

SCENIC VIEWPOINT

A THESIS

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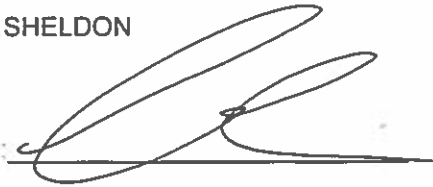
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY



SARA M. SHELDON

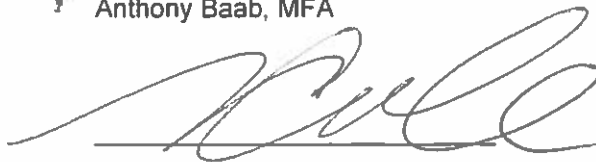
APPROVED:



Adam Crosson, MFA, Advisor



Anthony Baab, MFA



Teresa Cole, MFA



AnnieLaurie Erickson, MFA

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Chapter	
1. Abstract.....	1
2. Thesis.....	2
3. Bibliography.....	

Abstract

As an environmentalist, traveller, collector, and self-taught sculptor, my primary goal as a maker is to cultivate a sustainable studio practice. It is a slow process that encapsulates my experiences with my community and the environment, with a deep exploration of the discarded, material things I find woven throughout these two spaces. The work I create is contingent on my immediate environment, as it greatly influences the materials I acquire, the interactions I experience and observe, and the spaces I am able to access. As my surroundings change, my practice adapts, allowing for deeper exploration and improvisation as I take inventory of our transient spaces and the things we leave behind.

Attending graduate school at Tulane University altered my practice substantially. Although I had been living in New Orleans for several years, the transition from my modest, backyard studio, to a spacious, well-equipped facility provided the opportunity to expand my work. I measure this growth by the literal scale of my sculptures, the wealth and newness of the materials at my disposal, and the abundance of conversations that encouraged me to intertwine my process of creating with a succinct, conceptual narrative. Rather than presenting an audience with process-oriented works that conceal my journey as an artist, *Scenic Viewpoint* is an invitation to navigate the materials, spaces, and experiences that inspire me to create work.

This exhibition highlights the overwhelming abundance of our waste, with particular emphasis on the transient materials manufactured to live a short life, all of which were collected in and around the Tulane campus. The forms are reminiscent of our natural landscapes, geological stratas and archaeological ruins, which imagine our visual legacy based on the things we leave behind. The work is installed to simulate existing scenic overlooks, at which tourists are guided by a series of pathways and benches to experience a particular setting. These spaces are microcosms of a vast landscape, designed to briefly immerse its visitor and lead them to its most scenic view, often resulting in incessant photo-documentation in order to preserve the memory. *Scenic Viewpoint* simultaneously presents the experience of navigating a space and the act of remembering it through images, exploring what it means to be present.

Thesis

Throughout the last decade I have been committed to exploring alternatives, both in the process and subject of my work. The timeline of my journey began with traditional darkroom photography, evolved into building experimental, homemade cameras, and ultimately led to an investigation of sculpture. I have always been drawn to the freedom of alteration that is inherent in artmaking, in which I can learn a traditional technique and change the process as I explore my work. This improvisational exploration of process has been indelibly linked to my subject matter throughout the years, as I have sought to represent alternate versions of our surrounding environment. Obscuring existing landscapes through multiple exposures and apertures has slowly transitioned into an alternative representation of our landscape in the form of sculptural installation, wherein I utilize manufactured materials to mimic the natural forms of our world.

There was a precise moment when I chose to seek inspiration from the ground, specifically the garbage, rather than through the lens of a camera. I was living in Nairobi, Kenya in 2008 when I began working with an artist collective at the Kuona Trust Art Centre. Most of the artists were self-taught and created work from the materials at their disposal, which usually consisted of recyclables and refuse. There was a thread of intuition, innovation, and unencumbered creativity that connected the artists as they pioneered their own methods of creating. The artists embraced a Baudelairian¹ aesthetic, finding beauty and possibility in the disgusting and the forgotten. It was here that I was encouraged to devise my own process of making that would be determined by my ability to adapt my process to my surroundings, rather than the reverse. It allowed for an investigation of “beauty of the ugly and the memory of the human”² as I began weaving elements of our refuse into my work.

The work I have selected for my thesis exhibition directly reflects my emphasis on adaptability, particularly in my exploration of material. The installation is created from discarded objects found within a one mile radius of Tulane’s campus, most of it excavated straight from

¹ Charles Baudelaire was a French poet who glorified the chiffonier (ragpicker) and used it “as an extended metaphor for poetic activity itself.” See Whiteley, Gillian. *Junk Art and the Politics of Trash*. 2011. Page 17.

² See Vergine, Lea. *When Trash Becomes Art*. 2007. Page 12.

university dumpsters. I was interested in our waste and its capacity to become “direct documentation, minute and incontrovertible, of the habits and forms of behavior of those who produced it, aside from the beliefs and perceptions they have of themselves,”³ as I began to relate my process to our culture of disposability. As I collected my findings, they grew to become precarious stacks of material, announcing a visual narrative through each object’s association. Stacking the objects relayed a sense of time, creating a record evocative of geological strata, and could be measured as the towers increased in height. My studio became a microcosm, simultaneously reminiscent of narrow canyons and the chaotic sidewalks of trash collection day, as I zigzagged between the forms. It was during this ritual, of traversing my studio, that I began to imagine a landscape made entirely from our refuse.

As I began to relate the towering piles in my studio to the natural landscapes of the Southwest, I travelled to explore the diversity of rock and land formations in the region. This form of experiential research directly informed my visual language, as I documented geological striations and erosion within these simultaneously narrow and vast spaces. Several sites were home to archaeological ruins of times past, constructed to mimic their immediate surroundings. The walls and deterioration of each structure mirrored the layered strata of the nearby rock formations, as well as the formal undulations carved away by water and wind. The juxtaposition of these structures, set amongst a natural landscape, allowed me to connect my interest in constructing an environment from our waste with the lasting legacy it will present about our time.

The Thoreauvian⁴ experience of immersing oneself in nature is often thought to be reflective, solitary, and meditative, allowing for a stillness and clarity that is sometimes lost among the chaos of everyday life. What I noticed on my travels, however, is that traces of our urban existence and daily rituals continue to infiltrate our pristine landscapes, regardless of their remoteness. Most prominently seen at the scenic overlooks⁵ that speckle our highways, they

³ See Vergine, Lea. *When Trash Becomes Art*. 2007. Page 12.

⁴ Henry David Thoreau was an American essayist, poet, and philosopher who embraced the isolation of nature in order to engage in reflection and creativity, best illustrated by his novel *Walden*.

⁵ A designated location where people can view scenery and photograph it.

have become the inbetween space, where the natural and manmade worlds collide. They are sites that guide us through a brief experience, an immersion in nature, still allowing for our creature comforts of sitting, picnicking, smoking, and accessing cellular service. Inevitably, the trails become littered with garbage and function primarily as a transient site for tourists as they document the site as a spectacle⁶, through the lens of a camera. The distance between experiencing the space and becoming nostalgic for the moment was almost indistinguishable, as the picture-taking and slide-show of the landscape occurred almost simultaneously.

As I began fabricating the work for *Scenic Viewpoint*, I reflected on my research from the southwest in tandem with the experiences and artists who have inspired me to create. I revisited a long lineage of work, beginning with my time in Kenya and leading to an investigation of Outsider Artists⁷, Land Artists⁸, and the abstract sculptors of the 1960's and 70's⁹. Connected by their ability to transcend the limitations of their medium, and more specifically the expectations of the popular movements of their time, these artists implemented a process that is intuitive and authentic to their creative impulses. I often look to the work of Noah Purifoy, Lonnie Holley, Lee Bontecou, Eva Hesse, and Sarah Sze for their bold use of materials and process, which deviate from any traditional "norm."

My work adopts a similar process of intuition, especially in my selection and application of the materials I find. I purposefully choose objects that communicate transience, like moving blankets, foam mattress toppers, plastic wrapping, and carpet. This refuse communicates something about our culture, as each was made to fulfill a temporary purpose, and my goal is to extend its lifespan to create something unforeseen.

⁶ See Debord Bourriaud's *Society of the Spectacle*.

⁷ Outsider artists are defined as self-taught or naive art makers.

⁸ Land Art expanded boundaries of art by the materials used and the siting of the works, usually within natural landscapes.

⁹ A reaction to the trendy Abstract Expressionist movement in painting, abstract sculptors of this time pushed the limitations of tradition by employing unconventional materials and processes.

The process of collecting reflects a state of chaos and collage, akin to Walter Benjamin's Arcade Project¹⁰, wherein disparate objects are intuitively collected in order to create a whole. Once I have amassed a substantial volume of material, the fabrication process becomes organized and linear, allowing the completion of one sculpture to directly influence the direction of the next. Drawing from the memory of my experiences, I stack the objects to form clean lines of strata that mimic the sites¹¹ of my research. The goal is to communicate the sheer volume of our waste, rather than curate the aesthetic arrangements of the media. Here is where I channel Lonnie Holley's practice of improvisation with Eva Hesse's affinity for the absurd, as the towering sculptures grow to become simultaneously sublime and haunting.

The stacked sculptures are installed to engage the viewer in an immersive experience. They are simultaneously mimicking the scenic viewpoints I encountered in the Southwest and the old, crumbling archaeological sites of the Chaco¹² peoples. It is a claustrophobic arrangement of our refuse, paired with an imagination of our legacy based on the things we leave behind. The chairs strewn throughout the gallery are an extension of the readymades of Marcel Duchamp¹³, wherein functional objects become unusable. Here the chairs only become non-functional in a traditional gallery setting, a place where we've been trained to keep our hands to ourselves. In this case, the chairs are installed to slightly obstruct the viewers path, requiring some contact with the work. The act of moving the work, even slightly, breaks the barrier between the functional object and its nonfunctional setting, thus returning the chair to its original context.

The narrow passageways that cut through the towering, layered sculptures lead the viewer to a dark, open room covered in imitation grass. Inside the room is an orderly stack of moving blankets, supported by a plastic laundry basket, a stationary chair, a manual projector, and an arrangement of precious keepsakes. This portion of the installation becomes a version of

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin's Arcade Project is "an enormous unfinished palimpsest-like work which presents quotes out of context and snatches of text wherein they were able to prove their "in such a way that they illustrated one another and were able to prove their *raison d'être* in a free-floating state, as it were." See Whiteley, Gillian. *Junk Art and the Politics of Trash*. 2011. Page 17.

¹¹ Specifically Chaco Canyon, Diablo Canyon, and Canyonlands National Park.

¹² The United States oldest archaeological sites, dating from AD 900 and 1150.

¹³ Developed Conceptual Art through use of manufactured objects presented as sculptures.

the previous room, including the same materials and imagery, presented to the viewer in a new format. As the viewer examines the precious, plastic boxes and rectangles sitting directly on the astro-turf, they are seeing the same materials used in the stacked sculptures, isolated and confined in their own sanitized, plastic-wrapped environment. These objects symbolize keepsakes from our experiences, the things we collect throughout our travels and eventually accumulate in a form of ordered disarray. As Susan Stewart writes, these “Souvenirs act as surrogate experiences and enable us to have a second-hand experience or encounter”¹⁴ that allow us to continue reliving the moment.

As in the installations of Sarah Sze, encountering the stationary chair and manual projector, the viewer enters a space that appears to have been recently occupied. Here, they are invited to take a seat and manually click through the wheel of 80 slides. The slides are handmade, using the cardboard from vinyl records and digital images printed on transparencies. The use of dated materials, in both the projector and materiality of the slides, is used to highlight the theme of nostalgia as the viewer engages with the material. Clicking through the images, the viewer will quickly discover that the subject of the slideshow is the very installation they encountered in the previous room. The slides include various angles and details that document the installation experience, some from a generic viewpoint and others from my own. Within the images, there are a handful of blurry and obstructed images that highlight our tendency to rush through the things we experience in order to move to the next thing, or the next picture.

The work in *Scenic Viewpoint* is meant to be a playful commentary on the way we experience place, the way we value the material things in our life, and highlight the ever changing nature of our encounters and our surrounding spaces. It is simultaneously critiquing our culture of disposability and the endless distractions that prevent us from being wholly present while simulating an experience that most of us have encountered, in which we have likely recognized our own absurdity. The great irony of the project is that I am ultimately at the center of my

¹⁴ Whiteley, Gillian. *Junk Art and the politics of Trash*. 2011. Page 35-36.

critique, as I create an environment that is meant to be temporary, only to live eternally in photographic documentation.

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Image 1: Aerial view of *Ruins*, 2018, found mixed media



Image 2: *Ruins*, detail



Image 3: *Ruins and Rest Stop 8*, 2018, found mixed media



Image 4: *Rest Stop 2*, detail



Image 7: *Ruins*, detail



Image 8: Entry to *Archive and Souvenir Room*



Image 9: Aerial view of *Archive and Souvenir Room*, 2018, found mixed media on astro-turf



Image 10: *Souvenirs*, 2018, found mixed media and sewn, clear vinyl on astro-turf



Image 11: *Souvenir 9*, 2018, wooden pallet scraps



Image 12: *Souvenir 3* and *Souvenir 7*, 2018, found mixed media and sewn, clear vinyl on astro-turf

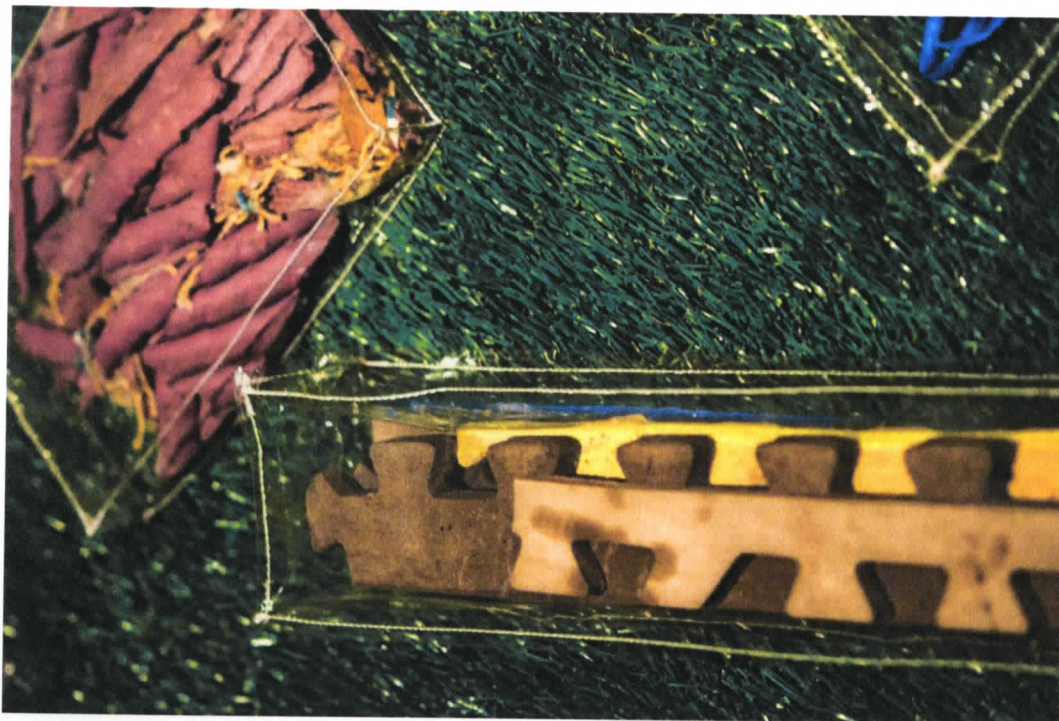


Image 13: *Souvenir 4* and *Souvenir 9*, found mixed media and clear, sewn vinyl on astro-turf

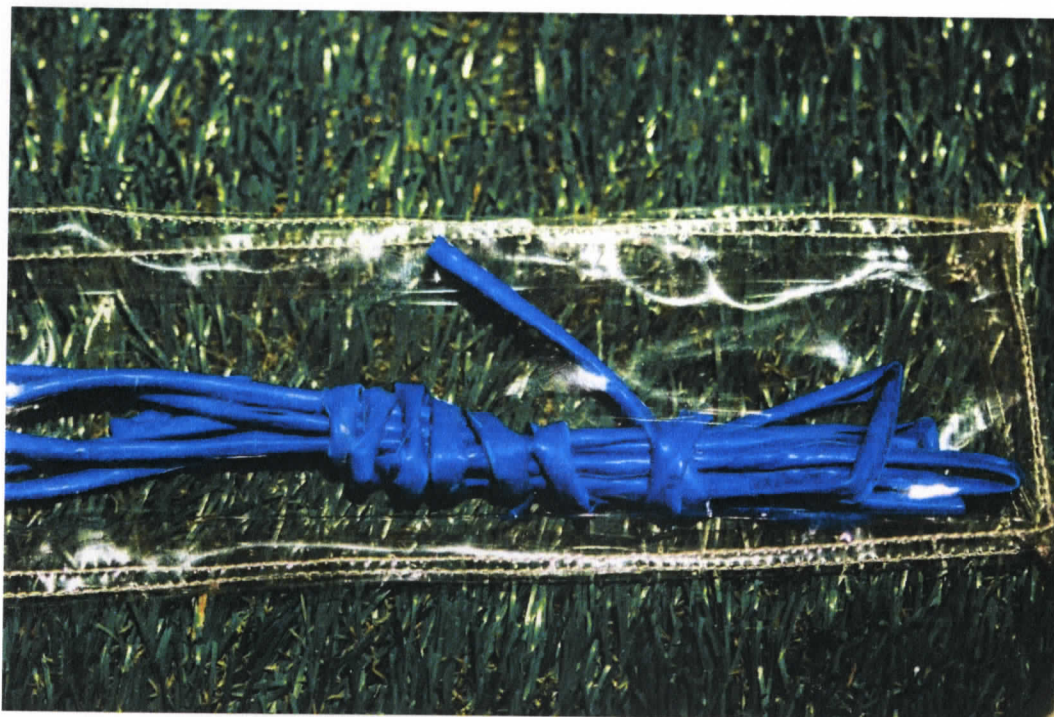


Image 14: *Souvenir 5*, 2018, wire casing and clear, sewn vinyl on astro-turf