

**Abandoned Homes and Haunted Houses**

By

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores my studio practice and the development of work for the show *Abandoned Homes and Haunted Houses*. Throughout this paper I will address the 'house' and 'home' as a concept, space and object that is anthropomorphized as it works through a lifecycle. My work explores how a 'house' can become a 'home' then over time become a 'house' again, and so on. Within this project I use a 20<sup>th</sup> century kit home as a model for an iconic 'house' to explore the notion of the double. In this paper I will connect these concepts to the work I have created and to my studio process. Finally I will connect notions of comfort and discomfort to my use of fabric and craft practices by considering what is communicated through these mediums. Fabric relates to construction and relates closely to the lifecycle of the house that I am exploring through my work.

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*To Ozzy.*

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## **Introduction**

My artistic practice is an ongoing examination of the subtle emotional space between feelings of comfort and discomfort. This paper will begin with an examination of the process I use in my studio practice. Throughout my practice I have explored numerous media and approaches to the topic. I have created works in the theatre, in video and photography, through social practice, and through various textile and craft approaches. I have found that my investigations in fabric have been the most successful and fitting for the blend of emotions I seek to convey through my work. Currently in *Abandoned Homes and Haunted Houses* I have undertaken these feelings of comfort and discomfort through an interrogation of the concepts of 'house' and 'home' through the use of textiles and adapted craft practices.

By taking an actual house as the starting point for the work I began to think of the house as both an object and a space. The next step in my work was to break the image of the house down to a simpler form for it to become more of an icon than an individual house. Finally I sought to animate the structure, allowing it to draw conclusions about a metaphor for a larger idea. How can an animated textile house form represent the lived experience and lifecycle of a 'house' and a 'home'?

My previous work has explored the use of word play as a way to broach difficult subjects in an often sarcastic and comical way and I continue to use these themes in my practice. My artistic approach is centered in a reflexive practice-based method. I begin my work by identifying subject matter that is deeply personal to me yet

general enough to still apply to and affect my viewers. In this paper I will explain my studio practice through a narrative connecting the creation of the work to its intended theoretical and methodological basis. My methodological approaches to the use of fabric and embroidery are based in trial and error, repetition and sampling. To create this work I employed a process of data collection, sampling and trial and error. Each step led me towards the creation of a large-scale inflatable house. The work is nine feet by seven feet and eleven feet high. The house is constructed from unbleached muslin and intricately embroidered. Throughout the exhibition the inflatable fills to capacity with air, through the use of a generic house fan. The work inflates and overwhelms the gallery space. After several minutes, the inflatable fills to capacity, the fan turns off and the house collapses into itself. This action repeats for the duration of the show.

In this paper I will further explain my studio practice through the narrative I have followed to come to the final work I have created for my exhibition. Next I will examine the way domestic space is remembered and recalled through theories of the uncanny, and through the iconography of the concepts that inform the term 'house'. The theories of Gaston Bachelard and Sigmund Freud inform the intended meaning of this exhibition. The house is both a demarcation of real physical space and an important part of memory.

The houses we keep stored in our memory are collapsible, malleable and untrustworthy. Through our lived experiences we project our knowing of 'home' onto the houses of strangers, and especially onto uninhabited houses. In my work I

am interested in how this is simultaneously a nostalgic experience and a dreadful one. Through the lens of the theories I present in this paper and examples of artists working through similar questions of memory and home, I have been able to reflect on the work presented in my exhibition. Finally I will examine my artistic relationship with fabric as a medium. I will discuss what my use of fabric communicates to the viewer and how textiles and craft practices engage in a dialogue of memory and nostalgia.

The title of the show is *Abandoned Homes and Haunted Houses*, I wanted the title of the home to hint at the underlying concepts of work, as I have created this narrative of a house working through a cyclical process of 'house' to 'home' and back to 'house' again, I believe that the memories and physical markings left behind by former inhabitants of a dwelling contribute to the life of the house. As a house is abandoned by one group of inhabitants they leave behind their past, through memory or the wear and tear of a space. Those past inhabitants become the ghosts of the new inhabitants new home, and so on. Through this cycle there is a layer of histories and memories within a space, within a space, within a space.

## **Research and Creation**

### **Wassaic, New York/ Abernethy, Saskatchewan**

In May of 2013 I traveled to the hamlet of Wassaic, in upstate New York to participate in a month long artist residency. My application to the residence declared that I was looking forward to learning local lore and creating work based on ghost stories and myths from the surrounding community. Upon my arrival to the town I quickly found locals excited to share their ghost stories with me. I was looking for specific local ghosts whose histories could be explored and through my time in my studio. I also took to walking and biking through the community looking at abandoned houses and buildings in the town and surrounding area. I explored many spaces including abandoned asylums from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, abandoned neighborhoods, uncared for swimming pools and a myriad of unoccupied homes in the hamlet of Wassaic. The significant number of abandoned houses in the community fueled my interest in ghosts, the paranormal and the mournful feelings of absence and loss in spaces of neglect. I felt that the emotional reaction I had to the abandonment of the town were feelings that were not unique and that to witness abandonment evoked a universal eerie feeling of loss.

What quickly dawned on me was that ghost stories across America and Canada follow very similar plot points. I began to feel that my traveling to another country to seek out such stories had been unnecessary given the ample number of similar stories I have heard around my own home province. As a result, while in Wassaic I stopped looking for real ghosts and started looking more closely at the town itself. I

focused on the buildings that were said to be haunted and their neighboring houses deemed ghost free. For the rest of my residency I wandered the town and neighboring area, documenting houses while trying to understand a handful of questions. What sort of narrative leads to a haunting or ghost story? How do 'houses' create a presence? How can the concept of 'house' be used in my work to explore memory, narrative and the uncanny?

During my explorations of Wassaic I often found myself wandering to the yard of a large two story pale yellow house. The house is abandoned and has been left in disrepair with a large blue tarp eroding in the wind on the rooftop. The house is a kit home constructed during the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the houses in Wassaic are kit homes, as are thousands of houses across America and Canada. It was this familiarity that drew me to the house in addition to the sad beauty of the blue-fringed tarp blowing in the breeze against the yellow siding of the house. Finding a subject to interrogate is a challenge in my studio practice. I work instinctively with my surroundings and often become fixated on an image until I can interpret it and find meaning within my body of work. I often find myself acting first on an idea or impulse, then working through its meaning once the work is in process or complete. The yellow house became the subject of my interrogation for the greater part of the year. Following my stay in Wassaic, I continue to struggle with the notion of 'house/ home' in my body of work.

I come from a rural background, having grown up on a farm in southern Saskatchewan, 10 km away from a hamlet that is comparable in size to Wassaic,

New York. The house I called home for 17 years was a small Eaton's kit home, built in 1910, beside the original one room homesteader's house. Although the yellow house in Wassaic and my farmhouse are located over 3000 km apart, I found familiarity in the yellow house. The yellow house became symbolic of the concept of 'house' and acts as a double for my farmhouse in Saskatchewan.

While I was in Wassaic, conceptualizing *Abandoned Homes and Haunted Houses*, a friend sent me a series of horror shorts she was curating into a festival. I selected one randomly to watch; the movie took place in an apartment with high ceilings and a hardwood floor. The film was an unsettling short about a woman who would secretly extract her lover's hurt feelings from his stomach every time they would fight. He became a sort of zombie who lacked the ability to recall his memories. With him in this sedated state the couple stayed 'happily' together. As the short came to its depressing end, I felt an overwhelming sense of dread and unease. I realized the short film was shot in the home that I presently live in. I had forgotten that prior to my arrival, my partner had rented his place to a film crew for a week and this was that production. I was witnessing a past life of my current domestic space. Throughout my viewing of the film I felt a bizarre sense of familiarity to the setting, and in fact I was seeing a double of my own home. Mine but not mine; someone else's. The feeling was uncanny.

## **Theory Section**

### **Introduction**

Throughout the process of conceptualizing and realizing the work I have been informing each step with a theoretical foundation that informs my process and its outcome. This section will introduce the various conceptual theories that have informed my work. I will explore these concepts through examples found in contemporary films and artworks. I will investigate the scholarship surrounding the physical space and human-like presence of the ‘house’/‘home’. Finally, I will shift my gaze toward the material concerns used in my studio practice and how they relate to domesticity, craft and memory as I connect the physical work in the gallery space to the theoretical foundations that support it.

My studio practice begins with my use of craft, textiles, photography, video, performance and social practice to break down an individual idea in a variety of ways. Through this interrogation of an idea using different mediums I draw connections to new themes and questions as my work develops in the studio. Often my practice is situated in works that require repetition. This may be the repetition of a stitch or pattern or the repetitive process of rehearsals, actions, and reframing shots. Repetition often becomes a meditation and in these states new connections are made to extending themes. For *Abandoned Homes and Haunted Houses* I began by asking, what haunts a house? How can a house be used to explore the uncanny, and conversely, how can the uncanny be used to explore a house? As I began to

unfold these ideas by gathering stories of hauntings and the uncanny I came to another branch of investigation. I wondered, what does a 'house' communicate? How can the iconic symbol of 'house' be animated to explore broader themes of memory and the double?

Gaston Bachelard writes, "All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home" (5). The concepts of 'house' and 'home' have become the central point of interrogation in my work. The difference between 'house' and 'home' is minor but the distinction between the two terms is important in my work. A sense of the familial or domestic in the 'home' versus the vacant physical structure of the 'house' helps define the nuances in meaning in my interrogation of an abandoned home. Through out my work I have thought of the structure of the house as a sentient being, similar to a character in a story. Within this narrative that I have created the house inhabits a lifecycle, and the structure shifts from a 'house' to a 'home' throughout this cycle. As the house sits unoccupied or dormant I consider it to be a 'house'. Upon its activation as humans move into the house and occupy the space, the house becomes a 'home'. This cycle fluctuates and shifts at different paces given that often a 'home' is occupied and reoccupied at a steady pace by various homeowners or tenants, never allowing for the house to fully enter back into 'house' status. A 'house' can also lie dormant for a long period of time as an empty 'house'. An example that can presently be found in the Hamlets of Wassaic, New York and Abernathy, Saskatchewan as each community has experienced a great deal of economic down turn over the past thirty years. I have created this



definition of 'house' and 'home' to help me work through the life cycle of the domestic space. In no way do I claim my definition to be a definitive resolution about the use of the terms 'house' and 'home'. For the sake of clarity, throughout this paper I will be using the word 'house' to define the unoccupied space that once was or might become a 'home' and the term 'home' to define a space that is being lived in, in a domestic sense. I also recognize that the iconic image that I am using in my work to define a 'house' or 'home' is situated within a specific era, class and geographical location. As I am a middle class, fourth generation Canadian, I acknowledge the inherit privilege imbedded in the work I am creating. Although not all viewers will have the same knowledge or experience with the pentagonal 'house' structure I am using in my work, I believe the image holds enough weight as a symbolic icon to represent not only the physical structure but also the much more metaphorical notion of 'home'.

Sigmund Freud's concepts of the uncanny and Gaston Bachelard's musings on memory and the home have greatly informed the theoretical underpinnings of my studio practice. My interrogations of concepts of the 'house' and 'home' will pay special attention to these theories as I explore the significance of kit or catalog homes. I will also be looking to film, namely horror films, and their use of the haunted house narrative as a device for exploring the uncanny in the domestic sphere.

## The Uncanny

In Freud's *Uncanny* he grapples with the complexities of defining the *unheimlich* or uncanny; these terms are defined partially by their inability to be fully explained, that which is hidden or repressed as it is exposed (132). This is a significant problem in working with the uncanny. The feeling is based in the avoidance of expressing what should not be revealed. Freud dissects the etymology of the German *heimlich* and its opposing but interrelated counterpart *unheimlich*. Both words relate to concepts of the home and familiarity. Freud writes:

[A]mong the various shades of meaning that are recorded for the word *heimlich* there is one in which it merges with its formal antonym, *unheimlich*, so that what is called *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*... This reminds us that this word *heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which are not mutually contradictory, but very different from each other - the one relating to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden... the term 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*) applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open. (132)

As Freud suggests, an experience with the uncanny can cause a complex reaction.

The feeling is one similar to fear but usually layered with multiple related emotions, memories, or ideas. In my studio practice I call these 'weird feelings'.

Anthony Vidler defines the sense of the uncanny in horror films as "...characterized better as 'dread' than terror... its sense of lurking, unease, rather than from any clearly defined source of fear - an uncomfortable sense of haunting rather than a present apparition" (23). In *The Uncanny*, Freud goes on to clarify that the causes of sensations of the uncanny and the intense reactions it elicits vary

widely among individuals (124). It is important to keep this in mind when conceptualizing or viewing work that intends to provoke an uncanny reaction, not all viewers will be affected by the same imagery or concepts, while other viewers may have a strong reaction; to an image. Freud posits a difference between the fictional uncanny and the lived experience: "...many things that would be uncanny if they occurred in real life are not uncanny in literature ... in literature there are many opportunities to achieve uncanny effects that are absent in real life" (156). Similarly, my work is based in a lived experience, but fictional narratives inspire the work.

In my attempt to elicit feelings of the uncanny in my viewer I begin by adopting the familiar image of a 'house'. My intention is to work through the notion of the 'house' and the 'home'. A 'house' is a vessel that becomes a 'home' upon its domestication. Consequently, through abandonment for any number of reasons, a 'home' once again becomes a 'house'. It is at this crucial point that my interest in the 'house' narrative delves into works of fiction. My exploration of 'house'/'home' narratives often hinges upon film narratives, many of which are based on real life events. Freud explains that within works of fiction the writer and reader (viewer) are able to explore an amplified version of the uncanny that is not as accessible in daily life. (156-157) Freud writes, "The writer can intensify and multiply this effect far beyond what is feasible in normal experience...he tricks us by promising us everyday reality and then going beyond it" (156-57). In his writing Freud compares fairy tales to fiction in a children's story anything is possible, a

princess being revived by a kiss is magical and joyful. In a story where magic is not possible, a revived corpse is a horrifying concept, and an excellent example of the uncanny.

Horror movies, especially haunted house plots, set a premise of stable reality within their opening sequences, 'everything is normal, nothing to see here.' In addition to being completely normal the central characters, usually a family, are taking a new step in their trajectory - new jobs, new homes, new family members. There are a myriad of variations to this plot and as with real life each situation is nuanced with familial difference. In *The Shining*, written by Stephen King in 1977 and reworked by Stanley Kubrick in 1980, the seemingly fragile mother figure, Wendy Torrance, waits at home, while her husband is out of town at a job interview. The audience sees that his job interview goes exceptionally well and soon the family will be moving into the Overlook Hotel for the winter. In the 1979 movie version of *The Amityville Horror*, written in 1977 by Jay Ansen and based on real events that occurred in 1975, the strapping young George Lutz buys a house with his new wife and her kids from a former marriage. These are everyday occurrences and ordinary scenarios. Within Freud's boundaries for creating the uncanny in fiction these are examples of the ideal setup for a future dreadful experience. This kind of formulaic setup in horror movies is an important device in creating a safe, 'normal', space for the viewer to settle into before the secrets within the plot begin to reveal themselves.

## **Kit Homes/ The Double**

What does a ‘house’ communicate? In order to answer this question I first needed to settle upon a specific image or type of house and to set boundaries on what the architecture of a house looks like within the ‘house’ narrative I am creating. Through a series of events and personal experiences, to be addressed momentarily, I settled upon the kit home as the style of house I would base this work upon. To begin, I would like to connect the concept of the uncanny to the shape and blueprint of the kit home. Kit homes were mass-produced detached houses popularized between approximately 1910 to the mid-1930s. Although the major producers of kit homes continued production into the late 1980s, the most significant period of construction of kit homes was at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hunter). Kit homes were ordered via catalog and each piece of the house was shipped to the owner (via train), arriving in unassembled pieces, numbered and labeled for the owner to build himself (Hunter). The owner would follow the directions and assemble his house on site. I liken this practice to our modern relationship to Ikea furniture. Due to their mass production and the need for simple assembly the houses were not complex in style. “House designs were standardized to reduce waste in materials, but customers were encouraged to personalize their order by moving windows or doors, adding porches, fireplaces, sunrooms” (Hunter).

The very nature of the kit home prescribes a ‘doubling’ effect throughout domestic spaces. My home and your home could be exact doubles in size, shape

and style, yet differ slightly due to the placement of a window or the shape of a banister. This doubling effect is undoubtedly situated within the realm of the uncanny. Of course, this phenomenon of similarly designed homes is not restricted to the kit home. Contemporary suburban communities are developed on the premise of ‘cookie-cutter’ homes. This same uncanny scenario, wherein neighboring houses are identical to one’s own domestic sphere, unfolds upon the realization that these houses are filled with strangers and strange memories. My own work utilizes the kit home design and is informed by my personal relationship to the layout and style of kit homes.

Currently the yellow house in Wassaic is unoccupied and falling into disrepair. My own experience of seeing this abandoned ‘double’ of my childhood home evoked within me an unsettling sense of loss and mourning. I felt that my emotional reaction to this experience was not unique, but rather significantly common. At the same time that a home that is not our own evokes an unfamiliar or even uncanny feeling, finding an abandoned, dilapidated house that looks like our own home will undoubtedly evoke feelings of ‘dread’ and, perhaps momentarily, a sense of panic and loss. One cannot help feeling uncomfortable when confronting one’s own death, as insinuated by the abandoned home.

In the opening scene of the 2013 BBC America program *Orphan Black*, the lead character, Sarah, witnesses the grisly suicide of a person who looks exactly like her on a train platform. This is an example of the use of the double as a narrative tool to explore an individual’s sense of mortality through the use of the uncanny: “...it

becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (Freud, 142). Doubling is also utilized in the film *Amityville Horror*, albeit in a subtler manner than *Orphan Black*. The film is set in a beautiful Dutch colonial style home. This house is also a kit home and the familiar layout and style would have been noticeable to viewers of the film at the time of its release. This doubling has been so effective that the movie franchise and the house have been revisited and parodied for three decades and the house has become an iconic image. In fact, this style of house was offered as a kit through a handful of kit home companies. It is likely that doubles of the *Amityville Horror* house exist across North America. The setting of such a dreadful, ‘true’, story in such a familiar place is driven by the idea that ‘it could happen to you!’ My work is based in the slippage of reality that this frequent occurrence of doubling offers to, “...the helplessness we experience in certain dream states” (144). This unsettling feeling accompanies the knowledge that my home is not my home because it is also your home and visa versa.

## **Anthropomorphism**

In *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film*, Barry Curtis discusses the anthropomorphic relationship we have with our homes in relation to the haunted house in film. He writes, “There is something unsettling about the house’s brooding self-possession, its visual complexity and its anthropomorphic façade. It is identified as a troubled place marked by neglect, strange habits and failed rituals of order and maintenance” (30). Similarly in *Geography of the Home*, Akiko Busch recalls her young son’s anthropomorphized drawings of the family home: “The resemblance of this outline of a simple house to the human face was unmistakable... And it occurs to me that this primitive rendering captures the way we imprint ourselves on the place we live” (24). This desire to imagine the ‘house’ as a sentient object is also found within popular idioms like ‘if these walls could talk’. The human body is projected onto the form of the house, and in turn the house is projected onto the human body: ‘the eyes are the window to the soul’, ‘home is where the heart is’, ‘your body is a temple’. The structure of a house itself is an anthropomorphized space or object. It is not uncommon to see a house, inhabited or abandoned, and to gain a sense that the space is either welcoming or unwelcoming. Curtis touches upon a possible reason for the discomfiting power of an anthropomorphized inanimate object, writing that “houses are deeply implicated with humanity, and yet they are not human” (10). This convergence between human and inhuman is a fertile site for scenarios of the uncanny to unfold. Susan



Stewart offers further insight noting that anthropomorphism is a human projection of self. She writes, "... in order that its image might return to us: onto the other, the mirror, the animal, and the machine, and onto the artistic image" (125). This notion recalls Akiko Busch's child projecting the human form onto the drawing of the house.

The most productive contemporary illustrations of linkages between the uncanny and the anthropomorphized space/object of the 'house' are found within popular fictional narratives. An abandoned house or disturbed home is not only the setting for traumatic events in film but it also acts as a character in the plot. *The Amityville Horror* and *The Shining* are excellent examples of stories wherein a house or dwelling becomes an ominous presence and character in a story. Curtis, referring to the agency given to the house in these narratives, writes that, "the haunted house brings its occupants into confrontation with older and usually crueller times as the latent signs of life that are coded into its structure manifest itself" (32). Conversely, in other more wholesome genres of fiction the 'house' is both the heart of the family unit and the keeper of memories. Popular sit-coms and family dramas on prime time television are often based around the interior of the family home.

The popular adage 'if these walls could talk...' implies that the 'house' itself is an omnipresent viewer, and a keeper of secrets. Depending on the context this can be perceived as comforting or deeply disturbing. Following the logical narrative of the anthropomorphized 'house', allotting human qualities to the abandoned dwelling and in particular one that has fallen into considerable disrepair, it is my own

assertion that the structure of the 'house' is comparable to a corpse or a dead 'thing'. Through this collapsing and disrepair, the 'house' becomes what Julia Kristeva describes as abject: "[t]he corpse, the most sickening of waste, is a border that has encroached upon everything" (3). A dilapidated 'house' can no longer be re-domesticated by new owners and resurrected as a home. Its corpse like state has pushed it into a new, less definable category. As Kristeva writes, "[w]hat does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). In dissecting these concepts for my project I am prompted to ask, if a 'house' has fallen so far into disrepair that it cannot be a home any more, may it still be called a 'house'? Dilapidation or demolition causes an abrupt end to the life cycle of the concept of 'house'/'home'.

Not all abandoned houses are dilapidated. Some are perfectly habitable but remain vacant for one reason or another. Rachel Whiteread's *Ghost* (1990) and *House* (1993) explore vacant interior space, encapsulating the crypt-like essence of the empty house. Andrew Graham Dixon describes Whiteread's concrete sculptures and notes the presence of anthropomorphism in these works:

[A] monument made out of void space, a thing constructed out of the absence of things... The sculpture has a peculiar, almost anthropomorphic quality, or at least the traces of humanity that it bears are so strong that it ends up feeling oddly human for such an evidently non-figurative work of art."

These concrete monuments are heavy, fixed objects. Somehow the weight of their materials mimics the metaphorical weight of the past that has been stored within the walls of the structure. Although the works are impenetrable the mind is able to

wander through the filled in void. A 'house' is always penetrable for the mind to wander through even when the physical task would be impossible.

The breathing of the inflatable house represents the concept of the lifecycle of 'house' and 'home' that I have addressed through out this paper but throughout the creation of my work I have also thought of the inflatable house as a singular 'body'; with a specific anthropomorphic physicality. The body of the house breathes in a big breath, filling up so it appears it might burst, suddenly it exhales and slumps into a defeated posture. As with Whitread's work this house is impenetrable, the viewers of the work frequently asked go inside to see its interior, but due to my choice of an opaque material, like a body, this is an impossible request. The house can only be entered though the imagination of the viewer, and in this action each interior imagined is different, while still a double.

## **Memory/ narrative/ *The Poetics of Space***

Memory is unreliable. When we recall a space from our own past, Bachelard reminds us that our memory of space is neither whole nor accurate (5). In his discussion of childhood, Bachelard ponders what may be revealed through an individual's memories of their first dwelling (5). According to Bachelard, the childhood home is "our first universe" (4). This space is further complicated when it is experienced through the recalled narrative of the parent. When every detail of the space is warped through time, scale and the influence of emotional recall, "the house is not experienced from day to day only on the thread of a narrative or in the telling of our own story" (5). Memories are stored within the self-created walls of a familiar home and thus to recall a moment in time is also to recall the surrounding space. This established 'house' in the memory travels with us to each new step in our lives as "an entire past comes to dwell in a new house. The old saying 'we bring our lairs with us' has many variations" (5). The physical house that we see from the outside looking in is explored internally through the passages of the 'house' stored within the mind.

Bachelard's exploration of the remembered house is primarily a happy one. He finds comfort in the childhood home, noting that "[w]hen we dream of the house we were born in, in the utmost depths of reverie, we participate in this original warmth, in this well tempered matter of the material paradise" (7). For Bachelard, home is a comfortable space with plenty of room for daydreaming. For this project,

I am interested in how these spaces that we recall from our past and construct in our memories are intrinsically sad or uncanny. I am examining how feelings of nostalgia for the past lead to an experienced feeling of loss or mourning for something that never was. Susan Stewart takes a particularly analytical view of nostalgia. She writes, “Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack” (23). Bachelard’s writing is a memory sequence in soft focus, slow motion and with masterful lighting while Susan Stewart’s critique of nostalgia and longing is imbued with sadness. I am interested in examining and combining both approaches in my studio practice.

Narrative, nostalgia and memory are essential topics in my work; the mind is able to wander through imagined or impenetrable spaces because of the relationship between objects and memory. The ‘home’ is recalled in tandem with loaded memories. The space is rebuilt as is necessary in order for the memory to take place. As the memory fades the space it occupied collapses into the recesses of the mind. The ‘house’ is reborn and dies. A memory fills the mind and deflates.

I have constructed an inflatable house that breathes within the gallery space. The physicality of the house is a symbol for the constructed ‘house’ within a person’s memory. Upon its inflation the house itself is incomplete and the details and image of the house are flattened; similar to the inconsistency and inaccuracies I experience with memory the inflatable house is inconsistent with reality. Viewers

of the inflated object are welcome to transfer their internal home into the impenetrable space. As an object it welcomes daydreaming and nostalgia. But the moment at which the house is at its most 'homely' is brief. Through the animation of the inflatable house I am exploring the brief movements of clarity I experience (and I expect others experience) when trying to recall moments in time and past narratives, be they lived or fictional.

In addition to the clear moments or the period of time that the house is filled to represent a 'house' or 'home' the structure also goes through a process where it begins to over-fill with air and balloon out like a bubble about to burst. The gallery space is overwhelmed as much as the interior of the inflatable is. The action of the house causes tension and anxiety as the house has pushed past comfort into discomfort and awkwardness. This tension is broken when the fan turns off and the house deflates, falling back into a comfortable stage of 'homely-ness', then further down into a pathetic, deflation. The image is lost, the house is no longer a home but a deflated 'nothing' on the floor, a carcass. This animated process follows a narrative trajectory from a sense of memory and longing through to the uncanny, the anthropomorphized object and the double. The house repeats these actions exhaustively. Like a repeated memory in the mind, obsessing over a point in time, the house breathes.

Do-ho Suh's recreations of his present and former dwellings are commonly suspended from the ceiling allowing them to float within the gallery space. His detailed work is meticulously sewn out of transparent fabric. The translucency of

the work implies a ghostly presence of the structures. In her exhibition introduction Chuyoung Lee, Associate Curator of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea writes about Do-ho Suh's *Home Within Home* (2009-2011), "The walls made of flimsy transparent fabric of refreshing color let the inside and outside views pass through them to cancel the weight of the enormous structure and simultaneously to enhance the sentiments of the visitors with 'weightless memories' of their own 'spaces'" (Lee). Through Do-ho Suh's personal experiences with his notion of 'home' the viewer is welcome to insert their own memory of home within the transparent buildings, while considering the artists personal narrative. Similar to Do-ho Suh's interweaving of experience, theory and memory I use the theories of Bachelard and Freud and examples from film and art to demonstrate how I make meaning in my work.

The connections that I make in my work to outside sources are often loosely connected, but I find them to be immensely helpful in supporting me in grounding myself within a space for creation. Within the films, art and theories that I use to support my artistic practice there is a sense of beauty that I am initially drawn to, but if one were to scratch the surface there is also a hidden darkness or sadness. What connects me to art and film is also sense of loss, remorse, or longing for what was and cannot be found or fixed.

The work in *Abandoned Homes and Haunted Houses* is beautiful, through the use of beauty the work is more inviting for the viewer to get close to the work, and

examine its parts. After taking some time with the work, the viewer can more slowly make connections to the loss and the horror imbued in the piece.



## **Studio Narrative**

I began investigating the yellow house in Wassaic, by wandering the yard with a camera and, without breaking into the house, I documented as much as I could of the structure. I documented the house during the day and at night, on video and with a still camera. During the night I would use a flashlight as a light source. My interest in visiting the house at night stemmed from my interest in the folklore of hauntings and ghost stories. The footage I captured on these visits will be used to inform future works. After collecting a large amount of source material I went to the studio to work through the problem of developing work around my interest in this house, the similarities it shared with my childhood home and my general interest in what 'house', as a concept, signifies.

Using my computer as a light box I traced out images of the house from every angle onto tracing paper. I taped the tracing paper to a piece of fabric and then, using my sewing machine, I slowly traced over the image of the house with thread set at a straight stitch. Once the image was completely sewn, I tore away the remaining tracing paper. From this point I began experimenting with surfaces to embroider on, using rabbit skin glue on fabric to create a stiffer surface and experimenting with patterned fabric or coloured thread. I accumulated a small series of samples as I became more comfortable with my technique and the process I was developing. Among my samples was the image sewn onto white paper. The image of the house floating on a vacant backdrop, scaled down to a miniature had

an effect that corresponded with the emotional response I was having in the presence of the yellow house. This piece triggered in me the “ah-ha!” moment that is crucial to my process in my studio practice. Through the process of trying different approaches to a problem I was able to identify an image that I felt was strong, and revealed themes that I am interested in exploring. This included repetition and my interest in the double. The image of the sewn house is a miniaturized version of the real life abandoned house that I interpreted to be like a daunting tomb or monument in a small community. I wanted to find a way to animate that space; this miniaturization of the house is a tangible way for me to do that as well as present large concepts (the uncanny, the double) in a palatable way.

My interrogation of what haunts a space is more coherently explored through a ‘model’ of a space rather than the lived experience of a true ‘haunted house’. Rather than using photographs, video or an installation for viewers to engage in, like a fair ground, ‘haunted house’, I explored the notion of haunting as a breath or memory. I also chose to animate and soften an object that should be rigid and sturdy.

I carried on with sewing the house from all angles, repetitively. The repetition of the process of sewing is an important action in my practice. In the past this has taken shape through the act of embroidery and quilting in performative settings as well as in the privacy of my studio. Often the push and pull of relaxation and anxiety in repetition mirrors the subject matter of my work. The work I have created in the past is positioned in a state of desire for humour, empathy and

comfort, yet I am consistently pulled into a place of disquiet and anxiety. The most concise example of this is an ongoing series of quilts I created called *Nightmare Quilts*. Friends and family are invited to write to me about their bad dreams. In return I lovingly transcribe their nightmares into imagery for a queen size quilt through the use of patchwork and applique. The dreamer is asked to sleep with their quilt as a way to comfortably confront their nightmares. The project is a dark joke, designed to both comfort and scare.

Throughout my practice I strive to make work that holds this position within both comfort and anxiety. The paper works I created from the source material of the yellow house present the image of a typical ‘house’. Their thread work is simple and resembles a basic line drawing. Wisps of thread resembling roots or tails hang from the image. While working on the pieces I associated these threads with the “ectoplasm” captured in Victorian-era spirit photography.

Moving forward from the works on paper I chose to use the house as an opportunity to explore my interest in movement, repetition and scale. The paper pieces are miniaturized houses. The images are beautiful and convey a sense of mourning or haunting. My next goal was to make a piece that would blow up to an overwhelming size and convey a range of emotions through its actions. I wanted the object to possess the metaphorical implications of an overwhelming behavior. The inflation and deflation of the house is no different. The house holds a heavy-hearted intention but through its collapse and growth the viewer sees the house in pathetic postures and witnesses the ridiculousness of a sculpture growing too large

for display. Its size has been selected to barely fit within the gallery space. As the house fills the gallery space the viewer is physically pushed back into the edges or corners of the space, the house acts metaphorically and physically as an intrusion. Physically speaking there is nowhere for the viewer to go but into the remaining space in the room. Metaphorically the house represents an object or idea that becomes all encompassing or overwhelming. For this to be obvious to the viewing audience the size of the house had to be almost as large as the exhibition space it was presented in. The embroidery on the large work implies an obsessive amount of time spent on the piece. The action of sewing something so large for so long adds to the anxiety of the work, for both the viewer who can see the labour invested in the work, and for myself as I labour on the piece.

The inflatable house is impenetrable. The interior of the house is not accessible to the viewer. This impregnable nature mimics the experience of viewing any unfamiliar house a person may encounter in their day to day. The intention of the piece is to invite the viewer to imagine an interior that mirrors the 'house' they see in their mind's eye when asked to think about the concept of 'house'. The essence of 'house'/'home' is communicated through memory and association.

The piece deflates and re-inflates. This movement is where the theoretical ideas that I am exploring begin to merge with the work. Memory is a living thing. It must be engaged with or activated. Through its activation memory expands. Ruminated upon for too long, memory can become overwhelming or pathetic. But for brief moments we get a structured piece of narrative from the past. I have designed the

inflatable house to act out this experience. The interior of the house is different for every viewer, and so the engagement with the piece will be different for everyone. The house is a symbol for the domestic past. The degree of anxiety, joy, or melancholy that is experienced by the viewer is personal and specific to each individual. The house breathes, it is animated, anthropomorphic and its life cycle is repetitive. This combination of elements situates the work between comfort and discomfort.

The necessity for a fan to inflate the object, then turn off to allow the piece to deflate is a crucial aspect of the meaning of the work. My associations of breath to life, death, anxiety and memory are linked intrinsically to the piece being able to physically breathe in the gallery. This breathing effect is achieved through a switch that turns the large fan on and off on a timer. In the studio I worked with a number of sizes and strengths of fan in order to inflate the house in the desired way. In the end I discovered that a large house fan works best. The fan is sewn onto a nylon tube that pumps air into the house when the fan is on.

My methodological approaches include processes of trial and error, repetition and sampling. I have engaged with these processes in my use of fabric and embroidery. The inflatable house is constructed with two layers, an interior plastic layer and an exterior muslin layer. The exterior fabric is unbleached muslin. Muslin is often used for pattern making in clothing design, as it is inexpensive and easy to work with. The nature of the fabric holds significance to the project. It carries with it a great deal of historical and domestic significance. It is commonly used in a vast

range of applications from pattern drafting for fashion design, the creation of affordable and practical clothing, to a vast array of medical and culinary usages. Because muslin maintains a presence within every room of every home it is literally the matter that transforms a house into 'home'. Sewing patterns share similarities to blueprints: in sewing, the replication and doubling of an object begins with muslin.

The house's details were flattened to replicate the original photographs and drawings. I projected an image of each side of the house recreating my earlier technique with the paper drawings. However, the issue of scale led me to a distinct difference in the power of the image and details of the house. On a large space, conventional sewing thread looked like a fine and somewhat passive line. I decided to use thicker lacing yarn and a couching stitch to recreate the strong lines I had originally achieved with the thread in the paper drawings. Couching is a process of using a threaded zigzag stitch to affix a heavier yarn to a surface.

Finding the right materials to use for the interior bladder of the house included experiments with various weights of plastics and nylon. My process involved the creation of a series of small-scale houses. First I made several small versions in paper. Then I moved on to duplicating this process in plastic sheeting and shower curtains. After that I moved on to a mid-sized version in rip-stop nylon. The rip-stop nylon house was four feet cubed and introduced the use of an air pump to inflate the work. Finally I built the full sized large-scale work, filling out to nine feet wide, eleven feet long and ten feet high. Here I had to consider the size of the

gallery that the work would be shown in. I wanted the piece to fill the space uncomfortably, but not push the viewer out of the space entirely. I chose to embroider every side of the house, regardless of the visibility knowing that hints of the backyard would be seen as the house crumbled into itself. Parts of the house remain secret. Like the interior space, it requires the viewer to imagine some of the details. I have lined the inside of the house with plastic drop sheets purchased from a hardware store. Although the viewer cannot see the internal structure they can hear it crinkling as it deflates. The sound mimics a creaky house and adds to the allusion to a collapsing house.

The house never fully falls to the ground, once it reaches half capacity the fan regenerates and the house refills with air. This lack of total dilapidation implies an opportunity for rebirth. The house appears to be breathing, slowly, rather than dying, this is an important element in the work. I believe these spaces of abandonment and hauntings are dichotomies, in one way the work represents failure, regret and loss but in the other half of the house's lifecycle there is an opportunity for rebirth, and potential. This potential is most easily seen within my choice of fabric in the work.

## **Textiles/ Repetition**

My choice to use muslin is directly linked to my interest in the kit home, patterns, and the quotidian nature of the fabric. Muslin is a fabric that is most often used in pattern making. As an undergrad costume design student it was my job to alter muslin patterns to fit actors for stage productions. In a process similar to that used in ordering a kit home, I altered the initial pattern slightly to suit each individual. In a sense, muslin is an adaptable, non-fabric. It can become whatever we need it to be as we project our vision of a future garment upon it.

In my decision to use muslin I wanted to explore how memory can be projected onto fabric through the use of a material that is intended to go unnoticed. Muslin's relationship or role in manufacturing is found in pattern making and the building of new things: in particular clothing. The fabric represents newness, and creation. Muslin is also a fabric that represents an in between state, my choice to use this particular material in my work was for the fabric's status as 'that which should remain hidden', as it is rarely used in a finished product. Rather than making a house that would be remembered for its texture, pattern and the quality of its fabric, I chose to use a material that could blend in as a subtlety as a pine 2x4 might as a building material.

Memory is a quality that is attributed to fabric in a number of ways. A piece of fabric can be trained to fit the body in a certain way or worn-in to maximize comfort like a lucky t-shirt or a cozy blanket. Fabric also picks up stains and fades with time. The wear and tear of fabric is proof of the process through which fabric



recalls the past. During the exhibition of the inflatable house the muslin “remembers” the motion of growing and collapsing. Within this recall the viewer can see wrinkles in the fabric as the house falls comfortably in a pattern.

Similarly, Janet Morton’s *Cozy* (1999) is a patchwork of white and beige cardigans and sweaters knit together to fit the form of a small bungalow on Ward’s Island in Toronto. The house sat covered in a custom made garment for 18 days in the fall of 1999 (Quinton). The work was later moved to downtown Toronto and set upon a scaffold to retain its original shape. In her curatorial essay *There’s No Place Like Home: Janet Morton’s Knitted Sculptures*, Sarah Quinton describes the second iteration of the piece as, “a powerful symbol of home” (Quinton). Morton’s work shifted in meaning when it was relocated and hollowed out. The form of the house became a symbol for onlookers. Additionally the work became an anthropomorphized object as gusts of wind blew through the interior. “With each new gust,” Quinton writes, “it was as though the sculpture took deep, deliberate breaths and pondered its new and unlikely, albeit temporary, circumstances” (Quinton). The house appeared to be in a state of contemplation, inviting viewers to ruminate on the concept of ‘home’.

The use of second-hand sweaters to build the piece compounds notions of memory that inform the work. Each sweater and cardigan carries the memories of its previous owner, the “physical marks and the familiar materials that carry them evoke real memories and illusory responses” (Quinton). A garment and a house are similar objects when one considers their use and the imbedded sense of memory

and nostalgia within the material they are made of. The house, like a garment, becomes stained and worn-in over time; each of these marks made by its owners is used to recall moments in time.

The repetitive behavior of my inflatable house is an action that not only ties into the anthropomorphizing of space, and the life cycle of the 'house'/'home', but also to the modes of production that I have chosen to engage in creating the work. The embroidery on the house was a laborious, physically exhausting task. Repetition acts as a meditative process, but at the same time it is a desperate action. In each new revolution of the same action there is an attempt to recreate the same stitch or pattern as the last. There comes a point in a repetitive action where the body begins to feel as if it has entered into a sort of purgatory. The push and pull of relaxation and anxiety inherent in repetitive acts mirrors the subject matter of my work.

Viewers who entered the gallery space commonly reacted to both the physicality of the work; the push and pull of the breathing structure, as well as the lack of space that was made available for their own mobility in the space. I found most viewers commented on feeling pushed out of the space, but compelled to move in closer to examine and touch the work. As viewers leaned in closer to examine the work, they often verbally noted the labour it must have taken to create the inflatable house. Within the viewer's reactions and comments about the work, I found a doubling effect in the viewer's reactions to the structure of the house.

## **Conclusion**

This house will take new forms as I continue to explore materials and scale. The use of nylon and tarp as alternative fabrics to muslin will change the feeling and meaning of the work. I am interested in seeing how different materials will affect the overall impact of the work. Additionally I will be researching exhibition space and considering how the work shifts when presented outdoors or in a larger exhibition space.

Following the exhibition at 2186 Dundas this work will be shown in a variety of different locations. I am excited to see how the work changes as it shifts location. In addition to the inflatable house traveling beyond its original exhibition space so will the house drawings on paper. Two of the drawings will be traveling to Wassaic for exhibition in a summer exhibition of past residents. I am interested to see how the work will be received in the home of its origins.

Through a reflexive process in my studio I have been able to broach the concept of 'house'/'home', memory and the uncanny. In my exploration of these ideas I have created an installation that evokes a sense of comfort and discomfort and through this examination of 'weird feelings' I have been able to touch on one of the many ways that a 'house' can communicate. A 'house' is imbued with the memories of former dwellers as onlookers and new habitants project memory on the space. The 'house' is a transformable space and through its elasticity, meaning can be placed upon it and pulled from within. The physicality of the house is a

symbol for the constructed 'house' within a person's memory.

For this project I sought out to create an animated, soft model of a specific abandoned 'home' as a means to explore the notion of double and the lifecycle of the house. I chose to explore a North American kit home as the subject of my interrogation as it related to my personal history and for the iconic shape of the house as it is represented in North American popular culture. This project is one example of how the concept of 'house' can be explored through narrative, memory, and repetition. The inflatable house is constructed from an innocuous fabric designed to blend in and adapt. The doubling effect of the concept of 'house' as envisaged by the kit home has enabled me to create a work, the inflatable house that is able to take on multiple meanings as individual viewers project their experiences upon it.

Additionally I have connected notions of comfort and discomfort to my use of fabric and craft practices by considering what is communicated through these mediums. While I will continue to create work that situates itself within this dialogue, my new work will take me into a territory of exploring different materials as well as new locations and themes.

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**Appendix: Photo Documentation**



Figure 1. Wassaic House. Front View. Brette Gabel, 2013



Figure 2. The Inflatable House (deflated). Installation shot. Brette Gabel, 2014



Figure 3. The Inflatable House (inflated). Installation shot. Brette Gabel, 2014



Figure 4. The Inflatable House (installation shot). Brette Gabel, 2014



