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Patterning a Home

Zoë Finkelstein

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Patterning a Home
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Abstract

The question driving my constant impulse to create is this: how do the places in which we spend our time transform the four walls around us into this larger entity we call “home?” I begin to answer this question with an investigation into the use of repetition, time spent, and memory in my own body of work. In order for a space to become a home, one must build up a collection of experiences in that space over time. To show this, I explore the relationship in my work between repetitive mark making, pattern, intense labor, memory, comfort, and my deep longing and simultaneous anxiety around calling a space my true home. A house only becomes a home after it has been lived in and filled with objects important to the inhabitant to personalize the space and to make it as comfortable as possible. Repeated action implies time spent, and over the time we live in a single place, we repeat the patterns of our daily lives inside the walls of that space. We have experiences in that space and create memories that live within those walls. Our homes become museums — collections of memories, both good and bad — that commemorate the time we have spent in them and the lives we have lived thus far.
You can tell a lot about a person by looking at the place they call home. Is the bedroom perfectly neat or is it an organized mess, reminiscent of a tornado’s aftermath? Is the bookshelf full of favorite reads or books that have yet to be opened? What objects are important enough to live in the nightstand drawer? We create a space for ourselves to feel the most comfortable. My own home is the haven of a collector, one more interested in objects than organization. My cassette tapes are lined up in a row on a shelf above my records; a cluster of candles decorates the top of my bookshelf alongside an incense holder; my finished sketchbooks lay stacked in a pile on my desk (organized by date) ready for me to grab at any moment if I need inspiration or am feeling a little nostalgic; my acoustic guitar finds its home propped in the corner by the bookcase; my zine collection resides in a box under my bed, just beside the box full of letters, stickers, photos, and other little paper things; posters, prints, postcards, and other paper relics are pinned up to the wall.

I feel most comfortable when surrounded by the things I love, though somehow this comfort is consistently paired with a tinge of anxiety, with constant anticipation of movement. When I was fifteen we moved from my childhood home in Darien, Connecticut (Figure I) to Las Vegas, Nevada. That drastic change, that disruption of home, is where some of that anxiety stems from. That is not to say that my home in Connecticut was perfect, it was more the comfort of it that I missed. Before the move, it had

Figure I: Zoë Finkelstein, Connecticut House, 2017
never crossed my mind that my home would ever be anywhere except the bedroom I had always known. With every residence I have inhabited since, the impermanence of the space is never far from my mind. It is in spite of that impermanence that I fill these spaces with objects, as if to win a fight with time. Even when I lived in that first house, I spent more time living in the chaotic yet cozy world inside my head, and it is that world that I bring into our world through my work.

In my quest to define and understand what home means through my art, I found myself coming to the understanding that I may never find a physical place to call my forever home, but instead that my art practice currently holds — and may always hold — that place for me. By this I mean that the feeling of making has become the place where I am most comfortable and can be most myself. The action of making is a therapeutic one for me, both in the physicality of the processes and in the almost confessional nature of my work.

To quell the constant anxiety inside me, I must keep making. I find comfort in the repetition inherent to the work I create. Each piece holds the memory of the process of making it, both physically and emotionally. My series of four books entitled A Journey Into the Dark (I-IV) (Figure II) embodies the therapeutic nature of my practice both in concept and process of its creation. These books are each snapshots of my experience living inside a brain with anxiety. In creating this
collection of books, I produced over 100 unique prints using three zinc plates (Figure III). I marked each plate, printed it in four set ways with room for experimentation on the plate after applying ink, and continued to do this for hours on end until I had an abundance of prints to choose from. I paired each print with a piece of text taken from my sketchbooks and journals in order to make four books with ten prints each. I fell into a pattern and a rhythm of making; the time consuming and repetitive nature of printing was calming and therapeutic.

My work is not just therapeutic in the practice of making, but also in the conceptual core of this piece. The text was taken from scribblings written in my sketchbooks in moments of panic, anxiety, and depression.

The use of this expressive and almost confessional language (both textual language and the language of mark making) takes inspiration from the work of Tracey Emin (Figure IV)¹. Her pieces overflow with raw emotion and the

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intense need to communicate those emotions; her work is honest and expressive, drawing inspiration from her own lived experience.

In times of intense anxiety, moments of boredom, or instances in which I am full of thought, I find myself falling into the habit of repetitive mark making. Over time, repetitive marks accumulate to form a pattern. This method of working and its patterned result appear in my work quite often, most notably in my installation Nightmarescape (Figure V), in which I hand painted tally marks on fabric, creating a wallpaper effect to both entice and overwhelm the viewer. While making, the labor intensive yet calming act of repeating the tally mark motion took over my body and I could do nothing but keep going. Time disappeared and repetition took over.

Figure V: Zoë Finkelstein, Nightmarescape, 2019

The act of repetition is a calming one, yet it also breeds anxiety; the action is soothing but the final product can be chaotic and overwhelming. I use repetition not only as a therapeutic
mechanism for myself, but also to create an overwhelming experience, mimicking the world
inside my head for the viewer to fully immerse themselves in. This relates to the work of Yayoi
Kusama (Figure VI) in that the
work is an “attempt to convey this
private world [of trauma and
mental illness] in [my] art.” It is a
visualization of trauma and mental
illness based on the artist’s lived
experience. The repeated dots in
Kusama’s work take inspiration
from hallucinations she began to experience as a child as well as her “fear of sexual vision”. Repetition of pattern is instrumental in the effectiveness of Kusama’s work, as well as my own work.

Patterns exist not only visually but also in our actions, in the rituals and routines that
make up our patterns of daily life. Some of the routines I have fallen into are calming ones, and
others are coping mechanisms for anxiety, depression, stress, and trauma. I explored these
routines and patterns of daily life in a set of two zines entitled Ritual/Routine and Lists/Organization. Ritual/Routine documents the ways my anxiety manifests itself through routines I
have developed to maintain some semblance of stability in the face of those things. Lists/

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kusama/infinity-rooms/.


Organization details the lists I compulsively make in a (usually failed) attempt at grounding myself and focusing on some concrete actions I can take to get through a day. These two zines live within another piece entitled Bookcase (Anxiety on a Shelf) (Figure VII). Bookcase functions for the viewer to experience and interact with and is part of the larger installation Nightmarescape which, like Kusama’s work, is a visual representation of the world inside my head. Similar to Kusama’s work, viewer interaction with the piece is essential to the success of the installation.

My work is largely experiential. It is meant to produce something that the viewer can keep for themselves, be it a memory or a tangible token — a zine or two from off the shelf, for example (Figure VIII), in the case of Bookcase. In this way, my work acts as a bridge to connect my own
experience with that of the viewer, as well as to provide an environment for the viewer to spend time within.

Repeated mark making implies time spent doing the action required to make those marks. Time spent breeds familiarity; the more time we spend doing something or existing in a space, the more familiar with that action or space we are, and the more comfortable we tend to become. The intricacy of the action and the accumulation of the mass of marks made over a period of time can sometimes be overwhelming, however the marks inevitably fall into a pattern, which gives the viewer something constant on which to rest their eye.

The time spent placing each mark adds up. My work is akin to that of Liza Lou in that both practices give importance to craft and involve time consuming, laborious repetitive action, as well as the adaptation of domestic space. In Lou’s installation *Kitchen* (Figure IX), she worked for five years to create this beaded kitchen space, not letting a single detail past her. The installation is completed with details such as a beaded broom beside a beaded dustpan with beaded objects laying within it, as if they had just been swept off the floor.

Her process is labor-intensive and, as a result, tends to be quite time consuming, which is evident in the five year period it took her to complete *Kitchen*. Her process is multilayered and

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importance lies in the labor she dedicates to her work. *Kitchen* began with collecting found and used objects as well as creating forms from wood, plaster, and papier-mâché, and continued with the application of tiny beads covering every surface, even going to the length to cover and add detail to those surfaces not visible to the viewer. It is the laborious and meticulous nature of her attention to detail as well as her adaptation and creation of domestic space that I look to for inspiration in my work.

*Bookcase (Anxiety on a Shelf)* references domestic life by using the bookcase as the backbone of the piece. This bookcase contains a collection of objects from my own bookcase in my bedroom that hold importance to me. The act of collecting is a time-based act. We pick up items over the course of our lives that stick out to us as important, that hold memories of the instances in which we acquired each object. The act of collection is both practical and sentimental; practical in that collected “leftovers yield nourishment in new forms” and sentimental in that it acts as a vehicle to “harbor […] memories. Each cherished scrap […] is] a reminder of its place in a [person]’s life, similar to an entry in a journal.” A collection stands for the stretch of time in which the objects were acquired, and our homes are filled with our own personal collections that tell the stories of our lived experiences. The act of collection is a type of repetition. We see an object that calls to us somehow, and we keep it for ourselves; this action is repeated until we find ourselves with a collection of objects that mean something to us, and we hold those collections close. *Bookcase* contains a number of my personal collections: lighters

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from gas stations all over the country, various scented candles, tiny tokens of importance, and quite possibly my most prized collection: all of my filled sketchbooks and journals.

It is the impulse of collection and its role in my overall practice that leads me to include my collection of filled sketchbooks in *Bookcase (Anxiety on a Shelf)* and alongside the presentation of my thesis work. Filling sketchbooks compulsively over many years has lead to a stack of books that hold countless memories in their most pure form. Each filled sketchbook holds value, but it is the ever-growing collection of them that I find most intriguing and most pertinent to my overall art practice. These objects exist as relics of the time I spent filling them, which is a common thread in my work overall.

This brings us back to a question that for years has grounded and driven my undeniable impulse to create: how does an empty house become a home? How do the places we spend our time transform from merely the four walls around us into this larger entity we call “home”? Experience, which in itself implies time spent, is a key component to the creation of a home. A space does not become a home overnight, it requires that time be spent in that space and memories to be made there. After we have spent enough time in these spaces, after we have truly
lived in them, our homes become museums that commemorate the time we have spent in them and the lives we have lived thus far. Our homes are filled with objects important to the inhabitant in order to personalize the space and maximize comfortability and familiarity. More importantly, through these objects and the space they exist in, the home becomes a collection of memories, both good and bad, that mark the time spent in the space.

It is that sense of familiarity and comfort achieved over time through repeated action and experience that I work to capture in *Worms Like Hugs Too* (Figure X) and *Hug Me* (Figure XI). Within these pieces resides a deep yearning to find true comfort, akin to the warm feeling of a good hug, within a home. The Pattern and Decoration (P&D) movement holds this sincerity within the use of pattern; artists like Miriam Schapiro and Joyce Kozloff “invite the viewer to take equal pleasure” ⁹ in the work. The P&D movement makes “gestures … of love and embrace,” ¹⁰ and those gestures can be found within my *Hugs* sculptures too.

A home contains evidence of the life the owner has lived, both good and bad. These pieces work to marry the chaotic recognition of fleeting time with the comfort of retroactive reminiscing on time spent. *Worms Like Hugs Too* was an early exploration of viewer interaction and participation in the piece. I revisited this type of interaction with *Hug Me*, this time designing the stuffed shape in a way that more intentionally and overtly implies the need for human interaction. My work rides the line between physical comfort and visual chaos, which is evident in these works, and in that sweet spot lies sentimentality and nostalgia. That bittersweet home feeling, the sentimentality of it all, is something I inject into all of my work. It is an

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attempt to harness memory, to fight its fleeting nature by attaching important moments and experiences to objects that I surround myself with. Home and memory are unwaveringly linked in this way. Memories reside in the places we spend our time and in the objects we spend our time with. My work is wholeheartedly driven by this air of sentimentality, which is akin to the work of Ree Morton. Her “interest in installation and domesticity gave rise to an exploration of sentimentality,” though in my own artistic journey the opposite rings true, as my exploration of sentimentality lead me to explore domesticity and installation. Morton’s body of work is “suffused in sentimentality, longing, and desire, creating an affective address of loss, a kind of slipping away, of opening and closing, of precariousness and propping,” which is something I look to for inspiration.

My work considers memory and the passage of time through the lens of pattern and accumulation. This is embodied fully in Another Kind of Rock Formation (Figure XII), which is a site-specific installation I created at the Granite City Art and Design District (GCADD) in Granite City, IL. I saw a line of creamsicle orange chairs and was gripped with inspiration from

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12 Molesworth, “Sentiment and Sentimentality,” 17.
the decay of the space around those chairs and the thought that I was existing in a space that
people had existed in before, but experiencing it in my own unique way. I collected rocks from
around the city of St. Louis and covered them with mono prints inspired by patterns found throughout the
landscape of GCADD. I then assembled the print-covered rocks on the seat of one of the orange chairs in a form
resembling a slumped body. This installation marks the beginning of my use of rocks and stones
to mark the passage of time and memory.

Recently I have revisited the image of rocks and stones, abstracting them a bit more this
time. Because of the quarantine mandated due to the outbreak of COVID-19, almost everyone
has spent more time inside the walls of their homes than they had ever planned to, and as a result, our individual relationships with our homes have had to shift. The act of repetitive mark
making in my work serves a therapeutic purpose, but it also acts as a mechanism to mark the
passage of time. Under these circumstances, there is nothing else to do but pass the time. Each
day blurs into the next with no clear end in sight. As a result, I have found myself filling the time
with variations on familiar methods of repeated mark making to cope. My series of Quarantine

Figure XII: Zoë Finkelstein, *Another Kind of Rock Formation*, 2019
Collages were made with pattern and repetition in mind in order to pass the time in quarantine (Figure XIII). While making these pieces I was investing thoughts about my home and how my perception of it has changed since spending most of my time confined in it. I focused on layering repeated actions to create images representative of the chaotic thought channeled into those actions. I would find myself focused on a task — carving linoleum blocks or cutting paper, for example— from mid-morning until sunset without really feeling the time pass. My mind seemed to separate from my body as I learned the familiarity of the action and fell into the rhythm of making. At the end of each day I had a pile of material to use in the final collages, which I assembled after a large string of these days filled with repeated action and mark making (Figure XIV).

These collages are the result of my mind left to wander with little outside structure to bring me back into focus.

Through spending all of this time inside my apartment, I have gained a little bit of clarity regarding how “home” is created and how that is
manifested in my art practice. Repeated action implies time spent. Over the time we live in a single place, we repeat the patterns of our daily lives inside the walls of that space; we have experiences in that space and create memories that live within those walls. It is that repetition of patterns of daily life and the accumulation of memories that gather over time that transform a house into a home.
Bibliography


Image List

Figure I: Zoë Finkelstein, *Connecticut House*, 2017, etching, block print, and acrylic paint on Stonehenge paper.

Figure II: Zoë Finkelstein, *A Journey Into the Dark (I-IV)*, 2019, each piece is 7 x 7 x 1 in, drypoint print on Stonehenge paper, typewritten text on tracing paper, Japanese paper, mirror paper.

Figure III: Image taken in Finkelstein’s studio

Figure IV: Tracey Emin, *I Love you too Much*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 153.2 x 182.2 x 3.6 cm.

Figure V: Zoë Finkelstein, *Nightmarescape*, 2019, installation view

Figure VI: Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli’s Field*, 1965/2016, stuffed cotton, board, and mirrors, dimensions vary.

Figure VII: Zoë Finkelstein, *Bookcase (Anxiety on a Shelf)*, 2019, 10 x 24 x 44 in., collaged zines, wood, LED lights, items found in the artist’s home.

Figure VIII: Zoë Finkelstein, spread from *Ritual/Routine*, 2019, collaged zine

Figure IX: Liza Lou, *Kitchen*, 1991-1996, beads, plaster, wood and found objects, 96 x 132 x 168 in.

Figure X: Zoë Finkelstein, *Worms Like Hugs Too*, 2019, screen print, pronto plate, and acrylic paint on fabric, stuffing.

Figure XI: Zoë Finkelstein, *Hug Me*, 2020, screen print on hand marbled muslin, stuffing

Figure XII: Zoë Finkelstein, *Another Kind of Rock Formation*, 2019, installation view, monotype on newsprint, wheat paste, found rocks

Figure XIII: Zoë Finkelstein, *Scatter*, 2020, 11 x 15 in., watercolor, linoleum blocks printed on Japanese paper, watercolor paper, paint pen, collage.

Figure XIV: Zoë Finkelstein, *Waterfall*, 2020, 9 x 12 in., linoleum blocks printed on Japanese paper, mixed media toned blue paper, watercolor paper, micron.