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WHILE MY GUITAR GENTLY WEEPS

An exegesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in
Masters of Fine Arts
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SAM NORTON

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ABSTRACT

This exegesis explores the ways in which my practice, while aesthetically and thematically varied, seeks to elevate the banal and transcend the everyday. I use collage, photography, and multimedia installation, working intuitively with an emphasis on making as way of developing, informing, and working through ideas. My practice is loosely autobiographical, drawing from both childhood experiences and everyday environment, with a desire to remain suspended somewhere between the actual and the imagined. This reimagining and recontextualising through the process of making allows me to retain a sense of control while simultaneously providing an escape or relief from harsher realities. I examine various artists and filmmakers/films in order to further contextualise my practice, specifically those whose works evoke a psychological tension. Although my work is autobiographically-informed, I am not interested in pursuing this in a literal sense, but rather in aestheticising a departure point into the imaginary.

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Q. What do you call an albatross without wings?

A. Depressed



(Figure 1) *Untitled*. Collage series. Sam Norton, 2016.

Over the past year my artworks have departed somewhat from my initial intentions. This has been a natural evolution, but has also made the process of writing about my practice challenging. For this reason I will use this text as a way of mapping my progression focusing on a selection of key works, while drawing links and comparisons where relevant.¹ While some of the references may not be explicitly related to my work, I have chosen them because they have either directly or indirectly informed my practice .

¹ I am dyslexic and find expressing myself in words difficult, so for this reason, I will use simple and direct language as well as a number of visual cues to try best to articulate my practice.

It is important to note that my practice is an intuitive one based on curation and improvisation² with a strong emphasis on making as way of developing, informing, and working through my ideas. It is also loosely based on the autobiographical, drawing from both my childhood and everyday environment, with a desire to remain suspended somewhere between the real and the imaginary. The way my work has developed throughout this MFA has often been as a response to previous work: a kind of action/reaction ripple effect, with one work informing the next. This sometimes means my work tends to contradict or repeat itself, instead of reaching a place of resolution. My work incorporates a number of subjects and media, but a theme that has persisted throughout is a desire to transcend the everyday, while simultaneously attempting to create my own world through some form of active reimagining of the exterior world.

I have explored this idea in various iterations. For example: *Untitled 2016*³ - comprised of a series of Skype screen shots - attempts to blur the line between reality and fiction while simultaneously creating an air of psychological tension. In this series I wanted to explore the idea of manipulating existing material through curation in order to create a narrative and atmosphere of unease. These images, while recognizing the possible sinister nature of online interactions, also aimed to elevate these mundane exchanges to an almost sublime and painterly level. In so doing, I wanted to allude to a world - or space - somewhere between the literal and abstract. This way of working is a form of escapism which allows me agency over my immediate surroundings, while also alluding to a world inside my head. It is not my intention to create a literal translation of this inner world however, but rather an abstraction thereof.

I explored similar themes in a series of collage works by assembling various found material from books, magazine and sheets of hand painted newsprint. Through this, I attempted to create a new dialogue through the juxtaposition of existing material. Artist Thomas Hirschhorn describes this form of collage as creating a “new world from two elements of already existing worlds”, while Birgit Brenner⁴ calls this depicting “multiple realities”. (as cited in Lutgens, 2012, p.49)

It was important that these collages were made quickly and freely as I wanted to capture a feeling of tension and urgency, while also evoking a sense of movement and play. This intuitive way of working sought to capture both harmony and disorder within the collage. Although I used images from magazines and popular culture, I was careful not to refer to the outside world directly - everyday products, labels etc. - wanting the work instead to exist in within its own time and historical framework. It is this recontextualisation which appeals to me most about collage. Through combining found imagery with painting I sought to create an alternative visual world that referred to this one, while simultaneously feeling both historical and contemporary. Martha Rosler describes this aspect of collage as a “productive fiction, a tension between the possible and the unlikely”. (as cited in Lutgens, 2012, p.49)

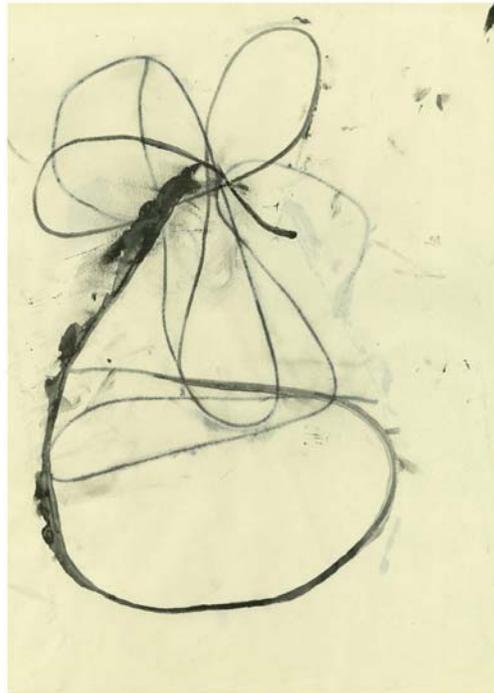
² This sort of improvisation is the same approach I have to making music, which until recently was a big part of my practice, but for reasons I will explain later in this exegesis, I decided to omit.

³ See images VI, VII, VIII

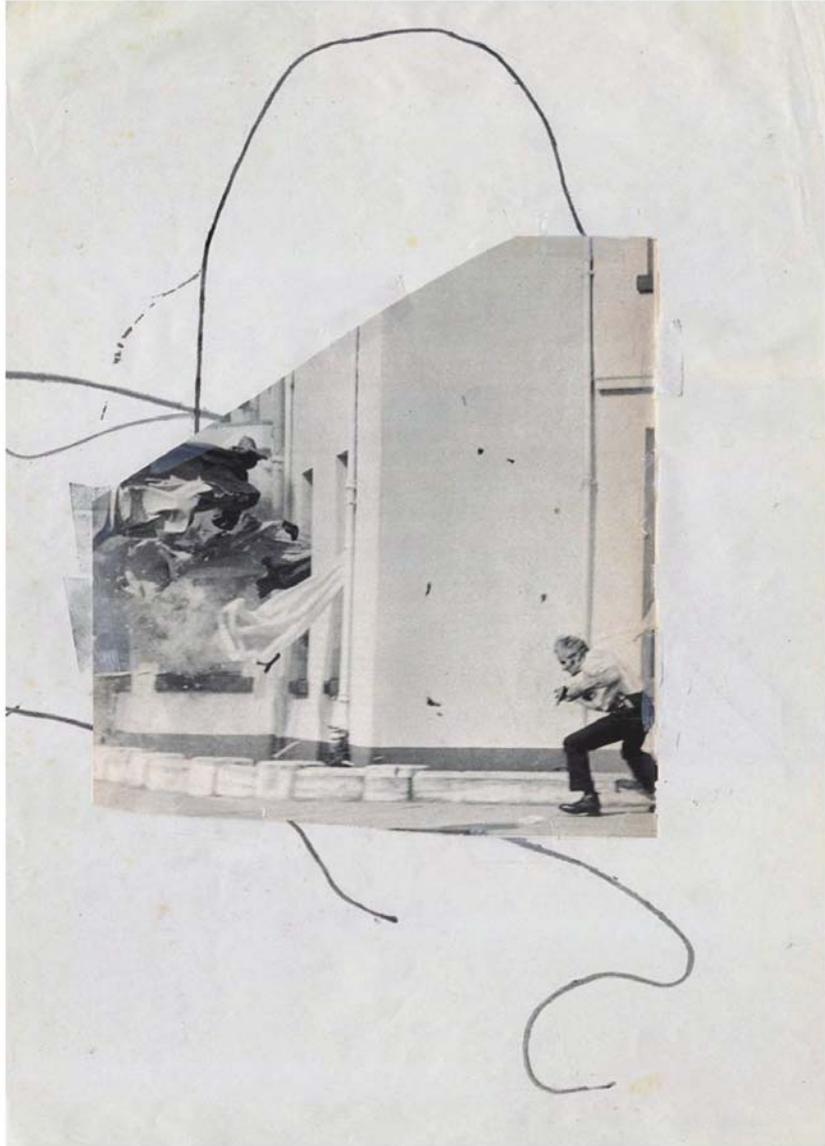


(Figure II) Collage from series *Will I Ever be My Mother*. Sam Norton, 2016

“We live in an age in which the variety and diversity of lifestyles and realities appear ubiquitous, as do the resulting contradictions and tensions. We have access not only to an unending supply of images and information through the Internet, but also to countless options and techniques for sorting and manipulating them in order to construct our idea of the world. The principle of collage has long since advanced to become a tried and tested means of perceiving and (de)constructing reality: it is a hallmark of our age, whether it be in architecture, sampling and mixing codes in fashion and music, in social life in the form of patchwork families, or individual representation.” (Salm, 2012, p.15)



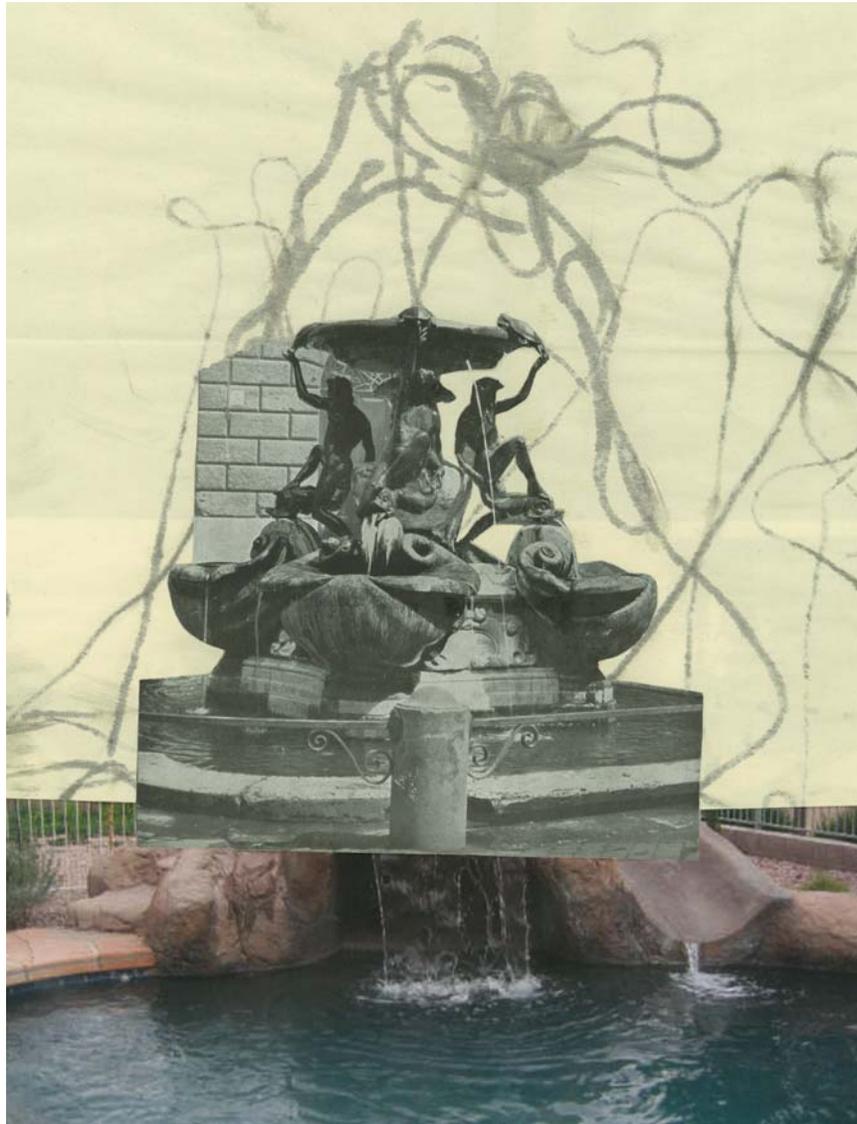
(figure III) Collage series. Sam Norton, 2016



(Figure IV) Collage from series *Will I Ever be My Mother*. Sam Norton, 2016



(Figure V) Collage from series *Will I Ever be My Mother*. Sam Norton, 2016



(Figure V) Collage from series *Will I Ever be My Mother*. Sam Norton, 2016

BACKGROUND

“Our ability to remember the past and to actualise it, includes the imperfections of the human mind and endorses sometimes voluntarily embellishes or falsified memoirs on an individual and collective level. (Niemeyer, 2000, p.3)

When I was about five or six my family drove down to Dunedin, we were going to visit the Albatross. In the car my mother told us it was one of the world's largest flying birds, it's wingspan reaching up to 12 feet. I didn't know what 12 feet meant, but I imagined it was enormous. I imagined that it's wings took up half the sky like some graceful giant, blocking out the light. When we arrived, the albatross were gone. They had migrated north to breed. It was winter and the sea was rough. Heavy clouds hung over cliffs that were covered with bird shit, sea salt and mist. In my mind there was music playing – choral and melancholic - and with the birds gone the place felt eerie, abandoned and expectant.

I don't know where this beach was located specifically, or if it was even in Dunedin, but I remember the atmosphere vividly. Because of my age and the eroding, consistently unreliable nature of memory, the event is now mostly fiction. For all I know there could have been blue skies and a still beach, but this is not significant. What interests me is the way in which I chose to remember the event, and the way in which these birds became mythologised within my own mind. This experience and the surrounding atmosphere catalysed an internalised world that I came to frequently refer to within my practice.

In retrospect, this event was the start of wanting life to feel extraordinary in a literal sense - above and beyond reality. It was also the beginning of becoming aware of a thin veil that separated myself from this world and another⁵ - a perception that continues to persist. This desire to transcend the banal and ordinary qualities of the everyday is a theme that has continued throughout my adult life and is something that I have attempted to illustrate through making.

By capturing the world around me through photography, video, collage, sound and painting, I am able to curate and recontextualise everyday experiences into a world with a heightened sense of reality. This process allows me to fictionalise and exaggerate an otherwise mundane transaction as I use the images to create an atmosphere of subtle discontent and tension – a feeling that didn't previously exist. Through this act of collecting and re-contextualising, I am also able to feel at once removed from the harshness and dullness of reality, while also having a feeling of control. I use this process of fictionalizing the past and present as a way of making sense of order in a world in which I have very little control.⁶

Art historian Matthias Winzen describes the act of collecting as the “attempt to overcome the fact that time is passing,” and that collecting is not only “designed to protect, but to also ward off fear.” He goes on to say that “the concern is for what is lost in the past and what is uncertain in the future. The systematic accumulation of objects must preserve the collecting subject’s symbolic continuity into the future”. (Winzen, 2012, p206)

⁵ This other world I am referring to is more of the imagination than it is spiritual or religious - although I did have my own belief system as child which I will elaborate upon further in this exegesis.

⁶ I mean this generally speaking, not specifically and recognise this is a universally shared feeling.



(Figure VI) Skype screen shots from series *I Used to Feel*. Sam Norton, 2016



(Figure VII). Skype screen shots from series *I Used to Feel*. Sam Norton, 2016



(Figure VIII) Aunt Donna, from series *I Used to Feel*. Sam Norton, 2016

COLLECTING / CURATING

In keeping with this theme of collecting and attempting to elevate the banality of the everyday, I created an online body of work entitled *I Used to Feel*⁷ (Norton n.d. a) while also keeping a journal and an Instagram account⁸ (Norton n.d. b) as a way of documenting and curating daily observations of my everyday environment.

The journal, while documenting my work in process, also kept recordings of observations: neighbours, passers-by, etc.

"I sat at the table listening to her talk about being laughed at in China. She talked about her children, money and the price of things a lot."

"It must have been the woman's birthday, because there was a cake and singing. Then she must have done something funny by the pool, because there was a lot of laughing and someone said, "Jo, you can't do that! "But she did it anyway. She sounded drunk and happy."

I Used to Feel, consisted of photos taken mostly on my iPhone and screen shots of family, friends, architecture, interiors, and various scenes from my suburban surroundings. It also included a selection of Skype screen shots that I had collected over several years. I am attached to this work - for although the online content and aesthetic perhaps dated quickly/ badly - It was in this body of work where I was able to communicate a specific mood and atmosphere through visual language alone, with the curation of juxtaposed images.⁹

By placing these unrelated images alongside each other online¹⁰, I wanted to create nonlinear narratives blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, while investigating notions of temporality. Through this, I wanted to build an air of psychological tension and unease – a feeling that was also not present in the “originals”, especially in the case of the Skype screen shots.¹¹ I found this process useful, especially as the online aspect encouraged me to have a more ordered and systematic approach to my otherwise intuitive and often disorganised way of working¹²

s

⁷ <http://i-used-to-feel.tumblr.com/>

⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/salmonnorton/>

⁹ Engaging with this more modern technology, contrasts for my preference in drawing from or working with more outdated media: filming on a Sony 3CCD hand held video recorder (2007), collaging from old books and magazines circa 1920 – 1990's and referencing films 1960s – early 2000s.

¹⁰ I am referring to *I Used to Feel*, not Instagram.

¹¹ I would like to note that, while the characters depicted in some of these images are portrayed in a somewhat sinister manner/ subtly distressed state, this is not the case in real life, especially in regards to my family. They have been manipulated to look this way through curation. During these candid sessions, I would take close to fifty or more screen shots/ photos and later look for the moments/shots in between where I could create a character that was fictional, as opposed to an honest portrayal of the sitter/subject in front of me.

¹² Because of my dyslexia, my thoughts are often fragmented and at times illogical. However, it is this same discordant way of thinking that allows me to make connections within my work that might otherwise not exist. My dyslexia is also a large part of why I make work in the first place as I want to communicate visually and/or sonically, what I struggle to communicate in words. Often this replies on creating a mood or atmosphere, or capturing a way of seeing, instead of relying on verbal communication which is another reason why I found taking photos on my iPhone a useful tool.

The decision to take these photographs on my iPhone as opposed to a good quality camera enabled these photographs to remain spontaneous, making the act of photographing more like an exercise in actively *seeing / looking* and engaging with my surroundings – contradictory of my desire to transcend them. In this way I viewed my phone more as a tool than a medium, enabling me to capture in the most immediate way an idea or moment, or something I wanted to draw attention to. Using my iPhone as opposed to a camera also made the quality of the image retain a homogenised aesthetic in keeping with online media paying tribute to a time in history - which by the time I finish writing this, will have already been superseded.

Unlike the carefully curated images and cohesion of *I Used to Feel*, I used Instagram more like a scrap book or light relief, collaging everyday observations interrupted with occasional photos of 'real life' while introducing text in the form of hashtags as part of my practice.¹³ The hashtags had their own internal logic, but referred to popular culture with a similar naivety or lack of context and exposure as I had growing up.¹⁴ For example, the abbreviation: *LOL*, or early 2000s pop musician *Justin Timberlake*.

This kind of absurdism between images and text payed homage to Dadaist collage which as Ralf Burmeister describes, is "bits of text and images [that appear] randomly scattered across the sheet, but once identified, unite into social satire". (Burmeister, 2012, p.29) By combining photos with nonsensical hashtags, I wanted to create a dialogue between the juxtaposed content while incorporating a sense of lyricism/ cryptic poetry and dark humour that didn't exist in my work prior¹⁵. This humour remained - for the most part - exclusive to this online platform. What my other work retained however, was an emphasis on play and spontaneity, combining imagery and subject matter as an extension of collage.

¹³ Because I hadn't intended Instagram to be part of my work until very recently when it seemed a relevant part of my working method, there are photos on there that are not meant to be included in this discussion - i.e. social events, friends, family, selfies etc – For sentimental reasons, I don't want to delete these, I hope however, that the distinction between the two is clear.

¹⁴ Growing up we didn't watch TV and I learned a lot of my pop cultural references orally by my neighbour and best friend often describing each scene of *Full House* – a popular television show of the 90s - while playing on the swings at the park – a pop reference once removed.

¹⁵ Up until this point, my work had been quite serious, although in an attempt to avoid this, I referenced the Gothic, which I will elaborate further on in this exegesis.



#crymeaiver #justintimberlake #whilemyguitargentlyweeps¹⁶

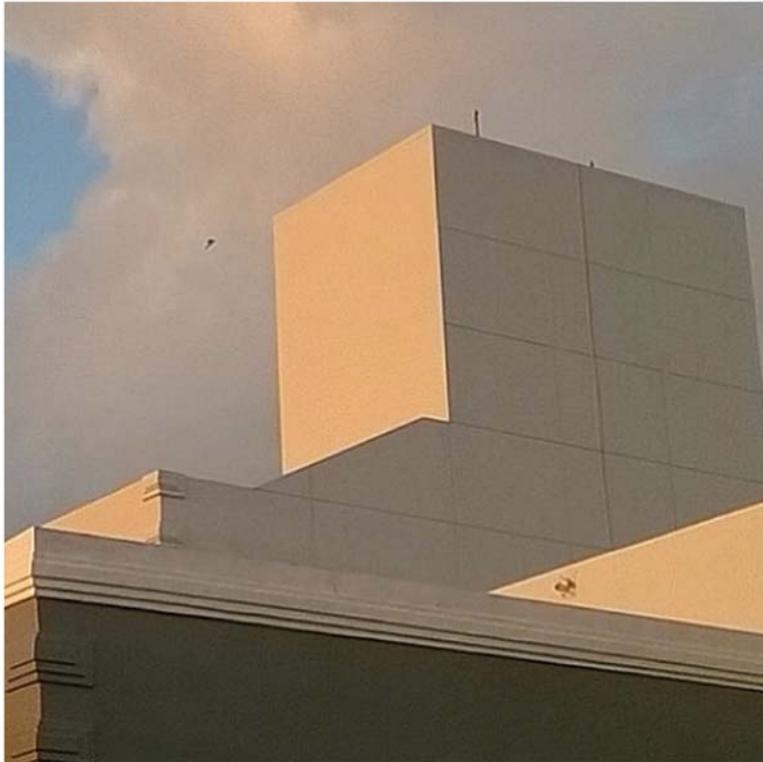
¹⁶ (figure IX) from iphone series. Sam Norton, 2017



#thereisaGod #Ledzeppelin¹⁷

¹⁷

(figure X) iphone series. Sam Norton, 2017



#rejoice #bornagain #ibelieve #salvation¹⁸

¹⁸ (figure XI) iphone series. Sam Norton, 2017



#havingalough #lollingalone #whilemyguitargentlyweeps #hysterical ¹⁹

¹⁹ (figure XII) iphone series. Sam Norton, 2017

RAYMOND CARVER

Raymond Carver became a major influence for me over the past two years. His minimalist, direct and sparse way of writing resonated, along with the tension and twists that often occurred within his short stories. Although Carver is not an obvious reference point for my work, his portrayal of the suburban everyday is built on an undercurrent of malice and discontent - a kind of dark realism. Carver depicts the lives of others as “suspended in animation, verging on disarray,” while conveying through simple and architectural prose characters living in a condition that “separates their empty lives from chaos.” (Boxer & Phillips 1979, p 76)

His work is also often interwoven with themes of voyeurism and dissociation while examining the everyday. The term “voyeurism” in this example doesn’t refer to the sexual interest of spying, but more the “identification with some distant unattainable idea of self” (1979). His often-dissociated characters “tentatively reach out toward otherness, Carver ambushes them, giving them sudden hideously clear visions of the emptiness of their lives: even the most familiar takes on the sharp definition of the most strangely unfamiliar. They become voyeurs, then, of their own experience” (Boxer & Phillips, 1979. pp.75-76)

CHANTAL AKERMAN

Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman explores similar themes of the banal and everyday in her film *News From Home* (Ackerman, 1977). Akerman reads aloud letters from her mother talking about liquidating the family business and feeling ill in the Belgian heat. This is juxtaposed with scenes from New York City of people waiting in the underground and walking about the streets. At times, the bustling city drowns out the ordinary world of the mundane and everyday worries concerning her mother, drawing attention to their contrasting worlds.

Rhythm and time plays a significant role in Akerman's work as she explains how she wants to make her audience aware of the passing of time, by shooting long uninterrupted takes from one angle.

(Figure XIII) Screen shot from *No Home Movie.. Chantal Akerman, 2016.*

Akerman uses this same technique to hold and build tension such as the case in *No Home Movie* (2016), a film/documentary about Akerman's relationship with her dying mother. The film opens with an unrelentingly long take of a tree being bent in the wind. A soundtrack, of peaking wind recorded on a hand-held camera, accompanies the scene. A shorter scene then contrasts this violent introduction with an old man, bathed in sunlight, sitting topless in park; a sort of release, only to be built up into growing tension again.

One of the main reasons I respond so much to Akerman's work, is because her primary concerns above all else, is getting people to feel something. Akerman says she hopes that "through evocation, [her audience] will feel something in their bodies"(2016). French director, Lucile Hadžihalilović speaks of a similar intent in describing her film *Evolution* (2016). The film portrays an "uncanny world inhabited by young boys and their eerie mothers," which Romney describes as "part horror story, part visual poem". Hadžihalilović explains she was interested in telling a story rooted in a recognizable everyday environment and was more concerned with sensations and capturing an emotional state, making her audience feel something, than she was in telling a linear narrative (Romney, 2016).

CHRISTCHURCH

I attempted to apply a similar poetic licence and exploration of time in a video work I made of the Christchurch fires, which occurred earlier this year (2017).²⁰ I wanted the work to blur the boundaries between documentary footage/bystander handheld camera, and cinematography. I liked the way these languages contradicted each other: the embodied camera and shaky hand, giving away to an otherwise slow cinematic pan. Scale also played a part in the work as the scene felt monumental, deserving of a high-definition camera as opposed to the camera I had at hand, from the early 2000s. This gave the footage an instant feeling of nostalgia, or as Paul Grainge defines it; as a 'nostalgia mood' "mainly built on loss." (as cited in Niemeyer, 2014, p.6)

Gregory Crewdson's, *Beneath the Roses* (2008) came to mind, as a haze from the fire's smoke fell over the neighbourhood, the light beginning to fade. Onlookers, neighbours, women walking dogs all gathered around drive ways to watch the spectacle. Some talked excitedly their phones out, while others grew silent watching with a sense of horror and awe. I filmed as the fire took a tree on the far side of the hill, threatening to go up in flames. We said things like, how awful! those poor people! their houses! over again, while a private part of us secretly wanted the tree to explode. Although I liked the added layer of narrative the suburbs and people provided, I left most of it out of frame- aside from a roof and occasional lamp post – as I wanted the work to remain abstract and evocative of something more ominous and eerie. Through the camera lens, the smoke looked more like mist than it did something sinister and the darkening hills held an air of romanticism and mystique, evocative of Lynch's woods in *Twin Peaks* (1990) or the establishing shots of Vincent Ward's *Vigil* (1986)

A soundtrack of looped guitar through various effects pedals enhanced this cinematic quality, while also attempting to remove it from the real world, locating it instead somewhere between the abstract and surreal. I wanted to use sound as a way of building a melancholic and subtly unsettling atmosphere, while at the same time being meditative and going no where, in contrast to the advancing disaster. Stuart Fischhoff describes the use of music in film as "an ally of illusion" playing on our emotions and the unconscious mind and that it is often a "non-intellectual communication" allowing the viewer/ listener to respond more to how the music makes them feel than what it means. Fischhoff goes on to say that music creates a "heightened realism or supra-reality" creating a new form of "theatrical, filmic reality", differing from our everyday perception (Fischhoff, 2005) liked the sound element of this work, however it had the tendency to become domineering, leaving little room for interpretation and prescribing instead a predetermined reading for the viewer. Nevertheless, I continue to use my music frequently as a tool and working method that immerses me within a world or atmosphere that I am often attempting to - in some way - illustrate visually.²¹

²⁰ See attached USB for video work.

²¹ See attached USB for sound works.



(Figure XIV) Video stills. *Untitled. (Christchurch Fires)* Sam Norton, 2017.



(Figure XV) Video stills. *Untitled. (Christchurch Fires)* Sam Norton, 2017.

PREVIOUS WORK / INTENTIONS

Although I removed the sound element from my work, it was not my initial intent to do so. I began this year by making a series of video works accompanied by soundtracks that aimed to explore the different ways in which I could create a feeling of unease and psychological tension. As part of my research I examined aspects of psychological tension in both fiction and documentary film genres,²² as well as surveying a number of artists, writers, directors and musicians as a way of informing my practice²³. Through video and sound I wanted to elevate or amplify aspects of the mundane in order to convey a feeling of tension, in particular, feelings of anxiety.²⁴

To contextualise my work I watched a number of films, naturally gravitating towards psychological horror or suspense. The directors I found most influential were David Lynch, Alfred Hitchcock, David Cronenberg, Stanley Kubrick, Vincent Ward, Ingmar Bergman, Chantal Akerman and Andrei Tarkovsky.²⁵ The specifics of these films weren't necessarily foremost in my thoughts while filming or editing my videos, but through daily immersion in these cinematic genres and their related conventions - instead of solely my personal perception - I felt a new sense of freedom to explore more universal themes, particularly those that entail psychological tension while blurring the boundaries between "high seriousness and self-parody" (Leonard 2008). This was an intentional attempt to avoid the danger of my work becoming overly earnest or sentimental.

An example of this is a video work I made featuring a car driving slowly down a mist-covered hill.²⁶ The scene was shot in one take, accompanied by an ominous soundtrack, paying homage to Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Kubrick's *The Shining*. The opening credits of *The Shining* presents the viewer with a calm descent through the mountains, establishing a sense of distance/isolation between the character's final destination and civilization. It builds a tension by evoking curiosity regarding the location of the horrors that follow – a kind of portent. At the same time, the sheer scale and vastness of the surrounding nature emphasises the vulnerability of the characters and acts to foreshadow the literal storm that is the catalyst of their undoing.

²² See film discography.

²³ See full list in bibliography

²⁴ Anxiety plays an important role in my practice as it is something I suffer from and often find debilitating (panic attacks/generalized anxiety disorder) However, this also fuels my practice as I attempt to give a physical manifestation to something that otherwise feels like an abstract concept. It is also where my need for control over my immediate environment/art practise stems from, along with my interest in alternate worlds and escapism.

²⁵ See full list in bibliography

²⁶ See attached USB for video



(Figure XVI) Video stills. *Untitled*. Sam Norton, 2016

As well as considering these film genres, I looked to the Antipodean Gothic in New Zealand cinema, photography and painting as a way of contextualising and localizing my work. I liked the way I could use the uncertainty of nature as a way of evoking a feeling of tension regarding the unseen/unknown. For example, the mist in my video work *Untitled*²⁷ acts as a temporal shroud or veil between the viewer and the subject – creating an air of uncertainty in an otherwise mundane situation.



(Figure XVII) Video stills. *Untitled V.* Sam Norton, 2016.

In his film *Vigil* (1984), director Vincent Ward used light and shadow to evoke a sense of unease and horror, as seen through the eyes of Toss - a young girl and the main protagonist. The environment is an “oppressive force that dominates over the family in the valley, threatening to fall in on them and drive them out of their home.” (1998). Jane Hitchcock draws links between the use of the landscape in both *Vigil* and Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (1993) as taking the place of the “Dark castle or monastery usually portrayed in Gothic literature” (1998, p.53)

Hitchcock states: “The desolate beaches or open spaces of the farmland, combined with the tangle of native vines and skeletal rotting tree stumps, reinforce the dark mood that the narrative espouses. It helps in encouraging the feelings of the audience, pushing them towards sharing the central protagonist's emotions whether they be loneliness, desperation and terror, such as felt by Ada, or the feelings of bewilderment and confusion experienced by Toss.” (1998, p.53)

(Fig.XVIII) Ward, V. *Toss keeps vigil over the farm*. Vincent Ward: the eloquence of Isolation Art New Zealand, Retrieved from: <http://www.art-newzealand.com/Issues21to30/ward.htm>

The Gothic appeals to me in the way that it combines “elements of romance and horror” (Leonard, 2008), while “skewing the ordinary- world dimensions of domesticity, decorative form and psychological balance” (Kavka, M., Lawn, J., & Paul, M, 2006, p.15). In his essay “Gothic Inversions and Displacement” (2005), David Craig suggests that the Gothic is simply “normality with a twist.” Hitchcock elaborates on this by stating that the Gothic "world" is separated into two spheres: the "diurnal" represented by the everyday and familiar, and the "nocturnal" or nightmare, the realm of the unfamiliar. (Hitchcock, 1998). New Zealand has a dark history that is often referenced in gothic works, but along with this, Leonard (2008) argues that the Gothic is also “an escapist fantasy, developed in response to the idea that New Zealand—particularly Christchurch—is boring and benign”. In my own practice, I enlisted New Zealand Gothic tropes as a means of illustrating tension between the everyday and the perception of the mundane subjective as threatening.

CONTEXTUALISING MY PRACTICE

I began my MFA studies by exploring the concept of women and madness in the hope of gaining a new perspective on my mother's history of mental illness. I made a body of work consisting of a series of collages and projected works entitled *Will I Ever Be My Mother*. This work was influenced both by my relationship with my mother and the research of several feminist theorists: Phillis Chestler, Herndl, and Jane M. Ussher. By becoming more informed on the subject, I sought a better understanding as to why my mother became unwell in the first place and moreover to use this knowledge to inform the ways I might respond to future incidents. During this time however, my mother was hospitalized and I was unable to "apply" my research as I had intended. Instead, I became aware of a regression in my behaviour, as I reverted into the role of (her) pre-adolescent child. This regression led me to Freud and Jung and their theory of regression as a way of coping during times of uncertainty. The work I produced at the time reflected aspects of Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Jung's analytical psychology. The collages that had previously sought to capture both the disorientating chaos and cathartic release of madness, took on another form. They became frenetic and childlike, both in their appearance and execution. The subject matter also began to shift as I regressed into a familiar and comforting world of make believe. Importantly, this was my world, a world separate and distinct from the real world and one that I had established as a child.

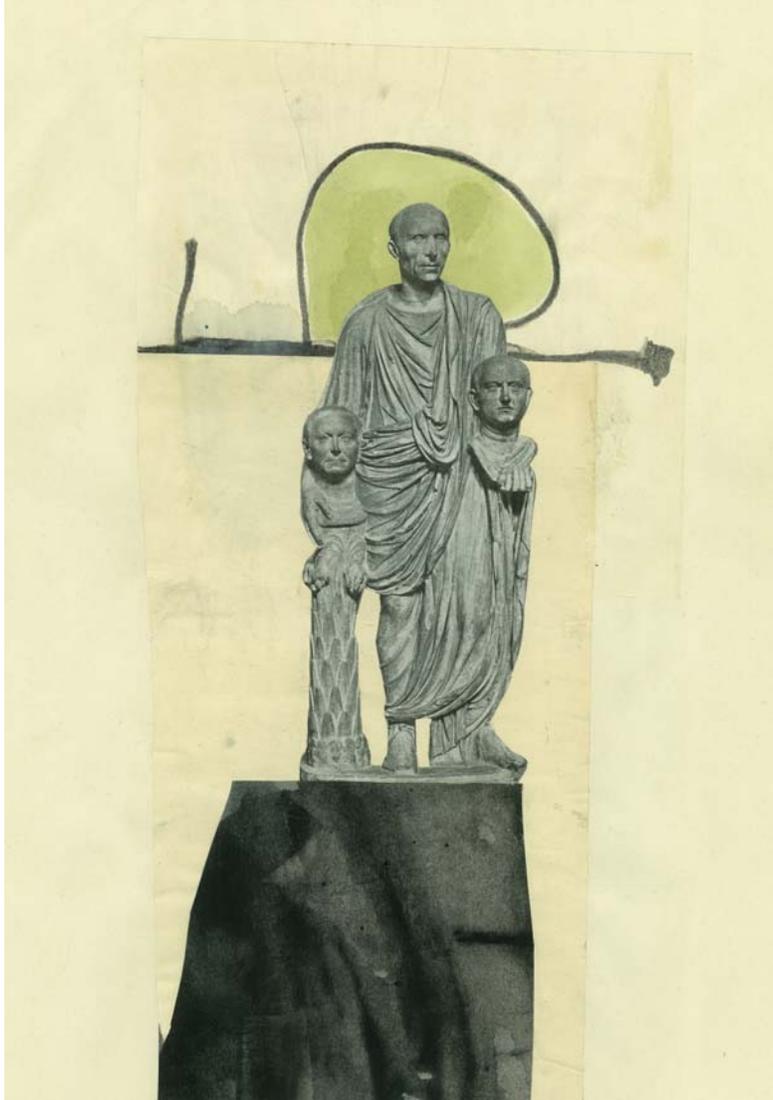
In my work, I began to use images of ancient pottery, amulets, talismans and statuettes of ancient gods and ancestor spirits. In early religions and spiritual belief systems these artefacts were used as offerings or representations of gods that maintained order in uncertain conditions. As Robert Wright states in *The Evolution of God*, this "inventory or supernatural beings" became the explanation for the "otherwise mysterious works of nature" that sustained life (2009, Chap 1, n.p).



(Figure XIXI) Collage from series *Will I Ever be My Mother*. Sam Norton, 2016



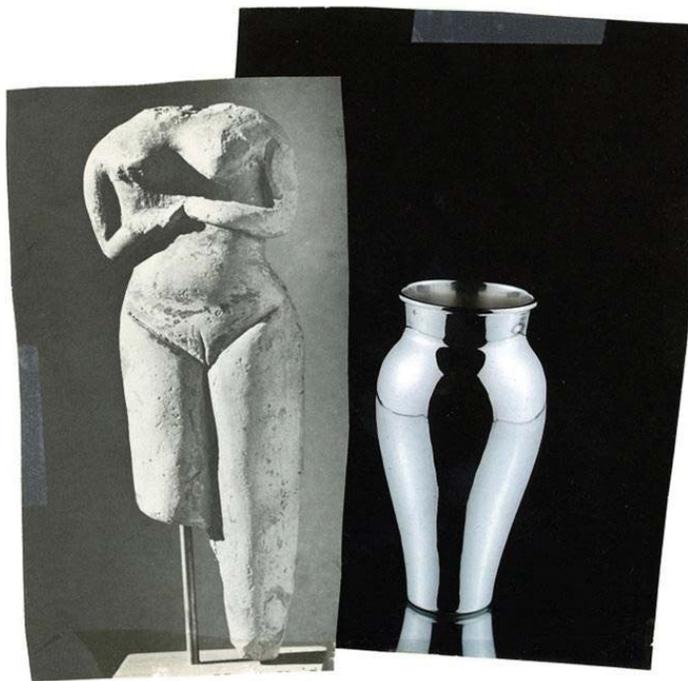
(Figure XX) Collage from series *Will I Ever be My Mother*. Sam Norton, 2016



(Figure XXI) Collage from series *Will I Ever be My Mother*. Sam Norton, 2016



(Figure XXII) Collage from series *Will I Ever be My Mother*. Sam Norton, 2016.



(Figure XXIII) Collage from series *Will I Ever Be My Mother*. Sam Norton, 2016

This form of escapism is of course nothing new and can be seen in the works of artist Bruce Bickford and Henry Darger. Watching Bickford's animations is like witnessing an uninterrupted stream of consciousness; heads morphing seamlessly into mountains, into bodies, into pizza, into torture. Through clay animation, Bickford creates an alternate universe of surreal and lurid landscapes, populated by god like giants, people and beasts. He found relief in his art from an early age and describes his world of fantasy as "trying to perfect the imperfect life" (Bickford, 2004). Bickford had a troubled childhood; a complex relationship with his mentally unstable father and a relationship with his older brothers that was often sadistic. Interestingly, despite all this, he never left his home, creating instead a world from the family's basement. Perhaps it is this familial environment that plays an important role in Bickford's work, as often his works depict struggles of power and acts of explicit violence, the 'smaller man' getting revenge over his oppressors. Through the physical act of sculpting and filming, Bickford is able to revisit, reform and reinvent his past.

In the case of Darger however, this form of escapism is arguably more extreme. Darger, a recluse and introvert, escaped into a world of fantasy to make sense of his troubled childhood and through watercolour, drawing and collage, fabricated an intensely detailed world of make believe. MacGragor (2002, p.202) describes Darger's work as incorporating "elements of romanticism and patriotic idealism, even occasional humour" while his ultimate objective being to portray a world "wracked and torn". Often, Darger placed himself within the stories, his works portraying an army of hermaphrodite children battling against fictionalized characters from his past. With recurring themes of good vs. evil Darger played out, in a fictional realm, the battles that he failed to fight throughout his childhood and re-established a lost sense of order in his day-to-day life. Darger's religious upbringing influenced his worldview which included a pantheon of gods, chimeras, mythical lands and spiritual armies: a complex belief system of his own design.²⁸

Childhood plays an important role in my practice as the two are closely linked. Like many children, I inhabited this world along with the world of make believe. My imaginary world was ubiquitous within my day-to-day life and one full of atmosphere and the supernatural. It was made up of gods, guardians, angels, rituals and superstition. There was God in a Rock, Truth the Tree, Papa in the sky, a doll that acted as a medium to Papa and a realm of guardian angels – among but a few. While the all-seeing Papa seems an obvious interpretation of the Christian God, the others drew from paganism or were more akin to the ancestor or nature spirits found in traditional tribal religions. I was raised in a secular home and as a result, the way I assembled these religious references came from a very naïve perspective, appropriating material I recognised but didn't understand. Although I now have a better understanding of history and context, I still approach my work with a related emphasis upon the speculative and intuitive. When working freely and most effectively, this method allows me to maintain a sense of play, with an almost childlike quality that allows for experimentation devoid of logic.²⁹

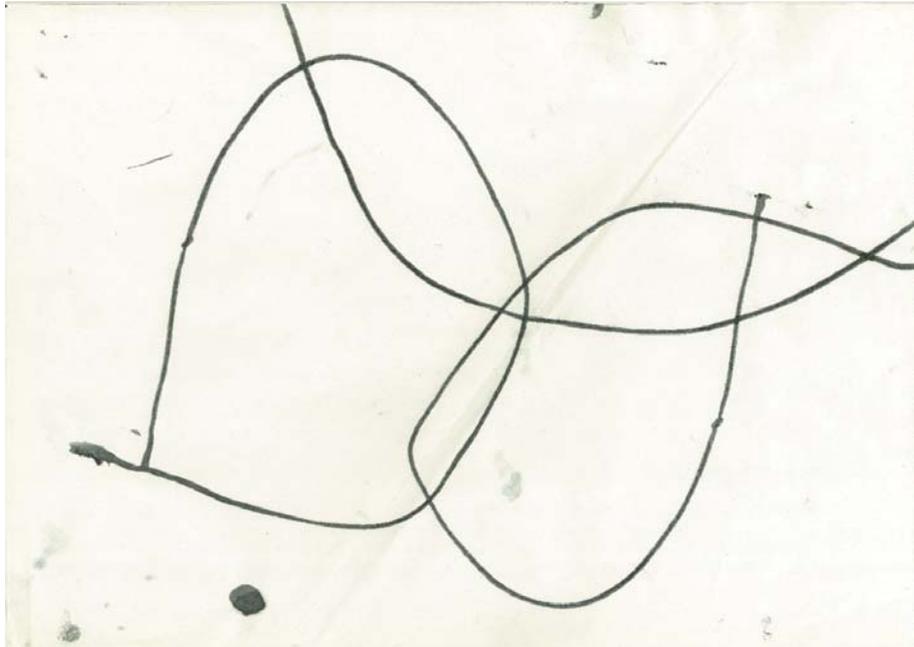
²⁸ Darger devoted much of his life to creating a 15,145-page, illustrated document called *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion* (2007, 2012)

²⁹ I would like to mention that while both Bickford and Darger have reoccurring themes of troubled childhoods, I am in no way drawing a comparison to my own as this was not the case. I have cited these artists because of the ways in which they formed their worlds from a seemingly naïve, childlike perspective and it is this childlike quality summoning instinct and intuition that I often draw upon in my own practice.

PROCESS / METHODOLOGY

Throughout my MFA I realised the work I was often most attached to happened in between making the 'real work'. This occurred because during these times I was working intuitively freed of self-expectation, while also feeling like I was doing something I wasn't meant to be. Artist Carol Bove speaks of a similar working method in her interview with *The Wild*: "I think with materials so I like to have things out, and it's nice to be able to leave an arrangement of objects in one room and then forget about it so it's a surprise later. Procrastinating also plays an important role. If I can devise a really difficult or unpleasant project in one room, then I feel like I'm getting away with something if I can do something with an artwork in a different room." (Kim, 2012)

However, my attachment to these works was more than the feeling of 'getting away with something'. Often these works acted as drafts for future work and once resolved, I no longer had the same attachment: a similar experience I have when comparing the 'real' recording in music as opposed to the demo. This was because in their draft form, the works seemed more uninhibited and free, preserving a vulnerability that didn't remain in the finished outcome. The drafts aspired to be something greater than they were, while simultaneously allowing themselves to never fully be actualised. In this form, the works alluded to something they could be but weren't, remaining instead suspended in a state of promising potential. In this way also, the works felt as if they never fully belonged in the real world but rather resided in the world of my imagination.



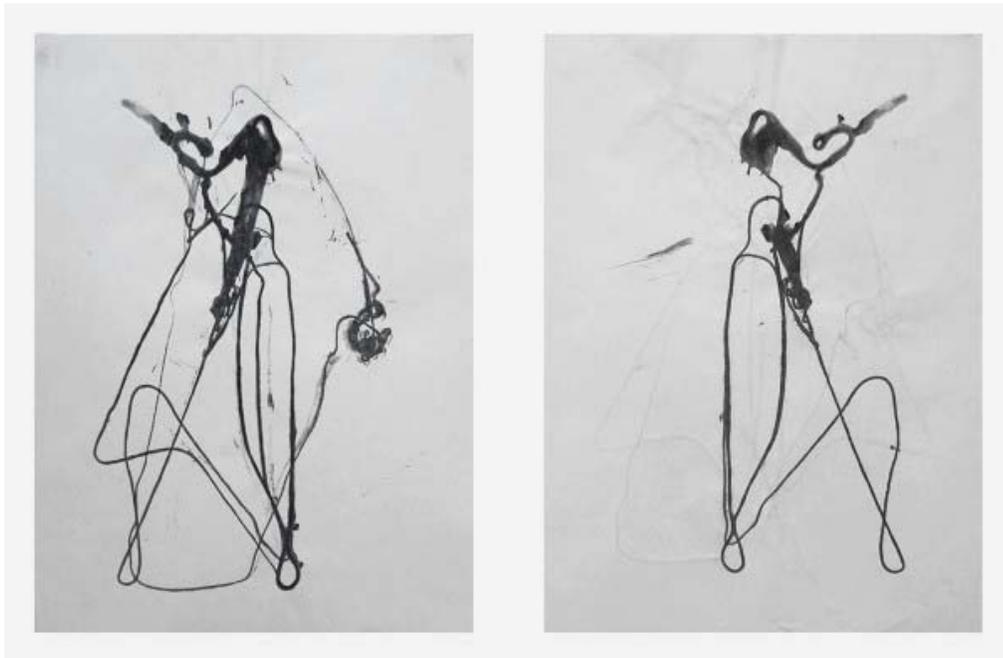
(Figure XXIV) Gauche on newsprint. Sam Norton, 2017

This provisional sensibility was heightened by the choice of materials I chose to work with and their temporary nature and tendency to deteriorate over time. For example, I liked the fragile quality of newsprint, as it perished and faded with age, challenging my need for control. Similarly, I enjoyed the way plaster was prone to crumble, mark, and break, giving the work a sense of history and time.

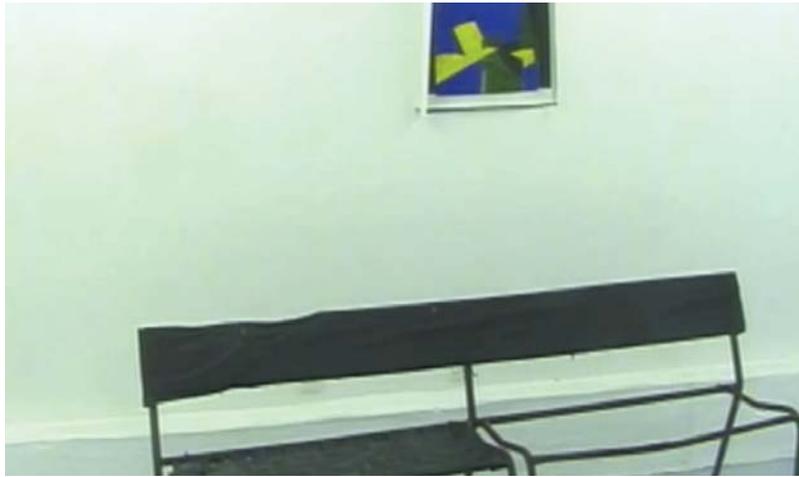
The works of Carol Bove and architect / artist - Carlo Scarpa, explore related themes in an exhibition *Carol Bove/Carlo Scarpa (2014)*. Both use materials as a way of investigating history and time while sharing “an acute sensitivity towards processes of aging” (2014, p46) Bove’s assemblages often blur boundaries of time periods and suggest an overlapping of places and meanings through the combination of found objects such as driftwood, petrified wood, rock and rusted steel. When assembled, they suggest “a dim geological prehistory, stretching from the present moment to the infinite past” (Bove, 2014 p.43) Similarly, Scarpa perceives the process of aging as “crucial to any architectural plan – bringing with it the eventual blurring between the original building and traces of his own intervention.” (Bove, 2014, p.49) Scarpa believed it was “fundamental for the architect to leave conspicuous and characteristic evidence of his own era within the historic fabric, trusting time to fuse it into a comfortable whole” (Olsberg, Scarpa & Guidi, 1999, p.14)

Although, aesthetically speaking, my works are very different to Scarpa and Bove, I wanted my practice to embody a similar architectonic language and sensitivity towards materials. I specifically chose to work with newsprint and plaster not only for their vulnerability, but also for the way they attempted – at least in my own methodology – to emulate something greater than they were. For example, plaster could be suggestive of something more permanent and monumental, like marble or stone. This conscious choice of materials relates back to notions of the draft and the demo, and their suggestive qualities.

As the year progressed, I became more interested in using these materials to allude to another world through abstraction, than I was in referring to it in a literal sense i.e. recontextualising the everyday through video, sound and photographs. I wanted these new works to act more like touchstones, or portals to another world, like the way a few planks of wood in a treehouse is symbolic enough for a child’s imagination to see a marble palace in the sky. This was in mind when making a work of woven inner tire tubes replacing a rusted bench seat I found left in the rain. I didn’t want the seat to be functional but rather symbolic of a bench that was *almost* practical, belonging instead to the language of sculpture.



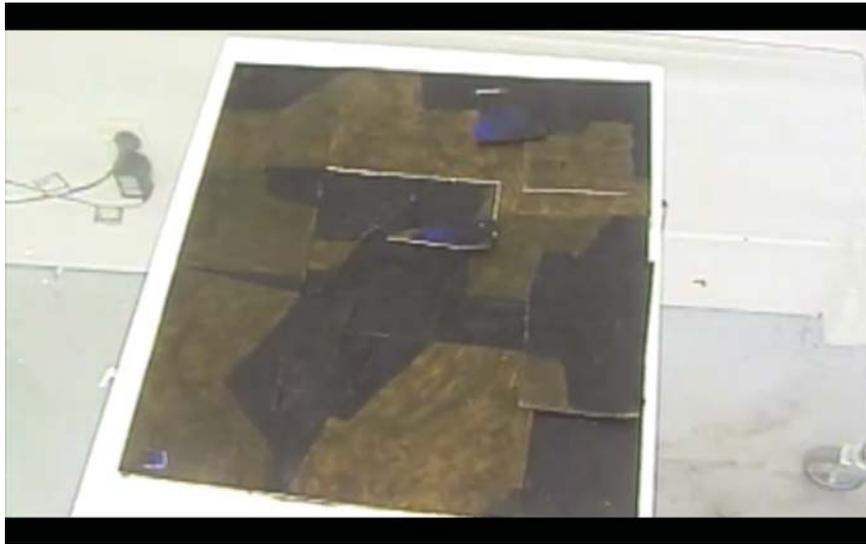
(Figure XXV) Gauche on newsprint. Sam Norton, 2017



(figure XXVII) Repurposed bench seat with woven inner tire tubes. Sam Norton, 2017

At the beginning of this year, I began making a series of coloured collages, made from torn sheets of paper covered in oil pastel. I made these collages alongside my video works and although unrelated, they persisted throughout the year. At the time, I couldn't rationalise why I made them other than I simply wanted to. Perhaps it was because they were the antithesis of my videos or 'real work' and a sort of reprieve from the themes of psychological tension/ anxiety that I was so invested in. Or perhaps they were more what Bove was describing as a type of productive procrastination.

Most of them no longer exist, as part of my process was to constantly reassemble/ repurpose/reconstruct the same 50 sheets of covered paper, over again, without sentiment. I was more interested in the idea of improvisation and play than I was with the idea of permanence. This way of making felt similar to being a child again, building / constructing various compositions and structures with full immersion, only to be later destroyed and rebuilt again. There was one exception where I directly applied oil pastel and paint to plaster. However, the process was similar to the collages in the way that I constantly worked over the existing image, the last version a result of twenty previous iterations. (see figure XXX below)



(Figure XXVIII) Screen shot of oil pastel collage. Sam Norton, 2017

I found this process or the process of collage in general a way of overcoming my often-crippling paralysis due to unrealistic expectations/ aspirations. This act of play allowed me to think with materials first, while feeling as though I was surrendering some form of control – which in turn allowed me to make freely.

Herta Muller talks of a similar process when creating poems out of existing collaged words, as a side project to writing her novel.

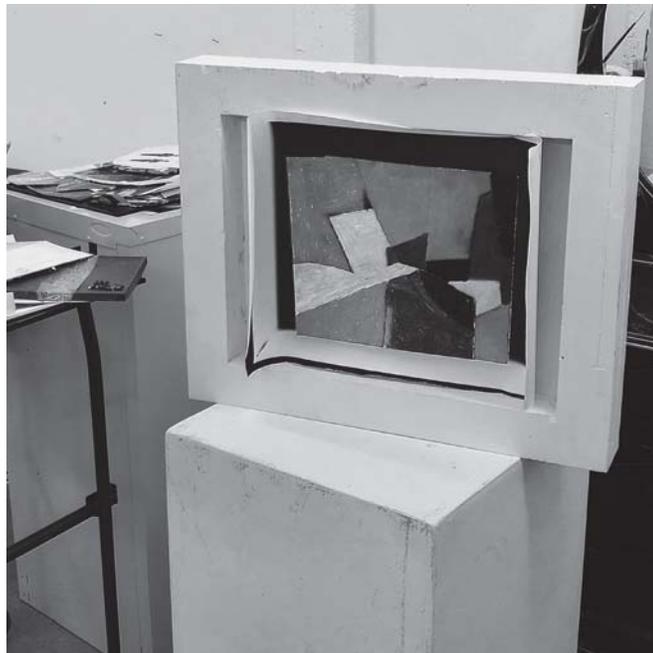
“you don’t have to think of the words for the collages because they’re all lying there on the table at the same time. Deciding to use words that are already there is different from writing down words that are in your head, because everything is there at once. [I] could never write a poem simply by sitting down with a pen in my hand. But this way, when I have the printed words cut out and lying in front of the table, the assemble themselves into a story. They leave me out of it and yet I’m there all the same”. (Muller, 2012, p.173)

Her last sentence in particular resonated with me and is a large part of why I like to use other media such as: camera, editing, instruments, readymade sculptures and collage/ assemblage in general, as opposed to solely relying on my own hands/ building something from scratch. Surrealist artist Max Ernst spoke of something similar, saying he “needed collage for psychological reasons” and that when “sat in front of an empty canvas, or white piece of paper” he experienced “something akin to a virginity complex”. (As cited in Spies, 2012, p145).

The coloured collage drew from Dada, and early 20th century paintings/ sculptures/ and architecture. However, I wasn’t so influenced by the actual works themselves as I was by the way they looked in old VHS footage converted to digital. I liked the way the deteriorated footage made the colours soft and muted, resembling almost a painting of a painting. But most of all, I was drawn to these images because the place they were located didn’t exist in the real world – past or present. The quality of the deteriorated images removed them from reality, inhabiting instead a place that was neither of this world nor otherworldly. It was this representation as opposed to the actual works that I drew from in both my collages and plaster works.

I wanted the plaster moulds/frames to feel both sculptural and architectural, drawing from Modern and Postmodern architecture and old interior magazines with rendered walls and sculptural spaces circa 1920- 1980s.³⁰

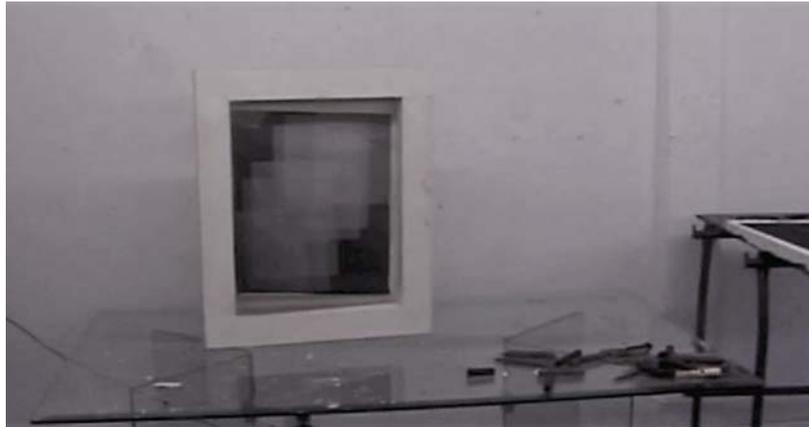
³⁰ This reading of second or third hand information has been referenced frequently when it comes to New Zealand modern art, particularly painting – Colin McCahon, M.T. Woollaston, Patrick Hanly etc. for further reading on this see Brown, G. H., & Keith, H. (1982). *An introduction to New Zealand painting, 1839-1980* p.11



(Figure XXX and Figure XXIX) Oil stick on plaster and oil stick collage in plaster mould . Sam Norton, 2017

(Above figure XXXI) Screen shot from Bauhaus documentary. Students perform in a play they wrote, designed/built.

(Below figure XXXII) Screen shot from Bauhaus documentary. Interior of Hau a Horn.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9vxsQYrREY&t=515s>



(Figure XXXIII) Studio. Work in plaster frame. Photogram of Andrew Beck. Sam Norton, 2017



(Figure XXXIV) Studio. Video work on found 1980's vanity unit. Collage in plaster frame. Photogram curtesy of Andrew Beck. Sam Norton, 2017

RECENT WORK / CONCLUSION

My more recent work developed as a result of needing to make something physical as opposed to continuing to allude to ‘another world’ in abstract terms through symbolic/gestural sketches. I had intended on including parts of a 1980’s vanity set found in an op shop (see figure XXXV and figure XXXVI) along with a high definition flat screen television for video as part of my final installation. The furniture’s black faux marble surfaces were reminiscent of interior magazines I had previously used as references, while its stylized aesthetic suggested a dysfunctional glamour associated with suburban chic. I liked the collapsing of time structures the assemblage created between the outdated décor, the new television and black and white video footage reminiscent of an older time

However, while installing this work I decided to no longer use found furniture, but build the objects myself as the assemblage felt too of this world, regardless of the pastiche. Through building the objects myself, I hoped to keep the work within its own context, the external influences less overt. I intended to keep the highly stylized /set design quality of the 80’s bedroom unit, but incorporate a more sculptural language as opposed to a “found” domestic assemblage. I also wanted to refer to the domestic/ suburban in a less literal way in order to maintain an element of the surreal.

I had also intended on using a large framed A0 photograph of *Donna* (figure VIII) as part of the final configuration. Throughout the year, I had become accustomed to her presence in my studio and liked the way she created a dialogue between the seemingly unrelated and more abstract works. By placing *Donna* amongst sculptural and symbolic works like the plaster works she reintroduced a more literal narrative, while acknowledging the domestic and suburban, particularly as represented in the cinema, writings, and photographs of Lynch, Akerman, Carver, and Sultan.³¹ However, much like the soundtrack element of my work, her presence became too overwhelming in the installation, leaving less room for interpretation. I referred to the suburban instead through stacked red bricks suggestive of a pillar/ column chimney that when lit, in combination with a plinth, elevated them to a sculptural and monolithic/monumental level.

³¹ I have not written about Larry Sultan’s photography/work in this exegesis however, his work has been an ongoing influence for many years particularly as a young adult along with Tina Barney, Gregory Crewdson and Nan Goldin.



(figure XXXV) Test work. Newsprint scan on HD monitor screen and part of 1980s vanity set in studio.



(figure XXXVI) Parts of 1980's vanity unit in studio. Framed photo of Donna, Sam Norton, 2017.

Lighting became a significant part of my final installation. I wanted to use it as a way of eliciting an ephemeral quality in the work, linking it back to the intangible 'other world'/ make believe, while the solidity of the objects themselves anchored them to the physical world. I used projectors – as opposed to a spot light-³² as a way of building and sculpting with light in order to conflate the real and the imagined.

The single bed - as opposed to the original double 1980s vanity unit - represents a place of solitude, childhood innocence and protection, but also the monolithic. I intended it to be read as a sculpture/symbolic bed, but I am aware of it potentially being read as a tombstone or grave. However, I am open to this interpretation as both function as a place of departure into the unknown. The tomb: to death/nothingness/the afterlife. The bed: a point of access to the unconscious - a return to Freud, Jung, dreams and earlier themes of my research.

British artist Rachel Whiteread's work *In-Out – I – XIV*, (2004) elicits a similarly open-ended interpretation, as she cast fourteen doors around London.

“The sculptures signify as doors, though not simply as functional objects to pass through, but rather metaphors for transition. Their dramatically increased significance of their raised surfaces makes them more significant as metaphors, closer to the carved doorways to churches or temples than the blankly functional objects from which they were taken. [They] might also be seen as hopeful, at least in a provincial way, in the sense that they can find an understated but undeniable beauty in such mundane objects ” (Whiteread & Schneider, 2005, p.74)

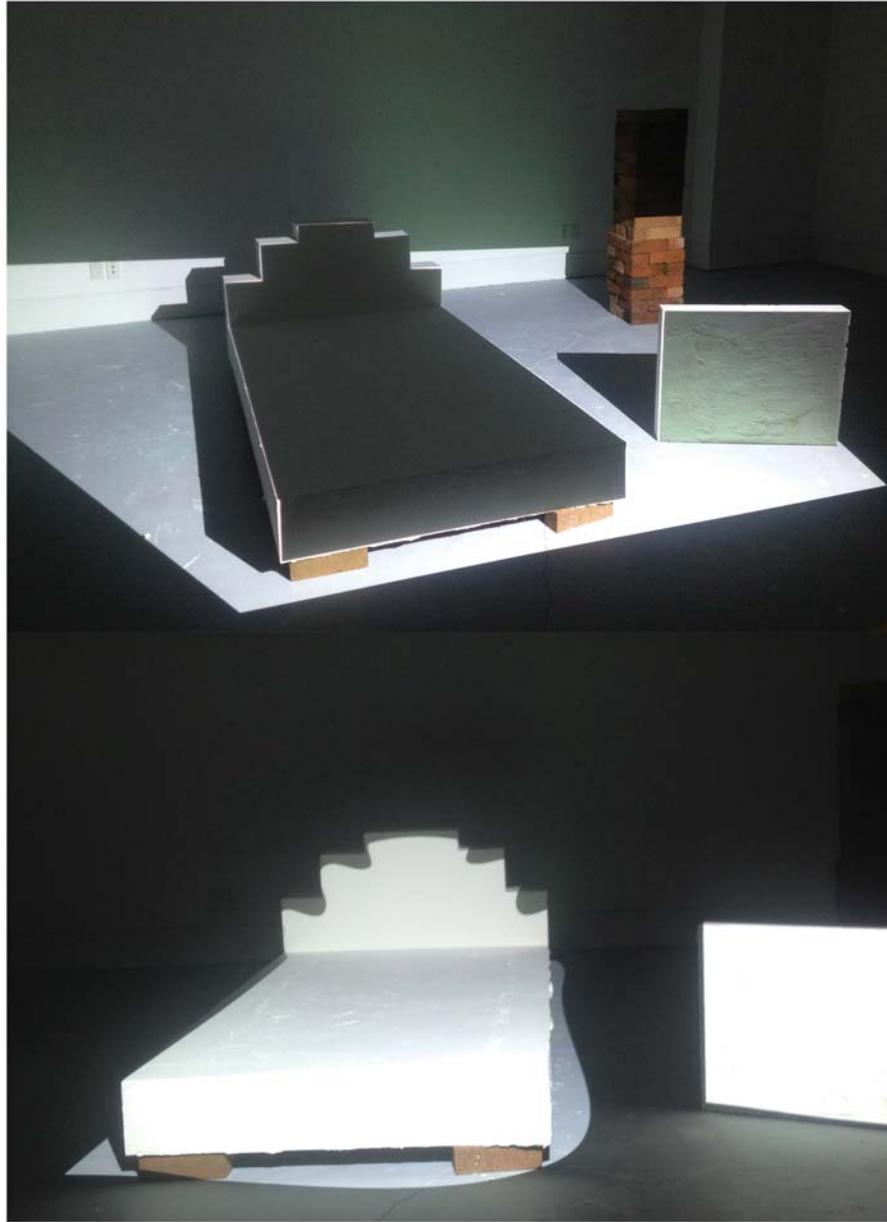


(Figure XXXVII) Video still, *Untitled VI*. Video playing on plaster screen. Sam Norton, 2017

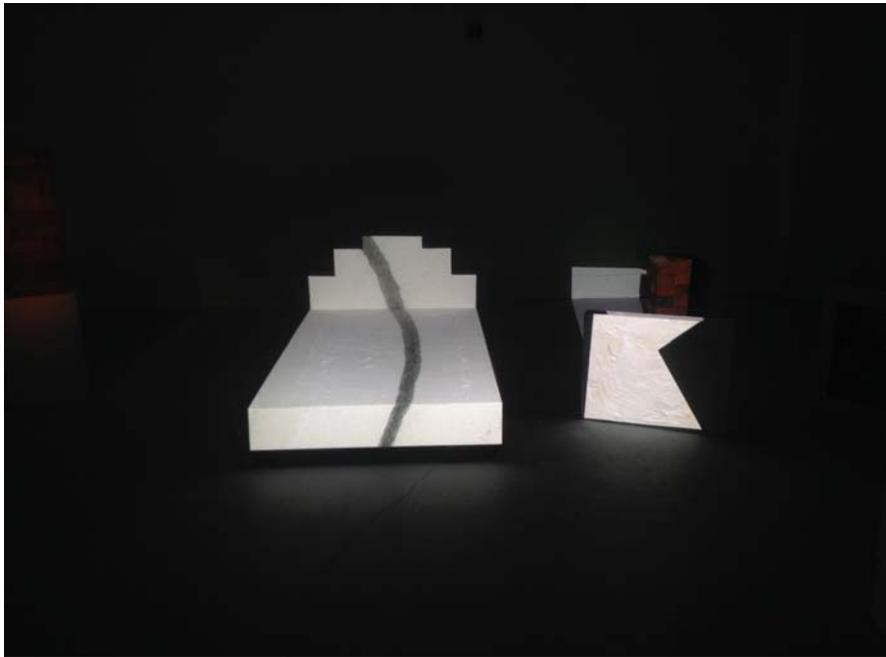
³² After Effects is a program primarily used for editing video that I used it to mask out light by building layers of black around each object – a process similar to online collage.

At the core of my art practice there lies a tension between my expectations/ grand illusions and the reality of my limitations. While I recognise this to be a universally shared experience, it is this specific point - where the two worlds collide- that I am most interested in exploring / exposing as it is where my work is at its most vulnerable and personal. In this way, my work is as much about ongoing attempts and process as it is about the final outcome.

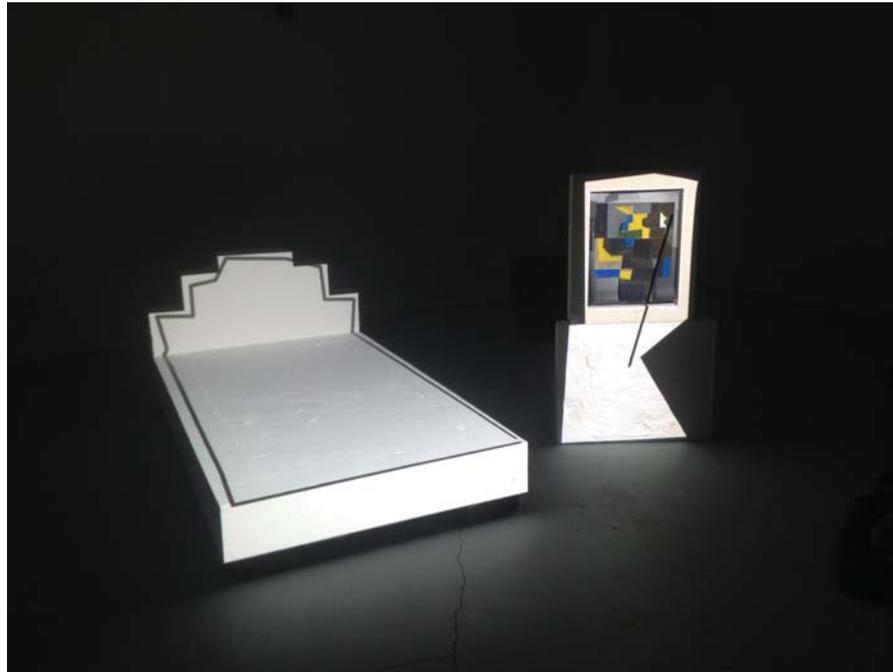
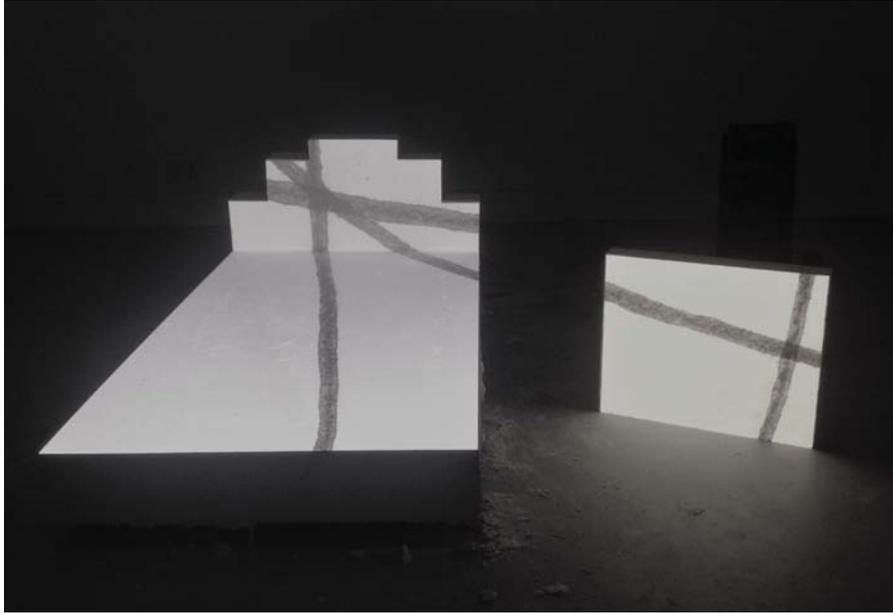
The works within my practice are often born of mutually exclusive places/worlds. One world is introverted, based on protection and the fear of the unknown. It draws from the past in order to make sense of it while re-establishing a feeling of control. The other world is based on fantasy and grand illusions, projecting into the future. Although at times my work differs greatly aesthetically and thematically, both are motivated by the same desire to transcend and provide relief from reality. Together they inform one another while creating a liminal space that attempts to elevate the everyday.



(Figure XXXIII) Test work. Masking out light from projector onto plaster bed. Sam Norton, 2017



(figure XXXIX) test work. Blown up collage projected onto plaster bed. Sam Norton, 2017



(figure XL) Test works. Above image, projected collage work. Below image drawn on lines in After Effects and cutting out with light. 2017

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