

**STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT NEW PALTZ**

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### **Recollecting the Homestead: The Site of Memory**

Home is universal: everyone has a location, residence, or nation that they identify as their place of origin. I am curious about the dwellings of others, how a building is transformed by its inhabitants, and how I will create my own place in the future. What home is and how I can express it are the pivotal questions around which I have built my thesis. In this paper, I will describe the origin and development of my piece, *Recollecting Home*, and provide examples of how other contemporary artists address this topic.

*Recollecting Home* was sparked by the fear that my parents' property was in danger of being changed by industrial development. In "You Can't Leave Home Without It," Mira Schor writes that you don't see your home "unless it is threatened, just as you don't notice your skin unless it is injured" (119) and I feel that this was true in my case. Thinking about my parents' house forced me to re-evaluate my sense of belonging. I realized that I exist without a place that I consider to be home. I did not move out to settle in a permanent location, and the apartments that I lived in while at school meant little to me. I haven't lived with my parents for six years, and the place that I remember is no longer the same. This is an unsettling feeling.

Today the household has evolved; most people expect to move several times during their lives. Jackie Millner writes that "to be suspended in the agonizing limbo of not knowing if or when we will ever have a home is to be utterly without agency. Home—whether we think of it as a dwelling, a homeland, or a network of relationships—is a fundamental human need..." (298). Most adults experience anxiety as they relocate from family houses, dorms, apartments, and other locations dictated by the search for employment. As I near the completion of graduate

school, I will soon have to look for a new place to live. In the face of this displacement, I set out to re-create the act of remembering Twin Maples (as I call the homestead), and the associations that come with it. While this place is specific to me, the idea of belonging taps into a universal human experience.

Given the universality of dwelling, one might ask why I decided to represent my own house. I am a believer in the idiom of “making what you know.” Twin Maples left an indelible mark on me and shaped how I address the world. When I decided to create this piece, I drew upon what I was experiencing at the time: being a young adult, struggling to make a place for myself. In Lily Markiewicz’s installation, *Places to Remember II* (2005), a voice asks, “if I lived in one place long enough, would I become part of it” (23)? The answer, for me, is yes. I lived in the same house for nineteen years of my life, and as a homeschooler, I spent much of my time there. I knew every tree, rock, plant and animal that lived within the boundaries of the property. I knew this place like the back of my hand, and as I revisit it through my art, I feel that it is important to use my hands in its recreation.

There is a long history of representing living spaces in art, whether it falls within the category of portraiture, domestic activities, architecture or landscape. Some argue that the house itself is an expression of the individuals that occupy it. In an exhibition catalog entitled *Let’s Play House*, curator Caren Heft writes that “no matter how we try to emulate the consumer-oriented examples of idealized household life provided to us by popular culture and the media, each home is a direct reflection of its inhabitants and as such provides a unique flavor all its own...”(1). The inside of houses first appeared as backgrounds to portraits and religious paintings in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and in the 1900s, domestic interiors began to emerge as a category, according [At Home: The Domestic Interior in Art](#) by Frances Borzello. These were scenes

where the room itself was considered important enough to be treated as its own subject. These paintings help us learn about the daily lives of people from different eras. As life changed, the ways that domestic life could be presented also multiplied. Today there are a number of artists whose work appears in conjunction with domesticity, and their work illustrates the variability of this experience<sup>1</sup> (Ryan 20-22).

The increasingly global nature of our daily lives has made it more difficult to connect feelings of belonging with a single place. In an exhibition catalog titled *Home and Away*, the curator writes that “one of the principal challenges for artists living in the new global configuration is to maintain a sense of self that is linked to a place of origin,” (Grenville 9). Despite this, many contemporary artists still use the Western image of the house, with four walls and a pointy roof, as a signifier for home<sup>2</sup>. There are several artists whose work I feel parallels my own, including Do Ho Suh, Janet Ballweg, and Michael Landy. While working on *Recollecting Home*, I drew inspiration from Olafur Eliasson’s laser cut book entitled *Your House* (2006), Francesca Gabbiani’s *White Book* (2005), and Su Blackwell’s work with paper-cutting and construction.

Do Ho Suh’s work deals with splitting time between two continents, as he resides in both South Korea and New York. Pieces such as *348 West 22<sup>nd</sup> Street* (2000) present his living spaces with hints of sadness or nostalgia, because it represents change and loss, and Suh writes that feelings of homesickness inspired his work. He uses his work as a way of dealing with the anxieties of leaving one home for another. Suh’s houses are constructed from translucent, airy

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<sup>1</sup> Artists listed by the author include Rachael Whiteread, Mona Hatoum, Uta Barth, Donald Lipski, Liza Ryan, Janet Biggs, Gordon Matta-Clark, Mark Bennett.

<sup>2</sup> Rob Licht and Stacey Parker are two contemporary artists who use sculptural techniques and the familiar house form to represent the home in a state of change.

fabric, and are able to be packed away into a single suitcase. According to the curator of *Home and Away*, “Do-Ho Suh’s architectural phantasm effectively inhabits the space of the gallery, making it possible for him to be at home even when he is away...but like all memories, they are only a ghostly trace of an original that no longer exists in that state” (Grenville 10). Suh’s depiction of a New York apartment is “nondescript enough” to relate to many urban dwellers (Grenville 16). This aspect of creating a piece that is both specific and universal is something that I aspire to in my own work. I find myself drawn to the ephemeral nature of Suh’s work: there is something powerful about the ability to pack up this apartment and take it with him when he leaves.

Narrative is an important element in the creation of my homestead model. Janet Ballweg, head of the Printmaking Department at Bowling Green State University, uses images of the home, especially the kitchen, as the stage for narrative. I found both Ballweg’s writings and her methodology to be similar to my own. She notes that, “over the course of time, we consolidate the nature of our childhood home with our own mental, emotional, and physical creation of home...” (Ballweg 2). Ballweg says that the narrative is informed by what’s missing from the picture. This feeling of absence forces the viewer to ask questions and conjure up possibilities. In my own work, the absence of people mimics the way things get erased in memory, and the possibility of creating a new story from what is left behind. Her process also resonates with my own method of combining technological and labor intensive processes. In pieces such as *Pushme, Pullme* (2003) Ballweg weaves together digital technology and traditional techniques by creating computerized 3D renders which she prints as 4-color photopolymer intaglio plates. Ballweg writes that “the layering of dots produces a soft, grainy picture that shifts the image from the impersonal to the personal, by imbuing the image with a dreamlike quality. That

quality, like a fading memory, helps to question the truth of the image" (Ballweg 5). In *Recollecting Home*, the shifting animation suggests the transience of memory and questions the permanence of reality.

Another artist whose work parallels my own is Michael Landy. Landy's *Semi-Detached* (2004) is a life size replica of his parents' house. He reconstructed the building, complete with objects and videos of his father, for exhibition within the Tate Britain. Landy's father had spent much of his spare time modifying the family home, and images of his house speak about the importance of handwork and do-it-yourself culture. After he suffered a mining accident in 1977, the household that he had worked so hard to build became a prison due to his limited mobility. Landy wanted the building to be a metaphor for his father's body. He focused upon how everyday things, such as rolling a cigarette, could become rituals. He filmed the domestic environment, including tools, seed packets, and family photographs. (Racz 233-240). According to *Michael Landy's Semi-Detached and the Art of Making*, this use of commonplace objects "indicated a broader range of lives at that time and place" (238). Landy's films "add to one's understanding of [his father] as an individual, but also about his relationship with a particular culture where doing, making, mending, family and home were important" (Racz 239). My parents are also members of a labor-oriented, do-it-yourself culture, and such work was an important part of my daily life as a child. My process of creating *Recollecting Home* underlines this tradition of handwork with a contemporary twist: the inclusion of current scientific tools that have recently made their debut in the art world.

In my process, I combine hand techniques such as cutting, wrapping, embossing, silkscreen, painting and punching with technological processes such as laser cutting, CNC cutting and 3D printing and projection. I began *Recollecting Home* by gathering data, consulting

maps, looking at photographs, and taking measurements of the house and the property. This process forced me to look at the location and my memory in a critical way: listing, categorizing, measuring, and creating a hierarchy of memories. Then I experimented with materials: learning to make paper, and creating a small model that I used to try out techniques. Elements such as trees and grass were hand built from commonly available materials such as wire, manila hemp fiber, foam, string, and paper pulp. Building the woodlot was the most repetitive and time consuming process, as each branch and leaf was hand punched and fitted onto more than one hundred trees. Crafting pieces by hand represents the skills that I learned as a child, and the importance of manual labor and domestic tasks like weeding, planting, picking, sewing, chopping wood, milking, mowing, cooking, building, and fixing things.

Handwork is a meaningful component for me, but so is the inclusion of technology. Technology sparks the interest in progress that was instilled in me by my father's study of chemistry and electronics. During the creation of *Recollecting Home* I took the opportunity to learn about tools such as the 3D printer, using the resources available at SUNY New Paltz. One of these tools was 3D software called Rhinoceros, which I used to design the house, the base, and several objects in the model. I used Rhinoceros to laser cut the outline of the house, which I then continued to manipulate by embossing texture onto the surface. For the base of the model I created the topography entirely from memory, that was then cut into a piece of builder's insulation foam using a CNC machine. I built the car, pump, and mailbox using Rhinoceros and SUNY New Paltz's 3D printing capabilities. The last tool that I used was Adobe Flash, in order to animate the text that is projected onto the model.

The animation started as a "text map." I began by looking at a screenshot that I had taken of the property from Google Earth. I made a note of the prominent features of the property, and

then began to think about what I would remember if I stood in that spot. I wrote down each thought that I associated with a particular spot on the property, creating a map of the land and plants, memory, and physical attributes. Text has always been an important part of my visual experience. Throughout my childhood I wanted to be a writer, and kept journals and books of poetry. I enjoy text as a visual element and the quality that it adds to a piece, whether or not it is meant to be read and understood. I knew that I wanted to include text in *Recollecting Home* both because of its importance to me, and because of the difficulty of conveying memory without language. The text here, although not entirely readable, is meant to give hints of the life that I lived in this environment. Technology such as the projection speaks to change, the passage of time, and the ease of forgetting. It represents where I am now, looking at Twin Maples and my memories from an adult's point of view.

In creating *Recollecting Home*, I wanted to approach my home with a child's sense of wonder, and at the same time, capture the way that something remembered is changed. The house resembles a dollhouse in scale, forcing the viewer to look at it from a bird's point of view or to lean in and examine as one would a child's toy. The palette is monochromatic; it is a blank slate upon which the memories are replayed. The shifting text projected on the land represents the fluid nature of memory and its connection with place. The model is fragile and colorless—as parts of our childhood seem sterile when we have grown up and look back on them—it lacks the vibrancy of present experience. At the same time, the homestead becomes idealized: it is a symbol of what all my future homes should strive to be.

As a printmaker, my work is informed by my experience with multiples. There is ritual in the creation of duplicates; it speaks to the repetition of prayer, of habit and routine, of committing something to memory. Constructing the homestead in this repetitive, ritualistic way

encouraged me to think about my past and present. Thinking about memory triggered more memories, and so did the various processes employed: when I was creating stones out of paper pulp, becoming tired, I thought about how many stones I needed to make. This brought me back to a moment when I asked a similar question as a child. Caring for the garden and preparing to plant vegetables were yearly tasks of the homestead. As a small child, picking rocks out of the soil, I asked my Dad, “Why are there so many rocks everywhere?” “That’s why they call it the Endless Mountains,” he replied. The idea of the Endless Mountains has been particularly important in forming my sense of place of origin, belonging, and expressing my connection to the land.

Revisiting my connection to place through creation was a therapeutic experience for me. While *Recollecting Home* is a model of my childhood house, it is not a replica: as I worked, parts of it became distorted, shifting the focus to memory and making. As I researched the concept of home, I found one book especially insightful on this topic. Scholar and researcher Clare Cooper Marcus has been interviewing people about their homes for twenty years. In her book, House as A Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home, Marcus writes that as children begin to grow up, they often create a secret hideout, or “home away from home,” that plays a role in the psychological and social development of the child. According to Marcus, these places are “the beginning of the act of dwelling, or claiming one’s place in the world” (27). I have many memories of creating just such places during my own childhood, and I see *Recollecting Home* as a revisiting of this process. In a sense, the piece that I have constructed is a complete work of fiction. I am re-creating a place that no longer exists, because it can never be as I experienced it then. What I remember is tainted by the fickleness of memory: the placement of windows, the shape of the house, the number of trees, are difficult to hold in my mind. I don’t know how old I

was when we bought my beloved Chevy Nova car, or remember the name of the goat that broke her neck on the way back from breeding. Yet I remember other moments as though they were yesterday. Are these events more important to me, and if so, why? As the details of this home fade and I begin to create a new one, I want to honor to the significance that this place has in my life. In my work, I celebrate what I do remember and how I imagine it.

*Recollecting Home* uses replication, ritual, and the written word to link the process of remembering with a sense of place and home. Many contemporary artists work in this vein, demonstrating that the home is a viable and mysterious topic for exploration, as something that people all around the world search to find, or wish to forget. Whether or not *Recollecting Home* succeeds in signifying home to others, it addresses how my home has changed in my eyes now that I have left it. To me, it speaks of depicting memory, facing the challenges of adulthood, and discovering a way to create a home that is always with us. As it was once said, “the strongest home... is the one we carry around in our heads.”<sup>3</sup> Like Do Ho Suh’s fabric apartment, easily picked up and carried away, my home travels with me, allowing me to dwell elsewhere.

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<sup>3</sup> Dinah Ryan quotes Nancy Armstrong’s book *Desire and Domestic Fiction* on page 22 in her article “Roiling with Talk: Artists and the Contemporary Domestic.”

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