

Materiality: *How the Use of Materials in Art can Convey Human Needs and Desires*

Question 4: From the series of FINE ART MAKING research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners

Student Name: Celyn Hopkins

Student Number: 2300115

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Lecturers: Alex Duncan and Holly Slingsby

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“[A]lthough the materials around us might seem like blobs of differently colored matter, they are in fact much more than that: they are complex expressions of human needs and desires” (Miodownik, M. 2014, pg. 215-6). I aim to explore this idea put forward by Miodownik using his own words as well as those within Anthony Hudek’s collection ‘The Object’; I will also explore the works of Gülsün Karamustafa, Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen and Teresa Margolles.

Gülsün Karamustafa “champions the use of disparate materials and methods” (Karamustafa, G. 2024, pg. 4), something highlighted in her ‘Hollow and Broken: A State of the World’ exhibition; the “installation invites viewers to consider the tragic and tumultuous realities of a world impacted by wars, earthquakes, migration and nuclear peril...these works reflect her perception of the world as broken and empty.” (İKSV, 2024, para. 1). Scattered through the space were several column casting molds made of plastic, the one in the middle of the exhibition being dismantled and surrounded by glass shards.



Fig. 1 . Karamustafa's Plastic Mold Surrounded by Glass

A simulacrum of concrete which in itself is a “simulacrum of stone” (Miodownik, M. 2014, pg. 61), the naturality is stripped with each mimic; “nature is being ceaselessly scathed and the environment sick” (Karamustafa, G. 2024, pg.5). Beyond that, the use of plastic contrasting the traditional stone robs the shape of an established relationship with glory, artillery and power. These ideas culminate in the embodiment of the “artist’s feelings of emptiness and brokenness in the current world”. While the materials make this piece, the lack of them do also; “their vacant nature is accentuated by lighting” (İKSV, 2024, para. 4). This lighting also uses the motif of glass shards, further highlighting their connection within the exhibition space.



Fig 2. Karamustafa's Chandeliers



Fig 3. Karamustafa's Chandeliers

“Upon entering the Pavilion, visitors encounter three striking chandeliers suspended from above, crafted from discarded Venetian glass, each representing a monotheistic faith: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. These luminous symbolic objects are shrouded in a web of barbed wire – conveying the historic tensions and quarrels between each religion and serving as a lens through which she explores the state of our world today.” (IKSV, 2024, para. 2).

Though originally donned with pieces of crystal, the eighteenth century saw Murano glass “propel chandelier design to a whole new level”; a material that was too brittle to be shaped like the crystal but could be softened with heat, allowing a more organic design

(Kurtgozü, A. 2023, pgs. 54-55). The inclusion of Murano glass creates a close connection between the artist's Turkey and Venice, contrasting the meaning of the barbed wire; this simultaneous peace and war gives a wider idea of Karamustafa's world view, either in a way to create hope of peace, to acknowledge the co-existence of the two, or to paint peace as the beauty is the midst of conflict; Turkey's leading religion is Islam while Venice is predominantly Catholic, their relationship is the beauty in the midst of the religious tensions.

Karamustafa writes about our sense of domination over objects, how rarely anything we interact with exceeds eye level with one of the few exceptions being that of the chandelier; they look down on us while we project divinity onto them (2023, pg. 53). The shadows they cast across the exhibition space draw the eye to wheeled carts with the bottoms obscured by more glass shards; a mirror of the chandeliers but a version that we dominate. The metal element again surrounds the beautifully coloured glass, creating a tense, uninviting sense from the work.



Fig 4 & 5. Karamustafa's Metal Bins of Glass Shards

While Karamustafa and an audience could see a submissive nature in these pieces, one highlighted when contrasted to the others that surround and tower them, theorists Hudek and Miodownik propose otherwise; “objects define us because they come first, by commanding our attention, even our respect; they exist before us, possibly without us.” (Hudek, A. 2014, pg. 15). When speaking of glass, Miodownik writes that the material “allows us to transcend our scale”, it being the only thing that allows our scale and civilisation to be “special” (Miodownik, M. 2014, pg. 156). He does however acknowledge our lack of affection for the material, something that decreases further at its breaking; “The very thing that we value it for has also disqualified it from our affections: it is inert and invisible, not just optically, but culturally” (Miodownik, M. 2014, pg. 157). This idea of the cultural invisibility of glass does overlap with the themes the artist focuses on; phenomena such as war and migration that are often turned away from. The glass shards in this work are based on *Insecure*, a previous work of the artist. Karamustafa described *Insecure* as “arguably one of [her] most hopeless and dismaying works”, focusing on the “inequality, injustice, oppression and violence” that “were being unleashed at every corner of the earth” following the 2-year period of the coronavirus, a time in which “humankind was fragile, vulnerable in the face of it all” (Karamustafa, G. 2024, pg 28). Karamustafa transforms materials into “human needs and desires” by expressing a care towards the world and those who inhabit it through them; drawing attention and compassion towards wars, immigration, and the environment through her practice highlights the need for unity. Unity will remove the barbed wire from glass chandeliers, will rebuild columns and will rid the world of shards of glass and broken hope.

'The Pleasures we Choose' features several works with that of Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen outstanding.



Fig 6. Wallinheimo-Heimonen's *How Great is Your Darkness*

The “view of objects as partaking in a complex world of varying textures and densities strays from the conventional understanding of the object as a gauge of truth and reality” (Hudek, A. 2014, pg. 14). *How Great is Your Darkness* partakes in this world by combining several mediums, the pieces floating at different heights to suggest uncharacteristic densities; however, the meaning of the object tells a reality, just that less considered. ‘The Pleasures we choose’ exhibition “speaks of the inseparability of art and life” with Wallinheimo-Heimonen's work

speaking on the challenges faced by disabled people, both day-to-day but also from within the spaces they should most be cared for – the medical and social care industries;

“Under the guise of parties, pearls, and exquisite stitchwork, her piece is thickly laced with references to hate speech, stereotyping, judgement, shame, and guilt that people with disabilities are forced to endure in their everyday lives.

Wallinheimo-Heimonen's intricately fabricated realities also embody an incredible sense of humour by celebrating a world in which a biodiversity of human bodies have won the right to choose pleasurable life over mere existence” (The pleasures we choose, 2024).

Another element of *How Great is Your Darkness* is a wheelchair suspended over the exhibition, forcing the viewer to look up; “We are now in a better position to name that other way to promote human health and happiness: to raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed” (Bennett, J. 2010, pg.12).

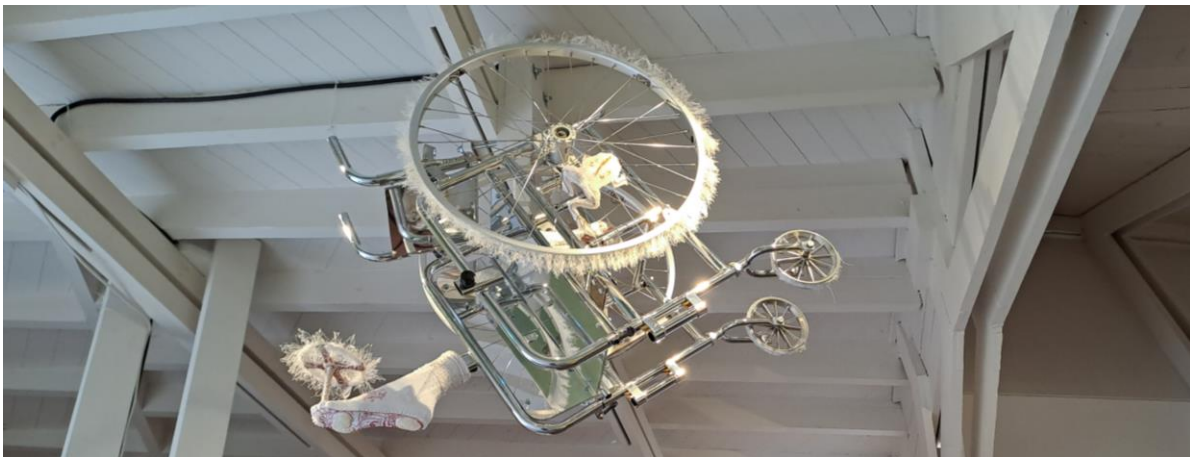


Fig 7. Wallinheimo-Heimonen's *How Great is Your Darkness* (Wheelchair)

A wheelchair becomes an extension of the individual which uses it, becoming a necessity in their life; they become part of the human composition, bring health and happiness in the way of allowing an individual freedom. By raising the wheelchair above all, its status is raised from ground to god; “If matter is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated” (Bennett, J. 2010). Wheelchairs are made of steel, a material which throughout history has “alter[ed] the appearance of so many faces and bodies” through the use of objects such as razors, a material furthermore thought to be “magic” (Miodownik, M. 2014, pgs. 19 & 5); it continues to alter humans through wheelchairs, the “magic” of which is amplified by the height opposed on it within this exhibition. “Stainless steel is the very epitome of our modern age. It is...ultimately democratic: in less than a hundred years it has become the metal with which we are the most closely acquainted” (Miodownik, M. 2014, pg. 19). Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen's work expresses the human need of acceptance, of care, especially for those who are often deprived it in all facets of life. She encapsulates the desire of being an individual, of being raised above the current status to dismantle the idea that an “ontological divide between persons and things must remain” or there would be “no moral grounds for privileging man over germ or for condemning pernicious forms of human-on-human instrumentalization” (Bennett, J. 2010); when a human relies on what is considered a ‘thing’, they cannot be sufficiently separated from it. She raises such ‘thing’ above the person, creating an “ontological divide” that instead favours the ‘thing’, it is privileged over man in a way that insists it’s important to life that it holds for disabled people.

Mexican artist Teresa Margolles “bears witness to all...pain and violence in order to preserve the memory of those who are no longer with us and to hand down their stories; to recognise their identity” (Garcia, A M. 2018, pg. 108); she creates her works using a range of corporeal materials, highlighting what in her country is simultaneously “venerated” and “growing rampant”: Death (Garcia, A M. 2018, pg. 97).



Fig 8. PM 2011, Teresa Margolles



Fig 9. PM 2011, Teresa Margolles

“PM always tells the truth” (Ferran, B. 2018, pg 162). 313 covers of Ciudad Juarez’s newspaper ‘PM’ are displayed as this work, “immortalised like a seventeenth-century still life” (Viola, E. 2018, pg 179). The covers were published in 2010, this is the same year that “two violent events left their marks on the world’s view of the conflict in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico” (Ferran, B. 2018, pg 160). These covers don violent images while the insides conceal “the scope of the slaughter”, “disguising, omitting or simply ignoring the victims” (Ferran, B. 2018, pg 162). Paired with these images however is seemingly a complete contrast: “images of women that respond to the imagery dictated by global pornography” in advertisement of sex work (Ferran, B. 2018, pg 165); the pages contained within PM are too littered with such things.

“It is hard to overestimate the effect of photographic paper on human culture. It provided a way of identification to be standardized and verified and, in this sense, has been accepted as the final arbiter of what we look like and, by extension, who we actually are.” (Miodownik, M. 2014, pg. 27). Margolles has not edited the covers, only digitizing and publicising them, presenting the true PM. In the process of creating this work, Margolles spurs the question of if the images of violence and pornography are truly that dissimilar? Ferran argues that “[o]n one cover page, we have two images that deny the victim” (2018, pg. 165). PM boils victims down to their deaths and women to their bodies, creating a spectacle of both. It has declared these people who they “actually are”, making them objects of “[d]esire” (Ferran, B. 2018, pg 163). Miodownik speaks of stacked papers, the image of PM being sold, becoming “a re-formed block of wood...a fortress for words for thousands of years” (2014, pg. 30); not only is PM controlling the view of those they exploit, they are manipulating an image that will outlast those it is of. “But PM is always there to tell the true story” (Ferran, B. 2018, pg 162)

“Things are made to speak – often by subjecting them to additional violence. The field of forensics can be understood as the torture of objects, which are expected to tell us all, just as when humans are interrogated. Things often have been destroyed, dissolved in acid, cut apart, or dismantled in order to tell their full story. To affirm the things also means participating in its collision with history” (Steyerl, H. 2010).

Margolles, who originally trained as a forensic pathologist, tortures the objects she works with to tell the story of violence and death in Mexico. Some works highlighting this are her series of “‘portraits’ of the dead” (Coulson, A. 2004); one of these works is *Papeles*.



Fig 10. *Papeles*, Teresa Margolles

Papeles is made up of watercolour sheets which Margolles pulled through the water used to wash corpses after autopsy; blood, hair and fat has clung to the paper. Each sheet carries the organic matter of a different individual, creating their anonymous portrait. The paper is unrestrained by glass or plastic, just tacked to the wall to show the full truth of these “violated bodies” (Garcia, A.M. 2018, pg 94). By absorbing the autopsy waste, “[t]he paper itself becomes a simulacrum of...skin” (Miodownik, M. 2014, pg. 49). The process of autopsy is that of torture of an object, a body cut, destroyed, and dismantled to tell the story of death. Margolles makes a portrait of such torture, it being debatable as to whether their display is additional torture, skin pinned up as spectacle, or humanising, a portrait displayed to be admired.



Fig 11. *Catafalco*, Teresa Margolles

Another of Margolles' "portraits of the dead" is Catafalco, "in which plaster-soaked sheets have been draped over corpses, creating a negative-relief cast, extending the tradition of the funeral mask to the entire body". Frieze writes of this piece fitting with "traditional iconography" of Western art, that "closely bound up with Christianity and its images of suffering and death"; "Body parts are venerated as holy relics, while 'imprints of death' – such as St Veronica's veil, on which Christ's suffering face was imprinted, and the Turin Shroud – have been glorified as proof of Jesus' divinity and suffering; Catafalco also bears witness to, verifies and commemorates lives that might otherwise have been forgotten" (Coulson, A. 2004). The image of Jesus is intrinsically linked to the idea of torture for the 'truth', destroyed through crucifixion for proclaiming he is the son of God. Much as Christian imagery, Margolles immortalises the torture of murder through sculpture with an emphasis on organic matter of the victim; the Eucharist is mirrored in the organic matter of a murder victim still attached to the plaster cast; "bodies, body fluids, blood...are not simply presented in their materiality as ready-made, but employed as a sign intended to represent other bodies that are not necessarily present, but are presented in some way" (Viola, E. 2018, pg 179). Margolles' practice embodies the true complexity of "human needs and desires", expressing both a desire for violence and need of its recognition, that both positive and negative, both that of the dead and that of living. She highlights the desire for sex, a topic that again delves into the idea of violence. Her works transcend being "blobs of different coloured matter", her use of materials delving so deeply and exquisitely into the way of humanity.

In conclusion, the works of these three artists as well as the writings in Hudek's 'The Objects' and by that of Mark Miodownik definitively prove that materials far excel being "blobs of...matter". They can tell stories of history while simultaneously telling tragedies of the present.

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