12-2018

Ruination

Caren L. Stansell
Clemson University, carenstansell@yahoo.com

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RUINATION

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
Caren L. Stansell
December 2018

Accepted by:
Todd Anderson, Committee Chair
Dave Detrich
Beth Lauritis
ABSTRACT

My work is an investigation of illegal dumpsites located in the Blue Ridge area. This body of work serves as a timeline of the impact on the local landscape. Using photography, printmaking, and sculpture, I explore the environmental impact of the dumpsites, the accumulations of trash it creates, and the reclamation by nature. I seek to bring the global concern of trash into a local perspective.
DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to my family and to my daughter, Auden.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the Art Department faculty at Clemson University for the immense contribution that each have made in my growth and development as an artist. I would like to give a special thanks to my advisor, Todd Anderson for his support, patience and contributions. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dave Detrich and Beth Lauritis, for their guidance and critical feedback.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

My family bought two acres of land in rural Blue Ridge thirty-six years ago. They viewed it as an opportunity to become land owners and establish permanent roots in Upstate South Carolina. Blue Ridge is a rural region within the state of South Carolina that sits at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which belongs to the Appalachian Mountains chain. Little did we know our move to a sparsely populated countryside would forge within us a new kind of relationship with the landscape. We gained a new appreciation and subsequent feeling of being tied to the land. Once we moved to the countryside, we began gardening vegetables. Working in our gardens soon became a daily chore that would at times mean the difference between our family having food on our table or not. It quickly became apparent that this place was not only the location of our home, but a place that would help sustain us when my parents’ wages did not. Now as an adult I reflect on these years and understand the how and why for my deep connection to where I grew up as well as my sensitivity to the relationship with the natural world.

About two years ago while driving close to my home I happened to notice piles of trash off the side of the road. After driving by what I thought was someone’s yard and home several times, it became evident I had noticed a local illegal dumpsite. Upon parking to take a closer look, the dumpsite was more extensive than I first thought. The site varied from tiny bits of trash and much larger debris like an unusable boat and a seat from a van. My first reaction was a simultaneous shock and intrigue. The scale and varie-
ty of trash was substantial. For whatever reasons the dumpsite seemed at best ignored and at worst accepted by the surrounding homeowners. I understand that for many folks in my neighborhood it is a struggle to use the proper channels for trash disposal. Large items for trash pick up require fees and tags. Alternatively, this means taking large items to the dump yourself which involves the need of a truck or a suitable vehicle to which everyone does not have access. The costs of regular, weekly trash pick-up are likewise out of reach for many. Prior to trash pickup services people would utilize unused parts of the landscape to discard their trash. These dump sites were common in ravines or off the side of obscure back roads where the landowner was perceived as nameless.

My Masters of Fine Arts Thesis artwork focuses on illegal dumpsites in my neighborhood. My intent has been to create artworks that shed light on illegal dumping and hopefully serve as a catalyst for change. The thesis artworks can be understood as a visual and scholarly exploration on three primary themes: environment, accumulation, and reclamation. Creating work within these themes I navigate the viewer within a time-line of imagery where abstraction increases as they move through the artwork. To this end, several types of media including photography, printmaking, and sculpture were utilized. The resulting artworks confront their audiences with both real and two dimensional imagery of trash. The artworks encourage viewers to reconsider their assumptions about trash and the way in which they think about their local landscape.
CHAPTER TWO

SCULPTURES & PHOTOGRAPHS

Our relationship with trash is complicated. We are active participants in the cycle of trash. As humans, we work hard to dispose of our garbage in landfills, green plastic cans on the curb, and receptacles within the home. With this in mind, it was difficult for me to understand the level of dumping I experienced in the areas around my home. My artwork seeks to bring these specific environmental concerns to the local community while participating in a larger dialogue of what to do with our trash as a planet. Julia Kristeva’s Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection is a reference text about waste. Abjection is generally defined as the state of being cast off. Kristeva explains that through the creation of categories humans are able to order their surroundings. She describes categories such as cleanliness and filth, order and chaos. Kristeva uses these as a means for explicating abjection. (Gendering Landscape Art, 175) In these categories is where my work intersects and poses a threat to order. Kristeva goes on to explain that it is not the fear of production but the fear of the rejected returning. The reality of what we abject we can never be rid of; that is the horror.

The first way I chose to communicate the environmental impact of illegal dumping was through photographic documentation and the collection of trash from actual dumpsites. I then sorted and composed pieces of trash inside Plexiglass cubes. When seen in the cubes the artworks demonstrate visual dimensions and physical layers. The cube artworks serve as indexes and tangible reminders that these sites are real. Juxtaposing trash in this manner in a gallery space asks the viewer to revisit what one chooses to dis-
card and throw away. Armand Fernandez is a contemporary artist working with trash on a large scale. His collections of trash are what initially influenced me to collect and document trash from the sites. The trash I chose to keep ranged from small items like a deteriorating book to large items like a back seat of a van. Fernandez’s artwork is principally commenting on consumer culture. My work points to specific locations in my local landscape, which makes it more regional in nature.

Plexiglas cubes and photographs work together to become a bodily experience as well as a visual experience. While the sculptural cubes push out into the viewer’s space large photographs entice viewers into an illusionary constructed environment. In these two-dimensional artworks pristine nature and trash appear to compete for visual space while neither totally encompasses the image. These large scale pigment prints engulf and immerse the viewer in the complexity the image. Photographs are in full color in order to allow viewers to visually connect objects within the timeline represented.

Various forms of symmetry including bilateral, approximate, and radial, serve as the main entry point to the photographic artworks. I use of differing types of symmetry as a way to impose order on a thoroughly unordered place. While there is no current hard science on the effects of symmetry to the human psyche there is a good deal of soft science on the matter. For example, Michael Bird’s writing on symmetry for the Tate Museum notes that we register the presence of symmetrical features in our field of vision before we realize what we are looking at. This manipulation in photography draws the viewer into these sites but once present in the landscape the realization of what these constructed spaces are actually made of begins to be revealed. It is additionally believed that
the regular and predictable nature of symmetry creates a sense of calm, comfort, and order. (Understanding Art, 74) For these reasons I use this method of organizing the artworks picture planes as a means of subtly introducing my content to the viewer.

“Order is a necessary condition for anything the human mind is to understand. Arrangements such as the layout of a city, a set of tools, a display of merchandise, the verbal exposition of facts or ideas, or a painting or piece of music are called orderly when an observer or listener can grasp their overall structure and the ramification of the structure in some detail. Order makes it possible to focus on what is alike and what is different, what belongs together and what is segregated.” (Entropy and Art, 1)

Arrangements within photographs intend trash to be considered as a whole and as individual pieces. The manmade objects are presented in the forefront to be a dominant feature while nature plays a subordinate role.

Saturated color within the larger photos makes it easy to recognize trash objects which signals that these places are based in reality. My hope is that this approach will lead the viewer to slow down and become immersed in these spaces. Although pigment prints are flat the implied visual seams of nature and trash in the artworks give the illusion of depth. This is particularly noticeable in these artworks’ vanishing points. This is implemented similarly to the way renaissance artists were using linear perspective. Additionally symmetrical objects invite the viewer into the visual space of the flat photograph. The beauty is essentially undone by the ugliness these spaces contain.
CHAPTER THREE
PHOTOPOLYMER PRINTS

Piles of dirt were my first memory of my parents’ land which I played in as they moved our double wide home to our new property. Construction workers dug deep into the soil to make room for a septic tank while I eagerly awaited what I thought would be a future swimming pool. My childhood memories are peppered with red dirt which quickly became a symbol of the new relationship we were forming with the landscape. It symbolized the first feeling of mutual respect and correlation of the old saying “if I take care of the land, the land will take care of me.” Red dirt is prominent in the South and often carries with it the cultural aspects of class that parallel my work. The dirt stains functions much like the trash I document which stains the landscape.

Place can be thought of as a location where one can define the unique characteristics, tangible and intangible, of a site but also associations and feelings that we have when we see or hear about a particular place. All places that people experience have to some degree been shaped by human activity. The places I creatively document capture the impact that human activities have imposed on the surrounding environment. The activity within these trash sites degrades nature. The sites become public eyesores, which are then often glazed over or ignored by the people who live in the surrounding areas.

Recalling that memory from childhood set me on the course of how place shaped my identity. It was through teachings by my parents and the land that I came to understand the relationship with my surroundings. I cared for the land and its future as a re-
source that became essential for my family. Lack of money, means of distraction like cable or Internet, and social media meant me being pushed outdoors by my parents. As a child imaginative play and fascination with the natural world took root. The landscape around me turned into a familial, intimate, and valuable space.

The photopolymer prints that comprise part of my thesis artwork reflect the intimate spaces I remember. In contrast to digital pigment prints, the photopolymer prints use only one or two colors. This limited color palette creates a greater degree of depth and more intricate detail to the spaces than can be seen in the large scale digital pigment prints. The artist Jenny Robinson’s drypoint prints were influential. For example, Robinson’s work is similar to mine in that she is documenting specific locations by using symmetrical imagery with monochromatic color. Unique from Robinson, I used the photopolymer gravure process to generate areas of contrast that are enhanced by the limited use of color. I feel the positive and negative prints Jordan 1 and 2 (fig. 9, 10), and Mountain View 1 and 2 (fig. 12, 13), accomplish this contrast. The process also allows for differing color experimentation. For example, in some of the prints I used a red dirt wash that was applied to the paper before the printing of the photopolymer plate. This orange rust color is prevalent in the yard around my home as well as at the dumpsite that my artworks draw from. I feel that the dirt ties the images back to the landscape and the community including myself. The use of blue ink in the photopolymer prints was an aesthetic choice. My intention is to bring focus to the image while keeping the visual contrast of the red dirt. The use of a monochromatic color scheme allows viewers to visually rest within the image and, I hope, allows for a contemplative viewing experience. This abstraction of space
leads to the idea of reclamation where trash begins to recede back into nature where it is hard to determine where trash is and where nature begins. The different color and scale make it difficult to put these images in a particular time and place.
CHAPTER FOUR
WINDOW SCULPTURES

Found trash objects became the inspiration for additional sculptural work. Aspects of my body of work titled Ruination reference the intersections of assemblage and objet trouvé. Sandy Flat 1 and 2 (Fig. 17, 18) are constructed using reclaimed windows found at one of the dumpsites. The found windows gave me an opportunity to remove and re-purpose some trash at these dumpsites. As the body of artwork evolved this aspect became increasingly important. Cornelia Parker’s sculptural artwork with objects was influential in how I thought of and constructed these pieces. The key word in her work that resonated with me was “action”. “Action” here meant taking apart the windows in order to construct a new form which changes the way we view them apart from their everyday function.

Symmetry is additionally utilized in these pieces. The window sculptures are arranged with a sharp angle towards the viewer. The center axis of the sculpture positions the viewer frontally to move around the artworks. Perpendicular to the wall orientation the window panes interrupt the visual space. Windows functions as a means to keep nature outside and ourselves safely tucked away inside. The pieces I have constructed seek to question this notion by complicating and inside/outside dichotomy.

The limited white palette of the found windows led me to play with transparent inks on the window panes. Transparent ink blurs the distinction between nature and trash but also gives an ethereal quality to these sculptural works. This speaks to the idea that
these spaces become overlooked and ignored. By using the windows the artworks play
with the idea of the outside being inside and the inside being outside. This is an important
idea to me, as I want viewers to enlarge their notion of home and responsibility for the
environment beyond.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION

My artwork serves as an extension of investigations within my local environment. I explore a never-ending fascination with relationships that connect me to nature, place, and identity. Working with multiple mediums allows me to foster a deeper understanding of my art practice by reiterating the same information in varying forms. These different reiterations give me an opportunity to connect with a larger community. I feel that my art work practice seeks to weave my personal narrative while connecting to the local and engaging in dialogue with a global community.

I initially thought that by making this work I would be satisfied even if no change to my neighborhood came from putting it out into the world. I was surprised to find two of the largest dumpsites I documented within my work have since been cleaned up. I feel that my presence and repeated photographing and absconding with trash might have played a role. However even though I did not participate in cleaning these sites I still feel that my artwork had some small part in this change. As I reflect now, I see a potential to extend my practice beyond my artwork. I look forward to future opportunities where I will be able to bring more awareness to these spaces and coordinate a community clean up. As a result, I feel there is still more to explore with this work when considering some of the dumpsites captured in photographs and prints no longer exist.
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