Metamorph

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METAMORPH

A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

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August 2015
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Collecting is part of the human experience. *Metamorph* examines my method of collecting and the important role it plays in introspection. The works exhibited address how the objects we choose to surround ourselves with both intentionally and unintentionally influence our identity.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To those who’ve helped me along the way and those who’ve made this stretch of the journey interesting, thanks.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: THE ACT OF COLLECTING

Metamorph refers to the transition of an animal from adolescent to adulthood. The sculptures in this exhibition incorporate dioramas that address pivotal moments in my life and contain meaningful objects from these periods. Metamorph is an exhibition of fantastical creatures and a collection of personal objects that highlight the importance of introspection and self-awareness. The act of collecting and cataloging is inherently a human behavior. This process helps to shape our identities and promotes a better understanding of life-defining experiences.

Humans interpret the world through multiple methods of investigation. The Enlightenment presented an alternative to religious doctrine and used the natural sciences as a new mode of investigating the world. In the sciences specifically, the collecting of specimens was utilized to uncover meaning in the environment. These objects composed the first Wunderkammers or cabinets of curiosity.

Early cabinets of curiosity were usually in the homes of the nobilities and filled with the most exotic pieces they could obtain. Paintings, drawings, and sculptures often accompanied the taxidermy, shells, bones, and fossils of these collections. Presently, due to resurgence in interest with natural curiosities, the general public has an increased ability to collect and new technologies for sharing their collections. Through social media applications like Instagram, not only are people able to share images of their collections, but also network with others who collect. This beneficial practice allows the lone collector to trade, find new places to collect new items, and open up dialogs that influence their collections.
In my art practice, the collecting of artifacts has a strong connection to both experience and memory. After one acquires an object, the object itself acts as a conduit to the memories (time, place, circumstance) one associates with it. The objects from my collection that comprise Metamorph are essential because they provide a frame of reference for individual stages of development. The objects act as a physical record of the development of my identity.
CHAPTER 2

INFLUENCING ARTISTS

The acts of collecting, repurposing, and presenting allow us to better understand the world and our own role therein. Collections fulfill an essential purpose in science and culture and provide a means for sharing knowledge, generating new ideas, and shaping identity. The following five artists, Mark Dion, Fred Wilson, Dave Wilson, Quinten Garel, and Damien Hirst, bring attention to the role of collections and explore how we understand and interpret the world through them.

Mark Dion utilizes his collection along with staged international explorations to comment on the significance of scientific methodologies that expand our understanding of the environment. Mark Dion’s artistic practice “examines the ways in which dominant ideologies and public institutions shape our understanding of history, knowledge, and the natural world. The job of the artist, he says, is to go against the grain of dominant culture, and to challenge perception and convention” (columbia.edu). Dion’s position as artist, amateur scientist, and conservationist is reminiscent of early explorers and how discovery helped shape cultural trends. His works comment upon interactions with nature and how human beings traditionally engage and analyze the environment.

In an interview with Andrew Russeth, a reporter for the New York Observer, Dion comments further about his practice stating, “my relationship to science is like the Renaissance artist’s relationship to theology, I’m representing the system through which I understand the world, my cosmology. How one understands our place. How we got here” (Russeth). When asked about Dion, Elizabeth Armstrong, curator of contemporary art at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts tells Russeth,"he’s part curator, part dilettante"
archaeologist. He is one of the pioneers.” Russeth continues by stating, “Dion’s way of discussing his work harks back to a humanistic era when the disciplines of art and science weren’t so distant from one another.” (Russeth) Dion’s artistic practice puts on display his method of understanding the world. The methods of a scientist applied to an art practice draws attention to the similarity of the two fields. The act of discovery and tactics of problem solving are some of the similarities Dion capitalizes on from each discipline.

![Fig. 1. Mark Dion and Robert Williams, Theatrum Mundi: Armarium, 2001.](image)

In *Gorgeous Beasts: Animal Bodies in Historical Perspective*, Dion explained his relationship to the history of animal specimen collections of the past. Dion states “The specimen has a real and magical power for the collector, in the way that an artwork’s meaning is not merely an illustration of its makers concept, these animal specimens are not intended to just signify the animal” (Landes, Young Lee, and Youngquist 175-76).
feel what Dion is touching on here are the deeper connections collectors have to objects and the personal connections collectors have with their own objects.

Dion informs _Metamorph_ through his practice, philosophy, and scholarship. The act of utilizing specimens collected from one’s environment to address his or her environment reflects my own process of documentation. In the making of _Metamorph_, I drew from Dion’s philosophical view of collected objects having power and his use of found objects within installation coupled with constructed forms.

Fred Wilson utilizes the existing collections of museums to create exhibitions that present new cultural narratives and challenge cultural expectations. Wilson offers his critique through the juxtaposition of artifacts such as slave shackles and fine silver flatware. These forced unions of dissimilar artifacts suggest alternative interpretations of history. An excerpt on Wilson states “(Wilson’s) work encourages viewers to reconsider social and historical narratives and raises critical questions about the politics of erasure and exclusion. Wilson has juxtaposed and re-contextualized existing objects to create new installations, which alter their traditional meanings or interpretations” (pace gallery).

In _Mining the Museum_, Wilson reshuffled the museum’s collection to address the history of African Americans in an oppressive society that viewed them as property rather than people. His concepts of utilizing objects within collections to perpetuate other versions of history and creating narratives through objects were the practices that informed _Metamorph_. Wilson’s practice demonstrates how artifacts have the potential to impact a viewer’s interpretation of history.
David Wilson created *The Museum of Jurassic Technology*. He uses natural and constructed specimens to pose fictional narratives rooted in natural sciences. Wilson creates a narrative within his “museum” by inventing dioramas and documentation of creatures and scientific processes that do not exist. What the "museum" presents becomes believable to the viewer, causing them to delve further into his work. In a pamphlet, Wilson describes his museum:

*The Museum of Jurassic Technology* in Los Angeles, California, is an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic. Like a coat of two colors, the museum serves dual functions. On the one hand, the museum provides the academic community with a specialized repository of relics and artifacts from the Lower Jurassic, with an emphasis on those that demonstrate unusual or curious technological qualities. On the other hand,
the museum serves the general public by providing the visitor with a hands-on experience of ‘life in the Jurassic. (Wilson)

Fig. 3. David Wilson, Fruit Stone Carving, peach pit and mixed media.

In *Inhaling the Spore: Field Trip to a Museum of Natural (un)history*, an article documenting a trip to *The Museum of Jurassic Technology*, Laurence Weschler begins to check up on Wilson’s content. He interviews Tom Eisner, a Cornell University biologist, about the information he recorded at the Museum of Jurassic Technology. Eisner tells Weschler “He basically had the facts right but the names he gave him were a little off or the research that was conducted pertained to the same subject but was different.” (Weschler)

These purposeful misrepresentations of science and research are where Wilson and his museum collection begin to investigate institutions. Wilson’s subject matter has transcended the facts but also embraced them to critique the institution he is mimicking.
Wilson’s created collection and investigation of scientific methodologies were especially influential in determining aspects of *Metamorph*. Specifically, drawing from the biological process of metamorphosis, I utilize this phrase to metaphorically describe the development of identity.

![Fig. 4. Quinten Garel, *Crocodile*, bronze.](image)

Quinten Garel casts bronze sculptures from wood-carved animals and bones. The works are larger than life in scale in order to engage the viewer. This mode of working both replicates specimens and manipulates their context through a shift of perspective. His traditional techniques in sculpting produce unconventional portraits. According to a Bertand Delacroix gallery representative, “Quentin’s unique sculptures, or “trophyes” as he calls them, seem organic in material and origin but unlike real wood or bone, these works of art will stand the test of time” (bdgny.com).
The portraits he sculpts are visually engaging, however, many of them leave the viewer feeling separated. Impressing the viewer with an unattainable yearning to be part of the wild. This need for wilderness in Garel is a quality we share, yet it is expressed differently; specifically, through my collecting of natural items and Garel through making sculptural interpretations of them.

Damien Hirst, is best known for his works *For the Love of God* (2007), a diamond encrusted skull made of platinum and adorned with human teeth and *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), a full grown tiger shark in a blue formaldehyde solution. He often utilizes animal bodies and presents pseudo-scientific presentations of them as a focal point. These natural history sculptures not only deal with science but address religion and death as well.

Hirst’s utilization and embellishment of specimens inspired my work during the early stages of *Metamorph*. His grandiose yet minimal installations elevate the specimens and bring new attention to them in a contemporary context. For example, a recent work of Hirst’s, involved gold leafing an entire Mammoth skeleton (*Gone But Not Forgotten* 2014). This embellishment takes the specimen and transforms it into an art object; this raises questions on the value people place upon objects and specimens.

The animal body, the collection and presentation of objects, and the institutions that utilize these tactics and materials act as integral resources these artists have at their disposal. Fred Wilson and Damien Hirst have both interpreted specimens and artifacts in alternative ways through interactions with their own and existing collections. Their art challenges cultural norms by bringing to light larger truths about the world and asking questions about the human condition. Through their investigations, Mark Dion and David
Wilson apply the tactics of collecting and creating to critique scientific understanding of the world. Collections fulfill an essential purpose in both science and culture. It is with these tools *Metamorph* explores not only form and collections, but the impact objects have on the framing of identity over time.

Fig. 5. Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), mixed media.
CHAPTER 3

DESCRIPTION OF METAMORPH

This exhibition formally explores the evolution of a fantastical creature. The content of these sculptures represent specific stages of human development (childhood, adolescence, and adulthood). However, they are displayed to encourage the viewer to engage the works in no particular order. The sculptures are composed of wood, welded steel, found objects, and electronics that are paired with crates made from reclaimed pallet wood. Specific crates are illuminated from their interiors and contain objects relating to the works they are displayed with. There are a total of six sculptures, two of which work in tandem to form an installation.

Fig. 6. Metamorph
The first sculpture symbolizes the beginning of life. The body of this piece is something that was made earlier in my artistic career. It was then modified to better represent my early life experiences. The interior is an abstraction of my childhood bedroom. The green light that fills this space represents new beginnings and the objects included are those that I associate with home. The color green I associate with springtime, a time of renewal and new life. The creature looks like it is able to forage for new things and explore its environment but still requires some adaptations to do so.
The exterior of this piece resembles a bird with one leg and two arms. The body is made of plasma cut 18 gauge rusted steel triangles. The skeletal arms end in rounded claws made from welded cut nails. The sculpture’s face is a box composed of oak strips and popsicle sticks. There is a porthole cut in this that allows visual access to the interior. The creature is set on top of a crate made of pallet wood.

The interior of the piece is illuminated with green light. There is a wooden floor composed of popsicle sticks and a pillow with a miniature of the creature perched on it. To the right is a shelving unit with various objects including a scarab beetle, a tag to the Museum of Art and Design in New York, and a tumbled stone. The interior of the crate houses a deer skull and a black bear skull, both given to me by my grandfather. The crate is illuminated from within and the contents are visible through cracks in the crate.
The second sculpture is an abstraction of my studio space at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. It is composed of objects that were collected during my time in Indiana, Pennsylvania. The interior is disorganized but appears to be at the beginning of being sorted out. This diorama refers to the first time I have been on my own and the struggle that comes with establishing myself in a new environment. I intended for the creature to look ill-adapted and almost incapable of carrying out tasks necessary for its survival.

The exterior of the second piece is made of rough cherry with anthropomorphic limbs similar to those of a tyrannosaurus. The arms and the ribs on the body are made of cut nails. The piece also has two legs made from rebar and repurposed pins from simmon-forms (molds used in construction to make foundations). This piece is displayed atop another illuminated crate filled with skulls, wooden shark teeth, taxidermy insects, and metal smithed objects collected and made during my time here in Indiana P.A. These artifacts were included because they reminded me of a place that played a critical role in shaping my identity and exploring my independence.

The interior of the second piece is a jumbled environment cast in a dim yellow light. There are crates, tables, a shelving unit, and a chair made from popsicle sticks that are strewn about the space. The other objects in the space include a sparrow skull, shark teeth, a small toy saber tooth tiger skull, two metal castings of frogs (one with a tail and one without), shells, bones, and a miniature of the creature. In the back of the space is a portion of a shipping crate with the text “fragile” barely visible as well as a collection of miniature show-cards from gallery openings. I believe the content of this piece, though disorganized in its composition, best embodies the goals I put forth for *Metamorph*. This space and the objects contained within reflect an identity in transition. The objects have
the potential to be sorted, organized, and added to. This interior space mirrors my own memory and the role objects play within it.

Fig. 9. Exterior of Piece 2

Fig. 10. Interior of Piece 2
The third piece has a weathered oak exterior with interchanging slats of grey and brown. Its limbs are attached to the wall surrounding the archway it is installed in. This installation acts as a barrier and denies access to the neighboring space. The body of this piece is shaped like a six-sided diamond with three four-inch holes that allow viewers to access the interiors. Five crates are placed under the creature, which appears to be scaling over them. Three of these crates are emanating light.

There are two interiors incorporated into this piece, a top level and a bottom level. The top level faces the viewer and looks out into the gallery space. The interior of the top is a small room illuminated with yellow light emitting diodes (l.e.d.s). There is a pile of crates atop a rustic wooden floor. The interior of the bottom level is a miniature outdoor space with trees, rocks, moss, and grass, made of model making materials. The back of this space is the façade of a house with an illuminated window and deck.

Fig. 11. Exterior of Piece 3
This sculpture represents the present and possible trajectories for the future. It does not incorporate any found objects. The creature is posed to appear as if climbing; this implied movement signifies transition. The top space that contains crates represents
a duality. Crates signify either transition or stagnation. They have the potential to be stored away or packed and moved to a new location. The space with the crates is cast in yellow light, and should be considered stored. The bottom space depicts a new environment with a welcoming facade and wooded area that symbolizes potential.

The fourth piece in this series is composed of wood, steel, foam, l.e.d.s and found objects. This sculpture has eight appendages and resembles a crustacean or arachnid. The head is a modified geometric shape called a truncated icosahedron. This is composed of laser cut eighth inch plywood and caulking. The eight limbs are similarly constructed and are composed of three segments each with three faces. The faces all have a floorboard pattern cut into them. This piece is looming over three crates.

Fig. 14. Exterior of Piece 4
Inside of the head is an environment enveloped in a warm white light. The surface of the interior is coated in white stucco paint with the exception of two pentagonal panels that serve as ceiling and floor. The floor is tan with a red hue and the ceiling is weathered ebony; each of these has the floorboard pattern etched into them. There is a table made of popsicle sticks accompanied by two chairs, a rug, a potted plant, and various small rocks and fossils. The viewer can only see this space through small flaps in the head.

This piece addresses the desire for home, and a person to share it with. The interior space of this creature is well lit and appears comfortable. The dining room is the place where families come together. The objects in the space symbolize my interests and the potted plant represents a stationary environment. This sculpture embodies an aspiration many could hope for in the future. The overall gesture of the creature looks as if it is hoarding or protecting the crates.
The fifth piece is another geometric shape composed of twenty-six planes. Twenty of these faces are made of pallet wood and six are left open. The shapes that make up this piece are found in the rest of the preceding works. Light is emanating from the openings and on the floor, there are small panels of glued popsicle sticks in various shapes. There is also moss coming from the piece. The light’s cord is a metal-shielded wire.

Fig. 16. Exterior of Piece 5

The inside is coated with spray-foam that has been carved away and painted to look cavernous. The base is a weathered wooden floor made of oak. There is a pile of moss, popsicle cut offs, and bones spilling out of the lower openings. The interior is brightly lit with a florescent bulb.

Piece five represents the foundation that parents establish for their children. This den suggests a creature was born and reared here. The sculpture represents the influences that parents have on their children based on their own identities.
The final piece in the exhibition is a creature made of welded cut nails and popsicle stick panels. The face is a metal ring resembling a porthole. The creature is a blend between animal and machine, which harkens back to works made earlier in my artistic carrier. The face is removable for access to the interior. The sculpture sits atop a low crate and in its environment are more crates, the fifth piece, and a solitary open crate.

Within the sculpture is a miniature of the fifth piece made of popsicle sticks. This miniature is illuminated with a bright white light emanating from its interior. The interior of the creature is unfinished with only metal walls.

This work is the only piece I consider an aspiration, not a self-portrait. This piece represents legacy, an offspring that is meant to carry on. In this installation, it is assumed that this creature lived in the fifth piece. Unlike the other sculptures, it is not distressed but made of all new materials. The open crate symbolizes the creature’s ability to make its own decisions but it utilizes the miniature inside to represent the influences of the parents.

This body of work explores development in multiple facets as well as the human condition. Through the lens of these sculptural animals and habitats, we are left with a
narrative and scenes that are up for individuals to interpret. This narrative of development is both personal with the incorporation of objects meaningful to myself and universal in terms of what drives us to develop our identities.

Fig. 18. Exterior of Piece 6

Fig. 19. Interior of Piece 6
Fig. 20. Installation View of Piece 5 and 6
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Everyday experiences shape our identities and collecting these experiences is an enriching responsibility. In this way a collection becomes more expansive, yet focused over time, our experiences define who we are. Objects are both things and memories of the experiences tied to them. When I hold an object from my collection, I think of these things as well as the item itself. They become physical manifestations and triggers of memory.

The creatures in *Metamorph* are reflections of periods of my life and the artifacts that remain from these periods. The objects they contain motivated their exteriors and interiors and the memories I have of them. *Metamorph* is a discourse on the human experience through the lens of self and the anticipation for the future.
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