

Like Two Turtles at Gikal

Brandi Chase



October 5-14

After exhausting all thrift shops north of 4500 south, I settled on a tan wingback chair from the Other Side Thrift Boutique. I chose it for the “good bones” I sensed beneath its skin. The salesman insisted upon carrying it out for me. I didn’t have the heart to tell him I planned to dismantle it.

Concerned that the arms and legs on the first chair were square and boring I sourced a second chair from Deseret Industries. I chose it for the finished wood on its exposed arms, legs, and its buttons. After demonstrating to me how comfortable it was, the salesman couldn’t understand why I would ever take it apart.

Three sources have inspired the work: First, an October 6 *New York Times* article “How to Recycle a 14-Story Office Tower;” second, a yen to “IKEA in reverse” a chair to understand its construction; third, a potter’s aversion to making useless objects. I planned to carefully dismantle the chairs, autopsy and inventory their parts, and then pull from this inventory to make something new, possibly monstrous.

October 17

I began work on the wingback chair today. After three hours, I was only able to remove the skirt and peel away the back panel. The cream fabric is sun-bleached and oil-stained. Embossed dots alternate with a fleur-de-lis motif in black and brown. I extracted fabric, scrim, and interfacing from the skirt:

x 4, 17" x 30" legs
x 3, 24" x 14 1/4" body
x 1, 22" x 14 1/4" skirt back

These materials will need to be separated from each other.

Hardware from the back:

x 2 metal tack strip alloy
x 1 28" x 20 1/2" batting
x 1 17" x 30" Decking fabric

171" Piping cord in 39", 36", and 96" lengths

Unfortunately, destroyed the 1/2" chip board tacking strip and the flexible metal tacking strip during removal.

Placed the many, many titanium staples into a container for recycling

Spotted a maker's mark, "OB," on the back panel. Maybe "outside back"?

The slow going physicality of the work surprised me. (3 hours)

October 19

Removed the left side panel and welting (piping) along the edges separating the top of the arms, the wings, and the armrest covering. Extracted the piping cord from the fabric and didn't bother to measure either. I may inventory all the fabric by weight.

It is clear needle nose pliers are inadequate for staple removal. I cursed the upholsterer as I worked. Why so many staples for every layer of material? Without better tools, I doubt I will be able to include the second chair in the project. Purchased a tack lifter and pry bar for next attempt.

I felt carnivorous as I moved over the form and turned its body, like a vulture might, to suit my scavenging. The movements felt unnervingly familiar, like picking over bones.

Though I was unable to remove fabric of the inside wing today, the layers of material invited comparisons to the body. The epidermis (upholstery fabric), the fatty hypodermis (cotton stuffing and batting), ligaments (decking fabric), and muscle (foam).

I destroyed the flexible tacking strip holding the panel in place along the curve of the wing. Christopher said that the tack strip looked like a spine. I agree in appearance but not function. It is not a support structure. It seems more akin to the chair's hypodermis "connective system." Staples seem to function like tendons and ligaments connecting muscle to bone (foam to the frame) and bones to bones (cardboard to wood).

Fascia connects, attaches to, stabilizes, encloses, and separates muscles and other internal organs—the analog in the chair might be the decking fabric and the lining fabric. (6 hours)

October 20



I watched upholstery and upholstery videos to understand the manufacturer's logic and to determine whether or not my slow progress was the norm. I learned that upholstered furniture takes shape layer by layer and the maker wants to be sure each layer of the current form will withstand use without regard for future modification. As such, anyone wishing to remove upholstery should identify and begin with its uppermost layer and expect hours of difficulty to undo, layer by layer, what was never intended to come undone. Noted.

I intuited the necessity of starting with what came last, but failed to take the time to assess the chair and strategize my moves. Had I done so I would not have become so frustrated by being unable to remove the chair's inside wing and arm. I will have to remove the seat bottom and back first.

Kevin Kennedy of the Upholstery School speaks about reuse in his trade: "The client wants to reuse the foam...and I like to do it as a good recycler. If there is nothing wrong with the foam. Why not? As a polyurethane product, especially if it's a high grade foam, it's not going to disintegrate. So for the sake of the landfills we don't want to produce more foam to put into this (piece) and we don't want to throw this away if we don't have to. I would encourage all you guys out there to try to recycle as much as you can, as much as you can. We are known as probably the best recyclers out there. I keep saying that and I want to stress that point."

None of the new tools I purchased aided the work. I ordered a specialty upholsterer's tool, the CS Osborne staple and tack remover/lifter. Going forward I will rely on hammer, tack lifter, and needle nose pliers. (9 hours)

October 24

Moses quipped that the chair seemed to be following me around like a ghost. Haunted by the slow progress perhaps.

I removed the back panel (at last!) and most of the right side panel and uncovered smooth, spindle-like forms beneath the fabric that supported the curvature at the front of the arms. Their loveliness owes to their context in the skeleton—mostly made of wood cut coarsely to approximate a shape.

While the new tool set improved my speed, it was no silver bullet. Removing the fabric from the second red chair and combining its parts with the other chair within my time frame is out of the question.

I felt a sudden sadness for that second chair—witness to the mayhem I was inflicting on its brother-by-circumstance, wondering when or if its time would come. I regretted the over-ambitious speculation that led to my taking more than I needed before I understood the labor required to extract the materials.

Bit off more than I could chew as the saying goes.

While looking at the exposed bones and the ligaments holding them together—heavy duty staples, not nails—Moses warned me that dismantling the frame would probably destroy the wood.

In my inventory of parts I opted to treat the frame as a whole. (12 hours)

October 26

I finished removing the right side panel. I noticed the maker's pencil marks suggesting that the wood of the wing was cut according to a pattern—like making a dress.

Shawn offered a pair of tongue and groove pliers to hold the fabric as I ripped it away from the frame. The method worked a charm in open areas but when faced with interior tucks and curves I resumed pulling staple by staple until I had removed the fabric from the seat bottom, seat back, inner arms, inner wings and two of the legs.

Every lifted staple revealed the shoddy material comprising the frame: packing foam, chipboard and roughly hacked boards of cast-off wood the factory had lying around—hard or soft so long as it would take a staple. I felt angry, betrayed. After working so carefully to protect the material to this point I allowed the lifter to gouge the wood and the fabric to tear. I let the staples fall where they may.

Then I remembered the upholsterer's pride for being among the best recyclers and realized I'd been on a treasure hunt. Some other maker had beaten me to it, had already made something useful out of discarded things.

I regretted separating this chair from its chairness beyond anything I could repair just to see if there was some resource inside that would justify my violence. I grieved when, finding nothing in particular, I knew I had ended its chairness for nothing.

I felt guilty because I had the same fate planned for the other chair, waiting in the next room. (17 hours)

October 31

Removed the last of the fabric and padding from two legs and the foam from the seat bottom and seat back. I pondered: Do the springs constitute bones?

It occurred to me that I could try out the chair—Goldilocks style—to determine whether or not the springs should stay or go. When I sat upon them the experience was surprisingly comfortable, elevated, throne-like. Despite being a mere outline, with the springs the chair was still a chair. Tomorrow, the springs go.



This is the inventory of the remains:

- x 4 leg fabric and padding
- x 4 leg skirts with scrim attached
- x 4 skirts with interfacing and scrim attached
- x 1 seat cover top and sides with piping attached, foam, and lining
- x 1 faded back outer cover, decking fabric, and batting
- x 2 Inside wing fabric, batting
- x 2 Inside arm fabric, batting
- x 2 stained and faded arm rests
- x 2 outside wing fabric, batting, decking fabric, foam, cotton padding
- 2 Tacking strips
- Lengths of cord
- Cotton padding
- Wood Frame, springs attached



Recyclable items:

- Flexible tacking strips
- Cardboard tacking strips
- Chipboard supports from arms
- Staples

What an impoverished postmortem, a sad, utilitarian way to measure the value of a thing.
(22 hours)



November 3

The moment I released the springs from the frame the chair expired. Emptiness tugged at me from voids that had previously held their presence. I imagined that this sensation might approximate what my nephew felt when my father died in his arms.

Rather than make something “new” from this skeleton and the inventory of parts I decided to respectfully and mindfully lay out the body as one would a loved one.
(≈25 hours to dismantle)

November 4

I began to lay out the chair’s flesh (upholstery) and bones (frame) to reflect its form in life and the nature of its demise—inside out—but concluded my process was not adequately thorough, accurate or reverent.

The folds and creases left in the fabric prevent me from recognizing the parts and their orientation to the frame. I resolved to iron the fabric in hopes of clarify the pattern. This care will approximate washing the body and stopping its cavities with cotton.

I’ve selected ceramic vessels I’ve made in stoneware with porcelain inlay to contain the small, loose items.

When I explained my revised objective to Moses, he mentioned the artist Gabriel Orozco. Orozco says his ritual arrangements of materials (calls them Asterisms) allow for surprising associations to spring up.



November 6

I ironed the fabric and other non-melting materials and laid them down such that lifting up from the corner furthest from the center would place it back on the frame. As though the upholstery had been peeled away and laid on the ground as it fell. This hides the wear on the fabric's surface—sunlight, touch, and spill. That is alright with me. The chair's wear and tear is something private. While ironing I discovered more maker's marks that helped me correct where I had mislaid the pieces before.

OA = Outer Arm

IA = Inner Arm

AR = Arm Rest

IW = Inner Wing

SK = Skirt

L= Leg

OB = Outside Back

While smoothing materials and reassessing their placement I felt the button eyes of the other chair—the chair not dismantled—resting on me. The sensation of that gaze triggered the memory of the two turtles at Gikal.

August 2004

My partner and I lived at Yirrkala, an Aboriginal community on the north central coast of Australia, in those days. Our Yolngu family honored us with an invitation to participate in a turtle hunt at Gikal, their traditional homeland.

The hunters took a dingy out into the bay and returned an hour later with two adult turtles plucked from the sea. They dragged them from the boat and laid them side by side, shell down on the beach. Powerless to escape, they waited for the fire to die down to coals and the hunters to decide who they would slaughter now and who they would save for later. They chose the larger of the two and did the deed with the celebratory exclamation, ritual propriety and physical power that a resource of this magnitude demands.

Everything from the inside was removed and cleaned. Most went back into the shell to be roasted in that ready-made oven buried under coals. The elders divided the cooked flesh according to familial relationships and stature.

The hunt, the slaughter, the preparation, the allocation, the celebration, and the consumption all occurred meaningfully within Yolngu law and custom. But us outsiders—my husband and me and two others—celebrated and ate very little. We all believed the turtle who watched and waited was crying.

Of Asterisms Orozco said, “When you put together a group of objects, regardless of their origin, you form a constellation: a group of associations that somehow belong to you.” A constellation fell into place as I laid out this body. When I recognized it, I wept.

