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Making Home – at home and abroad

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Making Home – *at home and abroad*

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors

April 2009

Honors Capstone Project in Painting

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Date: _____

Abstract

For my Capstone Project, I created a dual exhibition centering on the theme of home, in collaboration with Elody Gyekis, a Schreyer's Honor student at Penn State University, double majoring in Painting and Ceramics. The show was entitled "***Making Home: at home and abroad***" and was exhibited both in State College, Pennsylvania, and in Syracuse, New York, in March 2009. The body of work was the culmination of our three-year collaboration and consisted of photographs, drawings, paintings, sculptures, ceramic, and video art. The making and installation of the pieces investigated the physical and emotional experience of making home, as both young women and as contemporary artists. Encompassing our travels between different worlds both at home and abroad, the exhibit explored relationships with people and places that formed the foundation of our sense of home, and informed our identities. Some of the pieces were created in direct collaboration, by working together with specific assignments in mind, while others were made independently and later critiqued both in person and over the Internet. Although the individual pieces that comprised the show drew upon past experiences, the installation of the works into a cohesive exhibition focused upon the present. Rather than presenting a documentation of the search or loss of home, the show centered on the actual creating, or making of our home. The physical locations that inspired the works ranged from Italy to China, but focused specifically upon the places that Elody and I actually lived, such as central Pennsylvania and Moscow. Through this collaborative conception and creation of home, we hoped to prompt the audience to explore their own personal identities and understandings of the concept of home.

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my family for providing me with the foundation on which this project could be built. The notions of home

presented in this exhibition are a direct product of the love and support they have shown me.

Next, I would like to thank Stephen Zaima and Sharon Gold for their direction and assistance as my mentors. I would also like to thank Donalee Peden Wesley and Stephen Mahan. These four professors and artists dedicated a great amount of time and effort to this project and their guidance and recommendations have been invaluable to me.

Special thanks to my thesis partner, Elody Gyekis, for helping to bring this idea to fruition. It was a great pleasure to work alongside such a talented artist and friend.

Last, I would like to thank the Renee Crown University Honors Department for believing in this project and providing me with the means to realize it. The level of involvement and care from the staff in the Honors Program was astounding and acted as a great source of motivation for this project.

Reflective Essay

Moscow, Russia; Zhykovskiy, Russia; Mohacs, Hungary;
Middleburg, Pennsylvania, USA; Sunbury, Pennsylvania, USA;

Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, USA; Syracuse, New York, USA; Florence, Italy: these are the places I have lived. There exists the idea that people adhere to what they know and find comfortable, and I am certain that I am most accustomed to and comfortable with change. This inclination has allowed me to explore and learn a great deal about myself, while simultaneously distancing me from my respective worlds. For a long time, it was in this distance that I settled: all of my worlds squeezed out on one large palette, gobs of saturated color that never mixed. I suppose you could say that for my Capstone Project, I decided to really explore the potential of those mounds by mixing them together to paint one cohesive picture. The result came in the form of two exhibitions that explored the concept of home through painting, drawing, photography, ceramics, sculpture, and video art, all of which were made in partnership with my fellow artist Elody Gyekis.

A collaborative project may seem strange when considering the personal nature of the topic of home, without direct insight into our relationship or Elody as an individual. Elody is currently a Schreyer Honors Student double majoring in ceramics and painting at Penn State University. The two of us met as sophomores in high school at the Pennsylvania Governor's School for the Arts. Over the past six years, we have spent every summer working, traveling and making art together, despite living in different towns and attending

different universities. Elody has been a great source of inspiration for me as an artist and a person, and we have always been in the habit of discussing thoughts with one another. The idea for a joint exhibition on the notion of home was born two summers ago, while Elody and I were living and working together for ten weeks in inner-city Harrisburg, organizing, designing, and painting a community mural. The experience was life changing and brought us a great deal closer to one another, as we worked together through personal and artistic challenges in an unfamiliar environment. The neighborhood we lived in was the toughest in the city and like no place we had ever even visited. And yet, after some time spent immersed in the community, the place felt like home. This began a dialogue between us; we started to consider what actually constitutes a home and how that figured into our lives and identities. Soon, the conversation evolved to such great proportions that we decided to explore this concept together in our theses, through an examination of our travels between worlds both at home and abroad. After that summer, Elody and I traveled to China, Russia and Italy together. The work we were making began to explore relationships with the people and places that formed the foundation of our sense of home, and informed our identities.

After all of our journeys, we began to make work that examined our experiences. The process of creating was fluid; we

did not begin with a specific conclusion in mind, but with the intent to explore home as place, people, memory, and metaphor. Through this exploration, we allowed the physical making of the pieces to inform our search; one project led to the next, and unanticipated parallels began to emerge. Some of the pieces were created in direct collaboration, by working together with specific assignments in mind, while others were made independently and later critiqued both in person and over the Internet. Elody and I kept in contact through emails, phone conversations and Skype sessions. During breaks, the two of us took turns traveling between State College and Syracuse to work alongside one another in the studio. Both of us created photographs, drawings and paintings for the show. Independently, Elody also made sculpture and ceramic pieces and I made video art.

Throughout the creation of the works, Elody and I organized our photographs. This process took months upon months, as each of us had over seventy thousand photographs to examine. In the exhibit, these photos served not only to document our travels, but also as reference points for drawings and paintings. The photographs even became physical parts of the exhibition: they made their way into my drawings (through a photo transfer technique using acetone and denatured alcohol) and videos, and into Elody's mixed media sculptures. After a lengthy selection

process, Elody and I chose approximately fifteen photographs apiece to create diptychs that we used as the show cards, invitations, and flyers for the exhibit. We also selected twelve photos to hang as large digital printout diptychs in the gallery.

The shows were installed in two spaces, Spark Gallery in State College, Pennsylvania, and the Sparks Contemporary Art Space in Syracuse, New York. Although the individual pieces that comprised the show drew upon past experiences, the installation of the works into a cohesive exhibition focused upon the present. Rather than presenting a documentation of the search for or loss of home, the show centered on the actual creating, or making of our home. The space we chose in Penn State was a study lounge and the second, in Syracuse, an actual gallery. Both spaces had their share of pluses and minuses; while the lounge restricted our capabilities to freely install pieces due to computers and desks, the limitless possibilities of the gallery space intimidated us. In both spaces, installation time had to be condensed to a day and a half. This caused a great deal of anxiety: the exhibit was as much about the individual pieces as it was about the information they conveyed together, through their relationships to one another. The physical installation was also important because of the role of women as “homemakers” in history. Elody and I wanted to both confront and embrace that idea through the installment of our show.

Soon after we began the process, tensions faded. Elody and I worked as a team in every sense of the word. We calmed each other's nerves and took turns tackling the more difficult jobs. We organized, taped, nailed, measured, erased, attached, fastened and hung with tremendous amounts of care. This made me realize how fortunate I was to be working with a partner I trusted. As a result of that, it truly did feel as if we were creating a home together. I believe the constant stream of energy between Elody, the work and myself created an electric atmosphere. Before the actual installation of the works, both of us had only seen one half of the show's products. It was exciting to watch the development of our ideas culminate in an actual exhibition. Never before had either of us shown more than five pieces at a time.

Since the installation process was essentially controlled by the confines of the respective gallery spaces, there was no specific order to the pieces. Instead, the works were arranged in a way so as to highlight the relationship between pieces, both formally and conceptually. Individual works had no actual wall labels and were marked only by a number, which related to a printed list of works. Elody and I decided to omit artist names and titles from the actual walls, so that the works would read more as an exploration of one idea through different mediums, than singular works. However, in both exhibitions, the printed list of works started with our self-

portraits. Since the show was a joint show, we thought it was important to begin the exhibit with two images that exemplified our personal identities. From there, the works moved from paintings and drawings of our grandparents, to headdresses made in tribute to family members, a collection of paintings commemorating lost relationships, and various other representations of our respective individual experiences.

One aspect of our process that I was vastly interested by was the actual “moving” of our exhibition from State College to Syracuse. I felt that moving the show from state to state was akin to moving a family home: frustrating, straining, exhausting and yet exciting. I was surprised that after being forced to continuously relocate as a child, in my own construction of a home I necessitated the move myself.

For this exhibition, Elody and I buried ourselves in research. Because the concept of home is so broad, we found a great amount of resources on the topic. The contemporary art world seemed particularly preoccupied with the subject, perhaps because travel and advanced means of communication between people and nations have confused the notion of home and identity. Throughout the exhibits, books, and poems we researched, we found home to be synonymous with ideas and words that contradict one another.

One book, entitled *Homemaking, Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home* spoke eloquently about this:

The concept of home ... is a fertile site of contradictions demanding constant renegotiation and reconstruction ... home is always a form of coalition; between the individual and the family or community, between belonging and exile, between home as utopian longing and home as memory, between home as safe haven and home as imprisonment or site of violence, and finally, between home as place and home as metaphor. (Barnes and Wiley xv)

The majority of the visual artists we discovered also worked with the concept of home collaboratively. The PBS *Art 21* series, a television show that focuses exclusively on contemporary visual artists, was a phenomenal resource for locating these individuals. One of the featured artists was Pepon Osorio. His piece: "Tina's House" was particularly helpful. In it, Osorio worked in collaboration with a family to reconstruct a small model of the house they had lost to a fire. The importance of the project was not in the final product, but in the process of creating the work. The discussions of the rooms and spaces in the house did not consist so much of measurements as they did of the memory of a home, how each room felt and who they were inside of it. Do-Ho Suh, a Korean

artist, was of particular influence on me. His piece, the Korean House project, was a translucent celadon silk installation of the traditional Korean house the artist grew up in. I loved the work because it physically recreated the memory of a space. The piece was made in collaboration with a great number of people, including the artist's mother, seamstresses, and industrial designers. Both the collaborative and conceptual aspects of this installation influenced my thought process. In an interview with Suh about his work on the project, he was quoted as saying: "The experience was about transporting space from one place to the other ... I've noticed that I have this longing for this particular space and I want to recreate that space or bring that space wherever I go ... I think home is something that you carry along with your life." I believe that in many ways our exhibit accomplished this.

Poetry was also of great influence in my creative process. Because home is such a complex and abstract concept, I have found myself relating most closely to short poetic stanzas, which sum up the atmospheric qualities of home. Perhaps because home brings so many ideas to a discussion, it is easier to find a short poem that discusses these concepts, as opposed to an entire book or exhibition. In searching through poetry, I could pick and choose sections that directly related to my concept of home. Many of these pieces discussed the feeling of home and home as identity and

loss, without specific discussion of home as place. One example is Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," which talks about the act of losing everything from keys, to people and cities:

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster. (Bishop)

These lines accurately describe my experience with loss, and the concept of moving on. "Things," by Aline Kilmer, is another poem that discusses loss and, in many ways, relates to the body of paintings I created for the exhibit, the small trinket "portraits." These small things are important to me because of their association with specific people I have lost in my life. Kilmer's poem also relates the worth of things to their connection with people:

It is that the spoon that you just laid down
And the cup that you hold
May be here shining and insolent
When you are still and cold. (Kilmer)

Although her poem deals specifically with the death of an individual, my works dealt with the metaphorical death of an individual.

In relation to my art, the experience taught me a great amount about the pleasure of collaborative art making. I am very proud of the body of work I have created. This project was incredibly personal for me, but its true purpose was to encourage

our audience to explore their own identities and understandings of the concept of home. While I cannot say for certain how successful our show was at doing this beyond the gallery doors, I do know that, within our makeshift home, we inspired a lively dialogue. This was, perhaps, what I received the most joy from.

I did not begin this project with the hope of discovering myself, but with the hope of exploring my many homes. Through this project, I have come to realize that the two are one and the same. When speaking or writing, a person says: "I am home," and the sentence does not require a preposition. One cannot say: "I am church" or "I am school." For me, home is a state of being. I have always had a lot of difficulty figuring out where I am from and where I belong. In some ways, I considered myself homeless. However, all the thinking, analyzing and creating I have done for this show have confirmed Suh's quote: home is something you carry along with you. I have realized I am fortunate to have had an array of experiences, which help confirm the things I want and need: the things that make me feel at home, be they places, people or objects.

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Bendiksen, Jonas: *The Places We Live*
Billingham, Richard: *Ray's a Laugh*
Bishop, Elizabeth: "One Art"
Christo and Jeanne Claude
Dalziel, Matthew and Scullion, Louise
Deveney, KayLynn: *The Day-to-Day Life of Albert Hastings*
Do-Ho Suh: *Korean House Project*
Fischer, Arno: *The Garde*
Glück, Louise: "Unpainted Door", "The Traveler", "The Empty Glass", "At the River", "Study of My Sister",
Griffiths, Paul
Howe, Marie: "What the Living Do"
Kilmer, Aline: "Vigils, Things"
Larkin, Philip: "Home is so Sad"
Lyon, Danny: *Knave of Hearts*
Merrin, Jeredith: "Family Reunion"
Morison, Heather and Ivan: *Global Survey Radio Station*
N55: *WALKING HOUSE*
Osorio, Pepon: *Tina's House*
Owens, Bill: *Suburbia*
Richards, Eugene: *The Fat Baby*
Robert Frank: *Story Lines, Moving Out*
Stone, Ruth: "The Cabbage"
Sultan Larry: *Pictures from Home*
Towell, Larry: *The World From My Front Porch*
William Carlos Williams: "This is Just to Say"

Appendices (please see attached DVD)

Capstone Summary

For my Capstone Project, I created a dual exhibition, centering on the theme of home, in partnership with Elody Gyekis, a Schreyer's Honor student at Penn State University, double majoring in Painting and Ceramics. The show was entitled "**Making Home: at home and abroad**" and was exhibited both in State College, Pennsylvania, and in Syracuse, New York, in March 2009. The body of work was the culmination of our three-year collaboration and consisted of photographs, drawings, paintings, sculptures, ceramic, and video art. The making and installation of the pieces investigated the physical and emotional experience of making home as both young women and as contemporary artists. Encompassing our travels between different worlds, both at home and abroad, the exhibit explored relationships with people and places that formed the foundation of our sense of home, and informed our identities.

The process of creation was very fluid; we did not begin with a specific conclusion in mind, but with the intent to explore the different notions of home as place, people, memory, metaphor, or

even utopia. Through this exploration, we allowed the physical making of the pieces to inform our search; one project led to the next and unanticipated parallels began to emerge. Some of the pieces were created in direct collaboration, by working together with specific assignments in mind, while others were made independently and later critiqued, both in person and over the Internet. Skype proved to be an incredible resource in the creation of this exhibition. The program was used for everything from planning the format of our invitation cards to the actual writing of our artists' statement. In general, the Internet proved to be an invaluable tool. Elody and I used the web to post photographs, swap documents, discuss installation ideas and research other artists.

Although the individual pieces that comprised the show drew upon past experiences, the installation of the works into a cohesive exhibition focused upon the present. Rather than presenting a documentation of the search or loss of home, the show centered on the actual creating, or making of our home. The installation process was essentially controlled by the confines of the respective gallery spaces, therefore there was no specific order to the pieces. Instead, the works were arranged in a way so as to highlight the relationship between pieces, both formally and conceptually.

Individual works had no actual wall labels and were marked only by a number, which related to a printed list of works.

The physical locations that inspired the works ranged from Italy to China, but focused specifically upon the places where Elody and I actually lived, such as central Pennsylvania and Moscow. Our travels were represented mainly through photographs, which were shown in the exhibition both in collage form and as large digital prints. These photos concentrated on the physical environment of the places visited. Instead, the works made about the places where we had lived became more about the identity of those worlds as defined by the objects and people that surrounded us. For example, Lewisburg appeared in the form of a painting of my best friend's backyard, Moscow, through a charcoal portrait of my stepmother and sister, Millheim through Elody's porcelain shelves titled: *Shelves I Take with Me*.

Some of the works combined places and worlds. My relocations through the state of Pennsylvania were presented in the form of colorful, multilayered paintings of objects I associated with specific individuals lost through the process of moving. Each painting was titled after a person. One of Elody's porcelain pieces referenced both the places we had traveled and lived in by interlacing their architectural structures in one "city." Inside the center, some of the porcelain skyscrapers resembled Manhattan,

others Chinese temples and Russian churches, while on the outskirts one could make out factories and warehouses that recalled the decaying, industrial spaces found throughout the state of Pennsylvania. One video, titled *Certain Silence*, united my immediate family by showcasing their interactions with me as experienced through music. Though all are spread out between different cities and countries, they are presented together in this piece.

The show was about the marriage of the experiences, thoughts, and perspectives of two artists. It was about the process of building up and breaking down our conception of home in two different spaces. It was about an exchange of emails, phone calls, Skype calls, and text messages and the relativity and limitations of distance. Ultimately, the show was about the process of bringing all of these aspects together into one cohesive exhibition. Through this collaborative conception and creation of home, we hoped to prompt the audience to explore their own personal identities and understandings of the concept of home.