A PLACE FOR MY THINGS

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APPROVAL

A PLACE FOR MY THINGS

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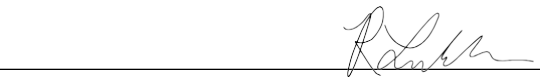
Major Professor



Cameron Schoepp

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dedicated to my ever so supportive family, and to Tony, Gus and Frankie

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A Place for My Things

My thesis show, *A place for my things*, is a reflection on my emotional relationship with place and the investigation of home as an analogy for my mental well-being. I reference my own personal space and furniture as stand-ins for the emotional attributes of a mental space. My practice is process-based, instinctive, and uses non-traditional materials and substrates. The exhibition consists of a series of image-transfer drawings on fabric in which I work on both sides of the material. The fabric is then stretched like a traditional painting, but the translucency of the material allows the structural stretcher bars to remain visible. Some of the work is then embellished with thread as a way to unite layers. The configuration of these drawings defines a psychological atmosphere, describing the introversive qualities of my personality.

My inspiration stems from my emotional relationship with the places I have called home, the impermanence of those places, as well as the lasting impact from the experiences of such places and how it has shaped my sense of identity. This work expands on themes that I have explored throughout my practice such as family dynamics, mental health, and belonging, including my curiosity about the psychological and social factors that shape one's sense of self. This body of work reflects on my relationship with myself and evokes a sense of place to describe those emotions, sensations, memories, and meaningful events that encompass my inner relationship.

Within this paper, the context in which I define the word "place" is a specific, tangible location. I specifically associate home as a stable, dwelling place in relation to a building. Space is created through the inhabitants of a place. It is in this way that I define my personal space as the action of inhabiting my home. Mental, or psychological, space is addressed as an imaginary place, activated by memories and daydreams.

By drawing and sewing into translucent fabric, my work addresses a mental space described as a repository of objects and memories. In this work, I have turned to my home–my belongings and the furnishings of a building–to iconography for a psychological space. Gaston Bachelard was a firm believer that "to gain insight into one's sense of self, a study of the sites one has intimately inhabited is fundamental."[1] He referred to this kind of study in his book, *The Poetics of Space,* as "topoanalysis". When everyone, including myself, was forced into self-isolation due to the pandemic this past year, I became aware of how I uniquely inhabited my own home. My small apartment became a living space, workplace, and a studio all at once. My intimate space became a place for every aspect of my life; personal, professional, social, and psychological. I resonate with Bachelard's understanding of the house as a shelter for daydreaming and the value of a dwelling place. It was this bit of text that turned my subject matter towards my home in order to investigate the daydreaming that occurs therein.

The subjects I draw, and how I choose to draw them, reflect their personal significance. I frequently draw objects like mugs, flowers, chairs, and plants for their affiliation to my home. They are repeating doodles amongst a composition composed of several drawings. In pieces like *Caladiums* (figure 1) or *Lone Star I, II, & III* (figure 2-4), the arrangement of these drawings define a mental space by means of compositional strategies. For example, the installation of *Lone Star I, II, & III* (figure 5) is a triptych of three smaller pieces, each 8" x 10". The flow of each composition creates an implied visual swoop across all three frames. The drawings inhabit the picture plane as well as the edges of the work, temping the viewer to move their body around each frame.

[1] Gaston Bachelard, and M Jolas, *The Poetics of Space*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 30.

The depiction of places like *Bathtub* (figure 6) or *Ceiling Fan* (figure 8) acts as a stand-in for daydreams that take place within that space. This is expressed in the visual accumulation of smaller drawings defining larger objects. For example, along the bottom frame of *Bathtub* (figure 7), the actual tub is suggested as a blue band of smaller drawings. The drawings that define the tub, including the drawings that begin to float above the tub, represent daydreaming. Furniture depicted, like *Wicker Chair* (figure 9), become personified objects. In this piece, the drawing of a wicker chair floats in the middle of the frame, above a shadow of itself and below a cloud that loams over it. It floats between the ground and the sky, within close proximity, but is fixed within the space. The cloud rains small embroidered hearts over and onto the chair (figure 10). In this piece, the chair below the clouds acts as a self-portrait. The drawings in this exhibition and space they inhabit within the fabric call attention to what I really desire in a mental space. They communicate the act of free thinking and confidence, characteristics of my personality that are oftentimes neglected. Collectively, these drawings represent a grounding, restorative quality amongst the chaos of my own anxieties.

These drawings are structured as non-linear, psychological spaces. In an architectural sense, that space is emphasized when the fabric has been stretched over a frame. I think of the space in which the work hangs, between the fabric and the wall, as an active, physical representation of mental space. The translucent cotton fabric, when stretched over a stretcher bar, allows the drawings to wrap around the frame and activate the face, edge, and back of the work. Although the work is visually open and spacious, the drawings feel contained within the frame. Thread has the capability of simultaneously inhabiting that space as well as the surface of the fabric. Drawings that occupy the back of the work are introverted and can only be visible through the outer picture plane. Furthermore, pieces like *Ceiling Fan* (figure 8) use architecture in a pictorial sense to describe a fan on the ceiling and its shadow. The shadow is composed of

several smaller drawings that inhabit the back of work. These drawings create a visual hierarchy of memory, emphasizing the complex emotional layers of information.

The work in the exhibition is quiet, spacious, and non-linear. There is low contrast between the drawings and white of the fabric, especially when drawn on the back. The drawings share an equal amount of open space within each picture plane. This openness is conceptually crucial. I do not consider the bare white of the fabric as negative space compared to positive image. It is, rather, representative of mental clarity. The white of the fabric represents a place to linger, a quality of the mental space I am trying to capture. The translucency of the cotton fabric emphasizes the collapse of time and space. These drawings are non-linear narratives that sooner depict a dream or a memory than the narration of a story.

My process starts from laser-jet printed photographs that I have taken and accumulated over time. I use the photographs as both a reference and a medium in which to draw. This destructive process removes the image from its original context as a means to signify an emotional condition. These photographs depict images of my family home in Indiana, including rooms, furniture, landscaping, plants, but rarely figures. In a past body of work, I have used these images as a way to "paint with the ink" from their photographic surface by dissolving the image onto a new piece of paper with acetone and a brayer. This type of transfer, from printed image to picture plane, results in a muted color palette. The color, now worn from the process, speaks directly to the quality of memory. Traditional drawing tools and techniques are also integrated into the transfer process. Through this process, the transference of gesture and pigment is simultaneously evident. Shifting towards the process of transfer drawing within my thesis work has allowed me to break away from the confines of the photographic image while still using emotionally charged source material.

Drawing feels like a separate language. Similar to writing, it emphasizes an intimacy of expression. My drawings are quick and doodle-like for many reasons, the most practical reasoning being that the solvent, once applied to the paper, dries within seconds. The marks are made in the quick moment of the transfer process. They also take the form of a doodle as a way of veiling personal imagery. On the rare occasion that I introduce text it is either scribbled in, or written on the back of the work to create a barrier to its legibility. Upon close investigation you can find text in the corner of *Split* (plate 11), a drawing cut in half and shown as a diptych. In this piece, the text is only partially visible as the fabric wrapped around the corner hides the rest of the text (plate 12).

Sewing is presented as another kind of drawing. Although drawn with thread, the marks are treated with the same doodle-like aesthetic as the transfer drawings. The width of the thread, and the scale of embroideries, is similar to other drawings found within the work. From a distance, these embroideries read as another transfer drawing. It is the subtle, visual quality of the thread that invites the viewer to be intimate with the work. An example can be found in *A place for my things* (figure 13), which hangs on a freestanding wall in the main area of the gallery. This 4’ x 3’ piece, depicts a large circular coffee table drawn upside down. The shadow cast by the table is an accumulation of several smaller drawings and wraps around the top of the frame. On the table sits a tea cup, a jar, bottles, and cans. All of which are stand-ins for people, or memories for me. About an inch below each bottle’s lip, are small embroidered flowers. Each flower has a stem of orange thread that drapes down the back of the fabric and sits on the bottom, inner-frame (plate 14). Unlike a transfer drawing, the thread exists on the face and back of the picture plane. The upside-down table reinforces the psychological atmosphere. However, the flowers defy the logic of the pictorial gravity by draping down from the same direction as the top

of the bottles. It is in this way that the thread acts as a unifying element to the physical and metaphysical layers of the work.

In opposition to the quickness of the transfer, sewing is a much slower process within my practice. I find the act of sewing to be meditative, even trance-inducing. Through sewing, I can create the "feeling of home" through the act. That feeling is also reinforced in the subject matter I draw. Home is established through many means: cultural, political, spiritual, psychological; all of which are made and remade through our actions. It would be an oversight to not acknowledge in this paper that I am a woman using sewing as an act of visual language. However, I am not using sewing as a productive, domestic act but rather a solitary, meditative one. Drawing with thread represents an act of self-care, being positive and restorative. Not every piece in this exhibition is embellished with thread. This part of my process is not a rule or a formula for the completion of each piece but rather is intuitive and indulgent.

The curation of the exhibition reinforces the conceptual ideas I have laid out in this paper. The curation, wall arrangement and show title resemble the works' aesthetic and concepts. For example, outside the gallery entrance is the exhibition title *A place for my things* written in my handwriting and solvent-transferred directly onto the wall. The color and tone of the transfer immediately references the reused personal photographs used throughout the entire exhibition. The title simultaneously refers to a physical place for my belongings, my furniture, my things as well as a metaphysical place for emotions, and memories.

As you enter the exhibition, the viewer can see two hallways leading around the perimeter of the gallery (plate 18). To the left, a small piece titled *Inside/Outside* (plate 15) is the first piece the viewer is able to see straight on. Despite its presentation as a diptych, this piece reads as two separate works shown close together. Together they express the opposition of introversive and extroversive personality types. The frame to the left is densely populated with

saturated shades of purple marks on the outer surface. Small drawings of bedroom furniture float within the space. The white of the fabric is almost nonexistent. The option to see through the piece is not given to the viewer since every drawing is clearly visible and fills the entire frame.

To the right, a much quieter frame hangs next to this piece. Its dimensions are the same as its sister to the right, however, the marks are only drawn on the back of the fabric. There are areas within the piece, where the pressure from my drawing utensil have pushed the toner through the fibers of the fabric. Regardless of its efforts to squeeze its way to the surface, the drawings are contained inside. The drawings loosely reference my second-story balcony, including my wicker chair, potted flowers and my railing. *Inside/Outside* (figure 15) depicts both an exterior and interior part of my home. The meaning of their pictorial space contradicts the physical space in which they inhabit. The drawings of my bedroom furniture, referencing a private space, are drawn on the outer surface of the fabric in clear visibility for the viewer. Whereas the drawings of my balcony, the most public space of my home, are drawn on the back.

Within the same hallway, *Inside/Outside* (figure 15) is curated in close relation to *Caladiums* (figure 1) which hangs on the opposite wall. In a similar way that *Inside/Outside* (figure 15) uses a clear visual approach in defining oppositional personality types, *Caladiums* (figure 1) uses compositional strategies and thread as a way to define a mental space. This piece is embellished with a drawing in thread of a potted plant found floating in the upper right-handed corner. Upon close inspection, the tails of the thread can be found unknotted and dangling from the inside of the frame. The tails stick out, activating the space behind the fabric. As the first piece created for this exhibition, I found it fitting to curate *Caladiums* (figure 1) in close relation to the last piece created, *Inside/Outside* (figure 15). Both pieces call attention to the space developed within the fabric in different ways.

Turning to the main area of the gallery from the hallway, the space opens to a larger room, similar to the way a hallway leads into a living room. This room calls attention to some of the larger pieces like *Wicker Chair* (figure 9), and *Bathtub* (figure 6), which are now visible from across the gallery. Curated within this room is *Ceiling Fan* (figure 8), *A place for my things* (figure 13) and *Split* (figure 11) which depict domestic furniture. The arrangement of these pieces begins to mimic the depiction of a domestic space (plate 19). Each piece hangs on its own wall within this room, allowing abundant space between them. Similar to the way the white of the fabric operates, the wall space between each piece becomes an active passing moment and encourages the viewer to linger longer with each piece.

The wall placement reinforces the resemblance of a living room by positioning the freestanding walls to simulate another room within the gallery. The main area of the exhibition leads to a long hallway that wraps around the perimeter of the gallery. Rounding the corner of the hallway, the viewer will find a small work titled *Cabinet* (figure 16). This piece, noticeably the quietest in exhibition, exists alone in the corner to amplify its solitude from the rest of the pieces in the show (plate 17). This hallway pushes the viewer closer to work that hangs on the wall, including some of the larger pieces like *Wicker Chair* (figure 9). It is in this way that the viewer is encouraged to be close to the work, with the ability to see subtle details like the incorporation of thread or smaller drawings.

My thesis exhibition marks the end of three years in the Master of Fine Arts program at TCU with a highly personal body of work. Throughout my work, I reference my personal living spaces and furniture as a means to investigate the home as an analogy for my own mental well-being. What I have created is an honest portrayal of myself that is true to my life experiences and aesthetic. Ultimately the work in this exhibition is intimate and personal and encourages the viewer to share in that intimacy.

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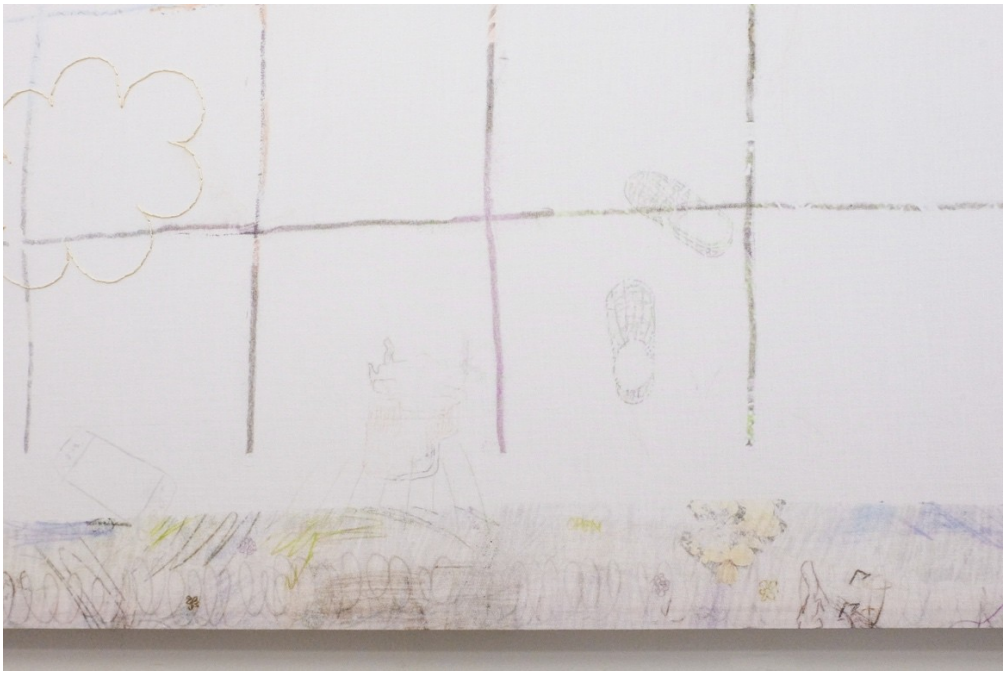

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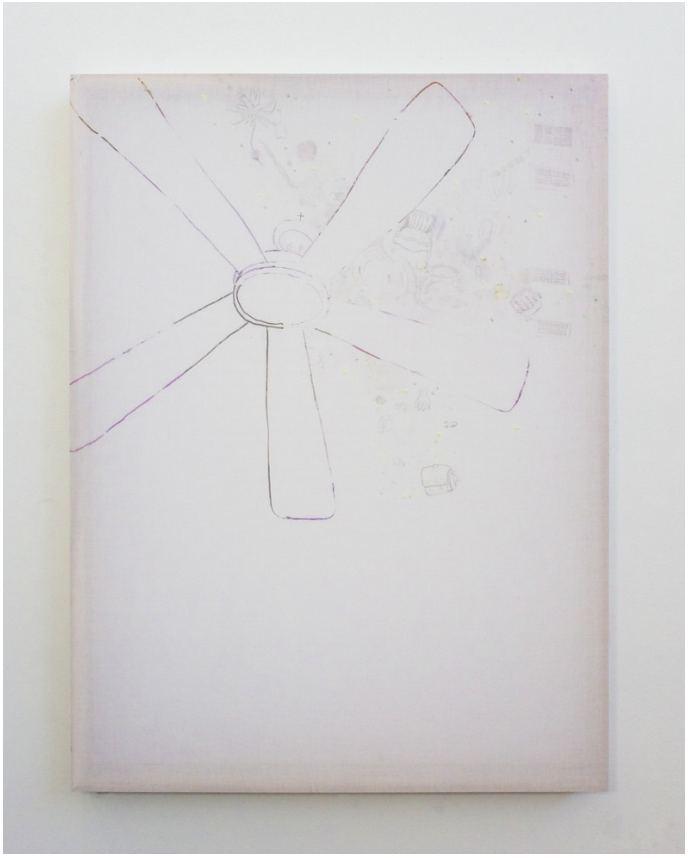

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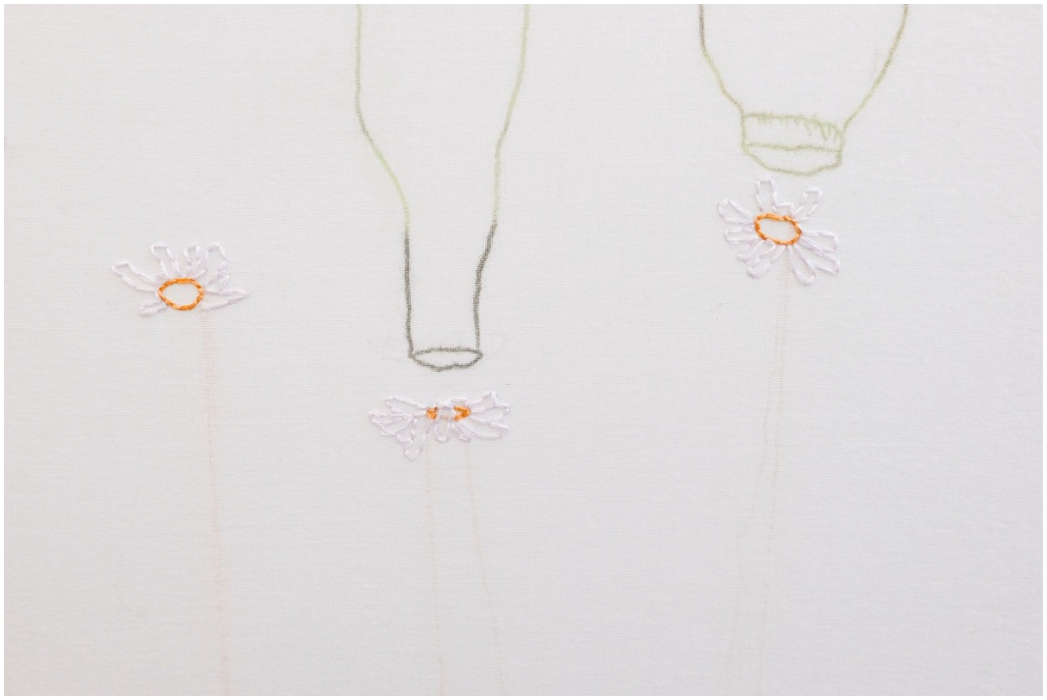

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Figure 18: Entrance of the gallery, Installation shot

Figure 19: Main area of the gallery, Installation shot

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VITA

Ashley Stecenko was born May 23, 1995, in New Brunswick, New Jersey. She is the daughter of Andrea and Victor Stecenko. She graduated from Clay High School in 2013 in South Bend, Indiana, and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting from Herron School of Art and Design in Indianapolis, Indiana in 2017.

In August 2018, Ashley was awarded a Graduate Assistantship from Texas Christian University in Studio Art, with a concentration in Painting. While working towards her Master of Fine Arts degree, she worked in the Galleries at TCU from 2018-2019, as a teaching assistant in Advanced Painting from 2019-2020, and as an instructor of record for Drawing 1 from 2020-2021. In 2020, Ashley had a solo exhibition at Moncrief Cancer Institute and has shown in several group exhibitions since 2018.

ABSTRACT

A PLACE FOR MY THINGS

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Dan Jian, Assistant Professor

A place for my things is an exhibition consisting of a series of image-transfer drawings on fabric. The work revolves around the concept of home, both physically and mentally. In the exhibition, I reference my own personal space and furniture as stand-ins for intimacy, comfort, and solitude. The configuration of these drawings defines a psychological atmosphere, describing the introversive qualities of my personality. Through a process of solvent-based image transfers in which I lift the ink from the surface of photographs onto a translucent fabric, I use drawing and sewing to interpret the house as a body of images and an extension of self.