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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Arroyo/Mud

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the
degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Emily Sevier

Committee in charge:

Professor Ernest Silva, Chair
Professor Amy Adler
Professor Judith Dolan
Professor Lesley Stern

2013

The Thesis of Emily Sevier is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2013

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Arroyo/Mud

by

Emily Sevier

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art

University of California, San Diego 2013

Ernest Silva, Chair

My interest in the mud, or more specifically my interest in San Diego's mud, began when I moved into a canyon and begin to sift through the debris. This thesis marks a yearlong investigation into the micro landscape of this partially developed urban canyon and the tangential flows that connect it to the larger web of San Diego history. The network of canyons that fan throughout the urban grid of San Diego provide a palimpsest of forgotten layers of mundane histories that have shaped the

city. The beauty of these sites is that they exist as awkward hybrids that defy standard terminology, which would place them along the nature/culture divide. Their current physical state is the result of both intentional and unintentional nurture, neglect, and abuse. The idyllic seclusion of the canyon with its tangle of feral vegetation is as much a construction as the houses that surround it. Both are part of the region's urban development. Their histories are intertwined within shifting ecologies at the micro-level of the neighborhood to the larger regional level of the greater San Diego area. In order to understand the material and psychological contradictions of the canyon, I began a process of kneading mud gathered from the canyon and shaping it into square tiles. Through these humble objects, I am offered a glimpse into the process of the landscape's unfolding.

Arroyo/Mud

Last spring, towards the end of April, I was sitting on the rock dam in Maple Canyon that the city brought in to stop mud from pouring out into the neighborhood below. It was late in the afternoon, an hour or two before sunset. The air was a magical California gold, soft with a light wind. The daisies and wild radish were blooming with the density of a bouquet. A feral garden of yellow and purple mixed with orange and red. Vegetation of another era, colors conspicuously out of style with contemporary gardening trends. It is amazing to me that the winter rains can induce such an orgy of flowers out of the hard clay soil. The hydrated earth unfurls like a kitchen sponge for a couple months before shriveling back down to a dusty brown by July. The physical difference between spring and summer makes the canyon seem like two separate places. In April, the rock where I sit sinks among the six-foot tall daisies. Sitting there in the liquid light, I feel warm and relaxed, soft like the air, almost giddy. It is spring and I am sitting in a nest of flowers. Shifting my feet, I look down and see a syringe between the rocks, slender, its needle rusted and bent to the side. Most likely washed down the canyon on the mud and embedded in the rocks like mortar.

The mud behind the rock dam has a sewer-y smell of ripening bacteria. I start to think of infection. I had been scooping up the mud earlier in the week collecting clay for my bricks. I did not use gloves or a shovel. A few days after the rain, the fine clay particles form a damp skin over the heavier and more porous sand, making it easier to scoop up by hand. A shovel would pick up too much sand and the mud feels nice squished against bare skin. It allows me to role-play a mini-Promethean fantasy,

my hands mystically linking my humanity back to the dirt and earth. Damp and cool, my hands in the ground, I feel connected, a part of something. The connection is direct and naked, indulgent in the absence of a mediating membrane. Lost in the dirt, the smell of incubating bacteria tells me that Prometheus had it backwards. He did not make life out of clay, the clay was already alive. Turning the clay in his hands, bacteria and viruses traveling from the mud through the micro-fissures in his skin, mutating and merging with his cells, living in his gut. Spreading through his bowels and blood. Our origins may in fact be mud, but Prometheus did not shape the mud. It shaped him, issuing in a reciprocating loop of shit and infection. The place and the being entangled in a relationship of antagonistic symbiosis.

It keeps coming back to bacteria, algae, and the primordial ooze. In her book, *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway makes a show of the mud and microbial. She cites the controversial theory of Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, which positions bacterial joinings and viral infections as critical players in the engine of evolution. To paraphrase the theory as laid out by Haraway, bacteria regularly pass genes back and forth, defying species lines, through a process of incomplete absorption and digestion, resulting in varied genomes of increasing complexity. These combinations and symbiotic pairings offer an explanation for the processes through which multi-cellular organisms evolved. Importantly, these symbiotic processes within and among organisms are ongoing and essential to sustaining life. In short, to be an organism is to be an ecosystem living within an ecosystem.¹ In her adaptation of Margulis and

¹ See Haraway's discussion of Margulis and Sagan on pages 30-33 in *When Species Meet*. See works cited.

Sagan's theory, Haraway offers a critical platform for understanding the levels of entanglement it takes to inhabit the world. To be a physical being embedded in space is to be implicated in a web of enfolded creatures in negotiation with one another. The organism is a physical dialectic in the most elemental sense. It is a sloppy mess of mundane actions and reactions. "From the lowliest among us to the most eminent," existence is the result of co-evolutionary forces (31). Haraway states:

The ordinary is a multi-partner mud dance issuing from and in entangled species. It is turtles all the way down; the partners do not preexist their constitutive intra-action at every folded layer of time and space. These are the contagions and infections that wound the primary narcissism of those who still dream of human exceptionalism. These are also the cobblings together that give meaning to the "becoming with" of companion species in naturecultures. *Cum panis*, messmates, to look and to look back, to have truck with: those are the name of my game. (32)

As leaky containers moving together in time and space, bodies inevitably encounter other leaky bodies. Each encounter leaves all bodies changed. The shape of the organism, like the shape of the landscape, is dependent on layers of previous interactions, compounding and evolving with time. At its most obvious, Haraway's book is a reminder that what is human is fundamentally not other than nature and that existence, no matter the species, has its etiquette—like any process of negotiation. This etiquette of existence, however, is not a passive one without confrontation, but one that requires acknowledgment and response. As Haraway later states, "Touch, regard, looking back, becoming with—all these make us responsible in unpredictable ways for which worlds take shape" (36). In a perpetual state of becoming, the world does not have an ideal state toward which it is moving or from which it is falling away. It is continually being made. As such, the shaping of the world is an evolving

dialogue of touch and response, of looking, being looked at and, most importantly, looking back. The act of looking back acknowledges the reciprocity involved in being, in which there is an implicit accountability for the wake each action sets in motion. In these actions, multiplied by a web of reactions, worlds are reformed in the most literal sense. Through the direct communication of touch and exchange, the multi-species 'we' are able to physically understand the irregular being of the other as intertwined with our own. In the disordered ooze of leaky bodies, we find empathy and transformation. This is the daily space in which worlds are made. Staring at the mud, the narcissistic veil dissolves allowing us to experience the complexity of world-making as it unfolds.

Further up the canyon, under the loquat tree, the smell of human waste mixes with the fragrant sweet peas. The ravine is deep here, maybe eight or nine feet. Runoff from the surrounding mesas forms a seasonal creek, which cuts away the softer soil and pushes it towards the rock dam. Maple Canyon, unlike many of its sister canyons, never received a central infrastructure of drainage pipes. The dam corrals the mud into a flat pool, but the water continues through the neighborhood towards the nearest storm drains and down into the bay. Standing at the bottom of the ravine you lose sight of the world, sinking through the cut in the earth into an alien time of primordial sludge. The watery sky stretches above like a canopy over the remains of a Pliocene bay. The sandstone basin of the canyon, aptly labeled San Diego Formation, was lain down as silt when this area was under water millions of years ago. The mesas above map the retreating waters as the bay transformed from alluvial plane to coastal scrub.

Soil in this area is mostly clay, the powdery hydrophobic remains of ancient sediments. At first contact with water, droplets bead together as the ground rejects the moisture in shock. It takes a couple minutes for the earth to wake up and recognize its thirst. A sudden rain will turn the first layer of exposed soil into slush and carry it away downhill, making the process of erosion swift. The muddy water of this canyon joins with runoff from other canyons to form the Pueblo Watershed, which empties into the San Diego Bay. Slowly, these canyons pump the Bay full of sediment, continuing the infilling process of previous epochs. The San Diego Bay must be dredged periodically to maintain a deep channel for large ships and to remain commercially viable. Spoils from the dredging have been used to radically alter the coastline through major infill projects including Harbor and Shelter Island, the expansion of Coronado Island, and the San Diego Airport (Canada, 1). The most impressive act of coastline reordering was the rerouting of the San Diego River from emptying in the San Diego Bay to below Mission Bay. A Marine Corps recruiting depot now sits on the former marsh at the River's sealed mouth. Historically the San Diego River danced between Mission Bay (or False Bay) and San Diego Bay. As a major source of silt choking up the San Diego Bay's utilitarian value, the River was first artificially redirected in 1853², beginning a century long battle of containment. In 1953, the River was finally channeled to flow in a straight line from Mission Valley to the Pacific, flowing neither to San Diego Bay nor Mission Bay, leaving both bays open for recreation and enterprise. The wrangling of the San Diego River significantly

² Led by Lt. George Horatio Derby, the United States Army Corps of Engineers built a levee at the base of Presidio Hill in 1853 to redirect the San Diego River through pre-existing channels back into Mission Bay. See works cited Papageorge.

decreased the risk of flooding and literally paved the way to the development of Mission Valley (Papageorge).

The reshaping of the San Diego Bay and River are part of a larger historic balancing act around landscape in which commerce and romantic mythos have physically and politically molded San Diego to fit the booster's image of "America's Finest City". As chronicled in Mike Davis's chapter, "The Next Little Dollar," in the *Under the Perfect Sun*, these myths were driven less by utopian environmental ideals than by real estate speculation and anti-labor sentiments. At the turn of the last century, as the modern City of San Diego was shaping itself, debates raged between the slow-growth "Geraniums" lead by George Marston and the pro-industry "Smokestacks". Davis explains:

As George Marston...was the first to realize, San Diego had preserved the potential—which rapidly industrializing Los Angeles was squandering—to someday shape itself into a City Beautiful...With proper planning and good advertising, San Diego might yet become a bigger version of Pasadena, the celebrated town in the Los Angeles foothills that was a winter home for dozens of Midwestern millionaires.
(31)

Marston's City Beautiful idea, as noted by Davis, emphasizes "clean growth" catering to the Navy, retirees, and tourists over blue-collar industry. This seemingly progressive ideology of proto-environmentalism veiled a socially conservative political agenda that would go on to become a dogmatic aspect of San Diego politics in later decades (Davis 43). Part of the myth-making machine was to promote San Diego to wealthy Midwesterners as "a hyper-romanticized image" of California using Balboa Park as the centerpiece (Davis 51). Again, as noted by Davis, "The City Beautiful—or, rather, its simulacrum in Balboa Park—would be the heart of the

proposed sales pitch. And, indeed, many of the eventual ads were headlined: ‘Built Around a Park—San Diego’”(51). The regulated public space of the municipal park offers an image of the city as utopian garden of paradise. In short, a sanitized version of nature at its most beautiful and least threatening, divorced from the social ills of class struggles and the blights of industrialization. With its Spanish-esque architecture, Balboa Park separates the visitor from the “reality” of the present, visually transporting them to an exotic past that never was, invoking California’s antebellum days of genteel ranchero life cloaked in a fantasy version of Old Spain. In this way, San Diego was able to establish itself as a sort of ahistorical Arcadian escape and quarantine the notion of history to a romanticized pre-industrial past.

Beyond the architecture of Balboa Park’s buildings, the physical character of the landscape was altered to present a more verdant and perfect version of paradise. Prior to the 1915 Panama-California Exposition, Balboa Park (then City Park) was mostly chaparral and described as bare and grass-less by visitors (Montes). Through the efforts of the celebrated San Diego horticulturalist, Kate Sessions, the park began to transform and take its current form as a more appropriate representation of the Anglo-East Coast concept of a park. Sessions leased land in the park for a nursery under the agreement that she would plant 100 trees a year and provide 300 more for planting throughout the city (Montes). Session’s beautifying efforts went beyond the trees. In preparation for the coming exposition, Sessions suggested improving San Diego’s multiple vacant lots (the by-product of boom and bust speculation) by planting several species now regarded as invasive. She recommends a hedge “made with green variegated cane, pepper trees, by planting the seed, castor bean, by planting

the seed”, a boarder of “ice plant (*Mesembryanthemum*) the coarse green with large yellow flowers is first choice, the small gray, with pale lavender and pink blooms, the second choice. Climbing nasturtiums, which spread very generously, seedlings set three to five feet apart...”³ Her list of plants could double for the list of plants found in the canyon today. These rampant colonizers are now an integral part of the canyon’s blazing charm in spring.

In the chapter, “Just Another Day in Paradise?” which appears later in *Under the Perfect Sun*, Jim Miller compares San Diego to a theme park, using Jean Baudrillard’s assessment of Los Angeles in relation to Disneyland, in which the fantasy of the theme park makes the surrounding city seem more real by comparison when in fact everything is a construction.⁴ Miller uses the specific examples of Old Town, Seaport Village and the Gaslamp Quarter, to illustrate how aspects of history, the colonial past, the defunct fishing industry, and former red light district respectively, are sanitized and repackaged as tourist attractions with little to no connection to the actual history of the area (159-160). The idea of history is mutated and condensed, erasing the jagged edges of a contradictory and possibly unpleasant legacy, providing a clear conflict-free gloss for the rest of the city to relax into. This comparison can be extended to Balboa Park and the “natural” environments of the city’s urban canyons. Appearing as spaces separate from the urban infrastructure, the

³Originally published in *California Garden* in June 1914, Vol 5 #12, Page 7 under the article heading “Vacant Lot Improvements”. See Sessions in work cited.

⁴ The original quote Miller uses in *Under the Prefect Sun* on page 160, from Baudrillard’s 1983 essay “Simulacra and Simulations” is, “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation.”

park or canyon's "naturalness" is elevated. As a result, many people come to these spaces to experience nature as an escape or a "breath of fresh air" away from the stress of daily life. When in fact, these vegetated open spaces are as deeply interwoven into the infrastructure of the urban grid as the visitors' own homes and their naturalness a highly cultivated affect. By condensing the concept of nature to these green spaces, it also assumes that what is outside is apart from nature and thereby mediated by a different standard of responsible behavior. It arrests dialogue. Similar to the process of quarantining history, it assumes that one is independent and not a part of the world taking shape. Ruptures that interrupt the idyllic tranquility of the theme park notion of nature or the city are physical reminders that transport us through time and space. As Miller states, "these 'transgressions'...expose the dark history of the city like the lightning bolt does the night sky." Rather than exceptions, these ruptures merely expose the hidden layers of complexity under the smooth artifice of "America's Finest City".

On a sunny Wednesday morning in early October, a 59-year-old man jumped 90 feet from the Spruce Street Suspension Bridge behind my house into Arroyo Canyon (also known as Kate Sessions Canyon). His was the first suicide attempt from the bridge in 40 years. While picturesque, the Spruce Street Bridge is not your optimal suicide bridge. The fall is only high enough to ensure severe injury but not death. The brief article in the Union Tribune reported that the man later died at the hospital, no other details available (Ceballos). Suicide is the second leading cause of non-natural death in San Diego, behind drugs and alcohol, according to the 2011 County of San Diego Health and Human Services report. Edmund Wilson famously labeled San

Diego “The Jumping Off Place” in the 1932 essay of the same title, about which Mike Davis notes:

Although Wilson’s essay has always infuriated San Diego boosters, he was only pointing out some civic statistics that were not included in the San Diego-California Club brochures: the highest suicide rate in the nation and the largest percentage of invalids and sick people (nearly a quarter of the population). Wilson suggested that self-murder was not a surprising response when sickness and depression, having escaped to the sunshine and blue waters, find neither cure or solace. (56)

While the suicide rate in San Diego has fallen since the 1930s, it remains historically high in relation to the national average. Between bays and canyons, San Diego offers several jumping off places including the Coronado Bridge, ranked among the Country’s top five most popular “suicide bridges” (Dottinga). Prior to the opening of the Coronado Bridge in 1969, the Cabrillo Bridge in Balboa Park, built in 1915 for the Panama-California Exposition, held the dubious distinction of being San Diego’s most popular spot for jumpers (Dottinga). Perhaps when history is erased the future becomes impossible. When contradictions are smoothed over the contradictory have no place. Arresting the image of the city in the ideal, as the “City Beautiful”, suffocates movement presenting only a one-sided formulation of smooth homogenous placidity. A rupture in its skin is a cause for terror, introducing polluting bodies that threaten the order of time and place. Yet, perhaps it is through this terror, at the glimpse of unregulated disorder, that escape becomes possible and breath unblocked. The desire to jump is a desire for movement.

Looking down might cause us to lose our balance. Is that why, then, when we encounter a rift in the grid, a cliff, a bridge, a canyon, the vertigo entices us to throw things? Is it an act of transference? The canyon floor is littered with paraphernalia

from bridge-goers testing the canyon's depth. A squadron of kamikaze paper airplanes recently pounded the crab grass under the bridge. Some items are brought with the intent to smash, among which I would classify pumpkins (a seasonal favorite), TV sets, and ceramic dishes. Glow sticks are fairly popular as well, still in the intentional category, but less to smash than to watch descend. Other items found under the bridge were perhaps more victims of circumstance, on hand and disposal. These would include glass bottles (there are a lot of bottles), shoes, remains of takeout dinners, and the occasional apple bong. I can only guess at the amount of spit ejaculated into the canyon on a given week. Most of the throwers and spitters are curious and timid pranksters gleefully enjoying the splat of rupturing objects below as they, themselves swing suspended above. The joggers, strollers, and throwers move along the bridge in a horizontal line with a clean exit and entrance rarely making the vertical descent. A few of the more adventurous visitors scramble down the crumbling and steeply inclined trail.

Shrouded in eucalyptus trees, the canyon offers the illusion of secluded burrow, a mysterious hidden woods below the urban grid. Down below it is easy to forget that you can be seen from above. Rooting around in other people's garbage, I am reminded that I am solid, "Hey Girl, What are you doing down there?" What do I say? Reconstructing histories? Collecting trash to mix in mud? "Collecting seeds," I mutter, scampering quickly under a bush. "Hey Girl, Where did you go?" Do I tell them I am not a girl, but a woman well into her thirties? But, I am not in the mood for dialogue. I would rather be invisible. I ignore them and try instead to assemble the crumbled body parts on the paper scrap submerged in the grass. I make out a woman's

face and a penis. Her tongue ingesting it. There is another piece of paper crisscrossed with ass cracks. A rope of cut t-shirts trickles down hill, an orange box-cutter, dryer sheets and a bottle of hand sanitizer lay nearby. The teenagers laugh above as the bridge bounces. With my blue surgical gloves from the UCSD bookstore, I collect these items and stuff them into my order controlled CVS trash bag.

My interest in the mud, or more specifically my interest in San Diego's mud, began when I moved into a canyon and begin to sift through the debris. Marked by North Arroyo Drive, the canyon I live in is a partially developed canyon with shaded houses at one end and open space at the other. Locating the canyon within the topography of San Diego, it traverses the grid of streets named after birds and trees, which constitute the area known as Horton's Addition. This canyon, however, is conspicuously absent from L.L Lockings' 1870 map advertising the area's subdivided lots. The map's grid of streets runs uninterrupted across the invisible canyon, which is part of a larger matrix of canyons splitting the Hillcrest, Mission Hills, and Bankers Hill neighborhoods. It forms a "V" with Maple Canyon, which is a city designated open space spanned by the First Street and Quince Street bridges. Realtors Howard and Lyons marketed the area in April 1887, with all the spirit of San Diego boosterism, by advertising a tropical paradise, "...some of the lots in the ravines sheltered from the winds, and warm enough to ripen bananas and pineapples placed at 60 and 75 dollars each"⁵. The canyon's most distinguishing landmark is the Spruce

⁵ See City of San Diego, Planning Department, "Uptown Historic Context Statement" B-21. The actual area they are referring to is bounded by the Laurel on the south, Washington on the north, Goldfinch, Reynard Way, Curlew, Dove and Front Streets on the east and the I-5 freeway on the west. This area is just west of Arroyo Canyon.

Street Suspension Bridge, a pedestrian bridge built in 1912 to connect the developing Bankers Hill neighborhood to the new trolley lines on 4th Street (Brownlee). The canyon is just east of the I-5 and north of the Laurel Street overpass. The San Diego International Airport is a five minute car ride downhill.

As with many canyon raked neighborhoods in San Diego, development crept from the flatter mesas on top, down the hillside and into the canyon as construction and grading techniques grew more sophisticated (City of San Diego B-49). Development sealed off the canyon, leaving the patch of open space under the Suspension Bridge. Early images of the bridge from 1915 show the openness of the canyon⁶. Only a few houses and a couple spotty trees populate what looks to be rolling hills covered in grass. An earlier image from 1888 of the former Rankin Brickyard⁷ located at the nearby intersection of Reynard Way and State Street, presents a largely un-vegetated landscape with the same rolling hills extending into the background. With development, the contrast between hill and valley has become further accentuated.

An aerial photograph of the area dated from 1953, shows the beginnings of North Arroyo Drive as a cut line ending a quarter of the way into the canyon. The patch of ground next to the road, in the black and white image, is a uniform light gray indicating that it was freshly graded. The only other indication of development in the canyon is the white line and shadow of the Suspension Bridge. By 1964, the aerial image changes dramatically. Ranch houses are built along the beginning of the street

⁶ Image included in Brownlee article “Bull Strong, Horse High, and Hog Tight.” See works cited.

⁷ Image included in Bevil article “The Park Brick Yard.” See works cited.

and a cluster of houses surround a new extension of North Arroyo Drive, which stretches development back into the canyon an equivalent of roughly three blocks as compared to the adjacent grid of Banker's Hill above. Additional grading is apparent in the appearance of uniform light gray spots. By 1980, the aerial map shows that the grading scars have healed and the houses are mostly obscured under trees. The canyon is distinguished from the surrounding grid as a dark vegetated area as compared to the earlier photographs in which it is an open light patch dotted with a few dark tree spots. Present day images show little visual change from 1980.⁸

In a push by residents to curtail further development, the Spruce Street Suspension Bridge received designation as a San Diego Historic Landmark in 1977⁹. When a house was built on the top of the canyon within three feet of the bridge, the residents of the area grew alarmed and a petition went into circulation. As a not-entirely-tangential outcome of the bridge preservation efforts, five lots beneath the bridge were donated with the bequest that they remain open space.

My apartment is attached to the back of a house owned by Maureen Flores. She and her husband, Frank, built the house, starting in 1971 and moving in a year later in 1972. At the time they bought the lot, Maureen describes the canyon as "a dry dust bowl". The eucalyptus and most of the vegetation moved in with the houses. While gas and electricity lines were running up the canyon when Maureen and Frank Flores built their house, water lines had to be run in a zigzag down from the ridge. All the water meters for the canyon are still located on ridge above. The existing cast-iron

⁸ These interactive maps are accessible online at historicaerials.com

⁹ Historical Landmarks Designated by the San Diego Historical Resources Board.

sewer system was already several decades old when the house was built and was beginning to deteriorate. The City had to come in and re-lay the pipes, as well as install storm drains. The canyon would flood regularly when it was first developed, turning people's front yards into muddy riverbeds (similar to what now goes on in Maple Canyon). A series of storm drains and culverts were installed to direct the water's flow and take it underground where it hits the main city street on its way to the ocean. Brick circles marking former manholes and sections of ceramic pipe can still be found in the canyon, mapping the defunct sewer lines. Old and new manhole covers dot the creek bed, sticking out like rock pillars where the soil has eroded away around them. The dank smell of sewer gas can be overwhelming when the wind is right.

The physical complications of building on a sloping hillside left the canyon open while development grew around it and crept in from below. A section of the canyon later remained open through the conscious recognition of its value as undeveloped space. The term undeveloped, however, is not quite the right description for this area. While buildings weren't constructed on the site, it did get an infrastructure of sewer lines and storm drains. These new additions, combined with the street runoff from the mesas above, have changed the physical shape of the canyon, intensifying and channeling water flows. The plantings brought in with the encroaching development transitioned the canyon landscape from dry and scrubby to shady and densely vegetated, altering its ecosystem. Even the native plants that grow in the canyon are more shrub-like and shade tolerate than those found in brighter canyons. Several of the plants growing in the canyon have overflowed out of private gardens and have become naturalized, seeding themselves as the rains wash their

genetic material down stream. Jade plant and nasturtiums are the most prolific examples. Growing untended in the canyon, these plants chronicle a history of gardening trends. It is impossible to think of returning the canyon to a wild state predating development without considering the development itself. Even if all of the current vegetation was removed and replaced with native plants, the actual topography has changed through a combination of street runoff and grading, thereby, impacting the viability of various native plant species reliant on the subtle shifts in slope and soil composition. The canyon is not a static space with an ideal state apart from the landscape surrounding it.

San Diego's open spaces, including the highly constructed Balboa Park and the network of canyons, like the one I live in, that fan throughout the urban grid, provide a palimpsest of forgotten layers of mundane histories that have shaped the City. The beauty of these sites is that they exist as awkward hybrids that defy standard terminology, which would place them along the nature/culture divide, their current physical state is the result of both intentional and unintentional nurture, neglect, and abuse. The idyllic seclusion of the canyon with its tangle of feral vegetation is as much a construction as the houses that surround it. Both are part of the region's urban development. Their histories are intertwined within shifting ecologies at micro-level of the neighborhood to the larger regional level of the greater San Diego area.

In Robert Smithson's essay, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," he discusses the shaping of Central Park in terms of "a concrete dialectic between nature and people" (65). In a non-coincidental historic parallel, in 1868, approximately three years after the inauguration of New York's Central Park, San

Diego set aside 1,400 acres of pueblo lands for a municipal park (Montes, San Diego's City Park)¹⁰. As Smithson describes, Olmsted designed Central Park according to a notion of the picturesque, which embraces chance and change over a static ideal, so that the constructed environment of the park evolves over time according to the forces nature integrated with human activity. Inherent within the dialectical landscape, Smithson explains, is the constant negotiation of contradictory and unexpected relationships unfolding within in physical space. The picturesque depends on the dialectic function in all its uncomfortable parameters, because it is not a thing but a temporal dimension and therefore relies on the contradictory action to be visible. Central to Smithson's conception of the dialectical landscape is the understanding that human activity is one of the many simultaneous forces acting on the land. It is not a part from, or in anyway more exceptional than, any other force originating from non-human action. It is part of a tangled web of collaborating forces. In one particularly provocative passage, Smithson states:

Looking on the nature of the park, or its history and our perceptions of it, we are first presented with an endless maze of relations and interconnections, in which nothing remains what or where is, as a-thing-itself, but the whole park changes like day and night, dark and light—a carefully designed clump of bushes can also be a mugger's hideout. The reason the potential dialectic inherent in the picturesque broke down was because natural processes were viewed in isolation as so many classifications detached from physical interconnection and

¹⁰ In a further parallel, the Olmsted Brothers, lead by Frederick Law Olmsted's sons, were originally hired as the landscape architects for San Diego's 1915 Exposition until the contract fell apart over disagreements about the location of the Exposition site. The Olmsted Brothers argued for a meandering decentralized sylvan design over the centralized Mesa design. Not surprisingly the centralized plan won out with the backing of John D. Spreckels, whose streetcar lines would profit from the Mesa location. See Montes "The Rise and Fall of the Olmsted Plan" in works cited.

finally replaced by mental representations of a finished absolute ideal.
(65)

The perception of what is or is not picturesque is dependent on seeing the interconnected parts at work to create the present reality, as opposed to a lament over a deviation from an imagined past or the vision of an idealized future. The picturesque takes material form when the landscape is experienced as a system of interactions. When the system is divided into its component parts, the connection is severed and function ceases. In isolation parts carry hypothetical notions of function, which when placed in a system may in fact behave unpredictably. The process of classification, such as the labeling “carefully design clump of bushes” or “mugger’s hidout” or even nature/culture, is an attempt to rationalize contradiction and provide order, which ultimately bears little resemblance to reality and instead leads towards stagnation and moralizing over-simplification. Underlining Smithson’s essay is a request that we look and recognize contradiction as essential to inhabiting the world, and to avoid viewing our actions in isolation and therefore above or removed from the forces of nature.

In many ways, Smithson’s dialectical landscape runs tandem to Haraway’s interspecies becomings. World making is a daily endeavor of systems in negotiations. Both Smithson and Haraway warn against the practice of romanticizing nature and viewing what is human as something other than nature. As Haraway says, “this is the premise that humanity alone is not a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies. Thus, to be human is to be on the opposite side of the Great Divide from all the others and so to be afraid of –and in bloody love with–what goes bump in the night” (11). This process of othering nature stifles dialogue, turning humans into

godlike creatures and the landscape into a discrete and static entity to alternatively be exploited or preserved as an ideal. It erects boundaries that conceptually prohibit the possibility of co-existence, ending in the eradication of all life of the planet or the decimation of the human race. This type of defeatist thinking often employs the rhetoric of rape, evoking a power dynamic that eliminates conversation. In their conceptualizations of the world, Haraway and Smithson both offer a less dramatic dialectics in which boundaries are blurred and differences are nurtured. This is the dialectic inherent in dialogue. Both authors similarly understand that a direct physical engagement, whether with other species, in the case of Haraway, or the material landscape, in the case of Smithson, is essential to understanding the entanglement of the world. Smithson says:

Spiritualism widens the split between man and nature. The farmer's, miner's or artist's treatment of the land depends on how aware he is of himself as nature; after all, sex isn't all a series of rapes. The farmer or engineer who cuts into the land can either cultivate it or devastate it. Representing nature once removed in lyric poetry and landscape painting is not the same as direct cultivation of the land. If strip miners were less alienated from the nature in themselves and free of sexual aggression, cultivation would take place. (65)

Outside of the problematic gendering of this statement, Smithson offers helpful guidance. Avoiding the idealization of nature, the artist is able to have a direct and immediate relationship with the environment around her. Producing work becomes about collaborating with the landscape in such a way that simulates possibilities rather than shutting them down. The work itself is an entry point in understanding a system.

On one of my many walks in the canyon, I found a green sleeping bag in the creek below the Self-Realization Center on First and Redwood. This object was

among the best sculptures I have seen. It wove itself beautifully around the mass of tree roots and broken branches in the creek bed. Caught on a branch, it had become a dam, collecting more branches and debris. When I first found it, nasturtiums were beginning to sprout from the pockets of collected dirt. This synthetic structure of manmade polymers was remolding itself. No longer an object of human utility, it had a new use akin to the fallen branches and leaf matter it tangled itself within. It was redirecting water, helping to reshape the erosion pattern of the canyon. It had also become an anchor nurturing new plant growth. Sun-bleached, it was in the process of transcending itself.

This sleeping bag embodies the dialectical landscape at work in the canyon as its malleable form takes shape according to the forces surrounding it. As a site, the canyon, like the sleeping bag, exists as it does today and continues to morph according to an ongoing interplay of forces, human and otherwise, both in and outside of the canyon. It is a porous system reacting within a porous reactive system. Street water runoff, sewer gases, garbage, garden escapees and other rogue plant species find their way in to give it shape. It is a fluid space. Water flowing through the canyon serves as a transportation system for debris and wastewater. Canyon vegetation acts as a filtration system, trapping and absorbing much of the waste, forming banks and berms that redirect the water flow to irrigate the canyon floor. The construction of culverts and more efficient channeling systems, however, by-pass the canyon's natural filtering properties and push water and debris in a direct path toward the ocean. As part of an interlocking network of canyons, some more visibly developed than others, one canyon's runoff is multiplied by the others in a pattern repeated throughout the region.

The health of the canyon and the region is not solely dependant on what happens in the canyon, but equally on what happens around it. Each action initiates a web of reactions.

In an act of intervention or outright treason, I took the sleeping bag to the laundromat and washed it, twice. Smuggling it in on a Friday night when I thought laundromat would be empty, I walked to one of machines towards the rear and quickly shoved it in, trash bag and all. After tearing away the plastic bag, I washed the sleeping bag on hot with an extra capful of detergent. I immediately washed my hands and wiped them down with the antibacterial hand sanitizer the laundromat provides instead of soap. Proud of myself, I sat down on the bench of plastic chairs and waited for the machine to finish its cycle. A man sorted his laundry in front of me. Socks, underwear, shirts, jeans. The damp bacterial smell of the laundry hamper hung faintly in the air.

Turning the mud in my hands, the irregular announces itself as I pick out the pieces of glass, fearing contamination or slicing open my skin. The contradictions fade in and out of view, throwing mundane action into the line of sight. The irregular creates drag, which interrupts automatic, regularized action. Forced to contend with a new dialogue, I stop, and reorient myself. Living in a place it is easy to become subsumed in routine and to forget to look. Contradictions and ruptures in topography provide a physical and psychological disorientation that makes sight possible again. These ruptures, however, are not always grand. They can be as simple and mundane as mud. Watching it change from solid to liquid, seeing it sprout, feeling it crack and dry on you skin, tracking it across the kitchen floor or experiencing it wipe out a driveway.

Understanding the mud is to understand the dynamics of a space. As Smithson says, “a consciousness of mud and the realms of sedimentation is necessary in order to understand the landscape as it exists” (68).

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Addendum

Moving into the canyon, things started to come together for me artistically as a conglomerate of material and historical research. Embedding myself in this place, I realized the importance of collage within my art-making practice on a conceptual and physical level. The canyon is a site shaped by a historic melding of often-incongruent forces and mixing ideologies. The more enfolded I became within the space of the canyon as a result of my investigations, the more contradictions surfaced, challenging my thinking about the inhabitation of space. I came to realize that this site was the embodiment of a dialectic engine that mixes and merges, leaving bodies chunky and irregular in a new multilayered formation. This is the way I view collage. Objects remixed into new histories and functions, with the previous histories obfuscated but still visible. As a noun and verb, collage highlights the antagonism of the object/place/image and gives it a temporal dynamism of shifting un-reconciled parts in an illusionary whole.

Collage for me is a physical activity that begins with the process of collection. In the canyon, this began with a series of walks in which I documented the landscape, photographing seasonal vegetation and the flow of debris. Also on these walks, I collected plant material and pieces of trash that had filtered in. These images and objects marinate in my mind, shaping a mental reconstruction of the space. In tandem with these investigations on the ground, I started digging into the history of the canyon and the region. Together, the various forms of research assembled into a partial understanding of the space. Their melding together yields a lacey network of

connections pierced with holes. The layering of additional information remakes the connections, alternatively obscuring the gaps and ripping them open, ultimately making it apparent that a complete comprehension of the space is an impossible, Sisyphean task. Yet, its impossibility is its draw. The lack of final resolution invigorates the process of looking and questioning. It offers dialogue, inviting response. My thesis project ended up being a dialogue of parts. The installation and the companion paper became about a collage of research and experience.

The installation consists of a clean white room within a room. The floor inside the interior room is tiled with mud bricks, which have been molded together by mixing plant fibers, mud, and debris from the canyon. The exterior room containing the smaller room has two large windows looking towards the Eastern end of the UCSD campus and Pepper Canyon. The room itself has the institutional issue white and grey-flecked linoleum floor and fluorescent lights. Ductwork is visible on the ceiling. I chose this space because of the windows and the institutional quality. Thinking about the canyon as a porous container of vegetated open space within a larger urban container, I wanted to situate my installation in an environment that would have similar penetrating layers, provoking questions of boundaries. The room I built measures 10 feet by 12 feet with 10-foot tall walls, roughly the size of a small bedroom. The room is actually two sections of c-shaped walls facing each other. There is no ceiling. Two cross beams bridge the two walls and have fluorescent lights attached to them in order to give the room its own directed light source. To enter into the space, the visitor must walk up a small plywood platform measuring

approximately a foot and a half off the ground. To continue into the space, the visitor then descends to walk on the mud tiles, which cover the floor from wall-to-wall.

The intention is to physically involve the visitor in the movement of the space. By walking up the stairs and down into the room, the visitor is entering a space that gives the illusion of seclusion, much like the canyon itself. As visitors enter and exit the space, they track dirt across the plywood platform, sullyng the otherwise pristine perimeter of the room. The idea is to track flow and movement, allowing for the contamination of interior and exterior space, highlighting the illusory separation between environments. In addition, in order to stand in the space, the visitor must stand on the mud bricks. The irregular surface of the dirt contrasts with the clean white walls causing a disjunction that makes the viewer conscious of the ground below their feet, drawing their gaze downward. Looking down, the visitor begins to notice the objects buried within the tiles, and starts to engage in a process of discovery and speculation. As well as objects, the observant visitor will notice shoots of grass and nasturtium seedlings growing in the bricks.

The bricks are molded into eight-inch tiles, creating a grid across the floor. The mud and plant fibers are hand-packed into the mold so that the edges are uniform and the surface is irregular with traces of handprints. The tile grid functions as an unsuccessful attempt at containment. It offers a metaphor for the regularization of the urban grid, in which plots of land are subdivided and sold, each lot accounted for and assigned a permitted use. In the installation, dry dirt dusts across the top of the bricks, interfering with the boundaries of the grid. The clearly handmade quality of the bricks contrasts with the professional quality of seamlessly crafted white walls. In this

institutional box, visitors hesitate to walk on the bricks. The tiles give the appearance of being fragile, yet they are surprisingly sturdy as one of the more ancient forms of construction. The materials embedded within the bricks act as a record of history in the use and formation of the space in and around the canyon. The bricks contain discarded manmade objects as well as seeds of native and invasive plant species. Like a museum display case, the brick preserve the history of the canyon and yet they obscure it.

In contrast to the objects in the mud bricks, two objects are displayed on the inside North wall of the room. The first object is a green sleeping bag encased in a square plexi-glass box, the other object is a soiled bottle of hand sanitizer. Both objects were found in the canyon. When I found the green sleeping bag, it was wrapped among branches in the creek bed to form a dam. Rather than mix the sleeping bag deeper into the mud, like the other objects I had found in the canyon, I chose to lift it out and to go through the process of deliberate cleansing. I washed and folded it before encasing it into the plexi-glass box, echoing the process of sanitization, which events and objects go through in order to create the polite narrative of history. The irregularities get ironed out and a smooth, packaged version of history is presented instead, in which all the dots connect. Objects that support the narrative are elevated to heroic stature, those that do not, disappear as historic anomalies. The hand sanitizer is perhaps the most obvious object in the room, as a vehicle of sanitation that has become unsanitary. Elevated onto the wall in a display case and shelf, the sleeping bag and hand sanitizer give the appearance of being more important than the objects in the mud bricks, but I regard the objects on the wall as decoys of a sort. They fulfill the

expectation of the traditional gallery with objects on the wall. They bring the visitor into the room. The hope is that they will start a dialogue with the contrasting methods of display. The objects on the wall are psychologically removed from the touch of the viewer, while the same viewer's feet are standing on objects encased in dirt, provoking questions about our relationship with the objects around us, in what we choose to notice and ignore, histories we highlight or bury.

Constructing this installation, from the process of collecting the objects in the canyon and kneading the mud to the physical build out of the space, was a means of testing my boundaries in negotiation with objects and space. It was a way for me to understand the forces at work in the canyon in tangible way. The canyon is constantly being shaped by forces in negotiation with each other. In order to understand the site, I needed to implicate myself in the tension between forces. In thinking about the forces of contagion and the mixing of histories while working in the canyon, I was haunted by Sterling Ruby's 2005 video "Found Cushion Act". In the video, the artist rolls around on a found cushion, licking it and ripping it apart. He entangles himself with this object, yelling and cooing, "Stranger. Stranger's cushion!" His actions are violent, intimate and psychotic. It is difficult not to cringe while watching the video. The cushion of unknown origin and hygiene begins as a frightening object, threatening contagion. The fear of the unknown stranger embodied in the pillow. As Ruby escalates his interaction with object, the fearful stranger becomes the artist. The viewer's identification shifts from the artist to the cushion as Ruby annihilates it, and thus, the empathic viewer takes the place of the original stranger. The video presents a cycle of alienation and identification. The triangular positioning of the viewer, artist,

and object is inverted and confused. The destabilizing result heightens awareness with a reverberating and unsettled logic. I am drawn into Ruby's work because it confuses me more that it produces meaning. I am left instead with a series of points that become more complex and illusive as I try to attach significance to the connections between them. Understanding, therefore, becomes a dynamic process of intuition rather than a static, concrete articulation. In approaching my work in the canyon, this is a dynamic that I hoped to achieve. In order to do so, I had to place my self at risk by giving into my fears of contamination by holding, kneading and turning the dirt and detritus in my hands.

The layer of antagonism that Ruby achieves with his work is something that I hoped to achieve with my installation. The space I constructed is sterile and clean with cool, eye-fatiguing fluorescent lights. It is not a warm or welcoming space. Designing the space to be somewhat uncomfortable, I wanted to reposition the body of the viewer to be aware of themselves as they stood on the mud bricks. Walking on the dirt in the clean environment, the viewer becomes conscious of their movement and themselves as a polluting body, which disrupts the surface of the tiles by picking up loose dirt. Curiosity brings the visitor into the room, but they hesitate before entering, questioning whether they are welcomed or allowed to walk in the space. Visitors behave by the traditional rules of the gallery in which the work is apart from the viewer and not to be touched. The sterility of the space reinforces the hesitation of the visitor. The work operates as a sort of perverse temple. Rather than inspire awe for a sublime notion of nature, it roots the visitor in the complexities of the mundane. The

viewer's discomfort in the space mixes with a desire to look. The result is ultimately a heightened sense of awareness.

In the conception and design of my thesis installation, Robert Smithson was also present in my mind. As outlined in the previous essay, his discussion of the dialectical landscape in reference to New York's Central Park heavily influenced my thinking about the space of the canyon. Smithson's theory of the Non-Site influenced the design of the installation. The Non-Site is an abstraction and re-conceptualization of the landscape in a new environment. In part, it is a relocation of the landscape into the gallery. It functions more like a map in its abstract description of the landscape than a representational realistic image. The Non-Site edits and highlights aspects of the site while calling attention to the absence of the original site. Smithson regards the Non-Site as a three-dimensional "logical picture" of the site. He states, "A 'logical picture' differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the thing it stands for. It is a two dimensional analogy or metaphor – A is Z."¹¹ Smithson lists a series of dialectical oppositions that compose the site and Non-Site, and then gives a disclaimer that these oppositions are not fixed and that the site may exhibit qualities of the Non-Site and vice versa. What attracts me to the theory of the Non-Site is that it is not fixed, it is "tentative and could be abandoned at any time." The tentativeness is not a sign of insecurity, but a mark of true investigation. Working in a space, turning over the material of that space, contradictions surface in yourself and in the landscape, opening new avenues of exploration that require a negotiation or an abandonment of

¹¹ Smithson, Robert. "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites." Robertsmithson.com. Estate of Robert Smithson. December 8, 2013.

previous conceptions of the location. Sometimes those abandoned conceptions linger to tickle you from below and create an agitation that cause you to dig deeper. For me, thinking about the Non-Site offers a framework for exploration, a laboratory perhaps, in which the test subject is myself in relationship to site and space.

In my installation, I tried to achieve something of a hybrid between Smithson and Ruby, an edited and controlled representation of the site that is felt viscerally. Finding this balance is something that I have struggled with and continue to struggle with. My investigation into a site usually begins with an instinctual reaction to a material. I then work backwards to discover the root of the attraction. Holding, manipulating, testing, and photographing are all integral processes in my investigation into the material. A physical understanding precedes all other understanding. Additional outside research feeds into my physical understanding of the material and of the site. In the case of my thesis exhibition, the historical research into the site of the canyon became a way for me to understand the physical form of the canyon and the forces shaping the region. Seeing the material manifestation of history in the site excites me. I am interested in moments when the complexities of history become a tactile experience. My work in the canyon and with mud, and even in my previous works with used clothes, it is the layering of opaque histories embedded in these materials that drew me in. These layers are not always easy to see or understand. Sometimes they take a coaxing out. The field and studio are important sites of research for me as locations in which I am able to sift through and tease out these layers. They are both places of discovery. The studio and field are where the bulk of my work takes place.

Taking the work out of the studio it goes through an editing process, similar in many ways to the process of collage. Often I will lift sections of my “research” and juxtapose it in a new context to highlight a particular aspect or function of the experiment at work. The challenge in the final presentation is to translate my personal experience of discovery to the exhibition visitor in a way that guides them through the narrative I am hoping to convey and yet allows them to have their own experience and create their own narrative. Collage is my solution to this fairly common artistic challenge. Chunky and semi-assimilated parts are reassembled into a new directed context in which the connection points remain open. The framing of the work as an installation sets the physical context for the viewer’s body, which elicits a visceral twinge that informs the conceptual read of the work. As Smithson demonstrated with his Non-Sites, context is everything. An awareness of the body in space is dependent on a hyper-awareness of the space itself and how one’s movement alters the space it is in. The space of the canyon and the space of the installation are the result of layers of movement, similar to the process of collage. As a physical process of layering and arrangement, collage offers the possibility of a constant unfolding as new layers are added and meaning shifts. With my thesis exhibition, Arroyo/Mud, I wanted to enfold the visitor into the collage of space with the layered history of the mud, the construction of a room within a room, and the tracking of the dirt across the floor with the visitor’s movement.