



Ours/Mine/Theirs

Mackenzie Hill

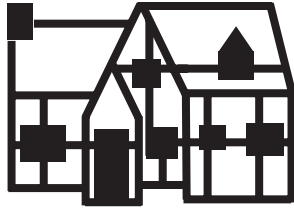
University of Michigan
Stamps School of Art & Design
Integrative Project 2021-2022



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Acknowledgements

My project wouldn't exist if it wasn't for my parents. Their continued support for me and for this house has shown me what it means to love a space so deeply.

Statement

Ours/Mine/Theirs explores my relationship with my childhood home, which served as the container that encapsulated most of my life; through school, family gatherings, and changing friendships, I always had that space to rely on. Despite my growing separation from that house, it's still the first place that comes to mind when I think of home. Using found objects and mixed materials, I froze my recollections of spaces from this home in miniature form. These handcrafted keepsakes capture my past interactions with the physical spaces they represent. Each box depicts one room, fragmenting the spatial plane within a hinged container. The framed photographs of current elements of my parents' house create a dialogue between memories of the past and present.

DEFINING HOME

Introduction

My inspiration for this series came through preparing for my senior year of college and thinking about what I would be doing next. I was overwhelmed by the uncertainty of my future, all the parts that come with graduating and trying to figure out how to navigate the “real world.” And to deal with the instability of all the unknowns, I was leaning on the stability of my memories of home.

Ours/Mine/Theirs stems from my relationship with my parents’ house. They’ve lived in the same house since before I was born so it’s been a constant hallmark in my life. For me it is the epitome of home and has filled the roles of many different spaces. My attachment to that house grew with every construction project I did with my dad and every day spent researching its almost century long history.

The title of this piece relates to my own shifting ideas of attachment and ownership of the house. For most of my life it was our house. But during summers in high school while my mom was away running a summer camp and my dad was busy managing a restaurant, it was my house. I got to rule the cats, cook my own meals, play music as loud as I wanted. All luxuries that I miss in my small apartment now. Since I’ve been in college, it’s back to being their house again and I am only a visitor. There’s this constant shifting of my own attachment and because I haven’t replaced this house with my own permanent home yet, I will always have this house as my marker of home.



Figure 1. The table in the final exhibition.

Contextualization

My research for this project began with exploring my earliest connections with home: dollhouses. I referenced my childhood and the toys I played with. I thought back to my prized dollhouse that my Nana got me or my collection of Polly Pocket compacts (Fig. 2). I was fascinated by these toys because they were portable and condensed but revealed complicated interiors once opened. I used the book *World of Dollhouses* as a steppingstone into historical research and deeper explorations of dollhouses through museum collections (Fig. 3).¹ I was amazed to see antique examples as complex works of art and the intensive levels of care and skilled craftsmanship involved in their creation.

My shifting perception of dollhouses as an art form led me to my most valuable creative resource: *Playing at Home*.² Gill Perry analyzes the range of forms that the house can take in contemporary art, whether interpreted as extremely literal or strongly abstracted. Perry explores what home means to different artists from the collision of a past house



Figure 2. An example of Polly Pocket compacts.

1 Jacobs, Flora Gill. *A World of Doll Houses*. Gramercy Publishing Company, 1965.

2 Perry, Gill. *Playing at Home: The House in Contemporary Art*. Vol. 2, 2014.



Figure 3. A dollhouse in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, original house c.1870, interior decorations c. 20th Century.

into a present residence in Do Ho Suh's *Fallen Star 1/5* to the cluttered empty dollhouses of Whiteread's *Place (Village)* (Fig. 4, 5). An eye-opening discussion for me was about differentiating the terms house and home. The idea of home evokes emotional attachment to the physical space of the house. Home exists between public and private, familial and individual, and constantly balances these overlapping roles and ideas. Home relates to growing up, adulthood, stability, financial burdens, ownership, childhood; it encapsulates the human experience and serves as a common touchstone for humanity.

Looking specifically at the relationship of childhood and home, Gulcin and Ozak explored spatial memory and architecture within our lived experiences.³ I was intrigued by their evaluation of body memory and learned memory. Body memory would be my own interactions with spaces while learned memory is an outsider experiencing it second-hand, or in the case of my series, being able to explore a replication of these spaces through my narrative lens. This encouraged me to think about my relationship with home more abstractly and how I could

3 Ozak, Nilufer, and Pulat Gokmen Gulcin. "Spatial Memory: A Childhood House a Proposed Model of the Memory and Architecture Relationship." *IOP Conference Series*, n.d.



Figure 4. Do Ho Suh, *Fallen Star - 1/5th*, 2008. Installation view at the Museum of Fine Arts in Texas.



Figure 5. Rachel Whiteread, *Place (Village)*, 2008, installation at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

visualize my personal experiences for a viewer. I spent a lot of time writing and mind-mapping about things that triggered memories and trying to put into words the many feelings home evokes (Fig. 6).

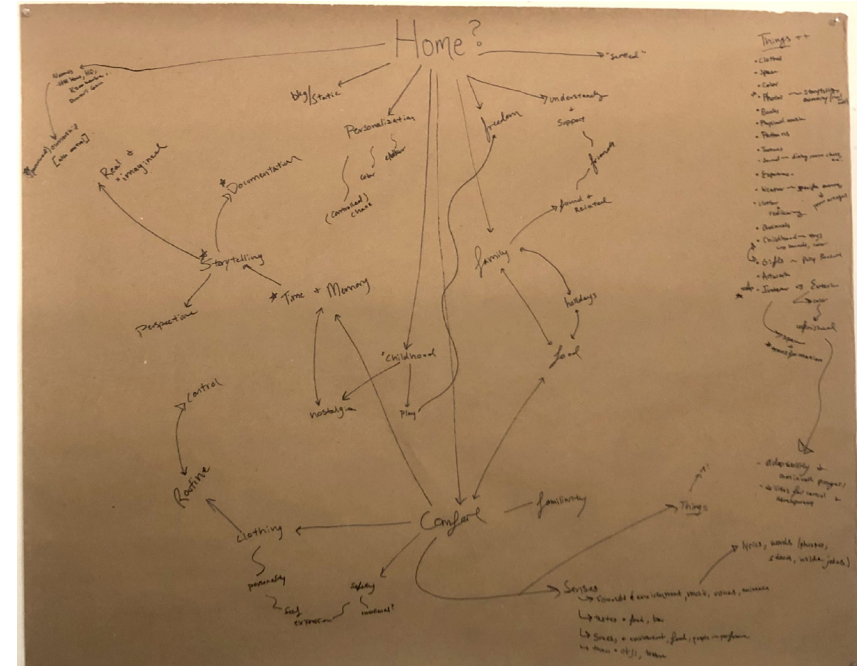


Figure 6. One of my early mindmaps trying to define "home."

While exploring more abstract definitions of memory and space, I found Mike Kelley's *Educational Complex* where he recreated the buildings of his educational experience in miniaturized forms (Fig. 7). Working completely from his memory, these models were often architecturally impossible. This tug-of-war between being accurate to your own memory and portraying a space that is feasible is something I considered often. I faced a different challenge than Kelley because I still have access to the spaces I was recreating, so I chose to focus on past versions of the house that are dramatically different now.

Eager to learn more about Kelley, I read *Mike Kelley: Memory Ware: A Survey*.⁴ Kelley took inspiration from the folk-art practice of memory ware vessels which are adorned with small objects to honor a person who has passed away. Kelley's pieces take a range of shapes, from amorphous sculptures or large vertical flats (Fig. 8). Kelley balances the idea of memory as something personal and universal by playing on a general feeling of nostalgia, adorning his sculptures with objects featuring pop culture characters or political pins linking them to specific times in history. In this way the sculptures are vague and impersonal. You are given clues to the imaginary subject in Kelley's work, and there's an implication for the viewer to picture how these individual elements are connected to create a portrait of a singular person.

⁴ *Mike Kelley: Memory Ware, A Survey*. New York: Hauser & Wirth Publishers, 2017.



Figure 7. Mike Kelley, *Educational Complex*, 1995, Installation View Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmo Sweden, 1997

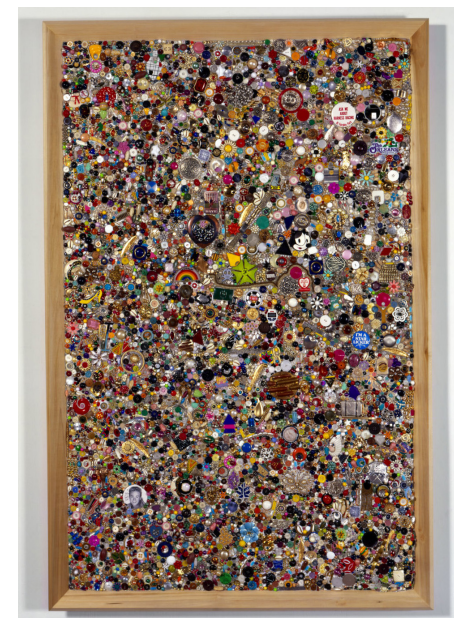
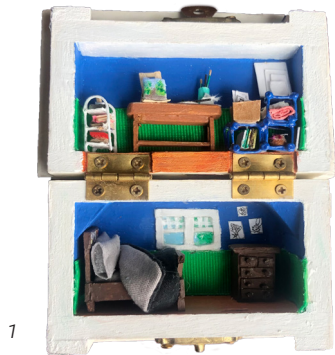


Figure 8. Mike Kelley, *Memory Ware Flat #8*, 2001.

Feelings and memories take priority over remembering the full scope of the places in which they occurred. In "Selfhood and 'Nostalgia,'" Begiato analyzes historical biographies to see how the physical spaces of childhood homes influence identity.⁵ Closely examining firsthand narratives like journals and autobiographies, Begiato recounts the importance of physical spaces and connections to material objects for their role in triggering memory and feelings of nostalgia as "agents conveying familial and moral values and identities as well as . . . a sense of self." The objects within my spaces serve as triggers of my own memory and markers for the times they represent. These recollections, as explored by Begiato, change depending on how distant in time a person is from a memory. As someone who still has access to my childhood home, that has influenced my ability to seek out accuracy when I want to.

⁵ Begiato, Joanne. "Selfhood and 'Nostalgia': Sensory and Material Memories of the Childhood Home in Late Georgian Britain." *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42, no. 2 (June 2019): 229–46.

MAKING HOME



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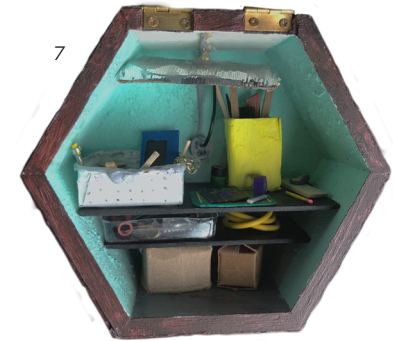
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Scenes:

1. My Brother's Room
2. My Room
3. Den
4. Porch
5. Living Room
6. Dining Room
7. Basement
8. Landing
9. Office
10. Kitchen

Creative Process

The biggest challenge I faced early on was figuring out what home meant to me. I did a lot of personal digging through freewriting and mind-mapping throughout this project to figure out how I wanted to talk about home. Deciding what I wanted to say brought up questions about permanency and instability. I discovered that for me home has a lot to do with reliability, comfort, and control. This idea of control became increasingly important to this series through the ideas of ownership. Each container navigates my own relationship and impacts on the spaces within. Thinking back to the title of this series, *Ours/Mine/Theirs*, these spaces will always belong collectively to my family for our shared time and attachment to this house. But my own individual interactions are just as important to me as the ones with my family. And I will still retain these memories and connections to this space even as my separation to the house grows and my ties to “ownership” fade.

A crucial point within my practice is the usage of found and repurposed materials. I am by nature a repurposer and it felt important that the materials I used were representative of my ideas about space and transformation. I thrifted boxes and fabrics, pulled beads and paints from my stash, cardboard and plastics from my recycling. The ideas of control also play into this element of material choices. Working with rudimentary materials allows for more exploration and customization because you are starting from scratch.



Figure 9, 10. Two miniatures designed by Narcissa Niblack Thorne in the late 1930s.



Figure 11. An early mockup of the Dining Room.



Figure 12. An early dollhouse iteration made in a peanut container.

The realm of miniatures is something I’ve always been fascinated by but never a part of. I remember rushing to see the *Thorne Miniature Rooms* in the Art Institute of Chicago on every family trip. I’d explore each scene and walk through the room at a snail’s pace no matter how many times I’d seen it, always finding new things to focus on or trying to figure out how they were made. I was fascinated by how the variety of styles and time periods managed to feel cohesive (Figs. 9, 10).

Working on a miniature scale was a big learning curve. I started by experimenting with repurposing containers and trying to get familiar with working on a small scale (Figs. 11, 12). With each piece of furniture I made, I had to think about which material would be the most logical. I worked the most with wood and cardboard with additions of a range of salvaged materials. Each piece was experimental, often going through a few rounds of changes before things looked right.

The first official piece of the series I made started on a whim. I was inspired by a piece of ribbon I found in a thrifted bag of scrap materials. This ribbon signaled to me the beadboard in my brother's room. I glued in the green ribbon, painted a window on the back wall, and sculpted all the furniture out of air-dry clay. As I continued to work and experiment on this scale, I started to expand my range of materials and as my skills improved, I came back and redeveloped previous iterations (Fig. 13).



Figure 13. A side-by-side of the original version of the interior of My Brother's Room (left) and the revisited version (right).

The containers influenced a lot of the interiors and they came from a stockpile of jewelry boxes I'd saved from my Nana, some from my mom, and the rest from thrift stores. As I evolved my practice, my process became more streamlined. I created more detailed plans of materials and construction steps (Fig. 14). I would start to think about what that room meant to me and in what ways I interacted with that physical space to plan both the interior and exterior scenes.

With each room came challenges of customized materials. Because I was set on making everything myself, furniture required hand-painted fabrics for the patterns to be at the right scale and each tiny piece involved careful maneuvering and assembly. Individual elements were

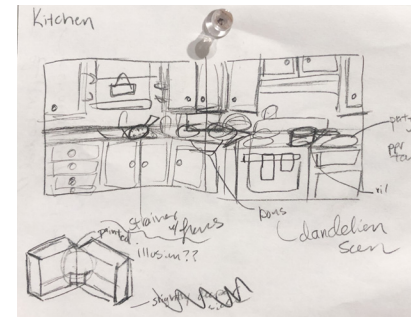


Figure 14. (top) Annotated sketches of the Kitchen.
Figure 15. (left) A close up of the desk in the Office featuring coloring pages, file folders, and floppy disks.
Figure 16. (right) The couch from the Living Room.



made like the clutter in the Office (Fig. 15). Focusing on these small elements was important to establishing each scene and how I used those spaces. Being able to hold each tiny sticky note or piece of furniture in my own hands felt electrifying (Fig. 16).

Another important element of the containers is the decorative exteriors (Fig. 17). Whether adding collage elements, text, painting, or three-dimensional sculptural elements, each box has a completely unique outward appearance. The Office is collaged to emulate when that room was my nursery, and the door was decorated with images of fairies and Barbies and cats. The Basement has elements of the interior and exte-

rior spaces, combining the pegboard and tools with the brick exterior of the foundations. The Den is collaged with scans of book pages that I remembered being on my parents' bookshelf. The Landing is decorated with a winding, board game pathway as the window seat in the real space doubles as a game cupboard. The exteriors were a way for me to further abstract my own relationships with these spaces and pinpoint what elements are the most significant to me.



Figure 17. A selection of box exteriors. Top Row: Office, Basement. Bottom Row: Den, Landing

A later addition to my project was the inclusion of photographs from my parents' house. Playing on the idea of the representational symbols of the exteriors of my containers, I wanted to focus on close-up elements, taken at a similar scale to the miniatures I created (Fig. 18). These little snippets of reality converse with the manufactured worlds of the boxes I created and connect the miniature world to a micro-view of the real world.



Figure 18. A small selection of the 42 photos on display.



Figure 19. A view of the exhibit table.

Exhibition

When configuring my exhibition, I was heavily inspired by the idea of trying to replicate elements of my parents' home within my studio space. I brainstormed ways to signify an interior home space without replicating any specific room. As I developed my plans and the series itself, I thought back to the idea of a Christmas village. I remembered fondly the large Christmas village set up by my Memaw every year. She would transform her sunroom with layers of batting and every inch of shelving and table space would be covered with tiny houses.

I asked my parents if I could borrow the white farmhouse table that is the feature point of my exhibit. It's been on our porch for years and is another constant element of that space. The containers are arranged scattered on the table (Fig. 19). A few are elevated in the center to allow for a better view of the pieces. The boxes that can't stand on their own have custom supports. The table is centered in the space, allowing viewers to walk around the table and examine the pieces from all angles.

Because of the table as a symbol of togetherness, I thought of the gallery wall in the dining room. My mom has had a gallery wall of family photos hanging up since they moved in. Luckily enough, while asking to borrow the table, I managed to borrow a bunch of frames from my parents' house as well. The images are scattered in the frames and elements of the real spaces appear across multiple photographs (Fig. 20).

There is something so special about the power of getting to have real elements of my parents' house within the exhibition. Inside each frame, behind the images that I displayed, there are still family photos tucked inside. Images of my brother and I, our pets, and my grandparents are physically represented in this space in a way that only I can really know about. Their hidden participation in this project says a lot about the unseen memories that are represented through the displayed photographs and the containers I created.



Figure 20. A section of the gallery wall.

Early on in this project, I wanted to make these pieces interactive. The point of the containers was to be portable and to have individual interactions with each piece. But concerns about structure and mishandling put a damper on those ideas. Although my exhibit wasn't participatory, I still let my parents pick things up and interact with the containers in the same way I had been able to while making them (Fig. 22).

Reflection

As much as I hope other people can relate to my relationship with home and space, I know that this project was really for me. Every time I talk about this project, I feel a little differently. It's happiness from the thought of my family, from the bliss of youth, but also sadness at the spaces I will never be able to recapture. It's nostalgia and a little bit of anger. It's loneliness and a sense of belonging. But most of all this project was incredibly comforting to me. Being able to look at it now, in its completed state, I can reflect on the significance of my childhood home and everything it represents. I wouldn't trade the time this project has given me to closely analyze my own relationship with space for anything.

I can't ever experience what it's like to be an outsider to this series but to bring this experience full circle and see my parents interacting with the containers I made solidified why this was so important to me (Fig. 22). My mom got teary eyed seeing the close-up photo of her wedding dress. My dad couldn't stop asking questions about materials and snapping pictures to share at work. As much as this project was for me, it was for my parents too. To show them how much their care and love and support continues to mean to me and how fondly I treasure our time as a family in that house.



Figure 21. (top) My parents closely examining the exhibit.

Figure 22. (bottom) My mom holding the Porch while my dad comments on the construction.

Sources

A37: California Hallway, c. 1940. n.d. Photograph. Art Institute Chicago. <https://www.artic.edu/highlights/12/thorne-miniature-rooms>.

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