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Eighteen Hundred and Froze to Death

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

by

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Nature is not a precise machine. It is wet, and vicious and has a lot of spinning parts.

Most of the time I perceive the world through a lens of convenience. I simplify and clean up the image, ignoring the stray data and random glitches that don't fit into whatever task I am focused on at the moment. There are an ever-increasing number of devices to help with my dull focusing. But there is a basic need in me to step outside these human structures and occasionally glimpse a more unmediated world. What I see when I do this is so violent and perfect; it defies understanding in the everyday sense of the word. It is both strange and familiar, it is absolutely teeming, crawling with competing organisms, and we as a species fit right in. It is enough to turn your stomach.



An amateur astronomer is ridiculous and romantic. He is not merely an observer of the cosmos. He is making stars, and cold wet feet, and nebulae, and ringed planets, and comets, and distant barking dogs. These more and less tangible objects would not exist if he didn't drag his telescope out into that dark autumn field.

Some thoughts about man and nature in response to these three passages:

“At certain seasons of the year, the wood-ants, or probably only the males, are winged; these wings they lose, and old woodsmen say they have seen the ants carrying their wings in their mouths. The ants remain all winter in hollow or rotten places in the tree, in a torpid state. When the trees are being felled in the winter it often happens that bunches of these frozen ants fall out of the holes. The woodsman would gather such frozen ants in his hand and eat them. They taste much like cranberries.”ⁱ

This is a way of existing that is rare today. Perhaps it has always been rare but how wonderful and miserable and sustainable it seems now. Lumberjacks from a hundred years ago had a knowledge of the world in which they worked and lived that may not be quite as pricklingly accurate as an entomologist working today. But it is arguable that their knowledge was understood on a more profound level. These men among the trees were participating in a very complicated relationship. They were exploiting the forest, taking what they wanted without care or remorse, but they were really there, involved in that situation, part of the fabric of the moment. They were touching the sap of the tree and understanding what that organism was. This was not a fully intellectual understanding, but they were there rubbing against it, pushing against the land and getting pushed around back. This may be romanticizing a base and brutal existence that we should be happy to let live in the past, but maybe there is a kind of lesson there. How much more do we really know when we limit our perceptions to such tight focus? How many people know that a handful of frozen ants taste like cranberries?



*This locomotive was dragged over land in winter, deep into the Maine woods to an unconnected railroad to carry timber to the Allagash River. It sits where it was left, a hundred miles from the nearest road or rail.

“Up the valley somewhere during the '27 high water, was a railroad bridge with a train sitting on it loaded with coal. The train had been put there because its weight might keep the bridge in place. But the bridge, vibrating in the floodwater produced so much friction that the coal in the gondolas caught fire. Soon the bridge, the train and the glowing coal fell into the river.”ⁱⁱ

Maybe we have the ingenuity to control all aspects of our existence but do we have the will, resources and attention to realize it? And is it even desirable? I'm not usually an advocate for disaster. But what an amazing moment, to see 500 tons of glowing locomotive slowly ingested by the river. Mankind and nature are still

pushing against each other, but the more we ignore that sensation the more extreme the results. It seems of invaluable importance to remember that we don't really control the world around us. It would be truly horrific if we did. Lately it seems hard to remember to look around. Everything looks so intense and strange when I do.

“Other birds shiver through the winter. Shivering though, requires calories. A chickadee's feeding rate increases twentyfold in winter. A crossbill needs to find a spruce seed every seven seconds. ...[When their] calories are gone and they can shiver no more, they die of hypothermia.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The crossbill is a plain little bird that gets his name from his peculiar beak. He uses that specialized bill to desperately pry into spruce cones one after another. How has he gotten himself into such a horrible predicament? It is entirely possible that we are all on the same knife-edge of survival as that small brown bird. That's ok, because I feel the sun on my face and a red light through my closed eyes. Maybe awareness of that terrifying and wonderful existence also allows me to experience the warm sun on my face.

Nature as Other

Humanity's concept of nature changes as our level of perception jumps and expands and shrinks. The very idea that a state of existence could be unnatural or that humanity could create something that is outside of nature is in some sense absurd.

On the savannah of our hazy past we had no basis to differentiate between human goings-on and an outer environment; they were one and the same. I am tempted to think that the barrier between internal and external was a more gradual transition than it is today. Perhaps at our most basic and animalistic, that sharp line again fades. We might, for a moment, slip a little deeper into our surroundings. Perhaps you can call this a profound experience, this momentary loss of self and a simultaneous awareness of something other than self.

As we have manipulated the landscape, as our idea of the self and time and place has matured, we have imagined ourselves lifted above the outer environment. There have been real driving reasons for the continued alienation of humanity from the environment. Domestication of animals and the orderly utilization of natural resources necessitate a certain control over the environment. To control something you have to be slightly removed from it. You have to see it as outside of yourself to be able to manipulate it. With this remove, we have come to see nature as other than us.

To be conquered, to be cared for, to be exploited, to be feared, to be destroyed, to be controlled, to be tamed, to be utilized, to be categorized, to be manipulated, to be cherished.

The current preferred interaction with nature seems to be that of an occasional stroll through the garden. The idea is so seductive that as a race, we are convinced that we exist in a world completely of our own fabrication. What an amazing idea. What a ridiculously stupid, amazing idea. The reality is infinitely more complicated. It is so obvious that we are entities embedded in this environment, so obvious I think we may have forgotten. I have been looking for moments that remind me of the exterior world, that jolt me out of this mediated experience.^{iv}



H. R. (Human Rights) the lead singer and driving force behind the influential hardcore band *Bad Brains* was known to regularly do standing front flips on stage.

Thinking about this human perception of nature is the major engine for my art practice. Sometimes I want to complicate it, other times to shave it down to a simple component, but always addressing this concept, highlighting it, rolling it around so it's facets flash. I am looking for a particular mode of seeing that is too important to lose or to never discover. I have realized that this is not a job I can do alone. I need an observer to complete my sculptures. By imaging the completion of an event set up by the sculpture, the observer pictures a profound experience. The hope of sharing a profound experience is often a disappointment. There is such difficulty in translation, even when using the direct language of objects. But there are some strategies for making sculpture that might get a little closer than others. I have been thinking about the possibilities in leaving an object unfinished, in leaving the end a little loose, a little unresolved. You set up a situation that points toward a certain event. But maybe the event never happens, or it happens too slowly for a viewer to take it all in. So somehow the viewer is made to construct the event in their mind. And if you do a good job of making it, and the viewer does a good job of looking at it, they picture what might have been a profound experience. Although this is not an authentic experience of the profound, only an imitated one, it is the best I can do with these blunt and clumsy tools. I can only point in the right direction and hope for the best. By earnestly reaching toward the profound and missing the mark, there is still the possibility of making something of interest.^v



Untitled, 2009, 70"x 68"x 48". Paper, plywood, steel, cymbal stand, power amplifier, speaker, contact mic, solenoid, programmable repeat interval timer, white pine branch.

Some thoughts on different kinds of time:

As the human conception of time and distance evolves, our existence is slowly shifting from one of experience and perception to one of stored data retrieval. This can be seen as a phenomenon accompanying the distancing of man from his environment. The concept of time scale has expanded from understanding time in relationship to one's body and lifetime, to a biblical scale, to a geological scale to a cosmological scale.

The medieval concept of time was based on the duration of an individual lifespan. People knew they had parents, and grandparents, and that they had children. Perhaps there was the idea of generations, but it was more of an isolated cycle, it did not stretch away into the future and back into the distant past. This can be seen demonstrated in how people were named. There was no surname that spoke of a continued lineage. You were Will, or Will's son. There was no need to express a concept that existed beyond your immediate few decades of existence. There was a similar concept of space and distance. The idea of place was limited to how far a person would travel in their lifetime. A medieval peasant was almost certain to live and die without leaving their birthplace, so place names where

not fixed or universal.^{vi} You might live next to the big oak, or near the lower field and that was enough information to orient yourself for your entire life.

With the rise of more structured and authoritative religions came a changing concept of time. Religion expanded timescale to include unique and definite events of the past. The extensive family histories included in Christian texts gave an opportunity to place oneself in a context outside their immediate existence. This fixing of events in the past starts to make a person wonder what events might happen after they are gone. Slowly an individual's view expanded beyond what he would actually see in his own lifetime.



Balance Rock, Lanseboro Massachusetts

As individuals began to rove across the landscape, they were exposed to increasing evidence of ages and processes much grander than Noah's flood. Even though the mark of immense time scale shows on every stone or eroded beach cliff, generations of great thinkers were able to ignore it all. From fossil seashells found on mountaintops, to glacial erratics,^{vii} to petrified wood, even the keenest scientific minds could not expand the

concept of time to encompass the grand scale of geology.^{viii} And then slowly, the grinding weight of natural process could no longer be ignored. The jump in scale was so large that there was no place left for the individual. It is difficult to place great importance on your life in relation to a million years of glaciers carving out valleys and tearing down mountain ranges. The revelation that our own existence was but an infinitesimal flash compared to the geological ages of the planet continued to separate us from our immediate environment.

Our contemporary concept of time is based on our understanding of cosmological phenomenon. Astronomers are able to literally look back through time and chart the very beginnings of existence. They tell us that the universe as we know it began 12 billion years ago. They also claim that individuals can experience time differently depending on their relative positions in space. Suddenly our concept of time has expanded beyond any kind of normal human understanding. In a similar but opposite direction, physicists are looking at events that take place in femtoseconds that question the very idea of an event. Time and distance have been changed from being experienced phenomenon to being understandable only as abstract data.

Question: How have we become so acutely aware of the world around us to record this precise and arbitrary information?

Answer: The scientific method. Which is approaching obsolescence.

In 2008, Wired Magazine published an article called *The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes Scientific Method Obsolete*. This short essay clearly articulated a massive shift in how human beings perceive the world around them. The author of the article, Chris Anderson claims we are in the process of removing the filter of representational models from our worldview. We are starting to look at the world as pure data. What a giant leap in human cognizance. We are entering the age of the petabyte and we are drowning in information while trying to fashion models to process it, to filter it through some kind of apparatus outside of itself. Scientists are starting to realize that maybe they don't need to make models at all.^{ix}

It seems for a while there has been a muddying of the rigid prism of the scientific method. The self-correcting rigor that is built into the scientific method is still necessary, but maybe more open to interpretation than originally thought. Models are a fiction that can be eliminated. There is such a high level of monitoring and recording of our environment, that there is no need for a model. The world is the model. Everything can be seen as data. Imagine looking at an organism and seeing it as a searchable database. If something moves from being a discreet external object to a dataset, what does that mean for how we see that object?

What does it mean when you can google an organism? The human genome is now a searchable database.

In 2004, J. Craig Venter set out to identify and categorize microorganisms living in a particular part of the ocean off the coast of Bermuda. Normally a scientist would go out and take samples from the ocean and then return to the lab and look at them through a microscope, counting the known organisms and looking for new ones. Venter took a different approach. Using a high-speed gene sequencer, a very powerful computer and a technique called "whole-genome shotgun sequencing". He scooped up liters of ocean water and looked at all genes he found in these samples. His published results included 1800 species including 148 newly discovered organisms. The thing about this that is truly revolutionary is that he did not actually observe these creatures. He doesn't know what they look like or what their behaviors are. He knows they exist in this environment based solely on the existence of their genes. He not only searched for whole organisms, he also searched for certain types of known gene sequences. He looked for what the kinds of photoreceptors could be spun out of that cloudy sample of seawater. He identified over seven hundred different genes for microorganism photoreceptors.^x He was able to search for what kind of eyes this biome was using. Venter skipped over the idea of the organism and looked at what kind of organs were being used in a large section of an environment. What an incredible kind of looking. He was using an entire habitat as a searchable database. This new ability to see everything around us as sets of data seems important. Is

this an expansion of vision or a glossing over of experience? Are we really seeing deeper into the world around us? Could you say that Venter discovered those 148 new organisms even though he never saw them squirming around on a slide in his laboratory?

I take these changes in human perception as a call to be a maker in a very concrete sense. I feel a need to flex and focus my own perception in reaction to any possible narrowing of experience. With perception changing and becoming plastic in so many ways I feel such an urge to look at the world in my own particular way. I want to give priority to an experience that can't be googled or watched on youtube. I want the viewer to sense the weight of the granite with their body. I want them to see the glint of sunlight on the rippling water.



Gem with Tit, 2010, dimensions variable. Brass, spray enamel, PVC, bristol, graphite.

Endnotes and works cited

ⁱ Pike, Robert E. *Tall Trees, Tough Men*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967. Print.

ⁱⁱ McPhee, John. *The Control of Nature*. 1st ed. Toronto, Canada: HarperCollins Canada, 1989. Print.

ⁱⁱⁱ Streever, Bill. *Cold : adventures in the world's frozen places*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2009. Print.

iv

Black Metal Grind Thrash Magic Methcore or

Why Hardcore Music Is All About Nature

My uncle Jim was the drummer for the band *10,000 Rednecks with Guns*. I saw them at the Rotary Club in Bennington Vermont when I was maybe eight or nine. The experience now exists as a hazy impression of controlled mayhem. I remember the hot smell of the too-brightly lit hall. I also remember a frantic energy of anger, sex, frustration, and joy. Witnessing the act of balancing all those energies at the very edge of control was profound. It was like standing too close to a whirring, malfunctioning machine.

There is a complexity that is exposed when something is spinning at such a high velocity. When those energies are straining, trying to remain a cohesive whole you can see the complex mechanism that is holding it together. This extreme behavior allows for a stretching of structure, it allows for a glimpse of the intricate framework that usually exists below the surface of perception. Having knowledge of that kind of logic, that looking through blurred eyes can be as informative as looking through a microscope, has served me ever since. You can see it anywhere, at any time, at any scale. But I am struck by it most when I'm outside the blatant sphere of human industry. Perhaps our heavy handed and self-aware design sense dulls that kind of perception.

When I am walking in the woods of western Massachusetts amongst the maple leaves and glacier worn boulders is when I really think about hardcore music. When I am looking at an icicle mounding off the side of an exposed shale cliff. The barely sensed texture of daily cooling and heating cycles, the inevitable power of water expanding into ice crystals and fracturing the solid wall of stone. And layered over this is the rhythm of dripping water, syncing and separating. A moment in a good hardcore song can elicit a similar experience. I think that every musician who performs at a certain caliber is making art about that dripping icicle in a quarry in Massachusetts, whether they know it or not.

Picture a time you were caught in a summer thunderstorm. Think about the thrashing and blowing rain, a hundred thousand gallons of water carving into muddy earth, punctuated by the perfect crystalline vision of a lightning strike. Now listen to *Sugar Coated Sour* by *Dillinger Escape Plan*(a). There is a lack of affectation in both those experiences, a loss of the contrived that happens at certain moments, which I think is a rarity in human expression. There is a loss of self. And there is truth in those moments.

Fighting to remain vertical in the sweaty bloody mass of other suburban white kids, being physically pushed around by the music, I am standing in front of a thundering waterfall. The drummer pauses for a split-second, arms raised head down sweat dripping from his chin. The wash of misty air pushes at me and I almost lose my footing on the slippery mud. It is daunting, and profound, and amazing. It is stupid, and lonely, and gruesome, and it doesn't care what you think.

(a) I just remember fading into the next song not knowing what to think. I wasn't even sure if I liked it. It was loud, bizarre, six minutes long, and had completely ruined the flow of the set. And then the phone rang. Some kid called in to say he hated me and the song I had just played and abruptly hung up. – Julie

Graf remembering the first time she played *Dillinger Escape Plan* on her radio show. Stylus Magazine
10/25/2007

playlist:

Neurosis – the doorway 7:35
Gojira – ocean planet 5:33
The Number Twelve Looks Like You – don't get blood on my Prada shoes 1:37
Goatwhore – alchemy of the black sun cult 3:30
Dillinger Escape Plan – sugar coated sour 2:24
Lamb of God – black label 4:25
Melvins – honey bucket 3:01

v

Some sculptures I haven't made:

1. a waterfall in a refrigerator
2. a giant bouquet of dried flowers, maybe some lady bugs also
3. a tree that plays harp music, or maybe is a harp
4. a picture of a deer in the space that the picture is being shown
5. an eagle and a wolf carved out of basswood, the eagle breaths smoke, and the wolf has laser beam eyes
6. a handmade sunset
7. a machine that slowly disassembles a cactus
8. some hardcore music played for song birds
9. a color chart with the colors renamed
10. a cast of the inside of my pockets
11. birds flying out of a log
12. a derelict car that has been turned into a green house
13. something about tumbleweeds
14. a sailboat with trees for masts
15. six people are asked into a room with six chairs and given cards that read: sit in chair and wait for five minutes with out checking your watch. stand and leave.
16. a drawing of the Housatonic river done in motor oil.
17. a wolf growl that somehow makes a drawing of mountains
18. a woodstove cast in dull red resin
19. a wave made of sand
20. something with a rock tumbler
21. my bmx bike cast in clear pink resin.
22. a shopping cart filled with river stones
23. a small model of a stalk of corn
24. some stone earphones
25. a painting of a tree done in only white paint
26. model of morning frost on grass
27. down, chop, and split a cord of hardwood
28. define a cubic area in a forest, define a cubic area in the sky
29. tall chair for viewing the sky
29. a large tank filled with magic growing crystals
30. a welded steel pine branch, that is allowed to rust in a basin of water
31. a machine that splits wood really, really slowly
32. something having to do with skipping 100 stones
33. balance two large rocks
34. a pile of green slime and a small geodesic dome pushed into a corner
35. a cast of a campfire
36. a rope made of blue tarp
37. set up a magnifying glass so it slowly burns through a stack of paper when the sun is

-
- in the right position each day
38. a mechanical bird wing that makes a drawing on the wall
 39. a long black stripe painted in tar
 40. a nice model of some deer shit
 41. a heavy rock lifted and mounted six feet above where it was found
 42. a painting shown in a burnt wood frame
 43. show an ax that I used to cut the head off a chicken
 44. a small pile of opaque pink resin cylinders
 45. fireworks being set off in the day time.
 46. a large leaded glass ball dropped in the gallery
 48. use mold to make a landscape painting
 49. a video piece about small puffs of smoke
 50. some kind of clock made with a tractor tire and a block of ice

Some sculptures I have made:

1. a mechanical branch of cherry blossoms
2. a painting made with a large rock and some graphite
3. a hummingbird that beats its wings when you call my cell phone
4. 3-D version of a Hokusai print
5. a tree that slowly loses its leaves
6. a constellation
7. a nighttime rainbow
8. some icicles from my childhood home
9. a slow-motion rain shower
10. a wolf growl that moves something

^{vi} Manchester, William. *A World Lit Only By Fire. The Medieval Mind and the Renaissance: Portrait of an Age.* 1st ed. New York, NY: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 1992. Print.

^{vii} Picture to left is of a glacial erratic that was deposited in Lanesboro, Massachusetts in the late Devonian Period (Age of Fishes). It weighs 165 tons and is composed of a triangular mass of limestone originally lifted from a location east of the Hudson River. "Massachusetts; a guide to its places and people." Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration of Massachusetts. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937. Print.

^{viii} Eiseley, Loren. *The Firmament of Time.* 1st ed. New York, NY: Atheneum Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960. Print.

^{ix} Anderson, Chris. "The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete." *Wired Magazine* 23 June 2008: Print.

^x Venter, J. Graig. "Environmental Genome Shotgun Sequencing of the Sargasso Sea." *Science*. 304.5667 (2004): 66-74. Print.