

UNHOME: OBJECTS OF VULNERABILITY

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By

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UNHOME: OBJECTS OF VULNERABILITY

by Chiaka McNaughton

Introduction

My MFA exhibition, *Unhome: Objects of Vulnerability*, has to do with notions of shelter and the vulnerability that we face with regard to the fundamental human need for shelter. I have borrowed the word *unhome* from Sigmund Freud's essay, *The "Uncanny"*. *Unhome* is an English approximation of the German word *unheimlich*. Freud explains, the term as follows:

The German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch*, meaning "familiar," "native," "belonging to the home"; and we are tempted to conclude that what is "uncanny" is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar.¹

I am intrigued by the way that Freud, from a psychoanalyst's perspective, associated what is frightening with the opposite of what we sense as "belonging to the home." In his attempt to elucidate the meaning of *heimlich*, the opposite of uncanny, Freud turns to other German definitions. From Daniel Sanders' *Worterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (1860) he records:

(c) Friendly, intimate, homelike; the enjoyment of quiet content, etc., arousing a sense of peaceful pleasure and security as in one within the four walls of his house. "She did not feel all too *heimlich* with him."²

It seems that psychologically, our sense of being safe, and not fearful of danger, is related to things and emotions linked with home. This is not surprising. Psychologically, home represents our haven from the outside world, a protected cocoon from many kinds of hostilities. Ideally, we find physical and psychological refuge from the world at home. Of course, domestic violence and other forms of attack and abuse often occur in the home, so the safe shelter of home can be elusive on many levels. My work in this exhibition has been an engagement with the concept of physical shelter. It is easy to imagine, however, that the physical and the psychological requirements and functions of shelter are very closely linked and perhaps inseparable, as Freud's exposition on the uncanny seems to indicate.

In crisis, the things we assemble to shelter ourselves can be rather uncanny (arousing Freud's "dread and creeping horror"³). Unconventional objects that are adapted for shelter can be unfamiliar, strange, and unnerving to those of us who observe these things from the context of our own conventional circumstances of shelter. Of course, when individuals are

forced to make shelter out of whatever they can find, their primary consideration is functionality. The desperation, lack of means, and fragility of their situation that may be evident from the forms that they erect is of relatively little concern in a life-and-death situation. As an adequately sheltered person, I have certainly experienced a strong sense of discomfort, approaching inner terror, at the sight of a row of still-sleeping homeless individuals wedged under a bridge in the early morning, or news footage of refugee camps, shantytowns, squatter encampments, or homes in the aftermath of hurricanes, tornadoes or ice storms. The terror comes from imagining myself in those situations and from my sympathy for people who are living all-but-impossible survival realities. Although I have never yet been in a situation of true homelessness I have been close enough to experience aspects of vulnerability that homelessness uncovers. Homelessness is not particularly far away from any of us, and the thought of it evokes a sense of our physical and psychological vulnerability. What heightens my anxiety is a profound lack of practical survival skills; I question my capacity to survive in my imagined predicaments of homelessness. Although in circumstances of limited resources innovation often emerges, I wonder, if faced with a lack of shelter would I become resourceful or panic-stricken and ineffective? As a result of my perceived inadequacies to meet the challenges of being without a home, the threat of such a scenario is highly alarming for me. Our vulnerabilities are constantly mirrored in the present realities of others. In his introduction to the collection of essays, Informal Architectures: Space in Contemporary Culture, curator Anthony Kiendl exposes our persistent frailty:

At the beginning of the twenty-first century Western society comprises a system by which we understand our lived experience – a matrix of ideas, images, stories, politics, histories – a system that holds up images of technological innovation, conflict, and excess, all of which cohere into a form of monumentality. Simultaneously, however, we are haunted by collapse, weakness and entropy.⁴

With the works in *Unhome* I investigate the basic human need for habitation and suggest the vulnerability that results from a lack of shelter.

Provisional Architectures

The works in *Unhome* are engaged with ideas of provisional architecture. By this I mean architecture that serves an immediate shelter function, arises and disappears as needed, and can be quite ephemeral in nature. In relation to global conditions of poverty and nomadic states,

those who build dwellings provisionally on land to which they have no legal claim must be alert to the resources that they can cull from their environment to meet their needs. They also must live in such a way that they are responsive to their environment's ability and willingness to accommodate their presence. If physical storms threaten or the legality of their tenure is challenged, they have to be mobile enough to deconstruct their shelter and re-construct it somewhere less hostile. Across the globe from Mumbai to Mexico City, in urban areas large unauthorized settlements rival the size of authorized neighbourhoods. The residents of these settlements face the constant threats of eviction and loss of access. Notwithstanding the fact that the settlements might be large and imposing, they are also ephemeral by their nature, and can be cleared of human residents at any time and at short notice.

The matter of shelter in the face of extreme circumstances is one that looms in current consciousness. The issue has contemporary resonance for a number of reasons, such as a rise in the frequency and destructiveness of storms in recent times. These storms inevitably result in periods of at least temporary homelessness for some people. Around the world rural residents are less and less able to provide for themselves on their farms and family lands. Many who had secured a living from subsistent farming, for example, may be unable to coax much from soils and waters which have nourished their communities for generations but no longer do so because of the ecological losses and depletions from multinational activities such as oil and mineral extractions that have ravished their lands and rendered them unable to produce food, as in the past. As a result, increasing numbers of rural people are continuing to move to cities around the world in search of a better life. Artists, architects, designers, writers and others are producing works dealing with the topic of shelter in relation to changing climatic, ecological or economic conditions and resultant disasters.

In his book Common Sense Architecture, John Taylor notes that, "A scarcity of resources led history's anonymous builders to achieve a highly economical and practical form of unselfconscious architecture rooted in timeless principles of reason rather than in temporary fashions or whims."⁵ It is this responsive feature of vernacular architecture as well as its attention to necessity that has interested me as I did my research. My studio explorations allowed me to examine shelter as a basic human need and to consider that many of us in contemporary times lack basic survival skills. By working within my own range of skills to construct vulnerable objects, I also intend for viewers to become aware of their own fragility.

At the start of the program I imagined that I would screw, nail and weld together small coverings for personal protection using wood, metal and other durable materials. As my research proceeded, however, I found myself repeatedly reaching for textiles from which to quilt, embroider, and stitch my coverings. My choices were based on materials and construction processes that are familiar to me. My research during the MFA program has magnified my own lack of skills to face the crises I conjecture. My sculptures reflect a narrow range of skills as I drew primarily on my sewing abilities. Every piece of cloth or leather and every stitch put into those materials undermined my confidence that I could survive in the imagined crisis. The fabric that I consistently and insistently used to construct the works seemed, after a while, to emphatically declare their insufficiency for the task of providing shelter. My stitched and cobbled-together works are engineered using my facility with needle, thread and textiles. I would not easily turn to nails and screws and hard materials like wood and metal; I imagined in a crisis situation I would need to fall back on what I know. But how effective could cloth be against bitter cold, or cotton against the moisture of snow, or a canopy-less bed against howling winds?

I am attracted to the word *unhome* in reference to the works I am presenting in my show because there is meant to be something unfamiliar and strange about these objects. I want them to evoke a sense of something vaguely familiar, in terms of domestic shelter, but to also be sufficiently unfamiliar and disordered so as to evoke an uncanny feeling and present a surreal image. The sculptures are meant to present for the viewer a contrast between his or her comfort at home and the disorientation that results from being homeless.

My own worry about a lack of skills and knowledge to allow me to physically survive in circumstances outside of my normal housing conditions, and my interest in how people who find themselves without shelter cope, currently fuels much of my interest in matters relating to shelter. In the works included in *Unhome*, I combine references to clothing as a primary shelter and to housing as a voluminous garment. To articulate unease, discomfort, and the potential distress that are linked to a lack of housing, I have made the works in my show from recycled clothing and other salvaged materials, allowing transitoriness and precariousness to be inherent in the sculptures.

Shelter is a social concern. Kiendl recognizes in the work of the artists featured in Informal Architectures: Space in Contemporary Culture “numerous attempts to re-inscribe modernity with alternative values and subjectivities.”⁶ He continues, “In exploring contemporary

art and spatial culture, we may redefine and recontextualise the terms under which we inhabit space, and understand how one may be in the world.”⁷ For Kiendl, contemporary artists engaged with spatial culture can offer social critiques on the politics of space and offer other readings, valuations, and ways of conceiving of individuals’ rights in relation to space. When we view our need for shelter in the context of a potential lack of shelter, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, notions of access and lack of access come to the forefront for contemplation and discussion. For Kiendl, “the autonomy of art from society has been revealed as a modernist myth, so art and society must be understood in relation to each other.”⁸ I have been considering shelter, its presence and its absence, its availability and lack thereof, as a relevant, topic for artistic investigation. Physical shelter and psychological wellbeing are closely linked. In the face of a technologically sophisticated contemporary world the fact that basic shelter is always elusive to so many at every given moment is a source of disorientation for even the well-sheltered.

Urban Growth

More than half of the earth's population -- 3.5 billion people -- now live in cities. Many of these individuals are poor and move from rural areas to cities in search of a better life. One billion of the urban poor worldwide live in informal settlements, commonly called slums, and that number is expected to reach two billion within the next twenty years.⁹ These hopeful urbanites must be inventive in their use of materials for constructing shelter, due to a distinct scarcity of money and materials. In some cases people build shelters in garbage dumps out of refuse. In that sense, many people's lives, in terms of shelter, are an on-going post-apocalypse-like reality. Through the course of my MFA studies, I have situated my practice at that social fringe where very basic shelter is the challenge and the goal.

In the foreword to the catalogue, Design With the Other 90%: Cities, American economist Ed Glaeser is quoted as saying, "Cities don't make poor people; cities attract poor people."¹⁰ As people arrive in the city, poor, in need of shelter, and seeking a living, they construct housing out of an amalgam of things that are available to them, and the informal city grows. Informal cities are composed of groupings or settlements of unauthorized survival-level dwellings. These unsanctioned districts are aggregates of architectural forms constructed from found materials such as galvanized, corrugated metal, plastic tarp, and cardboard. The architectural structures of the informal city are located on land not authorized for occupancy by the users. I have constructed my shelter-related sculptures in a way that mimics the unauthorized buildings of informal cities, which exist just outside of or within the authorized city.

Three Door, Eight Months

While my personal circumstances are not those of someone who is homeless, I, nevertheless, experienced dislocation and upheaval with respect to shelter during the early months of my MFA studies. Through a chain of circumstances, I called three separate houses, in three separate areas of Saskatoon, home during the first eight months of my program at the University of Saskatchewan.

Uncomfortable at the time, the situation was, nevertheless, a gift, in light of my research topic. My temporary displacement became an inadvertent laboratory to investigate the subject of homelessness on a personal level. Our first Saskatoon home was a basement apartment in an old

house in Sutherland. It was technically an illegal suite, because none of the windows in the two-bedroom apartment allowed for egress in the case of an emergency. Four months after signing the lease there, my husband and I purchased a forty-year-old house in Confederation Park. As homebuyers, our ability to purchase a home sets us clearly outside the circumstances of most people who are homeless. Our newly purchased house was in disrepair, however, and took months to make habitable. We were not able to live in the residence and experienced a continuing version of homelessness, living with friends in our second temporary home. Eight months and two homes after coming to Saskatoon, we finally moved into our partially-renovated house. Though not technically homeless, we experienced a significant amount of anxiety for several months. Our temporary discomfort, however, pales in comparison with true homelessness, or living on the edge of a chronic, insecure housing situation.

Clothing – A Primary Shelter

During my studies, I have been interested in examining forms of physical shelter that protect people from immediate physical threats within our environments on the earth. These threats include climatic hazards such as extreme heat, rain, cold, wind, hail, and snow. Shelter is one of the most basic human requirements. Clothing, as well as being fashion, cultural expression, and a symbol of class, is also a primary form of protection and an engaging starting point for considering physical shelter. Clothing is armour for the body in its contact with the physical world. All of our activities are facilitated by our first physical defense of clothing which serves as protection in the physical environments we traverse.

One of the ways that I work, as a sculptor, is to repurpose used materials for their expressive and formal values. In an emergency situation people would prize many of the things we readily discard in times of comfort and abundance. In my research, I repurposed my husband's old clothing and my own or, clothing donated from my colleagues in the program, and, occasionally, I purchased specific items, such as leather or moisture-repellant clothing items, from thrift stores. Thinking of clothing and shelter as related became a consistent strategy throughout my research. In this way my work is akin to that of other contemporary artists who are linking considerations of clothing and habitat. The resulting works manifest a wide range of constructions that reveal a coalescing of ideas about art and the everyday physical frameworks of

our existence. I situate my work in dialogue with artists who are linking clothing and shelter in their art practice.

There are many of these artists whose work I find challenging and inspiring. Kimsooja, for example, is a Korean-American artist, whose works symbolically incorporate textiles, and the acts of cutting, and sewing. Kimsooja examines social issues such as poverty, homelessness,



Figure 1: *Refuge Wear Intervention*, 1998, Lucy Orta

labour, and consumerism through the use of clothing and textiles. One such work is *Mumbai: A Laundry Field*, 2007-2008, a video installation examining the grinding daily routines of garment workers in India as they scrub and process clothing headed for luxury markets around the world, as a part of the consumer cycle that exacts a high human cost.¹¹ Dutch artist, Mella Jaarsma, creates fabric sculptures that are worn like clothing. One such work, *Shelter Me*, consists of small, textile, cabin-like structures worn by a single person. She conceived of these structures having a variety of uses, including that of providing emergency shelter for one person.¹²

British artist Lucy Orta's work has been particularly inspirational and germane to my own ruminations on shelter because her sculptures relate to both clothing and architecture. In *Refuge Wear*, 1993-1996, and *Refuge Wear Intervention*, 1998, Orta created clothing-like structures for the body and used them to highlight aspects of physical vulnerability, protection, and safety, particularly referencing the way individuals occupy and navigate the space of the city.¹³ The work consists of clothing that functions as architecture.

The subject Orta references in *Refuge Wear* is an imaginary urban refugee. Solitary in a place of teeming crowds, this refugee is insecure and functions in a state of homelessness. This imagined subject seeks refuge from an alien and hostile society. Orta states, “Living without a shelter for prolonged periods rapidly destroys physical and moral health. The lack of adequate sleep increases stress, weakens the immune system and accelerates the loss of identity and desocialization.”¹⁴ Orta’s reference to a lack of shelter, takes us back to the disorientation that for Freud inheres in his definition of that which is uncanny, unfamiliar and unhomely.

I began my artistic research by constructing the sculpture called *Barter Necklace, 2012*. The necklace obliquely addresses a crisis shelter scenario. The necklace is primarily made of long strips of canvas, left over from a painting project, and black leather from a little-worn pair of boots, sewn together into strips approximately one-and-a-half inches wide. The necklace is about seventy-three feet long. Although very long, it can be looped repeatedly and easily worn around the neck or across the body. It can also be used for other functions, such as a rope for tying or hauling objects.

In making this piece, I imagined that in a post-apocalyptic scenario the value of things would be assigned based on their usefulness and utility rather than, for example, beauty, rarity, or the social prestige associated with an object. Instead of jewels of precious and semi-precious stones, the piece is studded with practical nuts and bolts. These could be traded, like money, for other items of value in the emergency context of procuring necessary things: shelter, water, food, and clothing. Sewn to the leather and canvas body of the necklace are additional straps of soft leather. In a bartering situation you could attach items you acquire to the soft leather straps of the necklace.



Figure 2: *Barter Necklace*, 2012

Another work I made early in the first year of the program is *Composite Jacket, 2013*. The jacket is an amalgam of two jackets sewn together in such a way that each enhances the physical protection offered by the other. Orta's *Refuge Wear* influenced me to create this sculpture. The denim jacket which is the top portion of the amalgamated garment is attached to the lower portion of a garment made from a fine, metallic fabric. The resulting jacket is longer than the denim jacket on its own and harder than the metallic jacket alone. I also attached a hood that is constructed of a metal biscuit tin and a plastic honey bucket. I intended the rigid hood to evoke the shelter provided by the roof of a house. The collar of the new jacket is made from a wide patch of leather, providing warmth and some protection from the threat of physical attack.

The odd combination of materials and the possible narratives hinted at by the jacket suggests that the object was constructed to deal with an imminent danger and in circumstances of limited resources. Why, for example, would an object that looks like a piece of clothing include the appendage of a plastic and metal hood-like element? *Composite Jacket* is composed of materials which, considered individually, are familiar to us. Brought together, however, they underscore a heightened sense of physical vulnerability and cause us to wonder what the wearer is seeking to shelter and protect herself from.



Figure 3: *Composite Jacket*, 2012

The sculpture *Nest*, 2013, was also inspired by Orta's *Refuge Wear*. *Nest* is composed of a wooden kitchen chair that has been covered in a fitted wrapping of green khaki-coloured fabric. The material suggests combat, though more subtly than a fabric such as patterned camouflage. I intended the khaki to represent a fight for survival. I use khaki in many of the sculptures in the exhibit because the material references combat and durability for me. In an extreme shelter scenario, an individual is in a fight for survival within a hostile environment. The materials used for shelter will need to be as wear-resistant as one can find. The individual will also need to have mental toughness to cope with the situation. *Nest* is intended to allow an individual to be out in nature with partial defense from climatic conditions.

The sculpture includes an attached shawl, also made of khaki-coloured fabric, which can be used for warmth when necessary. Also attached are a black hooded sweatshirt and a multicolored crocheted blanket. The blanket is attached to the bottom of the sculpture and can be used for added warmth or to accommodate visitors who might join the sitter for conversation or to share a meal. This object suggests adaptability to multiple possible scenarios. I imagine, for example, that it could be used in a leisurely outdoor context whereby someone who is well sheltered may journey out into nature for tranquility and repose and take *Nest* in the back seat of his or her car so that it can be used to lounge in, propped against a tree in the woods, for example.



Figure 4: *Nest*, 2013





Figure 5: **Trailer**, 2000, Andrea Zittel



Figure 6: **A-Z Fibre Form Uniform: Fall/Winter 2005**, Andrea Zittel

A second artist whose body of work was particularly influential on my own is American artist Andrea Zittel. Like Orta, she has created works that deal with shelter in the form of clothing and architecture. Her clothing pieces are constructed from handmade materials, such as felted wool, using traditional methods. She states that with these methods she means to articulate a rejection of consumerism.¹⁵ The exhibition catalogue, *Aware: Art Fashion Identity* states that Zittel's work "breathes a feeling of freedom, autonomy and self-determination..."¹⁶ My own series, *GoBlankets*, 2014, was created with the sense of autonomy and freedom that Zittel refers to. I was thinking about protection and freedom of movement when constructing these fabric sculptures. *GoBlankets* is a triptych composed of three portable blankets. The blankets are for transient users. Each blanket is designed with a particular person in mind. What all the blankets have in common is that each offers an individual the ability to have the covering of the blanket at night and to wear the blanket in the daytime and not have it be identified as a blanket. The ability to covertly travel with each of the blankets allows someone to be mobile with his or her covering and minimize the risk of theft of the object—valuable in a homeless context—as it is not detected for being what it is. For the individual, not being seen as one travelling with a blanket in the daytime also conceals the user's homeless status. One blanket is double-sided, combining a solid blue crocheted blanket on one side and a cotton leopard print on the other side. There is a heavy cotton drawstring threaded through one long side of the blanket so that the person has the

option of wrapping the object around herself, like a skirt, when on the move. I am imagining that a female wearer, of any age, could make good use of this first blanket. A second blanket is made of a light plaid flannel which is stitched to the inside brim of an old wool felt fedora. It can be utilized for covering when needed and worn as a hat, with the blanket loosely wrapped around the neck as a scarf when not being employed as a blanket. I imagine a male or female consumer for this blanket. The third blanket is attached to the inside of a lightweight backpack and can be rolled into the backpack for easy transportation during the day. The user of this blanket would likely be a young male or female, who might be a student.



Figure 7: *GoBlankets*, 2014



Figure 8: *GoBlankets*, 2014

Door Locks and Beds

Door Lock 1 and *Door Lock 2* is a pair of sculptures each designed to secure a rudimentary door closure, as a means of offering protection from possible intruders.



Figure 9: *Door Lock 1*, 2012

Door Lock 1, 2013, started as a large glass ball that I have been holding onto for a few years. In the context of research during the second term of my program, I imagined I could employ the heavy glass orb to weight some other material and create a latch system for holding a door shut. The glass ball is about the weight and size of a large glass paperweight. To make the lock I started by encasing the glass ball in wire mesh and stitching the casement closed with thin metal wire. This then enabled me to attach other objects to manage the smooth, slippery ball and add functionality to it. I added an eleven-inch long section of mesh to the encased ball. I then used metal wire to attach a nineteen-inch loop of leather to the long metal mesh section. The leather loop could be slipped over a wooden or metal brace attached to a door and the weighted glass ball section slipped over another brace attached to the doorframe or an adjacent wall. The weighted ball would hold the door closed.

Door Lock 2 originated as two jars of stones and a bag of fifty cat's-eye marbles. I began the sculpture by wrapping random numbers of the stones and marbles into bundles enclosed in wire mesh. Some bundles were very small, containing only three or four marbles or stones, and some were up to four or five times as large. I ended up with twelve bundles of various sizes and shapes. I then covered the sharp edges where I had bent the mesh to form the bundles, with soft leather in blue or green. Using copper wire, I attached the wire bundles to a sixty-inch length of chandelier chain. I then wove lengths of sturdy grey leather through the links of the chain to muffle its jingling sound. The chain section of the lock can be wrapped around two braces to secure a door from the inside of a shelter and the weight of the bundles of marbles and stones would keep the door shut.



Figure 10: *Door Lock 2*, 2014

Bed 1 and *Bed*, 2013, started out as one double-bed size piece of high-density foam that we found in the basement of our house during the renovations. I divided the foam in half widthwise, cut each half into three pieces, and covered the resulting six pieces with patches of old fabric. The fabric came from old clothing that I deconstructed. In order to make the beds portable, I hinged three cushions together with fabric to construct each of the two beds. The beds can be hinged closed, and compacted down to little more than the size of one cushion, tied with



Figure 11: *Bed 1*, 2013

straps that I attached at the side, and transported with the help of backpack-type straps. The configuration of these beds would allow a transient person to carry the bed on his or her back relatively easily. I have traversed the campus with one of the beds so I have confirmed that they are portable.

Three Small Houses



Figure12: *Unhome*, 2013

The painting, *Unhome*, 2013, refers to shelter literally by depicting three rudimentary houses. The work is sixty-nine inches long by twenty-four inches wide. I used fabric scraps to hand-quilt the three houses onto canvas. The scraps of material are made of cotton, with the exception of the roofs of the houses, which are made from soft black leather scraps. After sewing the buildings I painted the scene with acrylic paint. The image of these houses was inspired by a haunting photograph of old slave huts on the shore in the Netherland Antilles. As a Caribbean descendant of slaves, I was reminded by these huts of the institution of slavery and chose, in this work, to bear witness to some of its conditions. The old houses are like sentinels standing guard over a difficult history. I was compelled to make this image as I considered how *unheimlich* the life of slavery is. As I made the painting, I thought about distorted family relations, about culture and cultural annihilation, about features of housing, circumstances of birth and death among slaves and about the fact that many kinds of slavery exist at this exact moment, all over the world. How uncanny, indeed, is it to have all aspects of your life in the control of



Figure 13: Detail, *Unhome*, 2013

other human beings, outside of yourself? How *unheimlich* not to live based on your own ideas, plans, or impetus, but to be purchased as property to fulfill the requirements of someone for whom you are a tool, like a farm combine, in defiance and denial of your rights as a human being. I constructed the piece slowly, intermittently, over the course of the first summer of my program. The painting can symbolize the disorientation of being alienated from one's own will and desires by any number of oppressive realities.



Figure 14: *Red Wall*, 2014

Walls

Red Wall, 2014, refers to a fragment of an old house in a recurring dream. It represents a yearning for a home in one's memory or one's fantasy. The faux wall is made of fabric, not wood, and is approximately one-hundred-and-five feet long and six feet wide. I began by tearing large canvas drop cloths used by industrial painters into large chunks of fabric that I then painted with loose brush strokes. I then tore those sections of fabric into strips five to eight inches wide, to approximate the size of a plank of wood that might have been used to construct a house in a rustic context. I then sewed these strips together to create the illusion of a long wall, adding further paint to evoke faded, weathered board. I made the wall very long to give the piece a surrealistic effect. By the insistence of this overstated, exaggerated wall I intended to coax a consideration of the elements that are required for shelter. The sense of something overgrown and excessive that the wall evokes is uncanny. The sculpture refers to the disorientation that a lack of shelter produces. The wall is to be installed so that it twists and undulates, reminding a viewer of a tornado and other storms, or of the chaos left in their wake, and the resultant need for emergency shelter.

During the construction of Red Wall, I wondered if my insistent single gesture of board-against-board needed more variety in order to suggest the image of the rustic dwelling that I had in mind. I decided to experiment with adding other materials to the canvas. I create a little wall section that became *A World On Your Shoulders, 2014*.



Figure 15: *A World On Your Shoulders*, 2014

For this piece I painted a small section of canvas in indigo blue and then tore it into strips, as I had been doing with *Red Wall*. I sewed the strips together, and inserted other kinds of material that could suggest windows and other elements in the wall. I added a crocheted doily, some striped fabric, and some embroidered cotton eyelet. I then painted over the object again, in the same way as I had proceeded with *Red Wall*. The resulting work inadvertently referred to ideas and forms quite different from *Red Wall*. During a seminar someone noted that the striped fabric reminded her of the beds I had made the year before, and of old-fashioned mattress coverings. She wondered what might happen if it had straps for carrying it, like the portable beds. Her musing made me curious too, so, I added straps to the object and found that it did heighten the reference to the *Bed 1* and *Bed 2*. After I had added the straps, the lightweight sculpture with its superfluous appendages made me think about how, when a person is displaced, life seems to be burden of finding shelter again becomes onerous.

Elusive Cover

Dry Dock Cradle, 2014, and *Elude*, 2014, started with my acquisition of two discarded chairs that I happened upon at the dumpster for the apartment building a block from our house. I had had the two chairs for about a year and then decided that I wanted to use them to make two pieces about how elusive shelter can be at times. I knew I wanted to take the legs off both chairs so that, while they look familiar to us, there would be something uncanny about seeing these chairs rendered almost unusable as a result of having their legs removed. I also knew that one chair would be placed directly on the floor, making the seating hard to access because it is positioned too low in relation to a standing person, and the other would be elevated and too high in relation to someone standing on the floor. Both chairs would thus be out of reach, one too low to access and the other too high, thus commenting on the elusiveness of shelter. I found an old cabinet I could use for *Elude*, the high and out of reach sculpture, a few weeks later at an architectural salvage store. The other elements for the low, and out of reach sculpture, continued to evade me. On one of many trips to the thrift stores, I fortuitously came across an old sea-grass bassinet. For some reason its carrying handles had been cut off, but the reference to its original use remained.



Figure 16: *Dry Dock Cradle*, 2014

I covered the bassinet with wire mesh to reinforce its shaky structure. I encased a throw pillow in sturdy leather and attached it to the underside of the lower end of the bassinet to even out its height when attached to the truncated chair. I used heavy gauge wire in the sculpture for various stitching purposes. *Dry Dock Cradle* is meant to remind the viewer of infants and children who also face shelter crises. The sculpture could also support a small adult for a short period if necessary, rather uncomfortably. I deconstructed and re-assembled together two rainwear garments that could be used to protect the inhabitant of the bassinet from moisture and wind. Underneath the water-repellant cover, I have inserted a fragile sheet made from lacy curtain fabric. These two coverings, made respectively of tough and ineffectually delicate material, have been attached to the bassinet with jute cord. The covers are meant to evoke a desperate, uncomfortable, inadequate sheltering in the absence of more favorable choices. I have called the sculpture *Dry Dock Cradle*, in reference to the bassinet and the logo *Dry Dock* on one of the rain garments that were re-constructed for the bassinet's cover.

Elude, is composed of the second found chair atop a section of narrow kitchen cabinetry. As unusable as the cabinet appears to be, it was on sale at an architectural salvage store for nearly fifty dollars, which reminded me that much of what we might discard in abundant times could be used by someone, and would certainly be used by us in dire circumstances. My concept

with *Elude* was to create an image that refers to shelter in a vague and uncanny way. To begin with, a legless dining chair is lodged at the top of the cabinet, making the entire object almost seven feet high. The chair is accessible only by a shaky cloth-and-wood ladder attached to one side of the unit. It is a confusing object that raises more questions than it answers and reflects elements of both normal and abnormal domestic situations. A first question might be, “Why is there a chair on the top of that cabinet?”



Figure 17: *Elude*, 2014

Bolted into one of the open cupboard volumes of the unit is a telephone table from the 1970s.

The table is rendered only semi-useful because it is solidly attached to the inside of the cupboard, like an odd and illogical growth. It might vaguely remind a viewer of his or her childhood home or of visits to his or her grandparents' house. On another wide shelf a bamboo basket lays on its side. Like the bassinet of *Dry Dock Cradle*, I have wrapped the basket with wire mesh; this askew element of the cabinet is likely to prompt questions about what has really happened here. What could have caused the chaos that one seems to be witnessing in this surreal kitchen-cabinet-like object? The wire mesh that wraps the basket suggests a restrictive and unyielding situation. At the base of the unit is a narrow platform comprised of two shipping pallets. These and the blankets atop them could provide a welcome bed that is elevated from the ground. The platform is covered with a sheet of patched together heavy-duty plastic that can serve as shelter in the case from cold and precipitation. The ladder on one side is made of found pieces of 2x4 wood and fabric, seeming to provide access to the chair at the top. On closer examination, it becomes apparent that the ladder is not truly functional but is only a suggestion, the illusion of access that is actually denied. *Elude*, once again, speaks of makeshift shelter that is just out of reach.



Figure 18: Detail, *Elude*, 2014

Conclusion

In *Unhome: Objects of Vulnerability*, I reference simple structures and ad hoc processes that come out of the need for shelter to function as protection from the elements. Proceeding from the need for physical protection from a hostile environment, I have developed various techniques and technologies – inventions engendered by need – to clarify my formal and conceptual concerns, using my existing skills. As I have sewn and woven elements of my vulnerable objects for fragile circumstances, I have worked like a vernacular builder to build provisional architectures. Rather than using conventional construction techniques and durable materials, however, I have drawn on my abilities to sew and weave. The resultant objects remain vulnerable and fragile in potentially dangerous circumstances. Although my vernacular materials and processes do not align with architectural histories, I seek to extend an understanding of shelter to include more provisional and ephemeral structures and processes. This, I imagine, is what I (and possibly others) would have to draw on in situations of emergency and dire need.

My explorations, through the course of the program, have been a dialogue with a small aspect of what might loosely be understood as kinds of vernacular architecture. My sculptural

objects that refer to houses and furnishings are akin to vernacular architecture in so far as they are hand-made by me and take into consideration resourceful, hybrid designs, and do-it-yourself processes. My work has been a hypothetical exploration of constructing shelters during extreme circumstances, such as the need to create emergency shelter in a post-apocalyptic scenario. While for me these are imaginary explorations, building on my sense of vulnerability about home, for many people in the world everyday housing conditions are consistently precarious. Through the *unheimlich* circumstances and the forms that result from homelessness, I seek to awaken in the viewer a sense of the vulnerability that we all share in our need to be sheltered.

Endnotes

¹Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” 1919, (First published in *Imago*, Bd. V. 1919, reprinted in *Sammlung Funfte Folge*, translated by Alix Strachey), web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf.

²Freud, 2.

³Freud, 1.

⁴Anthony Kiendl, Informal Architectures: Space and Contemporary Culture, Ed. Anthony Kiendl, (London, UK: Black Dog Publishing, 2008) 9.

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⁶Kiendl, 8.

⁷Kiendl, 9.

⁸ibid.

⁹Bill Moggridge, Design With the Other 90%: Cities, (New York: Cooper-Hewit National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institute, 2011) 15.

¹⁰Moggridge, 6.

¹¹Abie Coppard, ed., DSK Contemporary-Aware: Art Fashion Identity, (Bologna, Italy: Damiani editore, 2010) 115.

¹²Coppard, 109.

¹³Coppard, 33-34.

¹⁴Roberto Pinto, Nicolas Bourriaud, Maia Damianovic, Lucy Orta, (London, UK: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003) 34.

¹⁵Coppard, 233.

¹⁶ibid.

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