

TRUST

by

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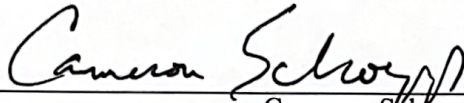
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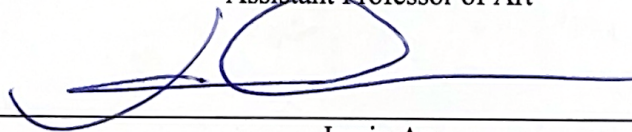
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INTRODUCTION

Across all my work, I aim to build structures that induce meditation. I am interested in creating aesthetic encounters that emphasize the subjectivity of existence. The exploration of this subjectivity is rooted in the everyday, using materials such as found objects or discarded cardboard, wood, and plastic packaging. Each of the works in my thesis exhibition approaches structure and space through various materials and building processes. We live in a world of endless complexity and are overloaded with materialism in many forms. Much of this information overload arises from excessive material abundance. An important aspect of my practice is the collection of materials taken from rejected or discarded sources, which I then use to create my sculptures. For this installation, I presented four sculptures made from discarded materials, manipulated into distinct structures of varying complexity. Through the creation of these sculptural forms, I invite the viewer to reconsider the oddity and wonder of the mundane.

INSTALLATION

The installation consisted of four sculptures. To combine these somewhat disparate-looking works, I arranged the space so that each work had its own context and did not compete with the others—sightlines from one area into the next afforded a dialogue between the sculptures.

Upon entering the gallery, the first piece you encounter is *Untitled (Sunfish)*. A long wall behind this first work bisects the gallery, creating separate viewing spaces for *Untitled (Sunfish)* and the work behind it, *Untitled (Monument)*, allowing both to be viewed in the round and space to view the work as a whole. Situated between the two larger works, the piece *Untitled (Sandcastle)* is visible from both ends of the room, positioned between the exhibition's two main divided areas. This placement was important to allow the viewer to see the whole piece including

its sandcastle top from a distance. As the viewer approaches *Untitled (Sandcastle)*, the opposite side of the gallery comes into view, providing a first glimpse of *Untitled (Monument)*.

Finally, tucked away in the front left corner of the gallery space, a small nook was set up using two gallery walls to create an enclosed area for *Untitled (Birthday Candle)*. The decision to give this piece the smallest and most private space in the exhibition was both to achieve the optimum viewing experience and to distinguish the performative nature of the work.

All the sculptures have their own internal hierarchy of parts, but each component is still essential, requiring a lighting strategy that balanced the need to emphasize certain elements while honoring the entirety of the sculpture. For instance, the lighting was especially important for *Untitled (Sandcastle)*, where the sandcastle is at the top of the structure's hierarchy and needed emphasis. At the same time, the boxes below serve as both pedestals and parts of the structure and required an even lighting that did not compete with the sandcastle and also did not diminish the boxes. The gallery space around all the sculptures was also lit in such a way that responded to how the sculptures occupied the space and to encourage viewers to view the sculptures in the round.

WORKS



Figure 1: Untitled (Sunfish) installation shot

UNTITLED (SUNFISH)

Untitled (Sunfish) attempts to achieve a state of sublime transcendence through its formal qualities and material manipulation. The materials used to make the piece are compacted and layered to obscure their origin as commonly discarded things that everyone could recognize (for example cardboard, Styrofoam, construction paper), but with enough observation these materials become recognizable to the viewer. This object was composed through a balance of formalism and structural engineering.

The starting point for the piece began with a desire to create a form with most of its visual weight at the top of the sculpture, supported by a single line through space. To achieve this goal, I began by welding scrap metal as a single line that would be able to support the more

bulbous part of the structure and altering the structure of the sculpture to be able to support this weight and then editing the structure when the engineering detracted from desirable formal elements. The formal decision making for this piece was mostly improvised with only a vague idea of a formal quality I wanted for the work.

As the structure was created, I considered the balance of line and visual weight in different parts of the form. I was guided by intuition; if a part of the form did not look right on an intuitive level, I adjusted correct this response. I think of this kind of intuition as similar to a sense like taste. I am immediately aware if something tastes good or bad to me, but like taste, it is often more nuanced than just good or bad. Sometimes, something can taste bad at first but then taste good after getting used to it, or the reverse, where something that once tasted good begins to taste bad. In the process of making these corrections, I often disrupt other parts of the form that feel intuitively correct, leading to further edits. This part of the process involves walking around the sculpture and staring at it.

One of the biggest challenges is making the form work in the round. Success from one vantage point can lead to failure in another part. Despite my best efforts these kinds of forms always end up having a side that feels like the “front” this is usually the point I decide to focus on and accept that other parts of it may feel out of balance to make that part work.

After a compromise between structure and form, I began layering the metal armature with various discarded materials such as Styrofoam, cardboard, and sheets of plastic to make the structure less angular and to provide additional structural integrity. The use of plastic sheets wrapped around the form as a means of structural strength was inspired by the issue of plastic bags wrapping themselves around equipment at recycling facilities, preventing the equipment from working. While a single grocery bag can easily tear from normal use, the vast number of

these bags disposed of becomes very strong and are able to bring large, powerful machinery to a halt.

While I am personally concerned about the environmental impact of plastic, I don't believe that my art has any real positive impact on this issue, but part of my use of discarded materials is to at least try and reduce the net negative impact of my work on the environment. I feel better knowing that when the sculpture needs to be disposed of at least most of what it is made of would have ended up in a landfill anyway.

The marbling pattern on the surface of the piece is created through an additive and then subtractive process. The effect is created by covering the entire surface of the piece with discarded documents on computer paper, construction paper, and brown paper bags and then layering another type of paper on top of that. After enough layers were added, I sanded the surface, which revealed the different layers of paper in streaks that resemble a wood grain pattern.

For this piece I wanted the sculpture to be larger than a person to create interest that can only be appreciated from a distance, but also give the piece focal points that are best appreciated at a closer vantage point like the marbled pattern on the surface, or the cut ends that reveal the internal structure of the work.



Figure 2: Untitled (Sandcastle) installation shot

UNTITLED (SANDCASTLE)

The second piece, *Untitled (Sandcastle)*, is a totem structure made of cardboard boxes. The boxes are taped together and compressed to create a level surface at the top of the totem on which a sandcastle made from a dollar store sandcastle mold is placed.



Figure 3. Untitled (Sandcastle) detail shot

Without any internal support, the verticality of the tower is maintained only by the tension of the tape wrapped around the stacked boxes, creating a precarious structure for the fragile sandcastle to stand on. The height of the sandcastle leads the viewer to perceive it as the crown jewel of the structure. Simultaneously, the precariousness of the totem reiterates the fragility of the sandcastle, prompting one to consider the different facets of this object. One can envision a sandcastle as something mundane or whimsical, perhaps in a looping cycle with sufficient thought dedicated to the object. The process of contemplating this specific object's value reveals the subjective nature of all value as a matter of one's perspective.

The origin for this piece came as a response to many laborious sculptures I made before it. Much of the work I had been making was labor-intensive, aiming to obscure or alter common materials. In the first iteration of *Sandcastle*, I sought to minimize the labor and make the materials clearly recognizable. The first iteration consisted of a single box topped with a sandcastle.

While this experiment in reduced labor and effort felt like the beginning of something, I still thought the piece needed more, so I began the next iteration with many boxes stacked on top of one another. This new development became more time-consuming, but the cumulative labor was still very minimal. Finding a sustained balance of the box tower required more patience as I needed to balance the tower and accommodate the inevitable lean that happens with the tension on the cardboard. At first, the sandcastle would fall off after a few minutes, after which I would rebalance the structure in response to the fall and wait to see which direction it would tilt in next. The time between adjustments increased as the tower became more stable, extending from minutes to hours to days between moments of failure and eventually the top of the tower remained level enough to hold the sandcastle for several months.



Figure 4. Untitled (Monument) installation shot

UNTITLED (MONUMENT)

Untitled (Monument) attempts to evoke meditation through one's encounter with scale. I was inspired to capture the sense of feeling small in relation to something bigger than oneself, which you get from looking at a large monument. However, I subvert this idea through the use of discarded materials such as scrap wood rather than a more luxurious or permanent material commonly used in famous monuments. The piece is displayed tilted on its side to emphasize the structure's precariousness.

This piece went through many changes on the path to its final form. The piece began as a test of the structural potential of paper pulp. I collected scrap wood and crudely taped the pieces

together just enough to hold them in place and suspend this weak structure from a chain, after which I covered the taped connection points with paper pulp and allowed the pulp to dry leading to a ridged and stable structure.

The paper pulp connection points on the upper part of the structure get their color from the original pigment of the construction paper from which they originate. I am very fascinated by the abundance of bright artificial colors found in our modern world. Before modern industrialization, the bright pigments one can find in a cheap stack of construction paper or plastic litter on the ground would have been much scarcer, existing only in nature as something like a flower or a butterfly. The abundance of these pigments in the world we now inhabit can often lead to feelings of indifference toward them; for me, seeing them in an unusual context allows me to remember how incredible and strange the world can be.

As I worked on the piece I tried adding many things to the structure that I ultimately removed. The initial structure with the colorful pulp joints remained the most interesting part of the piece, but not enough on its own. After many unsuccessful directions, I decided to focus on the architectural qualities of the piece and began to shape the work into something resembling a monument. To differentiate the base of the structure and make it serve as a pedestal, I used smaller fragments of wood and joined them with brown and grey pulp. This difference of color was intended to further separate these parts of the structure and enhance the hierarchy of the upper and lower parts.

I wanted *Untitled (Monument)* to occupy the space in a manner that rejected the upright freestanding orientation it was “built for,” so I decided to tilt the piece and lean it against the wall. Building the structure vertically then leaning it against the wall gave the structure a before

and after, a tension between a formerly upright and then leaning form that may cause one to consider this structure's temporality and from there the temporality of all things.



Figure 5. Untitled (Birthday Candle)

UNTITLED (BIRTHDAY CANDLE)

The fourth and final work, *Untitled (Birthday Candle)*, focuses on meditation in a similar way to *Untitled (Sandcastle)*. Both are tower forms supporting a crown jewel that is both mundane and whimsical. In turn, their whole structure focuses attention on the fragility of the jewel and its ephemerality.

For *Birthday Candle*, I wanted the structure supporting the candle to have very little visual weight to not distract from the small point of flame at the top. I straightened out a piece of wire to the greatest length that could support its own weight while remaining vertical and then supported it with bricks and thread in a tripod shape. I then zip tied a birthday candle to the thread and lit the candle, creating a small flame as this structure's crown jewel. The use of the material fire that is the top of the structure also demonstrates an interesting subjectivity and interpretation based on its context. As a small point of flame atop a birthday candle the material is harmless and potentially mundane, compared to something like a wildfire, which would be destructive and dangerous.

While making *Birthday Candle* I realized that the object should have a material language that referenced simplicity and functionality similar to an on-the-fly home repair like fixing a leaking roof with a piece of tape. Like a quick home repair *Birthday Candle* was made from common materials that were and combined in an improvised fashion to make the objects functional for its intended purpose without decorative considerations.

While other pieces aspired to be monumental *Untitled (Birthday Candle)* developed from more domestic influences. It is the smallest piece in the exhibition by both height and volume, the top of the structure is a bit above eye level to create a more intimate experience with the piece. It also occupies the smallest and most isolated space in the gallery, another call back to domesticity rather than monumentality.

CONCLUSION

Through each piece, I invite the viewer to reimagine the possibilities and complexities of the material world around us. All the materials used started from the natural world and were processed for human use, then broken down and discarded, then repurposed again into sculpture. Each piece reveals the steps of its creation through traces of its material origin. All the work is made of mundane and common materials used in a way that reveals their inherent qualities without obscuring their origin or what they are.

In many ways this is a show of opposites, each work differs from one another in terms of scale, labor, and form. All these considerations of the potential and excess of materiality have led to various feelings, ranging from hopeless nihilism to transcendence.

VITA

Austin Lewis was born in Dallas Texas. In 2020 he graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Integrative Studies from the University of North Texas in Denton. In 2025, Austin earned a Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art from Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. He received a graduate fellowship from TCU, where he served as a sculpture facility technician, teaching assistant, and instructor of record in 3D Design.

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Integrative Studies, 2020, University of North Texas

Cameron Schoepp

My thesis exhibition “Trust” took place in Moudy Gallery from March 27 to April 1, 2025. I make art with common household items or discarded materials like cardboard, wood, and plastic packaging. I hoard these items and give them new form in structures that are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, at human and larger than human-scale. The thesis exhibition featured four sculptures: Untitled (Balloon Float), 2024; Untitled (Sandcastle), 2024; Untitled (Monument), 2025; and Untitled (Birthday Candle), 2025. All the works shared aspects of my larger artistic inquiry into structure and meditation. My practice aims to create structures that invite the viewer to reconsider the oddity and wonder in the mundane.