

A SHARED CONNECTION:
VULNERABILITY AS A LINK BETWEEN HUMANS IN THE NATURAL WORLD

by
Kristian Chad Hargis

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Kristian Chad Hargis

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The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by student Kristian Chad Hargis, and they evaluated his presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

Francis Fox, M.F.A. Chair, Supervisory Committee

Dan Scott, M.F.A. Member, Supervisory Committee

Brian Wiley, M.F.A. Member, Supervisory Committee

The final reading approval of the thesis was granted by Francis Fox, M.F.A., Chair of the Supervisory Committee. The thesis was approved for the Graduate College by John R. Pelton, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College.

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KH

ABSTRACT

If I look with new eyes while walking

I may see nature differently.

When mind and heart behold no names,

create no boundaries,

the conversation becomes intersubjective.

A two-way path is formed and we walk together

along the river's vulnerable edge.

Flowing through our ups and downs

connecting our similarities and embracing our differences.

Like stripped bark from a downed tree

we are exposed to a new understanding.

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INTRODUCTION

I feel vulnerable. This is the written thesis for my terminal degree and writing is a form that I am less experienced in than the work I do in my studio. Nonetheless, I have tried to write in a fashion that is similar to how I make. I have cut, pieced and joined ideas together that were once separate. This is an achievement that is very significant to me and quite frankly, I have arrived at a place that I never imagined. I have written from a point of view that delves into the exploration of my path, beliefs, and artwork. I was pressed to find the answer to the why and for whom I make the things I do. The following words link the work I have done as a maker of drawings, paintings and sculptures and help to illustrate how all these things combined. This work has helped pave the way for my existence in the natural world.

I am fascinated in how we walk through this world as individuals, but also as a collective group. There are things that unify us and things that repel us from one another; be it pain, joy, fear, or difference in all of its forms. I approach the questions implied by the manner of our interactions through the way I create and the way I live. The natural world is the teacher that instructs my life and art practice. I am interested in making marks, putting down colors, singing songs and building things, not just because it makes perfect sense to me, but because “Art” or mark-making, music, dance or whatever form it takes, is a way to create meaning in our lives. For me it is a cathartic process that allows me to make sense of my life and the choices made in both the past and the present, and possibly the future. The experience of art, be it in the making, the consuming, or the

reflection through writing, is a way for us to understand things both individually and together.

In this thesis I will be referencing a number of terms and concepts that are very broad and that carry with them general understandings that have been filtered through dominant culture. It will be necessary to provide these conventional definitions, but to also ensure that the meanings can accommodate the ideas that are essential to my point of view. Terms such *nature* or *natural* and *vulnerability* carry with them ideologies that are socially constructed and not inherent to their composition or character. These concepts gain meaning in part through the words we assign to help us better understand them, but it seems to me that the only way we can identify these things is to live them.

I will need to acknowledge in this writing my belief or disbelief in the conventional understanding of these terms and concepts; how I understand them and the manner in which they manifest themselves in specific ways within my work and my life will be important to make clear for us to enter into this discussion. I will propose potential new ways to understand these concepts that acknowledge the interstice of the self/other relationship and how focusing on the 'us' helps to manifest the parallels we find in or need for connection to each other and to the natural world. Before I qualify these terms and concepts that I have mentioned above, I first feel it necessary to address how I relate to them in my life and in my artwork.

In a conventional definition nature could be understood as “the physical world and everything in it (such as plants, animals, mountains, oceans, stars, etc.) that is not

made by people.”¹ This traditional definition resonates with me in many ways, however a problem with the way I understand this description of the natural world is in the differentiation of people from nature; I see humans as just another type of animal. This is essential to my understanding of this concept and it is where I veer away from this typical explanation.

Vulnerability is traditionally thought of as, “the quality or state of having little resistance to some outside agent.”² Another aspect of vulnerability is that of the social.

Which is determined by, various factors such as physical, social, economic, and environmental factors or processes, which increase the susceptibility of a community to the impact of hazards. Poverty, occupation, caste, ethnicity, exclusion, marginalization and inequities in material consumption of a society or community also enhance social vulnerability.³

By definition, these traditional understandings are very broad and just like in the question of the terms nature or natural, they carry with them a socially constructed lack of neutrality. However, these definitions provide a base for me to begin to share my perception of vulnerability and how I see it act as both a link and divider amongst us.

¹ "Nature." Merriam-Webster.com. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nature> (accessed January 8, 2016).

² “Vulnerability.” Merriam-Webster.com. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/vulnerability> (accessed January 4, 2016).

³ Sapam Ranabir Singh, Mohammad Reza Eghdami, and Sarbjeet Singh, “The Concept of Social Vulnerability: A Review from Disasters Perspectives.” *International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies (IJIMS)* 1, no. 6 (2014): 71-82.

CHAPTER ONE: NATURE AS AN IDEOLOGY OF MAKING

In the past, I never put much thought into a definitive exploration of the relationship between humans and nature or the natural, because I never felt there was any separation between the two. This is a belief that I continue to hold near; the idea that we are all part of the same rotating sphere. It wasn't until, at the age of thirty-nine while participating in my first MFA critique, that I began to question what nature or natural was, or was not, at least in the realm of the theoretical.

Nature plays an essential role in my everyday. It is the background noise in the world I live. It is the framework for my thought process and is vital to the choices I make in my art. It is the thread that connects everything I do. However, there is an aspect of nature that I have become aware of that does not feel true to my understanding. The nature I hear described by others seems a portion of my own perception, although the two versions coexist. I do not experience nature in its constricting definition, nor do I observe its boundaries.

This separation from a traditional definition of nature and my personal exploration into what its meaning is to me led to changes in my creative direction, not necessarily in subject matter, but certainly in application and my material choices. At this point, my work quickly moved into a more three-dimensional realm that used a more overtly naturalistic approach. This is when I began to explore and question my connection to natural world, not in theory, but in a way that was distinctly tactile. In moving away from my previous work of creating images and into a more concrete world

of objects. I began to shed some of the mediation that was a product of this transition. In *Step by step* (Figure 1) for example, I was no longer simply creating images with lines made by graphite filled sticks; I was making objects by using sticks as lines.



Figure 1. Kris Hargis, *Step by step*, 2014

In this new way of working that has evolved out of the questions I am asking myself, the strategy of rendering each part to perform a certain task is a way for me to control the form. Also important for me is a requirement for each part to have innate

characteristics that are significant in themselves. Seeking out the balance between the two qualities has provided insight into my own connections, but as my curiosity increased, so did my questions. I realized that although my relationship with the materials was solid and reciprocal, my theoretical understanding of nature was not.

Timothy Morton's book 'Ecology Without Nature: *Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*' represented for me a new way to think about this essential question. I felt the overarching message of his text was that 'nature' is the 'other'. We gave birth to the other when we set parameters for 'nature'. I am aware the word nature is a constructed human concept and it seems ridiculous to me to refer to nature as the other, but what I think he is getting at is that we have put up these boundaries for what nature can and cannot be, hence distancing ourselves from it.

In *The Ecological Thought*, he introduces the concept of the "mesh" to direct our attention to the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things, consisting of "infinite connections and infinitesimal differences."⁴ He writes, "... all life forms are the mesh, and so are all the dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and non-living beings."⁵ If we choose to accept his concept of nature, we can go right along the banks of our own Boise river or to the Olympic peninsula in Northwest Washington and see this reciprocal relationship with our own eyes, feel it with our hands, taste it in our mouths and, if we are patient enough to listen, we can even hear it.

Nature as we currently understand it is something that exists through a long process of differentiation. This process can have positive and negative effects, but it is

⁴ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 30.

⁵ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 30.

necessary. It is value neutral until values start to be projected on it. I apply a standard of differentiation that is unique and one example of how I integrate this is through the gleaning process.

Seeking in the Natural World

In my process of gathering that provides the materials I work with, *naturalness* is often a thing's primary identifying characteristic. I am drawn to things because of their uniqueness. I am aware that this might seem romantic, but it is honest. This process of seeking is one of the most fulfilling and important aspects of my creative journey. It is not driven by any specific agenda, but by my own idiosyncratic point of view and desire to search for things that are available within my chosen landscape.

Part of searching is realizing that my boundaries are more boundless than I knew. This responsive form of differentiation in my seeking helps me stay connected to the natural world, and also allows me time to think, breathe and discover newness. It is a challenge for me to walk along a river's edge and not return with a load of downed wood. These loads consist of stumps, sticks, limbs, or roots, all of which my hounds and I willingly carry or drag back to where we came from. Outings such as these, directly influence my desire to bring more of the natural world into my scope.



Figure 2. Kris Hargis, harvested lodgepoles - Fall 2015

Sometimes these remains are discovered by happenstance, while other times, I set out to harvest materials of specific shapes and sizes. In regards to lodgepoles (Figure 2) for example, I found a field of difference amongst the various species of downed limbs and from there I applied a criteria to the selection and their treatment. Through this transition, these fallen limbs took on an entirely new function because of my intervention.

The majority of my harvesting is compiled of downed material and what is still green, usually consisting of branches from the willow tree. Due to the nature of willow's pliability, strength and the straightness of the branches, these can be used to weave and construct the armatures which the clay and adobe can be pressed into. With willow's many uses, its sturdy qualities and longevity, it is no wonder it has such a rich history. In certain Native American cultures, willow was used for various purposes, depending on the geography of the tribe. The western tribes used it as a source of dyes and basket-

making material, while the Plains Indians used willow to create the armatures for their ceremonial sweat lodges.⁶

Prior to my immersion in the MFA program, I was building armatures of a different nature. My past history as a carpenter, I was mostly using dimensional lumber. I was still using my hands, but in a way that would be associated with traditional building techniques. For the most part, the majority of my carpentry jobs required specific methods to complete the project. Certainly there is an artistry present in the construction field, though many jobs were standardized and many lacked in creativity.

I am thankful for the skills that I learned while swinging hammers, but I rarely approach my art making in this same fashion. I prefer to just jump in and let the questions guide me, as this helps to eliminate the fear of being held to a certain model. This is not to say that I do not have any control of my actions or materials, just that I feel there is an integral, reciprocal relationship between the process, the maker, and their materials. This uncertainty is something that I trust. I have found that it is much more gratifying to create when I listen to the questions. When I am at a standstill and having a difficult time trusting this uncertainty, I often think of these following lines from a letter that Rilke wrote to Franz Kappus.

Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.⁷

⁶ *Native American Willow Mythology*. <http://www.native-languages.org/legends-willow.htm> (accessed March 7, 2016).

⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke, "Letter Four," in *Letters to a Young Poet*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1984).

In ‘Letters to a Young Poet’ we are able to read the correspondence between Rilke and Kappus, an aspiring poet who wanted some critique of his poems and advice about the life of a poet. His response to Kappus serves as a constant reminder to me to continue exploring and seeking, because I know that through trial and error, that at some point in time, by way of gesture, brushstroke, color, texture, fire, or whatever form it takes, the material and expression will allow the figure and form to develop. In my experience, it is often the pieces that I struggle with the most that are the ones that speak the loudest. The questions they ask are challenging me to extract more from them and in turn myself.

An artist that I feel lived the questions and eventually sought his way into the answers was the late Stephen DeStaebler. The figures and forms he created epitomize the human condition to me. At a very young age, the connection between humans and nature was engrained and absorbed by the artist through encounters with the landscape. His figurative sculptures were molded from clay – a medium that derives directly from the earth. “DeStaebler, in postmodern fashion, appropriates images of ancient sculpture’s bits and pieces into works new in material, but ancient in soul.”⁸ An excerpt from a review in the mid-nineties highlights one of the many characteristics that draws me to his work, but also serves as an influence when making my own; that being the ability to draw from the past in a contemporary environment and create something that is timeless. Also worth mentioning are his color palette, figurative expression, gesture of the form, and possibly the most significant, is that of the organic, explorative, and the physical presence

⁸ Andy Brumer, 1996. *STEPHEN DE STAEBLER*. (accessed March 11, 2016) <http://artscenecal.com/ArticlesFile/Archive/Articles1996/Articles0396/DeStaebler.html>

that exist in the construction of his sculptures. This presence is one of the many aspects that pulls me in and allows me to have a connection and conversation with his work.

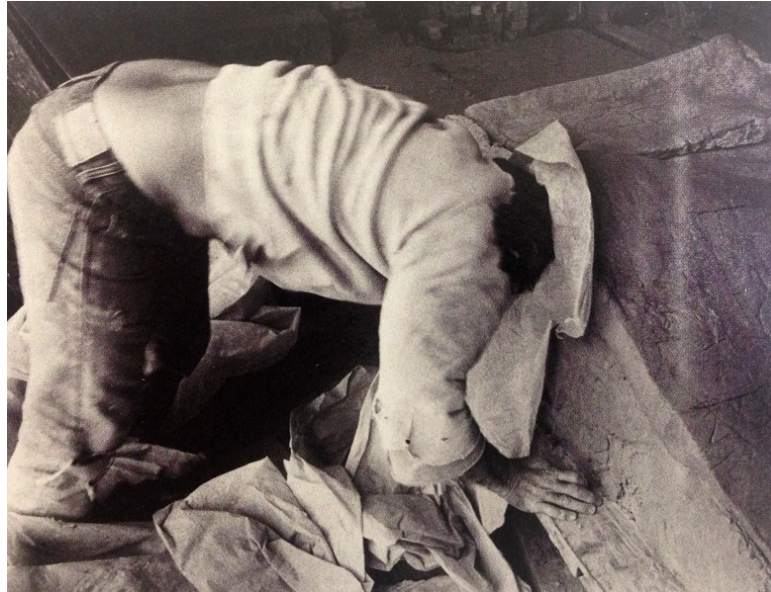


Figure 3. Stephen DeStaebl, Albany studio, 1974.

In the image shot in his Albany studio (Figure 3), he presses his head into the raw clay in order to make an impact and create a presence. I feel this impact is very important because it is physicality in motion, it is an impression; a moment captured in time. His approach to the stacking and building of his sculptures was very physical, bodily, and heavily rooted in process. In many ways, this image foreshadows my own impressions in clay represented in *Looking Ahead* (Figure 6) and *Chin up* (Figure 7). Many of us probably take this for granted, but our body has a natural relationship to process, it is in everything we do from the beginning to the end.

The relationship I feel to his work is similar to the way I view *The Jericho Skulls* (Figure 5) that date back to the Neolithic period. There is an authenticity that is very present in both DeStaebl's sculptures and *The Jericho Skulls*. In studying *Lavender Face with Missing Eye* (Figure 4) for example, one could assume he was aware of these

plastered human skulls, as there seems to be similarities in subject matter, material, construction, pigment, the casting of one's own face, and ultimately, the connection of humanity to the earth.



Figure 4. Stephen DeStaebler, *Lavender Face with Missing Eye*, 1976.

The *Jericho skulls* are thought of as the first portraits and serve as a natural connection between the living and the dead; these skulls provide evidence of the earliest art practices through their adornment of paint, plaster, and shells. The plastering of these human skulls was not just a treatment for the dead, it was also a way to celebrate, remember and honor their life in a way that may be more powerful and tactile than a thought or a memory.



Figure 5. *The Jericho Skulls, National Museum, Amman, Jordan*

The so-called Jericho skull on the right is among the oldest human remains in the British Museum collection. Thought to be between 8,500 and 9,300 years old, it is one of seven Neolithic plastered human skulls found together by Kathleen Kenyon during excavations at Jericho in 1953.⁹

⁹ Alexandra Fletcher, 2014. *What lies beneath: new discoveries about the Jericho skull*. (accessed February 3, 2016) <http://blog.britishmuseum.org/2014/07/03/what-lies-beneath-new-discoveries-about-the-jericho-skull/>

CHAPTER TWO: THE INTERSUBJECTIVE SELF

In *Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday*, Imogen Racz challenges the traditional understanding of normative sculptural narratives by highlighting a number of artists that stretch this framework.

Sculptural practice is of the world, and is experienced spatially, materially and in time. Sculpture is measured against the scale of the body, and the audience needs to move around it to engage with its material reality. Its physicality can act as a metaphor and stand in for other states. Found and manipulated objects hold echoes of their previous existence both in function and material. This does not mean that sculpture, objects and installations are 'reality'; their staging is also crucial. They act as mediators between art and life, and articulate the elusive boundaries between fact and the subjective values we ascribe to things. As such, sculpture can enhance our perceptions about what it means to be in the world.¹⁰

This description resonates with me because I also feel that sculpture has the capacity to become more like us than other art forms because of the way it shares the space we experience it in. For the viewer, a potential for intersubjective communication exists in works that evoke a sense of pathos, such as compassion or life experience in relation to the human form through particular material choices. However, one can never truly know another person's emotional life but through the process of art making, I strive to create openings that allow the viewer to be fully present and to bring their full self to the experience and to share in the completion of these objects.

¹⁰ Imogen Racz. *Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014),1.



Figure 6. Kris Hargis, *Looking Ahead*, 2015

Siri Hustvedt refers to the intersubjective dialog with an artwork in *Art is a Memory*.

Looking at art is always an intersubjective experience, and when I say that I mean that looking at art is, no matter how beautiful the table is, it's different and that the traces of a living consciousness remain a force in any work of art, so that the experience you are having is not identical to that of a living person who can speak back to you, but that it is nevertheless, intersubjective, that we treat works of art more like people than we treat the spoon.¹¹

¹¹ Louisiana Channel. *Siri Hustvedt: Art is a memory*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1DcWiy5xDA&feature=share&list=UUY2mhw-XNZSxrUynsI5K8Zw> (accessed August 1, 2014)



Figure 7. Kris Hargis, *Chin up*, 2015

The way I understand the concept of intersubjectivity through her ideas is that it is only attainable if one can approach the object in an open and honest way. A moment that is formed by and can be shared through our collective personal experiences is one characteristic that allow my sculptures to function in the manner that they do. This in itself is a myth, a romantic idea, but still it seems present and genuine in my work, thus allowing me to make things that have this potential.

It is a strange thing when at one moment, one goes from looking at an object to becoming the subject. I mean to suggest that there is a transformation that is possible in the experience of looking at something that is physically looking back at you and asking for something. Therefore, the focus has the potential to shift from the object or artwork, back to the viewer, or, what is now the subject. This was my experience in the making of

these sculptures and I have constructed these pieces with an intentionality that provides for the possibility of an exchange between us as individuals, and ultimately, a collaboration between our shared connection.

CHAPTER THREE: THE INTERSTICE OF IDEAS

A susceptibility that I believe we all share, whether it is social, physical or emotional, can appear in many forms, such as honesty, exposure, empathy or compassion. These are instances that occur when we put our self out there in the open and when this happens, there is always a chance that some may perceive these susceptibilities as signs of inability, but I do not align with this belief.

The notion of the construction of other, objectification and the reaffirmation of power structures is not something that I am not thinking of in the same way as the dominant and theoretical structures. I am setting aside these legitimate questions to say that what I identify as an issue is that this notion of creating boundaries between the self and other beings or the differentiation of the self from nature are constructs that do not match the way I move through the world and are paradigms that I have not embraced. The theoretical landscape that attempts to find a rational for why it exists the way it does, is also not part of my consideration.

I am finding that this system is one that constantly assumes our space and is hard to break free from and form your own thoughts. In the Eighth Duino Elegy, Rilke acknowledges this construct.

Never, not for a single day, do we have before us that pure space into which flowers endlessly open. Always there is World and never Nowhere without the No: that pure unseparated element which one breathes without desire and endlessly knows. A child may wander there for hours, through the timeless stillness, may get lost in it and be shaken back. Or someone dies and is it. For, nearing death, one doesn't see death; but stares beyond, perhaps with an animal's vast gaze. Lovers, if the beloved were not there blocking the view, are close to it,

and marvel... As if by some mistake, it opens for them behind each other... But neither can move past the other, and it changes back to World. Forever turned towards objects, we see them in the mere reflection of the realm of freedom, which we have dimmed.¹²

His eloquent and melancholic words reference the idea of the self and how one is immediately and often, surrounded by another; physically, theoretically or psychologically. In addition to referencing the pressure we feel from the outside, he reminds us of the importance of having our own voice, our own space, possibly one that is not yet understood.

My work attempts to address things in an authentic and different manner. Similarly, through my writing, I am trying to approach concepts from a perspective that does not represent the way things are traditionally understood. It might seem foolish to try and explain something that exists outside of codified ideas that carry with them a lot of historical authority, but I am beginning to understand that *my* ideology lies more in the interstice.

Looking from a space in between articulated positions, the self is easy to understand, as is the other. I am viewing this from a position of examining the empirical quality of those two things and the space in between. This position could also be taken in the discussion of the human/nature concept. Approaching these questions from the place of codified knowledge; the agreed understandings of these things declare for positions. My interest lies in the place between the self/other relationship.

My work does not talk about the construction of the other or attempt to reinstate hierarchical power systems. I acknowledge that these theoretical ideas exist and how they

¹² Rainer Maria Rilke. *The selected poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1984) 193.

act, but I am not interested in a world of differentiation or distancing. I am interested in giving the viewer an opportunity to see how we are more similar, than not. I see signs of strength and resilience in our similarities and our differences.

Historically, we have created a construct that suggests that those who conceive of themselves as more whole or intact should look down on those who are in need or marginalized. This concept is teased apart in Margrit Shildrick's book, "Embodying the Monster: *Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*" where she lays the groundwork for the western cultural view of vulnerability.

Vulnerability is figured as a shortcoming, an impending failure both of form and function; a predicate that marks its subject as potentially beyond normative standards of being. It is not exactly that vulnerability is denied in and by the normative subject, but that the 'proper' unfolding of human life and exercise of selfhood, is taken to overcome such dangers. Those who too readily admit or who succumb to vulnerability are either weak or unfortunate, beset by moral and/or material failure.¹³

She is saying that we have been deliberately taught this specific way of seeing and identifying vulnerability as such and this is a way to reassert a dominant power structure and enforce a power-based ideology that seeks to keep some people oppressed more than others.

By removing the interstice from the self/other relationship and focusing on the us, "then we place less emphasis on vulnerability as the dependency of others, and more on the notion of vulnerability as the risk of ontological uncertainty for all of us."¹⁴ Shildrick highlights a very crucial facet of my overall understanding of vulnerability. This aspect

¹³ Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the monster: encounters with the vulnerable self* (London: SAGE, 2002), 71.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 71.

being; that if we could see that due to the commonality of our existence, we are more alike than different, then possibly we would be one step closer to coexisting with one another as vulnerable beings.

CHAPTER FOUR: MANIFESTING VULNERABILITY THROUGH PROCESS

Before I had even seriously considered vulnerability as a word or what it meant, I was using it as a way to understand my emotions and the emotions of others. In a similar way that I accept transparency as a way to understand myself and other people, it also provides a window into my own creations. In order to realize or at the very least, begin to realize these understandings, I have to also become the viewer to my own artwork or object, to remove myself as the maker. I am aware that my artwork will not affect everyone, but I make them act in a very direct way, a way that allows this susceptibility to be evident through the material choices, gesture of the form or figure, and the scale or tension that are emphasized in particular ways.

I do not know how my process of making art differs from other artists, but for me, it is unique, habitual, cathartic, and sometimes quite convulsive. I intuitively make work that is responsive to my materials, my thoughts, and my subject matter; the work communicates, but I do not know if I have words for that communication.

Things aren't all so tangible and sayable as people would usually have us believe; most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered, and more unsayable than all other things are works of art, those mysterious existences, whose life endures beside our own small, transitory life¹⁵

Rilke addresses this very thing in this first letter to Franz Kappus I relate to what he is saying because there is something that happens when my body, mind and hands interact

¹⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, "Letter One," in *Letters to a Young Poet*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1984).

and intervene, a level of fluency is created that is unsayable. I know the language is on the outskirts, but the work is here and intact. My empathy for the materials, for people and for my surroundings is all poured into these objects, these non-living beings. I feel these sculptures convey a naturalistic material expression that speaks of the timeless and archaic.

There is an interdependence between the materials and me, it is a quality that I cherish, a relationship that I have found in very few beings in my life, living or non-living. Just as I listen in other relationships, I also have to listen to the raw materials. Each fragment of wood and each clay form have their breaking point and if I push too far, the material may fail, thus requiring me to reciprocate with gentleness and balance through touch and quality of hand. Sensitivity to the materials helps me to form gradients of specificity that acknowledge and emulate vulnerability.

In the face of frailty (Figure 8) is assembled in a manner that is solid in its construction, yet there are areas that have implications of time on this earth. For instance, there are certain parts that are much more exposed to possible damage than others, such as the figure's torso, which is constructed by feeding and bending young willow saplings through pre-drilled holes throughout the wooden armature. This technique is repeated horizontally and vertically, thus creating a grid-like system in which each intersection is then bound with annealed bailing wire. This armature acts as a rib cage of sorts and provides a foundation for the un-fired clay and adobe to be pressed into and form a dried and fibrous flesh. After these materials have cured, I then skin over them with a mixture of beeswax and Damar varnish.



Figure 8. Kris Hargis, *In the face of frailty*, 2014

There are parts of the figure that are more solid in their make-up, specifically, the figure's left leg (viewer's right). Carved from a driftwood log of Western red cedar, this appendage acts as a grounding platform for the sculpture as a whole. In contrast, the hip articulation on the figure's right leg (viewer's left) speaks to a feebleness or lack of being fully intact, not necessarily signifying trauma, but instead evoking a sense of pathos through empathy, similarity, or life experience. The way the figure is canted and occupies space in isolation, is suggestive of a brittleness that we may all share someday.

As we age, we become less able and more susceptible to danger; time makes us more fragile and our ability status will always be the one thing that is ever changing in our life.

This involvement is something that Susan Sontag references in her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she says that “Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers.”¹⁶ She was specifically referencing the ‘war machine’ and how people become less responsive to the horrors or the pain, if they feel that they cannot be immobilized. Her ideas can also be applied to my concern for our shared humanity and its various routes of navigation. *In the face of frailty* serves as a reminder of those routes, the uncertainty that we all face as we continue on and the spirit we must have to do so.

This spirit is something that I carry with me in life and in my art practice. An affinity that I believe is also shared by artists such as Martin Puryear and Magdalena Abakanowicz. One of Puryear’s most influential instructors, Nell Sonneman, shared with him his personal philosophical and spiritual approach to art of making, in which Puryear took very seriously. In many instances under the instruction of Sonneman, “...Puryear would find the processes of art identified as inseparable from the artist’s own being: art as a sphere of the psyche wherein an individual’s physical and intellectual existence might be joined.”¹⁷ This unique communion between the body and the mind is often present in my life. The feeling is not something that one can easily explain with words; it is physical and connective, mental, tactile, and for me it is the language that I understand most. I do not know if Puryear and I share this connection because of our similar interests

¹⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003), 101.

¹⁷ Neal Benezra, *Martin Puryear* (The Art Institute of Chicago: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 15.

in drawing, painting, constructing objects, nature or perhaps, it is our admiration for Danish furniture. I feel this explorative parallel of life and art is based on the continued experience of us as individuals as much as it is on us as a community.



Figure 9. Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Brown Coat*, 1968



Figure 10. Martin Puryear, *Cedar Lodge*, 1977

My work titled *Shingle Creek Lodge* (Figure 12) bears some formal and conceptual similarities to Puryear's *Cedar Lodge* (Figure 10) and Abakanowicz's *Brown Coat* (Figure 9). Mine was a site-specific structure built shortly after moving to Boise. It was a sanctuary that was symbolic of a place lost or missing in my life, both spiritually and physically. Having left my home and studio on the coast, I was feeling somewhat lost and placeless. During this period, I was being challenged to make work about the presence of the human figure without actually including it. This was perplexing to me and after many attempts in the studio, I realized that I was not occupying the space that

this work was meant to be constructed. So I headed to one of my favorite trailheads in the Boise foothills, Dry creek trailhead (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Kris Hargis, Dry Creek Trailhead, Spring 2015

I was searching for a specific place; an open space, a shelterbelt of trees and eventually I found an area that was comprised of both of those criteria. After six weekends of harvesting material, stripping bark, piecing and weaving the lodge together, a pit was stacked and a fire was lit. After packing up and preparing to hike out the last morning, I looked back and I was no longer perplexed. I saw the impression of a human figure and it was my own.

Shingle Creek Lodge, Puryear's *Cedar Lodge* and in a similar manner Magdalena Abakanowic's *Abakans* series, specifically the garmet-like *Abakan, Brown Coat* (Figure 9), all address the vulnerability of the self and evoke a deeply personal and natural environment through form, material choices and/or chosen location. One characteristic linking these works, is the presence of the artist, but also, the non-presence. What I mean

by this is that while I was constructing and upon completion of my lodge, I felt intertwined and embedded within it and although I am not always physically there, I am inseparable from it. I do not know if I can name this feeling, but it returns to me every time I visit.



Figure 12. Kris Hargis, *Shingle Creek Lodge*, 2014

CONCLUSION

If all the things we were taught and the names of things along with their meanings were all meaningless, then I would like to think that I would exist in a similar manner as I do today, as a gleaner. Walking through life and gathering pieces and parts that allow me to create and understand my own ideology.



Figure 13. Kris Hargis, *The Gleaner*, 2016

Having been pressed to find the answer to the why and for whom I make the things I do, I have come to realize that nature or the natural is a cornerstone to my process, but the most important aspect of my work, is that of the human connection. If I am able to create something that allows the possibility for someone to pause for a moment and see something new or different from how they saw it in the past, then I have done my work successfully.

A Shared Connection has allowed me to explore the ways that I feel that vulnerability is a link to humans in the natural world. Providing me an opportunity to better understand the historical views on how and why we identify nature and each other the way we do. However, by distancing myself from these dominant views and conventional definitions, my outlook has become more clear. I have solidified my ideas and expressed them to you in way that I was previously unable to do.

This body of work was created with the intention of communicating from a different standpoint. One that seeks to be free of boundaries and formed by our collective experiences. Offering the possibility to compassionately look into our self, but to also look outward towards one another in more of an empathetic and intersubjective way. Through this view we will hopefully start to see vulnerability not so much as a weakness, but more as a strength.

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