ENDURE

Jacob Copetillo
Virginia Commonwealth University

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ENDURE

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

by

Jacob Matthew Copetillo
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Painting and Drawing, University of Georgia, 2008

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Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May, 2012
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my Wife Mary Ann
You have been my greatest influence for the past decade. I’m amazed by your compassion and your love for people and I am blessed beyond measure to have you as my wife. I can’t imagine doing all this without your unconditional love and friendship. I love you Mary Ann.

To my Family
It is my hope and prayer that we all find rest in Jesus; the one who heals broken hearts and reconciles sons to their fathers. I long for the day when He will make all things whole again. I love you all.

To my Committee
Sonya Clark, Susan Iverson, and Bill Hammersley, thank you for all of your encouragement and expertise. I looked forward to every meeting that we had, I enjoyed every minute, and I always left inspired. Through your sharpening gestures, I have become much more aware of my strengths and weaknesses as I make my work.

To my Fellow Graduates and Friends
It has been wonderful making new friends and finding out how we do this thing called art. I look forward to seeing you all in the “real world.” It has been a pleasure to work alongside you; much of my education was facilitated by your honest and thoughtful critique. I would like to say a special thanks to Jason Hackett and Ariel Brice for their consistently encouraging and provocative questions during my most difficult semester. And to my studio mates, Nikki Farrand, Jacob Sorenson, and Ruby Troup, thanks for putting up with my shenanigans!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influences</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronology</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deconstruction</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstruction</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endure</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Vitae</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Untitled (Planetarium) Sarah Sze.................................................................1
2. Maybe Hope Will Find Us Another Day.......................................................2
3. Maybe Hope Will Find Us Another Day (detail)” ......................................3
4. State of Being (In Silence), Chiharu Shiota..............................................4
5. Maybe Hope Will Find Us Another Day (installation shot)”..................5
6. Confessional” Martin Puryear.................................................................6
7. Orthodoxy..............................................................................................8
8. 1990 Main St. (House No. 3).....................................................................9
9. 1990 Main St........................................................................................10
10. Seamless Tragedy..................................................................................11
11. 2x4 Project.............................................................................................14
12. 2x4 Project (When You Become Like Me)..............................................15
13. Endure...................................................................................................17
14. Endure (detail through window)..............................................................18
15. Endure (detail of arms)..........................................................................20
16. Unland: the orphan’s tunic, Doris Salcedo..........................................22
My thesis is an account of my research on Deconstruction as it relates to family structure and the making of the objects leading to, and consisting of, the work shown in the installation, *Endure*. The work is a product of my intercessory labor to make sense of the breakage within family structure. Through forced brokenness, domestic imagery, and intercessory reconstruction, I am building a memorial that expresses my concern with deconstruction and hope for reconciliation.
INFLUENCES

I have spent a great deal of time searching for influences since I came to graduate school. Before my time at Virginia Commonwealth University, I primarily focused on painting and drawing, so most of my influences were painters, printmakers, and draftsmen working in two dimensions.

My first major discovery was of the installation artist, Sarah Sze. I saw an image of her work *Untitled (Portable Planetarium)* on a poster while refilling a water bottle in the hallway outside of my studio. Immediately, I was captured by Sze’s ability to articulate space, since that was the most difficult aspect of my transition from working in two dimensional media and switching to three.

Sarah Sze, “Untitled (Portable Planetarium)” (2009); Installation at Lyon Biennale

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1 Untitled (Portable Planetarium), Lyon Biennale, Lyon, France, 2009.
Sze’s installations are themselves a leap from painting to sculpture. An abundance of consumer objects such as matchsticks, cotton swabs, and office supplies illustrate galactica, reminding us of the cosmic system of which we we are a part. Writer Christian Viveros-Faune stated in his review of Sze’s 2010 show at Tanya Bonakdar, her sculptures “both challenge and celebrate the human weakness for inventing stability for the world's messiness.”

She illustrates chaos in the midst of an underlying order while thrusting us deep inside of it all.

For my first-year review, I mounted the largest sculpture I have ever created in order to actualize a full-scale version of my previously model-like works. Maybe Hope Will Find Us Another Day took up 4,290 cubic feet of gallery space. It was a living room mounted in the skylight of the gallery, between the first and second floor and the piece deconstructed as if falling apart toward the ground. I was working in the spirit of Sarah Sze as I developed an elaborate scaffold-like system by piecing thousands of broken house parts together with steel wire and pick-up sticks. This method contrasted the instability of the entire installation with the complex system that held it all frozen in space.

“Maybe Hope Will Find Us Another Day” (2010); pick-up sticks, living room

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Because I had to work on a scaffold, I experienced a kind of intimacy with the work I have never felt while making anything else. It became a kind of sanctuary as I poured my own family pain into the effort of mounting a living room twenty feet in the air. This effort and labor became a very important aspect of my work. Effort and labor gave the work a sense of what I was more interested in, which was earnestness and hope in the midst of obvious chaos and brokenness.

During the time of making *Maybe Hope Will Find Us Another Day*, I discovered another Installation Artist named Chiharu Shiota. Her work is intensely emotional with a semi-neurotic affection. In her work, *State of Being (In Silence)*, Chiharu Shiota utilizes simple materials.

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Chiharu Shiota, “State of Being (In Silence)” (2009); piano, chairs, wool thread

With wool thread, she articulates smoke rising from the chairs and piano in the room, making us acutely aware of the air in the space. She also allows us to be aware of the potential of the music that could be made, but the room is silent so we are reminded of the loss of sound. With Shiota’s emotional work in my mind, I set out to find a more poetic nature I desired for my work. How could I make work as powerful as *Maybe Hope Will Find Us Another Day*, while working smaller? I wanted to maintain the effort and labor I experienced in the large installation and pack those concepts into a much more transportable object. This transportability would allow me to manipulate the form more quickly and in turn allow me to make larger leaps in my research.
For my third semester of graduate school, I did extensive research on the late minimalist Sculptor, Martin Puryear, comparing his work with the postmodern discourse and the spiritual works of Shaker Craft. After reading every major writing along with numerous articles on Puryear, I came away with a tremendous interest in Craft as it relates to Sculpture. I interpret Puryear’s work as an earnest pursuit of the “real” through making. I see this pursuit as a mirroring of the Shaker’s pursuit of making, since they believed they were building the literal Kingdom of God on earth. Researching Puryear’s work gave me a license to work minimally as I saw multiple layers unfold in his masterfully paired down sculptures. The power of his materials enriched my experience beyond what I was capable of appreciating beforehand.

In addition to Puryear’s work, I saw the Shaker’s basic lifestyle as a direct conversation with their heavenly hope. I have come alongside the Shakers in my pursuit. Though not nearly as minimal, I now work to strip away that which is superfluous and focus my intercessory mark-making on the events of this life.

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Lastly, I will briefly touch on the Arts and Crafts Movement. I took a deeper look at the Arts and Crafts movement since so much of it had to do with stability and order, coupled with honest work and material integrity. I began to see the figurative potential of furniture. More specifically, utilizing the Morris Chair from the Arts and Crafts Style allowed me to explore stability and order as they relate to the family by deconstructing selected parts such as, arms, legs, and backs.

I am pleased to join the discourse of those who have inspired my work. I experimented with several artists’ techniques, searching for my own approach in making. Somewhere between the abundance of material that Sarah Sze and Chiharu Shiota employ and Martin Puryear’s harmonious minimalism, I found my method for continuing the discourse.
A cast iron skillet flew from one end of the kitchen, barely missing his head and flying straight through both panes of the open, sliding-glass door that led to my bedroom with the crazy rainbow carpet. No one else cleaned it up for months and I sure wasn’t going to either. Dissonance. Deconstruction.

We are prone to deconstruction. It is in our nature to fall apart and break down. Our bodies begin to deteriorate even at the moment of birth, and when we get older, we build things that eventually break down as well. It seems as if we are doomed to an inevitably deconstructed end.

Through forced brokenness, domestic imagery, and intercessory reconstruction, I am building a memorial that expresses my concern with deconstruction and hope for reconciliation. Through meditating on the ways families deconstruct one another, I am interceding for reconciliation in the midst of brokenness while proposing a purpose for our inevitable deconstruction.
Upon arriving at graduate school, I dove into making without any direction at all. I felt that getting started was the best thing I could do at the time. With my interest in kinetic sculpture, I started on what became a complete disaster and later, an abandoned artwork altogether. I won’t speak of it anymore other than by saying, “It was a disaster!”

During the time I spent making this piece, I would wake in the morning with a flash of an image in my mind’s eye. Each day it was different, until one morning the image repeated itself. It was an image of a miniaturized craftsman home, hung with its foundation against the wall and rotated 45 degrees. Though a craftsman home may not seem to be the most ideal for many people, I will say for myself that there seemed to be something perfect about it. It was idyllic; so of course, I started blindly making it. It was pure curiosity and maybe even aesthetic draw that compelled me to make a direct representation of what I would later title “Orthodoxy.”

“Orthodoxy” (2010); 42 x 42 inches, pine
Why did I dream of a house? Why that house? Why was it rotated or even on the wall in the first place? These were all questions that I found most intriguing as I constructed the house’s framing in a model-like scale.

Orthodoxy became a work of meditation. Through the use of patterning and repetition, I recalled the 27 houses I have lived in and the memories made within these homes. I worked hard to remember the floor plans of each house, and I found that I could remember almost every architectural detail. However, the events in each home were hazy. “Who did what?” and “Who said what?” were difficult to decipher, but my memories of where it happened and what the environment was like were as fresh as if I witnessed them yesterday. Through this meditation, I produced 27 drawings, one of each of the houses I lived in longer than 6 months. While remembering these houses through my meditative drawing process, I noticed one house in particular that stood out over the others.

“1990 Main St. (House No. 3)” (2010); Ink on Vellum
1990 Main St. was special because the memory of it was complete in my mind. There were no holes in my recollection of its structure. No matter how many times I followed the walls through my mind from room to room, inside and outside, I could not find a gap. 1990 Main St. was later built in three dimensions in an effort to actualize this memory, which became for me a type of memorialization. It stood with a cold and disconnected posture, nearly void of human reference.

At first this seemed like a failure. I wanted to memorialize a convincing portrayal of actual people, instead I was disappointed by how empty and skeletal the work had become. I wanted to get a sense of the family’s presence, not its absence.

Discontented with the void previously explained, my work took a drastic change from constructed order based on memory to deconstructed chaos based on meditation. In the work Seamless Tragedy, I was challenging 1990 Main St. by taking several of the models I built of the 27 houses and crushing them to pieces. It was a cathartic move on my part that forced me to
approach the work from another direction and in the end it felt like a more accurate depiction of family life than *1990 Main St.* ever could.

“Seamless Tragedy” (2010); pine and steel wire

*Seamless Tragedy* embodied the energy of a “home” in complete chaos, combining imagery from natural disasters while raising questions of family stability. It also marked the first time I considered the difference between the terms “house” and “home” to describe my subject matter. The work became about the family and not the house itself.
As I consider what we know about the history of family structure and how it has changed over the centuries, I find gaps in my understanding of what it was really like. So I stick with what I know: my lifetime. I can’t help but consider the Postmodern Era in which I live. Our parents have handed down philosophies to my contemporaries and me that have shaped who we are and what we are becoming. Of these many philosophies I have focused on Deconstruction.

Deconstruction is described by its originator, Jacques Derrida, as "a tendency to subvert or pull apart and examine existing conventions having to do with meaning and individualism."\(^5\) Although Deconstruction is mainly associated with literary theory, it has shaped how we use our words and thus greatly affected our way of thinking, since we also think in words. Derrida shyed away from using the term but insisted upon the translation “deconstruction” rather than “destruction” in order to suggest “precision” rather than “violence.”\(^6\) Because of the adoption of deconstructive theory into our society, my contemporaries and I have been raised in a world that says there are multiple answers to any given question. Out of that spirit, we question everything, even our parents. Granted, humanity has questioned authority for centuries, but now we have come so far that it is expected. Family values now can be seen as mere suggestions rather than truths. Traditions are not respected but cast aside because of the relativistic worldviews we inherited.

I do not hold Derrida personally at fault for the direct deconstruction of the institution of family, but I am concerned with the obvious dissonance his theory has produced. The stability

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\(^6\) “Of Grammatology,” p. 1
that we once found in our beliefs and traditions is being “precisely” deconstructed as Derrida imagined and furthermore, there exists a relational “violence” between family members.

We live in a fragmented world that throws off idealized standards about life, yet we have dreams of what an idealized world would look like. We dream, and we should.

I am not content with living in a deconstructed world where everything is mediated and truth is only a social construct. So I am working toward wholeness, a mutual understanding between family members and a means of reconciliation that is beyond a state of civility, where we merely exchange forgiveness.

I am deconstructing in the sense of analysis. Instead of subverting meaning, I deconstruct to reveal the relational “violence” between family members while pleading for wholeness. My work toward wholeness is not an attempt to find another meaning for the family, but to memorialize what we have lost and forgotten. I work toward an honest state of brokenness that doesn’t cover itself up when it is exposed. I hope that these de-constructions, brought to life, will give insight into human pain and suffering.

The 2x4 Project was a semester-long study working with No. 2 pine studs: a simple object that carried a strong reference to the home, which I then adopted as a vehicle for discussion on family structure. Through various modes of deconstruction, I worked to develope a vocabulary of mark-making. The 2x4’s were split, shattered, cut, hollowed out, etc. These methods defined a language of what it meant for me to analyze the notion of family structure.
This work was minimal in comparison to other works like *Seamless Tragedy*. Each 2x4 became a potent object and had a life of its own, telling separate stories as figurative representations of individual family members. I began to see the value of working with one object at a time and doing one simple act of deconstruction that would offer up numerous interpretations. I put them in different orientations so they could react to one another, telling me more about the meaning of their deconstruction and relationships.
After deconstructing the 2x4’s, I naturally gravitated toward reconstructing them. I mended, covered seams, taped splinters together, etc., hoping to direct more attention to their brokenness while offering up a limited and desperate attempt to heal them. I began to ask myself, “What if the notion of family is Reconstructed? How would relationships change?”

With the 2x4 Project, I developed another language of mark-making that would define various modes of reconstruction in order to contrast my deconstructive marks. I began to see how contrasting these two modes of mark-making upon a domestic form could conjure many comments on family discourse. In the work When You Become Like Me, I contrasted two 2x4s, one the height of a child, and the other the height of an adult. They were placed a certain distance apart which evoked a feeling of either confrontation or reconciliation depending on the viewer.

“2x4 Project (When You Become Like Me)” (2011); no. 2 Pine Stud, acrylic, nail
For the first time, the work began to feel personal, not only for myself but also for others. It took on more than just the figurative nature, but in addition, a real conversation between the figures emerged. This piece was the culmination of the $2x4$ Project.

I continued my work on Reconstruction as I began working on my thesis exhibition.
My thesis exhibition, *Endure*, is an installation that references a domestic interior space. More significantly, it is a memorial that serves as a sign of the struggle for wholeness within the family structure. My first obstacle in working with this space was to make it feel like a residential space without adding more imagery that would complicate the work.

I chose to extend the preexisting wall that separated my exhibition space from my neighbor next door. The extension allowed the viewer to enter *Endure* through a small hallway, just long enough to disconnect the viewer from the rest of the gallery and reduce the size of the room by almost one hundred square feet. The hallway causes the viewer to believe he is entering a different kind of space altogether. Cast shadows from the opposite side of the wall are seen immediately as the viewer walks down the hallway. At the end of the hallway is the source of the shadow: a broken and mismatched window, leaning precariously against the wall from one of its corners. The viewer is able to see through the window into an interior where two solid oak Morris Chairs face the hobbled-together Craftsman Style window.
At first encounter the window places the viewer outside of the environment made up by the chairs and the window, then as the viewer passes the window to enter further into the installation, he finds himself inside the same space that the chairs occupy. It is as if the viewer has interrupted a private event.

I wanted the viewers to end up in a specific place within the installation: behind the chairs, facing the window. Here the viewer could project himself, if he allowed, into the chairs, imagining himself sitting within them. This would be the ideal place for the discussion I wanted to have with my viewers. In this place, the choice of material, the absurdity of construction and the testimony of struggle would all be on display for the viewer to contemplate.

“Endure (detail through window)” (2012); no. 2 pine stud, quarter-sawn white oak

The choice of material was not one of happenstance, nor was the type of chair I chose to use. Instead, I spent two months researching a piece of furniture that would compliment my themes.
After much deliberation, I chose the Morris chair. It gets its name from its original designer, William Morris, the founder of the British Arts and Crafts Movement. In the late 1800’s, American designer and furniture maker Gustave Stickley improved upon the Morris design by removing its frivolous Victorian reference, tossing Morris’ dainty textiles and replacing them with brown leather, making it a working-man’s chair for northern America. From then on, it became an American icon and even a kind of poster-child for the American Craftsman Style. It is a patriarchal chair, as it assumes the authoritative pose of stability and order as well as the richness of family history. How could I find a more perfect chair for the work I wanted to make?

I picked apart the concept of the Morris chair, looking at its material. The Morris Chair, along with all Stickley furniture, was traditionally made from quarter-sawn white oak. This cut of wood provides maximum stability for shrinkage and expansion through the seasons and therefore limits warping after the chair is made. I made both chairs from this material, hoping to set up a contrast between the strength and stability of quarter-sawn oak and my deconstructive mark-making.

While working on *Endure*, I remembered what I learned from the *2x4 Project*, Martin Puryear, and my research on the Shaker’s pursuit of Heaven. I thought of the marks I would make on the chairs well before making them. By thinking about the marks ahead of time, I was able to meditate on the decisions that mothers and fathers make that affect their children even before conception. I saw myself plotting the marks that these chairs would wear before they were brought into reality. By premeditating these actions of wear, or acts of violence, upon my
figurative stand-ins, I was able to peer into a purpose for our daily pain and suffering as a people of families.

Before making these deconstructive marks on the chairs, I searched for an authenticity in their execution. I wanted them to feel like these marks happened, not like they were engineered by a mastermind. But how could I do this, having premeditated the marks myself? I had to adopt a stage and become the one making the marks, as if I was one of these figurative chairs. During my last critique in graduate school, Professor of Art Jack Wax commented on the theatrics of my thesis installation, wondering what I thought about the stage-like quality of *Endure*. It seemed necessary to embrace the stage-like quality in order for me to become a part of the work again, like being on the scaffold in *Maybe Hope Will Find Us Another Day*. I was taking on the role of the chairs, as if I was one of them.

“Endure (detail of arms)” (2012); quarter-sawn white oak

By putting myself in the place of these chairs, figuratively, I thought of what it meant to
“endure” pain within family life. I chose two chairs so that the viewer could recognize a relationship as opposed to the story of an individual.

Recently, I stumbled upon the work of Columbian sculptor, Doris Salcedo and I immediately fell in love with her poetic work. It was one of those moments that happen all too often, when you find someone who makes work similar to yours, only better! Despite this minor disappointment, I continued on, inspired by her work.

I interpret her work to be almost strictly about violence and memorializing the loss of fellow Colombians. Loss and memorialization are topics I am deeply concerned with in my own practice, but I am also trying to find a way to reconcile the Deconstruction of family structure with those whom we have not yet completely lost. Researching Salcedo’s work made me aware of her countenance and the great care she had for her vision. One work in particular comes to mind as I describe her compassion toward her making. Unland: The Orphan’s Tunic⁷ is an example of an illogical gesture to memorialize. Salcedo embroidered human hair through the grain of the wooden fibers, transitioning one table painted white with another table of dark and natural color. It took a team of fifteen people working full time for three years in order to finish the piece. She describes the joint between the tables, quoting Pocelan the poet, saying “It is only absurdity which shows the presence of the human.”⁸

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I am adding to the absurdity that Salcedo speaks of as I perform a different kind of gesture. By placing the chairs together in front of a broken window, I have forced them into a place of shared contemplation where they gaze through the window at the dark and bare wall of the gallery. I do not want to give the viewer something to look at, rather I want the viewer to find what it is he would see. There is a general optimism that comes with the act of gazing through a window, but one cannot overlook the brokenness that this window portrays. It is not functional and there is an absurdity to its construction. The viewer must fill in the story answering how and why it was broken. Do the figures “endure” hopelessly, just holding on until it’s all over? Perhaps it is an optimistic gesture, built by the figures in the chairs, in order to remind themselves of a weak but growing hope.


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EDUCATION

2012 MFA Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), School of the Arts, Craft/Material Studies - Wood, Richmond, VA

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2012 Endure, Anderson Gallery VCU, Richmond, VA
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2011 Corrugated Box Building, Richmond, VA
2011 Spectrum, Page Bond Gallery, Richmond, VA
2011 Day One: The Early Protagonist, Art6 Gallery, Richmond, VA
2010 Broadband 10 + 11, Page Bond Gallery, Richmond, VA
2010 35th Annual Juried Exhibition, The Lyndon House Gallery, Athens, GA
2009 Calvary #1, Private Collection of Ms. Susan Brook, GA
2009 Encapsulating Historic UGA, UGA Tate Student Center Athens, GA
2009 Prince Avenue Gala, Auction, Athens, GA
2008 Shakey’s: The past 50 years, Shakey’s USA, Auburn, AL
2008 Wine and Turpentine, Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia, GA
2007 Solo Show: Intercession: Recent Works of Jacob M. Copetillo, University of Georgia, Athens, GA

2006 Annual Drawing & Painting Show, Juried Exhibition, University of Georgia, GA

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- Arts and Composition
- 5th-8th Grade Art

WORKSHOPS AND PRESENTATIONS


Extreme Printmaking: An Exciting Approach to Printing the Norm (workshop), Prince Ave Christian School, Bogart, GA, Summer 2010.

Exhibitions, Portfolios, and Representation (workshop), Prince Ave Christian School, Bogart, GA, Summer 2009.

Bookbinding and the Discipline of Visual Thinking (workshop), Glynn Academy, Brunswick, Georgia.

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Art Student Receives National Recognition: Jacob Copetillo, VSU Spectators, Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA

Figurative Works of the Last Exit Show, The Red and Black, Athens, GA

Figurative Works of the Last Exit Show, The Flagpole Magazine, Athens, GA

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