

# *Imposing Order*

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

by Claire Webb

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“We *are* our bodies.” My thoughts regularly return to this idea, seemingly obvious once I heard it spoken so succinctly from the mouth of Ilse Crawford while discussing her book *The Sensual Home* on her episode of the Netflix series *Abstract*. We are our bodies. Even the ephemeral—consciousness, memory, and emotion—arise from our biology. All of the experiences that comprise our *selves*—stepping into the river, kissing the cat, leaving the party—are produced and housed within our bodies, which are the only places we have in which to live. It is then easy to understand why one of our most fundamental imperatives is the preservation of our body’s physical integrity. I am interested in how our thoughts and actions might reflect the innate drive to nurture and protect our bodies. How is imagination, curiosity, possession, and pleasure related to self-preservation? I am particularly compelled to

examine the ways people go about trying to understand the world. The search for knowledge arises from the need to navigate and control our environment—to secure resources and create safe places in which our bodies can endure. This necessity drives us to find ways to illuminate the dark recesses of mystery, extract order from randomness by any means necessary, and take answers from the most unlikely places. Through my artistic research I investigate various paths to knowledge and probe the boundaries between known and unknown. I explore the role of wonder and beauty in our search for knowledge, comfort, and security. Through optically rich material manipulations I fabricate objects of wonder and inquiry that regard the nature of truth and perception, and question established routes to understanding.

Four reflective objects for the hand, *The Cradled Gaze*, *The Grasped Gaze*, *The Draped Gaze*, and *The Perched Gaze*, forge a relationship between two integral, and intertwined sources of human comfort: a quiet mind soothed by certainty, and somatic pleasure unclouded by malady. Something like the product of a crystal ball and a worry stone, these tools for meditation, comfortably contoured to the hand, wrestle the mind from the grip of common concerns by capturing the gaze and releasing the imagination into their mysterious reflections.



*The Cradled Gaze* (detail)  
2020  
hollow formed sterling silver

They acknowledge that the mind is *part* of the body, not separate from it. A comfortable mind and a comfortable body go hand in hand. These objects belong in the hand and on the hand: the part of our bodies that we use to both experience the world, and exert our will upon it. The subtle contours of each piece conform to the left or right hand in a specific way, revealing how it should be held through its shape, size, and gently-weighted contact with the skin. The hand cradles the object, and the object cradles the hand; much like a snail and its shell conform to one another.



*The Grasped Gaze*  
2020  
hollow formed sterling silver



*The Grasped Gaze (detail 1)*

Like a snail's shell becomes a part of the snail, and protects its soft body, so does our imperfect understanding of the world become a part of us, and the beliefs we cultivate protect us from the fearful unknown. The four *Gazes*

contemplate essential comforts we long for as not only physical, but psychological beings: the prospect of knowledge and the refuge of certainty. Through their polished, curving silver exteriors these works reference one of the methods human beings have employed throughout history to reveal hard-to-find answers: divination. Reflective surfaces—such as pools of water, or polished stone and metal—were often used in divinatory rituals.



*The Draped Gaze*  
2021  
hollow formed sterling silver



*The Perched Gaze*  
2021  
hollow formed sterling silver

Divination encompasses a number of human practices that involve seeking information through the use of special materials, objects, or patterns that aid in channeling intuition or accessing the divine/supernatural. As Stephen Karcher puts it in his book *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Divination*, “For at least three thousand years people have used divination to find ways to

imagine themselves and their situations" (8). He explains that divination "constructs possibilities through . . . nonrational means" in order to help people interpret their circumstances and predict possible paths toward a desired outcome (9). I find these "nonrational means" particularly intriguing. I often wonder how different methods of rational and non rational inquiry compare to one another, and how close their outcomes are to the truth. The two aspects of divination that interest me most are the empowering of "special" materials/objects, and a reliance on intuition to reveal what reason cannot. Like scrying objects, the four *Gazes* direct your gaze into the distorted reflections in their shining silver surfaces, inviting the mind to disengage from grinding rationality and open itself to intuitive revelation.



*The Grasped Gaze* (detail 2)

I am deeply curious about the nature of intuition, and its role in human life. Some people conclude that intuition is new-agey, imaginary, or simply an unreliable way of guessing at things. There are good reasons for these perceptions, but intuition is in fact a real, important, and ubiquitous mental process of rapid pattern recognition that allows us to make decisions quickly. It is an automatic, biological way for our minds to transcend the slow, cumbersome process of conscious reasoning by using our accumulated experiences to identify familiar aspects of novel situations. We use intuition not only in games, ritualistic practices, and other special circumstances, but also to make every-day decisions. When you are performing ordinary tasks such as driving a car, socializing, or doing your job, you are using a mix of intuition and deliberate, rational thinking to keep the “flow” of these activities going. Intuition is not a foolproof method of finding facts, but it can sometimes reveal “truths” that our conscious mind has failed to recognize. I recall countless anecdotes in which people relate feeling afraid before they consciously recognize any evidence of danger. A fascinating example of intuition at work is presented by Malcom Gladwell In his book *Blink*. He relates a story in which a seemingly ancient statue, purchased by a major museum, was initially discovered to be fake not by the barrage of forensic tests that were thrown at it, but by the intuition of art experts. It just looked *wrong* to them, even before they could describe how (2-4).



Intuition is commonplace, but because it happens unconsciously we have little understanding of how it actually works. Therefore, like other mysterious phenomena, it can seem to have wondrous or magical qualities. Something as banal and innate as a “gut feeling” might become *clairvoyance* through our limited knowledge about our own minds, which I find fascinating. I often attempt to harness this effect in my work: the transformation of something common into something marvelous via our attenuated impressions—our ignorance. I often wonder how our cognitive limitations distort our perceptions, and what outcomes emerge from our myriad and imperfect modes of inquiry. I like to create pieces that push past the familiar and approach these mysterious and improbable places.



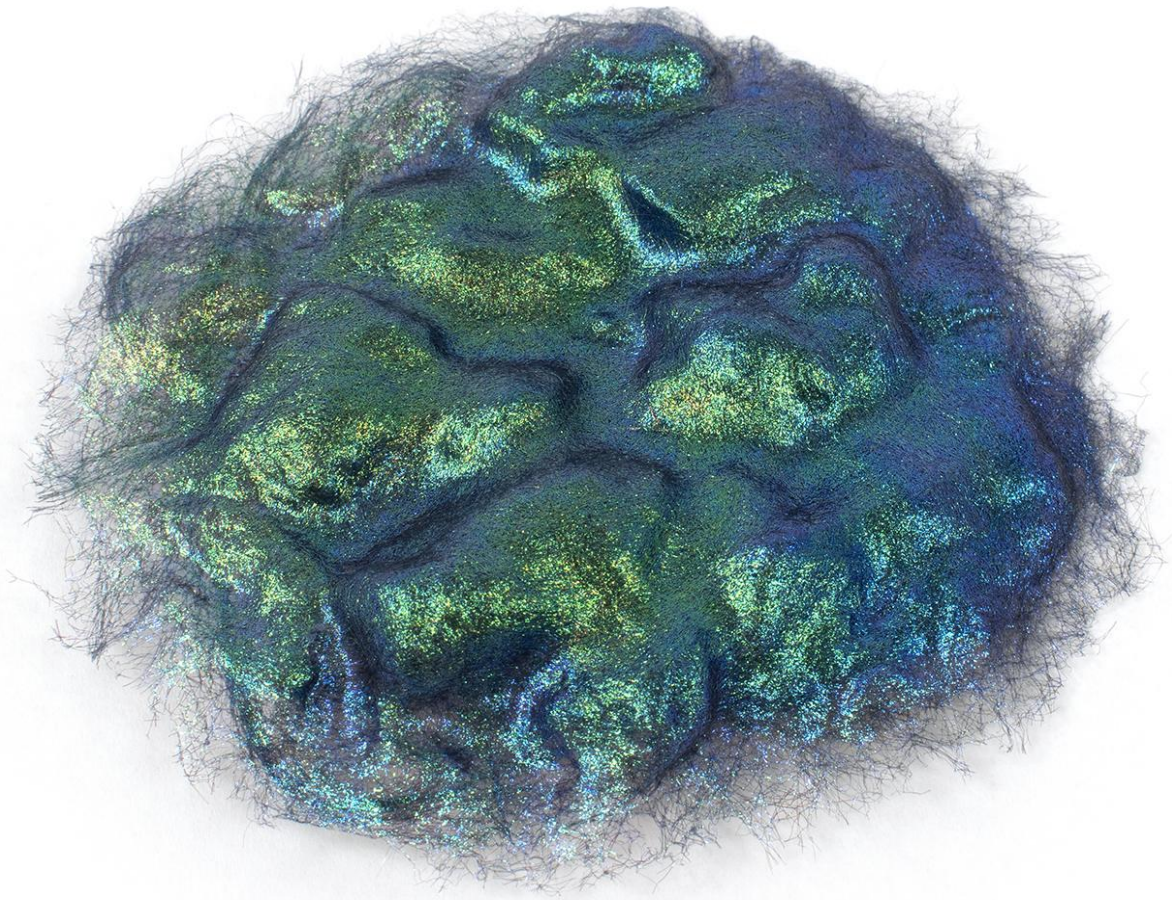
So Within  
2021

porcelain, glaze, gallium, fabric, cellophane, silicone, iridescent powder, stone

I also investigate how wonder and beauty are related to the search for knowledge. In their book *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park quote philosopher Francis Bacon, father of the scientific method, who described wonder as “the seed of knowledge” (11). They go on to point out that Bacon, and many of his contemporaries such as Robert Boyle and René Descartes, “saw wonder as a goad to inquiry” (13). Upon encountering a peculiar sight we might first be gripped by the awe of wonder, and then feel compelled to investigate the strange phenomenon. Daston and Park suggest that objects of wonder “[mark] the outermost limits of the natural,” and “[register] the line between the known and the unknown” (13). It is the objects and phenomena that dance at the edges of our current understanding, and charge our curiosity, that evoke a feeling of wonder, and that is where I seek to situate my work.

In their writings, Daston and Park make an important distinction between objects of wonder, and the *passion* of wonder. They describe the feeling of wonder as “visceral, immediate, [and] vertiginous” (11). Descartes is quoted as calling it “a sudden surprise of the soul” (Daston and Park 13), and Bacon is quoted as stating that “all knowledge and wonder . . . is an impression of pleasure in itself” (Daston and Park 11). Through my research into the nature of wonder, I have sensed a similarity between the pleasure of wonder and the pleasure of beauty. Given that human beings continually renew their

endeavors to find and create these pleasures I confidently place them  
alongside other essential human needs.



*Impression, Thrice Removed*  
2021  
fusible fibers, silver, adhesive strip, steel

Beauty is a crucial part of my work. This might once have been a reality so obvious and fundamental to an artist's practice as to render its utterance completely unnecessary. However, I do not believe that to be the case anymore. Some contemporary art shuns beauty entirely, and justifiably so. Not me, though. I make art that deliberately and insistently evokes the essential pleasures of beauty and of wonder. One of the mechanisms I use to achieve this effect is the inclusion of materials that are shiny, sparkly, iridescent, or transparent. Major threads of research presented in this thesis have their origins in the process of interrogating my own attraction to luminous materials. As I drilled down, I discovered two compelling and connected explanations: opulence and water, which are both deeply linked to basic human needs. Imagine a jeweled box, ornate gilded picture frame, or a string of perfect pearls. These shiny, opulent objects signify luxury: the kind of wealth, access, and skill that allows one to transform an uncertain existence into a life of abundance, comfort, and security. Opulence represents a shield of prosperity we can deploy to protect our bodies from the harshest aspects of earthly existence.

But what makes jewels, gold, and pearls opulent in the first place? Why do we consider these lustrous, sparkling materials especially exciting and beautiful? Why do we go to such great lengths to pluck them from the earth, and give them pride of place in our visual world? The answer is surely complicated, but

water may be part of it—the glistening surface of a gently running stream, or the jewel-like depths of a crystal-clear pond. Research Psychologists Richard G. Coss and Michael Moore begin their article “All That Glistens: Water Connotations in Surface Finishes” by pointing out that “for perhaps the last 5 million years, natural selection has acted on any failure by our hominid ancestors to find terrestrial sources of drinking water” (1). Their research suggests that the intense and ubiquitous human attraction to reflective and sparkly surfaces stems from our instinctual need to recognize sources of water in unfamiliar and visually complex landscapes. To the most primitive parts of our brain “shiny” indicates water, and to the thirsty there is nothing so viscerally pleasurable—so *beautiful*—as a drink. I am fascinated by how the drive to satiate our most fundamental desires makes its way into our visual and material culture; how thirst becomes opulence.



*Drop Studs*  
2021  
Opalite, glitter, silver

A material's potential, whether it can signify opulence—like glitter and gemstones—or provide malleability—like resin and clay—determines the role it can play in a work of art. Material considerations are an integral part of my research. I seek to unlock the hidden potential of my materials, and combine them in a way that inspires the viewer to reconsider their very nature, and aesthetic value. I often begin a piece with material experimentation, and let the outcomes guide me to the final form. Every substance has unique properties—they *live* in the world in their own particular way—and each is best suited to certain modes of manipulation. For example, polylactic acid (PLA)—a biodegradable thermoplastic—extruded from a 3D pen can create a dynamic texture, and may be shaped with relatively low heat, but it will not easily generate a perfectly smooth, straight edge. Air-dry clay produces a light, rigid form and exhibits very little shrinkage, but its surface quality cannot compare to the fine, luminous surface of porcelain. Just as natural objects are shaped by the behavior of their molecules and cells—as Christopher Williams describes in his fascinating book *Origins of Form: The Shape of Natural and Man Made Things*—my works are largely a consequence of the inherent properties of the materials of which they are composed. My research and experimentation is driven by a passion for discovering and maximizing the unique potential of each material, and coaxing them into forms and juxtapositions that defy expectations and produce wondrous outcomes. Whether it is the contours of a shell captured

in PLA with a 3D pen, and then layered with epoxy clay and bits of shell and stone—or heat-shrink tubing stuffed with mint green packing peanuts and capped with Herkimer diamonds—I want my work to transcend the multitude of steps and materials involved in its creation. I want each piece to seem as though it *obviously* belongs in the world.



*Stalk Earrings*

2021

silver, heat-shrink tubing, packing peanuts, Herkimer diamonds



*Stalk Earrings (detail)*

For jewelry in particular, materials exist in subjective, and ever-shifting hierarchies where a few things like gold and gemstones tend to hover near the top. However, many materials/objects attain value through personal significance; their role in one's life. In the hands of humans, matter becomes materials, and materials become things. Our things contribute to our habits and way of life. The materials around us shape our societies, and exist within our cultural frameworks; therefore, materials carry and produce meaning. Memory and meaning can make something much more valuable than gold and diamonds. My affinity for materials that feel "magical" reflects a childhood steeped in the visual vocabulary of late twentieth century American children's books, fantasy films, young-adult novels, and general pop



culture. My material choices reflect my identity, personal history, and my inner life. They emerge from my own curiosity and sense of wonder, which has led me to collect all kinds of things over the years. I sometimes reach for a material that I acquired a decade ago because I have just discovered its perfect purpose.

My desire to collect wonderful things is not unique. In fact, it is quite a prevalent practice among human beings of every era and region of the world. As a person with European biological and cultural origins, whose imagination is permeated with Western history and culture, I consider cabinets of curiosity to be one of the most exciting kinds of collections. Historical cabinets of curiosity were often rooms full of strange, rare, and opulent objects that were meant to not only impress visitors with the owner's wealth and knowledge, but to also fill them with awe and wonder. They were a place of marvels including zoological, botanical, and geological specimens; fine art, scientific and medical instruments, and biological oddities. Though cabinets of curiosity are historically fraught with colonialism and conquest, the practice of collecting natural and cultural artifacts arises from a more overarching and profound desire to understand, possess, organize, and classify the universe.



*Cartesian Creeper*

2021

PLA, pearls, epoxy clay, silver

As Giulia Carciotto and Antonio Paolucci point out in their book *Cabinet of Curiosities*, these cabinets were meant to create a “mirror and representation of the world in its entirety” (9). They expertly summarize that “the desire to understand the shimmering spectacle of history and the world by means of the systematic ordering of objects, art and knowledge is . . . the guiding principle behind the creation of the cabinet of curiosities” (14). To believe that the world is knowable—and that you might assemble everything of consequence into one place—is a comforting thought. The endeavor to gather all knowledge, and bring order to a dangerously chaotic world, is essentially an act of self-soothing. My work draws energy from the tensions between knowing/order and ignorance/randomness, and reflects the familiar desire to find solace in structure and certainty. Many pieces presented here utilize contrasts between geometric/organized and organic/chaotic elements which reflect seemingly binary or opposing forces that my research has uncovered in so many places.

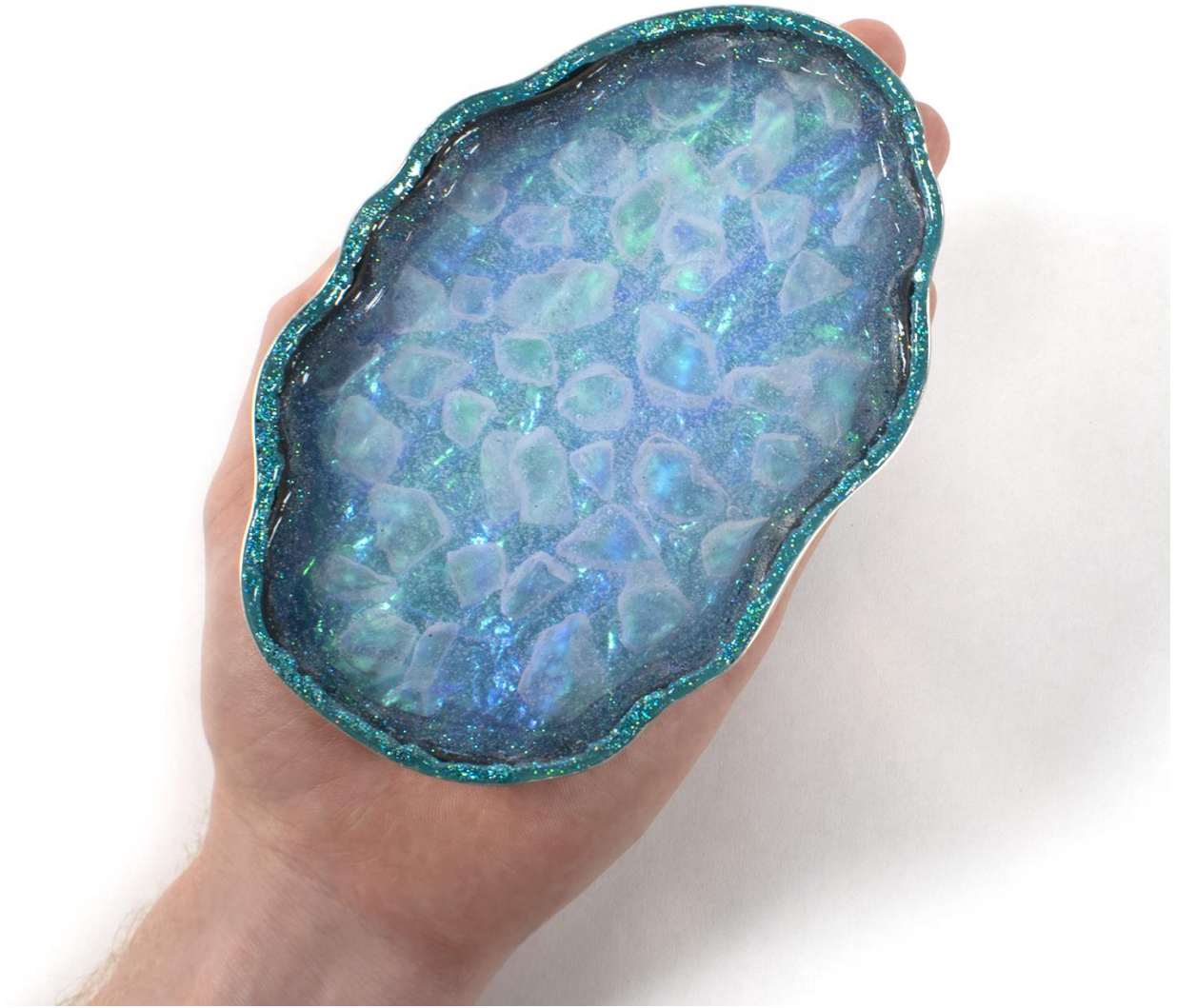


*Peek Earrings*

2021

PLA, pearls, citrine, epoxy clay, metal leaf, silver, resin

Many of the works in *Imposing Order* take direct inspiration from the kinds of objects that were collected by 16th–19th century European royalty, like coral, shells, gems, and stones; and like those items, they aim to inspire astonishment and curiosity. Each historical cabinet of curiosity reflects the preferences and preoccupations of its creator, and like those collections, the works in my thesis exhibition reflect my own aesthetic and intellectual interests. I've noticed a recurrence of shell and stone-like forms in this body of work. I have been drawn to discrete, hollow forms, and irregular textures. I've made objects that you might hold in your hand or put in your pocket. Much of this work contemplates physical comfort and security, so it is not surprising that shells have emerged from my imagination. A shell protects the soft, vulnerable body of the creature it covers. Divorced of this duty, shells are among the most beautiful of natural wonders with their luminous surfaces and mathematical symmetry. The four *Gazes* are hollow forms that vaguely resemble shells, and several other pieces utilize the form of a shell, or natural shell material. Stone is similarly endowed with dual virtues: endurance and beauty. Stone possesses the eternal life that we crave. It can physically protect our bodies if used as shelter, serve as a symbol of fortitude, or adorn us in glittering magnificence. There are echoes of stone and the shape of rocks scattered throughout this body of work.



*Rooted Illusions*

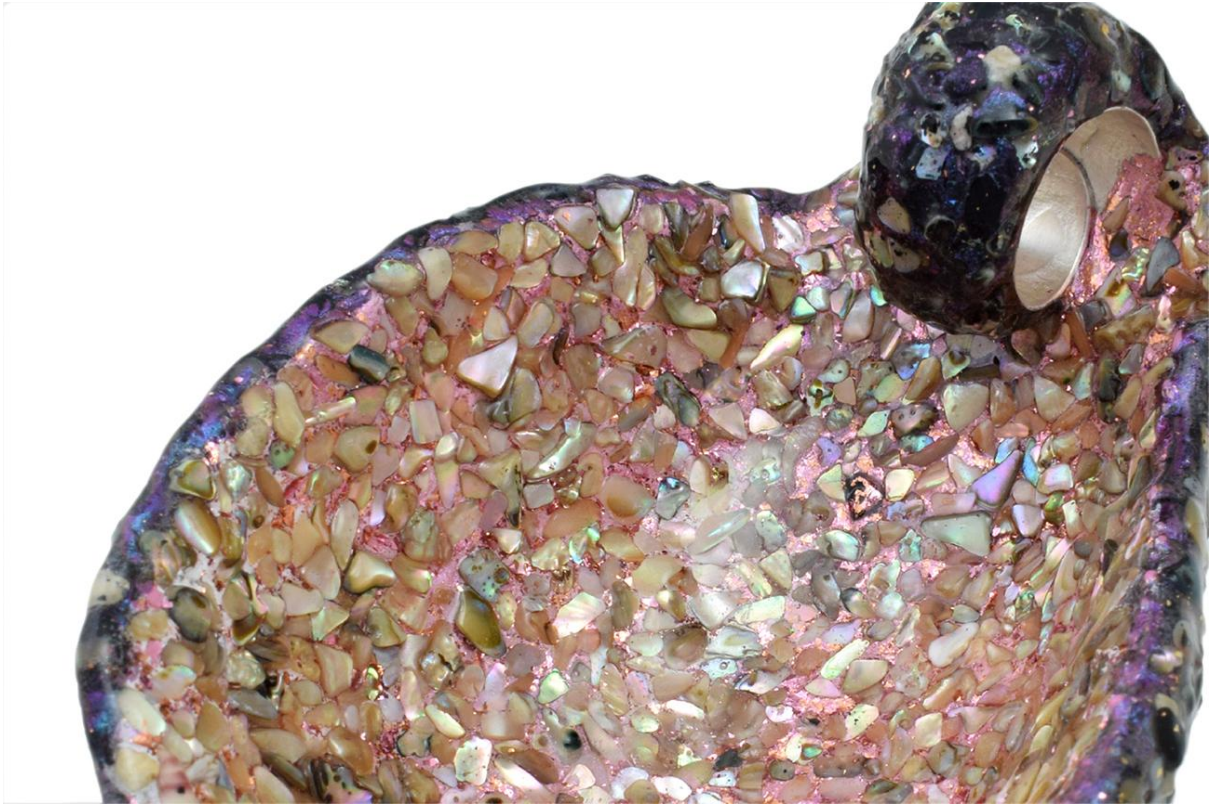
2021

silver, silicone, acrylic, cellophane, fabric, glitter, hot glue, resin

I have many personal connections to shell and stone that surely contributed to these artistic choices. I remember the ground by the docks in Galveston Bay—where I sailed with my father as a child—which seemed to be made entirely of crushed shells. I recall both of my grandmothers' collections, one of mostly shells and the other of mostly rocks and fauna. I inherited a tendency to scan the terrain for beautiful bits to take home with me. Many of the shapes in these works reference specific stones (essentially gravel) gathered from my walking trail during the summer of 2020 in New Paltz, New York. These experiences, and other moments echoing from the deep recesses of my memory, have contributed to the pervasiveness of shell and rock forms in my current body of work.



Practical Slab  
2021  
porcelain, stain



*Granular Panoply*

2021

PLA, epoxy clay, shell, stone, metal leaf, powdered pigment, resin, silver



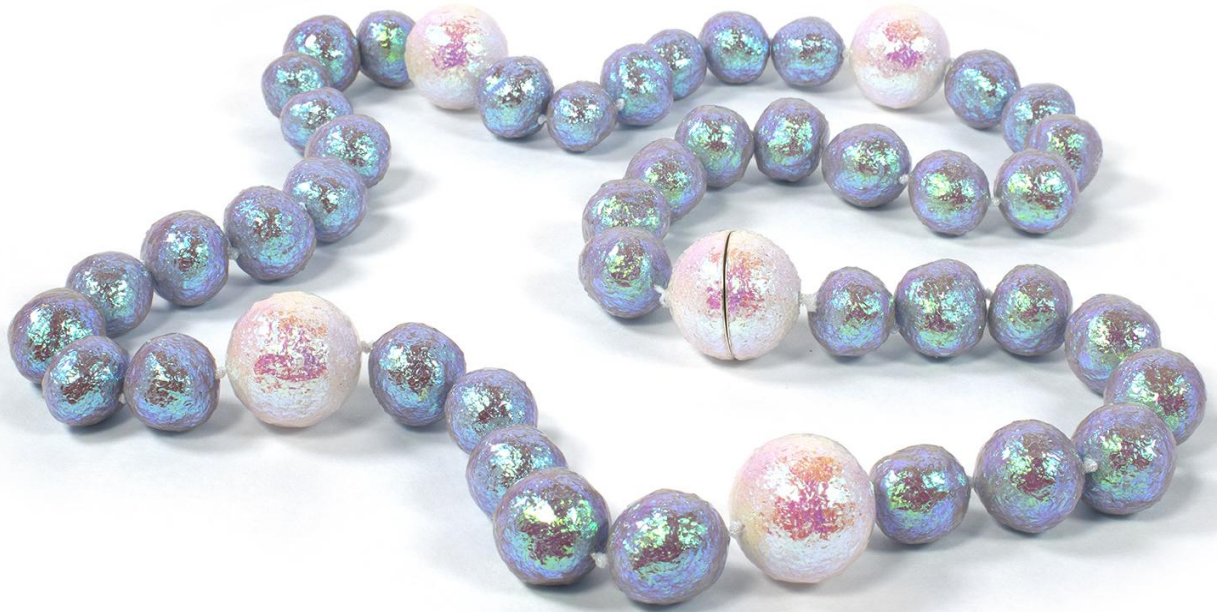
*Granular Panoply* (detail 1)



*Granular Panoply* (detail 2)



Shell and stone are likely some of the first objects to become adornment. Throughout human history we find a persistent and ubiquitous practice of selecting and altering materials from our environment to be placed on the body. What motivates people to adorn themselves? Why jewelry? The power of jewelry lies mainly in its ability to signify important things about the wearer. Jewelry connects us to the people around us, and helps us communicate the invisible about ourselves. It can inform people of our marital status, cultural identity, level of wealth, etc. Additionally, many materials are thought to have magical qualities, and by keeping them close to the body one might be availed of their benefits. Beyond jewelry, and related to the behavior of collecting, is the simple power of possession. To *own* something is to take control over it, and a sense of control is a sense of security. The need to *have* and to *keep* things drives us to take the things around us—especially the precious and beautiful—and transform them into personal possessions. Objects that are kept on the body—around the neck, on the finger, in a pocket—draw some essential quality from all of these motivations that are tied to basic human needs—social identity, health, and prosperity. By creating jewelry and other objects of a personal scale my work connects to the swirling undercurrents of human life.



*A Rare Strand*

2021

air-dry clay, iridescent film, PLA, resin, iridescent knotting cord, aluminum foil, epoxy clay, silver

This collection of work is about looking and finding. It is about seeing answers in strange places, and imposing order on an unpredictable world. It asserts that curiosity is crucial to survival, and that wonder and beauty are fundamental pleasures that help us find contentment in these bodies we inhabit.

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Thesis Exhibition  
Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art  
June 5th - 13th, 2021