

ABSTRACT

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Furniture accommodates us and organizes how our bodies move through space. We interact with furniture everyday and have sets of expectations for how it should look and act. If furniture defies these expectations, it disrupts our understanding of these familiar objects thus causing confusion. For my thesis I am interested in drawing attention to furniture by skewing its appearance, taking into account the associations we subconsciously carry about domestic furniture.

What we expect from furniture is that it exists to serve its function; if it's a table, shelf, bookcase, then you set things on it. If it's a chair, sofa, stool, you sit. If it's a bed, you lie. We are accustomed to seeing chairs and recognizing them as being accommodating for us. There's an established trust between our furniture and our bodies; when we use furniture it becomes an extension of the body. Taking furniture out of its original context and re-presenting it as an art piece can be unsettling. The familiarity is visually there but we cannot physically use it in the way we are accustomed to. If furniture doesn't serve its expected purpose it adds confusion. What does the new purpose become? If you cannot sit in a chair, has it failed? What does failure look like? For my thesis research I have been reading *The Queer Art of Failure* by J. Jack Halberstam, which presents queerness as failure in a heteronormative world. I am taking this sentiment and applying it to domestic furniture from my house. In accepting and navigating through failure we are exploring a new set of possibilities that are not contingent on succeeding. Recognizing failure illuminates what we consider success to be. For example, the mattress; it is not doing what a mattress is supposed to do. Then, what does it become? It highlights what we expect a mattress to do by defying it; illustrating the dichotomy of sculpture and object. At face value it is unsettling because it is unexpected.

The path to conventional success is limiting, there are so many different ways to bungle the course. When you take something as regulated as furniture and you fail it, you open up many avenues of exploration and understanding. The failure of the furniture is a direct confrontation of your garnered expectations. By altering furniture, making it recognizable but unfamiliar I hope to put into question your associations and relationships with these pieces that organize our lives.

Confusing the Quotidian: An Exploration of Domestic Furniture

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Furniture exists to organize space and our bodies within space, and because organization is logical, logic is at the crux of furniture. Logic controls both furniture's design and its placement in space. How does furniture change when it is stripped of its structural logic? What does it become? My thesis project seeks to explore these questions by taking recognizable, domestic furniture from my home and altering it both in materiality and arrangement. Following the threads of queer theorists José Esteban Muñoz and J. Jack Halberstam this body of work engages with their ideas on queer failure and queer aesthetic via furniture and the domestic space. The work, in conversation with works by Robert Gober and Mona Hatoum acknowledges and then ignores furniture's logical organizational core; by subverting the logic of how furniture exists within spaces I am disrupting our established expectations and investigating other modes of existence.

I chose to use domestic furniture from my house as the subject for two reasons; I believe that the objects we surround ourselves with define us, and things like beds, chairs, sofas, stairs when coexisting in a room together have a strong domestic narrative. When I think of "strong domestic narrative" I think of 1950's American ideals, 2.5 kids, regimented gender dynamics, marriage, baseball and apple pie. I take the furniture from my house that represents heteronormativity, and reinterpret it in a way that disrupts the comfort and negates the warmth of home. When I do this I surround myself with a new set of domestic objects that reject domesticity, organization, and logic.

In order to successfully disrupt the logic of furniture, I establish limitations that the furniture must follow to encourage its failure. The biggest limitation the furniture must overcome within the installation is that it does not exist to serve our bodies. This limitation is exacerbated because the furniture that is referenced within the work was intended to have a reciprocal relationship

with our bodies; the chair and bed hold our bodies and the stairs bring our bodies up and down.

This furniture refuses the anticipated connection between furniture and body. When the furniture no longer exists for us physically it becomes categorized as other.

Within the installation, this new mode of existence goes beyond being a contrast to furniture's old lived reality. Instead of isolating and switching furniture's properties within the work to create a direct oppositional logic, I take these objects that reference furniture and work with each piece's individual makeup in different ways. The furniture in this installation follows a logic of improvisation; the bed is made out of wood and it is propped against the wall, the chair is covered in grout and it leans precariously on a wheeled base, the stairs are a hollow vessel with no supportive interior structure and they are oriented upside down. In order to successfully disrupt furniture's inherent passivity it must be disrupted on two levels; both on the material level and the organizational level. These shifts in furniture's makeup confuse its original character; a once passive thing becomes loud and demanding. These alterations are what give the objects permission to exist differently.

If this furniture exists differently does it fail at being furniture? And if it fails as furniture, what does it become? My thinking about failure, and how failure can lead to other existences beyond the norm, began with the theory in J. Jack Halberstam's book *The Queer Art of Failure*. Halberstam frames failure within the queer/straight binary; on a basic level, straightness is what is expected and accepted and queerness fails to meet those heteronormative standards. Within this thesis I've framed the domestic furniture as the subject that conforms to our established standards and expectations because domesticity has historically been structured by heteronormativity. When I fail this furniture I am giving it permission to be something else outside of these structured norms. The way the furniture fails does not have to be obvious. Often

failure is confined to being a spectacular disappointment but, the failure within this installation is more defiant. The furniture is not trying hard and falling short, it fails because it can't succeed. The mattress within the installation does not succeed in providing warmth and bodily comfort but, when it fails at giving us what we expect it succeeds in transmuting into an object that rejects our structured desires and exists for itself. This idea of rejection comes from the lens of José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, "Queerness is essentially about a rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world." (1) The furniture's rejection of expectations insists on other possibilities; the furniture uses failure to defy expectations.

The chair served as my entrance into working domestic furniture. They seem to be the pieces that we engage with most frequently. There is an intrinsic understanding of how to sit differently depending on the design of the chair. We can apprehend how far we have to fall before the chair catches us without calculating the space between body and cushion. Bodies understand what they have to do, how they have to move. What would happen if those autonomies were taken away? How might we understand a chair that repels? Investigating that question of the repelling chair was the first step into a deep furniture investigation. The answer to that question is subjective, but a guess could be tentatively made. Another question is, what kind of chair repels? My answer to that is... a grout chair.

The grout chair was the first piece that came to be in this installation. Its reason for existence has everything to do with its materiality. When I find a material that I respond to I dive into the dark, head first and explore. The first material I dove into was grout. I was enchanted. It was everything one could hope for in a material; one of its best features was how well it adhered to the surface of the La-Z-Boy. Grout's combination of malleability and secret strength made it the

perfect material to use for covering the exterior of the chair. Because the grout was so forgiving when wet I was able to follow the contours of the existing La-Z-Boy. Going over the La-Z-Boy's creases and grooves with the grout reinforced that the encrusted object was, indeed, a recliner. The tension created between the seemingly soft shapes of the La-Z-Boy paired with its rough exterior made the chair a contradiction within itself. The familiar shape of the chair draws us in while the surface of the chair keeps us at a distance. This combination of deep familiarity and subversion keeps viewers from completely relating to and understanding the furniture.

Subverting materials to create tension was the first way I began to understand these objects conceptually. Experimenting with materials and how they inform the furniture was my way into the work; before I understood the work conceptually, I understood it through material. When the materials for furniture do not meet our inherent expectations there is a friction in understanding what we're looking at. Using materials to subvert expectations is at the crux of this work. The materiality of these pieces is the first, last, and constant thing I think about when envisioning the final product. I think of myself as a curator of material. I think about the possible conversations the materials can have, both visual and metaphorical and I organize my pieces to allow them to have the most engaged active and enthusiastic conversations possible. It's important that the separate works are related in their visual languages and that the materials talk to each other both within the visual pieces and together as an ensemble. The cohesion between materials is key because it gives the work intention and creates a sense of togetherness that relates to how furniture is selected and organized within a domestic space.

The criticality of the conversation between materials became apparent by accident. The original conversation was between a grout chair and a grout mattress but due to structural difficulties with the grout mattress I chose to scrap it. However, because I was already attached

to the idea of having this piece in the installation I recreated the mattress out of wood so the grout could have a strong internal structure. After being convinced by peers to keep the mattress wooden and not add grout the visual similarities between the objects began to reveal themselves. Both the bed and the chair were created by modeling a surface through repetition; the grout was applied by painting it onto the chair and the wood was applied by gluing dozens of cut and sanded Douglas fir squares onto a piece of plywood to create the surface of the mattress. These modeled surfaces of the bed and the chair paired with their stark material appears to create a lively conversation that connected the two pieces both visually and conceptually.

Within the installation subverting the arrangement is more critical than subverting the surface or the material of these objects. When the arrangement of furniture is askew so that it does not serve the body, the intimacy of the way we understand furniture is taken away. The arrangement of furniture in my house submits to furniture's organizational logic. The flow of the space and the placement of furniture within the house serve to maximize comfort and accessibility. The way the furniture is curated within the rooms of my house takes into account the natural flow of traffic. This attention to the flow of traffic reinforces my comfort, assumptions, and habits about the space. This installation works to do the opposite, of course each object is given the proper room to allow for people to walk around it, but, other than that, I reject expectations for furniture's arrangement. The pieces within the installation are positioned to actively reject our physical interaction with them. Even if all three objects in the installation were positioned and arranged how we might expect them to be. The objects I put in conversation with each other don't necessarily tell a coherent one-room story. The room that I am describing within the installation is one that doesn't exist; it's a Frankenstein room, taking bits and pieces from different areas of my house and combining them into one hodgepodge space that can be

categorized under ‘home’ or ‘domestic space.’ By taking objects from different parts of my house and putting them in conversation with each other I am negating the coherent logic and natural flow of this heteronormative domestic space. This negation frees the furniture from its anticipated orientation; because it does not exist for us, it is not hindered by our expectations.

In their book *The Queer Art of Failure*, J. Jack Halberstam writes “possibility and disappointment often live side by side” (105) The most direct way to work through this concept was to look at work by Robert Gober. Gober’s work fails quietly. His series of sinks, displayed in his MOMA retrospective *The Heart is Not a Metaphor*, has no faucets. Their failure is restrained; a crucial part of their anatomy is missing but in an inconspicuous way. They have a simplistic directness and quiet nature. Because his sinks do not behave as the things they are imitating they become metaphors. The possibility is that the sinks could function and the disappointment is that they don’t but through that disappointment their existence goes beyond their expected function. My exploration of possibility and disappointment is hinged on the notion that because the furniture exists for a purpose other than serving us it is disappointing as furniture. This notion gets muddled because this work is meeting at the intersection of furniture and sculpture. The possibility is that the possibilities are endless when furniture rejects its structural logic.

Gober puts wallpaper on the gallery walls to create an environment for the sinks to inhabit. By wallpapering the walls of the gallery space he is uniting the objects together visually. I took this move; transforming the plane the sculptures sit on, and brought it into my own installation. When the sculptures were installed on the floor they seemed lost. They were connected because they were in proximity to each other but the space they shared did not unite them. I created a second floor out of cold pressed steel so the objects could live in a defined space. This unity

pushes the visualization of the domestic space because the steel on the floor gives the objects separation from the gallery setting. If the objects sit on the wooden floor of the gallery they are sharing a spatial relationship with all of the objects that also sit on the floor. By altering the plane the objects interact with I am not allowing the work to engage physically with the space that surrounds it, this decision further encapsulates the work and reinforces the idea that this installation is a reinterpretation of a space. The addition of the floor elevates the pieces from being sculptures in a gallery to being an exploration of other realms of possibilities.

Mona Hatoum's work with quotidian objects shares the quality of the domestic sphere. The piece that helped to inform my work was *Dormiente*. In *Dormiente* Hatoum combines household objects, like the bed and the cheese grater, to create hybrids that reference both comfort and discomfort at once. If you look at *Dormiente* from the perspective of it referencing a bed, the only thing that says "bed" is how it is positioned in space. She relies on the size and shape of the object to encourage the viewer to draw connections between her sculpture and the domestic objects it cites. This work gives us very little that reminds us of a bed but we still read it as such because we are so familiar with the object our minds push it there.

Tapping into the power in the simplicity of everyday domestic objects is what Hatoum is doing. She relies on the viewer's familiarity with everyday objects as a way into understanding the work. I interpret *Dormiente* as existing on a binary; by combining an object that is extremely sharp and dangerous within the form of something we would attribute to be soft and comforting she incites alarm and confusion. Her work has removed the domestic objects far out of their original context; in doing this they are totally transformed into art objects. The strength in Robert Gober's work comes from his painstaking recreation of household objects. He does not venture as far out of these object's original intentions as Hatoum does. The subtlety in his absence of

function is where power and meaning are generated. *Dormiente* helped me think about material subversion within quotidian objects but beyond that this work felt glib. *Dormiente* did not seem to have the sincerity of Gober's sinks. It did not keep me thinking about possibilities and failure the way Robert Gober's work does. The bed fails to illicit within me any sort of intention beyond its visual aesthetics. The false depth of the piece hinders its exploration and potential thoughtfulness.

When Gober makes his sinks he is copying their original forms; his level of accuracy and craft is so high that these objects could be mistaken for being something you could pick up at Home Depot. The visual quality of his sinks matches what you expect from them everyday. While Robert Gober's work holds its meaning through subtraction, Mona Hatoum's work is additive. My work walks the line between these artists in regards to how they handle everyday objects. My pieces are not as concise as Gober's sinks nor are they as direct as Hatoum's *Dormiente*. Both Gober's and Hatoum's work lack a sense of playfulness and activity, which is something, I feel my objects embody. They lean into absurdity and nonsensicality. Because Mona Hatoum's *Dormiente* is a singular sculptural work, viewers put all of their attention onto one piece. My decision to put three objects in conversation with each other works to take the visual weight and importance off of each object and create a lively narrative between the works. The different qualities the materials possess enhance the works as a unit. The solemn character of the bed is cut by the playfulness of the stairs with their surprise orange interior. The weightiness of the grout chair is countered by the light color tones of the bed and the stairs. Alone the objects can be lackluster but together their strengths play off of each other.

My pieces within the installation reference their original forms to varying degrees. The mattress is a recreation of its original object but the material has been changed to wood. Even

though the material has changed it is visually the same as what you would expect from a mattress. The grout chair references its original object directly because it exists underneath the grout. To disrupt the chair from its expected orientation I've placed it on a wheeled base. This addition takes the object out of its original context and confuses its intentions. The stairs have the loosest interpretation of the three pieces. They visually reference stairs but they are abstracted by their positioning in space; because we are accustomed to seeing stairs right side up when they are oriented upside down it can be difficult to interpret what they are. The orientation of the stairs activates them. Instead of being situated flat on the floor they tilt into space.

The physical tilt of objects is a shared formality; the bed leans against the wall, the chair tilts on the base, the stairs lean outward into space. The repetition of angles creates a visual rhythm within the installation. The tilts destabilize the entire installation. This destabilization is another way of disrupting the structural intention of furniture within space. Because furniture has the job of holding our bodies it requires stability. How the furniture is positioned within the installation warns the viewer that it cannot be interacted with physically.

This installation seeks to take domestic furniture from my house and confuse its structural logic through both materials and arrangement. This is done in the hope of letting the furniture enact José Esteban Muñoz's and J. Jack Halberstam's theories on queer failure and the possibilities for other modes of existence that go beyond the structure of heteronormativity. In skewing the fundamental makeup of this furniture from my home, I am giving it a new sense of identity. This new identity hinges on the furniture's visual relationships between the objects rather than their physical relationship with us. Because the furniture in this installation is not for our bodies, it is granted a sense of activity. This activity through materials and arrangement is what gives the furniture a new mode of existence. The furniture has been transformed from something that is passive and stagnant to something that demands attention. When the furniture in

my installation is stripped of its structural logic, it begins to ignore us. It rejects the here and now for furniture and what we expect of it and works on creating potential other worlds.

This thesis explores altering domestic furniture so that it no longer belongs in a space that submits to heteronormative limitations. Thinking about how objects can resist their functions has resulted in a deeper understanding how to break objects from the regimented constraints of functionality. When functionality is taken away from these objects they begin to lean away from their structured logic. Each of these objects allowed me to explore my relationships with materials and making in different ways and each piece demanded from me a different kind of execution. This openness to different ways of building allowed the objects to play off of each other visually and reinforced a coherent visual language within the installation. Furniture is not sentient but the language within this body of work regards the furniture as existing beyond its perceived conceptual boundaries. because the furniture is used as a tool to understand queer theorist's ideas about futurity and failure.

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LIST OF ARTWORKS

1. *any given Wednesday night*
2017 sculptural installation
[stairs: chipboard, orange & blue enamel paint, graphite, screws chair: La-Z-Boy, grout, grey interior paint, wheels, screws]

2. installation: cold pressed steel]

3. *10 p.m. (wood bed)*
2017 sculpture
[douglas fir, pine, chipboard, cold pressed steel]