Houses move, houses speak

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HOUSES MOVE HOUSES SPEAK

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Allison Regan
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This installation is dedicated to Norah and Patrick Regan. You will never be forgotten. Thank you.

To my family and friends, teachers, and peers Thank you for putting up with me and sticking by me even in hard times. I appreciate all you have done for me.

Friends, you are my heart.

Thank you!

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ABSTRACT

This body of text speaks about an installation that deals with feelings of displacement, and isolation. This work invites and encourages the viewer to view another family with new eyes, perhaps finding similarities between this family and their own.
INTRODUCTION

Human relationships that oscillate between everyday reality and the domain of the impossible captivate me. This work was inspired by personal experiences, which left me feeling that in order to function I needed to latch on to particular routines. In a struggle to reclaim control of at least a small aspect of my life after the loss of family members, I latched on to safe and reliable activities like drawing, or cleaning the house arranging the objects exactly as my mother had. This was an attempt to revert back to normality and clear the aftermath of all commotion. These routines helped me maintain consistency within my everyday life and preserve its standard pattern. I found that these activities distracted me during times of hardship and helped me maintain a sense of control. Within my family life there were events that were out of my hands, events that could have not been prevented. We are conditioned from an early age to rely on our family and home. The fact that we will out live our parents is our expected role in life’s trajectory. Though this is not guaranteed, we expect our parents to remain alive for a large portion of our adult lives. Parents and my home provided me with a sense of safety and dependability. When these elements were lost, I was alone. The assured safety was removed. In the book YOU ARE HERE: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination, Steven S. Hall describes home within the context of which I am speaking:

“Home can literally be home, an abode, or our notion of family, or even a comfortable spot apart from our dwelling place, like work; whatever it is, home is where the lines are straight, the order clear, where even disorder seems predictable and the displacements tolerably temporary. And perhaps that is why when disorder invades the home-When illness, death, divorce or any dozen domestic estrangements disrupt the order- our metaphors for ensuing emotional distress are so often geographical: we are lost, disoriented, have lost our bearings, we are at sea.” (pg.17)

CHAPTER: 1 NARRITIVE TIMELINE

When I first moved to Louisiana from my home in Ireland, I had feelings of displacement. I was homesick. As my time in Louisiana continued I developed new feelings of admiration for both the place and the people I came to know. These feelings eventually got reversed so that when I was in Ireland I found myself missing Louisiana and the people there. Eventually, I no longer knew where I belonged. I felt as if I was in limbo. I didn’t seem to belong anywhere. This strange feeling is one that I am still coming to terms with.

After the sudden passing of my mother, I returned to Ireland mid-semester. I did not want my sister to have to deal with the arrangements alone. Our father had passed away when she was nine and when I was thirteen, the thought of her having to deal with everything without me was unbearable. I spent a lot of time alone while at home. I began questioning what home is and found that my perception of it had changed. Did I have a home? If so, where was it? These are questions I am still processing.

I began thinking about family and the importance of family experiences and how our past plays in to our future. All the while feeling isolated. Suddenly I had new responsibilities other than my education, which now seemed less important. I had left
my family and spent the last two years of my mother’s life away from her. This thought aggravated me and made my education seem inadequate. I realized now there was more considerations needed in my choices. Consequently, I could not only make decisions solely based on what I wanted to do.

CHAPTER 2: FAMILY.

I found myself thinking about how certain families function. Although you may know, befriend or share an abundance of memories with another family, there is only so far you can go or know. You may view from afar, but you will never fully understand what it is like to be a member of that family. I guess you could say that I am jealous of certain families. Yearning to find a place in one similar to the family I once belonged to. There is no malice or negativity in my jealousy, only admiration. For each individual and each family, circumstances are different, perhaps similar but unique. The one thing that is universally understood and all people have empathy for is the loss of someone. There is a common consensus in relation to death and the loss of a loved one. Experiencing the death of a close friend or family member is a connection all humans can have with one another. In John Donne’s poem No Man is an Island, living people are compared with a continent so when one piece of that continent washes away, regardless of its size, the entire continent is affected. This idea stuck in my mind and began sparking ideas in relation to the installation I planned on creating.

‘No man is an island entire of itself;  
Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were,  
As well as a manor of thy friends  
Or of thine own were;  
Any man’s death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind.  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
it tolls for thee’.  
(Donne, John. "No Man is an Island."  
Polyticks: A Secular Humanist ManifestoWeb03May2011.  
http://polyticks.com/home/Visions/NoManIsl.htm).

CHAPTER 3: PREPARATION.

In preparation for my installation I began sketching houses. The crude geometric houses signified the structural element to home, not only in the physical sense but also metaphorically speaking for example depicting whether the house was sturdy, or weak. This kept me occupied. It became routine to draw these houses in groups and to observe other houses in my neighborhood. These drawings became repetitive similar to the actual neighborhood my house is situated. I began grouping these houses, somewhat symbolic of family members. (Figure 1)
I imagined myself walking through a neighborhood, catching a glimpse of a family through the window in their house, absorbing information, viewing what I can, noting smells and colours. From my own observations it seems most people cannot help these shared psychological attributes of humankind; these senses all act as contributing factors in triggering memory. When dealing with the familiar, I have an irresistible urge to observe when I come across an individual’s living space for the first time. What can physical space tell you about someone or a family you have never met or seen? How do their past and present experiences play in to their future, or their view of home? Upon reading Snoop by Sam Gosling, I learned how the unique needs we seek to satisfy with our physical spaces are rooted in our past experiences. In addition I realized that our feelings about place are also rooted deeply in those past experiences and can effect our perception or ideals. We form relationships with other people and find the ending of those relationships hard to accept. However, the reality is that humans adapt and can manage these changes, yet not without consequence or difficulty. Under these circumstances our perception of reality, as we know it will have changed substantially. As Joseph Beuys says

‘Let us seek the ideas which point us in the direction of change’.

(Joseph Beuys 1982 pg 116.)

When I look out of my mother’s bedroom window, which is situated, at the back of my house I sometimes catch a glimpse of my neighbors in their own house whether they are in the kitchen talking, cooking, arguing, or in their bedroom singing or brushing their hair. I cannot hear them, this aspect made me feel detached. It seemed like I was watching home movies. I found this interesting. In my head I imagined mapping out where these glimpses of different families could be viewed from and how I could represent this in the form of an installation. While considering that, I began comparing and finding similarities between those families lives and my own family life and how someone could potentially view my family in the same way I viewed theirs.
At this time I was sorting through my parents belongings. I had to be diplomatic about what I kept and what I discarded. I ended up keeping one bag of clothing belonging to each of my parents.

While sorting through home videos, I found some super eight footage that I had never seen before. The colours were incredibly saturated but there was no sound. These clips were silent and I found them reminiscent of the experience I had when looking out my mother’s window. The absence of sound confines me to viewing actions, mannerisms and images much like watching from a window. The further I went through the footage I realised there were gaps of time within the images depicting my parents at different stages in their lives, such as, building a house, holding their niece for the first time and getting married. This gave me a chronological time frame. I thought about juxtaposing the panels created from swatches of their clothing as projection screens alongside the video I had found. I could construct projection panels from my parents clothing and fix those panels to the houses I had been drawing, while projecting my parent’s memories and interactions on to them. (Figure 2 and 3).

![Figure 2: Fabric panel](image1.jpg)  ![Figure 3: Fabric panel](image2.jpg)

This was a tangible way to allow others to view my family as I was viewing theirs. Inviting others to compare similarities and differences between their family and mine and rethink their idea of home. This would give the viewer an opportunity to experience how I felt while viewing them curiously from my mother’s bedroom window. The culmination of these experiences provided a foundation for my thesis work. My work physically expresses a feeling I have had from these observations and experiences.

Contrary to what we know, we expect people to live forever. The unpredictability of death is devastating, but death is inevitable. Despite our expectation, the reliable and secure aspects of familiar settings will inevitably become unstable. When I returned to Louisiana, it was strange; I got the same feeling of isolation, inadequacy and desolation I had previously experienced upon returning home. I felt disorientated and alone once again. There were a lot of distractions, in terms of family issues still needing to be dealt with but now I was a substantial
distance from my home. This made it difficult to focus. I found it hard to condone my
decision to leave my sister, friends and home. I needed to maintain some sort of
familiar surrounding to function. I began questioning whether my decision to come
back so soon was somewhat premature so I became frustrated. I thought I should
focus on the one thing I was closest to and that had interested me while I was at home,
which was drawing and thinking about the installation I wanted to construct for thesis.
I knew editing the video of my parents would be jarring in addition to cutting up their
clothes to create the panels for the projection.

I began with the houses, constructing them out of wood in multiples each
similar but with differences comparable to my family differences. I then decided to
fasten the cloth panels on to one side of each house. I then projected the super eight
footage on to these panels, using a small projector (Figure 4).

![Figure 4: Small projection test.](image)

After much consideration, I realised if I projected this footage as multiple
large projections that spanned over all of the houses the images would become
fragmented much like the glimpses I had seen in my neighbor’s home (Figure 5 and
6). The video is fragmented as it projects through the house structures, falling on the
tops of the paper mountains. The paper mountains jut out of the landscapes/
topographical undulation floor sculptures and create shadows in the projected images
On a small scale, I was recreating a landscape for the spectator to walk through. My
goal for the viewer was to create a landscape that was both recognizable and alien to
them with feelings of desolation, familiarity and comfort.

I decided not to enclose the houses entirely with fabric panels, you can see an
example of what I am describing in the next images. I wanted you to be able to see
both the interior and the exterior while the silhouettes of the houses fell on the walls
interfering with the projected images. These silhouettes seemed symbolic of structure
and framework, which are similar ideas in terms of the psychology of a home.
When considering the placement and grouping of the houses, I was again brought back to the fact that there is only so much you can know about another family before you are excluded. Families generally do not divulge all of their issues and problems to strangers, or even friends. There is only so far you can go. I began looking at maps and geographical locations considering the notion of place. This was when I decided to place the clusters of houses on their own topographical isle, with similar ideas in mind to ‘No man is an island’ by poet John Donne. The Island shaped landscapes would segregate each family of houses from another conveying isolation and privacy. The audience could view these landscapes from afar. The viewer would remain on the outside looking in but would never enter the island/landscape much like me looking in through the windows of homes in my neighborhood. The placement of the landscapes is depicted in the next photograph. (Figures 7 and 8)

CHAPTER 4: WALKING IN TO THE INSTALLATION.

Upon entering the installation the color from the projected imagery activated the space, as they panned across each group of houses they were fragmented. The colour
was vivid and fluid. The reflection on the floor made it seem like water, it had a sort of rippling effect, shown in the picture below. (Figure 9)

![Figure 9: installation detail.](image)

You could see my parents faces broken down into a series of geometric abstracted shape formed by the houses and at certain points the video would overlap, juxtaposing two separate clips simultaneously on the face of a house. The houses stood stretched, skewing your perspective (figure 10). The scale shift between the landscapes, the houses and the size of the people in the video projections was substantial. The colour contrast between the starkness of the cream houses and the brown heavily textured paper landscapes in conjunction with the heavily saturated
vibrant video footage helped further the feeling of catching a glimpse, as each image changed and moved around the installation.

Figure 10: Installation detail.

The viewers were invited to walk in and around the space. The floor reflected each projection, furthering the notion of water surrounding the islands and that you must stay off these landscapes and view from afar. The more time spent with the installation, the more the viewer would find out. At a certain point within the duration of the video the images sync up with one and other, and fall on the center of each house. Figure 11 is a good example of one of these times.

Figure 11: matching up.
CONCLUSION

I do not desire perfection nor do I desire chaos or disorder. Basically I would like a steady path on the base line, but I keep finding myself below that line. In order to function I need security in my life. As Stephen S. Hall states;

‘We need some secure oasis of order, even if only a memory (or a fiction), as a homeport for our various explorations, our attempts to make sense of the unknown’. This is the place we call home’. (Katherine Harmon pg17)

Although these images and structures are mine (Figure 12), and derived of my own experiences, I wanted the viewer to relate to the images within the video and to consider similarities of their own family life, perhaps recollecting a feeling of nostalgia within a dreamlike environment and rethinking what ‘home’ is. Home can be anywhere, not just the physical house but the idea of Home as an experience, sound, a plethora of feelings that when they are put together, they formulate a reflective experience and take you back to a specific moment in time. When the viewer walks in and around the installation my hope is they will be absorbed in the work. My installation is accessible to even those who do not know me, or my situation. My intention is to encourage the viewer to rethink their idea of home and family by promoting curiosity.

Figure 12: Ambient light.

I am adapting an endeavor to understand my circumstances. I feel the creation and realization of an idea in the form of an installation is a therapeutic positive tangible way of finding segues toward change. The creation of something many can enjoy is within reach and can act as a tribute.
Figure 13: Installation, without projected imagery.

The notion of constructing a landscape from something worn by the most important people in my life was a comforting idea for me. The islands have my parent’s essence in its soil, the houses are reminiscent of family members and the video is snippets of my parents living. This installation is a tribute to family and what home is- a feeling you can always return to. (figure13)
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Allison Regan was born on the west coast of Ireland. She studied fine art in The Galway Mayo Institute of Technology in Galway and finished with first class honours in 2006. She is the founder of an international artist collective called Expanded draught. The collective has exhibited internationally.