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This written thesis serves as a companion to the body of work I developed while pursuing my MFA at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. It traces the trajectory of my graduate school experience and culminates with my series, *In the Act of Playing You Forget Where You Are*. Beginning with my desire to challenge the authority of traditional sculpture, this document follows the evolution of my studio practice as I transition from the autonomy of sculpture-in-the-round to the development of more nuanced installations that claim the physicality of space as artistic medium. Paying close attention to the barriers and demarcations that influence how individuals navigate space, both physical and conceptual, my work probes the collective human experience through the lens of my own personal idiosyncrasies. Focusing on themes such as intimacy verses privacy, nostalgic longing and the humorously absurd, I encourage the reader to consider engaging with art itself as an act of play, one I believe may build a better understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit.

IN THE ACT OF PLAYING YOU FORGET WHERE YOU ARE

by

Patrick Healy

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CHAPTER I  
EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP TO SCULPTURE

The body of work I've produced in these past two years can be charted chronologically as a shift from the realm of object-based sculpture-in-the-round towards an investigation of space (both physical and conceptual) materializing in the form of more nuanced installation works. The seeds of this shift have been sown throughout my long rapport with sculptural objects, but they can be traced specifically to the contentious relationship I developed between sculpture and pedestal. While my undergraduate introduction to sculpture was a traditional one—where the crafting of steel, bronze, wood, and stone defined the boundaries of object making—entering the contemporary art historical context in the infant years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the utilization of pedestal as the traditional display mechanism felt dated and uninspired. The autonomy of the art object has been well established, and thus the neutral elevation of status provided by the pedestal appeared to limit the viewer's perception and experience of the art object. I craved work that would inhabit the same physical space as the viewer, work freed from the shrunken stage that acts as a barrier keeping the audience at bay. Thus, I produced works that occupy our space, objects that touch the same ground as the soles of our shoes, living among rather than above us. Resisting neutralized autonomy provided by a traditional plinth, an art object may begin to reestablish the confusion, instability, and multiplicity present within all objects (art or otherwise). This potential for confusion

provides a level of tension that positively effects the viewer's subjective experience of a piece, an experience more akin to a state of free play rather than a pursuit of answers.

Consequently, I followed that trajectory of object making for nearly a decade before beginning the pursuit of my graduate degree at UNC Greensboro. I continued to strive towards producing sculptural objects that elicit unease, insecurity, and confusion. To do so, I often utilize mechanisms of the familiar, both personal and cultural, in order to juxtapose expectations with the unknown. A turning point was reached in the closing months of 2018 with the completion of a work titled *Tumbleweed*. While I regard it as a functionally successful work that epitomizes my investigation into contained sculpture-in-the-round, its finalization began to suggest the limits of working within boundaries of contained sculptural objects. As a lifelong Northerner who called New York home for the first three decades of my life, upon arriving in North Carolina I pointed my focus inward, towards the regional idiosyncrasies of life in the south. The residue of Americana has often supplied material for many of my sculptural inquiries where folding chairs, ice cream truck Bomb Pops, and backyard badminton equipment have become as pervasive as steel, wood, and cast iron—materials historically considered to have achieved authority in the hierarchy of sculptural processes. Equipped with this ever-expanding material lexicon and a thirst for appropriation, I set out to explore my new landscape.

## CHAPTER II

### CONDENSED SPACE AND SPECIFICITY

I discovered the specificity of my source shortly after a stretch of devastating hurricanes swept up the southern coast and across the Carolinas. Newspapers and digital publications were plastered with photos of the wreckage left in the wake of these awesome forces. Suburban blocks were left indistinguishable from landfills, where entire homes were ripped open and spilled into yards, blurring the lines between what's inside and out, what's private property and what's public space. A series of images captured in a trailer park community depicted the storm's most violent impact: once solid units lay tattered and exposed as steel and wood skeletons of their former selves, sheet metal and roofing compressed around trees, forcefully woven around lawn furniture and swing sets. The images were as visually stunning and unnerving as they were emotionally unsettling and traumatic. The items that have come to compose our conception of home—the intimate, private, and sentimental objects we use to curate our personal space—were displayed void of hierarchy amongst the building materials that used to contain that very space.

That spastic, nonhierarchical assemblage of materials led me to the construction of *Tumbleweed*. Found building materials, steel corrugated roofing, faux wood flooring, insulation and bedding fabrics, aluminum camper siding, fake grass, and a sea of rivets ascend over seven feet, suggesting a cyclonic motion. Perched precariously on an uneven

trapezoidal structure, fragments of a ubiquitous weathered white plastic lawn chair sit nearly consumed by the crumpled sheet metal surrounding it. While appropriating its materials from the realm of construction and prefabricated houses, *Tumbleweed*'s form is borrowed from a much older time. Though perpetually at odds with the empty white pedestal, *Tumbleweed* echoes the form of traditional ancient Greek and Roman statues in addition to their renaissance and neo-classical counterparts. Unlike the white plinths whose popularity grew alongside the rise of salons, museums, and eventual white cube galleries, the pedestals of old world stone and bronze statues were integral rather than neutral elements of the work. Crafted to the same caliber as the statue themselves, they often donned adornments in the form of decadent molding or column work, reiterating or complementing the figures they uplift. They carried with them content and context rather than their antithesis. This is the case in *Tumbleweed*, whose teetering unstable foundation is constructed from the same mass-produced materials as its figure, blurs the line between the two. And *figure* in this case is meant literally, as the fragmented plastic lawn chair acts as a surrogate for the human body. Its simple ergonomics and omnipresence within the American landscape combine to produce the aura of the anonymous everyman while our personal experience and physical relationship to the object conjure memories far more specific.

This specificity, however, begins to expose the limitations of a sculptural object such as *Tumbleweed*. Its formal qualities produce a spiraling movement that encourages viewers to circumnavigate the piece, their gazes beginning at its foundations and climbing ever upward until its summit is reached. Its physical energy recalls the serpent-

bound agony captured in the iconic carved marble sculpture *Laocoon and His Sons*, a work firmly rooted in the canon of Western Art History. The celebrated Roman sculpture is ironically displayed in an alcove within the Vatican Museums, where one can access it from only three sides, despite the fact that its implied movement encourages one to move around it in a full circle. Though the viewer's full realization of the sculpture's form is hampered by its placement, the relationship that develops among viewer, object, and space is relatively straightforward, categorized by a static singular object and a mobile viewer. *Tumbleweed*, conversely, struggles to activate space beyond the constraints of its physical form. The true engagement with space occurs *within* the bounds of the sculpture where the viewer conceptually maps a new world based in the layers of reference embedded within the dense juxtaposition of materials. This compression and flattening of material and context enable the viewer to adopt a new perspective where all sides of an object may be perceived from a singular vantage point. Interior and exterior, authentic and cheap simulation, intimate and mass-produced, all of these loaded materials overlapping and piercing throughout the sculpture's surface forming ever shifting new relationships.

While these dense strata of information unfold and expand conceptually within the viewer, the expanse seems parallel to that of a catacomb, winding deep below but never breaking out into the open air above. The specificity of trailer park construction materials has the potential to fall into the realm of a stereotype, explaining in detail what viewers already think they know about a community of which they are not a member. There was the possibility that I had painstakingly crafted a one-line joke where the

viewer experiences an “ah-ha” moment before disengaging entirely with the sculpture. The sheer abundance of referential material created a specificity that in some ways limited the space in which the viewer can engage with *Tumbleweed*. Though I recognize that the power of any art object lies in its ability transcend the bounds of its physical form and enter one’s consciousness where it may expand exponentially, I longed to produce art where the actual physicality of space becomes the work’s subject. I wanted to forgo the hyper-specificity of a singular moment or location in favor of investigating the ubiquitous spaces of our everyday lives and the visual language that makes those spaces perceivable. This thought was the impetus for my shift from traditional sculpture-in-the-round to a more open and inclusive use of multi-object installation. I began creating active spaces where the participant may physically enter the work and exist within it, spaces that allow agency for one’s body and room for their subjective experience to become materials that are essential to the work.

### CHAPTER III

#### BARRIERS, BOUNDARIES, AND CODIFIED SPACE

When considering an installation where space itself is the subject matter, the form of such work requires an investigation into the organizational systems that aid in its division, categorization, and navigation. The vastness of space makes it difficult for people to comprehend the physical presence of something that is more akin to a void rather than an object. As described in *The Poetics of Space* by philosopher Gaston Bachelard, it is the breaks, pauses, and divisions of a particular space that direct our awareness towards a recognition of these voids and the inherent purposes they serve. Bachelard's phenomenological approach to architecture was developed not through scientific exploration but instead focused on the more personal and emotional relationships we forge with the spaces in which we live. The naming and organization of these relationships become an essential part of developing harmonious interactions within the cities, buildings, and rooms that we share with other individuals.

A key example in understanding these systems of organization is the naming of the horizon. The horizon is a human concept invented to describe the imaginary boundary between land and sky— two vast and nearly incomprehensible bodies of positive and negative space that, through human perception, form the illusion of a line dividing the two. The naming of that division allows us to conceptualize the duality of these spaces, unifying them within one system. This concept of creating a dichotomy through the

utilization of a barrier has become paramount in my work. A more relevant example of this concept can be found in the idiom, “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.” While this expression brings to mind visuals of two competing neighbors experiencing the insecurity inherent to lawn envy, the most dynamic object in this equation is in fact the fence. The barrier provides the polar basis necessary to frame our comparative judgment of the two sides. Hence if a fence is placed arbitrarily in space, we are compelled to seek and apply contrasting qualities to either side despite the space’s overall uniformity. This is evidence of the role these organizing systems play in constructing our daily perception of spaces as well as our potential to manipulate that awareness by isolating, exaggerating, and dislocating the objects that form this system.

While concepts such as the horizon and physical barriers such as fences appear to be universally recognized, the ways in which we occupy and inhabit space are not entirely intuitive processes but in fact are learned. We constantly decipher signs, systems, and visual language, which inform the ways that we both perceive and navigate the spaces in which we live. Recently, my installations have aimed to appropriate and subvert these codified spaces in order to bring a heightened awareness to the systems that dictate how we operate in and relate to the world. I prey on these seemingly infallible systems, performing interventions that expose the ambiguity and uncertainty of such structures in order to illustrate their potential to fall victim to subjectivity and personal bias. Rooms that foster both intimacy and isolation, barriers that offer safety yet exclusion, subtle lines that indicate where one belongs and who is unwelcome; uncanny relations that allow the viewer to recognize these situations as all too familiar yet nonetheless alien.

Standardization and ergonomics represent cogs in human systems that emphasize our relationship to and recognition of the human body in space. I construct objects and installations that attempt to invite the viewer to experience those relationships, not merely observing a world but entering into it. As one navigates an installation, such disparate components as dislocated architectural interiors, found furniture destabilized and repackaged, and fabricated allusions to handrails or foul poles all imply how one might engage with each object. However, uncertainty builds as one recognizes schisms within their normative functions and material associations.

Unlike the benign separation provided by the horizon, a natural phenomenon with its function rooted in the physiological properties of our planet, human-made barriers such as the chain-link fence carry a broader and more divisive multiplicity of associations. The wealth of meaning provided by that multiplicity was the driving force behind the utilization of chain-link fence in the construction of my 2019 installation, *Debate*. *Debate*'s primary form references the L-shaped pitching screens used during baseball batting practice. This shape allows a pitcher space to heave a baseball over its lower section and still seek refuge behind the screen's taller section should the batter crack one back up the middle towards the unbalanced pitcher. Usually quite light, fabricated out of tubular aluminum and rope mesh, and built with youth sports in mind, *Debate* confounds the normative function of this sampled form through material transformation. An unthreatening, child-friendly aesthetic is replaced by tiers of black chain-link fence, bifurcated by thick tubular steel, and suspended within rectangular voids by standard fence hardware, its galvanized coating exposed and untampered.

Chain-link fence embodies the not so unique, yet nevertheless powerful, conditions of being widely recognized as a form yet simultaneously associates with a diverse and divisive array of individual experiences. The three-foot green fence dividing two split-level, midcentury ranches in an affluent neighborhood, contrasting with the three tiers of twenty-foot fence surrounding a penitentiary up-county is but one example that illustrates the polarizing potential held within this singular barrier. By using chain-link fence as both object and material, to replace the drapery of rope mesh, the installation inherits all of its contextual reference and superimposes it upon a form native to the realm of sport and competition. Any sport's playing field operates via ground markings and spatial parameters that function as visual rules and ethical guidelines essential to the particular game's systems. Without these demarcations, chaos could ensue. In this way sports and their respective arenas can be viewed as microcosms for the urban planning and transportation systems that inform our daily interaction in the public arena.

Now, in *Debate*, what began as consensual space informed by baseball and occupied by individuals in a state of play, is supplanted by a far more antagonistic space. Feelings of player safety and protection shift to thoughts of containment and exclusion as we recognize the principal purpose of chain-link fence is to keep people either in or out of a designated area. The space contained by the installation is further complicated by an additional screen, a formal replica of its counterpart mirroring its position and separated by several feet. Strips of standard white duct tape delineate a four-foot square of concrete between the two screens. Foregoing the anticipated imagery of a baseball diamond, these

demarcating elements instead amalgamate to produce an arena more analogous to a boxing ring. While circling the forms, one is aware of the ominous presence produced by that void.

Though this void is open and exposed on two sides, one may hesitate to enter as it appears to carry with it a vulnerable if not victimized perspective. The experience varies for those on the exterior of each screen as they perceive both negative space and those who occupy it through the layered framing mechanism of the fences' rigid grid. The installation, while itself a static entity, harnesses the potential energy of the screen's original purpose, allowing the viewer to envision the paradoxical if not dangerous situation that would unfold if two pitchers hurled projectiles towards each other at close proximity. The potential conflict linked to this exchange is pulled out of the world of sports and into the domain of human relationships by drawing parallels between that physical volley and the heaving of ideas and opinions that often happens during instances of debate. In our contemporary moment, marked by highly contested partisan politics and fractured viewpoints on issues of social justice, debate is often met with anger and the reinforcing of old ideas rather than compromise and evolving perspectives. In this light, *Debate* functions as a physical space mapping the conceptual positioning of individuals engaged in an exchange of ideas, where one can assume the position of both aggressor and defender of one's opinion.

The quantity of referential material embodied in an installation such as *Debate* begins to highlight a question I grapple with in all aspects of my practice. What knowledge or experience is required by the viewer in order to understand and

conceptualize each installation? My personal fascination with sports and their ability to function as a microcosm of more widely recognized systems may suggest that this knowledge is necessary to fully experience a work such as *Debate*. However, by tapping into more ubiquitous materials and forms, such as its black coated chain-link, “safety yellow” tubular steel, and austere white ground demarcations, viewers have a wider swath of information from which to draw connections. This allows space for their subjectivity to construct relationships to the installation and the space it captures, based on their unique life experiences. While pitching screens may not be embedded in everyone’s collective visual lexicon, we can recognize the experiences adjacent to both a waist-high fence and one that contains the full height of an individual. The communal relationship of over-the-fence conversations between neighbors is met with the longing and hurt felt by those who can only see their loved ones through a barrier representing an absence of freedom. That dichotomy is heightened as one circles the work and experiences each of those separations collapsed into a singular perspective. The experience may be one of traumatic exclusion or gated community protection depending on the viewer’s personal history. And in that way, I hope that the true debate unfolds amongst the individuals witnessing the installation, sharing the ways in which their subjective relationships have been molded by their upbringing, socioeconomic standing, race, gender, and regional biases.

This example helps to illustrate how the physical relationships established in these installations also encourage a certain mental mapping within a (communal) cognitive landscape. As one’s body navigates space, so too does one’s consciousness, and

situations of physical relationships act as metaphors for emotion and societal relationships. While sampling the theoretical universality of these signs and spaces, these works privilege the audience's subjective relationships to these systems, allowing their own narrative or history to become material essential to the work's function. My narrative, assembled from a recognition of such relationships, is tethered to each installation. As a child of working class parents growing up in the suburbs of New York, I experienced the locality of stoop-side congregation and bodega-counter community, coupled with the far-reaching global network of the city and cable television. This micro/macro positioning has compelled me to parse, investigate, and manifest these nuances in my work. Intimate moments in the public arena, genuine emotions bathed in artificial lighting, the absurdity of "universal understanding" and private property/space—I aim to channel the multiplicity of these awarenesses.

## CHAPTER IV

### RELATIONSHIP TO MATERIALITY

My relationship to materials can be categorized as challenging the authority of traditional sculpture materials, and appropriating the common or banal in the pursuit of material transcendence. My work often claims conduit, chain-link fence, faux brick composite board, and a litany of other building materials, participating in widening the periphery of what constitutes valid sculptural material. The ubiquity and familiarity people associate with these materials invites viewers to consider the relationships they've developed with such materials outside the boundaries of capital "A" Art. As that bond of familiarity takes shape, they become uneasy and lose their bearings as they now attempt to juxtapose those experiences with the foreign situation these materials find themselves in. In this case, the gallery or museum becomes the system that produces the diametrical questioning of what is and isn't art. The materials carry with them the residue of their former functions, despite the rejection of their normative use. That confusion opens up the potential for duality, the potential for completely alien uses or associations to be projected upon the surface and core of the object.

Surface handling, such as paint and patina, have a liberating, if not transcending function within my work. While paint and pigment apply new meaning to a surface through unification or division via color, it is the rejection of the covered surface's material qualities that I find most liberating. This concept can be articulated by recalling

my first experience viewing a certain bodega on the southern outskirts of Greensboro. The building sits stoutly within a parking lot far too large for its usual volume of customers, isolating it within a wide moat of asphalt. Single story and square, it is capped with the typically southern low-pitched roof—unremarkable, but elevated to the absurd by a thick skin of bright orange paint. It isn't until I'm inside the parking lot that I discover that the building is in fact constructed out of brick, its texture flattened by incalculable layers of glossy paint. From a distance, it resembles a caricature of a house, a tiny orange Monopoly piece blown up to actual size, similar to Charles Ray's toy firetruck expanded to the proportions of its real-life counterpart. The dominating presence of the building's opaque orange membrane rejects the material properties of the brick that lays beneath, liberating it from its historical connotations. Exposed brick buildings carry a modernist purity to form as it harbors no mystery as to how it was built and continues to stand. Brick and mortar, structural object and adhesive, laid orderly atop one another, portrayed with an honest clarity that hides none of its functional elements. Once painted however it is unshackled from its history and function, declared sovereign and free to enter other realms of object or material association.

This power of historical liberation and material transcendence is not limited to the surface-encompassing power of paint. I often grapple with the question of how an object relinquishes its autonomous authority and becomes regarded as material. To what degree must I isolate a location or space in order for it to be recognized as an object? In the presence of a stoop, one as iconic and functional as its real-world counterpart, yet detached from the dwelling to which it is logically anchored, does one perceive the space

suggested by its normative surroundings? Or does its existence in a neutral setting such as the gallery allow a viewer to analyze the stepped monolith strictly in terms of its formal qualities? The duality bound to the ambiguous potential of location as object and object as material, are exploited in my installation, *This Must Be the Place*. Rather than depending on the polarizing function of physical barriers, the unsettling dichotomy of *This Must Be the Place* emanates from its blurring of setting. By merging dislocated household fixtures with familiar public spaces, I attempt to evoke feelings of nostalgia and misplaced longing, as viewers peer into a memory of home that is more analogous to a television sitcom set than any lived experience.

CHAPTER V  
THIS MUST BE THE PLACE

A generic living room and the residue of a neighborhood playground oscillate and intersect in my 2019 installation, *This Must Be the Place*. Its substantial footprint is defined by four curious objects whose positioning manages to suggest a location more claustrophobic than the physical space it occupies. Each element vibrates in the center of a Venn diagram comprised of two or more distinct objects grappling for agency in a viewer's eyes. A hybrid of a dining room chair and a playground slide radiates in the installation's epicenter, demanding recognition. Its elongated back legs form a nonsensical ladder leading up to its seat, which cascades down at a steady slope before widening its mouth at a height synonymous with that of a standard chair's seat. While its decoratively carved back and iconic claw-foot front legs are appropriated directly from life, its absurd slide/seat becomes increasingly foreign as you investigate its material properties. Upon its surface, reflective metallic Mylar is stretched taut and upholstered, with decorative tacks compressing foam to form regularly spaced fleshy depressions, like dimples on a robot. This mirrored skin burns brightly, suggesting the heat radiating off of a stainless-steel slide baking in the summer sun.

In this installation, the sun is replaced with an equally hybridized light source. Suspended above the slide/seat, a garish lampshade with scalloped edges glows on the short-side of an oversized candy cane shaped steel tube. The tube tapers out subtly until it

meets its trapezoidal base, narrow and precarious, like a dainty streetlamp post without its comically large hardware. This form suggests both the city streetlights whose illumination signaled dinnertime in my youth, and the softer radiance of reading lamps that greeted me upon arriving home. This interior/home and exterior/play dualism is heightened by the presence of a disassociated window. The window represents one of the innermost nesting dolls in the systems of division within an interior space. Isolated in space, the interior feature suggests a wall that incases it as its vertical planes projects outward and form a perceived spatial barrier. Like the aforementioned fence, fractured and arbitrarily placed in a given space, the orphaned window suggests an interior/exterior dichotomy without any firm grasp on which side is which. I hope that sense of confusion is amplified as a viewer navigates the installation, pausing as the window acts as a frame, composing their perspective of the objects within the installation as well as the space around it. While one of the double hung window frames is empty and only intimates the presence of glass, the other frame holds a sheet of plastic normally used to diffuse the light emanating from drop-ceiling style florescent tubes. This light fracturing membrane further obscures both a viewer's line of site, and the assumed functional if not rational qualities of a window.

In the midst of these absurd, amalgamated objects, lays a more inconspicuous element. Strips of household molding are relieved of their normal occupation, supporting interior walls, and allowed to rest easy in its isolation. Unlike the precarious footprints of the other objects, the horizontal monolith of molding sits stoutly on the floor but nonetheless acts as a powerful spatial organizer. Molding is after all the horizon of the

home. Its presence acts as the barrier between floor and wall, the horizontal and vertical systems of division within a given interior space, and thus implies more perceived volume than it actually possesses. The molding's form also harkens back to another understated albeit powerful object—the ubiquitous parking block. Omnipresent yet rarely considered, this strip mall parking lot staple holds authority over massive automobiles and their drivers, maintaining order in an otherwise lawless exterior expanse. At once molding, curb, and neither, this low-lying object provides another element of organizing intervention, one that encourages viewers to carefully walk around its perimeter despite the fact that they could easily step over the structure.

Similar to its constituent elements, the entirety of *This Must Be the Place* creates a space that hints at a duality of place or location, simultaneously existing as a familiar combination of the two and something entirely foreign. The disparate objects are unified yet unsettled by the installation's peculiar color palate and gentle ombré. Each element dons a smooth coat of pastel paint whose collective swatches resemble a look book brought to you by Easter edition SweeTARTS. Combined with a hazy tinted ombré, the installation suggests the aura of a forgotten yet known place, a fuzzy memory whose picture may come into focus if only you could lift the muddying veil of aging. Part blissful playground, part idealized image of home, *This Must Be the Place* is a manifestation of my own struggles with memory and its tendency to preserve only the highs and lows while the rest erodes into uncertainty. Though the space contained by my installation is unbounded, the viewer may be uncertain as to whether they are invited to enter the open space, building a tension similar to the vulnerable feeling of accessing

deep or repressed memories. The nonfunctional and absurd composition may encourage a humorous response, but one that I hope manifests as an awkward chuckle, amused but unsure what to make of it. In *This Must Be the Place*, my intent was to utilize that insecure humor as a way to access feelings of nostalgia and childhood playfulness, to provide an image of our idealized past. To relive the candy-coated glow of youthful spaces despite unavoidable truth that we've already seen the man behind the curtain.

CHAPTER VI  
ISOLATION/VACATION

When attempting to define humor in the year 2020, it would most likely be described as laughing to keep from crying. As the months slowly progress, it has become increasingly apparent that this movie in which we are all stars, is at its best a dark comedy, and at its worst, an apocalyptic science fiction. With the present moment in mind, I began working on a piece that returned to themes of absurdity, but shifted my focus to the possibilities of hyper-functionality as opposed to irrational situations set up by puzzling compositions of objects. While my installation, *Isolation/Vacation* approaches the potential of space with a more specific function in mind, I hoped to imbed it with a dichotomy rooted within the subjective reason for its use.

As I began questioning particularly personal spaces and how they would function in the public arena, *Vacation/Isolation*'s form was prompted by the absurd image of a shower stall in a public park. The creation of a private, intimate space placed in full view of the public. A low-fi escape pod for the introverted individual who wants to read a book in the sun without the pesky inconvenience of human interaction. This concept of isolation in public shifted dramatically once isolation became a mandatory aspect of life in the time of Covid-19. Now as we physically and socially distance ourselves from one another under the fear of illness and government mandates, isolation has lost its flare.

Now more than ever we yearn for interaction or at the very least escape from the mundanity of our homes that feel increasingly more like a cell than a sanctuary.

*Vacation/Isolation* now functions additionally as that escape. A reenvisioning of the concept of a “staycation,” where individuals may travel to the beachside time share of their mind, fully equipped with palm trees, white sand, and endless mojitos. Viewers are invited to visualize themselves comfortably seated in the installation’s folding deck chair, their view contained by a humorously low shower stall; like a horse wearing blinders meant to encourage relaxation. Strung on gently bent steel tubes, a backlit beach scene glows across a cheaply printed vinyl shower curtain, encompassing the perceived participant’s line of sight. Oriented backwards, so that the imagery faces inward, the glowing sheet mimics the self-contained lighting of a computer screen, like a Vaporwave wallpaper on your office desktop, promising heavenly tranquility if you can only make it through the workday. The cost of admission is merely a willingness to play. A willingness to forget your current conditions and engage in the construction of your own reality, even if it’s one rooted solely in one’s imagination. Whether imagined in the comfort of one’s living room or situated in a grassy field, *Vacation/Isolation* provides an absurdist solution to a relatable problem that we are all collectively dealing with in our own ways. In this installation, I aim to use humor as an entry point to a more difficult situation. To suggest that it is ok to laugh despite the uncomfortable knot of sadness and insecurity residing in our collective guts.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE SCREEN

My experiences constructing *Isolation/Vacation* influenced a deeper investigation into the concept of the screen. A screen has the characteristics of being unmistakably a physical form, but more often than not directs one's attention towards the recognition of a two-dimensional plane. Though our contemporary experience of the screen may allude to digital platforms such as the computer monitor, cell phone, and tablet, it also encompasses physical barriers such as window screening, shower curtain, or room partitions. This interest in the dividing and pictorial properties of the screen led me towards personally uncharted territory, an investigation into the intersection of painting and sculpture, a space where the authority of each becomes challenged.

The resulting piece, *The Tremendous Benefits of Jumping on a Trampoline*, samples its form from the tensioned surfaces of little league pitch-back nets and video projection screens. Its taut, transparent substrate began as a refuse material, catching over sprayed paint on its as it fell to the floor. In the same vein of elevating banal functional materials such as its steel conduit frame, I wished to capture this plane of disregarded, secondary action, and uplift it monumentally above an audience. This flattened pictorial plane, is further collapsed with the addition of physical sheet material, deepening the density of this pseudo two-dimensional space as paint and plastic vibrate between foreground and background. This confusing relationship to figure ground is only

heightened by the obvious object qualities of the piece, most notably the evidence of a back of the picture plane. Elements of the perceived front pierce through its substrate and are visible amongst the first layer of paint, buried beneath layers of process. In this way viewing the screen from its rear is comparable to peering into the layers of information stacked tall within a computer's hard drive. An analog record of actions to which this screen was subjected. This insinuation of the digital is strengthened by the backlighting allowed by the use of a transparent substrate. The lighting shifts as a viewer circles the screen, causing the inert surface image to flicker and change depending on one's position in space.

Though its outward appearance suggests a painting freed from its historical positioning against a wall, *The Tremendous Benefits of Jumping on a Trampoline* is not only an object but one that applies pressure to the tradition authority of sculpture. Its austere metal frame is made of steel conduit that appears to be void of human touch, possessing uniform right angled bends typical of factory fabrication. Additionally, its supporting structure is allowed to pivot and adjust, indicated by its hardware but fortified by the nylon yellow strapping that holds it erect. The strapping is perforated with equidistant grommets, one of which is latched to the corresponding kickstand, pulling the fabric taut. Though immobile on its own, the multitude of holes suggests the potential for repositioning in the pursuit of new perspectives. This implied, perplexing function helps to further complicate a viewer's expectations of both painting and sculpture. Through use of the screen I'm able to further muddy the brackish water where historical art mediums resist assimilation, challenging tradition and unearthing more questions than answers.

CHAPTER VIII  
IN THE ACT OF PLAYING YOU FORGET WHERE YOU ARE

During the later months of my final semester as a graduate student, the future appeared, in a word, bleak. My familiar experiences in academia were uprooted and reassembled to meet the growing health and safety concerns imposed by the ever-growing seriousness of 2020's Covid-19 pandemic. While I'm not one to dwell on cliché visual metaphors such as the phoenix, magnificently soaring anew above the ashes of its former self, some situations help to illuminate why these platitudes have risen in popularity.

Prior to the closure of university facilities and the indefinite postponement of my thesis exhibition, I began construction on an installation eventually named, *In the Act of Playing You Forget Where You Are*. Its conception began as a deeper investigation into concepts first explored in *This Must Be the Place*. Comprised of far fewer constituent elements, this more recent installation focuses its attention on the potential of grounded spatial organizers, expanding on the possibilities presented by the aforementioned isolated molding. Rather than a singular minimalist object, the structure of *In the Act of Playing You Forget Where You Are* expands outward and forms a semi-enclosed space, one more affiliated with its intended use of decoratively tracing an interior's perimeter. One face opens just wide enough to suggest a doorway, while the perimeter opposite of this entrance forms a perfect arcing alcove. The intimate if not sacred chamber intimates

an architectural space and specifically references the domed ceilings and semicircular alters I stood within during my 2019 trip to Venice, Italy. Similar to demarcated parking spaces and the iconic floor sculptures of artist Carl Andre, I hypothesize that objects placed directly on the ground have the innate ability to project themselves upward, encapsulating the negative space above its suggestive footprint. If this logic proves truthful, then the space confined by *In the Act of Playing You Forget Where You Are* isolates itself from its surroundings, as if imagined blocks of granite were stacked high above its immaculate molding.

This installation also suggests another ritualistic space, albeit one positioned in a more public arena—the neighborhood basketball court. The rectangular outline and singular arcing curve mimic the painted lines on the ground of asphalt courts, normally indicating the foul line and supplying clues as to how the game is played. The parallels drawn between spaces of worship and play are strengthened by the form’s color pallet. Pearly white, with a crisp line of burgundy striping its routed edge, the bold colors speak to the graphic jerseys worn by basketball players as well as the robe and sash worn by pastors during the Christian celebration of Lent. Both spaces welcome a congregation of individuals who seek reprieve from the struggles of daily life, a temporary escape to the sanctuary of community.

Several months into the Covid-19 pandemic, it felt as if the entire world could benefit from an escape, myself included. With the cancellation of my thesis exhibition, I struggled to stay positive as my studio grew increasingly full of works that missed the opportunity to reach their full potential—potential that flourishes with the addition of

human interaction, a necessary ingredient of all works of art. Unsatisfied with my newly adopted bleak perspective, I set out to use this opportunity to challenge my standard artistic practice. For the entirety of my graduate school experience I have been encouraged to consider context in my work, specifically the context of location. While I pride myself in actively questioning the traditional authority of sculpture, I too often look towards the iconic white cube gallery as the ideal arena to house my work. As museums and galleries remained closed indefinitely, I had no choice but to find a new location in which to activate my most recent installation.

As I searched for potential sites, I stumbled upon a sanctuary hiding in plain view. Tucked behind an abandoned lot in the Glenwood neighborhood of Greensboro is a single-hoop basketball court, dilapidated and forgotten by time. The hoop's filthy backboard is splintered, its rim clinging on by a solitary bolt, and its court appears to exist in a sort of no man's land. Similar to highway medians and the woods behind suburban homes, the court seems to live between the jurisdiction of private and public space. The location struggles to feel inviting though it lacks a fence or any other deterring barrier. This led me to begin researching public courts in urban spaces where I happened upon an article in *The New Yorker* that investigates the dwindling attendance at street ball courts in New York City. The title, *In the Act of Playing You Forget Where You Are*, is a quote from the article's author, Tomas Beller, who used it to describe the liberation young players experience as the act of playing basketball transports them from doldrums and harsh circumstances of everyday life in the city. I believe this declaration also acts a

metaphor for the potential of art, participation in which requires only a willingness to allow one's mind to enter an open state of free play.

While my onsite installation existed in physical form for a mere afternoon, its image lives on, memorialized in photography. As a trained sculptor, I have been conditioned to believe that true participation is only possible when in the physical presence of a work of art. However, the completion of *In the Act of Playing You Forget Where You Are*, began to challenge that assumption. Even prior to our mandated isolation, the majority of individuals experience art through mediated channels such as books and the internet. Art in the time of Covid-19 has only increase that majority. Nearly all of our current interactions— with people, art, and information— are disseminated through digital platforms as we yearn for connection while we are physically distant. This fact puts addition importance on the *image* of a work of art. Though hesitant to surrender such authority to the realm of photography, I came to relish the challenge and opportunity to embed my work with supplemental meaning.

The final iteration of *In the Act of Playing You Forget Where You Are*, now exists solely as the image you see below. This format allowed me the added specificity of composing not only the physical installation, but also the layers of context in which it resides. A chamber of pristine white and burgundy molding sits before the forgotten basketball court, provoking a synergetic contrast that heightens the differences between the two forms. The midafternoon sun pierces through the surrounding foliage and graces the surface of the backboard, illuminating it in a holy glow that aids in the suggestion of sacred, if not religious space. Placed directly on the ground, blades of grass and weeds

are framed against the white molding, increasing the saturation of each surface. The powerful symmetry of the image's composition makes it difficult for me to reimagine the installation displayed anywhere else. The conditions of viewing this installation in the austere confines of a white cube gallery seem especially uninspired as I have already witnessed its potential mature exponentially once released into the world. If, in a world post-Covid-19, I was given the opportunity to exhibit *In the Act of Playing You Forget Where You Are*, I question whether I would install it in its physical form, or, based on its amplified specificity and powerful imagery, opt to display its photograph. In a world where the digitally disseminated image holds the market share of viewership, is this the medium that now best fosters human relationships?

This highlights the paradoxical trajectory of my thesis experience. One that concludes with more questions than answers. Unlike the scientific method, where hypothesis is followed by experimentation, proof, and conclusion, this document traces a voyage of exploration that has yet to reach its destination. I want to continue making work that probes the collective human experience through the lens of my own personal idiosyncrasies—to mine the relationships we forge with individuals, locations, and memory, establishing new perspectives that complicate those relationships. I want to encourage play, conjure feelings of nostalgia, and construct absurd situations that imply self-deprecatory humor even in the midst of tragedy. In challenging the authority of traditional sculpture, I must also challenge myself to remain fluid and adaptable. By engaging with art, we participate in an act of play, one I believe may build a better understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit.

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