

Gathered Lines | MFA Thesis in Metal

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The home serves to protect our daydreams, compilations of memory and imagination. As material representations of place, baskets embody the environments they are crafted in. I explore connections to place by interpreting traditional basketry and textiles techniques. Responding to these processes, forms arise, giving language to the emotions of memory. Lines gather, twist, and diverge to create familiar, yet enigmatic objects. Just as baskets have the ability to transcend time, mark birth, death, and regrowth, my work marks significant and influential spaces.

Attachments to Place

"I don't remember a time when I wasn't seeking identity through a sense of place."
-Jack Lenore Larson

The home is one's 'first universe' (Bachelard 4). It is there that we begin to experience the world, first in its protective walls, and then outside of them. In turn, we experience the home through both lived and imagined experience. Once no longer contained within those guarding walls, we experience the home through thought and dreams, memory and imagination. The emotions that populate these daydreams, are in a sense poems that were once lost (Bachelard 5-6). The space of the home has always resonated deeply with me, especially spaces related to personal history and family. Seemingly mundane sites linger not because of what they are or how they look, but because of the subtle associations of what happens there. The imprints of those who once occupied a space and the events and relationships formed there influence us in our current perceptions of those spaces.

Through the piece *Embroidered Spaces* (fig. 1), I first began to process these ideas. Through time consuming, detailed, and repetitive embroidery over photographs,

I was able to begin to give words to the poetic emotions of my daydreams, or momentary recollections, related to home. Stitching over floral upholstery fabric awakens memories of playing the piano with my Pop, and highlighting the shadows of leaves recalls the laughter of my parents. Repetitive craft processes, such as embroidery and weaving, allow time to disentangle and comprehend the reveries of dwelling. *Embroidered Spaces* serves as research and a precursor to my thesis body of work, *Gathered Lines*. Here, the tedious process of creating expresses the intimacy of space and is realized through metal objects. Small knots and textured wires in the piece *Upstate* (fig. 2) require the viewer look closely. A physical proximity to the work brings up feelings of intimacy for the viewer, the knots becoming a material manifestation of the closeness of creating this work. The observation of small, intimately crafted moments on a larger, more complex form, pass along that feeling to the viewer.

Topoanalysis is the study of the sites of our private lives. This examines the intimacy of the home, not through physical space, but through the remembered, imagined, and dreamed space (Bachelard 8).

"In the past the attic may have seemed too small, it may have seemed cold in winter and hot in summer. Now, however, in memory recaptured through daydreams, it is hard to say through what syncretism the attic is at once small and large, warm and cool, always comforting." - Gaston Bachelard

This recollection of space portrays the emotions we feel toward it, and always remains slightly mysterious. Descriptions of place need not be too detailed to recall, but only expressive enough to position oneself in the space (Bachelard 13). Subtle moments of remembrance allow for more emotional, rather than factual, recollections of space. I do not explicitly recreate an experience through my pieces; I hope to include just enough, the nubby texture of the living room rug or a line of spice jars in the pantry, to encourage the viewer to recall their own experiences. The vessel forms of *North of*

Dean St. (fig. 3) are exaggerated spice containers, vases for flowers, or milk bottles, to be arranged and displayed. The same, but different, they act as a collective unit illustrating the many facets of space.

Basketry

Baskets' inherent ties to place and culture begin with the materials used: they are often created with matter from the surrounding environment by hands that have a relationship to that place. To better understand these objects and their ability to serve as ceremonial markers that transcend time, mark birth, death, and regrowth, I studied basket-making techniques with New Paltz-based artist Katie Grove (Shales 133).

Exemplifying baskets' tie to place, Grove harvests her materials from the landscape surrounding her home. Basketry processes are traditionally rooted in necessity, and the handmade. The ability to execute these processes with my own hands was critical to being able to reference the history and conversations baskets can communicate.

Material selection and processing is integral to the construction of baskets. It is speculated that Indian groups chose land to settle on in part, due to the native plants that could be used in the construction of baskets (Nature of Basketry 64). Materials are carefully selected for characteristics useful to the basket maker. Significant time and care goes into processing these materials. The inhabitants of the Aleutian Islands, native people who settled between Alaska and Russia, spend weeks processing strand wheat and wild rye. Care is taken in selecting only a few young blades from each plant, in turning and watching the materials as they wilt without sunlight, and in splitting the grasses into thinner pieces. Only after careful twisting to strengthen the grasses and a lengthy drying process, are the materials ready to be made into a basket (Nature of

Basketry 65). This intense care and time spent on materials shows a reverence for the final product, and allows materials that are seen as impermanent to withstand the tests of time. Time consuming material processing was integral to the creation of *Downstate* (fig. 4). Dozens of feet of round wire was rolled flat, constantly annealing the wire to preserve its structural integrity, and cut to the correct length. Each end was filed to a rounded shape, and only then was I able to begin weaving the form. The intense care and devotion to material processing, for me, references the location for which this piece was made – my childhood home. It was there that I was nurtured and allowed to grow, just as the materials for this piece were carefully shaped, evolving into the final form.

As basketry is an age-old process, many problems of construction were solved years ago. Techniques and forms have remained largely unchanged because of this (New Basketry 11). I utilize these concrete processes to create structural stability in larger scale works that are created with intricately woven thin metal strips and wire. By translating these processes into metal, I discover new textures and forms, and material limitations can influence final outcomes as well. I highlight and obscure the irregular textures that arose when metal sheet was twined in *Thorpe Avenue Necklace* (fig. 5) and I embrace the natural folds and creases that developed in *Downstate* when the sheet of woven metal was gathered into a vessel form.

The materials I use are able to mimic textile and basketry processes, while exploring and inventing new methods within the metalsmithing discipline. I weave and coil with wire and twine with thin strips of metal. The ability to translate these basketry and textile processes directly into metal connects the work with the history and

dialogue surrounding baskets and fibers. By mimicking these processes to create non-traditional basket forms, I connect contemporary works to their historical ancestors.

Permanence

The Andamanese, a hunting and gathering culture located on islands between India and Thailand, create temporary baskets on hunting and gathering trips to transport items back to the village. Utilizing materials at hand, the baskets are crafted quickly and with only enough density to carry what is necessary. These baskets are created to do a specific task and are then discarded and returned to the environment once that task has been completed (Nature of Basketry 15). These baskets are fleeting and temporary, only existing for brief moments in time.

Objects have a powerful ability to represent and recall the past. They can solidify the fading recollections of place. My work in metal seeks to give permanence to the intangible flashes of memory. By creating an object out of a material that withstands the elements, like metal, it is bestowed with importance and value, giving weight to these receding memories. This is further emphasized by the use of silver, a material historically seen as precious, which imbues these objects with significance and reasserts a sense of presence. *Basswood* (fig. 6), created entirely out of silver, was created in remembrance of my aunt's country home, which shares the same name. The home was sold a few years ago, but this piece preserves the summer days fishing on the lake, dinner lit by candles, and the moon on cool evenings. In association with silver as the only material used in this piece, the large scale of the work, closer to the scale of the body, asserts the location's influence on me and the piece's ability to anchor this body of work.

Material and Methodology

Material choices and applications contribute directly to viewer experience. Matière is the surface quality of material, an “outer” element of a work. Unlike the inner element or structure, which requires intellect to process, matière must be approached and experienced (Albers 45). The qualities I seek on the surface of my pieces are meant to draw the viewer in. It is these intimate moments that connect the viewer to my work, my process, and the home. Slight color shifts reference growth, hints of fiber recall a grandmother's quilt. These details are subtle and encourage and viewer to look closely. The patinas on the surface of vessels within the *North of Dean St.* grouping are abstract. Varying colors with dark outlines can conjure coffee stains on a kitchen counter and bring one back to Sunday breakfast. Gridded lines on the surface of other vessels within the series reference the woven structure in other works, but also the grout lines in a tile floor, darkened over time. These hints of space are meant to elicit an emotional response from the viewer and transport them to the locations of their daydreams.

Ezra Shales believes baskets hover “between an open and a closed structure...and slide between opaque and translucent envelopes, transparent solids and invisible planes (Shales 135).” A woven sieve functions as a porous plane for hulling seeds, yet is perforated, and still functions as a vessel for holding, again drifting between open and closed. Density and the ability for light to pass through my objects is important in communicating the ability baskets have to occupy multiple spaces at once. Material and formal explorations in twining, weaving, enameling, embroidery, and papermaking allow me to explore this phenomenon. The process of twining flat wire in *Thorpe Avenue Necklace* caused kinks in the material. This led me to enameling

the piece, which allowed some areas to be concealed, and others to remain open. Interactions of light within this object create abstracted shadows of the piece, not identical, but still connected. The hazy likeness of the shadows to the piece connects us to our hazy memories of past and place, recalling just enough to remember the emotions and feelings, the sunlight filtering through the dust of a room.

Conclusion

My work is both object and wearable, yet neither at the same time. They are intended to be intimately engaged with – to be touched and to be held, sometimes worn. The work gives permanence to the daydreams and memories of place and people. It creates shadows that return us once again, to intangible poetic emotions. The lines of weaving extend beyond the pieces themselves. Unfinished ends lead us into the future, to new spaces, new places, and new gathered lines.

Image References:



fig. 1 – *Embroidered Spaces* – Handmade book, embroidered photographs – 12 x 12 inch

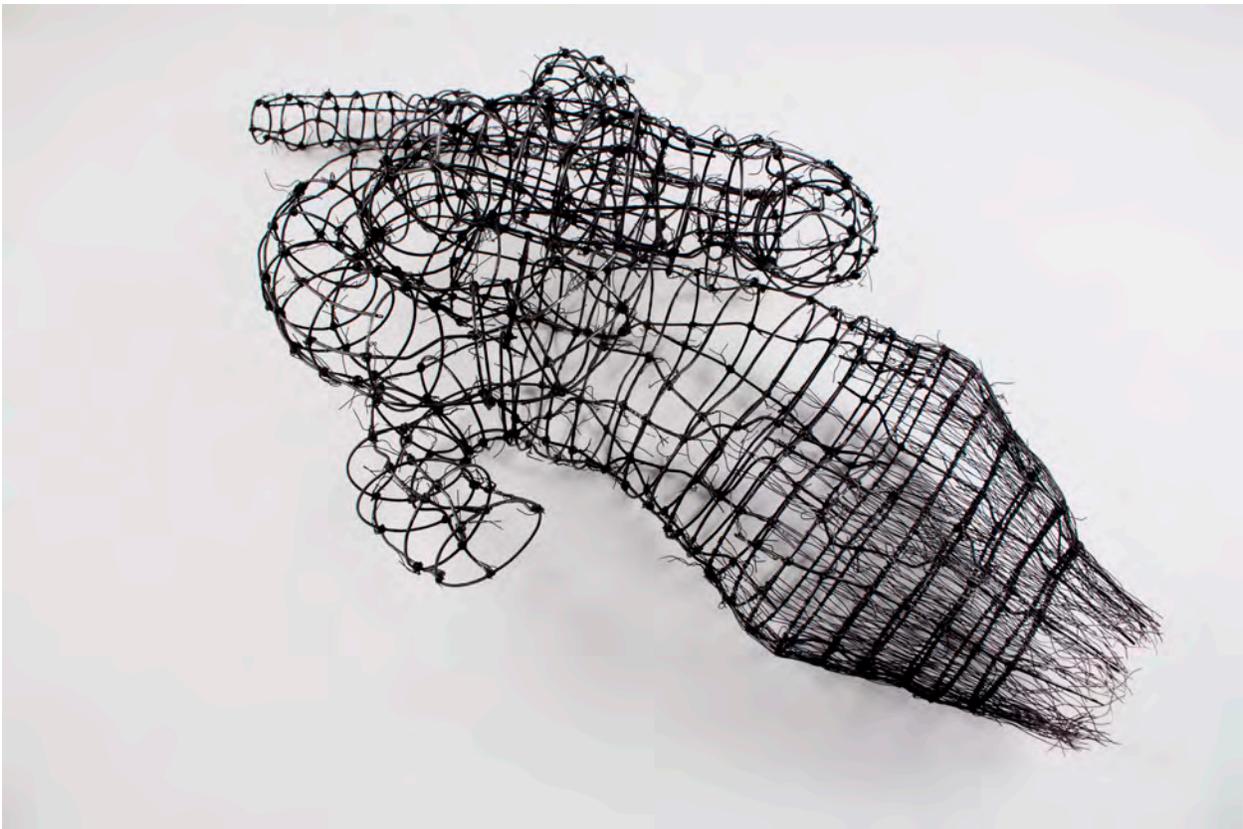


fig. 2 – *Upstate* – Copper – 24.5 x 13 x 8 inch



fig 3. – *North of Dean St.* – Copper – 3.75 x 3.75 x 3.75 inch and 3.75 x 3.75 x 6 inch



fig. 4 – *Downstate* – Sterling silver – 7 x 7 x 7 inch, 73 inch wire

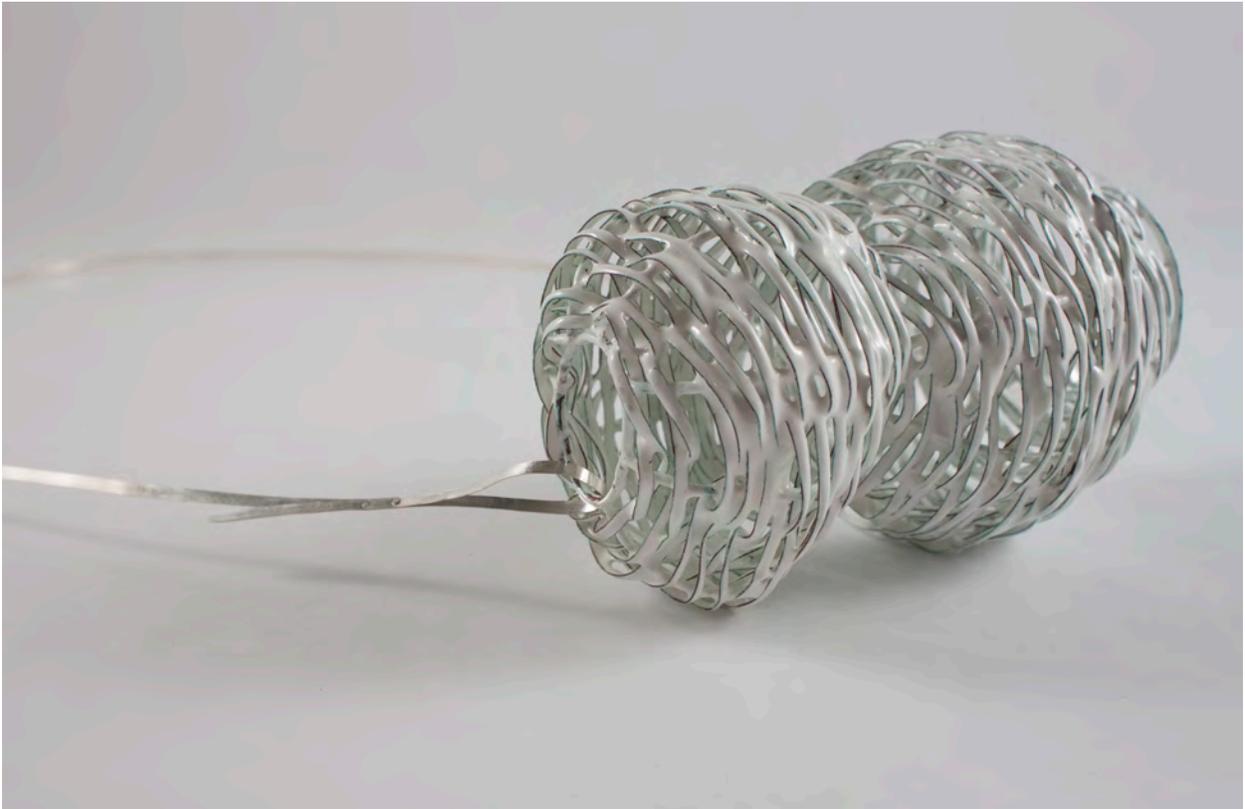


fig. 5 – *Thorpe Avenue* – Copper, enamel, sterling silver – 3.5 x 3.5 x 6 inch, 39 inch wire



fig 6. – *Basswood* – Sterling silver – 30 x 30 x 33 inch



Instillation View – Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art

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Show Announcement:



gathered lines

MFA Thesis Exhibition
Sylvie Lissa Alusitz

Opening Reception: Friday, May 10, 5 - 7pm

Exhibition Dates: May 10 - May 14
Hours: Friday - Tuesday 11am - 5pm

Location: Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
State University of New York at New Paltz
Alice and Horace Chandler & North Galleries

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