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# ***Warmth of the Sun***

By

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH, 2019

Thesis

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**Abstract:**

Chairperson: Cathryn Mallory

*Warmth of the Sun*, is a reflection on personal experiences I've had in the landscape while living in the Northwest. This curated experience is an attempt to capture my sincerity towards a place and hold onto that feeling. I intend to share faded memories of personal experiences through enigmatic sculptures to make the viewer look a bit closer at these objects and see the landscape in a new way. This paper explores thoughts on the idea of place, material, process, contemporary influences, and the experiences that inspired this body of work.

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## Introduction

At the beginning of graduate school, I continued my practice of creating mixed media sculptures. These works were aesthetically interesting on a purely formal level but I was still searching for content that felt like it had more personal meaning to me.

This desire to change my work led me to think broadly about my life. I was born in Illinois, moved to Ohio at the age of two, and stayed in Northwest Ohio until moving to Missoula. I grew up in a small college town, and knew what every corner, alley, and street looked like. I was bored with my surrounding landscape and was searching for something to connect to on a deeper level.

After spending a year in Missoula, I found myself spending more time outdoors than in the studio. I was going on hikes, swimming in the river, and spending time outside in the landscape. I was starting to understand how our environment can shape our perception of the world.

I realized how important this new landscape became to me. This strong connection I was feeling with the landscape pushed me to make work about my personal perception of the landscape, a place that was inspiring me more and more every day.

## Experience

Yi-Fu Tuan is the author of *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, a book that considers the ways in which people feel and think about space, and how feelings about space and place are affected by the sense of time. Tuan says, “To experience in the active sense requires that one venture forth into the unfamiliar and experiment with the elusive and the uncertain.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 9.

*Warmth of the Sun* is inspired by experiences I've had in a new, unfamiliar environment. These experiences changed how I perceived the world around me. I started to view the world through a less critical lens and became more aware of my emotional connection to a place. I wanted to acknowledge that change in perception by creating and arranging objects that exude a similar sense of wonder that I experienced in the landscape.

Artist Joseph Beuys says, "Key experiences come in many different forms. For example, practical life encounters with various matters can become a key experience, but there are also obviously key experiences which... have an almost visionary character, say childhood images."<sup>2</sup> Beuys continues to say that true key experiences always inherently have something that cannot be purely accounted for by rational cognition.

The experiences that inspire my work give me permission to slow down and contemplate similar to how a child might approach something new without expectations. I have minimal expectations of what I'll experience and that creates a strong sense of curiosity and wonder. I am fascinated by the different features of the landscape working together.

Beuys believes that art depends on experience and experiences should of course relate to the objective keys of understanding on a personal level. I believe these moments of childlike naivety are few and far between, so when I get that feeling, I must hold onto it and hone it into something else.

### **Making Place**

Through my experiences of traveling within the landscape, I've learned that the places that affect me the most are the ones that change my perception of the

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Beuys, "Joseph Beuys Interview about Key Experiences: Georg Jappe." Interview by Georg Jappe, *Neugraphic*, September 27, 1976.



environment and show me something new about myself. I enter a heightened state of awareness and intuitively move through the landscape, shaking off any anxieties I had about the unknown. These moments of self-discovery then become intimately tied to the places where I've had these realizations.

In Yi-Fu Tuan's book, *Place, Art, and Self*, he explains "A major motivation for travel is the vague expectation of entering a state of being, identified with a particular place or landscape, that, however transient, reveals an aspect of our character that we have not previously known."<sup>3</sup>

These happenstance moments of self-discovery keep me grounded in the landscape, studying every aspect with an attentive eye. But even with my attentive eyes, it tends to be the unplanned moments that provide the most self-revelation.

I operate through Yi-Fu Tuan's understanding of how humans create the idea of place. Tuan says, "Place is whatever stable object catches our attention. As we look at a panoramic scene our eyes pause at points of interest. Each pause is time enough to create an image of a place that looms large momentarily in our view"<sup>4</sup>.

It's nearly impossible to look at a landscape scene in general. Our eyes are constantly searching for a landmark or feature on the horizon that compels our attention (Tuan, 1977). From the earth's surface to the vast open sky, there are points of interest throughout every landscape and they all have varying levels of importance to everyone.

Ephemeral moments tend to be the most captivating for me. Sand ripples on a beach being swept away by the current, a shooting star, or wind blowing through a field of grass.

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<sup>3</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Place, Art, and Self*. (Center for American Places in Association with Columbia College, Chicago, 2004), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, 161.

I am interested in the confluence of these moments and how they work together to create a unique environment. I think about how I can make and arrange objects from the landscape to create a new environment, not to show you a direct representation of the landscape, but a deepened, personal perception of my experience.

### **Memory as Abstraction**

Multiple times a day I find myself daydreaming about places I have visited in the Northwest. Dreaming about spending my days exploring coastlines, hiking in an old growth forest, or sitting on a hill watching the sunset. The realities of everyday life creep back in, I find myself in my studio, completely removed from these places that I'm yearning to return to.

Since returning to these places is not an option because of the complexity of everyday life, I am left with only one choice. To use my memory to return to these places and think about what points of interest in the landscape stuck with me the most.

I am captivated by ephemeral, abundant, and large scale objects I find in these landscapes. Their omnipresence in these natural environments fills my memory with fleeting images of compositions of rocks, trees, sand, and the sky.

A study conducted at Boston College investigated not only what is remembered through a memory, but how things are remembered - the visual quality of the memory. They found that memories seem to literally fade: people consistently remembered visual scenes as being less vibrant than they were originally experienced (Hayward, 2019)<sup>5</sup>.

When I think back on experiences I've had in the landscape, I remember certain scenes with varying degrees of clarity. This lack of clarity in my memory pushes me towards abstraction during the making process.

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<sup>5</sup> Ed Hayward, "Memories Persist, Details Fade." *Like Old Photographs, Memories Fade over Time*, May 2019, <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/bcnews/science-tech-and-health/psychology/how-memories-fade.html>.

I intend to present moments of clarity paired with abstract elements that create a sense of wonder. Abstracting these environments reflects the curiosity I experienced in these places and demonstrates the idea of memory faded over time.

Think of a sharp, jagged stone that is swept into the bottom of a riverbed. It may sit there for 10, or 10,000 years before rising from the water. During its time submerged, the stone has changed from a jagged shape to a softened, simplified stone. This process is similar to when I contemplate my memories of an experience over time. When I am ready to make a piece, my memories have faded, so the objects I create are simplified, softened forms that attempt to represent a place when arranged together.

### Exhibition



Fig. 1: Drake Gerber, *Warmth of the Sun*, 2023.

*Warmth of the Sun*, is a reflection on personal experiences I've had in the landscape while living in the Northwest. When I find myself in a new place, I am fascinated by the different features of the landscape working together; black rocks supporting entire cliff sides, trees and blue sky collide, accompanied by the sound of waves crashing on soft wet sand that's being imprinted by the water flowing over it. These moments are like visual poetry to me.

A place can be defined by the objects that catch our attention in them. There are points of interest in every landscape and pausing on those points is enough to create an image representing a place.

By making a rock out of wood and sand out of clay, I am changing the way you would normally see these objects. Through my use of materials, I hope to capture an ephemeral moment from the landscape and make the viewer look at the landscape in a different way, perhaps with an open mind like I had when experiencing these places for the first time.

This curated experience is an attempt to capture my sincerity towards a place and hold onto that feeling. I intend to share faded memories of personal experiences through enigmatic sculptures to make the viewer look a bit closer at these objects and see the landscape in a new way.

### **The Radiant**

*The Radiant* is inspired by an experience I had with friends in Mackay, Idaho in the summer of 2021. We stayed in a remote cabin for a weekend and spent most of our days exploring the river nearby and basking in the sunlight. We had a bonfire the first night of the trip and I had never seen such a clear night sky. We spent at least an hour looking up at the sky, searching for constellations.

I saw my first shooting star and ended up seeing a total of five that night. I felt like a little kid, surrounded by my friends admiring such a simple but beautiful thing in



Fig. 2: Drake Gerber, *The Radiant*, ceramics, powdered graphite, 50 x 126 x 48", 2023.

this remote place that felt separated from the rest of the world. This experience solidified my growing interest in using the landscape to inspire my artwork.

The title references stars in two different ways. A radiant is the celestial point in the sky from which the paths of meteors appear to originate.<sup>6</sup> Another definition of radiant is reflecting beams of light; vividly bright and glowing.<sup>7</sup> Both of these definitions can be associated with shooting stars and how they operate in the night sky.

The most important part of the piece is the arching shape it creates when the sculptures are arranged. Putting the sculptures on low pedestals allows the arching shape to be at eye level of the viewer. The arrangement of the sculptures references a shooting star gliding through space.

*The Radiant* shares a similar aesthetic appearance to Isamu Noguchi's sun sculptures. Noguchi made several sculptures inspired by the sun throughout his career, mostly made of granite. Noguchi's, *The Sun at Midnight* (1973), relates to *The Radiant* the most because of its dark color, use of negative space, and simple shape. Noguchi transforms a simple circle into a sun-like image by inverting and elevating the form. Through my use of color, repetition, and arrangement, I also intend to transform a simple star shape into a dynamic sculpture referencing the night sky.



Fig. 3: Isamu Noguchi, *Sun at Midnight*, 1973.

I wanted to create the simplest form I could but still have it read as a star. An outline is one of the most simplistic ways to see something. By using an outline, I'm giving the viewer enough information for them to understand the essentials while still

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<sup>6</sup> "Radiant (Meteor Shower)." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 4 Mar. 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radiant\\_\(meteor\\_shower\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radiant_(meteor_shower)).

<sup>7</sup> "Radiant Definition & Meaning." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/radiant>.

leaving it open-ended enough for them to insert their own ideas or experiences into the work. Abstracting these star forms demonstrates the idea of memory fading over time, becoming simplified. It also reflects the sense of wonder that I experienced in the places that inspire my work.

## Process

*The Radiant* is made up of five separate ceramic sculptures. Each sculpture was handbuilt by joining slabs of clay together to create a star shape. I projected an image of a star onto drywall as a guide for building the various different sized stars.

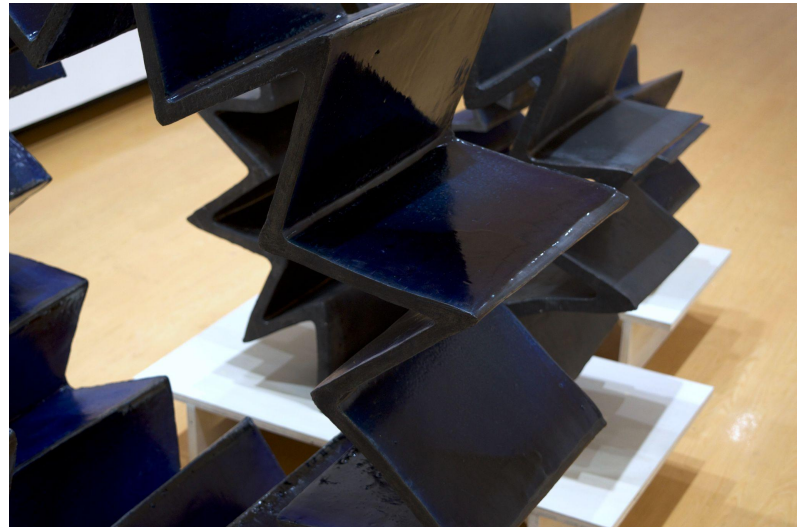


Fig. 4: Drake Gerber, *The Radiant* (detail), 2023.

Each sculpture is made up of 24 separate flat slabs of clay. I wedged around 1,440 pounds of clay to create all of the sculptures in *The Radiant*. Once my slabs were rolled out, I let them dry to the point where I was able to stand them up on their edge and begin joining them together. After joining the slabs, I leveled the top of the piece to be flat and then smoothed the interior and exterior of the piece with a rubber rib tool.

All of the sculptures were fired to cone 6 oxidation in a gas kiln. I chose this temperature so the work would be strong enough to live outdoors. I used a cobalt blue glaze with a bronze glaze painted on the points of the star. The cobalt blue glaze references the density of the night sky while the bronze glaze has a reflective quality that relates to the idea of light being dispersed.

*The Radiant* was the most physically demanding piece in the exhibition. During the construction, I realized I had entered a heightened state of awareness similar to

when I immersed myself in the landscape. The repetitive process of making this piece made me increasingly aware of my body's movement. Moving through a landscape is more of a heightened state of sensory awareness while the construction of *The Radiant* was more about my body's physical awareness. Both of these states of being allow me to focus on what's in front of me, letting less important moments fade away.

### **Current, Wave, Wind**

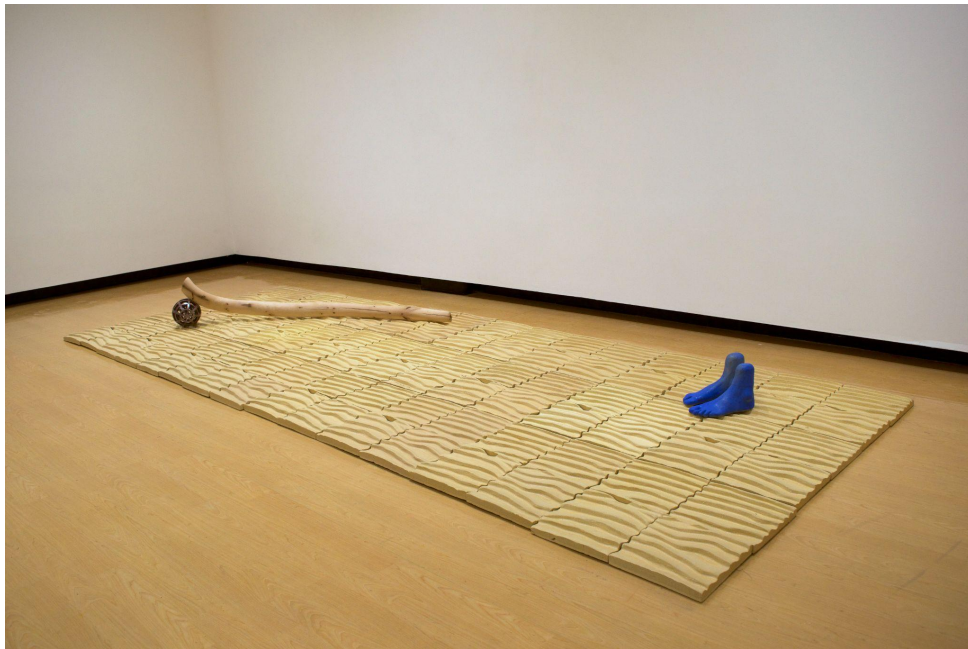


Fig. 5: Drake Gerber, *Current, Wave, Wind*, ceramics, maple, 12 x 149 x 57", 2023.

*Current, Wave, Wind* is inspired by visiting the Oregon coast for the first time. I had never seen sand ripples on the beach and was immediately fascinated by their ephemeral nature. I spent the whole afternoon exploring, picking things up, looking at them, and then setting them back down. I felt like a child exploring this new landscape that felt surreal.

Watching sand ripples form and disappear was the highlight of my experience on the Oregon coast. This natural ephemeral phenomenon inspired me to attempt to freeze this moment in time. By using a permanent material like clay to represent something that is impermanent, I am capturing this moment and preserving it in time.

*Current, Wave, Wind* is an amalgamation of what is left after an experience. My intent for this piece was to ground the viewer in a place, but create mystery through the arrangement of the objects. The title speaks to all the forces of nature that create sand ripples on the beach. I am representing things that are no longer there; no waves that created the sand ripples, a bone from a whale that is gone, and feet referencing a past experience in this place.

I rarely use the figure in my work, but including such a small part of the figure felt essential if I wanted to ground the viewer in this place. By making bare feet and placing them directly on the sand, I am creating a strong point of contact that the viewer can feel in their own body.

I think of the beach as a place for exploration, play, and collecting. My intent was to make the viewer feel like they are wandering down the beach, looking at objects, picking up and putting down. By including the bare feet, it gives the piece a sense of collecting these objects and movement throughout a space. This sense of collecting ties directly to my process of collecting and arranging objects to create this sculpture. I am part collector, part sculptor, and part arranger. I build something, let it sit and wait for it to speak to me.

*Current, Wave, Wind* shares themes of mystery, travel, and experience similar to William T Wiley's sculpture titled, *Ship's Log* (1969). In the middle of the sculpture is a notebook filled with writing about the construction of the piece and Wiley pretending he is the captain of the crew on a voyage at sea.<sup>8</sup> Many of the objects in this piece happened



Fig. 6: William T. Wiley, *Ship's Log*, 1969.

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<sup>8</sup> "Ship's Log." *SFMOMA*, 13 Mar. 2023, <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/70.37.A-L/>.



to be lying around Wiley's studio during the construction of it. Ultimately, Wiley wants the viewer to spend time to experience the piece, and make up their own mind about where it's going just like he did during the construction of it, that's where the magic and mystery lie.

## Process

The sand tiles in *Current, Wave, Wind* are made by pressing slabs of clay into four different plaster molds. Each tile used 15 pounds of clay to fill the mold. Once the clay is dry enough to take out of the mold, I clean up the edges of the tiles with a surform tool so they can fit together in a grid pattern. After the tiles are bisque fired, I layered two different glazes with a spray gun to create a matte, sugary surface. The tiles were then fired on a slow program to cone 6 in an electric kiln.

The press mold process is a way to replicate something with slight variations. This relates to my concept of replicating my personal perception of an experience in the landscape, not the actual landscape. This repetitive process is going to yield slight variations in each tile which relates to the idea of a lack of clarity or memories fading.

The blue feet were handbuilt and hollowed out to ensure there were no air bubbles in the clay. Once they were bisque fired, I sprayed them with a matte glaze that had 10% vivid blue mason stain in it to cone 6 in an electric kiln. The sphere form was handbuilt with coils of clay and fired in an atmospheric salt kiln to cone 6. The maple wood whale bone was sculpted from a tree limb. I used an angle grinder to rough out the form and an electric hand sander to smooth out the surface. I sealed the piece with a wipe on polyurethane to finish the surface.



Fig. 7: Drake Gerber, *Current, Wave, Wind* (detail), 2023.

## Making Earth

*Making Earth* is inspired by my upbringing in Northwest Ohio. For 22 years I was surrounded by flat fields full of grass. I had zero interest in the landscape. It wasn't visually stunning and it didn't have any meaning for me until I moved to Montana. Once I arrived in Missoula, I was met with these dramatic landscapes that I couldn't escape. I fell in love with the confluence of all these amazing features of the landscape coming together.

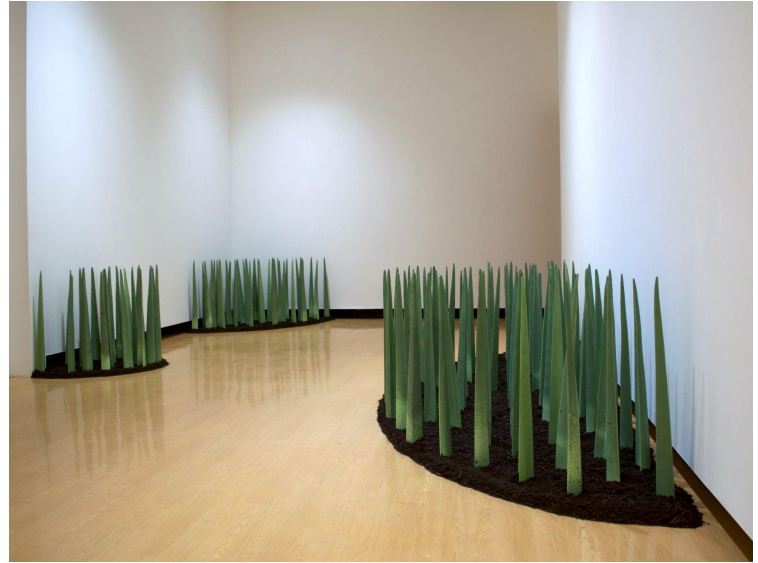


Fig. 8: Drake Gerber, *Making Earth*, ceramics, topsoil, 2023.

After being immersed in Montana for a few years, I started to realize I was missing something. I was missing the quiet moments. I wasn't seeing mundane moments, the normalness of a field of grass. I wanted to create a part of Northwest Ohio's landscape that I wasn't seeing anymore.

*Making Earth* is harder for me to speak about because it's referencing something from a long time ago, something I didn't appreciate at the moment. The other pieces in *Warmth of the Sun* are referencing recent experiences I've had during my time in graduate school.

The fields of grass in Ohio could only be viewed from the perimeter, most of them being private farm lands. In Montana, there is more public land and people enter the landscape everyday to become immersed in it.

This piece is a merging of my roots and where I'm at now. By creating three separate patches of grass that the viewer is able to enter and view from multiple

vantage points, I created this piece that looks like a Northwest Ohio landscape but operates as a landscape that you would find in Montana.

The title *Making Earth* is inspired by the Harrison Studio's piece, *On Making Earth* (1970). The Harrison's learned that topsoil was endangered worldwide and decided to make their own by combining sand, clay, sewage sludge, leaf material, and animal manure. Once the topsoil had a rich forest floor taste, it was brought into a gallery where viewers were allowed to take a bag home for their own garden.<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 9: Harrison Studio, *On Making Earth*, 1970.

This call to action is inspiring and sounds like a project that would be relevant today, even though it happened 53 years ago. I titled my piece after the Harrison's because I want to bring attention to their wonderful idea and share it with a contemporary audience.

### Process

The blades of grass in *Making Earth* are made through the process of slip casting in plaster molds. Liquid clay is poured into the molds and left to dry for an hour and fifteen minutes to ensure



Fig. 10: Drake Gerber, *Making Earth (detail)*, 2023.

proper thickness. Once the piece is thick enough, the excess liquid clay is poured out of

<sup>9</sup> Kavior Moon. "Kavior Moon on the Harrisons." *The Online Edition of Artforum International Magazine*, 30 Oct. 2019, <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201908/the-harrisons-80870>.

the mold. After an hour of drying time, I removed the piece from the mold and cut any seam lines that are visible from the casting process. After the blades are bisque fired, they are dipped in a cone 04 glaze and loaded into an electric kiln with a medium speed program.

Underneath the topsoil are wooden boards with cut outs that the blades of grass fit into tightly. I cut out more holes than needed in the boards to leave room for different arrangements and spacing in the three patches of grass.

### **Black Butte Boulder**

*Black Butte Boulder* was directly inspired by artist David Nash. Nash is a sculptor who has made a career out of making wood sculptures, some of them being wooden boulders. I was inspired by how similar these wooden boulders look compared to actual boulders, but something was still different.

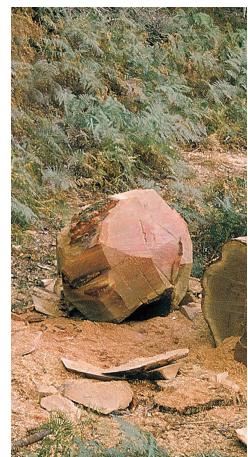


Fig. 11: David Nash, *Wooden Boulder*, 1978.

This inspired me to make my own wooden boulder, to see it in real life and look at something in a new way. I could have brought a boulder from the river into the gallery, but I wanted to create my own out of different material to show the viewer a reimagined part of the landscape, something different.

The somewhat hidden placement of *Black Butte Boulder* in the gallery was intentional. I would say that more than half the people entering the space told me they didn't notice it until they read the show titles or saw it as they were leaving the gallery. My intent for its placement was to create a sense of exploration in the space similar to how I was exploring the landscapes that inspired this show.



Fig. 12: Drake Gerber, *Black Butte Boulder*, burnt maple, 15 x 28 x 16", 2023.

## Process

*Black Butte Boulder* is a solid chunk of maple that was cut and carved with a Stihl chainsaw. Once the form was carved out, the surface was burned with a torch to turn the wood from a light brown color to black.

## Sunrise Waiting

*Sunrise Waiting* is inspired by an experience I had at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Before entering the space, I was surrounded by groups of children shouting with excitement. Upon entering the space, I noticed a quiet ambient sound playing in the background. At the moment, I didn't give it much thought. Suddenly, the music faded away and the roar of people talking got louder and louder. The music faded back in after a minute, and I immediately realized how much it changed the space. It allowed me to be immersed in my own experience and not distracted by all the different things happening around me.

I knew at that moment that I needed to have a soundscape for my thesis exhibition. I want it to operate in the same way the aquarium sound operated for me. A field experiment conducted in seven art galleries investigated the role of background music in visitors' experience of art exhibitions. The study found that art galleries can benefit from the favorable effects of music, but the music needs to match the style of the artwork so that its stimulus does not overlap that of the art (Loureiro, 2019)<sup>10</sup>.

I intend for the sound to slow people down and become immersed in the visual art in front of them. I believe it creates a more memorable experience and ties all the sculptures together to make it seem like its own new environment.

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<sup>10</sup> Loureiro, Sandra Maria Correia, Holger Roschk, and Filipa Lima. "The Role of Background Music in Visitors' Experience of Art Exhibitions: Music, Memory and Art Appraisal." *International journal of arts management* 22.1 (2019): 4–24. Print.

## **Process**

Sunrise Waiting was made with a Roland Juno DS, Rickenbacker 360 run through a Strymon Dig delay pedal, tape recorder, and Logic Pro. Once the base layer of sound played from the Juno was established, I played the same guitar chord through a Strymon delay pedal. This made the sound thicker and added a different texture on top of the already existing keyboard sound. Next I added a recording I took on a beach in Mendocino, California from a tape recorder. Once all of these sounds were in Logic Pro, I mixed the volume of each sound. The guitar and waves gradually get louder throughout the piece, while the keyboard sound maintains the same volume the entire time.

## **Conclusion**

*Warmth of the Sun* is inspired by experiences I've had in the landscape that have changed how I perceive the world around me. Viewing the world through an intuitive, less critical lens has allowed me to make meaningful connections with the landscape and see it in a new perspective. I intend to share faded memories of personal experiences through enigmatic sculptures to make the viewer look a bit closer at these abstracted objects and see the landscape in a new way. Overall, *Warmth of the Sun* is a space for exploration, contemplation, and transforming the perception of a landscape.

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