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*Build-up*

by

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THESIS

presented in partial fulfillments of the requirements  
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**Lund, Kate, MFA, Spring 2016**

***Build-up***

**Chairperson: Professor Mary Ann Bonjorni**

*Build-up* is based in an appreciation for quietude within the landscape that is interrupted by a sense of urgency and distress. The renderings, gestural drawings, and sculptural work are the result of allowing my studio process to mimic my analytical decision making and sensory observation as a wildland firefighter. The research investigates my work in relation to Romantic painters such as JMW Turner and Sublime philosophy, particularly Edmund Burke's 1757 Sublime theory. Burke emphasized the emotional and psychological response to the Sublime experience of terror and awe. My research also discovers connections with contemporary artists, Robert Smithson, John Peña, and Judy Pfaff through use of materials, content, and form. The exhibition *Build-up* uses drawing and sculpture to examine a relationship to landscape that is both quiet and distressing.

## ***Build-up***

### **Introduction**

Over my left shoulder, I saw a wall of black clouds moving towards us across the ridgeline. I took a deep breath and watched the swaying tree tops. I found myself crouching to block blowing dirt and debris. My co-workers were making the same gesture. We could not hear each other speak due to the howl of the wind, but when our eyes met we shared the same urgency about getting off the mountain. Twenty minutes earlier we cursed at the bees creeping into our collars and stinging our necks. We were far from a bed or shower, and it had been a long day methodically making our way up a steep ridgeline. An hour earlier a log came loose above us, rolled down the hill, and we dove into the brush, out of its path. At first the log impacted the ground in short, low intervals; as it built more momentum the rolling thuds became irregular strikes, and the log bounced higher and more erratically. I remember feeling distressed and exhausted. I wanted to go home. We stood and waited for the crashing sound of the log to stop, turned and slowly marched up the hill.

I have spent the past seven summers working as a wildland firefighter. This has developed an analytical relationship based on sensory experiences. Submerged in the landscape, I find myself reacting to changing conditions such as the formation of cumulonimbus clouds, steep topography, and the trajectory of a bounding log.

As a firefighter, nature edits me; as an artist, I do the editing.

After three years of graduate art study, the lenses of firefighting and artmaking have overlapped. In the landscape and the studio, I am incremental, observant, and responding to conditions. My thesis artwork is a result of allowing the studio process to mimic the careful observation and analytical decision making similar to that in the woods. By investigating my experiences in the landscape through rendering, mark-making, and sculpture, I am in appreciation of nature's quietude while communicating a sense of urgency and distress.

The title of my thesis exhibition, *Build-up* has a variety of meanings relative to both the process and content of the work. In the woods, the phrase build-up is used to describe the wall of black clouds, or the development of cumulonimbus clouds, indicating a thunderstorm and erratic winds. In this sense, build-up suggests distress through accumulation of mass and an impending event. In my studio practice, build-up refers to the process of layering of materials incrementally to build a whole. In nature and in my artwork, build-up has psychological connotations; the escalation of events that leads to an emotional reaction. In nature, the rolling log, bee stings, and erratic winds interrupted quietude in the landscape to create an emotional realization of distress and turmoil. In my artwork, I find quietude through the rendered drawings, while the aggressive mark making relates to urgency and distress.

### **Process: Observe and Respond**

In the woods and the studio, my decision making process involves observing current conditions and responding accordingly. In the landscape this process is observing characteristics of the natural environment, terrain, weather, or fire behavior, and reacting based on what these conditions dictate. As an artist and firefighter, I am making decisions based on training, intuition, and experience. Negotiation and adaptation, each decision leads me to a subsequent observation and subsequent action.

In the studio this means understanding the capabilities of materials such as deer fencing, graphite, or cattle marker, and responding based on my knowledge of technical and formal drawing strategies. Rendering is an incremental process of analyzing value structure and line quality as it relates to form and illusion. At the same time, rendering is evidence of my analytic process in the studio and my analytic way of relating to the natural environment.



Figure 1 *Indication Series* (Installation view)  
Photo Credit: Sarah Moore



Figure 2 *Rot* from the *Indication series*

The drawings titled, *Indication Series*, exemplify both the process of observation and reaction and the relationship between two and three dimensions in my practice (Figure 1). In this series, I collected objects from nature, evidence of distress. Fungus growing on a tree indicates that the tree is not solid, poses a threat, and could fail (Figure 2). I bring the object into the studio and carefully observe and render the object. Rendering allows me to more deeply engage with the intricacies of the object, including the distress which produced the object, signifying weakness in the natural environment. Within disorder, this process and the resulting drawings demand quietude and concentration.

I work in drawing and sculpture, and the process of observation and reaction has tightened the relationship between these disciplines. I have found that this work is most effective when the drawings and sculptures develop concurrently and one discipline can inform the other. In my thesis exhibition, I created the entryway sculpture first, and in this case, I arrived at an ellipse form by bending the tent poles into an exaggerated arc (Figure 3). Not only did the arced tent pole provide new line variety, but also it created a line that suggested a cyclical movement. I repeated the ellipse





Figure 3 *Build-up* (hallway view)

Photo Credit: Sarah Moore



Figure 4 *downdraft*

form in my drawing, *downdraft*, through gestural mark-making (Figure 4). The gestural lines mimic the ellipse form found in the entryway installation. The gestures and layering in *downdraft* informed the gesture and layering in the large gallery installation (Figure 5). The installation, *build-up* formed a spiral shape around the column of the gallery which mimics the gesture present in the drawing *downdraft*. The repeated layering of lines in the drawing led me to layer the linear tent poles and plumbing pipe to strengthen the relationships between the drawing and the sculpture.

I often translate occurrences in the three dimensional world into two dimensions and back again. For example, the cyclical gesture of the tent poles applies to my experiences in the natural environment, as it references the way that wind moves over topography. Firefighters study wind as it directly affects fire behavior, and the diagram illustrates how lee waves create updrafts and downdrafts (Figure 6). On the lee side of the ridge, air will rotate, temperature will rise and momentum builds. Eventually, this rotation creates strong, erratic downdrafts. This knowledge of topographic winds informed my interest in the ellipse form and demonstrates the relationship between three and two dimensions in my studio practice.



Figure 5 *build-up*  
Photo Credit: Sarah Moore

### **Materials**

Each material included in the installation could be connected to human interaction with the landscape and can be broken into two categories: recreation and intervention. Tent poles, sleeping bag fill, rip stop nylon, and fabric reference the gear hikers, bikers, and campers use to enter the natural environment. On the other hand, wire fencing, plumbing pipe, deer fencing, and steel cable are part of efforts to intervene in the natural environment. In both, humans create barriers between themselves and the natural elements for comfort and order.

My material handling speaks to a dialogue on the physical and emotional struggle that I am familiar with upon interacting with the natural environment. Dyed, cut, and ripped cloth integrated into metal framework is an effort to suggest a sense of turmoil. The dyed and torn fabric is meant to suggest repetitive wear over time to the point of becoming spent. Eva Hesse used material in a similar manner. She consistently draped and hung rope and cheesecloth allowing the fabric to demonstrate gravity and an emotional heaviness. In addition to the torn and draped flannel fabric that demonstrated wear, I integrated and layered tent poles, fencing, and plastic plumbing to reference moving air and wind through natural processes like storms and flowing water.



Figure 6 Topographic Winds

## Theoretical Background: Landscape Representation and the Sublime

My artwork is based on engaging with and observing the natural environment and then re-examining those experiences in the studio. I believe this process is also engaging in a dialogue with Romantic painting and Sublime philosophy. The Sublime can be defined as a philosophical theory used to explain the quality of greatness beyond all possibility of calculation, measurement or limitation. Edmund Burke connected Romantic painting and the Sublime when he described the Sublime experience in his 1757 treatise, *The Philosophical Enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, as a combined feeling of terror and delight upon confronting powerful and threatening forces of nature.

During the Romantic period, approximately 1800-1850, painters such as JMW Turner, and Caspar David Friedrich would use their experiences in the natural environment to create beautiful but violent and terrifying depictions of landscape.<sup>1</sup> The Romantic Sublime is best realized through JMW Turner's 1812 painting, *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* (Figure 7). In this painting, the general and his army are diminished in comparison to the overwhelming scale of the landscape and the swirling wind and snow.



Figure 7 *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his army crossing the Alps*



Figure 8 *Downdraft* (detail)

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<sup>1</sup> *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, [www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/the-romantic-sublime-r1109221](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/the-romantic-sublime-r1109221), 2016

Vanessa L. Ryan gives contemporary relevance to Burke's Sublime theory in her 2001 essay, "The Physiological Sublime: Burke's Critique of Reason", which was published in *The Journal of the History of Ideas*. Ryan explains that for Burke the Sublime was not an experience of reason, instead an emotional and sensory response to terrifying and awe inspiring events in the natural environment. She writes, "In stark contrast to his counterparts, Burke credits the isolated, startling, and particular physiological sensation in the sublime. He maintains that the sublime is a sensory response to the phenomenal world combined with emotion untrammelled by thought."<sup>2</sup> Ryan is referring to Burke's counterpart, Kant who held that the Sublime experience meant transcending emotion to achieve reason. The Sublime for Burke was an emotional and sensory response based on terror and awe, which flooded the mind and left it void of reason.

The large drawing, *Downdraft*, (Figure 8) answers to Turner's representations of landscape because I employed compositional devices which respond to Romantic Sublime techniques. *Downdraft* is twenty-three feet long, and its horizontal format relates to Turner's consistent use of the horizon line to reference landscape. The ellipse shape in the drawing relates to the swirling wind and snow which was a consistent theme in Turner's paintings and functions to create a sense of disorientation in the drawing.

*Downdraft*, also responds to Ryan's contemporary reading of Burke's *Enquiry* because I aim to communicate the physiological experiences of distress and urgency in response to my experiences in the landscape through gestural line, rendering, and color palette. The aggressive marks and the color palette of pink and red create a psychological awareness of urgency, in response to stimuli in the natural environment such as rolling logs and expanding smoke columns. The mark marking in particular conjures an emotional response because the physical act of repeatedly and aggressively

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<sup>2</sup> Vanessa L. Ryan. "The Physiological Sublime: Burke's Critique of Reason" (Philadelphia: Journal of the History of Ideas, 2001) 265-279.

layering graphite is obvious to the viewer. These urgent movements are balanced with quietude created through rendering which I relate to time spent observing swaying trees, and the formation of cumulonimbus clouds. This duality speaks to Burke's interest in the emotional and physical response to terror and awe in the natural environment

## **Contemporary Influences**

To place my thesis work within a contemporary context, I looked to artists with whom I share an engagement in the natural environment, emotional content, and form. I arrived at influences such as Robert Smithson, John Peña, and Judy Pfaff. In researching Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, I discovered a connection with his awareness of natural processes to inform his artistic decisions. Additionally, I find conceptual influence in John Peña's multimedia investigations of his relationship to the natural environment. Finally Judy Pfaff is an important connection in terms of form, and use of materials through her encompassing, abstract references to landscape.

Robert Smithson made significant contributions to Minimalism and Conceptualism, but in 1970 he created *Spiral Jetty*, a prominent work in the Land Art movement. I relate to this work because Smithson conducted careful study of the natural accumulation of salt crystals in executing the work. His careful study is not unlike my observation of natural phenomenon such as wind patterns. Smithson constructed *Spiral Jetty* on the northern section of the Great Salt Lake which had been cut off from fresh water supply (Figure 9). Subsequently, salt tolerant bacteria thrived in this area and created an unusual combination of colors which for Smithson evoked a sort of sci-fi landscape.<sup>3</sup> With this work, Smithson not only carefully studied crystal formation, but also utilized the build-up of natural materials to create meaning, in this case the passing of time.

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<sup>3</sup> Art Story, "Robert Smithson: American Sculptor and Writer" (New York, Art Story Foundation, 2016).





Figure 9 *Spiral Jetty*



Figure 10 Tumbleweeds, Wyoming

In the essay, “The Taste of Time: Salt and the Spiral Jetty”, Jennifer L. Roberts discusses how the accumulation of salt plays an important role in an understanding of *Spiral Jetty*. Roberts explains that the salt crystals were one material aspect of the sculpture that Smithson and his crew did not manipulate directly, but Smithson was aware of its impact on the work.<sup>4</sup> In fact he chose the location of the earthwork because salt would inevitably collect on the basalt.<sup>5</sup> Roberts describes Smithson’s use of materials to investigate and represent time. “Time builds up as a material sediment that remains on hand indefinitely.”<sup>6</sup> While Smithson uses the idea of accumulation and construction to demonstrate time, I layer and accumulate materials to demonstrate lack of clarity and turmoil.

Smithson studied the formation of salt crystals, while I studied the way that debris collects in nature. In my installation, I aimed to suggest that the materials had accumulated by forces of nature like wind and water. Debris naturally collects around downed logs in rivers and waterways, and in these locations, grasses, rocks and branches combine to create one large mass. I have spent a great deal of time driving through the Western United States, and have observed the snow fences that line the freeways of Wyoming and Eastern Montana, which collect tumbleweeds and trash blown along

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<sup>4</sup> Jennifer L. Roberts, “The Taste of Time: Salt and The Spiral Jetty” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

by the wind (Figure 10). The fence lined with tumbleweeds is evidence of a persistent, turbulent force that demonstrates distress. Concurrently, Smithson's observation of the slow accumulation of salt crystals in *Spiral Jetty*, exemplify quiet moments in the natural environment creating a tension between quietude and distress in the landscape. In *Build-up* the rendered drawings and the blurred marks in *Downdraft* create this sense of quietude that is interrupted by urgent gestural mark making.

Smithson demonstrates a relationship to the natural environment based on careful study of salt crystals as an indication of time, and John Peña works to demonstrate an unending struggle to relate to the natural environment through consistent, repetitive gestures. Peña is a contemporary artist working in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and I have followed his work for several years as he is an important conceptual influence. Peña's work varies in medium according to his content, but he consistently makes work which demonstrates a subtle relationship between humans and nature. Most often, this relationship conveys some sort of challenge with the natural environment.

I am interested in his project titled *Letters to the Ocean* which is an ongoing struggle to have a relationship with nature (Figure 11). For the past ten years, Peña has sent a letter to the Pacific Ocean every day. The letters are returned by the US Postal Service with markings indicating that "no

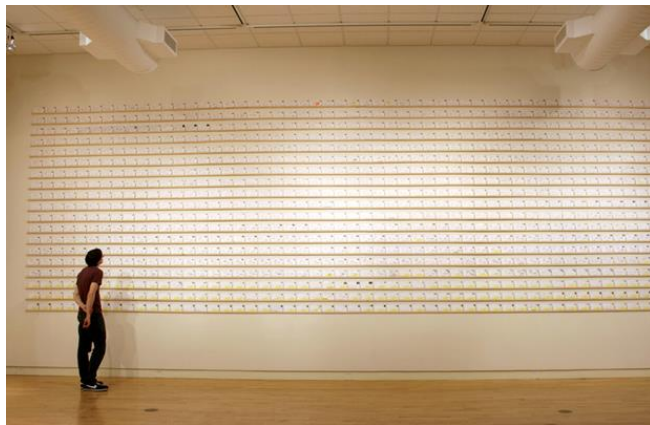


Figure 11 *Letters to the Ocean*



Figure 12 Digging Line

such place exists."<sup>7</sup> Peña is consistently unsuccessful in this endeavor, so the process reveals a struggle to form a relationship to nature.

Peña relates his process of repeatedly writing a letters to natural processes such as drift and erosion, and he explains that his goal is to find value in these mundane actions by considering the large effort that becomes monumental and powerful over time.<sup>8</sup> I liken this characteristic of Peña's work to the repetitive gestures of fighting fire, particularly digging line (Figure 12). The act of digging line, striking the ground, moving the dirt, and striking the ground again, is a small gesture but one that can interrupt the natural process of fire. This exemplifies my relationship to landscape as it is an incremental process of endurance, repeated motion, while working towards an end goal.

Digging line and repeatedly writing letters to the ocean are based on persistent struggles that carry undertones of futility. At the same time, I see a tension in Peña's work when his persistent struggle becomes a poetic and magical moment.<sup>9</sup> His poetic moments are similar to the moments of quietude and tranquility within a space of distress and urgency that I create in my work.



Figure 13 *Buckets of Rain* (installation view)



Figure 14 *Build-up*  
Photo Credit: Sarah Moore

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<sup>7</sup> John Pena "Artist Statement" *John Peña Art*. Last Modified 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



While John Peña acts as conceptual influence, Judy Pfaff becomes a formal and technical influence, as she also works between drawing and sculpture. Pfaff is considered a pioneer of installation art, as she has spent much of her career creating sprawling sculptures and installations in which manmade and organic worlds collide. Pfaff's 2006 exhibition titled *Buckets of Rain*, at Ameringer Yohe, sets a useful precedent for manipulating manmade materials to reference the natural world and ultimately create a sense of turmoil. Upon entering the gallery, the viewer is faced with a floor to ceiling, tornado shaped, plaster covered form (Figure 13). These two tornado forms very nearly touch, but not quite. The gap that is created here subsequently becomes a horizon line. Behind the tornado form is a mess of unruly, sooty, tree roots which create contrast in relation to the smooth, white tornado.

In considering Pfaff's installation in relation to my sculptural work *build-up*, (Figure 14) one discovers several connections. Pfaff uses line, shape and color to create a sense of turmoil. She painted a mass of tree roots black which removes the original context slightly, while utilizing the inherent tangled line quality of the roots to convey chaos. In my own installation, I used a similar line quality and color palette of dark gray and black with moments of bright color that act as a waypoint or place marker within the installation.

I recognize an additional connection with the overall shape of the Pfaff's installation, particularly, the tornado form that is a focal point of her exhibition. This shape references a tornado or whirlpool, which are symbols of increasing energy, distress, and chaos in nature (Figure 15). My installation begins in the narrow entryway of the gallery, where materials are hung above eye level relating to storm clouds (Figure 16). The installation travels through the transom window into the large space.

I liken the formation of the work in the entryway to the way that fire builds energy across topographic changes, slowly building energy across level ground, until it meets a steep canyon where



Figure 15 *Buckets of Rain*



Figure 16 *build-up*

it picks up steam and explodes across the ridgeline. My installation expanded after traveling through the transom window, and wrapped around the column in the large gallery in a spiral shape to mimic the movement of wind, smoke and water. Smoke columns will often develop vertically, and then turn in a slow spiral motion. Whirlpools form even in calm waters when two opposing currents meet exemplifying turmoil in the natural environment.

Judy Pfaff is a model for re-contextualizing and incorporating materials, but she is also relevant for the content of her work. Nancy Princenthall is an art critic and former senior editor of *Art in America*. In 2006, Princenthall wrote a critical review of Judy Pfaff's Exhibition, *Buckets of Rain*, and described Pfaff's use of material while examining the relationship between human emotion and the landscape that is present in the work. Princenthal writes, "*Buckets of Rain*, the title of Judy Pfaff's recent installation, doesn't just invoke Bob Dylan. It also links an unprepossessing manmade object with turbulent nature."<sup>10</sup> The foam, plaster, and tree roots are unprepossessing or not particularly attractive (Figure 17). Paired with intentional material handling and configuration, Pfaff

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<sup>10</sup> Nancy Princenthall, *Judy Pfaff at Ameringer Yohe* (New York: Art in America, 2006).



Figure 17 *Buckets of Rain*



Figure 18 *build-up* (entryway view)  
Photo Credit: Sarah Moore

creates a sense of a turbulence by making references to rain and clouds throughout the exhibition.<sup>11</sup>

Princethall concludes that Pfaff has again succeeded in creating a sense of controlled chaos by manipulating manmade materials to reference examples of distress in the natural environment.<sup>12</sup>

Specifically in the entryway, I worked to make associations to weather occurrences, or the experience of walking through a forest canopy (Figure 18).

Pfaff's installation moves into the realm of the psychological when one considers the emotional connotations of her formal decision making. The gnarled tree roots suggest a sense of struggle, the negative space created by the white, tornado shape conjures an awareness of an emotional void, and areas of density convey a sense of heaviness. Considered in this way, one is led to a contemplation of the psychological and emotional dialogues that Pfaff consistently creates in her work.

I also use formal devices such as color and gestural line to create a psychological experience. Within the exhibition, I intended for *downdraft* to function as an emotional or psychological response

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



Figure 19 *Downdraft* (detail)



Figure 20 *Build-up* (detail)

to exterior conditions (Figure 19). Here I used pink and red more generously than anywhere else in the exhibition. The repeated gestural lines are unapologetic in application; the viewer should be able to visualize the gesture of my hand on the surface of the paper. This is an urgent gesture, but it is placed alongside quiet moments of neutral colors and blurred, subtle line qualities. The installation presented several opportunities for the viewer to see the large drawing while standing within the sculpture (Figure 20). This vantage point created a strong connection between the physical experience of the sculpture and the emotional experience of *downdraft*.

Together the drawings and installation are meant to illustrate the psychological experience that occurs when one is standing in the forest and hears the sound of the wind in the trees, watches the trunks sway back and forth and feels the wind blowing around one's body. I hope that the viewer realizes a sense of quietude and contemplation but is left with a sense of distress and urgency.

## Conclusion

*Build-up* is based in an appreciation for quietude within the landscape that is interrupted by a sense of urgency and distress. The renderings, gestural drawings, and sculptural work are the result of allowing my studio process to mimic my decision making and careful observation in the landscape. By investigating my experiences in the landscape through drawing and sculpture, I am in

dialogue with Romantic painters such as JMW Turner and Caspar David Friedrich, who exemplified themes of Edmund Burke's Sublime philosophy through their representations of landscape.

Contemporary research finds that Burke's *Enquiry* denied reason and embraced one's physiological response to the simultaneous experiences of terror and awe. In *Build-up*, I use gestural mark making and a warm color palette to convey a physiological experience. My work also engages in a dialogue with artists such as Judy Pfaff, John Peña, and Robert Smithson based on an awareness of process, content, and relationship to landscape. After being immersed in the landscape and investigating these experiences in the studio, I have discovered a parallel process that is incremental, analytic, and observant, which unites my work in the landscape and the studio and will continue to inform my future investigations.



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