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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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# **I Thought the Earth Remembered Me**

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

By

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M.F.A. Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019

B.F.A. Columbus College of Art & Design, 2017

Director: Jack Wax,

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Richmond, Virginia

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## **Abstract**

I THOUGHT THE EARTH REMEMBERED ME

By Hannah Bates, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019.

Director: Jack Wax,

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The forest is teeming with activity: fungi transform dead logs into nutrients, roots entangle themselves with the earth, and strong winds break resilient boughs. Like the forest, the human body functions according to a complex system of agents - from the micro bacteria in the gut to the pores of the skin. The built world has often been rendered in opposition to these processes of nature. As a vessel through which the world is experienced, the body is an intermediary between raw matter and fabricated things. The planet is suffused with human life, and there is a critical tension between human production and the well-being of the biosphere. Is there an ecological benefit to dissolving the division between the human-made and the organic? My exhibition, *I Thought the Earth Remembered Me*, integrates the ambiguous forms of the forest into mass-produced sheetrock walls in order to break down the boundary between the built

and natural world. Through making, I hope the work unearths a way to be enchanted on a damaged planet.



Figure 1



Figure 2

### The Forest

In a midwestern forest, I walk on detritus in various stages of decomposition. Turkey tail fungi feed on dead trees, turning them into nutrients for new growth. I notice a squirrel decaying on a rock. It is easy to miss because the decomposition process has made the squirrel almost indistinguishable from the surface of the rock. I would have walked right by if I didn't also see a butterfly feeding on the body's remains. The squirrel's insides are becoming the butterfly. When I move I can feel the layers of former foliage underneath my boots. All this decay nourishes sparse greenery and naked deciduous trees. Mycelium stretches itself into all corners of the soil and acts as a brain of the ecosystem, transporting nutrients between trees. The cyclical nature of this place is potent. A strong wind transforms stoic trees into fallen logs, fungi digests bark into soil, and soil turns seeds into trees. Death is inevitable, unpredictable, and essential. Things are alive even while in decay, activated by the micro-bacteria that consume them. Unconfined and open, nothing is inert in the forest. I walk peacefully, comforted



by the organized chaos. Colors transition seamlessly into one another, from gray-brown bark to the pale green lichen. All is united beneath the diffused sunlight, a subtle movement of the wind, and the density of the air.

On the streets of an east coast city, I walk on stiff pavement. A breeze from a passing car hits my face. A recent excavation for new building construction reveals an abundance of red clay soil. Moist green moss seeps out of a brick structure. In an uneven cobblestone alleyway, unrecognizable plastic floats on an oily puddle. Evenly spaced maple, oak, crepe myrtle, and elm provide a canopy of green overhead. Unlike trees in a wild forest, these trees do not communicate through a network of hyphae. There is no underground system to transport nutrients or to warn others of impending illness. Instead their roots intermingle with city water and gas pipes and their branches twist among electrical lines. The sidewalk underfoot is cracked from the changing seasons and grass is beginning to invade the rift. I can feel the undulation of the landscape in steep inclines and declines as I walk, but my view is blocked by an ivy covered home.

When an oak tree in the urban forest dies, it is put on Richmond's Department of Urban Forestry tree removal list.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for removal vary from the deadly honey fungus *armillaria mellea*, to being struck by a car, to simply 'city wires.' Trees to be removed are marked with a spray painted 'X', denoting their upcoming execution. After a tree has been cut down, it is thrown branch by branch into a wood chipper in order to chop the snag into more manageable pieces. Often the remaining stump is ground down so a sapling can be planted in the newly emptied plot. But sometimes a stump is left behind at the site; its dead roots decompose into the soil underneath and mushrooms emerge between the exposed growth rings.

The urban tree inventory is updated.

The trees in a city are rendered inert, with little to no agency in the urban space. The bureaucracy views the trees with the sole purpose of serving the human constituents within the city limits. On the department's interactive "Tree Inventory

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<sup>1</sup> Richmond, Urban Forestry, Current Tree Removal List, <http://www.richmondgov.com/PublicWorks/UrbanForestry.aspx>

Mapping Application,” one can scroll around a map of the city and see the 120,200 trees expressed by a green pin. When one selects a specific pin, the tree’s species (e.g. *Quercus Phellos*) and the “Tree ID” number (e.g. 82837) are revealed. Contrary to this sterile, rational, and virtual iteration of the forest, the urban forest itself is extremely vibrant. It contains assemblages of biological, geological, and meteorological processes, all intertwined with the human-made. Tree roots stretch themselves in between cracks in the pavement, leaves pile up and mold in the gutter, and branches scratch at the roofs of buildings. The built world is deeply affected by the forces of the natural world, and vice versa.



Figure 3

### **Remembering Trees**

“In the constant rain, everything grows mold. Monster trees suck up the down pour and respire it back into the air as steam. Spores spread across every damp surface. Both her legs spore athlete’s foot up to the knees. Sometimes, when she lies down and

closes her eyes, she feels that moss will cover her lids by the time she opens them again. ” - Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

I didn't know the names of trees during my childhood. I knew how they moved in the wind and how their leaves turned inside-out when a storm was coming. How the row of pine trees in my backyard would hold onto their needles throughout the winter and bear the weight of heavy snow on their limbs. How a December deciduous forest became endless rows of naked trees. I could see farther into the distance when their leaves had fallen, and it made me feel as if the world was an infinite expanse of gray. Living in a place where you experience four full months of winter really hardens you. My father plowed snow in parking lots during the wintertime, and I remember how his dry and cracking hands would feel on my back. Like the trees, you must adapt to the harsh environment.

The spring felt open and vibrant, and I would soak up the blinding sun. I craved every last drop of its long-awaited warmth. The clear, shallow, and rocky waters of the Chagrin River is where I spent most of the summertime. Melancholy and starry-eyed, I would wander barefoot over smooth rocks and slimy mud. Looking up from the riverbanks, I felt embraced by exposed bedrock of shale that was blanketed with green moss. The canopy of green above allowed patches of light through to bounce across the river's surface. The trees were always there - a part of my world. I could not categorize or define them. They were inseparable from the earth they grew out of, and from the sky they stretched into.

Once as a teenager I watched an ant crawl on the bark of a pine tree in my backyard. There was nothing unique about this particular ant or tree, except for that it revealed to me a simplicity that I will never possess. Tears flowed down my cheeks in unmatched admiration and envy. The ant crawled with deep content, focused on the task it was created to do. It just *was*, while I was desperately trying to figure out how to be. As its hard exoskeleton moved skyward up the rough pine bark, I felt the density of my own bones.

Six years later, that awe-inspiring tree fell down during a thunderstorm. My step-brother cut it into pieces and we had a tall bonfire. It was a kind of funeral. I mourned while watching the sap ooze out of the burning trunk. The tip of the flame threatened to touch the looming branches overhead. I sipped my beer and remembered collecting its pine cones, stepping on its shed needles with bare feet, and dreaming underneath its branches.

There is a hole to the sky where it used to stand.





Figure 4

### **Cypress Knees on the Shore of Lake Lochloosa**

“ An idea, a relationship, can go extinct, just like an animal or a plant. The idea in this case is ‘nature,’ the separate and wild province, the world apart from man to which he has adapted, under whose rules he was born and died ... We never thought that we had

wrecked nature. Deep down, we never really thought we could: it was too big and too old; its forces - the wind, the rain, the sun - were too strong, too elemental. But, quite by accident, it turned out that the carbon dioxide and other gases we were producing in pursuit of a better life ... *could* alter the power of the sun ... we are ending nature. ” - Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*

When my grandfather passed away a year and a half ago, I traveled to Florida for his funeral. My grandparents lived on a 6,000 acre lake named Lake Lochloosa. As a child, Grandpa would take me out on his pontoon boat. My brother and I would count the alligators and the bald eagle nests. One year, tilapia fish made their beds right next to the dock. We would watch them swim in the murky brown waters. Every evening my grandfather would walk out over the water while leaning on his wooden cane. With a camera dangling around his neck, he would take photos of the sunset. The orange light would tint his glacier blue eyes.

Their pontoon boat was sold when my grandfather became sick. The water level of the lake dropped because of drought, and I would receive reports from my grandmother about the status of the dwindling alligator population. Weeds took over the waterfront and the tilapia fish never returned. In *The End of Nature*, published in 1989, Bill McKibben proposes that the idea of nature, as a world apart from man, has come to an end. The production of greenhouse gases has changed the atmosphere. This means that humans have affected every inch of the planet through altering the climate. McKibben describes his experience at a once secluded Adirondack lake: “Instead of being able to forget everything but yourself, and even yourself except for the muscles and the skin, you must be alert ... You’re forced to think, not feel - to think of human society and of people.”

When I visited Lake Lochloosa for my grandfather’s funeral, I wandered around the cypress trees at the lake’s edge and admired their exposed knobby knees. Spanish moss swayed above my head, and I silently mourned. I mourned not only my

grandfather, but I mourned the open areas of nonhuman life: breathing, moving, growing, multiplying, reproducing, dying, decomposing, communally operating, and ecologically diverse. These were the only spaces I knew as a child. Now, I find myself noticing the trace of humans in all landscapes, even the most “wild.”





Figure 5

### **Superficial Epidermis**

“ The epidermis is only in the most superficial way an indication of where an organism ends and its environment begins. ” - John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

The body is always there. It is the medium through which we experience the world. Sensory information percolates through my skin, through the boundary that defines “out there” from “in here.” When I carelessly cut myself on the sharp edge of a piece of glass, that border is breached, and my blood becomes apart of the outside. When I die and my body begins to decompose into the earth, do I still have an inside? Or has that division between body and earth become non-existent?

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari developed the philosophical concept of the rhizome in *A Thousand Plateaus*, which deconstructs hierarchical models of thinking. They challenge the tree-like conception of knowledge that functions according to binaries and dualisms. An example of this ‘arborescent’ model would be the biological tree of life, which places humans as the pinnacle of evolution. Based on the structure of a botanical rhizome (e.g. a ginger root), the rhizome theory contains a handful of principles including:

- 1 and 2. Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be.
3. Principle of multiplicity: it is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive, "multiplicity," that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world.

For my work, I am most concerned with these principles. Instead of placing humans at the top of the hierarchical tree of life, the rhizome theory places all life and matter on the same plane. To view the biosphere through the lense of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory, as ecologically diverse (or heterogeneous) and interconnected, can be environmentally beneficial. An anthropocentric viewpoint has been a feature of dominant culture, and it has ruined our planet. Everything on the planet exists as a multiplicity, constantly in flux, with porous boundaries, striving to maintain an equilibrium.

Taxonomy makes distinct divisions between forms of life, but when applying the principles of the rhizome to biological systems, those divisions become more fluid. The forms of trees are not so different from the forms of our bodies: wrinkles, cracks, holes, bulges and limbs. Trees grow burls just like we grow moles. Fungus grows underneath toenails just like trees grow mushrooms. Our bodies are birthed from our mother and the earth births the tree. Our bodies resist and fight wounds, illness, and weathering, but hold the scars of the past. The tree stands defiant and stoic during the strong windstorms and naked through cold winters. Trees, as well as other organisms, are not so different and separate from the human body. They may well have a way of growing, living, and nurturing that we can learn from.



Figure 6

### **A Futile Search for Permanence**

“In an open world, the creeping entanglements of life will always and inevitably triumph over our attempts to box them in.” - Tim Ingold, *Being Alive*

Steel, cement, glass, brick, gypsum, asphalt, plastic: these are the materials of the built world. Strong, durable, manufactured, cheap, and mass-produced. Humans seem to be obsessed with making a permanent mark on the earth; the production of these materials is a human attempt to embody permanence. It's the same instinct that drives someone to stamp their hand or foot into wet pavement. We've left an almost unfathomably large mark on the planet. It is an ancient desire for immortality or to leave something behind on the earth that outlives our corporeal existence. Some fungi are only alive for a few days before being reclaimed by the earth, yet their roles in transforming organic matter into food is essential to the ecosystem. If ephemeral mushrooms in the forest can make such an impactful difference, why are we so infatuated with permanence? Why are we so insecure about the length of our lifespan? What would happen if we embraced our ephemerality?

In *The World Without Us*, Alan Weisman discusses how quickly our human-made structures would crumble if we disappeared from the planet. "On the day after humans disappear, nature takes over and immediately begins cleaning house - or houses, that is. Cleans them right off the face of the Earth. They all go." As Weisman points out, even our strongest and most durable of materials (e.g. plastic, steel) will be recycled by the earth over time. Despite the ceaseless attempts to produce something that will endure far longer than a lifetime, all humans have done is cause damage that will take centuries to repair. The very idea that things should last forever is greatly flawed. The earth is constantly maintaining an equilibrium which requires both growth and destruction. It is in our interest to build into or with the natural world rather than building against it. If the built world is also viewed as a grown structure, then perhaps we could live in a more symbiotic relationship with the planet.





Figure 7

### **Materialism and Craft**

As a craftsperson, I have a close relationship to physical matter: the movement of hot glass, the viscosity of plaster, the smell of melting wax, and the sound of metal

teeth on wood. As I learn to manipulate these materials, I notice the way they react to various phenomena. Heat, humidity, time, gravity, pressure, and interaction with other materials transform their behavior. Glass is stressed by dramatic shifts in temperature, wood becomes malleable with steam, and steel oxidizes when exposed to moisture and time. These processes animate the raw material at hand. Glass, metal, clay, wood, and fiber all react, grow, break down, stretch, move and flow.

Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* proposes the theory that inanimate materials are not dead and inert, but have a potent agency in the world. Bennett describes an assemblage of things on a storm drain grate in Baltimore: one large men's black plastic work glove, one dense mat of oak pollen, one unblemished dead rat, one white plastic bottle cap, one smooth stick of wood. She noticed how this seemingly insignificant debris "commanded attention in its own right."

"In the second moment, stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, it provoked affects in me: I was repelled by the dead (or was it merely sleeping?) rat and dismayed by the litter, but I also felt something else: a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of *that* rat, *that* configuration of pollen, *that* otherwise utterly banal, mass-produced water-bottle cap . . .

I realized that the capacity of these bodies was not restricted to a passive 'intractability' but also included the ability to make things happen, to produce effects. When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, it was in part because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me. For had the sun not glinted on the black glove, I might not have seen the rat; had the rat not been there, I might not have noted the bottle cap, and so on. But they *were* all there just as they were, and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them . . . I achieved, for a moment, what Thoreau had made his life's goal: to be able, as Thomas Dumm puts it, 'to be surprised by what we see.'

This new materialist philosophy, of 'dead' matter in fact being enchantingly alive, is intrinsically tied to the way I understand all craft practices. A tactile knowledge of a material language is the epitome of craft, and that intimacy with matter highlights its vibrancy. My understanding of the properties of glass, a material that straddles an existence that is both organic and synthetic, has allowed me to see the dynamic qualities of all matter. It seems to have a mind of its own and, like the collection of debris that commanded Bennett's attention, has the ability to "provoke affects in me." Working with any material in the studio, from hot glass to paint, demands the craftsman to sensitively react and respond to its particularities. Tim Ingold touches on this process in his essay "The Textility of Making", where he argues against the *hylomorphic* model of creation, where form is imposed onto material. He proposes that "the forms of things arise within fields of force and flows of material. It is by intervening in these force-fields and following the lines of flow that practitioners make things."





Figure 8

***I Thought the Earth Remembered Me***

A burl is a bulbous protrusion growing on the side of a tree. Inside these burls, there is a tangle of knots and dormant buds that create intricate and unrepeatable patterns. When a tree has grown a burl, it is typically an indication that there is some sort of stress caused by a fungus, disease, insects, or injury. A burl can be seen as a kind of wound, scar, or tumor, but it also can be a reserve of genetic clones that will sprout when the parent tree dies. The rope-like forms of burls are one example of the natural world's many complex ways of regulating itself in order to return to a balanced state. Underneath the gnarly appearance of these burls, there is a carefully calculated, slow, and ancient process at work. The recognition of these processes may lead to a more collaborative way of existing on the planet.



Figure 9

In the installation *Burl* (Figure 9), these moments of transformation are embraced. The work integrates plaster casts of gnarly knots, roots, fungi, and burls into

the clean white walls of the gallery. These ambiguous bodily forms create an uncertainty: they appear to both be growing and emerging while simultaneously decaying and disappearing into the gypsum skins. The interventions have the potential to be permanent gestures in the space or as ephemeral as mushrooms. The neutral tones and organic textures both dissolve into the smooth white wall and extend into our space. These contradicting elements play off of each other to disturb the duality between what is grown and what is built. Deformed scars on otherwise flawless skin, these things follow a formula or system in their growth pattern. One can imagine a network of mycelium connecting them behind the wall as a dense matt of white webs weaving in between the wood studs. Subtly disrupting the clean blank slate of the white gallery wall, *Burl* insinuates the energetic potential of the interior space as living thing, something that is from and will return to the Earth.



Figure 10

When a tree dies in the forest fungi begin to take over. The tree's innards are hollowed out and become a habitat for invertebrates. Over time, the tree becomes new

soil. In the urban forest, there is little to no mycelial network to return the wood back into nutrients. When mushrooms do appear on a dead urban tree, it reminds me of the creeping entanglements of life. *Snag* (Figure 11) is a sculptural monument to these moments in the built-world, where non-human life makes home in the cracks. A facsimile of a tree stump with clusters of fungi, *Snag* recontextualizes the dead stump within a sterile gallery space on a white plinth. The stump appears solid, wooden, and 'real' upon first glance, but the object unfolds with time. It reveals its hollow, tenuous, and materially ambiguous nature (Figure 12). Both *Burl* and *Snag* exist in a space somewhere between human-made and naturally grown and reflect on the confused condition of the biosphere.



Figure 11



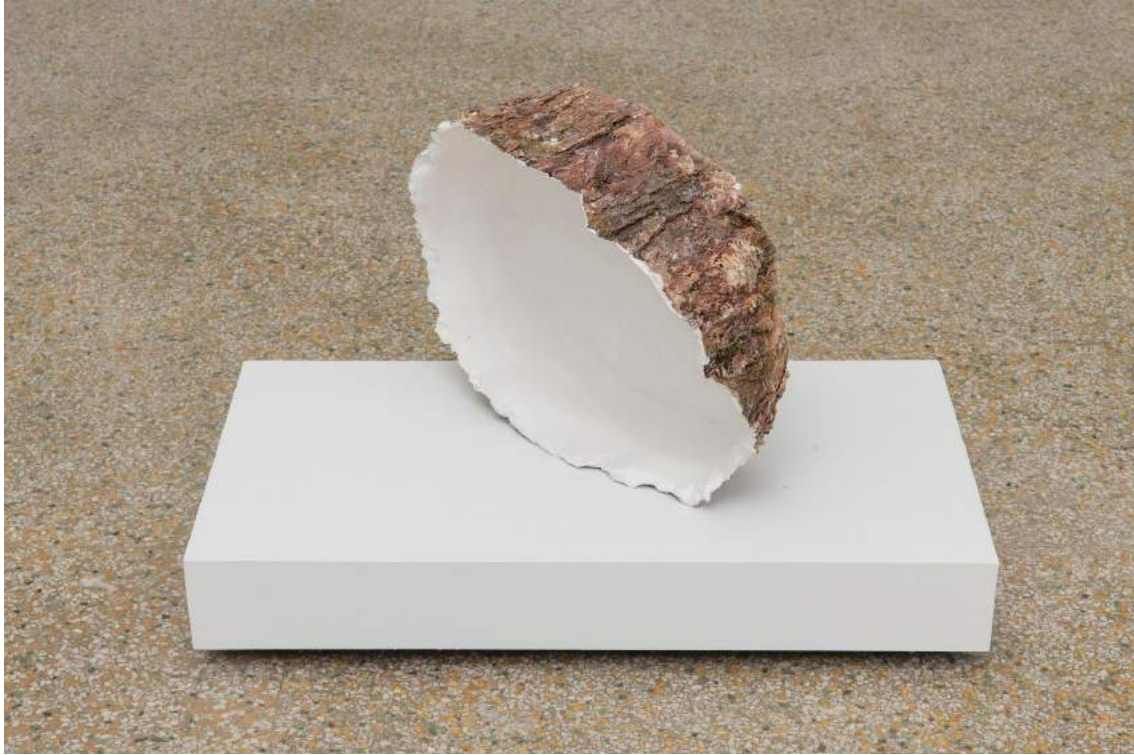


Figure 12



Figure 13

The white voids in *To Be Removed* (Figure 13) reflect the white of the wall and the plaster underside of *Snag*. A void lacks; it *is* nothing. The void is in direct opposition to the complex forms of life. The voided elements of *To Be Removed* are things that were once living; leaves, pine needles, and the scar of a former tree branch. In a built environment, the debris of former lives are removed. Human activity threatens to disrupt the cycles of the planet and to create a homogenous void.

The title of the exhibition *I Thought the Earth Remembered Me* is derived from the poem “Sleeping in the Forest” by Mary Oliver:

I thought the earth remembered me, she  
took me back so tenderly, arranging  
her dark skirts, her pockets  
full of lichens and seeds. I slept  
as never before, a stone  
on the riverbed, nothing  
between me and the white fire of the stars  
but my thoughts, and they floated  
light as moths among the branches  
of the perfect trees. All night  
I heard the small kingdoms breathing  
around me, the insects, and the birds  
who do their work in the darkness. All night  
I rose and fell, as if in water, grappling  
with a luminous doom. By morning  
I had vanished at least a dozen times  
into something better.

The short poem anthropomorphizes the Earth, who “arranges her dark skirts, her pockets full of lichens and seeds” for the resting speaker. The poem concludes, “By morning, I had vanished at least a dozen times into something better.” The poem expresses a sensitive and nuanced experience of wilderness, and it imagines the forest

as a place with potent agency: “All night I heard the small kingdoms breathing around me.” From the rocky streams of my childhood to the urban forests that surround me now, I have always found solace in the omnipotent forces of the natural world. I find comfort in an optimism that the Earth will regain balance, long after my body is tenderly welcomed back into the soil.

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## Vita

### Education

- 2019 MFA Craft / Material Studies  
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
- 2017 BFA Fine Arts  
Columbus College of Art & Design, Columbus, OH

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2017 *The Order of Things*, Byers Gallery, Columbus, OH

### Group Exhibitions

- 2019 *MFA Thesis Exhibition*, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA
- 2019 *Adaptability: Vulnerability*, Hind Gallery, Richmond, VA
- 2019 *Street Scenes*, Circle Gallery, Maryland Federation of Art, Annapolis, MD
- 2018 *Emerge*, Page Bond Gallery, Richmond, VA
- 2018 *Methods*, ArtSpace, Richmond, VA
- 2017 *Humyn/Nature*, The Anderson, Richmond, VA
- 2017 *Chroma Student Exhibition*, Beeler Gallery, Columbus, OH
- 2016 *Make Them Cry: Tradition & Emotion in a Time of Trouble*, Beaton Gallery, Columbus, OH
- 2016 *So Sense Me Maybe*, Corrugate Studio Collective & Gallery, Columbus, OH

### Residencies

- 2020 Sculpture Space Artist Residency, Utica, NY
- 2019 ChaNorth Artist Residency, Pine Planes, NY
- 2019 ACRE Residency, Stuben, WI
- 2019 Merrywood Artist Residency, Forest, VA

## **Teaching Experience**

- 2018 Intro to Glass Instructor, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
- 2018 Teaching Assistant to Sayaka Suzuki, The Secret Language of Colors (Pate De Verre), Pittsburgh Glass Center, Pittsburgh, PA
- 2018 Teaching Assistant to Jack Wax, Intro to Glass, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

## **Professional Experience**

- 2019 Studio Tech Assistant, Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, WA
- 2016 - 17 Sculpture Lab Technician, Columbus College of Art & Design, Columbus, OH
- 2016 - 17 Hot Glass Assistant for Molly Jo Burke, Columbus, OH
- 2016 Glass Lab Technician, Columbus College of Art & Design, Columbus, OH
- 2014 Beeler Gallery Assistant, Columbus College of Art & Design, Columbus, OH