SPACE, PLACE, AND SELF:
THE ART OF HOW ENVIRONMENT SHAPES US

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by

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Space, Place, and Self: The Art of How Environment Shapes Us

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We exist and interact within an ever-changing multitude of spaces – both real and imagined – that surround us everyday. The concept of my thesis exhibition is to visually represent three areas of mental space where human activity occurs: the space of the body, the space around the body, and the space of navigation. As we travel, we subconsciously collect and store sensory information which forms a cognitive map – actually more of an abstract collage rather than a cohesive, cartographic map. This map helps us to navigate or interact more effectively within our everyday spaces, even though the information is not remembered as a whole. Instead, our memories perceive and retain the sensory information as abstract fragments of aesthetic perception and emotional experience. These sensuous experiences develop our understanding of space, for as we create emotional territories – we begin to define them subjectively as places. It is within these mental areas that we define our identities and construct our own realities. As we gain a sense of where we are in the space, we then can begin to understand who we are. These concepts form the basis and guidelines for the creative processes in my thesis work.

My thesis exhibition is an abstract representation of sensuous geographies and a visual model of cognitive perceptions. In the space of the body, I am presenting a three-dimensional model of my mental self-image through direct body casting. Presented in fragmented human form, this model explores the role that environment has in shaping our
identity and our bodies. The space around the body captures the sensuous geographies of my everyday spaces as an abstract collage on the wall – consisting of both 2D and 3D mixed media, puzzle-shaped fragments. These fragments reference intuitive geographic landmark knowledge from my mental maps and create for me – a sense of place. The space of navigation – the space we travel to or journey through – is remembered in a two dimensional, abstract form, which is why I use photography to represent these slice of life moments of the past. Through a re-examination of my everyday spaces, I attempt to recapture sensory information and transform its essence into sculptural fragments, each representing a pause or moment from my journey through space. My thesis installation offers many sustained glances from my environment for the viewer to observe and perhaps for them to consider where their own personal pauses in life exist.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Also, thanks again to Davin Ebanks for his tireless efforts as editor and assistant curator for both my visual and written Thesis. (Thank God your mother was an English teacher.)

Finally, thanks to The Almighty (and the surgeons at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation) for helping me make it to see this accomplishment.
We exist and interact within an ever-changing multitude of spaces—both real and imagined—that surround us every day. My thesis exhibition was an effort to visually represent three areas of mental space where human activity occurs: the space of the body, the space around the body, and the space of navigation. As we travel, we subconsciously collect and store sensory information which forms a cognitive map—actually more of an abstract collage rather than a cohesive, cartographic map. This map helps us to navigate or interact more effectively within our everyday spaces, even though the information is not remembered as a whole. Instead, our memories perceive and retain the sensory information as abstract fragments of aesthetic perception and emotional experience. These sensuous experiences develop our understanding of space, for as we create emotional territories, we begin to define them subjectively as places (Tuan, “Space and Place” 6). It is within these mental areas that we define our identities and construct our own realities. As we gain a sense of where we are in the space, we then can begin to understand who we are (Massey 88). These concepts form the basis and guidelines for the creative processes in my thesis work.

My thesis exhibition involved the creation of a large-scale, mixed-media gallery installation that is an abstract representation of sensuous geographies and a visual model of cognitive perceptions. In Space of the Body (Figs. 1, 2, 3, & 4), I will present a three-dimensional model of my mental self-image through direct body casting. Presented in fragmented human form, this model explores the role that our bodies have in shaping our identity. Space Around the Body (Fig. 5) captures the sensuous geographies of my everyday spaces as an abstract collage on the wall—consisting of both two and three dimensional mixed media puzzle-shaped fragments. These fragments reference intuitive geographic landmark knowledge from my mental maps and create for me a visual collage of

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1 These are my hands, my hair. This piece became a commentary on the physical ravages of cancer on female victims. Particularly poignant is the loss of their hair and this work is a lament for the loss of my own. Strung between the fingers of each hand, from one end to the other, is a woven tress of my hair, but the multiplicity of hands, the subtle shifts in color, suggest the hands of different individuals and therefore present a more universal message.
my sense of place. The final area and work, *Space of Navigation*—the space we travel to or journey through—is remembered in a two dimensional, abstract form, which is why I will use photography to represent these slice of life moments of the past.

As an artist, I have come to understand my own creations as stemming from a strong desire to examine both the physical and emotional bonds to personal environments. Gillian Rose, an author on feminist geography, states that “Identity is how we make sense of ourselves, and geographers, anthropologists, and sociologists, among others, have argued that the meanings given to a place may be so strong that they become a central part of the identity of the people experiencing them” (Massey 88). By transforming observations from my world into the visual language of art, I can explore how my environment plays a large role in shaping who I am.

Environment has long been an immediate and important source of inspiration for visual artists. Throughout time, the relationship between self and environment has been transformed and represented into a vast array of media and conceptual narratives. Artists who transform their living world into visual works of art draw attention to natural wonders, the beauty of the mundane, and they often engage us to contemplate the world from another’s point of view. In a sense that is exactly what a sense of place is, a single individual’s perspective. After all, what one sees must depend on where one is standing, both mentally and physically. These artists can also bring awareness of environmental issues and even provoke the viewer to positive change. Many also draw inspiration from and cross-reference other disciplines, such as biology, geography and geology, all of which also explore and study the natural world. It is within this spirit of a loosely multi-disciplinary approach that I have engaged in my thesis work.

Recently, I set out on a personal journey to local places where—through daily routine—I have formed individual patterns or activity paths through repetition of traveling within these
geographical spaces and through a direct engagement with my terrain. These mundane places, as familiar as a favorite pair of shoes, foster within me a feeling of belonging to their natural rhythm and carve a sense of place for me to exist within them. I entered each place with the intent to rediscover my surroundings by walking through these spaces with a more critical eye. At each location, I conducted field research through photo documentation, the extraction of site materials, and the collecting of found objects. These kinds of environmental observations were the key processes in gathering the physical elements so that, when I returned to my studio, I would have a plethora of materials at hand. In a very real sense I could surround myself, even in the confines of my studio, with the elements of the environment that influenced my sense of place. Before long, however, I realized that the studio environment itself could not help but have the same influence on me as the world I was referencing outside. It was inevitable that I began to insert samples of the studio environment into my work. Earth, water, debris and asphalt were mined from these environments and were then transformed into a series of topography samples which form the two main installations of my thesis exhibition—my sculptural wall installation, Natural Identity: A Sense of Place and Self (Fig. 8), and the larger work, Space Around the Body (Fig. 5). These pieces present to the viewer a kind of cognitive mapping of the environments I explored. Though inspired by an exploration into the various places water goes to in my daily routine, the miniature, core-like samples of Natural Identity record and reference spatial coordinates and reveal physical attributes of those sites to the viewer by offering a visual palette of texture and color. Their diminutive size itself helps to remove them from the familiar materials we know so well and begins to abstract them. The

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2 “The metaphor of a cognitive map was coined by Tolman in a 1948 paper to refer to internally represented spatial models of the environment. The cognitive (or mental) map includes knowledge of landmarks, route connections, and distance and direction relations; nonspatial attributes and emotional associations are stored as well. However, in many ways, the cognitive map is not like a cartographic ‘map in the head.’ It is not a unitary integrated representation, but consists of stored discrete pieces including landmarks, route segments, and regions. The separate pieces are partially linked or associated frequently so as to represent hierarchies such as the location of a place inside of a larger region” (Smelser & Bates, Spatial Cognition 14774).
larger topographies of the opposite wall, on the other hand, are large enough to be recognizable types of landscape surfaces. I hope there is a sense of recognition by the viewer, perhaps a moment of “I know that place” or at least “I know a place like that”. Beyond viewing just their material nature, I hoped that my audience would also read these samples as a string of pauses within a personal journey through space and identify each with a part of my natural character.

These pauses, represented in the installation as fragments of topography and geography, reference moments from my experience through space, time, and memory. The fragments are not to be read in a linear timeline or as a unit like a traditional cartographical map but instead as representations of selected landmarks that are both mundane and significant in the course of my daily life. In greater or lesser ways they are factors in forming my spatial orientation and wayfinding ability. Barbara Tvesky, Professor of Cognitive Studies at Stanford University, researches both how people think about space and how they structure mental space. She explains that human activity takes place in various spaces both real or imagined, and in order for us to function successfully in space we need to have conceptions of space (Tvesky 2001).

One example of how we mentally structure space occurs in our perception of navigation. The space of navigation is the space we physically move within or to, such as exploring along a mountain trail or journeying to a distant country. When we travel, we need to orientate ourselves within that space and it is essential for memory processing that we orientate ourselves around particular paths or landmarks. Our brain remembers these landmarks as mere fragments of the all-

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3 My natural character or natural identity is the way in which I see or understand myself; the sum of all my parts both physical and mental that are intrinsic to my existence. Natural, here, refers to inherent or essential.

4 "Wayfinding is the cognitive element of navigation. It does not involve movement of any kind but only the tactical and strategic parts that guide movement. It is not merely a planning stage that precedes motion. Wayfinding and motion are intimately tied together in a complex negotiation that is navigation. An essential part of wayfinding is the development and use of a cognitive map, also referred to as a mental map. Still poorly understood, a cognitive map is a mental representation of an environment. It has been called a "picture in the head" although there is significant evidence that it is not purely based on imagery but rather has a symbolic quality" (Spatial Orientation, Wayfinding, and Representation, Rudolph P. Darken and Barry Peterson)
encompassing view and creates a *cognitive collage* of places that we have experienced. I utilized this concept of perceptual memory when I began the process of deciding what topographical *samples* were meaningful to me and which were to be selected for my art installation. The relationship between memory, mapping, and sense of self is also explored through the work *Space of Navigation: 70 Places I’ve Been* (Fig. 10). The fragments I chose to use were taken from natural landmarks\(^5\) that were important for the everyday navigation of my space.

The root of my artistic practice lies in a marriage between topography and geography, where it embraces both the formation of the land through natural patterns and the history left behind by those who use the land. The writer Wendell Berry believed that if you don’t know where you are then you don’t know *who you are*. He was not merely referring to an absolute location but alluding to a *cognitive mapping* where one comes to *know* through sensory perception, memories, and the value of investing a part of yourself within that place. Berry believed it to be the kind of knowing that poets specialize in, and even went so far to proclaim that no place is a place until it has had a poet (Stegner 1992). This knowing, or *sense of place*, is the attribute that makes a place extraordinary. It evolves through a relationship between certain physical characteristics of the land and from humans implying significant meaning to a place through experience and cultural history. A geographical space is often elevated to this status through the words of poets, writers, artists and musicians, who observe through their perceptual senses and respond through an expression that intensifies that place.

\(^5\) “Landmark knowledge is the most basic form of environmental knowledge and is developed by acquiring visual information about discrete features in the environment. These features may be remembered – subconsciously or consciously by the individual – because of their distinctive natural material character, or as a result of the feature’s location, or because an individual needs some requirement for a reference point while traveling” (Allen, Kraft 2001). Landmarks can be naturally occurring like a waterfall or constructed by humans, as in a skyscraper. When using the term *natural landmarks* in my writing, I am referring to both naturally occurring and built landmarks that are a reference point my eye is *naturally* drawn to because of the character of their material nature.
As humans, we are mark-makers, the only species that uses mark-making in a conceptual way for thinking or in a meaningful way for expression. We seek to represent our feelings and thoughts into tangible material; this is the creation of sculptural and architectural space. We can explore the physical space that geographers study just as well as we can explore the abstract mental space of an artist’s imagination. Geography and sculpture are both spatial disciplines involved with processes of spatial relationships, objects, forms and creation of pattern. Geographers seek to understand how those processes on Earth were created and how we as humans interact within Earth’s environments—physical, constructed and social places.

The introduction of Humanistic Geography in the 1970’s began to study the relationships between space, place, and human emotion. An affectionate relationship between people and place can best be explained by the definition of *topophilia*, defined as: “human love for a place” (Tuan, “Topophilia” 4). This kind of affection towards a place or a landscape usually stems from the principles of *aesthetics*: the theories and descriptions of the psychological response to beauty and artistic experiences. This aesthetic theory is the same philosophy which fine arts, such as sculpture or painting, are created by. The human mind, and more so an artist’s eye, categorizes the phenomena we see into opposite polarities; for instance, green and red are opposites on the color wheel. A breathtaking landscape immediately demands anyone’s attention, but it will hold a longer gaze for the viewer with knowledge of aesthetic principles who will note the striking beauty of complimentary colors in a landscape—crimson leaves sprinkled over a sea of bright green grass. Such an awareness or appreciation of such art aesthetics can also heighten the *spirit of place*.

*Topophilia* is not merely our response to a place; it actually *creates* place for us by providing a distinct separation of *place* from *space*. The humanistic geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan, clarifies this concept for us in his book *Space and Place: A Perspective of Experience*, “If we think of space as that which allows
movement, then place is pause, each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (6). Space, a central idea in geography, and can be measured in absolute physical formats—meters, miles, acres, and so on. Place, on the other hand, occurs when humans attach meaning to a geographical area and define it as being more important than its surroundings. Tuan considers place to be an emotional bounded area wherein people often derive personal identity (“Space and Place” 6). His writings have expanded our definition of geography and demonstrated that aesthetic or emotional dimensions can subjectively define places. It was this concept of Tuan’s on which I based the artwork in my thesis exhibition. In my mind, if I was to define the sites presented there as places, I needed to understand my value for them and identify the sense of attachment they hold for me.

The word topography originally meant to write about a place (think of the word, biography: to write about a life). Topography would describe a place’s physical location, history, and the relationship between the space and its inhabitants. Topography then, is not merely the information of a location’s natural geographic features, which is the way we understand the term today. Instead, it had a principal concern with the study of the history of mark-making and changes that were left by people who inhabited or visited a place. This is the manner in which I have utilized the topographic samples in my installation; cigarette butts, strands of hair, newspaper, oil, bits of glass debris, asphalt, and concrete are all signs of human habitation. Whether it is merely a footprint or a discarded object, we all leave traces of our impact in the environments we traverse through.

Through a re-examination of my everyday spaces, I can recapture sensory information and transform its essence into sculptural fragments, each representing a pause or moment from my journey through space. The installation will effectively use the entire gallery, creating a path to lead the viewer to explore both the aesthetic fragments and the space of the gallery. The format of each
sculptural fragment, as well as how the installation will be hung and function as a whole, is based not only on art aesthetics, but spatial cognition, and direct engagements with space. My thesis installation will offer many sustained glances from my environment for the viewer to observe and perhaps for them to consider where their own personal pauses in life exist.
Figure 1. *Space of the Body: Hands*. Life Cast Hydrocal Hands, Hair. 2008.
Figure 2. *Space of the Body: Hands* (detail).
Figure 3. *Space of the Body: Torso.* Glass, Rubber, Found Materials. 2007.
Figure 4. *Space of the Body: Torso (detail)*.
Figure 5. *Space Around the Body*. Life cast hydrocal, found objects, dirt, paint, rubber. 2008
Figure 6. *Space Around the Body (detail 1).*
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Figure 9. *Natural Identity: A Sense of Place and Self (detail).*
Figure 10. *Space of Navigation: 70 Places I’ve Been*. Digital printouts. 2007
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