

MILE MARKER: A MATERIAL INVESTIGATION IN TWO LANE TRAVELS

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This thesis contemplates American imagery, landscape, memories, identities, and travel in order to introduce the spontaneity of adventure to the viewer. My work attempts to spark a desire for being lost and focuses on the memorialization of the journey instead of a destination. Embedding my narratives into wearable objects enables an exchange of personal experience between the wearer and myself in order to share and collect personal insights about our world.

The formulation of this work relies on photographic documentation, information from historical preservation societies, and community interaction to preserve certain aspects of a location I observe. I record the distinctive economic, architectural and social curiosities of a site with photography and sketches that are later distilled into wearable jewelry.

In these recollections of regionalism I imitate and miniaturize materials like bricks, I-beams, roofing and road signs using jewelry and metalsmithing materials. I memorialize a location and create a narrative as a reminder to the wearer of the decline of the two lane blacktops that connect this country.

MILE MARKER: A MATERIAL INVESTIGATION IN TWO LANE TRAVELS

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By

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Dedicated to

Jeff and Wanda my biological parents

&

Dan and Jane my art parents

&

Erin Younge the sister I never had

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INTRODUCTION



Figure 1: Clarksdale, TN
Copper, brass, steel, cloisonné enamel, concrete
13inx7in

During the years of 2012-2014 I set out on numerous road trips across the United States. These drives took me through 14,548 miles of small town Americana and took a combined 232 hours of driving time. Utilizing secondary and tertiary road systems and forsaking GPS applications, I witnessed first hand the dilapidation of the American dream in these locations.

Seeking out towns bypassed by the interstate highway systems after the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1925 I documented the lonely beauty of what I call "Roadside Relics." For example, passing a building in *Clarksdale, TN* with visually beautiful boarded up windows caused me to stop, investigate, document and venerate with the production of a handmade necklace (figure 1). The people

and places I encounter on these detours are instrumental in the production of this work. I fell in love with those slices of mid-century Americana during those trips, and I reinterpret them into personal adornment objects in order for that fondness to spread.

CHAPTER 1: THE NARRATIVE LANDSCAPE



*Figure 2: Topton, PA: For Ted
Copper, brass, concrete, steel*

Anthropologists tell us that storytelling is pivotal to human life. It is the shared thread in every known civilization. Taking the written word out of the equation, the storyteller simulates the imagination while traditionally imparting a moral about culturally acceptable behavior. This interdependent exchange between the teller and the listener is pivotal to my work in order to counteract the ever-increasing emphasis on technology and Internet enabled anonymity in our culture. We are a lonely nation, "Social Isolation in America has grown

dramatically in the past 20 years and our internet interactions aren't helping and may be making loneliness worse. A recent study of Facebook users found that the amount of time you spend on the social network is inversely related to how happy you feel throughout the day." (Myer, 2006) The rise of apathy and the decline of civic engagement and community participation is a symptom of the digital age we find ourselves in. The objective of this body of work is to communicate the transformative power of the handmade object. These objects tell the stories in which encourage the audience to seek adventure and companionship in our national landscape.

Stories that have survived from the 5th century B.C. continue to be distilled down by our culture but are still deeply ingrained in it. Epic poems like "The Iliad" by Homer have survived by being handed down through many generations of storytellers (called rhapsodes) who altered and polished each tale to suite their style and audience. Some storytellers competed for prizes at religious festivals, like the 5th century version of the Oscars. Throughout history we have used story telling for passing down belief systems, traditions, instruction, and for preserving cultural history for future generations. "In a study led by the cognitive scientist Véronique Boulenger, of the Laboratory of Language Dynamics in France, it has been discovered that our brains are wired specifically to receive information orally. The brains of random participants were scanned as they read sentences aloud like 'John grasped the object' and 'Pablo kicked the ball'." The scans revealed activity in the motor cortex, which coordinates the body's movements." (Paul,

2012) The transformational quality of storytelling helps us to organize information, and tie content together:

Raymond Mar, a psychologist at York University in Canada, performed an analysis of 86 fMRI studies, published last year in the Annual Review of Psychology, and concluded that there was substantial overlap in the brain networks used to understand stories and the networks used to navigate interactions with other individuals — in particular, interactions in which we're trying to figure out the thoughts and feelings of others. Scientists call this capacity of the brain to construct a map of other people's intentions "theory of mind." (Paul, 2012)

This supports that narratives hone our real-life social skills; individuals who frequently read fiction and become entrenched in the story seem to be better at empathizing with others and seeing the world from their perspective.

As I make a piece I examine my memories and pick out details to fabricate into a chain, pendant, clasp etc. Each component is fabricated based on memories of buildings, signs, weather conditions, smells, sights, food, conversations and interactions in order to compose an intriguing visual travel narrative. While interacting with individuals on the road I feel I am making steps towards becoming a better person with a more complete view of the world around me. During my research and design processes I infuse romance, history and humor into my visual imagery to blur the lines between fact and fiction. A

Storyteller's voice creates a lively microcosm of learning, self-awareness and community building. I am interested in stories that create understanding between people. Those social connections that are seeds of growth that are needed if we are to nurture leadership and sustain a diverse organized culture in small towns once again.

CHAPTER 2: NORTHBOUND



*Figure 3: "Middletown, DE" Necklace
Copper, brass, glass, citrine concrete
4inx10in*

Delaware

I grew up in a small town in the second smallest state in America. Middletown, Delaware. The Necklace "Middletown, DE" (figure 3) is in reference to a large farmhouse that sat adjacent to the building where I attended high school. At that time it was my first experience exploring the ruins of a man made structure and in time it turned into our sanctuary from Mrs. Perry's algebra class. In retrospect I understand this was the point at which I started to find decay of uninhabited spaces profoundly tragic and beautiful. My father, Jeffery Allen James, is a Coast Guard Veteran and factory worker. Coming from a crabbing and fishing family,

he instilled in me a love for getting dirty and working with my hands. We used to take day trips to a place on the coast called Cedar Swamp to look for Native American arrowheads. Those trips were instrumental in imprinting on me the importance of history. With each washed up glass bottle, arrowhead, or civil war belt buckle came a story of a time when things were made by hand and personal touches existed on every single object produced. He used to say, "Show me your things and I will tell you your life story." My mother, Wanda Kay Morgan is a lifelong Delawarean and has been in the newspaper business my whole life. She started at The News Journal in 1983, at age twenty-seven, she was a receptionist in the classifieds advertising department. Twenty-five years later through countless redirections, layoffs and company buyouts my mother (with only a high school degree) is now the Classifieds office manager for the entire paper.

Growing up living in Northeast megalopolis (the most heavily urbanized region of the United States) there exists a civic environment where landowners cannot afford to let a building sit and age. The insanely high price of land combined with 931.3 people living per square mile produces an immeasurable amount of construction, leaving little room for history. These are just a few factors contributing to my sensitivity to gentrification, greed and consumerism being disguised as revitalization, efficiency, and pleasure.

Pennsylvania



Figure 3: "Lancaster, PA" Necklace
Copper, brass, steel, enamel.
7inx12in

I add color to my work mainly using powder coating to reference the color palette that I see while traveling on the road. Powder coating is a process whereby a plastic coating is applied to the surface of anything from automobiles to architecture to protect the metal from corrosion. To create aged surfaces on my work I will often scratch, sandblast, and faux finish them. Powder coating (a relatively new process for contemporary jewelers) brings the work into the contemporary art jewelry conversation and creates visual curiosity of the viewer.

The necklace *Lancaster, PA: Hare Pin Turn* (figure 4) is in reverence to the four years I spent driving around the back roads of Lancaster Pennsylvania in

order to get to class on time. It was made in tribute to the thousands of rabbits clobbered by cars flying around the many “hare” pin turns in Amish country (I have only hit one). The roads (“Crooked as a barrel full of fish hooks” as my grandfather would say) are peppered with banked construction barns (with stone walled foundations) strategically placed right up to the edge of roads built for buggies—not automobiles. I was in undergraduate school in Lancaster and while I was there I became independent from my parents and a sense of community began to encompass my life. Living beyond the Northeast megalopolis I became interested in the different cultures and people around me. The Amish have played a large roll in shaping Lancaster’s community. "Amish society emphasizes informal learning- through doing, a life of goodness, rather than a life of intellect; wisdom, rather than technical knowledge; community welfare, rather than competition; and separation, rather than integration with contemporary worldly society." -Chief Justice Warren Burger. In a time when many farmers across the nation are near bankruptcy and at the mercy of mega pesticide and seed companies the Amish are still making money. They turn a profit without regard for modern technology or government subsidies. Most of Lancaster is surrounded by Amish farmland forcing the city to stay small and personable. Eating fasnachts (Amish Doughnuts made the day before lent), crazy traffic jams caused by a horse and buggy trying to make a right turn out of Wal-Mart, and weekend walks to America’s oldest farmers market are just a few things that sustains Lancaster’s strong civic identity and sustainable infrastructure. It may be helpful to define the term sustainability. “Sustainability is widely accepted to refer to: an approach that

meets the needs of the existing generation while not compromising the needs of future generations, while protecting the rights of both.” (Pezzey & Toman 2002) This location holds a special place in my memory because my identity started to form there.

During my sophomore year of college the British Petroleum oil spill seemed to be the only event covered by the media. I felt bombarded with images of death, greed, and America’s increasing economic gap. I found myself terrified to go to any café, bar or public place with a television inside for fear of seeing yet another dead bird on the gulf sand and getting physically ill. Memories of crabbing and fishing with my made the event even more tragic. The thought of a few greedy and foolish people consuming and taking dangerous liberties with our ocean made me furious. I recruited four fellow artists who were just as distressed as I was and we decided to take a road trip. Our plan was to drive from Lancaster, PA to Mobile, AL to witness what was happening firsthand and to volunteer to help clean up. On our first day we stopped in Chattanooga, TN for the night and in the morning drove up Lookout Mountain to the “world-famous” tourist attraction Rock City. During the Civil War the mountain had played host to a rather significant squabble later nicknamed “The Battle Above the Clouds”. While Chattanooga was under siege by the Confederates the Union army captured Lookout Mountain that flanked the city and plotted their attack. General Grant began his attempt to take back the mountain by advancing his men towards the fog-covered peak. The fog masked the Union advance and, with only 1,200 Rebels facing nearly 12,000 Yankees, there was not much of a fight. The next

day the Union successfully broke the Confederate lines around Chattanooga. Fast-forward to the 21st century and this mountain is a roadside tourist attraction that has absolutely nothing to do with history, or the civil war.

We drove up the corkscrew road that led to the summit of the mountain, and paid our \$20 and started “exploring”. We arrived at the top by way of rope-

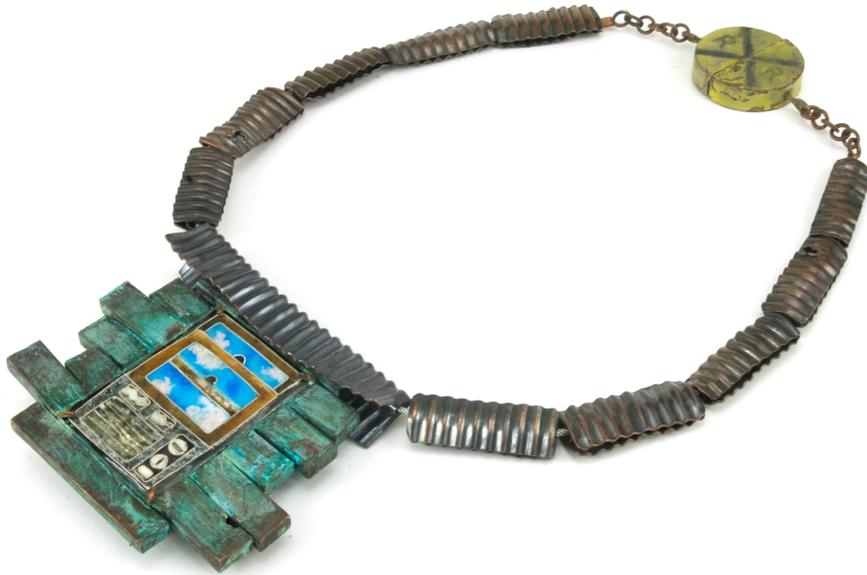


Figure 4: “Rock City, TN” Necklace
Copper, brass, champlévé enamel, powder coat
4inx12in

bridge to find two coin-operated viewfinders staring at us like two large chrome owls. I dropped in my only quarter and peeked through at supposedly all seven of the surrounding states. I could not help but ask myself; why are binoculars necessary to see what was right in front of me? This location, once full of breathtaking natural beauty and wildlife, was now reduced to a funhouse version

of its former self with blaring elevator music and creepy black light caves. Only a few of the natural structures still clung on. This was the place that sparked my fascination of people and communities that continue to capitalize on their naturally occurring local curiosities. *Rock City, TN Necklace* (figure 5) is my tribute to that mountain and a visual reminder to see what is right in front of you.

CHAPTER 3: SOUTHBOUND



*Figure 5: "Shack-Up Inn" Necklace
Copper, brass, steel, cloisonné enamel, liquid enamel.
6inx11in*

I moved to the South in the summer of 2010. I remember remarking about the amount of abandoned buildings that dotted the landscape. High anxiety traffic steered me towards the exit for Route 13 South early in my drive (a route that mirrors Interstate 95 along the east coast.) I imagined the families that had lived in each fallen over bungalow or vine covered farmhouse and quizzed myself on what American made product was manufactured in any number of rusted tight factories. The spellbinding beauty of the road (something specifically designed for mobility and travel) made me want to stop and explore. I was going through

big changes in my life while traveling through a landscape that had maxed out on changing. That first drive down route 13 south stirred in me a love for driving on alternative routes, it may take longer to get to your destination but you have a better story when you get there.

Greenville, NC



Figure 6: "Summit St. Greenville, NC"
Sterling silver, copper, brass, tin, cotton
11inx14in

My first impression of Greenville, NC was not a flattering one. I left Route 13 and its time traveling appeal to drive into a town taken over by purple and gold. Boasting more fast food and chain restaurants per capita than any other town of its size in America, Greenville is known for three major things—parties, football and its ever-expanding waistline. Downtown has little business diversity and most

of the remaining historic buildings have had their front windows tinted black, their insides gutted and their history forgotten to accommodate East Carolina University's 20-something party scene. Summit St. Greenville, NC (figure 7) is the first piece in this series that critiques the community in which I was living. I walk to school everyday down Summit St. (nicknamed the student ghetto) and witness the carelessness of the residents living there. Every Saturday morning there is a new sprinkling of red solo cups, club wristbands, abandoned bras, broken bottles, beer cans and the occasional stiletto. This piece is made to reference my memory of the trees lining Summit Street that are decorated with articles of clothing throughout the semester.



*Figure 7: "Dickenson Ave." Bracelet Set
Brass
Approx. 7inx8in each*

Throughout my three years in graduate school I would often ride my bike around the old parts of town. One day I stumbled upon what has become my favorite place in Greenville, Dickinson Avenue. This is the former location of The Imperial Tobacco Company a British owned company operating in North Carolina during most of the 20th century. I found solace in its former location, which now consists of two blocks work of twisted I-beams and crumbling bricks. Recently however, demolition has started for construction of The Greenville Southwest Bypass that would connect US 264 with Memorial Drive (NC11) to improve traffic flow and congestion. This road will bypass independently black owned businesses, artist studios, section 8 homes, public artwork and neighborhoods considered to be the ghetto. “As for really new ideas of any kind -- no matter how ultimately profitable or otherwise successful some of them might prove to be -- there is no leeway for such chancy trial, error, and experimentation in the high-overhead economy of new construction,” Jane Jacobs wrote. “Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings.” (Jacobs) *The Dickinson Avenue Bracelet Set* (figure 8) acts as miniature memorial for that location that is being chipped away by progress.



Figure 8: "Chocowinity, NC"
Copper, brass, champlévé enamel, steel, powder coat, LED lights
2.5in x 4.5in

While I was driving the back roads surrounding Greenville I started to become interested in portable arrow signs. The immediacy and straightforwardness of these signs struck me as the ultimate form of roadside expression. I like to think that each sign has its own personality. *Chocowinity, NC* (figure 8) is inspired by Choco Convenient Mart, a gas station located on the way to a fellow graduate student's house in Chocowinity. (Located in Beaufort County and three miles from Washington, N.C.) The Mart was established in the early 1950's, a small brick building, with 2 older model gas pumps perched outside. I prefer to stop at these types of gas stations because they provide interaction with locals.

CHAPTER 4: THE CONCLUSION

I have become a more thoughtful maker and have transformed from tourist to traveler during the three years spent researching and ultimately creating The Mile Marker Series. The work is inspired by nostalgic American locations and references more than simple Americana but alludes to the historical context and stories connected with the community. “The nomad operates in opposition to the migrant who moves from one clearly defined destination to the other, who retains nostalgia for his origins, as he pursues a purposeful progress.” (Paes de Barros)

Every person at each BBQ shack, juke joint, gas station, diner, hotel, and roadside attraction can provide an opportunity for a valuable exchange of lessons and these exchanges serve as an important part of the whole picture. I am afraid my generation is losing their adventurous spirit, creating a “roadblock” in their ability to have a liberated vision of their world. My work attempts to disrupt this mentality to inspire people to turn off their technology and pickup a road atlas. This series is just starting to materialize and I will continue to travel and document my encounters through storytelling and creating complex wearable visual narratives.

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