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Observance | A Passage

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Observance | A Passage

Charis Schneider Norell

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of Washington University in St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts.

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May 18th, 2018
Abstract
My art practice consists of drawing with fibers within handcrafted frame looms. I position these drawings as expanded, three-dimensional “drawing spaces,” creating medium-scale installations. I wish to expand drawing’s definition beyond its traditional material limits to simply be the process of leaving marks. Fiber is my medium, and the space within the frame loom’s warp and weft becomes my support. I see the drawing process to be the gestural residue of thought, and call these works my “fiber drawings.” While I use traditional weaving methods and materials as I work, I do not call myself a weaver. I see myself, first, as one who draws. I share conceptual and material “threads” with Sheila Hicks, Anne Wilson, and Anni Albers, among others.

In making these drawings, I seek to collapse the distance between childhood memories, places I long to recover, and where I am now in the present. While I acknowledge the futility of this task, my fiber drawings exist as my fragile attempts to pin down, to tie together, and to observe these longings into and within a physical, knotted form.

For me, fiber carries an inherent understanding of home, of memories, and of making. Stitched material implicitly evokes the hand, and I incorporate wool and other natural materials into three-dimensional frame looms, creating large-scale fiber drawings that suggest domestic space. My fiber drawings act as traces of my thoughts, memories, and gestures—all made visible through thread. Each pass with the fiber through the weft strings is my effort to grasp at something just beyond reach—as if I could affix those intimate moments into the spaces between the frames. Using the three-dimensional thread as a stand-in for the abstracted thought, the woven object imparts a material presence to the untouchable memory. By first recognizing the desire for the unattainable, to transitioning
into a state of celebrating that longing, my weavings hold within their tenuous fibers the trailings of my experiences.

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Introduction
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My art practice consists of drawing with fibers within handcrafted frame looms. I position these drawings as expanded, three-dimensional “drawing spaces,” creating medium-scale installations. Drawing is traditionally understood to be a process of applying marks onto paper and other similar supports with pens, pencils, chalk, and other materials. However, I wish to expand drawing’s definition to be, quite simply, the process of making marks. Fiber is my medium, and the space within the frame loom’s warp and weft becomes my support.¹ I call these works my “fiber drawings,” and see the drawing process to be the gestural residue of thought. While I use traditional weaving methods and materials as I
work, I do not call myself a weaver. I see myself, first, as one who draws. I share conceptual and material “threads” with Sheila Hicks, Anne Wilson, and Anni Albers, among others.

Before beginning work with fiber, I painted with oils on both canvas and Mylar. Throughout this document, I will share how many of these paintings inspire my current work. The layer-by-layer process of creating a painting is still one I incorporate as I construct my drawings. Working from frame to frame, my fiber drawings layer over themselves and create shifting compositions as the viewer wanders around the installation.

In structuring this thesis, I divided the document into five parts paralleling the five panels of fiber drawings in my work, *Observance | A Passage* (which shares a title with this document). In the chapter, “Observance | A Passage,” I describe the various material, procedural, and conceptual aspects to *Observance | A Passage*. In “Fiber | A Metaphor,” I describe my use of fiber as a drawing material in its specific relation to memory and haptic sensibility. “Weaving | A Drawing” lays out my understanding of weaving as gesture, and presents the performative, communicative nature of the drawing act. I relate the collection of objects to a nostalgic, preservative instinct in “Memory | An Object,” and go on to describe earlier works that inform my thoughts on longing, home, and memory in “Longing | A Material.” In select passages in the document, I inserted images taken at the childhood sites I desire to remember, as well as images of related objects that recall these longings for me. I also include a description of an earlier painting in the Appendix (*The Clay Reminds Me of What’s Lost*). For me, this painting operates as both a record of preserved objects, and as a nostalgic object in and of itself. I separate it from the main body of text but see it closely linked to my larger discovery of longing for home and on the trace object.
A passage is both a narrow space allowing access between rooms, and a process of moving through, under, or beyond something in a time of transition. “Observance” refers to a habitual perception or repeated noticing that evokes a sense of attention and care. However, “observance” also calls forth the ritual and performative nature of ceremony. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “observance” as:

An action, esp. of a religious or ceremonial nature, performed in accordance with prescribed usage…the performance of prescribed rites of worship, or of traditional and customary religious rituals and ceremonies. See also, the action of observing, noticing, or paying attention to what is said or done.  

I see my work functioning as a ceremonial act of observance, as well as a record of what is being observed—namely, the passage of longing for childhood, familiar places, and home. In drawing, I attempt to give tangible form to the abstract, fleeting nature of my thoughts. I reference memories and childhood experiences, and I become both performer and archivist, naming and filling away these memories within the woven space of the frame. Each line made with the thread is an action of marking and remembering through mark—a visualization of my thoughts by simply paying attention. It is my hope that my fiber drawings serve as both a repetitive reaction of noticing and describing, and a ritualistic, performative gesture.
Observance | A Passage
My drawing, *Observance | A Passage*, is composed of five white wooden panels resting within a gray, wooden support frame. The front and back panels sit flush with the sides of the frame, and a mirrored surface lies within its base. Each of the panels contain a successive progression of wool roving, crochet thread, and an assortment of cotton, linen, wool, and alpaca fibers. When looking directly at the piece from either the front or the back, the viewer sees through all five panels. However, certain passages within each panel are partially obscured by its predecessor. Inter-connecting threads between the panels create a pathway through the work, further obscuring the full view. Long, dangling fibers pool beneath the piece, and gently brush up against the mirror. From the mirror, the viewer can look up and around various passages of the work that were previously inaccessible to the eye. The entirety of the work cannot be seen at once, and viewing the work involves a journey of wandering, stooping, craning, and leaning.

I designed the spacing between the woven panels so that the distance between shortens by approximately one and a half times upon reaching the next panel. I intended the spatial collapsing to present perspective as understood in a traditional painting or drawing: that things further away from the viewer appear to be closer together, and things closer in proximity appear further apart. By literally placing the panels in closer and closer proximity to each other as the entire frame recedes, I am claiming that these panels occupy a simulated horizon-scape in which distance is compacted. This drawing occupies both three-dimensional space and manufactured “space,” and becomes a landscape within which my memory world resides.

As the viewer walks around the work, the warp threads present a moiré pattern. The off-white vertical threads within the white frames, standing up against the white wall, gives *Observance | A Passage* the illusion of atmosphere. I alluded to and created an atmosphere between the viewer’s gaze and the content of the woven panels. The small-scale atmospheric distance between the panels points to a longing to collapse space and reveal the contents of the further-away drawings. By varying the transparency of the sections of the panels, certain areas are visible through all five panels while others are hazy or blocked from sight by the preceding panel. Looking through the work, passages appear and disappear, and the weft contributes to the overall loss of focus. Because of the obscuring the view through the warp threads and the obstructing clumps of fiber, the viewer is forced to physically travel around and about the work to see it all. The inability to access the entirety of the piece in one glance actualizes longing.
Laura Owens’ *Untitled* (2015) plays with space, perception, and legibility. Five painted linen panels stand in a room. Each panel contains what appear to be handwriting practice lines, and a scrabbled combination of words. However, when wandering to just the right position in the room, the panels fuse together, and a clear sentence reads:

> There was a cat and an alien. They went to antartica. Then they teleported to the center of the earth. There they got 11,000,000 bombs and blew them up and turned earth.¹

By repositioning one’s viewpoint in the room, what is unclear and confused in Owens’ work becomes readable and direct. *Untitled* toys with the viewer’s curiosity and establishes a surprising “reward” for the moment the viewer locates the precise vantage point from which to read the work.

In *Observance | A Passage*, I provide visual indications of recognizable forms that are more readable from particular viewpoints. By standing directly in front of either of the 18.5” sides, a trailing landscape unwinds. Long fibers interconnect the panels, and when viewing from the side, these fibers contour and elongate the landscape. They both direct and anchor the eyes, while simultaneously, obscure other passages from sight. It is this contour of the landscape that thus becomes the journey of the traveler through the piece. Phyllis Tuchman mentions that at one point, Owens responded to a curator that, “A large part of the work is what happens between paintings.” I am inspired by those words and feel that the atmospheric disruption and connection occurring within my piece has similar properties.

The width of the panels and frame match the width of my shoulders, and the depth of the frame is exactly five feet long. As the word “passage” from the title suggests, the scale of these panels could be a series of doors along a narrow hallway, or perhaps, a progression of rooms within a house. The size as relating to the viewer evokes a bodily relation to architecture: the interior as it relates to the physical, emotional relationship between human and house. Just under the average height of a human being lying down, the five-foot depth could also hint at the size of a younger adolescent. While each of the woven frames are white, the base of the frame is painted “Elusion Gray.” The color division acts as a horizon between the upper and lower, past and recalled past, sky and earth. The threads drooping beneath the gray line operate as roots growing deep into the subterranean system of thought, or the various fibrous branches extending with the pull of gravity and the inevitability of time. The more controlled and calculated gestural impulses of the top portion have a converse relationship with the loose, dangling, dripping fibers below. The lower portion of
the piece operates as if it were the memory-attempts of my subconscious—intermingling, free-flowing, and uncontrollable.


When viewing *Observance | A Passage*, the mirror transforms the ground into a chief character in the work’s meaning. In capturing and releasing the bounced light, the mirrored floor appears to faintly glow. Evoking water, the dangling threads intimate dripping, dropping, running liquid, and all coalesce into the reflecting pool at the work’s base. A loop occurs as these fibers caress the mirror; the reflection extends these drips further beneath the ground yet returns the viewer to more carefully inspect the woven panels above. The mirror preserves and presents an image of the object before it only so long as that object remains before it, and only from the right viewing angle. As soon as the viewer shifts, the reflected image shifts. So, too, is the nature of memories ever-shifting as we pass through time and space.
I have hung tightly-knotted balls of thread all throughout the work. Like bundled-together packages, or preserved clumps of bodily sheddings, the bound-up balls of fiber reference the impulsively preservative nature of nostalgic recollection. My hope is that the heavily knotted and populated passages carry a sense of tightly-wound emotional states of being. Round, surface-layer shapes of thread frequently accompany the clumped thread-packages. In certain places, the looping masses of fibers take on the forms of lichen, fungal growths, or pebbles. I call these passages “nests” to describe the enclosing and encircling of the interior weft threads. Many of the fibers running through two or more of the panels have their genesis in these nests, as well as the tightly-preserved “memory” packages. In placing these nests throughout the panels’ progression, I point to memory’s elusive ability to look the same, and yet be entirely different in each of its iterations in the mind.


(Right) 7: Charis Norell, detail of “nests” in Observance | A Passage, 2018.
Fiber | A Metaphor
I use fiber materials that carry an inherent understanding of home, memories, and making. Stitched material implicitly evokes the hand. Incorporating wool and other natural fibers into a three-dimensional frame, I create large-scale fiber drawings that evoke a domestic space. Stitching serves as a close-synonym for time, care, and intentionality. I take inspiration from the places surrounding my childhood home, and the memories of my own experiences within those locations. I set up (for myself) a futile yet beautiful task of attempting to relay an elusive memory to form and preserve something which no longer occupies the present in a present space and time. I have taken up drawing out these experiences with fiber. I feel that it is fiber that best-lends itself regarding home, touch, longing, and the never-ceasing effort to preserve those three into a tangible form.

On a larger scale, I believe fiber to be one of the more widely understandable materials as relating to human experience. From merely wearing clothes or using a blanket, to having a grandmother or a mother create “handmade-with-love” articles, most of humanity is wrapped up in fabric. Homer’s epic of Odysseus’ journey is a fascinating narrative of nostalgic, arduous longing. His tale is one of tragic mistakes, unavoidable circumstances, and a driving desire to return home. The role Penelope takes in the later parts of the story links the Odyssey’s themes of homecoming and human fate with that of female laboring and loss. The ever-faithful and devoted wife, Penelope, staves off the relentless suitors in her husband’s absence by promising to remarry once she has completed work on a burial shroud for Odysseus. While she weaves diligently throughout the day, she just as diligently unravels the work at night to slow the pressing hands of the suitors and of time. Many of the female fiber artists of the 1960’s and ‘70’s used fiber to specifically refer to female labor and orientated their work as a critique of society. While I am chiefly
interested in using fiber as a poetic evocation of childhood, memory, home, and loss, I do find this archetypal connection between women and fabric to be an added layer that I hope to investigate in future works.

8. Detail of the denim jean quilt my mother made for me.

Quilting is a practice that reminds me of my mother. My mother taught me to sew. I remember heedlessly tossing aside the clunky silver-plated thimble when I started to hand stitch and wincing as little droplets of blood beaded up on my thumb from over-zealous needle pricks. I remember watching her piece together a quilt for me as a pile of basting pins rolled out over the sewing table. She saved all the denim jeans she wore as a teenager. Taking those scraps and adding them to my outgrown pairs, she made a “off-to-college” quilt for me at the start of high school. Scraps and fragments of her travels, her youth, and her life are forever stitched together with mine. Weaving occurs a few steps before quilting, as the process of weaving is the process of making a plane of fabric from individual threads.
Those planes are then fashioned into clothes, into quilts, into other wrappings for the body and for the home. Thus, weaving lies at the root of the home. Weaving is a work of origins.

9. My current working palette.

In my working process, I find a deep connection in having direct contact with my materials. In my recent fiber drawings, the process of selecting and handling the materials plays a key role in its making. The varying thicknesses, textures, and weights of threads I select directly influence my gestural application of those fibers. The haptic sensibility of the handmade yields me pleasure in the making. I find it to be directly linked with drawing, in that the trace of the touch itself aids me in understanding the world around me.

Anni Albers’ essays interest me, in that I find her writings to provide a fresh and honest statement on the maker’s relation to materials and the process of making. In her 1965 essay, “Tactile Sensibility,” Albers writes:

Modern industry saves us endless labor and drudgery; but, Janus-faced, it also bars us from taking part in the forming of material and leaves idle our sense of touch and with it those formative faculties that are stimulated by it. We touch things to assure ourselves of reality. We touch the objects of our love. We touch the things we form. Our tactile experiences are elemental. If
we reduce their range, as we do when we reduce the necessity to form things ourselves, we grow lopsided.\textsuperscript{9}

In touching a thing, I have an intrinsic awareness of that thing’s presence and realness. Touch is connected with knowing, and touch is also important to memory recall. Touch is a method of both taking in and giving out—passive and active. The hand-to-material process is primary for my work, and its relationship to thought, memory, and presence.

When considering the implications of fiber in the context of home and family, a particular children’s story I grew up reading comes to mind. While I do not remember the title, it is the vague particulars flittering back to me that hint at its significance. The story revolves around an ageing grandmother and her young granddaughter keeping warm over many long winter nights. Picture books often depict the grandmother-figure as a woman wizened by life, wearing her silky-soft hair in a chunky bun upon her head. Her hands are always busy—hand-cut cookies for the grandchildren, lattice-top pies for after dinner, quilts meticulously stitched from clothing fragments as old as she.

This particular grandmother worked tirelessly on piecing a large quilt after dinner as they both huddled by the coal stove. Evening after evening, she selected scraps of old patterns and attentively worked until the light of the fire died out. As the blanket neared completion, the grandmother pulled out her finer threads, embroidering eight-pointed stars with glimmering silver thread so that her granddaughter would always know the way home. When the quilt was finished, both were startled to find the quilt was invested with magical power, as the grandmother had actually stitched the very stars out from the night sky onto the blanket. The red and blue pieced quilt lifted up the granddaughter into its warmth, taking her away on a fantastical journey, leaving the little cottage far behind.
While I don’t recall where the girl traveled or how the tale ends, I do remember the deep desire I had to harness the stars—to stitch them up and to let them carry me away. My studio practice is an extension of that Odyssean desire for the journey, and paradoxically, for the return home. In the story of the starry quilt made for the little girl, the material was fashioned and pieced together by the grandmother with loving care. The object that was created from the powers of love and home became the object that guided the girl out along her own path and provided her with a map for the return journey. My stitched drawings also provide a map, although a full return to the nostalgic, recreated memories of my childhood will never be realized. Nonetheless, this loss of ability to actualize my desires drives me to keep stitching.
Weaving | A Residue
In my working process, I begin with images and found objects as a referential guide for my palette. The images are selectively taken in locations with layered meanings for me. I begin a series of gestural sketches, attempting to recreate and re-envision the settings within which those memories occurred. I then proceed to more mapped-out drawings on tracing paper, which I then tape behind my frame loom panels. I work with the under-drawing for the first few hours, but later remove the guide once each panel begins to take on its own life and generative properties. The fiber itself begins to dictate where the lines should go. I draw upon the thickness of the fiber, the type of texture it yields, and the colors to inform its placement. The tension of the weft strings is the fiber drawing’s support, and the warp threads operate much the same as an ink pen. Just as the calligrapher’s ink seeps into the paper and makes a uniform surface of mark and space, the weft threads become one with the warped surface and the gestures of my body are held taut in space—a floating, fuzzy indication of an instantaneous thought.

10. Studio view of my underdrawings, reference images, and easel.
The final panel is often different from the initial map drawing. However, I see these panels as drawings themselves—for they have become liberated thoughts. I see weaving as a process of thinking through fiber. My memories are loosed from abstraction by being given a physical form. Simultaneously, my memories are tied down and bound by being fixed into a framed space. Each of the threads are temporally-extended marks in space. As I place and adjust the threads within the space of the weft, I am participating in a mapping process of both thoughts and action. In her book, *On Longing*, poet and critic Susan Stewart writes:

> Speech leaves no mark in space; like gesture, it exits in its immediate context and can reappear only in another’s voice, another’s body, even if that other is the same speaker transformed by history. But writing contaminates; writing leaves its trace, a trace beyond the life of the body. Thus, while speech gains authenticity, writing promises immortality, or at least the immortality of the material world in contrast to the mortality of the body.  
> The act of writing is the transitional moment from an instantaneous (and finite) word-thought into its immortalized material trace. Through weaving, I am immortalizing that which intrinsically resists being preserved, bound, or documented. Drawing is a process of trace-making without the hindrance of dictionaries and grammars, giving dimensionality and a visualized life to a thought outside of the body of the thinker-maker. My weavings are fiber-drawings: traces of thoughts, of memories, of gestures—all made visible in thread.

In her talk given at the Menil Collection in January of 2017, Amy Sillman discusses the act of drawing in a similar fashion to Stewarts’ commentary on writing. She says that:

> Drawing is always a performance enacted for the drawer herself—even if no one is watching—as she watches the drawing forming at the edge of her body’s physical reach. Drawing is like speaking and like reaching at the same time. In this sense, drawing is like a speech-act, except that it is literally a gesture-act.

Drawing is a gesture-act. When I weave, I partake in a series of gesture-acts that enable my thoughts to be traced movement-by-movement. With those tracings, I hope to snag a few
trailing memories within the warp threads. I, the “drawer,” am able to observe my own body making a physical residue of my thought visible through my gestures. Observing and making, I as “drawer” am privileged to the physical, optical, and intellectual stimulation of the gesture-act. Assimilating together Stewart’s proposition that speech is the authentic form of language, and Sillman’s assertion that drawing is like speech, I see drawing as the authentic gestural record of thought. My weavings hold within their tenuous fibers the trailings of my thoughts.


I look to Anne Wilson’s work, *To Cross (Walking New York)*, because of her performance’s direct connection to my drawing process. Completed for the Drawing Center’s 2015 *Thread Lines* exhibition, the two-month durational performance concluded with a five by thirty-four-foot tightly-wound sculpture strung between the central columns of the building. During the scheduled performances, four participants walked around the columns while slowly unraveling a spool of thread, crossing the threads at the midway point.
Wilson quite literally creates a gesture-act in this collaborative weaving. By marking her passage through the room with the thin threaded trail, she, at once, maps, thinks, draws, and makes.

While I am not physically moving around my fiber drawings like Wilson as I weave, I do see the drawing-as-thinking to be an innately performative gesture. Wilson’s gallery audience gathered around the columns of the Drawing Center to view the sculpture as it grew hour by hour. I, the “drawer,” am the solo audience to my work as it is performed. Private and instantaneous, the performative experience of drawing with thread vitalizes the making process for me. The haptic encounter with the wool sliding through my fingers, the familiar optical display of the building thread lines, and the relay of thought that occurs through both processes, all amount to a communicative and meaningful drawing experience.

I find that it is both the active gesture of making the mark, alongside the receptive sensation of learning and knowing by touch, that makes this form of making so successful for me. Communication of thought is the end of speech, and I see drawing as the translation of that thought into a haptic sensibility. Anni Albers writes in a later essay:

Material is a means of communication. That listening to it, not dominating it makes us truly active, that is: to be active, be passive. The finer tuned we are to it, the closer we come to art. Art is the final aim.12

The dense materiality of fiber is deeply alluring to me. The fibers passing through my hands communicate something quite different than the runny pigments seeping from my brush. As I draw, I seek a measure of stillness to surround my making. By carefully considering and allowing the materials to guide their own placement, I open up a level of sensitivity necessary for the elusive and evasive thoughts and memories to come up to the surface of my awareness, and out upon the loom.
In this way, drawing is a delicate balance between listening to the creative impulses, observing what the materials are prone to do, and the actual resulting gestural action. Albers refers over and over to “tactile sensibility.” I believe this sensibility is one that has to be re-learned in an ever-increasingly digitized society. A quiet sensitivity and a haptic receptivity are two traits I actively seek to incorporate. In considering the delicate, momentary balance between the gesture and the impulse, Sillman continues later on in her lecture, saying:

There’s no drawing that is not temporal, fragile, instantaneous, in a state of flux; all drawing is of the moment. You are looking, acting, and reacting while you are thinking and feeling…The drawing itself is simply the residue of such relations, making them visible, and showing how they linger together.”

In the gestural-act of drawing, I am mapping out the instantaneous connections between thought and feeling and material. Through drawing, the fibers intermingle with memories and thoughts, becoming a visible trace of those interactions.

Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze’s (Wols), *Ohne Titel* [Untitled], is a compilation of faint scratchings and contour strokes. Wols creates a miniature world out of what might be trousers hanging out to dry, long drinking straws, trampolines, and an assortment of other groupings. In Werner Haftmann’s introduction to the 1965 Wols catalogue, he writes of Wols’ line:

> The line becomes, to an even greater extent, the vehicle of communication. It moves trancelike over the surface, in automatic progressions, often turns back upon itself as infinite line, sets out on long walks, in obedience to sudden impulse becomes tangled or digs in, then runs into some half-remembered natural form—a plant, an animal, a face…Line itself is the sensitive recording instrument.\(^\text{14}\)

Haftmann describes Wol’s use of the line to be “the sensitive recording instrument” of his experience. While I find Haftmann’s interpretations of Wols’ work to deemphasize his intentionality, and over-exaggerate the “automatist artist” persona, I do identify with the line being the trace marker of a thought. Whether or not Wols viewed his drawings to be a cumulative effort of a trance-state, I do find his linework to suggest what Sillman describes as “fragile” and “instantaneous” actions and reactions upon the page.\(^\text{15}\) In my own weavings, the momentary response of my hands to my thoughts creates a trace mark that serves as both map and record. The gestural performance of the drawing act is tempered by the reflective sensitivity to the materials I use. The lines through the weft exist as the residue of my memories.
Memory | An Object
I believe humankind holds a fascination with the concept of home and the distancing away from home that occurs over time. Perhaps within my strong desire to return to a place of belonging, lies a desire to find a place that has solidarity with my own experiences—an agreement of histories. In a sense, nostalgia is the longing to be centered. Home is a structural “center” from which I seek to know the world and know myself. Likewise, my work is a self-contained structure from which I seek to know and to preserve haptic understandings of my past. My work exists as a structure—a self-contained center from which I can know my own histories, memories, and experiences. It exists as a frame through which I can preserve as well as edit the contents into a fashioned center.

Nostalgia is often seen negatively as a borderline-obsessive tendency to selectively remember moments in time in an idealized or edited way. It is often characterized as a longing for the fictionalized and rewritten past to replace the present. However, Dylan Trigg fleshes it out to be more:
The fragmentation of the world we are nostalgic for presents us with a privileged temporality, which brings together, in a particularly vivid manner, the limits of imagination in the face of the diminishment of memory. This tension between timeliness and unreality is central to the logic of nostalgia. Indeed, the power of nostalgia depends as much on the evocation of place as it does on the time in which that memory occurred, forcing an image of the past in which time is literally held in an unreal place. One way in which we see this is how nostalgia relies on an image of the past as temporally isolated; that is, fixed. The fixture means that place, as a temporal episode, singular and irretrievable, as preserved. Fixing place in time, place is thus fixated on. (emphasis his)17

In wandering down the paths of the childhood park I spent my growing up years in, I have a visceral, somewhat painful, awareness that the place I now traverse is not and can never be the same place I remember being in. Nostalgia has revealed the transformative nature of time, and the distance of myself from myself. Allowing the objects that I fashion to become fixations of my thoughts upon the past yields me a certain hold (and perhaps, “bookmark”) that I can readily return to.

If the places I have lived in exist now as memories, in a sense, those places continue to exist within my consciousness. While the exact state of the place is not as it was the moment in which I remember, those states of place continue to exist within my imagination. Trigg writes:

In a word, the places in which we live, live in us. More precisely, those places live in our bodies, instilling an eerie essence of our own embodied selves as being the sites of a spatial history that is visible and invisible, present and absent. (emphasis his)18

Physical places become remembered places, and as repeated recollection occurs, remembered places fuse with experiences, emotions, and assumptions that occurred within those places.

Remembered places soon become imagined places. Elements of fact and fiction coexist harmoniously unless a confrontation with the real state of place occurs. As memory
logs, our minds hold the history of what was as well as what was imagined to be. Nostalgic longings to return to this reconstructed, created place intensify our mental craftsmanship of that guarded memory. My weavings are a way of allowing those memories to be expressed from my body through hands in a fragile attempt to record and remember.

My work exists as a conceptual preservation of recalled memories of the places I long to return to. By looking to memories of home, I attempt (futilely) to return to the past. I can never physically revert back to a previous state of awareness, nor can I reverse Time. I am reminded of the myth of Danaüs’ forty-nine daughters who, being charged with the murder of their husbands on their wedding night, were sentenced by Zeus to spend eternity filling up a giant basin with a drain hole at its foot. These unanswerable longings to return to a past home and state of being appear to me as eternal as the perpetual efforts of the daughters to fill the leaking vessel. My fiber drawings are gestures of labor over this longing, following a poetic observance of the passage of time. There is something tragically sweet in this futile grasping for the ungraspable. My experiences, while not rationally validated, are known and felt in memories even if I cannot relive them.

Trigg’s description of the concept of place illustrates what I find myself doing with my weavings. He suggests that:

Place is a fundamentally porous concept, falling between idealism and realism. What this means is that any given place is never autonomous in its unity, but forever bleeding and seeping into other places, both those of the past and those of the future. This movement of seepage is what gives a place its ambiguous character.¹⁹

“Seepage” intimates a fluid, transparent quality, which I find quite fittingly associated with a memory of a place. In late 2016, I created a series of *Fragments*.²⁰ Each painting holds my in-studio reflections on the emotional states of being I experienced on recent road trips. I incorporate the dripping as a symbolic gesture of longing. In allowing the paint to trail down the canvas, I reveal my loss of control over the material and of the memories. In layering the

thinned paint drips, I hope to present a melancholic atmosphere within the works. The drip-screens cast an unrecognizability over the identifiable horizon line. Just as one paint color pools into another, so my memories of past experiences and locations bleed into the present reflection upon them.

When I first began working with fiber, I was attracted to the similarities between the fluid faculties of thinned paint, and the trailing of a thread due to gravity. I began to knot long pieces of thread together and draped them over the edge of the frame. In *Observance | A Passage*, as the viewer progresses towards the back of the work, an increasing-density of fibers pool into the base. A soft palette of wool and linen threads extends down towards the mirrored floor, and it is almost as if these fibers are reaching out to connect with the reflection. The memories and experiences recorded and preserved within the frames above slowly seep down into the inaccessible plane of the smooth mirror.


I first encountered Sheila Hicks’ work at the 57th Venice Biennale. Her large-scale fiber balls filled the entire back wall in the Arsenale’s *Pavilion of Colour* and seemed to beg
viewers to come up and jump into the massive, soft pile. Hicks uses what she calls a “pillar” of dripping, pooling thread in a few of her works. In *White River (Fleuve Blanc)*, Hicks fastens her fiber clumps to the ceiling rafters, and lets gravity pull the threads down to the floor. The bulky weight of the fibers creates a dense pillar within the gallery and imitates what might be interpreted as a frozen-in-time outpouring of gallons of milky liquid.

Each of my painted, dripped clumps of material suggests place’s seepage between time, space, and recalled reality. In arresting the motion of the threads in the air, I take a momentary memory-shot, and preserve it within the frame of my loom. Gaston Bachelard wistfully says of reliving memories:

> Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.

By gently presenting my memories, and by giving carefully attention to not crush those memories by over-description, I believe it is possible to arrive at a deeper understanding of the past. Home, that place re-constructed in my memories through experiences, longings, and time, is perhaps closer to me than the irretrievable past—if only through a poetic apparition.

I find it fascinating how the places we frequent have their own sort of memory to them. Returning to the location where I experienced heightened or cherished emotions often seems to signal for a similar psychological state to return to me as well. Whether the events were meaningful, traumatic, or merely unusual, it is almost as if that specific spot has trapped those same feelings within the very particles of its space. Bachelard comments on the ability of a room to store memories in saying:
The finest specimens of fossilized duration concretized as a result of long sojourn, are to be found in and through space. The unconscious abides. *Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are* (emphasis mine).²⁴

When events occur, they hold a definitive place at a specific moment in time. The more grounded my memory is to a place, the more fixed it becomes within my consciousness. If a place can become fixed enough within me, my memories will join themselves to that place. This is, according to Trigg, “the holding power of place.”²⁵ The place I am held to is home.

Fiber, however, has a literal holding power. Through the process of knotting, looping, and weaving, various threads and materials are joined together into a single plane of cloth. Not needing glue, paste, or tack, a bolt of cloth is held together to itself by the trappings of the weft and warp threads. Fiber’s metaphorical capability as a material is one


reason why I am so inclined to using it in depicting my own experiences of place and home. While a place can figuratively “hold” or “preserve” a set of memories of personal experiences having occurred at that location, fiber can, quite literally, hold the physical remnants of those experiences. Thus, fiber serves as a talisman or authentic object-trace.

In *Observance | A Passage*, I incorporate many tightly knotted balls that hang throughout the five panels. These individual bundles symbolize the time intensive effort of recalling, recording, and preserving that I do as I remember my home-place. I associate this clumping with an emotional intensity—a binding-up of feelings, memories, and experiences into a loaded package. These bundles remind me of the tactility of fiber. By assigning meaning of recall and memory to these small yet weighty passages, I assign tactility and presence to an abstraction.


Hicks knots, tangles, and bundles thread on an architectural scale. When looking at my bundles, I connect with her fiber arrangements; both operate in the creation of an
environment—and while my scape is scaled down, Hicks scales up. Hicks’ *Ephemera Bundle* (1975) operates much the same way as my thread packages. A wadded clump of multi-colored silk fibers seems to float within a Plexiglas case. These crossing lines of thread communicate a sort of interconnected dependency. Bound together, their co-knotted fibers create their critical mass. *Ephemera Bundle* is a preserved fiber-specimen; protected and sheltered from potential fraying and dismantlement inside the Plexiglas, yet permanently halted in its metastasizing evolution. Indeed, this bound-up ball is like a photograph or a scrapbook. When the shot is taken, or the image is chopped and glued to a page, the remembered moment has already ended, died, and ceased to continue. What remains in the photobook is merely a trace.


I find that for me, objects collected from the sites of my experiences can often act as triggers for the memory of authentic experiences. In my studio, I have a growing collection of natural objects that both remind me of hours spent walking the trails in some of my
favorite haunts and inspire my drawing practice. A corner table holds quartz, granite, a Loblolly pine needle cluster, two dried clumps of shield lichen kicked loose from the granite mountaintop, invisible fingerprints of the hands that collected them, and a couple moments of solitude and reflection within which they were found. The weavings are created under direct exposure to the collected objects and images—but within the bubble of the indoor studio—hundreds of miles away from their original site, and years away from their original genesis. My studio acts as an archive for the trace objects, and from this archive, I trade one form for another as I make.

These objects provide important revelations for myself. While most experiences lose their vibrancy and their immediacy over time, an object can bring it all back to mind. A translation of memory occurs with the assignation of meaning from lived-experience to tangible object. Stewart writes of the memory-object:

> As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgic myth of contact and presence. “Authentic” experience becomes both elusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antique, the pastoral, the exotic, and other fictive domains are articulated. In this process of distancing, the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object…The experience of the object lies outside the body’s experience—it is saturated with meanings that will never be fully revealed to us. Furthermore…the object is only a trace. (emphasis mine)

The object taken from a lived experience serves as a tangible trace of my memories. It is the significance I imbue it with that gives the object its value. Invisible emotional and sentimental value drive me to keep it. The affixing of sentiment to the inanimate represents a nostalgic attempt to return. I hope secretly that somehow these various objects will transport me back to the mental state of being I was in when I found the thing. The authentic moment
Rachael Starbuck’s *Pothos* (pothos) engages the subjects of longing and the fragility of nature, feelings, and preservation. At the gallery talk for the 2018 *As Blue is to Distance* show at the Monaco artist cooperative in St. Louis, Missouri, Starbuck shared how she collected clipping of her mother’s pothos plant from her yard in Miami, Florida. Carefully transporting them back from the airport to her Texas studio, she preserved the leaves in various bottles and jars. Creating molds of both her mother’s pothos leaves as well as her own pothos leaves, Starbuck cast them into papier mâché.

*Pothos* (pothos) rests upon a tenuous steel rod, seemingly-tethered to the ground only by a sandbag. I think it was the rush against the leaves’ natural decay and transplanting of the leaves from a childhood home to another place that caught my attention. There is something very poetic in her preservation process. Indeed, in my own studio practice, I find...
myself in the same habit of collecting various natural objects and husking them away to sit on my studio table. Starbuck says of this preserving instinct:

> The idea of relating the decay of an organic object and the decay of memory is a really beautiful material metaphor. And I’m super interested in that gesture of the vain attempt or effort…trying to recreate, preserve or make tangible something too vast or ephemeral or intangible, like memory or the ocean or our feelings. Setting up an inherently impossible task for yourself in the studio, but still trying, reaching…it feels related to learning to live with longing or distance or desire.28

Perhaps it is an “inherently impossible task” to give tangible form to a memory and preserve and communicate it to a larger audience. Yet, I find that the very nature of longing is


(Right) 23. Rachael Starbuck, detail of *Pothos (pothos)*.
inherently impossible to fully reconcile with. This longing is to not forget, to treasure, and to preserve my memories of childhood experiences, and it lingers on after the pine needles turn to coppery-silt and the granite dust disappears from my shoes.


It might be self-denial or a suspension of disbelief to think that I can somehow overcome the unpassable linearity of time. A distancing occurs when I assign authenticity and history to an object—it remains in the mythical space of the past “authentic” moment, while I am ever-forced to reside in the present. As Stewart says, “the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object.”29 The object takes on a bodily role as stand-in for me, and though the object points me towards that past lived experience, I am hauntingly separated from it, for the object is merely a trace.

I realize that my work is an effort to capture fleeting memories and experiences. Each pass-through of the weft strings with the fiber is an effort to grasp at something just beyond my reach—as if I could affix those intimate moments into the space between the
frame. I am unable to ever fully bring my experiences or memories into the gallery setting, but I see these weavings as my fragile attempt to pin down, to tie together, and to link these ideas into a tangible body. I am driven by a deep longing to find the right way to express these memories as if, through expression, I might find a way to revisit and re-encounter those events. The weavings act as a body, in so much as writing demarcates and substantializes the intangibility of speech.
Longing | A Material
Blue is a color that used to overwhelm my studio. Over the last two years, my work has undergone a palette shift from Alizarins, Ochres, Ultramarines, and Payne’s Gray, to a basket filled with copper-dyed linen, lichen-yellow wools, and muscadine-purple alpaca fibers. Up until I began fiber drawing, blue was crucial to the language of my work. For, blue is the color of longing, of wide-open skies, and of denim jean quilts. Rebecca Solnit has been greatly influential in my understanding of place and longing. In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, she writes:

For many years, I have been moved by the blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that color of horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away. The color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire…the color of where you can never go. For the blue is not in the place those miles away at the horizon but in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains. “Longing,” says the poet Robert Hass, “because desire is full of endless distances.” Blue is the color of longing for the distances you never arrive in, for the blue world.\(^\text{30}\)

What struck me then about this quote, and what fascinates me still, is her determined linkage between longing and the color blue. To the human eye, the horizon appears in blues and

purples. Yet, the effort to reach it is a failing one, for upon “arriving,” the sky and earth collide even further out in those very same shades. Feelings of longing and loss seem inextricably linked within the blue of distance.


Upon completing a series of smaller landscapes (*Fragments*) in which I maintained the horizon as the chiefly recognizable element, I progressed to larger canvases (*The Place of Blue* and *Longing For the Blue World*) in which I let blue take a central role in the composition. While not every landscape I painted was blue, each work dealt specifically with feelings of longing attached to an ever-shifting “place.” In the *Fragments*, the place was the constantly changing view out of my car window as I drove back and forth from St. Louis down I-44 West to Tulsa. The act of traveling, of looking, and of listening to those feelings occupying my thoughts at the time of driving became the leading subject matter of my work. The paintings became the physical depiction of that moment’s emotional state, and now remain as a trace.

I allowed the actual location in *The Place of Blue* to remain vague and removed. I was struggling with knowing exactly *where* it was that I was longing to be, yet I knew I was
longing for place and placement. I wanted to instill a sort of unfamiliar-yet-familiar itch in the viewers and allowed the overall application of paint to seep into the fibers of the canvas. I added less gesso to the ground, and much of the under layers of acrylic paint soaked into

![Painting image](image)

27. Charis Norell, *The Place of Blue*. Oil on canvas, 60” x 72” x 2.5”, 2016.

the fibers of the canvas. In a way, the paint became more of a stain, and the place within the painting is caught in an act of seepage between the layers and the fibers. Thinning the paint, I applied drips in various stages of layering. The drips evoke notions of rain, of tears, of atmosphere, of trees on the horizon—clouded by distance. Allowing the paint to drip and to seep into the canvas is an act of release. Yielding control over to the materials provides a relationship of give and take with the paints. By dripping the paint and drying up the wet passages with a rag (and in doing so, pulling away paint), I created a play between the paint’s presence and absence in the composition, much as I find my memories shimmering and fading over time.

*Blue is the Color* was the intermediary between my landscape paintings and my fiber drawings. Hanging 108 inches of Mylar down from my studio walls, I began the process of
pouring layers of thinned oils down it. Having completely removed the horizon line from the painting, I was solely working with the material as content. The evocative blue pours down the Mylar referenced water, ice, and atmosphere, yet avoided direct representation. It was a solely gestural work, and I did no prior composition mapping. I wanted to create a blue “world” of drips, for, the drips symbolize both a conscious surrender of control over to the mediums and a subconscious release through gestural expression.

When I began to draw with fiber, I found the physical presence of the threads within the warp revealed another side of this place-longing to me. In using the three-dimensional thread as a stand-in for the abstracted thought, the woven object imparted a material
presence to the untouchable memory. In *A Remembered Place*, I began the task of preserving this longing within a defined frame. The color blue still being forefront on my mind, I picked up fiber as drawing material, and designed a frame loom with two woven panels. When warped, the pegs on the back and front sides of the frame created two layers upon which I could draw.

On a trip to NYC in 2017, I saw Tara Donovan’s *Compositions (Cards)* show at the PACE gallery. This series greatly influenced my approach to perspective and space in my fiber drawings and have lingered as I transitioned into constructing sculptural fiber-worlds within the frame. In Donovan’s *Compositions*, she has layered styrene index cards edge-side out. Within the squares, a plane of whites and greys meet the eyes. Walking past the panels, they appear to move. Upon closer look, Donovan has cut down the edges of the cards and

layered them in patterns across the square. Around the time of the show, I had begun work on a maquette for what I had originally intended to make into a larger work. I had constructed a box out of cardstock paper, and painted on frosted Mylar squares, which I then cut out in various designs. From these layers, I then stitched them together and inserted them into the box to create a shadow box. Giving physical form to the layers allowed me to visualize the depth of the space I was exploring. The Mylar allowed me a moderate amount of transparency, and when I held my box to the window, the light create interesting shadow patterns within itself.

While Donovan is better-known for her mass-quantity groupings and reconfigured site-specific installations of banal objects, I am fascinated with the presentation of light and shadow in her Compositions. Seemingly stagnant panels, the Compositions played with the gallery light. Being composed of the white paper cards, the entire work reflected and bounced the light, creating a spatial moiré for the viewers. The cavities where she had cut into the cards created darker tones. When the viewer adjusted their perspective, the cavities suddenly shifted to being lighter areas of reflected light, depending on the depth and angle.

of her cuts. Donovan’s spatial constructions are playful surprises.

As I work from a memory-collection of various places I idealized, I share this question with Solnit:

We treat desire as a problem to be solved…I wonder sometimes whether with a slight adjustment of perspective it could be cherished as a sensation on its own terms, *since it is as inherent to the human condition as blue is to distance?* If you can look across the distance without wanting to close it up, if you can own your longing in the same way that you own the beauty of that blue that can never be possessed? 31

What if desire was no longer a “problem to be solved,” but became a cherished and embraced expression of human experience? What if longing and the nostalgic desire to recreate and revisit was viewed as a necessary step in developing an ever-renewing construction of self-identity? I pursue, through my work, a transitioning passage of first recognizing desire for the unreachable lost past, and then transitioning to a state of celebration in that longing and loss.
In searching myself as an artist and as an individual, the things that shape my self-understood identity seem to elusively occupy the domain of my memory. Much of my work centers itself around these identity “pieces,” and I find my practice becomes a grand preservation attempt of those experiences. Whether it is a certain conversation with a mentor I admired, my childhood home, repetitive training from my parents and schoolteachers, or the locations that imprinted and shaped my understanding of where I was—all now lie in the past, and I long to retain those memories.

![Charis Norell, detail of a Maquette, Mylar, paper, oils, eggshells, 9"x9"x9", 2017.](image1)

![Tara Donovan. Detail of “Composition (Cards)” 2017. Photographed by David Behringer.](image2)

(Left) 33. Charis Norell, detail of a Maquette, Mylar, paper, oils, eggshells, 9”x9”x9”, 2017.


Longing feels cyclical in nature to me; when what I long for is attained, I am no longer in a state of longing for it. The state of longing is tragically beautiful. Unending, by its very nature longing forever maintains a distance. Delving deeper, I realize it is the longing to return home and the discovery of what that home truly means for me, to be the problem lying at the crux of my practice. Drew Dalton says of longing:

> As one of the subterranean underpinnings of our identity, our longings remain throughout our life a part of our being we think of as most us, and yet strangely, at the same time, few phenomena remain as elusive as our own
longings—always removed at a distance from us, constantly evading our grasp or full understanding.32

I believe longing to be firmly rooted within the threads of the human condition. In my studio practice, I collapse the distance between what I long to recover and where I now am in the present time by creating a material body in which these longings can lie. I sought to address this in Observance | A Passage through a physical return to the location in which my understanding of home originated. I collected objects around my childhood home in which I spent much time and amassed many layers of memories. Like strata in the earth, my memories hold thick, built-up passages of impressions, feelings, remembered experiences, and snippets of images stored away. These objects provide the tangible knot between the threads of my drawings and the threads of my memories. Their existence proves both the reality of the location, and the impossibility of that location being exactly the same as when I experienced it days, miles, and lifetimes ago.

I feel driven to connect with the lingering memories of my experience through the tangible traces of those experiences that remain in my possession. I approach these gathered objects as talismans; if only these objects could bring my elusive thoughts forward and collapse the accrued distance between myself and my remembered past. In my work, I set up the impossible task for myself of preserving these memories into a physical, tangled form. Throughout Observance | A Passage, I strung tightly-knotted balls of fiber. These bound-up conglomerates of thread scraps suggest sealed-up packages, or a snarled mess of thoughts being saved. These balls symbolize my longing to recover the essence of home and the loss of parts of myself that inevitably ensues with growing older. With the loss of clarity already occurring in my own memories as a young adult, I sense there are facets of life that are too-quickly lost within the horizon of Time. Like the unraveling threads dangling from my fiber
drawings, moments in my life experience fade in and out, and trail away. But they must be remembered and clasped close—for they shape who I am.


Home is an ambiguous place that shifts and adjusts to be that place in which I feel I belong. My concept of home has shifted over the course of my lifetime. While the noun, “house,” might communicate the physical dwelling location of an individual, a “house” is not always a “home.” A home is a place of belonging and carries associations of feelings of acceptance and being “at home.” In order to call a place “home,” I must recognize that place as being significant. How I understand home, longing, and the journey of growing up and out of childhood is best articulated in the words of Frederick Buechner. In *Longing for Home*, he writes that:

The word *home* summons up a place…where you feel, or did feel once, uniquely *at home*, which is to say a place where you feel you belong and which in some sense belongs to you, a place where you feel that all is somehow ultimately well even if things aren’t going all that well at any given moment (emphasis in original).33
It is this longing for home that drives my practice. I long to find myself within a safe, welcoming place that both remembers me and helps me to remember. Home is a place engendering memory of my childhood—of a carefully picked-out birthday card, of quilts, and of a clod of clay tracked indoors. Many of my childhood memories occurred in and around my house.

Yet, for some reason, that concept of “home” feels incomplete to me. I find myself searching for a greater home, as if the memories and experiences I have accrued are now melting and draining away before my eyes. And with the distance of accumulating years increasing, I wonder if those memories are bound tightly enough in my mind to still provide me with a place of safety, acceptance, and grounded-ness that I assumed home would always be for me. There is a tantalizing sweetness to loss, and I cannot help but cling faithfully to my longing that a home will always be there—either on this horizon or the next. In sharing these fleeting memories and impressions of home and the places and things I hold most dear, I seek to somehow preserve them. I have identified the impulse to work with subject matter stemming from my childhood to be an act of preservation, recording, and communicating.

In my practice, various preserved objects from these idolized snippets of time act as grounding for my understanding of home. The tangible trace is, for me, paramount in securing an experience as a memory. Addressing the desperate desire humans have to preserve the intimate experience of a place by communicating it to others, Yi-Fu Tuan writes that seeing a place is not enough:

Seeing has the effect of putting a distance between the self and object. What we see is always “out there.” Things too close to us can be handled, smelled, and tasted, but they cannot be seen—at least not clearly. In intimate moments, people shade their eyes. Thinking creates distance…Intimate
experiences are difficult but not impossible to express. They may be personal and deeply felt, but they are not necessarily solipsistic or eccentric. Hearth, shelter, home or home base are intimate places to human beings everywhere. Their poignancy and significance are the themes of poetry...Here is a seeming paradox: thought creates distance and destroys the immediacy of direct experience, yet it is by thoughtful reflection that the elusive moments of the past draw near to us in present reality and gain a measure of permanence. (emphasis mine)\(^35\)

I can experience the tangible and the touchable right here in the present moment. That which is merely seen or remembered occupies the territory of the horizon—the locale in which I can sense yet I cannot simultaneously occupy. I think intimate, sacred places such as home lie out upon the horizon. Peering out into the distance of the horizon, I see a place I would like to reach. The passage of time is the extension of distance between me and my past experiences, as well as those in the future. I am separated from this place by an atmospheric haze of years, days, and moments. Should I manage to recall and recapture this place through human striving, I know that looking out again, I will see another spot on the horizon further out that draws me. It is longing that intervenes and asserts what is “out there” back into my present moment. In my work, the objects pulled from those distant locations serve as magnets for my mind. By preserving the object through drawn records and allowing it to act as a trace of my lived-history, I take preservative, celebratory action.
Conclusion
36. View of another of my childhood locations.

In this thesis, I have sought to expand drawing’s traditional definition to be the process of leaving a physical residue of thought. Fiber is my medium, and the space within the frame loom’s warp and weft becomes my support. In titling these works my “fiber drawings,” I reference the drawing process as the gestural residue of my thoughts. I have shared how I find conceptual and material “threads” linking my work with Sheila Hicks, Anne Wilson, Anni Albers, and others.

From my *Fragments* paintings, to dripping paint down Mylar, to my current work with fiber, I have described how the layer-by-layer process of creating both painting and fiber drawing pull on feelings of longing and desire. *Observance | A Passage* was created as my effort to collapse the distance between places I long to recover, and where I am now in the present, and I see it as the start of a new direction of future work. It is my hope that the fiber drawings implicitly communicated the hand, home, and family.

I hope that you, my reader, have experienced a sense of this longing to touch and know by touch in viewing my work. By having direct contact with my materials, I allow
myself to have a greater haptic sensibility, and thus, a level of memory through touch. The trace of the touch itself aids me in understanding the world around me. My fiber drawings are thought traces, and with each pass through the weft strings, I am grasping at something just beyond reach. Longing to affix those intimate moments in the spaces between the frames, I knot, loop, stitch, and string. Through a ceremonial and gestural act of observance, the woven object imparts a material presence to the untouchable memory. By pushing beyond the negative side to nostalgia, and instead, celebrating the longing for what I will never fully regain, my weavings act as a bookmark of my experiences and leave me with mind-space for future places, memories, and experiences.
Appendix
37. Charis Norell, *The Clay Reminds Me of What’s Lost*. Oil on canvas, 48” x 60” x 1.5”, 2016.

There is a certain loss and grief accompanying growing up, for time is not considered irreversible without reason. I think the crux of nostalgic longing is wishing for what perhaps never was, but what I wished might have been, should have been, or could have been in the future. I painted *The Clay Reminds Me of What’s Lost* at a time in which I was processing the memory of my recently-deceased grandmother. During life, she did not occupy a primary role in my experience of home. However, she played a consistent role, and chiefly did so in momentous occasions such as birthdays and other holidays through the simple act of mailing me Hallmark cards. I was her first grandchild, and she wrote me cards for almost every birthday and holiday up until she developed dementia during the last eight years of her life. She died while I was at school seven hundred miles and twelve hours away from home.

While cleaning out a closet in my childhood home in 2016, I found a box of her cards. And it was these cards that took the form of a trace-object for me as I processed the loss of context of home and the grandmother-figure in my life. A large orange kitten
sprawled across one, mice traipsed across a cake with five-candled card, and a fuzzy-to-the-touch puppy dog was dressed up as a Halloween witch. Most held a simple “Happy Birthday Charis,” and almost all the cards were signed with: “Love, Grandma, Grandpa, Tiger II, and Duchess.” I imagine that I saved them because as a young girl, birthday cards were about the only mail I received. Only adults have the pleasure of returning from the mailbox with a handful of utility bills, promotional flyers, and bank notices.

38. Charis Norell, detail of The Clay Reminds Me of What’s Lost. Oil on canvas, 48” x 60” x 1.5”, 2016.

Using the tracing of one of the unfolded cards, I painted the shape with Polycryllic over the background. The transient emptiness of the card-shapes floating above the Georgia clay-colored atmosphere create an effect walking the line between the shapes being present and absent from sight. I used eight of the card shapes in reference to the eight years in which she could no longer write cards due to her increasing memory-loss. I find it interesting that her physical memory loss and death transformed the somewhat-sickeningly nostalgic paper cards into something of iconic significance for me. The very cards themselves became talismanic objects—recalling to my memory her love and her time. Her handwriting,
physical traces of her thought, is something that will never be written again and exists now in increasingly limited supply. This painting becomes the physical form of my own longing for the cards she might have written and the words she might have shared, had her thoughts not been slowed by the gradual degradation of her memory.

39. Image of some of the cards written me by my grandmother.

The rote definition for home feels incomplete to me. I find myself searching for a greater home, as if the memories and experiences I have accrued are now melting and draining away before my eyes. And with the distance of accumulating years increasing, I wonder if those memories are bound tightly enough in my mind to still provide me with a place of safety, acceptance, and grounded-ness that I assumed home would always be for me. There is a tantalizing sweetness to loss, and I cannot help but cling faithfully to my longing that a home will always be there—either on this horizon or the next. In my work, the objects pulled from those distant locations serve as magnets for my mind. By preserving the object through drawn records and allowing it to act as a trace of my lived-history, I take preservative, celebratory action.
1 “Warp” and “weft” refer to the elemental parts of a fabric. The weft threads run horizontally through the taut, lengthwise, warp threads. The warp is stationary and strung on the loom first (called “warping” the loom), while the weft threads (also called the “woof”) travels over-and-under the warp.

2 The vertical bar within the work’s title (and in the titles of this document’s parts) is most commonly used in computer coding, where it is known as the “pipe” symbol. In mathematics and logic, the symbol represents “such as” or “or”. Programmers use the pipe bar in Unix to share data between unconnected processes by redirecting the output of one program to the input of another program. However, in the context of my fiber drawings, I am using the bar to both connect and redirect the meaning of the two words that are being divided by the mark. In context of the document’s title, the residual experience of observance is fed into the process of passage.


6 When first approaching fiber as a material to add to my practice, I began to question why it is that fiber (and the bi-product, fabric) is associated with women’s work, and what is it about the tradition of women’s work that resonates with the homemade and the longing for home. I see the archetype of the maker-mother (or grandmother) as an interesting part of the long tradition of women’s labor in the home, and I found Elizabeth Wayland Barber’s work to be particularly thorough in focus on the traditions of spinning and weaving as a woman’s role in society. For further reading, see Elizabeth Wayland Barber, “A Tradition with a Reason,” Women’s Work: The First 20,000 Years; Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994. 29-30; and Judith Brown, “Note on the Division of Labor by Sex,” in American Anthropologist 72 (1970), 1075-1076. The associations of women with home, and women with fabric are complex. While in my work, I am primarily interested in using fiber as an evocation of the poetic rather than in critique of society’s assigned gender roles, I found this to be an important layer of research that I hope to investigate in future works.

7 Homer, The Odyssey, XIII, 187-191.

Fate and longing are interwoven throughout the entirety of this tale, and this story is used in many essays on nostalgia as a key example. For further reading on the tale of Odysseus and Penelope is linked to nostalgia, see Barbara Cassin’s Nostalgia. When are We Ever at Home? trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault, (New York: Fordham University Press), 2016, as well as a wider look at spinning and weaving in Ancient Greek mythology in Elizabeth Wayland Barber’s, Women’s Work: The First 20,000 Years; Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.), 1994, pages 235-243. Svetlana Boym also has a short paragraph on Penelope in The Future of Nostalgia, (New York: Basic Books), 2001, pages 7-8.


Interestingly, the tale of Penelope has been used as a dismissal of the serious work of female artists in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Auter references the remarks made by critic John Anthony Thwaits in his article, “The Numbers Game” from Art and Artists (January 1972) as a dismissal of the seriousness of Hanne Darboven’s work as an individual and repetitive craft. In response to Darboven’s work (not a self-identified fiber artist), Thwaits said it “could easily degenerate into a kind of Higher Knitting, with the female quality of patience, detail, and not much else. A pioneer or a Penelope of the 20th Century?”


Artist and maker Anni Albers writes on the degenerating nature of modern industry upon the senses. Albers says that while modern industry provides easy access to staple good and speeds up the previously endless labor of production, it withholds participation in the “forming of material.” A reason for my intense fascination with the weaving process is this
forming of fiber—the mind gets a sense of the direct relationship between source and product. This origin-to-object relationship is something that disappears when all the labor is done by machines and the product is packaged nicely on a store shelf.


14 Werner Haftmann, “Wols, His Life and Work” in *Wols: Watercolors, Drawings, Writings*, ed. by Werner Haftmann (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1965): 21. Up until the 2013 *Wols Retrospective* catalogue was printed for the major exhibition at the Menil Collection in Houston, there had been no attempt at a conclusive monograph on the work and life of Wols, outside the essays of Werner Haftmann and Jean-Paul Sartre in the 1965 *Wols: Watercolors, Drawings, Writings*. These two earlier interpretive models were foundational in the scholarship of Wols, and because of the lack in both information and other contemporaneous scholarship, were fundamental in the scholarship published thereafter. Haftmann’s introduction takes a largely biographical approach, and while deemphasizing Wols’ intentionality, he lauds his life as the greatest masterpiece.

Highlighting the life circumstances and the suffering that troubled Wols, Haftmann links them to be the chief driving force behind his work. Frequently speaking of Wols’ making through processes of “psychic automatism” and “a spontaneous will to expression,” he labels Wols as a suffering poet. Finding poetry embodied in the “creative power” animating all things, Wols becomes a sort of enchanter, calling out and harnessing the contentions of nature into his paintings.


For a further discussion on nostalgia as it relates to memory, see Barbara Cassin, *Nostalgia: When Are We Ever at Home?*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault, (New York: Fordham University Press), 2016, 5-8; and Dylan Trigg’s sections on “Phenomenology of Nostalgia” and “Homesickness” in Chapter 4 of *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*, (Athens: Ohio University Press), 2012, 174-198.


18 Ibid., 33.

19 Stewart, 17.

20 I go into further detail on the *Fragments* paintings in “Longing | A Material” on page 41.

21 I walked through the *Pavilion of Coulours* during a quiet spot of the day in June 2017, and later learned that the installation was meant to be interactive. I was quite upset I missed a tactile opportunity to encounter her work!

22 She titles one piece, *Pillar of Inquiry/Supple Column*, and it incorporates 17 feet of hanging, cascading fibers. *Pillar of Inquiry* was displayed at the 2014 Whitney Biennial.


24 Ibid., 6

25 Trigg, 12.

26 Hicks has repeated this motif many times since in her *Lares and Penates* (1990-2013), *Palitos con Bolas* (2011), and *Trésors des Nomades* (2014-2015), but *Ephemera Bundle* was one of the earliest iterations of using this sculptural approach.

27 Stewart, 133.


29 Stewart, 133.


Dalton analyzes Emmanuel Levinas’ theories of Metaphysical Desire and goes into depth on the topic of longing and how it affects the human consciousness. Here, he expands upon the etymology of “longing,” and provides grounding for how longing operates in the human condition.


An earlier iteration of found objects generating a memory feedback loop in my work is my painting, *The Clay Reminds Me of What’s Lost*. This painting influenced a turning point for my practice and shifted me into a greater awareness of the trace-object’s power to recall memories and experiences. I write more about this painting in the Appendix on page 56.

Yi-Fu Tuan, “Intimate Experiences of Place” in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1977, 146, 148.

Tiger II and Duchess happened to be my grandmother’s cats, and they frequently signed my cards with tiny, hand-drawn paw-prints across the bottom margin.
Plates
Plate 1. Charis Norell, *Observance | A Passage*, wool, cotton, linen, alpaca fibers, mohair, silk-wrapped paper, polyester, synthetic thread, mirror, painted wood, nails. 82” x 18.5” x 60.5”. Installed at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum in St. Louis, Missouri, 2018.
Plate 2. Charis Norell, side view of *Observance | A Passage*, wool, cotton, linen, alpaca fibers, mohair, silk-wrapped paper, polyester, synthetic thread, mirror, painted wood, nails. 82” x 18.5” x 60.5”, 2018.
Plate 4. Charis Norell, Detail of *A Remembered Not-Place*, wool roving, cotton crochet thread, pine, assorted alpaca, cotton, linen, and acrylic blended fibers, 74” x 18” x 2.5”, 2017.
Plate 6. Charis Norell, Detail of *A Remembered Place*, wool roving, cotton crochet thread, pine, assorted alpaca, cotton, linen, and acrylic blended fibers, 74” x 18” x 2.5”, 2017.
Plate 7. Charis Norell, Installation view of *Blue is the Color*, oil on Mylar, dimensions variable (as pictured, 108” x 18” x 48”), 2017.
Plate 8. Charis Norell, Detail of *Blue is the Color*, 2017.
Plate 12. Charis Norell, Installation view of *Lightboxes 1-5*, Mylar, paper, oils, 9”x9”x4” each, 2017.
Plate 13. Charis Norell, Maquette for Lightbox, Mylar, paper, oils, eggshells, 9”x9”x9”, 2017.
Plate 14. Charis Norell, *The Place of Blue*, oil on canvas, 60” x 72” x 2.5”, 2016.
Plate 15. Charis Norell, *The Clay Reminds Me of What’s Lost*, oil on canvas, 48” x 60” x 1.5”, 2016.
Plate 17. Charis Norell, *Longing for the Blue World at Dusk*, oil on canvas, 36” x 48” x 1.5”, 2016.
Bibliography


