

THESIS

WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS

Submitted by

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR
SUPERVISION BY AMY CATHERINE CLARKE ENTITLED *WHEN THE
BOUGH BREAKS* BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate Work

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Advisor [REDACTED]

Department Head [REDACTED]

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS

*Hush-a-bye, baby, on the tree-top
When the wind blows the cradle will rock;
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall,
Down will come baby, cradle and all.¹*

Inside a paper house with doors but no roof, on top of organically shaped furniture, I have placed hand-spun and knitted socks. Through this environment I have attempted to represent my struggle to understand the discomfort in the comforting and the suffocation in the secure. These socks represent a journey I am making; a journey that began when the bough broke. Like stones dropped behind me as I walk, these socks mark the path I have wandered. The journey began in my childhood when I pored over fairy tales, nursery rhymes and children's stories absorbing their lessons and discovering answers to my questions.

I believe these ancient stories, which contain truths

¹Edna Johnson, Evelyn R. Sickels, Frances Clarke Sayers, eds., Anthology of Children's Literature, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959) 6.

that have been reduced to an essence as they are passed from generation to generation hold the key to many of my questions. I mull over these questions as an oyster worries over the sand in its shell: How can something simultaneously inspire security and fear? How can someone be very, very good and still horrid? Why do some nursery rhymes, which are used to lull infants to sleep, contain frightening elements? Does it soothe the infant to hear her parent murmuring that "when the bough breaks the cradle will fall and down will come baby, cradle and all"? Or is this the beginning of the child's preparation for adulthood? I wonder if Hansel and Gretel lost their excitement when they discovered the witch that lived inside the gingerbread house. Certainly the ecstasy they first experienced when they discovered the edible house must have been diminished, but was it erased completely? Or was the candy even more appealing in contrast to the horrible and scary witch? Though I am older now, these questions still intrigue me as I learn to balance the uneasiness that co-exists with contentment in even the most mundane pursuits of my daily life.

There are times when I feel like Goldilocks as she explored the Three Bears' house, trying to find her place in an alien though familiar environment as she sampled porridge, chairs and beds. Trespassing into the den of my feelings, I try out these thoughts in an environment that

contains familiar though distorted objects. Each sock in this environment is an attempt to capture, in a visual and tangible form, my thoughts and feelings about the balance of conflicting emotions. Hoping to extend the metaphor beyond the socks, I have placed the dysfunctional and disproportional socks in an environment that contributes to the tension--creating comfort and familiarity through the form of a house, and discomfort through unusual shapes and proportions.

I choose socks as self-portraits because in their form and function I see aspects of myself. The shape of the sock is ripe for metaphor: Socks are usually created and worn to keep the feet warm and comfortable; through its form-fitting construction a sock simultaneously conceals and reveals the foot; socks are familiar garments; worn on the feet, socks are in contact with the earth; through the motion of feet we are able to make journeys and to explore. Polar opposite of the head, the foot seems to me to be an appropriate place to explore emotional depth as well as the possibility of movement. If the head can be considered the attic of the intellect, then maybe the feet can be considered the basement of the emotions. Feet, and therefore, socks, may be associated with the base and emotional aspects of people.

I choose socks because they are commonplace garments. I draw upon the associations that come with hand-spun and

knitted garments--they are emblems of comfort and security, expressing the love and affection the maker has for the recipient of the carefully (though not always expertly) crafted garment. However, while the socks I make have the soothing and warm qualities that most hand-knitted garments contain, this comfort is contrasted with elements that impair the function of the sock.

I have used the familiar, almost mundane, shape of a sock to allude to a conflict between contentment and constraint that I see in myself. Through these tensions I hope to convey aspects of myself that are elusive by equating them to something more tangible. These elusive feelings reflect emotions and thoughts that seem to push and pull at each other--wanting to love and to be loved, needing independence but desiring closeness, feeling simultaneously strong and vulnerable, being both a child and an adult.

This feeling of containing conflicting desires sometimes makes me imagine myself as Cinderella at the moment when her foot stuck in the pitch on the stairs, as she ran from the allure of the palace and the prince back to the familiarity of the ashes in the hearth.

I knit these socks not only because knitting is the technique most often employed to create socks but also because knitting is emblematic of comfort and security. Hand-knitting is sometimes considered the benign activity

of women striving to create garments that convey some of the love they have for their family. With inexpensive manufactured knitted garments, socks are no longer hand-knitted out of necessity; in our modern society hand-knitted socks are considered labors of love. Today people knit socks to protect their loved ones from the elements and from the less tangible dangers encountered when one leaves the protection of home.

Charles Dickens used the sedentary gentleness normally associated with knitting to provide a strong contrast in his portrait of the fierce Madame De Farge. Appearing to be engaged in the mundane activity of knitting needed garments, Madame De Farge, with relentlessly clicking needles, recorded the gruesome toll of the guillotine. Similarly, I hope to heighten the tension between the comfort and discomfort found in these socks by introducing unfamiliar elements into the predictable and mundane shape of the sock.

I spin the yarns so that I can design these forms exactly as I envision them and also because the process of making the yarn reiterates my involvement and role in the predicament they express. Because I make the socks "from scratch," frequently processing and dyeing the wool as well as spinning and knitting it, I make them wholly my own. As I spin and knit, my sensations and perceptions are caught in the fibers and become tangled in the interlocking web of

the socks.

Like Alice's changing sizes in the world down the rabbit hole, these socks are explorations of imagined experiences--the variety of sizes, proportions and shapes allows me to imagine how I might be in varying contexts. While I can't eat the sides of the mushroom to experience the transformations of size and proportion that Alice did, I can knit socks of many dimensions and shapes; in comparing the forms of these socks to my own body, I can imagine what it would be like to be so small that I am lost in the toe of a sock, or so large that the same sock won't even fit over my littlest finger.

Through scale and distortion I introduce into the familiar, comforting shape of the sock contrasts that address a balance between the predictable and the mysterious, the secure and the risky, the home and the journey. The socks express how my desire for security contrasts with my fear of constraint. I keep making socks of many shapes, sizes, colors, and textures because each one captures a different feature of the core feeling.

While the socks are self-portraits through which I try to capture sensations and thoughts, the furniture is an expression of a physical, interior structure and the house acts as the container for all these different parts. Simultaneously a domestic scene and an archetypal house, the environment provides a setting for the drama to unfold.

Like the vine-covered walls of The Secret Garden, these walls conceal a mysterious place, ripe with the potential of growth. Crossing the threshold, one encounters ordinary furniture covered with an organic texture. As hard, real objects the furniture offers a structure that the softness of the socks cannot communicate. If the socks evoke skin, the furniture suggests the skeleton and the inanimate world of earth and rocks and roots.

In this environment of house, furniture and socks I have attempted to shape the feelings I have as I try to comprehend the tensions between the safety of home and the allure of the unknown. Both a hallway and a room, this installation captures the moment when I have paused with my foot stuck in the pitch on the stairs. Though I still yearn for the lost paradise of my infancy, I am beginning to understand that my experiences of anxiety and uncertainty are essential for fully appreciating my contentment. It is at the moment when the bough breaks and I find myself falling free from the security that I once knew that my journey begins, and I will walk casting socks behind me--they are the markers of my path.

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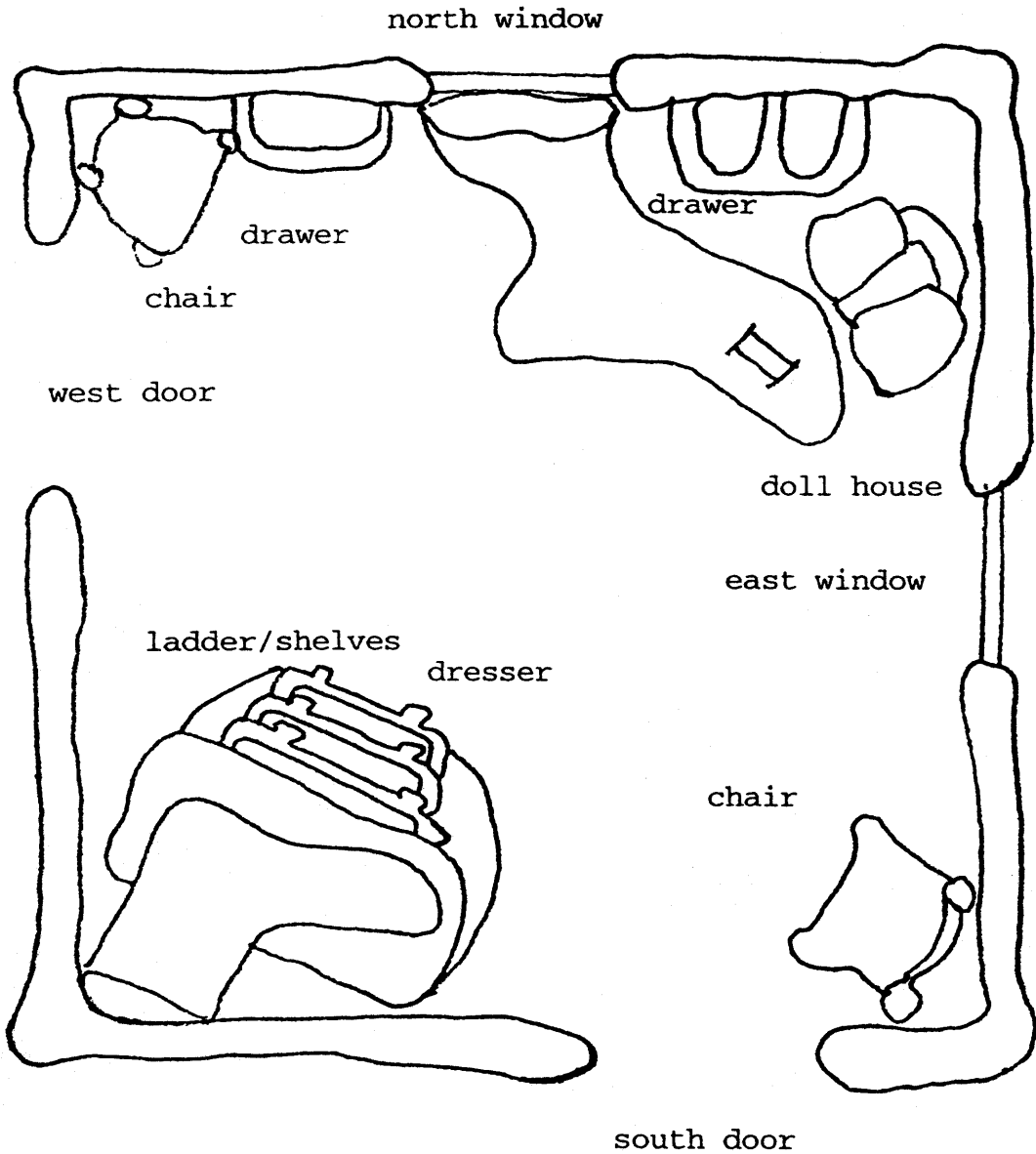
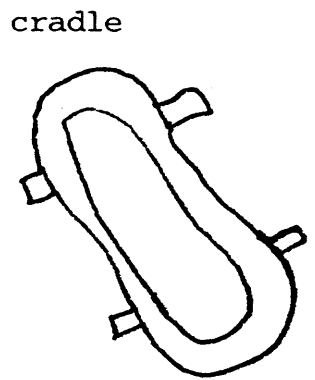


Fig. 1: WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS,
Floor plan. 10'X10'.



DEDICATION

To
Mark Alan Clarke
and
Patricia Barr Clarke

(In addition life and love)

Thank you
for
reading to me
as a child
and
encouraging me
to
make things.

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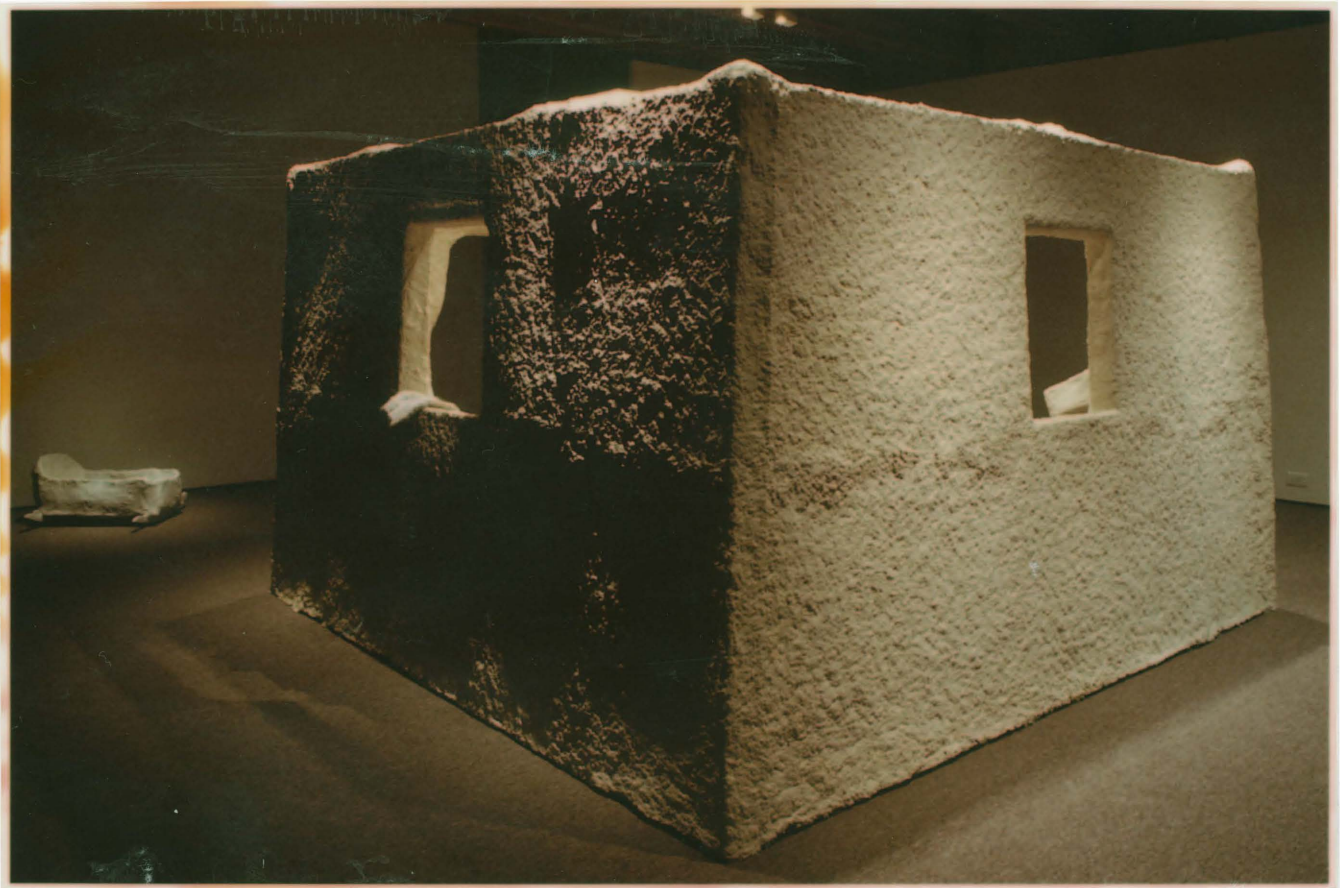


PLATE I: WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS,
North/east view of exterior with "Cradle."
Mixed media installation.
10'X10'X6'



PLATE II: WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS,
South/east view with "Cradle."
Mixed media installation.
10'X10'X6'



PLATE III: WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS,
North/west view of interior featuring "Sock
for my fears, sock for my serenity" and
"Footpath."
Hand spun and knit wool sitting on top of
paper mache sculpture.
4'X2'6"X6'



PLATE IV: WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS,
South/ west view of interior featuring
"Overflowing Dresser."
Hand spun and knit wool inside of a paper
mache dresser.
4'X4'6"X6'



PLATE V: WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS,
North/East view of interior featuring
"Gradated Depths" and "Doll house."
Hand spun and knit wool; Paper mache.
6'X3'6"X6'

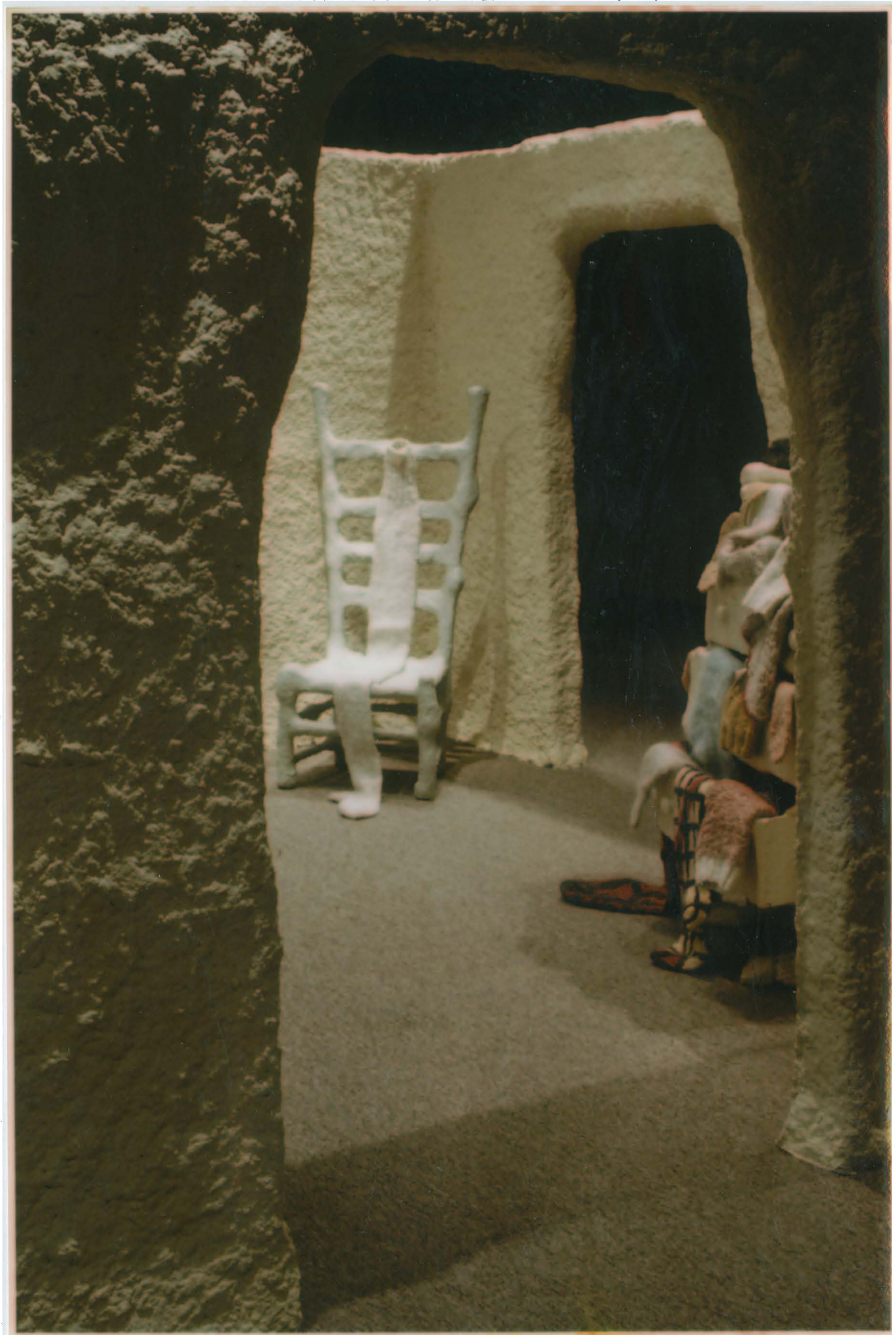


PLATE VI: WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS,
View through the west door featuring
"Elongated" and "Overflowing Dresser."
Hand spun and knitted wool on paper mache
sculpture.
12'X4'X6'

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