

May 4, 2020

1.

My hands are sore but confident. I cut a small piece of glass from a sheet, grind it smooth, make adjustments until it fits like a puzzle, and mortar it in place. All winter long I have sat in a garage near my city's industrial waterfront constructing a massive art installation. It grows in millimeters. The labor is maddeningly slow but my heart swells with the completion of each tiny detail.

This new body of work is a long time in its coming. Two years ago I reached a point in my making where I wanted something new, but as every artist knows, moving forward is never easy. I went through the exciting task of researching new ideas. I compiled stacks of library books. I made lists and charts. I conceived of elaborate intellectual conceits that I discounted by the end of the same day. I wasted time. Somewhere along the way I realized I had said goodbye to my past body of work, the one I spent 7 years achingly refining to a place of nuanced mastery. I had wandered away from the thing I cared about most about until it felt strange and distant. I couldn't figure out how to move forward, but I couldn't go back either. I was nowhere.

In the fairytales, the thing a heroine sets out for is almost always a red herring. She needs to get lost in the woods before her adventure really begins. Each time I start a new body of work I go through these phases. The truth is there is no immediate way to transition from old to new. First, I mourn the end of what just happened. Then I lay fallow. I fight this every step of the way, and I never win. In these terrible in between periods I am convinced I will never make another body of work. I will never have another good idea. The limbo goes on for what feels like an eternity.

Eventually I become so unhinged, there is no option other than beginning. The humiliation of the struggle has shed me of preconceptions and grand ideas. I try quick experiments that I can handle in my small bursts between tears. Can I glue a rock to a cloud? Can I build a ruin in reverse?

The questions I have agonized over for days in my head are solved in seconds in my hands. Each material sample teaches a lesson. From tiny combinations come better questions and bigger objects. I build on this. I ask friends for technical help with new tools. Discoveries send me back to the library, but this time with focus. I move from abstractions to specifics. I am still in an uncomfortable place, but at least I am somewhere.

Sitting here now amidst a sprawling work of art in progress, I can see the trajectory of making and thinking like a gleaming line. But this is a path only appreciated in reverse. There is no predictive looking forward to something whose foundational principles you do not yet know. I always laugh at movies where artists are struck with moments of genius and they tear apart their studios to capture the muse before she disappears. This never happens to me. I do the work. It happens slowly. I nurture it one step at a time.

2.

In 1986, when I was 11, Haley's Comet passed through the visible realm. Haley's is our most familiar comet, reported by sky watchers as far back as 240 BC. What humans have made and destroyed in that time are but the backdrop of a few rotations. You might even catch it twice if you are born in the right year and manage to live long enough. I probably won't see it again. Comets are sometimes called dirty snowballs, because they are really just a mix of dirt and ice trailed by gas. While Haley's appears every 76 years, other comets take millions of years to travel a single orbit. Their paths through the solar system traverse an incomprehensible expanse of time and space. In the reflected light of this immensity, the choice of flipflops I have been agonizing over while obsessively online shopping is diminished, but also perhaps is the importance of the continued existence of my entire species. This fact fills me with undeniable relief.

3.

Spending every single day making a giant work of art about an environmental apocalypse seems like a satirical penance during a global pandemic. But I designed it a year ago and I have to finish it. Things you set in motion stay in motion and sometimes you are powerless to reshape their course. This artwork is about that actually; that we are suspended between a completed past and its impression on the future.

This is not to abdicate responsibility. It is to admit that the proclamations of the future we utter now are inseparably tethered to the past; amidst the echo of a thousand Cassandras reverberating in a ruinous hum.

The objects around us - the trees, the buildings, the communities- are long events unfolding over centuries. Objects are undeniable. And they are powerful. The unstoppable force of a new virus is the proof that we too are things. And that as things, we are entangled in a constant state of physical causality. We experience this as humans, but there is no universal teleology that necessarily works towards positive human ends. If we pay more attention to other objects, we might become more like the rest of them. We will learn how to participate as peers. We will better understand our own role in the messy knot of stuff and its vast duration. We will realize we are not making all the decisions. To make things is to be connected to what is real. Any world we build, and any art we propose, must come from there.

Mastery is a seductive narrative. I want to control things, but building toward growth is an act of submission and partnership. I may mourn. I may lay fallow. But eventually I will reach for what is there. I will touch it and taste it and smell it. I will find small solutions and build what is possible. I will seek knowledge from the people around me and I will commit to helping things become the best they can be, piece by piece.

- Lauren Fensterstock