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## Age

Ty Barnes

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Age

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

Ty Barnes  
Mississippi State University  
Bachelor of Fine Art in Sculpture, 2015

July 2021  
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Bethany Springer, MFA  
Thesis Chair

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Dylan Dewitt, MFA  
Committee Member

---

Adrienne Callander, MFA  
Committee Member

---

David Andree, MFA  
Committee Member

## **Abstract**

*Age* is a body of work that uses open ended, multi-directional narrative, economical craft, body positioning, and disorder to create situations for curiosity to take hold and rekindle a sense of naivety. Intentionally pedestrian material choice and playful, curious methodology work in tandem with the visual language of play to create a world building opportunity for the participating viewer. The objects are anchors or starting points with spaces in between for flexible narratives and imagined and reimagined worlds with no prescribed beginning or end point.

The exhibition and written thesis represent a conglomeration of connected-by-association ideas, a Rube Goldberg machine of an idea, in which the idea is in constant motion. This is made apparent in the slightly disjointed construction of the written thesis, which represents a tentacular model of thinking in which the reader is focused on one thought, and everything around that thought simultaneously, much like the thought process of an octopus, who has a central brain in the head that works in tandem with a brain located in each tentacle.

This thesis paper begins with a section titled “This is an example of a back story,” that acts as a written representation of my state of mind throughout the process of making this body of work. It is a jotted down intuitional recollection, objectified through the use of sophisticated footnotes and figures.

## Table of Contents

|  |       |
|--|-------|
| This is an example of a back story.....                        | Pg.1  |
| Not Nostalgia.....   | Pg.3  |
| This is what <i>Age</i> looks like.....                        | Pg.3  |
| Economical Craft.....  | Pg.6  |
| Logical Absurdity.....   | Pg.7  |
| Two places at once.....  | Pg.8  |
| Confusion.....   | Pg.10 |
| The reason you kneel at a coffee table (Body Positioning)..... | Pg.10 |
| Embarrassment.....   | Pg.11 |
| Declaration of Naivety.....                                    | Pg.12 |
| Calder was 27 once.....  | Pg.13 |
| Think like an octopus.....                                     | Pg.14 |
| Sources.....   | Pg.16 |
| Figures.....   | Pg.17 |

## **This is an example of a back story<sup>1</sup>**

My name is Ty Barnes. I was born on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of July in the year 1993. My gut tells me I was cut out around 8am. I was born in Mississippi, and more specifically, the capitol of that realm, Jackson. I'm a Jacksonian. I've lived in two houses in my time as a Jacksonian. My gut tells me I lived in the first house for, maybe, the first eight years of my life.<sup>2</sup> I remember being sad when we moved away.

I remember a few characters from this place. First, there were the lizards. There were two varieties that I can remember. You've got the green ones that looked like they'd swallowed a penny, and you've got the metallic copper ones that had tiny limbs and appeared to slither everywhere (I liked the copper ones because they looked like snakes, and I liked snakes).<sup>3</sup>

After the lizards, there were the frogs. Much like the lizards, I can only remember two varieties of frogs. First there were the tree frogs who were lime green and sometimes stuck to glass, and second there were the toads who peed on you if you touched them.<sup>4</sup> I preferred the tree frogs because of their sleek aerodynamic shape and more controlled bladder.

The last character from this place that I remember was the neighborhood cat. An almost beautiful, fluffy white cat that we call Blubber Guts.

All these characters would eventually go away.

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<sup>1</sup> This example happens to be true.

<sup>2</sup> We left the first house in 1999, so I only lived here for the first six years of my life.

<sup>3</sup> The penny swallowing lizards are actually called Green Anoles, and they don't swallow pennies, instead they show off their dewlap, which is used for both the defending of territory and the attracting of potential mates. The copper lizards are commonly known as Little Brown Skinks. They are the smallest lizards in the south eastern United States and have transparent eyelids so that they can see when their eyes are closed.

<sup>4</sup> The American Toad pees as a mode of self-defense. This is especially common when picked up by a human.

The first that would go away was the lizard (the penny swallowing type.) The lizard went away because I killed it. These were the lizards that were easy to catch if you had a fast hand, the lizards that you could provoke to bite and hang from your lip or lobe. This lizard bit too hard, and because I was bigger than it, I knew I could kill it. I held the lizard on the ground and squashed its head with the chair I was sitting in (fig. 1). We would move shortly after I killed the lizard (but not because I killed the lizard). After we moved to the new house, I'd only see one green lizard again. It looked really old and pale and had what looked like white stubble over its face and chin. I asked him for forgiveness and then he shut his eyes and died.

The frogs, the tree frogs, were the next to go away. They too were killed, but not by my hands alone. It was a family effort. At the first house I lived in there was a large oak tree. There was an eye level hole in this tree, and in this hole lived a small family of frogs. Three of them; a mother, father, and a kid. My family collectively noticed their home, and collectively we decided to beautify the front of their home with paint. We painted a blue ring around the opening, and above the blue ring, in red we wrote "frog hotel." We thought we were being generous but in reality, we were placing a threshold hex on the frog's home. In some amount of time the hole had overgrown and sealed itself shut, presumably with the family of frogs still inside.

The cat we called Blubber Guts was an almost beautiful cat. She had beautifully long and white fur. I imagine that she was very soft to pet, but I never got around to doing that. She was all beautiful except for her under belly. At some point she had been brutally attacked by a dog, who tore open her belly. Her entrails hung from her open belly (not low enough to drag the ground, but low enough to be visible). I remember her appearing to be numb to it all, walking around as if nothing was wrong (fig. 2). I think she lived this way for months. She'd only occasionally stop by our place, and on one of these occasions my dad was prepared to put her out

of her suspected misery, so he grabbed an aluminum tee ball bat to crack her down. When he approached her, she began rubbing her back on his legs. He couldn't do it, and we never saw her again. Later we found out that the neighbor could do it, and so he did it.

## **Not Nostalgia**

My memories are fuel. I do not reminisce on them. I usually do not remember them correctly. I do not long to return to them. The experiences that I've had have only evolved into new experiences. It's a cycle in which experience fuels the next experience. Longing for the past and attempting to recreate it would only restart the cycle.

The backstory with footnotes that I have provided above primarily acts as a written representation of a singular model of dual thought, where the main body portrays an intuitively written memoir, and the footnotes, because of their institutional formatting and fact checking, act as an analytical/logical model of thought. However, the writing also acts as a pool of personal experience that can be mined to produce narratives while interacting with the physical works in the exhibition. I have mined the humorous yet somber tones from the narrative I have written to create physical works that are joyful and humorous on the surface, however, after inspected with a sharp eye, shift into a realm of mundanity.

## **This is what *Age* looks like**

*Age* is comprised primarily of miniature objects constructed from a wide range of materials, thoughtfully placed on manipulated found surfaces scattered throughout the exhibition space (fig. 3). The focal feature placed on many of the structures (which I call land masses) is the transparent house spouting water (fig. 4). I have built four architecturally (socially and

economically) different transparent houses that all share a common problem, a busted pipe.

Aside from the architectural differences between the homes, there are differences in domestic accessories as well. For example, one of the larger homes contains a large dining room table with only one chair, while the smallest home contains a smaller table, but has seating for four (fig. 5). These differences are created so that the viewer can weigh the options and select a house that suits them, and because there is an element of roleplay within the context of the work, the viewer can begin to think and rethink about why they've selected a certain house over another. The hyperbolic busted pipe found in each house acts as the common denominator, showcasing that there is a consistent problem found in all four homes, and therefore, none are perfect; making the weighing of household options a necessary task to objectively select a home.

Aside from representing a household problem, the cyclical flowing of the water in *Age* acts as a constant model of liminality. Water has been used as a liminal object for millennia, where it acts as a threshold between worlds. In the physical world, water can act as a threshold between aquatic life and terrestrial life, while in a spiritual world, it can act as a gateway between our world and another. The water in *Age* represents a threshold between two modes of thinking: the way a child thinks and the way an adult thinks. The constant recycling of the water transforms this threshold into an infinite space in which you can access both modes of thinking simultaneously.

*Age* also contains numerous wall mounted works that act as abstract backdrops/atmosphere for the constructed land masses scattered throughout the room. On the east wall of the gallery there is a circular shaped grouping of small bronze castings of various objects, such as toy dragons, flower shapes, star shapes, and skulls. This circular grouping of bronze objects acts as an abstract representation of the sun rising or daytime (fig. 6).

On the west wall of the gallery, there are seven framed risographs of astral shaped objects that are matted with crayon rubbings of the waste pieces of material spawned from the creation of the body of work in the exhibition (fig. 7). The rubbings, which mimic cosmic dust, are symbolic of the history of the world that I have constructed. Above the framed risographs is a large tablet-like meteor/UAP (unidentified aerial phenomena) made from OSB, acrylic, various paints, and HVAC duct tape (fig. 8). The OSB tablet is placed high on the wall to alter the viewers body position, forcing them to look up, mimicking the action of looking up at the night sky (which represents the birthplace of wonder and curiosity). The risographs and the OSB tablet act as abstract representations of the night sky.

A large backdrop hangs on the largest wall of the gallery (fig. 9). This backdrop is constructed from twenty canvas drop cloth pieces, in which ten are dyed light blue and ten are dyed black. The pieces are sewn together in a checkered pattern so that there is an equal distribution of both light blue and black pieces. This uniform distribution is symbolic of a dual consciousness in which the light blue-sky pieces represent the mind of the child, and the dark night pieces represent the mind of the adult, or vice versa. The checkered backdrop is fixed between the east sun wall and the west night wall to further illustrate the conglomeration of both modes of thinking. The light blue sections of the backdrop are adorned with embroidered butterflies, while the black sections are adorned with embroidered stars. From the distance required to see the entire backdrop, both the stars and butterflies begin to blend and mimic each other's shapes and random placement, further emphasizing the swirling of a child's and an adult's way of thinking.

## **Economical Craft**

I employed the use of economical craft while creating the objects in this thesis exhibition. This economical craft is an alternate evolution of the craft typically associated with the work of children, where craft-based decision making is heavily, but not solely, dependent on finite sources of material. These material restrictions are usually based on safety precautions and the child's inability to go out and get what they want. I am independent; I can ignore safety precautions and go out and get what I want, however, the child's vigor to convey an idea with limited sources has remained constant. I have imagined the restriction-based, vigor inducing craft of the child evolving into a craft where vigor induces a restricted selection of materials. It is a small challenge for both the viewer and I to consciously transform the chosen material into the intended material. For example, in one object I have used cut risographs of rubbings and clear flex seal to mimic the aquatic patterning of a pool liner (fig. 10).

The material restrictions a child faces while making rarely interfere with the child's intention. If a child intends to create a command module to visit the moon, the child does not need titanium and carbon fiber to accomplish this, as tinfoil and cardboard will work just fine. I have adapted this "works just fine" approach into my own practice, where the materials I use only require a degree of imagination to transform into their intended representations. Imagination is a muscle that children are constantly flexing and making resilient. However, like any muscle, if you don't use it, you lose it. Through my use of economical craft, I offer the equipment needed to flex the viewers imagination. For example, on all the land masses, I have used carpet pad to act as soil on which I can plant grass and build homes (or statically apply microfibers to mimic grass on which to place model acrylic homes) (fig. 11). Viewers will recognize this material and

its function, but the context provided by the adjacency of the static grass and with a bit of imaginative flexing, the carpet pad works just fine as textured soil full of colorful sediment.

## **Logical Absurdity**

Role playing creates an environment for the development of critical and ethical reasoning skills. For adults, however, role playing allows us to *re-develop* these skills. Role playing is also a low stakes game. You can rerun any scenario until you like the outcome. Because the stakes are so low in role playing, you can mentally participate in scenarios with different modes of thought. For example, in *Age*, you can participate with either a logical or illogical mindset (return the shopping cart to the cart corral or stack all the carts on top of each other and just see what happens) (fig. 12). Because of this, the production of the work contains both logical and illogical decision making (engineering and instinct).

I aim to exist in a state of both logical and illogical thinking when I produce work: a hybrid space. Because of working is this dual state, the work is imbued with a hybrid energy, resulting in a dual consciousness in the perceiver. We become both child and adult at the same time. We crawl on all fours and look for secrets while simultaneously noticing the discrepancies in the constructed world (fig. 13).

Intuition is based on experience. A child uses intuition to solve problems because they can only access their experiences and haven't fully given in to rational problem solving. While I work, I use my intuition to return to a mode of childhood thought, where my experience as a maker of things allows my emotions to subconsciously influence the outcome. However, because making objects takes time, I can insert rational problem solving into the process of making the work. I portray this problem solving through engineering, which I use to enter a mode of logical

thought. The works that I produce are multifaceted, allowing for these two modes of thinking to happen in tandem with one another multiple times throughout the creation of a single object.

When producing the work, subjects are intuitively (illogically) plucked from a pond of experience (all subjects are connected because they come from the same pond). The assets (a logical term) that I select are analyzed and economically (intuitively [illogically]) drawn. These drawings are then meticulously digitized into three dimensional models and laid out in a logical manner so that a highly engineered robotic machine can produce precision pieces. I then take these precise pieces and instinctually hot glue them together and cover them in a color that *feels* right. For example, after I decided to make the volcano that can be found in the exhibition, I quickly drew a rendering of the overall shape on paper, then inserted it into a digital modeling program so that I could make precision pieces suitable for 3D printing. I then took these engineered pieces and haphazardly hot glued them together. Finally, I instinctually covered the volcano with colorful Sculpey (fig. 14). Because this back-and-forth mode of thinking is imbued into each object, the work is both childlike craft with adult precision and adult craft with childlike precision.

## **Two places at once**

My parents have a great dining room table. However, it isn't only a dining room table; it's also a blank slab of earth that I can terraform. I have invented worlds on this table. The coffee table is the same, so is the desk. These locations hold dual functions: a landscape and a place to dine, a landscape and a place to rest your feet, and a landscape and a place to work. They hold two functions at once.

This hybrid function is yet another representation of the duality between child and adult consciousness, or between logic and illogic. In the thesis exhibition I used found tables because they serve the logical function of acting as a place to rest your beverage or supporting the computer on which you work, yet they also serve the irrational idea that an epic battle (or a surreal trip to the grocery store) is unwinding on its surface (fig. 15).

The found tables that I use contain history. They hold the marks of their logical functions, like the stains created from a lack of coaster use, or the scratches from writing with a heavy hand. I pick up these tables second hand, therefore myself and the spectator only see the implied history of the objects. We need to imagine where these tables once stood and how they were used. We imagine these scenarios by reflecting on our own experience.

The earth is older than us all, and we build things on its back. The earth is a foundation. However, it's not always a good foundation, as it's alive and in constant motion, therefore we place foundations on top of *the* foundation. Because I am no god or big bang, I mimic this by building my world on top of the preexisting foundations of the tables I collect.

In Robert Louis Stevenson's poem "Block City," he wrote, "Let the sofa be mountains, the carpet be sea/There I'll establish a city for me." I adapt this sentiment for my own work, but instead of sofa mountains (which are inherently epic and adventurous), the mundane tables I select act as bulldozed plots on which to build homes, and instead of climbing a (sofa) mountain, you might just push the shopping cart back to the cart corral. It's in the mundane journey to return the cart that you might notice things you've not noticed before and turn these new observations into something interesting.

Through interacting with the world in *Age* you are imagining imagination. You become conscious of the action of imagination.

## Confusion

A Zuan poet of the Russian Futurist movement said, “one should write in a new way, and the more disorder we bring to the composition of sentences, the better.”<sup>5</sup> How this disorganization is better is subjective, but I do know that disorder can objectively spawn a state of curiosity. I adapt this method of disorder to work in a visual realm instead of a written space by using inconsistencies in scale as a method to cultivate confusion. In the world I have made, your house (which is completely transparent and gurgling with water, which is confusing in its own way) is bigger than a volcano, a shopping cart is as tall as your front door, and the cars at the drive-in are smaller than your dining room table (fig. 16). This confusing scale aids in creating an innocent perception, which is necessary to truly enter the work/world.

## The reason you kneel at a coffee table (Body Positioning)<sup>6</sup>

If worlds are invented at coffee tables (and they are, I’ve done it) then you must kneel at the coffee table to begin the process. It’s a necessary action; kneeling. Play and invention can only begin after kneeling has been initiated. Kneeling is my catalyst. Imagine this scenario: you want to be in the presence of family or friends, so you decide to join them in the living room. By presence you only mean physically close, interaction is not necessarily what you seek, only the warmth of bodies around you. You think that you feel safer in their presence, the family, or the friends. You’re here to invent imaginary worlds on this blank slate of earth (the coffee table). If you choose to stay seated on the couch, then you are sitting on the cusp between two worlds; the

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<sup>5</sup> Fineberg, Jonathan David, *The Innocent Eye: Children's Art and the Modern Artist*, p. 31

<sup>6</sup> Not only does an altering of body positioning, like looking up at a work mounted high on the wall or crawling on all fours to investigate the cluster of objects tucked under a table, help to promote an unreserved viewing experience in you, the viewer, it can also act as a catalyst for the hesitant viewer, pushing them to let their guard down and interact with the work. Seeing someone do something first and not get hurt either emotionally or physically (but most importantly emotionally) is usually a good sign.

world that you usually exist in, which is the same world that your family and friends are currently in, and the world that you are trying to create or re-enter into. You cannot enter the world if you are sitting on the couch. You're only viewing the world and play, not active in it. You've got to be near eye level to *actually* enter into the world. This is why you kneel at a coffee table, to be eye level with the world you've just made. Kneeling is the conscious action that allows you to fully transition into active play.

## **Embarrassment**

In 1906, Matisse painted "The Pink Onions." This image of onions and vases can be described as having a childlike aesthetic, with its blocky colors, skewed perspective, and lack of light and dark value. In a conversation with Jean Puy, Matisse would declare that the postman was the one who painted "The Pink Onions." Matisse, in the beginning, was embarrassed and unsure by the childlike aesthetic of the painting, thus he did not claim to be the one who created it. He would later come to understand this work and recant his declaration and take full responsibly for the creation of the painting.<sup>7</sup>

The embarrassment that Matisse felt was spawned from a culture that prizes efficiency over play. There is a societal construct in adulthood, where adults are told, by other adults, to stop acting like children, and because of this construct, we use the term "childish" as a taboo descriptor of certain actions of the adult.<sup>8</sup> It is as if you have a limited amount of childhood energy in you, and if you don't use it all before you pass through the constructed threshold of childhood to adulthood, you aren't allowed to openly use what you held onto after passing through this imaginary threshold without feeling a sense of embarrassment.

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<sup>7</sup> Fineberg, p. 16

<sup>8</sup> Root-Bernstein, Michelle, *Inventing Imaginary World*, p. 23

I too have felt some form of embarrassment throughout my time making this work, and I have bashfully, yet resiliently stood next to it. I've been questioned about whether the work was serious enough, and to me it's almost dire.

### **Declaration of Naivety**

There is an inherent value to the naivety of childhood that this exhibition and written thesis seeks to rekindle. Channeling the innocence and naivety of childhood creates curiosity and a willingness to accept feedback from others. A rekindling of naivety creates the possibility for us to spend less time defending what we think we know and more time exploring the things we don't know. It reframes the unknown as possibility as opposed to risk and opens space for us to be in a perpetual state of curiosity.

This work is alive and does at least two things. It treats you and I differently. I have a much closer relationship to it. I created it, and it created the current me. This work holds me accountable. It is the declaration that I must continue to exist in the mental space between intuition and logic. It is a sharp and colorful space. I am on the edge of a mental age in which I can completely lose my naivety, and my intuition and soul does not want that to happen. I'm not certain, but I think the work stokes the dwindling naivety in you. That's if you *need* it.

They laughed at one I loved –  
The triangular hill that hung  
Under the Big Forth. They said  
That I was bounded by the whitethorn hedges  
Of the little farm and did not know the world.  
But I knew that love's doorway to life  
Is the same doorway everywhere.

Ashamed of what I loved  
I flung her from me and called her a ditch

Although she was smiling at me with violets.

But now I am back in her briary arms;  
The dew of an Indian Summer morning lies  
On bleached potato-stalks –  
What age am I?

I do not know what age I am<sup>9</sup>,  
I am no mortal age;  
I know nothing of women,  
Nothing of cities,  
I cannot die  
Unless I walk outside these whitethorn hedges.<sup>10</sup>

I recite Patrick Kavanagh's poem, *Innocence*, as a chant of declaration, in which I am deciding to acknowledge and remain a citizen of my whitethorn hedges. I am ignoring the speculative ridicule and embarrassment that comes with the quest of stoking my depleting naivety. The small fragments of a world that I have created are my whitethorn hedges, and my naivety and I cannot die unless we walk outside of them.

### **Calder was 27 once**

There is a video of an older Alexander Calder performing with his circus.<sup>11</sup> He uses his voice to make the miniature lion roar, his breath to make the tiny clown smoke a cigarette, and his fingers to make the wire trapeze swingers flip. He still had *it* in his old age. He was safe inside *his* whitethorn hedges. However, this wasn't Calder's attempt at returning to his past mentality, as he never left. I was fooled by his old age. I saw an older man attempting to

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<sup>9</sup> This became my mantra halfway through making this work.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, *Innocence*.

<sup>11</sup> Painleve, Jean, director *Le Grand Cirque Calder 1927*

rekindling something, when in reality Calder began making his circus when he was 27 years old. His circus was his declaration. I'm 27<sup>12</sup> now and making my declaration.

### **Think like an octopus**

In a conversation with Ezra Klein, Alison Gopnik talks about the differences between a child's consciousness and an adult's consciousness<sup>13</sup>. She uses the metaphor of a spotlight and a lantern, where the spotlight refers to the consciousness of the adult, and the lantern refers to the consciousness of the child. With spotlight consciousness, you become fixed on a singular notion, and you attempt to exploit this notion, whereas with lantern consciousness everything is illuminated, and you take in information from everything around you. Accessing lantern consciousness fills you with a curious energy and puts you in a state of discovery.

Gopnik claims that it's probably impossible for a system to exist that can optimize both the explore and exploit systems simultaneously, at least in humans. She uses the octopus as an example of these two systems working together. The octopus has nine brains, a central brain and one in each tentacle. The central brain in the octopus is the exploiter. Its goal is to complete an objective, like getting food, or moving locations. The remaining eight brains aid the central brain in achieving its goal, while simultaneously acting independently as individual explorers, absorbing information. The central brain is the adult, and the eight remaining brains in the tentacles are the children, yet they are both from the same creature, therefore existing in a constant state of hybrid thinking. The work/world that I have made acts as an alternative evolution in which I am both child and adult simultaneously, kind of like an octopus.

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<sup>12</sup> Biologically I'm 27. My mantra is still "I do not know what age I am."

<sup>13</sup> "Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Alison Gopnik." *The New York Times*

When I attempt to think like an octopus, I find it futile (as I only have one brain), yet I imagine my central brain being determined to find (or create) a world where I can continuously sustain some degree of naivety. This is the problem that I have the spotlight fixed on. I then must use my metaphorical remaining brains to get me to this realm. For example, one brain's lantern might cast light on a memory, showcasing its ability to be mined to produce narrative, while another brain's lantern might illuminate a material's ability to be imaginatively transformed into something else. On their own, these illuminated subjects are inconsequential, but when used together, they can create worlds.

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## Figures

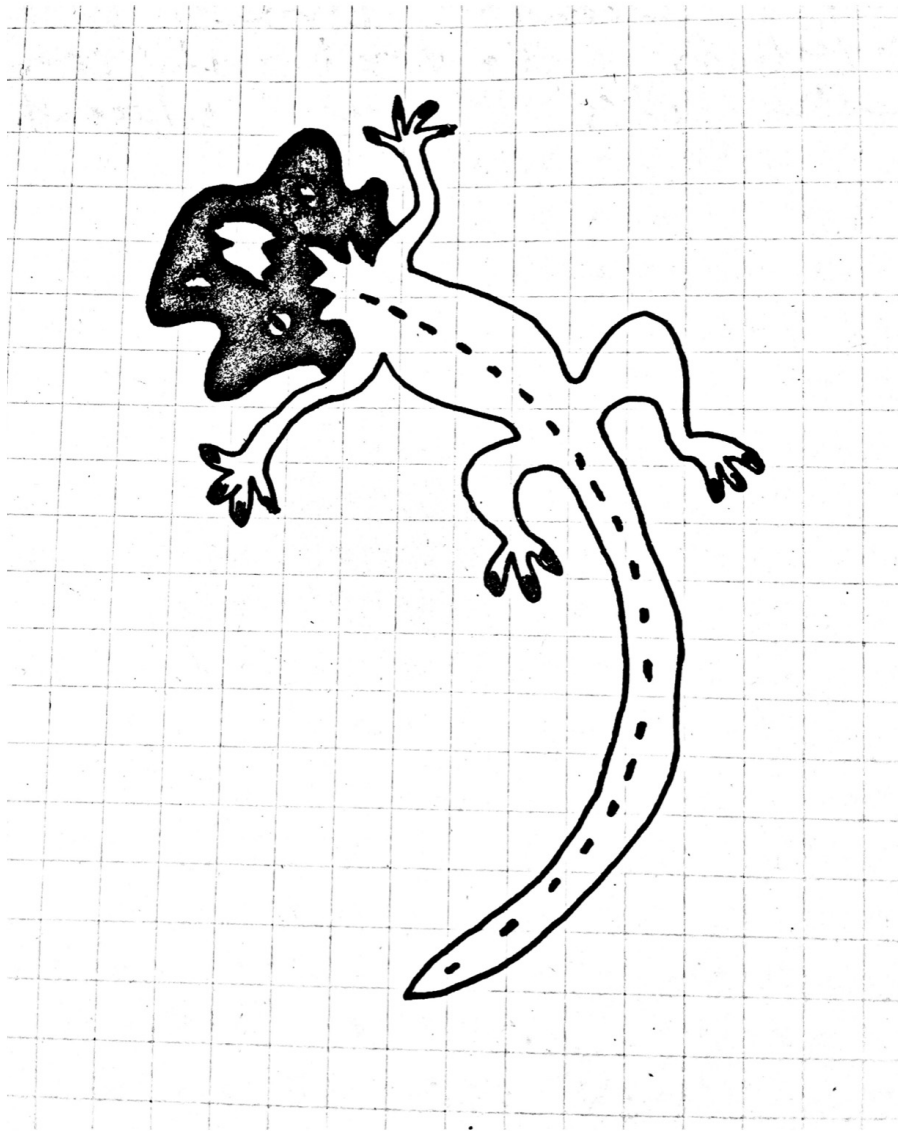


Figure 1. Artist's rendering of a lizard with its head smashed. 2021. Scanned ink drawing.

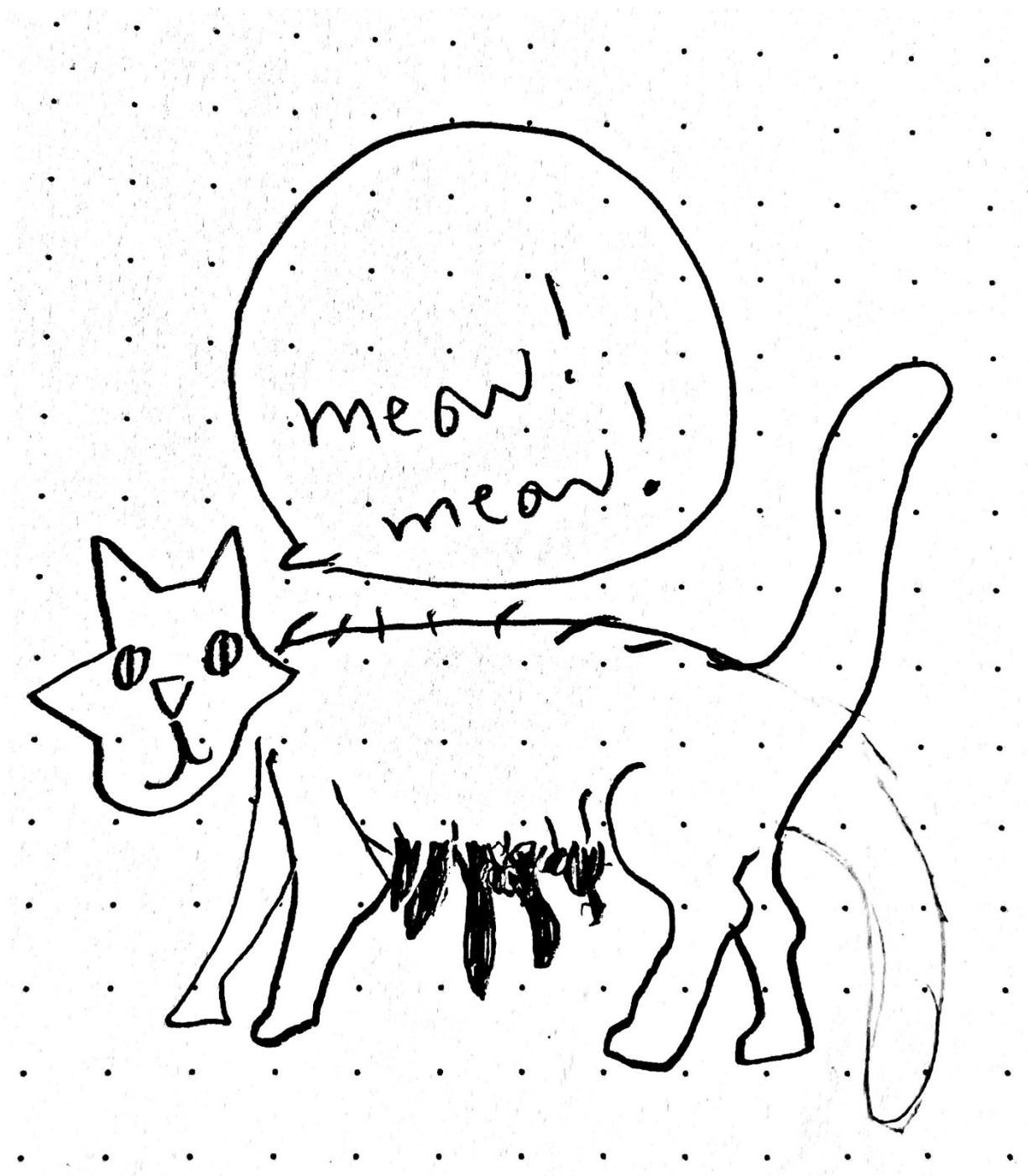


Figure 2. Artist's rendering of Blubber Guts the cat. 2021. Scanned pencil drawing.



Figure 3. *Age* (installation view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.



Figure 4. *Age* (detail view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.



Figure 5. *Age* (detail view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.



Figure 6. *Age* (installation view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.



Figure 7. *Age* (detail view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.



Figure 8. *Age* (installation view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.



Figure 9. *Age* (installation view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.



Figure 10. *Age* (detail view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.



Figure 11. *Age* (detail view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.



Figure 12. *Age* (detail view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.



Figure 13. *Age* (detail view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.



Figure 14. *Age* (detail view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.



Figure 15. *Age* (installation view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.



Figure 16. *Age* (detail view) 2021. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo Ty Barnes.