
Senior Projects Fall 2016

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

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Growth

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Bard College

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Growth

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Arts
of Bard College
by
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My senior project installation, *Growth*, is an exploration in pushing the boundaries between domestic space and the natural world. It exists in a state of surreality; when the human desire to control, contrive, and conquer nature is met with the inevitable power of nature to overcome.

I have always been fascinated by nature and the creatures that inhabit it, and over time this passion has grown to become a large part of who I am. About four years ago, I began to keep aquarium fish and was immediately drawn to the aspect of creating an underwater world within the glass tank for my pets to explore. The fish themselves were reason enough to delve into the hobby, but this creative aspect—aquascaping as it's called—is what truly got me hooked. It brought together several of my preexisting interests: a passion for fabricating objects by hand, an enchantment with miniatures, and an innate compulsion to collect. Soon, I was going on “driftwood hunts”, scouring a particular wooded area or the shore of a water body, and bringing home armfuls of any pieces I found that fit my specific criteria as far as the size/shape, condition, and type of wood. In doing so I was brought back memories from my childhood of going to the beach with my mother where, rather than playing in the water, I would occupy most of my time walking along the shore and picking up any rocks or shells that caught my eye; when it was time to leave, I would carry a bucket-full back to the car, eager to add them to my existing collection at home. This act of "collecting" nature, of being unsatisfied by memories or simply enjoying it in the moment, of needing to hold onto part of it and keep it as my own, has proven to be almost as important to my senior project as the passion that's been fueling it all.

In a way, *Growth* came out of a desire to incorporate my growing interest in aquascaping with my drive to create art. Surely the act of arranging carefully chosen components—a particular variety of driftwood or rocks, the perfect combination of aquatic plant species, perhaps a “cave” or other landform sculpted by hand, and of course, the lighting and other details to pull it all together—was an art form in some sense of the word, but I struggled to find a way that I could work within this medium, without leaving the audience feeling as though they were viewing an exhibit at the aquarium, rather than sculptural art in a gallery. The inherent component of the

glass fish tank, too, drew criticism for its strictly imposed boundaries, and limiting of creative possibilities. It was all too expected.

During my first semester of working on senior project, I began to explore the potential for what could be created outside of, and surrounding the fish tank, rather than focusing solely on that which was placed inside. My first attempt in this vein started with a tree stump, upon which I sculpted a long, relatively narrow, organic form, stretching diagonally upwards from the wood base, where it had anchored itself with tentacle-like roots, gripping the stump like some unidentifiable parasitic creature. Opposite the roots, at the highest point of the organic form, hung a hollow paper-skinned asymmetrical ovoid. When approaching the sculpture, a glowing light could be seen emanating from an opening in the side of this dangling form; once standing directly in front of the opening, the viewer discovered a small, round, glass vase, containing a miniature world, complete with live aquatic plants, delicately placed stones, and tiny orange shrimp nibbling on algae and exploring their surroundings.

Although this particular sculpture did not become a part of my final senior project show, it was the impetus from which all other ideas began to pour. At the same time, an attraction to furniture and interior design—a subject that always existed at least on the fringes of my interests—began to pick up speed and soon merged with this new-found way of incorporating aquascapes into my art. Over the course of this semester, my vision for the installation developed as I sought out and collected the necessary objects and materials to imbue the space with my desired style: pieces of vintage furniture and decor; various sizes and shapes of wood found on the forest floor; leaves, reeds, and other plant matter, which I would dry and use to sculpt with. I also amassed a rather large collection of live terrestrial plants, which came to be one of the most influential aspects of all.

When this all came together, my studio was transformed into a domestic space, where objects typically found throughout various parts of a household were condensed into a single room; a space inspired by my gravitation towards the style of Victorian design with a touch of industrialism, and reminiscent of what one might expect to see inside an abandoned home that's fallen victim to the elements and has been transformed by nature,

though in a most surreal and fantastical manner. A kitchen table, the surface entirely covered by a dome-shaped “nest”, over 6 feet tall, with walls woven from an assortment of leaves, sticks, and moss; inside, a glowing fish tank that contains a mysteriously woven form of its own. A fireplace, overflowing with wood that spills from its mouth, and is covered with plants that grow in every available crevice. A nightstand sitting atop a pile of dirt, being consumed by tree stumps and knotted pieces of wood, the gaps between these, too, filled with botanic growth.

These pieces, in conjunction with the room as a whole, hint at the past life that this “home” may have endured. Was it abandoned, and then overtaken? Or was nature the driving force that pushed the former occupants away? And who were these people? Or person, perhaps. Did they ever really exist? Perhaps you knew them. Perhaps it was me.