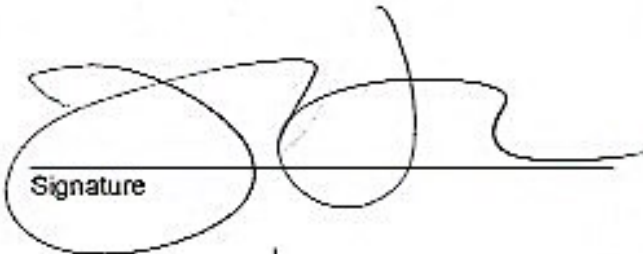


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THE OPULENT EYE

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May, 2016



THE OPULENT EYE

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Dedicated to Kona.

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As a child, I spent many summer evenings filling jars with fireflies. The bugs were magnificent but it was the containment of their illuminated energy that I found so magical. The same jar that once held my grape jelly now encapsulated a buzzing life force. My MFA thesis exhibition, *The Opulent Eye*, is a continuation of my fascination with the value we place on particular spaces. The work depicts vitrines and urns but it is not their physical structure that interests me rather the space that is captured within them.

*The Opulent Eye* stemmed from a previous series titled *The More I Build You* wherein I explored the concept of home as a conflict between stability and freedom. These paintings and drawings scrutinize the desire to establish an idealistic home while at the same time longing for travel and new experiences. In making this work I was most interested in Modern architects such as Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright (plates 1-3). This is ironic because the austerity of their styles lack the warmth associated with home. It was the clean and straightforward characteristics of the structures that I responded to. What they lack in coziness they make up for in solidness.

The research I did for *The More I Build You* series would also influence my thesis work. The drawings of these architects became even more inspiring than the actual buildings. The thought that these architectural sketches and blueprints were used as mere tools is what led to *Blueprints I, II, and III* (plate 4), the first pieces seen in *The Opulent Eye* exhibition. I saved the drawings and tracings during the making of this body of work

and made *Blueprints* from these studio remnants. They operate as blueprints in reverse as they are the final product not just preliminary work. These pieces are the essence of my entire thesis.

After making paintings and drawings of the exterior of houses for *The More I Build You*, I began to focus on the interiors of the buildings. I looked to artists that paint contemporary domestic environments like Matthias Weischer, Jim Richard, Dexter Dalwood, and Patrick Caulfield (plates 5-8). Their paintings lack a human subject and have the same sense of coldness as the work of the architects mentioned above.

These artists and architects perfectly organize their work in highly manipulated spaces. Seeing these paintings, architectural drawings, and models within a museum or gallery exhibition adds an additional layer of disconnect and tension. The scenes and buildings are for display, not for living. When visiting homes of his clients, Frank Lloyd Wright was known to move “his” furniture back to where it belonged in an effort to return it to his original vision<sup>1</sup>. Le Corbusier gave his clients strict instructions that the bedrooms have no curtains<sup>2</sup>. In Jim Richard’s paintings, the main subject is often a work of art situated directly in the center of a lavish interior; a painting within painting<sup>3</sup>. Initially, I placed the weight of understanding the concept of home entirely on its organized structure. In reality I was really

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<sup>1</sup> T.C. Boyle, “Living With Frank Lloyd Wright,” *CBS News*, May 18, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/living-with-frank-lloyd-wright/>.

<sup>2</sup> Roy J. Street, “Frank Lloyd Wright/Frank Lloyd Wrong,” *Counter-Currents Publishing*, June 4, 2015, <http://www.counter-currents.com/2015/06/frank-lloyd-wright-frank-lloyd-wrong/>.

<sup>3</sup> Micaela Frank, “Exhibition Pick: Jim Richard and Friends,” *Pelican Bomb*, April 16, 2016, <http://www.pelicanbomb/art-review/2016/exhibition-pick-jim-richard-and-friends>.

interested in the empty space held within the walls. This concept is the foundation of *The Opulent Eye*.

It was serendipitous that while working at the Kimbell Art Museum, I came across material which set in motion the path for my thesis. The museum's library offers duplicate catalogues and art magazines to the employees. One day while on break I selected one of these catalogues in hopes of finding collage material. In the September 22, 2011 issue of Christie's auction catalogue from the series, *The Opulent Eye*, I discovered an amazing image of a late 19th century French vitrine. It wasn't the beauty of the vitrine which caught my attention but its emptiness. The same feelings I attached to understanding the ideal home emerged but the vitrine was a more graspable subject. As a result of my discovery, all of the resource material was pulled from this catalogue. It wasn't long after working with the display cabinets that I began incorporating urns for the same reason such as *Private Collection* (plate 9) which is a suite of six small (6x6 inches) mixed media pieces depicting individual urns. With their smaller scale, an urn is an even more manageable object than a vitrine. In most cases you can hold one in your hands like you would a jelly jar.

For over one hundred years these vitrines and urns had been passed down as family heirlooms or gifted as wedding presents within the most elite and wealthiest of homes. And now, even though these objects are well out of my budget and class, they are available for me to purchase through an auction. Christie's website describes *The Opulent Eye*:

The *Opulent Eye* sale offers the finest 19<sup>th</sup> century furniture, sculpture, and works of art drawn from international collections and reflecting the eclectic styles of

the period from the regal grandeur of Napoleon's empire to the Art Nouveau of Belle Epoque Paris.

The Opulent Eye recalls a golden era of luxury and grandeur - an age of elegance, of the Paris Salon, of steam yachts, Newport Mansions, Russian Grand Dukes, winters on the Cote d' Azur, racing at Longchamp and waltzing in Vienna. Offering works of art of such handcrafted skill and precious materials, that they would be impossible to recreate today, the sale presents the opportunity to create a lifestyle of beauty and incomparable opulence.<sup>4</sup>

In this time period domestic salons were filled with curio cabinets. The home became a museum to show off exotic private collections. The displays were a form of entertainment and gave proof of far away travels. This notion created the experience we enjoy in museums today and greatly inspires my current work.

My employment in a variety of museum roles; ranging from selling exhibition tickets to lonely administrative roles in dark cubicles, became a natural extension of my studio practice. Residing amongst all of the moving parts that make up the life of an exhibition gave me the fascination of the museum world. As an employee and a patron I see the museum as being divided into two parts; on-view or public and off-view or private.

The public experiences a highly polished, neatly arranged selection of items whereas the museum employees see the items surrounded by their many other components. Curators, scholars, and registrars sort through massive amounts of objects and information in order to give the public the opportunity to better understand it.

I began visiting and working from off-view animal specimen collections to gather reference material for my work. I photographed, sketched, and wrote detailed descriptions of

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<sup>4</sup> *Christie's*, March 11, 2015, <http://www.christies.com/The-Opulent-Eye--25423.aspx>.

the specimens but it was the space that housed the collections that had the biggest influence. The air inside of that room was no different than outside of it but there was a difference - why? The cabinets, drawers, and jars with hand-written labels did more than just store the collection, they protected, preserved, and organized it. Unlike the meticulously arranged on-view exhibitions, the off-view spaces allowed for arbitrary pairings like a curator's coffee mug next to a drawer of butterflies or two creatures laying side by side that never would have met in nature. The exhaustive archiving and documentation of a specimen told its story. It is possible to follow the path of an individual bird skin, for example, by researching the tags attached to its foot. I followed a 134-year journey of a Collared Aracari skin as it traveled through four different museum collections. These off-view spaces are full of amazing stories that can be uncovered if one takes the time and makes the effort.

A museum exhibition that greatly inspired the format of my thesis show is *Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision*, from the permanent collection of The Menil Collection in Houston, Texas. The exhibit is of tribal art objects that were owned by the Surrealists. The small gallery guide explains the exhibit:

They assembled these tribal images in their studios and homes, juxtaposing them randomly, without regard for function, culture, or history. They let objects collide. They hoped accident would reveal analogies that convention concealed.<sup>5</sup>

Next to each item is a beautiful brass disc stamped with the coinciding catalogue number allowing the viewer to identify each object in the catalogue. I choose to use similar discs in my thesis show and this cataloguing system along with the same low lighting in order to help

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<sup>5</sup> Gallery guide, *Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision*, The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas.



the Moudy Gallery space take on the feeling of a 19th century salon or an intimate auction sale preview.

I not only enjoyed the Menil's collection for how it is presented but for its illustration of collecting and our sometimes obsessive need of the ownership of particular objects. In my show I use multiples as a mode to convey this need to collect. Five of the eight works are made up of multiple panels. In some cases, *Urns on Auction Day* (plate 10) and *The Property of a Gentleman* (plate 11) for example, I have reconstructed two or three urns to become one urn. This repetition also mimics the countless number of species and objects found within museum inventories. *Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision* is a great example of how collections begin. The Surrealists accumulated the items through travel, family, and experiences - they hold an element of the haunted. In order to replicate these elements, I continuously layer and remove the paintings, drawings, and collages to create a sense of history and the discovery of memories in the work.

*Lot 19* (plate 12) is a response not only to the number of objects within a collection but also the variety found. It is comprised of twenty-four panels. Each painting depicts a vitrine and each surface is treated differently. Acrylic, oil, Flashé paint, collage, vinyl cutouts, oil pastels, and colored pencil are some of the mediums used in the work. This diversity of materials reflects the variations within collections and extends to other works such as *Three Vitrines* (plate 13) and *The Property of a Gentleman* which are made of plaster, wood, Plexiglas, collage, thread, and found materials. Important references for these pieces are the work of Doris Salcedo and Rachel Whiteread. I am interested in both artists' use of

furniture, domestic environments, and wide range of materials. In her 1992 piece, *Untitled* (plate 14), Salcedo dissects an armoire, chairs, and upholstery in order to reconfigure them into one new piece using concrete and steel. Whiteread's *Ghost* (plate 15) is a plaster cast of the interior of a Victorian parlor. Both works reconstruct and redefine objects and space as well as encapsulate intangible ideas such as memory and history.

Even though *The Opulent Eye* exhibition depicts the imagery of recognizable objects, it is not the objects that are the main subject. The objects reveal the ideas around them and that is what I want to better understand. These ideas include space and its ability to take on value, collecting and the human need to believe in the history held within objects, and making order out of chaos through archiving and display. Just as *The Opulent Eye* was fed by a previous series, it too will fuel the next body of work and like all collections will continue to grow over time.

## PLATES



Plate 1: Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona Pavilion, Barcelona, Spain, 1929



Plate 2: Le Corbusier, Villa La Roche, Paris, 1925



Plate 3: Frank Lloyd Wright, Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona, 1937



Plate 4: *Blueprints I, II, and III*, graphite and colored pencil on tracing paper, 38x29 inches each, 2015





Plate 5: Matthias Weischer, *Fernsehturm*, oil, 78x114 inches, 2004



Plate 6: Jim Richard, *Sticks*, oil, 52x47 inches, 2004



Plate 7: Dexter Dalwood, *Room 100 Chelsea Hotel*, oil,  
72x84 inches, 1999



Plate 8: Patrick Caulfield, *Interior with Picture*, acrylic,  
76x76 inches, 1985-6



Plate 9: *Private Collection*, mixed media, 6x48 inches, 2016



Plate 10: *Urns on Auction Day*, collage and oil, 24x31 inches, 2015





Plate 11: *The Property of a Gentleman*, mixed media, 57x41 inches, 2016





Plate 12: *Lot 19*, mixed media, 38x103 inches, 2015-2016

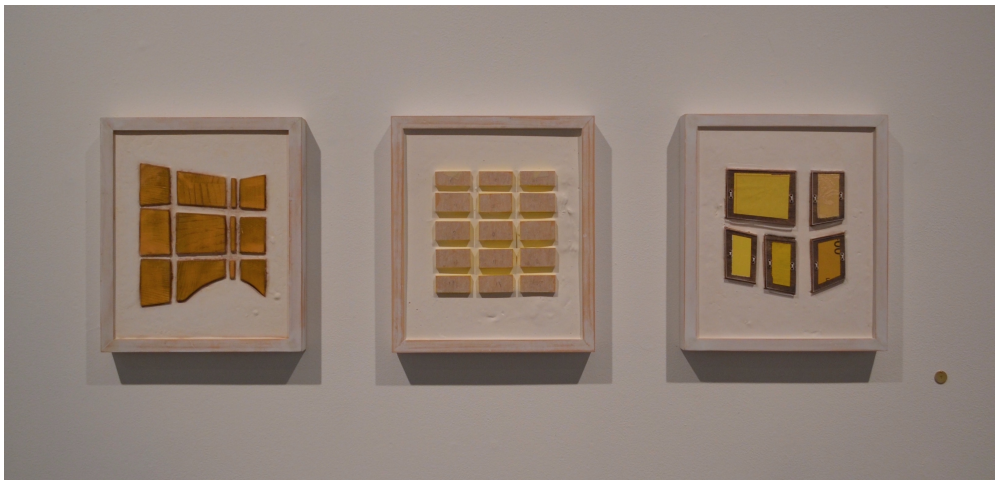


Plate 13: *Three Vitrines*, mixed media, 13 3/4x42 inches, 2016



Plate 14: Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, armoire with glass, wooden chairs with upholstery, concrete and steel, 45x73 1/2x20 inches, 1992



Plate 15: Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost*, plaster on steel frame, 106x140x125 inches, 1990

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## VITA

Layla Luna was born on November 17, 1975 in Fort Worth, Texas. She is the daughter of William Thomas McDonald and Linda Jane Gustafson. In 1994 she graduated from Aledo High School in Aledo, Texas. After receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting from Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona in 2008, she completed the Postgraduate Diploma Program in Fine Art in 2011 from Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand.

In 2014, Luna was awarded with a Graduate Assistantship from Texas Christian University in studio art. While working towards her Master of Fine Arts degree, with concentration in Painting, she worked with the Galleries at TCU (2014-2015) and performed as a teaching assistant in Advanced Drawing and Advanced Painting (2015-2016).

## ABSTRACT

My MFA thesis exhibition, *The Opulent Eye*, explores my fascination with the value we place on particular spaces. The work depicts vitrines and urns but it is not their physical structure that interests me rather the space that is captured within them. Placing a seashell, dish, artifact, or any other item inside of a display case instantly classifies that object as having significant worth. I am interested with the life force that exists inside of these parameters and the ability of an object to become something special by being separated and protected from the rest of the world. This paper will define the two main influences of *The Opulent Eye*; my previous series which explores the concept of the ideal home and my experience as a museum patron and employee.