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A PERCEPTION OF CHANGE,  
A CHANGE OF PERCEPTION

A Thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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May 2015

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## Abstract

### A PERCEPTION OF CHANGE, A CHANGE OF PERCEPTION

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015.

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Change is a constant reminder that permanence is the ultimate illusion. It is through the creation of hyper-realistic, ceramic sculpture that I explore the relationship between nature, humans, and the phenomenon of impermanence. I seek to expose the beauty that often results from decay while, at the same time, making my viewer question their own perception of the world around them. The juxtaposition of natural and man-made features in combination with the skewing of scale, proportion, and material, creates an altered perspective – forcing the viewer to look closer. By combining both human and natural elements within my work I highlight the fact that we are not separate from nature but are, in fact, part of it.

## **Impermanence**

“That nothing is static or fixed, that all is fleeting and impermanent, is the first mark of existence. It is the ordinary state of affairs. Everything is in process. Everything—every tree, every blade of grass, all the animals, insects, human beings, buildings, the animate and the inanimate—is always changing, moment to moment.” (Pema Chödrön, 8)

Change is an inescapable aspect of our lives. There is no stopping it. It is a relentless force that is constantly and mercilessly reshaping our existence. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus would say, “The only thing that is constant is change.” While it is no mystery that things will always change, there remains a strong desire to ignore and even subvert the process. Unfortunately, contrary to many people’s wishes and despite their futile efforts, everything is impermanent. Even the very ground beneath our feet will succumb to the relentless forces of nature and subduction to someday become new continents unrecognizable to Earth’s current inhabitants. Although many of us understand this and view it as an exciting prospect, the fear of impermanence continues to be an ingrained characteristic of the human psyche.

Humanities aversion to impermanence can be linked to the fear of change and uncertainty. When there is change, there is the potential for instability, which, in turn, threatens survival. Early humans, more susceptible to the natural elements, sought stability and permanence as a means of ensuring survival of the species, instilling in our inherent desire



to subvert change. There is a comfort found in the perceived security of permanence and stability.

In today's technologically advanced world people have attempted to surround themselves with stability: the newest computer, the fastest phone, or the latest camera with the most megapixels so you can catch every photon and digital byte of that special moment or stay up-to-date on the latest current event and weather. Do all those countless images that linger in the limbo of digital space really lend more permanence to the moments they have captured? Or, are we further removed from the experience through the mediation of technology? The preservation of the moment supersedes the appreciation. We are so immersed in that digital moment that time becomes almost imperceptible and everything seems to exist indefinitely, resulting in a loss of appreciation for the uniqueness that each moment offers.

Impermanence and the perpetual process of change provide the opportunity for new discoveries and new perspectives of the world around us. The fluid state of everything surrounding us, including ourselves, makes every moment different from the last. Even these keys I type upon are changing from keystroke to keystroke as I write these words. Every variation from the microscopic to the interstellar that is occurring each nanosecond differentiates one moment from the next – one experience from another. The philosopher Heraclitus makes the analogy of impermanence to a person unable to experience the same river twice because they are never looking at the same physical water. Conversely, we can never look at the same river twice because we are not the same person.

## **Imagination**

“The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see nature all ridicule and deformity... and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself.” (William Blake, 62)

Spending the greater part of my childhood roaming through the woods and hills of southern Indiana, exploring abandoned homes and dilapidated structures often succumbing to the persistent creep of nature, I find that Blake’s statement holds a significant amount of personal truth. The natural world is an **endless source** of imagination and inspiration. It is, in fact, one of the primary driving forces of my current work.

I am constantly inspired by nature. Whether it’s 5000 year-old Bristlecone Pines or a bracket fungus that sprouted 2 days ago. The natural world is a constant source of motivation. The innumerable variety and combination of colors, materials, smells, sounds, and textures overwhelm the senses. Twisted and curled wood, rusted metal, crumbling brick, creeping lichen, and brilliant orange fungi all find their way into my work. I am amazed and awe-stricken by the immensity, persistence, and variety of nature and how we relate within this shared existence. When standing among the ancient trees of Inyo National Forest, I can only wonder about the time that those organisms have experienced and how my own life measures in

comparison. What is my significance? What would it be like to measure one's own life in centuries rather than years? I am awe-stricken with the thought that even now there are organisms alive that as the first blocks of the Great Pyramids of Giza were being laid, were already a few hundred years old. With the realization of one's own significance, or perhaps insignificance in the grand scheme of things, it's little wonder why trees have long been revered and part of human history.



Fig. 1. Bristlecone Pine, Inyo National Forest, California

Trees have an inherent link with humans. Depending on your beliefs, the earliest associations between humans and trees either occurred as primates or in a garden or perhaps both. Regardless, since that time, we have held a reverence for trees. They are often used as a

symbolism for human characteristics or human physiology. Some more notable instances are the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, the family tree, along with the respiratory and circulatory systems. Trees have, also, long been a source of shelter. Early humans likely used naturally felled timber to construct rudimentary dwellings, while more recent and questionable usage would include imported, exotic woods to construct multimillion-dollar homes. And while the forest may provide the resources for safety and security, it also provides the setting for fear and horror.

In European folklore, more specifically the Grimm's Fairytales, the isolated settings of forests serve as the scenes of unfortunate events for the unaware, naïve, or irresponsible traveler. Wooded areas are often seen as place where the unknown and unfavorable take place, where children disappear and witches lurk. This continues to be perpetuated in today's media with movies like *Deliverance* and the *Blair Witch Project*. But forests are also a place of mystery and fantasy, that don't end with children boiling in cauldrons. They are a place where the imagination takes hold and anything can happen. Trees can provide the perfect setting to discovering the unknown. As artist Mark Ryden states, "I believe that if there is indeed a secret to the universe and a meaning to life, I am sure it would be found inside of a tree." (Ryden)

As someone who spent a large portion of their childhood among the branches of a tree, it is safe to say they have had a profound impact on the development of myself as both a person and an artist. The setting they provided gave me a deep appreciation to all the possible wonders and unknowns that the natural world offers and its ability to fuel the imagination and inspire my work. I hope to compel others to become more aware of the world around them and to evaluate their own engagement within that world. Perhaps, through my art I can revive

that childhood imagination and curiosity buried within each of us. That state of being which was in many ways infinitely more connected to the world than we are now, due to the myriad of devices streaming constant data across the globe mediating our experiences.

## **The Studio**

Where is my studio? It's anywhere and nowhere. It's wherever it needs to be. The studio can be as private as a locked room in the deep recesses of my mind or as public as the center of Times Square at rush hour. It is where, as Howard Singerman states in his essay *A Possible Contradiction*, both the artist and art are created and "things happen." The studio is the physical and even digital space where the artist can conceive, create and also become the artwork. (Singerman, p. 45) This is even more relevant today with the advent and proliferation of technology and digital recording devices. Any moment can be captured, stored, manipulated, and then disseminated to the masses within minutes. With the evolution of technology and critical art theory, the studio and media are no longer constrained by preconceived notions of what is considered an acceptable artistic practice or medium. This is the rationalization I use to alleviate the guilt I feel when not in my 'traditional' studio. It is what I refer to as 'studio guilt.'

While studio guilt is likely a natural affliction for someone compelled to make art, I also believe it is partly a byproduct of the capitalist society discussed in Johnathan Crary's book, *24/7*. At the root of this guilt is the fear of not utilizing every available moment in one's life for the purpose of production – and through production, consumption. As Crary notes, *24/7* capitalism "has made irrelevant the distinctions between work and non-work time." (Crary, p. 74) Luckily for me, as an artist there is rarely, if at all, a distinction between these two spheres of my life. Being an artist could oddly enough be analogous to being a fish, you have to breathe water to survive. Well not entirely I suppose, since I wouldn't physically die if I stopped making art. But

it is nevertheless a fundamental part of who I am, and in being so, it is not something that I simply start or stop doing. There is no switch to allow me to view the world through any eyes other than those of an artist. Consequently, anywhere can become an impromptu studio.

The impromptu studio is especially true for my own artistic practices. To facilitate this, I take advantage of the accessibility of digital photography. It is one of the few moments when I willingly accept the consequences of the non-stop digital world in which we live. Digital photography has allowed me to document things that would otherwise be impossible to do with the ability to see near-instantaneous results. With a camera almost always within reach, there is rarely a moment when I am completely removed from my studio. I am constantly a producer and consumer. The digital camera's ease-of-use and immediacy only helps to further dissolve the distinction between my studio and non-studio time, or Cray's "work and non-work time."

This dissolution of differentiation between "work and non-work time" stems from both the inseparability of the artist from the person as well as the blurring caused by the nonstop nature of our technological society – more specifically, the persistent march of a digitized space. By utilizing digital technology to engage with the world around us, we run the risk of losing ourselves in an endless sea of data, swimming in meaningless 1's and 0's that have very little relevance to the actual place in which that data references. That digital space becomes what John Berger describes as the "Nowhere." (Berger) It is a state of constant consumption facilitated by a digitally augmented and interconnected reality that displaces you from your physical location and time. The only relief from this state of being is to unplug, to disconnect, and to remove yourself (however briefly) from the hectic and relentless currents within the flow of capitalist society. Take a moment to breathe, to SEE. Let time stand still.

For me, this can become a kind of secondary studio – any place that allows creative activities to occur. With the help of technology, such as the readily available DSLR, smart phones, wireless global communications, and mobile computing solutions, the work can reach a larger audience than ever before. I produce. I consume. As a Marxist, would Walter Benjamin argue differently about the advent of “mechanical reproduction” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a means to engage the masses and promote cultural change? Undeniably, media in this age can reach the masses in far greater numbers and with higher efficiency, but at what cost? Would Benjamin still hold such a revered place for film in his hierarchy of art in the Digital age despite its ability to “mobilize the masses [?]” (Harrison & Wood, p. 526) While I’m sure it would please his political sensibilities, would the Marxist in him be screaming from the back of his mind at our (my) complacent participation in the evil capitalist society? Maybe, but for my artistic practice I require these tools to develop, create, and document my artwork in the slight hope that I will affect just one person, encouraging them to occasionally disconnect themselves from their digital lives and to occasionally step ashore from the endless torrent of images. My hope is that I can accomplish this without looking like a hypocrite in the process. My intent is for my art to function as what David Graeber would classify a “counterpower” in opposition to what Althusser may label as “Ideological State Apparatuses” (Graeber, p. 7, p. 35; Harrison & Wood, p. 955) These Apparatuses include family, culture, media, school, religion and other systems that reinforce specific ideologies.

As a “counterpower”, my work functions as a disruption in the continuous flow of our digital lives. However, the Arts can very easily be considered part of the State apparatus. My only salvation is the ability to be self-critical, and from that self-criticality I can reconcile with my



location within an Ideological State Apparatus and use it to my advantage. In a way analogous to Clement Greenberg's description of how "Modernism used art to call attention to art," I can rationalize art as using one Ideological State Apparatus to critique another Apparatus. (Harrison & Wood, p. 775)

Having reconciled with myself as being someone who is simultaneously critical and self-critical, positioned both within and outside culture, I am liberated from the constraints of using what would be considered traditional and acceptable media and methods. This is perhaps one of the greatest gifts bestowed upon us by the pioneers of the Modernist, Postmodernist, and Formalist movements. Through the erosion of norms dictated by the precedents of historical art criticism, anything can become art and artistic medium by simply "designating it as such" and placing it within the appropriate context. (Singerman, p. 45) I am now free to transplant moss from the urban crevices of surrounding Richmond's alleyways and place them upon a highly detailed simulacrum of rotted wood supported by steel piping for the combined effect of referencing the visual and textural landscape of my environment. I can take my wonderment in the world around me and re-contextualize it in any number of ways to create infinitely new and varied experiences for my audience. All the endless materials littering our everyday lives can become activated as a potential artistic medium thanks to the work of Allan Kaprow and Postmodernists. His work with art as a "participatory experience", which included the earliest iterations of installation and performance art, provides the historical foundation for my own work that encourages audience participation. (Kaprow & Kelley, p. xviii, p.9/15) Unlike Kaprow's work that embraces the everyday experience, my practice aims to create moments that suspend our reality.



Fig. 2. *Landscape I*, 2013



Fig.3. *LandScape II*, 2013

In those moments of suspension I strive for a sense of wonderment and excitement. This allows for an escape from the unrelenting flow of contemporary society and functions as a catalyst for change in how people perceive and interact with their environments. Similar to Heidegger's dialectic on art as the source of the artist and the artist as the source of art, I am attempting to investigate humanities influence on nature and the reciprocal influence nature has on us. In essence, my work functions as means to suspend the pace of our existence by offering a place for thoughtful contemplation. In returning to the initial question of what I'm doing in the studio, I'm creating moments of wonderment.

## **Process and Processed**

One of my favorite lines of poetry is from a poem by Edgar Allan Poe goes: "Is all that we see or seem but a dream within a dream?" (Edgar Allan Poe) The thought that nothing is what it seems and that our lives are but a dream has long interested me. This is largely due to my fascination with science, the unknown and the possibilities of alternate realities, along with illusions and fantasy. Honestly, I just like the idea that anything is possible. What is reality? Better yet, what is real? Starting with some of my earliest works, I was consistently drawn to the aesthetic of trompe' l'oeil – specifically the works of Ah Leon, Marilyn Levine, Patricia Piccinni, Tip Toland, Ron Mueck, and Richard Notkin. Of course, this list has grown considerably over the past two years. Some newer additions include Winfred Lutz, Thomas Doyle, Isaac Cordal, Martin Munoz, and Gregory Euclide. The level of detail and uncanny resemblance to natural objects and materials are like candy for my eyes. I am enamored by their ability to create such a believable illusion that it calls into question the validity of our perceptions. As someone obsessed with the genre of sci-fi and fantasy, the illusionistic effects of these artist's works along with their ability to transcend our reality has continually been an inspiration for my own art.

Much of my own work involves the use of highly detail surfaces which often mimic other materials in conjunction with shifts in scale and surreal juxtapositions of both natural and human elements. I enjoy employing the use of illusion and disorientation to force my audience

to question their own apperceptions and perspectives of the world around them. The high level of detail draws them into the work, begging them to engage with the work and resolve their uncertainty and doubts about their perceptions. Physical engagement is the only sure method for this discovery. It is the same physical interaction that I seek to promote beyond the walls of the galleries, homes, offices, and other dwelling, which we isolate and shelter ourselves within.

To achieve this effect, I have explored a multitude of methods during my time in graduate school. My first pieces continued my undergraduate work both aesthetically and technically as I acclimated to my new setting. Using primarily clay, I began by constructing skeuomorphic sculptures that were highly representational and seldom left room for ambiguity. Each piece was exactly what it was meant to be, with little room for interpretation. I had effectively negated the imagination from my work. Learning from these early works, I began exploring looser associations of elements within my work and allowing a free, perhaps more playful, approach to my process. At this point I began questioning my use of materials and the subject matter of my work. Rather than singular objects destined for a pedestal, I investigated several iterations of installation work to varying levels of success. These pieces, a reaction to my own frustrations and stresses, often included materials such as canvas, charcoal, foam, live moss, rusted metal, and sawdust. This exploration culminated in the creation of my candidacy show, which consisted of 9 large conical forms suspended within the gallery space. Each piece offered a fragmented and skewed landscape derived from my own perceptions of my environment. Although it was a fleeting moment, that endeavor provided me with a new clarity in my work.



Fig. 4. *Journey Through an Unknown Landscape*, 2014

Through the exercise of using alternative materials and seeking to make work beyond my comfort zone, I approached my work with a renewed passion. Having explored new processes and alternative forms of work, I returned to my studio practice with a new perspective. I had changed, yet I hadn't changed. I had come full circle, but I didn't arrive at the origin unaltered. I returned with those subtle differences that make every moment different from the last. I spoke the same language, but the message was different. My work, using many of the same aesthetic choices as before had now become less about specific ideas or didactic statements and more about the use of these choices to allow for my viewers imagination to formulate their own interpretations.

To accomplish this, I am again using clay as my primary choice of material. My decision to use clay derives from its unique ability to mimic a wide variety of materials. I enjoy its tactility and immediacy of mark. Approaching clay from the perspective of a painter, I am drawn to its fluidity and malleability. Clay can become what I need it to become with little effort. This ideology is perpetuated with my use of oil and acrylic paints for surface treatments rather than traditional materials such as glazes and stains.

### ***A Perception of Change, A Change of Perception***

For this thesis I created a series of trompe l'oeil works that utilize both natural and human elements referencing various states of change and decay. These pieces function as both self-contained and collective landscapes. Each piece references a synthesized landscape made from familiar objects that create a surreal experience for the viewer. Individually, they speak about various forms of engagement with our natural world, while as a group they speak to the ability of nature, both the beautiful and the abject, to inspire and create moments of wonderment.

The first piece, titled *A Walk That is Measured and Slow*, originated from the poem *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein. Thinking about how our perspectives and attitudes towards nature change as we develop from children to adults, I was inspired to make a piece that explores where the sidewalk ends and where imagination begins. For me, it is the place where nature has ruptured through our thin veneer of urban life. The creeping moss or the persistent roots that work their way up through the cracks in that veneer become the setting for the imagination. Like those roots, the bristlecone branch has erupted into our space from a place beyond our physical reach. But, our imagination has the ability to reach that space where we are physically incapable of positioning ourselves.



Fig. 5. *A Walk That Is Measured And Slow*, 2015





Fig. 6. *A Walk That is Measured and Slow* (detail), 2015



Fig. 7. *Core Sample*, 2015

The next pieces, in the similar vein as *A Walk That is Measured and Slow*, include a series of Sulfur fungi arranged on an opposing wall and another fragmented branch that, again, references the bristle cone. The fungi are titled *Grand View*, while the other piece is titled *Core Sample*. Both pieces explore ideas of colonization and advancement of humans in relationship to nature. How do we interact with our environment, and what are the implications. In both pieces I am using the lichen and fungi as a metaphor for the natural tendencies of human civilizations. We spread, propagate, and consume. While these ideas are a fundamental part of my work, I am also attempting to make that message indistinct in hopes that others can have the opportunity to make their own discoveries within my work. This related directly back to the lessons learned from earlier works that sought too much specificity.

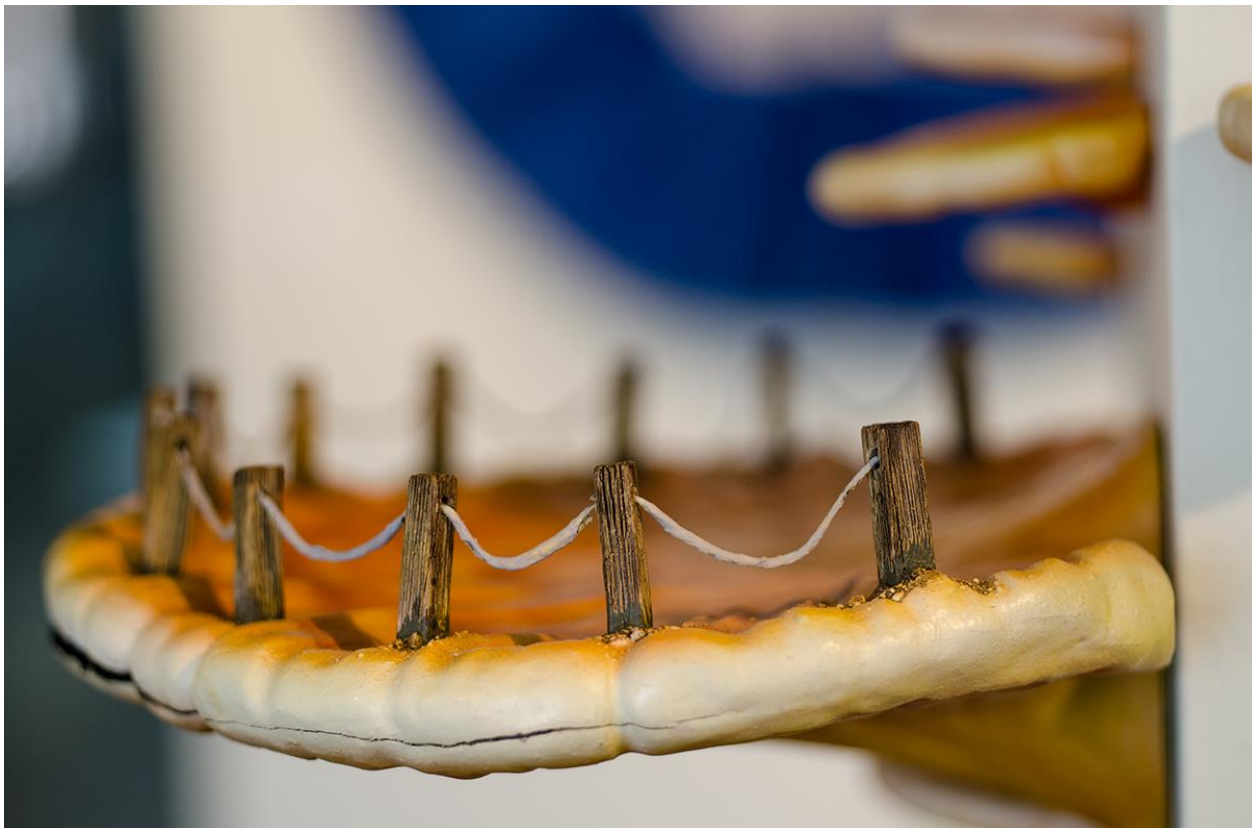


Fig. 8. *Grand View* (detail), 2015



Fig. 9. *Grand View*, 2015



The final work consists of a triptych of anthill-like structures referencing the accumulation of coal and soot transitioning into brick chimneys and emitting puffs of white smoke. The smoke, made from dipping reindeer moss into porcelain slip and then firing them to cone 6 to achieve vitrification and translucency, become a metaphor for the beauty and serenity I find in watching the rising of smoke from chimneys despite the knowledge of the process taking place within the furnaces and its implication on nature. These pieces, while exalting the beauty I find in smoke stacks, also draws into question the impact associated with the combustion of carbon-based fuels. In accordance with the accompanying work, I have attempted to mask my own intentions and ideas through the ambiguity of the work.



Fig. 10. *But Aren't the Clouds Pretty* (detail), 2015



Fig. 11. *But Aren't the Clouds Pretty*, 2015



Fig. 12 *But Aren't the Clouds Pretty*, 2015

## **Conclusion**

While my graduate studies have explored the idea of change within the landscape of urban and natural environments, they have also allowed me to explore the process within myself and my art. Through a progression of material studies and conceptual investigations, I have become aware and appreciative of the possibility and need for change within my own artistic practices. The transformation that has occurred within my work has allowed for new and exciting perspectives and possibilities with regards to concept, content and material.

By utilizing new artistic practices, I have embraced change and allowed myself the freedom to relinquish control over the interpretation of my art to the viewer. This has given rise to new and alternative forms and ideas that continue to alter my work, creating a more diverse vocabulary by which to communicate my thoughts. It is through this change that I will continue to develop and progress as an artist.

My work will continue to explore the inherent links between humanity and nature along with our apperception of that world and the implications of that interaction? Future endeavors will explore the creation of more immersive environments and site-specific installations to further investigate this question. It is through this work that I hope to create a heightened sense of awareness within my viewer of their engagement with their own environments.

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