This land

Abbey Blake

University of Iowa

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THIS LAND

by

Abbey Blake

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2019

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Anita Jung
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PUBLIC ABSTRACT

By presenting familiar forms and materials through photographic print media, assemblage and cast objects, I use simulacra, minimalist form and materiality to ask questions surrounding human relationships. Specifically, I make connections between our handling of various landscapes and their resources and how this echoes our relationships and behavior towards one another. I ask questions surrounding otherness, as it relates to our biological need to decipher, origin as it relates to our disconnections and connections of place, as it relates to migration, as well as ideas of exploitation, privilege and how we arbitrarily assign value and power.

These works often serve as a field guide or a place where images and objects come together as a grouping to connect research, specific histories and to ask questions about the human experience, our cultures and our ecosystems. The work is often playful and absurd and I use these motifs to create an open invitation for dialogue and questions as well as the opportunity to be informed.

Theories, ideas and philosophies I consider when making this work include eco-feminism, absurdist theory, existentialism, and Foucault’s writings surrounding objects of power. Along with these ideas, I reference my personal life experiences and relationships, both positive and negative, as well as an ongoing research project I have been conducting for several years surrounding our national borders. There will be much emphasis on the borders research project as it dramatically shifted my work throughout graduate school. This project also continues to change my ideas of what it means to be an artist for myself and for the greater public.
My MFA thesis will uncover my research and these explorations during my time at the University of Iowa. I will address my funded research trips to South America, the United States’ borders with Mexico and Canada as well as my experience of living in Iowa and amongst the greater Tallgrass Prairie ecosystem. I will introduce and discuss the works created from these experiences including their failures, transformations and the critical and abstract thinking that came before and after their existence.
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THESIS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Install Shot from the first exhibition, *This Land* Fall 2017 ........................................4
Figure 2: One of Many Roadside Memorials in Ajo, AZ .................................................................9
Figure 3: Border Fence as seen in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, AZ ..........................11
Figure 4: A children’s playground in Jacumba Hot Springs, California ........................................12
Figure 5: Caution sign at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, AZ ........................................12
Figure 6: San Diego Border fence as Seen at Friendship Park .......................................................13
Figure 7: San Diego Border fence as Seen at Friendship Park II ....................................................13
Figure 8: Photographs by Josh Haner, Photojournalist from the New York Times ......................14
Figure 9: Prototypes, Works created and installed in California ....................................................15
Figure 10: Install Shot from *Field Guide to a Border Town*, Drewelowe Gallery Spring 2018 ......17
Figure 11: Tire Pull, found fires, logging chain and welded steel ...................................................18
Figure 12: Photograph of the US/Canada Border near Vancouver, commonly referred to as “The Slash” ........................................................................................................................................19
Figure 13, 14: Border Monuments seen along 0 Avenue in Canada .............................................21
Figure 15: Photograph of the US/Canada Border near Vancouver, commonly referred to as “The Slash” ........................................................................................................................................22
Figure 16: Photograph of US/Canada Border Marker ....................................................................23
Figure 17: Softscape, steel, photographic transfer on fabric, woodchips, 36x15x48” .....................30
Figure 18: *Mounted*, black walnut, photographic transfer on fabric, 3 mil plastic .......................31
Figure 19: *Ore, Or, Oar*, Cast hydrostone, steel, iron ore pyrite, wood, approximately 26x60...32
Figure 20: *Ore, Or, Oar*, Detail .....................................................................................................33
Figure 21: *Grab bags*, cast hydrostone, gravel, river rock, sand and photographic transfer on fabric, approximately 24x30” ..................................................................................................34
Figure 22: Richard Misrach, No 237 ..............................................................................................35
Figure 23: Guillermo Galindo, Zapatello / Zapatello, 2014 ............................................................36
Figure 24: Post Commodity Art Collective, Repellent Fence, 2015 .................................................37

Figure 25: Sterling Ruby, Vampire 62, 2012, Soft Sculpture on view at the Nasher Sculpture Museum in Dallas, 2019 ..................................................................................................................38

Figure 26: Embryology, as seen at the Tate Modern in London..........................................................39

Figure 27: Untitled, 1968, Sculpture at Tate Modern Collection .........................................................40

Figure 28: Ancient Writing, 1936, Weaving at Tate Modern Collection ..............................................41

Figure 29: Needle in the Meadow, Ready-Made Round Bale & Needle, 2019, 52x72x60" ..................44

Figure 30: Needle in the Meadow, Detail .................................................................................................44

Figure 31: Monarch’s Time Capsule, Glass, Plaster, Milkweed Seeds and Porcelain, 2018, 5x2x12” each ........................................................................................................................................45

Figure 32: Walnut, Walnut, Black Walnut Hardwood, Walnut dye, Walnut Dyed-Cotton Jack Loom Weaving, Found jars, Plaster, and Brass, 2019, Approximately 10x5x12” ........................................46

Figure 33: Liquid Gold, Maple Syrup, Maple hardwood, Steel, Rope and Paster, 2019, Approximately 24x15x12” ........................................................................................................................................47

Figure 35: Soft Lines, Hard Places, Cotton thread, Porcelain, Black Walnut and Welded Steel. 2019, 12x14x42” ........................................................................................................................................48

Figure 36: Wedged, Steel, Black Walnut Photographic Transfer on Muslin, Gravel, and 3mil Plastic and Sand. 2019, 6x3x15” .................................................................................................................50

Figure 37: Ore Knots, Black Walnut Photographic Transfer on Muslin, Gravel, and Sand, 2019, sm: 6x6x5” lg: 4x14x3” ...............................................................................................................................................51

Figure 38: Oar, Ore, Or, Poplar, Welded Steel, Iron Ore Pyrite and Hydrocal 2019, Approximately 18x24x7” ..............................................................................................................................................52

Figure 39: Ore Knot I, Steel, Black Walnut Photographic Transfer on Muslin, Gravel, and Sand. 2019, 6x3x13 ..............................................................................................................................................53

Figure 40: Glamour Queen, Welded Steel, Photographic Transfer on Muslin, Quarts, Cotton String and Sand. 2019. 14x6x8” .....................................................................................................................54

Figure 41: Dumber Than, Machine and Hand Sewn Photographic Transfer on Muslin, 3 Mil Plastic, Found Apple Crate, 2019, Approximately 11x14x18” ........................................................................55

Figure 42: Dumber Than, Detail ..............................................................................................................56
THESIS

In Lucy Lippard’s book, *Lure of the Local*, she mentions that one of the best ways to discover a place is to walk the map and landscape. This quote was the catalyst that began my journey and my investigations of migration, land use and mapping. I began to ask myself about my own maps—where I sit upon them. My country; the United States, my city; Iowa City, my backyard; a suburban landscape nestled between farmlands that were once prairie. It was inevitable that I would begin to uproot my embedded ideologies about the treatment of land, borders, our histories and our use of resources as ‘americans.’ I began traveling to the borders of the United States looking for answers, but I only found more questions. The more I searched for borders the more I realized I didn’t need to leave my front steps to find them.

In summer of 2017, I was given the opportunity to be an artist in residence in Santiago, Chile. I worked at a small print shop, teaching papermaking while creating work for a solo exhibition at Universidad Finis Terrae. Chile, a country of the South American west, is full of beauty and is highly valued for its landscape and resources. The capital, Santiago, has a 360-degree view of mountains on all sides and is only a two-hour drive from the coast. During my stay and while chatting with Chileans, it was common that residents would describe themselves as islanders. Chile is the second longest country in the world stretching down the western side of South America and lays between the Pacific Ocean and Andes Mountains. There are various dialects of Spanish spoken and significant differences in political and social culture that is created from its separation from the rest of South America. This idea of being
an ‘islander’ consumed my thoughts. Although specific water or land features create some of our borders in the US, our borders are mostly a constructed ideology. I began to think about what it means to come from a certain landscape. How do those who are raised next to mountains act in comparison to those who are from the plains? Are they more humbled by the vastness of their landscape than I would be living in the Midwest? How do individuals react to a landscape when they don’t view or understand where they live as a “landscape?” How often does the average person consider their plot of earth and how does it affect their subconscious?

When I left Chile, I flew directly to California and then to Oregon followed by a residency at the Tallgrass Prairie Residency in Matfield Green, Kansas. Seduced and enchanted by mountains, desert and forests, I came to Kansas feeling a different respect for place and I spent a lot of time thinking about the prairie and its transformations. I stayed at the Matfield Green Station, a historical railway bunker converted into a couple of shotgun houses by a man named Carl and his Friend, Bill, who had fallen in love with the Flint Hills almost 40 years prior. When I arrived, Carl rushed out of the station to help me with my bags and supplies. After getting settled into my space for a moment, there was a knock on the door and he had returned to tell me that at 11pm there would be a blood moon rising over the horizon line and that it would be worth a look if I wasn’t too tired. A couple hours later, I sat a few rocking chairs down from Carl on the front porch listening to the passing trains, crickets and the clanks of the ice in his whiskey glass as the orange moon came up over the hills.
I had childlike emotions for these places over the three months I had spent there. The prairie, mountains, bison, migratory birds, the ocean and the trees; they moved me. After returning from my travels, I constantly went out to identify birds and read about Iowa’s native plants. The more I studied the species the more I found statistics, the more I thought about statistics the more I considered mapping and the constructions of place. This led to my beginning to study the histories of borders within the landscape and quickly, I knew that I didn’t want to see the borderlands in images, I wanted to experience and feel them in person.

Earlier into the semester, I proposed to the School of Art and Art History a project to create three exhibitions as a person living in the Midwest researching the borders of the United States. The first exhibition would be about experiencing the borders through the media. The second would be about traveling and responding to the US/Mexico border and the third, traveling and researching the US/Canada Border.

The first exhibition was inspired by the emotions I had surrounding the borders and by areal views and maps of the border. Thinking about the ideas that were prompted in Chile and Kansas, I noticed that the areal views revealed no border, just a continuous landscape, a river or a body of water. Looking at these maps felt hopeful even though I knew about the fences and border patrol. Viewing these areas without notation or drawings of their arbitrary lines upon the land gave me a sense of wholeness and optimism. I wanted to imagine a future
when the maps are redrawn and open. Where they are looked back on as ridiculous and obscure. However, visiting these places or when experiencing any form of border security, we are faced with fear and surveillance through embedded constructed ideologies surrounding power, ownership and authority.

Figure 1: Install Shot from the first exhibition, *This Land* Fall 2017
With the company of my husband, Kyle, the second part of the research began by driving from Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona to the San Diego Border Beach in California. We stayed in small border towns along the way while documenting, collecting and experiencing the landscape. With strong feelings of angst and a deep sense of being surveilled, we began to understand the embedded fears and ideologies of this place.

Traveling with Kyle influenced this journey dramatically. His company and conversations allowed me to realize and to consider elements of this experience that I may not have consciously recognized without him. He is a gifted photographer and his ability note and capture the unseen through the lens of his camera translates similarly to how he experiences place and how he creates connections. His presence provided me with comfort while also challenging me to see through a different view finder.

The border fence is architecture, and therefore in some ways it is art. There is power in its construction and its ability to evoke emotion. The border fence is deeply reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon tower within prisons. The Panopticon is a circular prison with cells arranged around a central tower. Its primary function is to ensure that prisoners can be observed at all times, and they are aware that they are able to be watched even if they are unsure of when or how. Though the fence is not circular or central to a tower, the signage and erected surveillance poles that are scattered across the landscape create a sense of omnipresent surveillance and arouse the same fears and prompt the same questions. Am I being watched? Is my presence problematic? Should I question my behavior? Are the towers active or are they
present to evoke fear? Michel Foucault’s writings and theories surrounding the principals of Bentham’s Panopticon align with the security of the border. There are four major principals of power that Foucault writes about and I will describe each below:

1. Pervasive Power: the ability to see all within the tower and in this case the ability to see all activity around the border fence in order to secure and create regulation.

2. Obscure power: the tower sees into the cells, however individuals are unable to know when, why or how they are being observed at any given time. Surveillance cameras and parked border patrol vehicles in the distance provoke the same questions.

3. Direct Violence made Structural: Though at times there is no physical punishment, the tower and surveillance itself subjugates those in its presence.

4. Structural violence made profitable. Foucault specifically looks at the history of prisoners being used for labor, but the US government also uses the border fence and surveillance for profit. The cameras and fence function as replacements for human presence and paid labor therefore saving millions of dollars through powerful ideology.

In addition to the fears of surveillance and of the government’s power, the Sonora dessert comes with its own feelings and power as a harsh yet sublime landscape. Of places and ecosystems, I have visited and experienced, the desert feels the least predictable. There are majestic mountains ranges, an endless sun, and something truly rare, silence. While providing
profound respite, the silence of the desert can also induce fear- fear of delirium, dissipating into its vastness and the fear of being alone. It comes by no surprise that it has inspired countless writers, artists and producers to discuss its mystery, desolate lands and politics.

In Luis Alberto Urrea’s book, The Devils Highway, He tells the stories and myths of the Sonora Desert spirits. “They came down out of the screaming sun and broke onto the rough plains of the Cabeza Prieta wilderness, where the sun recommenced it’s burning. Cutting through this region, and lending its name to the terrible landscape, was the Devil’s Highway, more death, another desert. They were in a vast trickery of sand. In many ancient religious texts, fallen angels were bound in chains and buried beneath a desert known only as Desolation. This could be the place.” (Urrea page 3)

Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument sits within the Sonora Desert just south of Phoenix in Pima County, Arizona. Pima, statistically, has the highest documented death rate of border crossers annually in the United States. In 2017 the Pima County coroner’s office released an annual count of 121 bodies found in Pima County alone. 96 of the 121 were unidentified when this number was released. Anthropologist, Dr. Jason De Leon, has been conducting studies surrounding these statistics including death counts specifically from coroners’ offices, as the governments annual count has previously only included 25% of deaths documented. These death counts are often skewed and require further research as officials will only accept counts found by other officials. Individuals discovered by civilians are not included.
Leon looks at these numbers but he also studies the rates of body decomposition in the Sonora. A partner in this research, anthropologist, Kate Spradle, describes the rapidity of decomposition by scavengers, "They can render a body to a skeleton in about five hours, with up to 35 black vultures feasting on a human body at once."

The reason I go into detail about these particular statistics is because of the policies that are in place that push border crossers into these terrains. Government policies surrounding the US/Mexico border, such as Operation Gatekeeper, Secure Fence Act, Operation Hold the Line, and most specifically, The Prevention Through Deterrence Act which has aimed to direct border crossers out of urban areas and into more rural and harsher terrains has resulted in the deaths of over 5,000 border crossers since these policies came into fruition. Statistically, this is a 100% increase compared to the previous policies. These deaths and these policies only exist because someone says they have the power to exist and to persist. There is a use of the land that is completely inhumane and somehow disguised as resourceful.

The wall does not function as an unclimbable barrier, but as a structure to claim land and to induce fear within those who believe in its arbitrary power and restriction. The sadness and deep regret I felt in the desert for the families of border crossers was painful but important. I had read the statistics, but seeing the dispersed memorials, hearing the target practice and feeling the embedded fear of this place, made me a tourist within my own country. This is a place I could spend decades investigating but could never fully understand due to the deep histories and tragedies that lay within its sands.
A week after Kyle and I returned from Arizona and California, he was brushing his teeth in the bathroom while I was sitting in the living room. With a foamy mouth, he slurred from out the bathroom door,

“Did you ever touch it?”

I replied, “touch what?”

He replied, “The wall. Did you ever touch it?”

“No, I guess I never did” I said.
“Me neither.” And he went back to brushing.

We both sat with this question for a while and then we had some critical conversations about what this meant. All along the border there were signs and border patrol officers scattered on various corners or sitting on the side of what felt like abandoned highways. It never crossed my mind to touch the wall. It was as though I had already accepted it as forbidden or as an electric fence with high voltage. When close to the border, it seemed with each step a new border patrol agent would approach, asking first, “Are you alright?” as if to psychoanalyze your drug buying or smuggling inhibitions.

“This is a very dangerous and high drug and human trafficking area,”

“Yes, we know, Sir.”

“Okay, be careful.”

“Yes, we will, Sir. Thank you.”

After these interactions, we continued to drive along the border fence. We had mixed emotions between feeling terrified and ignorant, while simultaneously feeling justified to be in pursuit of a better understanding of this part of the country. If we are the people being caught behind the curtain of its visual ethics, then we needed to be aware of its realities. We were privileged to show up with cameras and document this place as tourists. Though we were often confronted, screened and scanned along the way, we were treated with respect and I am sure an amount of casual disregard though unwarranted. I was and am thankful for my ability to navigate and explore freely though it is unfair that I am able to so casually. I was and am hopeful that with more conversations, more understanding and more consideration I would/will be able to share my experiences and my confronted ideologies surrounding this place with others.
Figure 3: Border Fence as seen in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, AZ
Figure 4: A children’s playground in Jacumba Hot Springs, CA

Figure 5: Caution sign at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, AZ
Figure 6: San Diego Border fence as Seen at Friendship Park
Figure 7: San Diego Border fence as Seen at Friendship Park II
The article “Eight Ways to Build a Border Wall” presenting the prototypes for President Donald Trump’s “wall” was released by the New York Times several months after contractors began to bid on the construction. The influence of this article on my work cannot be overstated; I continue to uncover threads in my work that lead me back to this article. Photographer, Josh Haner, captured eight structures made of various building materials with building outlines from contractors with specific goals to deter border crossers from the structures. Appalled by the
inhumanity manifesting in the ideas behind these structures, but amused by the humorous futility of them, I began to create my own.

Figure 9: Prototypes, Works created and installed in California

Materials include: yarn, elastic, rubber bands, fabric, pipe cleaners and steel skewers

After returning home, I struggled to make work that wasn’t a history museum-styled display of my findings. The work was horribly literal and solely didactic in a way that clearly demonstrated the typical story telling of a privileged person discussing a history and present crisis that didn’t feel like their own. I was angry and frustrated with my inability to express the
experience I had along the border. I wanted to explain the ghostly presence of the endless fence
creeping down the mountainside fading into an elemental perspective drawing into the desert. I
wanted to allow others to feel what it was like to find discarded remnants from fathers, mothers,
sons, and daughters who were on their way to finding a better life or their loved ones, but then
question their authenticity because of the border officers watching while you looked at them.
For me, there was a draw to the humanity in these objects that were found in a place that felt
totally void of humanness whether they were planted there or if they were lost. What I ended up
realizing later was that I needed to make objects that allowed viewers to feel the human-like
characteristics and emotions in objects and my photographs and false twenty-eight-foot wall
were not going to make the cut.
Figure 10: Install Shot from *Field Guide to a Border Town*, Drewelow Gallery Spring 2018
Figure 11: Tire Pull, found fires, logging chain and welded steel

Tire constructions similar to this object are pulled behind border patrol vehicles to smooth out the sand in order to track humans crossing the border.

This object was the piece from the show that made me think about the new direction of the work that was needed. The power of an object and its materiality was my new focus and this piece was the catalyst. With completion of the second project, a heavy heart and a lot to consider, I remembered I had a third exhibition to begin researching for. It was time to go to Canada.
An important part of the project that I haven’t mentioned yet is my political difference with my parents. We have very conflicting ideas about politics and I had it in my heart that if I studied the borders and kept them close to the project, they might open up to my liberal stance on border policies surrounding human and environmental rights issues. This was a bit farfetched but I was able to at least convince my mother to join me for the US/Canada portion of my research.

My mother is a beautiful person. She is someone who has gone through more abuses and hardships than most individuals I have met and she maintains an optimistic view despite those experiences. She was a nurse for over thirty years and continues to serve the public into her years
of retirement. I agree on most things with my mom but we struggle to meet eye to eye on border policies. Throughout our conversations we arrive at places that are frustrating but also important in order to remain neutral and to preserve the ability to have understanding and consideration surrounding other parties’ decisions despite our varying views.

My mom and I flew into the Vancouver International Airport from separate locations. I arrived earlier and returned to the airport to pick her up before her flight arrived. Sitting in the airport, I had time and I sifted through about a dozen tourist brochures for whale watching, kayaking, eating oysters and trying the best new brews of the Pacific North West. We would continue to see advertisements of these offerings on billboards, signs and posters in cafes and along the border. I remembered as I looked through the pamphlets and as we drove along the Northern border hearing a testament from Trump during one of his many ‘we need to build a wall’ speeches that ‘a country is not a country without borders,’ but here I was in Canada, without a wall or caution sign in sight yet there was a border; but not a wall. There were the seldom monuments and open gates to a majority that shared similar colonialist ancestry and histories as well as the same color of skin as another countries’ white majority.
Figure 13, 14: Border Monuments seen along 0 Avenue in Canada
My mom and I drove across the border daily. Border Patrol officers seemed confused as to why a mother and her daughter would fly into Vancouver, one of the most beautiful and lively cities of the Northwest, only to drive immediately back to the United States Border, but smiling and saying, “We’re just sightseeing!” seemed to be enough.

We traveled between Canada and Washington state. I was specifically interested in seeing the visible border line commonly known as “The Slash.” The slash is a twenty-foot mowed line that functions as the border between the United States and Canada for the entire length of the country, Canada maintains ten feet and the US maintains ten feet. These areas are most visible in the mountains, forested areas and in areal views of farmlands. These areas are timbered and mowed by government-employed workers in order to inform travelers that they have arrived at the foot of a new country.

Figure 15: Photograph of the US/Canada Border near Vancouver, commonly referred to as “The Slash”
One of the most profound moments from the trip for me was standing on the US/Canada Border on a completely unmarked beach. I was walking back and forth trying to distinguish the boundary when a man and his salty dog came walking up the beach.

“Excuse me, sorry to bother you, but can you tell me if I am standing in the US or Canada?

“See those buoys?” the man pointed out to the water adjacent to where we were standing. This side is Canada and the other side is Trumpville.” (Referring to our current president)

Just then my mother interrupts, “Ya know, we think he’s doing some great work!”

I immediately covered my face with my hands manifesting my distain and embarrassment of “we.”

The man nodded and continued his morning routine.

Figure 16: Photograph of US/Canada Border Marker
In this moment, I felt as though I failed the whole project. It was my last day in Canada with my mother, the day I thought was last day of my research to complete my three-part project and in this moment, I felt like I had circled right back to where I began. If I could not convince my own mother with any of the research I had gathered in the last six months during our drives along these borders, how could I convince anyone else?

Upon returning, I took a break from making work about the borders or at least I thought I did. It was at the end of the semester and I had some unrelated obligations to work on and I used them as my escape. I was enrolled in a class called Fabrication of the Hand built bicycle. I took to welding pretty quickly in the course and was asked if I wanted to go to England to display my bike at an international hand-built bicycle expo. Excited to go to a new place, I accepted and went to Bristol, UK for a long weekend. While on the bus to and from London to Bristol, even when unaware of it, my research continued. I thought about my own roots and my family history rooted in the UK. Imagining my own English blood floating across the Atlantic to the United States on the Mayflower and another few drops from Norway and Ireland arriving later when it was a little more complicated and political. I am removed from these histories and know very little about them even though they are what make me simultaneously an American and a Non-American.

Our country is an onion and much of its layers are rotten in its history- cruel in its hatred towards others but beautiful that we are all here together (mostly). I am aware that a lot of the references and research conducted in this project disregard Native Americans, the most
rightful inhabitants of this nation. I am also aware that I lack to mention previously enslaved
and indentured groups of people who connected the country through railroads and turned
untilled land into rich farmlands. These individuals who have come before me and my
ancestors were essential to my understanding and ability to live in this nation. No one
‘deserves’ a job here, a language here, a plot of land here with the exception of our native
peoples and those brought against their will. The white majority has lost sight that we are all
foreigners to this nation and have been since the day we arrived in what is now the United
States. In the same way there was prejudice, hateful and barbaric acts in our beginning
foundations, history is repeating itself. There is disregard for certain human beings. There are
acts of slavery, trafficking, power hunger, the belief of media-fed ideologies and ultimately the
idea that there aren’t enough resources for more than one group- all of which are inhumane,
incorrect and false. There is time, there is space, there are jobs, there is plenty- in the land of
plenty.
When I returned home, the semester came to a close and I was relieved to know that I had time to think about the project. I was also relieved to have time to make work without having to talk about it right away. I spent a lot of time riding my bike. I rode 800 miles in four months, looking at a landscape that is constantly being changed by the seasons but also completely altered in its roots. Second only to Nebraska, Iowa has the most worked and transformed landscape in the United States. It also has the least “public land” in the entire US. Once covered in Tallgrass Prairie, Iowa, now is 92% farmland. Riding down B Roads/ farming roads, you can physically feel the ruts created by the tractor tires in the dark soil. Riding in May, the rolling hills and landscape are visible for miles, and by July, you can ride the same road and see nothing but the tassels of the twelve-foot tall corn stocks. Regardless of its sad or heroic agricultural history, like most things that are beautiful, they are also complicated.

Since childhood, I have always been interested in landscapes and excited by the moments I was able to share with other living beings. With the same childlike heart, I watch the bird migrations as they make their rounds from the northern and southern hemispheres free of passports or permanent homes in order to work with their available food supplies and the winds that the planet provides for them. I wonder when this was lost for us beyond the advent of agriculture.
We have lost something profound in our communities and the appreciation of our commodities. We have lost trust for one another, knowledge of our consumption and knowledge of the importance of communication, contribution and community. We find it more important to name others as different rather than embracing knowledge and the sharing of invaluable past experiences. We lock our doors and fence in our backyards from our neighbors and even our families.

These ideas of tension, naming, identification, origin, change and weight are the qualities and histories that I would like to capture and create in my work. These are the relationships and positions I can speak to. The same forces that come from humans and their acts on the earth, are the same that influence us daily as we interact with one another. Materials are from the earth, as are humans so materials become the metaphors and the ready-mades.

While studying the border, unnecessary prejudices and the arbitrariness of power and value, I consider the role of absurdity as a way to question power and values as well as constructed ideologies.

Arthur Koestler writes in *The Act of Creation*:

> The features picked out for enlargement by the satirist are, of course, those of which he disapproves: 'If Nature's inspiration fails', wrote Juvenal

* indignation will beget the poem.* *The comic effect of the satire is derived from the simultaneous presence, in the reader's mind, of the social reality with which he is familiar, and of its reflection in the
distorting mirror of the satirist. It focusses attention on abuses and deformities in society of which, blunted by habit, we were no longer aware; it makes us suddenly discover the absurdity of the familiar and the familiarity of the absurd.

The same effect is achieved if, instead of magnifying objectionable features in customs and institutions, the satirist projects them by means of the allegory onto a different background, such as an animal society — e.g. Aristophanes, Swift, Orwell. In either case we are made suddenly conscious of conventions and prejudices which we have unquestioningly accepted, which were tacitly implied in the codes in control of our thinking and behaviour. The confrontation with an alien matrix reveals in a sharp, pitiless light what we failed to see in following our dim routines; the tacit assumptions hidden in the rules of the game are dragged into the open. The bisociative shock shatters the frame of complacent habits of thinking; the seemingly obvious is made to yield its secret.

By using absurd formal language and by presenting obvious and mundane objects and imagery, I hope to ask questions and ‘shatter the frame of complacent habits of thinking.’

My current body of work is based in assemblage. I use media and materials such as photographic transfer on fabric, welded steel, weavings, wood and cast found objects created
with various materials such as porcelain, wax, plaster and found earthen material. I use many of these techniques and materials to communicate ideas surrounding identity, treatment, origin and land use.

The following pages will display works that were specific to research surrounding absurdity and the Canada-based portion of the research project.
Figure 17: Softscape, steel, photographic transfer on fabric, woodchips, 36x15x48”
Figure 18: Mounted, black walnut, photographic transfer on fabric, 3 mil plastic
Figure 19: *Ore, Or, Oar*, Cast hydrostone, steel, iron ore pyrite, wood, approximately 26x60”
Figure 20: *Ore, Or, Oar*, Detail
Figure 21: *Grab bags*, cast hydrostone, gravel, river rock, sand and photographic transfer on fabric, approximately 24x30”
At this time, I would like to mention specific artists, theory and philosophies I have been considering throughout this project as well as the work that has come after it.

A book that has been monumental is *Border Cantos*, a collection of images and writing by artists, Richard Misrach and Guillermo Galindo who have been working in collaboration since 2004 to communicate ideas and to visually share their experience of border and border objects. Misrach is a US born artist whose work is based in color photography.

Figure 22: Richard Misrach, No 237
Galindo is a Mexican born composer and interdisciplinary artist who collects border objects to create sculptural objects as well as sound art compositions.

Figure 23: Guillermo Galindo, Zapatello / Zapatello, 2014
Repellent Fence is a two-mile long ephemeral land art piece that intersected the US/Mexico border. The piece stretches one mile into Mexico and one mile into the United States.

Looking at these specific collaborations has brought me to the realization that if I would like to continue to communicate specific ideas surrounding border politics, that collaborating with others may bring the most fruitful results. There is power in collective thought and collaboration and these collectives are making very considered and provoking work by creating through shared experiences and ideas.
Figure 25: Sterling Ruby, *Vampire 62, 2012, Soft Sculpture on view at the Nasher Sculpture Museum in Dallas, 2019*
Modern Artists who I have been looking at due to their use of materiality and content include:

Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930-2017) Polish born female sculptor and fiber artist

Figure 26: *Embryology*, as seen at the Tate Modern in London. I had the privilege of visiting this piece in 2016 before beginning graduate school and it continues to inspire me.

Figure 27: Untitled, 1968, Sculpture at Tate Modern Collection
Anni Albers (1899-1994) German Born Artist

Figure 28: Ancient Writing, 1936, Weaving at Tate Modern Collection
Now within this written thesis I would like to share the work and statement of my master of fine arts thesis exhibition, *Needle in the Meadow* which is a retrospective and cumulation of thoughts surrounding the material mentioned surrounding borders, land-use, absurdity, ideas of hard and soft, as well as personal information that will be included with the images when relevant.

The show title, *Needle in a Meadow*, comes from the history of the idiom, *Needle in the haystack*, referring to something as difficult or impossible to locate. *Needle in the Meadow* originated in the early 1500s and has colloquially been replaced by *Needle in a haystack* over time. This show title is in dedication to the Iowa Prairie, our own meadow replaced by haystacks and a cultivated landscape.

This exhibition has pieces specific to my three years in Iowa as well as influences from my travels. Looking at various landscapes and the people who live and work within them, I make connections between the way we treat the earth and how we treat each other. We can question our relationships with humans in the same way we communicate and ask questions about the landscape and its resources. How do we navigate them, use them, discover them, abuse them, love them, and hold them? Do we respect them and do we consider their origins and histories? As humans we were bound to take from the earth and to create from it—we have to in order to survive. I accept this reality but I still question how often we ask or investigate where something comes from. What is it made of? What is its value? Do we trust it? Why don’t we trust it? How did we construct the map to get to it?

The works are void of direct human depictions, but through the materials and formal language, I create the tensions and physical forces that we face daily whether it be feelings
within our personal relationships or the powers and oppression we fight against in our political climate.

There are moments of absurdity and humor in the work and in these moments, the work has autonomy. The works can mock our arbitrary decisions of value, power and the futility of constructed ideologies while simultaneously having emotive and personal qualities as well. They are individual characters with lives, emotions and secrets. There is discomfort and empathy as well as questions of identity, origin, land use and processing.

The transformation and personification of materials that takes place in my studio and through my hands, not only informs my artistic practice, but also my experience of being human.

Figure 29: Needle in the Meadow, Ready-Made Round Bale & Needle, 2019, 52x72x60”
Figure 30: *Needle in the Meadow*, Detail
Figure 31: *Monarch’s Time Capsule*, Glass, Plaster, Milkweed Seeds and Porcelain, 2018,
5x2x12” each
Figure 32: *Walnut*, Walnut, Black Walnut Hardwood, Walnut dye, Walnut Dyed-Cotton Jack Loom Weaving, Found jars, Plaster, and Brass, 2019, Approximately 10x5x12”
Figure 33: *Liquid Gold*, Maple Syrup, Maple hardwood, Steel, Rope and Paster, 2019,
Approximately 24x15x12”
Figure 34: *Soft Lines, Hard Places*, Cotton thread, Porcelain, Black Walnut and Welded Steel.

2019, 12x14x42”
This piece specifically references *The Prevention Through Deterrence Act* as well as broadly considering land-use and mapping along the border.
Figure 36: *Wedged*, Steel, Black Walnut Photographic Transfer on Muslin, Gravel, and 3mil Plastic and Sand. 2019, 6x3x15”
Figure 37: Ore Knots, Black Walnut Photographic Transfer on Muslin, Gravel, and Sand, 2019, sm: 6x6x5” lg: 4x14x3”
Figure 38, *Oar, Ore, Or*, Poplar, Welded Steel, Iron Ore Pyrite and Hydrocal 2019, Approximately 18x24x78”
Figure 39: *Ore Knot I*. Steel, Black Walnut Photographic Transfer on Muslin, Gravel, and Sand.

2019, 6x3x13
Figure 40: *Glamour Queen*, Welded Steel, Photographic Transfer on Muslin, Quarts, Cotton String and Sand. 2019. 14x6x8”

In this piece I am specifically considering precious stones and materials as a way to question the arbitrary value we place on materials as a way to question other arbitrary values and judgements we pass and place on objects and on others.
Figure 41: *Dumber Than*, Machine and Hand Sewn Photographic Transfer on Muslin, 3 Mil Plastic, Found Apple Crate, 2019, Approximately 11x14x18”
Dumber Than was the piece in the show that I spent the most time with in both the studio and at home. This piece was also the most personal and healing. Since age nine my biological father has been an absent figure in my life. In previous years he had been present however neglectful and abusive. Dumber Than is comprised of 27 rocks representing my 27 years of life. I individually printed and sewed each rock while contemplating my academic and professional success while doing so. I am the first in my family to attain a master’s degree despite being told as a child by my father that I couldn’t.
The process of creating work, writing this thesis and pursuing research during my time at the University of Iowa have been a privilege and I feel honored to have attended this institution. I feel genuinely supported and cared about by my cohort and mentors and know that the comradery and love manifested in this graduate program is not, by any means, an accident. This is a powerful group of thinkers, makers, writers and advocates who will continue to pursue powerful and thoughtful work. I couldn’t have imagined a better group and I wish this same form of success and support for future MFA candidates for years to come.
REFERENCES


