

*Disorientations*

by  
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Introduction: A Village in the City

I was raised in Atlanta, Georgia, and not separated by much distance from the enormous diversity of its people. Yet my model of community was wrapped in the concentric layers of whiteness, education, and an at least middle-class status, which we shared with nearly all our neighbors. I grew up in a cohousing—a planned, intentional community model imported from Denmark. The community, which was entirely white for most of my childhood, was made up of thirteen households, private, but connected and encircling two central courtyards (Fig. 1). There was a large building at one end of the community where we sometimes shared meals and community events. On a hand-painted sign at the back entrance, the cohousing was advertised as “a village in the city.” As I grew older, living in many other places with my mother or on my own, I came to understand the cohousing less as a village and more as the informal gated community that it was, though the rickety wooden gate on the side of our house was more symbolic than practical.

Though I am sure it was intended as an inclusive and forward-thinking place by its founders, I consider the cohousing as a reinforcement of a white spatial imaginary<sup>1</sup>—a complex of economic, social, architectural, governmental, and other structures that maintain whiteness as a valued and comfortable position. Through these systems, the “village” is distinguished from the city in a way not so different from a suburb or gated community—defined as a refuge from the urban and its racialized associations of criminality and chaos. The “village” faces inward, both architecturally and socially. Our ‘front’ door was not the one facing the street, protected by an outer door of metal mesh, but the one facing in toward the courtyard. When residents of the cohousing left their homes, they passed through the ‘village’ first, and only then, maybe, into the city.



[Fig.1] Google Maps view of Lake Claire Cohousing  
Image captured by the artist

This architecture in which I grew up made it abundantly clear to me how material holds social meaning, its arrangements and relationships always reflecting—and reproducing—some relationship among people. Now, as an artist, I often look to the most mundane and unremarkable materials as some of the most meaningful, the most telling of our social values. These are the things that maintain and reproduce a sense of normalcy. These materials, like whiteness, are naturalized and expected, perpetuating our understanding of what is normal. The feminist scholar Sara Ahmed describes whiteness as an “orientation” and a “background to social action.”<sup>2</sup> I am interested in materials that seem to fade into the background of our lives, innocent and unassuming, even as they orient us within predetermined social relations. I want to bring these materials into view partly as a strategy of bringing whiteness into view.

In the first chapter of this text, I outline how my work approaches whiteness as a habit, maintained through modes of inhabiting space as property, drawing on the work of the feminist and postcolonial scholar Sara Ahmed, and the critical race theorist Cheryl Harris. In the second chapter, I discuss the use of *disorientation* in my artwork to challenge spatial languages that *orient* us in a white spatial imaginary, taking inspiration from the writing of Edward Said, and the art of Ann Greene Kelly. Finally, in my third chapter, I explore the notion of a material afterlife, and the possibilities of repairing and reconstructing broken social and spatial systems, discussing the artists Abraham Cruzvillegas, Kader Attia, and Yeesoookyung.



[Fig.2] Noah Greene-Lowe, Nine Ways from Sunday installation view  
Courtesy of the artist and Mildred Lane Kemper Museum of Art



## Habit and Habitation

In my recent sculptures *St. Louis Landscape (Facing West)*, 2022; *I'll Fly Away*, 2022; and *Location, location, location,location,locationlocalocatocatiotion!*, 2022, I make use of unremarkable materials such as asphalt, ceramic tile, drywall, molding and trim (Fig. 2). I reconstruct these materials to disrupt and disorient the ways in which they maintain a white spatial imaginary. I consider these as architectural materials—but not in the same way as concrete, steel and tempered glass, or the foam core used to create scale models. My work focuses on the mundane surfaces and details where our built environments constantly come in contact with our lives: the character of a wallpaper or tile, the finish of wood, the condition of asphalt or brick, or the woven barrier of a chain-link fence. These elements make up the intimate, lived realities of an architectural world. In these three works, I juxtapose this more intimate materiality with the removed images of landscape in satellite photos and the landscape painting of Albert Bierstadt, highlighting relationships between decorative pattern and distant landscape, micro and macro scales of habitation (Fig. 3).

Although a building in the United States is likely held up by concrete, steel, or maybe wooden framing, you are more likely to know it by its antique molding, a patch of peeling paint, a mark you made on its wall as a child, or even the objects that decorate it. Whether you know a particular place or not, these surface elements may signal what kind of place you are in. They might also give you a sense of whether you are welcome there, or whether the place is not intended for you. As a white man in the United States, my experience is mostly that of belonging, of a material world that is generally intended for me. In my work, I try to subvert my comfortable relationship to materials that are familiar, ordinary, and even carry a sense of nostalgia for me.



[Fig.3] Noah Greene-Lowe, *Location, location, location,location,locationlocalocatocatiotion!*, 2022 (detail)

Photo by Richard Sprengeler

Courtesy of the artist and Mildred Lane Kemper Museum of Art

Interrogating my whiteness has become an important aspect of my work. But when I refer to *whiteness* in this text, I do not mean to simply refer to all white people as making up a universal community or identity. I agree with James Baldwin when he writes that “there is, in fact, no white community,” and that “no one was white before he/she came to America.”<sup>3</sup> In her essay “Whiteness as Property,” the critical race theorist Cheryl Harris describes whiteness as a form of property consolidated in the U.S. through the construction and subjugation of other “non-white” identities.<sup>4</sup> In other words, *Whiteness* is a form of power, or property, possessed and exercised by people. As a position of power, one established through the construction of race and European colonialism, whiteness calls for critical examination. It must be examined especially because it is a position that maintains its power by not being seen. Whiteness has been naturalized, so that all other identities must be compared to it. Whiteness is understood and discussed, especially by white people but also in U.S. culture more generally, as a default, neutral condition—even an absence of race.<sup>5</sup> Cheryl Harris writes,

Whiteness as property has taken on more subtle forms, but retains its core characteristic – the legal legitimation of expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as a neutral baseline, while masking the maintenance of white privilege and domination.<sup>6</sup>

When race is discussed or explored—and many artists do explore it—it is seldom the properties and practices of whiteness itself that are directly discussed. Explorations by non-white artists of the complexities of their identities continue to be hugely valuable to art and to projects of decolonization. Isn’t it also valuable for artwork to directly examine the experience and implications of whiteness, this ubiquitous but largely unseen category whose power is embedded and reinforced within the fiber of our world? In my work, I consider the implications of whiteness as a spatial practice, drawing on Cheryl Harris’ “Whiteness as Property” to consider

ways in which whiteness is reproduced through the habitation of space as property; and on Sara Ahmed's "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," which approaches whiteness as a "habit" and a spatial and social "orientation."<sup>7</sup>

Habitation is a condition of existing, dwelling, being somewhere. It implies not just being, but being *in* some place, whether on a larger scale—inhabiting a land or country, or more specific—inhabiting your house. In this way, habitation is a constant, taken-for-granted practice. A person is always inhabiting a place. One cannot *be* without being in some place. Sara Ahmed points out that habitation also contains the word *habit*, pointing to the way in which we build a relationship with the places, lands, structures we inhabit, over time:

Public spaces take shape through the habitual actions of bodies, such that the contours of space could be described as habitual. I turn to the concept of habits to theorize not so much how bodies acquire their shape, but how spaces acquire the shape of the bodies that 'inhabit' them. We could think about the 'habit' in the 'in-habit'.<sup>8</sup>

I would argue that this description applies as much, if not more, to private space. I am concerned with *habits* of habitation at both of these scales, public and private, collective and individual, and the ways that they are interrelated. At the same time as our individual habits shape personal spaces through customization, taste, use and wear; the drywall, ceramic tile, and other building materials I use in my work also represent collective habits. There are many traditional methods of home-building, like those practiced by many indigenous inhabitants of this country, that can provide often more functional housing while extracting fewer resources from the Earth than those widely practiced today. Rather than making clay into ceramic tile, processing and printing it with images of stone or sediment from other parts of the world, and transporting it across the country or the globe, a floor can be made directly from packed clay from its own site, and sealed with oils, holding thermal mass that reduces the need for heating systems. Walls, similarly, can

be constructed from clay or earth, straw, and other readily available natural materials, even providing more effective insulation than the foam or fiberglass that is widely used.<sup>9</sup> While effective, these natural materials are more difficult to regulate and standardize under our present legal structures. They can be gathered or obtained independently, and cheaply or freely, rather than bought as a commodity that produces profit for gypsum mining or other resource extraction enterprises, manufacturing companies, and distributors such as The Home Depot. Like whiteness, these basic elements of home-building in the U.S. are habits maintained and naturalized by complex systems of racial capitalist<sup>10</sup> extraction and exploitation, and legislative bodies that uphold them.

A habit persists because we do not realize it is happening. It implies a persistent, often unconscious repetition. For instance, I have several tics—compulsive actions that my body seems to carry out of its own accord, and which I usually do not notice. I often rub and stretch my fingers against each other strangely, not noticing until someone asks, “what are you pointing at?” or until I notice the small callouses that build up between my fingers. I sometimes blink or scrunch up my face excessively, having no idea until someone expresses their concern. In my sculptures, I consider the traditional materials of habitation in the U.S.—what we use to build and decorate our homes, to make our cities and our roads—as habits we have acquired, or inherited, not often given thought except as basic, logical elements of our collective habitation. I want to make these elements strange, to accentuate the habit enough that we are forced to take notice.

In *Location, location, location, location, location localocatocatiotion!* (Figures 3-4), I try to enact this repetition using fragments of doorframes, baseboards, trim, drywall and floor tiles. These are all traditional elements of homes in the U.S., so ubiquitous that they can be found

cheaply and reliably at a secondhand hardware store. They are modular elements, to be moved and rearranged to create any rectilinear design desired. Rather than use them to cover an existing structure, I want them to create their own improvised structure, following the functions and relationships that their forms suggest until they become absurd. I want to create a suggestion of an architectural space that fails to become any real space, instead contorting into itself, closing itself off, not unlike the structure of the cohousing where I grew up. What if the doorways of a house, the spaces between its walls, became so large that the house itself shrunk down to almost nothing? This is how I approach the form of the piece: a jumble of thresholds, boundaries, passageways, that do not yield any other place than the one you are already in.

In the summer of 2020, I experienced a psychogenic seizure. As opposed to an epileptic seizure, one that results from a neurological disorder, this was a single event, a psychological response to heightened emotion. To me, it felt as if all my involuntary tics united and crumpled my body into a strange, tense form, my hands and feet folding inward, and even my mouth pushed to one side as if trying to escape my face. The event was bizarre and frightening, but it also revealed to me a need to care for myself and my mental health in ways that I had not before considered. This sculpture, it occurs to me, is also in a kind of seizure. It contorts and clutches itself in much the same way, its habitual elements coalescing to reveal a kind of sickness, or at least an unhealthy habit. To *seize* also connotes taking control or ownership. The model of habitation that is encouraged in the United States, the house that is suggested by this molding, trim, and tile, is a habitation of space as property. In that sense, these materials are also mundane implements of property ownership, or at least a semblance of it.



[Fig. 4] Noah Greene-Lowe, *Location, location, location,location,locationlocalocatocatiotion!*, 2022

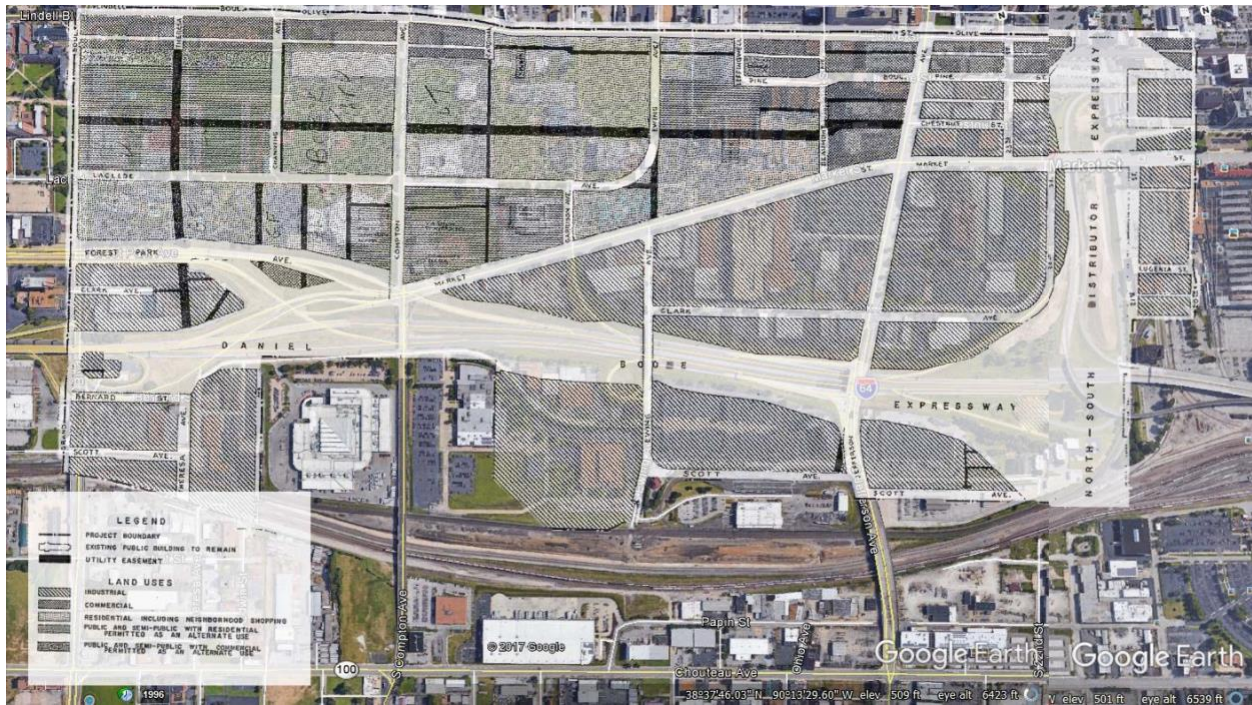
Secondhand building materials, concrete debris, caulk, inkjet-printed satellite images from sites of displacement: Kinloch and Mill Creek Valley, MO, and Little Manila, Stockton, CA  
36 x 27 x 23"

Courtesy of the artist and Mildred Lane Kemper Museum of Art



The name *Location, location, location, location, location localocatocatiotion!* comes from the real-estate saying “location, location, location,” emphasizing the importance of location when buying property. Like the materials used in the piece, I over-repeat the words until they are no longer a sensible motto, but instead feel like a delirious, trance-like appeal for *place*. This name is also meant to reference the aerial images that wallpaper the sculpture. These images are pulled from satellite databases like google maps and affixed onto the form’s domestic surfaces, imitating the patterns of wallpaper and faux-stone tile. The landscapes depicted in these images are sites of displacement, where during the urban renewals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, communities were driven off plots of land only for them to become empty lots, parts of a highway, or otherwise largely uninhabited. Although these sites were once inhabited by specific and established communities, they now appear as an abstraction of location, almost as nondescript as the tiles and wallpaper they imitate.

Despite their abstraction, these landscapes, which are also depicted in the work *I’ll Fly Away*, 2022, are taken from three specific locations: the former neighborhood of Mill Creek Valley, St. Louis; Kinloch, Missouri; and the former neighborhood of Little Manila, in Stockton, California. What the three locations share is that the construction of travel infrastructures, real or only planned, played a large part in the displacement of their communities. Mill Creek Valley, once a populous and vibrant Black community in the heart of the city, was selected for “slum clearance” during the urban renewal era of the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> As in many US cities, the removal of this community was aided by plans for the construction of an interstate highway, now I-64 (Fig. 5). Besides the interstate, the community was replaced largely by commercial and warehouse use, and eventually by parts of Saint Louis University and Harris-Stowe State University.



[Fig.5] Mill Creek Valley Project Area Redevelopment Map <sup>12</sup>

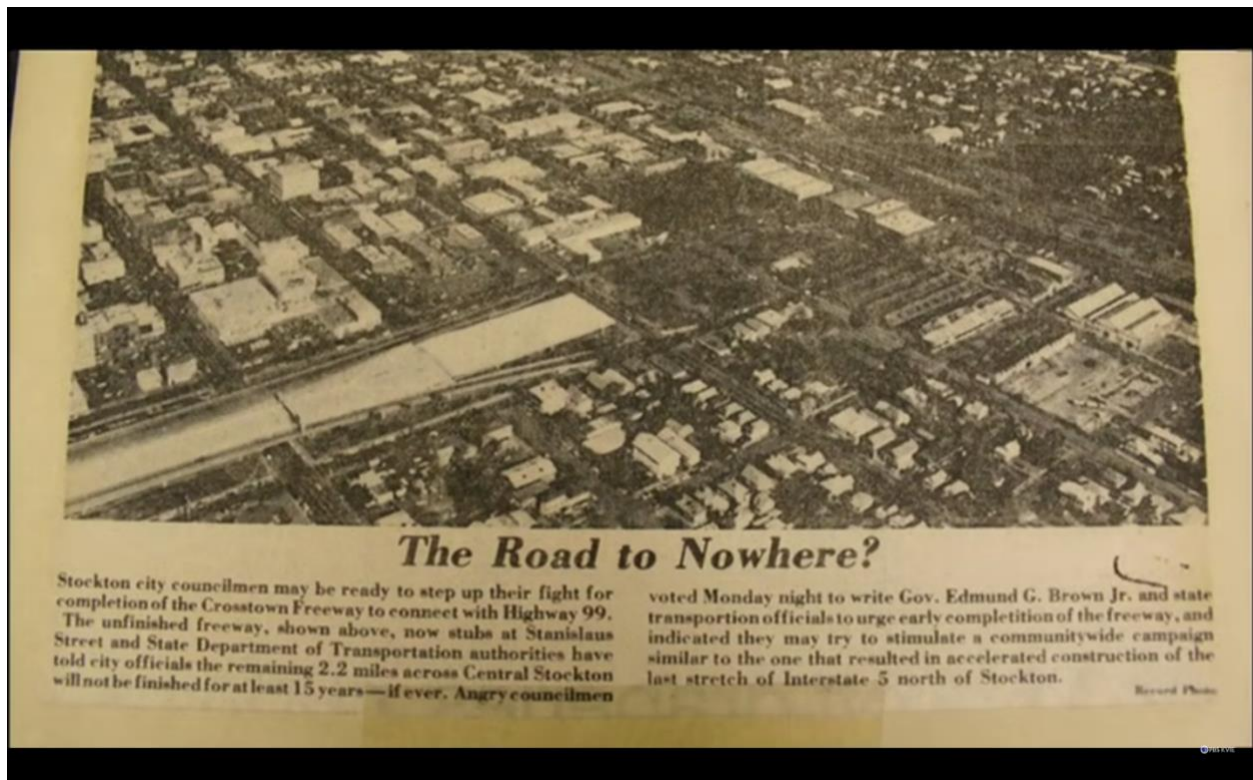
Kinloch, incorporated in 1948, was known as the first Black town west of the Mississippi.<sup>13</sup> Like many of North St. Louis County’s suburbs, it was first established as a white streetcar suburb in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The population rapidly shifted after the first Black families moved in, and for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kinloch existed as a functional and vibrant suburban community. From the 1990s to the 2000s, a planned expansion of runways for the neighboring Lambert Airport displaced the established community when the airport bought out half of its property in a land grab. The runway expansion was never built, and instead the town became largely a dumping ground of vacant suburban blocks with only a handful of residents, as well as a Schnuck’s grocery distribution center. In satellite images dating from the 2000s to 2014, the town appears as a grid of increasingly desolate suburban blocks, a kind of skeleton of suburban life (Fig. 6).



[Fig. 6] Satellite image of Kinloch, MO from 2014<sup>14</sup>

The neighborhood of Little Manila in Stockton, California was home to the largest population of Filipinos outside of the Philippines during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> In Stockton's urban renewal efforts of the 1960s, many of the neighborhood's homes, businesses, and community spaces were destroyed by the construction of the Crosstown Freeway. In 1970, the freeway project ran out of funding, and became a "road to nowhere."<sup>16</sup> The unfinished highway jutted out bizarrely into the city's landscape while the Filipino community remained irreversibly damaged (Fig. 7). Stockton's "road to nowhere" is a strikingly absurd example of the way abstract notions of space or even the possibility of travel have taken precedence over actual communities and the places they inhabit. Highways and airport facilities do not represent the places they are in, but a possibility of elsewhere. These sites represent the substitution of socially significant *place* with assertions of *space* as property, or even an aspiration toward myriad other locations. I chose to include images from Stockton's "Little Manila" because, while it is

geographically distant from St. Louis' histories of urban renewal and displacement, it demonstrates the remarkable similarity of these histories across the United States. Meanwhile, it points to the fact that these displacements are not simply a binary, Black-versus-white issue. The bulldozing of various non-white communities for sometimes not entirely thought-out mobility infrastructures is a habit that has structured the landscapes of many US cities.



[Fig. 7] Newspaper clipping of the unfinished Crosstown Freeway in Stockton<sup>17</sup>

In my sculptures, I do not present images of the communities displaced by these projects, but only abstracted views of the vacant landscapes that have been put in their place. If the sections of doorways, molding and trim in *Location, location, location, location, location localocatocatiotion!* resemble an intersection of highways or a jumble of overpasses and underpasses, the images of these erased sites function like highway

embankments, occupying the slivers of static place between the high-speed possibility of the highway.

What is the difference between habitation and ownership of a place? Legal contracts are an obvious answer, but whiteness also plays an important role. Cheryl Harris describes how legal structures of property developed as a justification for white theft of indigenous land:

Possession – the act necessary to lay the basis for rights in property – was defined to include only the cultural practices of whites. This definition laid the foundation for the idea that whiteness – that which whites alone possess – is valuable and is property.<sup>18</sup>

Though property possession is no longer legally limited to whites, the concept of property ownership, as a founding myth of this country, can still carry this implicit racial exclusion. Though these communities of color had clearly established a collective relationship to the places where they lived—many legally owning property—their claims to collective ownership of culturally significant places were not seen as valid enough to preserve, perhaps because their cultural practices were incompatible with the founding notion of property.

Although their outcomes are drastically different, I consider these three displaced communities as also related to the cohousing in which I grew up. All of these are attempts at some form of community building and collective ownership within the material and social confines of a white spatial imaginary.<sup>19</sup> But the displacements of communities in St. Louis, Stockton, and countless other U.S. cities result from a spatial imaginary that has sheltered me and the communities in which I have lived. In my work, I am interested in colliding these divergent models of habitation and community building. I want to challenge the mapped-out and pre-made with the organic and improvised. My work attempts to create a material conversation between these sites and the different practices of collective habitation that shaped them.



Dis/orientation

When I was a child, my mother explained the history of Earth and our universe by creating a timeline from the far end of our cohousing all the way to the third floor of our house. The Big Bang was situated beyond the community's back entrance, with planets and galaxies forming along the sidewalk between its two courtyards. Inside our house was the formation of our solar system. Life evolved as we climbed the stairs, and finally, she pointed out to me all of human history contained within the two top steps to our third floor. I must have looked differently at our stained white carpeting after that, as it now contained millennia. I can remember escaping into the surfaces of the house as a child does, seeing the carpet as an expanse of forest with a crater that our cats had excavated with their claws, or finding images in the brushstrokes my mother had left visible when painting our walls. I was always amazed at the way intimacy with these surfaces made them into vast landscapes; scale falling away for a moment and leaving me lost, but free. In my work, I try to recreate some of this feeling, confusing scale so that surfaces seem to open up and out with close examination. For me, this sense of vastness in the familiar surfaces of floors and walls also reflects the very real complexities of their material origins. Though we encounter rolls of carpet or sheets of drywall on the shelves of retailers as if they are naturally occurring building blocks of domestic life, they are also the products of complex chains of production, from the extraction of materials to their manufacturing and transport, and the human labor required for each element of the process.

One of the central goals of my recent work is to create moments of *disorientation*, in a particularly spatial, or even architectural sense, though never removed from the social. Disorientation implies losing one's bearings, being lost or disconnected from one's position in space or relationship to space, or even to others. In that sense, a disorientation might be frightening, dangerous, or damaging. But disorientations can also be productive and even



essential. They can create a sense of freedom and wonder. The philosopher Seloua Luste Boulbina argues for the value of disorientation in decolonizing knowledge, emphasizing the importance of the uncharted or unknown.<sup>20</sup> Disorientation implies an existing *orientation*, and in the Western<sup>21</sup> world, we are often oriented by maps, whether laid out on paper, or more often on the screen of a computer or smartphone. In whatever medium, the language of mapping that orients us based on a satellite or bird's-eye view is rooted in the surveying and quantifying of land for the purposes of ownership, and cannot be fully separated from the language of empire. These maps orient us not only in a place, but also in a logic of inhabiting space as property.

In my two-dimensional “map” works, I work directly with paper maps to create disorientation through a collage-like process. For instance, in *Map of Atlanta as Natural Disaster*, 2020 (Figure 2), I repeatedly layer and sand the maps into an abstract painting-like composition, combining them with soil from the place they depict—my hometown of Atlanta, Georgia. This process is meant to abstract the maps so that their information is essentially lost while the aesthetic character of maps remains. Their patterns and colors are visible enough to suggest maps, but they no longer have a discernable connection to the place they represent. Instead, I emphasize their material character. I abstract them through a sedimentary process, mimicking the land they were intended to map. My hope is that this work achieves an effect of disorientation by suggesting a map and then withholding its information. Rather than representing the cartography of a place, something that can be read and used for the purposes of orientation, it mimics the ground itself in a way that can only be experienced. As an abstract composition, the form of this work sweeps across from right to left, somewhat resembling a weather map of an encroaching storm. In my mind, this right-to-left movement is a nod to the role of mapping in westward expansion: the map as natural disaster.



[Fig.8] Noah Greene-Lowe, *Map of Atlanta as Natural Disaster*, 2020  
Powdered red soil, glue, and paper maps of Atlanta on tabletop  
30 x 59 x 1.5 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

Orientation could also be obtained simply by looking around us at recognizable materials in our environment, things that signal a certain type of place. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States, the elements of our built environment have been distilled into signals of specific functions and contexts. The type and arrangement of materials, in many different parts of the country or even the world, might reliably signal to me whether I am in a commercial, residential, public, or private space, and so on. Certain kinds of tile, for example, are manufactured for domestic spaces, while others are recognizably commercial. The pattern of a wallpaper or paint job may be predictably institutional or comfortably homey. These various elements together can go a long way in providing orientation. This could be considered another type of mapping—a representation of space that is used to create actual spaces. I am interested in creating disorientations at the level of the map or material signifier—not quite making the viewer feel lost but instead unsettling a system of mapping or understanding space, which inevitably shapes space itself.

The word *orientation* itself relies on a fundamental opposition, or othering, that designates the Western world as primary and central. Its stem, *orient*, comes from the Latin meaning East. In the Western world, “the Orient” calls to mind various parts of Asia as related to the perspective of Europe. In his essential work *Orientalism*, Edward Said points out that “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.”<sup>22</sup> Said writes:

Additionally, the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections.<sup>23</sup>

To be oriented, then—to look east from a Western position—is to be defined against this other. It would seem to imply sitting comfortably in opposition to this category of otherness, onto which we can project those undesirable parts of ourselves— “desires, repressions, investments...”<sup>24</sup> Although *orientation* appears often as a strictly spatial concept, removed from these social meanings, my work holds this etymological connection as significant because space is always inherently social. I am not claiming that simply knowing where you are or being situated comfortably in a familiar space is equal to participating and acquiescing to the white supremacist logics of orientalism and European colonialism. Instead, I want to address the ways in which spatial language—whether in words, maps, images, or physical structures—can perpetuate those logics by locating comfort within opposition.

After moving to Saint Louis from Atlanta, I quickly learned that the city had a geographical history especially fraught with racial violence, division, and erasure. In her book *Black Lives and Spatial Matters*, which analyzes the racial and political geographies of North St. Louis County suburbs such as Kinloch and Ferguson, the scholar Jodi Rios describes another instance of orientation as opposition:

The imagined space of the early twentieth-century suburbs was developed in contradistinction to the dark spaces of the city and indeed relied upon this binary. While the ghetto was always viewed as a space of containment—an urban form of incarceration—the suburbs offered protection as a place that could only be penetrated by those who were perceived to pose no threat.<sup>25</sup>

In this way, forms of oppositional orientation—being defined in contradistinction to something or someone other—are enacted at multiple levels of geography and social structure, from the nation or continent to the suburb or gated community. Saint Louis, in the narrative of westward expansion, is positioned as the gateway to the West. It is understood as *oriented toward* the West, from a perspective of European colonization. But within its own geography, as in any city,

there are a multitude of other orientations that similarly enact divisions, expansions, and exclusions, constantly reestablishing an *in here* and an *out there*.

In response to this logic of opposition, my work asks, what can moments of *disorientation* offer? If the need for an Other and an *out there*, against whom we are defined, is so embedded within our spatial language, can disrupting that language also disrupt our need for opposition? Rather than projecting those difficult or frightening parts of ourselves onto some distant geography against which we are oriented and protected by the language of benign domesticity or the expected trappings of ‘civilization’, can we locate the difficult, the frightening, or the foreign, within ourselves? Perhaps disorientation can provide a strategy, an exercise, or a tool toward creating what James Baldwin calls “a self without the need for enemies.”<sup>26</sup>

Although very formally different from my “map” works, my sculpture *St. Louis Landscape (Facing West)*, 2022, is also meant to create disorientation by combining an image of land with the actual material of a landscape. This work appropriates part of Albert Bierstadt’s painting *Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak*, 1863, depicting the western United States as an inviting, majestic expanse of sparsely inhabited land ready to be explored by white settlers.<sup>27</sup> Though he was German-born, Bierstadt’s works, as described by the Metropolitan Museum, “shaped the visual identity of the American West” as a frontier in ways that contributed to the aggressive and violent expansion of the United States across the continent.<sup>28</sup>



[Fig.9] Noah Greene-Lowe, *St. Louis Landscape (Facing West)*, 2022

curtain rod, found asphalt, jacquard woven blanket with a section of Albert Bierstadt's *Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*  
dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist and Mildred Lane Kemper Museum of Art

For this work, I ordered a section of *Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* as a customized jacquard-woven blanket—the kind intended to reproduce family photos or the face of a beloved pet. The blanket hangs like a tapestry from a used curtain rod, and I have unraveled it from the bottom, creating the shape of a road in perspective, winding into Bierstadt's unspoiled scene. Finally, I collect crumbling asphalt from St. Louis' streets and incorporate it into the blanket, from tiny grains at the road's vanishing point to large chunks beaded into the unraveled strands and spilling onto the floor. Like *Map of Atlanta as Natural Disaster*, this work at once invites and withholds the exploration of a landscape. The majestic image of the West and the road that invites you into it both deteriorate as they appear to approach you, no longer an image but a material fact. Rather than understanding landscape as simply an *out there* that is viewed from *here*, I want to relocate landscape as what is already under our feet.

In this work, I also use the road to disturb the familiarity of the domestic, creating a disorientation between interior and exterior. I see *St. Louis Landscape* in dialog with the work of Ann Greene Kelly, who uses tires, car parts and images of roads to similarly interrupt the comfort of domestic objects. Kelly's *Untitled*, 2019, for example, comprises a stained, pink mattress with two tire grooves made from plaster and graphite sunken into it (Fig. 10). A road is subtly inscribed along the outer edge of the mattress in the same materials. Although this work does not use an image of landscape, it creates a similar form of disorientation, in which the private intimacy of a mattress suddenly becomes equated with the surface of a road, or perhaps a piece of land itself. The depth of the tire marks implies the full weight of a car having sunken into the soft surface. To me, Kelly's sculpture also points to the centrality of the road and the car in U.S. culture and daily life. Though they are materially distinct, these are infrastructures that uphold and shape our domesticity.



[Fig.10] Ann Greene Kelly, *Untitled*, 2019

Mattress, graphite, colored pencil, plaster, wood  
82 x 69 x 32"

Courtesy of the artist and Michael Benevento Gallery



As U.S. cities in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century began sprawling into new white suburbs, it seems that the dream of expansion into a vast, natural landscape was enacted over again, in the most domestic and comfortable way. White residents fleeing to the wide-open lawns and rolling hills of the suburbs must have also felt oriented toward their own frontiers. Perhaps they displayed images like Bierstadt's in their new suburban homes. The notion of expansion, of the frontier, is reenacted in the development of suburbs. In *St. Louis Landscape (Facing West)*, I am also concerned with this entanglement, with the repetition of the frontier at many scales of life in the US, and the road as an infrastructure for these many frontiers. At the same time, the road in this work somewhat violently cuts through the soft domesticity of the blanket, as a road cuts into a landscape, and as roads have cut through the former homes of displaced communities described in the first chapter of this text. The road allows for suburban life to exist, at the same time facilitating the erasure of non-white communities. The empty land that Bierstadt depicts seems to echo in each vacant plot of grass in Kinloch's landscape, in the manicured highway embankments that cut through the former Mill Creek Valley, and the scrubby, empty lots that dot the former Little Manila neighborhood.

Like the road, the image of the wide-open frontier depicted in Bierstadt's landscape is also a kind of infrastructure. Landscape paintings like these were not only meant to create beauty, or to showcase the talent of their painters. I also see them as a form of reconnaissance. They reported on the West as a frontier for expansion, and in doing so, they also constructed an idea of the landscape as something to be explored. These paintings helped to invent the sublime and the untouched in our national imagination, and to locate it within our grasp. They oriented the United States toward its 'manifest destiny,' and cleared the way for roads to be built. By using a reproduction of this kind of landscape image as a structure to literally support the road, I

emphasize in this work that the road and the frontier are interdependent. Possessed as a domestic object—a blanket, or tapestry—the landscape image can offer a frontier safely contained within the familiar habitation of space as property. It provides a contrasting *out there* against which a domestic space becomes more safely oriented *in here*.

Sara Ahmed describes whiteness itself as an “orientation that puts certain things within reach.”<sup>29</sup> These things may include even the ideas of property, domesticity, and familiarity. The disorientations in my work, then, are also about playing with the ways that things are within, or out of reach. In my sculptures, spaces are never quite revealed by architectural structures, landscapes are withheld by the very materials that represent them, and the expectations of domestic comfort are repeatedly denied. How can we reorient ourselves in ways that depend neither on an exclusionary social structure, insular and defined in opposition to an Other, nor on a series of endless frontiers?



Afterlife: Repair and Reconstruction

The gospel song “I’ll Fly Away” is one I remember hearing often growing up. One of the most popular and widely recorded gospel songs, I heard versions of it played by various folk and country singers. But I can also remember half-joining in with crowds of people who launched into the song at some folk singalong or community gathering, which served as a kind of secular church. My parents were not religious, but gospel and folk songs like this one seemed to represent a rare aspect of our American-ness or southern-ness that I was raised to embrace.

Written by the white former sharecropper Albert Brumley in 1929, “I’ll Fly Away” is a painfully beautiful hymn, describing the singer’s yearning for freedom in death, the freedom of the afterlife:

When the shadows  
Of this life have gone  
I’ll fly away, fly away  
Like a bird from these prison walls I’ll fly,  
I’ll fly away, fly away

I have been reminded of this song often during my recent work. Perhaps partly because I have been working with ceramic bird figurines, which carry a quite literal association of flying away. But I also consider nearly all my materials to be in a kind of afterlife, a state of freedom in death. I work primarily with materials collected from second-hand stores or scavenged from dumpsters or from the street. In a sense, these are things that have passed on. They have lived, likely fulfilling the function they were intended for, and tend to show signs of their use. But in the afterlife of art making, they are detached, or freed, from what they are supposed to accomplish in

life. They hold associations and traces of their function in the world, and in some ways also reflect the social geographies from which they have been discarded. What can these materials express in their afterlife? How can they represent or re-map the relationships of social, geographical, economic, material and other processes that they result from?

In my approach to materials, I draw on the work of the artist Abraham Cruzvillegas, who describes working with “dead” things, or what he calls “prime matter,” and explores the possibilities of their reuse and transformation through his method of “autoconstrucción” (roughly translating as self-construction.)<sup>30</sup> The concept of autoconstrucción comes from the informal building processes used to construct houses in Cruzvillegas’ home community in Ajusco, south of Mexico City. He writes,

Aesthetic decisions are intertwined with the ability of the builders to use anything available or at hand, depending on place, circumstance, or chance...As opposed to massive building projects, it points to an autonomous and independent architecture that is far from any planning or draft: it’s improvised.<sup>31</sup>

To me, the community structure Cruzvillegas describes provides another counterpart to my experience of cohousing. Like those of Mill Creek Valley, Kinloch and Little Manila, this community emerged as a result of collective needs, resourcefulness and improvisation, almost the direct opposite of the predetermined and planned structure of cohousing. Further, rather than being physically constructed from regulated and pre-approved materials on the clean slate of a cleared plot of land, Cruzvillegas describes homes in Ajusco being built largely from the materials—volcanic rock and recycled materials—found *in* the empty building site itself.<sup>32</sup>



[Fig.11] Noah Greene-Lowe, *I'll Fly Away*, 2022  
Ceramic floor tile, grout, wood, ceramic figurines, inkjet-printed satellite images from sites of displacement: Kinloch and Mill Creek Valley, MO, and Little Manila, Stockton, CA  
12 x 60 x 60"  
Photo by Richard Sprengeler  
Courtesy of the artist and Mildred Lane Kemper Museum of Art

In all its beauty, as a non-religious listener, the vision of freedom I find in “I’ll Fly Away” seems to be a vision of escapism. In hymnals where it appears, the song is often listed under the topic of “acceptance”. It offers the promise of ultimate freedom and peace in the afterlife, in exchange for our acceptance of the current circumstances, whatever they may be. This vision of escape seems present in many of the mythologies of the United States. Even the notion of the ‘new world,’ as it was imagined by the Europeans, evokes a sense of escape from the past. I imagine that the western frontier, too, offered a form of escape, an opportunity to fly away. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, modernists declared that the past was over, and rejected anything traditional for the sleek forms of steel and concrete. As a symbol of modernism, the skyscraper certainly seems like an attempt to fly away, to defy gravity and to prove that the future had arrived. Soon, there was also the white flight of the 1950s and 60s, when white people left the cities behind in droves for their million suburban frontiers. In our present moment, the dream of escape is also alive. Debates rage in school boards and in congress about whether children should even be made aware of the dark parts of our nation’s history. Those with enough power even envision escaping to other planets in the face of climate catastrophe. The problem with all these futures is that they attempt to simply trade in the past for some form of clean slate. These are not visions of transformation, but of giving up and starting over. I argue that real freedom—a freedom of agency and possibility in the present—is found instead in forms of repair.

Much of my work employs some process of repair or reconstruction, in which a broken or deteriorated material is remade, not to recreate its original form, but to achieve a transformation. Making use of the material’s fractures or natural character to determine a new form, I believe this process also produces new insight into its meaning, purpose, and the values it carries. How a thing breaks can reveal not just its materiality, but the limits of its function and intended



meaning. When recombining materials, I am forced to follow the character of the material itself, and its cracks or ruptures become a framework for a new form. Although these ideas are present in nearly all of my sculptures, in my current work it is best exemplified by the sculpture titled *I'll Fly Away*, 2022 (Figure 11). This work uses ceramic floor tiles, which have been broken and rearranged, to create a waving, dimensional surface meant to resemble a landscape, ocean waves, or perhaps tree roots breaking through a sidewalk. The surface dissipates into the expected flat, tiled grid of a floor toward its edges. For me, the reconstructed surface of the tiles creates a sense of instability, but also of possibility. I want the floor to be in some way freed from its expected function and meaning, ready to express something new. I also want to disrupt our orientation to the floor as a predictable surface to walk on.

Repair, at least in a Western context, signifies the returning of something to its original or previous state, but this is not fully possible. Once broken or fallen apart, a thing can never be made truly the same as it was before, even if it shows no functional or visible change. In this way, repair always means some form of transformation, or *reconstruction*. In being remade, a thing is always changed. The artist Kader Attia points to divergent modes of repair practiced by Western and non-Western cultures.<sup>33</sup> For Attia, repair in the West is characterized by the returning of something or someone to an undamaged state, which involves removing evidence of harm or damage. This could be exemplified by medical practices like plastic surgery that seek to disguise transformation, but can also be seen, I would argue, in the design and redevelopment of urban spaces that are meant to appear 'natural' in relationship to their context and hide all traces of what came before them. By contrast, non-Western societies often approach repair in ways that incorporate evidence of transformation into a further evolution of the thing repaired.<sup>34</sup> These approaches to repair include practices of visibly stapling or suturing objects among some African

cultures, as well as the Japanese practice of kintsugi, in which broken ceramics are repaired with gold, highlighting their fractures.



[Fig.12] Yeesookyung, *Translated Vase*, 2010  
Ceramic trash, epoxy, 24k gold leaf  
44 x 50 x 44 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech Gallery

In her series *Translated Vase*, 2002-ongoing, artist Yeesoookyung uses a process similar to kintsugi to build bulging, organic sculptures from discarded fragments of traditional Korean ceramics (Fig. 12). But where kintsugi restores the original forms of broken vessels, Yeesoookyung's works combine fragments from many different pieces that have been rejected and broken due to their imperfections, creating entirely new forms. I take inspiration from this process in my work, applying it to a variety of ordinary materials. This process is most directly visible in *I'll Fly Away*. By inserting this form of reconstruction into the architecture of the domestic and the familiar, I look to interrupt the prescriptive logic of a white spatial imaginary with a moment of improvisation and a non-Western logic of repair.

In response to sites of displacement, histories of violence, and broken systems of habitation, perhaps these modes of repair and reconstruction can offer ways of representing, mapping, and rebuilding that respond directly to systemic harm, rather than disguise it. How can we reinvent the sense of hope and freedom that "I'll Fly Away" offers in a future that is continuous with our past? How can we allow ourselves the possibility of flying away through the transformation of the reality that we inherit rather than its denial? This transformation requires facing those histories that we are ashamed of, locating possibility within the cracks of our mythologies. I am interested in acceptance not as a trade for some future afterlife, but for an afterlife perpetually lived here and now. I want to accept our present conditions as inherited raw materials with which to constantly remake our world.

## Conclusion

The ideas formulated in this text have resulted from an extensive and ongoing dialogue between studio work, research, and my own lived experience. The frameworks and readings I offer here by no means encapsulate the whole of my work's meaning or implications, or even the intentions with which I began it. As I write this text and discuss my work with others, I continue to arrive at new ways of framing and contextualizing it within academic discourses, art histories, and my own life. This plasticity of artworks and their implications is a central reason that I continue to choose art making as a primary medium of expression. I think of my art practice as a project of continuously learning from material, its histories, transformations, difficulties, limitations, and associations. I make it my goal to repeatedly reconstruct and reorient myself through the material process of art making.

As I move forward in my work, I will continue to seek out a stronger vocabulary of disorientations and reconstructions to reach beyond existing spatial languages as I engage with a variety of landscapes and social geographies. Each of the lenses with which I consider my work, and the strategies I use to create it have been shaped by the places I have lived, their material remnants and social relations. I will continue allowing my work the freedom to respond to a range of places where I might live, travel, and exhibit. As I consider the importance of place, I also look for ways to expand my practice beyond the traditional context of galleries and museums, to challenge myself to engage with less clean and simple display environments. As I bring materials from mundane contexts into art spaces, how can I bring my practice of art making and exhibition back into the mundane, perhaps also bringing care into the seemingly un-special and un-cared-for?

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> George Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape,” *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (2007): 10–23.
- <sup>2</sup> Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (August 1, 2007): 149–68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107078139>.
- <sup>3</sup> James Baldwin, “On Being White... and Other Lies,” *Essence* 14, no. 12 (1984): 90–92.
- <sup>4</sup> Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787>.
- <sup>5</sup> Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss, *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory* (SAGE, 2009).
- <sup>6</sup> Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1715.
- <sup>7</sup> Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 149.
- <sup>8</sup> Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 156.
- <sup>9</sup> Joseph F. Kennedy, Michael G. Smith, and Catherine Wanek, *The Art of Natural Building-Second Edition-Completely Revised, Expanded and Updated: Design, Construction, Resources* (New Society Publishers, 2014).
- <sup>10</sup> Robin D G Kelley, “What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism?,” n.d., 1. By “racial capitalism,” I do not refer to a specific type of capitalism, but to the idea that all capitalism is inherently supported by systems of race and white supremacy, as described by Cedric Robinson.
- <sup>11</sup> “Urban Renewal and Mill Creek Valley – Decoding the City,” accessed April 13, 2022, <http://www.decodingstl.org/urban-renewal-and-mill-creek-valley/>.
- <sup>12</sup> “Mill Creek Valley Project Area Redevelopment Map – Decoding the City,” accessed March 23, 2022, <http://www.decodingstl.org/mill-creek-valley-project-area-redevelopment-map/>.
- <sup>13</sup> John A Wright, *Kinloch: Missouri’s First Black City* (Chicago, IL: Arcadia Pub., 2000).
- <sup>14</sup> “Historic Aerials,” accessed March 23, 2022, <https://data.stlouisco.com/apps/historic-aerials/explore>.
- <sup>15</sup> “More Than History,” Little Manila Rising, accessed March 23, 2022, <https://littlemanila.org/more-than-history>.
- <sup>16</sup> Ioto00, “Little Manila: The Recovered Soul of Stockton,” CalAsian Chamber, October 6, 2020, <https://www.calasiancc.org/post/little-manila-the-recovered-soul-of-stockton>.
- <sup>17</sup> “Little Manila: Filipinos in California’s Heartland - KVIE,” *ViewFinder* (PBS KVIE, October 1, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNCZ8sGJs8I>.
- <sup>18</sup> Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1721.

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<sup>19</sup> Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race.”

<sup>20</sup> Seloua Luste Boulbina, *Les miroirs vagabonds, ou, La décolonisation des savoirs (arts, littérature, philosophie)* (Les Presses du réel, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> The term “Western” itself is a racialized orientation, not referring to the whole of the Western hemisphere, but generally meaning Europe and the colonies in which its people and cultural practices have become dominant; in other words, referring largely to whiteness.

<sup>22</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> “Black Lives and Spatial Matters by Jodi Rios | Paperback,” *Cornell University Press* (blog), accessed April 29, 2022, 26, <https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9781501750472/black-lives-and-spatial-matters/>.

<sup>26</sup> “James Baldwin’s Faith in America,” Department of African American Studies, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://aas.princeton.edu/news/james-baldwins-faith-america>.

<sup>27</sup> “Albert Bierstadt | The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak | American,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10154>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 154.

<sup>30</sup> “Prime Matter: Abraham Cruzvillegas on ‘Autoconstrucción,’” accessed February 15, 2022, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/abraham-cruzvillegas-art-autoconstruccion>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Dartmouth, *Accident as Repair: Kader Attia - Artist Lecture and Discussion*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ybUeLyNb3o>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

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*Nine Ways from Sunday*, installation view  
Courtesy of the artist and Mildred Lane Kemper Museum of Art



*Nine Ways from Sunday*, installation view  
Photo by Richard Sprengeler  
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