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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to look at various artworks that showcase transience through the use of a bubble as a metaphor. In traditional Dutch Baroque paintings, a bubble is used to represent and reflect vanity as a sin, where the sphere's momentary qualities coincide with the ephemeral essence of life. Throughout this project, I will argue that contemporary photographer Justine Reyes and Mexican artist Teresa Margolles use the bubble in conjunction with *vanitas*—imagery that represents a fleeting moment, the resulting void due to overzealous delight, and the certainty of death—and place the work into a familial, cultural, or political sphere. Simultaneously, this project examines how David Fried utilizes similar representations of the bubble with dissimilar objectives—for science and experimentation—and compares his use of the bubble with that of Reyes and Margolles. Through this trope of a bubble as physically and metaphorically singular and uncontrollable, this project will use the bubble to complement both traditional and contemporary iterations of *vanitas* imagery, contemplating the bubble's relevance as a prominent figure in understanding the temporality of material possessions and of life itself. Using the bubble to think about work that is conventional, biological, and bureaucratic, I will explore how *vanitas* has been documented in painting, photography, installation, and printmaking, examining what is presented and retained on any given surface. In all, I argue for the bubble as an essential aspect of *vanitas* imagery—tying immorality to one's vain need for worldly possessions, and, in turn, illuminating the idea of life as ever fleeting.

This thesis is proudly dedicated to my late grandmother, Mary Molloy.

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Introduction

> *There was a danger that Abram might become too well pleased with his own good fortune. Therefore, God seasons the sweetness of wealth with vinegar…*[1]

This thesis attempts to uncover the depths surrounding the term "vanity" and analyze its relationship to the ephemeral by using the bubble as presiding metaphor. Portraying vanity, both in literature and within an artistic practice, has proven to be popular subject matter throughout the ages. From The Old Testament's book of Ecclesiastes dating back to the era of "Before Christ" (BCE) to still life painting in and before the seventeenth-century Baroque age, and into the present, understanding vanity has been an essential aspect in comprehending the transient nature of life, and more specifically, for the purpose of this essay, a single moment. Within Ecclesiastes, the supposed author, Solomon, warned his people of the sins that coincided with vanity; similarly, still life imagery pertaining to the Dutch Baroque put forth a scene that included a multitude of items, most of which indicated wealth and opulence, but primarily, for the case of this study, the temporal bubble as a signifier of a fleeting moment.

On that note, the Old Testament's Book of Ecclesiastes refers to vanity as equivalent to irrationality, a nonsensical, exasperating dilemma put forth by the devil

[1] Schama, Simon, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age,* (University of California Press, 1984), p. 130.

as a means of temptation: "'Vanity of vanities,' says the Preacher; 'vanity of vanities, all *is* vanity.'"[2] The verse reveals everything as meaningless, that pleasures gained from futile labor should not rival the fleeting time one is granted on earth: every item obtained, every act performed, all time spent on toil is a result of vanity. In essence, the chapter illustrates particular chores, happenings, and circumstances in which man financially and materially profits from his labor, but does so without knowledge of the everlasting gift of God's grace. Solomon proclaims this to his people of Jerusalem, urging that generations to come will not recall what has been done before them: "*There is* no remembrance of former *things*, nor will there be any remembrance of *things* that are to come by *those* who will come after."[3] Emphasis is not placed solely on death and the afterlife, though; rather, it is fundamental to place importance on the present moment - a moment filled with heavenly actions - versus substance, for ages to come will not give credit to what was done before them. The passage translates to damnation in one's finding substantiality and happiness from possessions, rather than living a life that will not profit from commodity. This is all due to the transience of each day and living with the knowledge that death is inevitable and vanity is a sin. According to the Bible, in the end, those living in the light of God live with the intention of ascending to a new life in Heaven.

[2] *Ecclesiastes*. In *The Old Testament*. NKJV ed. Zondervan, 2013. Chapter 1, Verse 2.

[3] *Ibid.,* Chapter 1, Verse 11.

As interpreted by Christian tradition, the author of Ecclesiastes is attempting to analyze the perceptible world, the human condition, good versus evil within humanity, and certainly, vanity. He urges his audience to remember that vanity is a sin, that the worshipping of idols is, in fact, no way to enter the Kingdom of Heaven: "What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end."[4] What the author discovers is man's longing for more - the more energy exerted and labor completed equates to an abundance of material items, wealth, and happiness. It's not a foreign concept to our modern world, *especially*; this realization, in Ecclesiastes, particularly, calls for an attempt at overcoming vanity, prevailing over the aforementioned quote that suggests "all *is* vanity." And in turn, a life without vanity is a pure one; a life that brings one closer to God and closer to purity; a life that is, nevertheless, temporary on earth, and eternal in the promise of heavenly transcendence: "To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This also *is* vanity and grasping for the wind."[5] To overcome vanity, one must surrender to the righteousness of God, leaving behind the joy that comes from materiality and remembering that the real profit comes only from Him.

[4] *Ibid.,* Chapter 3, Verse 9-11.

[5] *Ibid.,* Chapter 2, Verse 26.

I. Moralization and God's Sphere

To better understand the association between vanity and the bubble, it is essential to note that the Old Testament book refers to the term "vanity" quite often, as if to warn God's people of mortality. The English "vanity" translates to the Hebrew word "*hevel*,"[6] meaning "steam" or "vapor," which in essence, references a void or an emptiness. Vanity, then, becomes a sin that fills no needs and grants no desires. While impermanent vapor seems an odd figure to represent vanity (as one's self-absorption of vanity lasts much longer than a few seconds), such self-regard *ought to be* temporary, much like the vapor that fills the air. This connection between vanity and that which is fleeting proves apparent when using the metaphor of a bubble. Its mirrored surface contemplates what is in vain[7]; its pure, floating nature relates to subtlety; and its short life-span correlates to momentariness and the futile. With that, the bubble extends the metaphor of "vapor" and serves alongside the antagonist that is "vanity." To better understand "vanity," I venture to analyze the vain through an investigation of *vanitas* imagery, work that reminds one of the transience of life and the inevitability of death, and the impermanent bubble's place within that imagery.

Mundane as it is, the bubble proves significant in comprehending the intentions of *vanitas* composition. The bubble's subtle portrayal in many illustrations is often used as a visual rhyme for glass or a vessel, another subject commonly found in traditional

[6] The translated term "hevel" is also known interchangeably as "hebel".

[7] Here (and forward) I use the word "vain" as a shorthand term for "vanity." Thus, this project does not necessarily refer to one's conceited nature; rather, it refers to the notion of worldly possessions as immoral and temporary.

Figure 1. Hieronymus Bosch. *The Garden of Earthly Delights.* Oak, oil paint. 7’ 3” x 12’ 9”. 1503-1515.

still life imagery. Take Northern Renaissance painter Hieronymus Bosch’s 1503 rendering of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (fig. 1), for example. The massive paneled triptych is laden with futuristic machinery and chaotic metaphors, where each minute detail is placed in the painting with intention. The scene is broken up into three, with the left panel illustrating God’s hand in Adam and Eve’s introduction, surrounded by various animals created by Him, and referencing ingenuity, and the human ability to reproduce. The innermost panel exhibits the disorderly moment of desire and nudity, presenting crowds of offspring belonging to Adam and Eve. The pandemonium depicts man’s position in a world of divinity, superiority, and nature. Finally, the third panel to the right portrays a moment of agony, where the world unravels and all hell breaks loose. The display is dark and bleak, showing masses of bodies huddled together in fear, city-walls acting as a confine, and animal-beasts on the brink of attack. The panel warns of the wickedness of self-indulgence and the horrors of human arrogance. In the

Figure 2. Hieronymus Bosch. Details of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Oak, oil paint. 7’ 3” x 12’ 9”. 1503-1515.

end, the panels portray scenes based on man’s judgment and free will and God’s ultimate ability to put an end to all of his creation.

So much is happening in every corner of the piece, one might overlook the man and woman sitting comfortably close in a shimmering orb. While the scene is a reference to the sinfulness of sexuality and lust, a man rests his hand on a woman’s stomach, with her hand on his thigh, in a sensual, longingly way, almost as if to signify their short-lived time together in the cracking sphere. At the same time, the orb, seemingly trapping the couple, brings the two lovers together in a medieval scene of courting, perhaps signaling paradise in a fleeting moment (fig. 2). Not only is the couple encased in the bubble, but further up the painting, an animal seems as if captured in the transparent thing, floating in a balloon sprouting from a vibrant flower (fig.2). Then, you notice another couple, enveloped in a bubble that is split in half, secretly shying away from the disorder that is surrounding them as their backsides face the audience (fig. 2). Each of these spectacles presented above is intricately placed within the central panel, seemingly denoting moments of bliss and imagination. At the same time, each

Figure 3. Detail of outer panel. Hieronymus Bosch. *The Garden of Earthly Delights.* Oak, oil paint. 7’ 3” x 12’ 9”. 1503-1515.

Figure 4. Detail of God on outer panel. Hieronymus Bosch. *The Garden of Earthly Delights.* Oak, oil paint. 7’ 3” x 12’ 9”. 1503-1515.

image, along with the repetition of the sphere, references more than just temporality, but how fragile life within the orb is, contending with the fact that it could shatter at any given moment at the hand of God.

Throughout the entire triptych, the spheres’ repetition is significant, each differing in size and shape, some with cracks and some with reflectivity. Each signifies something temporary - love and lust, time, and pleasure from possessions. Perhaps the amplest sphere, unseen when the triptych is fully opened, proves to lend itself to the teachings of Ecclesiastes. When the outer panels close in on the central panel, a diptych materializes of what appears to be the world (fig. 3). The earth, engulfed in a magnificently glistening orb, demonstrates the work of God (who is visible in the top-left corner, overlooking his handiwork, fig. 4), manifested before His formation of man or animal. The scene references God’s creation and His capacity to take away what He

Figure 5. Karel Dujardin. *Homo Bulla as Fortune*. Oil on canvas. 116 x 93 cm. 1663.

has established, as depicted where half of the orb is submerged in the Flood. Not only does it serve as the keeper of humanity, but as protection from influences outside the confines of God's world, upholding all reality within it while maintaining the ideals of society and tradition.

II. *Homo Bulla*

The *Homo Bulla* imagery (or literally "man as bubble") suggested in the interior panels of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* becomes ubiquitous, in popular culture and art alike. A similar depiction, Karel Dujardin's seventeenth-century work *Homo Bulla as Fortune* (fig. 5), displays a youth standing atop a bubble that rests inside a shell, all floating in dark, murky water, while ominous clouds hover in the distance. The allegorical scene, unsurprisingly, denotes the briefness of human life, while

simultaneously illustrating the folly of fortune. The boy, balancing on a transparent orb as if to further connote precariousness, smiles after having just breathed life into two bubbles that float off through the air. He holds a third bubble in his hand, it resting within one half of a seashell (another common symbol within Dutch, *vanitas* still life). The relationship between bubble and body further emphasizes the fickleness of fortune, rather than the sins of vanity and moral condemnation, as portrayed in the aforementioned works. The boy's entire being rests on the life of the bubble he stands on, relying on the fragile bubble to support and protect. Despite the seemingly rough water that crashes beneath him, the boy smiles in elation, as if surrendering his life to that of the bubble. It is this very relationship that brings man and bubble together as *homo bulla*: man embraced and enveloped by bubble, wholly surrounded by its wonder and amusement. Thus, the title, *Homo Bulla as Fortune*, alludes to an advancement of one's wealth in establishing such a connection with the entity that holds in balance his life; the "fortune" comes from the intimate relationship formed and the resulting dependency.

In many cases, an additional sort of vanity is evident: a pride in skill. Such paintings render the scene – and the bubble – with extraordinary finesse, illustrating an image that exhibits not only common objects, but the reflectivity and daintiness that the bubble possesses. There are countless more renditions of *homo bulla* that illuminate the symbolism of the bubble and demonstrate such elegance in rendering its liveliness. For example, David Bailly's seventeenth-century painting *Self-Portrait with Vanitas*

Figure 6. David Bailly. *Self-Portrait with Vanitas Symbols*. Oil on wood. 65 x 97.5 cm. 1651.

Symbols (fig. 6), illustrates quite literally, the artist - a young man - and common still-life motifs: figurines, a skull, floral arrangements past their prime, an unlit candle, and of course, a family of floating bubbles to indicate the ephemeral quality of the living. In short, both *homo bulla* and traditional *vanitas* exemplify the significance of the bubble and the brevity that it upholds, though each proves to be unique. Images that represent *homo bulla* focus on the precariousness of youth, while *vanitas* illustrates both brevity and morality. Nevertheless, contained in both portrayals is the bubble, conveying suspension, reflectivity, and transience.

III. The Bubble within the Dutch Still Life

So, why focus on the trope of the bubble if so many other *vanitas* objects epitomize that same concept? The bubble symbolizes a particular breadth, not only impermanence but naivety, nostalgia, self-reflection, distortion, and brilliance. The bubble serves as the ideal trope for all that is fleeting, itself present in one moment and absent the next. Its centrality within works of art extending into the contemporary has challenged its purpose, having been captured and fixed in the transient moment depicted within each medium. These bubbles possess the quality to be manipulated: injected with pigment to portray a monoprint of the vibrant sphere; captured by a lens to live on after it has ruptured; physically painted on a fixed surface, signifying a fleeting moment that ultimately lasts indefinitely. Each suspended orb that is presented, brilliant and unique in its own right, is supreme in comprehending the wide-range of *vanitas* symbology - essential in understanding ethics, establishing judgments, and grasping the knowledge of a passing life and destined death.

Further, in order to unveil the depths of the vain and its relationship to the bubble, we must first reference art of the Dutch Baroque era: a time in which *vanitas* arose from discomfort. This distress evolved from a prosperous Baroque era, one that had to contend with the biblical moral imperative that wealth led to sin and eternal damnation. As a result, such a compromise steered the Dutch towards the popularity of *vanitas* imagery. This notion is central in Simon Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches*, which traces the genre in a historical and theoretical way, examining Dutch culture through an illustrative lens by way of painting and printmaking. In order to note

the significance of *vanitas* imagery with Dutch Baroque work, a brief overview of Schama's work is useful. What is most significant to this thesis is Schama's reading of the traditional still life genre and its historical context as it relates to each crucial aspect of a particular object. He goes in depth surrounding the meaning of each piece of food that is laid about across the table of the still life, every one obtaining a definitive metaphor for life and the latter: breakfast fare suggested "flamboyance and luxury," to be digested in an "unhurried, contemplative manner," while strawberries signified decency and walnuts were a representation of "the dual nature of Christ, the meat of the nut being flesh and the shell the wooden instrument of the Crucifixion."[8] In essence, Schama reveals that all things spread across the still life table, though they are alive for a moment, will cease to exist. The painting in which each object is portrayed is a mere description and representation, a method of preservation in paint.

Schama's conceptual model of a still life does more than rest on a simple surface; here, the still life becomes

> an absurdly appropriate term for the heaps of fruit, flowers, or fish that in some Dutch pictures sat carefully on white linen, on others tumbled over silver and glass. *Still life* was a misnomer…for these things still live; they respire. Life in death; animation in immobility; the illusion of vitality and the reality of inertia: all these polarities seemed deliberately made to rebound off each other.[9]

Thus, the depiction of such imagery enhances Schama's claim that vanity - and *vanitas* – is a response to the Dutch's "embarrassment of riches" and opulent desires within a

[8] Schama, Simon, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age,* (University of California Press, 1984), p. 161.

[9] *Ibid*., p. 10.

strict moral context. He goes on to discuss the life of the Dutch, living in an ever-changing society, reveling in materiality, eventually leading to a scrambling about as if their society's ease was limited. Comfort was frowned upon, as prosperity from possessions served as a sort of corruption, blinding one from discerning between what is right and what is wrong. With that, *vanitas* imagery demonstrated critical subject matter in comprehending the unlawful power of opulence and the need for living a simple, non-materialistic life.

Further along in his text and particularly germane to the bubble is Schama's discussion of the portrayal of smoke, created from tobacco that was, from a "moralist" point of view, considered a sin to ingest. He points out its energy within the scene:

> Whatever the mixture, and whether the effect was tranquilizing or stimulating…the pictures of dead pipe puffers were merely a variation on the old theme of *ijdelheid*: the vain and lethargic passage of the hours. Smoke was especially suited to these visual tracts on worldly vanity and the ephemerality of earthly pleasures, since it could evoke the psalmists' reminder that 'my days are consumed like smoke' (Psalms 102:3).[10]

The Bible continues to make an appearance, consistently, as a reminder to banish sin (vanity) and relinquish control (a surrendering). Schama reveals drawing after painting, each of which portray a smoker in the foreground so as to convey the passage of time, or "waste" of time, in some cases. Despite the bubble being distinctive in shape and able to physically contain something, these consistent portrayals further the connection

[10] Schama, Simon, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age,* (University of California Press, 1984). p. 213.

Figure 7. Jacques de Gheyn II. *Vanitas Still Life*. Oil on wood. 32.5" x 21.25". 1603.

shared by both the bubble and the quality of smoke: their airiness and indefinite nature supplements the notion of the progression of time, the uselessness of blinding possessions, and the significance of each fleeting moment.

To better comprehend the seventeenth-century Dutch Baroque, I put forth a quintessential *vanitas* image painted by Jacques de Gheyn II in 1603, a painting considered to be the initial *vanitas* image to have been illustrated among the Dutch.[11] In his *Vanitas Still Life* (fig. 7), a skull rests in an inset niche adorned with two Greek

[11] Met Museum. "Vanitas Still Life." The Met Museum. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436485.

philosophers. The figures, Democritus and Heraclitus,[12] gesture towards a large orb that floats directly above the top of the skull. The bubble, asserting its dominance as the largest object presented, is suspended mid-air, perfectly encompassed by its background, reflecting light and conveying depth. An inscription above the bubble reads "HVMANA VANA," which translates to "Human Vanity," serving as a cautionary of the sinful act. While a lively orange tulip sits on one side of the skull and coins sprawled across the foreground, the bubble is distinguished. The eye is immediately drawn to the sphere that never seems to burst, defying gravity in its crevice. The rather dark and dimly lit *vanitas* portrayal gestures towards the briefness of life, complete with a smoking urn to the right in the foreground. This image brings together the iridescent bubble and vapor (or smoke), and utilizes the skull in place of the human figure, placing an emphasis on the large, suspending bubble (though the two philosophers are comfortably situated as minor characters within the piece). Therefore, Jacques de Gheyn's portrayal is the essence of *vanitas* imagery: displaying an array of opulence, centralizing a skull as a reminder of an inevitable death, and the showcasing of the bubble as prominent object.

[12] Armstrong, Steven. "Heraclitus and Democritus: The Weeping and Laughing Ancient Greek Philosophers–From a Rosicrucian Manuscript." 1 Sep. 2017. https://www.rosicrucian.org/podcast/heraclitus-and-democritus-the-weeping-and-laughing-ancient-greek-philosophers-from-a-rosicrucian-manuscript/.
The two figures, Democritus and Heraclitus, signify the cackling and whimpering philosophers of ancient Greece. Democritus was noted for his atomic theory of the cosmos, while Heraclitus was known for his emphasis on continuous change as being the central element of creation. The pair, typically presented together to note the contrast in role, were common motifs in Dutch imagery, maintaining the position that philosophers ought to retain an optimistic behavior.

The particular illustrations that Schama delineates seemingly offered a way to mollify sin, as if attempting to "have one's cake and eat it too." His analysis of a typical Dutch culture, one surrounded by an assumption that labor obligations would in time foster material success, falls [indirectly] in line with the contemporary philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's hefty examination of the bubble's relationship of the self to the neighboring world. The Dutch placed importance on items that would promote the recognition of mortality within their blinded society, ultimately creating an intimate association between humanity and space. Sloterdijk, on the other hand, portrays this same link by relating the all-encompassing world to the sphere, placing the self within the confines of a bubble. This, in turn, establishes an intimate connection between identity and spatiality. Sloterdijk uses the bubble as a way to connect humanity and the surrounding world, creating a relationship that is devoted and essential in comprehending ephemerality. While Chapters One and Two of this thesis provide a more in-depth exploration of Sloterdijk's text, I find it fundamental in noting the similarities and distinctions among his massive, twenty-first-century investigation and Schama's period-piece that spans the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. While Sloterdijk's take on the connection is a more idealistic one, both utilize vapor and the bubble in conjunction with time to attempt to uncover the morals of a fleeting relationship. With that, both texts identify fragility, each placing significance on the bubble - or vapor - as portrayed within an artistic practice and signaling the body and time as transient things.

Figure 8. Rivane Neuenschwander and Cao Guimaraes. *The Tenant*. HD video projection. 10 minutes, 34 seconds. 2010.

In all, each chapter of this essay will outline the bubble's significance in art within various moments in recent history and society (in the facets of tradition, science, and politics) and how the ephemerality of the subject matter influences artistic practice. The works of art, varying from a wide range of media, employ and reveal the vulnerability of the bubble, emphasizing its fleeting nature and assigning it new substance. The bubble takes on the breadth of vanity and morality, nostalgia, social formations, process and procedure, and wonder. Throughout this piece, the bubble will maneuver through each work and practice as if floating through various passageways, engaging with the atmosphere of each room. This notion of entering a space and the effortless movement that follows comes from a video entitled *The Tenant* (fig. 8), in which a magnificently glistening bubble continuously floats from room to room, crossing over thresholds, almost uniting with walls and stairways, though never seeming to burst. The everlasting bubble, the brainchild of Rivane Neuenschwander

and Cao Guimarães, epitomizes what a "tenant" has to offer as it drifts in a "permanent state of suspension," refracting light and shifting in color, providing a human existence in an otherwise lifeless home and managing to conserve its spherical shape. What is key in the film is the lack of ownership, where property has no possessor, establishing a significant difference from the lavish Dutch desires that were previously mentioned. The bubble, then, is free of such affluence and proprietorship, existing in a constant state of autonomy. We follow its journey, intrigued, concerned for its survival, on the lookout for what it might encounter around each successive corner. The film is an experiment that plays with our attention span;[13] the bubble contests both impermanence and progression, as it seeks to find its way out of the enclosed space, conveying delicacy and sense of panic, a moment of suspended transience. Thus, *The Tenant* will find its way through this essay, beginning first with the history of both the bubble and its presence within art, and ending with a multitude of orbs carrying the weight of the voiceless in the work of Teresa Margolles.

[13] Guimarães, Cao & Rivane Neuenschwander. The Tenant. 2010. http://www.caoguimaraes.com/en/obra/o-inquilino/.

Chapter One

History and Tradition: *Vanitas* and the Bubble in Time

> *Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart rejoiced in all my labor; and this was my reward from all my labor. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; And indeed, all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.*[14]

The bubble that is *The Tenant* wanders through an uninhabited house that once held memories and nostalgia, gliding through each room in a constant state of suspense and suspension, bouncing off the walls to anticipate its eventual fate of disappearing into nothingness. Uncertainty builds; you hold your breath as the bubble bounces against a solid wall, moving its way down a staircase, carefully following the path laid out before it. Such an effortless scene, one that keeps you on the edge of your seat, yet functioning as a reminder that at any given moment, it could all end. *The Tenant* resembles a body, or a human life, where it lingers, but only for a limited amount of time before it vanishes into a void of oblivion. The ten-minute film proves viewers wrong, though, as the bubble lives on for the duration of the piece. It is here that the attributes of a fleeting bubble prove essential.

[14] *Ecclesiastes*. In *The Old Testament*. NKJV ed. Zondervan, 2013. Chapter 2, Verse 10-11.

A bubble is here, in the current moment, and then gone. It leaves no trace other than the faint scent of a cleanser. For mere moments, it lasts before rupturing either on its own or by coming into contact with an additional surface. It becomes the past almost as quickly as it was in the present. Its fleeting nature cannot be captured; all that remains are the few drops of liquid that disperse as it explodes. Each bubble is irregular and spontaneous and creates a meticulous explosion as it bursts. They are elastic and versatile, delivering either a smooth, mirrored finish, or an abundance of frothy foam. The bubble is both independent and dependent, obtaining the ability to either combine into a larger bubble, or share a common wall that deems two or more bubbles as equal. In all, the bubble is an impulsive being, proving to be both stable and unstable, only to disappear in seconds. It is recreated to resemble the bubble before, becoming a memory in the seconds to follow. The bubble is created - blown from a small wand, most likely from the hand of a child - and set free into the vast openness of the world, floating away and upwards, farther and farther from the one that gave it life. It ceases to come back, until it is recreated - a repetitiveness that never fails. The idea of this moment of suspension as temporal and finite, decaying as time proceeds, functions as an ideal comparison for the short-lived bubble and its symbolism of naivety.

I. An Association Between Bubbles and the Brevity of Youth

Present in many historic Dutch Baroque paintings is this bubble, utilized to represent and reflect moral judgment and a constant shift of life, whereas *vanitas*

Figure 9. Jean Siméon Chardin. *Soap Bubbles*. Oil. 3’ 1” x 2’ 5”. 1733-34.

demonstrated the bubble to note the ephemeral essence of vanity. In essence, there was an emphasis on the brevity of human life and the fleetingness of youthful innocence. Eighteenth-century French iterations portray similar values; among them, Jean Siméon Chardin’s *Soap Bubbles* (fig. 9), created in 1733-1734, in which a boy blows an elegantly illustrated bubble, exhibiting its reflective and vibrant nature. The image displays a moment in which two figures find company from the bubble, breathing life into a momentary being that is fixed in time. In the oil painting, a young man is leaning over a ledge, breathing into a long hollow reed to create a delicate bubble of soap. Behind the main figure is a younger boy, gazing in amazement at the whimsy of a bubble. The scene is muted; there is little color and little excitement; although, one

Figure 10. Jean Siméon Chardin. Detail of *Soap Bubbles*. Oil. 3’ 1” x 2’ 5”. 1733-34.

waits for that moment when the large, fragile bubble bursts into the void that is the darkness.

The symbolism present in the painting is seemingly recurring throughout a number of still-life paintings and snapshots of the sixteenth-century [and on]. What distinguishes this French model from its Dutch counterpart, however, is the figure, specifically a young male blowing the bubble and another gazing from the background in awe (fig. 10). The boy in the background peeks over a ledge, revealing only a portion of his youthful face, gawking at the bubble that was just given life. Though the bubble remains noteworthy, the figure of the boy is dominant. Thinking back to Jacques de Gheyn’s *Vanitas Still Life*, both iterations place the bubble in the spotlight as a means of suggesting a fleeting moment in time. The French model creates a relationship

between the boy and the bubble - creator and his creation – suggesting his youth and naivety as impermanent. On the other hand, a Dutch Baroque depiction of *vanitas* warned of an inevitable death - a "memento mori," which literally translates to "remember that you must die" and operates as motivation to live versus the instilling of fear.[15] This is evident in its overall message that suggests material distraction as a sinful undertaking. The divergence here is Chardin's *Soap Bubbles* serving as a reminder of life, placing prominence on a wonderous youth. The painting, while presenting similar objects within a scene, are disparate in degrees of lightness, both literally and in the context of morality. Both portrayals, though, perform similarly in serving as a reminder of life as fragile.

In *Bubbles: Spheres Volume I: Microspherology*, Peter Sloterdijk uses a similar painting to Chardin's *Soap Bubbles* to outline the creation of the bubble. In doing so, he relates the bubble to the essence of *vanitas* with an emphasis on nostalgia and wonder versus moral judgment. The image, Sir John Everett Millais' nineteenth-century *Bubbles* (fig. 11), illustrates a young boy, moments after breathing life into the orb that floats just above him, observing his lustrous creation:

> The child...enraptured...holding its new present and watching the soap bubbles float into the sky as it blows them out of the little loop in front of his mouth. Now a swarm of bubbles erupts upwards, as chaotically vivacious as a throw of shimmering blue marbles. Then, at a subsequent

[15] Wecker, Menachem. "7 Ways of Looking at the Memento Mori, Art History's Spookiest—and Most Misunderstood—Genre." 14 Sep. 2017. ArtNet News. https://news.artnet.com/art-world/guide-memento-mori-art-historians-1076897.

Figure 11. Sir John Everett Millais. *Bubbles.* Oil. 1885-86.

> attempt, a large oval balloon, filled with timid life, quivers off the loop and floats down the street, carried along by the breeze. It is followed by the hopes of the delighted child, floating out into the space in its own magic bubble as if, for a few seconds, its fate depended on that of the nervous entity…For the duration of the bubble's life the blower was outside himself, as if the little orb's survival depended on remaining encased in an attention that floated out with it…But even when, immersed in the eager supervision of its creator, it was allowed to drift through space for a wonderful while, it still had to vanish into nothingness in the end.[16]

Sloterdijk constantly refers to the child's life as a metaphor for dependence, one that leans on the bubble that is floating away, as if the moment it bursts, so too will the innocence and wonder of childhood. The scene makes you anticipate the worst, and yet, nothing happens other than the wading scent of soap in the air and its wet, fallen

[16] Sloterdijk, Peter, *Spheres - Volume 1: Bubbles and Microspherology*, (Semiotext(e), 2011). p. 17.

residue. He notes the boy as being in company with the floating bubble, not having to spend those minute moments alone. Though the second the bubble is no longer, the boy returns to his state of exile, no longer accompanied by the joy and whimsy of the suspended vessel. Sloterdijk reveals that these spheres create a sort of intimate relationship with its creator, their existence dependent on that of the connection between the two - their closeness. He utilizes the notion of an inanimate object as a source of companionship to reference the structure of human community, where focus is on establishing connections in a state of constant change and brief existence.

The passage does more than just recount a portrayal of *vanitas*; rather, Sloterdijk reminds readers of how influenced we have become on lifeless objects. Just as the bubble is dependent on the one that manifested it, so too is he fixated on its purity and exuberance; he has become enveloped by its whimsy and temporality. The visually descriptive episode continues:

> But the melancholy lasts no more than a second before the joy of playing returns with its time-honored cruel momentum…The little wizard's attention follows [the soap bubbles] trail and flies out into the open, supporting the thin walls of the breathed bodies with its eager presence. There is solidarity between the soap bubble and its blower that excludes the rest of the world. And each time the shimmering entities drift into the distance, the little artist exits his body...to be entirely with the objects he has called into existence.[17]

For a single moment, it was just a bubble and its creator. Nothing else in the surrounding world took precedence over the relationship between the two. These "microspheres" have established a devoted relationship between physical beings, a

[17] *Ibid*.

connection that lives on longer than itself. The boy is enthralled and taken aback by such a simple entity, finding himself captivated by the amusement of the orb and thus excluding all reality. As previously mentioned, *vanitas* insists that these relationships with mere objects and idols take away from the fleeting beauty of a moment; infatuation clouds judgment. In this case, Millais' painting suggests the opposite, where the boy – the bubble blower – is entirely caught up in the short-lived splendor of the moment. Sloterdijk's takes this notion and suggests that there is a reliance between bubble and blower, one that forms when the orb manifests. The relationship that develops is one of both intimacy and brevity, never superficially maturing. In all, Millais' *Bubbles* represents a middle in between the classic Dutch Baroque style of vanitas and our present depictions.

II. Morality and Ethics Within *Vanitas*

The notable theme here and amongst *vanitas* painters of the seventeenth-century, was the ridding of possessions that served little purpose in the end. That being said, *vanitas* of today takes into consideration this concern of consumption, while defying it at once. Contemporary versions depict darkness, opposition and pessimism; wickedness and impermanence. The promise of redemption from the Dutch Baroque has vanished, as attention falls on prosperity. The scene is frequently similar to Jacques de Gheyn's *Vanitas Still Life*, where the bubble is surrounded by objects that symbolize death and fortune. And throughout each *vanitas* portrayal, splendor is cautioned. Although, in few modernized interpretations, some take the ethics of *vanitas* to new

heights, challenging ephemerality and attempting to fall in line with the genuine *vanitas* work that came before it.

In such current versions, this rejection of indulgence is disobeyed. Take Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God* (fig. 12), as an extreme example. The platinum plated human skull, aptly titled after the words of his mother: "For the sake of God, Damien, what will you do next?"[18] is adorned with thousands of "pavé-set" diamonds, weighing in at over a thousand carats, and lined with the skull's original set of teeth. The incredibly intricate and exceptionally gaudy skull is anything but subtle, drawing upon common themes of *vanitas,* while defying them at the same time. Not only are the diamonds a sure sign of vanity and narcissism, they detract from the belief that life is anything but eternal. And while the intent of the piece serves as a "reminder that our existence on earth is transient,"[19] I call nonsense. There is irony in Hirst's words, vandalizing a human skull to exhibit nothing more than luxury and ultimately straying away from the morality that *vanitas* offers. His abundant use of the precious stone takes away from any reference to an inevitable death, regardless of his chosen base material acting as a "memento mori." Rather, the piece lends itself to our need for substantial possessions to maintain contentment. The power of the skull is muted by the spectacle of worth that is each singular diamond. In the end, *For the Love of God* becomes a

[18] Hirst, Damien. "For The Love of God, 2007." http://www.damienhirst.com/for-the-love-of-god.

[19] *Ibid.*

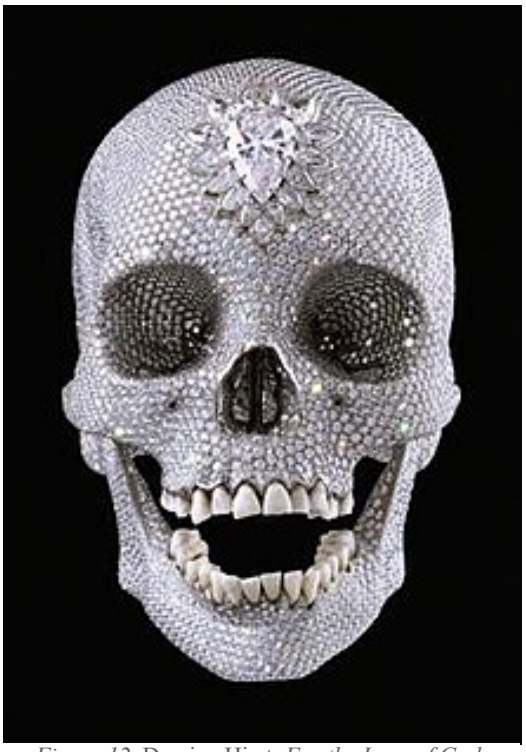

Figure 12. Damien Hirst. *For the Love of God*. Platinum, diamonds, human teeth. 6.7" x 5" x 7.5". 2007.

Figure 13. Damien Hirst. *For Heaven's Sake*. Platinum, pink and white diamonds, infant skull. 3.4" x 3.4" x 3.9". 2008.

shrine to Hirst himself: no more than a decoration in which to revel in the glory of fortune, an object to brag about - the complete opposite of what *vanitas* stresses to disavow. It is ironic that his garish skulls mention something of faith: "God" in the first and "Heaven" in the following. In the end, religion takes little pride in materiality, insisting believers focus on ingenuity and giving, rather than the acquiring of commodities and wealth.

Let's also not forget Hirst's second iteration of the diamond-encrusted skull: *For Heaven's Sake* (fig. 13), just a year after his first. An infant's skull, layered with platinum, again, is embellished with gems, this time eight thousand pink and white diamonds, perhaps expressing urge for youthfulness, while defacing the child's bones. Hirst acquired the two-week old's skull from a nineteenth-century pathology

collection, striking up debates surrounding the potential suffering of the child. The protest from a number of enraged parenting groups demanding an explanation has resulted in no one party revealing the actual price of the glistening skull. Though not confirmed, it is believed that Hirst procured the skull on his own in order to drive the price up. [20] This furthers the argument that his motives are based solely on capital (and fame), leaving behind his aforementioned contention of the work as a reminder that existence on earth is impermanent. All the more, the piece basks in commodity and value. These objects that uphold a materialism are in undeviating opposition to the morals of traditional *vanitas* imagery, where wealth is futile. Of course, death is often masked to be something it isn't, softening the blow and sugar-coating its reality, but Hirst's iteration of vanity as immoral does not line up. The infant's skull, inhumane and evidently of a newborn, "has been described as 'an anthropomorphized disco ball', 'a cosmic wonder', 'the vulgar embodiment of modern materialism' and, by Hirst himself, as 'quite bling.'"[21] Clearly, Hirst possesses no remorse. Much like his *For the Love of God*, the skull, as a symbol of mortality, takes a backseat as the eight-thousand pink and white diamonds embellish the vulnerable base. In this instance, it is unusual to associate youth with the inevitable mortality. Hirst exploits the defenseless nature of

[20] Riding, Alan. "Alas, Poor Art Market: A Multimillion Dollar Head Case." The New York Times. 13 Jun. 2007. https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/13/arts/design/13skul.html.

[21] Nikkhah, Roya. "Damien Hirst courts controversy with diamond-studded baby's skull." The Telegraph. 09 Jan. 2011. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/8247686/Damien-Hirst-courts-controversy-with-diamond-studded-babys-skull.html.

the child and thus creates a spectacle; in defending his vandalization of the skull, the artist speaks of his work as a commemoration:

> What's the maximum I could do as a celebration against death? When you look at a skull, you think it represents the end, but when you see the end so beautiful, it gives you hope…Diamonds are about perfection and clarity and wealth and sex and death and immortality. They are a symbol of everything that's eternal, but then they have a dark side as well.[22]

His response is lacks in conviction and responsibility. There simply can be no "celebration" in spoiling something as defenseless as a newborn's body. He aligns himself with the morals of traditional *vanitas*, claiming that his combination of the human body and an outrageously expensive commodity equates to the notion of life as possessing magnificence. In my opinion, Hirst hides behind the facade of equating his works to acts of "God" or "Heaven" in order to establish a foundation of prosperity and opulence. He uses his power to contradict the norms of *vanitas*, inspiring egotism while ignoring atonement.

III. *Vanitas* in the Contemporary Moment

Though some artists have demoralized the essence of *vanitas,* it continues to be of prominent subject matter, having been recreated in almost every medium: installation and sculpture, photography, and of course, painting. An article in *Art News* written by Rachel Wolff lists numerous artists who have taken on the feat of capturing what made a still-life so mesmerizing during Renaissance and Baroque periods. She

[22] *Ibid.*

Figure 14. Mat Collishaw. *Last Meal on Death Row: Garry Miller.* Photograph. 2011.

begins her commentary, "A Cornucopia of Contemporary Still Life," by illustrating a photograph that displays a meal - a table adorned with sandwiches piled onto a platter, cheese oozing down the sides of the bread, a ketchup-filled gravy boat next to hard-boiled eggs, a french fry mess and the remnants of dessert: cinnamon buns loaded with frosting.[23] The artist, Mat Collishaw, has set up the site of a last meal, one to be devoured by convicted rapist Garry Miller moments before he was to be executed by lethal injection in the year 2000. The piece was part of a greater series entitled *Last Meal on Death Row, Texas* (fig. 14), highlighting "…indulgence—literal and

[23] Wolff, Rachel. "A Cornucopia of Contemporary Still Life: Artists are devising high-tech, high-concept updates to the traditional *nature morte." ArtNews.* 10 Feb. 2014. http://www.artnews.com/2014/02/10/contemporary-still-life-is-high-tech-and-high-concept/.

spiritual—in the face of death, on the brink of death, and as a stand-in for the dead man himself, each the visual equivalent of a last gasp for air."[24] Wolff depicts a scene of what was, and presents us with the aftermath, proving how fleeting life truly is. This representation of *vanitas* is an astute interpretation of the abject "visual syntax" of common still-life imagery, challenging traditional aspects of the genre and pushing the representations further. In doing so, the contemporary still life seeps into the details of everyday life, departing from the existential matter of morality and delving into issues of our modern time. Today's *vanitas* representations do more than function as a reminder of the brevity of life: they confront commonplace issues that have seemingly gone unnoticed.

She goes on to illuminate artist after artist, using this theme of *vanitas* and symbols associated with traditional *vanitas* painting: "a coded vocabulary [of] fresh flowers, ripe fruit, raw meat, shucked oysters, skulls, feathers, shells, and other exotic curios." Wolff does so to explain how *vanitas* can be used as a stepping stone to confront anxieties surrounding today's world: concerns surrounding over-consumption and a lack thereof in particular communities, the pollution that contaminates mass populations, and the world's fascination with technology and social media. She poses her stance on the delicacy of modern life as a mere 'trend,' comparing and contrasting work that challenges notions of "waste, haste, war, and globalization." Chosen artists, such as Sharon Core, present the dangers of falling for vanity and material possessions over humility and naivety. Core's print *1606* (fig. 15) depicts nothing more than a vase

[24] *Ibid.*

Figure 15. Sharon Core. *1606.* Archival pigment print. 26" x 19.75". 2011.

Figure 16. Emma Bennett. *A Weightless Quiet.* Oil on oak panel. 25 x 20 cm. 2013.

of blooming flowers, carefully arranged, one-by-one, each in its designated slot. The table it lies on is scattered with seashells and fallen flowers: a simple scene. Another artist, Emma Bennett, paints a brightly lit portrait of a deceased bird, falling mid-air next to a bunch of small flowers against a deep void of black nothingness in *A Weightless Quiet* (fig. 16). The image portrays another pessimistic take on the European theme, displaying two objects afloat against a black background, perhaps floating in the vast openness of an empty memory. Though contemplating the realities of a lost archive of memories, Bennett's contemporary take on the *vanitas* still life keeps with the feeling of nostalgia and a longing for more. The modernized interpretations on *vanitas* are endless, with each artist's view quite distinct; whether incorporating a skull or a neon light that begins to fade, or even an animal carcass,

rotting away in real time, each interpretation, though continuing to bring home the idea of a fleeting moment, is disparate in medium and subject matter.

Rachel Wolff paints an illustrative picture of the expansion of *vanitas* imagery and how the theme has conformed to today's standards. Such artists as those listed above have piqued my personal interest in *vanitas*-laden portrayals, though none come close to that eighteenth-century French painting of a boy blowing a bubble. Each piece, that Wolff elucidates is completely unlike the other, each conveying some message about the transient, whether it's about an ever-changing technological age or humanity's finite nature due to global warming. But none exhibit the bubble that reminds us of the insignificance of materiality and the essentiality of the present. Though not outwardly portraying the sphere, these contemporary iterations point to *vanitas* imagery and Dutch Baroque painting, making the tradition one of substantiality.

Continuing along the path of contemporary takes on traditional vanitas imagery, New York based photographer, Justine Reyes, deconstructs the still-life in true *vanitas* form. Justine Reyes' rendition of *vanitas* (the series being titled "*Vanitas*") showcases twenty images, each a simple portrait of common household items. Two, three, even four items are expertly scattered across a surface, each object interacting with its counterpart effortlessly. An animal's skull is placed beside family photographs, which in turn are beside a vase of tangled flowers with vines stretching in every direction. A sliced-open pomegranate sits atop a white plate that also carries a serrated knife, all next to two white porcelain birds that seem to be whispering to each other. A small wooden drawer overflows with red and orange leaves that are situated near used

Figure 17. Justine Reyes. *Still Life with Bottle and Pears*. Chromogenic print. 16" x 20". 2009.

paintbrushes and palette knives, reminiscent of the body that might have been utilizing them just moments before. In all, Reyes' images reflect the link between an impermanent moment and nostalgia, utilizing similar imagery in similar ways as conventional *vanitas*.

One photograph, *Still Life with Bottle and Pears* (fig. 17), stands out from the others, though. While it displays nothing more than an empty bottle and two brightly-colored pears, each object is related to the bubble. The pears' globular form resembles that of a bubble, both unstable beings that are similar in shape. And the empty bottle does what a bubble can do, reflecting light and dispersing the momentary beam to surrounding surfaces, creating a shimmery, prismatic finish. In short, both the glass and the bubble have the ability to create an iridescent surface while obtaining singularity and fragility. Reyes' style may be based on the still lives of the Spanish Baroque

Figure 18. Juan Sanchez Cotan. *Still Life with Game, Fowl, Vegetables and Fruits*. Oil on canvas. 1602.

painting particular to Juan Sanchez Cotan. His "bodegones" (fig. 18) portrayed an array of delicacies across the still life, some even depicting storage spaces that perhaps contained items to preserve. In depicting such a spread, Cotan's still lives were intended to make viewers aware of the artistic properties within mundane objects, while illuminating their short lifespan. Similarly, the common bubble will end when it is met with another surface, their very connection eliminating the bubble. Both life-cycles are limited. Each can be manipulated and taken away just as swiftly as it was blown or picked. Reyes' selected objects are calculated; they constitute a relationship that is uncertain, yet manifest a dialogue that is clear.

A second inclination that the bubble just might be top-of-mind in Reyes' work, and further referencing Cotan's "bodegones," is evident in *Sill Life with Cup and Melon* (fig. 19). A goblet stands upon the edge of a long green branch. To the right of that, a

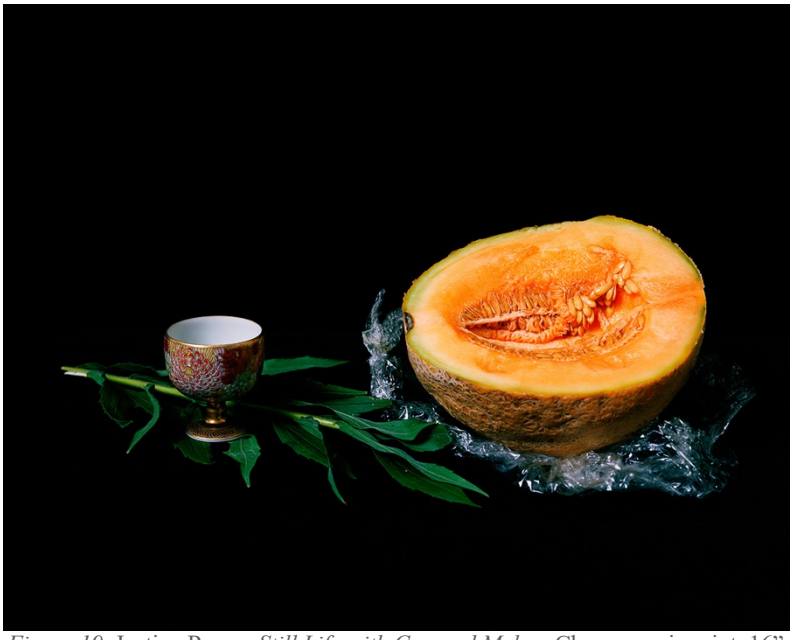

Figure 19. Justine Reyes. *Still Life with Cup and Melon*. Chromogenic print. 16" x 20". 2009.

dissected cantaloupe lies face-up atop a piece of battered Saran wrap. The scene is simple: cup, branch, fruit, container. But, the image represents more than it lets on, where two entities happen to be more than they suggest; the Saran wrap, much like the glass bottle, is reflective, preventing what it holds inside from the effects of natural decay. The choice to display Saran wrap is significant: it is manipulated over and over again, becoming slightly less stiff with each wrinkle, though never seeming to decay due to its artificiality. Its functionality decreases with each crease, its purpose becoming more and more obscure. In the end, the piece of plastic proves useless, its functionality taken away. Though the Saran wrap eventually becomes useless, its symbolic value remains, attempting to preserve and protect. Further, the cantaloupe eventually rots, taking away any role it obtained while ripe. There is nothing more to the fruit than its obvious shape; it is round and firm, yet vulnerable and temporary. Similar to the bubble's limited lifetime, so too does the cantaloupe cease to exist after a short period

of time. Each object is purposeful, their simplicity alluding to the dangers of investing oneself in materiality. And while the two photographs do not blatantly reference the bubble, each implies a connection to it in a subtle way.

Reyes' intention for the series was to integrate personal items with a strong sense of nostalgia and longing to create a conventional scene of a still-life. She pairs artifacts of her own with trinkets and treasures that belonged to her grandmother, lending to the notions of life as impermanent, memory as fleeting, and certainty in the pursuit of time. Reyes' statement on the work illustrates her objective:

> The incorporation of modern elements such as the Saran wrap, plastic, sugar packages etc., as well as the use of photography itself add an additional layer of nostalgia and irony when viewed within the historical framework of Vanitas painting. Both the decomposition of the natural (rotting fruit and wilting flowers) and the breakdown of the man-made objects, reference the physical body, life's impermanence and the inevitability of death.[25]

Reyes' points out that she works "intuitively," placing objects next to one another as if assembling a puzzle. The work is a portrayal of the daintiness of life and the inclination to part ways from narcissism and materiality. Her rendition is entirely *vanitas*-inspired, approaching the genre with a contemporary interpretation and putting forth objects that are seemingly mundane, yet signify a transient, ineffective state: fruit, used Saran wrap, tattered photos, etc. Although, it must be pointed out that Reyes' practice involves the nostalgic keepsake and aspects of sentimentality; the bubble, on the other hand, reminds us that we are unable to maintain a hold on time. Her process is slow and

[25] Reyes, Justine. "Vanitas." *JustineReyes*. www.justinereyes.com/galleries/vanitas.

deliberate, positioning herself in a state of mediation while capturing each image; her methods seemingly reflect the preciosity of something as delicate as the bubble: conscious yet meticulous, freeing yet vulnerable, transient yet timeless.

Reyes continues to be a strong advocate for *vanitas* in the modern sense. She is subtle with her chosen subject and strategic with her placement. The work becomes one of remembrance and recollection - piecing together the features of a particular moment in time. Though the bubble is absent, nearly each object within her photograph symbolizes ephemerality in some way. The title of the series, "Vanitas," directly lends itself to the ideals of the genre, keeping close those things that hold individual value and letting go of materiality. Reye notes, in each photograph without out rightly saying so, how caught up the world is with material items and capital. Each object is deliberate in its arrangement: the remnants of a grapefruit cradling colorful buttons, carefully placed next to an open container of mundane, pale buttons just waiting to be threaded and sewn. As a result, she finds herself in an induced state of contemplation, letting each item speak for itself. Her "memorials" cry for a realization that time spent on self-absorption and vanity is a moment lost - time one cannot call back. Although Reyes chose not to exhibit the suspending, luminescent orb, her attentive selection of objects presents almost the same thing. Each item vanishes and breaks contact with reality, only existing for a moment in time.

To reiterate, bubbles represent the ephemerality and beauty of innocence while concurrently denoting an awaiting death. And thus, the bubble's form, a thin layer of soap and water, has the capacity to confine air to construct a vacant orb with an

iridescent finish, while upholding the notion of the present as a fleeting moment. It is subtly blown and floats through thin air, bouncing in the vast openness; it reflects light, merges with another orb, and forms a new object. In mere moments, the bubble bursts as droplets of soap and water splatter across any nearby surface. It implodes and explodes and has no way of coming back. The bubble situates itself in a way that is inevitable and involuntary.

And like that, the bubble within *The Tenant* that travels from room to room throughout the home has reached yet another entryway, transitioning from an empty room to a set of stairs. This progression brings us to another iteration of the bubble, a more empirical interpretation. The bubble transforms from a transient entity that forces one to contemplate the insignificance of possessions and enter a state of present-ness into one of intimate relationships and experimental processes. It maintains its spherical shape, though, captured in the moment and remaining whole. Though *The Tenant* challenges the idea of the bubble as a transitory being that will eventually meet its demise, the delicacy endures, allowing viewers to manifest a relationship with the bubble, seeking an identity within it, one that cannot be deserted. As follows and throughout this thesis, the perpetual bubble in *The Tenant*, and throughout this thesis, continues to function as a surveyor that contemplates the brevity of life, while simultaneously operating as a medium for both manipulation and intimate relationship.

Chapter Two

Science: *Vanitas* and the Bubble within Experimentation and Repetition

> *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.*[26]

The verse above suggests living each day with the knowledge of an inevitable death, while maintaining a strong vigor and a consciousness of the power of will. In this case, the bubble serves as a prompt of such ephemerality; it becomes a versatile entity, having been utilized within tradition and interpreted throughout history. Unlike Rivane Neuenschwander and Cao Guimaraes' *The Tenant*, the following chapter presents the bubble as a stable image, rather than physically floating in time. Thus, the bubble that maneuvers between rooms is caught in time and space, here. As a result, the of the presence of the bubble is suspended - flattened as a print and expanded to become macroscopic.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Peter Sloterdijk maps out what he refers to as "microspheres," or intimate connections between physical space, force, and temporality, in his massive text entitled *Bubbles: Spheres, Volume I: Microspherology*. Sloterdijk connects humanity with modernity, outlining those relationships between contemporary religion, society and politics, and ponders how beings adapt to current

[26] *Ecclesiastes*. In *The Old Testament*. NKJV ed. Zondervan, 2013. Chapter 9, Verse 10.

states in a constantly shifting world. In essence, the text reads as somewhat pessimistic, relating change to that of a microsphere, utilizing aspects of human history with scientific evidence. He argues that the modern-day, independent individual, one that fights for itself amongst its surroundings and nature, is an inaccurate representation of the existence of the human race and thus cannot offer a comprehensive explanation regarding the significance of human life. Further, a human is captivated when coming into contact with another being, sharing "souls" in a singular relationship between equals.[27] And this physical connection manifests a need for the other - a sense of vulnerability - that can only be fulfilled by an intimate correlation. This relationship becomes one of man and bubble, another representation of *homo bulla*, where creator and created share a bond that is both intimate and exposed. Thus, Sloterdijk's theoretical attempt to use the bubble in ways that surround human history and existential interaction correspond to this text's intention to make a case for the bubble as a prominent figure throughout traditional and contemporary *vanitas* artworks. His illustration of Millais' *Bubbles* analyzes the moment a boy is outside of himself, no longer a singular figure, but now sharing souls with the entity in which he just breathed life. That association and familiarity is the essence of human life.

This notion is quite imaginative, especially when relating this sort of connection to an amalgamation of bubbles; but, in retrospect, it makes sense to compare the human and the bubble when touching on the sort of intimate space the two take up: humans

[27] Ganz, John. "Bubbles: Spheres, Volume 1: Microspherology." *The Brooklyn Rail*. 1 Feb. 2012. https://brooklynrail.org/2012/02/art_books/bubbles-spheres-volume-i-microspherology-by-peter-sloterdijk.

yearn for that warmth and affection - a freedom that brings along dependency - most frequently within another being; a bubble, most often, rests upon another like it, sharing a common wall and relying on each other for survival. I explicitly reference this text due to its persistence on creating an association between one's relationship to the fleeting bubble, rather than his analysis of medieval beliefs, societal concerns, psychoanalysis, myth, and theology. Sloterdijk notes that these spheres "constitute the intimate forms of the rounded being-in form and the basic molecule of the strong relationship."[28]. Because of this, in the writing to follow, the author becomes pertinent in understanding an artistic practice that involves the bubble's dependence on other orbs and their relationship to man as both creator and destroyer.

I. The Photogram and David Fried's *In bed with Lucy and Dolly*

Straying away from the traditional paintings of *vanitas* imagery, the photogram provides a contemporary take on the genre. A photogram is the result of placing objects onto a light-sensitive surface, revealing it to a light source and, in turn, generating an image. The technique is a historical one, having been first form of photography developed in the nineteenth-century. The result resembles a photograph, though each tone created is dependent upon the levels of transparency of the object being captured.[29] In other words, the photogram exhibits the shadows created from negative space, or the

[28] Sloterdijk, Peter, *Spheres - Volume 1: Bubbles and Microspherology*, (Semiotext(e), 2011).

[29] Widewalls Editorial. "Exploring the Photogram, - How Does Cameraless Photography Work?" 25, Jul. 2016. https://www.widewalls.ch/photogram-process-cameraless-photography/.

Figure 20. May Ray. *Rayograph.* Gelatin silver print (photogram). 9.4" x 11.75". 1922.

spaces in which light was unable to shine through, presenting an image that is in opposition to a standard photograph. Though the outcome is not a negative, the style of photography does not utilize a camera lens, relying solely on surface and light. This process was used extensively by twentieth-century Dada photographer Man Ray. The photograms, which he referred to as "rayographs," display a collage of objects set against a light-sensitive surface, each unmasked space getting darker from exposure. His 1922 *Rayograph* (fig. 20) exhibits various items that served as stencils: a set of hands as one layer, two faces kissing as another, and a tray as the third. The final product is an image that utilizes no physical model, but bears resemblance to the form of a photograph. Though the process was not individual to Man Ray, his methods of layering, creating depth and illusion, challenged the limits of photography. In short, a

photogram distorts standard images, transforming the product into the unfamiliar.[30] Such methods have been manipulated and redefined by artists to follow, distorting what is thought of as a photographed image and utilizing the objects themselves as medium.

That being said, a contemporary take on a longstanding practice reveals the ephemeral bubble secured in time and space. Experimental artist David Fried creates his own style of photograms, portraying the temporal balance between water and air in the form of unique bubbles - which emerge as a result of dynamic systems that do not follow linear and hierarchical patterns of organizational behavior - [he] charts the fundamental economy of fluid networks in nature.[31] The outcome is suggestive of an "x-ray [or] photocopy", maximizing the minute bubble and exhibiting an image that is indicative of the abnormal. Fried's unnatural, eccentric practice, produces an image that is playful and unlikely, taking viewers back to a time of simplicity and naivety.

The final form Fried's images take is a magnified c-print, or the result of an image being exposed to a color-specific and light-sensitive surface:

> the color negative or slide is exposed to Chromogenic photographic paper (wet process paper) that contains three emulsion layers, each of which is sensitized to a different primary color. After the image has been exposed it is submerged in a chemical bath, where each layer reacts to

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] Fried, David. "DAVID FRIED - Photograms, Kinetic Interactive Sculpture, Photography, Sculptures." *DAVID FRIED.* www.davidfried.com/.

Figure 21. David Fried. *In bed with Lucy and Dolly No. 40.* Color photogram, c-print, diasec, aluminum. 100 x 130 cm. 2003.

Figure 22. David Fried. *In bed with Lucy and Dolly No. 33.* Color photogram, c-print, diasec, aluminum. 100 x 130 cm. 2003.

> the chemicals to create a full-color image. Because the chemicals are so complex, the image continues to react even after the process is completed.[32]

Fried's c-print series, entitled *In bed with Lucy and Dolly,* exhibits the enormous and perfect bubble, surrounded by smaller bubbles and sitting atop pastel-colored surfaces. One representation displays a light pink colored image, revealing a network of interconnected spheres (fig 21). Another group of joined bubbles is centered on a greenish-gray surface, presenting what looks like multiple halos surrounding the orbs. The spherical shape is suggestive of a brilliant, prismatic film of soap that forms a number of circular rings, outlining the bubble that previously rested there (fig. 22). The next image is a mixture of light blue and gray tones, with three larger bubbles that hold

[32] Tate. "Photogram." Tate. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/c-print.

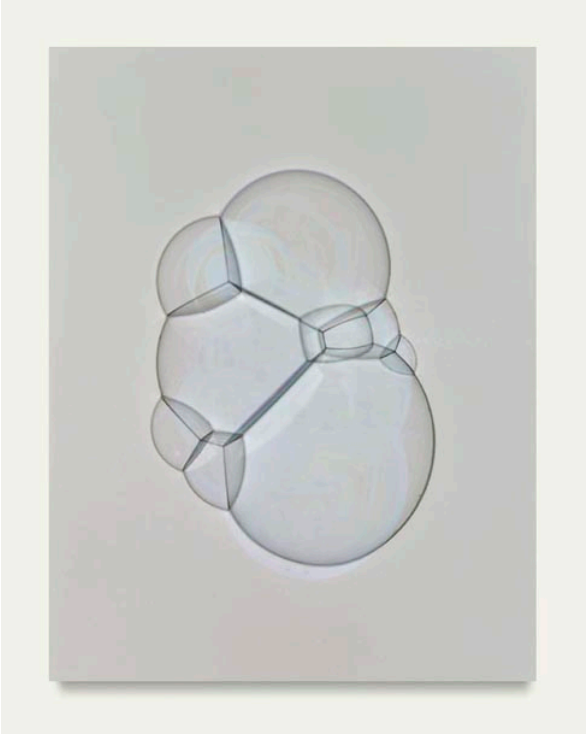

Figure 23. David Fried. *In bed with Lucy and Dolly No. 28.* Color photogram, c-print, diasec, aluminum. 100 x 130 cm. 2001.

on to a number of smaller ones, almost acting as a maternal figure to the ephemeral beings (fig. 23). Each image shifts in pastel color, accentuating the magnificence of the bubble and revealing particular details specific to the orb: misting, iridescence, and gradations. The images are macroscopic representations of microscopic entities, each single bubble perfectly defined, their makeup naturally establishing unions of delicately placed bubbles. They almost look like families - referring back to Sloterdijk's concept of the bubble and its blower as familiar - hugging on to one another during their short lifetime, yet captured in a moment that will survive.

Within these prints, Fried portrays organic-looking forms that oppose representations of physical life, while simultaneously resembling a manufactured, laboratory-crafted product. In doing so, his "self-organizing" bubbles bring together

the qualities of biological-resembling matter that bears likeness to microscopic organisms. The result is an enlarged image of the fabricated being, where the bubble is apprehended right before its moment of cavitation. In order to seize this moment, the larger-than-life orbs are created in an unlit space, beginning as minute, free-floating bubbles that expand as they are enlarged. Utilizing infrared goggles, Fried makes a timely decision as to when to "photograph" the bubbles, capturing the moment they fall onto light-sensitive colored film without the use of a camera. In the end, it is the shadow of the object that is retained. The resulting image is the product of a combination of photographic methods manifested from light and reactive material as each independent bubble arranges itself around its corresponding orb. As previously stated, the camera is absent; the reflectivity and concavity of a bubble, in turn, assist as the photographic elements that arrest the image. The final images are created from utilizing the bubble itself as the lens, distorting the light and "altering its own image."[33] The process lends itself to brevity strictly by use of the bubble, though the artist directly contradicts the morals of vanitas: "I look at it as an 'antifragile' phenomena, as an interdependent networked model of dynamic relationships/forces that do not follow linear 'certainty' - but rather probability, chance and unpredictability; in essence, [it's] diametrically opposed to *vanitas*."[34] Rather than leaning into the notions of *vanitas* and restrained,

[33] Fried, David. "Selection of enlarged color Photograms." http://atelier-fried.com/photograhic/color-photograms.html.

[34] Fried, David. Interview by Alexis Lastomirsky. Personal Interview. 1 Mar. 2019.

intricately positioned imagery, Fried's overall practice leans into the erratic, challenging concepts of control through the behavior of the bubble.[35] He utilizes the spontaneous bubble as a metaphor for reproduction and order, stabilizing the orb in a moment in time. Fried's multi-faceted practice involves various imagery, ranging from modern-day reproductive iconography, astronomical depictions, and amplified prints of networks of bubbles.

Fried's intentionality reveals to viewers that "what [is seen] in [the] enlarged C-prints are the latent shadows and spectral aberrations of these transparent forms caused by the membrane's curved surface."[36] They are simple yet striking, showing no flaws or defects. The work reminds viewers of the potential of human life, and at the same time, how sensitive that life really is. Not only does the work resemble life in the form of an embryo, but it utilizes the evanescent bubble in a way that arrests the spontaneous entity. His use of the bubble is directly connected to notions of transience and trace, capturing the moment a bubble floats and falls, a moment that lasts for only a split-second, and creates a new moment that acts as a lasting print. He contrasts the fleeting quality of a bubble with the endurance of printmaking, taking the momentary, replicating the form and making use of its consistency, and allowing it to remain. Reiterating his desire to rely on chance, Fried makes use of the bubble's natural ability

[35] Fried, David, *Far From Equilibrium*, (Kerber Art. 2018), p. 8.

[36] *Ibid*.

Figure 24. David Fried. *In bed with Lucy and Dolly, act one.* Scene from video-play. 2001.

to create a network and ultimately captures the moment bubbles come together in unwavering impulsivity.

And even more thought-provokingly, the series is named after two figures that signify both life and artificiality: Lucy and Dolly. Though the work is only ephemeral due to its utilization of the fleeting bubble and its reference to an artificial, fragile being, *In bed with Lucy and Dolly* (fig. 24), aptly named after society's need for validation, references Lucy as earth's first maternal model, and Dolly as the first cloned sheep. Fried mentions Dolly as the "missing link" in a world that is consistently shifting, where "man has moved from adapting to and controlling their environment, to designing life itself to fit its environment."[37] This cloning process is visible in his bubble-work, as each network of spheres is unpredictable yet completely similar to others, allowing Fried to directly manipulate his process and environment to capture

[37] Fried, David. "DAVID FRIED - Photograms, Kinetic Interactive Sculpture, Photography, Sculptures." *DAVID FRIED.* www.davidfried.com/.

the interdependent beings. Dolly thus serves as the potential prototype for humanity to come, as 'she' is known as the first life form to be cloned from adult cells using a nuclear transferring process. Additionally, Lucy becomes the "myth," an anthropomorphic symbol of the matriarch, having been the earliest known human on earth over 3.2 million years ago. Because of this, Fried investigates the imbalance of a life, questioning reproduction and fertility in both natural and extraordinary circumstances: "What has been generated? What possible variations of life are on offer here? And what part will chance still play in the future, in our will to dominate nature?"[38] Fried is successful in this series in transforming this pure, sensical and real perspective of the world, and the bubble, into one of a "biomorphic journey…[a] genetic engineering."[39] In an interview from 2001, Fried describes his intentions for the title of the series: "

> With [Dolly's] arrival, a media star was born. Suddenly everyone knew a barrier was shattered between mankind's practice of altering his environment, and mankind's attempts at reinventing himself. Humans have always looked for what separates themselves from other species. Ironically for me, Dolly became the new 'missing link', fulfilling man's need to be supreme.[40]

In short, Fried's reference to the ability to clone and man's need for authority transforms the bubble's subtlety, altering what was once an innocent activity for child's-play and pushing its standard for reproduction. In the end, Fried's intention for

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[38] Fried, David*, Far From Equilibrium*, (Kerber Art. 2018), p. 16.

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] *Ibid*., p. 137.

the bubble to resemble biomorphic matter presents to viewers delicate and subdued representations of a multitude of orbs through the repetition of the photogram.

In his text, *Far From Equilibrium*, Fried references Sloterdijk, relating the bubble to the orb on which a group of people reside: a globe. This notion brings us back to Bosch's representation of God's earth, monitoring humanity's actions; although, in Fried's instance, the concept becomes material, where the bubble is no longer God's, but man's. No longer is Bosch's depiction relevant, as Fried strays away from the ideas of morality and ethics. The work becomes structured and tactile. Further along in the text, Fried quotes that illustrative moment in Sloterdijk when a child blows a bubble and thus becomes outside of himself (as stated in Chapter One), creating a life between his life and the momentary time of the bubble: "We enter life within a bubble, and when we die, we slip away in a final breath. Surely this subliminal body knowledge also helps to form a basis for the fascination of this elementary experience interpreted by Sloterdijk in such an adroit way."[41] In mentioning this text, Fried emphasizes Sloterdijk, who leads us out of the Christian morality of *vanitas*, and begins utilizing the temporary bubble in a way that rejects the still-life imagery so often portrayed in an accustomed scene. Thus, he defies traditional and modern *vanitas*. He manipulates its transience to become everlasting, much like Dutch Baroque still lifes that portrayed a painted image of various objects that signify the temporality of life. Although, the key distinction here is one of fabrication: Fried plays with reproductive technologies by way of mechanical reproduction, doing away with vanitas imagery and arresting

[41] *Ibid*. p. 12.

time through photography versus painting. Further, he confronts the notion of cloning, of manufacturing a rendition based off of the real, a science that differs from bubble as singular and distinctive. The ephemeral nature of the bubble is affected, in this instance, as their production is fundamentally manipulated and reproduced to resemble networks of organization.

Further, *In bed with Lucy and Dolly* employs a technical process, integrating a wide range of imaginative and analytical knowledge to form new iterations of current imagery, allowing viewers to reflect on today's understanding of a rapidly changing, technological era. Fried's extensive practice confronts various concerns within society today, ones of authority, imitation, and change; but, keeping with the theme of the bubble as the more prominent object within the subject of *vanitas*, the work represents assorted networks of bubbles in order to contemplate the transient disposition of life. Thinking back to *vanitas*, the purpose of the depiction was to remind one of the uselessness of material possessions, for life is transient. This representation of vanity as unethical is absent in Fried's work; rather, the vanity that is individual to his practice, stems from an interest in cloning and reproduction, using the subtle and fleeting bubble as a way to illustrate man's control with the surrounding world.

II. *Stemmers*, Reflectivity and Narcissism

Keeping with the theme of the bubble as primary subject matter, not only does Fried portray the orb in photograms, but in sculptural form, as well. His *Stemmers* depict a reticulation of linked spherical entities, alluding to a natural and man-made

environment and portraying macroscopic "clusters" that are biomorphic structures (fig. 25). The constructions propose a conceptual manifestation of a genesis, the very beginning of a life, either in a routine, innate way or genetically constructed.[42] The facade of each larger-than-life sculpture presents a mirrored surface, encouraging viewers to contemplate identity, putting forth the impulse for self-reflection. The reflective exterior gives rise to distortion, seeing oneself glaring back from every angle. The sculpture is dynamically merged within its chosen environment, both demarcated by it and demarcating it. In doing so, Fried is making the assumption that the sculptures are "hinting that one's sense of identity is a complex development of 'nature and nurture.'"[43] Regardless of the round, polished and finite surface, facets are created where two orbs meet, creating an interdependency, no matter the size of each bubble. While size varies among these entities, shape and form are pristine, a never-ending face of polished "glass." Each family of bubbles creates a sort of character, whether or not they resemble a biological organism, giving each segment an abstract, yet individual, quality.

Coining the term "Stemmer" as a representation of stem-cell formations, each sculpture plays on the relationship between the natural and man-made world. The configurations obey the standard principles of "economy and self-organization" that is

[42] *Ibid*., p. 28.

[43] *Ibid.*

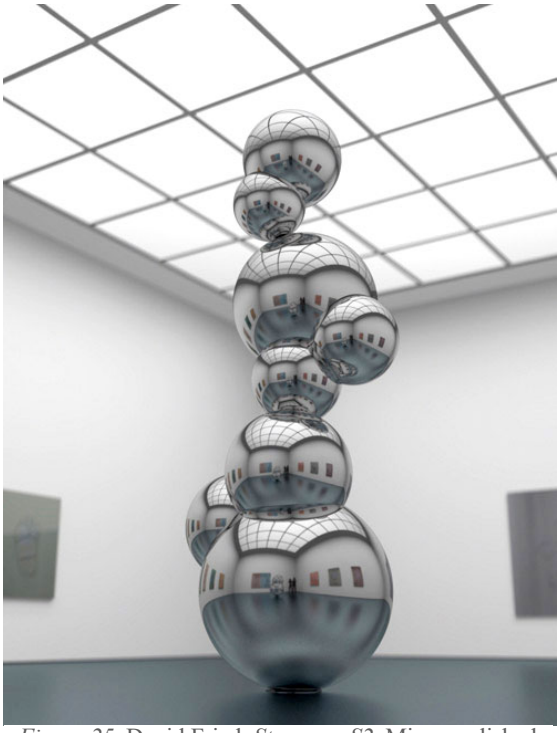

Figure 25. David Fried. *Stemmer, S2*. Mirror polished stainless steel. 140 x 135 x 415 cm. 2015.

fundamental within the basic make-up of bubbles, offering the illusion of a reliance on the orb beneath for support and situating itself in a natural, conditional state. He explains his "Stemmers" as both innovative and divergent, ever-evolving forms that are in constant progression: "Their forms appear in an undifferentiated yet fertile state—like a Venus von Willendorf at conception—full of potential, ready for chance, influence and self-determination. Anti-fragile balancing acts operating far from equilibrium - individualities in an interdependent process of becoming."[44] While some of Fried's "Stemmers" have fewer mirrored surfaces, some display matte surfaces, and others present a sort of sheen that appears more glazed than shiny . Each challenges the

[44] Fried, David. "Stemmers." http://www.davidfried.com/david_fried_Stemmers-2005_contemporary_art_sculptures.htm.

viewer's perception of reality and myth, referencing what we look to as an idol ("humankind's oldest fertility icons," the real versus the fake, and even scientific theory). Simultaneously, these [reflective] structures force one to confront issues of self-absorption, serving as an attempt to place the audience in the unbearable position of coming to terms with 360 degrees of perpetual gaze, surely channeling the work of Yayoi Kusama and her installation entitled *Narcissus Garden* (fig. 26).

Kusama's "garden" was a dramatic one: one-thousand and five-hundred glistening balls were spread across the lawn of the Italian Pavilion amidst the 33rd Venice Biennale that took place in 1966. The reflective spheres, bubble-like in shape and reflection, presented a wide field of mirrored images, bouncing off of various surfaces of the surrounding facades, the terrain and even audience members. Each image created from the landscape was contorted due to the convexity of each orb, warping physical features, size and distance between both ball and viewer. It is pertinent to note the size of each silver globe, resembling a crystal ball in breadth and shape, as if utilized by a psychic, forcing passersby to gaze at their own personal reflection and challenging the proximity between one's self-absorption and image. In doing so, Kusama questioned reality, forcing an engagement with the self's egotistical ways and aspects of vanity. Though there is an obvious parallel between Fried's and Kusama's reflective structures, both artists challenge *vanitas*, leaning into the vain nature of humanity and disregarding the notion of materiality as a means of conceit.

Figure 26. Yayoi Kusama. *Narcissus Garden.* 1966.

This theme of narcissism and the half of the title "Narcissus" comes from Greek mythology, in which a man, Narcissus, became so self-aware of his beauty that he fell madly in love with himself and his image. He ogled at his reflection in a pool of water, becoming so enveloped with what gazed back at him that not even an alluring nymph could pull him from his entrancement. So blinded by his handsomeness, Narcissus eventually fell into the pool of water, drowning and perishing, never to see the reflection of himself again.[45] Kusama amplified the notion of self-absorption by placing two signs near her installation during the opening of the Biennale, one reading "NARCISSUS GARDEN, KUSAMA," and the other: "YOUR NARCISSIUM [sic]

[45] Cartwright, Mark. "Narcissus." *Ancient History Encyclopedia.* 20 Feb. 2017. https://www.ancient.eu/Narcissus/.

FOR SALE." Kusama then performed a sort of skit, encouraging her audience to partake in an interchange of commodity and value:

> ...acting like a street peddler, she was selling the mirror balls to passers-by for two dollars each, while distributing flyers with Herbert Read's complimentary remarks about her work on them. She consciously drew attention to the 'otherness' of her exotic heritage by wearing a gold kimono with a silver sash. The monetary exchange between Kusama and her customers underscored the economic system embedded in art production, exhibition and circulation.[46]

This idea of narcissism as an interplay between two objects furthers the notion of the self as an all-consuming being, focusing too much on materiality and less on its temporality.

Surely, Kusama's reflective garden served as inspiration for Fried's larger-than-life luminous bubble structures; in keeping with the theme of coercing viewers to confront the desire to gaze longingly back at themselves, perhaps the outcome is an envisioning of another version of themselves, a youthful, more exuberant thing, reminiscent of the bubble taking on part of its creators' soul [as previously implied in Sloterdijk's text]. The connection between Kusama's garden and Fried's structures is manifested not only from human arrogance, but from the notion of replication and an opposition to the inevitability of death. In the end, the "self" is lost in a network of "others," where the cluster of the community and Sloterdijk's intimate relationships are consumed by society's knack for self-assurance and extreme superiority.

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[46] Shang, Danielle. "Yayoi Kusama, Narcissus Garden." *Khan Academy*. https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/later-europe-and-americas/modernity-ap/a/yayoi-kusama-narcissus-garden.

III. A Relationship to the Morals of Traditional *Vanitas* and Sloterdijk's Intimacy

Coming full circle, I bring us back to Peter Sloterdijk's *Bubbles and Microspherology,* taking a step back from narcissistic nature to the young child, blowing a bubble that resembles his entire being. He reminds us of a sheltered life aside the orb, enveloped by it and intertwined with it, comprehending what it means to share a life and soul with an entity that embodies endless support "inside, outside, and…between."[47] The scene is indicative of a uterine image, suggesting the primacy of the fetus as protected by the mother's body (in this case, the interconnected networks of bubbles serves as guardian). Sloterdijk places a particular importance on a connection with the bubble, noting that the relationship between object and viewer is essential in maintaining a sense of security, freedom, and sentimentality. Not only does Sloterdijk dive deep into the bubble as a simultaneously dependent and independent body, sharing a common wall with its symmetrical counterpart, but he notes the space in which the interconnection dwells. In Fried's *Far From Equilibrium*, he outlines the magnitude of the bubble:

> Bubbles, as one conclusion of Sloterdijk's cultural observations shows, are the basic molecules of a strong relationship, in which one part always remains related to the other; the relationship is more important than the singular being, the couple more important than the individual.[48]

[47] Dillion, Brian. "Bubbles by Peter Sloterdijk, translated by Wieland Hoban - review." *The Guardian.* 10 Feb. 2012. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/feb/10/bubbles-peter-sloterdijk-review.

[48] Fried, David, *Far From Equilibrium*, (Kerber Art. 2018), p. 13.

This is evident, again, in both the imagery of the egg in *utero* and the narcissistic mirror, where both portray a reliance on the other, persisting amongst a maternal influence and an independent influence. Thus, Sloterdijk so imaginatively takes us through life beside and within the bubble, establishing a history through embodiment and temporality.

Therefore, the bubble is a crucial element in the work of David Fried, signifying a particular fixed moment and working against the properties of the bubble. His bubbles obtain versatility and the ability to be controlled. Fried

> employs highly symbolic motifs that are universally recognizable as organic or pertaining to natural phenomena with chaotic tendencies, contextually infused with hints of human influence and our urge to control, manipulate and predict outcomes.[49]

He notes the bubble's significance within his work as more frantic and impulsive, following no patterns of order; rather, the bubble represented in his work is singular in its character and unique in its makeup. When asked by Christopher Chambers in an interview about his past and present experience and motivations within a scientific realm of art-making, Fried suggested that his desire for manipulation and reliance on relationships has offered him a greater sense of not merely trying to "illustrate scientific understanding," but "to create works that explore inter-dependent relationships and the energy distributed within a dynamic but closed system, and subsequently, raise questions about contemporary individuality within the global village."[50] In other

[49] *Ibid*., p. 8.

[50] *Ibid.,* p. 137.

words, his process reflects Man Ray's mechanic and photographic methods, while his intentions are to realize the life that other entities embody and how they affect the surrounding environment through a self-governing network.

Though there is no concrete correlation between the morality and ethics of traditional *vanitas* and the intellectuality of Fried's macroscopic bubble renditions, other than the blatant utilization of the orb and the arrogance of humankind's attempts to defy death, the two objects epitomize ephemerality in entirety. While Fried takes a more theoretical approach to the theme of temporality, he continues to reference *vanitas* imagery by portraying the fleeting bubble in a fixed state of suspension, much like the aforementioned paintings that display an arrest in time. Nevertheless, Fried challenges the concept of life as momentary when referencing *Lucy and Dolly* and the cloning process it indicates. His contemporary take on the age-old tradition of portraying the instability of a soap bubble, and his incomparable methods of manipulation, prove to further place importance on the sustainability of the bubble, making it an undeniable entity to exhibit whist disobeying the longstanding tradition of demonstrating its ephemerality.

In short, David Fried's speculative practice challenges the transient nature of the bubble, working against the ethics of *vanitas* imagery. He captures the fleeting life of the floating object and positions it on a physical surface, creating a print of what once was. Not only does the work relate to the film of *The Tenant* in that the bubble is seized in time, but it presents diversity. In one, the bubble is allowed to float freely

Figure 27. Jiri Georg Dokoupil. *Exit.* Acrylic and soap bubbles on canvas. 94.5" x 212.6". 2015.

throughout a house, entering a new room every few seconds; in the other, the bubble is suspended in a moment, unable to relieve itself from its surface. Fried's rendition is both relational and dependent, relying on closed systems to seize his preferred moment in time.

Fried isn't the only artist to manipulate this sort of suspension: Czech painter Jiri Georg Dokoupil creates bubbles in real-time, allowing them to float above a surface and burst seconds later, leaving a trace of the orb in vibrant color (fig. 27). What is key here is Dokoupil's intentions to exhibit the final burst, rather than the bubble itself, capturing the exact moment of cavitation, and engaging in chance and play, noticeably disparate from Fried's strong sense of control. In doing so, he transforms the fleeting entity into a more stable being, taking away its aspect of briefness. And Canadian artist Bradley Hart injects bubble wrap from the backside to create larger-than-life, impressionistic replications of famous works of art, implementing a single-color dot-pattern to reflect a cohesive image when standing a few feet back. Though Fried is not the only artist manipulating the bubble, his quasi-scientific methods prove substantial

in examining the notion of cloning a life as related to the repetition of the bubble. And while only few reviews can be found on Fried's multi-dimensional practice, the work is dramatic, transcending time and seizing the moment a bubble lives in infinite space.

Chapter Three

Politics: *Vanitas* and the Bubble in Politics and Society

> *For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Also, their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; nevermore will they have a share in anything done under the sun.*[51]

The dainty bubble continues to be manipulated and challenged, apparent in the work of Teresa Margolles, as she transforms the delicacy of the bubble into a gory spectacle. Neuenschwander and Guimaraes' *The Tenant* thus questions Margolles' use of the bubble, here, as she succumbs viewers to a moment of terror, waiting for the moment the infected bubble reaches the skin of the audience, permeating their presence, rather than portraying the bubble in its genuine state of ascension. Further, while *The Tenant* suspends cavitation and never seems to burst, Margolles' *En el aire* portrays the momentary being and the eventual moment it gives in to rupturing. Just as *The Tenant* enters another space by drifting between doorways, Margolles utilizes masses of bubbles to delineate bodies: those of the deceased. Thus, the orbs prove adaptable, representing one figure and thousands simultaneously. And while this take on the entity involves both tradition and history, the work is vastly different from that of David Fried, employing a more political stance versus an experimental and mythical

[51] *Ecclesiastes*. In *The Old Testament*. NKJV ed. Zondervan, 2013. Chapter 9, Verse 5-6.

one. With that, the multifaceted bubble makes its way from Dutch history, to the darkroom, and finally bursts in the audience-filled gallery space. I start this undertaking by surveying Margolles' background and practice that informed her solo show, one that exhibited her monumental bubble-filled installation entitled *En el aire*.

I. Teresa Margolles, SEMEFO, and the Somatic

Born in 1963 in Culiacán, Teresa Margolles made a living as a forensic technician in a Mexico City Morgue, analyzing evidence and uncovering the morbid fate of those who lay across her cold, metal table.[52] Her multi-media practice lends itself to acknowledging and resisting the ramifications of death and the social principles that coincide. In many cases, the morgue serves as a representation of Mexican society where drugs are easily accessible and widely utilized, resulting in a high-crime rate, mass impoverishment, a disruption of politics and causalities by way of military exploits. Margolles' work in forensics has offered her a greater, more vulnerable connection to her hometown, examining cadavers as if their death has brought them new life. And because of this direct association with the dead, SEMEFO was born. Servicio Médico Forense (translated to Forensic Medical Service) was founded by

[52] Milenio. "Homicides Surge in Mexico City: Worst Four-Month Period in 20 Years." *Mexico News Daily*, Mexico News Daily, 31 May 2018. https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/violence-surges-in-mexico-city-worst-in-20-years/.
I find it crucial to note the geographical size of Mexico City, being one of the largest cities in the world. In 1998, Mexico City's homicide rate reached 309 in the first four months of the year, decreasing to 249 in 2004, increasing steadily each year and soaring to 382 in 2018.

Figure 28. SEMEFO. *Proyecto Para Parque Infantil (Project for Children's Park).* Embalmed horse fetus, and metal. 1995.

Margolles in 1990, acting as an artist's collective while simultaneously employing the methods of a forensics laboratory.[53] SEMEFO displayed performance art and installation work, each project scorning the horrific states of execution and brutality within Mexico. The work, both gruesome and confrontational, left viewers exposed and liable to the representation of the politics of death within Mexico. One piece, entitled *Proyecto Para Parque Infantil* (*Project for Children's Park*, fig. 28), displays a mummified horse fetus situated atop a rocking chair, removing the innocence from the childhood activity. Another piece, *Teul 1, Lavatio Corporis* (*Washing of the Body,* fig 29), exhibits a makeshift construction holding upright the corpse of a horse, alluding

[53] Bray, Scott R, *En piel ajena: The work of Teresa Margolles,* (University of Sydney. 2007).

Figure 29. SEMEFO. *Teul 1, Lavatio Corporis (Washing of the Body).* Horse cadaver, wood, steel, coal. 1994.

to further violence of conquests experienced by Mexican civilization. Margolles' interest in the scientific techniques of the morgue lent itself to the ideals of the collective, delving into societal and political issues of Mexico and relating such concerns to the histories of the deceased. Though the work takes on the gruesome realities of an overcrowded Mexico City, Margolles demonstrates what can be perceived as empathy for the deceased, while simultaneously putting forth a sense of shock for the bodies that go unclaimed and therefore unseen. Although this act seems like an exploitation of the dead, there is a unity among those attempting to uncover cruelty and understand the dead. And though Margolles' relationship with the group

lasted nine years before she established her defiant, solo artistic practice, she continued to use truth, strife and discovery as the foundation for her discipline.

Margolles' text *What Else Could We Talk About?* offers a summary of her explorational and physical practice, which I find crucial to point out in an attempt to comprehend the confrontational and vulnerable aspects of her works:

> Although the investigative terrain, the raw materials and the technical referent continued to be anchored in the Mexican morgue…which at the same time involved a growing rejection of the circumscription of the 'artistic object'…the artist also used human fat to coat monochrome installations or as 'filler' to repair cracks in the building, the social body.[54]

This excerpt is relevant in understanding the materiality within Margolles' corporeal work. Her use of malleable bodies, the ones that no longer have purpose, is both distressing and manipulative. She maintains complete control over each bodily attribute of the corpse. She positions herself in the susceptible position of the abject, utilizing the human elements of those who have met an end, subjugating any physical threat from the deceased and exceeding ordinary boundaries. There is an emphasis on this "life of the corpse," pertaining to the afterlife of the deceased and the new purpose they serve. She draws upon those essential tasks in preparing a body for its end and the customs and rituals in laying a defenseless body to rest. In doing this, she is pointing out that not even the consequence of death can serve as a balancer of social bias. In the end, her work takes on a life of itself, in both social and economic matters. Unknown

[54] Margolles, Teresa, Cuauhtémoc Medina & Taiyana Pimentel. Translated by Michael Parker and Lorna Scott Fox, *What Else Could We Talk About?*, (RM, 2009), pgs. 18-19.

are the bodies that Margolles purifies; they go without identification and without commemoration. No longer are they someone who lived, but rather, an object, personified, that signifies the inevitability of death.

In essence, Margolles confronts the culture and politics of Mexico by working solely with those bodies that endured a brutal execution, relieving them from being ignored.[55] Those who experience this affliction come from an area of Mexico that is damaged by drug trafficking, where citizens and even youth die by force, where young mothers have no way of caring for their newborn children and discard of them into the trash. Poverty levels are inconceivable, as families must dispose of their loved ones in unethical ways due to lack of burial funding.[56] In *What Else is There to Talk About*, it is noted that according to the press in Mexico, 2008 experienced more bullets fired than any of the country's previous years, a massive five-thousand lives lost due to drug trading and the following attempts to restrain it.[57] The multitudes of casualties transcended that of any war-zone globally and indicated a state of emergency as the image of Mexico disintegrated. And though fatalities increased catastrophically leading up to 2008, death, destruction and extreme poverty persist from year to year. The result was widespread panic and devastation, and due to this detrimental state of Mexico in

[55] Coulson, Amanda. "Teresa Margolles." *Frieze*, 10 Sept. 2004, frieze.com/article/teresa-margolles.

[56] *Ibid*.

[57] Margolles, Teresa, Cuauhtémoc Medina & Taiyana Pimentel. Translated by Michael Parker and Lorna Scott Fox, *What Else Could We Talk About?*, (RM, 2009), p. 15.

the early twenty-first-century, artists like Teresa Margolles have shone light on the desolation. She exposes a severe lack of basic humanity within Mexican society due to a precarious government, and thus honors those who have lost their precious lives due to the destruction.

Decay is an obvious thread, here: literal decay of the deceased, social decay among Mexican communities, and political decay between society and government. Additionally, there's a temporal decay, the time-sensitive, fleeting moment that encompasses the figurative existence of each bubble that is portrayed in her orb-encompassing installation *En el aire* - that eventually bursts. This decay is a confirmation of cavitation, or the moment pressure builds within an enclosed entity, resulting in a shock wave, or a rupture. A subtle, iridescent bubble, so vulnerable and innocent, tests the connotations of deterioration. The decay, here, while remaining negative, is not the disintegration of a physical thing, but a moment in time that ceases to exist in seconds. Margolles' entire artistic practice utilizes decomposition by using human remains as a means of confrontation. Her work as a whole challenges the perception of viewers, bringing to the forefront what might have been beyond belief:

> The mortal remains of a human life are often the point of departure for the works of Teresa Margolles. In a minimalist aesthetic, the artist transforms past life, transporting it into new perceptibility by way of artistic intervention and thus wrestling 'her' dead from the grips of anonymity and oblivion. With highly unusual methods of eliminating the distance we usually place between ourselves and the dead, Teresa Margolles carries this documentary aspect of her work to an existential

> extreme. She succeeds in transcending aesthetic boundaries with artistic means that function silently.[58]

And while she deliberately makes use of the remains from the dead, there is a subtlety in her actions. Granted, utilizing human blood and fat is anything but delicate, Margolles brings to life the bubble with that same deliberateness and disbelief, but in the simplest of ways. For this reason, I find *En el aire* to be her most morbid, yet fantastic, of works. She intentionally eliminates any obvious portrayal of the human body, leaving viewers to immerse themselves in a whimsical environment, children and adults alike dancing between the floating orbs that drift from a single vent. Hidden is that mere fact of how the bubbles were made. It is that simple notion of concealing that knowledge from audiences (at least for a period of time) that I find most intriguing. There is be an abject quality to the human blood that she soaks a cloth in and outwardly displays. There is that same quality in the airy, naive bubbles that are created from the water that has disinfected the dead. Such an act is horrifying and distressing at once. Nevertheless, it is magical and wondrous, a wonderland of bubbles. It is here that the bubble proves to be adaptable based on its environment. It is a versatile entity that has the capacity to be manipulated, simultaneously harmless and toxic. *En el aire* reeks of contradiction, but in the most alluring of ways. By utilizing the bubble as a main source of pleasure, the work challenges one's perception of reality by means of an unconventional and gruesome, time-sensitive installation.

[58] We Art. "Teresa Margolles: 'Muerte sin fin'; Home Depot; Peter Roehr 1944-1968. Works from the Collection." We Art. https://weartproject.com/event/it/31396/teresa-margolles/.

In an interview for the 2006 Liverpool Biennial, Margolles was asked what being an artist meant to her. Her response to the question was simple: "as an artist, I feel the need to tell what I see inside the morgue. I feel the drive to do it. I must communicate what I see, what I learn there. And that's what I do."[59] Her voice becomes that of innumerable victims. She speaks on behalf of those who cannot, those who have met their untimely, unjust demise. And it's not only that Margolles feels as if she has an obligation to do this, it's about confrontation, about honoring those lives that have been lost due to a corrupt system and inhumane living conditions. Margolles assumes the power to construct and deconstruct the life of the corpse, emphasizing the notion of the uncanny, an experience both memorable and strange, and defying customary methods of purification.

II. *En el aire*, *Muerte Sin Fin* and *Vanitas* Imagery

The piece under examination, here, is Margolles' installation entitled *En el aire* (In the Air, 2003, fig. 30)[60], which addresses instabilities within her hometown of Culiacán. *En el aire* is positioned within an empty exhibition space, seemingly incomplete and lifeless. In seconds, the once vacant room is overwhelmed by masses of bubbles that reveal themselves from the ceiling, bouncing off of one another until the naive entities

[59] Tate. "Teresa Margolles - Liverpool Biennial 2006." *Tate Britain*. 14 Sep. 2006. https://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/teresa-margolles-liverpool-biennial-2006.

[60] The piece was initially exhibited in Art Basel Unlimited in Basel, Switzerland in 2003 from June 16-21. The next time the work was displayed was for Margolles' solo show in Germany: *Muerte Sin Fin.*

Figure 30. Teresa Margolles. *En el aire.* 2003.

burst into thin air, leaving behind no trace of their short-lived existence. The room becomes humid and inundated, obscuring the audience's perception of reality. The gravity-defying bubbles consume the space, taking up majority of the capacity of the room. Though the orbs seemingly overcrowd the room, a severe lack of presence is apparent. The atmosphere is ominous as the masses of bubbles become the antagonist, forcing viewers to position themselves around each orb that drifts within the damp room: "The subject is also the object. The sensory response is elicited not by an image but an absence."[61] Though viewers are completely surrounded by the brilliance of the buoyant orbs, captivation turns into a state of vulnerability. The space begins to feel increasingly compact, the air grows congested, and visibility through the convex beings becomes indistinct.

[61] Strozzina. "Teresa Margolles." *Emotional Systems*. www.strozzina.org/emotional_systems/e_tm.htm.

The installation is arresting. It solicits an explanation. Upon initial glance, the work seems cheerful and innocent, and at the same time, completely vulnerable. This interaction between human and bubble refers back to Sloterdijk's analysis of the boy in Millais' painting *Bubbles,* where a figure gazes in wonderment at a premature bubble. The bubble represented in the image is dependent on its creator, and vice versa as the creator's youth depends on the bubble. This moment of man and bubble colliding - again, *homo bulla*, or "man as bubble" - manifests a sort of relationship that Sloterdijk refers to as intimate and completely transient. This association proves relevant to *En el aire*, as viewer and bubble become familiar, each floating entity bursting onto the surface of skin, thus connecting the dead to the living. The nature of such a relationship, in the end, becomes distant, as one's jovial expression turns into disgust and outrage. A review by Amanda Coulson illustrates this moment:

> In the museum's soaring hall children play under bubbles that come from Teresa Margolles' piece *En el aire* (In the Air, 2003). Running, laughing, catching, they are fascinated by the glistening, delicate forms that float down from the ceiling and break up on their skin. A common motif in art history, the bubble has long been used as a memento mori, a reminder of the transitory nature of life. The children's parents, meanwhile, studiously read the captions. Suddenly, with a look of disgust, they come and steer their offspring away. The moment of naive pleasure turns into one of knowing repulsion: they have learned that the water comes from the Mexico City morgue, used to wash corpses before an autopsy. It's unimportant that the water is disinfected; the stigma of death turns the beautiful into the horrific.[62]

[62] Coulson, Amanda. "Teresa Margolles." *Frieze*, 10 Sept. 2004. frieze.com/article/teresa-margolles.

And so, the bubbles bounce through the air before exploding onto their chosen surface, most often that of the skin of audience members. The erratic behavior of the bubbles, along with their strong urge to be utilized for whimsy and play, directly resists the unpleasant notion of the use of polluted water to bathe deceased bodies.

No anatomy is exhibited, no physical evidence of the human figure, other than those who willingly partake in the viewing of the exhibition. The work presents the bubble in place of the somatic, each representing a single unit, one that no longer has a voice. No one person would assume that the work was concerned with something much greater than what was presented in front of them. Rather, Margolles confronts the sociopolitical tragedies: "…the government does not want these dead – the proof of a failed administration – to be seen, to cause an uproar. Margolles, who works only with the bodies of those that suffered a violent death, wants to rescue them from invisibility."[63] The piece conveys the vulnerabilities of the human race, how the public is at the 'mercy' of power that is out of personal control. On the other hand, we are much more than mere sufferers, for there is a constant battle between right and wrong within every human. With that, being human and part of a society as a whole, we carry with us the weight of influences outside our walls, regardless if we are personally affected or at fault. Here, Margolles is reminding her audience that such tragedies are either directly or indirectly influenced by the politics and well-being of other areas.

En el aire points out that by entering the space and subjecting oneself to the contaminated bubbles, that life is validated. In essence, the installation reveals to

[63] *Ibid.*

viewers an obliterated life. When the soapy, once-polluted water breaks on to the skin, existence is confirmed and compels one to come to terms with the notion of death that society has become so accustomed to.[64] She does this by way of a fleeting object, one that last for seconds. Her intentions are loaded as the bubble takes on the breadth of a politically unstable Mexican society. Something as innocent and weightless as a bubble becomes not only a representation of each body that ends up in the morgue, but an evocation of violent death as abnormal. And in an untraditional way, the installation is lifeless, despite there being physical bodies present, though they are inert due to the bodies having been executed and ultimately absent.

The political, confrontational piece proves unique to those that are similar to it. Information regarding the piece is deliberately placed inside the exhibit, forcing audiences to enter the playground of bubbles prior to learning of its intention. In that case, viewers willingly expose themselves to contaminated bubbles before learning what they are made of and the fate of those that shared a connection. Author and curator Christina Grevenbrock notes that upon setting foot in the room,

> Shock and disgust are intensified, because people expose themselves to the material without hesitation. Bubbles will have burst upon their skin before they get to know about the true nature of the water. The reduced, clean outer appearance of the works is attracting the viewer; the abject content is not obvious on first sight. *En el aire* almost forces itself upon the audience and transgresses their boundaries. The shock of realization is maximized, because the beautiful form allows for maximum

[64] Mundo del Museo. "Contemporary Art Work." Mundo del Museo. http://mundodelmuseo.com/ficha.php?id=1028.

> convergence. There is no room for a self-distancing of the viewer, because of the direct contact with the material.[65]

Margolles takes away the viewer's choice to turn away and not enter the room. Without question, she subjects her audience to fear (a much more minor form of fear, of course, but nevertheless, a moment of panic) and pressures them to reflect on the violence.

A similar article, entitled "Each Bubble is a Body," and in conjunction with Sloterdijk's notion of companionship, touches upon the bubble's relationship with *vanitas:* the ephemerality of life and a need for self-reflection. A typical French *vanitas* image presents a central figure, surrounded by objects that reflect the brevity of human life, where the bubble is one of those "objects." In *En el aire*, no figure is represented, no one body is in the spotlight. Rather, the bubbles take form of the body, signifying a life via floating orbs, "extend[ing] the meaning of the baroque motif to encompass sociopolitical aspects…the human form is in permanent transition in her works, instable, life's perishability is inscribed into the material."[66] The work has the ability to present brilliance while obtaining something more than just disinfecting soap and clean water. The water is contaminated, polluted with the death of the undeserving. The bubble becomes a political figure, a sign of rebellion, a plea for exposition.

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[65] Grebenbrock, Christina. "'Each Bubble is a body.' Teresa Margolles - Hidden Terror." Seismopolite. 8 Oct. 2015. http://www.seismopolite.com/each-bubble-is-a-body-teresa-margolles.

[66] *Ibid*.

The exhibition that showcased *En el aire*, entitled *Muerte Sin Fin,* made its debut at the Museum Fur Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt in the spring of 2004. Translated to *Death Without End* and adopted from an Octavio Paz poem,[67] the solo show presented various separate installations, each confronting the "life of [a] corpse," or the fate of those deceased bodies that make their way to the morgue. The exposition's intention was to tackle the realities of violent death, alluding to what each corpse undergoes after passing and "the connections between their lives before and their 'lives' after death."[68] In actuality, *Muerte Sin Fin* was an exhibition about death; it was an opportunity to react to presentations of death that are so often misinterpreted and unseen. In recognizing the dead, Margolles merges her experience in the morgue with an artistic practice that aims to challenge sources of power and shed light on social tragedy. In doing so, she introduces death to the living by way of the bubble, occupying a space with both bodies and ephemeral entities. And while *Muerte Sin Fin* was prominently about revealing the brutality that many Mexico City natives encountered, the show was also a celebration, one of life after death and without pain.

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[67] Kunstaspekte. "Teresa Margolles - Muerte Sin Fin." *Kunstaspekte*, 2004. http://kunstaspekte.art/event/teresa-margolles-muerte-sin-fin-2004-04?hl=en.
The press release for Muerte Sin Fin reveals a quotation of Octavio Paz: ""Other experiences, other deaths await us," Octavio Paz commented on the 1939 poem "Muerte sin fin," written by Mexican author José Gorostiza (1901-1973), which gives the exhibition its title. It shows a great, touching and overwhelming work if you do not close your eyes to the dead. Teresa Margolles does not do it."

[68] We Art. "Teresa Margolles: 'Muerte sin fin'; Home Depot; Peter Roehr 1944-1968. Works from the Collection." We Art. https://weartproject.com/event/it/31396/teresa-margolles/.

Muerte Sin Fin, which was Margolles' first preeminent solo show, acted as a sort of rebellion towards the Mexican Republic, presenting the mass amount of bodies that end up in the morgue as a direct outcome of a faulty system. While juxtaposing an aesthetically pleasing aura with a horrific realization, her practice transcends space, both literally and figuratively, connecting physical life on earth to the histories of the dead. She is unapologetic and deliberate in representing a society infested with death. She holds accountable a flawed bureaucratic system in an audacious fashion. She breaks boundaries and represents realities through a contrasting lens. And much like many of her various other works, there is an emphasis on the dead, in a singular sense, not only the mass amount of citizens who have met their demise due to instabilities throughout society, but each death, each body that perishes, each history. Margolles' involvement in bringing to light the stories of the dead thus reconstructs their pasts, bringing them to the forefront via the intervening of limits. And consequently, the substantiality of the work and its resemblance to death proves to be distressing, "[standing] on the border of the representable and on the border of art, so they are exactly at the place where death - beyond a symbolization - just becomes visible as the dissolution of all form."[69]

The display generated much conversation, receiving reviews that touched on the dichotomy between the gruesome and the delicate. Amanda Coulson points out some of the more disturbing aspects of the exhibition, calling out the disturbances in

[69] *Ibid.*

Margolles' work and suggesting that she, herself, is undoubtedly troubled by the creation of the work. Her practice demonstrates sorrow for her country and outrage for those who cannot fight for themselves. She takes an indirect approach in confronting the tragedies that her community faces, not depicting adversity outright, for the outcome would be too ghastly, but presenting them with subtly and grace, though the underlying horror remains.[70] It makes sense to agree that much of Margolles' work is likely a product of lamentation for those unclaimed whom she lays to rest. At the same time, the work is not one of "catharsis," but one of conflict: she is not attempting to come to terms with the horror that surrounds her; rather, she is aiming to hold those at fault accountable. And the simple fact that Margolles probably does suffer from "acute grief for her country" proves that the work is that much more effective. It is a personal account from a forensic technician who has no choice but to cleanse the dead, ridding them of any signs of a previous life.[71] That being said, Margolles' work within the show presented a multitude of things: recognition to those who have passed, a personal, albeit temporary, mourning, and an honoring of the innocent, those who can no longer speak for themselves. Amanda Coulson is correct, though, in making known Margolles' intent of liberating the dead from concealment, commemorating a past life and a relinquishing of life beyond mortality.

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[70] Coulson, Amanda. "Teresa Margolles." *Frieze*, 10 Sept. 2004. frieze.com/article/teresa-margolles.

[71] *Ibid.*

III. The Abject and the Index

The overall performance is as despicable as it is seductive: an abject experience. Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror*, discusses the moment that death threatens the living:

> [T]hese body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border…if dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.[72]

Kristeva points out the moment in which an inevitable death becomes a reality, noting that the body that continues to function, albeit in disturbing ways, is alive. This shocking moment of obliteration is illustrated as the tainted bubbles hit the skin of viewers. Those who enter the room now possess the same death that contaminates the water from which the innocent bubbles are manifested. Viewers are now connected to the dead – by way of the bubble – in an intimate sense, further confirming Peter Sloterdijk's notion of the bubble and the human as partaking in a familiar relationship. This very moment is the meaning of the abject, the moment of revelation, panic, and repugnance; it reveals the ultimate act of self-preservation. Kristeva goes on, elucidating the corpse that contaminates life:

> The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as

[72] Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: Approaching Abjection*, (Columbia University Press, NY, 1982), p. 3.

> from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.[73]

The abject is less concerned with a lack of cleanliness or mere filth; rather, the abject becomes apparent when "identity, system, order" are disrupted. And this idea of being in direct contact with the dead, their skin on your skin becomes a disturbing moment of interference and realization; the abject is, in such a situation, dominant. It is for this reason that I find *En el aire* so spectacular and momentous, so long as I, personally, remain on the outside of that bubble-crammed room.

Julia Kristeva poetically defines "the abject" as that one thing that is opposing, that fights its counterpart, that makes your skin crawl. Kristeva mentions the uncanny,[74] a seemingly unnatural experience or thing, that simultaneously serves as an unsettling and familiar moment. When contemplating *En el aire*, the abject and the uncanny go hand-in-hand, as the pastime of amusing oneself with bubbles is recognizable from childhood, while maintaining the qualities of an atrocious event. Further, the abject, as an act, equates to defiance of regulation, evident in Kristeva's notion of crime being a force that calls attention to the "fragility of the law." Margolles makes use of the bodies that have been wronged by a corrupt society in a confrontational, yet weightless way; in turn, this correlates to the abject nature of the dead, as the use of their remains within an artistic practice and the rotting of the corpse transforms into a buoyant bubble.

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[73] *Ibid.*

[74] Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf.
The notion of the uncanny stems from Sigmund Freud's theory of when familiarity and terror collide: the "uncanny" is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.

Coinciding with the way that the abject functions, in this case, is the index, or the concept of a sign that indicates – or indexes – an item in the framework in which it occurs. In essence, the index functions based on the imprint of the sign, or what is left from what the object, quite literally, touches.[75] In this case, the abject qualities within Margolles' *En el aire* operate as a type of trace on the human body; as the bubbles fall from the ceiling and land on viewers in the space, the figurative souls of the dead seep into the skin of those who enter. The water serves as residue, or a stain that contaminates the body, regardless of the fact that the water is not harmful, and thus emphasizes the proximity between the living and the dead. This connection between bubble and audience is where the abject reveals itself, where such a response is so powerful that it outweighs logic. Though, as a viewer, one is able to read the plaque that states where the water originates, the close proximity between the living in the dead is alarming to those who enter. This, in part, is due to the psychological state of the living being, where one can't help but react even with the awareness that the bubble is harmless. In this instance, the bubble is threatening, creating an abject experience by way of direct contact of the indexical sign, bringing one so near to actual death. Further, the contaminated water that penetrates the skin of its audience serves as an index that points to real, corporal presence: the bubbles infiltrate those who are alive and subject themselves to the damp space. This is evident in Margolles' ability to create such confrontational, precarious work, as she is physically hands-on with those who reach the morgue, further influencing her belief in the power of physical evidence. Therefore,

[75] Krauss, Rosalind, *Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America*, (The MIT Press, 1977).

the meaning of the piece, in the eyes of the viewer, shifts because of the realization of the makeup of the orbs, forcing one to cope with the bubble as death versus it as a mere symbol. In the end, her utilization of the bubble, giving it new purpose and meaning through the index and the abject response, lends itself to more than just an unusual, packed space. The erratic entities become the bodies of the dead, the link between past and present, and a source of dissemination. While the bubble maintains its symbolism – equating to the brevity of human life – what is particular to Margolles is her exploitation of the bubble as both symbolic and indexical, where without the indexicality, the piece would cease to function the same way.

Nevertheless, Margolles' blatant, political use of the bubble takes the entertainment and humor out of the childhood activity and replaces it with the realities of death and horror. Unlike many of her other controversial and confrontational pieces, *En el aire* utilizes the notable bubble in a way that is unconventional. It eradicates any distance viewers put between themselves and contents within the room (other viewers, the walls, and even the bubbles themselves). The bubbles become one with those in the room, polluting skin, as previously mentioned, and connecting the living with the dead. Not only is the piece about challenging those forces that caused the death of the masses, it is about absence - absence of the persecuted human, absence of the voice, and absence of choice. At the same time, present is a new body, an amalgamation of the dead and the existing living, two being becoming one. There is only one way out, and, if one chooses to remain, they are forced to connect to the dead, to be in conversation with the voices of dead. The audience partakes in the sharing of a body and a reflection of

the end. Margolles, then, offers an ability to be in dialogue with the deceased - listening, feeling, becoming - and allowing the death to touch the living. In the end, the water utilized to establish the flurry of bubbles functions as both a sign of life and a lack thereof.

Though quite indirectly, the work seems to line up with the lessons of *vanitas,* serving as a notice to be mindful that death is inevitable. This belief of death as inescapable, a result of a failed judicial system, is at the center of Margolles' methods. In the case of the judicial system of Mexico, money is at the forefront of big business, trading, and the narco wars, paying no mind to those who are financially unstable. Ultimately the minority makes their way to the morgue as a result of trafficking, poverty, and physical violence. Therefore, time and attention are focused on materiality - in this case, corruption - rather than the ephemerality of life and inevitability of death. Margolles inserts the bubble into a fraudulent situation, tainting the skin of the viewer while reminding them of the transience of that single moment. This is where the abject meets *vanitas*, and where the political event of death and the structure of the present lead to decomposition.

As a result, the bubble is consistent, demonstrating the substantiality of such an entity, both within the classic *vanitas* still life and in more modern forms - installation, durational-based work, and perhaps moving art (in Margolles' case). It has come to signify a fleeting moment, one that can vanish in an instant. Constantly repeated, the bubbles, in all their shimmering, indistinct glory, takes on the breadth of socio-politics within a broken society, each representing one of the countless that now cease to exist.

In that overwhelming, vaporous room, the bubbles are the voice for the voiceless and the life of the lifeless. They take on more than just a representation of a collective, though; rather, each bubble, singular and dependent as it is, is injected with the death that fills the lungs of its audience. Further, "there is yet another aspect to this: bringing visitors from all over the world in close bodily contact to the type of material, she uses, is also an act of cultural transgression and inscription."[76] The work, in all, harks back on the certainty of death, albeit peaceful or heinous.

The wonder and amusement that comes from the bubble is displaced by revulsion in *En el aire*; a childhood activity has turned into a moment of distress, as the bubble has been distorted, removing all innocence from the pursuit. The virtuous image of the boy and the bubble, painted by Sir John Everett Millais and interpreted by Sloterdijk, is challenged in Margolles' installation. As pointed out in the first chapter, the scene depicts a young boy gazing in astonishment at a floating bubble in which he has just created, admiring his handiwork and establishing an affiliation with the entity. The boy is naïve, partaking in an activity that is harmless and childlike. Those same adolescent children enter *En el aire*, dancing about in the seemingly innocent environment that is consumed by bubbles. Except in this setting, the bubbles do not come from the hands of its child creator; rather, the bubbles are infected with the touch of death. No longer is the pure orb a whimsical entity, but one of nauseating penetration.

[76] Grebenbrock, Christina. "'Each Bubble is a body.' Teresa Margolles - Hidden Terror." Seismopolite. 8 Oct. 2015. http://www.seismopolite.com/each-bubble-is-a-body-teresa-margolles.

Margolles has shifted perspective, tainting the impermanent bubble and challenging its integrity.

In terms of ephemerality, Margolles' *En el aire* is outstanding, utilizing the most transient object - the bubble - and portraying it in an abject, fleeting way. For this reason, her work comes last on the delicate thread that makes its way throughout this text. In addition to exploiting the bubble with a profound, confrontational approach, she transforms a whimsical and simple hobby into one of radicality and repugnance. The work echoes *The Tenant*, as the iridescent orbs hover aimlessly, unaware of where they came from or what they contain. They resemble an absent being for the few moments that they float; it is until the moment of cavitation occurs that the short-lived bubble comes to mean much more than intended; they represent the impermanent, naivety and youth, and offer up interpretation when in comparison to the sociopolitical state of an area. For that reason alone, the bubble is a force. It signifies the need for being present, paying little attention to materiality and offering more of an awareness on the transient nature of memories and life.

Conclusion

> *Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart. They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands.*[77]

The lustrous bubble denotes not only ephemerality, but wonder and simplicity. Though there is much science behind its physical properties and the like, the impulsive being is contingent on its makeup and environment. In "Universal Foam: Exploring the Science of Nature's Most Mysterious Substance," Sidney Perkowitz delineates the chemistry behind bubbles (and foam), contemplating on the substance as solid, liquid, or gaseous, all while maintaining elegance: "And its very frothiness brings something special: a delight that comes from its fragility, its beauty, its sensual appeal."[78] Perkowitz notes the physical properties that are unique to the bubble and its momentariness, while commenting on the many scientific experiments that focus on the matter as substantial in understanding surface tension, enclosed air pressure, and the emulsion that is foam. The bubble has the ability to find the most minuscule surface between any two given areas or margins, proving to be both sovereign and dependent on the other: "the walls between adjoining bubbles become very thin: instead of each sphere floating serenely in its liquid cocoon, bubbles press against each other. In some

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[77] *Ecclesiastes*. In *The Old Testament*. NKJV ed. Zondervan, 2013. Chapter 5, Verses 10, 15, 16.

[78] Perkowitz, Sidney, *Universal Foam: Exploring the Science of Nature's Most Mysterious Substance,* (Anchor, 2001).

places, the wall is breached, and two bubbles join into one."[79] In this case, not only is the creator in connection with his creation, but the bubble forms an intimate relationship with itself, relying on a common surface before the moment of cavitation occurs. This brings us back to Peter Sloterdijk's theory of the bubble and the body as interrelated, depending on it for wonder, amusement, and companionship.

The bubble, then, operates as an optimal metaphor for those things that are ephemeral; the childhood activity symbolizes nostalgia, wonder, and naivety, and has taken center stage in artworks that contemplate both morality and momentariness. Throughout this thesis, the bubble has maneuvered through traditional Dutch Baroque still life imagery and its French counterpart; *vanitas* photography; otiose contemporary sculpture; photograms that resemble a form of printmaking; narcissism by way of mirrored spheres; and an overwhelming bubble-packed space. It has maneuvered through morality, ethics, reproduction of technology and biology, and sources of power, taking on more than just spontaneity, replacing the physical figure and acting as a voice for the disadvantaged. Further, the bubble has travelled through time, beginning in the era of the Old Testament, through centuries and finally making its way to the subject matter of the present. Not only has it served as a reminder to relinquish control and rid oneself of possessions – as stated in *vanitas* imagery – but the glistening orb has come to represent the dangers of wasting time, a call for surrendering to God and an expression of the desire to find purity and rejuvenation in the afterlife. In essence, the soap bubble becomes more than just a sphere in suspension: it carries

[79] *Ibid*.

Figure 31. Jason de Graaf. *Papilio.* Acrylic on panel. 33" x 45". 2015.

symbolism while obtaining intricate qualities that allow it to be both free and supportive. The entity is unpredictable and organic, continually establishing a link between itself and its blower, and other orbs reminiscent of it.

Keeping with the notion of the bubble as fixed in time and in a constant state of suspension, the effervescent object is central in Canadian painter Jason de Graaf's hyper-realistic work entitled *Papilio* (fig. 31). The title references a species within the swallowtail family of butterflies and portrays a modernized scene, complete with a deceased and framed insect, an extinguished candle, and an image of the "Dutch Masters" of still-life imagery. The bubble, situated near the left side of the painting, hovers atop a stack of black journals as it just barely skims the surface of the leather. Next to it is the encased butterfly – *Papilio* – casting back an image of the bubble in its

Figure 32. Jason de Graaf. *Viridis.* Acrylic on panel. 24" x 24".

reflection. Directly above, smoke wafts in the air, as if just blown out by the one that gave it life. The image boasts an alternate reality, tricking the eye of the audience with its illusory photographic appearance. Through utilizing a sense of depth and imitation, Jason de Graaf attempts to convey a sensation of presence while leaving the physical figure out of the painting. Further, he challenges reflectivity and the properties of light to depict a translucence that contemplates wonder, captivation, and mystery.[80] The hyperreal illustration is laden with objects that are commonly found in *vanitas* imagery and pays homage to not only the Dutch Masters, but the illuminating bubble.

[80] Huffington Post. "Artist Jason de Graaf Creates Amazing Hyperrealistic Paintings." HuffPost News, 7 Dec. 2017. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jason-de-graaf-realistic-paintings_n_1586642.

Figure 33. Jason de Graaf. *Lux Brumalis.* Acrylic on panel. 24" x 48". 2015.

Though Jason de Graaf's paintings focus on the theme of portraying physical representations of everyday objects, his painterly finesse in demonstrating the bubble and overall reflectivity is remarkable. For example, in *Viridis* (fig. 32), referential to a state of blossoming and budding, where a skull that seems to be crafted out of glass or ice floats midair against a solid black background, facing towards the left-corner of the frame. The painting seems to be an oxymoron, indicating a space of greenery and blooming, while presenting a reflective skull. The skull is entirely transparent, depicting a distorted, reflected image of a landscape in the distance. The painting is both intricate and cold, portraying a realistic image of a skull while representing the skill it takes to illustrate a reflection of a scene against an uneven surface. Another model of such refinement that conveys the same vitality and replication is *Lux Brumalis* (fig. 33): a painting of three mirrored orbs, each reflecting light on and off each other, exhibiting multiple representations of spheres on each physical surface. The orbs showcase another landscape, complete with a blue sky, tall trees and fresh white snow

on the ground, and further indicates Jason de Graaf's extraordinary ability to depict a wondrous mirrored image. In each of the aforementioned paintings, the reflective objects are either reminiscent of or thoroughly representative of the bubble and its attributes, broadening the notion of the bubble as a renowned figure for comprehending realities that are fixed in an image, though ultimately transient. There is exceptional skill in painting the bubble, documenting each moment of reflection and recreating a skewed scene. This finesse was evident within the Dutch Baroque imagery, such as Jacques de Gheyn's *Vanitas Still Life*, as in Jean Siméon Chardin's French iteration *Soap Bubbles*, and in even more contemporary versions, evident in Jason de Graaf's work. In such cases, the bubble is able to transform, expanding its repertoire to more than just a source of wonder and amusement and allowing it to remain suspended in time and space.

In all, there is a decadence to the bubble. It is vivacious and celebratory and has the capacity to symbolize a fleeting moment, a desire for the pure, and utter delicacy. From the time of the bubble as signifying a passing moment and the longing to reach heaven and God, to the modernized take on *vanitas*, confronting social politics and contemplating reproduction, it has embodied more than mere temporality.

With that, I conclude with a last image of Rivane Neuenschwander and Cao Guimarães' *The Tenant* (fig. 34), reaching its final destination near a bay of windows in an empty, desolate room. The video closes on one last look at the bubble that defies cavitation, never bursting, even up until the final second. The bubble that embodies

Figure 34. Rivane Neuenschwander and Cao Guimaraes. *The Tenant*. HD video projection. 10 minutes, 34 seconds. 2010.

such a tenant has threaded this thesis through various representations of the bubble as primary medium and subject matter, signifying brevity and wonder. In the end, the innocent activity of creating bubbles to watch them float and burst has transformed into a relationship with the sphere; the connection is one that places the creator outside of the self, relying on the immortal bubble for more than just amusement, but for companionship, youthfulness and wonder, and a reminder of ultimate ascension and ephemerality.

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