Thin Time

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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.

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Bachelor of Arts, Brandeis University, 2006

Director: Corin Hewitt, Assistant Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

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Abstract

THIN TIME

by Jonathan Benjamin, MFA in Sculpture + Extended Media

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, 2012.

Major Director: Corin Hewitt, Assistant Professor, Department of Sculpture + Extended Media

This thesis is an honest attempt to put language to a non-lingual practice. It describes my studio process, my thoughts on materials and surface, and outlines some of the images and things out in the world that inform my work.
I. Pause for Breath

THIN TIME

FLAT TIME

PAPER SLIVER ONION SKIN TIME
Replication is an essential part of my studio process. A lot of what I do in the studio is centered on translating information from one surface to another, or shrouding objects in new skin. Many of the objects I construct act as containers or grounds for imagery. The same form might shift between materials multiple times as it gets defined: a clay positive gets molded and cast, then reworked in plaster or wax and re-molded. I try to let the ideas driving my work shift as the issues go from my head to my hands, and I find the best way to start manifesting ideas in the physical is through a process of creating surface and material studies. I had the image of a small log in my mind. I began to tease out some of
the form, a few test strips of paper, seamed with plaster, a quick facsimile of bark and wood grain. I set about constructing the hollowed out log, flattened on each end as if sliced across a clean plane, capped by two graphic discs that closed off the interior hollow space. I let the log build up in layers, foam and cardboard sub-structure, with plaster encasing it, inscribing the surface into the plaster as it accrued more and more mass. One of the end disks was translucent, so it could act as a projection screen. With a small projector running inside of the hollow space, I became more aware of that inner space existing, the projected image giving proof that something vital was happening in its insides. For days, the feeling that the inner core was the most vital part of the piece stayed with me. The end-cap projection screen became an unnecessary barrier between the viewer and the inner core, and the content of the projection was extracted from the piece, translated into a still, physical image. As I contemplated the density of the hollowness inside the log, the thickness of the thing came into sharp focus. It was functioning like a shell, about 1/2” thick all around, the opening was gaping. I got the sense of the opening closing up, like an aperture or an anus, or a tightly rolled sleeping bag, constricting the interior space. Once the image of the small log overlaid with the sleeping bag roll worked its way into my head I began making more surface tests of how the two images could collide, the kind of touch that would exist between them. I like to be surrounded by the beginnings of sculptures when I’m in the studio, to have test strips of materials interacting with other materials, scraps dipped in paint, things hacked into, sanded back, glued together. Like the test strips for the intersection between the plaster log edge, lapping up against the pillowy, bulging quilted fabric, quick surface proposals act as material sketches for larger wholes.
These fragments can be generative, freeing up objects from old ideas, pushing them toward new functions, or sometimes the test strips become patches that get transplanted directly onto other pieces. These test objects usually get thrown away. They are pushed past the point of visually “working” - they are at the very end of their productive period, the last step or process being the one that ruins it, covers up too much, obscures the thing that made it tactile or worth looking at. That introduces a kind of concrete stopping point for a surface.

*buoy*, 2010.
For example, one piece contained a suspended chunk of a rotting branch, fabricated from foam. The image of the branch chunk that I had in my mind was fluid, certain aspects were clear (it would reveal some small part of the real branch, as well as hint at its materiality, it would reference a well-used buoy, it would be encased in marine grade varnish) others aspects were completely unknown (its color, the type of surface it would have under the varnish, the level of detail it would hold up to before it began to pixilate). I began with a real rotting branch, pieces crumbling and mushing under my fingers as I tried to work into the surface. In short, the end was removed, replicated in foam and spackle, finished, painted, and varnished, and reattached where the previous piece had been. Mucking around with materials external to the object itself lets the final object contain a sense of directness in its fabrication. Here is the process I went through to find the process for the facsimile wood chunk:

A chunk of foam was broken into multiple parts. Each part was roughly shaped to match a scrap of the original wood. One of the foam wood chunks got primed, only the bottom half. All of the chunks got dipped in varnish, again, just the bottom halves. One or two got primed over the coat of varnish. Each of the little chunks then got subdivided again - their coated bottom halves got split in half, so a layer of spackle could be added to the bottom quarter of each chunk. Some were dipped in paint, others had paint sparsely brushed on. Some were dried under a very hot hairdryer, slightly melting the foam in places. Some of the chunks were already unusable, others were revived with sandpaper and a wire brush. After repeating the steps that seemed to be yielding the most interesting surfaces, more little test scraps were taken up to the same point. After the
process was repeated a few times my worktables were dotted with foam artificial wooden chunks, roughly arranged to show their location along various spectra – ultra-detailed/generalized, roughness/smoothness, shininess/matte-ness, chromatic, etc. A few of the individual bits resonated. The others were set aside or discarded. The most compelling test chunk became the template, and its process was transcribed onto the larger piece. The branch end was further carved, sanded back, spackled smooth, then smaller details were carved into the skim-coat of spackle. The areas of foam that represented the bark were left somewhat rough, while the foam that was occupying the form of the exposed smooth wood beneath the bark was sanded up to a high finish. A thin strip of pink foam was left exposed to show the material shift from wood to foam, and the rest of the foam was thickly coated in a dull, grayish-blue exterior paint, and finally the entire surface got a few coats of marine grade varnish.

*wobbly one for the pewter shelf, 2011.*
I try to stay aware of how controlled the surfaces of my sculptures are. By relegating the messiness of experimentation to surface tests it obscures the final surface of the piece. Other objects require that messiness, they need to be wrapped in skins that bear the record of their change, they build up a patina and a residue of potential moves and erasures. They show slippages, or glitches in their surface. On the most extreme end of the spectrum, an object can exist in flux in its entirety. The skin and the bones are all shifting, being reworked, and being drastically reconstituted at each step. I was working on a piece that kept shifting between model and sculpture, above and below ground, worktable and art object. Everything was in flux, capable of forcing itself to the foreground or dropping off into the background. I like to jump between both ways of working. The unexpected missteps that let a surface organically grow through its building and subsequent erasure, the back and forth of defining where the edge of the surface ends, locks the object into a very real-world time scale, where marks and layers provide a readable history to the object. A fabricated surface, applied onto or acted upon the object, annihilates that legibility, making the object’s surface impenetrable, opaque, allowing it to pass for something its not.
III. Against Fixity

The bric-a-brac around the studio functions as a kind of visual slurry. I like to have little bits to dip back into, to set next to something else. I often find myself unhappy with some portion of a piece, but obsessed with a single moment, or a certain section of surface, or a material mash-up. These objects get layered back into the studio, as a work surface, or a riser, a prop or crutch to hold something up. Often the part that clicks will get removed and become a
component for something else. Here’s an extreme example. I made a pedestal. It was an average looking pedestal except that it had a chunk cut out from the top, as if someone had sliced through one top edge at an angle - it became a quasi-podium or lectern, maybe a mailbox. I quickly altered it so it could function as a sort of storage cabinet with a small window-like opening at the top, on the angled face. Originally its storage ability was supposed to be a side-note in the piece and its main function was to act as a pedestal. As I worked on it I became aware of how unnecessary it was to put something on top. But it was such a strange object, so out of place in my studio, that I had to create a new mental category to put it in - it had elements of being a sculpture, it held a form, punched out a volume in space, but it had the immediacy and presence of a piece of furniture - it was just there, in the way a hand-me-down sofa just exists to be sat on, muddy shoes and all. It’s height was so ideal, its proportions so naturally relatable to my body - my hands, my elbows, the way the top of my spine wants to curl up when I’m peering down at my fingers as they turn out a tiny drawing. The pedestal instantly became a favorite work surface. Unlike a table or a desk, it existed in a liminal state - it was a half-sculpture that somehow begat other sculptural parts. It started to accrue traces of its use - graphite dust, plaster, clay, crumbs and coffee rings. I was broadsided by its importance in my studio. Its usefulness became intrinsic to what it was. I had trouble understanding it. I got headaches trying to understand it. I knew how important it’s hollow interior volume was, but had no idea how to give weight to the space. Its first opening was about the size of a brick, which was covered up by a tacked-on piece of old chipboard with a small slit, roughly the shape of a letter opening for a mailbox. The air inside was different than the air outside - it sounded
different, it was stiller, and cooler. Putting your ear up to the slit, you could feel
the cool stillness hit your eardrum. I took the entire pedestal apart, ripped it open
at its seams. I added insulation, a secondary chamber to house a refrigeration
unit, a small shelf, a cooling vent on the side, and a fan to keep the cold air
moving around inside. I plugged in the pedestal. It hummed. The vent pumped
hot air towards my feet. Inside, the fan kicked up traces of sawdust that stuck to
cold drops of condensation dotting the aluminum-sheathed insulation sheets. I
patched up the fractured seems. I sanded it back, and patched it again. I
sanded it with 220 grit, 320 grit, 400 grit sand paper. 600 grit, to push it over the
edge - up to that point it looked smoother than it felt, after 600 it felt smoother
than it looked. I waxed it, and buffed it, and waxed it again and buffed it again. I
mixed up batches of plaster on top, made rubber molds, made clay positives,
carved wood, cut through paper, poured hot wax. Almost all of the mess, all the
debris and leftover material, would crumble, chipping off effortlessly. Only the
smallest amounts of residue would be left clinging to the slick sides of the
pedestal. Instead of a quick build-up, the way a batch of plaster sets in a bucket,
or a knocked-over gallon of paint engulfs the surface it spreads across, the
pedestal forced the gunk of the studio to build slowly, incrementally. The surface
of the thing had everything packed into it, traced out what it had been used for, it
metered out the time I had spent with it in scratches and stains and drips.
The pedestal, with its internal cooling unit, is now a functional appendage of a larger installation. It sits on top of a constructed room, an ersatz basement space, a hallway-ish, barn-ish amalgam. Poetically speaking, it is a room with no exterior. Plywood cladding closes off the object, unifying its massive geometric body. Simple unadorned theatrical construction joins each of the architectural components. The dappled and mottled faces of the pedestal meld into a wash of planar sheet-good and pine lumber surfaces. The outside of the room affirms its object-hood, it is unabashedly a put-together thing, its shallowness nipping in the bud the possibility of a space for mental projection. The new-ness, the off-the-shelf readiness of the fresh plywood sheathing, primes me. It hits a reset button in my brain for crossing the threshold into the room.

Walking into the room I think of neither artwork nor sculpture but about the empty volume of space around my body. I become aware of the space between my body and the heavy oak walls, and the joists above my head. I think about my privileged knowledge of the refrigerated space inside of the pedestal on the ceiling above; cold, humming, dark and empty. When the gallery is quiet, when the air vents stop running and no one is talking, as I stand underneath the pedestal I can hear the faint hum of the refrigeration unit directly above. Visually, it becomes a blacked out square, a stoppage of light otherwise visible between the floorboards overhead. The cooling unit leaks, causing water to drip between the cracks in the floorboards, run down the joists, and drop onto the floor. It becomes a miniature sonar ping, proving to the ears how close the floor is to the ceiling, the wall to each other wall. I think of how far removed I am from the lofty vaulted echoing gallery space, and then I conjure up a mental image of myself as the smallest member of a set of Russian nesting dolls, inside of a room inside of
a bigger room inside of a building, or like Pinocchio and Geppetto in the belly of the whale. As I look at the back wall, a cement slab with a window, a portal or secondary threshold into a further-back space I feel a glitch in how big my body is, how tall I am. My eye-level, when looking at this smaller, mirrored-room, an inverted copy of the room my body is in, sets me into the floor, looking up at the space, the rafters, some light coming in. Water drips next to me, on my hand, I hear it hit the ground near my foot. I look for a minute, let my eyes rake across the cement floor of the 1/3 scale mirrored model, and I turn my body, focusing on the corresponding full scale window across the room. As I walk toward the door and out of the room, I’m very aware of how fast I cover the distance, how small the space seems suddenly, and I shut off the light and close the door behind me.
IV. Chevy Chase

Chevy, on-screen, presented as if recorded by security camera.

Chevy, on-screen, in-hand, further mediated, presented as a still printout from the fictitious security camera.
Chevy Chase, like all people, is gradually undergoing a continual transformation, living, aging, and his corresponding constructed identity, his filmic image, is constantly expanding to contain the newest layer of his identity, the most recent role or character, the new, slightly older version of himself. Despite this inevitable slow shift, he always reappears in an instantly understandable, knowable form. There is some kind of inherent humor in Chase’s inability to appear as anything other than himself – its an impossibility for him to disappear into a role.\footnote{What about the 1985 hit, Fletch? What about 1989’s smash follow-up Fletch Lives? I would argue that Chevy’s endless stream of costume changes and over-the-top characters only call attention to the fixity of his persona, and underscore how unfalteringly present he is in his own skin.} He’s the anti-chameleon. Watching him onscreen, we constantly have the sense of locating him; “There, that’s Chevy Chase, in a movie scene on my TV.”

His mediated image is so much a part of our understanding of who he is that to see a candid photo becomes a bit uncomfortable in it’s inability to mesh with his other trajectory.
Chase, as with any well-documented person, gives us slices or particulate slivers extracted from the continuum of his existence. Unlike many dramatic actors, Chase gives us a narrow bandwidth to pick from, minute changes in facial hair, hairstyles, time periods in which his films take place (they are all set in their respective present), which reinforces the disconnect between the fixed, unchanging aspects of his image and his body/person as an inevitable vessel to reveal the passing of time. There is another disconnect in that we are able to experience this decades-long documentation of a constructed persona through highly produced films, as opposed to the more familiar documentation of a family member or relative through old photos albums, slides, or 8 mm film reels.

In some ways, the aggregate of Chase’s films act as a container, a vessel to hold shadows or traces of Chevy Chase the person. All that is being contained within his films is immaterial, flickering light, pure image, and required
some body to weigh it down, a physical container. I wanted to manifest a solid form to encapsulate his image, a totemic object that could be draped in the meaning of the entirety of his other, filmed image. I wanted an icon, a fetish, that was emptied out of everything non-essential, that holds in as much as it holds out. It had to be self-contained, impermeable. I made a bust. A simple bust that metered Chevy's image across its small form. The scale of this object is modest, fist-sized, visually consumed quickly and fully. It was sculpted, molded, cast, treated, polished – it had to lock in his image with directness and keep that image suspended. It had to act as a kind of cipher, containing nothing, or repelling excess information, while maintaining the platonic sense of an everyman and of Chevy simultaneously. It had to both affirm and deny the importance of its own image. It became a talisman in my studio. The bust was supposed to be cast in bronze from a wax. The way the image of the thing began to operate in a system of signs, pointing inward, reflecting back, gave me pause about its substance. The material should point and deflect, diffuse or pixilate. The surface points to the familiar, the bronze bust, but it is graphite and metallic pigments worked into the plaster, built up in its small fissures, smoothed and polished. I made the plaster cast from an extra wax positive – it had a slight defect in the chin and neck, from a thin layer of leftover wax in the mold. Because of the way the wax had built up, no visual information was lost, it was a perfect copy of the surface of the mold, reduced by a fraction of the size, set back from the rest of the surface by a few millimeters. It had the effect of an onionskin – each layer of onion a perfectly scaled replica of the layer beneath or above. I began imagining the bust wearing a perfect replica of itself as a mask, or a skin suit, each layer perfectly corresponding to the layer below. Instead of using the original bust to
mold and cast from, I made a secondary mold around the defective wax – making a copy of a copy of a copy.

As the wax and plaster casts populated studio tables and shelves, each one started to lose potency. Just having them in the visual field started to wear on me, so they were all trashed or boxed up. The singular Chevy became denser, surrounded by air, compressed. It was an object for rituals, like a carved wooden Saint. The bust was anointed with epoxy egg-whites and wooden yolks.
V. American Lobster

I.

The first time I was in Florida I went to a seafood shack on the water, near Fort Myers. The server was in his early 20s, and had just moved down from Boston. I told him I was from Massachusetts, too, but I don’t think he cared. I asked him why the menu only had lobster tail, and no whole lobsters. He told me the lobsters down there don’t have claws, so they just serve the tails, which contain the bulk of the meat.

Boiled lobster (the most common preparation where I’m from) confronts the eater with the full carcass/body of the newly dead animal. Serving the lobster tail
(usually grilled) seems to further distance lobster the food from lobster the animal. The potential guilt of tourists is assuaged. This is the standard prep for spiny lobsters.

I instantly feel artificial sitting on a wooden porch adorned with fishing nets and Corona posters, being offered a fragmented sliver of an iconic whole because, in this case, the whole it was being extracted from did not conform to my understanding of Lobster in the platonic sense. Real Floridians have no misgivings about their ugly pseudo-lobsters.
II.

Lobsters, as a species, are very old. Individually, they can also get very old. In many ways, lobsters are ageless, maybe even timeless. They date back to the Cretaceous (145.5 – 65.5 million years ago) and have changed very little since.
Lobsters basically continue growing (and living) until something eats them – people, large fish, parasites, bacteria, or other lobsters. They have negligible senescence – they continue to function throughout their maturity without any kind of decline. Older lobsters are able to reproduce continually, and actually produce more offspring than their younger counterparts. If people’s lives could be graphed as a bell curve, a slow start in infancy, a productive bulge in the center, and a slight dwindling down towards death, lobsters would give us a straight line, steadily sloping up to a sharp ending point. They are, essentially, overgrown underwater bugs with an unusually long life span.

Giant lobsters are rare, and can become absurdly large in size. I know plenty of people who have preserved claws, or whole lobsters, shellacked and mounted in their living rooms, garages, or workshops. The barbershop I went to as a kid had a giant, bleached lobster hanging on the wall. I would stare at it while I was waiting, repulsed by the dirty white shell, the straw-like bristles poking out around its leathery joints. Preserving the shell, the outermost husk of the living animal, is one way to freeze and contain the existence of the thing. But a shellacked lobster is another kind of void, its everything but the thing, it is the interface between the lobster and the rest of existence. It is a demarcation line in three
dimensions, everything is within its bounds or outside of its bounds. What small ruptures once existed – entry and exit holes for food and excrement, oxygen and water – are filled and covered by the shellac layer, creating a singular, fully encapsulating surface. A lobster shell is a delicate structure that hints at heft, it is a paper-light space-holder.

I wanted a lobster shell with more mass than any lobster could have. I wanted a lobster that could be the anti-particle of every other frozen-in-time lobster shell, a sinkhole that exists in the universe to rebalance all of the vacuous voids hanging on living room walls, circumscribed with vaguely nautical rope. I carved a lobster into clay. I thought about the largest lobster I had ever held. I thought about how much it weighed, how uncomfortable it felt to hold, the weight of the claws too much once out of the water, as if they might rip off in the air. It is a strange thing to hold something by its skeleton. Meat in the bones. Every movement a lobster makes is defined by a strict geometric logic. When you have a live lobster in
your hand, you feel the way its movements are defined by the rigidity of its
structure.

I carved this lobster out of a clay slab, as if I was excavating it from out of
the mud, uncovering it. The clay slab became the flange for the mold I would
make. As I worked on the clay lobster, I continually laid out the form, built it up,
knocked it back, trying to get the proportions and ratios of its body parts to align
with my memory of the largest lobster I had ever held. I spent a lot of time on it.
I knew my memory was unreliable, so I tried to think about the difference in the
size of my hands, tried to recall the feeling of the lobster in hands that were
maybe half, two-thirds of the size they are now. I wasted a lot of time on it. I had
no way of knowing when it was “done” – I decided to stop modeling the lobster
when my long-ago memory of holding the lobster had become less vivid than my
new memory of making the lobster. I found myself trying to think about the way
the lobster felt, and found more and more the feeling of wet clay coming into my
head, the density of the clay, how it moved in my hand. I stopped sculpting, the
memory of the thing and the experience of the thing having reached a sort of
synchronicity, or a singularity. I dismembered its limbs, molded the top in
sections, and flipped them all over and continued digging out the rest of the form
from the clay. These lobsters would be full, solid, dense. I made waxes which
would then be cast in lead. As I assembled all of the wax components, I let them
accrue more material, coming from the molds and growing, getting extra shell,
extra bulk. After making ceramic shell molds, I started melting and pouring the
lead. Even the smallest fragment of a claw is unwieldy, overly heavy. A full
lobster is unmanageable. They are toxic, and surprisingly soft, more malleable
than most metals. Every time the casts are set down they crush slightly, hard
edges round, claw tips twist, ridges dull. They become weights, ready to settle
to the bottom and never come back up. They can pin things down, flatten,
compress what’s beneath them. It is essential to understand these lead lobsters
through their weight. The bulk of a quilted flannel, a compressible, familiar
object, is understandable through our eyes and our bodies. There is no moment
of hesitation before we know the feeling of it on our arms, around our shoulders –
it can become a proxy beneath the lead lobsters, grounding them, forcing them
into our real-world scale and standing in for a kind of touch.
I.

I don’t know much about James Michener. I’ve read a few of his novels. He reminds me of my grandfathers, both in the Navy during WWII, or at least the world he comes from reminds me of them. It would be easy to lump his work in with the wide-eyed optimism of other mid-century Americans if it weren’t for his absurdly open-ended sense of time. I first became aware of him as a kid, perusing thrift store bookshelves. Tom Clancy, Stephen King, Michael Crichton, cheap romance novels, and Michener. No matter what thrift store, one or two of Michener’s books would pop up, like chunky paper bricks, a testament to armchair historians and beach-readers who had given up on his unending, dry stories, but their ubiquity hinted at a once grand popularity. I can imagine a
movie scene where my grandmothers are in a split-screen sequence, mid 1970’s, each buying a copy and bringing it home to my unenthused grandfathers, before the Michener novels settled into semi-permanent places under a glass dish of mixed nuts or a TV guide.

Michener’s novels aren’t character driven, but geologically driven. He saw nothing wrong with a hundred pages or so being devoted to underwater lava flows, tectonic plate shift, and weather patterns. By the time a coconut enters the scene he’s really got your attention.

Michener never knew his biological parents. His own personal history was veiled in secrecy. Maybe this is the root of his preoccupation with starting points, blowing-up the timeline of a normal story-arc by linking disparate narratives through place.

II.
A book as an object is experienced through our hands and our eyes. What a book does to my perception of a relatively small volume of space is phenomenal. A volume of space that is 7” x 4” and 2” thick is so efficiently sliced and made planar by the nature of the page that I lose awareness of the page existing as a finite, particulate division within the book. Instead, book-in-hand, open to the middle, I conceive of the book as a fluid, continuous material, and whatever page I am open to as a constantly shifting divider between two fluctuating segments of

I set about transcribing the object of James Michener's SPACE. Like the Chevy Chase bust, this book would need to repel or reflect more than it let in. The mass and density of the book was vital. I needed the book to relate to the hand as much as it did to the eye. The act of holding the book, picking it up, bringing the proximity to the object down to zero, is part of experiencing the object. It can't only be looked at. It's central to the fabrication of props that the fabricator has some sense of the distance the object will be viewed from. I worked for a while at a fabrication shop in Philadelphia. We made exhibits for museums, did work for tradeshows, created climbing walls, fixed theme park rides. Every object we touched, we tried to have a sense of where its visual breakdown would occur, even if we were doing this subconsciously. Sometimes
there is some juice in the breakdown, some untapped energy that gets activated through the tension of closing in on a surface right as it starts to reveal itself for what it is. There is a particular kind of activation that occurs when the visual image is suspended across the surface of a thing, holds itself as the viewer’s proximity closes in, then right as it is about to collapse, and in fact does collapse, a different kind of suspension can happen with a physical intersection between the body and the object. The gap gets so close that it closes off completely, the hand merges with the object, in this case the book, and after the image of the skin of the book has given itself up as a painted surface, the tangible, ultra-smooth, immediacy of the wooden carved book in the hand reveals an entirely new set of issues.

This breakdown, then transference to a different set of parameters echoes the experience of the interior of the main room installation. The book offsets in some way the larger breakdown of the inside space. While the books image becomes compromised, its weight and heft, and the presence of its surface against the skin of the fingers are elevated. As the basement interior diffuses into darkness, or slips into a visually neutral field, there is an inversion from the visual sense of understanding the space into a much more body-centric, experiential understanding, grounded by the image through the cement portal. The visual experience moves from being able to see the immediate confines of your body in the more well-lit end of the room, to the inability of seeing your own body but the possibility of seeing out of the space into the secondary removed space, the angled, mirrored, scaled model. There is also a kind of logic that binds the book and the room installation together. They reinforce in each other
the fact that they must be dealt with and understood through a physical interaction. The door to the room needs to be opened, and can be closed behind you, and the light turned on or off, as the viewer wishes. The drip, coming from the cooling unit above, can force its way into the viewer’s space. The hand becomes an important tool for fully experiencing each piece; it acts as a probe, a built-in lie detector test for the way a thing feels and how that relates to the image the thing casts. The hand also becomes a pleasure receptor; in the case of the book, the only way to decode the physicality of its surface is through the fingertips.
VII. Nostalgia

Up until the middle of the 19th century, nostalgia was primarily thought of as a mental condition. The word comes from the Greek, a combination of the words “nostos” and “algos”. Algos is the Greek word for “pain.” Nostos roughly translates to “homecoming”.

I first learned about the concept of Nostos from the the Iliad and the Odyssey. The entire epic gives us two sides of the coin; the Iliad is focused on Kleos, and the Odyssey on Nostos. We don’t have a correlating word in modern English, but “kleos” is close to the idea of Glory. A Greek soldier could attain Kleos through great and heroic deeds, but it had a broader range of implications. The term is related to hearing, or being heard about, having a reputation. To gain
Kleos meant you would be remembered in poems, people would literally hear your deeds, through song, after you were gone. To be included in epic poems was to attain a kind of immortality pre-dating Judeo-Christian theology, and even Hellenistic theology. The memory of a person, or the imprint of a person's life, recounted through sung narrative became a de facto kind of immortality. By the time of the Homeric poems, Kleos was a more finely honed concept.

In *The Iliad*, Achilles exemplifies the more traditional view of Kleos, choosing to die nobly in battle, surely to be included in songs and poems after his early demise. In *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus ventures into Hades, he encounters Achilles' incorporeal soul, and Achilles' reflects on his decision, saying: “I'd rather slave on earth for another man / . . . / than rule down here over all the breathless dead.” This is a radical departure from the Achilles we know from *The Iliad*. It represents a departure point in thinking, a new wave of rationalism, the first glimpse of a Heideggerian kernel, where the experiential, in it's most debased form is prized above the posthumous successful attainment of Kleos. This sets up an interesting dichotomy, giving us an ancient hypothetical case study – a life of pure experience with no audience, no record, and no documentation versus prolific documentation and a universal audience at the cost of the permanent exclusion of the individual. Experiencing a world fully within your own body, cut off from all meaning, or not experiencing a world where your meaning is constantly flowing to others.

Think of radio waves. Think of echoing. Information resonating or rippling outward from its immediate source, becoming diffused, blurred the further out it travels, temporally, geographically. Think of images, and after images, and overlaid images. As a radio tower broadcasts a signal, waves radiate outward
from the source, functioning in the same way light waves function. Because radio waves travel at the speed of light, some of the first radio broadcasts are reaching out 100 or so light years into space. Some of our earlier television broadcasts are already 70 light years out. The infinite sense of radiating is in some way overwhelming, but the universe seems to compensate – as the waves emanate outward in three dimensional space, the field that they occupy grows exponentially. Imagine a cross-section or a plane slicing through a beam of light emanating from a lighthouse. If the plane slices through the beam close to the lighthouse, the light will be brighter, the circle it occupies smaller, each photon densely packed together. If the plane slices through much farther out along the beam’s conical path, the circle will inscribe a much larger area, the same number of photons must spread over this larger area, and the light appears dimmer. As radio waves reach farther and farther outward into space they spread out over an ever-widening area, their quality diminishing, until they become spread so thin that they essentially dissipate into nothingness, disappearing into the static of a billion other faint ripples of interference patterns.
I was looking through old family photos and came across two photographs taken from the same position at two different times. I felt lucky, like I was benefiting from an unknown relative’s foresight (my mother? an aunt, or uncle? one of my grandparents? – the pictures lack any sign of authorship). The photographs show part of a living room, a large rear window framing a section of the backyard. Both photographs exist in a hazy sense of time – one is taken in winter, the other in spring or summer. Either one may have existed before or after the other. I began tinkering with the photos. I began to alter their geometry, forcing them to align to a singular underlying structure. I felt complicit in my unknown relative’s plan – I can only assume the wish was to document this space without straying from the predetermined viewpoint. I felt like I was an impossible-to-predict future helper, photoshopping these images into perfect alignment, equipped with unimagined technology. I wondered how the original photographs were taken – a registration made of masking tape on the counter, maybe a few penciled hatch marks, or possibly just a mental note made half way through a roll of film (take the next one in six months, put the camera near that knot in the wood). I had a craving to feel the layers of the image respond like a skin under my fingers. I had been working on so many real, physical objects that
I half forgot how facile and malleable these layers of immaterial pixilated light were. I began building up layers, eradicating time, or denying it by mixing it with its opposite – images combining like interference waves, canceling each other out. I wanted to take these flattened, scanned skins of skins and suck all of the oxygen out.
The basement or foundation of a house is the generative core from which the rest of the space emerges. A basement is an interior volume with no verifiable exterior. We know the extent of the basement only from its interior lining, with no gauge of its thickness or structure – through an inverted visual knowledge we know only the inside skin.

My father’s parents have lived in the same house for at least 60 years. My dad was born there, and grew up there. The house was, and is, full of things much older than me. As a child I felt particularly aware of the way my grandparent’s old consumer goods lingered into the present. Some of these consumer items were riff-raff, filling boxes in the cellar and cabinet drawers up in the kitchen - my grandfather’s tape measures with tell-tale 1950’s fonts, pencils and notepads that had a different feel to them, miraculously never-ending boxes of powdered laundry detergent. Other items had become embedded into the architecture of the house - the Formica countertops, wallpaper lining the inside of the cupboard and cabinets, square-cut 2 x 4’s and 2 x 10’s framing out the basement stairs. I was in elementary school when my grandfather, and a few years later my grandmother, retired. As far back as I can remember the house
had been undergoing minor expansions here and there, windows getting put in, an addition getting added, the kitchen wall getting pushed out. The house had a hodge-podge feel of different time periods - wood paneled walls in the backroom, full of sewing machines, old skiing photos, and potted plants, the living room with elaborately ornate white-on-white designs embossed on the wall paper, 7 foot ceilings, sea-shell filled lamps. Everything in the house was overlayed with time, lived-in and adapted, adjusted and packed full of incongruous items. I felt drawn to the basement. It felt complete, and unadulterated, undiluted. It was so basic, and so entirely untouched. Nothing down there was new, and as a kid I felt the age of things viscerally. The sound of the basement is so essential to the experience of being down there. There were so many transitional materials that sound had to get through before I heard it, each successive layer further dampening it. I can visualize the layers, like a geological cross-section, that the sound had to penetrate: voices emanating from the tops of bodies, then bodies, then socks and shoes, or my grandparents’ slippers, thick blue carpeting, new floorboards, sub-flooring, then the original floorboards, the joists, the cross bracing, pipes and wiring, dust, then air, then my ears. Lawnmowers could be yards away, but by listening I knew they were above my head. Being in the basement was like being underwater, but instead of a waterline there was a soundline, and every sound in the world had to come down before it got to my ears.
The room in the center of the installation is masked off from the viewer. The only way of knowing it is to experience it from its inside out. One can quickly map out the rough form, the possible dimension of the interior, but as you cross into the space, your memory of the exterior gets stretched. The space inside, although relatively small, has an economy of use. The threshold of the door, as the viewer crosses inside, becomes a transitional space, the most well-lit area, the most visually consumed. The awkward inside corner compresses the space, acts as a kind of funnel. The darkness of the hallway blurs the perception, or what is perceptible, and forces more reliance on the other senses. I wanted the room to be able to function as a present-tense experience of memory, a physical embodiment of the process of recall and slippage. The drip, coming down from the cooling unit embedded in the pedestal on the ceiling, becomes another veil. It is a crossable barrier, a hint at a stopping point that is easily pushed through, but our bodies must intersect with it to cross it. The cement wall anchors the
whole room. As the water droplets continue to fall a puddle forms. It stretches back to the cement wall, pushes against the sides of the walls, then slowly starts spreading out along the floor as it gains volume. This water becomes another threshold, a reflective surface, doubling the faintly lit cement opening above.

The doubled sections become about location. Recalling the self, the orientation of one’s body in the space, and seeing the doubled, mirrored space that the viewer is absent from is the crux of the piece. The mirrored, cement covered model offers a different kind of doubling from the book outside. As opposed to the replica that has come to stand in for the thing, replacing the original, this replica exists in constant tension with the original, defined by its mirroring. Architecturally they are tied together, but are in a perpetual standoff. They create a singular ceiling plane, winding through the entirety of the interior space. The two, doubled rooms, one accessible, enclosing, the other closed off and
projected into, become a feedback loop. They provide the other with something each lacks. The smaller cement model becomes drained of time, or drained of experienced time. It is a vessel for holding the gaze, a container for looking. The larger room is nothing but time spent. Time spent walking, standing, leaning against a rough oak wall, sitting in the dark, sitting under the light. The room has very little prescriptive sense of purpose – it just exists as a place to exist within. Even with the implied elevated importance of the far back corner, the vantage point that connects both miniature and real scale windows through the viewer, this experience can be stumbled into.

interior view, cement-covered scale-model section, 2012.
interior view, looking back from the far corner of the room towards the door, 2012.
Vita

Jonathan Benjamin was born February 29, 1984, in Gloucester, Massachusetts. He received a Bachelor of Arts in History and a Bachelor of Arts in Fine Art from Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts in 2006. After a string of odd jobs and studio work brought him from Boston, to Washington, DC, to Philadelphia, he came to Richmond to earn his Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture + Extended Media at VCU, graduating in 2012.