

Assembly Required

by

Anthony Naimo

May, 2023

Director of Thesis: Tim Lazure

Major Department: School of Art and Design

*Assembly Required* is a narrative-driven project using found objects to explore themes of imagination, community, impermanence, and reinvention. The artworks encapsulated within this research are fabricated almost entirely using waste-materials: rusted metallic oddities, mildewed comic books, and found images. An alternate future is imagined using the materials of yesterday. This is a found-future setting which celebrates a scrappiness and ingenuity in people to think our way out of the impossible. I illustrate how all things exist in a cultural cycle of rising and falling value – and reflect on people’s ability to enact alchemical exchange upon these material meanings to fabricate exquisite, new realities.



Assembly Required

A Thesis

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East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

by

Anthony Naimo

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Director of Thesis: Timothy Lazure, MFA

Thesis Committee Members:

Lisa Beth Robinson, MFA, MLIS

Angela Wells, MFA

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# Introduction

## **I Intend to Speak of Forms Changed into New Entities**

*“Even if we build the future we look forward to, gone is the future we expected or prepared for.”*

*- Hank Green.*

I come from a family of collectors. My grandmother is a magpie, and my father is a packrat. Contained in each artifact they steward, there is a story. How and where an object was acquired, how long they have cared for it, the origin of each dent and scratch from a lifetime of use. Their collections came to represent their life stories. Those narratives elevate the value of the object associated with them. Knickknacks and paperstock curios become irreplaceable heirlooms.

I have inherited my family’s affinity for the stewardship of found and discarded objects. I manipulate these materials through collage to tell stories of what the material *could be*, rather than what it is – *junk*. The inquisitive, childlike question of, “what else could this be,” is paramount to my artistic interests.

I use found materials to illustrate how all things exist in a cultural cycle of rising and falling value – a force in culture stuck in rapidly changing patterns of consumption and obsolescence. Value is not inherently possessed by the material object. Value is culturally informed. We then project those values onto the object. If an object ceases to perform its intended task, or its performance degenerates with use, cultural sensibilities deem the object valueless. The seduction of the New incentivizes us to throw out and replace the Old. But just as easily, the Old could be refurbished or repurposed – and imbued with a new sense of value by placing it in a new context. We have the capacity to enact this alchemical exchange and fabricate exquisite, new realities.

Assembly Required is about imagination, community, impermanence, and reinvention. The works encapsulated within this body of art are fabricated almost entirely using waste-materials: rusted metallic oddities, mildewed comic books, and found images. An alternate future is imagined using the materials of yesterday. It is a found-future setting which celebrates a scrappiness and ingenuity in people to think our way out of the impossible. The salvors of this setting build incredible technologies to survive in a post-capitalist world still haunted by the pulp-terrors of global enterprise. There are expansive dungeons filled with valuable scrap, mutant aberrations, and zombified capitalists floating through space. It is Sunday-morning schlock and escapism influenced by the science-fiction/fantasy/horror films I watched alongside my grandparents, the literary works of Jack Vance, the toys of my childhood, and the aesthetics of 80's heavy metal.

Though I revel in themes of transmutation and becoming, I remain ambivalent toward the widespread changes surrounding me. Like the stories I am inspired by, in this document I will shift between notes of levity as I reflect on my life experience and wonder at the possibilities of the future – and the existential dread of living in late-stage capitalism, the unease of coming into adulthood in the midst of a global pandemic, and that dull ache of returning to a place you once called home and feeling like a stranger. I invite you to journey into this world with me. To construct a better tomorrow, there will be some Assembly Required.



# Materials & Methodology

## LEGO, Transformers, and the Material Ouroboros

*“When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty, I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.”*

*- C. S. Lewis, On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature.*



Plate 1: *Time Displaced Artifacts*, Digital collage, 2022.

The image printed on the front of a LEGO box is not a prescription. It is not a command for how you are meant to put the pieces together. It is a suggestion. By following the instructions to construct a

particular set, the pedagogy of LEGO is that they are demonstrating to you one possible option of infinite possible combinations utilizing the bricks inside. There is an open invitation to explore those other options.

When you play with LEGO, most of what you play with is inside your imagination. Your materials are symbolic shorthand – imperfect translations of your lucid and vibrant imagination. The full picture of what is being constructed doesn't exist in the bricks. It exists in the mind of the imagineer. I dedicated innumerable hours of my childhood to the delightful challenge of constructing functioning Transformers toys out of LEGO bricks.

Once I had the model built, I would run across the house to show my parents this incredible thing that I engineered from the thousands of plastic caltrops scattered across my bedroom floor. In my mind's eye, I was rendering photorealistic models on par with the computer graphics of Michael Bay's live-action Transformers movies. This appraisal was incongruent with the reality of what I built. I imagine that from my parents' perspective, they witnessed a vaguely car-shaped blob that articulated into a vaguely person-shaped mass. And to their credit, they did their best to match my enthusiasm toward those LEGO Transformers. I was so proud of each one I made. And after a couple of hours of idly cherishing my creation, it was time to take it apart and begin the ritual anew.

Next to LEGO, Transformers remain my favorite toy – acting as a 3-in-1 toy that combined vehicles, spatial puzzles, and action figures. Their slogan, “robots in disguise,” promises an invisible realm of spectacle existing in parallel with our daily experiences. The stories dwell in that liminal membrane between the genres of science-fiction and fantasy, of technology and magic. Constructing these LEGO models acted as a kind of prayer that maybe, just maybe, the fiction is based in some echo of reality.

Tom Sachs is quoted as saying, “all artists' biographies have a chapter titled ‘The Fire.’” One of my story's greatest fires is that I have no documentation of my LEGO Transformers. They exist only in

my memory, and I believe that this absence was what I aimed to fill by creating much of the artwork in *Assembly Required*.

My artistic interests now are fundamentally linked to my experience of playing with LEGOs. LEGOs are a toy designed and marketed toward taking the bricks apart and rebuilding them – encouraging its wielder to indefinitely explore alternative combinations of materials. There’s a reason why “Krazy Glue” is regarded as a weapon of mass destruction in the *Lego Movie*. Glue means permanence. Resolution. Completion. Lego is never complete. There is always something else to create.

I work with found objects and images because they share similar properties to LEGO’s building blocks: they are a kind of atomic element which can be explored indefinitely through infinite configurations. This is what makes them so much fun to play with. They are building materials – and they need not be accepted on the terms of their initial purpose nor imagery during the construction process. Their connections can later be broken again so that new figures can be constructed from the same materials. The cycle is as endless as it is rewarding.

My material may have changed since I was a child, but I am preserving and re-enacting that sacred process of joining parts piece by piece, engaging in a dialogue with my material as each subsequent alteration informs the necessary step forward toward an unknown completion. When I collage, it is a free-build exercise of intuition and ideation using familiar materials in unfamiliar orientations. “What futuristic technologies can be built with this box of rusted parts?”

This process functions as a system of play based on the pivotal question, “What else can this become?” The system is not just about the objects, but about what humans do with the objects. Found object art encourages us not to only look at the pieces, but also to examine relationships, patterns, and underlying cultural structures attached to our perspective of materials.

Though I have used the word “build” throughout this introduction, I am not a builder. I interpret the word “build” to have a certain finality and prescript result to its process. I am a salvor. I am interested

in the manipulation of prefabricated, discarded materials. My work encapsulates a process of re-building where waste becomes art becomes waste becomes art. The cycle continues until the material cataclysmically fails.



Plate 2: *Portrait of Daedalus*, Digital collage, 2021.

## **Held Together with a Shoestring, Bubble Gum, and the Will of God.**

*“It could make a fine subject for a fairy tale by Andersen, that mass of garbage cans, baskets, pots, and serving bowls, metal pitchers, wires, lanterns, pipes, stovepipes that people have thrown away. I really believe that I shall dream about it tonight, and in winter I shall have much to do with it in my work.”*

*- Van Gogh to Von Rappard, The Hague, 1882.*

Reality is never an accumulation of separate units existing side by side without connection. Every material ‘something’ is interconnected in a dimensional web of patchwork relationships. These relationships are as real as the material objects. The connections to each other constitute the objects’ reality and significance (Lang).

I think of my brain as a quilted patchwork of intertextual excerpts – with the loose threads compounding into a dynamic network of media interconnected with personal values, memories, and associations. Creating art provides me an opportunity to reach into my rat’s nest of entangled streams of consciousness and try to make sense of how I process my experience in this world. Nothing exists in a vacuum. Everything is interspliced. I think and learn best through the use of associative framework: comparing new ideas through established understandings in adjacent fields.

My way of interpreting experience and information is itself a kind of collage, and I believe that is why the practice of remixing of ideas, forms, and materials is central to my artist process. Collage traverses the minutiae of life through the discard of others: snippets of imagery, photography or found objects, reconnecting bits of fleeting data and prose – a way to reflect on scavenging and salvaging what is already out there in an ever-expanding context of cultural materials (Bianco).

To collage is to transmute the familiar into the fantastic. Collage is not a medium of art so much as a method. It is an activity. It is a process. It feels magical. Within this practice of mashing together materials comes the concept of coalescence: the act of independent units joining together in one body or

mass; to merge; fuse; and blend. Though I manipulate prefabricated materials in my artwork, these materials surrender their autonomous forms and meaning by assembling a new, collective identity when presented together.

I work primarily with weathered, junked-out metal materials. Mass fabricated, yet idiosyncratic objects. Over the course of their lifetimes, the consequences of their utility began to manifest across their surfaces: they get scratched, they dent, they rust or chip or shatter. These surface imperfections compound from extended use and abuse- and as a result, an object becomes individualized. The fact that my materials are irreparably damaged is what makes them valuable to me. The damage lends the object a sense of individuality. Authenticity. Rust makes it real. Scratches affirm its history in the same way the scars on my skin reflect mine. The object stands apart from its distant assembly-line siblings – once identical, now the material is individualized. This is *my* bip. There are many like it, but this *one* is mine.

The word “bip” is my term for the parts and pieces I collect. The term is derived from the whimsical naming conventions of Hollywood propmakers towards the materials they use in detailing surface planes: greebles, nurnies, and wiggets (Kirn). The act of greebling develops narrative through detailed surface texture. The detail can be made from simple geometric primitives, or more complex shapes, such as pieces of machinery. Over the course of my thesis studies, I have collected and photographed over 700 bips for my asset library.

In my digital composites, found materials coalesce as compact and interconnected modules of nondescript machinery. The vast systems of mechanical forms imply functionality and purpose: the complex systems necessary to facilitate advanced technological feats – marvels of science fiction informed by the visual language of rusted hardware you may discover in the dank recesses of your grandparent’s basement. I employ a heavy-handed, maximalist approach to surface detailing by utilizing digitized found objects – I developed this process from studying the kitbashing techniques of artists involved in films such as Star Wars, Alien, and The Matrix.

Kitbashing is an intuitive application of material, though it is a non-trivial artform. A throughput logic of systems must be established: a maintained internal reasoning which manifests itself in the visual language of the material surface. Set-up, follow-through, and pay-off. These motifs of design invoke a sense of verisimilitude which suspends the audience's disbelief within the context of a story to present a semblance of truth and realness. The Millennium Falcon feels plausible because: 1) it's filthy and beaten within an inch of its life – suggesting generations of use, and 2) there are *thousands* of tiny kitbashed machines covering every surface of the ship – surely one or two of those nondescript parts allows it to enter warp speed.

Beyond tactile qualities, there is a particular anonymity to the material I search for. The original functionality of the bip is insignificant to my process. I am attracted explicitly to mechanically ambiguous materials. If an object is readily recognizable, it disrupts and distracts from the artwork. The illusion dissipates. The obscurity of mechanics allows me to treat the found metals as symbols of function. The ambiguous asset becomes a shorthand of technological complexity, and it has infinite applications depending on the context of its presentation.





Plate 3: *With A Box of Scraps*, Digital archive of found objects, 2023.



## Meddle with Metal: Queering Material Through Collage

*"I want to erase the boundaries that we humans have falsely erected around everything that surrounds us."*

*- Hannah Höch.*

I identify as queer because the boundaries of its definition are indeterminate. Attempting to define "queer" is like trying to define the shape of water. It is a multi-faceted and necessarily fluid identity. I believe Eve Sedgwick best captured its essence in saying, "Queer encapsulates the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, and the excess of meaning."

If queer is what we are, queering is what we do.

Queering is the process of making something commonplace appear strange by altering its context or environment. A hotdog in a banana peel, a zebra in a field of donkeys. Queering is the activist's equivalent to "One of these things just doesn't belong here." The queering of context draws emphasis to a subject's naturalized properties. Things we wouldn't notice think to question. What once was commonplace now strikes us as alien.

Queering is the perversion of reality to survey unobserved relationships, unseen patterns, and underlying cultural structures attached to diverse social rituals. This is a method to speculate beyond the harm of the present. To move beyond the here and now, to a potential then and there; to imagine another way of life (Smith). We can use this process to consider the invisible power relations constituted in social-political meanings.

The framework of queering shares striking similarities to the structure of science-fiction: isolating an aspect of our cultural practice, manipulating its context, and speculating on the unforeseen ramifications of its evolution. Science-fiction is a genre fixed in sociology. These authors don't invent new worlds – they reveal the remarkable existing in *our* world.

I consider Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to be the first literary example of modern science-fiction. The plot is a thrilling critique on the proto-capitalist rhetoric promoting science, industry, and progress as universal forces of objective good – as though these systems and tools could do no inherent wrong (McFadden). Shelley deconstructs these notions of the Enlightenment to unveil the harrowing depths of man's depravity in the endless pursuit of knowledge and power.

It is also very gay. As was Mary Shelley!

Shelley produces *Frankenstein* in the year 1818, during the British Regency. This era inherited a tradition of sociopolitical unease about male queerness. Sexual activity between men was regarded with deep horror – sodomy was institutionally condemned and persecuted as sinful, as it had since at least the fourteenth century. In British history, a total of 8,921 men had been prosecuted since 1806 for sodomy with 404 sentenced to death and 56 executed (Cook).

The Monster is a manifestation of Victor Frankenstein's repressed homosexuality. The story of *Frankenstein* situates love, and the desire for love in its absence, at the heart of life. This is a story of flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born: disparate parts caught in the fluid motions of becoming and unbecoming – an exquisite corpse who longs for acceptance (Stryker).

Frankenstein's attempt to bestow animation upon lifeless matter symbolizes the destruction of a heteronormative stasis – interrupting the human cycles of life, reproduction, and death. He extricates the homosexual desires from his being in creating the Monster. Frankenstein compartmentalizes this aspect of his person to avoid persecution from the heteronormative world – locking the Monster away in a dank and desolate cell. But then the Monster escapes.

I feel profound admiration and sorrow for the Monster: a kind and hopeful being whose good nature is shattered by a society which others them and persecutes their being as an affront to God. Simply for existing.

The Monster internalizes the rhetoric that they are an outsider of miserable deformity. The Monster's rage emanates from the cindering pain of abandonment and isolation. They are an embodiment of heartbreak. When the Monster finally speaks of their anguish, "Man will not associate with me," they evolve from being a Romantic tragic-hero to a Queer tragic-hero.

Was this queer content *in* the book? It was for me.

Rarely does queer art or literature speak to queerness directly. The historical criminalization and social stigma connected to homosexuality necessitated queer artists speak through lavender language and coded symbols: a green carnation on one's lapel, or giving finger-guns as a goodbye (Bucholtz). Our history is evidenced among questions of absence, allegory, encryption, and dissimulation. We discover archives of sexual difference in the gaps between representations, rather than the representation itself.

The shortage of meaningful representation means that the impetus is on us, the viewers— to create and expand upon elements of queer experience hidden in media. The significance of a text is not inherent within the text itself. Meaning is created within the relationship between the text and the reader. Queer headcanons provide rich alternative readings of media. For example, Rosie Cotton is clearly a beard to cover Frodo and Samwise Gamgee's forbidden love.

Queer readers scour through heteronormative texts for inscriptions of ourselves that confirm a social and private identity. Their reception or interpretation in making meaning is based on their cultural background and life experiences (Campbell-Kibler). We are building a library of representation for ourselves – working to define our own values, how and where we can. This is the queering process. It is worldbuilding. It is appropriation as activism. Queering is a project of building affirming queer spaces within, among, and between persistently heteronormative and anti-queer societies. Plus, it's fun! It makes the fascists writhe when you say that the green M&M is a lesbian.

This idea of appropriation as activism is why collage feels so quintessentially queer. Collage's method of appropriation is ripe for this queering manipulation of cultural signs; collage artists use

fragments of marginalized materials to deconstruct dominant social norms – producing queer associations through radical reorder. Queerness is not necessarily based on an artwork’s content. The very method of collage makes use of queer concepts such as humor and camp, inversion and reversal, excess and extremes.

At its core, collage is the art of misalignment. It’s about the fragment and collision of competing worlds: a process of conflict and resolution which preserves evidence of its formation. The combination of two conflicting ideas do not negate one another. We instead observe the creation of a third new idea that co-exists with the previous two (Wagner). As with queer theory, collage hinges on understanding: culture as tradition, popular/mass culture, culture as ambition. Past, present, and future.

I encourage you to curate a library of fiction that reflects your being – fiction which embodies what you wish to propagate into the world. Manifest a future in the fragments of art and language which shape you. Identify yourselves within the ever-expanding tradition of worldbuilding – and forge new realities.



Plate 4: *Dream Millennium*, Digital collage, 2022.

# Assembly Required

*A dim place, a familiar place. A weathered surface captured amidst its restoration, handled by calloused yet gentle hands. Once it was a tall city of cloud-kissed buildings and earthy rivers, and the sun radiated its brilliant white rays upon the denizens of this city. Ages and rain have corroded and sundered its monuments of industry, and the rivers have flooded the craterous sinkhole which swallowed the lost city of Saint Louis. Earth exists as a realm of darkness, dimlit by her feeble sun that meekly fills an ashen blue sky. A dead planet resting under its black star. There is Evil on this earth... Aberrative creatures prowl the wasteland. Wretched powers lair in dank, skeletal ruins. Resources scarce and disparity growing, the brave salvors of earth must rely upon the materials of the lost world if they hope to construct a new one.*

*Travel into the future: to an earth with a dwindling sun that threatens to exhaust its precious lifeforce; an earth in the disquieting repose of apocalypse; an earth where science and magic are one in the same; an earth populated by vibrant, resilient persons and creatures unaware of the fate their planet has in store for them.*



Plates 5-6: *Calamity! Put on Your Lipstick, Stewards of Orphaned Spaces*; Digital collage, 2021.

# Earth 314

*“The concept of private property, which I regard as evil, does not incorporate all things. For capitalism to function it has to have both ‘assets’ and ‘liabilities’, which the capitalists associate with opposite signs of numbers. What if a turd is not a liability or an asset? It does not exist in the capitalist universe, it is their ultimate trash, of value to no one, and it is the seed that we must use to create a better world.”*

*- Dr. Lafe Spietz, Trash Magic Manifesto.*

Earth 314 is a visual anthology series where each composition features a one-shot narrative moment within the speculative futurescape of St. Louis, my hometown. I discovered my love for photography while exploring and documenting the ruins of abandoned superstructures through the greater St. Louis region: Armour Meat Packing, Lever Soap, St. Mary’s Infirmary – and many other important landmarks of St. Louis’s history which have now been demolished, leaving behind an endless series of undeveloped gravel lots. My continued affinities for weathered materials and alien environments stemmed from these, in retrospect, boneheaded and naive forays into orphaned spaces.

In this series, I contend with the absurdism of capitalism’s death spiral and rapid acceleration of the Anthropocene, escapism and the naturalization of apocalypse through media, and the propaganda mythologizing the virtuosity of capitalism. I am grateful to exist in this moment of human history. The weekly updates of newfound existential terrors can be exhausting, but I remain optimistic in the everyday apocalypse. An apocalypse is not the end of life – it is the end to a way of living.

I use a restricted value range in the artwork. This two-tone palette helped to unify the clippings of my found images, allowing upward of 100 image layers to seamlessly blend into a singular composition. The stylization was inspired by the ink renderings of the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Monster Manual, co-opting their charming yet unnerving illustrations of fantastic beasts and where to slay them. I use the muddied comingling of shadows to introduce visual ambiguity, inviting viewers to closely

examine the work to discover what obscured details lurk in the recesses of a composition. I sourced the paper from a local artist co-op, selecting it for its jaundice discoloration and heavily textured surface which reminded me of my own collection of yellowed sci-fi paperbacks.

The conflicts erupting in Earth 314 are the echoing consequences from the recently departed capitalist regime: monstrous Monsanto experiments which escaped from their labs, the neo-capitalist Bootlickers hoping to reinstate the system of the Old World, or the environmental dangers from industrial waste – like the sentient ooze of Lever Soap Factory. I depict heroic salvors collecting materials and fabricating fantastic technologies in their Chop Shops. Familiar faces of modern-day capitalists are rendered as sickly, miserable ghouls preserved in vats of brine for the duration of their interstellar journey to colonize the stars.

I utilize the narrative beats of apocalypse media to convey two clear messages: there is no Planet B, and that the skillsets and materials necessary to construct a new social order are within the collective grasp of the working class. The global capitalist network of waste dissemination has redistributed access of raw materials to every reach of the world – virtually the entire periodic table can be salvaged from a community’s municipal dumpsite or local scrapyards. It is labeled as waste, and it *is* a waste. Accessing that material resource is critical to decoupling local communities from the capitalist superstructure. Truly sustainable, responsible development is in material ouroboros: waste becomes technology, becomes waste, becomes technology. This is the unending mission of the salvors.





Plates 7-9: *Next Day Delivery of a New Tomorrow, Monsanto Wants You Dead, Canary in an Emerald Mine*;  
Digital collage, 2023.

# Salvor Helmets

When we play or work in the activity of collage, it is natural to reflect on these superimposed montage images and to ask questions about how we construct ourselves and our world, the difference between childhood and adulthood, and the role of sustainability and reusability in the modern industrial world.

Within the narrative of *Assembly Required*, the *Salvor Helmets* subvert the roles of spacesuit technology. Spacesuits act as portable life support systems allowing astronauts to exist in alien environments by replicating a pocket earth-like environment around the wearer. The *Salvor Helmets* are utilized on Earth – an earth where the consequences of capitalism have warped from its formerly holostatic frontier and into a shadowy, alien and hostile environment (Nunley). The progression of technology to conquer Earth has subsequently led to a cataclysmic loss of dominance over the environment – and new technology must be rendered to survive the man-made horrors of the unrecognizable wilderness.

Protective headgear, more than any other type of mask, is an index of the technological and cultural developments that have taken place in civilization. Headgear expresses the temper of their times: the products and consequences of technology. But while the magnitude of destruction and technology have changed, the ongoing need for protective masks confirms that human nature has changed very little. Yet there is a heightened stake for motivating people's desire for protection and comfort, as global capitalism continues its death march deeper into the Anthropocene and toward annihilation. The industrial headgear of the *Salvor Helmets* represents cultural values beyond their work-a-day functions, which is one of the reasons I am so captivated by them as a subject. The purpose of contemporary headgear is to protect the wearer from environmental danger, and symbolizes cultural ambition, enemies, fears, and yearnings through technology (Nunley).

In reflecting on the theme of space helmets as portable atmospheres, I chose a naming convention for the helmets relating to plants. The Salvor Helmets are each named after a flower or tree I've observed at the St. Louis Botanical Gardens – where each return reminds me that there's no fictional world so complex, alien, and breathtakingly beautiful as our Earth.

So much of the joy of art is the play involved in creating work, and yet by displaying the results of that play in stagnant frames – I rob my audience of that facet of joy and significance that the work could otherwise allow. If I solely hung the work on the wall or placed it under a vitrine, then I am refusing the necessary social, playful exchange with the artwork. And so I approached this series' presentation with play foremost in mind, creating works and environments of display which encourage tactile play with the art.

My Salvor Helmets are displayed in three presentations, each encouraging a different engagement from the audience. The first display solution for the helmets includes multilayered, 2.5-Dimensional photo frames. The imagery of the helmets was spliced into three layers: foreground, midground, background. These layers are distended overtop each other between quarter-inch acrylic, similar to the setup of a multiplane camera. The distance between the layers allow the audience to peer under and through the varying image planes, and to experience a 2-Dimensional image in the 3-Dimensional context with parallaxing layers.

A second solution for display was to construct a series of mechanically interlocking frames that could be stacked to construct a dimensional image similar to the first iteration, but with the added feature of audience members being encouraged to mix-and-match the various layers. I imagined a frenzied dance of excited visitors taking part in the fun of discovering new combinations of imagery. Unfortunately, I made several critical errors in executing these frame structures: my frames were too thin to maintain their shape, and I misjudged the total weight of the nesting frames. Upon installation, I discovered one of my frame sets had warped and could no longer be trusted to safely hold itself together. I resorted to securing

the frames together and not communicating that they were meant to be intermixed, taking notes of areas for improvement if I return to this idea in the future.

The third display solution was to print miniature instances of each layer in the helmet collages for audiences to mix-and-match their own combinations. These proved successful in several categories that the previous iteration could not have achieved. The prints were small and lightweight, meaning children could easily access the system of play presented to them in a far safer situation for them, the art, and the museum. During my opening reception, I watched a young girl play with these slides for several minutes with her parents. I was profoundly moved to see this moment – as it was the exact interaction I hoped to curate.



Plates 10-16: *Dogwood, Sandbox, Dandelion, Tacca, Sweetpea, Daisy, Snapdragon*; Digital collage, 2022.

# Rayguns

One is born with a gun to their head, and it has been there so long that they fail to recognize its presence. It is a naturalized, omnipotent threat. From a mechanical perspective, I am fascinated by the technical systems of firearms. I am enveloped by the romantic designs of fictitious rayguns and blasters and plasma-cannons. However, even in exploring the rayguns of science-fiction it is impossible to untangle the fantasy of the firearm from its real-world counterparts and the violence wrought with their use.

In the American mythology – a gun is celebrated as the ultimate arbiter of justice, and to disarm a citizen is to render them lame to threats of incurring Evil. The gun is framed by the American political-right as the solution to evil's manifestations – not addressing the systemic disparities which motivate the crimes characterized as evil. When one's level of anger, desperation, or fear grows they utilize whatever they have, whatever ways they have been socialized to deal with those conflicts – and resoundingly the cultural protocols of the United States turn to the firearm as the solution, rather than enacting programs to boost the social welfare which would alleviate the motivation for firearm-involved crimes to begin with.

There is nothing a-political in the existence of this technology. It is not a question of context or rhetorical parlor games justifying the use of firearms in particular circumstances. There is no abstract to question. Guns are real, and their existence has caused irrevocable evil. One in three households in America have a firearm. America has more firearms distributed in civil possession than there are people in its population (Black). We naturalize this. The shock of mass shootings has turned to a numb ambivalence. To ascribe gun violence to an invisible, unknowable force of Evil is a strategy of the American right to justify their inaction in the face of thousands of gun-related deaths annually.

And yet – it was not my intention to participate in these conversations when making these pieces. But I cannot ignore that by manufacturing the image of a firearm that I am intrinsically participating in the dialogue of firearms. Even my childlike fascination with the fantasy of these weapons is an intentional consequence of American indoctrination. *Call of Duty*, for example, became a fantastic campaign to troll participants into the U.S. Armed Forces. I know this. But, oh – how cathartic it feels to mow through endless waves of the fascist undead with a busted-up assault rifle. It is a fantastic platform for escape – despite its real-world ramifications.

My feelings remain in conflict, and I have no simple solution to point an audience toward. I believe no person should possess the power of the firearm, and that the fantasy of firearms, however playful, be wielded with mindful caution.



Plates 17-19: r.1 *Big Dipper*, r.5 *Woolly Aphid*, r.2 *Silverfish*; Photo transfer on laser-etched acrylic, 2023.

# Ratpods

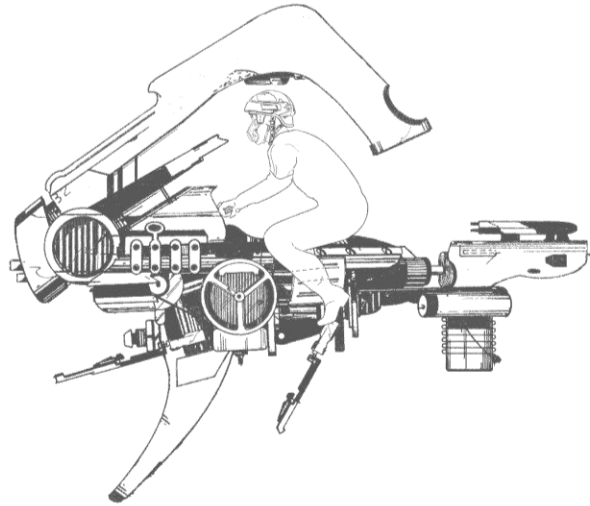


Plate 20: *Chickadee*, Digital illustration, 2022.

The cyclist and their motorcycle is a modern cowboy upon their steed – symbolizing a desire for freedom and a more individualist, independent lifestyle. My *Ratpods* series imagines the schematic makeups of used-future hovercraft. The name ratpod derives from the hotrod subgenre of ratrods, a custom car genre which features cast-off salvaged parts and a deliberately weathered, unfinished appearance. The ratpods, like the other technologies in *Earth 314*, are jury-rigged machines faceted together with salvaged parts. Each is an idiosyncratic mechanism. After devoting years to the assemblage-like composites of robots, helmets, spacecraft, and ray gun – I felt a desire to imagine the skeletal mechanics that may be operating beneath the hulls of these machines. The greebled detailing and false history in the schematics support a verisimilitude in the plausibility of the machines’ existence. A playful questioning of “*what if?*”



# Conclusion

I recognize this work as contributing to a larger conversation of queer futurism and worldbuilding as art. *Assembly Required* is a source for understanding the presence of materials in our lives by investigating how the values objects shift with context and exchange of stewardship. My studies consider the activity of acquiring objects and stories to reflect our sense of identity, the idiosyncrasies of collection, and the importance of forging fictions to propagate seedlings of a better tomorrow.

My digital cabinet of curiosities, my bips, may at last be retired. There's a bitterness to reflecting the impact of the work. Already I feel a separation from the aspect of me which worked so diligently, so desperately to manufacture this series. The stoic mechanical forms whose creation gifted me hours of contemplative stillness during uncertain times. They feel cold to me now. But I recognize that they have much to offer others.

The work which continues to resonate with me are the collages of *Earth 314*, for their collapse of dimensional forms and dynamic environments. These compositions illustrate the full spectrum of emotions I felt in procuring this thesis body. Each vignette delivers another peek at a greater narrative environment. The ambiguity is enchanting. They are uninterested in delivering explicit stories, rather investing in its audience to fill in the implied relations of an artwork's subjects. Their content reflects my sense of humor, as well as my love for the strange and macabre.

I will continue to treasure the preciousness of weathered materials – marveling at the curious ways aged objects patina with use and wear to reflect the story of their existence. It's fun to speculate what those stories may have involved – the alternate lives of these everyday materials.

I remain enveloped by the fantasy of rayguns, robots, and flying machines. I thought this would be my Blue Dog, and I imagined I would obsessively continue reinterpreting these iterative forms

indefinitely from the same boxes of scraps. But I've finally found closure in this line of material exploration – I have discovered the language to understand and articulate my lifelong practice of queering materials to construct intricate fictions. I've created a series of work that both I and my childhood self can be elated by and proud of. I have come into my own being.

It's time for a new story to begin.

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# Appendix A - Influences

“*You are only as brilliant as your references are obscure.*” - Matthew Colville

## Books:

Jack Vance, *Dying Earth*

Jeff Vandermeer, *Annihilation*

Gary Gygax, *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks*

## Music:

King Gizzard and the Wizard Lizard, *Infest the Rats Nest*

.clipping, *Slendor & Misery*

State Azure, *To a Distant World*

## Movies:

*Tank Girl*

*The Thing*

*Evil Dead 2*

*Fifth Element*

*Total Recall*

*Rocky Horror Picture Show*

## Artworks:

Sin Wai Kin, *Universe Noodles*

Phillip Prokopiou, *Why Wait for Heaven to Experience Glamour and Beauty*

Juliana Huxtable, *Future*

Rashaad Newsome, *#1st Place*

Bill Casilly, *City Museum*

César, *Compression d'Automobile*

Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *The Seasons*

Jack Kirby, *Spirit World*

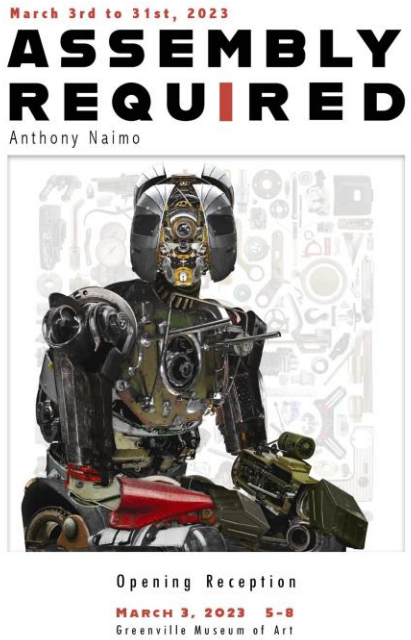
Frank Frazetta, *Red Planet*

Nemo Gould, *Cabinets of Curiosity*

Claes Oldenburg, *Rayguns*

*All of the above creators, as well as many not listed, certainly helped to shape the form of Assembly Required. For this reason, and for the hours of enjoyment, I heartily recommend the works of these persons to you.*

# Appendix B - Thumbnails



Assembly Required Poster

Dream Millennium



Time Displaced Artifacts

With a Box of Scraps



Portrait of Daedalus



Universal Tool Kit



Calamity! Put on Your Lipstick



Trash Magic



Stewards of Orphaned Spaces





Next Day Delivery of a New Tomorrow



Monsanto Wants You Dead



Canary in an Emerald Mine



Next Day Delivery of a



Monsanto Wants You Dead



Canary in an Emerald Mine



Well Oiled Machine



MINOS Rx-621



Druid of Forest Park



Citizen Eco Drive



h.13 Dogwood



h.14 Sandbox



h.15 Dandelion



h.16 Tacca



h.17 Sweetpea



h.18 Daisy



h.19 Snapdragon



r.1 Big Dipper

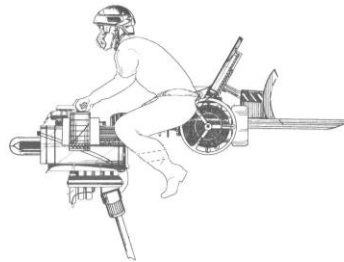
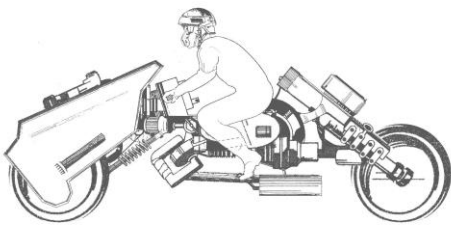


r.2 Silverfish



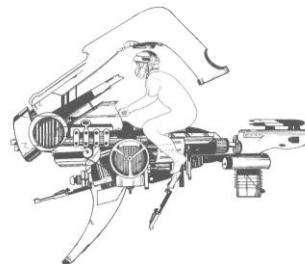
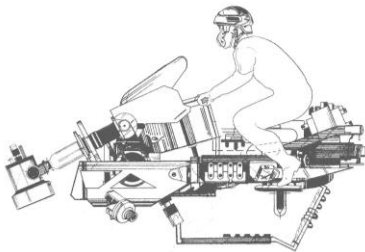
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r.5 Woolly Aphid



v.1 Redstart

v.4 Gnatcatcher



v.10 Warbler

v.4 Chickadee



# Appendix C - Installation















