

Tellings

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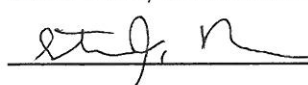
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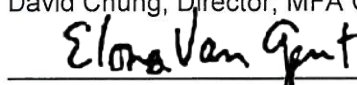
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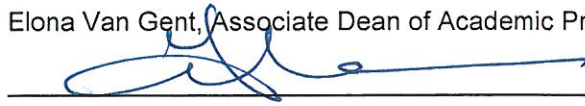
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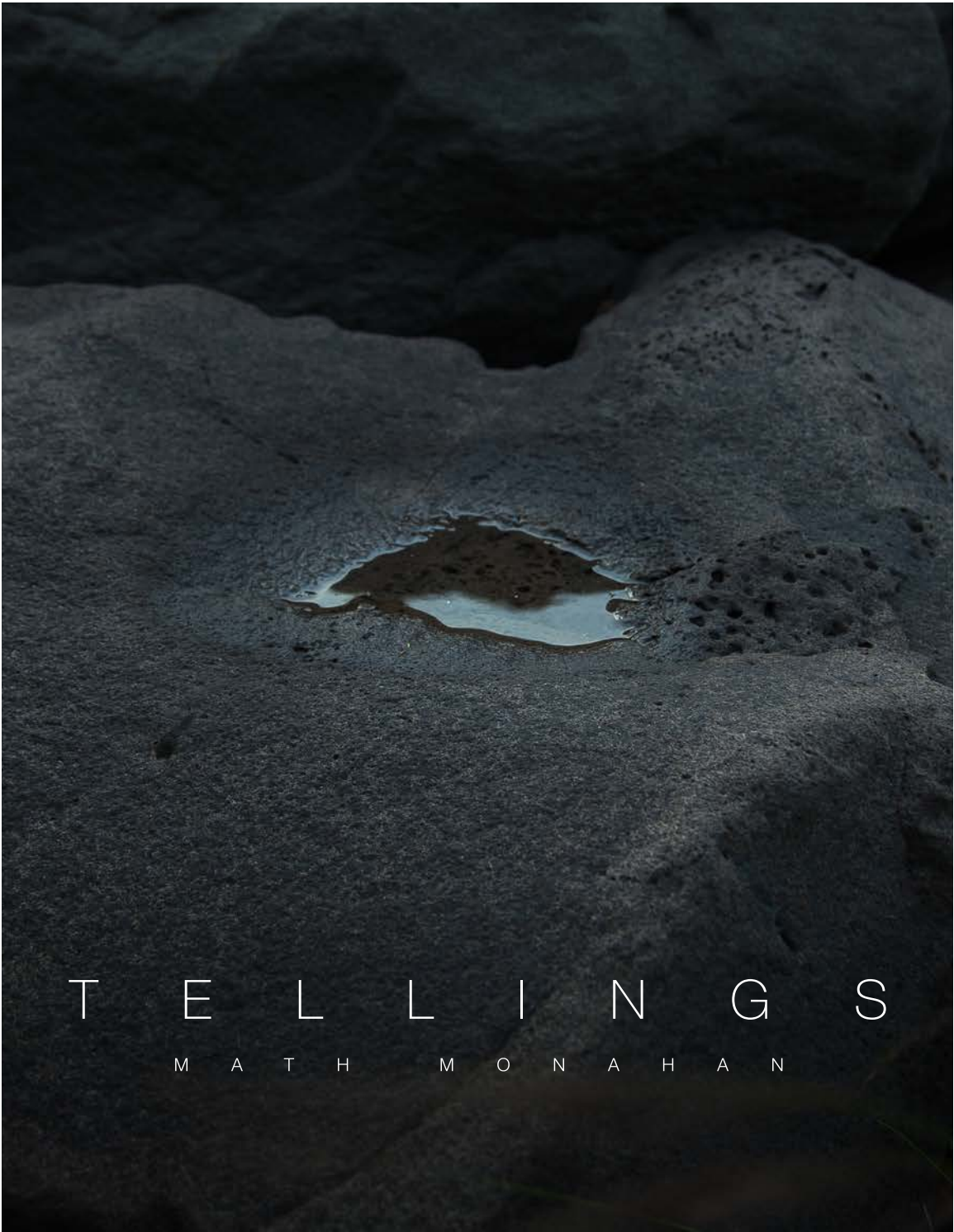
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Abstract

Tellings is an art exhibition that interprets the impermanent state of storytelling through visual art, narrative, space, and objects. Exhibited in the Stamps School of Art & Design's Slusser Gallery, this MFA thesis project places the viewer in the delicate position between the world of things and the imagined spaces of folklore and fables. Sculptures, installations, and narratives draw on folklore, mythologies and personal memories, to obscure the role of storyteller and leave the audience to build their own narratives. The work deconstructs the narratives/fables into key moments, translating them into viewer experiences in visual storytelling. This MFA thesis explores the relationships of these elements and will illuminate their role in conjuring the exhibition, *Tellings*.

Keywords

Folklore, memory, mythology, narrative, nostalgia, objects, storytelling



T E L L I N G S

M A T H M O N A H A N

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The Story Is: The Structure of Story and Space

Story is more than a narrative. Within this document and within my work I use the term story often. To begin with clarity I attempt to use them as the following. Narrative is the tale: a collection of characters, setting and details sewn together within a plot. They are the written fables that pair each installation. Story is greater. Story includes the narrative, but also the visceral reactions to those narratives, the collective conjuring of imagined realities, and the emotional ties to personal experience and memory. Several terms throughout this paper are used in specific ways for specific purposes. Though I seek to make my purposes clear, I do not make claim to their general meaning.

Everyone lives within his or her own story. That story is a construction of how we perceive our lives; *I've lived here since... my grandmother gave me these when... I don't get along with my neighbors because...* These are a part of your story; it is built from memories and incoming information (i.e. circumstantial or environmental) from every direction. Our stories overlap with one another. Sometimes we adopt parts of someone else's story or imagined parts of an unknown story and they become a part of our own. This does not make it false or fictional. To live in a story creates a duty to maintain it, to refine it, to develop it, and to add to it.

"Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

John Keats

"... It was agreed, that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that *willing suspension of disbelief* for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

"Willing suspension of disbelief" is the line between story and lie. The term, coined in 1817 by poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is the action of a reader (or viewer) deferring the rejection of a narrative due to its inherent implausibility. The suspension, according to Coleridge, can only operate if there is some "semblance of truth" or appearance of reality. The purpose of Coleridge's proposition was to reveal how a rationally minded person might understand and even enjoy an irrational story. J. R. R. Tolkien wrote about a rationally minded reader in *Tree and Leaf* in a way that contradicts the idea of suspension of disbelief. Tolkien writes that in lieu of enabling this suspension, the writer must create a consistent reality within a second system of belief, or "Secondary World". In this way, the author and reader must separate the written world from what is considered the real world (Tolkien refers to this as the Primary World), thus creating a system of logic in which anything written must only function within the secondary world. To Tolkien, this alleviates the rational mind from entering into the place of "irritable reaching" described by Keats. Tolkien chose to locate these worlds in a hierarchy, "Primary World" and "Secondary World", indicating "Primary World" is shared by all, also regarded as "reality." I, however, believe Keats and Tolkien's ideas are closer than they appear. I suggest that Tolkien's "Primary World" is actually the story each of us live in, as mentioned before. The story, being independent, is not shared by all, however, can overlap with others (his "Secondary World" being the others). In this way each of us has the perspective of *my story* and *all other stories*. What suspension of disbelief does here is to allow for the merging of stories without rational or direct connections. For instance, without the suspension of disbelief a person living within a story of logic and law (i.e. lawyer) may not have opportunity or need to merge stories with one of fantasy. I do not seek to make the viewer believe my narratives to be true in the way they believe their story to be true, or Tolkien's "Primary World" to be shared. I am attempting, by putting all stories on the same plane, to use the suspension of disbelief to obscure their boundaries and become permeable; each remaining separate truths, whilst influencing the whole.

Thus, connections must be created, anchors in "reality" must be cast, and a semblance of truth must be assembled. In this work, I interpret a semblance of truth as a component to the greater structure of seduction, which is carried out through installations using three components: objects, space, and narrative. To seduce is to persuade someone to abandon his or her duty. We all have a duty or obligation to function within our own story. This is made evident in the ubiquitous act of carrying out our lives. To abandon this, even momentarily, allows another story to enter and even become a part of it. My intention is to seduce viewers into the suspension of disbelief.

One day an archer was walking along the road. He was the best archer anyone has ever seen and was often recognized for it. As he walked along the road he came to a wooden fence running

between a house and a barn. Across the fence several targets were painted. Some very high, some very low and in many angles since the fence had warped with age. As the archer moved closer he could see holes in the center of every target. He was amazed! He was known as the best archer in the land and even he thought a truly remarkable archer must practice here! He quickly walked up to the house and knocked on the door. A woman answered and before she could even speak the archer asked, "Who practices on this fence, I must know. I am a very accomplished archer and I must meet the person that practices here!" The woman went back into the house and moments later she returned with a young boy. "This is my son," she spoke, "he is the one that practices on the fence. The archer was momentarily stunned at the boy's age but it quickly wore off. "Can you show me how you practice?" he asked the boy. "I must know how you do it. Every hole is in the middle of the target!" The boy took the man to the fence. "Well, I stand here," the boy said with his back to the fence. "Then I take about thirty steps this way." The boy took thirty steps away from the fence and turned to face it. "Then I pull my bow way back, like this." He was mimicking a bow and arrow. The archer was focusing intently on his technique. "And SHOOT!" The imaginary arrow was released and the boy walks back to the fence. "After the arrow hits the fence," he pauses as if trying to remember, "I go to the barn to get the paint. Then I paint around the holes."

I first heard this story told by Angela Lloyd in episode #114 of *The Art of Storytelling*, a podcast that interviews storytellers from around the world. I use this story to illustrate my own practice. The story functions the same way as the structure for seduction. The fence is the space in which the action takes place. The objects are the arrows or the holes left by arrows. The paint is the narrative transforming the holes into targets. These three elements are combined in a way that leads the archer to believe a certain chain-of-events has occurred. More than that, he believed in the story: the perceived chain-of-events, the imagined character of an archer better than himself, and the feelings of possibly advancing his own technique. I use the phrase *painting around the holes* as a term for this combination of elements and my creative practice.

The Rock Is a Rock, The Book is Being a Book: Material Power

“Sculpture means direct dealing with the material world.” Thomas McEvilley (*Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, p. 42)

Objects create the power of shared space between multiple viewers, and therefore can become the focus for a shared story. Thomas McEvilley writes about this in *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*. While describing the reversal of values between painting and sculpture in a post-modern culture, McEvilley touches upon a particular power or perceived authority contained within sculpture: “Its representational function is obscured or complicated by the facticity of its presence.” (41) What he is remarking on is the very realness of sculpture and its power to overshadow the illusion of representation. I would also attribute this “realness” to all objects, and go on to describe it as a facticity rooted in its shared space. Unlike an image or representation, the objects I’m using are occupying the same space as the viewer. While an image can be a believable likeness of an object, it is only as believable as the frame will allow. That is to say, an image of an object will always only be accepted as an image. Objects exist in the same space I am in and therefore bring the story one step closer.

The rock *is* a rock. The book is *being* a book. The story *is*.

I cannot fake the rock for the same reason I cannot fake a river. There are elements to the artworks that must exist in the way that they are. A rock must be a rock. It cannot be paper-maché; it cannot be made. It is this rock at this time in this place. *Is*-ness is present. While the rock may conjure associations within the viewer just as the book does, the rock was formed the way rocks are formed in order to exist as this particular rock. In this way, I think, *is*-ness is about intention, or rather, the non-intention of being anything but what it *is*. However, a book is not always a book. In *Enter into the Rock* the book is *being* a book. *Being* is an action, a task, or a role. When I say the book is *being* a book, I mean that the object under the rock is performing as a symbol of a book. Its purpose is to recall associations with a group of objects and their meaning, usage, or place in material culture. The book is being a book because it is not a particular book, but a symbol of knowledge, information, narrative, or religion. It is an archetype creating an analogy. These criteria are not always fixed for every material or object; they change based on their position within the piece.

Parallel Verses, an installation in *Tellings*, consists of seven tall, spindly tables arranged in a half circle. Each table has a bell jar, and each bell jar contains a voice. The voices all tell the same narrative but from memory. Each is unique

and is only distinguishable from the cacophony of voices upon very close inspection. Here, the voice *is* voice. When you move closer you listen to the voice, trying to distinguish it from the others. You may not be listening to the story but you are listening to the voice. Is it a big voice or a small one? Could the voice be male or female? What tone is the voice? The bell jar is *being* a bell jar; it is *being* the trap. In the narrative, voices are acts of display. They are taken, collected and trapped. Bell jars and glass domes are used to hold precious things. They display these things and keep them from being affected by the environment around them. This installation uses the bell jars in a way that questions their purpose and effect. The bell jars are enacting the trap, though the sound escapes them. They are enacting the collection, though the story spreads beyond them. In the exhibition catalogue, there is a set of photos showing me holding a bell jar open to another person as they speak into it. Here, the bell jars enact the taking, though each voice in the installation is given to anyone who will hear it. The bell jars are *being* bell jars. The tables have only one responsibility: to support the bell jars. They may invoke a particular impression of time or a sense of fragility and uneasiness within their spindly legs, but they support the bell jars. The story *is*. The story is without and within. The story is within the voices and the tables are twice removed. Because of this, the tables can be created. They can be invented, built, and arranged.

In *Between Tides*, another installation, you are presented with a desk. Alongside the desk you find a dilapidated chair and a pile of driftwood beneath. The driftwood has been written on and the desk shows signs of this writing. Here, there is no voice. The story resides in the writing; it resides in the action. The action takes place at the desk, so the story resides in part within the desk. The desk *is* a desk; therefore the desk cannot be made. The text on the driftwood is different than the act of writing. Text is the outcome of that action. The text, here, is *being* text. It is illegible. It is only recognized by the familiarity of its aesthetic: scrawling lines moving along the wood in a linear system, occasionally broken by a short sporadic spacing. This text is almost texture. It is not the words but the idea of writing that is read. Combined with the narrative of a boy writing letters, it is easy to speculate or invent what the text might say. It could be any text, or simply scribbles, and yet it is not.

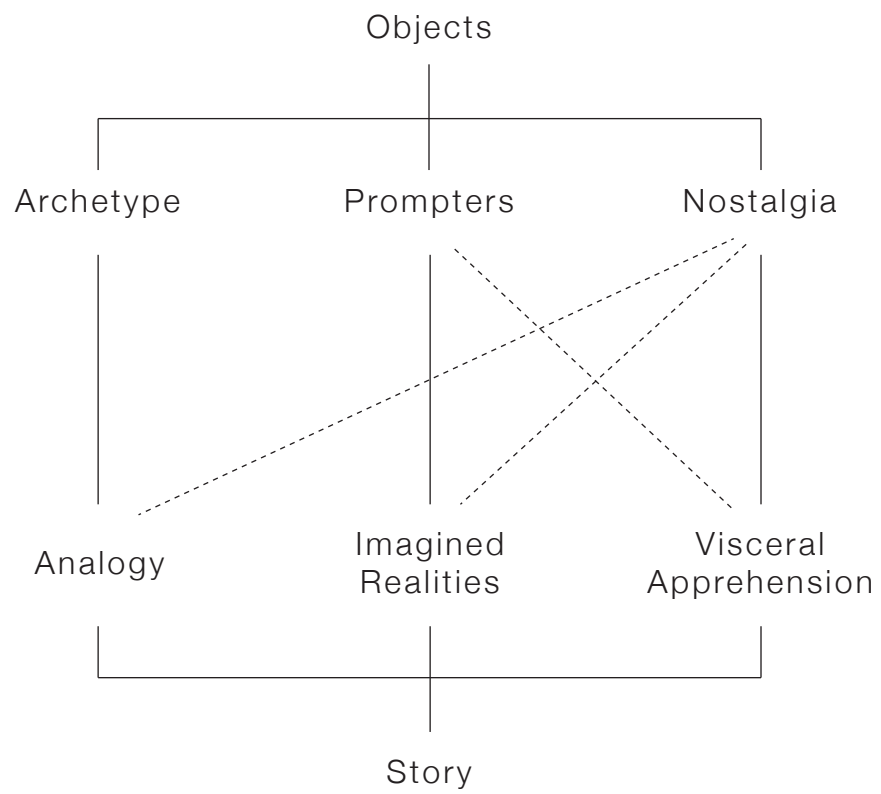


Figure 1. Paths Between Objects and Story (diagram)

There are several paths that lead between physical objects and the story they present to the viewer. In this diagram there are three main paths. The path on the left is through *Archetype* and *Analogy*. This is the cognitive path. Archetype is a typical example of an object; that object is understood through analogy in a narrative as a comparison between two things. This comparison is made cognitively between an idea of those things, or group of things. The path on the right is through *Nostalgia* and *Visceral Apprehension*. Through this path, objects are connected to story by a physical and emotional reaction. Nostalgia is a constructed emotional state combining familiarity, perception of history, and physical association. It draws on personal memories and experience through the experience of objects. This is the basis of sense memory in which sensory information, like smelling the sea in driftwood or feeling the sturdiness of a rock, can trigger memories not directly related to the object or experience. This causes emotional and physical reactions before it can even be understood on a cognitive level.

The center path is through *Prompters* and *Imagined Realities*. Here I am using Kendall Walton's use of "prompter" in *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Walton defines prompters as things that cause spontaneous imaginings through their perception. (24) He uses an example of children playing in the woods to illustrate this phenomenon: "While walking in the woods, Heather comes across a stump shaped strikingly like a bear... and she imagines a bear blocking her path. Her imagining is prompted by the stump; but for it she would not have done so." (21) Here, the stump is the prompter. Prompters can also provoke conscious, cognitive imaginings: for instance, "'Let's say all stumps are bears.'" In this example it is decided between two boys that all the stumps in the woods are bears. Each time they are confronted by a stump the boys imagine a bear, according to the social convention they've created. Subsequently this act of imagination can even be internalized, according to Walton, so that "when they see a stump... it provokes them automatically and unreflectively to imagine a bear." (24) Within the diagram, this path moves between the cognitive and visceral path as it can function within each.



Figure 2. Joseph Cornell, "Untitled (Pink Palace)". <http://eyelevel.si.edu/2010/09/two-new-additions-to-the-museum-joseph-cornell.html>



Figure 3. Joseph Cornell, *The Caliph of Bagdad*, 1954.
<https://aaronsehmar.wordpress.com/2013/03/01/joseph-cornell/>

Though these paths are what I consider the primary paths between objects and story, it is possible for lines to cross or multiple paths to be in play at once. For example, a personal object of nostalgia like a quilt could at once cause a visceral reaction of homesickness, as well as, prompt one to imagine stories of the grandparent from which it was passed down. Joseph Cornell uses the crossings of these paths to create narratives of found objects within shadowboxes and other containers. Cornell draws material not only from the vintage images of birds and thrift store buttons, but also the associations and memories they provoke. In *Cast of Hawks* and *Between Tides*, I am using similar objects to elicit a sense of time and history, as well as create a space of action. The small pieces within these installations include handheld tools, chalk and charcoal, and other objects that refer to a workspace be it crafting arrows or writing on driftwood. Eliciting memories through the experience of an object is important to many of the things we collect and can be our only remaining connection to people and places from our past. Recent research has revealed that each time a memory is recalled it goes through a process of reconstruction. In this process the memory is temporarily at risk to changes that fill in gaps the brain cannot reconstruct. This allows memories to change over time, especially if recalled often. Perhaps this is another way in which our stories are built; the brain performs tellings of its own.



Figure 4. "Cast of Hawks", detail.



Figure 5. "Between Tides", detail.



Figure 6. Dario Robleto, "Telegrams of Loss b/w War Pigeon With a Message (A Burden Nourished By Time)", 2006. <http://www.dariorobleto.com/works>



Figure 7. Dario Robleto, "Words Tremble With Thoughts They Express", 2008.
<http://www.dariorobleto.com/works>

When I was first made aware of Dario Robleto's work I was mesmerized and in awe of his use of materials and how they seamlessly wove a story around the sculpture. Reading descriptions of materials like WWI gauze bandage, mourning handkerchiefs, and bullets made from dissolved audiotape recordings of poets' voices combined with altar-like sculptures put the work in a realm of history, nostalgia, and fantasy all at once. I continued looking at his work and the more descriptions I read the more skeptical I became. Materials like bone dust from every bone in the body, pulp made of letters to brides from soldiers who did not return from various wars, and a 10,000-year-old flower caught in amber started losing their meaning. Was I being desensitized by the rapid amount of work I was taking in? Do I really believe he collected all of these rare materials, and, seeing his use of history and relic, that he would alter or even destroy them to create sculpture? Without the answers, I was even more intrigued. Something else is happening. Robleto is tying narratives to the materials and objects. A viewer may not know that a glass inkwell was made from glass produced by lightning strikes when heat from the blast melted the surrounding sand. However, after reading the description the inkwell becomes transformed. Stretched audiotape may be a simple material found in any electronic store, but once revealed to be "audiotape of field recordings of the sound of glaciers melting (2005-06)" the material is now connected to a time and a place through the simple act of ascribing a narrative. Robleto is, in effect, painting around the holes just as the boy in the archer story.

Though I chose not to directly attribute the materials or objects in my artworks to specific narratives, their proximity to each other creates a bond that is similar. I do not aim to have the viewer believe that the voices in the bell jars are the stolen voices from the narrative. I am interested in creating subtle connections that lead a viewer to consider if they are meant to be the voices of the narrative, possibly even imagine they are voices in the narrative or, better yet, yearn for them to be those voices. The viewer yearning for the voices is now invested in the installation and closer, if not completely, to allowing the story to enter their own.

TELLINGS

Math Monahan



Figure 8. "Between Tides"

Building an Island: Access Through Space

Throughout *Tellings*, I use space in various ways to achieve two main objectives: to build on the narratives behind each installation and add to the structure of seduction. The term “space” is used in many ways especially when writing about sculpture and installation. It can often be referred to as the type of location, or context, the work inhabits (i.e. a gallery, library, forest or castle). I would argue that these examples fall under the section about objects since it is the objects within (walls, books, trees, stone) that define the space, or at the very least are recognized by them. Here, I am defining space as the design of the physical distance: the arrangement of things, the space between, and how these influence the viewer.

The first installation a viewer encounters when entering the gallery is *Between Tides*. This piece consists of a desk, chair, and a collection of driftwood. In the narrative paired with the installation, a boy deals with grief over the loss of his mother. To cope, he ritualizes the act of writing on driftwood at the edge of the sea. In this ritual, he isolates himself from others in a way that is similar to the isolation he feels in grieving. The installation is arranged as a place of action, a ritualized workspace in which the action has stopped—whether momentarily or indefinitely is unclear. The placement of the installation at the forefront of the exhibition establishes a tone of loss and isolation and, therefore, the island of driftwood is isolated from the rest of the works. The white walls of the gallery reject a connection to the sea-worn piece, which remains, as all islands, alone.

Parallel Verses and *Stone Tomes* both contain a set of seven: seven stone books, seven tables, and seven bell jars. While their numbers align, their arrangements differ. The seven stone book-pedestals in *Stone Tomes* are scattered across a large space toward the back of the gallery. In the paired narrative, several monks are performing a similar task over the course of many years. It is an undertaking that is to be performed alone, in a space of one’s own, over and over until each one passes away, whereupon another takes their place. This narrative takes place over a large expanse of time. The task is scattered not only through time but also through characters, though they all exist as one group and are unified in their goal. The staggered arrangement of the stone book-pedestals is meant to reflect that lapse of time.

By contrast, the seven bell jars on seven tables in *Parallel Verses* are orderly. The tables stand in a half circle, with just enough space to move between, but not spaced as widely as the stone books. Their arrangement exists within a smaller space constructed of three walls, with the open curve of the tables facing an invisible fourth wall. This opening invites the viewer to approach the work.

In the written narrative of *Parallel Verses*, a girl learns to steal voices only to find they all are caught in her head. In the end she accidentally locks herself in a tower in an attempt to escape the cacophony of voices. The arrangement of the bell jars accomplishes three things. First, the curve mimics not only the tower in which the girl is locked away, as well as the space of her own mind in which the voices are trapped. Second, the arrangement of the bell jars mimics the timeline of the narrative. The narrative is unified around the girl, not scattered through time and character as in *Stone Tomes*. The third effect of the arrangement is to give access to the viewer. The voices coming from the bell jars are set up to be experienced as an indistinguishable murmur when heard from any distance further than a foot, mimicking the experience of the girl in the narrative. One must draw close to single out any voice. The experience of leaning toward something so delicate and aurally bewildering can be uncomfortable, and it is meant to be. The orderliness and symmetry of the physical arrangement allow the comfort needed to experience the discomfort of the audio. An element of ease seduces the listener/viewer into a willing suspension of disbelief.



Figure 9. "Parallel Verses"



Figure 10. "Stone Tomes"



Figure 11. Marcel Duchamp, "Étant donné", 1966.
<http://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/324.html?page=2>

Another element of ease is offered to the viewer through *Enter into the Rock and Hide in the Dust*. As we already know, the rock must be a rock. This element works toward the semblance of truth Coleridge suggests is necessary for the suspension of disbelief. In order for the viewer to know that the rock, in fact, is an authentic rock, access to the rock must be granted. Just for a moment imagine that the rock had been fabricated. To conceal this, the sculpture might be placed in a smaller room to which the viewer's access would be limited only to looking through the door. As with Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, they could not cross the threshold. In Duchamp's installation the viewer may only look through a hole in the door to view the arranged scene; all the crucial information of the narrative is obscured. While this arrangement does create interest in the inaccessible, similar to the trapped book under the rock, the nearly complete inaccessibility creates a stronger sense of irritable reaching, reaching for fact or understanding, leading to a resistance to the suspension of disbelief. In the arrangement of *Enter into the Rock...*, I balance the inaccessibility of the pinned book with accessibility of the rock, creating the pleasant uncertainty intended throughout the work.



Figure 12. "Enter into the Rock and Hide in the Dust", details.

The balance between access and distance is a tenuous line that also plays out in *Cast of Hawks*. Special attention is placed on the arrangement of arrows in the space of the installation. It is important that there be just enough space between each arrow, or between the arrows and the wall. In this space, the viewer must feel as if they could become one of the arrows by placing themselves alongside the arrows or become the target by positioning him or herself in front of the empty chair. All this must be done without blatantly guiding the viewer to do so. The choice to become an arrow or a target is the same choice as allowing the story to enter your own. Again, the arrangement is integral to the seduction. The arrows are aimed at the chair but the space is aimed at the viewer. The choice must be easy, but it must always be a choice.



Figure 13. Annette Messenger, "Them and Us, Us and Them", 2000.
<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2009/mar/05/annette-messenger-hayward-retrospective>



Figure 14. Annette Messenger, "Them and Us, Us and Them", 2000. (detail)
<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2009/mar/05/annette-messenger-hayward-retrospective>

Annette Messenger is often known for using playful materials and objects, such as stuffed animals or other toys, in an austere way. In her installation *Them and Us, Us and Them*, Messenger uses the heads of stuffed animals to cover the heads of taxidermy. She has received various criticisms for the dark tones in her work. While the combination of very different objects draws attention to their mutual “stuffedness,” I am more interested in the installation. The strange little creatures stand on small platforms suspended from the ceiling above the viewer’s head. While their peculiarity already draws some attention, the inaccessibility serves to create even more. The concern I have in my own work (creating too much inaccessibility in the installation, physically and narratively) is tempered in Messenger’s work by the fact that her works are clearly fabricated fictions. As the viewer I am not asking myself “Is that creature real?” The height of the installations creates the desire to see more clearly, to know it, and if I cannot, my mind will strive to make up the rest, as we will see in the next section.

Painting Around the Holes: Narrative Transformation

As stated earlier, the use of the term narrative, here, is designated to the written myths/legends/fairytales paired with each installation. Its part in the seduction of the suspension of disbelief goes beyond revealing aspects of the story not conveyed within the installations. Narrative plays a role that can be understood in the utilization of three parts: the wall text in the exhibition, the cognitive functions of fiction, and lure of myths/legends/fairytales. Each of these work together developing impulses for explanation, firing neurons in the motor cortex, and appealing to a weakness for self-propagating cultural elements, also known as memes, in the efforts of seduction.

“The sole condition for the existence of reality is fable (i.e. storytelling), since narrative is its only means of transmission.” Christian Boltanski

In *Tellings*, each installation is paired with a small label on the wall. Each label consists of a title, a list of materials, and a short narrative. I use the term “paired” instead of, for instance, accompanied to reveal that the installation and text are two parts of a whole. One does not supplement the other; they each perform significant roles and are held to that account. In the text, each component is carefully considered and uses the label, a convention of the gallery, towards the greater goal. The materials list is presented as a list of materials used in the installation for the viewer to better understand the making of the piece. I used this opportunity to highlight certain objects or materials, de-emphasize others, and conceal some entirely. For example, in *Parallel Verses* the list of materials is

as follows: voice, bell jars, and tables. The first is voice, not voices, but voice. I want the viewer to consider voice as a material key to this installation. The other two, bell jars and tables, in order of significance, are the only materials seen. There is no mention of the mechanics behind the audio because to state them would be to bring the equipment to the front of awareness and effectively break the illusion of voices trapped in bell jars. Yes, viewers will question the mechanics on their own, but this will be on an individual basis and brought into awareness through curiosity creating a link, or quest, between them and the work.

Another part of the label is the written narrative. This may seem to give away information, but actually performs another task. Social neuroscience reveals unconscious responses to action or emotion in others and even “shows that merely encountering an action word like ‘grasp’ can trigger neurons to fire in the area of the motor cortex that would be activated when actually grasping.” (Aziz, 19)

“Fiction allows us to extend and refine our capacity to process social information, especially the key information of character and event — individuals and associates, allies and enemies, goals, obstacles, actions, and outcomes — and to metarepresent, to see social information from the perspective of other individuals or other times, places, or conditions”
(Boyd, 192)

As written in his book, *On the Origins of Stories*, Brian Boyd reveals to us another role narrative plays in cognitive science. He states, “We are not taught narrative. Rather, narrative reflects our mode of understanding events” (Boyd, 131). Narratives and fictions allow us to experience a range of social actions and behaviors vicariously without the risk of being in the situation. The breadth of characters and action that takes place over a short period of time enables the rapid consumption and processing that are the draw of fiction (Nettle, 22).

Boyd describes our perception of knowledge as “moving from known to unknown.” Knowledge understood as a quantity of knowns and unknowns creates an impulse to acquire explanation: I see what is, but want to know why. This unconscious desire triggers our brains to fill in the gaps with conjuring of how we perceive the information and events in our lives: narrative (Boyd, 200). This is the same impulse that happens when you witness an interaction between strangers but cannot overhear the conversation. Almost immediately you create a narrative of what is happening: how they know each other, what they are talking about, even detailed backstories of each person. This happens when looking at art, especially when it is representational. You create narratives of the

artist making the work, of the characters in the image, even of anthropomorphized materials in social interactions. When a narrative is presented, we grasp at it to fill the gaps and fulfill the impulse. In *Tellings*, I made the installations knowing there would be narrative gaps that would trigger this impulse. The desire for the narrative text creates another link between the viewer and the work. They become invested in understanding.

Even with all the information we know about narrative and fiction, and their roles in cognitive processes, it is still important to discuss why I am creating and using these particular narratives. The narratives I am creating could be categorized as many things: myth, legend, fairytale, fable, and even folklore at times. The distinctions between these genres (i.e. the use of animals, their social functions in histories, or processes of dissemination) are important to their individual study, however, all share commonalities that create a uniquely irresistible draw, as Jack Zipes would put it.

It is first important to understand how fairy tales (this term now used as a condensed form of the earlier list) function in a sociocultural setting as memes. To do this we must briefly recall Richard Dawkins' *meme*:

*“Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, way of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain... [M]emes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell.” (Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 192.)*

In his book *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, Jack Zipes makes a case for fairy tales as successful cultural memes. Beginning in an oral tradition, the fairy tale has remained constant through world affairs and changing media. The widespread sharing of fairy tales through oral storytelling, plays, novels,

television and movies (to name a few) is consistent with Dawkins' parasitic propagation of a meme. Zipes also argues that their evolution plays a key part in their functionality as memes. While sometimes considered static in their classical status, fairy tales actually remain alive and evolving by, "gathering fragments, bits of information, motifs, and characters from stories they have circulated around them." (Zipes, 19)



Figure 15. Kiki Smith, "Born", 2002.
https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/burning_down_the_house/smith.php



Figure 16. Kiki Smith, "Rapture", 2001. <http://thematerialcollective.org/exposed-kiki-smith/>

Aside from their rapid transition as cultural memes, fairy tales also present themselves as excellent candidates to elicit the development of social cognition through fiction. Fairy tales, myths, legends, and folklore exist as short narratives often relying on archetypes and familiar motifs. In her sculptures, etchings and paintings, Kiki Smith often utilizes archetypes to draw on their narrative associations. In *Born* and *Rapture*, Smith is pulling from the narrative of Little Red Riding Hood in which a girl and grandmother are eaten by a wolf and later emerge unharmed. The image of a person, specifically a female, emerging from a wolf is used explicitly, as seen in *Born*, and in a more subtle way, as seen in *Rapture*. In a similar way, Miwa Yanagi, a Japanese photographer, uses motifs and archetypes in fairytales to create her own scenes. In these scenes the young girl and old woman characters from the narratives are compounded to obscure the victim and oppressor. This fits into place with the rapid consumption and processing that this development is drawn to. The fantastical appeal of these narratives offers alternative situations and resolutions (i.e. enchanting worlds, magical creatures, and supernatural powers) not found in typical circumstances, allowing that development to expand beyond one's immediate situation.



Figure 17. Miwa Yanagi, "The Wild Swans", 2005.
<http://www.yanagimiwa.net/e/fairy/>

The narratives throughout *Tellings* function in similar ways. They are born from a spontaneous inspiration, whether an idea for installation or brief snippet of narrative, and gain momentum as they grow. In the case of *Between Tides*, the simple inclination to throw driftwood found on the beach back into the water, lead to considering where that inclination came from, or better yet, where it could come from. The narratives are all written as organically as possible and in conjunction with the physical works. As the narrative develops through new characters, events, and details, the making of the installation is influenced. As the installation develops through new materials, objects, and associations, the narrative is influenced. At the time, the narratives seem to be written purely from imagination, however, this is often not the case. The driftwood I would toss into the water as if a message in a bottle was the same driftwood my mother used to write, "I love you, Dad" in the sand. When I revisit each myth or fairy tale, I find they are often amalgamations of not only other myths and fairy tales but also draw directly from my own story. *Parallel Verses*, for example, is at once a narrative of a girl who learns to steal voices, a composite of Ariel and the Sea Witch from a popular fairy tale, and a reflection on feeling unheard growing up in the country isolated from a community I longed to be a part of. Each narrative and corresponding installation grew in this way until they both reached a level of completion for this exhibition.

Conclusion

These artworks are stories themselves, to be told and retold as they evolve through each telling. The installation *Between Tides* was first told as a small performance along the Huron River in Ann Arbor, MI. I sat at the desk by the river writing the narrative of this piece repeatedly on the driftwood. I would take a piece of driftwood, gently coat it in powdered chalk, write a few lines in charcoal, and add it to a pile. When I finished with the small batch of driftwood I would wash them in the river, dry them, and begin again. As people passed by I invited them to hear the story and offered to write a letter to someone they've lost. If they agreed, I asked for them to share a memory of that person as I wrote. In this telling of *Between Tides*, the ritual of exchange was the highlighted facet of the artwork. When preparing this piece for *Tellings*, I shifted the focus to create a scene of arrested action in which I removed my role and the objects became the storyteller. In future tellings of this installation, I am interested in issues of place and scale, both of which I have grown to discover are tied to the narrative and objects. I plan to perform the piece similarly to what was described before, however, located along Lake Michigan in southeastern Wisconsin. This is the place where the narrative connects to personal memories of loss. I am also interested in expanding the installation, in another telling, to the scale of a single space and shifting the focus to endurance and an impossible task. The emotional and personal nature of the narrative and performance in *Between Tides*, was set

aside for the telling in this exhibition for me to better understand and explore the structure of storytelling. Moving forward, I will be re-engaging these elements, as they are crucial to the story.

The unique powers of space, objects, and narrative are all entwined in different parts of our lives. From the nostalgia of personal moments, to the enticing fiction of a new blockbuster, and even the clever layout of a department store display, we all encounter these elements in many ways and are influenced by them, sometimes without our knowledge. Through installations and sculpture I am engaging these forces, tying them together to weave my own story, and inviting the viewer to make it a part of their own.

The next time you see a large stone, consider: is there a book underneath? If you find yourself asking the question, you've already put one there.

Tellings Exhibition Index



Cast of Hawks

Arrows and found objects.

A craftsman is charged with making an impossible number of arrows only to find they are all pointing at him in the end. To save his life he tries to make more than can possibly be turned on him to hide within the thicket of arrows.



Stone Tomes

Cement.

There is a mountain that once had a flowing river said to come from the same source that watered the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. It is believed that if the mountain is presented with all of human knowledge it will awaken and the river will flow again. A group of monks charged themselves with the task of reading every book aloud to the mountain. Days, months, and years pass. As they read, the books turned to stone in their hands, their voices poured out like gold, and their bodies withered like ash rising from a fire. When the river flowed it soaked into their faded bodies and carried them through the earth.



Between Tides

Driftwood, chalk, charcoal and found objects.

A boy's mother dies suddenly. Unable to cope with the grief, the boy is convinced she has turned into a whale. In an effort to reach out for what he has lost, he begins writing to her on pieces of driftwood and throwing them into the sea. As the text washes away in the waves it became a part of the water and, in turn, the mother's spirit.



Parallel Verses

Voice, tables and bell jars.

Put-down and unheard by her own family, a young girl hopes for a way out. When a nameless witch teaches her the power to take people's voices, the girl's world turns in her favor. Though she was cautioned to be careful with this gift the girl doesn't heed this warning and her power becomes unruly. After silencing the kingdom she begins hearing all the voices she's stolen only now they are in her head. In a frantic effort to escape she locks herself away while accidentally taking her own voice and is trapped in a tower unable to call out.



Enter into the Rock and Hide in the Dust

Rock and book.

A rock is placed on top of a book. The story is written in a book. A rock is placed on top of the book.

Tellings Exhibition Images



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EXHIBITION







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