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## Placed residue

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PLACED RESIDUE

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by  
Tom LaPann  
B.S., SUNY State College of Buffalo, 2008  
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## ABSTRACT

“Placed Residue” is a series of eight works that highlight nature and its transformative quality. The video, photos, and sculptural objects, contained in the show, call attention to different materials and how they undergo growth and decay. Using various resources ranging from Kinect to video projection I incorporate the unnatural in order to depict a natural narrative involving the viewer. In order to emulate these natural processes, a cause and effect system had been developed where nature completes the final object. These systems activate the material providing for behaviors to be visible through their tactile qualities and allowing for their properties and behaviors to relate with the viewer. With this Thesis exhibition I hope to show people that the world is alive around us and that we are a part of a bigger system, which we can see through a closer attention to matter.

## INTRODUCTION

Placed Residue is a show designed to highlight the intricacies of the natural world, which surrounds us. Standing in a room filled with materials from tar and hay to technological projections, the viewer immediately can become immersed in process. Because of the largely experiential qualities of my work, scale becomes an important criterion in order for my work to be relatable to an audience. Entering into the realm of installation art, each work—individually as well as collectively—is large enough that it demands its own space. The viewing experience is dependent upon the relation to the scale of the audience. This relationship to scale creates an important viewer-object dynamic, which shifts the audience from viewing to experiencing as the work interacts with the architecture and space around them.

Each of the eight pieces within the gallery focus on a growth or building using materials that will bewilder the viewer into curiosity. This curiosity combined with what will be a learned understanding of growth and decay as they progress through each work, helps the viewer to develop a dialogue. This remembrance and connection built through thought is where the title residue is derived. Not only does my work serve as a remnant in the viewer's mind, a residue that is a constant reminder of the natural world around them; I am also placing residues within my work. I use materials or processes that leave behind traces of their past; the dough left on the string is a memory, a lasting piece of something that was much bigger. That small reminder of its past serves as a placeholder for the transformation that was undergone; from the viscose material, its stretch and gesture, to the eventual break where the material finally gave way; that remnant, that residue, holds the narrative that each of my eight works hope to tell.

In this narrative of change, there is a constant pushing forward. Within this story my work is designed to evoke recognition that loss is transformation. In order to do this I use unconventional processes combined with natural materials in order to give them lifelike qualities. Very few would describe table salt as glowing or find tar to have movement. That is where my art allows for a more abstract environment. Removing how or where we may actually see these materials or outcomes in our everyday world, allows us to remove the intimate details attached to emotions and begin to think of the work in a more objective manner. This show hopes to connect us more actively to our surroundings in order to show the living quality of material.

## NEW MATERIALISM

I study unconventional uses of materials to embody the feeling of impermanence and to represent the visual language of transformation. With the importance placed on the communicative power of materials, I find a strong alliance to the Materialism movement. While I hold the subject of matter to a high importance within my work, I differ greatly with early materialists in how I work with matter/material. The early materialists emphasized preservation and ownership of materials, illustrated in the early Land Art movement and public works of the 1960's and 1970's. Land Art was considered:

“...the most macho of post-war art programs. In its first manifestations, the genre was one of diesel and dust, populated by hard-hat-minded men, finding their identities away from the comforts of the cultural center, digging holes and blasting cuts through cliff sides, recasting the land with “masculine” disregard for the longer term.”<sup>1</sup>

Rather than insisting on making a dent in nature I instead work side by side with nature using material as my ally. There is a constant dialogue between the materials and myself, which, in effect, creates an evolving process that, reflects this conversation. *The New Materialist* by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost explains “ the new materialists are rediscovering a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us to think of causation in a multitude of interlocking systems”<sup>2</sup>. In my work the narrative created by working leniently with material is what then compels the viewer to want to know more. Their bewilderment is what eventually allows the audience to see all of the parts at play within each piece. Ultimately my active relationship with material then allows my audience to have an involved relationship with my work.

This new approach towards material is echoed in recent exhibitions such as “Swept Away: Dust, Ashes, and Dirt” (2013) as well as Claire Twomey’s recently curated show “Formed Thoughts” (2012). Both shows highlighted contemporary artists who I believe illustrate the new direction of materialism. When asked about the exhibition “Formed Thoughts,” Twomey stated that the show questions who the authors were between the exchange of artist and the material. She insisted their process was “a relationship that shifts and breathes as the

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffery Kasther, *Land and Environmental Art* (London: Phaidon Press 2010), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialism: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press 2010), 9.

material informs the process which influences the maker that then influences the message”<sup>3</sup>. Both “Formed Thoughts” and “Swept Away” demonstrate an entirely different approach to the idea of materialism. In both cases, there is a concurrence with material, a partnership rather than an assertive exchange from artist to material.

Phoebe Cummings, an artist who had works in both of these shows, is someone whom I align myself with. Cummings makes large-scale temporary installations using unfired clay that she builds on-site. In an interview about her work in the show, “Swept Away”, Phoebe talks about how the clay feels more alive and fluid in its unfired state and that she enjoys the fact that her sculptures are temporary and meant to be experienced like a performance or a dance.<sup>4</sup> There is an authenticity that she chooses to use when she removes her hand and allows the material to undergo its own metamorphosis.

The field of materialism has undergone a transformation from, first, an impersonal relationship with nature, then, to an immersion in nature, and now to an equal partnership with nature and material. Currently, materialism celebrates its place in an ever-changing environment. We place less importance on the permanence of a material and focus more on its evolution and its placement in time. This can be seen in “salt wicking,” where the process that salt naturally undergoes is equally as important as its final product, and how a delicate crystallization could be easily undone at nature’s will. For me my materials’ natural inclination and my relationship of guiding a natural process into a work of art is what is most important. This relationship with ephemeral or temporary works speaks to a new framework that is then created for the viewer. Rather than seeing something stoic, the viewer is able to reference a change undergone and recognize that their “moment” with a piece is fleeting, thus personifying the role of material into a performance by the art itself and a memorable experience with the viewer.

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<sup>3</sup> Claire Twomey, “1000 Bowls” *LSU Lecture Series*. Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. March 28 2012. Lecture

<sup>4</sup> MADMuseum (2012, February). *Artist Phoebe Cummings*. Youtube. Retrieved from [www.youtube.com/user/MADMuseum](http://www.youtube.com/user/MADMuseum)



## PERSONIFICATION OF MATERIAL

This equal partnership between the material and myself is what ultimately informs my viewer. Because I choose to keep my work non-referential and remove nearly the entire context of an object, my relationship that I have built with the material is what helps the viewer then build their relationship with my art. In my work with material I have developed a process that enables me to highlight a material's personality. Learning what a material will or won't do, how it transforms in different conditions; all of these things inform my work. This leaves the viewer to investigate the material, form, and process, allowing them to connect to the emotions that are embedded in their transformation. This allows materials to communicate via tactile language directly to our senses, creating a visceral viewing experience. Through this emotive viewing experience, the material and processes evoke new characteristics that transcend their traditional functional use. With these new identities, the viewer is left with an immersive experience in the relationship between man and material.

When using a tactile mode of communication, I believe it is important to avoid making the viewer feel like he/she had been tricked. Because I am trying to connect to the senses, it is imperative for me to remain authentic and allow works to actually transform and evolve before the audience. Artists such as Michel Blazey, who work with similar subject matter, use a similar approach to express their concepts and have been great sources of inspiration. Michel Blazey works with perishable materials from everyday life, such as cotton, wool, toilet paper, plastic bags, food, mold, and insects. He sets up his environments as evolving installations, and lets time do its work on his pieces. Ephemera, biology, microorganisms, and time inform Blazey's work. Similarly, I choose to work alongside nature rather than illustrate nature running its course over time. Indications of how things grow or decay reference a time code for the viewers to connect to within each piece. The real-time evolution of the work provides a framework for the viewer as they move forward through other works within the show.

Processes such as burning, slumping and wicking leave me with artifacts filled with tactile scars of the time passed and the changes that have occurred. As time exposes the natural processes of the material, my intentions evolve to highlight the behaviors and innate properties of the matter. Each of these processes, while changing the properties and aesthetics of a material do not change the material itself; rather, they transform the materials. Working with these transformations allows me to be able to use one material in a variety of ways. These "tests" allow me to recognize the most basic properties of a material that I am then able to twist and realize my final form.

With a degree of mystery and autonomy, my relationship to material and space allows the viewer to have numerous access points to my work. Be it small nuances in a natural formation that references a viewer's previous experiences, or the overall form of a piece that then the viewer is personally connected to; my process, manipulation and relationship with the material guides the work in order for the viewer to develop a relationship with their experience.

## TECHNOLOGY

Traditionally I have set up causation relationships between natural processes and material. The digital medium allows me to set up these cause and effect scenarios with my audience while including the importance of their navigation in space. Aylish Wood describes viewer responsive installations in her book *Digital Encounters* as “an evolving process, no longer a static object, but as a work that unfolds in relation to both a the viewer and its location, a perspective drawing attention to the ways a viewer engages with the work of art”<sup>5</sup>. I enjoy making these works for similar reasons as they are filled with unknowns and varying outcomes. What is Unique to these digital works, unlike the sculptural objects, which are artifacts of evolving material/process these interactive works unfold and change in real time with the viewer.

Both interactive pieces record the placement and movement of the participant with Microsoft's Kinect. The Kinect uses infrared sensors to gather a plotted grid that it then projects into the space. Using triangulation of two sensors and a light beam the Kinect is able to transfer 3 dimensional information into a 2 dimensional projection. Its compactness, and use of infrared (a light that the human eye can not detect) allows for a discrete connection of the participant to the projections. This invisible tie of placement to projection allows for a relationship to be built with the audience. While the piece does not require an object controller it still accounts for the range of decisions the audience can choose to make. The reasoning for removing a controller and allowing movement in space is to keep a more sensorial interaction that skips the idea to button and allows a direct transfer of movement to reaction

Amongst the varying possible outcomes, it is of great importance for there not to be a “light switch effect”: being a succinct on and off with only one cause and only one effect. This reasoning is to allow for a more dialogical work that allows for a participant or a group of participants the opportunity to create something more unique to their interaction. The criteria these pieces operate on are: first they must be easily influenced in order to directly inform the participant that they are part of the work. Secondly, the pieces require a degree of time and variation of movement and approach to be understood. Lastly, that they can be activated by more then one person allowing for an area of collaboration to occur.

In *Wait For It* a cellular fluid-like material is projected directly onto the floor. Participants who walk across the projection become agents of change. If they stand in one location for a period of time they then become

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<sup>5</sup> Aylish Wood, *Digital Encounters* (New York: Routledge 2007), 134.

“activated”, allowing for them to push or pull the medium they are standing on. Patterns evolve and change as different agents enter or leave the piece. Although this might seem to have a switch effect, allowing for multiple agents and for them to be interrupting a bigger push/pull outside their control, all changes the effects they have within the composition enabling the piece to be quite diverse.

In the piece *Dough*, I replace the force of gravity with the viewers distance to the screen and amount of people viewing the works. This allows for the process and material to perform in ways that are not based on the systems and structure of our everyday experiences but instead on the participant's actions. As the viewer approaches the screen, the dough projection is acted upon and plays at a rate that changes according to their distance from the screen, allowing their distance to be correlated to gravity. What is important about the works is the movement and gesture of the material as it passes through this network of strings leaving traces of its life on the strings. The sequence and pace at which it transitions is altered by the audience's participation creating a range of outcomes to occur.

These works allow me to recreate the systems and behaviors of my materials of interest as well as allowing the audience to stimulate their metamorphoses. The dialogue between the interactive works and the sculptural objects informs a different experience than if they were to be viewed independently. Being apart of/or causing something to change helps personify the material I am using and allows a range of meaning to be attached. Now with the viewing of these objects, the relationship of material and process might be examined through a different, more informed lens than if the show contained purely standalone sculpture.

## CONCLUSION

This body of work aims to stimulate a visceral viewing experience through a range of methods such as tactile visuals, installation scale and interactive media. The audience will be presented with objects of metamorphosis that are holding a story encoded in their material remnants. Through the viewer's investigation of the works they assume the role of narrator as they decode and attempt to fill in the blanks between the sculptural objects and interactive works. This conversation with the interactive work permits qualities of the material to be relatable to the relationship of viewer as well as between the viewers themselves. This will allow the qualities of the materials and their processes to be spotlighted. The overall show aims to encourage exploration and re-examination of our surroundings and to visually represent my position that there is much to be learned by paying attention to material around us.

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## VITA

Thomas LaPann was born in 1986, in Glens Falls, New York. He received his B.S. in Art Education from SUNY University at Buffalo State and his MFA in Studio Arts from Louisiana State University. As an interdisciplinary artist, his work reflects natural processes with an emphasis on materiality and interaction in large-scale installations and sculptures. His most recent works intertwine interactive technological endeavors with the sculptural manipulation of materials such as tar, hay, salt, and dough.