

A C C U - M U L A T - I N G T H E M E D I U M

Endnotes

1. A. Jones, 'Beneath this Mask another Mask Analogue and Digital Photography', in *Self Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 43.
2. T. Gunning, 'What's the point of an index?, or Faking photographs', *NORDICOM review : Nordic research on media & communication*, vol. 25, no.1/2, 2004, p. 40.
3. Rosalind Krauss discusses the relationship photograph processes have to the object, trace and the cast in her writings *Notes on the Index Part 1 and 2*, published in *October*, vol. 3 (Spring, 1977), pp.68-81 and Vol. 4 (Autumn, 1977), pp. 58-67.
4. J. Koplos, 'Ceramics and Art Criticism', in G. Clark (ed.), *Ceramic Millennium: Critical Writings on Ceramic History, Theory, and Art*, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Canada, 1999, p. 292.
5. C. Greenberg, 'Status of Clay', in *Ceramic Millennium: Critical Writings on Ceramic History, Theory, and Art*, in G. Clark (ed.), The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Canada, 1979, p 3.
6. A. Rosen in J. Sorkin, 'Annabeth Rosen's Accumulations', in V. C. Oliver (ed.), *Annabeth Rosen*, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2017, p.35.
7. J. Sorkin, 'Annabeth Rosen's Accumulations', in V. C. Oliver (ed.), *Annabeth Rosen*, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2017, p.35.
8. Guggenheim Collection Online, Bernd and Hilla Becher *Water Towers (Wassertürme)*, 2019, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/500> (accessed 5 June, 2019).

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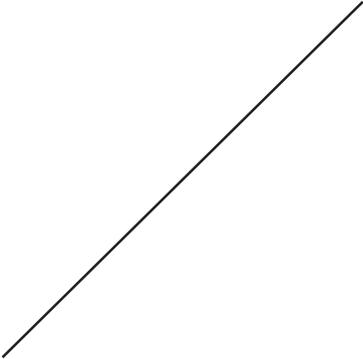
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RMIT University acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of the University. RMIT University respectfully acknowledges their Ancestors and Elders, past and present. RMIT also acknowledges the Traditional Custodians and their Ancestors of the lands and waters across Australia where we conduct our business.

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SPARE ROOM

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Madeleine Thornton-Smith
Spare Room
7 June to 6 July 2019

I accumulate collections of things wherever I go—stick collections, rock collections, interesting-shaped pieces of concrete. Courses, friendship groups, stamps on my passport. My partner tells me I'm like a bird creating a nest. In our bed I'll have around me the novel I'm reading, pens, pill packets, clothes, jewellery, ear plugs. He tosses the objects to the side of the bed every night but magically they accumulate again by the next day.

Whilst on an art residency last year with Intersect, Andrew Tetzlaff and I had a discussion. Looking over a series of textural ceramic tiles I had made over those last few months, he encouraged me to consider the conceptual notion of *accumulation* in relation to my art practice. I always knew I had been a collector (or hoarder!) having held onto years' worth of possible art materials in my garage. Since studying ceramics, I developed a penchant for the *production* of objects. Hand-building a ceramic vessel over several months last year, I started to slip-cast different textures from my studio: bubble-wrap, polystyrene blocks, concrete, acrylic paint, plastic bags. Slip-casting involves making a plaster mould of an object, into which liquid clay is poured, creating a replica of the original object. I began casting textures I had accumulated in my studio over time. I added small segments of these textures to the vessel: memories of each surface.

Casting is linked to the idea of memory. Casting objects creates an index that emulates the original, creating a three-dimensional mirror-image of the object—an idea which has many similarities with and can be informed by the history of photography. Writing about the analogue photograph, Amelia Jones explains 'an indexical image of the "real" is supposedly presented through the technological means of mechanical reproduction, tempting the

viewer to turn to it as a document of the truth of what Roland Barthes terms the "that-has-been" before the lens'.¹ The 'truth claim' is a term coined by theorist Tom Gunning to describe the belief that analogue photographs can truthfully depict reality due to their indexicality and visual accuracy. In both mould-making and analogue photography, indexicality depends on a physical relation between the object photographed or cast, and the image or object created.² When a cast of an object is created then, is it no longer a true or *real* object? Does only a trace of the original remain? Or does remediation simply alter the meaning of that new object, creating a new material reality?³

My art practice has developed out of this accumulation of memory and experience. I began my studies with a major in painting at Monash in my early 20s. Later, as a form of art therapy for myself in my final year, I started a short course in ceramics at a community centre—which later led to a diploma and then Honours in the ceramics department at RMIT. I've also studied social work, creative writing, literature, art history, language, history and sociology. All contribute towards an accumulation of knowledge and a building of personal history and experience. After all these years of study, with a particular interest in painting, installation and ceramics, my practice has become focused on challenging what a medium is if its material is subverted. Is a painting still a painting if it's remediated into clay? Can the plinth itself become the art object instead of simply operating as an invisible support?

Janot Koplos wrote in her essay for the 1999 international ceramics symposium *The Ceramic Millennium* that 'ceramics is a visual art' with 'its own identity'; further, she emphasised that 'the "otherness" of ceramics, this non-paintingness, non-sculptureness, is a good thing.'⁴ Previously,

in 1979 at the First International Ceramics Symposium, Clement Greenberg described the advent of postmodernism in art as 'medium-scrambling and medium-mixing, between painting and sculpture,' lamenting that 'the idea of the sanctity of the boundaries between different mediums [has] lost its hold.'⁵ I see the liminal place where media intersect as an exciting area of possibility. By focusing on remediation, in particular in relation to sculpture, painting and ceramics, I challenge Greenberg's staunch defence of medium specificity. Through an accumulation of experience and training in various media, I try to bring different ways of working to the practice of object-making. This mimetic process also interrogates material hierarchies: for example, expanding foam's material currency is subverted through slip-casting—raising questions about the status and value of ceramics, art and craft.

The American visual artist Anabeth Rosen also looks at this idea of accumulation, applying a labour-intensive, methodical approach to artmaking. Rosen makes piles of ceramic sculptures and paintings as a self-described means of 'safeguarding against disaster or deficiency'.⁶ Stockpiling, repetition and production are important elements in her practice. There's an image of her studio at the back of a book I borrowed from the university library. The room is writhing with bulging, twisted ceramic pieces, the walls covered in similar drawings. Her studio is so full of objects it is hard to imagine how a person would be able to fit inside. As Jenni Sorkin writes, the 'extreme malleability of the material and the addictive nature of production in ceramics fuels accumulation'.⁷ Similarly, Bernd and Hilla Becher's *Water Towers*, a series of black and white photographs shot between 1972 and 2009, encompass this idea of repetition and accumulation. The pair took hundreds of images of

industrial water towers across Europe and the United States over a period of decades, organising them into grids and labelling the subjects of their photographs 'anonymous sculptures'.⁸ This process of repetition is something to which I profoundly relate. After studying how to be a production potter, I have taken this method of working and applied it to my art practice—producing tile upon tile, mould upon mould, casting objects and crafting clay blobs. The small wall pieces started out as tests—a common practice for a ceramicist trying new glazes or clays. Creating these objects became a process in its own right. Each time I went to my studio, I would cast a few pieces, squeeze a few blobs—the pile of small ceramic objects accumulating with every visit.

My garage at home remains stacked to the ceiling with objects I have collected over the years. Old branches, discarded wood, cement, clay, rocks, pieces of old art installations. Hard rubbish furniture, slabs of clay, buckets of glazes. I even have a cardboard box collection, remnants from attempts to build the 'perfect plinth'. I have t-shirts from when I was a teenager. I have increasingly colonised bookcases with boxes of ceramics from past exhibitions. Sometimes I feel concerned that I will never be able to move because the accumulation of objects I own weighs me down, not only physically but more concerningly, emotionally. It is difficult for an artist to 'Marie-Kondo' her studio when much of it is about creating new installations out of these collections. Afterall, is not every art practice, to an extent, about accumulation? Is not life?

Madeleine Thornton-Smith, 2019