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## Place(ment)

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Place(ment)

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

Ashley Lynn Byers  
Missouri State University  
Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2011

May 2016  
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Clinical Assistant Professor Sam King  
Thesis Director

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Department Chair Jeannie Hulen  
Committee Member

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Associate Professor Leo G. Mazow  
Committee Member

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Assistant Professor Dylan J. DeWitt  
Committee Member

## **Abstract**

Throughout her time at the University of Arkansas Master of Fine Arts program, Ashley Byers has been creating work about the folklore, landscape, and people of the Ozarks. Though she continues to create work with the Ozarks in mind, it became a motif used for a broader conversation about the ad hoc, holiness, painting, landscape, the figure, and intimacy. In many ways, the concepts within her work are born out of the Ozarks.

When can remnants come together to become more than the sum of their parts? Derelict, easily dismissed objects, when set in the right context or viewed through a particular gaze, can have a resonance to them. This installation became a platform for the viewer to think about their relationship to artwork. When is interaction sanctioned and when does physically interacting with the piece seem uncomfortable? There is a suggested narrative within the non-linear work that speaks of the holy and the everyday and how context changes the reception of those things.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I owe a great deal of thanks to my Thesis Committee: Sam King, Jeannie Hulen, Dylan DeWitt, and Leo Mazow for their continuous support and encouragement to above all, seek the questions rather than answers. I also would like to thank my family, Sara Hankins, Kyla Byers, Judy Lambert, Mike Lambert, and Joe Hankins for their encouragement and unwavering belief in me. My fellow MFAs also deserve my deepest gratitude; thank you Aimee Odum, Lindsay Barquist, Wilson Borja, Jon Cromer, Chris Drobnock, Elena Volkova, Danny R.W. Baskin, Owen Buffington, Katrina Ratterman, Mike Pennekamp, Parker Bowles, Maryamsadat Amirvaghefi, and Erin Gardner. I couldn't have done it without you all.

## **Dedication**

Place(ment) is dedicated to those flyover places and the people that inhabit them-- in particular, the great folks and storytellers who live on the knobs and hollers of the Ozarks.

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## **I. Introduction to the Motif**

*Taney County still holds the name of those men who sat up on Snapp's Bald in 1883. With flashing lights and TV commercials, Branson gives a nod to the folks who swore to protect life and property from bushwhackers and Cole Younger's gang. Though they're not the same sorts of folks that are seen today. The Baldknobbers that now reside in Branson are old men who stand on stages and sing songs about teddy bears and apple blossoms and the delta that they've never seen. They make faces where they suck in their lips and puff out their cheeks. They snap their neon suspenders and say things like "aw, shucks". Those new-age, old-aged Baldknobbers show no sign of the hoods or horns or fire of their namesake. They've co-opted a name that masks the original story of the protective Bald Knobber<sup>1</sup> vigilantes that went far beyond the punishment of Matthew 5:38. In an attempt to bury the past, the stories of the hooded men from Snapp's Bald have muddled truth with fiction. Now most of what's heard of them is a group of bumbling old men, sold to tourists that come to the Ozarks for some comfortable taste of "redneck country".*

I grew up near Branson, Missouri. For school field trips we often went to Branson, which caters itself to a particular brand of mid-American, conservative tourist and often represents Ozarkians as a unified front of hard-scrabble, redneck, God-fearing folk. Reality, however, is always much more complicated and often far more interesting. Stories with a clear protagonist and antagonist are easy to read and remember, but end as soon as the stories are finished being told. Stories with a fuzzy line between good and bad, stories that make me fearful

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<sup>1</sup> "Baldknobber" describes the current variety show based in Branson, Missouri. Within this paper, "Bald Knobber" (while confusingly sometimes also written as Baldknobber) is the Civil War-era vigilante group.

and curious, stories that seem to be both truthful and fictional are stories that can live in my mind beyond their telling; that is where I find art.

When I was about 8, there was a rock filled sinkhole in the field next to my aunt's house. My sister and I used to play in that field with our cousin. When it rained, we would stand on the stones and listen to the water fall through the gaps in the rocks. When it was humid and hot, we would pull stones out of the filled-in sinkhole, trying to reach the cool relief of some unexplored cave system below. We once dug so far the grass was eye level; we felt like explorers and mice. When the sun started setting, my aunt saw us from the window of her house and rushed out, yelling that we could get killed if the rocks fell or if the sinkhole decided to open up from under us. We stopped digging in the stone pit after that. Instead, we built shelters from twigs, branches, leaves and trash we found around the field.

There was something sort of magical and reverent about building things that were larger than us. We were creating our own places. I've taken the same idea of building a space out of the stuff that surrounds me and re-imagined it in my thesis work.

The works presented in my thesis are a result of three years worth of investigating my own preferences in art and culture. I've been expanding my definition of art and painting while still focusing on tenants such as assemblage, the relation of the part to the whole, mark-making, color, and representation.

As my history suggests, the work I've created not only comes from my research here at the University of Arkansas, but also my life-long research and interest in place, placemaking, storytelling, and rural cultures.

## **II. On Lists**

List-making is essential to my art practice and was integral to me understanding what it is I wanted my thesis to be about. While I have always been interested in storytelling, the real bread and butter seems to work its way through in compilation rather than direct narration. In my previous two years of graduate school, I strove to create work that focused on storytelling, while neglecting my propensity towards compilation rather than narration. I liked creating work with narrative qualities, such as my work that was about the Bald Knobbers or the flooding of the White River, but I was missing something. To figure out what my missing component was I created a list of all the things I found appealing in any sort of artistic sense the summer before my thesis. What follows is a somewhat condensed version of my list.

Things I like:

Place, home, pilgrimage sites, sites of awe/wonder, changing viewer's understanding of scale, horror movies, the feeling of the unknown, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Kent Dorn, that old barn on the compound that's falling apart, stories that feel real and dissolve into the mystical, the suspension of disbelief, Joe Meno's short stories, Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!*, Jorge Luis Borges' "On Exactitude in Science", metamodernism, art vs. craft, Vance Randolph's Ozark folklore collections, Aaron K. Ketchell's *Holy Hills of the Ozarks*, the Bald Knobbers, Silver Dollar City, the Ozarks, Appalachia, Branson, ad hoc, transient people, oral traditions, the makeshift, Whiting Tennis, the back side of large set-pieces for plays or movies, Cinecittá, antiquing, making new things look old, making old things look new, ghost stories, trash that collects on the side of the street, the change in sound when going from an open space to an enclosed space, the insides of closets, the surprisingly muffled acoustics of the outdoors during a heavy snow, cicadas, the musical drone of saws as they power off, that particular glow that powerlines get half an hour before sunset, the light that passes through tree canopies, dissonance, anticipating resolution, smelling rain before feeling it.

While I believed that my previous work was strong, it often very directly imitated stories and narratives that I had researched. I felt as if I had been creating work that was too direct of a translation of other things. This list allowed me to see that I was generally interested in multi-sensory experiences that focused on things like painting, intimacy, ad hoc, holiness, and the figure.

So why are lists important? They allow me to figure out overarching themes and preferences. They allow me to organize things in a more holistic way. List-making manifests in my work as a whole, where I've created compilations of things that I liked and placed them together to create something new without needing a linear quality that tends to limit my work.

### **III. Holiness and Place**

The Missouri Ozarks has always affected the way I make art. In the summers, my sister and I would stay at our family's property in a small town on the edge of a lake. We'd swim, boat, and float around the river when the cicadas were so loud they'd drown out our voices. That particular landscape of bluffs, caves, hills, and waterways forever reside at the back of my mind.

This installation became a platform for the viewer to think about their relationship to artwork. When is interaction sanctioned and when does physically interacting with the piece seem uncomfortable? There is a suggested narrative within the non-linear work that speaks of the holy and the everyday and how context change the reception of those things.

The Ozarks places a particular importance on knowing and interacting with the land—where that sort of knowledge is at times more valued than “book smarts”. People from the Ozarks are expected to experience nature, generally in the forms of floating, hiking, fishing, and camping. Church retreats often involve going out into nature and seeing God's vision in bucolic landscapes.

Experiencing God through the land is a large part of a book I've found particularly insightful, “Holy Hills of the Ozarks” by Aaron Ketchell. Ketchell<sup>2</sup> argues that since there were no pilgrimage sites of historical origin in the United States for Christians like there were in

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<sup>2</sup> (Ketchell 2007, 164-172)

Europe, Christians yearned for a place that they could trek to in order to experience the wonder of God. One of these sites was and is the Ozarks, where Shepard of the Hills, Passion Plays, and megachurches all exist alongside waterfalls, thick woods, and spring-fed lakes. Though I am no longer religious, I still feel the same, indescribably holy<sup>3</sup> sensation when hiking through the landscape of the Ozarks.

I don't experience this feeling solely in the Ozarks, however. In the summer before my thesis year I was lucky enough to get the chance to study abroad in Rome, Italy through the University of Arkansas. There I was able to see numerous holy sites like the Vatican, St. Peter's, the Basilica of Santa Croce, and Trastevere's Santa Maria. These man-made structures weren't the only places I experienced the "awesome" in the truest sense of the word. Hiking up to the top of the highest tower of Assisi's fortress, Rocca Maggiore and seeing the surrounding countryside did this, as did climbing the hot, interior corridor of the duomo in the Florence Cathedral and seeing nearly the entirety of Florence from up high. So what was it that all these spaces had in common? What was it that I was so moved by? I worked to understand this, as mentioned earlier, through list-making. I parsed out that these spaces made me come to grips with my scale and forced me to re-asses my place in relation to my surroundings. This is something that I was compelled to pursue in my art making. I didn't want to re-create a church or a specific landscape, I wanted to create work that elicited the same feelings I got from these holy spaces.

Hsan Hsu, in an article titled "Literature and Regional Production", discusses how regions, cultures, and cities aren't cultural islands unto themselves<sup>4</sup>. Places are always informed by larger, global networks and are constantly changing with immigration, trade, and technology.

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper I use the term "holy" to describe places, things, and experiences that are worthy of reverence, that provoke pause and contemplation, and that often use visual and audial cues such as repetition to reference religious structures.

<sup>4</sup> (Hsu 2005, 36)



This resounded with me and reminded me of the way that Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton discussed the claims of them being Regionalist. Benton<sup>5</sup> and Wood<sup>6</sup> stated that just because they did work that depicted people from certain areas, didn't mean that they weren't talking about issues that could be found elsewhere. Similarly, in my work, I wanted to use the Ozarks as a foundation to discuss ideas such as holiness, and (as my title suggests) one's placement within a larger context.

The installation includes a visual language that describes landscape, nature, holy sites, ad-hoc tents, derelict barns, the comfort of home all in the context of the gallery it's housed within. The viewer's relationship to these elements change with each component of the piece. The fabric structure is an imitation of the gallery floor, a reference to eroded hills, a constructed tent, and a pile of blankets (Fig. 1). With each component, the relationship of the viewer's size to the fabric structure changes. The viewer has a one-to-one relationship to the blanket pile and the false tile, the viewer is much larger than the representation of hills, and the viewer is enveloped by the tent form (Fig. 2). This continuously changing relationship of the viewer's scale in relationship to different parts of the piece were meant to cause the viewer to question their overall placement within the gallery, intimate objects such as blankets, and ultimately the world around them.

In my thesis I wanted to ask: when does something become holy? When do people recognize the gallery space as an influence in the way artwork is experienced? The gallery space was long, narrow, columned and reminded me of the nave of a church. I heightened this religious feeling by keeping the lights dim and filtered through the fabric inside my tent form—as if through stained glass or a canopy of leaves. Sparsely lighting the gallery also allowed the

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<sup>5</sup> (Adams 1989, 233-234)

<sup>6</sup> (Wood 1935, 234)

delineations of the walls to be less noticeable and allowed for viewers to imagine themselves in an alternate space. The audio component<sup>7</sup> within my thesis was also used to heighten the experience of the holy within my work. I used repetition, bells, the sound of footsteps walking, and an echoed singing in to create a sense of calm, holy, reflection. The sounds of cicadas and crickets, as well as the references to landscape served to talk about the holiness of the outdoors.

While I have always been interested in specific aspects of landscape and place, particularly in regards to the Ozarks, I used the idea of place to talk about holiness and scale. I created a piece that served to make the viewer re-examine their relationship to a gallery setting. The work I made was made out of easily discarded materials that transformed into a space that felt reverent. My goal was to transform the mundane into something worthy of pause and reflection.

#### **IV. Painting**

Painting has become for me a multisensory and multidisciplinary process, though I haven't always felt that way. When I first entered into the Master of Fine Arts program here at the University of Arkansas, I was painting fairly traditional portraits and landscapes, with the only notable exception of being slightly more illustrative and based around collage than more traditionally minded painters. When I came to school here I wanted to expand my definition of painting. Firstly, I took out the figure in my work, then I attempted to describe landscape in ways that weren't direct paintings of specific landscapes, then I tried limiting my color palette. While these things certainly helped me to understand my preferences and choices within painting (I liked utilizing the figure, I still wanted to use the Ozarks as a motif), I didn't really start to

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<sup>7</sup> The audio component, which was looped in the gallery, can be found at <http://www.ashleylbyers.com/placementaudio/>

expand my ideas of painting until I started incorporating some of my peripheral interests such as sewing and music into my work.

Working multi-disciplinarily pushed my artistic ideas further than I expected. I thought about this a lot when researching Thomas Hart Benton. The aesthetic and conceptual choices made by Thomas Hart Benton, as explained in Erika Doss' chapter on American art between the Wars in *Twentieth-Century American Art*<sup>8</sup> and in Henry Adams' book *Thomas Hart Benton*<sup>9</sup>, surprisingly influenced the way I thought about my work. While I didn't seek to create work that looked like it was directly influenced by Benton, I saw how he sought to create 2D work that was sculptural. In creating works that referenced sculpture, drawing, and music, I felt freer to experiment and play. Trenton Doyle Hancock, who had been an influence of mine since undergrad, stated in a video produced by Revel in New York,

"I'm really interested in experimenting more with all these other worlds that revolve around the traditional painting world. I was lucky enough... to co-direct a ballet based on my work... It was really exciting because of the risk that was involved. At some points, our work on the ballet, was working past the work of the paintings, so I had to catch the paintings up to where we were with the ballet... I knew that if we came out victorious that this would ultimately get us, as artists, to the next level." <sup>10</sup>

The way Trenton Doyle Hancock talked about his work resonated with me. In creating things that talked about painting without being traditional painting, I felt like I was better able to understand my preferences within painting and create something that truly felt like it was my own. Painting manifested in the sculptural elements, the sound, the installation process, and the way I utilized the viewer as the figure.

The sculptural elements of my installation were, at the heart, basic representations of components of a traditional painting. There was canvas, a wooden support, paint, and a figure. I

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<sup>8</sup> (Doss 2002, 112)

<sup>9</sup> (Adams 1989, 257-266)

<sup>10</sup> (Hancock)

utilized the fabric pieces to create pattern, texture, color, and to play with opacity. The manipulation of small, quilted patches in relation to larger, bed sheet-sized patches referenced focal points of the paintings of Jessica Stockholder and Amy Sillman. When I sewed up the tent, I started with sewing larger pieces of fabric together then I used the leftover, cut up smaller pieces to then fill in and break up space among the larger cloth patches. Doing this felt very much like dealing with composition within painting. I had to decide what needed to be covered up, what deserved more visual attention, where pattern and texture could reference things like landscape, and how line (colored thread or thin pieces of fabric) could be used to move the eye around (Fig. 3). Translucency and opacity were utilized in the way the interior of my tent looked and referenced the way in which glazes are used to manipulate the way light passes through paint (Fig. 4).

In the audio, I developed layers, textures, and utilized repetition using sounds recorded from my walks, cicadas in the summer, computer generated facsimiles of cicadas, bell-like echoes, and a sung harmony—I thought of these as painterly elements. The repetitive nature of the cicadas and the false cicadas reminded me of the loop-like quality of Cy Twombly paintings. The way that I layered the various components was like covering up and uncovering under paintings. The sound of the piece in the gallery helped to develop a sense of space and a rhythmic-like, ritualistic movement for the viewer to respond to.

Creating this installation not only made me think about painting in terms of formal qualities, but also reminded me of my painting process. Generally, I like to have an idea for what I want to create and when the foundation is placed, I expand upon that and respond to what I've already got. Trenton Doyle Hancock said in his interview with *Revel* in New York, "In coming up with an answer, I come up with ten more questions... Sometimes I start out making a piece

and within the process, discoveries are made. The ultimate goal is...making it move into new directions.”<sup>11</sup> I’ve found that when I allow myself some freedom from what I expect, far more interesting things happen. The back side of my tent is a prime example of this (Fig. 5). When I first thought of the installation, I hadn’t figured out the back side of it. I knew, very vaguely, that I wanted it to include blankets, but I didn’t actually resolve that until the time of installation. The day that I was set to install, I obtained around 30 blankets from family members. Using these blankets as marks, I layed out piles, mounds, and stacks. The result was an undulating form that started to reference home more than landscape-- the punctuating mark, a folded, small, red fleece blanket.

Within my thesis, I was interested in re-incorporating the figure in a new way. Instead of creating a painted figure, I created a stage for the viewer to become the figure. In this way, the focus was still on the figure, but also on the interaction between the viewer and the installation as a whole.

## **V. Truth, Fiction, and the Unknown**

I’m interested in the suspension of disbelief—when we know something isn’t “real”, but we choose to believe it anyway. We start to care less about how closely something mirrors reality and more about the story, the experience, or a larger truth that’s explained through something in-been real life and fiction.

Throughout much of my time at the University of Arkansas, a short story has been stuck in my head:

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<sup>11</sup> (Hancock)

“...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.

—Suarez Miranda, *Viajes de varones prudentes*, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lerida, 1658”<sup>12</sup>

With this short story, Borges describes the creation of the most detailed map imaginable. In doing so, what ultimately happens is that the map becomes one with the countryside and the two become indistinguishable. In joining the manufactured with the natural, the flat with the dimensional, the place with the description, as one they become more interesting.

In many ways, the unclear boundary between truth and fiction as well as a fascination and desire for the uncertain is a direct reflection of my experiences with tall tales, ghost stories, and folklore. The films that resonate are particularly explicit examples of all of this. Films like *The Thing* (1982), *The Shining* (1980), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* (2010), and *It Follows* (2014)—deal with perceived threats, where the imagination of the viewer becomes more powerful than the actual threat. Experiences are often more powerful and engaging when you have to fill in blanks rather than when you're given all the information outright.

In my thesis, there is a mix of truth and fiction, old and new, authentic and inauthentic. I have created a wood floor out of old barn wood and facsimiles of pieces of the old barn wood that are made out of new pieces of plywood, chip board, and MDF—some of such pieces are

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<sup>12</sup> (Borges 1998, 325)

then distressed and made to look like the old barn wood, while others are very obviously just duplications of the shapes of some of the old barn wood but their surfaces and materiality are very clearly new and contemporary (Fig. 6). The sound element of my installation also does this. There are recordings of cicadas and facsimiles of cicadas made digitally. The floorboards in my installation actually did creak, but there is also a recording of that creak that was played back.

Branson showcases this blending of truth and fiction, authentic and inauthentic. It is a city of theme parks and tourist attractions mixed with history and exaggerated tales of saintly and villainous people. These tourist attractions reflect some version of historical reality but also clearly depart from fact. Visitors participate and watch acts like fake gunfights and train robberies at Silver Dollar City and allusions to the Civil War at Dixie Stampede. While these places and shows are clearly exaggerated or even wholly invented, visitors gladly participate in with the knowledge that they are representations of an idea, not strict re-enactments. I thought of this a lot when I went to Italy this summer. There were buildings there that actually had crumbling facades and a patina often unconvincingly replicated in Olive Gardens and wealthy subdivisions. The combination of history and fiction starts to make one question the validity of “one true history.”

## **VI. Utilizing Analogy as the Backbone: A Conclusion**

Analogy is the most basic part of my art making. My list-making becomes a way for me to re-order aspects of seemingly different things in relation to a new whole, and inevitably, these lists become paths to analogies. By re-framing ideas, I’m able to form more complete, complex, and holistic schemas.

My thesis was about creating an analogous experience for my viewers. I suggested a narrative, I didn't prescribe one. The installation allowed my viewers to take some ownership and relate parts of my work to their own ideas and imaginations. My piece was a tent that also felt like a church. My audio felt like a dream or a memory of a reverent space. The bed sheets and blankets were within a gallery, but it reminded the viewers of a comfortable bedroom to nap within. These connections that I made through analogy allowed my audience to ask about the creation and interpretation of place. By thinking comparatively, I also caused my audience to become the figure in my work. They were at once the viewers and the subjects of my painting, my installation. I made painterly marks by utilizing fabric as blocks of color, layers of fabric and paint as glazes, and blankets as wide brushstrokes. I took materials that were easily dismissed and discarded and found ways to make them become larger than the sum of their parts. In utilizing ideas of place, painting, truth, fiction, and the unknown, I created a holy space out of the mundane.



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## VII. Appendix



Figure 1. Place(ment) installation. View from gallery entrance. 2015-2016, fabric, wood, dirt, paint, sound. 12' x 12' x 27'. Image courtesy of Kristoffer Johnson.



Figure 2. Place(ment) installation. Interior view of installation. 2015-2016, fabric, wood, dirt, paint, sound. 12' x 12' x 27'. Image courtesy of the artist.





Figure 3. Place(ment) installation. Detail from interior view of installation. 2015-2016, fabric, wood, dirt, paint, sound. 12' x 12' x 27'. Image courtesy of Kristoffer Johnson.





Figure 4. Place(ment) installation. Looking towards the interior view of the installation. 2015-2016, fabric, wood, dirt, paint, sound. 12' x 12' x 27'. Image courtesy of Kristoffer Johnson.



Figure 5. Place(ment) installation. Looking towards the back side of the installation. 2015-2016, fabric, wood, dirt, paint, sound. 12' x 12' x 27'. Image courtesy of Kristoffer Johnson.





Figure 6. Place(ment) installation. Looking towards the interior view of the installation. 2015-2016, fabric, wood, dirt, paint, sound. 12' x 12' x 27'. Image courtesy of Kristoffer Johnson.