

Tausif Noor, Excerpt from Optimal Conditions catalog, 1/2022:

OPTIMAL/OPERANT

If objectivity is a limited framework for individuals to understand themselves in relation to others—a framework that must be complemented by alternate forms of deep, subjective knowledge—it stands to question how identities cohere in the first place. Samuel Wildman approaches this question across sculptural installations that imbricate feminist theory and Kleinian studies of child psychology to propose a reparative reading of the domestic as the site of both crisis and renewed possibility. *A Small Domestic Crisis, 2021* is a series of sculptures and installations informed by Wildman's experiences as a handyman and caretaker. Made from the ordinary detritus of the American home, such as air filters, paper grocery bags, and assorted kitchen and bath fixtures—the sculptures re-present domestic ephemera in uncanny combinations to dramatize the forms of labor and care required to uphold the dream of unification at different scales: the body, self, the family unit, and the nation. This aspiration toward reparative work is a mode of mitigating anxiety, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued drawing on Melanie Klein, through the rearrangement of “murderous part-objects”—objects toward which our instincts are directed—into comprehensible wholes.[5]

In Wildman's sculptures, functional objects separated from their usual contexts are reconfigured in malfunctioning, off-kilter combinations that antagonize the strong attachments and desires to make things work. In an age of neoliberal capitalism where productivity is always regarded as something to be optimized, scaled, and accelerated, “making things work” often entails working against our best interests, hindering our flourishing. The late theorist Lauren Berlant has referred to this tendency to attach ourselves to desires that prevent us from thriving as a relation of “cruel optimism,” fantasies of the good life that promise stability even as the liberal model of success falters and relations become increasingly atomized and insufficient.[6]

Wildman's sculptures suggest then, that it is through an ethics of care, rather than the fleeting sense of success, that the domestic fantasy can move into the realm of the real. In his efforts to make sense of the home as a dynamic site of negotiation between the self and environment, the artist fixates on the logics of interiority and exteriority, lining paper bags and cardboard with subway tiles, or situating a night light in the unexpected chasm of a detached kitchen sink. These gestures evince how the desire to make things work is not only borne of capitalist greed and the promise of individual aggrandizement, but of an ethic of being with and caring for others.

With this, we can understand the “optimal” outside of the rubrics set forth by neoliberal institutions—the university and the art gallery among them—and inch toward a mutualistic approach to present conditions of crisis. Each of the works presented in *Optimal Conditions* is the product of collaborative work as much as it is the result of individual artistic labor. Together, the artists and their respective works propose that ideal conditions—while subjective, and dependent on history, environment, and particular cultural framings—are also malleable. Resisting the impulse to direct their creative labor for strictly individual ends, these artists

suggest that their art, with all its particularities and preoccupations, can also change the ways that we apprehend, and define our ideals.

[5] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're so Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay is About You," in *Touching Feeling*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003: 150.

[6] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. Tausif Noor is a critic, curator, and PhD candidate in the History of Art Department at UC Berkeley

Sam's artist statement from the same catalog:

The series of sculptures in *Optimal Conditions* take as their context the single family home in the United States. These spaces are not neutral contexts, since the early 1900's private interests and the federal government have used single family homes as a way to reinforce gender norms and racial divides, and as a design site to embed consumerist habits and nationalist sentiments. 1 To describe the single family home, architect Dolores Hayden has likened it to an image of a body. 2 Likewise psychologist Carl Jung has described it as a version of self. And while these descriptions of the home may seem comedically anthropomorphic, when consider - ing the representation of single family homes in cinema, particularly Hollywood films of the 80's and early 90's, they are in good company.

In the zaney films of that period like *Home Alone*, *Money Pit*, *BeetleJuice*, or *Poltergeist*, the single family home is so central to the film that it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to describe it as a leading character. As a handyman and a caretaker, fixing rotten floors and leaky pipes, Samuel has worked with the bodies of these buildings, each one with its own particular history and charac - ter. An important distinction might be made here—handyman work is distinct from carpen - try. A carpenter generally works holistically, removing significant portions of an existing house, its internal systems, gutting it, and then remodeling it. Whereas a handyman repairs only what has failed, augmenting the existing structures and systems to function for future use and leaving the rest of the building intact.

Considering the contentious history of single family homes and the current housing crisis, what does it mean to extend the life of such a contested space? What systems, forms, struc - tures and habits are being augmented and extended? When working with the body of a house, its surfaces and subsurfaces, is it possi - ble to inform its character, or the characters acting within? For the work in *Optimal Conditions*, Wildman considers the formal opportunities of repair in conjunction with the history, body, and character of single family home.

1 Jonathan Massey, "Risk and Regulation," in *Governing by Design: Architecture, Economy, and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Aggregate, 31-37.

2 Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: the Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life*, Norton 1986, 67-78 .