Material Affection: An Exploration of Materiality in the Anthropocene

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Material Affection:
An Exploration of Materiality in the Anthropocene

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from
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by
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Accepted for ___Honors________________

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Williamsburg, VA
May 6, 2020
"It all turns on affection"¹

INTRODUCTION

For as long as I can remember I have had an affinity for found and discarded objects. I love thrift stores and dumpsters and am always stopping to pick up a dropped pen or lost slip of paper on the street. These objects compel me to stop, admire, and often bring them home with me; however, I have never considered why these objects evoke this reaction in me.

Living in the Anthropocene, the period of time during which human activities have had an environmental impact on the Earth, I witness mass production, destruction, waste, and a lack of connection between individuals, materials, and objects. This has been described as the linear ‘take-make-waste’² model, in which people acquire an object, enjoy it, and then discard it when it no longer interests them. However, this is the only way of life I know. This makes it difficult to imagine and design for a future that does not operate in this linear mindset and one that is different from what I currently understand to be ‘normal’.

Despite this challenge, it is critical to understand that we cannot continue to design and use materials the way we previously used them. The aim of my work is to foster ‘disruptive approaches’ that give way to alternative methods of production and consumptions. From using alternative packaging to sourcing sustainable sources. To achieve this, material innovation is crucial.

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With this in mind I turn to material studies. To start, I need to define how I see materials. I define a material as the building block of all objects, with materiality relating to the composition of those objects. However, when I imagine materials, I go beyond what the average person may picture such as wood, metal, or clay. I see paper clips, hot glue, books, bottles, and acorns all as materials. I realize these materials can be disassembled into other materials, but I prefer to think of them as a whole all-encompassing material.

I see materiality as fluid. There is no right or wrong way to work with a material. However, this belief is guided by common sense in regards to safety factors and practicality—I do not intend to build a work bench out of feathers or a window of scrap metal. Instead I aim to use materials outside of their expected existence. To do this I have adapted the guiding phrase ‘use your tools the way you see fit’ to apply to a materials. By this I mean, I do not limit myself to the accepted or common use of the material—I manipulate, and utilize materials to my advantage. For instance, I cast cardboard in bronze and use hot glue as an additive stand-alone material. This helps me to push the limits of materials and find new ways to use a material in my work. This mindset also fosters a relationship between maker and material that allows the material to drive the work and influence the final form produced.

The disconnect between user and maker is another aspect of the Anthropocene with which I take issue. We live in a fast-paced world, in which one rarely stops to think about what is going on around them. The loss of the connection between material and finished object is easily lost when design and consume objects meant to be disposable. To slow down, create, or consider the constructions of everyday objects has become a foreign and underappreciated
skill. We rarely look past the surface of an object to think about the process, time, and material that went into creating the final object.

I recently stumbled across a line in the magazine *American Craft* that stated: ‘you have to be a crazy, obsessive, focused, and a hard-willed individual to build a log cabin.’ I suddenly realized this is why I have always wanted to build a log cabin. The second and more pressing reaction to this sentiment was to realize a lot of people used to build log cabins as they were a crucial means of shelter. Building log cabins was something people just did as a crucial means of survival. It was not an undertaking for only ‘crazy and obsessive’ people, but a common practice. The commitment and long hours required to build a log cabin only recently began to seem unreasonable as the loss of value and need for craft diminished the personal relationship between maker and material in our society. It is here—where we develop affection for materiality and objects—that I am intrigued.

Affection is everything. It is the “The primary motive for good care and good use...because affection involves us entirely.” Working intimately with a material changes an individual’s experience, it establishes a personal relationship between maker and material. As Wendell Berry so aptly said: “Affection is Personal.” It is here that my work begins. It is affection that drives my work. Affection for materials. Affection for change. Affection for the future.

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3 Unnasch, Karl, “Cabin Stories,” *American Craft*, (February/March 2020), 42

4 Berry, *It All Turns on Affection: the Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays*, 33.

5 Berry, *It All Turns on Affection: the Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays*, 15.
“If ever we are going to do good to one another, then the time to do it is now; we are to receive no reward for promising to do it in the future.”

1: MOTIVATION

I believe when we stop learning new skills and expanding our knowledge problems arise. We become stuck in our ways, conform, and do not challenge our relationship to materials. Instead we accept things in the shape and form we are expected too. To combat this, I aim to constantly push myself to develop new skills and reassess how I view and value materials. This constant critique helps me to analyze the way I relate to materials. For instance, I have always been drawn to using the bandsaw when working with wood, but once I developed a stronger skills hand tools (i.e. chisel, hand planer) I found myself choosing to work by hand. Using hand tools allows me to create an intimate relationship with wood, which helps me develop affection for the material.

However, expanding your knowledge and learning new skills can be difficult. I find myself getting caught up in the end result of my work and I lose track of the process. I wonder if my work will be ‘good enough’ or achieve my expectations. Often, when we believe the stakes are high, we don’t let ourselves fail or take risks. We are fixated on a final outcome and choose the path of least resistance. I believe it is good practice to take these risks. To do something unexpected, like put your grocery bags in the blender and see what forms you can make (more on this later), or to start carving wood without a clear end form and see what happens. The purpose of this exploration is to work with materials in a way that moves me. Not to do what is expected or to follow the norm, but instead to see an object and to think about how I can

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transform it into a new form. For instance, when working with cardboard I often start by cutting into the material with no set direction as opposed to planning out and cutting only where I planned. This process lets me make quick decisions on where I want the work to go and to not get frustrated if something goes awry.

This is important, for we are living in a time when nothing is certain. One should strive to look critically at everything around them and question the motives behind how they design for ‘design is a living, ongoing process that has to learn from its mistakes, refresh itself, and make new mistakes all the time.’

We must constantly question why we design the way we do and challenge ourselves to reimagine the relationship between an individual and object. It is through these challenges that change will take shape.

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“Change is difficult, messy, and takes extra materials and time.”

2: Material Exploration

I use natural, mundane, and found materials in order to rethink, redesign, and reimagine their purpose and presence in our changing world. Some of these studies have been informative and successful. Others were bad. There have been pieces of wood I cut too short, bonds that did not hold, and projects that have yet to be completed, but this is all part of the process. My intentions are to explore and question the material, process, and final form. I am disrupting my mindset and changing the expected and intended purpose for objects. These explorations inform the next rendition in hopes that I will learn and grow, and these changes are not easy. They are hard, messy, and sometimes they don’t work out. But that is the point.

Cardboard:

Cardboard is my material of choice. Its accessibility and prevalence in our daily lives makes it easy to acquire and work with. This accessibility lowers the stakes for messing up for a new piece of cardboard can easily be obtained. It is also easy to acquire a large amount of cardboard when needed for a project without a steep price. Most people only see cardboard as a packaging material and overlook it due to its mundane and functional nature. The what draws me to think so highly of cardboard is the ability to elevate it. Transforming a cardboard box into something so different and so much more complex than its original form is what keeps bringing me back to work with cardboard.

**spiral circles:**

Spiraling cardboard around itself to create circles has become a fixture in my work. Taking the corrugations out of their planer existence and curling them around themselves is extremely satisfying to me. The entire process of cutting cardboard into strips, peeling back a one side to expose the corrugation and creating coils is a time intensive and intimate process. The repetition of the corrugations break up the form and allow the eye to move across the spiral. Since these spirals fit in the palm of your hand, I arrange them in multiples. This allows me to create complex forms. Using multiple circles to create forms allows me to create organic shapes, which is a contrast from the rigid box the spirals originated from.

Working with the lace-like cardboard spirals led me to incorporate a light source into my work. I was intrigued by the shadows that were cast a light shone through a spiral leading me to investigate light in other mediums.
**BRONZE:**

Bronze as a material has a stately quality. It is strong, permanent, and bold; however, the processes of casting in bronze is tedious. From mixing investment, firing the kiln, and pouring the bronze, it is a multiple day work-intensive process. Each piece needs to be vented and gated with wax, carefully cast in investment, burned out, and then poured with bronze. After the pour, the amount of time that goes into removing the investment and cleaning up the pieces only increases the time the artist spends interacting with the piece. If it was not for affection, this would not take place. Without caring deeply for the work and the end result no one would go through with this process. It is this intimate relationship that develops in a bronze pour that is driven by affection.

Translating a material to metal has allowed me to find what I am searching for in my material exploration. Working in flexible materials has its benefits, but metal makes my studies permanent. It has the power to preserve found sticks and add strength to cardboard forms. However, the casting process leaves room for error. A casting may not cast in the entirety, break the mold, or have flashing—where the bronze has seeps out from breaks in the mold. Some people see these elements as a failure of the piece, but I like to embrace these alterations. They add to the piece—a remembrance of the processes and affection that went into creating the piece.
**bronze lamp:**

Taking the cardboard spirals and casting them in bronze was incredibly time consuming. The first time I cast the spiral circles, none of them formed in entirety. Some of the spirals only cast on one side, other not all, and there were a wide range of disformed in-betweens. I restructured the way they were placed in investment, opting for a larger tree-like form with each spiral branching off the main gate of. This attempt proved to be successful.
Once cast, I spent hours sandblasting the investment out the corrugations. Several of the spirals did not cast entirely, so I chose not to use them in the piece. However, a few spirals had places where the corrugations had been filled in by bronze. The means that the investment did not fill in between corrugations, so when the bronze was poured into the mold it filled the spiral in its entirety. Yet I chose to use these imperfect and filled in spirals for I liked the contrast they created between the corrugations. I also was interested to play with creating a light form that had aspects that project and blocked light.

For the final form of the spirals I was interested in shining light through them as I had done with the cardboard spirals. To do this, I worked to reimagine what I think about as a light source and challenge my notion of light. For instance, I usually imagine lights as hanging, so I made this form sit on the ground with the intentions of casting light up. I did this because I like the shadows that the spirals project onto the ceiling and I am working with the concept of incorporating shadow as an aspect of light. As seen in the photograph, many of the spirals have sections that are solid bronze and effectively block light.

The final piece sits on the floor and projects onto the ceiling in a dark room. Since the bronze piece is not seen during this, I chose not to patina the bronze. However, the heat from TIG welding altered the surface of some pieces. The process that went into creating this piece allowed me to foster a deep affection for bronze, cardboard, and the finished product.
Kasten 12

Spiral that is partially filled in with bronze

Left: completed lamp, Right: Preliminary lighting in the tool room
**bronze stick & leaf:**

Often when I am outside, I will be drawn to pick up and hold onto an object. I find that I am drawn to smooth and organic forms, sticks, leaves, and acorns are some of my favorite. If an object sits well in my hand I find I am immediately attached to it. If the surface is irregular, the object is too heavy, or it does not feel right to me I leave the object where I found it. This relationship varies person to person. Something that ‘feel right’ to me could be completely different for someone else. It is this deep personal connection that develops instantly when seeing an object that sparks affection.

In the case of this stick, I found it on William & Mary’s campus in the parking lot behind Andrews Hall. I was as initially struck by the stick because it was in the middle of the parking lot surrounded by asphalt. Upon further examination, I was struck that a single leaf managed to stay attached to stick as it traveled to the middle of the parking lot. I wanted to cast this stick and leaf in particular for I wanted to see how my relationship to it changed if the stick was no longer made of its original material. Unfortunately, the stick and leaf did not cast in a continuous piece, so when I have access to a TIG welder I will connect the two pieces. I have found that casting the stick in metal increased my affection for them, not only because of the process of casting, but because I was also drawn to the form of the stick, not the wood that originally made up the stick.
Left: Leaf from stick, the leaf did not cast entirely but captured the venation. Right: Connection between the stick and leaf. Eventually they will be joined.
**bronze acorns:**

I am also prone to collecting acorns on my walks. Similar to the stick, I wanted to explore how a natural material would translate to bronze. With acorns, I found I am drawn to the collectability of them. I like holding multiple acorns in my hand and having a tangible relationship. When cast in bronze, the acorns became heavy which altered the relationship between the acorns and my hands. The physical weight of bronze makes holding a handful of acorns unpleasant to me. However, this transition gives the acorns an assertive presence when placed on a surface. The observer can see the bronze pulling down on the acorns and connecting it to the surface it rests upon. This piece is unfinished but will be completed when I have access to a metal shop.

Left: cast acorns, Right: cast stack of acorn caps
WOOD:

Wood is an incredible natural resource that I appreciate from both artistic and a biological perspective. Woodworking is the intersection between my interests in botany and sculpture, and with this perspective I am able to appreciate the entire lifecycle of the material. From cotyledon, to forest, to lumber, to sculpture, having a grasp on the processes of harvesting woods gives me a deep affection for the wood and makes working with wood special.

In the summer of 2019, I attended a woodworking workshop at Haystack School of Craft. This experience opened my eyes to the variety of work that is being done with wood. We focused on slats, stacks, and bundles, and the idea of repetition in our work. The pieces I made at Haystack reflect exploration of repetition and slatting which has influenced the decisions to use slats in other pieces after this experience.

slatted lamp:

I made the slatted lamp at Haystack while exploring slats, stacks, and bundles. Haystack is surrounded by water, which encouraged me to think about boat forms and how curves can be incorporated into slats. Previous to this I envisioned slats as pallets—a very straight and rigid form. I created multiple boat-forms from scrap 2x4s and stacked them on top of each other. I played with angles in which they were oriented in order to create spaces for the eye to rest when looking at the piece. The end caps of each slat is discarded copper from the metal shop at Haystack. The use of metal at the end of each slat breaks up the wood giving material variety to the lamp. The lamp incorporates shadow into the experience for there is both light and dark
emitted from this piece. The affection for this lamp is tied both to the piece itself and to the memories I associate with where I made the lamp. Both of these aspects deepen my connection and affection for the piece.
cherry lamp:

This is my second rendition of a slatted lamp. Here I focused on balance and repetition. I played with asymmetry and open spaces. I intentionally left out one side of each layer to expose the light on the inside. The repetition in my wood lamps is different from the repetition seen in the bronze lamp. The repetition here is very structured. There is a clear level of repetition, whereas the bronze piece is a cluster of similar elements. This difference creates a very different experience for the viewer. The bronze piece is more welcoming and open whereas the wooden pieces assert themselves. There are clean lines and edges for the eye to follow. Yet all of my lights incorporate both light and dark elements.

Cherry lamp before light is added
Cherry lamp with light

View of the Cherry lamp from the light source
moss box:

I am interested in how a form can enclose another object. I was drawn to a piece of moss on a rock and wanted to contain it in a different material. Thinking about how found objects can relate to materiality—do I want the two to contrast or attract each other? Helped create a box from scrap wood to contain the box. Creating a place for the moss to exist is an affectionate act because it protects the object.

pine vessel:

I started this piece by following the natural grain of the wood while thinking about a vessel to collect rain. I felt as though the bark needed to remain in place for it would evoke a sense of where the wood originated from in the viewer. However, the carving did not lend itself to the vision I had planned. The warped wood was difficult to carve, and the bark flaked in unintentional places. This caused me to become frustrated with the material and to begin
losing affection. Halfway into carving, the wood changed color in the middle of the board which gave the vessel a yonic association. This was not my intention for the piece and this loss of intention altered my affection for the piece. I tried to regain my interest in the vessel by adding water as it was meant to hold rain. This proved unsuccessful. I completed the piece, but in the process I lost affection. To me, loosing affection is different than giving in to the material. It is a disconnect between material and maker in which the maker is no longer satisfied with the material. Giving into the material implies that the material has beaten the maker, which is not the case with this carving project.

walnut vessel:

The carving imperfections—accidental scrapes, marks from the gouge, and places where too much material was removed—show the human element of the piece. The imperfections add dimension by allowing the viewer to connect with the material and show a human quality to the work. These imperfections break the surface tension of the walnut and give it a ripple
effect. This makes the piece more approachable. The viewer can see the process behind the vessel and relate to it. This helps the viewer develop affection for the piece even though they do not have a personal history with the vessel.

Walnut carves beautifully and asserts itself as a high quality material. When working with walnut, I regard the material in a higher light than when working pine or a scrap piece of wood. I find myself making calculated and cautious decisions when carving for I want to respect wood. Since this walnut vessel is unfinished, I am still thinking about how I want to finish it. Do I want to sand it smooth or keep the traces of my gouge? And how will this change the vessel?

**Unfinished Walnut vessel**

**walnut spoon**

Spoons were an early carving project that I began working on to deepen my relationship with wood. Spoons are a very practical utensil to most people, but they also have beautiful sculptural qualities. Variations in the angle, depth, and handle can be the difference between functionality and poor design—a fine line that I like to walk with my spoons. Carving creates an
intimate relationship between the carver and the piece of wood. Each stroke takes away material. Harsh movements remove material too quickly, creating gouge marks in the wood that are not easily fixed. The whole process requires time, patience, and of course affection. This is especially applicable when carving spoons because spoons have an intimate relationship with the body. They are meant to be held and used to nourish our bodies. The process of creating such an object begins an affectionate relationship that only develops further when the spoon is used.

quarter spoons:

Quarter spoons are my second rendition of spoons. With them I play with scale, by sizing the concave portion of the spoon to a quarter. They are the beginning of a series in which I hope to experiment with scaling spoons based on other objects. I intend to further this concept by basing the size of a spoon off of lightbulbs, currency, and jars. I am interested in
how this use of other objects determines the size and shape of another will translate to affection. These spoons are unfinished and a still a work in process.

![Sketched out quarter spoons and the start of carving](image)

**STONE:**

Working with stone presented new challenges. Aside from wood carving, I prefer to work in an additive manner. Stone as a material has a very strong presence. It is often used to portray figures and memorialize important people, which was by no means my intention when I approached working with stone. Instead I focused on technique and how to use the tools. I let the tools lead me in this exploration and did not focus on the results. Because I set no expectations, I was able to experience stone in its entirety and begin to build a relationship with the material. My relationship to stone is still new, but I am working on building and maintaining affection.

**soapstone:**
The soft soapstone allows for the quick removal of material. Having never carved stone before, I explored using the point, claw, and flat head chisels on the material. Soapstone is a very soft rock, so I also used a rasp to remove material. This tool exploration allowed me to play with texture in ways I have not been able to achieve with wood. I chose to keep one edge of original 3x3x8 inch piece of soapstone in order to contrast the textured and curved form I carved from that edge. The contrast between a rigid and organic form is a theme that permeated my work and is something I intend to explore further in future carvings.

Texture on soapstone created with the rasp
“Make the most and the best of what we have”

3: ISOLATION

Due to the global pandemic, I am practicing social distancing. As a result, I am spending extended periods of time alone. During this time, I have been thinking about how objects influence my personal narrative and how my narrative changes in relation to objects, time, and place.

I work with what I can find in my house. This includes paper, fur, and textiles. These explorations have been a good insight to how I will continue to work when I do not have access to a wood or metal shop. These studies are smaller in nature and involve a less intensive process, for I am limited by the resources, workspace, and tools. Today, it is more important than ever to evoke an emotional response to a place so that we can begin to have affection for it and the people around us.

I will be the first to admit, these times are scary; however I choose to look at the bright side. This pandemic will alter the future structure of society and because of this we are “on the cusp of a dramatic change in the way that we make things, a shake-up that promises to alter the way we live and work, potentially rebalancing our relationship with our planet and reshaping society for the better.” This give me hope that even amongst all the bad, we will emerge better and with a deeper affection for ourselves and each other. I hope for a world in

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10 Franklin and Till, Radical Matter: Rethinking Materials for a Sustainable Future, 143.
which we can “solve problems and at the same time create a better world, and it all depends on collaboration, love, respect, beauty, and fairness.”\textsuperscript{11} A world driven by affection.

\textbf{paper:}

Everyone works with paper. We write on it. Print it out. In the case of my nervous fidgeting I fold and unfold it into perfect segments, but I have never made paper. My house has been inundated with brown paper bags now that grocery stores are prohibiting the use of your own bags. I have taken this as an opportunity to repurpose these bags to create forms. Using only my blender, a strainer, and my hands I played with how I can mold and manipulate paper. Having never made paper before the learning process of this built an affection for the material. It was a new and exciting process for me, that changed my relationship with paper bags from one of utility to one of excitement and affection.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{paper_forms.png}
\caption{Paper forms created from squeezing wood pulp between my hands and fingers}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{11} Berry, \textit{It All Turns on Affection: the Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays}, 35.
textiles:

Repairing our clothes and textiles is an act of care. Companies like Patagonia are actively working to teach people to mend their own clothes—a skill that is lost in the Anthropocene. Patagonia and menders alike claim that ‘mending is a radical act,’ and in today’s world it is. Mending subverts the take-make-waste narrative by extending the life of treasured pieces. It goes against everything our consumeristic mindset has taught us, but it shouldn’t be that way. It is a way of preserving and prolonging the life of textiles we are affectionate about.

In this time I have patched, mended, and embellished some of my favorite textiles in order to make sure they last longer. This builds on my already established affection for these items, knowing that I have put time and effort into mending them makes them even more special and heightens my affection.
As a long-haired cat owner, I have a large quantity of cat fur at my disposal. Most people are disgusted with the idea of using hair in their work, while other are ‘challenging hair and
dust, pushing the boundaries of renewable resources and even challenging our perceptions of beauty.'¹² I fall into the latter category, but have no experience working with fur or felting. Lacking felting tools, I did my best to make my own. I explored how I could shape and press fur into new forms. At this point I am still working on basic form such as balls and sheets, but I hope to continue this exploration into more complex objects.

¹² Franklin and Till, Radical Matter: Rethinking Materials for a Sustainable Future, 75
Felted balls of cat fur
“We have at hand the first fact of hope: we can change ourselves”\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{CONCLUSION:}

This project is the beginning of what I believe to be my responsibility to think for the future, mitigating the impact of human life on the landscape, and encouraging people to live in harmony with the environment. Reworking the ‘use and discard’ relationship with materials and “placing emphasis on materiality, enables us to reconsider the building blocks of the design process from the bottom up.”\textsuperscript{14} I believe that we learn from each other and the only way to begin these changes is to lead by example. I hope to inspire individuals to interact with their surrounding materials as the beginning of a revolution to reassess the way we design. This reassessment will take a driven movement—one I am inspired to be a part of.

If we do not make these changes, design will continue to create an ineffective relationship between human and material. We currently take materials for granted. We want things fast, now, and cheap, but good work takes time. It is something we work for and pay for. It this time that develops the relationship between person and object. The relationship is driven affection, and in the end affection is all we have.

\textsuperscript{13} Berry, \textit{The World-Ending Fire: The Essential Wendell Berry}, 328.
\textsuperscript{14} Franklin and Till, \textit{Radical Matter: Rethinking Materials for a Sustainable Future}, 14.