WHAT LIES WITHIN OR BENEATH

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

by
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I would like to thank the incredible faculty and staff at Kent State, my committee, and especially my advisor for the encouragement that was always inspirational, and the necessary criticism that wasn’t always easy to hear. I am grateful for the support of my family and friends, most importantly my wife, without whom I would not have made it through this process. I am genuine when I say that this has been as much an achievement for you as it has for me. Finally and most importantly, I thank God for the gifts He has given me, and the undeserved opportunities I continue to receive for their betterment.
INTRODUCTION

Materials and amenities selected for inclusion in a dwelling place are generally chosen out of necessity or determined by an owner’s taste. Because of unique experiences over the course of time, the structure and comforts within a particular dwelling place become symbolic for its inhabitants. These items, which I refer to as signifiers, determine an individual’s perception of a particular place; and when re-encountered, even out of context, these signifiers propagate memories associated with that particular place. These memories become as important to the dwelling as nails driven into the walls.

Gaston Bachelard addresses this phenomenon in his book *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard states, “we are never real historians, but always near poets.” ¹ This is because when experiences are fresh, we make associations with them that seem concrete and firm. However, as time goes on, experiences become more fluid and less certain. Ultimately our experiences become symbolic memories, forming and shaping our perception of the world around us. Like Bachelard, I acknowledge the poetic nature of the home, seeing it as a rigid container for memory. Although memories are internalized through experience, the spaces in which those experiences take place serve as reminders. In my thesis exhibition, I construct visual metaphors of specific dwelling places by combining material elements that act as signifiers. *What Lies Within or Beneath* is a reference to the nature of memory, how it is absorbed into the places one inhabits, and then recalled through signifiers.

DEVELOPMENT

I have had a long-standing fascination and love for the art of construction. As a child, I once constructed a rollercoaster through the trees of my parents yard out of found wood and plastic piping. I am still thankful for their ten acres; if their lot had been any smaller I may have nailed wood directly onto their home. I also recall taking apart an expensive tent to build a glider, and being certain of the contraption’s reliability, I allowed my younger brother to test it by jumping off a large hill.

In high school I was fortunate to have an influential art teacher who introduced me to many important modern and contemporary artists. I gravitated to the work of Robert Rauschenberg because of his unapologetic use of found objects. Although at the time I did not realize the historical relevance of Rauschenberg, his work was exciting to me because he gave me permission to make art out of found objects that I thought were intriguing.

When I was an undergraduate student at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago I took on an internship as a set designer for a local theater company. This type of work experience exposed me to the tools and methods that facilitate proper construction. Also, because of the faux finishes and textures I helped to create for the stage, I gained a foundational understanding of surface quality and texture.

My experience with surface later influenced my work as a graduate student at Kent State University. I began walking residential streets with a camera, photographing houses, and seeking out various textures, shapes, and decorative elements that were intrinsic to the
local architecture of northeast Ohio. The houses had an over-emphasized, almost animated charm, with numerous colors and material variations. The juxtaposition between the different surfaces of each home appealed to me.

The surface textures I captured in my photographs were used as reference material for drawings and paintings made during my first semester. I began to combine the immediacy of drawing with the tonal quality of painting. The combination of these different processes excited me, and opened me up to a variety of drawn marks that when combined with paint suggested the different textures and surfaces of local architecture.

As I was exploring surface quality and texture, I wanted the work to feel three-dimensional — I wanted the houses to appear constructed. Falling back on skills learned years earlier at the theater, I formed cliff-like structures with canvas stretched over a foundation of stretcher bar frames. I then lined the surfaces with joint compound and latex paint to solidify the canvas’ shape. Finally, I crowded the canvas with small houses I assembled out of balsa wood and glue.

This process of construction led me to the work of James Casebere. Although Casebere’s small architectural models are “made of simple materials, pared down to essential forms (Casebere),” they appear highly realistic and detailed when light is cast into them. His ability to construct light and space allows the viewer to enter into his photographs, and experience them as if they were three-dimensional. Like Casebere, my original intent was to use my constructed models as references for two-dimensional works,

but I quickly became more excited about the process of constructing three-dimensional forms.

In the summer of 2012, I participated in Blossom, an intensive visiting artist program and workshop for Kent State students. This session featured two well-established artists, Zak Smith and Sue Williams. I dedicated my time at Blossom to producing one substantial piece that explored surface through the process of construction. While constructing a group of small houses, I began to incorporate found materials that created a variation of texture. I used screening material and began to make openings in the objects surface. By doing this I allowed the viewer to peer around and through the surface of the work. This was an important discovery, because it reaffirmed the connection between the domestic forms I constructed and the interior space of an actual dwelling place.

The Blossom session was instrumental in the development of my current process, and the studio visit with Zak Smith became one of the most important experiences of my art-making career. Smith explained to me that my work was a dialogue about the process of building a painting; he claimed that the decisions I was making in my work directly correlated to my interest in the construction process. 3

Smith’s insightful comments allowed me to make the connection between surface and texture, and the process of construction. He helped me to understand that drawing, painting, and three-dimensional collage were all equally important constructed

components; each of these processes could be utilized to build paintings, which reflect both surface and dimensionality.

FOUND MATERIALS

With this new understanding of the process of building a painting, I began traveling to derelict urban areas to scavenge for materials. One day as I was sifting through a pile of shingles and wood, I came to the realization that the materials I was collecting were not random. “Artists who work with found materials are frequently described as making something out of nothing. This characterization is based on the estimation that the salvaged materials are ordinary.” 4

Artist Joseph Cornell believed in the importance of transitory objects, calling them “metaphysique d’ ephemera”. In other words, “literal things can create an elaborate and subtle form of magic.” 5 Working with simple tools, little more than hammers, saws, scissors, pencils, and glue, he constructed small boxes, filling them with assorted found and collaged objects. These boxes became windows into different places “environments in which a window or room in a hotel (or dwelling) and an entire hotel (or dwelling) exist simultaneously.” 6 Cornell was using found objects to construct metaphors for a specific places or ideas.

5. ibid.
6 ibid.
The materials I scavenged were anything but ordinary; these pieces referenced someone’s home, hopes and dreams, first dates, last days of school. Naturally I began to wonder about the people who had lived in these homes, who they were, what they had experienced. I realized that even though I had no relationship to the people in the homes from which I was now borrowing, some of the materials reminded me of houses I had personally experienced. Looking at piles of stained carpet, I began to visualize the gaudy yellow Berber of my childhood home. The materials I was scavenging were completely foreign to me, yet they had momentarily recalled memories that were very familiar.

Similarly, contemporary artist Leonardo Drew scavenges the streets of New York City with a shopping cart, filling it with various discarded objects and materials, which he inserts into the cell-like box structures of his large abstract sculptures. “In what might be called vertical fields of junk-broken electronics, crayons, cartoons, ceramic shards, plastic utensils, rubber tubes, masking tape, appliances and an unusual number of mate less shoes,” 7 Drew constructs a personal metaphor of memory and experience by creating a dialogue between the different materials, as he seeks to understand their relationship to himself.

I concluded that my work should allow the viewer this same privilege. By constructing work with domestic materials I am familiar with, I invite the viewer to enter my dwelling, wonder about my experience, but ultimately consider how these elements might relate to their own experience.

SIGNIFIERS

Because my thesis work examines the dwellings that make up my personal experience, I am able to use past and present spaces as pliable resources. I use material signifiers, combining them into metaphors that describe my perception of specific dwelling places.

With each piece, as I seek out items and materials that remind me of the dwelling I want to describe, I develop a new language. In order to find identifiable elements and workable materials I explore thrift stores, hardware stores, as well as frequent Habitat for Humanity stores. Wallpaper, fabric, carpet, and glass all have become important elements in my work. The aesthetic and tactile qualities of the materials I choose are extremely important to me.

Like Leonardo Drew and Joseph Cornell before him, I am participating in the same persuasive evocation, or “gathering a ‘bouquet’ of materials, images, and effects that delivers a distinctive and characteristic quality.”

For example, in *The Shape of Near Perfection (Figure 1)*, I chose to recreate my grandparents’ living room, as I perceived it prior to their house being remolded. When I mentally entered the space, I recalled green couch cushions, bottle-bottom glass windows, and heavy plaster ceilings. Collectively these features became important signifiers, creating

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8 Hartigan, Lynda Roscoe
a visual metaphor of this particular dwelling space. One day as I scanned through a stack of material at a fabric store, I discovered a dark green canvas that immediately reminded me of my grandparents’ tweed couch. As I ran my hand along the rough-forest green surface, my senses were activated. I could suddenly smell the musty-crowded air of my grandparents’ living room, where the couch once sat covered in old newspapers and Lego pieces. I later discovered a cabinet at a second hand store whose windows were made out of an acrylic pane, it curiously resembled the yellow ochre color and circular indents of my grandparent’s bottle-bottom glass windows. Finally, I suggested the pattern of the plaster ceiling was accomplished by mixing acrylic paint and medium with joint compound, that was then applied with a drywall knife.

As I allow the viewer to behold the assorted materials, colors, textures, and patterns, my role as an “artist and creator is re-designated to that of ‘presenter’,” each work becomes an icon for another reality.

The Boyle Family, a group of contemporary British artists, is widely known for their work, which deals with the objective presentation of reality. The World Series, which the group began in 1968, as part of the exhibition Journey to the Surface of the Earth at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, has become their most notable body of work. Before the Boyles begin each piece, a random visitor is selected to visit their studio, blindfolded, and then instructed to throw a dart at a wall-sized map of the world. The Boyle Family then travels to wherever the dart happens to land on the surface of the map, where they create a painted fiberglass representation of the earth’s surface at that location.

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Because the fiberglass molds are re-creations and not the actual subject, they can only act as metaphors or reduced versions of the actual locations that the group is describing. Like the Boyle family, my work attempts to honestly represent its subject matter in order to create metaphor, though no matter how accurately I represent each signifier, my work can only act as “an approximation of reality.” 10 Though unlike the Boyle Family, who elects their subject through near random chance in what they call ‘motiveless appraisal’, the dwellings I explore as subject are deeply personal, and therefore, must be approached intentionally.

Because the signifiers I choose to reference create personal visual metaphors, it is important for me to proceed with caution when making material and imagery choices. Without intentionality, the work loses its specificity; furthermore, without being honest about my subject the work no longer stands as a metaphor.

PROCESS

My work is both an exploration of key signifiers, which create a metaphorical representation of a dwelling, and a dialogue about the construction of a painting. Because of this, the process I utilize must reflect the individuality of each dwelling, and my understanding that drawing, painting, and three-dimensional collage are all equally important constructed components.

10 ibid.
I begin by mentally entering into each dwelling; I contemplate my experience of the space, and then decide which elements are important for me to include. The texture of a wall, the color of a particular set of drapes, or the pattern of the lead in a glass window, are all mentally dissected and re-imagined as elements in my work.

As I construct the initial rectilinear frame I recall the architectural nuances that make up each space. For example, the sharp corners in *The Bluest of White (Figure 3)*, a piece that is about my apartment in Cleveland, are very different than the rounded corners and edges of *From the Floor They Smiled (Figure 5)*, which is about the living room of my parents home in New Mexico. The structure’s shape directs the eyes of the viewer across, around, and through the work, like a key word or stanza.

I stretch canvas and raw pliable materials over the frame of the ridged skeleton, which I adorn with a vast array of materials. I layer painted and drawn elements, wood, metal, fabric, glass, and even fiberglass. Stripes, patterns, and textures cohesively act as surface, line, value, and form. My process becomes part of the poetic language of my work. As I construct, I openly dialogue with the work, allowing the structure to direct me as I place and remove various material elements.

Many times I aggravate the surface of the work with a sander, removing material to leave glimpses of information in order to create a sense of ambiguity. Similar to the nature of memory, my work oscillates between organic and rigid, fluid and concrete, and moving and immobile forms. In *The Truth From Within 3012 (Figure 4)*, I revisited my college apartment, where I lived in a concrete high-rise in downtown Chicago. Nestled under and between sharp geometric forms created out of canvas, wood, and steel, I present collaged
drawings I completed while living in apartment 3012, clippings of contact paper from the drawers of my desk, and a particular green hue from a can of paint that had spilled onto my white carpet. As I combined, layered, and sanded through the various materials, I formed delicate relationships between lines, textures, and values, which reflect the complexity of my experience.

Furthermore, my constructions are made more complex and intimate by the placement of dimensional slits and openings. These allow the viewer to literally peer into, around, and through the work, as one does with a box, or a cup, or a room. These openings are an intimate invitation for the viewer to approach the structure and enter beyond the exterior layers of information. Here inside of my construction, the viewer is allowed to explore and fully experience what lies within or beneath the surface of my work. Here my poetic metaphor of the dwelling is made complete.

CONCLUSION

Gaston Bachelard’s words became increasingly relevant as I produced the work for my thesis exhibition. With each piece, I am allowed to reenter my most personal dwelling places if only for a moment; to touch the fabric of a particular green chair, or to remember the floor where I built tents on rainy Saturdays. I am not a historian; my intent in producing this body of work isn’t simply to recreate the dwellings I have experienced, nor do I expect the viewer to directly relate to my experience of these dwelling places. My intent is to explore key signifiers, as a means with which to construct metaphors that deal with my
perception of specific dwellings. This body of work may however resonate with a viewer’s own experience of a dwelling. Maybe they are even taken away to their own living room, or dining room, or as Bachelard states:

You would like to tell everything about your room. You would like to interest the reader in yourself, whereas you have unlocked a door to daydreaming. The values of intimacy are so absorbing that the reader has ceased to read your room: he sees his own again. He is already far off, listening to the recollections of a father or a grandmother, of a mother or a servant, of "the old faithful servant," in short, of the human being who dominates the corner of his most cherished memories. 11

My work constructs poetic space. The signifiers in my constructions become visual metaphors, informing perception much like a key word or prolific stanza. “Because of it’s novelty and its action, the poetic image has an entity and a dynamism of it's own; it is referable to direct ontology (*introduction xvi*).” 12

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12 ibid.
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