Arcadia Disrupted

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by

LESLIE DRENNAN

Under the Direction of Ruth Stanford, MFA, MS

ABSTRACT

The suburban built environment sanitizes our relationship with the non-human world by flattening ecological processes under the supersystem of capitalism. My upbringing in the densely populated suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia shaped my experience of nature as being separate from myself. Plant and animal life are repeatedly replaced by the asphalt of planned developments, where our interactions with nature can be meticulously managed. Suburbia is the modern result of oppressive systems that have sought to control every aspect of the material world, including people, for centuries. Each piece in my thesis exhibition, *Arcadia Disrupted,* examines aspects of how suburban psychology reinforces the idea that humans operate separately from the rest of the biosphere. By using the material excesses of capitalism, of which I am complicit, I emphasize the myopic attitude of suburban design and inhabitancy.

INDEX WORDS: Suburbs, Suburban sprawl, Climate change, Ecofeminism, Childhood, Capitalism, Motherhood

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DEDICATION

Everything that follows is dedicated to my daughter, Sadie Wren Banks, who was born on August 9, 2023 at the start of my second year in this program. I am a profoundly different person now than I was before her existence burst into my life like a shooting star. My endless thanks goes to her and my partner, Mitchel Banks, for being living, breathing, laughing proof that this world still has some good left to give.

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I must also recognize Susan Richmond's contribution to my completion of this program. I could not have finished without your defense in my first year after learning I was pregnant.

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figure out how to best help me achieve my goals. I have learned so much from you in such a short period of time – I truly don't think 'thank you' is enough.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Earth's orbital pattern around the Sun influences when ice ages have occurred throughout geologic time. To put human influence into perspective, the next ice age would have been set to occur around fifty thousand years from 2025 CE. However, due to the exponential increase in greenhouse gasses over the last two hundred and fifty years from fossil fuel combustion, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) predicts that this ice age will be skipped all together, with the earth still sizzling from our ecological impact.[1] The irreversibility of human damage seems obvious and perhaps even too big to address. Certainly, a trip through the dizzying maze of strip malls, gas stations, grocery stores, and subdivisions of suburban America calls no attention to this crisis. Landscapes continue to be leveled in the name of capitalist progress with little attention or effort on sustainable design. Throwing even the smallest wrench into the machine is viewed by industry at large as a threat, so these changes simply do not happen.[2]

There is no urgency among suburbanites to interfere with homeostasis. Lacking community and faking a pastoral sense of peace, the suburbs create the perfect conditions for shoving our heads in the sand and ignoring the catastrophes unfolding all around us by creating distractions of consumerism and status. My environmental interactions as a child in suburban Atlanta consisted mainly of moving from one air-conditioned box to another: home to car to school to car to home. There were no sidewalks in or around my 1980s era neighborhood, so there was very little opportunity to experience the outdoors except for in the yard, which was

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[1] "There Is No Impending 'Mini Ice Age'," NASA Science Editorial Team, published February 13, 2020, accessed September 7, 2024, https://science.nasa.gov/earth/climate-change/there-is-no-impending-mini-ice-age/#hds-sidebar-nav-1

[2] Eric Scigliano, "The Homeowner's Sunshine Problem," *The Atlantic,* August 31, 2022. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/08/fight-climate-change-get-white-roof/671287/.

manicured by my father and, later, a lawn maintenance company. Instead of fully experiencing our surroundings like our wayfaring ancestors, my family traveled at an ever more frantic pace to and from each suburban locale. These areas intentionally nurture a false sense of safety and convenience, but even during childhood I felt insulated from a wildness I had yet to experience.

Although the nuclear family is prescribed to suburbanites, my experience with my family of origin has informed the relationship I am building with my husband and daughter. My life and interests as an artist are a rebuke of the disillusionment that seemed to settle over my parents after years of working fifty hours a week, with some stretches of overnight work, both finishing night degrees, having two children five years apart, and struggling to make advances in their corporate careers. They were exhausted. They were frustrated. So, I kept to myself—exploring every nook and cranny of my neighborhood and yard in the time just before every child had a cell phone. Even subconsciously I think I knew that by being out in whatever tamed landscape I could find, I could disentangle myself from the machine gripping my parents. By the time I reached my teens, the gap started to widen.

As a teenager, I sought out the North Georgia mountains and, closer to home, Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield, as a reprieve from the nerve-frying suburban lifestyle. I observed white-tailed deer, rat snakes, red-tailed hawks and falcons and even a coyote on one occasion. These species have adapted to live within suburban constraints, sourcing their water, food and shelter from human detritus. When you fall in love with nature, but not much of it is at hand, any plant or animal will do. I learned to appreciate what hid in trees or in culverts, to look harder at the life that was around me to get to know the species I shared space with. My encounters in the yard and mountains fostered a love for non-human beings and altered my perspective of our built environment.

As a cross-disciplinary artist, my reaction to these formative experiences has been to rely on intuitive placemaking—to bring into realization a wider definition of the word home. The house I grew up in felt like a fortress from which I could only observe the non-human world, so now as an adult I constantly seek to bridge the intellectual and physical divide between nature and self. Much of my initial work about place and home centered on the psychic pain I felt watching acres of woodlands forcibly converted to suburban use. If not for my obedient pedigree, I may have acted on my instincts to destroy "for sale" signs of yet more acreage traveling north through Cobb County. Sprawl hollows out more than the ecosystems that are drained or cleared for its expansion. It creates a vacuum for existential dust, sucking up every ounce of sympoietic potential through American capitalism's inescapable power, consuming in its wake our awareness of our vanishing resources. If sympoiesis, as defined by M. Beth Dempster, is collectively-producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries, then, through much effort, there are opportunities for turning oppressive control into fertilizer for a different future.[3]

Creating *Arcadia Disrupted* has taken me on an emotional tour of materials as I dissect my own consumption habits, critique conventional ways of living, and question the place of humans in the larger biota of Earth. This body of work is about more than the mundane horrors of suburban life or my nostalgia for a misremembered idyllic past (although it is about that a little). I interrogate the Western philosophical view of nature as an inanimate backdrop on which human progress moves ever forward, using the suburbs as the most convincing evidence. Often times, this means using the material excesses of capitalism such as recycled paper, old toys, plastic garbage, surplus doors and windows, or other found and reclaimed objects. I am

[3] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2017), 33.

interested in flipping my own and others' perspective as a break from the monotony sold to us on every corner. I hope to land viewers in an unexpected place by subverting the oppressive suburban dynamic.

Ultimately, I am grappling with my apprehensions, reimaginings, and hopes surrounding the future of this planet and the multi-species existence on it – not just for my generation, but for my daughter's and those to come. Their world will undoubtedly look different than this one, but what that future world will be like is not yet decided. Through sculpture, installation, drawing and painting, *Arcadia Disrupted* explores my personal history with the suburban landscape to reckon with what suburban society is and could be.

2 GROWING SIDEWAYS

"What they discovered, to their horror, was an aesthetic and social wasteland filled with tract housing, station wagons, and organization men."[4]

After World War II, the United States sought to establish standards for the white middle class. Rural populations poured into urban centers to support the war efforts, but there was too little housing to support this influx of residents, so blue collar workers ended up living in cramped apartments.[5] By the time the war ended, the GI Bill and new Veterans Association lending policies made it possible for middle and lower classes of white veterans to obtain homeownership outside crowded city centers. Of course, none of these generous policies applied to non-white American citizens, who experienced the detrimental effects of redlining until the years following integration in 1954 and finally the Fair Housing Act of 1968.[6] Nonetheless, from 1949 to 1989, there was an average of over one million new housing starts every year in the United States. On the East Coast and in major midwestern cities like Chicago, all this development had to be suburban because cities were at their capacity within their respective limits. In New York, the Levitt brothers, responsible for the original suburb of Levittown on Long Island, streamlined the entire suburban process in the 1950s—developing, purchasing, and closing—marking the path for others to pave suburban America using their model.[7]

Levittown offered the promises of security, safety and the solidarity of one's own land for the young families that camped out to secure their first home. Historian and photographer

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[4] John Palen, *The Suburbs* (McGraw-Hill, 1995) 77.
[5] John Palen, *The Suburbs,* 64.
[6] Peter Bacon Hales, *Outside the Gates of Eden: The Dream of America from Hiroshima to Now* (University of Chicago Press, 2014) 115.
[7] Palen, *The Suburbs, 77.*

Peter Bacon Hales details in his book *Outside the Gates of Eden* the sentiments of Levittown residents: "The Great Depression had removed much of the freedom to define oneself that was a hallmark of the American dream." People were cramped inside cities, likely working in factories where they could have been making uniform buttons or handling uranium, perhaps a preferable option to being hunkered down in the US military. The houses were built with mass produced lumber and needed no expert craftsmanship, an industry first, so prices could remain low. By acquiring, clear cutting, and compacting over twelve hundred acres of land, Bill Levitt turned the quiet farming landscape of Long Island into barren, muddy rows of identical timber boxes.[8] From a sociological perspective, Levittonians marked the beginning of a new kind of consumer and their settlement became a landmark of post-WWII capitalist America.

The instincts of Bill Levitt have held over into present day construction practices. Instead of clearing what is only necessary to build homes or retail, crews still maintain violent clear cutting as the primary form of preparing land for grading and subsequent building. Mature trees and creek beds provided vital habitat to a range of wildlife, but it is difficult for me to remember the dense woods of Kennesaw, the suburb with which I am most familiar. The space between neighborhoods, churches, and youth soccer fields has transformed into empty strip malls that rotate businesses through their characterless facades. The aura of my home has changed so much that upon returning, I have little sentiment for what is left.

My working definition of home is a multitudinous idea with deep-reaching roots in my psychological, emotional, and physical formation. It is a physical place with recognizable characteristics, yes, but it is also smells, sounds (or the absence of), and sensations. It is my family and also the way those people have changed. It is the Zillow listing of my childhood

[8] Hales, *Gates of Eden,* 80.

home, which my parents sold in 2021, and also the dozen or so of other family members' homes that I return to in Cobb, Cherokee, and Bartow counties. My ancestry can be traced to this area of Georgia for more than three centuries. Home is the cognitive dissonance between confederate flags on lifted trucks with Wednesday night "God is Love" youth group sermons.

I first began to parse out my complicated view of home in *Pretend You're Not From a Place* (fig. 1), and I continue to pull from this work for inspiration. This piece is a patchwork visualization of the growing estrangement I feel towards Kennesaw and the rapidity with which home, as a place and idea, is transforming. I have witnessed the gouging out of natural places, justified by capitalist or entrepreneurial opportunity—places seen as empty, building-less land. *Pretend You're Not From a Place* tries to locate the holes in my memory. I will never see those thickets and hideaways again, but they were just as much home to me as my own bedroom. There is a required carefulness when working with the delicate handmade paper that is embroidered, drawn on, painted, dyed, and burned. The fragility of the work reflects the tenuous nature of my relationship with Kennesaw as the place where I was born and raised but now distance myself from. I find this work an important inclusion for *Arcadia Disrupted* as it signaled a change in my practice and my interior world. This is where the show began.

Working with paper in this way has become a major outlet for me. It is methodical but produces a fragile object that easily shows negligence. I find it to be a versatile canvas for expressing my ideas abstractly or representationally, two or three dimensionally, drawing from the likes of Kelly Taylor Mitchell and Lee Running.

Figure 1 Leslie Drennan, Pretend You're Not From a Place, 2024, Handmade paper, ink, thread, acrylic paint, fire, 33 x 27 in. Collection of the artist.

It turns out the suburbs were never of benevolent design, and the racist and exclusionary processes reinforced by the Levitt Brothers were not new, just rebranded. Human beings laying claim to land and creating property boundaries is a Babylonian invention.[9] Lewis Mumford, a sociologist and literary critic active throughout the twentieth century, lamented the consequences of the middle class suburbs: "While the suburbs served only a favored minority, it neither spoiled the countryside nor threatened the city, but now that the drift to the outer ring has become a mass movement, it tends to destroy both environments without producing anything but a dreary substitute."[10] I have to wonder if the appeal of perceived safety and status is worth the cultural and environmental vapidity for which the suburbs are known. Its built environment implicates suburban residents as willing participants in a no-longer-winning and never fair game, becoming isolated in their land-owning lifestyle.

My parents were raised in the 1960s and 70s during peak "American Dream" propaganda. Their idea of a loving household involved performative agreements about going to church, eating dinner in front of the television, and quieting any discontent about their behavior. Angela Strassheim's images capture the specific brand of white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant burn out I watched, and still watch, my parents experience. They did everything they were supposed to, but the system, including but not limited to Western capitalism, consumerism, and materialism, did not deliver the dream they had long hoped for. In *Untitled (McDonald's)*, Strassheim stages a replicated scene that she witnessed on a road trip she took from Minneapolis to New York in the year after she graduated from Yale. The family joins hands and prays together before eating a fast-food meal, but one child looks away. A stand-in for Strassheim, this

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[9] Ursual Lang, *Living with Yards: Negotiating Nature and the Habits of Home,* (Montreal, Queens University Press) 2022, 21.

[10] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), quoted in John Palen, *The Suburbs* (McGraw-Hill, 1995) 77.

daughter represents the disconnection she felt within her own conservative, Midwest family. This photograph is part of a larger body of work called the "Left Behind" series, citing the religious fiction book series of the same name. Within protestant Christian ideology, "left behind" refers to all souls not rendered into Heaven during the rapture, or the return of Jesus Christ. Strassheim describes a painfully familiar sentiment that inspired this body of images: "We belonged to a congregation that made me feel (unfortunately) like an outsider; being a shy child contributed to these feelings. When I started asking big life and faith questions, I did not feel heard."[11] It is as if those words came from my own mouth.

Strassheim staged the scene at a McDonald's restaurant to encapsulate the universality of both this type of American dining experience and the archetypical rebel child.[12] Not only does this image depict a young girl's wandering from her family's value code, it speaks to the hypocrisy embedded in white, suburban, middle-class America, something I witnessed first-hand. Some of my work, much like Strassheim, is an exploration into the do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do adages of my childhood. In my thesis work I address the extent to which one family (my family) may be totally consumed by the appeal of capitalistic ladder-climbing, brought on by suburban life, and how the product of that home (me) could reverse engineer her way into being an open-hearted person, devoid of the religious guideposts that set the standard for her behavior as a kid. In *Dreams of Domesticity* (fig. 3), I explore the emptiness of these suburban promises of unconditional love. The hypocrisy of my family of origin is a main piston pushing this work forward. If my own experience and the images of Angela Strassheim are to be useful as a

[11] Angela Strassheim, "Artist Statements: Left Behind & Pause 2002-2007" Angela Strassheim. Accessed November 20, 2024. https://www.angelastrassheim.com/new-page
[12] Lisa Hodermarsky et al., *On the Basis of Art: 150 Years of Women at Yale* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Art Gallery, 2021), 278-79.

window, there must be an existential inquiry into why this place exists at all and what mechanisms are motivating the endless expansion of suburban sprawl.

Figure 2 Angela Strassheim, Untitled (McDonald's), 2004, Chromogenic print, 37 9/16 x 47 5/8 inches. Collection of Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.

Figure 3 Leslie Drennan, Dreams of Domesticity, 2025, Architectural glass samples, steel, lead solder, artificial turf grass, 35 x 8 1/2 x 21 inches (not including turf). Collection of the artist.

3 DOMINANCE

Patriarchal colonialism is at the root of our psychic disconnection from the earth. Resources that took millennia to create have been extracted from the land in less than three hundred years.[13] People within the most vulnerable populations are the first to feel the pain of climate change and loss of resources, not those sitting comfortably in their homes and corner offices. Around the world that means women, children, and people of color are at the greatest disadvantage. To hold the political forces shaping the global future accountable, regenerative feminism must link with conservationism to empower the greatest number of people to incite change from both grassroots and top-down approaches, citing ecofeminism at the root of this idea.

Figure 4 Lenka Clayton, The Distance I Can Be From My Son (Back Alley) (still), 2013, Video (color, sound; 1:53 minutes).

[13] Johanna Oksala, "Feminism, Capitalism, and Ecology," *Hypatia* 33, no. 2 (2018) 227, doi:10.1111/hypa.12395.

I do believe there are millions of likeminded people interested in a more compostable way of coexisting with the other worldlings on Earth. Ultimately, caring for one another and all *things*, as a comprehensive term, is the base of matriarchal systems. It is no secret that the art world, like every other silo of American capitalism, does not yield to mothers and caregivers. Although artist-mothers have a long legacy, interdisciplinary artist Lenka Clayton points out in her 2012 Artist Statement written during her exercise of An Artist Residency in Motherhood that "many aspects of the professional art world are closed to artists with families. Most prestigious artists residencies for example specifically exclude families from attending."[14] From her time in this residency, two poignant works developed about her surrender to "fragmented focus, nap-length studio time, limited movement and resources and the general upheaval that parenthood brings."[15] Her video series *The Distance I Can Be From My Son* and sculptural work *63 Objects Taken From My Son's Mouth* document her unbreakable, pressurized, and intense role as a mother. Clayton's work on motherhood harkens back to Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* and Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Go In.* All are works paying homage to the tedium of motherhood—the attachment, the protecting. Domestic work, childrearing, elderly care, and community projects are all inherently anti-capitalist pursuits by way of their collectivism. Male-dominated societies prioritize constant growth, capital gain, individuation and innovation. Care work of any type is resistant to these ideas and yet, at the same time, is the life support of the energy-hungry system.[16]

[14] Lenka Clayton, *Artist's Statement* September 2012
[15] Lenka Clayton, *Artist's Statement* September 2012
[16] Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, (Melville House: Brooklyn, 2019) 20-33.

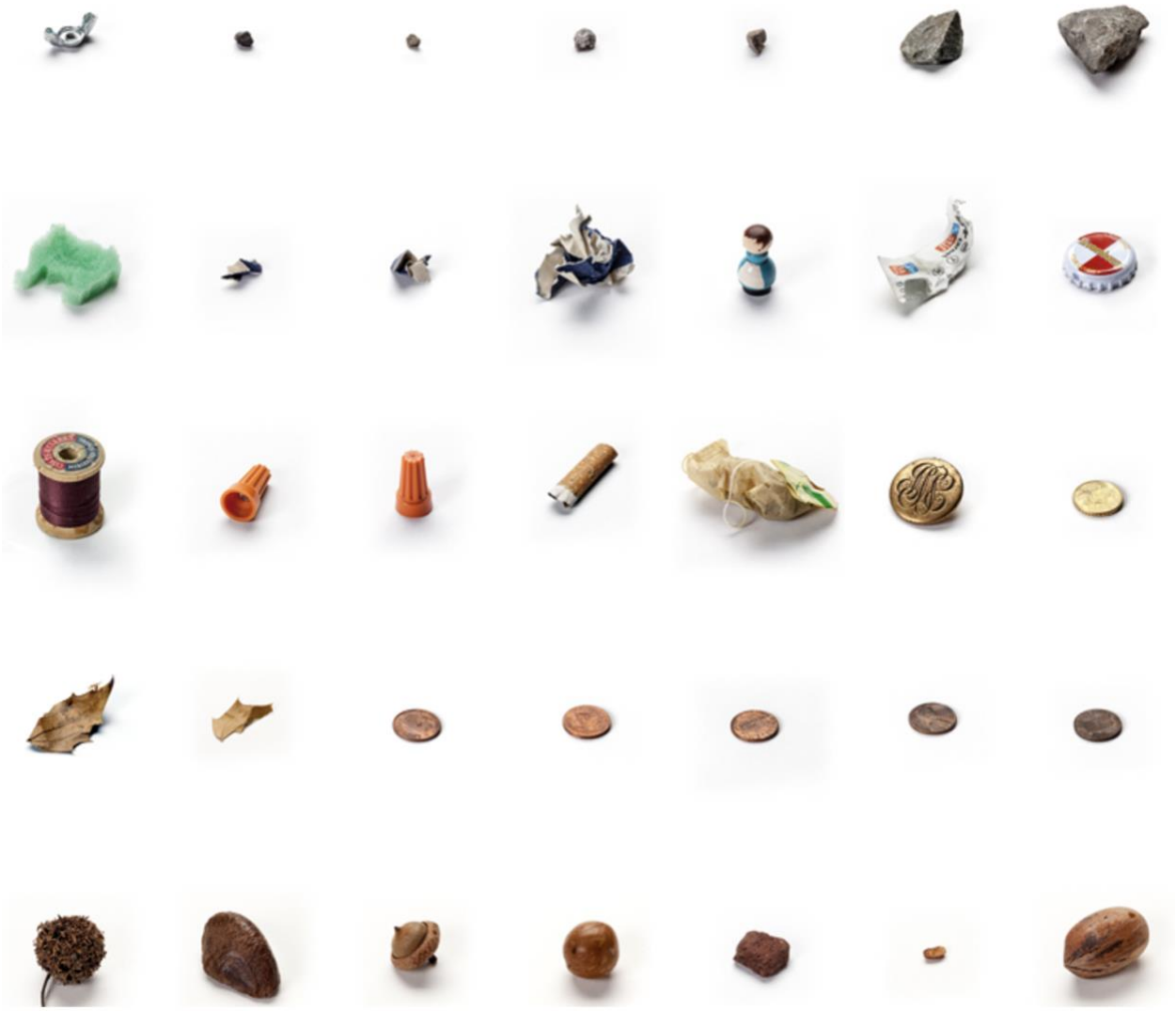

Figure 5 Lenka Clayton, 63 Objects Taken From My Son's Mouth, 2013, acorn, bolt, bubblegum, buttons, carbon paper, chalk, cigarette butt, coins, cotton reel, holly leaf, little wooden man, sharp metal pieces, metro ticket, nuts, plastic "O", polystyrene, seeds, slide, small rocks, specimen vial, sticks, teabag, wire caps, wooden block, size as show"; 40 x 40 in. Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas.

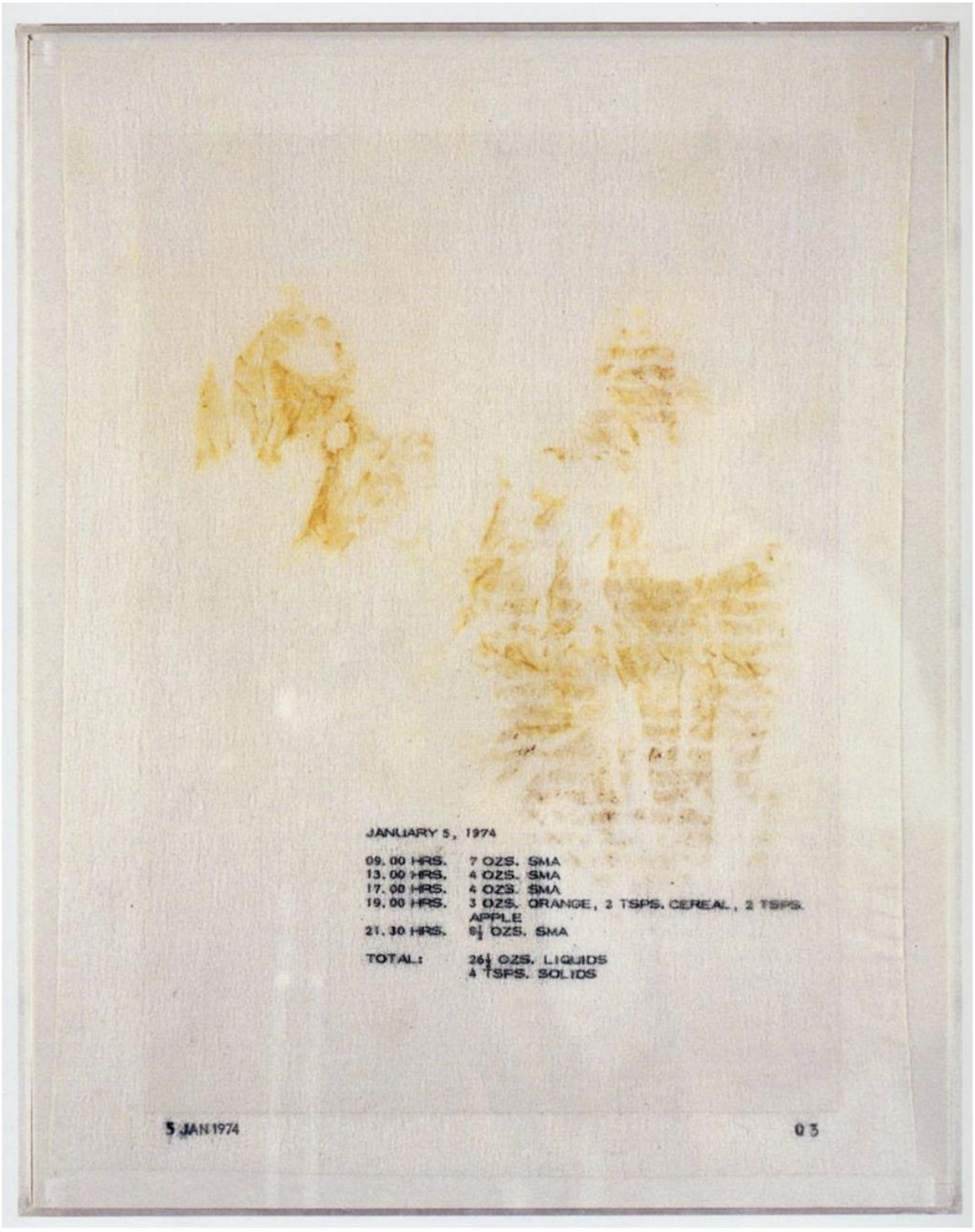

Figure 6 Mary Kelly, Post Partum Document (selection), 1974, Perspex units, white card, diaper linings, plastic sheeting, paper, ink, 1 of 31 units, 11 x 14 in. Collection of Art Gallery of Ontario.

Figure 7 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Go In, 1978, Ninety-five black and white photographs mounted on foamcore with chain and dust rag, 57 x 44 x 13/16 in. Collection of Smith College Museum of Art.

In a 2024 talk, artist and activist Carmen Winant makes no mistake purporting that matriarchal feminist systems are ultimately what will and have saved humanity from itself. When this idea is paired with a more gracious attitude toward earth, as in the ecofeminist movement of the 1960s-70s, the intersectional issues oppressing both women and nature can be dually addressed.[17] Feminist scholar Elizabeth Carlassare offers a clean definition of ecofeminism in her *Ethics and the Environment* article: "Feminist environmentalism begins with noticing similarities and connections between forms and instances of human oppression, including the oppression of women, and the degradation of nature." Artists in this camp were responding to newly public research surrounding the impact of unmitigated fossil fuel consumption on the environment by working in conjunction with Earth and its processes, oftentimes using care as a gesture. These works were mostly made and shown outside of a traditional gallery setting. Land artists of the time like Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson also participated in the rejection of the gallery, but their result was violent, site-specific intervention.[18] Their female counterparts argued that sexism, speciesism, and capitalism worked together to perpetuate the harmful effects of capitalist values and chose a less destructive approach to their work.[19]

In her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!*, Mierle Laderman Ukeles defines two categories of labor: development and maintenance. Development is the pure creative act, the progress and change, while maintenance acts are in service of the development, oiling the gears of advancement and preserving what has been made new.[20] Ukeles arrived at environmentalism through the duality of her roles as an artist and mother, where she discovered that the idea of

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[17] Elizabeth Carlassare, "Socialist and Cultural Ecofeminism: Allies in Resistance," *Ethics and the Environment* 5, no. 1 (2000): 90, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27766057

[18] Robert Morris, "Notes on Art as/and Land Reclamation," *October* 12, (1980): 97, https://doi.org/10.2307/778576.

[19] Oksala, "Feminism, Capitalism, and Ecology." 217.

[20] Helen Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," *October* 92, (2000): 77

maintenance work, the unseen and undervalued work happening to keep our society churning, may serve as a productive example for the contemporary issues facing modern society.[21] The throughline for Ukeles was that every facet of modern progress was completely dependent on the depreciated and monotonous labor of maintenance.[22] This speaks to Winant's views on care systems. In a conversation with Winant about these "competing" roles, Ukeles retells the experience of being a visibly pregnant graduate student at New York University, told by a male professor "Well, I guess now you can't be an artist." Ukeles in response: "I went silent, and [there] was actually deep, deep in me, a fury." [23]

When I found out I was eight weeks pregnant on December 31, 2022, the middle of my first year of this three-year master's program, the first emotions to surface were fear and denial. At age twenty-eight, I had spent my twenties defining my life as an artist. I apprenticed for a year under a master woodworker, spent two years making custom furniture, another two years running kilns and slip-casting at a ceramics studio, and now I found myself with an opportunity to make anything in any medium I desired and engage with more art than ever before, but I found myself holding a countdown clock to the most responsibility I could imagine. Before I understood what being a mother meant, what being pregnant meant, what caring for a child meant, I grieved the possibilities I thought were ahead of me because I knew that being a working artist and, specifically, a mother were contradictory. At the time, there were only three faculty members in Studio Art at Georgia State University with children. Two of them were men. I had to defend my choice, to my professors and my peers, to carry this child and proceed with my graduate program without faulting.

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[21] Eleanor Heartney, "All or Nothing," *Art in America* (May 2020) 41.
[22] Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," 79
[23] Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Conversation: Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Carmen Winant" in *To Begin Again: Artists and Childhood* (ICA Boston: DelMonico Books 2022) 252.

There were many days while I was pregnant that I felt too sick and weak to attend class, much less make art, but showed anyway, perhaps out of fear of seeming affected by my changing physical and mental state. Then Sadie, our daughter, was born just before the start of fall semester in 2023. I missed only two weeks of class and returned bleeding, leaking, and stitched up from a level two tear. My sleep-deprived partner kept her while I was gone for the first seven weeks, then a sitter; my spent body dragging to each obligation. I felt split in half. Ukeles described the mental gymnastics of being a new artist-mother:

> "When I was with the baby, I would be thinking 'I'm going to lose it. I'm going to lose it. How am I going to keep going with my work? I won't be an artist.' Hearing that voice in the back of my head. I was also so tired. Nobody even knows how tired you can get with little babies. It's beyond comprehension. So, finally, I got the babysitter and went to work. There I was. Okay, now you're at work. Now work. Now make art. And I'm thinking to myself, 'Is [the sitter] paying attention to her? Is she really paying attention to her?'"[24]

It took me all of that semester to come to terms with my new reality, and I produced a body of work that reflected my newfound anxieties about a world I saw as antagonistic to her very existence. I was also dealing with this fury revealed by Ukeles. I was so jealous of the freedom my classmates without children had when I was on campus, but when I got home, I felt so much joy for this budding human being changing right in front of my eyes. The overwhelm was awe-some. The same phrase kept intruding into my mind: fear *is* loving. I was and am weary for my daughter's future as a woman and resident of this chaotic planet. When those worries are so new, the fear leaks into every part of your identity and the fear that this thing, this child, might

[24] Ukeles, "Conversation" 252-253.

die or get hurt because of some arbitrary choice I made is absolutely crippling. It is exactly the thing that every mommy blog and new parent book tries to hook mothers on. Perhaps if you read enough, buy all the right equipment, shelter her from all that intends to harm, she will have a chance at whatever it is we define as a life.

As I have grown into my new maternal role, I have found such incredible beauty in an ordinary day. Our household functions on the labor of maintenance and routine and there are many days when my partner and I collapse on the couch after bedtime. The exhaustion is interestingly paired with joy, like food to wine, enhancing the experience and creating complete sensory engulfment. This pairing has radicalized my views of the external world outside of our home and made every hateful act an assault on my daughter's future.

My Only Child is a sound composition that was born out of the emotional experience of waking up to Donald Trump's reelection in November of 2024. It consists of my partner reading an excerpt from Tom Whyman's 2021 book *Infinitely Full of Hope: Fatherhood and the Future in an Age of Crisis and Disaster,* field recordings of our neighborhood in Atlanta, interior sounds of making breakfast, lunch, and dinner in our home (before and after we became parents), vocalizations of my daughter at thirteen months old, and a harmonica played as a breathing exercise the day after the election results were finalized. Whyman's book is a defense of why having children our current time is the most radical expression of hope in our species, acknowledging that life includes suffering. We read this book together in 2022, while we were still trying to decide if bringing kids into this world was a good or selfish act. Ultimately, the decision was made for us, as my pregnancy was unplanned, but I have attempted to collapse my feelings of helplessness, guilt, and fear. Our daughter is here, and she is truly the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Life persists, regardless of the American political climate, and through

sound I could tease out the messy details of what that lived experience is like for me. Certainly, there was an expectation for me to have children. There is an expectation for all women to be caretakers. The psychological pressures enforced by societal norms are suffocating, but my daughter, despite this truth, is pure oxygen. I feel emboldened by the likes of Clayton, Ukeles, Winant, and other feminist/ecofeminist artists in my lineage. The definition of my practice has shifted so much after becoming a mother and I look to them as my proof of concept for how to care for a sick planet and how to see the value a child can bring to this tumultuous world.

Learning from my predecessors, *Arcadia Disrupted* includes my growing identity as a mother as an offering of in between-ness. Having children, as I understood it as a child myself, was a one-dimensional undertaking. Suburban life seemed tiresome—-with endless work in every direction. It is true that the work never stops, but the discipline of rest, the discipline of creativity, is one mother's resistance to the constant requests of the world, home, and child. In contrast to patriarchal capitalism's (without distinguishing the two) push for global dominance, ecofeminism argues that humans must recognize their place in nature and awaken to the fragility of the interdependent cycles of the Earth.[25] This philosophy is intersectional, involving many aspects of societal operation as well as theoretical analysis on the meaning of existence and the starvation of the mind as a result of an overstimulated and overworked global society.

[25] Carlassare, "Socialist and Cultural Ecofeminism." 89

4 MATTER & THE MATERIAL WORLD

By placing every living thing into a hierarchy, Carl Linnaeus, the father of taxonomy, unknowingly created an ever-widening gulf between humans and nature. Now everything is seen through the lens of differences rather than affinities, but if *Homo sapiens* are to endure, we must reconsider our relationship with the world around us and become coauthors instead of villains. Donna Haraway applies the concept of sympoiesis as a solution to the anthropocentric view of the present. Sympoiesis is "making-with" non-human species as the basis for a more rhizomatic near-future, an era she has termed the Chthulucene, a reference to H.P. Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*. This epoch is more generative, less apocalyptic, but still very much damaged and in awful need of revolution.

Realistically, it will take many generations to heal the scourge of the Industrial Age. Haraway's writing offers readers stories of human and non-human species interaction, dependence, and stewardship to support her models of porous multi-species existence here on Earth.[26] More powerfully, she argues that artists, scientists, and activists need each other desperately in order to create the kind of sympoietic existence she imagines for the Chthulucene. Without knowing the term, sympoiesis has been the conceptual focus of my graduate work. Upon encountering Donna Haraway and her varied imaginings for the term's application, my practice has swelled to include new materials, practices, and research. Instead of just considering how I can reuse materials for each piece, I look at the entire lifecycle of my work in a closed loop.

Also influential in this work is American philosopher Jane Bennett. She discusses material cycles in depth in her book *Vibrant Matter*, in which she explains how the humanist

[26] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble,* 98.

view of parsing the world into "matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)" exacerbates the American problems of waste, growth, and consumption.[27] She pulls inspiration from thinkers like Spinoza, Adorno, Deleuze and Guattari to encourage readers to start thinking in true materialist terms; to respect all matter.

As Robert Morris, an American sculptor and prolific writer of art theory, describes in his 1980 *Notes on Art as/and Land Reclamation*: "Behind the conservationist/industrialist conflict is industry's ever accelerating demand for new materials." According to Morris, it is the increased use of synthetics that is behind nearly every increase in demand for natural resources.[28] American consumption practices are materialistic, yet very much anti-material. We purchase ever-greater amounts of products with shorter and shorter lifecycles due to planned obsolescence, material degradation, or the intoxicating power of advertisements.[29] It is the degree of our acquisitiveness—the sheer abundance of goods we can purchase, and the ease with which we can buy things—that devalues the materials from which these goods are made. All life, things, and entities on earth can be broken down into ever-simpler matter. This matter has relational agency and is now acting upon humans as much as humans are acting upon it.[30]

The seminal piece of *Arcadia Disrupted* is a realization of the influence that Haraway, Bennett, and Morris have had on my practice and personal philosophy. *Materials of Great Importance* (fig. 8) is a picket fence constructed from modern materials, materials of industry, and found natural materials. As a piece, it will dissect the gallery space, forcing viewers to intersect with the work at different points. My goal in this is to use the fence, both as many parts and one object, to represent the farcical boundaries humans create around nature and how there

[27] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press) 2010, 1.
[28] Robert Morris, "Notes on Art as/and Land Reclamation," 92.
[29] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 5.
[30] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter,* 78.

actually are no boundaries when it comes to materials. All material—everything made, used, or altered—will eventually return to the ground, air, or sea, whether broken down into microplastics or degraded into methane or decanted into water systems.

Figure 8 Leslie Drennan, Materials of Great Importance, 2024-2025, Seventy-six individual fence posts made from plastic waste, aluminum, iron, ceramic, acrylic sheeting, drywall, found branches, pine, and cement. Dimensions variable. Collection of the artist.

It becomes harder to see the relationships between systems and how systems form a whole because technology has allowed us to operate within silos, with all aspects of production specialized. We are, on purpose, unaware of what our purchasing and discarding habits have on even the ecology closest to our homes. These silos create what sociologist Timothy Luke calls

"technoregions"[31] or areas of technological specialization that define the laborer's role in society by their area of work, which prevents holistic thinking about overall impact, whether environmental or cultural. The effect is that systems are conceived of as their own insular domains and our impact as an individual consumer is written off as meaningless.

Suburbanites are particularly guilty of turning a blind eye to wanton consumption. They are proven to have a much larger carbon footprint than rural and urban inhabitants, and with virtually zero public transit, these people drive more, consume more, and therefore create more waste. Economist Matthew Kahn found that suburban households drive thirty-one percent more and consume more than twice as much land as their urban counterparts, but suburban areas retain their clean air because of the vast consumption of land.[32] He also found, not surprisingly, that as household income grew throughout the 1980s and 90s, more families moved to the suburbs, as they were attracted to larger, newer suburban homes.[33] Having lived in Kennesaw, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta, the first eighteen years of my life, I can attest to the determination it requires to detach from the convenience-based lifestyle. You need not worry about the waste you create, what matters much more is the conviction with which you adhere to a certain morality.

The importance of centering materials in my work can be summarized by Jane Bennett's theory of *thing-power*. In short, thing-power is the active agency of matter to produce results.[34] It is a series of events that generates a happenstance occurrence. This is an assemblage approach to objects as they appear in relation to each other outside of human contextual understanding. "A culture of things irreducible to the culture of objects."[35] American consumption camouflages this

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[31] Timothy W. Luke, "Art and the Environmental Crisis: From Commodity Aesthetics to Ecology Aesthetics," *Art Journal* 51, no. 2 (1992): 72
[32] Matthew Kahn, "The Environmental Impact of Suburbanization," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 19, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 582.
[33] Kahn, "The Environmental Impact of Suburbanization," 584.
[34] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter,* 5.
[35] Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 5.

kind of thing-power through our constant disposal of matter into the black hole of the waste stream. This waste will always find a place to coalesce.

Exposing the wounds of the production/consumption cycles is just one step toward a different future. In my experience, suburbia is designed as a very specific type of consumption silo. The impact of our waste is carted away and redirected to landscapes and neighborhoods mostly out of reach, but no material can be trashed without consequence. Using Haraway's concept of sympoiesis and Bennett's theory of thing-power, I am implementing a dogged paradigm shift away from the wasteful suburbs of my past. I am in conversation with domesticated flora and fauna, wild places of refuge allowed to be uncontrolled, and the psychology of human beings justifying a negligent lifestyle, particularly at this moment in time. At the deepest level, I aim to challenge the human identity that is now positioned outside and above the food chain; not as part of the feast in a chain of reciprocity but as external manipulators of it.[36]

[36]Val Plumwood, "Human Vulnerability and the Experience of Being Prey," *Quadrant* (March 1995).

5 OVER-ENGINEERED

That man should have dominion "over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" is a prophecy that has solidified into fact.[37] There are now dams or walls on most of Earth's major waterways and our planes, cars, and power stations emit about a hundred times more carbon dioxide than Earth's volcanos.[38] In America, the Army Corps of Engineers has done a remarkable job at controlling natural resources. This Jeffersonian endeavor has had its hand in an array of domestic and foreign projects, including the Panama Canal, the reversal of the Chicago River, the St. Lawrence Seaway, the Bonneville Dam, and the Manhattan Project.[39] The rise of American cities and suburbs can at least in part be contributed to this organization's particular involvement in water systems. Science writer Elizabeth Kolbert outlines the overreaching of the Corps of Engineers to suggest that we, as Americans first and humans second, are handcuffed to the control we now harbor over Earth's systems.[40] She explains how in order to keep up with the demand for water, food, and fuel, as well as maintain a livable planet, humans will inevitably overcorrect for the mistakes made in the past and present.[41] There is, perhaps, no better example of this than in the arid cities of the western United States.

The suburbs of Los Angeles, Phoenix, and other water poor cities have abutted crisis for decades. The Los Angeles River was channelized by gold rushers nearly a hundred years ago to control flooding – a harsh contrast to the generations of Tongva, the native inhabitants of the region, that structured their lives around the flood and drought cycles of the river. Despite proposals to redesign LA before it grew any larger, the city continued its expansion in the early

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[37] Gn 1:26-28 KJV
[38] Elizabeth Kolbert, *Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future* (New York: Crown Press, 2022) 7.
[39] Elizabeth Kolbert, *Under a White Sky,* 8.
[40] Ibid, 27.
[41] Ibid, 19.

twentieth century by deceitfully diverting water from the Owens River Valley hundreds of miles north.[42] In a too-familiar story, any plans to change the development of Los Angeles were abandoned because such a change would have prevented the building of the speculative real estate that inflated the city's economy.[43] Los Angeles continues to grow, unbridled, to a metropolitan area of over twelve million people as of 2023. In an already dry environment, the changing climate of Southern California and the West Coast at large will increasingly endanger its residents (human and non-human) with no regard for the engineering feats of humankind.

Lake Mead, which now provides thirty percent of LA's freshwater supply, again approached dead pool in August of 2024, meaning that the Hoover Dam area was in such an intense drought that the water still in Lake Mead was not heavy enough to be piped into Los Angeles county.[44] Alice Bucknell, a Los Angeles based video artist and writer, responded to this news by releasing a video game in 2024 titled *The Alluvials,* which depicted LA after its water supply finally runs dry. Bucknell created *The Alluvials* from the perspective of the non-human inhabitants: wildfire, wolves, mountain lions, and the LA river. The interactive video highlights both Bucknell's dystopian perspective on their current city of residence and honors their cohabitants by including a rarely seen non-human perspective. Bucknell's work inspires positive formulations for entities other than our own, helping to dismantle an anthropocentric perspective. As Christian ideology has justified the expansion and domination of virgin territories, anthropocentrism has been accepted as truth. However, I believe shifts in our hierarchies of power will lead to a more equitable future and it is artists like Bucknell, subverting typical power structures, leading the charge.

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[42] Jay Owens, *Dust: The Modern World in a Trillion Particles* (New York: Abrams Press, 2023) 45.
[43] Alice Bucknell, @alicebucknell @lapubliclibrary, Instagram video, posted August 19, 2024. Accessed October 24, 2024.
[44] Alice Bucknell, Instagram video. Accessed October 24, 2024.

Figure 9 Alice Bucknell, The Alluvials (still), 2024, interactive video game. Copyright Alice Bucknell 2024.

Australian philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood, known for her anti-anthropocentric ideology, echoed Bucknell's disruption of a hierarchal order in her activism. She wrote the essay *Being Prey* after a near-fatal attack by a crocodile in the Australian bush and describes this horrific experience in tandem with the hubris of humanity to position ourselves apart from nature as "radically other".[45] This same hubris empowers humans to control rivers, flood valleys, and engineer myriad solutions to barriers created by earth systems. Plumwood vilifies the Christian perspective of Earth as only our dominion and a place set below the human soul. If the body is nothing more than a vessel to control other matter, then any matter acting upon or around the body is expendable. "The eternal soul is the real, enduring, and identifying part of the human self, while the body is animal and corrupting. But transcending death this way

[45] Plumwood, "Human Vulnerability"

exacts a great price; it treats the earth as a lower, fallen realm, true human identity as outside nature.," explains Plumwood.[46]

If there is no reason for humans to have an earth on which to live—and fertile soil, water, and biodiversity can be bastardized for our progress—then there is no motivation for humans, regardless of where they live, to be stewards of nature. It is even easier, then, to deny the effects that human-induced climate change is having on global ecosystems when there is an impersonal economy driving the endless acquisition of suburban status and wealth. Although our engineering achievements may be what ultimately pulls humankind back from the brink, it will be a reparative effort rather than a restorative one. The idea of progress as we now know it will be meaningless.

My thesis exhibition includes moments of the same subversion practiced by Bucknell and Plumwood. I had the opportunity to speak with two doctoral students at the University of Georgia that study urban coyote populations living within the city of Atlanta, Summer Fink and Carson Daniel. As part of the Kohl Wildlife Lab, they humanely capture coyotes so that they can put a collar camera on them in order to see where these animals make dens, if they mate, and where they draw their territory lines.[47] The footage reveals how coyotes live among us, virtually unseen, scavenging our garbage, living in culverts and under power substations, and navigating roadways in the middle of the night. There is an innate sense of predation I felt watching these animals watch us. In creating *Eyeshine* (fig. 10), the intent was to take the footage that the Kohl lab generously lent me and make a piece where others could feel that predation. It is a portal into their unseen world viewed through the vantage of a 1990s style window facing. There are so many barriers to seeing wildlife as they have had to adapt to our presence, but the more I can

[46] Plumwood, "Human Vulnerability"
[47] Summer Fink and Carson Daniel, Zoom conversation with author, November 19, 2024.

blur the line between a built environment and the natural world, the more successful my work becomes.

Figure 10 Leslie Drennan, Eyeshine, 2025, Window, plywood, paint, curtains, rod, monitors, collar camera footage of urban coyotes in Atlanta, Georgia (courtesy of Kohl Wildlife Lab at the University of Georgia), 86 x 40 x 14 inches. Collection of the artist.

6 PLACEMAKING IN THE GARDEN

"Teach the children. We don't matter so much, but the children do. Show them daisies and the pale hepatica… And the aromatic ones—rosemary, oregano. Give them peppermint to put in their pockets as they go to school. Give them the fields and the woods and the possibility of the world salvaged from the lords of profit. Stand them in the stream, head them upstream, rejoice as they learn to love this green space they live in, its sticks and leaves and then the silent, beautiful blossoms. / Attention is the beginning of devotion." – Mary Oliver, "Upstream"[48]

Everyone born after the invention of the internet, and certainly the home computer, has had every emotional expectation of their lives mitigated by media.[49] The societal standards of love, success, failure, war, death, birth, and every in-between thing is delivered to our eyes on a screen, written and developed by another person and/or corporation. Digital consumerism is particularly harmful. Lev Manovich, an early computer and cultural theorist, predicted that "just as the printing press in the fourteenth century and photography in the nineteenth century had a revolutionary impact on the development of modern society and culture, today we are in the middle of a new media revolution—the shift of all of our culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication… we are just beginning to sense its initial effects."[50] This stage is marked with consumption and consumerism, of which the suburbs is Mecca. During the era of analog capitalism, there were elements of culture and society formation that were based upon collective recognition of value and a discernable link between cause and effect. American curator and author Glenn Adamson terms this "material intelligence", where

[48] Mary Oliver, "Upstream" in *Blue Iris* (Boston: Beacon Press) 2004, 57.
[49] Robert Hassan, *The Condition of Digitality: A Post-Modern Marxism for the Practice of Digital Life,* (University of Westminster Press) 130.
[50] Hassan, *The Condition of Digitality,* 131.

scale and distance were produced analogically and established at human scale.[51] The elimination of human scale by the speed and size of an occurrence creates *hyper-objects,* defined by object-oriented philosopher Timothy Morton as events or concepts so much larger than human scale that they are impossible to understand in their full scope.[52] Capitalism, COVID-19, and climate change all fall under this incomprehensible umbrella.

Digital media and the internet exacerbate the effects of hyper-objects. They have caused culture to form faster and spread wider—with an alienating effect on the individual, since all interactions are now mitigated by some sort of technology. French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard suggests that "the age of consumption, being the historical culmination of the whole process of accelerated productivity under the sign of capital, is also the age of radical alienation." For the children of the first world, this means their upbringing, whether intentional or not by their caregivers, is effused with information and screen-based interactions.

Children and human beings desperately need time away from constant stimulation to explore their existence. In his book *Why Boredom Matters,* Kevin Hood Gary states that in a capitalist society, "producers want people to dread boredom and be unreflective about it, so consumption becomes simply a knee jerk antidote to it." [53] The indelible screen, the structure of school, and the judgement and peer persecution inundating children through social media has created an incredibly stressful childhood experience, especially in America.[54] The inexhaustible artist and activist Mary Mattingly has a manifesto that states "the business of education and compartmentalized forms of learning best serves the people we work for, and those that they work for. With steady erosion of job security, it leaves us dependent while increasing their

[51] Hassan, *The Condition of Digitality*, 143
[52] Jay Owens, *Dust*, 16.
[53] Kevin Hood Gary, *Why Boredom Matters* (Cambridge University Press) 2022, 2.
[54] Gary, *Why Boredom Matters,* 58.

control." This is a violent educational order that stifles different kinds of intelligence.[55] Children need outdoor play and exploration to develop a positive attitude towards the places they inhabit. Wild or semi-wild places provide a rich backdrop for imagination and fantasy and an opportunity for world building away from adults.[56] Playing outdoors can improve a child's ability to regulate their emotions and develop a "mutual appropriation" for a space because the child learns that they belong to the space and, in a reciprocal loop, the space belongs to them. This fact remains true even at urban and suburban playgrounds.[57] My own child experiences finds peace when she is outdoors. When she was a newborn, I was told by parent friends and family that if she refused to stop crying, a dose of fresh air would do the trick. Indeed, it always did. The research from Lester and Maudsley, as well as my first-hand experience, shows the importance of outdoor spaces in suburban and urban settings as meaningful, identity shaping, emotional regulating places of refuge.

If wild places are unavailable, as they mostly are to urban and suburban residents, the garden and yard should be seen as these places of respite. To keep a garden is an interruptive act and an act within the divisional system of land ownership. The yard can be contextualized as a treasure, a part of nature that humans can actively participate in and care for, and it can be as broadly defined as potted plants on porches or public green spaces.

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[55] Mary Mattingly, "Manifesto," Mary Mattingly Studio, accessed August 20, 2024. https://marymattingly.com/pages/manifesto-1

[56] Stuart Lester and Martin Maudsley, *Play, Naturally: A Review of Children's Natural Play* (Los Angeles: National Children's Bureau Enterprises Ltd.) 2007, 26.

[57] Lester and Maudlsey, *Play, Naturally,* 41.

Figure 11. Leslie Drennan, Utility, 2024, Handmade paper, ink, charcoal, acrylic paint, thread, soft pastel, plastic netting, key. 48 x 16 x 1 in. Collection of the artist.

For *Utility* (fig. 11), I catalogued the land-defining infrastructure I experience living in Atlanta. Just beyond my fence is a major substation for the area, and I hear the buzz of the high voltage lines running a few dozen feet above the sidewalk. Powerlines creep outward in all directions, following down street after street. The signs of humanity are ubiquitous and a familiar visual vernacular. One truth about growing up in the suburbs, so beautifully articulated by Julie Beck for *The Atlantic,* is that suburban topography allows its residents to feel at home anywhere.[58] *Utility* was, in part, an expression of that sentiment and also a judgement of it. In my garden, I feel a sense of place. I can experience the slowness needed to recuperate from modern life. Yet, I cannot fully break from the chains of the grid; not here, not anywhere, and there is loss associated with that. We pay a psychological price for the convenience of living in an urban center. This work, however, started to feel like something different. No longer was I grasping at what to do with my waste or vaguely excavating the meaning of home. This is the first work that sought to join the symbol of the picket fence with a world dripping in modernity. It planted the seed from which *Materials of Great Importance (fig. 7)* grew and was the first expression of my contention with the built environment.

The yard, as well as public parks and greenways, foster a unique bond between the owls, hawks, garbage, neighbors, coyotes, my daughter, my partner and me. The fence and its feeble attempt to contain and restrict is a representation of the tenacity of man to put a stake in land and alter its order. Any yard can be a garden with the right eyes. I watch my child squat to investigate the mulch as she learns what type of being she is. Like the fictional generations of Camilles in Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble,* raised as stewards of a chosen non-human species between

[58] Juile Beck, "What the Suburb Haters Don't Understand," in *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2024. https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2024/04/nostalgia-nowhere-suburbs-strip-malls-subdivisions-community/677939/.

2025 and 2500, she will inherit a broken landscape with a broken relationship to Earth and endure much suffering and loss. The Camilles learn and teach not to anthropomorphize every living thing and to instead become and think like them, like waterways and birds and extinct butterflies. Haraway's imaginary generations of children were inspired by indigenous American's knowledge of land stewardship and community building, but mirror knowledge of indigenous groups from all around the world. The Camilles collectively develop a population of environmental guardians.[59] From a non-human perspective or even a child's perspective, the world can be seen anew, both things I directly engage with in my exhibition.

Figure 12 Leslie Drennan, Intervention / Noticing (installation view), 2025, Handmade brick / Handmade paper, chalk pastel, paint stick, thread, pen, 9 x 4 x 3 inches / 15 x 13 inches

[59] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble,* 165.

Dealing with the grief and the joy of watching her interact with this damaged planet, I created two smaller works, one on paper and one ceramic sculpture. *Intervention* (fig. 12) is a handmade brick, made in the aftermath of the political policies laid down in early 2025. *Noticing* (fig. 12), however, is a work on paper depicting a hand reaching for a flower drawn by a child. As a pair, these pieces collaborate to bear my intensified experience of being a mother to a young daughter while fighting against the hypocrisy of my family of origin. My daughter and I spend time in the garden every day, and I teach her to be tender with all that she sees. With all the noise and distraction in our modern life, it is only in our stillness, our noticing, that we will rediscover our place here. Perhaps there is some image in which we were created, but from the perspective of the oak leaves and carpenter bees, my image is just an individual portrait when the long roll of attendance is taken at dawn and dusk.

7 ARCADIA DISRUPTED

Arcadia Disrupted is an expression of hope only possible because of the checkered experiences up to this point in my life. This includes my conservative, religious upbringing in the suburbs of the South, the awakening to myself throughout my twenties, every creative experience I have ever had, and all the material and interpersonal relationships that have shifted my perspective of home around and around. Although this body of work began as an indictment of the American suburbs and grew from an angry place – anger towards my parents and political systems – it finished as a curious reevaluation of what home can mean. People and places not previously considered as family or native to me have been coopted as my chosen home bases. In these chosen relationships and environments, I have found unconditional love and support, which has given me so much hope for communities of the future.

In truth, this exhibition was about traveling back in time. Each aspect of my research was an attempt to answer an old question. As viewers entered the gallery, they were dictated by *Materials* (fig. 8) to move clockwise around the center wall, immediately stepping into *Self-Portrait while Standing* (fig. 13)—a room within a room. As the directional speaker in the chandelier at the top of the work plays *My Only Child,* viewers are encapsulated in my current world full of chaos and big decisions and loving people. After the initial confrontation of *Attachment* (fig 14), in which a family of four larger-than-life fence posts are caught leaning on each other, *Self-Portrait* is a gentle embrace. There are other works in this quadrant of the gallery supporting my experiences in the present, but as you start to move through the works, the vulnerable underbelly of the exhibition turns.

Most of these pieces began with a specific material or a particular aspect of the built environment. At first, my intention was to show our negligent bastardization of the natural world

and how the suburbs play a large part in that by convincing people their lifestyle is not wasteful, but productive. In creating some of the works, my own biases against my family of origin emerged, especially given the changing landscape of American politics after the 2024 election. This is on display in the gallery and that tension can be felt as soon as viewers crossed into the fenced-in portion of the show.

Figure 13 Leslie Drennan, Self-Portrait while Standing, 2025, Oak logs, I beam, oak flooring, cast paper, cedar, rebar, chandelier, 96 x 60 x 60 inches

Figure 14 Leslie Drennan, Attachment, 2024, Pine, 110 x 49 x 25 inches

The three works behind *Materials* were much more delicate than other pieces in the exhibition, some in content and some in makeup. The psychic disconnection previously explained through the work of Jane Bennett, Angela Strassheim, and Val Plumwood, who all discuss the different ways modern life severs us from the rhythms of natural systems, is explored separately in each. Some viewers chose not to move all the way to the narrowest end to see the final work on paper for fear of damaging other objects, but those that did experienced the squeeze of the final piece. As viewers approached *Left Behind* (fig. 15), the fence narrowed in on them, making this piece much more experiential than initially planned. It trapped the audience, perfectly parallelling the experience of growing up within the narrow physical and mental bounds of Suburbia.

The exhibition felt unified and vulnerable—more so than I expected. The punctuation of houses on both interior walls of the gallery provided important context for the viewers, and I am very grateful for the opportunity to explore myself on such a deep level. This research validated so many of my unnamed values and beliefs and grounded the work in truth.

Figure 15 Leslie Drennan, Left Behind, 2025, Handmade paper, photo transfer, thread, 13 x 11 inches

8 CONCLUSION

The term *making kin* is derived from Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble,* the ethos of my thesis work, in which she proposes a commitment by humankind to all life forms on Earth. I add that humankind must fervently commit to all matter on Earth, if we are truly to stay with the trouble humans created. Below is an excerpt summarizing her definition and implementation of the phrase:

> "I think that the stretch and recomposition of kin are allowed by the fact that all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time). Kin is an assembling sort of word. All critters share a common 'flesh', laterally, semiotically, and genealogically. Ancestors turn out to be very interesting strangers; kin are unfamiliar (outside what we thought was family or gens), uncanny, haunting, active."[60]

The path I am following with my work is to see the interconnectedness of all things and beings. This took shape in my exhibition as an offering of authenticity, even though authentic is a difficult to pin down sensation. My artistic practice has become more personal and narrative in hopes that it will become more universal. By working with sculptural materials in a very analog way, I have been able to locate an antidote for the suburban sickness I carry with me and that drives our global economy. I sense the apathy and helplessness bounding through people around me. My work, *Arcadia Disrupted*, acts as a gesture of care toward the cynic—as if to say, "I see you, I know you, I am you, and there is a different way forward."

I found that the suburbs are a wonderful example of the short-sightedness of humans. Progress or social ladder-climbing is just a showcase of luxury in excess, with no mind paid to

[60] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble,* 103

the debt we owe to the earth as a biotic system. In many cases, evangelical Christianity is used as a justification for the hoarding of wealth and possessions, as well as violence toward land, people, and other species. My research only cemented the current American oligarchic system as purely self-serving, meaning that suburbanites, operating with little awareness of how their choices affect others or how political policy affects them, ignorantly ascend up a ladder to nowhere. The decades-long defunding of public education has much to do with their blindness, but much of it is also by choice and a key aspect of social acceptance, as I have witnessed in my own family.[61]

I believe the suburban masses, where most Americans now live, are slowly awakening to the corruption behind most corporate practices that have led global systems to the edge of collapse, but the window of opportunity is closing. It will take every urgent effort, every utopian ideation, large and small, to revolutionize the way humans build, expand, travel, consume, and think. "There is a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its effects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference."[62]

Kin has taken on a completely new definition for me while completing this body of work. This exhibition was an effort to capture the flattening of the world and of the human mind, through screens, globalization, suburban sprawl, midrise apartment buildings, and plastic waste. In the same stroke, it was also an effort to honor my interactions with nature, either through the garden, the woods, the wilderness, the rivers—whatever is available—to demonstrate how making kin is an actionable concept. *Arcadia Disrupted* synthesizes human and non-human

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[61] Deborah A. Verstegen, "Education Fiscal Policy in the Reagan Administration, Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis," *American Education Research Association* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 355.
[62] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble,* 4.

stories, experimenting with remediation and material use along the way. My research debunked myths I learned as a child about who and what has agency over us, allowing me to better understand how the future can be coauthored with non-human entities.

As I look to the future of my artistic practice, accepting that there are things here not meant to be understood by humans, I am drawn down again and again to the small and beautiful moments of kinship here on earth. To again quote the prolific Mary Oliver, "We took the long walk to the river and waded out to one of the small islands where we found—I had never seen it before and only rarely since—the extraordinary cardinal flower, red and blazing—a total excess of beauty in that place where few human eyes ever came, which told us, in the nicest way, that beauty was not only for us."[63]

[63] Mary Oliver, "A Blessing" in *Blue Iris,* (Boston: Beacon Press) 2004, 29.

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APPENDIX

Full excerpt from Tom Whyman's *Infinitely Full of Hope: Fatherhood and the Future in an age of Crisis and Disaster* read by my partner in the sound composition, *My Only Child.*

"And there is almost nothing that they can do about it. But of course this all raises the possibility of making a somewhat different argument in support of anti-natalism. Ontic anti-natalism maintains that while life or existence is not inherently bad in itself, contingent facts about the world right now make it impossible to justify creating it. Ontic anti-natalist arguments are often put forward in response to climate change, with prospective parents worried not only about the quality of life for the child in a world destabilized by climate disaster, but also the carbon footprint of one human life might generate. One 2017 study published by Seth Wines and Kimberly Nicholas in the journal Environmental Research Letters found the greatest impact an individual can have in terms of reducing their carbon footprint is to elect to have one fewer child.

Ontic anti natalists might include climate activist and musician Blythe Pepino, who's birth strike movements have been published in several broadsheet newspapers. According to the artist's Tumblr page, participants in the movement have decided not to bear children due to the severity of the ecological crisis, the current inaction by governing forces in the face of this existential threat. In a March 2019 Guardian interview, Pepino distanced herself from ontological antinatalism by insisting that her movement does not intend to condemn people for having children, or even to discourage those who really want them, rather she sees her actions as radical acknowledgment of presently existing conditions that can help communicate the urgency of the crisis and alter the way we imagine our future. For ontic anti-natalists like Pepino, anti-natilism is a stance one might selflessly adopt to serve life as such.

So are my partner and I only having a child for stupid, short-sighted, selfish reasons, bringing a baby into a very bad world, in which they will never thrive, just because we've always wanted to be parents? Just as someone might adopt a cat as a pet because they've always wanted a cat.

When we met in Berlin in 2014, Edy was working as an au pair, looking after the daughters of a very wealthy family who lived in one of those mansions in the west end of the city that were appropriated from Jewish industrialists by the nazis.

Later after she left that situation and moved in with me, Edy became a nanny to two little girls – one a toddler and one less than a year old. So even very early in our relationship the two of us spent a lot of time around small children and got a taste, in a way, of what it would be like to be parents together. It became a crucial part, in fact, of how we related to each other as a couple. Looking after children alters your dynamic. It forces you to cooperate on achieving something more than the particular happiness of yourselves as individuals. Little children are, for some reason, completely determined to kill themselves—to throw themselves off benches or dive head first into open water. So you must remain ever-vigilant together. Around children your language changes, and not just because you're trying more carefully not to swear. You start picking up on their mannerisms. Little muddled mispeakings through odd, invented turns of phrase. If a child shouts "Loud!" whenever they see an ambulance, it's because they think it's what they're called, you start to feel compelled to do so yourself. If a child calls apples "happles", adding an h so they can use the indefinite article "a", well then of course an apple is a happle from now on. In so parenthood became something that we longed for.

When we were struggling financially, our inability to afford a child was always the thing Edy became the most despondent over. In these situations, I'm always the one who does the

comforting, as opposed to voicing my worries in order to be comforted, with the effect that I can no longer really if I was despondent at all. I probably was and probably for similar reasons as her. For the most part our emotional life is spread, if this doesn't sound too weird, across a single shared soul. For a few months after we decided to try we struggled to conceive. The problem, to the extent that there even was one, turned out to be very basic and easy to solve, but the idea that we might not get to raise a child together was terrifying on an existential level. When Edy did find out she was pregnant, I felt not only joy, but also relief. So, in short, yes, I do have selfish reasons for wanting to be a parent. On the other hand, these reasons hardly seem to register when compared to the weight of what it means to actually have a child. When I saw my unborn child on that ultrasound it took me completely beyond myself.

In a way, I suppose, I want to answer the anti-natalist worry by turning it on its head. I want to ask, given the state of things in the world, given how terrible it is, and given the way things are going, how could someone not create new life? Is it really possible to look at the world as it is now and think, "Well, I'd be perfectly happy if three hundred thousand or so odd years of the human species fizzled out with this." As individuals, yes, our children might suffer, but I suffer in all sorts of small ways every day. Almost certainly the moments of crisis and inconvenience in its various forms of discomfort outweigh the moments of happiness and contentment. But that doesn't remotely mean that I regret being alive. And indeed I think its pretty infantile to suppose it all could mean that one might. A toddler might howl to go home the moment they trip up on the playground, but a parent surely knows that they'll be much better off as soon as they calm down, and had a go on the swings."