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Site unseen

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SITE UNSEEN

A Thesis

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by
David Carpenter
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ABSTRACT

Site Unseen is a large-scale installation of seventy-three brightly screen-printed and painted house forms. The houses stack and interlock with one another, creating clusters of towers and archways. The forms appear to grow into one another, physically connecting the homes. Each house is printed with images of materials in various states: raw, processed and waste. These materials represent the cycle of community's rise and fall. Beyond examining the construction of community, *Site Unseen* explores a moment when trust or foundation is lost in a community. In the center of the community is a gaping, spherical void. This void represents the absence or loss of a cornerstone of a community. *Site Unseen* explores the relationship between a group of individuals and a man-made force that exists outside of them.

SITE UNSEEN

Contemplating these essential landscapes, Kublai reflected on the invisible order that sustains cities, on the rules that decreed how they rise, take shape and prosper, adapting themselves to the seasons, and then how they sadden and fall in ruins.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

My MFA thesis exhibition, *Site Unseen*, examines the relationship between people and powers outside of themselves that shape their lives. My work explores how man-made forces such as; religion and global markets create significant impacts on individuals, communities and society. I am interested in representing people's connections to these relationships in a physical form, and investigating how they change and mold lives. In this work, I also investigate the continuous cycle of community as it builds, peaks and collapses. Many societies, such as cities or towns, grow around their landscape; they respond to features like rivers and arable land. This led me to the question, "What happens when a group of people are formed around ideas and man-made entities, and further, what happens when those ideas and entities fail?"

Site Unseen is a large-scale installation made of seventy-three small house forms that appear as a single entity. They stack and interlock with one another creating several tower-like structures. The houses appear to have slowly grown to form an arch overhead. A spherical void exists in the middle of these houses, and its circumference is defined by incisions cut along their rooftops and walls.

In the last decade, I have been amazed by the tragedies that have shaped our world. Our nation has seen a recent economic recession causing massive layoffs,

scandal and deceit in the Catholic Church, the global domino effect caused by collapse of the US housing bubble, increases in greenhouse gases, scarcity of natural resources and multiple wars. These events inspired the basic idea behind *Site Unseen*, a group of people missing their axis. I am creating a metaphor from an amalgamation of my personal understanding of these tragedies. I want this installation to show a physical representation of the moment when the base of a community collapses. When the cornerstone of a community disappears, we don't know how things will shift in its absence. My main concern is ensuring that the viewer can clearly see what has been built around this now missing entity. I want to show the relationship between a large group of people and forces that are greater than them.

In *Site Unseen* there are two main formal components. The most noticeable is the group of interconnected houses and the other is the negative space in the center of them. The houses are objects with physical connections; they interlock and stack on top of the other. The negative space is a void defined by where the edge of the sphere comes in direct contact with a roof or wall of the houses. The community and the sphere are connected physically to each other; yet they stand in contrast to one another, both formally and conceptually. The community I am illustrating is built as an actual physical form, defined by several different house forms that stack and intersect with one another. The formal negative space represents a sphere, or singular entity, created by a large void in the middle of the community it has no surface of its own; its implied surface exemplifies the absence.

A unifying feature of much of my work is a sense of duality; my approach often builds from two major elements contrasting one another. Employing duality allows me to

explore the complexities of relationships. In my past work, for example, I would do this by connecting a small, dense object such as a concrete teardrop form with a large buoyant form like a bundle of lager tractor inner tubes. With each component struggling for balance, I explore the effects of an opposing force both on a visual and conceptual level. This study is continued in my thesis work by juxtaposing the group of houses and the void. I want the viewer to examine the contrasting relationships of these opposing forces.

To struggle and fight is inherently human. Even if the fight is futile, our personal struggles often define who we are. This belief leads me to focus my work on how people struggle with forces outside of themselves, be they systems of hierarchy like religion, government or social class. I use my house forms as surrogates for individuals who struggle with these forces. I try to employ empathy for the characters in my work as an attempt to better understand, what motivates them.

When conceiving this installation, I started thinking about how resources move through communities. I classified them into three in different stages, first being raw matter, then processed for use, and eventually exhausted waste. I began by collecting pictures that document these different stages in my local community: stacked lumber, trash at construction sites, live trees, dirt, and dilapidated buildings. This cycle of materials led me to reflect on how groups of people go through stages of development. A community also starts out as raw, is developed and often is discarded or replaced. To represent this cycle, I printed images on all the exterior walls of every house form. I categorized the images into three groups: raw matter, processed resources, and waste. I choose to print these images on different planes of the houses, depending on their

physical relationship to the sphere. Raw matter begins on the perimeter. The closer you get to the sphere, the more processed and developed the materials become and every plane that touches the void depicts waste. The inside of the cut houses are painted a dark, deep black, representing carbon. This implies the end of a cycle and the beginning of a new one, as carbon is a basic building block of life.

THE COMMUNITY

Community can mean many different things, but at its most basic, Webster dictionary defines it as “a unified body of individuals.” It is not limited to an individual’s proximity to another. The amalgamating factors may be a similar belief, living in a particular area, a shared experience or common goals. The longevity of a community may be fleeting or it may last several generations. The members are linked to one another as being part of something larger, and they share a bond that can connect them throughout time and across oceans.

Throughout the process developing *Site Unseen*, I have been thinking about different types of communities and how they relate to my installation. Some communities I have been thinking about are: a factory’s workforce, individuals united by religion, or victims of the most recent housing crisis. The factory’s workforce is a community based around a few shared goals, to earn a living and produce the needs of the factory. The workforce depends on the factory for their livelihood. The town depends on the factory to pay workers so the workers can then put more money into the town’s economy. The workforce plays a vital role in the growth and development of the town. Religions are based on a shared belief that can connect people over generations and borders. This long lasting belief creates some of the strongest communities. This community can be so vast the members may not even know each other, but their shared belief connects them. The collapse of the housing bubble is a shared experience among people that may never meet. This is a community of people bonded together by the loss of a home. It’s a far reaching, but temporary bond.

THE VOID

The void is a metaphor for the absence of the purpose of a community. It is a power that can build nations, level cities or dissipate like any great storm. The void can be caused by an impact, an event, loss or a significant flux; it may even have a physical form, but its influence is far greater than its circumference. The void is the West Virginia mine that took twenty-nine miners on April tenth of this year. The void is a plane full of troops on their way to war. In their absence, their families are waiting for them to return in hopes of putting their lives back together. The void is the massive foreclosure crisis, taking the domicile of the American dream with it. The void is the hierarchy of the Catholic Church failing its congregation.

The void does not have to make national headlines. It maybe a vacant box store like “The Real Super Store” a generic discount retail store that sits vacant in North Baton Rouge. The store maintains its physical form but stands as a monument to the void. The capitalist market built this building, used up the land, and moved on once it no longer had any use for it. It sits vacant. As I drive by it I think of the people who worked on this building and for this store, who kept it stocked, and helped the costumers. What is the value of the workers that came together to build this store and their shared accomplishments? This massive, vacant discount store reminds us that as products become devalued so do the people that produce and distribute those goods.

I chose a sphere to represent the void because I wanted a form that showed a clear distinction between the people and the forces imposed on them. Formally, the shape of the sphere is different from the blocky house forms. Describing something as a

ball of light or energy is a common way to give form to an intangible entity. I wanted the negative space in the community to remain as an idea and not become a specific place or entity.

THE CYCLE

The house forms have brightly colored images screen-printed on their surface. I have classified the imagery into three categories: raw matter, products and wastes. I have chosen these three categories because I see them as three main stages in the cycle of a community, conception, development, and transformation. For the resource imagery I used pictures of sticks, grass, bark, and other unprocessed materials. The product images are neatly stacked boards, bricks and cinder blocks. The waste pictures are of trash bags and busted up concrete. The formal qualities of both the raw matter and waste imagery, in contrast to the products, are chaotic and encompass the entire plane.

What lead me to think about society and goods in this manner was reading Guy Debord's 1967 book the *Society of the Spectacle*. Where he wrote, "For the spectacle as the perfect image of the ruling economic order, ends are nothing and development is all- although the only thing into which the spectacle plans to develop is itself" (Debord, 23). Debord refers to capitalism as a spectacle intended to distract the public from their actual day-to-day lives. Debord led me to ask the question, if continuous development is all that concerns the spectacle, capitalism, or the housing market, then what is to keep it from moving through communities in the same manner as it processes goods?

TONE

For *Site Unseen*, I used a bright, whimsical color palette in contrast to the severity of the subject matter. My forms and palette produce a playful landscape. This is done to charm the viewer into entering the space. As they spend time with the installation the surface images and the severed houses, reveal a bleaker landscape. Provoking questions such as “Why are the houses missing sections?”

I have been approaching my material and subject matter in a similar method as Netherland’s artists Folkert De Jong. His large-scale installations often discuss themes of greed and capitalism (Drysdale, 2008). He creates detailed figures constructed completely out of industrial foams such as Styrofoam and Polyurethane foam. Using glue to bond his material together and to create different fluids like snow, water or blood. His installations often show horrific scenes dealing with human conflicts. The inherent bright colors and insincerity of De Jong’s foam figures offsets the viewer. This pulls viewers in and upon closer examination the figures appear violent, disturbed or lost.

This past couple of years, the concepts that fuel my work have been dark and sobering. I found myself wanting to balance this with a bold, superficial approach in my selections of materials and colors. I do this with the intention of altering the viewer’s initial expectations of the sculpture or installation. If I capture them with bright colors and recognizable forms, the expectation is that they will continue to investigate and start to make connections to darker elements present in the work.

CONCLUSION

When I started this project I knew I wanted to have two elements that were relatively equal in visual proportion. One element was going to be made of many little pieces, while the other element would be a single entity defined only by visual negative space. I also knew the single body needed to be absent, yet still affect the smaller elements. I wanted to use this formal relationship to explore the dynamics between those who inhabit a community and those who shape it. I sought to do this both on a physical and metaphorical level, creating a space for deliberation on the world around us. It is my hope that I have created a space for the viewer to reflect on our contemporary landscape and explore notions of community and the aftermath of loss.

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VITA

David Carpenter was born and raised in Arkansas. He attended The University of Central Arkansas where he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts with an emphasis in sculpture in 2004. After graduating he lived and worked at Francoina Sculpture Park. In 2007, he started attending Louisiana State University. In the summer of 2009 he was part of a collective of Louisiana-based artists who went to Galway, Ireland, to collaborate with the Irish artist collective, Expanded Draft. He received his Master of Fine Arts in studio art in 2010.