

THESIS

PLACES AS SITES OF EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

PLACES AS SITES OF EXPERIENCE

I am sensitive to my environment, and to how perceptions of an experience within a particular geographic location are effected through the relationship of body, object, and place. My work oscillates between human induced and natural systems, and continues to reveal questions regarding the complex relationship between Americans' and the land in the 21st century. Through the process of mining and manipulating large quantities of earth I reference the land as a resource, while acquainting myself to the specific features that set this landscape apart from the rest of North America. The focus on the landscape translates into my art practice, where I explore how a person's sense of self-identity might become altered through experiences within different places and in light of changing landscapes.

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INTRODUCTION

I am sensitive to my environment, and to how perceptions of an experience within a particular geographic location are effected through the relationship of body, object, and place. The theories of Robert Smithson, the acts of Ana Mendieta, the objects of Janine Antoni, and the aesthetic of the Minimalists have all impacted my current body of work. Unlike their masculine contemporaries, Mendieta and Antoni have created work that directly relates to and affects their bodies. This dialog between the human form and a singular act resonates with me because it is through this relationship that my artwork comes into being. Both of these female artists also concede to change within their work, either through their own volition as in Antoni's *Gnaw* (Figure 1) or through the allowance of natural processes to occur as in Mendieta's (*Untitled*) *Silueta Series* (Figure 2). I quote work by artists of the Minimalist movement such as Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII* (Figure 3), wherein simple geometric forms "isolate and elevate to invoke the inherent properties of the matter itself."¹ Similar to Antoni's sculpture *Gnaw*, which quotes the sculptural piece *Die* (Figure 4) by Minimalist David Smith, the differentiating factor between my work and the Minimalists is required inherent change. Robert Smithson refers to this as entropy, or the irrevocable deterioration within a closed system.² I suggest in illustrating this change that Nature is a system affected by humans while simultaneously causing effect on humans.

I was born in the land-locked state of Vermont, but grew up close enough to the Atlantic coast to develop an affinity for the ocean. After spending six years working, living, and studying in Maine I self-identified as a "Maineiac", but eventually pointed my car back towards the town I first called home. I spent three years working in Vermont before packing up my life up again

and heading west to Colorado. As a friend remarked, once you've gone as far east as you can go, there's nothing to do but turn around and head in the opposite direction. Once in Colorado, I felt of the west the way Rebecca Solnit describes it in her book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, "The vast spaces of the American West, so little known to its immigrants even now, have always invited travelers to lose their past like so much luggage and reinvent themselves."³ After the creation of one large-scale steel sculpture that referenced the form of a jellyfish (Figure 5a and 5b), I couldn't bring myself to make work about an ocean 2,000 miles away.

The climate in Colorado is arid, and the terrain is dominated by cottonwood trees, red clay, and the endlessly sublime Rocky Mountains. In response to my lack of familiarity to the region I began sculpting with specificity to site. This allowed for an immersive exploration within my new place. Through networking I learned about an architectural technique of building known as rammed earth. This method is utilized more in the western United States than other parts of the country because the composition of soil here is almost ideal for constructing in this manner. My work has since oscillated between human induced and natural systems, and continues to reveal questions regarding the complex relationship between Americans' and the land in the 21st century. Through the process of mining and manipulating large quantities of earth I reference the land as a resource, while acquainting myself to the specific features that set this landscape apart from the rest of North America. The focus on the landscape translates into my art practice, where I explore how a person's sense of self-identity might become altered through experiences within different places and in light of changing landscapes.

CHAPTER ONE: BODY

Process, material, concept, and form all revolve equally around the cognitive nucleus that is my art practice. There was a time when I would work in nothing but steel. Historically I am not alone in feeling this draw; steel and aluminum became the fetishes of the New York Art World during the 1950s and 60s because they bore the stamp of a technological ideology.⁴ There was a suggestion of permanence and strength imbued in these industrial machine-made materials. Steel is composed of iron alloy with small percentages of carbon added. Iron can also be alloyed with nickel, chromium, etc. for desired properties such as hardness and rust resistance.⁵ The first sculpture I created in Colorado, *Illuminating* (Figure 5a and 5b), fit into a previous body of work exploring the relationship between the form of a marine organism to its function within an ecosystem. *Illuminating* was created at a larger scale than previous work such as *Life and Death* (Figure 6), and afforded me the opportunity of showcasing the work in an exterior space. Without a protective finish the steel composing *Illuminating* began to rust, thus highlighting the sculpture's impermanence. This degradation elicited questions about the sculpture's value as an object, and how physical alterations of the sculpture affected this value. I began to look for material susceptible to more immediate change in order to explore these notions.

Soon after constructing *Illuminating* I became aware of a recently re-popularized form of constructing in the western United States known as earth building, which consists of "pounding moist earth into a moveable formwork to create monolithic walls."⁶ Currently in the U.S. earth building is going through its third wave of popularity. In Boulder, Colorado Swoon Art House is an artist residency created through this technique, using 300 tons of regional dirt and pigment

compressed into 30” thick walls. Building with the technique of “rammed earth”⁷ simulates the natural process of sedimentary rock formation, with layer upon layer of soil deposited then consolidated into a solid structure. The strength of rammed earth lies in the make-up of the soil used. In the region of Colorado where I live, the soil is composed primarily of clay. Due to its “sticky” quality, clay works as one of the best natural binders to cohere other components of a soil’s make-up such as gravel, sand, and silt. However, the elastic properties of clay which cause it to expand with the addition of water, and shrink as water evaporates can potentially cause cracking in a final rammed earth form.⁸ Because of this, clay cannot be used on its own. Sand is also found in the make-up of Colorado soil, and when used with clay it becomes the primary aggregate in rammed earth.⁹ Through researching the composition of successful and still-standing earth construction from the past, a ratio of 70 percent sand to 30 percent clay appears to yield the most durable rammed earth forms.¹⁰ To test the percentage of aggregates in my soil I performed the “jar test.” This test consists of mixing soil in a sealed jar of water and then measuring the layers of aggregate as they separate and settle. By calculating the relationship of each layer of material to the whole sample I discovered that my earth was composed of 55 percent sand, 43 percent clay, and 2 percent silt. To compensate for the high level of clay, I added sand to my mixture to bring the ratio closer to the ideal 70:30. Sometimes in rammed earth construction small amounts of Portland cement are used to contribute to the strength of a structure. Due to the potential complexity of the molds I would be casting into, I decided to incorporate 14 percent cement into my soil.¹¹ Aside from strength, Portland cement also increases resistance to moisture.¹² Particularly in cases where Portland cement is added, the soil mixture must be thoroughly mixed and homogenized to assure that the final form will be structurally stable at all points. When using fresh damp earth I could avoid adding water, but if

the earth sat exposed for too long in my studio I would need to reincorporate moisture. To test for the correct moisture level, I compress the earth into a tight ball in my hands then drop it; if it shatters to its former loose state than the mixture is ready to be worked with.¹³ Subsequent layers should not be left to dry before the next layer is added, because the layers will no longer bond properly.¹⁴ This means that once the process of filling a mold with compressed earth is begun, it must be finished within hours. The amount of soil needed depends on the size of the mold, but generally the soil will compact down to 60 percent of its un-compacted volume.¹⁵

My first rammed earth sculpture, *The Road Less Traveled* (Figure 7), began as an experiment using this technique in relation to body casting. The earth acquired for this piece came as Mortenson Construction was breaking ground for a new football stadium to be built at Colorado State University next to the Visual Arts Building, 700ft away from my studio. Each layer of earth rammed into the plaster mold of my torso was composed of a different concentration of sand, earth, and Portland cement. I wanted to understand the characteristics of the earth, and how the minute shifts in color, texture, smell, and size effected the overall structure. The process was unexpectedly lengthy, gathering the 20 gallons of dirt needed and separately mixing the 3 quarts of dirt that comprised each layer. Even more unexpected was the weight of the torso, around 60 lbs. In its final iteration the sculpture stands 63 inches tall, with the torso resting atop a cement base. The sculpture is free standing, often displayed inches from a wall so that while the torso leans precariously far back it does not rely on the support of the wall to keep it erect.

I am not the first to use my body to create sculpture. American artists participating in the second wave of Feminism such as Hannah Wilke, Marina Abramovic, and Ana Mendieta unabashedly bore their vulnerable naked form. Their bodies became both the vehicle for

performance and the subject of their art. Ana Mendieta, a Cuban immigrant, wrote, “I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb [nature]. My art is the way I reestablish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source.”¹⁶

Through her body, Mendieta tried to understand her identity as well as society’s perception of itself.¹⁷ I can relate to her need to feel physical contact with the earth, but am even more curious about the acknowledged disconnect between the body and the land in her *Silueta Series* (Figure 2). With her body she created physical silhouettes in the land, impressions implying that at one time a body occupied the empty space. Without the artist next to them, these voids could not be identified as a specific individual but instead imply a universal form. This implication could be looked at as both familiar and uncannily intimate. Art critic Lucy Lippard wrote about the female body in art,

There are exceptions on both sides, but, whereas female unease is dealt with hopefully, in terms of gentle self-exploration, self-criticism, and transformation, anxiety about the masculine role tends to take a violent even self-destructive form. When women use their bodies in their artwork, they are using their selves: a significant psychological factor converts their bodies or faces from object to subject.¹⁸

The Road Less Traveled expresses vulnerability in its pose and missing limbs. The stratified layers evident in the rammed earth allude to time on a geologic scale, slow and expanding past a human lifetime, but the material contradicts these implications with its susceptibility to immediate change. The aesthetic of the piece takes on a monumental quality, paying homage to a rich history of sculpture as both object and memorial. Historically “traditional memorial sculpture, whether it was funerary in nature or dedicated to ideas, events, or individuals, took a figurative form and was built with the assumption that the community that commissioned it existed as a historical continuity and that the values it expressed were shared.”¹⁹ While it is difficult to imagine that one sculpture can account for the diversity of values felt within a

community, particularly over time and taking into account shifts in demographics, the figure is undeniably relatable across the human race. Memorials utilize memory, something both personal and unique, and therefore remain “forever incomplete” until they are viewed and imbued with the memories of their viewers.²⁰ *The Road Less Traveled* represents the idea of a human, as Mendieta’s silhouettes do, through a manipulation of earth. However unlike in Mendieta’s work the land is what is absent but suggested, rather than the human figure. I have chosen to use the figure in this particular manner in order to quote the ancient Greek sculpture *Venus de Milo* (Figure 8), an idealized female form that over time has fallen into ruin. In the history of art, the repeated use of the figure reveals evidence of a deeper curiosity with the nature of what it means to be human. Mendieta and others utilized this and widened the entry point for sculpture to explore the direct relationship of this nature to Nature itself.

Desiring to continue working with the figure, I felt compelled to wander off the path of my daily routine in search of new and unknown sites close to my familiar studio. I felt, in many senses, a desire to get lost. Rebecca Solnit quotes Virginia Woolf in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, “getting lost was not a matter of geography so much as identity, a passionate desire, even an urgent need, to become no one and anyone, to shake off the shackles that remind you who you are, who others think you are.”²¹ My wanderings brought me along the Cache la Poudre River, passing chicken wire nets that held back banks ready to crumble. I sought dissolution of identity, an artistic expression bowing to the notion that “the self only exists in reference to the rest of the world, no you without mountains, without sun, without sky;”²² acquiescence that humans are not the autonomous beings they might think they are. *Body Cast into the Land* (Figure 9a and 9b) was a site-specific sculpture composed of earth and sand gathered in Fort Collins, Colorado a quarter mile up the Cache la Poudre River from where the final sculpture briefly rested. Harriet

Senie, who takes issue with the term “site-specific”, defines its development as “an acknowledgment that placing an art object in a public space [is] not enough, unless that space [is] a sculpture garden. To justify the placement of sculpture in the public domain...the work [has] to have some unique relationship to the site.”²³ The concern with site-specificity arises when viewing the whole history of a site, and trying to create a timeless work of art that will continue to be interpreted as a harmonious reflection of its surroundings. Environments are not static, but change continuously through both human agency and natural processes. Because of the materials that composed it, my plan was that Body Cast into the Land would respond to the changes in its environment by changing and degrading itself over time.

Body Cast in the Land had to be constructed on site so as to avoid the need for equipment to transport it (Figure 10a and 10b). The site itself is a bank off the Poudre Trail, overlooking a pond formed after the abandonment of a mining site. The water level rises and lowers throughout the course of the year in relation to the rise and fall of the Cache la Poudre river. There are occasionally people fishing in the pond, and above the bank is a bench for walkers to stop and observe the landscape, but for the casual passerby the sculpture would be hidden. In its final form Body Cast in the Land depicts a head-less human form cast out of earth. It appears to be emerging from, caught within, or holding back the bank. There is a harmony between the sculpted form and its surroundings, as the arms of the sculpture take on the characteristics of the roots that encompass them. There is the sense of primordial beginning, as if the earth has just become conscious of its existence and has moved to extricate itself from the part of it that remains unconscious. If one looks at nature and believes there is no maker, it seems natural to impose meaning based on qualities distinguished through imagination, sensation, emotion, and cultural narratives such as history, myth, folklore, and religion.²⁴ Americans are not alone in

anthropomorphizes the land with titles such as Mother Earth, which imbue it with a comprehensible human fallibility that *Body Cast in the Land* reveals.

When I reflect on the images taken of the sculpture, the photos command their own aesthetic value. The cropped bank, which might recede infinitely to the right and left of the human form, serves to dwarf the sculpture. The photo, with its open-ended narrative, starts to allude to notions of the magnitude and uncontrollable sublimity of nature. In her book *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary art and complicity*, Johanna Drucker defines the sublime as historically being an “experience of unbounded and infinite terror,”²⁵ but that today we perceive it in a new light. The “now” sublime, as she calls it, references social and historical conditions. In Francis Alys’ work *When Faith Moves Mountains*, (Figure 11)

The transformation these aligned participants bring about on the land is only possible through their absorption into an action that dwarfs their individual scale even as it depends upon their participation. How could the displacement of a few inches of dirt, shoved across a mountain by the coordinated action of the feet of several hundred people, even register as a significant blip on the surface of the earth?²⁶

There is a reference to the insignificance of human endeavors within the system of the landscape, created through scale and action. *Body Cast in the Land*, while not as grand in scale as *When Faith Moves Mountains*, does reference the ephemerality of an endeavor within a matrix that is not claiming hierarchy but is instead capable of collapsing the past, present and future into static time. This time becomes a place that all of humanity is fixed within. Over the course of 6 months the sculpture was pulled from the bank and fractured. Spring run-off, extended exposure to sun, and one final winter storm took their toll on the work. The sculpture exists now only as a photograph.

Other than exhibiting female features, the body I cast and placed in the land claims no identity. I chose to avoid specifics, because the image of a person’s own body can hold them

back from imagining their integration within something more cosmic; a collective unconsciousness that resides within the human genome. Culturally, American citizens cannot escape seeing themselves as individuals.²⁷ Mendieta's work acknowledges this, and in a different way so does Alys'. I cannot claim the power to disassociate myself from my identity, but I do admit to a curiosity of how this identity is shaped. After *Body Cast into the Land* my interests fractured into two separate ways of processing and exploring human identity within the matrix of the land. One approach brought me to question the notion of authentic experience, perception, and the idea of place. The second looked at the land on a macro scale, at how American's value, map, and organize space amidst ceaseless change.

CHAPTER TWO: PLACE

After a series of adventures in Colorado and Wyoming in which I learned the names and properties of native flora, spent an afternoon in a bison herd removing the hoof of a decomposing bison, battled rapids in the Poudre River, displaced heavy stones along the bank of the Horsetooth Reservoir, and mapped the change in seasons along the Cache la Poudre, I began to understand Colorado's front range in a way I hadn't when I first arrived. Observation of nature is one way of understanding it, but experience of nature provides a different type of attachment and comprehension. Ronald Hepburn is quoted as saying in Emily Brady's *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*,

We have not only a mutual involvement of spectator and object, but also a reflexive effect by which the spectator experiences himself in an unusual and vivid way; and this difference is not merely noted, but dwelt upon aesthetically. The effect is not unknown to art, especially architecture. But it is more intensely realized and pervasive in nature-experience - for we are in nature and a part of nature; we do not stand over against it as over against a painting on a wall.²⁸

The act of becoming enveloped by nature affords for a new way of experiencing one's body and its movements. Phenomenologists, through their study of structures of experience and consciousness, believe that bodies are the vessels through which humans perceive and communicate with the world around them.²⁹ Bodies become a constant as the world around the body changes, and in order to comprehend things "as they are" a person must rely on this constant.³⁰ The creation of *Shul* (Figure 12) came as I reflected on my direct experiences in the Colorado Front Range, and how each worked to shift my understanding of the land around me. There is a raw wildness to the western United States that isn't found in New England. This understanding could be influenced, in part, by cultural myths of the west, but is certainly based also on the overwhelming magnitude of each geographic feature I've observed. Even the lack of

humidity seems to add to the sharpness of the western landscape, causing the sun to feel hotter and the visibility to be clearer. It's difficult to perceive a place, to understand it for what it is rather than what one thinks it ought to be. Veils of subjective associations are always covering a viewer's eyes.

Portrait of the Past (Figure 13) was constructed before Shul, with earth left over from Body Cast into the Land mixed with gathered regional flora. The piece is a physical map of Lake Champlain, which comprises three fifths of Vermont's western boarder and separates the state from New York. It is a common reference point for New Englanders, and a body of water I know well. Brady suggests that "emotions color our perception and experience of a landscape, and we must remember that how we see it isn't necessarily how everyone else sees it."³¹ It's hard to shake the initial mental map I made of the lake when I was young, because this map was saturated in an understanding developed through the carefree act of living devoid of responsibility and expectation. When I think of the lake today I think of jumping off my parents' boat and exploring caves off the shore with my sister. I look at the lake as an extension of myself, although whenever I return to Vermont for a visit I'm more inclined to swim in a river or less populated lake.

In the mid-19th century, settlers to the west were encouraged not to become overly attached to any one piece of land.³²

A composition of identical rectangular spaces extending out of sight in every direction, ignoring all inherent differences, produced a landscape of empty, interchangeable divisions like the squares in a checkerboard. In the course of time they were put to several different uses and thus acquired individuality, but in this very level, very uniform terrain, there was always the temptation to consider all uses as temporary. Space, rather than land, is what the settlers bought...³³

Somewhere along this country's historical timeline, Americans started to settle and grow roots in one location, allowing for each generation to know a place through both their eyes and the eyes

of their family lineage. In the 21st century, it has again become customary to relocate multiple times within one's lifetime.³⁴ This makes it difficult to develop a 'sense of place', "a way of experiencing an environment that includes the aesthetic, but reaches beyond it to embrace a whole range of personal feelings and community values in relation to the distinctive qualities or 'spirit' of a place."³⁵ Places, both those that a person moves to and those that they remember, write themselves onto one's memory like a semi-transparent quilt. They overlap one another, creating new memories of places that never existed while altering old memories. Portrait of the Past is a nostalgic look back at the place where I grew up and the person I believed I was there. I use representational imagery that feels disingenuous for the place charged with shaping my adult sense of self. The linear steel structure recalls standing below lobster piers in Maine, and the segmented "islands" of earth allude to the disjointed and precarious nature of memory. The lake, carved down the center of the piece, lines up along five blocks so that the form can be read as a whole. However, there is the potential for the individual units to become separated and read individually. If this were to happen, the simplicity of each form would give way to the materiality of the object. Without a conceptual reference point, the flora or strata layers within the blocks might become more apparent. Each layer of Colorado earth encompasses native flora from the state. These materials juxtaposed against the map representing a Vermont landmark speak to a multicenteredness and overlapping place. The "map" is angled to abstract the primary contour of the piece, which makes reference to a human or cross form. This reference is not unintentional, as I believe there is sanctity in these forms as there is a sacred quality to childhood memories.

Shul manifested out of a deeper exploration into how places effect individuals, and overlap to shape how a person perceives not just their surroundings but themselves. There are

degrees of knowing a place, and as a local, one acquires knowledge through familiarity. As a visitor, one tends to compare a place to something familiar, mixing in associations and concepts.³⁶ I felt as though I needed to know my place in Colorado through accumulating authentic experiences, free of expectations, comparisons, and dissociation. In his book *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man is, How Queer Language Is, And What One Has to do with the Other*, Walker Percy tells the story of a couple that attends a Native American corn dance looking for an ‘authentic experience’. He observes how “their consciousness of the corn dance cannot escape their consciousness of their consciousness, so that with the onset of the first direct enjoyment, their higher consciousness pounces and certifies; ‘Now you are doing it! Now you are really living’ and, in certifying the experience, sets it at naught.”³⁷ The couple becomes consumers of an experience rather than a part of it. Toeing the line between consumer and participant, I designed and hand-sewed two pairs of shoes out of raw silk to replicate an old pair of hiking boots. Taking the laces off the old boots, I used them to lace up one pair of silk shoes and proceeded to hike the Foothills Trail in Fort Collins, CO. The trail begins a quarter mile from my front door. Roundtrip, the route was 4.5 miles, taking approximately 4 hours. Just under a year later, when visiting my family in South Burlington, Vermont, I went for a hike in the second pair of shoes. This time I walked along the Potash Brook trail, a path beginning 100ft from my parents’ front door. The laces used on these shoes were from a pair of cross-country skiing boots I had from my adolescent years. In its first iteration, the shoes in Shul were displayed humbly hanging off a cedar board by nails.

In his book *Buddhism without Beliefs*, Stephen Batchelor defines shul as a Tibetan word meaning “a mark that remains after that which made it has passed by...the impression of something that used to be there.”³⁸ As I walked both trails with only a thin layer of raw silk

between my bare feet and the earth, I kept my eyes glued to the ground. I noticed the marks left in the dirt from countless other souls, but observed that my shoes left an almost invisible mark in their stead. The earth, on the other hand, left its mark on both pairs of shoes. “To know the spirit of a place is to realize that you are a part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is whole. You start with the part you are whole in.”³⁹ My body is my constant in the world, the point that orients me in any new location. The silk shoes are symbolic of tools, and while shoes allow for the freedom to explore a place, they also create a physical barrier between one’s body and the earth. The silk shoes are also objects of art, used creations made through time and craft. Their preciousness for me as the artist becomes the memory map they recall, the physical evidence of their use, and the vividness of my senses as they allowed for a new way of bodily engagement with the earth. What they afforded, at least on the Foothills trail hike, was a new sensitivity to the trail below me. The trail was rockier than I recalled, and each subtle shift in terrain required a shift in perspective. The tiniest stone in the path was painful, and the constant pain grounded me in the present moment. There was no room for my mind to wonder, nor time to gaze at the picturesque landscape around me. I did not feel like an observer, nor did I feel a part of the land. I felt like a small child becoming conscious of the world for the first time, because the terrain was unforgiving of my expectations. While hiking the Potash Brook trail, both a trail and terrain I grew up understanding, I felt disengaged with the moment and less in tune with the earth below my feet. Because I didn’t have to think about my foot placement, and because I was sheltered under trees from any unpleasant weather, my mind became self-conscious of the unnaturalness of the experience. I had walked the same trail barefoot before, previously feeling less constricted because the walks in the past weren’t laden with expectations.

Giorgio Agamben writes in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* that humans are incapable of having and communicating authentic experience⁴⁰ because “experience is incompatible with certainty, and once an experience has become measurable and certain, it immediately loses its authority.”⁴¹ Agamben also believed that humans recognize things based on their meaning as explained through language. Because of this there is a tendency to forget about the effect of an initial encounter and instead trust meaning generated and filtered over time through language.⁴² The silk shoes are a more honest explanation of my hikes than the words I could use to describe them, because my feelings toward each hike has become less engendered by the actual experiences and more by the explanation and analysis now given. The shoes are maps that don’t need to tell a story in a linear fashion. The significance of each footfall blended together; during the event time and distance felt absent. I initially chose to display these shoes hanging from a wooden board, with more nails to imply the potential for more hikes, because once the walks ended the shoes lost their purpose as tools. They became comparable to something from a bygone era one hangs in their garage; at one time they were used but now they serve as decoration. The shoes slip farther and farther into object-hood and away from their original purpose, and as time goes by memories build up to crowd out and distort old memories. I chose to alter the orientation of the shoes in *Shul* after reflecting on the differences between the two walking experiences (Figure 14). Now the shoes hang suspended separately above the floor. The pair used in Colorado just barely misses touching the floor, while the pair used in Vermont are farther removed from the ground. Both sets are caught in limbo between a purpose and potential, unable to reclaim the experience of walking. The Colorado pair, however, comes closer to an unmitigated experience with the land.

CHAPTER THREE: SYSTEMS

For over a year I have been working with Emad Shafik, a PhD student in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Colorado State University. Shafik is currently studying under Dr. Hussam Mahmoud, Associate Professor and Director of the Structural Laboratory. Dr. Mahmoud's research focuses on quantifying the effects of extreme loads on structural systems, and the subsequent life-cycle cost and socio-economic impact this has in communities. He also looks at assessment, repair, and life-cycle costs of deteriorated infrastructure, including steel bridges and hydraulic steel structures.⁴³ Shafik focuses on the multi-hazard response of steel structures, and their effect on community resilience. My goal in working with Shafik and Dr. Mahmoud has been to learn the process of assessing and analyzing structures for the purpose of creating large-scale outdoor sculpture.

Harriet Senie acknowledges in her book *Contemporary Public Sculpture* that successful museum and gallery art doesn't equal successful public art. Certain aesthetics don't translate well from a controlled to a changing environment. She also writes that, "Public art will continue to be judged on its appropriateness to its site, even though the artist can do no more than consider the physical characteristics and needs of a site or a community at the time of commission."⁴⁴ My expectations in exploring outdoor sculpture have had less to do with a desire to experience a democratic public art process and more to do with a curiosity about sites themselves. What makes one site desirable over another? How is value placed on that site, and how does that value increase or diminish depending on how the site changes over time? Can artwork placed at a specific site reflect the changes that occur there? Initially I approached Dr. Mahmoud with a sculpture proposal (Figure 15a and 15b), 23 two-foot in diameter rammed earth spheres

suspended on ten-foot steel poles positioned at angles increments of 15 degrees off the ground. I inquired as to how I would go about determining the specifics of such a design to make it safe and structural. I assumed this would entail calculating the thickness of steel needed to support the 450 lb spheres. After reading *Steel Design* by William T. Segui, I determined that a lack of adequate finances, time, and resources would limit what I could realistically make. As I continued to work with Shafik, reworking my design to provide a more manageable and cost-effective endeavor that would still utilize our calculations and deliver the message and experience I was looking for, I concurrently moved forward on the piece *Hidden Systems* (Figure 16a, 16b, 16c, and 16d). *Hidden Systems* was created out of concerns similar to those in the larger public sculpture (Figure 15a and 15b), but responded to site differently.

From the construction job site that provided dirt for my previous works, I received another yard of earth that allowed me to complete *Hidden Systems*. The chosen site for this piece falls in the shadow of the now finished Colorado State University Football Stadium and has, since its inception, been flanked by another construction site (Figure 16c). Robert Smithson once said about sites of construction, “With such equipment [advanced tools and machines for digging, drilling, etc.] construction takes on the look of destruction. They seem to turn the terrain into unfinished cities of organized wreckage...These processes of heavy construction have a devastating kind of primordial grandeur, and are in many ways more astonishing than the finished product.”⁴⁵ It’s difficult not to feel some measure of awe watching humans erect structures the size of football stadiums, or a sense of wonder at being privy to the internal systems of structures most people only experience from outside their façade. A building is designed, engineered, and constructed through replicable equations that assure the structure will meet government standards and codes. All of these equations and codes were realized by

humans, and tested so that function and form could work harmoniously with intension. What I find of particular interest is that nature works in much the same way. Macro and micro forms follow necessary structures which have evolved over time to survive and perform particular roles within an ecosystem. Brady reflects that humans are part of nature, and that this inclusion extends to encompass all things that result from human civilization. She also notes that humans are part of nature and simultaneously different from it.⁴⁶ Hidden Systems is based on the synonymous relationship between humans and nature, while illustrating an undefined hierarchy of entropic processes. Arnold Berleant is quoted by Brady as saying that,

[The] environment, in the large sense, is not a domain separate and distinct from ourselves as human inhabitants. We are rather continuous with the environment, an integral part of its process. The usual tradition in aesthetics has difficulty with this, for it claims that appreciation requires a receptive, contemplative attitude. Such an attitude befits an observer, but nature admits of no such observer, for nothing can remain apart and uninvolved.⁴⁷

If Berleant is correct, are humans capable of evaluating their impact on an environment?

Hidden Systems is based off of a section of the public agency Northern Water's water collection and distribution system (Figure 17), which has been working with the federal government since 1937 to build the Colorado-Big Thompson Project. This project provides supplemental water to irrigated farm and ranch land as well as citizens of Northeastern Colorado. The section of the project I focused on effects Fort Collins, and transports water through a series of canals, pipelines, and hydroelectric power plants to terminate in the Horsetooth Reservoir.⁴⁸ The three grouped spheres in Hidden Systems represent the Pinewood, Flatiron, and Horsetooth Reservoirs. The lone fourth sphere symbolizes Grand Lake, the largest natural body of water in Colorado and the last western slope stop for water headed 13.1 miles through the Alva B. Adams Tunnel to the eastern slope. In each of the four spheres there is a stylized steel pipe system (Figure 18) 13.1 inches long and capable of transporting rainwater from a chiseled out collecting

bowl to a point lower on the form. These exit points are designated on the grouped spheres by a “spout” and on the lone sphere by a cluster of three holes. The lattice on the internal structures mimics the steel structures found at the entrance to the Alva B. Adams Tunnel, and the welded rings around the pipe represent the number of power plants the water travels through before it reaches a reservoir. While driving through the Big Thompson Canyon from Loveland to Estes Park, Colorado, sections of pipe from this system are visible. I imagine systems like this could be found throughout the United States, although most of them are hidden under the earth. This hidden aspect fascinates me, because it carries a message of “not in my backyard” aversion to the disruption in natural features associated with a landscape. I wonder whether these pipes hold any beauty of their own, or whether once visible they might not “spoil” the beauty of their surroundings. Robert Smithson notes that it can be difficult to identify and define the space around us, because we interpret it based on our concept of it.⁴⁹ There are expectations about what the wilderness should look like, or how nature should be, but it’s hard to find land that has been unaffected intentionally or unintentionally by human activity.⁵⁰ In *Hidden Systems*, I have mined the earth from itself, and transformed it in an unnatural way by mimicking natural processes. As you look at the spheres of earth, they look harmonious against the architecture of the Visual Arts Building, bathed in a color pallet of earth tones. However, they no longer look like they are of nature, only from nature. When the earth eventually erodes away, the steel infrastructure will be all that’s left. American’s attempt to make things that last, that’s why we have engineers who construct bridges “up to code”, but everything has a lifespan. Things age along their own timelines, and these scales appear slow or fast in relation to the length of a human life. Each new construction brought forth becomes a part of a landscape’s dialog for a time. Agamben writes that, “While we are no longer able to judge a work of art aesthetically,

our intelligence of nature has grown so opaque, and, moreover, the presence in it of the human element has grown to such an extent, that sometimes, in front of a landscape, we spontaneously compare it to its shadow, wondering whether it is aesthetically beautiful or ugly...”⁵¹ I wonder how the viewers of the North American landscape can reconcile both the beautiful and the ugly within it, appreciating it for what it is and not just what it was or could be. Humans have agency within the systems of nature, and each act taken is consequential.

Unveiled Symbiosis (Figure 19) is not a culmination of the ideas I have been wrestling with for the past three years, but rather a continued exploration of value. I question how value is applied to a place, and how this application reflects the applicants’ self-identity. In Unveiled Symbiosis, I look at the landscape as a conglomeration of natural and unnatural systems, where order breaks down into a series of illogical hierarchies constructed in a grid-like map. The sculpture was created out of the deconstructed parts from a previous work, *Recomposing the Fragments* (Figure 20). The inspiration for this initial piece came during flights between New England and Colorado when I had time to gaze at the landscape and notice its shifts in geography. Overlaid onto these natural shifts was evidence of civilization. These marks came in the form of roads and property lines that gridded up the land, as well as light pollution that indicated densely populated pockets of human habitation. Robert Smithson notes, “Parks are idealizations of nature, but nature in fact is not a condition of the ideal. Nature does not proceed in a straight line, it is rather a sprawling development. Nature is never finished.”⁵² This might be true, but it’s hard to comprehend the infinite, suggesting there is a need to contain the unending and unruly into smaller and more orderly components that make sense on a human timeline. It’s easier to grid up the land into workable sections that can be cultivated or developed. These spaces are then transformed from wild to useable space. J. B Jackson

comments on the omni-presence of the grid within the American western landscape, “I think it must be imprinted at the moment of conception on every American child, to remain throughout his or her life a way of calculating not only space but movement.”⁵³ We always see the grid around us, though it’s easier to observe from the window of a plane. It rests in the subconscious and alters the way space and identity is viewed.

Humans not only divide the tangible but the intangible as well. Large groups of people self-identify with smaller groups of similar individuals in order to feel included. For instance, groups of Americans might look at themselves as westerners, New Englanders, Vermonters, and Coloradans. In America, we break down our identities even further into binaries such as female or male, Atheist or Religious, Democrat or Republican. These binaries define and confine our sense of place and self into specific possibilities that make it easy to take for granted that our identity is fixed. This complacency can strip us of our adaptability, not just in continually reevaluating ourselves but also the world around us. When a person does become aware that time has passed and has brought change in its wake, fear is induced due to prolonged apathy. Agamben addresses the cyclical nature of change and restoration from change,

Thus we find it natural to speak today of “land conservancy” in the same way we speak of the preservation of a work of art, both ideas that would have struck other eras as inconceivable. It is also likely that we will soon create institutes to restore natural beauty just like those for the restoration of works of art, without recognizing that such an idea presupposes a radical transformation of our relationship to nature, and the inability to penetrate a landscape without spoiling it and the desire to purify it from such penetration are two sides of the same coin.⁵⁴

When it comes to conserving the land, conservationists must ask, “Should we attempt to restore particular aesthetic features which are no longer apparent in the landscape, preserve features as they are to minimize change, [or] allow for welcome changes that occur naturally or through human development?”⁵⁵ Ultimately they are questioning which authentic state of the land should

be chosen for preservation.⁵⁶ Not unlike with the human body, attempting to restore the aging to a past state of youth is futile.

Recomposing the Fragments was a linear interpretation of mapping an experience within the land. The sculpture depicts a series of bilateral perpendicular lines that define boundaries within the wall, and within those boundaries are abstracted patterns of salt, mica, clay and coal that come together to reference organic geographic formations. This piece was made in reaction to the landscape before me, a place seen from afar. Lippard writes, “I suspect no landscape, vernacular or otherwise, can be comprehended unless we perceive it as an organization of space; unless we ask ourselves who owns or uses the spaces, how they were created and how they change.”⁵⁷ She continues to say, “Space defines landscape, where space combined with memory defines place.”⁵⁸ Unveiled Symbiosis is the transformation of a map of a landscape to a map of a place. This becomes necessary because, as Turnbull asserts, “our experience of the world and our representation of it are mutually interdependent - inseparable.”⁵⁹ Once a place is experienced, it’s viewed differently, and that difference can at times be quantifiable. If it can be quantified it can be recognized, and all of a sudden a person might recognize not just change around them but change within themselves. Denis Wood points out in the case of mapping, “After all, objectivity does not consist in suppressing an unavoidable subjectivity. It is achieved by acknowledging its intrusion so that the reader is relieved of the necessity of ferreting it out.”⁶⁰ Once a person becomes objectively aware of their subjectivity, they might become conscious of the greater workings of the overall system that they are catalysts within. The grid in Unveiled Systems exists, but within it, moments of organic lines emerge as the meniscus of the blocks blend together to show a whole unified form.

Unveiled Symbiosis maps the spaces within a place by elevating them to varying degrees above the ground, framed in some areas with steel and left unframed in other areas. Most of the blocks of earth are bisected with copper pipe that begin to take on an organic line quality, staying within structured parameters. There are two points where the pipes are left uncapped, but nothing to indicate whether these represent an “end” or a point for further growth to occur. The scale is ambiguous, because the viewer is not oriented towards a specific point of reference. There appears to be order and intension, but the purpose and reason behind the pipe system remains unclear. Time is alluded to through strata lines within each block of earth, and through the altered use of aged copper and new copper pipe sections. Pipe suggests that some material, be it water, gas, oil, or other fluid substances, is being transported. Since the pipe is moving through the blocks of earth there is the suggestion that whatever is being transported is also being extracted from the earth or hidden from view. The abundance of pipe in relation to earth gives the copper equal prominence in the overall composition of the piece, so that one becomes reliant on the other for the success of this work. I am suggesting not only a symbiotic relationship between the natural and unnatural, but also that the unnatural has taken on dynamic and organic qualities while the natural has acquired a stagnate unnatural state. The overall form, self-contained within negative space, alludes to a quote by Leonardo da Vinci,

Man is called by the ancients a world in miniature and certainly this name is well applied, for just as man is composed of earth, water, air and fire, so is the body of the earth. If man has in him bones which are the support and armor of the flesh, the world has rocks which are the support of the earth; if man has in himself the sea of blood, in which the lungs rise and fall in breathing, so the body of the earth has its oceanic sea which also rises and falls every six hours of the world to breath. If from the said sea of blood spring veins which go on ramifying throughout the human body, similarly the oceanic sea fills the body of the earth with infinite veins of water.⁶¹

The entire system, as one entity, can be looked at as a human body. The body is a microcosmic system relating to the universe, relying on the transportation of fluids and synapses in order to function physically and cognitively. To reiterate an earlier statement, there is no part of this earth that is untouched by humans. Similarly, humans might be weary in extricating the way they perceive the world around them from the nature of humanity. Humans are products of biology, and as such we define ourselves within a closed system.

CONCLUSION

When I examine my need to create, I believe it comes from a desire to understand the nature of my self. The earth can at times stand in as a metaphor for the body, just as my bodily interactions within the land help me create a distinction between myself and the world around me. Being a product of a patriarchal society, I am drawn to my female contemporaries to justify my voice and give my artwork lineage. John K. Grande writes, “Female artists have always had to search for a language without the maps of their own historical definition. Their vision works in reverse, from the inside out, and gradually expands to include the outer world, the male world of exteriors.”⁶² I am also drawn to the bravado and ego of my male contemporaries, who unabashedly took their bulldozers and carved their marks of existence into the Earth. For me, it feels safer to start with my body as the source for my artwork and understanding, because I have learned to think of my body as a site for experience and cycles of change. The body is “home”, the point from which I orient myself to the world, “where the lines are straight, the order clear, where even disorder seems predictable and the displacements tolerably temporary.”⁶³ When reflecting on the work I make, I can always trace the source of my art back to an exploration of orientating, a term Stephen S. Hall describes as “crashing through larger landscapes of memory and experience and knowledge, trying to get a fix of where we are in a multitude of landscapes that together compose the grand scheme of things.”⁶⁴ I believe this is a universal desire of the human race, to find a purpose outside of the repetition of day-to-day tasks. It isn’t easy to quantify evidence of this purpose, so humans create art, poetry, music, etc. to avoid the cultural constraints that language would bring to any explanation of these authentic experiences of living. My work grounds me in the present through the process of making, and manifests in fleeting

experiences that are traced through artworks that will only tell the part of their story that can be shared with their viewer.

FIGURES

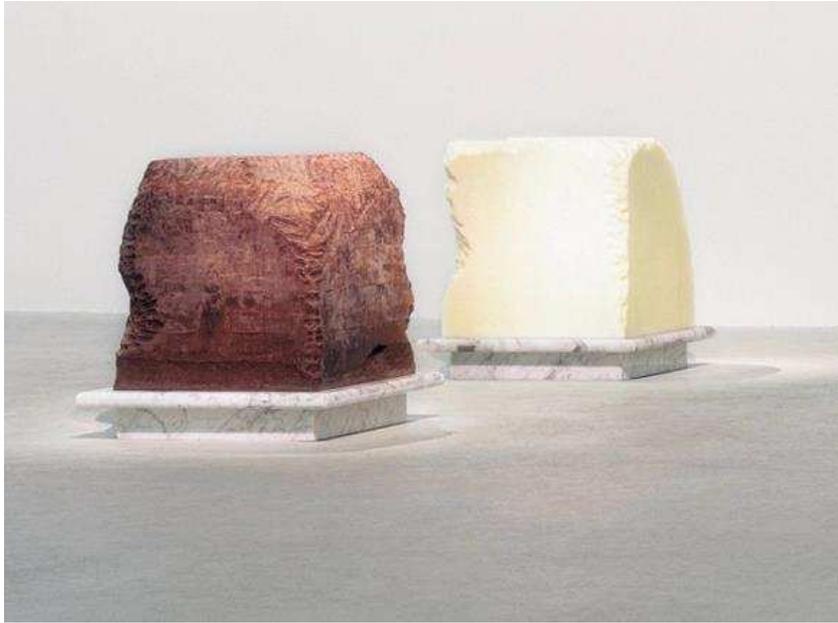


Figure 1: Janine Antoni, *Gnaw*, 1992, chocolate and lard, variable dimensions. Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art. Accessed March 10, 2018. <http://www.janineantoni.net/#/gnaw/>



Figure 2: Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Silueta Series, Mexico)*, 1976, 35 mm color slide. Accessed March 1, 2018. <http://www.reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/072/boetzkes.shtml>



Figure 3: Carl Andre, *Equivalent VII*, 1966, firebricks, 5 x 27 x 90 inches. London, The Tate Modern. Accessed March 10, 2018. [//www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/andre-equivalent-viii-t01534](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/andre-equivalent-viii-t01534)



Figure 4: Tony Smith, *Die*, steel with oil finish, 72 x 72 x 72 inches. Washington D.C., The National Gallery of Art. Accessed March 21, 2018. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.127623.html>



Figure 5a and 5b: *Illuminating*, 2015, steel, found bike parts, fiberglass, resin, solar panels, LED lights, 110 x 89 x 48 inches. Fort Collins, Colorado State University Visual Arts Building. Depicted with LED lights illuminated at night, and with the lights off during the day.



Figure 6: *Life and Death*, 2014, steel, aluminum, 13 x 9 x 5 inches. Private collection.



Figure 7: *The Road Less Traveled*, 2016, rammed earth technique; Portland Cement, sand, clay powder, rebar, sticks, concrete, donated dirt by Mortenson Construction from the Colorado State University football stadium construction site, 63 x 13 x 13 inches.



Figure 8: Alexandros of Antioch, *Venus de Milo*, 3rd-1st century B.C., marble, 80 inches tall. Paris, The Louvre. Accessed March 10, 2018.
https://www.google.com/search?q=venus+de+milo&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewjTit2VzP7ZAhVB32MKHddqDksQ_AUICigB&biw=1000&bih=616#imgrc=WISiKflNm2KbUM:



Figure 9a: *Body Cast into Land*, 2016, rammed earth technique: Portland cement, sand gathered from the Cache la Poudre River, dirt gathered from Fort Collins, CO, sticks gathered from the Environmental Learning Center in Fort Collins, CO, grass collected from the McMurry Nature Area, twine. 46 x 48 x 37 inches. Fort Collins, Cache la Poudre River, McMurry Nature Area.



Figure 9b: (detail) *Body Cast in the Land*, western view.



Figure 10a: Constructing *Body Cast in the Land*, April 2016. Fort Collins, McMurry Nature Area.



Figure 10b: Installing *Body Cast in the Land*, April 2016. Fort Collins, McMurry Nature Area



Figure 11: Francis Alys, *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002, still from three-channel video installation, 16mm film transferred to DVD. Lima, Peru. Accessed March 10, 2018 <https://publicdelivery.org/francis-aly-when-faith-moves-mountains/>



Figure 12: *Shul* (first iteration), 2016-2017, hand sewn; raw silk, found repurposed shoe laces, cedar, nails, accumulated dirt from a 4 mile hike along the Foothills Trail in Fort Collins, CO and a 2 mile hike along the Potash Brook Trail, South Burlington, VT, 14 x 28 x 5 inches.



Figure 13: *Portrait of the Past*, 2016, 5 individual blocks constructed using a rammed earth technique; Portland cement, sand, dirt gathered from Fort Collins, CO), human hair donated by Floyd's 99 Barbershop in Fort Collins, CO, burlap, rebar, concrete, bison hooves cast off of a donated bison hoof from Terry Bison Ranch in Cheyenne, WY, bison nose cast from a carving made through observation of the stuffed bison found at the Fort Collins Museum of Discovery, Fort Collins, CO, 58 x 116 x 20 inches.



Figure 14: *Shul* (second iteration), 2016-2018, hand sewn; raw silk, found repurposed shoe laces, polypropylene fiber, accumulated dirt from a 4 mile hike along the Foothills Trail in Fort Collins, CO and a 2 mile hike along the Potash Brook Trail, South Burlington, VT, dimensions will vary based on installation.



Figure 15a: Public art proposal maquette (side view), 2016, dirt, steel, plaster. 11 x 48 x 12 inches.

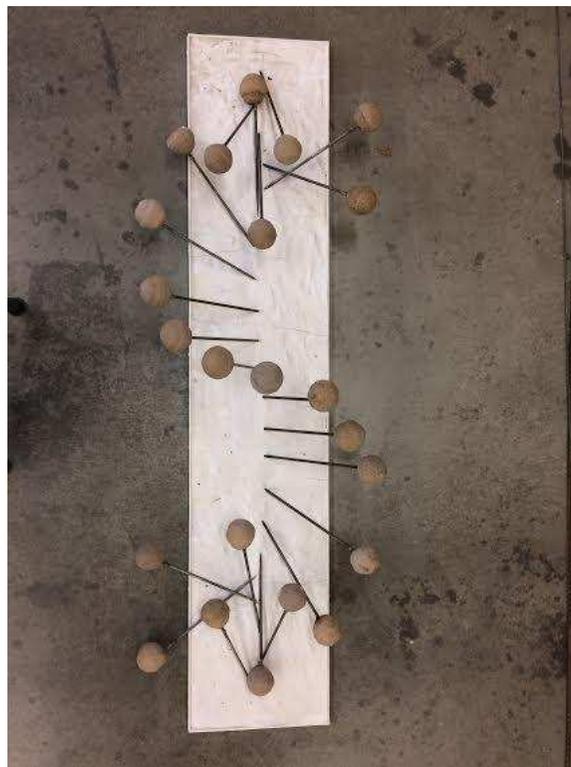


Figure 15b: Public art proposal maquette (top view), 2016, dirt, steel, plaster. 11 x 48 x 12 inches.



Figure 16a: *Hidden Systems*, 2017, 4 individual spherical shaped constructed using a rammed earth technique; Portland cement, sand, dirt donated from Mortenson Construction and excavated at Colorado State University football stadium construction site, Fort Collins, CO, steel. Rough site dimension: 55 x 25 ft. Fort Collins, Colorado State University Visual Arts Building. Photographed facing north May 15, 2017 mid-day.



Figure 16b: (detail) *Hidden Systems*, photographed facing north May 15, 2017 at dusk.



Figure 16c: (detail) *Hidden Systems*, photographed facing south February 1, 2018 mid-afternoon.



Figure 16d: (detail) *Hidden Systems*, photographed October 9, 2017 mid-afternoon.

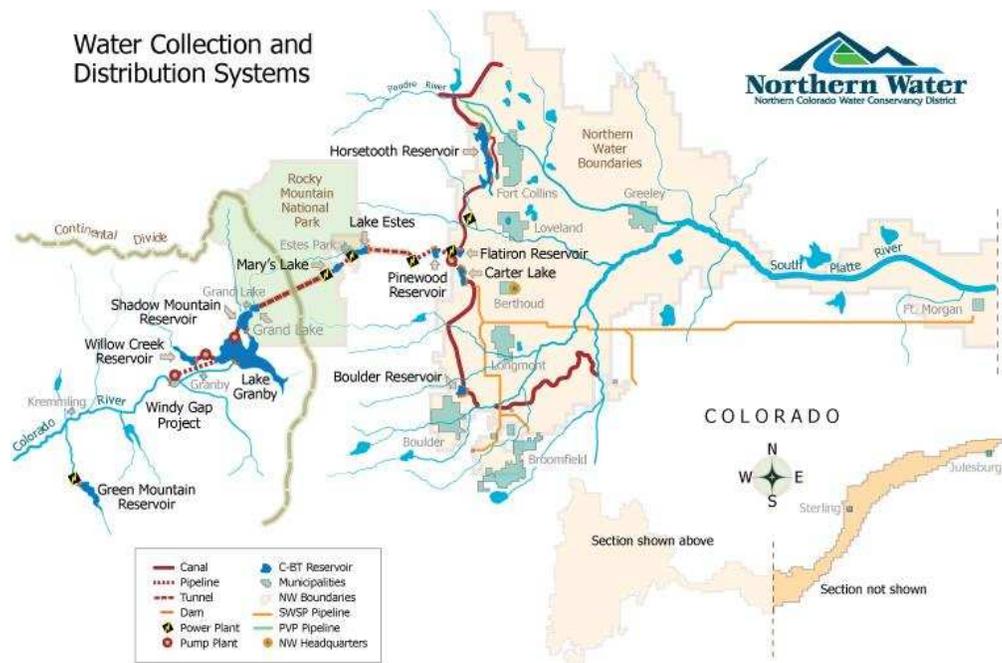


Figure 17: Water Collection and Distribution Systems Map. Accessed March 10, 2018. <http://www.northernwater.org/WaterProjects/HowtheC-BTWorks.aspx>



Figure 18: Structure embedded within Hidden Systems, steel, 24 x 24 x 24 inches.



Figure 19: *Unveiled Symbiosis*, 2016-2018, 50 individual blocks constructed using a rammed earth technique; Portland Cement, sand, clay dirt gathered from Fort Collins, CO, flora and clay gathered from Lory State Park, Fort Collins, CO, coal, salt, steel, copper, silicon, chalk, 54 x 114 x 96 inches.



Figure 20: *Recomposing the Fragments*, 2016, 30 individual blocks constructed using a rammed earth technique; Portland Cement, sand, clay dirt gathered from Fort Collins, CO, flora and clay gathered from Lory State Park, Fort Collins, CO, coal, salt, wood, concrete, steel, 76 x 68 x 13 inches.

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