

On Objects and Things: The Wilkie Wedding Dress and the Drawings of Sarah Casey

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Figure 1. Wilkie Wedding Dress (Front), Ryerson Fashion Research Collection. Gift of O'Reilly Family, 2016. Photo by Victoria Hoggood, 2019.

A silk taffeta calf-length wedding dress is stored in a coffin-like archival box in the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection in Toronto, Canada (Figure 1). This homemade dress, worn on November 15, 1927 by Evelyn Normand Wilkie (1902-1969) for her wedding to William Douglas Howard at St. James United Church in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia was once described as pretty, but over the years, the lustrous silk has yellowed. Stored for decades in a cardboard box by the family as a poignant reminder of their beloved 'Nanan,' the textile used to make the dress has deteriorated due to the presence of metallic salts in the silk and the untreated stains of wear. Normally a garment in such an advanced state of decay would not be accepted into a museum or study collection, and although the dress was not formally accessioned into the collection, it was set aside and later became the artistic provocation for the work of UK based artist Sarah Casey. This object biography probes the *thingly* presence of Wilkie's wedding dress both within the study collection and also as the source of creative inspiration for the drawings of Casey that became the focus of a 2019 exhibition at Ryerson University in Toronto¹.

Thing theory recognizes that some things express a 'force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence' (Brown 2001: 5). Some things may captivate us with vibrant energy, exerting a *thingly* presence that acts as a gravitational pull. This type of metaphysical presence has been acknowledged by philosopher Martin Heidegger in a painting of shoes by Van Gogh (Heidegger 2008), by theatre scholar Marlis Schweitzer in a Salomé costume worn by Maud Allan (Schweitzer 2014), and by political theory scholar Jane Bennett in a pile of debris that included a dead rat and a plastic glove (Bennett 2010). Critical theory scholar Bill Brown identifies the power of objects that attract our attention as things:

As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts (Brown 2001: 4).

In this passage, Brown suggests that it is in analyzing our relationship to things that we can unlock the underlying narratives between the thing and ourselves. Museologist Susan M. Pearce expressed this idea in a similar way when she wrote: 'Objects hang before the eyes of the imagination, continuously representing ourselves to ourselves and telling the stories of our lives in ways which would be impossible otherwise' (Pearce 1992: 47). Although Pearce, unlike Brown, does not distinguish between objects and things, her statement acknowledges that each object has a material presence that embodies a non-textual link to the past. It is worth noting that the words 'objects' and 'things' are often used interchangeably (Schweitzer and Zerdy 2014: 3), since thing theory is a framework of recent origin credited to the writing of Bill Brown, even though philosophers have long acknowledged the power of things. The distinction between objects and things is not always easy to articulate and may depend on the person; my acknowledgement of a *thingly* presence may not be felt by someone else.

When the Wilkie wedding dress and bridal veil were donated along with other garments and photographs, my inclination was to refuse them given their very poor condition; each time the dress was handled, small fragments of silk fell off (Figure 2). Similarly, her bridal veil, with its delicate wax orange blossoms, was discoloured and brittle. However, the *thingly* presence of Evelyn Wilkie's wedding attire was so potent that I could not bring myself to discard the dress and veil, even though in museological terms they might be described as a 'dead objects.' I packed the cavity of the dress with tissue, which then took on the slender shape of Evelyn Wilkie herself. In doing so, I felt her uncanny presence in the dress; she was there in the sweat stains under the arms; she was there in the hand stitching of the bow at the nape of the back neckline; she was there in the creases and the folds of the dress, and she was there in the handwritten note that reads: 'Nanan's wedding gown (Evelyn Wilkie) Nov. 15/27.' The dress became a *thing* that pulled me closer, drawing me into its field.

Thing theory acknowledges the in-between state that exists in objects and allows us to articulate the stories and ideas that arise from the encounter between human and thing. In his seminal essay 'Thing Theory', Bill Brown articulates the transformation of an object into a thing when there is a 'changed relation to the human subject' such that the 'thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation' (Brown 2001: 4). Brown notes that the word thing is often used to describe a state of ambiguity that hovers between 'the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable' (Brown 2001: 5). He suggests that we become most aware of the power of things when they 'stop working for us' and/or assert their 'power and presence' as can happen when we trip over a toy, cut a finger, or the car stalls (Brown 2001: 3-5). Likewise, Robin Bernstein suggests that the power of a thing can be felt when we manipulate or shake it 'to see what meaningful gestures tumble forth' (Bernstein 2009: 90). And yet, we do not need to use, hold or shake a thing to feel its thingly presence. Brown identifies the key question as being 'less about what things are for a given society than about what claims on your attention and on your action are made on behalf of things' (Brown 2001: 9). In other words, it is not the thing itself, but what ideas it represents and what actions it inspires that is worthy of examination.



Figure 2. Wilkie Wedding Dress (Back), Ryerson Fashion Research Collection. Gift of O'Reilly Family, 2016. Photo by Victoria Hoppood, 2019.

27). These material traces in Evelyn Wilkie's wedding dress are compelling totems of memory and mortality, serving as reminders of the fragility of life. For some institutions whose collection mandate is to preserve and display garments of exemplary quality, condition and provenance, like The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute Collection for example, physical signs of wear or use are undesirable. However, garments that are not in pristine condition inform object-based research, since 'these marks provide evidence of a personal history in the garment's biography' (Mida and Kim 2015: 27). I also argue that garments in an advanced state of decomposition, like Wilkie's wedding dress, can become compelling objects for artistic inspiration, since beauty can be found in decay.

The *thingly* quality of Wilkie's wedding dress prompted me to present it as provocation to artist Sarah Casey, as part of a larger collaborative project with Casey called *Exquisite Corpses* that was partially funded by Arts Council England and the British Council. Casey, who sees clothing as a metaphor for the ephemerality of human presence, created drawings of this dress as well as other garments from the Ryerson study collection. In Casey's life-sized drawings of the Wilkie dress front and back, she adopted a process that echoes that of the dressmaker, using a sewing needle to inscribe marks into the surface of the wax-coated surface of folded newsprint (Figure 3). This choice of a relatively inexpensive material was a deliberate one that was intended by the artist to echo the yellowing of the dress over time. Casey also carefully folded the waxed newsprint to echo the folding of the beloved keepsake in its cardboard box as well as the enfolding of time and memory in the dress itself. Displayed with a black felt background, her drawings appear to be white marks on black paper, but when seen in person, the incised marks on the translucent wax coated paper are barely visible. This

It could be argued that extant clothing in a museum or study collection is predisposed to assert its *thingly* presence, since in the absence of the living body, garments become an uneasy reminder of presence/absence. Cultural scholar Elizabeth Wilson described her experience of dress on display in the Costume Court of the Victoria & Albert Museum in the 1980s as 'eerie' and hinting at 'something only half understood, sinister, threatening, the atrophy of the body, and the evanescence of life' (Wilson 2011: 1). In extant clothing, the presence of the person who once wore the garment can become embedded in the material – found in the imprints of the body as well as in the marks, stains, and patches of wear. To me, this material evidence of the former owner can be as potent, if not more so, than the representation of that person in a photograph, especially since scents can linger in worn shoes and clothing. These imprints, marks and smells act like philosopher Roland Barthes' notion of *punctum*, that aspect or detail which draws notice and 'pricks me' and 'also bruises me, is poignant to me' (Barthes 1980:



Figure 3. Sarah Casey. Absent Presence (Wedding), 2018-2019. Drawing, wax on paper (100 x 140 cm). Photo by Mark Bentele, 2019.

play on visibility is meant to highlight the 'interstices between being and not being' (Casey 2019: 6). The delicacy of Casey's touch and the haunting beauty of the resulting drawings embody the *thingly* quality of the dress in capturing the spectral presence of Evelyn Wilkie on paper.²

In the exhibition *Absent Presence: A Wedding Dress and the Drawings of Sarah Casey* (9 May – 5 July 2019) at the MLC Gallery in Toronto (Figure 4), I juxtaposed selected drawings by Casey alongside the Wilkie wedding dress in its coffin-like storage container. The drawings, intentionally hung by clips rather than in frames, were not static but fluttered slightly as visitors moved in the gallery space such that the artworks also took on a *thingly* quality. The exhibition of Casey's drawings displayed adjacent to the wedding dress and other clothing worn by Wilkie invited the visitor to ask questions such as: Are only pristine garments worth saving? Whose stories are worth telling? In reflecting on this collaboration and this exhibition, I suggest that a study collection can also be used, not only for scholarly research but also as a site of artistic provocation, in which 'things' take on new lives, and new forms.

Thing theory embraces the thing and acknowledges the power of a dress or any *thing* to captivate, to enchant, and to reveal underlying meaning. The *thingly* quality of the Wilkie wedding dress was instrumental in this collaboration of artist and curator that resulted in an exhibition that presented the haunting drawings by Casey alongside the objects that inspired her artistic work. In giving attention to the life, clothing and memory of Evelyn Wilkie, a vibrant Canadian woman who lived a relatively quiet and unremarkable life but was much beloved by her family, the exhibition invited the viewer to reflect on the processes of memory, time and disintegration and to also consider the politics of preservation. In this way, Wilkie's story was a catalyst to creativity and became embedded in Casey's artworks, and moreover, Wilkie's story lives beyond the material traces of the bride's existence.

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Figure 4. Installation Photo *Absence Presence: A Wedding Dress and the Drawings of Sarah Casey*, MLC Gallery, Toronto. Photo by Victoria Hopgood, 2019.

Notes

- 1 Deborah Smyth, "Till death do us part: New exhibition explores the themes of time, memory and the fragility of life through a 1927 wedding dress," *Ryerson Today*, May 3, 2019. <https://www.ryerson.ca/news-events/news/2019/05/till-death-do-us-part/>
- 2 More information about this collaboration can be found on Sarah Casey's website <https://www.sarahcasey.co.uk/exquisite-corpses> as well as in a series of blog posts for the British Council <https://design.britishcouncil.org/blog/2018/may/01/canada-exquisite-corpses-1/>

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