

## RESTORATION

A thesis presented to the faculty of Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art.

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In this incredible journey, it is fitting to acknowledge the influence of the beautiful and wonderful natural world which has brought more joy and pleasure to my life than words can express. For this reason, I feel strongly about the protection of our planet for current and future generations so that our children might feel the same sense of wonder and delight that I have experienced.

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## ABSTRACT

### RESTORATION

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My thesis essay and creative work examine and critique contemporary attitudes towards environmental sustainability by exploring the philosophies and practices of earlier global cultures that led them to a more harmonious existence with the natural world. My interest in this subject is intensely personal and based on my experiences as an immigrant to the U.S. Growing up in the mountains of Colombia, I learned the importance of balance in life. We understood that our actions had a direct effect on the environment. As children we were taught that humans are deeply connected to nature, dependent on its vital resources for survival and, therefore, responsible for acting as caretakers of our environment for the benefit of our entire community. In moving to the U.S., I observed many differences including a disconnect between people and nature that is most evident in the vast consumption and misuse of resources.

As a citizen, I am concerned about what is lost when we remove the natural world from our lives and value a sanitized lifestyle that is mainly concerned with convenience. My research investigates cultures that for centuries lived in harmony and balance with the

natural world. My research is intended to compel the viewer to think about what these cultures might teach us about the way we distribute and use natural resources. My hope is to produce work that contributes to a deeper appreciation and awareness of the consequences of our actions.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“We are the people of the Earth. We do not own her; we belong to her. What she experiences, we experience.”

Moral Ground, Robin Collin (2010, 86)

My work examines and critiques contemporary attitudes towards environmental and social sustainability by exploring the philosophies and practices that have led some cultures to a more harmonious existence with the natural world. My interest in this subject is intensely personal and based on my experiences as an immigrant to the U.S.

Growing up in the mountains of Colombia, I learned the importance of tending to the earth as an essential part of achieving balance in life. We understood that our actions had a direct effect on the environment. As children we were taught that humans are deeply connected to nature, dependent on its vital resources for survival and, therefore, responsible for acting as caretakers of our environment for the benefit of our entire community. In moving to the U.S. I observed many social and cultural differences including a disconnect between people and nature and people and society, a disconnect that is made manifest by the vast amount of consumption and misuse of resources.

As an adult I have become aware that the environment is simply one aspect of a breakdown of social and cultural values that are important for the well-being of our society. As a citizen I am concerned about what is lost when we remove the natural world from our lives and value a sanitized lifestyle that is mainly concerned with convenience. We have implemented changes that have made our interactions quicker but have eliminated the important social engagement with and support of members of

our community. These changes have made it possible to be anonymous and isolated within our communities.

I remember how long it took to do simple shopping at the local market in Nebraska because my parents would stop and talk to everyone. It seemed like they knew everyone by name. As a child it seemed like chaos and was exhausting because it took so long to do everything; at the same time, it was incredibly satisfying because of the great sense of community. In many ways my small community in Nebraska was an extension of my experience in Colombia. I felt like everyone really cared about each other and they showed a great deal of support for one another. When I left that community I noticed that things were different in other places. People were always in a hurry to get done with everything so that they could move to something else. Their desire for convenience led them to go to huge stores like Wal-Mart where they could find everything they needed in one place. They thought it even better yet when they did not have to talk to anyone thanks to the use of the self check-out service.

All of this is great if you are in a hurry, but terrible if you care for your community. Now there is no need to speak to anyone, much less care about who they are or what they do. Too many people have tunnel vision and only look at the most direct path, completely missing all of the wonders of our surroundings. Human isolation ultimately affects our economic and social lives because we are no longer embedded within mutually supportive communities.

My research investigates cultures of the Americas, such as Native American, that for centuries lived in close-knit communities with deeply held core values concerning

harmony and balance with the natural world. My body of work is intended to compel the viewer to think about what earlier cultures might teach us about the way we use and distribute natural resources and the negative effect that use has on our social system. My goal in my thesis project was to make work that contributes to a deeper appreciation and awareness of the consequences of the actions taken by contemporary culture.

In this critical essay I present my work in the context of the research that informed it as a means for further understanding the work as well as to raise awareness of the dire conditions facing our planet. One of the ways in which my work operates is to highlight the importance of the processes of natural restoration. In the few remaining environments where there is no human intervention, nature restores itself. Humans, whose actions place responsibility for stewardship on someone or something else, too often interrupt the regenerative process.

In *The World Without Us* Weisman observes, "One day after humans disappear, nature takes over and immediately begins cleaning house-or houses- that is. Cleans them right off the face of the Earth, they all go." (2007, 15) The process of cleaning might take thousands of years because the material on the ground today includes matter that is neither biodegradable nor recyclable. To compound the problem these substances are often toxic leaving a wasteland incapable of the process of restoration that is so essential for the survival and well-being of the earth.

## Section I: Conceptualizing Sustainability

The initial inspiration for my work is rooted in my earliest memories. Growing up in the mountains of Colombia, I was surrounded by the natural world. In this magical place, there were no fences, walls or streets between me and the amazing jungle of the rainforest. Waking up every morning in this environment gave me the education I needed to survive, but more importantly to appreciate the world around me. My typical day began by checking my shoes and pants to make sure nothing crawled in them during the night, like scorpions and spiders. Beyond that daily ritual my major concerns were food and playing in the jungle.



*Figure 1. Javier Fox, "The Orphanage," 2008*

When I moved to the U.S., I was overwhelmed by the fast-paced environment and the vast array of choices. It was like the whole world was suddenly in front of me. I could go to a store and buy things from anywhere in the world: food, clothes, toys, and books. This abundance opened my eyes to the greatness and opportunities that America can provide to me and to others living in this nation. Initially, I was inspired by the freedom on almost every level that I had for the first time in my life and the great many opportunities that lie before me. Once I began to mature, however, I realized that everything has a price, especially freedom. I began to realize that as a nation we spend so much on defense that is touted as protecting our freedom at the expense of so many other vital necessities such as health, education, infrastructure, and the environment.

My intention for my work is to raise awareness of the lasting consequences of human activity on the earth. My pieces are intended to foster an understanding that everything we do has an effect on the natural world, on our way of life in this great nation, and the lives of countless others living in the developing world.

The earth's natural balance is disappearing at an alarming rate as resources are being taken without thought to regeneration. If we continue our present practices, there will be no resources left to continue the cycle that nature needs to provide us with life. As Weisman points out, "There are cycles in life. From the seed comes the tree, from the tree comes the fruit we eat, and we give back as humans. Everything is meant to serve man. If people are gone from this cycle, nature itself will be over." (2007, 270) In this statement, we see the important role played by humans in sustaining the earth and

vice versa. In our pursuit of “better” lives, we have become accustomed to having access to an abundance of goods that are easy to acquire. On just about every corner in this country, we can find places to eat, places to shop, and places to play. As a result, our values have shifted from participating in productive and active communities to a much more self-centered and consumerist society.

My work also critiques the consumption of synthetic materials that contribute to an unhealthy ecosystem. These man-made materials have created more pollution because they are slow to decompose. In some cases, for example, with plastics as well as other synthetics the process of restoration does not occur for hundreds of years, if ever, and meanwhile the land becomes toxic and dangerous for any human or wildlife to use.

In my work, I hope the viewer sees an exploration of the way natural restoration occurs as a result of the interaction between earth and humans. It consists of eight sculptures, each representing the regenerative power of nature. They also display the interaction between earth and humans in daily life. My work is constructed primarily of clay with components of natural and man-made materials. All of the pieces are built by using different ceramic processes. Clay is a material obtained from the earth that can be molded and shaped by human hands. I chose this material because it is an important natural material that can be fired or glazed according to what I am trying to express. My process involves the construction of hand-built pieces with components of wheel-thrown parts.

I took as inspiration recognizable man-made structures such as factories, bridges, churches, schools, and vehicles. They have become so embedded in our

society that it would be almost impossible to live without them. I wanted to see for myself the way nature breaks these structures down through natural decomposition. I visited many places where these types of buildings have been abandoned and paid close attention to the incredible work performed by nature once humans have stopped maintaining them. This process reminded me of the times as a child when my friends and I went to a part of the orphanage that was off limits. This part of the building complex was abandoned, making it unsafe. Being typical children, we went anyway. We liked going at night because it was very dark and spooky. When we walked inside the buildings our footsteps echoed in the narrow passages. My friends and I liked to haunt each other. It was easy to do because we were already pretty scared by the sounds and shadows of the bats around us. In the darkness we could see nothing.

Once when I went during the day, I had an experience that I cannot forget. As I walked through the building, I saw the sunlight coming through the cracks of the roof. As I walked to the middle of the room, I faced a big tree that had grown through the roof allowing for more sunlight to come through. Flowers and plants were growing next to the tree inside the building. It was like a garden. I just stood there and looked at it in amazement at the beauty and tranquility of nature flourishing inside a man-made structure. Nature was restoring itself. The house cleaning had begun.

I decided to try to duplicate the process by putting my own structures through a similar procedure of decay and restoration that involved experimenting with natural processes. I subjected my pieces to rain, wind, erosion, and hot and cold temperatures. I placed the structures in various outdoor locations so that they were exposed to conditions similar to those in the orphanage. The initial results were devastating for my

pieces. I used unfired clay to make the structures in order to be able to see the results quickly. Nature was too harsh: all that remained were puddles of clay. I was pleased to see the process but was faced with the challenge of trying to create or replicate quickly a process that normally occurs over a long period of time.



*Figure 2. Javier Fox, "Rain Maker," 2018*

I decided to make my own rainmaker. The rainmaker provided more control of the environment in which to expose my pieces and allowed me to experiment with the amount of water and wind (provided by a fan) that affected the structures. My experiment helped me to understand how the variables of time and quantity affected the process of decay and restoration of nature.

During this time of experimentation, I was looking at the work of Paul J. Stankard who is an American glass artist best known for his very detailed microorganism environments created inside glass paperweights. I was interested in looking at habitats

and the natural balance in order. In Stankard's works, I saw microscopic, detailed habitats that expressed the relationship between man and nature in an interactive environment.



Figure 3. Paul J. Stankard "Paper weight, 2014



Figure 4. Paul J. Stankard "Field Flowers," 2012

I was impressed by his attention to detail and ability to capture the richness and complex texture of nature in such a small space. From early in his life, nature played a crucial role in how and why he puts natural themes together. (Corning Museum of Glass, 2015) One of his favorite memories as a child was picking blueberries and flowers for his mother. For this reason, he uses them in most of his work. Stankard's experiences in his youth taught him to appreciate nature as well as the importance of living in harmony with it. I am always inspired when looking at his work and motivated to try to capture such complex and rich detail in my own work.

Another artist that has influenced my work is Kristen Morgin, an American visual artist who primarily works in sculpture. She creates objects that at first glance appear to have been discarded. Each piece shows evidence of wear, often containing the rust and rips of things that have long ago ceased to be used. Despite the appearance of having

been made of cardboard, tin, and paper, the works, which reflect American culture's ephemera, are actually created entirely from unfired clay. The works are illusory recreations of mementos that have been lost to time. (Gonzalez-Jarrett, 2017) Morgin keeps her pieces unfired to retain the natural texture and appearance of the clay, a material that changes drastically when fired. Like the objects that they imitate, her sculptures are meant to eventually crumble, having an even shorter lifespan than the objects they resemble. The content of these works focuses on fantasy versus reality, highlighting celebrity and beauty that has long past, created by a material that is not what it seems.



Figure 5. Kristen L Morgin, "Piano Forte," 2004



Figure 6. Kristen L Morgin, "Monopoly," 2007

From Morgin's work, I learned that when making sculptural pieces, I was not bound by using fired clay for the finished product; rather, I could use any kind of finish

necessary to achieve the desired result. For example, the cold finishes, as they are called, can be applied and changed at any time because they do not need to be fired. Her work provided me with a different perspective on clay as a medium. I began to look at it as a canvas with infinite possibilities.

## Section II: From Conceptualizing to Actualizing Sustainability



*Figure 7. Javier Fox, "What beliefs," 2018*

I began my work by creating a church, which for me is a symbol of religious institutions. Sadly, these institutions are slowly deteriorating in our modern age. My

process started with an examination of my own personal beliefs by thinking about the role they play in shaping the way I conduct my daily life. I recognized that divisions occur often among individuals who hold strong opinions and different beliefs, and these divisions can create a sense of isolation and a lack of unity in communities. In my opinion, the main purpose of faith is to share love, patience and compassion. Based on these values, we should take time to appreciate each other's differences in order to create a better society.



Figure 8. Javier Fox, "Broken Bridge,"2018

This broken bridge represents the decay of the infrastructure of our country. For many years we built great highways and roads. We failed, however, to look to the future and did not maintain what we created. Because of our failure to invest in public works, our roads and bridges are failing and falling apart.

I decided to use the bridge because it symbolizes humanity's ability to connect people to places that were unreachable due to natural barriers. Bridges spanned canyons and rivers but, most importantly, they connected people and gave them the opportunity to build communities. The decaying bridge is a good metaphor for the break-down of the structure of our society, a structure that is failing us because of our self-imposed isolation from each other. Our failed bridges no longer connect us to communities.

This bridge is a representation of the Brooklyn Bridge. I selected the Brooklyn Bridge because it is an iconic monument, built in 1883, at a time of enormous optimism and large construction projects in the U.S. It is also one of the oldest road bridges in the U.S. In my work, I demonstrate what could happen if we do not take care of our infrastructure. Without roads and bridges, the fabric of society will also decay.



Figure 9. Javier Fox, "Higher Education," 2018

"Higher Education" is a school. For me this building represents the decline in American education. Schools have become a microcosm of our society and, therefore, are plagued with the problems of society. Schools have become a battle ground with school shootings, drugs and gang activity increasing every year. The government has failed to provide enough money for education and for the safety of its children and teachers and instead has opted to spend money on the military. As an educator, I believe that the greatest gifts we can give individuals is a great education. With education, individuals have opportunities and the hope for a better future. Without equal education for all, our society decays like our infrastructure. To restore our society, we must invest in our children so that they will be equipped to continue the work of improving our society. Without the investment, our schools will crumble just like the structure depicted in Figure 8.



Figure 10. Javier Fox, "Human Appetite," 2018

This sculpture is a representation of the progress necessary to create new jobs and a better society. At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, there were thousands of factories throughout America that made this country great by developing new materials and products to make our lives more efficient. But with industrialization came isolation. As we became more and more reliant on these new products, society stopped striving to create and ceased learning how to make things for themselves. With this piece, I decided to incorporate a video because it helps the viewer to understand the juxtaposition of a huge building belching toxic materials and waste into the air with a waterfall that represents clean water, the source of life and restoration.

## CHAPTER TWO: CONCLUSION

We must take great care to balance the environment with the development of the human race. According to the Dalai Lama, as quoted in *Moral Ground*, “When the environment changes, the climatic conditions also change. When the climate changes dramatically, the economy and many other things change. Our physical health will be greatly affected. Again, conservation is not merely a question of morality, but a question of own survival.” (2010, 15) Essentially, the spiritual leader underscores the fact that humankind suffers when nature is out of balance. Furthermore, the present generation must consider future generations: a clean environment is a basic human right. Therefore, it is our moral and ethical responsibility to ensure that the planet we leave our children is as healthy as we found it, if not healthier. This is not as difficult a proposition as it might sound. While there is a limit to what we, as individuals, can do, there is no limit to what a universal response might achieve. It is up to us as individuals to do what we can, however little that may be, with the knowledge that when everyone does their share, the results are exponentially multiplied. Future generations will be affected by the choices that we make today. This is the time to take action. Together we can take steps to improve the health of the planet and, in so doing, create positive changes to strengthen the fabric of our communities.

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