VOLUME OF PLACE

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine
Arts in the Graduate School at The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

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2005

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During my five years in Alaska, my son and I lived in a variety of places, including a fifth-wheel trailer, a tent, a cabin, a shed, a house, and a cab-over camper. By living in these different shelters and being affected constantly by my surroundings, I have developed a deep interest in my intuitive understanding of a sense of place, both in architecture and in landscape, and of the space — or volume — that a place occupies. Thinking about the volume of a place has led me to create hollow forms that explore that sense of place and that provoke questions about the form's relationship to its particular surroundings.

The hollow forms that I have been making play with the idea of volume, of place, and of interior and exterior. When I'm making these forms, I think of the inside volume as an actual tangible object, not just as nothing or inconsequential. I find the outside interesting, too, because — through the process of pulling the material away from the inside in order to create a volume and place — I am able to intuitively explore process, material, and form. This process of working allows me to balance my own intentions with the opportunities presented by the qualities and limitations of each different kind of material, and also allows me to push the limits of that material and of my own abilities.
Dedicated to my son, Willow James Lee Bugbee.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my committee members: Malcolm Cochran for your intuitive approach that has helped me find my way, and for all of the concrete and practical advice that you have offered; Ann Hamilton for your encouragement, insight, and confidence in my work and in my writing; and Steven Thurston for sending me off to look at architecture books and for asking me questions that I had to work hard to answer.

I would like to thank Eric Huntington. Your assistance with both my MFA thesis show and with the editing of this thesis paper has been invaluable.

Thank you to my sister, Carla Irene Rennick, for her help in editing this thesis paper, and to all of my friends who gave hour after hour of their time in order to assist me with my show. I literally could not have done it without you.

Thank you to my entire family. I could never write enough to explain just how amazing you all are and how much you have helped with your endless supply of both love and assistance. Mom and Dad, you have faith in me always, and everything you do makes me feel safe and confident. Eva Marie and Carla Irene, you are the best sisters and aunties in the world. James, you inspire me.

Finally, I want to thank my son, Willow. You hang out with me at the studio, draw me pictures, and make me laugh. You have survived this crazy schedule with lots of patience, creativity, and fun. Congratulations. Now we can get a pet.
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INTRODUCING AND PRESENTING

During my five years in Alaska, my son and I lived in a variety of places, including a fifth-wheel trailer, a tent, a cabin, a shed, a house, and a cab-over camper. By living in these different shelters and being affected constantly by my surroundings, I have developed a deep interest in my intuitive understanding of a sense of place, both in architecture and in landscape, and of the space — or volume — that a place occupies. Thinking about the volume of a place has led me to create hollow forms that explore that sense of place and that provoke questions about the form’s relationship to its particular surroundings.

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IN ALASKA

May 2001. I recall it being a beautiful sunny day in Cantwell, Alaska: two feet of snow still on the ground. Willow, eighteen months old, crying on the step, because he wasn't going home. I remember crisp cold, this new cabin feeling cavernous, silent, hyper real. I opened one of our hastily packed garbage bags and found a flannel shirt of Mike's that smelled like him. I didn't throw it out. Boxes and bags all around.
Sleeping bags on the bed, slippery and falling off throughout the night; the wool blanket I got for my birthday. Kitchen things. Placemats. Spices. The Amanda baby quilt, handmade for grieving mothers. I hung it up on the wall, had my spinning wheel and wool nearby.

The next morning I woke up to sunshine. I remember incense, a Mickey Mouse tank top, a mirror, music. I danced in front of the mirror and sang a song about freedom. I loved that cabin. I hung everything in it, made the food that I wanted, kept it clean and organized.

Before visiting my parents in Michigan for a month with Willow, I had to pack up everything and put it in yet another cabin, an old horse tack shed with a little room in the back. When we came back we lived in there, in the tack shed, and I worked around the yard and ranch house in place of paying rent.

I remember going outside in the morning while Willow was still sleeping. I would bring out a blanket there on top of our mountain, Hippie Ridge, and do yoga, Sun Salutations to the spring sun finally coming over the morning mountains. Then Willow would wake and call to me.

In our tack shed/cabin was a wood stove. There was a gas one too, but it didn't look safe, so I never used it. That cabin was half ally, half opponent and adversary. There was no insulation in the tack part; daylight came through some of the walls. The whole thing was kind of patched together, and we had a few small scraps of carpet on the floor planks. The roof was tin, nice for all the rain that spring and summer. It rained and rained, so much and so often that I would wake up and just think, there it is still...it's still raining. Doesn't seem possible. By the time autumn came most of the wild blueberries had become rotten and inedible.

While in Michigan I bought an orange, blown glass ornament for a dollar at a garage sale. From then on every time Willow and I moved, the first thing I did was unpack that ornament and hang it in a window. It was
a constant, a symbol of home. Even in our next home, the cab-over camper, it hung in the window. The camper itself was perhaps more of a symbol of home, with the aluminum walls embodying the idea of safety and warmth.

In reality, the wood stove in our cab-over camper was homemade out of sheet metal and about the size of a wide shoebox. The firewood had to go in at a funny angle, so it was really more like kindling. When winter came, my friend that sold firewood would cut the logs short enough to fit into the stove, and then outside in the tundra I would chip them down into splinters with my ax, always a little at a time, on a stump for resistance against the spongy ground.

I started the fire each day after work. Willow and I inside the cold camper. Such a small space warmed quickly, and the ice on the windows would start to melt, the olive oil would reliquify. Each night I started a kettle of water boiling to both warm the cabin and make a hot bedtime drink for the both of us. Some days I would bring home vegetables, but when it got too cold it was pointless. They would freeze and be ruined. I remember a lot of bread, butter, and oatmeal.

Another reason I heated water at night, once winter came, was that the door stuck so it was difficult to open, even though you could see daylight in several spots along its frame. Lots of it. The wood stove with its coffee can pipe was next to the door, so I never kept the fire going at night. I would pour the boiling water into jugs wrapped inside plastic bags in case of leaking, and then put them in our blankets to keep us warm after the flames died down and the coals were gone.

By the time we woke up, the camper would be frozen again, and there was snow on the floor that had drifted in through the cracks around the door. The first thing I did each day was melt the ice inside the tea kettle and start it boiling again. Then I would start the fire and try to warm it up before waking Willow.

We found as winter came that our bed got wet every night, and I finally realized that it wasn’t from a leak. It was condensation caused by the warmth of our bodies contrasting with the cold air flowing below our bed in the cab-over part of the camper. We began to sleep on top of garbage bags so that our blankets would stay dry.
SPINNING AND MAKING

When I lived in Alaska, it was in a place where warm winter hats are made by hand and a house is built by the person who is going to live in it. Cantwell, Alaska, is a village of 150 people. It is surrounded by mountains and centered around the seasons. There exists a natural rhythm in the way things are done and in the way people live. I feel that this rhythm has become very much a part of the way that I work now in my studio.

While living in Cantwell, I learned to sew leather and fur, spin yarn made of wool and sled dog fur, make baskets and build cabins, among many other things. I find that since returning to studio work I have brought with me the rhythm and ways of working that I used while there. I am almost exclusively drawn to the use of sewing in order to create my forms and am also drawn to using a wide variety of materials — anything from traditional fabric, to more nontraditional materials such as insulation, tarpaper, and landscaping fabric. Using this wide range of materials comes from a love of the tangible. In addition to reflecting my experiences and perceptions of place, my work is also material driven, and when I trust the intuitive play that happens with the given qualities of a material, I find that those qualities often lead to delightfully unexpected surprises in form. In my work, the time-honored craft of sewing is such an integrated part of my
practice that it is at once the subject and the visual language that I use. This reliance on traditional skills comforts me, makes instinctive sense, and gives me a sense of connection to the history of making and the history of living.

During the times when I was making things that I needed, I felt the same sense of honor in being able to fashion what was necessary to live as I do when I am making artwork. When I returned to the art world and began making art with a capital “A” again, it made sense for me to continue using the same language of labor. It is not unimportant that this means of making has been working for women for thousands of years. I have come to feel that I am honoring traditional labor through my artwork as well as honoring artwork through my labor. In my mind, my use of a traditional useful skill — sewing — not only elevates this craft to the status of “Art”, it also elevates the concrete value of art by placing it in the same category as those efforts that are necessary for daily survival.
STARTING AND PROGRESSING

The very first pieces that I made during my time in The Ohio State University MFA program were but a small step into my practice, yet they were also indicative of issues that I would continue working with throughout the next two years. While these pieces — small, mixed-media corner installations — look nothing like the work I have done most recently, they did begin creating spaces and defining borders of one space within another. An element within one installation was simply a ladder leading up to a storage loft. I covered the ladder in a red fabric called fun-fur using techniques similar to those used when working with leather or fur. The piece itself was disassembled shortly after, but the ladder still remains and is a reminder of the place at which I started.

After those first two installations, I began sewing nylon pantyhose. Initially I imagined them sewn together and then pushed out into free organic shapes in air. I sewed the nylons together by hand, using bright pink thread to emphasize the hand-stitched quality of the seam. I sewed them into flat panels, added them to another pair, and eventually created a flat plane. I made two of them at the same time, working back and forth between one and the other.

Because nylon does not naturally become a shape on its own, and I wanted a three-dimensional form with an internal volume, the first thing I did was stretch each large sewn planes over an object. One of these objects was my Ashford Traveler spinning wheel that I had brought with me from Alaska. It was just the right size for the
nylon fabric, and the memory of spinning was still fresh in my mind. The other object
was a group of branches, which was also the right size, and — although not empty —
created an abstract form. As the nylon was stretched over each object, I tailored it,
sewing the object shut within it. Eventually I removed the spinning wheel from the
nylons, and stretched the resulting form into three-dimension by pulling it into shape with
strings tied onto a cubical frame. I then infused the fabric with resin. After the resin
hardened, I cut the piece loose from the frame, leaving the strings trailing down as
reminders: as a memory of the process of its formation. The remaining strings resonated
the most with me, while the form itself was largely defined by the points at which it had
been pulled into shape rather than by its inner volume (Figure 1). With the second piece I
also coated the nylons over the branches with resin and then bit by bit broke off pieces of
the branches and pulled them out, leaving the shape the same, but empty (Figure 2). I
enjoyed this piece because it had a defined form that led to a contemplation of the inside.

Figure 1  Untitled form,
nylons, thread, resin, 2’ x 2’ x 2’

Figure 2  Untitled form,
nylons, thread, resin, 4’ x 2’ x 2’
After working with the hand-sewing and the multi-stepped process of making stretchy nylons become rigid, I moved onto using another kind of fabric. I wanted to move away from artificially forcing my will onto a material — as with the resin — and toward working with the properties inherent in the material itself. I used a length of dark blue corduroy and cut it into pieces as randomly as I could. This was the first of many pieces that I have made trying to balance skill and intention with intuition and chance. After I had a pile of pieces, I used my five-dollar thrift shop Singer sewing machine to sew them back together, but this time tailoring the pieces as necessary to create a form rather than a plane. While doing this I also attempted to work randomly by adding pieces only in order to follow corners and curves, and by trying not to think of the overall finished shape. It was an experiment in following my intuition and in trusting the material to have a natural way of existing. When I was finished I turned it right side out and hand-sewed the rest of the seam that had been left for turning it. There was now this object that I had made, but I did not know what it looked like. It was a pile of sewn fabric with no opening, and it looked rather like a shirt or dress balled up on the floor. I contemplated stuffing it like a bean bag to give it volume and form, but came back to my desire for a hollow form in space. In the end, I created a system for myself; anywhere there was a point where three or more pieces of fabric came together at the same spot, I attached a long piece of poly-twine, sewn through the point and then tied. The twine pieces were then stretched across the room to various points in my studio until every point was pulled tight and the fabric was pulled out into a taut form (Figure 3).
This piece was installed in a couple of different places and it looked different each time. This is because, although the strings were always in the same places on the piece itself, they were attached to different places on the wall. Each space had differing amounts of wall room and a different amount of space that the piece could take up. A good quality about this piece was the stability of the fabric. It was soft and flexible, but it was not able to stretch like the nylon. This allowed for a more structured and intentional look that focused on the volume and the overall shape. It allowed the piece to be pulled into its full potential form without being deformed by the pulling.

After my corduroy piece I wanted to use a stronger material to explore some of the same ideas of inside, outside, and a thin layer of separation. I went browsing at hardware stores looking for a material that would offer possibilities for exploration, eventually purchasing some black rolled roofing. Using the same process as I did for the
corduroy piece, I cut random pieces a little larger than the fabric ones because the stiffness of the tarpaper would not allow me to make sharp turns or corners. Through working with this strong, yet brittle material, I found that it would not bend very far without breaking. I found, also, that I would have to sew it with the seams on the outside, because the seams would not bend inward without also breaking.

Making this piece was hard physical work to sew. I used a large upholstery needle and had to use a pair of pliers to pull it through the stiff tarpaper. I had to pull it tight enough to stay together, but not tight enough to break through the small edge of the rolled tarpaper roofing. During construction, this piece constantly felt as if it were about to fall apart with one last wrong move. In spite of this, I kept on working on it and pushing the material to its limit. In the end it held together and became an organic, defined form, with the hand-sewn seams accenting the points where the pieces came together. In this case the seams were actually what created the structure for a material that is meant to exist in a two dimensional state. One thing I learned, though, is that the nature of tarpaper is to lie flat. When I came back the next day, it had slumped substantially toward the floor. In order to pull it off the floor, I hung it from the ceiling by using the same kind of poly-twine as I had used in the corduroy piece. This time, however, I attached the strings along the top seams of the piece and connected all of the ends to the ceiling at one single point. This allowed gravity and the piece's own weight to hold it into shape, thereby using gravity to my advantage, rather than fighting it. This piece was an important step in realizing what a material can do, what it cannot do, and in
finding the opportunities that arise from both of these aspects. In this case, the rolled roofing could become a form, but it could not hold that form for very long without the additional elements of gravity and suspension (Figures 4 and 5).
Figure 4 *Suspended Volume*
rolled roofing, poly-twine, 4’ x 4’ x 4’

Figure 5 *Suspended Volume* (detail)
rolled roofing, poly-twine, 4’ x 4’ x 4’
Because of my affinity for using construction materials, I went back to the hardware store again and bought pink insulation. Again I hand-sewed, but this time I had to wear long sleeves, gloves, an apron, and a respirator. Because the insulation was so thick, I wanted to see just how thin it could get before it was not strong enough to hold its own weight. I found that for my purposes the answer was one-sixth of its original thickness. I used the insulation as if it were a construction material similar to sheetrock or plywood and used the seams almost like 2" x 4"'s, as a way to strengthen it while at the same time holding it together (Figure 6). This material was amazing, and I loved the way that it looked and the fact that it is usually used inside of a construction, and not as a structural material, itself. Eventually I gave it up, however, because of the danger of the possibility of breathing the fiberglass in, and because it was sweaty work.
Figure 6  Untitled fiberglass form
fiberglass insulation, thread, 4’ x 2’ x 2’
After this project I was taking a hot glass class in which our final project was to make a sculpture out of plastic sheeting and use fans to inflate it. This coincided nicely with many of the things I had been thinking of, with a thin material becoming the outside, and containing only air on the inside. In this case the air acted both to fill and to support the form. I collaborated with David Murphy and Ashley Beroske on a large, twenty-foot long and eight-foot high tunnel made of quilted plastic (Figure 7). The plastic was held together with small strips of plastic, similar to the way a quilt is tied. When we finally got our piece to the installation site and set it up, we turned on the squirrel cage fan. The air current was so strong that as the piece filled with air, it started bursting at its weakest points, which were the points where it was tied together. We eventually realized that we would have to cut holes in the opposite end in order to let some of the air escape. We did that, and it worked and held its form without bursting. The piece really let us explore the limits of the material, how far we needed to go, and where the thin line existed between enough support and so much that it became damaging. The amazing and surprising thing was what we discovered when we looked through the hole at the inside of the piece. It was heavenly, glowing, translucent, and other worldly (Figure 8). I realized that this is a view that we never see — the inside volume of something that is full — but in this case it was simply full of air.
Figure 7  *Inflated Volume*
plastic sheeting, air, 8’ x 7’ x 20’

Figure 8  *Inflated Volume* (detail)
plastic sheeting, air, 8’ x 7’ x 20’
IN FIFTH GRADE

Place. I remember being in fifth grade, living out in the country on Felch Road. I remember it was spring. The snow had just melted, maybe a little left where it had been deep. I had a terrible and romantic feeling of awe, of place. I took a blanket and went across the creek, down the path, to a big tree next to the field. I sat on the ground, wrapped in the blanket. I remember thinking that I was taking it all in, maybe part of something big. It was cold. I stuck it out for a while, then picked up my blanket and headed back home.
INSTALLING AND REACTING

During the summer, with the Clean Space Gallery available at the Sherman Studio Art Center, I decided to try to take advantage of the large amount of space that it had to offer and of the fact that I had a lot of free black landscaping felt at my disposal. The landscaping felt was fifteen feet wide, and came to me in lengths of twenty-five feet. Working on this black installation was when I really started considering the room itself in relation to the hollow forms that I had been creating. I measured the room and sat in it, drawing sketches and really trying to get the feel of the place. The form that I drew for the room was several feet smaller than the space itself, and proportionate to it. It was a perfect rectangular box. Although I had worked with fabric on a large scale before and knew that fabric does not hold a rigid form on its own, I completely disregarded the laws of gravity and drew this rectangular box suspended in the air. I sewed the 25’ x 4’ x 15’ form together, attached lengths of airplane cable around the top edge, and then pulled the piece up by anchors attached to the walls. When it was partially raised, so that the sides of the piece were pulled up but the bottom was still touching the floor, it was indeed a perfect geometrical shape. Once the entire thing was off the ground, however, gravity took over and an entirely different shape resulted, with the bottom part following the
parabolic curve (Figure 9). This was much more exciting than what I had planned and reaffirmed my trust in the material in addition to highlighting the importance of following my intuitive relationship with materials.

![Figure 9 Clean Space Installation](image)

landscaping felt, thread, wire cable, 25' x 15' x 8'

Just as I had sewn the corduroy piece inside out so that the seam edges would be hidden, so I did with this piece. The entire thing was turned right-side out and — because I was short on time — hung without having the last seam sewn up. After it was hung, I stood on a chair and looked inside, and was again blown away by the interior volume of this piece, by the opposite view of the outside, and by the bits of light that showed through the fabric. Because the exhibit was fairly informal, and because I was so excited about the inside, I left the chair in the room and told people that although looking inside was not part of my intention for the piece, they should take a peek anyway. This piece
presented some questions that I am still working out about the relationships between outside and inside volumes and spaces. “How do I let people experience the inside without making a forced viewing point, or a viewing point that is not naturally part of the piece? Do they actually need to see the inside, or can they understand it simply by seeing the outside?”

Looking for different kinds of landscaping fabric that might be slightly different and might help me explore some of these questions, I went back to the hardware store and found a thin, translucent weed barrier landscaping fabric. I’d found several different types of weed barrier landscaping fabric and finally chose a kind that was brown. I chose brown because the only other colors I had found were grey and black, and since I’d just made one black installation, I didn’t want to make another. The brown fabric came in widths of four feet, which I then sewed side by side to create a total width of sixteen feet. I created a rectangular form much the same as the black one, only slightly larger and with this new, lighter material. With the black installation, I used attachments clamped onto and then screwed through the cloth. This was necessary because of the weight of the fabric, but this brown weed barrier fabric was extremely lightweight and strong. I used alligator clips, the kind used for electronic testing. They were beautiful, and emphasized the separateness of the piece from the hardware and the room. They were just barely able to hold the fabric. When trying to tighten them, sometimes the metal bent on the opposite end rather than tightening onto the fabric. The hanging of this brown installation was another test in finding out how much the fabric and the clips could handle, and in finding the point of failure. Fortunately, it held up just fine (Figure 10).
This time, with the piece up, I was able to play more with its hanging and with the lighting. Lighting was important, because it came from the top and shone down on and into the piece. The light that came through the inside made the sides glow. Since the fabric was translucent and the light was strong inside of it, people were able to see inside the form when they approached it and put their eyes right up to it (Figure 11). This material, coupled with the intense lighting, provided a nice answer to the question of how to allow the viewer access to the inside. The material was also nice because when the light reflected off of the outside, it looked like paper, and when the light shone through it looked almost fleshy and heavenly. The top piece was stretched to its full potential, and the bottom hung just six inches or so off of the floor (Figure 12). Because the top edge was fully taut, the bottom and sides became a parabolic curve and the whole piece had the feeling that the air inside of it was actually weighty, and that it was the air inside, rather than gravity, that was giving it form. It almost felt as if there were water inside of it (Figure 12).
Figure 10 *Clean Space Installation II*
weed barrier fabric, thread, wire cable, 26' x 16' x 10
Figure 11  Clean Space Installation II (detail)
weed barrier fabric, thread, wire cable, 26’ x 16’ x 10’

Figure 12  Clean Space Installation II (detail)
weed barrier fabric, thread, wire cable, 26’ x 16’ x 10’
IN CANTWELL

April 9, 2001 Cantwell, Alaska. I was at home lying in bed; had left the fourteen-year-old boy to cook, and promised I’d come back to help close up the cafe. With the sock full of hot dry rice on my abdomen, I slept on and off with the sun bright through my bedroom window. Back at the kitchen we started to clean. He took the tough jobs and I took a sponge. I remember opening the microwave, just the size for one plate. The sound of the latch releasing, the door open, bracing myself against the counter, leaning over to look in. The inside was cavernous. It felt like a warehouse, and I felt small. I stood holding my sponge, and saying, “Sorry, I just can’t do it.”

Later that night in the ambulance, I had just lain down on the cot, still in the driveway, still wearing my orange down coat. The ambulance volunteers — all friends or acquaintances — were helping get my coat off before we pulled out. When I tried to pull my arm out of the sleeve I started screaming. I couldn’t breath for screaming so loud, too loud for the little space of the ambulance. When they helped me get comfortable once again and started to pull out of the drive for the three-hour drive to the hospital in Fairbanks, I remember thinking it was okay, then, to have called the ambulance. By the time Mike came, I had already had the operation for an ectopic pregnancy. I had already lost the baby, and was in the maternity ward with a brown paper autumn leaf taped to the outside of my door.
SWEEPING AND MOPPING

The piece for my MFA thesis exhibition had been in the works for several months, and was an installation following many of the ideas of my earlier large suspended forms. This time, though, the form was made to fit inside the main space of the new Knowlton School of Architecture building. The room was five times larger than any room I'd ever worked in, and I had been working on two different models of the space itself, as well as one model of the piece that would go in it. With a room this open and large, which was used on a daily basis, I was curious how people would be affected by it, and how they would interact with it. This room also had many different points from which it could be seen, including ramps on both sides and a studio balcony above. A viewer could take in the piece from a variety of vantages, and it would always look different depending on where they were in relation to it and the room.

The piece was going to be 123 feet long and 23 feet high so I had to find a larger space in which to work and sew. I arranged to work in the back half of a warehouse. In May of 2005, three weeks before my MFA show was scheduled, I got appendicitis and was in the hospital for five days after the operation, with strict orders not to drive or lift more than ten pounds until I recovered. I had to push my show back, and then slowly get back into the rhythm of the project. In order to begin sewing, I first had to clean the floor of the warehouse. I was still tired from the operation, the warehouse was big, and my sisters — who came down from Michigan to help — did the major work while I swept up

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the dirt piles. My part of helping was wearing a dust mask, spreading out the sweeping compound, picking up piles of dirt, and sitting down to rest every once in a while. I wanted to get the whole thing done, cleaned, and ready to go, but I knew that my sisters were so sweet to help and that I could not ask them to push themselves as hard as I would push myself. Since I was still in recovery, I could not push myself either. I was feeling the frustration of being limited by body, by scale, and by circumstances.

After my sisters left, I mopped the warehouse by myself and it took three days. I took some advice and swabbed the floor. I carried small buckets of water and Murphy’s Oil Soap — a weight that I could manage — poured it on the floor, and pushed the dirt around with a big floor squeegee. I did little sections, the size of which I worked out according to how far the water would spread while still picking up the dirt. When the floor was done, I tested it out by walking around it in a circle in my bare, clean feet. My feet were fairly clean, still, after the circle was done. After the first two days of mopping, I grew tired of repeating this same motion over and over again, and of needing to gauge whether or not I was pushing myself too hard following the operation. I hoped no one would tell me that I shouldn’t be mopping, because it needed to be done. I had the fabric just waiting for me, propped up against the wall. By day three of mopping, I desperately wanted it to be finished so that I could begin. Thankfully that was the last day of mopping.
PLANNING AND CUTTING

Eric Huntington and I spent two full days, maybe more, thinking and rethinking, measuring and remeasuring, imagining, figuring, guessing, sketching, graphing, making paper models of various scenarios, each drawing our version of what would happen, and then trying to translate the sketches to each other. One sketch from just before we quit for the night, feeling as if we were about to get heat stroke, is on paper towel from the bathroom. We took turns pretending to be the piece so the other could stand back and see, and I used my flip-flops for walls, so we could get a sense of scale. I walked back and forth, up and down, all around, trying to guess what would happen. We then took all of those guesses and tried to formulate a plan that would put the guesses together into a form, all the while reminding ourselves that when we cut it, it would be backwards, since we were sewing inside out. Getting ready to make the cut was the scariest part. Finally making the first cut, while scary, was a relief. Even if it had been wrong, it was at least started and back into the physical real realm; out of the frustrating, intangible realm of theory, of what if’s, and maybe’s. I actually wonder what would have happened if something had gone wrong in the figuring. I think that I would have first had an undiagnosed panic attack, and then had to figure out a really great way to deal with it.

Three of us — Eric, Andrea Moreau, and I — did all of the cutting. We used a chalk line and scissors. After the line was snapped, one person would start on one end of the line, and another would start on the other. The two would cut toward one another.
until they met in the middle. After we cut each section, we would neatly fold it, and then place an identifying card on top of it. It took two days to cut them all and then we had to go back and forth from our theories on paper to the physical reality of the piece. We had to go through our barely decipherable notes, and remember what we were thinking when we made the plans, and then remember how the pieces were supposed to connect. I made a couple of “models” (using the word in the roughest of terms) by literally ripping out two shapes of paper and holding them together to see if they looked about right. We also used a block of wood with drawings of each side of the piece on it to double check the orientation of the fabric. The entire process was nerve-wracking but exciting. Eventually we got everything settled and began to sew.
SEWING AND CONSTRUCTING

I asked Davey Foster for suggestions on how to make my set-up for the sewing machine. My original intention was to put it on a table on wheels and just figure out a way to make it run while I pushed the table forward — to move the machine rather than the fabric. It seemed brilliant to me. I modified a found table, put it on wheels, and followed Davey’s suggestion of putting the foot pedal at hip height so that I could run the sewing machine with my hip rather than my foot, and simultaneously push the table forward. When Eric and I modified the table even further, put the fabric in place and plunged the needle down, however, I realized that my conception of how the machine works was backward. I either needed the fabric to come in from behind me, or I would need to walk the machine backward. I tried turning it around and sewing backwards, but it was as awkward as drawing with my left hand. Since I needed the seams to be in straight lines, that was not going to work. With the disorganization of the non-woven fabric and the perfection of the seam, the resulting consistency of line created by the stitching and the doubling of fabric at the seam was extremely important: it was the one organized and controllable thing. The fabric would hang as fabric hangs — the fabric itself just barely in existence — so that the neat and systematic seam lines seemed a valiant effort to organize the ingredients. Keeping this in mind, we tried several different
approaches and finally realized that the fabric would have to do the majority of the moving, with the machine only moving a bit here and there to accommodate the ever-shifting and ever-growing mass of fabric.

The fabric I selected for this project was the same brown fabric I had used before. It was a spun-bonded, heat pressed, non-woven polypropylene weed barrier landscaping fabric. It is similar to polypropylene felt, but it is very thin and strong and looks as if it’s made of coconut fibers loosely stuck together. It is millions of strands randomly pressed together, with the strands being so thin and far enough apart that one can see through it quite easily.

Once we accepted that the table would not move, the hip pedal for the sewing machine worked brilliantly. Petra Schilder helped me make a dispensing frame to hold the fabric rolls, which enabled me to do the first sets of seams on my own. For those first sets of seams, with two pieces face to face, it was a hypnotic one hundred and fifty feet that led me to feel as if the sewing machine was part of me, an appendage, an extension of my body. I leaned in to work and the machine began. The separation between my body and the sewing machine became unnoticeable as I leaned down close to the foot to sew with one hand in front and one behind; and the fabric came together. It was hard to notice the line of thread coming off the back as I was sewing, and I started to feel as if I were just using my fingers to press the two pieces of fabric together. I started to feel as if I were willing the fabric to have a seam. I became aware that as the fabric ran beneath my fingers, I felt as if I were actually traveling very slowly along the floor of the main
space of the architecture building for which this work was created. I was feeling it bit by bit, getting to know it, inspecting every fraction of it by touch, feeling it as a blind person might feel another's face.

The more I sewed, the more I felt that I was almost sewing nothing. The non-woven fabric is strong, yet has barely any substance, any kind of organization. It was almost as if I were using the line of the seam to organize air. Even the seam is not solid. It is a stitch about 1/16 of an inch long, and the stitch is actually nothing more than single points where the top thread and the bobbin thread catch at each other. It is the same with the non-woven fabric. It isn't woven; there is no warp, no weft, and no single lines of thread or yarn running the length of it. It is simply places where separate strands of melted polypropylene stick together in the making.

I teach my three-dimensional design students about line and how a line starts with a point, then becomes a line, then a plane, and then a volume. I was struck by the literal way that I was making this three-dimensional sculpture: I was starting with a point, where the needle went through the fabric to catch the bobbin, made a line of all of these points, which connected the planes of fabric, and then sewed enough planes together, that — when hung — would create a volume. It is the most basic rule of depicting volume, only I have taken it out of the drawing context and done it in three-dimension.

After I finished all of the sets of two, I tried to sew two sets of two together, but, because the amount of fabric had doubled, the same length of seam took four times as long, and that was even with bribing my son into helping me several times. This was the end of this project being mine personally, and it involved volunteer assistants from there.
on out. As the fabric sections grew it took six people to work on one seam. Each linear seam took several hours of an entire group of people focused on one simple task of joining two pieces of fabric with a seam width of 5/8 of an inch. This was not like a quilting bee; it took on qualities of a barn raising. It was hot and humid in the warehouse, even with two fans pointed directly at us, and the main source of light was the skylights. As the sun went down, so did our light levels. Near the end of constructing the piece, when time was running out, the room would darken before the seam was finished. After dusk the main source of light that lingered was simply the light coming from the sewing machine.
IN MICHIGAN

Everything was flooding in Western Michigan from my house all the way to my friend's house an hour away. We lived out in the country, and down the road the peninsula of houses inside the river's hairpin turn was entirely underwater. Many things I saw then, in fifth grade, are images that still come to mind from time to time. A two-story house underwater, a family's boat floating next to the chimney, tales of a house trailer floating down-stream in this river where my brother and I had always gone tubing. Our little ankle-deep stream down through the mint patch was now dangerous and high. We heard the road had been blocked at the gully by a fallen tree, so Mom, Dad, my brother, and I went to help clear it up. Our neighbors from the other side of the gully met us there. We all looked, the kids to gape and the parents to assess the situation. The rain was hard and we could hear the mud plopping down in the twenty-plus-foot-deep gully below. Both families left to get axes and chainsaws. When we returned the road was gone. It had slid down into the gully, right where we had all been standing.
RAISING AND LIFTING

Once we got the piece sewn together, I was pretty sure that the seams would hold, but I was not positive. I could have double-seamed the whole thing, but that would have taken pretty close to an extra month, and it would have cost too much in morale and enthusiasm. We tested the whole piece in the warehouse. It was beautiful and exciting, although we never actually got it all the way off of the floor, so I wasn’t one hundred percent sure that the clips would hold and that there wouldn’t suddenly be an extraordinary amount of extra weight put onto the seams once it came off of the ground.

It turns out that the weight was no problem for the seams at all. The seams on the sides and bottoms didn’t even get stretched taut by their own weight. I am, now that I think about it, a little disappointed that the seams weren’t stretched a little. It could have been disastrous, having such a fine line between taut and ripping, but perhaps if it had been taut, the sense of volume, of a weight of that volume, would have been even greater that it already was.

Installing Volume of Place: An Architectural Installation took an entire week and took dozens of people. Although the piece itself was monumental, the points that held it up were simply tarp clips holding onto the top edge of the piece and then pulled into the air with thin wire cable (Figure 13). Because the points of attachment were so tenuous,
my friends and I each had to adjust the piece little by little in order to avoid the clips popping off. After the piece was raised up past fourteen feet, there was little we could have done to repair any that may have fallen off.

Figure 13  *Volume of Place: An Architectural Installation*, second floor hallway weed barrier fabric, thread, wire cable, 123’ x 23’ x 12’

After much trial and experimentation, we finally got the piece off of the ground and were able to explore the space of the room, the form of the piece, and the volume within. With all of the different vantage points in and surrounding the room, the piece changed along with the position of the viewer (Figures 14 through 18). Because it took time to physically walk from one end to the other, and from one level to the next, understanding the effect and scale of the place and its volume became a physical as well as visual experience. During the opening, I was happy to see that people did, indeed,
explore the building and the piece. They approached the fabric to look in, walked under
the entire piece, walked up to all of the ramps around the room, and relaxed on the steps
underneath it as the evening sun came through the large glass windows.

When we took the piece down it took less than two hours. While taking it down I
also realized that we had been just at the upper edge of the limit of the clips. The form’s
weight distribution was so uniform, and the amount of force used to lift the piece was so
sensitive, that we had managed to just get it into place. After five or six of the cables had
been untied and loosened, the clips started releasing from the fabric, several at a time.
All of that volume quickly disappeared and we were left with a relatively small, neatly
folded pile of fabric (Figure 19).

Figure 14 Volume of Place: An Architectural Installation, first floor
weed barrier fabric, thread, wire cable, 123’ x 23’ x 12’

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Figure 15  *Volume of Place: An Architectural Installation*, top of steps
weeds barrier fabric, thread, wire cable, 123’ x 23’ x 12’
Figure 16 *Volume of Place: An Architectural Installation*, third floor stairs, weed barrier fabric, thread, wire cable, 123’ x 23’ x 12’
Figure 17  *Volume of Place: An Architectural Installation*,
second floor stairs,
weed barrier fabric, thread, wire cable, 123' x 23' x 12'
Figure 18 *Volume of Place: An Architectural Installation*, first floor, weed barrier fabric, thread, wire cable, 123’ x 23’ x 12’
Figure 19  *Volume of Place: An Architectural Installation*,
taken down and folded
IN FLIGHT

December 10, 2004  Out the window there is a bright light. I know the light is on the wing of our plane, but it makes me feel companionship, as if that's another plane traveling next to us. I am reminded that my favorite thing about flying is seeing the cloudscape from above, feeling like they are objects of substance. I have a sudden urge to jump out the window of the plane. I want to test them out. Looking out as we approach Atlanta, I see the patterns of nature and of people, the combining of them. Traffic on winding thoroughfares becomes decoration of lights; cul de sacs become patterns on fabric; seeing a yellow school bus next to a semi trailer lot and seeing they are the same size. I am surprised to look back in the plane and have all the people still be regular sized rather than tiny. They seem oversized now, as do I. When I see the neighborhoods I once again want to jump off and explore them physically. It seems like jumping off a swing, too excited to wait for it to slow down. In these moments I want to experience the perception as reality; the clouds as actual ground, the tiny city below as a destination to which I can jump. I feel impatient: if I just jump out/off I can go faster, more immediately than the machine. I don't want mediation
TESTING AND PUSHING

Limitations are an important part of my work. There are the limitations of the fabric, what the material is, the things that it is expected to do, the things that it naturally does, and the things that it can be convinced to do. There are the limitations of the materials of my houses, tents, campers, and sheds. There are the limitations of my body — what I can physically do, what I am willing to do. When working with resin, I had to put a barrier between my work and myself, for protection. The rubber gloves and respirator would make me sweaty and worry about my health. Similarly, with the fiberglass insulation I always had to put up some kind of protector between my material and myself. There is the limitation of my ability to handle pain, to understand pain, to realize that I am not a machine, and that sometimes I do have to slow down in order not to damage myself. Along with accepting limitations comes accepting that people are willing to help and that there is a limit to self-sufficiency.
IN GENOA

December 12, 2004, noon, Genoa, Italy. The bells have just rung. I don’t know where they come from, but I hear them loudly coming down the street between the buildings from the left, and echoing off the building from the right. Maybe they are from San Lorenzo. I’m getting that cozy feeling when the sounds of people talking, clothes rustling, cars moving, cell phones ringing, laughing, engines of the machina (car), low rumbles of trucks, a throat being cleared, pigeon wings fluttering, person asking me something (is he begging or trying to sell me something?) and then he ambles heavily on from foot to foot, dog nails clicking on the stones, a child’s voice speaking Italian, footsteps, the radio voice, are all blending with the sunlight, the shadows, the cigarette smoke over there, the Christmas light arches going downhill, down the street and all the windows, the cold marble beneath me as I sit and lean back, stroller wheels and eating and bright yellow and orange cartoonish motorhome, short grass fighting through the stones. An apartment window holds a rainbowed “Pace” flag. I am in Genoa.
DRIVING/DRAWING/SPINNING/SEWING/FORMING

Betty Edwards (Edwards 5) wrote that drawing is like driving. Sewing is a bit like both driving and drawing. You press the peddle with your foot, literally, and slowly create your own path, your own landscape and road, discovering something along the way. The seams left are also a drawing, as are the lines left by the thread.

Spinning wool is a micro example of the work that I do, the way I think about and look at things. I start with a jumble, a random assortment of material, found basically the way it exists in the world, the way that it is. By feeding it through my fingers, I transform it with my body into an organized system of fibers that are now a line, a form to work with. The line wraps around the spindle and becomes a mass and weight of wool that has turned into something made by me; every single bit of it touched by my fingers, the wheel operated by my body, and the whole thing existing because of the rhythm that I have worked out.

This same intimate connection to materials, process, and form carries through to my studio practice and allows me to rely upon both skill and intuition as I explore my ideas of the interior and exterior spaces that form the volume of place.
IN BLUE AIR

That first winter in Cantwell I lived a couple of miles from my work, and would walk in the darkness to open the store in the morning. That walk was so silent, except for my boots and my breath and an occasional friendly fox. The moon, when it was full, was as bright as headlights behind me, and even when it wasn't, everything glowed and I had no need for a flashlight. The mornings were my favorite part of the shift. For two months we did not see direct sunlight, only the light glowing from behind the mountains for a few hours each day. The air would start out dark, and then it would lighten to a tangible blue in front of my eyes. It was the color of the sky; only it was right in front of my face. I felt as if I could reach out and hold it, and I sometimes tried.
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