THESIS

HABITATION: ANTHROPOCENTRIC NOTIONS OF HOME

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ABSTRACT

HABITATION: ANTHROPOCENTRIC NOTIONS OF HOME

One of the most essential human conditions is to seek and establish a home. Conceptualization of home is generated by the material and psychological structures impacted by our shared cultural ideals. The vernacular of the home extends beyond mere shelter and creates context for the discourse of identity. Our external selves are socially constructed and identified by our connection to an abode, a region, or an even larger territory....home. Concurrently, we have a need for a private realm, a space to conceal the personal and vulnerable parts of our existence. In the bodies of work, *I reside, Armament, and Comforter*, I have produced a system of structures that imply the fragility and strength of the fabric of the domicile. These objects exemplify an innate desire for the sanctuary, protection and comfort of the intimate interior and simultaneously reveal that there is imperfection and impermanence in the concept of the domestic.

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HABITATION: ANTHROPOCENTRIC NOTIONS OF HOME

Introduction

The home is the psychological origin by which humans navigate the world. We identify ourselves by where we live and where we are from, and in turn we judge others by these same conditions. The construction of home is integrated with personal identity, social vulnerability, and the temporal nature of human survival. The conceptual state of home is what I focus on in my current artwork. Through the bodies of work, *I reside*, *Armament*, and *Untitled*, the goal is to capture the essence of the impermanent and imperfect collective conceptions of the domestic, while considering the beauty and resilience that emerges from the necessity for individual refuge. Gaston Bachelard posits that

"...our adult life is so dispossessed of the essential benefits, its anthropocosmic ties have become so slack, that we do not feel that first attachment to the universe of the house. There is a dearth of abstract, 'world conscious' philosophers who discover a universe by means of the dialectical game of the I and non-I. In fact, they know the universe before they know the house, the far horizon before the resting-place; whereas the real beginnings of images, if we study them phenomenologically, will give concrete evidence of the values of inhabited space, of the non-I that protects the I." ¹

There are places that have been archetypally cast from being the designated setting for copious volumes of popular cultural storytelling. New York happens to be one of these places, and it happens to be where I was born. During the awkward early adolescent years of my life, I left my home in New York, and learned how others, not

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Spaces*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 4-5.

from there, identified people from the region in which my family resided for generations. Mostly, it was wrong. Even though the terrible attempts to imitate the accent never get old, I have since been reluctant to say I am from Long Island for fear of the uncomfortable projections of others. But this was my home. Home, I learned at that time, is an ambiguous thing. Home can be socially constructed and often mythical, but it can also be physical, comforting, and individual. Home is both historical and contemporary, and sometimes non-existent. The anthropocentric abode fluctuates, but a need for some semblance of shelter is universal. Human modes of existence, occupation of space and time and creation of shelter, compose the framework of self. The three bodies of work, *I reside*, *Armament*, and *Comforter* are connected by foundational themes of home. Through the creation of these abstracted objects I explore different ways of connecting homes, houses and identity. Each body of work can be analyzed by links to conceptual and formal choices and life experiences and artist influences.

I reside

Personal sanctuary was the muse for the first steps in the exploration of the concept of home. *I reside* is a series of brooches that references architectural structure, the domestic and the personal (Fig.1). Each brooch is fabricated using scraps of copper, silver, brass, and electroformed fabric combined to give a loose interpretation of a residential edifice. Layered materials and negative spaces come together to suggest miniature interior spaces. The entryway or façade is represented by geometric components hinting at structural architectural elements, such as stairs or rooftops. The

brooches are a series, but they live independently. Like houses in a neighborhood, each shelter has its own characteristics. Such representations of home induce nostalgia and imply narrative. In her essay collection *On Longing*, Susan Stewart pontificates on nostalgia by analyzing the desire created by the figurative souvenir.

"The souvenir replica is an allusion not a model; it comes after the fact and remains both partial to and more expansive than the fact. It will not function without the supplementary narrative discourse that both attaches it to its origins and creates a myth with regard to those origins."²

Because the souvenir operates like a fetish, it is a part substituted for the whole. It has no designated use value, and so it meets the demands of nostalgia. I posit that these brooches operate in the same manner as the replica souvenir. In this series the allusion to the original is more distant and abstract. The narratives of origin are not based in specificities like the souvenir, but instead through expressive references to the domestic that are activated though personal projections of the viewer. Stewart touches on projection in relation to nostalgia when she states, "What is this narrative of origin? It is a narrative of interiority and authenticity. It is not a narrative of the object; it is a narrative of the possessor." These brooches create nostalgic narrative through the miniature iconographic references to architecture.

In my work I have used interpreted architectural forms and used traditional metalsmithing techniques. Loose and gestural modes of assemblage are employed to create the brooches. I can relate these expressive choices to the drawings of Do Ho Suh. He captures this beauty of home while discussing the larger questions of identity

² Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, The Souvenir, The Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 136.

³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 135.

⁴ Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 136.

and anonymity.⁵ Although he is well known for his installations, I find his drawings, such as Walking Home, align with the way I am representing issues of home. His stitched gestural illustrations are less literal than his large scale installations, and contain an expressive representation of the house form (Fig.2). This way of representing home through abstraction creates layer of meaning. In I reside, I use a similar strategy to create rudimentary representational forms mined from my own memories. These recollections come from the brief period when I lived in the Southeastern United States, still in my awkward early adolescent years and suffering from culture shock. Fixed in my mind are the opposing characteristics of historic colonial homes alongside modern ramshackle residences. As premeditated by architects from centuries past, I was imprinted with the grandeur of the facades of the colonial houses along the main streets. In contrast, the cobbled together cottages on the outskirts of town, sometimes painted in lovely and wild hues, commanded an otherworldly presence. With their tense and divergent narratives, these homes struck me with equal fascination. The narcissistic and meticulous preservation of the colonial and the innovative and prudent assemblage of the more recent structures each created their own particular type of beauty.

I reside presents a similar confluence of architectural and structural styles.

Mythologies emerge as the abstracted forms imitate nuances of the domestic façade, and entice the imagination. These three dimensional drawings embrace the traditional format of the brooch used by many contemporary metalsmiths. In this series, the small scale of each brooch reduces the spectacle of architecture to moments of personal, quiet contemplation. Susan Stewart explains how miniaturization alters the use-value of

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⁵ "About Do Ho Suh," Artsy.net, accessed February 20th, 2018. https://www.artsy.net/artwork/do-ho-suh-walking-home-14.

a thing. When the scale of an object is transformed from its original functional size to a decorative size it communicates differently. Shrinking the scale of a house, not even a house but the impression of a house, binds the object to visual consumption and close personal interaction. It makes quiet proclamations of individual identity and reflects both collective nostalgia and personal mythology, only noticed when the wearer is in intimate proximity to others. In this case, there is a rearranging of body and shelter, meant to demonstrate the home as a fabricated idea.

Armament

Armament is an experiment in capturing the emotional qualities of displacement, vulnerability and the defensive modes linked to transition (Fig.3&4). The transposition of peoples from the domain of home, be it house, region or territory, was fodder for my own artistic exploration. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes,

"A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly reimagining its reality: to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house; it would mean developing a veritable psychology of the house."

He speaks of the metaphorical structure of the house in connection with phenomenology and psychology as a means of understanding the insecurities of the domestic. These primal insecurities we have all felt. As for myself, it was during the onset of my rebellious adolescent years when my family and I set out for an unfamiliar destination to make a new home that I had first felt what Bachelard calls "anthropocosmic fear". It was mid-trek, and as I experienced the drive across the plains

⁷ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 17.

⁶ Stewart, *On Longing*, 62.

⁸ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 23.

of Kansas and felt the abysmal, endless grasslands and sky closing in around me, I suddenly was overcome by the sense that I had no place, no home. Never had I felt such dislocation and insecurity.

The liminal human condition expands far beyond my momentary adolescent turmoil. Our sense of belonging is impacted by the pressures of socially collective ideals about home. When one relocates home, one's identity is recontextualized and often exaggerated through difference. Home and self are inevitably linked to the exterior, the social and the cultural. In his article When the idea of Home Was Key to American *Identity*, Richard White discusses the ways in which the American's concept of home has fluctuated over the centuries, and how social and political connection to home have been used to control or change the dominant narratives about freedom. He writes, "Position people outside the home and rights as well as respectability slip away." The ownership of property or proof of residence has been linked to voting rights, cultural standards, and the marginalization of the Other: African Americans, immigrants, Native American, transients, "women adrift" and the working poor. The "lack of true homes underlined their supposed unsuitability for full rights of citizenship." There were also times the cultural concept of home was used by social reformers to fight for the rights of such marginalized and maligned populations. 11

The individual's susceptibility to such outside forces and their reaction to them informs the material construction of *Armament*. The brooch format is intended to shield and distract. When placed on the body these brooches function as a different kind of

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⁹ Richard White, "When the Idea of Home Was Key to American Identity," *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 18, 2017, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/when-idea-home-was-key-american-identity.

¹⁰ White, "When the Idea."

¹¹ White, "When the Idea."

signifier than the brooches of *I reside*. Rather than a contained form pleasantly projecting a comforting and secure sense of identity and narrative, these are nonobjective, thin, fragile pieces. Metaphorically, the technical processes and resulting forms capture the creation of a defensive coating fraught with contradictions. The pieces are meant to be brought together in an attempt to be passively defensive through exhibition. The futility of defensiveness is exposed, the beauty of circumstance is unveiled. Each piece is a fragment of deterioration meant to be assembled along with the others and worn as a decorative and protective layer.

Similar to Sayumi Yokouchi's brooch from her series *Absence is Present*, the materials are allowed to do as they will (Fig.5&6). She pushes the boundaries of wearability and explores the interplay of the natural and the manmade to create works that are textural, rigid and delicate. With *Armament* I use these same material-driven devices. Gaps expose that which is meant to be contained; the transparency of the material exemplifies the transformation and the vulnerability of private to public display. There is an emulation of the bodily and the decorative through my use organic hues, as if the interior is being turned inside out. The inside is exposed, pushing outward to display lovely hints of the insular, core being that we desire to protect. These brooches are fragile experiments fabricated with enameled electroformed material, resulting in visually powerful yet physically delicate objects.

One cannot speak of experimental electroforming and enameling processes without mention of June Schwarcz. Her work, which combined the processes of electroforming and enameling, defied traditions and enabled her to create objects in

¹² Olivia Shih, "Soyumi Yokouchi: Landscape Absence is Present," Art Jewerly Forum Interview, December 2nd, 2015. https://artjewelryforum.org/sayumi-yokouchi-landscape-absence-is-present

ways previously unheard of. As exemplified in *Apollo's Pool*, depth and surface variation cause her vessels to be seen as a metaphor for the beauty of transition, chance, and rupture (Fig.7). In a continuation of Schwarcz's explorations I use electroforming to transform a soft and very elastic adaptable fabric into a rigid state. Copper deposited onto the textile generates rigidity, but the thin fabric framework renders it delicate. The process of electroforming involves the movement of copper ions through an electrolyte solution. The copper is forced by a DC current to move toward a nonmetal material and coats that material. The vitreous enamel glosses the surface. It adds layers that create a brittle but transparent coating. The enameling process causes chemical reactions that change the appearance of the underlying materials. Both techniques involve transformation of substance from one state of presence to another, and both processes are the result of specifically cultivated conditions and show signs of the slightest disruption. These results emulate the transition and re-identification of self when confronted with a new cultural and social parameter of home.

Comforter

The finale of my research encompasses the transitory nature of home from a self-consciously anthropocentric viewpoint. The fluctuation of the home, the structural, the private, the public, the physical, the local – all dictate the human condition. The fluxes between these frameworks is abstractly represented in *Comforter* (Fig.8). This is the culmination of my explorations into artistic influences, processes and materials, and conceptual framework; therefore, it speaks the language of my aforementioned series of

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¹³"June Schwarcz: Invention and Variation," Smithsonian American Art Museum, Renwick Gallery, accessed February 20th, 2018, https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/schwarz.

works. Hints of architecture indicate the human presence. These are encased in electroformed materials to impose both a sense of structure and of passive impermanence. Joined together, the processes of fabrication comment on the transformations that occur as we humans make our homes in time and space. With this body of work I am more interested in the contrast between tangible corporality and abstract ephemeral moments than elegance. The methods used induce the variability and temporality of the materials to which I subscribe. To make the components of *Comforter* I repeat the material processes and implications of *Armament*, pantyhose and metal are used as opposing substances that I manipulated to generate my work. This concoction results in a dense transitioning of materials and meanings which encompasses the liminality of the human condition.

The individual units that comprise the installation represent something in between homes, houses, and human identity, for houses are identifiers of home, and homes are identifiers of humans. In the forms, the structure of human architecture is merely suggested. The loosely closed structures contain hints of corners and angles found in human dwellings. The components are made by merging the skeletal, geometric frames with the pliable textile stretched to form fleshy walls. This play between body and manmade space can be compared with Monica Wyatt's experiment *Inhabiting the Wall* (Fig.9). Wyatt documents by mapping and enveloping the body to create a "wall", treating the skin like a wall that fluctuates. ¹⁴ She begins conceptually with phenomenological and psychological questions in connection with the ambiguity of the wall. She wants to "get into the wall" and simultaneously see herself apart from the

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¹⁴ Dan Hoffman, "Space-Enfolding-Breath," in Toward a New Interior, ed. Lois Weinthal (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), 342-347.

wall: she wants to be in both places at once, "...to make this possible, to conceive of a situation in which space and material become intertwined, as if consciousness and body were intertwined within the space of a fold." ¹⁵

Bachelard speaks of topoanalysis, as a systematic psychological study of sites of our intimate lives, of how memory and history are theatrical and are housed both figuratively and literally. He states, "At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability-a being who does not want to melt away." **Comforter* represents a conceptualization of home and our struggle not to melt away. Home, with its multitude of meanings and associations, is a fundamental part of identity. The external self and the internal self are both enclosed and exposed in the home. Distinguishing between house and home is key to the creation of the forms embodied in *Comforter*. Joyce Carol Oates waxes poetic about the abandoned house in her essay, *They All Just Went Away*:

"The house contains a home but is not identical to it. The house anticipates the home and will very likely survive it, reverting again simply to house when home (that is life) departs. For only where there is life can there be home." Human life moves and takes with it the home, and sometimes this movement of home has an undetermined trajectory.

Upon arrival in Colorado I became a part of the American tradition of westward expansion. With me came my own history that I was to add to the collective narratives of place. I, and many others, have adapted and manipulated the social structure of the place I now call home just as it changed my identity. Suburban sprawl and a new kind of economy have begun to overcome standard resistance to the inevitable change that occurs with movements of humans into a guarded territory. The romanticized identity of

¹⁵ Hoffman, "Space-Enfolding-Breath," 342.

¹⁶ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 8.

the West is steeped in the acquisition of territory: the pioneers' fight to survive, to gain control of the place and to dominate the culture, at the expense and demise of the people who called this place home before them and still do. Like my fellow roaming humans, I began to navigate and appropriate the language of the land and cherry pick the culture. The cultural rhetoric of Colorado is designated not only by its vast open spaces and imposing summits, but also, like all inhabited spaces, by anthropocentric arrangements.

The cubelike forms of *Comforter* also imply this kind of ambiguity (Fig.10). They attempt to merge a representation of the psychological and the physical being through the materiality of the electroformed fabric and geometric frameworks. I am interested in creating an abstracted collection of variations of home that result from the changing of the physical and mental state of being. The concept and the physicality within each unit embody vague temporal moments of identity. Each iteration connects to the next, but the notion of home constantly takes on a new form while the previous notions fade to different degrees of decay. The entropic nature of self and home is neither unilateral nor unidirectional. We humans can move from ruin to create new structures or we can be forced from the pristine to destruction. As we view the decay and loss of "permanent" human constructions we then begin to question our assumptions of stablity.

A part of *Comforter* gives a glimpse of the of the foreboding abjection of the Anthropocene implied by the rough and eroding parts of the installation. This work aestheticizes destruction in the same manner that Julia Kristeva describes literary apocalyptic representation. In her essay *The Powers of Horror* she states,

"Their only sustenance lies in the beauty of a gesture that, here, on the page, compels language to come nearest to the human enigma, to the place where it kills, thinks, and experiences jouissance all at the same time." ¹⁷

Yet, contained also within this work I maintain elements of structure and order of harmonious human control. That which Kristeva questions as such:

"Is it the quiet shore of contemplation that I set aside for myself, as I lay bare, under the cunning, orderly surface of civilizations, the nurturing horror that they attend to pushing aside by purifying, systematizing, and thinking; the horror that they seize on in order to build themselves up and function? I rather conceive it as a work of disappointment, of frustration, and hollowing — probably the only counterweight to abjection." ¹⁸

Such a counterweight is represented by the linear connections between the components. The emphasis on the social, economic and political connection within communities that prop up the idea of home from the exterior are essential to our sense of home and self. In the time of the Anthropocene we cling to systemic remnants of a Utopian age: the optimistic residue of uniformity and tranquility. This formal element is rooted in the universalist philosophy of designers like Le Corbusier. I have referenced his study sketch *Chandigarh*, *Modular I* and the drawing *Contemporary City for Three Million* in the grid structure of my installation (Fig.11 &12). 19 *Comforter* is constructed of an amalgamation of forms that mimic these basic rectilinear signs of the utilitarian community. The binding of the ambiguous enclosed forms with linear, gridlike linkages makes the parts into a mobile, flexible whole. The system of connections can be viewed metaphorically as the collective unconscious: these social constructs are reinforced by

¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 206.

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, 210.

¹⁹ Amit Thungare, "Le Corbusier's Principles of City Planning and Their Application in Virtual Environments," (Thesis, School of Planning and Architecture New Dehli, India, 2001) 117, https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk3/ftp04/MQ61319.pdf

the built public environment that Corbusier sought to perfect. The array of the grid in the installation is disrupted through haphazard expansion and collapse that relates to human migrations. Paths are determined or mapped with the intent to follow allocated patterns, but often new paths must be forged. Ultimately and universally it is a matter of circumstance and chance that creates detours and disrupts the attempts to control movements.

Public influence of the home is far reaching. John David Rhodes writes in his article, *Prop and Property*, about the house from a voyeuristic and cinematic perspective. He specifies that home is shelter for everyday life, and that the architecture differentiates space to make it private, and yet; this same edifice is also very public. Property is private within, but the exterior makes it public. The physical home is alienable, it is susceptible to violation, displacement and loss, and therefore, not really that private. The spectacle and potential instability of private property forces us to realize the relationship between public and private.²⁰

In this piece, like in *I reside*, the spectacle of the shelter is reduced and made more intimate through the manipulation of scale. Consider the scale of the enclosed forms comparatively to Susan Stewart's analysis of the dollhouse,

"...the dollhouse not only presents the house's articulation of the tension between inner and outer spheres, of exteriority and interiority- it also represents the tension between modes of interiority..."

Due to the scale of the dollhouse, Stewart implies that secrecy and transcendence lie within the small enclosed space.²¹ Although the enclosed forms are not figuratively representing the house, the size of each individual unit allows for the

²¹ Stewart, On Longing, 61.

²⁰ John David Rhodes, "Prop and Property: The house in Amercian cinema, from the plantation to Chavez Ravine," *Places Journal*, December 2017, http://placesjournal.org/article/prop-and-property-the-house-in-american-film.

speculative assumptions of small interior spaces, yet the overall scale of the whole installation is closer to that of the human. This allows the viewer to shift modes of interaction. It has intimate and private detail and an extroverted public presence.

Manipulation of scale, combined with the semiotic properties of my materials inevitably create a variety of responses from the viewer. Any quantity of representation or nonrepresentation is fraught with projection. When Joyce Carol Oates speaks of the representational of the "real" house in art she says,

"The real is raw, jarring, unexpected, sometimes trashy, sometimes luminous. Above all, the real is arbitrary. For to be a realist (in art or in life) is to acknowledge that all things might be other than they are. That there is no design, no intention, no aesthetic or moral or teleological imprimatur but, rather, the equivalent of Darwin's great vision of a blind, purposeless, ceaseless evolutionary process that yields no "products"-only temporary strategies against extinction."²²

The temporary strategy against extinction was amplified for me in the matriarchal stage of my life. My abrupt transition into parenthood caused a critical relationship with the domestic. The home was immediately bound to me and my identity. I was no longer adrift in the world because I became fused to the configuration of the habitat. I am responsible for the home, for making it, for securing it, for being it. The concept and I morphed. The shelters I acquired for my family came and went, and each time I shed my exoskeleton and created a new one. I am tasked with wrapping my loved ones in layers of home, identity, history, mythology and place. The home I create is interconnected with the social structures to which we are bound.

Conclusion

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²² Joyce Carol Oates, "They All Just Went Away," *The New Yorker*, October, 1995, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1995/10/16/they-all-just-went-away.

With these bodies of work I have experimented with the abstract conglomeration of materialism and consciousness, of inner and outer selves, of collective and private and the spaces in between to express the transitory state of home. I reside, Armament and Comforter, each explore different tactics to navigate the complex and emotive concept of home and humanity. This research is instigated by the triangulation between public, private, and self, accentuated by the home and participation in the creation of cultural order. Each piece includes the exploration of the formal, conceptual, personal experience and artist influences. The works depend on the relationships between the exterior physical world and the interior perceptions of home. Territorial attitudes and pride arise from the collective, while the domestic interior comforts and personalizes. The architecture of the abode, especially the façade, creates voyeuristic narratives about the comfort and sanctuary of the interior. Outside the threshold, there arises longing and desire. This desire is perishable, and like the manmade structure itself, eventually dissipates, as it inevitably succumbs to human destruction or the elements. Yet throughout it all, the nostalgia for homes past remains.



Figure 1, Melissa Laugen, *I reside* (*brooches*), 2016, copper, brass, sterling silver, electroform material, steel, various sizes.

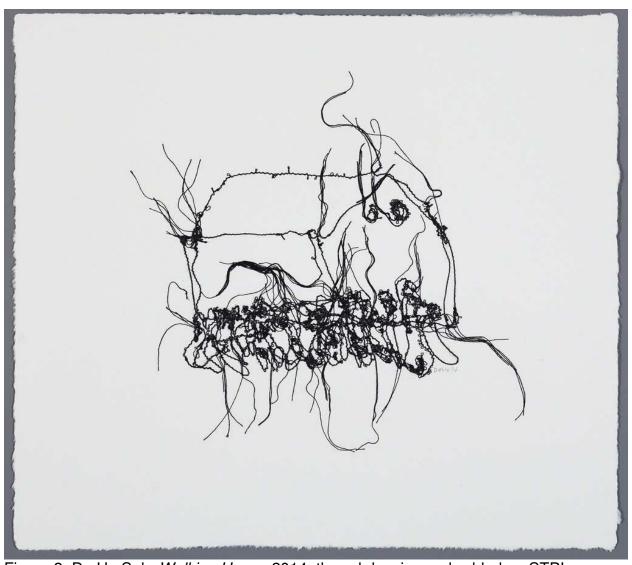


Figure 2, Do Ho Suh, *Walking Home*, 2014, thread drawing embedded on STPI handmade cotton paper, 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ "x17 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".



Figure 3, Melissa Laguen, *Armament*, 2017, electroformed material, copper, enamel, steel, various sizes.



Figure 4, Melissa Laguen, *Armament*, 2017, electroformed material, copper, enamel, steel, various sizes.



Figure 5, Sayumi Yokouchi, *Absence is Present (front of brooch),* 2015 oxidized silver, plastic.



Figure 6, Sayumi Yokouchi, *Absence is Present (back of brooch),* 2015 oxidized silver, plastic.



Figure 7, June Schwarcz, *Apollo's Pool (#2025)*, 1993, electroformed copper foil, enamel.

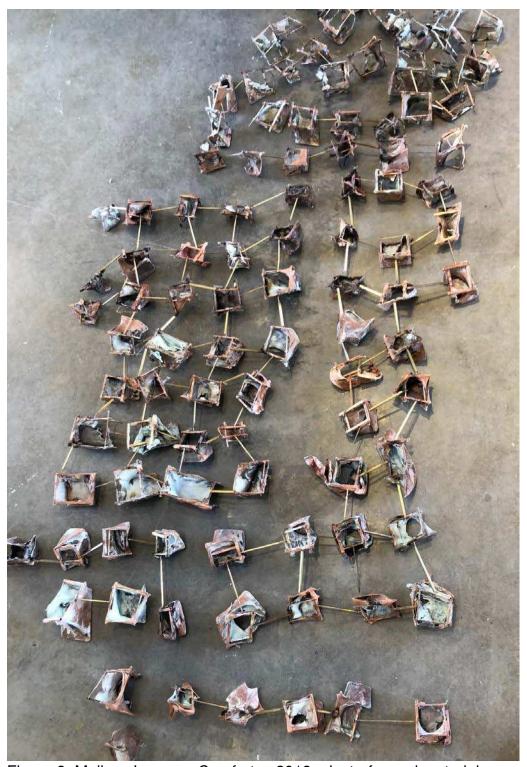


Figure 8, Melissa Laugen, *Comforter*, 2018, electroformed material, copper, brass, gesso, 4'x12'.



Figure 9, Monica Wyatt, Inhabiting the Wall, 1992-1993, wallpaper.



Figure 10, Melissa Laugen, *Comforter* (detail), 2018, electroformed material, copper, brass, gesso, 3"x3"x4".



Figure 11, Le Corbusier, Study Sketch for Chardigarh Modular 1, 1966.

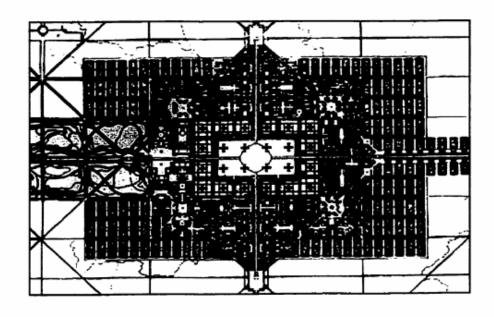


Figure 12, Le Corbusier, *Contemporary City for Three Million: The City of Tomorrow*, Urban Plan, 1929.

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