Splitting Water with Wood

Matthew D. Smith

B.A., Anderson University, 2006

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________________________________________________________________________

Jeanne Quinn (Committee Chair)

________________________________________________________________________

Yumi Roth

________________________________________________________________________

Erin Espelie

________________________________________________________________________

Alvin Gregorio

Date_____________

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.
Abstract

My thesis project *Splitting Water with Wood* is an installation consisting of a handmade boat and projected video of a durational performance that engaged the boat in unconventional ways. Throughout the project and paper, I employ conceptions of faith as a crucial lens to begin to understand my current body of work; a handcrafted boat as an exploratory apparatus, the labor surrounding it as an act of devotion, and a resulting performance that experiments with ideas about baptism. By challenging presupposed notions of how a boat traditionally functions, I rely on the lively materiality of the object and its environment to capture and extract previously unforeseen possibilities. It considers the do-it-yourself lineage in my family and how that history of fabricating, constructing, and repairing informs me as an artist. *Splitting Water with Wood* draws on personal stories of my past and reimagines them as new narratives to explore the many facets of my Midwestern roots and provides insight to myself as a maker.
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“Though I can’t prove a thing, I trust that it’s something solid.”

–Ted Leeson, *The Habit of Rivers*
A Revelation from Walter Glen Allen

Personal fishing stories, my religious upbringing, family heirlooms, and familial histories of do-it-yourself practices are a curious combination that have sparked my most recent body of work. *Splitting Water with Wood* started with a film called *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, where the charismatic narrator, Jim White, takes us on a journey through the Deep South. In one scene, he takes us to a Pentecostal church. As he drives up to the building he describes the church service saying, “There’s a real power there that you can’t deny, you just can’t deny it.” This sentiment transported me to memories of my conservative Christian upbringing, small-town rural culture, and most profoundly, the memory of my grandmother and great-grandfather who were both Pentecostal preachers. As the film credits rolled into black, I couldn’t help but envision my great-grandfather saying, “Don’t you see, what we had was real.” I felt intense guilt and regret over my dismissal of my family’s belief system.

Even after the film was over, the reverberations of that moment continued to breed curiosity. I wanted to know who this man was that I had never met, but unexpectedly came back to me in a startling familiar way. This provoked a phone call to my father who told me stories about my great-grandfather, Walter Glen Allen. Not only was Walter a Pentecostal preacher, but an avid fisherman, and even more pertinent, an object maker with a do-it-yourself sensibility. He left behind an array of handmade objects, namely fishing bobbers scrawled with Bible verses. These objects impacted me in numerous ways. The objects themselves spoke to a kind of making that was based in function, necessity, humility, and held a level of authenticity that seemed impossible to reach while making art in a graduate school context. Outside of my interest in making, the bobbers and their verses pushed me towards working with ideas of faith and religion as subject matter. For the next year and a half, my studio practice focused completely on dissecting the power of the fishing bobbers and their religious content. By continuously observing these objects, I developed an insatiable curiosity that began to frame how fishing, religion, and making relate to my art practice.

The culmination of these feelings, interests, and experiences provided the groundwork for *Splitting Water with Wood*. The project involves a handcrafted wooden boat made without a set of directions or prior experience. Using only materials saved by my father, I constructed and improvised a functional object. Then, I upended the traditional function of the boat by drilling holes in it. In doing so, it became a performative vessel for reexamining past experiences, exploring water in novel ways, and questioning my past religious rituals.

Along with the influences of the film and fishing bobbers, I engage five personal stories to set an anecdotal foundation for my conceptual and material explorations. Stories about fishing trips with unintended consequences, building a ramshackle dog house, and being baptized (in one way or another) assemble inventive trajectories towards other diverging and robust inquiries. What can an implausible handcrafted boat teach us? When and in what capacity do generations of past making inform our present creative activities? And how does an act of enduring labor situate itself when the resulting object delivers futility, contradicting its apparent purpose? My hope is the following stories will not answer these questions for the reader as much as spark a new and imaginative responsiveness towards the ideas that adds to and enlivens them.

“It is of the essence of life that it does not begin here or end there, or connect a point of origin with a final destination, but rather that it keeps on going, finding a way through the myriad of things that form, persist and break up in its currents. Life, in short, is a movement of opening.”2

Baptism

On a cold January night in 1995 my family drove out to White's Junior-Senior High School for me to be baptized in the swimming pool there. I was 11 years old and desired to take the next step in my Christian faith. This decision, as my mother and twin brother recall, was made autonomously. My church, The Christian and Missionary Alliance, subscribed to a ‘believer’s baptism’ meaning an individual must be old enough to make their own decision to be baptized. This is a precarious tenet because it leaves many childhood years open to uncertainty. Some people believe that an individual doesn’t go to heaven if they aren’t baptized and therefore many denominations baptize at birth. Others see baptism as a signal to the community that they desire a more dedicated relationship with Jesus. Either way, my mother was elated with my choice of being baptized.

Dozens of people dressed in casual church clothes were gathered around a school swimming pool singing hymns. It was a powerful and strange scene. I don’t remember what I was feeling as I

climbed down the pool ladder with two other church brethren and Pastor Jim Walker into the water. I am sure I would have been nervous as I was shy as a child. We all stood there in the water together. An older gentleman went first. He gave his testimony of coming to this church and accepting Christ. Then either my brother or I went next. I cannot remember. My mother recalls that the pastor led us through a testimony-like public confession. I said why I wanted to be baptized. While I grabbed Pastor Jim’s arm and plugged my nose, he recited “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” and then dipped me backwards into the water, fully submerging my head. As I came up, everyone clapped. I made my way over to the edge of the pool and climbed back up the ladder. People congratulated me with hugs and smiles. I don’t remember if I felt like a changed person or not.

Capsized I
(another baptism of sorts)

We pushed our aluminum fishing boat from the launch ramp at Mount Hope State Recreation Area into Salamonie Reservoir in northern Indiana. With its easy access, miles of shoreline, and good fishing, Mount Hope was a favorite spot for my father, brother, and myself. As soon as all the fishing poles, tackle, life jackets, coolers, and anchor were in the boat, we started rowing towards the nearest inlet to get our lines wet. We dropped anchor under a nearby willow tree. This being a time-tested hot spot, we were eager to see what we would catch. Set up with a bobber and minnow, we started casting out our lines. We quickly caught several panfish that we threw into our live-well for safe keeping. This scenario was very typical of any fishing outing. And on this day a very typical problem occurred. In casting his line, my brother got his hook caught up in those scraggly tentacles of the willow tree. He gave it a few tugs and couldn’t get it to release. My father borrowed the pole to help, but couldn’t get it to pull loose either. He hesitantly stood up to get the line untangled. It is here that numerous external and elusive forces dramatically changed the situation. Surely my father standing in the boat was the greatest, but perhaps the water was a bit choppy, maybe my brother or I shifted to help him, or the wind added a little extra tilt. In an instant, we found ourselves in the water. The boat capsized, some of the gear sank to the bottom while most of it floated around us. The fish that were in the live-well returned themselves to the water from which they came. I remember vividly that my brother splashed in panic with his hands and pushed towards shore for what seemed to be his life. Peculiarly, my father pushed him down into the floor of the lake to show him it was only five feet deep. My brother and I stood on the tips of our toes with our heads barely above water surveying the situation. The scene was
a broken puzzle of our gear floating around like ducks on a pond. My father swam over to the capsized boat and pulled it towards us. With the three of us on one side, we muscled it right side up and started collecting the dispersed goods. Cooler, life jackets, and the tackle box were all waiting for us on the surface of the water. My brother’s fishing pole was still hanging from the willow tree. I can’t recall if we ever found my fishing pole or my father’s. The most significant loss of the incident was a family heirloom. My father decided that day to take my great-grandfather’s rod and reel out and now he scoured the bottom of the reservoir with his feet to try to find it. Every time he hit something he’d dive down with his hands outstretched for a closer feel. As my brother and I became increasingly uncomfortable in the cool water, my father relinquished his hunt. He was visibly upset about the whole scenario and especially by the loss of his grandfather’s fishing pole.

A Reverse Baptism

Like many children, I had an overt concern for animals. Squirrels, dogs, cats, and fish were frequently encountered in both the home and outside. Fish were an odd group because they were the only kind of animal that I spent time with in both the domestic and natural spheres. I had a 20-gallon aquarium filled with cichilds, pufferfish, and guppies. They were fun to watch and I enjoyed taking care of them. Nurturing these pet fish may be why it struck me with worry when we would go fishing. Whenever we caught fish we would place them in the live-well of our boat. They were going unfed and uncared for. The scariest situation was when we had a live-well full of fish and we would rev up the engine to take off to our next fishing hole. The 5.5-horsepower Evinrude motor would force our boat not only forward, but also out of the water. In lifting the boat, the water in the live-well would drain out and the fish would be left flopping around in the air. I would ask my dad if they were okay and he would always reply with a sense of affirmation, but that didn’t make my worry subside. I would watch them until we would get to the next spot. As my father turned off the motor, I was relieved to see them start swimming again as the live-well filled back up.

Capsized II

(or the baptism that my father leaned into with help from his grandfather, Walter Glen Allen)

On a summer night in 1959 my father and his grandfather packed up the ‘49 Hudson Commodore with the fishing poles, tackle box, and a handmade boat strapped down on top of the car.
As my father recalls, this boat was more “like a wooden coffin without a lid.” Handmade by my great-grandfather Walter Allen, the boat was a patchwork of old boards pieced together with at least enough skill to float. My father, even though he was only five at the time, vividly remembers getting into this boat with a warning from his grandfather to not lean towards the edge of the boat. It wasn’t long after leaving shore before either Walter’s structural engineering went awry or my father leaned too close to the edge as they went flipping over into the dark night water.

A Dog House

Like Walter Glen Allen’s own experiments with his piecemeal boat, I have my own history of making do with what materials are on hand. During a slew of summer days, while I was on break from W.C. Mills Elementary school, my brother and I decided that our German Shepard Sammy needed an outdoor doghouse. My father kept piles of leftover materials and a stockpile of tools in the garage and so while he was at work we started dragging things out and building. I cannot recall exactly what board went where, but have a memory that it was quite the hodgepodge with sharp edges and nails protruding everywhere. When my dad came home and saw it he was supportive, but hesitant. He told us that he would have someone from the Humane Society check it out to see if it was fit for a dog. I’m sure he never actually did this, but it took the blame off him for having to tell us it wasn’t up to code, and it excited us that someone would be coming to test it out.

All these distinct memories gather into a rich amalgamation that breathes life into the curious endeavors of my studio practice. Looking back at the various stories about baptism, I examine how a symbolic action, intentional or otherwise, might enact a felt change. In a similar manner, the recollection of the fish in the live-well offers an investigation into what happens when a body moves from one material world to another and back again. And in the case of the dog house and my great-grandfather’s hand-built boat, I reflect on do-it-yourself creations as a guide towards my own making. While all these stories relate to my current body of work, they are also imbued with an element of faith that equally instructs me.

Matthew Smith, Conversation Between John Smith and the author, Phone Call, October 28, 2017.
Faith

Faith is the single thread that weaves its way throughout these family stories and into fishing, religion, and ways of making. In each story, faith holds an optimism, both subtle and overt, that things will work out. In my baptism, I relied on Pastor Jim for help and believed in his power to conduct a transformation. In the capsizing stories, everything ended up okay. For the fish in the live-well, they swam again, despite my worry. And even though the dog house didn’t pass code, the faith imbued in the making of it held strong. At the root of these narratives is the idea that faith involves trusting or believing in something.

At the heart of fishing is faith. Fishing is marked by long hours of waiting for a fish to strike. This sentiment is well understood by author Thomas McGuane. In his book, appropriately titled The Longest Silence, he writes “What is most emphatic in angling is made so by the long silences—the unproductive periods.” A fellow contemporary of McGuane, David James Duncan, conveys the power of waiting in his classic The River Why, “And so I learned what solitude really was. It was raw material—awesome, malleable, older than men or worlds or water.” This kind of instructive silence is the byproduct of faith. Sometimes a bite never manifests itself, but it is in the potential of the strike that those of us who fish subscribe so wholly that we spend our time, money, and energy to wait and hope. Faith becomes evident in the act of fishing in part because the activity is the collision of two worlds; land and water. As we stand on the known shore and stare into the mysterious world of water, our reels, rods, and rigs become the sole indicators of what is happening in a place we cannot sensibly fathom without those tools. The line and hook are thrown into the water as a connective gesture of hope and with the vague certainty that something is there.

The complicated relationship between faith and religion carries a paradox; it is difficult to find religions without faith, but is easy to find faith without religion. Religion comes with its set of rules, dictums, and rituals. Faith rarely makes itself present in what you must do and how you must do it, but faith is starkly clear in the rituals of religion. A prominent ritual in Christianity, the act of becoming a Christian, is the pivotal moment that an individual professes to have faith that Jesus died on the cross for their sins and through that act an individual is saved and secures their place in heaven. Regardless

of whether someone is a believer or not, there is a touching attractiveness in the act of wholeheartedly engaging a past story, a symbol, and a process.

As a basis for making, faith projects that simply being in the studio and putting one’s hands on material offers unique observations, atypical problem-solving, and lively decision-making resulting in an artwork. For my concern, it doesn’t matter the quality of the artwork, but that it was made at all. To step into the studio with materials and tools shows that the maker has some level of trust that these two elements will work together towards creation even if it’s not easy. In an interview with Rebecca Fortnum, artist Tacita Dean says, “I use the expression ‘act of faith’ a lot, because I have to believe that it’s going to be all right and sometimes it feels like it’s not.”7 To push through the instabilities of making towards some end goal is faith. This kind of faith in the process gives us the endurance as artists to continue in our vocation.

Faith is entangled with the warp and weft of my family’s historical fabric. It is difficult to point out specific moments because all memories are soaked in it. While I may find evidence of faith strewn throughout my family’s stories, it is most evident in the rituals that my mother and father created which showed a supreme trust in family structure. Even though the family budget was always tight, my mother demanded that we took an annual family vacation. This trip was where stories were built and it symbolized an unshakable strength in the ties that bound us as family. For my mother especially, I believe these vacations held the belief that to spend intimate time with one another was a preemptive resistance to any wayward paths that my brother, sister, or I might take in life. As the Bible verse Proverbs 22:6 states, “Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”8 These intimate family vacations culminated in stories that showed the interstices of faith in family and the Bible as forces positively oscillating together for my mother and, in extension, the whole family.

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Making as an act of faith:

In any material or process we find an element of faith; the chair maker trusts there will be a chair, the potter a pot, and the painter a painting. In his Art21 video Make-Work, Bruce Nauman reiterates this sentiment, “I’m an artist. I want to be in the studio and I want to be doing something. You just get desperate and so you just do whatever is at hand and you don’t even worry about whether it’s going to be interesting or not interesting to anybody else or even yourself. You just have to make something.” While they wouldn’t consider themselves artists, the lineage of makers in my family engage with this kind of awareness. This recognition also informs how I think about the making of the boat. Both my father and his grandfather engaged in an informal way of making. Much of their making starts with a problem, which prompts a question, and then onward to a solution. There is always a gap between problem and solution and this is where faith in making sits. That gap, where faith resides, calls for a maker to see what materials they have, what they need, and what processes must be enacted to create a satisfactory answer. Many times, those materials and processes offer themselves in uncanny ways. Ways that call for improvisation.

It became evident to me about halfway through the building of the boat that I was building without directions. This seems so obvious it is silly, but I hadn’t come to that language yet or what that language meant to me. Building without directions is central to most art. It is a part of why art is original. But art isn’t usually made with practical function in mind. Most things that operate, like cars, computers, and tools, come with directions and diagrams to aid the fabricator or mechanic towards completing or fixing the object. If the object is not at least partially understood at the outset of making or fixing then it becomes an improvisational exercise for the maker.

It is in this spirit of improvisation that I embarked on making the boat. Without any directions on how to build a boat and only a couple of sketches based off my childhood fishing vessel, I continued to hold a deep understanding that this thing would become a boat one way or another. From the sketches, I planned to start by making three seats first and then I would attach planks around the outside to form the shell. To build the seats, I first made a wood steaming box out of foam so that I could bend wood to make a frame. I spent weeks building the steamer and experimenting on wood only to find out that it wasn’t going to do what I needed it to. The thin planks of wood, even after steaming, were breaking. This failure led me to take a more hands-on approach to shaping the wood—the jigsaw. I started taking

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all the random boards and chunks of plywood and bringing them together in a way that would allow for easy manipulation. The jigsaw allowed me to alleviate the pressure from some of the variables. Even after I moved past the steam box, the seats still needed additional focus. It became evident that the shell of the boat would not be able to attach sufficiently to the curve of the seats. I added extra planks to the exterior of all the seats to give enough surface area to be glued down (Figure 1). The extra planks worked perfectly to create a satisfactory surface for the shell of the boat.

![Figure 1. Creating a shell around the outside of a seat so planks can be glued onto it](image)

The next major improvisation that demanded new solutions was the bow of the boat. I initially built the bow of the boat with a sturdy spine that I manually sanded into what seemed like a 45-degree angle (Figure 2). The curve of the spine ended up being significantly off, resulting in the creation of a whole new system of blocks and shims to make the bow come together (Figure 3). While it is evident on the inside of the bow (Figure 4), the outside of the bow exhibits a subtler visual result, but still speaks to the improvisation (Figure 5). Despite the makeshift process of building the bow, it exuded substantial strength in the finalized boat.
Figure 2. Bow of the boat before shell is added

Figure 3. Bow of the boat with shell partially added, notice the triangular block that has been added to initial spine

Figure 4: Inside of the bow of the boat shows the system of blocks and shims

Figure 5: Outside of the bow of the boat shows the one-offness of improvisation

Figure 6: Poorly designed oar lock

Figure 7: Broken oar lock (after performance)
Unlike the strength and functionality of the bow, the oar locks proved to be an improvised failure. Without the typical metal hardware at hand, I built oar locks out of wood. I wanted a design that would give room for the oars to move, but tight enough that the oars wouldn’t easily disengage while I was rowing. I cut holes out of 2x4s that were just large enough to barely fit the oars through, then I also sanded part of the oar down so that it would catch onto the lock (Figure 6). Unfortunately, the failure of this design did not show itself until the day of the performance. While cameras started rolling and the boat was being launched, I fit the oar in perfectly to find out it did not touch the water! Luckily, I could pull the oar out to a thinner spot on the handle to make it function, but the initial design failed miserably (Figure 7). This kind of moment-to-moment improvisation with alternative material demands and shifts in process goes by another name, bricolage.

Bricolage is creating through improvising and problem-solving with materials and tools that are readily available, but may or may not be fit for the creative act. This kind of making shows a faith that the thing will become manifest despite the possible barriers. It is these barriers that push the bricoleur, someone who creates in this manner, to think and make in new ways. “A bricolage is an essential counter to linear, sequential thinking, narratives, and practices.”

It is these outside-of-the-box connections that lead to unique end results. The product of this kind of thinking is exactly what I see in Walter Allen’s fishing bobbers (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Walter Glen Allen’s fishing bobber

My great-grandfather’s fishing bobbers were made with leftover materials and makeshift processes. Most of the bobbers were made with recycled corks. He would take timeworn wire and push

it into the cork before dipping it in a molten substance made by mixing acetone and discarded plastic. The activity took materials with certain properties and reshaped them into something else. It is the definition of improvised bricolage through a material lens. The final form by itself holds an authentic feel, but as an additional finishing touch, he would handwriting Bible verses on each bobber. Only through the non-linear element of bricolage, does writing Bible verses on fishing bobbers make sense. Walter Allen took his devout religious views and inscribed them onto unlikely objects. It creates a nonsensical visual appearance that has a fresh and seductive quality. My great-grandfather made something humbly unique, precisely functional, and provisionally necessary all because of the confining framework of dubious processes and unconventional materials. At the root of a bricoleur’s effort lies the questions; what materials are at hand and what possibilities do they offer?

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Materiality  

Material possibilities hold similar concerns for the bricoleur and the artist alike. Both are attentive to how materials can come together to make a final creation. Those materials speak to an individual’s circumstance, skill set, and practical or conceptual concerns. One difference between bricoleurs and artists is that bricoleurs typically have a lack of available options, while those available to artists, in many cases, are unlimited. Unlike Walter Allen’s limited resources, mine are nearly boundless, but I believe his limitations created the unique aesthetic that makes his handcrafted objects authentic and provocative. In hopes that my experience with the boat might stimulate the same affect as the fishing bobbers, I created my own material perimeters. In the building process, I only used wood gathered from my father’s hoard. To salvage supplies means foregrounding unique histories. My limitations forced the question of what was possible with a finite and familial collection.

To dig deep into the potential of materials is to not only ask what is available or to understand what those available materials can do, but it is to ask what do the materials want to do? This is the kind of material agency that hoarders understand. In her lecture Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter, Jane Bennet asked us to see hoarders as “...differently-abled bodies that might have special sensory awareness to the call of things.” In this view, there must be a spectrum of sensory awareness. In other words, on one side there are hoarders who keep old moldy newspapers because of the potential of giving information back to the hoarder, even though the newspapers aren’t readable. This is an example of the power of intangible potential. On the other side of the spectrum, some hoarders simply cannot get rid of things because they are still tangibly useful like an old sink or random lumber. My father fits in this category. His understanding of the usefulness of materials quickly came to the forefront in my own boat-building endeavor.

My father is a self-proclaimed packrat who keeps all kinds of things like semi-working tools, broken antiques, and piles of construction materials. There are lots of ways of thinking about his hoarding as something else. He is a builder, a landlord, and a handyman, but at the base of these practices he is a collector of useful things. Because he is a jack-of-all-trades, he understands how almost any item may be used or reused and thus he recognizes the inherent potentiality of material. To

understand this is one thing, but to put into practice is another. My father suffers from a cognitive dissonance of knowing what he can do with something and actually doing it. This leaves plenty of stuff hanging around in any space he can store things. I return to my question of what do materials want to do and to help answer it, I call on Jane Bennett again. In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, she describes what she calls “Thing-Power” as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.” In attaching this definition to my father’s store of materials, I wanted to engage their “thing-power” in my own artistic pursuits.

![Figure 9: My father’s garage, view of workbench covered by stuff](image)

To build the boat I drove back to Indiana to go through my father’s garages, shed, and basement to collect materials (Figure 9). In choosing these materials to make the boat, I applied the liveliness of them instead of letting things lie dormant. In activating these materials, I tapped into a vein of making within my family history. Within this narrative, bricolage has always played a part; my great-grandfather’s fishing bobbers, any number of my father’s DIY efforts, even my own understanding of constructing evidenced by the dog house I built when I was child. In going back to Indiana to pick up these materials, I created a perimeter around my making. It was my attempt within a graduate school context to create something authentic. Materials charged with familial history offer a new reality to the substance of the boat. These materials have lived before and are finding new use again. The paint, stain, and marks of the wood recall an active life before they were stored in my father’s heaps. The

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diverse lives of these components become a single amalgamation in the boat; an old pin top baluster that was never installed in a staircase, dismantled pallet boards with its ‘HT’ proving it wasn’t chemically treated, and a worn oak table with the dowels still sticking out asking to be slid back together. Seemingly, materials have a life of their own.

The potential for materials to be active is always at hand. As an artist, I have the honor and responsibility to take such materials and tune into their liveliness. In return, their liveliness plays on me. During my performance, the wood creaked and cracked as I stepped into it. While it didn’t worry me, it reminded me of my own weight and movement as I negotiated the hull. When I started to row, I was cognizant of the spherical ends of the oars. Their organic quality eventually disappeared in my hand as I engaged the task of rowing. They became extensions of my arms. The only thing I paid attention to in rowing was how the paddles were hitting the water; I felt intrinsically connected to the end of that paddle. Reflecting on my making of the oars and their relationship to the environment was one thing, but within the performance there were active substances that, rather than participate in as a maker, I interacted with as a performer.

A material that I did not employ with directly in making the boat, but chose to engage with in the performance, was water. Upon entering the boat on the lake, cool water started spilling through the holes, my submerged feet sent a chill up my spine. I remember scuffling my feet on the wood floor of the boat to try to warm them as I paddled. With my feet moving, a new sensation arrived. The water touching the polyurethane-treated wood became almost sticky. My feet felt grounded as I heaved the oars back. The water and wood conversed together in an uneasy way. Like hearing the crack of the wood when I stepped in, I became aware, as the boat filled with water, how my weight became an exponential factor in the fate of the vessel. The smallest shifts in my body position would set the boat to sway. While faulty design might be blamed for this unevenness, I believe it was more about how the heavy moving water acted upon the light buoyant wood. This dynamic force was eventually what capsized me.
As the boat turned over and I fell out, I became acutely aware of the water (Figure 10). When watching the performance, the viewer can hear my audible gasp. Not just that it was cold or wet, but that the water pushed against my body. The cloth of my outfit took on a new weight and moved on me with different sensations. The lack of gravity while in water showed itself as I tried to hoist the boat back over; an act of futility that was materially motivated. The cold water directed me to get onto the top of the capsized boat. This was not planned, but was a subconscious decision guided by the qualities of the water. As I gathered myself on top of the capsized boat, I felt the lukewarm air start to chill me. It wasn’t long before the air was too much and I slid back into the water to swim to shore. Throughout the performance, the materials themselves worked on me in ways that I hadn’t predicted. The boat and oars along with the other materials in the immediate environment collaborated as a precarious orchestra where chance overtook my plan. The performance was the materials speaking.

The materials that enabled me to build the boat and helped perform with me were distinct and multi-layered. Both the scrap wood from my father’s garages and the blue-brown water of the lake held a liveliness that I worked with and was affected by. The history of use infused in my father’s salvaged and saved materials lent a unique and animated element to the boat. The collision of materials involved in the performance generated an active moment that celebrated itself as much as it did the wood, water, and the boat. Fully imbued in and simultaneously sitting outside of these matters of materiality is that the boat is a thing within itself.
Boat as an Object of Faith

In *Splitting Water with Wood*, the boat reveals itself as an object of faith. As a vessel, it has functions that are only completed when they are activated. A skiff is meant to row, a speedboat to pull a skier, a large tanker to transport consumer goods. When the skiff is rowed, it has completed its function. This action is done by an individual. Between the interplay of user and object, meaning is derived. I understand this idea from the many years I spent making pottery. In making pots, this question of how a drinker would interact with my cup was important. The vessel was not complete until someone drank from it. In doing so, they began to intimately understand even the minor details of the object. The body, lip, foot, and handle of a ceramic mug only come alive when activated. My boat in *Splitting Water with Wood* is a functional vessel that demands to be used. It is necessary that I understand the comfort of the seats, the awkwardness of the oars, the imbalance of the structure, and ultimately how the perforated hull takes on water. The connection of the use of the object and intimate knowledge gained are inextricable. It is with this first-hand confidence in the object that faith endures.

I trust that this object will invite me into reciprocity; that as I work with it, it will work on me. For my boat, the priority is not to transport an individual across a body of water. It serves as an exploratory vessel towards another function. In this realm, the boat does not need to float. In fact, this boat must not float. By drilling hundreds of holes through it, I marked it with a new and different function. This was intentional and by acting on it in this way, I have not created something dysfunctional or completely futile, but I made an object that refuses to be defined by its traditional norms for the sake of another kind of pursuit.

The search for an alternative repurposing of the boat is based in the childhood story of the live-well. Like the story I wrote about earlier, the live-well was a metal box that was welded into the middle of the boat. It had two holes that would let water come through any time the boat was in use and the purpose of this structure was a holding tank to keep any fish we caught alive. While I couldn’t have named it then, the concern I had about the fish flopping around in a near empty live-well was based in the question of what was air and what was water, or perhaps more accurately, when was air and when was water. In drilling the holes, I transformed the boat into a live well and I became the fish flopping between two worlds. The story of the live-well offers up the recognition of liminal spaces. Spaces where the understanding between two disparate entities are so infused into each other that they are individually indiscernible. When is air and when is water?
The question prompted by the boat is at the heart of baptism. Growing up in my church, there were many discussions about how a baptism should be enacted. My church believed in a full submersion. The person must go all the way under the water to be considered baptized and, only then, was the church member seen as redeemed by their faith. I think they mandated full submersion to eliminate the possible problems associated with liminality. A sprinkling of water on the head, a standard form of baptism especially for infants, leaves open the questions of how much water is enough or when does the symbol become fully embodied. To be fully submerged creates a hard line and there is safety in that demarcation.

In putting oneself into a liminal activity like baptism, questions become an important part of embracing and enduring the experience. How much is enough? How much is too much? When is the experience realized? When can the encounter end? The answers to these questions help clean up the mess of the gray areas. It’s difficult to live in these gray areas for too long. As humans we desire, maybe need, demarcated and organized understandings of our place in the world. But I would argue that if we are ever to experience something on the fringe of this tangible world we will need to enter into and embody whole-heartedly the ambiguous present.
A Charge from Walter Glen Allen

I crave to experience in my own artistic practice the kind of affective impressions that the places, people, and things from *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* left on me. While the film may simply be purporting a stereotyped authentic grit or selfishly glorifying regional hardships, it still seems honest to me. Surely, the murky sublime imagery and earnest banjo-saturated soundtrack play right into my desire for a genuineness that I want to believe is there. But my hope is that if I stripped away the trappings of a highly-produced film, the heart of the narrative would still show through fervently. In our modern age, it seems backward for any artist to refuse the limitless options presented to them: unlimited materials, infinite processes, and the prioritizing of flashy aesthetics. However, perhaps I am coming to see my world more like the way my great-grandfather saw his situation; defined and limited. With only particular and sporadic materials on hand and minimal monetary resources, Walter Allen always paid careful attention to the question of what an object could do instead of what it looked like. He used leftover materials to create handcrafted fishing bobbers. In looking back at my great-grandfather’s circumstances, I observe skills and traits that I need now and as I move into the future. In anticipating my own artistic trajectory, I possess a cynical demeanor. Not towards my conceptual interests of faith, religion, or my small-town roots, but towards my contemporary artistic practice. There is a bit of fear in my fingertips as I type this; *I am not interested in making art, but simply in making*. So, I’ll gather up my disparate materials and ensemble of tools and place my faith in the idea that following the materials I have on hand will produce something worthwhile.
Bibliography


