CECORGIA DIGKIE AGOUTISKY

REGARDING OBJECTS

Frances Loeffler

Look around and you will see that the world is filled with objects. These material "things" that can be seen, used and touched accumulate on street corners and in waiting rooms, in garden sheds and under the stairs. Some we create and some we buy and discard without giving them much thought. Some we inherit. Objects can have long lives, after all, often outliving their fabricators and consumers. In a sense, they are the fossils of tomorrow, but instead of indexing a geologic period, they describe our current material wants and needs, and record the stories of who we are for generations to come.



For her exhibition *Agouti Sky*, Georgia Dickie brings some of these objects into the gallery. In so doing, she maps out a physical terrain of sorts using the bric-a-brac refuse of a society born to acquire, accumulate, consume and discard. A "reef" is made up of wood and metal offcuts, a bundle of candlesticks, two carved wooden birds and a plastic "S." A field of leather boxing gloves punches upwards from the floor, while rusty garden trellises stagger uncertainly against the walls. Rows of old tills stand at attention, filled with a variety of odds and ends rather than coins and bills. Has capitalism been replaced by some madcap bartering society? Included are the letters "O" and "B." Are they signalling a coded message? Objects made from organic materials have also been included: small stones clustered together in a vine hang delicately from the wall like a protective amulet.



Above: A building being demolished in Toronto, photograph by Georgia Dickie, 2019.

Previous page: *Pretty colours on Queen E sidewalk...*, text message image and caption by Ron Dickie, sent to Georgia Dickie on April 29, 2019 at 12:04PM.



A satellite dish with a 2-metre diameter fills one corner of the room. Titled *Wendell Spinney (rainmaker)*, 2019, the work looks not dissimilar to a copse of bushes or trees, with branch-like arms laid bare where the wire mesh has ripped. Smaller items surround it, as though drawn into its orbital plane. On the horizon line, raised high on a wall, is the artist's own couch, plucked from her studio. Fire engine red and sagging to the body's contours, it is the kind of couch on which you could easily spend a comfortable afternoon, resting and thinking. Two strange figures are perched on it, perhaps doing just that. Or have they succumbed to the horrors of some post-apocalyptic disaster? One wears a mask reminiscent of the sinister Mickey Mouse gas masks issued to American children during World War II. The other figure is headless. Both wear blue coveralls, although their deflated outlines suggest the absence of a body within.

Some of the items in this exhibition have clear stories to tell. The rusty armature of the satellite dish, for example, will for many recall early attempts at global communication, the feeling of suddenly being connected, and the subsequent encryption of signals, all of which prefigure conversations about internet censorship. It may call to mind the burnt-out dishes piled high in parts of the Middle East where they are illegal, or the radio telescopes in Hat Creek, California, erected to capture that one pulse of extra-terrestrial light that might mean we are not alone in the universe.



Above: Image of satellite dishes and receivers being destroyed in Tehran, 2016. Digital image. Japan Times. 29 August 2019. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/07/25/world/guard-linked-militia-destroys-100000-satellite-dishes-across-iran/#. XWgv-pNKjyl.

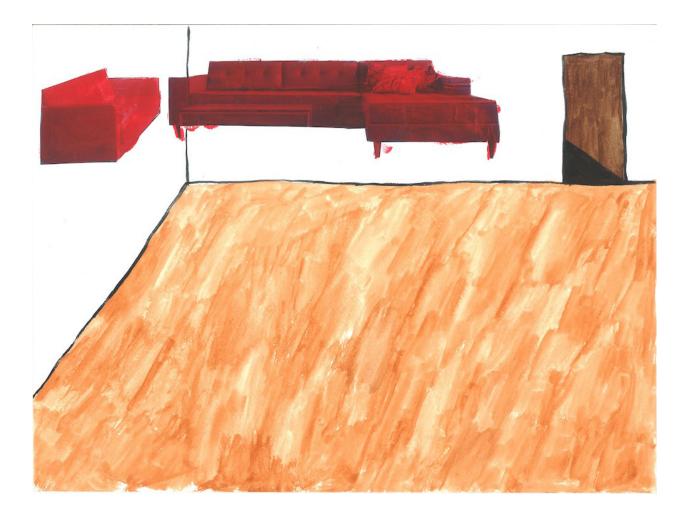
Previous page: A burnt-out garbage bin on Bloor Street in Toronto, photograph by Georgia Dickie, 2019.

Many of the items Dickie assembles suggest labour, particularly manual labour, such as metalwork or carpentry. Baseball caps, reclaimed wood, machinery parts, sandbags, heavy duty trolleys, boiler suits (so called because they were first worn by men working at coal-fired boilers): these all point to heavy industry and blue-collar jobs. The kind of jobs usually performed by men, rather than women. The boxing gloves, too, point to a "most dramatically 'masculine' sport" (in the words of author Joyce Carol Oates). Fists jabbing into the air, they also serve as a reminder that art historical movements associated with the found object—the Arte Povera movement of the late 1960s in Italy, for example—have usually been the preserve of men.



Of all the labour sectors, art is the one in which the concept of work raises some peculiar contradictions. The sofa brings this acutely to mind. Nothing has really been "produced" here, in the sense of artworks fabricated in a factory or hewn into shape by the artist's hand. And yet the artist was clearly at work. Her red couch, occupying a key position raised high above the other objects in the gallery, commemorates a different kind of toil—that of reading and planning, looking and thinking. This is not to cast aspersions on

A shop display of red couches in Glasgow, UK, photograph by Georgia Dickie, 2015.



production in itself, however. Indeed, it is hard not to feel nostalgia for the manual trades that produced much of the "stuff" here, now gone as economies have changed and skills have been lost. Overall, there is an uneasy sense of industry decline and male anxiety. The title of an earlier work describes it well: *A man of your skill, it should be no problem (but it might be a problem)*, 2016.

While a couch is easily recognized, certain of the objects Dickie works with are so old and displaced that their original identities no longer register. Rubbed clean of their prior uses, they become unfamiliar and strange. Scraps of machine parts, plastic netting and wooden beams: all we can know of them now is their outward appearance, their texture, colour, and form. This is where Dickie starts from when choreographing her installations.

Georgia Dickie, Interior 4 (London Drawings), 2014, watercolour and collage on paper, 12 x 9 in (30.5 x 22.9 cm).

Conglomerates of seemingly disparate objects are pulled together by formal properties. The shape or colour of one object will act as a catalyst, setting in motion the arrangement of others. In the animal kingdom, the bowerbird performs a similar task when signalling to a mate: selecting, arranging and balancing found objects. To bow is also to bend or curve (like the curved bow of a boat). The bend of a chair's arm informs the work's overall design, becoming a conductor's baton that leads a host of other objects with a sway to the left. It is as if electromagnetism draws the ensemble in one direction, just as centrifugal force might keep a satellite in orbit around the Earth.



One impulse behind Dickie's activities might be to exercise control. By reordering the tide of accumulation around us, can we bring some feeling of rationality to the madness of our current reality? By creating a parallel, alternate landscape, can we escape this one, in which—contrary to the clean minimalism of our Instagram posts—we're actually all drowning in rubbish? Or perhaps the focus here is on regarding the objects accumulating around us. Not consuming and discarding, but seeing and valuing. After all, that baby's plastic seat and that scrap of old lace that we throw out so readily do not really disappear at all, but will hang around for centuries, valuable traces of lost histories.

Left: Satin bowerbird nest decorated with blue objects. Digital image. San Diego Zoo. 12 August 2019. https://animals.sandiegozoo.org/animals/bowerbird.

Right: Bower of Vogelkop bowerbird. Digital image (credit: Tim Laman / naturepl.com). BBC Earth. 12 August 2019. http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20141119-the-barmy-courtship-of-bowerbirds

A regard for objects is clear in the often painstakingly delicate placement of objects in *Agouti Sky*. One can imagine the mental and physical activities that must have taken place for the installation to come together. An almost performative process—the artist's hand hovering and guiding, feet pirouetting—wrestling with gravity to get the composition just so. As viewers we are drawn into this dance too. We tiptoe, bend and stretch into the work's contours, our eyes searching out small details we might have missed earlier. Around us, heavy fragments of rusted steel perform a fragile pose, ready to tip in an instant. Everything feels momentary, coalescing for the duration of the exhibition but destined to be disassembled, and then discarded or reused. As such, the work speaks of our times. Against the backdrop of a world sliding toward environmental collapse, it is a fragile composition, holding together just for now.



Artist's studio, photographed by Georgia Dickie, 2017.

This electronic publication was produced in conjunction with the exhibition *Georgia Dickie: Agouti Sky* presented at Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square from 6 October 2019 to 5 January 2020.

Editing: Meg Taylor

Cover: Georgia Dickie, *Studio Table* (detail), 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

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The artist wishes to acknowledge the support of the Toronto Arts Council and the Ontario Arts Council.



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