

2006

## Here ... *is the place where you are*

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**Here... is the place where you are<sup>1</sup>**

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In this paper I will be discussing my use of material and process as conceptual elements for exploration in my practice, and the ways that narrative intersects with my work. I will be focusing on the first four works in ‘here’, my ongoing body of sculpture, installation and video works. These works examine human relationships with place through a lens of the contemporary and historical.

I am not exclusively a textile artist although I have used textiles periodically throughout my practice and extensively in the last several years. In my practice I draw on the social, personal and formal connotations of a wide range of materials and processes as integral conceptual components. Because of a heightened social relevance associated with the development of cultures in relation to both domestic and industrial territory, I have found textiles to be particularly suited to the embodiment of the issues I am currently exploring. Most, but not all, of the work I will present in this paper is situated within the realm of textile practice.

My work incorporates aspects of memory and history, cultural and personal iconography, and elements of the social and political to examine continua of human behavior. In connection to this path of inquiry in general, and in particular to my current explorations into issues relating to place and belonging, I am interested in the ways in which knowledge is indirectly communicated through generations, how experience and memory seep from one generation to the next to inform identity and agency. I see the familial narrative as a significant part of this intangible process - amalgams of subjective memory that act as conduits through which the lived experiences of our ancestors filter through time to inhabit our character.

...*here* indicates that someone is offering something to somebody<sup>1</sup>

I grew up, not uncommonly, with a father who was a teller of stories. It wasn't until after his death earlier this year, however, that I understood through the course of many conversations that what he was engaged in was a deliberate epistemology of story-telling. Although they were told with intention, my father's stories were often enigmatic, contradictory and inconclusive. You brought to them your experience and from them you had to divine meaning. They were repeated not merely out of habit but as an opportunity to dig through the layers and find what was relevant at the time.

My approach to conveying meaning bears similarities to my father's. I work with shifting strata of fragmented and interwoven narratives that are underpinned by ambiguity, contradiction, confidence, intent and uncertainty, and are constructed to allow for multiple points of entry.

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<sup>1</sup> Microsoft Word X Dictionary, 2001.

Of course the telling of stories, like the writing of history is riddled with omissions and inaccuracies – that which is left out revealing as much as what has been said. Until I was well into adulthood, I did not know about the chapter in my maternal grandfather’s life that preceded his arrival in Canada. In 1917 at the age of 14, he narrowly escaped the destruction of his small Jewish village and with it the death of his family, and then spent ten years in repeated displacement throughout Eastern Europe. This story was a point of reference in the inception of the works in ‘here’ informing the direction of my research through its relationship to the intricacies of states of belonging, and broader issues of location and dis/location.



*stills from video here #4: back to front, 2006*

The video ‘here #4: back to front’ was created for a touring bookworks exhibition on the theme of lineage. It was originally made to be viewed as a loop on a portable dvd player the size of a large paperback with a hinged lid that opens like a book



*stills from video here #4: back to front, 2006*

My interest in this work was to explore intersections of lineage and place, and of belonging, loss and resilience. It incorporates the placing of stones - a Jewish custom that honours the dead by marking a visit to their grave, as a metaphor for history, remembrance and, particularly, agency - and a book of my grandfather's that chronicles the travels of Job which, as the gift his father gave him upon leaving their village and the only possession that survived his circuitous journey to Canada, it is my single tangible connection to his past.



*stills from video **here** #4: back to front, 2006*

Narrative is imbricated into this video's structure and content. It is a book within a book within a book - the performer writes place with accumulating footprints that trace the enactment of a perimeter, and maps time through the ritual of the placing and removal of stones.

...*here* indicates a situation or event that is happening at the present time<sup>2</sup>

In the first three works from 'here' I have incorporated commonplace but contextually incongruous elements, fundamental textile techniques and digital video with the intent of interrupting superficial associations and suggesting the reality of unsettled narratives. Each one represents the beginning of an exploration into a particular issue concerning our relationships with place. Having been exhibited together in the incarnations discussed here, they are each now evolving into individual installations.

My process of making begins with experimentation and involves a great deal of repetition. Repetition in the processes of making is often mirrored as a tool of expression in the resulting work. It holds notions of both the collective and the individual, foregrounds aspects of difference and homogeneity, and can be harnessed to create or disrupt order. Repetition is for me a form of collecting, meditation and research.

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<sup>2</sup> . *Microsoft Word X Dictionary*, 2001.



*raze 2006*  
*felted wool, thread*  
*size variable*  
*Photo: Rob Lovatt*  
*Courtesy of the artist*

In 'raze', hollow cast felt houses are suspended from the ceiling by fine thread. Hanging in a grid pattern at about gut level they appear to be resting on a virtual plane in space. The shadows cast on the floor disrupt the house form extending outside the confines of the grid to create a distorted mirror of the houses above.

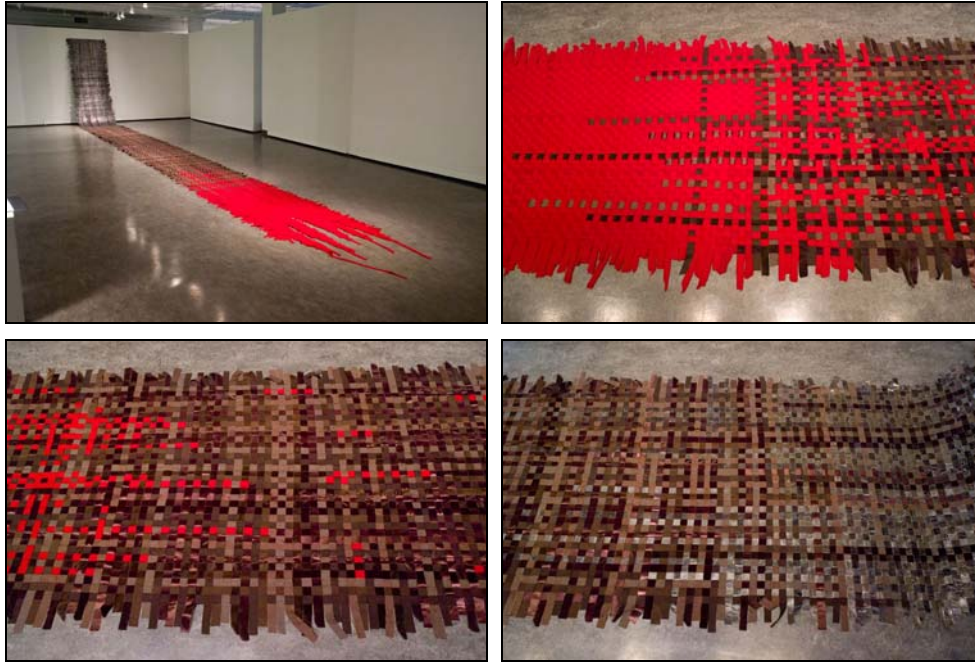


*raze (details)*  
*Photo: Rob Lovatt*  
*Courtesy of the artist*

A remarkably haptic and evocative material, felt also conjures human presence, connecting to the body through the sensuality of its texture and the process of its construction. At once displaying structural integrity and a soft permeable texture, it carries both inherent strength and intense vulnerability, and as an insulating material it acts as a metaphoric barrier between interior and exterior.

'Whole Cloth' emerged from two interrelated streams of thought: the role that labour, culture and generational continuum play in creating place, and the construction of and attachment to place as a human imperative and a potentially destructive force.

Although this piece is by no means intended to refer to the specific, the root of its inception was a response to a four and a half hour documentary film called 'Route 181, Fragments of a Journey to Palestine-Israel'. This film chronicles the co-directors, Palestinian Michele Khalife and Israeli Eyal Sivan as they travel along the 1947 demarcation line that divided Palestine according to UN Resolution 181, talking to people with a variety of viewpoints on the Palestine-Israeli conflict.



***Whole Cloth*** 2006

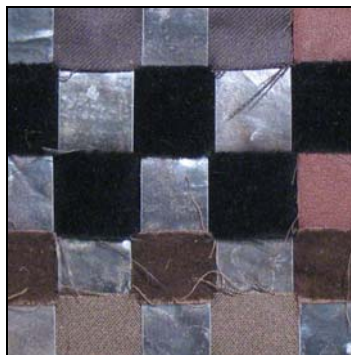
*Lead, felted wool, fabric*

*40' x 4'*

*Photo: Rob Lovatt*

*Courtesy of the artist*

I rarely use the figure though my work always revolves around human experience. I often work with presence denoted by absence and, as in this piece, utilize labour-intensive processes to imbue the work with a physicality that references human presence. 'Whole Cloth' descends from the wall extending 40 feet onto the gallery and is woven off loom from strips of felted wool, fabric and sheet lead.



***Whole Cloth (detail)***

*Courtesy of the artist*

Lead is a material I often work with. A substance of contradictions, it is poisonous if ingested but used as protection from the harmful effects of x-rays, and as a barrier against sound and decay. Its disproportionate weight implies gravity in all senses of the word, its weight having been aptly described as 'a desire to fall.'<sup>3</sup>

...*here* is used to introduce or draw attention to a topic<sup>4</sup>

I often harness the personal as a point of departure from which to engage in intensive inquiries and to develop conceptual trajectories. However, my work is intrinsically rooted in social and political concerns.

'trespass/es', for instance, began as a manifestation of my experience of place as a community of people rather than geographical location. As I continued to work on this piece I became increasingly interested in exploring complexities intrinsic in the contemporary context and their relationships to threads that run through the past. Thinking about my own history and my own constructions of place in relation to the broader North American context led me to focus, from my perspective as a descendent of immigrants, on legacies of displacement embedded in our colonial history.



*trespass/es* 2006  
clothes, soil, video  
size variable

Photo: Rob Lovatt. Courtesy of the artist.

In 'trespass/es', the quilt serves as the primary image. It is inserted into an interplay between digital video and textiles forming a dialogue that settles across centuries. Though rooted in a tradition of necessity and thrift, the quilt has historically been both a site of transgression and a method of chronicling current events and personal milestones, while video has become a contemporary repository of familial and cultural narratives.

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<sup>3</sup> Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, (Knopf, 1975) 92.

<sup>4</sup> *Microsoft Word X Dictionary*, 2001.



*trespass/es (details)*

*Photo: Rob Lovatt. Courtesy of the artist.*

The video element of this piece, an eight-minute silent repeating loop projected on the wall above the head of the bed, echoes its fabric counterpart. Constructed from single frames, its editing process can be seen as analogous to the quilt's production. The quilt is filled with soil, an imperfect container with edges that are open and unfinished. It is pieced together from over three hundred squares of fabric that are recognizable as having been cut from articles of clothing. Tracks of tiny red stitches intermittently span the seams between its squares, picking up and leaving off randomly.



*stills from video for trespass/es, 2006*

My work results from a synthesis of the intellectual, the intuitive and the making - a dialogue between my head, my gut, and my hands. The making is very much a part of my thought process. Tactile and technical investigations into the qualities of the material and both the potential and limitations of process parallel search and research into the issues I explore.

The making is the conduit that connects intellect and intuition. It is the method by which I travel through temporal and geographical landscapes - the process of thought that connects fragments of narrative, tracing the threads that bind subjective history and experience to conditions and interactions that transcend time, location and the individual.

*...here is used to refer to people in general and their life on earth<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> *Microsoft Word X Dictionary, 2001.*