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Amassing Subsistence: Creating an Environment Through Objects and Time

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Senior Independent Study

The College Of Wooster
Department of Art and Art History

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Advised by Walter Zurko

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Preface

I am a very process oriented artist. I am attracted to the spontaneity of playing, interacting with, and understanding a material as a means to create. The unexpected results and problem solving that come with this exploration of material serve as one of the main motivators behind my art-making. Once I became aware of this aspect of my identity as an artist, I began to see similarities in how I approached tasks in my day-to-day life. My desire to always work through a problem and address each stage as it comes along is a skill I can trace back to my childhood.

As my Senior Independent Study (I.S.) project progressed, it developed into an exploration of creating an environment based off of my childhood memories of family, home, and nature. For my I.S. project I intend to construct abstract sculptures out of discarded household objects transformed into materials. With these materials I use the meditative, repetitive rhythms of domestic chores, and simple daily actions as the foundation of my creative process. Over time I accumulate material that I amass into organic, biomorphic forms that reference the ephemeral and shifting qualities of nature.

Part I. Memory: Action and Imagery

Our house itself is a work in progress. My parents have been adding on to it—bit by bit—for almost twenty-five years. We take it in steps, working on the weekends and evenings, assembling disjointed odds and ends into something cohesive and complete. My parents gathered discarded materials such as beams, floorboards, paneling, bricks, tiles, toilets, sinks, bathtubs, radiators, and doors from various jobs over the years. They would come home with my dad's truck bed filled with castoffs from restorations of old

farmhouses and sea captain's houses from around the island of Martha's Vineyard, where we live. There was a slow accumulation of these materials around the house, the yard, and in my father's shop, each piece –eventually– finding a place and function within our house. I used to walk through our house running my hands over every surface, feeling the imperfections and histories contained in our secondhand walls. There was always a mix of rough and smooth textures, old and new, finished and unfinished all coexisting in the same space. My parents have always been resourceful and willing to work with and reuse what's available, and this mindset has been incredibly influential in my life and art making.

That being said, we still only inhabit about two-thirds of our house. A series of twenty-year-old temporary walls draped with rugs, curtains, and tapestries separate our current living space from an unfinished kitchen, pantry, mudroom, and foyer. Our temporary kitchen is a narrow L-shape, no more than three feet wide and six feet long, not unlike the galley of a ship. Even though this kitchen is the smallest room in our house, growing up it was the hub to which everything and everyone gravitated.

Throughout my childhood, there was a constant flux of family and friends in and out of our house, and to accommodate them there was a steady stream of food coming from the kitchen. Large family dinners were not a mandatory event in our house, but resulted out of necessity due to the size of our family. Even though my mother and father did most of the cooking, we all worked to pull dinner together. I remember as a young child learning to help with simple tasks, like setting the table, cooking, and clean up afterwards. My siblings and I would wash vegetables in the kitchen sink, squeeze past my parents at the stove and then peel, cut or dice the vegetables on the dinner table. Even though these are basic household chores, I enjoyed the unpredictability that sometimes occurred as a result of us

not having the right ingredients or not knowing until the last minute how many people were eating dinner that night.

I enjoyed eating with my family; the constant, crazy energy that resulted from all of us cramming into our small kitchen and around our dinner table felt cozy and familiar. While many of these nights were hectic and left up to chance, they were also filled with routines and tasks that I repeated over and over until they became second nature to me, like they do for many of us. I went through the same motions to set the table so often that they seemed choreographed. These repetitive actions gave me a particular kind of focus and clarity to counter the high energy emanating around me – in time it became an oddly soothing combination of chaos and calm. Instead of becoming mundane and boring, these types of tasks allowed me to explore and examine every object that passed through my hands, igniting my tactile senses, and sparking my interest in the way I interacted with these types of domestic objects.

As part of this ritual, I loved taking one of our mom's secondhand tablecloths to unfold, shake and float up over our long dinner table, letting it fall quietly. Then I smoothed my hands over the cloth, brushing out any wrinkles or folds in wide, sweeping motions. I remember as a child always being very tactile. I loved the way it felt to run my hands over things and smooth them out. As I checked to make sure the tablecloth was centered on the table, I would look at the gentle ripples and waves created from the cloth draping over the edges. The way the tablecloth took on the form of our table intrigued me. I remember wanting to freeze how the fabric moved over itself in this new temporary shape.

From here I would arrange pots, pans, and dishes full of food in the center of the table, clustering and nestling them around each other trying to leave room for everyone

and their plates. I pushed each pan up to the next so that their edges grazed, utilizing as much of the table's surface as possible. The way all the pots and pans clustered together to make one cohesive, biomorphic shape intrigued me. Gradually I began to notice similar forms and random clustering everywhere, especially in nature.

Even though I set the dinner table over and over again, each time how the pots fit together changed depending on what was for dinner and how many were eating that night. Once everything was ready we all piled onto the two long communal benches on either side of the table and ate. When we finished eating, we took each dish, pot and pan off the table and into the kitchen to be washed or saved for washing the next morning.

These few, simple steps of setting the family dinner table have stuck with me and are just one example of how I enjoy engaging with even the smallest of daily routines. My memories of learning and utilizing practical skills play an integral part in my creative process and have shaped the way I see myself as an artist. The focus and patience I developed over the years from these daily tasks is something I use daily and plays an important role in my Senior I.S. project.

Memories like those of setting the table or washing dishes have been the inspiration for my artwork and creative process. My art is a result of my cumulative experiences, and recently I've been addressing experiences/memories from my childhood as they come to mind while I work. These memories center on family, our house, and the surrounding natural environment. Growing up in a naturally beautiful, bucolic place, I spent a lot of time outside exploring, observing and absorbing the world around me.

Childhood memories that focus around routine tasks and domestic chores can be broken down into a series of actions or tasks accompanied by flashes of imagery,

sensations, or associations. For example, when I recall past experiences of setting the table as I work I distinguish the physical tasks of stacking plates, unfolding tablecloths and arranging dishes from how I remember these moments felt or looked, and use these tasks to guide the actions I perform throughout the making process. Separating tasks from my sensations and associations –like smoothing out and noticing the way the tablecloth forms around the table, and the imagery of clustered dishes –enables me to use the emotional/reactionary part of my memories to convey feelings of home, familiarity, and habitual activities in my art. When I am engaged in making a new sculpture –say cutting out fabric circles, I consciously separate the action from the imagery/sensations in any childhood memory that may arise. This dissociation allows whatever action my hands are doing–unfolding the tablecloth, washing dishes – to inform my process of making sculpture. As the sculpture progresses I will continually reference imagery/sensations to communicate my emotions abstractly through the formal qualities of the work.

By isolating childhood imagery and sensations from actions first, I can focus on the visual moments of the memory –like the tablecloth draping over the form of the table, or dishes clustering and nestling into each other – and how images come together to create an arrangement of forms in my mind. As more flashes of memory make their way into my working consciousness, the images will overlap and occur simultaneously, becoming a conjoined network of childhood imagery. Soon I do not just see the tablecloth falling around the edge of the table, but this image in combination with the clustered dishes, which morphs and transforms into an idea for a new, multilayered sculptural form.

The other part of a memory, separate from the imagery and sensations, is the particular set of domestic tasks I perform with my hands. When recalling past experiences,

my actions within the memory are often overshadowed by the potent sensations and imagery that come to mind so easily. But the actions I move through in the memory – unfolding, shaking, floating and smoothing out the tablecloth with my hands for example – are responsible for making the moment so clear and memorable. I focus on the tasks my hands perform to get a better sense of how all my sensations and the imagery come together into the present, thus informing how I might go about recreating these sensations in my work.

Such memories of place and family have been influential to my art making process. My creative process revolves around exploring the domestic, mundane, and repetitious moments that become a part of an object's function and history over time. To convey this facet of the domestic objects I use as materials in my work, I intentionally mimic the tasks tied to each object as I manipulate them. There are two contrasting concepts in my process of trying to “freeze time” within a memory and, at the same time, express the continuous repetition and occurrence of the domestic tasks these memories are rooted in. I want to capture the fleeting sensations and moments of my childhood memories, but in a way that also references how I repeated these domestic tasks over and over. Domestic activities such as washing, rinsing, folding, stacking, scrubbing, and cooking that I perform on a daily basis often feel endless –there will always be more dirty dishes, laundry to fold, and meals to make. At times it seems like these tasks will go on forever and never amount to anything because I will repeat them tomorrow. Using memories embedded with domestic chores for my I.S. project helped me find the calming, meditative focus I used to enjoy as a child helping my parents and apply it to my art making.

Early in the project I felt intuitively that my childhood experiences – everything from my family’s lifestyle, living within our unfinished house, and the surrounding natural environment – were connected to one another and played a major role in my creative process but I struggled verbalizing these connections and overlaps. Learning from nature, living in a small house with a big family, sharing and receiving knowledge and skills, and understanding the history and traditions embedded in each of my interactions with nature, objects, and people – these are all experiences I cannot put into words neatly. My childhood experiences taught me the significance of interacting respectfully and not passively with the people and environments around me. My appreciation for my surroundings only re-affirms my own existence, and continues to serve as one of the main influencers of my creative process. Through this project I realized how life’s small, common, and familiar moments have as much of an impact on my art work as the bigger, more memorable times in my life. Domestic chores are a way of caring for and maintaining our day-to-day lives; we move through them quickly without much thought. I find that carrying out basic, mundane actions with my hands like folding, washing, sewing, and cooking provides me with a chunk of time to slow down, be present, and meditate on the repetitious movements of my hands.

Part II. Process Section

In addressing the process of making my work, it feels most congruent to speak of and describe the entire making process of a particular piece –*Subsist. Set the Table. Subsist* (referred to as *Subsist* in the proceeding discussion). The reason I want to speak to this piece in particular is that it was the first piece I started for my I.S. and one that I have been working on continuously for the past seven months. Each stage of the process –from

gathering, testing and assembling materials to making sketches, problem solving and final installation for my Senior I.S. exhibition –is time consuming and highlights the importance of creating and maintaining rhythm and routine in my creative process. *Subsist* has gone through several changes and speaks to the fluidity of the experimental component of my working process of allowing the material to help determine what form the piece takes on.

Because I am unable to assemble and install *Subsist* in its entirety until my Senior I.S. exhibition I have included sketches to show the progression of the piece, images illustrating the natural and domestic influences, and images of my making process. I decided to compile these sketches, and images into a series of collages to demonstrate how inspiration, creation and adaptation develop together and continuously throughout the making process of my I.S. Figures 1-7 highlight different phases and moments of *Subsist* over the past seven months. Each stage –gathering, testing and transforming materials, sketching, problem solving and installation –once started, continues throughout the rest of the making process. While I am discussing my process in a particular order for the sake of *Subsist*, these stages occur simultaneously and as needed throughout the progression of a piece.

I worked on multiple pieces at the same time for my I.S. over the past seven months, rotating from piece to piece. I set up my studio so I could work on several things at once to prevent me from getting stuck and to sustain a rhythm and routine in my working process. Once I begin gathering materials I habitually do so until I've amassed enough or as much material as I can. The initial tests and experiments I carry out with any given material are one of several; I continued to explore with the material throughout the construction process, familiarizing myself with and discovering new ways to manipulate the material

along the way. Even while experimenting with several materials, I continuously jot down words, descriptions and quick sketches for ongoing pieces as well as new ones. A piece may begin as a clear, comprehensible vision of form, construction and material that I work towards, or a piece begins as playful experimentation prompted by how the material acts, which eventually progresses and transforms into a finished piece.

Gathering and Gleaning of Materials

I spent the first few months of I.S. going to local businesses such as Goodwill, Habitat for Humanity Re-store, and small thrift stores several times a week to collect household objects such as tablecloths, candles, bed sheets, and curtains to transform into my materials. Sometimes I went with a particular object in mind to continue collecting for a piece, but I would also take time to walk through and see if anything caught my attention with its potential to transform.

The history of each secondhand object I encounter and utilize in my work is something I consider and pull inspiration from on a regular basis. When I think of the history of a particular object I see it as a record of the objects past existence. And, like the history of many things, I can only know or infer parts of an objects history while the rest remains uncertain and unknowable. The first part of an objects history is its intended function or purpose. When I discover an object I consider using as art material there are four factors I take into account. After I first encounter an object I consider its design, how it is constructed, and manufactured for a particular purpose.

Oftentimes there are physical markers like scratches, dents, or stains that adorn the object documenting how a previous owner utilized and interacted with the object, which is

the second aspect I consider part of an objects history. It is interesting to imagine the object in someone else's home before it appeared in the store and eventually made its way to my studio. The reason why the previous owner discarded the object in the first place is the third consideration in an objects history –whether it's due to a flaw, broken part or the item was no longer needed –and another aspect I can never know for sure. The fourth part of an objects history is what I associate and how I interact with it upon its discovery. If any or all four of these factors catch my attention I will purchase the object and, throughout the making process, I employ the knowable and unknowable parts of its history to free the object from its functional form and past, giving the object a new life as an art material informed by its previous existence.

I knew from the beginning of my I.S. project that fabric in all its various forms would become a dominant material in my work because fabric and textiles have a strong historical connection to domesticity and matters of the home. Over the years, I accumulated an assortment of tablecloths, bed sheets, curtains, pillowcases, blankets and other fabric-based objects to use for making clothes and other projects, and I was able to find a use for many of the scraps and leftovers in my Senior I.S. project.

Long before I began this project I was gathering and gleaning used and found objects for use in my daily life, as well as my art making. My I.S. project is the first instance that I am trying to maintain a connection between the history of the object, the processes I employ, and the conceptual inspirations behind each piece. Much of this relates to growing up in our pieced-together house and learning resourcefulness from my parents. The search for the right materials and the unexpected discoveries made along the way is something I learned to appreciate from an early age, and I have made it a habit to take the time to

explore and glean from the world around me. The gathering and gleaning of materials did not only happen at the beginning of my I.S., but continued for the duration of the project.

For *Subsist*, I came across a small, semitransparent tablecloth that was flimsy and delicate, but when the uneven pattern of the weave caught the light a certain way, it seemed to energize and come to life. This particular tablecloth, that formed a number of the bowls I made, had a quality and texture distinguishing it from any others I had amassed over the years. The tablecloth's expansive pattern of small raised dots in combination with muted cream colors seemed incredibly delicate and endless. I knew that I wanted to capture and encase the movement of the tablecloth as well as the light around and within in it because these two elements working together gave the tablecloth a softness I had never seen before.

Tests and Experiments

When I brought the small tablecloth into my studio I began testing ways to capture the movement and interaction of the fabric and light. I melted down some candles I had bought that day at Goodwill and experimented with coating parts of the tablecloth to see how the wax affected the fabric and its interaction with light. I started experimenting with wax mostly because I was attracted to the off-white and ochre tones of beeswax and paraffin wax. I played with different ways to cut and then mold and manipulate the fabric once it was coated, eventually coming to a shape and process that drew attention to the movement of fabric and light.

Initially, as I went through these tests, I was not mentally connecting anything I was doing with my hands or the forms I was coming up with to my past memories associated with home, tablecloths or bowls. I was purely focusing on what my hands were doing and

how the materials were changing. But the longer I spent manipulating the tablecloth and the wax the more my childhood memories of setting the table and eating with my family flooded my mind.

I knew I wanted to experiment with forming and molding the fabric coated around different shapes I had lying around my studio like bowls, cups, tennis balls, boxes, and my own hands. Circles and spheres are shapes I have always been drawn to –they have the potential to symbolize cycles, rhythms, continuity or nothing at all. Without realizing at first, I cut a circle roughly the circumference of a dinner plate out of the tablecloth and dipped it in wax three times so the fabric remained stiff and had some integrity when cooled. Before it had completely cooled however, I took the coated circle and draped it over my hand held in a fist. The form this last step created sparked something in me and before I knew it I had laid out an assembly line of materials and tools to produce as many of these bowl-like shapes as possible (Figure 1). As I worked I streamlined my process; I set up a washbasin of water next to the double boiler I used to melt down recycled wax so I could dip the coated fabric in cold water to speed up setting time, and I discovered that molding the coated circles over balloons was much more efficient and less painful than using my own hands. I would drape them over the balloons then and allow them to harden. When the wax was strong enough to hold the form without the balloon being there, I would release the clamp and the air would release (Figure 2). I would let them float in the washbasin until they were chilled and no longer malleable. I began to pile them on the table to dry. This was when the object –the patterned cream fabric –transformed from its former life as a tablecloth to an art making material. It felt more intuitive rather than thought through. I wanted to see how the tablecloth, wax and my hands interacted.

Sketches, Notes, Afterimages

After these first few rounds of tests I started the process of drawing and recording ideas in my sketchbook. I also started a series of *Wax Drawings* (Figure 3), that I created as I worked on *Subsist*. These drawings document the making process of the piece and I refer to them as *Afterimages*. The *Wax Drawings* record the stage in my process when I have melted down my current supply of wax and there is still some left in the bottom of the double boiler, but not enough to coat or form a piece of fabric. With sheets of watercolor paper I took impressions of the remaining wax while it was cooling so as to not waste it and document the state of the wax throughout the process. Oftentimes the wax at the bottom of the double boiler would be filled with water and debris from the mixture of candles and fabrics used over the last few days. The ovular shapes in the drawings are the result of water pooling in the bottom as I go between dipping the fabric in wax then water while I work.

My early sketches for *Subsist* after the first rounds of tests were a series of jotted down words and rough shapes. Since I had established the rough form of these small, spherical components, my preliminary sketches explored how to assemble these individual pieces into a large, visually cohesive structure. In one of these early sketches I stacked the spherical coated fabric forms into a tall, narrow, fourteen-foot column shape (Figure 4). At this early stage, I was using mainly natural and organic textures, patterns, and structures as influence for the compositions of my pieces. Sculptural associations with imagery of biomorphic formations like barnacles or fungi and lichen on trees came to mind much quicker as I worked than any of my experiences related to the use and function of a tablecloth as a domestic object.

Organic forming patterns found in nature –clustering, layering and accumulation over time – that I’ve observed since I was a child influenced how I initially approached *Subsist* and other pieces in my I.S. project. But as the physical piece progressed alongside the sketches and I spent more time with it, whether I was working on it or just sharing my studio space it, the more I felt that the final installation of *Subsist* should reflect its making process.

As I continued to work on *Subsist*, I kept recreating and reworking my sketches of the column shape, trying to solve the problem of connecting each spherical form to the next. I was stuck in my original idea of this vertical form because I thought the upward movement and impressive height of the finished piece was the best way to illustrate growth, accumulation and the passage of time.

The idea to display the individual pieces laid out and unattached on a long table came from a conversation about the assembly line I had arranged for myself. As I moved through the same series of repetitive actions the connection to domestic chores became more apparent. The way that I laid out the tablecloths on my worktable to cut out as many circles out of the fabric as possible began to remind me of setting the table for dinner, clustering the dishes edge to edge and using every inch efficiently. I coated and stacked the fabric circles before I molded them around the balloons in a way that resembled stacks of plates (Figure 5). As I continued to drape the coated circles over the balloons I caught myself intently watching the fabric layer and fold over itself the same way I watched my mother’s secondhand tablecloths take on the form of our dinner table (Figure 2). These few connections to my childhood memories of these daily domestic chores drastically changed

how I envisioned the final installation of *Subsist*, and brought the piece to a more complete state than it had ever been before.

Exhibition/Installation Connections: Creating a Sensory Environment

The more time I spent with *Subsist*, I began visualizing the final form in relation to endlessness and repetition. I wanted *Subsist* to convey time through its making process as well as time spent doing the domestic tasks that served as influence. The repetition of process and the bowl-like forms makes the passage of time visible throughout the piece. The final installation of the wax bowls on a narrow, forty-two foot table creates a simple visual connection between the tablecloths history/function, the processes I employed, and the conceptual inspirations.

I also wanted the piece to express unending growth to reference its own making process as well as natural cycles (Figure 6). I let the material guide the development of *Subsist*, allowing the piece to shift and change with each new tablecloth or candle added. The long narrow table is meant to express endlessness and, if it weren't for the gallery walls the piece could go on forever (Figure 7). I felt this was the most natural and clear way to display *Subsist*, and the progression of the piece over time reflects my creative process.

Tara Donovan and Eva Hesse served as the two main artists I researched over the course of my I.S. project. Their use of repeating forms and patterns, transformation of materials, and use of exhibition spaces helped me to contextualize my own work. Both artists allow their sculptures to expand and move into a space, since setting and associations of place are important themes in both their work (Figure 8).

Tara Donovan utilizes an interplay of natural forms composed of synthetic materials, removing commonplace objects from the context of their intended purpose and

setting (Figure 9). Her works have no subject matter, but are instead about compiling materials in unexpected ways to comment on their own making. While her work can translate into so many different meanings, her pieces all convey a strong sense of their own materiality, never completely disassociating from the original material they were constructed from.¹

Because of the impressive scale and repetition of her work, Donovan creates sculptures that resemble minute natural systems, as if the viewer were looking through a microscope. Donovan shares her inspiration from the natural environment with Eva Hesse, who also constructed abstract sculptures that referenced natural forms and patterns. Both Donovan and Hesse created these organic forms out of manmade, synthetic materials, often salvaged and collected, just like my creative process.

Subsist, along with the rest of the pieces in my I.S. project, is meant to convey a feeling of accumulation over time. Not just accumulation of materials, but gestures, tasks, sensations and memories. Each piece in my Senior I.S. Exhibition is abstract, yet they provoke sensations and associations from my childhood experiences. I thought it was important that my Senior I.S. exhibition reflect a sense of place associated with my childhood, even if this connection is only visible to me. The pieces developed and transformed alongside each other in my studio over the past seven months and built up a compact environment around me. I think the motivations behind I.S. project are much more apparent when my work is experienced rather than viewed. I wanted to convey the sense of environment from my studio in my Senior I.S. Exhibition. To do this I kept

¹ Chuck Close, introduction to *Currents 35: Tara Donovan*, ed. Brady Roberts (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2012), 9.

expanding and amassing each piece through the same repetitive processes until I could no longer work on them because of size or time limitations.

I chose the title *Subsist. Set the Table. Subsist* to draw attention to the endless continuity of the main piece of my Senior I.S. Exhibition, as well as the other pieces in the show. The title illuminates the repetitive act of setting the table the piece references, and connects this action to the making process as well. Starting the title with “*Subsist,*” and ending it without punctuation denies any distinction between the beginning and end of the piece and highlights the cyclical, repetitive processes that influenced my I.S. project as a whole.

Appendix



Figure 1
Subsist Assembly Line



Figure 2
Subsist formation

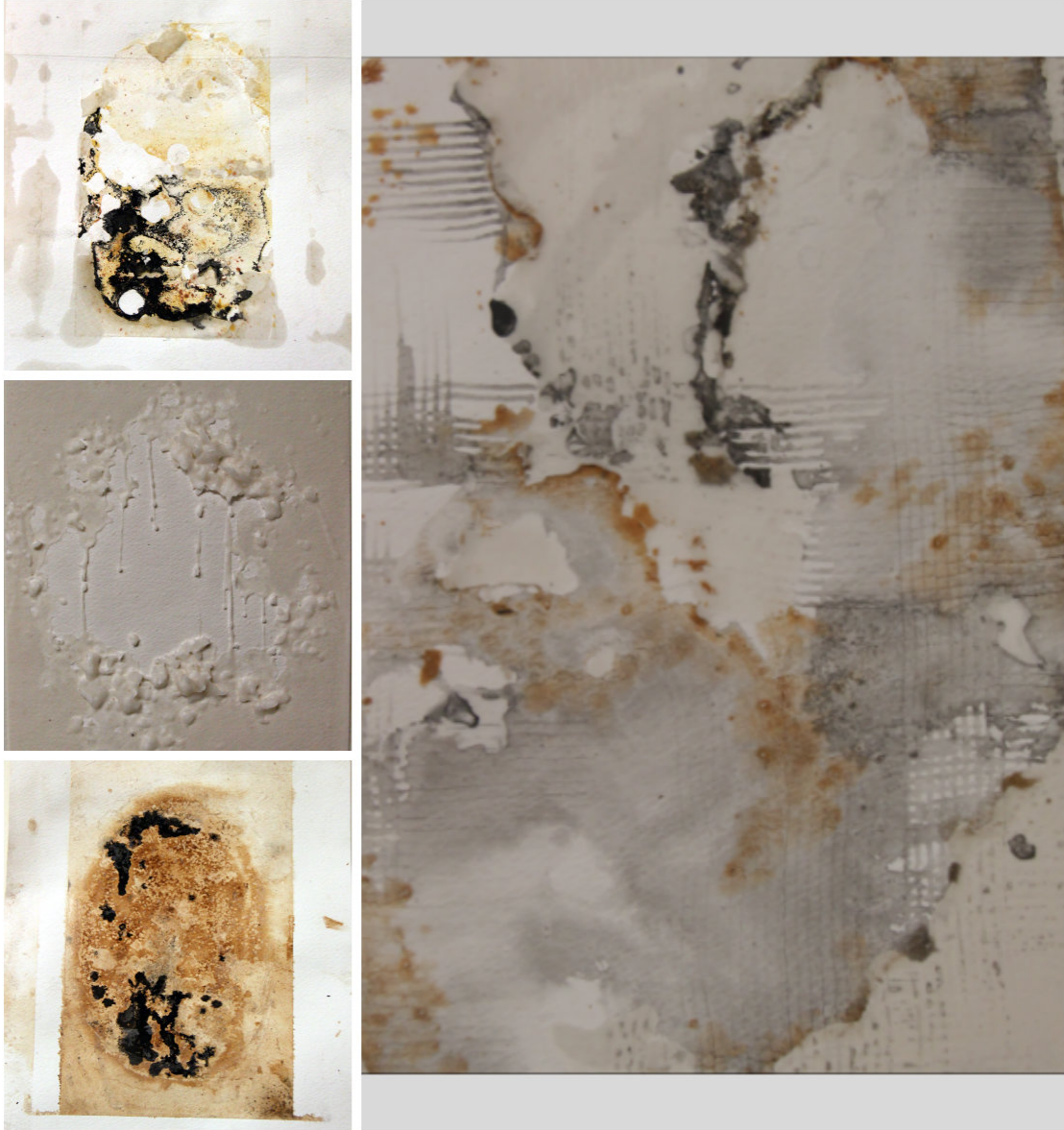


Figure 3
Matilda Alexander, *Wax Drawings*, 2015-16.



Figure 4
Matilda Alexander, *In-process Sketch*, 2015-16



Figure 5

Matilda Alexander, *Subsist in process: natural and domestic references*, 2015-16.



Figure 6
Accumulation in natural processes

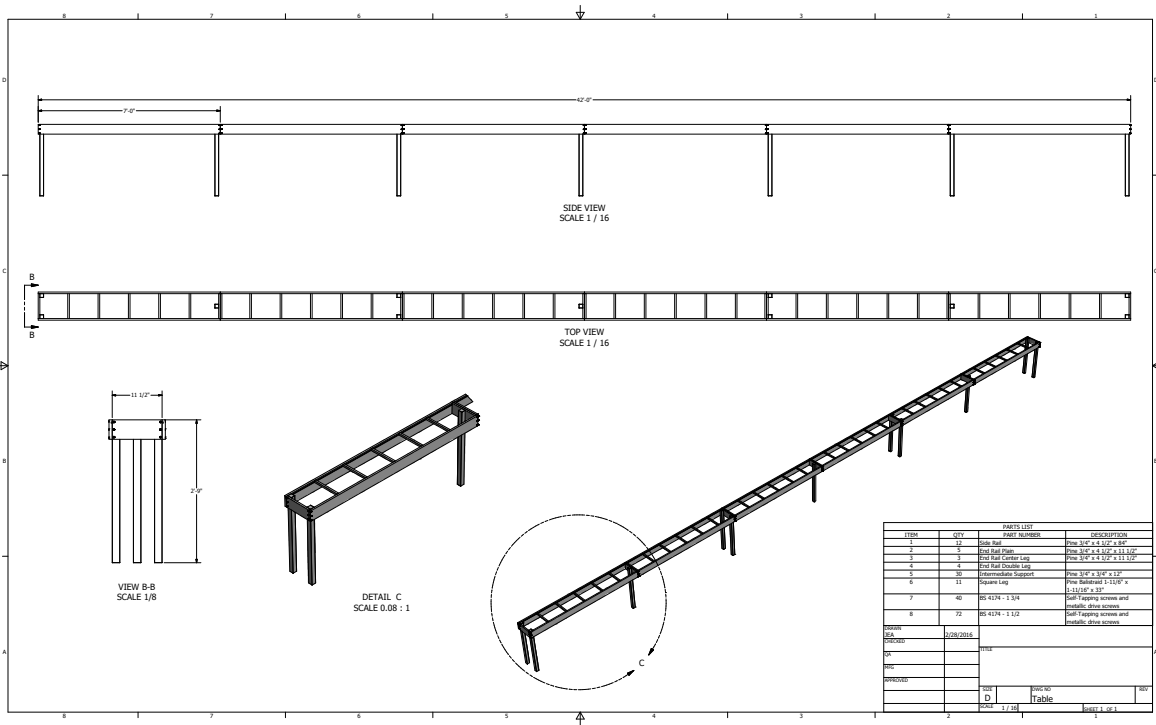


Figure 7
Matilda Alexander, *Table Design*, 2016



Figure 8
Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*, 1969.



Figure 9
Tara Donovan, *Untitled (Plastic Cups)*, 2006.

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