own family history and strongly influenced by the films and writings of Russian film director Andrey Tarkovsky (1932-86), Hamilton's *The Life of Perished Things* captivates the viewer while avoiding traditional strategies of dramatic narrative, emphasizing "the rhythm of the movement of time."[4]

Hamilton's association of sitting alone in nature with a feeling of terror certainly evokes the 19th century's Romantic notion of the sublime, the particular mixture of fear and awe that was believed to be central to the appreciation of both nature and art. But Hamilton's intermixing of these themes with her ruminations on *Housekeeping* and housekeeping infuses these older ideas with a uniquely modern perspective. In today's world, the lines between art and everyday life have been increasingly blurred, and the practice of keeping house is seen by many as a means of empowerment and mindful living. Mindfulness has its risks as well, as evidenced by the sense of unease Hamilton repeatedly mobilizes in *The Life of Perished Things*. Sitting alone in nature brings with it a feeling of terror because it reminds us of our mortality, but in a more mundane sense it reminds us that there is much work to be done in the here and now. Cooking, cleaning, laundry, bills—the effort to keep up with these tasks is only matched by the effort to keep thoughts of them at bay. Like the daily chores of keeping house, art making can be both joyful and burdensome. The comfort and solace that comes from each are the result of continuous effort on the part of the homemaker or the artist, but these Sisyphean undertakings hold within them the constant possibility of their own undoing. The overturned boat, the houses undone, and the specter of a watery grave suggest to us what will occur if and when we come to rest.

It is thus the vexed relationships between housekeeping and the "domestic arts," between art and life, and between competing realities that lie at the heart of Hamilton's installation. The promise of relief from these worries comes in the form of a vista onto a frozen lake. Bringing to mind Hamilton's earlier video piece *Beautiful/Terrible* (2007-2009), a reimagining of the disappearance of a Russian lake, this fortuitous view from the gallery's windows reassures us that the submerged world of *The Life of Perished Things* is not a drowned world. Like the installation itself, this spectacle of nature offers the possibility of a resolution of the anxieties that may fuel one's compulsions, and the ever-present hope that tempers them.

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1 Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980), 152.

2 Ibid., 6.

3 Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 114.

4 Ibid.

The Life of Perished Things

New video, drawings, and installation work

The audio and video installation *The Life of Perished Things* (2009-2012) draws from Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*, Hamilton's family history, and Hamilton's experience living in the stark landscape of southern Idaho for the past eight years. Stills from the video work have been re-imagined as paintings, drawings, and sculptural objects, which are then filmed to become part of the video itself. The works loop back on each other—the boundaries between medium, object, and image made porous and transitory.

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The Terrors of Keeping House: Amanda Hamilton's *The Life of Perished Things*

By Janice Neri

"To sit in nature for five minutes fills me with terror," says Amanda Hamilton, discussing the ideas informing her installation *The Life of Perished Things*. The blunt honesty of this statement reveals many of the competing concerns present in Hamilton's work. As an artist, Hamilton brings worry, fear, passion, reverence, joy, and a yearning for precision to her creations, while at the same time exploring what it means to yield to the seemingly inevitable processes of decay, chaos, and death. Inspired by Marilynne Robinson's 1980 novel *Housekeeping*, Hamilton's installation uses painting, drawing, sculpture, and video to examine ideas about nature, culture, socialization, and normalcy.

Water, plants, houses, and boats are among the images that appear in Hamilton's contemplative exploration of this uncertain territory. On one end of the main gallery, a wall-sized painting forms a dark, watery backdrop for an overturned boat. The boat's surface is encrusted with a thick, undulating, mud-like substance out of which emerges a ghostly garden of delicate white plant forms. Is this an unmarked grave, a decaying ruin, a remnant of a thwarted or abandoned journey? Drained of life yet still exerting an unmistakable force, we sense that these fragile flowers would dissolve into dust at our slightest touch. Or are these figures made of salt?

Hamilton is particularly drawn to a passage in *Housekeeping* referencing this archetypal compound: "Imagine a Carthage sown with salt, and all the sowers gone, and the seeds lain however long in the earth, till there rose finally in vegetable profusion leaves and trees of rime and brine. What flowering would there be in such a garden?"[1]

Robinson's novel begins with a breathtakingly horrific accident, a train derailment into a deep mountain lake in the dead of night with no survivors. The tragedy is all the more terrifying due to the lack of witnesses; would-be rescuers can only guess at the train's location in the quiet depths of the lake. "A suitcase, a seat cushion, and a lettuce were all they retrieved."[2] The train derailment sets into motion a series of events that bring two young girls, Lucille and Ruth, into contact with their aunt Sylvie, who has been summoned back to her hometown of Fingerbone to care for them after a long, self-imposed exile.

Sylvie represents all that is at stake in the small, everyday acts that come together to make a home. In her new role as caretaker, she is unable or unwilling to maintain a "normal" household, and the results are both charming and chilling. Upon cessation of housekeeping the natural world immediately makes its presence felt indoors—leaves, wind, and dirt come sweeping into the rooms of the house. Sylvie's failure to engage with the task of caring for her nieces and their home is not simply a benign quirk of personality, however. Danger lurks in her chaos, as when she ventures out onto a bridge as a train approaches, mesmerizing Ruth nearly to the point of joining her.

Botanical imagery has long been integral to Hamilton's work. The plant forms comprising *Rupture this bright surface* echo the artist's earlier pieces made from cut paper or dura-lar; these marvels of intricacy recall historical forms of art traditionally practiced by women in domestic spaces. During the 18th century, activities such as collage, cut paper, shell work, and papier maché were integral to the upkeep of a respectable home. Fashionable interior design was not simply an elite pastime but rather a crucial component of a family's social, cultural, and political life. Hamilton's carefully composed tableau reminds us of the beauty and pleasure a fine home may offer, while also uncovering its ephemeral core.

This tension between permanence and impermanence in the face of the indifference of the natural world is also central to the small framed works. Hamilton translates stills from video footage of shadows on snow into images in which meticulously applied graphite seems to hover over the smooth surface of the paper. The images vary subtly from one to the other, each marking the passage of a single minute, and together they present small movements and changes painstakingly—perhaps obsessively—observed. Repetitive and meditative, these works reflect the artist's processes of thinking through her own fascination with Robinson's novel. Hamilton estimates that she has read *Housekeeping* more than 20 times, and her examinations of its themes have not been limited to creating visual images. Reciting its passages and singing its songs are other ways that she has sought to understand its unrelenting hold on her. The drawings are a metaphor for the creative process itself, of the conflicting feelings of pleasure and discomfort that come from immersing oneself in a topic or activity one is passionate about.

Projected opposite the tableau of boat and water, the audio-video work *The Life of Perished Thing*s presents the multiple demises of houses in starkly elegant landscapes. The video begins with the "unburning" of a house and the deafening sound of air drawn violently through flames. This is a touchstone image for Hamilton, alluding to the complex emotions she experienced when her family's house in rural Kentucky was destroyed by fire. Smooth stones under sparkling water reference the installation's large painting *The Middle Ground*, and footage of shadows playing over snowy ground serves as a reminder of the small framed works. The intensely quiet scenes of water, snow, trees, and moon instill an awareness of "the life of nature, majestic and unhurried, indifferent to human bustle and passions."[3] Another house succumbs not to fire but to water. As the flood waters rise to fill the house and the surrounding landscape, an eerie quiet descends upon the scene, along with clarity. The house itself comes into new focus and the once fearsome waters take on a sense of calm. The viewer might begin to wonder what reality is now on view? What was that world that just a moment ago seemed so real but now so distant? Drawing on her