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Reality is flexible and personalized.

As you become, it becomes.

In her 1922 classic, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, Margery Williams reminds us that once a thing becomes real

"It can't become unreal again, it lasts for always."

My thesis work is an extension of the imagined world I have harbored in my thoughts since childhood. A world experienced simultaneously with the one we now occupy.

Combinations of photography, sculpture, painting, and play represent a visual chronicle of the travels and adventures of my companions and I, as we move between worlds and encounter the fantastic.

MAPPING REALITIES & CULTIVATING BELIEF

by

Jennifer Leigh Bonner

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in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

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2014

Approved by

Committee Chair

To friends, family, and faculty,

And those who are all three.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by JENNIFER LEIGH BONNER has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro,

Committee Chair

Barbara Campbell Thomas

Committee Members

Nancy Doll

Jennifer Helen Meanley

Sheryl Oring

Mariam Aziza Stephan

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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MAPPING REALITIES & CULTIVATING BELIEF

My thesis is an extension of the imagined world I have harbored in my thoughts since childhood. Through photography, sculpture, painting, and play I am introducing that world to a greater audience within the gallery setting. The paintings depict places I have been and the way I experienced them - realizations of my mental projections into physical space. Many of the photographs used document a journey, evidence of marathons run on rugged mountain terrain. Vivid acrylic marks painted on the surface of these prints indicate remembered hallucinations brought on by dehydration, exertion, and the unstifled eagerness of a painter left alone in the beauty of nature.

Many of the landscapes feature images of the Arctic, specifically Alaska, a place I have thought of since childhood and until recently, never visited. Growing up in Florida, my only knowledge of snow was through Disney movies, festive holiday snow globes, and the lunchbox of snowballs my aunt from Virginia would sometimes bring with her when the family got together at Christmas. Thoughtful as my aunt's gesture was, the reality of Ziploc-baggies full of ice, within an Igloo cooler differed widely from my expectations. Have you ever noticed the way that snow is animated in film? It is personified with the same kind of sparkle as the verb of magic. As a child this imprinted a direct association, and I longed to see it for myself. Having lived now in colder climates, the fascination still lingers, unquenched. Continually mystified by how something as simple as frozen water, can reflect light like a thousand precious stones, I return to the

subject matter again and again, touching it the only permanent way I can fathom, through painted image.

Traveling to Alaska, this past December, I was fortunate enough to take a helicopter tour across a range of glaciers close to the Turnagin Arm, on the state's southern peninsula. Weaving above, and ultimately landing on and exploring these formations on foot was the realization of so many childhood dreams. By making inkjet prints of the photographs I took that day, and others, I am able to touch again what I touched in person, and make marks in the same way one makes footprints, in the implied space of the photograph. The final imagery is a representation of my own experience with the place. Of both the reality of how a painter experiences landscape and the possibility of what it could be when we're not looking. These images are their own facet of time.

Just as the aforementioned landscapes exist as both imagined and real, so exist the plush animal sculptures I have made. Sophisticated ancestors of the many cherished toys I once possessed, it would seem as though a mutual maturation has taken place between myself and them. Growing up, stuffed animals were an enormous part of my life, taking up nearly two-thirds of the large master bedroom I shared with my sister. We were constantly researching animals, and each new discovery of cuteness led us to a new exotic animal we required as a pet. We made charts and presentations for our parents, and ultimately, the result was a gift of a plush likeness. They may as well have been real to us however. Polar bears, giant sea turtles, rabbits, and elephants, we tended them as the best zoo keepers would; brushing them, feeding them, taking them on fieldtrips, and inevitably staging dramatic storylines for them to take character roles in. Likewise,

animals that I have constructed as part of my thesis, like Ellie the musk ox, Bill the corpulent groundhog, and numerous penguins, are now key players in the continuation of these role-plays, in both my life and the gallery setting. They are a lifeline to that same possibility of anything I experienced as a child.

Inhabitants and co-adventurers in the subject of my landscapes, these animals take on the role of my sole companions in the imagined world of play I have created for myself. In *It Can't Be Mapped, But We Still Go* (2014) a series of photographs captures the theatrical narrative of a girl, a bunny, a groundhog, and a hedgehog, enjoying a sunny winter's day in a large nest high atop a tree. One image depicts them drinking gin and playing checkers, in another, the girl holds a telescope and all the nest's occupants gaze west, as if they were aboard a ship and pirates had been spotted in the distance. These theatrical stills invite the viewer to engage in the suspense and whimsy of a world different from their own. While the girl is the artist (myself), and the nest, animals, and telescope are all constructed props, the finality of the photograph exists to suspend the disbelief of the viewer and document the event as real.

The goal of this work is to preserve a series of moments, as fleeting as the constructed world they occupy, and to evoke in the viewer his/her own set of faded memories, with a new light and vigor. My photographs are meant to be inviting, like a nap in the sun, and it is with this invitation that I invite gallery-goers to participate in the dream.

This work sits in the context of other contemporary artists dealing with the ambiguity of landscape and narratives of Animalia. Laura Owens, Kristin Baker, Anna Gaskell, and celebrated illustrators like Maurice Sendak, Beatrix Potter, and Jan Brett hover on a list of contemporaries and influences.

The landscape paintings of Kristin Baker (b. 1975) have always struck me in their ability to evoke exactly the feeling of the event they depict, no matter how abstracted. Many of her earlier works depict car crashes on race tracks, her stepfather having been an amateur driver in her childhood. Most of the images reveal very little about their subject matter. Fractured shapes, bright and jewel-like as stained glass explode on curving panoramas. Frenzies of red, yellow, and orange indicate a crash has occurred. They capture the essence of the event, without revealing too much. In this same way I wish to portray natural landscape and painted mark as what can be an epic experience.

The photos follow suit of contemporary artists like Anna Gaskell (b. 1969), who's poignant tributes to the unmarked territories of childhood sometimes resonate with themes from Louis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. However unlike Gaskell I do not wish to point the viewer toward something lost, but remind them of something perhaps they had forgotten they ever possessed at all; something gained.

After graduating from the Ohio State University in 2006 I began working at a Costume Development workshop that specialized in Mascot Costumes. The majority of our clientele was children's book publishers. Scholastic, Penguin Press, and Barnes and Noble were a few of our more notable customers. Giant likenesses of Peter Rabbit, Clifford the Big Red Dog, and other childhood favorites were fabricated and serviced

under our roof daily. I began to know my friends on a more intimate level than I had before. It is these skills that have now found their way into my practice, and perhaps this experience that renewed what has since been an unwavering relationship with my childhood ideal. The work has become the actualization of everything I ever wanted as a kid. It is the absence of bills and responsibility, and the embodiment of genuine engagement with the imagined and fantastic.

In sharing my fantasy with others I am giving them a free pass to temporarily exit the world around them. The work critiques our disloyalty as adults to the seeming frivolities of our childhoods and at the same time gifts them right back. It is my hope that this work, visibly staged in neighborhoods and tangible environments, will serve as a reminder that the worlds we map as children, and subsequently lose sight of upon “growing-up,” still linger as bright lights, ready to be found, in the corners of our everyday.

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