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Just Enough: The Work of Susan Vander Kooi

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JUST ENOUGH: THE WORK OF SUSAN VANDER KOOI

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
Susan E. Vander Kooi
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Accepted by:
David Detrich, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

This body of work considers how psychological human experience parallels the rhythms of the natural world, with an aesthetic of spare elegance. Focusing on the desert and a temperate forest in winter, I explore the concept of having *just enough* and *too much*, and its effect on human mentality, both during and resulting from times of scarcity. Stories are a fundamental part of the work. Wall texts containing narratives function as an entrance point for the viewer. Using metaphor, simple grandeur, and ritual, this work provides an opportunity to inhabit the artwork through installation and photography. Photography encourages the viewer to imagine themselves within the landscape, and the installations are concrete places to experience that ask the viewer to wonder about the landscape from which it was born.

DEDICATION

To my grandparents, who loved loved and supported me always; who passed on to me their affinity for stories and knowledge of the land. Thank you for fostering my imagination and collecting all sorts of fun stuff for art making.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank God, first and foremost, for his grace towards me, and for giving me just enough to get me through these last several years. Thanks to my committee members, Dave Detrich, for bringing me to Clemson and leading me in this process, Anderson Wrangle, for photographic advice and a new reference always at the ready. And to Andrea Feeser, for encouraging me and taking the time to listen and sort out my unorganized thoughts with kindness. Thanks also to my family for their constant love and support, and to the Shotsberger family for enveloping me into your home, cooking dinner when I was installing my show, and all-around keeping me sane. To The Well for being free and willing unskilled laborers, and to everyone at DCF for reminding me of Truth and sharing your stories and inviting me into the rhythms of your lives.

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INTRODUCTION

This exhibition contains sculptural installations and photographs that use story as a fundamental influence. Rich in imagery and metaphor, the collection of artworks are visual poems that become inhabited by the viewers. Aspects of the human experience are condensed into carefully constructed pieces that invite contemplation with their spare elegance.

For this body of work, I am considering two different types of landscape formally and conceptually: the desert, and a temperate forest during winter. With both of these climates I investigate the ideas of *just enough* and *too much* through narrative. These oppositions are closely entwined; one condition often being the root cause of the other. The potential for this theme of *just enough/too much* ranges from being literal, often in the case of understanding the resources available within a landscape, to metaphoric. The metaphor arises when one understands the conditions of a life event, or life as a whole, through the lens of nature. Our awareness of life, and what it takes to sustain ourselves, becomes heightened when we consider the conditions of these two stark environments.

This is where story and parable become key. Parables are simple stories that illustrate truths about life and spirituality. All these pieces are motivated by narratives—from nature, from desert sages, and from my own experience. Stories frame vision into the desert, offering complexity that is tied to place. Each one carries a thread of the spiritual through it, with themes of contemplation, meditation, providence, and supplication. The stories direct my viewers. They function as an entrance and an orientation to considering landscape as a parallel to psychological conditions and the narrower theme of *just enough/too much*. The desert stories focus on need, surrender,

and hope that is required to survive for long periods of time in dry conditions—deserts are large. An event as extreme as the stripping-away that the desert requires causes a reaction. As Isaac Newton observed, every action has an equal and opposite reaction. A natural reaction of an encounter with scarcity is to cushion oneself against possible lack in the future. The forest piece focuses on the results of living through the kind of scarcity that is realized in the desert.

My work considers the psychological human experience that can be found mirrored in the land and the atmosphere. Nature is often used as a descriptor of emotional states of being. If we allow ourselves to step closer to the natural world and be open to awareness of it we can identify connections between the rhythms of nature and the rhythms of life. We express emotions through images that are taken directly from nature using phrases and idioms like: waves of grief, every cloud has a silver lining, out of the woods, dark night of the soul, weather a storm, when it rains it pours, pure as snow, icy temperament.

Ruskin critiqued the Romantic painters and poets for assigning emotion to objects in nature to make them sympathize with human emotion¹. Ruskin's theory of pathetic fallacy is tempting to look to when considering the connection between nature and the human psyche. But the lens of nature I'm suggesting to understand our emotions through is not one that allows us to imprint our own feelings upon nature. What I am suggesting is to understand the rhythms of nature and recognize that their own life can speak to ours. They run parallel; the landscape and weather are indifferent to human psychology. We recognize the objective cycles of nature as we see them in ourselves.

¹ Tall, Deborah. From Where We Stand: Recovering a Sense of Place. Syracuse University Press, 2016. p 214.

Deserts are not angry, or even spiritual—deserts are dry and large and entirely unaware of emotions or spirituality. We don't assign emotions to the landscape, but understand the rhythms of life through nature's unemotional existence. We don't understand nature through our own experience, but we look to understand our human experiences through nature. The order is important to communicate this distinction. Nature then teaches us about scarcity and surrender through deserts because it is the way of deserts to have limited resources and to swallow all but what is necessary to survive.

JUST ENOUGH: DESERT RIVER

There is a traveler in the desert, lost and unsure of how far away the edges of this barren land may be. Tired, thirsty, and scared, the traveler stumbles across a cup of water, just enough to push on and walk a little farther. Then another glass appears. And another. This is no desert oasis; it is not a cold spring or torrential downpour. But it is just enough, the traveler hopes, to lead him out of the desert. Though, in fact, the end of the providential line of cups is unknown.

I begin with the severe desert landscape for the first pieces of this exhibition, exploring stories and phenomena found in this vast, dry terrain. The desert was a natural choice for me because of my own experience of having just enough strength and resources to keep going, but no more. The desert is an embodiment of the toll of having *just enough*. In the desert there is nothing but a hard, horizontal line that separates sand

and sky—unforgiving to a traveler. The earth is a mass of dry, hot sand; the color unvaried, the wind unchecked. The horizon boasts solid blue sky from where the sun beats down without the hindrance of atmosphere. In the desert, a wanderer is small, unseen by the sun. Nature doesn't care for one's spirituality or survival, it is unforgiving in its disinterest.

The piece entitled, *Just Enough: Desert River* is a photographic series of a temporary outdoor installation. The images depict a desert landscape; a setting of pale sand and striking blue sky. Lines are carved into the dunes by the relentless wind. Cutting through the middle of the landscape is a line of transparent glasses that contain various amounts of water, though none of them are full, the sky reflects its brilliant color to the water. The cups are not uniform, they are large and small, wine, water and juice glasses all mixed together. Some have tipped over, spilling their contents onto the dry sand. The cups disappear into the horizon, the end unseen.



These photographs document an ephemeral site-specific sculpture, but function primarily as artwork in and of themselves. It is generally assumed that photographs capture a moment in time. They are representative and often used to document. When looking at photography as an art form, it is understood that the photographer chooses to focus on certain elements within a wider scene to create a specific type of photograph. The photograph shows you the artist's view. What is seen has been carefully scripted. It is more than mere documentation, because it is composed purposefully to communicate the desires of the artist. Installation, conversely, allows viewers to move freely through it and explore other vantage points. It is still an experience directed by the artist, but movement is encouraged. The piece can be understood from different vantage points. When these two mediums conjoin, there is an awareness of what is told to the viewer and what is experienced by the viewer.

I chose to use photography for *Desert River* because the scope and dryness of the desert was essential to understand the position of the traveler. I wanted the viewer to recognize their place within the landscape, and because photography is most commonly used to capture a time and place, this was the most effective way to place the viewer and get them to understand the setting. The photograph also allowed me to organize the composition into a story by bringing certain elements to the forefront. The first glass in *Desert River I* is monumental. The viewer is placed low to the ground, in the position of one who is crawling or lying on their stomach in the sand. This is similar for the *22 Degree Halo* photographs, where first the shape the collection of glasses form is emphasized, and then the vastness of the landscape is presented through the second

photograph. Using both these photos communicates the expansive wilderness and (in contrast to *Desert River I*) the modest scale of the glasses.

The *Desert River* installation took place in the Oregon sand dunes, a site chosen for its accessibility and environmental conditions, as the appearance of endless, windblown sand and clear sky was a necessity. One unexpected result of the wind was that the sand was blown from underneath some of the glasses, their foundations flying away and leaving them at unplanned angles, tipping and spilling their contents onto the pristine sand. Though this was unforeseen, it emphasized the ephemerality of the sculpture. I imagined the traveler would have to continue walking to ensure they got to the water before it was compromised by the elements of the desert. It provided an additional element of anxiety and displayed the conditions of the desert in photographs that might not have been communicated with perfectly upright glasses dotting the landscape.

The use of a directional line gives the viewer a way to visually travel through the photograph and provides a sense of where they are and where they should be going next. The perspective anchors the viewer and provides a sense of scale, showing the vastness of the desert. It also draws attention to the other lines in the composition: the hard horizontal line that separates sky and sand, and the small lines formed by windblown sand. In comparison, the line of glasses is unnatural. The glasses might be affected by the desert's harsh conditions, but it is obviously not a natural source of water. It has been placed there, the provision of water not an accident or a lucky stumbling across of a stream or river. There is something unsettling about this gift. The repetition of glasses that form the line also strike a push and pull between the suspicious feeling of breadcrumbs left to lure travelers into a trap, and supernatural provision.

The variety of types and styles of glasses underscore the feeling of desperation, of taking whatever is offered, of using whatever is on hand to accomplish what is needed. The domestic nature of the material also contributes to the dialogue of what is natural and what is not. The vessels represent a place of comfort, of civilization, of a certain amount of refinement. Finding them in the desert, displaced from their usual residence in kitchen cupboards and dining room tables creates an incongruity that contrasts the two environments represented: that which is domestic and refined, and that which is wild and harsh.

The specific choice of glass containers was important for several reasons. They had to be sturdy, purposeful, and not to be mistaken for litter or remnants of previous visitors. The glass material also offered a unique dialogue since glass and sand share almost identical chemical components. They are, essentially, the same material, separated primarily by different cooling rates.

The tale of the traveler in the desert is a parable—a story meant to illustrate truths that find meaning within one’s spirit. The desert communicates need; the cups of water, supernatural provision. The installation and photographs describe tension between feelings of gratefulness, mistrust, doubt and desperation. These conflicting reactions are common among those who have experienced long stretches of scarcity when they are shown reprieve through an act of kindness.

Working in the landscape as opposed to within a gallery setting has several advantages. One of these is it gives the viewer an understanding of their placement. This happens immediately when working in the landscape, either because of the viewers presence within it, or in this case, because the photographs provide an easily recognizable environment that is accepted as having certain characteristics. The desert

is understood to be a sandy and dry place without easy access to food and, more importantly, water. These assumptions are an advantage because they quickly establish the nature of the environment I am concerned with. The viewer is able to mentally transport themselves to this environment because of the representation provided through the photograph.

Historically, many artists took advantage of working in the landscape during the Earthworks movement that took place around the 1970's, with many of them working in the desert. Their preference for the desert had little to do with the necessity to communicate an understanding of that specific landscape, but because of the availability of large portions of land to manipulate without the difficulties and consequences that would occur if they were to work in a more populated area. Despite the similarities in landscape between my work and the American Earthwork artists, I relate more closely to the British land artists, who treaded lightly upon the land. Richard Long is a contemporary artist working solely with natural materials in the landscape. He also uses photography as a record, document, and final product to capture and display his work outside the specific site in which it took place. Long is also communicating an importance of connection to the earth. His creations are process driven—his time in the landscape is of utmost importance. My work brings natural and unnatural elements together for the purpose of understanding environment in relation to the lives we lead apart from it.

By bringing manmade materials into nature my work has some reference to that of the artist Christo, intervening in the landscape so the viewer can understand a specific aspect of their relationship to the place. In this instance, I am focusing on the the size of the desert and the absence of water. Christo emphasizes contrast between the natural

and the manmade, as opposed to other earth artists who challenged the distinction between art and nature. However, the scale of my work is on a more intimate level and so relates in that way to Long's creations. The use of manmade objects is an effort to bridge the gap between what is "out there" and what is "in here." The "in here" being the life we experience as humans in a contemporary world. There are emotional and psychological struggles that seem separate from the natural world, but are not unfamiliar when examining the cycles of life, death, need, and abundance that is found in nature.

All these components work together to create an experience that places the viewer in the position of the traveller crossing the desert in the story at the beginning of the chapter. The story is a way to depict a psychological struggle of scarcity. There are times where we lack, or perceive ourselves lacking, everything but that which is needed for survival. This mindset is a familiar one for me over the past several years as I have dealt with loss, financial instability, health concerns of my own and my family's, being separated from friends and family, and spiritual turbulence. During this time, the desert has called to me, luring me to a place where the outside environment reflects the place I find myself in spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. Belden Lane writes very specifically about this in his book *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*. Lane is similarly dealing with loss after being informed of his mother's illness and imminent death and finds himself drawn to extreme environments during this time, most notably, deserts. The desert is a manifestation of his internal state of mind in which he can physically place himself and tangibly interact with and experience. There seems to be a catharsis when internal and external environments match. Setting and state of mind are woven together.

"This intimate connection between spirit and place is hard to grasp for those of us living in a post-Enlightenment technological society. Landscape and spirituality are not,

for us, inevitably interwoven. We experience no inescapable linkage between [...] habit and *habits*, where one lives and how one practices a habit of being. Our concern is simply to move as quickly (and freely) as possible from one place to another. We are bereft of rituals of entry that allow us to participate fully in the places we inhabit.”²

Because a large part of the reason I find myself in this psychological landscape is spiritual, I have examined biblical accounts involving the desert, of which there are many. God is often leading his people into the desert to strengthen their reliance upon him, knowing that the empty desert could not sustain a nation without supernatural aid. When God leads his people out of slavery in Egypt, he takes them the long, roundabout way to the Promised Land, directing them through the desert. Here, he provided manna that fell from the sky every morning for the people to gather and eat. However, the manna didn't last overnight, and those who took more than they needed for the day found it rotten in the morning. This was an exercise in faith that their God would provide sustenance for them in the barren desert. Similarly, the vessels filled with water require trust from the traveler that the water is good to drink, and that the line glasses will lead away from harm.

22 DEGREE HALO

There was a group of people living in the desert wilderness. One night, they saw a ring around the moon, and knowing the proverb: ring around the moon means rain soon, they all ran to their kitchen cupboards to grab their glasses. They placed them into

² Lane, Belden C. *Solace of Fierce Landscapes Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*. Cary: Oxford UP, USA, 2014. Print.

a ring that mirrored the one they'd seen in the sky, and hoped for rain to come fill their cups.

These images are of a temporary installation located in the desert of Eastern Washington state. This pair of photographs in conversation with *Just Enough: Desert River*. The same basic components from the previous photographs are used — clear glasses set in the desert. Using the same glasses in both locations strengthens the connection between the two pieces, and makes sense considering the haphazard assembly of resources in a place of scarcity. The story entwined with the work is also similar, involving a thirsty people in a dry land. They differ from the *Desert River* in a few ways, though. In this photographic series, the water is not present within the vessels, but hoped for, and the mode of receiving the water would be natural, in the form of rain. This scene is one of hope, of longing, of prayer for the sign of coming rain to be fulfilled. Instead of leading the viewers eye back into the horizon and the enigma of the seemingly never ending glasses, this arrangement uses a finite number of glasses that originate from a desert people, rather than the mysterious unknown of the desert.

The title, *22 Degree Halo*, comes from the atmospheric phenomenon where ice crystals in the sky form a ring around the sun or moon. The ice crystals show that there is moisture high in the sky in the form of thin cirrus clouds. These clouds precede a storm. The saying “ring around the moon means rain soon” is not an exact science or a promise. This is a piece about anticipation and supplication.

The landscape is also markedly different. Though both regions represented in the photographs are deserts, the presence of brush and even flowers in the *22 Degree Halo* series provides a different understanding of the term desert. One composition is

arranged to emphasize the circular shape the glasses have been placed in. This is to mirror the image of the halo that was seen in the sky. It is an exchange between the people and the sky. A response of faith that rain will come as indicated by the sign. The other photograph fills in the narrative by describing the surrounding land and shows the viewers the necessity of water. This is wilderness as far as the eye can see, and the rocky surface sustains only the hardiest grasses. This quick illustration of place is yet another benefit of working within the landscape.

WHEN THE STREAM GAVE ITSELF TO THE WIND

Awad Afifi the Tunisian, a dervish teacher in the nineteenth century, told his students of the wisdom of the North African desert through the story of a gentle rain that fell upon a mountain peak far away. The story goes that the rain formed a stream that ran happily down the mountain, splashing and playing with loud joy until it reached the bottom of the mountain where it pooled atop the sand of the neighboring desert. It could go no further, and it despaired. Then a whisper from the desert told the stream to give itself to the wind, for the wind could cross the desert. The stream cried that it wanted to remain a stream. The desert wisely replied that it could no longer be a stream, it could either be a swamp at the desert's edge, or give itself to the wind, where it could fly over the desert and one day again fall to form a rushing stream.

With this story in mind, I considered the movement of water across the desert. My purpose was to trace the journey of a stream across the desert. During this research I discovered the desert phenomenon called *ghost rain*, a process that involves rainclouds gathering into a storm and dumping their heavy water onto the earth. But

instead of bringing life and nourishment, the rain evaporates before it ever reaches the ground because the surface of the earth is so hot that all moisture evaporates back into the sky before it can water the land. But nature is persistent, and this cycle repeats until the ground is cool enough to accept the moisture.

Many characteristics of this phenomenon contributed to my investigation of the concept of *just enough*: the need for nourishment, the harsh, unreceptive environment of the desert, the stubbornness of the vapor trying to fall, and the repeated deferment of what is essential.

I chose yarn to diagram the process of ghost rain because it allowed me to trace a line through space in a unique way. The color of the yarn is a variety of hues in the turquoise and teal color families. This is not simply representative of the perceived color of water, but chosen for the calming effect these colors evoke, which is similar to the feeling of standing in front of a large body of water. Communicating this serenity through the materials makes the piece meditative and inviting, compelling the viewer to step closer, into the midst of the repeated lines. The choice of yarn over other types of string also creates a quiet presence, bringing to mind afghans and knit sweaters, objects of comfort and relaxation. The fuzzy softness of the yarn references the domestic, like the glasses placed in the desert. It provides a contrast between the rugged and sparse desert and the objects of civilization. Through the placement of domestic objects in the desert, one considers the conveniences of our age, but contemporary life has its own harsh realities that are more complex than that of the desert.

As an installation piece, the form the yarn takes is altered with every space it occupies to create the most dynamic composition for that specific place. There are advantages of installing this piece in a gallery setting instead of a natural landscape,

beginning with the ability for viewers to inhabit the artwork. With photography, the viewer sees the place and imagines what it's like to stand where I've placed the camera. In an installation, viewers stand inside the artwork and envision the conditions of the landscape it where it was born.

Yarn may not be a common material for contemporary artists not classifying their work as fiber art, but artist Chiharu Shiota has found the advantages of using yarn to draw three dimensionally. Her work is reminiscent of webs and nets, often overtaking a space with yarn in a single color. The message Shiota communicates deals with the interconnectedness of life and people. She sometimes uses boats to anchor the yarn in addition to walls and ceilings. Also visually related is the work of Eva Hesse, whose practice concentrated on investigating new and different materials. Hesse's use of string initiated fiber into the fine art world. Her work allows gravity to dictate the final form, which finds a place between the geometric and the organic. This has influenced my formal strategy with *When the Stream Gave Itself to the Wind*. Hesse's work, *Right After* (1969), is a primary reference for the way this installation is displayed, suspended from the ceiling as small groups of fiber and thinning into individual lines as the various lengths of string are pulled down by their own weight. The string sweeping up to form loose lines was also informative.

This entire exhibition pursues the grandeur that is found in nature and Olafur Eliasson is a firm reference point. Conceptually, *When the Stream Gave Itself to the Wind* is also in conversation with the work of Eliasson through the exploration of atmospheric conditions. His *Weather Project*, where he installed a large sun in Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern, is the most noted example of this manufacturing. Both *When the Stream Gave Itself to the Wind* and *Weather Project* use materials not directly

correlated to the essential and natural world to demonstrate an aspect of meteorology. Working with weather is not a unique idea for Eliasson, as he has also recreated rain in his piece named, simply, *Beauty*, and most of his work includes either water, light, or other natural elements. In contrast, my work does not function as ecological activism, but, like Eliasson, it asks the viewers to contemplate their relationship with the earth in a personal way. There is an awareness, when experiencing the artwork, of the place of human life within the natural world.

WHAT ONLY WINTER KNOWS (ACCUMULATION)

My most recent installation, *What Only Winter Knows (Accumulation)*, is a departure from the world of sand and scarcity into the abundance of the temperate forest. I specifically chose to concentrate on a temperate forest in wintertime because it offers the paradox of being both very different and very similar to deserts. Temperate forests are comprised of deciduous trees, which lose their leaves in the fall and stand bare through the winter. Unlike the desert landscape, this is a place of repetitive, vertical lines. These vertical lines interrupt the horizon, even to the point of obscuring it altogether. The sky is broken by empty branches, and when viewed from beneath the trees, is framed like a stained glass window. The forest is not normally devoid of life, but it is quiet—lying dormant—waiting to bloom for springtime.

What Only Winter Knows (Accumulation), may be a shift in landscape, but not from the concept of *just enough*. The installation amasses sticks and branches that have fallen onto the forest floor. They have been gathered, systematically sorted by size,

and bundled together. They stand vertically and loosely resemble the topography of a forest devoid of green leaves and needles.

This isn't another commentary on the experience of scarcity, it is a representation of the psychological consequence of scarcity. It's a reaction of those who know what it means to question if they will have enough. Collection, both during times of need and times of plenty, is a mark of one who has been effected by need.

The compulsion to collect reminds me of my grandparents, who grew up in the Great Depression era. While they were known by the whole family to be packrats, when they passed away it became obvious that growing up in an environment of *just enough* influenced their collecting tendencies. There was a basement pantry packed with non perishable food that expired ten years previous, and what looked like every article of clothing and pair of shoes bought by every family member in the past fifty years. They were not stingy with money—enjoying their comforts, traveling, and giving money to causes they supported and gifts to grandchildren. But inside that midcentury modern house they had stocked away resources to take care of the entire neighborhood if tragedy struck. Their collection of objects, both useful and not, was not because they were in need; they were well off by most's standards. But their experience of scarcity during their childhood affected their habits for the rest of their lives. We collect because we have experienced need. We arm ourself with anything we think might defend us from this need in the future of our unstable world. These are preventative measures.

Memories about my grandparents were among my most frequent thoughts as I combed the forest floor for downed tree debris. They are abundant—a natural resource in the temperate forests of the southeast United States. Abundance is the opposite of having just enough, but the abundance of one resource is often the reason for the

scarcity of another. In the desert there is an abundance of sand and sun that causes a lack of water.

Like in the case of my grandparents, the compulsion to collect often comes from the experience of need, and of never again wanting to be without. *What Only Winter Knows (Accumulation)* does not have a token resource that is absent as the desert does. But the presence of so much of one resource raises the question, what is (or was) missing that has deemed this extreme accumulation necessary? It speaks to the desire to amass resources that could be useful in the future. The sticks are abundant and useful for firewood or kindling. They are pushed tightly together, so the installation resembles a forest — a recreation of their origin. What does it mean to recreate a woods by preserving the debris of a living forest? There is an absence of life and foliage now, but this is temporary. The obsessive hoarding and accumulation represented stands as evidence of both an abundance of resources and also a mindset of scarcity. There is a need to preserve the abundance as an anxious defense against loss. It is a means of control in an environment perceived as unstable. This is the most significant aspect of the installation: the process.

While gathering sticks I consider the animals that live in forests preparing for winter. Squirrels stock away nuts for nourishment during the winter months. Bears fatten themselves in preparation of a long seasonal nap without breaking for meals. And while these animals are living off of their collections, I am collecting the fruits of winter. These dead and decaying sticks are useful as kindling to create fire and warmth—winter is cold and wet. As they decompose they become a home for insects and good soil for new growth. I collect them without the intention to use them in this manner. As Spring comes the forest inhabitants will warm and awake, and new branches will become tangles of

new growth and thick leaves. The old, fallen branches will soften and decay for insects to live in and feast upon. I am driven here because I want to preserve them, not for need, but for remembrance of the bareness of winter.

My purpose in using sticks is in the numbers, for as a resource they are plentiful. In this way I am influenced by Maya Lin, extracting meaning and emotion out of modest materials. Her work is influenced by the minimalist artists, and she uses the power of simple forms and large quantities to create great personal impact upon her viewers. Whoever encounters Lin's work realizes the intimate exchange that is experienced between the viewer and the artwork. This kind of emotional interaction between the work and the viewer is important to me, as I am communicating the connection between the psychological aspects of humanity and the patterns of nature. She has also impressed upon me the value of tension between contradictory ideas. Lin has said, "I'm always trying to find a balance. A place where opposites meet." As I am exploring the paradox where "just enough" and "too much" collide, her work has been a primary example of successful merging of opposites and the power of austere and elegant aesthetic.

The process of making the piece became a ritualistic exercise, not unlike Wolfgang Laib's process of collecting pollen every day, or the careful pouring of milk on marble that his *Milkstone* requires of gallery workers. Meditative in its simple and repetitive motions, collecting and sorting sticks involves interaction with the forest landscape, and then bringing the outdoors to the indoors. This piece is a hybrid of the first two, taking elements found in nature and bringing them into the gallery. This is not a new concept. Robert Smithson is known for doing this, for example, in his work *Dead Tree* (1969). Walter de Maria has been influential this piece as well, specifically through his *Earth Room* installations, and Olafur Eliasson is again a close contemporary when

considering his *Riverbed* (2014) installation. Maya Lin's arrangement of *2x4 Landscape* was also informative when considering formal decisions and communicating the topography of landscape.

Bringing the outdoors inside allows me to focus on a single element of the forest, as sticks are only one small part of the landscape. I can arrange them to fit my

motivation. The gallery is a

blank canvas that allows me to filter out aspects of the forest that distract from my purpose. Though I could install the piece outdoors, even in the forest where the sticks were gathered, the gallery alters the context and underscores the idea of stockpiling and preserving resources. The presence of the sticks indoors emphasizes their displacement from the forest and also displays the sheer quantity that has



been amassed. An obsessive quality emerges when we we consider this piece outside of its natural habitat.

By putting the sticks together in this way, the viewers are prompted to consider them in a way they wouldn't when hiking through a forest. There is a "look at this" mentality when the viewer sees the sheer number of sticks and considers the process of making this installation. By using sticks, I have taken something utterly insignificant and accumulated enough of it that it has to be noticed. This practice was inspired by Maya Lin, who has been very influential through the breadth of my work. She uses quantity to create a minimal, yet potent, aesthetic experience. In *Groundswell* (1993), she used 43 tons of broken glass to create a simple, flowing form that's reminiscent of a sea or snowscape. 58,318 names are etched into polished stone wall that makes the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. Lin understands the power in numbers and uses the material without embellishment.

CONCLUSION

There are three themes that reappear throughout the work, which I have explored. The grandeur that is found in nature, specifically the severe landscapes I've focused on. Condensed metaphor is another important characteristic that reaches across this exhibition that reaches elegantly through nature and using large quantities of a single material. The third idea that is represented through this work is the practice of ritual. Here, the processes epitomize the use of meditative, obsessive ritual, to create art pieces. These three ideas tie back to the connection we can understand through a landscape that is indifferent to us. Seasons of our lives can be recognized by looking at

the natural world around us. The ritualistic rhythms of the earth provide us with a metaphor to understand the often disorienting psychological experiences of the modern world. The grandeur of the natural world and its steady push forward through all landscapes and all seasons offer a way of seeing our place within the world. This is not to diminish human experience of suffering, joy, or anything in between. It allows us to understand our position and draw wisdom from those who have traveled this landscape before us.