

THESIS

AND SHE BUILT A CROOKED HOUSE

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ABSTRACT

AND SHE BUILT A CROOKED HOUSE

The title of my installation originates from a favorite short story I first read in high school. Robert A. Heinlein originally published “- And He Built a Crooked House-” in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1941. The tale is about a California architect who designs an efficient structure by building a house in a three-dimensional representation of four-dimensions. An earthquake causes the house to actually fall into the fourth dimension: time. This is not a horror story, but a whimsical view of the wonders of the space-time continuum, and how a natural event like an earthquake can affect our lives.

In my response to Heinlein’s tale “she” is Mother Nature or Gaia, who has “built a crooked house” still beyond our complete understanding or control. The forces and movements of the earth that create organic structures and environments are the basis for the formal and conceptual aspects of my thesis: Tectonic plate movements cause mountains to form at a geological pace, punctuated by the rapid turns of volcanoes and earthquakes. Even the fastest rivers must yield to the rhythms of stone in their making of canyons. Weather events, like hurricanes and tornados, swirl through land and sea on a seasonal basis. Water and minerals slowly build into sand dunes and caverns of stalactites and stalagmites. It is the mystery and force of these complex occurrences of nature that compelled me to build *And She Built a Crooked House*.

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AND SHE BUILT A CROOKED HOUSE

There was a crooked man and he walked a crooked mile.

He found a crooked sixpence upon a crooked stile.

He bought a crooked cat, which caught a crooked mouse.

And they all lived together in a little crooked house.

“There was a crooked man” was first recorded in 1840s England. The *crooked stile* is the border between Scotland and England and the entire tale refers to a covenant that secured religious and political freedom for Scotland. These are manmade issues and solutions, but Mother Nature has other ways of defining borders and lifestyle. The title of my installation originates not with this poem but from a favorite short story I first read in high school. Robert A. Heinlein originally published “- And He Built a Crooked House-” in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1941. The tale is about a California architect who designs an efficient structure by building a house in the form of a tesseract. A tesseract is a three-dimensional representation of a four-dimensional cube. The evening before the architect shows the completed house, an earthquake occurs. The house crashes in on itself and falls into the fourth dimension: time. This is not a horror story, but a whimsical view of the wonders of the space-time continuum. Upon entering the building, the characters find themselves in a maze of rooms. Walking through a door or looking through a window leads into a different space-time at each passage. A look through the openings can offer glimpses of one’s past or future. The group eventually escapes by realizing that their states of mind interact with their choices. While the characters are outside of the house, an aftershock causes the house to completely disappear. The architect and his friends presume that the house has entered an altogether different space-time.

As a California architect who has lived through many an earthquake, I found myself drawn to this story. My architecture and my art have often focused on time and change, but the earthquake as a life-changing event has had a subtle but significant influence in my life. I find that I miss earthquakes, and wonder why I should have this strange desire. While trying to understand this emotion I began to study time (personal and geological), change (growth and decay), and patterns (including chaotic systems like earthquakes). The fields of science, especially physics and astronomy, offer valuable explorations into the world we live in, but they only served to heighten, not explain, my emotional response. Ultimately, I found some answers in a study of philosophy and the qualities of the sublime.

Admittedly this installation concerns a huge topic but is not intended to answer the “big questions,” such as why and how we are here. This installation is primarily a personal exploration of responses to my environment and may quite possibly ask more questions than it answers. However, one of the roles of art is to ask questions and encourage the viewer to consider a different perspective of the world we live in. Time and experience are interrelated and affect our view of the present. It can be argued that these experiences immediately become a part of the past. This history then alters our expectations of the future. As a result even the rhythms and patterns of weather and geological events can have a significant impact on our lives. It is the mystery and force of these complex occurrences of nature that compel me to build *And She Built a Crooked House*.

“She” is Mother Nature or Gaia, who has “built a crooked house,” that at this point is still beyond our complete understanding or control. In fact, scientists have discovered that randomness happens at a molecular level and the full prediction of nature is currently (and may always be) impossible. Rather than being disappointed in this information, I have come to

believe that this lack of predictability may be one of the joys of the world. Mother Nature is constantly surprising us, and while acts of nature can sometimes be destructive, most are simply an inconvenience.¹ It is fascinating that we work so hard at prediction, but don't take advantage of the knowledge. Harsh climates and massive natural disasters are known to be more prevalent in certain parts of the world, but that does not deter people from remaining in these risky locales. We are creatures of habit who become attached to a place, but there seems to be another factor. People continue to live in California and other locales plagued by earthquakes, fires, and mudslides. I have observed not only a sense of pride, but other emotions as well, when surviving in an environment possessed with random and sometimes harsh acts of nature. This has led me to study why significant acts of nature are viewed as "great, fearful, noble, calculated to arouse sentiments of pride and majesty, as well as awe and sometimes terror."²

Kant divided the sublime into two categories: the mathematical and dynamic. The mathematical sublime consists of elements of huge scale or infinite numbers. The vastness of an ocean is an example of the mathematical sublime. We are unable to grasp its vast size in one gaze. The dynamic sublime can be described as a great act of nature: for example, a tsunami, earthquake, or hurricane. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* concludes,

The feeling associated with the sublime is a feeling of pleasure in the superiority of our reason over nature, but it also involves displeasure. In the case of the mathematically sublime, the displeasure comes from the awareness of the inadequacy of our imagination; in the dynamical case it

¹ The top 100 causes of mortality, quantified by the World Health Organization, do not even have a physical act of nature. Fire is in the top 100, but often as the result of accidents rather than natural causes.

² Susan L. Feagin, "Sublime," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). p. 886.

comes from the awareness of our physical powerlessness in the face of nature's might.³

Simon Blackburn further comments, “Kant thus paradoxically places our sense of the sublime in an awareness of ourselves as transcending nature, rather than in an awareness of ourselves as a frail and insignificant part of it.”⁴

The experience of the dynamic sublime in nature is difficult to construct in art— perhaps even impossible. Kant implies that it can’t be accomplished. He does concede the possibility that an imposing piece of architecture, such as St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, might invoke the feeling of the sublime.⁵ However, he infers that only nature can truly evoke the sublime. A photograph can capture a view of a sublime element (an immense waterfall, a tsunami) but it is never the same as a place or event experienced in person. Likewise, scientists produce data defining the complex chaotic systems of nature, but charts and graphs rarely evoke emotion. However, there is a distinct difference between evoking emotions and investigating those emotions. In the process of investigation of a topic, some people may react with emotion and some may not, depending on one’s inclination and personal experiences. My intention here is to build a model to explore my personal understanding of and responses to the great elements of nature.

Several movements and individual artists have influenced my study and portrayal of nature in *And She Built a Crooked House*. The Land Art Movement and the artists Eva Hesse, Ursula Von Rydingsvard, and Leonardo da Vinci have informed my work in various ways. A

³ Hannah Ginsburg, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2009 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2009).

⁴ Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1996). p. 366.

⁵ Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art*, Oxford philosophical monographs (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1989). p. 153.

brief overview of these artists and movements helps to explain their connection with my exploration of emotions churned up by natural events.

In the 1970s, the Land Art Movement took art out of the museum. These artists also focused on celestial phenomena like the solstices, planetary alignments, and changes in weather patterns. Many of their works, especially those of early Turrell and De Maria, directed viewers to observe both the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime.

The viewpoints of James Turrell persuade us to look into the heavens in a controlled framework that fill us with awe. In 1979, Turrell purchased an extinct volcano and began to construct a naked-eye observatory to view celestial phenomena. The project is an expression of time through both the building process and in the viewing of celestial events. Even without alteration, the ownership of an extinct volcano is significant. While one cannot physically own an experience of the dynamic sublime, Turrell has purchased a historical relic of a sublime event.

Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field*, built in 1977, functions as a network to capture the chaos in nature. *The Lightning Field* is a one-mile by one-kilometer grid of poles, 220 feet apart. The poles all terminate at the same absolute height despite any variation in terrain. Rather than focusing on the predictable rhythms of nature, De Maria shows us the chaotic patterns of nature. While the site can be visited during times of year prone to weather events, there is no guarantee that lightning will strike the field. Nature has its own rhythms and De Maria's attempt to capture a complex weather system is an expression of man's place and desire for control within the chaos.

Eva Hesse and Ursula Von Rydingsvard emerged in the post-minimalist period of the late 1970s. The work of both artists is intensely personal and relies on deep trust in the intuitive process. Hesse's art often refers to the body and to her environment. She experimented with

materials, often finding expression in anthropomorphic forms and textures reminiscent of skin. She employed a distinctive use of multiple units and described her wrapping, binding, and layering processes as another form of repetition and obsession. While Hesse hesitated to assign a specific meaning to her wrapping of materials, she did state that she was compelled to work with repetition as an elemental activity in her art-making process. Her materials and wrapping became distinctive characteristics of her personal artistic vocabulary.

In 1959, Hesse wrote a paper on Abstract Expressionism and stated that, “The Abstract Expressionist attempts to define a deeply-rooted bond between himself and nature, and to evoke this kind of union between himself and his painting.”⁶ This statement seemed to inspire Hesse in her paintings and into her transition to sculpture. She sought to portray the union between herself and her art. While her forms are simple and repetitive, her construction materials are imbued with a dematerialized organic quality that gives them a strong emotive content. Her materials are not archival and she allowed and expected her paintings and sculpture to age even in her short lifetime. Words like absurdity, unease, awkwardness, eroticism, and humor were descriptions she recorded in her journals. She wanted her art to surprise and purposefully avoided presenting beauty, sensing that beautiful work might not entice the viewer to take a second look and see the depth and meaning. In her notes at the end of her life she wrote, “I wish I could with words do what I do with my materials.”⁷

Von Rydingsvard’s work often refers to the landscape. Her aesthetic is abstract, yet suggestive of familiar objects. She often “evokes great natural forms...such as the formation of

⁶ Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976). p. 12.

⁷ Mara Rose Witzling, *Voicing Today's Visions: Writings by Contemporary Women Artists* (New York: Universe: St. Martin's Press distributor, 1994). p. 151.

the earth's strata through forces of wind and water." ⁸ The ineffable effects of weather, seasons, and time are crucial themes, and Patricia Phillips further expands,

Von Rydingsvard's work has the scale, duration and constitution of a prose poem that orchestrates elaborate yet enigmatic narrative dimensions with an elegant economy of strikingly succinct materials and grammar. Merging the poetic and prosaic, it possesses serenity found in a deeply ingrained stoicism. It incites yet resists intelligibility. It is distant yet inviting; it summons people to experience and endure the disorienting effects of imponderability from which the possibility of imagination is discovered in this brave and persistent work. ⁹

This intelligibility and imponderability are among the qualities that make Von Rydingsvard's her work so compelling. The inability to grasp or understand is an important element in the experience of the sublime.

The studies and inventions of Leonardo da Vinci have also been an inspiration in my architectural career and now in my art. In his book *Flow*, Philip Ball comments,

When Leonardo looked at something he saw more than other people. This was no idle gaze but an attempt to discern the very soul of things, the deep and elusive forms of nature. In his studies of anatomy, of animals and drapery, of plants and landscapes, and of ripples and torrents of water, he shows us things that transcend the naturalistic: shapes that we might not directly perceive ourselves but that we suspect we would if we had Leonardo's eyes. ¹⁰

Leonardo never stopped being a student and thirsted for knowledge of both the minutia and the grand forms of nature. He has impressed in me that in order to be a problem solver, architect, or artist, one must also seek knowledge as a scientist and scholar.

⁸ Patricia C. Phillips, Ursula Von Rydingsvärd, and Sculpture Center (New York N.Y.), *Ursula Von Rydingsvard: Working* (Munich; New York: Prestel, 2011). p. 17.

⁹ Ibid. p. 175.

¹⁰ Philip Ball, *Nature's Patterns: A Tapestry in Three Parts: Flow*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). p. 2.

The forces and movements of the earth that create nature's structures and environments are the basis for the formal aspects of my thesis: Tectonic plate movements cause mountains to form at a slow geological pace, but they also cause volcanoes and earthquakes that can suddenly alter our environment. Fast-flowing water and slow-moving ice commonly erode the earth. Weather events, like hurricanes and tornados, swirl through land and sea on a seasonal basis. Water and minerals slowly build into sand dunes and caverns of stalactites and stalagmites. Even the remains of animals and vegetables evolve into hard surfaces in our landscape, as in coral reefs and petrified wood.

Following in the footsteps of da Vinci, D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson and Philip Ball¹¹ have documented Mother Nature and her forms. The books of these three scholars have all helped to define the formal qualities of this project. From them I was able to study the morphology and teleology of natural forms and thus develop the vocabulary of shapes used in *And She Built a Crooked House*. I am particularly interested in why circles and spirals are so often formed in nature. Events with a center—an earthquake epicenter, the eye of a hurricane, or the origin of our universe—speak to beginnings. Spirals and circles are also indicative of growth; for example, the increasing shape of a shell as a mollusk grows and needs more space. Circular and spiral forms are predominant in this installation. Angular grids, fraying silk, and stray wires are indications of the passing of time through decay, erosion and tectonic forces.

Rocks are a traditional foundation for a house, and represent gravity and the earth. Mountains and rocks are stable in a human lifetime, yet they are markers of change in the geologic timeframe of the universe. Any of us could draw a generic river rock, however, given the randomness of variety in rock and stream, the shape seems impossible to predict. Recently,

¹¹ Philip Ball, *Nature's Patterns: A Tapestry in Three Parts*, 3 vols. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

physicists have been able to define and mathematically describe the smooth shape of a river rock from its original broken-off form. As Ball explains,

This means that a theory of pebble formation by erosion ought to produce, from any initial rock shape, a form that converges on the Platonic pebble. The mathematical shape supplies a criterion for evaluating theories of how pebbles are made.¹²

Thus, there is some ability for prediction of the geologic timeframe, but this is just for pebbles. To predict a mountain, we would have to look at all the possibilities of all rocks in the landscape. The effects of not only water, but also wind, tectonics, animals, and minerals would all need to be put into any equation that would lead us back into an experience of the mathematical sublime.

The skeletal structure of wire gives form to the individual elements of *And She Built a Crooked House*. Wire is a malleable material that can hold its shape. It can also form springs that retain potential energy built up in the process of winding. Wire, as a line, visually ties the installation together and as a connector literally ties the components together. Small-gauge wire and thread can be ethereal and textural, while the larger gauges are the main structure in the architecture of my built environment.

The silk organza is transparent but strong, and shreds with almost invisible threads that insist on sticking together, reminding us that it is an animal product. Rather than the wrapped cord used by Hesse, I have been wrapping and knitting silk. These repetitive activities help me to analyze the structure and energy of natural forms. The silk gestures toward the flow of water and air, both of which make constant marks of time on our environment. Acting through movement and erosion, these are two forces that help define our landscapes. The results can be

¹² Phillip Ball, *Nature's Patterns: a tapestry in three parts: Shapes*, 3 vols., vol. 1, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). p. 26-27.

instantaneous like a flash flood or hurricane, and slow as in the formation of a great canyon or desert—silk represents these actions.

We live in areas prone to earthquakes, hurricanes, flooding, and drought, knowing that they will eventually occur. What makes one person terrified of earthquakes when just driving down the freeway is far more dangerous? What makes me miss the earthquakes and the roar of the ocean in California? This collection of pieces explores those questions by studying and interpreting the forms that nature provides. The sheer complexity and grandeur of nature exceeds our ability to control or understand it. By visually articulating these moments, I have found some answers about the perverse pleasure of the sublime. Robert Smithson comments on the abstraction of nature in art by stating that, "...abstraction brings one closer to physical structures within nature itself. But this does not mean a renewed confidence in nature it simply means that abstraction is no cause for faith. Abstraction can only be valid if it accepts nature's dialectic."¹³ The dialog of the complex system of nature has opposing forces constantly at work. We are animals and thus a part of nature, but we often view ourselves as separate and capable of both cultivation and destruction. Gaia, left to her own chaotic patterns, is capable of great change, but it is difficult to determine or even define which change is positive or negative. Was the erosion that formed the Grand Canyon a positive or negative change? For me, these are contradictions that disclose some degree of truth, however ineffable. I conclude with these lines from *On Growth and Form*:

But even the ordinary laws of the physical forces are by no means simple and plain. In the winding up of a clock (so Kelvin once said), and in the properties of matter, which it involves, there is enough and more than enough mystery for our limited understanding: "a watch spring is much

¹³ Simon Morley, *The Sublime*, Documents of Contemporary Art (London, Cambridge, Mass.: Whitechapel Gallery; MIT Press, 2010). p. 116

farther beyond our understanding than a gaseous nebula.” We learn and learn but never know all about the smallest humblest thing.¹⁴

The continued pursuit of knowledge and understanding continues in my art. However, I have learned to embrace the unpredictability and chaos hidden under the laws of nature.

¹⁴ D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, *On Growth and Form* (New York: Dover, 1992). p. 19.



Figure 1: And She Built a Crooked House, 10' x 12' x 12'



Figure 2: And She Built a Crooked House (Detail)



Figure 3: And She Built a Crooked House (Detail)



Figure 4: And She Built a Crooked House (Detail)



Figure 5: And She Built a Crooked House (Detail)

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