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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2zf2p5tk>

Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 3(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.5070/R73151221

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**Traces, Fragments & Voids: An Artist Representing
Detroit's Vanishing Homeland**

Whitney Lea Sage



Figure 1 Whitney Lea Sage, Neighbors, Homesickness Series. Ink on paper, 13.5" x 17.5", 2018. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2 Whitney Lea Sage, Family Room, Homesickness Series. Ink on paper, 7" x 10", 2017. Image courtesy of the artist. Previously published by Newfound Journal and WomenArts Quarterly and republished with permission.



Figure 3 Whitney Lea Sage, White Picket Fence, Homesickness Series. Ink on paper, 13.5" x 17", 2017. Image courtesy of the artist. Previously published by Newfoundland Journal and WomenArts Quarterly and republished with permission.



Figure 4 Whitney Lea Sage, Threshold, Homesickness Series. Ink on paper, 11" x 11", 2018. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5 Whitney Lea Sage, Foundation, Homesickness Series. Ink on paper, 13.5" x 16.5", 2017. Image courtesy of the artist. Previously published by Newfound Journal and WomenArts Quarterly and republished with permission.



Figure 6 Whitney Lea Sage, Cottage, Homesickness Series. Ink on paper, 13.5" x 16.5", 2017. Image courtesy of the artist. Previously published by Newfound Journal and WomenArts Quarterly and republished with permission.



Figure 7 Whitney Lea Sage, Single Family Home, Homesickness Series. Ink on paper, 13.5" x 15.5", 2017. Image courtesy of the artist. Previously published by Newfound Journal and WomenArts Quarterly and republished with permission.

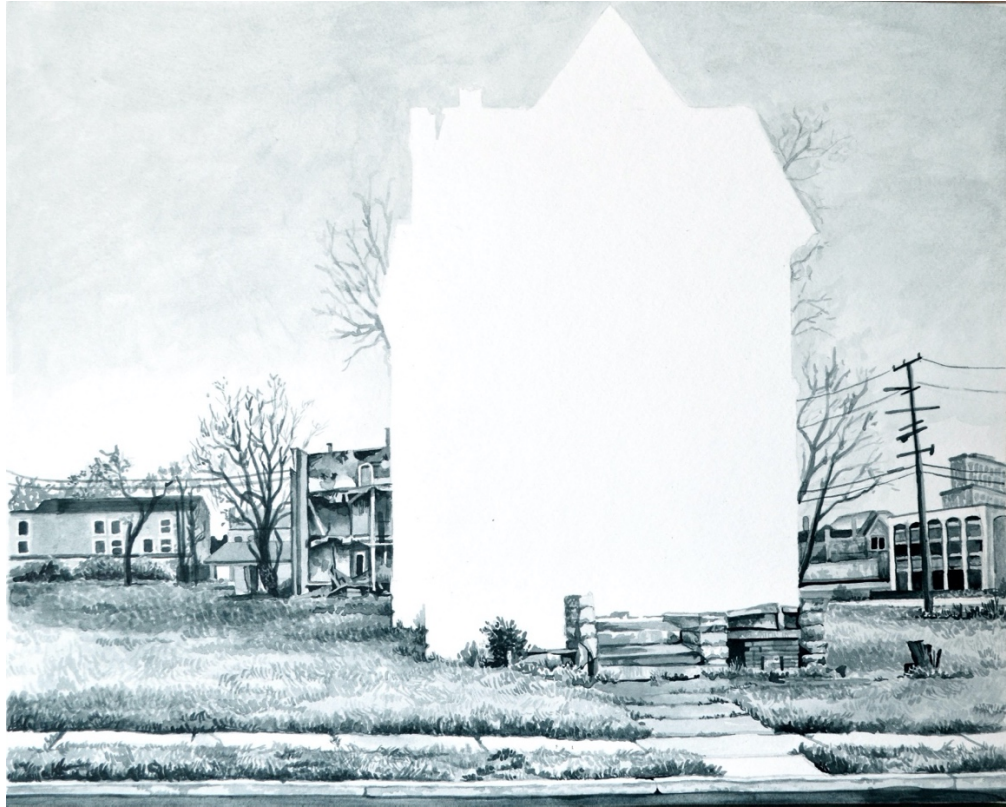


Figure 8 Whitney Lea Sage, Lone Victorian, Homesickness Series. Ink on paper, 13.5" x 15.5", 2016. Image courtesy of the artist. Previously published by Newfound Journal and WomenArts Quarterly and republished with permission.

Artist Statement

I am a native of suburban Detroit, and the rich cultural heritage of midwestern cities and their vital contribution to the formation of American ideals and values is influential to my artwork as well as my identity as an artist and image maker. Industrial cities like Detroit were built around traditions of hard work, remaining free of pretention, and making do with what one has. I see these values mirrored in my work's insistence on laborious processes and accessible subject matter, and my use of mixed media and multidisciplinary approaches. In focusing on Detroit's urban landscape as a subject for artist inquiry, I see it as a place of increasing cultural significance with parallels to national deindustrialization trends that have left behind empty storefronts, ghostly architectural skeletons, and scarred plots of land. Throughout my career I have depicted Detroit as subject matter, not only as a personal crusade for a place I love, but also to create an open dialogue about challenging histories and the problematic lens through which outsiders sometimes view urban communities. Common representations of Detroit in national media often rely on misleading tropes and overly simplistic stereotypes that fall short of exposing the institutional forces at the heart of the city's economic decline. As a corrective measure in representing Detroit, my practice uses visual or written means to provide the audience of my work with oft-overlooked historical contexts to illuminate how corporate abandonment, housing segregation, highway construction, and white flight led to the city's present-day challenges. The Black and minority communities who remained in the city disproportionately shouldered the devastating impact of these practices, and it is these same communities who shoulder the burden of stereotypical representations of urban residents by outsiders.

Having grown up in Farmington Hills, a Detroit suburb, I am constantly forced to confront my own outsider relationship with the city due to the physical and experiential distance of my upbringing. My family moved to Farmington Hills from a rural area of western Michigan and thus experienced a collective and contextual alienation as transplants in an unfamiliar and politically charged region. Like most suburbs surrounding Detroit, Farmington Hills is an affluent, primarily white, and densely populated pocket within a sprawling and diverse, though economically and racially segregated, suburban region. Since we were not from the region originally, my family did not exactly have shared history with our neighboring expat Detroiters, but we did benefit from the resources that came with a suburban zip code. The experience of growing up within a safe, affluent, and insulated suburb whose residents directly benefited from the outward migration of people, resources, and opportunities from the urban core shapes my outsider authorial perspective. While the sprawling nature of metro Detroit's suburbs makes me an

insider in broader geographic contexts, as a suburbanite I constantly walk the line between regional insider and privileged outsider. This is an important line to authentically own in the context of the troubled relationship between city and suburbs due to issues of race, politics, money, and mistrust. Grounding my work in an outsider perspective and often directly targeting outsider audiences, the impulse at the root of my practice is one that seeks to build bridges through exposing prejudices, to acknowledge inequities, and to leverage empathy and our shared humanity as a way to knit back together the fates and relationships of this region.

My work embraces my suburban status, depicting the physical, experiential, and cultural distance of outsiders through its common side effects: stereotyping and emotional ambivalence. Problematic stereotypical tropes of Detroit have been perpetuated regionally, nationally, and internationally and include Detroit as dangerous, lawless, and crime-ridden wasteland; Detroit as postapocalyptic ruin; and Detroit as primitive and uninhabited prairie in need of colonization. In addressing the perpetuation of these problematic tropes, I layer, interrogate, and hold accountable language and images derived from news and media as a way to expose and critique misrepresentations of Detroit. In *Misery Index Series: Greetings from Detroit*, I utilized the criteria of the popular “Most Miserable Cities” click-bait listings to sarcastically exaggerate common tropes of abandonment, crime, misery, and depression associated with the city. In *Composition in “D” Series*, I assembled, through collage, painted fragments of imagery taken directly from popular ruinous photos of the city, decontextualizing, remixing, and producing dramatic and imaginary apocalyptic landscapes. In *Domestic Fragments Series*, I utilized found objects and plaster to create sculptures that both relate to the role of objects as markers of memory and mimic lost artifacts mined from ruins of a fallen civilization.

Across my larger practice, the imagery employed in my work often utilizes architecture as language for discussing urban history, its current challenges, and the hotly contested visions for Detroit’s future. As a multidisciplinary artist, I manifest these ideas through works that engage drawing, painting, fibers, sculpture, installation, and community-based practice. What unifies these varied media approaches is a consistent focus on the language of home as an empathetic entry point for the audience. For many, the space of the home and the objects it contains are the root of emotional longing and nostalgia for place. Martin Heidegger writes of humans’ shared impulse to build homes, places of dwelling that we become intimately attached to physically and mentally, places we identify with and are able to reflect on past experiences within.¹ The majority of the homes in Detroit’s most endangered neighborhoods are recognizable, middle-class, mass-produced architectural types and thus make the work accessible to the shared experiences and latent bodily memory of a wider audience, what Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes

as the “instinctive understanding of where the paths of personal experience intersect with those of others.”² While the work is rooted in a potentially exclusive and regionally specific experience, through this intersection of memory and experiences it seeks to appeal to many through our collective affinity for belonging and the protective impulse that we share for the people and places we love.

In connecting architecture with people and their lived experiences, my work aims to address the history and current struggles of rust belt communities and the disappearance of a recognizable homeland. Through the recognizable shape of the home, the works stir within the viewer the same emotions of loss and homesickness experienced by the residents of the endangered neighborhoods depicted. The work thus relies on the ability of architectural domestic forms to symbolically connect to the human body and bodily trauma. The creation of visual and physical linkages between architecture and the human form is not new; connections between the two are derived from some of the earliest architectural treatises recorded, including Renaissance thinkers like Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci. In drawing connections between architecture, the portrait, and the mind, Leonardo likened the functions of eyes and windows, describing the human eye as the “window of the soul.”³

Homesickness Series, an ongoing series of monochromatic ink paintings modeled after tintype photography, frames the facades of individual homes in Detroit as a form of portraiture. If individual depictions of lost or endangered homes can be seen as portraits of the residents they once contained, and if homes are sites and containers of memory, then rendered windows and doors serve as both literal and psychological passageways into the interior of the home and the interior sites of the mind, with its associated lived experiences and memories. In exploring connections between the abandoned home and the human body, Alberti went as far as to make connections between the life cycles of buildings and the life cycles of humans and culture.⁴ In *Art and the Home*, Imogen Racz describes Alberti’s dismay at the natural decay of buildings and how Alberti saw the failure of architecture as mirroring the failure of humanity.⁵ In that way, the cultural, social, and economic distress borne by Detroit’s residents can be embodied through the devastating toll on the physical landscape.

Drawing on Alberti’s connections between humanity’s decline and architectural ruin, my work uses depictions of decaying or lost homes to symbolize the losses of individual, familial, and communal memory that endangered or demolished structures represent. Visually, the inaccessibility or abrupt lack of doors and windows figured in the white voided facades in *Homesickness Series* is emblematic of the inaccessibility of familial and communal memory formed around the site. In addition to illustrating the devastation of generational disinvestment and

abandonment over time, the ruination or harsh absence of the home in these works becomes symbolic of the toll that time and separation can have on memory and community identity. In *Storming the Gates of Paradise*, Rebecca Solnit makes the connection between ruins, absence, and memory explicit, writing that “memory is always incomplete, always imperfect, always falling into ruin; but the ruins themselves, like other traces, are treasures: our links to what came before, our guide to situating ourselves in a landscape of time.”⁶ Thus the physical removal of homes throughout Detroit and the harsh erasure of the home within my work represent the removal of accessible landmarks of communal memory and history. In this way *Homesickness Series* can be seen as an effort to document what exists, what is disappearing, and what is already unknown in order to communicate, in Solnit’s words, that “a city without ruins and traces of age is like a mind without memories.”⁷

While my ongoing bodies of work, including *Homesickness Series*, aim to pull viewers into the experience of collective communal grief that the loss of Detroit’s neighborhoods represents, the work is charged with my personal longings and loss. The Detroit I physically experienced as a child in the 1980s is an unrecognizably different city from the one captured in books and photographic archives. I have always mourned my inability to reconcile images of crowded parks, bustling street corners, and the densely populated housing districts of Detroit’s midcentury heyday with the recovering postindustrial city that it is today. As an experiential outsider, the experience of mourning the devolution of a place you are not from is emotionally complicated given that my lived experience as a suburbanite insulates me from its impact. The stability of the suburbs exempts me from feeling the full weight of homesickness as experienced by those whose homes and neighborhoods have literally disappeared from the soil. My feelings of grief and longing are not rooted in personal experience but instead come from my ability to identify with the city, its identity, and its values and to recognize the important cultural and historical richness of Detroit, a place as worthy of mourning as any other. Borrowing from Merleau-Ponty, who writes of the human process of projecting thoughts and feelings onto places we encounter and identify with, Detroit has become a “homeland of [my] thoughts.”⁸

I am part of a generation of required mobility, and geographic detachment from Detroit has intensified my feelings of longing and loss as career pursuits have repeatedly taken me across the Midwest. My deep investment in the story of Detroit for the past two decades and the emotional distress of this detachment can be credited for the melancholic sobriety that permeates my ongoing bodies of work. While the emotional toll of physical distance expressively shapes the work’s somber content, it also energizes its production. The process of returning to the

landscape, rendering what remains, and memorializing what has been lost serves as a coping mechanism for my own homesick longing. The process of reengaging the city routinely in the creation of works presents me with an opportunity for return, a return to a meaningful place with a distinct physical character, a rich history, and an identity of shared values. My practice as an artist thus provides me with an opportunity to participate in the telling of the city's story, to knit the conflicting perspectives of outsiders and insiders back together through our shared humanity, and to participate in the documentation of site and memory—what was, what is, and what has been lost.

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Whitney Lea Sage is a multidisciplinary artist from metro Detroit, currently serving as assistant professor of art at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois. Whitney's work has previously been featured exhibitions at the Painting Center, Superfront LA, UICA, and the Muskegon Museum of Art, and will be featured in an upcoming solo exhibition at Ripon College. Whitney's work has been featured in a number of publications including Manifest's *INDA 14*, *WomanArts Quarterly*, *Newfound Journal*, and MoCAD's *Post-Industrial Complex* catalog.

Notes

¹ Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in *Martin Heidegger: Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated and collected by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 149, 157.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002), xxii. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203994610>.

³ Shirley Neilsen Blum, "The Open Window: A Renaissance View," in *The Window in Twentieth-Century Art*, edited by Suzanne Delehanty (New York: Neuberger Museum, 1986), 9–16.

⁴ Caspar Pearson, *Humanism and the Urban World: Leon Battista Alberti and the Renaissance City* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2011), 26–27.

⁵ Imogen Racz, *Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation, and the Everyday* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 106.

⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *Storming the Gates of Paradise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 352–53. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520941786>.

⁷ Ibid., 354–55.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xi.