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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

SIGNIFICANT OBJECTS AS METAPHOR FOR HOME

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Alison Renae Wilcox

College of Performing and Visual Arts
School of Art and Design

May 2020

This Thesis by: Alison Renae Wilcox

Entitled: *Significant Objects as Metaphor for Home*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Master of Art in College of Performing and Visual Arts in School of Art and Design, Program of Art and Design

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative Arts-Based Research investigated how certain objects come to embody a personal definition of home. Objects that are treasured and are associated with home were defined in this research as *significant objects*. As the researcher, I selected personally significant objects to study. These objects were studied through still life painting and interviews, based on the work of Barbara Fish (2017). Data were then refined into a final reflection painting. This study indicated that significant objects are often denied their intended function, are tied to idealized memories, and help to reconnect the owner to confidence that may have been lost with the passing of time.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rationale

The American Dream is a term that was first coined by James Truslow Adams in his book, *Epic of America*; Adams defined the American Dream as “the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man” (1931, p. 405). Part of achieving this American Dream could be seen as home ownership, such as in John Steinbeck’s (2017) classic novel, *Of Mice and Men*, when the main characters wish to “live offa the fatta the lan” and finally “have our own place where we belonged” (p. 56). Regardless, home ownership is a goal that countless individuals in this country strive to achieve. However, since the housing market crash of the late 2000s, some feel as though it is an unattainable ambition. According to a *New York Times* article written by Elyse Cherry (2016, para. 2), “homeownership has been a gateway to the middle class and a primary source of wealth creation” for decades, and the housing crash has disrupted this cycle for current and future citizens. According to the author, one million homeowners face foreclosure and seven million more owe more on their mortgages than their homes are worth; Cherry stated forebodingly that “Plummeting homeownership rates are a worrisome sign that the American Dream remains a fantasy for millions” (Cherry, 2016, para. 1).

Having experienced the housing market crash and subsequent recession while transitioning from high school to college, I suddenly found myself believing at the age of 18 that I would never be able to own a home. This belief has made my most important possessions become the stand-in for a permanent dwelling place. I can bring my favorite objects with me and put them in any space, and I am home. Why and how have certain items come to embody the concept of home for me?

My dwelling places, once I moved out of my parents' house, have consisted of a series of rather small and sometimes run-down apartments. However, that is only what these spaces look like on a physical level. Home is more than just what a place is physically; I am defining home as a shelter where you feel safe to be your truest self. This concept is supported by Gaston Bachelard (1958) as he defined it in *The Poetics of Space*, "If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (p. 28). In other words, to quote the old saying, "Home is where the heart is." For the purpose of this study, home is also where our significant objects gather.

Marie Kondo, who is also known as KonMari, is a Japanese organization expert with a recently popular Netflix show called "Tidying Up" in which she teaches how to declutter your life. In this age of Marie Kondo minimalism, I wanted to take a deeper look at the items that bring us joy--the objects that we feel some sort of cosmic connection to, despite their worth, utilitarian purpose, or outward appearance.

Some objects seem mysteriously imbued with meaning and importance on an individual level. As Glenn and Hayes (2007) stated in the opening of their book, *Taking Things Seriously: 75 Objects with Unexpected Significance*:

Step into the living room, study, office, studio, or den of just about any engaged, imaginative, passionate individual and you'll gravitate toward an item that, although it may not appear particularly valuable, is reverentially displayed as though it were a precious and irreplaceable artifact. (p. 9)

Regardless of my attachment to some personally meaningful material possessions, I have had to stay light and mobile as I have moved frequently and lived in a variety of places. This nomadic apartment dwelling life I live causes me, every few months, to sort through and cast away possessions that do not serve enough of a purpose. However, there are some objects that I have justified keeping throughout the years; whether they are easy to retain or not seems unimportant next to their sentimental value. This personal ritual that I often overlooked was uncovered consciously when, after having lived and worked for two years in Japan, I was forced to select and choose just four suitcases and two carry-ons worth of my possessions to bring back with me to the United States. I spent a month deliberating over which things meant more than others and lamenting which items would need to be sacrificed in the name of airplane weight restrictions and left behind. I still remember my beloved pair of suede plum-colored cowboy boots that I tried desperately to get someone to adopt before I left; no one would take them due to my abnormally small foot size. Where did those beloved boots--which I paid only \$3 for at a second-hand shop--end up?

My thoughts on the mystery of what I left behind mirror some of Mark Doty's (2001) words in his book, *Still Life with Lemons and Oysters*: "Where is that silver dish with its incised dragon afloat on clouds of smoke? Where is the old oak bureau that held my grandmother's folded supply of rubbery stockings? They must still be around somewhere, those old things" (p. 49).

Some items may leave their mark on us and come to define some part of our identity. Reflecting on the objects that are precious to us on an individual level may help us to realize more of who we are and what we consider home to mean.

Using an Arts-Based Research approach, I looked closely at the significant objects in my life in order to better understand my own personal definition of home. By documenting, reflecting, and then creating response paintings based on these special items, I uncovered a visual representation of what home feels like to me.

Purpose

What is home and how do we find it in the objects we collect?

Research Question and Context

I believe that by reflecting on the question of how objects help us to build our idea of home is beneficial because it can indicate a deeper aspect of who we are. Just as we may style our appearance to show the world who we are, we style our homes to reflect a more personal side of our true nature; however, we live in a world of idealized false realities, encouraged by social media. We may even occasionally stage aspects of our homes to appeal to guests and visitors.

Perhaps it is the objects that are most important to us that tell us the most about ourselves. My personal experiences throughout my years of living and moving across the world have led me to ask the question: How do objects help me to build my own personal concept of home? In my painting, I hoped to uncover why I treasure certain objects and how these objects have come to represent home to me personally.

Having moved a significant amount during my life and having lived in a variety of places, I knew I wanted to explore the topic of *home* for my thesis. I eventually,

through early research, settled on the topic of significant objects embodying aspects of home.

I was still pursuing my teaching license when I first started working on my thesis and did not think an action research project was applicable; the more I considered my topic, the more personal it became. I decided on using an Arts-Based Research methodology. I conducted my research primarily in my own home and focused on objects that were significant to me personally.

Definition of Terms

There are a few terms which are used throughout this paper. I have provided the following definitions.

American Dream: The ability to work towards a personal level of comfort and freedom.

Home: A shelter where you feel safe to be your truest self.

Significant object: A treasured possession, specifically that which is carried throughout the years, which holds some aspect of a personal concept of home.

CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE
Searching for Home

The word “home” conjures up a variety of images, and each individual may picture the concept of home differently, though at times it is easy to simply visualize the generic notion of a house. Judith Flanders (2014) elaborated that “It is too easy to simplify home until it is like the child’s picture, a clear, detail-less outline” (p. 20). Children often draw a similar house despite what their childhood home looks like: a tidy triangle roof, usually accompanied by delicate smoke spiraling out of a chimney, and a plain square building with one door flanked by symmetrical square windows on either side. “As adults, we have more elaborate notions of what that archetypal home looks like than the children’s drawings, but these notions are no less works of imagination” (Flanders, 2014, p. 5).

One aspect of home that is consistent is its relative permanency; our expectation is that it is always there for us when we need it. “A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability” (Bachelard, 1958, p. 38). However, permanency also ties us down and can inhibit our freedom at times. Doty (2001) stated that we can often experience “a fierce internal debate, between staying moored and drifting away, between holding on and letting go. Perhaps wisdom lies in our ability to negotiate between these two poles” (p. 7).

I have personally experienced this internal debate on a number of levels. There were times when I lived as a temporary resident and was constantly prepared to move out at a moment's notice, times when I wished I could live somewhere different, and times when I did live somewhere different and, instead, longed for the comforts of a more familiar place. Throughout all of these experiences, I have gathered a significant number of items that continue to follow me with every change. These significant objects have become shorthand for what home is to me and help to bring me comfort when most needed; "The normal unconscious knows how to make itself at home everywhere" (Bachelard, 1958, p. 32).

Our significant objects may inform us about ourselves as much as they come to define a personal idea of home. Bachelard (1958), in *The Poetics of Space*, stated that "On whatever theoretical horizon we examine it, the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being" (p. 20). We often choose or change our surroundings in order to express some aspect of our personal identity; because of this, our homes, workspaces, and the items we collect can possibly become signifiers for who we are. Bachelard (1958) continued his reflection on home, saying that "our house is our corner of the world," and even calling it "our first universe" (p. 26).

Bachelard (1958) also placed a deep importance on a home's ability to foster intimacy. This place where we spend so much of our time is usually very private and, therefore, is interpreted as being safe. "Intimacy needs the heart of a nest" (p. 85). Our home, our nest, is a shelter not only for ourselves, but the physical extension of our being as well; that is to say, the significant--and not as significant--objects that we possess. Home is where the heart is, and our heart can be attached to these objects easily.

Significant Objects

We live in a society that is driven by consumerism where success is determined by how many possessions you own and how high quality those possessions are. Flanders (2014) explored how society's change from agricultural to industrialized contributed to the importance of possessions, reflecting on how "personal judgements" which were once made based on "knowledge of lineage or character," are now made according to "presentation of self" which is ultimately "intertwined with the possessions" owned (p. 28). This societal shift in western culture has presumably led to objects being produced faster and cheaper than before industrialization, which in turn creates items that are not meant to last a full lifetime, or even more than a few years. Objects that at one time were made by hand are now mass-produced, and fewer people create goods by hand due to the ease of being able to purchase them in stores or online.

Flanders (2014) continued her exploration and pointed out that "In the twentieth century, the commercial utilization of the idea of home merely made explicit what had long been an unspoken reality: there might be no place like home, but most of its component parts could be purchased" (p. 123). Objects have become more temporary, but no less important since we are now judged by what or how much we own.

Despite this fact, most individuals are still able to find meaning in some objects, whether they be family heirlooms or found treasures that were discarded in the street. "Just as we are collectors of things, things are collectors of meaning" (Glenn & Hayes, 2007, p. 9). How do certain objects catch our eye and speak to us? Why do some items become priceless to certain individuals, and meaningless to others? It may be mostly due to our own personal history and experiences; for instance, some items connect us to

something that we may have lost. Objects may also grow to embody someone dear to us, as Doty (2001) pointed out in *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*: “If it is a reminder of loss--my mother, my lover vanished in the slipstream of time--then it is equally a token of what can be kept; a sense of home, of permanence, of the ground for ourselves we can make” (p. 43). Or, perhaps our significant objects somehow signify an emotion or idea that connects to us in some deep, unknown way (e.g., an individual who found a small broken toy which, at one point in time, had resembled a green army man:

This tortured little being had connected with me. It looked like how I was feeling. Pain was reeking from its distorted, mutilated body. I wanted to help it, and held it gently so as not to hurt it anymore than it already was. Oh Green man, I feel for you. (Glenn & Hayes, 2007, p. 90)

Everyone most likely has some form of significant object, some item or items that have come to define their personal shelter. These significant objects surround us so constantly that at times they may seem to become invisible in a way:

We’re accustomed to not seeing what is so near to us; we do not need to look at things that are at hand, because they are at hand every day. That is what makes home so safe and so appealing, that we do not *need* to look at it. (Doty, 2001, p. 56)

However, this does not diminish the value of our most treasured possessions. After all, we have kept them so close to us for a reason, and there was a reason they came to be in our possession in the first place. “We are instructed by the objects that come to speak with us, those material presences” (Doty, 2001, p. 10).

Even if our significant objects seem to fuse and become a part of our physical home, we are usually very aware of their presence. Bachelard wrote that objects which are treasured and taken special care of “attain to a higher degree of reality than indifferent objects” (1958, p. 88). Significant objects, for the most part, are not simply knick-knacks

that are to be kept on a shelf for decoration; they often come to represent some deep individual truth. “The self is emptied into things, and thus the things shine with an astonishing life” (Doty, 2001, p. 68). Objects also go on after we are gone. Those objects we keep because they connect us to someone we lost hold a promise of doing the same for us once we too are no longer here. They reassure us that the passing of time is not as frightening as it seems to be, and that the transience of life can be a beautiful thing.

Most of the time, we humans dread the passing of time and the effect that it has on our bodies. Significant objects, antiques, and family heirlooms which have withstood the passing of time all bear marks that reveal their age, and it makes them unique, special, and even priceless. Objects have the ability to connect us to the past and reassure us of the future.

These marks and wearings-down mark the evidence of time, the acclimation of the object’s body to human bodies. They are what make it beautiful; it may have been handsome, to begin with, but I believe that its beauty is the result of use, of being subject to time. (Doty, 2001, p. 30)

Though everyone may have a collection of significant objects, it has been my experience that one usually starts off with bare essentials, whether they are housed in a college dorm room, a spare room in a relative’s house, or a meager first dwelling space. My significant objects were few and easy to travel with; I was light and nomadic. Eventually, after a few years of living on my own, after I had left my parents' home, I had accumulated enough items that I was no longer as nomadic and light as I once was. “At some point, the mass congeals, no longer individual things but something with a weight and presence of its own, heavy as history” (Doty, 2001, p. 60). Possessions eventually reach the point where one may be forced to downsize and rid oneself of some of the bulk.

This is where an individual may become aware of how some objects have become significant and have separated themselves from the usual household goods: “With its scars and pits, the pan is now patinated with memory” (Glenn & Hayes, 2007, p. 72).

Accumulating these significant objects can also act as a substitute for the permanency of home if our home is not as stable as we wish it were. Each object may signify some different aspect of what home means to us. So, despite how long we stay, our home is with us so long as we hold onto these objects. Significant objects also hold a promise of our future home:

Of course I want to live in space that is honeycombed with the past, and not merely for sentiment’s sake--those things that are full of the passage of time point to the future, too, by means of their persistence, their staying on. (Doty, 2001, p. 62)

Bachelard (1958) also mentioned the hope that future homes can bring, encouraging the reader that “it is a good thing . . . to keep a few dreams of a house” that we could one day live in, although it may be so far ahead of us “that we shall not have time to achieve it” (p. 81). Whether they connect us to our lost past, or hold a promise of a future that we strive to achieve, our significant objects are important to use for the meaning they embody.

Finding Connection through Art

I have decided to study this concept through Arts-Based Research (ABR) because I wish to conduct research specifically on my own personal experiences. In reading about significant objects, it came to my attention multiple times that capturing the essence of these objects and conveying it to others can be quite difficult. In the book, *Taking Things Seriously: 75 Objects with Unexpected Significance*, a few of those who wrote about their objects tried to describe the way they felt (Glenn & Hayes, 2007). For one individual,

whose significant object was a particular glass jar, they stated that it created “a sensation in my mouth, a taste in my throat, that I can’t make anyone else understand” (p. 96).

Another essay mused that “Everyone asks where I got it, but nobody asks what it means” (Glenn & Hayes, 2007, p. 36). One writer bluntly stated that “Others do not seem to appreciate the intrinsic beauty of this thing” (p. 104). The importance one sees in an object may not be visible to another. Doty (2001) wrote that “the adult recognition that the things of the world go on without us, that the meaning with which we invest them may not persist, may be visible to no one else, that even that which seems to us most profoundly saturated in passion and feeling may be swept away” (p. 28).

When studying my own significant objects, I wanted to represent them in a variety of ways in order to peel away the outer layers of meaning and uncover a deeper truth. Still life painting has been a method of documenting items, no matter how ordinary or mundane, throughout the ages. True to its name, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (Doty, 2001) is a book that delves into the concept of the still life in a very personal way. The author, Doty (2001), stated that “these paintings fill me with the pleasure of being bound to the material, implicated, part of a community of attention-giving” (p. 53). I also enjoy the irony of how my paintings of objects are, in a strange way, objects themselves. “A painting doesn’t especially seem like an object, since we seem always to be looking through it, into it, rather than at it” (Doty, 2001, p. 59).

Communicating through Images

There is a strange power in communicating through images: “We see images, we reproduce images, we retain images in our memory” (Bachelard, 1958, p. 18). Although we may not understand a written or spoken language, we may still have an ability to

communicate by using visual imagery. Because this research project was very personal in nature, what I would have had difficulty expressing through words was made more accessible to others by using my art to express meaning. “In still life . . . these things had a history, a set of personal meanings; they were someone’s. The paintings seem to refer to this life of ownership, and to suggest something of the feeling attached to things, while withholding any narrative” (Doty, 2001, p. 29).

Using the process of artmaking to help uncover how my significant objects are attached to my personal vision of home also enabled me to better understand how I use art to relate to my world. “Even in an art like painting, which bears witness to a skill, the important successes take place independently of skill” (Bachelard, 1958, p. 16). Because I am an artist, and because art itself is a form of research, it was imperative that I include my artistic process throughout the course of my thesis. Graeme Sullivan expanded on the idea of using art, specifically painting, as research; he wrote that painting “involves giving form to thought in a purposeful way” and that despite whether we focus on painting as “process or product,” it is a powerful research tool that can “reveal new insights and understandings” (2012, p. 241).

CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY
Plan of Action

As I grew up, I often thought of what my home would look like and where it would be. At certain points, it seemed as though I might never settle down. I began collecting and holding onto certain significant objects to comfort myself in times of change and uncertainty, to act as a stand-in for a home of my own. These objects have come to represent what home means to me and are portable enough to help bring stability and a sense of permanence with me during the more nomadic points in my life.

Despite this being a very personal research project, the concept can be relatable to a wide audience. I have previously mentioned the housing market crash of the late 2000s, but there are other societal issues which relate to the theme of searching for home and the objects we carry with us on our journey. For instance, the Syrian refugee crisis as well as the treatment of immigrants and aliens in our own country and others are related to this theme. And, because I am a teacher, I can easily apply this concept in my classroom in order for my students to build a better understanding of each other.

I previously explored this topic in a short series of paintings. These paintings were all done with acrylic paints on either canvas or wood and each one was a self-portrait which featured me interacting with different significant objects. The series documented different stages of my life since marriage until the end of my time in Japan.

The first painting, *Hand Brace*, (see Figure 1) depicted me staring blankly at the viewer in a dark room as I cradled my hand, which was tightly wrapped in a brace. This painting documented my state of mind during my first year of marriage when I provided the sole income for me and my husband by working as a cake decorator. When I began to suffer the effects of carpal-tunnel syndrome, I could afford to buy only one hand brace. I would wear this brace on one hand during the day and switch to the other hand at night. I still keep this brace, although I do not need it anymore, and I could now afford to buy another if needed. Why do I hold onto this strange memento?



Figure 1. Alison Wilcox, *Hand Brace*, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 24," 2018.

This earlier series of paintings led me closer to my focus on significant objects and how they connect to my personal definition of home. The first painting really helped me to understand what I wanted to explore and how I wanted to perform research for my thesis. The other paintings feature objects that are an amalgam of a variety of possessions or objects that I lost along the way. The first painting was the only one to feature a physical object that I could hold in front of me and use as a reference, and it was an object that I held onto for mysterious reasons.

For my thesis, I used Arts-Based Research (ABR) methods involving visual arts, specifically painting. I conducted a heuristic study involved with my own personal research and feedback without input from any other participants. As Patricia Leavy (2018) stated in *Handbook of Arts-Based Research*, “ABR is often useful in studies involving identity work” (p. 10). Because this topic is very important to me personally, I wanted to delve deeply into my own personal thoughts and reactions. I also wanted to explore how my use of art might change my perspective of the significant objects in my life. Sullivan wrote that:

In this process, the artwork becomes the primary site of knowledge and painting becomes the source of questions, problems, and insights, which emerge as part of practice. Visual problem finding and problem solving are characteristic of this kind of inquiry whereby forms, materials, properties, and qualities become the means by which concerns are explored or expressed. As a result new forms and images are created, and these open up the possibility of new meanings. (2012, p. 245)

Often times when I paint, my artwork helps to inform my future work, both through the physical process as well as what the final creation looks like. I believe that this could be a useful and exciting new research tool when pursuing a specific answer while creating.

Procedure

My process involved choosing a number of significant objects in my life to study in depth. After choosing my objects, I began my work by writing down a few preliminary notes about my memories and associations with each object individually (see Figure 2). Over the course of my research, I created two paintings for each object: a small preliminary still life painting and a second painting based on my notes and data collection; the second paintings I refer to as “reflection paintings.”

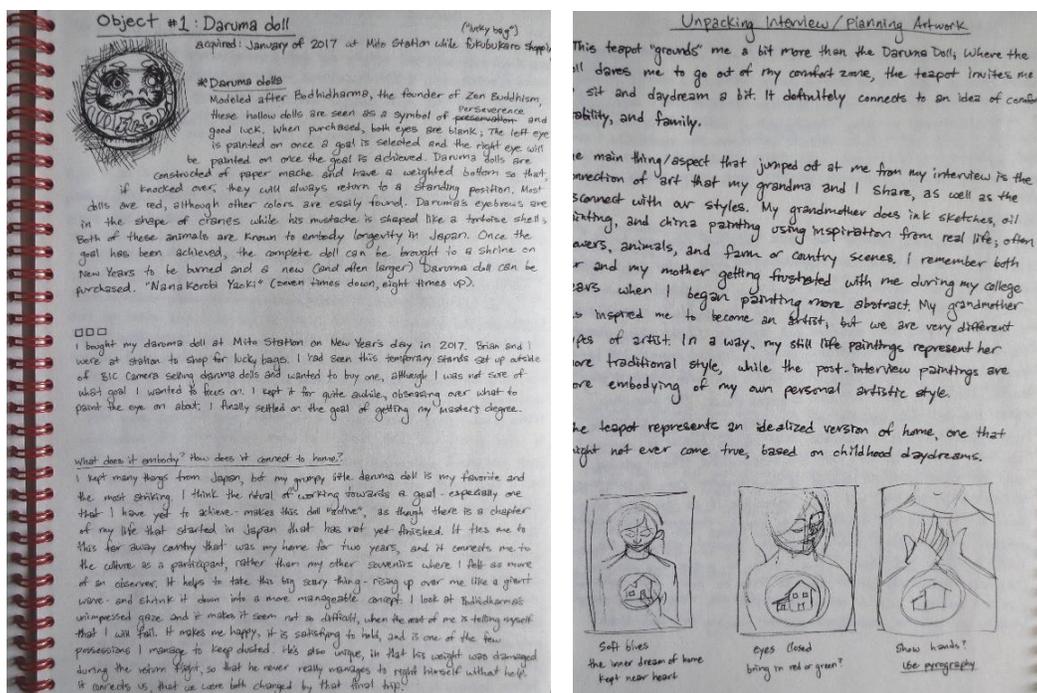


Figure 2. Alison Wilcox, Interview notes.

The first painting that I made of each object was based on the object itself; for reference, I used a photo taken from a viewpoint different than the one I normally saw the object from. I used a square format in order to crop the image and provide a different perspective. The purpose of this first life study painting was to focus in on the details that

I rarely notice. I looked closely at both the object itself and my reference photo, noticing subtle differences as I painted. Looking so closely at each object as I created helped me to reflect on why I had kept the object, why it is so significant to me, and how it connects to my personal definition of home. “The capacity to look beyond what is known to seek the possibility of new understanding is what artists do. Knowledge may be power, but insight makes a difference” (Sullivan, 2012, p. 243).

Once my first painting was finished, I interviewed the work. This process involved taking time to first study the object itself, and then the life study painting I had created, taking notes about what came to mind; specifically, I wanted to note the differences between the original object and my replication, what emotions or memories were evoked that had not been documented previously, and any free-flowing conscious thought. After this data collection, I began to plan a final artwork for each significant object using my collected notes and previous artwork as inspiration. These final creations were meant to be of a surreal or abstract nature and encapsulated my thoughts on the essence of each object as well as how the object embodied an aspect of what home means to me.

I often waited a day or two after the interview process before returning to my notes; this enabled me to look at my writing with fresh eyes and see new ideas that had emerged in my writing. I wrote a new page of notes, separated into two different sections. The first step involved unpacking my interview, in which I picked out the big ideas and concepts that had stood out in my notes to that point; the second section is where I began to plan my second reflection painting. I thought about what colors and shapes might be used in my painting. I looked for recurring symbols and images.

The last step in my research process for each object was to create a reflection painting that translated what I had uncovered about the object; in this painting, I also focused on an aspect of what home means to me. These paintings were created on rectangular wooden panels and were done in a more interpretive style.

Over the course of two months, I gathered data through my written and recorded reflections and the progress made throughout the process of making the artworks themselves. Most of the research was conducted in my apartment in order to further connect me to the overall concept of home.

Participants

Due to the heuristic nature of my research methodology, I was the sole participant. I was responsible for creating, collecting, and organizing the data from my research. Most of my data came from the process of creating artwork based on reflection of certain significant objects that I possess. I focused on one object at a time during my research in the hopes of becoming more intimate with each individual subject and the memories and underlying meanings attached to them.

Data Collection

Data collection was done both with hand-written notes during my times of reflection and through the process of artmaking itself. I documented progress using a small hand-held digital camera. I also used the final artworks depicting each significant object as a form of data for further reflection. “Creativity often requires trial and error, changing course based on new ideas and insights, and relying on one’s internal monitor or ‘hunches’” (Leavy, 2018, p. 11).

My process of creating and collecting data began with choosing the significant objects in my life that I wanted to focus on for this project. I chose three objects, all from different periods of my life; this resulted in a total of six paintings, three of which were still life paintings done at the beginning of my research on each object as well as three which were reflection paintings. Once my objects were chosen, I wrote a short reflection for each, justifying why it was so significant to me. After photographing each object and painting the small preliminary study and then using both the object and the photograph, I painted a reflection painting for each object. During this step, I gathered the object, photograph, and still life in order to analyze and plan my final artwork. When analyzing each object as well as the photograph and first still-life pieces, I took the time to “interview” the work, as Fish (2017) referred to it:

I asked my drawings for more information through witness writing and active imagination. I started the process by sitting comfortably in my living room across from the drawing, with the intention of being receptive to its message. Then I transcribed the imaginal dialogue as I experienced it. This took the form of a conversation between parts of the drawing and me. (p. 343)

My interview process was similar, although for me I allowed more of my stream of consciousness to be written, rather than a more structured conversation. I would write my thinking down, using commas to signify connected thoughts, and periods to signify when I moved on to a different concept. The interview process usually took between 30 minutes to one hour.

Once the interview was finished, I began to plan and create the final paintings for each object with an overall goal of conveying the personal meaning and significance of each object and, specifically, how it related to my definition of home. I paid special attention to composition and color when planning and how these would help to give

insight into what I had learned through research about each significant object. My hope was that, through a more personal abstraction of each object, I would be able to gain a clearer idea of what “home” means to me on an individual level.

According to Leavy (2018), “ABR requires us to think in these different ways as we develop projects, make sense of what we have learned, and transform the essence of what we have learned into a coherent expression” (p. 11). I also wanted to use my artistic craft to help me in this endeavor, both because it is an important aspect of who I am and because it is a method in which I can try to better understand the world around me. My grandmother is an artist and has worked as one her entire life; she is a member of my family who greatly encouraged me to pursue my growth as an artist. Because making art is something I relate closely to family, and family is often intertwined with the concept of home, I therefore equate my craft as being a significant aspect of my home life.

Data Analysis

My data analysis required my initial notes on each individual object as well as my notes from my “interview” later on in the process. For each set of notes, I highlighted and made special note of words that repeated or writing that held special significance. These smaller sections that I took away from my set of notes helped me in the planning of each final artwork. Essentially, during this part of data analysis, I condensed every piece of information gathered into the most meaningful and truthful finished artworks. Reflecting on the final artwork for each object was a form of data analysis in itself, portraying the concentrated aspects from my notes in a visual way. I did a final “interview” with each set of notes and each final artwork in order to better understand how visually

transforming my data had unveiled new information and allowed for more accessible understanding.

Limitations

My research process was very personal; I relied on my memories, experiences, and abilities when conducting research. This type of research brings with it all sorts of possible issues and constraints. As Freeman suggested in *Handbook of Arts-Based Research* (as cited in Leavy, 2018):

All I have are memories; and these, as we all know, are frequently quite blurry and indistinct. Plus, they are ones I have selected from the welter of experiences and events that comprise my life--which in turn suggests that I have some sort of 'account' in mind, one that points me in the direction of *this* rather than *that*. Then, of course, there is the challenge of somehow relating these experiences and events to one another, seeing what kind of pattern they form. (p. 124)

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS

Description of Artwork

Daruma Still Life Painting

The first object that I began my research with was the Daruma doll that I had brought back with me from my time in Japan. I wrote down a quick reflection, took a few close-up photographs of the doll, and then used one of my photographs as a reference for the still life painting. The painting was done on a 12x12 inch canvas with acrylic paint. I chose this significant object to focus on for this project because it symbolizes my time living abroad and how it affected my view of what home means.

Throughout this chapter, I will refer to quotes from my research notes in quotation marks. In my initial notes, I wrote that this doll was different from my other souvenirs from Japan. The Daruma doll “connects me to the culture as a participant” while other Japanese keepsakes were from events where I felt that I was “more of an observer”, watching from the outside. Daruma dolls are round, portly, and made of paper-mache. They are hollow, but have a weighted bottom that will always right the doll if it is knocked over (although my Daruma doll was damaged on the return flight to the U.S.). These dolls are made to represent “a Buddhist priest by the name of Bodhidharma;” Bodhidharma brought Zen Buddhism, “a method of training body and mind by sitting in quiet meditation,” to Japan (Atsuharu, 1947, p. 142).

When one acquires a Daruma doll, the eyes are left blank. It is customary to think of a wish or a goal and paint on one of the eyes, and then place the doll in a prominent place where it can be seen daily so one is reminded of the goal. I had my daruma doll for months, agonizing over what I wanted my goal to be. As our work visa in Japan grew close to expiring, I began to look into getting my master's degree. I painted on the left eye of my grumpy little Daruma doll and have been working towards the goal of receiving my master's for close to four years now. I struggled during the creation of the first still life painting, trying to negotiate between the object itself, my reference photographs, and my brushstrokes (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Alison Wilcox, *Daruma Doll*, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 12," 2019.

Daruma Reflection Painting

When I planned my reflection painting, I found myself incorporating the red of the Daruma doll. I used dark blues against shades of red and orange to evoke tension (see Figure 4). My planning sketches brought about two symbols: a figure and a house. In this first reflection painting, the figure is away from the house, but is looking back towards it as though to reassure herself.

The figure and home icon are both inside of circles, although they are separated by a representation of a forest. The circles that encapsulate my symbols are round and safe, juxtaposed by the surrounding pointed and sharp tree-like objects. This painting represents the reassurance of returning to home, no matter the reason one had to leave. I recall my time in Japan as a foreigner and the courage it took to go out and complete even the most mundane errands. I took to viewing my small apartment as my own private America, a place I could escape the rigid social norms of the culture I was living in. My time living somewhere so far removed from what I considered ordinary made me brave and more willing to go out from my home.

During my interview with the Daruma doll and the Daruma doll still life painting, I had found that:

“I associate my Daruma with winter, when I enjoy staying comfortable inside. Everything about the doll makes me want to push outside of my comfort zone and get things accomplished. It is very easy for me to curl up inside and hide and be lazy, but my Daruma lets me know that I will have time to do that later; right now I have things to do that need to get done.”

I learned through this process that the Daruma doll represents for me the aspect of home as the promise of rest once work is finished. I wanted to convey this in my reflection artwork, that I had home on my mind no matter how far away I strayed.



Figure 4. Alison Wilcox, *Daruma Reflection*, acrylic on canvas, 14" x 11," 2019.

Teapot Still Life Painting

The next significant object that I focused on was a china-painted teapot that had been a gift from my grandmother to me during my time in college (see Figure 5).

My grandmother is one of the reasons I pursued a career involved with the arts. She has worked as an artist, a china painter, her whole life. She taught me how to china paint as

well, although, as I note in my early reflection, “I find it to be a very slow and frustrating process”.

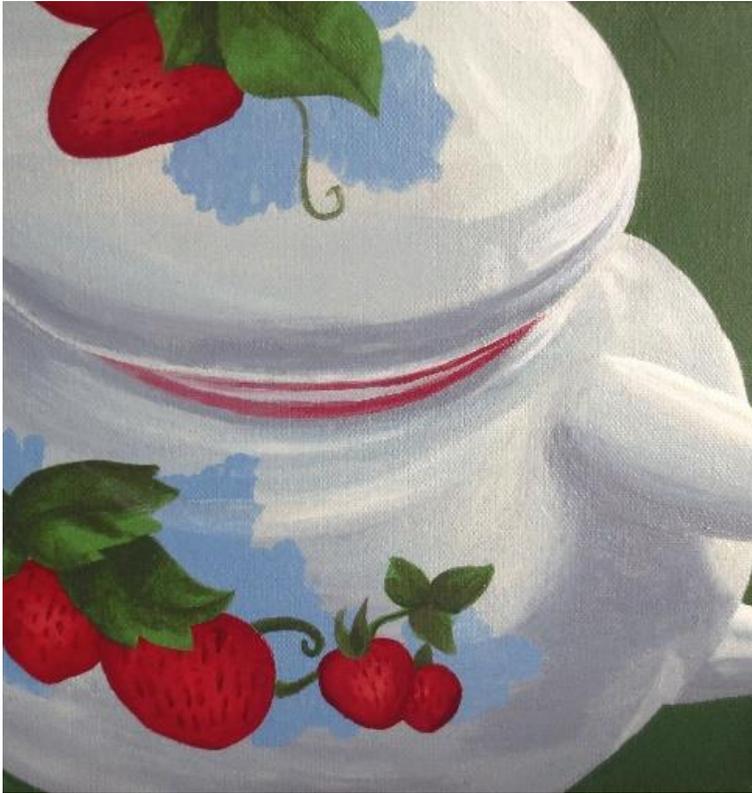


Figure 5. Alison Wilcox, *Teapot*, acrylic on canvas, 10” x 10,” 2019.

Every fall during my time in college I went with some of my family to a craft fair in the Arkansas Ozarks called “War Eagle.” My grandmother had been a vendor there since the 1960s; my mom and uncles used to go and help her with her booth when they were young, and now I was going with my cousins to help.

It was either my first or second year at the craft fair when this squat, single-serve teapot caught my eye. I don’t know why I liked it so much, there was just something

about it that made me happy. I let my grandmother know, and I soon received it as a birthday present the following year.

One interesting thought about the teapot that I came across in my interview notes was that I “appreciate it as an object, but don’t let it fulfill its function”. I believe that this concept can be applied to most of my significant objects; I treasure them and hold them close, but often do not utilize them in a functional way. This causes me to question why I deny these loved objects their purpose; is it for fear of losing my possessions to gradual wear and tear? Why should I not be able to let go some of my control and find “a kind of beauty not immune to time but embedded in it” (Doty, 2001, p. 40). Is it simply because I can find a sense of control in how I preserve these objects?

Teapot Reflection Painting

For my reflection painting, I used a monochromatic color scheme in order to evoke tranquility or peace, the way it felt when I spent time at my grandmother’s house when I was younger (see Figure 6). Those were long, lazy days spent together without worry about other responsibilities, days when I was allowed to play and practice my craft using my grandmother’s stockpile of art supplies.

In my notes I wrote that “this teapot “grounds” me a bit more than the Daruma doll; Where the doll dares me to go out of my comfort zone, the teapot invites me to sit and daydream a bit”. While planning my reflection painting, the figure and house symbol were once again used. In my Daruma doll reflection painting, the figure was looking back at the house and the two were separated. In this painting, I wanted to show a more introspective side involved with home. Because of this, I painted the house symbol within the figure’s chest. Below my planning sketches for this painting, I jotted down “the inner

dream of home kept near the heart”. I was equally inspired by this revelation from my notes: “The teapot represents an idealized version of home, one that might not ever come true, based on childhood daydreams”. So much of what home is to me, because I do not yet have a truly permanent living space, is internal; as Bachelard stated, “our soul is an abode” (1958, p. 21).

The house symbol in this painting was created using pyrography. I chose to incorporate wood burning because of the cabinets at my grandmother’s house, upon which she used pyrography to sketch windmills and farmhouses, some of her favorite subjects. I reminisced in my notes that there is a “connection of art that my grandma and I share, as well as the disconnect with our styles”. I elaborated on that thought later in my notes: “In a way, my still life paintings represent her more traditional style, while the post-interview paintings are more embodying of my own personal artistic style”. When I used the phrase “more traditional style” I meant how my grandmother often draws and paints realistically, while I often bring in more abstract elements into my work.

While creating my reflection painting, I found myself contemplating how I often view my memories of family in a positive manner, despite any friction or negative interactions we’ve had in the past that may still come to mind. In a way, I choose to compromise my feelings at times in order to be more at peace with others; I often ignore the aspects of others that irritate me in order to preserve harmony. This painting ended up being very dream-like, and I believe that it conveys this idea of focusing on the positive in order to achieve happiness. Often, there are imperfections that we cannot change and do not have control over, not only in our homes, but in our lives; I find a need to navigate these as best I can, which often for me is to focus on the parts that I find pleasure in.



Figure 6. Alison Wilcox, *Teapot Reflection*, acrylic on canvas, 14" x 11," 2019.

Childhood Toy Still Life Painting

This stuffed animal, who I named “Freddy” when I was younger, was a replacement for a different toy that had been lost on a family vacation. Freddy is my longest-kept possession, and he now sits upon a shelf with my husband’s similarly beloved childhood toy, “Clowny” (and, yes, Clowny is, in fact, a clown).

I wrote in my initial notes that “my childhood toy represents exactly that—childhood”. There were a few keywords I included, such as “freedom”, “play”, and “daydream”. I connected these first thoughts to “the hope and stability of a childhood

home”. Not everyone is lucky enough to have a stable or comfortable childhood home environment. I consider myself fortunate to have had such a warm and loving home to grow up in. Despite moving a fair amount, when I think of my childhood home, I think of the very first one we lived in, the house in which both my younger sister and I were born.

Since being on my own, I have yet to live in a physical place which makes me feel as secure as that first childhood home. “There were routines, adventures, sickness, sadness, sleepovers . . . but nothing felt so big that it made me lose sleep at night or become sick from worry”. I still watch home videos when I get the chance, when I visit my parents from time to time. Why do some have such a fascination with watching captured memories? Is it because those memories were so good, and we worry that maybe we will never get that again? From my notes: “I hold onto Freddy because what if that was all I got? What if I never feel that safe and loved and hopeful ever again? At least I have this physical piece to hold onto and remember”.

While creating my still life, I applied too much control in the beginning and found that I painted my toy too smooth. His fur was pilling from age and use. I finally let go and began to use more of a stippling technique which gave me less control over my brushstrokes, but created the correct texture (see Figure 7). I lovingly focused on the detail of his damaged eye, painting the fogginess of the peeled plastic. More than any other object, I looked very closely and deeply at Freddy. In the end, this painting seems alive with the essence of my childhood toy.



Figure 7. Alison Wilcox, *Childhood Toy*, acrylic on canvas, 10" x 10," 2019.

Where the grumpiness of my Daruma doll's face gives me courage, the smile of this childhood toy fills me with comfort and assurance. This came up during my interview with my still life painting. I wrote down that "his smile seems to tell me that everything will be alright". Due to the free-flowing conscious thought style of my interview notes, I often interjected with current worries and doubts.

But, my still life painting connected me to the essence of my childhood toy in a way that brought me reassurance. "I painted this, small victory, one tiny thing that doesn't make me feel small". Home is a shelter, a place where we can go when we need to retreat from the world; my childhood toy represents the restfulness and comfort of retreating from concerns, if only for a moment.

Childhood Toy Reflection Painting

When I began unpacking my interview notes on my childhood toy, I instantly picked up on the notion of the freedom that comes with childhood, a time when there was far less fear of failure for me. My childhood toy “represents a time when all possibilities were available and attainable”. I find that, as an adult, I am constantly trying to make others happy, even at the expense of my own happiness. I realized that Freddy also “represents a time when I was able to put myself first”. That freedom and confidence is hard to come by for me as an adult. Most people tend to imagine that as we grow, so too does our confidence. However, in my own personal experience, I have come to realize that the opposite seems to be true. When studying my interview notes from my childhood toy, I wrote:

“This stuffed toy represents a time when all possibilities were available and attainable. I hold onto him in order to hold onto my younger self. I was unafraid, climbing trees higher and higher without a thought for how I would get back down. In adulthood, I feel petrified and tied to the ground; the fear of failure has permeated my mind.”

I remember being so brave as a child, whereas now I am sometimes quite meek and unsure of myself. My childhood toy is a significant object for me because I want to reconnect with the confidence I possessed in childhood.

My grandmother’s teapot held a daydream quality to it, where I felt as though it represented an idealized version of home. More than that, Freddy represents “pure fantasy, freedom, fun” when it comes to imagining what home means to me--uninhibited imagination and the ability to not be afraid of the future, but excited for it.

In order to tap into this child-like quality, I decided to use the element of building blocks in this painting. I brought in the recurring home symbol, but this time it was

constructed with images of children's building blocks. This is still a very introspective version of home, so the house symbol is inside of the figure again. In my teapot reflection painting, I associated that significant object with emotions and so placed the home in the figure's chest. Since my childhood toy connects to creativity and an individualistic nature, I placed the home symbol inside the head of the figure (see Figure 8).

I made use of primary colors for the blocks, and painted the figure with grays. In the background, I used a fine point pen to create intricate scrawls and scribbles. These patterns visually parallel the free-flowing conscious stream of notes from my interview process. I let my mind and hand wander as I drew, causing these scrawls to also be reminiscent of times when I found it hard to focus in lectures or classes and would doodle in my notebooks as I listened.

Overall, throughout the process of studying each significant object closely and then interpreting them visually has enabled me to uncover new insights into my original research question; these include that significant objects are often denied their function, significant objects are often tied to idealized memories, and significant objects can show how we sometimes lose confidence with age, rather than gain it. I will go over a few of these new questions and insights in my next chapter.



Figure 8. Alison Wilcox, *Toy Reflection*, acrylic on canvas, 14" x 11," 2019.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The guiding question throughout my research was how do objects help me to build my own personal concept of home? Through the act of painting, I have closely studied a number of my own significant objects and have uncovered new questions. Why is it that I often place these significant objects on a pedestal and do not use them for their intended purpose? Is the way that I choose to make use of my significant objects related to my memories of them? How much of our concept of home is inspired by the physical, and how much is inspired by emotions and memories?

My research led me to new insights that I did not expect when starting with my original question. Most of my reflections seemed to draw upon my own relationship to my idea of home, rather than a more concrete definition of what home is. For instance, from my reflections on my Daruma doll, I found that I sometimes had the courage to leave my shelter when I knew there was the promise of home to return to. My grandmother's teapot made me realize that I tend to idealize my memories in order to bring about my own happiness with my surroundings. My childhood toy reminded me of times when I had the courage to dream fearlessly of my future. Through working on my reflection paintings, I have come to realize that my significant objects represent my own relationship to home as an idea, rather than a physical place.

From my research I have come to realize three main themes. First, significant objects are often denied opportunity to fulfill their intended function. Second, significant objects seem to become significant due to an idealization of memory. Lastly, significant objects can help to reconnect us with a time when we were sure of ourselves; this is especially true if, like I have experienced, one loses confidence as they grow rather than gain it. Overall, the research techniques used and artworks produced throughout this study have opened future avenues for exploration.

Every possession has a function, and yet the more precious the objects become, the more often it seems they are denied this function. My childhood toy was an object meant to bring comfort to me, and I now keep it up on a shelf that I cannot even reach. My grandmother's teapot has not been used as a teapot in over a decade, instead hiding amongst books in my living room. In my experience, objects wear down over time and with use. It is this fear of eventually changing or losing my significant objects that causes me to deny them their function.

I am a sentimental person. I value memories and past experiences. Often times, we do not enjoy dwelling on unpleasant memories and choose instead to place value on positive ones. This selective process of remembering can lead to an idealization of memory. Objects become significant when tied to idealized memories, becoming more precious when they embody a person or place that is dear to us.

As a child, I was outgoing and confident. As I have grown, I have found that I have experienced a loss of confidence. The more responsibilities and day-to-day stresses that I encounter lead to me question my abilities. I have come to realize that my significant objects embody a time when I was more sure of myself and my abilities.

Plans for Further Action

The research method used in this study was surprising and compelling. By completing two paintings for each significant object studied, I was able to reach deeper understandings and uncover new questions to explore. My interview process allowed me to make connections between the artmaking process, memories, questions, and insights. I plan to show my artwork as well as document or write about my research method.

I also am interested in integrating this topic into my art classroom. I often assign my students long-term free-choice projects centered around a single theme. It would be intriguing to see how my students address the theme of *Home* or *Significant Objects* in their artwork. This theme could be a way to encourage dialogue between students and build understanding.

Bringing in the interview process itself and utilizing it in my classroom is another future action I hope to take. In my personal experience, students are often frightened of making mistakes and are, at times, unwilling to talk about or critique artwork. Perhaps the free-flowing conscious stream of notes could be a way for them to look deeper at artworks, both their own, their fellow classmates, and those of other artists. Throughout my research process, especially the interview portion, I was able to uncover profound realizations and open up new questions that I can further pursue; it is my hope that this process will be able to provide my students the same opportunities to deepen their appreciation and understanding of their own artwork, as well as the artwork of others.

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