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by

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Between Us an Invisible Column

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Report

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Abstract

Between Us an Invisible Column

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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In this report I chronicle the processes and influences relevant to my work as it has developed over the past three years. I examine how our human separateness and new technologies have effected myself and the work I create, ultimately exploring how technology has aggravated this separation rather than mitigate it. I explain my appropriation of digital, repetitious, and machine-like processes in order to recreate this separation, primarily in the form of drawings, sculptures, and photographs.

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Between Us An Invisible Column

1. The Digital Melancholy

In the short essay "Desrt" Robert Lorayn compares the vastness of the internet not to an ocean, but a desert that deceives with mirage:

...I interact, presumably, with those people whom I know from the outside world - friends, family, and colleagues; their worldly selves acting as shell which the mirage uses to interact with me. It seems to work. When my mind has a sense of a person from the physical world it fills in many of the blanks... it maintains a sense of life and transference that occurs in the normal interactions between others and my self, but in this there is disconnection and illusion. What I read and see on the screen of another person is merely the mirage of another person. I interact with no one.

I have been in a relationship for over 4 years now. More than half of this relationship, the past few years, has taken place over long distance. Once every two months or so we get to see each other. This has made me acutely aware of how much I forget of another person in what is a relatively short span of time. There is always a learning curve, a period in which we reacclimate to each other's habits, preferences, jokes, and bodies. I forget things I've done with her, restaurants we've tried, places we've visited, shows we watched. Or, at least, I find it very difficult to place them at a specific time. I forget many of the details. I remember others very clearly. When we are again separated my memory of her is fresh and I can recall smells, textures, her weight and sounds easily - but as the days pass I eventually remember none of these things. Instead my memory of her is determined by screens, online profiles, texts and phone calls, all of which are incredibly poor compared to her actual presence. Because of these digital avenues and devices, the space between us is incredibly minute, yet it remains infinite and deep. We can exchange thoughts whenever. I can see her

image whenever. But everything I see or hear of her is not her, it is a digital reproduction, a transmission of her likeness.

This results in, as I will call it, the Digital Melancholy, the dull feeling of longing or loneliness aggravated by the replacement of real objects and physical interaction with intangible digital variants. As I deal with this separation, I produce work that recreates it, that displays a desire to hold, see, touch, and remember. My presence in the work is largely of the impassive observer, a mask I take to steel my emotions and to ascribe some form of logic or reason to them. My practice has responded by becoming more machine-like, logical, and repetitious, lending my works a coldness and sense of separation.

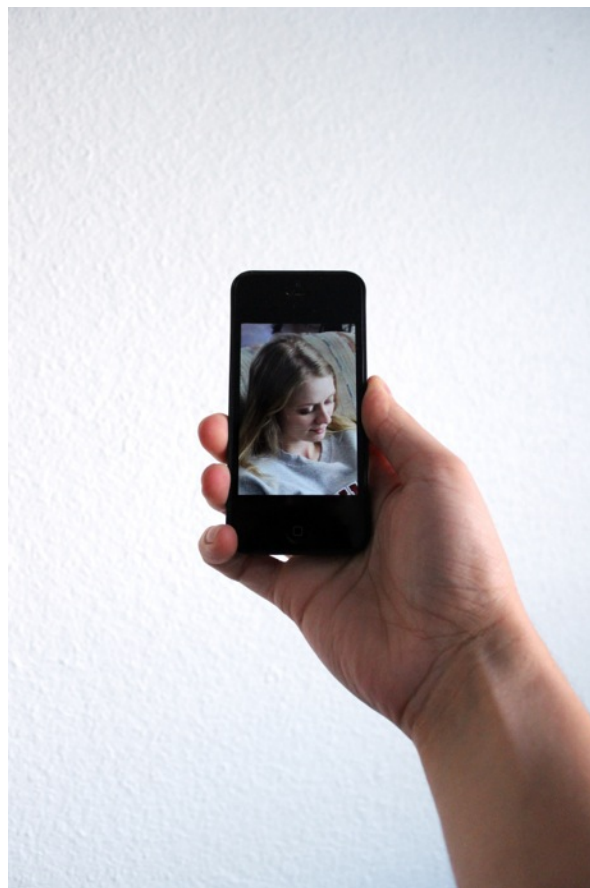


Figure 1

2. Drawing Light

That the light strikes a certain wall at a particular time of day in a particular way and it's beautiful... that, as far as I'm concerned, now fits all my criteria for art.

-Robert Irwin in conversation with Lawrence Weschler

A. Windows

I originally chose light itself as the subject of my drawings based on my interest in capturing ephemeral experiences. I wanted to distill experiences, to purify them, so they could exist in a clean, simplified manner. A component of my practice then became an awareness of the spaces I occupied, an observation and recording of how light inhabited space with me.

I developed several methods to draw and print light shapes. At first I applied a paint pen to various papers, using the sheen and calligraphic stroke of the pen to draw light (Fig. 2). In some drawings the line work was tightly spaced, distributed evenly across a shape in an attempt to emulate the linear nature of light. I thought of the lines as rays, individual vectors that when seen together built the light shape that I had observed. I folded the paper to create lines that referenced architectural corners and to introduce natural shading into the works. The fold also served to make the drawings more object-like, curving them ever so slightly away from the wall. The paint pen was eventually abandoned in favor of graphite, a more precise and predictable medium especially when carried through a mechanical pencil. To maintain the luster and sheen that had become integral to the works I reduced my selection of paper down to only one, a heavy black printmaking paper (Fig. 3). Light shapes, because they are so commonplace, often fade into the periphery of vision - since the graphite mark is nearly invisible on this black paper at oblique angles, a perceptual experience is

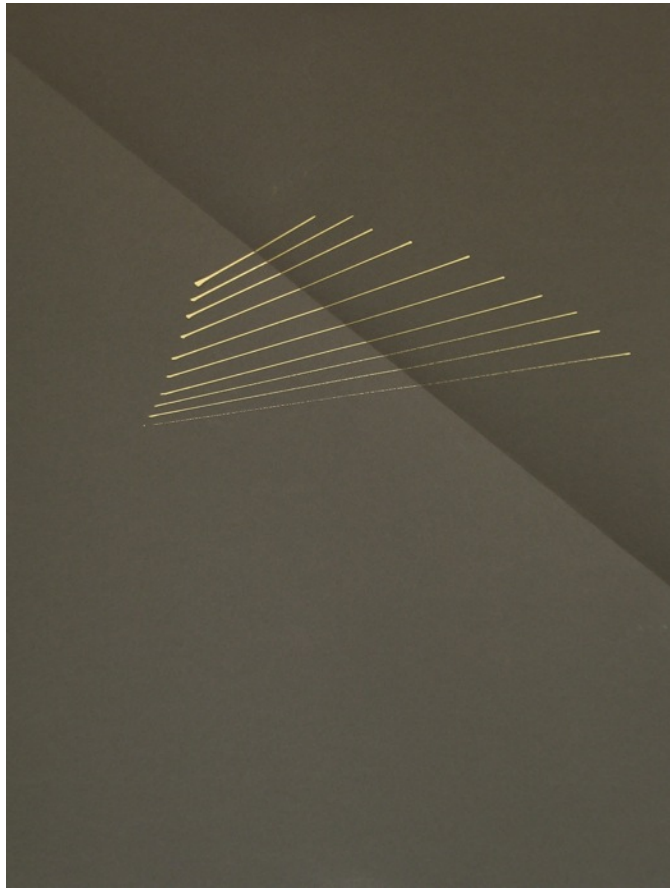


Figure 2

created that parallels this periphery experience. The drawings subtly respond to light itself, quietly preserving the ephemera that yielded them.

The early drawings were intentionally non-specific, recreating anonymous corners, walls, and windows. They were, though, despite my efforts to conceal their source, indexes of very specific places, generally within my apartment and most often my bedroom. Just as Rosalind Krauss describes how cast shadows can serve as the indexical signs of objects, so is a cast light shape the very most primitive sign of a particular room or space:

[Indexes] are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify... Cast shadows could also serve as the indexical signs of objects ...

In this case the object being signified is a window and instead of a shadow the inverse, a light shape, behaves as the index of the window - and by extension the room. This indexing is apparent in the titling system of the drawings, which describes the way the light shape hits the wall and includes data, the time at which the reference photograph was taken. They are built up of parallel lines, a logical process befitting their indexical nature.



Figure 3

As the drawings progressed several simple but critical adjustments were made. I traded the fold for a window-like flatness, began drawing on the back of the paper which is darker and has a more even texture, and cropped them to more specific sizes. Also I began working on a glass surface to minimize the slight warping that occurs with row after row of drawn parallel lines. The greatest shift was my choice of subject which, despite still resulting in a ambiguous image,



Figure 4

had become more concerned with what the light was casting over - this is again reflected in the titles. The fold was no longer needed to achieve a spatial flip, the silhouetting of objects (in many cases actually their shadows) creates an enigmatic, compounded spatial plane.

These seductive surfaces entice with a luster and absorptive darkness. There exists though a barrier, a separation that results from the inaccessible image. The banality and opacity of the image forces the viewer to project their own associations and experiences on the work. They are denied complete access to the image and thus the drawings exist in a liminal state, presenting a non-event, the stillness surrounding a climax.



Figure 5



Figure 6

B. Embracing the Digital

As I developed the drawings I began to question my hand in the work. My process had come to mimic that of the printer head. I used a straightedge but despite this variables such as the pressure and length of the stroke, breaking of lead, and slippage of my hand led to unintended marks. In an effort to circumvent this I began using scans and photographs of my drawings to create digital templates for laser etchings. Using the laser cutter with the appropriate settings can yield an etching as the laser burns into the chosen surface. To reflect this logical process I adjusted my titling system, it became purely numerical, the time of the source image translating to the title of the print - 9:57pm becomes 0957P. The detail that the laser can achieve is outstanding. A focused, intense beam of

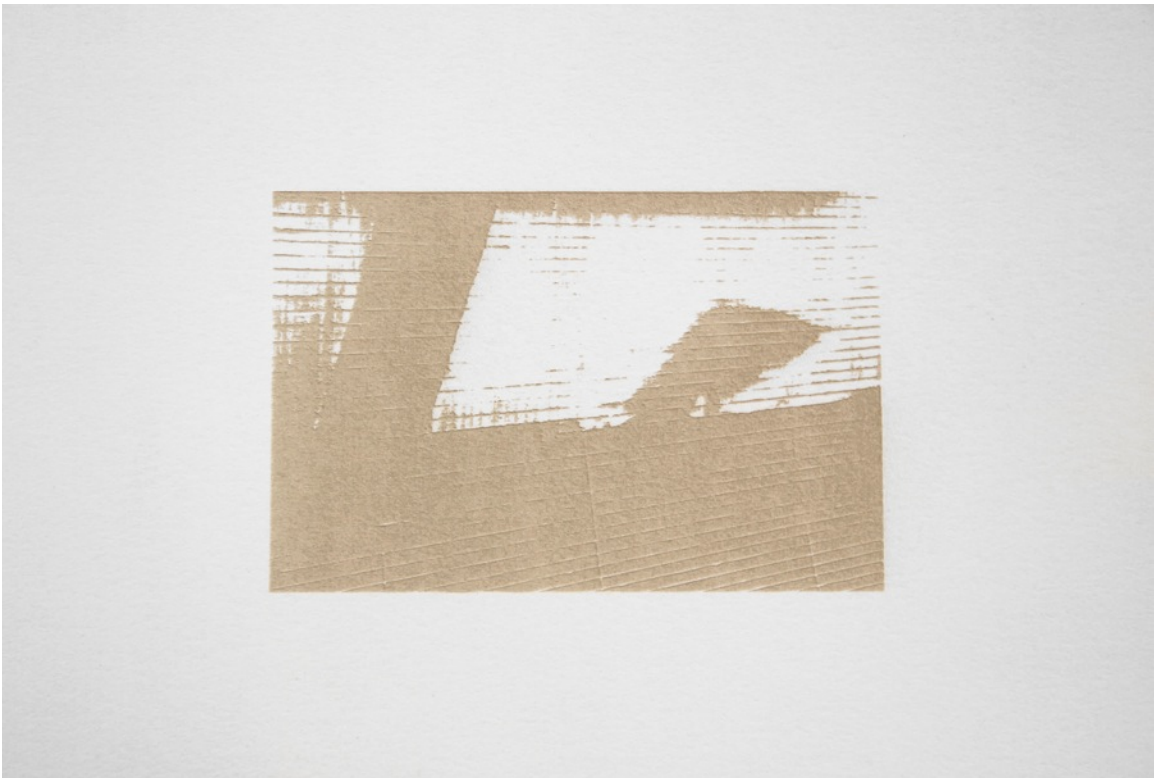


Figure 7



Figure 8

light creates the print, essentially reintroducing light into the cycle of facture, completing it.

Another process I developed involves cutting down printmaking paper so it may be fed through my compact laser printer. The resulting electrostatic print is unstable and the ink is easily removed with a brush or pencil mark. I can then use a graphite or charcoal to silhouette or erase part of the image. A brush can easily lift the toner, further obscuring the image. The drawing medium merges almost seamlessly with the printed image, activating the entire surface as a drawing.

Three prints - *Mother*, *Erase / Sleep*, and *Erica* - introduced noticeable figures into my work (Fig. 9). The images, despite in each the presence of another person, were chosen because of their inaccessible poses; blinking while brushing hair back over an ear, curled up asleep, and on the phone. These poses heighten their separateness from me, and by extension the viewer, as they are all

arrested in moments of unawareness. It is fitting then that the cold precision of a machine (the printer) reproduces the image, adding a parallel layer of removal. My marks on the prints, although they actually obscure or ease the printed image, complete the image by silhouetting the subject.

I realized with this grouping that by determining specific pairings and sets I could enhance the my work. Although each panel is a separate print with its own title, they are intended to exist in the shown grouping whenever possible. This process of pairing has continued to inform my work, allowing a new degree of overlap between my various processes.

By utilizing actual printers I expanded my drawing practice by embracing machines and digital processes as drawing tools. These tools heightened the coldness and sense of separation within the work, taking it further than I ever could with my own hand.

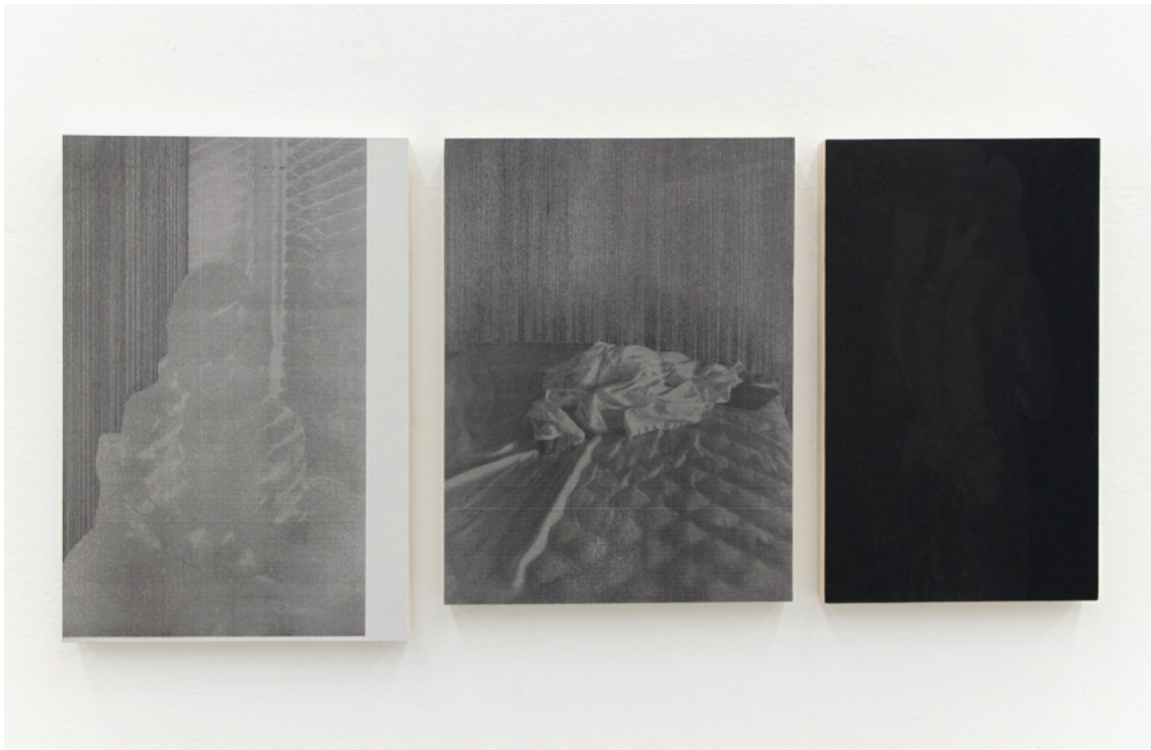


Figure 9

3. Gestures

A. Objects

Concurrent with the drawings and prints, I was developing works utilizing objects and materials from my apartment. The materials were excavated from my own life, chosen for their history and associative qualities. They remain largely unchanged - I rely on the positioning, reorientation, and subtle alterations to highlight otherwise hidden qualities. I reveal and suggest the emotive qualities buried within the material, generally by removing all utility and functionality from the objects. When the material's usefulness is removed, its other qualities and characteristics surface, no longer obscured by its understood or intended utility. They become the vehicles for my gestures.



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

Using aluminum blind slats and material from my mattress box spring, I tested the material, allowed it to bend, lay limp or bolted it together. I removed the intended function of the material, instead charging it with holding a simple, graceful form. In this way I attempt to recapture a quality of the material or object that it had in use. For example, my box spring was broken and sagged on one side, both *Tensile* (Fig. 12) and *Sag / Slump* (Fig. 13) recreate and preserve this patina of use - the past use of the object, the way it had warped and given under weight, determine in part its form. By bolting several of the wooden slats together I recreate the sag while introducing a tension that, when stood erect, becomes sexual. *Sag / Slump* displays how much the wire grid of the box spring has warped and, when standing, hunches over. Abutting the wall and protruding perpendicular from it, it also creates a screen, a grid that divides the wall.



Figure 13

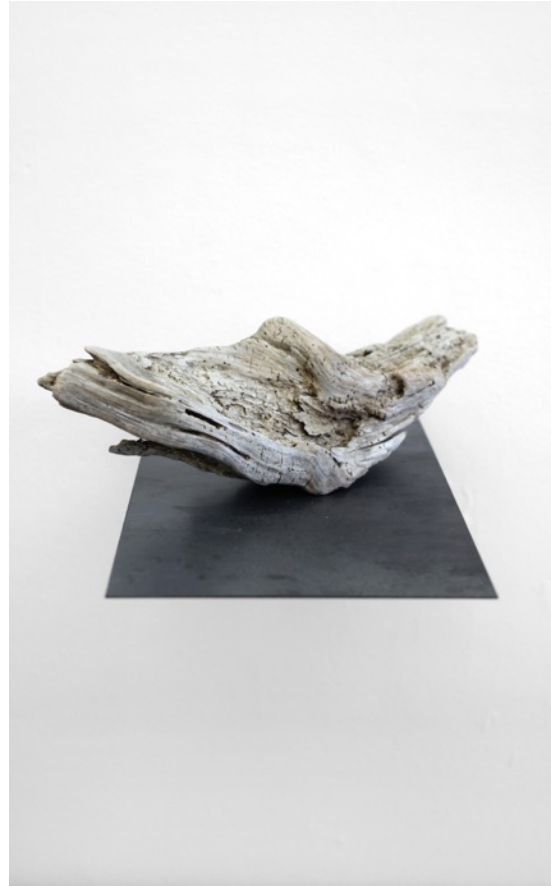


Figure 14

The aluminum blind slats are slightly reflective and catch light themselves, becoming sometimes strong, silvery gradients. They were intended to pair with the drawings as sculptural cues to the origins of the drawn light shapes. They bend, flaccid, unable to maintain their rigidity, curving elegantly - yet pathetically - away from the wall. *Bend* (Fig. 11) quivers as it is so lightweight, responding as air is displaced near it.

I also work with found material, as in *Whale Bone* (Fig. 14), which is displayed on a metal shelf. This simple method of presentation offers the driftwood up as a specimen or an object of admiration. Its tactile surface is a record of erosion, both water and insects having eaten it away. My gesture is to leave it as is, to place it on a narrow metal shelf jutting from the wall in such a way that the arc of the wood is activated.

B. Mirrors and Photographs

Photography emerged as an alternative way for me to record gestures, both my own and those that I found. The photograph also serves to reformat the gesture, solidifying it and providing a permanence that it otherwise did not have.



Figure 15

DESIRE (Fig. 15) is a photograph of a found gesture. Written on an abandoned, dusty storefront window is the word “desire” in a graffiti-like font. As opposed to the same word sprayed across the window, this gesture - made with a fingertip - is much more gentle and ephemeral. The image expounds the building’s sad, empty interior and the ghostly reflection of the buildings opposite

it. The drawing (the word DESIRE) exists on the surface of the glass, the liminal point between interior and exterior, calling attention to the separation between the two spaces.

Lorayn posits that the mirage intends to evolve into the mirror, a step necessary to inspire the empathy it needs in order to eventually meld with us:

In whatever way I seek to manifest my internal, the mirage would seek to act as a mirror of it in the hope of attaching itself to me completely ... irrevocably embedded in the act of my growing. It inches closer to achieve the state where I cannot discern where it begins and I end.

The surface of a mirror reflects its surroundings, bringing into its confines an almost virtual reality. I began to use this reflection to create an encounter, an awkward encounter, one that, in *Doppelgänger* (Fig. 16), honestly presents the viewer's physical image and, in *Blur* (Fig. 17), denies the viewer their image. The

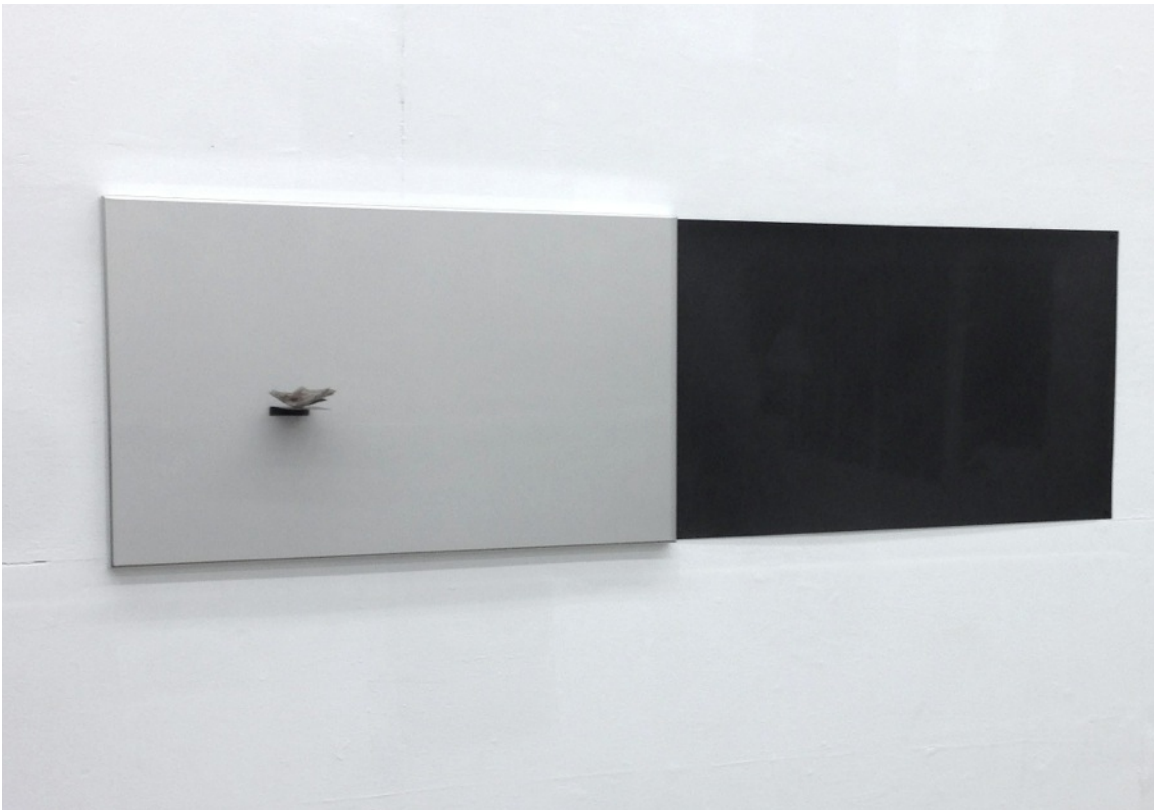


Figure 16

experience of one's physical image becomes compounded with the memory of their mental image. The gap between these two, one existing as surface within the visible world and the other a nebulous concept determined largely by ego, can be quite large. The mirror works and photographs are then my attempts to embody the acute distance between surface and the inner world - that we are incapable of fully knowing the inner states of others and of ourselves. They are ways of embodying a separation.



Figure 17

For *Blur* I applied a spray fixative that fogs the mirrored stainless steel, making it capable of reflecting only a blur. The blur gives the work a heightened material presence (it appears a slab of silvery metal from most viewpoints) while also denying the viewer their own image, separating them from it. The work



Figure 18

creates a barrier between image and observer by disguising the observer, recreating the haze of unknowing that surrounds our images, embodying the separateness between two people. The work's proportions are determined by a standard vertical mirror, the kind designed to hang from a closet or bathroom door, scaled up to 76 inches in height. *Untouched / Reach* (Fig. 18) pairs with *Blur*, working in tandem to provoke a desire to touch and engage with the blurred surface.

These works highlight that we very much know where we end and a mirror begins, that the confines of our bodies are concrete and absolute.

4. The Invisible Column

A pillar of memory, an essence locked in the mind, felt but never seen - the invisible column is woven seamlessly into our surroundings. It is the amorphous space between people. I have always been fascinated with this separation, the unknowability of another person and of the self. I am excited by the prospect that this separation, the invisible column, may be shattered by the digital, but I am also skeptical. Skeptical that with each new way to connect and to acquire information we also isolate ourselves. If the internet and the mediums through which we interface with it are indeed changing the way we think, then we are by extension also changing ourselves, our bodies, and our world. An awareness and reaction to this change seems paramount.

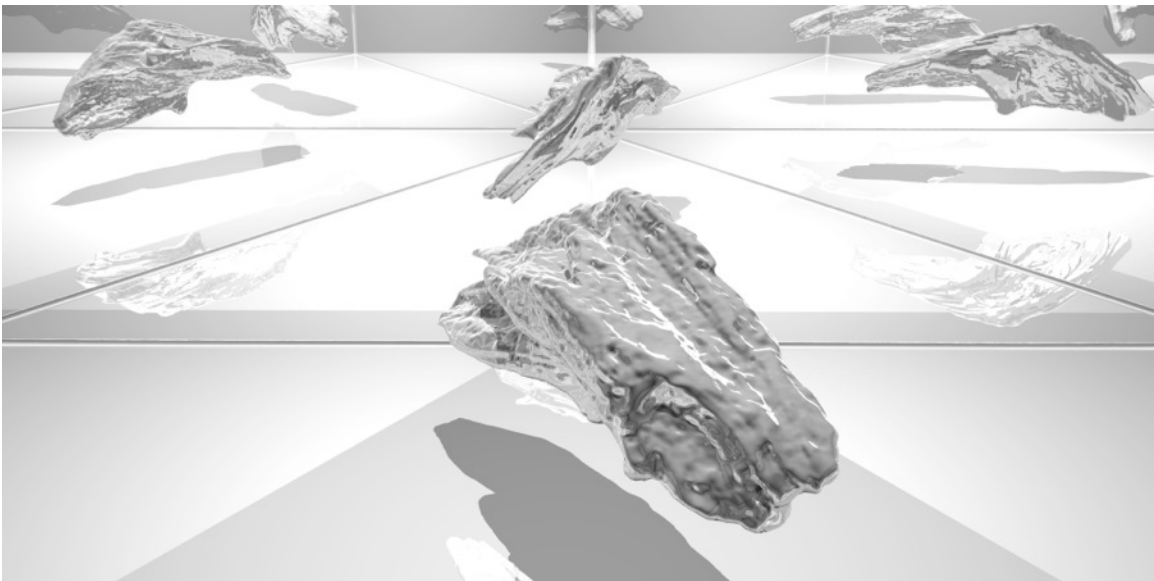


Figure 19

I have examined the latent memories held within existing architectural spaces through drawing and sculpture, suggested the hidden past of specific buildings and rooms. I am intrigued by how technology skews and abstracts this past, while also archiving and crystalizing it, maintaining an imperfect digital replica. I predict my future work will continue to utilize various programs and

digital methods of fabrication, but will eventually move - at least in part - into the digital realm itself, appropriating the spaces and screens that separate us. I can only hope that my efforts reveal some truth of our new, increasingly digital world and encourage the preservation of the things that make us human.

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VITA

Philip Ross LaDeau was born in 1988 near Houston, Texas. He attended Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, earning his Bachelor of Arts in Art and graduating magna cum laude in 2011. He then came to The University of Texas at Austin to pursue his Master of Fine Arts. While at Austin he received numerous fellowships, attended two residencies, including Vermont Studio Center in 2012, and curated a group show that traveled between Austin and San Antonio. He will graduate in May of 2014.

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