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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

A Nomad With Every Thing

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Joshua Michael Smith

June 2016

Thesis Committee:
Professor Jim Isermann, Chairperson
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Professor Charles Long

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Joshua Michael Smith
2016

The Thesis of Joshua Michael Smith is approved:

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The following is an incomplete list of the questions that I feel are currently interesting and may be productive:

- How do the things that I make expand or tickle not only my own perception but that of others who encounter the works?
- What is the responsibility of the viewer?
- Is the awareness of history with its effects, instability and seemingly infinite capacity to morph a destabilizing force in the process of making something “new”? Is this a tool?
- Has thought and perception evolved, prompted by the ever expanding image based cultural phenomenon, to the point that we are alienated from all physical things? Or have we always evaluated the world in a similar way and are confronting our alienation anew because of the luxury’s of time and distance from the struggle for survival?
- Are the constructs of word and image the same equally delightful and problematic devices, both acting as the shim between experience and our body.
- What lies behind the language that expresses our consciousness?

For many years, from when I was very young, while I would drift off to sleep I would often stop at an in-between place flanked by wakefulness and the other. The place I would stop was a space, which was both large and small. It was comfortable, infinitely flexible, and able to vacillate in scale from close and tidy to a large billowing almost unknowable toroidal form. The space was thoughtful, it was thought, and it felt in every way like rubbing two pieces of silk between your pointer finger and thumb. To this day I can recall it in its multiplicity and when I do I experience what feels like a radiant draping chain extending from the middle of my forehead to center of my occipital bone at the rear of my skull.



Image 1:

Pointy stick

Setting

If I poked you with this crudely pointed stick would the moment not have the makings of a comedy? If I stabbed would I be a savage? If I marked the soil would I be an artist? This pointed stick is a signifier for so many things. It is a tool, a phallus, comical now, but related to the spear that killed the mammoth, to a drawing implement used in the dirt on the floor of a cave before, I imagine, there was comedy. It also represents viciousness and a dominating way that has evolved into the world we live in. This stick plucked from the wilds whittled with my thumbnail and a sharp rock is comical because it is the tool version of our vestigial tail.

I do not mourn the loss of a tail any more than I do the necessity to hunt and gather and die by the age of thirty-five or forty. What I mourn is a diminished sensitivity to my surroundings, less awareness, less vibrance. I suspect that before we had a word for every thing those things were more, larger in our mind.

I suspect that the convenience of language throws a tarp over what it signifies. And blinds us to intricacies that would and could soften our hearts.

In an effort to understand the nature of my own work as a maker in a broader context, I want to unhinge my own objects from their place of contemplation and bring them into a space of exploratory potential. In this adventure I want to move away from ideas of a traditional human vs. world scale and towards an understanding of consciousness plus everything else. In this act of discovery I will attempt to understand not only what I make but what to make of what I make; to do this I will deploy anthropologist Tim Ingold's taskscape, peer towards cultural and linguistic anthropologist Keith H. Basso's interpretation of the Western Apache, and stand beside philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's nomad as the world slides by.

Precedent for a Dialectic of and for the Blurry

While teaching, Gregory Bateson, one of the forefathers of cybernetics, confronted a group of his graduate students with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's tautological question of whether they thought that a blind person's cane was a part of that person's body.ⁱ It was conclude that yes in fact the cane was an essential element of the body, which allowed for a more complete interaction with, and illumination of the world around. This cyborg or post-human notion of body/tool integration was a radical shift in perspective, allowing new forms to be recognized in conceptual and physical space. This intellectual leap came at a

time when the atom and its vast power had truly shoved us through a door to a permanent existential ungrounding. The era of the Kantian sublime has come to an end and this new world no longer affords the luxury of a simple scalar relation that can be rationally appraised. We now exist in a spectrum of possibility with our body as only a referent opposed to the antiquated absolute.

During this time philosophy was also fermenting ideas unmooring the certitude of language. Jacques Derrida, a proponent of a philosophical deconstruction, was engaged in a reappraisal of normative cultural tropes. One of the things he focused on was the notion that language represented a *Thing* but was not the *Thing*, which really means that it (the word) is a new *Thing* unto its own. Derrida's influence informs my view that language is a highly suspicious system of metaphor, which allows for "Truths to be spoken". I become uncomfortable when language is used to highlight differences or minimize the same to suite whomever's want, and I must always remind myself of the multivocality of my vocabulary. Language is like statistics, incredibly useful to communicate but wholly flexible and intended to satisfy the needs of those who deploy it.

The scholar and philosopher Michel de Certeau's defining of 'spaces' and 'places' acts to solidify my understanding of them as being socially constructed entities that fall prey to the tricks, traps and trappings of metaphorical language. Certeau's says, "*space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections*

of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it.” and he states that “*place is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationship of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place).*”(Certeau, 117-118) The strangeness of place and space is that they seem to be in a binary relationship, which can switch. Headed toward the microscopic- a place exists inside of a greater space but inside of that place is another space which can be divided to innumerable dominant and subjected places and space; then headed in the opposite direction toward the macroscopic and beyond- all *places* exist within *space*, but the instant I quantify my understanding of that truth the *all encompassing space* starts to strain under its title and becomes a place...which exists in space. The fact that neither of these words will submit to the other but can be utilized with a certain degree of specificity is both fascinating and destabilizing. This kind of silly logic brings to mind the simple and often dismissed optical illusion, which can be a distraction from reality or, as I prefer to think, a tool that acts to expose the flexibility of perception.

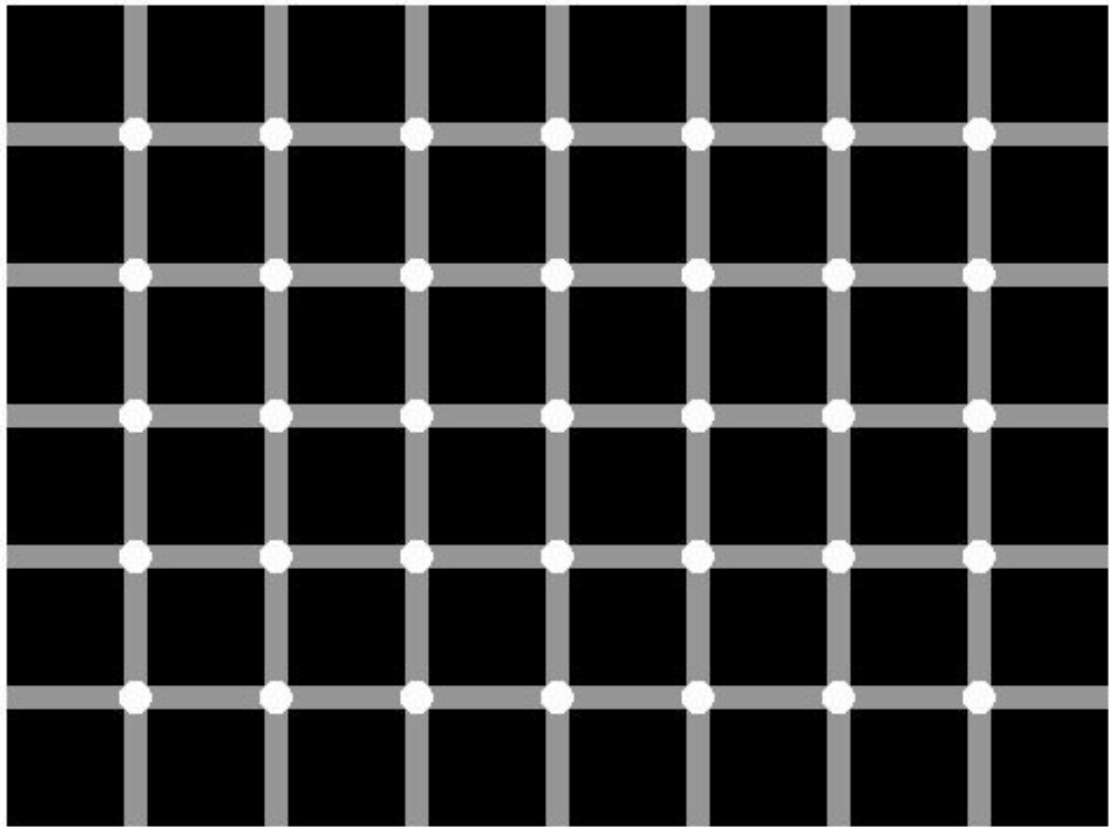


Image 2:

scintillating grid illusion

(notice how the white circle at the intersection you are focused on remains white while other intersections in the periphery of your vision become filled with a black dot)

If ideas of the cyborg tell us that the body can be anything outside of our consciousness, which enhances or expands our reach and perception, language is only a flexible metaphorical construct, and place and space manifest as a linguistic Ouroboros what is the usefulness of this departure from the shores of certainty? How can the language of place and space help to decode or access the endeavors of others, can we see things unmoored from language and what can that expose about how we relate to and use our own and other bodies?

Tim Ingold- Anthropologist:

While illuminating the groundwork for his idea of the taskscape, Ingold exposes the notion of landscape as a moment represented. And the moment of the landscape when contrasted with the notion of the fully animate taskscape becomes nothing but a photograph, a framed image, which discounts the pluralistic interplay of all the characters represented. Ingold argues that what we see is the landscape while what we hear is the taskscape. To illustrate his point about the animated nature of what populates the landscape and how it insists on being taskscape, Ingold narrates the view of a scene through a vast swath of time that shows plants moving in growth, rocks eroding, the earth heaving and glaciers sliding by. (Ingold, 162-164) It is this uncoupling from our singular perspective that allows for an understanding of objects and sites as having the capacity to act. Ingold goes on with this idea of time and temporality while also further entangling animate and inanimate. *"I have argued elsewhere, life is 'a name for what is going on in the generative field within which organic forms are located and "held in place"' (Ingold 1990: 215). That generative field is constituted by the totality of organism-environment relations, and the activities of organisms are moments of its unfolding. Indeed once we think of the world in this way, as a total movement of becoming which builds itself into the forms we see, and in which each form takes shape in continuous relation to those around it, then the distinction between the animate and the inanimate seems to dissolve. The world itself takes on the character of an organism, and the movements of*

animals - including those of us human beings - are parts or aspects of its life-process (Lovelock 1979). This means that in dwelling in the world, we do not act upon it, or do things to it; rather we move along with it. Our actions do not transform the world, they are part and parcel of the world's transforming itself. And that is just another way of saying that they belong to time.”(Ingold, 164)

The way in which Ingold links us to the world forces a reappraisal of our understanding of not only landscape but of other bodies: animate bodies, inanimate bodies, corporeal bodies and incorporeal bodies. It is with a new sensitivity to the connectedness of things that I look out onto the world and contemplate the fixedness of my perception. The article that fixes my understanding would be the words that I attempt to couch things in. In Ingold's world, an object is an object in name only. Every thing is divisible into an active new thing and all things actually disperse or coalesce in the blurring taskscape depending on the focus of the one exerting the gaze. The term multivocal suddenly seems to be short of effect, to not be powerful enough to describe the truly infinite plurality of what is.

Keith H. Basso- cultural and linguistic anthropologist:

When writing of places Basso states “As natural "reflectors" that return awareness to the source from which it springs, places also provide points from which to look out on life, to grasp one's position in the order of things, to contemplate events from somewhere in particular. Human constructions par

excellence, places consist in what gets made of them-in anything and everything they are taken to be-and their disembodied voices, immanent though inaudible, are merely those of people speaking silently to themselves."(Basso, 56) This directly addresses the multivocality of site, space and place, but I would also like to complicate Basso's statement by asserting that objects have the capacity to embody or occupy the conceptual space of *Place* in Basso's labeling as "reflector". As Ingold utilized geologic time to help illuminate our understanding of things thought to be inanimate as animate I would like to slide the scale of scale and identify the similarity to site/place formation and to object formation. Calling to mind something like Charles and Ray Eames' film *Powers of Ten* we can quickly gaze upon the earth as easily as we can hold a stone in our hand or a ceramic cup to our lips. In the same way that Ingold's fast forward metaphor highlights our naturally limited relation to time an acknowledgment of scale as wholly subjective is imperative to understand that a site is not only a landmark in the landscape, but a temporally located phenomena in Ingold's *Taskscape*. I would like to offer a moment of speculation in which an object (a cup, sculpture, feather, ect.) is a thing as a hill or a nucleus is a thing and these Things act as "reflectors" showing us not only themselves but also something of ourselves.

Basso quotes Dudley Paterson, a western Apache who lived in Cibecue Arizona, as saying that "*wisdom sits in places*"(Basso, 67). This seemingly simple statement blossoms under gentle prodding. The overarching feeling given by the description of wisdom sitting is that it sits like water to be drunk the second

sensation is that it sits in waiting like a thing to be picked up, learned and returned and a third interpretation is that it is a singular body composed or formed by haptic experience, presence and locality. Whichever of these or other metaphors most aptly captures the potential for Basso's interpretation of the Western Apache's wisdom it would seem that the message is clear; going to the place and being there is primary, but its not only going to one place but to many places and building a sensitivity to the terrain, flora, fauna and ones own body in relation to these things.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari- Philosophers:

The nomad sits while the smooth world, like the smooth mind of the wise Western Apache, slides by. It is a strange thing to see the same world differently through the shifting of words. It makes me almost believe in magic or some form of simple incantation driven shamanism. When a *problem* can be transformed into a productive *opportunity* with an utterance, things take on a shimmering quality and I am excited by possibility.

In the book *A Thousand Plateaux* Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari explore the notion of the nomad. *"The nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to the another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen, or not well localized. But the nomad goes from point to point, only as a consequence and as a factual necessity; in principle, points for him are relays along a trajectory.[...]"*

“ The nomad, nomad space, is localized and not delimited. What is both limited and limiting is striated space, the relative global; it is limited in its parts, which are assigned constant directions, are oriented in relation to one another, divisible by boundaries, and can interlink; what is limiting (limes or wall, and no longer boundary) is this aggregate in relation to the smooth space it ‘contains’, whose growth it slows or prevents, and which it restricts or places outside. Even when the nomad sustains its effects, he does not belong to this relative global, where one passes from one point to another, from one region to another. Rather, he is in a local absolute, an absolute that is manifested locally, and engendered in a series of local operations of varying orientations: desert, steppe, ice, sea.[...]”(Deleuze, Guattari, 382)

In this idea of the nomad I see links to Ingold’s taskscape and Basso’s wisdom but I also see an indictment of language and a destabilization of the singular body. The very structure of our western existence seems to keep the migrant as the normative state inhabited by the masses. The migrant moves but is always contained by a societal or linguistic structure that disallows holism. To call a word a nomad is a permissive act, as is the labeling of an object or site as nomad. The idea of the nomad can be applied to our bodies or any number of other things that inhabit our taskscape. And to meditate on these changeable and blurry manifestations in a multitude of settings seems to offer a kind of wisdom about how we can productively interact with these strange bodies in this strange space that we inhabit.

**A Moments Understanding of
The Permanent Dilemma of Misunderstanding**

Wisdom does sit in places, but I would define place as any local space where we rest our gaze. Be it on a grain of sand, the space between, a bronze statuary or a tree between two hills. And I would say that the way to that wisdom is to become blurry in the taskscape, allowing yourself to mix with what is around you.

To locate our very gaze as having the power to create new beings whose transitory lives are unbound from our own perception is a strangeness that privileges a new ambiguity, which is contrary to our basest survival instincts however, I believe this is the reality of the world we live in. Survival necessitates an essentialist viewing of the world. Danger, safety, food, predator and prey all must be located and identified without delay. The luxury of our current state allows us to move past, potentially, epiphenomenal responses to the surrounding world. I believe that we address our own bodies, objects and space with the same expectations; that they will serve us. And I believe that the same logic that allowed for the cane to be considered a part of the body can be applied to our relationship with objects, spaces and everything addressed by our conscience mind, but that we need to not think of the cane as in service but simply of us.

A Simple Purpose

The simple truth is that I make to discover what I do not know. The second truth is that I strive to make shaky ambiguous things, whose imbalance and openness exemplify my belief in an unstable world. The third truth is that, to me, the things that I make, once constructed, seem out of time, like words spoken softly that hang strangely in the air accruing more meaning the longer they stay aloft.

I know that I must rely on language to easily achieve my daily goals; this however is not done without some degree of animosity. I view language with the specific distain one holds for an unrepentant liar. This is the reason I relish the ambiguous object, which defies a name. Something that is almost *this* and almost *that* leads to new places and because it is not *this* and not *that* it is a new *thing*, which exists for a novel instant outside of language.

The primary source, the original, the doing, the looking, and the seeing; all this sounds like romantic madness inspired by the aura of things, but it is what I look for in not only my own work but in that of others and the world. I seek this novelty not solely as an escape from the mundane but as a unique component of life, which I believe teaches empathy and has the ability to convey wisdom.

My hope is that I can make items that have a capacity to act, objects that shimmer with possibility under scrutiny, and things that enhance our perception after our backs have been turned to them.

Addendum:

It's hard to know what to share and what to hold back and harder still to know anything. But I suppose this paper is a tool. It's a way for me to point, without grunting, as precisely as I can. It's a rough map, which will fade over the years but hopefully remain legible enough to mark a path that was traveled.

The reason for this addendum is to allow space for a nebulous pairing of texts, which I have been flailing through and around while writing this paper and making work this past year. The first text is *The Inhuman* by French philosopher and sociologist Jean-Francois Lyotard and the second text is *Food of the Gods* by ethnobotanist and psychedelic luminary Terence McKenna. Both were published within just a few years of the other Lyotards' in 1988 and McKennas' in 1992. My belief is that these two texts carry a deep and fundamental similarity, despite their apparent divergent topics, authors, and audience.

Both texts allude to an impending doom for our planet and us and attempt to offer a way that does not wholly avert disaster but provides a kind of method for carrying on. This method culminates in both with the realization that our bodies are evolving and that at some point we will need to leave them behind. The important thing though is that both authors are also pointing to a way for us now that acknowledges a need for an open existence that makes way for others. And both are championing a sensitive existence that for Lyotard is exemplified as bearing or being *witness* and *transformer* and for McKenna is exemplified as

participating in an *Archaic revival* or being and becoming part of a *partnership society*.

Lyotard while discussing what he terms “another blow to human narcissism” states that: *“Freud already listed three famous ones: man is not the center of the cosmos (Copernicus), is not the first living creature (Darwin), is not the master of meaning (Freud himself). Through contemporary techno-science, s/he learns that s/he does not have the monopoly of mind, that is of complexification, but that complexification is not inscribed as a destiny in matter, but as possible, and that it takes place, at random, but intelligibly, well before him/herself... And that thus s/he must not consider him/herself as an origin or as a result, but as a transformer ensuring, through techno-science, arts, economic development, cultures and the new memorization they involve, a supplement of complexity in the universe.”*(Lyotard, 45) So when we see ourselves as this supplement or as another of the cogs in the great machine we are relieved of some of our responsibility or maybe our guilt and allowed to revel in our new place as creators of complexity.

And finally I want to use the words of Terrance McKenna who points to something that I am intrinsically bound. He speaks of language as a powerful thing that forms all. I would like to complicate or maybe insinuate the visual language of art into your mind as this quote is read. So let art and language blur. *“The twentieth-century linguistic revolution,” says Boston University*

anthropologist Misia Landau, “is the recognition that language is not merely a device for communicating ideas about the world, but rather a tool for bringing the world into existence in the first place. Reality is not simply ‘experienced’ or ‘reflected’ in language, but instead is actually produced by language.”

From the point of view of the psychedelic shaman, the world appears to be more in the nature of an utterance or a tale than in any way related to the leptons and baryons or charge and spin that our high priests, the physicists, speak of. For the shaman, the cosmos is a tale that becomes true as it is told and as it tells itself. This perspective implies that human imagination can seize the tiller of being in the world. Freedom, personal responsibility, and a humbling awareness of the true size and intelligence of the world combine in this point of view to make it a fitting basis for living an authentic neo-Archaic life. A reverence for and an immersion in the powers of language and communication are the basis of the shamanic path.”(McKenna, 7)

Once I walked a long distance in the night, in the desert, with two friends. We joked, laughed, were quiet, stumbled, talked about what we thought, let our eyes tell us where to go even though we were hardly able to see a thing by the light of the stars, and importantly we moved without ego, as a unit, and without a destination. When we stopped and sat it was on a large flatish rock that had been under the same stars for so long it seemed to have been worn down by them. We sat for a good while enjoying the warmth of the stone beneath us and continuing to lapse in and out of conversation. There were shadows cast by the light of the star, there was the call of distant and near coyotes, and there was a gentle stirring at the center of the stone on which we sat. The thing that moves in the dark, which you think you see, provokes strange sensations. The evolution of our optics to give us information in not only a broad spectrum of light and color also allows us to see with little light, to detect more than see. The thing we detected was a small scorpion. It had either been sitting on the stone before our arrival or stealthily joined us. It stayed and we left to walk, quiet now for a bit, solemn in the presence of the desert.



Image 3:

still life
wood, cardboard
73"x100"x20"
2015



Image 4:

thinness
plywood, soil, enamel paints
14"x12"x4"
2013



Image 5:

HA-CHA
constructed plywood tubing, flashe vinyl paint
69"x12"x18"
2014
21



Image 6:

end of running line

constructed plywood tubing, wood, cardboard, plaster, acrylic paint

60"x64"x66"

2013

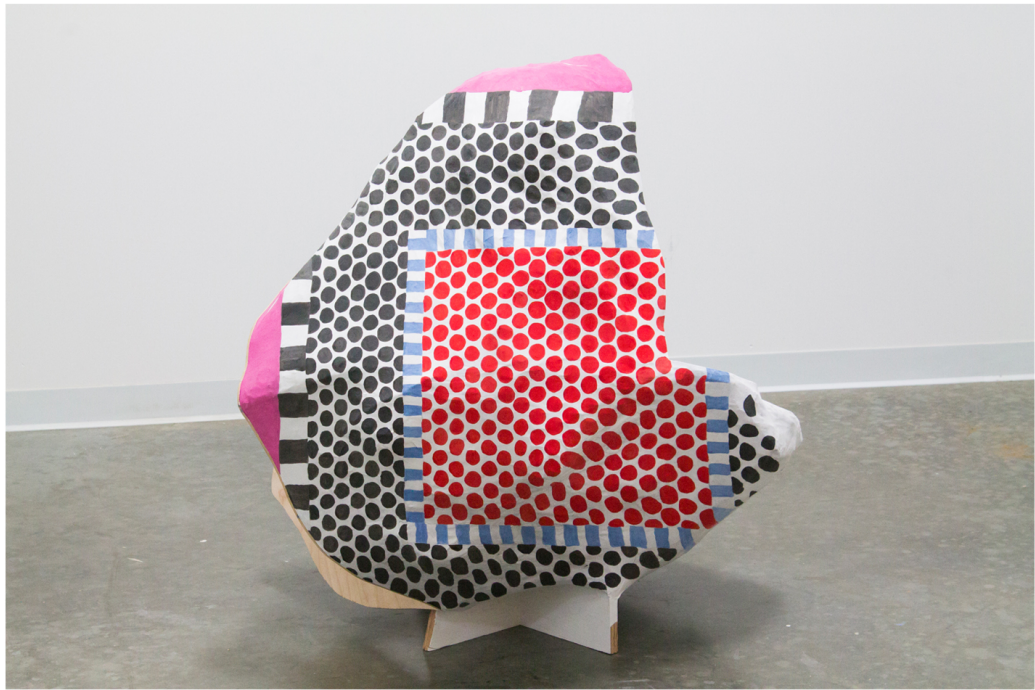


Image 7:

nomad

milk paint on paper mache, wood, wire, foil, cardboard

38"x36"x38"

2015

23



Image 8:

side pony
paint, wood, wire, cardboard
38 "x36"x38"
2015



Image 9:

nomad

plywood, dry erase panel, steel, paper pulp, wood, color-aid paper stack, salt encrusted
stone

46"x94"x46"

2015



Image 10:

doing/done

(Kinesthetic Synesthesia)

Archival inkjet on vinyl, walnut frame

37"x57"

2016



Image 11:

dummy

jersey knit cotton, hydrocal, wood, steel, string, stone

54"x37"x44"

2015



Image 12:

screen
cut pvc, wood, steel, clay, gold leaf
85" x 60" x 65"
2016



Image 13:

(walnut) screen
walnut, clay
49"x49"x13"
2016



Image 14:

The Oracle

wood, vinyl pigment print, hydrocal, aqua resin, cast concrete
104"x58"x18"

ⁱ A Quotation of a Reference from N. Katherine Hayles, *How we became Posthuman* (The University of Chicago Press, 1999) - "Gregory Bateson brought the point home when he puzzled his graduate students with a question koan like in its simplicity, asking if a blind man's cane is part of the man." "1. See Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 251, for an interpretation of the question. "It is not communicationally meaningful to ask whether the blind man's stick or the scientist's microscope are 'parts' of the men who use them. Both stick and microscope are important pathways of communication and, as such, are parts of the network in which we are interested; but no boundary line-e. g., halfway up the stick-can be relevant in a description of the topology of this net."

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