Day Gone

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DAY GONE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
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Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
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in

The School of Art

by
Matthew Zorn
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Abstract

As an exploration of the natural world and the otherworldly, Day Gone seeks to define the relationships between disparate places. Through the use of ceramic and supporting materials, the objects serve as a portal to a terra incognita of color, texture, and language. The installation is a catalog of experiences and feelings I hold consciously or unconsciously.
Solar Trance

“It was an old wedding band in the sky, or a morsel of bone. There were stars. It was all over.”

-Annie Dillard, Total Eclipse

My first semester at LSU was marked by a total solar eclipse. I followed the crowd outside and borrowed a welding mask to get a look at the sky. There was something unsettling about a crowd of people all looking up. For a moment, every student and professor was outside of their classroom, motionless, as the moon absorbed the sun. There was a tingling eeriness. Then there was a shift. The light around us became metallic grey and shadows morphed into crescent shapes. I could only describe this as a sublime cosmic experience, beautiful and terrifying.
Before becoming an artist I considered myself to be a Finder. When I was six I found a lost wedding ring in my best friend’s lawn. As kids, a truck would come to our neck of the woods to spread fresh gravel up and down the road from my house to my grandma’s. My brother, sister, and I would walk the one mile stretch to my grandma’s house, heads down, scanning the fresh gravel for fossils. We found quite a few, and sometimes we’d even find railroad spikes. My mom eventually put our “eagle eyes” to use and had us hunt for morel mushrooms in the backwoods, usually pretty successfully. Right around this time, I found a fossil in the woods by my house. When I examined it, I couldn’t place it— not in any time period or in any category of animal or plant. I thought it might be a bone but it was too heavy. I would try to imagine exactly what it was and what it might have been, but every time I did, its origins would change. The lawn had given me this relic, laced with great detail and mystery, and it was up to me to find its place.

Figure 2. Reliquary, Walnut, texture paint, acrylic, gold leaf, found fossil. Zorn, 2020. Photo by Chris Burns
I grew up on a 100 acre farm, thirty minutes from the nearest town, an hour from the nearest traffic light, and a mile from my closest neighbor, my grandma. As we had a little less than three local TV channels, my childhood was spent outside—climbing hills, damming streams, and pushing over dead trees. When I wasn’t being a hell-raiser, I was an alchemist, making creatures out of colored polymer clay, BB’s, feathers, sticks, and mixing “potions”. These were usually a mixture of things like soda, dirt, rocks, and Doritos. It took a long time to understand how unique this lifestyle was. West Virginia is a mystical, ancient landscape with a rich history of story-telling and folk-lore; much of its culture is connected to the natural world. The fossil fuel industries are a constant reminder of how incredibly old this region is. It’s one of the few places where the past and the present are deeply intertwined. This relationship, though incredibly complex, is fascinating. Coal mines are portals to the unknown; to treacherous fossilized worlds of night.

Because of its mountains, West Virginia can feel isolated from the rest of the world. Thus, in film and literature, the landscape and the culture is often exaggerated and exploited as otherworldly. This otherworldliness is something I, and many other Appalachians, have come to embrace. My affinity for the weird comes from this culture. I was too young to fully understand when I watched the Mothman Prophecies with Richard Gere, but the story cemented my interests in the strange and the unknown. A story about a red eyed, Moth-human hybrid who traveled dimensions to a town, not unlike my own, to warn about the eventual collapse of the Point Pleasant bridge. The Mothman now holds a significant place in my life. The film and the accounts it’s based on are a unique hybrid of folk-lore and science fiction. It’s common that science fiction inhabits spaces that are far off, unknown, and isolated, but this creature seemingly belongs to the Lovecraft mythos. Knowledge of this folklore has greatly impacted my connection to the natural world and the otherworldly in all that I make.

Opposites Attract

[On the essence of a strong image] “having arisen from the spontaneous approach of two extremely disparate realities of which only the spirit has understood the relationships.”

-Pierre Reverdy, Phantoms of the Imagination

I have a sweet tooth, however Jello makes me vomit. This didn’t stop me for quite some time. It’s unearthly, the way it's clear like a block of glass but soft like a jellyfish. I find it to be extremely seductive yet at the same time utterly repulsive. It literally turns my insides out.

I’m enchanted by feelings like this. Between seductive and repulsive, inside and outside, and what is natural and unnatural. I find that the relationship between these opposites evokes a certain tension and humor. The tension lies in their contrast but the humor lies in their awkward interaction. The capability to undergo two contrasting feelings is seemingly rare yet distinctly human. I experience them most often through texture. Texture is a deceitful aspect of eating, anyone who’s eaten a Wood Ear mushroom would know. I’m fascinated by our ability to experience texture physically and visually. Working in ceramic unlocks the door to a garden variety of deceitful textures. Ceramics is a shape shifting material, the forms and skins it can embody are limitless, which is precisely why I’m so drawn to it.
Figure 6. *Mr. Yuk*, Ceramic, glaze. Zorn, 2020. Photo by Matt Zorn

Figure 7. *Makeout Creek*, Ceramic, walnut, spray paint, flocking. Zorn, 2020. Photo by Matt Zorn
The Other World

Mystery and fascination exist in the area between places, on the edge of the otherworldly. This transitional space is like a curtain, or, as Lovecraft describes it: “The line to the boundless and hideous unknown— the shadow-haunted Outside”. The Weird and the Eerie by Mark Fisher has helped me, tremendously, to understand my attraction to the otherworldly. Fisher’s approach pulls examples of film, literature, and music together to establish the threshold to the unknown as a motif essential to horror and science fiction. These two genres make up a significant portion of what I draw inspiration from. Thus, movies and literature have become a well of information for my studio practice.

This piece, titled Snallygaster (Fig. 8), references the otherworldly in Appalachia. The title is based off of the Appalachian folk creature the Snallygaster which comes from the german Schneller Giest or “quick ghost”. It consists of cone 6, 02, and 013 clays and glazes, and one found ceramic cabinet knob. It echoes a landscape and measures a little over six inches in length. The pastel pink and matte chartreuse are seductive, like necco wafers and gum, juxtaposed with the black lava rock form, grounded on a blanket of grey froth.

Figure 8. Snallygaster (Detail), Ceramic, glaze, found cabinet knob, gold leaf. Zorn, 2019. Photo by Matt Zorn
Abstraction and Horror

In John Carpenter’s *Halloween*, the slasher character, Michael Myers, was never written in the original script by name. He was only referred to as “the shape”, per Carpenter’s request. Not only does this take the slasher out of a human context but it abstracts the character; it removes clarity and replaces it with a haunting ambiguity. This is one example of an intersection where language and visual arts coalesce.

Monochromatic abstraction is used as a tool for horror now in some arthouse films. In John Smith’s *The Black Tower*, the horror comes from the inescapability of the viewer from the abstract undefined darkness of the looming tower. Everywhere the camera turns it's there, watching, always moving closer. To further disorient, between shots the film will flash with solid colors. In a similar vein, the 2013 sci-fi horror film *Under the Skin* (Fig. 9) uses color and texture in a way that speaks to the work of James Turrell.

Color and language is where many of my creative decisions lie. When I visit hardware stores I often spend most of my time looking at the house paint cards. Sometimes the name of the paint is more significant than the color itself. Some of my favorites have been *Alchemist, Fired Earth, Cosmic Quest, Eon, Lazy Caterpillar*, and *It’s Sage*. Through doing this, I discovered that “title” played a crucial role in my perception of the colors themselves. The search was no longer about the color alone, but rather the personalities of each one. Some were outrageous, others were pitiful, and the best ones were absurd.
I find myself seeking out glaze recipes based on their titles *frothing, foaming, crawling*. I also recognize these terms from the Weird Horror fiction stories I’ve read. Once again, language, form, and image interplay. The piece, *Body Snatched* (Fig. 10), emerged out of froth, foam, and crawl glazes that interested me, they acted like words to determine its sensory qualities- lava foaming glaze, green froth, runny chartreuse, sticky orange epoxy, and one found slickly glazed ceramic cabinet knob.

![Figure 10. Body Snatched, Ceramic, glaze, found cabinet knob, epoxy. Zorn, 2019. Photo by Matt Zorn](image)

During the install process of this work, I positioned the lights to create long shadows that pull away from the objects. With this, I intend for the shadow to emphasize the scale of each landscape. The shadows themselves mimic the in between stages of sunrise or sunset. In turn, this creates an eerie atmospheric feeling.
Form and Void

“Faced with the stone circle at Stonehenge, or with the statues on Easter Island, we are confronted with a different set of questions. The problem here is not why the people who created these structures disappeared — there is no mystery here — but the nature of what disappeared. What kinds of being created these structures? How were they similar to us, and how were they different? What kind of symbolic order did these beings belong to, and what role did the monuments they constructed play in it?”

- Mark Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie*

My practice begins as a search for something. I have been seeking for as long as I can remember. Whether it's a sense of place, a fossil, a glaze, a word or a material, I follow my intuition and curiosity. This has led to many research explorations during my time at LSU, such as mixed media assemblage, collage, firing buckets of reclaimed ceramic material, or digging for wild clay on the bank of the Mississippi River in East Baton Rouge. The search often leads me to clay. The act of finding, however, is an almost cosmic experience; in this, I feel an engagement with the universe.

The monolith has been a recurring motif in my research. It has sparked this body of work and has been haunting me in the same way that the film *The Black Tower* haunts the viewer— after every turn I take in my research it is there, waiting for me. In my life, I’ve spent a lot of time camping in the shadow of one of West Virginia’s monolithic geological formations, Seneca Rocks. This 900 foot giant was once an ocean floor that over millions of years tilted 90 degrees upright to become a jagged gray fin that protrudes out of soft green hills. The rocks hold an eerie power beyond their scale, something ancient and magnetic.

The monolith is often used in horror film and literature to provide a portal to other worlds and dimensions, an eerie trace of what once was, or a symbol for what’s to come. Monolithic structures are so rich with interpretation and mystery, I hope to provide a similar “unknown” to my viewer.

Figure 12. *Grave Digger* (Rear), Ceramic, glaze, walnut, “fired earth” house paint. Zorn, 2020. Photo by Chris Burns
My monolith series consists of free standing ceramic objects that explore form and void, and the portal between the two. In my work I use the symbolic language of monolith; each form has two sides that either through texture, color, or form play off of each other.

Figure 13. *Indistinct Chatter*, Ceramic, glaze, paint, lacquer, acrylic. Zorn, 2019. Photo by Matt Zorn

Figure 14. *Indistinct Chatter* (Rear), Ceramic, glaze, paint, lacquer, acrylic. Zorn, 2019. Photo by Chris Burns
Despite my interest in the monolith, the pieces are relatively small. Making monoliths no larger than a shoe is an absurd task. It’s this absurdity that draws me to this scale. In doing this, I want the viewer to let their guard down and question what makes an object powerful. I consider the gems and minerals collection at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh. These bits and pieces that resemble canyons and cityscapes glow and whisper in their glass cases. Each shimmering chunk of earth is snug and compact, however the power they hold is akin to the much larger Seneca Rocks.

This piece, titled *Freudian Slip* (Fig. 15), consists of low fire ceramic, glaze, and silver leaf. The form portrays two contrasting sides with a peephole or tunnel between. The runny chartreuse glaze glows against the hazy purple and crimson fog. It’s strict flatness resembles the architecture of a doorway or arch.

Figure 15. *Freudian slip* (front), Ceramic, glaze, walnut, “fired earth” house paint. Zorn, 2020. Photo by Chris Burns
It’s opposing side (Fig. 16) is a slick black, like a wet seal, and pillowed out as if it contains a skeleton and organs. The title references both ceramic and psychological processes. A slip is the liquid form of clay as well as a latent thought that leaks from the subconscious into the conscious. My interests in both have run parallel. Sigmund Freud’s *The Uncanny* was the first piece of literature pertaining to the horror aesthetic that I explored. The relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar stands at the core of my interests. The monolith is a distinct symbol of the uncanny. Whether through geological processes or human abilities, despite thousands or millions of years, it exists. Because it exists, we imagine the disappearance and remnants of our own civilization.
Conclusion

Between what is known and what is unknown, there is wonder.

The fossil I found 20 years ago has an origin, it has a scientific name, and a known material make-up, but when I look at it, I see the eons looking back at me. I see the journey it took to find me. I see the many origins I imagined for it. With my understanding of the natural world, I wonder about the otherworld. With my knowledge of clay as a starting point, and other materials playing supporting roles, I explore the relationships between disparate places. The show title *Day Gone* is an interpretation of language and feeling in relation to my understanding of these thresholds. It serves as a catalog of experiences and discoveries from childhood to adulthood that shaped my understanding of material and feeling.

![Image of the installation Day Gone](image)

*Figure 17. Day Gone installation. Zorn, 2019-2020. Photo by Chris Burns*
Afterward

This installation was on display during the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic. Due to a nationwide quarantine, my access to the university was halted and my reception was canceled. For myself, this work will always serve as a reminder of the bizarre experience shared between a world of people.

My graduate school experience began in a total solar eclipse and it has concluded in a global pandemic.

Figure 18. *August 2017 A.D.* (Shadow Side). Ceramic, glaze, “world’s blackest black” acrylic paint, “autumn sky” and “midnight blue” house paint. Zorn 2020. Photo by Matt Zorn
Bibliography


Vita

Matt Zorn was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and grew up in West Union, West Virginia. He received a BA from Davis & Elkins College in 2017. The themes in Zorn’s work include humor, horror, the gothic, science fiction, geology, astronomy, and food. He continues to seek and find inside and outside of his studio. He anticipates graduating from Louisiana State University with a Masters in Fine Art in August, 2020.