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MATERIALIZING ABSENCE: TRACES OF LONG’S FARM

by

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Materializing Absence: Traces of Long’s Farm
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

I have worked as a farmhand on Long’s Farm in Boulder, Colorado, for 10 months. I have sought to harness the tactility of knowing this place in the form of rubbings and casts as
impressions of the pump house at this farm. Touch is the tangent of both my labor as a farmhand and the very act of making this work. This lexicon of touch reveals fragments of the pump house bearing witness to the palimpsest of its surfaces. The general act of mark making to create this work becomes specific in my contact. It is my conversations with Catherine Long, who is the third generation of Longs operating that farm; the dirt that gets on me; the rough hay that scratches my forearms as I duck under the tarp that covers the hay mound; the texture of the ground beneath my feet and the soft and worn wood on my hands as I work in the barn. These works allow the notion of place to oscillate between materiality and site, harboring a fullness and specificity to the surfaces they touch, and the materiality simultaneously preserving agency in the process. The casts and rubbings are aware of their materiality and removal from their mold. These traces now droop and tear, tethered to the walls of the gallery. In this work, absence is presence.

This place affects me; it is somehow a part of my being. The energy these structures hold has a powerful presence in this work. This energy has drawn me to these places in play as a child, as a farmer, and as an artist. These temporal ways of being in a place inform this work.

Considering my process, I have sorted and weaved together the culmination of my experiences for this exhibition. I was seeking a daily, experiential way of learning about place through farming. In my day to day labor at the farm, I honed in on two important concepts that directed this work. One was my touch, both in the creation of these traces and the tactility of doing farm chores as a method of mining a tacit knowledge of this place. The act of touch resulted in the materialization of this work; I acted as the facilitator of materials that literally act as the medium, the thing both the pump house and I touched. The second concept that developed in the process of making this work was my position in that place. Having experience raising cattle on my family farm, I felt at ease in a similar type of space, both in the physicality, and the mentality of operating a small farm. Yet, simultaneously, I felt out of place, living in a new region of the country, being in the primary role of a student in academia, and learning the ways of
operating a goat dairy. I do not feel that I am aligned with one position more or less, but through my multiple positions I sought to reveal a unique and exhaustive inquiry of this place.

Recognizing my layered position, it was important to me to know this place in as many capacities as possible. My aim was for myself and this work to be aware of its position in relation to the farm and to the institutional space I am bringing it into.

I will preface my experience at Long’s Farm with a reflection on some past work that has led me to this project. I will discuss my process in order to encompass the making of this work and the revelations that fueled the depth of my inquiry of this place. I will bookend this narrative with thoughts on my art practice and the reasons I actively sought out this way of working. Though I am not able to present the entirety of this work in the gallery, I realize this idea and my practice require an iterative process, which I wish to expand on here.

In the summer of 2016, I made a series of works on my family farm that I will use as a point of departure to decipher the process I am engaged in now. I realized part of the success of that work was based in me occupying the space of the farm while creating the work. Having just come from the field school, a three-week intensive field research trip, I was eager to make work that was created in situ, in reaction to what I was experiencing on my family farm. The works that I am contemplating are two wheat pastings, which point to the history and physical presence of the farm. One pasting is a graphic logo and the other is a pattern that covers a large sliding barn door. The logo was a rubbing from the embossment of a glass milk bottle. The bottle reads “Onondaga Milk,” which was a local milk company that served many small dairies in the 1960s and 70s. Onondaga is the county in which our farm is located, situated in the center of the state in a region known as Central New York. Growing up around these dairies in their decline, I witnessed the last generation who were operating these farms. Now, these places only exist in the absence of this industry, none operate as they did in the early 1990s. These farms remain in varying states of decay and use, and many are at the verge of becoming ruins. Our farm was previously the Meirs Dairy Farm, subsequently adapted to the Red Angus Cattle operation my
The family runs today. We have occupied other barns and spaces on the farm, but the milking parlor that lives in the basement of an early 1800s barn remains untouched, as a sort of unintentional relic to a different era.

In response to this space, I wanted to create a sign of this past industry that added to the traces of history that I witnessed around the farm. These traces of a past function I speak of are layers in the palimpsest, which make up this farm. They are the addition of a newer milking room to hold larger bulk tanks, the remnants of a gravel driveway where the milk truck would back in, or the chipping of the eggshell whitewash that coats the milking parlor. These
characteristics are common to almost all small dairies that surround our farm. The trace that I indicated was missing from our farm was the tin sign next to the door of the milking parlor that stated the milk company that picked up the dairy’s milk. These signs often still exist amidst the decay of these dairies—usually white washed or completely rusted and illegible, but nonetheless they remain a part of this palimpsest. I set out to recreate one to point to the past function of the milking parlor. I did rubbings of a collection of old milk bottles from local dairies and milk companies. I then scaled up the Onondaga Milk logo to a size that would have a presence on the side of this big red barn. My goal in this interpretation of these signs was to point to the basement beneath this barn and to the defunct industry of these small dairies. Like the dairies and the signs, the wheat pasting disintegrated. Similarly, other traces of these dairies will continue to dissolve in time, becoming less specific and identifiable as what they were. Like relics, they hold an energy and mystery that keeps them powerful and that no amount of decay can seem to take away from them. Even when these dairies exist as rubble, as faint foundations consumed by the landscape, they will still signify a particular place, as imprints in the earth, holding a specificity, as traces have the power to do, whether the beholder is aware of this history or not.
It is these places that act as a collaborator in my work. I become one agent among others in the creation of the work, and this is my motivation for having an artistic practice. I sought out Long’s Farm as a locus in which I could react. The developments in the studio were based solely on my ideas about a particular experience, the farm, and specifically the pump house became the focus of an intensive study.

In the essay “Means and Ends,” Cornelia H. Butler discusses the show she curated, *Afterimage: Drawing Through Process*. The show consisted of a selection of drawings by artists who were associated with the process art movement of the 1960s and 70s. In the text, she contemplates the artists’ struggle of finding meaning in their studio practice, stating,

[Jack] Whitten and his contemporary Marcia Hafif both describe the essential experience of being in the studio faced with the endgame of painting: how can one construct a
painting that has meaning and is not a representation? What does it mean to occupy the studio and make objects? How is a drawing made and how does it function in terms of the space of painting? Their obsessive mark making is an attempt to find painting’s zero degree to see if it will give way to another kind of activity and, if not, find the most reduced gesture that still comprises a work—to find a fullness by emptying out.¹

Whitten was interrogating his studio in order to demystify the abstract gesture in painting popularized by the abstract expressionists. He created graphite rubbings of the floor in his studio as one method to de-center the accepted mode of a studio practice set by the painters that preceded him. Butler states, “These elementary, gray landscapes map the topography of labor and record the artist’s activity.”² Though these artists’ reactions were geared to the state of painting at the time, I feel at the core of my work I was grappling with the endgame being a representation of an experience, rather than the experience and materiality being a participant in the creation of the work, like the place and materials had participated in making the casts of the pump house. Butler’s statement is relevant to this work in the act of giving myself permission to find meaning outside of my studio and outside of myself as the sole contributor to the work. I find that there is still value in their critique of the studio as contemporary artists seek an awareness of the role of the studio in their practice. The act of decentering my practice, by working at the farm, fueled this creative process.

In my work at Long’s Farm, the materials have gained agency in the process beyond what I was imposing on them. Working on site rather than in the studio, I was not inclined to collect and re-present materials from that place, which is a method I have used in previous projects. The latex, tarps and paper rubbings maintain specific qualities which allow them to capture fragments of the pump house’s presence. The materials serve more than just a reference to place and no longer felt arbitrary as they did in my studio. Rather, certain requirements I had, led me to materials that actively recorded my contact with the pump house. These materials revealed

² Butler, “Means and Ends,” 104.
new meaning to me because they now had a job in capturing traces of the pump house, just as I did. The work would not exist without my contact and the materials’ contact with that place.

My labor, relationships and practice revolve around this visceral contact with the farm. As farmhand I milk the goats, feed them alfalfa and grass, and I rake the barn and yard. When I learned to hand milk the goats I was confronted by the tension of this tactile form of learning. Sitting at the edge of the milk stand with the end game of filling the bucket, I was overwhelmed, getting only the smallest drops of milk from the goat’s udder. I quickly realized when I thought logically about how to do this task it hindered me; it was by doing, getting a feel for it, by practicing that the act of milking became an extension of myself, just like when we walk or write, without considering how that is being done. Raking the barnyards was more intuitive, it does not require the specificity of action that milking does. Differently than milking, moving dirt across the ground forms a drawing as a byproduct of this labor. It creates an ephemeral record, layering a woven matrix over the ground formed by the prongs of the rake. The specificity of knowing through the act of milking and the act of mark making produced by raking brought about a persistent dialogue between the act of creating the traces and the act of doing farm chores.

Tactility as a way of knowing this place is the link in all of my experiences at the farm. I wanted to be more than just the observer, or do more than just re-present that place; rather, my goal was to harness the tactility of this place. Donald Schön, in his text *The Reflexive Practitioner*, articulates a way of knowing that is better translated through action and contact like that of my traces and labor as a farmhand. He states, “Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say our knowing is in our action.”³ Importantly, both the traces and the farm chores reveal tactility as a mode of knowing this place in different capacities. Though it is not explicit, I strive

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to show the time I spent at the farm through these traces. In the act of making the work, I aim to show how one can know something well through the fundamental act of touch. The rubbings, the latex negatives and the tarps act as the medium between me and the place—as agents to record this time. Robert Morris explored this phenomenon in his *Blind Time* drawings, where he aimed to disembody the role of vision, in order to explore the body’s form of touch in the making of an object. In the catalogue essay from the exhibition *Afterimage: Drawing Through Process*, Cornelia H. Butler references Kimberly Paice’s thoughts on Morris’ work, remarking, “…the black velvet of the powdered graphite reading less as a trace or imprint of the hands’ passage over the page than as a mirror surface for touch itself—the drawing touching back the artist’s hands.” Butler goes on to say, “This invocation of reflexivity with the materials is what Morris refers to as the ends and means coming closer together—the dissolve of the proverbial life/art, art/environment duality.”

I believe, similarly to Morris’ drawings, that the pump house itself is touching back. This reciprocation of touch seems to further blur this proverbial life/art, art/environment complexity. In my immersion at the farm, I grapple with this duality, pondering where the act of marking registers on the spectrum of art. I contend, with the process of making these impressions and that work emerges in the recording of both my activity in making the work and of the traces of the pump house the work captures. The marks I make at the farm seem to ride the spectrum of art and life until the moment of isolation or selection of their form by me as the artist. I will expand on the role of this place, the materiality, and the act of touch as they determined my process.

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4 Butler, “Means and Ends,” 94.
Rubbing: From Material Study to Record

The closeness required by the act of touch led me to a fascination with mark making and what it captures based on the surface the mark is made on. It was the elimination of distance between myself, the materials, and the pump house in order to make the rubbings, the latex impressions and the tarp casts. This elimination of distance became profound when I was creating two similar drawings, but at two different places and at two different times. I thought of them as related, in that both were about architectural thresholds—one, a rubbing of a door at the pump house, and the other a recording of remembered proportions of windows and doors of a similar structure on my farm in New York. What struck me is the distance of these drawings in relation to their subjects. If one were to only analyze and consider my role in the mark making and the materials I was using, they might conclude that these two drawing are exactly the same. The materials I used, 6 and 9 B graphite and tracing paper, were the same, and my action, a general back and forth motion to cover the surface of the paper, was the same. The difference was the surface I was touching: one set of drawings was done in the studio and the other against
the surfaces that make up the pump house. This simple discovery told me a lot about the work I set out to make and reinforced my motivation in seeking out a meaningful place to create this work.

Rubbing the pump house is a way to engage with the palimpsest of marks that make up the building. This structure has a way of transmitting history tactiley through my contact. Past generations of Longs milled the wood, repaired the windows, and brushed on the paint. I am touching all of these materials at once—time has collapsed in this palimpsest. This tactile way of experiencing the pump house is a layer of knowing a place that goes beyond vision as our primary way of understanding a space. Instead, it opens a dynamic way of knowing a place.
Through the very act of their making, rubbings are physical witnesses of a place or moment in time. Each one is distinguished by the personal hand of its maker, and together they form a lexicon of the language of touch. Proportionate with the human scale, they also connect physically to the author and to the beholder through their one-to-one relation with the objects reproduced. Moreover, rubbings belong to the indefinable status of “in between,” embodying the transformation that occurs in the transfer from surface to surface. A metamorphosis of the rubbed object may arise in that process as well as a revelation of previously unrecognized traces and textures. Appearances become apparitions.5

Allegra Presenti curated the exhibition “Apparitions: Frottages and Rubbings From 1860 to Now,” in 2015 at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. In her catalogue essay, she suggests that rubbings as traces are a way of transmitting a historical record or personal history, as a means of visualizing memory.6 These one to one architectural traces, as Presenti writes, place the viewer proportionally within the surfaces of the pump house, yet in the absence of the viewer being at the pump house. The faint, seemingly invisible marks that the pump house holds are captured, halted in time as they are transmitted into rubbings. A mark that was made by the act of touch, like a repair, or more subtly like the chipping of paint when interacting with the building, is transmitted through the act of rubbing into a purely visual form. Yet, both what is being rubbed and the act of rubbing are foremost tied to the act of touch. It is perplexing that the elementary act of touch can make a work, yet, despite this seeming simplicity, there is a sort of conundrum in placing it within the discipline of art. The indefinability of a rubbing’s status heightens my appreciation for the specificity of Presenti’s exhibition title “Apparitions.” Presenti speaks to this in-betweenness of rubbings by way of the transmission that takes place from surface to surface. She states, “Their subjects oscillate between presence and absence like ghostly apparitions.”7 This flickering of absence and presence materializes in the traces that occupy the museum. They exist in the absence of the pump house yet hold an eerie likeness to the surfaces they have touched creating this tension.

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6 Presenti, Apparitions, 16.
7 Presenti, Apparitions, 19.
This materiality is at once the surface of what is being rubbed and who and what is rubbing this surface. Mine and the rubbing’s contact with the pump house dictates the wrinkles, tears and blemishes in this action. My mark is another agent in the work, just like the tears and impressions the pump house contributes. The trace of my hand in the rubbing is inseparable from the action of rubbing. Taking time with the structure through the rubbings is an important component in striking a balance between what I reveal and what the pump house reveals. The materials I choose, a large or small piece of graphite, will determine the marks it picks up, or if my motions will be broad or tedious. I have realized each rubbing is slightly different depending on the lighting of the day, the weather conditions, the space in which I can move my body, and the surface I am rubbing. All of these varying components reveal the process I am aiming to capture. Presenti articulates this, and reinforces the intrinsic nature of materiality in the making of a rubbing, as I also see in the other forms of drawing in my practice. She states, “Perhaps the most elemental of all forms of rubbing are derived from the artist’s primary interest in materiality and the process itself. Through the indexical nature of these explorations, there emerges the imprint of the artist’s identity.”

She observes both forms of the index as inextricable to the work, the trace of my body and the trace of the pump house. It fascinates me that the rubbings, and the casts manifest as the immateriality of the surfaces I have touched, yet, at the core of my practice lies my interest in materials. I reconcile this tension between material and immaterial through my contact with the farm. The traces I have taken from the pump house lack the material form that the structure has, but they have taken on new material forms, as traces that are distinguished from the mold of the pump house. The materiality of these traces have an awareness and sensitivity to the form they take in acknowledgement to their removal from the pump house.

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8 Presenti, Apparitions, 16.
Traces: The Index of an Absence

The trace or imprint as an indexical mark of place incites a complexity of what this might mean as a concept within the realm of art. All of the work I have undertaken in this process is woven through this idea. In my process, I contend how the index must be critically researched and put into practice as an intensive concept. Mary Ann Doane interrogates the index as a theoretical framework that is not prescriptive as concept, but rather, as a field that must be explored critically among disciplines. She references C.S. Pierce and Rosalind Krauss as frameworks to build upon and critically examine. Peirce created a taxonomy of signs in the latter part of the nineteenth century stating that the index occupies an uncomfortable position in this complex classification. He defines the index as follows:

An index is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant. Such for example, is a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as a sign of a shot; for without the
shot there would have been no hole; but there is a hole there, whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not.\(^9\)

I would most closely ascribe Pierce’s example to the decay of the dairy farms near my home in New York. As they dissolve into ruins the beholder may no longer attribute them to a dairy, but without the dairy there would be no ruin. The traces of the pump house relate in that they are a cast and become the absence of the structure, the pump house is the bullet. The pump house as the signified had to be present in the making of the casts, but it is no longer important that the viewer knows of the structures presence. Pierce characterized the index as a diverse set of signs such as the footprint, the weathervane, the photographic image, and the word “this.”\(^{10}\) He stated, “The index asserts nothing; it only says “There!”\(^{11}\) He was adamant that there was no meaning in these traces, rather they simply pointed to something. Doane contends that the concept of the index is even more precarious than Peirce and later Rosalind Krauss conceptualize it. Doane proposes, in order to understand the notion of the index with more complexity, one must recognize the tension between the deictic index and the index as trace. She states:

As photographic trace or impression, the index seems to harbor fullness, an excessiveness of detail that is always supplemental to meaning or intention. Yet, the index as deixis implies an emptiness, a hollowness that can only be filled in specific, contingent, always mutating situations. It is this dialectic of the empty and the full that lends the index an eeriness and uncanniness not associated with the realms of the icon or symbol. At times, the disconcerting closeness of the index to its object raises doubts as to whether it is indeed a sign, suggesting instead that the index is perched precariously on the very edge of semiosis.\(^{12}\)

Rosalind Krauss in her two-part essay “Notes on the Index” was one of the first theorists to take on the concept of the index as it pertains to contemporary art practices. In this essay, she aims to distinguish the output of the artists working in the seventies from the tradition of

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\(^{10}\) Doanne, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign," 3.


\(^{12}\) Doanne, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign," 2.
aesthetics of style and expression, where the creation of meaning comes solely from the artist. Similarly to Peirce, she notes that the idea of the index only indicates a space or object; like the function of the photographer, the artist’s role is to simply select or frame an object. In the process of framing, she sees the concept of the index as simply an indicator, stressing the “meaningless meaning” in this indication. Krauss likens this selection process to Duchamp and the use of ready-mades, stating, “the physical transposition of an object from the continuum of reality into the fixed condition of the art image by a moment of isolation.” Thirty years after Krauss wrote her essay, Doane reinstates a conversation on the index to open up a dialogue on this subject. Krauss would agree with Doane in that the trace as deixis is contingent on the space that it occupies, or as Peirce would say it simply says “there!” What Doane detects in Krauss’ argument is that she does not see a tension between the index as trace, like that of the photograph or cast, and the deictic or referential notion of the index; Krauss, rather, sees both as an affirmation of a meaningless but irrefutable presence. Doane builds upon Krauss’ analysis in acknowledgement of the gap in her logic. Krauss used the concept of indexicality to create a critical dialogue around the 1976 exhibition “Rooms” that took place at P.S.1 in Long Island City, New York. The work in this exhibition was indissociable from the derelict primary school, which it inhabited. Krauss joins all of the artist’s work by way of the index as deixis, or the index as contextually dependent. The artists used cues of the school’s form to bring presence to the space. Michelle Stuart created two rubbings of wall sections across from each other in a corridor of the building. She then transposed them, placing them across from each other, seemingly the same section of the wall, but aware of the invisible marks on the surface they came in contact with, and the physical east/west relationship of the space.

16 Doane, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign," 3.
The blurriness of the indexical trace presents itself again between materiality and immateriality. This inherent trait of the index is ever present in the rubbings of the pump house, full of detail as a witness to the materiality of the pump house, but as a rubbing or record, the materiality of the pump house in no longer tangible or present like the graphite and paper are now. Presenti concurs: “This singular type of draftsmanship depends on materials and materiality, yet it encapsulates the essence of immateriality.”\textsuperscript{18} I equate this sentiment similarly to the idea of touch in this work, both what the rubbings capture as a witness of the building and the action itself are tied to touch, yet it results in a visual rendition of that act. Both material and immaterial, and touch and vision lend themselves to the tension of classifying the index.

This tension extends itself to the blurry spectrum between representation and record that the index finds itself on. The act of touch required to make the rubbings and casts is general and becomes specific in what it touches. Traces seem difficult to pin down because they originate through the act of selection and not by their formal qualities. Like a photographic trace that captures light and requires a similar selection process, these rubbings have the ability to hold an excess amount of information that lends them to realist representation. Beyond this cursory tangent, realism and the indexical trace stem from distant origins. Mary Anne Doane interrogates the trace on this spectrum as it relates to the 1976 exhibition “Rooms,” where the critic Rosalind Krauss linked all of the artists in the show by way of the referential trace.

What seventies art contested in this embrace of indexicality was the very concept of style that had ruled modern-ist abstraction. In the trace, things speak themselves; they are not spoken. A whole history of aesthetic conventions concerning style and expressivity (as well as a certain conception of the “I” of representation) collapses. The function of the artist is to simply—in the manner of the camera operator—select or frame an object.\textsuperscript{19}

I can only make these drawings because I touched the pump house. The pump house seems to hold some agency in the process of mark making—the traces seem to speak as Doane alludes. I

\textsuperscript{18} Presenti, \textit{Apparitions}, 23.
could not represent that surface in another form because of the contact that making a rubbing requires. Doane recognizes the conflicting origins of the trace and realism when she states, “While realism claims to build a mimetic copy, an illusion of an inhabitable world, the index only purports to point, to connect, to touch, to make language and representation adhere to the world as tangent—to reference a real without realism.”

This imprint is related, by way of touch, to the reality of that place and its material history, but it is at once the immateriality and absence of that place. I contend that it is my contact, both in the selection of the pump house and the time spent at the farm, which gives these traces their meaning. The Long’s family history and their identity being tied to that place holds more meaning than I can begin to address, but it is in my interaction with that place where I begin to find meaning in these traces. Do Ho Suh remarks that in Mandarin, rubbing most closely translates to loving and I would have to agree. The act of touch requires two present subjects in which both entities contribute to touching and being touched. It is through this contact that both subjects’ histories and perspectives merge. The rubbings bear witness to this contact recording both subjects’ form of touch. In her essay, Krauss concludes that what is striking about the index is its role to solely affirm a presence that is void of any meaning. I contend this conclusion is made in part in reaction to the “certain conception of the “I” of representation,” where the artist claimed the sole meaning in the work. I challenge this notion by way of having an embodied experience at the farm and being in collaboration with the pump house in this process. This experience embraces the act of touch required in the making of these traces and claims that fleeting contact would undermine this work.

**Tarps and materiality**

I am a student of materiality in all segments of my life. This study informs my material sensibility in my artistic practice. Like all aspects of this work, touch continues to be the unifying

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I best know materials; I learn this silently in the action of handling them. Like Presenti articulates, the action of rubbing evokes a sensitivity to material and process intrinsic to one’s artistic practice. At the most basic level, I see the rubbings as a study of material, a slow form of touch as a mode of learning, like the learning that takes place working on the farm. Different from the touch of knowing materials in farming, the rubbings create a record of this touch and a record of my activity in that place for an audience to interpret. A quote by Cornelia H. Butler which I cited earlier in this text best articulates the parallel I strive to show between my time as a farmhand and my time creating these traces. She states, “These elementary, gray landscapes map the topography of labor and record the artist’s activity.” Here she is referencing Jack Whitten who created rubbings of his studio floor. I aim to have the audience take away a similar sense of time and activity that Butler sees in Whitten’s work.

Whitten was not only creating rubbings for their final form, but as a method to demystify the studio in order to show the activity of an artist in that space. Similarly to Whitten, I aim to show my time and labor of touch that took place at the farm. I do not expect these traces to explicitly delineate all of my activity at the farm, but, at minimum, show I was there to create this work.

I draw upon a tactile form of knowledge from raising cattle on my family farm. This way of knowing has informed my past work and led me to this current body of work. Learning about materials in this silent but active way takes longer. It is different than knowing a material in the isolation of the studio. It is slow—each day, each month, each season a material reveals itself differently. The way my numb hands twist wire in the winter or in a humid gully straddling a small stream fixing fence. Each drip of sweat fogs my vision, I must keep tension on the fence, threading the wire through the insulator as I yell “get back” each time the cows take a bite of grass stepping forward. This tacit knowledge is contextual knowledge. The silence in this knowing requires one to be in a certain place at a certain time. The place hints or dictates your motions. It is different in every place. It is not predetermined and cannot be fully translated into

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language, but it is rich because of one’s contact with a place. Schön articulates this way of knowing in his text. He acknowledges the conundrum of translating this type of knowledge into language. He states:

When we go about the spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life, we show ourselves to be knowledgeable in a special way. Often we cannot say what it is that we know. When we try to describe it we find ourselves at a loss, or we produce descriptions that are obviously inappropriate. Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say our knowing is in our action.24

What I have added to this ordinarily tacit way of knowing is that these actions of the everyday are contextual. They are vernacular; the way of fixing a fence I know in Central New York is different from the way I fix a fence here in Boulder. It is as simple as the fencing pal that I carry around as I fix the fence, it contains different tools, insulators and wire. It is in the action of doing and the context of the place I am in that differentiates this task regionally. With language I would describe them both as fixing a fence, language does not allow for the nuance in my action of knowing like a form of touch does.

24 Schön, The Reflexive Practitioner, 49
I continue this dialogue with materiality as it overlaps in my art practice. I try to see material qualities as they reveal themselves. I let them tell me something each time I use them. They transform in the process or announce themselves as they are. The tarps that cover the pump house do both. Similarly to fleeting materials like paper and latex, tarps have the ability to absorb an impression of the structure and to document the marks the structure is absorbing or has absorbed. Tarps also have a similar dialect to the materials that spot Long’s Farm and many other farms that I have spent time on. Tarps mimic the patchwork roofs that surround the pump house; they cover piles of wood and machinery forming casts of these objects. They have the ability to conceal the pump house raising questions on the building’s utility and history. Assembling the tarps for this concealment, I found that they draped over the pitch of the eves, changing direction, folding over themselves. They gathered at the foundation, rolled and folded up tight. I secured them with old tire rims, fencepost and bricks that were in arms reach. I tied them all together through their grommets with bailing twine, placing new grommets fashioned with a knife and some duct tape. Tarps don’t allow for an airtight seal, the corner of the building protrudes
through this imperfect quilt. I see these as the qualities of the tarp that announce themselves. Drape, gather, gap, and wrinkle.
I went further in wrapping this structure in order to tailor the tarps to the pump house, to define the overhang of the pump house’s eves and to show the unique taper of its frame from the roof to the foundation. I used the structure as my mold to tailor this paper architecture, a drawing with tarps, twine, and wire. The cuts, then folds begin to more closely reveal the structure. I used duct tape to finish the cuts to keep the tarps from unraveling, thread by thread, in the wind. I sewed the tarps together with wire, eliminating the need for a needle and thread. Beyond bringing a new presence to the pump house with this colored patchwork, it disclosed an invisible presence of that space: the wind that filters through the cracks and seams of this structure. The breath of these exterior lungs showed an invisible harmony with its environment. It revealed a presence these buildings command despite their weary patches.
This tarp assemblage is a drawing atop the pump house, but in form it exists as a cast. It grew out of my schematic drawings that center on the imperfect form and construction of structures similar to the pump house. These drawings exclude the context or landscape they would normally be situated in. These rural barns and sheds dissolve into the landscape like picturesque ruins. I see them as camouflaged by landscape like the faint ruins of a stonewall. These buildings become difficult to decipher as human-made or as part of the earth. These structures are intriguing to me because they hold energy to tell us so much about themselves and the space they occupy, despite appearing undistinguished from the rest of their surroundings. I wanted the tarp cast to transform the structure to a form closer to the anonymous structures in my drawings. In these paper drawings, I inscribe repeated patterns and textures to make anonymous what in reality is very contextual, the vernacular facades and construction methods that make up these structures. By covering the pump house, I wanted to bring my drawing to the landscape in hopes of seeing something exactly where it should be, yet, somehow decontextualized, slightly askew. Drawing atop this structure subverts what exists, a colorful patchwork overlaid on the familiar worn and muted paint colors of an old building. This subversion brings attention to something we know or we believe to know well, but I am proposing in the act of covering the structure that there is current dialogue to be had. It challenges how we often think about these structures, alluding they are more than punctuation in a picturesque landscape, that they appear to have comfortably settled into. Here, I propose some basic questions that I believe could be conjured up by my action of concealing. Why are these structures there, who made them, why do they look the way they do, were they ever out of place? How is it that they have come to sit so seamlessly in their place? I do not seek to answer these questions in my work but rather bring them to the attention of an audience through my contact with the pump house.
The gesture of covering the pump house did not really bring more attention to the structure as an oddity in the picturesque landscape like I had intended. Rather the patchwork became another form of camouflage. I see the unsheathed pump house as hidden in plain sight, taken as part of the landscape, unquestioned. The tarps succeeded as camouflage because they use the same language as this place. Tarps form casts of other objects that spot the property. The tarp covering resembles a patchwork of repair that clad the nearby structures. It is fashioned from the bailing twine that keeps the bales of alfalfa together, twine that we break apart to feed the goats. In a recorded history with Catherine, she speaks of the genealogy of buildings, stating that we set out upon such an inquiry because of the unknowability of it. If all of the pieces were present in order to weave together this history, an iterative inquiry would not be necessary. Perhaps this absence brings more present-ness to the space. Like a ruin, absence evokes a
mystery, pondering what was. If presence is what makes this landscape knowable or
comfortable, perhaps absence may provoke the discomfort to incite these questions. I believe
situating these traces in the gallery as fragments of this place, decontextualized, will incite a
curiosity from the audience. Ruins, like fragments ask a viewer to piece together a history or at
least raise questions about these objects. When there is too much information and an object is
explicit in its form and function, there seems to be a loss of curiosity or thoughtfulness. In the
process of fragmenting and concealing the pump house, I have found that it incites a curiosity for
the viewer to construct a dialogue with the work.
Once the tarps were removed from the pump house, I was still intrigued with the way the tarps functioned out of that place as a spatial cast. It quickly became clear that the scale of this structure was too large to inhabit the gallery space. What was important about covering the pump house with tarps to create the spatial cast was the proportions of the pump house, specifically the measurements of the space, that I could then translate into a flattened diagram. Besides reconstructing this cast in the space of the gallery, I was able to take the qualities this paper architecture captured by the pump house and in more detail map the construction of this space.
As I flattened and mapped, I was curious to then redimensionalize this paper architecture, sewing these patterns from the tarps that covered the pump house into supple diagrams of that space. Similarly in form to the tarp casts of the pump house, drooping with the weight of their own materiality, this process used the immateriality of the dimensions of that space to create patterns, then three-dimensional forms. In the absence of the pump house, I realized that a measured dimension in my notebook acted as a trace. This immateriality allowed for the materialization of this form, opposite of the work of the tarp cast. The use of that place as a material remained constant, and became the visual cohesion of this work.

Cast Negatives

When conceiving of this work there were two main threads that I wanted to see through to the completion of this work. The first was the act of touching that space, the rubbings recorded that interaction, both in my activity of the making and the surface I was rubbing. The second point was that I wanted the work I was making to be aware of its context in the gallery,
specifically how it responded architecturally to the space. This was important because the work originated in a place with a very different context, almost opposite types of spaces. A quote from Charles Eames best articulates the difference between the space of the farm and the gallery. He light heartedly proclaims, “don’t let the blood show!” in regards to his design firm’s practice. I find that the gallery space confirms this notion, the space and often the art do not allude to the process or behind the scenes effort that takes place to present the final work. Rather, at the farm, the blood pours out, with one hundred years of process enveloping me, every move is on display. The tarps addressed my concerns about the gallery by both acknowledging the space they occupy and their materiality. They are aware of their removal from the pump house, they would slouch and sway on the verge of collapse suspended from the gallery ceiling, with no structure like the mold of the pump house. Similarly in their materiality as a shroud, they recognized themselves in their lack of function in the gallery, slouched, wrinkled and gathered. This form, or importantly lack of form, alludes to a past use or a missing piece. This is key in conveying a presentness in the pump house’s absence. This shift of form was important because I wanted the work to transform in its move from the pump house to the gallery. I had trouble harnessing that with the rubbings. Though they tore and wrinkled, capturing a faint embossment of the surface they touched, they seem unchanged in their removal from that space.

The qualities I detected in both the rubbings and the tarps led me to the qualities of brushable latex in order to create detailed casts of the building. The latex had the ability to record the structure’s surfaces similarly to the rubbings, but what excited me, somewhat unexpectedly, about the latex was its ability to absorb the patina of the wood, the flakes of the paint chips and the dirt that coated the surface of the structure. This place then becomes a material, just as the latex, graphite, paper and tarps are. The latex appears to cover just the surface of the structure, but it soaks into all of the tiny crevices of the wood grain, creating a much more detailed topography than the surface suggests. The grit that the latex captured shows the energy of that place closer to the way I experienced it. The rubbings captured a detail and specificity of that
place like the latex casts do, but they remain as static records excluding the presence of that place. The material quality of the latex once removed from the structure mirrored the tactility of that place closer to the way I experienced it. The latex has a ruggedness and an unkemptness that I associate with the Long’s Farm. Like the structures and objects that make up the farm, they are honest in their decay and maintenance, they have a dignity that covering up or creating a façade would undermine. In form and materiality, I see the latex in parallel with that sentiment. The latex is tattered, it slouches and wrinkles in its removal from the pump house. It has a physical and metaphorical weight to it, like the weight of the history and identity that the farm holds. In contrast, when applied in thin layers on the pump house it is pristine, it appears to be a fresh coat of varnish. It is in the act of removal when this weight becomes apparent, when the grit of that place, the cracks and holes of the surface, are revealed. The act of peeling the latex from the pump house is another layer in my contact with the material and the structure. Somehow this extra layer of contact is present in these casts, and I believe this extra contact is part of what is missing in the rubbings. The act of peeling is an intriguing part of the process because it is a struggle to separate the latex from the pump house. I think this action is a metaphor for the tension I feel being very much a part of the farm and creating work within that context, but simultaneously inevitably tied to the institution even as much as I assimilate to the role of a farmer. I feel the latex negatives conjure up this tension in both form and materiality. They capture a specificity of the materiality of the surface that they touch, but they are unable to hold the rigid form of their subject, rather they droop and wrinkle by the weight of their own materiality. It takes the force of my entire body to separate the latex from the structure. This slowness and struggle in the removal is revealed in the latex’s final form, it appears to have been a part of an intensive process.
Process is another quality of latex that is inherent in its materiality and form. It has the ability to take casts of three-dimensional objects to create molds. Latex is not usually the end result in a process when used as a tool in mold making. Latex decays fairly quickly when exposed to sunlight and air, which works well for this intermediate step of mold making. Perhaps not transparent to most of the audience as a material of process, it is important to me as an artist to be using materials that say process, that are more aware of my continuum of working, which puts less value in a completed work and more value into the time and experience in making the work. I believe what will come across as process to the audience is its gritty materiality, which captures the sense of time in the wood grain, dirt and paint chips. Both the marks of my action in its making and the traces of the pump house more explicitly reveal this process.
Place as Material

The lexicon of touch that I have been assembling took form in the chores I did at the farm, by milking, raking and feeding, and also by the traces I was creating at the pump house. I was rubbing graphite, brushing latex and sewing tarps together. In my mind these methods of touch were bound together in this lexicon. Yet, I struggled to form a cohesive visual assemblage of these traces that was reflective of my experience. These traces were seemingly so closely tied through mine and the pump house’s form of touch, but as visual entities they read differently. I grappled with this conundrum, adamant that I would share more than one form of my touch with that place with the audience. I worked with the traces in my studio, pushing and pulling their form and materiality in hopes of discovering something new in this transformation. I shellacked
some of the rubbings, preserving them beneath this amber finish. Each layer seemed to further freeze these traces in time. They became more like ancient fossils rather than fragments of this present experience. I also used a transfer process in order to translate the rubbings into prints—my thought was that one more form of touch would transform these traces closer to my experience. The prints captured all of the detail recorded by the rubbings but, similarly to the shellac, they lacked the grit and the moment of transmission and transformation that this form of touch has the power to capture.

After little success in finding the common visual thread in the language of these traces, I went back to the pump house with different paper and materials to do rubbings with. The paper was thicker than the tracing paper I had been using and I hoped it would reveal something different in this transmission. I tested a variety of materials: oil sticks, charcoal and beeswax. None of them posed the excitement I had felt with the latex casts. In touching the floor of the pump house, the surface I was trying to capture, it occurred to me that half of the materiality I needed to make the drawing was already there, a part of this place. I had made a drawing months ago by stomping my boots on a piece of paper in order to clean them off as I was leaving the farm. It captured the traces of my boot print and the pebbles and mud from the farm. Using the site as a material, the act of making these new rubbings became clear, and my vocabulary of touch with this place was further revealed. I later realized in my studio, with the rubbings and latex casts side by side, that it was in using this place as a material that created this visual cohesion. It is the dirt that gets on me and the dirt that accumulates on these traces in the transmission of their making. The parallel is again my role as a farmhand and the act of making this work. It was the grit that I peeled off with the latex casts and the mud that accumulated on my boots to form these imprints. The most basic motion of walking, stomping and scuffling made these rubbings. An act so common that I had barely considered it as a way of knowing this place, yet it is likely the way I tactilely know this place best, for it encompasses the majority of
my contact. I know this place by the dirt that sticks to me and the way I smell when I leave that place, and I would say perhaps, the way these traces know that place.

This body work manifested from my contact with the farm and the subsequent removal of the casts and impressions from the pump house. It is no longer important that these traces explicitly reference this place like Krauss conceptualized it in the exhibition “Rooms.” The moment of tangent imbues more meaning and more information than I can begin to recollect, and I believe a viewer could conjure up a similar complexity. It is in making this place ambiguous, as just a fragment, that I incite this complexity. If a viewer was presented with the whole farm, one would begin to delineate and categorize it in a way that is recognizable to them, as we do to understand our surroundings. My goal is to reveal something relatable and ordinary, but in a context and materiality that unveils an uncanniness about it. It is a mere shift, subversion and transmission to see something ordinarily knowable, anew.

**Audience as Place**

The audience became an integral part of my process by way of working outside of the studio. I was constantly surrounded by farmhands, volunteers and the landowners, Catherine and Dennis. It became clear that they were all a thoughtful and invested audience. They seemed to be at the verge of collaborators and audience. They were a part of the process, both in the making of the work and the farm chores. They were witnesses to my contact and persistent process. I think they will see the work closer to the way I view it, or at least on a spectrum of audience and collaborator. When I did my first latex cast, the tarps had been up for about two and half months, I had completed some rubbings and I had been volunteering there for six months. I was eager to see what these new traces revealed, as I peeled the latex away from the window some of the cracks were not yet dry. I was excited by the detail, rather the dirt it captured down to the cobwebs. At this moment I was contemplating the trace and the actual window side by side, when Maddie, the Herd Manager, walked over and asked how it had turned out. We looked at it together, and she effortlessly iterated the ideas I had been thinking about with this work. I
realized she had been actively observing this silent process over the past six months. She observed the history and sense of this place that I was aiming to capture through my contact. She saw the meaning in doing chores as a way to know this place, and that the residue these traces absorb was revealing of my contact. That interaction was meaningful to me, it showed me that others found meaning in what I was doing and could connect my threads of contact. She realized the importance of me immersing myself in the workings of the farm to grasp the complexity of this place. It told me that the work I was doing demystified my role as the artist and showed me that an audience, when given the tools, can construct meaning in both action and form.

**Position: Threshold as a Trace**

At the inception of this process I set out to investigate methods of repair amidst the persistent decay of the pump house, emphasizing my contact via the rubbings, the tarp covering, the latex casts and the oral history with Catherine. What I discovered in my process was that the human touch on these structures and a constant decay from the environment was evident in all modes of the contact I was facilitating. The latex captured the color of the peeling paint and the patina of the weathered wood. The rubbings captured ad hoc repairs like the wiring shut of a broken window. The tarps captured the incessant sunlight that beamed down on the east side of the tarp covering, which disintegrated to the lightest touch of my hand. The west side of the roof tarp retained the original dark blue the tarps because it was sheltered by a mammoth cottonwood beside the structure, which Catherine contends was there long before the pump house. Each mode of contact seemed to have an awareness of what it captured in relation to the pump house and its history.

In this discovery, I realized that I wanted to position myself in relation to the farm and specifically the pump house. Repair or the things explicitly shown in these traces seemed redundant to delineate in too much explanation. I felt it undermined the agency the pump house offers, each trace speaks very firmly to the presentness and history of that place. The rubbings, the latex and tarp casts were leading me to my position unsuspectingly. When I peeled off the
latex and rolled up the rubbings and brought them into my studio, I discovered they were all variants of the threshold. They were the windows, doors and openings between the inside and outside. The transition from the space of the pump house to the studio was necessary for me to notice the profoundness of the threshold. It was the blankness of the white wall framed by the doorjamb I took a latex cast of. It occurred to me that in theory there are always two sides to a threshold. Being directly in the threshold dissolves any binaries of space and conjures up a vast in-betweeness that I felt I was very much a part of participating at Long’s Farm. The blankness of the white wall framed by the doorjamb was also in likeness to my position of in-betweeness. In the blankness there was a moment of contemplation about the threshold that I couldn’t have had in, or on either side of the threshold at the pump house. The uncanniness of the white wall touching the trace of this threshold allowed me to realize the complexity of my position in making this work. I saw the tension of my role as an artist participating on the farm, paired with my role as the artist who is a part of academia. The vastness of the cut of the threshold posed as a breath—I saw absolutely nothing projected by the white wall of the gallery and, in parallel, I saw all of the experiences I had at Long’s Farm and at my own farm in a glitch of clarity, and simultaneously a jumbled fullness. By isolating this openness or portal, I was more closely able to contemplate my experiences regardless of their clarity, it allowed for a deep introspection into my role as an artist and my parallel role as a farmer.

Simultaneously, this portal confronts the viewer with a vastness in which to position themselves in relation to the work. The proportional relationship humans have with architecture allows the viewers to implicate themselves in order to construct meaning in the work. The thresholds activate the tension that is present in these traces by way of the transmission from the pump house to the gallery. The viewer cannot cross the threshold from inside to outside as I did to create the mud imprints, they are kept out by the concealment and obtrusion of the sewn tarp cast, and they are confronted by the white light in the cut of the threshold of the latex cast. The viewer is not able to see or step through the threshold because of the absence of the pump house,
the tension manifests in the materialization of absence. The viewer, now, only bears witness to my contact in absence of that place.

In this absence, the opening is no longer the threshold, rather, the traces themselves become the threshold. Physically, we are unable to pass through the traces but their specificity of place ushers the viewer there unknowingly. Like passing through a physical threshold we are impacted by what we encounter on each side, differently with the traces, we are confronted, absorbing the specificity of a place, just as either side of a threshold would affect us. Perhaps the term threshold does not encompass the entirety of the phenomenon I experience with these traces, but, importantly my use of the term is about the moment of in-betweenness of two spaces. The viewer encounters this with the traces in the gallery; they are situated between the surfaces of the pump house and the space of the gallery. The surfaces of the traces demarcate the space of the pump house, and these surfaces relate proportionally to the body. The traces maintain the specificity of that place both spatially and by the residue that they capture of that place. The viewer finds themselves in-between two spaces. In removal from the farm, these traces become thresholds.
Bibliography


