

Navigating Spaces, Being in Place

by

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Abstract

This paper outlines an emerging methodology that links separate art projects made in multiple locations. Accumulation (of both materials and experiences over time) combined with a process of interruption serve as a common line of enquiry that reflects both my past and present situations as a temporary resident in a foreign country. Through a psycho-geographical and phenomenological lens the work uses the experience of movement through a landscape (natural or urban) as a site where the visual and haptic sensory information imprints itself in the mind. Mapping, tracking and recording these experiences points towards a broader engagement with ideas about attachment to places that are not yet home. My work utilizes the methods of layering, collage and assemblage as a means to visualize and contrast our complicated experiences of time that cross borders and continents in a highly mobile and technological society. I ask what can be learned by questioning our connections to place and how do these experiences contribute to our sense of belonging? How do we carry these experiences with us to create continuity between places, past, present and future? Filtered through the ambiguity of memory I build upon patterns of association, trusting in intuitive yet controlled responses where the work becomes a site to explore our permanent and temporary relationships to place.

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The Beginning

This narrative begins in the middle in a small coal mining community in the Crowsnest Pass in Southwestern Alberta, listening to the train rumbling through town, reminding me of other trains of my prairie childhood, the haunting whistle and the boxcars of grain being transported across the country. Place, as a Canadian as I have come to know it, has been inextricably linked to the natural resource sector. It has served as a backdrop to my upbringing filled with wheat fields, large vegetable gardens, pig barns, and small-town community relationships which led me to travel across Canada to the East Coast to attend college. I married a geologist and set out on an adventurous journey growing our family as we chased work in the international oil and gas industry over the next two decades. Following the economic upswings and downturns, the rise and fall of public opinion and environmental politics we moved countries, travelled extensively, packed up and set up numerous homes first in Angola, then Kuwait, Malaysia, Libya, Tunisia, Ukraine and Mexico, returning to Canada each summer.

As my experiences outside of my home country expanded, I came to understand that place is not only a location that informs who I am but also that I carry these places with me. The experiences have left an impression on me made even more bittersweet knowing that I would likely never return to them, and if so, they would no longer be as I remembered. I had never known anyone else who was “an expat”, but I learned over time the communities I built were built quickly and they dispersed just as quickly as people moved on to other postings in other countries forging new friendships and networks of support. It is a continuous cycle, one that never repeats itself in exactly the same way, and it has led me to experience many international places but also to question how and why we form attachments to some places and not others. Although my place in the expatriate community has shifted and will continue to do so in response to personal and global pressures, I feel the questions I have about finding a place of meaning continue to inform the work I make in my studio practice.

Position Statement

My studio has been the one constant place that has been set up in each and every location I have lived. Whether it is a large open space or just a table in the corner, it is an area designated as mine separate from the chaos and routine of raising a family in a diverse international community embedded in a country culturally different than my own. Walking has also always been an important and consistent activity for me to get outside to experience the day and has now appeared as an emergent methodology in my studio practice. It is not only a matter of seeing what the city has to offer but involves a never-ending checklist of errands that need doing and people to meet. Through these everyday interactions I form an embodied knowledge of my urban environment that filters its way into the work that I make.

The methods I use in this thesis diverge from my previously established practice of drawing and printmaking techniques to include collage, digital media and wall installation. Over the past two years navigating through the low-residency MFA program while simultaneously managing feelings of dislocation in yet another international relocation, I have directed my work and research in an unanticipated way. My understanding of place and displacement in how I consider representations of site and non-site are layered into the work along with themes of memory, absence and temporality.

This has led me to ask: within an environment of constant change, how do places provide opportunities for enquiry (and inspirations for my art practice) to understand relationships of connectedness and belonging? How can methods of collage contribute to interpreting my experiences of the compression and expansion of time and place in my changing global community? As the COVID-19 crisis takes hold during the writing of this paper, it has laid bare our connections to each other on a global scale forcing us to retreat to our homes or to our home countries challenging our everyday routines. In the works presented in this thesis I am looking for access points to form an understanding of the physical and spatial structures in the places where I live, working to form my own perceptual understanding of the space to build

familiarity over time. I want to further examine this notion of bounded space, and also bounded time that creates spaces that we shift and move within. What can we learn by examining place through experience rather than location? How might that be done? How can it provide us with new ways of imagining transient spaces?

Connecting Walking to Sites

In my practice, walking becomes the mediator between understanding the spatial relationships between time and place. We must get up, move about, take action, interact, engage all our senses if we are to formulate an understanding of the world around us. I have been inspired by Yi Fu Tuan, a human geographer, who studies how communities and people interact with their environments and how these interactions form their understanding of place. He suggests movement creates and reinforces connection to the spaces we inhabit. In his book *Space and Place* he writes, “When we stretch out our limbs, we experience space and time simultaneously – space as the sphere of freedom from physical constraint and time as duration in which tension is followed by ease” (118). Walking infers a slow connection to a place that is tied directly to the speed in which a person encounters their surroundings.

Rebecca Solnit, in her book *Field Guide to Getting Lost* discusses Virginia Woolf’s relationship to place:

“for Woolf getting lost was not a matter of geography so much as identity, a passionate desire, even an urgent need, to become no one and anyone, to shake off the shackles that remind you who you are, who others think you are. This dissolution of identity is familiar to travelers in foreign places and remote fastnesses but Woolf, with her acute perception of the nuances of consciousness, could find it in a stroll down the street, a moments solitude in an armchair” (16).

As I continue to develop my walking practice of wandering and allowing myself to get lost in my thoughts and new places these connections to private moments of solitude take on greater

meaning. They point towards an internal processing of subconscious observations, letting the sensory stimuli and emotions percolate to settle into a depiction of my experience.

Walking Practice as Methodology

The walking methodology I employ is predominantly used to gather impressions of a place. As I move through environments, I unconsciously gather information. I am simultaneously aware and not aware of the things happening on the periphery of my line of vision. My walking practice is pragmatic and meant to be purposeful as a means of covering distance while I am engaged in something else. It is a method to situate myself physically within the space to establish routines and rituals in response to the contours and layout of the city streets. Walking is a solitary, private experience yet I am acutely aware of my surroundings and their effect on me. The walks provide an opportunity to discover the nuances of specific places. They are like collecting expeditions for visual clues and markers that become important to build a structure of understanding about a particular place. Walking in new and unfamiliar environments is an assault on my senses but also provides a place to turn inwards to trust in myself, in the action of moving forward, aware of my breath and my step.

Guy Debord, a member of the mid-twentieth century Situationist group used drifting as a mechanism to promote engagement with the city in protest to the rise of consumption and disconnection that had come to define city-life. The 'derives' were scheduled activities identified outside of leisure and work commitments and best accomplished in the company of others. Designed to explore the psycho-geographical feel of a city, the walks were established within a set of constraints limited by duration or distance that encouraged an intentional letting-go but also a strict adherence to a set of parameters. The walks provided an alternative way of delineating a place irrespective of administrative boundaries. The participants reacted to the contours of the built environment navigating points of access and denial. These were not leisurely strolls like the poet Wordsworth (who composed poetry while walking) would take to

activate the imagination and connect with his natural surroundings but deliberate acts of disruption to the everyday interactions within a place.

Janet Cardiff and George Bures-Miller's early soundwalks also explored the city by taking participants on walks through designated routes in different cities. The viewer listened to a pre-recorded narration on a headset that led them on a walk through a specific location. A sense of dislocation occurred as the recorded visuals and audio information conflicted with what their senses were encountering in real time and real space. Cardiff and Bures-Miller employ these same tactics in later works that became less about walking in cities and more directly associated with creating alternate places within interior, architectural spaces. As in the walks the viewers became participants simply by spending time within the constructed scenarios or by activating movement sensors embedded in the piece. Through their presence, the external environment began to shape their internal experience and knowledge of the space.

I point towards these artist's works as a way to highlight walking practices that use the city and its architecture as a site of investigation. Juhani Pallasmaa in his book *The Eyes of the Skin* (which has become a classic in architectural theory placing emphasis on the correlation between identity and sensory experience) writes "Equally the task of art and architecture in general is to reconstruct the experience of an undifferentiated interior world in which we are not mere spectators, but to which we inseparably belong." (25) The artworks created through the derives of the Situationist and the city soundwalks both simultaneously created experiences of being a participant inside the moment responding to the immediate environment yet also moving through the spaces as an observer. Whereas the Situationists approach evokes an emotional and aesthetic response, the soundwalks of Janet Cardiff's require the viewer to collage the scenes together overlapping the present, the past, and the imagined. Each set up scenarios of interaction with their current physical environments encouraging the participants to discover the city in an alternative way to everyday experience. My work keeps the space

ambiguous and partially unknown drawing attention to the spaces which surround us without defining a specific location.

During my walks through different cities I think of the space from both an aerial and street view perspective, imagining myself with the space but also outside of it. Technology in part has provided ways of seeing the world from above and also from within without actually having to be physically walking through these spaces. The images, whether as a digital download, or from an airplane high above the ground, or through advertisements of a physical place reside within the imagination as expectations of a place and are experienced at a distance. We can only imagine them, but we also set them against our experiences and knowledge of the physical place. These ways of seeing are constantly being reconciled with our perceived knowledge of a place and the actual movement of the body within the space.

In January 2018 as the temperatures plummeted, the snow fell and the roads iced up, I walked through the streets of Blairmore Alberta taking photos (to be used as source material for future drawings) of the small houses originally built by the coal miners for their families in the early 1900s. I was taking this time for my art practice attending a residency at the Gushul Art Studios and working on my application for the MFA program. By the time I received news of my acceptance into the low-residency MFA program, I would be walking through knee deep snow days after arriving in Kiev, Ukraine. Once settled, I began walking in my neighborhood where I would find the same house styles with their oddly shaped roofline an indication that immigrants from Eastern Europe at a different time had brought their designs with them to Canada. (As an added connection, when I asked a fellow student to review my text she informed me that the photo I included from Blairmore was in fact her Aunts' home located across from the Gushul Residency Studios.)



Figure 1. House in Blairmore, Canada, 2018



Figure 2 House in Kyiv, Ukraine, 2018

Edward Relph, in his book *Place and Placelessness*, discusses our sense of belonging by designating boundaries for the binary concepts of ‘insidedness’ and ‘outsidedness’. He states, “to some degree we carry these zones around with us as we move, we are always at the centre of our perceptual space and hence in a place.” He suggests it is our intentions to be in one place or the other that determine where we feel like we most belong and where we do not. His original writings situated places as “characterized by variety and meaning” and “placeless geography a labyrinth of similarities” suggesting that local places as places of distinctiveness were far more meaningful than placelessness, where there was a prevailing sameness and disconnection to the surrounding environment. In the 2008 edition of his book, Relph updates his stance and states that in the post-modern era duality of “place and placelessness exist in a state of dynamic balance”. He acknowledges that “increased mobility means that ideas of what

constitutes 'home' must also have changed". This update is important as it reflects the complex relationships of connecting with a specific place in an increasingly differentiated world.

Anthropologist Marc Auge describes non-places such as airports, hotels and grocery stores as places we move through but in which identity is not inscribed. He offers them as places of temporary engagement within a global perspective. He links these non-places as places of familiarity for those people who are far from home who find comfort in the surroundings that are the same wherever they travel. These liminal places are defined not only by their physical locations but by the users who share these spaces and abide by the established rules while they occupy them. These types of 'non' places can also be applied to virtual spaces, the chat rooms, Zoom and digital meeting platforms that have become so important since the COVID-19 lockdown that create places where people can gather and form connections. With today's technology of satellite global positioning, Google maps and video conferencing we can easily situate ourselves in relation to the rest of the world that connects us all across time and space.

Marc Auge envisions the world as one city comprised of many individual cities from around the globe. He calls this place the city-world which is also simultaneously made up of cities which contain the world in all its diversity within one city. These two views, one of the world-city and the city-world, where the local suddenly becomes the global and the global is also the local, has grounded but also complicated my shifting relationships to places of home. Experiencing places from here and from away have led me to ask: how does the body process transitions making attachments that form connections to and between places? Over the past two years, I have come to consider the importance of walking as part of my practice. It is in the moments between countries and local towns, of walking in one place and then another on the other side of the world that has provided the methodology for the work created throughout the MFA program connecting past, present and future artworks. Walking breaks the space of 'placelessness' and turns a non-place into a place.

Interim

Recognition of the Temporary

I live in a perpetual cycle of setting up and dismantling the spaces I call home. Fixing things to walls like hanging pictures has meant that this place is now home and suggests an intention to stay. We always leave a framed piece of artwork leaning against the wall to ward off notice of our next move. It is family lore in our house that the moment the last picture is hung, it signals our next move.

Since transitioning between places has been a way of life since I can remember, it should not have come as such a surprise to discover how difficult it was for me to show a 'finished' work midway through the MFA program. After years of finding viable alternatives navigating my environment, adjusting to fit my present circumstances, I found it difficult to settle on one work over another. I explored presentation strategies combining and recombining the separate groupings of work completed over the previous year. My underlying intention was to have the work come 'off the wall' to break free from the form of a traditional frame. All the individual pieces were made up of small parts requiring different kinds of hanging mechanisms and I spent a considerable amount of time experimenting with different materials and configurations in an attempt to integrate them within the space.



Figure 3. Sometimes Going Somewhere, MFALR Interim Exhibit, 2019

The work *Sometimes Going Somewhere* stretched along a main hallway corridor at Emily Carr University where it could be encountered from either direction by passing staff and students. At one end was a series of photo-collage paper pieces taped to the wall, in the middle a set of tiny accordion books resting on two shelves, and a set of wood block wall constructions at the other end. I enjoyed the process of creating on-site for the very first time, hauling supplies from the studios to the exhibitions space, painting, and cutting directly on the wall. Other provisional presentation strategies that made minimal impact such as push pins and double-sided carpet tape that allowed for easy repositioning and removal also made an appearance. The use of such ubiquitous materials opened up new possibilities for attaching paper and small objects together in a multitude of possibilities. It pointed towards my growing awareness of the need for flexibility not only in my daily life but also in my studio work. Most importantly, tape made a significant appearance in my work. Until then I had used painter's tape extensively as a stencil or to mask out sections, but this was the first time that tape became a material in itself.

The “stickiness of tape” of pressing objects up against each other to hold the work physically and conceptually together was beginning to surface as an underlying theme supporting the ideas I had about attachment to place. I recognized a correlation of concept and materials. It led me to wonder about how our interactions in one's environment need to constantly adapt, be repositioned and pieced together with the available resources forming temporary bonds that connect experience together but do not necessarily last a long time. The deinstall in particular exposed the materials tenuous relationship to the gallery space. The work disappeared leaving little to no trace behind, much like a move to a new city provides a clean slate each time as an opportunity to start over. As a low-residency MFA student showing up from out of country to install the work, the exhibition revealed an opportunity to address the work and the site together as a temporary condition.

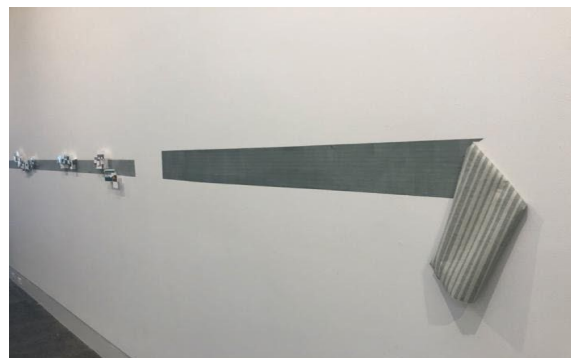


Figure 4 MFALR Interim Exhibit, De-install detail, 2019

Sticking Points of the Photographic Image

With this series the specificity of place, through the inclusion of photographs in the work proved to be one of the biggest sticking points. The photograph - although it grounded the work as an important starting point for me - was also unintentionally limiting and distracting for the viewer. The photos made the artwork specifically about Mexico, while I was aiming for work about the psychology of a transitory lifestyle, rather than about the politics of a specific place.



Figure 5 MFALR Interim Exhibit detail, 2019

The photographic image as a source of documentation, unlike a semi-abstracted drawing drew attention to my position as a foreigner and led the discussions towards place as locations of class inequity and privilege. I was asked for clearer definitions between the nuances of being an expat, tourist or temporary/permanent resident to establish my relationship to my location. Although this reading identified very valid and worthy subject matter, I felt that it did not align with the goals or intention I had for my artworks. The viewer brought with them their own biases, interpretations and experiences of that specific place (in this case Mexico) and the commentary became structured around those concerns. While I wanted the artwork to discuss a sense of displacement and search for connections to place, it became clear that the photographs directed the work outside of my primary themes. I realized that the presentation of my personal navigations through public spaces required further consideration. Abstraction as a way to by-pass the objective/representational visual fields would bring me closer to depicting a more subjective experience.

This questioning also made me wonder where “place” fits into our sense of identity. Relph addresses these concerns in an interesting way. He writes, “To be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it.” However, if ‘home’ is not established then how do connections of belonging form to shape a place with meaning? Place becomes an important marker of identity. How could I better represent my experience of moving through unfamiliar places without using photo documentation yet still embrace my personal experiences of specific locations?

On the Move

Interruptions and the Shaping of Place



Figure 6 Preliminary Study, gouache, color photocopies on matboard, 2019

Collage appeared as a method to merge time and space into one image and simultaneously carried over in the following months as I settled into our place in Mexico. I looked for ways to interrupt the image in a similar way to how my mind is distracted walking through neighborhoods full of visually contrasting color and competing facades. The empty spaces between the image fragments became a meaningful space to explore, providing areas for the eye to rest but also consider what had been removed. Previously, much of my work had been predominantly black and white drawings. Filling these areas with local color was a new

technique to explore. I began to connect rooflines that created angles and additional shapes, visually complicating the compositional space further. The positive/negative shapes around the architecture began to define the space, the lines created where the shapes pressed up against one another important points of connection and transitions. These color spaces created both a presence and an absence simultaneously.



Figure 7 Color Collage wall piece, Masonite, gouache, wood, panel, photographs, 2019

Edward Relph in his criticism of contemporary space planning complains that the individual building takes precedence without considering integration of the space left over around it. He laments that the empty space that is not designated for specific economic and efficient purposes has lost value. I think about all the high-rise apartments and office buildings, uniform in shape that can be built anywhere regardless of the local context. It reminds me of residential homes in older neighborhoods razed to the ground in the neighborhoods wherever I have lived that have been replaced to maximize square footage. He suggests that more attention to integrate the design with the surrounding spaces would activate these areas, creating spaces of

imaginative experience. As I reduced the photo's presence proportionally, it began to open up more spaces of possibility.

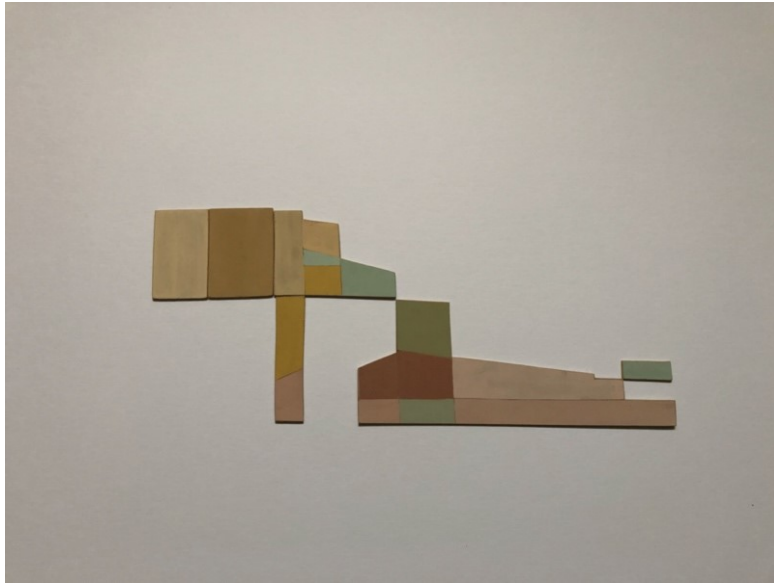


Figure 8 Color Collage wall piece, Masonite, gouache, 2019

The representation of absence/presence and the void in the work of Rachel Whiteread offers an interesting counterpoint to my approach. In her famous work entitled *House* (1993) she undertakes the monumental task of casting the interior of a Victorian terraced house in London. In this gesture she makes the emptiness of the rooms tangibly and unavoidable present. The empty spaces of the building filled with concrete create a grey, heavy mass that cannot be ignored nor can the loss of the last standing house of its kind in this area. The sculpture alone in the empty lot acts as a monument/memorial as a reminder of the working-class homes that once stood there. Whiteread is interested in the representation of the interior surfaces. Her casting process uses existing architectural spaces (and objects) as the mold rather than building molds around the forms. When we look at *House* it is the interior wall spaces that are made visible in the final form not a casting of the exterior of the house. The art site Gagosian says, "Whiteread articulates the negative space surrounding or contained by objects." which is similar to the functioning of the negative spaces in my work where the surrounding shapes draw attention to the absent object. This flip where the architecture is turned inside-out plays with our visual grounding of positive/negative and interior/exterior spaces. The finished

work is not speaking about the house as object but rather points towards the life and history of what the house once contained. It is these themes of capturing memories of a place and making absences visible that I work with in my wall installations.

Tracings of Abstraction

For many, home is a primary place to begin a discussion about places of belonging because that is where we have established a family, a sense of security and comfort. The sites I have chosen to investigate in the studio work explore places that represent for me locations of transition away from where I currently call home, between one place and another; institutions such as ECUAD, airports, road trips and nearby neighborhoods. All of these sites have personal significance to me as places I have spent time in over the past two years of this program. They are liminal sites that exist on a threshold between important moments whose boundaries are defined by their duration.

I find the works of Ingrid Calame ambiguously distill a sense of place. She makes visible seemingly inconsequential moments and vestiges of events into tangible, large-scale abstractions referencing time and place. "Where geographic maps show the relationship between regions or roads, she documents the relationship between humans and their environments." (Harmon) Her process involves laying down translucent Mylar paper on the ground, tracing around the shapes of stains and marks left behind through the activities of everyday living in public spaces. Recording their presence through the action of drawing, she connects the hand and the body to the space transcribing the surface where an action once was into a drawing that embodies past and present interaction.



Figure 9 Indianapolis Speedway drawing detail, Ingrid Calame, Figure removed due to copyright restrictions.

In her *Indianapolis Speedway* series Calame specifically traces the marks left behind by tires under repetitive pressure of heat and speed with the surface of asphalt. Unlike in the past, when people trod pathways into the landscape, hard man-made surfaces of today do not hold the information in the same way yet can still remind us of our collective impacts. She stacks the separate drawings of paper retracing line and shapes together to create new iterations that extract and blur associations to the original site. She then uses these drawings to create additional works in paint or directly onto gallery walls. The mark making takes on a logic of its own as she separates layer of color to represent the often obscure and random stains left on the surfaces. These series of drawings feel topographical and map-like. In her more recent work *Essen and Lacoste* drawings the site tracings transition to a type of ‘frottage’ where she rubs pigment into paper that holds to the contours of the surfaces creating more textural surfaces. In her process the physical labor and time required to produce the marks connects the body to the site but also reveals the limitations of the sheer magnitude of her projects. To attempt to reveal the site in its entirety is impossible, rather the work acknowledges that we can ever only know small fragments of the larger whole.

In the *Road Trip* series I was attempting to record my impressions of a place, not one that is fixed in a specific moment of time but ‘place’ that has been affected by the passage of time and distance. Although similar in appearance to the earlier works of Calame, these drawings were not physically connected to the ground like hers but rather were meant to capture the

ephemeral qualities of moving through a landscape. Travelling from Canada to our newly established home in Mexico, I recorded the passing landscape outside the car by making drawings on my iPad. The car jostling my body moved the pen in unanticipated directions producing lines dependent on the surface of the highway, the curve of the road, and the speed at which we followed or passed other vehicles we encountered. Similar to the steady thrum of a vibrating engine on a very long international flight the body retains the movement long after disembarking, highway travel imparts its own rhythmic experience. The drawings became a mediator between body, hand and the environment. The smooth, hard screen on which I was drawing acted like a thin barrier (similarly to the windshield) that simultaneously connected me to the world outside the vehicle but also kept me from fully experiencing the passing landscape. Back home I combined layers of individual screenshots in Photoshop to create one image that merged the durational aspect of this experience bringing time and place together.



Figure 10 Passenger, iPad digital drawing, 2019

I was interested in the varied temporal spaces of consciousness created during a road trip. Digital devices which update automatically to our present location made the tracking of time and distance ambiguous. Gas stations and fast food places found along the route offered no additional clues to our specific location. While drawing I completely lost track of time. Some drawings were as short as a minute, others much longer. The interior of the car became like an

alternate universe where expectations of others were cast off and I could be myself away from a regular routine. Distances were experienced differently too, as the conditions of the outside environment - such as the hours of daylight, weather conditions and road construction - affected our progress. I began to rely on the internal rhythms of the body to tell me when to nap, eat, read and take breaks to stretch my legs. When travelling I am often thinking about what was left behind but also thinking ahead to what needs to be done once we arrive. It was a transitional time between two important life events and my thoughts kept shifting from thinking about leaving one place and arriving in the next. The road trip became a place removed from time and place.

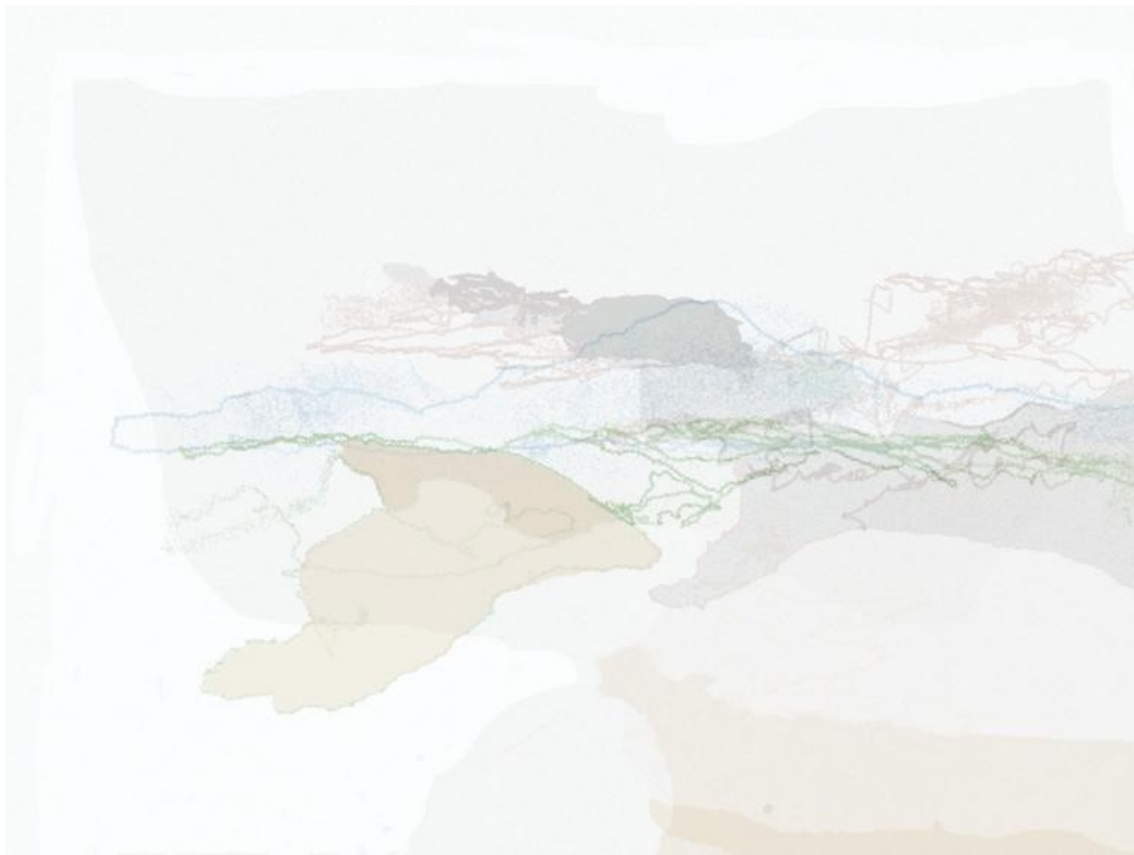


Figure 11 Road Trip, Digital drawing collage, 2019

When experiences exist across time zones on different continents, as they so often do for my family a sense of place becomes distorted. While work takes my husband overseas and my kids work or attend school in Canada, we often schedule regular times to video chat taking into account an eleven-hour time difference. During these times I expected to feel the distance in the thousands of kilometers separating us, but instead I realized I often felt so far apart because we were not experiencing the same part of our day or week (in the Middle East the weekend falls on Friday and Saturday). Absences began to represent the moments between places. Unlike time advancing on a trajectory in one direction into the future, memory of the spaces of my experiences merged together into a fragmented construction of separate moments.

Accumulation of Material, Time and Place

Material

As I settle into my new studio unpacking our recently arrived household goods shipment, the space becomes overfull with art supplies and materials I have collected from all the places where I have lived. I begin to think about the embedded history these objects carry with them. The price stickers are still visible, indicating values in foreign currencies packaged with labels written in languages such as Arabic or Cyrillic script. I remember the frustrations of dealing with metric and imperial measurements standard in one country but not the next; or tools made useless because the plugs were the wrong shape or size for the electrical outlets. Stuff collects in drawers, on shelves, in corners and on tabletops as an odd, mismatched collection. Foucault writes “The archive cannot be described in its totality; and in its presence it is unavoidable. It emerges in fragments, regions, levels.” (Enwezor, 16) This idea feels relevant to the way accumulations overpower the spaces I inhabit. My inventory of materials is too large to be able to use or see all at once, I only pull out the things that I need when I find a use for them. There is much that remains hidden stored away. The individual items I choose remind me when and where I acquired them. Accumulation becomes a form of incremental remembering of places and experiences but like memory merge together in a kind of palimpsest of my layered history.

Time

As I think about how to make the small collage pieces occupy more space, my accumulation of materials begins to translate visually into artwork across the studio wall. My preliminary experimentations predominantly focus on visual reminders of the shapes and patterns I noticed during my walks. Other sensory information, slower to seep into my consciousness, starts to make an appearance later in the process. To further explore the theme of time and temporality, I considered how to control and contain the work within a framework. Should I restrict the individual elements or let them spill out into the available space? Each time I was in the studio I intuitively added to the collection exploring different materials such as Masonite, matboard and wood pieces so that over time the work expanded across the wall. Time became measured in the amount of material incrementally added. The variety of shapes and proximity of the pieces to each other formed groupings and relationships. This provided an alternative way to consider how to structure a narrative by slowly gathering associations between objects while building upon a two-dimensional space.



Figure 12 Studio wall detail, 2019



Figure 13 Studio wall detail, 2019

I am drawn to the work of Canadian artist Lynda Gammon. In particular, as Kathleen Ritter points out in her catalogue essay on Gammon's work, the series *Salvaged* provides an anchor

point to consider the use of studio materials “in evocative and unexpected ways, and act as a foil to traditional expectations of permanence, coherence and monumentality.” Gammon repurposes cardboard, foamcore, paper, photographs and found pieces of wood to construct precariously built installations attached to the wall. She constructs the wall pieces in her studio practicing for a gallery setting, documenting the finished work before disassembly so that each time she reconstructs the work it becomes something new. I find this a provocative way to work that draws parallels to the perpetual cycles of setting up and dismantling the spaces I live in. To think about how to pack/condense for example a XX square foot house into a forty-foot sea shipping container and then reassemble into the next house that is a completely different size and configuration is surprisingly similar to her processes of assembling and disassembling. Arranging and rearranging until a sense of balance is achieved provides a way for me to internalize these new spaces.

Place



Figure 14 Neighborhood Map wall installation, variety of tape, paint, chalk pastel, graphite, 2020

Neighborhood Map followed the accumulations experimentations on the adjoining wall. I contemplated my relationship as local resident/foreign visitor within this city with the materials I felt compelled to work with from the studio. I thought about my networks within this place over time which stretched back to the early 90s when I first visited. I wondered how these wanderings through the streets offered connections between the physical experience of walking in this particular location at this particular time and how we use memory to construct a sense a place. It was only during the beginning months of COVID-19 that the work began to grow into its present iteration. As the city locked down most foreigners left, but I chose (and out of necessity decided) to stay. With access to my studio and the logistics regarding the Summer Intensive unclear it became evident that I would likely not be transporting work to Vancouver. In response I began to commit to the piece without regard for an unknown future destination. I was not only working directly on the wall as I previously had but I was making a work that was firmly fixed in the here and now without having to imagine the next move. It would be specific not only to this place but this particular moment in time without having to imagine the next move. I cut out large tape shapes, this time primed with a flat white paint that allowed me to draw directly on the surface. I layered a variety of household tape on top of a watercolor, graphite and chalk pastel base combining the immediacy of drawing that had been absent for a while with the flat, abstract works that had become a part of my studio practice.



Figure 15 *Neighborhood Map detail, 2020*

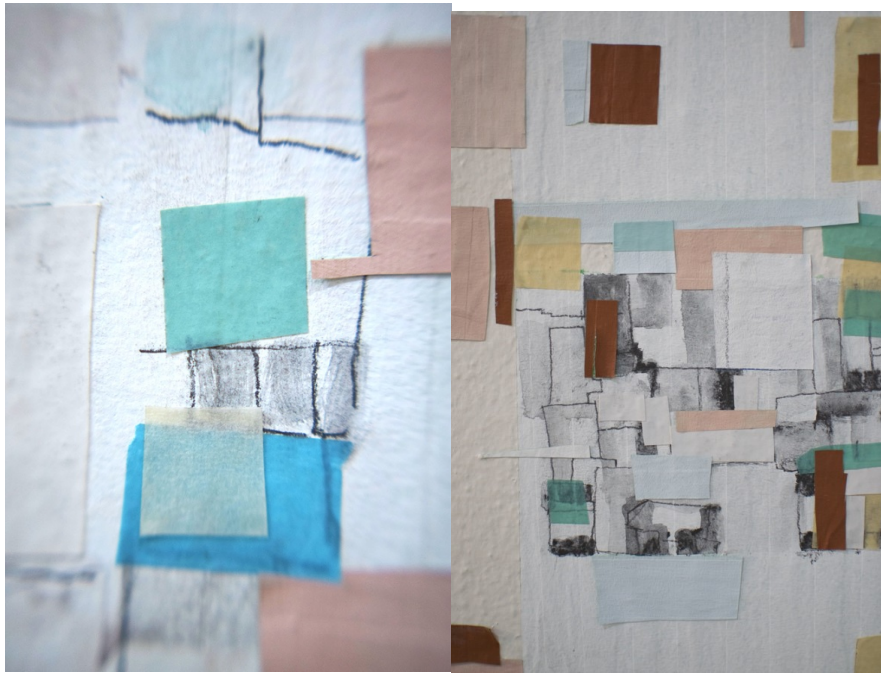


Figure 16 Neighborhood Map detail, 2020 (Photo Credit: Alesandro Osuna)

Figure 17 Neighborhood Map detail, 2020 (Photo Credit: Alesandro Osuna)

The building up of texture became an important consideration to further develop connections between the separate, abstract shapes. What is a place if it cannot be felt? In the book *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* Juhani Pallasmaa argues an ocularcentric view of the world in contemporary society privileges the visual over our other senses causing a separation of the self with the world. The phrases “touch of the eye” and “eyes of the skin” cleverly flips the reading and blurs the distinction of their hierarchical positions. Sight and touch become inextricably linked acknowledging the connections between spatial considerations and the sense of touch in architectural spaces. Surfaces can fool the eye (ceramic tile made to look like real marble, plastic made to look like wood) yet textures offer us a way of seeing through touch. The body is attuned to feel the most subtle differences between the physical properties of the materials felt in the smoothness and coolness underfoot or when a finger is run across its surface. Layering textures in the spaces we inhabit and also in the form of auditory clues, or even scent can define a space. An empty house filled with belongings and the aromas of cooking becomes a home and a place of significance. This applies to moving about in cities and

the architecture which fills these spaces. The ability to recall the sensation of the ground underfoot whether it is sand, cement, or grass is fleeting. What about the feeling of heat and humidity on skin? It burrows deep within the mind adding layers of cumulative associations to events and experiences. With the addition of the material layers and variety of tape more complex haptic relationships began to appear.

To make the neighborhood map I gathered up all the available rolls of tape I had in my studio combining together a variety of widths, colors, matte and glossy finishes. The rough cement wall, difficult to drill into to hang work made an ideal surface for the tape. Mainly though I was seduced and eased by the methodical and meditative aspect of working one section each time I was in the studio. Each day I cut and layered a block of pattern onto the existing large shapes recalling different parts of the neighborhood from the private space of my studio. I had decided to put down roots here for a year to complete the MFA program anticipating the city to be a relatively familiar place. I had always had to move to experience new places, but now the very notion of travelling with the fluctuating border restrictions due to the Covid-19 lockdown, I could not easily leave. By remaining in a place, I was also able to navigate through a completely new experience providing me an opportunity to explore notions of permanency in an unprecedented temporary situation (of indeterminate length).

Looking Back/Going Forward

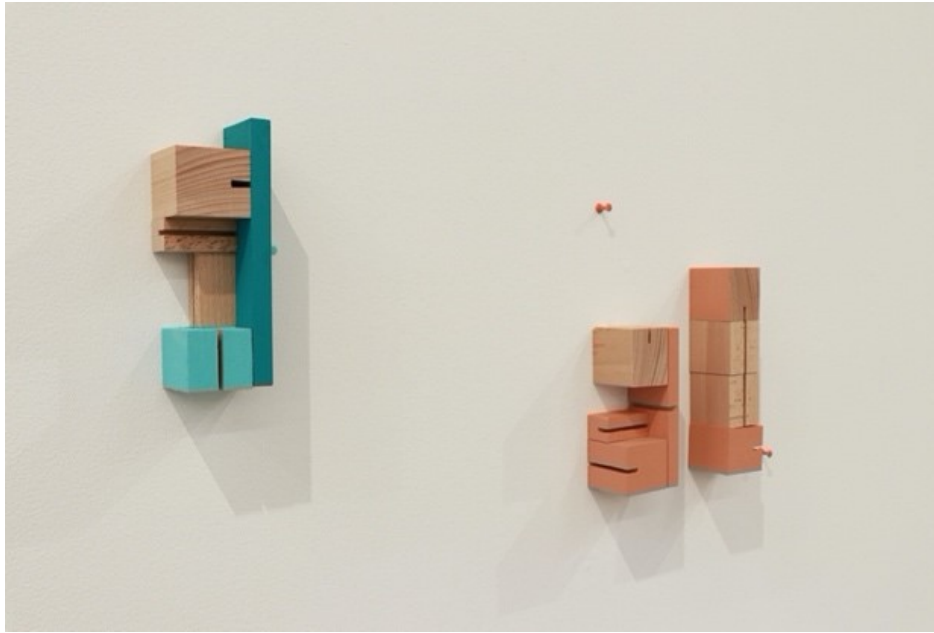


Figure 18 Painted Blocks and Pushpins, wood, pushpins, house paint, 2019

I remember places where I have been in association to time as if a place has been bracketed by a set of dates. Memory palaces use the metaphor of walking through a house where each part of a story has been stored in different rooms. Similarly, compartmentalizing separate groupings of places in relation to time helps me organize a trajectory of events. I pause to consider which place came before or after another and I begin to arrange them not in a sequential manner but in relation to one another.

The wood block assemblages from the interim exhibition wall installation represented a significant departure from my previous work settling someplace between image and object. They were a combination of my experience navigating the institutional labyrinth of ECUAD, an experimentation of arranging the display plinths to support the paper works, and a reference to the architectural forms in the collage work. In this work I found a way to visually abstract the experience that led up to their making.

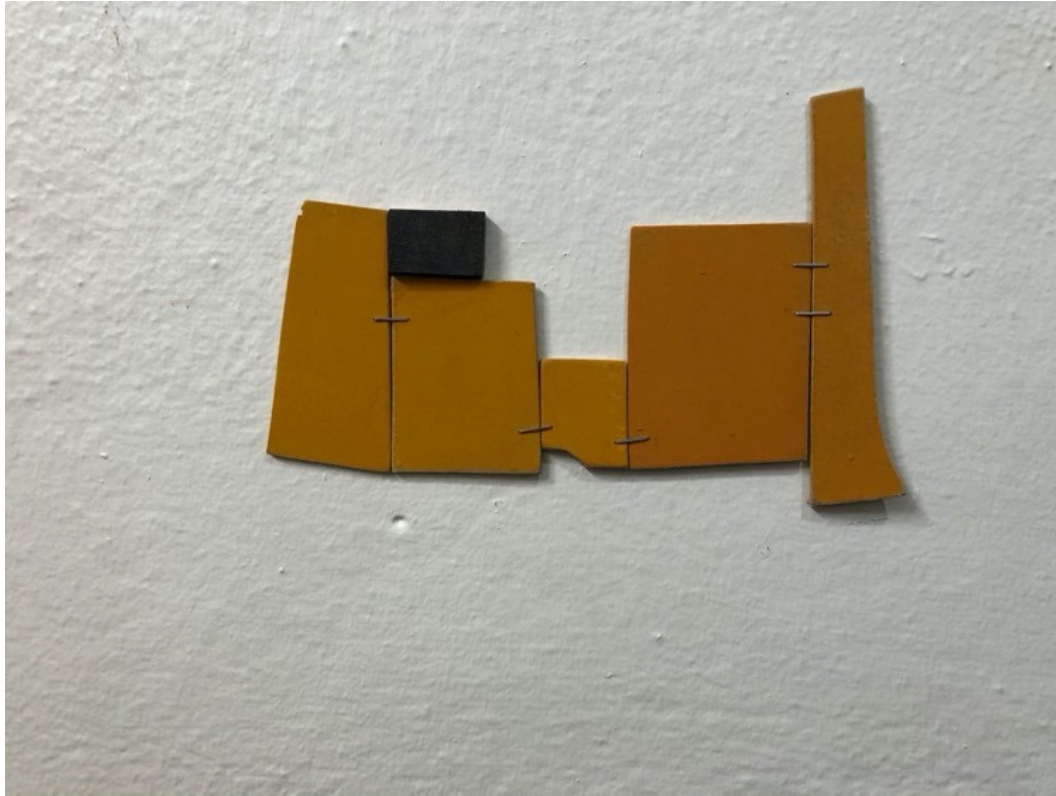


Figure 19 Ochre Shapes and Staples, Masonite, gouache, staples, and stained cedar wood, 2020

The *Ochre Shapes and Staples* piece also made in response to my environment represents a moment when separate but distinct events came together spontaneously. Using readily available materials found within my studio such as Masonite, staples, and gouache paint each piece was individually cut, sanded and painted. The assemblages came directly from my experience of wandering through an urban environment and took on the simplified form of groups of buildings. I feel that abstraction connects our bodies and minds, our interior thoughts to our external environments. By taking care and consideration, by appreciating not only color but attuning our bodies to the haptic and auditory sensations architectural spaces of the city provide us we gain a greater awareness of ourselves. With these works I began to sit more comfortably in the realm of abstraction.

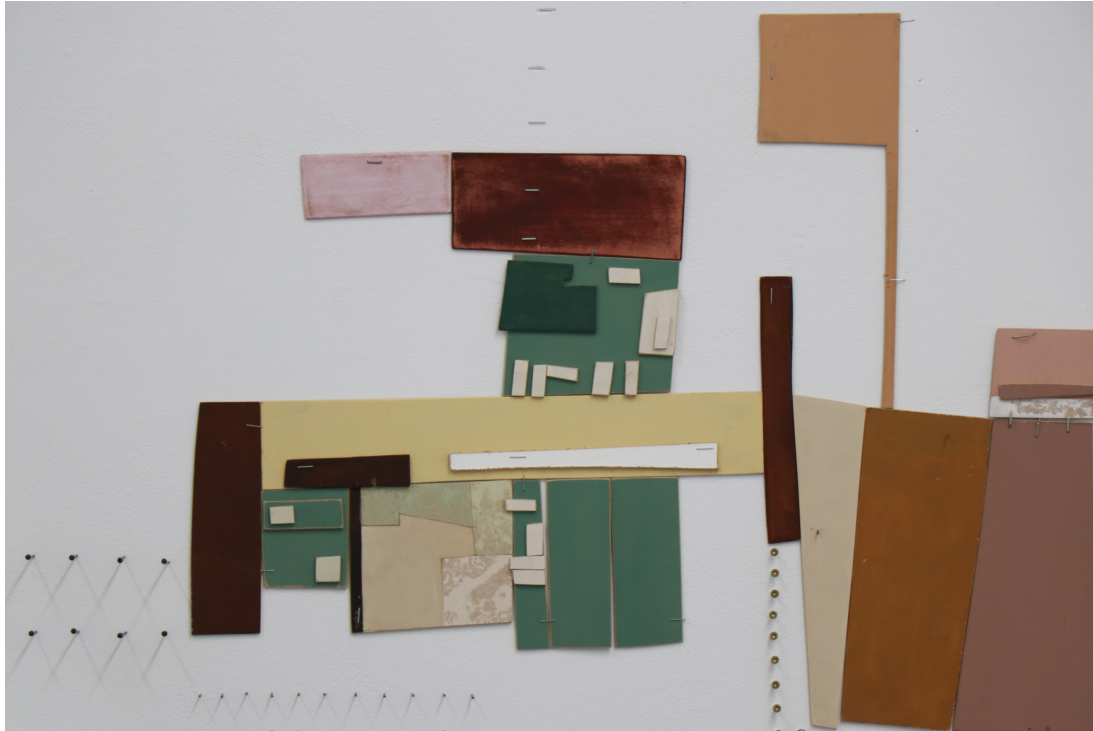


Figure 20 Spaces B E T W E E N wall installation, Masonite, gouache, staples, screws (photo credit: Karsen Seel)

The Masonite and staple piece alongside the tape map compositions served as a jumping off point that led to further material explorations of combining hand-painted Masonite shape assemblages. Because of the added weight the tape was no longer sufficient to hold the pieces to the wall and a different method of attachment was required. The studio walls were made of drywall in this part of the studio and I began to experiment by not only stapling the pieces together but also stapling them directly to the wall where only one or two staples were needed to keep the work from falling.

These added details also created a distinct form of mark making on their own. I used different kinds of staple guns and discovered incredible variety in the kinds of staples available. The surfaces on which I worked also affected their form and function. If I stapled the pieces together on the ceramic floor tile, the long staples would collapse, and the wood pieces would jump apart by the force of the gun creating gaps between them.

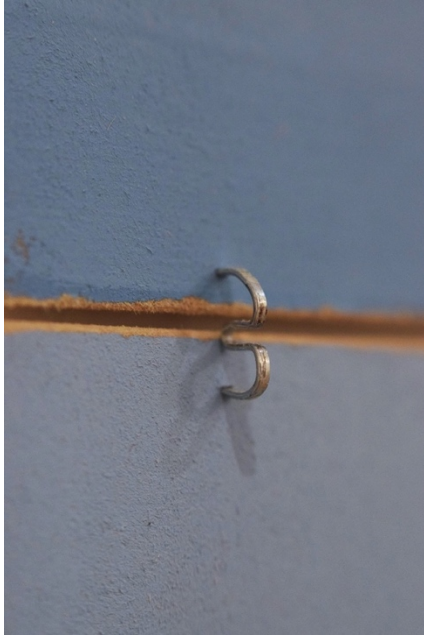


Figure 21 *Spaces B E T W E E N*, detail, Masonite, gouache, staple (photo credit: Alesandro Osuna)

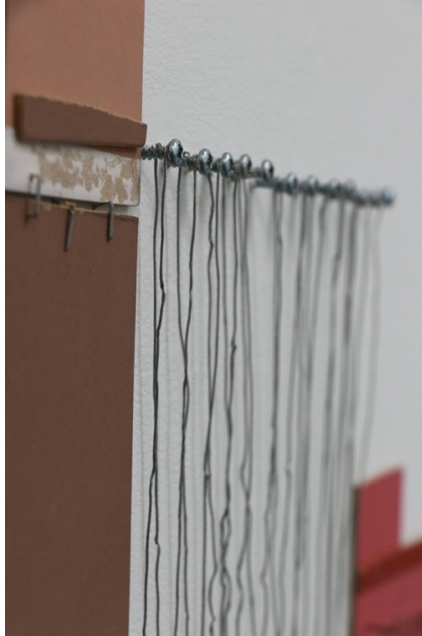


Figure 22 *Spaces B E T W E E N*, detail, Masonite, finishing nails, screws (photo credit: Karsen Seel)

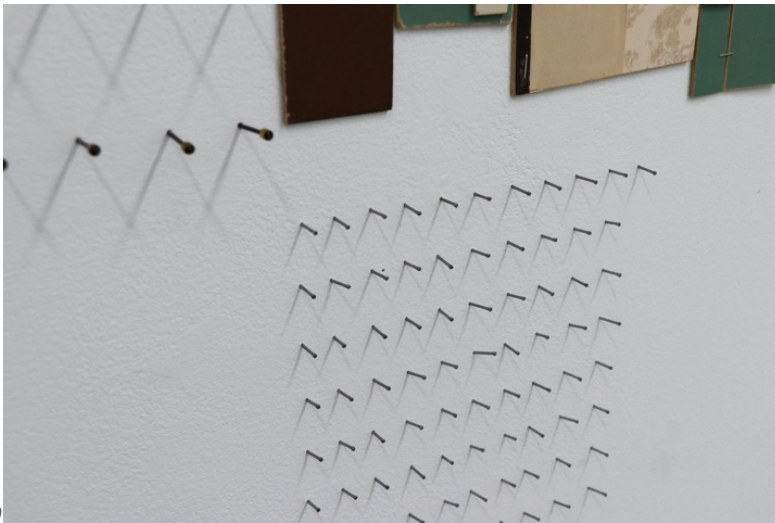


Figure 23 *Spaces B E T W E E N*, detail Masonite gouache screws, wire (photo credit: Karsen Seel)

Once I began working on the wall surface I realized the staples themselves could be used to create line and patterns that activated the large empty spaces between the large color shapes. Other types of hardware that I screwed or pounded directly into the wall also provided opportunities to think about my growing interest in how to represent connections to place.

Winding wire around these supports provided further 3-dimensionality to the work as did the holes left behind made by removing the hardware. Through building more complex relationships between segments I was able to expand the individual detailed components to fill an entire expanse of the wall as well as continue the work around corners, onto the floor and to touch the ceiling of the gallery space.



Figure 24 Studio Exhibition, Masonite, gouache, staples, screws,, eyehole screws, brads, wire, Mazatlan, Mexico, July 2020



Figure 25. Spaces B E T W E E N, Final Exhibition, Masonite, gouache, staples, screws, brads, eye hole screws, nails, wire, ECUAD, September 2020

The final thesis exhibition first took place in my studio space in Mexico, and then was re-installed on campus in Vancouver. I was thankful for the opportunity to bring closure to the MFA program despite the continued uncertainty of the pandemic. It also seemed a logical progression for my work to move to different locations (just as I have over the course of the program) expanding to accommodate the dimensions of the space and adapting to fit into its present surroundings.

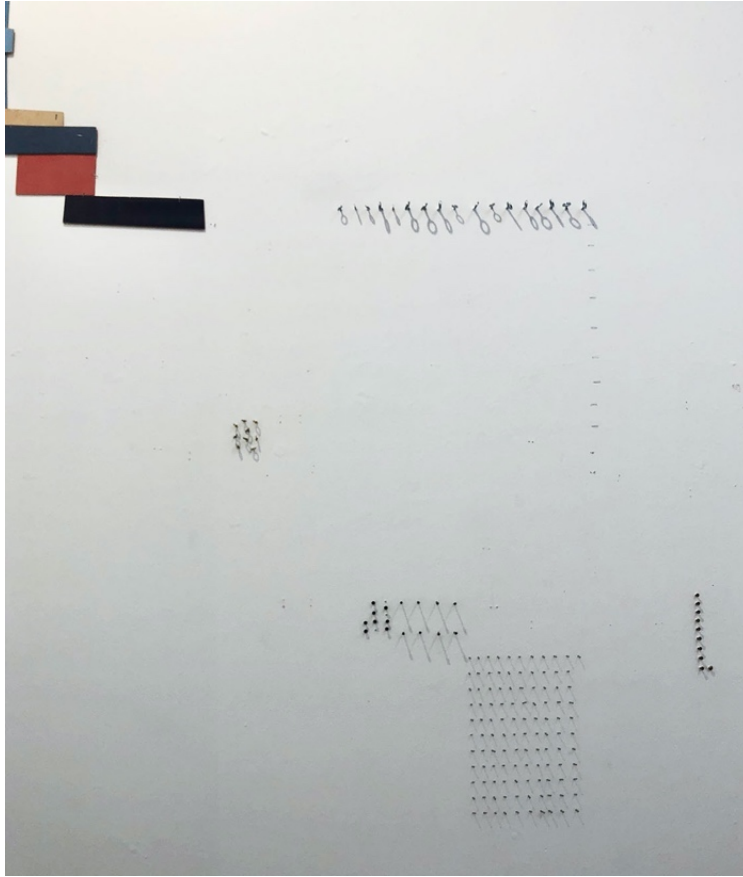


Figure 26 Spaces B E T W E E N, Connection Points, de-install detail, Masonite, gouache, screws, nails, wire

As I removed the colored boards leaving only the nails, screws, and wire behind it made me consider how much material was actually needed to hold the image together before the connections between them began to weaken and then disappear. Making visible the threshold between the seen and the unseen has been a thread that has carried through with all my projects and I believe will continue to carry my material practice forward.

Conclusion

A friend once described expatriate life as complicated simplicity or simplified complexity. I cannot remember which but each I feel are equally descriptive. I was always extremely pleased when I accomplished one thing off of my to-do list after going through a day of frustrations. That 'one thing' signified an important accomplishment.

I began this enquiry relying heavily on a representational imagery to support where I lived as a specific location. I became interested in developing more complex forms of presentation to find points of connection as ways to engage the viewer and situate place outside the narrow view of geographic location. Answering the question 'where you are from' is never an accurate representation of all the cumulative experiences of place that reflects who you are but merely a 'snapshot' of a certain time in which you find yourself in a certain place.

Throughout this document I have attempted to connect my lived experiences away from my 'home' country to studio material investigations and presentation challenges of making in multiple locations. I have come to realize how important being outside is for our minds and body. To connect ourselves to the places we live, I feel that to slow our pace allows us to appreciate the sensory experience a place has to offer. As I have progressed through the program my drawing practice has merged with my walking practice, as I still find that they both play important roles to help me represent my subconscious thinking processes. Abstraction has provided a method to situate myself in a place yet allows me to continually link my experiences between all the places I make home.

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