

**The Hole in the Backyard**

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Documents submitted to the Faculty of  
the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art

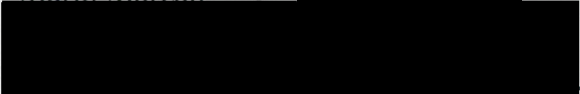
Chapel Hill

2012

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I grew up in a little turn of the century farmhouse in a suburb of Minneapolis. When I was three my parents decided the house was too small and we needed more space. A huge pit was dug in our backyard, next to the house to accommodate a new section of the basement. This is one of my earliest memories, this deep, seemingly endless wound in the yard that began as a cylindrical black hole and resulted in a surgically precise rectangle removed from the earth. This event was, perhaps, my first introduction to the idea that our everyday environments don't just exist, but rather, are physically constructed with backhoes and shovels, for perhaps less tangible reasons--like my parents fulfilling some predisposed western notion of necessity. After the addition, my twin brother and I shared a brand new big, plain, rectangular room. When we were 6, I successfully petitioned to move into the guest bedroom, which was a smaller attic room with gabled ceilings and irregular angles. I felt free in the illogical containment of that room, like anything was possible because it was a space that operated under my own alternative, nonsensical way of thinking, visualizing and inhabiting.



Figure 1. Lee in beach fort 1993.

There is something very satisfying about being enveloped in a space that has its own logic, or a sense of structure that you have influenced. Growing up I made countless indoor forts, snow forts, igloos, beach forts and dioramas [fig.1]. My work still has a childlike sense of possibility, of obsessive, haptic perspective. From refusing to wear matching socks to living in cooperative housing for two years, my whole life I've learned to make up my own rules, methods, and systems, and along with it my own ways of existing in the world. This has played a large role in the creation of my artwork; this desire for an alternative way of being, living, creating, and consuming, with the acknowledgement that this desire is full of contradictions. My sense of global citizenship is temporarily placated when I buy organic Rainforest Safe Fair Trade coffee at Starbucks, listen to the world news on NPR and recycle my plastic bags, but these are such small actions that exist within our conventional framework. Through my work I am asking viewers to consider these contradictions inherent within the objects and architectural spaces that simultaneously define us as individuals and are the basis of world economies and political structures.







In recent years we have seen cruise ships sink, earthquakes, revolutions, recessions and occupations [fig. 2-5]. I am inspired by the formal qualities of these images, of precarious accumulation, as well as the conceptual ramification of these events. Through sculpture and installation I express contemporary feelings of anxiety and instability palpable in the world at large. I create tangible, visible connections between notions of alternative, designed, and 'sustainable' American consumer culture and those of systemic progress- positing them tentatively as antithetical. I see my work as gentle apocalyptic art-props that question our relationships to familiar objects and everyday spaces. Like hybrid cars or recycled plastic yoga mats, my work suggests the potential for elegant material transformation or utopian design solution contained within a familiar logic of insatiable consumption. However, unlike such products, my work embodies a dystopian unease, and the potential for structural or conceptual collapse.

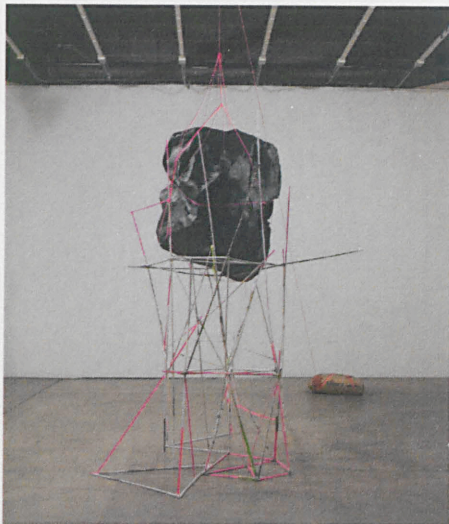


Figure 6. *untitled (tools)*, 2012

For example, in *untitled (tools)*, 2012, the piece currently installed in UNC's Ackland Art Museum, a large, black, rock-like, papier-mâché mass ominously hovers above a potentially fragile pink structure (fig. 6). The black form is suspended by hot-pink surveyor string and is anchored by a bag of Quickcrete cement. The pink structure is made of computer paper rolled into tubes, and adhered with papier-mâché, newspaper, masking tape and string. Despite its bright colors and references to bamboo scaffolding, the utopian architectural endeavors of the Russian Constructivists or Buckminster Fuller, its ambiguous function is playful, but not necessarily optimistic (fig. 7-8).



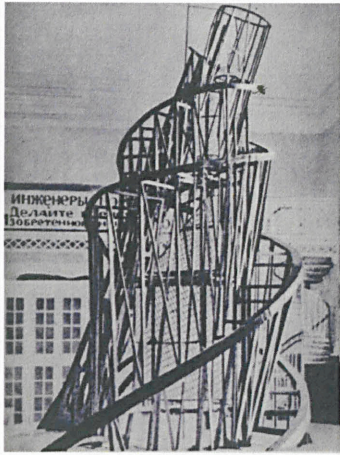


Figure 7: Tatlin's Tower, Vladimir Tatlin, 1917. Figure 8: Buckminster Fullers geodesic dome.

My work has no secrets; my materials reference their own design or intended functions: crocheted yarn, stacked books, layered paper, drawn lines, sanded wood, architectural samples, cast concrete, marbles, NPR, and windbreakers. I cull materials from the things around me. My work is not sublime or transcendent; it does not pretend to be something it is not. Materials playfully (and ominously) bend, cover, accumulate, balance, and lean. My hipster-DIY- design meets compulsive architect-student sculptures seem to teeter on the verge of physical and conceptual collapse: inside is outside, heavy is light, structure is decay, progress is decline and prop is object. In *untitled (tools)*, specific industrial materials -- like a bag of concrete, a band saw box, and surveyor's string -- also stand in contrast to the haptic papier-mâché elements, working to create a sense of discordance within the piece. I view these three materials as metaphors for commonplace tools that constitute the everyday spaces around us. For example, the high visibility pink surveyor's string almost exceeds its materiality through its intended use as a vehicle for color, a sign or mark that references grids, maps, topographic surveys, and future plans. The rectangular bag of quick setting cement recalls cinderblocks, institutionalized architecture, studio spaces, cheap apartments and American ideas of never finished do-it-yourself-home improvement projects. The band saw box, which can only be seen through an opening in the black form relates to ideas of commerce, standardized rectangular shapes, mass production, institutionalized architecture, organization, and, specifically, the UNC Art Lab (fig. 9). Intercepted from the Art Lab's trash, this box once held the unassembled parts of a 14" band saw. This tool's main function is to cut standardized pieces of wood into smaller parts to then be reassembled in a different, non-standardized, form, i.e., an undergraduate's wooden abstract sculpture.

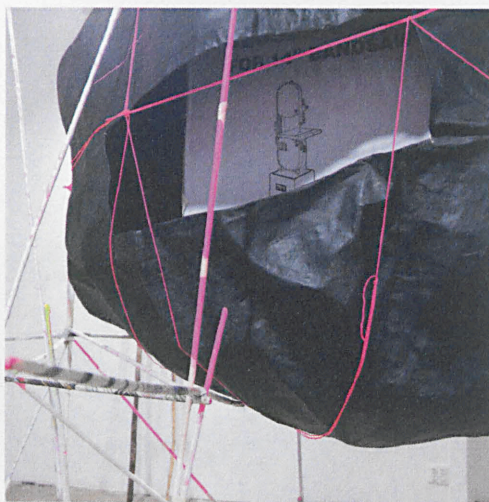


Figure 9: untitled (tools), detail, band saw box.

I see these things (cement, surveyor's string, saws, academia, sculpture, art) as tools with which to make something else. As the Quickcrete name brand implies, this material is in an in-between state and has the



potential to make and remake. However, it must be used and activated in some way - moistened, packed, stirred, squeezed, cut, set, hardened, measured, transformed and eventually tossed away. By enclosing these materials in my own awkward papier-mâché forms, I employ their materiality, arresting any future possibility for transformation. Like the continuous loop of the band saw blade itself, I use the graphic image of the saw to question the limitations of the ongoing transformation of forms within a specific model of production or framework. Do we need other tools? A new model of production?



Figure 10. Rock Rug, 2012

I experience similar quandaries of contradiction when I buy organic vegetables from Whole Foods that have been shipped from Chile, or when we managed to elect Obama into a system that is so corrupt and inefficient he can barely accomplish anything. In my work I am exploring the inherent conundrum, but also the necessity of questioning a structure that uses the same structure itself. (e.g., exploring the limitation of language by using language).

I recently had the opportunity to install a show at UNC Greensboro's project space ANDRE. While installing this show I was listening to NPR as the Italian cruise ship ran aground and tipped onto its side in shallow waters off the coast of Italy. Due to the arrogance of one man this huge machine was rendered useless and thousands of peoples' lives put in danger. I am interested in how easily one's sense of order in the world can be disrupted. As a response, these works, composed of common materials and objects, referenced the designed aesthetics of functional objects, while they themselves had no obvious function. I approached arranging the works in this room as one would arrange the furniture in a living room. It was while installing this show that I began to think of my work as props. For example *Rock Rug*, 2011 a white papier-mâché, hollow rock form with a white plastic hamper inside of it, sits on top of a rug crocheted out of jersey cotton t-shirts (fig. 10). Often used in theatre, papier-mâché references props, but also furniture, interior design and children's elementary school projects. The result is a room filled with objects and materials brought into contingent relationships. There is a sense of meticulous, yet serendipitous arrangement of works in which color, specifically hot pink, creates formal connections between the works and the gallery space itself. People in dangerous working environments who needed to visually stand out traditionally wore this type of 'high visibility' neon color. More recently these colors can be seen in a variety of functional things like safety gear, but also in a myriad of non-functional products including running shoes, sportswear, designer t-shirts, gardening gloves, extension cords, Iphone cases, and surveyors string. What do these colors signify in contemporary society? This trend is reflective of the increased 'designification' of everyday objects. One can choose from ten different colors of surveyors string at Home Depot. Consumer 'choice', and thus the opportunity to affirm one's identity through these choices, has infiltrated the most banal consumer products.



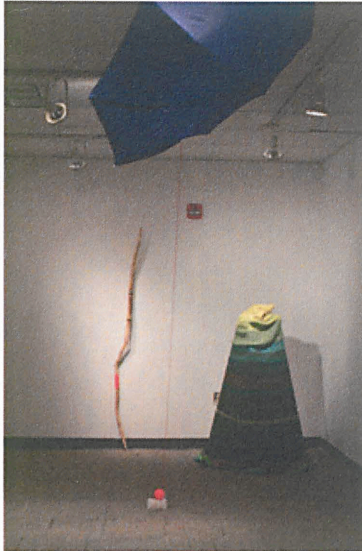


Figure 11. Left: You'll probably need this later, (stick, fire alarm). Right: ladder sweater.

I am attracted to this palette because it calls attention to itself as color, as specific formal decisions that carry more ambiguous meaning. These formal connections between color and materials become a type of three-dimensional drawing that extends to include the gallery space. For example in *untitled (Ill probably need this later)*, 2011, a strange fetishized stick leans against the wall next to a fire alarm (fig.11). This stick is composed of two sticks sanded, jointed together, and meticulously decorated with tape, string and paint. As an object it seems vaguely familiar and exists somewhere between hipster-killing device, non-functional decorative walking stick, prop, consumer object, and image. I am interested in the juxtaposition between this unfamiliar stick and the fire alarm, playfully positing them both as potentially useful in the event of a disaster.

In a 2004 interview between artist Yona Friedman and Hans Ulrich Obrist discussing Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau, Friedman says "[r]eality around us is not isolated facts, but rather a process." (100). I am committed to this idea of process that can be seen literally in the way that I handle materials (crocheting, sanding, papier-mâché, etc). However, my sculptures are not products. They remain in process in the way I arrange them together, asking viewers to make connections and associations between works. The act of viewing becomes a process in which viewers must shift their attention between the works, but also extend it to encompass specific architectural nuances of the gallery. In this way viewer's physical presence and process of comprehension becomes the most challenging aspect of my work. They find themselves in a space that references its own logic and construction, but also the illogic of the contemporary constructed subject as we exist within increasingly mediated modes of consumption that have become conflated with notions of experience.



Figure 12. Untitled (landscape #23), 2011



Where and how do we locate ourselves in our contemporary landscape? This idea of struggling to piece together meaning, of the desperate attempt to marry disparate elements into a singular structure or identity is further exemplified by the palpable absence of the human body in my work. For example *Rock Rug*, *untitled (tools)* and *untitled (landscape #23)* are all very corporeal (fig. 12). All are to human scale and include organic shapes that envelope smaller units which are revealed to be empty or containing inane domestic objects. Also, *untitled (I'll put it away later)*, 2012 and *Rock Rug* have an implied use value or sense of potential function that requires the viewer's presence to activate the sculpture (fig. 13).



Figure 13. *untitled (I'll put it away later)*.

I am fascinated by Amanda Ross Ho's work. Its quirky logic, intuitive arrangements and designed aesthetics are like irresistible contemporary art candy. Process is also of the utmost importance in her work and jumps between categories that question ideas of constructed/found image, image and object, real and representation. What does it mean to experience? To represent? These questions reoccur in her work. Traveling around Europe in college during a semester abroad I would see gaggles of tourists having their pictures taken in front of stunning landscapes or historic monuments. I noticed how few people actually stopped to take in the scene. Instead they would look only at the resulting documentation immediately after it was shot, most concerned with what picture they would post to Facebook. As the digital and the physical become obscured, experience is increasingly delineated to the visual. Is an experience less authentic if you don't have a picture, a record? If you don't look the part or have the right gear? Boundaries between real life, representation and identity used to be more defined. Now we have eBay, Facebook, live action/role-playing video games. We have homogenous 'personal style'. Ideas of image, object, and space have become jumbled and fused, and the relationship between signs and signifiers less clear. With her sculptures of images of objects from e-bay, or her compositions of objects that read as photographs, Ross Ho's work forces the viewer to navigate this uncertain aesthetic terrain asking them to locate themselves within a system of physical and conceptual connections that we usually ignore. Ross Ho's work is challenging because its subject matter speaks to a contemporary mode of understanding. Although visually luscious her work is not easy to eat up. She is not illustrating anything, does not predigest a specific stance to spoon feed viewers. Her work is not product; rather it is process that resists organization and categorization. I am captivated by this ambiguity and it is a quality that I cultivate in my own work. We are accustomed to passively letting images seep past us. Ross Ho establishes scenarios that engage viewers in an active process of criticality within a physical space. Her compositions refuse to be easily consumed as images; rather they are grounded in the physical, in real objects that humbly and humorously meet us in real life. But what does this constitute? What is a real object? What and where is real life? And how do these ideas manifest through the objects and images around us?

Ross Ho's palette is rooted in the photographic and in sharp academic deconstructions and connections. My own work, however, is based on the sculptural and utilizes idiosyncratic, handmade constructions. In both of our works, as in many other artists', we ask viewers to address individual elements within systems of our own making, but more importantly we are asking viewers to extend this critical mode of perception to pre-existing frameworks, including the gallery space, consumerism, etc.

This engagement or extension of an alternate mode of criticality is all I could hope to achieve through my work. As I move forward past graduate school I hope to have the opportunity to continue many of these



inquiries. Despite my 'softly apocalyptic' art I am an optimist in the way that many Westerners are. I believe in hard work, self-expression and exploration. Like the void in the backyard I believe that in ambiguity there is room for possibility, wonder and transformation. In Yona Friedman's words "I am simply trying to change our way of looking at things."