

JACK DIDDLY SQUAT

by

Madeline Ortega

Bachelor of Fine Art, 2019, University of Texas at Arlington

An MFA Thesis Statement

Submitted to the Faculty of

College of Fine Arts

Texas Christian University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Art



May

2023

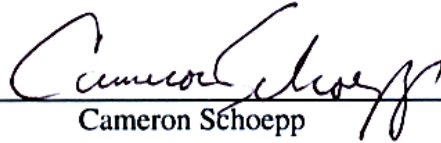
APPROVAL

JACK DIDDLY SQUAT

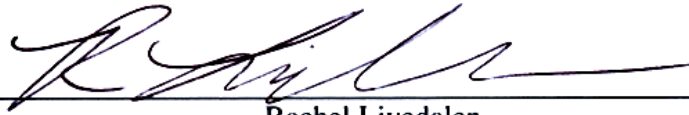
by

Madeline Ortega

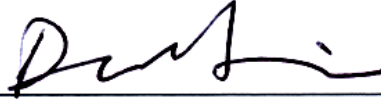
Thesis approved:



Cameron Schoepp



Rachel Livedalen



Dan Jian

Copyright by
Madeline Ortega
2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation and my thesis exhibition were completed with the support of many people. I would first like to thank my family, specifically my parents, for supporting me in my artistic career and helping me throughout my life to find my path. I would also like to thank my sister, cousins, and grandparents for all of my childhood memories – especially those we created at the farm. The various people who have served on my committee, Cameron Schoepp, Rachel Livedalen, Chris Powell, Dan Jian, and Nick Bontrager, have pushed me to stay true to myself and find the treasures within my making. My cohort, Benjamin Loftis, Sheryl Anaya, and Sarah Theurer Hunt will be my Italy buddies for life, thank you for your thoughts, questioning, and encouragement throughout the years. Ben, thank you for being my anchor, guiding me through these strange, transitory three years and being my endless motivation.

I would like to dedicate this text, alongside the work in my exhibition, to my parents and Nana and Grandad.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	ii
List of Figures.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Concrete Domains.....	1
Give and Take: A Metaphor	3
A Form Of Play (Relief)	8
Reflections	11
Conclusion	12
Bibliography	14
VITA	
ABSTRACT	

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: View of cabin at the farm.....	2
Figure 2: Entrance view of <i>Jack Diddly Squat</i>	4
Figure 3: Detail of <i>Whoman - 81 inches</i>	5
Figure 4: Installation view of <i>North Tank</i>	7
Figure 5: View of <i>my feet reached no ground</i>	8
Figure 7: Alternative view of <i>a hole in the gravel</i>	10
Figure 6: Installation view of <i>a hole in the gravel</i>	10
Figure 8: Detail view of <i>they watched as I watched them</i>	11

INTRODUCTION

In my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, *Jack Diddly Squat*, I navigate loss through child-like play with familiar materials and routines. The outcome of this exploration results in an exhibition consisting of a metaphorical representation of my occupied mind - one that never looks forward without looking behind.

The title *Jack Diddly Squat* refers to a euphemistic phrase typically used to mean “nothing” in American slang, specifically when there is an expectation that was not fulfilled.¹ Other than being a customary phrase to hear in the South, it is also an expression that I heard growing up. My Grandad and Dad are the primary users of this phrase, making it one that sentimentally epitomizes the Southern slang used in my family and the cyclical nature of generational experience. In relation to the show, the phrase is satirically used to represent the unseen labor, grief and loss that I have experienced while remaining a tender way to title the exhibition. The sentiment to the phrase is connected to the memories I hold from childhood, particularly the innocence and contentment I remember feeling at my family farm – a property owned by my grandparents that my cousins and I frequently visited as children.

CONCRETE DOMAINS

The farm is an eighteen-acre Blackland Prairie tract in western Navarro County near Frost, Texas.² It is a long, quiet drive off of the main road leading to a dusty gravel one only inhabited by three families in trailers. Upon entering the gate from the gravel road is the cabin.

¹ Jonathan E. Lighter, *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House Reference, 1994) 1:588.

² Keith Olenick, *Wildlife Management Plan* (Austin: Landmark Wildlife Management, 2021) 3.

Built by my grandparents, the house is approximately five-hundred square feet and is “jerry-rigged” in the finest fashion from plywood floors to a ceiling assembled with cedar fencing. The house sits in the middle of two stock tanks, lined by many small bumpy crawdad mounds. Each pond is about a ten-minute walk down a gentle slope where greedy minnows, catfish, and toads await to be fed by eager six- to twelve-year-old kids. Although long and narrow, a few cows occupied the farm for a while alongside their neighbors – a resident skunk, the fattest toad, and more wasps building their nests on door locks than my fingers can handle.



Figure 1: View of cabin at the farm

Although quaint, the farm was plenty for my cousins, sister, grandparents and me to spend weeks at a time visiting. Those significant memories later influenced my art practice.

While much of *Jack Diddly Squat* originates with fond memories of childhood, my intuitive process of making forces recent hardships and grief to surface. The deaths of family members, animal companions, and loneliness during the pandemic reach the surface of many works and emit nightmarish undertones. The affection towards childhood experiences considers these warm tones alongside the sorrow associated with loss and grief. In addition to recent instances of loss, the distance between my current daunting environment and those fond memories leads me to feel out of control and forces me to mourn the impermanence of my childhood. Within *Jack Diddly Squat*, I interpret the concepts of loss and grief by relying on the experiences of the farm. This connection is explained in an essay titled “Metaphor: Bridging Embodiment to Abstraction,” in which the authors state that “metaphors allow us to draw on concrete, familiar domains to acquire and reason about abstract concepts.”³ This look into the past causes me to play within vagueness and positions the viewer to encounter the work’s stubborn nature. This approach is characterized through the non-traditional installation of artwork and how much the audience is allowed to understand before being pushed away once more.

GIVE AND TAKE: A METAPHOR

Upon entering the space, the sparseness of the gallery elicits uncertainty. While intending to rebel against the traditional accessibility of artwork to a viewer, the space is curated so that various pieces are difficult to see or are hard to find. While faux crawdad mounds camouflage against the floor, hand-made lampshades cover out-of-reach gallery lighting, and colorful imitation mud dauber nests litter the wall of the space, the show questions the concept of

³ Anja Jamrozik, Marguerite Mcquire, Eileen R. Cardillo, and Anjan Chatterjee, “Metaphor: Bridging Embodiment to Abstraction,” *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 23, no. 4 (August 2016): 1080, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-015-0861-0>.

domestic space, including my perceptions of domestic spaces within the natural world, while interrogating time. These parallels are apparent in Martin Heidegger's essay, "Off the Beaten Track," where he investigates these relationships, arguing that the conception of artwork is characterized by previous experiences and is embodied through allegory and symbol.⁴ In the case of *Jack Diddly Squat*, I reference childhood and touch on moments of clarity within physical materials before resorting to an abstract veil while processing emotion. The push and pull within my work forces ambiguity and frustration while acting as a metaphorical way to travel between the past and present. Within the exhibition, the facetious installation of artwork causes confrontation and wonder. It asks the audience to observe closely, leading uncovered information to become lost and overlooked.



Figure 2: Entrance view of *Jack Diddly Squat*

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*. trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

The first to confront the viewer is a mock spiderweb titled *Whoman – 81 inches*. Made of primarily horsehair, mournfully gathered from my late companion of ten years, the web hangs nearly invisible, suspended between the floor and ceiling. The fishing line suspension permits tiny clothespins to frailly hold the web in mid-air. These clothespins and the eighty-one-inch strand of lime green baler twine interlaced within the web, act as the only comfortably visible aspects of the work. Intending to draw the viewer in close, the frustratingly hard to see glossy, gray horsehair silently hangs without a well-defined host. Rather, it exists as an abandoned nest, dwelling, and home. As the creator of this habitat, this piece is the first in the show to characterize the intersection between the understanding of my domestic space with the child-like, empathetic interest in animal, or bug, dwellings. It hints at autobiographical details, while remaining shrouded by abstraction.



Figure 3: Detail of *Whoman - 81 inches*

To reach for what is familiar or close to me in my making feels authentic. The authors Jamrozik, Mcquire, Cardillo, and Chaterjee in the essay “Metaphor: Bridging Embodiment to Abstraction,” validate my process stating that “repeated metaphoric use drawing on particular aspects of concrete experience can result in the development of new abstract representations.”⁵ In this case, a horsehair web is hosting an ambiguous strand of twine, seemingly trapped. Though this piece originates with grief, the subtle personal references to the farm act as a shoulder to add weight onto. References to fishing and the reminiscence of an orb weaver spider on her web, suspended between two tree branches, call on recollections of the farm and act as a crutch to process loss.

Much like the ambiguity that can be investigated within *Whoman-81 inches*, the large installation of curtains in *North Tank* questions the seen and unseen. Facilitated by twelve sets of windows, the curtains are hung just high enough so that light can enter from below – disrupting the communication between interior and exterior spaces. Similar to those at the farm, the gingham vallances hang on tension rods within each window, embellished with various items from my collection. The curtains display acts of application, removal, cutting, painting, testing, and sewing. Through these acts of instinct, each curtain is a new canvas to paint on, with various objects and materials obtained from hoarding acting as the palette. Most of the objects are sentimental in some way, while some are remnants of fidgeting and involuntary destruction.

⁵ Jamrozik, Mcquire, Cardillo, and Chatterjee, “Metaphor: Bridging Embodiment to Abstraction,” 1080.



Figure 4: Installation view of *North Tank*

Collecting is a sentimental act that prepares for loss - in a way it is self-sabotage. I hoard random things that make themselves known to me or are gifted to me by others. In some cases, they become significant aspects of a piece, such as the baler twine used to measure my horse in *Whoman – 81 inches* or the mud, collected from previous artwork, used in *wolf spider (toad in his home)*. In an installation such as *North tank*, the many objects hint at a meaningless narrative. The billows within the suspended structure of the fabric pull some sections forward while hiding others. Again, this intentional concealment or revelation pushes and pulls the viewer to and from understanding, enforcing ambiguity and uncertainty.

A FORM OF PLAY (RELIEF)

Made primarily from wood, fabric, foam, and mud, *my feet reached no ground* uses references to the familiar and safe materials of the farm to evaluate change over time. The structure originates with the reminiscence of my childhood dining chairs and was made from raw materials to mimic the turned-wood seat that would lift my small body to the table. Jerry-rigging wooden dowels to construct the chair, using glue and screws inadequately while saving sewing pins as a memento of my labor, provided the ability for the later, fully upholstered furnishing to begin falling apart after being slathered with mud.



Figure 5: View of *my feet reached no ground*

Although drying to a lightweight, cracked surface that mimics the landscape of the farm, the initial application of the water-weighted mud causes my makeshift objects to slowly fall apart. While I hold skillsets to be able to construct nearly faultless objects, there is intentionality to create makeshift things. They become ephemeral and melancholic, much like the dining chairs I no longer see, and accurately play into my ruminating thoughts of time and home. Although a fragile process, it is strangely sentimental to create in this way because it parallels the tactics for construction at the farm and touches on the intergenerational sharing of language and methods I absorbed from my grandparents.

Other works in the exhibition, such as *a hole in the gravel*, use the same methodologies as the fabrication of *my feet reached no ground*. Recalling times of play in the mud, these upholstered objects again are slathered with soaked soil and represent more recent scenes that exist at the farm. After entering a dark, intimate space created by four portable walls in the far corner of the gallery, a group of mimetic tools anticipate a viewer – two shovels, a hoe, and a three-tine rake. Across from them stand four boards reaching towards the top of the ten-foot walls, only covered with mud as far as my arms can reach. Below, a wagon, bucket, some ambiguous golf balls, and a ceramic skunk hiding behind a square board, idle quietly. Above them are foam tools, fastened to the wall with sewing pins. An off-white and black ticked fabric, with origins in classic farmhouse décor, bedding, and working class uniforms, is used to conceal the wooden structure and soft foam shroud.⁶

⁶ Christina Garton, “Ticking: From Humble Origins to High Society,” *Piecework*, Accessed April 16, 2023, <https://pieceworkmagazine.com/ticking-from-humble-origins-to-high-society/>.



Figure 6: Installation view of *a hole in the gravel*



Figure 7: Alternative view of *a hole in the gravel*

Coupled with the obsessive physicality of upholstering life-like objects, the application of mud becomes an act of play and form of relief. In this case, the group of shed-inspired objects draws from the concreteness of what exists, such as the shed at the farm, while aiding in the process of healing. The pensive, yet intensely obsessive process of making, culminating with compulsive acts of free will, allows weight to shed. It is therapy, much like the obsessive creation of *they watched as I watched them* – a work in the exhibition that stems from extreme hurt.

REFLECTIONS

they watched as I watched them is the final piece in the exhibition that exemplifies the way I process loss in my making. The piece can be seen upon looking to the ceiling of the space, where a vague infestation of cast paraffin wax fish overrun a detached portion of a ceiling fan. A one-hundred-inch pull chain dangles below to bring attention to the mound of melted wax fish that lie on the floor.



Figure 8: Detail view of *they watched as I watched them*

Consisting of hundreds of wax castings, molded from fishing lures, *they watched as I watched them* alludes to the visceral memory of staring at swarms of catfish and minnow eyes as they swim beneath the water. As I grew older, I would visit the ponds at the farm by myself.

Leaning over a wooden dock with fish food in hand became the most interesting way to feed them. Multiple catfish would come to the surface to vacuum pellets of food into their mouth before retreating to the depths below. The contemplation I felt as I stared at my reflection in the water made me aware of myself; I was alone. More recently, I was again immersed in turmoil. After being abruptly abandoned by my partner during the pandemic, I was left behind in an overwhelming two-story house alone. Laying on the floor in the only room that had any open view of the outdoors was a pastime. I stared up at the ceiling fan, ostensibly being my only companion. Within *they watched as I watched them*, the infestation of tiny, pearly translucent wax fish implies neglect as the material piles onto itself. It traps me between looking down at the eyes below without being able to look up, almost like a two-sided coin.

This piece exemplifies my process of making within *Jack Diddly Squat*. By reflecting on the past, I use metaphors and allegories to form new imagery and sensibilities to create my work. Connecting what I know of the past to recent, challenging experiences allows me to imagine new environments in which my work lives. Reaching for materials that are charged with memory, like mud and fabric, to use within emotionally fueled intuitive acts fills the gap in time, finding an in-between contemplative place where my work resides. Described as daydreams or nightmares, the work offers a fantastical space for my mind to comprehend recent hardships. As the host of dwellings within *Jack Diddly Squat*, my mind permits the viewer to enter and witness the abstract places I create for myself.

CONCLUSION

Jack Diddly Squat is a rocky gravel road on which I can expose and conceal autobiographical details of loss and grief while reaching for the affectionate attachment to my

childhood experiences. Connecting my struggles within domestic spaces to a child-like eagerness to feed catfish enables me to relieve the burden of recent hardships and find contentment as I move forward. The parallels between interior and exterior environments will continue to be at the forefront of my thinking in not only my art practice, but in life, purely due to the comfortability I find in their duality. The process of creating work in this exhibition has connected me to the unknown, including finding relationships with late family members and companions that I was not able to fully appreciate before their death.

In this exhibition, I externalized visceral, sensorimotor fueled memories alongside fragmented flashbacks of sadness. Through a tumultuous process of obsessive and repetitive acts, I was able to contemplate the importance of dwelling on these events. By allowing myself free-will through compulsive, spontaneous acts, the weight of sorrow is freed from my shoulders. Although now overwhelmed with the expulsion of my sadness, the works in *Jack Diddly Squat* continue to seek the threshold of the joyful memories that originated at the farm.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Garton, Christina. "Ticking: From Humble Origins to High Society." *Piecework*. Accessed April 16, 2023. <https://pieceworkmagazine.com/ticking-from-humble-origins-to-high-society/>.

Heidegger, Martin. *Off the Beaten Track*. Translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Jamrozik, Anja, Marguerite McQuire, Eileen R. Cardillo, and Anjan Chatterjee. "Metaphor: Bridging Embodiment to Abstraction." *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 23, no. 4 (08, 2016): 1080-1089. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-015-0861-0>.

Lighter, Jonathan E. *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*. 1st ed. Vol. 1: A-G. New York: Random House Reference, 1994.

Olenick, Keith. *Wildlife Management Plan*. Austin: Landmark Wildlife Management, 2021.

VITA

Madeline Ortega was born in Dallas, Texas in 1997. In 2019, she graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Fine Arts, focusing in glass, at the University of Texas at Arlington. In 2023, Ortega earned a Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art from Texas Christian University. Ortega received a graduate assistantship from TCU, where she served as a studio technician, teaching assistant, and an instructor of record teaching fundamental art courses.

ABSTRACT

JACK DIDDLY SQUAT

by

Madeline Ortega

Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2019, University of Texas at Arlington

Cameron Schoepp, Professor of Art - Sculpture

Remembering the familiarity of a gingham vallance and the valleys of cracked mud, my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition *Jack Diddly Squat* burrows into the subconscious to expose autobiographical details of childhood and stubborn change that ensues with age. By reflecting on the past, I use metaphors and allegories to form new imagery and sensibilities to create my work. Connecting what I know of the past to recent, challenging experiences allows me to imagine new environments in which my work lives.