Fragments of Recollection: Building a New Whole

by

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Introduction

Three years ago I resituated myself into a landscape aesthetically and culturally different than the one I grew up within. The result has been a subconscious reflection on places most familiar to me through sculptural forms. The title of this paper *Fragments of Recollection: Building a New Whole* alludes to the way I have been thinking about and approaching art making within the three-year period. My studio practice has drifted through a variety of processes with the interrogation of memory as a basis. My ideas have manifested themselves through immersive spaces, kinetic machinery, objects relational to the body, theatrical constructions, photographic processes, large-scale drawings, ambiguous castings and fragmented assemblages. A series of thoughts by the environmental psychologist Toby Israel serves as a good starting point for me to detail my creative pursuits presented in this paper.

1. “Our sense of self and sense of the environment are intimately and profoundly entwined.”

2. “The seeds of this connection between self and place are planted in childhood.”

3. “Our sense of self-place connection continues to grow and change throughout our lives.”

4. “That connection is shaped not only by the physical reality of our environment but by the psychological, social/cultural, and aesthetic meaning that place holds for us.”

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Part One: Place of Origin/Place of Reference

My father’s family immigrated to the United States in the early 1950’s. Their landing destination was Wilmington, Delaware, an immigrant and import hub of the Mid-Atlantic Region. Upon arrival in the U.S my grandfather, grandmother, aunt and uncles began working for the DuPont family as housekeepers and landscapers on various family estates.

I was born in Wilmington, Delaware in 1987, where the landscape has drastically changed over the past 60 years. The economic downturn that affected many urban centers throughout the United States did not leave Wilmington untouched. Due to this decline, Wilmington breathes a rustic and decayed aesthetic throughout the city neighborhoods, in proximity to which I grew up.
Part Two: Subconscious Objects

In June of 2012, I started making intuitively in a new space. In an attempt to avoid attachment to my work I began building quickly, continually changing the studio atmosphere. Things in the studio began morphing, merging and influencing one another very quickly. The objects I made were usually vertical, relational to the size of my body. I used materials that were familiar to me, things you might find discarded on a construction site where remolding projects or new buildings were being erected. Surface and texture began to develop a decayed or weathered feel. I started to realize the objects were aesthetically reminiscent of the dilapidated and rustic aesthetics of home. My studio turned into a field of objects that referenced environments that I used to hold distaste for when I lived within them. Within this new space and new place, the aesthetic became refreshing and personal.

Simultaneously I recognized an interest in architecture emerging. One night in the studio I started thumbing through old photographs I had taken at Pompeii and Herculaneum on a trip to Italy in 2005. I had a certain sense of familiarity with the archeological site. Further research into how Pompeii and...
Herculaneum were uncovered led me to the process used in bringing the citizens of the cities back to life. Excavators poured plaster into voids they discovered after removing layers of ash. The forms they erected gave a glimpse at the last citizens of these places. After reading this I became very interested in the idea of pouring a material into a void and resurrecting a solid, ambiguous, object. I acquired a number of interior architectural elements, which I used to make moulds.

My first object was a porcelain sink pedestal. I cut the form in half and reassembled it backwards, creating a cavity to pour material into. At the time I was extremely enamored by how the castings balanced a fine line between ambiguity and referencing the original object. I used the same process on a variety of other objects, including an interior doorway.

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Part Three: Specific Places

Three experiences coalesced to form an installation titled ‘Abandoned Terrain’. In the studio, I began reflecting on my past experiences of working in production, the landscape of those settings and how they were relational to my new environment in the South.

Growing up, I worked in a high production Italian bakery. Occasionally my job was to dispense flour and cornmeal onto a conveyor belt assembly line of dough balls. Looking back at this experience I most vividly remembered the accumulation of debris, machine slippages, and the deafening white noise of the machine running. In homage to this experience, I created a mechanical sculpture titled Resurgence. The mechanized sculpture was fabricated out of steel and wooden slats. The wooden slats formed the belt and were coated in a thick layer of Portland cement. Over the course of the machine running, at intervals of 30 seconds, the cement began to shed as the wooden slats clashed together. The machine became a strange marker of time and ephemerality.

The centrally located piece in this installation was titled, Stacks. The form stood as faux concrete structure and a symbol of industrial debris, something vaguely reminiscent of a dilapidated structure. Mounted on the wall of the gallery was a piece titled, Apartment #15. For a six-month period I walked by the front window of the apartment below mine in Athens, Georgia never seeing the person who lived inside. A towel protruding through his or her window blinds was my only indication that somebody lived there. One night on my way home from the studio I noticed the towel was gone and the blinds were situated exactly the same. I immediately decided I needed to memorialize the moment and Apartment #15 was conceived.
Abandoned Terrain. (left) Resurgence (middle) Stacks (wall) Apartment #15

Apartment #15. Venetian blinds, cement and fibers. 2013
On a trip to the northeast in the summer of 2013, I began documenting places, spaces and surfaces to use as reference for my work. I photographed two specific structures that spawned the creation of claustrophobic and sensorial environments when I returned to Athens. The environments came together as an installation titled, *Mysteries in the Gaps*.

![Mysteries in the Gaps, 2013](image)

The first piece created for the exhibition, *University City Station: Glassboro*, was a structure inspired by two different, yet similar forms of architecture. One is a bunker like pod I found in a scrap yard in Glassboro, New Jersey. The second, a steam room alongside the SEPTA rail line in Philadelphia Pennsylvania. Both inspirations had ambiguous interiors. I used loose memories from working in fan rooms, boiler rooms, tight corridors, attics, basements and industrial refrigeration units merged together for the construction of the pieces’ interior.
The second structure, *Whispers*, presented viewers with a similar environment of being presented with a dead end but incorporated a large metal drum with a high-speed fan running inside. The sound reverberating off the walls of the structure created a similar experience to the ones I had working in fan rooms and industrial corridors.
Whispers. foam, steel cement, light and high speed fan, 2013

Winterthur Museum. documentation of fan room.
From 2011-2012, I worked at the Winterthur Museum in Wilmington, Delaware, which houses one of the largest collections of Americana in the country. The interior spaces of the museum, also referred to as period rooms, are comprised of false walls taken from historical architecture in New England. Throughout the estate, there were pockets and gaps where equipment would be housed in-between the two walls, hidden corridors staff would navigate to avoid visitors and a large underground maze of fan rooms and boilers. The noises and claustrophobic experiences of those spaces inspired the interiors of both University City Station: Glassboro and Whispers.
Part Four: Objects and Assemblages

Moving forward I took a break from immersive sculptures viewers interacted with and moved back into object making. I began making molds of objects to which I felt a connection or attachment. These pieces became the basis for assemblages that referenced memories of my own. I was interested in the potential narrative qualities the pieces might evoke. The following images are documentation:


*Fragments*. Cast bronze tools from 1920 found in the basement of a family members home, steel and wood paneling, 2014.
Summer Garden Revisited (Bog). Tomatoe, basil and oregano plants from my garden in Athens, GA summer of 2014, bucket, lawn chair, foam and cement coating, 2015.
Part Five: A Move Back to Specific Places: Fragmenting, Diluting and Repeating Details

36 units, 316 bars, 414 holes, 316 steel pins, 228 laminated plys of wood, 105 welds, 1,808 rounded edges.

*Sky the Color of Cement* was a piece that reflected on space and production. Folding fire escape ladders inspired the modular units. While in the process of working on the assembly line of processes I was reading “Oracle Night” by Paul Auster. The quote, “The sky was the color of cement: gray clouds, gray air, gray drizzle borne along by gray gusts of wind. I have always had a weakness for that kind of weather, and I felt content in the gloom…”³ helped me reflect on my time working in a high production bakery. During my shifts I would spend 5-8 hours working on a single daunting tasks, pushing my mind into a state of neutrality where thoughts would wonder aimlessly. I always had a mixed feeling of gloom and content. *The Sky the Color of Cement* became a similar neutral zone where I began to experience a similar psychological state.

Shipley St: Thomas St: Jefferson County was inspired by three locations I have frequented over the past several years. The fragmented stair structure, shrunken fire escape forms and hanging sneakers stand in as memories of Shipley Street in Wilmington, Delaware. The sewer grate forms, which sit next to the staircase, are constructed with a fallen oak tree that I milled down two years ago from Jefferson County, Georgia. The oak grates are based off some that sit outside my current studio on Thomas Street in Athens, Georgia. The piece as a whole builds a fragmented recollection of place.
Limitato. graphite wall drawing, steel and cast concrete, 2014.
At the point of building *Limitato*, I began considering how reference images were becoming a pivotal element to the design and completion of my work. In thinking about memory and the fragmented/diluted nature of my recent work, drawing became a vehicle that seemed important. I started the venture by returning to the reference images mentioned in Part Three. I began a process of drawing on top of photographs diffused through plexiglas similar to a light table and re-photographing the image with graphite line work on top. Refer to the image below.

![drawing on photograph of a photograph. 2014](image)

I began thinking of these images in a variety of ways, one of them serving as the backdrop to a sculptural assemblage, almost in a theatrical way (*Limitato*). I was interested in the shifts that occurred between material acting as line and a drawn line implying space on the wall. The Images below document various places around northeast cities from my summer of 2013 trip using the graphite drawing overlay technique.
drawing on photograph of a photograph, 2014.
Part Six: Deterioration and Distortion

Agostino Ramelli, an Italian Architect from the 1500’s, is best known for his reading machine design and water movement systems. I became fascinated with the mechanics of his designs, especially the redundant circular motions within them.

Researching these designs reinvigorated my interest in building a machine, specifically one that would record a deterioration of material. Looking back at the work I had been making with cast objects that
held significance to me, I conceived of a piece that would slowly break down specific cast objects using the tools found in the basement of a family members home dating back to 1920. I believe these tools be my grandfather’s, purchased when he first moved to the United States.

The barrel of the machine, filled with fifty plaster castings of the tools, runs on a fifteen-RPM motor, slowly shaving and breaking down the castings. Below the machine, a shower of dust accumulates. I consider this breakdown a vehicle describing the loss of history or memory these objects contain. The personal connection I had to them was fraught with unknown variables. As the people who hold the stories of the objects get older they lose memory of them, when they pass away the stories are completely lost.

Fluid. steel and photographs on transparency, 2015.

Here my work returns to the images detailed in Part Five. Expanding on my experimentation with small photographic prints on transparency and the overlay of drawings on images, the piece I conclude with, emerged. Eight reference images with overlaying drawings used over the past three years were printed on long rolls of blue transparency film. The contorted, distorted, overlaid and blurred conglomerate that was created summarizes my practice of making. These are, in many ways, how I
remember places. Not all aspects of the work are clear and the more one navigates the piece from various angles the more experience becomes whole. My venture of building work in the studio over the past three years can be looked at similarly to this experience. There is always a slippage of information recalling a place, reflecting on it, and then making work that in some way resembles or references it. Intuitive decisions lay at the core in an attempt to allow subconscious connections or beliefs to emerge. The sterile almost minimal attribute in my work is a by-product of working this way, and is the essential language I have been attempting to speak. How can subtleties spark not only my recollection of something or some place, but also begin to build a story or recollection within a viewer’s mind? To some degree my work is regional and more familiar to some than others, but the interrogation of my built surrounding is the core of my practice. In thinking about how our sense of self is connected to our environment the personal connections I use of places, the history of objects and familiar mechanisms is always the starting point. I am interested in how recalling a moment, space or experience, diluting it and filtering it through a mental sieve, can create new poetry in what we find important.
Bibliography

