5-2015

Unmonumental Moment

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To the Dean of the Graduate School:

We are submitting a thesis written by Amy H. Holbein entitled *Unmonumental Moment*.

We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts.

Thesis Adviser

Committee Member

Committee Member

Dean, College of Visual & Performing Arts

Dean, Graduate School
UNMONUMENTAL MOMENT

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty

Of the

College of Visual and Performing Arts

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the

Requirements for the Degree

Of

Master of Fine Arts

In the

Department of Fine Arts

Winthrop University

May, 2015

By

Amy Holland Holbein
Abstract

This thesis statement investigates the coexistence of joy with grief, light alongside darkness, and the intersection of the divine with the ordinary, as they express themselves in my thesis “Unmonumental Moment.” In it, painting merges with sculptural forms to create a three-dimensional work that addresses the idea of duality. The exhibit is marked by the ongoing common elements in my work, namely the use of a saturated color palette, the incorporation of papier-maché with everyday detritus, dream imagery, and portals alluding to a parallel spiritual world. This statement analyzes the thesis components and examines them in light of art historical movements and debates. It further explores the underlying inspiration (The Annunciation by Fra Angelico), and comments on the influence of artists such as Charlotte Salomon, Ai Wei Wei, Vincent Fecteau, and Ming Fay.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Thesis Committee members: Shaun Cassidy, Stacey Davidson, and Clara Paulino for their encouragement and guidance during my Master of Fine Arts program. Professor Cassidy prodded me to think deeply about my work and pushed me to always reach for more. Professor Davidson made me feel like I belonged in the MFA program in the early days of my study and shared her knowledge about structuring a beginning painting class. I am grateful to Dr. Clara Paulino for her deep knowledge of aesthetics, art history and writing skills. I thank each of you for your steadfast commitment to me as your student.

Thanks to Professor Tom Stanley, Dr. Laura Dufresne, and Dr. Laura Gardner for your enthusiasm and encouragement during my M.F.A. study at Winthrop University. I am grateful for the opportunity to have worked with the Winthrop University Master of Fine Arts Faculty. The experience has strengthened and enriched my life and work as an artist.
Personal Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my husband Erwin Holbein for his support of my educational endeavor. I am particularly grateful for his help with solving technological and technical problems. Your enduring belief in my abilities helped keep me afloat.

I am deeply grateful for my daughters Olivia and Charlotte, who make my life and work meaningful and bring me joy.

In addition, I want to thank my friend Zan Schuweiler who pushed me to go back to college and earn my M.F.A. Thanks to Amy Chalmers, a fellow artist and former student who assisted me in the studio and made the work more fun. My thanks also goes to Vivianne Carey who inspired me when she began her M.F.A. studies at Winthrop and to whom I am grateful for sharing the burden of the commute from Spartanburg to Rock Hill.
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A few years ago I heard an interview on National Public Radio with a singer/songwriter who said that there are only three subjects available to the artist: love, death and God. At the time those words resonated with truth for me and they still do. My work is essentially about all three. More specifically, in my art I am exploring duality and the coexistence of joy with grief, light alongside darkness, and the intersection of the divine with the ordinary. I have chosen to merge painting with three-dimensional forms in my thesis work to create a sculptural scene of The Annunciation scene in which these seemingly opposite forces come together in one moment. The Annunciation, a popular subject in Gothic, Renaissance, and Counter-Reformation art, is the moment when the Angel Gabriel is said to have announced to the Virgin Mary that she will conceive and give birth to the baby Jesus. My favorite painting of the Annunciation and the inspiration for my work is The Cortona Annunciation fresco by Fra Angelico from 1430 [Fig.1]. Although I have borrowed elements from his masterpiece -- using the framework of the portico for the figures, for example -- much changes in my thesis exhibition work titled Unmonumental Moment. Instead of a birth announcement being proclaimed, a death is pronounced. The messenger Angel Gabriel is transformed into a dreamlike beast that emerges from my nightmares, and the still body of an infant replaces the Virgin Mary. Even with these changes, I hope to portray a sacred encounter in which heaven and earth intersect.
My interest in religious iconography intersects with my work as an artist. Overlapping with my M.F.A. degree, I completed four years of Theological study through the University of the South at Sewanee School of Theology. I have always been interested in theology and had an awareness of the spiritual even as a child. After the tragic death of my son seven years ago, I felt the need to wrestle more deeply with my faith. That exploration naturally flows over into my work as an artist. Nothing provokes the sensibilities of an artist like grief. In grief there is a myriad of human fears, from the visceral blow of the initial knowledge of death which brings rage, followed by the insidious pain that lodges in the heart, to the waves of anguish that continue through the years. The loss of my child has led me as an artist to acknowledge these universal emotions and muster the individual will to unearth and expose them.

Early in my graduate work, I became acquainted with the work of Charlotte Salomon. Charlotte, a young Jewish artist living during the Nazi Reign in Berlin, created a unique and powerful body of work in her brief life. By the time Salomon was a teenager she had experienced immense tragedy including escape from the Nazis, learning of her mother’s suicide, and witnessing the suicide of her grandmother. In response to her loss, Charlotte reached for the creative power within her and decided to engage in something extravagant so as not to lose her sanity. Beginning in 1942 at age 23, she painted furiously for two years creating over 1300 gouache paintings. From these pieces she selected 800 to comprise her autobiographical work titled *Life? Or Theatre?* (Jewish Historical Museum). This work comprised the portfolio Charlotte passed to a friend for safekeeping as the artist was transported to a
concentration camp where she would die. Salomon’s motivation for painting was to express the difficult emotions of despair, sorrow, and rage associated with tragic loss. In the depiction of her Mother’s suicide, which is painted with honesty and directness, the figures become vehicles for psychological and emotional narrative [Fig. 2]. Her work, like mine, has an authentic quality born from a response to personal history, and our work shares a similarity in encapsulating emotional moments from a larger narrative. Charlotte Salomon had to embrace her wounded heart and soul in order to create an extraordinary body of work. The powerful emotions associated with profound grief need a form of expression. I have been moved by her courage to relive tragedy through painting. Like Salomon, I have also worked from memory to recreate scenes from a very dark period in my life, searching for a way to live with grief and despair.

Before entering the M.F.A. program, I had been painting in oil, drawing in pastels, and combining oil paint with cold wax to create abstract encaustic works on panels. The subject matter of this period was dominated by a fascination with doors, windows and shadows. In my first semester at Winthrop I continued with two-dimensional work by creating a series of pastel drawings of my son’s room, which had not been touched or disturbed since the day he died. These drawings were executed on fine black sand paper. The contrast between the black ground and the saturated pastel colors make the images vibrate [Fig. 3]. My intention was to document the personal space filled with possessions that my son left behind. Among the drawings, there are broad views of the room along with close-ups of particular objects. Again, many of the paintings include doors, windows or the shadows they
create, which become a binding element in the series. There is an elegiac poignancy in the work that comes from what is absent in the room. The space is empty of the young man who belongs there. As I worked on this series I began to acknowledge the sacred quality of the space and the activity of drawing became an act of love. I had the sensation that as I applied pastel to paper, my fingers were caressing the surface of the room and its objects. Upon completion, the pastel drawings were photographed and published in a small edition artist book.

Continuing to wrestle with my grief through art making, I tackled the project of transforming my son’s car which was a move towards three-dimensional work. Perhaps this transition was prompted by research into the art of Ai Wei Wei, the contemporary Chinese artist and architect. I had the opportunity to view his work at Art Basel and the Venice Biennale in 2013. His installation entitled Bang was particularly moving [Fig. 4]. The artist had dismembered 886 antique Chinese stools and rejoined and connected them in one sculpture which filled the gallery space. Of notable interest to me is Ai Wei Wei’s belief that at times, something must be destroyed in order for something new to be created. I was compelled to transform my son’s car, destroying its viability as a vehicle and imparting a new purpose for it as art. The car, a 1994 Ford Escort, had particular significance. The last time I saw Alex on the day he died was when I passed him on the road as he was driving home from school in the Ford. Since my son’s ashes are not buried, the car took on the added significance as a sacred burial site. I parked the car in my garden and covered it with royal zoysia sod, documenting the process on video [Fig. 5]. Eventually as autumn came, I planted pansies within the sod and as the seasons changed, the grass naturally
turned brown and reflected the dead of winter. Perhaps the ephemeral quality of the project reflects the fleeting nature of human life itself. The car’s function as a vehicle was repurposed into a sacred object as it became a symbol of his body which I was covering in a shroud of grass. Here again I was exploring the sacramental nature of an everyday object; taking the car, which was a trigger for the pain of loss, and drawing forth an expression of love. The horrible becomes beautiful.

My art work has also been influenced by the experiences I have had as a commercial artist. In addition to working as a fine artist, I create design work for a local business building props for the company’s showrooms. The design work inevitably spills over into my art. For one project I was required to make thirty papier-mâché birds. Creating them and then seeing the finished flock was delightful. I was hooked. Papier-mâché is lightweight, yet strong and durable. It is inexpensive and can be formed without requiring heavy tools. I love the simplicity of the materials: flour, water, and paper. In addition, it lends itself to the incorporation of recycled materials. Vincent Fecteau, a contemporary artist who sculpts biomorphic shapes from papier-mâché, foam core, and everyday discards, is inspiring. Fecteau’s sculptures are relatively small in scale; however, his work moves beyond its size to suggest architecture or theatrical design [Fig. 6]. The rediscovery of papier-mâché coincided with the artistic research I was attempting next.

Since my son’s death, I have had recurring nightmares. Papier-mâché was an optimal material for my sculptural images of the weird beasts that inhabit my grief-driven nightmares. One of the nightmares always contains a door. The setting may change, but in the dream something horrible is pursuing me and I struggle to open or
close the door to escape. The thing I fear often takes the shape of animal-like beasts. A few years ago I started making paintings of doors as an interrogation into this nightmare. After rediscovering papier-mâché, I decided to build the nightmare for the piece entitled *Pitbull* [Fig. 7]. In this piece I used foam core, papier-mâché, photographs, and everyday detritus to construct the door image and the figure of the pit bull that lives behind it. There is a theatrical quality to *Pitbull*. The dog alludes to a world of fears shaped by experience, while the origami folded photographs add an element of lightness and joy. The photographs depict fleeting moments of joy. The accumulation of these moments makes up a life. The clean brilliant palette of the door panel provides a light contrast with the dark interior from which the Pit Bull emerges. Part of my intention is to raise questions about the nature of illusion which is born in the nightmare itself. In what form do I dream? The nightmare is a manifestation of real fear, but the nightmare is not real. It exists in the realm of irrationality. In order to process the irrational fear, I make it concrete through art, thus controlling it. The pit bull is terrible and yet it is only pink papier-mâché. My nightmare is terrifying and yet it is only a dream. The image straddles everyday reality and the world of nightmare and symbol.

What began as a single work became a series of papier-mâché beasts. I brought the first creature in the series, *Steal Your Baby* to class for critique [Fig. 8]. Several students and the instructor commented that if I made it out of stone or metal it would be a “real piece of sculpture.” This comment led me to contemplate the question of materials. Traditionally sculpture has celebrated the permanent and the monumental by nature of the materials it was composed of, namely stone or metal.
The expertise required to carve or mold these materials set sculpture apart as rarified. The use of papier-mâché as a sculptural material falls in line with a trend in contemporary art to deskill the production of art. I have a certain skill set and it does not include stone carving or metallurgy. Once again I refer to Vincent Fecteau’s sculptures. Having never taken a sculpture class in college, he described an uneasy relationship with materials. Fecteau cannot weld, cast, or carve stone or wood. Papier-mâché is low tech and he chose it in his early work as an inexpensive way to begin making larger paintable forms (De la Torre 52).

This deskillling in sculpture can expand art from the exquisite to the more common. “Deskilling art collapses it into life...” states Eva Diaz in the book on contemporary sculpture titled *Unmonumental* (207). Ming Fay, a New York based contemporary sculptor, forms poignantly beautiful work from papier-mâché. His creation of well-crafted natural forms such as oversized nuts, fruit and flowers form garden-like installations. At one point he worked solely with papier-mâché but now combines it with plaster, pigments, gauze, and other materials. Ming Fay says that his pieces have to grow in his studio over time before they can be shown. His natural forms, with their beautiful surfaces, elevate papier-mâché beyond craft [Fig. 9]. The traditional role of papier-mâché was that of a material for craft-making and therefore the general attitude existed in the past that it was unsuitable for fine art. My creatures are not cast, carved, or molded. Rather they are glued, tied, sewn, and cobbled together. The work belongs to a category of sculpture that incorporates found materials, second-hand images and even rubbish. The use of such ephemeral materials highlights the fragility of the objects which in turn addresses mortality itself.
Each colorful individual animal in the series was taken from my personal nightmare repertoire. These creatures vary in scale from the size of a chicken to the size of a lion. The surfaces of the animals are highly embellished with texture and color. There are found objects embedded in the creatures’ flesh such as broken porcelain, a hinge, and a bird’s nest. The palette is vivid. These vibrant color choices have been a constant in my work. As previously mentioned, I used color in my pastel drawings and in *Pitbull* to build contrast with the darker elements in the works.

Color and ornament are important in my thesis, and I am well aware of the debates around these topics in the history of art. In *Chromophobia*, the contemporary artist David Batchelor writes that, “color has been the object of extreme prejudice in Western Culture” (22). He believes that color has been marginalized, not only by artists, but also by philosophers and art historians going back to Antiquity. He argues that this attitude can be traced back to Greek Philosophy, more specifically Aristotle, who believed that reason found its repose in drawing and line, and that color was adornment. Drawing means order; color can mean chaos. This thought brings to mind Nietzsche’s definition of the terms “Apollonian” and “Dionysian.” If Apollo represents reason, order, clarity and control, then color falls under Dionysus, who represents passion, feeling, excess, and frenzy. Batchelor points to Charles Branc, influential critic, color theorist, and Director of Arts for the French Government in 1848, for whom color must be either abandoned by artists altogether or controlled: “Here we recognize the power of color, and that its role is to tell us what agitates the heart, while drawing shows us what passes in the mind, a new proof […] that drawing is the masculine side of art, color the feminine side.” (qtd. in Batchelor 28).
Immanuel Kant stated that color could not play a role in the larger schemes of Beauty or the Sublime. According to him, color could be pleasing and charming, but it could not have real significance in the aesthetic assessment of art. On the other hand, Charles Baudelaire says, “[J]ust as a dream inhabits its own proper atmosphere, so a conception, become composition, needs to have its being in a setting of color peculiar to itself” (qtd. in Batchelor 35). Baudelaire condemned artists and critics for whom color held no influence to dream or imagine. Batchelor also recalls Dorothy in “The Wizard of Oz.” She leaves her gray world of Kansas and falls into the color-saturated Land of Oz. In the end, she awakens from her dream back home in black and white Kansas, safe again. Here, color clearly represents the world of the irrational. It is a scary dream world full of fear and beauty. Home, on the other hand, is safe and simple (Batchelor). For me, the use of color is essential in my work on several levels. Besides alluding to the messiness and uncontrollable nature of existence, it can represent moments of fleeting joy and release.

Similar to my liberal use of color, ornament finds its way onto the surfaces of my work. Along with color, ornament has suffered in art history especially in the early 1900s. The Viennese architect Adolf Loos wrote a treatise in 1908 entitled “Ornament and Crime,” in which he equated the decorative with cultural decay (Diaz). In this period, ornament fell by the wayside in favor of sleek modernist style. Clement Greenberg commented that decoration got left behind by Modernists in their quest to purify their medium to its most efficient and economical function of providing an experience of aesthetic value. Ornament was merely embellishment and had no function in the logic of paring things down to the essential. The decorative
reemerged in the 1960s as psychedelia, but, like color, it carried a stigma of indulgence. The ornamental, along with color, opposes the idea of efficiency and reason. Barthes wrote in *Camera Lucida* that color applied to black and white photographs altered the truth, working as an artifice or cosmetic (Barthes 24).

Color and ornament are often associated with the cosmetic which links it to the feminine. As Western philosophy deals with the ideas of depth and surface, a moral question of the profound versus the superficial arises. During my graduate research, I realized that I felt apprehensive, even shamed, about the colorful and ornamental qualities in my work. For me, this has been an issue with which I have wrestled. Is the use of color and ornament in my work superficial? Does it demean the work and make it less profound or even silly? I have come to terms with these hallmarks of my work for now. My otherworldly beasts come from the chaotic world of nightmares and the irrational. Color, along with form, portrays this imagery most effectively for my vision.

In the gallery, papier-mâché animals were installed with a series of 9’ x 5’ companion paintings on paper, combining sculpture with two-dimensional work [Fig. 10]. These unframed paper panels hung on the wall at 8 feet in height so that the bottoms draped onto the floor. Paint was applied on the paper with a trowel, moving in grayscale fashion from dark to light, the dark area starting at the top of the panel and transitioning to light as the paint moved down the paper towards the floor. The palette varied among the panels, but all were painted in cool tints and shades of gray, blue, violet, and green. On several panels a figure was added. The figures are painted likenesses of the papier-mâché animals themselves. Once again, I enjoy the
conversation between the two-dimensional paintings and the three-dimensional sculptures. The panels hung on the walls behind the beasts like portals or doorways which I intended to be part of the dreamscape. To reinforce this concept, I painted pathways on the floor of the gallery space in the same trowel effect as the panels. The pathways extend the paintings onto the floor. The muted palette of the paintings sits in contrast to the intensity of the colored beasts. My aim was to create a space of otherworldly creatures that straddles reality and dreamscape. Parts of the animals are familiar, but they are combined with odd distortions giving them a dreamlike quality - yet the work contains bits and pieces of everyday life. The beasts are frightening, but on the other hand they are wounded themselves and provoke sympathy. They are horrible and beautiful simultaneously. These are the dualities that my work addresses.

Traditionally, sculpture has shared historical space with monuments to the dead. A statue of marble or bronze forever preserved the deceased in effigy. My thesis work is also made in memory of the dead. However, by choosing the subject of the Annunciation, I am suggesting a reality where the living and the dead intersect in a sacramental moment. The Renaissance artist Fra Angelico painted this subject several times. Born in 1387, he was a Dominican monk, a mystic, and an accomplished painter of 15th century Florence. Like many Renaissance artists, he was adept at perspective, had mastered light and shadow, and was able to cajole form from color. In his Cortona Annunciation, c. 1430, the figures are set in a loggia painted with architectural perspective [Fig. 1]. The architectural element divides the narrative into two parts: the scene in the surrounding garden and the momentous event taking place inside the loggia. The loggia acts as a stage intended to frame the
figures of the Angel and Mary. On the left side of the portico, the Angel Gabriel seems to have just alighted, interrupting Mary from meditating on her prayer book. The source of light does not come from nature, but from celestial sources. Fra Angelico believed that light was God-sent and flowed from celestial bodies. Its purpose was to reveal nature to human eyes in order to purify our sensory experience. For Fra Angelico, the purpose of painting was to transform objective sight into light-filled vision and in the process, restore harmony between the earthly and the divine (Argan).

In my Annunciation, the portico also serves as a stage for a sacred encounter [Fig. 11]. As the viewer enters the gallery, he sees the back side of the portico initially and must walk around the sculpture to view the front side which faces the back wall [Fig.12]. The surface which initially confronts the viewer is murky, worn and pock-marked, giving the impression that it has a dark history. From the back, a window is cut in the portico wall and a large black bird sits perched in the opening looking down on the scene on the other side. My intention is to ignite the viewer’s interest as to what the raven sees on the other side. By turning the sculpture around where the figures face the wall, I am forcing the observer to walk around the sculpture. My purpose in installing Unmonumental Moment in this way is to activate the viewer to move in the space. On the front side, in contrast to the dark outside wall, light is abundant and the interior of the loggia is lit in gold leaf and cinnabar red. From the window cut into the back wall, a patch of light shines onto the floor. The angel-beast looks upon the still baby who lies on a pile of memorabilia. Both the angel and the child are constructed from papier-mâché with found objects embedded
in their skin. The infant is crowned with a halo constructed from gold wire, pen nibs, and paper brads. The angel has wings, a human-like face but a beastly three-legged body. The arrangement of the figures is meant to evoke an undeniable poignancy. This is a vision of the world in which objects and images do not immediately belong together. Like Fra Angelico, I am depicting a sacred encounter in which heaven and earth, love and death, become one.

Although my thesis exhibition approaches the spiritual, it is grounded in the grittiness of everyday life. This point is most prominent in the materials used to construct the piece. *Unmonumental Moment* is a three-dimensional collaged painting. The interior of the loggia is lined with my “to do” lists which I have saved for several years. Since my son’s death, these lists have become a crutch for me to organize my mind and keep track of daily tasks. I have thousands of pieces of paper upon which are written phrases such as, “rake leaves”, “bank”, “buy stamps” and “call Mother.” They have been stitched together in quilt fashion and coat the surface of the portico. The body of the baby is covered in pages from one of my son’s favorite books. The skin of the angel is encrusted with everyday objects. The wear and tear suffered by the objects remains visible. The materials are vulnerable to the humiliations of decay. The architecture is structurally precarious made plain by the use of provisional materials for its construction. Because there exists such an abundance of choice in materials available to the contemporary artist, the question becomes, “What not to use?” When an artist has unlimited options for materials, the result can be relativity and a breakdown in hierarchy lending every choice equal value. When hierarchy dissolves, papier-mâché has as much value as marble.
The same breakdown in hierarchy of materials also occurs in content. In everyday life we are bombarded by a steady stream of information. Because of this deluge of stimulation, hierarchy collapses in regards to content. Without a pause between stimuli, there is no cue that one event may carry more import than another.

In my work, I am making a connection between the physical stuff that piles up in our lives and the emotional experiences that compile our lives. The everyday objects that I choose to use in my work are symbolic of my internal experience. The constant presence of the reality of death which has accompanied the loss of my child has shaken my sense of hierarchy and value. My son’s death was life-changing: A momentous event. And yet, it exists alongside the mundane. Life continues after tragic death in all its ordinariness. So, in a world overcrowded with events, stimulation, and endless material glut, the question arises, “What is essential?” I am selecting bits and pieces of ordinary, everyday stuff, such as grocery lists, travel mementos, and discarded toys, and incorporating them into my work in an attempt to make comprehensible the relativity that comes from endless choice. It is my objective to elevate the event of tragic loss in one moment in time by placing my constructed forms in the light-drenched loggia, creating a small theater of the extraordinary, pinned down by the discards of everyday life.

My Annunciation attempts to suspend time, creating an opportunity to pause and reflect upon that one moment. In this work I attempt to stop the flow of stimuli in order to re-install a hierarchy where this moment rises in importance. Because the chosen materials for the work are considered discardable, they proclaim a tension between the perishable and the imperishable. The timelessness and relevance are not
in the lasting of the material objects, but in the universality of the timeless themes of love and death. *Unmonumental Moment* is a sacred object in that it straddles reality, firmly planted in the here and now, and simultaneously pointing to the eternal.

As an artist my M.F.A. work has played an essential role in reconciling tragic loss and the ongoing life marked by grief. During the course of my graduate research, I have focused on the powerful emotions associated with profound grief with a particular focus on the dualities of human experience. This research has led me to search for a visual language to express the juxtaposition of joy with pain, light alongside darkness and the thin line that separates the divine from the ordinary. In this process, I have come to understand my work as sacramental, being an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality. My thesis attempts to speak to my belief that pain and joy, dark and light, the divine and the ordinary -- seemingly opposites -- coexist in the moments of everyday life. By selecting the Annunciation scene as a framework for my thesis, I was able to merge my experience as a painter, with the desire to construct a three-dimensional form. By borrowing imagery from art historical sources, I have called attention to the universality of the themes of death and love. With the use of ordinary materials and the addition of detritus, I have introduced the concept of the mundane to a sacred subject matter while maintaining a quality of authenticity in my work. This authentic quality which emanates from the work originates from my personal experience of loss. The powerful emotions associated with profound grief need a form of expression and they find a platform in my work. In the future, I will continue to pursue the construction of three-dimensional paintings using a variety of mixed media, including found objects, and
further incorporate traditional religious iconography in my work. As I continue on this path of research, I plan to further investigate the subjects of love, death, and God, digging for new ways to comment on these themes through painting and sculpture.
Fig. 3. Holbein. *Alex’s Room*, 2012.
Fig. 5. Holbein. *Mint Skittle*, 2013.
Fig. 7. Holbein. Pitbull, 2013.
Fig. 8. Holbein. *Steal Your Baby*, 2014.
Fig. 10. Holbein. *Untitled*, 2014.
Fig. 11. Holbein. *Unmonumental Moment*, 2014/2015.


