

# Home Truths:

*Identity through environment*

“Home *truths*: Identity and Environment, is about our homes; their physical structures, their ideological implications, and how these enable, constrain and reflect our identities. Recently, new fields of academic study such as Cultural Geography; the social aspect of physical space, and Geosophy; a philosophical view of Geography, have allowed us to examine our complex physical, social, and psychological relationships to our homes. A house conjures images of family and of sanctuary, however, paradoxes and ambiguity are inherent in our interpretation of home; it’s simultaneous offering of safety and potential for entrapment, the dichotomy of public and private space, individualism and community, and, stability in an ever-changing world.

In this statement, I will offer narratives of how my experiences have informed my current work and how I have ensured that the materials and processes reinforce my thesis. By sharing this personal journey, I will illustrate that in building this body of work; I have re-discovered aspects of my identity and communal ideals. This the story of the metaphoric demolition, reconstruction and renovation of the psyche reflected in the imagery of houses.

Home truth in this context is critical self-reflection which culminated in artwork that illustrates my own identity and belonging, as well as how collectively we establish the boundaries and definitions of these concepts. It is my intention to allow people to view

themselves or aspects of their lives within my art and invite them to reflect on their own experiences and interpretations of home whether simply a physical space, or an ideal.

**“Buildings don’t just sit there imposing themselves. They are forever objects of (re) interpretation, narration and representation – and meanings or stories are sometimes more pliable than the walls and floors they depict. We deconstruct buildings materially and semiotically all the time.” (Gieryn 39)**

When I was a child living in the suburbs of Toronto, I couldn’t help but glance at the front windows of houses as I walked by. Every Wednesday evening, it would take me 30 minutes to get to the library-on-wheels known as the ‘book mobile.’ It was light on my way to the library however, as I browsed endless shelves of books, night crept in and the trip home was shrouded in darkness. I walked along this middle-class street with its ‘cookie-cutter’ homes built in the 1950’s, and streetlamps randomly lit large picture windows. Often, I had to stop and re-adjust my cargo of books and caught glimpses of windows showcasing the front rooms of strangers’ houses. Some were dark, others were lit but had curtains drawn, still others had the lights on and curtains wide open.

Apparently then and now, people have different ideas about privacy. I felt guilty yet strangely compelled to peer into some of the windows, and was filled with questions; “Who lives in there? Why don’t they have any pictures on the wall? Why do they have plastic plants? Why doesn’t anyone use their living room?” I never tired of allowing my imagination to create narratives about the unknown and unseen occupants. At the time, it was nothing more than being a bit ‘rude’ and looking into other people’s lives, in

hindsight; it was a common act of curiosity. It is this curiosity which allows us to relate to our environment through comparison, and helps us form a communal identity and a sense of belonging.

**“Buildings do as much to structure social relations by concealing as by revealing, and therein lies their distinctive force for structuring social relations and practices.”**

(Gieryn 39)

It seems humanity never tires of transforming private spheres into public domain. An endless line-up of reality-based television shows can barely keep up with current global demand. This dualism informed my work in a way that encouraged me to expose what would be considered personal space, and yet allow it to remain enigmatically private. I achieved this by leaving the pieces ‘unoccupied.’ Because there are no figures depicted within the art, viewers become active participants in the creation of accompanying narratives.

In deciding whether to use block printing, or realistic imagery, I emphasize black and white photographs printed onto heat transfer paper. The resulting collage seems more truthful in its gritty realism and documentary-like quality, and, the photographs denote a feeling of nostalgia. The root of nostalgia is the Greek word ‘nostos’ which fittingly translates as to ‘return home.’

I spent many years as a graphic designer, and fine artist, and currently I enjoy the convergence of bringing varied technical experiences to my fibre work. Digital cameras, scanners and photo editing software are all vital tools for creating and modifying digital imagery. Stitching and layering cloth, canvas and photographs affords me the opportunity to construct an identity based on external forces rather than internal experience. However, refusing to allow this identification can enable the freedom to live comfortably within a

paradox and enjoy the ambiguity of being from several places and peoples concurrently. This dichotomy informs my work, and has a tremendous impact upon it.

**“With distance from home a person is temporarily or permanently dissociated from it and becomes both more conscious of its role in life, and increasingly appreciative of its inherent qualities as well as its contribution to personal sustenance and psychological well-being.” (Terkenli 327).**

Ideologically, home can also be defined as a communal space shared with a coalition of like-minded people. Many years ago I was hired by members of the First Nations community to work as a historian and spokesperson. Not surprisingly, this has contributed to how I define space and how acutely aware I am of whose land we occupy. Often, as part of my job, I discuss what can only be described as genocide and Canada’s often hidden history of a colonizing force displacing a sovereign nation: an act that contravenes the international human rights code. Here in Toronto, after 11,000 years of continuous First Nations occupation, there isn’t a square inch of space that you are walking on that wasn’t built on the remains of Native people.

**“Oh Canada, our home and native land...” (Weir 1908).**

In examining my fibre works over the past years, I couldn’t help but notice that the symbol of a house kept appearing. It just seemed to be creeping up from the depth of my subconscious, but I began to objectively examine how I was depicting the house. Many times we can analyze our work to ridiculous proportions, but experience dictates that some things ring true, while other things just end up fitting after the fact.

Jung believed that the house was a symbol of oneself, and contemporary theorist J.

Douglas Porteuos in the Geographical Review posits that the house “...reflects how the individual sees himself, how he wishes to see himself or how he wishes others to see him. The house then, is a means of projecting an image both inwardly and outwardly” (384).

Imagine my sudden feeling of vulnerability when I realized that many of the houses I depicted were abandoned, on fire, falling apart, or dark looking. Although initially I felt uncomfortable at the exposure, I understand that in defining our identities, we always negotiate which parts of ourselves to express, and that not all of these aspects of our lives are ‘pretty’ or always remain true. To obtain a balanced view of life we need to look at everything; to deny the shadow is to deny the light.

**“And we too had found happiness in that house now afflicted with bad luck, and our happiness had managed to conquer uncertainty and bad memories. That sad house, that cheap, ugly house located in a cheap, ugly neighbourhood, was a holy place”**

**(Galeano 196).**

On the morning of September 11, 2001, (9/11), terrorists destroyed the World Trade Centre in New York City. Many people lost their lives, and are still suffering from the long-term effects of the incident both psychologically and physically. Our illusory concept of a secure ‘homeland’ has been threatened, more by the political backlash of 9/11 than the act of terrorism itself. Propagandists have used the incident to incite a fear and loathing for anyone deemed ‘other’ who may be a potential terrorist. This single act has altered our perception of international relations permanently. While the internet has expanded our consciousness of global issues and offers simultaneous and multiple points

of view, once informed we become complicit in global issues; issues which may seem too overwhelming to solve. Many people live in privilege, and, at the push of a button, can turn off the world and focus on their own, small territory; their own home. Faith Popcorn referred to this act as ‘cocooning’ and heralded the coming of an age in the 90’s when we all began to look inward for security. (Popcorn 24).

I think of how often creating art in the protection of a home space offers security. I recall the years I spent staring at a computer screen as a graphic designer unable to physically interact with the medium and compare that to the wonderful feeling of handling cloth. While some people follow strict formulae for creating specific dye lots, I mix colours spontaneously and from experience, and always enjoy the unpredictability of this method of dyeing as much as the ceramicist enjoys the anticipation of how a final glaze may look. The process of dyeing silk is almost alchemical. It can seem as much mystical as physical. Unbelievable arrays of colours appear as I move silk pieces from dye pot to dye pot. Fibre has a life of its own and I feel as though I am merely a bystander facilitating the inevitable and inherent transformation contained within the cloth.

Silk is often viewed as a garment of prestige in contemporary society, to me, it is an extremely versatile and intuitive fabric which takes on the personality of its human counterpart, and therefore is an excellent vehicle for self-expression. I am attracted to cloth and am aware of its ‘loaded’ meaning. As Ruth Sheuing and Ingrid Bachman explain in their introduction to *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles*,

**“As a material, textiles have a complex and charged history in all cultures, making them an ideal field to deal with issues of gender, cultural identity, social status and allegiance, whether it be familial, cultural or subcultural.”** (16).

After creating and collecting a wide variety of colours and textures, I look for captivating images. I search through old photos in digital and paper formats, and choose a few that evoke particular memories or feelings. Most photos I use from old family albums, recent travel pictures, or current pictures I take while in the city and rural areas. I often alter these images in photo editing software to adjust colour, tone, or texture, and, when satisfied, print them onto a heat transfer medium. Then, I create a backdrop which consists of a painted, sanded canvas. The square of a neatly stretched canvas serves as a perfect balance for the very organic and sometimes chaotic assemblages. I feel secure in the structure I have built to contain, solidify and perhaps protect the artwork. I am reminded of theorist Treano Terkenli's views on how a house creates stability in our ever-changing environment,

**“...home reinforces the need for human beings to attach themselves to a context that is unquestionably theirs, so that they are secure in the changing associations with place, society, and time.”**

**(Terkenli 331).**

Many years ago, when I lived with my husband in a small, downtown Toronto apartment, we were caught in a fire. A disgruntled ex-tenant broke into the unit next to us, set a phone, and other items on the stove, lit it, and left. Soon, we found ourselves scrambling to get shoes and coats to the chaotic shouts and ear-piercing fire alarm. We ran down the third-story stairs to the exit through toxic black smoke nearly getting knocked over by anxious firemen as they rushed past us to the burning apartment. We stood outside in the cold, icy weather shivering, watching, and wondering if we were homeless.

When the fire was extinguished and we were allowed to return, we learned that no one in the building was injured, and our apartment was spared any lasting damage. Suddenly we

became aware of how tenuous safety is. Ultimately, the landlord was charged with a failure to provide safe residences. Several apartments, including ours, didn't have a fire escape. Small ledges were built outside of our windows, and, I suppose, we felt a little bit safer.

**“What it all comes down to is that we are the sum of our efforts to change who we are. Identity is no museum piece sitting stock-still in a display case, but rather the endlessly astonishing synthesis of the contradictions of everyday life.” (Galeano 125).**

The house is often interpreted as a vessel, or female, and history has shown us that the home space is indeed a gendered space. Women have been symbolically married to their houses as the term 'housewife' indicates, and the relationship of the house to gender roles and issues is inextricable. Since the Victorian era, many European and North American architects have followed a gendered space formula which kept women's spaces at the backs of homes and away from the public 'gaze' of men. Indeed the Victorian home was likened to a woman's body, and in this context we see the inextricable connection between a woman's identity and the home space (Walker 826). Whether or not this is proper is not my contention merely that it exists, and on a subconscious level many women may internalize this experience as part of their identities. My childhood home had its kitchen at the front of the house.

Women's roles within the home have changed dramatically, in large part, because of the efforts of feminists. Feminism is a concern for equality and a movement which strives to eliminate gender-bias, despite its lingering misinterpretation as a club for hairy women who dislike men. To me, being a feminist is simply to contribute towards the ethical treatment of women within a sometimes biased patriarchal system. This includes the freedom of choice.

When I was young, I was told that unless I learned to sew, I would never become a ‘proper’ woman. I had no idea why a technical skill was so intertwined with the notion of ‘woman-ness’ as most tailors in our neighbourhood were men. I remember how much I hated having to stitch endless seams in my home economics classes and wondered if I would become more womanly with each stitch. Because it was boring work and I didn’t notice any particular feelings of femininity blossoming, I quickly shed what I perceived as the restrictive shackles of cloth and sewing. I have since come to realize that while gender is a social construct, perhaps I’m not complicit in an oppressive male hierarchy for working with textiles. Using cloth in a non-traditional way, has allowed me to include aspects of my views on feminism; effectively and without compromise.

**“Buildings become objectified history: systems of classification, hierarchies and oppositions inscribed in the durability of wood, mud and brick.” (Gieryn 39).**

While this work is about the search for and asserting identity through built spaces, I also want to illustrate the transient memories we associate with a time-place-space continuum and the ideal of home. Collage lends itself well to the past because of the many pieces or bits of memories attached to an experience. Although most pieces reflect the exterior of homes and houses, I have included some interiors and the occasional piece of furniture. The interiors are unoccupied, as are the chairs, which serve as structural markers for identity and memory. In one piece “Silver Anniversary,” I have depicted two antique chairs with a small, embroidered rose in a vase between them. Feelings of vacancy, isolation, anticipation of guests, and loss or separation come to mind. Through research, I have found that furniture especially chairs, are associated with memory; more so than any other household object. (Csikszentmihalyi, Rochberg-Halton 88).

**“To Westerners, home is clearly no longer primarily a place: it is more and more a state of being, constructed on the accumulation of personal habits, thoughts, or emotional patterns of the lifeworld.” (Terkenli 332).**

Each piece in this series is a mirror which reflects aspects of my personality, community and homeland whether through material choice, process, or specific memories.

Simultaneously, all pose a question and offer an answer, and, reflect my choice to live comfortably within the ambiguity and paradox of identity and how it relates to our environment.

**“Of all the words in the German language, aufheben was Hegel’s favourite. Aufheben means both to preserve and to annul, and thus pays homage to human history, which is born as it dies and builds as it destroys.” (Galeano 124).**

On occasion, when walking in our neighbourhood, I still look at people’s houses. I steal furtive glimpses into large picture windows to see how others live. I still question the spheres of public and private spaces, and the ambiguity of safety and peril contained within the walls of a house. Our built spaces, while physical structures that protect us, semiotically interact to create and reflect our identities; identities that are shaped through gender, memory, culture and geographical location.

By using the house as a focal point for self-actualization, I have offered a few home truths and encourage the viewer to participate in this evolving narrative by challenging how they view their own homes, identities, values and communities.

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