

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

*A Kind of Souvenir*

Morgan Rose Free

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts, School of Art and Design  
Division of Sculpture/Dimensional Studies  
New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University  
Alfred, New York

2017

---

Morgan Rose Free, MFA

---

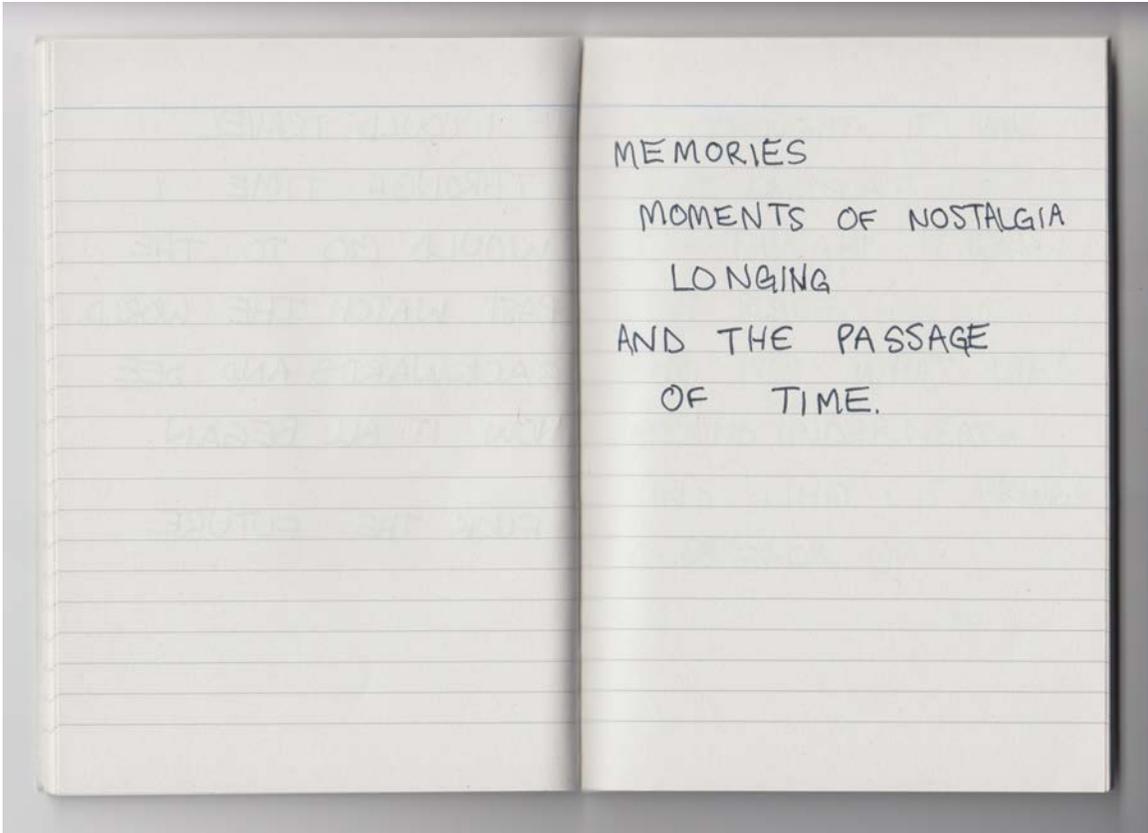
Angus Powers, Thesis Advisor

---

Diane Cox, Thesis Advisor

## Table of Contents

MEMORIES MOMENTS OF NOSTALGIA LONGING AND THE PASSAGE OF TIME	3
DO NOT FORGET THE SMELL OF THIS PLACE	4
I THOUGHT IT WAS ABOUT LANDSCAPE. I THOUGHT IT WAS ABOUT PLACE. BUT ITS WHAT LIES UNDERNEATH AND WHAT IT BRINGS BACK UP	6
LONGING FOR LONGING FOR LONGING FOR LONGING FOR LONGING	8
SEEK OUT PROFOUND MOMENTS HIDDEN IN THE MUNDANE AND PROLONG THEM. KEEP THEM	10
WHY IS IT AT THIS TIME OF NIGHT THAT MY BRAIN WORKS THE BEST?	13
ROSY RETROSPECTION (IS A GREAT TERM I FOUND ON THE INTERNET)	16
THROUGH MOST MODES OF TRANSPORTATION YOU ARE GOING SOMEWHERE WHILE SITTING PERFECTLY STILL.	19
SEE WHATEVER YOU'RE LOOKING AT BUT ALSO FEEL THE WAY YOU'RE SEEING	22
ITS ABOUT RECLAIMING SOMETHING THATS LOST AND SQUEEZING IT SO FUCKING TIGHT THAT IT BREAKS AGAIN	24
ENDNOTES	25



MEMORIES

MOMENTS OF NOSTALGIA

LONGING

AND THE PASSAGE

OF TIME.

I make art to attempt to fill a void.

To feed an insatiable hunger.

I forever want.

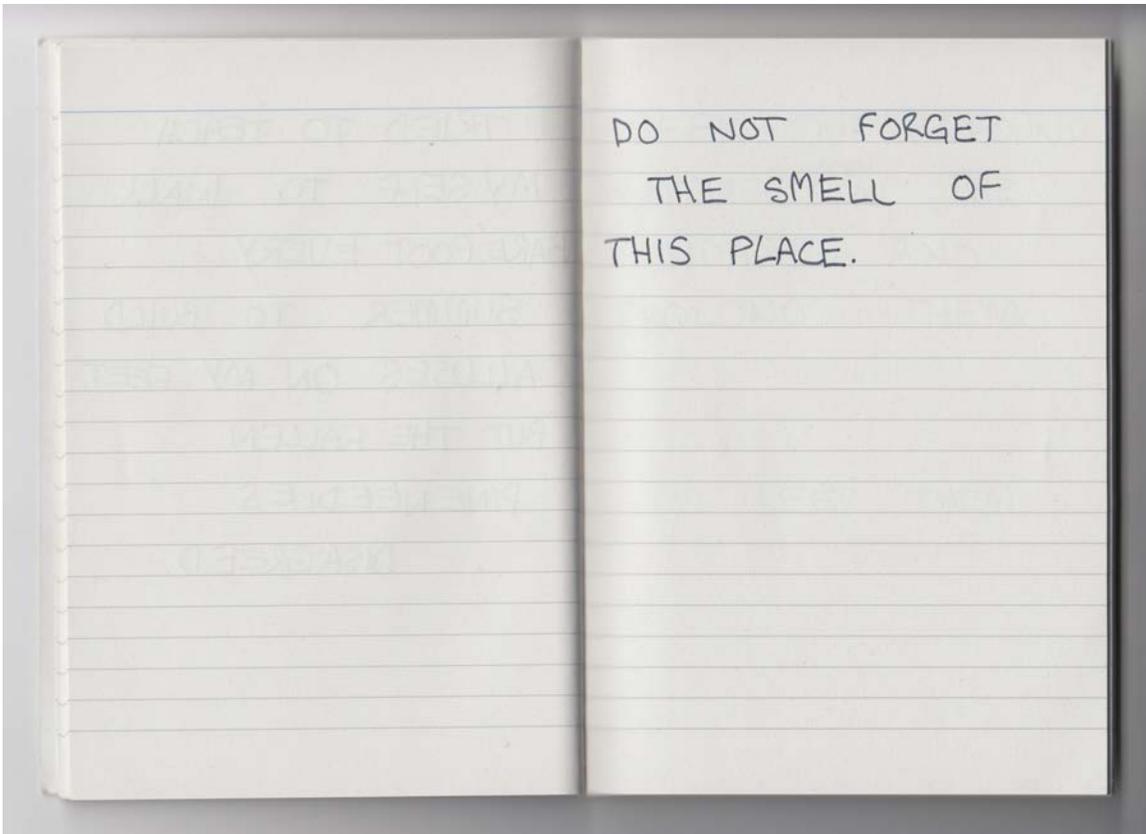
I can't stop.

Nothing satisfies.

It's about creating something that I can't have.

Something that can't exist.

A perpetual chase after an impossibility.



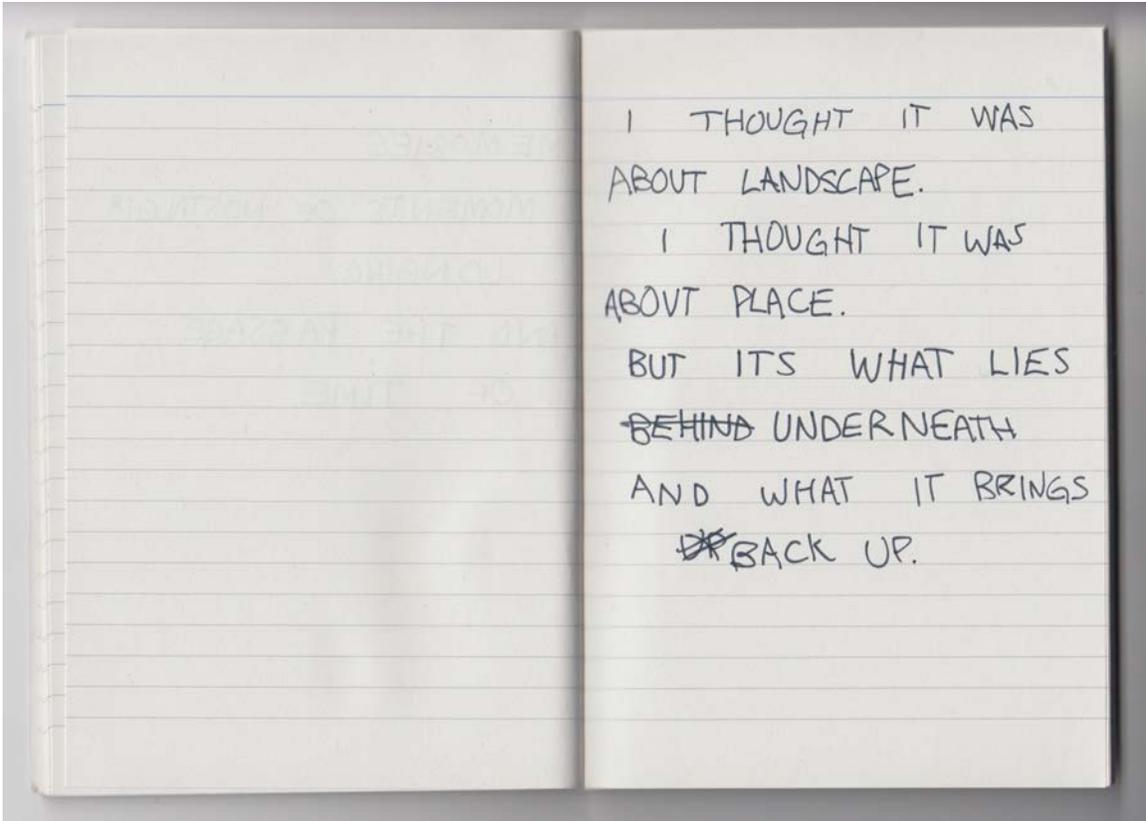
I have always been fixated on how nature and wilderness intersect with contemporary culture. Human beings are of the Earth, we are mammals derived from nature; yet we are so far removed from it. Nature is that wild thing that's so hard to define. Today it is innately considered to be separate from us, separate from the culture we've amassed, separate from our day to day lived experiences. It is something outside of human control, simultaneously precious and dangerous, beautiful and frightening. We fill our apartments with exotic plants, we mount landscape paintings on our walls, we take weekend drives to the mountains, to the lake, to the forest, to the beach, and post our experiences on social media. This is how we attempt to remain connected to the natural

landscape. The broad scope of my practice revolves around this distance, both physical and psychological; how nature creeps into our lives, and how we in turn influence what is perceived as natural place.

One of the ways this has manifested in my work, is through a preoccupation with nostalgia, with memory, and with the idea of a pure and utopic experience within the natural world; with wanting to capture an experience with wilderness and prolong it. I yearn for a space in which to re-experience, reimagine, revisit and re-create a place or a memory of a place.

In his book *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Robert Pogue Harrison defines nostalgia as ambivalent: “it cannot but evoke the condition it laments, and by the same token it cannot but present its lost paradise as anything but imaginary, inaccessible, or unreal.”<sup>1</sup> As in this discord between factual events and memories of them, my work can only be artificial, a mere effort to suspend a sentimental past in the present moment.

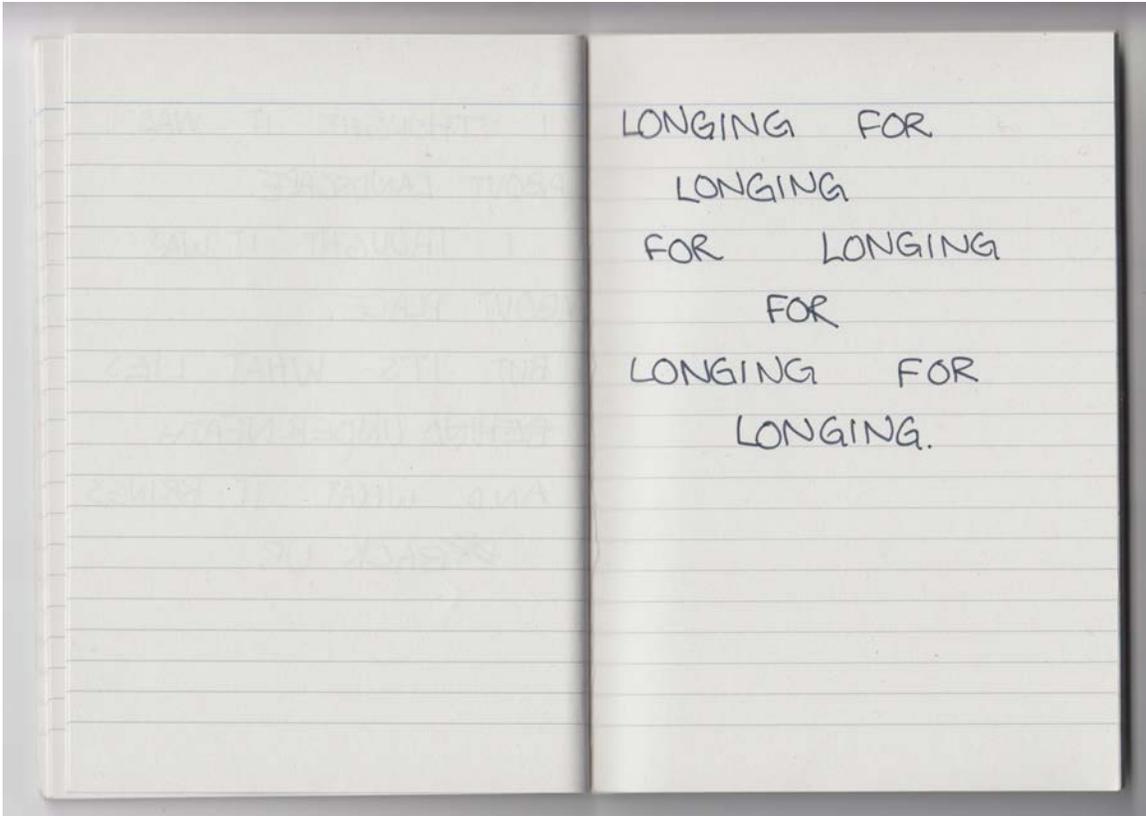
That is to say, to re-create a memory is an impossibility. Therefore the result must be fictitious and its status as a substitution for lived experience is ultimately punctuated. However, I believe this endeavor holds validity. Attempting to hold on to a memory, to retrieve and revive it, demonstrates the significance of the experience.



When living in a city the craving for nature is overwhelming and overly romantic. I romanticize the wilderness, the forest, the mountains, the seclusion, the adventure, the far and the free. I dream of a closeness to nature, a relationship with it, a pure and true experience of it. Yet when living more rurally, as I do in Alfred, New York, I crave the city more than ever; often taking weekend trips to Toronto or Montreal. In this way, it seems to be true that the grass *is* always greener on the other side of the fence, and I want to have it all. I want to straddle that fence with a leg on each side and let the grass grow so tall that its blades brush against the bare soles of both my feet. I want to pitch a tent in the living room. I want to smell the fresh mountain air from my apartment balcony. I want my favorite local coffee shop in the middle of the forest. I want to feel the

sand under my feet as I ride the subway. I want to sit on the couch around a campfire. I want one to be the other and the other to be the first thing. I want to have my cake and eat it too; in my apartment, on top of a mountain, close to the subway, on the edge of the lake, right downtown.

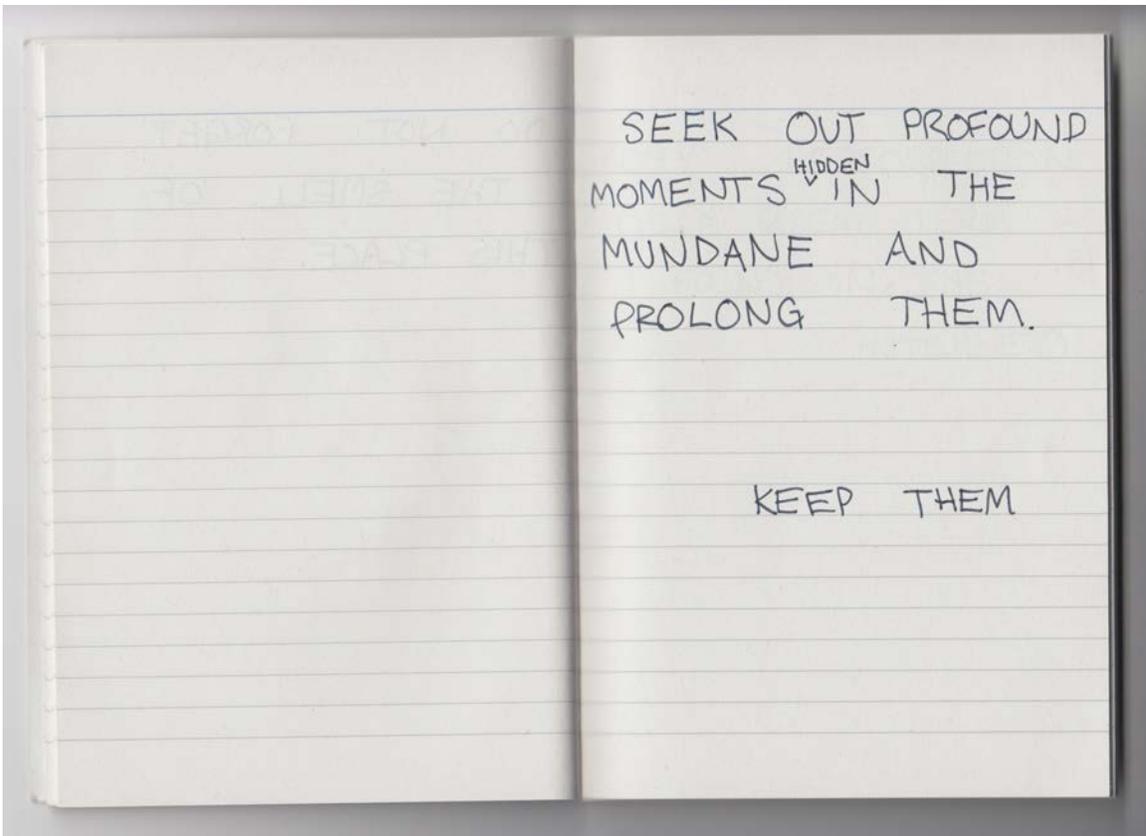
After taking a long hard look at all of this wanting, I have come to realize that this fence can never be knocked down. Even if I could at least sit on it, the grass would never grow at the same rate at the same time. In the end, the two lawns are equally green, although perhaps different shades. That is to say, that although we are children of nature, we are also citizens of the city, and to dwell in both is unattainable. But perhaps it is not about having to choose, perhaps that feeling of longing is not about the fence at all or what lies on either side of it, and the physical place is not important. Perhaps it is the feeling of desire itself that is left desired.



Insatiable desire is a product of the society in which we live. We are constantly bombarded with images of stuff we “need”. We are taught as children to want the latest toy, yet once we get it the next one comes out and the cycle continues. And now, with a new iPhone released every year, Christmas displays cropping up as early as September, and fashion trends lasting only weeks, this cycle is perpetuated into adulthood.

On display in her house, my mother keeps a Mother’s Day card I made for her in Kindergarten, a heart shaped pink paper sitting in a frame on the wall. Glued onto its backside lies a typed list of each child’s opinion on *Why Moms are Great*. A surprising amount of the students wrote “Because they buy you stuff.” Reading the card recently, I was shocked to discover I was one of them.

It's difficult to articulate the emotion behind desire. It's an earnest excitement, a craving for satisfaction, a rush and a seduction of conviction. While nature and wilderness remain fundamental undercurrents in my practice, to analyze this wanting itself has become my focus. My work has become concerned with time and place, exploring the longing for a time that has passed or a place from memory. And perhaps it is the chase, the mere attempt to feed the hunger that satisfies.



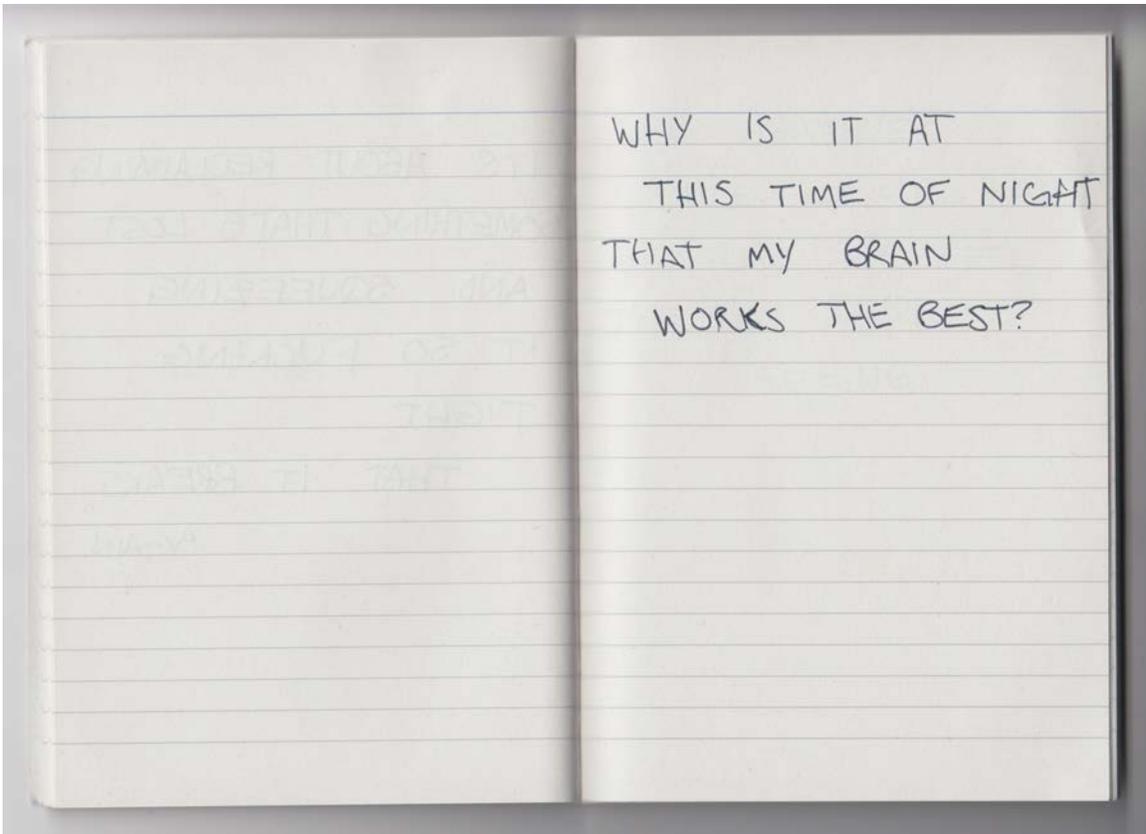
For the majority of human history, to document an event, one had to interpret it through the physical means of drawing or painting. Within the last 150 years, with the emergence of photography, one can distill an event into a single image in real time, first through film and now through digital means. Later still, an event could be captured through moving image, and in time came the addition of sound, followed by color, and digital technology has provided almost endless opportunity for advancement in the medium. As technology continues to progress, it becomes easier and easier for the average person to document every moment of their life.

Yet there are still experiences that cannot be accurately recorded. Even in this technological age, there are experiences which we cannot fully capture or re-create. There are emotions we cannot recover, thoughts we cannot recall, smells we cannot restore. In *Places of the Heart: The Psychogeography of Everyday Life*, author Collin Ellard describes the property of parallax: the way in which an object appears differently when viewed from different angles. Ellard describes how when screen based views of scenic landscapes are placed in windowless buildings, they only have a minor positive effect on the human psyche. Since our current screen technology lacks the property of parallax, it is easy to discern that they are not in fact real windows.<sup>2</sup> Thus, a mere image of a thing is often not enough to evoke an emotional or psychological response and in turn, viewing an image alone cannot trigger the full narrative of an experience. Perhaps we can never re-experience a full event, for the only solution is time travel. But there is something to be said in attempting to harness a moment. The effort shows attention to the everyday's transformative potential, proving that the experience is worth remembering, analyzing, and revisiting.

As in the famous Proustian moment, I aim to make a memory reappear. For Marcel Proust, the taste of a tea soaked *petite madeleine* brought surging back a specific memory of his Aunt Léonie, which effectively lead to the recapturing of many more memories of his childhood village of Combray. Simply laying eyes on the madeleines conjured no memories for Proust, they revealed themselves to him only through a physical and visceral experience.

“The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it; perhaps because I had so often seen such things in the meantime, without tasting them, on the trays in pastry-cooks’ windows, that their image had dissociated itself from those Combray days to take its place among others more recent; perhaps because, of those memories so long abandoned and put out of mind, nothing now survived, everything was scattered; the shapes of things, including that of the little scallop-shell of pastry, were either obliterated or had been so long dormant as to have lost the power of expansion which would have allowed them to resume their place in my consciousness.”<sup>3</sup>

In my work I aim to go beyond a visual experience— encompassing, engulfing; something to encounter through multiple senses, something to be inside of, to touch, to listen to, to interact with. Like the madeleine, each work in *A Kind Of Souvenir* focuses on prolonging a moment where a photograph or video does not suffice in its place, and cannot fully express the emotion behind a memory. I aim to pinpoint one instant, one moment longed for, a moment where desire is at its height, and keep it; bask in its splendor. And from there the memories can unfold and reveal themselves.



*Thoughts Prior To Dreaming* is a notebook of short poems I've been writing for several months. Each of the poems is written at night prior to sleep, as soon as each thought occurs. I have trouble sleeping, finding that as soon as I turn off the lights, (and the laptop) my brain starts buzzing. This time of night, thoughts and ideas stream through my mind, and the only way to quiet them is to expel them onto paper. When paging back through the notebook, I feel as though each thought is profound and special, while the reality is that the writing happens in a moment of frustration where I desperately want to fall asleep.

*Thoughts Prior To Dreaming* has been the foundation for this body of work. The section headings of this paper are pulled from the notebook, and many

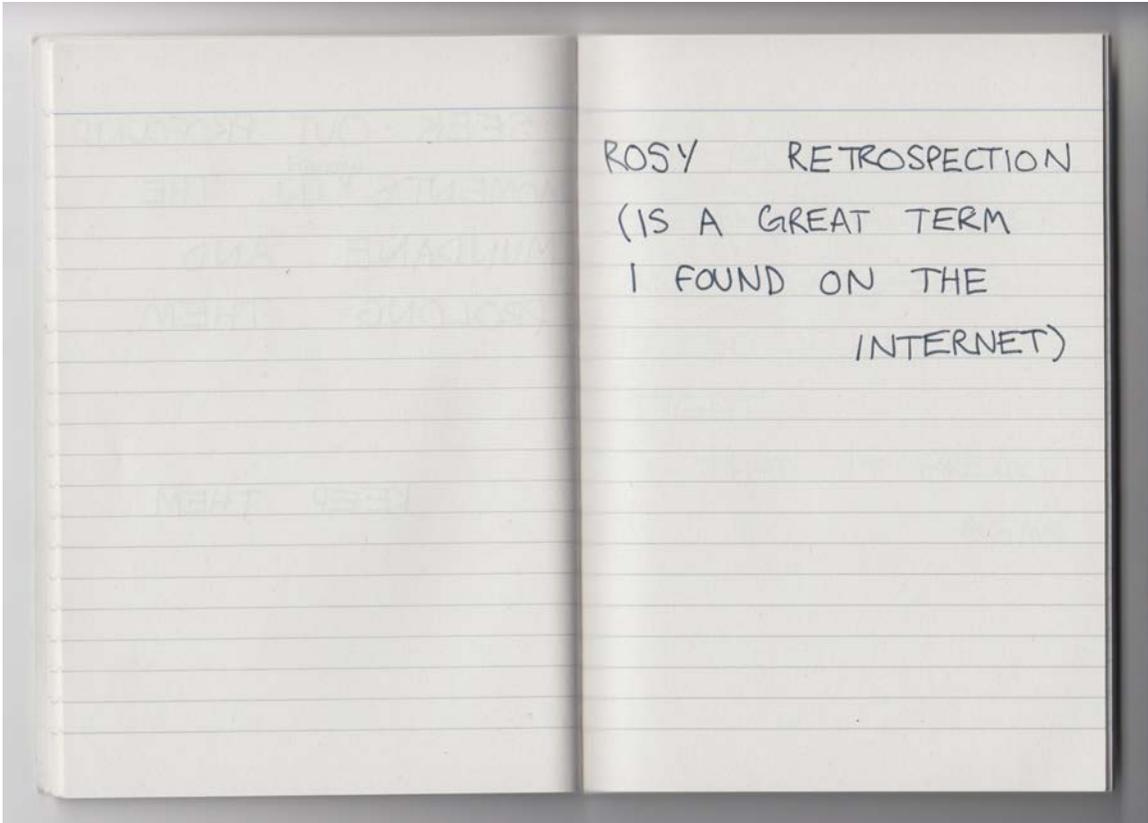
of the works in *A Kind Of Souvenir* were born through the process of writing these poems.

In *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart writes that “The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia. The souvenir generates a narrative which reaches only ‘behind’, spiraling in a continually inward movement rather than outward toward the future.”<sup>4</sup> To me, souvenirs are not just cheap trinkets bought at tourist destinations, but can be any object which functions as a symbol of memory.

*Thoughts Prior To Dreaming* functions for me as such a symbol; a sentimental object. And so, I have chosen to share it with my audience. For *A Kind of Souvenir*, three hundred zine versions of *Thoughts Prior To Dreaming* are given away to the public, which viewers can possess as their own souvenir.

Each zine is adorned with a mirrored mylar cover and the spine is sewn with silver thread. The mylar is delicate and scratches easily; therefore, the more the book is handled, the less reflective its cover becomes. This is meant to reflect the way in which memories fade and become less clear over time; faces are forgotten and details become nebulous. Because each poem is meant to stand alone as a separate thought rather than function together as a linear narrative, each page of the zine is separated with a sheet of semi-translucent velum, creating a nuanced barrier between each moment. The zines are meant to function as individual sentimental objects, rather than the mass produced

replicas of vacation-spot gift shops. Twenty at a time sit on a table within the gallery, and as the pile diminishes, they are restocked. The original *Thoughts Prior To Dreaming* contains thirty-two poems, while each zine version contains four randomly selected. In this way, each version of *Thoughts Prior To Dreaming* is unique, and each viewer takes home a special hand made object.



Imagine a particularly lovely sunset. Close your eyes for a moment and conjure it in your mind. I'll wait...

The light is getting low, the sky is starting to change color, it's the perfect mix of cloud and sky; enough cloud to embrace the potency of color, but enough sky that the sun is able to gaze through. It's yellow and it's orange, it's bright and it's breathtaking. As the sun dips a little lower, everything around you turns golden pink. Not just the sky, but the pavement, the buildings, your hands, everything. It's even better in the winter, the whole landscape turns rose gold as the snow picks it up and it shimmers and shines. But this glorious landscape only lasts a few minutes, and then it's over, then it's gone.

*Rosy Retrospection* is my attempt to prolong that moment, to harness it, to keep it. A space created in order to be inside of that moment again and revel in it, to drudge it back up from the past and immortalize it in the present. A sudden appearance of a time that had been lost has now been regained.

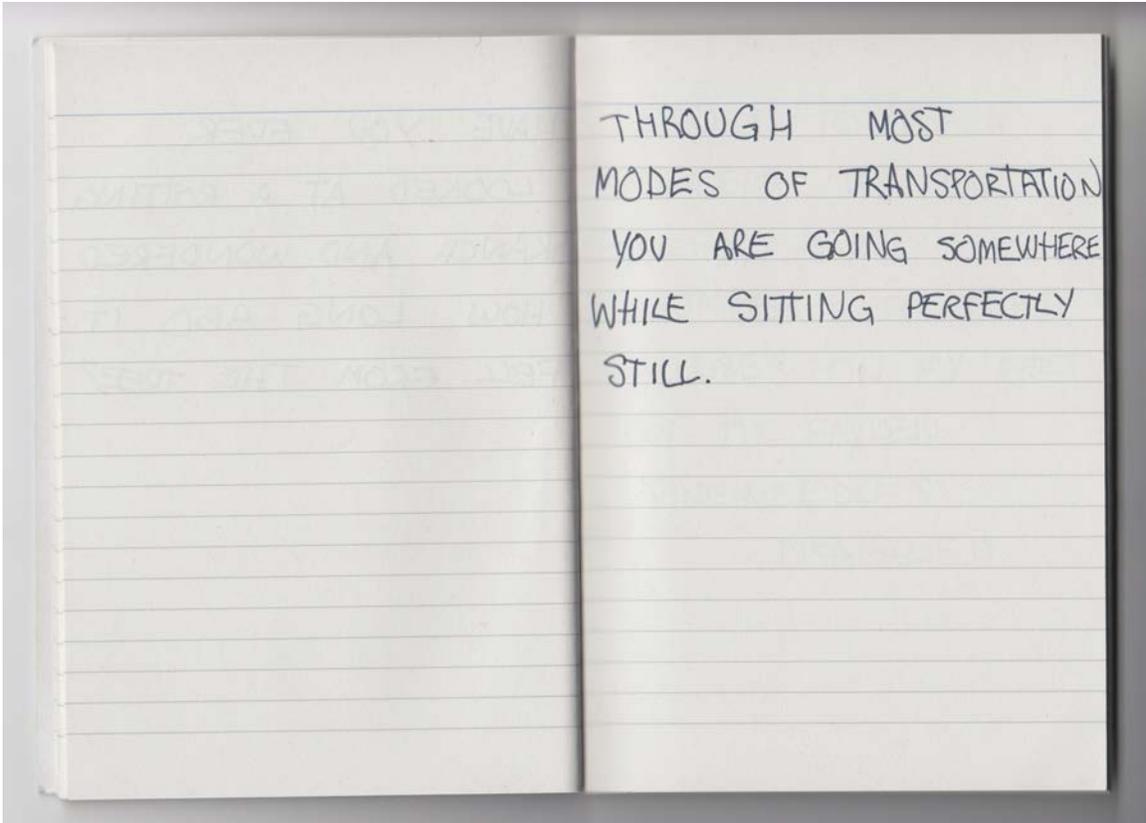
Although a photograph of a sunset such as this holds its own beauty and transformative potential, it is not the same as being there. Within the borders of the frame of an image, one cannot capture the full extent of this fleeting and immersive moment. And as in that moment of being there, *Rosy Retrospection* begs you to become actively engaged, to be immersed within it. To round the corner into this prism of light and to step inside of it, is to once again be consumed into the rose gold moment.

The golden pink light emits from the ceiling above, reflecting against white canvas walls and your clothes and your skin, consuming you. There is only enough room for one or two people, allowing you to have a private moment within, but also making you aware that you cannot possibly stay for long, emphasizing the transience of such a rose gold moment.

The embroidered image on canvas walls is also white, the shadow cast by the light draws your attention to it. The image depicts an impossible landscape, mountains give birth to skyscrapers, streetlight posts jut out from the terrain. In the middle-ground a highway runs through, surrounded by wind turbines and a pump-jack. In the foreground sits a couple, drinking beers and looking out on the landscape.

This image is collaged from photographs I have taken in places that are important to me, from memories that I miss. For example, the couple are friends of mine, and this photo of them was taken while drinking beers on the bank of the Elbow River in Lindsay Park, Calgary, Alberta. This was a tradition of ours every summer, and since this photo was taken, we've all moved away. The chances of the three of us sitting in that spot together again have become very slim.

In thinking further about these memories and this rosy gold light, I became interested in the common idiom "seeing through rose-colored glasses." *Rosy Retrospection* is term in cognitive psychology relating to evaluation and biases of memory: "the tendency for people to remember and recollect events they experience more fondly and positively than they evaluated them to be at the time of their occurrence."<sup>5</sup> In this way, I think of the embroidery as embodying the bitter pleasure of nostalgia channelled through the sensorial experience of an ephemeral moment, one of this particular kind of sunset.



When snow drifts across the highway, when it creates those lovely swirls, when it leaps and dances and hovers before you, it is only visible for just a moment and then it's under you, it's behind you, it's gone. A fleeting instant of beauty. Yet if you could pause it, if you could stop it, it would never have the same effect. The movement of it is essential, to try to capture it in a single frame robs it of its beauty and grace, to bring it to a standstill diminishes its elegance.

*Perfectly Still* consists of a 88" by 104" banner of fabric printed with just that: snow blowing across a road, paused into a single image. It is a screenshot from a low quality video taken with a DashCam, of a drive through the Canadian province of Saskatchewan in December 2016. The tapestry is accompanied by a monitor looping the original video the image was pulled from. The video is of a

very low quality, grainy and pixelated. The tapestry and the monitor sit adjacent to one another on corner walls of the gallery. In front of them sit two benches, one facing the monitor, the other, the tapestry. As a viewer can sit to contemplate each component of *Perfectly Still*, they become aware of what each lacks or brings to light. The video highlights the speed and the movement of the moment, while the tapestry highlights the stillness of your body in space.

This is an example of an intangible, ungraspable thing, evasive and transient. Even at the moment of its occurrence, being there in the car while it's happening, it's so quickly swept underneath and behind, that even in that moment it is out of reach. It is related to time, and to speed, hence the embroidered text:

Through most modes of transportation

You are moving remarkably fast

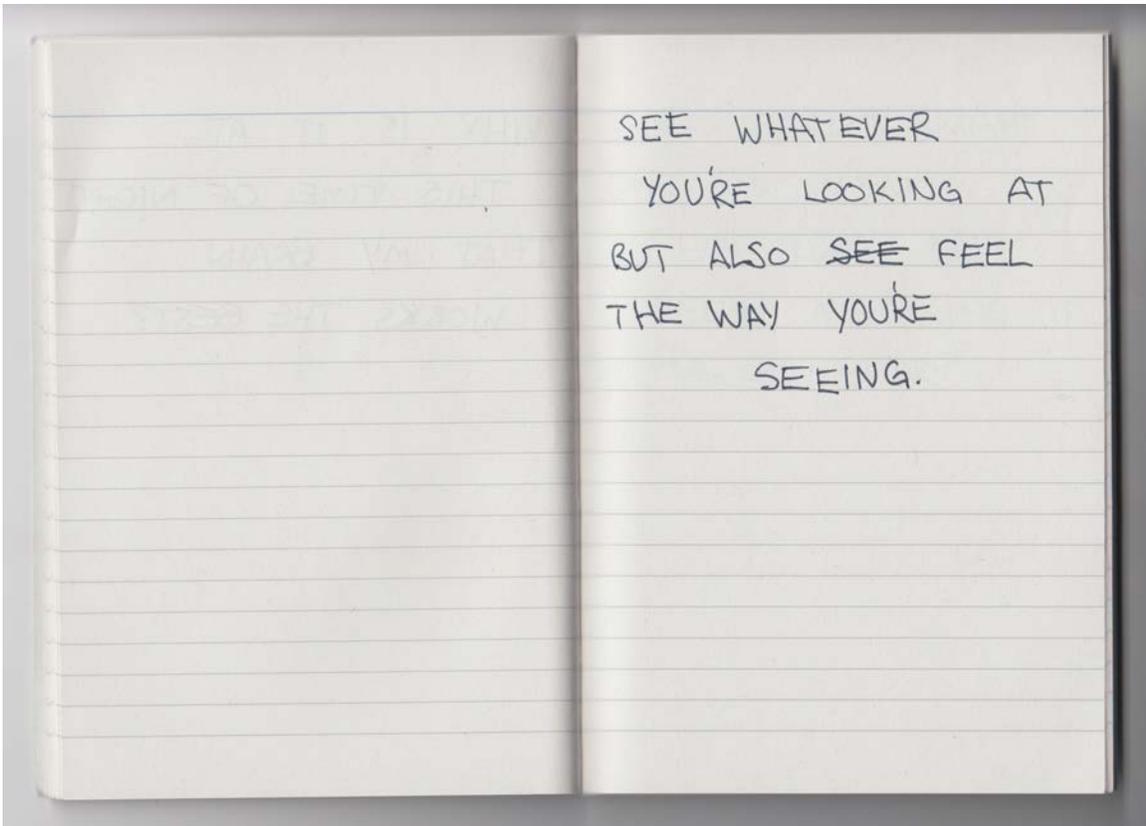
While sitting perfectly still.

On the one hand, it is simply a true statement, the way we travel geographically in contemporary society; by car, by bus, by train, by plane. It is also the way we move through our lives, the way moments and memories pass under us and shoot behind us and at times we can become complacent in the journey. Here the image becomes but a metaphor for something deeper, becoming tangled with a broader notion of life itself, our tendency to move through life without a full appreciation of the beauty hidden in the mundane.

Road trips have long been a part of my identity. As a child this is how my family traveled, driving across Canada, America, Mexico and Australia. For me,

the experience of driving long distances presents a freedom and peace of mind. In *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*, author John Brinckerhoff Jackson notes that “Increasingly, roads are the scene of work and leisure and social intercourse and excitement. Indeed, they have often become for many the last resort for privacy and solitude and contact with nature. Roads no longer merely lead to places; they are places.”<sup>6</sup> Although road trips can be monotonous, they allow the mind to wander and bring the promise of adventure.

Hand embroidery too, is a time consuming endeavor and thus becomes an essential part of *Perfectly Still*. Tedious and demanding great patience and care; to work a needle and thread for long hours allows my mind a similar freedom as that of gripping a steering wheel, with the end result being altogether as satisfying.

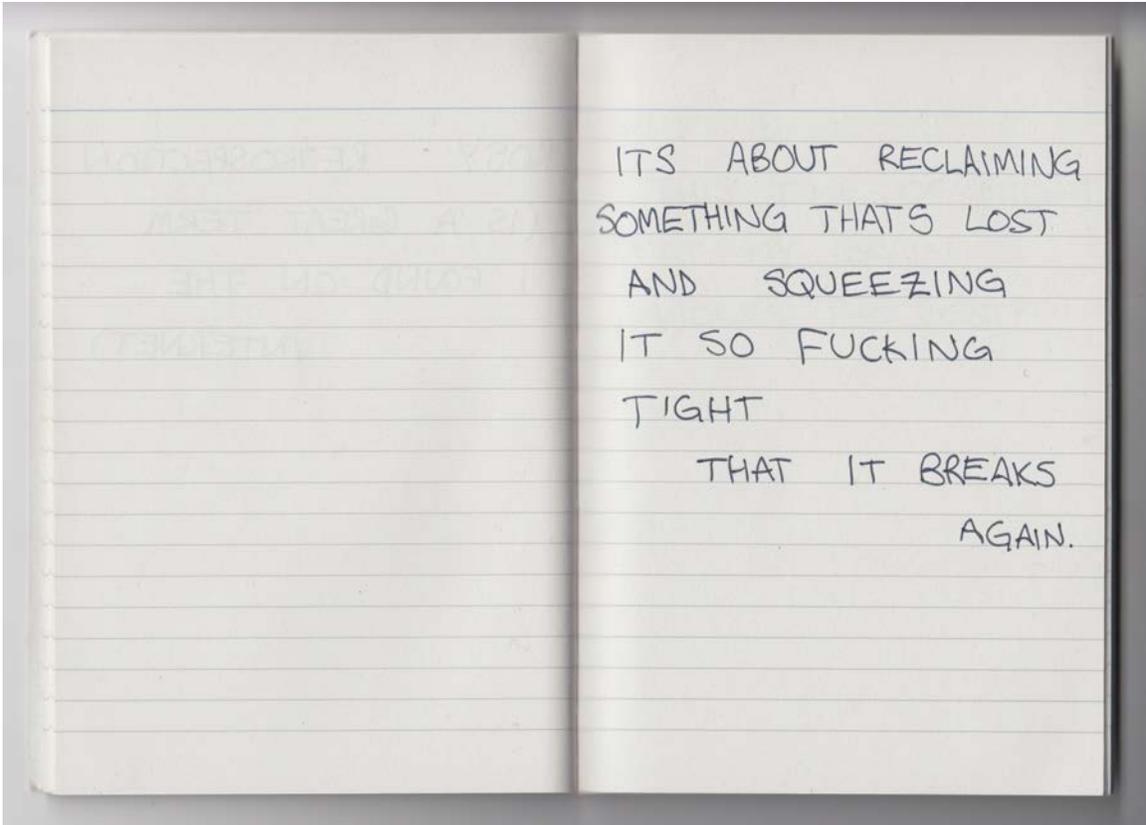


As with Proust's madeleine moment, remembrance can be brought about through physical experience. For Proust, it was close to muscle memory. The long forgotten ritual of gently handling the spongy little cake, dipping it into warm tea and bringing it to his lips, was just as much a part of it as the actual taste. I believe memories reside within the body as much as they do in the mind, and through bodily gestures, moments can be revived.

Take for example, the act of lying in a grassy field and peering up at the clouds. This simple act awakens many fond memories in most of us, like those of lazy summer days from childhood. But to revive this moment, you must now lay down in the middle of a gallery. Although resembling a great grassed hill, *Clouds Inside* is clearly constructed out of plywood and two-by-fours, a wooden ramp

upon the floor. The ramp's surface is covered in a layer of astroturf. Lying on your back, running your hands through blades of artificial grass, you see directly above you a 24" by 48" mirror tilted at a 45° angle towards the wall behind you. Mounted on the wall are two more mirrors, one at the same height as the one above you, with the third mirror a few feet above that. Each mirror is tilted at 45° angles, creating a periscope system leading to a monitor. The video on the monitor is that of clouds slowly moving across the sky in real-time. The monitor is propped directly against the highest mirror, therefore the video can only be seen from your vantage point, lying on the grassy ramp on your back. The adult in you feels vulnerable and hyperaware of your exposed body, but your inner child is excited, curious. The experience allows for individual awareness and reflection. Perhaps you're reminded of a past self, a past moment full of naïveté, ignorant bliss, free from responsibility.

*Clouds Inside* is an obvious re-creation. You're simply looking up through a series of mirrors at a screen playing a video of clouds (a video which lacks parallax I might add). The materials and mechanics of the work are not hidden, the experience is utterly fictional. You are forced to suspend your disbelief. The sensorial experience of lying down, the feel of grass between your fingers and gazing up at the sky; like that of the taste of the madeleine, is enough to take you there.



I am a collector of things. Things which remind me of certain places and people, memories of specific events. I am a collector of souvenirs, choosing to surround myself with objects that provoke nostalgia and memories. Within my practice, it is much same thing. This body of work specifically tries to feed the insatiable hunger of nostalgia. I aim to memorialize unrecoverable moments. In this way, each one of these works can be read to function as *A Kind of Souvenir*.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)156.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Ellard, *Places of the Heart: The Psychogeography of Everyday Life* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2015) 46.

<sup>3</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*. Vol. 1. (New York: Modern Library, 1999) 63.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Stewart, *On longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 135.

<sup>5</sup> Terence R. Mitchell, and Leigh Thompson. "A Theory of Temporal Adjustments of the Evaluation of Events: Rosy Prospection and Rosy Retrospection." *Advances in Managerial Cognition and Organizational Information Processing* 5 (1994) 87.

<sup>6</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 190.