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BITS AND PIECING

EMILY LEHMAN

33 Pages

My work questions the ways we consider and value materials in our everyday experience. I question by collecting, viewing, sorting, and enabling their performance both in the studio and by the making of works. Through such the works enact the enchantment of castoff materials, causing us to call into question the agency of materials we tend to ignore.

KEYWORDS: Ecology, Materials, Thing, Enchantment, Shimmer, Bits, Piecing

BITS AND PIECING

EMILY LEHMAN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
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for the Degree of

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BITS AND PIECING

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the small things that have meant a lot.

E.L.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

a hamburger wrapper, a neon green gulf tee, a chunk of disintegrating styrofoam, a broom head, a single confetti star, netting shreds, a glove with a black banana peel, a deflated smiley face balloon, a purple boot, a lavender industrial paper towel, construction debris, and a scrap of loose weavings (see Fig. A1-A12).

I notice materials. The specific materials I am interested in are the ones that we forget about or ignore. I am drawn to the ambiguous histories and trajectories of these objects. Due to the fact that they are no longer owned by humans, they exist in a “twilight zone” of sorts, along with other forgotten and discarded things. I am concerned about our ignorance towards these seemingly inert objects and the liminal spaces in which they reside. As a result, I use my art as a means to acknowledge the effect of overlooked materials on our current ecology. I make art that is quiet and slow in order to engage viewers in the act of noticing materials differently. My intention is that viewers repeat this gesture in their everyday to come to acknowledge, not ignore, our unnatural ecology. Jane Bennett writes:

“Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies.”¹

My show title, *Bits and Piecing*, refers to both my studio process and the performative process that happens when engaging with a work. Piecing is a putting together, an adding to, or a

¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2010), ix.

mending. Piecing is what I do when I bring things that shimmer back to my studio, it is what happens when those things intermingle with other materials in the studio, it is what happens when I orchestrate a piece, and it is what happens when I view a completed work. Piecing happens when materials are able to perform in such a way that they reveal their processes of coming together to an audience. These processes are not finite. Instead, they circulate and appear only to slowly submerge back into the works. Materials employed in artworks enchant us just long enough to notice them differently.

The studio plays an important role in helping me to get acquainted with and enact the material performances of bits. It is a place where materials shift from dead to circulatory and I am able to play the role of an active witness. It is a place where I think about things.

Have you noticed what happens to newspapers outside?

They mush and clump.

They ooze from their plastic encasements—

onto sidewalks, porches, gutters, streets.

They are walked on, walked over, and stamped out.

They are inconvenient inky, blotchy mounds waiting to be washed away—

or freeze into hard wart like blobs.

They muddle with little bits of dirt, rock, grass, glass, trash, and hair.

They make homes for tiny bugs who like moist heaps of things.

They are beautiful, uncontrollable, and forgettable.

They are bits—

piecing together something unknowable.

CHAPTER II: ECOLOGY AND MATERIALS

We effect and are affected by our surroundings. Through decades of mass consumption and production we have changed the physical make-up of the Earth to the point in which there is no natural or pure thing.² There is plastic in our water, plastic in our bodies, trash beneath the surface of mountains, and acid in our rain. We talk about an ecological crisis, but in doing so we often fail to acknowledge that there is no returning to a pure or natural state. The mere potential to retain purity ran away with the onset of the industrial revolution. Our current ecological crisis is overwhelming and sad, but we should not turn a blind eye to it. We need to spend more time considering it in order to confront the reality of what it means to coexist.

A glass shatters on the floor.

Tiny shards burrow into the fluffy beige carpet waiting.

A tiny puncture—

enough that it hurts more than it should—

and the coffee spills.

The carpet on the curb waiting, mildewing, and gathering—

finds its way into a mound across town.

Smashed and battered it lays and waits for nothing in particular—

where there are a lot of other things waiting for nothing in particular—

and together they make a mountain.

I propose that we notice trash mountains and accept them into our understanding of what an environment is. I am not proposing this happily, but rather realistically and realistically

² Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 3.

acknowledging the state of things is no easy task. The action of attempting to understand or interpret the state of the world becomes overwhelming amidst the “knottiness and tangle of entanglement”³ we find ourselves sharing with materials.

Alexis Shotwell, researcher of the politics of complicity, writes about the importance “of thinking about complicity and compromise as a starting point for action,”⁴ urging us to realize that we must put energy into acknowledging what is, not what can no longer be. We must deal with the fact that we have all had a hand in reorienting our ecosystem. Simply buying packaged foods or driving implicates us in this web.⁵ Because we are all twisted up and stuck in this web we must at least attempt to understand how to realistically live in this web. However, realistically living in the web does not mean blindly accepting the things that have gotten us into the web, but communing with them in order to understand how they are affecting us.

Timothy Morton, a scholar based in object-oriented philosophy, uses the term hyperobjects to refer to the massive phenomena that arise from the web of complicity that Alexis Shotwell refers to. Hyperobjects are invisible and huge. They are the result of an incredible build up of things over many years. Global warming is an example of a hyperobject. It is the emergent phenomena resulting from things like waste, output, and runoff. Global warming is no one thing and is difficult to see it with certainty, but that does not mean that it is not present. It has long term unforeseen effects, which makes it dangerous and omnipresent. A specific characteristic of hyperobjects is that they “involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones

³ Shotwell, *Against Purity*, 195.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

we are used to.”⁶ They are complicated and viscous— existing within liminal spaces that defy modern knowledge systems. They involve consequences and connections between humans and things, but more largely point towards the indecipherable entwinement of material things in our current ecology.

If we wish to better grapple with hyperobjects we must spend more time attempting to understand them beyond ourselves. As Morton writes, “the hyperobject is not a function of our knowledge: it’s hyper relative to worms, lemons, and ultraviolet rays, as well as humans.”⁷ Hyperobjects are often difficult for us to see because they build up over time. They are intangible, but present. Grappling and co-existing with hyperobjects is complicated and sticky. But, acknowledging their existence seems to be an important step in beginning to notice the inescapable web that we share with them. Hyperobjects are not benign— they act as carcinogens, they are embedded in the tissues of embryos, they are climate change, and they are not going away. Hyperobjects constitute inseparable parts of our current ecology. Acknowledging them serves as a means to brainstorm ways to overcome their consequential effects.

⁶ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

CHAPTER III: ENCHANTMENT AND SHIMMERING

Today is the day. You decide to spring clean several months late. Moving your bed back from the wall you find it, a sock fallen from glory— a white one that you bought in bulk several years back. There is so much dust on it that it takes you a minute to figure out exactly what it is. You didn't even know that much dust could collect in one place. You take a minute to think "is this what a dust bunny is?" It takes you a while to decide what to do with it because you are not grossed out by the dust, but rather curious about it. You spend some time just looking at the thing that you excavated from beneath your bed. It is so freaking cool.

Questions arise:

"What is this now?"

"Is it a sock?"

"Is it alive?"

"When did I lose this?"

"Is this even mine?"

"Should I memorialize it on my dresser?"

"Should I throw it away?"

"Should I buy new socks?"

"Was this actually grey?"

"Can this hurt me?"

"Is this physical proof of something becoming something else?"

What if this particularly ordinary and potentially gross thing enchanted you just enough that you could not stop thinking about it. Jane Bennett writes that "To be enchanted is to be

struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday.”⁸ Bennett explains that the extraordinary can be “non human and human, natural and artifactual”⁹ and that enchantment affects our sensory experience of something; “You notice new colors, discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds, as familiar landscapes of sense sharpen and intensify... to be simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transported by sense.”¹⁰ Enchantment is being transfixed beyond any rational explanation. It is being effected by something and not entirely understanding why.

Eva Hesse was enchanted by materials like latex, fiberglass, and plastics. At the time, these were largely industrial materials— things meant to fix and be covered by layers of wall and paint. This said, they were not materials that were considered to be particularly sexy or desirable. Through her process of making Hesse was able to convey the enchantment she felt towards these objects to a larger audience and make them desirable. One specific example comes from an untitled piece from 1970 (Fig.1). Materials listed include wire, latex, polyethylene, mesh, cloth, and fiberglass. In this piece materials are pushed beyond the ordinary to become something we do not quite know, but relate to. We can understand the human like rhythms of hanging and twisting, we can understand the somewhat bodily feel of the hanging latex and fiberglass and we can understand the now aging coloration of the structure as a mark of time. This process of relating, but not quite knowing, but not being able to look away is a form of enchantment. Hesse’s work enchants us, allowing us to see the potential of materials that we otherwise could not fathom, or might have ignored.

⁸ Jane Bennett, *Enchantment*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.



Fig. 1. Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, 1970, Sculpture¹¹

¹¹ Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, 1970, accessed 20 March 2019, https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/HUCB_SHARE_109913109922.

I am enchanted by what some might call trash, what Gillian Whitely refers to as “bric-a-brac, castoffs, crap, crud, detritus, discards, dross, dregs, garbage, junk, lumber, mongo, ordure, rammell, refuse, residue, ruffraff, rot, rubbish, rubble, schlock, scrannel, scrap, spam, tat, waste.”¹² The concept of trash is a construct. The construct of trash is one that drives us to be prejudicially “grossed out” by certain materials. We therefore tend to end up distancing ourselves mentally and physically from the large abundance of cast off stuff with which we share the planet. But, most of our trash is actually stuff with which we once had an intimate relationship. We suck on wooden popsicle sticks, wear our socks tight to our skin and bump up against plastic shower curtains while we are changing in the bathroom.

Artwork made by Richard Tuttle points towards the artist’s enchantment with trashy materials. In an interview with Art21 Tuttle speaks tenderly about a scrap of tissue paper. He goes on to explain it as being one of many like materials that others would rather throw away. Tuttle talks about how his artworks create spaces to sustain rather than discard and disregard scrappy materials.¹³ I feel a kinship with the way Tuttle thinks and talks about trashy scraps. What seems to draw Tuttle to many of the materials he uses in his works is their likelihood to be ignored and his inability to ignore them. Tuttle’s works suggest the potentials of things like tissue paper scraps and cardboard to visually express something that is difficult to verbally express. His works enchant through the tenderness he carries out in handling and empathizing with the materials he is drawn to using. Materials in his works are enabled to breathe and wiggle around because Tuttle works with them rather than pushing them into a predetermined order.

¹² Gillian Whiteley, *Junk*, (Cambridge, Whitechapel Gallery and the MIT Press, 2015), 108.

¹³ Richard Tuttle and Ian Forester, “Staying Contemporary: Richard Tuttle,” July 22, 2016, in *Art 21: Extended Play*, Produced by Wesley Miller and Nick Ravich, video, 2:47, <https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/richard-tuttle-art-life-short/>.

I use the word shimmer to refer to the moment before something begins to enchant. When a material shimmers it oscillates in our perception between the statuses of being overlooked and catching our eye for some inexplicable reason. Shimmering is when a fire flickers off of metal, or when the reflection off of a gold watch momentarily blinds you, or when a thumbtack pierces thin soled shoes, or when you trip over the curb you thought was two inches shorter. It is when the ordinary is triggered to move beyond the ordinary and as a result catches our attention.

There is a small purple boot that I have been walking past for about two months now.

I am fascinated by it.

Drawn to it.

I squat down to inspect it.

I was initially drawn to it because it was alone and not part of a pair—

maybe it lost its mate long before it came to the sidewalk—

maybe it ripped or grew too small or offended its owner—

maybe it was intentionally lost—

maybe it was intentionally not found—

But I noticed it—

accidentally—

and I think of it often.

Why did no one come back for it? How does one boot end up on the side of the road?

How long did the owner have the boot? Will this boot end up in a stream? Will it ever

leave this sidewalk? Does anyone else notice this thing?

Removed from the possession of its owner the boot speaks of new unhindered potential, it shimmers. So, when a boot is removed from a foot, when it is removed from one person's possession, when it is smashed, alone, cold and wet, what is it? Is it still a boot? Is it becoming the ground on which we walk? The acts of noticing and questioning the status of the boot are moments of shimmering and what follows is enchantment. Enchantment is what happens after a material thing catches our eye. It is what happens when one becomes transfixed in processing material performances that move beyond the expected.

Bill Brown explains a phenomena akin to enchantment through his description of Thing Theory. According to Brown, everything is an object, but has the potential to become a thing. A thing asserts itself while an object blends in. Things do not perform as we expect. They tend to be slippery and beyond human control. Objects are comparatively submissive and tend to perform in the ways we expect them to. A thing is a broken glass cup, while an object is an intact glass cup sitting in a cupboard.¹⁴ The intact version of the glass cup does as expected. It sits and waits in the cupboard to be used and patiently dries on the dish rack to be put away. The broken glass is an inconvenience. It may cut our hand, slow us down on the way to work, or mean that we are one cup short for a dinner party. Brown's definition of a thing describes the moment that a material begins to shimmer. It describes the moment that we are forced to reckon with the reality that the material world is not submissive to us. We are submissive to it and sometimes we cannot help but to spend a moment noticing materials over ourselves.

Shimmering speaks to a material's potential—the potential to move beyond an inert glass cup to one that slices open a foot. I am interested in the moment of realization that shimmering

¹⁴ Bill Brown. "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry*, no. 1 (2001): 3-4, Accessed February 23, 2019, www.jstor.org/stable/1344258.

and enchantment provide for materials. I am interested in the moment when a material is squeezed and wrung out yet still remains active, when it no longer operates as we expect, when it has begun to operate in relation to its surrounding environment and our perspective of materials is challenged. When the fluffy insulation of the boot oozes out onto the pavement to mix with the pebbles of concrete and asphalt that surround it we have the opportunity to experience something new. This moment hints at the impact of the things we have been taught to ignore. The boot is not inert. It is in the state of becoming a physical component of the ground on which we walk. The boot on the ground shimmers. It invites us to notice it.

Liz Magor is an artist I turn to in thinking about shimmering and the enactment of material enchantment. Magor's works push objects beyond the realm of the ordinary. Her apparent time spent and consideration of materials enables them to perform in unexpected ways. In an interview, Magor talks about how "a work starts with [her] acknowledging these ever present not noisy operations in the world. They're always there but not always acknowledged."¹⁵ Magor's tendency to notice the quiet operations of things is an enactment of those things shimmering to her. In the same interview Magor points to the bottom of a brown paper bag from which she is making a plaster cast. She talks about the contradictory beauty of the fold on the bottom of the bag being equally present and ignored. Further, Magor talks about using her work as a means to draw attention to the things that she cannot help but to notice. The shimmering of the bag's bottom is what leads to her enchantment with the thing and ultimately her ability to convey that enchantment to an audience. Like Hesse and Tuttle, Magor finds herself enchanted

¹⁵ Liz Magor and Pamela Mason Wagner, "Everyone Should Have a Studio: Liz Magor," February 10, 2017, in *Art 21: Extended Play*, Produced by Wesley Miller and Nick Ravich, video, 3:21, <https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/liz-magor-everyone-should-have-a-studio-short/>.

by what most consider to be ordinary— in fact she is enchanted by the ordinary. Her works provide opportunities to convey her enchantment with materials to viewers who may require slightly more prompting than Magor to be enchanted.

CHAPTER IV: BITS AND PIECING

Ecology, materiality, enchantment, and shimmering brings me to the place of considering small things. I am interested in the impact of small things on an environment. Small things tend to slip through the cracks and go unnoticed. This dismissal makes them tiny dangerous things. One bottle cap dropped into a gutter is likely to go unnoticed. It will flow into a larger body of water to be broken down or ingested by a creature. But, what happens when five hundred bottle caps pass through a gutter in a week? They rush past us and disappear from sight, but they do not go away. The bottle caps build up and their volume comes to drastically effect the quality of life for the creatures who are forced to live among them. Further, through processes of degradation and the likelihood of plastic not to degrade they become a physical part our landscape, entangling with bits of sand and earth. The slipperiness and unassuming threat of bits is what makes them a silent yet volatile part of our current ecology.

I notice these bits that make up our ecology and they shimmer to me. Bits shimmer to me because they are endearing, loaded, subtle, beautiful and forgotten things. They shimmer to me because they are supposed to seem ordinary. Through their common presence in landscapes they often appear misleadingly natural. A battered shred of a dirty glove tends to fade comfortably into a bed of leaves, but the unnaturalness of this disturbs me. Shimmering bits are often disturbing reminders of how comfortably numb we have become to human altered landscapes. The shimmering of bits causes me to consider them beyond a their status as trash. I spend time thinking about them without wanting to know their origins. I am interested in how they operate as ambiguous little things. Their ambiguity makes bits seem alien— of this world but not known to us and I am enchanted by this. My enchantment with bits becomes obvious to me the longer I

spend thinking about them. My enchantment becomes obvious to me as I mentally process bits within the space of the studio and the artworks I make.

My work is concerned with the ambiguity of bits possessing non human powers. Bits are remnants that gesture towards something that was once present without entirely revealing what that thing was. It is like when you over-pour a bowl of cereal and find a bit of it on the kitchen floor the next day. You pick it up and eat it only to realize that it is not cereal, but something tangy and hairy. The bit reveals something, but needs more bits to hint at the source. More than one bit is essential in piecing together a complex narrative. Piecing is visual and physical. Physically, it refers to the act of carefully placing and is used in quilting to refer to the specific placement of fabric scraps. Visually, it refers to the connections we make between things, taking into account the performative potentials of a seemingly inert collective of bits. Piecing sheds light on the webs and narratives that gathered bits reveal to us.

Reaching into pockets I find pebbles, paper shards, fabric scraps, degrading coins, crumpled sidewalk notes, brightly colored threads, plastic doll heads, and shiny tassels. I pick these things up when I am outside walking—

because I am curious about their state of being—

tiny

seemingly misplaced

dirt covered

wet

alone

resisting degradation

supremely unnatural

because I am drawn to them—

shimmering

shiny

broken

empathetic

curious

shimmering

because I do not know what to make of them—

enchanted.

Pocket bits make their way into my studio or end up in small dishes around my house. I gather and observe. They shimmered to me and I am enchanted by them. I want to experience the sensation of being enchanted. Enchantment is what causes me to piece. Piecing happens when I arrange the bits gathered in my house. It is when they perform in context of one another. A multitude of ambiguous bits forms an alluring sensational experience that is difficult to ignore. The studio becomes a place where piecing is amplified, where hours are spent putting together and arranging small bits.

Piecing bits together is what I do to coexist with shimmering, enchanting hyperobjects. It is a congregation with tiny, sticky and dangerous things. It is communicating material potentials to others and a process with no direct answers. It is both an action and a mental wrestling with things. Piecing is multifaceted. Piecing is my studio practice. We all practice the act of piecing. It is putting together small pieces of evidence or information to formulate a more holistic

experience of something. Piecing happens when we ask for our friends, family, or colleagues to sign a card. Gathering names on a piece of paper amounts to something that is difficult to put to clear words. We know that the list of names will make the recipient of the card feel cared for, but it becomes difficult to put to words what the gathering of the names is. The names on the card are bits and what we do with them when we gather and observe them is the act of piecing. For the gatherer of the names piecing is the gathering and amassing to a total of something. The piecing feels good because it represents a combination of something larger than us. It represents an abstract group of people who supposedly care. Piecing happens for the recipient of the card when they read the names and consider them as a whole. Piecing sheds light on some sort of experience that cannot happen with one bit alone. The names or bits together perform a coming together for us.

For me, the physical action of piecing is comprised of a series of careful placements, which takes into account the performativity of bits in relation to one another. I piece to visualize the performance of a sum of bits because I am enchanted by the operations of ambiguous things in relation to one another. I find comfort in the performance of uncertainties. When bits are pieced together they are not faking anything because there is nothing to fake. They are confidently no one thing in particular and that gives me comfort. Certainties make me squeamish.

The mental action of piecing is a headspace of unknowing comfort. It is the mental comprehension of things in relation to one another and a complimentary desire to understand them as other. The mental action of piecing involves engaging in the performativity of an artwork. It is how we begin to see inanimate bits take on characteristics within the picture plane.

It happens when we are able to imagine how bits operate in space without them actually moving. An example of this happens when something we have seen a hundred times shifts in front of our eyes.

Bored one afternoon you find yourself staring at the green upholstered chair in your parents living room. You realize that the tiny red dots on it are not tulips, but tiny red vines. For twenty years you looked at the chair and saw tulips that were vines. Noticing the vines causes you to spend more time visually inspecting the chair. A mental piecing happens as you reckon with the chair in an attempt to *really* see the chair. A piecing happens as you begin to reconsider and regather the things that you thought you knew about the chair. It happens as you realize that the constituent parts of the chair seem to operate in a different orbit than the one you occupy.

CHAPTER V: PIECING

My studio is an ecosystem in which things affect things, where sensory elements affect the work I produce. Bringing a bit of asphalt into the studio results in responsive prints and drawings, which become collage material. The gap between found and fabricated closes through a close resemblance of the two. It also speaks to our complicity in overlooking or misunderstanding materials. Alexis Shotwell proposes that we are complicity entangled with materials and that this entanglement makes it difficult for us to see them beyond ourselves.¹⁶ This means that approaching materials with an anthropocentric need to understand or classify them denies materials the potential to function beyond our understanding. A failure to accept the liminality of materials makes us complicity entangled with them. The reality is that materials are a part of something that goes beyond our understanding. They are liminal, slippery, affective, and consequential things. My work asks what happens when we acknowledge that our material entanglement denies us the potential to observe materials beyond their human intended function.

The piece *Untitled (Dotting)* (Fig. 2) is littered with tiny black dots from the spray of a bottle. Only upon closer inspection does one notice bits of asphalt hiding amidst the spray. The two materials have muddled to the point in which they can only be separated through the actions of an attentive viewer. Attempting to separate and decipher is a gesture that momentarily reveals our complicit entanglement with them. We are so entangled that it becomes a struggle for us to see materials beyond ourselves. When engaging with artwork we often find ourselves attempting to understand materials through our humanly rules and classification systems. But, what if we were to step back and watch materials perform? What if we were to accept that our knowledge limits

¹⁶ Shotwell, *Against Purity*, 195.

us? We would effectively strip away our expectations of what materials should be and instead begin looking at what they do. We would notice the camouflage like performance of the spray and the shy nature of the tiny black rocks. We would notice a mirroring in the pattern lying beneath the spray and the spray itself. We would begin to notice performances that extend beyond ourselves.



Fig. 2. Emily Lehman, *Untitled (Dotting)*, 2019, Mixed Media

I am specific about what enters the studio— the space is a particularly ordered chaos. Generally, I only permit small found objects to enter the space. I am interested in the simultaneous ambiguity and consequence of small things— a cavity unfilled or a splinter wound

infected are small things with the potential to turn consequential. I collect within a color palette: black, white, cream, grey, tan, light blue, and magenta are the most frequently occurring colors of bits that enter my studio. Bits that are black, white, cream, grey, tan or light blue interest me because of their tendency to blend in with their surroundings. These seemingly innocuous colors are like snakes in the grass or a needles in a haystack— potentials tied up in their status as unassuming threats. I distrust the implied inertness of unassuming colors and because of this I collect them and refer to them in my work. Magenta is different. Magenta is assertive. Magenta interests me because of its infrequency amongst the other bits I notice and collect. I collect magenta because it shimmers to me and because magenta things are usually human made things and because a pile of found magenta bits suggests the existence of hyperobjects.

My curiosity with unassuming bits brings me back to Timothy Morton's definition of hyperobjects. Morton describes hyperobjects as stemming from things that appear to be seemingly inert, yet volatile. I think about how our societal structures have conditioned us to maintain passive relationships with materials referred to as trash. I think about our resulting ignorance towards their affective potentials. Morton talks about the affective consequences of hyperobjects, in his writing he grimly addresses their role in our earthly demise.¹⁷ Hyperobjects, resulting from things like trash, are not meek and unassuming. Rather, as a collective they are destructive networks that suggest consequential implications.

In the studio I use factors like color and scale to spend time thinking about the contradiction of inert yet volatile bits. Spending time with these things provides me exposure to

¹⁷ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1.

noticing their performative potentials. Spending time with them reveals to me how they begin to perform in context of one another.

A pile of cork board triangles spills out of a yogurt cup onto a slab of gloppy handmade paper,

Semi iridescent cut bits of purple ribbon leap into a sandstone collection,

Black and white marble plaster chips mingle with fragments of pink stained muslin,

Tattered baby blue work gloves stockpile alongside slivers of air-pocked spray foam,

Transparent magenta plastic gently touches particle imprinted canvas,

Paint stained jersey cotton crumples and hardens in small puddles of water,

Shiny gold s-shaped confetti mixes with a single pink thread,

Sloppy newspaper rectangles coagulate with smelly green paint,

Worn sandpaper scraps sprinkle across a ragged blue tarp,

Paper shredder shreds of magenta shiny paper criss cross paths with a paint stained plastic countertop,

I love the moments that materials behave in ways I did not expect them too—the moments when paint runs unexpectedly or glue peels off of a surface to reveal a slimy shining surface. These are the moments I use to listen to the things with which I share the world. Further, these are the moments that pull me into the liminal spaces of material residence and reveal the atemporal agency of things. Sandpaper scraps move across the blue tarp in their own time. Their movement is a product of other moving parts in the studio: my body in the space, air changes, and materials that fall, move, and push. As the sandpaper bits causally drift through my studio, I am attentive to the fact that they no longer serve an overtly anthropocentric purpose. I am also aware of the

contradiction that happens when I use them in my work. But, using sandpaper bits in my work is different from using sandpaper to smooth a surface. In works the bits often decide where or how they are placed, such as in *Untitled (Mounding)* (Figure 3). If one edge of a bit curls up I do not stop it. I adhere it to the surface in a way that does not punish this characteristic. In my work I think about atemporality as a type of liminal agency. I think about scraps doing their own thing and me being the communicative agent between things and people.



Fig. 3. Emily Lehman, *Untitled (Mounding)*, 2019, Mixed Media

I spend a lot of time walking, photographing, and collecting materials that shimmer. I study my collection to think about what draws me to these things—

One day while walking home I came upon a chunk of broken asphalt in the street.

It sat perfectly in the hole it came from.

But it was no longer part of the whole—

and due to that I saw the conglomerate take shape—

and due to that I noticed the tiny bits that made it up—

and held it together.

Wear caused it to be released, but—

there it sat in the place from which it had been released.

Smaller pieces drifted to the gutter to be swept up in a storm—

and so I took the part from its whole—

and carried it to my studio to smash into smaller bits.

In the studio, I think about what “it mean[s] to give agency to the material, to follow the material and to *act with* the material.”¹⁸ I let the smaller broken bits of asphalt spill from the yogurt cup I store them in and into the gluey painting that sits beneath it. If the chunks are too heavy they fall off. Noticing what sticks and what does not, I intentionally glue small bits of asphalt rock onto the surface of a painting. I want to converse with materials and arrange them in an unnaturally natural way. My work is a space in which I am able to, as Jane Bennett writes, “advocate the vitality of matter.”¹⁹ Allowing rocks that fall to stick where they land is a small action of

¹⁸ Petra Lange-Berndt, *How to be Complicit*, (Cambridge, Whitechapel Galley and the MIT Press, 2015), 13.

¹⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant*, ix.

enabling the performance of vitality. My enablement of material performance is an advocacy for its existence. While making *Untitled (Dotting)* (Figure 2) I was conscious of the need to suggest the vitality of the pebbles. Establishing the contrasting element of the conglomerate of glued pebbles and rocks helps to suggest the capacity for the rock material to perform in more than one way. It also gives an agency to the pebbles that seem to uncooperatively hide amidst the black spray.

Like Eva Hesse I find myself enchanted by everyday materials. I am lured by materials that offhandedly appear industrial and trashy. Curious about their likelihood to be dismissed, I find myself enchanted by them. I make work that asks us to consider the volume and potential of things that are not overtly flashy. Relating this back to Bill Brown— the bits that I find and the works that I make are things. They are things because they are materials that perform in a way that defies our expectations of materials.

A smaller artwork faces the challenge of being ignored. However, a shitty big painting also faces that challenge. I want for my work to enchant and lure, like a small gem in a riverbed or cave, or a shiny coin in the gutter. These are things that we cannot help but double take. They are things that draw us in to engage with them face to face. Upon closer inspection of *Untitled (Mounding)* (Fig. 3) one notices small shavings of black rock. Did the black come from the graphite halo above it or some other source? Being forced to consider the origins of the materials at play in the piece helps to heighten an audience's sense of awareness. Due to the scale of the piece, awareness increases with proximity. I am interested in how this physical act of viewing may function to promote a similar type of looking for an audience in the everyday. I am interested in the relationship between the act of looking and enchantment.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

I make work that often resides within the liminal spaces of our understanding. Too often, realities are dismissed because they are too confusing, too loaded, too different. Acknowledging that we cannot know something is more challenging than ignoring it. My concern about our awareness of the current state of our ecosystem parallels the logic systems I employ in my daily life and in the studio. The works that I make are active and performative. They reveal themselves through time spent and small gestures of noticing.

They are bits—

Piecing together something unknowable.

Tugging at the seams,

Picking at the scab,

Nudging the glass,

to rip, to bleed, to fall.

They are bits—`

Atemporal liminal things.

Shimmering at dusk,

Fading into the velvet dark,

Burrowing under shadows,

Pulling the wool over our eyes.

They are bits and piecing.

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APPENDIX A: MATERIALS WE FORGET ABOUT OR IGNORE



Figure A-1. Hamburger wrapper



Figure A-2. Neon green golf tee



Figure A-3. Chunk of disintegrating styrofoam



Figure A-4. Broom head



Figure A-5. Confetti star



Figure A-6. Netting shreds



Figure A-7. Glove with black banana peel



Figure A-8. Deflated smiley face balloon



Figure A-9. Purple boot



Figure A-10. Lavender industrial paper towel



Figure A-11. Construction debris



Figure A-12. Scrap of loose weavings