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This is only Temporary

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THIS IS ONLY TEMPORARY

A Thesis

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requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Melanie Robyn Wall
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ABSTRACT

This is only Temporary examines my personal history of homes as reimagined spaces. The series of prints in the exhibition depicts reconstructed memories of houses. These visual narratives give context to the installation constructed from handmade paper and raw materials. The framework is reminiscent of housing plans that converge into a labyrinth. Participants actively engage the space, navigating the confined structure. A playful nature runs throughout the prints and installation reflecting upon reinterpreted memories within transitional spaces.

RECALLED MEMORIES



Figure 1. M. Robyn Wall, *My Dad was a Carpenter*, 2014

Lying in Northern British Columbia, Canada, the company town of Cassiar was surrounded by mountain regions near the Yukon and Alaskan borders. Here they mined another form of gold, asbestos.¹ At the height of extraction at the mine, the town had a population of 1200 with additional seasonal workers. The first buildings built in 1953 were Pan-Abodes, prefabricated houses made of western redcedar. They functioned as men's winter bunkhouses and homes for upper management.² In 1992 the mine went bankrupt because of complications in converting an open-pit to an underground mine and a diminishing market.³

The company auction lasted six days, selling off commercial buildings and equipment along with residential homes.⁴ Dismantled and placed on trucks, the buildings disseminated. Residents and workers were forced to leave and the townsite was leveled. This compromised the entire surrounding community in the North that relied on the town's resources. A number of fires swept through the abandoned town in the following years. Anything that remained fell into disrepair, including the beloved hockey rink.

One house was driven nine hours, approximately 685 km south, to a subdivision off the Yellowhead Highway. The logs arrived ticketed with silver duct tape slapped on the ends. It sat in pieces until a foundation was laid and built to the second level. Coded by their tags, the logs were placed according to numbers scrawled on the silver tickets completing the split level home. The tongue and groove joints secured the logs. Once the structure was complete, the interior was finished in purple, beige and forest green carpets. Trailing along the walls's borders were flowers, pooh-bears, dinosaurs and unicorns. The natural western redcedar lined the kitchen, living room and upper level bedrooms but the exterior of the logs remained the original matte chocolate brown of Cassiar for an additional five years.



Figure 2. M. Robyn Wall, *This is only Temporary* detail, 2016

¹ Jack Chisholm, *The Cassiar Road*. The Cassiar Road (The Story of a Mine on a Mountain Top). Film, 22:48. 1960. <http://www.hollowaybar.com/videos/hb16.html>.

² Suzanne LeBlanc, *Cassiar: A Jewel in the Wilderness*. Prince George: Caitlin Press, 2003, 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

INTERPRETING THE PAST

Are we looking for evidence of the climatic moments or for any manifestation of tradition we can find, or are we judging and evaluating the past, choosing the more significant over the less, retaining what we think of as best? Should things be saved because... they are unique or nearly so or ... because they were most typical of their time? ... Or should we (as we most often do) let chance select for us and preserve for a second century everything that has happened to survive the first?⁵

Specific experiences pervade memories of the previous places I have lived. These reflections are continuously being processed, selected and organized by recalling them to the present. By preserving specific experiences, the past forms an ongoing narrative of the present.⁶

My work represents a reinterpretation of my past that incorporates the understanding I have of my surroundings. I depict the places while interjecting my sensibility through humor. Lucy R. Lippard, American art historian and critic, offers that “sites should not have to conform to past values but should be used as they best enhance the present.”⁷ Within my work this means acknowledging the fluidity of memories while reconstructing real and imagined spaces.



Figure 3. M. Robyn Wall, *This is only Temporary*, 2016

⁵ Kevin Lynch, *What Time is This Place?*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1972, 35-36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

⁷ Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: The New Press, 1997, 90.

RECONSTRUCTING SPACE

The installation *This is only Temporary* is part of a collective history of relocating houses. In the past, homes from abandoned towns were often relocated. Abandoned places often follow this pattern; a prosperous region suffers a quick economic decline, remains dormant then slowly falls into disrepair.⁸ Using an empty building is economical and can be seen as a form of appropriation. The original use is disregarded and the space is re-outfitted as necessary to fill a desired function. Seen in cases of redevelopment “grand old houses become dentists’ offices; sweat shops become artists’ studios; churches become restaurants.”⁹ The subsequent use indicates a fragility between past and present identity but relies on the convenience of space.

My installation alludes to how the past is reconstructed memory in the present. The history of my installation stems from a building in a desolate mining town that was transplanted to a rural neighborhood and built into a family home. As an installation it is reconstructed from my past homes, rid of the dated colors and kitsch forming a reimagined space. The labyrinth-like design creates a structure recalling transitional passageways of additional previous homes. Its open framework is reminiscent of memories playing in spec houses constructed by my father. Local materials informed the aesthetic and structure of the tongue-and-groove joint home specific to the Pacific Northwest region. I also make use of readily available and local materials to achieve a balance between the delicate handmade paper, cloth and raw wood. The logs are cast from reclaimed cotton paper and local plant fibers including banana, ginger and Louisiana mulberry. The framework was built in sections for ease of mobility and maximum use of materials based on standard measurements used in construction. *This is only Temporary* is a single entity composed of space, materials, observers and participants.¹⁰



Figure 4. M. Robyn Wall, *This is only Temporary* detail, 2016

⁸ Lynch, *What Time Is This Place?*, 30-31.

⁹ Lippard, *Lure of the Local*, 94.

¹⁰ Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. New York: The Viking Press, 1977, 267-271.

When entering the gallery, the installation immediately confronts the viewer due to its large scale. My intention is to foster a spatial consciousness between the participants in the interior and observers on the exterior of the installation. Because there is no fixed viewing point, the installation permits different perspectives as either participants or observers.¹¹ These roles are in flux depending on the actions and behaviors that activate the physical space.¹² Individuals engage and disengage with the installation interacting as they choose creating their own personal experience. The half walls were conceived to visually draw in observers by seeing participants through the open framework. The view of the physical space continually changes as participants activate the interior. This heightens awareness as shadows are cast on the sheer cloth of the exterior walls and lower bodies are seen navigating around framework and participants.



Figure 5. M. Robyn Wall, *This is only Temporary* detail, 2016

¹¹ Clair Bishop, *Installation Art*. New York: Routledge, 2005, 53-4.

¹² Allen Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966, 198.



Figure 6. M. Robyn Wall, *This is only Temporary* detail, 2016

Navigating the impractical, awkward floor plan generates conflicting feelings of anxiety and a sense of play. The structure is composed of the winding movement occurring in hallways, foyers and stairways. The layout guides participants within the interior space and creates a loop to continually cycle within the interior walls. These walls create implied boundaries consisting of open framework. To fully activate the space, participants can travel through the framework and pathways. This movement increases sensitivity to perceived boundaries.¹³ As an increasing amount of people occupy the installation, personal space is decreased and the more fluid the illusory walls become. Tension is constant within the confined space of the self-supporting albeit wobbly structure. This disrupts and decenters the viewer because the perception of the work is not solely based on the “privacy of psychological space” allowing the participants to become more aware of their surroundings.¹⁴

¹³ Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 20.

¹⁴ Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 270.

CONTEXTUALIZING NARRATIVES

I am interested in disrupting the picturesque by including suggested narratives in my prints. Using personal photos and found images, I create digital collages that are transferred to a limestone for a lithograph. This technique allows for layering, reworking images and blurring photographic images with hand drawn textures.

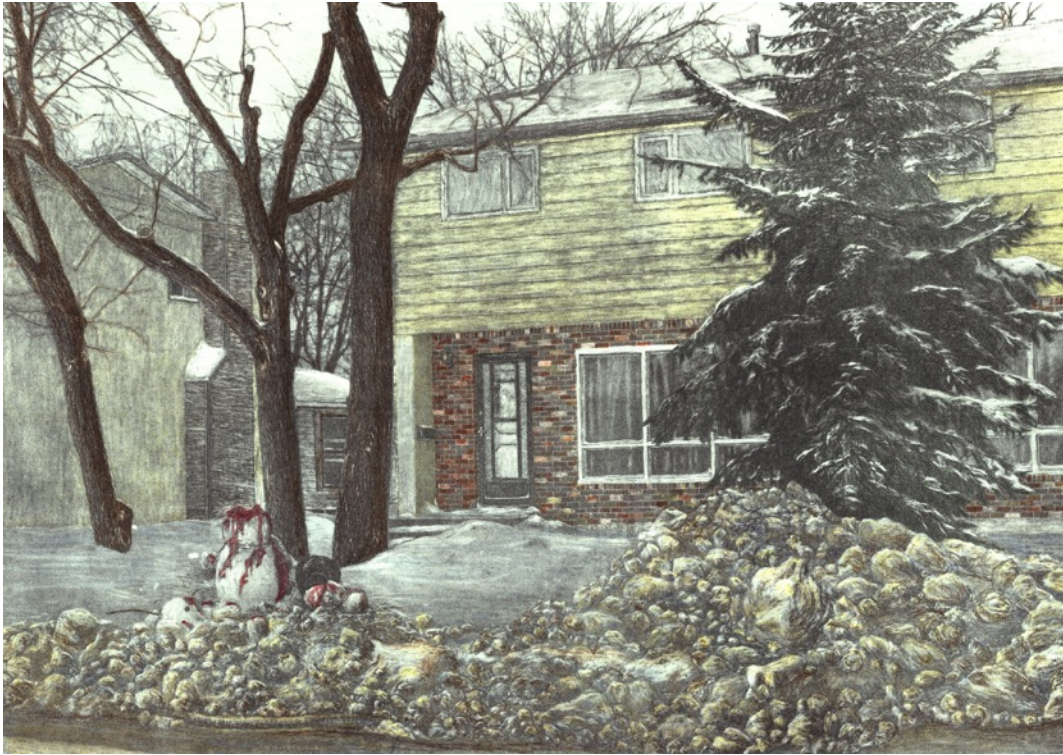


Figure 7. M. Robyn Wall, *Everything Dies in Winter*, 2014

Memories influence the places portrayed. Inclusions and deletions are made to the original photos re-contextualizing them to how I perceive each home and its surroundings. Lippard suggests “photographs are about memory - or perhaps the absence of memory, providing pictures to fill voids, ... an excellent means with which to trigger concern and soothe anxieties about history and place.”¹⁵ Combining memories into documentation reconciles their differences allowing me to reflect particular environments including personal iconography. This creates images truer to my present perspective of each location.

¹⁵ Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, 20.

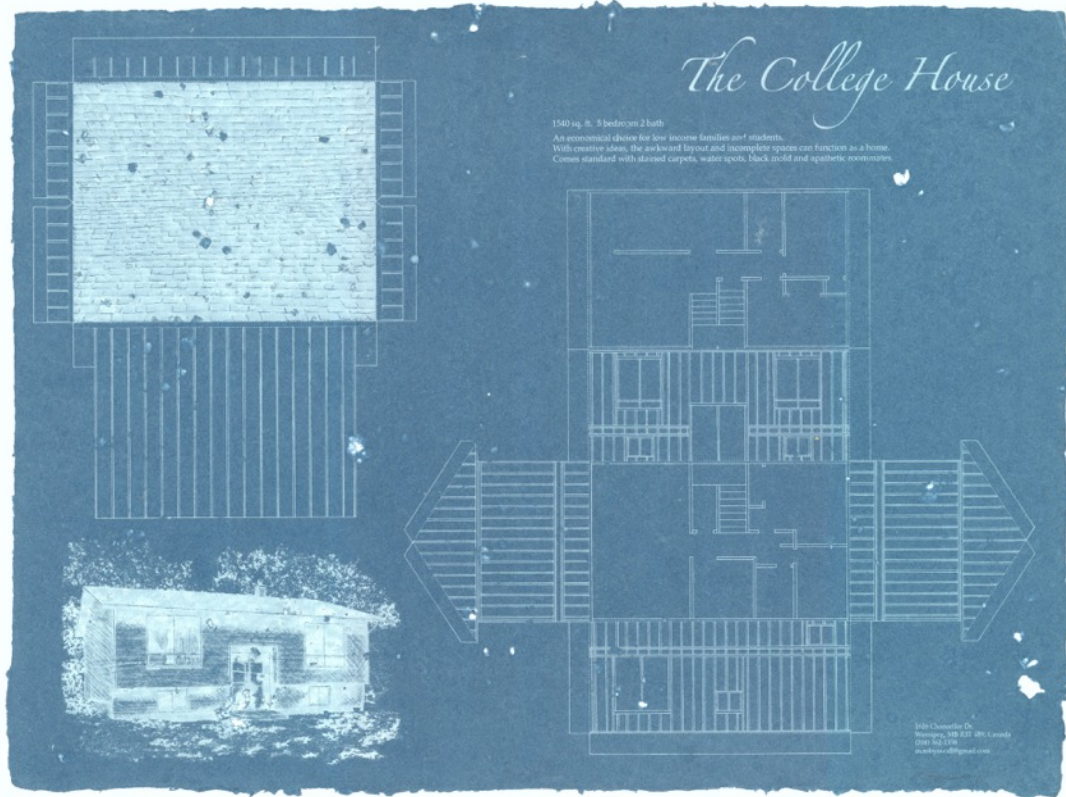


Figure 8. M. Robyn Wall, *The College House*, 2015

Profanity and humor are throughout the history of prints. As a marginal “low” art form with the ability to make multiples, printmakers had the ability to disseminate their work. As such it was often politically charged including subversion or satire, poking fun at sinful behavior and “human foolishness.”¹⁶ I approach my prints in a similar manner, whether it be mocking local traditions or alluding to bodily secretions. Xerox transfers aesthetically look like old photos which I use as a technique to instill a sense of familiarity while working in a traditional landscape format. Within the scene I am dismissive of nostalgia but interject stories from personal experiences. Many of the areas I have lived facilitate bizarre behavior connected to local culture and identity. They take on varied forms of expression but the purpose of the acts are uniting, creating common, universal personal experiences. When recalling my past homes, the more kitschy, stereotyped or humorous experiences become prevalent memories of these places. Though the prints are of traditionally depicted homes, they become relatable by my everyday foibles.

¹⁶ Christa Grössinger, *Humour and Folly: In Secular and Profane Prints of Northern Europe, 1430-1540*. London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2002, 6-7.



Figure 9. M. Robyn Wall, *Under the Shadow of Death Valley*, 2015



Figure 10. M. Robyn Wall, *Fifty-Seven Eyes Were Watching*, 2016

The idea of preserving one's own history through buildings appeared in the 1500s. In the eighteenth-century this idea became fashionable for the upper-class; by the nineteenth-century onward it "became part of the intellectual baggage for all middle-class."¹⁷ Objects are often kept as a reminder of the past. Personal associations are placed on objects which "have fairly limited iconography: faded photos, old books, bottles, stuffed animals... boxes and drawers of mementos, dried flowers, bric-a-brac and keepsakes, etc., etc."¹⁸ Personal identities and values are bestowed upon these inanimate objects giving a further sense of stability. Especially during times of change the objects are relied on for self identity and comfort. Memories cannot be dissociated from objects validating material excessiveness. Similarly, the practice of restoring homes is an act of preserving a romanticism of the past.

Images of the home are often portrayed as comfortable or quaint, evoking sentimentality. The construct of home itself implies a sense of stability. This archetype relies on the building itself to enforce structure and support within the home of individuals. However, uncertainty exists even amongst order and structure. A psychological need to belong somewhere is the "undertone to modern life that connects it to the past we know so little and the future we are aimlessly concocting... the notion of the local is attractive to many who have never really experienced it."¹⁹ Stages of life coincide with cycles of change. I have lived in ten different homes. Moving from the Northwest Coast to the Prairies I noticed distinct changes of regional culture and values. My moves to the Southwest and Deep South were temporary but I continued to observe the influences of my surroundings.



Figure 11. M. Robyn Wall, *Homage to Mishaps*, 2016

¹⁷ Lynch, *What Time Is This Place?*, 29.

¹⁸ Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings*, 162

¹⁹ Lippard, *Lure of the Local*, 7.

AT PRESENT

After arriving home from the studio and hauling my bike up the stairs. I step through the door, turn on the lights and immediately check the floor to make sure no roaches are bounding to scuttle across my feet. My apartment provides the basic needs of shelter but does not satisfy security or stability. However, it is a comfort to know *This is (once again) only temporary.*

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VITA

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