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# Diminishing Connections: Nature, the Domestic, and Thingness

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DIMINISHING CONNECTIONS: NATURE, THE DOMESTIC, AND THINGNESS

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts  
Visual Art

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by  
Mary Elizabeth Cooke  
May 2016

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Accepted by:  
David Detrich, Committee Chair  
Todd McDonald  
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Anderson Wrangle

## ABSTRACT

In my work I am examining Nature/Culture dualism manifested in contemporary material culture through domestic objects. I'm surprised by how many things around me (furniture, textiles, wall coverings, etc.) reference something natural but how there isn't anything one would consider 'Nature'. It is evident that traces of the natural are all around us but it is mediated through man-made things. It is as if Nature has been co-opted, commoditized, and grafted into what defines the domestic realm. I question if artificial and abstracted representations of Nature within the domestic space, manufactured or hand made, have relegated Nature to the level of 'thingness'. I use theory from Jane Bennett and Daniel Miller to illustrate the agency that objects and things hold as well as their ability to influence people.

My work combines, conflates, and deconstructs objects and materials from the domestic realm to interrogate their underlying order. I tease apart what is instilled by an object's form, aesthetics, function, as well as spatial and socioeconomic location. As I uncover the internal order of a thing I very quickly disrupt that order as a form of critiquing the system it participates in. That system may be consumer culture, Nature/Culture dualism, subject/object relationships, or issues of the individual versus the social. By teasing apart this combination that exists within an object, my work offers viewers the opportunity to reconsider their position in relation to things as well as to reconsider the terms defining what is natural, cultural, and domestic.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my husband Matthew Brown and our two sons, Jackson and James. Without my guys I would have never been whole enough to accomplish this.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my fellow graduate students for all the advice, suggestions, and materials they have given me. I am grateful for all the laughs we have shared and I thank them for giving me a shoulder to panic on. I truly appreciate the constructive criticism and encouragement given to me by the art department faculty. I would like to thank my committee, Anderson Wrangle, Beth Lauritis, Todd McDonald, and Dave Detrich for helping me through this process. I am truly touched by the level of engagement and investment they have expressed in my work. I would like to especially thank, again, Dave Detrich, for all of his guidance over the last two years. When we first met on my campus visit he described the outcome of this program (I am heavily paraphrasing) as guiding students into more solidified versions of themselves but also being open to artistic evolution. I clumsily added “so you make ‘em like Crisco, solid but malleable?” Coming to the close of this experience, I feel like Crisco. This is, of course, the highest compliment to his teaching.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

I am cleaning. I walk through each room of my home picking up toys and clutter and putting them in their designated locations. I have a system: put everything in its place (the tidying phase), then wipe off all the counters and dust, sweep all debris from hard floors onto the carpet, vacuum the carpet and then the house is clean enough. As I go through this domestic ritual that somehow validates me as a mother (I have no rational reason to explain this) I catch a glimpse of an episode of Sesame Street that my youngest son is watching. Debra Messing, surrounded by puppets, is explaining to my child that Nature is something ‘not made by people’. She flashes her beautiful smile, hugs the puppets, and continues ‘Nature is all around us’.

I look at my son. He is sitting on a couch that is covered in a fabric constructed out of cotton, which comes from a plant. There are pillows on that couch that have flowers embroidered onto them. There are yet more flowers dried in a vase on the bookshelf, which also holds a large drawing of a group of bird nests. The bookshelf resembles wood, but being from Target I can assume that it is mostly made out of something my Mother would call ‘glit’, which is made of sawdust mixed with glue. We have painted some of the walls green, so that’s kind of natural in that its local color is the same as the leaves and grass outside. The house itself is constructed with wood 2x4’s and has vinyl siding that assimilates a faint, but fake, wood grain texture. Then there is our lawn where our cat Lucyfur hunts rodents so they don’t come into our home.

Beyond that are wide fields and what seems to be last clump of trees left in the midst of so many neighborhood homes popping up. None of these things count though- the Sesame Street definition states that Nature ‘is not made by people’. Even the pasture has terraces sculpted by a farmer from generations past. The trees. The trees are natural because people do not make them, but Nature is more than just a thing; it is a place. And although the individual trees are natural, the forest has been shaped and manicured by occupants of the land over time so people have also ‘made’ it. The closer I come to the idea of Nature the further it slips away from something present and tangible. The idea of Nature becomes something ‘out there’.

I’m surprised by how many things around me (furniture, textiles, wall coverings, etc.) reference something of Nature but how nothing fits the Sesame Street description. This search to find Nature within and just beyond the physical boundaries of my home yields an inventory of objects and places that complicate notions defining what is ‘of nature’ and what is ‘of culture’. It is evident that traces of the natural are ‘all around’ me but it is mediated through man-made things. It is as if Nature has been co-opted, commoditized, and grafted into what defines the domestic realm.

Using the criteria presented in the television program that Nature is ‘not made by people’ places anything that is made by people into a collective entity that can be defined as material culture. We live in a culture that views a distinction between man and nature. This dualism has persisted within our collective consciousness. The idea of a distinction between nature and culture is problematic because of current controversy about a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. This theory is based on the hypothesis that there is

not a part of the natural world that hasn't been affected by humans. If pure untouched nature does not exist, why do we continue to buy into this assumption?

My thought is that we are really buying into the Western/European conception of the idyllic, pastoral landscape. This provides a sense of nostalgia for a pre-industrial time. It is comforting to think that there is a simpler place to go to to escape the stress of everyday life. That phrase: 'Nature is all around us' is like wrapping up in a warm blanket. My question is: if we need to hold onto an assumption of some more peaceful 'out there' space for comfort then what is it about the things that actually are 'all around us' that are causing tension?

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE INTERNAL ORDER OF NATURE AS DECORATION

In his book, *Stuff*, Daniel Miller uses Bourdieu's theory of socialization stating: "the key operator in making us characteristic of our own society is stuff." He goes on to elaborate:

"This seems to correspond very well to what I called the humility of things. Objects don't shout at you...but they help you gently to learn how to act appropriately. This theory also gives shape and form to the idea that objects make people. Before we can make things, we are ourselves grown up and matured in the light of things that come down to us from the previous generations. Things, not, mind you, individual things, but the whole system of things, with their internal order make us the people we are. This provides a theory of material culture that gives stuff far far more significance than might have been expected. Culture comes above all from stuff."<sup>1</sup>

In my work I combine, conflate, and deconstruct objects and materials from the domestic realm to interrogate their underlying order. I am teasing apart what is instilled by an object's form, aesthetics, function, as well as spatial and socioeconomic location. As I uncover the internal order of a thing I very quickly disrupt that order as a form of critiquing the system in which it participates. That system may be consumer culture, Nature/Culture dualism, subject/object relationships, or issues of the individual versus the social.

I find the domestic realm an appropriate location because of the intimate relationship we have with our things. Our homes are our personal territory, where we have ownership and control of the surroundings, a place where we can be comfortable, natural, ourselves. Objects from the domestic space also present an interesting

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Miller, *Stuff*, Cambridge: Polity, 2010.

intersection between the individual and the larger society they participate. I use manufactured domestic objects that simulate or represent something of nature in order to understand our complex relationship to our immediate surroundings, the larger context that our society provides, and the elusive construct of Nature.

One enters through *Nature 1 (Artificial Forest)* [Fig. 1.1] it is comprised of artificial plants that are spray painted fluorescent green. The plants are filled with motion activated birds and fiber optic butterflies. This installation takes objects that typically function as decorative domestic props and assimilates them into a forest. Doing this complicates how a forest is defined as well as how houseplants operate in the home. We can understand the forest as a collection of trees and undergrowth that cover a large area. Although my installation does not cover a large area it evokes a familiar forest arrangement. Trees are dispersed at irregular intervals, birds are placed in the treetops and butterflies are in the bushes. This follows the logic and conventional ordering of what happens in the woods. By arranging elements of the installation in this manner, I am insisting that the viewer focus on the associations and intent of the objects as mimicking the 'beauty of Nature'. This beauty is contrasted by the perversion of Nature through plastic, glitter, flashing lights, etc.

Houseplants, manufactured by industry and available at your local Lowe's or Home Depot, are typically used to purify the air and beautify the indoor space. The uses of artificial houseplants, also manufactured by industry, are actually counterproductive to air purification given the amount of dust they collect. Both living and faux plants are meant to beautify interior domestic space. Using artificial houseplants brings some

semblance of the ‘outdoors in’ but without the labor of taking care of a living thing. All of these elements represent a manufactured version of Nature that serves to amuse or visually please the owner.

In his book Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape, Denis E. Cosgrove explains:

“The landscape drawn, painted or photographed, placed on a wall or reproduced in a book, is addressed to an individual viewer who responds in a personal way, and can elect to remain before the scene or to turn away. The same is true for the relationship we have towards the real world once we perceive it as landscape. Another way of putting this is that in landscape we are offered an important element of personal *control* over the external world.”<sup>2</sup>

This experience of landscape belongs to the outsider. This is contrasted with what Cosgrove calls the “‘existential insider’ for whom what we may call landscape is a dimension of existence, collectively produced, lived and maintained.” Decorative representations of nature function in similar way to Cosgrove’s explanation of an outsider or tourist experience of landscape; it is personally affective, distanced, then recedes into the background. The objects in this installation are removed from their background status that is distanced from us. The viewer walks into it so that they become, if only for a moment, an insider in an artificial woodland setting. This installation makes the viewer/participant aware of the arms length relationship with nature, carefully maintained through and within the domestic realm.

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<sup>2</sup>Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin, 1998. 18

The artificial birds that fill the trees trill when the viewer walks through, activating the installation. The artificial butterflies glitter and flash. The erratic nature of the materials can at first be amusing but then irritating. The birds generate this feeling of irritation not just because they are noisy but also because they reflect a lack of control on the part of the viewer. This installation also makes the viewer/participant aware of the lack of control they have over objects that are not meant to have agency or influence.

Things in the home that are of nature or emulate it position the person as the dominant being within the space. A pet provides companionship for the person, houseplants provide cleaner air, wood provides the skeleton of the shelter or aesthetic pleasure in its various applications, etc. The fact that the birds, when activated by motion, call out creates a push pull in the focal subject of the experience. This disrupts the anthropocentric point of view that humans are the most central or important element within their territory.

## CHAPTER THREE

### SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND NATURE AS THINGNESS

In *Nature 2(Astroturf and Clothes)* [Fig. 2.1] the displacement and disruption of the overt iconography of the materials prompts the viewer to consider the sublevels of understanding provided in the forms. Astroturf is no longer only understood as artificial grass, but as part of a system of ordering and manufacture as emphasized by the grid. The clothing, in its form as a long stuffed tube comprised of multiple deconstructed garments, gives a sense of something bodily or organic. We can see a familiar yet unfamiliar version of the ‘natural’ but it has been coated or even coded with aestheticized and abstracted representations of vegetation in various patterns. These patterns reflect obliquely and metaphorically a system of ordering: a grid.

When we view prints, patterns, clothing, and objects, we participate in a process of projection and reflection of the self. That process of projection and reflection of the self onto things reinforces an anthropocentric viewpoint. Thinking on Daniel Miller’s statements that “objects make people” and that they have an “internal order that makes us who we are” leads me to the idea that people are social constructions. I see the clothing tubes as a representing a merger of the body and the socially constructed self. When I consider this notion the interaction of the tubes and the tilted perspective that the Astroturf offers, represents the obscure position that people have between things-how those things function as constructions, and people- and how we function as constructions.

In her book Vibrant Matter, Jane Bennett describes things as having vibrancy and agency that mimics the vibrancy and agency of a person. Things, she postulates, provide

a relationship that is distinct from the traditional notion of subject and object. The thing is something the way I am something. It is also distinct from its function as a fetishized commodity.<sup>3</sup> The decorative patterns on the couch and clothing tubes initially function as a signifier of taste, class, or even a projection of the self but more than that I feel that the pattern paired with the object and all of its thingness bring forth Nature—that thing ‘out there’ that surrounds us. By doing this Nature is pulled from the abstract into reality via sensuous specificity. It brings Nature, which exists in the realm of metaphor, into the tangibility of materiality and allows us to participate in that construct through consumerism and ownership.

I question if artificial and abstracted representations of Nature within the domestic space, manufactured or hand made, have relegated Nature to the level of ‘thingness’ and have thus commoditized it. Commodities provide people with a sense of dominion over their environment; they can be owned and reflect the owner. There seems to be a parallel in attitude toward Nature and Things. Relegating Nature to ‘thingness’ through artificial reproduction illustrates a futile attempt to establish control over the external world. This attempt being futile because, as Daniel Miller stated, “things...make us the people we are.”

In *Nature 3 (Landscape Couch)* [Fig. 3.1] I created an abstracted landscape utilizing strategies of landscape painting. I tipped a floral covered couch on end in order to expose the underlying structure that gives the couch its shape. Capitalizing on the

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<sup>3</sup> Jane Bennett, "Powers of the Hoard: Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter." Vera List Center.,01 Apr. 2015. *Vimeo*, Web, <<https://vimeo.com/29535247>>.

understructure I have built on a wall and used metallic tape to highlight the grid that is made from internal metal coils. A white cloud-like form envelopes the work resulting in the wall that has been deconstructed. Tan linoleum flooring surrounds the form, functioning like dirt or stones. Metal tape reorders the grid that exists in the faux tile. This work takes familiar domestic items and compresses and reorders them into having a similar spatial logic as a landscape. The clouds are up, the vegetation is in the middle, and dirt and stones are on the ground.

Conventions of landscape have been laminated onto the couch and elements such as the linoleum flooring and drywall have been deconstructed. The conflation of domestic space and landscape acknowledges the overlap between the two and their connection to comfort. Both ideas of home and the pastoral landscape offer a sense of comfort. The cloud-like form on the front of the couch oscillates between ordering itself around the floral pattern and breaking from this into a gestural edge quality. The painted breaks in the cloud are soft and conjure romantic landscapes but as the formation moves to the opposite side of the work, the breaks in the cloud become literal and destructed. By deconstructing the work literally it figuratively dismantles the connection of comfort with the home and the pastoral. Dismantling these notions presents them as social constructions that are not stable. Thinkers like Bruno Latour, Yi-Fu Tuan, and Cosgrove all argue and elaborate on the idea that Nature and landscape are socially constructed, subjective notions.<sup>4</sup> This is true for the domestic environment as well.

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007.

Social constructions of a comfortable home environment or pastoral environment are not actually accessible to everyone. Comfort is afforded to and can be afforded by the privileged. Even if someone comes from a position in which they can have a comfortable home environment, that comfort is always in a state of flux. There are numerous tensions within the domestic space including arguments with other occupants or the constant struggle against entropy. Experiencing comfort in the home is similar to experiencing comfort in Nature-things are peaceful and you are separated from the hustle and bustle of society. It clicks into place for a fleeting moment until someone spills grape juice on the carpet or an airplane flies overhead leaving a linear trail in the sky. That spell-broken moment is what I capture in my work. The moment when you realize what you understand about an object or idea is actually part of a larger context. This context, when traced to its source, reveals itself to be socially constructed and synthetic.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### INTEGRATION OF OBJECT AND SELFHOOD

Many of the pieces in this body of work are cast off items from thrift stores. The objects that I acquire from thrift stores really speak to and about the place they came from. I am curious about the internal, underlying order and social constructions that the local community's stuff perpetuates. I have found, as previously discussed, there is a strong affinity for pastoral representations of nature. It is interesting that in a rural area many of the objects found in the thrift store reflect the notion of an idyllic rural landscape back at the owner.

A thrift store is essentially a large dumping ground for a community's cultural detritus. These objects inform the aesthetic tastes and needs of the local environment but also express vulgarity in their state of shabbiness. Typically donated items have lived their life out in someone's home and now have been replaced by the new. These items are intended for the less fortunate so there is an interesting filtration of taste through time and class.

Class and status are major components in understanding the stress that our tangible, object-oriented reality causes. In looking for the internal order of the local community's objects through its cast-offs in thrift stores, I have become aware of two types of people who frequent these places. One is the privileged thrifty, DIY type and the other is the person who is of low socioeconomic status. Both groups engage in various forms 'do it yourself' construction but this engagement performs very different functions.

*Culture 1(Black Couch)* [Fig. 4.1] engages in elements of DIY that represent both groups: the decorative, Martha Stewart/ Pinterest DIY and the DIY of necessity. The wall that comes from the interior of the couch and extends over it is built from materials at hand rather than 2x4s. This structure is reminiscent of shanty lean-to homes and demonstrates a similar rickety construction. This wall is also covered in a faux finish technique that mimics wood grain. A tube of stuffed clothing pierces the form.

This work positions the person as being integrated with the objects and conditions they are surrounded with. In contemporary culture being integrated with one's surroundings also comes with awareness of things you do not have or are not capable of having. Pinterest DIY culture gives people a way to convert low materials into simulating objects with higher economic value through aesthetics.

The Pinterest form of DIY relies on the belief that something like a coat of paint can transform a junk object to the point where it transcends its low status. An object comes loaded with connotations of class, status, wealth, etc. but by altering the object it pushes it into a new context. The Pinterest form of DIY allows a person to make their environment more visually appealing. The elevation of value through aesthetics allows a person construct a myth around them. This myth functions in a similar way to the idea that Nature exists 'out there'; there is comfort 'out there' and there is comfort 'in here'.

In *Culture 2 (Bed)* [Fig. 5.1] I have deconstructed the bed to alter its overall form into a gentle sloping slab that results in a cutting away of the layers of the mattress. These layers evoke the idea of excavation, which creates a landscape-like form. The bed is a location in which we are most natural but it is at the same time a mass-produced object of

culture. I have covered a portion of the bed with metal foil tape. I find an interesting connection in the soft industrial quality of both the tape and the bed itself. When I think of the term industrial, softness is not usually associated with it. A mattress is an intersection between the hardness of what is labeled ‘of culture’ and the softness of the body which is ‘of the natural’.

The mattress brings up issues of public space versus private space. In a radio interview, artist Anna Kell states that the use of flowers on mattresses had the practical purpose of hiding stains but, being that flowers are sex organs, also coded the bed as a location for sex.<sup>5</sup> The use of the shiny metal tape on the floral surface of the bed provides an intersection of industry within the private act of sex. I think of the ways that media and even pornography refine or alter the natural act of sex into something entirely synthetic. This work represents an intersection between what is natural and cultural within an object. That intersection influences and becomes integrated with selfhood.

There is a tension in domestic objects between the social collective and the individual. Many mass-produced objects refine or alter the self to the point where it, like Nature, slips further from grasp. We negotiate selfhood and individuality relative to social constructions that are embedded in mass produced objects. These social constructions create tension because of exclusionary assumptions about reality.

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Kell, WVIA 89.9 FM. ArtScene Radio Program, Interview with Erika Funke, 15 Feb. 2015. Radio.  
<http://stream.publicbroadcasting.net/production/mp3/wvia/local-wvia-1024106.mp3>

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

The strategy of the overall exhibition reflects a transition from a more exterior space to a more interior space. *Nature 1 (Artificial Forest)* [Fig. 1.1] is a once removed representation of the courtyard just outside the gallery. *Nature 2 (Astroturf and Clothing)* [Fig. 2.1] represents an exponentially removed version of Nature. As the viewer moves past *Culture 1 (Black Couch)* [4.1], the exhibition reflects an interior space. I have painted the walls behind *Nature 3 (Landscape Couch)* [Fig. 3.1] and *Culture 2 (Bed)* [Fig. 5.1] in a manner that reflects conventions of decorative painting in the home but also represents an abstracted landscape. The objects within the domestic interior tend to correlate aesthetically with the walls surrounding them. By integrating this into my installation I am highlighting the associations of these colors with landscape paired with the references to the natural printed on the objects.

My work focuses on the associations evoked by artificial Nature as representative of the pastoral, paired with associations evoked by domestic objects. By teasing apart this combination that exists within an object, my work offers viewers the opportunity to reconsider their position in relation to things as well as to reconsider the terms defining what is natural, cultural, and domestic.

FIGURES



1.1 Nature 1 (Artificial Forest)



1.2 Nature 1 (Artificial Forest) Detail



2.1 Nature 2 (Astroturf and Clothes)



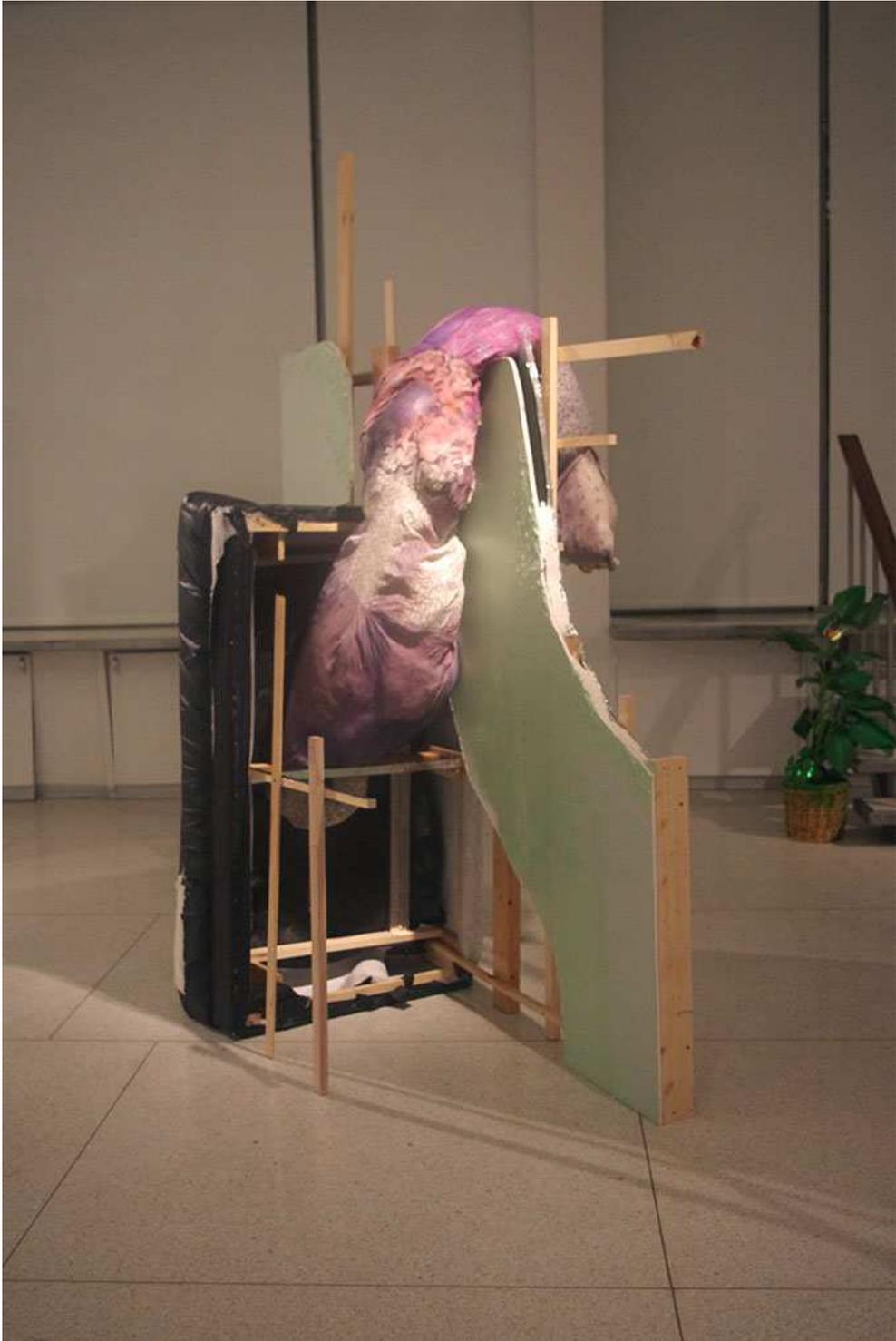
2.2 Nature 2 (Astroturf and Clothes) Detail



3.1 Nature 3 (Landscape Couch)



3.2 Nature 3 (Landscape Couch) Second View



4.1 Culture 1 (Black Couch)



4.2 Culture 1 (Black Couch) Second View



5.1 Culture 2 (Bed)



5.2 Culture 2 (Bed)

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