



MOUNT HOLYOKE
COLLEGE ART MUSEUM

exhibition guide

Skinner Museum 75

LENKA CLAYTON

COMEDY PLUS TRAGEDY

SEPTEMBER 28, 2021 – MAY 29, 2022

HARRIET L. AND PAUL M. WEISSMAN GALLERY

LENKA CLAYTON

COMEDY PLUS TRAGEDY



Introduction

Artists are truth-tellers. Through their vision, artists help us see the world anew. Lenka Clayton (b. 1977), a British-American conceptual artist based in Pittsburgh has committed her work, whether sculpture, drawings, video, or performance, to uncovering hidden truths about everyday life. One of Clayton's methods is exploring museum collections and their histories.

For this 75th anniversary exhibition, Clayton has selected individual objects that once amazed Joseph Allen Skinner and has reactivated them for a 21st-century audience. Through her incisive reinterpretation—including new titles, shifts in context, and material juxtapositions—Clayton renders each object anew, most likely in ways that Skinner never intended. She has found both comedy and tragedy through varied and unusual objects that reveal the idiosyncratic and fascinating collection of the Skinner Museum. Unearthing witty and stark truths, Clayton guides us to unexpected places.

This exhibition is made possible by the Susan B. Weatherbie Exhibition Fund and the Leon Levy Foundation.

Photography by Laura Shea, 2021

Four Invisible Objects: Flag Too Big to be Seen, Exploded Cannonball, 134-Year-Old Wedding Cake Eaten by Mice, Stolen Diamonds, 2021

Cardboard, ribbon, and wax paper; linen; wood with paint; ink on paper

Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, Mount Holyoke College

SK 2006.880.INV, SK 2006.1077.INV, SK L.D.2.4, P.C.A.1



Presented in three separate cases, this work is a collection of objects—both present and missing—that for various reasons cannot truly be seen. An enormous American flag too fragile to unfurl ever again, an empty box and wrapping that once contained a cherished piece of Joseph Skinner's 1887 wedding cake, a cannonball that survived the horrific fields of Gettysburg only to be exploded by a 21st-century bomb squad, and a selection of gems pilfered from the Skinner Museum long ago by unknown thieves.

Through *Four Invisible Objects*, Clayton remembers what has been forgotten and shows us that we do not need to behold in order to contemplate—we can have meaningful experiences with the invisible and unknown.

Meteorite at its Highest Height in 50,000 Years, 2021

Iron nickel

Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, Mount Holyoke College

SK P.M.1.1



Suspended from the ceiling is 115 pounds of celestial metal that has encountered both the beauty and severity of the solar system. Fifty millennia ago a giant mass of nickel and iron from the depths of space exploded into the atmosphere above what is now Canyon Diablo, New Mexico.

As the dust settled around what is now a giant crater, the asteroid's monumental voyage across millions of miles ended here on Earth. After countless millennia, Clayton has returned this meteor fragment into the air once again. This is a fitting homage to an object that, since the beginning of time itself, has had the freedom of flight.

***Remainder*, 2021**

Ceramic, copper, glass, pewter, and wood with sand

Objects from the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, Mount Holyoke College, collected from 4 continents and spanning 400 years



A graduated sequence of containers stretches into the distance. All but the largest vessel are encircled by haloes of black sand, vestiges of a repeated action that reanimates these objects. The arrangement was created by pouring sand from the largest vessel into the adjacent smaller one, an action repeated 20 times. The halo of sand at the bottom of each is the literal remainder of that which could not be contained. Clayton chose these objects from hundreds of receptacles at the Skinner Museum in order to represent a range of cultures, materials, forms, functions, and periods of manufacture.

Much of Clayton's initial thinking about the Skinner Museum focused on concepts of reactivating objects. *Remainder* is the culmination of a process of acknowledging forgotten and lost contexts and the human beings that animated these spaces and used these vessels. Drawing inspiration from an envelope of sand from the Sahara (also on display), the progression of spilt sand marks the passage of both motion and time and the loss (and renewal) of intended purpose.

Envelope Containing 0.000000000000000015957% of the Sahara Desert,
2021

Envelope with sand

Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, Mount Holyoke College

SK 2006.2603.INV



An aged envelope labeled "Sand from Sahara Great Desert" is displayed here with some of its contents—grains of powdery ochre-colored sand spilling out onto the vitrine. From a myriad of intriguing objects in the Skinner Museum, this small souvenir arrested Clayton's poetic imagination and served as one of the inspirations for *Remainder*, the centerpiece installation that incorporates various Skinner Museum vessels and haloes of black sand.

Just as people pick up shells and pebbles at the beach, someone years ago decided to collect sand from the Sahara Desert, which spans 3,600,000 square miles across Africa. Through approximate calculations and the retitling of this object as *Envelope Containing 0.000000000000000015957% of the Sahara Desert*, Clayton has laid bare the comedic impossibility of trying to contain something as infinite as the vast Sahara.

Sculpture for Keyboards (Rocks and Minerals) II, 2020

Vintage Royal typewriter, typed paper sheet, azurite, bismuth, calcite, desert rose, emerald, fluorite, garnet, hematite, indigo gabbro, jasper, kyanite, lapis lazuli, mookalite, nickle, obsidian, pyrite, quartz, rhodonite, selenite, tourmaline, unakite, vessonite, white howlite, xylophal, yellow jasper, zosite

Purchase with the Henry Rox Memorial Fund for the Acquisition of Works by Contemporary Women Artists

Mount Holyoke College Art Museum

2021.14



A colorful array of rocks and minerals rests on the keys of this vintage typewriter. Clayton has matched each stone by its name to every letter key. For example, a squarish piece of hematite rests on the "H" key, striped jasper on the "J" key, and semi-translucent kyanite on the "K."

Clayton created this work after seeing the brimming assortment of rocks and minerals on display at the Skinner Museum as well as some old typewriters collected by Joseph Allen Skinner. Through the addition of each rock or mineral, Clayton layers in both wit and loss by making this keyboard unusable. Sourcing her own typewriter for this new creation, the artist also alludes to her almost decade-long practice of making drawings exquisitely rendered through only a typewriter and its ink.

Petrified Glove. Brave Glove., 2021

Sulphate and carbonate coating, wire and zinc buttons; leather with faux pearl buttons

The Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, Mount Holyoke College

SK 2006.2105.INV; Loan from Artist (leather glove)



A hardened and misshapen white glove is perched upright and alongside a white leather glove, the latter still soft and supple. The glove at the left for many years remained a mystifying object until a staff member noticed its delicate buttons and realized it was a Victorian lady's glove.

The petrified glove most likely originates from Mother Shipton's Cave in Knaresborough, one of England's oldest tourist spots. Mother Shipton (ca. 1488–1561) was said to be a witch and an oracle, who predicted future peril and disasters in the form of long rhyming poems. She famously forecast, "The world to an end shall come in eighteen hundred and eighty one." The water in a well next to her dwelling had an unusually high mineral content. Since the 1600's locals and tourists have dangled objects in these waters, which turns them to stone in just a few months. Over time, this glove became its own stalactite, solidified and petrified by the calcium salts contained in the waters. Clayton pairs the petrified glove with another antique glove, naming its linguistic opposite, "Brave Glove."



Lenka Clayton with *Remainder*, fall 2021