

## ABSTRACT

Susan B. Fecho. PORTRAIT OF A TOWN CALLED PENNY HILL.  
(Under the direction of Donald R. Sexauer) School of Art,  
East Carolina University, May 1988.

This written report of creative thesis is an account of the development of a body of work based on the town of Penny Hill, North Carolina. This report conveys a poetical impression of the intimate spaces of the structures at Penny Hill and focuses on the effects that time and the aging process has had on the buildings. Excerpts from Emily Dickinson's poetry are included as supportive material. This thesis explores the possibilities of using traditional collograph techniques with collage for the purpose of embellishing and enriching the surfaces. It recounts the problems and questions involved in the working process as well as their solutions and answers.



THE TITLE OF A THESIS  
CALLED PENNY HILL  
PORTRAIT OF A TOWN  
CALLED PENNY HILL

A Report of a Creative Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the School of Art

East Carolina University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

by

Susan Barbe Fecho

May 1988

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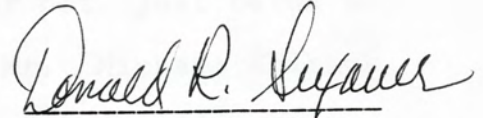
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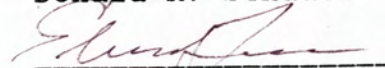
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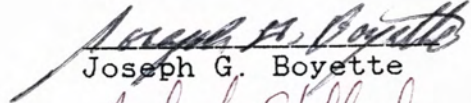
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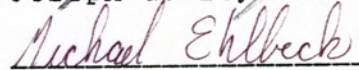
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## INTRODUCTION

Images of buildings and rooms have social connotations whether we see people in them or not. There are always signs of past inhabitants, of their care or lack of it, and of their abandonment.

"Now the entrance of one of the old ones into the Rock too often means a lifework perished from the land without inheritor and the field goes wild and the house sits and stares. Or it passes at cash value into the hands of strangers."

- Wendell Berry <sup>1</sup>

"We paused before a house that seemed, A swelling of the ground; The roof was scarcely visible, The cornice, in the ground."

- Emily Dickinson <sup>2</sup>

We daydream about old buildings, about who lived there and when. The house image is a poetical symbol. By remembering houses and interior spaces, we hear the forgotten, the housed, yet intrinsic memories within ourselves. Archetypal symbols of rooms and houses have



also been viewed as a haven, a shelter, or a retreat with the windows and closed doors as barriers of protection against the world. Emily Dickinson, who spent most of her life in self-imposed seclusion, must have thought of the house form as a protective haven. But in this life there is also the equal but opposite force. These same symbols can convey thoughts of imprisonment or confinement. Henrik Ibsen's play called A Doll's House, published in the late 19th century, uses the house form as a symbolic sociological imprisonment. And even for Emily Dickinson, the homestead was not enough of a peaceful solitude. In time, she incarcerated herself into the rooms of her consciousness for a death-in-life like state. These printed images of Penny Hill will also be of two separate thought consciousnesses; the Godfrey A. Stancill house will be the house form being presented as a comforting haven, and the Doctor's office representing an individual's private world of fears and insecurities that might cause them to view the symbol of the house as a prison.

## PORTRAIT OF A TOWN CALLED PENNY HILL

"For the time being, in the Interim, in the course of time, from day to day, from hour to hour, until in due time, and in the fullness of time, time endures, goes on, remains, persists, lasts, goes by, lapses, passes, flows, rolls on, flies, slips, slides, and glides by."

-Nancy Holt. <sup>3</sup>

Penny Hill has always intrigued me. It is an old town located in Pitt County, North Carolina, on Highway 33. <sup>4</sup> The origin of the community's name is uncertain, but it is said to have been named for Penny Hill, wife of James Thigpen IV, who moved to the area circa 1729.<sup>5</sup> I have passed through this town regularly for about ten years. There are only two structures left of the original town. There is the old Doctor's office and the Godfrey A. Stancill house. About seven or eight years ago a third structure still stood. It was a post office or pub.<sup>6</sup> At the time I didn't care about this old group of dilapidated buildings. I may never know what triggered the need to

record on film the remaining structures of this rural nineteenth century town. Nevertheless, I began to keep a photographic record of the erosion of the buildings.

These buildings are not typical nineteenth century rural structures. Because of Penny Hill's (incorporated in 1875) ornate qualities, it is supposedly one of the most unusual towns remaining from this period in Pitt County. The Doctor's office is of a Victorian style and is one of only a handful of country doctor's offices remaining from this period. And the other structure, called the Godfrey Stancill house also possesses architectural notability because of its ornate and imaginative use of millwork on an otherwise unassuming turn-of-the-century house.

I view Penny Hill as an establishment long forgotten and with few viewers to appreciate it. It is a place with decorative exteriors and intimate interiors. "Architectural experience depends on memory..the land will win in the end." <sup>7</sup> These buildings are eroding away into the landscape. My work should be viewed as a personal, yet visual, recollection of the Penny Hill area. For years, I passed another building that was recently torn down, but if asked to draw a facsimile of its appearance, I could not. As each year goes by, these buildings sink a little further toward nothingness. Nothing lasts forever, and without a record of its existence and its deterioration, who will

ever know that Penny Hill ever existed. These prints are reminders that the buildings once stood. I find myself constantly returning to the town to gain more insight into the spatial and physical concerns of the architecture.

Like poetry, two-dimensional work deals in meanings conditioned by emotional attitudes evoked by the artist's selection of visual elements. It is up to me to discard cluttering details and to select and arrange the remainder to communicate my impression, thereby transferring my experience to the viewer. At times, I wish I could construct an exact duplicate of Penny Hill so that viewers could explore and feel the psychological experiences that I have had as I have walked through and around the structures. But the purpose of these prints is to allow the viewer to see what mirrors my mind at the particular instant that I am viewing a particular scene.

## THE IMAGES

Rather than begin my prints on white paper, I wanted to use a less stark surface such as gray or tan. The problem with this was that local stores do not have a large selection of different colored printmaking paper. Having the knowledge of how to make paper, and also liking the soft surface quality of handmade paper, I decided to make my own. This allowed me to produce a variety of tones. Most of the paper I made for this thesis project was gray because I felt it best typified the faded quality of the aged buildings that had long since lost their original colorings to the weathering elements of nature. The choice of pulp was a combination of cotton and hemp. Hemp has much longer and softer fibers than cotton linters. This textural quality remains visible even after printing. But the softness of the fibers also means that the surface cannot take constant reworking without damage. The combination of the two pulp types allowed me to produce a stronger surface for printing. To reduce delamination problems, the different layers of paper were glued together

instead of laminating the pulp when in a wet state. The surface was then sprayed with fixative before printing to harden the surface.

Another reason I chose to make my own paper was a comment I once heard from a professional papermaker. "If one must take time to process natural materials into usable pulp, which can be quite an undertaking if using raw plant material, would not the artist be left with a different sensibility toward the surface of that paper than someone that merely goes to a store counter and asks for a sheet of paper?"<sup>8</sup> I will probably never make paper in a production manner, but I do feel this attitude and experience has helped when I approach a new print or drawing. I intend to leave more of the paper surface showing on purpose in an attempt to marry the paper and the ink in the final product. If I use a textured or patterned paper and leave some of that paper showing, I increase the illusionistic textural qualities of the print. Also, if preprinted material is used, then I have added something that I could not have added otherwise.

## THE GODFREY A. STANCILL HOUSE

The shapes in Time, Morning (plate 1) and The Parlor (plate 2) have been simplified so that they will not interfere with the softness of the color and the paper. This first image, Time, Morning (plate 1) is the largest in the series, and is much more abstracted than the other prints. The room image has an exaggerated perspective to draw the viewer further back into the picture plane. The floor's shape is pyramidal to stress the idea of spiritual expression, but even though this print is visually pleasing and was the thesis project's beginning, it will not hang in the thesis show. I do not feel it fits in with the other prints because of size and technical differences. In both prints, the grays are soft and of low intensity. They are not free and immediate in appearance, but I do not consider this a limiting factor. The compositions are planned and the value thoughtfully arranged. The layering of values evolves slowly rather than happens spontaneously. These are rooms offering a protected and contented calm. The bluish tones are balanced with the warmth of sunshine. Warm hues are normally never used to depict scenes that are

mournful. The Parlor (plate 2) even has flakes of gold underneath the layers of gray, for the print began on gold marbled paper.

While working on the images Kitchen (plate 3) and Dining Room, (plate 4), I found that stationery, photos, and various preprinted papers could also be used since these prints were of a smaller scale. So, I incorporated a variety of commercial papers in with my handmade paper. Because of the lushness of the available papers, I realized that I probably needed a different approach. The collaged prints produce a surface full of jewel-like flickers of color under the layers of ink. For the past few years I had tried to work much more abstractly, but by the time these images were finished, I had fairly graphic renditions of the Penny Hill structures' interiors. I was pleased with the printed surfaces, rich textures, and the wide range of cool and warm grays in the final states. All the years of experimenting with various printmaking techniques had allowed me to develop the creative freedom necessary to step out of the bounds of traditional processes.

In Upstairs (plate 5), I wished to keep the composition's detail to a minimum so that the tonal qualities could be more important than a mere imitation of the room. Color was again limited so that the textural



qualities of the surfaces dominate. Media manipulation was important in this print. Since structural elements of the composition were kept minimal, differentiating textural qualities through the use of collage and ink layering were used to achieve variety. "Stairs are means of access to various parts and levels of the soul of an old-house."<sup>9</sup> The idea that a house had a soul has created many a legend and superstition. Emily Dickinson, relates the house form to the human body.

One need not be a Chamber-to be Haunted-

One need not be a House-

The Brain has Corridors-surpassing

Material Place-<sup>10</sup>

Here is an entryway with peeling paint, a torn curtain, and faded memories. The image Without Doors (plate 6) conjures up symbolic notions about openings. Openings can be symbolic of escape passages, a means to get away from what scares us or angers us. In the print Without Doors(plate 6), there are no doors to lock and no doors to close. The viewer is left to find the escape passage. The composition has two openings. Which one, the room with the fireplace or the bathroom, will be a haven? The color combinations are different in the two rooms. A fireplace, if lit, would provide warmth and comfort. Yet,

instead, the room transmits an atmosphere of disturbance and unrest because of its cool coloration, thick textural quality, and sharp value contrast. The small bathroom is of a warm monochromatic palette. The image has a soft illumination and an element of pattern to convey a sense of harmony and reassurance. The post and lintel shapes of the door jambs have been interpreted as contrasting values for emphasis. The beams appear more stable if not broken off by other shapes or thrown into uninviting shadows. I like the idea of the properties of color representing emotions. "White...acts upon our psyche as a great, absolute silence, like the pauses in music that temporarily break the melody...On the other hand...black is a silence with no possibilities. In music it is represented by one of those profound and final pauses..."<sup>11</sup> A picture with bright tones usually has a bold assertive quality, whereas one consisting of middle range tones will tend to be of a quiet and restful nature. In the print Without Doors (plate 6), the bathroom is of middle range colors such as beige, brick red and gray with only a small amount of dark gray. In contrast, the room with the fireplace is of low range values like black, and dark gray. Only a small amount of beige appears on the mirror. In this context, the room on the left will produce a reaction of symbolic unrest. The search for a haven would be found in the room on the right.

There is a peculiar fascination about an old house that charms so many people. The Attic, (plate 7), is an image representing the space where past inhabitants stored items of memorabilia similar to how we store bits of our past in our brain. There is a close parallel between an old house and the human body. A house has a protective skin that is supported by a wooden skeleton. This attic is a space that is dark and crowded with the support beams uncovered like bones thrusting outward toward the viewer. Holes have been pushed through the thin flooring to expose the underlying room. Electrical wires, being a later addition to the house, are haphazardly laid out and positioned as they run toward their final destination. As the eaves of the house take the attic into unaccessible spaces, the values become darker and the textural qualities smooth out.

The prints Desk (plate 8) and Hallway (plate 9), are void of the deep perspective angles found in some of the other prints. They do not have as much meaning on the conscious level but serve as continuous enhancement of a portrait of the interior. The interest lies in the way the structural elements of the house were built. In Desk (plate 8), we see the small second window above the door. If one were to go to the second floor one would find that this small window is at the floor level of the room.

Perhaps this is where the two houses were joined and the parlor was built as the joining addition. Many restorations and structural changes have been made to the house. This is why the structure did not get on the National Register of Historical Places. As for me, these quirks add to the structure's visual character. These structural interests are accentuated in the prints with tonality contrast. The coloration remains warm in hue and the values light to middle toned. Many ink layers are used to explore the potentials of the imagery and enrich the surface.





Plate 1: Time. Morning

35"W x 30"H





Plate 2: Palor

11"W x 14"H







Plate 3: Kitchen

8.5"W x 11"H





Plate 4: Dining Room

5.5"W x 9.25"H





Plate 5: Upstairs

8"W x 11"H





Plate 6: Without Doors

8"W x 11"H







Plate 7: The Attic

4"W x 5"H





Plate 8: Desk

5"W x 7.5"H





Plate 9: Hallway

11"W x 8.5"H

## THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE

Local tradition has it that one doctor that set up an office in the building had quite a thriving practice there. After his death, the office was used as a school. The room of the Doctor's office is grim and uncompromising. Not even as much as an echo remains to remind us of what the room might have looked like when in use. This second set of images invokes feelings of isolation and loneliness that represent the dark side of Emily Dickinson's personality. At times, she wrote of the house form as a haven for her suffering soul, but at other times, the house form was a prison. So crushed was her life that she wrote in her later years: "I do not cross my father's ground to any house or town."<sup>12</sup> She was afraid of being hurt by others. So, I have chosen to show this other side of her feelings in the images of the Doctor's office. These images do not try to explain but to acknowledge. The warm tawny colors and light values of the Stancill House images do not appear in the second set. These prints have much darker values and less contrast. The colors are also cooler to be more symbolic and representative of fear or confinement.

The images called The Smallest Room (plate 10) and Flooring (plate 11) are derived from the Doctor's Office. There is only one room to the entire structure. Small bits of light seep through the cracks in the small door located in the back of the structure. This is a room where one can dream of love and freedom but never awake to them. It is a room of suffering and tribulation. The structural planes squeeze in tight on the occupant. The door in the images is decentralized and the space of the room arbitrarily cropped so the viewer can get the idea that these are fragments or scraps of reality. Values are dark and the surfaces are lacking in detail to accentuate the idea of a distorted and melodramatic personality. Psychopathy is a "time of darkness, despair, disillusion-so black only as the inferno of the human mind can be-symbolic death".<sup>13</sup>

In The Doctor's Office (plate 12) image, the viewer sees the windows jutting out from their plane because of stark value and warm to cool contrast. In order to get to a state of surrealism, I altered the composition. I did not want to distort the perspective because that would be too obvious. I wanted a more subtle alteration. The walls are dark and of cool color so that they will recede and the windows of a warm, lighter value for the purpose of illusionary advancement. By allowing the planes of the windows to fluctuate I hope to convey an idea of



insincerity. This insincerity challenges the real and the unreal states of being. The bluish color of the wall is the blue of mystery and unapproachability. Blue can denote the color of freedom and beauty, but it, as here, can also be the color of death. I am aware that this print does not fit in completely with the rest of the series if one were to compare the value levels and scale. But I want the viewer to also be aware of the wide range of possibilities in expressing these notions. This is a room full of illusionary, yet subtle, textures and shifting planes. This is done in an attempt to mock the root meaning of home as haven and transfigure it into a prison. Emily Dickinson quite often mocked the universal meaning of home as a positive symbol because of her personal insecurities.

I never felt at Home-Below-  
 And in the Handsome Skies  
 I shall not fell at Home-I know-  
 I dont like Paradise-  
 Homeless at home.<sup>14</sup>

In this last image, Corner (plate 14), we sense enclosure. Life begins for us enclosed and protected by a house form, and when we dream, the house form often represents the human body.<sup>14</sup> This print shows the corner of the room from a close proximity, and the values are dark

and stifling. The door and window are right there, but the composition does not allow the viewer to look out. There is the sense of smallness again in this composition. This print sums up the two states of consciousness that I have presented in the thesis. There is the want and need to have the house as a haven, but at times the haven becomes a prison. Here, the window and door's structural beams become bars. The size is small to represent the insignificance of one human in the scope of eternity. A person tries to protect oneself by hiding away, by enclosing oneself as if trying to enter the womb again. But out of this grows neurotic feelings of "inscape"<sup>15</sup>.





Plate 10: Smallest Room

5"W x 7"H





Plate 11: Flooring

5"W x 3.5"H





Plate 12: The Doctor's Office

11"W x 7.5"H







Plate 13: Corner

5"W x 3.5"H

## CONCLUSION

When I began this creative thesis, I had wanted to use the imagery of Emily Dickinson to serve as a back up to the symbolic representations of house as haven. But the more I studied her work, the more I realized that she fluctuated between the two opposite consciousnesses. Two states of consciousness were presented in regards to Emily Dickinson. First was the idea of the house form as a haven, and second was the opposite idea of the same symbolic form being thought of as a prison. Subsequently, I felt I needed to divide the work into two sections for a more correct interpretation of her poetic consciousness. This decision also aided in reaching my own imagery's full visual potential. The experience of portraying the portrait of Penny Hill and trying to convey simultaneously a thread of continuity about Emily Dickinson's poetic imagery and how the two related was a positive artistic experience. It did help that had I begun with a familiar subject upon which I could expand. I was pleased with the outcome of the thesis prints. Medium and technical concerns were of a secondary nature. The creative endeavor in trying to join the visual with the poetic imagery was the more important concern.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Wendell Berry, "At a Country Funeral," in A Southern Album, ed. Irein Glusker (Birmingham: Oxmoor House, 1975), 172.

<sup>2</sup>"Because I Could Not Stop For Death," The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Elizabeth Browning, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 676.

<sup>3</sup>Nancy Holt, "The Time Being," Arts Magazine (May 1978), 144.

<sup>4</sup>Penny Hill flanks the road near the junction of the Tar River and the Penny Hill mill run, and the town straddled the Pitt/Edgecombe boundary according to a U.S. Geological Survey map, Tarboro quadrangle, 1901.

<sup>5</sup>Alice Whitley Smith, The Thigpen Tribe (n.p. 1961), 31.

<sup>6</sup>The 1901 U.S. Geological Survey map shows that there were 32 major buildings in Penny Hill at the time of the survey.

<sup>7</sup>Phil Leider, "Robert Smithson: The Essays," Arts Magazine (May 1978), 99.

<sup>8</sup>Mary Ann Zotto, conversation with, Greenville, North Carolina, February 1987.

<sup>9</sup>Christopher Evers, The Old-House Doctor (Woodstock,

New York: The Overlook Press. 1986), 3.

<sup>10</sup>"#274," Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson Poems.  
selection and introduction by Thomas H. Johnson (Boston:  
Little, Brown and Company. 1961), 220.

<sup>11</sup>Wassily Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art  
(New York: Wittenborn Art Books, Inc. 1963).

<sup>12</sup>J.D. O'Hara, Poetry (New York: Newsweek Books.  
1975), 120.

<sup>13</sup>Sylvia Path, The Bell Jar (New York: Bantam Books.  
1976), 209.

<sup>14</sup>"1573", The Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas  
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Harvard University Press. 1958), 1084.

<sup>15</sup>Sigmund Freud, A General Introduction to  
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