

**A CUP OF TEA IN INFINITE FUTURES:
A POSITIVE LOOK AT SPECULATIVE FATES**

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Abstract

“A Cup of Tea in Infinite Futures: A Positive Look at Speculative Fates,” explores the sentimental aspects of speculation for the future. Research pertaining to this thesis has included examining the connection between the concept of speculation, its use in the speculative fiction genre over the past twenty years (in literature, film, art, and social media), and its shifts in culture. Furthermore, I will share observations about how these fictions have affected everyday / slice-of-life speculation during the COVID-19 pandemic. With this background in mind, how have these cultural speculations on an individual and collective level altered personal imaginings of life to come? The culmination of my own speculations about the future will provide the content for a series of vignette/diorama scenes. These scenes will present possible outcomes that I’ve imagined for myself as kinetic sculptures.

Key Words: Speculation, Future, Slice-of-Life, Cottagecore, Automata

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What could happen? What might become of us, the world, humanity, me? How will we live? How could we change? How could we die? What could happen? What might happen next? What will happen in a week, month, year, decade, century, millennium, beyond? One can only guess what can happen a millennium away. We spend our time questioning the unknown, asking our ‘what ifs’ questions, and then plan around those questions. Calendars are created, spanning years beyond the present, so we can plan ourselves into corners for our survival and for the betterment of what could happen next. Betterment, success, thriving, hope. I suppose that it is presumptuous of me to say, “we” in this context. I cannot definitively know what anyone else is thinking, only what they might be thinking. However, I can share my own thoughts; how those thoughts began, how they have shifted over time, and speculate about what could come of these thoughts. What could happen from these thoughts, this speculation? What could happen?

Chapter 2: Speculation

Humans have engaged in speculation throughout history, manifesting in many ways. In *Speculative Everything* (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p.70), the act of speculation is defined as the act of imagining various outcomes, scenarios, and worlds. The act of speculating is found in a variety of forms, from the quantifiably predicted instances of tomorrow’s weather, theorizing the state of the world based on patterns from the past, planning what you may eat for dinner tomorrow, to asking *the* question, “what if?”

We are introduced to speculation early on in our lives. Well-meaning adults ask: What do you want to be when you grow up? Are you going to go to college? What type of partner would you like to be with? When are you going to get married? Are you going to have kids? Where

would you like to live? What will happen in your future? This last question is how this thesis began...

I began with the speculative question, “What will happen in your future?” which branched off into more questions: personal questions (questions with an anticipated response of an opinion), background questions (questions provided by facts or societal opinions), and creative questions (questions on how to provide and display the responses from these personal and background questions). In a way, these questions can be a slurry of all three of these categories. What was the type of question I just asked? How do we respond to such questions? Who else has delved into questions similar to mine? How have I come to guess the answers to this question? In what manner have I decided to answer this question?

What have I found while seeking answers to my initial question? What will happen in my future? We now understand that my question is a speculative one. When hunting for speculative answers, we may never fully experience a resolution. Our question could continuously expand, creating more scenarios that bring about more and more questions, as is the case for many speculative fictions. Or, as with my question, we may find some answers, but only with the passage of time. Thus, for now, I can only investigate and speculate the answers to my original question.

2.1 Logic and Sentiment in Speculation

“What will happen in my future?” is an inherently personal question, but I also understand that we don’t live in our own separate bubbles. A wide variety of factors beyond our control can affect what may come to be in our lives. Societal, familial, and peer influences all shape who we are, how we come to be, and where we are going. I will be reviewing some of the key influences on this project throughout the rest this paper; however, while exploring these

influences, I've realized that I have been associating this project with both logic and deep sentimentality.

As I have examined external influences on my thought process to answer my initial question, I started to apply a logical approach when trying to peer into the future. I have tried to estimate possible outcomes instead of speculating about them. Many of the decisions we make are based on the outcomes we anticipate, but how do we anticipate these outcomes? We look to past experiences to provide context for what's to come. What happened when we, or someone we know, did something similar to what we are about to do? We look to the environment around us: how will making this choice at this time and in this place, affect the outcome? However, there is a limit after which we can no longer estimate what will happen. According to *A Review of Functions of Speculative Thinking* (Huang et al., 2021, p.2), the closer that one is in psychological distance to a future event, the more likely it is that a prediction will be accurate. Thus, the farther one looks in future, the more decisions and exterior factors affect an estimation. For example, let's say my friend and I are making plans to go out to eat once a month for the next year. The likelihood of us meeting for those first few meals is greater than us coming together for the meals that are almost a year away. This is because the number of potential obstacles increases the farther out we plan, from important or urgent events replacing our mealtime, to forgetting a meal the farther away we get from the day we initially planned. As accuracy diminishes with increased passage of time, estimations become guesses, and guesses become speculation.

Another, more personal illustration of the effect time has on the accuracy of estimation is this: when in high school, we were told to make a four-year plan in response to the question: "What classes would you take to reach your desired outcome after graduating?" My hope after

graduation was to continue my education in university. When I made my list of classes the first week of high school, I envisioned pursuing an engineering or industrial design undergraduate program. I predicted that I would join robotics in high school because I was in Lego robotics in middle school. I joined robotics a week later; however, instead of working in the electrical or mechanical section of the team, I joined the animation section. I never predicted that I would leave my first high school Tech Ed course (technical education: technical drawing, woodworking, metalworking, etc.) a semester later because it felt too slow, or that I'd leave AP (advanced placement) European History because I couldn't keep up with the readings. Quite a bit can happen in four years, one year, and even in a month or two. That original plan was devised logically, yet I had peered so far into the future that the accuracy of my prediction was greatly diminished. When the time came, I never did apply to an engineering program, but double majored in Art and Theatre. In the end, my four-year plan was a speculation on what my future could be.

Why do I associate sentimentality, a thought process often associated with emotion and memories, with a project based on future speculation? What is sentiment? When reviewing the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.-b) and the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.-b), the term sentimental is defined as the sway of feeling/ emotion, often joyous, over that of logic. For instance, one may inherit an item from a loved one. There may not be a logical reason to keep said item, but the sentiment can overtake logic. Thus, one will keep an item because of the emotions they feel when possessing it even if it's not useful. Although sentiment is often used interchangeably with nostalgia, a feeling of affection or longing for something in the past, nostalgia is a complex emotion versus sentiment which is a strong reaction caused by an emotion. In other words, nostalgia is an emotion that could cause a reactionary feeling of

sentimentality. For example, I have a sentimental preference for waffle woven fabrics. The reason I enjoy the feeling of waffle fabric has little to do with practicality or logic, but instead comes from a place of nostalgic comfort. I am sentimental for waffle woven fabrics because they provide the nostalgia for a specific blanket from my childhood. Though sentiment has its connections to memories of the past due to its common association with nostalgia, sentiment is not inherently derived in the past. The external influences I have, create sentimental feelings for me. My friends, family, the activities I enjoy, all have an emotional sway over the futures I see for myself. To illustrate, a career in the arts is not known for high paying jobs. There is even the archetype of the starving artist. However, I am pursuing a career in the arts because the joy creativity provides is important to me. I continue apply logic to my job research and look for positions that afford a comfortable living. However, the decision to pursue creative positions is a sentimental one because I know it is work that brings me more joy than positions that are known to bring more income.

What will happen in my future? Any attempt to answer this question requires both logic and emotion. Although I know that the possible outcomes are vast, due to the distance between my present-self and the outcomes about which I'm speculating, I still make predictions regardless. I imagine a wider net of scenarios due to my understanding of the nature of speculation, yet I make predictions, nonetheless. I will continue to try to plan with those predictions in mind for the betterment of that which could happen next. That aim toward betterment, or what I think is betterment, is based on the sentiment and logic in my speculation.

2.2 Speculative Fiction

Speculation is an imaginative and commonly used thought process in literature, of which it constitutes an entire genre, speculative fiction. According to Marek Oziewicz's *Speculative*

Fiction, the most recent definition of speculative fiction is as, “a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating ‘consensus reality’ of everyday experience” (2017, p.1). Some of the genres within this category include fantasy, science fiction, horror, and supernatural fiction.

The category of speculative fiction has undergone various redefinitions throughout the years. Oziewicz explains that the term speculative fiction was originally coined by Robert A. Heinlein in 1941 as a subset of science fiction that focused on human reactions to the advances of science and technology, instead of the focusing on the science/technology itself (p.3). Due to the subjectivity involved in defining which pieces of science fiction literature fit the definition of speculative fiction, it had sometimes been used as an exclusionary tool to rate the quality of certain science fiction stories on an individual basis. Due to the subjectivity of Heinlein’s definition, the term fell out of use starting in the 1960s (p.4).

Speculative fiction saw a resurgence in the 1980s when Margaret Atwood, author of *A Handmaid’s Tale*, tried using the term as a category separate from science fiction (p.4). By her definition, works of science fiction were stories that *couldn’t* come true, while the tales of speculative fiction had the possibility of coming to pass. However, once the time frame of the story had passed without that scenario coming to fruition, then those speculative stories would become science fiction. According to Oziewicz, the most recent use of the term speculative fiction as a category for all genres diverging from reality started gaining traction in the 2000s amongst primary readers and younger academics, and it is still the definition that is commonly in use today (p.6).

2.2.1 Dystopia and Reality

A particularly potent and abundant form of speculation today is dystopian fiction, which presents imaginings of worlds experiencing great misfortune and/or injustices. This form of speculative fiction is not a new phenomenon; however, children growing up in the 2000s and 2010s found themselves in a saturated market. Dystopian literature rose in popularity during the 20th century with classics such as: *A Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932/2006), *1984* (Orwell, 1949/1961), and *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 1953/2012). The late 2000s and 2010s had an explosion of young adult dystopian fiction including novels such as: *Unwind* (Shusterman, 2007/2009), *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008/2010), and *Divergent* (Roth, 2011/2014). Dystopian novels from both the twentieth and twenty-first century were converted into television shows and movies in the 2010s: *A Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985/2006) with the show adaptation (Barker et al., 2017-present), *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) with the movie based on the novel (Noyce, 2014), and *The Hunger Games* (Lawrence & Ross, 2012).

In Jessica Finden's article, "Dystopian Literature: more than just the end of the world for teens," (2022, p.8-9) interest in the genre harkens to many characters' abilities to face great obstacles and still make a difference in their respective worlds. There is the introduction of morality and moments of hope in the apocalyptic situations of the dystopian literature, that mirror the uncertainty of our own world. While consuming these fictions in the past decade, many have been able to imagine these dystopian worlds becoming our reality. March 2020 was the start of quarantine for the majority of the world as COVID-19 spread. The unknown filled a myriad of people with dread, and the inability to visit loved ones exacerbated those feelings of trepidation as the number of cases climbed. The closest to a pandemic that many children of the 2000s and 2010s had seen were popularized in zombie media such as the comic books (Kirkman,

2003-2019) and TV show (Darabont, 2010-2021) *The Walking Dead*, and the popular video game *Plague Inc.* (Ndemic Creations, 2012).

Humanmade world destruction and the potential of doomsday has brushed up against reality in the 2020s. *The Doomsday Clock*, created by *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* in 1947, displays how close to humanmade world destruction we are. In January 2023, it shifted the closest to midnight (doomsday) that it's ever been: ninety seconds. According to *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, the War in Ukraine was the greatest influence in this fluctuation: "Russia's war on Ukraine has raised profound questions about how states interact, eroding norms of international conduct that underpin successful responses to a variety of global risks" (Mecklin, 2023).

Figure 1

2023 Doomsday Clock Press Release



The potential for world ending doom has been reflected in the media for decades, from giant creatures destroying cities as in the Godzilla franchise (Toho Co., 1954-current) to the display of the aftermath of doomsday, such as in the video game Fallout franchise (Bethesda, 1997-2018) and the Pixar movie Wall-e (Stanton, 2008).

One of the closest examples of reality overlapping with fiction is the rollback of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States allowing an abundance of new state regulations, including constricting to outright banning, and hunting of those who wish to seek abortions. While discussing this loss of bodily autonomy, many have found similarities between this situation and the Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Even Atwood herself pointed out the resemblance of *The Handmaid's Tale* to the loss of *Roe v. Wade* in an Instagram post of herself holding a mug saying: "I Told You So," after *Roe v. Wade* was overturned (2022).

Figure 2

Atwood, "I Told You So," Instagram Post



In my lifetime I have witnessed and experienced some of the effects of the world inching towards dystopia, such as the increased security at airports after 9/11 and active shooter drills becoming as common place as natural disaster drills. What we don't experience due to distance, we can connect to through the Internet; an ever-increasing amount of information at our fingertips, where the world shares its successes, disasters, opinions, truths, lies, and everything else in between. "Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each

other or not at all” (Haraway, 2016, p.4). “Becoming-with each other” is often easier said than done. Many of us believe in fighting for what we believe is betterment, but at the same time, it feels as though it has been years of continuous, unchanging bad news.

2.2.2 Slice-of-Life Fiction

With the similarities between dystopian fiction and our reality increasing, many have been retreating to other forms of fiction as a form of escapism. These are stories that can distract one from the realities of everyday life. People often seek escapist media to regulate stress and emotions and there tends to be an uptick in the use of escapism in times of increased strain or hardship. This tendency towards employing escapism in fiction has also been witnessed during the Great Depression in the United States (Library of Congress, n.d.). Some escapist movies of the time include *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Hand et al., 1937) and *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939).

Today, fantastical and other worldly fictions are still being utilized for escapism, however, I have been observing an increased popularity over the past few years for slice-of-life speculative fiction. Other names and subsections of slice-of-life speculative fiction include magical realism and cozy fantasy. The environments and characters may still be fantastical but is often a more subtle departure from reality than other forms of speculative fiction. This genre involves fantastical elements such as time travel, witches, or sentient robots, yet the primary focus is on the relationships between characters, everyday life, and/or displaying moments of mundanity. Their plots have lower stakes than some of their other speculative fiction counterparts. There aren't any large potentially-life-ending quests with danger around every corner.

For example, *Legends and Lattes* by Travis Baldree (2022), a runner up for Best Novel Hugo Award (2023) and runner up for Best Fantasy (2022) on Good Reads (popular book cataloging/social media cite), the novel is about an orc leaving her adventuring days behind in order to start her new quest: opening a coffee shop. The story not only provides details of the shop's construction and initial business ventures, but also the many relationships she makes while building said shop. Other examples of the slice-of-life speculative media include: *A Monk and Robot* (Chambers, 2021) book series, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* (Kawaguchi, 2015; Trousselot, 2020), *Kiki's Delivery Service* (Miyazaki, 1989), and *Stardew Valley* (Barone, 2016). Here there are no wars to be fought, no great world-saving quests, just tea, coffee, and communication.

Slice-of-Life speculative artworks, like the other works mentioned, depict mundane moments, environments, and characters with an air of separation from our reality. Everyday environments and activities, such as gardening with a partner, baking in a warm kitchen, relaxing in a living room, etc., are displayed in a romanticized fashion and with the additional whimsy of the characters not being human, the influence of magic, etc. An example of this is found in India Rose Crawford's work on Instagram. Her photos and videos feature knitted creatures exploring, baking, gathering berries, having picnics, tea parties, or dancing in their living room. All of these could be thought of as typical human activities but are accentuated by soft anthropomorphized animals with their small homes and tiny food. The two most recurring critters are Frog and Toad, which reference the characters in the beloved *Frog and Toad* book series by Arnold Lobel (1970-1979) (another great example of slice-of-life speculative fiction).

Figure 3

Frog Goes Blackberry Picking



Note. Frog figure and photograph made by India Rose Crowford (2023).

2.2.3 Cottagecore

Slice-of-life speculative fiction has a strong visual and thematic connection to the aesthetic of cottagecore. At its heart, cottagecore reflects a desire for simple living. Simple living promotes living in the moment, celebrating often mundane activities and objects or those taken for granted. This current name and iteration of the aesthetic was popularized as a form of escapism on the digital plane during the COVID-19 quarantine. However, sentiment for the aesthetic is nothing new. In the article, “What is cottagecore? ‘Your grandma but, like, hip,’” Edwin Heathcote (2021) relates the trend to Marie Antoinette’s, “faux-rural hamlet” (a group of small buildings too small to be a village) built on the Palace of Versailles grounds, the Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th early 20th century, with the most recent connection being the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s. The counterculture movement of this period, much like the themes of cottagecore also had an emphasis on nature while, participating in handicrafts such as macramé and patchwork (Walters, 2008, p.504).

In the video essay, “Frog and Toad: The Philosophy of Simple Living” from the YouTube channel Quality Culture, an important aspect of simple living in the Frog and Toad series was the lack of technology. Technology has made long distance connection and gathering information quickly possible. However, the volume of media we consume, and the increased access employers expect from employees can cause a negative impact to mental health. “Sometimes, existence right now feels like endless noise,” (Quality Culture, 2022). Our use and reliance on technology increased when most of the world’s population was stuck at home during the COVID-19 quarantine. The cottagecore aesthetic, popularized on social media (content on platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest and TikTok, etc.), extended beyond our screens and manifested as a desire for simple living, a break from the virtual. Increased free time due to a lack of social events along with a heightened interest in simple living culminated in many striving to learn the traditional skills and crafts associated with the cottagecore (cooking/baking, sewing, knitting, crocheting, gardening, etc.) The aspirational and fantastical visuals of this slice-of-life escapism, this quaint hopeful lifestyle, provided a template for a somewhat achievable reality for many.

Visually, a love of nature and comfort is prevalent in cottagecore. Color palettes lean toward earth tones, greens, blues, yellows, creams, and browns along with naturally occurring pops of color such as florals. Textures are often soft, both in the natural sense, such as fluffed-up bushes and velvety petals, and in a hand-constructed sense with homemade knits, flowing fabrics, worn woods, and visible paint strokes. Examples of cottagecore in art would include, again, the works of India Rose Crawford. The activities her creatures perform embody slower living and are often in outdoor settings. Even with indoor scenes, there are often depictions of greenery observable through windows in their videos or earth tones from worn woods. The

creatures themselves are roughly palm sized and are knitted. Since the videos and stills focus on such small knit creations, visually the fuzz and the fiber of the knits provides a softness. Gwen van Knippenberg and Vanessa Bowman are two-dimensional artists primarily working with paint. Like Crawford, van Knippenberg and Bowman often depict moments of slow living such as outdoor walks, gardening, baking, etc., in earth tones. Both artists fully embrace their mark making by showing underlayers though dry brush strokes; no straight line is ever truly straight and fluctuates in weight. One can feel the human touch behind those visible strokes.

Figure 4

The Vegetable Garden



Note. Oil painting made by Vanessa Bowman.

Figure 5

Baking



Note. Gouache painting made by Gwen van Knippenberg (2022).

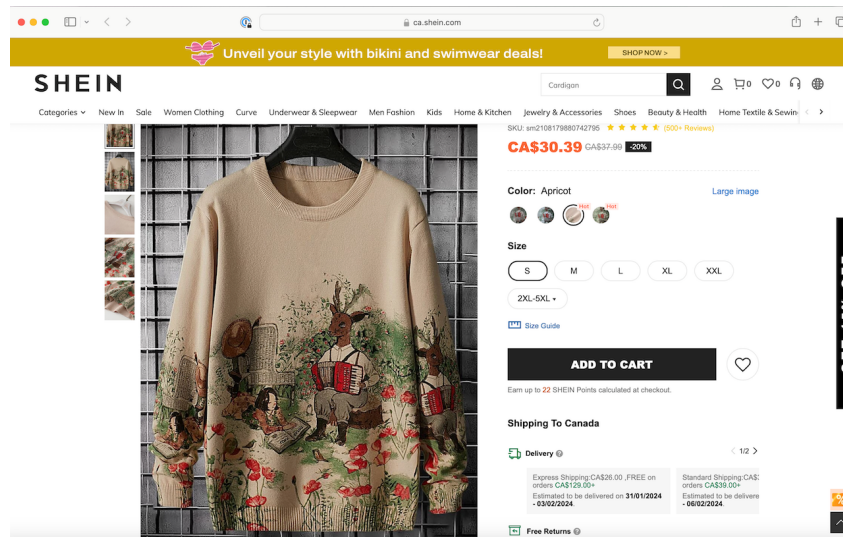
However, one may not be able to achieve all that one sees online. In “Critical Eye on cottagecore being a digital escape from the digital” by Sarah Goodman (2021) makes an argument against cottagecore, stating that it is not a “movement,” that is, it does not consist of collectively organized activities working toward an eventual outcome. She is correct in saying that cottagecore isn’t a movement. In essence, it is an aesthetic belying an underlying desire for slow living. Yet, it has become a tool to promote other movements. And, like all tools, there are multiple ways in which it can be used, whether it is an intended method of use or not. For movements such as environmentalism and anti-capitalism, cottagecore provides an accessible platform to start conversations and teach others around the movements. Harper Klotz’s (2021) article, “Cottagecore, a beautiful aesthetic with issues to address,” recognizes its use within other movements, and exposes the points that may be lost within their discussions.

When looking at environmentalism through the lens of cottagecore, both Klotz and Goodman argue that the aesthetic romanticization of the natural world and elements of rural life are limited to a digital landscape. Thus, they don't address the full scope of nature and rural living. Nature and many aspects of rural life are messy and have their own set of hardships that aren't visible in these curated posts. Social media, in its currently state, can be seen as a curated presentation of people's lives. We pick and choose what we post, what we want to share, and this is often our "best selves" or what we imagine to be the best. However, it omits the good that environmentalism has promoted through cottagecore. For example, one of the primary hobbies depicted in cottagecore is gardening. When thinking about these small ecosystems, we ask ourselves questions about our own spaces and those questions often expand beyond the garden into the wider context of local life. Do I want to grow edible plants? What plants will grow well in my area? Are there any native edible plants that I can incorporate? How will the plants I bring to this space affect the creatures around me? This initial list of considerations applies not only to home gardens, but also community gardens, parks, balconies, house plants, etc. Even contemplating how one would compile a speculative garden gives rise to questions about the world around us and how we effect it. The lens of cottagecore is a catalyst for the conversation.

There is also the criticism that cottagecore is being consumed as a fast fashion trend. We live in a capitalist society that often prides itself on consumption of goods. With the popularity of an aesthetic that resurfaced on social media, fast fashion and décor pursued our consumer dollars as quickly as possible. And if one were to look for fast fashion cottagecore items today, one would find an abundance of shops and garments to choose from.

Figure 6

Cottagecore in Fast Fashion



Note. A cottagecore sweater listing from the fast fashion e-commerce site Shein.

However, this argument demonstrates a capitalist leveraging of cottagecore while missing how it has also been used by anticapitalism. Cottagecore includes crafting among its list of associated hobbies; sewing, mending, and altering garments is seen as cool. People may not be able to afford ethical slow fashion, but they can still mend the clothing they already have or alter a garment they no longer enjoy wearing. They may construct clothing, garnering an understanding of how much it takes to create the pieces we wear. Cottagecore has brought more visibility and critical thinking to the issue of fast fashion. More people are starting to think about how and why we are consuming.

For me, cottagecore embodies my past, present, and future. It has a sentimental quality because many of these simple living hobbies were instilled in me from a young age. I remember learning to knit with my mom when I was seven, loom knitting in summer school, baking with one of my grandmas, and learning to use a sewing machine from my other grandma. In recent years, I've picked up an interest in gardening, planting spent tulips my dad bought my mom in

the small flower bed behind our house and watching them come back the past couple of years. Like many, I pursued a new hobby during the pandemic, crocheting. When cottagecore's latest iteration rose in popularity, I found it displayed much of what I have already learned and want to learn in a positive light, a set of habits and modes of thinking, I wish to carry into the future.

The sentiments of cottagecore for many of my peers and myself is well encapsulated in the quote by TikTok user InfamousBees in Sarah Wooley's (2020) article, "Cottagecore is the pastoral fantasy aesthetic taking over TikTok":

The ideal cottagecore life isn't something realistic for me or many people. But I can still do little things. I can make bread in a tiny city apartment. I can grow herbs in my windowsill or in flowerpots or in old mugs. I can surround myself with loved, cared-for plants that can thrive on little sunlight. I don't need a huge yard to have a few chickens or a big, fluffy dog. I certainly don't need a cottage to be vulnerable with my girlfriend. I didn't realize that though, until I was exposed to those ideals through this aesthetic movement. And in that way, cottagecore, to me, is beautiful.

Chapter 3: The Project

What will happen in my future? What do I want? What do I hope for? What are my goals? What am I living for? What am I passionate about? What am I striving for? I want the world to change, to become better, to become calmer. There can be exciting moments, but the world and humans are currently shouting, yelling, screaming, crying, dying. All of which is amplified by digital landscape. Every qualm, debate, and opinion smothers the other, hardly leaving time for quiet. Someone will always be in a worse situation than us and some will always be better off. Many try to sympathize, empathize, learn, send money, donate time, vote, rally,

vocalize. We wish and work for calm and betterment, yet the volume increases, the screams are surrounding us, and the progress once gained, regresses. I suppose it must be louder in order to become quiet. Chance, change, and time will decide when that quiet will come. Will humans reach a breaking point and burst or fizzle out or slowly drown like melted wax consuming the wick of a candle? Will we find betterment or destruction? Either way the world will move on. The world will continue past humanity, humanity will most likely continue past me, and I will plan, speculate, and work towards betterment. In a time that is loud, I hope for quiet moments. In a time of uncertainty, I try to plan for stability. Even though there are infinite futures, let there be comfort in speculating some positive outcomes.

“What will happen in my future?” This graduate thesis intends to speculate answers to this question. When I first attempted to answer this question a year ago, the answer was viewed through a narrow lens. I was looking only to myself and my partner’s feelings as the sole factors. I knew that there was room for variation in the outcomes such as where we may live or whether we have a pet or two. However, by researching the act of speculation, I garnered a greater understanding of how many contributing factors could exist. There are a vast number of questions one needs to ask just to reach into what a personal future will look like. For example: will I finish graduate school? I am planning for that to be the case, but since it has not come to pass as of writing this, it is speculation that I will complete grad school. Let’s assume that I finish, will I find a job before I graduate? Will I have enough time during grad school to apply to positions? Will my paperwork be appealing to the recruiters? Will the job be in Canada or the United States? What will the job even be? These questions are still narrow, applying primarily to my future in the next year, yet there are so many factors that could affect the future, so many questions to ask.

When I formally attempted to answer the question, “What will happen in my future?” again, my view had expanded. The external factors felt all-consuming. The infinite number of factors and decisions made by humanity and earth was almost too vast of a view. Yet, I still was able to identify the two main elements I desire for humanity as well as my personal life, quiet moments and stability. Even though I may speculate with a broader view, when applying my findings to my work, I still find that displaying a personal perspective is what I can speak to best. The speculative vision for the future will always be blurred, but when focusing on my future, I can see some of the possibilities. It’s akin to looking at various bodies of water, where each drop is a potential future. The future that directly relates to my experiences is a glass of water; still a great amount of water droplets but has more tangibility. The speculation of humanity’s future is an ocean of possibilities, so vast that you can’t see a land mass on the horizon. Thus, I shall display moments, moments of mundanity, of quiet joy. I will provide a thimble worth of speculation.

To visually display my speculative exercises, I’ve constructed four kinetic sculptural vignette/dioramas out of a variety of materials some of which include: polylactic acid (PLA, 3D printed plastic from FDM printers), textiles, and acrylic paint. The dioramas depict three speculations that capture both the quiet moments and stability of my future with the addition of a piece displaying the action of speculating. The vignettes’ bases are 14.5in x 16in x 40in tall wooden tables. Within the tabletops there is a space for the mechanical components of the dioramas, which imply that the parts of the vignette move. The mechanics are displayed through clear acrylic panels with wooden cranks attached to the mechanisms within and extend from one side of each box.

The first work is the act of speculating: *Walking*. It is a 13in tall (total: 14.5in x 16in x 53in) a blank portrait digitally sculpted and constructed from PLA with wire and epoxy putty hand-sculpted hinges located at certain joints. The mechanics along with the joints allow the figure to move as if in a walk-cycle. This work is the physical manifestation of my contemplative exercise, as moving, walking, pacing often helps me process my thoughts. In addition to presenting how one can physically speculate, the work is also a metaphorical visual of future speculation. The figure gestures toward the space in front of them with a forward walking motion. Their face looks forward and slightly tilted upward, indicating being lost in thoughts. *Walking* lives in the closest realm to the viewer, compared to the other dioramas. The figure remains the closest to their original form, blank face and exposed PLA to both peer into the open, starting the process of speculative thought while allowing the audience to super-impose themselves in place of the figure. There are also no components to perceive an environment: no woven ground cover, sculpted trees, or tiny furniture. The tabletop is plain, aware of what it is, with the figure looking toward that of which it is actively speculating. Thus, this piece leads the viewers to my speculative thoughts, the three other vignettes.

There are three speculative vignettes: *Living Room*, *Garden*, and *Death*. *Living Room* is the first of the dioramas. The diorama itself is 12in tall (total: 14.5in x 16in x 52in) and depicts the scene of a living room space with two human figures, a cat, and a dog. One figure is bringing mugs of warm steaming drinks into the space while the other reads on the couch. On the visible wall, there's a window with a short bookshelf underneath it. A coffee table is in the middle of the room in front of the couch with a chair perpendicular to the couch. This is a quiet moment that feels obtainable and timeless, whether it happens in the next year and continues into the next five, ten, thirty plus years.

Garden is the second vignette. Similar to *Living Room*, *Garden* is also 12in tall (total: 14.5in x 16in x 52in). This scene depicts two human figures working in a garden space. One figure is watering a raised garden bed while the other is trimming the roses on a trellis. The space has flower beds lining the two opposite sides of the vignette, while the back side of a home lies in between the beds on a perpendicular side of the diorama. The home wall has a window, door, and small porch. This scene is farther into the speculative distance compared to *Living Room* as the feasibility of having a home is slimmer for those in Generation Z compared to past generations. We would both need to save and advance in our career before we could think about owning a home. However, since owning a home is an important goal for us, representing stability, it is something we often speculate about.

Death is the final speculative vignette. This diorama has two layers, above and below ground (total: TBD). The top layer, above ground, is a forest scene consisting of carved wood trees and woven ground cover. Below ground has two figures suspended amongst the roots of the trees. Mechanically, the moving components mimic the wind by slightly tussling the branches of the trees. *Death* is the only inevitability amongst the speculative dioramas, yet the exact look of the scene could vary in primarily two ways. First, I hope and speculate that I live a long life with my partner, and we die in close succession to each other. Second, I have never cared for the idea of the casket and tombstone burial, yet also don't care for the idea of people holding onto ashes or releasing ash into the world. Take what organs may be beneficial, and return me to the earth as I am. However, even with that variability in mind, the inevitability of death is still persistent. Thus, this is the most rendered of all of the vignettes. The figures have sculpted details and are fully painted. Trees are carved and painted with the texture of bark in mind, and the woven forest floor is varied with multiple yarns, threads, and weaving techniques.

While creating my thesis, I began to realize the act of planning these vignettes (sketching layouts of each work, determining how to put the tables together, etc.) was an act of speculation itself. It is defined as the act of imagining various outcomes, scenarios, and worlds (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p.70). However, I was so focused on responding to my questions of the future that I forgot how prevalent the act of speculation is to most everything we do. With this in mind, my exhibition presents the act of creating these potential futures as exercises of speculation including the future dioramas themselves. There is an installation of a worktable amongst the vignettes that put the midst of the creation process on display for the audience. A dirty work mat, stained tea mug, sculpted figures, and spare mechanical components, are scattered across the table. On the walls digital prints of sketches and notes of various sizes that plan the project are displayed. Providing the visible process and marks of creation allow the audience insights into the act of speculation. How the artist plans their work, how they visualize their speculation. As a way for the audience to visualize a person behind the speculation, a person creating and going through this speculative process.

In addition to providing the visuals of a working artist and driving the idea of creator mid speculation even farther, the dioramas themselves are also in various stages in the process of creation. *Walking* has been materially left in its original, simple form, with fully exposed PLA printed, non-sanded body to illustrate that it is the starting point of the speculation process. It's simplified features also allows viewers to place themselves at the start of that speculation. *Death* is the only inevitable speculation amongst the other speculative dioramas. Thus, it is the most rendered and tangible of the works. With *Walking* in the state of the least refined and *Death* as the most finalized, the two other works are in various stages of completion between them, to show a more comprehensive scope of the creation process.

3.1 Object and Visual Inspiration

In this project, there were many sources of visual inspirations for the works, the key inspirations being cottagecore, automata, and doll houses. The depiction of simple living and quiet moments that can be found in cottagecore was very important to express due to its great presence in my desired futures. The speculative dioramas connect with the depiction of nature with two of three vignettes having outdoor scenes. The handcrafted elements of cottagecore art are echoed in some of the materials of the dioramas, such as the woven textile ground covers in *Garden* and *Death*. Even elements that wouldn't traditionally be thought of as handcrafted, like the 3D printed figures relate back to cottagecore through additive components like hand sculpted hinges, hand sculpted bodily features, as well as some of the figures being hand painted with little attempt to hide brush strokes.

Leaning into cottagecore's aesthetics has also distanced the work from realism. I'm not trying to copy real life, but instead display speculations, potentials, goals. These works are hopeful and inherently escapist endeavors, similar to the cottagecore content found on Instagram during the COVID-19 quarantine. This project initially came from that place of escapism. I've been wanting to create a cute little garden scene for a while; however, I was hesitant about making one due to many academic works requiring theoretical and historical context to justify their creation. With psychological research, philosophical research, and personal reflection, I am producing much more than a garden, yet still scratching that escapist itch.

3.1.1 Automata

Automata (singular: automaton) are figures that mimic a repeated motion through mechanics. They began as manual objects, dating back to ancient Greece with their heyday in

19th century Europe. Some of the most popular automata of the 1800s were mechanical caged birds. An advanced automaton of that period is *Draughtsman-Writer* by Henri Maillardet (1800),

Figure 7

Draughtman-Writer



Note. Photo of *Draughtsman-Writer* taken by The Franklin Institute Science Museum.

which could write and draw a certain number of images and phrases. In time, motors and electrical components were added to create more complex automata, resulting in today's best-known automata which can be found in Disney Parks as animatronics.

Though they were most popular in the 19th century, there are still makers, artists, and craftsman creating automata today. Amedeo Capelli is an automata maker who creates playful wood and wire hand crank automata. Anthropomorphized critters and colorful, stylized vignettes captivate those following his work on Instagram and YouTube. Tim Lewis is an artist who creates motorized automata which mimic human and animal actions and are made from found objects. His amalgamations suggest feelings of the uncanny valley, where the automata's visible similarities and actions similar to life still feeling off and unsettling. Mechanisms draw on walls

with pencil, an action feeling innately human, yet no human hand is in sight. Figures move as animals while they are visibly a composite of skeletal mechanics and other curiosities.

Figure 8

Glade



Note. Photo of *Glade* (Lewis, 2023) taken by Flowers Gallery.

I find a similarity between my thesis project and the animatronic theater show *Walt Disney's Carousel of Progress*. Both works invoke positive outlooks on the future through automata vignettes but focus on differing areas of the human experience. The *Carousel of Progress* is a show currently in Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom depicting the progression of technology throughout the 20th century into the start of the 21st century through four animatronic scenes. Though this show's focus is on the progress of technology through depictions of the past, it takes on a positive futurist outlook as time moves forward and scenes change. The theme song of the ride, "There's a Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow," encapsulates that message. My thesis focuses on human experiences versus technological innovation and reaches beyond the past and present into speculative spaces that the "big, beautiful tomorrow"

refers to. I show some of the positive possibilities of what may come to be as both an escapist fantasy and a hopeful goal to work towards.

Figure 9

Walt Disney's Carousel of Progress



I chose to incorporate the mechanical components, turning the dioramas into automata and allowing human interaction. The original intention was for have the audience to become active participants in animating these speculative futures when they turned the crank. They would become an external influence upon a future that I describe as mine, yet I am not solely in control. In the final creations, many of the mechanics didn't function as originally intended; however, their visibility still provides an implied movement. This shift from literal to implied movement allows even more freedom for viewer influence than the original. They pick up upon the mechanics' visual cues to determine what the figures could do, but they either need to predict their movement based on the corresponding sketches displayed in the exhibition or create an imagine movement based upon what they see in the sculpture in front of them. They thus also participate in the act of speculating these potential futures with me.

3.1.2 Doll Houses

Though the novelty and entertainment of automata have fascinated many for generations, another more common set of objects interested me while creating this project: dolls and dollhouses. Similar to automata, they are objects that can present vignettes and dioramas; however, it is up to the viewer's imagination to determine what event takes place in those vignettes. Today dolls and dollhouses are primarily used by children as playthings. However, though some adults stipulate that dolls are only for children, dolls and dollhouses aren't only for children. They are truly for anyone to use as they are prompts for imagination, tools to help the act of speculation.

A particular moment of dollhouse history that caught my attention were the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch cabinet dollhouses. Along with being toys for children, dolls and dollhouses were also collected items by some well-to-do women. These doll homes were household fixtures that were integrated into the home, like a china or curiosity cabinet. The rooms within the dollhouses were exquisitely decorated and furnished with the fashions of the time from little sheeted beds to tiny silverware settings on tables. Along with the furnishings, dolls represented everyone in the household, including the lady and the man of the house, children, servants, and pets. These ornate Dutch dollhouses have been studied to garner a better understanding of the women who owned them, how they may have lived, along with potential ideals they may have had keeping their household. These thoughts have been explored in articles such as Susan Broomhall's, "Imagined Domesticities in Early Modern Dutch Dollhouses" (2007) and Michell Moseley-Christian's, "Seventeenth-Century *Pronk Poppenhuisen*: Domestic Space and the Ritual Function of Dutch Dollhouses for Women" (2015).

Figure 10

Dolls' House of Petronella Oortman



Note. Dolls' house of Petronella Oortman (1686) at Rijks Museum.

Today, dolls and dollhouses are still being created and collected, though they are more often than not used as a form of enchantment, escapism, and storytelling rather than being duplicates of the home in which they reside. For example, many Lego sets are a combination of puzzles and doll houses, displaying environments in which their small figurines or “mini figs” reside. Another example would include Christmas village sets, where one can make whole Christmas themed towns including buildings, villagers, and outdoor environments. Along with physical dollhouses, we also now have virtual homes in the form of many videogames, such as the Sims franchise, where you can build and design both homes and characters. One can control and follow these characters around in their daily lives, monitoring food intake and emotions, as they in interact with the Sims world. The Sims is not only a controllable escapist fiction but has also become a tool of speculation for real life. Since the Sims building system has become so complex, people will even plan renovations and home decoration projects in the Sims.

My thesis project takes visual inspiration from dollhouses; first, the mode of display is inspired by Dutch dollhouse cabinets. Those dollhouses were displayed as integrated furniture within the home customized to suit the owner's taste. I took the visual concept of combining the displayed vignettes of daily life with furniture. However, rather than have the vignettes on shelves creating a shadow box effect (seeing each room from only one opening), I wanted each vignette scene to live in-the-round for the audience to see all the components in greater detail. Second, the vignettes are, for all intents and purposes, populated by dolls. I am the one playing with them. Their kinetic movement allows them to act out speculations that I've constructed even when my hands and voice aren't there to activate them.

Chapter 4: Reflection

This speculative exercise is both very much of its time and timeless. It is of its time because my current knowledge, desires, and opinions greatly affect the outcome of the project. As we've learned, time, external influences, and decisions can affect how a project looks. If I were to redo this project 5,10, 20 years into the future, I would have more life experience, have met more people, and created more projects. This thesis would never look the same as it does now. The question motivating this project, "What will happen in my future?" has been at the forefront of my mind for quite some time. Asking ourselves what will happen is a common occurrence for someone of my age, in their 20s, compared to other ages. Our 20s are a time where many of us first truly start navigating the society we have only been able to imagine a child. It is a time that brings about many questions due to the variety of new life experiences and uncertainty.

Asking about one's future may be a particularly potent question for people my age, but at the same time it is also a very human question, making the project timeless. We have always been asking speculative questions like this. We speculate about our respective futures as I've done in this project (perhaps not all of us displaying our exercises to this extent). And we ask about a country's future, the land's future, the world's future, the universe's future. Many artists, writers, scientists have dedicated their lives to predicting, imagining, speculating those futures. Yet, I also had to be reminded the speculation does not just consist of questions about our future, even though speculation has been defined and a variety of examples have been provided in this paper alone. Speculations are the imagining of outcomes. They are the, "what if" questions that keep you up at night. They ask what you will eat for breakfast tomorrow. They are a pivotal component of the creative process, and I will be continuing to create my work with a greater understanding of the role of speculation in this process. Whether I am asking myself how I would create certain movements for automata or how I would display a particular narrative, I now recognize the act of speculation is what brings enjoyment and challenge to the creative process. Speculation and its many outcomes will always be a welcomed influence on my positive fates.

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Appendix

The Creation Process and Exhibition Documentation

In summary, the 2023 Spring semester began the written research and proposal, the initial sketches of the project, and learning how automata components were constructed and functioned. The 2023 Summer semester consisted of the bulk of my written research along with the first formal sketches of the project. In the 2023 Fall semester, my focus was on table construction and formalizing the layout of the dioramas. The 2024 Spring semester focused on the construction of the mechanical components along with the creation of the moving diorama parts such as the figures. The start of the 2024 Summer semester focused on creating the nonmoving components of the dioramas and a continuation of constructing the mechanical elements. The installation of the exhibition was in late May and the defense was May 27th, 2024.

Though the overarching elements of the thesis remained as intentionally planned, there were still quite a few obstacles and changes that were made throughout the course of the project. The two most time- and resource-consuming component of the project were the tables and the mechanics. The initial table designs from round tables to rectangular table due to my lack of furniture construction experience (a round table is mathematically more complex to construct than a rectangular table), I still made constructing these tables more complex than necessary. I attempted to make them modular, meaning furniture pieces designed to be taken apart and put back together multiple times. This was intended to make the works easier to move as need be. All the separate components were constructed with a few obstacles, but once it came time to put all of the components of the table together, nothing fit together quite right.

Figure A1

Table Process Image



Note. The table has just been assembled.

At this point, I only had a few weeks left in the 2023 Fall semester and was behind on my original schedule by two months. I ended up letting go of a large amount of the modularity to complete the tables by then end of the semester.

The mechanics were also a point of contention within the creation process. This supports holding the mechanics in place kept breaking. I was able to strengthen them by gluing on additional wooden braces; however, resolving that dilemma took quite a bit of time. When I finally pieced and glued the mechanics in place, I found that none of the mechanics worked properly. Unfortunately, there was not enough time to try to fix them. I would have had to deconstruct and rebuild certain mechanical and supporting components requiring more time and resources than I had access to. Thus, the works remain physically stagnant.

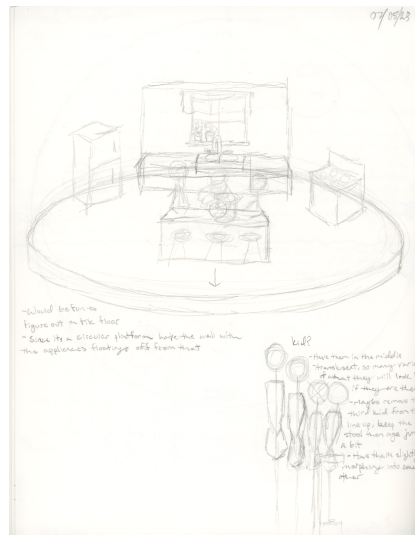
Another change that altered project conceptually and physically was how the project focused on future speculation. Originally, there was a heavier emphasis on the infinite number of

outcomes that could occur in the future. The overarching scenes remained the same. There was always a plan to show environments like a garden, a living room, and death, but the designs were more surreal in nature. The house in *Garden* shifted in material and style from industrial apartment buildings to brick and vinyl housing. Birds in the lawn were to shift from mourning doves visiting the space to chickens and ducks living in the garden. However, as the project progressed and my research continued, the design shifted away from the surreal. The idea of displaying a few possible futures as opposed to a multiplicity felt more in line with the visualizations of simple living, quiet moments, and stability that I have come to emphasize as a desire in my research and personal reflection. Thus, the dioramas were adjusted to reflect that shift in tone.

Throughout this project, I estimated a range of how many dioramas I would be constructing to adjust for potential time constraints or artistic alterations. Up until the middle of the 2024 Spring semester I thought I would be creating five automata. Due to the obstacles found while creating the tables and mechanics, I made the decision narrow down the project's scope and remove *Kitchen*. *Kitchen* was primarily based on the initial infinite futures idea by displaying a growing multilayered translucent figure that represented possibility of raising a child. As the focus shifted away from infinite futures and into quiet moments, it would have also meant simplifying the child, removing the main interest of this vignette and make the work feel sparse compared to the other dioramas. Thus, *Kitchen* was edited out from the project to allow for more time to complete the other components of the thesis.

Figure A2

Kitchen Sketch



Note. Conceptual sketch of the diorama *Kitchen*.

Overall, I am pleased with the outcome of the project itself, though it diverged from the original plan more than I would have expected. Even though I was familiar with all the processes I've implemented in my project, the technical expertise needed to create the project as planned challenged my prior knowledge. I thought I was able to rise to the challenge and meet the increased demand in expertise; however, it was to the detriment of time. When learning to better one's skills, there are often mistakes and obstacles that weren't foreseen but were important to the learning process. These obstacles ate away much more time than I had originally anticipated, resulting in adjustments that helped to focus the project from its original scope.

From the knowledge that I have gained from this thesis, I wouldn't change any aspect of the final outcome. If I were to reflect and alter something to achieve the original project, I would either alter my original designs or adjust my schedule. As I have previously stated, the needed expertise of the work was more complex than I had anticipated when proposing the project. If I were to go the time route, I would have presented my defense later in the summer. If I were to

simplify the project, there are three clear options that I could adjust: simplify the tables, simplify the mechanics, or plan to make less tables from the start.

When I look back towards my undergraduate thesis, I understand why it maintained its timeline and trajectory from concept to completion. In preparation for that thesis, I had created a few works to build up my skill level. The first project was a small prototype. I then increased the scope of the second project. The third project is scaled and materialistically similar to some of the pieces planned for my undergraduate thesis. I did this specifically to make certain I had the capacity to complete my thesis before I had even formally started to plan the construction of the thesis. In working on my graduate thesis, I have started to work my way through a similar process; however, I jumped into creating my thesis after only creating the small prototypes. At the opening of the thesis exhibition, a guest touched on this leap in skill level when he asked me how many points of articulation the piece, *Death* had? I had originally planned to have nineteen points of articulation (and had sixteen points once the project was completed), yet the most functional prototype I created before working on my thesis had four points of articulation. Four to nineteen points of articulation is quite the jump and did not include the three other sculptures into the equation. I was not aware of all of the techniques required to create the project that I had planned. At the end of the day, the increased amount of technical knowledge gained over the past year has made this experience worthwhile.

Figure A3

Exhibition



Note. The exhibition, *A Cup of Tea in Infinite Futures: A Positive Look at Speculative Fates* at the Penny Gallery, 2024.

Figure A4

Exhibition: Sketches



Note. View of desk and sketches in the exhibition, *A Cup of Tea in Infinite Futures: A Positive Look at Speculative Fates* at the Penny Gallery, 2024.

Figure A5

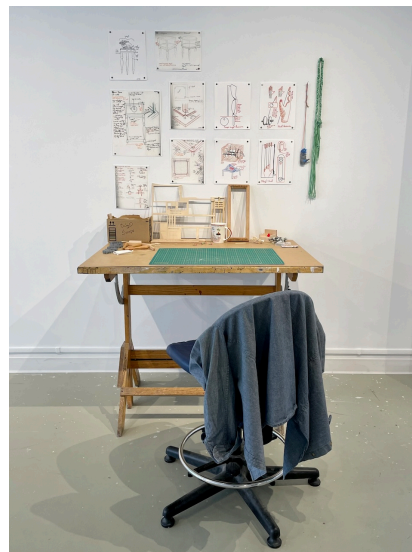
Exhibition: Sculptures



Note. View of sculptures in the exhibition, *A Cup of Tea in Infinite Futures: A Positive Look at Speculative Fates* at the Penny Gallery, 2024.

Figure A6

Desk Overall



Note. *Work Desk* installation. Desk has a cleared off cutting mat in the center front with spare parts strung about the edges. Sketches and materials hang on the wall and a chair with a shirt draped on the back is angled as if someone was using it.

Figure A7

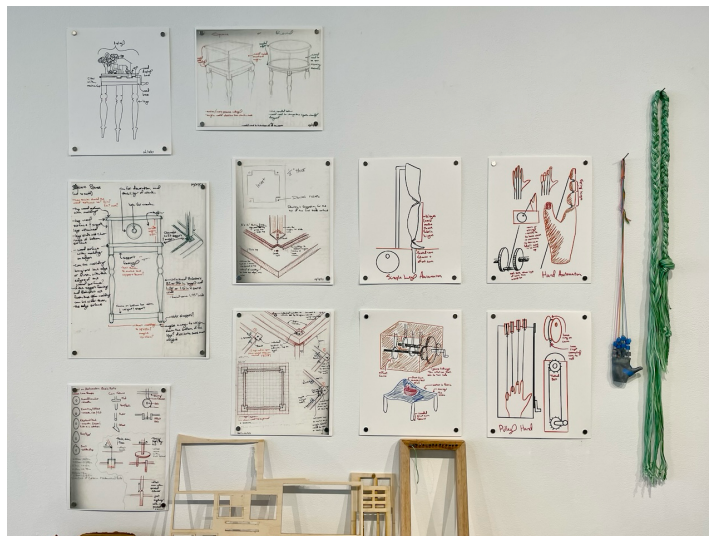
Desk Detail



Note. Work Desk installation. Desk has a cleared off cutting mat in the center front with spare parts strung about the edges.

Figure A8

Desk Sketches



Note. Sketches over the desk from top to bottom, right to left includes: *Hand Automaton*, *Pulley Hand Automaton*, *Leg Automaton*, *Boat Automaton*, *Square vs Round Table*, *Table Sketch 3*, *Table Sketch 2*, *Table Start Sketch*, *Table Sketch 1*, *Mechanical Parts*

Figure A9

Walking Sketches



Note. Walking sketches top to bottom, right to left include: Walking Sketch 2, Walking Sketch 1, Walking Mechanics Sketch

Figure A10

Walking



Note. Isabel Kelly, Walking, 2024, Mixed Media Sculpture

Figure A11

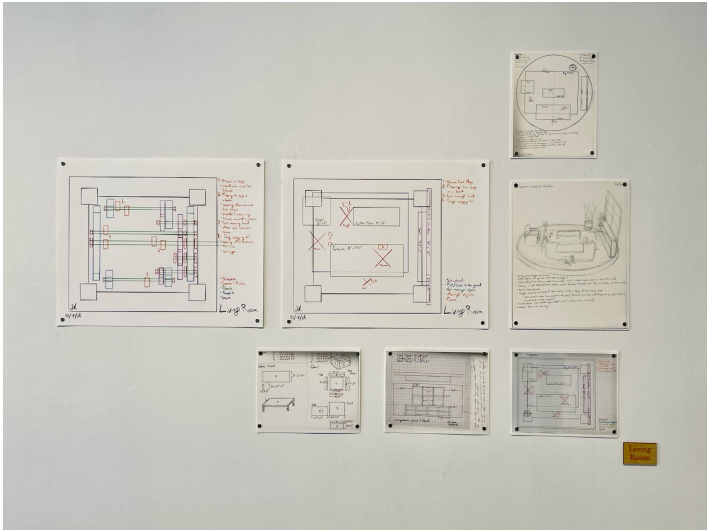
Walking Detail



Note. Isabel Kelly, *Walking*, 2024, Mixed Media Sculpture

Figure A12

Living Room Sketches



Note. Living Room sketches top to bottom, right to left include: *Living Room Layout 1*, *Living Room Sketch*, *Living Room Layout 2*, *Living Room Layout 3*, *Living Room Wall and Shelf*, *Living Room Furniture*, *Living Room Mechanical Layout*

Figure A13

Living Room



Note. Isabel Kelly, Living Room, 2024, Mixed Media Sculpture

Figure A14

Living Room Detail 1



Note. Isabel Kelly, Living Room, 2024, Mixed Media Sculpture

Figure A15

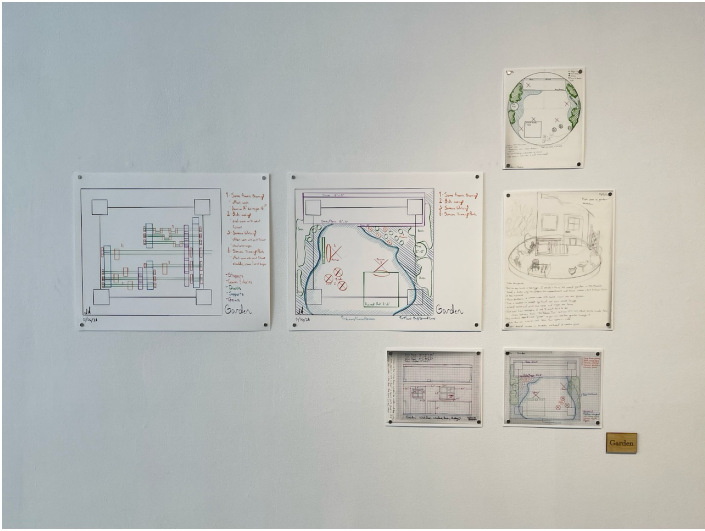
Living Room Detail 2



Note. Isabel Kelly, Living Room, 2024, Mixed Media Sculpture

Figure A16

Garden Sketches



Note. Garden sketches top to bottom, right to left include: Garden Layout 1, Garden Sketch, Garden Layout 2, Garden Layout 3, Garden Wall and Deck, Garden Mechanical Layout

Figure A17

Garden



Note. Isabel Kelly, *Garden*, 2024, Mixed Media Sculpture

Figure A18

Garden Detail 1



Note. Isabel Kelly, *Garden*, 2024, Mixed Media Sculpture

Figure A19

Garden Detail 2



Note. Isabel Kelly, Garden, 2024, Mixed Media Sculpture

Figure A20

Death Sketches



Note. Death sketches top to bottom, right to left include: Death Layout 1, Death Sketch 3, Death Sketch 1, Death Layout 2, Death Sketch 3, Death Mechanical Layout

Figure A21

Death



Note. Isabel Kelly, *Death*, 2024, Mixed Media Sculpture

Figure A22

Death Detail 1



Note. Isabel Kelly, *Death*, 2024, Mixed Media Sculpture

Figure A23

Death Detail 2



Note. Isabel Kelly, *Death*, 2024, Mixed Media Sculpture