Found and Fabricated

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Found and Fabricated

Molly Davis

Thesis submitted to
the College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Sculpture

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Abstract

*Found and Fabricated*

Molly Davis

My MFA written thesis addresses work completed and shown in a thesis exhibition at West Virginia University as well as significant influences to my studio process. While my stated focus is sculpture, the work presented in the exhibition consisted of three sculptural pieces and two sets of prints. This thesis, along with the supporting exhibition, addresses my investigations into the physical properties and tendencies of materials and how that information can guide and inform a work of art. Physical characteristics of the materials such as color, texture, shape, and weight are emphasized and guide the creation of the works in conjunction with consideration of form, space, history, and cultural associations.
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Introduction

I am intrigued by overlooked everyday objects and materials from the man-made environment around us like discarded floorboards, concrete, or used egg cartons. I’m drawn to their physical characteristics, materiality, history, personal and cultural significance, and intended use. I present these materials in ways that ask the viewer for close examination and consideration of color, shape, and texture; to consider how materials change when grouped in multiples, when placed in a different environment or in relation to other materials; and to notice the tiny cracks, rust, individualities, or other “imperfections” in those materials that are evidence of their history and use.

While I acknowledge the personal and cultural connections the viewer may bring to my work, my interest lies primarily in materials and form. I prefer to let material inform content. Certain contexts might be suggested in the work, but my decisions are primarily guided by the physical qualities of the materials. Additionally, my decisions are influenced by my history. To that end, I prefer to leave my materials and process apparent. I appreciate the natural colors, shapes, and textures of each material and I want those characteristics to remain evident. I make choices of form, construction, and presentation based on those physical properties. This strategy gives the viewer an opportunity to better understand what each material is, to bring to my work their own experiences and connections to those materials, and to consider how their personal context contributes to the work as a whole.

Experimentation and play are important parts of my process as well. I often begin by sitting down with pieces of a material and stacking, twisting, smashing, piling, arranging. Through these processes of play and experimentation, discoveries are made and ideas begin to form. For example, in my work with eggshells (Image 1), I tried combining and arranging eggshells in different ways, but the most interesting result happened when I noticed the way the shells naturally nested into one another when placed in containers. Ultimately, I took advantage of that attribute and used their natural tendency for nesting to guide the work’s formation, embracing the unexpected results of the experimentation process. This also happened in my work with concrete (Image 2). This exploration began by pouring the material into different types of containers. I was often surprised by the results, the smoothness of the molded concrete, its
weight versus the delicate details embedded in the surface, or the varying color, texture, holes, and crumbling due to variables in the mixing and casting processes. In the end, I tried to find ways to exploit these results in both their physical and conceptual properties.

Much of my recent artistic process also revolves largely around the ideas embedded in the title of my thesis, *Found and Fabricated*. I often begin with a “found” material, but then make decisions to “fabricate” additional elements or alter the material by bending, hanging, casting, printing, or propping. These processes provide a different viewpoint of often familiar materials by translating the information and details of their physical characteristics and presenting them in a new way. As such, all of my decisions are confined within the attributes of the materials so they remain recognizable to the viewer and to allow their properties to guide the resulting form.

The work of Tara Donovan, Eva Hesse, and Rachel Whiteread reflect a similar interest in materials and process. These artists allow their materials to be unaltered or evident, and react to materials within the confines of space, process, or technique. These artists share my interest in material and use their properties to guide decisions about process, inform the content or their work, and ask the viewer to observe materials and objects that we encounter in our everyday lives in a new light.
Research

I have chosen to focus my research on artists whose process of working or interest in materials and form is similar to my own. Their work gives me a reference point from which to reflect on my own work and validation of my ideas. I have sought out artists whose work focuses on the properties of materials and who utilize Minimalist and Post-Minimalist strategies.

One such artist is Tara Donovan. Donovan has stated on multiple occasions that her current body of work, which includes sculptures and installations made of large quantities of an object or material, began with a discovery involving a spilled box of toothpicks.\(^1\) Noticing how the toothpicks held together when the box spilled, Donovan was intrigued by the properties of this material and wanted to see what its limitations might be. This discovery led to a 38-inch cube made of approximately 500,000 toothpicks, held together by gravity and friction. This work, *Untitled (Toothpicks)* (1996) and two others made of straight pins and tempered glass (Image 3) are often displayed together, a series of three cubes, sitting directly on the floor in true Minimalist fashion, inviting viewers to walk around them and to inspect more closely the materials and fabrication.

Donovan’s current practice has evolved from the cubes into large installations which she has termed “site-responsive” works.\(^2\) In one of these installations, Donovan creates the appearance of a glowing, hovering, apparition from thousands of white Styrofoam cups (Image 4). The mundane cups are joined according to their dimensions and surface quality, hung from the ceiling, and lit from behind. Donovan takes advantage of the cups’ qualities of weight, texture, flexibility, form, and translucency to create the resulting effect. The cups respond to each other and to the interior space of the installation.

In many of her works, Donovan resorts to the simple strategies of stacking, piling, and amassing a single material to create her installations. Through the process of repetition and formal investigation, Donovan explores the physical characteristics of material and embraces those natural characteristics to dictate how the form will develop.\(^3\) Nora Abrams, Mark G. Falcone Director at MCA Denver, observes in a panel discussion of Donovan’s work:

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\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Ibid.
I think that that is so central to her practice today, which is looking at what the material is capable of, how it can define its own boundaries, and how she just views herself as unleashing it rather than her... That her agency isn't as vital as really finding a way to let the material speak in its own terms.⁴

In her work *Transplanted* (2001), pieces of tar paper are torn and stacked to create a large, room-size formation resembling a rolling landscape of undulating ocean waves (Image 5). This material, made of sturdy paper impregnated with tar to become waterproof, is typically used for construction and roofing. The dark gray pieces of paper, with their ripped edges, stacked in an uneven manner resemble naturally occurring formations of rock or water. By using Minimalistic processes of repetition and stacking and allowing these man-made materials to naturally adhere or align to one another in accordance with their physical properties, Donovan’s formations create a naturalistic appearance. Charles Molesworth notes the naturally occurring limits and shapes, which are utilized, but not imposed, convey an “intensive engagement with the materiality of her sculptures and the impersonal forces at work on them.”⁵

Some of the aspects I feel my work shares with Donovan’s are the connections to Minimalism, the utilization and highlighting of material properties, and the titling strategies which support those ideas. Throughout my work leading up to and included in my thesis exhibition, I have employed various Minimalist strategies. Like Donovan, I have used systematic, repetitive processes as well as repetitive forms. My work often sits on the floor or otherwise engages the space of the viewer in a way that invites the viewer to investigate the work and the materials more closely.

Also, like Donovan, I seek to find a balance of control, between completely letting the material determine the form and making interventions of my own personal and artistic will. The material and its characteristics remain the focus of the work with evidence of the artist’s hand either hidden or entirely invisible. Over the last three years, I have explored the properties of materials and objects such as concrete, steel, eggshells, egg cartons, street signs, rubber, and

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lumber. My interest has been on allowing the physical attributes of the material to guide my decision-making and remain evident for the consideration of the viewer.

I have also employed Donovan’s strategy of titling artworks. Often, her works are untitled with a reference to the material she used in parenthesis, for example… I feel this approach works well in de-emphasizing any cultural or larger meaning imposed by the artist, while emphasizing the material. Tara Donovan explains her title choices in an interview,

I think once we make a work and put it out there, we have very little control over what the viewer experiences. A lot of conceptual artists intentionally inscribe meaning into their work or write it out on a wall text next to it to explain it, but that often feels like a forced message, which has never really been something that I’m interested in. Viewers bring their own associations when they experience a work of art — and then they read a wall label that could contradict their own interpretation.⁶

Like Donovan, I welcome the interpretations of the viewer but am not interested in suggesting a message of my own.⁷

Eva Hesse’s artistic practice focuses on raw, man-made materials with an organic appearance. Hesse’s interest in raw materials, as well as her use of and reaction to Minimalist strategies, are two reasons I’ve chosen to research her work as well.

Art critic Lucy Lippard noticed in Hesse’s work, a deviation from the rigid geometry and emotional detachment of Minimalism. She felt that Hesse was “working both within and outside current geometric tendencies”⁸ and that her work was “motivated by Minimalism, but separate from it.”⁹ One of Hesse’s works that most clearly depicts her use and transformation of Minimalist principles, is Accession IV (1968). Fourth in a series of five sculptures, Accession IV is a 5-sided cube made from perforated galvanized steel panels with short lengths of black rubber tubing inserted into the holes and extending towards the inside of the box (Image 6). Her use of the hard-edged metal cube and repetitive grid pattern of holes are recognizable references to

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⁷ Ibid.
Minimalism, while the soft, flexible rubber tubing brings an opposing tactile sense to the object. Bill Barrette, one of Hesse’s studio assistants, points out that “the inner space created by the extrusion is suggestively organic, the impression intensified by the sharp contrast with the ordered appearance of the box’s exterior.”\textsuperscript{10} By Hesse’s literal insertion of a new sensual, non-traditional material into a common Minimalist shape, she is creating a contradiction of visual language, thereby asking the viewer to question the rationality of the object. Hesse was very interested in the idea of irrationality, opposites, and absurdity, as she succinctly explained in an interview, “it has to do with contradictions and oppositions.”\textsuperscript{11}

Visual contradictions are also evident in Hesse’s work titled \textit{Repetition Nineteen III} (1968). Again, one of a series of like-named works, \textit{Repetition Nineteen III}, is a grouping of bucket-shaped objects arranged directly on the floor (Image 7). Using the Minimalist device of repetition, Hesse made nineteen separate objects, similar in shape and size, around 20 inches tall and 12 inches in diameter, but each varying slightly in height and width, and surface imperfections. Hesse’s previous iterations of these objects were made of latex, another of her recurring, organic materials. For \textit{Repetition Nineteen III}, Hesse chose to use fiberglass, a new material for her at the time. Both the latex and fiberglass gave the objects a natural, skin-like appearance, but the fiberglass in particular, let the light pass through the objects giving them a luminous quality. In addition, the scattered, unordered arrangement of the objects, seems to be in defiance of the systematic repetition used by Minimalist artists at the time. Barrette suggests that Hesse “began to dismantle the minimalist geometry… and the sculpture moves toward a more emotionally suggestive use of geometric form and space.”\textsuperscript{12}

In a way, it seems that Hesse utilized the more organic properties of materials like rubber, fiberglass, cheesecloth, and rope to emphasize a contrast to the Minimalist ideas so popular at that time. Perhaps Hesse did so sardonically by using such materials in combination with strategies like repetition and using simple geometric shapes. In an essay on Hesse’s work titled “Letting It Go as It Will: The Art of Eva Hesse,” Elizabeth Sussman notes that Hesse had an “impulse to manipulate a material but to let it act according to its own dynamic,”\textsuperscript{13} and that she “capitalizes on the unique properties of each medium.”\textsuperscript{14} Like Donovan, Hesse was allowing the

\textsuperscript{12} Barrett, \textit{Eva Hesse: Sculpture: Catalogue Raisonné}, 146.
\textsuperscript{13} Hesse et al., \textit{Eva Hesse} (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2002) 18.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
materials she used to inform her work, but where Donovan is amassing large quantities of an object and manipulating it into a single form, Hesse is manipulating a material within certain confines of Minimalist art as a reaction to those same ideas. I feel my work falls somewhere in-between, not a direct reaction to a historical style or movement, or transforming a material to appear to be something else, but working in ways that emphasizes material through my choices in form and presentation.

Hesse’s legacy stems from her foundation in Minimalism, but Hesse also expanded upon with the addition of non-traditional and organic materials like rope, latex, and fiberglass. In many instances these new materials make explicit references to the human body, which is a notion that is in direct opposition to the “detached objectivity of minimalism.” Many historians and critics assert that Hesse’s work was instrumental, if not pivotal, in a transition away from the then dominant style of Minimalism, and into the realm of Post-Minimalist art. Summarized by Swartz, Post-Minimalism “emphasized tactile sensual surfaces” and “reacted against the sterility of Minimalism, celebrating instead curved, gestural lines and forms.”

I feel my work embraces both elements of Minimalism and Post-Minimalism in both the forms I create and the variety of materials that I use. I owe a debt of gratitude to Eva Hesse for helping pave the way for contemporary artists like myself by expanding the possibilities of materials, and also as a female artist defying the expectations of the 1960s male dominated field of sculpture.

Another more contemporary artist that I have connections to is Rachel Whiteread. In addition to the same tendencies towards a Minimalist and Post-Minimalist aesthetic that I share with Donovan and Hesse, I share with Whiteread an interest in casting, the use of concrete, and the use of everyday objects or materials. On Whiteread, The Tate Museum succinctly states “Whiteread uses industrial materials such as plaster, concrete, resin, rubber, and metal to cast everyday objects and architectural spaces.” Whiteread’s casts present a different perspective on commonplace objects whose details would typically go unnoticed. The casts serve as another means of exemplifying the physical characteristics and details of an object, or material. The

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16 Ibid., 296.
18 Ibid.
textures and forms of the source material are transferred onto a second material, thereby making
those details more evident, and also proposing a comparison or contrast between the original
material and the casting material.

Whiteread’s casts “preserve each surface detail” resulting in sculptures that are
“remarkably faithful to their source molds, but also uncannily foreign in that they represent an
inverse of the original object and require a constant reorientation of perception.”20 Whiteread has
cast such things as the underside of chairs (Image 8), water bottles, and the inside of buildings,
sheds, and rooms. I view her work as a utilization of the properties of both the source material
and of the concrete or resin which she is using to make the cast. The juxtaposition of the two
materials also provides another layer to investigate. Whiteread embraces the details and forms of
the source objects that come through in the casting process, as well as the textures, colors, and
surfaces that result from the casting material. “This acceptance of the literal… is something
Whiteread shares with the Minimalists.”21

Like Hesse, human connection is also evident in Whiteread’s casts.

Borrowing formally from Minimalism and intellectually from conceptual art,”
[Whiteread’s work] “captures and gives materiality to the sometimes unfamiliar spaces of
familiar life (bath, sink, mattress, or chair), transforming the domestic into the public; it
fossilizes everyday objects in the absence of human usage; and it allows those objects to
stand anthropomorphically for human beings themselves.22

While I do not emphasize this kind of human connection in my work, I believe it is present
through the materials themselves and their place in our everyday lives.

Rachel Whiteread’s work Untitled (Stairs) (2001), is a life-size cast taken from the
surface and space above three sets of stairs and landings (Image 9). The work is made from ten
separate plaster casts that are reassembled to depict the entire space. The large, freestanding
structure appears to be solid, but is in fact made from thin castings of the surfaces supported by

20 “Rachel Whiteread - Looking Out - Exhibitions - Luhring Augustine,” accessed November 14, 2022,
21 Karen Wilkin, “Rachel Whiteread at Tate Britain,” The New Criterion, accessed December 5, 2022,
22 “Whiteread, Rachel,” Grove Art Online, accessed October 17, 2022,
fiberglass and wood. The zigzagging of the stairs is exaggerated and made even more disorienting by the fact that the artist chose to flip the whole form on its side so that the structure is actually resting on one of the walls of the original cast space. In a review of Whiteread’s work, critic Karen Wilkin observed that *Untitled (Stairs)* “gains potency not because of its connection to the quotidian, but rather because Whiteread did not simply accept the results of her process. She instead made a decision about placement that disrupts the overtones of the ordinary.”23 Depicting materials and objects as they actually exist in combination with the decisions made by the artist in display, casting material, and orientation, poses questions and gives new interest to an otherwise mundane subject matter. The often overlooked, and sometimes surprising details, textures, forms, and negative spaces of commonplace materials are brought to the attention of the viewer through the artist’s choices.

In examining the connections between my work and the work of other artists, I have focused on similarities in materials, process, and aesthetics. While Donovan, Hesse, and Whiteread, have been the focus of my research, there are other artists whose work I feel is worth noting: Carl Andre, Richard Serra, and Robert Morris. The work of Andre and Serra has always caught my attention, both for their use of industrial materials and their Minimalist approach to forms and space. There is no transformation of materials in Andre and Serra’s work. The materials are to be seen as they are. The simple forms and lack of added color allows the viewer to appreciate those materials for their own qualities. In different ways, both artists address space, by creating environments with forms that interact with the space of the viewer, or with which the viewer must interact. Many of Andre’s works are made of simple materials, like concrete blocks or metal tiles, arranged directly on the floor of the gallery, causing the viewer to interact with the work by walking around or bending over (Image 10). Serra’s works on the other hand invite the viewer to interact by walking through the spaces he has created, looking up and around (Image 11).

My interest in materials includes an appreciation for the nostalgia, history and warmth of a material, but also an appreciation for its purely formal qualities of texture, form, and color. It is my interest in these properties that compels me to leave these materials as they are, and to present them in a way that makes those properties evident to the viewer as well.

23 Wilkin, “Rachel Whiteread at Tate Britain,” The New Criterion.
It is this goal that drives my use of Minimalist strategies like grids, systems, and repetition; placing work directly on the floor; works that interact with the space of the viewer; and the use of simple shapes and forms. Leaving out irrelevant information and removing other distractions allow the materials to be the focus of my work. Lucy Lippard touches on this idea in the preface to her book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, in which she discusses the transformations happening in art at the time, from the role of Minimalism to the foundations of Conceptualism. “Criticism itself tends to clog up these direct reactive processes with irrelevant information, while the terseness and the isolation of much of the art reproduced here forces mental jumps; these in turn facilitate a heightened alertness to sensorial or visual phenomena.”

Material exploration and experimentation through various means has comprised the bulk of my personal research for this thesis. I typically begin my investigations with an interest in certain attributes of a material such as its color, texture, or form. At times, personal history and nostalgia also influence my choice to use a material. From there, I experiment through casting, constructing, playing, or printing. When I get a result that I find aesthetically and/or conceptually interesting and that also exploits the unique properties of the material, I make decisions on how best to present my findings to an audience through a sculpture, installation, or prints. Materials I have explored include basic construction materials like concrete, steel, wood, and rubber, as well as found materials and objects like street signs, eggshells, egg cartons, and discarded floorboards.

For example, I chose to work with concrete for its color, texture, and casting ability. I started by pouring cement mix in different types of molds, or “forms.” I first cast concrete in wood forms that I built in a variety of sizes. I found the wood grain and texture that transferred from the form to the concrete, in combination with the rough, gray texture of the concrete to be visually interesting. These results led to more experimentation, this time intentionally lining the forms with different materials to try to deliberately create more changes in the surface of the concrete. Padded mailing envelopes left a regular pattern of indented half-spheres on the surface, while street signs left the raised outline of letters, a smooth shiny surface, and a trace of the hexagonal pattern of the reflective film (Image 2). These discoveries led me to try casting concrete in all types of containers, including

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packaging from food and household goods including plastic soda bottles, snack bags, steel cans, milk jugs, and juice cartons. Like Whiteread’s sculptures, these recognizable objects appeared distorted by the casting of the interior spaces which presents themselves differently from the exterior. The physical qualities of the concrete also play a role in this distortion through its uneven gray color, small circular holes made from air bubbles, and the rough, crumbling edges where the aggregate is sometimes visible. Despite its association with industrial uses, concrete has many natural, organic qualities. These qualities in contrast to the mass-produced man-made materials of the forms also created an interesting paradox.

I also experimented with different types of ready-made cement mixes, including a glass fiber reinforced concrete mix. The glass fibers replaced the traditional stone aggregate to create a thinner, lighter concrete. Thereby testing the limits of the material and defying the expectations of concrete to be heavy and industrial. This glass fiber reinforced concrete was cast in wood forms that could be stacked or hung on a wall, challenging expectations of concrete display. The idea of defying expectations can also be found in the shiny surface that sometimes results in cast concrete pieces. Concrete is generally assumed to be rough, but when cast in a smooth and shiny mold, concrete can assume those qualities. I stipulate “can” because I have learned that the type of concrete mix, aggregate, and amount of water can affect the outcome. These different outcomes are part of the discovery and surprise inherent in the casting process and motivates me to continue working with the material.

Aside from concrete, I also use found objects as materials in my work. Some of the found objects I have experimented with include eggshells, egg cartons, and old floorboards. These materials, being recognizable objects, carry with them different associations than the more basic construction materials. Concrete, steel, and wood have associations through their use in constructing the built environment in our everyday lives. But some recognizable objects, like egg cartons, will have more direct and specific associations for some viewers, as they do with me. I do not ignore these qualities in my materials, and they do influence my decision making, but are secondary to the physical qualities of the material.

_Eggshell Formations 1 and 2_ (Image 1) began as I cleaned, dried, and collected the shells of many standard, white, grocery-store-bought chicken eggs over the course of about a year. Eventually, I had enough eggshells to begin stacking, arranging, piling, sorting; all the while noticing the different physical qualities of the shells. Ultimately, I decided to take
advantage of the broken shells’ tendency to nest into one another. This allowed me to stack the shells vertically, while leaving evident their jagged, uneven edges, and also mimicking their organic nature in the bulbous, wavering towers that resulted. By pairing the eggshell structures with cast concrete and steel stands, I could control the stacks through molds made specifically for each formation (Image 1). The material juxtaposition provided a contrast between the whiteness and fragility of the eggshells, and the dark gray, and hardness of the concrete and steel. While being aware of the suggestiveness and symbolism of eggs, my motivation in exploration and presentation was guided by my interest in their physical attributes.

Similar associations may be made in my work with egg cartons. But again, I am most interested in the design, material, and the visual repetition I see in the egg cartons. As I made casts of the cartons in concrete, I became interested in the smooth texture of the Styrofoam cartons that leaves a shiny surface on the concrete. The slight variations in the design of the cartons are another interesting aspect I have noticed. All properties that only became visible to me through casting, and therefore have become a focus of the resulting sculptures, installations, and prints.

Another found material that led to surprising results, came from a large pile of discarded floorboards that had been removed from a stage in an old school building. Years ago, the stage had been repurposed into office space and the wood floor had been covered with carpet. The carpet was glued to the boards, which held them together after they were removed. When I found them, the boards were laying in curving sections in a dumpster, upside-down with the flooring nails sticking outward. It was the combined elements of the curved panels and protruding nails which caught my attention. With the boards, I created three large cylinder sculptures, with the carpet holding the boards together on the insides and the nails protruding from the outside (Image 12). In order to allow the material to inform the content, I kept the forms simple and utilized repetition to emphasize the details of the boards and the volume and space that was created with the planar material. The history of the material, and the contrast between the inside and outside surfaces of the cylinders added interest and suggested other possible associations. I see similarities in this piece and Eva Hesse’s *Repetition Nineteen* series (Image 5). Both in the use of Minimalist principles of
repetition, placement on the floor, and simple geometric shapes, and also in the way that each unit is unique and imperfect and highlights the properties of the material.

Most recently, I have been experimenting with found rolls of construction-grade synthetic rubber. The black rubber is 18 inches wide and about 1/16 inch thick and typically used as flashing for masonry. The smooth material is both flexible and heavy. Material exploration began by playing with the material to discover its attributes and test the limits of those qualities. I decided the way that the material hangs and the resulting curves and friction due to its weight were features I could exploit. In one solution, I mounted two 18-inch wood 4x4s perpendicular to the wall from which to hang the rubber. I repeatedly draped the rubber back and forth over the two wood brackets, creating hanging loops and sagging drapes (Image 13). The black rubber references Tara Donovan’s work with tar paper (Image 3) in its color and in the way the material is allowed to hang naturally, with friction and weight holding it together. The overall form is reminiscent of Robert Morris’ felt sculptures. In his piece *Fountain* (1971), he draped seven strips of thick industrial felt over pegs mounted in the wall (Image 14). The black strips hung heavily and ended in stacked layers resting on the floor. While the intent of Morris’ work may not have been to highlight the properties of the material, the process involved in the creation of the work is reliant on those properties and the resulting form dependent on them. Morris’ work was part of an attempt to dematerialize the art object in reaction to the artistic precedents of the time.25 I am able to build upon those advances made by artists such as Morris to create work that reference those forms and strategies but are primarily a reaction to the material itself.

Printmaking has also become a part of my exploration of materials. I see it as a different way to look at a material and essentially another means of discovery. Similar to casting, details and information emerge through printmaking that are not visible in the physical manipulation of materials. Printmaking also provides an often faster and more efficient means of experimentation allowing for higher volume of output. Materials used as printed matrices include street signs, egg cartons, wood, and rubber; the same materials used to make sculptures (Image 15). Minute surface details like scratches, blemishes, lettering, and textures are transferred from the material to the paper via pressure and ink. These prints are typically done in black ink so as not to detract from the characteristics of the material with extraneous information that would come from

adding color. Many of the sculptors I have researched also make prints and I feel the connections are clear. As a sculptor I am interested in the physicality of objects, materials, and construction which makes the physicality of printmaking (through the use of tools, materials, pressure, and surface) an attractive process.
Exhibition

As a culmination of my research conducted during my time studying sculpture in the graduate program at West Virginia University, I presented a body of work in my Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition, held in the Laura Mesaros Gallery in the Canady Creative Arts Center, which was on display from March 27 to March 30, 2023.

Upon entering the gallery, visitors are greeted in the vestibule by the title of the show, a printed artist statement, a small wall sculpture and a print (Image 16). The title of the exhibition, *Found and Fabricated*, is printed in black and gray, san serif, lettering in the center of the wall. To the left of the title is a small sculptural piece exhibiting the black rubber material that is featured in a large wall installation in the main hall of the gallery. To the right of the title, is a framed print, an extension of the five other similar prints hanging in the gallery. These two works serve as a preview to the body of work found in the gallery and as an introduction to the ideas underlying the thesis of the exhibition.

The title, *Found and Fabricated*, was chosen not only for its alliterative appeal, but for its support of the importance of material exploration throughout my work. The word “found” refers to the source of many of my materials. Often, I use found materials because of my interest in their visual qualities, versatility in their physical attributes, interest in their individual history, or the cultural and personal connections associated with the material. In some cases, the word “found” could be interchangeable with the word “appropriated,” as some of my materials are being sourced and recontextualized from non-art industries such as construction and food production.

The word “fabricated” refers to the constructed elements that are often combined with the “found” elements in my work. These fabricated parts serve to enhance the qualities of the found material in a variety of ways, while also drawing attention to the material qualities of those fabricated elements as well. I take more control over these elements and use their properties to contrast or support the qualities of the found materials. The different ways in which the “found” and “fabricated” elements work together in support of my thesis will be discussed further in relation to the individual works in the exhibition.
As visitors leave the space of the vestibule and enter the gallery, nearly all the works are visible at once. In the entryway to the gallery, on the wall to the right, in lieu of individual artwork labels, guests will find a map of the gallery space (Image 17). The map outlines the gallery space with the layout of the work, which is labeled with numbers that correspond to a list of materials for each work. Since most of the works are more like installations responding to the space of the gallery, I did not want to interrupt the wall space with individual labels. On the map, the works are referred to by a list of their materials, de-emphasizing the importance of artist-imposed titles and emphasizing the importance of the materials that make up the work. I feel this approach also aligns with my view that the show is a connected body of work.

When viewing the gallery, it is my intention to have no one piece of work stand out above the rest. On the back wall of the gallery, directly across from the entrance, is a large installation. Activating the entire space of the approximately 22-foot-wide and 15-foot-high wall, is a series of seven wood posts supporting lengths of 18-inch-wide black rubber (Image 18). The square, wood 4x4s are mounted perpendicular to the wall with hidden hardware, protruding 18 inches outward into the room. Hanging and draped over the posts are three, 1/16 of an inch thick and 18-inch-wide strips of black synthetic rubber, ranging in length from 36 to 50 feet long. The rubber and posts are arranged in ways that form loops and hanging droops in a variety of sizes that create a three-dimensional drawing. Additionally, the ends of the lengths of rubber are not readily visible as they are all tucked under to form loops at the ends of each section, creating a visually seamless single piece of rubber (Image 18 detail).

The emphasis of this work is the material. The properties of the black rubber are exploited and dictate the outcome of the shape and forms created. The color, weight, flexibility, and texture are highlighted by contrast with the physical properties of the wood and the wall. The warm red tone of the wood stands out against the dull blackness of the rubber, and the square cut of the posts contrast with the flexible, curving rubber. Conversely, an interesting similarity between the materials is the way that the flowing grain of the wood is similar to the repeating curves of the rubber. Additionally, the weight and texture of the rubber allows it to hang in such long and smooth curves and to remain in place on the posts by friction alone.

Prior to this large installation using these materials, I had made a few smaller individual wall sculptures (Image 13). While viable on their own as individual works, these smaller pieces also served as a series of experiments, which ultimately led to the large wall installation in my
thesis exhibition. Play and experimentation is an important part of my process, similar to many of the artists I have researched. It allows me to test the abilities of the materials and discover new possibilities. Even this most recent installation using the wood and rubber taught me new things about the materials which will lead to future variations in sculptures and installations.

Overall, the installation has a commanding presence in the room, due to the large space that it occupies and the high contrast of the black rubber against the white walls. Viewers’ eyes are led up, over, across the wall, and finally down to the floor where the rubber rests naturally flat and in folds. By leaving the work untitled, I am allowing the material to speak for itself. While associations can be made in relation to the industrial looking black material and in the hanging and curving of the lines that result, the unfamiliar material ultimately becomes the focus of this installation.

With this same material, I created a series of prints. From the gallery entrance, these prints are installed on the wall to the right. These prints are the first works that the viewer physically encounters when walking through the space. With the help of the gallery map, and the wall installation in front of them, guests can discover the material connection between the prints and sculpture, the black construction rubber. Generously spaced along the 25-foot section of wall, are five prints on white paper, in square black frames (Image 19). The image size of each is approximately 8 inches square with ample space surrounding each image. The prints were made by folding, inking, and printing a square of the synthetic black rubber. The square orientation of the paper and frames reflects the original square piece of material before it was folded. Much experimentation was needed to find the right amount of pressure and ink to use on the rubber matrix to get the desired results. As I have learned in my prior experience with printing from non-traditional materials (typically materials I have used in sculptures), a lot of trial and error is necessary, and results are often unpredictable and sometimes unreplicable. Therefore, the majority of my prints are monoprints, or one of a kind.

Interesting connections exist between my sculptures and prints. I relate the physicality of the printing process to the physicality in creating three-dimensional sculpture. I also see trial and error as a means of play and experimentation. But most importantly, I feel printing gives me a different perspective of the same materials that I am using in my sculpture. Textures and other physical properties become visible in a print that are not otherwise noticeable. And when I make
multiple prints of the same material, little differences come to light, even in materials we know to be man-made and mass-produced, and assumed to be identical.

To make these prints, a square of the rubber is folded to create different layers, or depths, of the print matrix. These surface changes hold black ink differently, which print a variation of black and gray (Image 19 detail). The highest layers of the matrix create a crisp black shape, while the lower layers print a lighter shade of gray. Within those two colors though, the fine texture of the rubber is visible, and in some cases slight imperfections and divots leave white marks. The different sections of black and gray in the prints are divided by a white line, a gap created by the different depths in the matrix, where the paper did not touch the ink. The resulting images are groupings of simple geometric forms created by the varying shades of black and the white lines. The lack of added color and extraneous information allows the viewer to focus on the forms and textures created by the material. The display of a series of similar prints depicting different folds, alludes to how the prints were made.

Similar to the works utilizing the synthetic rubber, there are two works which I included in the exhibition that use Styrofoam egg cartons. On the floor, in the center of the gallery, is a large grouping of over 120 cast concrete egg cartons (Image 20). Occupying a space of approximately 40 square feet, the cartons are arranged in four long rows and are staggered on either end of a skewed rectangle. The casts are displayed with the top of the cartons down and the large, rounded, egg-shaped bumps pointing up. Not only does this choice create a repeated pattern of rows of bumps, but it also allows the viewer to notice the differences in the designs of the cartons used for the casting. At first glance, one might assume that all the cartons are the same, however, upon closer inspection small differences are noticed. Several different brands of egg cartons were used for casting and each had variations in their design. For example, some cartons have bumps that are more square than round, some have small circles in the bottoms of the egg wells, and some have supports to help give the structure to the cartons. Additionally, some cartons left a shiny surface on the concrete and others left wrinkles. The Minimalist strategy of repetition is what makes these small variations evident. By placing these different cartons in rows next to one another, their individual differences are highlighted against those around them.

While the majority of the egg cartons are the color of the gray concrete, a few have pigment added to them. The pastel colors of the original egg cartons were a characteristic of the
found material I wanted to include. To do so, I selected concrete pigments that corresponded with those colors, and added small amounts to the cement mix. The resulting color is subtle and suggestive of the original light pastel colors, while also allowing the distinguishable characteristics of the concrete to remain visible. It was important to me that the properties of both materials, the Styrofoam and the concrete, be evident. I feel the inclusion of the colored egg cartons also serve as an initial clue to the viewer that not all egg cartons are the same and subtle differences may be noticed through close examination.

Like all my work, the concrete egg carton castings are the result of many previous experiments and sculptures. Casting in concrete was one of the first new processes I tried when I began graduate school and continued to do throughout. Early on, I experimented with casting various types of concrete mixes in a range of found and constructed molds that produced different textures (Image 2). I quickly discovered how versatile the material is, and its aptitude for picking up the details and surfaces of the molds. Shiny glass or plastic molds will produce concrete with a shiny surface. Concrete that is poured into a wood mold will exhibit the grain of the wood. In some of my experiments, I used street signs to line the molds, and the concrete picked up the lettering and patterns of the reflective material. As mentioned before, I experimented with making my own concrete mix using glass fibers in place of the traditional aggregate in order to make thinner and lighter concrete. This mix resulted in a softer, duller surface texture. I also poured concrete into found containers, mostly household goods packaging (bottles, jars, boxes, bags), which is when I first cast concrete in an egg carton. Drawn to the interesting form and texture of the concrete carton, and also its physical resemblance to another material I was working with, bumpy yellow detectable warning surfaces used on sidewalks, I decided to make more. To cast the cartons, I sealed shut Styrofoam egg cartons, cut two holes in the top in which to pour the wet concrete, then once the concrete was set, peeled away the Styrofoam to reveal the cast inside. I repeated this process each time with a new egg carton since the mold is destroyed after each casting.

As I started to accumulate enough casts to make a small formation, I experimented with color and presentation. I did not want to paint the cartons or change them so much that they were no longer recognizable as concrete, which led me to use certain concrete pigments. I also considered several different ways to display or arrange the cartons, but ultimately settled on arranging them on the floor. For me, this arrangement created another connection with the
detectable warning surfaces that are also on the ground, and that are meant to be walked on (which is in contradiction to something you would want to do with actual egg cartons).

Being placed in the center of the gallery, the formation of concrete egg cartons created an obstacle to walk around but also guided viewers in a circle around the room. Visible together with this piece, are a series of prints also made from Styrofoam egg cartons (Image 21). Coincidentally, while both works exhibit the characteristics and properties of the Styrofoam egg cartons, the cartons are not physically present in either. Like in the concrete casts, the prints pick up on details of the cartons that are otherwise invisible. Different from the concrete casts, however, the prints all come from the same type of Styrofoam egg cartons. Due to the material and how it flexes and breaks, like the previously mentioned rubber monotype prints, each egg carton print is unique.

Again, trial and error was necessary to obtain the desired results for these prints. I printed parts of the cartons and the whole carton, but in the end I appreciated the level of abstraction which resulted from printing only the half of the cartons that hold the eggs. Once this decision was made, I cut apart and flattened that half of the cartons, which made the material wrinkle and crack in different and unique ways. Black ink was rolled onto the surface of the inner side with a brayer, so that only the high points of the lumpy and uneven surface were covered. While printing, a Masonite board was placed on top of the paper to ensure that only the highest surfaces of the printed matrix come into contact with it. This resulted in a balance of white and black in the image and allowed the “design” of the crushed egg carton to stand out. The process of printing in a press further flattened the cartons, changing any subsequent prints with the same carton.

Different amounts of pressure and ink had very different results. More ink created a higher contrast image with bold shapes while less ink resulted in an image with fine details like visible cracks and wrinkles. In the end, the prints in the show were created by finding a balance between bold shapes and find detail. Through repetition of display, the variations within the prints become evident. Eighteen prints are displayed on the wall in a vertical arrangement of 6 rows of 3 prints. Unframed and hanging freely, the prints are mounted to 1-inch strips of steel with small rare earth magnets. The arrangement is suggestive of the 3 x 6 grid in the 18-pack egg cartons that were used to make the prints. While the general shape and dimension of the carton image is the same throughout, the process of flattening the cartons created cracks, wrinkles, and
distorted the pattern of the carton design. The result is a series of abstract, black and white images, with repeating shapes, and tiny cracks and variations. The resulting images may not be immediately recognizable as egg cartons, but with the help of the nearby concrete floor piece in the exhibition, can be discovered as such.

The last work in the show is one that truly epitomizes my interest in materials and form and can be seen as the culmination of my research and experimentation on material-guided art making. On the left side of the gallery is a sculpture featuring three large wood boards that stands nearly 11 feet tall and jutting out from the wall over 7 feet towards the middle of the gallery (Image 22). The three 11-inch wide and 13-foot-long boards were found discarded from the renovation of an old school building. Initially, I was drawn to the sheer size and length of the boards. Aside from emphasizing the length, I also wanted to create an artwork that would highlight the individuality of the boards and the small physical traces of their history. Being boards taken from an old building, they exhibit clues of their previous use. The boards, apparently used as floor joists to support a stage floor, have notches cut from the corner of one end, multiple nail holes along one edge, and still retain branding from their manufacture. Opposite the notched end, each board is roughly cut and uneven, suggesting their hasty removal and that that the boards were at one time even longer.

To emphasize their length, I wanted to present the boards in a vertical orientation. This placement also contrasts their prior use as floor joists, something unseen, horizontal, and below our feet. In order to support these large heavy boards, I created a strong stable steel base. Steel, a familiar material to me, provides the strength needed to support these beams while also presenting an interesting visual contrast. The warm color and rough texture of the wood is emphasized by comparison to the dark, smooth steel. Each board is supported by two large steel triangles made from 3-inch-wide and 3/16-inch-thick strips of flat steel (Image 22 detail). Thirteen feet of steel was bent into right triangles with rounded corners at a height of 4.5 feet, that supports the boards vertically at a nearly 60-degree angle. The three boards with their support triangles are connected by three cross bars, made from the same steel and attached by bolts across the back of the structure. This fabricated element gives stability to the group of boards as well as creates a visually interesting support structure that reflects the straightness and rigidity of the wood boards.
From the front, the viewer can see small steel brackets which support the wood and help secure the boards to the steel tringles. Made from thinner, 1-inch-wide steel, and dull silver in color, the brackets wrap around the front edges of the board to gently hold them in place while not visually detracting attention from the wood. Once again, through repetition, the individual details of each board become apparent, and emphasis is placed on their length by directional placement. The fabricated element of the steel support structure is necessary to accomplish the feat of raising the boards into the air, but also complements and emphasizes the characteristics of the found wood boards. An additional element, which adds physical support, but also gives the boards place within the space, is a steel ledge on which the top ends of the boards rest. The steel ledge, made of the same steel as the triangles, provides a connection point between the boards and the wall, giving visual and literal stability, and creating a space of interest and tension below the boards. Viewers may feel uncertain about walking through the 4-foot-wide space underneath the towering, leaning boards, but the ledge provides some assurance that it is a safe space.

Many of my sculptures and installations interact with the space of the viewer and often, as with the wood boards, the viewer is enticed to move around and under the piece to discover additional details and experience its physical presence from a different perspective. It is often the physicality of a material that interests me, and I feel that interest is reflected in the physicality of the resulting sculptures and installations. Every step of the process is a very physical act, from the finding and acquiring of materials, to the experimenting, fabricating, and constructing, and finally to the installing and interacting. It is the physical qualities of the materials, like color, texture, weight, and form and the relationship of my body to them, that intrigues me. It therefore makes sense that those same elements become integral to the completed artworks.
Conclusion

My research over the course of my time in graduate school has helped me narrow the focus of my work. Materials and form have become the center around which my practice revolves. Mine was a journey of paring down and stripping away the extraneous information and distractions in my work. At times I felt unsure about this choice to focus on materials, but research into other artists with similar interests gave validation to my ideas, and my own experimentation and material research instilled confidence in my instincts and abilities.

The work of such artists as Eve Hesse and Robert Morris, opened new possibilities of materials available to artists. Latex, fiberglass, string, and felt were utilized for their characteristics and became the focus of the works. The materials were allowed to bend, hang, and pile according to their own properties of weight and flexibility. And their colors and textures were not disguised or covered with paint, but appreciated for their luminosity, irregularity, and tactility.

Tara Donovan often uses found or recognizable objects in the same way other artists might use wood or clay. Creating large sculptures and installations, Donovan uses the properties of objects like Styrofoam cups and toothpicks to guide the construction and formation of her works: toothpicks grab on to one another by the texture of their surface and flexible Styrofoam cups bend into ovals and glow from their translucent material. Donovan lets the materials make many of the decisions, while the evidence of artistic intervention is often minimal.

Likewise, Richard Serra and Carl Andre also allow their chosen materials to remain evident. They use their materials to create spaces and environments that activate the viewer’s perception of their physical self. Serra’s large steel structures are made to be walked through and around, with the viewer being guided along by the natural textures and surfaces of the material and by the spaces created by the curving, vertical walls. Carl Andre also created spaces and environments for viewers to navigate around. Often, Andre’s undisguised materials were laid out on the floor in a grid, making the viewer wonder if they could, or imagine what it would be like, to walk across or through the formations.

Like these sculptors, my interest in materials and form has also crossed over into printmaking. The physicality of the printmaking process aligns well with the physicality of
making sculpture. A process involving three-dimensional materials and surfaces, but with a two-
dimensional result, printmaking provides a different method of experimenting, playing, and
understanding materials. There is an element of surprise and unpredictability in the process. New
details and information are discovered as materials are allowed to respond according to their
properties to the pressure of the press, the ink, and the paper.

I take inspiration, motivation, and validation from these artists and share their interests in
materials, form, and space. I exploit the properties and characteristics of materials and use those
features to guide the formation of my sculptures, installations, and prints. The materials I use are
encouraged to behave according to their physical abilities and left evident and undisguised so
that viewers can appreciate them for what they are. My materials are taken out of their traditional
context, which encourages the viewer to notice features and details that might otherwise be
overlooked. The spaces and forms that result from my material-guided approach draw viewers in
by interacting with the space of the viewer by covering the floor, protruding out from the wall, or
balancing overhead.

My own desire to physically interact with and manipulate these materials is what has
motivated my research. I find excitement in the discoveries I make as I experiment and play with
a new material. I am often drawn to a material or object by its color, texture, size, or weight, but
also by its familiarity or history. Therefore, those same properties, both physical and abstract,
guide my decision making as I build, arrange, construct, fabricate, and print.
Image 1 (and details):

*Eggshell Formations 1 and 2*, 2021, eggshells, concrete, and steel, approx. 14 x 14 x 40 in. each.
Image 2:
Various experiment with concrete textures.
Image 3:

Left to right:
Tara Donovan, *Untitled (Pins)*, 2004, straight pins, 97 x 97 x 97cm.
Tara Donovan, *Untitled (Toothpicks)*, 2004, wood toothpicks, 97 x 97 x 97cm.
Tara Donovan, *Untitled (Glass)*, 2004, Tempered glass, 97 x 97 x 97cm.

Photo Credit: San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art.
Image 4:

Image 5:

Image 5 (detail):

Detail photo credit: https://www.mcasd.org/artworks/transplanted-detail
Image 6:

Eva Hesse, *Repetition Nineteen III*, 1968. Fiberglass and polyester resin, nineteen units, Each 19 to 20 1/4" (48 to 51 cm) x 11 to 12 3/4" (27.8 to 32.2 cm) in diameter. Gift of Charles and Anita Blatt.

https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81930
Image 8:
Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled (One Hundred Spaces) (Detail)*, 1995.
Photo © Rachel Whiteread
Image 9:

Photo © Rachel Whiteread
https://www.tate.org.uk/kids/explore/who-is/who-rachel-whiteread
Image 10:
Image 11:


https://www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-Serra
Image 12 (and detail):

*Untitled (Floorbords)*, 2021, found floorboards with nails and carpet, steel, installation dimensions variable (36" diameter each).
Image 13 (and detail):

*Untitled (Rubber)*, 2022, synthetic rubber, wood, and steel, 65 x 36 x 18in.
Image 14:

Robert Morris, *Fountain*, 1971, seven felt strips, 96 x 93.5 x 10.7 in.

Photo credit: [https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6075467](https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6075467)
Image 15:
Various prints from street signs and egg cartons, 2021-22.
Image 16:
Vestibule and signage, *Found and Fabricated*, 2023, rubber, wood, and framed print.
Image 17:
Image 18 and detail:
Wall installation, *Found and Fabricated*, 2023, synthetic rubber and wood.
Image 19 and detail:
Relief print series, *Found and Fabricated*, 2023, synthetic rubber, ink, and paper.
Image 20 and detail:
Image 21 and detail:
Relief print series, *Found and Fabricated*, 2023, Styrofoam egg cartons, ink, and paper.
Image 22 and detail:

Bibliography


Curriculum Vitae

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Education

2020-2023 MFA Candidate, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV
(Expected graduation May 2023)

2017-2019 Non-Degree Student, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV (Studio courses)

2009-2010 Visual Arts PK-Adult Teaching Certification, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV

1996-2000 BFA, graphic design, cum laude, University Honors Scholar, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV

Professional Experience

2022-2023 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Instructor of Record, ART 122 Visual Foundations 2, School of Art and Design, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV – Duties include instructing a 3D visual foundations course in which students learn to use the basic elements for creating 3-dimensional artwork

2022-2023 Graduate Assistantship, Mesaros Galleries Assistant, School of Art and Design, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV – Duties include assisting with the installation of exhibitions in the Mesaros Galleries: unpacking and packing
artwork; placement, hanging, installation, and lighting of artwork; creating and installing signage and labels; wall patching, painting, and general cleaning

2002-2022 Graduate Assistantship, Art Museum of West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV – Duties included creating educational content for online outreach, lesson and tour planning, designing print materials, and gallery attendant

2011-2015 Visual Arts Teacher, Monongalia County Schools, Morgantown, WV


Exhibitions


2022 Juried Student Exhibition (Juror’s Choice Award), Laura Mesaros Gallery, Canady Creative Arts Center, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV

2022 WVU Emerging Printmakers, Gallery 287, Morgantown, WV

2022 51st Annual Juried Arts Exhibition, Valley Arts Center, Chagrin Falls, OH

2022 Emerging Printmakers, Stopwatch Gallery, Greensburg, PA

2022 _alahchian [ah-LATCH-en] (Juror’s Choice Award), Three Rivers Arts Festival Juried Visual Arts Exhibition, Pittsburgh, PA

2022 Trifecta, Love Hope Center for the Arts, Fayetteville, WV

2022 Smorgasbord Volume 3, Artists Image Resource, Pittsburgh, PA

2022 35th Annual McNeese National Works on Paper Exhibition, Shearman Fine Arts Grand Gallery, McNeese State University, Lake Charles, LA

2022 Being Seen (Honorable Mention), TAG: The Artists Gallery, Frederick, MD.

2021 Juried Student Exhibition (Judy Raese Arts Award), Laura Mesaros Gallery, Canady Creative Arts Center, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV
2021  *West Virginia Juried Exhibition 2021*, Culture Center, State Capitol Complex, Charleston, WV

2021  *Unconventional*, Love Hope Center for the Arts, Fayetteville, WV

2020  *Juried Student Exhibition* (Art & Design Director’s Award), Laura Mesaros Gallery, Canady Creative Arts Center, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV

2019  *Just What the Doctor Ordered*, curated by Arts Monongahela, Mon Health Medical Center, Morgantown, WV

2009  *What Trash?* (2nd Place Viewer’s Choice Award), Our Studio, Morgantown, WV

2000  Group BFA Exhibition, Paul Mesaros Gallery, Creative Arts Center, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV