Comfort, despair
and other matters of scale and perspective

A Thesis

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by
Stacy Lynn Henning, BFA

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Master's Examination Committee:
Malcolm Cochran
Carmel Buckley
Stephen Pentak
Todd Slaughter

Approved by

[Signature]
Adviser
Department of Art
To My Family
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VITA

June 1, 1969........................................................Born- Frankfort, Indiana

1992...............................................................BFA, Virginia Commonwealth
University, Richmond, Virginia

Fields of Study

Major Field: Art

Studies in Sculpture
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Preface

I lived under the constant fear of being discovered. I was sure that people could tell...it would only be a matter of time. Something would betray me and tell the story of who I was. I had to be prepared.

Nothing happened. But I had to be prepared. I was marked. I knew it. I stood in line every morning on the blacktop and knew it. Some days I stood paralyzed, trying not to anticipate when the discovery would come, hoping it would not happen on the blacktop. Other days I enjoyed the suspense. On those days I would seem to lose my equilibrium, but I did not fall. There would be a pause...gradual silence...and then I would begin to disintegrate and become lighter than air.

Nothing happened. I was able to pass undetected. I longed for some kind of physical distinction. I longed to be marked outright. It would cut short the wait for the inevitable discovery.

Amy Pisanelli could slip a quarter between her two front teeth in the manner in which one inserts a coin into a pay phone, a talent that stunned our entire Girl Scout troop. I have not seen her since the seventh grade, and I fear that orthodontics has probably denied her at least one valuable life experience.
My heart ached for Patti Rogers, who wore her marks of distinction on her dirty clothes, in her unkempt hair, and in the fact that her family was poor. I wondered if she ever felt weightless, but I didn't dare ask. Her distinction provided her with an insight that I was too terrified to explore.

I sometimes found interaction with people exhausting, a constant process of evaluation and comparison carried out in the search for answers for which I did not even know the questions. It was then that I began to travel. I would open up the atlas to the state of Ohio and locate my town. Looking at the dot that represented Sheffield Lake, I could recall in great detail things that I encountered within the one mile radius that I traveled on foot from my house: north to Lake Erie, south to Warren Gunther Park, east to the Ramada Inn golf course, and west to the road that seemed to always be ten degrees colder than the rest of the area. I knew the location of every cracked piece of concrete on my block: the places where tree roots had displaced entire panels, home-made repairs, general crumbliness. The information represented by my city's dot astounded me. Did all dots on the map convey the things that I and everyone else knew about our towns? Leaving Sheffield Lake, each dot became a story, full of detail, with no specific action but many combinations of elements. I enjoyed knowing little or nothing about these places to which I traveled. I would imagine how wide the streets were, how the sun warmed the sides of brick buildings, the smells of the trees that lined the streets. Gazing at the dots, I saw some towns situated on top of a steep hill, so that the streets would rise up and flex with the contour of the hill as I observed from a spot in the valley. There were never any people in the towns. I would
travel on to Canada, pausing in the Great Lakes to imagine their depths by removing a slice from the bottom to the surface and placing that slice next to things that I knew were tall like the smokestacks of the power plant that was a few miles from my house. I traveled the world using these methods.

As a child, my understanding of the world and its workings was based on comparisons, with myself as the point of reference. I used the information I gathered from these comparisons to understand what I could not directly observe. I am still that point of reference. I view my work as the tangible manifestation of things that I could not otherwise observe and as a means of apprehending the elusive, the infinite and sometimes, the incomprehensible.
I have always been interested in objects that possess many references. In the winter of my first year of graduate study, I began a work in which I hoped to combine qualities of two ordinary things that I found extraordinary: the folds of skin around an old dog’s collar, the round body and gesture of a nervous sparrow. I wanted these references to be ambiguous enough to invite repeated scrutiny, yet specific enough to feel familiar. The piece was made of long, thin pieces of wood laminated together and sanded down to form an irregular orb, the “body” of the work. The ends of each row of wood strips tapered and faded into the next row, like the breast feathers of a bird. I applied a mixture of sand, wood glue, clay, plaster and blue paint to the surface and between the wood slats, and then removed areas to form gauges that revealed and accentuated the layering of the wood slats. With this form as a base, I built a neck-like extension mounted on one side so that it supported the bulk of the weight. Although this element was yellow ochre, it looked more vaginal than neck-like, a reference that I was not intending, but would not have minded had it been more subtle.

Presenting this piece to other people for scrutiny brought back the thoughts I had as I lined up on the blacktop every morning. I have always felt that way to some degree when I present work, but it had been a while since I had lost my equilibrium. In that critique, I became the slouching
200 pound, clumsy blue thing that could not understand why people were staring. Nine months later I heaved it off of my storage loft as if I were trying to dispose of a dead body. It crashed to the floor and I felt a twinge of remorse. The piece had its own marks of distinction, and the knowledge that accompanies them, if only I had paid it more attention.

Looking back at that piece and my mindset at the time, I understand that I could not give it the attention it demanded because my work and thought processes were undergoing a transformation. I could no longer work within the framework that I had come to establish as "mine," nor did I wish to. I had reversed my position on certain issues that I had previously defended with conviction. I felt as if someone had shaken me so hard that parts had come loose. I then began the process of putting them back together, but in a slightly different configuration.

I followed up the "slouching, 200 pound piece" with something that I thought was a radical departure: I constructed two identical structures out of plywood, 2x4's and asphalt shingles. These structures, each measuring 6'x8', were essentially two wedge forms elevated one foot off of the ground by 2x4 supports. They were positioned one foot apart, with the low ends sloping toward each other to resemble fragments of neighboring suburban roofs. The piece was presented in a dark room, with the space between them illuminated by dim yellow bug lights recessed into the soffit area. A waxed-paper airplane with an overly sentimental letter written on it was perched on one roof. It was illuminated from underneath by the light of a 10-watt bulb which shone through a cut in the roof, so that the airplane appeared to glow. A strip of tiny blue lights encased in a narrow,
9-foot long box slowly faded off and on to suggest a runway in the distance. My intention in this work was to address miscommunication, like those instances when you think that someone is waving to you and you respond, only to realize that they were signaling the person behind you. The futility of that response is what I had hoped to convey with the little airplane, glowing with a misguided urgency on the rooftop. Unfortunately, that did not happen: the piece relied too heavily on a narrative that it could not convey due to many factors that I find difficult to sort out. Something was wrong with the scale. I wanted the roof sections to be seen from above, giving the viewer a bird’s-eye view. This almost worked, but the size of the roof sections was problematic. I used the light between the roofs and of the glowing airplane to focus attention on that space, but it did not provide the film-like, zoom-in quality that I was after. Instead, it raised more questions about what was left in the dark. The crickets and the runway were extraneous elements that pushed the piece too far into the realm of corny melodrama.

I let go of the rooftops and references to particular narratives and locations. I realize now, that with the narrative aside, I was thinking of the aerial view as disclosing a truth. My awareness of my ability to produce melodramatic, corny work, and my desire to avoid making work that could be classified solely under those terms, enabled me to challenge myself to walk the line between the personal and the universal, the corny and the comforting, the melodramatic and the melancholy. These states or conditions interest me, by pairing them up and placing a line between them I attempt to find a balance, in order to control the distribution of these conditions in my work.
I began to focus on depicting the visible results of human labor or intervention as manifested in the "customized" Midwest landscape, and the truth that this landscape holds.
Beauty, Seduction and Truth in the Midwest Landscape

When viewed from an airplane, our efforts to manage and customize nature are most evident: corn rows, interconnected plots of land, each maintained for a specific purpose. I am permitted briefly to feel that the land that dwarfs me has been conquered and exposed for what it really is: small parcels of land dotted with houses and barns, grid patterns punctuated by tract homes and office complexes, cars moving through state roads, streets and highways like blood cells through arteries; each as important and yet insignificant as the one that preceded it in time or will replace it in the future.

As I look out the airplane window, my response fluctuates between feelings of joyful superiority for I have escaped my smallness, my human limitations, and contempt for those on the ground who have not. This immediately turns to empathy for those on the ground, and I feel depressed to be privy to such devastating information. All of these responses are triggered by the subtle shifts in color, texture and patterning of the land, which I find both exquisite and terrifying. These thoughts and observations run through my mind in a continuous cycle, I can never travel on an airplane without having them.

Back on the ground, I find myself having similar thoughts: when I stand in a newly plowed field and look toward the horizon as regimented
paths recede into the distance, I feel overwhelmingly insignificant. I cannot believe that I am not even a dot on a map. If I were looking into the Grand Canyon I could accept feeling small, but I find it painful to look at something upon which humans have made an impression. The ground humors us in our feeble struggle to produce something that we need. But we are still small.

As an observer, I am seduced by the beauty of the manipulated land that I observe both from the air and on the ground. Parcels of land viewed from an airplane, enormous structures towering over me, the paths shaved into mountains to accommodate power lines, all have the power to drive me to a point of ecstatic revelation, only to mock my adulation by revealing the truth that is momentarily obscured by this beauty. That is that as an individual, I am powerless in comparison. Unlike the landscape I cannot, by virtue of my appearance, cause people to think about their own mortality, their smallness, the fact that they are but one infinitesimal part of a larger continuum. I cannot, with my physical presence, force other people to so distance themselves from their individuality that their perspective shifts and they become startled and momentarily embarrassed by this individuality, only to reclaim it with relief and optimism.

The underlying theme of all this is my desire to be a part of something larger and more expansive than myself, and my inability to accept the fact that I am but a tiny speck among other tiny specks in the continuum. No knowledge or action, no matter how profound or noble, shows up in a satellite photograph. I have often wondered if I could stand
on the surface of the moon, for example, and look back at the earth and not be devastated. Could I take driving to the grocery store seriously anymore? I cannot help the sense of despair I get from dwelling on these notions, because part of me buys that "seeing is believing" and applies it to these topics. What can be seen is True. But how equipped am I to process this Truth?

As my ideas about what I wanted to express became clearer, I set out to make objects that affect the viewer in the ways that I am affected by the landscape, by beauty, by living in a human body, by memory. I want to make objects that may not be what one would consider beautiful in a classical sense, but have something about them that is beautiful, whether that be color, texture, posture, overall form. I am fascinated by the power of beauty and want to use it as the persuasive device that it is, in the hope of disclosing a hidden truth.
Comfort, despair

and other matters of scale and perspective

My desire to address these issues resulted in a thesis exhibition entitled Comfort, despair and other matters of scale and perspective. The five pieces in the exhibition address my responses to the landscape, and vary in size, scale and vantage point. Two pieces take the form of clothing, one piece deals with interior and exterior space, two address aspects of the panoramic landscape. All of the works are nearly symmetrical. I intuitively equate symmetry with order and calmness -- both spatially and psychologically-- and I believe that this use of symmetry draws the viewer into the work. All of the works are made of materials that have been removed from their original contexts, however, the history and associations surrounding the materials are called upon to supplement the new role that the materials have been asked to play. This body of work revolves around my knowing a terrifying and discouraging truth, while at the same time being seduced by the supporting evidence.

Field [plates I, II] is the first piece I completed for the exhibition. It is 10 feet in height, 11 feet wide and 7 feet deep and is comprised of bound straw and pillows and cushions that have been painted with pigmented wax in varying tones of reddish-orange. Long, tapered “furrows” of straw, 1 1/2 feet in diameter at the large, hollow ends, move along the floor away from the viewer, and decrease in diameter so that they
appear to recede as they meet the wall and climb up 6 feet to converge at a central vanishing point. Other furrows, whose ends are smaller than those on the floor, are attached only to the wall, forming a middle ground. These rows also converge at the central vanishing point. Narrow, 1-inch in diameter furrows are fastened to the wall above the middle ground area to form a horizon line. The pillows and cushions are mounted on the wall, beginning along the horizontal line created by the straw, and continuing up the wall, each fitting snug against the next to form a narrow band of variegated color.

When I began this piece, I was interested in representing my response to the Midwest landscape with a tangible form that employed a device that is used primarily in two-dimensional work: the creation of illusionistic space through 1-point perspective. I wanted to address the intimate and the infinite simultaneously using actual space, the illusion of space, and sensual materials.

The choice of materials and how one uses them opens up the potential for metaphor that exists within those materials. In past work, my choices were made for a variety of reasons, some of which were quite removed from the associations that the materials carry with them. In this work, I found it necessary to allow my desire for a "material equivalent" of my ideas to govern my selection. The materials that make up "Field" -- straw, pillows, cushions-- have been selected for that reason. They serve as metaphors for aspects of the Midwest landscape that I observe both directly and through memory. Straw is an organic material often used for bedding for livestock or outdoor pets, it is an excellent insulator. It speaks
of the rural landscape, of harvesting and baling machines, stables, lofts. As I was working with the idea of the Midwestern ground as manipulated, coerced into doing something for us, straw seemed to be a material with which I could address those ideas. By binding the straw with twine to form "furrows", I imposed an order on the material that enables it to speak of the manipulation that I observe, while at the same time calling forth the associations that I desired. The ends of the furrows are open, creating a row of subterranean tunnels that draw the viewer's eye below the surface of the field and suggest the possibility of physically entering the space.

The individual pillows and cushions that make up the sky vary in size from the soft, head-pillow to the springy, bottom-supporting cushion. They are painted with pigmented wax to transform them into a field of modulated reddish-orange. Small portions of the original upholstery show through to create a tenuous balance between the illusion on the surface and the reality of the base material. When combined, the pillows and cushions become a long patchwork "mattress." The color of the sky refers to sunset, a melancholy time of day, the time of day in which I believe contemplation is inevitable.

"Field" distances the viewer from the horizon through the use of a central vanishing point. The viewer is alone in a field, contemplating his/her own smallness, aloneness, distance from anything else, while at the same time being comforted by that expanse, due to the accessibility of the materials.
Upon completing *Field*, I felt the need to address my response to the landscape in smaller, more intimate pieces. I used to wear ponchos in elementary school. My favorite was a green-white-and orange-striped one that my aunt had knitted by hand for me. I felt so safe under it: since there were no sleeves, it was like being wrapped in a blanket. A poncho is essentially a blanket with a hole cut in it anyway. I wore the poncho as my blanket in disguise and enjoyed the kind of security I felt after being tucked in at night.

*Poncho 6X* [plate III] is both an article of clothing and an aerial view of furrowed land and trees. It is small and hangs on a shiny brass coat hook, low enough on the wall for a small child to reach. I represented the land using a synthetic foam stained with red iron oxide pigment and sewn together to form the furrowed plots of land. The trees, which are designed to be used in scale model railroad landscapes, are also made of foam. The interior is lined with a gold brocade drapery fabric. The foam used for the land and trees gives the poncho a soft, spongy feel. The drapery fabric that lines the hood and body gives the poncho a regal yet pragmatic quality: at first glance the lining seems fancy, its color also compliments that of the exterior, however upon closer examination, its past life as a pair of tacky drapes manifests, then disappears, enabling the lining to be fancy in spite of its humble origins. The shiny brass coat hook suggests that this poncho is cherished, well cared for.

The viewer can imagine both standing on the land among the trees and furrows, and being inside, thus cloaked by the land, comforted by that which is the source of despair or discomfort. This to me is a metaphor for
my relationship to nature. I am overwhelmed by my smallness but find it comforting to locate my space, possibly the current equivalent of my atlas-traveling days.

I followed that piece with a larger version entitled XL Poncho [plates IV,V], which is made from two identical green blankets sewn together along the long edges. This piece is mounted on the wall with no visible means of support, 6 inches above eye level as measured from the seam at the top. Little of the blanket has been manipulated: a grove of trees surrounds a neckline that has been cut along the top seam; the lower corners of the blanket have been rounded to form a half-circle; the surface has been brushed smooth, beginning at the trees and radiating out in long strokes. This piece can be read as an aerial view of well-maintained grounds. One can place oneself alone in the middle of the flat field or at the edge of the trees. The trees, being recognizable as those used for model railroads, indicate the scale and enable the viewer to feel small in comparison. This poncho would envelop an average sized adult, the size of it implies the feeling of smallness that would come from being inside the garment. There are no houses or people, the viewer is alone. The evidence of human manipulation, however, intensifies the isolation of the viewer in a way that would not be possible if the viewer were looking at "untamed" wilderness or "unspoiled" nature. Nature is impressive, we are expected to feel small looking at it. I feel even smaller, though, looking at "tamed" wilderness. With these ponchos I wish to convey my empathy with the person inside them.
I have written earlier about how in an airplane, my consciousness continually shifts from an awareness of the rhythm, texture, and color of the land below to how this glorious display slaps me in the face by alienating me with its scale. In *View from 5,000 feet* [plates VI, VII] I attempt to convey both the interior of a commercial airplane and a view of the Midwestern landscape below. The work consists of an orange wool blanket and a green wool blanket sewn together along their long edges. The seam between the orange and green blankets forms a horizontal line on which three small oval embroidery hoops, spaced equal distances apart, are fastened. The orange blanket is stretched over a 4-foot wide, sharply curved laminated plywood frame that is secured to the wall and extends 3 feet from the wall at its furthest point. The green blanket hangs loosely from this frame, its ruffled satin border showing as it meets the floor.

The curvature of the orange blanket creates a low overhang that refers to the cramped interior of an airplane. A folded pink blanket rests on a ledge above the orange blanket, a reference to the airline blankets stored in overhead compartments. The blankets double as the interior upholstery (orange, green) and accessories (pink), and as the sky and ground outside as seen through the embroidery hoop windows. The view is constricted by these windows, but also expands beyond their confines.

I wanted the piece to have a “homey,” comforting feel. The associations that surround the blankets, comfort and warmth (ones that I associate with “hominess” as well), add information that supplements their formal functions in the piece. They are blankets for a twin bed.
Embroidery hoops are meant to be held in the hand, and are used to hold fabric taut. These elements work together as "individual-sized" things that are stand-ins for something much more expansive; personal items representing something much larger.

The final work in this series of landscape-inspired pieces, entitled *Fan, 7:55 p.m.* [plates VIII, IX], is comprised of 73 pillows and cushions that range in color from yellow- to red-orange. They are secured to steel frame, reminiscent of a folding fan, with buttons—“button-tufted” like standard mattresses used to be. The back side is lined with used mattress pads—a simple, unadorned surface which allows the form to be clearly seen and refers more overtly to a hand-held fan. This piece stands at a 90-degree angle to the floor, and is 8 feet tall and 10 feet wide.

I used pillows for the basis of the sky in *Field*. They reappear in *Fan, 7:55* once again for the associations that they carry: comfort, support, and this time, ornamentation. The pillows range from the decorative: pleated corduroy ones that may have rested in the corner of a 1940's sofa, to the more functional: seat cushions for furniture, back support pillows, battery operated neck rests. In selecting them from local thrift stores, I was interested in trying to unite related objects of a specific color range. I did not want to unify them by giving them a common surface treatment, as I had in *Field*. The original functions of the pillows were to provide support for an individual. This is an underlying element in the piece, however, the focus remains on the gesture of the form and its reference to a sky at sunset.
A hand-held fan is usually delicate and beautiful. It provides relief with little physical exertion on the part of the user. I do not mean to imply that this piece requires nothing from the viewer, merely that the sheer arrangement of color and texture provides a type of visual pleasure that passes the viewer along to contemplate other aspects of the piece: its frumpiness, its material components, the overall references of the form.

The used, slightly dingy quality of the materials gives the piece a kind of frumpiness that is knowledgeable, world-weary. It is wise yet unassuming. It is proud of its humble origins. It is twinged with the sadness that comes from this experience. It has good posture, though at first glance one would expect it to slouch.

This piece reads as a sunset and a fan. As I mentioned earlier, sunset is the time of day in which contemplation is almost inevitable. It is a more melancholy time than sunrise: one has the opportunity to reflect on the day's events, as opposed to thinking about what the day will hold. Looking at the sky provides momentary relief from the terrifying and exhilarating observations I make when looking at the ground. This piece serves as a metaphor for my thoughts of the sky as a comforting expanse.

Though the ideas and forms are different, there are striking similarities between the works in my thesis exhibition and the “200 pound blue thing.” The main correlation is in the way that they greet the viewer. I use “greet” to mean that they are friendly, hopeful that the
viewer will see beyond the gap between their teeth, or in the best situation, will find that gap endearing and/or beautiful. The “200 pound blue thing” slouched at this confrontation, the pieces in the exhibition stand poised, ready to go through with it. Whatever the outcome they become wiser for trying.

I use materials that I relate to on a human scale—blankets, pillows, embroidery hoops, the coat hook that the small poncho hangs on—in an attempt to make a body of work that simultaneously addresses the vastness of the landscape and the smallness of the individual. These human scale items, be they material components or entire works in the cases of the clothing pieces, act as agents in the attempt to momentarily apprehend that vastness, compress it, then allow it to re-expand. I return to the atlas and am astounded by the grace with which it handles that task.
Plate II  *Field  (Detail)*
Plate III  Poncho 6X
Plate V  XL Poncho  (Detail)
Plate VI  View from 5,000 ft.
Plate VIII  Fan, 7:55 p.m.
Plate IX  Fan, 7:55 p.m.  (Detail)
END OF THESIS