

Rooted in topsoil

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A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture in the Department of Sculpture of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island


by

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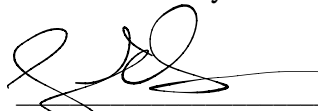
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Abstract

Disillusioned by my transnational identity, I have come to realize that my sense of belonging is no longer attached to any physical location, but instead to a state of mind, to an intimacy with the world. My notion of home is an obscure and unsettled—at times utopian—idea, which can be infinitely decoded, re-positioned and re-established psychologically. This thesis is an investigation of that liminal state, questioning the paradoxical place at the intersection of longing and belonging, interior and exterior, rootedness and uprootedness. Through a collection of short essays that accompany projects, I seek to unpack the precarious emotional complexities that surface in the experience of conflicting realities. As I navigate between nostalgia for the “native” culture of the past and search for affinity in the adopted culture of the present, I use material processes to forge a zone of stability and comfort, a “homecoming” in disguise.

Although it is not possible to map all the shattered fragments, my work makes an attempt. In it I explore how the quest for personal reconciliation makes space for compassionate experimentation with materiality informed by place and sense. Mundane objects act as transitional souvenirs that are manifestations of my personal history, and indexes of multiple belongings. Through casting, digital media and site-interventions, I construct a space for finding, connecting, attaching and detaching.

“...[It’s] not that there is no place like home, but rather that there is no longer such a place as home; except of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz: which is anywhere and everywhere, except the place from which we began.”¹

—Salman Rushdie

she

In the mirror I imagined this other girl, mouth full and dripping with perfect English, bright and loud. I observed and measured the patterns of her movements. I practiced small talk, party moves – everything that would make me an “ideally constructed” American. Just as how I learned to mimic British etiquette, how I segmented my closet so that I could quickly blend into Singaporeans or transform back into a Chinese. Despite the attempts, I seemed to have been failing the role-playing contests over and over again. I was desperate to pick up new values, yet struggled to let go of the imprint of the previous social conventions and habitual familiarities. One symbol, one gesture, a few misplaced prepositions could easily expose my status as an outsider.



Jiaying in Hainan

Lost home

We moved out in 2015. Since then, I've gone near it many times – in taxis, on foot; with or without company – but have been unable or unwilling to go in. Five years passed, Mom sent me over to pick up a pair of old shoes. I don't know what made her think of those shoes.

I walked in the elevator, the one that repeatedly imprisoned me in my anxiety dreams, together with a familiar looking man, who I couldn't locate in my memories. One deep breath. And another. Heart pounding. The screen showed 33.

I remember reading Miwon Kwon: *Places can feel wrong because our self-perception and world view are out of sync, too outmoded to make sense of the new spatial and economic organization that confronts us.*² Alienated. Disoriented. Troubled to make coherent meaning of one's relation to its physical surroundings. Even threatened — these are all symptoms of inhabiting a wrong place.

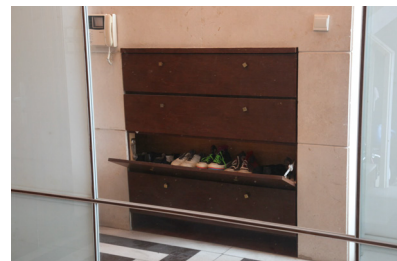
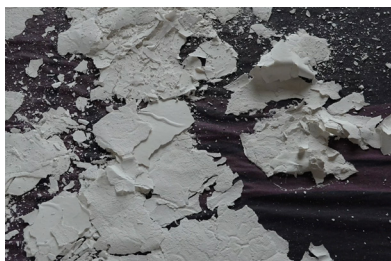
And that was how I felt about *here*. The cracking sound doors made, the mustiness in the air, the peeling paint from the ceiling, the dust, the cluttered room and the photo of me and this girl who I've lost contact with... The past and present, dreams and desires all blended into a single reality. Within this reality, an unsettledness stuck around.

I don't belong here
An insoluble distance is keeping us apart.

“Often we are comforted by the thought that a place is ours, that we belong to it, perhaps even come from it, and therefore are tied to it in some fundamental way. Such places are thought to reaffirm our sense of self, reflecting back to us an unthreatening picture of a grounded identity.”³

—Miwon Kwon





video stills

A moment

It was in the middle of my Econometrics exam, I experienced a huge panic attack. All the blood drained from my fingers in a rush as I flipped the exam paper in a fumbling mess. My eyes were fuzzy. My throat was itchy. I felt my anxiety growing teeth, chewing on my stomach. I felt the eyes of the examiner warming the skin on my forehead. I didn't dare looking up.

Numbers. Data. Theories. It seems that for my entire life I was driven by this tendency to essentialize the human experience through the lens of rationality. While empowering in some ways, this tyranny of rationality led me to an increasing sense of disillusionment. No amount of reasoning taught me how to process my existence - experienced not through abstractions, but concretely through what I see, hear, touch and feel.

In that very moment, I knew art is the way out.

“Every creative effort comes from within. We have also to nourish our feeling, and we can do so only with materials derived from the world about us. This is the process whereby the artist incorporates and gradually assimilates the external world within himself, until the object of his drawing has become like a part of his being, until he has it within him and can project it on to the canvas as his own creation.”⁴

—Henri Matisse



Daydream, 2020, mixed media installation

Farewell

In 2021, I parted with my boyfriend at the time. *Hey*, He said, after that long searing silence, *this distance thing is not working out. When would you be home? Are you returning home?*

For the years we spent together, we shared different time zones. My days started when his days ended. In tears, or prancing with joy, to each other we were just those small figures trapped in a box called iPhone. For every reunion, we shared an hour of awkwardness, waiting anxiously for a moment of familiarity, to get intimate again.

There are no special places for farewells at airports and train stations. All you get is a parting glimpse at the line demarcating *departees* and *others*. And that was the last time I saw him.

Jet lag

My recent dreams have been very bizarre. I can't tell if it was the result of my last journey. Or of all the journeys added up.

I found myself in a familiar yet strange land where time seemed to stand still. People from different eras mingled, as if by some magical thrust. Pursued through a crumpled maze of streets, I was in duple meter, both here and there at once. Feeling the ruptures of time. The intermittent detachments of space. The moment I tried to force these multiple exposures into one single image, it crumbled.

I began to wonder if these dreams are really mine, or they're part of an enormous collective dream. And I'm just one of the many carriers.

“Nostalgia speaks in riddles and puzzles, trespassing across the boundaries between disciplines and national territories.”⁵

—Svetlana Boym

I knew I had to leave. Beyond that I don't know anything.

I am oriented towards an undefined place.

Towards an absence

Towards a fleeting past

Towards sideways

SHE

Towards a realm I never knew of

Towards the moments of s e p a r a t i o n i n the fissure of reality

Towards the Fridays we curled up watching
周星驰 on Xing Kong over and over and over
again until one day they cancelled that channel
and those nights faded out of our lives as if
they never existed and I was left to mourn for
the loss of all.

In the clamour I saw her.

She is lonely.

All the time she has been lonely.

I tried to fill the empty spaces within her. Yet
that opened up a bigger void.

Full of hurt. Full of anger.

She needs somewhere to put it.

It has taken her entire life to search for that
shimmering vessel. And now she wants mine too.

Her voice is sharp. Rhythm of longing roaring in her chest.
Everything transformed into a performance of dramatized
rituals.

A set of complex symbols.

A series of calculable achievements.

Trophies.

Souvenirs.

Her emoting exists only within the structure of her rituals.

In her world, all are rituals.

I know she loves me.

But being loved takes work too.



Shell, 2021, plywood, foam, HD video, excerpt of distorted soundtrack from Innocence of Memories, 5:42 minutes



Providence home

As soon as I moved into my new apartment in Providence, I was faced with the urgent task of setting up a home that would feel like home. Yet the supposed home no longer points to a specific physical place, but rather to an intangible, unsettled — at times utopian idea. The meaning is renewed, each time I utter the word home.

Setting up a place feels like an extension towards a future unseen but longed for. You are given once another chance to construct, to repair, to lay the foundation for that personal dreamwork. Yellow light enfolded the room, emptiness took hold of me.

I started to make my list.

Grey couch - steel, not mink or ash grey

Couch pillows - 4, soft, fluffy

Dining table - round, walnut

Coffee table - chunky, raw

Bed - queen size, cushion, storage under bed

...

As the shrinking space of experience no longer fits the new landscape, we look backward and yearn for the particular. These choices grow into a minimal sense of continuity, which patches up the gap of alienation. Each item on this list was curated and refined; they are different limbs of my fragmented whole coexisting in this apartment.



A cake

Critique

On October 27th 2021, I had my first ever art critique.

~~My mind was rushing with words, phrases and contradictory thoughts and scribbles. Tears welled up in my eyes before I realised. Silence followed and I watched myself flickered in and out of focus as tears got hot. In a sudden sense of searing loneliness, I was suspended in time. I didn't know it would've been this hard. To draw from within and challenge the fundamental beliefs that shaped and informed who I am; to open up the chamber of intimate thoughts to the forces I couldn't yet fathom; To negotiate between my super ego and the criticism from different publics; to unveil and reveal frustration, trepidation, doubt, fear and pain... all the ugliness that made me feel small and twisted and struggled to overcome in misguided bravery. I felt like I was at my most reductive state, watched and clothes and skin stripped off.~~

I still get that feeling now. The powerlessness that socks me in the stomach. Even with showing a tiny pencil sketch of probably the most insignificant thing, I would get that feeling. But I'm starting to be ok. At the end of the day, flawed, hurt, wronged, wanting to control are all parts of being human. Instead of carrying it all, I know I could pause and lay my head on the lap of my own creations and ask them to carry some of it with me. Art making provides me with that space to navigate between transparency and opacity, embracing vulnerability not only as wound but also as a ground. The critical self-knowledge generated from the vulnerability acts as concrete bedrock for generous listening towards a compassionate creativity. I'm learning to accept that it doesn't harm to be honest, incomplete and unprotected.

I cried.

Wall

I made two walls at RISD and I find it hard to talk about them. Are they really site-specific? I don't know. I care not about what was said, but rather the sheer sense of contact developed between encounters.

I preserved some remnants of the wall during de-installation. They now act as "nostalgic objects" that stand as my memories captured in physical form. They are markers of time -- of an authentic experience which can't be repeated.

To touch. To be touched. To orient towards the definitional. To indulge the placelessness. To leave traces. To be grounded. To unearth the hidden. To seize the ephemeral. To invade the permanence. To estrange the topography. To archive. To be archived.



Untitled (I), 2021, joint compound, plaster, foam, photo printed on silk





Remnants of the installation

Guilty pleasure

No matter how good you are with the language, or how impeccable of a personality you possess, as an outsider: you are structurally vulnerable to being hated.

It is amusing how you can barely do anything about it. Simultaneously, it grants you a profound excuse to be forgiven.

Look, I don't belong here to know.

The glitches, the lack of information, and the incompetence allow one to perform and transform in an infinite variety of identities. Though I whined about it all the time, I found some parts of myself enjoying it secretly. I had no urge to extricate myself from this bubble.

However messy leaving and re-integrating might be, I found a unique sense of belonging intrinsic to a system of moving. Gazing out the window, I felt cocooned in the small sovereignty of my own, which was accompanied by the shifting landscapes. I thought of J.B. Jackson's words on roads. He wrote about how roads offer a journey into the unknown, into the agonizing moments of private decisions, eventually into the potential to discover who we are and where we belong. *Which do we value more, a sense of place or a sense of freedom?*⁶

“Roads no longer merely lead to places; they are places.”⁷

—John Brinckerhoff Jackson

Tea eggs

To this day I cannot smell tea eggs without thinking of the gauzy curtains glowing in the blazing sun, lazy hum of the ceiling fan, and the map of wrinkles on grandma's face. Does her cooking smell as rich in heaven now? Does the light leave a warm odour on the breakfast plates it touches? Does the wall sweat in the summertime? Does my duvet sniff me out when I get out of the shower? Exactly how many circles does it take for soap to claim ownership over a piece of garment? If I wear SANTAL 33 every day, do I think in this scent too? When I share my perfumed thought, does it linger in the receiver's head?

Smell is a bad-tempered hermit. It remains poised in human memories for a long time, patiently waiting and hoping for its moment. Once it is out, it is everywhere. It gives clues. It crosses boundaries. It stirs the emotions. It evokes the visceral. It blends fragments into wholes. It traverses history in no particular order. It transports us across mountains and oceans, months and years. It carries the remnants of the past behaviour and traces of life it once shaped and affected. It tells the story of many common yet unique, pleasant yet disturbing, short-lived yet eternal lives. It can never be sure whether it has vanished or is still in the process of fading. It cannot feel our gaze or touch, but neither does it need anyone's gaze or touch. In its silence, it assimilates with and becomes us.



A trace

What's contained in the “sayable”

I often find it frustrating when we fight in English. When self-translation doesn't catch up with the rising anger, I give in to my emotions. The inability to reason and all the resulting bodily reactions are nothing but draining. On brighter days, it is equally frustrating when certain memories can only be shared, felt and conceived through foreign verbs. Each language occupies a reality, and each reality contains a part of me; it is impossible to disentangle the simultaneity and return to a monolingual state of mind.

Sitting now at the desk in my studio, whose walls have been painted over and over again, I stare at the cracks on the ceiling. I stare so long that my brain has stopped responding to what I see. I appreciate this sense of nothingness, and the silence that comes with it. The studio has been the only place where I've felt able to embrace silence -- where my language sheds all hesitation. Instead of fussing over how mispronunciations wilt on my tongue, this respite gives me hope to build unity out of bifurcated experiences.



Between two worlds

*2022, 2 x 4" pine, drywall, joint
compound, needle, thread, 110 x 96 x 5.5"*



Banality



A socket

We live surrounded by piles of stuff. Manufactured, distributed, adopted, loved, hated, passed on or discarded. Then manufactured again, almost like an accelerated archaeology. Some get frequent attention, some go unnoticed, some await, some approach; they don't cease to exist. After serving their functions, they are seen with clarity for the first time. Their lack of relevance leaves them free to be considered, cultivating relationships of a more intimate interest.

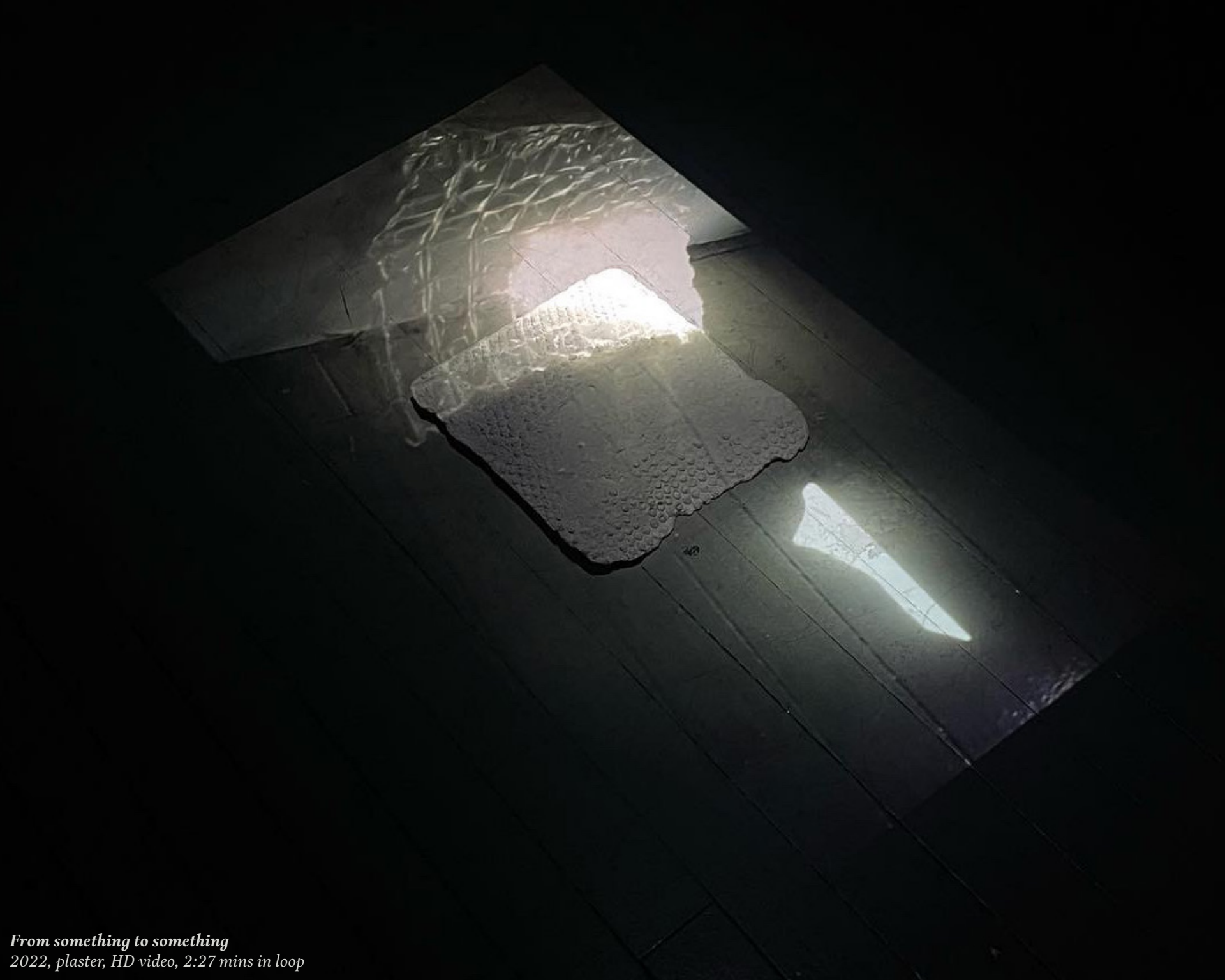
Cardboard, bubble wrap, plastic buckets... I see these mass-produced goods as intermediaries between us and what we claim we care about, desire and long for. Their malleable bodies cater to multiple forms and possibilities, protecting valued and vulnerable things.

Though they are fragile, too.

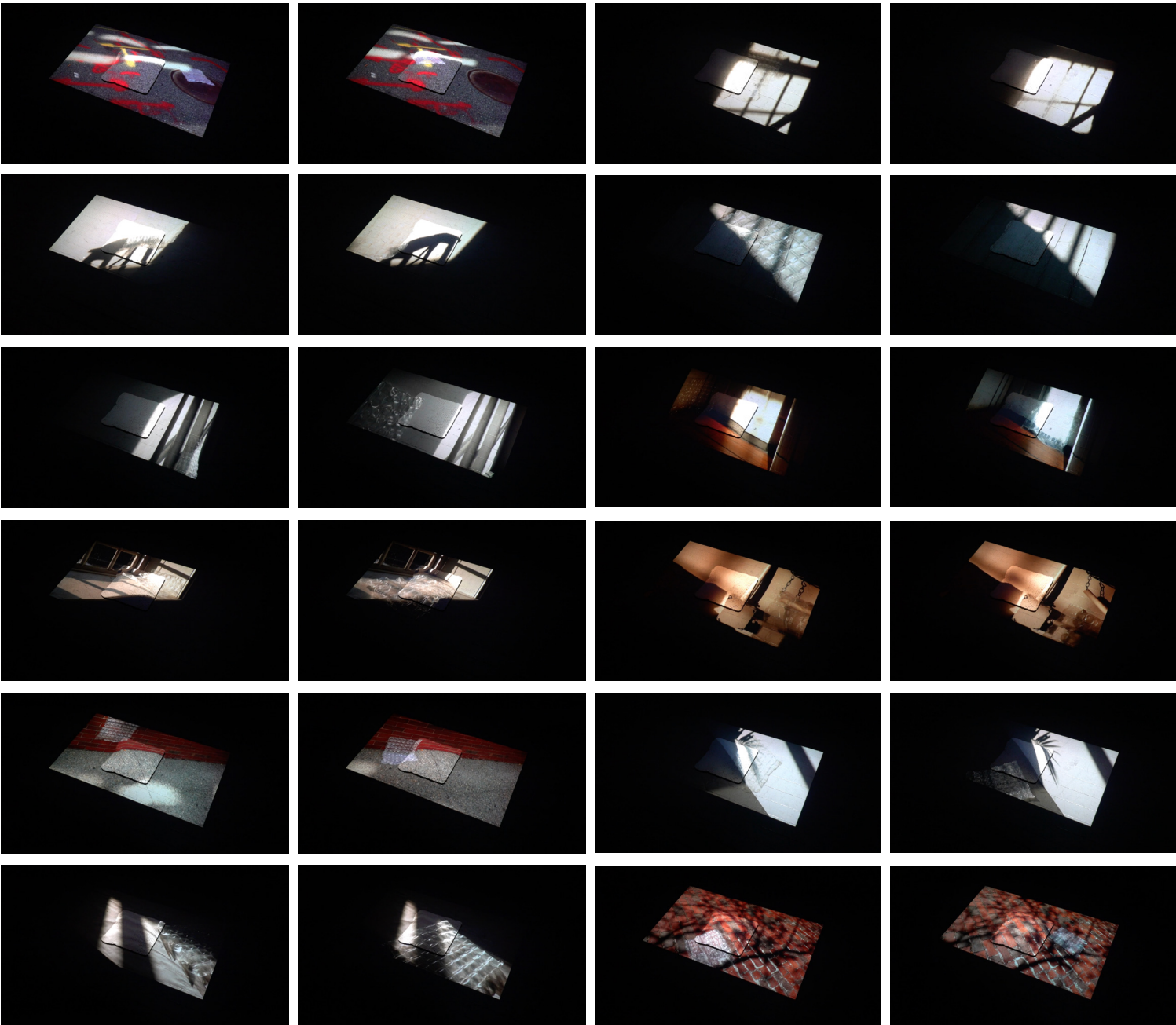


I, too, am fragile
2022, plastics, thread





From something to something
2022, plaster, HD video, 2:27 mins in loop



video stills



Richmond Street, Providence, RI



At studio



Cast cardboard



Cast cardboard



Scrap
2023, plaster, fiberglass

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Acknowledgments

I establish a temporary home each time I visit a new city. Providence is a special one - one that feels a little more rooted than others. This experience wouldn't have been the same without the people who inhabited this time and space with me. There are a number of them to whom I feel deep gratitude. I would like to acknowledge them for their incredible impact on my personal and artistic development.

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I am grateful to my peers, whose friendship inspires me as much as their work. Thank you for taking me in, for being my most attentive critics and support, for two years of irreplaceable memories and hopefully many more.

Finally, I am enormously indebted to my parents, who assure me there is always a home to return to. Whenever. Wherever.

23.1291° N
113.2644° E

1.3521° N
103.8198° E

51.5072° N
0.1276° W

41.8240° N
71.4128° W

and