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Ice Balloon

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ICE BALLOON

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Dedicated to my husband and partner, Peter Simek, with gratitude for your love and commitment; to my children Eva, Felicity, and Oliver, with great delight in the gift of your ingenuity and spirit; and to Cam Schoepp and Gavin Morrison, my guides on this adventure.

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ABSTRACT

Ice Balloon is a thesis exhibition that, through various sculptural works, drawings and video, explores themes of impotency, failure, misunderstanding and the sometimes-fertile products of dashed hope and defeat, such as beauty. As a touchstone, the exhibition uses the story of S. A. Andrée's attempt to reach the North Pole in a hot air balloon.

VITA

Lucia Simek was born on January 2, 1981 in Irving, Texas. She is the daughter of Glenn and Virginia Lombardo Arbery. She graduated from Bishop Dunne High School in 1999 in Dallas, Texas, and received a Bachelor of Arts in Painting from the University of Dallas in 2003.

In August 2012, Lucia enrolled at Texas Christian University for graduate studies in Studio Art. While working on her Master of Fine Arts, concentrating in Sculpture, she held a TCU Graduate Assistantship as editor of the TCU Sculpture Department website (2012-13), as well as a teaching assistant to Drawing I and Sculpture I (2013-14).

In the summer of 1897, after years of preparation and research, a team of three amateur Scandinavian explorers set off in an enormous hot air balloon in hopes of discovering the North Pole. The leader of the group was a Swede named S. A. Andrée, and the idea to reach the Pole in such a “half-ancient conveyance” was solely his.¹ Although he was certain the mission was viable and he was persuasive enough to earn the support, both scientific and financial, from important entities like the Swedish government and famed philanthropist Alfred Nobel, most weathered Arctic explorers doubted entirely Andrée’s ability to successfully complete the expedition.

When Andrée and his two companions, twenty-four year-old Nils Strindberg and twenty-six year-old Knut Fraenkel, left on July 11 from the small Norwegian island in the Arctic called Svalbard in a hot air balloon named “The Eagle,” it was the last time they were ever seen alive. The details of their ill-fated mission remained a mystery until wayward sealers discovered their death camp, complete with journals and reels of undeveloped film that documented their four-month march through the ice, thirty-three years later in the summer of 1930.

I turned to the story of Andrée’s beautiful, if doomed, aerial mission by happenstance. I was nearly finished making work for my thesis show when I discovered the book called *The Ice Balloon* by Alec Wilkinson, which catalogues Andrée’s journey and after which my thesis exhibition is named. Andrée’s stalwart commitment to his hare-brained expedition confirmed many of the ideas I had been considering over the last two years as I shaped a body of work: impotency, failure, misunderstanding, and the sometimes-fertile products of dashed hope and defeat, such as beauty. The image of a vulnerable silk hot air balloon ascending into the farthest Arctic regions of the unconquered world and then landing and deflating on the ice (Fig. 1) became a kind of touchstone for my work then, guiding the rest of what was

¹ Alex Wilkinson. *The Ice Balloon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 51.

to be made, as well as steering what was already well underway, toward a more poetically cohesive visual and intellectual terrain.

The work in *Ice Balloon* began with a series of dowel rods that I would idly bind together in pairs whenever studio activity seemed dry. After making a few rods without any direction in mind, I began to see the system of rules I had unconsciously set up for myself: always two rods bound together so they were close, but not touching; always rods taken from the rack at a big-box supply store; and they should always look like they could perform some purpose. Then I began to make *The Rods* (Fig. 3-4) in earnest, following this set of limitations, with a few exceptions among the pieces—an occasional unbound pair or a set made from old dowels rather than new ones. The rods are usually bound or fastened with the detritus of my domestic life and studio practice: spent electrical cord, discarded rope from failed projects, hazard tape, and holiday string. Each set of rods has a formal pictorial quality, with a strong concern for composition. Some are more successful than others, though determining that is largely subjective. Some are refined, articulate and very structural; others are, as one professor lightheartedly put it, “complete failures” in the manner of Richard Tuttle—something loose and un-self-conscious. That balance between tightness and flimsiness helps push the ideas of striving, vain or otherwise, that run as an undercurrent in my thinking.

En masse, *The Rods* have the look of a supply of absurd weapons—Samurai swords, whaling harpoons, or cannon-ramming rods; they also look very much like the playful inventions of feral children. And very few of the coupled rods are autonomous—they cannot be lifted or handled without partially falling apart, further emphasizing their absurdist tone. The contingent nature of *The Rods*, combined with their tangle of references, deliver them into a realm of fantasy or suspended reality.

The urge to functionally deploy them is strong in the body—to fend off a combatant, say, or stir an outsized vat of soup—and one has to practice a certain measure of restraint in order to resist that

urge to handle them. Within the context of an exhibition titled *Ice Balloon*, *The Rods* seem like part of the slew of tools that could not save Andree and his crew on their ice trek. *The Rods* in the exhibition that were displayed on the ground in an orderly row reference the nulled power of objects within an orderly museological tableau, like defunct weapons set out as art objects at any encyclopedic museum. Like those real weapons and tools, *The Rods'* considered yet utterly unfunctional nature allows them to also operate within an aesthetic and conceptual realm as art. Meanwhile *The Rods* that are propped along the wall reference weapons or tools at-the-ready, on the deck of a ship, let's say, waiting to be used.

The series of reductive paper drawings under the title *Rigging* and the small foam sculptures under the title *Conditional Monuments* in *Ice Balloon* (Fig. 5), all also explore these ideas of utility and de-function. Both of these series have their origins as packing materials: the images in the drawings are the traced silhouettes of flattened cardboard box inserts, used to protect digital equipment or other fragile components for shipment, and the foam pieces are a variation on their cardboard counterparts, also used to pad and protect vulnerable and expensive items like medical supplies, computer parts, and cameras.

First and foremost, I was drawn to these packing-material ready-mades because of their implicit architectural references, specifically Brutalist architecture, which had a brief and glorious heyday from the 1950s to the mid-1970s. Brutalism is defined by hulking, concrete fortress-like forms, described by contemporary British critic Jonathan Meades as “inverted pyramids, allusive shapes, reckless cantilevers, toppling ziggurats, vertiginous theater, imitations of pyrites, the defiance of gravity.”² It was a popular style for government or institutional buildings throughout Europe and the United States. I was interested in that visual connection and contradiction: how the soft or pliable form made of foam, designed for the very specific purpose of protecting something, could reference so strongly the stalwart, rock-hard shapes of Brutalism, with its countenance of formidable power. Both foam and architecture act as bunkers, but

² Jonathan Meades. *Bunkers, Brutalism and Bloodymindedness: Concrete Poetry with Jonathan Meades*, television series, BBC Four, 2014.

unlike the architecture, the packing materials lose their purpose once the object they protect has been removed and put to use. Much like weapons put in a museum, the packing materials carry a history of utility and strength but are now disarmed.

Upon taking these materials up, I tried to push this corollary between Brutalist architecture and its miniature packing-material doppelgangers, thinking all along, again, of what can be harvested from the byproducts of purpose. The packing materials are treated like fanciful architectural models, signifying something that would *not* be realized, though *could* be: the foam inserts *are* feasible models, the smaller ones, in fact, are very reminiscent of the Soviet war monuments scattered about the former Soviet block in Eastern Europe, while the larger pieces recall the work of American architect Paul Rudolph. That the packing-material works sit on the floor is a gesture signifying play, in many ways, as if the hulking antecedents of these small forms have been shrunk down to fit in a gallery. Setting small objects which allude to larger ones (monuments, bunkers, etc.) on the ground is also, converse to ideas of play, a gesture that positions the objects in a perceptual and intellectual space of conflict, teasing expectations regarding sculptural presence and the macho-scale of similarly architectural work—Donald Judd’s stacked aluminum boxes, Carl Andre’s timber configurations, and the more recent work of Matias Faldbakken and Oscar Tuazon. The *Conditional Monuments* also make reference to digital products, creating a corollary between architecture’s ability to project power and modern technology’s ability to do the same.

The next work, a large text piece, *A Mariners’ Lexicon, Abridged* (Fig. 6-7), lists a variety of terms for ice as culled from various sources of ice nomenclature. Looking to the crystalline yet impermanent “architecture” of icebergs, the letters of the ice words are formed from cyanotype photographs of Brutalist architecture, specifically Habitat 67—an apartment complex made up cubes set in odd formations—to create visual corollaries between the two structural forms. The text is also oriented vertically to create a kind of concrete image of an iceberg formation. It was important to me to use the cyanotype method both for the cool quality of its blue and because the chemical process of making the

image through cyanotype requires the full light of the sun, and I was keen on having the heat of the sun allow the ice terms to be populated with imagery, again employing a certain dependent contrariness.

The series of three works under the title *By Some Circumstance* (Fig. 8) explore how information can be misinterpreted, misplaced, or conveyed with error, and how those mistakes can make a new image in reality or in the imagination. The first image in the series is a quote from Paul Gauguin: “By some circumstance, because I don’t read the newspapers, I found out that Strindberg had set off for the North Pole in a balloon, but since then no one has heard anything. But I do hope that he comes back without delay and without having broken his arms and legs.” The quotation reveals that because of his ignorance of current events, Gauguin created a new narrative for the flight of the Eagle to the North Pole, one that sent his playwright friend August Strindberg into the Arctic instead of an the aeronaut Nils Strindberg. The vinyl text of the quote is applied to the wall in the manner of a Russian Avant-garde or Constructivist sign or publication: applied first in a straight horizontal line, the text begins to slowly tilt at a slope as Paul Gauguin’s mistaking of the two Strindbergs becomes clear. The text, like Gauguin’s reference to broken arms and legs, breaks and falls apart.

The second piece in *By Some Circumstance* is a 1-100 number chart that is traced wrongly, evidence of a child’s boredom: the numbers are all shifted down a tens place, creating a map of a child’s wandering mind as it subscribes to a dictated purpose. The incorrectness of her math makes instead a beautiful image that rather than indicate failure, speaks to a mind lost in imaginary worlds, unencumbered by the prescription to maintain order.

Lastly, the series includes a found video, shot from the point of view of a child swinging in a hanging chair. The camera tracks the room as she sings a song—a lullaby or dirge. Towards the end of the video, the child turns the camera toward herself and says: “Thank you for listening to my beautiful song. And remember: all accounts in this song are built for you,” and then she turns the camera back out again,

and continues to swing and sing. The back-and-forth swinging motion of the film mimics the sensation (if one can imagine it) of swinging in a hot air balloon basket just before it touches the ground, which I found an ironic coincidence when I discovered the video on my camera after my daughter had used it, unbeknownst to me. Also serendipitous is her conflation of a digital radio ad—“all accounts in this song are built for you.” It’s a kind of fanciful, Digital Age interruption upon the lyrical, consistent with our contemporary co-dependent relationship to technology.

Together, the three elements within *By Some Circumstance* synthesize ideas of order, adventure and technology that weave throughout the exhibition, emphasizing the role that mistakes or slight shifts in understanding, trajectory or desire play in creating something new and possibly beautiful, like the fertile image of Andrée’s balloon stranded on the ice.

Could it be, then, that the work is really about success?



Fig 1: The Eagle crashed. Photograph: Nils Strindberg, 1897



Fig 2



Fig 3: *The Rods*, 2012-ongoing; wood and mixed media.



Fig 4: *The Rods*, 2012-ongoing; wood and mixed media.



Fig 5: Above: *Rigging* (series), 2013-14; Below: *Conditional Monuments* (series), 2013-14



Fig 6: *Ice Balloon* installation

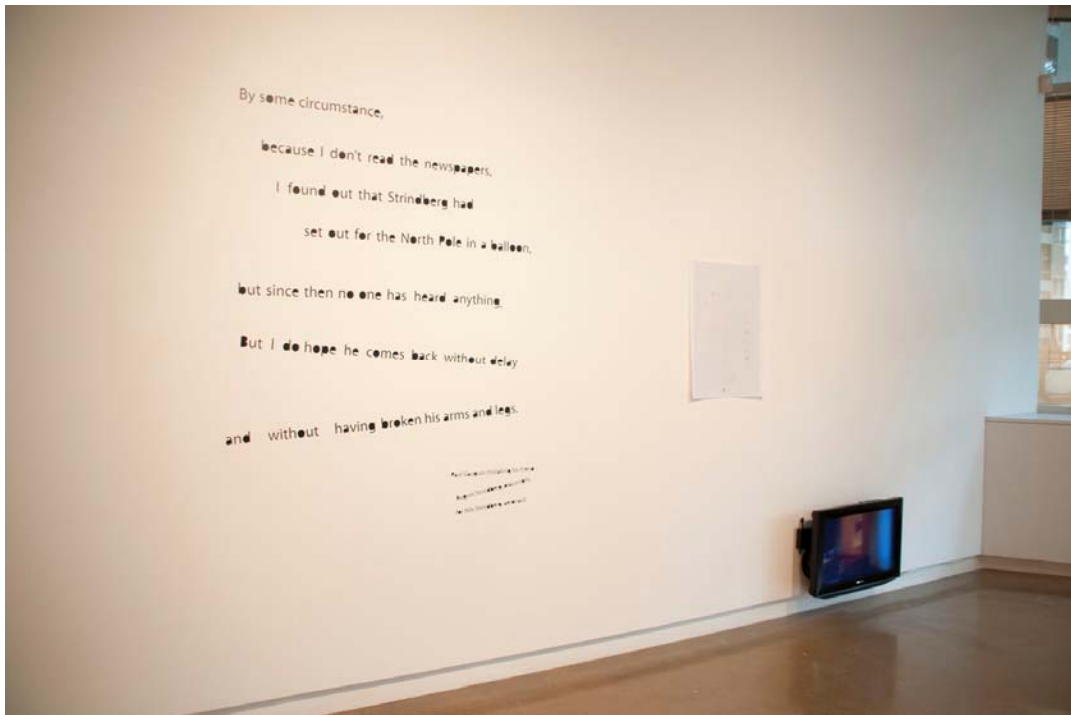


Fig 8: *By Some Circumstance*, 2014



Fig 9: *Ice Balloon*