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Continuing West: 
In Search of the Heroic Landscape

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Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXOTIC BACKDROPS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERSISTENT JOURNEYS</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE FABLED WEST</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

My practice has evolved out of a curiosity about the way in which we depict and relate to the natural world, its various landscapes, and what they mean to us psychologically and collectively. I am interested in how we perceive the notion of Utopia and fictionalize the actuality of place. This stems from my own desires and sentiments that I find myself pursuing again and again, without satisfaction or conclusion. These desires relate to the need to escape, or survive, if only aesthetically in an increasingly unnatural, obnoxious urban setting. I aim to explore our magnetic and ideological relationships to landscape through filmic, sculptural and documentary representations. Specifically, I investigate Western film, my own exploratory filmmaking and the production of mnemonic objects in relation to utopian desire.

I will begin by considering the concept of Utopia initiated by Sir Thomas More in 1516. More's fictional concept was contradictory and problematic, and our understanding of Utopia remains this way, due to its intangible and imaginary foundations. I will also look at Michel Foucault's notion of Heterotopia and Marc Auge's non-place: spaces of otherness, demi-worlds that exist on the edge of reality. I will also explore the legacy of utopian ideas and the mythologization of space in contemporary artists such as Douglas Aitkin, Tacita Dean and Mircea Cantor. These artists consider the stories, objects and images we use to fetishize space, the exoticism of the far off land, and how we react to certain embedded idealizations associated with the tales of heroism that we see in constructed narratives associated with the natural world.

Representation of the environment in fiction and film fetishizes real geographical space in contrast to lived, embodied experience, and the fluid and indifferent nature of space. The natural world in all its forms shatters our distinctions between time

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and space; it is constant space. It unfolds and shifts, remaining unmoved by historical, linear time, museological displays and geographical concepts. Through my own work I aim to develop a shifting conversation between the constructed object of representation and the fluid actuality of open space. I manipulate object relationships in order to amplify the function of the souvenir as a frozen signifier of Utopia and multiply the contingencies associated with the space of travel and migration. Jean Baudrillard's *System of Objects* and *America* offer invaluable insights into the desires and mnemonic values implicit in such objects when they become part of a collection.² Positioning my work on the iconic and classic view on the Utopian American West in relation to these ideas, I will consider the mysterious ability of the object to transform, distort and idealize space.

'Outopia' coming from the Latin for ‘no place,’ was the initial inspiration for my practice of exploring the surrounding landscape as a fictional manifestation; as infinite potential, and a chimerical combination of lived experience. My practice explores landscape as the unwitting protagonist in cyclical fables, myths and legends. This is habitually explored in film especially in Terrence Malick's *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*. With an examination of these films, I will explore the way fiction has fetishized natural spaces across Australia and America. I am interested in the way in which feelings of heroism, desolation or freedom are coerced by the visual narratives imbedded within constructed landscapes. These concepts motivate my exploration of romanticized space, the human imagination and utopic vision.

While acknowledging the impossibility of representing the ethereal nature of an absolute environment in space and time, my work aims to distill the fictional and geographical concepts that evolve out of particular landscapes. Be it threatening mountain ranges, wild rivers, sparse deserts or snowy expanses, every place has its legends and fictitious associations. I aim to incorporate notions within my practice that are sensitive to the idea that thought will embrace a geographical space in such

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a way that, regardless if it is real or fictional, will become an artifact of the imagination, a product of human thought.

I explore the mysterious relationship between geography and the imagination through the act or performance of aimless wandering. Following the legacy of Baudelairean street practice, Guy Debord celebrated urban wandering (the dérive) as a way of navigating space and understanding geography through desire, a practice that favored the process and journey over the destination. Unfinished or failed journeys that I will examine are those of Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader, and the forged journey of amateur sailor Donald Crowhurst. I will also discuss the fictionalization and fetishization of narrative and space derived from their spirit of discovery, lack of arrival and consequential aesthetics of disappearance.

The act of wandering and the constant nature of movement offers a new perspective on the openness of horizon and the abstract nature of space; it also offers the opportunity to re-journey mythologized and fetishized spaces bought to us by the heroism of the West. The film works, which I produced during my research trip through the American West, explore the performativity of embodied travel, meandering, and journeying through spaces. These works are a gesture towards the exploratory and mystical nature of the journey and the utopic idealism that remains static and lingers within the un-finished or suspended journey.
EXOTIC BACKDROPS

The concept of utopia has puzzled and preoccupied civilization since its evocation by Sir Thomas More in the sixteenth century. More's fictional account has been considered, discussed and rendered a fickle concept, due to shifting definition. It is considered by More both as a 'happy place' and a 'non place'. These dueling definitions may be unstable and intangible as concrete concepts, but therein lays the fascination with Utopia “that captivates and taunts those who dare hope for it while remaining utterly fictitious, at least in a tangible sense.” This ‘non place’, in all its perfection exists evanescently in the minds and dreams of people; it has elusive form and is certainly something to be explored. The mystery of the ‘almost’ and the ‘imagined’ is more charming than the actuality of any material society or space, as the act of function within a space whether real or imaginary promptly faults its perfection. For Utopia to appear, even fleetingly, it needs to be rendered impossible.

Utopia is a curious concept that is not fact, but a possibility bought to life by thought and process. It is enveloped in fictional image making, thus giving the opportunity for a multi-faceted or ambiguous presence. Utopic images and objects signify a space that is ultimately un-real, thus giving it the possibility or opportunity for imaginary simultaneous locations, environments and spatial qualities. This place can only posses these qualities because it is never realized, arrived at or concluded. Its presence is invented and amplified by the thought process and the act of imagining. French philosopher Louis Marin offers an illuminating evaluation of Utopic thinking, explaining “Utopias attraction is revealed in anticipatory dreaming, attitudes of questioning and astonishment. Hopes true energy and significance is at work in the process of stretching out, in imaginative projection. Hope is stirred by embarkation,

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3 Thomas More, Utopia, (London: Casell & Co. 1516)
travel and arrival, more so than permanent occupation. Hope is a productive energy not a finished product.”5 This definition of Utopia rings true to how I, as an artist am able to initiate aesthetic apparitions and give gestural form and embodiment to my own Utopic fantasies. The fantasy of place and perfection exists only when it is imagined and embarked upon, depicted by objects and images created by the artist and carefully organized into an evocative collection. As Marin argues, “In a selection of works a proposal emerges: Utopia is found in pockets of time, in moments, or in the appreciation of an idea.”6

I embark on this utopic journey through the concept of survival and the material preparation associated with flights into the unknown. Survival is a foreign concept in post-industrial societies, and suggests a nostalgic desire to submit the banalities of the everyday to instincts and the imagination. The objects I produce in light of the notion of ‘survival’ offer a symbolic apprehension, drawn from an anticipation of the unknown, more specifically in my case, the wilderness. The wilderness offers a significant degree of concealment and mystery, of danger and discovery. This concealment entices the imagination to visualize what lies beyond ones immediate surroundings, the possibility of ‘yonder’. This vision materializes in the acts of preparing, packing and collecting. It is utopic because it is entirely based on a suspended fantasy of survival; the journey never truly comes to fruition, but is rendered half present and entirely mythical by the manifestation of the objects present.

The aura of the mythic is established by the arrangement of the objects in a space. My rabbit fur cloak, for example, is awkwardly hand stitched and hangs limp and inanimate on a wall. The hood is sewn shut, symbolic of the impossibility of its use. Functioning only as a dust collector, it forlornly signifies its own inanity in contrast to the miniature capsule of kindling which sits alongside it, suggesting the possibility of self-sufficiency, warmth and light. Yet even the kindling, stultified by

5 Louis Marin, Utopics: Spatial Play, (New Jersey: MacMillan, 1984) 8
6 ibid
its awkward size and given a museological permanence with its glass sheath, suggests that both objects belong to the realm of the imaginary. A pair of traditional moccasin soles hangs beside the cloak with a found walking stick. These objects are distantly suggestive of a past journey that may well be re-travelled. These frozen objects are apprehended together in a moment suspended between the too late of past use, and the too soon of future use. Like Utopia, which is forever unfolding before or after us, we are denied immediate, present access to this imagined journey of survival in a mythical wilderness.

This Utopian preparation for survival explored in my work can also be compared to its real contemporary equivalent: urban catastrophes and environmental disasters. Such events are defended against with collected objects like the survival kit or constructed sites such as the bomb shelter. My work references the psychological similarity in these inventions; the survival kit and the bomb shelter are created out of nervous, sometimes paranoid, anticipation. In its most neurotic form, the obsessive act of preparing for disaster stems from a desire to escape the everyday; it is an opportunity presented on the basis of catastrophic change brought about by disaster. Thus the invention of such object collections and constructed spaces represent an emancipatory release, a moment of true freedom in an otherwise oppressive world of responsibilities.
The objects I produce are in perpetual relation to an un-reality or imagined space. The memory of such imagined spaces could be preserved in the *souvenir*: a useless, symbolic object that embodies a suspended moment or image. The objects I create mirror the constellation of associations bound up with the souvenir. Souvenirs are often kept together as a part of a collection; a group of interweaved accounts of potential places, moments or happenings. They are signifiers of the *exotic*, an abstract, idealized version of reality fraught with personal projections and utopic desires. The souvenir becomes a fetishized objectification of place; their lack of context and richness of texture, form and essence amplifies their sense of mystery and exoticism.

Susan Stewart investigates the qualities of the souvenir, in her book *On Longing,* explaining, “The souvenir by definition is always incomplete, the object is
metonymic to the scene of its original appropriation in the sense that it is a sample. Within this operation of souvenir, the sign functions not so much as object to object, but beyond this relation, metonymically, as object to event/experience.”? This relationship is fetishized again by me as the ‘curator’ of objects. The objects are souvenirs of imagined spaces and function as signifiers of a potential, partially realized narrative. I deliberately make my objects stilted and ambiguous in order to exacerbate this fragmentation of the utopic narrative. Often they are non-functional parts of previously functional objects, or functional objects robbed of their use-value through a Surrealist defamiliarisation or a readymade misappropriation. Stewart emphasizes the importance of understanding the souvenir as an object dependent on a mythical narrative: “The souvenir is an allusion and not a model; it comes after the fact and remains both partial to and more expansive than the fact. It will not function without the supplementary narrative discourse that both attaches it to its origins and creates a myth with regard to those origins.”8 This narrative is doubled again within my work in the sense that the images used are often sourced from found photographs and objects. They are then re-inserted into a fictional narrative that renders them “placeless palimpsests” of mysterious trace origins and infinite future relations.

My collages of rock faces and turbans are a good example of this multilayered invention of place and the illusion created by these artifacts. I use incomplete images of rock faces, mountains and brightly coloured turbans from old national geographic magazines. The slithers of rock are placed in direct juxtaposition to the luscious folds of distended turbans, which float like clouds alongside the jagged rock faces. Origin is alluded to but warped through the displacement and surreal union of images. The natural landscape is viewed only as a partial narrative in relation to the turbans, which are then abstracted by their lack of context. Their unnatural size, position and incompleteness nullify any sense of whereabouts, initiating the potential for newness and the mythical aura of the unknown. Although these

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8 ibid
collages allude to an exoticism and the potential for a mental passage to this ‘non-place’, they also represent the hindrance that is present in my attempt to explore or play with the idea of Utopia. The mass of negative space and blankness alongside the partial slithers of colour and texture amplify this inability to explain or vivify the interiority of these imagined spaces.

Figure 2. Eloise Kirk, Palimpsest, 2012

The Historical preoccupation with the exoticism of ‘the far off land’ and the craving of this unattainable reality is often attached to the possession of samples, objects, riches and rare material and fleshy pleasures. Utopian theorist Ernst Bloch explains “both legendary dream-journeys and those that were actually carried out used gold and paradise as a navigational guide, in the hope of loot and marvels all at once. The curious conspiracy of money and marvels, gold and god, cinnamon and souls
provide abundant examples of this colourful and violent history.” ⁹ With this idea in mind I have created several ‘artifacts’ or souvenirs in response to a period of my time travelling in America. This five-week period was in fact, quite a lonely, alienating and unromantic time in my life. I was staying in a small-town in Oregon, studying taxidermy and living in a cabin with no windows. I was learning to hunt, eat and preserve animals. One day we drove to the top of a mountain to hunt a bear. We didn’t find the bear, much to my relief. We did, however practice our target shooting on a tree after a long period of waiting in silence. My one memento from this moment is the paper target I plugged full of holes on the tree.

I had this piece of paper framed and upon reflection, this artifact re-appears to me as a supremely naïve utopic daydream. The memory feels crisp, free and resilient. The act of journeying through that fresh damp mountain returns to me as a handsome moment, suspended in space. It is full of meaningless acts. Wild, pointless, ambling and violent attempts of self-sufficiency and obsolete survival skills. Intense visual images have stayed with me from that day. Firstly, the journey up the hill with dust lingering behind us. Secondly the stillness of our bodies, waiting for a beast in which I had never laid eyes on… drifting away in my mind, I noticed the more minuscule banalities of being amidst nature. I followed a hummingbird with my ears. I traced my fingers around a tree stump for half an hour, I watched my fellow hunter closely through the binoculars I was given.

The souvenir I now keep seems to me like some sort of hypnotic memory, laden with anticipation and violence, with pointless meandering and tiny sounds. It is elevated in my mind like a dream sequence, with a sleepy, surreal amalgamation of thoughts, actions and demi-worlds. In response to this moment and the artifact that embodies it, I have made several other artifacts to accompany its presence. These objects respond to the notion of those ‘mythic’ moments, the moments that allude to

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the hope of the journey and the irrational idealism that comes with distance and reflection.

The objects I have made in response to this artifact are a series of spherical components that visually and conceptually interlink. I used two round copper plates as a basis to begin my project. These plates appealed to me firstly because of their shape, mirroring that of my bullet-ridden target. Secondly, because of the material associations they have with the exoticism of the east, such as foreign riches, gold, unknown foods and exotic smells, a typical example of historical idealism and utopian archetypes. The first one I filled with a bright gold resin, the second; a dark purple resin ring, with a found image of snowy mountaintops inside. I also made two wooden frames filled with hand-made arrowheads, sourced from Mexico. The arrows are arranged in a triangle shape, mirroring their own physical nature. They
are also set in resin, mirroring their materiality. Each object somehow reflects a part of its origin or nature, but is then connected with a new aspect or material that leads us to fictional connections. This forms irregular relationships and associations with place or narrative, the objects are suggestive, illusory and posses their own secret passages to places and histories imagined.

This combination of shapes, colours and materials is as much aesthetic as it is conceptual. The aesthetics of this project truly encompass the need for a certain visual idealism that is embedded in the idea of place and perfection. This piece acts as an aesthetic survival journey, laden with fantasy and the dream-like images that one only conjures up upon the act of nostalgic reflection. It suggests functionality and survival at the same time as completely dysfunctional aesthetic meandering, much like what that day, in reality embodied. And the existence of the artifacts creates a passage back to a space that existed outside my own functionality, a space of un-reality and otherness.

The concept of Heterotopia, discussed by Michel Foucault is also useful in examining the notion of Utopia and ‘non-place’ within my work. Foucault proposes a space of ‘otherness’ that exists simultaneously and parallel to hegemonic society. Heterotopias are real spaces that alternate in nature and function throughout history; they are spaces of otherness that reflect and contest society from within. Foucault explains: “Generally speaking, in a society like ours, heterotopia and heterochronism are organized and arranged in a relatively complex fashion. In the first place there are the heterotopias of time that accumulate ad infinitum, such as museums and libraries. These are heterotopias, in which time does not cease to accumulate, perching, so to speak, on its own summit.”

Thus museums have the heterotopic quality of reflecting various times and various geographies within one (present) site. The nature of the museum’s organization is based on its location and

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10 Michel Foucault and Jay Miscowiec, ‘Of Other Spaces’, *Diacritics 16: 1* (1986) 22-27
context. In other words, its version of history is based on nationalistic ideologies and cultural imperialism: a largely fictional narrative.

The concept of the gathering and arranging objects to create a fictional archive that represents many spaces within one is essential to my work. Each object is unique in origin and essence, but when placed in a collection, mirrors the museum as a heterotopia by alluding to many alternative times and places and performing a complex network of inter-relationships. This heterotopic collection exists on its own accord as well as alluding to possible worlds and imaginary spaces. Each object can be displayed in multiple collections, re-used and re-positioned to form new meanings with new objects. This creates a multi-faceted archive that represents several Utopic visions and refers to a multiplicity of spaces. By using elements I have taken from real landscapes or spaces I have visited, I am able to then re-create a utopic space in the act of arranging and displaying objects. The space I create is an array of the imaginary, memorial and fictive, and a network of tensions, objects and references.
Douglas Aitkin’s 2008 film installation entitled ‘Migration’ literally placed wild animals such as peacocks, deer, buffalo and horses into various motel rooms in transitory American settings. The animals were then filmed existing in these spaces. They shuffled around, sniffed, fanned or swished their tails; the buffalo even tore up the room. The deer rummaged through the fridge and the horse stared at images of brumbies in full gallop on the television. These animals temporarily exist outside of their own wildness by being physically placed in motels. Motels are in fact also heterotopic spaces of otherness, of the interim of ‘migration’; they are neither origin nor destination, they exist in a liminal and psychologically over-determined limbo. The motel exists outside and parallel to productive society, it is the secretive space of illicit affairs, honeymoons, criminal activities and various uninhibited states of in-betweeness that clash with the reality of the outside world. Perhaps Aitken suggests with the surreal juxtaposition of beasts in bedrooms that the motel is a site
in which our baser instincts return. However, the opposite is also true: the notion of wildness and the practicalities of ‘migration’ typical to the classical American West are ironically quelled within the claustrophobic sterility of the American motel. This is doubly so when we see the immense scale of the video works on the pristine white façade of the gallery wall, again contesting its physical existence in space and time. Aitken has produced an alternative, frozen backdrop in which all these elements co-exist for a moment.

I will consider migration and travel further in the next chapter as an important element within my own work. The significance of Migration is an interesting concept within the sphere of Utopia. The act of travel and moving through space brings us to the poetic nature of the search for Utopia, which is apparent in the journey. The destination in essence is never really found, but the act of moving and the ever-expanding horizon offers a mystical potential in the human imagination, for the idea of perfection, of discovery. The impossibility of destination and realization allows us to invent an imaginary utopian world. This act of migration or movement is coupled with a conscious juxtaposition of frozen and stultified objects, still images and artifacts in my non-performative explorations of space. The object, or any kind of unified form, is antagonistic to the nature of Utopia, which is fragmented, impermanent and intangible. I explore its nature in two very different ways. In the act of travel and inserting myself into a horizon or a space where I don’t quite belong, I perch on the edge of spaces, willing a revelation and a kind of morphing, mythical event to take place, however, the only event that takes place in fact, is the event of myself, willing the space, pushing the boundaries of body, mind and space. Thus the product, the willed event, is less important than the journey of its preparation, those survival objects and souvenirs suffused with desire in the act of choice and creation.

I have wrestled with the significance of the still and the moving image in my work. My objects, taxidermy and collages act as frozen signifiers of this incongruous search for the wild, the open and the free. Isolated, the objects may be symbolic of
the past or duration, but in a collection, a fictional relationship is manufactured between objects through petrification, manipulation and placement. The collector lives, desires and communicates through the object collection; a distributed system which is capable of transforming time and distorting narratives. As theorist Arthur Schopenhauer said, “the world is my imagination. The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I am at containing it.”¹¹ This statement inspired my thoughts on the subject of ornaments, miniatures and the souvenir. The very act of miniaturizing or manipulating an object, speaks about containment, possession and representation. It becomes about directing and manipulating the scene, a set of ideals and a set of relationships that exhibit those ideals.

As Baudrillard points out in *The System of Objects*, “The possessed object refers only to the subject, and a collection of possessed objects exhibits a system in which the subject constructs their world.”¹² The multiplicities of narrative, meaning and relationship within my practice reveal the varying nature of the will of the subject through display. Each object is contained, distorted and resolved to reveal a pattern or a layering of narrative. The petrifaction of each object and image carries a series of implications yet nothing is concrete, in contrast to the transparent, ordered and didactic display of objects accompanied by detailed plaques in a museum. The fluidity of spectatorship and experience of my collections also encourages malleable interpretation and a fragmented narrative contingent on the will of the subject. I have been influenced by the concept of fossilization and suspension of the object to induce historical narrative and chronological order. But like art museums, natural history museums are always susceptible to the overturning of fact in light of new technologies and findings. I am interested in the idea that an object can be examined and interpreted through its various uses and transformations just as a fossil can carry trace or various archaeological layerings that offer hints of its inner life, its mysterious history and its intangible origins. When placed in a collection, such

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objects create a tension suspended by desire, mystery and the impossibility of a unified and absolute resolution.
PERSISTENT JOURNEYS

I think a place; it stretches before me, parting with the weight of my feet. This place does not understand geography, it knows not of maps, borders or the certainty of direction. It embraces life and death simultaneously, as with violence and serenity, fable and truth. It is macro and micro, it is constant. I am southbound, westbound, northbound and eastbound. I stalk the horizon. It is constant, unfolding. As I walk, reckoning ancient tracks, I surge forward, loping, creeping- like a river, continually rushing through several points in time, from source to outlet then source again, blurring notions of linear space and time, always present and always past, like the shifting sky, or flurries of wind moving over water and sand.

I recall a passage I recently encountered, concerning the perplexing nature of the river. I understand it relates to the existence of all movement within nature, within space. Including the nature of myself, moving through space, with intent but without destination.

The more one meditates on the river, the more completely the subject erodes the distinctions between definitions of time and space, until finally these basic concepts by which we set the world in order are flooded by a chaotic sea of confusion in which all things seem one, and in which there is no time and there are no spaces, only space unfolding.13

I consider this an attempt to surrender my hopeless wish to arrive, conclude, and succeed. I consider the perplexing nature of space itself and my encounter with nature as a continual stream of beginnings. Rather than leading to a destination, each beginning simply leads to another beginning and another horizon, another step yonder.

13Wyman H Herendeen, From Landscape to literature/The River and the Myth of Geography (Pittsburgh Duquesne University press, 1986) 3
My concepts of aimless wandering and journeying as an art form belong to the methodology of psychogeography as defined by Guy Debord in 1955. Psychogeography is the study of the effect of an environment on the psychology of its inhabitants. In order to resist particularly alienating urban environments, the Situationists championed the dérive, or drifting. Debord promoted the idea of the playful journey led by desire over the destination, jolting us into a new awareness and appreciation of the urban landscape, or in my case the natural landscape. Debord notes that:

The adjective psychogeographical, retaining a rather pleasing vagueness, can thus be applied to the kind of findings arrived at this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and even more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery.14

This spirit of discovery within my work is apparent and embodied within the act travel and movement. I always maintain a curiosity in my practice regarding the act of travel and the allure of the unfinished journey. In a series of films I made in the USA, I documented myself following various trails and paths across several different landscapes. Some of these paths led nowhere, some led to lookouts, some led to monuments. In general I make five or ten minute films of cros-sections of these walks without their terminus; consequently I never arrive at any point through my documentations and they become a massive accumulation of purposeless journeys through several different points of space and time. Simultaneously, they appear as several contrasting horizons, bobbing and expanding on the screen.

The intention with this style of documentation and reflection is revealed when viewed on the screen. The journey becomes an amplified and protracted perception of moving through space, putting emphasis on movement as meaning, rather than destination. It is the mystical moment of anticipation that lingers before a journey is

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made. It is in fact almost a fiction of its own, full of possibilities and multiplicities, but can only truly exist during the movement of the journey.

Figure 5. Eloise Kirk, Utah, Arizona, 2013

Marc Augé writes about liminal space in his book *Non-Places*. He describes the difference between place and non-place:

> Space could be the place what the word becomes when it is spoken: grasped in ambiguity of being accomplished, changed into a term stemming from multiple conventions, uttered as the act of one present (or one time), and modified by transformation resulting from successive influences.15

This relates directly to my ideas about movement and continuation. The moment one arrives at a point, the mythical space of the journey disappears. The act of movement, apprehension and multiple possibilities opens our imagination to a new

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space, a space of abstraction, that lacks definition and this is what makes it curious to me. It’s a place of opportunity, a porthole to the imagination that can never truly be captured.

Augé’s study explains that as place is relational and directly references its surrounding culture, specific histories and environments, then our understanding of space is the opposite, and this is what I am trying to explore through my work. Space is ‘non-place’, transit points, progressive and non-specific. For Augé, “[Space] doesn’t exist in pure form: places reconstitute themselves in it; the ‘millennial ruses’ of the ‘invention of the every day’ and the ‘arts of doing’, so subtly analyzed by Michael de Certeau, can clear a path there and deploy their strategies.”

The notion of interim transitional passages are as fascinating to me as they are frustrating. They never exist in a pure form, only as an ephemeral moment. They appear in my work as momentary shimmers of immateriality in the commencement of a journey. They cannot possibly resolve with the completion of a journey or the completion of an artwork. I can only really allude to this notion, to this temporary space and it only truly exists momentarily in the making of the work, in the performance of the act. It is a continuous temporality, only enabled by movement.

A recent exhibition that explores the concept of movement and desire was held at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, curated by Juliana Engberg. This exhibition titled ‘Desire Lines’ explores the notion of paths created by people travelling off official routes, these are also referred to as ‘goat paths’. The exhibition includes many significant artists from the 20th and 21st centuries.

The exhibition takes us on a number of unexpected journeys, unleashing many lines, both actual and conceptual, pragmatic and poetic. Geographies, geometries and g-force elements are all activated in works that form poetic encounters and

memorable moments, as artists seek to follow their hearts, minds and navigational desires.\textsuperscript{17}

I am particularly interested in one image by the Romanian born artist Mircea Cantor. He photographs these so-called ‘Goat Paths’ in black and white, bringing us a poetic visual manifestation of these deviating journeys. Created by unseen footsteps, the photographs are devoid of life, so all we are left with are the residual marks of a preferred route.

![Figure 6. Mircea Cantor, Shortcuts, 2004](image)

The journey of amateur sailor Donald Crowhurst has also fueled my inspiration for journeying as an access point to the mystic passages of the journey and the invention of space through isolation and movement. He entered the Sun Herald Golden Globe Round the World Yacht Race in 1968, and commenced a journey that is considered by the world as ‘failed’ or ‘forged’. Crowhurst, of course, planned to win this race, but just days into it, his boat began to fail him. He bobbed about in the

\textsuperscript{17} Desire Lines, Media Release (Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2013)
Atlantic Ocean for months, and upon turning off his radio he began to forge journals and with false locations and information about his fabricated progression. Gradually Crowhurst became delusional and obsessed with his faulty chronometer, developing a common symptom that sailors experience called ‘time madness’. He then planned on making his way back to Cape Horn, England with his fabricated journals. Upon realizing that he was probably going to win and be exposed, Crowhurst began to windup his 25000 word logbooks with poetry, rambling notes, and false conditions that indicated his mental deterioration. His boat was later found adrift and empty soon after he threw himself overboard with his chronometer.

The thing that fascinates me about this journey is not the reality of his deception or his cowardly lack of sportsmanship but the ability of space, time and pure horizontality to drive a rational human being mad. Crowhurst not only formed a web of lies and seemingly achieved nothing in the world of sport and heroism, but he invented a space around him and became completely consumed within the illusive and arbitrary nature of geometry as he moved through it.

A similarly hallucinatory, but much less tormented story is that of the Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader who represented himself setting sail from Cape Cod in 1975 in his photograph entitled ‘In search of the Miraculous’. Ader’s sense of departure was the most poignant part of this seemingly drifting journey. Ader never returned from this voyage. It is a legend, ever suspended within the artist’s oeuvre, an everlasting departure leaving us with the notion of disappearance and continuity in his search for the miraculous.
English artist Tacita Dean has also shown a fascination with the mystical notion of movement and disappearance as a concept in visual art. She has also researched the journeys of Crowhurst and Ader, and produced work concerned with the force and poetics of journeying. Dean went to the hometown of Crowhurst and spoke in depth with the locals about his journey. She discovered Crowhurst’s abandoned Trimaran in the undergrowth and used this wreckage as a sort of homage to the heroics and failures of his voyage of fable and madness. This voyage that somehow opened up a lingering porthole of desire and paid homage to passages to Utopic visions. The photograph of the last physical embodiment of the journey is static and tragic, as if it’s a sudden collision of the whimsical departure with the decay of reality, failure and inertia.
This is the nature of the still, of the petrified. Although beautiful, tragic and reminiscent, this image is perverse in its inertness. It is a reminder that the voyage for the Utopic is transitory and temporal, and it is only through the ‘act’ of travelling that one can hope to suspend the notion of Utopia, if only for a moment, through movement and the magic of space unfolding. This act creates a ‘space’ that is constantly revealing itself and its intrinsic potential for newness and discovery, for desire and ultimately for Utopia.

Another film piece of mine that explores the psychology of geography and the poetics of space is a work called ‘Warren’. In this work I wear a hand stitched rabbit pelt cloak, which I have progressively extended and used in multiple installations. This cloak is interchangeable within my displays, as are most my object works that
reference the shifting nature of space and its narratives. The film incorporates the cloak into a natural environment, one in which a rabbit might reside. I sit, engulfed in pelts, swaying grass and the inescapable heat of country New South Wales. Within this cloak I am blinded to my environment, I am in a space of imagining what I am surrounded by, what might approach me, what I am or am not pretending to be. I am almost transformed by my own invention, by my own stillness and lack of agency.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 9. **Eloise Kirk**, Warren, 2013

This piece is symbolic of the nature of prey and predator, of the gaze and its object. A tension is created between my faceless body as a passive and vulnerable receptacle and the audience as a desiring predator. The blindness I experience envelops and silences me, highlighting my performance as a creature within the grips of geography. My performance creates a space for me, almost like geography imploding, as opposed to the openness created by my walking pieces.

The Australian artist Angelika Mesiti also examines the nature of geography, folklore and the spaces that surround it. In her video work ‘The Death of Charlie Ray’, Mesiti travels to Broken Hill in outback New South Wales and upon declaring
herself an outsider, proceeds to document various threads of local knowledge through multiple film pieces. One of the videos in particular captured my attention: a loop of a Goat standing at the top of some stairs in a local historic motel. The goat stared into the camera from the interior of the old building; it stood below a typical landscape painting of the surrounding area. The piece is a subtle wrestle with historical narrative and wild, open space. Similar to that of Aitkens ’Migration’, it threaded together our mythologizations of the landscape and the relevant historicization of the motel interior, but then alienated us from it with the bewildered eyes of the goat, remote, perplexed and completely surrendered to the experience of not belonging.

Figure 10. Angelica Mesiti, The Line of Load and Death of Charlie Day, 2008

An essay recounting her exhibition held at Artspace in Sydney in 2008 begins with the words:

What strangeness, the way we are perched on the earth. We move from sensing we are part of a
continuum to an insistence on the moment. And then to be overtaken by the past, whether caught by nostalgia or a desire to slow things down. How resilient then, the human capacity to let go of one experience and remain open to what is yet to come.\textsuperscript{18}

This is a poetic introduction to a work that indeed explores the struggle between past and present and the desire that images induce, for us to remain locked in a moment, in the beauty of the ideal. These are the questions that I aim to negotiate within my own works. Through the placement of objects, bodies and gestures within a space, I aim to create challenging relationships that protract our passive acceptance of the connections between things, and the possibility for partial, multiple and complex relationships that form our understanding of place, space the imagination.

\textsuperscript{18} Melody Willis, ‘Media Release’, Natural History, (Sydney: Artpspace, 2010)
Open spaces, unfolding highways, and abundant horizons. These things drive a desire for the unknown, for the intangible immensity of space. A longing for new worlds and the constant search for the myth that is the west, that is youth, that is violence, that is freedom. This search is chronic and unending, fuelled by Hollywood, western film, tales of heroism and adversity. It’s like an unfinished romantic painting, never realized but slowly developing in the imagination. Fuelled by the myth America has created of itself through the means of Hollywood, the heroic western Novel and the likes of Robert Redford and Clint Eastwood.

My practice involves a growing investigation into these spaces; in particularly I am interested in the exploration of the dramatic space offered to us by the images created by classic American imagination and its landscape. I am interested in how this image has become so important to us as consumers of the image of perfection, freedom and our ideas about space. The American desert landscape is big and so is its psychological impact on the world, but it is not unlike the Australian desert in terms of space and wildness. I want to take a look into this idealization of one particular space over another and take a deep look into the natural heroism that is in fact, a heroism and expectation imbedded within the American western landscape itself. Through years of history, nostalgia, narrative and myth, the western landscape has almost become a museum of itself, a living, breathing homage to its own existence.

Douglas Aitken explores this concept in his ambitious project *The Idea of the West*, in which he accumulates masses of photographs, texts and interviews about peoples notions of what the West means to them. Some of the texts include things like. “Civilization, James Joyce, Nothingness” “Wild, wild west” “Coyotes in the street... sex” and “Cliffs, deserts and scorpions” This Wildness, this masculine liberation that is
purely associated with something as simple as direction and location is so crystalized, and burnt so brightly into our imaginations, a shimmering mirage of itself that has been created by the stories of America that have bled into our minds through our television sets. Jean Baudrillard discusses the American landscape in his book ‘America’, describing vast space as he travels through the ‘capitals of fiction that become reality’, the sublime and the gigantic. He describes his search for pure, astral, empty America. Travelling desert roads through pure horizontal and geometric forms.

The experience of the barren, the horizontal, the indifference of desert space is truly felt by traversing its vastness at great speed, see the unending highways and endless flats blur by, through the American landscape. The incessant expansion is sped up, reaffirming that the vastness is not just an illusion of the immediate surroundings. It appears before you just as fast as it disappears behind you, and lopes alongside you. It is North, South, East and West, as Baudrillard notes, it is an ecstatic form of disappearance.19 This disappearance is indeed felt whilst moving through the desert scape of Americas West. It truly geographically and psychologically engulfs one in its purity and remoteness that is felt in films such as Easy Rider, Badlands, True Romance and Days of Heaven. This grandeur is piercingly scenic, in all its oblivion and all its embedded histories and myths, one is in a sensory overload of nothingness. This abstract nothingness is then conflicted by such a rich history of storytelling and myth. This action is totally conflicted by the lack of form and life that essentially surrounds you.

Baudrillard also discusses the notion that desert is absolute silence. Silence is something only truly present in pure horizontal space, and with silence comes an absolute awareness of the relationship between self and space, and the mutuality of the two in terms of how it fuels a moment in which you almost cant recognize yourself amongst its nothingness, amid the gigantic, vast solitude. Baudrillard claims

that the ‘silence of the desert is a visual thing, too. A product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it. There can be no silence up in the mountains, since their very contours roar.’ The desert’s silence offers the individual nothing, yet we know it has been witness to so much and has, throughout history, become the setting for bloodshed, heroism, adversity, absolute terror and violence. We challenge it, it challenges us back with its silence and still it remains a fantasy, the intangible and crucial character to our story.

The Badlands of South Dakota, setting of Kit and Holly’s inevitable demise, in Terence Malik’s 1973 film ‘Badlands’ proves to be a cruel silent witness to their violence, fear, hope and desperation. It is their bridge to freedom, their hope, their immense loneliness and their hunger. Its ponderous vastness rests heavy on their souls, ever expanding before their eyes. Alongside this swelling horizon, the hope of freedom and love approaches just as quickly as the fear of consequence and death. They seem to come hand in hand with the environment. Malik fetishizes the concept of the inhospitable desert horizon to exacerbate their impending fate. The landscape is silent, indifferent and fraught with the violence of American history and the Western Myth. ‘The scenery constantly changes in Badlands, yet nature’s monumentality remains unaltered.’

The concept of desert, vastness and horizon are fetishized in western film, to the point where the presence of the landscape is so vital to the romanticism and nostalgia associated with the west, that it almost becomes its own character, its own event. In Ben McCann’s essay ‘Enjoying the Scenery’ Landscape and the Fetishization of Nature in Badlands and Days of Heaven, he describes this as ‘Image events’, where environment and human interdependence is created in the story through a

20 Ibid
succession of image events, so the person and the landscape become mutual.\textsuperscript{22} We see the characters emotions transformed and swept up by form and contrast. McCann notes that a ‘fetishistic attention is paid to nature’s indifferent beauty in the midst of human mayhem; the expressive externalization of private emotions; and the mythic meditation on the role of conflict, violence and death in nature.’\textsuperscript{23}

When Holly and Kit first become fugitives, they hide out for a brief period of time in the woods, they build a cubby, surrounded by traps and tunnels. Kit fishes for food, steal’s chickens and teaches Holly to defend herself. Holly wanders aimlessly through meadows and perfects her lipstick in a small mirror, while kit lounges in the sun and reads. This brief performance amplifies the will and impossibility of Utopia for Kit and Holly. It’s a moment of silence, of peace and idealism before any true danger can touch them; this rendition inspired my work ‘survival kit’ A piece largely based on the idea of surviving Utopia, aesthetically at least. Kit and Holly’s campsite is actually quite precarious and exposed. The illusion of being untouchable lies within the aesthetics of their fragile, and very temporary new home. Home made traps, make shift clotheslines and the presence of nature kind of envelops them in the delusion shelter.

I have made several objects that are inspired by this scene, by this temporality and fragile existence, by the act of persistence both in survival and the creation of objects. The works indicate endurance and freedom, but they don’t come together under one title; they are numerous in nature and are interchangeable, like the many narratives and spatial motivations that envelop them both individually and in relation to each other. This makes them difficult to discuss in writing or even to exhibit as a complete piece, and it begins to explain the struggle in exploring the idea of space as a totality, or a particular utopian ideal. For me, it is an idea that is never fully realized and only partially functional, but in this brief place these ideals

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
are suspended and tangible if only for a moment. I am in a sense, building relics, or the remains of a scene to record the potential of this moment to create a space, a space that exists outside the reality of society, but also the reality of the natural world. My objects are basically non-functional. Their ornamentality demonstrates the elusive nature of such and escapade. They hang frozen, like relics of an unrealized or failed dream. A journey only half made.

My work aims to play with the mutuality of narrative and space, to distend and amplify objects of myth and intrigue. The objects I use, whether functional, real or fabricated, pick up threads of narrative and use the relationship between place and object to create a fetishistic, if not surreal awareness of an implied space. Within my work, I hope to reveal an intimacy between these somewhat fractional objects, broken threads and their inference of idealized landscapes. Natural space acts as the nucleus for the initiation of my work, the stories and myths that run throughout it are like broken undertones, allowing a constant flow of fragments that are essential to space as it is, embraced by the imagination.

The illusory essence of space and the heroic nature of wildness are perfectly articulated by Terence Malick in both his films ‘Badlands’ and ‘Days of Heaven’. They are like long loops of image events, long takes of the west as it is, evoked in all its perfection in our imaginations. His lack of sustained interest in narrative, only fuels the sense of nostalgia created by the western landscape and embraces this space as a central presence within the story. It maps the characters journey, intensifies their sense of loneliness, hope or fear, then at the same instant it quells the consequence of human turmoil, breaking the narrative with sparse and silent indifference. As film theorist Ben McCann points in his essay Enjoying the scenery ‘A clearly recognizable visual atmosphere is constructed and the narrative is driven as much by
setting as character, so that nature, or more abstractly, the construction and use of natural space, assumes a vital aesthetic and narratological function.\textsuperscript{24}

This narratological function is not so much an operative portion of the story, but a consuming element which fetishizes and signifies landscape and setting to such an extent that they submerge the event, leaving us with an moody sentiment, more than an considered understanding of the implication of human drama. The landscape offers a simultaneous, and highly suggestive element of the story, one that is unspoken, likewise does the landscape in the Australian horror film Wolf Creek, directed by Greg McLean. This film revolves around three backpackers and their horrifying experience in the Australian outback. Although the film is largely event based, the landscape constructs a feeling of desolation and cold inconsequence surrounding their turmoil. The desert stretches around them, the characters profoundly recognize the silence that engulfs them, and the speed of escaping vehicles on the stretch of road is insignificant in comparison with the horizon. The simultaneousness of space and narration here alludes to a more desolate and despondent atmosphere than that of the optimistic autonomy implied by the classic American highway dream.

The concept of ‘desert’, in all its vastness and horizons, is fetishized in Western film to the point where the presence of the landscape is so vital to the romanticism and nostalgia associated with the West that it becomes its own character.

In my work Westering I am using this concept as a departure from the linear narrative of film or fiction, from the suspended, quixotic visions left behind by the romantics, the rugged desert trampled upon by bloodied cowboys and the lonely highways traversed by handsome, misunderstood youth. Westering is a work I developed over my journey through America in early 2012. It began with a taxidermy course in Roseburg, Oregon. My first piece was a ‘stalking’ Coyote. The

\textsuperscript{24} Frank McConnell, \textit{Storytelling and Mythmaking: Images from Film and Literature}. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) p.77
Coyote is symbolic of the American West, of open spaces, hunger and a sort of cackling wildness. His stalking poses to evoke the nature of a constant hunger, constant desire and movement. The Coyote is one part of a Triptych of objects. The second is a small Perspex box containing soil from monument valley in Utah. Monument Valley is the location of many famous Western Movies, those in particular of John Ford. This location is an important place of mythmaking in the American West; it is desolate, hot and breathtakingly beautiful. The last installment of this project is a sixteen-minute loop of a moonrise in real-time over Arches National park in Utah. It is a slow moving image that gradually makes its way off the screen, this subtle movement within a seemingly petrified scene is a gesture towards that wrestle between the moving and the still, the real and the imaginary. In comparison with the coyote and the box of removed desert, the moon seems to subtly escape the petrification I have impinged on these symbolic objects of the American West. All three pieces make up the image of a classic desert landscape. Although frozen, if not somewhat disabled through the process of display and arrest, they allude to a certain dream-like stereotype. Like the strange placement of props from a western scene, that momentarily comes to life through the process of assemblage within the space.

This scene I have created is largely inspired by the mythmaking of classic western movie scenes, not the linear narrative of gunfights and heroes, but the subtle in-between spaces, the padding scenes that make up our imaginations of location and space, the characterization of the surrounding landscape that creates the personification of space, and the fetishization of nature. It fills our imaginations with fantasy and wonder, the idealization of place and the enthralled fear of nature. The forms that evoke a sense of space are important to me as a sort of locating or mood making element. These forms that are prudently and deliberately placed in the gallery help us understand implied spatial qualities, and the rest can be filled in by our imaginations. The objects are important signifiers of an organized scene, a backdrop of the American West.
I would also like to consider the idea of the ‘backdrop’ as an underlying element in my work through its presentation. The backdrop is an idea I have recently encountered as an element in the finished display of some of my installations. It’s a purely aesthetic reference to the idealism generated in the beginnings and ‘less eventful parts of film narratives. The parts that set the scene locate our imaginations and generate feelings of space, peace, trouble, comfort and general atmosphere. This is most apparent in my installation Westering, the work appears to naturally mimic the aesthetics of a scenic backdrop or scenario. The referential objects are inherently wild and reference the idea of space and the liberty of the remote, however they are stultified. They naturally reference this idea of the ideal open space but through their form of display they mimic the aesthetics of a scenic backdrop, or constructed artifice, unreal, utopic and suspended in space and time.

The juxtaposing elements of form, colour, object and identity is an important element in Westering, the placement of objects mimic some sort of ordered landscape, but the most essential part of the work is the conversation induced by the relationships between the objects. They exist on their own terms and have their individual histories, but their dynamism and remote westerly aura is only recognized upon their interaction with each other as visual personalities.

The Coyote as well as being symbolic of this remote space takes us back through history to Joseph Beuys’s I Like America and America Likes Me, 1974, where he lived with a Coyote in a galley space for three day. Beuys flew into America, was carried in an Ambulance straight to the Rene Bloch gallery in New York, and upon finishing the performance he was taken straight back to the airport in another Ambulance, he claimed that all he wanted to see of America was the Coyote. This piece was very symbolic of a primal intercourse with nature and the wildness that is lost to us.25 The performativity of this piece is imperative to me as a landscape event, taking

25 Gotz Adriani, Winfried Konnertz & Karin Thomas, Joseph Beuys, Life and Works (New York, Barron’s Educational Series, 1979) pg. 275
place within the sterility of the city, homage to the wild America that so many identify with as a past-time, as a story, as a ‘western’.
CONCLUSION

The research I undertook both within my own work and academically proved to be established, diverse but at the same time very bendable in nature. Perhaps this element was what initially intrigued me about the mythology and shifting nature of space and representation. It’s multiplicities and obscurities are therefore possibilities for transformation and intrigue, this is what makes this topic enigmatic in nature, traversable in so many forms.

The most curious of non-places have revealed them-selves to me as remote desolate places, or places of tremendous story telling and myth, such as the American West and exotic places that were or are fundamentally unknown or wild. These spaces translate in an absurd and mythical manner within our more intimate of spaces, such as museums, art galleries, private collections and displays. The intimacy of the act of arranging or displaying our ideas about space indeed is an act of creating a constructed backdrop, thus transforming the original space into a new space of invention and fable. A space within a space, which is ultimately suspended, petrified and rendered a non-place, a space of otherness. This mythologizing of space enables it possesses otherworldly qualities, to become a product of the artist’s imagination.

The topic of Utopia can be viewed in many ways and is multidimensional, I feel that I have explored this through the act of making works through several different channels that reveal its potential for difference in attributes, spirit and sensation. My walking and film works are explorative and reveal abstract and conjectural qualities about movement, desire, horizon and direction. This is a surreal quality that is difficult to demonstrate, or convert from performer to audience; the work lies very much in the experience, the act. For artists or explorers such as Bas Jan Ader or Donald Crowhurst this experience is inexplicably translated through the occurrence of disappearance, in turn all that we are left with is remnants or ruins of these quests, this then creates a new space, the space of object, exhibition and display for us to mythologize the journey though.
Ultimately through my work and research I have aimed to bridge the gap or blur the distinctions between explorer, collector, artist and storyteller. I feel these qualities are fundamentally linked and essential to each other’s existence. Through building relationships between space, object and event one can create a potential for a new kind of mythmaking, a conversational, playful and fantastic one. Eccentric and grotesque, a conversation that is true to the curious nature of human thought.
Plate list

Figure 1. Eloise Kirk, Installation, Rabbit Cloak, Camping Seat, Moccasins, 2013

Figure 2. Eloise Kirk, Palimpsest, 2013

Figure 3. Eloise Kirk, The Quarry, 2013

Figure 4. Douglas Aitkin, Migration, 2008

Figure 5. Eloise Kirk, Utah, Arizona, 2013

Figure 6. Mircea Cantor, Shortcuts, 2004

Figure 7. Bas Jan Ader, In Search of the Miraculous, 1975

Figure 8. Tacita Dean, Teignmouth Electron, 1999

Figure 9. Eloise Kirk, Warren, 2013

Figure 10. Angelica Mesiti, The Line of Load and Death of Charlie Day, 2008
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*Desire Lines*, Media Release (Melbourne, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2013)

Melody Willis, Media Release, *Natural History*, (Sydney, Artspace 2010)

Work Presented for Examination
Catalogue

1. *Timberline*, Collage, Resin and Linen, 95cm x 45 cm

2. *Big Game*, Brass, Plasticine and Resin, 8c, x 5 cm x 6.5 cm

3. *Westering*, Taxidermied Coyote, Fibreglass and Pigment, Dimensions Variable

4. *Eyot*, Collage and Resin, 25 cm x 18 cm

5. *Rise*, Collage, Resin and Linen, 95 cm x 45 cm

6. Installation Shot (And Supporting Work)