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Skin

A Thesis Presented

by

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Abstract of the Thesis

Skin

By

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Master of Fine Arts

In

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2009

I use materials and procedures to create an emotional response in the viewer, including strategies of assembling, piling, layering, and demolishing. In my work, I juxtapose elements of external and institutional structures like architecture and aspects of the internal body. In this written thesis I am going to take an in - depth look at my solo and group thesis works in relation to metaphorical concepts of the body and skin, tracing the artists and ideas that have influenced it. These works include *Welcome, A Durational Installation; Home Sweet; Lights and Shadows, Highlighted and Exaggerated.*

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I. Introduction

I create because I enjoy the challenge of conquering new materials and art making techniques. I create for myself to make sense of my current situation. I create to heal the past and move on to the future. The act of creating is a pleasurable experience, yet challenging. I am always wanting more, and demanding more, of my mind, body, and spirit. For me, art making is an investigation of culture, the environment, and my place in the grand scheme of it all. Digging beneath the surface, I highlight my discoveries for others to see.

In this thesis I am going to take an in-depth look at my current body of work in relation to the underlying themes of skin and architecture. Then I will briefly discuss the following reoccurring elements in my work: participation, metamorphosis, surfaces, and experimentation. I will also touch upon a few works and concepts that set the stage for my thesis works, tracing the artists and ideas that have informed them. Specifically, I will discuss in detail the following works: *Welcome, a Durational Installation*; *Lights and Shadows*; *Home Sweet*; and *Highlight and Exaggerate*. *Welcome, a Durational Installation* was my solo exhibition in the Lawrence Alloway Gallery last fall and the other three works were part of the spring group MFA show *Seriously...MFA Thesis Exhibition*.

II. Themes

The reoccurring themes of my work are the skin and the body in relation to architecture. In my work I often go back to my body as a reference and use it metaphorically. In this section I will specifically explore the bodily idea of skin and various personal and structural aspects of architecture.

II a. Skin

The body has a surface that holds, covers, and protects: skin. My work examines the relationship between an object's surface or skin and its environment. In biology integument is the name of this body function that has a barrier between one's internal systems and the outside world. According to Webster's Dictionary integument is something that "covers or encloses; especially: an enveloping layer (as a skin, membrane, or cuticle) of an organism or one of its parts."¹ The integument covers the entire body and is made of three layers. The top exposed layer is the epidermis. It interacts with the environment. In the middle is the dermis. The hypodermis is the innermost layer that blends into the muscular system. From a visual standpoint the epidermis is a very important layer of the integument; it contains all the physical elements of identity, such as hair and pigment. Most importantly, the epidermis protects the body against harmful agents of the external environment. In the book, *Skin on the Cultural Border Between Self and the World*, Claudia Benthien describes two levels to the metaphoric use of skin:

1

"integument." Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2009. Merriam-Webster Online. 2 May 2009 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integument>
Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," October (2004).

- skin encloses the self: skin is imagined as protective and sheltering cover but in some expressions also as a concealing and deceptive one. What is authentic lies beneath the skin, is hidden inside the body.
- skin with the subject, the person: here the essence does not lie beneath the skin, hidden inside.²

My artistic investigation often begins with the study of skin as a porous fragile boundary. This boundary can be affected by the external world in the form of physical wounds or emotional pain. It can also be affected by the internal organism in the form of emotional pain or disease that eventually manifest on the surface. Stress is a good example of a psychological state that can manifest symptoms externally. It starts on the inside the body. If left unchecked for a period of time it can register on the surface of the skin. A simple example of this is the cold sore. Some medications attempt to heal the blister from the outside, causing it to spread. However, a cold sore has to go through the process of opening up, oozing, and scabbing over, and if that process does not happen the situation can become worse by spreading and taking longer to heal. I find it interesting that such manifestations of stress have to be fixed from the inside out. “Speculations about the inside are possible only through signs that appear on the skin or through significant discharging ‘fluxes’.”³

By focusing on this idea of surface, my work alludes to the fact that something is not quite right in the spaces, objects and images I present. For example, *Infected Corner*, my first year showpiece, was an installation in which rusted iron growths were embedded in a corner of the gallery wall. The rocky wart-like growths varied in size and seemed to ooze down the surface of the wall. The invasive installation gave life to sores in a corner

² Claudia Benthien, *Skin on the Cultural Border Between Self and the World* (Published by Columbia University Press, 2002). pg. 17

³ Claudia Benthien, *Skin on the Cultural Border Between Self and the World* (Published by Columbia University Press, 2002). pg 40

of the inanimate white box of the gallery. The growths emanated from within the white walls giving the space a corporal essence. I wanted the installation to appear to be a part of the gallery, yet be an awkward and uncomfortable situation. To promote this reading I separated myself as the artist by not labeling it with my name or title. I did this to bring attention to a seemingly natural phenomenon in the institutional setting of the gallery.



Figure 1. *Infected Corner*, 2007



Figure 2. *Infected Wall, 2007, detail*



Figure 3. *Infected Wall, 2007, detail*



Figure 4. *Infected Wall, 2007, detail*

II b. Architecture

My work comes from me. It has a foundation in my previous bodily and emotional experiences. For a period in my life I did not have a permanent address. It was the moment I did not have an address when I discovered that my home was a part of my identity. I did my undergraduate work among the old abandoned houses and factories of Buffalo, NY. I could relate to these structures and wondered what stories the buildings could tell. In art therapy the idea of the house symbolizes a person and how they feel about themselves and their interactions with others. All of these personal experiences have helped inform my interest in using architecture in my work.

When I think about architecture, I often am dealing with several ideas that move back and forth between personal and structural. Architecture acts as a privacy or boundary regulation system. Its walls and doorways define inside and outside and a flow through space. As a person I have a tendency to pretend to be open, and if I am open its only for fleeting moment. During the process of planning, I often I create walls or structures with myself in mind. If I'm feeling open, I want to tear down boundaries and let in the world. If I'm feeling vulnerable, I want to quickly build them up. Often times during the process of creating the space I move through both feelings. For example, in *Welcome, a Durational Installation*, at the very beginning of creating this piece I was feeling open and willing to share, so I wanted a wide door threshold. Days later I was feeling protective, so the size of the threshold shrank to half of what I originally intended. Throughout my process I have to keep reminding myself of the most important question: what is it I want this work to do?

In the installation *Infected Corner* the driving force was the idea of a solid structure like a wall actually being porous like skin. I wanted the wall to become a skin wounded by unknown interior factors. The wall became a porous fragile being hiding beyond the years of layers of paint. Like art galleries covering up holes with joint compound and paint to hide years of wear and imperfections. Eventually, something seeps to the surface of the wall demanding to be dealt with in some way.

In creating *Welcome, a Durational Installation*, I was also thinking about the idea of suppressing ones feelings instead of dealing with them and putting on a happy face. What I pictured was an abandoned room stuffed with unresolved problems, and instead of dealing with the problems, a wall was built over them creating the appearance of an empty white room. The gallery was therefore divided into two spaces: an interior body that references the human body and the exterior space that interacts with the public.

In different ways, all three of the pieces that were part of the group MFA exhibition had a similar relationship of architecture and surface to some interior drama. *Home Sweet* was designed to be an elaborate mask covering up a fragile organic system. It was created with the idea of pulling the audience in close so they might look beyond the pretty painted surface. *Highlight and Exaggerate* was created to call attention to an interesting architectural element of the gallery that is normally overlooked and to provide it with its own drama. It also suggested that the surface was being destroyed by the interior. *Lights and Shadows* was created to focus on an unseen psychological space. The structure of this place comes apart at the seams and the room slowly buckles and collapses. According to Bethien there is: “special significance attached to the parallelism

between the stony house and the fleshy body as solid, enveloping, and concealing forms, as rooms in which life happens.”⁴

The house is a vessel container whose structure is comprised of multiple layers, which separates the self from the exterior world. The skin is comprised of many layers. The skin my of my structures are often comprised of multiple layers of plaster and hair that cover wood lath. The exterior of the house is the face, which interacts with the world. The exterior interacts with the world as a façade. The façade in my body of work tries to tell the world that every thing is fine, but also shows the cracks that reveal everything is not really fine. This tension is the heart of my work.

⁴ Claudia Benthien, *Skin on the Cultural Border Between Self and the World* (Published by Columbia University Press, 2002).pg. 26

III. Elements

During the past three years the aesthetic quality of my work has changed a lot. I do not have a uniform style of working or a particular medium. What tie my works together are the underlying repeating elements and themes. In this section I will examine the following qualities that resides in my work: viewer participation, metamorphosis, surface, and experimentation.

III a. Viewer Participation

Participation is a very important element in my work. Without active the body involved, viewing my work cannot evolve beyond being an object. Another way to think of participation is as “relational art.” Claire Bishop describes this as art that is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment. Most of my work requires some type of participation from the viewer in order to be fully understood. I use my work to transform those who see it from a passive viewer to an active participant. My work involves two types of participation: visual confrontation and physical involvement. Depending on the work, they take place separately or simultaneously.

I define visual confrontation as forcing the viewer to deal with what is in front of them. When it is working, the result of this strategy is that viewers question themselves about their lives, their community, and the world. I achieve this by creating awkward situations that require the viewer to get very close to the work. By employing techniques such as layering and simultaneously showing contrasting layers at the same time. For example, *Home Sweet* involved the act of getting extremely close to the work of art to

figure out what was going on beyond the façade. *Home Sweet* was an installation designed to tempt the viewer to look beyond the quaint innocent surface to what lies beneath.

In addition, I sometimes provide viewers with equipment to investigate the installation. For example, in *Welcome, a Durational Installation* I left flashlights on a table in the gallery for people to examine the dark corners of the crevices in the decaying wall. My goal is to use a person's curiosity to entice the viewer to step out side of his or her comfort zone and get close to the work and wonder what is happening.



Figure 5. *Welcome, A Durational Installation, 2008 (Day 4)*

III b. Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis in my art typically happens over time and with duration. It is also suggested by the illusion that the work is constantly evolving. Time is slowed down or sped up to bring attention to process of deterioration, or reveal what is hidden below. This was most apparent in different ways in both *Welcome, a Durational Installation*, and *Highlight and Exaggerate*. *Welcome* was physically transformed over the time period of the exhibition through tearing down the wall and showing this demolition to the viewer throughout the exhibition. *Highlight and Exaggerate* also changed form over time but did so in the video that was projected into the corner of the gallery.

Metamorphosis is also present in my work by extending the life of the art through changing the format. One frequent method I use to extend the life of my work is photography. In the installation *Welcome, a Durational Installation*, the process of destruction was documented and posted on an Internet blog. At times the images that come out of an installation can even become photographs that stand on their own.

III c. Process and Experimentation

Experimentation is the act of trying and playing with new materials and ideas. Within the context of my art practice it refers to creating a series of smaller works to find the tools, methods, and visual language to employ in the creation of larger works. Experimentation is a very important stage of my work. Through experimentation I work out my thoughts on singular ideas or materials. Results from such experiments become tools for future work or lead to more investigations.

During the process of designing *Home Sweet*, I did some experiments creating

windows. These studies were inspired by the rusted broken windows of the old abandoned Central Train Station in Buffalo, NY. My first test was to create a window out of cast iron by carving the shape of a four-pane window into a block of sand. Next I created a series of windows with cardboard, plastic, and glue. Based on previous experience I knew that white glue, depending upon its thickness, could end up looking translucent. I also knew that when glue dries on plastic, it releases fairly easily. Playing with the thickness of the glue and its drying time, I created a window reminiscent of the windows I saw at the train station. These experiments resulted in the three small windows of *Home Sweet*.



Figure 6. *Home Sweet*, 2009



Figure 7. *Home Sweet*, window detail, 2009

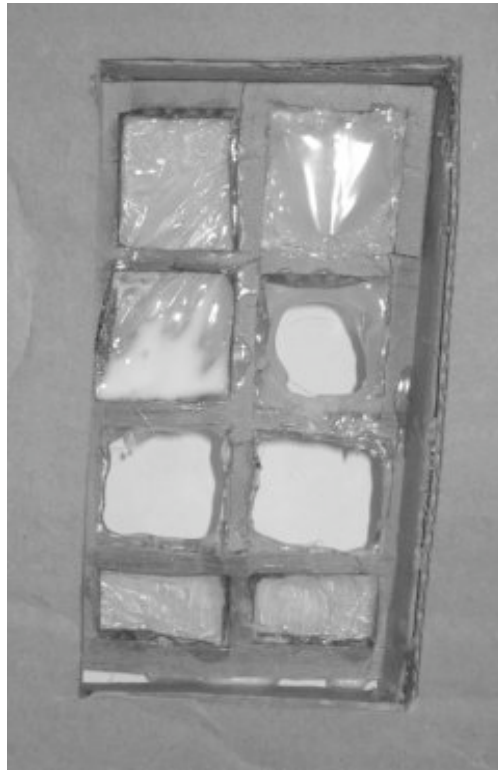


Figure 8. *Window Study*, 2008

III d. Surface

Another important aspect of my work is the exploration of surface. My work can be divided into the following relationships: 1) work that focuses on the exterior surface and hints at what is happening on the interior, 2) work that exposes the interior and hints at the surface, and 3) work that focuses on the relation between the façade and the interior by simultaneously showing both through layering. I will further explain these approaches when I detail the individual thesis works that I have created.

IV. Welcome, a Durational Installation

Welcome, a Durational Installation was a site-specific installation at Stony Brooks University's Lawrence Alloway Gallery. The installation evolved over a period of four days. Each day the installation was a different experience. This installation was my interpretation of what I intuitively felt was taking place at Stony Brook. *Welcome* was also my reaction to the institution to which I belong. Though it has its well-manicured grass and modern fountains, my campus apartment was deemed structurally unsound. I envisioned the gallery the installation inhabited was a blank white mask that covered up a problematic past. I built a false wall across the rear of the gallery. By using the rear wall, which is directly across from two window doors, the installation could be experienced after hours through the glass doors of the gallery. The setup allowed visitors of the library to see the act of the wall being torn down, enticing them to investigate the situation closely when the gallery was open.



Figure 9. *Welcome, a Durational Installation, 2008 (Day 1)*

Beginning with an empty room, I seemingly tore down the rear wall of the gallery. A

performative, yet combative act of violently striking a seemingly innocent wall with a crow bar. First, I created a dent in the wall.



Figure 10. *Welcome, a Durational Installation 2008, (Day 1)*

I struck it again until it became a hole, prying back the drywall to expose the lath skeleton of the false wall. The hole revealed lath encrusted with plaster and eerie dark hair from an unknown being. The act of tearing down was very much a performative act. There was no set time for the act, but library visitors who were around when the gallery was closed were able to witness the destruction through the doors of the gallery. Many of those viewers came back when the gallery was open to take a closer look at what they had seen taking place in the gallery after hours. *Welcome, a Durational Installation*, evolved over a period of four days. It began as a seemingly smooth white wall and ended as a large hole in the wall that revealed another space and much more.

The installation was intended to invoke the desire of destruction and curiosity.



Figure 11. *Welcome, a Durational Installation, 2008 (Day 2)*

Each night I revealed more of the internal structure, exposing more of the lath and the space behind the wall. For the duration of the show, visitors were encouraged to use the small flashlights that were casually placed on a table in the gallery to explore the wall and hidden spaces. My goal was to create an environment and provide the tools through which the viewer could investigate and come to their own conclusions about the installation. I wanted them to spend time looking at the small details, without being told how to react.

On day four, a threshold was revealed. It enticed the viewer to fully experience the once hidden space revealed over the previous days. The viewer entered a small narrow space, approximately five feet by twenty-seven feet. The space was lined with old architectural plans of Stony Brook University. The floor was covered with Styrofoam and plaster tiles that mimicked the tiled floor on the exterior of the artificial structure. When the viewer walked inside the space, the floor crunched under the pressure. At some points, it seemed like the floor might give way, letting the person fall through.



Figure 12. *Welcome, a Durational Installation, 2008 (Day 3)*



Figure 13. *Welcome, a Durational Installation, 2008 (Day 4)*

As an artist, I realize that seeing a hole in a wall in any other context would be just that, a hole in a wall, especially within an ever-expanding institution. By putting it in a gallery, I am elevating it from its everyday status, to a work of art. In *Welcome, a Durational Installation* I presented a situation in a manner that forced the viewer to

consider the circumstances, if even for a brief moment. It was as if I were holding the remote and a clip that would normally take a minute to play was being slowed down to three minutes. The viewer is was given an opportunity to see details that they normally would not see. In a situation like that, the details take precedence.



Figure 14. *Welcome, a Durational Installation, 2008 (Day 5)*



Figure 15. *Welcome, a Durational Installation, 2008, detail*



Figure 16. *Welcome, a Durational Installation, 2008, detail*

Welcome, a Durational Installation was a show full of contrasting elements. First, the postcard depicted a welcome mat, implying easy access, and a crow bar, suggesting something having to be pried open. Through the invitation, I wanted to suggest that the installation would be an experience in which the viewer had to actively participate. Second, the threshold was narrow to enforce the idea of something that is reluctant to allow entrance. The artificial wall mimicked the rest of the gallery, down to the black vinyl border. The point in which the wall meets the ceiling, informs the viewer that the wall was a new addition to the gallery. The wall was the façade that covered up that a problem never existed. Instead of taking action and fixing the situation, it was covered up with a white wall.

V. Seriously...MFA Thesis Exhibition

Seriously... was the capstone exhibition of my studies at Stony Brook University. It was a group exhibition in the University Art Gallery that showcased the work of the graduating MFA students. My contributions to this exhibition were *Home Sweet*, a self-contained installation, *Highlight and Exaggerate*, a video installation and *Light and Shadows*, a triptych of digital images. Each of these works is detailed below.

V a. Home Sweet

Vanity functions as self-protection, shielding a person from being utterly denuded and exposed to the world.⁵



Figure 17. *Home Sweet*, 2009

⁵ Claudia Benthien, *Skin on the Cultural Border Between Self and the World* (Published by Columbia University Press, 2002).pg22

Home Sweet was a self-contained installation within the group MFA thesis exhibition titled *Seriously*. *Home Sweet* was a quaint house, which stood six feet tall by four feet wide. The structure had white stucco walls with pink trim and a purple roof. It had five windows strategically placed to limit the amount of light allowed inside. Three out of five of these windows were small, round, four-pane openings. When placing the windows, I wanted to give the viewer only a glimpse of what inhabited the structure. Depending on where the viewer looked, they were presented with a different view of the interior. Thus, the window acted as a visual symbol, creating the idea of reluctance to let anything inside. On the other hand, the roof, slightly raised from the structure, let in the exterior atmosphere and hinted at the idea of vulnerability. The narrow white door floated six inches off the ground to add to the essence of being inaccessible. The door was ajar slightly, giving the illusion that one could possibly enter the space, but it had a handle on the interior with a chain lock to prevent it from opening further.



Figure 18. *Home Sweet*, 2009, detail

Home Sweet was intended to be a sweet innocent house with something dark and mysterious living inside. I wanted viewers to work to find out what inhabited the interior by looking in every window and coming up with a conclusion for him or herself. However, I realized that not everyone was going to do this or be able to see the interior for various reasons. Some viewers simply did not want to, while others with poor eyesight could not see anything, and some were afraid of what might happen. Therefore, I wanted to know if it would make a difference if the viewer could see more of the interior space. How would seeing more of the interior space change the conversation? Would the viewer's interaction with the structure change?

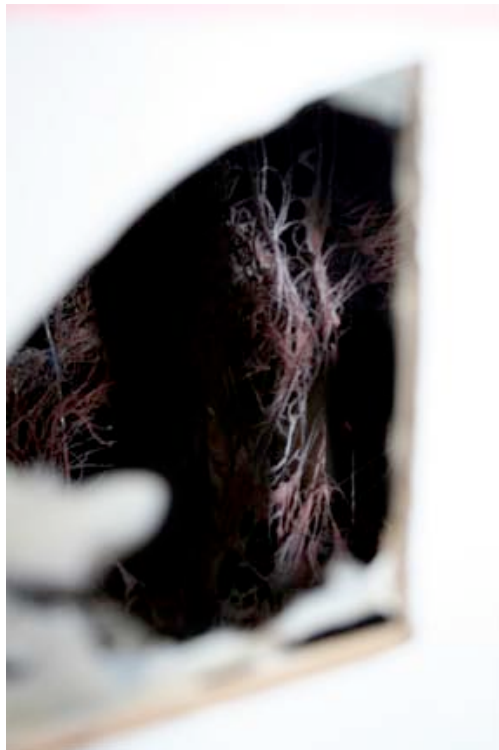


Figure 19. *Home Sweet*, 2009, detail

On the last day of the thesis show, I took the lock off the door and spent the entire time in the gallery. I learned a few things while observing the visitors that day. The average viewer was still hesitant about approaching the structure even with the door open. Yet others tried to open the door even further, which is interesting due to the many signs telling visitors not to touch the work. The result of having the door unlocked was that viewer spent less time with the structure.

V b. Highlight and Exaggerate

Highlight and Exaggerate was a site-specific video installation, which highlighted the architectural elements of a corner in the gallery. It was comprised of two hours of sequential moving still images of a white wall that bubbles, oozes, and bursts into flames during the period of two hours. The sequence was looped, and projected on the shades of the University Art Gallery.

The purpose of the installation was to draw the viewer's attention to a part of the gallery that normally not used. By animating the corner with organic textures, the structure of the gallery became a crude body that deteriorated over time, leaving a gaping void. The original time of *Highlight and Exaggerate* was thirty minutes. I slowed the video down until it appeared to hardly move. I wanted the image-based installation to be treated as an object that slowly decomposed over time.

Each viewer had a different experience, depending on when he or she saw the work, how much time they spend with it, and how often they visited it. The typical viewer only saw a few minutes of the projection, while others saw the projection on

multiple occasions and were able to form their own conclusions about what was happening.



Figure 20. *Highlight and Exaggerate*, 2009, video still



Figure 21. *Highlight and Exaggerate*, 2009, installation video still



Figure 22. *Highlight and Exaggerate*, 2009, installation video still



Figure 23. *Highlight and Exaggerate*, 2009, installation video still

The thoughts behind *Highlight and Exaggerate* are similar to ideas explored by Douglass Gordon and Jennifer Steinkamp. For example, in 1993 Douglass Gordon created *24 Hour Psycho*. He took Alfred Hitchcock's film *Psycho* and slowed it down to last 24 hours for a single viewing. He said he thought it would be "interesting for someone to imagine what was happening in the gallery right then, at that moment in time when they have no access to the work."⁶ *Highlight and Exaggerate* uses a similar strategy; it shifts time and exaggerates small moments that would usually go unnoticed. *Highlight and Exaggerate* is also similar to Jennifer Steinkamp's video installations that highlight architectural elements of existing spaces.

V c. Lights and Shadows

Lights and Shadows is a triptych of digital photographs of both a domestic and a psychological space. When hung in the gallery the series was labeled A, B and C. I will begin with image A that depicts an ordinary room. It is also the introduction for images B and C. Images B and C present psychological spaces that convey emotions of depression and recovery. The scene in all three images depicts a window in a dark, mysterious room. The room is bare except for a simple wooden chair and the striped wallpaper holding the chair prisoner in the strange room.

⁶ Jan Debbaut, Marente Blomheuvel, Stedelijk, Douglas Gordon, *Kidnapping* (Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1998).



Figure 24. *Lights and Shadows, 2009, B, A, C*

Image A has the addition of a lamp that sat on a small round table. Even though the images are of the same room, they are very different from each other. Image A is the only image in which the lamp and table plays a part in the scene. The lamp in image A is not on, heightening the idea of anxiety and fear of the scene.

The simple wooden chair in the space remains in the dark. Its presence in the images suggests a main character. It also is an entry point for the viewer to take part in the scene. The back of the chair faces the viewer, ignoring the viewer and creating an intimate personal space. The window is a threshold, which divides the emotional interior mind from the exterior worlds of reality. The window lets in the light from the outside, symbolizing hope in spite of the darkness. The corner is a very important component in the image, as it symbolizes a person withdrawing into himself or herself and ignoring reality. According to Gaston Bachelard, “every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves is a

symbol of solitude for the imagination.”⁷

Image B depicts an image of total despair, and depression. The viewer is looking at the scene, which is framed by darkness. The chair is on its side, tipped against a wall in a dark mold- like substance. The walls in Image B play an important role in that image. The two walls are collapsing inward creating a tight space. The light from the window heightens the emotions of the moment. The floor is severely warped, forcing the chair to sit on an incline.

In Image C, there is some hope – this scene is not as dramatic and dour as the previous one. The chair has been tipped over, signaling the character has stepped off the stage. Bright light and energy sweep through, shedding light on a decayed room. The scene was intended to symbolize that the character was in the process of recovering, with the possibility of returning to despair.

⁷ Gaston Bachelard, M. Jolas, John R. Stilgoe. The Poetics of Space: the Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places. Beacon Press, 1994.
pg 136

VI. Conclusion

As this phase in my artistic journey comes to an end, I look forward to the future and where my art will take me. Working toward my MFA degree has been challenging. There have been obstacles, but I am very proud that no matter what the situation, I have been able to create.

Moving forward, I want to continue to work with the ideas of architecture as body and interior verses exterior space. As it may take some time to find opportunities to physically transform large spaces, over time, like I have done at Stony Brook, I see myself using video to explore these ideas in the near future. Working with video will allow me to suggest transformations of space much as I did with Highlight and Exaggerate, but will not incur the expense of building materials. Still, working photographically may be the most practical way of making and exhibiting work once I leave school. Through this medium, I can still create psychological spaces, but on a small scale. These images can be entered into shows and shipped easily. Hopefully, through my images I can convey the types of spatial and psychological transformations I eventually hope to create in full-blown installations in the not so distant future.

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