Between what exists

Madeline Pieschel

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My thesis work, *Between what exists*, explores the conceptual and aesthetic intersections between disregarded industrial spaces, notions of nature and landscape, and analog image intervention. For the past two years I have repeatedly visited the site of gas stations and truck stops to make work; this exhibition is an extension of my experiences. *Between what exists* incorporates site-specific materials that denote our systems of convenience and consumption: found plastics, truck shipping and freight remains, discarded wrappers, and Gatorade. These materials are integrated into and interrupt the photo and film images I’ve made at these sites. My desire to give value to the devalued flows throughout this work and imbues the pieces with a meditative sense of looking and questioning. Ultimately, my ideas about these spaces vacillate
between the possibility of reclaiming their material worthiness and reckoning with the ecological anxiety and capitalist destruction that they manifest.

INDEX WORDS: The everyday, Vital materialism, Gas station, Landscape, Site, Analog, Film, Photography
A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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BETWEEN WHAT EXISTS

by

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my family, classmates, mentors, friends, and collaborators who have given me so much love, support, and inspiration throughout my time during graduate school and leading up to graduate school. I would like to especially thank my Grandma, Jodi Pieschel, and late Grandma, Helen Enger, and for being such independent and influential matriarchs. I would like to thank my Mom and Dad, Sharon and Paul, for always supporting me and showing me what love is. I would like to thank my siblings, Olivia, Joe, Adam, and dog Izzy, for always being there for me and encouraging me to be myself. I would like to thank Ches Dix and cats Murray and Charlie Jo for the unwavering support and friendship throughout my graduate school challenges. I would like to thank Julia Reiner, Heidi Peterson, Olivia Underdah, Sean Hickey, and Jillian Morgan for their lifelong friendships. I would like to thank Parker Thornton and Coorain Devin for showing me the ropes of GSU Photo and for being so smart and funny. I would like to thank Andrew Lyman for being an amazing classmate and friend who teaches me how to be more patient and loving. I would like to thank Amin Ghasemi for his friendship and making me feel welcomed to Atlanta. I would like to thank Amber Bernard for her friendship, smart advice, and loving support. I would like to thank Travis Dodd, Talecia Tucker, Azya Moore, and Em Getsay for their generous and warm support and feedback. I would like to thank the rest of my classmates at the GSU MFA program who have been deeply inspirational and kind, and who have made my graduate school experience such a rich one. I would also like to thank Travis Dodd again, and Hanna Newman, for their generous and amazing installation weekend support. Finally, I would also like to thank all of the individuals who have allowed me to photograph them, film them, and interview them in order for my work to take shape over the years.
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1 INTRODUCTION

Highway 14 and my Mom’s Ford Expedition were my childhood lifelines to the world outside my insular community. I grew up in Springfield, Minnesota, a small agricultural town in southwest Minnesota without a single stop light. For Springfield residents, commuting to larger towns and cities was a weekly or even daily aspect of living in a place that had minimal resources and few cultural happenings. We regularly drove 30 minutes to an hour to eat in restaurants, go to appointments, and see movies; we even drove several hours to places like the shopping malls and sports events. Every holiday, we drove seven hours to North Dakota, where my grandparents lived. As a teenager I often drove around for fun, just to get away for a while. Being on the road, in motion, was how I came to understand the smallness I was really from – driving from one point to the next showed me different sizes and shapes of reality. These shifts in scale led me to recognize and decipher the endless variations and divergences that existed around me.

All that time spent riding in a car, and the destinations we typically frequented, affected my perceptions of nature. Being physically encapsulated in a metal box as I moved through landscapes at 60 miles per hour, viewing the world through rectangular panes of glass, static while in motion, indelibly shaped how I perceive the world: one big, connected thing. “Nature” was not something separate and away from us. It was not merely a forest, a mountain, or a faraway quiet place. It was looking at the clouds over highways, frequenting Minnesota lakes filled with people on jet skis and pontoons, swimming in the Pacific Ocean lined with cruise ships, gazing at the infinite green fields of monoculture crops, hanging out at the golf course with my dad, and glimpsing the hogs in the barn at my friend’s house. My family never engaged in conventional “nature experience” activities that tend to evoke deferential connections with nature, like camping or hiking in remote landscapes. While I wasn’t conscious of the way I perceived nature growing up, in retrospect I now understand that I viewed it by default as something that is relational, everywhere, and present throughout. In Between what exists, I am interested in extending the attentive, reverential attitudes associated with conventional “nature experiences” into the mediated spaces of utility, industry, and the everyday.

2 THE EVERYDAY

The Everyday is a concept used to describe our quotidian lived realities. The academic meaning of this term is suffused with a wide range of philosophical viewpoints, cultural theories, and overarching generalities. In my own understanding of the term, the Everyday consists of the individual self and society, varying temporalities, familiarity, unfamiliarity, comfort, discomfort, obviousness, and existential mystery. Author and cultural theorist Michael Gardiner states in his book Critiques of Everyday Life that “although everyday life can display routinized, static and unreflective characteristics, it is also capable of a surprising dynamism and moments of...
penetrating insight and boundless creativity. The everyday is, as Maffesoli puts it, ‘polydimensional’: fluid, ambivalent and labile.”

I like Gardiner’s definition of the Everyday, with its contradictions and multiplicities; it demonstrates the Everyday’s potential to be more than one thing at once. In this sense, the Everyday and its ordinariness brims with the potential to become extraordinary. This dynamism has the ability to take hold by “…fully appropriating and activating the possibilities that lie hidden, and typically repressed, within it [the everyday].” While the mundane aspects of the Everyday can and do produce feelings of angst and monotony, I find a sense of liberation and artistic freedom in “activating the possibilities” within the same locations and materials that produce angst and monotony.

Prior to my graduate studies, I used medium-format color photos to express this viewpoint. Influenced by artists such as Rineke Dijkstra, Andrea Arnold, Irina Rozovsky, and Larry Sultan, I took photos of quiet moments that verged on the trivial yet were suffused with a sense of becoming or a moment of subtle shifting. Within the dull surfaces flash an abyssal depth. I was devoted to spending time and looking at spaces that typically didn’t suggest interest. These early photographs always emphasized the materiality of a quotidian environment: old bricks, chipped paint, stained sidewalks, muted colors and objects, ugly carpets.

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2 Ibid.
Figure 2. Madeline Pieschel, *Untitled*, Photograph. 2017.
Figure 3. Madeline Pieschel, *Untitled*, Photograph. 2017.
Questions about society’s hierarchy of values are another important aspect of the Everyday. What is beautiful or ugly? What is desirable or undesirable? What images pervade visual culture and what is concealed from view? These questions ultimately define things as worthy or unworthy, significant or insignificant. French filmmaker and writer Georges Perec, in his collection *L’Infra-ordinaire*, coined the term “infra-ordinary” to imply an everydayness that
was neither ordinary nor extraordinary. He invented “infra-ordinary” to fill a lacuna he saw in existing anthropological and sociological studies, which did not examine the differences between the significant and the insignificant.⁴ Through his own peculiar methodologies, Perec brought attention to the things we continuously miss. He decided he had seen enough “significant” cultural objects and documents (art, writings, photographs, etc.). In *An Attempt at Exhausting A Place In Paris*, Perec set out to “describe the rest instead: that which is generally not taken note of, that which is not noticed, that which has no importance…”⁴ By extension, this kind of practice gives voice to the overlooked and gives agency to the marginalized, as it simultaneously resists that which is already valorized.

I came across the related concept of vital materialism after my first year of graduate school. Coined by political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett, vital materialism further expands and complicates these notions of agency and privilege in everydayness by considering the affectivity of non-human agents. Reading about vital materialism expanded my framework beyond conventional methods of photography into alternative processes, material collection, and installation. I began thinking through the mundane and Everyday with a new sensitivity to matter and materiality. In her writing, Bennett argues that the commonplace “stuff” of life, like trash, food, electricity, and metal are actors, forces, and lively participants in the world. Matter, often viewed in Western culture as lifeless and inert, possesses a vitality and agency which is capable of changing the course of events in our world. By extending agency to all matter and material,

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even to things like trash, we can begin to reconsider how we human beings both affect and are deeply affected by the inanimate things around us.

Bennett posits that the non-human is inseparable from the human. She alerts us to the dangers of human overconfidence and denounces our self-proclaimed notion that we are the supreme life form on the planet. She argues that an expanded notion of self-interest, one that includes all bodies, both living and non-living, would create a vastly more considerate society for humans and non-humans. Bennett states:

The ethical aim becomes to distribute value more generously….Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations.5

Drawing heavily from post-structuralist thought, Bennett conceives that organic and inorganic bodies, natural and cultural materials, are all affective, which dissipates more traditional, often violent subject-object ontologies. In Gilles Deleuze’s words, we are “ontologically one, formally diverse.”6

My 2019 Gas station/Truck stop series probes the ideas of the Everyday and vital materialism. In this body of work, I considered gas stations and truck stops as spaces that deserve closer examination. Gas stations are overlooked, ubiquitous, liminal spaces that are not normally considered worthy of elevation. Yet these spaces are responsible for keeping the US economy

6 Ibid, xi.
running. Trucks moved 72.5% of all the freight transported in America in 2019.\textsuperscript{7} There are more than 150,000 fueling stations across the United States and 127,588 of these are convenience stores selling fuel.\textsuperscript{8} These spaces are America’s symbolic backbone, omnipresent. Critically important, but vastly overlooked.

Gas stations and truck stops are designed for utility: they must perform the specific functions of parking, filling up gas, selling goods, possibly providing a resting area, and departing. We generally dismiss gas stations as dirty, undesirable, and utilitarian, but I wondered what we miss by only experiencing and viewing these spaces in terms of their assigned functions and common categorizations. These questions prompted me to spend hours sitting at gas stations and truck stops over the spring, summer, and fall of 2019, observing, taking notes, photographing, and collecting materials.

As I sat watching, I noticed the almost imperceptible happenings and rhythms that occurred, along with the colors, textures, habits, exchanges, materials, and artifacts I saw at each location. Patterns and relationships emerged. Plastic water bottles full of urine (‘pee bottles’) were a ubiquitous item. I wondered to myself what someone from the past, like my great-great grandmother, would think of this 21st century artifact. The bottles are disgusting yet beautiful, both sad and whimsical. They are ethereal when sunlight pierces the clear plastic and illuminates the deep yellow bodily fluid. Conceptually, I was interested in how these bottles evidenced a preference for convenience over quality or comfort. They also reflected the long stretches of time many truckers spend on the road without stopping. Furthermore, the various tones of yellows and browns were visual evidence of each individual’s diet, hydration levels, and lifestyle choices.

\textsuperscript{8} American Petroleum Institute, Service Station FAQs, Accessed March 4, 2021. https://www.api.org/oil-and-natural-gas/consumer-information/consumer-resources/service-station-faqs
This engagement with an object that we might normally regard as unsavory and even repulsive has the ability to change the direction of how we think and act. Sara Ahmed, in her book *Queer Phenomenology* states:

Perceiving an object involves a way of apprehending that object. So it is not just that consciousness is directed toward objects, but also that I take different directions toward objects: I might like them, admire them, hate them, and so on.
In perceiving them in this way or that, I also take a position upon them, which in turn gives me a position. I might perceive an object as beautiful, for instance.

Such a perception affects what I do: If I have this impression, then I might pick up the object, or get closer to it, or even press it nearer to me.9

Ultimately, Ahmed illustrates how our “orientations” toward objects and space, both sexually and in everyday spheres, affect who and what receives our attention. She argues, “A queer phenomenology, perhaps, might start by redirecting our attention toward different objects, those that are ‘less proximate’ or even those that deviate or are deviant.”10 By choosing to orient myself towards these overlooked objects in a way that shows them attention and curiosity, I open myself and viewers to the possibility of thinking about a space that we take for granted or entirely disregard.

Moreover, I wanted to show the diversity of these spaces’ material inhabitants. The gas stations and truck stops I visited exhibited almost no architectural uniqueness, yet each site retained a locally-specific material language. I created a set of 25 lumen prints that incorporated an amalgamation of the material I had gathered. The material inventory includes hair, gum, laundry lint, lettuce, crabapples, grass, flowers, cigarette butts, ketchup, barbeque sauce, duck sauce, chicken bones, leaves, straw wrappers, mango pits, sand, shipping labels, net, orange peels, feathers, and rope. I was interested in the overlaps and ecological webs that brought all of these disparate things to a specific location.

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10 Ibid, 3.
A lumen print, an alternative process that produces light-sensitive chemical reactions from organic materials when left in the sun, highlights the agency of these discarded materials. The various materials react to the heat of the sun and paper in unpredictable ways, producing chemical reactions that make pink-, orange-, and violet-colored auras around each object. These
objects and materials all began life with an intended purpose, but with the passage of time, they transcend their original purpose, which diminishes and evolves. The material becomes an artifact, a storyteller, a piece of evidence. Nothing can ever really be thrown away. Even an unwanted or discarded commodity continues its activities until it transforms. I digitally scanned found materials that embodied this idea of transmuting. A black glove becomes an ant’s canyon. A Styrofoam cup becomes a pliable, impressionable surface that records marks made by contact with other objects.

Figure 8. Madeline Pieschel, *Black Glove*. Found object. 2019.

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The traditional photographs I took at the gas stations and truck stops were made with a 4x5 camera. This process demands deliberation: the equipment and materials are expensive and heavy; working with them is taxing and conspicuous. All of those qualities force me to make a series of choices about when I took the camera out and what I photographed. In the photographs I chose to take, I focused on up-close, meditative moments that disclosed details of topography, texture, and colors that describe better than words can. In several of these images, I constructed the scene to represent the materiality of objects and consumables present at gas stations and truck stops. For example, in the hot dog photograph, I bought (and later ate) the Cheetos, wafers, and hotdog – popular convenience food items that when subtly taken out of context, in this case put onto the gasoline-stained cement, barely resembles something consumable. Instead, what we see...
is material strangeness: artificial colors and dyes, the harsh reflection of polypropylene, and a very shiny piece of processed tube meat.

Figure 12. Madeline Pieschel, *Pilot Travel Center - Villa Rica, GA*, Photograph. 2019.
For the final piece in this series, I interviewed a truck driver named Bob one afternoon at a gas station in Rockmart, GA. I asked him questions that filled gaps in my knowledge about the trucking industry. He was open and honest. I created a zine of our interview and distributed it at
the 2019 *Temporary Art Center* show in Atlanta, GA, a warehouse show in which all Georgia State University MFA students were given a space in a derelict building that was soon to be demolished. I created an installation for this exhibition that included every element of this series.

Through my *Gas Station/Truck Stop* work, I turned the mundane and overlooked space of gas stations into an activated space of material affect and cultural significance. How do the materials and actions in these spaces work on us and how do we work on them? This project led me to question how I could further push the perception of these omnipresent, mundane spaces from unworthy to lively, dynamic and prolific—these spaces matter.
3 LANDSCAPE & NATURE

The landscape of any given environment determines how humans and non-humans move through, interact, and interpret our surroundings. I began considering ideas of landscape in 2017 while working a desk job in a corporate office park. I worked this job for a year, and on a certain level it was a perfectly lovely setting for an office: green, spacious, and full of fresh air. But after walking through this mediated-landscape environment every day for the next several months, the fake rocks, the man-made pond, the carefully placed plantings, and uniformly-sized trees became more and more obvious and contrived. The deep level of human control evident in the landscape mirrored the cultural psychology of the corporate office in which I worked: an artificially pristine setting designed to produce a higher degree of worker productivity. A luxurious kitchen with granite counter tops and a free supply of all-you-can-eat-snacks and beverages, a brand-new work-out facility complete with flat screen TVs and a lounge area were the perks that drew me in, but these luxuries did not undermine the fact that I had to meet my monthly quota of data entries at a pace that made my fingers, neck, and eyes ache.

I began noticing how nature responded to this control: places where weeds found tiny spaces to grow through the concrete, a family of ducks claiming the pond as theirs, a pile of eons-old real rocks that exposed the absurdity of the fake rocks. I realized that there was an inventive, unpredictable rift between a landscape’s intent and its actual use. These observations culminated in a photo series titled Lunch Break, an homage to my daily allotment of 30-minutes’ outdoor time. During each lunch break, I brought my camera with me and documented these moments.
As part of my graduate work, I have further researched landscape in its art historical context and its broader geographical context. 17th and 18th century painters, along with 19th century painters and photographers, have deeply influenced landscape as both artistic genre and ideological construct. Historically, landscape was divided into two genres, classical landscapes, which use a highly stylized representation of land, and naturalistic landscapes, which use style of representation based on realism. In the US, the 19th century Hudson River School painters united these genres to create an ideology of landscape that exalted ideals of purity within the “untouched” primal wilderness: an American way of seeing.
Thomas Cole, the group’s founder, used a combination of allegory, historical and literary references, religious representations, and scenes from reality to produce a theatrical and idealized style of landscape painting that portrayed a new American mythology -- “a recognizable image of itself [America] in art.”12 The Hudson River School cultivated a particular notion of the American wilderness through their picturesque paintings, concocting compositions that were spatially vast, sublime, and awe-inspiring. The sentiment expressed in these paintings went hand in hand with notions of Manifest Destiny, American exceptionalism, expansion, and land that was waiting to be “discovered.”

In a possibly unintended side effect, these paintings stirred emotions that fostered a greater public concern for protecting natural spaces impinged upon by industry. In many of Cole’s works, he included symbols, like dying trees, to represent the threats posed by the onslaught of industrialization. According to the National Park Service’s website, the Hudson River School painters, “laid the foundation for the creation of the first national parks and helped establish conservation as a national value.”13 The Hudson River School cultivated more than a new genre of American landscape: they cultivated an ideology for how one should experience and conceive of nature that has stayed with us to the present day. They fostered feelings of deep reverence for this vast, “virgin” land.

The Hudson River School’s idea of a pure and sublime wilderness influenced photographers like Ansel Adams, Minor White, and others who reveled in the concept of the “nature experience.”\textsuperscript{14} The “nature experience” suggests that the only way to understand nature is in its pure, untouched, wild form, completely removed from urban life. According to this school of thought, the American western landscape represents, “…the romantic dream of a pure,  

unsullied wilderness where communion with Nature can transpire without technological mediation, a dream that has been effectively engineered out of most modern experience.”

In Deborah Bright’s “Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men” essay, she writes that the “‘nature experience’ was a desirable antidote to the unhealthy urban life” and that “wilderness areas began to be claimed and named as refuges of timeless order in a changing world– ‘God’s gift to the American people’ – to be preserved as a legacy for future generations.” These strong religious overtones helped to cultivate a conviction that going to these places means partaking in a sacred experience. A code of personal conduct (park rules) soon followed, as well as other “ritualized expressions of devotion” like taking photographs of specific views.

While I acknowledge the value and importance of protecting, conserving, and devoting time to these areas of land that have stayed mostly untouched by development, I am wary of the amount of power the “nature experience” wields in how we define and think about nature.

Additionally, while it may seem like a positive outcome that these images have garnered protection for certain areas of land, the accompanying ideologies have had extraordinarily devastating consequences on other bodies and beings. This ideology has promoted a way of viewing land that totally disregards and renders invisible Native and indigenous inhabitance; and it has marked all things that fall outside of this narrow scope of “nature” as inherently less valuable, which has led to harmful exploitations and misuses of resources and bodies. Scott MacDonald says of Werner Herzog’s film Satan’s National Park,

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15 Ibid, 129.
16 Ibid, 126-127.
17 Ibid, 127.
Should remind us that, on one level, the national park system and the “sacred spaces” it preserves—or pretends to preserve—is a set of monuments to American imperial designs and successes; the parks are the remnants of our battles with “the wilderness” and with the indigenous peoples we decimated in our relentless expansion westward. The sublimity of the spaces enclosed by parks, their power in the American imagination, is complex: it is a function of nature; but it is also, at least implicitly (and explicitly for the indigenous peoples whose loss was our gain), a function of the military power of the American nation, which, as a monument to itself, has defined these special spaces as symbols within its continental domain—symbols, ironically, of a respect for landscape that has hardly been a consistent dimension of our exploitation of the continent.¹⁹

We view a national park as natural resource that is sacred, purposeful, and inspiring because it has not yet been built on, destroyed, or heavily manipulated by humans and corporations. Therefore, the thinking goes, these are spaces where we can connect with nature in its purest form, as “God intended”. The problem with this concept, among many, is that it limits our idea of what nature can be, where it can be, and how we can commune with it. By default, it discredits the possibility of nature in places where human intervention prevails, like the office park where I worked, and casts as unworthy nature that does exist (and persist) in these places. I argue that the “nature experience” and the positive attributes that this psychological framing may provoke—attention, devotion, deep reflection, meditation, and a rich veneration and empathy for things—can and should also be applied to landscapes that are heavily mediated. This shift in attitude, of bringing a deep attention to spaces we might consider ugly, impure, or despoiled, could have a

¹⁹ Ibid, 327.
real effect on the well-being of the environment and on bodies that inhabit those environments. The “nature experience” contends that nature holds more significance when it is pristine and separated from humankind, but that is not a realistic vision for contemporary circumstances and what our future holds. I am more interested in how we can reframe our everyday encounters with nature so that they, too, are meaningful, vital, and full of potential. How can the “nature experience” be repositioned to include the overlooked, mundane, and impure? How might our urban and industrial vernacular landscapes and what resides within these spaces begin to be seen and valued differently?

In Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, she argues that capitalism has a sinister way of alienating land and nature. She asserts, “The dream of alienation inspires landscape modification in which only one stand-alone asset matters; everything else becomes weeds or waste.” For example, if an investment group buys farmland for soybean production, only one thing on the land matters to them: the soybeans. Everything else around it becomes irrelevant (at best) or a barrier that must be removed (at worst). When that farmland’s singular function has run its course (i.e., the soil is depleted of its nutrients) the place no longer has any value and can simply be abandoned. This abandonment is what Tsing describes as ruins. Ruins are everywhere nowadays. But at the heart of Tsing’s research is the belief that despite the destruction these ruins evidence, nature continues to exist, and “abandoned asset fields sometimes yield new multispecies and multicultural life.” She goes on to assert that “In a global state of precarity, we don’t have choices other than looking for life in this ruin.”

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21 Ibid, 6.
22 Ibid, 6.
Walter Benjamin is another figure who ruminates on the possibility of life among the capitalist ruins. He wrote about Ragpickers, individuals who struggled to get by and resorted to picking through detritus or trash for anything of use or value. Benjamin writes that the modern ragpicker “deals in the second-hand, in the dreams of the past for a future that was never realized.” In *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, Ben Highmore asserts that Benjamin’s focus on detritus suggests two things: first, an account of modernity that refuses to celebrate the new, and second, an exhortation not to sentimentalize the past. These two things, for Benjamin, made ragpickers’ use of debris a “radical refusal of progress.” Conventional capitalist thinking sees progress as virtuous, inexorably accelerating forward, linear, hierarchal, and irreversible. This distorted and romanticized view of progress impedes the implementation of a more inventive, inclusive, and empathetic type of progress that acknowledges varying levels of capabilities, temporalities and an acknowledgement of what already exists. How might embracing ideas of reusing, relooking, and reconsidering the devalued and the overlooked help to mitigate the harmful aspects of progress?

In his book *Hyperobjects*, Timothy Morton argues that the idea of Nature itself is an “empty category looking for something to fill it” and that “the aesthetics of Nature truly impedes ecology.” He insists that the idea of Nature prevents us from realizing that it is not external to anything else. He ponders a Nature where there is “nothing to get back to” and where the concept of Nature “is an ‘object in mirror’ whose referents are much, much closer than a view

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
27 Ibid, 105.
from the front seat of an SUV careening across the Tibetan plateau...”

Rather, no “away” or “over there” truly exists, only a nearness in which all things enfold into one another. When you flush the toilet it is not truly going to some “away,” and when oil spills, it is not oil spilling “over there.” These occurrences may be out of sight, but the effects are lingering and globally distributed. They are not easy to directly feel or see but they nonetheless connect to us. Morton states, “The classical idea of the separability of the world into distinct but interacting parts is no longer valid or relevant.” Morton’s unraveling of Nature or renunciation of the concept, opens us up to a more ecologically aware and thoughtful way of perceiving and acting that has directly impacted my line of thinking in *Between what exists*. While I do use the term nature throughout this paper, I aim to unpack and expand the concept.

Filmmaker George Kuchar’s *Weather Diaries* also challenges conventional notions of landscape and nature. Kuchar lived in cities his whole life, but in *Weather Diaries*, he visited a small town in Oklahoma for one month every year during tornado season to diaristically record his experience of tornado weather and intense Midwest storms. In *Weather Diary 1* (1986) using a compilation of footage from his month in Oklahoma, Kuchar, in an irreverent-mockumentary style, describes his surroundings: the worn-down motel he’s staying in, the few clothes he brought, the food he eats, his daily desires and boredom, his bathroom habits, the animals and occupants he notices outside of the motel, and the powerful weather formations happening around him. He films the nuances of his day, the quotidian and the profane, from the flushing of the toilet to the vastly magnificent stormy skies. His shots of the sky are beautiful and provoke a feeling of the sublime, even as they are framed within the setting of a worn down, sad motel. Film critic Scott MacDonald says of *Weather Diary 1* that Kuchar seems to suggest that we can

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28 Ibid, 28.
29 Ibid, 41.
intimately connect to nature anywhere we go “so long as we learn to use the inevitable, pervasive mundane to provide a psychic ‘frame’ for an immersion within the awesome power of nature.” Kuchar’s *Weather Diaries* takes the framework of the previously discussed “nature experience”—reverence and awe—and applies it to his everyday vernacular. His filmmaking creates “...a far broader sensibility to the particular natural realities within which we live.” The sublime and the venerated commingle with boredom, utility, humor, dread, and bodily exigencies.

Figure 19. George Kuchar, Still images from *Weather Diaries 1*, Video, 1986. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvNHDJGMPs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvNHDJGMPs)

Through my research into landscapes, I have come to realize that our concept of the term is constantly in flux and heavily swayed by the prevailing beliefs and priorities of any given time period. I have come to view the landscape as a creative space ripe for adaptation and transformation by both human and non-humans forces for an assortment of purposes—some wildly destructive, some exquisitely generative, and some which linger in the middle of these

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31 Ibid, 146.
extremes. In *Between what exists* I think about both the vulnerability and malleability present within our contemporary, industrial vernacular landscapes: by applying the influential framework of the “nature experience” to my study of these overlooked, heavily mediated spaces, I incite a more reverential and inclusive sense of what constitutes nature.

4 **THESIS EXHIBITION: BETWEEN WHAT EXISTS**

Throughout this paper I have discussed the potentiality that lies within the Everyday and mundane, and the subversive power of expanding how and what we consider Nature and progress to be. *Between what exists* is an immersive installation that consists of 3 hand-processed unique chromogenic prints, a hand-processed super 8 film, a hanging screen made from site-specific found litter, HD video and 16mm film clips projected onto found material, and sound. The work draws connection between analog image making, site specificity, questions surrounding nature/landscape, and overlooked spaces and materials. A through line that exists throughout these underlying concepts is a combining and confusing of value-based binaries. Specifically, I am interested in the merging of the abhorrent with the beautiful, sacred with profane, depleted with generative, unrefined with refined.

Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* is a work that vividly illustrates the power of these opposing characteristics flourishing within the same space. The work consists of a luminous photograph of a small crucifix submerged in a glass of the artist’s own urine. Tyler Shine, a PhD Candidate in Art History at The University of Pennsylvania, says of Serrano’s early photographs, which used bodily substances, that they possess an “...ambiguity and ability to crisscross
symbolic boundaries in the unstable space between sacred and profane, thus making his images both powerful and potentially dangerous.”


Reverence and repulsion happen at the same time. We see the two items in the photo regularly without shock or even much attention, yet when synthesized into one image, the contradictory connotations embedded in each object clash and reverberate. A new object that cannot be easily categorized arises, one that confuses, or even upsets, our established sense of aesthetic categorization. In my thesis exhibition, I aim to create similar boundary-transgressing images that blur distinctions between opposing values.

In *Between what exists*, I continue to direct myself to truck stops and gas stations – spaces that are industrial, littered, undesirable, and largely overlooked. I wanted to devote my attention to this specific site of transit and industry and find moments here that make us reconsider where and what we direct our attention to. From September 2020 – March 2021 I frequented these spaces on a weekly basis to make this body of work. Occasionally, my visits stretched 10-12 hours, from sunrise to sunset. Other times, I only visited for a few hours. The exhibition is ultimately a result of months of site exploration at gas stations and truck stops, alongside analog image making exploration.

Since late November 2020, I had been experimenting with Chromogenic Printing, or C-Printing. During this same period, I experimented with toning my prints using unusual liquids, creating photograms within my C-Print process, and hand processing motion picture film. I gravitated towards analog processes because it was important for me to physically incorporate site-specific materials into my images. Bringing the place into the image alters how we see and experience a site’s representation and materiality. I wondered how I could merge specific moments in time (through a photograph and film), with corporeal forms central to these locations. I also wanted to create images that bear the marks of its making: dust from the darkroom, chemical stains and flickers from imperfect development, and an indexical uniqueness.
of materials and moments that cannot be reproduced identically even if I tried. All of these qualities force me to engage deeper with what I am seeing and making in relation to materials and site.


In my C-Prints Pilot Intervention #1 (Pilot Travel Center, Atlanta, GA) and Pilot Intervention #2 (Pilot Travel Center, Braselton, GA) I layered found plastics from the site of each Pilot location over the top of my darkroom paper before exposing my negative—mediating how we see and interact with the final image. Plastic is a ubiquitous material that seeps through into nearly every landscape, yet it is often not pictured or physically incorporated into representations of places. It felt like the right material for me to use in this process, first due to its translucency and second, because of its conceptual weight. Gas stations and truck stops are
particularly potent signifiers of our culture of capital and convenience: every item we buy here is single-use plastic, and everything we purchase online flows through these transportation hubs, implicating all of us.

Figure 22. Madeline Pieschel. *Between what exists* installation view. 2021.
Figure 23. Madeline Pieschel. *Pilot Intervention #1 (Pilot Travel Center, Atlanta, GA).* Unique C-Print with photogram of found plastic. 2021.
Figure 24. Madeline Pieschel. *Pilot Intervention #2 (Pilot Travel Center, Braselton, GA)*. Unique C-Print with photogram of found wrappers. 2021.
When I spend time at these extremely littered places, I usually feel sharp pangs of disgust and a melancholy towards our insatiable consumerism and the ecological destruction it causes. These feelings are often followed by moments that complicate my disgust and expand into slight feelings of wonder and a strange optimism. For example, an empty Coke can casually tossed on the ground in a parking lot turns out to be a fortress for the slug who lives underneath it. Or when I see a swarm of bees happily feasting on an abandoned bag of sugar to eat in a truck parking lot. Or when I observe plants that have somehow found ways to thrive in the foulest, most inhospitable plots of earth. All of these moments make me consider the adaptive creativity in these unfavorable environments and ultimately lead me to question what is natural.

In C-Print *Pilot Intervention #3 (Pilot Travel Center, Villa Rica, GA)* I made a photograph of a vibrant, sun-filled afternoon sky while I was sitting at a Pilot and later developed the image and toned it in red Gatorade purchased at the same Pilot. Gatorade felt like an apt material to use because of its convenience store ubiquity and its ‘artificial’ and ‘natural’ flavors and coloring. The red food dye’s potency and depth seeped into and darkened the sky, drastically changing the original print into something more ominous. One of my thesis committee members, Kate Cunningham, commented on how it reminded her of the extraordinary beauty of toxic sunsets. Air and light pollution produce the most vivid hues of orange and red in the sky, creating seemingly pleasant sunsets that are actually signs of severe environmental destruction. The small photograph is matted in cardboard, a widely available material that is easy to overlook and connotes freight, shipping, and consumption—a material I frequently find discarded at truck stops. As another thesis committee member Jill Frank pointed out to me, cardboard is also highly acidic, so eventually its fibers, together with whatever toxic substances are in red Gatorade, will
degrade and destroy my print. Destruction and a toxicity, creation and a beauty overlap and merge.

Figure 25. Madeline Pieschel. *Between what exists* installation view. 2021.
The centerpiece of my installation, entitled, *Sunset (TA Travel Center, Commerce, GA)*, is a 5.5 x 7-foot screen constructed of collected litter and translucent wrappers that I accumulated over my site visits. In this piece, I filmed a sunset from a gas station parking lot on one 50-foot cartridge of super 8. The film is projected onto and through the hanging plastic screen. Holes, tears, and gaps in the plastic allow light to pass through freely in some areas, while others are more opaque and block the projector’s light. The majority of the sunset image is obscured, but a ray of warm sunshine juts through a hole in the plastic at just the right angle to project onto the back wall, creating a barely legible image of the setting sun. As I shot this piece, I was contemplating the litter in the parking lot all around me: it is just as noticeable, present, and affective as the sun. The screen recreates my own mediated experience of this moment. A sunset
is not separate or far away from the ground, the litter, the cars, or myself. We are deeply implicated and entangled with one another. Again, I was thinking about where nature begins and ends, if it does at all, and how found material intervention could communicate these ideas.

Figure 27. Madeline Pieschel. *Sunset (TA Travel Center, Commerce, GA)*. Hand processed super8 film and screen assembled from site-found litter. 2021.
Figure 28. Madeline Pieschel. Detail of *Between what exists* installation view. 2021.
Lastly, my exhibition includes two found object projection pieces. One piece is a site-sourced cardboard box splayed open and nailed to the wall; and the other is a site-sourced piece of wood and sheet of cardboard adhered together. Both are used as projection screens. Miniature projectors sit on raw wood pedestals, projecting sequences of short moving image clips. However, most of the clips act as still images; they barely move. In one of the clips, the only movement comes from parking lot trees blowing in the wind; in another, movement exists in the form of exhaust belching from a car’s muffler in a crowded yet still parking lot. A couple more clips include a slug slowly gliding across a littered receipt in glimmering light, and bees swarming around a bag of sugar. I selected moments that centered around varying temporalities
and time scales. A feeling of deep, slow geological time exists on the same plane as the backdrop of contemporary convenience culture and industry. The images are inseparable from the surfaces onto which they are projected, and the worn quality of the found materials further heightens the sense of time passing.

Throughout the exhibition, there is a feeling of slow transformation: materials break down and become something else. Most of the pieces of litter I collected bear a timestamp, a clear sign of how long something has been sitting there gathering dirt or insects, morphing into a different shape, adapting new purpose. My hand-processed images slowly deteriorate alongside them. The projected works play in repetitive loops, alluding to a sense of time circling itself, of the incessant cycles of destruction and regeneration.

Figure 30. Madeline Pieschel. *Untitled*. HD video, 16mm, and super8 film projected onto found cardboard box. 2021.
Figure 31. Madeline Pieschel. *Untitled*. HD video, 16mm, and super8 film projected onto found cardboard and wood. 2021.

Figure 32. Madeline Pieschel. *Between what exists* installation view. 2021.
5 CONCLUSIONS

In the months leading up to my thesis exhibition, I struggled to develop fluid connections between the diverse media in this body of work. How would short digital video clips work alongside hand-processed super8 film, and how would these moving images function with the still images?

In March, I found a solution that married together all the disparate pieces. I decided that my exhibition aesthetically and conceptually needed the physical presence of site-found objects inside the exhibition space: being projected through, over, and under, weaving through and directly mediating the images. Discovering this method of bringing a place’s unique materiality into the gallery setting ultimately led me to construct an immersive installation where I translated and filtered my own experiences of the site. In creating Between what exists, I pushed myself to explore new modes of site observation and experimental image making; by elevating the life-matter of these disregarded places, I complicate normative perceptions of value and nature. I am excited to continue this type of making.
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