Symbiotic: The Human Body and Constructs of Nature

Simone Sciascetti
*The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor
Kelly Jazvac
*The University of Western Ontario*

Graduate Program in Visual Arts
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Fine Arts
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Abstract

Combined with a Masters of Fine Art thesis exhibition, Symbiotic, the dossier provides three components: an extended artist’s statement, documentation of my artwork and an exhibition review of There Is No There at Hamilton Artist Inc. in 2015. These three components help guide and illustrate my findings in investigating the interrelationship between the human body and the environment, specifically in trees; how they are inseparable and interchangeable, and how they pertain to the non-existence of a pure natural world. Through sculpture, I explore the essence of these two entities by considering constructs of nature, as well as where the human body fits in within these categories.

Keywords

nature, natural, sterile, constructs of nature, post natural world, David Nash, Giuseppe Penone, human, pollution, tree, environment, bark, skin, wood, plaster, latex, body
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Introduction

In conjunction with the Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition that will take place from April 14th to the 22nd, 2016 this thesis dossier includes three chapters: Comprehensive Artist Statement, Practice Documentation and an exhibition review on There Is No There from the Hamilton Artist Inc., 2015. The pairing of the exhibition and the thesis dossier represents the research I have conducted during my Masters of Fine Arts Degree.

The first chapter comprises my Comprehensive Artist Statement. This chapter explains my investigation of my research trajectory and how my findings and thoughts are portrayed through my art practice. I employ the work of artists, theorists and writers that address themes of the human body and nature to consider the symbiotic relationship between the humans and the environment and how they pertain to the non-existence of a pure natural world. The artists include David Nash, Giuseppe Penone, and the theorists include, Timothy Morton, Neil Roberts and writer Diane Ackerman. My work explores the relationship between the human body and the environment, specifically within trees. I draw upon their similarities and put emphasis on their ecology, to draw attention to the fact that they are a direct result of their environment.

Chapter two is made up of my Practice Documentation. Included with the photographs of my studio-based research are the titles, dates, mediums, dimensions and descriptions of the work including information about how the work was constructed. This documentation is arranged in a chronological order as explained and laid out in my Comprehensive Artist Statement. The documentation further examines my research and acts as a visual aid in describing and exploring my research.

The third chapter is an exhibition review of There is no There that took place at the Hamilton Artists Inc. in Hamilton Ontario, 2015. There is no There is a group exhibition comprised of six artists, curated by Stefan Hancherow. The works deal with themes of in-between spaces and covering and uncovering. Examining the works in this
exhibition focused my consideration and observations of these in-between spaces, and encouraged me to investigate approaches of “uncovering” when considering constructs of nature. The works in the exhibition also comment on how the human transforms the environment to conform to its will, creating places and altering their surroundings to better fit the human’s needs.

My Artist Statement and artwork seek to communicate a similar relationship between the human body and the environment, how they are connected and a part of each other; one cannot do something that does not affect the other. The human body and our environment has changed and formed into something new that was not part of existence thousands of years ago. My hope is that through my research these interferences in our bodies and environment are acknowledged and questioned.
Comprehensive Artist Statement

My artwork investigates the parallels between the human body and constructs of nature – how they affect one another and how the two intertwine. I draw attention to their similarities, rather than their differences, and how they pertain to the non-existence of a pure natural world. I will employ work by artists, such as David Nash and Giuseppe Penone, theorists Timothy Morton and Neil Roberts and writer Diane Ackerman to focus on the environment and its relation to the human body in order to further cultivate ideas relevant to my investigation.

My idea of what nature is and what is considered to be natural has shifted and changed throughout my life. It has had a significant shift during the last two years as I have begun my current research and have created artwork in response to my findings and thoughts. I grew up in a small rural community in Wilsonville, Ontario, surrounded by my family’s fields and rows of trees. My family moved to Hamilton when I was in my early teens. I suddenly became highly aware of my new, very seemingly opposite environment and its affect on me. The city’s pollution impacted my breathing. I could no longer obtain a clear view of the day or nighttime sky, and I yearned for greenery. I was under the illusion that my family had moved further away from nature, that we were in an unnatural space squeezing our way through the busy streets and crowds to get to the city’s trails and parks. In actuality, however, the small community of Wilsonville is no closer to the “natural” than the city of Hamilton; both are manufactured, manicured, processed and conditioned to serve a purpose. Rows upon rows of corn are as designed as the rows upon rows of city blocks; humans have constructed both. Everything has been touched or influenced by humans, whether it is hand-to-hand contact or chemically, through the air, soil or water. A National Geographic article on the human condition explains that humans have physically touched over eighty percent of the world’s surface, and the Earth’s atmosphere is affected and changed by humans through exhaust and emissions; pollution, as well as, overfishing affects oceans, lakes and rivers.¹ There is not one place

left on Earth that has not been affected by human influence, and there is not one human that has not been affected by their environment.

Through my research and artwork I investigate the sculptural and material relationships between the human body and constructs of nature. To do so, I draw upon the ways in which these two entities transform and adapt by overlaying human-like references with forms more associated with constructs of nature. Through this process I develop ambiguous, organic forms that fuse these properties together rather than separate them into their own distinct categories.

I use materials such as plaster, found wood and latex to create sculptures that mimic tree forms. Whether I precisely replicate tree sections, utilize actual parts from a tree, or make works alluding to a tree’s form and growth patterns, these tree-like sculptures can act as stand-ins for the “natural environment” while still drawing connections to the human body in their anthropomorphic forms. I view trees as closely related living entities to human bodies; like us, they grow, adapt, revolt, heal, develop defense mechanisms and procreate. Environmental changes, disease and poor nutrition can negatively affect the human body as well as trees and their growth, but like the human body, trees also have defense mechanisms in the structure of their cell wall, making it difficult for pathogens and diseases to penetrate and spread through their bodies. Furthermore, as humans, if we have a cut in our skin, our body and skin react to that cut to start the healing process, developing a scab over the wound until it is completely healed. If a tree’s bark is damaged or sliced, resins, gums and latex help seal the wound. These substances also discourage animals and insects that might be attracted to the wound potentially causing more damage. Trees have a circulatory system that reminds me of the human body: like humans, beneath trees’ skin (bark) water and nutrients are circulated throughout their entire bodies. By linking the human body and trees, I draw on their overlapping parallels and their lack of clear categorical distinction from one another. Theorist Timothy Morton states: “[t]he more you think about the body,

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the more the category of nature starts to dissolve.” He argues that if the human body is a part of nature, but a pure natural world no longer exists, then the human body is not natural. The human has altered the environment and as a result has altered the human body itself, this has made the idea of a pure natural world or entity impossible and out of reach for it no longer exists. Nothing is “purely” natural, not humans or the environment.

We, as humans, have come from nature: nature was here first. Humans are a direct result of their environment and yet our current environment is a direct result of human influence. These ideas of the human body and its relation to the environment that Morton and I are posing are not new views; Indigenous peoples have long considered the environment and humans both as common living entities. There was once a time when all humans and nature lived side by side one another, and human impact was minimal. At that point, all humans were hunting, fishing, and gathering – living off the land, but not making the land bow down to their will like the current city-dweller. Through social evolution peasant farming was formed and ultimately changed the way the greater population viewed and worked with domestic plants and animals, thus ultimately changing the true sense of the natural forever.

Plaster Series, 2015 is a body of work that is completely comprised of cast plaster tree branches. The branches were collected in Hamilton and London Ontario. Implementing wood from my surroundings is important to my process; I’m using wood that I have come across in my travels, on my family’s property, and on long walks in forests. It is wood with which I have a personal connection, for to some degree we have

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shared the same habitat. I choose not to cut down trees or cut off living branches for my work, preferring instead to use found or dying wood that has already been cut or has fallen. Each cast piece is adhered together with plaster, fusing the bifurcated and distinct sections back into whole branch forms. The results look familiar, and yet slightly wrong – at close inspection the careful repair work of the patched plaster is visible, and the branches suggest a once broken body part that has healed out of alignment. In *Plaster Series*, the formation and differences in the various tree species attached to one another is unsettling, for one may simultaneously think these forms are strange, but also could have possibly been found in one’s own environment on a forest floor. Their sterile white colour makes the objects appear as bodily forms, in their likeliness to clean bones. Their shape and gesture is very human in their stance, as implied by their dance-like gestures. 5’2”, 2015, in particular, is very reminiscent of a spinal cord. Eliminating the natural bark and wood, and replacing it with plaster, allows the focus to remain on the form itself, taking it away from preconceived notions of where it came from or what it should be or do - the white tone implying a clean slate, bone, an absence, or new beginning.

Artist David Nash has worked with wood as his predominant medium for most of his career. Although he has worked with living trees, such as in the work of *Ash Dome*, 1977, he also, like myself, uses wood from trees that have either fallen or are already dead, such as in the piece of the *Cambium Column*, 2012. *Cambium Column* is a sculpture made from a tree that died but was still rooted in the ground; the work has been carved and shaped into its new form of a multi-cup shaped column. By cutting off the remaining branches and stripping the tree bare, Nash has altered the tree into a new form from which it will begin a new period of its existence. Even though it still remains planted in the ground in the same place it had grown, it will be altered and weathered from its surroundings. Nash keeps the tree rooted in the ground, respecting the tree and where it comes from as he emphatically inserts his own sculptural hand into the process of decomposition. Since Nash often works with trees on a massive scale, it is very difficult to move them; so working on the trees where they have lived and ultimately died has become both a practical and conceptual part of Nash’s practice.\footnote{Tim Ingold et al., *David Nash: A Natural Gallery* (Richmond, Surrey: Kew Publishing, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 2013), 13.}
explains that Nash’s “…sculptures speak of the particular individual tree from which they came, a tree which itself is a unique phenomenon formed from and shaped by its specific habitat and environmental exposure.” The environment that surrounds the tree is what has helped form the tree into itself and possibly has also led it to the tree’s demise. Its environment is essential to understanding the tree; the same can be said in regards to the human body, for the human body is a result of its environment, diet and exposure. Nash recognizes this and uses this information and awareness when developing the tree into one of his sculptures.

Nash works primarily with wood and often sets his wood sculptures on fire to char their surface. The artist explains, “[w]hen I see a sculpture made of wood, the first thing I see is the wood and then I see the form, if it’s burnt it is no longer an experience connected with the emotional narrative of living wood. It also changes the sense of time.”

Wood as a material has a strong and familiar presence; we have all experienced wood in many different forms, which elicits many different ideas and feelings when one approaches something made of wood. However, eliminating that familiar experience or expectation and shifting it to an unsettling one expands on how one could think about this very familiar material. In my own work I use plaster which I see functioning in a similar way to Nash’s burnt wood surfaces: the form maintains the reference to wood, but the material and colour shift interrupts an easy familiarity. Further to eliminating the natural appearance of the wood, I subtly implement my own presence and hand in these works: 5’ 2” is comprised of one single piece of branch cast in plaster forty-nine times placed one on top of the other, protruding straight out horizontally from the wall in one long line – the length is the same measurement of my own height, thus referencing my own body. For the work Plaster Series – Untitled #5 I took a cast of my own thumb and attached it to a piece of branch. This bodily intervention is only visible at close range – otherwise, my thumb looks as though it is a branch. By adding references to my body in the works, I suggest common ground within these strange forms. Further adding to this idea of the human’s interrelationship with constructions of the natural, the thumb I cast was nearly severed when I was four years old in a farming related accident; although it was

10 Ingold et al., David Nash, 13.
reconstructed into a close resemblance of what it was before, it is not in its original form. “The body is the umbrella under which terms such as nuance and rhizome find shelter. If I add to or take away from this body (a prosthetic device here, an amputation there), is it still the (same) body?” This question from Timothy Morton was one I had to ask myself. I do not have the exact same body I was born with; it has changed and will continue to do so. My thumb is not structured naturally, but my ontology was never completely natural to begin with.

My work Adaptation #1, 2015 is a wall piece that, when installed, is attached directly to the wall, as if it is part of the wall. The whole sculpture’s form was inspired by a found piece of tree bark. From this piece of bark I attached wire mesh and created a tree form with the plaster on top sealing all the materials together, making it appear as if this form could have been part of the original bark, yet also like some sort of crystallization or ossification is taking place on the now dead tree. David Nash states, “…compared to stone, wood is closer to us and I think we have a natural affinity with [wood] and understand it has a defined mortality.” I find this statement has resonance in Adaptation #1, in that when looking upon the plaster surrounding the bark, it is clear that the plaster is not part of the original form; it juxtaposes a frozen, light-absorbing weight against the porous skin of the dead tree.

In addition to material juxtapositions, my work also uses abstraction as a strategy of investigation. Artist Giuseppe Penone explains when talking about his own work that “[a]bstraction is the attempt to describe an aspect of the real world through a specific language. (It is a vocabulary of shapes which is based on the sensibility and the logic of an individual).” The abstracted tree form is recognizable to the viewer and allows the viewer to approach the sculpture with one’s own memories and feelings, yet the abstracted form adds a sense of the unfamiliar, drawing attention to a suggested alteration. It has a bodily quality. The bark can be seen as a scab that the plaster is encroaching upon, perhaps to help heal it, and the branches act like arms stretching up towards the sky. It evokes a healing, growing, adapting body.

Giuseppe Penone, in a manner similar to David Nash, works mainly with wood and trees as the subject matter. Penone’s work relates nature to the human body. The work of *It Will Continue to Grow Except at that Point*, 1968 is one of his works that I admire. When Penone was twenty-one he grasped the trunk of a young tree in the woods of Garessio Italy, then he copied that gesture of grasping the tree with his right hand by casting it in metal and placing the cast on the tree. The tree continued to grow and adapt along with his cast hand. The tree adjusted its growth patterns and over time has completely grown over the cast, enveloping it under its surface. The literal physical touch and influence of Penone’s body affected the tree and became part of the tree over a length of time somewhat akin to the human life span, as opposed to the time typically taken in a gallery to view a work of art. Although the “touch” is currently not visible to the human eye, it is there and it has influenced and continues to influence the adaption and growth of the tree. The cast and the tree have physically become the same body: the foreign matter still present, but absorbed and surrounded by the tree. Penone states that “[i]n grasping the tree with my hand I set up a relationship between my own being and the being of the tree, a relationship not of domination but of contact, a union of two elements, man and tree…” Penone is not trying to announce one entity’s dominance over another, he is conveying how these two seemingly different entities are very much alike and are a part of one another when in the same environment.

My work *Adaptation #3, 2015* references growth, with the plaster cast pieces of branches attached directly on the surface of the cut log pieces. One half of the split log is completely covered while the other half looks to be in the process of being completely engulfed in the plaster pieces. The split log has the plaster pieces attached to the cut surface area of the log; the bark has remained untouched. A log may automatically be perceived as “natural” to the human eye, but what the human eye cannot see is the contamination of pollution that has seeped into every fiber and has now become part of its entire identity. Activist, scholar and artist Max Liboiron has stated that plastics are everywhere: “‘Everywhere’ includes all five of the world’s oceans, but also the entire planet, its human and non-human inhabitants, and even Mars…. Different parts of

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15 Penone, *Giuseppe Penone*, 4, 5.
‘Everywhere’ have different concentrations of plastics, chemicals, and the harms they produce.”17 Plastics are another form of pollution; they spread and seep into the ground and water and are ingested by living beings. Furthermore, “… high concentrations of sulfur dioxide, fluorides, and nitrogen oxides emitted by industrial plants have injured or destroyed forests and ecosystems within 20km of the point of origin.”18 In Adaptation #3, the plaster pieces act as pollution, a defective growth, or a parasite, as the “invasive” material fuses with the log, unable to separate from it. Naturalist and writer Dianne Ackerman states in her book, The Human Age: The World Shaped by Us, that “[w]e’ve turned the landscape into another form of architecture; we’ve made the planet our sandbox,” making everything fit a mold to better serve the human.19 Ackerman explains how humans have become the strongest force to ever affect the planet, redefining the world and humanity’s part and our place within it. What is not blatantly visible to the human eye is that unnaturalness is everywhere; it has seeped into every thing and every part of this world; it is our reality and it is the norm. “Like supreme beings, we now are present everywhere and in everything. We’ve colonized or left our fingerprints on every inch of the planet….20 Like the different plaster pieces of branches spread across the logs described above, humans have spread through the world not completely understanding what we have changed (although we might see visible changes to our environment and to our own bodies). This is mainly why, according to Penone, “[o]ur knowledge and understanding of the world is the product of the projection of our body and our capacity for logical thought on the world around us.”21 Relating objects to a human form is a strategy to make viewers more sympathetic, and allow them to better question how something might work, and where we fit in with such systems. I aim for the invading plaster pieces on Adaptation #3 to be relatable to humans; in light of the work, one can imagine a rash spreading across his or her own body. Even though the rash was

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20 Ackerman, The Human Age, 12.
21 Penone, Giuseppe Penone: Spazio di Luce, 27.
not there before and it is not indigenous to someone, it is now a part of them and they must learn how to live with it.

My work Self Portrait - Body Surface Area, 2015 is completely comprised of latex. The logs and tree trunks that I brushed the latex upon determined the sizes of the separate pieces; I then peeled away the latex to reveal the impressions of the different bark. Giuseppe Penone also finds that drawing connections between the tree bark and the human skin emphasizes the similarities between our environment and the human body; “[i]f we read the skin of the wood we always find something there that speaks of man.”22 Like bark, skin protects the body; it shields the body from the elements, it heals, grows with the body and it contains memory. Penone further explains that “[t]he skin and the bark both convey information. They are surfaces, containers, but they are also organs of sensation, of communication, sensitive and permeable.”23 Skin and bark are both identifiers of state of health and origin; they can tell someone part of their story without speaking a word – they communicate. The colour of the latex brings forth a human skin reference that is unnerving and disturbing, evoking the same sensation and response I would have if I viewed fresh bark on a wall that had been freshly shaved off of a tree’s body, with the tree’s sap still fresh and dripping towards the ground. As two living things, human and tree, are of the same world and environment, a response to and offspring of their common surroundings. The latex itself comes from the environment, more specifically, trees. But this latex is intermixed with ammonia and other harmful and toxic ingredients in order to serve as a constructing material. This material choice echoes my argument that everything we breathe and ingest is “contaminated”. Here latex is used to represent two entities, the human body and trees - neither of which are purely natural. Yet, latex itself is found in “nature” but is not purely “natural” either because of the way in which it has been processed and refined, similar to how plywood is not “natural”. Further, just like bodies and trees, and as artist Eva Hesse discovered, latex will also break down and age, morphing into a new version of itself. It can either soften or become very brittle if it is exposed to a lot of light and air, and it can even ooze.24

23 Penone, Giuseppe Penone, 4.
Egg Sacks, 2015 is a collection of latex skins made by the same process as in Self Portrait – Body Surface Area; however, I took the process a step further and I sewed the seams together, bringing them to their original cylindrical shape. I filled the resulting latex tree trunk forms with cast hedge apples from an Osage Orange tree, sourced from a parking lot near my studio. This thick, fibrous, sweet smelling fruit carries the seedpods of the tree inside of it. The combination of the flexible latex and the heavy plaster cast fruit creates a bulging, lumpy sack. This piece possesses a bodily form, but the scale is larger than human-size. The latex describes the comforting and unintimidating form of a tree, but the way in which it is displayed and materially altered is potentially unnerving and ambiguous. The hedge apples cast in stark white plaster furthers an unsettling feeling, as the odd forms are slightly hidden from the viewer, making it difficult to fully examine what they are. As the viewer approaches the sacks he or she may not be sure what to expect. Although they first appear to be living things, they are actually lifeless, and seemingly sterile and petrified objects. Once again I am drawing connections between skin and bark. I am aware that although these sacks reference life and rebirth, they also relate to death and can come across as disturbing, cancerous or detached beings.

Diane Ackerman explains that

[d]uring our brief sojourn on Earth, thanks to exhilarating technologies, fossil fuel use, agriculture, and ballooning populations, the human race has become the single dominant force of change on the planet. For one species radically to alter the entire natural world is almost unprecedented in all of Earth’s 4.5-billion-year history.25

Humans have had a profound affect on the environment, and as a result, this has also had an affect on the human body. We now find ourselves in a new state that still connects us to the environment, but makes this relationship unstable. Creating works that connect non-human living forms with the human body initiates a conversation about what we are to our environment and what our environment is to us. Drawing attention to their similarities rather than their differences further exemplifies that the human body and its environment are integrally connected. Although this perspective is at the core of many indigenous worldviews, its crucial premise has been largely neglected by Western modes

25 Ackerman, The Human Age, 10.
of thought. Humans have altered the environment so much that it no longer resembles what it once was. The human body has likewise changed in this new environment, and not necessarily for the better. By fusing references to the human body and organic forms, such as trees, I create ambiguous objects that are not fully human, nor tree, nor natural. Conducting an investigation with various materials, shapes and forms allows me to further explore and communicate these ideas and findings, and to question a preconceived notion of the “natural” world. This is what interests me and what drives my work and research: the endless possibilities that exist with explorations in this non-natural world in which we all live.

Bibliography


5'2”, 2015, plaster, steel pipe and iron flange, 5.5 x 5 x 157.5cm

5’2’’ is comprised of one piece of tree branch that has been cast forty-nine times in plaster. Forty-eight of the cast branch pieces have holes in the center in order for a steel pipe to slide through the pieces and be secured in an iron flange that is attached to the wall. This piece hangs parallel to the floor with its length equal to my height.
Plaster Series – Untitled #1, 2015, plaster, 33.5 x 23 x 21cm

Plaster Series – Untitled #2, 2015, plaster, 38.5 x 16 x 13cm
Plaster Series – Untitled #3, 2015, plaster, 17 x 38 x 16cm

Plaster Series – Untitled #4, 2015, plaster, 35 x 29 x 31cm
Plaster Series – Untitled #5, 2015, plaster, 37 x 38 x 15cm

Plaster Series – Untitled #6, 2015, plaster, 12 x 54 x 17cm
Plaster Series – Untitled #7, 2015, plaster, 26 x 17 x 10cm

Plaster Series – Untitled #1 - #7 are sculptures completely made of plaster. They are made from a number of molds that are of a variety of pieces of branch that I have cast in plaster and attached to one another with plaster. The variety of tree species with different textured bark, in addition to the distorted forms and angles the sculptures create adds to their organic origin. All but one is made up of casts of branch pieces. Plaster Series – Untitled #5 contains a cast of my own thumb from my right hand. The thumb blends in with the branch casts for it too is distorted and reveals my pinched thumbnail and scar.
I started constructing this artwork around a piece of bark that I had found in Hamilton, Ontario. I started to mold the form with wire mesh as the base and added plaster on top to seal and finish the hollow form. All that is white is what I have constructed.
Adaptation #1, 2015, found wood, wire mesh and plaster, detail
Adaptation #3, 2015, white ash wood and plaster, 31 x 154 x 54 cm x 2

I found this white ash log on Western University’s campus. I split it in half and attached plaster cast pieces of branches to the cut and exposed interior half of the log. One half is completely consumed with the plaster casts, while the other half appears to be in the process of being consumed with the encroaching plaster pieces.
Adaptation #3, 2015, white ash wood and plaster, detail

Adaptation #3, 2015, white ash wood and plaster, detail
I brushed on liquid latex to pre-cut tree logs and applied various layers of latex. I peeled the latex from the logs; the latex pieces’ size and texture are based off the log it was brushed upon. The different textures are a result of the different tree species with different types of bark. The collection of the latex pieces equate to my own body surface area.
Egg Sacks, 2015, latex and plaster, dimensions vary

Egg Sacks, 2015, latex and plaster, dimensions vary
Egg Sacks, 2015, latex and plaster, dimensions vary

Egg Sacks, 2015, latex and plaster, dimensions vary
Egg Sacks, 2015, latex and plaster, dimensions vary

The latex sections of these sculptures were made in the same process as in the *Self Portrait – Body Surface Area*, except that these pieces of latex have been hand sewn together – bringing them back to their cylindrical shape. The plaster pieces inside the latex “sacks” are Osage Orange tree fruit, known as a hedge apple. These hedge apples of the Osage Orange tree contain seedpods inside; I had found the trees and collected their fruit on Western University campus. The sacks are completely comprised of the cast hedge apples.
I found this rotting log by the Thames River on the Western University campus. Inside the belly of the log, I have attached plaster cast hedge apples. The whole piece is incased in a thin layer of latex. The latex protects the piece, providing another layer.
Untitled, 2016, found wood, plaster and latex, detail

Untitled, 2016, found wood, plaster and latex, detail
I found this piece of bark near the Thames River on Western University Campus. It had fallen clean off of the tree branch it once originated from. I filled the inner belly of the bark with plaster cast fingertips. The casts are from my own fingers; they have been misshaped by the method in which I cast them, causing them to be irregular in shape.
The foundation of these two works is constructed of wire mesh. I added plaster onto the mesh to seal and finish the hollow form. The surface is smooth plaster with adhered plaster casts of my own fingertips. The fingertips were made using the same method as the previous *Untitled* work, causing them to be irregular in shape. These two forms are completely hollow with heavily applied latex inside, emitting a strong rubber scent. The forms themselves were constructed with the human and tree form in mind, I have taken elements from these two entities and have combined them together, forming them into an abstracted hybrid form.
Untitled, 2016, plaster, latex and wire mesh, detail

Untitled, 2016, plaster, latex and wire mesh, detail
Exhibition Review: There is no There
Curated by Stefan Hancherow

Artists: Jen Aitken, Josée Aubin Ouellette, Liza Eurich, Jenine Marsh, Derrick Piens and Beth Stuart

May 2 – June 13, 2015 at Hamilton Artists Inc. Hamilton, Ontario

There is no There, curated by Stefan Hancherow, is an exhibition that lends itself to deeper questions of industry and livelihood. The show’s title refers to a Gertrude Stein quote, “there is no there, there,” which reflects upon Oakland, California’s relationship to San Francisco in respect to concepts of suburban expansion and loss of industry. These themes are fitting for an exhibition held in Hamilton, Ontario given that Hamilton is known as the “Steel City” for its past as a leading producer of steel. This theme is relatable to many different cities in the area, including London, Leamington and Detroit, all of whom have seen recent and radical changes to their local industries. This act of removing and covering up the city’s industrial infrastructure is something with which most people are familiar but which most of the time goes unnoticed. The Hamilton Artists Inc. is a prime example of this type of act for the original gallery was torn down and rebuilt into what it is today. The artists in There is no There bring the unnoticed to the forefront by creating work that is exactly that – a result of covering and uncovering.

This covering and uncovering is intriguing to me for it is something that I constantly witness in my environment, physically and metaphorically. The Hamilton escarpment is a natural landscape; it uncovers and presents natural events such as the many waterfalls that run down the rock and sediment, the ancient trees, and the wildlife that thrive within it. But it is also covered up and blown out by asphalt-covered roads, highways and trails that required the clearing of trees in order for them to be made. The works in There is no There bring this construction of our environment, and the human’s role within it to the forefront by referencing both “natural” elements and biomorphic shapes. In doing so, it reminds the viewer of these more organic entities that are manicured and processed to fit the needs of the human. These works made me further consider what is “natural”. The interferences in the works speak to the interferences in the human body and the environment, questioning their role and acknowledging their
existence. The works in *There is no There* begs the viewer to take a closer look at their environment and to question, observe, and to live within and through the in-between spaces. These acts have altered my perception of my environment and have made me aware of different constructs of nature that threw me forward to observing my surroundings in a different light.

Hamilton has gone through many transformations, from a bustling leading city in industry and manufacturing to an innovative leader in the arts and community building. Hamilton is all too familiar with loss of industry; the Steel Company of Canada (Stelco) was founded there in 1910 and not too long after became the largest producer of steel in Canada in the 1920’s. Fast-forward to 2015 and Stelco no longer exists as a domestic company, but is now known as U.S. Steel Canada and although it still produces coke and steel finishing, steel is no longer part of their production line. This removal leaves the identity of the Steel City in a tenuous place. Like many cities in Southwestern Ontario, Hamilton’s rich history is regularly covered and uncovered through renovation and construction. The Baptist Church on James Street South in the center of the city was a landmark, standing since 1878. Only two-thirds of the church now remain for a current construction project is turning the space into a thirty-story condo tower. Only the front façade of the church remains as a gesture towards the city’s history. Just as the front façade of the Baptist Church is a reminder of Hamilton’s history, as well as a form of uncovering, so are the tall dark smoke stacks belching black clouds from the old Stelco plant a somewhat unpleasant visual symbol of the hard work and industry that formed this city.

This sense of uncovering and covering is strongly represented in specific pieces in the exhibition, such as Jen Aitken’s work *Potakin Min* (2015), which first caught my attention. This piece crawls along the first exterior gallery wall over onto the interior gallery wall, as if guiding you, welcoming you into the space, which features six diverse artists. The bright neon yellow/green colour of the resin, combined with the raw gray concrete and foam, hugs the corner of the wall in an intricate geometrical form. For a form that comprises such mathematical dimensions and precision, it seemingly has no purpose. Perhaps it once had a purpose, a more pronounced shape that has now been deconstructed or seemingly abandoned. *Potakin Min* elongates itself across the wall,
fanning out to the other side and forming holes and in-between spaces. It seems to have been expanded, but it has lost something in the process. The manufacturer’s stamp on the foam reveals the material’s origin and industrial purpose, but its role in its present form is enticingly unclear. Construction, design and manipulation are strongly referenced in this piece: it has been precisely measured to fit around the wall and to its counterparts. It builds upon itself one building block at a time, making it seem like there are more blocks to come but instead, it has stopped production and sits at a standstill. It sits uneasily as a subtle reference to growing and expanding construction. Construction on a road, for example, may be finished and ready to withhold the weight of continuous transportation and traffic but over time this same road will need some patch work or will even need to be repaved completely. Like the constructed environment, the human age is constantly in flux with continuous layers of the past embedded in the ground – building on top of one another.

Jen Aitken *Potakin Min* (2015) concrete, foam, and resin. © 2015; Simone Sciascetti

By comparison, Josée Aubin Ouellette’s *BODY BLOCKS* (2015) appear as posters despite the manner in which the inkjet print on paper works are installed. These seven
pieces are strewn across the gallery floor in the farthest right-hand back corner of the
gallery space, with some only half or three quarters mounted on the wall and the rest
curving to the floor. Faceless models pose with these “body blocks,” illustrating how they
are to be used. With their leggings and tights the models look as though they have been
cut out of an American Apparel ad. These body blocks act as an extension of the body
perfectly conforming to certain body parts (thighs, calves, neck, forearm, hand, and
elbow). The filling and surrounding of space is apparent in this work as some look as
though the foam would be quite comfortable while others look constricting and foreign.
The structured foam and the seemingly random installation of the prints are taken
together, making a strange yet convincing juxtaposition. These body blocks bring
attention to the in-between spaces surrounding body parts otherwise overlooked, bringing
forth an awareness of the space the human body takes up in its environment, and how the
human’s environment is molded to form to the human. The pieces of foam bring the
viewer’s attention to the in-between spaces, uncovering those nooks and crannies and
bringing the unnoticed to the forefront. The shapes and positions of the blocks are very
successful in questioning space, shape and everyday objects such as a computer mouse or
a pillow. The human body adapts to its environment, BODY BLOCKS is commenting on
how humans make their environment conform to them. These blocks are specifically
made to form to the human body, putting emphasis on the human form. These blocks do
not appear to be all that necessary to support a clear utilitarian function or movement.
They appear to be stand ins for a new fad or product that is made with the purpose of
making your life easier, more comfortable or better in your environment (but perhaps this
fad or product will soon be forgotten).
The works in this exhibition sprawls evenly throughout the gallery space, allowing the viewers to encounter each piece in their own time according to their interest, but the theatrical, spotlight-style lighting in an otherwise darkened space is distracting and is more of a hindrance than an aid to the viewing experience. Pieces like Aitken’s *Potakin Min* (2015) and Ouellette’s *BODY BLOCKS* (2015) deal with space and function within the works themselves as well as in how they are situated in the gallery. The placement of the pieces produces an electrical surge that makes the space come alive, bringing in to question how art can be installed while conveying new ideas to the viewer. Just when I thought I had finished viewing the exhibition and made my way to the exit, there, behind the ramp leading to the doorway on my left, were two more of Ouellette’s prints slumped to the floor, this was a nice surprise and reminder to constantly observe your surroundings for they will forever evolve and transgress. This holds true whether you are in a refurbished industrial park or you are witnessing the reconstituting of the human body. The important question is: will you notice when change happens in the space you occupy?
I kept this question in mind as I stepped out of the gallery and into the bustling James Street North, more mindful of the old storefronts with apartments up top – some businesses had been here for generations, but how long will they last before they become the unnoticed?

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Bibliography


Curriculum Vitae

Born: 21 April 1990 Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Education:
2016 Master of Fine Arts, University of Western Ontario, London, ON
2013 Bachelor of Arts with Honours and Minor in English, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON

Exhibitions:
2016 Symbiotic, The Artlab Gallery, University of Western Ontario, London, ON
2016 Mushroom Festival, The Bookcase, University of Western Ontario, London, ON
2015 SECOND WIND, The Artlab Gallery, University of Western Ontario, London, ON
2015 Fresh Paint / New Construction - 11th edition, Art Mûr Gallery, Montreal, QC
2014 Member’s Exhibition, Blue Angel Gallery, Hamilton, ON
2013 Bookmarkers, McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton, ON
2013 TEDx, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON
2013 President’s Corridor of McMaster, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON
2013 SWARM, Hamilton Artist Inc., Hamilton, ON
2012 Annual Member’s Show, Hamilton Artist Inc., Hamilton, ON
2012 Liuna Station, Hamilton, ON
2012 Thou Art Party, Hamilton, ON
2012 Fusion, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON
2012 The Balloon Hoax, Baltimore House, Hamilton, ON
2012 Hello Stranger, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON
2011 TEDx, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON

Collections:
2011 – Present The Centre for Leadership in Learning, Mills Memorial Library, Hamilton, ON

Publications:

Scholarships & Grants
2014-16 Western Graduate Travel Grant, Western University
2014 University of Western Ontario Entrance Scholarship, University of Western Ontario
2009 Honour Award Scholarship, McMaster University
Related Work Experience:
2014 – 2016  Foundations of Visual Arts Teaching Assistant, University of Western Ontario, London, ON
2012        Drawing Teaching Assistant, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON
2011 – 2013  Studio Assistant, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON
2011 – 2013  School of the Arts Office Assistant, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON
2009        Co-Op, Theatre Aquarius, Hamilton, ON

Volunteer Experience:
2015-16     Member at Large Board Member at Forest City Gallery, London, ON
2015-16     Chair of the Visual Art Graduate Student Association at Western University, London, ON