The Highway Between

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary highway is the culmination of our species’ productive ingenuity, a site of ultimate disconnection and control. The highway untethers us from the earth, forcing us to travel without walking, rushing us past too quickly to smell, too loudly to hear, and too elevated to feel through its thick asphalt. The Highway Between fights the highway’s frenzied isolation and selfish force with obsessive gathering, binding, and building, using clay to enact ancient human impulses in a place designed not to be touched. These actions are captured in large-scale ceramic sculptures that combine manufactured and wild clay with raw materials collected from the highway and transformed through fire. The Highway Between reestablishes human touch with the earth where it is most forgotten, to fight the ever-widening gap between our collective mind and body.
INDEX WORDS: Highway, Ceramics, Sculpture, Clay, Wild clay, Modernity, Paleolithic,

Environmental art, Sacred, Spiritual, Myth, Ritual, Body, Land, Earth
THE HIGHWAY BETWEEN

by

BRONWYN SIMONS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Art

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2024
THE HIGHWAY BETWEEN

by

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DEDICATION

My thesis is dedicated to Bob, my partner in everything. This exhibition would not have been possible without your tireless support, encouragement, thoughtfulness, enthusiasm, extremely handy studio assistance, and timely burrito delivery. I am so grateful to be sharing my life with you, and I am excited to see what adventures we get into next. My best ideas always find me when I am with you.
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1 INTRODUCTION

“Direct sensuous reality, in all its more-than-human mystery, remains the sole solid touchstone for an experiential world now inundated with electronically generated vistas and engineered pleasures; only in regular contact with the tangible ground and sky can we learn how to orient and to navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us.”

Clay is the heart of my artistic practice. It is the material of ‘sensuous reality,’ the earthy flesh of Gaia herself. It is an ancient material of empathy, transformation, and intuition. Through bodily labor and alchemical fire, the ceramic process births the intangible and internal into the world. Discovering this process may have struck the first spark of human ingenuity within the hominin.  

Hundreds of thousands of years after this spark caught, human ingenuity seems severed from the geological alchemy of its birth. The contemporary highway, a microcosm of our current relationship with the geological earth, grips the natural world tightly. It is the culmination of our species’ productive ingenuity, a site of ultimate disconnection and control. The ever-increasing force of the highway heedlessly pumps a constant roar of goods and people forward along its blackened veins. The highway severs the connection between interior and exterior by isolating humanity within boxes of their own making, separating us from the earth. So how do we respond to the systematic disconnection and devaluing of our natural world? How do we challenge systems that we depend on economically, socially, and, in our desire for freedom and mastery, even symbolically?

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The Highway Between fights the highway’s frenzied isolation and selfish force with obsessive gathering, binding, and building, using clay and collected highway refuse to enact ancient human impulses in a place designed not to be touched. Through labor, skill, and intuition, I create large-scale sculptures with fired ceramic and found materials. I mimic the symbolic forms of the highway, its billboards, transmission towers, and winding roadways, rendering them personal and empathetic by sculpting them by hand. I collect trash from medians and roadsides, and bind these materials together with obsessive wrapping, reframing these discarded materials as sculptural forms. Ultimately this exhibition uproots materials and imagery from the overlooked but familiar site of the American highway and re-roots them in the gallery, rendering them unfamiliar but undeniably seen. I look to the land of the highway as our Paleolithic ancestors looked to the land around them, searching the landscape for material, meaning, guidance and connection. By purposefully re-observing and re-involving myself with the modern earth as I find it, I seek to follow in the footsteps of those who lived within and amongst the world, and not on top of it. The Highway Between reestablishes human touch with the earth where it is most forgotten, to fight the ever-widening gap between our collective mind and body.

2 GETTING OUT OF THE CAR

My early work was intensely personal. I sculpted in order to visualize and externalize my internal, emotional word. I did not see my work as a means of connecting with the physical world, but rather as a means of connecting with myself through physical material. But I became dissatisfied working solely within the cocoon of my own psyche. I yearned for connection outside of myself. My sense of disconnection intensified after I
moved to Georgia and began the endless commute cycle into Atlanta's city center and back again. I would arrive at school in the predawn darkness, work within my windowless studio, and leave in the post-dusk gloom. Buried in the school's cinderblock belly, I increased my isolation by continuing to look only to my personal history and aesthetic sense for artistic inspiration. Like a snake eating its own tail, I became locked in a creation cycle with no external influence and no resolution.

It was only by following my primal drive to touch something that I broke this self-reflexive seclusion. I began collecting all the materials that caught my eye as I traveled from my bed to school: eggs in the kitchen, lint in the trash, hair in my car, chestnut burrs, flowers, and grasses from the roadside, red string and tissues from forgotten corners of my studio shelves. I bound these odds and ends together into relics of my involvement with the physical matter around me, creating proof that I was more than a mind hovering above the surface of the world (fig. 1).

I felt more whole when I was enmeshed in the physical world, making wreaths and flower arrangements, exploring nearby fields and forests, searching for bright objects, befriending stray cats and dogs, feeling the sun, watching for the moon, and rescuing worms that flipped themselves onto the endless river of asphalt winding through it all. The more joy I felt outdoors, the more I realized how many structures were in place to keep me inside. I grew more and more restless as my commute dragged on, staring through my windshield at the unsettling objects I drove passed daily: the refuse, mattresses, invasive flowers, smashed furniture, and broken bodies. As participating in the highway system became harder to bear, I focused increasingly on its impact on the American psyche.
First implemented by Dwight D. Eisenhower sixty-seven years ago, the modern interstate highway system is a relatively recent institution. But since its creation, it has firmly shifted us from a world of wayfaring to a world of transport. Anthropologist Tim

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Ingold created these terms to explain not just the evolution of travel, but how the switch from wayfaring to transport is responsible for the core paradigm shift that defines our modern age. Whether on foot, horseback, or sled, humans used to absorb information during their daily travels, learning about their environment through observation, touch, smell, and sound. This enmeshed humans within their environment and established the complex intermingling of all lifeforms as an undisputed reality. Ingold expresses this enmeshment or wayfaring trail as a wandering line that changes course continually as it responds to its environment.

In contrast, transport allows you to jump from your journey’s start point to its end point without engaging with the environment in between. Instead, you are held within a self-contained environment that caters to your senses. Cars have perfected this service, having evolved to be “a machine so perfectly responsive to individual whim that it assume[s] the neutrality of a prosthesis.” However, Ingold stresses that simply employing mechanical means of travel is not enough to lead to a world of transport. Bicycles, for example, leave the rider in connection with their environment while amplifying their locomotion. Transport only really begins with “the dissolution of the intimate bond that, in wayfaring, couples locomotion and perception.” The modern car works to dissolve this bond by no longer requiring or encouraging us to use our senses to glean information as we travel. Instead, we are instead trained to disengage as much as possible and simply watch the flattened world stream by the television-screen windows.

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4 Tim Ingold, Lines: A Brief History (New York: Routledge, 2007), 75.
5 Ingold, Lines, 76 and 80.
6 Kris Lackey, RoadFrames: The American Highway Narrative (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 4.
7 Ingold, Lines, 78.
There are those who still negotiate a wayfaring relationship with the earth. Their observations and experiences become increasingly important as we realize the damage perpetuated by a transport-dominated world. Early in my undergraduate education, I saw the documentary *Rivers and Tides: Andy Goldsworthy Working with Time* by Thomas Riedelsheimer. The film follows sculptor Andy Goldsworthy around the world as he creates meditative sculptural interactions with the natural landscape. Surrounded as I was, at the time, by sturdy ceramic sculpture, I was baffled that such fleeting gestures could be considered art. I watched this documentary again years later and found myself overcome with new understanding. Goldsworthy is a wayfarer, a man devoted to enmeshing himself within the rhythms of the earth and deepening his conversation with the natural environment. His practice is druidic, studious, and grounded in rituals of connection that integrate him with his environment.

In his recent work *Iron*, Goldsworthy collected enough iron-rich red pigment from the land around a dead Hawthorne tree to coat every inch of it in a vibrant rusty skin (fig. 2). All red earth contains iron, which is the same mineral that makes our blood red. The presence of iron materially links our own veins to the red veins of the earth, creating a geo-biological bond between humans and land. The reddened branches of the Hawthorne speak of connected bloodline between the dirt and the tree, and, by extension, the human hand that brought the materials together in this symbolical gesture. By revitalizing this tree with iron ochre, Goldsworthy is invoking human practices that originated 100,000 years ago.
Even at that time, our ancestors already knew how to heat ochre to certain temperatures for certain durations to turn yellowish brown goethite into red hematite, and to intensify the dull hue of local ochre into a rare, brilliant scarlet. Red iron ochre has been incredibly spiritually important throughout human history. The Aboriginal Australian peoples “consider the act of applying ochre to the body to be a transformative practice, in which people recharge themselves with ancestral power.” Goldsworthy is performing this same

8 Von Petzinger, The First Signs, 44-45.
rite to his Hawthorne, using the medicine of ochre to revitalize the bones of the dead.\textsuperscript{10}

I have performed a similar ritual, but I have used the synthetic materials of modernity rather than the sacred red earth. By using plastic to perform this ancient gesture of revivification, I am highlighting the modern desire to reestablish our ancient connections, and our complete lack of knowledge about how to do so. Instead of a noble Hawthorne, I used a dry bush or tumbleweed that somehow wandered across a parking lot to rest beside my car. As I found it just as I was about to begin my commute home in peak rush hour traffic, I felt a wry kinship for this tumbleweed. It was uprooted and doomed, as I was, to ceaselessly wander an asphalt purgatory. I coated the tumbleweed’s delicate curving branches with spray paint and synthetic nylon flocking (fig. 3). This essentially coated the branches in plastic, albeit a fuzzy plastic that provokes empathy in the viewer. Red flocking is the transporter’s route to revivification, hopping over the intricate histories of materiality and ritual to make the simple association between red and life.

Goldsworthy’s work is the antithesis of synthetic, as he works with natural materials almost exclusively gathered on site. He is known for working in spaces that tend toward the picturesque and pastoral, although he does not appreciate this interpretation of the landscapes in which he works; Goldsworthy is at pains to point out the darkness inherent within nature’s rhythms of survival, death, and decay.\textsuperscript{11} However, it is difficult for Goldsworthy to deny that he prefers to surround himself with the raw beauty of nature, as he himself describes his first time working outdoors as a type of escape.

\textsuperscript{10} Boivin and Owoc, \textit{Soils, Stones and Symbols}, 38.
Goldsworthy recounts fleeing the claustrophobia of his art college’s cubicles for the freedom and energy of the beach, and it is this avoidance to man-made spaces which has continued to define the aesthetic of his life’s work. When I walk out of my front door, I step onto an endless river of asphalt that floods the ground around me. I join its flow in the

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12 Rivers and Tides, 20:51 to 21:36.
plastic shell of my car, scanning the sides of the highway. I am searching for a beach of my own, a place where the earth does not feel so strangled. And at mile marker 28.9, I find it.

You must summon a small rush of courage and recklessness to pull over on the side of a highway. I dread it every time, glancing repeatedly in the rearview for accelerating cars, cops, trucks, or any excuse to keep driving. I finally pull over on the left shoulder as far as possible, tall grasses scraping the dusty sides of my Toyota Yaris. I try not to think about the two vehicles I saw fully engulfed in flames in similar positions along I-20 this week. As I exit the car, my sensory experience is immediately split. My right ear is full of the droning, whistling whine of rushing traffic, a sound of pure mass and speed. But my left ear is full of sun-sounds and grass-sounds. It is July in the American Southeast, and as I walk, I hear an incredible array of chirps, buzzes, and drones from the invisible insect world at my feet.

The transmission towers I pulled over to document loom before me, massive and still above the cacophonous earth. As I gaze up through my iPhone camera, the nape of my neck prickles with dull apprehension, my animal body tensing for a violent collision with the cars hurtling by my back.

Getting out of the car means releasing control and embracing connection with the physical world. This exposes us to the danger we have created around us, as the roadway is only safe if you play by its rules. Once we get out of the car and step into the forests and fields alongside the highway, we lose our human advantage. We place ourselves in the territory of plants and animals, the same lifeforms we have placed beneath ourselves in the hierarchy of importance. Of course, this hierarchy is not common to all cultures. There are many indigenous North American cultures that reject a human-centric view of lifeforms. Robin Wall Kimmerer, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, reminds us that “[i]n
Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as ‘the younger brothers of Creation.’ We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn—we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance.” 13 This way of knowing requires us to listen to nonverbal teachers and act against the values of efficiency and control promoted by U.S. systems. Our systems of travel, business, transport, agriculture, construction, and production enforce our tendency to see land as a collection of exploitable resources.

It is these systems, and not the land they control, that are my inheritance. While I did not put the systems in place, I am descended from those who did, and my entire way of life is supported and entangled with them. Kimmerer recounts a Native elder puzzling about the feckless attitude of European colonists and their descendants: “The problem with these new people is that they don’t have both feet on the shore. One is still on the boat. They don’t seem to know whether they’re staying or not.” 14 My desire to pull off of the highway and learn firsthand what the land is experiencing is a desire to anchor both feet on the shore. Kimmerer, as a botanist and author, provides a roadmap for the descendants of colonists who wish to become “naturalized”: they must respectfully and earnestly learn how to live within the environment in such a way that all forms of life can thrive. 15 Through a lifetime of balancing scientific rigor with a deep spiritual belief in the “threads that connect the world,” Kimmerer has developed an eloquent, passionate guide for reintegrating us, the observer, with the observed. 16

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16 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 42.
This integration is related to Goldsworthy’s work, in which his ongoing conversation with the natural world and ephemeral gestures he uses to record it help him “feel as if [he’s] touched the heart of the place.”\textsuperscript{17} But if I was to search for the heart of the natural world, I would be inclined to travel very far away from my asphalt-locked townhome. I would still be the immigrant with one foot in the boat that Kimmerer describes, willing to leave for greener pastures at the sign of discomfort or ugliness. I must merge commitment to place, as illustrated by the tenants of bioregionalism, with Goldsworthy’s reverence to truly begin my conversation with the land. Bioregionalism, as described in the 1970s by environmentalist Peter Berg, draws on indigenous teachings and land practices to create “awareness not only of the many life forms of each place, but how they are interrelated, including with humans.”\textsuperscript{18} My personal bioregion is not the scraps of pristine nature preserved in America’s local and national parks. My bioregion is the ecosystem that surrounds me and the land I interact with most; it is the land beneath the highway.

The entangled lines of wayfaring form a living meshwork, but I live in a network of isolated experiences. Individual commuting lines crisscross and run parallel without touching and life is only lived in the buildings these lines connect.\textsuperscript{19} U.S. citizens have consented to a contained life, spending 87\% of our lives indoors and 6\% in vehicles.\textsuperscript{20} In this culture, when we are so separated from the rugged outdoors, it is no wonder that Richard Long’s scenic photographs documenting his robust artistic practice seized the public imagination. His work seems uncontained as he charts his course against the grain of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Rivers and Tides, 17:48.
\item Ingold, Lines: A Brief History, 80-81.
\end{enumerate}
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preestablished roads and national borders. Long has devoted his practice to walking outdoors, raising this simple activity to an artform. He embeds himself within the landscape through sheer presence and purpose. Long’s works range from feats of endurance to simple gestures, like leaving footprints and moving stones. He considers himself a classical artist, using “the basic, simple ideas of lines and circles as a very primitive, simple vocabulary.”

Much like Goldsworthy, he approaches his ephemeral practice with meditative seriousness and poetic embrace. Long is also compelled to work in pristine natural surroundings, from the vast moors of England to the Sahara Desert. These are places, he says, “where nothing seems to have broken the connection to the ancient past.” It is increasingly difficult to find places unsullied by modern infrastructure, but if Long encounters contemporary obstacles or people while executing his works he does not record them. Long documents his artistic endeavors with written descriptions and photographs, and through both documentation methods he chooses to portray a solitary, poetic environment that harkens back to an older world.

An example of this tendency is Long’s work *Mahalakshmi Hill Line*, which was created in 2003 on Warli tribal land in India (fig. 4). The photograph documenting this line shows an abandoned rural scene of thatched huts set beneath a striking stone hilltop. But this pastoral location sits less than an hour outside of Mumbi, one of the most populous and dense urban areas in the entire world.

The paths of over twelve million people crisscross daily forty minutes away, but through his photograph Long has created a vacant world where there is enough space for him to make one solitary, special line. This is a pattern within Long’s oeuvre. He has created a body of work replete with excursions to far-flung lands that uncomfortably bring the term ‘exotic’ or ‘primitive’ to mind: words used by other white explorers wishing to discover new and beautiful landscapes. Long is, after all, an inheritor of the English legacy, just as I am an inheritor of the U.S. legacy. Jean Fisher points out the colonist undertones of Long’s practice: “The map and the camera are the colonizer’s tools; the terrain has already been colonized, measured, and translated into a sign system according to the rules of cartography. Long re-marks the map with his own system of abstract drawings, sometimes imposing the form, sometimes allowing the topography to dictate its type and scale.”

Tim Ingold echoes this statement in his treatise on lines, stating, “[c]olonialism… is not the imposition of linearity upon a non-linear world, but the imposition of one kind of line on another.”

Long disputes these interpretations of his work, insisting that “my work takes its place on the same landscape that has been used by all different cultures and generations and different histories… [nature] belongs to all people in all times in history.” But this view of the natural world is impersonal in a way that only a “western artist working…as an individualist in the 20th century,” as Long describes himself, can manage to achieve.

Fisher highlights the problems perpetuated by the western within Long’s work: “In

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Western culture, nature does not exist in itself but as an ideological construct, subject to the organizing principles of knowledge. The further from intimate experience, the more abstract the signification becomes, so that whatever system is brought to bear on the landscape, it is in some way a colonization of it."

I am seeking intimacy with the earth through my practice, and this intimacy can never be truly found if we require the earth to be beautiful first. While Long’s works might empower the viewer to start walking in the world, they also promote the idea that you can only truly connect with the land where it is still unsullied by modernity. This supports the unfortunate idea that we cannot connect with the earth where we are, but that we must first travel to a space where the earth is more pure. Consequently, we discount the earth around us and exoticize the land where the earth is still held sacred. Long’s work, while inspirational in its elegance and ingenuity, is still a cautionary tale to me as I begin making work with the land. The power of the earth still hums equally beneath the asphalt parking lots of America and the sands of the Sahara Desert. When we begin listening for the earth, it is natural to be drawn to pristine places where she is easier to hear. But I am resisting the urge to search for such places to make art. I am striving to connect with nature in noisy places where it is almost drowned out. I am committed to the land that I live on and drive across, as I believe that this ‘spoilt’ land will allow me to tell a more honest story.

When I first began to work outdoors, I searched for natural beauty. Like many U.S. citizens, I live beside a roaring highway, amid rows of identical townhomes with short-term leases, surrounded by long-haul trucks pulling in and out of the neighborhood Flying J Travel Center. I was drawn irresistibly to a field tucked between asphalt roads and

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suburban developments, and I discovered that it contained a strange secret. The air was rich with birdsong and the sky glowed gold as I watched a field full of derelict-looking sprinklers on poles water their own separate circles of grass. Some moved in a jerky rotation, while some had become completely untethered and sprayed arcs of water into the sky like fountains. The sound of rushing water grew as I followed the gridded lines of sprinklers into the treeline, where they cut new riverbeds into the forest floor. It was a bizarre and fantastic sight. I couldn't imagine why the sprinklers were there in such numbers, who had put them there or why they had fallen into such disrepair. Though I checked frequently, I only caught the watering once more, which made the experience feel like a dream. I later discovered this field was a land application site, where wastewater is sprayed as part of its treatment process. According to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, for slow-rate land treatment like I had observed, “Total Suspended Solids are limited to 50 mg/L for mechanical systems,” and “[d]isinfection is generally not required for restricted access land treatment sites.” This news soured my fairytales about the magical watering field. I thought I had found a little Eden, a field left wonderfully abandoned to water itself with gleeful irregularity, only to find out it was being sprayed with sewage.

I created the mouths of your children’s children in response to this field, using its scavenged grasses combined with materials from the highway to build a large wall-hanging infinity symbol (fig. 5).

29 See Appendix A, figures 20 and 21.
30 See Appendix A, figure 22.
Figure 5. Bronwyn Simons, *the mouths of your children’s children*, 2023, grasses from land application site near I-20 exit 19, inner tube from mile marker 39.3, dirt from exit 19, iron powder, wisteria from various mile markers, found wire, 96 x 47 x 26. Collection of the artist.
The symbol’s looping grass and flowers disconnect at the bottom around a plastic inner tube. On the ground between the severed grass arms is a small pile of iron powder ringed by red dirt. This piece was my first experiment using material context as the core of the artwork. The title references the biblical story of God’s promise to mankind after the Great Flood, in which he promises to never destroy the earth again. The repetition of circles throughout the piece speak of harmony, the fullness of the earth, and fertility, but these cycles are interrupted and replaced by the glittering inner tube yawning at their center. As a material, plastic is far more infinite than the compostable straw and flowers that once represented regeneration and renewal. Similarly, the pile of iron powder demonstrates human’s ability to refine sacred red earth into something concentrated, alien, and functional. The replacement of grasses and dirt for plastic and iron speak to the increasing focus we have placed on the functionality of materials rather than our empathetic relationship with them. We have removed the spiritual from the physical, and in doing so we have broken the promise of eternal earthly prosperity. *The mouths of your children’s children* embodies my fear that our relationship with the earth is irreparably broken. But the promise continues because we belong here. Regardless of what we do, we will always belong here, with our feet in the dirt and our eyes on the sky.

While Goldsworthy’s bucolic hills and Long’s exotic travels may be alluring, the truth is we do not need to find Edens. We need the land we already have around us, because this land has the most to teach us about ourselves. If we forego learning about our own environment to seek perfection elsewhere, we run the risk of exoticizing places with a stronger connection to our shared past. We also prevent ourselves from strengthening that connection where it is weak. Can we reawaken our connection with the ancient past in our
backyards and parking lots? We are still biologically the same people that we were when we were ancient. We contain all the knowledge necessary to build a connection with the earth in our DNA. We must trust that we can find the lessons and the answers that we found before.

3  LOOKING AROUND

Once you are out of the car, you look at the highway site differently. The first frightening realization is the true speed of this system. The peaceful flow of traffic you just left now seems to be a frenzied, endless river of mechanical beetles. The second realization is the true scale of the system. The bridges loom like dumb concrete giants, the mile markers tower above you, and even the guardrails bafflingly reach up to your hip. You feel so significant and powerful behind the wheel, but on the highway side you experience almost the same sensation of insignificance as staring up at a limitless starry sky. The largest constellations in this highway skyscape are the transmission towers. Incomprehensibly tall, spidery, alien, and cold, they stalk the hills and valleys in parallel lines. They radiate purpose, posed like gigantic As and Ts and Hs with their upper limbs buried in the clouds. Their forms appear symbolic, like individual symbols in a monumental code that might be solvable if you could only see them from the right perspective. The speed of the highway lanes runs perpendicular to the scale of these power lines. Together, they form a grid that is the matrix of our modern world.\textsuperscript{32}

As you stand exposed on the roadside, this electric matrix of speed and scale feels inescapable and omnipresent. Every day new advancements speed up the pace and scope

\textsuperscript{32} See Appendix A, figure 22.
of human life in ways that the mind’s biological evolution is simply incapable of matching.\textsuperscript{33} If we cannot understand our present, perhaps we may better understand our past. If we are seeking to reestablish our bonds with the earth, who better to teach us than ourselves?

Humans have a very short memory relative to our history. We view anything over 3,220 years ago as ‘prehistory,’ a term implying that all relevant information and events began with written history. This dismisses all human experience before this point, and as a result we lose respect for the wisdom of those who lived most closely in concert with the earth. To illustrate the enormous breadth of history we are led preclude, we will first peer back in time to the oldest evidence of a humanesque mind. The “first stirrings of abstract thought” extend our history back as far as 540,000 years, when a lone \textit{Homo erectus} on Java engraved a purposeful zigzag pattern onto a seashell.\textsuperscript{34} Colossal evolutionary developments were necessary for this hominin to create a purposeful symbol. The leap from abstract thought to abstract speech and the subsequent leap from abstract word to abstract physical symbol are all cognitively monumental. This means that the first glimmers of abstraction, a capacity associated with the core of humanity, extends back at least as far as this simple carved seashell. We cannot know how humanity evolved from generation to generation, as words and thoughts leave no imprint on the archaeological record. But the importance of solidifying thought and speech into physical mark-making is so primary to our sense of shared humanity that once the hominin gained this power, we recognize them as human; and as humans, their experiences hold relevant information for how we conduct our lives.

\textsuperscript{34} Von Petzinger, \textit{The First Signs}, 31.
Scattered across the ancient cave walls of Europe is potential evidence of the world’s oldest abstract symbols (fig. 6). While documenting hundreds of geometric markings etched and painted on Paleolithic cave walls, archeologist Genevieve von Petzinger recently discovered that “barring a few outliers, there were only thirty-two signs in use across the entire 30,000-year time span of the Ice Age and across the whole continent of Europe.”

Figure 6. The set of 32 symbols that Genevieve von Petzinger has catalogued in European Ice Age caves. Courtesy of Genevieve von Petzinger, in “What the mysterious symbols made by early humans can teach us about how we evolved,” by Patrick D’Arcy, TED.com, July 7 2017, accessed April 26, 2024. https://ideas.ted.com/what-the-mysterious-symbols-made-by-early-humans-can-teach-us-about-how-we-evolved.

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Her ongoing research further suggests that twenty-six of these signs are commonly incorporated in Ice Age cave sites on all inhabited continents. This suggests that *Homo sapiens sapiens* may have developed a culturally-shared symbology before they dispersed from Africa 60,000 years ago.\(^\text{36}\)

Von Petzinger’s symbol set suggests a human source code, one from which all subsequent abstract thinking developed. All of humanity’s non-representative interactions with physical matter could be tied to these thirty-two first gestures of abstract graphic communication. While we may never understand exactly what each of these symbols meant to those inscribing them, it is important that we understand how deeply linked the ability for abstract thought is to our humanity. The symbolic traces discussed in this chapter are as close to evidence of the origin of the human mind as we have found. Von Petzinger’s research suggests that graphic communication, and therefore abstract cognition, is not a recent human achievement but a core element, or perhaps the core element, of our species. Meaning-making is not a result of human thought and evolution; it is human thought and evolution.

I am struck by the similar form-language shared between the transmission towers of 2024 and these ancient symbols: the claviform, line, cruciform, triangle, pectiform, scalariform, and tectiform are all represented in the towers’ architecture. The transmission towers may literally be nothing more than practical assortments of metal lines, but the cave symbols are literally nothing more than scratched lines. We understand that there is nothing new under the sun; all forms have been used countless times for countless reasons.

over the course of human history. But we do not often realize the power of these millennia of repetition. Life is expressed through form, just as the mind is expressed through the body and as meaning is expressed through symbol. Every mark we make, and every form we create, is a sigil that connects us back through time to the first moment of contact between the internal and the external, the meaning and its form.

Julia Haft-Candell is a sculptor who plays with our ability to create our own symbology and mythology, using fiction to grasp the intangible, paradoxical heart of reality. Haft-Candell created a glossary, called the infinite, of her own primary sculptural forms. Each entry in the glossary is a collection of personal, cultural, and political associations, threads that intertwine within and around a particular simple form.37 Much like Genevieve von Petzinger’s cave symbols and Richard Long’s ‘primitive vocabulary,’ as previously described, Haft-Candell first anchored her glossary around the line and the circle, which she calls the Dash and the Torus, or the phallus and the opening.38 At first glance these forms are opposites, representative of the gender binary’s two extreme ends. But Haft-Candell is compelled by paradox, not definitions. She uses the intuitive process of sculpting to search for the moment when two supposedly opposing forces diverge so far that they meet each other again, merging in squishy, complicated, and surprising ways. By putting the Dash into motion and looping it around itself into two Toruses, Haft-Candell formed the Infinity symbol, “a symbol [used] to define the indefinable,” in all its paradoxical splendor.39

39 Haft-Candell, “Monuments for the Overlooked.”
This illustrates how Haft-Candell uses sculpture’s externality and physicality to explore the internal relationships and interconnections of reality. The hand gives form to the formless.

The first graphic communicators were tasked with expressing boundless reality through symbolic form. As time passed, humans became more and more comfortable with symbolic shorthand. We now live in an age of stagnant symbology expressed in rigid rules and unexamined associations. Haft-Candell’s work seeks to reveal and even liberate the infinite from within the symbol, reviving the boundless multiplicity of possibility experienced by our ancestors. Rather than using form to create set definitions, she is recomplicating relationships between forms and meanings that we too quickly dismiss as simple or mundane. The push and pull between defining rules and expansive force is expressed in Haft-Candell’s work *Infinity: Soft Grid with Necklaces and Drips* (fig. 7). This sculpture coat the paradoxical Infinity form with another layer of paradox: a combination of the containing net of Weaving and the uncontainable, pulpy Nothing/Everything. Haft-Candell loosely defines the Nothing/Everything as the “primordial goo…the center of the earth, maybe the cosmos, the guts.”

Haft-Candell uses gloopy glaze, made of “the same chemicals that are in the earth and the cosmos,” to communicate the pulpy, tactile stuff of unformed reality. Nothing/Everything is uncontainable and undefinable, an amorphous blob that holds within it all the raw potential of unformed matter.

Contrasting this unrestrainable molten mass are the thin blue lines of Weaving painted onto the glaze’s surface. Weaving lines are meant to hold and define their contents. They are the rules by which we comprehend and orient our existence, and the boundaries by which we distinguish one thing from another.

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40 Haft-Candell, “Artists at Work: Julia Haft-Candell.”

In *Infinity: Soft Grid with Necklaces and Drips*, these delicate lines float on the glaze surface, activated and softened by the liquid energy and undefined potential of the Nothing/Everything. Together, the container and the uncontainable meet in the infinity of possibility, challenging both the impulse to establish order upon chaos and the primal chaotic impulse to reject order.

These paradoxical relationships are embedded in reality at a quantum level, as demonstrated by Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. Put simply, Heisenberg postulated
that the more certain we are of a particle’s position, the less certain we are of its momentum; and the more we can pinpoint its momentum, the less we can determine its position.\textsuperscript{41} The very act of obtaining certainty precludes us from certainty. The same is true of means and meaning, or the functional and the symbolic. If we treat the Ice Age symbols as functional signs, they become transmission towers in the sense that we lose sight of the huge cognitive and spiritual ramification of their creation. If we treat the transmission towers as forms of power and influence, they become symbols in the sense that we lose sight of their physical form and see instead the power and control they radiate throughout the landscape. Both the towers and symbols hold functional and symbolic value, but because of when they were created, we are biased to focus on one quality over the other.

We have become convinced that we started as a functional species and developed into a symbolic species, but I believe the reverse proves true. When we examine the scant evidence of Paleolithic hominids, we find more personal expression than utility. One of the few windows we have into the development of the human mind is the development of language. “Complex or full language,” which evolved alongside symbolic thought, “is far richer in every aspect of meaning than it has to be for ordinary communication.”\textsuperscript{42} The body language and vocalizations of social animal groups prove how much information can be communicated without the need for complex grammar or vocabulary. It is mythology and belief, with their requirements for abstract thought and narrative linguistic complexity, that pushed the hominin brain toward consciousness.\textsuperscript{43} Belief may be our defining human

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\textsuperscript{42} Barnard, \textit{Genesis of Symbolic Thought}, 6 and 35.
\textsuperscript{43} Barnard, \textit{Genesis of Symbolic Thought}, 9.
ability. In this sense, by looking for meaning we are acting on our deepest, most primary human drive. By contrast, insisting that the transmission towers that dominate our highway landscapes and literally tower above us have no internal spiritual impact on us is to render ourselves less human. We focus on the functional aspects of modernity at the cost of learning its spiritual aspects.

I believe that whether we are inventing symbols for enlightenment, function, or control, we are drawing on a hidden common source. This primary pool, one-ness, or God undergirds and permeates all reality. When we stretch out the fingers of our subconscious intuition, I feel that something is placed in our palm. I was raised in the religious framework of the New Church, which details a complex spiritual substructure to reality. The bible is read as a symbolic text of infinitely layered spiritual symbols and implications, paradoxically contained within the simple external narrative of the text. The unlimited speaks through the limited, linking physical matter with spiritual matter.

Although I continue to wrestle with my relationship to organized religion, the tenets of the New Church formed the framework through which I continue to interpret the world. As such, religious imagery from the New Church and Christianity at large remains embedded throughout my work. Sometimes I use these symbols to critique Christian theology but sometimes I use them because they hold legitimate emotional and theological meaning for me. I am particularly drawn to sets of three, sacrificial animal bodies, crosses, and circles that reference solar bodies, crowns, and halos. I began to explore these symbols explicitly in Roadkill, which depicts a sacrificial scene and many biblical illusions (fig. 8). I have continued to use Christian imagery throughout the work created for The Highway Between.
Figure 8. Bronwyn Simons, *Roadkill*, 2023, cotton paper pulp, GAC 400, earthenware, solidago, 47 x 26 x 25 in. Collection of the artist.
Our deep human history is rich with ways of knowing and ways of living that are now lost, obscured by the thick fog of time. But while there may be truths in humanity’s past that could illuminate aspects of our murky present, we do not need cyphers or symbols to guide our next steps. What we have truly lost is our understanding of our place within the river of time and space, an instinctual presence that allows us to fully inhabit our immediate moment. This presence requires no lost or secret knowledge; we need only step away from the roaring highway to listen. The greatest secret of our deep past is that we are fundamentally the same as we have always been. We have the same hopes, fears, and temptations as we always have, albeit accompanied now by much more complex tools. We need the same things we needed 3,220, 60,000, and 540,000 years ago. We need the land, and the land is still speaking to us.

4 TOUCHING THINGS

Humanity’s relationship with the physical earth began in empathy, not the distant sympathy that plagues us today. We drew no distinctions between the matter of the mineral world and the matter of our own bodies. As archeological researcher Nicole Boivin explains, “Rather than neutral and inert, minerals in a number of [pre-industrial] societies are animate, and are engaged with on the basis of a worldview that understands all matter to be infused with spiritual energy and ‘life-force’.”44 Nowhere is our empathetic connection with the earth more clear than in our ancient use of red ochre. We began using ochre symbolically before we were fully human, when we were still the hominin Homo heidelbergensis. Our first example is from 450,000 years ago, when someone crafted a

44 Boivin and Owoc, Soils, Stones and Symbols, 2 and 7.
ceremonial red ax, known as 'Excalibur', for the specific, ritualistic purpose of interring the object with their dead.\textsuperscript{45} 75,000 to 100,000 years ago, in the South African Blombos Cave, someone carved some of our oldest geometric symbols, carefully incising them into fifteen ochre blocks.\textsuperscript{46} And starting 33,000 years ago, nearly every Paleolithic grave in Europe bears the red stains of ochre powder or paint included in its funerary rites.\textsuperscript{47} From these few examples it is clear that “the sway of the ethereal over the material [has] occurred since the dawn of human modernity in its broadest sense.”\textsuperscript{48} Red ochre is entwined in all of the evidence we have of the development of consciousness. In this way red ochre is the heart of humanity’s consciousness, fostering our ritual, symbolic and cultural evolution.

I dig for this ancient heart on the side of the highway, hunting for red clay just as our ancestors hunted the landscape for exposed veins of iron-rich red ochre.\textsuperscript{49} Despite beginning this hunt with no guidance, I am confident in the purity of my quest. I can see the orange-red Georgia dirt flashing past me as I drive, and I am sure I will quickly be able to tame it and manipulate it into pliable clay. However, the beautiful dirt I dig at mile marker 34.5 and exit 19 prove to be sandy and uncooperative, revealing the extent of my ignorance. I begin to suspect that if clay didn’t come in obedient homogeneous blocks or bags of pre-mixed powder, I wouldn’t be able to practice my craft at all. Stubbornly I press on, and, following a dim memory that clay is often found near water, I begin sloshing up and down an oil-slicked creek running underneath Interstate 20 near mile marker 18.9.

\textsuperscript{45} Von Petzinger, \textit{The First Signs}, 29.
\textsuperscript{46} Henshilwood, Christopher S., Francesco d’Errico and Ian Watts, “Engraved Ochres from the Middle Stone Age Levels at Blombos Cave, South Africa,” \textit{Journal of Human Evolution} 57, no. 1 (July 2009): 27. \url{https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhevol.2009.01.005}.
\textsuperscript{47} Von Petzinger, \textit{The First Signs}, 111.
\textsuperscript{48} Barnard, \textit{Genesis of Symbolic Thought}, 2.
\textsuperscript{49} Von Petzinger, \textit{The First Signs}, 32-33.
Hounded by the mocking scratches of pricker thickets and countless false starts, it is with all the excitement and awe of a gold miner that I finally strike true supple clay. The clay is dark and smells foul, contaminated by rotting leaves, gasoline, and other unnamable runoff from the highway droning relentlessly nearby. But when the clay agrees to roll and coil and hold, I feel deep, giddy joy in this hard-won collaboration with the earth.\(^{50}\)

Many artists have sought to reconnect with mother earth by working with her materials. Artist Ana Mendieta, well-aware of ritual Paleolithic relationships with geological matter, used her practice to seek reconciliation with the earth, stating: “I have thrown myself into the very elements that produced me. It is through my sculptures that I assert my emotional ties to the earth and conceptualize culture.”\(^{51}\) Mendieta used red ochre or tempera paint, her own silhouette, and whatever natural materials were at hand to create the extensive *Siluetas* series, a body of work born of personal, private performances within and for the earth (fig. 9). These performances and the sculptural impressions they created were ephemeral. Our only record of this extensive engagement with the ground are grainy photos and film. Violence, seen in her use of blood-red pigment, and desperation, seen in her ceaseless repetition, haunt her work as much as a sense of communion.

Mendieta desired to be buried and born in the cradle of the earth, as her *Siluetas* document her interment and delivery entwined in the same gesture. In her work, the earth becomes a conduit for connecting living and dying energies.

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\(^{50}\) See Appendix A, figure 24.

The San people of South Africa, who still maintain the ancient hunter-gatherer lifestyle, demonstrate a similar belief in the earth’s connective properties. They retreat to caves to practice shamanistic ceremonies, during which they make marks on the cave’s stone walls. As Petzinger describes, “[t]hey believe that the physical rock surface on which they paint and engrave their art is a veil, or membrane, that separates the real world from the spiritual. The negative and positive hands they create on the rock are a way of directly connecting with that membrane.”52 This practice allows the San to press their hands against the earth and feel their ancestors’ hands pressing back. As Mendieta presses her body into the ground again and again, she echoes this ritual of reconnection. She articulates her hunger for this reconnection in her artist statement: “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.”53

The physical experience of womanhood, as seen through Mendieta’s work, is one of nurture and violence. These two forces are bound together in the abject nature of birth, in which the internal gore associated with death gives external form to new life. As Mendieta reveals through her bodily interactions with the earth, the blood of death and the blood of life are the same blood. It flows through us as we grow, stagnates as we die, and then disperses to purify itself in the earth before reuniting, renewed, to support life once again. The body is the meeting place for violence and nurturing, a fact that was illustrated poignantly for me by two deer.

52 Von Petzinger, The First Signs, 248.
53 Viso, Ana Mendieta, 181.
One evening I sat stuck in unending traffic, staring at the brake lights in front of me as my thoughts grew darker. “I think we are less human than we were,” I began repeating in my mind, “I think we are becoming less human.” Out of the corner of my eye I saw movement. A doe stood on a small green ridge, nursing her fawn in the pale evening light. She gazed calmly at the cavalcade of mechanical beasts performing their ceaseless migration before her. She exuded the calm of wisdom, undaunted by her circumstances and committed to her responsibilities. I can only pray for grace like hers. I need her clear eyes to look at the danger and madness before me and remain calm. I need to pick my way through the sea of callousness and detachment. If I cannot do this for myself, then I must find the way for those I will soon shepherd.

Violence is easy to find on the highway; the number of deer, dogs, cats, armadillos, and unknown animal carcasses I drive by daily is unnerving. I watch the bodies decay, charting their decomposition by my commutes. I can have compassion glancing through my windshield, but I am kept at a comfortable enough distance to quickly forget these bodies. But encountering bodies on foot is a different experience. While walking the main roads around exit 19, I stumbled across a clearing where a bag of organs had been abandoned.¹⁴ I stared, trying to process the unnatural folds in the empty skin, the soft, weird boating of unknown organs, and the rawness of the remaining flesh. One hoof, trailing on the red dirt, told me it was a deer, now a non-deer, its remains badly bound up in a black trash bag. The deer seemed curled up in a human fetal position within an amniotic sac of black plastic. As I absorbed the scene, I became accustomed to the viscera but increasingly unsettled by the thin skin of plastic underneath the body that separated it from the ground. The deer could

¹⁴ See Appendix A, figure 25.
never return to the earth this way. It would be held in limbo, hovering above the surface of the earth as it rotted. The hunter who had taken this life had given it the indignity of a plastic grave. My stomach knotted at this carelessness, a microcosm of all the injustices suffered by lifeforms whose honorable lifecycles are trodden upon by uncaring human feet. Humans once understood the sacredness of the earth and the dignity of returning to it in death, and we maintained these holy cycles for those whose lives we took.

I created Deer Pond in remembrance of these two deer (fig. 10). Deer Pond depicts two interconnected circulatory systems held in artificial separation as they reach towards the water pooled between them. PVC pipes sprout out of the ground, symbolizing the circulatory system of modern infrastructure and its vast interconnected network of tubes that pumping around waste and water. The pipes grow through the ceramic pond above them in a series of gridded vertical tunnels. In work for The Highway Between, I used holes cut through ceramic slabs in grid formation to symbolize our desire to control and order the earthly world. The rigid grid and the empty tunnel-like holes reference human operations like mining, core sampling, and fracking. Hanging over the pond is the flocked tumbleweed discussed previously in Chapter 2. I have denied my dead tree its burial rites of red iron earth by coating its dry branches in red nylon flocking. The flocking’s texture and color turn this form into an eviscerated bundle of veins, its soft red branches as interconnected as the bloodlines that bind humans and animals and water. Caught in between these two circulatory systems is a ceramic pond filled with water collected from the side of the highway. As the water settles, a thin film of oil develops on the water’s surface and algae collects along ridges. The work’s title speaks to the inextricability of all life and all environments, and the necessity of life to imbibe the environment it produces.
Figure 10. Bronwyn Simons, *Deer Pond*, 2024, glazed stoneware, drain and sewer grade PVC pipe, flocked tumbleweed found in parking lot, water from below I-20 mile marker 28.9, red sand from exit 19, 92 x 44.5 x 24 in. Collection of the artist.
Knowledge of environmental destruction does little to strengthen our connection with the earth. We are overloaded with information about the damage we are causing, and this can lead us to view humanity as a parasite: a species antagonistic and painful to its host. But humanity evolved in communion with the earth. We became fully human through lessons of red ochre that taught us of our geobiological bond and shared matter. The objective lens of science is necessary and can do much to explain our current situation, the effects of our actions, and even our own origins as humans. But it cannot make us care; it can only present facts. Scientific distance can warp our understanding of our humanity, reducing our history to one of logical communication, practical tool use and advantageous material exploitation. But tool-use did not make us human any more than technology will increase our humanity now. It was everything we began to perceive beyond material practicality, everything pulsing beneath the skin of the world that we began to honor and value, that expanded our minds. We must return to the instinctive and intuitive without losing the factual knowledge we have gained. Robin Kimmerer articulates this balance through her metaphor of goldenrod and asters. Kimmerer holds that the true fullness of the world cannot be known until we use both science and traditional knowledge. As she says, “We see the world more fully when we use both.”55 The intellect is not our only way of knowing. To truly know the earth, we must touch it.

5 BUILDING AND BINDING

The sculptures in *The Highway Between* were created chiefly through two complementary processes: building and binding. Building is a primal human activity, and one of our most beautiful and dangerous abilities. We are equally capable of building solutions as we are of building problems, which is both empowering and frightening. Building propels us forward, expressing the simple desire to use the materials around us to create something new. Clay is my primary building material. Through the intervention of my hand, this primeval mass of potential takes form, becoming transformative and bodily. Clay has long been used as a receptacle for human meaning-making, as Nicole Boivin articulates: “While many traditions cross-culturally hold that clay is the material from which the first humans were made, it is the divine rather than human qualities of earth that seem more often to be emphasized. Stones may contain the spirits of ancestors or heroic individuals, but earth is the embodiment of a divine, all-encompassing creative force.” Working with clay allows you to build with the body of the creative force itself.

Building in clay also means you are creating something permanent. Ceramic is one of the original enduring human materials, so durable that ceramic artifacts are often the only clues remaining from huge swaths of our deep history. When early humans discovered the ability to transform earth into stone through the power of fire, they were able to harness the power of permanency. Working with clay answers the same desire for permanency in me today as must have for my ancient ancestors. But now that we have more dangerous tools, now that the scale of our building is unfathomably enormous, and

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now that our permanent materials are more numerous and toxic than ever before, we must build with care. More than ever, building cannot be idle.

In contrast to building, binding is communal and collective, creating ‘out of many, one.’ Binding elements together can be a healing process or a harmful one. Binding knits together what has been severed and secures the incomplete to its missing piece. Once bound, individual elements never lose their identity but form a collaborative whole, best seen in the binary warp and weft threads of ancient crafts like weaving, basketry, and net-making. The individual threads or twigs are still identifiable, but their existence is subsumed by the identity of the whole. When I began working with non-ceramic materials, I instantly began binding them together in bundles. I became mesmerized by the wrapping motion itself, and its ability to create unity and harmony. I quickly began dipping my bound compositions in clay slip and exposing them to the same kiln fire as my ceramic sculptures. This process is called a ceramic burnout. Absorbent matter becomes saturated with ceramic slip, and when this combination is exposed to the kiln’s extreme heat, the absorbent matter burns away, leaving behind a perfect porcelain replica of its form. The burnout process allows me to build form with binding, combining these two practices.

In my first burnout piece, *Burning Bridges*, I bound dozens of hand-made porcelain needles together with waxed string and wrapped the entire mass over and over with thread dipped in porcelain slip (fig. 11). While the waxed string held the needles together tightly at first, it quickly burnt away in the kiln’s 2200°F heat. I waited to see if the remaining strands of porcelain could hold the mass of needles together throughout this ordeal.
In a hopeful omen, though many individual threads failed, and porcelain points warped in the heat, the bonds between the needles did not completely fail as the temperature rose around them. The threads were impossibly thin, surviving the firing as a ghost of a line that was much more brittle and delicate than the flexible cotton it had replaced. This process invited the kiln fire itself to become my collaborator, reintroducing risk into my practice. As I expanded the binding gesture larger and larger, making cocoons of layered threads and yarns, the gesture itself began creating its own forms. The slip coating different layers of threads began combining, blurring the individual lines and merging them into a meshwork of clay instead of a network of lines.
By freezing the impressions of binding threads within the vitrified matrix of ceramic, I echoe an ancient relationship of permanent and impermanent material. Clay is known for preserving organic material for millennia, including ancient textiles. Along with animal hairs and fingerprints, ceramic objects at Dolní Věstonice captured textile impressions “so fine that the warp and weft diameters and counts per centimeter compare favorably with fabrics produced by Neolithic or even state level societies...and, in fact, are within the range of machine-woven cloth.”57 The clay-heavy soil of the Dzudzuana Cave in the former Soviet republic of Georgia similarly preserved flax fibers for 36,000 years before they were discovered. These threads were not just delicately crafted but also dyed with vibrant shades of turquoise and pink. 58

The discovery of 36,000 year old threads defies how we have been taught to view our ancient past. We are told that the time of hunting and gathering was transient, difficult, and austere. We tend to see our human roots as practical and brutal rather than expressive and artistic. Anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher explains this tendency through her theory of the carrier bag.59 She posits that humanity’s first cultural object was a recipient or vessel, rather than a weapon. Because stone tools can withstand the weathering of time, they have made a greater impression on our modern understanding of the past by simply outlasting other objects. Weaponry became associated with early humanity’s culture and greatest achievements purely because it was all the evidence that remained of these peoples. Nets,

slings, and other tools typically improvisational or prone to decay simply have not survived long enough to tell the tale of their fundamental importance to the human story. Our obsession with permanence makes us blind to the power of the impermanent.

Understanding what early humans spent time creating is vital because there is a feedback loop between what we build as a society and what we value. The contemporary values of growth, scientific discovery, technological development, and efficiency are expressed by the infrastructure and systems we continue to perpetuate, and our infrastructure and systems strengthen these values. What we build binds us to itself. The highway is our greatest tool for facilitating and increasing the building capacity of humanity, and by extension its values. Modern consumption, transport, travel, and construction, all of which depend on the highway, are such massive systems that they are invisible. We have become unaware of the influence of our infrastructure as it grows. I am fighting this invisibility so that we can see what we have allowed to bind us.

6 RITUALS OF EARTH AND SKY

I was raised believing that I, and everything around me, simultaneously existed on two planes. You had a physical body and a spiritual body, and they moved on these two planes in unison. In death, your attention would simply pivot from your physical surroundings to the corresponding spiritual ones, usually described as ‘opening your spiritual eyes’. One unintended consequence was that, as a dramatic child, if I felt a sudden breeze or sunbeam, or if something seemed subtly different or unusually beautiful or strange, I would immediately question whether I had died. Slipping suddenly from the physical world into the spiritual one seemed as easy as blinking. But despite my vague
paranoia, this belief also led me to look at the world with a sense of wonder and gravity. The veil between the exterior physical world and the greater, brighter internal world was so thin I could see it shimmer and ripple. Every person, animal, plant, and object I saw existed solely as a physical receptacle for spiritual reality and was therefore sacred in its very existence. Daily life was richly symbolic, and anything I touched had the warmth of connected life pulsing beneath its skin.

There is a tendency in Christianity at large to focus solely on the internal. While this practice is intended to elevate your thoughts and help you focus on spiritual practices, it can be twisted into a condemnation of the physical and bodily for the sake of the soul. This twisting can even become a justification for cruelty and callousness. Women’s traditional connection to the physical, demonstrated through the abject quality of birth, appears to have made them particular targets for suppression and condemnation. In my interpretation of the New Church teachings I was given, Christian focus on the internal can be peacefully reintegrated with the demonized, pagan focus on the external. Instead of the physical world acting as a barrier to spiritual focus, it could become a window to the inner workings of spiritual reality. When we celebrate this link, we can begin to see the holy within mundane.

I believe Nancy Holt captured something similar with her famous work *Sun Tunnels* (fig. 12). Physically, this work is just four massive concrete cylinders. As objects, they speak the formal and material languages of modern infrastructure and construction. Just as buildings become stages for life, Holt arranged these cylinders as a passive theater set through and upon which the desert, sky, sun, and moon can dance.

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60 See Chapter 4.
The cylinders are carefully positioned to capture the sun as it rises and sets during the summer and winter solstice. A pattern of apertures in the roof of each cylinder projects a different constellation of sunlight or moonlight into the cylinder’s dark interior. In this way, the tunnels become macroscopes with which to view the silent cycles of planet-sized bodies. Through careful observation of the site and precise installation, Holt manages to transform these bare cylinders into portals imbued with all the power and magnificence of the entire celestial universe. Like Mendieta, Holt uses the physical matter of stone and

earth as a vehicle of connection between lightness and darkness, and birth and death.

Walking through one of the tunnels is transformative, something understood on a bodily level, as Holt explains: “Let’s say the public knows nothing about art. They walk through a tunnel, they are going to be affected by it...I’m very aware that certain aspects of my work are just very gut experiences, that you don’t have to have words to describe them. That people are just going to have an experience. It may be a wordless experience, but they’ll have it.” Sun Tunnels invites viewers to become participants, forgoing instruction in favor of connecting them with a core human experience felt throughout time. Like Haft-Candell’s “monuments for the overlooked,” Sun Tunnels is a testament to our place within the universe, a position paradoxically significant and insignificant.

Through Sun Tunnels, Holt reintegrates the genius of modern craft with the ancient knowledge of the skies. This work is a reorientation, in which our understanding of our existence can be reassessed. In an age when humans have more raw power to alter the world than ever before, this reorientation is critical. In The Highway Between, I am attempting a similar reorientation but on a much smaller scale. Like Holt, I am using the materials of modernity as tools of reintegration. Unlike Holt, I have chosen to make sculptures that bring the place to the people, rather than requiring that the people be brought to the place. I cannot download my experiences of standing in the center median of an eight-lane highway into someone else’s mind, nor can I safely bring them to that site. But by recontextualize the highway’s materials, systems, and effects in the gallery space, I hope

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63 Haft-Candell, “Monuments for the Overlooked.”
to provide my viewers with a new lens through which to view the space, their daily commutes, and Amazon deliveries.

The highway is the contemporary world-builder. It is the portal through which all raw materials, all refined materials, all component parts, all products, and all personnel must travel. As such, the highway is a ritualistic space. There is no one definition of ritual, the only scholarly consensus being that it is a profoundly human activity. By claiming that the American highway is a ritualistic space, I am asserting it is a space designed to contain specific, repeated actions, performed by the population at large to “[obtain] outcomes over which the participants have little controlling power” and to “legitimize certain power relations.” In simplest terms, highway rituals are repeated actions that express and affirm belief, and as such they build our reality. I have identified three categories of highway ritual, which I will address in turn: rituals of transformation, rituals of hierarchy, and rituals of disconnection.

Rituals of transformation are performed through travel. Whether it is the formative teenage road trip, the begrudging family vacation, the college move-out, or the mundane but staggeringly constant ritual of commuter traffic, we reify the highway’s power to transform us by participating in these pilgrimages en masse. As we allow the highway to transport us externally, we begin to believe it can transport or change us internally as well. We expect the road trip or move to change us fundamentally; we expect to ‘find ourselves’ on the other side of the journey. Even commuter travel is transformative, as it helps us change from our informal, family selves into our professional selves and back again every

day. As we naturally associate states of mind with places, the ever-present highway holds
the constant promise of escape to new, better ways of being ourselves.

The highway’s rituals of hierarchy are so ingrained in our social fabric that they are
almost invisible. But if we believe “that the structure of daily life serves as a small-scale
reflection of the broader organizational tenets of society”, then the danger and violence of
the highway hierarchy reflects the latent danger and violence within the larger cultural
hierarchy.65 One of the most blatant and gruesome relationships that the highway system
enforces is that of humans over animals, reinforced through the ritualistic sacrifices of
roadkill. At some point during the twentieth century, roadkill became “the leading direct
human cause of vertebrate mortality on land,” with twelve percent of land-dwelling
mammals meeting their end on the road in 2017.66 Following the ritual establishment of
humans over animals, human drivers are then established over those on foot. While police,
EMTs, firefighters, and construction crews may work on the roadside, these occupations
are associated with supporting drivers. Therefore, these professions have the authority to
stop and direct traffic and they are protected with flashing lights, large vehicles, and orange
cones. But workers like mowers and trash pickers, who maintain the land around the road
and not the road or drivers themselves, get hi-viz vests and make do as the traffic roars
past them. Finally, the highway system is beginning to enforce the hierarchy of machines
over drivers. Highways are already made to the specifications of the machine, not the
driver, as any long-haul trucker fighting highway blindness will tell you. But with the
increasing enthusiasm for mass implementation of self-driving cars, the highway grows

66 Ben Goldfarb, Crossings: How Road Ecology is Shaping the Future of Our Planet (New York: W. W. Norton &
Company, 2023), 4.
closer to becoming a purely mechanical space. All the hierarchical relationships that the highway enforces and maintains reveal the highway’s power to orient us culturally, control our behavior, and enforce our values for its own benefit.

Most deeply, the highway embodies the ritual of disconnection. Sealed in climate-controlled shells, we are untethered from the earth, traveling without walking, rushing past too quickly to smell it, too loudly to hear it, and too elevated to feel it through the thick asphalt. Disconnection may seem innocuous but it is the preparator of violence, as Stephen Wright captures in Going Native: “Out of the house and onto the road, a solitary in his cage, he joined the other solitaries locked and buckled into their cages, hundreds, thousands of them, all streaming determinedly along in a credible masquerade of purpose and conviction.”67 The protagonist’s disconnection and latent violence, poetically captured by Wright’s description of the highway, escalate throughout the novel as he commits increasingly antisocial acts culminating in his own suicide. The madness of modernity is its callous detachment, which renders all atrocities conceivable. Whether it is the blindness of road rage, the emptiness of mindless speed, or the silence of isolation, the highway accustoms us to being disconnected from our humanity. The speed and alienation of the highway turn the rest of the world into television. We become observers instead of participants, and we become more real and more important than the biological and geological life systems that once taught us.

I created the works in The Highway Between by reworking the highway’s rituals of transformation, hierarchy, and disconnection. It is my hope that by challenging these societal rituals, I can disrupt their influence over myself and hopefully over others. I have

used wild clay and the ceramic process to counter the highway’s ritual of transformation. Rather than enacting transformation by seeking out transformative spaces, I am committed to finding transformative energy in highway site, which I have located in the wild clay that lines Interstate 20. The transformation of clay into ceramic is an ancient ritual. Hundreds of small human and human-animal statuettes litter the floor of the ceramic workshop at Dolní Věstonice, the oldest ceramic workshop ever discovered. The oldest-known ceramic object, a figure known as the Black Venus of Dolní Věstonice, rested among these figures for over 25,000 years. These figures predate the earliest evidence of functional pottery by at least 5,000 years, and figures like them are found world-wide throughout the archeological record. This difference proves that the complex ceramic process was first developed to channel an expressive, artistic, or spiritual need rather than a functional one. It is easy to imagine the possible symbolic implications of transforming a soft, malleable clay body through a trial by fire into a permanent, petrified ceramic form. I create work using the wild clay of the highway and expose it to the same trial by fire, invoking the transformative power of this craft. Simultaneously, I am transforming myself, deepening my knowledge by creating collaborative work with the land.

I use the practice of exiting my car to counter the highway’s ritual of hierarchy, placing myself on the same societal rung as plants and animals and dirt to learn their experiences of this site. By placing my body in this space, I challenge where I am supposed to exist as a driver-person. I expose myself to the dangers of this place, emerging from my

69 Von Petzinger, The First Signs, 106.
car’s beetle shell to stand nakedly, observing the system of which I am a part. Further, I remove material hierarchy from my work by valuing all materials equally. Roadside trash and polluted clay are prized finds that take days of careful study and planning to obtain. A transmission tower is as compelling as an Ice Age cave symbol, and both have real relevance for my life in this moment. Mystery and meaning are everywhere and in everything; nothing is neutral, and nothing is mute. Through observation and care, the highway becomes a teacher. All the physical matter of the earth vibrates with the song of the internal sky.

Most importantly, I counter the ritual of disconnection through my artwork. My practice has bound me to the highway’s land. My work is a ritual of connection, an active, physical means of fighting the comfortable distance promised by our material systems. Our disconnection from the natural world only grows as man-made systems become more complex, immersive, and alluring, which is especially frightening in our age of environmental crisis. To save something, you must love it. But how can you foster love and respect for the earth without interaction, closeness, and connection? Through the energy I have spent on the highway, gathering materials, listening, looking, feeling, and building sculptural responses, I have connected myself to a place for which I used to feel only distain and sadness. My work for *The Highway Between* has taught me how to find the ancient pulse of the earth in a place where I assumed it no longer existed.
7 THE HIGHWAY BETWEEN

The Highway Between features seven large-scale sculptures created from wild clay, commercial clay, and materials gathered from highway. Installed within a spacious, darkened gallery, each sculpture is illuminated by a soft spotlight. The theatrical lighting helps frame each piece as its own scene. This illustrates the sensation of catching a glance of something out of the corner of your eye while driving. The highway speed turns the outside world into a series of vignettes that flying by the windows, each glance capturing its own isolated snapshot. While lighting and placement provide separation between the works, they are still united by strong formal ties. I used the line as a core formal element, influenced by Tim Ingold’s thoughts on wayfaring and transport. I represented Ingold’s line both through its presence, as a pole or thread, and through its absence, as a hole or tunnel. I also wanted to exhibit control through the exhibition’s ceramic forms, requiring them to be some combination of large, straight, and flat. These are the most difficult qualities for clay to achieve, as it naturally favors organic forms and struggles to stand straight or lay flat without cracking or warping. I resisted shapes that were more natural to the medium to demonstrate the human desire for control over the earth, shown through my control over the clay. These attempts were especially poignant when working with wild clay, as it fought my control and expectations with unexpected ferocity. The forms that resulted from this wrestling match between my will and the clay’s will are representative of the collision between the will of modernity and the will of the earth that I see played out on the highway.

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70 See Chapter 2.
Along with being theatrically lit, the sculptures are theatrically large. I wanted to capture the enormity and spectacle of the highway, qualities that became increasingly significant to me during my ongoing commutes. The highway site is designed to be unobtrusive. The average driver hardly notices the ever-changing cavalcade of billboards, mattresses, transmission towers, armchairs, traffic-monitoring drones, animal carcasses, tires, and wisteria vines whizzing by their windows. But the more observational focus I brought to this space, the stranger, more menacing, and more wonderful it became to me. The large scale of the work in *The Highway Between* demands the viewer’s focus, captures the literal scale of the site, and reveals the power that the highway has over us physically and psychologically.

The exhibition opens with *Three Mute Prophets*, a towering sculpture surrounded by a half-circle of fine red sand sifted directly onto the ground (fig. 13). This work dominates the front half of the gallery, centered and isolated in front of the partition wall that divides the gallery in two. It is designed to awe and overwhelm the viewer through its height, the number of its components, and its alluring orange glow. *Three Mute Prophets* depicts America’s increasing devotion to the modern material hierarchy. Three blank ceramic billboards push up through three levels of materiality: wild clay, symbolizing the raw earth; fired wild ceramic, symbolizing the handmade; and plastic debris, symbolizing the machine-made. The last two layers seem to hover in space, an illusion that increases the work’s fantastical air. The billboards themselves seem almost suspended, pushing through the final plastic layer like mountain peaks pushing through a dense mass of clouds.
Figure 13. Bronwyn Simons, *Three Mute Prophets*, 2024, stoneware with copper carbonate wash, LED neon tubing, weed wacker string from mile markers 26.1, 44, 45.2, 45.9, and 47.7, foil-covered wire from mile marker 25.4, fiberglass insulation foil from mile marker 38.5, wild clay from beneath mile marker 19.4, red sand from exit 19, porcelain burnout, 115 x 67 x 33 in. Collection of the artist.
The cracked billboards mutely preach of progress away from the physical and toward the immaterial: away from the heart and toward the mind. While plastic is still a physical material, it represents our ability to abstract material away from its natural source to the extent that it becomes alien to its origins. *Three Mute Prophets* highlights the alien quality of plastic by juxtaposing it against clay and ceramic. The more abstracted materials become, the more they leave the purview of the hand and enter the purview of the machine. We are currently surrounded by materials that we cannot personally create or explain; this is both the result and the cause of our escalating disconnection with the earth.

A fragile porcelain burnout lies on the wild red sand at the billboard’s feet. The burnout is a delicate relic of human touch, a sacrificial bundle of all the soft and ephemeral things that are fossilized by the power of modern progress. *Three Mute Prophets* is backed by a partition wall in the middle of the gallery, preventing a complete 360 degree view of the work. However, as the viewer walks around the piece, the neon orange LED tubes lining the hollow backs of the billboards are revealed (fig. 14). While pleasantly diffused from the front, the bring orange lights become glaring when seen from the side. Like the light of a bug zapper, these LED tubes simultaneously warn and invite the viewer, alluding to the dangers of the material hierarchy presented in the piece.

As we move around the gallery to the right, we shift to a quieter piece. *All the stars in the sky* (*petrified and encased*) is a muted diptych of off-white porcelain, fabric, and glittering silver plastic. The two halves are hung on the gallery wall under separate spotlights (fig. 15 and fig. 16). In stark contrast to the overpowering presence of *Three Mute Prophets*, this work generates the same mute watchfulness as a cold full moon.
Figure 14. Bronwyn Simons, *Three Mute Prophets*, detail.
Figure 15. Bronwyn Simons, *All the stars in the sky (petrified and encased)*, left side of the diptych, 2024, inner tube from mile marker 39.3, mattress cover from mile marker 28.9, porcelain burnout of mattress cover from mile marker 38.1, reflective bubble wrap from mile marker 28.9, 38 x 31 x 3 in. Collection of the artist.
Figure 16. Bronwyn Simons, *All the stars in the sky (petrified and encased)*, right side of the diptych, 2024, inner tube from mile marker 39.3, mattress cover from mile marker 28.9, porcelain burnout of mattress cover from mile marker 38.1, reflective bubble wrap from mile marker 28.9, 73 x 69 x 14 in. Collection of the artist.
Both halves of the diptych are composed of circles and semicircles, referencing celestial bodies. On the left side hangs a porcelain burnout that was formerly a swath of fabric skinned from a mattress found by the highway. The porcelain rests upon a circle of silver foiled bubble wrap that glints in the gallery’s light. A silver inflatable inner tube hangs on the right side of the diptych, draped with gauzy fabric from another highway mattress. Left unaltered, the fabric is mildewy and delicate from its time decomposing outdoors. I created this piece to interrupt the natural rhythms of time and decay. While the right half may deflate and rot away with time, the flattened, petrified left side will remain unchanged. By petrifying textiles in porcelain, I can make the impermanent permanent, fossilizing each fiber. This process removes organic material from the timeline of natural decay, denying it the ability to rot. This speaks to our fear of decay and our subsequent desire for permanence and preservation, as discussed in Chapter 5.

The work’s title, *All the stars in the sky (petrified and encased)*, is based on the strange constellations I began noticing in the black pre-dawn sky above my winter commute. The constellations were oddly bright, consisting of small groups of three or four lights hovering just above the horizon. I began to realize that these constellations were moving, one light shifting suddenly up or down, the others moving left and right. These were not constellations, but the lights of hovering traffic-monitoring drones. We are already losing our view of the stars, and now they are being replaced with cold, monitoring eyes. In our relentless push to develop our technology and abilities, we risk losing sight of what once guided us. *All the stars in the sky (petrified and encased)* demonstrates the

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71 See Appendix 28.
72 See Appendix 29.
limitlessness of our desire to control forces and systems larger than ourselves, even to the extent of time and space itself. In this work I have petrified time and encased space, but only in illusion. The true power of these forces continues acting quietly and invisibly upon both the sculpture and the viewer.

Turning away from this diptych to the back half of the gallery, we see that the space is split between three sculptural scenes. In the back right corner stands Deer Pond, previously described in Chapter 4 (fig. 10). Its flocked tumbleweed hangs like a soft red planet, echoing the moon-like forms of All the stars in the sky (petrified and encased) but invigorated with spherical fullness and vibrant color. Deer Pond’s red flocking is itself echoed by the red brake light bars of Vulture Kings with Sun as they blaze out across the gallery from the dark side of the partition wall (fig. 17).

The glowing bars pin a dried wreath of solidago fronds to the wall. I composed this material interaction to illustrate a dying and rising sun, the fading flower sun superseded by the blinding wattage of a new electric sun. This references the passage of time discussed in All the stars in the sky (petrified and encased); it shows the end of one age and the dawning of another. These suns also echo the material hierarchy of Three Mute Prophets, which is positioned on the other side of the partition. The dark side of the wall acts as a backdrop for a spot-lit tower of metallic black poles rising up out of a hovering pink fiberglass cloud. Powerful and imposing, the blunted black spires are surmounted by three crowns modeled after 5G cellphone towers. The maze of connections between the spires are similarly adapted from the structural form language of cellphone towers.
Figure 17. Bronwyn Simons, *Vulture Kings with Sun*, 2024, glazed commercial ceramic, fiberglass from mile marker 38.5, solidago from exit 19, brake light bars, 84.5 x 28 x 24 in. Collection of the artist.
*Vulture Kings with Sun* is a series of mistaken first impressions. The soft pink fiberglass is dangerous to touch; the form appears to be made of metal but was built of malleable clay; the spires seem rigid and straight but upon closer inspection they have bent and warped. I created the sculpture’s form by combining the massive structure lines of 5G towers with the flexible way blades of grass and flowers bend in the wind. During construction, I purposefully invited ceramic warping to enliven the rigidity of the structure with gentle bends, which help it feel subtly more organic.

Looming near exit 19 is a massive 5G tower, which a large group of vultures has claimed as a roost. The vultures live like kings in this lofty tower, well-fed by a cluster of overflowing restaurant dumpsters beneath them. Vultures are also a victim of mistaken impressions, and as such they can provide us with a better understanding of ourselves. Vultures are carrion birds. They are associated with cowardice because they do not kill their own prey, callousness because they wait for their prey to die, and with evil because of their black feathers and morbid associations. Many see humans in a similar light. They see us as users who feast on the suffering of the world and filling ourselves with sacrificial offerings. But vultures are crucial to their environment, as they safely reintegrate dead matter with the land. Because they are enmeshed within natural rhythms and cycles, their feasting provides massive benefits for the lifeforms around them. Similarly, while humanity will never be able to live without using the animals, plants, and land around us, this is not a reason to demonize ourselves. We are simply out of balance. We must acknowledge that we take, and we must give back in equal measure.

A fine layer of red sand covers the floor in the leftmost corner of the gallery; it is the same sand displayed beneath *Three Mute Prophets, Deer Pond*, and mixed into all of the wild
ceramic works in the show.\textsuperscript{73} I used this red sand to literally ground the work in the red earth of Georgia’s highway sides, and in remembrance of the ancient human connection to red ochre discussed in Chapter 2. Tiptoeing above the sand is \textit{Spotted (Mattress, July 21st 2023 to February 18th 2024)}, a shrine to the broken meshwork of an interconnected way of life (fig. 18). At the center of the sculpture is a jagged nest of interconnected porcelain strands, which were originally created as one large burnout.\textsuperscript{74} The wrapped, interconnected lines represent a wayfaring meshwork, one now fossilized as a relic of the past. Cradled by foam, crowned with a plastic halo and girded with a broken ratchet strap, I have sainted the fragmentary remains in a humorous act of reverence.

Surrounding the burnout are colorful pieces of foam ripped from a mattress I found on the side of the highway. Hunting mattresses quickly became a significant part of my practice, as they offered so much raw material in one stop. While driving and scanning the land on either side of the road, mattresses would suddenly loom up out of tall grass like enormous white bison. Though comical, this simile accurately evokes the experience of sighting, stalking, capturing, and skinning a highway mattress. Hunting mattresses was a tongue-in-cheek way of mimicking Paleolithic hunting practices in the modern environment. The mattress I used to build \textit{Spotted} weathered outside for nine months, hidden from the road by an embankment.\textsuperscript{75} When I was able to finally reach it, I skinned off its outer covering by slicing a line down its belly and then cutting diagonally to each corner, in an approximation of how a hunter would skin an animal. These actions explore how completely I am disconnected from the traditional hunting act.

\textsuperscript{73} See Appendix A, figure 26.
\textsuperscript{74} See Chapter 5.
\textsuperscript{75} See Appendix A, figure 28.
Figure 18. Bronwyn Simons, *Spotted (Mattress, July 21st 2023 to February 18th 2024)*. 2024. Aged mattress foam from I-20 mile marker 28.9, porcelain burnout, ratchet strap from mile marker 28.9, weed wacker string from mile marker 45.2, plastic-covered wire from mile marker 38.5, wooden stakes from mile marker 20.2, reeds from mile marker 28.9, manufactured clay, red sand from exit 19, 60 x 29 x 16 in. Collection of the artist.
I used the weathered mattress’s foam in *Spotted*, and the thin cotton lining of its cover in *All the stars in the sky (petrified and encased)*. I surrounded the sculpture with a landscape of reeds from the mattress site, theatrically reproducing the moment I spotted the mattress through the underbrush along the highway. This piece balances gingerly on a platform held up above the earth by three pointed stakes. The distance between the foam and sand speaks to the mattress’s inability to reintegrate with the earthly environment. Because it cannot truly decompose, I have depicted it as tiptoeing uncomfortably on land that it does not understand or recognize.

The exhibition’s final two works are hung in orderly rows on the leftmost gallery wall. Both *Attempts to destroy the earth with fire* and *Attempts to preserve the earth with bubble wrap* consist of forty symbols, and both sets portray an opposing impulse towards the earth (fig. 19 and fig. 20). The impulses start in the center of the wall and develop in opposite directions from each other, opening like two pages of a book. I made sets of forty because this number is used throughout many systems of belief to signify time periods of turbulence, difficulty, and lesson-learning. I enjoy giving material form to symbolic elements of religious significance to see if they can still communicate meaning without their traditional context.

I developed the symbols by reducing many transmission tower forms into simple, line-based silhouettes and rendering them by hand in clay dug from the highway side. To create each symbol, I would observe a particular tower, eliminating any lines that were not vital to communicating its essential form and highlighting elements that seemed strange, unusual, or beautiful.
Figure 19. Bronwyn Simons, *Attempting to destroy the earth with fire*, 2024, wild clay from beneath mile marker 19.4 (unprocessed and unformulated, mixed with red sand from exit 19), fired successively hotter from cone 04 (1945 F) to cone 13 (2428 F), 82 x 122 x 1.75 in. Collection of the artist.

While the original transmission towers were not designed to communicate hidden meaning, everything we choose to build, especially at monumental scale, is bound to our societal psyche.76 We cannot create without being impacted by our creation. By translating the towers into hand-crafted symbols, I suggest that they subconsciously communicate just as much meaning and power as graphic communication symbols.

76 See Chapter 3.
In *Attempting to destroy the earth with fire*, I acted on a desire that I see latent within the highway site: the desire to destroy the earth (fig. 20). I wanted to push the wild clay to its breaking point; I attempted to overfire it until the clay failed in some way, anticipating cracking, melting, or bloating. Because the clay was wild and unformulated, I expected it to fail. As I fired the clay hotter and hotter, I was increasingly amazed by its natural resiliency. Not only was I unable to make the clay fail, but as the heat increased it became even more beautiful. When I had reached 2428°F, the hottest temperature I could with the department’s kilns, the iron within the clay body rose to the surface and became a sheen of metallic armor: a defiant challenge to its trials by fire. We often come to the earth with preconceptions and plans to get it to do what we want. We forget that we are in conversation with its materials, and they don’t have to listen. By hanging each successive firing in columns, I help the viewer trace the clay’s responses to the increasing heat and its refusal to break. For me, this is a hopeful message of the earth’s resiliency to all the threats we level against it.

In *Attempting to preserve the earth with bubble wrap*, I acted on a desire I see latent within society: the desire to save the earth (fig. 20). I used the same symbols as I did in *Attempting to destroy the earth*, but I placed in a different arrangement. This time, my desire to protect led me to wrapping the symbols deeper and deeper in layers of porcelain-soaked yarn and bubble wrap. I then burned out the original materials, which left behind cocoons of delicate porcelain. Using bubble wrap to preserve something that will be fired to 2232°F is a fruitless and humorous gesture. It speaks to our inability to understand the earth’s needs.
In our desire to protect the earth, we sometimes believe that we need to withdraw from it completely. We watch nature documentaries, walk on sidewalks and caution children not to pick wildflowers for fear of disrupting the delicate ecosystem. But this withdrawal, born from the fear of further damaging the environment, allows us to grow more and more distant from it. Admittedly, we may also be more comfortable with this distance, as it keeps things simple. Distance allows us to continue seeing the earth as a passive, delicate victim, rather than a wild, violent, and complex meshwork. Our desire to
keep nature nice and safe is symbolized by the deepening, suffocating layers of entombing porcelain that finally obscure the form completely. In my desire to protect the earth, I have actually rendered it mummified and silent.

Both Attempting to destroy the earth and Attempting to preserve the earth play with time in several ways. The developing actions of vitrification and encasement can be read from column to column, each set displayed like snapshots in a time-lapse. This display allows the viewer to trace each gesture backwards and forwards through time. Secondly, I used sets of forty symbols to echo historical, cultural, and religious connections to time periods of struggle; this highlights that our current period of struggle with the land is not a permanent state. Finally, I have looped materiality and form together through time, spanning millennia with my fingers to connect the ancient craft of wild ceramics with the modern object of the highway side transmission tower.

8 CONCLUSION

The Highway Between was created to counter the highway's powerful rituals of transformation, hierarchy, and disconnection. The wall works, All the stars in the sky (petrified and encased), Attempting to destroy the earth with fire, and Attempting to preserve the earth with bubble wrap, address rituals of transformation. Quiet and symbolic, these two sets of diptychs bookend the exhibition, facing each other across the gallery from the lefthand and righthand walls. Through their symbology, materiality, and the processes of their creation, they reveal the limits of human control in the face of time. The two towering ceramic pieces, Three Mute Prophets and Vulture Kings with Sun, address rituals of hierarchy. They stand on either side of the mid-gallery partition like flip sides of the same
coin, both glowing with warning orange and red lights. Through the building labor required
to create them, their monumentality, and the upward reach of their limbs, these two
sculptures reveal human ambition and the deceptive nature of modern materials and
structures. *Spotted (Mattress, July 21st 2023 to February 18th 2024)* and *Deer Pond* both
address rituals of disconnection. Both sculptures reference the enmeshment between
humans, animals, and the land we all inhabit; both portray this enmeshment as damaged or
disconnected. These two works attempt to communicate the value of what we have lost
through our disconnection with the land.

I created *The Highway Between* with hard hope. This hope is the iron in my blood
and in the red earth I hold. This hope is a doe nursing her fawn on the highway side,
undeterred by the violent noise around her, determined to nurture her young. The systems
we have set in motion roar so loudly that I fear we will not be able to hear the still silent
voices that could help us find ourselves again. I fear that by losing connection with the
earth we are losing our humanity, becoming vulture kings gorging ourselves at an
overflowing dumpster. But I will not despair. I find comfort in the tale of the people of the
Seventh Fire, recounted by Robin Kimmerer:

The people of the Seventh Fire do not yet walk forward; rather, they are told to turn
around and retrace the steps of the ones who brought us here. Their sacred purpose
is to walk back along the red road of our ancestors’ path and to gather up all the
fragments that lay scattered along the trail. Fragments of land, tatters of language,
bits of songs, stories, sacred teachings—all that was dropped along the way. Our
elders say that we live in the time of the seventh fire.77

This narrative describes the necessity of learning from our ancestors, walking on red dirt and gathering fragments. I have used the year spent creating this exhibition to begin walking this path. I have turned around, as Kimmerer describes it, by stopping my car. I have mimicked our oldest ancestors in order to learn from their interactions with the earth; I have hunted, gathered, watched, and listened to the land. I have walked the red road, developing my relationship with the earth by wrestling with its wild clay and sand. I have gathered fragments, binding highway scraps together with fragments of instinct, knowledge, and belief. These practices are the roadmap for changing how I live with the earth; these practices are my new highway, bridging earth and sky. I want the work I make to encourage others find their own path so that we can begin rebuilding our severed connection with the land and with our own humanity.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Photographic References for Thesis Work

Figure 21. Documentation of a broken land application sprinkler, photographed in the evening. The site is located near Interstate 20, exit 19. Photograph by Bronwyn Simons, 2023.
Figure 22. Documentation of a broken land application sprinkler, photographed in the day. The site is located near Interstate 20, exit 19. Photograph by Bronwyn Simons, 2023.
Figure 23. Documentation of broken land application sprinklers in the forest. The site is located near Interstate 20, exit 19. Photograph by Bronwyn Simons, 2023.
Figure 24. Documentation of transmission towers, land, and a mattress at Interstate 20 exit 28.9. Photograph by Bronwyn Simons, 2023.
Figure 25. Documentation of gathering wild clay from the creek running underneath Interstate 20 near exit 18.9. Photograph by Bronwyn Simons, 2023.
Figure 26. Documentation of deer organs left by a road near Interstate 20 exit 19. Photograph by Bronwyn Simons, 2023.
Figure 27. Documentation of the site where red sand was collected for *The Highway Between*. Photograph by Bronwyn Simons, 2023.
Figure 28. Documentation of a mattress hunted and skinned at mile marker 38.1. Photograph by Bronwyn Simons, 2023.
Figure 29. Documentation of a mattress hunted and skinned at mile marker 28.9. Photograph by Bronwyn Simons, 2023.