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Every Night at 8pm

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Every Night at 8pm

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of
Fine Arts in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Bachelor of Arts, Reed College, 2002

Director:

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Virginia Commonwealth University
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My father, for teaching me the value of presence through his absence.

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Aristotle, who I love because he tried to explain everything, contends:

“The “void” is essential to hearing; for the air is commonly understood to be a void, and it is air... which causes hearing.”

Voice, he goes on,

“is the sound produced by a creature possessing a soul; for inanimate things can only metaphorically be said to have a voice.”

Aristotle, *On the Soul*.

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ABSTRACT

Every Night at 8pm

By Jennifer Lauren Smith, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011.

Major Director:

Gregory Volk, Associate Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media, Painting & Printmaking

An experiential thesis, this document begins at dawn, travels through storms and calm air and ends at night in Argentina. It details the circumstances and influences leading to my thesis exhibition at the Anderson Gallery, including an artist's statement told through a creative reading of Ray Bradbury's "All Summer in a Day" and the excitement I found in an out-of-print text on scuba diving.

Prologue

The calmest wind is before sunrise, after you've awoken to an inky blackness and there is no one around. You leave on the light of your motel room because incandescence is nice against the black night sky and you slip into the street where the cars are asleep and the only sign that the day is upon you is the rolled newspaper resting fresh on the stoop and the distant sound of a semi on a highway way away.

The unpopulated darkness preceding the dawn is the quiet outcast of time. Drinking the quiet, you begin to wonder if you've been fooled and that this is the day the sun might not rise, not today or forever, because something went wrong up there in the universe during the night, some fight, some thing that chased the sun out the sky and left behind nothing but a bunch of fading stars. It's that still.

Alas, by the time your coffee is finished and you dump the sludge from the mug before tossing the mug to the floor of the truck, eerily glowing color is bleeding towards you from edges of the earth and you begin to hear the sounds of the regular world and there's a circle of brightness traveling up in the sky and the fantasy of being alone is obliterated and suddenly, suddenly there's all this language.

Love, Sound, and the Weather

The eternal thunderstorms in Ray Bradbury's "All Summer in a Day" have haunted me since I was a little girl, looking out the rain-slashed windows of our condominium at the edge of the course at the Sunrise Country Club. Bradbury imagines an inhabited Venus where the rain cedes for only a short afternoon every seven years. For Bradbury, the drenched gray world is cacophonous while two hours of sunlit color is jarringly silent:

It was as if, in the midst of a film concerning an avalanche, a tornado, a hurricane, a volcanic eruption, something had, first, gone wrong with the sound apparatus, thus muffling and finally cutting off all noise, all of the blasts and repercussions and thunders, and then, second, ripped the film from the projector and inserted in its place a beautiful tropical slide which did not move or tremor. The world ground to a standstill. The silence was so immense and unbelievable that you felt your ears had been stuffed or you had lost your hearing altogether. The children put their hands to their ears. They stood apart. The door slid back and the smell of the silent, waiting world came in to them...¹

Three details of this story set a backbone for some of my recent projects.

1. The Love of Certain Images

Consider the perpetrator of mischief in Bradbury's fictive theater, ripping the film from the reel and cutting the sound, knowing that the beauty of the tropical slide would be more so because of the loud violence on either side of it. He invades the projection room with a vision: to stun the audience through a visceral interference, make them feel something more clearly through the manipulation of an environment. The Sublime catches you unawares, its power being furnished by the tenuousness of its being. It makes you feel lucky for a little while, vanquishing you in its Bigness, before it goes away again and you're alone with your

¹ Bradbury, Ray, "All Summer in a Day." 1954.
www.dodea.edu/instruction/curriculum/.../AllSummerinaDay.doc (accessed March 11, 2011).

self. Bradbury's projectionist loves that beautiful tropical slide, but what he loves more is the power that it gives him when he becomes the author of its use. He can create a moment of magic, catching his audience off-guard and making them feel provident to bear witness to such circumstances.

2. The Implied Sound-Scape of the Weather and the Land

Having become accustomed to a "drum and gush" of the monstrous water raining down year after year, the feeling of silence during the two hours of sunlight is so aching that the children put their hands to their ears in order to feel their ears hearing, making sure that the silence wasn't deafness.² Faced with the new silence and stillness of springtime on Venus, they experience themselves sensing, existence becoming urgently pure. What is visual and what is auditory connect to create a special wholeness in rare weather conditions, and things intellectual, studied or learned fall away, leaving the children with a wild sense of Dasein: they looked at everything in its blaring color until tears streamed down their faces, and listened to the silence which was like a "blessed sea of no sound and no motion", savoring every bit, absorbing it with their entire physical being.³ It is a gesamtkunstwerk of reality impossible to ignore. Nothing matters; there's a grander design.

3. Meteorology and Waiting for the Weather

While the children are outside marveling the moments of their first springtime, Margot, the pale and fragile 9-year old protagonist in Bradbury's story, is locked in a closet underground. An outcast to her elementary school society, the other children have punished her for insisting that the sun would return today, relying on her memory from her days on planet

² ibid.

³ ibid.

Earth and her trust of the scientists. She had grown nearly mad with the wait. For Margot, those two septennial hours of sunshine will bring back her peace, and survival. It is essential to her project of living. Years of intensely following meteorological calculations are shattered and what ought to be a beautiful story ends with the very same darkness with which it begins. We don't know what happens to Margot.



Woodwind and Kite, 2010. Video Still.

Woodwind and Kite, 2010

On a crisp October evening I presented a performance work in an old cobbled alley in the Fan neighborhood of Richmond. I provided maps to my audience and asked them to come at 8:30 pm. The alley led the audience east; at 8:30 a bright, waxing gibbous was peeking over the tree-line, slowly on the rise. The audience could hear faint, breathy clarinet sounds

coming from somewhere down the way. Following the sound, moving in the direction of the moon, the group soon met an open carriage house, the small kind, more of a garage. Inside the house, which was brick and very cold, a video projection contrasted strangely with the night. In it, a crystalline-shaped kite soared through a bright morning sky, perfect geometry amidst a swirling, amorphous weather system. The clarinet sounds came from a real man in a suit who stood behind the building. A small window framed only his torso and his instrument while he played improvisationally to the movements of the kite in the video. His notes seemed to keep the kite aloft, as if the wind in the horn was being transferred to the wind in the kite.

The piece continued for approximately fourteen minutes before the kite left the perimeter of the screen and the musician disappeared from view. The video dimmed, and the audience was again in a regular alley way, beneath the street lights, under the night sky.

End of scene.



Installation view from alleyway.



Detail.

Through the combination of its various parts—the location, the action, the score, the gestalt, and the timing—this work was structured like a sculptural *mise en scène*. The audience in the

alley found themselves watching a cinematic composition unfold while soon realizing their own presence within that cinematic frame. It is like going to see a performance and finding yourself on the stage. This doubling of the window (looking-at and being-in) has emerged as a method that I've continued throughout this thesis year. My guiding principles echo my three points of interest in the Bradbury story:

1. The Love of Certain Images

My work often begins with a devotion to a hallucinatory or dream-like vision: a short, powerful little clip that I go over and over in my mind. The content of the work is furnished by a skill that I set myself up to learn (if I am the performer) or the procurement of another kind of specialist who can help me make a work possible. The performance and/or video is framed by a total environment: architecture, the air, the sky, ambient sound, and scripted sound all contribute to a realized vision. Staging the work in unexpected locations distills the magic of the work within the fabric of the world around it, and contributes to a “stumbled upon” effect that I feel yields a high-impact gestalt. I make decisions about the completion of the work in tandem with a study of details of the chosen site. The final task is determining when the work is seen, for the gestalt is primary.

2. The Implied Sound-Scape of the Weather and the Land

With photography and video, I probe the metaphorical potential of landscapes in certain conditions, trying to “see” the sound (and feeling) implied in them. I develop work inspired in part by their imagined sound and rhythmic amplitude. The imagined sound of the subjects I study leads to actual scores that impose a different kind of texture on the work. The fusion of auditory and visual material completes a more saturated experience.

3. Meteorology and Waiting for the Weather

I struggle with the waiting required to do many of the things I set myself up to do. My work is created as a result of reluctant patience, redundant practice, scrutiny, emails, constant fidgeting, and so much worry. I wait for the wind to come, or for it to go away. I wait for a moonrise and wait for someone to finally relent and give me a place to put my work that coincides with that rising moon. I wait for certain performers, or for certain architectural conditions. I wait on myself and I slowly learn things. I refresh my azimuth graphs every hour and can tell you the forecast 5 days out. A project evolves into a devotion because of these inconveniences, these little obsessions. All this waiting is channeled towards a single, desperate, passionate moment where the vision is realized.

Flashback

Was it Ovid who said, There is so much wind here the stones go blank.⁴

During the epic winter of 2010, Captain Wayne Rasmussen gave me an out-of-print book to read: “Diving for Pleasure and Treasure” by Clay Blair Jr. It is based on the author’s travels with the pioneer American wreck diver, Robert F. Marx, and begins with their adventures in North Carolina’s Outer Banks. While stationed as a marine near Cape Hatteras, the easternmost tip of the OBX, Mr. Marx became obsessed with finding the ironclad hulk of the Union naval vessel, the *Monitor*, which had met its demise in the Diamond Shoals in 1862. Blair writes an disarming blow-by-blow detailing the sinking gunboat:

On December 30, 1862 a furious gale swept the bleak island-like sand strips off the easternmost tip of Cape Hatteras, the cold gray Atlantic seas thundered down on the decks of ... a weird-looking craft, the ironclad *Monitor*... The mountainous seas soon tore a gap between the *Monitor*’s hull and deck. The pilothouse filled with water; auxiliary steering was rigged atop the turret. The situation went from bad to critical on the *Monitor*. Just after dark when it was clear that the pumps were unable to cope with the rising water in the bilges, the captain signaled, by lighting a red lantern, that he was abandoning ship... soon the *Monitor*, partly flooded and helpless... drifted off into the growing darkness, and there, among countless other hulks in the shifting sands of the Outer Banks, the *Monitor* slept in peace...⁵

The image of the seas tearing apart the heavy metal ship was intriguing enough, but countless other hulks? The phrase stopped me. Quick research revealed that this place—a 16-mile wide mess of fang-shaped waves providing true nightmares for nautical people riding the Labrador south—was only a four-hour drive from my studio. Over two thousand shipwrecks, many visible. Wild horses sulking around, ghosts in the wind, perfect oysters.

Off I went.

⁴ Carson, Anne. *Decreation*. New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. p. 8.

⁵ Blair, Clay Jr. *Diving for Pleasure and Treasure*. Cleveland, Ohio: The World Publishing Company, 1960. p. 22-23.

Awestricken, one trip became several. Through March of that year, you could find me driving up and down the icy beach in my dying Toyota, attempting to record the feeling of the destructive power of the winter storms in digital media, clay, and in writing. When working outside the studio, raw experience trumps the controlled conditions of working indoors. Everything and nothing was art. Creation and destruction became confused, interchangeable terms. What mattered? I didn't know. I stared at the ocean in fear.

The physical excitement of being there contrasted with the introspective pressure of figuring out why: mind and body pitted against each other in a daimonic, primal war. I came back, finally, bringing work that felt awfully pared down and rectangular: a silent video imagining a death at Salvo, five allegorical photographs, a short-wave sound recording, and nearly a thousand pounds of wet, salty clay that had weathered the winter on the beach in the form of a heart. I stuck it all in a gallery and dimmed the lights down low. The work sighed softly behind a partly closed door: an elegy to a passage of time whose meaning was buried too deep to be ascertained.

Failing to present the naked power that I longed so much to show lead me to realize the key element that I was missing: presence. I had to *go* to the Diamond Shoals to know the feeling there, the physical experience of its presence was the work. One thousand pounds of wet clay pounded into the dunes at Corolla Light was the work. Hearing eerie military signals come through the radio while the truck was stuck in the sand was the work. I needed to take you there so you could know it.

February

(Pan from sky, overcast morning)

(The sound of diesel fans slowly powering up)

Unraveled on an open farm field, a hot air balloon jumps to life as the fans force a bossy wind through the diaphragm of the soft aircraft. The massive billowing bag gulps helplessly at the air, unfurling its striped body. We get lost in its nylon ocean of waves as the fans blow and blow.

Sudden, piercing explosions of propane blast through the drum of the fans, spitting fire into the center hollow of the balloon. We rush closer. As the air within the envelope warms, the balloon tumbles upwards in awkward majesty. The morning winds attack the gargantuan pillow; for a moment, it is even convex. The burners heat the air in haste,

(psssshpt!) (phsssshpt!)

beating the wind at its own game.

Fully inflated, the balloon stands nearly eight stories upright and robust, swaying in the breeze as it awaits the ascent. The fans shut down and a singing voice is heard, *a cappella*.

(Fade)

Shivering in black, a soprano sings upward to the balloon, perfectly pitched and frozen stiff. The balloon eyes her from above while it gains jerky altitude. She exhales steam as the

burners interrupt her, forming an unlikely duet of song and fire. Drifting upwards still, the balloon loses sight of her and floats riverwards, carried the winds aloft. Eccentric aerial winter-scapes fill the ensuing frames, nearly effacing the memory of the soprano. The rivers take funky bends and lanes slice through farms like brushstrokes. Trees are uncannily within arm's reach and the shadow and reflection of the balloon over the frosted pond is slow and curious. The longer it goes on, the stranger it is that she was there, singing in French of her sepulcher and of her spirit.

(Pan to the blinding sun)



February, 2011 (stills).



February, 2011 (installation view).



Ghosts from Candombe, 2011. (Exterior of Carriage House, west-facing window.)

Every Night at 8pm

February, a nine-minute film, was staged in the entryway of the Frederic Scott Carriage House, adjacent to the Anderson Gallery. The projection screen was scaled to the dimensions of the stable door effecting a gestalt that involved the entire framework of the house, its fresh spring lawn, and the roaring black and white film within it. The audience was invited to attend the exhibition for the hour around dusk (8pm) throughout the duration of the week-long exhibition. During that time, the film continued on a loop and the live performances of *Ghosts from Candombe* could be seen from the west-side of the building. As the sky grew darker, the actions coming through the apertures of the building grew brighter, energized by increasing visibility.

The balloon sounds of *February* lured the audience closer to the threshold of the space where the black monolithic rear side of *Ghosts of Candombe* could be seen at the far end of the carriage house. During the silences that occurred between burner blasts, the swell of tango music and sweeping footsteps could be heard from within the theater. Built to vaguely resemble the form of a stable and to highlight the ornate architectural details of the carriage house, the box contained two live tango dancers, who could be seen only through a cropping of a window from the adjacent parking lot.

Like the balloon drifting through the air, the dancers around the corner were also aloft, tangoing nearly five feet above the ground with no visible stage or platform. Gliding in and out of view of the leaded-glass window under warm lights, their tight cropping contrasted starkly with the cold, expansive grayscale of *February*. Certain pictorial resemblances occurred

fortuitously: a figure's skirt fluttered while the balloon billowed, dance steps resembled the leg-like splits and bends of the river seen from the sky. Once the viewer had seen both works (they cannot be viewed at once) the memory of one accompanied the viewing of another.



February (left) and rear-view of *Ghosts from Candombe* (right).
Installation seen from the threshold of doorway.

Ghosts from Candombe



Ghosts from Candombe, 2011.
Live performance in the window of the Carriage House.

Tango is more of a manner of conversing than a dance. Its steps are like the small words in a lexicon, combined patterns of footwork form basic phrases, idioms. Improvisational around the elementary vocabulary of steps, the dance requires keen physical perception and an open heart. The true communication in the dance is the spontaneous choreography of movements resulting from feeling. Tango makes a single essential demand: to open your energies to your partner (often a complete stranger) so you can be receptive to his or her feeling. Without the connection, tango dancers would be merely marching to the beats of the bandoneón; nights in Argentina wouldn't be filled with trance-like passion carrying you into the dawn of the next day.

As an American Sign Language user, I am particularly drawn to the non-verbal linguistics of tango—how communication is put into effect by listening and responding to another person's body, rather than communicating through words or by signs. With tango, you have no head; you are all body. There are occasions when I've found a great partner who barely touches my shoulder or moves a muscle and –wham—uncannily, something locks into place.

The second my mind wanders, or my core axis wobbles, or I tense up, he knows, and in the intangible matrix of tango he seems to say “you’ve left, come back.” It’s a kind of focus that you can’t think about too much, you just have to do. When I dance, I close my eyes.

In *Ghosts from Candombe*, my goal was to distill the magic of the connection between two tangoing individuals. Lifted from ground-level by a raised stage invisible to the audience, the Carriage House window cropped the bodies of the dancers down to their lower torsos and legs. Costumed in black to fade into the background of the theater, only the bare arms of the lead dancer (the man) and the legs of the follower (the lady) could be seen through the glass. Their bodies seemed to merge into a single disjointed tangoing creature, headless and gliding together as if on air. They moved in and out of view of the window, sometimes disappearing for minutes at a time.

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VITA

Jennifer Lauren Smith was born in 1979 in Portland, Maine and grew up in Sarasota, Florida. She attended Sarasota's Pine View School before earning her diploma from Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts in 1997. Jennifer attended Reed College in Portland, Oregon where she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in 2002. After graduation, Jennifer moved to New York City where she spent several years working as a mural painter and later, operated a bed & breakfast in Chinatown. Jennifer earned her Masters of Fine Arts in 2011 from Virginia Commonwealth University.