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So Long, Sinkhole City!

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So Long, Sinkhole City!

A Thesis

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Louisiana State University and
Agriculture and Mechanical College
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Master of Fine Arts

in

School of Arts

by
Heather Molecke
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For Frodo

You will be eternally missed!
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Abstract

A sinkhole is land that appears structurally sound, but underneath its surface lacks foundation. If there is not enough support for the land above, a sudden collapse of the surface happens. Sinkhole City is a conceptual three-part installation that metaphorically conveys experiences of childhood sexual abuse, incarceration in adolescent psychiatric hospitals, and young adult drug addiction. This work illuminates and explores the relationship between childhood trauma and drug addiction.

Sinkhole City takes the viewer on a journey through semi-autobiographical life passages. In this three-part installation assemblage I am confronting my own sense of past shame, the emotional roller coaster that has accompanied it, and a sense of healing that has come from working with it. I want the viewer to feel the vulnerability of shedding secrets by perhaps considering secrets of their own. My hope is that this work will be perceived as empowering, and my audience will be able to understand that their own struggle towards healing is worthy of the pursuit.

Sinkhole City is a narrative about a subterranean city that parallels and addresses my own real-world experience of sexual violence, inhumane psychiatric practices, and the opioid epidemic. I examine and present a relationship between these events and how they influenced one another. Because I consider myself a survivor, I want to create and foster a safe environment that shows understanding and compassion for this group of people that may not get the attention they need and deserve. Many drug addicts are regarded as criminals or the underbelly of society. They are placed in prisons without rehabilitation, often homeless, jobless and suffering. Most people want to turn a blind eye and blame the addict for their choices. I want to depict and unearth what lead up to the
moments before the addiction occurred. My desire is to help humanize a rejected group of people, and hopefully bring about a better understanding of a very misunderstood, ignored, and greatly shamed subject matter.
He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past.
--George Orwell, 1984

Sinkhole City is made up of three individual spaces. Each space represents a specific time in my history. What I consider the earliest memory, which is the first space in this triptych series, is titled *Suburban Nightmare*. With this work I reference the “nuclear family” by using mid-century design that nods to the black and white reruns of television shows that I watched as a child. Examining my own suburban nuclear family, I designed the furniture using impermanent cardboard meant to allude to a false wood-like veneer. A cardboard chair, side table, and television serve as the most basic ordinary objects in a room. The fake wood-like veneer implies notions of the false façade of suburbia, for example the beautifully manicured yards and homes. However, what is hidden behind the walls in suburbia is distinctly not perfect. In my narrative, this room represents a time when the child feels lonely and neglected. A shadowy figure preys on her innocence and longing for attention. The foundation of the child’s life has collapsed, and the descent into Sinkhole City has begun.

I wanted to create an environment that was physically and emotionally immersive, challenging boundaries between the art and its audience. Scale played an important role in this piece. I wanted the viewer to be an outsider looking in, and the furniture to
resemble life-size scale to create the feeling of the uncanny\(^1\), the psychological experience of something that is strangely familiar, yet completely unsettling. Inspired by images of desert nuclear test sites I carpeted the ground with sand, to represent the barren and empty landscape. The use of sand is also metaphorically attributed to the concept of time. The traces of footsteps left behind by the viewer reflect the memory that someone was once there; the sand shifts under the viewers feet in an unsteady and unbalanced way causing an instance of awareness, and of the viewer being present in the moment.

Projected from the television is a video of a girl experiencing a range of emotions, happy, sad, angry, and scared. Another video is projected onto the television of a shadowy figure pacing in agitation. This video of the girl cycling through emotions is a common theme in all three rooms. The ages coincide with the story that is being depicted; as this room is the earliest memory, the girl in this video is the youngest. While filming this video I stood behind the camera directing my friend’s daughter, Sofia. I would say to her, “now be sad”, and then she would struggle and innocently stick her tongue out, or shrug her shoulders, or roll her eyes, as preteens do. I would try again and say, “no, sad like your best friend just died”, again she would struggle- attempting to wince in pain, but it just wasn’t the pain that I’m familiar with. I quickly realized that in all actuality, she must have never experienced pain like I was suggesting, and she didn’t have the resources to express it. The video ended up being much more innocent than I had anticipated, but that innocence is perfect! The projection represents the girl in the room watching television. The pacing shadowy figure is the abuser, waiting.

\(^1\)Freud, Sigmund, *The “Uncanny”*, [Tr. Alix Strachey, 1925], 368-407
Process:

Pairing historical and contemporary imagery and objects is a critical conceptual tool for my work. The past reflects the present, which will undoubtedly predict the future. I find myself thinking about Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, seeking to find a connection in that which no longer is there through the *punctum*, the wounding, personally touching detail that pricks the viewer. My relationship with time is very important in this semi-autobiographical body of work as it is based on history, the present, and my memories. With the use of sand as a material, and the intentional decaying of surfaces I reflect on the cycle of past, present, future. I have become aware that the present can only exist in suspended animation between the past and the future. This can also be represented as the same unrelenting cycle of birth, life, and death that I also reflect on throughout my work in the use of the deterioration of my materials.

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2Bartes, Roland, *Camera Lucida Reflections on Photography*, [Hill & Wang, 1981], 43
Inside Suburban Nightmare

I can’t go on, I’ll go on.
—Samuel Beckett, The Unnamable

How embarrassing to be human.
—Kurt Vonnegut, Hocus Pocus

A single table lamp illuminates Suburban Nightmare, shedding light on the walls and the cockeyed, broken embroidered wall hanging stating “Home Sweet Home”. I melted Plexiglas onto the wall hanging to exaggerate the satirical sentiment of those words.

As the child descends into Sinkhole City, the walls are covered with an underground root system. To create the root system I began with panels of 4’ x 8’ foam installation board attached to wooden frames. Strips of fabric covered in plaster create the appearance of roots. While experimenting with materials I realized that different water-based products dry at different rates of time, creating cracking. An application on the plaster of water-based paint, a glue concoction, and polyurethane allowed me to achieve the results I was looking for. I painted the cracked surface of the roots with the same wood finish as the furniture. This establishes a unity within the room. To bring the raised roots further into the foreground a mixture of grey talc and water was applied, the same mixture of grey talc is in another room so that traces of each room are left in one another, which allows it to be a cohesive grouping. I have found that the use of the lightweight installation foam board was incredibly efficient for me because I can easily carry the panels. As a solo artist this proved to be genuinely helpful.
Found objects are important to me for their inherent history and intrinsic visual interest. Often times I feel spiritually drawn to an object. It radiates an untold story. I feel it begs me to be its storyteller. Many of my objects are found in the trash, thrift stores, or antique shops. In *Suburban Nightmare*, I was lucky and the object found me at a roadside antique shop. It is a rusty old tricycle; battered, and missing its pedals. I placed it lying on its side in the center of the room, and surrounded by wooden alphabet blocks, a reminder that a child was once there, but the child is gone, and has been for a long time. Only the memory remains.

I have often thought that making sculpture is like using material poetically. In this instance I felt compelled to write a poem about this installation.
The Shroud of Suburbia

Pensive contemplation of the perverse underbelly, the soiled deviance, and the obscured violation that hides behind the façade that disguises itself as suburbia. Private depredation isolates the familiar, and cheats the adolescent of childhood. Security vanishes leaving solitude and secrets. Infected, they must hide in the quarantine of a desolate shelter, but never truly alone. Surrounded by insecure vulnerability and danger. Trust is broken and now everyone is a threat.

Heather Molecke, Suburban Nightmare, 2019


**Diagnosis: Hysteria**

The second space in the series is titled, *Diagnosis: Hysteria*. This piece examines a period of my life when I was institutionalized. As a young girl, I was told I had behavioral problems. Reflecting on my own memories of that time, I can only recall being strong-willed and emotionally expressive. In this installation an emotional state is meant to be embedded in the texture of the walls and ceiling, to suggest that the viewer is not just inhabiting my room in the institution but inhabiting my mind when I was institutionalized. This work questions the thinking that normalizes the incarceration of young women in mental institutions, young women who’s strong will is considered a threat to civilized society.

Throughout history, women have been forced into insane asylums under the diagnosis of hysteria. The first records of hysteria go as far back as ancient Egypt. Later, in ancient Greece, Plato’s dialogue, *Timaeus* compared a woman’s uterus to a living creature that wanders through a woman’s body, “blocking passages, obstructing breathing, and causing disease.”³ The word hysteria originates from the Greek cognate of uterus. It became so common place during the Victorian era that some physicians estimated that as many as a quarter of women were afflicted with the disease.

A study was done at the University of Texas following 32 teens, 19 of whom had suffered childhood trauma. The researchers described childhood trauma as maltreatment of any type of significant abuse or neglect that lasted longer than six months. The other 13 participants were used as the control group. The researchers would follow up with the teens every six months for three and half years. The findings of the research uncovered

that nearly half of the teens that suffered childhood trauma developed a diagnosable drug problem, major depression, or both. This was three times the rate seen in the control group. I believe this suggests that addiction has more to do with a person’s desire to flee or manage emotional pain, rather than a genetic disease as many have suggested. I don’t believe that addiction is a disease. It is a symptom of a coping mechanism.

In thinking back to the first video of Sophia, when I said “no, sad like your best friend just died”, her inability to harness an emotional reaction to what I said made me realize that children do not have the frame of reference to put traumatic experiences in context and make sense of them. Children lack emotional maturity. When sexual abuse occurs, the child feels scared and full of shame, because children don’t have the experience to handle emotional crises, and instead of dealing with their feelings, they act on them, often in self-harming or destructive behaviors; their world comes crashing down, much like the collapsing of land in a sinkhole.

I believe that when I was told that I had behavioral problems as a child that I was simply acting out on emotions that I lacked the resources to express. Rage, shame, confusion, betrayal, fear, and sadness are all feelings that I associate with that time period. Those are difficult feelings for any adult to deal with, but for a child lacking support and understanding, it is devastating.

One might believe that my parents placing me in inpatient mental institutions beginning at the age of twelve years old could offer me the support and understanding that I needed; however, it was even more destructive. Being removed from my home, my friends, and being isolated in a locked psychiatric ward only piled on the feelings of betrayal, shame, confusion, rage, fear, and sadness. It placed the blame on me and felt
like a cruel punishment. I was surrounded by other kids who were as emotionally sick as I was; my new peer group was now other broken children. I learned a lot of new methods of self-harm from that new peer group.
Inside Diagnosis: Hysteria

*Diagnosis: Hysteria* is the second in the series, a space that is 8’ x 8’ x 8’. For this installation, I treated each panel as if it were a painting; my paint was slip, or watery clay. Slip was applied to each panel and took days to dry, but I knew that the material would crack. The cracking represents the decay of a crumbling wall. After removing some of the cracked pieces of clay, I dripped a mixture of watery glue and paint to adhere the remaining clay, and to also add to the runny, drippy, water-worn aesthetic, a metaphor for neglect and abandonment. I use clay because it is an earthly matter that forms from erosion and weathering. It lives deep within the earth, much like Sinkhole City.

In *Diagnosis: Hysteria* the floor is a cold and unimaginative black and white checkered piece of linoleum to reference the design style of institutional hospitals. Sand cascades across the linoleum tile, as a metaphoric allegory of time and memory. A single bare light bulb is suspended from the ceiling in the center of the room in an industrial explosion proof cage, inspired by the imagery of an interrogation room. The light illuminates a hospital bed. The sheets on the hospital bed reflect the ancient Grecian style of wet drapery, which is a nod to Plato’s *Timaeus*. The process for creating the bed began with having to first purchase a bed in the style of a hospital bed. I felt a need to distress and age the bed to resemble an object with a history. Much thought went into the bed, height was important as I knew I would be back-projecting the pillow from the floor below, it needed enough space to allow for a clear image from the projector. There had to be an additional two feet added in height. To disguise the inconsistent material of the additional legs, I wrapped it in cheesecloth dipped in plaster. The addition of the plaster-covered cheesecloth reminded me of bandages. I draped the bandages all along the
exterior frame of the bed, thinking of it as impotent bandages healing nothing. The pillow shows a video similar to the video in *Suburban Nightmare*, of a girl, older than the girl in *Suburban Nightmare*, cycling through the same emotional roller coaster of happy, sad, angry, and scared. Her emotions are now more defined, more expressive. The innocence is gone.

Heather Molecke, *Diagnosis: Hysteria*, 2019
**Piece of Shit Lawn Chair**

What can art do? Art cannot help directly. Art is the way to make it obvious. Art is cynical, it shows the negativity of the world, it’s the first condemnation.”

--Anselm Kiefer, Interview with Anselm Kiefer, ahead of his Royal Academy Show

*Piece of Shit Lawn Chair* is the final piece of the three-part series. I built it differently than the other two; the frame is more pliable, the panels needed to have more flexibility. This part of the installation is the depiction of drug addiction; nothing about drug addiction is straightforward, therefore I needed the panels to create a more narrow, twisted viewpoint for the viewer.

After reading a poem by William Brewer, titled *Daedalus in Oxyana* where he writes about a syringe hanging like a feather from his arm, the feather is a comparison to birds in flight being like getting high on heroin. I borrowed from that sentiment and created a bird out of clay. However, a bird in flight seemed too whimsical, too easy, being high on heroin isn’t whimsical or easy. I reflected on the idea of birds and thought about what kind of bird would be most like a heroin addict, baby birds. Baby birds can’t fly, and they are always hungry. Metaphorically, baby birds are like heroin addicts trying to fly, baby birds are chasing that high that every addict knows so well. I began with a clay sculpture of a baby bird, and created a two-part mold so I could cast multiples. I casted them in plaster, nine in total, but after much consideration, I had decided that I only need three. Three rooms, three memories, three is a magical number, and magic is

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very important to my work. Art is magic, art is spirituality. I feel that I must imbed elements of magic into my work so that it will give off the essence of the *punctum*, for the viewer to feel its energy and power.

The birds needed a nest to sit in. I used a plastic container, cheesecloth, plaster, and grape vines to construct the nest. The nest sits atop of a standing floor ashtray; the ashtray represents the countless cigarettes I have smoked, another addiction. The nest also has a secondary purpose of hiding a projector. The projector has another video, the video is of me, playing myself, cycling through the same emotions, happy, sad, angry, and scared. While directing my own video I was inspired with the idea of Camp. Camp suggests itself as serious but cannot be taken too seriously because it goes over the top. During the video my emotions are overly exaggerated. I used the silent films of German Expressionism to motivate me. I value Camp as an aesthetic. Susan Sontag explains Camp in her essay *Notes on “Camp”*, as “love of the unnatural: artifice and exaggeration.” Camp offers a comedic view of the world by neutralizing moral indignations. I believe that if we can neutralize our own moral indignations about addiction that it can become more digestible, and we can begin to see addicts as humans.

About a year ago, I saw an old beat up lawn chair sitting in a trash heap. Out of all the objects in that trash heap, the chair spoke to me. I knew I had to have it, I knew it was going to be part of this space, I didn’t know how, but the object beckoned to me, and I listened. I brought the lawn chair to my studio where it sat for months. I would look at it and think to myself, “what does this piece of shit lawn chair want from me?” The chair reminds me of the type of lawn chair that every dad has ever sat in, every dad in his dad

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5 Sontag, Susan, *Notes on “Camp”*,1
shorts barbequing in the backyard. It reminded me of summer, of lemonade, of the childlike freedom of running through the woods and climbing trees. It reminded me of a happier time. Yet, the chair is battered and abused, and that felt appropriate.

After the creation of the birds, they needed a finish. Influenced by German Expressionism, Film Noir, and graphic novels, I decided the finish should be graphic black paint with white dry brush. I identify this black and white finish with static, the black and white tranquilly running into one other, the distortion, confusion, how it might feel to be on drugs, difficult to discern where one dreamy object starts and another ends. I then applied the black and white finish to the panel using a broom. The panels became the barriers for the space. The black and white finish needed to be everywhere in the space. I painted the lawn chair, the floor lamp, the ashtray, and the bird’s nest.

During my research I came across this poem by William Brewer, the punctum of the poem was very powerful for me. I would like to share a section of the poem.

*Today I Took You To Our Oxyana High School Reunion*

It was held in the gymnasium
Which was full of coffins
Full of smaller coffins
Full of Oxys.
I guess we were underdressed:
Me in my surf shoes
You in an urn.
Heather Molecke, *Piece of Shit Lawn Chair*, 2019
The Collage

In the summer of 2018, the school of art at LSU was asked to participate in a fundraiser to help children that had been rescued from sex trafficking by creating art on small canvases. The issue of children in sex trafficking stirred up a lot of emotions within me. I was happy to help, so I began a series of what I consider 3-dimensional collage. I experimented with plaster-covered objects on canvas, mostly toys, to reference the children. I was pleased with the results of my experimentation.

I created a side project that I will be showing at the same time as So Long, Sinkhole City! during the exhibition. The side project is a combination of 3-dimensional and 2-dimensional collage wall hangings. This work is loosely based on the narrative of Sinkhole City. I reflect on my childhood, my parents, life lessons, fear for humanity, and cartoons.

Heather Molecke, The Collage, 2019
The Exhibition and Defense

I mostly think of my work as the spoor of an animal that goes through the forest and makes a thought trail, and the viewer is the hunter who comes and follows the trail. At one point I as the trail-maker disappear. The viewer then is confronted with the dilemma of ideas and directions.

—Edward Kienholz

So Long, Sinkhole City! was a solo exhibition that was on view at Glassell Gallery between the dates of March 12th – March 23rd 2019. This exhibition was the largest show in my artistic career. It consisted of twenty 4’ x 8’ panels, two ceilings, flooring, a hospital bed, a life-size cardboard chair, television, side table, many other various objects, and 1500 pounds of sand. My first obstacle was figuring out how to transport all of my work. After much consideration and calculation it took a 15’ U-Haul, a pick-up truck, and several car trips with a team of four people to get everything over and set up.

My workspace while creating all of the work had been a dusty warehouse space with dingy walls covered in peeling paint, and floors that probably haven’t been washed since the building was built in 1924. My studio was a much different environment than the clean white gallery that I moved into. My work looked much different in the new environment. The work felt more intentional in the clean space. It had a purpose, and the purpose was to narrate the story that I had been working on. The placement of each piece was important for the story to be told. Glassell Gallery is a wide-open space with two large cement support beams in the center of the room and several movable walls. When I began my set up I wanted to control the flow of traffic within the space to suggest a path for the viewer. To achieve this I placed one of the movable walls in-between the large
cement support beams so the viewer could not see the final room behind it. This placement suggested that the viewer should walk to the visible room, *Suburban Nightmare*, then on to the next room, *Diagnosis: Hysteria*, and finally to the final room, *Piece of Shit Lawn Chair*. The collages were displayed in salon style across the gallery from the main pieces. Lighting was critical as I had projections and my own light sources in each space. I wanted the gallery as dark as I could get it. I turned off all the lights in the gallery except for a few dim lights directed at the collages. I was ready for my defense.

My defense was on the same day as the reception of my exhibition, March 15th, 2019. During my defense we discussed difficult questions such as if the outside of the rooms should become part of the work rather than the plain white exterior that I created, or if I could have found an easier method of creating a space like a storage container? We discussed the purpose of a ceiling, and perhaps not having one to allow the pieces to live beyond that boundary. We talked about the idea of the root system on the walls in *Suburban Nightmare* as a metaphoric concept for family. The thesis committee suggested some simple changes to the gallery such as moving the wall that I had strategically placed to block the final room, as to open the space up and allow the viewer to dictate their own direction. We took some time during the defense to explore the suggestions made, and it looked much better. Sometimes you need several eyes to see what you can’t.

My exhibition reception started at 6:00 pm. As an undergrad I worked at my school’s art gallery, so I was experienced in preparing for a reception, procuring the appropriate food and drinks. When my guests began to arrive they would ask me where to start? I suggested that they start by reading the artist’s statement. I chose to not use title
tags and relied solely on my descriptions in my artist’s statement for the viewer to know which piece they were looking at. I did this to allow them to learn more about the meaning behind each piece.

As the sun went down the gallery became darker, and the pieces became more dramatic. It was an unusual experience to be in a dark gallery; usually they are blown up by light. The gallery was transformed into a moody atmosphere; it felt like walking through a dream, which was exactly what I wanted. The show was supposed to end at 8:00 pm, however, there were a lot of people still in the gallery at closing time and I wasn’t going to throw them out. Finally, I closed the gallery at 9:30, the show was a success and I was proud of myself.

Heather Molecke, *So Long, Sinkhole City!*, 2019
The Reflection

Although I am proud of the exhibition, on reflection there are a few changes I would have made. I would have turned the final room, *Piece of Shit Lawn Chair*, at an angle towards the other rooms so it spoke more directly with the other two, and I would have given people an outlet to write down secrets they wanted to shed.

During and after my exhibition, I had several people approach me that wanted to share their childhood traumas. I was honored that they found the strength from my show to share their hardship. Now seeing the impact that my work made in several people’s lives I wish I had been more attuned with the outcome prior to the show. I think the design of a time capsule station to allow the viewer to write down a secret and unload it into a safe place would be a great addition to this body of work.

Also, since the exhibition, and the sale of many pieces of my collage work I have decided that I would donate a portion of the proceeds to an organization to help children that were rescued from sex trafficking. I regret that I hadn’t thought of that earlier as I think I could have raised more money.

As I go forward as an artist I am not sure that I will always work on such a large scale. I am considering the use of fabric that is easily rolled up and moved, rather than large wooden framed structures. In my future, I probably won’t have the space to store such large objects, but also it will make transportation easier. I need to learn how to work smarter, not harder.
Vita

Heather Molecke will be graduating with her MFA in studio arts with a concentration in sculpture in August 2019. Teaching students has been the most rewarding accomplishment of her life. She has been invited to teach foundations and sculpture during fall semester at LSU in 2019. When she isn’t in the studio making art or teaching sculpture to students, you can find her reading graphic novels, collecting vintage toys, or finding humor in the absurdity of life. Her aspirations are to live in a world where humans respect one another. She is currently working on a graphic novel called *Poor Life Choices*. 