

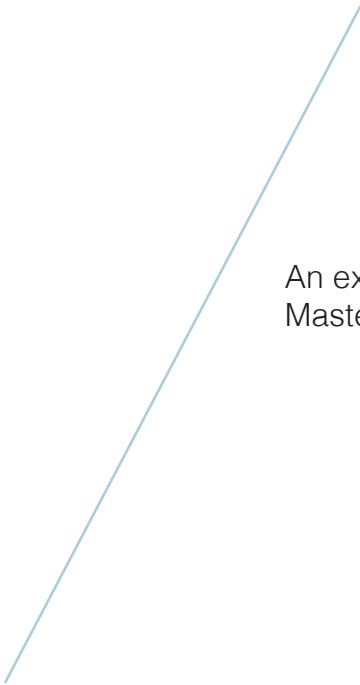
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A close-up photograph of a wooden workbench. The workbench is made of thick, dark brown wooden planks. A metal frame, possibly made of brass or a similar material, is visible in the background. Several red clamps are attached to the workbench, holding pieces of wood in place. The lighting is warm and focused on the workbench, creating a sense of craftsmanship and attention to detail.

Entertaining the Object

*An Investigation
Into Human-Object
Relations*

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An exegesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree of
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Abstract



The focus of this research is to investigate human-object relationships. How do we as human beings interact with objects and how do we understand them. The work uses a process that focuses on investigating preconceptions about objects and engaging with them in order to develop objects into characters. This is achieved through collaboration with the furniture, by augmenting, developing, and then representing the object.

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To the people, animals and objects that have supported and influenced me.

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Illustrations

All images, unless otherwise specified are property of Matthew Fanning 2011.

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Fig 7: Ball, Ralph & Naylor, Maxine, 2005, *Stack Of One*. Retrieved: 10/1/2012 From: <http://www.pumpkinwholesale.com/large-covers/9781904772217.jpg>

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Synopsis:

The primary focus of this thesis is to investigate human-object relationships. How do we as human beings interact with objects and how do we understand them. Do we assign meaning to the objects that inhabit our world? Do objects hold their own inherent meanings that we in turn make sense of and utilize? Or do objects in fact have autonomy, allowing them to become producers of their own meaning? This is not a chronological documentation of the process that I followed; rather it is a document that locates the work. This work uses a process that focuses on investigating preconceptions about objects and engaging with them in order to develop objects into characters. This is achieved through collaboration with the furniture, by augmenting, developing, and then representing the object.

My initial aim for this project was to explore how objects, specifically furniture, could become more than strictly functional, how they can become characters. By defining furniture as characters, I am building on the notion of a character in a theatrical play as one that has life and enacts a certain motive

or role. From the outset of this project I was interested in how objects could be made to be more than strictly functional. At that point in time, my understanding of furniture was fairly concrete; furniture was that which supports and enables a human body in the case of a table or chair or stores goods and objects in the case of a drawer and that which provides light in the case of a lamp. In all these cases, furniture's primary function is their intended practical purpose, to enable us to physically engage with it and serve us. I was interested in how they could be made to perform a more elaborate function, create an effect or cause the user to feel something about a situation that would normally pass unnoticed. I deemed this state to be one of theatricality: how a piece of furniture could create an effect or atmosphere that would resonate through the space that it inhabited and the people that came into contact with it. This notion of theatricality caused me to consider the elements of my investigation in terms of the analogy of a theatrical production. The objects in this analogy become characters, and I become the director, capable of prompting the effect caused by the furniture. This analogy draws similarity with the use of roles and purpose

within a greater group associated with Actor-Network Theory (ANT). ANT is a theory for understanding the way that people, objects, machinery, etc, interact and function together in a web of meaning. Within this theory the players are deemed actors (human beings) or actants (inanimate objects). These actors or actants are enrolled into the network to play roles that are fundamental to the continuation of the network (Law, 2007). The analogy of the theatre represents a web that gives meaning to the actors and actants that operate inside it. From the perspective of ANT, I take the role of director who is still an actor, but one that brings more direction to the network. The role of the furniture in a normal web is to play the role of an object that is simply functional, but one characteristic of ANT is that there are multiple webs that produce associations that we derive meaning from. In this new web, the role of furniture is to take on characteristics and form a character to explore a narrative. From deeming the objects that I create and interact with as actors, and the realization of the work as a performance, I have implied an audience. The audience in this case is the user, people who interact with objects everyday.

The words in which the play is written are key to everything. (Unwin, 2004, p. 124)

In a traditional theatrical production, the starting point is the script. Everything comes from the script, the characters, the narrative, the set, etc. This is not the case in the production I am directing ; the starting point is the objects. Sociologist Annemarie Money's doctoral thesis, *Consumption in the home: cultural capital, family gift cultures and place* addresses how objects can be made to perform by the associations people place on them. She explores the performative aspects of furniture within the space of the living room, highlighting how an object "...acts as the interface between the private and the public world... in which the material culture can be seen as a performance both for oneself, and for others" (2007, p.358). She discusses how people apply meaning and significance to these objects (Money, 2007), allowing the user to project an image of their lifestyle. This places power with the person, they become the director, they decide which pieces will appear, how they will be arranged, what role they will take on, and

even which audiences will be allowed to view them. Through this manipulation, a consumer can change the way a piece of furniture is perceived. Money's work suggests that our relationship to objects is one of dominance and subordination, providing us two functions. Firstly they perform the typical role of furniture, as they are functional. Secondly, from a semiotic point of view, objects function as signifiers to signal meaning to the viewer about the owner. Semiotics is an approach to understanding linguistics but can be applied to the study of objects also. The linguist Ferdinand Saussure, who shaped the modern understanding of the relationship between words and objects, developed this approach. It suggests that we 'read' objects as symbols that point to concepts we hold. The connection is made by the viewer and relies on the creator and the viewer sharing similar understandings so that the 'correct' concept is signified (Evans, 1999). This process is one that is defined by the viewer, this results in meaning shifting over time. I believe that this is the way that most people interpret furniture; they develop interest in the piece as it means something to them or suggests something about them as a

person. This approach, as I suggested earlier, places furniture beneath us, the audience dictates the meaning rather than investigating it. This was the attitude with which I selected the first piece of furniture for my research project.

The motivation for selecting objects for this project were varied but united by my associations with them. Some were chosen simply because of their ready availability, and another was ease of interaction, the objects have to be able to be changed and developed while maintaining their features. All the objects I chose should be familiar to most people in the sense that they are objects that come from different classifications of objects that we interact with and use everyday, chairs, lights and drawers. This mode of familiarity also increased the likelihood these objects would draw associations by other people.



Fig 1: School Chair

Characters:

The first piece of furniture that I selected was a child's school chair. I had used this kind of chair in my youth (fig 1). It reminded me of being at school. For the most part I enjoyed my school years but looking back now they remind me of being in a submissive role to the teacher. I am reminded of getting up early and being excited about being able to leave at the end of the day. I think that my ideas surrounding school have become exaggerated over the years and when connected to the chair, the prevailing memory has become tainted much like the chair. This object appears to me as utilitarian and authoritarian.

In order to explore my relationship to this chair, I engaged with it through a process of appropriation, creation and representation. This process is informed by the idea of the hermeneutical circle in which ideas or preconceptions are created and explored through making while simultaneously reflecting upon and developing through representation. In my case the representation is done through photography. The objects inform the image making while the image making informs the making of

objects and the development of more images (Coyne, 2006). The initial appropriation of objects results in associations and preconceptions that are built upon while adapting furniture as an attempt to physically realize and explore these concepts. The developments are represented through photography in order to capture, reflect and enhance desirable features. The use of repurposed objects in this work was not a notion that I found easy initially but was one that ended up shaping and defining this project. In the beginning of the project, I presumed that I would make all of the objects from scratch; the use of found objects was simply a way of investigating forms and trying to uncover the kind of furniture I wanted to make in an expedient and sketch kind of gesture. When raising this issue at a presentation, I was told, "Actors bring themselves to their roles." This idea stayed with me through the rest of the year. I began to realize that what brought the things that I was making to life were the associations that people drew from them; the objects' histories gave the new forms meaning.

Why should I invent new forms if reality already offers so many fantastic images... As a designer I only have to

discover them and to restructure them into new stories. (Betsky, 2006, p. 36)

The reuse and recycling of objects to form new representations is an idea explored by the product design group Droog headed by Gijs Bakker and Renny Ramakers. Their partnership, along with the inclusion of other now famous designers, engage with the associations surrounding objects and use them to create new forms that are playful and unexpected. Explored through representation, objects shifts into new contexts to reveal how they are perceived.

...design was not a question of making more objects, using more materials, or even inventing new ideas or solutions to the problems we encounter in our daily lives, but one of finding more ways to experience, explore and expand the possibilities of existing objects, images, spaces and ideas (Betsky, 2006, p. 15)

Droog's approach to reuse and representation through understanding the signifiers in an object is a way of connecting with the user in a way that is unexpected and intriguing, affording

multiple possibilities for the meaning and purpose of objects, the users' interpretation and experience are paramount. Their approach to relating to objects is valid as it show awareness of objects. But remains still very human directed.

My first interpretative acts with the chair were through the physical experience of using it. As an adult I find the chair to be small and uncomfortable (fig 2); it is unsupportive of my body, ill fitted to my size and places me in a position much lower than I would like. The result of this position is that I feel belittled, I am not in a position of power, and I am at the mercy of others. I used this experience to form the basis of my relationship with this chair, by identifying the main associations I had during my interaction I am able to develop and explore them in new ways. For example, how would it feel if the chair was three times as high? How would the combination of the associations with a child's chair and exaggerated height affect the experience of the user?

I extended the legs (fig 3) to make the user stand out to make them feel like a child does with their legs swinging



Fig 2: School Chair



Fig 3: High Chair

above the floor unable to touch the ground. This experiment resulted in an object that created a sense of unease when it was used (fig 4); this was in part due to the height and also in part down to the inadequacy of my welding. The chair was delivered to a select group of designers that know how to weld so they focused on my technical abilities. They did not enjoy the idea of elevating themselves on a chair that looked as though it could fall apart at any minute. The most informative part of this experiment was that I found that people reading the object in a semiotic way determined the experience of the chair. As people approached the chair they tended to make a decision, even a judgment, about it before interacting with it physically. They had already decided how they would feel while using it before they had sat down. This experiment focused my attention on how the relationship we have with objects is primarily function based, the appearance of the chair suggested it would lack the ability to support them made people uneasy. The way that we normally prescribe function as the primary purpose of an object negates the object's alternate possibilities. This way of viewing objects kills their characters

as it focuses them specifically and almost exclusively on practical purpose. As a result of the modifications I made to this chair, it is no longer conducive with creating the same harmonious interaction that is common between people and objects. It creates a situation where we become aware of the object and its role.

This is an idea explored by Graham Harman, a contemporary philosopher of metaphysics who discusses a Heideggerian interpretation of the objects that inhabit 'our' world. His discussion is entitled *Tool Being*. He asserts that when we encounter objects in context, they take on the meaning of the role that we assign to them, and encountering an object without a context is an uncommon event. The discrete object is cloaked in the role that is assigned and as a result; the object is not visible (Harman, 2002). Dutch artist/writer Louise Schouwenburg describes how utilitarian or 'use objects' that are primarily concerned with function have a sealed fate, they are consumed and then disposed of. However, objects that do not function as we normally expect them to draw our attention to their presence and as a result, maintain our captivation for longer, causing us

to form questions about them (Betsky, 2006). The two states of being aware and unaware of 'tools' are deemed present-at-hand and ready-to-hand. This makes reference to our awareness of the object, where they are normally unnoticed and ready-to-hand; when they fail our intended purpose they become present-at-hand. (Harman, 2002) I employ this understanding of primarily function based or 'use' objects, as Harman describes them in the form of a question that shapes my project: If we diminish or shift the primary function of an object away from its practical purpose, how does this affect our relationship with it? Harman points out that Heidegger's discussion appears to place the user at the centre of the production of meaning. He goes on to explain that what we are experiencing is not how well a 'tool' works but how fit it is for our interpretation of its purpose (2002). Harman writes, "Inanimate objects are not just manipulable clods of matter... Instead they are more like undiscovered planets..." (2002) Harman suggests that objects have meaning that we engage with rather than simply being meaningless matter. Our interpretation is valid but we don't dictate the meaning of an object, we discover it. (2002)

I agree with Harman in his understanding of our awareness of objects in relationship to function. The idea that an object could have an undiscovered meaning that differs from the prescribed one destabilizes our self-appointment at the centre of the production of meaning. Paul Dourish, who works in computer science and anthropology, explains that when the seamless interaction while using objects fails, we become aware of the object (Dourish, 2001). At this point the object becomes foreign and we become suspicious of it. This idea of an object serving some foreign body or purpose is a strategy that I employed in the development from high chair to high-back chair (fig 5). By augmenting its back to become less accepting of a human form, it looks and feels alien and uninviting because when we 'read' the dimensions of it, a process of visual scaling, and compare it to ourselves, it doesn't match up. As the audience begins to question the chair, it begins to adopt, what architectural academic Patricia Pringle would describe as an "independent character" (2010, p. 344) and we cease to view it as subservient.

Patricia Pringle's paper *Performing Interiors: A Situation Comedy* focuses

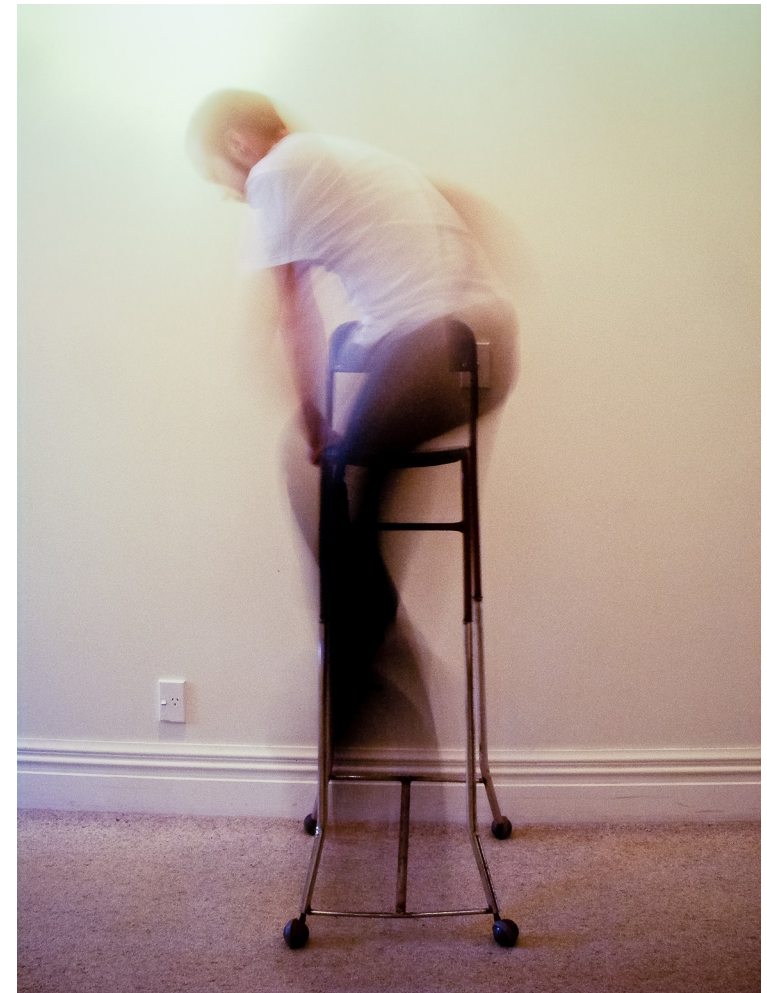


Fig 4: High Chair



Fig 5: High Back Chair

on the depiction of domestic interiors as protagonists. Her work documents the changing attitudes towards furniture from a historic perspective in the 19th century and how these associations are still present today. She tells the history of our interaction with objects and how we begin to personify their characteristics, a habit due to the intimate relationship we have with them. The role they play is one of reliability and purpose; we trust them to do their job and as such, the characteristics we find in them begin to form characters (Pringle, 2010). In the context of her 19th century tale, this relationship began to turn sour when commodities began to take over:

The suggestion that the world was filling with an excess of commodities that were taking on a life of their own and leaving their owners uneasy was the subject of popular entertainment... it is also imagery that, in presenting the interior as both animate and capable of slipping out of control, allowed all sorts of dreams, fears and desires to be expressed... (Pringle, 2010, p. 344)

Pringle demonstrates the growing feeling of uneasiness toward the

amount of commodities in light of the personification of these objects. Her discussion is a comment on the use of representation in imagery, a topic I will discuss in later sections. The intimate relationship we have with objects, especially chairs, the attitude we have toward them, is reliant on their subservience. When this is challenged, they become animated by our newfound awareness.

Mirroring Pringle's sentiment, art historian, Mimi Hellman describes how our interactions with furniture are performances that allow furniture to begin to dictate interactions that affect the way that we appear. Her way of understanding these performances elevate the role of the objects beyond being simply subordinate. She suggests that objects are able to help or hinder people, dependant on their ability to demonstrate mastery over them (Hellman, 1999). Hellman's depiction of objects is one of interplay where there is give and take, where furniture plays a role of purpose but is more exclusive as it demands the user to know how to interact.

The Droog design group demonstrates

an example of how design can be like a performance and demand interaction from the user. They highlight the importance of the experience provided by the object and the role that interaction plays in the production of meaning. The *Do* series of objects produced by Droog in 2000 uses interaction to create attachment to objects and through involving the user in the production of an object, they become imperative to its function. *Do hit* (fig 6), designed by Marlijn van der Pol is delivered as a stainless steel cube supplied with a hammer that invites the user to sculpt the final shape of the product. Their advertising depicts a rather large sweaty man wielding a hammer and a newly formed chair with a look of satisfaction across his face. This advertising appears to describe the satisfaction one would get from involving oneself in the design process. This promotes physical interaction as a way of developing associations with an object to make it desirable by linking it to the person and making it unique. This chair represents a powerfully theatrical metaphor for how we relate to furniture. It suggests that furniture has to be beaten into submission so that it may conform to a recognizable form and maintain its

inanimate nature. But I do not agree that it has to be the case, my interventions with the school chair carry much more finesse; they do involve cutting and welding, both violent acts but these acts are done to engage with the objects creatively in the co-production of new forms to employ a characteristic of the chair and embrace and exaggerate it rather than taking a hammer to it, to make it something it isn't.

I believe that the play on associations is an important way that audiences interact with furniture. Borrowing from a number of visual and physical cues, audience develops a concept of what a piece of furniture represents. Architectural theorists Nathan Silver and Charles Jencks describe the process of gathering and repurposing objects as *Adhocism*, a process they describe as being subject to urgency and purpose, and making use of available materials to fulfill a specific outcome. (Jencks, 1973) They go on to compare the process to that of the bricoleur who is capable of working in multiple areas but is not bound by having to make use of specific materials. This is similar to that of designers Ralph Ball and Maxine Naylor who take part in "...an activity



Fig 6: van der Pol, Martin, 2000, *Do Hit Chair*, Stainless Steel, Hammer



Fig 7: Ball, Ralph & Naylor, Maxine, 2005, *Stack Of One*.

of finding ideas and connections by playing with the cultural and formal components of objects..." (2007, p. 17). Adhocism, as it is described here, appears more naïve; it is a process born from necessity-- it is hasty and inventive while not being overly considered and if it works at the time then it is a success. Naylor and Ball's process on the other hand, is one that is attempting to challenge the traditional process of design. It exhibits an awareness of its process and its function. The other way that these concepts differ is through their approach to function; adhocism is all about function as objects united under the guise of a single immediate purpose, while form follows idea, in a lot of cases negates the traditional function of the object in order to explore another meaning and play on function of the object. They place the importance on utilizing the function to explore a purpose other than normal utilitarian interaction. The two approaches are united by their dedication to exploring our relationship to objects and how the intended purpose of objects is not the only way to engage with them. Their design, *Stack of One* (fig 7), demonstrates different chairs designed to be stacked separately, stacked as one. This plays on all of

the different chair's unique ability to be stacked; they all possess the same ability but cannot function as one (Ball, 2007). Adhocism is more concerned with the use of existing objects to create a new object with purpose that happens to be made from the objects immediately available, while Naylor and Ball are more concerned with developing the associations we assign to existing objects. I feel that these two approaches are not mutually exclusive; they can be combined to facilitate an approach that takes note of the meaning in the available objects to develop conceptual furniture that constructs a theory while playing on the associations that exist within the object. This approach takes account of more than just the end goal; it is an approach that proceeds with an awareness of the materials being appropriating and how they may impact existing and new narratives.

I sought to practice this approach by engaging with the strictly purposeful use of materials in the chair. I wanted to re-present the chair by adding value through materiality (fig 8). By painting the frame gold and covering the panels in velvet I hoped to elevate the status of the chair. This effort resulted in a look

that lacked subtlety; the use of paint was immediately apparent. After performing this experiment, I discovered that Naylor and Ball had undertaken a very similar one and found similar results. Their motivations for their experiment were the same; they recognized the ubiquity of a chair and its inadmissible cheapness and endeavoured to,

...make them legitimate and to make the chair visible. To make it noticed for all of its aspirational aching to be more than ordinarily ordinary... How can it be invested with personality, with crafted idiosyncrasy? (Ball, 2007, pp. 100-101)

Their investigation questioned the use of paint for ease and time, but quickly realized what I too had found; they "...specifically and deliberately chose not to do that, because that is a cheap, theatrical trick..." (Ball, 2007, p. 101). The application of paint does not elevate the value or associations of chair, it becomes a parody of itself; it does not gain value, as it is a superficial transformation. This criticism is valid; I am not drawn to this object, dolled up and draped in velvet. It feels cheaper than it did originally; it no longer has

the honesty of material and purpose. I think that the issue is one of context and presentation; this is a theatrical trick, and it is superficial, just as our reading of objects is. If we present the object as one that is elevated and in a way that makes the most of the additions then it becomes what we say it is. The photography of this chair transformed it by manipulating the angle and the lighting, augmenting the chair, forming a representation, or character. The photos of this chair further the process of manipulating the representation of the chair. In the reading of the image, the question of taste and cheapness of material is at first thrown out as the viewer makes sense of this object. Then as they delve deeper they discover a level of humour as it reveals its plastic underside, exposing the separation between what the photo is showing and the reality of the object. The use of photography affects the work in numerous ways; this will be explored in the next section.



Fig 8: *Gold Chair*

The Scene:

[Photography] yields to the receiver a quantity of indefinite information, like statements but unlike words... (Metz cited in Evans, 1999, p. 26)

The role of photography in my work is to capture and develop the character of the objects that I am engaging with, it is a tool for investigating through staging that led me to identify other characters that play roles in my work and explore, more deeply my relationship with objects. The features of a photograph change the way that we view 'reality'; Ball and Naylor describe images as a "...self-contained story..." (2007, p. 13) and I agree, they discuss how images visually articulate concepts and become strong arguments. (Ball, 2007)

Literary theorist Roland Barthes discusses how photographs remove the notion of time, there is nothing linking an image to what happened before and what will happen after, it is disjointed from temporality (Evans, 1999). The exciting reality of this notion is that anything can be suggested and held that way; the freezing of time allows the creator of the image to present a slice of time to transmit their concept. The

transmission of this concept through photography is advantageous due to the social constructs associated with its viewing. Margaret Hagen writes of psychologist James J. Gibson's *Perception of Pictures* and how when viewing paintings, the same can be said of photographs. Firstly the viewer becomes an audience, that is to say that they conform to westernized conventions and view the work from a fixed perspective. Secondly and more importantly, they look upon the work as representations rather than scenes (Hagen, 1980). This assumed condition of conventions makes the work more accessible to the viewer and they assume a stance that makes them more receptive of the work.

Photography was long considered to be a very accurate method of recording a true depiction of reality, "...being the result of an optical redistribution of light rays emanating from an object..." (Evans, 1999, p. 13). I would argue that the medium of photography is as constructed as a drawing or any other mode of communication. Taking a photo involves many decisions that change the presented reality; photos are in fact not presentations of reality

but representations of a person's view of reality. Through capturing an image there is an idea being communicated that defines the purpose of the image, there are techniques used to take the photo, lighting, angle, focus/blur, and finally what is omitted from the image that was there at the time of the creation of the photo. Roland Barthes explores these ideas through examining advertising imagery. This is fitting because this work as advertising suggests that there is an intent to sell or persuade. The goal of the imagery is to demonstrate a concept and transmit that to the viewer (Evans, 1999).

I have already isolated the main associations of the object as utilitarian, alien and unfriendly. The development of the high-back chair into a character came through staging the chair in an industrial setting (fig 9). I was able to create an ominous atmosphere with an air of uncertainty. Removing it from a traditional location dislocated it from its function and made people question what the chair was doing there. Was its placement there a reflection of its character or was something holding it there for some purpose? This ambiguous narrative draws the audience in, suggesting possibilities

but never being explicit. The use of a single light out of the scene highlights the chair and its character but the source of the light is not visible, it exists in the narrative space. This creates a situation of apprehension. As the chair faces the light source it appears that the chair is addressing the light, but what is being communicated? While taking this photo I took another photo (fig 10) that I imagined would document my process, an image of how I was lighting and arranging. I was surprised to find later that this image actually captured the relationship between two chairs. One was the high back chair that I had augmented and one that had not been developed at all. The differences between them generated a stronger meaning that could not have been established by either object independently. It developed a contrast within the image by providing both the reference and the deviation that made the image more successful (Evans, 1999). The strong lighting from the work light functions as an interrogator. It was as if I had stumbled upon an interrogation by objects of objects, where the high back chair was working against the smaller chair. This image cemented the role of photography in expressing



Fig 9: High Back Chair



Fig 10: High Back Chair



Fig 11: Crewdson, Gregory, 2008, *Untitled, Dream House*

relations with objects; the manipulability of this format enabled a medium to explore my concepts.

...manipulation... photography would not exist without it... Photographers are people who manipulate the physical means of production of photography: cameras, film, lighting, objects, people. Using the productive capabilities of photography to reproduce the world as an object of aesthetic contemplation... (Evans, 1999)

The staging of the work incorporates the concept of *mise en scène*, which designer Robert Nelson refers to simply as putting in the scene. More poetically he describes it as the sensory engineering of the film (Nelson, 2009). *Mise en scène* is everything that makes up the staging of the image. It is the lighting, the time of day/night, the angle the image is taken from, the setting and more. The importance of this notion is the atmosphere that it creates. These tools combine to create the overall sensation of the work and frame how it is viewed. The concept of *mise en scène* draws parallels with my adhoc process of using recycled materials to create furniture as

they both involve arrangement of objects and equipment to draw associations in which promotes an overriding theme rather than the pieces themselves.

We are on the brink, the precipice. This is a cinematic sensation, this forward thrust, this feeling of a narrative bursting out of... a photographic frame. (Swinton cited in Crewdson, 2008, p. 3)

Gregory Crewdson creates large scale images (fig 11) that look more like stills from movies rather than just photos, in his series *Dream House*, he captures people poised to act, they are frozen in time, we look for cues to discover what they are getting ready to do or what is happening in the scene, how they relate to other people or objects. This is the power of photographic documentation, director Stephen Unwin describes how this through the theatrical term of blocking and how it expresses relationships between people exploring class and creates images, capturing atmosphere and captivating the audience (2004). The difference between my images and those of Crewdson are the subject matter, his work explores human interactions and emotions while mine deals with

object interactions and the development of character through association. Art Historian Norman Bryson discusses how the elevation of inanimate objects to the position of people is an assault on the “anthropocentrism” (1983, p. 60) of most artistic genres, the exclusion of people celebrates the humble nature of objects exploring their anonymity (Bryson, 1983) this allows their character to become the focus of the image rather than the viewer imagining their implicit user, they become descriptors of their own nature.

Through the development of my images I began to realize how much of a strong presence the use of light was becoming. It created atmosphere, transformed the characteristics of the chair and played the role of interrogator. Lighting designer Patrick Keating’s description of the use of effect lighting explores how “instead of imitating the lighting effects of the real world, the light of the theatre should express the deeper emotional truths...” (2010, p. 58). This approach strives to aid the depiction of a concept rather than appear natural; it is done with specific purpose. Director Orson Welles’ 1962 film *The Trial* (fig 12) provides inspiration for my images. *The Trial* presents the story of a man accused of a mystery

crime and his process of trying to understand the system that is oppressing him (1962). I associated with the plot of this film as it is loaded with tension and a yearning to understand what the main actor was involved in. I have often felt lost within this work, trying to make sense of what I was doing. Welles uses lighting and shadow to create an atmosphere that is loaded with tension is very successful and I want to try to capture some of the effects he creates. The use of shadow to allude to character is also used throughout Fredrich Wilhelm Murnau’s 1922 film *Nosferatu* (fig 13) where the characters’ actions are often explored through the use of his shadow, which creates an ominous quality while distorting his appearance through the exaggeration of perspective (Murnau, 1922). To develop the character of the chair further I focused on how the shadows created by the high back and thin frame and how the abnormal height of the chair gave it an unfamiliar quality. The addition of extra spokes to the back and extended height exaggerates the effect I had created through the original augmentations. The images of these additions work as establishing shot that utilize some of Welles’ techniques to reinforce the physical characteristics



Fig 12: Welles, Orson, 1962, *The Trial*.



Fig 13: Murnau, Fredrich, Wilhelm, 1922, *Nosferatu*

that are crating the character of the chair (fig 14); using a low angle shot to exaggerates the form of the chair and makes it appear much larger, empowering it. The tight focus and the way it appears out of the darkness gives a dark tone to the image, concealing parts of the chair to create suspense. The next image (fig 15) reveals more of the chair while using the shadow cast by the spokes to create a warped shape to exaggerate the character of the chair. This works well but I think the last image may be visually stronger due to the angle that has been used in the photo and the way it only partially reveals the chair to create a more ominous image.

Due to the developing role of lighting to expose character in my work, I transformed the atmosphere created by the light into a physical object that could embody the characteristics (fig 16) I wanted to portray in my performance. This character could be used to provide emphasis or direct attention while adding to the mood through its creation of light and shadow as well as its overall physical appearance. The light drew inspiration from the character of Count Orlok in Murnau's film *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922) and was

created in a similar style to the chair to create a relationship between the two pieces, using long spokes to make a frame and using a found shade to add character to the design, while the use of legs were given to the light to accentuate its anthropomorphic qualities. This light was developed on from this to exaggerate it further, it was made taller and the proportions changed so that it could loom over another object creating a sensation of an impending threat. The creation of this light would allow it to function as a way of activating and enhancing the character of other pieces while behaving as a physical manifestation of the atmosphere of light that I had been employing. Due to the motivations of the lights construction, it quickly became subservient to the chair; it aided it, called attention to it and generally assisted its character, I began to see the light as an accomplice to the chair and its leading role.

These images have enabled the development of the chair as a character, but I don't feel that they address narrative, there is a character being portrayed but without the other elements in the image to form relationships, associations and assumptions, the story



Fig 14: Developed High Back Chair



Fig 15: Developed High Back Chair

falls flat. The image of the two chairs holds a kind of realism and spontaneity that is lacking in the other images. Looking back to the image in the garage of the two chairs, I realize that the success was the contrast, with the two characters I have now there isn't any drama and as a result, no excitement. Their qualities were designed to make them appear unfriendly and ominous, they are antagonists without a protagonist to enable their characteristics and explore the relationship between the objects to develop a narrative. To engage the chair and the light I created a drawer (fig 17) character from the base of an office chair and a drawer handle. The development of this piece was different from the other two as it was driven more by an end goal than being based on my initial preconceptions of the collected pieces. The chair was based around my knowledge and associations with a piece of furniture I had interacted with many years ago and has become a sign to trigger these memories. By exaggerating its features and physically representing the associations I attributed to it I was able to create a strong object that embodied my associations. The light was built out of the kind of atmosphere I was already creating and its industrial

nature lent itself to associating with the chair. Creating a stand to support the head was as if I had created a body to give the head the ability to move and become a character. The drawer was created from the narrative in the sense that I had noticed a gap and identified a way to fill and extend it through developing a new character, but there is less of a connection between the pieces of the drawer and its character. The pieces were chosen for qualities that I thought would animate them: the legs that are utilitarian and the aqua coloured handle that adds some interest to the drawer. The motivation to make a drawer was for it to be a more neutral character. It could be inquisitive; having a storage area could create a motivation for the characters to play off of. Did it have something they wanted? Could the opening be used to show a change in the character? Was something being prosecuted within the confines of the drawer?



Fig 16: Light



Fig 17: Drawer



Fig 18: Shelton, Ann, 2001, *Trespass, (After Monster)*, Daytona Beach, Florida, Diptych, C Type Print, Edition of 5

The Stage:

Just as we can develop associations with objects, different locations can create similar effects, they suggest moods, and create atmospheres that form another layer of representation. Like the recycled elements of my furniture, the use of existing sites employed features to build themes and provide a richer set to stage my work. Lecturer in theatrical Fiona Wilkie identifies this type of performance as “site-sympathetic” (Fiona Wilkie cited in Pearson, 2010, p. 8), performances that are pre written performances that are enacted in a specific physical space, there is some play between the narrative and the location but they are not designed exclusively for one another. The use of this approach allows me to incorporate my characters and the basic narrative I had developed into a space to see how they can benefit from each other. I think the use of sympathy is appropriate as it implies that there is an association with the site, an awareness of its character, a feeling of respect for its meaning. The approach suggests that the performance is an investigation into how it will play out in light of the site, rather than forcing a strict performance onto it.

In the same way that we associate memories with objects, photographer Ann Shelton makes use of location and the associations that we place on them. Her 2003 work *Public Places* (fig 18) documents locations that were the place of “...ill-fated events...” (Shelton, 2003, p. 7). She explores how these become urban myths that have then been translated into cinema or novels, she describes these banal locations become transformed through becoming scenes and through the associations that we apply, when in reality they are just locations. Shelton’s images appear to be more a documentary of what could be considered reality, the images are more true to life, and they show normal, everyday scenes. Her work is very far from that of Crewdson who’s work transforms the location through the use of lighting, processing but more importantly he includes actors to activate the location. The location gives the actors a context, while the actors activate the scene, giving it purpose and allowing it’s meaning to come alive. They form a network that allows meaning to perpetuate.

The importance of location is finding

a context that can be activated by the actors and make sense of their actions. There is a complex play going on between the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand. There has to be a sense of belonging, the actors have to make sense so the audience can rationalize their presence and not question why they are there. They have to be removed enough from their traditional context so that they can suggest something through their presence.

Seatoun Wharf provided an interesting location for staging the work, it has a run-down appearance and adds drama in the form of strong overhead lighting, similar to what I had been using, the lighting allowed for dramatic shadows and contrast while challenging me to consider how I could incorporate the fixed lighting to work for me. The combination of the lighting and the shadows it created facilitated an image of the chair as a shady silhouetted character approaching the drawer (fig 19), the shadow of the chair extending into darkness and its gaze addressing the drawer, intentions unclear. The stillness of the scene creates a sense of apprehension. The second image (fig 20) continues the narrative; the drawer

appears to have dethroned the chair, the tar seal glistening with rainfall as if blood had been spilt. The setting in this case does not really feature in the narrative. Instead it provides a dramatic location for the performance to take place but lacked features that linked the site and the objects together; they had no real relationship to each other.

The second site, Guy's Body Shop made more sense to the narrative and allowed me to build on what I had learnt from Seatoun Wharf. I began to question how I could involve my objects in a space, how they could interact with a location and how could I enhance the plot through the use of props (fig 21). Inanimate objects that were found on location could animate the characters in my work and the narrative. I continued to explore the tension I had created between the characters by trying to involve prop objects to create a story.

I believe at this point it is important to discuss the difference between prop and actor in my work as the word prop is normally associated with inanimate objects in a play or film. The difference with my work is that in a normal situation, the prop is something that facilitates an



Fig 19: Seatoun Wharf



Fig 20: Seatoun Wharf



Fig 21: Guy's Body Shop

element of the narrative through aiding a character; they act through a human actor. In my case, the objects themselves are animated through the narrative and are the main facilitators of the narrative; they do not work through others. The director and set designer Robert Wilson designs objects to enhance features of his productions to aid the conveyance of a characters' identity or describe a scene, in this text they are described as props as their main function is to aid the narrative. In his 1974 production *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, his chairs (fig 22) appear heavy with history. They are dark and dense with turned tubular armrests that reinforce the authoritarian nature of the design. They are described as having as much importance as the actors (Bertoni, 1997). This is an interesting distinction to make, his objects take the role of an actor: they engage in the story, they depict a narrative. However they are designated as props as they are not the main signifiers of the narrative, they do not function autonomously.

Back at Guy's Body Shop (fig 23) the drawer stumbles upon the chair and the light ganging up on some other furniture with the help of various items that were sourced from the site, after they discover

the drawer they turn on it, a struggle ensues and eventually the drawer comes out on top. This narrative feels contrived and far too explicit; the objects appear to be taking on roles normally held by people. Rather than being involved in roles that explored their character they were cast in parts that did not make sense and did not tie into the location. There was no reason why it would happen here specifically. How did the objects get there and why did they not like each other?

My strategy for connecting the furniture to a context was not as successful as I had hoped. My relationship to these objects was becoming a challenge to navigate. When an object is more than the sum of its parts what does it become? How can we relate to the character of an object that is developing autonomy? I began to animate the objects and allow them to interact with one another to understand their relationships and character. The light is a very pose-able character so it became a tool to explore objects. The light peeked into the drawer, highlighted the chair and enabled interaction between all the objects. The use of a mirror (fig 24-25) creates an image that



Fig 22: Wilson, Robert, 1974, *A Letter for Queen Victoria*



Fig 23: Guy's Body Shop



Fig 24: Reflections

explores the questions I was beginning to ask. The object reflects on itself and simultaneously looks to the audience, examining their co-relationship.

In a moment that could be described as serendipitous, a stool fell from the stage at work (fig 26) and the seat cushion came off as it landed. The stage was filled with stools that I imagined as a herd standing behind and I wondered did they push it? Had it jumped? This moment captured what I had being to try to create and uncover.

Political scientist Jane Bennett describes a similar situation of realization where an arrangement of objects changed from trash to thing, Bennett describes objects as things that hold 'thing-power', a type of energy that gives life to objects (2004). Bennett's assertion is that things have this thing-power and it is this power that affords agency in all material bodies (2004). Bennett does consider whether she was conditioned to viewing objects as things by "...a certain anticipatory readiness – a perceptual style congenial to the possibility of thing-power." (Bennett, 2004, p. 350). I associate with this notion; through the process of attempting to understand the relationship

I have with my creations, has led to me seeing them with a new perspective. One that is sympathetic and quick to associate their actions with autonomy and individual authority. I believe however that what Bennett is really attempting to do is remove people from an ontological centre, and allow people to realize that things have importance and the ability to affect people. She is not elevating things to the level of people, she is simply developing the relationship we have with them to make it less one sided (Bennett, 2004)

Just because we can create and manipulate things does not necessarily mean that we can control our creations. Anyone who dabbles in creation would do well to remember that as soon as something exists we begin to lose our grip on it (Piccinini, 2006).

Artist Patricia Piccinini's work *Nature's Little Helpers* (fig 27) depicts another scenario that draws on Bennett's work. She depicts fictitious animals that were created to aid local species but have instead began to inhabit locations not initially intended for them, they began to carve out their own niche and live



Fig 25: Interactions



Fig 26: Serendipity



Fig 27: Piccinini, Patricia, 2005 , *Thunderdome*,
Type-C Photograph, 180x90cm

amongst us. Her work explores how things have the ability to carve out their own role in their own context. I think that her sentiment is eye opening, it is important to remember that we are not the sole creators of meaning; that meaning exists in objects and they hold some level of autonomy. I think that this is true for my creations, in the sense that although they had intended meaning they have developed beyond that and have begun to create a new or more advanced narrative.

I began to explore different settings (fig 28-31) that I thought the objects would make sense in, how would they fit into these spaces, what unites them, and what is their relationship to the space? The spaces that began to make sense were utilitarian and desolate, they are back alleys and areas where refuse accumulates; they exist on the fringes. They are beginning to find their place in amongst the other objects in our lives through a shared sense of displacement. Curator and critic Nicholas Bourriaud, describes how the process of consuming is a mode of production (2007), these objects have all been consumed, recycled and repurposed so it makes sense that they seem at home in these

places. This location in and amongst trash is not a comment on consumerism; it is a comment on the authority of objects and their ability to endure and create meaning. They make sense in this type of location as they connect with the sense of being unwanted and used but they gain authority by standing out, they command a narrative that explores our complex relationship.

The last iteration of this work presents the three objects in a space (fig 32-34), they are physically present in the space, but not visible. Images are projected around and on them as a spotlight highlights them, casting them into different scenarios to create relationships between the objects and the projected images.

The projections activate the objects, playing on Bourriaud's notion that it is the viewer who creates the meaning of an object. He describes how the role of the designer is to direct, to explore *mise en scène* in order to create a narrative for the viewer so that meaning can be derived (Bourriaud, 2007). While I agree that there is a certain amount of meaning being developed by the viewer, I would argue that it is an act that the audience



Fig 28: Alley



Fig 29: Keep Clear



Fig 30: Stoop

and the object engage in together. I present objects and images to establish a scene, which leads the viewer to create meaning and draw associations from the images and their own memories. There is a sense of meaning that I am trying to create but it is not explicit; the images and objects fade in and out exposing the audience to multiple suggestions of narrative but never settling on one. The images and the objects activate one another to create situation where the viewer in turn becomes activated and they begin to question the level of autonomy of the objects. The audience presented with objects without their typical functions, and as a result they are aware of the objects and their role is questioned. This creates a situation where the object becomes elevated beyond function and activates the viewer in the co-production of meaning.

Situating the work in a space that is similar to a gallery means that the conventions of viewing come into play. The audience is presented with a situation where they know they are going to be asked to have a position, through this context they become active participants.

The physical staging of the objects had not happened until this point and called the craftsmanship of the objects into question. Pieces became primarily functional objects when viewed by spectators; this was not an association I wished to create. These objects were created with haste, but for a specific function. They were realized for the purpose of creating an association; their function was negated through incorporating them in images and creating the sensation of them as autonomous objects rather than subservient functional ones. The reality of these objects is that their construction is an element that adds to their character and the idea that they may be constructed poorly or are less 'finished' is a reflection of a person's attitude toward furniture and design rather than a reflection on the object itself. The staging of the objects allows the audience to view the objects as physical items of furniture but their placement within the staged space also suggests that there is room for contemplation. Just as a photo freezes time and frames a representation of a reality, the staging of these objects presents them as more than just utilitarian objects. It suggests they have added value.



Fig 31: The Gathering



Fig 32: Installation View1

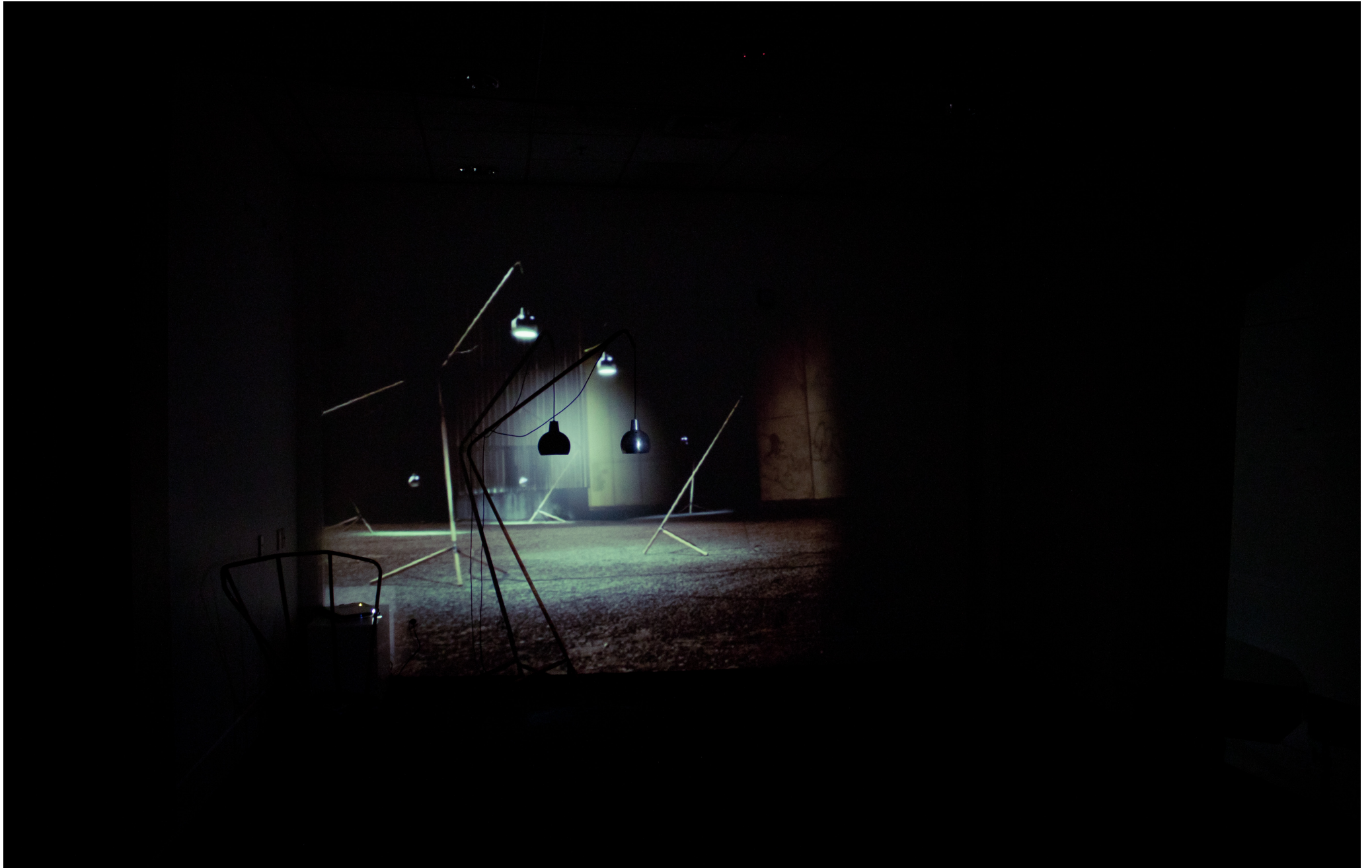


Fig 33: Installation View2



Fig 34: Installation View3

The Final Curtain:

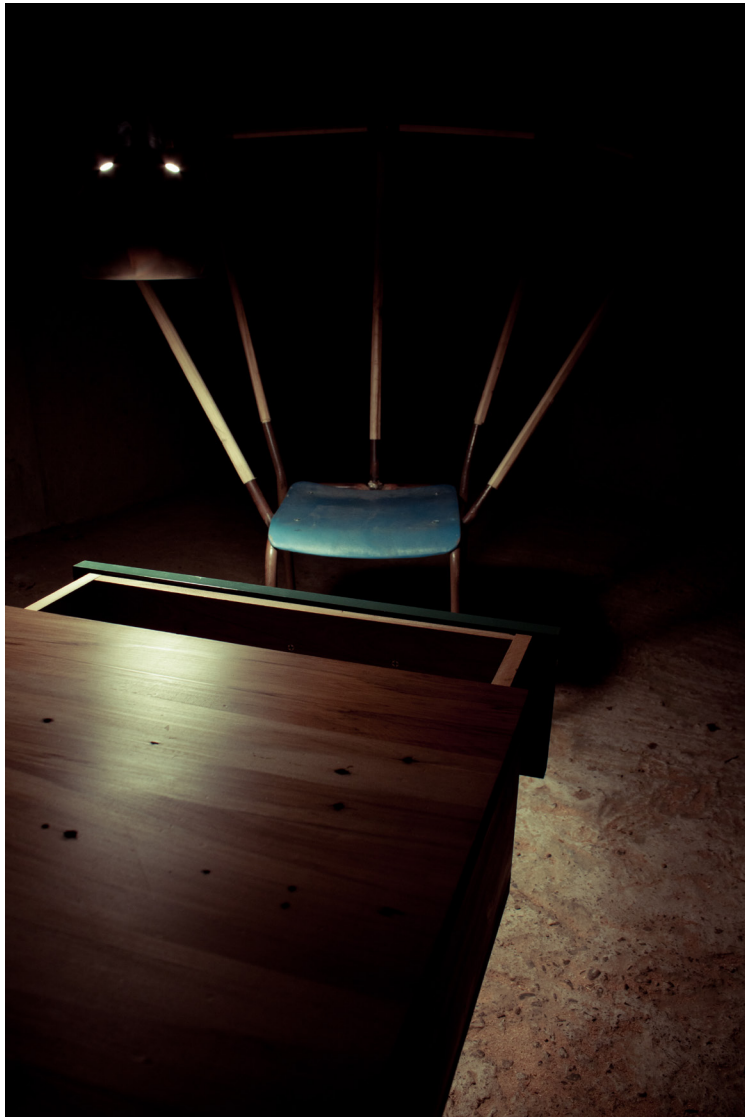
When I began this research I wanted to understand how we relate to objects, and how do the meanings that we associate with them develop. To investigate this I employed the use of the Hermeneutical circle to understand my preconceptions, and develop my understanding of human-object relations. This research has shown that at any time, objects are capable of holding multiple meanings and delivering these to people simultaneously. This is achieved through our desire to assign concepts to objects by way of association so that we may understand their role. Objects afford these meanings through their interactions with us. The relationship we have with objects is co-operative, but I believe this process is primarily a result of the audiences' desire to seek out meaning.

I have noticed a level of autonomy developing in the objects I have been exploring. This is due to my own changing perception of objects. I am more sympathetic toward things and locations, and I am able to appreciate

the subtleties of their characters as a result of the investigation and reflection that I have employed.

This work has also allowed me to develop an awareness of my attitude toward objects; I associate purpose with the practical functionality of an object. This has directed the work without me really noticing, and has become a primary focus of the work. Through diminishing the practical function of objects I have been able to explore the nature of their characters. By engaging with these objects in a way that was not practical I was able to better understand how I relate to them. We already have an intimate relationship with objects however; this view has afforded the elevation of the object beyond one of subservience so that they could be explored from a more democratic view.

The utilization of photography in this work afforded the level of reflection and analysis that was necessary to understand the way that my understanding was developing. It creates an atmosphere that changes a user into an audience that is poised to inquire and allow new ideas to permeate.



I believe that this work has opened a door for me; the possibility to develop this relationship further, through personification, anthropomorphism or another method is now available as my relationship with objects is not limited to function. Function is still a priority but it is a concept to play on rather than the defining feature of a design.

Fig 35: Encounter

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