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**Empathetic Gestures: Locating Memory and Site Through Craft**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Alisha Rae McCurdy**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

in

**Studio Art**

Stony Brook University

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Abstract of the Thesis

**Empathetic Gestures: Locating Memory and Site Through Craft**

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in

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**2012**

My work begins with a search for a familiar site that I associate with home. Beginning with artworks that intimately explore a personal homesickness and a yearning to connect, I have moved into works that have a wider, more socially conscious impetus relating to coal mining in Western Pennsylvania — to mining globally; having grown up in a coal town nestled in Western Pennsylvania, it has been a part of my personal and regional identity. Only now am I beginning to understand its significance in my life and in the lives of millions of people around the world.

This thesis will chronologically examine significant works of mine that have led me to my current interests in the coal industry. In the analysis of each artwork, considerations of media, materials, scale, conceptual concerns, and art historical references will be addressed. A more sharply focused examination of art historical references will then center on concepts of site sculpture as conceived by Robert Smithson and Rosalind Krauss. Krauss' seminal essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" will be used to help locate a substantive definition of Site and

“Sited-ness” in relation to sculpture and installation, two areas that my own work occupies. I will then focus on Smithson’s notions of Site and Non-Site as defined in his essay “A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites.” I am interested in his ideas about Site and Non-Site and how they manifest themselves in my work. Of particular interest is whether there can be an expansion of the Site / Non-Site discussion that makes room for artwork that includes a consideration of both Site and Non-Site as potentially emotionally charged.

My solo thesis exhibition, *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*, took the form of a sculptural installation, was displayed in the Lawrence Alloway Memorial Gallery November 14 – 25, 2011. Work shown in the 2012 MFA Group Exhibition at the Staller Center University Art Gallery, included sculptural and print-based artworks.

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To Lorena Salcedo-Watson, thank you for continually sharing your heartfelt thoughts about my artwork. Thank you for seeing and defending what is at the core of my work: the love, respect and care contained in the artwork and its subject matter. Thank you for bringing me back to what is important.

To my family, your unyielding love and support have sustained me. I love you and thank you.

## **Introduction**

Family relationships and connections to industry have been integral components of investigation in my artworks. In the context of these interests, “industry” refers not only to the professions that have financially sustained the family, but also the desire to be productive outside of the traditional economic workforce, specifically in craft and sewing. Chapter One, Artworks, will describe in detail sculpture and installations that I have completed over the past three years. The artworks chosen for discussion have emerged as significant turns in my practice that have led me to my current work, that is concerned with coal mining.

It is through the analysis of the selected artworks that I will frame a philosophy guiding my practice in Chapter Two, Toward of Philosophy of Craft Through Generosity. Concerns of material, process, and media will be discussed in relation to sculpture and installation. Throughout this chapter I will define and clarify a framework of methodology that guides the physical and conceptual aims of my art. In this way, I will be able to define the scope and validity of conceptual and material questions and also what kinds of discourses are relevant to my work. Completing this thesis, Chapter Three (Conclusion) will be a meditation on how I intend to move my current body of work further, as I transition into a practice outside of the academic realm.

While my work begins from a deeply personal place, a broader conceptual interest in site, sited-ness, and location regarding sculptural and installation practices develops from it. Issues of site and location within my work are related to historical references of Robert Smithson’s notions of site / non-site of artwork and its relationship to a specific location. Art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss’ elucidation of the contrast between pedestal-object oriented

sculpture, to sculpture that encompasses a more expansive plane of the art encounter in her essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," will be used to connect to Smithson's concerns and my artwork. I will examine the development of Krauss and Smithson's ideas as they are relevant to my works, particularly *Waiting for Home, tether*, and, *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*, in the Appendix, Related Research.

## Chapter One

### Artworks

#### *Sheltered Thoughts and Waiting for Home, 2009-10.*

Beginning my time on Long Island I felt a great deal of trepidation and nervousness in leaving the very well known place of home. I grew up and spent all of my life previous to moving to Long Island in a small coal mining and college town nestled in Western Pennsylvania. Leaving my family and support system behind, the move to New York was flush with uncomfortable adjustments and longing for everything I had previously taken for granted.

*Waiting for Home*, began as a series of maquettes that would overcome their function of small-scale dimensional studies to full-fledged artworks on their own. I will detail this development more thoroughly when I discuss the transition from maquettes to the site-specific work *Waiting for Home*.

*Sheltered Thoughts* (Fig. 1) is a series of small-scale sculptures that serve as investigations of materials, vernacular architecture, and locality. At the conception of these pieces, I was interested in the university and Long Island at large, as a transitory space; one that I felt partially at home in. Being in an academic institution, albeit a new one, wasn't a foreign concept for me, but this university is in a drastically different landscape, which I found unsettling. In thinking about education and transitory spaces, I became interested in bus stops as prototypical structures that serve a basic purpose of being a temporary structure and where one waits to go to school. Bus shelters are ubiquitous in the suburban and urban landscapes, so much so that they tend to blend in with their surroundings. This fading into the landscape is partly

because of being constructed of transparent materials, but also because they are conceptually anonymous architectural spaces.

When planning for this site-specific sculpture, *Waiting for Home* maquettes were made out of the practical need for determining amounts of materials for, and a definite size of the final piece. Throughout the making of the maquettes it was clear that they were not just models but artworks in themselves. Each small shelter's interior is adorned with materials that I associate with home: carpeting, richly patterned fabrics, textured wallpapers, and sewing notions. After completing the models I couldn't just view them as studies; they were pieces that contained thoughts and longings for the familiarity of home. While the maquettes informed the construction and dimensions of *Waiting for Home*, I view them as part of a separate piece, *Sheltered Thoughts*.

*Waiting for Home* (Figs. 3- 4) is made of pine plywood, a material referencing the rural Western Pennsylvanian landscape I am from. Wooden bus shelters dot the rural countryside throughout the Midwest. These simply built constructions are for school children whose homes are set back from the main roads the school buses travel. I view these wooden bus stops as the last vestiges of home before a child boards the bus for school. The bus stops are small and built to the scale of a child, made from simple and inexpensive materials; they serve the basic function of protecting a child from the elements and to keep her away from the road.

While most bus shelters are simply built with a plain interior, *Waiting for Home's* interior is painted a warm yellow color and upholstered with shreds of cotton calico patterned fabric, and a built-in seat. On the interior yellow wall, there are several small shelves that are shrines to home. The top shelf is a digital print of a 30 year-old photograph of my family's home. Other

shelves hold rocks gathered from a Long Island beach, a nest wrapped from fabric, and paper bird feathers made from sewing patterns inherited from my mother dangle from the nest. *Waiting for Home* was also built to be a mobile structure that can be wheeled to various sites throughout campus. The piece was installed at various campus bus stops at Stony Brook University. By placing it next to the standard glass and metal bus stops, a contrasting vision was developed between the thoroughly anonymous Stony Brook bus stops and the uniqueness of mine. Because of its mobility, *Waiting for Home* is able to speak to the transience one experiences when placed in an environment for a finite amount of time. When the occupant is ready to leave, she need only to release the brakes and move home wherever she goes.



Fig. 1 *Sheltered Thoughts*, pine, inherited fabric, carpet, sewing pins, crochet thread, bobbins, paint, each 4 x 6 x 10 inches, 2009-10.



**Fig. 2** *Waiting for Home*, pine, inherited fabric, digital pigment prints, tissue, crochet thread, carpet, wheels, paint, 4 x 4 x 8 feet, 2010.





**Fig. 3** *Waiting for Home*, pine, inherited fabric, digital pigment prints, tissue, crochet thread, sewing pins, carpet, wheels, paint, 4 x 4 x 8 feet, 2010.

***scrapbook ii and tether, 2010.***

“To picture is not to remember. No doubt a recollection, as it becomes actual, tends to live in an image; however, the converse is not true, and the image, pure and simple, will not be referred to the past unless, indeed, it was in the past that I sought it, thus following the continuous progress which brought it from darkness to light.”

Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 135<sup>1</sup>

In the months leading up to the completion of *tether*, I was studying the philosophical writings of Henri Bergson. The above passage from his seminal text, *Matter and Memory* became the lens through which I am best able to understand *tether*. A culminating work, *tether* went through a translation from a lithographic print to a sculptural installation. *tether* begins with a family photograph and a swatch of calico fabric inherited from my mother. The photograph (Fig. 4) of my brothers aged five and two, was taken at a time of which I have no memory, I was less than a year old. The inability to place this photograph within an actual memory of my own, presents an interesting opportunity to me. While I have a connection to the photograph's subjects, I don't have a connection to the moment the image was taken. Bergson describes the process of memory recollection as,

“Whenever we are trying to recover a recollection, to call up some period of our history, we become conscious of an act *sui generis* by which we detach ourselves from the present in order to replace ourselves, first, in the past in general, then, in a certain region

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<sup>1</sup> Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. 1988. Trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer, New York: Zone Books, 1999. Print.

of the past—a work of adjustment, something like the focusing of a camera” (Bergson 133-34).

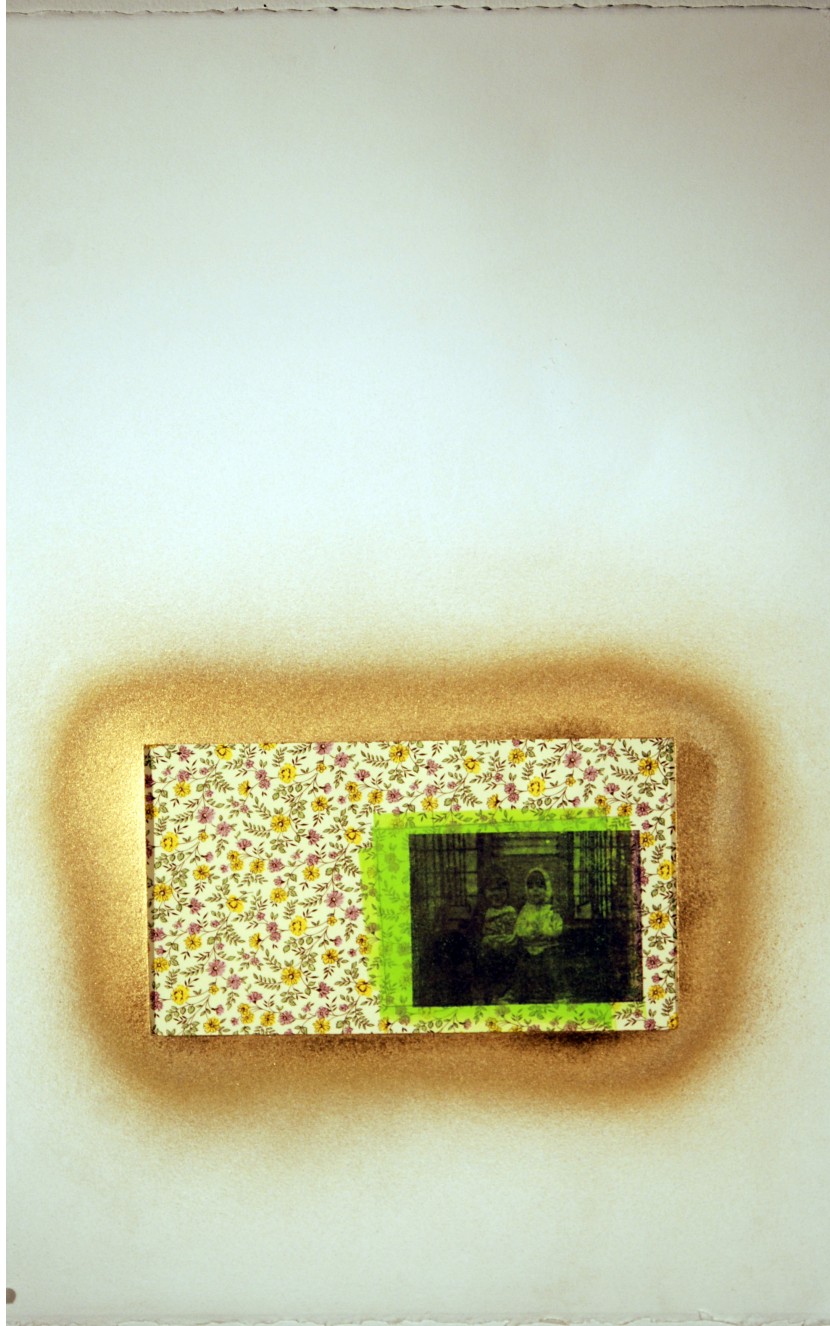
Read against Bergson’s use of the camera, I am not the photographer, I did not select the frame, focusing in and out until my brothers became clear and distinct. However, I come to this photograph quite literally, as an image-object, outside of its context within linear time. I cannot cite even a general region of memory and then focus until it becomes clearer.

Created a year prior to the installation *tether*, *scrapbook ii*, (Figs. 5-6) is a photolithographic print of an image of my older brothers huddled together on the front steps to our house, taken at an indeterminate time. The photographic image was processed digitally onto a lithographic substrate, printed onto patterned scrapbook paper, and fitted behind a high quality printing paper with metallic gold paint framing the print. The print references the practice of scrapbooking, the preservation of memory, and also extends to the domestic space; kitschy gold picture frames surrounding family photographs. From *scrapbook ii* sprung forth a question: what would this print be like if it was rendered sculpturally, as an installation within a space that a viewer can engage with physically?

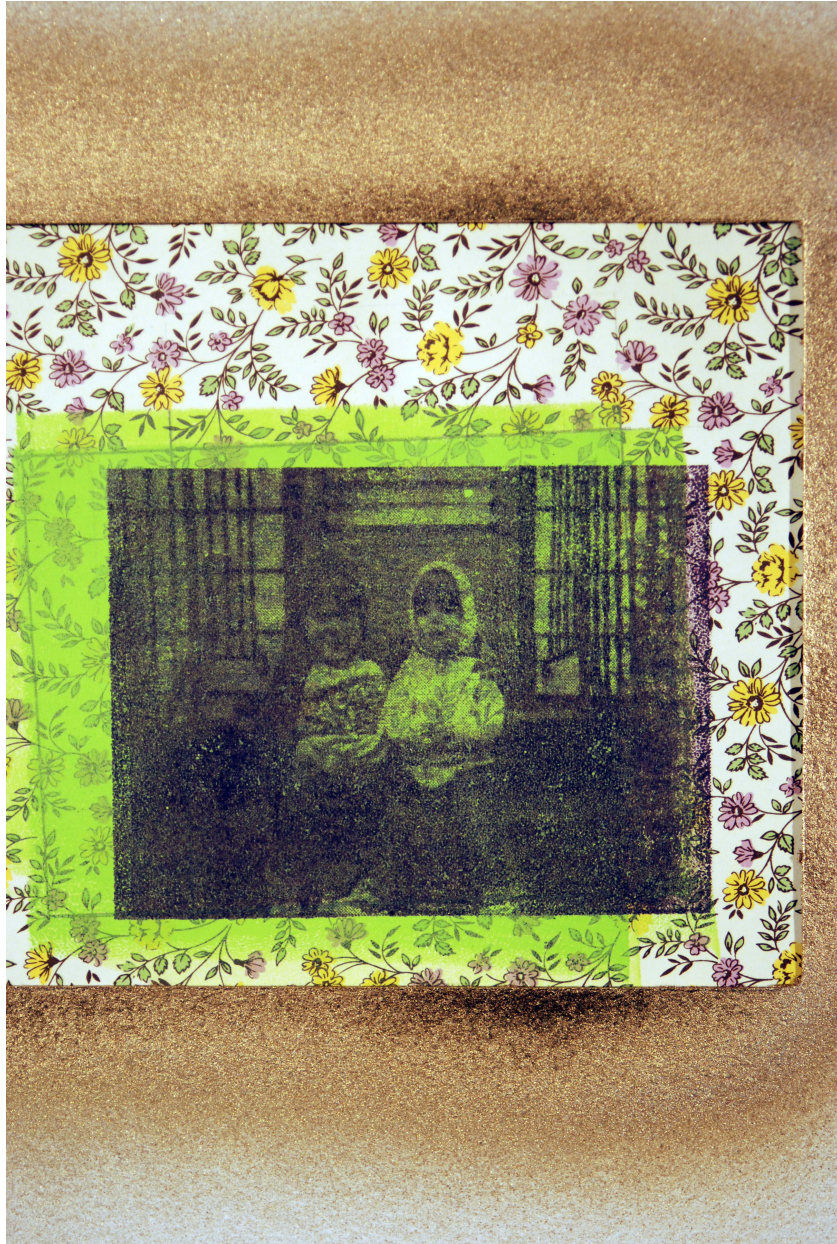
The transition of *scrapbook ii* to *tether* required me to think between two- and three-dimensional space. In the movement to three-dimensional space, I came to think about memory *through* space and how our surroundings can condition how we remember. The display format for *tether* became an integral component of the work to communicate the slippery conceptual moves of constructing memory through space and allowing the photograph to live in a new contemporaneity.



**Fig. 4** Brothers, Cory and Ryan, 1984.



**Fig. 5** *scrapbook ii*, lithograph on scrapbook paper, Rives BFK, and paint, 2009.



**Fig. 6** *scrapbook ii*, lithograph on scrapbook paper, Rives BFK, and paint, 2009.

*tether* (Figs. 7-9) straddles printmaking and sculpture in order to align itself predominantly with Installation Art. A relatively new movement in art-making and gaining establishment within the past 20 years; Installation Art carries vestiges of avant-garde, time-based media such as Happenings and Performance Art. Because of its links to time and performance-based media, Installation unabashedly implicates theatricality; insofar as the work takes on the entirety of a given space it transforms it into something similar to a theatrical set. To the extent that Installation Art is rooted in aspects of theatre, it is also imbued with both time and space. Installation sets up the art piece as a self-sustaining framework, governing the viewer's experience to be conditioned by both their negotiation of space and time. In the context of Installation, I needed to be acutely aware of how the work existed within the gallery space, but also how I could further manipulate the gallery to emit the stillness of an aged photograph. Theatrical lighting was used to lend *tether* a calm atmosphere that also hums with possibility of constructing memory.

Being the youngest and only girl sibling, my childhood memories are marked with incidents of my brothers behaving quite differently than the cherubic boys the photograph presents them to be. I emphasize "marked," in that my childhood was not exclusively me being tormented by my brothers, but predominantly a happy haze of memories digging in the mud, playing with dolls, and playing ice hockey. In order to set up this difference of cheerful and unsettling memories, an anchoring point of the installation is a series of eight 4 x 8' sheets of drywall screen-printed with an intense pattern derived from a favorite fabric inherited from my mother.

Placed in front of the frieze of prints, is a simply constructed pine doorstep. Seated on the steps are two ghostly figments of my brothers. Minimally rendered, the boys are constructed

from an armature of wire and translucently sealed sewing patterns, lending them to be understood as loose constructions of apparitions. The figures are connected to the printed fabric pattern with thin red thread secured to both the figures and the drywall with straight pins. The red color of the thread is meant to be a reference to the ties of family through shared bloodlines. The significance of the thread and attaching by piercing the works with pins adds a prickly uncomfortable feeling in the space. The same pattern printed onto the drywall spreads onto the gallery floor; there, instead of being printed, the flowers are formed from small pieces of anthracite coal. A stencil was created from the floral pattern printed on the drywall, and used to pattern the coal on to the gallery floor. Growing up, my father was a coal miner in Western Pennsylvania, his profession served as the linchpin in the family, much like the anthracite flowers provide the base on which *tether* is built.





**Fig. 7** *tether*, mixed media installation, 2010.



**Fig. 8** *tether*, mixed media installation, 2010.



**Fig. 9** *tether*, mixed media installation, 2010.

## **Turning to Coal Mining as Subject Matter**

Up to this point in this body of work, I had been predominantly focused on the love and creativity that my mother possesses and how it has influenced my life as an artist and also, how I view our family's past. Through this work, I began to question what my father's role has been in the development of my life. On the surface, I never felt much there was of a connection between his life and mine. On a spring day in 2011, my dad was telling me stories of working in the coal mines of Western Pennsylvania. These were stories of him and his crew buddies playing practical jokes on each other, but laced within these recollections were recounts of near fatal accidents he encountered, and the struggles of the strike in 1993.

Growing up, my brothers and I knew our dad worked as a coal miner and that it was a dangerous job. We remember the United Mine Workers of America union strike in 1993; our dad was a union representative and a picket line leader. One morning we woke up to the back windshield of his car shot out with a pellet gun. Another night, our overhead garage light was shot out. Our family stayed afloat with the help of our extended family, and the union's strike fund; my siblings and I were not explicitly told what was going on (aside from it being serious), and we tried to carry on as usual. There were stories of my dad's crew getting out of the way of a sagging roof within seconds of its subsequent collapse, power outages in the train cars that ferry miners from the surface to the mine and needing to carry an injured miner for four miles to the surface. It wasn't until this morning nearly ten years after my dad retired, that I understood the gravity, sacrifices, risks, and his own deep connections he forged to the profession he worked in for 25 years—and its effect on my life. This is when I decided to turn my attention to coal mining, miners, and the industry's effect on the communities' environment.

***Seven Hundred Thirty-Five, 2011.***

*Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* is the first major piece completed that has focused on my father and his profession. Coal mining was his sole occupation for nearly 25 years. In those years 735 miners were killed on the job domestically. This number, 735 is the basis of the installation created for my solo thesis exhibition in November 2011. It consists of 735 canaries sewn from various shades of yellow patterned fabric, one to bear witness for each life lost in the mines. Each of the canaries was hand cut, sewn, and stuffed with anthracite coal that spills out of each bird's belly. Grounding the installation is a four-inch bed of earth covering a footprint of 16 x 8 feet. The canaries rest upon the earthen ground in rows of 50, the remaining row leaves space for more birds to be added. Suspended from the gallery ceiling are five pine trays that hold sod, and with dimensions of 2 x 8 feet, resembling the size of a burial plot. The plots are hung at 48 inches from the floor, the approximate ceiling height of a coal mine. Hanging above the plots are two fluorescent light fixtures that serve as the only light sources for the installation.

The structure and dimensions of *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* (Figs. 10-12) are contingent on the gallery space. Within the Alloway Gallery at Stony Brook University, the piece can be perfectly centered, which allows the gallery space to become neutralized and the work to absorb all of the viewer's focus. The plots of sod that serve as a main visual and physical divider of space also create a conceptual line between what is surface and subterranean. For the context of Long Island (and any other region that doesn't have a direct tie to coal mining), the dividing plots becomes a way of revealing what is often unknown to the viewers regarding coal mining. While *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* was conceived as an artwork to memorialize each of the 735 miners killed, it also came to be about informing an audience that had not previously understood aspects of or thought much about the coal industry. In this venue, what is understood as a basic

metaphor—the canary—was lost on most viewers. Through the 1930s it was common practice in coal mines that caged live canaries were taken into the mines. When their songs waned and they eventually died, the miners would know to flee the mine because of the build up of toxic gases. Since the 1930s more humane and scientific devices have been used to detect the build up of carbon monoxide and methane. Once explained, the viewer then had a deeper understanding of the reality of another’s life. While I have not yet been able to witness viewers interact with the work in a context that is more empathetic and knowledgeable of coal mining, I can anticipate that they will not need many of the particulars, like the canary, explained<sup>2</sup>.

The lighting of the piece, coming from only two fluorescent light fixtures, became one of the main entry points for viewers unfamiliar with coal mining. It was read as the deadening fluorescent light of a corporate boardroom or perhaps the offices of coal industry executives. This interpretation implies the negligence and lack of oversight that caused the deaths of these miners. These ideas were not part of my motivations for using the materials. The lights were employed for their ability to set an atmosphere for the artwork. The unforgivingly stark light casts a still pall over the installation, acknowledging that this is a space of unfathomable loss. The lights also establish a separation of the personal, individual tragedy of one canary in contrast to the impossibility of understanding the individual death among a large group of deaths. Along with the lighting of the work, the inclusion of earth, sod and canaries, led viewers to think of the environmental impacts of mining. Much like the interpretation of the lighting, the environmental effects of mining were not the initial intent of the work, but a valid interpretation that frequently emerges. I cannot deny the interpretations of *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* that imply the piece is

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<sup>2</sup> *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* is scheduled to be installed in central Pennsylvania at a time after deadline for this writing. During this installation I will be able to evaluate my suspicions.

about corporate oversight or the environmental damages of coal mining, because they are the predominant points of entry for viewers unacquainted with coal mining.

Through procuring the sod and earth materials for *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*, a connection is made between the referential sites of coal mining and of the artwork. Materials of the installation travel the distance between western Pennsylvania and Long Island to make a connection for the audiences viewing *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*, and the site the work is based on.

*Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* is a piece that was about me making a connection to my father. This piece communicates to him my love and respect for his chosen profession and for supporting me as a child and now as an artist. In the process of making it, also became clear that *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* is about sharing my family and home community's stories of coal mining. In the months prior to the installation of *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*, "Bird Bees" were held where close friends and family helped by tracing the canary patterns onto fabric and cutting them out. While I was reluctant to ask for help, I was reminded of quilting bees that are convened by quilters to help each other quilt together the already sewn tops and bottoms. "Bees" are held for many forms of craft, predominantly fiber-based practices of knitting, crocheting, quilting, and sewing. These events are not just for getting help in completing work; they gather a community together, to share the latest gossip and stories. During the "bird bees," I would recount stories my dad told me about coal mining, as others would catch everyone up on their families' news, what was going on in their studios, and other topics of conversation we don't often get to. When people that participated in the bees viewed *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*, they had another layer of experience by already knowing what the piece is about and being able to pick out the canaries they helped complete. It was not just myself that was able to bear witness

to the deaths of the coal miners, but also a newly empathetic community that emerged from aiding in this work's completion.





**Fig. 10** *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*, mixed media installation, 2011.



**Fig. 11** *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*, mixed media installation, 2011.



**Fig. 12** *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*, mixed media installation, 2011.

### ***Upper Big Branch, 2012.***

On April 5, 2010, 3:27 pm EST a catastrophic explosion ripped through Upper Big Branch South Mine in Montcoal, West Virginia. High methane and coal dust levels were detected just prior to the explosion. Investigations into the disaster found the then mine owners Massay Energy and the U.S. Department of Labor Mine Safety and Health Administration's inspectors at fault. Since the tragedy at Upper Big Branch, one former Upper Big Branch security director has been indicted for perjury for lying to federal investigators and ordering the destruction of evidence<sup>3</sup>. Another former employee was sentenced to jail time after he was convicted of faking a mine foreman's license and lying to federal investigators. And on Feb. 22, 2012, an Upper Big Branch mine superintendent was charged in a criminal information for conspiracy to defraud the United States by engaging in a conspiracy to give advance notification of mine inspections, falsify examination record books, and alter the mine's ventilation system before federal inspectors were able to inspect underground. During the explosion, 29 miners were killed; two were injured.

*Upper Big Branch* (Figs. 13-14) is a piece that pays homage to the 29 miners killed in the disaster. Leaning against the wall are 29 pieces of pine, rubbed with coal, and a print of a dead canary is mounted with straight pins. Suspended above the line of canaries are three small incandescent lights. Each pine plank is cut to a unique height, yet each canary print is from the same plate. The contrast of the uniqueness of the wooden substrate and the uniformity of the prints underscores that the individuals that perished in Upper big Branch mine will forever be grouped with each other as the 29 lost miners. The use of printmaking to create the canary image is an important vehicle to complicate the relationship of singular and multiple. The main

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<sup>3</sup> Trial is still in process.

motivation for using printmaking techniques was to create a perfect replication of a singular image. However, subtle shifts in the printing process, like inking and wiping, disrupt the consistency of the edition. Also, producing a print can be considered the marking of a specific time and space within the editioning process. All of these things contribute to establishing a complicated relationship of individual and group, like the relationships of the 29 miners.

The pieces are resting against the wall creating a link to makeshift memorials that blossom at the sites of tragedy and mourning. The lights hanging about the series of prints are similar to the headlamps miners wear and the lights that are strung in the hallways of the mines. The little bulbs also bend low to the canaries to illuminate their memories. Upon encountering the work, its scale to the viewer and the gallery requires one to stoop low to see the piece entirely. The seemingly casual display of *Upper Big Branch* is a conscious move to force the viewer to make a decision of either bending low to encounter the piece, or viewing it at a distance. The implication of the viewer to interact physically with the work is a move toward a more intimate experience with the artwork.



**Fig. 13** *Upper Big Branch*, mixed media installation, 2012.



**Fig. 14** *Upper Big Branch*, mixed media installation, 2012.

***Plot, 2012.***

Many of the decisions of form and material of *Plot* came from the criticism I received from *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* and discussions I had with my father in light of those criticisms. In the weeks following the installation of *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*, I shared with my dad some of the comments I received about the work. He felt offended by ideas and implications that the mining companies were somehow at fault for the deaths of the 735 miners. In his perspective, to focus on the cause of death for these miners shouldn't be categorically placed on the administration; on the contrary, most of the deaths can be attributed to the errors of the miners themselves. He noted that there had not been a major domestic coal mining disaster during the years (1975-2000) that he worked. The conversation we had allowed us to talk about art, the roles of the viewers, critic, art and artist in a way that was never previously possible with my dad. After hearing my dad's frustrations, I thought about how an artwork could speak more to his experience as a miner; herein lays the inspiration for *Plot*.

Using the same structuring of space as *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*, there is a suspended plank of rough-cut pine cut to the same dimensions of a simple wooden coffin. Resting on top of the pine plank are clumps of grass and earth, creating a division of surface and underground. On the floor, covering the same footprint as the pine, are cast porcelain canaries. Streaming down from the gallery ceiling are seven small incandescent lights that pierce through the pine and illuminate the canaries.

The casting process follows similar principles of printmaking, to perfectly replicate forms. However, the canaries in *Plot* (Figs. 15-16) complicate the traditional ideas of casting by being created from six different molds and finished in varying manners. Consequently while each canary was initially created from the same series of molds, each one is individualized



through different glazing and firing methods. To this end, like *Upper Big Branch*, there is a confusion of individual and multiple. The lighting of *Plot* also functions likewise to *Upper Big Branch*, in that it references the miner's headlamps and the lights inside the mine. They are also a warmer light than the florescent lights in *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*—the incandescent bulbs' warm glow in reverence rather than with the deadening starkness of the fluorescent bulbs.



**Fig. 15** *Plot*, mixed media installation, 2012.



**Fig. 16** *Plot*, mixed media installation, 2012.

## ***Remains, 2012***

I address *Remains* last not only because it is the most recent piece that I have completed, but also because it goes into different conceptual and formal directions. *Remains* included five humbly basic cardboard boxes filled with the left over materials used to complete *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* and *Plot*. All of the remaining scraps of fabric, thread, dirt, coal, porcelain and extra canaries from *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* are contained in the boxes. Illuminating their contents are the same little incandescent bulbs from *Plot* and *Upper Big Branch*.

Unlike the aforementioned artworks, *Remains* (Figs. 17-18) is the only one that did not have a preconceived vision of what it would be. One afternoon in the studio, visiting with a colleague, the means of “presenting” artwork was a topic of conversation. This person pointed to a corner of my studio housing older artworks in storage. Fabric canaries filled several cardboard boxes, each stacked on top of each other. He asked me a bewildering question, “why can’t those boxes in the corner be considered an artwork?” Dumbfounded, I replied, “On the spot I can’t give you a reason why not.” Continuing our conversation I came to the understanding that most recent works don’t rely on any sleight of hand gestures in their structures of presentation. They exist in an unpretentious way because my artwork conceptually doesn’t need to play games with the viewer. They are made to reveal a reality that may not have been previously understood by the viewer, so why should the presentation of the piece rely on extraneous pedestals, gallery lighting and other constraints. The work can just *be*.

It was through this conversation that *Remains* was conceived. Thinking about the artwork being in storage led me to consider the remains of the lives of miners, or any deceased person, packed into boxes and stored. Even though this person is gone, the collecting artifacts belonging to that person is a relevant and important task to be completed by the living.

Collecting becomes an act of another person bearing witness and accounting for a life that once was. The boxes in *Remains* are half full, nearly empty, or just about filled; there is always room for more, when a box is filled, another can be added. This speaks to the perpetuation of the sacrifices and tragedies families will endure as long as we still mine coal. Moreover, my task as an artist to account for the losses of coal miners, their families, and the communities will also continue. I, along with others, will continue to bear witness to their lives.



**Fig. 17** *Remains*,(foreground) mixed media, 2012. As installed for *Bound* MFA Thesis Exhibition 2012, University Art Gallery, Stony Brook University.



**Fig. 18** *Remains*, mixed media, 2012.

## Chapter Two

### Toward a Philosophy of Generosity through Craft

The starting and end points of my art are a sense of generosity. Art cannot be an entirely self-serving endeavor; it must emit and give to an audience. My work's subject matter is coal mining and the fallout from the industry's long-time presence in rural Appalachian communities. Understanding that coal mining is not a direct concern for a vast portion of the world, I need to take account of the several kinds of audiences for my artwork, and how it might become meaningful for those audiences. Art is to be giving, not only for those in the "art world," but perhaps more importantly, for those that feel excluded from that realm of society. That is not to turn entirely away from the "art world," rather to engage it with issues not typically addressed. My artworks in the context of the "art world" (understood here as New York City / Long Island) become meaningful through shining a light on realities of life, death, and industry that this particular audience is not likely familiar with. Within this audience, the work gains a layer of being educational, and also it broadens the scope of awareness of coal mining's regional and global effects<sup>4</sup>.

When my artwork is shown within the context of its subject matter, in rural Appalachian areas, it will be meaningful in other ways. What needs to be defined for an audience unfamiliar with coal mining doesn't need to be explicitly clarified in an accompanying written statement about the works. The metaphor of a yellow canary doesn't need explaining. The artworks in this

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<sup>4</sup> Specific examples of how the viewers engaged with *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* in ways that raise consciousness about the coal mining industry are cited in Chapter 1 Artworks, pages 20-21.



context touch on familiar realities; they are sensual articulations of deeply understood and internalized experiences.

My motivations for using craft materials and techniques in my artwork are also rooted in generosity. As contemporary art spans a wide gambit of forms and materials, craft remains a framework for the touched, felt, and genuine. Craft is a giving gesture to the subject matter and audience of my artwork. It allows an entry point to the artwork for those that are not versed in the historical or contemporary languages of art. People in the Appalachian region will likely connect more with objects that are rooted in realms of handmade craft. Many of the objects that fill a house in these regions are handmade, passed down through family and friends, and are imbued with memories. Using handmade craft techniques in my art is my way of reaching out to those populations that the artwork most sincerely relates to.

Materials used in my art are often tied to craft traditions. Sewing, embroidery, and stitching were first used to develop and enunciate a creative connection with my Mother's doll and clothes making. In using these materials and techniques, I have developed an understanding that craft is a language that can communicate specific ideas.

Traditionally, the conversation about craft evokes a dialectal one; Fine Art versus Craft<sup>5</sup>. Discussions were often consumed by a hierarchical argument rather than viewing craft in the same aesthetic and critical league as Fine Art. Through attending an art program that is situated in the Bauhaus model of education, conversations of the primacy of art and craft are rendered moot. A student with a focus in fibers will come into a sculpture course seamlessly; he would

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<sup>5</sup> This debate of Fine Art versus Craft stems from the Arts and Crafts and Bauhaus movements beginning at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the United States and Europe. The Bauhaus model of art education included the “crafts”—Fibers, Ceramics, Woodworking, and Small Metals and Jewelry—in the same academic arena as Painting and Sculpture.

use the techniques from fibers congruently within a sculptural framework. A conversation about craft and contemporary art becomes interesting for me when it involves how craft is a welcoming gesture to the viewer and how it creates linkages between the maker and audience.

Art through the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has been placed in a context that sets up a division between the viewer and the work. When one encounters art in a museum or gallery, touching and even getting too near it is off limits. Experiencing art under these conditions can limit the intimacy a viewer has with a work. While the rules governing proper behavior when viewing art is valuable to the safety and life of the work, I am interested in how my artwork can permeate this boundary between art and audience. When conceiving an artwork, the first thoughts I have regard material and how materials can initiate a more intimate experience for the viewer, though not necessarily through different rules. For me, craft materials and techniques are used in an attempt to establish a more emotionally intimate relationship with the viewer. Because of fabric and porcelain's communal, utilitarian, and tactile natures, there is a desire to touch or handle the artwork, and the work no longer just appeals to the visual register, but also the tactile. Through the evocation of the tactile sense there is a connection to the handmade. A connection that implies the artist touched and created the artwork, in a way that art made without an apparent trace of the hand cannot.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Conclusion**

Hovering beneath the surface of the body of artwork concerning coal mining is the environmental conversations circulating around the subject matter of the work. Yes, mining is harmful to the environment, communities it exists within, and the miners. These are all issues that are relevant to the work, but have not been the catalyst for my creating these works. My main concern is the personal, human tragedies and sacrifices of the mining industry. While issues of labor and the environment are no less significant, they just have not been at the forefront of my work. As I move forward with this body of work, I intend to continue not only to bear witness and testify to the stories of coal miners and their families, but to also extend to concerns of environmental impacts of the coal industry.

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## Appendix: Related Research

### Locating an Emotional Non-Site

“By drawing a diagram, a ground plan of a house, a street plan to the location of a site, or a topographic map, one draws a ‘logical two dimensional’ picture. A ‘logical picture’ differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the thing it stands for. It is a two dimensional *analogy or metaphor* -- A is Z.”

“A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites,” Robert Smithson, 1968.<sup>6</sup>

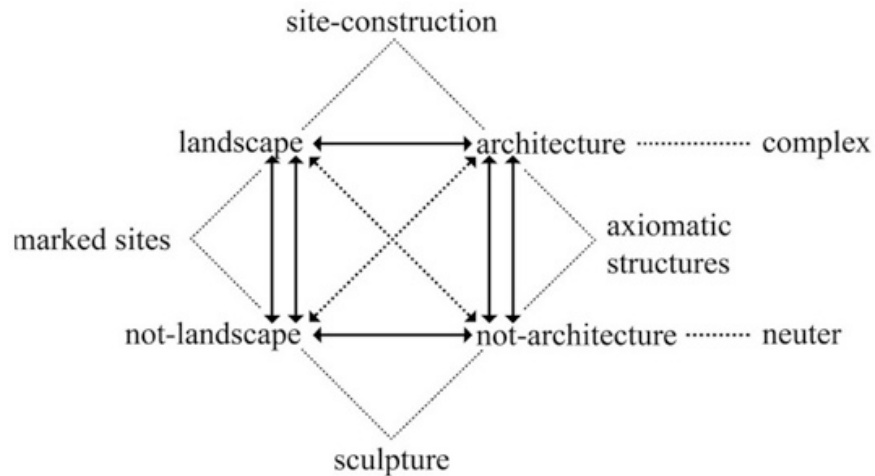
Reeling in the wake of Post World War II modernism, sculpture faced a crisis. The conventions under which sculpture operated were no longer viable; art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss articulates this rupture, “...sculpture has its own internal logic, its own set of rules, which, though they can be applied to a variety of situations, are not themselves open to very much change” (Krauss, 33). Krauss goes on to illustrate this problem of sculptural convention through monumental sculpture. If the logic of sculpture is inseparable from the logic of the monument, then sculpture becomes a commemorative representation. Following this argument, several issues arise, chiefly among them, if memorial sculpture is taken out of the site that it commemorates, can it still be referred to as monument?

Krauss continues in her pioneering essay, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” to propose new conventions and forms of three-dimensional art in a context of a more extensive definition of what constitutes sculpture. Sculpture is no longer just situated between “non-architecture” and “non-landscape,” but is situated in a more complex schematic (Fig 19) with what she terms as the following:

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<sup>6</sup> Smithson, Robert. “A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites.” *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Ed. Jack Flam. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996. 364. Print.

- “Site-construction:” artwork constructed *within* the site.
- “Marked sites:” the physical manipulation of landscape; also includes other forms of marking (often via photography).
- “Axiomatic structures:” the intervention into the real space and scale of architecture.



**Fig. 19, Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October*, 8 (Spring, 1979), pp. 31-44. © 1979 by Rosalind Krauss.**

Sculpture is no longer the privileged middle term between two things that it isn't (landscape and architecture), "*Sculpture* is rather only one term on the periphery of a field in which there are other differently structured possibilities" (Krauss 38).

Krauss's restructuring of the idea of sculpture came in response to a decade of artists; including Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, Mary Miss, and Alice Aycock, who moved out of a formal studio setting to make their works in and of the landscape. Their works turned away from sculpture as understood as either a monument or a pedestal-bound object. As these artworks sprawled out of their studios, the artists defined the terms within which they worked and how their sculpture functioned. A prolific writer and artist, Robert Smithson defined his earthworks in several essays and interviews. His essay, "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites" is a grounding

point for my conceptual interests in my own work concerning site. Written in 1968, predating Krauss' "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" by 11 years, Smithson's "Provisional Theory" stakes out a definition of an artwork that has an interest in a specific site, which is constructed and displayed *outside* of that relating site. "A *Non-Site (an indoor earthwork)* [is] a three dimensional logical picture that is *abstract*, yet is *represents* an actual site in New Jersey (The Pine Barrens Plains)" (Smithson 364). Smithson here refers to the artwork as a Non-Site and the artwork / Non-Site is both an abstract descriptor *and* representational of the actual site. By linking abstract and representational, Smithson brings together two stylistic categories of art that have previously been understood as directly opposing each other.

While the Non-Site refers to a site outside of the walls of the gallery, therein lies an important idea of travel, of traversing the time and space between site and non-site.

"Between the *actual site* in the Pine Barrens and *The Non-Site* itself exists a space of metaphoric significance. It could be that 'travel' in this space is a vast metaphor.

Everything between the two sites could become physical metaphorical material devoid of natural meanings and realistic assumptions" (Smithson 364).

The line of travel through the physical and conceptual space that separates the actual site of an artwork and the non-site is open to interpretation that is merely referential in the same way that the non-site is referential to the site. This gap between site and non-site becomes a potential space for redemption and insertion of meaning. It is this possibility of redemption through non-site that I am interested in. Using Krauss' opening up of artwork tied to site and Smithson's proposition of a non-site, I am interested in how my artworks consistently seek a site outside of itself; a physical and *conceptual* non-site.



## ***tether* as a Non-Site**

It is with *tether* that I became acquainted with Smithson's Site / Non-site relationships<sup>7</sup>. The gap between the site and non-site artwork that Smithson articulates becomes the gap between my non-memory and the act of creating a new memory via the construction of an installation. The conceptual distance between the photograph and the installation holds redemptive potential of constructing memory. Although my memory / non-site is cobbled together in the same spirit that Smithson works through his site / non-site artworks, *tether* is based on not just on an image referring to a site, but also the emotions that we associate with specific sites. The fond childhood memories I have of my brothers are intermingled with the hurtful taunts and teasing that accompanies most young sibling relationships, therefore my view of the site (the photograph) for the non-site, *tether* spans not only distance, but time too, thus complicating the "travel" needed between photograph and *tether* (site and non-site, respectively).

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<sup>7</sup> Please see Figures 7-9.

### **Linking Site of Coal Mining to Non-Site of *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five***

In order to make a connection to the coal mining sites and the location the work is being shown, the dirt and sod of the piece are sourced locally. My connection to Smithson's conception of site / non-site is not based in a "dimensional logic" of photograph of site relating to non-site artwork. Materials of the installation travel the distance between western Pennsylvania and Long Island to make a connection for the audience's location viewing *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*, and the site the work is based on. Through procuring the living materials of *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* in the location of its installation, a connection is made between the referential sites of coal mining and the non-site of the artwork. By sourcing the materials locally I am able to insert my non-site, *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* into a new site and give that site a direct connection to coal mining. By continually transposing site to non-site to new site, *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five* perpetuates coal mining as not only a regional concern, but also a global one. Most importantly the lives lived of those in coal mining regions also become interleaved with the lives of those who view and experience *Seven Hundred Thirty-Five*.