

11-18-2011

[]

Megan Metté

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Metté, Megan, "[]" (2011). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.

[]

By

Megan Mett 

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

College of Imaging Arts and Sciences: School of Photographic Arts and
Sciences

Approved: 11-18-2011

Assistant Professor Carla Williams, Committee Chair, Interim MFA Director Date

Professor Emeritus Elaine O'Neil, Committee Advisor Date

Dr. Jessica Lieberman, Committee Advisor Date

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
Abstract.....	2
List of Figures.....	3
Introduction.....	4
I.....	6
II.....	15
III.....	20
Installation.....	24
Conclusion.....	27
Bibliography.....	29

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my committee members, Carla Williams, Jessica Lieberman, and Elaine O'Neil, for encouraging me to take the necessary steps to fully realize the meaning of this work. Thank you for being my mentors and my reminders of why I make art. I hope to one day be as good a mentor as you have been to me.

I wish to thank all of my fellow classmates, especially Matt Chung, Erika Heffernan, Rodrigo Gonzalo-Encinar, Sarah Newman, Whitney Warne, and Emily Zeller. Thank you for your support, guidance, and friendship throughout this time.

And finally, I couldn't have done this work without the support of my mother and brother. My mother's strength and my brother's constructive criticism were driving forces in my work. They will always be inspirations in my life and work.

[]

By

Megan Mett 

Abstract

[] explores the socially constructed notions surrounding a house and a home and those things that are necessary in order to feel at home in the world. As a way to process the feelings associated with being the child of a broken home, I reconfigure the rooms of various houses in an attempt to escape my reality, and enter into an ideal dream space. Both my photographic and video works explore how utopian architecture and the American dream have in some ways influenced my concept of the ideal and my process of making these dreams. In the end, the dream space has many imperfections, proof that even in dreaming we can't escape our past.

List of Figures

Figure 1 “Flesh” 2011.....	6
Figure 2 “Jutting Blue” 2011	9
Figure 3 “Whitewash” 2011.....	11
Figure 4 “String” 2011.....	16
Figure 5 “Dark Corners” 2011.....	17
Figure 6 “Chopped Door” 2011.....	18
Figure 7 “Green Walls” 2011.....	21
Figure 8 “The Space Where I Am” 2011.....	23
Figure 9 Installation Shot for [] 2011.....	25

Introduction

All human beings—everyone, everywhere and always—begin existence in homes constructed of the same material, of the same shape, size, light, sound, and temperature. We all begin life in the womb. Though we have no conscious memory of this, our earliest environment, we generally imagine our mother’s womb to be a place of calm, of nurturing, of total safety and protection. Once we are born, however, we must learn to create our own places of safety and security, of nurturing and calm.¹

I dream of a house that will comfort me and make me feel at home: a structure where the “perfect” family resides.² I bring to these imagined houses an understanding that even in dreams, we cannot escape our past. [] explores the house as a home, the meanings we assign to their walls, and the reappearing projection of one home—my own.

When I was three, my father, filled with delusions of grandeur, left. I do not remember the moment he left, but I do remember the moment my mother said he was not coming back. This thesis forces me to understand the void left by an absent father, and my disconnection from the structure called home. Also it provides an ineffable means of expressing the anxiety and anger resulting from being the child of a broken home.

Walls, corners, and ceilings of various houses were reconfigured using the camera’s frame and focus. The houses that I chose to photograph were those of friends and acquaintances. The type of house did not matter, only that it was a lived-in house with many rooms, and, thus, many possibilities. Each room provided me with an open space, diffused light, and a monochromatic color palette, tools used to create dream spaces for contemplation. As the color and focus shift, the representation of a house is confused by abstraction. At once beautiful and unsettling, these images lie somewhere between reality, a daydream, and a nightmare.

¹ Toby Israel, *Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places* (Chichester, England: Wiley-Academy, 2003), 4.

² Here I am referring to a westerner’s desire for perfection. The American Dream with house, car, kids, and the overarching feeling of completeness provides one possible definition for perfection in a westerner’s life. Many Americans, such as I, are products of this socially constructed mentality.

Opening a window into my subconscious, the installation includes sound and video to narrate the anxiety I felt within my own childhood home. Although I strive to make each piece aesthetically beautiful, my past interrupts the present. Within each dream space there is an emptiness that cannot be filled. This body of work attempts to move through the personal to the general, projecting an intimate account of home into the images and sounds that I create to question the fantasies in which we all live.

This thesis paper begins with the house; questioning its structure, its makers, its idealized place in the world, and its spatial effects on family and individual. It also explores the structure of the house as a canvas, the process of infusing my personal experience with its surface, and the creation of images that show the persistence, even in the most perfect place, of the imperfections of both person and structure. It ends in the dream space, the corner of a room where emotions rise and fall, and the overarching question: Can we ever feel at home in the world?

I.

The enterprise and skill with which animals make their nests is so efficient that it is not possible to do better, so entirely do they surpass all masons, carpenters and builders; for there is not a man who would be able to make a house better suited to himself and to his children than these little animals build for themselves. This is so true, in fact, that we have a proverb according to which men can do everything except build a bird's nest.³

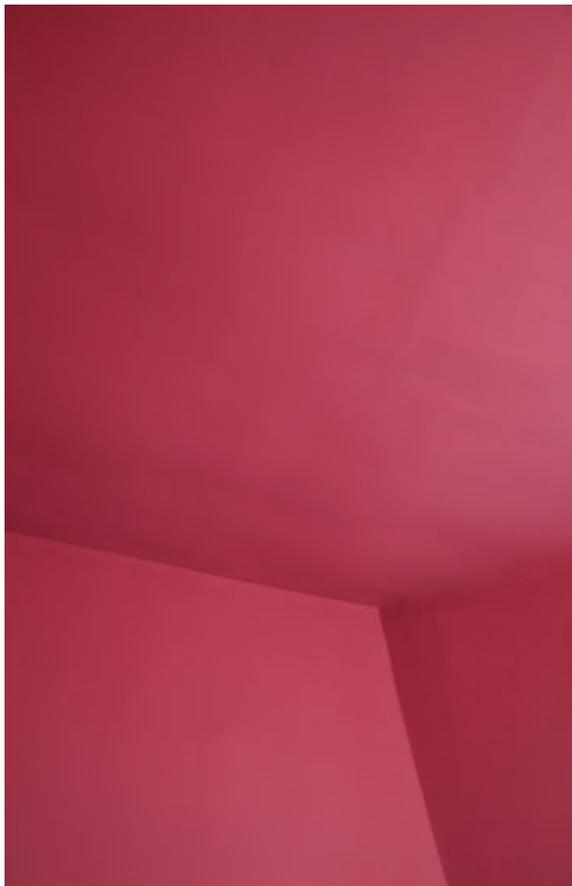


Fig. 1

Building spaces with the mechanical eye of a camera allows me to present the house as I want it to be seen. It is through the camera's frame that I look for the ideal shapes, colors, and light that are most alluring. I then leave it up to my subconscious mind to make final decisions. In "Flesh," (Fig. 1) three pink walls create the corner of a room. The walls appear soft and cushiony. For a moment, the pink corner plays with our perception, appearing to protrude out toward our bodies or collapse into the wall where the photograph hangs. Although the

warm color and diffused light are attractive and inviting, the optical illusion created in the piece presents the space as constantly shifting, causing the viewer to feel unsure about

³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 92.

entering into it. Like “Flesh,” the entire series [] takes on the appearance of idealized spaces, but underneath the beauty there are flaws.

The process and reasoning behind creating these spaces has made me question other fantasies surrounding the house. I am specifically interested in the American Dream and how it has shaped my expectations of perfection in a house and a family, what architects have thought of as utopian architecture, and how we actually experience these spaces. Examining the architecture and spaces of houses, I ask: Is there a structure where the perfect family resides and is this home for me? Can I make a place home if I don’t recognize what one is? My interests lie in the reality and fantasies of a house, specifically the structure itself and a person’s way of coping with a less-than-settled life.

According to the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, “life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house.”⁴ At its most primitive, a house is a shelter from the outside world, but in its more metaphorical state, it is a blank canvas where we bring life. In each room, notions of family hang on the walls, loaded with memories of how we came into being and expectations for the future. And then things get spilled, people leave, people pass on, new additions arrive, needs change, people evolve, and the ideas of family and the expectations of a house change. The canvas gets reworked. As a child from an incomplete home, I rework the canvas, take it apart, turn it inside out, and reassemble it with the naivety and imagination of my childhood self.

The importance of a house is especially great when we attach expectations to it by calling it a home. “Home” means different things: for some, it is a fleeting moment of familiarity; for others, it is the comfort brought on by a person or object; and still for others

⁴ Ibid., 7.

it is a level of Dante's hell. When calling a house a home, we expect to gain more than a shelter. We expect furnishings that are comfortable, belongings that express our identity, protection from Mother Nature and predators, and gathering spaces for entertainment and learning. Above all, we expect a family to thrive in a home. When we leave the house in which we grew up, we are left in a void of the unknown, and we start to fantasize about future houses. For someone who came from a broken home, a future house could take on numerous forms, and in some ways I show this in the variety of houses that I photograph in this work. However, many of us have a tendency to dream of perfection, the perfect scenario: this notion of feeling complete with house, car, and kids. As Americans, a culture with many learned expectations, we have an itch for the socially constructed notion of the perfect family and the perfect house. However, in many cases, as evident in my images, our homes reflect the realities of our past, and the house itself has nothing to contribute but a space for dreaming.

I live in shelters, boundaries from the outside world or walls that contain my mind and body. They may look beautiful, I might fill them with comforting, nostalgic things, but they are just things. As some of my images suggest, underneath the personal clutter, houses are banal, sterile spaces, controlling the air that we breathe and the motions of our bodies. The structure of a house becomes a marker of boredom, a barrier causing alienation of community and the kind of isolationism that breeds broken homes and families. So why do we continue to dream of houses as supplying our perfect ideas of home?

Many architects and developers in the late twentieth century suggested and upheld an ideal structure for American habitation at the same time that the divorce rate was steadily increasing. The idea of a perfect structure and location coinciding with the perfect

family still persists in our society even though we see an increase in broken familial relationships. In her article, “Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal,” Laura Miller explains how even though our ideas about family have changed due to divorce, there is still hope for many individuals: “While ‘togetherness’ as a term has perhaps been discredited, there is still a strong sense that the sentiment behind it is a noble goal, and that suburbia offers the best chance to reclaim the spirit of togetherness.”⁵ It seems, then, that even when we realize there is no such thing as the perfect family, we still strive for those standards.

Modernist architecture and suburbia each play an influential part in the conception of [] as well as in my daily life. In my images, I mimic the Modernist minimal design. In my everyday life, I’m subconsciously influenced by the social construction of American suburban life. I, too, strive for perfection. When starting this work, I would search for the perfect angle or light in each house that I entered; it was whatever I understood as perfect or as most desirable to the eye. However, I



Fig. 2

⁵ Laura Miller, “Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal,” *Sociological Forum*, 10, no. 3 (1995), 402.

“Family togetherness, meaning that husband, wife, children choose to spend the time not claimed by wage labor or school with one another, preferring each other’s company to the competing attractions of the outside world.” Miller, 394.

would then subconsciously frame the image, skewing or focusing in on some sort of imperfection. Initially, I wanted the spaces to be ideal in their splendor. It was only later that I realized I wanted to reveal that even with the most beautiful light, shape, and color, there is always some sort of imperfection. From a distance, “Jutting Blue” (Fig. 2), is quite elegant, glowing with a diffused light. However, upon closer inspection, one sees the cracks, a strange shape jutting from the wall, and dirt on the floor. The pristine space becomes tainted.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Modernists’ International Style of standardized structures was thought to be “revolutionary, utopian, and puristic.”⁶ They challenged the highly decorative architecture of the Victorian and Edwardian ages popular in nineteenth-century America. As architecture historian Mark Wigley explains, “to look at decoration is to be absorbed by it.”⁷ The move toward a more simplistic house was to show how “the look of modernity is that of utility perfected, function without excess”⁸ and “a machine for living in.”⁹ Stripped down to what architect Le Corbusier called their “essence,” these houses were intended to promote a more simplistic life and an improved society. As English scholar Tim Woods states, this type of architecture was “partly generated by the necessity of postwar urban housing regeneration, in a grand utopian gesture, architecture was to become not just a reflection of, but a decisive agency in the creation of, a new society.”¹⁰ The Modernist shelter with white walls and a lack of ornamentation was thought to raise the morale of society by simplifying distractions and covering up dirt and decay as

⁶ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1977), 3.

⁷ Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1995), 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester University Press, 1999), 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

well as provide a more cost-effective space for living. When discussing Le Corbusier's book *The Decorative Art of Today*, Wigley states, "It argues that modern architecture can only be modern inasmuch as it is white and insists that this is not simply an aesthetic issue. The whole moral, ethical, functional, and even technical superiority of architecture is seen to hang on the whiteness of its surfaces."¹¹ For Le Corbusier, white, otherwise known as "whitewash," covered up all signs of imperfection and gave the appearance of cleanliness, of a highly moral society, and of wealth. The hope was that the appearance of a better society would encourage residents to create a better society:

Whitewash exists wherever people have preserved intact the balanced structure of a harmonious culture. Once an extraneous element opposed to the harmony of the system has been introduced, whitewash disappears... Whitewash has been associated with human habitation since the birth of mankind. Stones are burnt, crushed and thinned with water—and the walls take on the purest white, an extraordinarily beautiful white.¹²



Fig. 3

I grew up in a house covered in whitewash. At times, I found the minimal design to be beautiful, but mostly I found it to be a restrictive, sterile, and banal space. The idea that

¹¹ Wigley, xvi.

¹² Ibid., 8.

a culture could be positively affected by whitewashing the imperfections of a house inspired me to search out spaces to photography that were specifically white. In “Whitewash” (Fig. 3), white spreads across the page with only a few black lines dividing the space. Like Le Corbusier, I stripped the walls of the house down to their very essence and created a clean, white, beautiful space in the image: a minimal design. However, while looking at this image for a length of time, the white shapes delineated by three thin black lines disorient the viewer by forcing the question: Is this a wall, a pillow, paper, or a couch? With my use of abstraction, an illusion is created and the space loses its ability to make logical sense; the white constricts and expands, placing the audience in a space between what is there and what is seen. Unable to decipher the space quickly, a sense of anxiety and dissociation creeps in. Once an object is defined, a confusing space is transformed into a banal object. As a result, there is a feeling of disappointment and melancholy.

In addition to the ideas of a pure or moral society being stimulated by modern architecture, another piece of the utopian ideology was booming in the 1950s when the American Dream moved to the suburbs. Years later, I would be living in the suburbs. Here, not only did the structures need to be ideal, but also the locations of these houses were paramount. As Miller states, “the legendary family of the 1950s, complete with appliances, station wagon, backyard barbecues, and tricycles scattered on the sidewalks, represented... the first wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all its members’ personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life.”¹³ In suburbia, it was hoped that the family would spend all leisure time together, thus strengthening the family unit. Ultimately, it became understood that it was unrealistic to think that a single

¹³ Miller, 401.

family home could fulfill all the personal needs of each family member. Suburbia has been shown to cause more alienation and isolation from community and family than family togetherness. According to Miller, “the stress on privacy that places a boundary between family and others also serves to separate family members from each other.”¹⁴ Instead of family members spending time together, they spend time in their individual rooms, locked away from their families and the outside world.

In many cases, the suburbs failed to strengthen the family unit, while Modernists failed to see how their architecture could be restrictive and banal. Even with the dream spaces that I create, I can’t refrain from expressing these failures. Architect Paolo Portoghesi went so far as to call the Modernist house, “single family cells, which even resemble in their morphology the walls of funerary niches in great urban graveyards.”¹⁵ For Portoghesi, our houses are prisons where we live to die. For artists Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins, the house needed to be a more stimulating place to live long and prosper.

For Arakawa and Gins, the ideal home was one that could constantly stimulate our minds. They believed that with enough mental stimulation, architecture could help prolong our lives.¹⁶ Disorientation, vibrant color, and various physical disruptions in the home would need to take place for this type of stimulation. Arakawa and Gins want people to “learn how not to die.”¹⁷ Their philosophy stems from their theories of the mind and body. They see an increase in violence and chaos in the world as the outcome of our present thinking. To end this violence, we must change our concepts, which are “encoded in the

¹⁴ Ibid., 412.

¹⁵ Paolo Portoghesi, *After Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), 17.

¹⁶ “A creature of the post-utopian era exacts out across its thinking field pace-forming images of how to position oneself or an evolving to that maximum demanded by the most perspicuous of ecstasies. For this to happen, every detail must be attended to and all processes in question should be exaggerated and prolonged.” Shusaku Arakawa and Madeleine Gins, *Reversible Destiny: We Have Decided Not to Die* (New York: Abrams, Inc., 1997), 135.135.

¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

brain and grounded in the body.”¹⁸ We therefore have to change our brains and bodies.

Arakawa and Gins see their architectural works as playing a role in this change.

Inspired by Arakawa and Gins, I want people to have an aesthetic experience that is somewhat disruptive. I reconfigure an ordinary space by skewing the angles of the room with only my camera, creating disorientation that is accompanied by emotion. I want to encourage the viewer to see beyond our fantasies and expectations. It is the purpose of my work to make people question the dream space before them, the spaces in which they live, and the fantasies that we build to fill the void.

¹⁸ Ibid., 20.

II.

To withdraw into one's corner is undoubtedly a meager expression. But despite its meagerness, it has numerous images, some, perhaps, of great antiquity, images that are psychologically primitive. At times, the simpler the image, the vaster the dream.¹⁹

Entering each new house, I find myself returning to a child's world of endless possibilities. I absorb each room's unfamiliar sights, smells, and sounds, exploring every nook and cranny. I let myself be drawn to spaces with beautiful light and shapes. I use the camera's eye to focus in on the areas of a house that I wish to transform into a new space, a dream space—a corner of my own.

I only use the camera's frame to manipulate my environment. Intentionally leaving out parts of rooms, people, and objects, I limit the colors on a monochromatic scale. I choose off-kilter compositions and framing techniques to create a different experience of the space. My focus is somewhat soft as to present a more dreamlike state, and my colors and light are carefully controlled. There is a sense of anticipation with a need to complete or comprehend the space. This intense concentration of an area of a room is a way to change my environment but also to reflect the uneasiness of my past where the only logic available to a three year old was to dream.

As Bachelard states, "an entire past comes to dwell in a new house."²⁰ My rooms are empty because they can't replace or cover up an absence that has been inside of me since my father's abandonment. In the houses where I reside, I still search each corridor, each light-filled room, each nook and cranny for something to make me feel at home, but that comfort is nowhere to be found. In this void, I do what I have subconsciously always

¹⁹ Bachelard, 137.

²⁰ Ibid., 5.

done to deal with the absence: I start to create something beautiful in its place. In a utopian



gesture, I imagine and create an alternative house within all the houses I visit or in which I reside. However, my subconscious projects itself into every fantasy, where everything was once beautiful and familiar is now unsettling and strange.

In “String” (Fig. 4), you see a white room empty except for a string attached to a rectangular shape that could easily be a doorway or a frame. Different colors define a room as light pours in from unknown sources. Much like all of the

Fig. 4 photographs in this series, the

representation of a space is confronted as the angles of the rooms are skewed, and there is no determining orientation as up, down, or sideways. “String” is a dream space, an abstraction or reconfiguration of space in which one can change the orientation, thus changing the dream.

My images confuse the walls, floors and ceiling of a space as well as get rid of any objects that are conveyors of wholeness. In “Dark Corners” (Fig. 5), I eliminate everything from the space but the walls. I skew the perspective of the ceiling so it no longer resembles a ceiling, wrenching the head beyond its normal axis, revealing the instability of our

perceiving self. This instability of perception becomes a metaphor for our often-misguided perceptions of the ideal.

Also working with elimination in abstraction, Rachel Whiteread creates sculpture casts out of empty spaces of a house. In her work “Untitled (One Hundred Spaces),” one hundred pieces are cast from the empty spaces found underneath one hundred abandoned chairs. She repeats this process with other abandoned domestic objects such as beds, closets, bookshelves, etc., and records the traces left behind in the absence between things. As Whiteread explains:

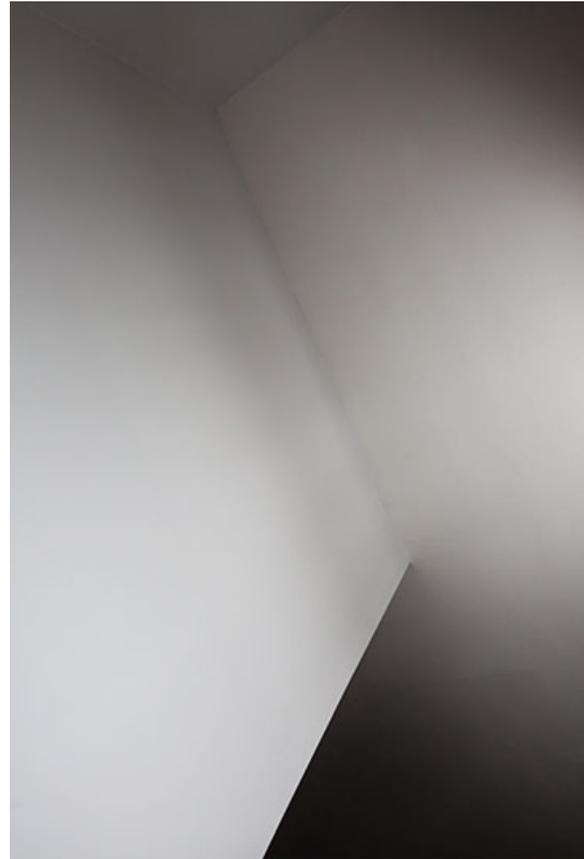


Fig. 5

There's a sense of puzzlement in just looking at them and thinking. 'We live in that kind of place. How do we function physically within a place like that?' This is definitely what I do when I look at my works. I think about how they affect me physically.²¹

Whiteread's sculptures force the audience to look at the absence inside the house (dealing with something we do not see but always feel), the memories projected into the space, and the disturbing psychological states that can arise in such spaces. She turns the house inside out, exposing a pathological body that needs to be studied, diagnosed, and treated. I,

²¹ Craig Houser, "If Walls Could Talk: An Interview with Rachel Whiteread." In *Rachel Whiteread: Transient Spaces* (NY: Abrams, Inc. 2001), 54.

however, see the house as what we make of it. We call it a home and make it our dream, but that dream is always fluctuating and destabilizing. I want my audience to teeter, at once feeling attracted and repelled by the spaces I present to them.

According to philosopher Hubert Dreyfus, “we never feel completely at home,”²² rather, we never feel completely at home in the world. As a result, Martin Heidegger explains this is “why we plunge into trying to make ourselves at home and secure.”²³ Repeatedly we fill the void with a fantasy.

Within the perception of home there is the possibility of the uncanny, of a threat. Sigmund Freud defines the uncanny as being something familiar yet very strange, or in other words, “something one does not know one’s way about in.”²⁴ Initially defined by psychologist Ernst Jentsch, the feeling of uncanniness is a result of “lack of orientation.”²⁵ As author Anthony Vidler further explains, “[There is] a sense of something new, foreign, and hostile invading an old, familiar customary world.”²⁶ In my images, I use abstraction to elicit an experience of the uncanny as well



Fig. 6

²² Hubert Dreyfus, quoted in Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1992), 8.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, quoted in Vidler, 23.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

as the instability of home. I take something familiar and create something unsettling. As a result, there is a desire of the viewer to change the disorienting space into a space that is ordinary. In the image "Chopped Door" (Fig. 6), one can find something familiar in the space (a closet door), but the way in which it is framed causes the viewer to have an uncanny experience, a kind of visual vertigo, of that space. At best, this lack of orientation awakens in the viewer his or her own feelings of being unsettled in the world, at worst the imagination conjures up a forgotten nightmare.

III.

*Architecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames its occupant.*²⁷

My work, in various ways, deals with space. When we think of space, we think of it as being this invisible unoccupied entity, but what we don't always acknowledge is the amount of control it has over us or how little control we have over it. Whether it is the space in a house, in the image on the wall, between the viewer and the image, a duration of time, the space between two lines, the void inside, or the space you encounter when entering an exhibition, space affects our bodies and minds and vice versa. We project our past experiences into the space even as the different spaces act upon our bodies, controlling how we breathe, see, think, and feel.

The photography of James Casebere demonstrates how scale and space can affect the audience as well as the creator. In his asylum photographs, he builds models of sterile spaces found in prisons, and then photographs and prints them on a large scale. From a distance these images appear to be photographs of a real space, giving off a sense of isolation, claustrophobia, and horror, but upon closer investigation one sees the illusion. The distance between the image and viewer becomes imperative to perception and the emotion that one can feel with the work. Backing up we can feel an atmosphere of solitary space, provoking in the viewer a feeling of dread. Casebere explains:

I'm trying to reflect an experience I desire as well as resent. I look at the solitary nature of that activity with affection, but I also look at the [labor] as at times limiting, and so try to build those sensations into some of the work. I think that's

²⁷ Beatriz Colomina and Jennifer Bloomer, *Sexuality & Space* (NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 83.

where the ambivalence is—I love this space but God, I wanna get the hell out of here as soon as I can.²⁸

Sometimes cold and dreary, sometimes warm and cluttered, the houses that I photograph are unsettling, often making me feel uneasy. I bring this discomfort to my work, most evident in “Green Walls” (Fig. 7). In this image, you find yourself in a corridor, the eye is led to a dead end where a right or left turn must be made; however, the diffused light is mysterious and uninviting. The caulking suggests that there is a rupture on the floor with the possibility of other ruptures that may not be safe. The color palette is dull and melancholic. Although the soft focus and green palette are entrancing, I feel trapped between the three walls that surround me, not wanting to see where the halls might lead.



Fig. 7

The house in which I made the video “The Space Where I Am” (Fig. 9) is another example where I consider and am affected by the space, but in this case it is both physical

²⁸ James Casebere, *Asylum* (Galicia, Spain: Xunta de Galicia in association with Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, 1999), 119.

and ephemeral. Here, I project a personal experience into the space, but use the sounds of water, combined with the moving image to enhance my performance. The video forces the viewer to experience a range of emotions over a short duration of time. While each photographic image records various rooms and geographic locations, the video and sound were created in only one structure, my current residence, in order to express a more personal and specific account of home.

After my father left, my defensive walls went up and I didn't talk to strangers for two years. The house became a place of alienation and a constant reminder of the abandonment. Unable to relate verbally to the outside world and to other people, a type of generalized anxiety took over much of my childhood and young adult life. The video resonates with this intense dread, anger, and anxiety. The sounds of water narrate my anxiety with the rising and falling of water pressure. The audience is forced to contemplate their own experience of the sounds, which are isolated by headphones. Images of the house, water, and myself fill the screen either as a single screen or multiple screens. I control the relationships seen between images to create an element of nervousness while the brain hastily tries to make sense of what the eye is taking in. In one instance, there are four screens of me sitting in the same chair, in the same room, mostly immobile, my white dress blending into the white walls of the house; meanwhile a mirror stares back at me without a reflection conveying my emotional discomfort of being in the physical space of a house. In one of the screens, I appear to have language but no voice. The water drowns out the sounds of my voice. Although you can't hear a word that I'm saying, my face reveals my distress while reading something out loud. I am reading a letter to my father.



Fig. 8

The Installation

The title of my exhibition, [] , is another empty space to be dealt with. The brackets create an opening which the mind can fill with whatever meaning the viewer assigns to it. In the English language, brackets are used for inserting one's own thought about what is presented before them. Mimicking my process, the title provides a moment for the viewer to insert a fantasy into an empty space as well as deal with the unsettling feeling of uncertainty when one finds no explanation.

The full realization of this thesis came into view when the images were printed on a large scale, framed, and hung on the walls in the gallery. Not only were the scale, color, positioning, and sequencing carefully considered but also the exhibition space itself and the emotion that I wanted to instill in the viewer. When installing the work in the gallery, I found myself, again, creating another dream space.

The exhibition space was already painted white, and ready to be transformed. I used movable walls to create three different spaces: the corner space for the video, another smaller space for images, and an extremely large space for the remaining images. I wanted to isolate the viewer in a corner with the video so that they could have an intimate experience with the sounds and moving image. The video space needed to have less light for viewing; the only image in this space, placed cater-cornered the video, was the most ominous image in the exhibition echoing the mood of the video. Not only did it function to draw the audience into a dark room in the far corner of the gallery, but it also defined the space as foreboding and horrific. The larger room felt cold and empty, while the narrow room felt a bit

more comfortable due to a showering of warm light. I juxtaposed this narrow space next to the large one so there would be a variety of emotional responses to the images. The viewer's response would be different depending on the distance between image and viewer along with the emotions felt in the exhibition space alone. With walls of whitewash, the



Fig. 9

exhibition space became part of the work (Fig. 9).

When sequencing the images, I paid particular attention to the colors in each image. There was a range from deep blue to rich pink and a smooth gradation from white to black. The more intense colors had a magnetic effect on me, ultimately drawing me closer to the image, forcing an intense emotional reaction. The more subdued colors had a more melancholic effect, allowing contemplation. With this in mind, I made certain the more brightly colored images were placed between images with a more muted color palette. I wanted to create an emotional roller coaster experience within the space, from

manic to melancholy. Like Mark Rothko, who painted large-scale blocks of two or three colors side by side, I wanted to communicate emotion through color. Printed large, my images would allow the viewer to feel as if they could transport into the space which existed in the photograph before them. Once inside the image, it would be the viewer's choice as to how long they would stay and what they would allow themselves to see, think, and feel.

In retrospect, I had created a situation in the space where the viewer could have multiple experiences. Due to their placement, the images could bounce off each other, or be viewed separately, thus allowing the viewer to see either the relationships between images or have the experience of one. After viewing the images, the video would alter interpretation, forcing the viewer to experience the images again. This time the images would be more sinister as one exits the whitewashed space.

Conclusion

For a house that was final (as final as one's dreams suggest), one that stood in symmetrical relation to the house we were born in, would lead to thoughts—serious, sad thoughts—and not to dreams. It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality.²⁹

Creating this work made it possible to build a bridge between my past experience of home, my process of creating dream spaces, and the fantasies of a house. In the end, the audience was able to feel different emotions throughout the space, but a general feeling of melancholia was a frequent response. Viewers could see a child creating a dream space in each of the images and the anxiety and anger in the house but didn't always see the correlations I was making with Modernist architecture and the fantasies of a house. It was not necessary, however, that the correlations be made in the photographs, rather it was important for me to understand them in order to create the work. Overall, the mood and emotional experience of the work was successful.

After making this work, I realized more clearly the parallels between my life and artwork that I had not seen previously. I was able to look closer at the social constructs of perfection, and see which of them still affect me. I realized how often I created fantasies when my expectations would fall short, and my need to work within an idealistic modernist aesthetic; facts which say something about a girl who comes from a place of incompleteness, and the desire to dream of something better.

I like to think, for me, home means comfort within myself. A house will never bring me comfort; therefore whatever house in which I reside can never be my home. Completeness is the unobtainable nirvana, so we must accept the imperfections, and the incomplete to allow us to start to feel comfort.

²⁹ Gaston Bachelard, 61.

This work is the beginning of understanding what it takes to feel at home in the world, and what happens when you have the courage to look inside yourself. I have discovered how to manipulate sound, video, and the photographic medium in order to make it tell my story. I have defined a life long theme to explore, and a willingness to reveal my most hidden secrets.

Bibliography

- Arakawa, Shusaku, Madeline Gins, Michael Govan, and Guggenheim Museum Soho. *Reversible Destiny: We Have Decided Not To Die*. New York: Abrams, Inc. 1997.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
- Casebere, James. *Asylum*. Galicia, Spain: Xunta de Galicia in association with Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, 1999.
- Colomina, Beatriz and Jennifer Bloomer. *Sexuality & Space*. NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992.
- Israel, Toby. *Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places*. Chichester, England: Wiley-Academy, 2003.
- Miller, Laura. "Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal." *Sociological Forum*, 10, no. 3 (1995): 393-418.
- Phillips, Glenn and Thomas E. Crow. *Seeing Rothko*. London: Tate Pub., in association with the Getty Research Institute, 2006.
- Portoghesi, Paolo. *After Modern Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1982.
- Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1977.
- Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1992.
- Whiteread, Rachel, Lisa Dennison and Craig Houser. *Rachel Whiteread: Transient Spaces*. NY: Abrams, Inc. 2001.
- Wigley, Mark. *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.
- Woods, Tim. *Beginning Postmodernism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999.