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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE**

Shapes for the Deep Unrest

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Studio Art

by

Maura Murnane

Thesis Committee:
Professor Monica Majoli, Chair
Professor Jennifer Pastor
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Shapes for the Deep Unrest

By

Maura Murnane

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Monica Majoli, Chair

This writing serves as explication of thought-processes regarding the making of the thesis exhibition *Shapes for the Deep Unrest*, installed in the UAG Gallery from April 28-May 13, 2017. In this document, the connection between spirituality and commerce is foregrounded. Other topics include the creation of the desirable image in commercial photography and the role of digital post-production in that process. Throughout, there is an exploration of the concepts of mindfulness, mindlessness, and the intersecting flows of both time and information.

SHAPES FOR THE DEEP UNREST

Maura Murnane

“One moves for a while in aqueous suspension, not only of light, but of judgment, not only of judgment, but of personality.”

— Joan Didion, *On the Mall*, from *The White Album*

The place I go back to again and again is of being lost; of, for just one second, forgetting where I am, what time it is, and just what it was I was intending to do. When I encounter someone I might know at the grocery store but can't quite recognize them, when it seems the same song has been playing for the 30 minutes I've been at the store but I've only just noticed. What is being described in this artwork is an experience of dislocation, dissonance and distraction.

— — —

Mindfulness is generally understood as a state of rising above the demands of the ego, stopping the inner monologue, and being totally present in one's body in the moment. It is a meditation practice that includes paying attention especially to the breath, and all bodily sensation—sight, sound, smell, and touch—without having a positive or negative reaction to them. The experience offered by *cul-de-sac*, a series of prints contained in a large poster rack in the center of the exhibition space, has a similar quieting effect on the inner monologue. It is my intention that this series of images could move the viewer into a state of contemplation. Unlike in meditative mindfulness, the act of perusing images, whether artistic or commercial, induces a retreat *into* the mind *from*

the body. However, the physicality of the object, the size of it and the sound of the metal frames as they clack against one another, keeps the viewer from fully engaging in either the mental or physical plane. It is not quite an inversion of mindfulness, but a dislocation of it.

A couple of intensive meditation courses have left me with a lingering interest in the concept of desire in a Buddhist sense, particularly the Buddhist adage that “desire is the source of all misery.” If that is the case, then the construction of images with the intent to create desire (manipulating photographs to sell products) is a dubious if not evil occupation. Unfortunately, constructing images was a way I happened to be making a living at the time of my first meditation course—retouching photographs for beauty and luxury brands—which was as near as one can get to the creation of the desirable image.

My former employer shot a large cosmetic catalog for a high-end client every summer. Each branded item came with its own brand representative (usually an exhaustingly earnest girl wearing Tory Burch ballet flats) and a binder of dos and don'ts for styling the product. It would dictate orders such as: show the texture of the cream and the flecks of glitter in it. The package should be open. The bottle should be turned at a 3/4 angle and you should never show it with the cap off... It should never be shot from below or on a light background. The soft goods stylist on-set told me that past photographs from the catalog had been analyzed in comparison with sales data to see what kind of photography sold the most products. Ultimately, she said, the conclusion arrived at by the study was that the product priced highest sold more than anything else. Whatever it was, however the packaging was designed, if it cost more than any

other product it was perceived to have more value than other lower-priced options. The picture matters less than the ideas of status and exclusivity that are presumed to justify the product's worth.

It is assumed that something in image itself generates desirability, but perceived or monetary value is a much greater force. I would argue that there is a level of quality to the luxury image in terms of lighting, equipment, and expertise that the average person cannot imitate, but essentially it's content has very little importance in comparison to it's context. As long as the image appears to have the markers of high-quality photography, it is accepted as part of the canon of fantasy, of a place where to own is to become one with the ideal that has been depicted.

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At its worst, enlightenment is as much a thing to be acquired as any other status symbol; the journey from one juice cleanse to another Peruvian hallucinogenic ceremony is a symptom of a prescribed state of desire, a kind of spiritual materialism. That phrase is used here to describe the pursuit of spirituality in order to feel euphoria, or merely as a distraction from reality.¹ Someone once accused a friend of being “addicted to healing” and the phrase has stuck with me; the wound never closes.²

I have been in and around communities that dabble in alternative healing and mind expansion for a long time; this area of interest is a significant part of artist cultures I have experienced in Brooklyn, Austin, and Los Angeles. Several years ago, at the Body Actualized center in Bushwick, a space that defined itself through a lifestyle of yoga, randomly sourced spirituality, healthy eating, and doing lots of drugs,³ I saw a girl with a Chanel purse drink psychedelic mushroom tea next to a crystal-covered altar at a noise

music show: all of these signifiers collapsed into one another as one and the same thing. There is a desire for something, something else than what's been offered, but ultimately it is all still a distraction from the real.

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The central sculptural object in the exhibition is a poster rack with 50 sleeves, of the variety one would see at a music or framing shop. This object is filled with a series of images made over the past year, 71 prints in all. Thinking of the way images appear on-line—that there is a changeable stream of them in time—I wanted to re-enact that virtual flow physically in this form. When I say “flow,” I mean it in the sense that it is defined by Boris Groys: there is the flow that is time (clock time, time that ages), but there is also a flow that is an interchange of information or goods.⁴ The way images persist virtually is both in a flow of information and out of the flow that is time (they do not change or degrade and can be infinitely displayed in multiple locations simultaneously). However, the larger physical systems that support this interchange are still part of the physical world and therefore prone to decaying forces. All of the devices we use to hold and display data, including image data, are very delicate; they can easily become obsolete once emptied of this content.

The poster rack is solidly in the flow of time. As an object that is no longer produced, is distinctly from another era, one with record stores and *Spencer's Gifts* at the mall. In the exhibition, it has been re-activated in the contemporary moment and saved from obsolescence, from life as an inert thing. The viewing system is aged and damaged, and the PVC poster sleeves are yellowed from exposure to sunlight. In the places where the price stickers once were is a perfectly clear rectangle. The layer of age is

visually appealing, as some kind of thickening, or enriching, of whatever lies behind it. Objects can have a vital energy that acts as a force of attraction to the sensitive viewer.⁵ As a person with this sort of affinity, I have chosen to centralize objects that have low monetary worth but are materially fascinating. Some of the poster images included within the rack also share this quality, of being throwaways, junk, but also strangely arresting.

In a Buddhist sense, to appreciate beauty is to be completely absorbed in the object itself, with no separation between the viewer and the thing being viewed.⁶ From the beginning, I wasn't sure how I would show the work but I knew the way I wanted the viewer to experience it. The solution was to use the poster rack; as it is as large as the body, when a person stands in the center of it they are also enfolded in the content.

I wanted to address the experience of looking at images and consider if they matter discretely or as a continuum. When only a few images are expensively framed, hung on a wall, and stared at, they must bear the weight of meaning much more than images displayed in relation to one another. In the pages of the poster rack, many images hold a smaller or layered interpretation, interacting with one another, and to the object itself, to make meaning. When the element of time is introduced (the time it takes to turn the pages), only portions of the piece can be viewed and retained in memory. Every viewer will remember the artwork differently, since some images will appeal more than others to each individual.

The prints' subject matter ranges from catalogs to collections to suburban architecture. It is meant to be a visual cul-de-sac, mirroring the street-shape that circles back on itself. The title, translated literally as "the bottom of the bag," also represents

an emptying out of my visual repository. On display the images become a fanned-out decorator's palette of various photo techniques, ranging from camera photography to in-computer composites. As the pages are turned, the quality of the images varies, swinging between the suggested viewing states of contemplation (rich, hi-resolution) and distraction (poor, low-resolution).⁷ Seeing all things equally, no image takes precedence over another.

Many of the images are related to pictures of objects for sale—plated like a restaurant meal and presented to the viewer. If there was text accompanying the original image, it is often submerged or partially removed to dislocate the source material, taking the viewer to a pre-linguistic state, before words could be linked to images as identifiers. This operation disrupts the architecture of the pictorial space and leaves the objects to drift. Catalog pages can be topographical, read as maps of space seen from above, with objects and graphics becoming miniaturized plots of image real estate, or landscape. Images in print and media, viewed with distraction, can function this way, seeming to be depicting something, but then becoming something else, a printed surface to slide the eyes across.

If, as Roland Barthes writes, a photograph reminds the viewer of their own mortality through the permanent arrest of a particular moment in time,⁸ then an altered photographic image does something else; the uncanny can resemble the undead. The altered image never really existed in time so it cannot be representative of a moment that once was and will never be again. That is why contemporary, post-production heavy images often read cold; they have no soul. However, it is somewhat pointless to ask whether a photographic soul can be contained in something that has no body

(meaning a physical referent as well as an existence in print form) when de-materialized images are the unarguable present and future of image production. Perhaps it is not the dichotomy of soul/no soul but merely a different, alien form of life.

As tableaux, and as a collection, the images are confusing. Confusion has a function: when what one is looking at isn't identifiable, the viewer feels pressed to understand it and is frustrated when they cannot. It stops the person from slipping into a pre-conceived state of knowing, where they assume they already know what they are looking at, and therefore are only partially *seeing* it. For example, in drawing from life, it is always preferable to have a model who is not conventionally attractive; drawing a beautiful person is difficult because beautiful people, while recognizable, are hard to see.

Similarly, realism in photography and painting keeps the viewer from seeing the image itself as a thing.⁹ Keeping my collection of pictures in the realm of the “off” or uncanny makes them more visible—people will look until they can know what they are looking at. This places the viewer in a state that comes before literacy—when a page in a book was a mysterious thing to be deciphered. To allow for a reversal of this action, the list of image descriptions below are included for the to reader imagine what they might look like:

- On the left, a woman lays in a deep but small bathtub, relaxing, head angled up but eyes closed. The water in the tub is an unnatural bright blue. On the right panel the same shade of blue is churning with super-sized remnants of rocks and minerals.
- A enormous bottle of water on a mottled-gray studio backdrop says “Aura” and “mineral water.” The actual scale of the bottle is one inch—it is superimposed into the new environment.

- A contemporary white truck is positioned against rolling sand dunes. Covering the truck are many black plastic framed green signs purchased at a liquidation sale for the store Sports Authority. They were originally photographed on another truck and then re-placed on this one.
- Two enormous yellow paper Buddha-shaped Post-it notes are on facing pages, one of which has hairs and bits of detritus stuck to his head.
- Thirty-one cyan blue gum balls set out in the sun for several days, faded to white on one side, then photographed, are shown opposite an image of an open tanning bed
- A sticker-book with the paper pages removed, photographed from the reverse side
- Tan carpeting and crystal plastic wrapping
- On the left, the interior of an Elizabeth Arden scanned cosmetic set casing; on the right, the site of a demolished ancient Buddha, and the “Aura” water bottle again
- A cluster of satellite dishes on a rooftop, looking left and up
- A cluster of satellite dishes at an apartment complex. The only clear part of the vinyl pocket is blue
- Some cleaning spray on a scanner bed
- Craft supply catalog (several)
- U-Line catalog (several)
- Junk mail (many)
- Shiny sticky paper in several colors
- A friend’s grandmother’s perfume collection, just as she left it, in a mirrored bathroom.
- The inside-outside portal in the ceiling of the In n’ Out
- A woman’s hand, aging, from a plastic surgery ad
- The inside of my eyeballs

A cohesive relationship between the pictures could be inferred, but this is not a list of clues; there isn’t an over-riding theme or structure to the selection. The sequence was

ordered to provide the maximum amount of variety for the viewer as a tactic to prevent boredom in looking. They are simply images that contained an inherent draw: they had some small force within themselves that was appealing.

There is a premise in that the content is subservient to the structure, so it could be said that the images themselves are irrelevant. Yet I made many decisions and labored over them non-specifically, working until they felt “right.” If I were forced to articulate a process for how I approach the taking and making of photos, I would say: blindly, in pieces, with faith that I can alter whatever I want to fit my vision in post-production—a backwards-facing vision. “What is progress?” An angel facing backwards watching the destruction of time...¹⁰

— — —

I’ve been talking about the image as a cul-de-sac, a space that can be looked at but not transcended, that one must turn around and repeat their experience with over and over. It doesn’t go anywhere. The poster rack is like that: it starts, ends, then starts again. Each image comes with the expectation of being followed by another so there is constant sense of restlessness, of moving through. I thought, and one time, to make it a “choose your own adventure” with a separate list of page numbers for different visual journeys. As it is, the viewer can still choose, but a list would have been too proscriptive. Ultimately they can look at what they want to look at, and that image will be their memory of the piece.

The poster rack is essentially a giant book. One could argue that I should have installed a flat-screen with a slideshow playing on it with a big remote control to flip through, and then pause on images, as in the television show *Black Mirror*, which

depicts a future dystopia, where people make a swiping hand movement to look through virtual images projected onto their corneas. They swipe, open-palmed, to the left or right, to choose what they are looking at, in a totally disembodied fugue. Though I imagined it a digital version, I never considered it, because everything here hinges on physicality: remembering and re-finding images in actual time and space is simply more satisfying.

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In a sideways trajectory of thought related to addiction and desire, my mother often brings up an old science fiction novel she read about a future where every citizen's duty is to consume as much as possible. In this society, no one is allowed to hold on to anything. Possessions must be constantly replaced with new versions of themselves. The most successful citizen-consumer of this world has built a fortress with an enormous conveyor belt of products going in and out at all hours. When the speed at which he consumes surpasses the rate of production, the government must stop him from destabilizing the entire economy, but they can't penetrate the fortress. Eventually they discover that all of his manic consuming is the result of not being allowed to continue to possess a particular stuffed animal as a child. They make a plan to break into the fortress disguised in a Trojan-horse teddy bear. I'm not sure how the story ends. However, this idea of a place where acquisition, not ownership—is desired is compelling: to want only the wanting but not the having. William Leiss, in his essay *The Limits of Satisfaction*, describes a similar kind of wanting: "The realm of needs becomes identical with the range of possible objects, while the nature of the object itself becomes largely a psychological state of those who desire it."¹¹The object of desire becomes

a projection of internal inadequacies which parallels the previously mentioned adage that desire is the source of all misery; in a Buddhist sense, the cycle of wanting things and being dissatisfied by them is an egoic trap. The equivalence of material wealth and success in our society leads people to believe that if they attain wealth, they will attain satisfaction; when that satisfaction doesn't manifest they question not the inadequacy of the system itself but their own failure to feel correctly.

In thinking about consumerism, the word "consume" is fascinating because it literally implies that things are swallowed up and made part of an individual's being, when to consume in market terms means to exchange symbolic units of value for a symbolic agreement of ownership. Ownership in action implies some physical closeness to the thing: one may only need to be adjacent to an object to "consume" it in the aura of possession. This aura of possession is vital even if the object itself is mass-produced and not unique. Experientially, I believe this to be so. If that were not the case, no one would collect the possessions of celebrities or even of loved ones.

If a person's status in society is dependent on what they particularly consume,¹² then identity depends on one's ability to compose a whole self-image from an array of commodities.¹³ Looking at and choosing objects to purchase implies a kind of merging with the object. So when one is shopping, or even "just looking," one is also selecting an identity. That makes it necessary for the identity to be in a state of flux when the selection is taking place—a state of near-hypnotic malleability. This fracturing of the persona is the particular psychological state I am referencing in my artwork that relates to mindfulness—the state of being lost in the space of selection.¹⁴

Ideally, the viewer will experience this mental state while the sound piece from the rear of the gallery washes over them, oceanic and without horizons. The sound is dense but if it is allowed to recede also has a quality of nothingness, of no content, representing only background music in the broadest sense.

The installation consists of five radios transmitting a signal delayed in time consecutively; 0s, 1s, 2s, 3s, 4s. The radios are playing a modified version of the Whitney Houston song “And I Will Always Love You.” Her melismatic notes pull time out of vowels, amplified by the looped delay. The chorus is made to last an hour but experientially it seemingly lasts forever. The elongated form is a play on the “always” of the song that stubbornly resists laws of universal impermanence (nothing lasts forever). A round is formed; it is both a structural piece and an emotional one.

The back room has been filled with acoustic panels set up in a vaguely sacred arrangement—like organ pipes towering over and surrounding a church altar. Any similarity the semi-circle of sound absorbing monoliths has to minimalist sculpture is coincidental; they were designed provisionally, based around the size of rock wool acoustic material. Tall in the way that a parent is taller than a child, they have a bodily presence and are shaded in different grays. They look like they should emit sound or perform some kind of positive function, but their purpose is to instead absorb the sound from the radios so it doesn’t travel to the front of the space.

Music is very manipulative. As it is presently fashionable to mix art and neuroscience, I recently attended a lecture at UCI about how sound waves affect brainwaves, how an up-tempo beat can make a person energized and a down-tempo

beat can cause depression. Outside of any cultural conditioning to associate certain sounds with certain feelings, this effect persists, not a choice of free will but rather a command from the body to the mind.

In contemporary sound design, the premise is to remove all natural sounds (echoes, reverberations) and replace them with other sounds at will.¹⁵ Effectually this is a divorce of space from sound—the two become discrete elements. On another level I suspect this adds to the subtly disconcerting feeling of a totally designed environment—when the information you are receiving with your eyes is contradictory to what you are receiving from your ears.

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The first piece you see in the show, and the last I am going to describe, is a sign in the entrance way with the show's title "Shapes for the Deep Unrest," applied in white letters and then repeated in braille underneath. The title was lifted from a collection of essays on the foibles of modernist architecture.¹⁶ I was attracted to the subject matter because of the claim it about the failure of modernism based on its lack of accommodation for the spiritual needs of humans in spaces (such as windows, high ceilings, and other such frivolities). It is a generic design; the sign was fabricated by a company that makes them for public buildings. The shapes of the letters in braille invite the viewer to feel them; they describe themselves as shapes, interpreting the poetic title in the flattest possible way.

At the left of the gallery entrance is a small object on a plinth. There is an extension cord connected to an AC Converter connected to a miniature power strip connected to a miniature plug that is then wired to a 1.5 inch electric candle with an imitation gold

base. This chain sits on a plinth the length of the cords needed to light the candle. The oversized apparatus needed to light it is the most visible part of the piece; still, it performs like a candle, even though it isn't one. Sacred moments may still appear within a constructed and artificial system.

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These pieces point to different aspects of the experience of mindfulness in the context of being in a flow, when time becomes a particular concentration of energy. They are a response to my contemporary environment, and to living for the past few years in the designed communities of Southern California, realizing the visible world is for the most part created as a *pharmakon*. A *pharmakon*, as I interpret it, is a Platonic term for anything that is designed to augment reality; it's existence is the indicator of a lack, inadvertently drawing attention to what is suppressed (where *does* all this stuff come from, who *don't* you see in this picture). Assisted by speakers and screens, in the contemporary environment there is always something to listen to and there is always something to look at but there are also fissures—a dissonance between what I was meant to be feeling and what is ultimately felt. Whether that failure is the architect's or one's own is negligible.

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When I think of the word dissonance I have a memory of my family's two VCR's (Betamax and PAL/NTSC), each with a flashing red digital clock. The clocks pulsed every half second and went in and out of sync with one another. At times they were harmonious and at times they were not.

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Whitney Houston's song was used without access to copyright, and I'm not sure if it could be shown in a setting outside of academia. Ideally, it would be permanently installed in what I imagine to be a non-denominational feelings chapel in a public space. Non-denominational feelings chapels don't exist but probably should—a location outside of art, religion, politics, and commerce. I feel no compunction about using the record company's holdings but there is some insecurity around using a real person's voice as an art material. A voice is produced by a unique human body and a recording of that voice can persist after the body is gone. Like a photograph but much more intimate, the voice comes from inside the body as an excretion of air through vocal cords while a photograph of a person is merely the light reflected from the surface of their skin. It is a simple excuse to say that a celebrity in some way made a deal to become public property, at least in terms of their image and identity, but the idea of celebrity is still attached to someone real who cannot be known.

The intent was to take something that had been made into an accompaniment for commerce and to re-situate it in a transcendental context. When asked why I didn't use the Dolly Parton version of the song, I answered that they are not the same thing at all: the Dolly version wasn't a huge, overplayed hit, and it's also not half as haunting.¹⁷ This artwork is a test of what it would be like to really wallow in this music, to make a place to just feel one thing in continuity and in opposition to all laws of impermanence—songs do end and feelings do fade.

I used human images and sounds in an artwork from 2016: in the dual-channel video, two hired psychics stare into a camera behind an projected live image of each other (the mirror device used is called an "interrotron") and tried to guess what number

the other was thinking. They demonstrated a struggle to perform being psychic, an internal action that is invisible and also non-existent. The video was meant to incite an emotional projection between the viewer and the image; the psychics made eye contact through the camera and strained to read each other's minds. Interestingly, a person can be called a psychic if they declare themselves to be one; this same convention also applies to artists.

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To get to the point of this whole project, all of this work: it's something about parallel universes, that all moments can exist simultaneously, forever, in images and sound. It's about phasing in and out of irritation when being forced to feel something and then succumbing to that feeling (dissonant feelings), of maybe not having free will at all. And lastly, it's about withholding judgment on the world as it is, in the present moment.

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Meditation is a healthy thing, everyone knows that, but it is also not a thing. It is something you can pay to learn how to do, or something you can do for free, and you won't ever know if you've learnt it, except at some point you will just say that you have. It's also a sort of status symbol of maturity or enlightenment. There is an association of waiting, mulling over, or sitting on something, "I'll meditate on that and get back to you," which is synonymous maybe with focusing but definitely not meditating. Really, you are not supposed to be thinking, you're meant to repeatedly come to the awareness that you are still thinking and non-judgementally stop yourself from that thinking over and

over again. The goal is to become a non-person, a mindful non-person, who is sitting and concentrating on the act of doing nothing. Doing nothing is the final most perfect act. Doing nothing and feeling change.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Trungpa, "The Development of Ego," 121
- 2 Trungpa, "How Does Desire Lead to Birth," 199-200
- 3 Pearl, "RIP Body Actualized Center, Bushwick's New Age Hot Mess"
- 4 Groys, *In the Flow*, 6
- 5 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 61
- 6 Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, 16
- 7 Stereyl, "In Defense of the Poor Image"
- 8 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 90-94
- 9 Groys, *In the Flow*, 116
- 10 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257-258
- 11 Leiss, *The Limits to Satisfaction: an Essay on the Problem of Needs and Commodities*, 98
- 12 Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 201
- 13 Leiss, *The Limits to Satisfaction: an Essay on the Problem of Needs and Commodities*, 25
- 14 Crawford, "The World in a Shopping Mall," 14
- 15 Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*, 2
- 16 Culmsee, "Shapes for the Deep Unrest: Three Essays: the Radiant Apex, Wright and His Helix, Mold of Fire
- 16 Rischar, "A Vision of Love: An Etiquette of Vocal Ornamentation in African-American Popular Ballads of the Early 1990s," 419-421

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