

TEMPORARY STRUCTURES

by

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To my mother, Kathryn and my father, Philip:

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*The University of Arizona resides on the ancestral lands of the Tohono
O'odham Nation.*

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ABSTRACT

Through performance, installation and literary research, I investigate the inner workings of how landscapes can create feelings of displacement. The shift of visual features, weather and separation from items of comfort can cause alterations in stability, both physical and mental. Through this thesis, these themes are examined through the lens of visual art in a way that connects my body directly to the sites that have impacted me. Performative actions act as a way to compare and contrast these seemingly opposing landscapes in a way to help describe emotions that cannot be seen.



Figure 1

ARTIST STATEMENT

Combining intuitive performance with video and sculpture, I analyze my fragile relationship with unfamiliar landscapes. Having spent the first 25 years of my life oceanside, moving to the desert became both my inspiration and restraint. The topography of my practice is temporal as I use personal experience to understand how the experience of being nurtured, where and how we are raised, can alter reactions and perceptions of new landscapes as adults. Displacement and spaces that simultaneously induce comfort and discomfort are themes that serve as interruptions within each piece. In my performances, obsessive counting and numeric structures intertwine with body movements that develop narratives of futility, organization and physical strain. While my immediate reactions are profoundly impacted by the varying landscapes I inhabit, the experiential residue of where I have been will never be washed away.

In recent work, my perception of, and aversion to, ideas of home are echoed through exploration of personal memory. Place and object become synonymous within actions and interactive sculptures. These fabricated mental realities that my works depict represent a distinct binary between the desire to never settle and the need to find a place that feels secure.

CHAPTER ONE

Understanding Displacement

Temporary Structures, this thesis and the resulting exhibition, is no longer an isolated body of work, but rather an amalgamation of sand, skin, self-understanding and time which have come together through several intuitive performances and installations. Social distancing and quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic has afforded me the time and solitude to rethink my art practice with a more holistic approach. As a result, this thesis has become much more than the documentation of working towards a single group exhibition.

Before we are able to dive into the work that this thesis describes, we have to understand the definition behind two words that will repeat themselves frequently, as anchors and signifiers through each performance:

dis·place·ment¹

/dis'plāsmənt/

noun: **displacement**; plural noun: **displacements**

1. the moving of something from its place or position.
 - "vertical displacement of the shoreline"*
 - the removal of someone or something by someone or something else which takes their place.
 - the enforced departure of people from their homes, typically because of war, persecution, or natural disaster.
 - the amount by which a thing is moved from its normal position.
2. the occupation by a submerged body or part of a body of a volume which would otherwise be occupied by a fluid.
 - the amount or weight of fluid that would fill the volume displaced by a floating ship, used as a measure of the ship's size.
3. PSYCHOANALYSIS
the unconscious transfer of an intense emotion from its original object to another one.
"this phobia was linked with the displacement of fear of his father"

nur·ture^{2,3}

/'nɜːtʃər/

verb: **nurture**; 3rd person present: **nurtures**; past tense: **nurtured**; past participle: **nurtured**; gerund or present participle: **nurturing**

1. care for and encourage the growth or development of.
2. the sum of the environmental factors influencing the behavior and traits expressed by an organism

Through reading these definitions, we can discern that the primary element of displacement is the transfer of something to another space, whether that is physical or emotional. Each individual definition plays its own role in my art practice, from the cerebral to the corporeal. The exploration of displacement through physically manipulating the world around me via mental stimulation and self-study is what makes my work possible.

Casting the definition of displacement through my own personal history is what brings nurturing into play. The places and circumstances that set the stage of my developmental years created a lens through which I now view the world. These formative years through childhood and adolescence molded me into the adult and artist I am today. Growing up in close proximity to the ocean has instigated my particularly visceral experience of the desert landscape and as a result, has led to the creation of my most recent bodies of work.

CHAPTER TWO

Oppositional Biomes

The question then is how to get lost. Never to get lost is not to live, not to know how to get lost brings you to destruction, and somewhere in the terra incognita in between lies a life of discovery.⁴

Moving to Tucson in 2017 brought a range of unexpected, mental and physical challenges to light. My birthplace, Norwich, Connecticut, is a signifier I carry with me and a constituent of who I am.⁵ Individuals are, through place, bound to certain people and landscapes because they are ingrained in our memories - and it is through memory that these places have meaning.⁶ Although I did not choose to be born in a place with ample access to coastlines and four distinct seasons, these are the elements that are closely tied to many of my childhood memories and the way I was raised. The impression left by things that used to be in our lives after making the transition to a new place can leave us walking in circles instead of moving forward. Our minds, in many ways, are also landscapes with intense and varied terrain where getting lost is easy, but perhaps not in the way that we need to grow.⁷

Purposeful abandonment of my previous life - the Atlantic Ocean, vivid green foliage and closeness to kin being the most obvious identifiers - left me confused, frustrated and feeling isolated for much of my first year in graduate studies in the Sonoran Desert. This act of deliberate displacement and expansion beyond a familiar and familial landscape fostered a new obsession with my past life. Surrounded by this arid, dusty, *seemingly* desolate landscape, I was continuously thinking about displacement and in turn, attachment. Within me, attachment exists as a possessive thought of needing a certain person, place or thing to survive or thrive - all stemming from childhood nurturing. A shift in the level of accessibility to those items we are attached to brings about the inner turmoil of displacement.

My first performance in Tucson, *Attachment*, (figures 2a, 2b, 2c) explored a longing for my mother and the ocean. Performed in October 2017, I cleansed my hair in a metal wash bin, dried it, and French-braided it. I repeated this process 26 times - an homage to my mother who brought me into this world at that age, and the age I would be turning the following summer. The act of braiding, something that was common for me to both watch my mother do as a child and eventually learn myself, is a motion that connects me to her through memory and the physical act of entanglement. It seemed if I repeated the action enough I could prevent the memories fading.

Although appearing as exercises in futility, these repetitive actions (cleansing, dry, braid) acted as a cathartic exercise in acceptance. I simultaneously cleansed myself of and bound myself to any sense of home. Continuing to search for associations between what still felt like home and where I was living, I found myself performing mental gymnastics in an attempt to disconnect from the desert entirely. This growing disconnection led only to more feelings of isolation and loneliness.

There's something about solitude, whether forced or perceived, that is both a beneficial experience and a terrible burden.



Figure 2a



Figure 2b



Figure 2c

And one does not get lost but loses one-self, with the implication that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender, a psychic state achievable through geography.⁸

CHAPTER THREE

On Being Lost

Some of my earliest childhood memories involve digging holes in the sand at the beach, searching for water underneath. I would dig tirelessly until I reached that level of moist soil and would enclose myself in pseudo-cocoons, comforted by the damp earth and cool walls separating me from the bright sun and crowds above. I would frequently isolate myself from the world around me, as both a game and an escape from any- and every-one. As an adult, frequently moving seems to be the way I satiate this need to continuously escape, but it comes with a larger emotional toll.

Finding common ground in the writings of authors such as Rachel Carson and Rebecca Solnit, I found a comfort in my examination of landscape, ecology and the internal self. The study of the self in connection to feelings of displacement starts with working to understand the landscape that surrounds you. When we continue to think of landscape as the embodiment of a place, a visual memory that carries emotional meaning⁹, we can begin to derive our own individual pictorial dictionary. Through these visual descriptors language becomes a place where you can envision your body connecting past experiences to the present, constantly receiving sensory information about the world.

Sensory experience is something that begins as a child. Before we can talk, walk or comprehend, we are able to touch¹⁰. We process the world through a lens of physically feeling each and everything possible trying to make connections in a space that is much larger than ourselves.

26: Madera Canyon (figure 3a, 3b) is a site-specific performance that combines the childlike urge for tactile learning with a frantic impulse to create a safe space in an unfamiliar landscape. For this performance, completed in 2018, I set a stage by clearing a circular space from ground debris using my bare hands. I then formed a larger central pile of earth and extracted 25 smaller piles to place around the edge of the circle. The number 26 again holds the same meaning as in *Attachment*, and this use of numeric structure as a way to find and create meaning is evident throughout my artistic practice.

Reflecting on memories of digging at the beach in Connecticut as a child, *26: Madera Canyon* accesses a primordial urge to acclimate and organize combined with my pictorial dictionary to connect past to present. Through performance and direct collaboration with the Arizona landscape I process the land through kinesthetic action and consequence.



Figure 3a



Figure 3b

CHAPTER FOUR

Transient Spaces

Continuing collaborations with landscape, in November 2018 and March 2019 I performed *Untitled (Edge)* [Figure 4a, 4b].



Figure 4a



Figure 4b



Figure 4c



Figure 4d



Figure 4e

The edge of the sea is a strange and beautiful place...For no two successive days is the shore line precisely the same.¹¹

The edge of the sea is a point where the world is constantly shifting and changing, much like the turbulent time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this specific piece was not disrupted due to the crisis, there are parallels that have become evident while taking the time to study and dissect each work while writing. Where the waves crash onto the shore they continuously disrupt, alter and then recede after their adjustment has been made. There is no consistency.

In the creation of *Untitled (Edge)* I explore this small space where land meets water, in an attempt to separate the sand from the sea. I continuously chase and trace the top of each wave, only for my lines to be erased as I draw. This vain endeavor is simply an action of desperation to categorize and maintain personal boundaries. It is in this imprinted, fleeting margin that keeps alive the awareness of endless creation and the persistent strength of life.¹² Performing this piece on the beach closest to where I grew up in Connecticut, along with the beach my father lives near in California, I connect coast to coast through an imaginary familial line that bypasses the space in-between.

It is in this marginal world, the place that my drawn boundary occupies, that I inserted myself to force apart a relationship that has been bound since the beginning of time. Sand and water are two elements that automatically function as one unit. Sand is (often) formed over millions of years by water wearing away at rocks, shells, and sediment.¹³ An attempt to create a void between these two features is to try to make a personal space of security, where I could easily see the sand belonging to solely to the desert, and the water to the ocean.

Sand, on the other hand, forms a yielding, shifting substratum of unstable nature, its particles incessantly stirred by the waves, so that few living things can establish or hold a place on its surface or even in its upper layers. All have gone below, and in burrows, tubes, and underground chambers the hidden life of the sands is lived.¹⁴

Just as the sand along a beach is ever shifting, the sands of the desert are also a tumultuous home. The flora and fauna need to be rugged in similar ways - able to burrow away from or endure the heat, monsoons and dust storms that ravage the biome depending on the season. It is these connections between oppositional lands that help to create an understanding of the space in which we are living to bridge the uncomfortable mental gap that is created when circumstances change.

CHAPTER FIVE
Rebuilding



Figure 5a



Figure 5b



Figure 5c

Through *Balance* (Figures 1, 5a, 5b, 5c), I took on these negative emotions and turned them into something that allowed viewers of the work to choose to become active participants. This installation combines elements of sculpture, audio and performance documentation. *Balance* includes a 9ft wooden see-saw and nearly 100 handmade sandbags to create a transitional environment that enacts both feelings of anxiety as well as equilibrium depending on the time one enters the gallery space.

In my performance, I divided the sandbags up to represent the landscapes I have lived in. Delicately placing the bags on either side, I filled the seesaw up to the brim and then continued until they were all placed on the structure, allowing them to spill onto the floor as gravity took its toll. Gently I returned all of the bags back to a pile at the front of the gallery, cleaned and rebalanced the structure, and left the space as calmly as I entered. The gallery was then left to allow viewers to interact with as they saw fit for the two weeks that followed the performance. Each individual got to experience a unique space that can never be perfectly replicated, allowing their own personal history to urge them to interact with or avoid the work left in front of them.

This interaction solidifies the gallery as a form of anthropological place, or a space where visitors are able to utilize their personal memory through action and reaction. Place in this sense being defined as the “[p]rimary and immobile surface of a body which surrounds another body [or] the space in which a body is placed”.¹⁵ The installation takes into account people’s identities, history and their want to see or experience that in a space.¹⁶ By encouraging free interaction, this work explored how the life experiences of participants influenced them to make (or not) the choices that they did.

It is through my art practice, research and time at the University of Arizona that I have been able to work through my own defense mechanisms and feelings of displacement. Each of these works, although in the same world of thought, execution and comprehension have built upon one another to create a cohesive artistic language where I can discuss and theorize these notions of landscape, memory and displacement.

CHAPTER SIX

Temporary Structures

Much like the shifting of scenery, the quarantine and stay-at-home orders during the COVID-19 pandemic function similarly as a transient mental space. Many people, I included, have faced massive life changes due to this virus and have been dislodged from the life that we are accustomed to living. Acts of displacement can be seen almost continuously during this time in the ways that people are reacting to the absence of normalcy. From wide-spread panic to toilet-paper hoarding, these responses are classic non-sensical displays of humans trying to rationalize and protect themselves from a larger mental and physical threat.

Although we do not know what a new “normal” will look like or when that will be achieved, this period of social distancing will remain an evocation of a time where the majority of the world experienced the same form of social displacement. We are all trying to create our own space of comfort in the uncertain, drawing our line in the shore to separate this reality from what was and what will be going forward.

Home and the aversion to home.

This short excerpt from my artist statement at the start of this thesis was the catalyst for the work that would have been installed in the University of Arizona Museum of Art in April 2020.

Through the lens of displacement, this work resumes where *Balance* ended. Continuing to include viewers as participants by asking them to enter and explore fabricated structures, I curate their perception of the sculptures as spaces of comfort and/or discomfort. Using visual cues from my own childhood, barnacles and sand, I make these objects become a hinderance to freely moving about the space.

Barnacles have fascinated me throughout my graduate research, and it seemed fitting to utilize the shape of this unique creature that only exists along the coast to talk about displacement in the desert. As juveniles, barnacles can freely swim about in the ocean, wandering along the waves. Once they mature, they find one spot to create a calcified shell around themselves and remain adhered to that spot until they die.¹⁷ This process can be seen in many humans as well, whether it is a forced settling in one location or a choice of shelter and comfort, the parallels between barnacles and humans is one that is strangely similar.

Using an industrialized form of the shape of this shell, I created a steel structure that is large enough to function as my own, personal calcified exterior. Cumbersome yet mobile, this structure is my fabricated protector. Unable to function as a true home or space of safety but also not portable enough to allow for ease of movement from inside or outside. Eluding to ideas of tents and other mobile shelters, this idea of a temporary structure is the embodiment of feeling both at ease and unsettled at the same time.

I know I cannot return to where I feel safe because it is not the best place for me as both an artist and human to succeed or learn, however I am yearning and searching for a sense of home in any new landscape that I encounter. It is through my art practice that I am able to take the time to rationalize these mental disruptions and make work that functions as a collaborative effort with the landscape around me.

Although my fabricated barnacle would stand as a pseudo-shelter in a museum setting, it is a piece that will eventually find its resting place out in the landscape where it is able to endure the elements such as I have throughout my time in Tucson.

To be shown with the barnacle, I created a performance entitled *Letting Go/Letting In* (Figures 6a, b). These images are from a test shoot that will not function as the final work, but are a placeholder for this thesis until that work can be actualized. *Letting Go/Letting In* features a large wooden frame wrapped in stretched, waxed muslin that is filled with sand. I stabbed holes through the muslin to let the sand leak and pour onto the ground and through this act, meld my known landscapes together. Utilizing similar materials and methods that I have developed over the last three years, this performance symbolizes the connection between the two biomes that I have feverishly worked to categorize and separate. I let go of previous notions of what I can comprehend and allow myself to reclaim control of both mental space and physical earth as a place that I can belong.

*So the present is linked with past and future, and each living thing with all that surrounds it.*¹⁸



Figure 6a



Figure 6b

Through excavating each connection and memory that continues to attach me to the place where I was raised, the works created throughout this thesis unearth the lengths that I undertook in an effort to pin “ocean versus desert” as the catalyst for my displacement. In reality, it is something much larger than that.

Displacement, as stated on page 8, is the mental or physical shift from one place to another. Often seen as a negative experience, it is the ideas and theories surrounding displacement that have been the catalyst for all of the works I have created in the last three years. It is no longer about trying to detach the landscapes from the things that connect them, but rather unifying my experience growing up by the ocean with that of jumping into the desert with no safety net. My memories, nurturing and desire to learn about how they affected me through this transfer has allowed me to highlight the parallels of contrasting environments to create cohesive installations and performances that encourage interaction while examining separation.

Creating the physical work of *Temporary Structures* has come to a pause, however, finishing this work, post-COVID-19, brings new perspectives and approaches to this particular installation. I am now able to navigate the space where physical and mental displacement creates room for other research to develop. I have felt at ease living in the desert landscape through this tumultuous period in history, finding solace in the mountains and endless sea of sand that Southern Arizona has to offer. This feeling of comfort came as a shock and surprise to me, as a short time ago I could have never imagined being at ease in this space.

For many years, I have been moved by the blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that color of horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away. The color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go. For the blue is not in the place those miles away at the horizon, but in the atmospheric distance between you and [everything else]... If you can look across the distance without wanting to close it up, if you can own your longing in the same way that you own the beauty of that blue that can never be possessed... The far seeps in even to the nearest.¹⁹

Although at this time I do not know what the finished work of *Temporary Structures* will look like, I now have a better understanding of the ideas I want it to convey. I no longer wish to run from the feeling of home, but I do not need to settle to find it either. There is now comfort in the ability to explore the unknown, and somehow relief in the displacement that new places will bring.

After all, we hardly know our own depths.²⁰

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