2012
MASTER
OF FINE
ARTS
GRADUATE
THESIS
EXHIBITION

Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts
CRAFT / MATERIAL STUDIES
Melissa Athey
Jacob Copetillo
April Dauscha
Ginger Metzger
Jacob Vincent
Jacquelyn Walther

KINETIC IMAGING
Laura Vitale

PAINTING + PRINTMAKING
Amanda Baldwin
Mayme Donsker
Loie Hollowell
Andrew Meerow
Ander Mikalson
Nikolai Noel
Reid Ramirez
Matthew Shelton
Vladislav Smolkin

PHOTOGRAPHY + FILM
Georgi Ivanov
Dana Ollestad

SCULPTURE + EXTENDED MEDIA
Jon Bobby Benjamin
Ryan Crowley
Jessica Kain
Melanie McLain
Jesse Potts
Alina Tenser

TEXT WRITTEN BY OWEN DUFFY
Melissa Athey’s work comments on popular culture’s obsession with self-perception and the absurd methods one often employs in crafting images. Rising up from a custom made leguminous white pedestal, the aluminum supports of *Reflections of Self: Perceptions of Others* balance clusters of cast glass mussels. On top of these relatively opaque crustaceans rest compact mirrors that open and close like bivalves when individuals walking near the installation trip motion sensors. As spectators navigate their way around *Reflections of Self: Perceptions of Others*, they are tempted to peer into the mirrors and confront their own self-image, establishing a psychological connection between Athey’s installation and the viewer.

In addition to the exposed mirrors, *Reflections of Self: Perceptions of Others*’ transparent assembly methods contrast with the glass’s opacity and the sealed mollusks, acting as thought provoking metaphors for the carefully constructed false identities people project to conceal their perceived imperfections.

Continuing with these themes, *Geodesique (Study 1)* and *Geodesique (Study 2)* are organic rock forms, split open and put on display, revealing insides peppered with pill capsules. Whereas *Reflections of Self: Perceptions of Others* remarks on contemporary culture’s obsession with external enhancement, Athey’s geodes discuss the internal transformation of the body, as Americans ingest an unprecedented quantity of medication to prevent and alter the natural developments of life.
MELISSA ATHEY

Reflections of Self: Perceptions of Others
mixed media
MELISSA ATHEY

Geodesique, Study 1
glass, found objects

opposite page

Geodesique, Study 2
glass, found objects
When a viewer first enters the intimate space inhabited by Jacob Copetillo’s *Endure*, she or he encounters a seemingly private domestic moment. Two Stickley-style recliners, an American version of the Morris chair, fabricated from quarter-sawn oak are positioned towards a white window, suggesting a familiar American narrative of idealized middle-class family life. However, upon closer examination, the Stickley recliners — traditional signs of stability in the twentieth-century American home — have been splintered and the window they face is shattered. The physical condition of the chairs and window reference the underlying difficulties many families experience in present society. Often the proverbial white picket fence camouflages the more troubling realities of domestic life. Yet if Copetillo’s title *Endure* is coupled with the fractured wood held together by transparent and often crude means — nails, adhesive, duct tape, c-clamps — the artwork can convey a hopeful message to those undergoing trying times themselves.

The precise method by which Copetillo rebuilds the Stickley recliners lends itself to French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s theories of deconstruction, a term the author chose to advocate meticulousness rather than violence. Derrida argues that one can expose contradictions within a work, be it art or literature, by examining beyond the apparent surface meaning, looking at the individual parts rather than the whole. Therefore, if considered through this notion, *Endure* can serve as both a literal and metaphorical deconstruction of the romanticized American family life.
JACOB COPETILLO

previous page + right

Endure
quarter-sawn white oak,
no. 2 pine stud, various materials
69 x 67 x 87"
In her sculptural installation, *Magdalene*, April Dauscha has created what appears to be a larger-than-life head of auburn hair, sprouting from the gallery wall and measuring over fifteen feet in length. To the viewer’s surprise, Dauscha has composed a true tromp l’oeil; *Magdalene*’s flowing locks and gentle curls are in fact coated copper wire weighing over sixty pounds. This Duchampian sense of playful deception in *Magdalene* allows one to interpret the iconography of hair through multiple lenses. Historically, women’s hair has been a constantly changing signifier. Depending on a given society’s social conventions, these meanings range from purity to temptation to power and penance, all of which help reinforce the complexity and multiplicity of *Magdalene*’s possible meanings. Of the many potential discourses that *Magdalene* exists within, the installation has direct associations with traditional Christian iconography. According to Dauscha, the title references Mary Magdalene who is generally depicted in Christianity as a penitent woman, often with long hair representing the weight of her sins. Because of these connotations, *Magdalene*’s process of creation can be understood as an exercise in individual reconciliation and reflection for Dauscha, or, conversely, the artwork speaks to a broader audience as a symbol of personal burdens carried throughout life.
APRIL DAUSCHA

Magdalene
*Copper Wire*
15'
above

Act of Contrition

video

(03:52)

left

Extreme Unction

handmade lace veils, walnut, porcelain, glass, muslin

26 x 20 x 15" (Open Dimensions)
Ginger Metzger’s *Piecing* digresses from the present-day mechanized processes of product manufacturing widely used in a post-industrialized, consumer driven American society. For the duration of the MFA Thesis Exhibition — almost two whole weeks — Metzger tirelessly worked in the Anderson Gallery from open until close hand-stitching precut squares of secondhand and discarded clothing into a seemingly endless strip of fabric. Both performance and craft, Metzger effectively isolated herself from the outside world in an attempt to reconnect with the history of crafting traditions. Quilting, for example, is traditionally a collective activity enacted outside of an economic capital system, with the ability to bring together an entire community. However, as evident by the degree of futility in *Piecing*, post-modern society breaks down craft’s relational possibilities. At the conclusion of the exhibition, Metzger leaves her work at the Anderson Gallery and reenters the techno-centric and interconnected world, demonstrating the near impossibility for an individual to exist outside of societal structures.

*Piecing* is not an artwork devoid of positivity. Metzger’s artistic process symbolically represents the cycle of existence — life, death and rebirth. Metzger revitalizes forgotten, anonymous clothing by repurposing it as significant source material for a meaningful work of art.
Piecing
discarded clothes, cut clothes, furniture, performance of piecing
6 x 5 x 6’
Piecing

discarded clothes, cut clothes, furniture, performance of piecing
6 x 5 x 6'
At over one thousand words and complete with six footnotes, the title of Jacob Vincent’s thesis exhibition is a work of art itself. Referred to as ...But from this moment on we know nothing for brevity’s sake, the title’s absurd length and self-referential content aptly gel with the rest of Vincent’s show which challenges artists’ charismatic authority. ...But from this moment on we know nothing is refreshingly satirical, commenting on people’s tendency to accept values or truths without investigating them firsthand.

...But from this moment on we know nothing is comprised of two apparently different sculptural components that are in fact one artwork. Firstly, Vincent constructed an open-ended conical shape from a steel frame and sheets of plastic. When standing at the wider opening, viewers peer down the opaque tunnel to watch a video on an iPad of Vincent copying Henry David Thoreau’s book Walden in pencil into a notebook. However, in order to figure this out for themselves, viewers must make their way through conical tunnel. Inviting at first, the space becomes increasingly cramped as the participant must force her or his body into an unnecessarily contorted position to watch Vincent’s one hundred and twelve hour video. Opposite the massive tapering sculptural form, Vincent has placed a diminutive steel object of unknown origins on a velvet pad, inside a vitrine, and on a pedestal. This action calls into question an artists’ reasoning for assigning precious meaning to objects through simple re-contextualization and the viewer’s willful reception of the item as valuable and significant.
If you only knew how people have misunderstood me. My work has suffered terribly because of it: my projects, my investigations, my experiments. But who can fault them? For the world no longer fosters understanding. It’s engaged in one of the most important things I’ve ever done. I’m on the verge of a significant breakthrough, and if all goes well I believe I’ll hold the key to a series of major discoveries.

mixed media
installation
If you only knew how people have misunderstood me. My work has suffered terribly because of it: my projects, my investigations, my experiments. But who can fault them? For the world no longer fosters understanding. It’s engaged in one of the most important things I’ve ever done. I’m on the verge of a significant breakthrough, and if all goes well I believe I’ll hold the key to a series of major discoveries.

mixed media
installation
Evidence of process is pivotal when formulating an interpretation of Jacquelyn Walther’s *The Dragons in Your Dreams*. Walther’s ceramic skeletal structure is roughly modeled, leaving a definitive trace of the artist’s hand in the development of the sculpture. Elongated human jaw and pelvis bones, complete with soft tissue, are rendered from ceramic with blue-green pigment. They are arranged in an anthropomorphized manner that shifts between a singular surreal creature and two dragon-like heads, with one devouring the other. Because of the ceramic’s firing process, these dragons display an ashy and calcified quality, reminiscent of decay. Consequently, *The Dragon in Your Dreams* simultaneously exists in two ontological states: creation and fossilization.

If the tactile surface qualities and subject matter of *The Dragon in Your Dreams* are viewed in conjunction with the material’s oscillation between growth and preservation, then Walther’s sculptural object could be understood as a physical manifestation of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theory of “becoming-animal” from their book, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). According to Deleuze and Guattari, “becoming-animal” happens when one assumes the actual or fictional powers of a particular animal resulting in a supernatural amalgam capable of compelling an individual beyond their perceived limits as a human. On this basis, the distorted bones of Walther’s *The Dragon in Your Dreams* can be seen as becoming something greater than their human limitations allow.
JACQUELYN WALThER

The Dragons in Your Dreams

*ceramic*

10 x 5 x 4’
The Dragons in Your Dreams

ceramic

10 x 5 x 4'
A combination of art and science, Laura Vitale's *White Sands* strikes a balance between experiment and installation. Hanging from the ceiling, massive balloons were pumped with carbon dioxide from metal tanks, eventually making its way back into the gallery. Plants scattered throughout the space transform the carbon dioxide into oxygen, which viewers breathe in, exhaling carbon dioxide and prolonging the cycle — effectively turning the room into a biological system. Reminiscent of raindrops, sounds of plaster rehydrating are played through speakers as a live video feed the deflated balloon is projected on the wall.

*White Sands* came to be from Vitale’s efforts to produce a sound lens using the balloons. Since they are filled with carbon dioxide and denser than air, the balloons can focus sound just as lenses do with light. Out of this experiment grew a larger project that generates a discourse around the history of scientific experiments and their implications for humankind and the environment. The title of the exhibition, *White Sands*, directly references White Sands National Monument in New Mexico. Vitale visited the park’s gypsum dunes, which was the test site of the first atomic bomb. This trip proved to be formative for Vitale during her graduate studies, and manifests itself in several of her formal decisions. In one such example, the close-up angle of the live video transforms the glitter-dusted, deflated balloon into an abstracted shape, suggesting the glistening, rounded dunes of White Sands National Monument.
Laura Vitale

White Sands (Dunes, Walking, Wayfaring)

ink on balloons, 10-channel sound installation, plants, tanks of carbon dioxide, camera, projector, ultra-fine glitter, pipetted drawings, flocking, video.

dimensions variable
Primarily based in the realm of representation, Amanda Baldwin’s paintings are reactions to a technology driven, media focused culture. Painstakingly rendered via oil on canvas, the lifelike Doberman Pinscher and immaculate jade column of *Pasadena Poolside* are contrasted with the piece’s rough white background. Baldwin made this unfinished-looking background by sanding down over twenty layers of paint, accreting bumps, marks, and traces of the wall behind it. Here both subjects are three-dimensional in appearance, but the regal canine sits without casting a shadow, as if pasted onto the canvas. This realization cultivates a sense of visual and psychological unease for the viewer, calling into question the painting’s figure-ground organization. Such a lack of depth seems to be in stark opposition to Baldwin’s slow and labored method of pictorial representation. However, if the painting’s elements are indeed reflective of popular culture’s fixation with physical and technological manipulation, then *Pasadena Poolside* perceptively initiates a dialogue about the value of meticulous, naturalistic painting in such a society.

*Joints* builds on this conversation. On a single surface, Baldwin explores painting’s range of possibilities as a medium and how it has been used throughout the course of modernism. Over a thick and expressive impasto brick background, Baldwin imposed detailed and realistic arms and hands, once again without shadows. The experience becomes awkward and uncomfortable when one notices the hands lack fingernails. Instead of nails, there are empty cavities, allowing viewers to peer through to the background of the painting. Here, illusion, representation, expression, geometry, and materiality converge on the picture plane to create a painting about the medium’s many forms of representation.
opposite page

**Pasadena Poolside**
*oil on canvas*
*69 x 96”*

from left

**Joints**
*oil on canvas*
*18 x 24”*

**Manicured**
*oil on canvas*
*20 x 24”*
above

Joints
oil on canvas
18 x 24"

left

Manicured
oil on canvas
20 x 24"
above

Bellmer’s Bathroom

*oil and acrylic on canvas*

50 x 60”

right

Pasadena Poolside

*oil on canvas*

69 x 96”
A sense of yearning can be found throughout Mayme Donsker’s two-toned exhibition. Her three works on paper and video installation memorialize overlooked and forgotten moments. Enthused by found footage of a 1947 contra dance, Donsker organized and directed *Untitled* which exemplifies the show’s melancholy themes. The silent black and white film depicts two seated individuals, pensively gazing out at the other unseen dancers. But the anonymous slow dancers’ shadows are visible, gently projecting onto seated spectators as they wait for a partner or something else unknown. The onlookers’ loneliness and alienation becomes palpable through Donsker’s recontextualization of the original movie — an ordinary event of the past becomes nearly metaphysical in the present.

To create her works on paper, Donsker begins with a found photograph from an old newspaper or book, clips a small section of the picture, and enlarges it. For *Moon Shadows*, Donsker created a montage by stitching elements from different images together to formulate the romantic, but lonely scene of a man waiting in a yard, simultaneously conveying a longing for solitude and a desire for connectedness. In all her images, Donsker works the surface with charcoal to darken and enhance the rich shadows. Embellishing the stark contrast, Donsker pulls out some of the charcoal with an eraser, revealing brilliant white highlights. When selecting her images, Donsker looks for unintentionally intimate situations. What may have originally been a dispassionate instance is transformed in *Embrace*, as two anonymous persons seem to gently caress and fondle a block of unknown material. Fleeting, everyday moments become introspective and reveal life’s temporality through the picture’s black and white and hazy atmospheric qualities.
above

Tablets Made of Ice
digital print
diptich

left

Contra Dancers / Wallflowers
video installation
MAYME DONSKER

left

Moon Shadows
mixed media

above

Tablets Made of Ice
digital print
diptich

Contra Dancers / Wallflowers
video installation
Women have been depicted as submissive erotic objects throughout the history of art. Moving away from this trope, Loie Hollowell’s oil paintings can be understood as empowering signifiers of female sexuality. Hollowell’s three miniature paintings, *Eyeing the Everglades, Mirror Stage*, and *Glass, Peacock* portray a nude woman, immersed in nature, overtly exploring her body in various positions. In this series of paintings, the woman is no longer a passive subject. Instead, she commands viewers’ attention through her provocative actions. The miniatures’ lush flora and dreamy jungle settings visually seduce viewers, drawing stylistic comparisons to the French Post-Impressionist painter, Henri Rousseau (1844-1910). These similarities are no accident or mere emulation on the part of Hollowell. In *Mirror Stage*, she consciously appropriates Rousseau’s composition from *Beauty and the Beast* (1908), which portrays a women being penetrated by a doggish creature. By removing the animal, Hollowell shifts the focus from the sexual act to self-reflection and introspection. Altering Rousseau’s representation of woman as obedient and docile, Hollowell replaces the subservient woman with one who controls her own sexuality.

*Jon, Loie, and Legs* and *Jon and Loie nipple kiss* broaden this dialogue about sexuality. For Hollowell, these honest and intimate portraits of the artist and her husband are first and foremost lived experiences and personal fantasies. Depicting interracial sensuality in a positive light, they can also be interpreted as signs of cultural progress in America, especially considering that only half a century ago interracial marriage was illegal in many states.
LOIE HOLLOWELL

Jon, Loie, and Legs
oil on canvas
28 x 21"
LOIE HOLLOWELL

right
Eyeing the Everglades
oil on canvas
7½ x 10''

bottom
Mirror Stage
oil on canvas
10 x 7½''

opposite page
Prickly Pear and Barrel Cacti
oil on canvas
96 x 84''
Parodic, yet serious, the black and white minimalist-style paintings of Andrew Meerow’s *Some Examples of Displacement* create a tension of meanings. Adopting the circle motif from an earlier body of work, Meerow used contact paper to stencil the positive and negative images onto several canvases. Originally appearing to be perfectly reproduced, one can detect subtle differences between each painting. The placement of the lower black circle is never the same twice as it shifts right and left, canvas to canvas. Moreover, the stenciled shapes are not flawless. Upon closer inspection, jagged and uneven edges around the circle and its outline are readily apparent. If one moves beyond the first impression of *Some Examples of Displacement* as a pristine and carefully worked high modernist series of paintings, the pieces slip into satire. As if to reinforce the tension of meanings, Meerow has arranged *Some Examples of Displacement* into two different groups on adjacent walls. On the right wall, the paintings are orderly and traditionally hung at eye level. In direct opposition, the canvases are casually stacked against the left wall like wooden pallets at a hardware store. This spatial arrangement succinctly illustrates the tension *Some Examples of Displacement* creates, leaving viewers to decide Meerow’s ambiguous intentions for themselves. The provisional qualities of Meerow’s paintings seems contest the prestige of the medium itself, which often champions expertise and permanence above other characteristics.
ANDREW MEEROW

Some Examples of Displacement
acrylic on canvas
variable
Though space is vacuous and has no air for vibrations to produce noise, the Big Bang emitted a 400,000 year long sound during the universe’s creation. Combining art, astronomy, physics, and music, Ander Mikalson collaborated with University of Virginia astronomer Mark Whittle to translate satellite data of the Big Bang’s acoustics into the heroic resonances of her orchestral composition, *Score for the Big Bang*, which would otherwise be inaudible to the human ear. On April 13, 2012 at the St. James Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, Mikalson’s *Score for the Big Bang* was performed in front of a crowded audience of artists, scientists, church members, and everyone in between. The dynamic performance — complete with thirty-six vocalists and a church organ — signaled the culmination of Mikalson’s past two years of interdisciplinary research.

Many of the utterances heard in *Score for the Big Bang* are rooted in the Hindi language, lending itself to the Hindu concept of *Sahasranama*. Literally meaning “a thousand names,” the *Sahasranama* is a scripture where a deity is referred to by a thousand or more names, each relating to a specific quality, legend, or attribute. Thus, through the *Sahasranama*, an individual is able to give form to the intangible. If read through this lens, *Score for the Big Bang* creates a form for human beings to identify with, both through the concretization of inaudible sound and the compression of a sublime event into a comprehensible timeframe. Furthermore, rather than alienating the metaphysical from a scientific conversation, *Score for the Big Bang* brings together contrasting ideologies by encouraging conversation and mutual understanding in an effort to blur the boundaries between self and other.
ANDER MIKALSON

Score for the Big Bang
the Commonwealth Singers (performers)
St. James’s Church
AN DER MIKALSON

Music of the Spheres
Charlie Maybee (dancer)
Anderson Gallery Carriage House
Trinidad, like many other colonized Caribbean islands, has a complicated history of hegemony, oppression, and exploitation by the British Empire. Nikolai Noel utilizes emotionally invested, natural materials — sugar, salt, and dirt, among others — to construct artworks that raise questions about this history and the problematic residual effects of colonial rule. Burnt sugar cast into the form of human teeth, placed atop a mound of damp earth from a cemetery, slowly melts to serve as a poetic metaphor for the transience of an island worker’s existence in Noel’s — 2012. — 2012’s earth serves as a loaded signifier, especially considering the social hierarchies of Trinidad where an individual’s status is customarily indicated by their proximity to the soil. The closer someone is to the earth, the lower their status is in the community. Further emphasizing Trinidad’s tumultuous colonial past and its lingering aftermath, Noel burns the sugar of – 2012 well past the point of caramelizing until it is completely bitter and unpalatable. What the viewer expects to be sweet is not. This dichotomy mirrors a tourist’s expectation of an idyllic island paradise and the realities of everyday island life. In actuality their resort experience is a façade, hiding the difficulties and complexities numerous Caribbean populations face. However, that is not to say Noel depicts a monolithic Trinidad or Caribbean. Reflecting his diverse heritage and the creolization of the region, Noel’s art draws from a variety of sources including African, Christian, Hindu, and indigenous traditions to reflect a transcultural hybridized Caribbean identity.
above

Who will love
low tack adhesive text on floor
varies

right

A Trace for Mercury
graphite, linseed oil, orange highlighter on paper
8.3 x 11.7"

left

Yoke
wood, rope, metal screws & soil/earth
varies

the sweet of my brown
brown sugar & fabric
varies

— 2012
soil/earth & cast brown sugar
varies

member
salt & cast brown sugar
varies
NIKOLAI NOEL

Yoke
wood, rope, metal screws & soil/earth
varies

opposite page, top
Charles’ trench
soil/earth on fabric
80 x 36"

— 2012
soil/earth & cast brown sugar
varies

opposite page, bottom
member
salt & cast brown sugar
varies
Born and reared in the San Francisco Bay Area, Reid Ramirez interrogates notions of class, social status, and high culture through his art. Generic soda and white sweatshirts from Wal-Mart are transmuted into fine art materials in Hoodies. After soaking the sweatshirts in the sugary liquid, Ramirez manipulates them into expressive and spectral positions with armatures, creating excessive folds in the fabric. If considered through the discourse of Western art history, Reid’s Hoodies could reference iconography from the Italian Renaissance. During the Renaissance, exceptionally rendered flowing fabric was a trademark of a master sculptor or painter, and became a frequent motif in religious art. However, because Ramirez utilizes the most base of commodities – off brand soda and Wal-Mart clothing – he is able to create an amalgam of not just high and low culture, but historical traditions and contemporary trends as well.

Boomin’ Words from Hell is more anecdotal. The 1989 Pontiac Sunfire rear door, whose black, spray painted window is propped open by an orange, directly relates to a story the artist’s sister conveyed to him about a group of her friends from the Bay Area. Since they came from modest economic means, these friends could not afford tinted windows, a popular trend at the time. As an affordable and rudimentary alternative, the car’s owners spray painted the vehicle’s windows black. Once one is aware of the tale, Boomin’ Words from Hell becomes a narrative about the resourcefulness of those who want to project a specific image of social status, even if they do not have the fiscal resources.
REID RAMIREZ

Invisible Ambulance
aluminum, fluorescent lights, enamel
59 x 79 x 4½’

Boomin’ Words from Hell
car door, spray – paint, organic orange
37 x 21 x 35’

Deposit
foam, resin, latex paint
16 x 32 x 62’
REID RAMIREZ

right
Invisible Ambulance
aluminum, fluorescent lights, enamel
59 x 79 x 4½"  
middle
Boomin’ Words From Hell
car door, spray-paint, organic orange
37 x 21 x 35"  
bottom
Deposit
foam, resin, latex paint
16 x 32 x 62"  
opposite page
blk® Cloak
hooded sweatshirt, blk®, wire armature
41 x 12 x 22"  
Orange Crush® Cloak
hooded sweatshirt, Orange Crush®, wire armature
37 x 11 x 18"  
Grape Crush® Cloak
hooded sweatshirt, Grape Crush®, wire armature
37 x 11 x 24"
North Carolina native Matthew Shelton reconsiders contemporary Southern identity by revisiting Confederate history through his series of photographs, *The Revenant*. Impulsively, Shelton began drilling holes into the book *Embattled Confederates: An Illustrated History of Southerners at War* (1964) by Bell Irvin Wiley. The tome provides a detailed account of Southern life during the Civil War, including numerous professional and amateur photographs taken during the conflict. When Shelton’s drill ripped the pages to shreds, he began to notice the eloquent remnants from the photographs. Selecting choice examples, Shelton then photographed the shreds over a black background, documenting the aggressive act and preserving the book’s delicate fragments. Despite their damage, the unassuming, yet stirring, scraps contain recognizable signs of Southern culture and history. Amidst the holes, in one particular image, the viewer can discern the uniform of a Confederate officer. While in another, a family of African-Americans confronts the spectator’s gaze. One fragment, devoid of photographic imagery within its borders, resembles the hood of a Ku Klux Klan member. Due to this sequence of juxtapositions, *The Revenant* not only recognizes and draws attention to the South’s complicated history, but serves as a personal means for Shelton to understand his own heritage as a Confederate descendant.
MATTHEW SHELTON

from left

**Transitional Object No. 1**
custom-printed dry-erase board, marker, eraser
36 x 60”

**RIGHTEOUSWOUND**
Archival inkjet print on masonite
40 x 32”

**nothin scarier than stupid ghosts**
archival inkjet print on masonite
40 x 32”

**A Most Disagreeable Mirror**
(After J.B.)
archival inkjet print on masonite
40 x 32”

**USOUGHTOREWIND**
archival inkjet print on masonite
40 x 32”
Fearing the slaves wrote that Negroes will not fight, I said there were other places. The Union soldiers do very well to fight them.
MATTHEW SHELTON

left

A Most Disagreeable Mirror (After J.B.)
archival inkjet print on masonite
40 x 32"

above from left

RIGHTeousWOUND
archival inkjet print on masonite
40 x 32"

nothin scarier than stupid ghosts
archival inkjet print on masonite
40 x 32"
Through the seemingly simple gradient gestures of *Atheist Icons* and *Ladder*, Vladislav Smolkin examines the intricate history of painting’s role as a means of transcendence and connection to the spiritual. Alluding to the sublime and the otherworldly in his *Atheist Icons*, Smolkin applies thin lines of archival marker ink to the twin stretched canvases, gradually transitioning the pigment from dark madder brown to lead white, motioning upward toward the heavens. Likewise, in *Ladder*, Smolkin creates the same uplifting phenomenological effect, but over a series of intimate icon-sized paintings. Smolkin’s work ultimately considers painting’s metaphysical qualities in both skeptical and optimistic fashions.

Smolkin also crafts an elegiac account of an immigrant’s experiences through two poignant and untitled sculptural works. The first *Untitled* is comprised of a well-worn end table and a bronze cast of the inside of a discarded empty wallet. Unassumingly sitting by the entrance of the exhibition, *Untitled’s* table was a donation to Smolkin’s family when they first arrived to the United States over twenty years ago. The second “Untitled” consists of a worn out pair of soccer shoes that have been partially burned out with bronze. These objects collectively reference the artist’s family’s own story of integration into American society as well as the shared difficulties countless immigrants face on their own journeys.
VLADISLAV SMOLKIN

left

Ladder
six paintings, markers on canvas
17 x 11” each

Atheist Icon
markers on canvas
84 x 42½”

above

Untitled
indoor soccer shoes, bronze
Vladislav Smolkin

right

Ladder
Dix paintings, markers on canvas
17 x 11” each

Atheist Icon
markers on canvas
84 x 42½”
*Ideal Cities*, Georgi Ivanov’s series of large format color photographs, depicts the American downtown metropolis as a constructed type. Shot in Baltimore, Chicago, and McLean, VA, Ivanov’s pictures achieve currency as signifiers of centralized government and corporate power at a time of global economic instability. They also capture the uniformity of experience found in American built environments — a direct consequence of urban planning and societal structuring. Although the photographs were taken in different locales, one notices the striking similarities of each picture’s gleaming steel, concrete, and glass architectures; the subject matter simultaneously appears to be anywhere and nowhere. The compositional choices in Ivanov’s urban spaces can result in an awareness of the average citizen’s alienation from the powers represented in the image. Frequently occurring in *Ideal Cities* are motifs of isolation and division such as fences, walls, and other barriers, as if the photograph itself does not create enough of a sense of separation between the viewer and the worlds found in *Ideal Cities*.

Given photography's inherent indexical qualities and the subject matter of *Ideal Cities*, some of Ivanov's pictures could be understood as documentation of what French philosopher Jean Baudrillard calls *simulacra*. In his treatise, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard describes *simulacra* as cultural signs that construct perceived realities, thus fabricating a more desirable illusion. If this theory is applied to pictures such as *Untitled*, which shows a faux coastal highway backdrop from a car dealership, then this image can be interpreted as indexical evidence of *simulacra* enticing consumers with an idealized and unrealistic lifestyle.
GEORGI IVANOVA

Ideal Cities

from left

(Untitled)
archival pigment print
22 x 44"

(Untitled)
archival pigment print
40 x 50"

(Untitled)
archival pigment print
34 x 34"

(Untitled)
archival pigment print
40 x 50"

(Untitled)
archival pigment print
22 x 44"

(Untitled)
archival pigment print
32 x 40"
GEORGI IVANOV

Ideal Cities

left

(Untitled)
archival pigment print
40 x 50"

(Untitled)
archival pigment print
22 x 44"

above

(Untitled)
archival pigment print
32 x 40"
On May 4th, 2012, high-riders descended upon Virginia Commonwealth University’s campus. Gathering in the Park Plaza behind the Anderson Gallery, these customized four-door American sedans, known for oversized chrome wheels and elevated ground clearance, were assembled by Dana Ollestad for his performance Auto Tune. The participating drivers plugged an electromagnetic pickup into their boisterous sound systems and hovered the device over the car. Depending on the vehicle’s shape and audio equipment, the cars produced a variety of pitches, tones, and vibrations; the high-riders’ cacophony lasted for approximately fifteen minutes. While the audio portion of Auto Tune came to a definite conclusion, the artwork continued on as curious spectators approached the drivers after the performance to shake hands, ask questions, and take pictures. For Ollestad, bringing together people who would not usually interact is a recurring aspect of his art. Through Auto Tune, Ollestad has created a social space for positive dialogue between seemingly opposite demographics, high-riders and gallery goers, who would otherwise not have this opportunity to learn about each other.

Inside the Anderson Gallery Ollestad produces a more intimate encounter with Boys, suggesting digital media’s popularized potential to facilitate sincere interpersonal connections. On separate floors, two larger-than-life slow motion videos depict two different men from the chest up, bathed in golden sunlight. Because of the films’ frame speed and romantic lighting, Ollestad transforms awkward instances and stoic gazes into sentimental, eroticized experiences. At first, Boys and Auto Tune may appear at odds. In actuality, the two artworks complement each other by engendering a comprehensive dialogue about how humans build relationships and interact in today’s society — whether in person or through technology.
high-rider cars and their owners, electro-magnetic pick-ups, bass-heavy sound systems, sound resonate environment, audience outdoor space for 4 cars and an audience
DANA OLLESTAD

Boys
two channel projected HD video
two different full wall projections
SCULPTURE + EXTENDED MEDIA
Uncanny in nature, Jon Bobby Benjamin's *Untitled* oscillates between eerie architectural interior and unassuming sculptural object depending on the viewer’s spatial relationship to the piece. During an initial encounter with *Untitled*, one notices its seemingly slapdash assembly; Benjamin uses pine and plywood to build the form’s two boxy units, leaving the artwork’s exterior with a rough and unfinished quality. Once individuals step through *Untitled*’s doorframe, the piece transforms into its other, more sinister half. Until the viewer’s eyes adjust to the interior’s dim lighting, they experience a slight sense of bewilderment as they feel their way through the cramped, musty space. After reaching the far end of the room, viewers are met with a startling revealation. In a smaller chamber at eye level at the back of the room, Benjamin has attached a 1/3 scale replica of the chamber the viewer stands in. This mirroring causes a baffling cerebral effect. In an attempt to unravel Benjamin’s artistic puzzle, viewers experience disorientation on both physical and psychological levels. Heightening *Untitled*’s drama and suspense, Benjamin has placed a cooling unit on top of the room, emitting a droning hum and steadily letting drops of water fall through the ceiling’s cracks, trickling next to the viewer to complete the spine-chilling experience.
Thin Time
wood, cement, door, light, curtain, curtain rod, tar, wood putty, insulation, masonite, glass, refrigeration unit, plexiglass, hardware, foam, wax, paint, fan, water rust
13 x 22 x 7'
JON BOBBY BENJAMIN

Thin Time
wood, cement, door, light, curtain, curtain rod, tar, wood putty, insulation, masonite, glass, refrigeration unit, plexiglass, hardware, foam, wax, paint, fan, water rust
13 x 22 x 7'
Finding a middle ground between the familiar and strange, Ryan Crowley’s sculptures from his thesis exhibition, *In Tub and Wig Out*, reference a range of commonplace objects. Household icons like glass shower doors, bed sheets, and under sink plumbing loom throughout the gallery. The works’ roughly sculpted surface textures accrue like crusty residues — indicating a temporal process of growth, decay, and regeneration. Crowley employs ubiquitous construction materials, such as concrete, plaster, and plywood to fabricate forms which transform the nondescript and mundane components of a home into aesthetic objects. Networks of plaster pipes covered with glues and sawdust twist and turn like an intricate plumbing system in the pretzel-like *You Sum Soap Scum*. Moving thematically from the bathroom to the bedroom, Crowley plastered a pastel colored floral bed sheet into a concave, taco-like shell in *Wing*. Several motifs and patterns that relate to acts of visual and physical filtering, like a colander, a lattice gate, and windows repeat throughout the show, allowing the viewer to experience the works through each other as a visual web. In the end, rather than resisting language and interpretation, Crowley’s sculptures invite wordplay that complicate the show’s visual relationships.
RYAN CROWLEY

IN TUB AND WIG OUT
mixed media
dimensions variable
RYAN CROWLEY

IN TUB AND WIG OUT
mixed media
dimensions variable
If considered individually or in totality, the fiberglass, foam and pigment sculptures that comprise Jessica Kain’s thesis exhibition, *Meanwhile Crushingcircles*, resist easy definitions. Ambiguous but prosaic, they astutely challenge contemporary society’s preoccupation with interpretation and need for concrete answers. Upon entering the space occupied by Kain’s art, many individuals will feel the urge to ground in reality or identify the monolithic blue mass of *Meanwhile* or the canyon-esque peach curves of *Jessica*. When confronted with these elusive works, viewers inevitably find their bearings in the sensuality of the sculptures’ shape, color, surface, and edge. Nevertheless, beholders may yet find themselves at a loss for words. When viewers’ expectations collide with their time spent looking at Kain’s work, the indistinct objects establish an open system of communication that lends itself to the invention of personal, even perhaps conflicting, interpretations. However, Kain does not completely leave the viewer without anything distinguishable. As one moves through the gallery from *Jessica* to *Meanwhile* and finally to the whiteness of *Crushingcircles*, the viewer is steadily gifted with more identifiable forms. While the continuously unfolding shape of Jessica can be understood as wholly vague, one discovers baskets’ imprints on the back of *Meanwhile*, or even a found object, such as the cotton shirt draped in *Crushingcircles*. Consequently, Kain’s enigmatic interplay of signs and physicality can be interpreted as deeply rooted in language, semantics, and the production of meaning.
opposite page

**Crushingcircles**
cellulose dough, pigment, plaster, foam, wood, cotton, epoxy
33 x 28 x 38''

left

**Jessica**
fiber glass reinforced gypsum cement, foam, pigment
54 x 84 x 67''
left

This Way, That Way
fiberglass reinforced gypsum
cement, pigment
80 x 45 x 7"

above

Jessica
fiberglass reinforced gypsum
cement, foam, pigment
54 x 84 x 67"
Emotionally and physically intense, Melanie McLain’s *Warm Compression — Damp Gestures* integrates video, installation, and performance that can elicit a variety of psychological responses. When viewers climb a few stairs and enter McLain’s sterile, white-tile environment through a narrow shower door, they instantly notice the space’s palpable humidity and heat. Once the door is ominously shut behind viewers, they are faced with a choice: to sit in a chair where massage therapists will rub their face, or to join the group of onlookers cramped into the surrounding space. Should the individual choose to receive the massage, the performer’s actions will relate to the bodily movements and gestures projected in video above the shower door, all while spectators watch the entire event unfold.

Social psychology is an important means through which one can understand the relational components of *Warm Compression — Damp Gestures*. As a field, social psychology encompasses the study of people’s emotions, thoughts, and actions and how they are affected by the presence of others. Generating an awareness of one’s own body in relationship to other people and their surrounding environment, McLain’s situation distorts the delicate threshold between comfort and discomfort. *Warm Compression – Damp Gestures* fundamentally pushes the boundaries of an individual’s personal security; what should be a private moment is experienced in a public space.
Warm Compression — Damp gestures
installation / video / performance

ceramic tile, painted mdf, wood, steel, acrylic, glass, wash cloths, spray bottles, heaters, masseuses, video projection, speakers

120 x 168 x 144"
MELANIE McLAIN

Warm Compression — Damp gestures
installation / video / performance
 ceramic tile, painted mdf, wood, steel, acrylic,
 glass, wash cloths, spray bottles, heaters,
 masseuses, video projection, speakers
 120 x 168 x 144"
Jesse Potts’s *Recoil Temple de l’Amore*, a time-based sculptural work that addresses issues ranging from constructs of power to Richmond’s local history, was installed in the carriage house of Scott House. The Scott House is a mansion on the VCU campus and is a classic example of the American architectural Renaissance during the early twentieth century, showcasing the grandeur and affluence of Richmond and the South. Its exterior, as well as many other buildings’ from this period, was designed after Versailles’s *Petite Trianon* (1762 – 68), a French Neo-Classical chateau built exclusively for Marie Antoinette. In *Recoil Temple de l’Amore*, Potts implements a timed winch, perpetually ripping a bundle of vector lines from sheets of drywall. The result is a “drawing” of an effigy of the *Temple de l’Amour*, a garden temple on the grounds of the *Petite Trianon*. Because this mechanism operates on a half-life, the tearing process would theoretically never end.

Paradoxically, *Recoil Temple de l’Amore* creates a historically relevant image of power through a destructive process. The ordered architectural likeness *Recoil Temple de l’Amore* produces acts symbols of prestige, authority, and opulence, just as they did in Ancient Greece and Rome. To a degree, the contradictory nature of the piece and the marks it makes speak to the inconsistencies and unpleasantries underlying the grand histories of Western powers. Rather than continuing these fallacies, *Recoil Temple de l’Amore’s* serves as a reminder that power and representations of it, are carefully constructed phenomena.
Recoil Temple de l’Amore

installation

25 x 40 x 14’
JESSE POTTS

Recoil Temple de l’Amore
installation
25 x 40 x 14’
As spectators meander through the densely filled area of Alina Tenser’s exhibition space, they find no individual wall labels, only a single text displaying the title of the show, *Whiff of Black Ice*. Raising questions about the relationships among individual objects within an exhibition, *Whiff of Black Ice* and its components blur the boundaries between multimedia installation and autonomous artworks. If one attempts to consider the artworks individually, it is challenging to discern where one begins and another ends. For instance, the work *Hug*, which was created using a t-shirt stretched over a wire armature, layered in expandable foam, and wrapped in a caramel-brown plastic tarp, is situated underneath a looming tinted light box. This juxtaposition produces a series of inquiries about the relationship between the two objects, if there is one at all. Because viewers are deprived of descriptive labels and titles, this sense of uncertainty is heightened. Tenser’s artistic and curatorial decisions shrewdly raise questions, rather than answer them.

At a superficial level, Tenser’s video, *Pong With Herself*, appears to differentiate from the three-dimensionality of *Whiff of Black Ice*. Like a painting in motion, enigmatic orange and cream colored shapes seem to float gracefully across a mauve background. What appears to be an animation of digitally rendered shapes is actually a recording of a performance done by Tenser on a green screen with sculptural objects in her studio, resulting in a perplexing slippage between the two and three-dimensional.
ALINA TENSER

left
Pong With Herself
video
1 hour loop

above
Untitled
styrofoam, aqua resin, pigment, headliner fabric, spray paint, pinch brackets

Untitled
pink fabric, clamp lights, wood, sheetrock, casein paint, cable

Hug
t-shirt, armature, expandable foam, plastic tarp, spray paint.
ALINA TENSER

far left

Hug
t-shirt, armature, expandable foam, plastic tarp, spray paint

left + above

Untitled
styrofoam, aqua resin, pigment, headliner fabric, spray paint, pinch brackets
Special thanks to Photographer Terry Brown
Text written by Owen Duffy, current PhD Art History — Historical Studies student
Designed by Brandi Price, Graphic Design MFA 2011

THIS 2012 MASTER OF FINE ARTS CATALOG IS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH
THE SCHOOL OF THE ARTS, VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

vcuarts
arts.vcu.edu