

BAYNES, MAX B. M.F.A. Make Contact with Your Life. (2023)
Directed by Professor Patricia Wasserboehr. 26 pp.

This body of artwork is an exploration into feeling connected to a specific plot of land. By combining disparate objects found in the place where I grew up, I am working to reimagine their significance and relationship to each other, the land and to me. The work often alludes to ideas of tension, restraint and breaking through barriers. The materials have a sense of pushing toward or against each other as if they want to burst. Through working with these themes, I like to create sculptures that weave between interior and exterior spaces. These constantly changing visual settings are what I employ to create a rounded experience for the viewer, ideally insinuating the mindful movement I use to make these works. I want the works to read as chaotic and strange, but for there to be a sense of calm at the center of this chaos, like the unscathed awareness that is all around us. Make Contact with Your Life is about acknowledging and letting go of the mental constraints I put on myself in order to fully engage with the idiosyncrasies that make up my life.

MAKE CONTACT

WITH YOUR

LIFE

by

Max B. Baynes

A Thesis
Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro

2023

Approved by

Professor Patricia Wasserboehr
Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Max B. Baynes has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

Professor Patricia Wasserboehr

Committee Members

Professor Nikki Blair

Professor Christopher Cassidy

Dr. Elizabeth Perrill

April 26, 2023

Date of Acceptance by Committee

April 11, 2023

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“An object is not an object; it is a witness to a relationship.”¹

I make abstract sculptures out of a process of mindful movement. Steel and wood are the mainstays. I consider these sacred materials; however, I have begun to loosen my grip on this habit of preciousness in order to more fluidly incorporate found objects that have specified charge. I make work from the perspective of a working class, country upbringing that is filtered through a frenetic energy informed by jazz and punk rock. With these guiding principles, I aim to create artwork that embodies a sense of calm within a chaotic and precarious shell.

A clash, I hear and feel the rumble inside me. My artwork is a giant funnel. The opening is a scanner, an observer, that takes in sensory information throughout my waking life. Whether it is a cigarette filter following a peanut and a small patch of moss on the sidewalk or a face concealed in a boombox handle, my eyes are constantly scanning. These curious symbols do not often make it into my work intentionally, but they inform my way of being. My creative output stems from this way of being.

Entropy is always on my mind. The breakdown of the body, the planet and society are interlinked in a myriad of ways. I do not look at any of these as inherently negative occurrences though because with all degeneration there is inevitable regeneration. Everything functions in a cycle. By acknowledging the true realities in which we live, we begin to see that, although they are valid, they are largely social constructs. This makes us able to more creatively dissect them and cultivate ones that better suit our harmonious flourishing with all of life.

¹ Vicuña, Cecilia. *About to Happen*. Second, Revised edition, Siglio, 2017.

In my sculptures, I pull apart the objects around me in order to understand their material and conceptual makeup. I then reorient their individual parts to create unique and pleasing relationships. The goal is to stimulate questions for my understanding of the material world. How do objects fit together? This can become an endless reservoir of curiosity when I focus on pursuing these questions.

CHAPTER II: QUONSET HUT: THE TREASURE CHEST ORGAN

I was raised in a rural tobacco farm community twenty miles north of Greensboro, called Bethany. Growing up, I spent a lot of time exploring and rooting through a mass of stuff that occupies my family's land. My father, Walter Baynes, has owned his own small demolition and grading business for over forty years. When he built the house I grew up in, he used leftover materials from jobsites and timbers that he milled from trees around the property. Once he had settled on the land, my father's accumulation of objects never ceased. When I was a child in the 90s and early 2000s, I was privy to a beautiful landscape of fields and ponds dotted with old barns, steel I-beams, tractors in various states of function, mounds of handmade bricks and countless other materials. The most interesting structure on my property, however, has always been a building called a Quonset Hut. Mass-produced during the second world war, these tubular structures were designed for efficiently erecting a shelter over a large, open floor. They are built with modular units of corrugated steel that form a massive archway of any desired length. Ours is fifty feet long and contains a treasure trove of random materials and objects. Before learning how I could use these things, I loved navigating through and amongst the detritus. It felt like a forgotten maze inside of a giant, metal digestive organ. Mice and black snakes would skitter by as I jumped from board to board.

The wonderland of oddities my father created did not come without its drawbacks, however. As I grew into a young adult and began to cultivate my own ambitions, I was quickly confronted with the reality of organizing and moving stuff around. My father is the hardest working person I have ever known, and he always went above and beyond to help me and my brothers make or do whatever we wanted. But the frenzy that is inside me also swirls within him.

We have obsessive tendencies that can be helpful in working hard on tasks, but the compulsion to hoard has always been present.

When I was sixteen, he parked a full-size tractor trailer in the driveway so that we could clean out the garage to make a workshop. We must have put thousands of different tools, machine parts and other random oddities in that trailer. At the same time, we were skateboarding around it on makeshift ramps made from metal scraps my brother was welding together. Once the floor was visible in the garage, it was quickly filled with more stuff. My father got a ridiculous collection of woodworking tools in exchange for spreading gravel out for a neighbor's driveway, but all that great potential quickly became more clutter. I have always maintained optimism, however, despite the frustration and disorganization. This is where my artist's mind comes in. I believe, in a lot of ways, this overstimulation of objects is what fostered a large portion of my creativity. Ever since I can remember, I have been observing disparate materials sandwiched together in curious piles.

I look at my being in the world as a balance of my father's innate sensibility of playfulness and determination combined with my mother's ease of presence. I have been given no greater gift than my mother's ability to listen to others. Having grown up the seventh of ten children, she has always embodied a calm and patient sense of observation. No doubt this has informed my path toward mindfulness. Combined with the sensitivity and obsessive energy I inherited from my father, these traits from my parents have driven me to investigate and understand my mental and emotional self. I have learned over the past seven years, through studying Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies, that this is a constructed self. Meditation has helped me understand that all the torture my mind has gone through is like a cloud passing over the skyline of my awareness. Sure, there are physical and psychological ramifications of the

traumas I have endured, but even still they are all just thoughts that can pass through me. These are the concepts that inform my fascinations with portals, windows and projection. The physical and familial dynamics of my upbringing are what lead me to manipulate objects by running them through a process of expansion and compression. I like to imagine schematics and exploded-view diagrams that are cut up and reorganized. A component may split in two and come back together as if it is being squeezed. This has been a useful way of looking at the sculptural decisions I naturally make so that I can better understand them and find new avenues more efficiently. A visiting artist named Donté K. Hayes told me my drawings made him think of schematics. Nobody had ever said that to me before. It made a lot of sense though in how I think about forms wrapping around and through each other.

CHAPTER III: MOVEMENT, MUSIC, SKATEBOARDING

In parallel to the details of my family's land and the stuff on it, music has been a guiding force in my life ever since I was about eight years old. One of my earliest memories is of winning a dart game at a fair. For my prize, I chose a framed picture of the rapper, DMX, covered in blood. I thought it was so cool. I have always been captivated and enriched by aggressive music. I had the good fortune of growing up with two older brothers who played guitar and introduced me to all the cultural things they were interested in. From a very early age, I grabbed onto the sensation that came through my headphones and shot a jolt up my spine and I ran with it. My brothers would take me to Edward McKay's or BB's Compact Discs in Greensboro, and I would soak up all the sounds I could. I never went anywhere without my Walkman and case of cd's. The first rock concert I went to at the original Ziggy's when I was twelve exposed me to moshing and the rest was history. I thought, this is the most exhilarating thing I have ever experienced. At the same time, skateboarding entered my life. I never really vibed with team sports so skating immediately presented itself as an athletic and creative outlet that did not require anyone else. It also opened up unique nuances in my spatial awareness. Suddenly I was looking at all structures for how they could be traversed on a skateboard. Like exploring the piles of my youth, skateboarding contributed to the breaking down, in my mind, of conventional movement. Flailing my arms to create balance is akin to the motions of rock and roll.

When I was a teenager, my brother Amos introduced me to Charlie Parker. That was another pivotal moment. The aggressive energy and attack that skateboarding, punk rock and heavy metal nurtured inside of me was then cooled by a different kind of mania. When I first heard jazz, I thought, this is what my mind sounds like. It is a slippery, smooth fluidity that

simultaneously can bounce around like an erratic pinball. Once I started creating art in a serious way, it felt instinctual to use the music of Parker, John Coltrane, Miles Davis and Ornette Coleman as a tool to fill my creative reservoir. A common ritual in my practice is to begin a work session by playing Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. I use Elvin Jones' gong hit that introduces the album as a switch in my mind to open up to the creative process. So much of Jazz music is about feeling and intuition. The best improvisation comes out of being fully engrossed in the experience, losing oneself to the sound. In martial arts this is referred to as mind like water. One does not resist impact, but rather absorbs it like ripples in a pool. This is how I approach making art. Often, concepts I bring to the work can muddy the water and restrict my movements. The objects I choose to incorporate can have their own inherent characteristics, but it is often beneficial to the work when I put my creative emphasis on what an object is made of instead of what it is made for. The philosophy in Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* really instilled this notion into me. In one section, the narrator confounds his friend by proposing to fix his loose throttle with shim stock made from a beer can.² Reading that book when I was nineteen years old forever altered the way I look at machines and materials.

² Pirsig, Robert M. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*. Morrow, 1974.

CHAPTER IV: EARLY WORK

When I began making sculpture in my early twenties at UNCG, I was bringing these notions into an infantile, subconscious state. I did not know it at the time, but looking back, the groundwork was there. Under the guidance of Jon Smith and Andy Dunnill, I began exploring these ideas, first in wood and then steel. I remember seeing an abstract painting by Alexander Rodchenko of a circle with these curved, wing-like forms orbiting it and passing through it. The first wooden sculptures I made were attempts to replicate this imagery in the round. Once I began working in steel, though, it seemed to flow more naturally because of the malleability of that material. I started making forms that repeated color or pattern in a rhythmic manner. Rhythm and upward projection into space were visual elements that I naturally incorporated. It wasn't until I made a sculpture in 2015 at Salem Art Works in Salem, New York that I started to recognize this natural pattern. It was also there where I discovered a book by Herbert Read called *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture*. In those pages, I found the work of Umberto Boccioni, David Smith, Alberto Giacometti and Constantin Brancusi. They gave me new insights into a more expansive visual vocabulary. Smith's curving and swooping lines broken up by moments of calamity had a massive impact on me. From then on, I felt a greater level of agency in being an artist and communicating with my mentors. I am eternally grateful for the encouragement I got from Jon, Andy, Pat Wasserboehr, Nikki Blair and Anthony Cafritz of Salem Art Works. Without these figures in my life, I would not be the artist I am today.

CHAPTER V: ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS

In the Summer of 2022, during my cohort's trip to the Venice Biennale, Sculpture Magazine released an issue with a bright pink and green skateboard ramp on the cover. A skateboarder was doing a frontside air inside of an art gallery. Multiple people asked me if I saw this since I had been referencing skate ramps in a couple sculptures during the first year. When I got a copy, I read the interview with the artist, Abraham Cruzvillegas, and was taken aback by how much his art related to what I was thinking. Collaboration with dancers, skateboarders, musicians and use of plants within these imaginative assemblage sculptures was and is where I want my practice to go. This guy has been doing it for decades. The greater impact was postponed though until I fully dug into his work in my last semester.

Cruzvillegas has a strong connection to his upbringing within his art. The term *autoconstrucción* refers to the building practices of the people in his neighborhood on the former outskirts of Mexico City. Colonia Ajusco is built on volcanic and uneven ground with materials collected from around the area. He talks about how growing up in this way modeled a collaborative and joyful determination to cultivate their lives with dignity, despite the lack of resources. One of the core considerations of his practice is that of change. Cruzvillegas states, "Change is the rule for the *Autoconstrucción* houses, and transformation of identity is behind my approach (or misuse) of the concept: self-construction is permanently unfinished."³ Although our circumstances in life are quite different, this idea of self-construction through the materials one has around is extraordinarily resonant for me. Cruzvillegas' approach has become a major source of inspiration for how I am thinking about the materials on my property. I recognize the huge

³ Yang, Haegue. "Abraham Cruzvillegas," *Bomb*, no. 124, 1 June 2013, pp 117.

difference in me being a privileged, land-owning white man in America and him being a Mexican man that grew up in a squatter settlement outside a massive city. I am constantly considering my social and cultural relations to the things I am interested in so that I do my best to pay respect. I have a lot of passion though, and I approach my use of inspiration with acknowledgement and deep reverence. I feel a kinship with Abraham Cruzvillegas in how he describes himself and his work as being full of contradictions, always in a state of flux. This humble recognition avoids the pitfalls of righteousness by approaching life with curiosity and delight for the idiosyncrasies that make us individuals. He was asked to describe

autoconstrucción in an interview with the Tate Modern in London in which he stated:

I think of my work, in a very general way, as the result of playing - almost in a childish manner - with found materials; attempting to produce some questions about how I arrived to be myself, why and what for, and then giving to these questions a particular shape in space. At the end, very often the results are chaotic, like piles of things that speak very little about who I am, and more about where I am and who with. Some of these heaps are not only precarious (both physically and conceptually), but also very funny. (Moran, 16)

This approach seems to represent a sense of non-attachment, following curiosity rather than trying to force an outcome. It also speaks to the idea Cruzvillegas often references about having multiple, differing aspects to oneself. Location and relationship to others is an acknowledgement of mindfulness. He is creating art that distills the time and place in which it is made. The growing interest in art that recognizes the lived experience through movement, interaction and storytelling is something I want to push myself to be a part of. I think this kind of work can dovetail beautifully with sculpture as Cruzvillegas so eloquently demonstrates.

CHAPTER VI: CURRENT WORK

My recent body of work has become a chrysalis for the development of assemblage and precariousness in my practice. I remember being hit with an affinity for this kind of art when I saw a retrospective of Richard Tuttle's work in 2016. Before that, I never would have imagined a sculpture could be three lines made of wire, pencil and shadow or a stack of blue foam. This realization was a rush. But I still held onto some preconceptions regarding sculpture. I knew I wasn't necessarily meant to be a steel purist, but I was unable to break out of that comfort zone for a long time. I came into graduate school working in steel; however, a shift has begun. I am now using the skills I honed building steel sculpture and wooden furniture to construct assemblages out of a growing vocabulary of materials.

This new shift began with a sculpture I have titled, *The Cavernous Body (Rocket Rocket USA)*. This piece is, overall, a steel sculpture, but it is one of the first times I have kept hardware and removable parts front of mind. A makeshift axle with ten-foot rods on either side encases an off-road tire. The rods are bent in a way that alludes to motorcycle handlebars and also pelvic bones. They are united at the top by steel bars that mimic the shape of a broken rocket ship tethered to the center of the sculpture with rope. The rocket has actually been the beginning of my desire to incorporate these charged objects. It comes from a piece of broken playground equipment that I have held onto for many years. After hesitating to use it for so long, feeling like it had to go to just the right sculpture, I have incorporated it into this artwork based on its shape and its relation to my interest in projecting forms. The bars that mimic its shape dissipating into the air feel like a successful first step into incorporating a found object into these ideas of entropy.

Figure 1: *The Cavernous Body (Rocket Rocket USA)*



In tandem with *The Cavernous Body*, I was creating a work with two steel stick figures that were originally carrying a box spring over their heads that was framed in picture molding. The original idea was that they would be carrying a large, abstract expressionist painting since the exposed foam padding has a sort-of optical trance effect. I thought it was kind of funny that the “painting” is made of ordinary, curbside garbage. That was a clear case of the concept getting in the way of the form. The new version of this work has turned the “art handlers” into *Dream Stokers*, the title of the work. They have cut the bizarre object into segments and piled it together as if building a campfire. The destruction and absurdity feel more apt in this orientation because it is less about a fixed thing and more about the energy insinuated. It is one of the first sculptures where I have made an arrangement by piling objects together in this precarious way. I have

always been a bit hesitant to try something like this, but because of the crucible that is graduate school, I feel a new level of confidence in making this kind of art.

Figure 2: *Dream Stokers*



Multiple sculptures quickly came after toiling with these works that I had, honestly, given too much thought and preciousness too. They were made with a greater sense of freedom to associate materials based on formal and/or conceptual relationships. The first of which is titled *L.A.B.C.A.T. (L Animashaun Ballmation Clay Aiken Tank)*. This name has no meaning. It is inspired by word play and free association of sound. The sculpture itself is the same kind of play with objects. Two planes intersect each other at a right angle, forming a faux-interior. One wall is painted a vibrant Carolina blue and has multiple shredded holes drilled into it. The top of this wall contains a focal point of the entire show. An orangey-yellow plastic circles is flush with the complementary blue wall. It is stained with dirt and plant fibers because it is an old loader filter, one of the main machines used in my father's line of work. The intersecting wall is clad in fabric that is purposefully ragged. I like the play of its red and gold floral pattern with the colors on the perpendicular side. Using fabric also feels like an appropriate juxtaposition to my more common

materials of wood, metal and plastic. The play of hard and soft is a frequent consideration for me. The bottom of this wall has an inserted square cutting board that references the yellow circle because the center of the board has a circle stained into it from soot when a plate was left on it during a fire. My father found this cutting board in a burnt house. On the opposite side of the blue wall there are electrical track pieces from the bridge crane in the sculpture studio at UNCG. One of them is pointed laterally and topped with a cotton buffing wheel giving it a sort of wiggled security camera identity. The sculpture ends with a skateboard ramp that is bisected and reinserted into itself. I have always been fascinated with the patterns that halfpipes are made from. The studs in this component are cut and flipped upward to be a prominent feature instead of hidden. They read like teeth in a splayed open mouth.

Figure 3: *L.A.B.C.A.T. (L Animashaun Ballmation Clay Aiken Tank)*



This play with interiors, exteriors and shelters has always been one of my biggest fascinations. It would not be a total stretch to say that my work often references abstract creatures projecting into and outside of spaces while occasionally morphing into those spaces

themselves. Not surprisingly, I am interested in science fiction. The works of Philip K. Dick often come to mind. His elaborate titles for his novels are a big inspiration. The sculpture, *How Do the Vents Speak?: Resonator*, is an example of this. A work that began as a reference to shelter and age transformed into a cluster of forty-five-degree angles made from distressed, green steel and aged barn wood. A tall column shoots straight up from the center and is tethered with a series of knotted hemp ropes that form another right angle pointing out laterally and tying off to an instrument at the top that references a wind chime or a radio antenna. All of these metal components are made from chopped up industrial vents. There is a wooden vent positioned parallel to the ground at a table height. It is from an old building and has the words Greensboro, N.C. painted on its side. I am thinking of wind and how it moves through these vents and around these angles. Antennas and ship masts are tools for observation and communication. These references tie into a myriad of my creative interests through layered metaphors.

Figure 4: *How Do the Vents Speak?: Resonator*



In between the beginning of that sculpture and its refinement, I made a work I titled *Chrysalis*. I was thinking of its bug-like qualities and the sort-of cocoon shape on top, as well as the moment I was in. As I stated before, I feel like this new body of work is a sort of chrysalis for a fresh approach to my practice. I felt like there was a shift during that sculpture. The base is a pedestal that is made of an intuitively built jumble of wood. I purposefully constructed it by freely adding parts to try and break away from my tendency to overthink connections. It reflects, in a way, my sensibilities when it comes to painting. Swooping curves and repetitive marks bounce back and forth within this compartment. I made the disparate pieces of wood uniform by blackening them with a torch, bringing out an array of different patterns in the wood grain. The outside of this base is a turquoise patchwork of slotted plywood. This patterning lends toward my frequent use of repetitive line, but it spawned from a new technique I have been experimenting with in chipping out notches from between the slots. This scaffolding of sorts is topped by a rusty barrel that mimics the worn, turquoise plywood in its color and rust spots. Out of one side of the barrel juts a bent pipe capped with a vertical tractor seat. It mimics the speckled eyeball of a bug or a tongue reaching out for sustenance. Out of the backside of the barrel, a black camper shell reaches toward the sky. It is cut two thirds of the way from the top and slotted with a makeshift roof made from the corrugated steel of the Quonset hut. Inside of this chrysalis/shelter hybrid, there is a lining of royal blue fabric that highlights and contrasts the “jewel” in the center. A glass building block rests as the base for a pile of metal slag and a bright yellow plastic lemon. I love the idea of a grand alter-piece anointed with a tiny precious object that is actually just a cheap piece of plastic. Injecting little bits of comedy into my work relieves my tendency to take it all so seriously.

Figure 5: *Chrysalis*



In my thesis exhibition, I positioned this large-scale sculpture in between two much smaller works. On the backside of *Chrysalis*, I displayed a piece I titled *Power Beam w/ Silver Cactus*. In a way, this sculpture was the precursor to its larger cousin because it was a quick burst of intuitively composing these found objects. I did not fully realize that until installing the show. The sculpture is a plank of wood fastened to an I-beam. It contains pieces of electrical equipment that form a curved line of cable that ties off around a steel loop at the top. On one side of the plank, there is a lampshade-like form made from a drill press pulley, and on the other there is a shiny aluminum casting that was the result of a spill. Its resemblance to a cactus is what drew me to the form. It made me think of an installation by Joseph Beuys I saw at the Tate Modern. It is a

work titled, *Lightning with Stag in its Glare*. A giant bronze suspended from an I-beam strikes the ground, illuminating a series of small primordial creatures made of aluminum.

Figure 6: *Power Beam w/ Silver Cactus*



On the other side of *Chrysalis* rested a conceptual piece I titled *Red Clay (for Cildo)*. This sculpture is a simple homage to the artist Cildo Meireles, whose sculpture, *The Southern Cross* really affected me when I read about it at the beginning of my second year. His sculpture is a nine-millimeter cube of pine and oak wood laminated with a perpendicular grain pattern. The work is a reference to the spiritual resonance the connection of these woods had for the Tupi people of Brazil. I felt the bricks that I have been carrying around and working with in my sculptures had a spiritual resonance for me in where they have been and how they have lived on my property for many years.

Figure 7: *Red Clay (for Cildo)*



In the final weeks before my exhibition, I made two more sculptures from materials I had in my studio. I titled one of them, *A Moment in the Morning*. It is comprised of two beige porcelain sinks that were in my house when I was a child. They are both stained around the rim by rust after having sat out in a field for over a decade. I bent a steel pipe into a U-shape to hold both sink basins at a standard vanity height facing opposite one another. The inside of each sink is filled with a plaster cave. I poured the plaster around a mound of dirt and then removed it to reference an oval picture frame. The center of the pipe, where the sinks meet, is covered with strips of rubber inner tube that conceal the connection. I like the visual play between the hard materials and the soft rubber that is flowing all over the ground as if the pipes are dissolving into a chaotic mess.

Figure 8: *A Moment in the Morning*



The second piece was a conceptual work about my father. He was a record-holding wrestler at Page High School in Greensboro. Growing up, I often heard him mention eating only lettuce and ice before a match. Afterwards, he would feast on pancakes. For the sculpture I stacked a series of concrete weights on a physician's scale. I put a barbell through the center of them and in the middle, I placed the back-support board of an old weight bench. I positioned the board to show the underside because it was signed "December 25, 1969" with the initials WB, coincidentally the same as my father's. This was his eighteenth Christmas. I stacked enough weights on the pole to measure roughly what my father weighed in at when he would wrestle, 145 lbs. I see this sculpture as a sort of portrait totem in a way.

Figure 9: *Lettuce & Ice*



The rest of the show consisted of accent works placed throughout the windows and on the gallery walls. One painting I titled *Schematic Visions* hung at the entrance to the gallery. It felt like a gestural mapping of the sorts of marks I made in some of the sculptures. A small sculpture named *Bolero Chicken* stood high up in one window, looking out over the gallery with its piano hardware legs and elevated bronze head. I would often listen to Maurice Ravel's *Bolero* when beginning a workday in the studio. *The Cavernous Body* was flanked on all sides by colorful sculptures made of wood and other materials such as a garden hose, a safety vest, dry-erase marker and foam stress ball. In the third gallery, I showcased a series of simple wall works comprised of red pine boards with holes drilled out of their top halves. I strung cotton twine through the holes and wrapped it around broken pieces of brick that show the marbling swirl of clay inside. In the entrance room, I hung two patterns of metal from the Quonset hut. One of

them consisted of four staggered, overlapping bars and the other made a sort-of face. It called to mind the idea of a boombox. In that same room I hung and stacked a series of red pine boxes on all the other walls. One of them formed a chain-link pattern in a corner. Another jutted out from the wall with a cascade of blue fabric that spilled onto the ground. I made this in collaboration with the gallery director, Caitlyn Schrader. We topped the fabric with a machine cloth rectangle I had that made it look like a gridded pillow. The final series of boxes contained a series of ridiculous knick-knacks and tchotchkes I had collected and made during grad school.

Figure 10: *Quonset Hut Wall*



Figure 11: *Brick Board Wall*



CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

Graduate school has, without a doubt, been one of the hardest things I have ever done in my life. I definitely made it harder for myself at times with too many commitments, distractions and mental breakdowns; however, I feel a greater sense of confidence than I have ever felt in starting this next chapter. It truly feels like the most pivotal moment of my life thus far. This school and my mentors I have gained from it have profoundly changed my life. I took my first sculpture course with Jon Ray Smith in the Fall of 2013, and I started teaching that course nine years later. I told my students that the first day because it felt so surreal. When I look back at my twenty-one-year-old self and see how far I have come and how much I have made since then, I feel the deepest sense of pride. The past seven of those ten years have been the most intense years of my life, beginning with the death of Andy Dunnill. He used to call me “young squire.” I felt, as we all did, a large void after he left. I used to occasionally notice a look in his eyes that I recognized but could not quite understand. It was only after his passing that I knew because I have felt it too. This is the reason I take mindfulness so seriously. I first learned about it that summer in 2016 when Caroline Bugby gave me a book that said, “you are not your thoughts.” Ever since then I have been slowly carving my path and facing other obstacles. I was nearly murdered, I lost my cousin to overdose, we all lost our dear Jon to cancer, the pandemic happened, and my engagement with a woman who I felt was the love of my life crumbled. The path has been difficult, but now, at the age of thirty-one, I feel like a whole new world of possibilities is beginning.

My thesis exhibition was truly a remarkable moment. I have been steadily pushing myself these past three years to perform again and make events to share with others, but that night and that entire week really opened me up. Family and friends came to see the work in the pouring

rain. They stayed to watch the first dance performance I had ever choreographed with my friend Joe Blocker. People expressed that they were really moved, and I was too. That whole week I thought of Jon and Andy. I felt them congratulating me just as Pat, Nikki, Elizabeth and Chris did. I know they would be so proud of the man I have become.

Making this work has tried every ounce of me and I am tired. But I know that the conditioning I will have gained on the other side of this is going to be great. I plan to immediately start digging into all the little experiments I have been dreaming of at my studio downtown, and I am going to spend a lot more time out in the country on Baynes Road. I am going to find ways to foster growth out there, both in the soil and in my art. One day I hope to share space there with others who want to cultivate the same things. The state of our world is the ultimate precarity, but I do believe good things will come. I will carry that optimism into the future because this crucible of an experience has given me the greatest tools I have ever had for achieving the life I want.

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