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### Blurring the Boundary: Reinvigorating Joy in the Mundane through Juxtaposition

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# Blurring the Boundary:

## Reinvigorating Joy in the Mundane through Juxtaposition

BFA Thesis Statement

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Capstone II

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Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts  
Studio Art and Psychology major  
Printmaking Concentration

Washington University, St. Louis

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## Abstract

There is an inherent tension between interior and exterior as experienced by the human body. We live an overwhelming majority of our lives indoors, yet we are consistently compelled towards the natural world. This compulsion is necessitated by biophilia, driving a desire to be around lifelike processes.

The boundary between interior and exterior mandates that we live our lives on one side or the other at a time, never simultaneously existing both indoors and outdoors. A disparity between the spaces is therefore maintained by the boundary. This perpetual separation sets up for the perfect use of juxtaposition, which is utilized by artists to reinvigorate observational skills and guide viewers to rediscover joy in mundane experience. Visual art is the most conducive to this means of communication, as it allows the viewer to take a cyclical approach to information rather than forcing it into a standardized structure. Artists who take a critical eye to the standardization of presentation and violate the traditional methods of gallery display encourage a viewer to approach experience from a novel perspective, especially that of a domestic nature. Through a manipulation of perspective, the usual becomes unusual and mundane experience elicits a newfound sense of joy.



## Introduction

We, as human beings, experience a dichotomy in the worlds we inhabit. We walk outside and smile in the spring when tulips first burst from the ground to flaunt their vibrant colors, we enjoy a picnic in the park beneath the expansive oaks, we hammock and hike and frolic in outdoor activities because they bring a sense of active satisfaction. Yet at the end of the day, we retreat to the cozy interior of our homes. Doors are shut tight behind us to shelter from the cold, the danger, the frightening things in the dark. The EPA states that the average American spends 93% of their lifetime indoors,<sup>1</sup> bracketing outdoor excursions with ample interior time that is governed by repetition and routine. The boundary between interior and exterior separates these disparate worlds like oil and water, challenging us to live our lives on one side of the border at a time.

The tension in ephemeral experience with the natural world is toyed with by artists, who utilize a visual language of juxtaposition to evoke a new perspective on familiar spaces. By manipulating limits that define interior and exterior, artists can redefine perception of space and aid a viewer to rediscover joy in quotidian events.

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<sup>1</sup> Environmental Protection Agency Project report, 1991

## Part I: Defining Interior

The definitions of inside and outside are dependent upon the separation by a limit or barrier. One cannot exist without the occurrence of the other. However, they differ in semantics of sentiment. Inside is a shelter; it is safe, it is control, it is clarity. When manifested as a body or a house, for example, “inside” is a concrete representation of a greater concept of home or personal existence. Home can be aspects of a neighborhood, a community, a place, images and people, yet a house can be used as a symbol of home. Our individual existences, similarly, extend beyond our physical bodies. But the house and the body are known and finite. Within our physical proximity, they are representations that we have a more developed sense of control over.

In the body and the house, it becomes clear what is in and what is out. The epidermis of the body functions as the limit or barrier that as something crosses, it changes from inside to outside or vice versa. It is “an indication of where an organism ends and its environment begins.”<sup>2</sup>

With a house, the walls function as the epidermis, becoming the limit that contains an interior. The controlled shelter of the house tends to become “our corner of the world;”<sup>3</sup> a centerpiece in our life experiences. The reinforced geometrism and easily identifiable boundary of body and house create the structure for an interior. However, this setting can be construed as a variety of presentations. Images like *Homebodies*

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<sup>2</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (Capricorn books, 1934), 58.

<sup>3</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Penguin Classics, 2014), 26.

illustrate this premise, where the body and the house are represented as drawn icons that fit snugly together. [fig.1] The pairing can be interpreted as a comfortable intimacy of shelter in the safe confines of the home, but also can be approached with the notion of feeling trapped and contained in a physical or mental sense of isolation and suffocation, depending on the approach to the piece.

Though the idea of a body placed in an interior is a comfortable one, this image illustrates the potential tension residing in the tampering of a familiar image. When artists manipulate aspects such as scale, this comfort can become distorted. Now the image of house is interpreted as both a comforting shelter and a contained prison; it provides protection but also restricts mobility.

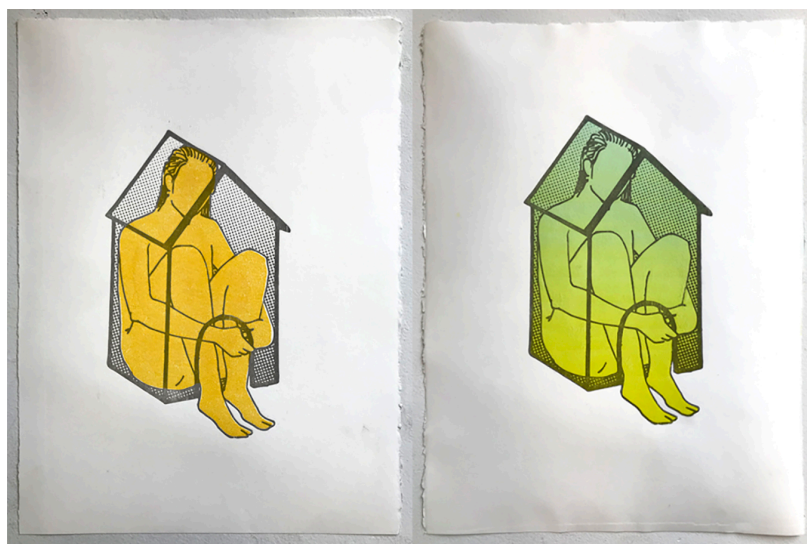


Figure 1: *Homebodies*, Taylor Fulton, 2019, laser cut woodblock print and monotype

## Part II: Defining exterior

While an interior is easy to visualize with its clearly defined limit, an exterior is difficult because it touches on the infinite. Outside is a vast void that expands away from

the boundaries of the interior. It holds the wild, the novel, and the expansive natural world. Possibility and the unknown are held in an exterior, which can be both daunting and entrancing.

Life outside of one's body and house contains essentials for survival, and elements such as eating and respiration in the body, move in and out of interiors lending to a cyclical connectivity of nature.<sup>4</sup> Natural imagery like inaccessible jungles, tall mountains, and the historic undomesticated West are often romanticized because they promise mystery and possibility. Yet civilization doesn't flock to them because there is also danger, lack of resources, and a daunting, ferocious landscape waiting in the wild. Nature lacks the societal comfort that is so established in human civilization.

Imagery like that in the print *Seeded Mountains* communicates the looming sense of outdoors that appears both intriguing and scary. [fig.2] The variety in interpretation is based on different backgrounds of comforts and perspectives. Some might see this image as a look into a peaceful collection of homes nested into the crook of tall hills, enabling the enjoyment of serene mountain life. Others might perceive the hills as intimidating and looming, crushing the homes with a nonexplicit pressure of scale.



Figure 2: Taylor Fulton, *Seeded Mountains*, Block print, 2019

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<sup>4</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 58.

### Part III: Boundaries

The very definition of interior and exterior depend on the existence of a boundary. Outside cannot exist without the contrary inside, which ceases to exist without a border to define it. In this way, all power resides with the boundary.

These boundaries are also integral in defining the structure of the spaces themselves. The orientation of walls will dictate what space is contained within them. Our skin keeps our inner bodily systems from being exposed to the outdoors, while walls encase the inner workings of a house. This is where the blurring of spaces enters into play, when artists visualize what form these portals take to upend the structures of uniformity by considering what belongs on an interior versus exterior.

### Part IV: Action as an Artistic Role

Art is a form of communication that carries meaning and particular intentions from the artist to the viewer. Standards of presentation exist to maximize the ease of communication, and so artists often look for controlled settings to display individual pieces of art. This is not exclusive to the art world; students turn in essays on the same white 8.5x11" sheets of paper, musical performances are given in concert halls, plays are performed on a stage. For the artist, this space is the gallery and the white cube setting.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (University of California Press, 2010)

Art viewing has become compartmentalized and almost restricted to inherent laws that govern presentation. The viewer expects a space, namely the gallery, to contextualize what is contained within. It almost doesn't matter what is presented on the walls, so long as it is presented in this particular context. Paintings hung 60" from the floor on an immaculate white wall has become a standard.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, art was viewed with a similar assumption. Viewers would walk into a salon with the expectation of seeing walls overgrown with framed paintings which, at the time, was the ultimate goal of an artist. [fig.3] The focus was on art as an interior, where the space gave context to the items within. In the modern and contemporary setting, "we have now reached a point where we see not the art but the space first."<sup>6</sup> Brian O'Doherty recognizes how the gallery space has grown to become a sterile white cube, as an interior meant for the sole purpose of artistic display. Artists who recognize this historical trajectory and aim to disrupt the notion of the gallery display are doing so through the manipulation of boundaries between spaces.



Figure 3: Francois Joseph Heim, *Charles X Distributing Awards to Artists Exhibiting at the Salon of 1824 at the Louvre, 1827*

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<sup>6</sup> O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 14.

With this intention, an artist is able to change the way that viewers approach the language of art. The artist allows a viewer to consider art as an experiential aspect of life rather than exalted on an isolated platform.

Duchamp was able to accomplish this varied perspective with his piece, *Mile of String*, where he wrapped a full mile of string around the exhibitions at a gallery opening in 1942. [fig.4] He understood the implication of the white cube and aimed to disrupt the perceptive experience for viewers, snapping one out of the expectations of the role of the gallery. The effect generated by this modern piece resounds across many contemporary works. Tezi Gabunia plays with experience by altering a sense of scale. Like Duchamp, she aims to disrupt the pattern of seeing the white cube space before the art itself by drawing attention to the standards by which we govern the art world. Her pieces, “Put Your Head into Gallery,” mimic the traditional gallery space but have the viewer approach them by physically inserting their head into the back side. [fig.5] The viewer is able to experience the space of a gallery as art itself, or rather, the transformation of gallery space into a new perspective.

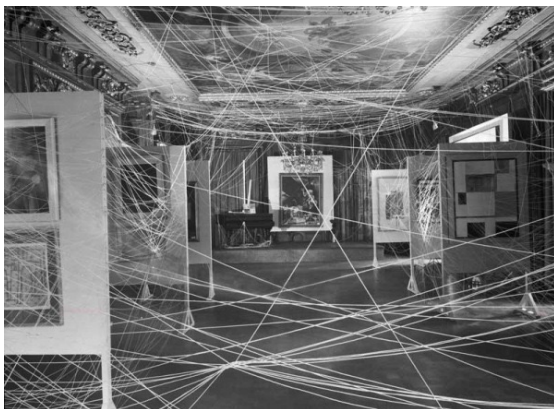


Figure 4: Duchamp, *Mile of String*, 1942



Figure 5: Tezi Gabunia, *Put Your Head into Gallery*, 2015



Zeng Mi also accomplishes this effect through his outdoor exhibition, “Stories of Some Other Day.” [fig.6] The exhibition in Hangzhou, China, aimed to “inspire conversations on art and memory with visitors and nature” by attaching 42 paintings to trees.<sup>7</sup> By placing his works outdoors, Zeng Mi facilitated a space that brought nature and the exterior into artistic conversation just as much as his painted pieces. The definition of interior established by 18<sup>th</sup> century salon paintings has been brought to an exterior in this exhibition, creating new conversations and perceptions on the compartmentalization of art and lack of integration into what we experience as life.



Figure 6: Zeng Mi, *Stories of Some Other Day*, 2014. Photos by Xinhua.



Figure 7: Taylor Fulton, *Inside / Outside*, 2018

The piece *Inside / Outside* by Taylor Fulton also challenges this notion of experiencing art outside of the standard white cube. [fig.7] In it, small landscape paintings pay homage to the salons but are glued on the ceiling and hidden away inside long vertical tubes of paper. An opening in the paper on the ground allows space for a single head to be inserted into the tube, requiring the viewer to lie down on the ground in order to view the paintings hidden inside. Like Gabunia, Fulton manipulates scale to alter a viewer’s experience. Both artists reference the white cube as an interior inside an

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<sup>7</sup> China Daily. “*Outdoor Exhibition Shows Latest from Zeng Mi*” chinadaily.com



interior, which naturally makes the original interior of the gallery into an exterior. Also in conversation with Zeng Mi, *Inside / Outside* allows a viewer to experience outdoor imagery, but only through a carefully curated interior. Rather than bringing an interior to an exterior, this piece contains the wild outdoors inside controlled white columns.

Distorting the definition of outside and inside can also be done by simply bringing elements of the wild into a controlled setting. The gallery is the epitome of control. “A gallery is constructed along laws as vigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light.”<sup>8</sup> Sometimes, the art itself is able to overpower these “unshadowed, white, clean, artificial”<sup>9</sup> spaces through use of natural imagery. Monet’s *Water Lilies*, in the Musee de l’Orangerie, Paris, overwhelm the viewer with their expansive nature and turn the elliptical room into a vacuum of movement and color. [fig.8] The paintings expand across the entire wall, so that the white cube is dissolved and the viewer feels fully immersed in the image. Monet makes the viewer feel aspects of an expansive exterior space, while retaining placement in the safe and controlled indoors.



Figure 8: Claude Monet, *Water lilies: Morning with Willows*, 1918-26



Figure 9: Mia Pearlman, *ONE*, 2012, Installation at the Smithsonian.

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<sup>8</sup> O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

While Monet's peaceful depiction of the outdoors feels extremely docile and controlled, other artists reference the untamed wild and bring it into an interior in a way that appears almost threatening. Mia Pearlman's cut paper installations bring the sensation of the wild into a composed space. [fig. 9] The arcades filled with paper reference portals that allow for the fusion of the natural exterior world with the discipline of an interior gallery.

The same kind of action is represented in Taylor Fulton's *Meditation with Fish*, which demonstrates an interior being overrun by exterior life. [fig.10] Plants fill the corner of a room, leaving trails of dirt in and around a bathtub. The wildest aspect, live fish, are encased in layers limiting them to suffocating interiors. Plastic bottles placed in a bathtub inside a room constrain the wild from returning to its mother, rather than sheltering it from the "implicit dangers" of the outdoors.



Figure 10: Taylor Fulton, *Meditation with Fish*, Installation/performance, 2020

The visual language is one that can be universally understood, and it is the role of an artist to utilize it to challenge the defined notions of interior and exterior by manipulating the boundary between them. The contemporary notion of the gallery is built upon the fabrication and dismantling of the white cube over time, and

contemporary artists are very much in conversation with the historical precedent. By manipulating aspects of interior and exterior to comment on the nature of perception in space, artists can bring a new way of looking to spaces that one has grown so accustomed to.

## Part V: Significance of Blurring the Boundary

The artist, as one who manipulates the barrier, holds an incredible amount of power that governs how we experience space. The significance of this action lies in the joy that is brought to our quotidian lives through the juxtaposition of mundane events.

It is difficult to conceptualize the strange tension that hangs in our desire to exist indoors versus outdoors. That fact that “human identity and personal fulfillment somehow depend on our relationship with nature”<sup>10</sup> is a sentiment that resonates within most of us yet is hard to explicitly define. Kellert and Wilson, in their *Biophilia Hypothesis*, illuminate how there is an “existence of a biologically based, inherent human need to affiliate with life and lifelike processes,”<sup>11</sup> which helps one understand the instinctive desires to be around nature. However, our actions are perpetually limited to a majority of interior experiences.

Our need for shelter naturally delegates houses as the central hub of activity. Because of the economic advantages of living in larger groups, the human race has

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Kellert and Edward Wilson, *The Biophilia Hypothesis* (Washington, D.C: Island Press, 1993), 34.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

grown to cluster in urban societies. Houses are geometric so as to fit multiple on a street, and apartments are stacked on top of each other to maximize utility and space usage.

As this central hub, the space we call home tends to be experienced in relatively identical quotidian movements. A multitude of domestic repetitive actions tend to focus on eating, keeping ourselves clean, and sleeping in the same places, which tend to be perceived as normal and subsequently mundane. We eat without thinking, clean because the chore needs to get done, and mindlessly navigate hallways and stairs as places of transition.

This mindless interaction with space and activities can become more enjoyable if we are able to view it through a lens that allows for more present observation and experience. This can most easily be done through juxtaposition. By placing an object into an environment that it doesn't usually reside in, attention is brought to both the object and the environment. This is because an object out of its original context and in a new one disrupts the schema that we have formed around the object or setting.<sup>12</sup>

According to psychological principles, more salient objects are also more likely to be remembered more clearly. In the context of the home, many domestic activities can be expected. Washing the dishes or walking down the hallway are done without much thought, but if taken out of context, can appear more important.

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<sup>12</sup> Rudolph Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*. (University of California Press, 1954)

The same can be inferred in the white cube gallery space, as art itself can be incredibly diverse yet still be experienced in the same formats, prompted by the inherent laws of the gallery. Nature, however, is something that isn't usually expected in these sorts of spaces. When the natural and domestic world are brought into contact, even the most common activities can become reinvented.

Being more conscious of the ways we observe these spaces can make living in them and navigating through them more interesting and enjoyable. By rupturing the boundary between interior and exterior and therefore using juxtaposition to make aspects of the interior or exterior more salient, we can improve our interactions with the spaces we spend time with. Intentional observation evokes a newfound enjoyment of mundane spaces, which is best depicted through visual art.

Not only does rupturing these boundaries through art satiate our biophilia, it allows us to discover a newfound appreciation for experiences that we might traditionally describe as boring or mundane. An example of an experience that can be heightened through this manipulated boundary is the action of having a cup of tea. By using art, one can transform this experience from one of the everyday into one of exceptional peaceful meditation. Taylor Fulton does this in her installation piece, *Tea*



Figure 11: Taylor Fulton, *Tea Table*, Installation of handmade mugs, resin top table, paper, tea leaves, various printmaking techniques, 2019

*Table*. [fig.11] This piece invites participants to sit down at a constructed table and experience a cup of tea with new eyes. Eating and drinking becomes intentional. One is present and engaged either in a solitary practice of thought and meditation or with another individual. Handmade mugs, a decorated resin table, and walls adorned with prints further intentionality and consideration in transferring aspects of the natural outside world to an interior.

Art is cyclical, unlike written or spoken language which explicitly dictates the way one navigates through it. A sentence begins with a capital letter and carries attention across the page left to right until halted by the period. Visual imagery, however, allows

one to approach a piece and explore salient aspects before meandering to elements that reveal themselves with time. The eye can circularly travel across an image, allowing for attention to be commanded by the viewer. Pieces like *Inverted*, which aims to communicate the tumultuous relationship between our experience with interior and exterior is able to comment on this type of connection without dictating the way a viewer must read their experience. [fig.12] It communicates a potential sense of wanderlust or peacefulness that resonates both in the repetitive nature of printmaking and also in personal romanticized ideas of mountainscapes, while also conveying ominous aspects of the threatening outdoors and wild.

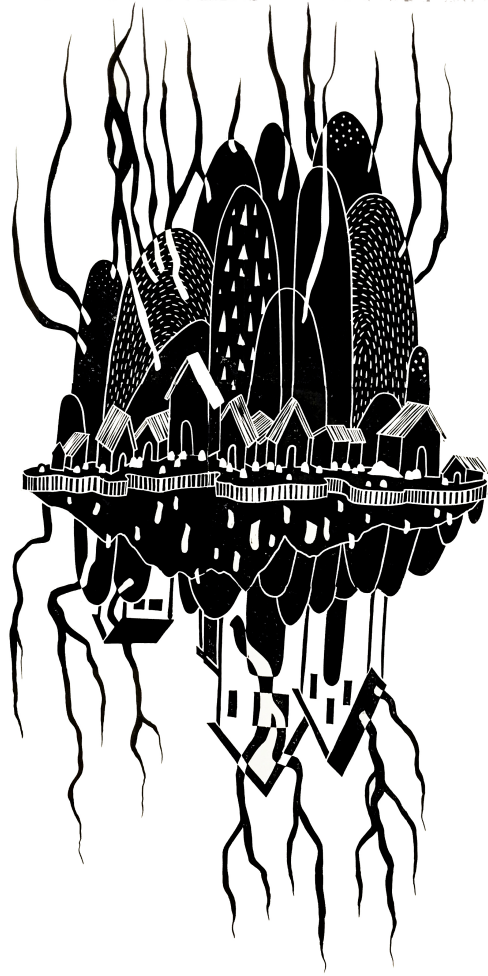


Figure 12: Taylor Fulton, Linoleum print, 18x24", 2020

## Conclusion

Art can elicit joy in the mundane, which is done by rupturing the boundary between interior and exterior. The materialized juxtaposition makes the usual, unusual, and allows us to bring more intent observation to it. Through this presence and observation, one can command a more holistic enjoyment of daily experience.



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