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## Sculpture as Souvenir: Reportable and Repeatable

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**Sculpture as Souvenir: Reportable and Repeatable**

by

Ashlyn Lee

Submitted to the graduate faculty of Meadows School of the Arts in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Art, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX.

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### Abstract

In this paper, an analysis of the site as material, process, and concept for an artwork results in an understanding of the art object as a souvenir. Reportable and repeatable experiences are discussed and remembered in the six works of the Qualifying Thesis Exhibition at the Pollock Gallery. Of the six works is an installation, *Catfish Fence*, and five small works displayed on the gallery window sill: *Bundle*, *Posted: No Trespassing*, *Sling*, *Right Recipe*, and *Margie Ruth's Swing Where the Wasp Bit Me*. Susan Stewart's discussion of souvenirs from *On Longing* (1984) serves as a tool for considering the art object as a souvenir. The souvenir originates from two motivations, to share and remember an experience, which is reporting, and the need to recreate an experience, or repeat it. In my practice, sculptures fluctuate between objects of report and repetition by using rural folklore, personal memories, and place as identity. The site becomes souvenir, and souvenir becomes site.

## Introduction

Two types of souvenirs are established in the theoretical text, *On Longing* by Susan Stewart: the consumer souvenir and the intimate souvenir.<sup>1</sup> A magnet of the Eiffel Tower purchased at a convenience store in Paris and then given to another is a consumer souvenir. It is a purchased object with, typically, an image or text from the origin site. It serves as proof of attendance. An intimate souvenir is an object taken with personal intention. A flower plucked from a hike, taken home, and placed between the pages of a heavy book, is one such souvenir. Preserved, the flower serves as an intimate reminder of physical experience. It represents a moment to be shared, memorialized, and displayed. With both the intimate and consumer souvenirs, an experience and a place are understood within an object. In my practice, I compound reportable and unrepeatable experiences, like seeing rotted catfish heads on a fence line as a child— with repeatable ones, like a saving every little garage sale sticker on my bedroom mirror from Saturday morning rummagings with my Nana.

Site is the core component of a souvenir. Without the site, a souvenir would cease to exist. With this in mind, Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another* serves as an investigative source of the properties of place in my practice. Kwon explains that site can be referenced as a concept, like my use of Sanger, Texas as the origin location for each work, material, a box from my dad's tool shed, and process, like learning to sew on paper bags from the local grocery store to form a quilt.<sup>2</sup>

I have come to realize that memory can never be recreated in totality. Ultimately, it is this failure of perfect replication that bridges the repeatable qualities in a souvenir to the reportable. That even a repeatable experience will have specific reportable qualities that cannot be replicated exactly. There is a

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore, MA: John Hopkins University Press, 1984, pages 74-202.

<sup>2</sup> Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, pages 1-52.

re-occurrence in my practice of forcing a souvenir of an experience I have not had or cannot have. For example, *Buried* (Figure 1), is a recreation, though not perfect, of Patsy Cline's last photo shoot. *Buried* is absent of Cline, but touts the all red attributes of her outfit and the backdrop. For me, souvenirs become tools to bridge my own experiences of rurality and my longing for connections and memories that are not possible, whether because of time or place. My works are souvenirs of longing, wonder, and fear.

## Chapter 1: Construction of Souvenir

“We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather, we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative.”

— Susan Stewart<sup>3</sup>

In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart describes souvenirs as ideal objects which have been removed from their natural environment. Souvenirs carry a heightened sense of meaning for their owners because of their separation from their origin site and placement in a foreign environment.<sup>4</sup> They move from the exterior to interior, coming into the domestic setting. In my practice, I make souvenirs from experiences I want to report, like the common site of catfish heads on fence lines along the backroads of Sanger in the work *Catfish Fence* (Figure 2) and experiences I long to repeat, like the last time my dad, my sister and I trolled down the river in *Canoe* (Figure 3).

Collecting and gathering has been a tool of inspiration in my practice, but it is something I learned from my family. For example, *Right Recipe* (Figure 4) is made of wood filler, an old box of screws, a found zipper, a pin, and a clipping from the recipe section of a newspaper. The text reads, “Right recipe for California bundt cake: a cake recipe that ran in the August 11 Cooks Corner listed baking powder as an ingredient. It should have been baking soda. Here is the correct recipe.” The newspaper clipping is integral to *Right Recipe*. Pulled away from its surroundings and placed in another setting, it gives context to its origin by way of the clarification and correction. The old screw box serves as a frame, a preserver, a ground for the recipe. The zipper and pin, both found, oddly match in color, almost as if they existed in the same place or time previously.

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<sup>3</sup> Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore, Mass: John Hopkins University Press, 1984, pgs 74 - 202.

<sup>4</sup> Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore, Mass: John Hopkins University Press, 1984, pgs 74 - 202.

Locational identity is an idea Miwon Kwon speaks of as a, “loss of place or disappearance of the site in mind.”<sup>5</sup> In *Margie Ruth’s Swing Where the Wasp Bit Me* (Figure 5), the title references an intentional specific location; my great grandmother’s front porch swing, as well as a particular event, the first time I was stung by a wasp. In this piece, found material is not utilized as a blatant reference to the origin site. Rather, the materiality – the wobbly construction of the swing, the rusted pale orange color, the splotchy but thick application of the glaze, and the dusty texture of the concrete, suggest aging and decay. My works are not didactic within the theory I research. I allow the works to occur on a range between reportable and repeatable souvenirs. It is the fear of losing, forgetting, or missing my home town of Sanger, TX that influences my choices of imagery, materials, and memories. I want to remember, share, and embed my rural upbringing through my work.

*Bundle* (Figure 6), *Right Recipe* (Figure 4), and three other small works included in the thesis exhibition were placed along the window sill of the Pollock Gallery. I saw the window sill as a way to voyeuristically frame each work as a souvenir. I envisioned myself washing the dishes, looking to the window sill above the sink, and reminiscing on the memory held in the objects displayed. *Bundle*, is one of these window sill works. It has a small rubber band with a tag reading “1 ⅓ yards.” The rubber band not only holds the cone in place but also veils the entire piece with fruit netting. In my practice, titles are an important clue for the narrative or memory embedded in a piece. Installing the small works on the window sill was an action of site responsive for the exhibition. Installation responsiveness is applied to every place my work inhabits. These works could exist in a gallery without a window sill, too.

Both Eva Hesse and Phyllida Barlow’s sculptures are an example of abstraction representing a location or memory rooted in the artist’s identity. Hesse’s family fled Nazi Germany when she was two. As an adult, Hesse returned to Germany for the first time and worked in an abandoned textile factory.

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<sup>5</sup> Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002, pgs 1 - 52.



During this time she created sculptures referencing her panic and desperate memories her family fleeing.<sup>6</sup> Hesse sourced the remnants of the German textile factory for pieces like *Oomamboomba* (1965, Figure 7). Similarly, Phyllida Barlow's process begins with paintings of her childhood landscape from memory. Barlow uses the objects she paints, which are distanced from reality by her memory, and the act of painting, to make three-dimensional forms.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Barlow saw drainage culverts fairly often in her native Britain, and consistently paints and draws long cylindrical grey forms, above the ground, with mouths wide open. In 2010, she exhibited a sculptural abstraction of the culvert pipe drawings and paintings. The piece is untitled, and reminiscent of her paintings that reference a reality to landscape, though excavated, above ground, and chopped up. Both Hesse and Barlow created objects to remember and work through reportable and repeatable experiences. My work, too, draws on the distancing and abstraction of memory with a linkage to place.

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<sup>6</sup> Begleiter, Marcie. *Eva Hesse*. New York, New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2017. Film.

<sup>7</sup> Barlow, Phyllida., Harrison, Sara., and Orbist, Hans-Ulrich. *Phyllida Barlow: Fifty Years of Drawing*. London: Hauser & Wirth, 2014, 23.

## Chapter 2: Construction of Place

“The countryside is the space of ideal, space of childhood and death; then you have the suburbs where only outsiders walk the streets. Next is the city where people function as corporations; silent. And on the outskirts are the gypsies.”

— Susan Stewart, *On Longing...*, 1984<sup>8</sup>

My aesthetic influences are gathered from Sanger, Texas, where I grew up. There is a particularly faded dustiness of the streets and buildings, with their long shadows, and smell of hay and lake settles over the town. Joan Didion’s description of small rural towns rings true in Sanger: “everything seems to be made of concrete, the roads, the schools, the churches.”<sup>9</sup> I am drawn to the aesthetic I have lived in, and it influences my process.

*Posted, No Trespassing* (Figure 8) is inspired by the crumpled up, bullet-hole-ridden, no trespassing signs scattered along the backroads of Texas. The sign can be nearly illegible but still functions as law. The idea of a sign representing a law, combined with its aesthetic qualities, is frighteningly humorous. I made my own abstraction of a no trespassing sign. The result is smothered concrete covering a bumpy terracotta slab, sticking to it like a fungus on a tree. The piece hangs on the wall with a single nail, posted. It is a sign of a sign: a sign that holds power, place, and paranoia.

Throughout Sanger, there are other versions of the no trespassing sign, like catfish heads on fence posts. The largest sculpture I’ve made to date, *Catfish Fence* (Figure 2), is a further exploration of no trespassing. It is also an object of memory, a souvenir. I’m reminded of Sigfried Giedion’s alchemic essay

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<sup>8</sup> Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore, Mass: John Hopkins University Press, 1984, pgs 74 - 202.

<sup>9</sup> Didion, Joan. *South and West: From a Notebook*. New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017, 39.

on concrete from 1928 where he describes the metaphorical strength of the material as a whole, solid, and details the weaknesses of its parts: binder, aggregate, and water.<sup>10</sup> *Catfish Fence*, too, unites parts that when alone lack meaning, but together –as concrete, barbed-wire, u-posts, and catfish heads– become clear to those who have experienced the sight of rotted sunburnt signs to stay away.

There is similar imagery in the writings of Flannery O'Connor. In short stories like *Good Country People* and *Wise Blood*, for example, O'Connor has ownership in her subversion of the rural south. She does not belittle or gloss over the happenings behind the piney curtain but rather exposes the dark, gross, and disturbing actions of the south -- whether it be a con-artist masked as a bible salesman with a compulsive prosthetic fetish, or a white-trash teenage girl in a doctor's office throwing a bible at a judgemental old woman. O'Connor is not critiquing her surroundings from as an outsider, she lived in Milledgeville, GA all her life. O'Connor was immersed in the place she wrote about, she was inside looking out. I, too, am immersed in rurality, as I make work about it. I've gutted crappie, eaten stolen peaches from my neighbor's tree, and sunk fence posts into the earth with my dad. I know how to live and make in this way.

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<sup>10</sup> Giedion, Sigfried S. *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete*. Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995, 201.

## Conclusion

“Is it whimsical to believe that a building material which is beautiful and lasting, and yet inexpensive, might have a considerable influence... a hint of eternity?”

John J. Early, *The Concrete of Architects and Sculptors*, 1926, Portland Cement Association<sup>11</sup>

My great grandmother, Margie Ruth, has a collection of door knobs mounted on her dining room wall. I gather that they are a collection of all the front door knobs of the houses where my great grandparents have lived. That the door knob is a souvenir taken from the exterior, and displayed in the interior as a reminder and token. I have never asked great grandma her specific reasoning for at least twenty different door knobs on her dining room wall, but I have developed my own meanings and associations with the door knobs. The making from my own memories, to be free to other associations by viewer is a tricky balance. Though, I have faith that the viewer's interpretation will be similar to mine of Margie Ruth's door knobs. Like the door knobs of previous homes, my sculptural objects move and transition. They live on in eternity, as long as they can, with a generous dusting for new associations to be made. David Searcy, the writer I chose for my Qualifying Thesis Exhibition catalog, details the association of eternity in his essay on *Catfish Fence*:

“Our ancient bottom-feeding fascinations anchored firmly, elevated, and presented as a boundary. How can brutal be so delicate? And ornamental, frightening? One wonders what the boundary separates. The uniformity or components suggest an easy extendability. Allows us to imagine it stretched out - and even continuing Christo-like forever, clear across the landscape on and on through the dark, delighted heart of us.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Early, John J, and Portland Cement Association. *The Concrete of the Architect and the Sculptor*. Portland Cement Association, 1926.

<sup>12</sup>Searcy, David. *Ashlyn Lee*. Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist University, 2019.

My work exists beyond the origin site, Sanger, and the original meaning because it engages in the universal phenomenon of growing up and away from our homes. We make and craft and take to remember. In my practice, every piece is an action and result Kwon's idea of a fear of loss.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.

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## Image Appendix

Figure 1

*Buried*, 2019

Found bulletin board paper, plastic tubing, and red pipe cleaners  
36" x 48" x 72"



Figure 2

*Catfish Fence*, 2019

Concrete, U-posts, and barbed-wire  
120" x 8" x 48"





Figure 3

*Canoe*, 2018

Cardboard, twine, concrete and nails

5" x 4" x 24"



Figure 4

*Right Recipe*, 2018

Wood filler, old box of screws, found pin, found zipper, and found newspaper clipping  
3" x 5" x 1.5"



Figure 5

*Margie Ruth's Swing Where the Wasp Bit Me*, 2018  
Stoneware and concrete  
5" x 2" x 3.5"



Figure 6

*Bundle*, 2018

Popsicle sticks, wood fruit netting, acrylic, and found rubberband  
6" x 4" x 10"





Figure 7

Eva Hesse

*Oomamaboomba*, 1965

Paint, cord, cord-wrapped metal, and concretion on masonite

21" x 26" x 5"



Figure 8

*Posted, No Trespassing*, 2019  
Terra Cotta and concrete  
10" x 8" x 12"

