

A tool rendered useless

Exploring the politics and stories of found gloves

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When walking into the second floor of Northern Arizona University's Riles building where *Remnants: Drawings and Photographs of Found Gloves* is on display until May, you'll notice, save for the artist statement, there are no signs, no names, no descriptions for these gloves. There's a reason for that.

"We came in here, looked around and put [the exhibit] up and made a conscious decision to not put tags and label anything, and [we] just let it be what it is and let people consider it in the same way we considered it at the time without words to tell you anything," says Eric O'Connell. "It's an unknown entity to us. It's a wonder of, 'Where did this come from? Who lost this? What's this person going through?' Finding an object is nothing but questions, so hopefully that happens with no other information given. That's what it was. It was just a damn glove on the floor."

Through O'Connell's photography and Shawn Skabelund drawings, *Remnants* explores the lives, stories and politics of found gloves. The drawings and photographs that make up *Remnants* leave us quietly basking in its imagery, wondering who might have worn them and where these things might have been.

But a found glove contains more than a mystery. It's also a symbol for power, control, protection and inflicting damage.

"The glove is all about people using these things to protect themselves, whether it be toxic substances or to protect themselves from being damaged," Skabelund says. "And when they take them off, there's something symbolic in that."

What's more, these gloves not only protect us from damage, but they become a form of separation from the damage we incur upon other people, the environment and

the world.

"So when you take the gloves off, it becomes an act of, 'Now I'm not damaged anymore,'" O'Connell says. "It separates you from the world, from being injured."

"From you either being injured or from you injuring the world," Skabelund adds. "So you can't totally take responsibility for your acts because this glove is separating you from that act."

Both artists have been working on their own lost glove art pieces for some time, and for Skabelund, after almost 30 years of collecting and drawing found gloves, his portion of the exhibit, like a lot of his work, has become political.

Skabelund found his first glove while attending grad school in Iowa in the 1980s. He knew early on that he wanted to juxtapose the glove with something of the natural world. Eventually he decided to use cottonwood leaves because of their relation to the Earth and water, as well as their sacredness to Native Americans. When we see Skabelund's drawings of these tattered and powerful gloves looming above a delicate leaf that's been preserved or painted on or reduced to its skeletal features, there's an impending sense of destruction and loss. What have we done? What are we about to do?

In this regard, his work becomes less about the gloves and more of a political observation about the people who might wear the gloves to destroy, or even those who destroy without the need for gloves.

For O'Connell, his photographs of gloves are more about "that feeling, that memory, that concept of something that worked and now doesn't work."

"These gloves, it's this single thing that's been forgotten, discarded, left," O'Connell says. "For me, all of a sudden it's a tool rendered useless, both from the part that I found, and the person who

lost it. It's like losing the head of the hammer."

After photographing the gloves, O'Connell mounted the prints on a wooden canvas which was then covered in resin. The resin preserves the images of the gloves, a forever still life, like insects in amber or leaves on setting concrete.

Despite the artists' differences with regard to the exhibit's political connotations, O'Connell and Skabelund both agree there is something beautiful about these gloves, the ways in which they've been used as tools and how they've been thrown away or have gone missing, how the gloves now have been shaped by a world that has run over, stepped on and forgotten about them.

The literal shape it takes, its flat, crinkled body, its deteriorating surface, torn and frayed.

There's a beauty in its destruction, in the way questions have been left unanswered and in the way imagination consumes its history.

Remnants: Drawings and Photographs of Found Gloves is on display at the Riles Building, 317 W. Romey Dr., on the Northern Arizona University Campus. The exhibit will run through May 24, 2019. [↪](#)

