac: The Everyday Work of Tom Friedman". *Art Journal*. 67 (1): 68-81, 80.

⁷¹ Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador USA : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, 4.

⁷² Applin, Jo. 2014. "Bric-a-Brac: The Everyday Work of Tom Friedman". *Art Journal*. 67 (1): 68-81, 72.

assembling, I twist the objects' given purpose by coating some works with silicone, adding phallic protrusions, or rotating the intended display to "abjectify" their functionality. In doing so, I problematize their manifest soothing responsibility, urging the space's visitors to question the invitation of observation. The uncomfortable feelings induced lift the protective illusion of a safe living room.

Bursting and Sticking: The Unexpected Revelation

I created *Sights-of-Interest* to externalize and visualize my denial of death in the living space or room. The living rooms are separated by color; one simulating a damp swamp floor and the other a warm-blooded body. The rooms are to be traveled by sightseeing visitors; who enter and exit like the glittery, life auras or souls I learned about in my Christian schooling. The soul's presence is ephemeral. The installation's walls are lined and decorated with doilies, curtains, and blankets, enveloping the visitor in a soft barrier. The space is filled with a collection of textural fibers available to be observed and discovered. Reflecting back on my sightseeing experiences, I was lured into the "optical orgasm" and offered, sometimes by force, an invitation for the "optical snatch." So many textures and colors were looked at and enjoyed. While in mid-seduction, I found something not so enjoyable, even borderline horrific. That something occurred during the distraction of an exposed sphincter, orifice, or raw internal flesh. I recreated two living rooms that could be involuntarily "optically snatched" and archived in the brain as an unexpected experience. That experience or revelation burst forth and stuck to my brain, creating a pocket of fear in the once perceived safe living room or space.

The unexpected encounter put me on alert for potential danger. Even though the sights might break the “genital correctness” code, my audience will leave the installation sensitive to woven materials.⁷³ The woven materials, objects of comfort, were transformed into distractions. This realization of exposure and new found fear penetrate the illusion of safety in the living room. “The fear of death, which dominates us oftener than we know, is on the other hand something secondary, and is usually the outcome of a sense of guilt.”⁷⁴ The living room is an illusively safe space now riddled with “exposure.” Leaving the installation, the experienced sightseeing visitor will be seasoned and perhaps embarrassed or reminded by association every time a doily, curtain, chair or knitted blanket is seen.

Illusion and the Unconscious

Why did I fall for the illusion of comfort? “[One] needs a ‘second’ world, a world of humanly created meaning, a new reality that he can live, dramatize, nourish [one]self in. ‘Illusion’ means creative play at its highest level.”⁷⁵ Fear bubbles out a hallucinatory reaction in an attempt to steer the sightseer away from danger.⁷⁶ Even though danger may be present, like when I was in the Greater Yellowstone Area, my brain focused in on the gentle, enjoyable aspects of the sites. My unconscious attraction invited me to let my guard down so the sites could be seen, participated in, and experienced. Allowing danger

⁷³ I realized this conversation could be focused on Craft and Gender, but I have chosen to think about these material through a fresher conceptual lens.

⁷⁴ Freud, Sigmund. "Thoughts for the times on war and death." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, pp. 273-300. 1957, 297.

⁷⁵ Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997, 189.

⁷⁶ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. European Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, pg 6.

to rule my participation would have cost me my chance to live. The seduction of lived experience sugarcoated the potential danger of the landscape. “The unmentionable aspect of experience then tends to become a subject for much private fantasy, more or less realistic, fantasy charged with pleasurable guilt or guilty pleasure...”⁷⁷ I think that guilty pleasure, fantasy, or the optical orgasm gave me permission to tempt various fatal situations. It was not about getting the best picture; rather, it was about immersing myself in the environment to live, to gain a narrative, a story that could be told, documented, manipulated and turned into something else. “Our unconscious does not carry out the killing; it merely thinks it and wishes it.”⁷⁸ The unconscious is an illusion, essentially immortal or bodiless, free from death. My unconsciousness allowed me to be free, free from the fear of death.

Conclusion: Death Made Conscious

When danger was confronted in Yellowstone, the possibility of death moved from my unconscious to my conscious. At that moment, I had to choose whether to continue photographing or to back off the site-of-interest. Freud suggests that “If you want to endure life, prepare yourself for death.”⁷⁹ Looking back, I was already in the situation, but used my better judgment and stepped away. I was almost trampled by an elk, struck by lightning, and later visualized the guts of a warm-blooded body – all these events occurred in during mid-optical orgasmic seduction. The attractive sights lured me in,

⁷⁷ Gorer, Geoffrey. “The Pornography of Death.” *Panton House, Encounter*, Vol. V, no. 4 (October 1955): 49–52, 50.

⁷⁸ Freud, Sigmund. “Thoughts for the times on war and death.” In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, pp. 273-300. 1957, 297.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 300.

created a distraction, and wham! A horrific flash of mortality ignited before my eyes the instant my own bodily living space was jeopardized. I wandered too far into the living spaces of others, and uninvitedly “snatched” too many sights. The open, unprotected space was invaded, and the physical (Yellowstone’s dangerous ground signs) or socially constructed (guts equates mortality) signs of danger were ignored. I wanted to endure life but hadn’t prepared myself for death. The fatal distraction sucked me in and scared me with mortal repulsion.

For me, “[p]hotography is the process of rendering observation self-conscious.”⁸⁰ I didn’t really know how afraid I was until I faced unexpected fear. The camera is a mortal blinder; it allows me to be oblivious to my surroundings and tempts me to take risks. After recognizing death on numerous occasions, I have realized that my joy of photography gave me the courage to live. I no longer rely on Christianity to soothe my fear of dying. Pinpointing fear and developing an understanding of how that fear was established is the greatest freedom I could have ever asked for. Living in denial or living in “rooms” of illusion cheated me out of lived experiences. “To tolerate life remains, after all, the first duty of all living beings. Illusion becomes valueless if it makes this harder for us.”⁸¹ I left Atlanta because the danger was visible. Moving to the West, danger was invisible but still present; I just had to find it. Experiencing life became easier when I moved behind the camera and stepped into the landscape. The viewfinder acts as another tool for denying death, a more enjoyable and less dreadful way to encounter and create

⁸⁰ Trachtenberg, Alan, ed. *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven, Conn: Leete’s Island Books, 1980, 292.

⁸¹ Freud, Sigmund. "Thoughts for the times on war and death." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, pp. 273-300. 1957, 299.

lived experience. After all, I have discovered two choices in chasing the documented sites in Ansel Adam's legendary photographs: live life and risk death in the landscape to gain life-altering experiences—OR—live life and risk death in the comforts of my not-so-secure living space. I choose to keep photographing.

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