

*Anna Dawson*  
MFA 2022

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree Master of Fine Art in the Department of Furniture Design of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

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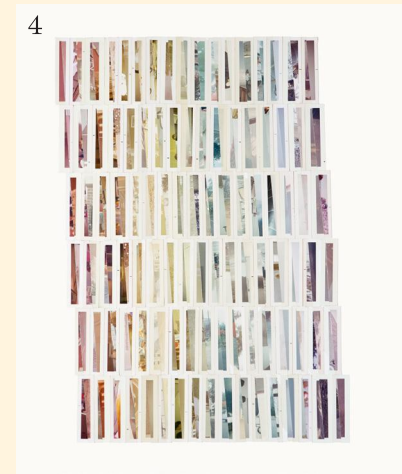
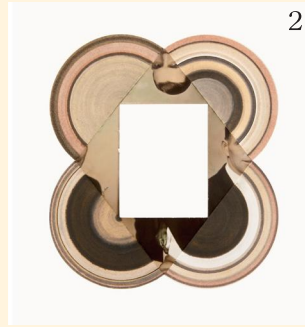
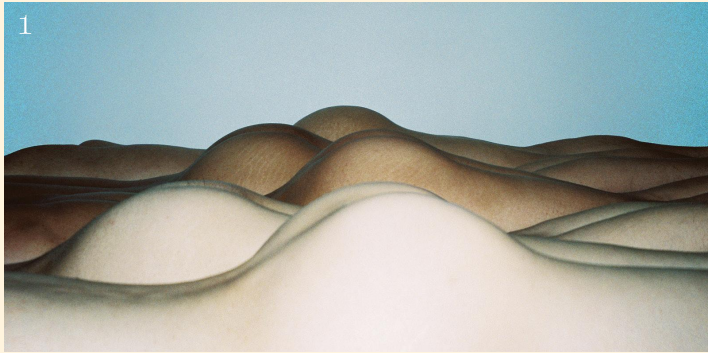
Immersed in the sun's light, my body feels saturated, during a long day at the beach. When it begins to cool down and the day inverts into night, I watch the sun set on the ocean horizon. Bart Lootsma, the dutch architectural theorist describes this experience of light as an immersion and inversion. Intangible, yet something to look at and something to submerge in.

This thesis is a personal journey, and an open exploration of the aesthetic and experience of furniture objects in everyday living. It is a collection of thought processes, observations, and speculations. Sometimes it's just a note to myself.

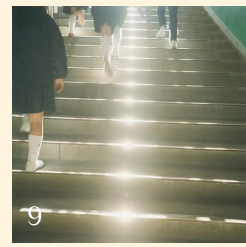
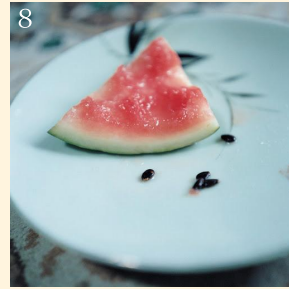
The objects presented explore the thresholds between private and public space, and the reasons I cross them again and again. It is a large and puffy chair, rooted in its place, pleading my body to rest, recharge, even stay for awhile. It is a bag, hat, and keys hanging on the wall, ready to travel with me to school. It is two seats at a cafe where I enjoy a friend. It is a bright, warm light bringing me in welcoming me home.

1. Untitled, Ren Hang
2. Clover, Joe Rudko, 2018
3. Eclipses I-IX, Rachele Bussieres, 2017
4. Rainbow Lean, Joe Rudko, 2019
5. Dinner Prep At Home, Anna Dawson, 2020
6. Untitled, Kensuke Koike, 2019
7. Untitled, Ren Huang
8. Untitled from *Cui Cui*, Rinko Kawauchi, 2005
9. Untitled from *Illuminance*, Rinko Kawauchi, 2011
10. Construction on the Highline, Anna Dawson , 2019
11. Anna and Tommy, Anna Dawson 2019
12. Prospect, Chris Engman
13. Family Tree, Zhang Huan, 2001
14. View from My Tent, Anna Dawson, 2017
15. Tourist Shadow, Anna Dawson, 2017





My friend Kerr is here! And it feels like my old life and new life are merging. We used to work in the darkroom all day together. We would listen to the ambient sounds of Toro y Moi, fumble with film in the dark, check each others' exposures, and complain about bad developer and other dumb things related to darkroom processing. We learned photography as a craft. It was hands on, complicated, and delicate. When we moved into digital processing, it became about the achievement of sharpness and optimizing work flow through immediate feedback. Making photographs was fast, less hands on, and I felt less connected to it. I did come to love digital photography in its own way, but never let go of the darkroom. Photography became more about content and theory and less about material, process, and iteration.





fucking beautiful!

YEP.  
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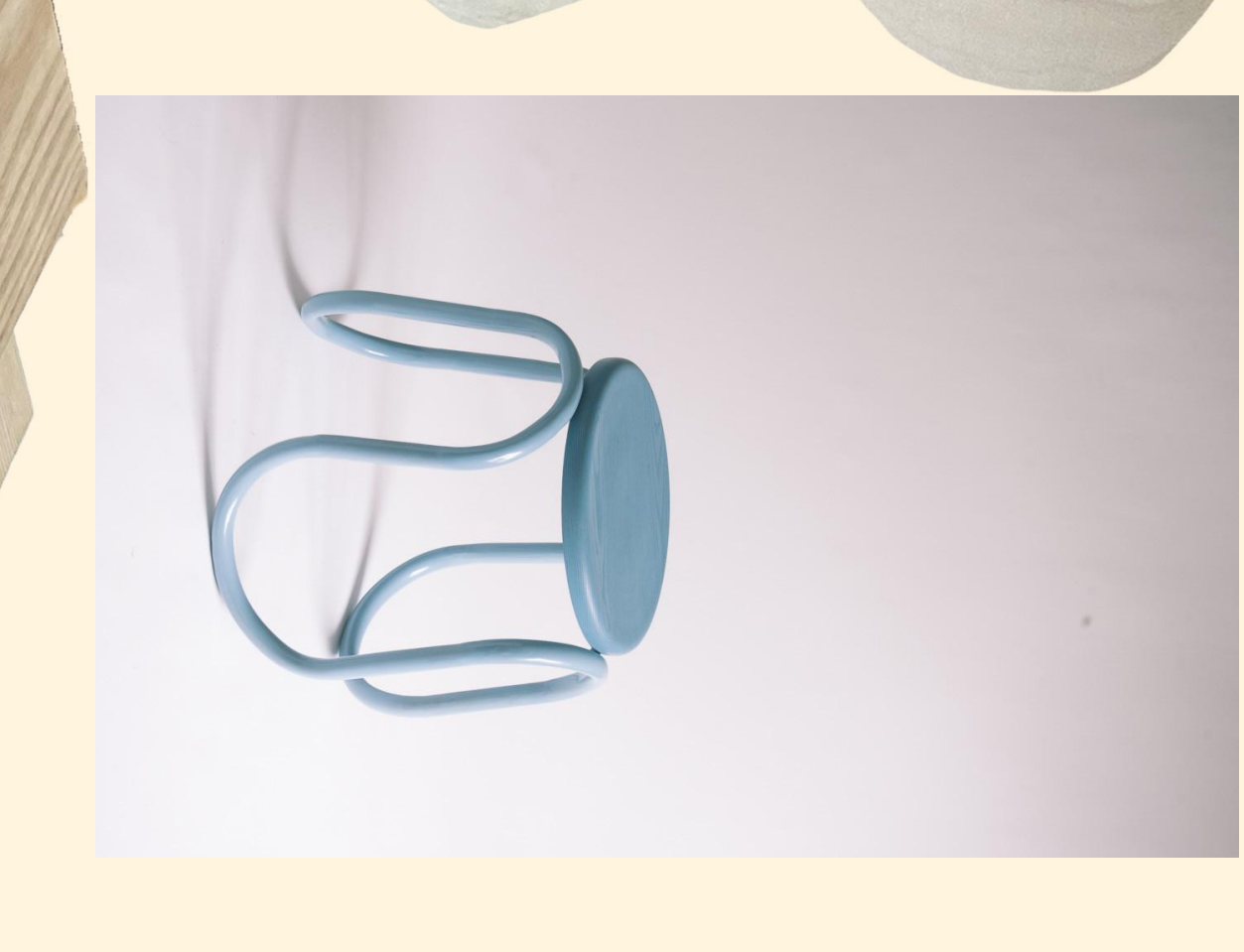




As a kid, I had a step stool with my name on it. Each letter was a wooden block painted in a different color that slipped into place like a puzzle piece.

My stool was fairly narrow because my name “Anna” is short.

My brother Tommy had a longer stool with his full name “Thomas” and my sister Madeleine had an even longer stool. All three lived in the bathroom to assist us in reaching the sink, to sit and tie our shoes, and to leave clothes and toys on. They were steps, seats, surfaces, and even block puzzles.



A stool's lack of imposed function allows it to be whatever it needs to be. It doesn't quite have the surface area of a table, or the incentive of a chair, but can be used as either. It lets me prop my feet up after a long day, place a stack of books, sit and tie my shoes, or even lift a plant up closer to the window.





As an owner of knock off versions of Aalto's Stool 60, I recall conveniently pulling the stool up to my small dining table to fit more guests. After, I would bring the stool back to the couch to use it as a footrest or prop my computer on it to watch Netflix. Other days I would bring the stool into my room so I could sit at my dresser like a desk to write my grad school application for this very program.

Stool 60 was originally designed by Alvar and Aino Aalto, but I came across it through an Ikea version. This stool as an object has a legacy beyond its original designers. Its lack of identity is actually a symptom of the design's success, reaching a "Super Normal" status. Naoto Fukasawa describes this as "the quietly seen unseen, a refreshing surprise that awakens the person who had thought of looking for something obviously special in design by instead reconfirming what we already hold important." Aalto's stool is normal in a contemporary context but has aesthetically become mundane. In that way, Fukasawa would say that is the design's strength and continuous success.

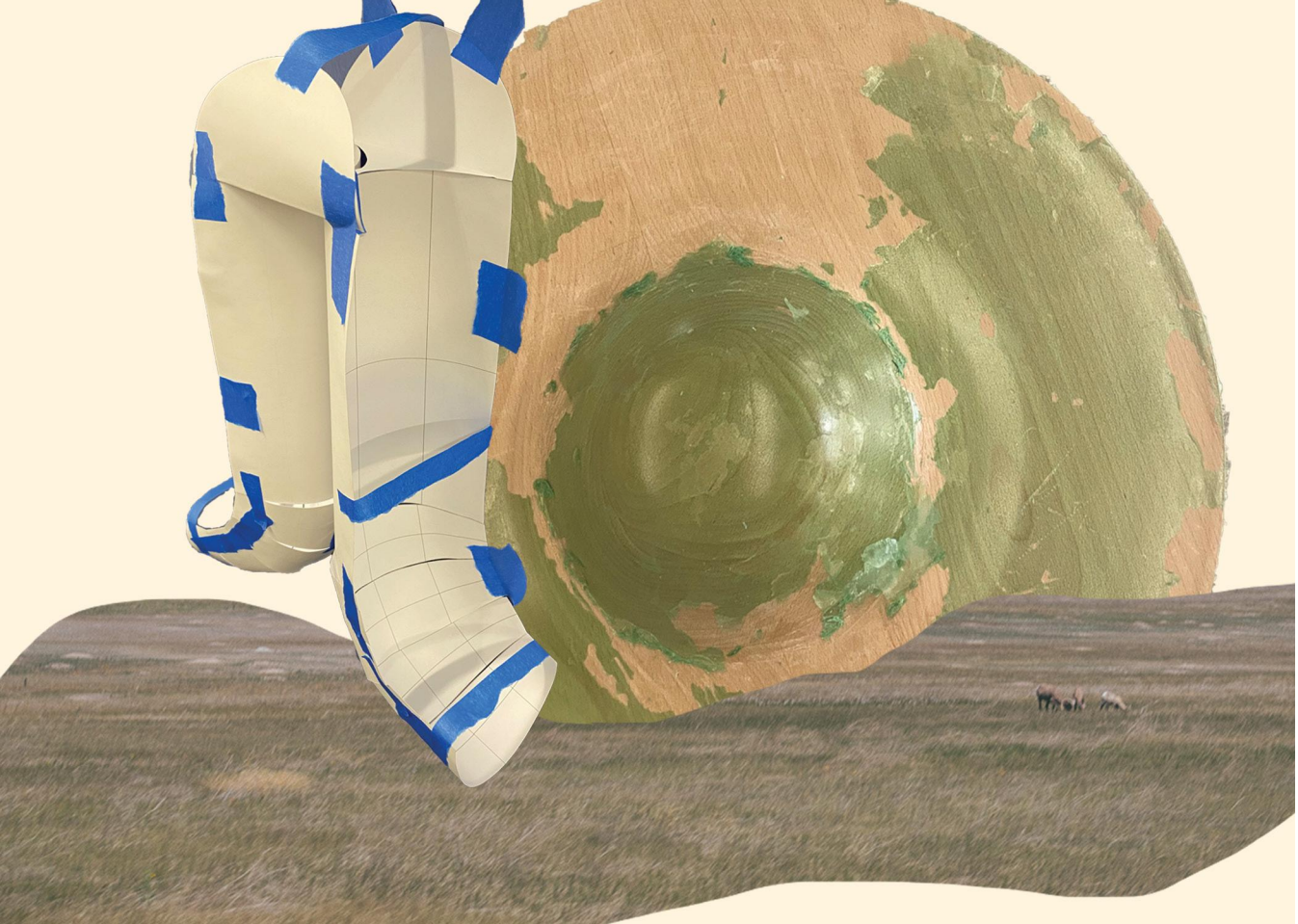


Having lived with knock-off versions, I agree with Fukasawa and also highlight that this stool's lack of identity allows it to exist, and in any type of residential or public space.

Jasper Morrison describes Super Normal as also an ode to a history of objects and function. He says, "The Super Normal object is the result of a long tradition of evolutionary advancement in the shape of everyday things, not attempting to break with the history of form but rather trying to summarize it, knowing its place in the society of things." Morrison emphasizes an object's livability and how it contributes to an experience functionally.

Artek describes Stool 60 as "elemental". Its design is so basic. Aino designed iterations as chairs and tables now part of the larger L leg collection. Stool 60's original design is the basis for many other functional structures. Aalto speaks to the idea of a standard object when saying it "should not be a finished product, but on the contrary be made so that man and the individual laws controlling him supplement its form." He emphasizes the importance of having as many varying and unique experiences a person can have with an object. Stools invite specificity through personal use and become local through interaction.





There can be no space, for space exists only when it is opened up, animated, invested with rhythm and expanded by a correlation between objects and a transcendence of their functions in this new structure.”

Baudrillard reminds me of a stool that was not formally a stool, but a debarked and finished tree stump. Its scale and proportions were of a standard stool and therefore took on that role. It always sat to the left of my mom’s office chair next to her desk. It served the many functions of a stool: at times a secondary surface for papers, a foot rest after a long day, and a perch where my siblings and I would sit and watch curiously over her shoulder as she navigated her computer.

This little stump stool was really a piece of furniture that defined the space as hers alone. With the work desk and chair as my mom’s more permanent personal space, the stump stool was for a momentary sitting place where we were never meant to hang out very long. It was the only part of our house that was just hers, and when she allowed us in we knew we were guests in her world and understood our place on her stump.







I love the feeling of a saturated sponge so full of liquid, heavy, and overflowing. The satisfaction comes from squeezing the water out, until it returns to a light foam.

Stretching his arms out above his head, his red shirt catches the light. The glow saturates the bright color as if it were vibrating with energy.

After a long day at the beach, my whole body is warm. I don't even notice how burnt my skin is until I return indoors. My skin and body feel saturated with the sun. This is when my body feels the most like itself.

When I get into the shower and let the hot water soak into my hair, I find myself swimming in my own ruminations. The shower is oddly a safe space to think. I can't be distracted or bothered. It's just me, my soap, and my brain saturated with thoughts.



They were all looking out and up at the large dune ahead of them. It was a monumental pile of sand with people scrambling up it. Their clothes like little saturated dots of color slowly moving through the big beige mass.


When you don't expect it, a bright orange cone appears in your car lights. Its reflection an immediate sign of what is to come. I get so mad when I see those saturated orange cones on Main St.

Its been a while since I have been in traffic. I forgot what it's like to sit on the highway in darkness at 5 pm, slowly crawling my way back home. The sea of brake lights becomes more saturated, the darker it gets. I feel red.

I finally walk to the entrance of my house. I can't get my keys fast enough to open the door. I step in, kick my shoes off, and take a deep breath. My body feels heavy and tired, like a saturated sponge.







Dear Tywen,

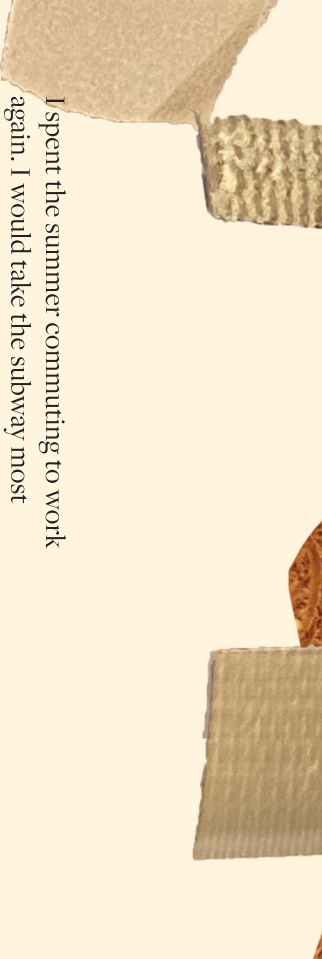
Recently I decided that I don't want to believe in absolutes.

I remember in my intro to photography class in undergrad I brought in a photo that I had printed in the darkroom with strips of paper on top. The final images were abstract, unclear, not really anything at all. And our professor Charly, asked the class if they thought it was a photograph. That started a long debate within the class about what a photograph is. Someone said it's made from a camera. Someone else said it was a document. I honestly didn't care. What it really was, was a piece of paper. Okay maybe that's the only absolute I have in my practice.

At the end of the semester, I presented about work with an aesthetic informed by ambiguity. That might not be the right word, but I felt when merging the industrial aesthetic of modern architecture with softness in texture and forms I was creating a visual language. As I wrote in my presentation notes, "I like that the objects aren't really quite the thing that they are referencing, and are sometimes confusing and unknown when you first approach them." I still feel this way after a long two weeks of letting my body and mind recover from the semester. I hope to continue to keep making things that are a little confusing and ambiguous when approaching them, but grounded in function and how they fit into living.

I think as a people, we become stuck and wanting to know, and know exactly what a thing is. And sometimes that's great, it can help create the ends of a spectrum, and sometimes I find it creates sides and division. That might be the fatigue talking.



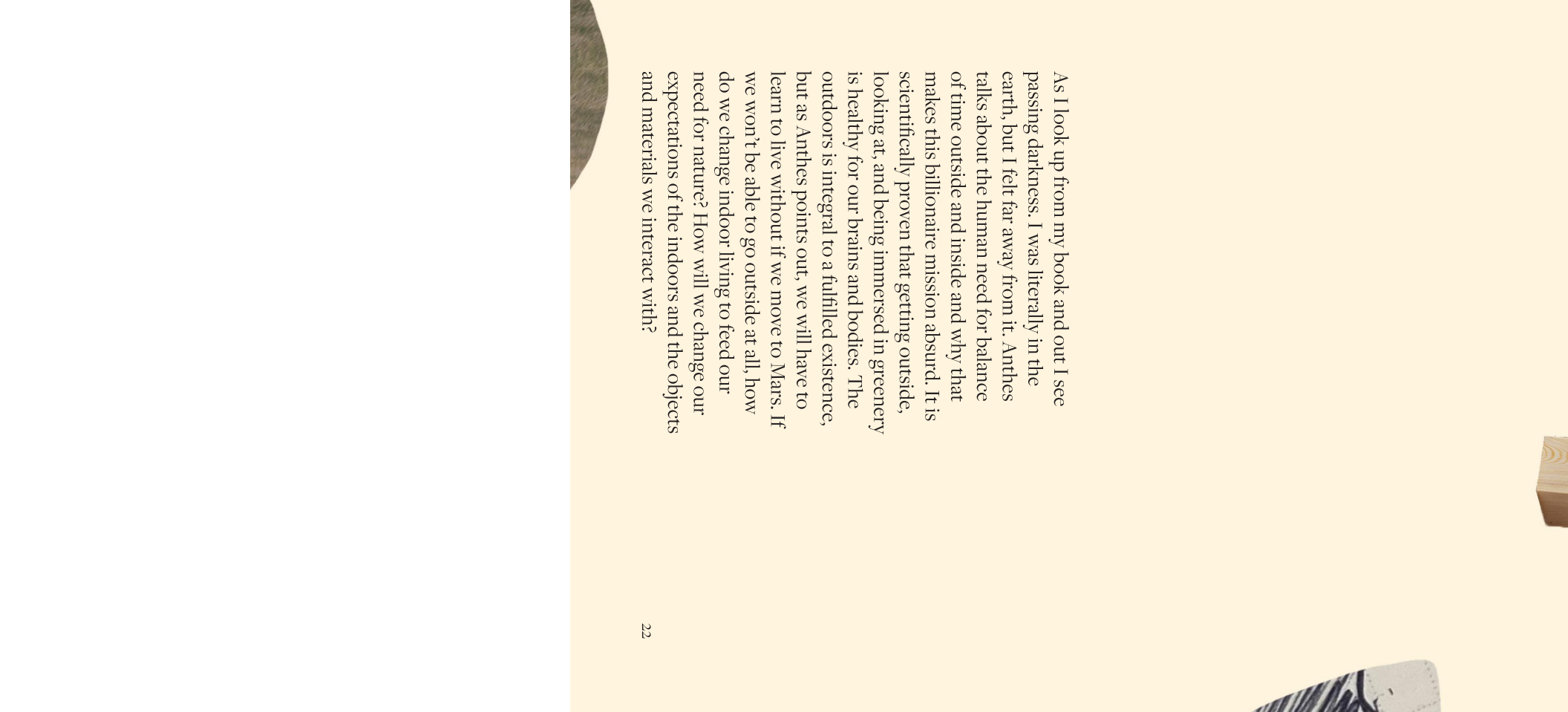


I spent the summer commuting to work again. I would take the subway most mornings and do what most others were doing on the train - sit and read a book. I had recently picked up 'The Great Indoors' by Emily Anthes, a book that started with the statement, "Modern humans are essentially an indoor species. North Americans and Europeans spend roughly 90 percent of our time inside." As I read this I was sitting inside of a metal box underground taking me from one indoor space to the next.

It had been over a year since I had commuted in person to a job. Besides being in school, there was and continues to be a global pandemic. My time spent indoors probably increased from an astonishing 90% to a devastating 99% especially when I worked from home. I saw people re-evaluate their home space and upgrade furniture, buy more plants, and in drastic cases move to bigger houses and even a different city. Living in a one bedroom apartment in downtown Seattle, I craved escape. As I wallowed indoors, Bezos was planning his mission to colonize and bring our world to Mars.







As I look up from my book and out I see passing darkness. I was literally in the earth, but I felt far away from it. Anthes talks about the human need for balance of time outside and inside and why that makes this billionaire mission absurd. It is scientifically proven that getting outside, looking at, and being immersed in greenery is healthy for our brains and bodies. The outdoors is integral to a fulfilled existence, but as Anthes points out, we will have to learn to live without if we move to Mars. If we won't be able to go outside at all, how do we change indoor living to feed our need for nature? How will we change our expectations of the indoors and the objects and materials we interact with?



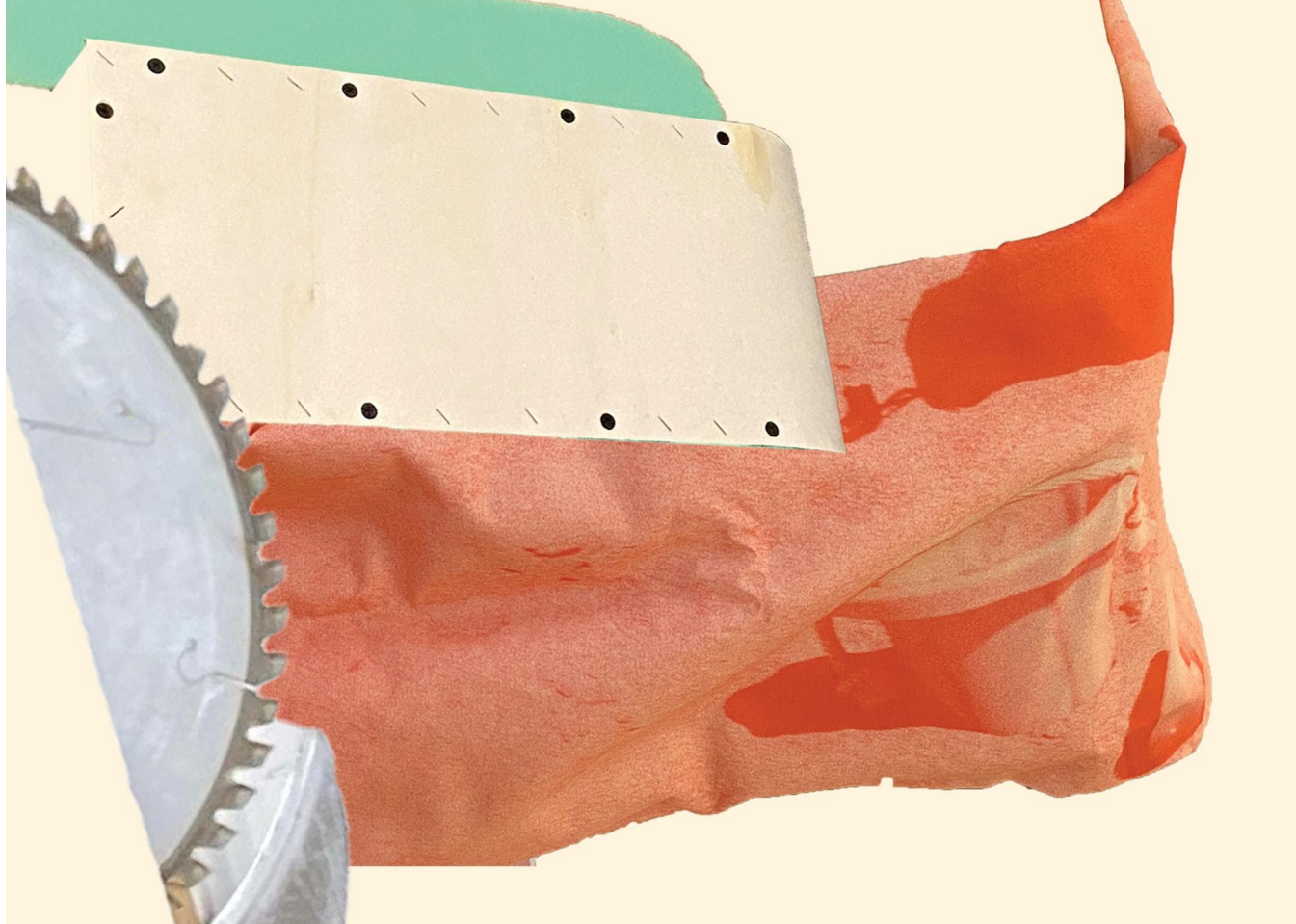
In my own practice, I do not see my furniture making it to Mars. I am fascinated by speculative space living, and foresee a need to drastically change our interiors. There will be new opportunity to understand space and place through materiality.

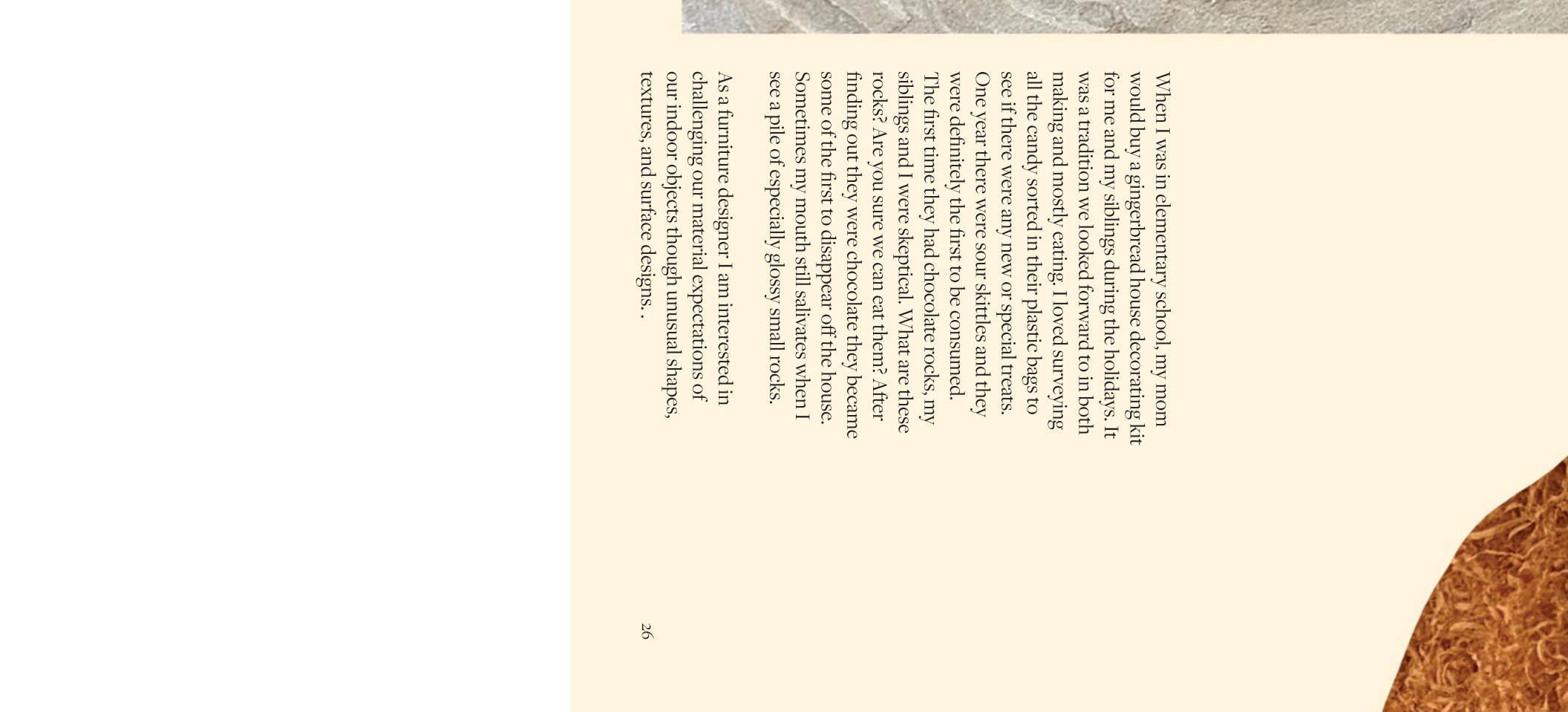
Will pictures of nature be some of our last evidence of Earth's environment? Will we look at them and think, "I just want to be immersed in that."

Soft branches are broken up by blue sky, reminding me to look up once in a while. The endless floor of tall grass moving fluidly in concert painting the earth in yellows and greens. The deep blue shadow in a foldable bag suggests a bright sun and hot summer day. Swells of red waver in and out of focus like the end of a calm morning. All of these feelings experienced in nature are captured by the details of photographs.









When I was in elementary school, my mom would buy a gingerbread house decorating kit for me and my siblings during the holidays. It was a tradition we looked forward to in both making and mostly eating. I loved surveying all the candy sorted in their plastic bags to see if there were any new or special treats.

One year there were sour skittles and they were definitely the first to be consumed.

The first time they had chocolate rocks, my siblings and I were skeptical. What are these rocks? Are you sure we can eat them? After finding out they were chocolate they became some of the first to disappear off the house. Sometimes my mouth still salivates when I see a pile of especially glossy small rocks.

As a furniture designer I am interested in challenging our material expectations of our indoor objects through unusual shapes, textures, and surface designs. .



This is



Challenging material expectations I think can lead us to eventually change our expectations all together. And this would lead us to re-evaluate our expectations of our interior spaces and our habits as we adapt our ways of living. Re-introducing nature and natural materials in new and synthetic ways helps continue the design ethos of bringing the outside in.

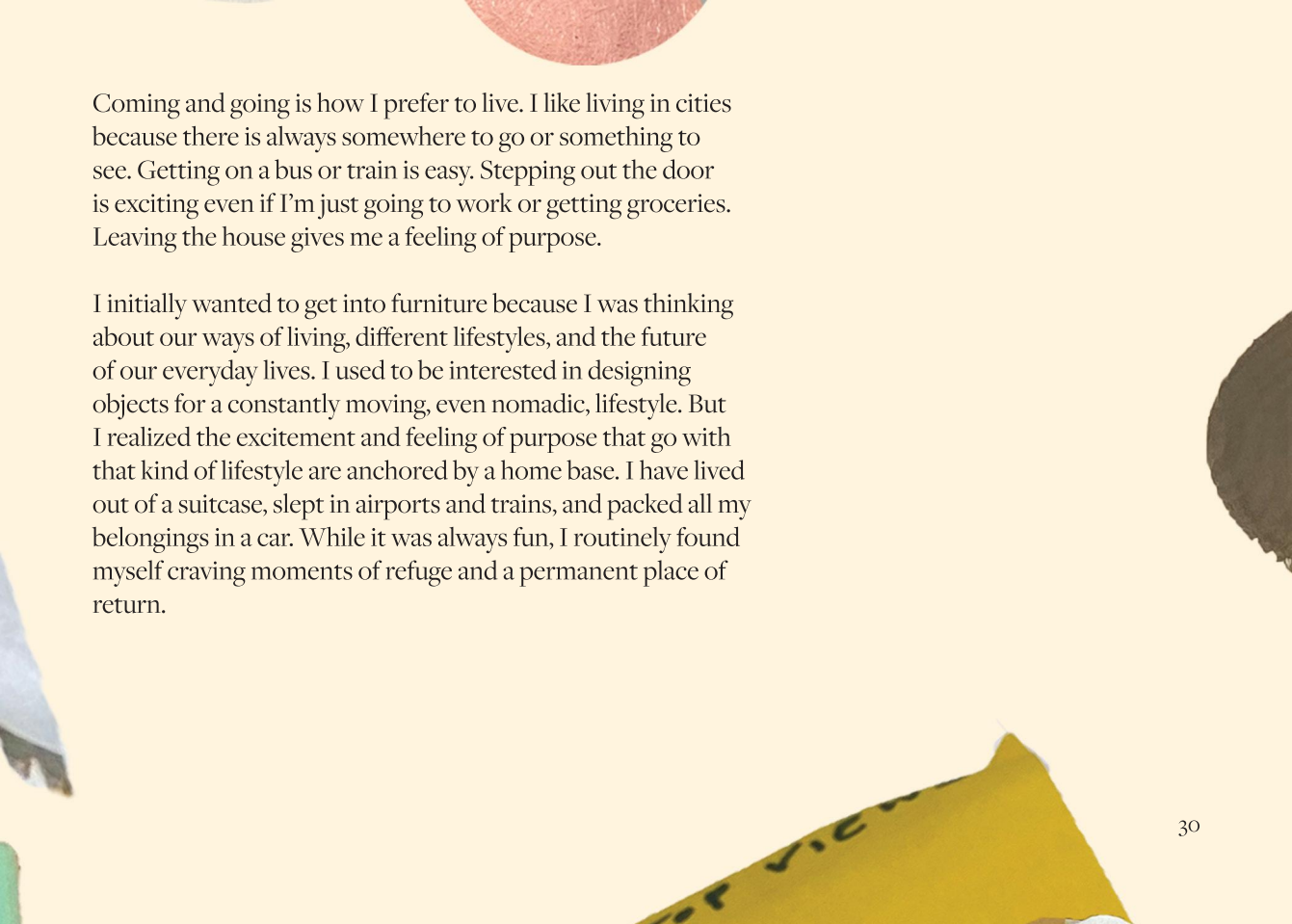


A natural feeling environment connects us to larger context of earth and settles our minds and bodies. Although Front Design's intentions are not focused on mars, their practice pushes a cultural change through with our interactions with objects.

Like the idea of soft wood, upholstered red sand alludes to a new and maybe martian landscape. Its something unfamiliar to look at but familiar in feel.





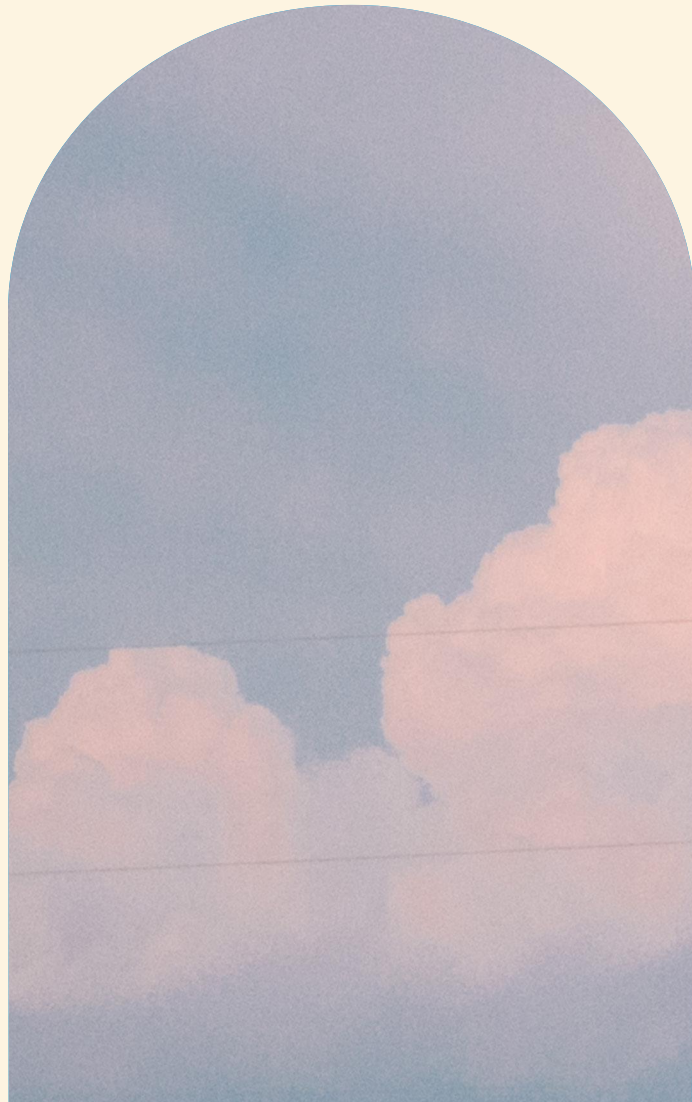


Coming and going is how I prefer to live. I like living in cities because there is always somewhere to go or something to see. Getting on a bus or train is easy. Stepping out the door is exciting even if I'm just going to work or getting groceries. Leaving the house gives me a feeling of purpose.

I initially wanted to get into furniture because I was thinking about our ways of living, different lifestyles, and the future of our everyday lives. I used to be interested in designing objects for a constantly moving, even nomadic, lifestyle. But I realized the excitement and feeling of purpose that go with that kind of lifestyle are anchored by a home base. I have lived out of a suitcase, slept in airports and trains, and packed all my belongings in a car. While it was always fun, I routinely found myself craving moments of refuge and a permanent place of return.







In the middle of a large green wall that faces a large green marble set, an archway is illuminated. In walks actor, poet, and activist Saul Williams. Iconically Virgil Abloh has used arches as portals for his runway models to emerge from. In the Louis Vuitton Fall-Winter 2021 show, the arch appears bright and monumental, as if the models are walking in from the beyond. As the show proceeds, new characters enter, only suggesting a more eclectic world on the other side of the arch.

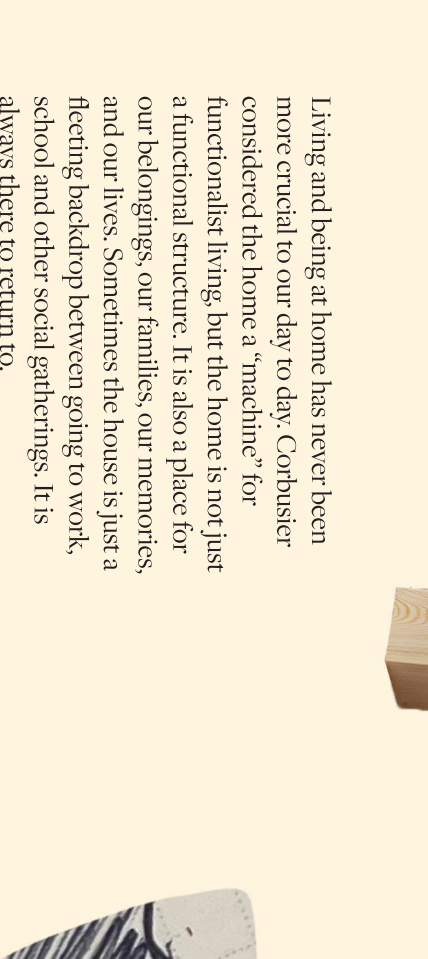
A skyline walks out and turns the corner. The separation between a place and person are united on the runway. The imagined world comes to life as it crosses the threshold.

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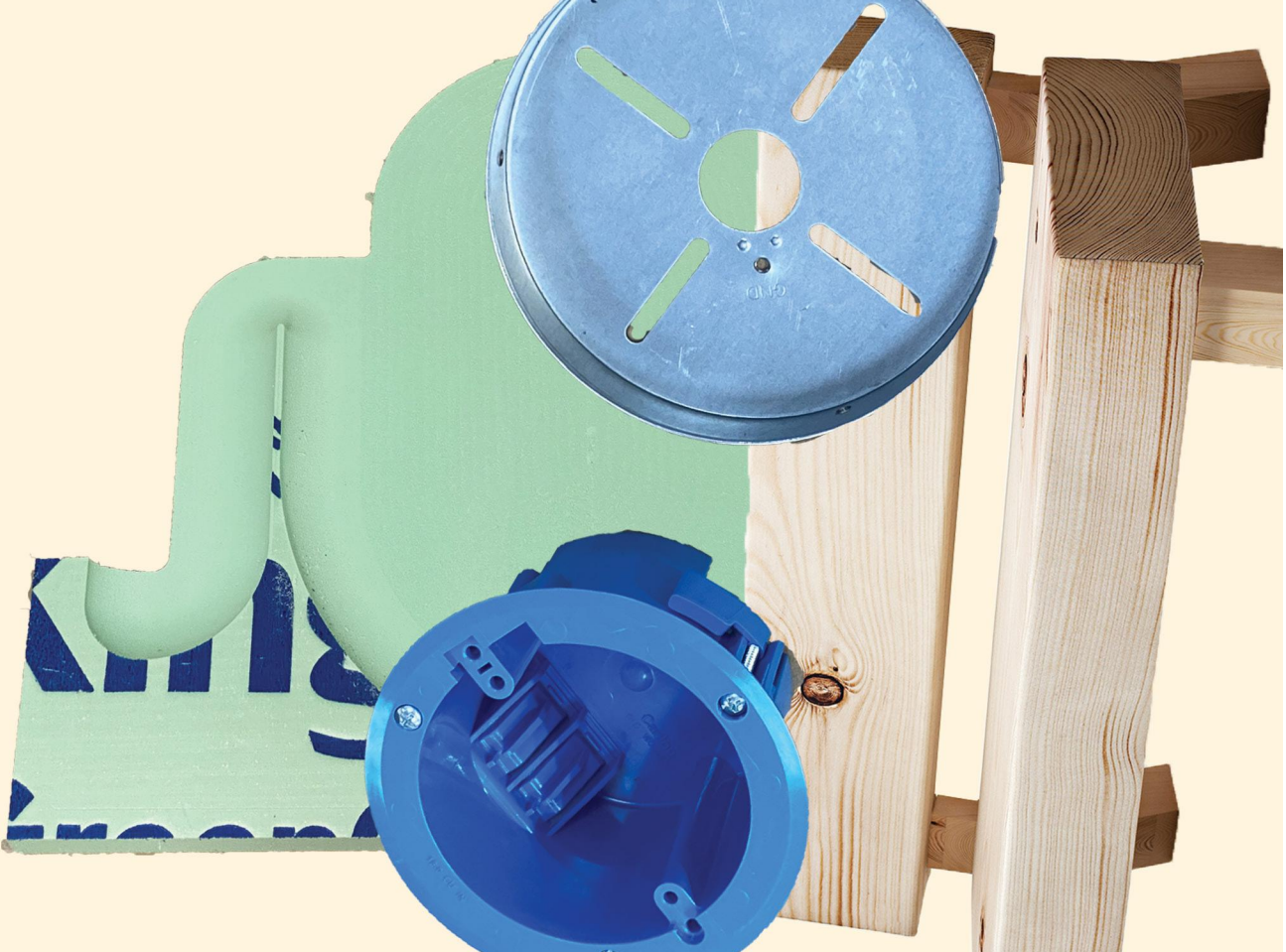


Living and being at home has never been more crucial to our day to day. Corbuser considered the home a “machine” for functionalist living, but the home is not just a functional structure. It is also a place for our belongings, our families, our memories, and our lives. Sometimes the house is just a fleeting backdrop between going to work, school and other social gatherings. It is always there to return to.

During the past two years of COVID, home became the safe space, the office, school, restaurant, movie theater, gym, and at times the cubicle we were trapped in. Home didn't get to be home. It made many people including myself re-evaluate my living space and how I could change it to improve my well being. So many others started buying plants, decorating walls, and updating furniture.

There was a sense of personal world building during isolation. So how do I want to imagine living now?

My day to day now resembles an adapted version of how I lived only a few years ago, but my outlook has shifted. In recognizing home as a place of return, I continue to crave departure paired with refuge. Home is continuously changing, but I think the items in it stay the same. A chair for resting the body, a bag for roaming, a coat for protection, and a light to find my way back to.



Dear Anna,

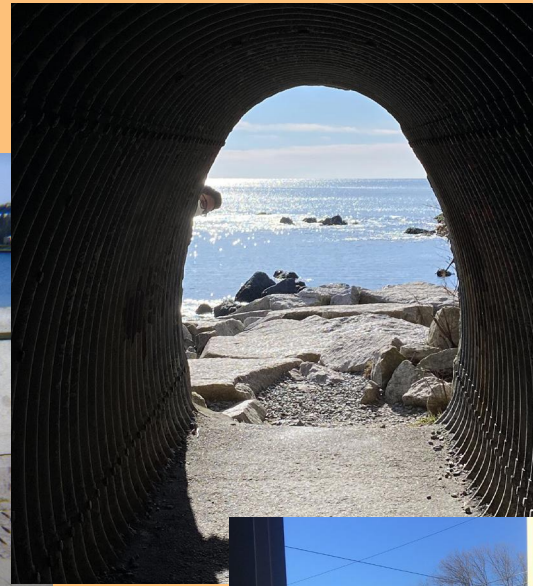
Some people have a high opinion of their own opinions. They also have an opinion on things that they know at the very surface level. It's the Dunning Kruger effect. People who have strong opinions and feel like they know a subject in entirety tend to be beginners in the field and tend to know the least. On the other hand, very smart people become very opinionated not because they don't know anything on a subject, but instead because they become too good at cherry picking data that already supports their biases, and their research tends to compound and reinforce what they already believe.

Which is to say, I've become slightly jaded as well to people who have strong opinions because they are likely to not know the subject at all, or they know the subject too well and they have some deeply entrenched biases. Not to say that experts should not be listened to, but any wise expert, and the experts worth listening to, will approach their topic with ambiguity. Some of the experts I respect the most:

Don't have an opinion on everything, and don't pretend to  
Can change their mind on stuff as they learn more about it  
To quote Ned, who is quoting Star Wars: "Only a Sith deals in absolutes."

While the high intensity environment of a MFA might not be conducive to ambiguity, I think ambiguity is a powerful and under-appreciated tool in the real world. If you keep iterating on your idea of ambiguity I think you'll find some surprising things.





I come from the sunny sweater land of San Francisco, California. The sunsets are incredible, the sky is especially blue, and winter fog is very mild in comparison to parts of the world like Scandinavia. When I landed in Copenhagen, I expected winter, but I wasn't prepared to experience the long term darkness that plagues the northern hemisphere.

There is a lot I can learn from the Danes, especially my light-sweater-brain. They might have it all figured out. They created bike highways for commuters, universal education and healthcare, and a big culture for sweets. I found that despite the harsh winter, people in Copenhagen still biked to work, drank their cappuccinos outside, and led happy lives. Probably more happy than most in super sunshine land California.

Hygge is a word that doesn't exist in the English language. It's sometimes translated to coziness, warmth, and close friendship. It is related and can encompass all of those things, but it's really a culture of living. Bringing people into your home and sharing your life with them in close intimate ways. Danish culture focuses on happiness as communal instead of individual. Rather than wellness as a personal journey, hygge encourages people to come together to enrich each others' lives.



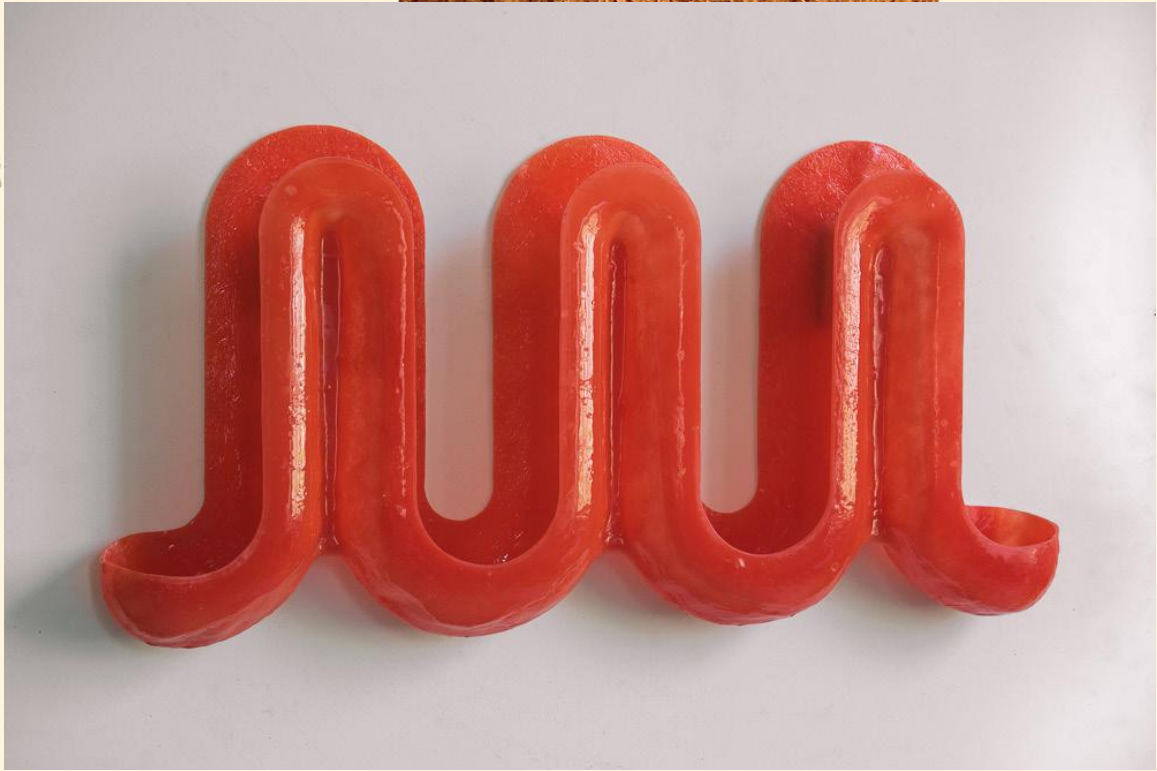
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To Kerr for being a long time friend.





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