Confabulation

Ruth Lakhani

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Confabulation

by

RUTH LAKHANI

(Under the Direction of Marc Moulton)

ABSTRACT

I create work that is an investigation of memory—individual memories from a single location over a span of time. Over time, these individual memories are layered on top of each other to become remembered as one. When the boundaries between the original and successive memories become unstable and unreliable false memories are produced.

My sculptures are non-literal representations of selected interior details from my memories of a place that I visited regularly throughout my life. This place that I am inspired by has undergone several different stages of repair, from when the house was first constructed up to the current day where the home is being remodeled.

My assemblages are playful, yet precarious sculptures that represent a hybrid of the physical space, perception, and memory. The color, scale, and materials of the pieces are a direct link to this hybridization. Color, scale, inspirational details, and material representation are exaggerated. The highly saturated colors, magnification of mundane details, and use of readily available products produce a specific emotional response and shift in perception. Although
I am drawing from personal references, it is not intended for the viewer to experience my exact recollections.

There is a dual purpose for determining my materials for each assemblage. Each material is specifically chosen to communicate the inspirational reference to the viewer aesthetically and literally. Aesthetically, I am interested in the physical qualities of the material, i.e., texture, shape, and pliability. Literally, the materials chosen are often physically located in the inspirational reference. On occasion this literal reference is generalized so that the viewer can create a connection through familiarity with the material, such as the fact that cabinet liner is used in kitchens across the country. Artistic influences which have lead to conceptual and formal discoveries throughout this project include artists such as Andrea Lofke, Jim Hodges, Ina Babavia, and Jim Lambie.

INDEX WORDS: Master of Fine Arts, MFA Thesis, Memory, Architecture, Installation, Sculpture, Location, Place, Childhood
Confabulation

by

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Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
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CONFABULATION

by

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DEDICATION

My family has been a huge support for me throughout the MFA program. My husband has provided the most support to me during these past years. I want to recognize his constant support for my artwork and personal goals. Second, my dad and sister have often provided advice and encouragement. Finally, much of my inspiration comes from my grandparents’ home, so I am thankful to have them as my source of inspiration.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My committee members, Marc Moulton, Jessica Burke, and Elsie Hill, have helped me so much while I’ve been in this program. Their guidance has impacted my studio practice and writings.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This body of work investigates the instability of memory through the recollection of location. My primary references are personal memories of my relatives’ house. Through my work, it is my intention for viewers to recall their own personal memories or create their own narratives of a location, since the sculptures contain recognizable interior imagery.

The influence of time and memory first came to my attention when I observed the decay of my relatives’ house and how that mirrored the physical deterioration of memory.

My first memories of this space were incredibly influential. A clutter of adventure and excitement burst from the rafters and seeped from the joists of their home. Rooms swallowed guests in their 1970s décor- orange wood paneling, green bathroom fixtures, and shag carpets. The décor and finishes were from an era that I was not a part of but by entering their home I could transport myself back to that decade. The furnishings and décor enhanced the purpose of the rooms by providing a space for people to gather.

Over the years, the house has been simultaneously losing function and deteriorating. The rooms are now used as storage. The clutter that now invades the space consists of piles of artifacts with perceived sentimentality, which causes the rooms to become blocked-off and functionless.
The decay of the house did not happen suddenly, since it was caused primarily by weather. It started on the outside with rotting shingles and crumbled bricks and slowly seeped into the interior eating away the structural-wood, plaster, and carpets. Over the years, I took mental snapshots of particular incidents where the decay overtook the structure. These snapshots are strong individual memories that divide time like bold text in writing. They present timeline-markers; important or emotional times wherein I recognized the physical changes and deterioration of the house. Recent renovations and remodeling has improved the state of disrepair. New construction materials are being layered on top of the 70 year old home to strengthen the structure, function, and cosmetic appeal of the space while allowing it to retain its distinctive identity.
Chapter 2

BODY OF ARTWORK

Earlier Artwork

When I first began my graduate work, the idea of the origin of the material was very important. The works before my MFA mid-program review experimented with a variety of distorted and skewed perspectives of measurements and memory and were particularly influential in guiding my thesis body of artwork.

During my first year of the program, I not only looked for non-traditional materials, but also non-traditional methods of creating the artwork. *Untitled 1*, 2013 contains measuring tapes that I systematically cut into pieces. For example, one measuring tape was cut after each “3.” Another measuring tape was cut after
each “4” and “6.” Then, they were put back together in a reverse order. This piece uses found material from modern women’s clothing to make corsets. I used my actual measurements, which I know by memory, and then cut the fabric according to the distorted measuring tapes. There are six total corsets, which resulted in two corsets made with the measurements of each distorted measuring tape. I was particularly interested in how a distorted measuring tool would affect the products that it was used to craft.
I continued to explore standard methods of measuring in *Untitled 2*, 2013. I made another measuring tape where only the numbers were cut out and all of the measurement marks were discarded. It was then sewn back together in the original order and used as a tool for counting. Next, I took 36 socks that I had manually grated holes into and used a regular measuring tape to measure the length and width of each hole. Then, according to the counting tool, I hand stitched the corresponding number of patches onto the socks. The patches, made of clear vinyl, cover the holes and yet still allow them to be visible. Due to the hand stitching, the patches are delicate and may detach easily if worn. The many layers of patches also makes them uncomfortable for walking in, which makes them completely non-functional and brings up the ridiculousness of these items in our daily lives.
The ridiculousness of these non-functional items sparked the idea of incorporating mundane details from dysfunctional situations into my artwork. An example of a dysfunctional detail is my grandmother’s method for drying laundry. I used the architectural details of this scenario to create the installation *Delicate Matters*, 2013. Here, the origins of the materials are commercially available. They are items from my daily life, such as brown paper bags, duck tape, clothes hangers, and yarn. *Through the Lens*, 2013, as like the previous piece, appears to have an organized sense of chaos. It feels game like, such as the “trap the mouse” game, with its bright colors and long lines that pull the viewer’s eye from one side to the other. It was inspired by the architecture and imaginative games I
use to play at my relatives office. I exaggerated the colors and patterns in the piece to reflect these childhood games. At this point, I was becoming interested in three key elements: the architecture of locations, the way color affects the tone of the space, and scale.

Figure 4: Ruth Lakhani. *Delicate Matters*. 2013. Foam board, paper bags, yarn, duck tape, clothes hangers, & acrylic paint. 24”x120”x288”

The scale and precarious nature of *Through the Lens* was a decisive point for my current body of artwork. The structures are arranged in a manner that is unnerving and hard to navigate. They appear to be teetering on the edge of falling over, and they fill a very confined space. The scale is life size and becomes easier to interact with.
The designs for my sculptures become more streamlined, with a definite connection to residential architecture and saturated color, which continues to drive my current artwork. I began using geometric and linear forms to link to construction materials and structural forms. The hues are specific to the original interior references, but I’ve used highly saturated versions in order to link these memories to my childhood environment.
The artwork in my mid-program review became a turning point for my artwork, and I focused on the fact that memory is perceived differently due to a variety of factors, such as age, mood, or surroundings, which makes memory itself unstable. To amplify the instability, I began pairing material with specifically selecting reference details that contained elements of physical instability. The first piece of work in this series is *Hang on for just a minute.*, 2013. It is based on
the detailed recollection of a precariously disorganized structure in my relative’s home. An imbalance is created with blocks that appear to be toppling out of the wall and have long flagged wires extend toward the viewer. Another example of this coupling appears in *I’ve stood there before, so don’t worry.*, 2014. The reference for this piece imagines the hidden structure beneath a home, and combines details from both the room above and the structure beneath the failing floor. This reference was paired with wheels to visually imply movement. This potential movement parallels the fact that memory slips away and shifts over time.
The fluidity of memory is expressed formally through the combination of linear and organic forms, such as in *I dropped it. 5 second rule!* 2014, a piece which examines the carpeting of my relatives’ home. When I was growing up, it was a fun play area; however, now that I know how dirty that carpet was, I think it looks and feels disgusting. The shiny, brightly colored cellophane wrap relates to the types of “hidden/lost” treasures that I imagine are still buried in the carpet fibers from my childhood, and also my childhood perception of the carpeting. However, these crisp edges juxtapose the oozing yellow foam that is emerging from the seams of the rigid tubes, which connects to my current perception of the carpeting.
Figure 9: Ruth Lakhani. *I dropped it. 5 second rule!* 2014. Dryer vents, cellophane, spray foam, & mixed media. 108"x108"x84"
CHAPTER 2
BODY OF ARTWORK

Confabulation: Thesis Exhibited

A collection of playful, yet precarious sculptures represents a hybridization of the physical location, perception, and memory. Similar concepts that I had touched on during my mid-program review are perfected in this body of artwork. It explores the psychology behind false or inaccurate memories and incorporates a variety of these concepts through the use of readily available products, bold bright colors, magnification of mundane details and organic form, and imbalance. When combined in the artworks, these key elements create specific emotional responses, shift in perception, and a humorous appearance.

The material choices for my sculptures are inspired by common interior details, such as wallpaper, bricks, and carpet, include PVC pipe, 2x4’s, foam insulation board, crafting materials, and rope. They are accessible materials that speak to the everyday nature of my inspiration, the aesthetic of the 70’s decor of my relatives’ home, and the multiple states of remodeling and renovation of that place. Their recontextualization, which is achieved by altering the intensity of color, context, and texture of the materials, points to the fluctuating nature of memory.
The exaggerated, saturated colors that I use imply a childlike quality, create visual movement, and alter the appearance of the materials. Changing the color of a mass produced item is one method of separating it from its original context. Each recreation of a location explores this hybridization in a playful and whimsical manner that contains an imbalance of real and imaginary elements. It is necessary for the hues to evoke emotional qualities for a variety of reasons. First, intense combinations complementary and analogous colors are visually perceived as lighthearted. Second, they transport the viewer out of the ordinary world and into my created scene. Third, they emphasize the inflation and exaggeration of remembered details, which is important because memories or details of memories can be exaggerated or remembered incorrectly when they
are recalled due to the act of imagining\textsuperscript{1}. The inaccurate recollection of memory is also represented through the layering of additional formal elements.

![Image of artwork]

Figure 11: Ruth Lakhani. Watch those corners! 2015. Foam board, wood, spray foam, wire, & mixed media. Dimensions variable

The juxtaposition of exaggerated scale and emerging organic forms highlight the layering of initial and subsequent memories. A child’s perspective is observed through the magnified scale of the work, which meshes with the seeping and emerging forms that layer or grow on the initial oversized structure. This quality ties to the tendency of memories to shift in perspective and become amplified over time. Memories themselves become amplified over time through the process of recollection. Simply by recalling a memory it becomes altered and

magnified in comparison to other memories\textsuperscript{2}, which points to another aspect of the instable nature of memory.

![Image of Ruth Lakhani's artwork](image)

**Figure 12:** Ruth Lakhani. *Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, flip the switch and watch it glow.* 2015. MDF board, egg cartons, spray foam, Chinese takeout boxes, chain, & mixed media. dimensions variable.

Imbalance is indicative of the emotional undertones where color, material, and placement are key interpretive elements. Many of the materials used in the work have a built in sense of shifting gravity that holds to the truthfulness of my memories and their ever-shifting perceptions. Balance and imbalance are created by: the light-weight and seeping quality of spray foam; the upturned sliced pipe insulation; and the suspended ropes. The module elements of the sculptures also have unstable placements. By distributing the visual weight of each installation into smaller clusters, the pieces have an asymmetrical

appearance, which is enhanced through the overall slanted and angled appearance of the crafted structures. This imbalance uses a humorous approach to place the viewer in a position to notice the ever shifting and conflated nature of memory.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 13:** Ruth Lakhani. *I closed the lid, so it's not my fault.* 2014. Foam pipe insulation, spray foam, wood, yarn & mixed media. 30”x60”x30”

The humorous layering of real and imagined elements shows the instability in each piece narratively and psychologically. False memories, or confabulation, range from the recollection of inaccurate details to entire events, and imagination is a significant contributor to this miss-recollection. By imagining events, participants in studies were more likely to believe that
the events actually occurred. It is easy to forget details, such as who attended an event or what was served for dinner, and it is also easy for the brain to falsely create new memories, whether by imagination or suggestion. Elizabeth Loftus' “lost in the mall” technique found that 25% of test subjects fabricated “memories” of being lost in a shopping center as young children, which illustrates the ease of manipulating memory and why it should be continually questioned. What are the real details in the memory and what was added? There is a fabricated component to each of my pieces- a “what if” component. What if the repair wasn’t done well enough; what would it look like if ‘x’ happened; what does that look like close up? A process of combining imagined situations and actual locations, which enhances the creative process, abstract narrative, and skewed perspectives.

This combination of a real and imaginative scenario is most notable in I closed the lid, so it’s not my fault., 2014, which also uses material choice to heighten the comical tone. Using a deteriorating ceiling that was recently repaired as a reference, the piece portrays a layering of the past history of the architecture with the new renovations. The new portion is represented through hard, crisp edges, but the memory of the organic decay is visible beneath. The stability of the entire structure is questionable, through the emerging pink mass. Humor is also incorporated through the unexpected combination of yarn, tubes, and foam bubbles. A similar method was used when integrating egg cartons and

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4 Loftus, 73.
cut takeout boxes, which are unrelated materials, yet the materials work together to show the fragility and mundane nature of the original architecture. All of the sculptures created in this body of artwork are a hybrid of remembered detail and skewed perception about a specific location through their formal elements. The psychological content and link to childhood is also embodied in their humorous appearance and recognizable yet unorthodox use of materials. Together, this confabulation produces a specific emotional response and shift in perception for the viewer.
CHAPTER 3

CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

Four contemporary sculptors heavily influenced my work. The whimsical imaginary worlds of Andrea Lofke, the personal history of Jim Hodges, the architectural nature of Jim Lambie, and the material choices of Inna Babaeva.

Andrea Lofke

A contemporary artist who has greatly influenced my material usage and whimsical settings is Andrea Lofke, and her artistic intention is very similar to my own goals. Andrea Lofke work focuses on combining fictional narratives and fantasy worlds with real world anchors. Her delicately crafted materials transcend their original qualities and immerse the viewer into the unique miniature worlds that she creates. These are intended to fill the space between familiarity and unknown. While viewing the work, Lofke intends for one to associate personal experiences to each installation. "Specific or vague personal memories are awakened." 5 states Lofke. These fantasies are enhanced through the titles and layering of intent of the artwork.

Lofke uses titles to create another layer of narrative, which is something I have adopted into my own practice. Cheerful titles add a form of abstract direction to the crafted landscapes. Her title selection adds an enticing plot to

5 Lofke
each piece, such as *Oh do let me help to undo it!* However, there is a sense of darkness in each piece. For example, the use of sharp edges and bleeding wounds create a tension in the work, since it is juxtaposed pastel colors and organic forms. In this piece, *Oh do let me help to undo it!* Lofke incorporates contrasting emotional intents. “I was trying to create a place between realities, between comfort and disaster, between familiar and outlandish, keeping the viewer a bit off balance”.

![Figure 14: Andrea Lofke. Oh do let me help to undo it!](image)

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7 Black
My work is largely influenced by Lofke’s use of a wide range of materials and methods, which she alters from their original form. As her work developed, Lofke began incorporating elements from all areas of daily life, such as home, school, hospitals, and restaurants. For these supplies, she often visited the local dollar store, which is filled with cheap, colorful items. Lofke uses these items as a material choice to guide the viewer’s experience partly because of their universal nature and partly because of a wide variety of associations that they embody. In *The squirrels, hedgehogs and rabbits are indeed harmless*, plastic toy animals, miniature trees, twigs, egg cartons, and miniature fences re-enforce a pastoral atmosphere. The arrangement and relationship of materials guides the viewer to go transcend a traditional landscape and step into a fantasy world. These found objects are unified through the color palette and emphasize her hand-crafted construction methods. The viewer is physically guided through the installation by the large scale of the ladder and the segmented miniature setups that line the gallery walls.

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8 Gutbrod
Scale is approached differently in her more recent installations, where the viewer is physically experiencing the space in a large installation. This change in focus from small to large scale allows the viewers to participate in a different way, by either directly or indirectly inviting them into the sculptural space[5]. A larger scale is observed in *Oh do let me help to undo it!*, where the ladders, chalkboard, illustration, and foam panels are life size. This relatable scale creates an environment that easily allows viewers to insert themselves into the created fantasy world.
CHAPTER 3
CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

Jim Hodges

I am influenced by Jim Hodges’ work because of his inclusion of personal biography in each piece, material selection, and color. Jim Hodges sees many of his works as recaps of actual events in his life. He has used fabric and sewn elements in a number of pieces, which is in memory of this mother and grandmother, who taught him to sew. By treating the materials in a simplistic manner, in order to retain their original qualities and tie to his personal biography, Hodges makes the pieces more understandable to viewers; however, this decipherable quality ranges from literal to abstract. “I was feeling a strong need to change, grow, and break with particular

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9 Cotter
10 Gean
things that were going on in my life and my history, and the material was the perfect answer for that," states Hodges about the use of mirrors in his work. Mirrors also invite the viewer to interact with the artwork, such as in *Toward Great Becoming* (turquoise/purple), 2014.

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11 Gean
Color is an important component for Hodges and it serves as a link between himself and the viewer. He considers it to be a complex element and the “purest form of expression, the purest abstract reality”\textsuperscript{12}. He describes color as musical notes; they are simultaneously free and complex. He states, color “is an intense experience on its own,” and it is something that people of all ages can connect to comfortably\textsuperscript{13}.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid
One piece I particularly respond to, *Toward Great Becoming*, illustrates a balanced use of material and color to humorously captivate the audience. *Towards Great Becoming* is a series of wall mounted reflective objects of different colors. The color combinations seem to dance throughout each piece, as well as any surface its reflected light may hit. It is lighthearted and humorous, which is especially noticeable when the pieces are exhibited together. The combination of rectilinear panels of reflective material and bold color schemes invite the viewer to connect to these playful, energetic qualities to their personal experiences because the viewer can see themselves reflected in the sculpture.
CHAPTER 3

CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

Jim Lambie

Jim Lambie also uses his personal history with music to influence the formal and conceptual concerns of his artwork, and his use of color, material, and architecture are also elements I try to emulate in my own artwork. Music has always been a part of Lambie’s life. He grew up performing in bands, and currently DJ’s for events. He uses this inspiration in his material choices and titles\textsuperscript{14}. Titles such as, Careless Whisper, 2009, and The Doors, Morrison Hotel, 2005, are examples of Lambie’s interest in musical themes\textsuperscript{15}. Although he claims that he does not think about music at the beginning of each pieces, he says that it is an unconscious incorporation, and states, “I use sculpture to create the physical space that music inhabits”\textsuperscript{16,17}.

Often, Lambie collects and scavenges popular cultural materials from second-hand shops to hardware stores. These shops are perfect for his

\textsuperscript{17} Kennedy
collecting due to their variety of vintage, kitsch, and memorabilia. Although he uses all forms of cultural items in his work, he gravitate most towards record\textsuperscript{18}. He has used a variety of materials, including record decks, speakers, clothing, door handles, and mirrors\textsuperscript{19}. Lambie is drawn to these objects because they surround him in his daily life, and these recognizable features makes the items universal, familiar, and relatable to his audience. He states that “they have an energy to them” because of this personal connection\textsuperscript{20}. Once included into sculptures, the objects seem to be treated without reverence, often covered in glitter or broken mirrors\textsuperscript{21}. 

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid
\textsuperscript{20} Kennedy
The common items transcend their humble beginnings and rough assembly. Some critics compare this to punk bands: “It's also redolent of the do-it-yourself, photocopied flyer and crap cassette recording ethic of Punk in that cheap materials are used in a crude fashion to produce something that frequently transcends its meager means”\textsuperscript{22}.

Physical architecture directly informs the appearance of his floor installation, \textit{Zobop}, which has a variety of color combinations. Lambie states, “it navigates the architecture. It accentuates the nuances of the architecture\textsuperscript{23}” The piece forms a type of skin, or tattoo, across the floor that builds a rhythm through

\textsuperscript{22} MacMillan  
\textsuperscript{23} Kennedy
its vibrant colors. It is then covered with a clear varnish to maintain its quality\textsuperscript{24}. The rhythm of the vinyl tape lines dissolve the hard edges of the gallery’s architecture, and seem to be contracting and expanding. He has created variations of this installation with multi colored tape, about nine colors; gold, silver, black, and white tape; and monochromatic color schemes. Labmie’s architecture references are subtle.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Jim Lambie. \textit{ZOBOP}, 1999. Installationsansicht Transmission Gallery, Glasgow, Scotland}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid
CHAPTER 3

CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

Inna Babaeva

Babaeva’s work has influenced my own artwork through material and humorous characteristics. The physical qualities of found objects attract her and she is always open to the idea of expanding the notion of what is an “art supply.” She says that having a broader range of materials allows her to work outside of traditional methods of creating artwork\textsuperscript{25}. These materials can be used for their intended functions; or, they can be used as sculptural elements and unintended functions. She is drawn to the industrial aesthetics from places such as New York construction sites and products found in hardware supply stores\textsuperscript{26}.

\textsuperscript{25} Keeting
\textsuperscript{26} Progress Report
One of the more commonly used hardware store materials in Babaeva’s work is spray foam, a material that I have use in a number of my own pieces. Babaeva’s uses this material as an element to undermine objects’ daily functions and represent color as a physical form. Hollow cavities in objects, such as wine glasses and buckets, are filled with the foam and subsequently lose their functionality. Babaeva first discovered this material through a mishap with a previous project. After filling silver balls to float on the river for another installation, some of the balls overflowed and, as a result, the foam began bubbling out of the balls. The foam allows her to think of color as an object and as a 3-dimensional element that can coexist with found objects.
Other non-hollow objects are also unexpectedly paired with spray foam, such as rocks and crystals. In *fixing a hole*, 2012, the crystals are considered trite objects, and it becomes a challenge to make these kitsch objects seem beautiful. Rocks are almost the opposite; they directly tie to memories of hunting for rocks on the beach. The tension of the hovering stones and dripping foam is humorously and precariously situated on a clear pedestal with wheels. This precarious nature is automatically included in her work through the unexpected combinations of materials and the way each piece seems to resist gravity. Babaeva’s combination of material is something I reference in my work.

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27 Ibid
Figure 21: Inna Babaeva, *fixing a hole*, 2012
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

My sculptures successfully investigate the instability of memory through the formal elements of color, scale, and material. The inspirational architectural details reinforce this through their personal origin and the actual changes that occurred at the location. Additionally, these key elements affirm the influence that my contemporary research has had on my artwork.

The work created for *Confabulation* succeeded on many levels, and I plan to continue these themes in future work. Future work will contain references to memory and architecture, and it will be finished in a similar color palette. The major differences for future work will be related to scale. The work will not fill the gallery in the same manner, but instead be pedestal or wall based sculptures. Each piece will still fully encompass an architectural element, memory, and time.
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<http://www.andrealoefke.com/PDFs/Loefke_may08_spreads-Comp.pdf>.


APPENDIX

Photographic Documentation of Thesis Artwork

Exhibition Overview: University Gallery, Georgia Southern University
I closed the lid, so it’s not my fault. 2014. Mixed media, Dimensions variable.
Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, flip the switch and watch it glow. 2015, Mixed media, dimensions variable.

Watch those corners! 2014, Mixed media, Dimensions variable.
If you hold it real close, it works fine. 2015. Mixed media, Dimensions variable.

I think there’s something growing in there. 2015. Mixed media, Dimensions variable.