

[be]LONGING

A Thesis  
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the  
College of Graduate Studies  
University of Idaho  
by  
Megan Atwood Cherry

Major Professor: Stacy Isenbarger, MFA  
Committee Members: Delphine Keim, MFA; Allie Kurtz Vogt, MFA  
Department Administrator: Sally Machlis, MFA

December 2015

**AUTHORIZATION TO SUBMIT THESIS**

This thesis of Megan Atwood Cherry, submitted for the degree of Master of Fine Arts and titled “[be]LONGING,” has been reviewed in final form. Permission, as indicated by the signatures and dates below, is now granted to submit final copies to the College of Graduate Studies for approval.

Major Professor: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Stacy Isenbarger, MFA

Committee Members: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Delphine Keim, MFA

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Allie Kurtz Vogt, MFA

Department  
Administrator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Sally Machlis, MFA

**ABSTRACT**

This writing is a translation of what is communicated by the body of art work called [be]LONGING. Points of reference for this work include theatrical, construction and fiber art traditions. There are also strong influences of the art work and writing of others. Iconography, materials and processes are central to the meaning of this exhibition. In both words and installation, [be]LONGING sets the stage for an abstracted play, one which suggests the viewer as a character.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been aided in my work at the University of Idaho by many people and organizations. I'm grateful to all who offered support for my growth during this process. These people include faculty members at the University of Idaho and North Idaho College and a lifetime of unbelievable teachers.

Thanks go out to my major professor, Stacy Isenbarger, who has helped me to navigate both aesthetic and bureaucratic challenges. Her willingness to engage in conversations both emailed and in person has been essential to my success as a low-residency graduate student. This process would have lacked humanity without the presence of Delphine Keim on my graduate committee; she is the poetic soul of the University's Art Department. Very special thanks go to Allie Kurtz Vogt, who has generously volunteered her time on my graduate committee. Her unflinching support has cheered me through many a busy day, and her artistic input is invaluable.

Outside of my graduate committee, there are other University of Idaho faculty members who have contributed greatly to my learning. Sally Machlis has helped me to understand not only art, but also the bigger picture of arts education. I am also grateful to Joe Casey Doyle and Marco Deyasi. Both professors have provided important examples of pedagogical methods. Aaron Cordell Johnson speaks the language of paint; his love, practice and defense of the medium are greatly influential to my work.

I am grateful for the financial support of two scholarship foundations. A scholarship is both a financial gift and a vote of confidence. I thank the scholarship committee, the Norah Southon Tisdale Scholarship and the Harriet Shrontz Scholarship for their assistance and encouragement.

North Idaho College has been my academic home since 2010. I am fortunate to teach there, in the collegial company of many great people. I am buoyed, on a daily basis, by the positive and friendly environment in the Fine Arts and Communication Division. My colleagues in the Art Department are magicians who turn stress into laughter with a well-placed word or goofy gesture. I am very grateful to be part of this North Idaho College community.

I would be unable to work at this academic level without a lifetime of gifted teachers. They taught me to love art, to love words and most importantly, to love learning. Many thanks go to: The Brothers Zimmerman, Stephen Drinkard, Pauline Delamarter, Janel Keating, George Marker, Deborah McShane, Deborah Barrett Graves, Olivia Delgado De Torres, Ron Picco, Cheryl Odom, Alexander Clark Duncan, Stephen Schultz, Kristy Sherrold, Julie Meyer, Sharon Gunter, Debbie Staggs, Chris Kraisler, Tricia Florence, Tim Thomas, and Barry Barush.

## DEDICATION

This work is for my family.

The photographic documentation is dedicated to my sister, Casey, whose first word was “light,” and whose images illuminate our shared story.

I understand homemaking as a practice by watching my father, Jerry, as he carefully tends the altar of the house we call home.

The devotional obsession present in both sculpture and text honors the connection to my primary artistic co-conspirator, also known as my mother, Ann.

The beating heart of this work’s content dances in time to the song of James, my husband and the center of my life.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>AUTHORIZATION TO SUBMIT</b> .....	ii
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	iii
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	iv
<b>DEDICATION</b> .....	v
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	vi
<b>CHAPTER 1: POINTS OF REFERENCE</b> .....	1
<b>A. The Need for [be]LONGING</b>	
<b>B. The Nature of Influence</b>	
<b>C. Arts, Practices and Letters</b>	
<b>D. Transformation of Process: From Plans to Improvisation</b>	
<b>E. Universalizing the Story: From Autobiography to Allegory</b>	
<b>F. Art Making, Theatrical Design and Homebuilding/Homemaking</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 2: ICONOGRAPHY, MEDIA AND PROCESSES</b> .....	10
<b>A. Iconography</b>	
<b>B. Painted Wood Constructions</b>	
<b>C. Fiber Art Objects</b>	
<b>D. Fiber Construction Processes</b>	
<b>E. Selected Utilitarian Objects</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 3: SETTING THE STAGE</b> .....	20
<b>A. Mise-en-Scene</b>	
<b>B. Work in Progress: The Practice of Homemaking</b>	
<b>C. Setting the Stage for Play</b>	
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	26

## CHAPTER 1: POINTS OF REFERENCE

### The Need for [be]LONGING

[be]LONGING is a body of artwork and writing that rises from a foundational assumption: the longing for belonging is universal. The word is a complicated one. Belonging can refer to an object that one possesses, or it can refer to a state of being. This dual meaning is at the conceptual heart of the work. To distinguish house from home is to parrot a cliché, but in this work the distinction initiates an unpacking of what home *is*. A house is an object to build, maintain or trade on the open market. The house is important because it provides physical shelter - it is emphatically true, after all, that we are living in a material world. Home differs greatly from house, however, in that it is not a material possession. The word possession is delightfully two-faced, and both meanings explain the drive to take comfort in physical signs of abundance. Obsessed and possessed by fear, humans seek safety in the ownership of objects. This work is an exorcism. It brings fears and desires to light, scuttling anxious acquisition in favor of a sedulous practice of belonging *to* home. These sculptures and words assert that home is the act of connecting to internal source. This is a state of being which, despite its incorporeality, requires constant maintenance.

This artwork and this writing assume that the need for internal connections to safety, abundance and belonging are universal in human experience. There are no statistics that can justify the assumption, but this work's economy trades in currency that defies numerical logic. Similarly, the hegemony of stylish theories is powerless here. This work does not seek to dominate, argue or obey, but rather it offers a glimpse of an internal landscape. In exploring this foundational claim that desire for belonging is universal, this work finds its way using multiple points of reference for navigation.

### The Nature of Influence

The true nature of creative influence is multifaceted, circuitous and often messy. Art makers, writers and thinkers are shaped by a broad range of forces. These might include daily tasks and scenes, internal experiences and the creative works from a broad spectrum of practices. A successful artist is not driven by what is en vogue within his or her discipline; slaves to fashion are doomed to short and unsatisfying careers. An artist may not even feel true connection with those whose work shares formal or conceptual qualities. Some might group artists according to subject matter, appearance, and theme but this categorical approach lacks scope. To categorize artists' work according to surface details is to miss the deepest parts of both context and content. Artemesia Gentileschi's work exemplifies the limitations of surface-level categorization. Is her work

powerful because of the influence of Caravaggio or of Catholic tradition? Certainly that is the case, but Gentileschi's Judiths and Susannahs are extraordinary beyond driving narratives or the use of tenebrism. Contextual information about the artist's life is key to understanding the impact of her images. Each muscled and determined Judith enacts revenge against Gentileschi's own aggressor. In this method of examination, Gentileschi can be as successfully grouped with Ana Mendieta or Louise Bourgeois as with Rembrandt or Rubens. My own work could be grouped with the work of others based on simple appearance, but that would risk shallow interpretation. The use of the house as a symbol is hardly a unique innovation, and seems to be interesting to many contemporary visual artists. It might be tempting to claim membership in that realm by way of iconography alone, but similarity and influence are not synonymous. An accurate study of influence requires the casting of a different net. Along with personal experience, my work is influenced by the languages of many creative traditions. The content parallels transformations in my own studio processes. It is informed not only by contemporary visual art, but also by cross-disciplinary ways of working and thematic approach.

### **Arts, Practices and Letters**

Daily experience is an important point of reference for this work. It both rises from and examines what creates and maintains sensations of connection, of comfort and safety. The act of cooking, cleaning or relating with others parallels repetitive and devotional gestures in my art work. These art pieces assert that the making of home is a sacred practice. Expressed in this body of work by tidy stitches and hand-wound rope, the tasks of housekeeping take on special significance when viewed as parallels to internal work. It is a challenge, however, to accurately express the distinction between house as a structure, and home as an internal space. I draw on my relationship with the work of other artists to give voice to these ideas. These artists' ways of working, subject matter, and expressions of emotional content influence my devotional portrayal of quotidian experience.

Processes of thinking and working have always been central in my attention. It is not enough for me to make the work, I must always think about *how* I am making it. Most of my bodies of work utilize process as a metaphor which underscores content. When writing about my own work, I am deeply influenced by the work of John Berger. He writes at the intersection of contextual and formal analysis, and his reverence for visual communication is expressed in a poetic voice. When I read his work called *The Shape of a Pocket* as an undergraduate student, I used it as a permission slip to write lovingly and multi-dimensionally about art (Berger). This analytical method has served me in penning a personally-accurate translation of my art work's visual communication.



In the studio, construction processes and emotional states almost always determine the outcome of a work. In making this body of work, no artist was a greater influence on my processes than Louise Nevelson. At once desperate and resourceful, Nevelson made her work with what scraps were around. She is in good and copious company in her practice of gleaning. I might as easily have thought of James Hampton or Joseph Cornell as I cockroached my own materials, but my mind always returns to Nevelson. Her edifice of clothing and eyelashes is easily as influential as her scavenger's resourcefulness. There was an announcement of optimism in her personal appearance, and no small measure of self-protection. The mink eyelashes, like the painted elements in my own work, function as armor (Nevelson).

My work is also connected to other artists by simple choices of subject matter. In *Foundational Warp* and *Landing Line*, handmade ropes take center stage. In this focus, my work has kinship with other makers of objects and weavers of words. Many aspects of Janine Antoni's work have made an impression on me, but in this instance, her 2001 work called *Moor* is particularly influential (Antoni). While Antoni's sculpture is more focused on autobiography, it shares my interest in binding, twisting and combining. The artist describes the rope in *Moor* as an "umbilical" figure (Antoni). The symbolism of rope as connection to mother is also available in my work, but it speaks equally of connections to other, and potentially intangible, sources.

The rope is assigned to a different action by the work of another artist, famed lyricist Robert Hunter. In the words of *The Banyan Tree*, rope is a means of escape. Chased by "...a tiger, and a killer with a knife," the speaker uses rope as a way to climb away from physical danger (Hunter). The climber rises, with great urgency, to a higher vantage point; the rope connects to a source of safety and objectivity. This sense of urgency is present in my current body of work, which is driven by a desire for a cool, objective view of what is fearful. In this group of sculptures, rope has both cozy familiarity and urgent purpose.

The iconographic image of the house appears repetitively in my work. It is used as a way to point past the relatively simple structure of the house, focusing attention instead on the interior space of home. When the simple triangle tops a rectangle in my work, its sturdy and predictable geometry is disrupted by awkward binding, broken parts or emphasis on negative space. The definition of home as the air inside a structure has been beautifully articulated by Rachel Whiteread and Doris Salcedo. Whiteread's 1993 piece called *House* piece memorializes the life of negative space by filling it (Whiteread). Doris Salcedo's *Untitled* series from 1995 also focuses on filling the empty, living spaces of domestic fixtures (New Museum). The entombing and erasure of internal

space is unbearably sad. The mournful, elegiac quality of both Whiteread's and Salcedo's works has informed the emotional and conceptual content in my own. There is a hint of desperation and sadness in my work, though the spaces of home are left open for entry. Characters implied by the staging seem haunted, however, by the need to keep the space open.

No artist has influenced my work and my life more than Marilynne Robinson. Her first novel, *Housekeeping*, was written about my home town in the year I was born (*Housekeeping*). The autobiographical connections are of some interest, but the themes Robinson addresses in this work are of much greater import. Her words in this novel address practices of homemaking as well as comfort in transience. My own work deals with lives precariously perched in containers of air and light. My characters, like Robinson's, are always on the move, always striving and mending. In Robinson's most recent novel, *Lila*, the writer revisits transience as a motif (*Lila*). One has the sense that her female characters are not on the move because of aimless vagrancy, but because the motion is necessary and produces a sense of freedom. They are chased by figures representing societal norms, but each one makes a theatrical attempt at comfort in transit. The implied characters in my own work experience conflicting desires for rootedness and motion. There is tension between the urgent need to move and the deep desire to put down roots. Neither Robinson's nor my own work offer resolution to that tension, presenting it instead as the true nature of home.

From the pedestrian performance of daily chores to the poetics of transience, many forces have influenced my work. I understand that home is the act of tending an internal space when I look at the work of Salcedo or Whiteread, but also when I tidy up the house. The bright, affected optimism of Nevelson and Robinson informs my own investigation of constant motion and scavenging. My understanding of connection to home relates to the seemingly opposite influences of Hunter and Antoni. These influences are not simple, tidy or linear. They are woven into the fabric of my life and my studio practice. Like Berger, I offer these influences up for contextual analysis, expressing my reverence for them with a bit of homespun poetry.

### **Transformation of Process: From Plans to Improvisation**

While I adore the poetics and exhilaration of improvisation, I also have a deep need for structure. As a maker, teacher and as a student, I require the stability of an organized plan so that I can move forward. In the absence of extrinsic motivation and structure, I internalize my own framework for understanding. This is not to say that all endeavors are submitted to the same planning methods. In fact, each aspect of the work responds to a different logic. My creative

process requires discovery of the unique rationale at the core of each piece of artwork or piece of writing. Often, the process of discovery and creation becomes central to the resulting artwork's communication.

In the series of paintings called *Shipping and Handling*, tightly planned compositions and obsessively polished marks underscore the work's insistence on safe passage for fragile things. In these paintings, the urgency of planning was at the center of the paintings' unique rationale; thusly, the working method was in harmony with the content. Hypervigilance in organization and planning typically produces favorable results in my studio. In the case of recent fiber art installations, however, attempts at a preordained plan interrupted my ability to hear the voice of the work. Such was the case in the development of *Foundational Warp*, where the improvisational logic of an evolving construction process provided structure. While this working method certainly affected the physical making of the work, it also underscores the installation's communication about brave forays into unfamiliar territory.

Process informs meaning even in the creation of improvisational structures. I began making fiber-based installations quite recently and largely without a foundation in the traditional fiber arts. I have done a bit of sewing, but the machines are intimidating, so I stick to hand stitching. I've neither knitted nor crocheted. When I signed up for a weaving workshop in November of 2014, I knew that I was interested in referencing the process as a construction method, and tried not to take on too much weight from the long-standing tradition of weaving. When I returned to the studio to experiment with weaving, I had a fairly solid plan. I was going to make a tapestry loom using a nail box, ladders and a pipe clamp as the frame, with mason's string line as the warp. I was moving and thinking from instinct in creating this structure, and it worked.

Trouble arose when I began to weave the fabric. I fastidiously cut tidy strips of moving blanket and tucked them neatly into the warp. I secured each strip with tight whipstitches at the selvedge. As the weaving grew, so did my disconnection from the piece. Frustration mounted. I needed a break, and I needed to try something different. I went to a local spin-in, thinking that I'd like to learn how to spin fiber into yarn. Upon arrival, it was clear that I was far out of my social element. Feeling grumpy and left out, I returned to my studio. I picked up a handful of fabric fluff with tatty bits of string and began to twist. I found, quite simply and magically, that if a person twists fibers in the same direction, they naturally wind together in a rope-like fashion. While this discovery was far from groundbreaking as a technological innovation, it was new to me as a mode of hand-wrought communication.

By continuing a long-standing habit of returning to the studio when frustrated, I made space for myself to approximate a process instead of getting bogged down in a preordained outcome or tradition. I began to make rope from the scraps of moving blanket and string that were around. It did take a couple of weeks and several gentle promptings from my husband to consider using the rope as weft in the weaving project. I initially resisted the idea, clinging to the predictably tidy strips of blanket. When I finally acquiesced and wove the funky wildness of my invented rope into the warp, the piece came to life. I heard the voice of its improvisational logic. Internalizing a structure can be incredibly productive for me as a maker, but in some cases, adherence to an ideal is the voice of resistance to unexpected and fortuitous solutions. This transformation of my working method exemplifies the central claim of this body of artwork. Just as preordained plans can hobble improvisation, obedience to the idealized house mutes the internal voice of home.

### **Universalizing the Story: From Autobiography to Allegory**

Much of my work originates from autobiographical details and relics. Rather than addressing the political or historical, the artwork is a reflection of inner experience with sensations of belonging. The challenge, of course, is to base the work on an authentic source without corraling the viewer into some narcissistic rodeo. I have made several bodies of work that are self-referential, but are abstracted or encoded in such a way that they are relatable for the viewer. In general, my artwork highlights universal emotions rather than an individual's biography. What originates from autobiography transforms into allegory. In this current body of work, personal relics are emotional access points for the process of making.

I arrived in graduate school with a strong desire to make work about a scrap of wallpaper from my first bedroom. This artifact has been stuffed away for years in a precious objects collection. The paper is unremarkable in its appearance, save for its pastel palette and distinctive period styling. The color harmony was hit so hard by the 1980's that it might as well be wearing legwarmers, but for me, it represents primary experiences of the home. The design features a tightly organized and repeating cluster of architectural elements seen in aerial perspective. In works made during the year or so before I arrived at the University of Idaho, the focus was on replicating the visual elements of this wallpaper. These early works were attempts to discover what was so compelling about this particular relic. As the project evolved, it became clear that the wallpaper was not useful as a formal point of reference. Instead, it is my relationship to the object that provides access to a universally-experienced emotion. Perhaps all personal artifacts and treasures operate in this fashion. By deeply considering my connection to this scrap of paper, I've

found myself contemplating sensations of home, connection and belonging that are common to all people.

*Dollhouse in Wallpaper Room* is an important transitional piece. It illustrates a point in my working process when the wallpaper scrap became less important as a physical object. After presenting this piece, I realized that the visual presence of the wallpaper barred the viewer's access to the emotional content of the work. How can anyone fully understand this piece without first knowing that the printed paper room references a detail from my life? That sort of information might be relevant to other artists' work, but not to mine. The avoidance of autobiography is, on one level, self-protective; by speaking in visual metaphor, I establish boundaries around the personal space that is mine. The primary purpose for my work is not therapeutic, but I certainly do work out personal thoughts and feelings in the studio. That part, small though it may be, is for me, and it is deeply private. Secondly, the value of art as a communication device is far higher than its value as a diarists' soapbox. One communicates *with* another when there is common conversational ground. Who hasn't had that friend who only wants to jaw on endlessly about the specific details of their life? There is no vibrant exchange in such a relationship, only an opportunity to be battered by a monologue. Excessively autobiographical artwork is tiresome in a similar fashion. While it is true that my abstraction of personal relics is partially self-protective, it is more crucially a statement about the kind of exchange I wish to have with the viewer. This desire to commune intellectually, emotionally and psychologically with the viewer drives me to transform autobiographical details into visual allegory.

The installation piece *Embroidery Hoop and Stand* is a powerful example of that transformation. In this piece, my own understanding of the value of home informs many formal choices, but my personal perceptions are abstracted in such a way that the work is accessible to the viewer. The house shape, so familiar to me from the image of my wallpaper, is universalized by its expression as standard iconography. The embroidery hoop is deeply connected to my sensations of home, but it easily stands in for the comforts sewn by any domestic hand. The staged workplace may originate from my comfort with industrial settings, but it becomes a more general comment about the ongoing nature of homemaking as a laborious practice. One need not see photos of all my hand-stitching ancestors to connect with this embroidery hoop, stand and work place as a symbolic environment. The intention here is to ask the viewer to meet the work with his or her own experience to share. Rather than prescribing tight parameters for meaning, this work asks for

collaboration and response. The viewer does not learn about the minutiae of my life, but rather they are invited to consider their own connections to home through the lens of my work.

### **Art Making, Theatrical Design and Homebuilding/Homemaking**

Some artists specialize in one discipline or even in one medium. They develop a deep, vertical knowledge of their chosen field. This working method produces a level of mastery that is tantalizing, but my artistic development has followed a different model. My approach is more horizontal, less like a tap root than it is a rhizome. A historical snapshot of my work depicts a disciplinary peripatetic. Shifts between different art-making approaches have been roughly chronological, but their influences appear in a non-linear fashion. Over a decade spent in the theater informs current expressions about the temporal nature of the home. Another decade spent in home building was necessary to articulating a language of the industrial. The warp of my experience as a maker is the visual arts, where I constantly reach for different materials and processes. Current studio focus is not only on the theatrical, the industrial or the domestic, but rather employs visual metaphor as a lingua franca to unite all three.

The performing arts have been dealt a mighty blow by 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century entertainment media. It would appear that movies and television could easily perform the duties of the opera, the ballet or the theater. Why pay for live performance when the silver screen is cheaper? Why leave the house, even, when Netflix beckons from the couch like a penny-wise devil? The common value of all the live performing arts is their temporal nature. One cannot pause or rewind the action. To sit, congregationally, in an audience, is to share communion in the moment. Live performance is valuable and powerful precisely because it exists in the flow of time. Theatrical settings share this power. When one looks at stage sets and lights, the temporary nature of the suggested environment amplifies the urgent need to pay attention. The scene presented will not last forever.

My current body of work points emphatically to this temporal power of the theater. In *Dollhouse in Wallpaper Room*, rolls of printed paper hang from jute webbing and tie line. These panels ape the appearance of theatrical backdrops while approximating a domestic space. Theatrical impermanence destabilizes the fantasy of home as permanent and immutable. Throughout this body of work, installations present the rough implication of spaces, activities and characters. They wield the uncomfortable power of the temporary.

On the surface, domestic building might seem diametrically-opposed to theater. The idealized house is presented as a tidy and unbreakable package, wrapped up in a picket-fence ribbon. It is unshakeable, they say, and built on the steadfast foundations of industry standards.

The fantasy of the house is that it is permanent and predictable. Construction and real estate advertisements buttress this illusion, selling houses when most are in the market for homes. My current work examines both the fallacy of domestic permanence and the desire for inner connections to home. I learned to hear industrial tools speak when I began working at the construction of houses. Employed variously by craftsmen of wood and stone, I watched tools and materials conspire to present a lie of the house as immutable fortress. As a painter, I meticulously decorated the surface, furthering the fantasy. At every jobsite, it became obvious that the owner sought the necessity of a shelter, but was in more profound need of home.

I examine the intersection of house and home by working on my own improvised shelter. This project was started by my husband in 2005, and in 2011 I joined him in its ongoing evolution. *The Shack-teau* is an alternative living shelter made from the back of a semi-truck. It retains the tires and mud flaps necessary to its previous occupation. This implication of potential movement is of paramount importance. Symbols of motion point, quite theatrically, to the temporal nature of the physical. This structure eschews industry standards, which serve only to homogenize outcomes and cripple imagination. Materials for this project were gathered from other jobsites with all the glee of a buzzard or a squirrel. It is patched together, yes, from salvage, but this structure is not about abjection or poverty. Reverence for found materials, combined with the intellect of skilled eyes and hands, make this a dreamy space. It is lovely and strong, and lit only by candles. It is a perfectly functional and economical house by pre-industrialized standards, though in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is more a work of conceptual art than it is a viable house. This is a small shelter made from materials close at hand, and while it bears the vestiges of utility, its deeper purpose is less tangible. *The Shack-teau* is a love poem, a sonnet to the elusive inner source called home.

Visual art, with its celebration of metaphor and uncommon adjacencies, has trained my mind to reflect on experiences in the theater, in construction and in homebuilding as a single practice. This approach requires translation of disciplinary jargon into a common language. In this body of work, theater's celebration of the temporary undermines marketplace rhetoric of the house. The players on this stage, including the viewer, improvise the mobile, temporal and intangible script of home. Without points of reference from a variety of art-making traditions, this work would not have a fraction of its communicative power. Objects and processes, familiar from several disciplines, provide multiple points of access into an allegorical landscape. This territory has a language all of its own.

## CHAPTER 2: ICONOGRAPHY, MEDIA AND PROCESSES

### Iconography

The home is often symbolized in contemporary visual culture by a triangle placed on top of a rectangle. The ubiquitous iconography of the house, with its triangle roof over a sturdy and predictable rectangle room, presents a narrow definition of what constitutes a suitable dwelling. Perhaps its simplicity reveals a crippled human imagination in regard to domestic architecture. This house symbol stands in for the *home*, which is a point of connection to a broader and more universal sensation of belonging. What benefit arises from homogenizing the physical house, and with it the symbol for comfort and safety? Neither the physical house nor the intangible home are so simple as the iconography might suggest. The use of the absurdly reductive house symbol in this body of work highlights a complex topic: home is an internal sensation of belonging, and not even the house a geometrically-perfect structure.

In the triptych called *Home Sweet Home*, this symbol appears repetitively. Its repetition throughout the entire body of work is devotional, but perhaps nowhere more so than in these three pieces. The embroidery hoop is a circular space in which romantic ideals of the homemaker reign supreme. In this triptych, the ideal is reduced to simple geometry. They are prayers for what appears to be basic shelter, roof on top of room, but clearly they speak of deeper needs as well. Part of the allure of the house symbol is that it presents home as a predictable and tidy structure. For the truly anxious, that kind of predictability is a soft bed by a warm fire. The repetitive use of this simple icon is an obsessive, if fruitless hope for comforting connections to be stable, simple and immutable.

The simple icon represents the lifelong fantasies of house and home. Practicality drives the need to create sturdy domestic structures, to be sure, but raw necessity alone cannot explain the fervor with which homemakers approach the endeavor. Introduced and reinforced by childhood play, this symbol represents internal longings that begin in the cradle and end in the grave. *Playing Home: Toy Box*, presents these ideas in a scene of formative play in progress. Bright, shiny house-shaped blocks tumble across the mat, and much like the obsessive polishing practices of the house-proud adult, they give voice to an inner yearning. These toys symbolize a primary desire for belonging not only in color, but also in the urgency of their binding. At once playful and laboriously-wrought, this piece points to the soul's cry, which is not for a stick-framed building or a well-appointed living room. That longing, rather, is for a sense of stable connection which cannot be



perceived by the physical senses. Thus, the simple house icon helpfully stands in for a lifetime of intangible, homelike sensations.

The building of physical shelters is unbearably messy compared to the iconographic dream. In that world where nails are hammered and surfaces are smoothed and protected with paint, there are no ideals. There is only a constant response to the details that have already been established. Even when working from detailed blue prints, serendipity rules the process of building, demanding improvisational response rather than adherence to a preordained plan. Parts break during construction or crumble under the weight of time, and ingenuity is required to cobble them back together. The series called *Primary Residence* highlights structural solutions to a variety of problems, each made in an improvised response to necessity, each made in an effort to connect with belonging. These pieces are not perfectly geometric expressions of an ideal. They are feverish approximations. This series represents an effort to exact an eternal ideal from a physical world constrained by time, finance and gravity.

Sensations of belonging are deeply individual and are created by a constantly shifting relationship between internal and external states. There is interdependency between the outside world where houses are built and the internal, intangible place called home. To construct both an internal and external sense of home, one must constantly mend the divide between dream and reality. Efforts to create an idealized state of comfortable connectedness must be constant, yet will always fall short of the mark. Perhaps devotion to a practice of belonging is the best possible goal. In this work, attention bounces back and forth from ideal to worldly point of reference. A zigzagging focus stitches the ideal, as expressed by simple iconography, to contingent objects and materials. This roving gaze turns inward, then outward and back again; it connects, it secures, and it constantly fixes the notion of *home* in place.

### **Painted Wood Constructions**

Home is the place where you live. To say it so simply belies the complex construction methods needed to create the sensation of belonging. Home is not a physical structure, but a twisted bramble of emotional, mental and visceral connections. The symbol of the house, with its triangle atop a sturdy rectangle, is simplified to the point of absurdity. Perhaps that is its power. This reductive structure points to the fleeting nature of that place one might rather imagine as permanent, stable and safe. The homes in this work are bound together with urgency and earnest improvisation. Wires intersect, twist and pass over one another in an effort to stitch the wooden structure together. The surfaces are obsessively tended. Hand painted color unifies the structure,

working with the wire to hold an ephemeral notion of home in place. This work provides an uneasy comfort by highlighting unconventional structural solutions. It recognizes both the hunger for stability and the precariousness of home as an internal state. Two series of works, *The Place Where You Live* and *Primary Residence*, address the complexity of housekeeping and homemaking. Each one asks where, in lives marked by nothing so much as change, can safety and comfort be found?

The complicated nature of stability is communicated through use of both precise and approximate geometry. *The Place Where You Live* features reasonably regular triangles and rectangles. No home in the physical world is so simple and strong. The wire binding in this series articulates a desire to translate a big messy idea of belonging into tidily-ordered form. The iconography presents the mobile, fragile nature of home as predictable and stable. Nothing could be further from the truth. Home is not built on concrete foundations like houses are; it is relentlessly mobile. Home is an ever-changing network of internal sensations created by the deep desire for belonging. Perhaps *Primary Residence* expresses the nature of home more accurately. These rough shelters are made from broken pieces, from raw shards, from hasty approximations of roof and room. There is an urgency and instability in them. In some places where wall and rafter don't quite meet, plain woven fabric bridges the gap. This is how home is really built: from pieces that are close at hand, with methods that will work for now. Safety and comfort are not to be found in physical places, but rather in the constant development of a contingency plan.

References to geometry are essential to these works' communication, to be sure, but the materiality of wood and wire are also foundational. These houses are cobbled together from tatty scraps of wood, lengths of wire and dogged resourcefulness. Wood is commonly used to build living spaces. It bears the warmth of the tree's life and gentle swaying movement. This warmth and constant mobility underscore the content of the work. There are unique comforts available in transience, but attempts have been made to keep these houses in place. Each structure is bound by wire that any sane person would reserve for mending fences, but this is not work about things falling apart. This is work about how things are patched together. The simple geometric shapes of *The Place Where You Live* are neatly captured by wire. Is it a restraint or an embrace? The urgency of the wire connections in *Primary Residence* is greater than in *The Place Where You Live*, announcing the value of improvised solutions.

In *Primary Residence*, wire does hold the external structure together, yet its pathways and intersections also call attention to the works' internal space. When twisting, taut wire lines carry the eye inside the approximated house, attention shifts from physical house to the inner space of

home. If the house is a physical and practical entity, home is an intangible force, a sensation built from emotional and psychological connections. They are interdependent. What holds the house together, in this case tautly bound wire, creates a moment of feeling-at-home. Making contact with that internal sensation of security, in turn, facilitates building in the physical world. The wire in this series secures the external structure of the house while simultaneously exploring the internal space of the home.

In both *The Place Where You Live* and *Primary Residence*, the combination of wood and wire provides hard structure while paint softens and unites the surface. The structures in each series are painted unlike any house in the visible, waking world. In *The Place Where You Live*, color soothes and polishes the rough structure. One imagines the brush caressing the house as one would a scared and fitful animal. The paint does not perfect the surface of these improvised structures, but it does describe their interior spaces lovingly. In the case of *Primary Residence*, the painted texture more closely matches that of the roughhewn wood. The colors are primary in every sense of the word. The application has all the urgency of hastily-applied lipstick, which turns the mouth up to face the world. It is thick. This paint protects a raw and fevered surface from impact. It is sweet, soft armor against the abrasiveness of constant change.

By calling attention to the materiality of house and the dreamed space of home, this work points to a transient focus. The viewer is called to mediate a conversation between inner life and worldly concerns. Over-attention to either one results in suffering. These two series of works announce that the house is *The Place Where You Live*, while home is one's *Primary Residence*. The attention must shift constantly from house to home, outer to inner experience, and back again. Focus zigzags back and forth, just like these irregular wire stitches, creating a sense of inner space protected by structure.

### **Fiber Art Objects**

Home is not a fixed state or physical place, but a pathway requiring constant tending. Insignificant poetry has no business here. Home is not "where the heart is." Home is an action; it is less a noun than it is a verb. Home is the hand reaching, through its labor, for connection to an intangible source. Home is in the act of striving. If this connection requires ceaseless maintenance, then abundant resources are needed for support. Home, much like the house, is made of time and materials. Three pieces in this body of work speak of the resourcefulness required to construct the experience of plenty. *Playing Home: Bassinet, Foundational Warp, Landing Line* all incorporate spooled ropes, string or strips of fabric. The repeated use of the spool and rope are significant, as

are the references to weaving. All are evocative of domestic fiber construction, but they simultaneously point to industrial settings. These elements speak optimistically about working to create strength and abundance from what is close at hand.

In general, a rope is a connecting force. It is a life line, an umbilical structure. It is a binding restraint. It can secure a vital attachment, but simultaneously limits mobility. A simple two-strand rope appears in many settings. It is at home in the world of industry, theater, shipping, and in the swaying world of the sea. The double-strand is not the strongest of rope structures, but it is sturdy enough in most cases. This rope is made by twisting two bundles of fiber in the same direction, all the while winding them around one another. For the viewer, this process could bring to mind the joining of two lives, the binding of a contract, or the twisting marriage of process and materials.

Ropes are made from all manner of fibers including sisal, hemp, cotton, nylon and a host of other substances. The ropes in this work, however, are made from materials that speak of rope's inherently dual nature: they represent both security and limitation. In *Foundational Warp*, the rope is made from strips of moving blanket and lengths of mason's string line. The moving blanket, in its known utility, clearly speaks of mobility. The string line, used on construction sites for laying out foundations, speaks of a sense of rootedness. These material choices express the contradictory nature of rope itself.

*Landing Line* gives voice to the resourcefulness needed to make vital connections. This piece features a two-strand rope made from tarps, lumber wrap, duct tape, drop cloth, synthetic rope, moving blankets and mason's string line. It appears that the rope maker's hand has reached not for the ideal rope making supplies, but rather those that are readily available. The scraps have little individual strength, but become formidable connectors when twisted together. Similarly, these scraps may not possess much monetary value when appraised separately, but their combination produces an undeniable sense of abundance. The message here is clear: the scavenger's acuity, paired with tireless alchemy of the hand, results in a strange and uncountable wealth.

Though difficult to reckon with any kind of numerical system, this abundance, in the form of rope, is organized tidily on a large spool. The reverence with which it is wound describes the rope's value as well as the necessity of the spool's structure. This central figure operates as a storehouse and a dispensing tool. It is a container, albeit an open one, for the rope. In the case of *Playing Home: Bassinet*, the spool is a powerful symbol of connection. The basket itself is an obvious reference to infancy, and the fiber connection is easily read as umbilical. The spool

operates here as a source of construction materials, but also as a figure. Does it stand in for a physical, animal or spiritual source, or a combination of the three? When one longs, like a child, for belonging, it may be a craving for connection with something unnamable. That source, that root, that sensation of home is a temporarily lost word at the tip of the tongue. It is understood but not speakable. It is felt but not tangible. The rope and spool are symbols of abundance, resourcefulness and origin; they refer to something that is universally-known but inexpressible by the spoken word.

### **Fiber Construction Processes**

Handmade stitches are homemaking made visible. If the true nature of home is not physical, then fiber art construction processes come closest to giving it tangible form. Sensations of belonging, of connection to source, depend not on location or ownership, but rather on the practice of tendering care. In the domestic realm this care is visible in the presence of sewing, weaving and embroidery. All are deeply related to the domestic sphere, but they also function as powerful symbols of healing, devotion and rugged practicality. In this body of work, fiber art processes suggest the presence of a nurturing force, a fastidious caregiver and economically-minded homemaker.

Sewing is a deeply practical method of construction and repair. This pragmatism is at the center of romantic notions about all manner of stitchery. The darning of a sock, for example, is a nostalgic symbol for the stoic resourcefulness of olden times. In this storied past, those who did not waste consequently did not want, all because they took the time to care for what they had. There is some magical thinking in this concept, to be sure, but that is exactly why stitched repairs communicate so effectively. In this work, repetitive mending moves past practicality and into the realm of prayer. In *Playing Home: Toybox*, tidy stitches appear to heal a play mat. This mat, made from a moving blanket, has cut edges bearing the resemblance of a house symbol. It is as if home has been carved from this object dedicated to mobility, and some nurturing character has sewn up the wound. There is resourcefulness in the act of mending, but also a gentle delivery of care.

Weaving shares some of the practicality of sewing, and it is equally romanticized as an indicator of domestic abundance. Cultures around the globe have deep weaving traditions. It is as much a symbol of settled life as is the loaf of bread. This work does not concern itself with tradition, but rather it uses the construction method to situate the viewer's experience in the domestic realm. In *Foundational Warp*, the cloth is obviously made without much precision or polish. It appears to be the work of someone who is desperate to ape that state of homelike prosperity. There is a tragic cheerfulness in this futile endeavor. Just as weaving's structure is

inherently dual, warp holding fast to weft, this piece speaks equally of poverty and plenty. The maker is desperately eager to produce the physical signs of the settled house, hoping for internal connections to home. This desperation has urged a clunky approximation of weaving, using odd materials simply because they were close at hand. It has the air of desolation, but also the sweetness of optimism.

Embroidery differs from sewing and weaving in terms of practicality. It is not a practice that answers a utilitarian necessity, but an aesthetic or spiritual one. The pursuit is one that indicates monetary wealth, since it requires considerable leisure-time hours. It is tempting to think that those with an abundance of dollars do not experience insecurities about connections to home. Nothing could be further from the truth, and nowhere is this more evident than in the space of the embroidery hoop. Along with all manner of religious niceties, the words that most often grace the embroiderer's fabric are: "Home Sweet Home." One imagines the embroiderer as a comfortable creature on a sofa, quietly stitching the shape of her prayers. The physical house may be sound, but the embroidery cries out for connection to the inner home. The three embroidery hoops in *Home Sweet Home* address this intersection of wealth, poverty and earnest supplication. The maker of these objects has cast about for materials, finding barrel tops, blue tarp, duct tape, lumber wrap and moving blankets to approximate the process. The tatty nature of the materials suggests that this embroiderer is not of the genteel and well-fed variety. These objects appear to be essential to setting this homemaker's scene, however, because precious time and great care went into their making. This work states that the wealth of a physical house is not a prerequisite for a connection to home. It submits, plaintively, that one need not wait for physical housekeeping to be perfect before initiating the internal work of homemaking.

The soft passage of thread through fabric and the embrace of weft against warp have the power to mend, to build, and to conjure. Fiber art techniques locate this work definitively in the domestic sphere, where physical objects and processes are indicators of internal connections. Sturdy houses can be built from hard wood and stone, but it is only the fiber arts that can come close to describing the soft spaces of the home. In this work, one is keenly aware of the homemaker. Present only in the stitched evidence of the hand, this figure directs attention to resourcefulness, caregiving and devotion to inner life.

### **Selected Utilitarian Objects**

Objects found in industrial settings are often woefully underestimated as communicators. In this body of work, things that are typically assigned only utilitarian value are employed as carriers

of content. Many reversals of fortune exist. Shipping materials become signs of rootedness. Elements from the jobsite, such as pipe clamps and ladders, pair with domestic objects and processes. The domestic and industrial accentuate one another in their adjacency, contrasting work of the carpenter with that of the homemaker. The objects selected for this work simultaneously suggest the potential for motion and stability. They bear the weight and record of arduous labor. These objects transform from shipping and construction goods to an approximation of homelike fixtures.

A good carpenter's tools are always ready for motion. They either move in the arc of their intended use or are stored in tool boxes ready to go out to the next job. Some of the tools, including ladders and wheelbarrows, facilitate the carpenter's bodily motion. The mobility of these tools is in stark contrast to the rootedness they create. This work examines that contrast by forcing the industrial to play house with the domestic. In *Playing Home: Bassinet*, an unusually-constructed basket perches atop a step ladder. Ladders are not only moveable tools, but they facilitate the upward motion of the human body. They symbolize a precarious progression. In this piece, the step ladder is used in place of a more stable support. It appears that the homemaker and the carpenter have compromised, making a structure that falls short of idealized stability, yet one that will work for the moment. In this collaboration, the carpenter brings situational innovation to the homemaker's desire for static perfection.

It is remarkable that the rough and hardened tools of the carpenter can be used to create houses, which soften into homes when the space is tended. In the case of *Foundational Warp*, a sturdy wooden nail box serves as a receptacle for spools of excess warp material. In its intended use, this kind of box would be laden with nails of several sizes. It would travel in the grip of a strong and calloused hand, moving from one place to another, diligently nailing things down. In the context of this piece, however, the transient nail box is given a moment of repose. Its typical heavy burden has been replaced by the lightness of string. Of course this entire piece, with its presentation of work in progress, communicates about labor. But the way the nail box is employed here is in the service of a softer pursuit. One imagines that the carpenter's work is done, even if for a moment. Hard hands and tools rest for a time, softening in the warm air of the home.

Labor is equally represented in this body of work by the repeated use of the pipe clamp, but this figure also speaks loudly about temporary solutions. In *Foundational Warp*, the pipe clamp forms the top of an oddly-conceived tapestry loom. It clearly gets the job done, but no one could be fooled into thinking that it is permanent. The same is true in the case of *Landing Line*, in which a

similar clamp helpfully suspends the spool of handmade rope. It is an admittedly makeshift solution, but it is an intentional and effective improvisation. In each case, the viewer is invited to imagine their own hand cranking down on the handle, then loosening it when the situation shifts, requiring a new approach. By romanticizing the temporary solution, this work questions the homemaker's desire for stasis. In a living experience governed by change, why must permanence be a prerequisite for comfort?

Constant motion, labor and innovation are required to maintain connections to home. This arduous work requires diligent focus. The homemaker must define boundaries for attention. To become distracted from the task at hand is to lose connection with a sense of belonging. In *Embroidery Hoop and Stand*, a work light defines this boundary. Its utilitarian nature does belie the presence of the carpenter, who has perhaps set this stage for the homemaker's labor. Here, in this open container of light, the embroiderer stitches her fondest desires. What happens in the shadows outside that space is of little concern. There is work to be done here; vital connections to are established using the quiet power of construction tools and materials.

Nurturing a sense of belonging requires reconciliation between stability and transience, and in this work, shipping materials mediate rootedness and motion. As a result of this negotiation, these materials adopt new roles. Symbols of transience transform into artifacts of settled life. Elsewhere, mundane packaging materials are romanticized in an allegory of a journey, of shelter in transit. Yet another approach to this theme presents stable connection as an anchor or lifeline for a figure in motion. In each avenue of thought, motion is inevitable, and stability a fleeting notion.

The carpenter's and the homemaker's hands are transformative, turning objects designed for motion to create playful symbols of rootedness. Shipping pallets and moving blankets are powerful symbols of the precious object in transit. In several cases, these objects are asked to tell the story of mobility converted to stasis. In *Playing Home: Dollhouse*, dismantled shipping pallets are cobbled together to make a child's toy. What was in motion has come to rest and put down roots. Not only is this an object that facilitates the child's romantic notions of the home, but the object itself typically rests in domestic coziness. A dollhouse is a home within a home, yet this one is built from objects designed for motion. The *Bassinet* in the same series strikes a similar chord; it is wound together from moving blankets and truck rope. Again, the relentlessly mobile is twisted into some semblance of stability. These transformations embody the negotiation between situation and ideal.



*Shipping & Handling* is a series of representational paintings which examines sensations of security and value systems through the lens of simple subject matter. The painted packaging materials are, by one line of argument, not special; they are certainly not as valuable as the things they protect during transport. *Shipping & Handling* takes a refreshed look at the worth of ordinary objects. Depicted larger-than-life in oil on canvas, these humble packaging materials are elevated in status. By offering a romanticized view of packaging materials, this work shifts focus from the discomforts of mobility. Instead, it celebrates the safe passage of a precious thing. All the tucks and folds, peaks and hollows are evocative of architectural spaces. The viewer is asked to inhabit these spaces, and in doing so, adopt the perspective of a precious object that is being shuttled from one place to another. The cardboard box would loom large and strong in its vision, the bubble wrap a cushion for the journey. By offering this viewpoint, these paintings state that stability may not be possible, but that there are comforts available in transience.

*Landing Line* is a work that deals with a combination of connection and mobility. Less formally representational than *Shipping and Handling* or *Playing Home*, this installation points abstractly to a figure in motion, yet connected to source. A wheelbarrow has been fitted with a pipe clamp, which holds a spool of handmade rope. It is an improvised machine that is ready to travel, ready to work. It is not freewheeling, however, because the rope connects to a marine cleat incongruously perched on a ladder. Taken on its own, the cleat represents a solid connection between ship and shore. In this configuration, however, it sits precariously on a tool designed to facilitate motion of the body. The ladder uproots the cleat. This work romanticizes neither stasis nor the act of travel. These are presented, matter-of-factly, as co-existent. The viewer is offered the experience of taking the handles of the wheelbarrow, to walk forward, to unspool the rope's story while connected to the approximation of stability. Maybe this piece is the most homelike of them all. It does not offer up ideals, fantasies or transmutations of fear, but rather recognizes the contradictions at the heart of lived experience. In this body of work, *Landing Line* is the most direct representation of the innovation, labor, motion and tenuous stability that defines both house and home.

## CHAPTER 3: SETTING THE STAGE

### Mise-en-Scene

Installations in *[be]LONGING* appear as theatrical tableaux; bathed in dramatic and moody light, they depict a frozen moment. With the stage set, one imagines the actors waiting for cues to enter from the wings. There is an expectant, palpable silence in this suspension of time's passage. It is clear that many hours have elapsed in laboring on each vignette, but the viewed instant stands still. Viscerally-present, a cast of characters seem to lurk in the shadows, conspicuous in their temporary absence. In this situation, the viewer is given a role to play. There is no space for the passive on-looker. By engaging with the urgency of work shown in progress, the viewer imagines his or her own hand laboring in its continuation. In this mise-en-scene, objects, actors and viewers wait in a moment of breathless silence for work and play to continue.

These installations present homemaking as a theatrical scene in which activity is ongoing. Each one asserts that a state of comfort and belonging is not to be found in a static situation, but rather in ever-evolving practices of housekeeping and homemaking. The lights, staging and props borrow heavily from the world of industry, but their combination approximates a domestic scene. This choice of materials and objects dramatizes the alchemy of construction. Strange approximations of familiar situations are disquieting; the jobsite is distorted, twisted up with subject matter from the home. No one is fooled into thinking that the scenes are purely utilitarian or representational, least of all, the viewer. The audience is offered a hand up onto the stage, breaking the fourth wall between waking experience and the allegorical space of dreams. In this space, mundane objects and processes are points of entry into the plot. When one imagines taking up a length of weft to weave or grasping a handle to lift or twist, familiar sensations are activated. Those physical actions, so similar to quotidian duties, take on a special significance. These installations ask viewers to redefine with their own ordinary chores as powerful metaphors for connecting to Home.

The staging of installations in this body of work embodies the quiet stillness at the center of domestic construction. The tools and goods used to build houses are hard. Building is noisy. Saws and drills and routers and grinders cut through peaceful silence. Rough lumber, heavy labor, and screeching tools somehow, quite miraculously, conspire to create quiet, soft and restful spaces. While work is clearly ongoing in each of the installation pieces, they are each presented in a frozen, staged moment. When one beavers away, earnestly hammering together a shelter, it is in service of stillness and silence. The fevered labor of the hand is transformative; what is laboriously-wrought

becomes armor for a place of repose. Home is the air inside a room, a temporarily-held breath in the lungs. In these installations, the hand stops its effort and racket for one moment, a split second long enough to inhale the quiet air of home.

If the process of homemaking is theatrical, who are the actors? Where is the script, and who wrote it? In the case of these scenes, an improvised script is played out by mythical figures: The Child, The Carpenter and The Homemaker. They are not recognizable individuals from human or personal history, but rather they are universally-familiar presences. The Viewer is hardly offered a comfortable chair from which to conduct detached observation. Participation is required. The Viewer joins in a mercurial dialogue, conversing extemporaneously with these archetypes. A moment of silent stillness is The Viewer's point of entry into conversation with The Child, who works at the business of play. There is opportunity for banter with The Carpenter as another cleverly-improvised structure goes up. There is a chance to sit shoulder-to-shoulder with The Homemaker, to weave and stitch the soft space of dreams.

#### **Work in Progress: The Practice of Homemaking**

The creation of shelter is work in perpetual progress. As one advances toward an ever-receding goal, a sense of weariness creeps in; the combined weight of uncertainty and urgent necessity weakens the knees. Often enough, the assembly of physical shelter requires the collaboration of many partners, not least of whom are the construction materials. Both builder and building are subject to gravity and the sense of gravitas inherent in the process. Bodies and buildings crumble, and while it is with the exaggerated strangeness of cinematic slow motion, the disintegration goes on. Yet there is always the internal drive to build, to shore up foundations, to strengthen the structure. Armed with the intellectual knowledge that nothing is built to last, a logical person would stop trying to build stuff that lasts forever. Despite ample marketplace rhetoric claiming the contrary, the impulse to build a house does not originate from intellectual or financial logic. A house is a tangible model of spaces which defy both gravity and numerical appraisal. Similarly, the work of building home responds to reasoning of a different kind. It has an economy all of its own. The obsessive labor of the hand is internal work made tangible. Maybe, rather than being impenetrable fortresses, house-like structures mimic connections immune to moth and rust. Two installations in this body of work pay homage to the sacrifices made by body and mind in the service of homemaking. Contrasting unending labor with the desire for completion, these works express the anxiety, uncertainty and urgency central to the practice of making home.

Presenting a finished object creates a regard for an autonomous presence in the world. To show work in progress is to ask The Viewer to step in, if only in imagination, as the maker. Things that seem incomplete, no matter how meticulously crafted, beg to be finished in the mind of the onlooker. Nowhere is this more evident than in the observation of construction projects. To look at forms set for a foundation or a sidewalk is to become the cement truck filling in between the lines. The craving for completion is undeniable. In *Embroidery Hoop and Stand*, an improvised embroidery stand is set as a workplace. The embroidered stitches in the circular space of the hoop are tidy: an effort has been made towards perfection. The stitched image is a simple geometric abstraction of a house. Familiar from other works in the series, this iconography derives power from ubiquity in contemporary visual culture. The simple lines are nearly complete, but not quite. A needle hangs from a piece of thread only a few inches from the end of a line. Significantly, the unfinished territory is at the bottom of the shape, at the structure's foundation. In this work and indeed in many of these vignettes, incomplete details wait for resolution. In this way, each member of the audience becomes maker or character in the scene. The Viewer, as a player on this stage, is offered an opportunity to inhabit the space between reality and desire. By imagining a domestic project's completion, The Viewer experiences the longing and labor required to connect with home source.

Incomplete work speaks of an unambiguously anxious state. There are innumerable fears about whether the labor will be completed, and if it is, whether it will bear fruit. Many pieces in this body of work invite the viewer to experience that anxiety, which is only amplified by the improvised nature of the construction methods. In *Foundational Warp*, two ladders support an improvised tapestry loom. The ladder, as an object, is a great symbol of the temporal and unstable. One moves a ladder from place to place as necessity requires. The task at hand always demands that the worker trust the ladder as a connection to the grounding force of the earth. The Carpenter may have developed a great sense of equanimity in precarious positions, but the possibility of a fall is always present when using a ladder. The Viewer is asked to consider this risk while looking at this piece, but it is the risk of improvised fiber construction that takes center stage.

In *Foundational Warp*, the fabric in process is made from unconventional materials. Mason's string line is used as warp, into which is woven a ratty rope made of string and moving blankets. The weaving is incomplete. By one line of argument, it could be said that the stakes are fairly low in this improvisational gamble. So what if this piece of weaving doesn't work? Failed fabric hardly equates to losses of life and limb. In the context of this body of work, however, this

piece of weaving is of ultimate importance. The presence of The Homemaker is obvious in this scene. It appears that this character has little experience with this construction method, but has deemed it central to the practice of homemaking. The imagined character approximates the process of weaving, making it up as the project goes along. The Viewer is invited to experience the anxiety of this experiment. If the weaving doesn't work, precious time and materials have been wasted. Failure to succeed comes with a loss of face, an increased hesitation to improvise further connections. This piece presents physical intersections of warp and weft, but also the crossroad of fear and blind optimism.

At the center of these installations is an aching and constant labor. To look at these scenes is to both experience the promise and urgent necessity of work. What benefit is promised? These works in progress state that labor creates a sense of belonging more than any physical shelter ever could. The desire for completion experienced when looking at these works mirrors a deep craving for belonging, for a sense of home. Here again home is a pathway, conduit or open interior space. It is made accessible by the hand's labor of mending and tending. Home is not a final destination or definitively accomplished state, but a habit of establishing connection to unnamable source. This is urgent and uncertain work, full of anxiety, full of possibility.

### **Setting the Stage for Play**

In childhood, play comes as naturally as breath. Exuberantly acted scenes lay a foundational understanding of what it means to belong in the world. Blocks are stacked and mud pies are made. This innocent play builds both social satisfaction and internal sense of belonging. Children say: "Here is our house! We will live here and love each other and eat this delicious pie!" No matter that the house is a ramshackle fort made of sticks and boughs, no matter that the pie is inedible and full of grit. Those objects are simply markers for belonging with one's playmates, for belonging in lived experience. Far from being a silly game, *Playing House* is fractally-related to the inner experience of building connection to source. Games of house and home share the shape of an internal work, a labor which progresses at a different scale. The series entitled *Playing Home* addresses this relationship. In these three pieces, subject matter, color harmony and construction methods set a scene where play and work are conflated, where implied characters reveal deep vulnerability.

Both early and advanced age proffer daily experiences with vulnerability. In *Playing Home: Bassinet*, the subject matter highlights the fragile and defenseless nature of infancy. While The Child's presence is certainly suggested, this scene's work in progress is that of The Homemaker. It is

clear that great pains have been taken in creating this oddly comfortable basket. The Homemaker's hand is present in the raggedly cut strip of moving blanket, her own anxiety revealed in the obsessively twisted wire that holds the shelter together. Precarious at the top of a short ladder, this bassinet is grounded by its connection to source. While other works speak more abstractly about this connection, in *Playing Home: Bassinet*, it is definitively umbilical. This direct statement does not, however, prescribe a singular meaning. This scene has the potential to activate recollections of many links between self and source.

The stage has been set for The Child's play in *Playing Home: Toybox*. The meticulous staging and construction of both toy box and blocks suggest a collaboration of The Homemaker and The Carpenter. In this piece, shipping materials come to rest. A moving blanket, mended at the edges, serves as a play mat. A small, wired-together shipping crate is tipped on its side, spilling blocks across the mat. The labor involved in the making of the mat and the crate alone is considerable, but the house-shaped blocks themselves are record of diligent effort. What is made in service of play requires much work, which begs a question about the primacy of play. The color harmony of this piece is emphatically primary. This strong triangle of hues represents the building blocks for mixing color. In the context of this piece, primary color also speaks of foundations of another kind. A child's play builds the habit of improvisation and establishes the value of fantasy. In games of house and home, the child learns to build demonstrably odd shelters and systems, to reach symbolically for primal belonging. This kind of play is steeped in imagination, where structures and rules and conversations bear little resemblance to counterparts in the commercial world of adults. The absurdity of these acted scenes serves to highlight their true purpose. By *Playing House*, a child constructs shelters, systems and dialogues which facilitate a sense of belonging.

Is the work of an adult really so different? Isn't the maintenance of the physical house really child's play seen in a different scale? Primary colors, so familiar from playgrounds and toys, reappear in the world of construction. Many of The Carpenter's tools are bathed in intense primary colors, which serve as a reminder of what foundations are actually being built. It seems that the fundamental lessons of play are forgotten as one moves into adult life. In later years, *Playing House* becomes housekeeping, a chore often approached with an unproductive sense of urgency. The need to provide physical shelter requires toil and sacrifice in the workaday world. Physical, social and financial necessities overshadow the need for the imaginative play that facilitates deep contentment. Perhaps this is why so many adult humans feel a sense of estrangement. Perhaps a

roof provides shelter, and a room provides space in which to live, but internal sensations of safety and belonging are sacrificed on the altar of financial logic.

This work attempts to reconnect with the foundations of belonging. In *Playing Home: Dollhouse*, The Carpenter's desire to provide shelter yields strange results. Presented at the scale of a child's dollhouse, this structure is made of parts from a shipping pallet. The pieces are wired together in a way that suggests neither impending collapse nor permanence. The walls and roof are open, suggested only by lines of rough stick-framing. The doll house rests on two sawhorses, moveable tools that serve a foundational purpose for the moment. One imagines that, in this odd installation play, The Carpenter has made this toy for the benefit of The Child. Perhaps it is of more value to the adult than at first meets the eye. This approximated shelter is enough to activate imaginations of home and deep contentment. If that is so, how is it that adult humans, living in much more solid houses, ever feel disconnected from a sense of belonging?

This series of works introduces play as a means of connecting with primary source. It suggests a recalibration of values, a helpful confusion of work and play. When the householder's burden of financial responsibility stoops the back, play proffers the gift of imagined contentment. In play, even the rattiest, most tenuous shelter is sufficient. A structure is good enough if it provides space for connection. This truth might relieve the anxious urgency of building, buying and maintaining physical shelter. In this series, serving the needs of The Child reminds The Homemaker and The Carpenter to labor toward internal connections to home, safety and belonging. A house is handy, but home is one's connection to primary source.

### Works Cited

- Antoni, Janine. *Moor*. 2001. *PBS Art 21*. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.  
<<http://www.pbs.org/art21/images/janine-antoni/moor-2001>>.
- Berger, John. *The Shape of a Pocket*. New York: Pantheon, 2001. Print.
- Hunter, Robert. "The Banyan Tree." *The Complete Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics*. Eds. Alan Trist and David Dodd. New York: Free Press, 2005. 396-397. Print.
- Nevelson, Louise. *Dawns and Dusks: Conversations with Diana MacKown*. Scribner, 1976. Print.
- New Museum of Contemporary Art and SITE Santa Fe. *Unland/Doris Salcedo*. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art. 1998. Print.
- Robinson, Marilynne. *Housekeeping*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980. Print.
- Robinson, Marilynne. *Lila*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. Print.
- Whiteread, Rachel. *House*. 1993. Concrete. 193 Grove Road, London.