

Elemental

by

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This document is written in support of a creative body of work for the Master of Fine Arts degree at East Carolina University. The work presented focuses on both my relationship with the natural world as well as the complex relationships of man and nature. The visual depictions of work show both a celebration of and reverence to natural objects. This is illustrated by collecting specimens from nature that are integrated into wearable objects in an amulet form. The objects created allow a wearer to be connected to the natural world in a time when contact, which is so essential, is elusive. This paper will talk about personal experiences and relationships with the natural world, the natural cycle of decay and repurposing of man-made structures and materials, and finally the psychological effect that a disconnection with nature has on humankind as a whole.

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A Thesis

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Masters of Fine Arts

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between man and nature is complex. This body of work addresses three aspects of this relationship. The first section of this thesis deals with my personal experiences and interaction with the natural world. I explore past and recent memories in which nature plays a role by integrating mementos gathered during those times to recall those experiences. Spending time outdoors is an activity that one may have to make a conscious effort to fit into one's life. The second issue I address is that humans have an innate and profound desire to be connected to the natural non-manmade world. Experiences with nature are increasingly missing in our everyday modern lives; this has a physical and psychological effect on us. Nature is therapeutic and is essential for society's health. The final issue this document explores is the cycle of decay and the repurposing of material to give it new life. I use jewelry as a means to express these ideas and as a way to help the viewer connect to nature.

CHAPTER 1

REFLECTIONS ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH NATURE

“There is a love of wild nature in everybody, an ancient mother-love showing itself whether recognized or no, and however covered by cares and duties.”

— John Muir

Family History

As the author, scientist, and ecologist Aldo Leopold said, “I am glad I will not be young in a future without wilderness.” I agree with that sentiment. The suburban neighborhood in which I spent my formative years was called Forrest Oaks. It denoted the sheer number of trees and the wooded area that encased the neighborhood; it left a distinct impression on me. As a child of the eighties, I was a part of a generation of children that, even with a plethora of new fun plastic toys, still found that the best and most fun was to play outside with the neighbor children and to explore the woods and creek in our neighborhood. A great many afternoons were spent swatting our way through brambles to find a small clearing where we would have our pretend club meetings and talk about life. It saddened me when they tore down the trees next to our home to make way for a new house. The new construction meant the end of another mysterious space to explore.

My father grew up on a farm, which we would go visit at holidays. This is where he had learned about the world, how to grow vegetables, raise animals, and work the land. The appreciation and connection to the natural world stayed with him and, I believe, he strove to instill a love of the land and the knowledge of how to live simply in his children. The times when we visited my grandparents’ farm were some of the most memorable times of my life. There are ten grandchildren in all, including me and my two

siblings. We explored the land tirelessly. We rode horses, helped work cattle, stacked firewood, played in the creek, climbed around in the haylofts, journeyed down to Initial Rock (Fig. 1), and played hide-and-go-seek in the dark...a game which most parents would never dream of letting their children play nowadays, due to the sheer number of hazards.

It is no surprise that my parents' idea of a vacation was always to escape to the outdoors. Whether it was traveling to Colorado, as we did nearly every summer, or



Fig 1: Initial Rock, a large boulder on which several generations of our family have carved their initials

some national park, it was always somewhere we would camp and go on hikes and enjoy nature. During our hikes my father would always make the proclamation that when we got home we would eat better and get more exercise, as we were all out of shape and out of breath from hiking. In between these wilderness vacations was a significant amount of time spent on the couch watching television. Despite our lack of physical prowess we always made it to see magnificent waterfalls and impressive views. These excursions into

nature were a special, intentional event. It was an escape from our everyday lives.

From the experience of camping with my family, the piece *Yellow Home* (Fig. 2) evolved. The piece is a depiction of the bright yellow two person tent (Fig. 3) in which I would sleep on camping trips with my family, sometimes shared with one of my siblings. It was my home away from home.



Fig.3: My Tent



Fig 2: *Yellow Home* (brooch)
Wood, Tin, Brass, Copper, Found Object
3.23 "x 3.5" x .5", 2014

My paternal grandmother's family gathers every few years at The Grand Lake of the Cherokees in Oklahoma. My great grandfather helped to build Grand Lake of the Cherokees and my grandmother had lived in a house located in the valley that was filled to make the lake. Her family is the origin of our Cherokee heritage. I have fond memories of going there and gathering in the large pavilion where everyone would share in an enormous potluck and catch up on distant relatives. The children, me included, would immediately make our way through the pine trees and underbrush to



spend some quality time on the shore of the lake gathering shells and wading in the water. The necklace *Family Reunion* (Fig. 4) is about part of my family legacy and our connection to the land as reflected in this experience. The center piece represents the pavilion where my family gathered. Sections on the sides are aerial views of the area around the lake. The leaves and pine needles represent the vegetation from the region.

Fig. 4: *Family Reunion* (necklace)
Wood, Steel, Found Objects
26" x 2.25" x .75", 2013

My Relationship with Nature as an Adult

Despite an upbringing filled with exposure to nature it has not always continued to be a regular part of my everyday life. Over the years I am evermore attached to computer screens and working on projects indoors. Being outside, breathing fresh air, and enjoying a walk in the woods is still something I enjoy immensely, but it is an infrequent occurrence for me. Perhaps it is naïve, but I feel that my life would be improved with a little more nature in it. It is special when I do spend that time outdoors and I want to remember it. While appreciating some of these times I collect mementos to remember the experience. Whether it is a leaf, branch, or rock, it is a little piece to remind me of a pleasant time.



Fig. 5: *Bark* (necklace)
Wood, Copper, Brass, Steel, Bark
24" x 2" x .5", 2011

The necklace, *Bark* (Fig. 5), comes from my experience of walking across campus. It was fall and after a hurricane. In the center of campus large chunks of bark had fallen off of or been stripped from the trees. I gathered some pieces and brought them back to the studio. This piece is a memento of being outside enjoying my environment. The keyhole is a symbol of unlocking the mystery of nature or finding my connection to it.



Fig. 6: *Summer in Greenville* (brooch)
Wood, Bone, Steel, Brass, Copper, Found Object
4"x2.5"x1.5", 2013

The brooch *Summer in Greenville* (Fig. 6) is a collection of elements both fabricated and found, that represent my time in Greenville, North Carolina. The doorway represents discovery and transformation. The rest are mementos of time spent outside on walks, places where materials were gathered, and gifts left in my work space. A circular form shows the cycle of the seasons changing. The arrangement of the elements tells of the chaos and freedom of a summer without a schedule.

CHAPTER 2

NATURE'S EFFECT ON OUR WELL-BEING

“The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quite alone with the heavens, nature and God. (...) And I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles.”

— Anne Frank, The Diary of a Young Girl

“We need wilderness whether or not we ever set foot in it. (...) We need the possibility of escape as surely as we need hope; without it the life of the cities would drive all men into crime or drugs or psychoanalysis.”

— Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire

To most it may seem an obvious statement that nature is good for you, but many may not fully realize its implications to our modern society. Beyond nature providing our nutritional sustenance it is also essential to our morale. Humans have an innate and profound desire to be connected to the non-manmade world. It is something that is increasingly missing in our everyday modern lives. Some things we seem to continue to do either out of tradition or intuition. We take flowers and plants to loved ones in the hospital, decorate our households with potted plants, and we escape on vacations to nature to decompress at national parks, the mountains or tropical beaches. In the not too distant past when people would get sick it would be prescribed that they get some fresh air and exercise to help speed up recovery. “For example, records of early Roman philosophers and physicians, such as Cornelius Celsus, show that walking in gardens, exposure to rooms filled with light, staying close to water, and other nature-based activities were effective components of standardized plans to improve mental health and sleep.” (Selhub and Logan, 11) This is just one example of cultures’ perspective on the health benefits of nature. As little as five minutes of nature exposure can boost your mental health. “Many studies have shown that spending active time in the great

outdoors is good for the mind. Humans have a deep-seated need for contact with nature, which researchers theorize provides relaxing down time for a brain that is otherwise overtaxed by modern pressures." (Barton & Pretty) There is "a large potential benefit to individuals, society and to the costs of the health service if all groups of people were to self-medicate more with green exercise," said co-researcher Jo Barton.

Richard Louv who coined the term "Nature-Deficit Disorder" has become a champion of making sure our future generations as well as our own can reap the benefits of spending time in nature. This focus on the wilderness is not only intended to improve our personal and societal well-being, but would help to shift attitudes about nature and create a renewed desire to preserve it. Nature-Deficit Disorder is not an official diagnosable disorder but rather refers to the hypothesis "that human beings, especially children, are spending less time outdoors resulting in a wide range of behavioral problems." (Wikipedia) Louv states:

A growing movement will continue to make the case that a meaningful human relationship with nature, shaped in children's formative years, is crucial to our society's practice of stewardship, its sense of community, and the strength of family bonds. We also believe that natural play will increasingly be recognized as a key element in any successful effort to turn the tide on child obesity.
(No More "Nature-Deficit Disorder")

In addition to fighting childhood obesity he cites that it also helps with a wide range of problems from Attention Deficit Disorder to feelings of self-worth, anxiety and depression. Or as Louv describes, "Kids who play outside are less likely to get sick, to be stressed or become aggressive, and are more adaptable to life's unpredictable turns." (Egan, Nature-Deficit Disorder)

Technology has changed our lives significantly. Everywhere we look there are commercials for the newest cell phone, computer, video game, etc. The commercials

that seem particularly strange show how having a particular device will keep us entertained wherever we go, even camping. As Richard Louv articulates it, “[i]ncreasingly, nature is something to watch, to consume, to wear — to ignore. A recent television ad depicts a four-wheel-drive SUV racing along a breathtakingly beautiful mountain stream — while in the back seat two children watch a movie on a flip-down video screen, oblivious to the landscape and water beyond the windows.” (Louv, 2) What he describes is not only the experience of being removed from nature, but an immense generation gap. With ever-present electronics to monopolize our attention gone are the days of staring out the window seeing the landscape on long road trips. The attitudes and responses to nature that we cultivate in children today will change our daily lives. If provided with opportunities to experience the joys of the outdoors firsthand children will develop love and respect for it as well as a desire to preserve it. Nature can also have the added bonus of being exactly what the doctor ordered in a wide range of problems that have developed in children and society. Louv says, “At the very moment that the bond is breaking between the young and the natural world, a growing body of research links our mental, physical, and spiritual health directly to our association with nature—in positive ways” (*Last Child in the Woods*). We need to connect with nature for our health.

Spending time outdoors is not the only kind of helpful nature exposure. Art can be helpful as well. In a study in which subjects suffering from anxiety and depression were exposed to a variety of types of art, the researchers observed the arts’ different influences. The study used three different types of artwork: abstract, abstract representational, and realistic nature. Patients who were exposed to images of realistic

nature and nature based abstract art required less medication and reported a significant reduction in stress levels. It appears that simply seeing an image of nature can be healthful to humans. There is a direct, quantifiable, correlation to humanity's appreciation of nature and what effects having contact, even just an image, with nature can have on us physically and mentally. (Nanda)

In Greenville, North Carolina there are a few places to look for prehistoric shark teeth that wash down in the creek that empties into the Tar River. A friend and I went shark tooth hunting together for the first time one chilly November day. (Fig. 7) We met after a day of classes and were prepared with colanders, bags and a shovel to get started. In the creek bed, we began sifting and collecting various rocks and teeth. It was

pure joy to be outdoors and getting our hands dirty. Within the creek bed the sounds of traffic from the nearby road were muffled and all that could be seen was the water and trees surrounding us. It was a time that I acutely felt the mental rest from the modern world. I felt renewed and relaxed. It was refreshing to feel like we were in the middle of nowhere; to be away from what had been a busy and noisy day.



Fig. 7: Danielle hunting for sharks' teeth

The body of work for this section celebrates the natural world and keeping a piece of it for therapeutic purposes. The pieces contain doorways and shrine-like elements to showcase a component such as a leaf, bone, or tree branch. *Shrine to Nature* (Fig. 8) is a celebration of the natural world. The leaf form is the symbol chosen



to represent nature in its broadest context. The archway and platform provide a showcase for the leaf and signify its importance. Found branches at the bottom become the roots from which that piece grew. Tree branches represent both wild forests and cultivated gardens. The branches are carefully collected and strategically placed. They provide an authentic element from nature that serves as a talisman. In addition to being a fabricated image of the tree the natural object serves as a memento of the reality of the experience I hold dear and want to share with the viewer.

Fig. 8: *Shrine to Nature* (necklace)
Wood, Brass, Copper, Steel, Found
Objects. 22"x2.5"x1.5", 2014



Fig. 9: Landscape (necklace)
Wood, Copper, Found Object
2" x 3.25" x .75", 2013

The format of jewelry allows the wearer to carry the shrine with them wherever they go. Similarly, in the piece entitled *Landscape* (Fig. 9), the doorway acts as a shrine for a piece of bone. The other components in this piece represent different layers and colors found in the natural world. The idea behind *It Leaks* (Fig. 10) is that the effect nature has on us leaks through this sieve of our everyday lives. The wooden porthole has holes drilled through denoting the passage through a doorway and the spaces which expose the wearer to soothing natural elements. Even with a barrier, the feeling we get from exposure to nature comes through. The brooch *Transition* (Fig. 11) highlights the separation of urban environments and the natural world and finding a path to connect the two.



Fig. 10: *It Leaks Through* (brooch)
Wood, Copper, Cotton, Found Objects
2" x 4.75" x .5", 2013



Fig. 11: *Transition* (brooch)
Wood, Copper, Brass, Steel
4.75" x 3" x .5", 2013

CHAPTER 3

RELATIONSHIP: MAN, NATURE AND DECAY

“It’s amazing how quickly nature consumes human places after we turn our backs on them. Life is a hungry thing.”

— Scott Westerfeld

“For most of history, man has had to fight nature to survive; in this century he is beginning to realize that, in order to survive, he must protect it.”

— Jacques-Yves Cousteau

Mankind’s relationship with nature has been challenging from the beginning of time. Humankind has endeavored to not only survive, but to tame, control, shape nature to work for our needs and wants. However, nature can only be tamed for so long. It has a way of surviving and coming back to reclaim spaces. The boundaries of what we consider nature have become muddled due to our influence. Untouched spaces are rapidly diminishing. Selhub and Logan define nature as “the nonbuilt, nonsynthetic environment – sights, sounds, aromas, rivers, oceans, plants, animals, and light in as close a form as possible to that from which we evolved.” (Selhub & Logan, 2)

The natural world is a cycle of living, dying and everything in between. I am drawn to the interplay between how material is taken from the natural world, used for our purposes, and then nature coming back in to reclaim it. Our purposes are usually to alter the natural world even if it is only for a short time. For this reason old houses and structures that have been abandoned and left to decay are appealing to me. Building materials, particularly wood, illustrate the relationship of man and nature. What was once a tree becomes wood as a material to make siding, shingles, furniture, flooring, etc., then, left alone and exposed to the elements, it rots and breaks down to be reclaimed by the earth. (Fig. 12-13) I gather artifacts from these places, the half

decayed materials, and repurpose them into another man-made object turning them into wearable art. Potentially that material could break down even further with time. It is a detour in the recycling process.



Fig. 12: Decaying house, Greenville, NC



Fig. 13: Decaying house, Ayden, NC

The body of work for this section addresses not only the cycle of creation and decay, but also man's influence on nature. Whether it is taming nature or building, mankind seems to always believe that things can be improved. Each piece showcases the materials that were gathered in each space staying true to the condition in which they were found.

The necklace *Recycled Home I* (Fig. 14) was inspired by an exploration with a friend taken one afternoon during a break from a workshop. We discovered a decaying home on the side of the road tucked behind the overgrowth of the unattended front yard. The entrance was rickety and there was a gaping hole in the corner of the house. We

were drawn to it and enticed to investigate this place someone had once called home.

The material for this piece came from that excursion.

Additionally, the piece Recycled Home II (Fig. 15) came from another abandoned house in Ayden, North Carolina. I was drawn to the material that I collected there by its layers of peeling old paint showing signs of wear from time and exposure to the elements. The settings for the sections of siding were constructed from copper sheet and decorated them with patterns of leaves, which point to another step in the cycle of the wood material. Not only is the tree the provider but it also decays to make room for new growth, reclaiming it.

Our Industrial Landscape (Fig. 16) is a piece that further illustrates this interplay of building materials. It combines the rusted steel from shed roofing and the weathered board from a barn with the found natural branch and a carved wooden leaf. This speaks to the idea of these materials being broken down and becoming part of the natural landscape once again. The pieces are stitched together with brass wire to create a marriage of the two parts of the cycle of decay working together. In the same way that *Progression* (Fig. 17) addresses several different incarnations of wood. It can be shaped and carved to make other imagery, and can change form in becoming petrified.



Fig. 14: *Recycled Home I* (necklace)
Wood, Brass, Found Objects
24" x 2" x .5", 2013



Fig. 15: *Recycled Home II* (necklace)
Wood, Copper, Brass
30" x 4" x .75", 2013



Fig. 16: *Our Industrial Landscape* (brooch)
Wood, Copper, Brass, Steel, Found Objects
4.75" x 3.75" x .5", 2013



Fig. 17: *Progression* (brooch)
Wood, Copper, Found Object
1.75" x 3" x 1", 2012

Man's relationship with nature is one of give and take. The *Stitches* series is about man's influence on nature. It is literally taking something natural and adding to or improving upon what already exists. The brooch *Branch Revisited I* (Fig. 18) is a fabricated branch with leaves which have been attached by stitching it to a natural

branch. This is my illustration of man repairing or improving upon nature. *Branch Revisited II* (Fig. 18) is nature affected by my hand. This collected branch has been stripped of its bark, cut into pieces, carved, and has had fabricated leaves attached. The cut sections have been stitched back together with brass wire; my attempt to repair this natural element even when it has been cut by me. It represents man's dual influence on nature...destroying it, and then making attempts to repair the damage done.



Fig. 18: *Stitches Series: Stitches II, Joined, Stitches, Joined II* (brooches)
Wood, Copper, Brass, Steel, Silver
8.5" x 5.5" x .5" (largest), 2014

CHAPTER 4 CONCEPT/CONTENT

The objects, forms and materials in my work are a reflection of my feelings about nature. These found materials such as branches and seed pods are collected as mementos of my surroundings and my limited time spent in the outdoors. Other materials I choose attract me with the evidence of their wear and tear of time. These objects and materials are given a new life and purpose. The choice to use wood as my primary material is not accidental. It is a renewable material resource, a form of recycling. The work takes on an amulet-like quality in that the pieces depicting abstracted landscapes. The natural materials are themselves pieces of nature, for wearers to carry with them as a small connection to the outdoors. It is a small piece of nature therapy, if you will. In an ever-changing lifestyle that seems to include fewer moments enjoying nature and more of being bombarded by technology, making this work is a respite.

Process

My process begins with collecting materials while on walks or exploring abandoned structures. Some other materials are given to me. They hold their own history. The special nature of receiving a gift from someone else's experience of the outdoors provides a connection through that shared experience. I take various elements such as collected branches and pieces of wood then creatively arrange them. Intuitive reactions to the arrangement of materials guide my composition until it feels "right". Sometimes I cut and shape a piece that will then be rejected only to show up later in a different piece where it seems to fit better. While designing a piece I may have a

particular theme in mind such as the desire to combine rusted manmade elements with more natural forms or natural materials. I take into consideration a material's texture and color as well as juxtaposing materials that will illustrate the tension between the natural and the man-made. There is no portion in any piece that has not been affected by me.

Materials

Wood is a material which repeatedly appears in my work. I most often select softer, light colored woods such as poplar and basswood. They provide a nearly blank slate that can be shaped, carved, and easily painted to add color. It is also a renewable and recyclable resource, and therefore an ecologically responsible material to use.

Copper, brass and steel are the metals I use most often for their color, stability, and their connection to common construction materials. Copper can be easily cut and textured while also taking a patina well to give a darkened, yet warm glow to a piece. Brass is attractive as a highlight. The bright color, most like the more precious gold, adds a little brilliance to the overall look. I often choose steel for its strength, durability, and the way that it rusts over time.

Painting

Milk paints are a natural mineral based pigment that soaks into the wood as well as rests on the surface. The colors I use tend to be more natural looking and have a subdued, soft quality to them which is in keeping with the natural materials. They can be sanded back through to reveal textures and carving or even other layers of colored

paint. In addition to the milk paint, colored pencils also sometimes come into play to highlight certain areas.

Carving

Carving the wood began, for me, through the connection with relief printmaking. As with most other processes I enjoy, carving gives me direct contact of the hand to the material. I use the same tools in printmaking that I use to carve my wood forms. Marks most often used in the work are similar to the types of marks I use to create texture in prints. Pieces are cut and shaped with a jeweler saw, a band saw, and a belt sander, then texture is added using Japanese wood carving tools.

Connections

The elements are connected using various techniques of riveting, soldering, prong setting, gluing, and sometimes binding with string to connect the different elements to each other. The materials are most often layered and connected to a back plate, which provides a space for the findings, such as pin backs, that make the piece wearable or functional.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

As I continue to work it is my desire to reconnect the audience with the natural world through jewelry. This work conveys my love of nature. I have witnessed both the decay of structures as well as the breakdown of parts of our culture as we are increasingly inundated and seduced by the newest technology. It is my hope that we will not succumb to cynicism. We must make an effort to protect what is natural and continue to strive for small changes in an effort to be happy and healthy.

The experience in making this work has been, in itself, rewarding. It reminds us all that it is important to make nature an integral part of life. The subject of humankind's relationship with nature, I believe, is a rich theme that I will continue to explore for many years to come.

GLOSSARY

Patina	This is a coating of various chemical compounds such as oxides, carbonates, sulfides, a common example of which is rust which forms on iron or steel when exposed to oxygen. Patina also refers to accumulated changes in surface texture and color that result from normal use of an object.
Prong setting	This refers to the use of metal projections or tines, called prongs, to secure a gemstone to a piece of jewelry.
Relief Printing	Relief printing is created by starting with a flat original surface, and then removing (e.g., by carving) away areas intended to print white. The remaining areas of the original surface receive the ink.
Riveting	This is the process of connecting two pieces by placing a section of wire or tubing through a hole and flaring the ends.
Soldering	This is the joining of two metals by using another alloy with a lower melting temperature as the bonding agent, generally silver or gold alloys.

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