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### Publication Date

2019

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

A Long Away

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Tanner Samuel Jervois Gilliland-Swetland

Committee in charge:

Professor Anya Gallaccio, Chair  
Professor Amy Adler  
Professor Teddy Cruz  
Professor Cathy Gere

2019

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Chair

University of California San Diego  
2019

## DEDICATION

To my family, past, present, and future.

To my committee.

To my cohort.

To my friends.

To the Earth and all the things that depend on it.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Long Away

by

Tanner Samuel Jervois Gilliland-Swetland

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2019

Professor Anya Gallaccio, Chair

Tools, devices that change the way one mediates the world, unlock new opportunities for experiences. My recent work references tools as both an entry-point for multi-sensory generative interactions and as a formal aesthetic rooted in craft, family heirlooms, and agrarianism. Through the act of making, relationships between materials and maker are formed and deeper



understandings of both technique and the histories of the forms and materials employed may emerge. These sculptures are a product of research and investigation, they are imperfect, changing with time, interaction, and use. Hints of whimsy and absurdity in the sculpture's designs mesh to challenge narratives of land use and notions of utilitarianism.

## INTRODUCTION

I have realized quite recently that I find it difficult to articulate concisely the vast scope of interests and thoughts that blend together while I am conceptualizing and rendering my work. This text, as a compilation of musings attempts to provide some amount of clarity to the goings-on in my mind as they relate in this specific body of work through the use of anecdotes, historical and art historical references, metaphors, and my personal philosophy. What will be described is not an exhaustive explanatory look into how I conceptualize the way I relate to my art, which is not fixed but instead is perpetually growing with parts left behind perhaps to be rediscovered the way one might find a long-forgotten toy from childhood while cleaning out a garage at a family home. So, perhaps toys and tools might be a good place to begin.

A toy is a tool primarily for amusement, often acting as a medium through which imagination can project constructed temporary realities on top of the physical reality of the user, the site(s) and its other occupants, and the toy itself. A child's push toy that bobbles and makes a rattling noise can be, and in my own experiences from childhood has been, a fantastical car, lawnmower, train, and so many other tools that I would see around me. A toy can also be some machine that does not exist, an aspirational object, but more likely that toy is a tool for socialization of a child. Toys, like other tools often become anachronisms, as their need diminishes over time, or in the era of mass-production, replacing parts becomes a greater expense and effort than purchasing anew; but some tools survive to be passed between generations as heirlooms. Exchanged between friends, family, collectors, or passed from teacher to student. This happens when the tool offers something more than a newer alternative, or its use exceeds its redundancy. The utility of tools can shift from objects facilitating physical actions to objects facilitating actions of contemplation or facilitating both. For example, the Sheffield steel

in a chisel that is over a century old can produce a cutting-edge superior to most newer equivalents, assuming one takes the time to maintain it and hone it. But besides quality, a tool may carry with it its history, the wear on the handle and the sentimentality that the tool conjures. This is not to say that sentimentality brought about by an object is necessarily good, neither is it necessarily bad. A tool may act as a bridge to the imagination of one's past, a reaffirmation of one's belief structures, a locus for placing oneself historically, or a calling to question of one's socialization and the narratives shaped in relation to that tool and the contexts in which one might expect to find such a tool, among other things.

The sculptures that make up this body of work and the pieces that immediately led up to this point in my practice call upon a visual vocabulary of tools, but are probably most of all a product of critical inquiry into specific narratives promulgated by the various branches of my family and the various histories within which these narratives have played out or to which they are tangential. These familial experiences are fairly regional and personal but may still be relatable as metaphors. These regions are more or less summed up into three geographies in my thoughts. The first of these is the urban conurbation of Southern California, where I for the most part grew up and still live. Second among them is the space of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland, which is the area from which my mother comes and is where almost all of her family resides. It is where the family home is and is where I have spent many summers and a few winters. Third is the Midwest of America, specifically, Nebraska, which is where my father comes from and where his family largely resides. All of these regions have complex histories that are responsible for shaping the areas into what they are now. These histories include, but by no means are limited to experiences of ingenuity, care and passion, optimism, but also violence, colonization, displacement, and issues of class (in both the American sense of class based on a

hierarchy of wealth, and in the British sense of class based on a social hierarchy). Through my work, therefore, I hope that the viewer may also question their own positionality and relationships within larger historical, economic, agricultural, material, and social systems.

## MATERIALITY AND FORM

When conceptualizing a work, the role of the materials in creating content is one of the most important things for me. Or perhaps it is more appropriate to say that the use of specific materials to hint at histories, memories, anecdotes, and cultural associations is one of the driving factors for the decisions I make in employing particular materials. The other major factor is the practicality of the material in relation to its intended use functionally and aesthetically within the sculpture. I like the idea that the materials used in relation to each other and the form language employed can become an accumulation of narratives, a palimpsest that reveals fragments of stories in a non-linear chronology without ever giving everything, like the mass of names carved into a tree trunk along a popular trail.

I think about honesty in relation to the way I use materials and the way I make. There is no attempt to try to hide a material being used, my work is not about tricking the viewer into believing that something was made in a way that it was not. By not trying to cover up the inconsistencies of the materials that are both naturally occurring and byproducts of my craftsmanship one can find the marks of the maker left behind and the narrative of making, each piece is a receptacle for an individual and unique experience for myself as the maker. In my sketches there are often multiple iterations of each sculpture, with the end version reacting to the materials and challenges that arise during making. I often find myself trying to anticipate and render mechanical components, based on previous trial and error as well as references from encounters I have had both internal and external to my making practice. For the viewer there may be an experience with me as the maker by proxy, as well as an experience with themselves and what it is they project onto the work.

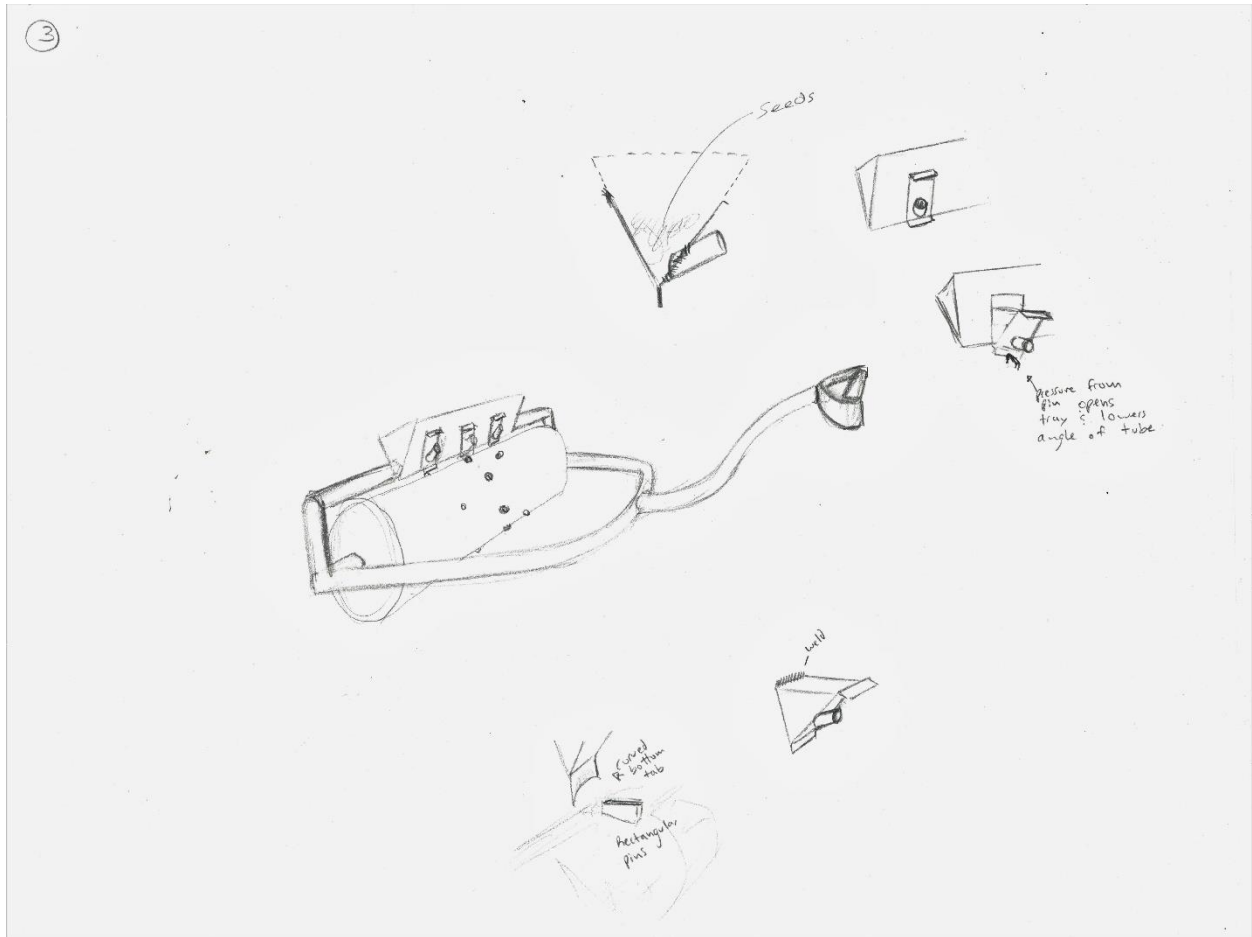


Figure 1: No. 3 (concept sketch), pencil on paper, 2019.

The material and the sculptures are imperfect, as a colleague of mine points out, they are Sisyphean, they do not always work or work well from a functional utilitarian perspective, in fact they are designed to disassemble as rust and rot set in overtime. The specific forms to which this body of work most closely relates are pieces of agricultural equipment. I have used salvaged sections, all from a single tree, as the base from which each sculpture is built. Harry C. Ramsower's book *Handy Farm Equipment And How To Use It* discusses land rollers, which aesthetically are probably the most similar to many of the sculptures in this body of work. Ramsower talks about making simple land rollers by using large logs that can be pulled to flatten earth, and also how to improve on these basic designs by adding mechanical components

(Ramsower, 184). The sculptures I have created are, when placed in contrast to their utilitarian reference points, absurdly dysfunctional. Ramsower provides a table listing the sizes and weights of steel and iron tube rollers with the minimum increments listed being length of 6 ft., 24 in. in diameter, and 485 lbs., while also stating that “a roller must be of large diameter and of course it must be heavy” (Ramsower, 186). In size and weight alone my works would be miniatures if they were to be compared for use, which is not even to discuss some of the impracticality of my rigging, axles, and handle bars.

Function in this sense is not the end goal, a sculpture that resembles a tiller is not a tiller. A viewer who pushes the sculpture and discovers that it is in fact poorly suited as a functioning tiller might then pose the question, *why did they expect it to function like the tool with which they are familiar?* Additionally, they might ask themselves, *why would they have wanted it to be a functioning tiller anyway?* The sculpture is likely to be located within a space that does not necessitate tilling. So, then, *what does the space necessitate, and what tools already exist for that space? How does the viewer relate to these spaces and tools, and why?* The interaction with the sculptures is in this way primarily a mechanism to drive contemplation.

## CYPRESS

When I was about five years old my parents purchased a house together, it was new construction, with a backyard of mud and debris. Since then the interior has been redecorated and remodeled piecemeal many times over, as has the backyard. However, the things that have remained the same are the trees. Certainly they have grown, and some have been removed, but many are still there. Among them are maybe a dozen Mediterranean Cypresses. These are the trees often imagined lining Tuscan country roads. Depending on which parent I ask you will hear a different account of the planting of these trees, and it is perhaps worth noting that my parents no longer live together. In my lifetime I have watched these trees grow and mature from young trees no more than a foot or two tall to towering far above the houses that surround them. Just as I have watched them grow, and as they came to provide privacy and shelter from the wind, they are now failing incrementally. One by one, each of these trees is dying. You can see the sickness in many of them, two already have had to be removed and one just dropped the top of its crown. Filled with termites and water-starved, they are iconic of the era of a more water-needy and hopefully water-wise California that has been fueled by urban growth and agricultural planting in regions that in decades past had been deemed too arid for such activities.

In watching this gradual failure, I am coming to recognize the affect of their slow passing and by extension the demise of the locus for larger memories I associate with the property and family. I am reminded of the account of the felling of the Prometheus bristlecone specimen given in *American Canopy: Trees, Forests, and the Making of a Nation* by Eric Rutkow, how a tree can be a receptacle for records, but how it also exists far outside the temporal and cognitive paradigms of humans. The Prometheus tree was the oldest known tree on the planet and was cut down in order to date it by counting its rings, only to discover after doing so that it was in fact



older than any other tree that has ever been dated (Rutkow, 3-4). In the account from *American Canopy* the individuals involved hoped that an older specimen would be found as that might assuage their guilt and the metaphorical impact of their actions (Rutkow, 4) -- actions that have little bearing on the trees as a species, since the felling of a single tree has such a minor impact on the health of the totality of the species and a difference even of decades in age likely mean little to plants that may be almost as old as the recorded written language. While the macro population of Bristlecone Pines might not feel the impact of the felling of a single Elder, the local biological community that has established a millennias-long cohabitation with it may. The roots will no longer continue to burrow. Over the years they will decompose and the ground that they held firm will take in those nutrients as the stump breaks down and becomes a trace.

I have been salvaging these trees as they are removed from the home, collecting their logs in an attempt to retain something of them in relation to myself. I find a part of myself within the material of the tree and excavate the memories that come with it. With the first of the trees that had to come down I processed the trunk from timber into lumber. According to the Wood Database, Mediterranean Cypress's common uses include "utility lumber, fence posts, musical instruments (flamenco guitars), furniture, boatbuilding, and turned objects" (Wood Database). I think about how these trees that ringed the interior of our suburban backyard fence-line might have otherwise been milled to demarcate that same space as fence posts. The pieces that I milled I maintained a live edge on. I think of this as both a reference to the use of live edge slabs in contemporary bespoke furniture, which is in vogue now; and also as a reference to the tree in the wood. The live edge traces the contours of the trunk of the tree, albeit without its bark and branches, but nevertheless, the live edge is far more organic in form and origin than are the smooth milled geometric angles of most lumber -- although now I have taken to maintaining the

tree much more as an organism and environment. The second of the Cypresses I have left as logs, bark intact with the termites, spiders, and silverfish still immersed within. The chainsaw marks on their end grains and the removed branches are evidence of the physicality employed in the process of their felling. The sculptures with which the logs were made recreate the whole of a dissected sickened body; a body that was made sick by both humans and natural forces. When displayed together with their sculptural additions like prosthetic branches, they are reminiscent of the curated spaces of the Body Worlds Exhibition, or more closely to Mark Dion's Seattle Vivarium.

I counted the rings on the largest of the logs, the tree was a year older than I am now. Presumably originating as a seedling from a nursery and transplanted into the backyard to shade what was at that point a triangular patch of lawn with a club house that my father built and a sandbox. Although the species itself originates from much further afield. In the shadow of these trees the garden had been a space for play, as gardens so often are for children; a shelter for imagination and fantasy. I remember that some of my friends had tree houses in their backyards. The tactility of bark and branch, the stickiness of sap, the smell of leaves and needles, and the chatter of squirrels, these trees, on some level, provided care for what was around them. However, the cypresses were out of place, in a garden that at the time was not optimized for the massive drought that hit California, nor were the trees prepared for the termites that came from a disrupted nest compliments of a neighbor's construction projects. They were perhaps doomed by the choices that got them there, by the fundamental paradigms of Los Angeles suburbia. The backyard and the trees that I cherished were inherently at odds, and it is a manmade opposition.

I spent quite a bit of effort trying to remove the stump of the second cypress. I had aims to make a sculpture of it, but it was stalwart and resolute. It is now like a great circular plaque

that reaches down below the foundations of two houses, a shed, a fence, and an irrigation system, memorializing itself and its place of being; a monument to absence. Rutkow describes how the early Plymouth colony deforested the region, stating that “each family burned through an acre of wood a year” (Rutkow, 20-21). I can’t help but think about an acre of stumps per family per year, and the scale of the decimation that begins from those early moments of subjugation that reshapes the continent at the expense of the indigenous peoples and ecosystems. The fenced-in yards, uniform houses, planting of non-native species, and wide boulevards of urban and suburban sprawl are in part a practice of dominion and control over the other systems already in place within that geography.

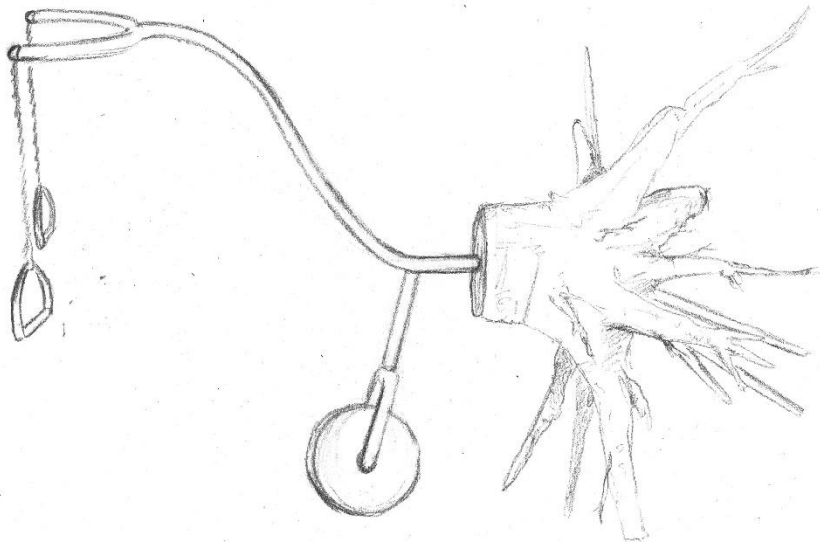


Figure 2: Concept sketch of sculpture with intention to use cypress stump, pencil on paper, 2018.

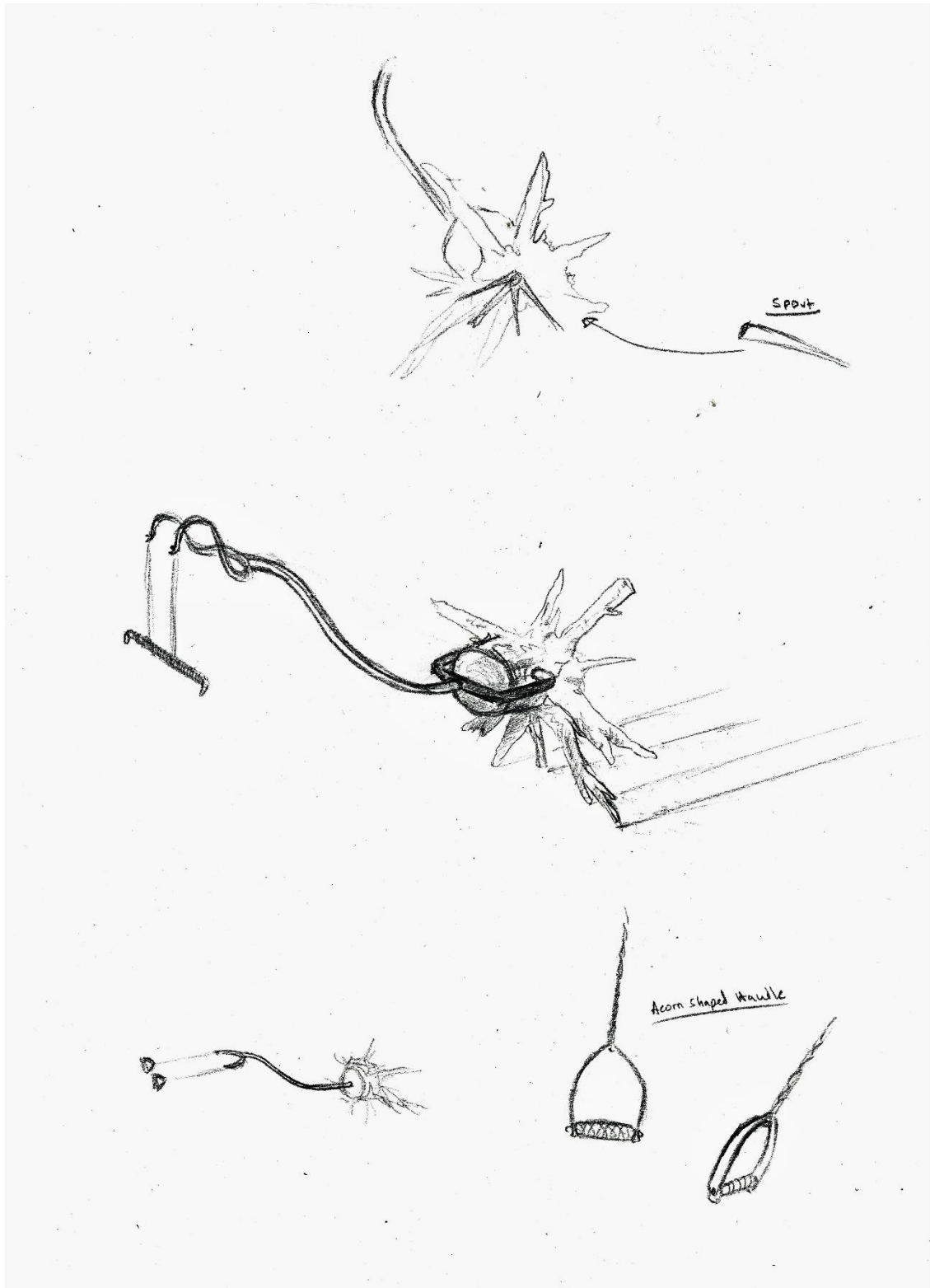


Figure 3: Concept sketch of sculpture with intention to use cypress stump, pencil on paper, 2018.

The sculptures that come from these trees are a partial chronology for narratives -- aesthetic objects to be experienced -- and still, if only partially, the tree from which they originate.

I learned recently from my cousin, that at the family home “Brookhall”, in Northern Ireland, there have been two subspecies of trees that have originated as hybrids of different species that had previously not been hybridized to the best of anyone’s knowledge. Of those subspecies one, a *Stewartia*, was killed when a tree fell and crushed it. But the other hybrid coincidentally enough in relation to the cypresses of my mother’s home in Los Angeles, is also a cypress. Specifically, it is *Cupressus Lusitanica* “Brookhall”.

## WHITE OAK

Four summers ago, I was back in Northern Ireland, staying with my cousin at the family home. He was finishing up a master's degree focusing on biology and ecology while working on the family farm and managing the gardens around the property. The trees come from around the world and have been planted over several generations. A handful of my ancestors were avid tree collectors, a hobby common in the British upper class and made possible by the expansive reach of the British Empire. The gardens for the most part now are better described as a botanical garden and an arboretum that includes specimen trees that now function both for pleasure and scientific conservation.

While I was there, my cousin and I spent a day during my visit measuring the circumferences of the ancient oak trees still scattered on the property. The oaks predated most of the other trees and indeed the property, and as we cross-referenced maps that had been mined from various archives we tried, as amateur dendrochronologists and archaeologists might do, to determine the path of the old road that maps indicate ran along the riverbank, just above the estate's walled garden. What became clear while taking these measurements is just how I relate to these trees that were all around me -- trees I took for granted since childhood as always being there and by the nature of being beyond a human scale I supposed to be the same age. But what became clear is that the oaks could be used to draw a mental map of the terrain knowing that the road which had been there could not pass through where a tree was.

In fact, my cousin explained that the two evergreen oaks that are planted across from each other along the short section of the bottom of the lane were likely planted to mark the road, because like arboreal lighthouses they would be visible no matter the season. Furthermore, we were able to trace a line across the property and into the two neighboring properties of native

Irish and English oaks that perhaps marked the road further on. The importance of the road for the family was in trying to date not just the road, but also the walled garden which appears on some maps and not on others and trying to locate the approximate location of the original house on the property which is said to have been the site of the Catholic English King James' camp during the 1689 Siege of Derry~Londonderry, a definitive event in Irish history. It should be noted that my family didn't come into possession of the property until long after the siege. It is the trees that provide some of the answers when invasive archaeology is outside of reach for the family for a number of reasons. I think it is also worth noting that the name 'Derry' is derived from the Irish word 'doire' for oak grove, the city supposedly was founded on a forested island just up-stream from our family's house. The city is fortified, with walls built around by the Guilds of London, who were granted the city as a prototype for planned future American mercantile planter colonies, hence the "London" in the name Londonderry derives from the Guilds' charter. In the end the siege was a failure, its outcome became a major moment that contributed to Protestant William of Orange's winning of the Glorious Revolution. Presumably King James had hoped his camp's position would provide dominance over both the land surrounding the city and Lough Foyle, which the city abuts. As the book *Island City: The Archaeology of Derry~Londonderry* written by Ruairí Ó Baoill recounts, the frigate "Mountjoy" ran the boom that had blockaded access by sea to the city, thereby relieving those surviving defenders of the city (Baoill, 159).

Oaks, both Irish and English, and the hybrid of the two are native to Ireland, with other varieties including the previously mentioned evergreen oaks having been introduced successively. Both native oaks could be characterized from the perspective of a carpenter as varieties of 'white oak'. White oak is hard and strong. When quarter sawn and oiled its medullar

rays glisten like raw precious metals in veins of rock, but a rock that was grown that lived through the seasons. White oak is an idea, a symbol that conjures up nostalgia for a place into which I was not born, a place that while I've spent so much time in, I cannot say I've weathered and known in the way those trees in the arboretum have. Yet, it is also a material, physical thing with which I'm working. It has fostered its own memories, in the sawdust, sweat, and frustration; it is the smells of making and the weight of lifting, trembling arms and hands from chisels and sanding; it is memories that are those of the novice, the carpenter, and the craftsman. I find myself drawn to white oak as a way of trying to draw upon the place of memory and history. I think back to Ireland, I think about measuring the trees, and I think about their age and stature.

While white oak holds a symbolic connection to an ancestral home, the wood that I use I assume comes from either the Pacific Northwest or the East Coast of the United States, and likely is plantation farmed, not from the long-gone old growth forests of Ireland that were decimated to construct the British maritime fleets. Here is a contradiction, the oak trees of the property that I like so much are still standing because the various stewards of the land valued them but also had the means to keep them rather than turn them to lumber and the land to fields, while at the same time almost certainly participating and benefiting from deforestation and colonization across the British Empire. The early justifications for the colonization of the American East Coast were to secure its vast forests with the intention of mercantile trade back to Britain and naval dominance (Rutkow, 11-19). My white oak is connected to an American history, a history of furniture building, of tea clippers, of the USS Constitution "Old Ironsides", and craft. Donald Culross Peattie in his book *A Natural History of North American Trees* describes the role of the Eastern White Oak in furniture and in the construction of ships and buildings, as an alternative to the depleted oak forests of Great Britain and Ireland, and of their consequent depletion here in North



America (Peattie, 197-202). Farmed trees seem to be a solution to the massive demand for lumber, and they do sequester carbon and provide green spaces, but plantation farms are not true self-regulating biodiverse ancient forests. They are a managed commodity and are vulnerable to many of the same challenges as other agricultural commodities. The oak of the family home hold value as specimen trees and value to me, but that is predicated on the conditions that created the scarcity of the trees and the presence of the arboretum, the more of which I learn the harder it is for me to reconcile a sense of nostalgia with the realities of the histories that make such nostalgia possible.

## LEAD AND BEESWAX

One of the two entries to Brookhall passes through a gate flanked by a pair of anchors. The large solid prongs protrude out of the asphalt within which they are partially buried. I've been told that they were salvaged from a yacht named the "Sunbeam" that sailed around the world, becoming decorative bollards, far removed from the sea, from a ship, embedded in the ground. As my mother tells me upon reading my thoughts about these anchors, that they are there to "commemorate the family – children and all – who sailed around the world." She also says "they are buried in tarmac because over the years, the main road has been widened and tarred and re-tarred in many different layers, but the gate is protected by a historic preservation order, so the anchors gradually accrue tar in an effort to stay at the same level as the road."

I went recently to buy lead at a local metal supply shop. The clerk who rang me up asked me what I was planning on using it for, I replied to wrap a log. He asked me if I was making an anchor or ballast for a boat, to which I replied I am making sculptures; but I think to some degree his guess was correct. Thirty three years ago Terry Allen created a triptych at the University of California San Diego (UCSD), collectively titled *Trees*. According to the UCSD Stuart Collection website article "Terry Allen", Allen wrapped three salvaged trees that had come from the Eucalyptus groves of the campus, which were being encroached on by construction (UCSD). In my time at UCSD there is still a good deal of Eucalyptus, but it seems to be in pockets whose topography would not easily lend itself to new construction. In front of the library I've passed by the Allen tree numerous times, often watching people pose for photos with it or using it as a meeting spot. I love that lead is enduring and it is almost completely nonreactive, making it very weather resistant, which is why it is a traditional roofing material. I like lead, just as Allen did in

this work, because it is soft, and can be marked and marred by simple touch; and so it is also fleeting.

But while Allen's trees speak to the site of the campus and are presented as monuments, my lead wrapped log is an anchor, a time capsule, and an albatross. My *No. 14* is to be dragged by a thick manila rope that runs through a section of steel fence post that acts as a push bar. The surface of the log is wrapped in a lead sheet like the cladding on a roof, nearly doubling the weight of the log. The lead, the log, and the large steel hook through which the rope attaches are all coated in beeswax and mashed up bits of a honeycomb that was found in what had been UCSD's Pepper Canyon, before it was filled in anticipation of new construction. In the honeycomb there are again parallels to Allen's works. By encasing the log in these materials it is swaddled in these soft materials that delay its decomposition, perhaps fitting since it is the last of the logs from this Cypress tree and from the highest point of the crown of the tree that I was able to rescue, making it also the youngest growth. It may be fitting that the top of the crown is clothed in lead and golden beeswax, as in the making of the sculpture is a kind of alchemic transformation.

When one purchases wood-turning blanks they are often encased in wax to seal in the moisture of the tree, which makes for better results on a lathe. The water that is still left inside the tree becomes a lubricant for its milling, thus facilitating its undoing. In the case of *No. 14* the wax will wear off, and so too will the lead, but the log may last longer than the thirteen others, shielded by the layers of its carapace.

The potential longevity of the log also means that it most likely will be a time capsule for the tree from which it came, but lacking so much of the information that made that tree significant, both in terms of growth rings and my memories. In this it is an exercise in futility,

associated with something that will not return, into which I continue to pour effort, energy, and thought; it is the albatross of nostalgia. It is wrapped in a material that is literally toxic but scented like honey, bewitching and burdensome.

## AGRICULTURE

If one were to travel around the more agricultural regions of the United States, and I have seen only a small fraction of the vastness and diversity of these regions, then one might observe a wealth of agricultural tools. Almost all of my father's family live in Nebraska – in, Lincoln specifically. I was talking to my father recently about family history, about how the family ended up in Nebraska. Until World War II they were working class farmers who had chain-migrated across the Midwest. The farm on which my grandfather grew up had been a homestead. My father was talking about how generationally the family had moved west, probably pursuing opportunities. In visiting Nebraska for family reunions, I would occasionally hear about the farm in fragments of stories. The family sold the farm during WWII. It had previously been hit quite hard by the Great Depression and Dust Bowl, and my grandfather was absent during the War as he had been drafted, all of which likely impacted the family's ability to maintain the farm. My father and his siblings would talk about how my grandfather carried on as a farmer after returning from the War, turning the backyard of his urban house that he moved to in Lincoln into a functioning farm. I believe growing was both a form of sustenance for a family that was not wealthy and was also a way of maintaining a connection to the land, to the place.

My father has a photograph of my of my grandfather crouching over a line of crops, and in my mind, I associate that with stories of my grandfather collecting seed catalogs, and also with the objects that he left behind as heirlooms of the family farm and of himself. The objects hint at stories, like the rusted branding iron with a simple "S", the accordion in its old box, or the hand-cranked solid cast meat grinder. I think about how many of these things potentially become decorative and archival, just as old rusting tractors and ploughs in front of homes share both a history and an aesthetic, originally being tools but later sometimes bridging into folk art.



Figure 4: Lee Swetland gardening in his backyard, Lincoln Nebraska, 1982.

## STEEL

This past summer I was in Ireland and Scotland and noticing how old farm equipment and the empty carcasses of buildings become like tree stumps, like public art pieces, like trellises for climbing plants, and probably sites for local histories. The steel and iron of objects like old ploughs and turf rollers becomes rusted, dull, flakey, rough, and increasingly takes on the characteristics of the earth that they used to work; they smell, not like the earth but almost like blood, not a coincidence as the iron in both blood and steel perfumes similarly. These objects that functioned with bodies, to help human bodies, to feed human bodies, built by human bodies, after use take on the characteristics of human bodies, revered, decaying, sweating and bleeding, marking the earth while being consumed. Bodies, land, and tools are part of a cyclical alchemic process of formation and decay, a continual metamorphosis.

## MAKING

For me as the maker, sculpture is a way of rendering myself, that is to say as a complex web of narratives, ideas, interests, curiosities, and histories. In fabrication there is the drudge of menial tasks peaked by moments of catharsis -- my studio practice is both more mundane and more thrilling than most other things I've experienced. In the making of the works, I find myself searching further, asking more, and pushing myself, I grow through making and connecting with my tools and materials. After grinding steel all afternoon, I have many times gone home and taken a shower. There is the smell of rust and wet steel, it takes me immediately to rusting farm equipment, to small fishing harbors that I would visit with my mother and grandfather in Ireland, and back to the studio minutes or hours earlier, to making.

When working in the studio I am surrounded by tools, materials, debris, and sketches. Sketches show the various potential iterations of a work, but the product is never what it is in the sketches, it is always a compromise between my technical skills, time, materials, cost, and patience. This makes the sketches hypotheticals, loose guidelines to be followed but separate from the physicality of making, and yet limited again by technical skill in their rendering. I slowly become more comfortable with the tools I use, just as I do the materials, and with each work I attempt to teach myself a new technique, process, and or material. I do not have a craft background and yet I am interested in it -- but not perhaps in the near perfectionism that master craftspeople approach, but more so in the bonds that dyed-in-the-wool craftspeople form with making; because, my priority in making is not the creation of decorative objects or of utilitarian goods, even if the work references those. Instead my interest is in the results of the way I interface with the making of the work, and the resulting affect, curiosity, and actions within the viewer of the completed work.



I have therefore decided to take from craft what I will, respecting its history and knowledge, and often referencing back to its fabrication and form. I look to artists like Martin Puryear whose work and practice are described by Neal Benezra in his book *Martin Puryear*. Benezra discusses how Puryear has made a body of work out of sculptures that address craft while still being decidedly sculpture, training under craftspeople but with a “refusal to be cornered, a determination to maintain his options” (Benezra, 19). His work speaks to the history of making and labor, and he has worked with artists and craftsmen alike. I draw from the techniques of craft, but while craft has an inevitable connection to utility, I am interested in the ideas craft can, as a vector, communicate. For me, concept is more important than function.

What the language of craft, or at least the form language of craft, provides is an entry-point for the viewer. My work is meant to be touched and experienced, it speaks to the tools that made it, and the tools that made so much else around us that we now take for granted because they are just on the event horizon of our peripheral vision. Wheels for rolling, cross beams for sitting and leaning, handles for pushing and pulling are just that, but they are also more. They are components of a more complex sculpture which does not have any singular purpose, other than the production of critical reflection.

## SHARING AND EXCHANGE

A plant giveaway, that turned into an exchange... In front of my studio at UCSD I had started a small garden for myself, beginning with trees, specifically a pair of Japanese Maples and a Ginkgo. This was a way of establishing a little bit of home symbolically and adding greenery to a building complex that otherwise is almost exclusively various forms of concrete and battleship grey surfaces. The trees were admittedly a nostalgic tie to the arboretum, and the Ginkgo is a favorite tree not just of myself but of several of my family members as well. Quickly enough my garden expanded and I began growing produce for various reasons, including a joy in cultivating and learning, just as I have found a joy in making. I still, to some degree conceive of plants not dissimilarly to how I think of other materials like wood and steel in my practice. I also found that through growing things I could begin to connect back to histories of agriculture and production, family histories, attempting to understand where something comes from, and the effort that goes into its production and through that coming to value it as more than just a commodity. This is not to say that through planting a garden I could possibly understand nearly the scope and depth of agricultural history, but instead I could take some of what I have learned and apply it and share it; share some of the opportunities to encounter growing as an act of exploration and connecting with a greater pool of experiences.

What I started doing was growing seedlings, heirloom tomatoes at first, and giving them away. I set up an area outside of my studio with well over a hundred seedlings and hand drawn signs in a style that might be reminiscent of a farm stand inviting local passersby to take one or two seedlings. The project began as a form of giving, often I was not around, and the plants would slowly disappear until only a few were left. What happened over the following weeks and months was that locals, meaning folks around UCSD, would pop in and tell me how their plants

were doing, share their stories and experiences, ask for advice, give advice, and pick up plants for friends. It became an exchange, what I gave were plants and what I got back were fragments of larger experiences, experiences that many people had had with the project that were both similar and totally dissimilar. Within that I believe a community, if only a temporary one, was created. To some degree the ideas around transforming a space, giving, and community outreach are inspired by work from Theaster Gates, specifically his *Dorchester Projects* in Chicago.



Figure 5: Plant exchange poster, colored pencil and ink on paper, 2018.



Figure 6: Plant exchange poster, ink on paper, 2018.

In my sculptures I have a similar interest in shared experiences, in creating objects that speak to individual viewers differently but are common in that they are experiences that have been mediated by the same sculpture. I think about Yoko Ono's *Wish Tree*, where participants record their wishes on paper and hang them from the branches of a tree. It is a communal but also an individual exercise, the tree branches become saturated with leaves of wishes and each participant stands in the presence of so many others even when their bodies are absent. In my work it might be the absurdity and physicality of a sculpture being used, the sound of *Big Wheel* being ridden around with the clanging of the steel pedals and the grunting as the participant tries to turn the sculpture or ride on a slight incline. The sculpture being a mobile garden made from hollowed out logs is impractical and reminiscent of a child's toy, semi-truck, train, or tractor. The participant generates an experience for themselves but also likely for spectators around. As they dismount, they leave a print of themselves in the thick beeswax upholstered seat, just as

others have before them; the sculpture becoming a repository for the evidence of interactions and experiences.



Figure 7: *Big Wheel*, Steel, red alder, beeswax, soil, and plants grown from seeds, 2018.

## INTERACTIVITY

I want these sculptures to be interacted with, to be handled, and touched. In contacting the work, the viewer contacts the same materials that I and others have; they have the opportunity to have similar experiences to others and new radically different experiences, particularly as the work and the context around it change with time. In the 2016 documentary *Sustainable* directed by Matt Wechsler there is a portrayal of a local group of farmers who work together alongside restaurants in what might be described as a community driven utopia. Perhaps more accurately, however, the film portrays a community that is engaged with itself, aware of the wants and needs of its neighbors, and interested in stewardship of the land. The model for success that is laid out in the film is in part a breaking of the division of labor schema. This is seen when a local baker comes to the farm to help with daily tasks and to discuss the types of grains being grown in the interest of mutual cooperation and higher quality produce. Another scene depicts the local farmers working together to decide what should be planted and by whom; they have, through engagement with the local food industry been able to form relationships where they provide direct supply, while growing the crops they want to grow at the prices they are comfortable with. The film makes it clear that this reconfiguring of the production chain was possible because of the interpersonal relationships that formed.

I want the viewer to have a chance to have relationships with these works, with those who have relationships with these works, with the spaces these works inhabit, and with the peripheral zones these works address; in this these sculptures might provoke a viewer to approach other objects, spaces, and people in new ways. In thinking about my works and the way they relate to an audience I draw some parallels to the *Adaptives* of Franz West, the bizarre forms that are activated by audience participation with them, contorting their bodies and repositioning

themselves around the objects. However, beyond the dynamic between the audience and the works there is a secondary relationship that plays out with the works as proxies or surrogates for myself as an artist. Author Richard Sennett in his book *The Craftsman* discusses the notion of 'presence' in relation to brick making and the artist's mark upon the crafted object:

“‘Presence,’ in the modern way of thinking, seems self-referential, emphasizing the word ‘I.’ Ancient brickwork established presence through small details marking ‘it:’ the detail itself. In the lowly Roman craftsman’s way, anonymity and presence could combine” (Sennett, 135).

The small brass butterfly key in the wooden wheel on *Leaner* not only counteracts the splitting of the wheel, but also identifies the wheel as unique, calling attention to the moments that I, as the maker, had with those materials. Making interactive objects that still have markings of myself as the creator provides the opportunity for audiences to relate with me. This mode of thinking does have a vein that can be traced to Nicholas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*, in which he writes:

“...This system of intensive encounters has ended up producing linked artistic practices: an art form where the substrate is formed by intersubjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, “the encounter” between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning” (Bourriaud, 15).

There is a growth of understanding that comes from dialogue, from sharing, and the composing of collective experience -- this is how knowledge is formed. When I make work in the studio, I learn as much from the critique, advice, and conversations with others as I do when I am having a one-to-one experience with the material being worked. Perhaps the affect and the memories that come from interactions with other people will be more long-lasting and poignant than many actions taken independently, which may otherwise be forgotten as part of routine. I have found a

long drive in a car is often far more compelling to reminisce upon when the drive included someone else, even if the experiences were different. With one person driving and the other a passenger, they were still shared. The memories are of the social dynamic and conversations within the vehicle. Conversely, having grown up in Los Angeles, where sitting in traffic is a local pastime, when reminiscing about driving solo it is almost always in relation to others who are external to the vehicle who have had similar experiences; the griping about hours-long commutes that each individual has had separately, and yet similarly, as if together.



Figure 8: *Leaner* (detail shot), white oak, cypress from artist's family home, brass, beeswax, and tung oil, 2017.



## SITE AND PLACE

For about a year now I have had a red Radio Flyer wagon mounted to my studio wall. It looks down at me silently, watching the waxing and waning of clutter and order, art and materials, like a mute trophy. Its red paint is flaking off to reveal the rusted steel below and further still, where it has borne weight, water, and earth it reveals the light and shadow beyond. Its bed is perforated like a tin can used for target practice or an animal hide perforated by the rending of projectiles. This wagon had been a tool used by my family to move soil, gravel, pavers, and us, that is my brother and I, as children. Always pulled, first by my parents around our small middleclass suburban Los Angeles backyard, and as time passed, it was pulled by me.

The path in our backyard that wraps around the house is made of pea pebbles and as the wheels of the wagon, bearings shot and rusted, tried to turn, the relationships between the object, the operator, and the topography of the garden became more than apparent. The wagon, when empty, nearly glides, kicking up gravel with a crunching sound like a continuous smashing of a bag of potato chips. These experiences, with an empty vehicle for a child could often have been fun. The noise and fast pace of running and pulling the wagon behind like some mad chariot that had lost the driver but the horse continues to race. But the full wagon, to which it almost always was, dragged, building a wake and cutting furrows as it went. The overloaded axle creaked while the gravel crunched dully below coupled with the overtones of grunting and cursing from the operator, whose weight would likely be exceeded by the full wagon.

Now, or for now, the wagon is static. It is a sentinel in my studio and a reminder of moments from a rather mundane and likely common part of a family history but separate from that place. The wear on it from use and the elements is frozen. Perhaps by bringing it inside, by mounting it on the wall it is being vernalized or perhaps it is something closer to being

entombed. All while the backyard, the house, and the family change. I'm not sure if my mother really noticed that it is missing. She had bought a wheelbarrow several years ago and the wagon had more or less been left in the corner of the garden by the time I had absconded with it. Although now too the wheelbarrow is showing the signs of distress of outdoor life to which an object inevitably succumbs.

## MEMORY AND IMMAGINATION

There are places in my mind to which I keep returning, I would assume that most people have places to which they physically return but also dream of. Somewhat frequently in my sleep I dream of the family home in Northern Ireland, being there, exploring and playing; only, it's not actually that home. In fact, what I often see in my dreams is only vaguely similar to the building and gardens in construction, scale, and layout. It is always the same weather, cool summer, but not raining, a fact that if anyone has spent any amount of time in Northern Ireland already would seem to be indicative of fantasy. The house is more an exquisite corpse with architectural elements likely assemblaged together through the workings of my subconscious. There are rooms and objects within that do not exist in reality but that flavor the imagined space. Even the lane that leads down to the house is different, longer and perhaps closer to the way it may have been over a century ago, based on maps and illustrations of the house when it still had a ballroom, before half the house burnt down. The building, the gardens, and the lane exist outside of real space and are immortal.

I have been going back to this place for my entire life, mostly during summers, but even in my lifetime I've seen the house itself change, its occupants, upkeep, and decoration. It is as much a living thing as anything can be said to be, and likewise the arboretum and the farm have changed. The arboretum has lost and gained trees as hurricanes, theft, and diseases took trees, while various individuals have planted new trees. The farm in my lifetime switched over from growing grains to willows for biofuel. In the past few decades the areas surrounding the property including the city of Derry~Londonderry have transformed. What had mostly been fields adjacent to the property are now homes, there is now a massive high bridge over the Foyle that

can be seen out one side of the house, and there are is no longer the ubiquitous military presence of the Troubles along the road and in the town that I remember from my childhood.

For me this illustrates how spaces exist within my mind, as both static and monumental, and in flux and alive. Memories and imagination allow for a throughway to communicate with that which populates spaces that may be gone or may never have existed, but physically going and being in the space grounds one in a fleeting way in the space as it is, not as one conceptualizes or remembers it. Eventually, though, both myself and the places from my memory will no longer exist as they are and as happens with all places, revisiting and inhabiting if still possible is not the same experience as in prior times. Perhaps I become one of the phantoms in the imaginings and memories of others in relation to those places, a presence within the multiplicity of individual experiences of others with a place and the transient elements within it.

## LAND

This past summer, the summer of 2018 was exceptionally dry in Ireland, a result of changing climates as a byproduct of humanity as we terraform the planet. The lack of rainfall on an island notorious for its greenery and mild climate was evident while I was there. Interestingly enough, the drier landscape began to reveal things forgotten to human memory but not to the land. Along the River Boyne there are many Neolithic tombs and mounds among the roads, houses, and agricultural fields. What made headlines over the summer were the forgotten and unknown Neolithic remains in a field found using aerial footage from a drone. The tumulus structure that was found could be seen as a circular perimeter composed of individual points in the crops planted above it. What had happened, as I understand it, is that the points were the locations or holes of posts that had ringed the structure and even thousands of years later the soil density and composition in those now-filled holes held moisture at a slightly different rate than did the surrounding soil. Land may conceal or reveal its histories. It is a record that is lived on and with; it is continuously amended, shifting with each footstep upon it and every stone turned. Yet each moment of contact with the earth itself expands on this record, almost all of which are imperceptible at least for now.

I find myself drawing parallels between the tumulus of the Boyne Valley and Richard Serra's "Shift". Serra's concrete earthwork is discussed by Sarah Zabrodski in her 2013 article "In Search of Richard Serra's Embattled "Shift"". Zabrodski talks about how the sculpture had, for most of its existence and up to the point of the writing of the article, been largely forgotten or unknown by locals until recently (Zabrodski). This is largely because of its location within a private agricultural field that is regularly planted (Zabrodski). The concrete of *Shift* is stone, albeit, manmade rather than quarried, but like the Celtic tumulus and so many other monumental

constructs across human history, it is rendered from the gristle of the earth. It sits low, likely eclipsed seasonally by the vegetation, but still it modifies what might be described as the natural topography and the terraforming of the farmer's systematized agricultural practices. Serra's work is geological, tied to a time scale far more expansive than the life of a single human, but the variability of its cultural context from local to global and generationally gives multiple layers of significance, presence, and absence to *Shift*.

I often think about the idea of presence and trace left on places and objects. About how someone's having been somewhere, having left a mark, having contributed, experienced, learned, lived, shared, and died can both be seen, and yet also can be on a scale that is imperceptible. Marcel Duchamp used the term *infrathin* to describe the lingering presence of another person on an object. I think about this both in my sculptures and in how I interact with spaces. While I'm hiking or walking a dirt path, I wonder who else has taken this same path and how each person's traveling has permanently shaped the land and the way others also experience it. It is worth mentioning at this point that I disagree with the belief that humans are somehow separate from nature and that there is some perfect landscape that is apart from the human zone of influence; global climate change has made abundantly clear that this is not the case; but also, similar to humans, other animals shape the land and its contents. A trail that may be used for leisure walks may very well have been a deer trail that was adopted or coopted by humans. How can a space change over time, how can one's perceptions of a space adapt, and how can a place simultaneously be setting, subject, and author of narratives?

## STEWARDSHIP

Tom Bombadil, a whimsical, uncanny, and deific character from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* embodies notions of stewardship. Bombadil has bound himself to the land, working in tandem with the plants and animals, warding off antagonistic forces that might corrupt his domain, but is otherwise unconcerned with the outside world (Tolkien, 119-131). In comparing the sort of purity of Bombadil to people's relationships with plants, animals, and land that I have noticed, I see both parallels and sharp contrasts.

In community gardens, like the one my father participated in for several years, there is the potential for care, care for the soil, for the plants, and for others who share the space. In the arboretum at the family home, as is the case in many similar gardens, there has been immense care and forethought while simultaneously, seemingly little. Trees require maintenance, a diverse range of trees requires a staggering amount of attention and knowledge to be properly cared for. Trees also are often not planted for the benefit of the person planting them, as much as they are planted for generations. Arboretums are often the product of someone interested in passing-down something that they probably believe to be special. I would like to believe that this is frequently a gesture of optimism and love both for the trees and for the future family members who it is hoped will inherit the land. The same would likely have been true for orchards and vineyards.

However, particularly in the case of specimen gardens, such as, an arboretum, there has often been disregard for the very land that is so valued. By this I mean the introduction of plants from around the world poses dramatic risks to the indigenous flora and fauna. Henry Grabar in his article "Oh, No, Not Knotweed!" Discusses the hazards that species introduction to an ecosystem, specifically focusing on Japanese Knotweed in the British Isles (Grabar). He talks about how Knotweed chokes out the other native plant species while also being exceedingly

difficult to eradicate, even through the use of virile herbicides (Grabar). The irony of an invasive plant like knotweed that was introduced by plant enthusiasts, is that the local plants they love are now the ones affected, the land they love, and in the case of Knotweed, even the structures built upon that land are at risk, and in using herbicides their own health along with that was the surrounding ecosystem are at risk. The story of Knotweed is similar to so many other stories of invasive species dominating a landscape; in Southern California it is perhaps most noticeable with the abundance of Eucalyptus, and in the carpentry community in the United States one almost certainly has heard of the Emerald Ash Borer Beetle.

To be a good steward, one might look to Tom Bombadil, aware of one's surroundings and the systems in place, and setting a value on the care and coexistence with everything that cohabits in the area. It is important in doing so to contemplate not just one's own offspring and the security of their futures, but also the security of the ecology and of other humans, since everything is interconnected.



## MOVEMENT

When we would take family trips as a child and even still now as an adult when I take the same trips to Northern Ireland, I follow a routine trajectory. I think it is a bit like the Capistrano Swallows migration annually, returning to the eaves of bridges and buildings to nest for a time and then moving on, making stops in the same areas, performing their routine. For us the journey almost certainly begins several hours earlier than it might.

My mother is fastidious about arriving early to the airport, the logic behind this is sound, it is better to be early than late to a flight. So, we depart with a short drive to a bus depot and then the boarding of a bus to brave the Sepulveda Pass en route to LAX. Upon arrival at the airport there is a rush to get to the gate, to which we arrive exceedingly early. My mother likely is seated and working on a laptop, I am likely staring out the window watching the parked planes. If seated in front of a runway then I will watch the planes come-in, looking for the faces of people through the windows, I have always felt a little like the folks standing dockside as the ocean liners of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century departed harbor; the scale of the human beings within the vessel to my own body becoming more and more disparate.

After a layover, often in London, we arrive in Belfast. At this point it has been the better part of 24 hours from the time we left the front door to exiting the airport in Belfast. The next stop is likely for fish and chips, airline food is nothing to write home about, but beer-battered cod wrapped in newspaper with a compliment of Irish potato wedges might be. After eating there is a roughly 2 hour drive from Belfast to Derry~Londonderry but along the drive there may or may not be a stop at the shipyards and port. My mother's family love boats, and if given the opportunity to detour to see boats most of them would I think take it without much hesitation, even when exhausted. Those Belfast shipyards next to the airport in particular bear the working

class history of the transatlantic vessels I would have been contemplating earlier. The Harland and Wolff company built the famed Olympic-class liners there, of which the Titanic is the best known. There are two massive cranes built in the mid twentieth century for hauling the massive steel constructs into drydock are landmarks of the city. The cranes are always pointed out by my mother and admittedly I find them a source of wonder and joy.

Most times, we arrive at the family home in the early evening, if it is summertime then it will still be light out for several hours. The journey, while my grandfather was still alive and living at the house, always concluded with an almost ritualistic garden walk. As I got older the pace of the walk noticeably slowed with his age, as he went tree by tree and named each one of them, pointing out anything he thought to be significant in their condition as well as any new additions to the garden or losses. In retrospect I could have been so much more diligent as I find myself so often trying to piece together information about those trees and the garden from afar, lacking the knowledge of provenance, and missing that generational knowledge and connection to the life of each tree. I have seen my mother reenacting that same garden walk when she is back and introducing someone who has not been to the house before; I also performed it on my last trip, walking my partner around in the wet grass. I can't help but notice the cycles.

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