FOOTNOTES TO AN EXHIBITION

A Thesis

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by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MOM

Last night I spoke with my Mom. I told her I was writing my thesis. She said, "Don't forget that you were playing with clay from the time you were very young. Remember we always kept a bucket of sculpting clay on the back porch." And I said, "Yeah, and we always had screened-in windows too."

BOB

Yesterday I spoke with Bob. He read through my thesis and said, "Yeah, but what about Hemingway? Shouldn't he be mentioned too?"
VITA

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FIELD OF STUDY

Major Field: Ceramics
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INTRODUCTION

"...In conclusion, I plan to use graduate school for more clearly defining my personal direction in sculptural Raku. I hope to strengthen my over-all artistic knowledge by tightening various technical abilities and refining certain aesthetic sensibilities."

The quote at the top of this page is from my "Statement of Purpose," written as part of The Department of Art's application requirements. When I wrote it, I intentionally, and I thought, cleverly, left it open enough to include all the possible directions I could, or would want to take my work. I knew the kind of art I would be making. What I was going to learn before finishing the program was how to make it better. I had not anticipated that the process itself would reveal, in a logarithmic manner, possibilities and directions I had previously been tabulating on one hand. When I hung my thesis show two years after starting the program, everything about my work had changed.
The work I was making when I arrived was attached to my immediate personal circumstances. In an unconsciously therapeutic manner, making these pieces allowed me to speak of the emotional struggles I was involved with. The Raku figures, armless, legless, and lacking all facial features, were "me": who I was, how I saw myself, how I felt about myself in relation to the world-stripped bare of my ability to function in it, or to communicate with it. I made this work in relative isolation, emotionally, intellectually, as well as physically. Needless to say, I spoke to no-one about the work. And then, Bam! Graduate School.

Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, discuss, dissect, analyze, criticize, verbalize, invigorate, instigate, motivate, intimidate, theorize, agree, disagree, defend, deny, cry...all this within the first week. I was overwhelmed. As I began finding my voice, the psycho-centric source of my work began closing off. I was adrift. I turned to a trusted friend/mentor and confessed, "I don't know what to do, I don't know what to make..." And he replied, "Begin at the beginning. Make what it is you know the best."

I began making coconut trees. It was a starting point. It was the first time in many years that I was making
work based on something other than my most current personal dilemma. My focus began to shift from the inarticulated internal to the intimated external. Through many fits and starts, I began to understand and clarify what it was I was working towards and where the base of my direction was located.

Each of the following short stories represents a moment of denouement about my current work. Although each denouement did occur while I was working on a particular piece, or during the course of a critique about a particular piece, the stories themselves are not piece-specific. They are however, time-specific.
From first grade through fourth grade I spent the better part of my schooling going to or being at the eye doctors. These visits were an integral part of my childhood.

Every day, or what seems now to have been every day, my Mom would arrive at the school just before free play. We would walk together from school to Vernon's Drugstore to wait for the bus. If the bus were behind schedule, I would have time for a hot fudge sundae at the soda fountain. We would then get on the bus that took us over the causeway to the mainland, transfer buses at the toll-gate stop, and ride the next bus downtown to Dr. Witmer's office. It took an hour and a half each way.

Once at his office, the questioning would begin:

"How are you today?"
"Did you practice on the stereoscope?"
"Did you watch television last night?"
"How far away did you sit?"
"How long did you watch?"...

These were the easy questions, they had concrete answers:

"Fine."
"Yes."
"Yes."
"Pretty far." and,
"One hour like I'm supposed to."

And the answers elicited affirmative responses:

"Oh, that's great!"
"Very good"
"Fine"
"Fine"
"Wonderful"
"What a good girl!"
However, once the exam began, the questions and answers became progressively more difficult and more subjective:

"Is this, better than this?"
"How about this? better than this?"
"Or is this one? better than the first?"......

I would sit in the dark, behind the lenses, squinting and squirming and trying to decide which was better:

"Maybe"
"No"
"I don't know....sort of..."......

To every response I gave him, Dr. Witmer would reply, his voice emanating from the dark:

"Hmmmmm," he would say, before moving on to the next question.

That completed the standard exam. But, about once a month I was taken into the back room, seated at a table, and shown a photograph of a fly. It was a large fly. It covered most of the eight by ten area of the photo. Each time I was shown this photo I automatically broke out in a cold sweat because I knew the question that was to follow:

"Is the fly resting on the background? or hovering above it?"

I knew there was a correct answer to this question, but no matter how many times I saw the photo, or picked it up trying to "feel" the answer, I never knew whether it was on, or off, the background. Most of the time, in reply to the question, I would say:

"I don't know,"

But sometimes I would lie and say:

"It's on the background."

Other times I would lie and say:

"It's off the background."

Each time after I had answered, Dr. Witmer would say:
"Thank you, that will be all for today."
The last time I saw the fly I was eleven years old. It was my last visit to Dr. Witmer's. By that time I knew the purpose of the exercise, and I wanted to know what it was I wasn't seeing. So I asked him:

"Dr. Witmer, what is the correct answer?"

And he replied:

"It doesn't matter, we see the way that we see."
This past weekend I went home to Florida to visit my family. I spent a day with my sister and her horse, an afternoon with my Mom reviewing her new manuscript on the history of Key Biscayne, and spoke with my step-father late into the night about the trials and tribulations of a life in academia. But, to be perfectly honest, I hadn't really gone home to see my family. I went home to hang out in The Swamp.

The Swamp still existed. Our old house and three quarters of the plantation were gone, but The Swamp was still there. We lived next door to it when I was a kid. It formed the western border of our yard, and more or less the east-west divide of the plantation. Since it was the only swamp on the island, it was called The Swamp. The Swamp was made up of massive intertwined and overgrown sub-tropical trees, plants, shrubs and vines, with areas of quicksand and mosquito infested stagnant water. A plethora of spiders, snakes, scorpions and you-name-its lived inside. And we, my brother, my sister and I spent most of the hottest months of summer playing there—hacking out trails with the machete, constructing forts, acting out Tarzan episodes. Back then it was "our's", even though we didn't really own it. It was our's in the way that intimacy allows you to have something without really owning it. A good twenty years had passed since we had last played there and I wanted to find out if my memories of this place were accurate. Finding this out had become very important to me.

About six months ago I had one of those "remember when" conversations with my sister. The kind of conversations one can only have with siblings or old friends— the kind that inevitably ends with "But that's not how it was at all!" Suzy and I had had one of those about The Swamp. It went something like this:

"Suzy, remember when we used to play hide and seek in The Swamp?"
"Yeah!" "And none of the other kids could find us 'cause we knew all the best places to hide."

"Yeah!" "But do you remember running so fast and with all the light and shadow everywhere, having to duck under or jump over everything, objects and shadows alike, 'cause it was impossible to tell what was real and what was a shadow?"

"No." "You only remember it like that 'cause you could hardly see!"

That's it. That was the conversation that compelled me to return to The Swamp. What she had said took me completely by surprise. I remembered the quality of the light and shadow so vividly that I could not imagine that it hadn't really been that way. So I went back, fully intending on spending a good portion of my visit hanging out in The Swamp. I wanted to find out the truth.

But, when I finally got there, I was too scared to go in. It wasn't "mine" anymore. And, although I had always run in it barefoot and half-naked, there I was, walking it's perimeter wearing shoes and socks, shorts and a long sleaved shirt, feeling too naked to brave the interior. I stood by it's side and peered in, thinking perhaps if I went and got a machete I would be braver. But I didn't. I couldn't. I knew it wouldn't help. Instead, I began pacing back and forth. Each time I turned, I turned away from The Swamp hoping that somehow during that split second it was out of my vision I would, somehow, gain the courage to stride right into the thick of it. I had just about given up when I turned for the last time and just stopped. I stared into the swamp, transfixed by a particular memory. I remembered the first time I found the best place to hide.

It was in the middle of a game of hide and seek and I was working my way back to the home-fort when I heard the seeker rapidly approaching. I had no time to take cover. I crouched down right where I was in front of a silver buttonwood, breathing as softly as I could. I was in full view of the seeker. I watched as he came towards me, scanning the exact area I was in a number of times, but he never saw me. From head to toe I was drenched in leaf pattern shadows that blended me
perfectly into the buttonwood foliage. After that, I hid there often, it was only three feet from the trail.

I'm not sure if I will ever share this memory with my sister.
When I was four years old, my brother told me there was no Santa Claus. I was terrified and ran shouting to my Mom that Robin was telling me lies. She confirmed he was lying, but something about the way she confirmed it made me realize he wasn't. Since I was the youngest, and the last to know, this marked the end of Santa in our house. After the initial shock, it was fairly easy to let go of "Santa," after all, we had no chimney, it never snowed at our house, and we rarely got what we asked for anyway. The Easter Bunny, on the other hand, was another story. We loved the Easter Bunny.

Preparing for the Bunny's arrival always took a couple of weeks of concentrated work. Everything had to be just right. We would begin by dividing the yard into thirds. Typically, one section had the clump of banana trees, half the syrinnam cherry bushes and the oleander by the back door; the next area included the other half of the cherry bushes, and the side yard up to the plum tree; the third area had the malalucha trees, the thicket by the century plant, and the icky-lumpy grassy patch on the east side of the back porch. Each of us kids would claim a section, and over the two weeks prior to Easter we would not violate, or permit anyone else to violate, our own or each other's territory. Secrecy was paramount. Without it the Easter Bunny would not visit. We snuck around a lot during those two weeks. We had work to do. We had Bunny-Hutches to build.

Bunny-Hutch (bun'e huch), n. 1. a temporary home. 2. a sanctuary. 3. a special place. 4. the place where the Easter Bunny leaves your Easter Basket.

Choosing the exact site was the first step. This involved wandering around in your territory, searching for a spot that was virtually concealed from the house and the other territories; and to which you could get to, and from, without being spotted. Our yard was perfect for secretive activities. It was not what one would call well-manicured, actually, to call it
meerly-manicured would be a proper misnomer. Pruning or clipping occurred only when it became too difficult to get into or out of the house, or when we could no longer see out of any window, or from any porch. Then, and only then, someone would grab a machete and hack away, removing just enough flora to physically or visually clear the obstructed area. We never tampered with nature for aesthetic reasons. One of the benefits of this was at Easter: even if you got the same section of yard year after year, every year there were new places to choose from— we never built in the same place twice, nor did we ever build the same kind of hutch more than once.

The Hutzets didn't have to be very big...just big enough for the Bunny to get inside, and drop off the Easter Basket. But, each hutch had to be spectacular enough to entice the Bunny to come in. Sometimes the hutzets were tunneled into thickets, or recessed under bushes, or dug down in the ground, or sometimes simply fabricated and camouflaged against a backdrop of foliage. Always different, always elaborate. After defining the site, or carving out the space, the process would begin: sneaking to the site with gathered leaves, twigs, branches, vines....tying hundreds of little twigs together for wall panels or structural support, weaving roofs out of grasses, carefully placing layer after layer of leaves on the floor...and then pulling it all apart because it didn't look quite right, and starting all over again— reshaping the area, maybe a little rounder, maybe squaring off a side, adding some hybiscus for color, checking to make sure the hutch had remained well concealed...doing and redoing the entrance, sometimes bigger sometimes smaller, with a door without a door, small over hang, foyer, windows!....finish one day go back the next to find the roof had collapsed, or the leaves had wilted to much, or, on seeing it again, it just didn't look right, and starting over again....The closer it came to Easter the harder we worked and the more excited we became. It was all we talked about. But always, always, we were very careful not to reveal the hutch location. That was something we told no one, not each other, not our best friends, not even our parents.

Yet, when we raced to our Hutzets on Easter morning, my Basket would be in my Hutsch, my brothet's Basket would be in his Hutsch, and my sister's Basket would be in her Hutsch. We would show off our Hutzets to each other, and then bring our parents out to take them on The Grand
Bunny Hutch Tour. Each of us would talk about how we had made the Hutch, why we had made it a certain way, why we liked it, why we didn't, what we might do differently next time....and then it was over, another Easter come and gone. Within a matter of weeks the hutches too would be gone, swallowed up by the yard, consumed by the rapid growth vegetation, deconstructed and re-assimilated by nature.

I don't remember when we stopped making Bunny Hutches. There was no traumatic revelation about the Bunny, we never questioned whether the Bunny was real or not, nor did we ever try and catch our parents "in action" as we did many times with "Santa." I'm not sure if I ever stopped believing in the Easter Bunny.
I awoke one morning to a completely silent house. I lay in bed and listened. I could not hear a sound, no tossing and turning, no soft snoring, no dog scratching, no leaves swishing on the screen. The whole world was asleep, except me.

I slowly got out of bed, pulled on a pair of shorts, and began creeping out of the house. I stopped at the back porch an very carefully reached above our sleeping cat and took my bow and arrow down from the rack. I left the house and entered into stillness.

I waited by the back door, listening for any sound, even a morning dove. I scanned the area, looking for any movement, there was none, not even the tops of the palms. I put my bow and sheath across my shoulder and began walking.

I got as far as the grapetree by the back road, and stopped. I waited again. I looked. I listened. I turned three hundred and sixty degrees. The house was no longer in view. I was completely alone in the world. I was the very first person to touch the day.

I headed east towards the beach. I measured every movement in fluid terms as if I were swimming through the quiet. I got to the beach and walked down to the water's edge.

I waited. The ocean was flat. Where it met the sand, there was no sound. I squatted by it's edge and shut my eyes. I waited. When I felt the sun first hit my face, I opened my eyes. I stood up. I turned north and began walking. I kept my left foot in the sand, and my right foot in the water.

I turned west at the north gate and began walking towards the dunes. The sound of waves followed me, and up ahead I could see row after row of fronds swaying in the breeze.
I got back to the house. Lucky ran barking out to greet me. Suzy and Robin were watching cartoons. Dad was in the shower. Mom was in the kitchen cooking pancakes.

"Where have you been?" she asked.
"Hunting," I said.
"Did you get a dove?" she asked.
I stopped. "Dove?", I replied,"No, no dove."

I turned. I walked to the back porch. I placed my bow and arrows on the rack. I stopped. I turned. I waited. But it was gone. The day had begun.
STORY # 5

When I was eight years old the first high rise apartment complex was built on Key Biscayne. I wrote the following letter to Bill Baggs, Editor of the Miami News:

Dear Mimina News,

I have a kimplant to make about the apartment on key Biscayne. Here are my kimplants! It ruins the look of Key Biscayne. I suggest you tear it down and put up trees.

Please don't let another apartment go up on Key Biscayne. I suggest the people of Key Biscayne and Mimina voat.

We have a racoon. If apartments go up, her mother, father, sisters, brothers, freiands, and relatives they won't have a place to stay. There won't be any grass, woods or trees left. By the way she has a boy frend he will loss his home to.

I am eight years old.
Send by,
Prudence Yates Gill

This letter was published, along with a full page photo essay and interview with me, in the Miami News Sunday Magazine section on June 2, 1963.

Two weeks ago I had the following dream:

I was back on Key Biscayne. Hundreds of bull-dozers were plowing under the remaining open areas of land on the island. At the same time, the coconut plantation caught on fire. I was screaming for someone to help stop the bull-dozers and to help put out the fire. Hundreds of people were milling about, walking by the fire, past and around the bull-dozers, but none of them paid heed. It was as if they were deaf to my cries and blind to the carnage around them. I awoke drenched in sweat and weeping.
Two days after this nightmare I received a phone call from a friend in Miami. She was a member of a group of island residents who had petitioned The City of Miami Planning Commission to put a construction moratorium on Key Biscayne until an Environmental Impact Statement could be made. She had called to tell me that the Commission, two days before, in a joint decision, had denied their petition and had voted in favor of allowing construction to begin on two major development projects. These two projects would destroy the last remaining open tracts of land on the island, including what was left of the old plantation.

I felt like I was eight years old again.
CONCLUSION

All of the stories in this thesis are obviously autobiographic. The first third of my life was spent living on a one-hundred and eighty acre coconut plantation, on an island off southern Florida. The cottage my parents rented was, including the front and back porch, approximately five-hundred square feet. We had very little inside except ourselves—my parents, my brother and sister and I, and our dog, cat, racoon, hamster, parakeete and assorted pet-snakes. Consequently we spent very little time inside the house. My childhood was a mixture of "Swiss Family Robinson," "Old Yeller" and "Tarzan," with a bit of "Mutiny on the Bounty" thrown in for a twist. The lines of demarcation between inside and outside, between what was nature’s domain and our terrain, were significantly blurred.

Although I have lived and worked in many other places since then, the central sensibility I bring to my art is intrinsically tied to that first third of my life. Each of the stories in this thesis is conceptually, texturally,
or contextually tied to my current body of work. But, as Jackie Winsor so aptly said, "...It is not the quality of being there that I hope to achieve...but rather the quality of remembering..." What I carry with me from my childhood, and what I seek to convey through my art, is the essence of my experiences and memories. This essence forms the intimated external. And the intimated external, is for me, the intangible essence of nature.

It is what makes the difference between the wilderness and a park, between the ocean and a seaquarium, between the rain forest and a botanical garden. It is the difference between seeing a herd of elk disappear over the horizon, and watching one eat it's dinner at the zoo. It is what is missing when nature is severed, separated, amputated from itself. As the lines of demarcation between what is nature's and what is our's become more distinct, the less we will come to know of this essence, and the more we will begin to believe that by merely visiting a park, a seaquarium, or a botanical garden, we will "come to know nature." With a sense of great tragic irony, I call this The New Belief System.

Whether I want to be or not, I too am a participant in this new belief system- if only by the simple fact that I now live, for the first time in my life, in a
land-locked urban setting: when I want to "be in nature," I go to a park. Through my memory, I maintain my connection with the intangible essence of nature. Through my art, I seek to make this intangible essence tangible.

My thesis show was an attempt to create within the confines of a gallery a visual experience which would capture the essence of the freedom and movement, and in a sense the magic, of the ocean. I had arrived at this idea through a relationship I had developed with aluminium screen. Over the course of my two years in graduate school, beginning with the initial series of coconut trees, aluminium screen had been simply one of a myriad of materials I experimented with, and incorporated in, individual pieces and mixed-media installations. About four months before my thesis show I became, as I now refer to it, "lost in the land of screen." It took over my studio. I folded, manipulated, shaped, sewed, streached, contoured, small and large segments of screen. I added welded threaded rod super-structures, and started attaching and suspending the forms between the walls/ceiling/floor of my studio. I became enamored by the diaphonous and ephemeral qualities of the material. I started working with light and screen, building multiplicity of form and line-
there were many times I could not distinguish between what was screen or rod and what was shadow. And there were many times that I took the proverbial machete and hacked my way through the cacophony of my studio. Gradually, the plant and land based forms I had been working with, gave way to forms suggestive of the ocean environment. Three weeks before my thesis show, by grace of circumstance, I was able to work for a few days in the gallery space. It was at this point that I began to see how to orchestrate the elements and, most importantly how to use the light and shadow patterns to build volumes in space. I went back to my studio and began working on new pieces based on what I had learned. When I hung my thesis show, almost every piece had been made within those last couple of weeks. I spent the entire weekend, or what seems now to have been the entire weekend, working on the installation—editing, manipulating, grouping and regrouping the pieces, building pockets of shadow, then directing and re-directing the light—when I finally finished, it was five o'clock Monday morning, the day of the opening. I rode my bike home to take a nap, and I wasn't even sure if I liked the piece. When I got up from my nap I went immediately back to the gallery. I unlocked the door. I walked in. I stopped. I looked. I listened. I waited.
And I felt again as I had when I was a child, intimately connected to the external.

It is my hope that these installations will facilitate a connection or perhaps re-connection for other people as well. Although, sometimes I can't help wondering if what I am really doing is simply creating yet another aspect of the New Belief System...