2017

The Loss You Feel

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The Loss You Feel

A Thesis Presented

by

ANDREW NAPOLI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2017

Department of Art
THE LOSS YOU FEEL

A Thesis Presented

by

ANDREW NAPOLI

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ABSTRACT

THE LOSS YOU FEEL

May 2017

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M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Susan Jahoda

The Loss You Feel is an examination of my personal artistic exploration of disposable objects and everyday actions as sites of potential introspection and understanding. Through an investigation of the mundane and its capacity for transformation, this paper maintains that a more deliberate engagement with the prosaic may reveal dynamic spaces between the familiar and the strange, the inanimate and the autonomous, and that actively engaging these spaces helps to facilitate both empathy and understanding.
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The staircase in my childhood home consisted of thirteen steps. In other words, to get from one floor to the other, one would step up or down fourteen times. As a child, I developed the habit of counting with each step, a habit that continues to this day, regardless of the staircase. I remember cleaning the steps periodically with a yellow plastic bench brush with soft black bristles. I remember the gradual accumulation of dust and grit as I worked my way backwards from the second floor landing, the sound of the plastic knocking against wood as I cleaned between the warped white balusters. Over time, as books began to accumulate on each of the thirteen steps, this ritual shifted to reflect the altered terrain. Instead of the brush, I used wet paper towels to clean each step individually from between the balusters to the edges of the stacked books.

Much of my childhood was informed by this negotiation of space as objects came and went, though always with the net effect of accumulation. Over time, as rooms were slowly filled and closed off, I could sense myself yielding to the presence of thousands of objects, recalibrating my movements and resigning myself to fewer and fewer pathways. At some point during my high school years, the pull-up bar in my bedroom doorway was repurposed, and I found myself having to either squeeze through or crawl under a curtain of tweed sports jackets, which I jokingly referred to as the “Birth Canal.”

My relationship to these objects was typically sympathetic, in the sense that we seemed to have an unspoken understanding of our need to coexist. Occasionally this
sympathy manifested in superstitions that would govern my actions and interactions; I often feared that an object could, and likely would, exact some karmic retribution if neglected or mistreated. Similarly, I worried about the feelings of toys that had fallen out of favor, offering as consolation a sort of ceremonial recognition, an honorable resting place or reimagined role or responsibility. Ultimately, I began to sense that the objects around me possessed an intrinsic power that had very little to do with me. The significance of a particular book or article of clothing, its unique history, its physical presence, was not dependent upon my recognition or appreciation. And yet, I did have the power to move, disregard, even discard these objects with relative ease and impunity.

In the opening scene of the 1972 animated film, *Snoopy Come Home*, Charlie Brown, standing with Linus on an empty beach, plucks a small black rock from the sand and joyfully throws it into the sea. Linus, upon seeing the splash, says to his friend, “Nice going, Charlie Brown. It took that rock four thousand years to get to shore, and now you’ve thrown it back.”¹ Despite its comic hyperbole, this exchange, and Charlie Brown’s subsequent guilt, illustrates a mode of interaction with the physical world that cannot quite reconcile human agency with that of the inanimate. It is a mode of interaction that characterized my childhood and informs my artistic practice. Indeed, my pseudo-ceremonial interactions with certain objects served primarily to absolve myself of the guilt I felt for imposing my will and desires onto what were clearly autonomous entities.

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Figure 1. *Snoopy, Come Home* by Bill Melendez and Charles M. Schulz, 1972. Video Still.
I grew up watching Charlie Brown videos, and for a few years of my early childhood it was a near-daily activity. To this day I have vivid, almost physical memories of the dialogue, sound effects and visual scenes that I encountered as a child. The way things tended to unfold, the logic and intricacies of Charlie Brown’s world, had a profound impact on me that continues to resonate. Looking back on these episodes now, I recognize that much of what made Charlie Brown’s experience so captivating and compelling to me as a child was the fact that he was in constant negotiation - even conflict - with his inanimate surroundings. While the agency of the beach rock is revealed only in conversation with Linus, much of Charlie Brown’s life is characterized by uncanny confrontations with objects and characters run amok: the kite-eating tree, a garden hose come to life, a pesky vine in the baseball diamond, and of course, his own pet beagle. Needless to say, I identified with this constant encroachment of Charlie Brown’s surrounding environment, and was sensitive in my own life to moments of similarly uncanny revelation.

A large proportion of my work stems from similar instances in which the mundane presents itself in a new light, opening a space between the familiar and the strange. I recognize in these moments a transformation that allows for the simultaneous recognition of both the complexities of the ordinary and the agency inherent in what we often consider inanimate. These are moments that subtly transform, however briefly, our
conceptions of, and interactions with, the surrounding world. Like Charlie Brown, I gather from these instances a culpability, not from having done something wrong, but rather from having been made aware of a reality that I had previously overlooked. There is a feeling of loss that I associate with this awareness, as the routine is emptied of its familiarity, and some emotional truth, like a rock’s journey to shore, is revealed. Through my work, I hope to convey this process so that what we perceive as mundane may instead be seen and valued as complex, multifaceted, and worthy of attention.

It is worth noting that while much of my work may stem from uncanny moments, it is not a representation or exploration of the uncanny specifically. In other words, the work itself is not necessarily uncanny. Rather, it explores and seeks to facilitate a deeper understanding of the transformative power of objects and actions through what Viktor Shklovsky refers to as “enstrangement” or defamiliarization. The repetition and duration featured in my work defamiliarizes ordinary objects and actions by “mak[ing] perception long and ‘laborious.’” Prolonged investigation, whether through the repeated representation of a particular object or the performance of a specific action, allow for an encounter with the familiar out of context. The rationality of typical, habitual understanding becomes somewhat less reliable as we are confronted with the “knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition.” In a sense, my work is a representation of the aftermath of my encounters with the uncanny, in which I attempt to make sense of and better understand the transformations that have challenged my recognition of the mundane.

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Freud, in his 1919 essay on the uncanny, presents “severed limbs, a severed head, a hand detached from the arm...feet that dance by themselves,” as well as dolls and automatons, as examples of the phenomenon, suggesting that the uncanny resides somewhere between the inanimate and the autonomous and emerges when that line is blurred or disturbed. Despite their obvious links to castration and its psychoanalytic significance, these examples do point to the great difficulty and fear with which we ascribe power to the inanimate - and even once-animate - matter that surrounds us. Indeed, theories of the uncanny would designate this emergence of autonomy as an aberration, as something that “was intended to remain secret, hidden away.” 3

And yet for me, these moments in which the familiar is rendered uncanny through some unveiling of a previously overlooked power points solely to the limits of my own perception. In her book Vibrant Matter, Jane Bennett argues that, in fact, this “vitality of matter” or “thing-power” is always present, but is concealed by “the sheer volume of commodities, and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones”. Defined as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle,” thing-power is no aberration, though its recognition may be. 4 In this sense, I find the intersection of these theories to be illuminating and constructive; the uncanny can and does function, albeit fleetingly, as an acknowledgement of thing-power, and if embraced and actively engaged as such, I believe we may better understand and care for that which surrounds us, animate and inanimate alike.

Admittedly, my artistic investigation of the mundane, of thing-power and the uncanny, began with a rather detached critique of the sympathy card as a reductive commodification of a complex sentiment. I recognized in the pastel wall of the supermarket’s Hallmark aisle a troubling simplification and fetishization of a profoundly emotional moment - a moment of interpersonal care, of grief, of reassurance. Here were the most complicated of ideas reduced to catchphrases, kitschy silhouettes and banal shades of pink, green and sky blue. Adrienne Rich, in speaking of the commodity in general, suggests that “this devaluation of language, this flattening of images, results in a massive inarticulation, even among the educated. Language itself collapses into shallowness. Everything indeed tends toward becoming a thing until people can speak only in terms of the thing, the inert and always obsolescent commodity.”  

Certainly this inarticulation is nowhere more massive than in the commodification of death, where a card that reads “Thinking of You” has somehow come to say everything that needs to be said. It seemed to me that a simple recontextualization of these cards would reveal this shallowness and somehow call into question the validity of the sympathy card as both a cultural object and a commodity. What I didn’t anticipate was the extent to which a prolonged engagement with these items could reveal the humanity surrounding them, the power they possessed as physical objects, and the profound sense of loss that they, as reductions, invariably embodied.

These revelations were in large part due to the fact that my watercolor drawings were created by projecting the scanned sympathy cards onto the paper, thus

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allowing me to quite literally enter into the card itself. No longer detached, my critique of and engagement with these cards became physical, intimate, and inseparable from the realization that they affected people in very real ways. Whatever my cultural criticisms, it became clear to me that these objects possessed a power, and that through my own personal investigation they began to transcend their semiotic limitations. What’s more, the limitations began to assert themselves in my drawings as manifestations of loss, failure and fragility.

Figure 2. Thinking of You by Andrew Napoli, 2015. Watercolor on Paper.
The text, left blank in the drawings, points beyond a “devaluation of language” to the very human tragedy of a resulting “massive inarticulation.” The cards’ characteristic flattened imagery of silhouetted trees, leaves and butterflies resists any suggestion of life, of vitality, of dimensionality that is inevitably at risk of coming to an end. Rendered in the imperfect and perceptibly erratic washes of watercolor, however, these silhouettes reveal rather than reinforce the cards’ adamant avoidance of fragility, imperfection, and ultimately death. The painful futility of keeping up appearances via the inert commodity is thus exposed.

Similarly, the faded and weathered appearance of the watercolor representation calls attention to the original card’s insistence that time, even for an instant, can stand still, that colors need not fade. The exposure of these limitations and failures, through a simple shift in context, allow for the illumination of the emotional complexities inherent in and triggered by this particular object, bringing to light its potential as a site of understanding and empathy. As will be made clear, this shift, whether contextual or durational, informs - and is in fact the impetus for - all of my work.
In the spring of 2016 my girlfriend and I drove from Massachusetts, through central New York, to Montreal. At that time, the interior of my car was heavily “decorated,” as I was spending very little time at home in an effort to avoid my housemates. My car had become a haven of sorts, containing childhood toys, mementos, clothing, even sports equipment. Aside from a well-hidden pack of cigarettes, though, nothing in the car was particularly suspicious, at least not to me. We approached the border with passports in hand, answered the border agent’s questions, and received a yellow slip of paper. Ahead on the left was a cinder block building. We were to park, enter the building, hand the yellow slip to one of the agents inside, and await further instruction.

As agents and police officers began to search the vehicle, I sat in the building and anxiously catalogued its contents, wondering if I had somehow overlooked the illicit nature of a particular item. The cigarettes, which I had failed to declare to the border agent, were a source of worry, but I was mostly preoccupied with the fear of some impending transformation - of something inexplicably changing shape, meaning, status. When an agent finally returned to the building holding a strip of candy buttons, asking if they were tabs of LSD, I laughed nervously. I assured him that the candy buttons were pure, that I had simply left them on the dashboard to see how they would fade in the sun. Returning my keys, he informed us that a few days earlier someone had tried to smuggle
LSD Sour Patch Kids into the country. We thanked him, wished him a pleasant day and exited the building.

Upon re-entering the car, everything appeared strange. My belongings, now shifted and out of place, vibrated with a suspicious, unsettling power. Familiar items, some from childhood, had become uncanny. Like the books on the staircase, they had transformed from static, knowable objects to autonomous and unpredictable actants over which I had little control. Still, they belonged to me, or I belonged to them, and their familiarity, though altered, somehow remained. Displaced, they hovered in this strange middle ground, affording me a glimpse of their shifting identities and complex histories. The whole experience, though illuminating, was ultimately unsettling and I found myself searching for a way to externalize it.

Using watercolor, I began to draw the objects that had been in my car at the time of the search. Some objects are represented individually while others are grouped together in awkward still lifes, referencing the unusual groupings of displaced items that caught my attention upon re-entering the vehicle. The drawings vary in scale, definition and verisimilitude, calling attention to the fluidity of the object’s visibility and significance in shifting contexts. Several objects are represented repeatedly, referencing both a multiplicity of meanings and the subjectivity of perception. Most significant, however, is the acknowledgment through this series of the singularity of each object. By studying closely and attempting to sufficiently represent each of my belongings, I began to honor the intrinsic power of these items that had been made visible at the border.
I began to contemplate the extent to which these seemingly static car objects were, in fact, always in a state of transition or motion, asserting themselves in subtle, perhaps invisible, ways. Indeed, they accompanied me on my daily commute and occupied my car, regardless of whether or not I was in it. Not unlike crossing a border, the concept of parking became charged with a new significance. The routine anonymity of the parking lot was presumably more complicated, more interesting, than I had previously acknowledged; behind the exterior of each car there was likely a cache of objects as complex and kinetic as mine.

My video, *Parking*, calls attention to the persistence of objects by parking the contents of the car and not the car itself - as matter, as commodities, as an extension of oneself - within a context that typically renders them invisible. Offering a counterpoint to the drawings’ subjective renderings, the video opts to empty or flatten the objects involved, to free them of their specificity, to allow them to be seen as both matter and metaphor. Unlike the highly politicized liminality of the border, the parking lot’s utilitarian monotony illuminates in these objects a delicate relationship to the passage of time, referencing the repetition of the commute, of shopping, and other activities tied to daily maintenance. Ultimately, I wanted to emphasize the ways in which context can and does affect a car’s contents, potentially rendering the objects suspicious - as was the case at the border - or simply uncanny. The objects, now arranged within the footprint of my car, approach another realm of existence, beginning to resemble the remnants of ownership, the limits of belonging. As I drove away during the filming of the video, I felt
once again that my possessions had shifted from the familiarity of personal understanding to a strange universality, at once foreign and illuminating.

The durational format of Parking requires a patient participation on the part of the viewer. There is no punchline, per se - the outcome is fairly evident from the start - and the focus is not necessarily on the act of unloading one’s car. Rather, the video suggests that closer attention be paid to the limits of typical interactions with the mundane. Over time the objects begin to assert themselves, to exist autonomously, distanced both physically and metaphorically from their belonging. As a collection, the objects appear somewhat strange, resembling at once a memorial, a rummage sale, and debris. Positioned between two parked cars, the collection seems to exist somewhere between

Figure 3. Parking by Andrew Napoli, 2016. Video Still.
the present and some other temporal realm, between property and remains, material and metaphor. As the documentation of an action, *Parking* presents a task performed to its logical inherent limit. It demands, albeit gently, that the mundane be regarded closely, suggesting that perhaps within the most prosaic of items and actions we can locate and foster empathy and understanding.
The internal logic of *Parking* extends to my other videos, all of which explore, in different ways, the intricacies and limits of everyday actions. Dealing not with objects but my own body, *Stretching* documents my first successful attempt to touch my toes since elementary school. What is revealed rather quickly, however, is how insignificant the “success” of the action actually is. The video focuses almost entirely on the tension between my will to complete the task and the physical limits of my own body, highlighting, as the title suggests, the stretching rather than the attainment of a particular goal. I am hanging, quite literally, between success and failure for upwards of seventeen minutes, at which point I am able to touch and hold my toes, knees locked, for what I deemed to be an adequate period. The action, as presented in the video, is significant not because of its utility - it is not performed in preparation for something else, like exercise - but rather because it functions as a liminal space of monotonous, repetitive exploration. That is, in the suspended space between an origin and a destination.

Due to its slow pace and duration, the action depicted in *Stretching* transitions slowly from a familiar and recognizable activity to a sort of limbo of immobility and inability. As such, it positions the body within a context that extends beyond the here and now, emptying the act of stretching of its most immediate associations and calling attention to the impermanence and fragility of the physical world. The focus is directed away from the act of stretching and toward a state of seemingly inevitable inertia that
must be endured. My body, at first upright, competent and unencumbered, becomes hampered by limitations, the destination dangling just out of reach. Still, the video stops short of being alienating. The action maintains a familiarity throughout, sometimes verging on the comical, but always empathetic. It suggests a commonality in those moments of coming up short, of trying, of waiting.

![Figure 4. Stretching by Andrew Napoli, 2016. Video Still](image)

In this sense, Stretching bares a similarity to Nedko Solakov’s *A Life (Black & White)* in which a space is simultaneously painted with both black and white paint in a circular, repetitive dance of perpetual labor. Like my stretching, the painting in Solakov’s piece remains identifiable, but is defamiliarized through both duration and repetition, allowing it to resonate on an existential level. But whereas *A Life (Black & White)* reframes its central action as a kinetic collaboration of balanced yet oppositional actions,
Stretching highlights a state of internal immobility and limitation. Nevertheless, both performances result in the recontextualization of forms of routine maintenance, calling attention to both their perpetuity and universality.6

Washing Up, a video in which I wash my hands with a bar of Ivory soap until the soap disappears, deals at least superficially with concepts of cleanliness, appearance and routine maintenance, calling attention to an intimate and anchoring action of daily life. As the washing continues, however, its utility becomes eclipsed by Sisyphean repetition. By virtue of its duration, the familiarity of the action is challenged and upended, leaving the viewer to consider its significance out of context. What is typically recognized as a brief and repetitive action is prolonged, pushed to the inherent limit of the soap itself. Reframed in this way, the act of washing one’s hands takes on a narrative of depletion, looking always toward its inevitable conclusion. Additionally, the accumulating lather, often overlooked due to the action’s brevity, points to the persistence of matter and the autonomous capability of the inanimate.

While engaged in the filming of this video, I found myself repeatedly wondering what I would do with the bar of soap once the task was finished, forgetting that the performance was predicated upon its inevitable disappearance. The sense of being unable to put back what had been used summoned in me an intense feeling of loss that extended far beyond the object at hand, beyond the action of washing. Like the collection of objects in Parking, the soap and water in Washing Up had begun to function metaphorically, calling my attention to broader, often overlooked instances of both

accumulation and loss. Recently, while reading an article on the destruction of the Great Barrier Reef, I was reminded of this feeling of loss, this inability to put back what I had altered and depleted. Despite the obvious discrepancy in both scale and severity, the sense of loss experienced during *Washing Up* had allowed access to an emotional understanding of disappearance and depletion that could be applied to a broader ecological context. The private and familiar had once again asserted themselves, opening a window to a world beyond the immediate and the personal.

*Pet Sounds* functions similarly to its aforementioned counterparts in that it documents the performance of an action taken to its limit. Beginning with my attempt to whistle along to the Beach Boys’ “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” while driving, the video continues until I have contributed to each of the album’s thirteen tracks. Like my other videos, *Pet Sounds* relies on a performance of endurance, but whereas *Parking*, *Stretching*, and *Washing Up* all focus on and highlight the labor of their respective tasks, *Pet Sounds* centers around an action that distracts from the more significant labor - namely driving - that is being performed. In this sense, *Pet Sounds* functions as both a celebration of and distraction away from those forms of daily maintenance that are not labor, per se, but nevertheless keep us afloat and functioning.

There is a significant interplay in *Pet Sounds* between the private interior of the car and the world passing just beyond the window. While the camera is invariably fixed on me, the fact that I am navigating a public space is evident from the outset. By virtue of its duration, the whistling begins to assert itself as something beyond a subconscious appreciation of a Beach Boys album, approaching an essential accompaniment to the
navigation. There is a sense, as the video continues, that a successful journey somehow relies on this ongoing performance of my own limited appreciation of the music. Of course, this is true of our daily navigations in general; the habitual maintenance of our private lives is both informed by and in anticipation of our engagement with the outside world. In other words, we do in private what is necessary to achieve and maintain a sense of equilibrium, while sustaining constant contact with the realities and expectations of the world around us.

Figure 5. *Pet Sounds* by Andrew Napoli, 2017. Video Still.
CHAPTER 5
PINK SPONGES

The 2016 presidential election was a stunning verification of the severity of divisions among the American populous. The potential for understanding, acceptance and reconciliation had steadily disintegrated throughout the duration of the divisive campaign and its aftermath. Due to my political leanings, the election’s result made this realization all the more jarring. As winter approached, the prospect of making meaningful, reparative art seemed like an insurmountable task. To focus on the personal felt self-indulgent, not to mention futile, and my faith in the prosaic as a site of potential empathy and understanding was diminished.

And yet, one morning while searching under the sink for either detergent or a plastic bag, I recognized in the curved form of a sponge an intimate routine to which so many people undoubtedly relate. I became fascinated with the sponge, as both an object essential to domestic maintenance and a symbolic connection to other individuals, a rare source of commonality in the face of overwhelming divisions. Perhaps because of my post-election malaise, the potential absurdity of investing so heavily in such an insignificant object did not bother me. Insignificance felt inevitable; absurdity was the order of the day. Upon reflection, I recognize as well the sponge’s metaphorical potential as a cleansing and restorative implement; as the subject of my own process of making sense of the recent political wreckage, the sponge’s proclivity for cleaning, for clarification, was extended to a broader context.
As I began engaging with sponges on a regular basis - studying their
topographies, their powers of absorption and retention - I became aware of how kinetic
these objects could be, how actively they held onto and bore the residue of the elements
and actions to which they were exposed. This active retention - and its metaphorical
implications of memory and history - seemed essential to the sponge’s capacity for
emotional resonance. Through the process of re-presenting these sponges with
watercolor, I began to understand that the sponge’s absorbent capabilities could best be
communicated negatively. By rendering the sponges flat and frontally on the paper and
emptying them of their weight and materiality, I was able to accentuate, through a sense
of loss or displacement, just how much they could hold.

Figure 6. *Pink Sponge* by Andrew Napoli, 2017. Watercolor on Paper.
As a series, the watercolors emphasize the singularity of each sponge while simultaneously concealing this singularity through series and repetition. Taken individually, the unique contours and shadows of each sponge are accentuated, suggesting the intimate physical nature of our encounters with these objects. When observed at close range, the sponge’s singularity is refracted through the subjective brushstrokes of my own personal engagement with observations, hinting at the potential for close investigation to facilitate dialogue and understanding. Observed from a distance as a collection of drawings, one is reminded of the mundane repetition of daily, domestic life, the relentless passage of time, the inevitability of loss.

This interplay between the singular item and the collection is crucial to my investigation of the sponge as a cultural object hovering between intimate utility and disposability. Unlike the indexical paintings of Lisa Milroy, my sponge series actively resists the collection as subject, opting instead to highlight the process of accumulation through the repetitive representation of the individual, solitary object. Milroy’s paintings, through their depictions of organized, even merchandised, groupings of like objects, seem to reduce each item to a state of detached anonymity; the individual object is subsumed by the collection, thus rendering each object static, mechanical and thoroughly fetishized. The sponges, on the other hand, are situated on separate pieces of paper, operating autonomously but always in communication with one another. The end result, of course, is a collection, but one that points to the potential for intimacy between object and viewer, and the ways in which this intimacy is repeated, obscured, and inevitably lost.7

Ultimately, this sense of loss cannot be divorced from the materiality of the mundane and the disposable. While these items may point metaphorically to loss in a broader context, they are also irrevocably woven into the most fundamental aspects of our lives, carrying with them a history and a potential for care and compassion. The moments in which we are confronted with an object’s autonomy, its history, its singularity, are moments that solidify our humanity, our interdependence, our receptivity to emotional, political and ecological realities.

This fall, after thirty years, my family sold my childhood house and we were suddenly confronted with the task of having to deal with an overwhelming amount of stuff. In the interest of the mobility and safety of everyone involved, I focused my preliminary efforts on the staircase. As I dusted off and packed into egg boxes books of varying dimensions and subjects, some relatively new and others centuries old, I became acutely aware of the “impossible singularity” of each book, not only with respect to their unique histories, but as forces influencing the present, my present, in that particular space. I recognized in these books the accumulation of decades of collecting, of living, of walking up and down a staircase rendered narrower and deeper as time went on. I recognized the ways in which these books, like so many other objects in the house, had necessitated physical and emotional negotiations throughout my childhood. And in moving them, I recognized that I was still having to negotiate them, that I was still struggling to reconcile my own agency with their undeniable, relentless existence, both as singular objects and as a collection.
In a sense, the packing was itself an exploration of the limits of a particular action, a form of maintenance performed to its inherent end. As I packed the last of these books, turning to regard the empty staircase, the sense of accomplishment that I had anticipated was complicated by a sense of loss. The staircase that I had known as a child had returned, all thirteen steps of it, but in emptying it of the books I had somehow been forced to confront the intricacies and contradictions of a journey, its successes and failures, compulsions and fears. I was more aware of these things now and glad to be free of the burden of a too-full house, but in the emptying I had thrown something, irrevocably, back.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


PHOTO OF THE ARTIST-AT-WORK