

## The View From Here

by

**Amber Eve Anderson** 

Mount Royal School of Art MFA '16 Maryland Institute College of Art "Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to was never there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place... Nothing outside you can give you any place... In yourself right now is all the place you've got."

## -Flannery O'Connor



I was born and raised in Nebraska, and it's still the place I say I'm from, even though I haven't lived there in almost a decade, even though I became who I am when I left. Nebraska is big skies and flat expanses. It is distant trains on the horizon. It is my dad's weak coffee. It is the specific and the vague. It is deep roots. It is home.

There, in my mind, it is eternally summer: hair tangled by highway drives, cicadas chanting, aqua pools that turn your hair green, golden rows of wheat and corn. But the cold, long, lonely months are the foundation for the solemnity of Nebraskan character. The reality of heavy snows and 4pm sunsets force a retreat within oneself, where you must confront the darkness of isolation. It makes us grateful for sunshine and companionship. It makes us helpful and friendly. The balance of the seasons keeps us rooted in the stable earth. But the skies. The skies are what make us wonder. Their frequent explosions of pinks and yellows indicate the

possibility of something more. In this sea of fields, isolated by geographic and cultural distance, one's focus becomes exterior. The horizontality of the landscape speaks to adventure and discovery. It inspires abandon.

I dreamt of leaving, and when I finally did, I moved east, to the limit of land and sea. The first time I traveled the roads of the East Coast, I was suffocated by the trees that lined the interstate. Without the context of the distant, I couldn't place myself. My perspective was all foreground, someplace else an allusion in the imagined path of the birds above.

Eastward turned south; I became an adult in Lima, Peru. It was where I lived the first time someone asked me how old I was, and I couldn't remember. It was there that I lost myself. Presented with the edge of a continent, I retreated. I was disoriented by the gray haze of the Pacific Ocean that rolled through the lush park in heavy clouds of fog just outside my balcony windows. When I walked the five blocks to the cliffs overlooking the ocean, the shore was the only distinguishing feature of where the sea met land or sky, the horizon gone missing. Along with it, I missed my own shadow and those of the trees. I felt uncomfortable in my own skin. I felt too young. Too tall and too blonde. Too rich and too poor. I felt what it was to be condescended to when I felt inadequate already. To try to feel proud and fail. Lima was what it was like to not belong. To not understand. To want to leave.

Damascus made me want to stay. My first view of Syria—our descent—began over limitless desert and ended in a compact, fertile valley. The cold, Soviet-era architecture of our neighborhood matched the dry, dusty landscape. From here, now, I see the city in its isolation. Damascus feels very distant from other places, even though a shared cab ride from the city will take you to Beirut in just a couple of hours. It's the horizontality, again, and the starkness of the surroundings. Damascus matches Nebraska in that way: in its isolation and its horizontality, though it is isolated not by farmland, but by desert. This isolation of Damascus also shapes the character of its people. Perhaps it is the proximity to limitless emptiness, similar to the winters in Nebraska, that makes the people the most generous I have ever encountered.



After only a year, I was forced to leave my home there. The Arab Spring had finally arrived in Syria, and after a few months of incessant worry over whether or not I would have to leave, I was given one week's notice to evacuate the country with my husband, my dog and four suitcases. We left our house, our belongings, our friends and a future we had planned there for the next two years. And then we waited. For six months we waited. To return. For 40 years of suppression to be resolved so that we could go back to the lives we loved so much. We shifted and sorted and discarded and moved, mostly living in hotel rooms since we didn't know how long we were going to be anywhere: Nebraska, D.C., Syria. Or would it be San Francisco, where my brother lived? Or perhaps some other new place? But I didn't want to start over again. I wanted to go back. I was always looking back.

I spent the following year drifting—from airport to airport, hotel to hotel—until ultimately landing again in DC, buying a house, and finally learning how to be happy. But the

bricks and mortar weighed me down more than they ever grounded me. It's been five years, and I'm still drifting now. The problem with leaving comes in the return. Going back never feels quite the same. Nebraska no longer fits me, and I don't quite fit into it.

And so, I moved into two houses in two cities in two countries. The expanse of the Pacific Ocean became the metaphor for the middle distance in which I existed. Did I have two homes, or none? Or many more than that? Or is my home the home of isolated distance? Like an island that promises escape, solitude and disappearance—Nebraska: a sea of fields; Lima: a sea of fog; Damascus: a sea of sand. After ten years of displacements, my home: a sea of uncertainty.

"Home is a meaningless word apart from "journey" and "foreign country." —Yi Fu Tuan, Topophilia

Rootless and drifting, if home is not the place where you live, is it the place where you're from? The place where your stuff is stored? The place where your family lives? Where your friends are? In attempting to answer these questions, I am confronting the fear that I may never find a home again. Homesickness—longing for an absent home—is inextricably linked to nostalgia—the Greek roots *nostos* and *algos* meaning home ache, respectively. My work evokes this sense of nostalgia and the melancholy associated with absence. "Nostalgia cannot be sustained without loss," writes Susan Stewart in <u>On Longing</u>. "It is in this gap between resemblance and identity that nostalgic desire arises. The nostalgic is enamored of distance, not of the referent itself" (145). The sweet sorrow of nostalgia is inherent in the longing for home; the home is a place of inevitable absence.

I orient myself within the distance by constructing spaces of my own: a globe of horizons, an ocean of bed sheets, a dotted line of holes in the sky. I seek to depict the placelessness of this distance—of being in between, not there, nowhere—as I search for points of reference and stability. I build archives of images from which to work in an attempt

to order my displacement. *Adrift* began as a collection of photographs of the horizon—the line separating sea and sky. The lines, connected end to end, east to west, in a continuous circle, mimic the global, made up of my personal experiences of those specific places. A 2-second looped GIF of the collaged image "spins" endlessly along the constructed circular horizon line. I exhibited this GIF via personal text messages from which I created a subsequent GIF of screenshots of the texts. In effect, the work becomes about distancing in—from the initial experience of looking toward the limit of my vision came the photographs as documentation, then the constructed image, and finally the GIFs as a personal intervention into this digitally rendered environment. Technology functioned as the medium to both generate and mediate that distancing.

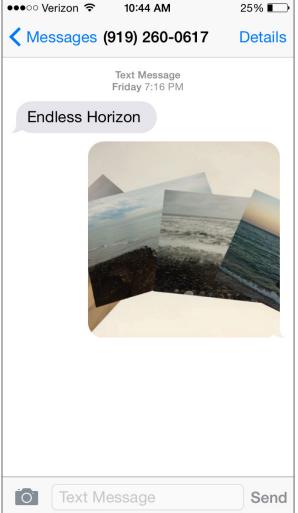


Distance necessitates longing. Distance has been an asset as well as a hindrance in my work. It is calm and collected—cold and aloof. It looks backward. Depictions of distance: the distance of the space between, distance as emotional reserve, distance as time, distance as the idealized, distance as desire, the infinite distance created between two mirrors facing each other. Distance is nonexistent without something on either side. From here to there, now and then, one to another, east to west, near to far.

"Once you leave your place of birth, there's never a complete sense of center, you're always in the state of in-between and nowhere feels completely like home."

—Shirin Neshat







In a waiting room, aboard an airplane, on a train: the in between is nowhere. The sea as placeless, undifferentiated space serves as a metaphor for the in-between. To make myself at home in the distance, I turned my bed, the ultimate perimeter of personal space, into an ocean. Seabed, in its first iteration, was a map of the floor of the Atlantic Ocean I drew on a piece of paper the size of a twin bed and subsequently slept on. The original graphite lines smeared and smudged while the paper crinkled and tore. Bedsheets themselves, though, are reminiscent of the lulling tide in their gentle disarray each morning. So I documented my own bedsheets every morning from directly overhead over the course of one month. I compiled the photographs into a book with an accompanying poem and filmed myself turning the pages of the book to the sound of waves crashing on shore. Waves of nostalgia, wave of nausea, wave good-bye. Ocean waves and brain waves. Microwaves. The images of the bedsheets combined with the sound of ocean waves associate the intimate with the immense. The poem, a personal soliloquy on the distance between my homes in Baltimore and Morocco and the possibility of living in a bed made of waves, interrupted by my hand turning the pages of the book, illustrates a disjuncture.

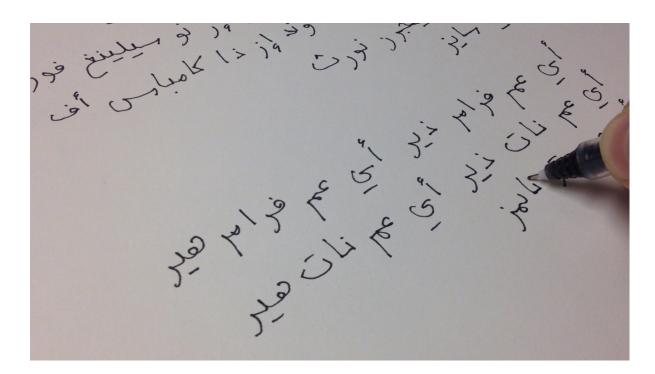
Concurrently, wind became my material. Formless and invisible, it can be felt, but not seen, except in its effect—on branches and leaves, discarded plastic bags, bedroom curtains. I used two fans to blow two curtains toward each other, both passing over an area

of sand that filled the space on the ground between them—over time, the curtains pulling the singular mass into two distinct islands. I replicated the breeze by building a fan connected to a microcontroller that runs on a program that mimics the wind, in real time, of another place—A Breeze From the Other Side of the Atlantic. I discovered an excerpt from a poem by the famous Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish about the death of Edward Said:

On wind he walks, and in wind he knows himself. There is no ceiling for wind, no home for the wind. Wind is the compass of the stranger's North. He says:

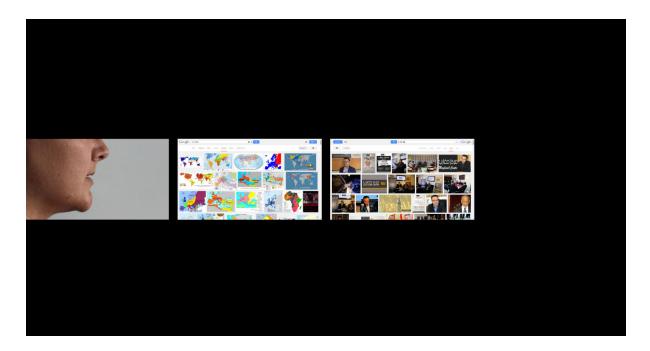
I am from here, I am from there,
I am not here, I am not there.
I have two names which meet and part
I have two languages, but I have forgotten
which is the language of my dreams.

Originally written in Arabic, I first encountered the poem in English, and so to solidify my existence in the middle, my unbelonging—physically, emotionally, linguistically—I transliterated the English translation back into the Arabic script. By using the sounds of the Arabic alphabet to mimic the English words as closely as possible, a gap in understanding emerges in



which an entirely coherent transliteration is impossible. In this gap, the impulse to document, catalogue and translate elements of my history as tangible artifacts is an instinctual attempt to contain a disjointed history. An attempt to acquire and keep something which is lost.

My experience of living apart has coincided with technological leaps that put dislocation at the forefront of daily existence. The ways in which these digital representations shape one's understanding of place are not always apparent. This was the impetus for *GhaRaBa*, a video piece that stems from a single three-letter Arabic root: *gha*, *ra*, *ba*. More than 50 Arabic words come from this one root. Using Hans Wehr's <u>Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic</u>, there are three times as many English translations, including not only *Morocco*, but also *place of the setting sun*, *life away from home*, and *exile*. *GhaRaBa* shows a man and a woman saying these words. Paired with these screens are two additional screens that show Google Image Searches for the words in Arabic alongside their English equivalents. As the four screens appear and disappear according to the sound of the words, a rhythm is created. The similarities and differences in the Arabic and English words, as evidenced by Google Image Searche, demonstrate not only the impossibility of translation, but also the way in which language forms visual representation on the internet.

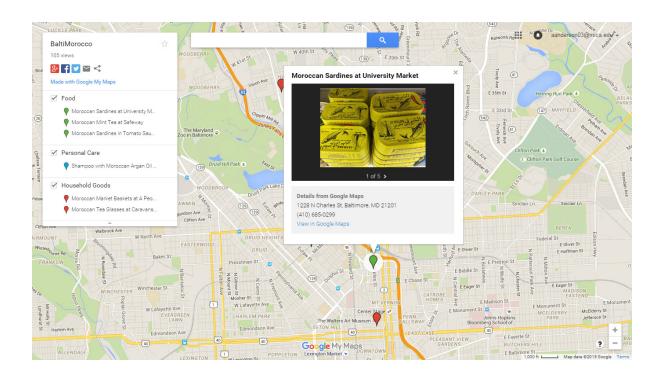


While networks of connectivity make our world smaller on a grand scale, daily experience is altered as we exchange everyday reality for the virtual reality of our devices. Longing and loss is emphasized, rather than mitigated, by this exchange. We are constantly locating ourselves, but we don't really know where we are. Mapping gives parameters to dislocation. Maps collect memories of places and define space in a language others can interpret.

Using maps of the world, I folded and flattened my personal experience of displacement through time and space. I fold towels and clothes and letters I will put into envelopes. As a child I folded paper like hot dogs and like hamburgers. I was told you can only fold a piece of paper in half seven times, but as an adult, I forced my world to fold an eighth. I've folded my hands in games—of poker and in prayer. The folds made creases at the corners of my mouth to match my favorite pair of jeans, molded into the memory of my body. Like Duchamp when he wrote, "When a clock is seen from the side it no longer tells the time," I photographed a map hung perpendicular to the wall. Beginning in Nebraska, the place of my birth, I folded a map along an invisible line connecting it to the East Coast, and from the East Coast to Yemen and Peru and all of the places afterward until the map of the world no longer made sense and new land masses were created out of the disparate pieces of the ones represented.







"Perhaps all map love is a form of nostalgia."

—Ken Jennings

Paper maps have been replaced by Global Positioning Systems regulated by satellites in space. These systems extend a sense of dislocation in new surroundings as one's focus is absorbed by a screen rather than the shops, streets and monuments directly surrounding him or her. In a sense, this way of experiencing space essentially erases the distance between two places—the beginning and the end the only points of any significance. In our digital era, we use map-based apps to find the nearest coffee shops, restaurants and theatres, making choices based on the collected knowledge of ratings and reviews. In a similar effort of collection and sharing, as well as a continuing attempt to conceptually link the two places I lived, I documented Moroccan products available in Baltimore through series of photographs and compiled a Google Map: *BaltiMorocco*. Imported Moroccan sardines in a yellow tin at University Market in Mount Vernon where I would buy ramen for late nights in the studio. Blue bottles of mass-marketed shampoo with Moroccan argan oil from the Rite Aid in my

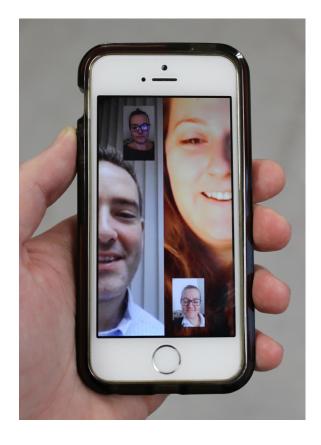
neighborhood (that was later looted during the Baltimore uprising). While internet-based mapping systems are the way we experience and explore places now, BaltiMorocco also reflects the ways in which we can extract an experience of one place and transplant it to another, as well as how we absorb and consume other cultures.

A more immersive way to experience a place far removed is through Google Street View. Anyone with an Internet connection can virtually walk the streets of any city where Google cars have driven. Otherwise, anyone with the Google Street View app can take and upload their own 360-degree images of anywhere in the world by simply standing in one place and turning in a circle while capturing the surrounding scene from ground to sky. Because Google Street View does not exist in Morocco, I began taking and uploading my own images with the app, while also exploring the archive of other publicly uploaded images. In this process I discovered that if, while standing in one spot and capturing the surrounding space, the user fails to look directly overhead to capture the sky above, Google will render the forgotten space a black hole. I searched through every image uploaded to Google Street View in Morocco, exploring above and below in order to collect every view in which the user failed to capture the sky. This resulted in a group of 60 images of the sky with black holes. I printed these screenshots



and arranged them in a row, the smallest hole at one end of the line, the largest at the other, the last 4" x 6" image rendered entirely black. Black holes grow larger as the surrounding sky disappears—the black hole becomes the gap between the physical and virtual experiences of place, the row of prints a visual representation of the effects of technology on perception. Disruption, dislocation, disquiet, distance, disappearance. Absences and emptiness.

Distances and absences that were once mediated by letters and phone calls are now connected by video chatting programs. The pain of separations is lessened by the sound of a voice and the subtlety of facial expressions. But time continues to pass and memories fade. Commonalities of shared past experiences tie us together across oceans and continents. In 1320 my older brother—living in Thailand—and my younger sister—living in Nebraska—recall memories of our childhood home. The specifics of the blue facade and the tall pine trees balance the universal: the basement, the backyard, the dinner table. Memories fade in and out, come and go. One remembers, the other forgets. Recall and response. Repose.

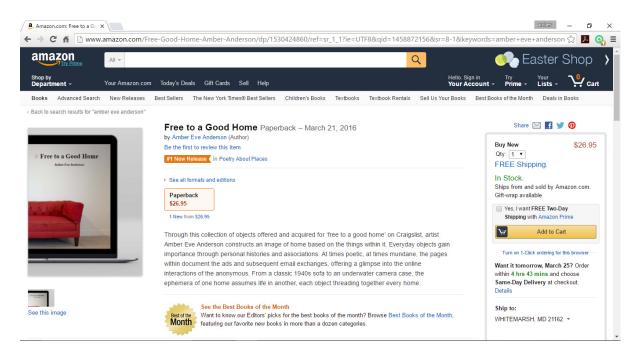


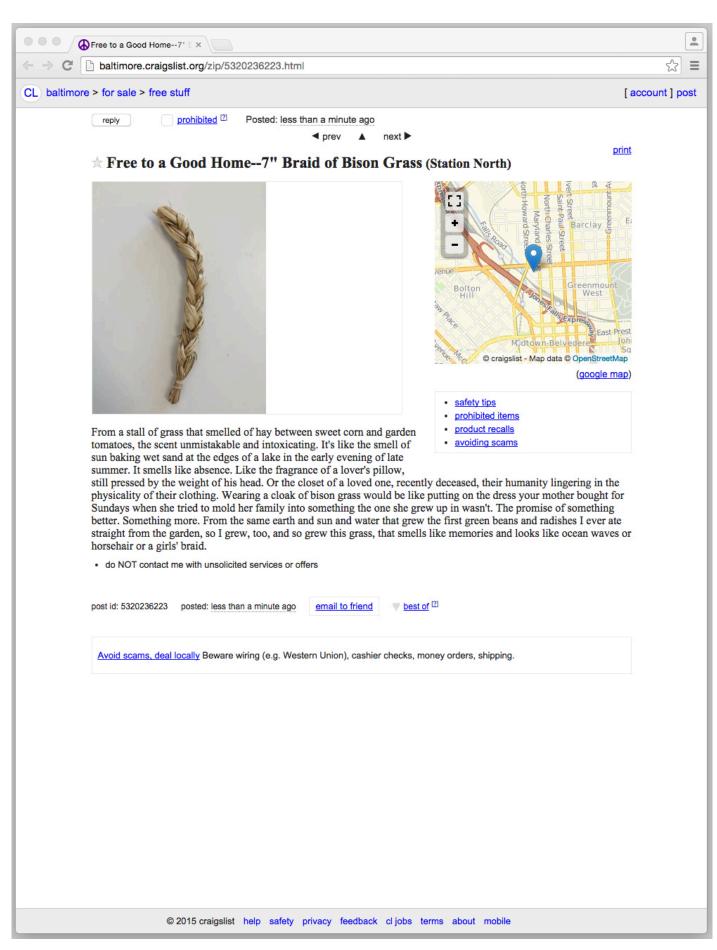


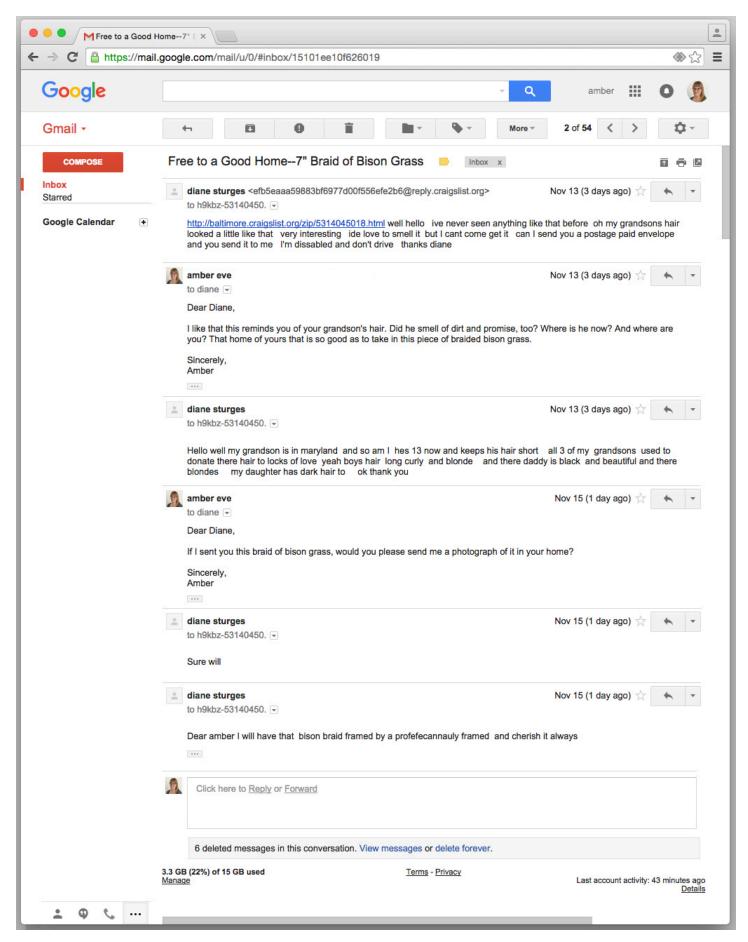
As digital technology replaces the way in which we primarily experience the real world, the Internet itself has become a sort of mobile home in which we live. There we can listen to music, read books, visit friends. Collective actions come to define our world. In *Free to a Good Home*, I searched Craigslist in Baltimore for objects advertised for "free to a good home." As Sarte said, "The totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being. I am what I have." What would home look like if constructed only by objects offered for "free to a good home" on Craigslist? I began to acquire these objects and along with them, stories of their histories. At the same time, I advertised my own belongings, accompanied by poetic descriptions, for "free to a good home." Everyday objects gain importance through personal histories and associations. Free to a Good Home documents the ads and subsequent email exchanges—at times poetic, at times mundane—and thus offers a glimpse into the online interactions of the anonymous. From a classic 1940s sofa to an underwater camera case, the ephemera of one home assumes life in another, each object threading together every home.

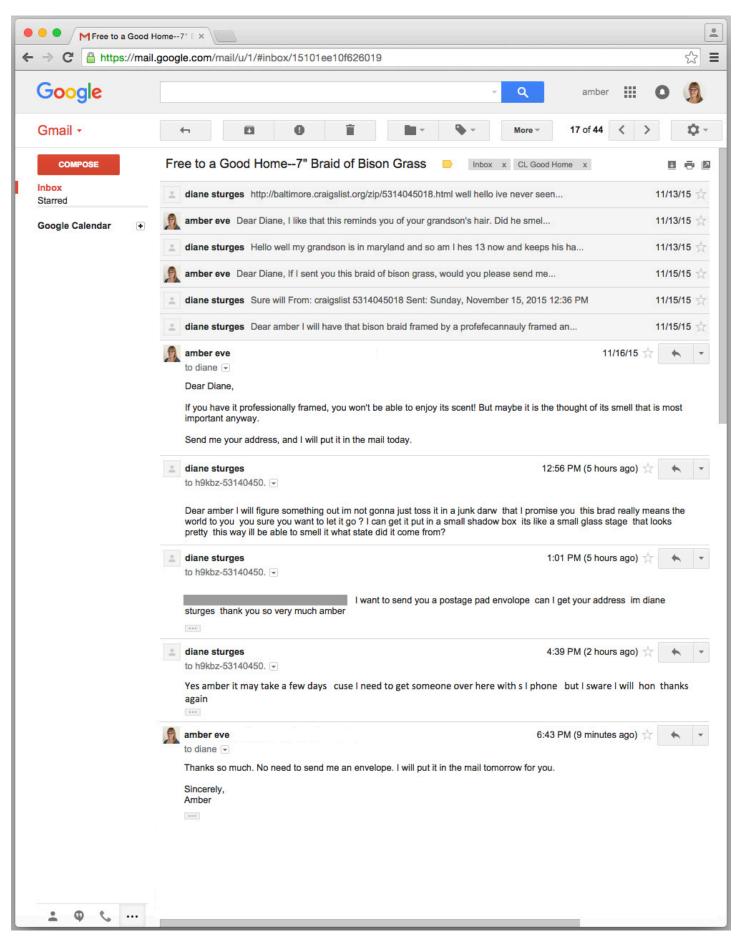
"For most people the home is not just a utilitarian shelter but a repository of things whose familiarity and concreteness help organize the consciousness of their owner, directing it into well-worn groves."

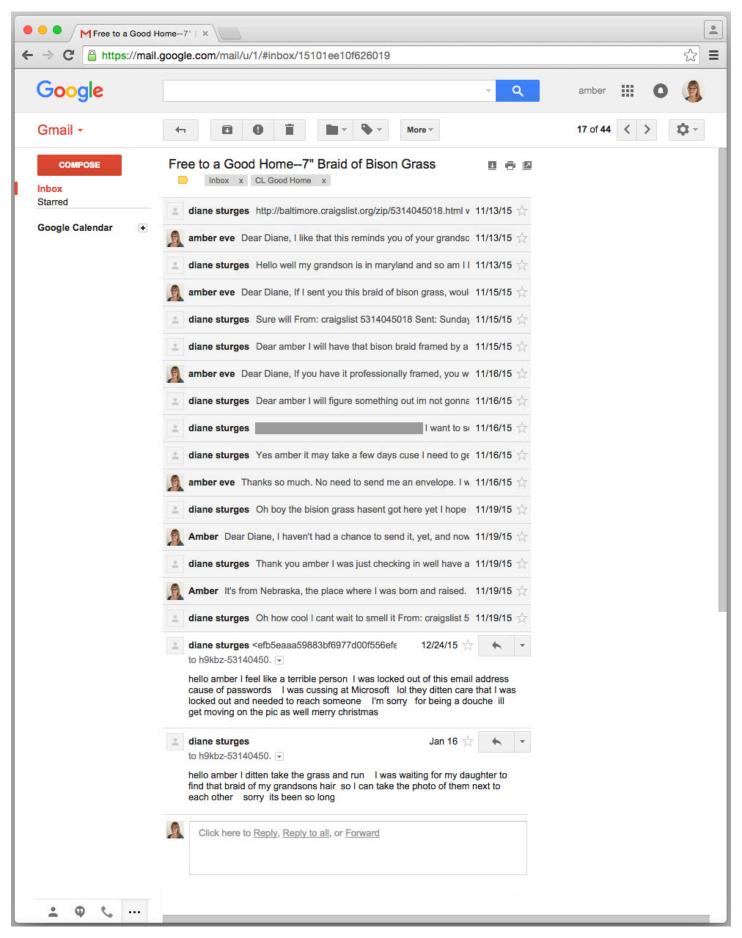
—Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Why We Need Things











The nebulous idea of home as constructed by the objects within it was also the motivation for my thesis exhibition, *Apartment 404 Not Found*. To begin, I moved my home into the gallery. I documented this installation in a 360-degree virtual reality (VR) image before removing all of the furniture to leave the space devoid of any personal belongings. The dislocation of relocation is exemplified by the juxtaposition of physically standing in an empty space while viewing that same space—through the VR viewer—filled with the furniture and objects that make up my home. My impulse to map the world in an attempt to document my displacement is translated to the mapping of my personal space—a look at the interior.

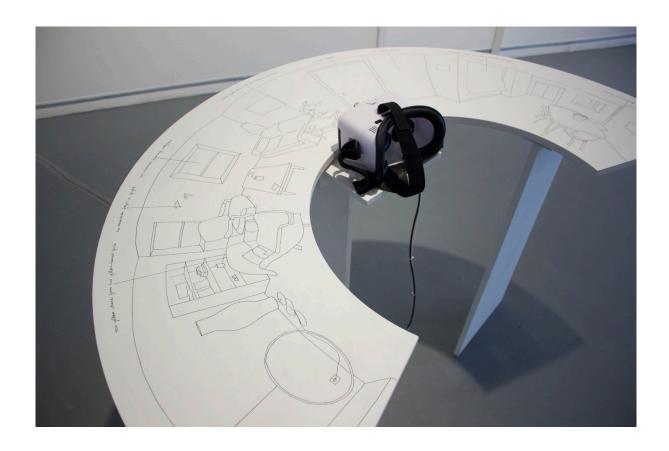
The virtual installation of my home in Decker Gallery mimics the orientation and arrangement of my living room, including not only all of the furniture and decorations, but also a false door and window blinds. These architectural indicators act as points of reference between the virtual installation and the physical space of the gallery, as they are the only elements left installed after I removed everything else. A white table with the VR viewer sits



in the center of the space—a half-circle "orientation table," similar to what you might find at a hilltop vista or overlook. On it are drawn the objects in the room, accompanied by poetic references in relation to my personal life. The horizon becomes an arc. The table acts as an anchor from which the viewer can stand and view the surrounding space.

a hula hoop leaning against a bare wall two yellow chairs from two yellow-haired girls two brass birds frozen in flight two windows framing rooftops two marble-topped tables made for staying in one place one door, closed the fragile edges of a painted paper waterfall mornings and evenings in lessons of leaving

Just outside the entrance to Decker Gallery, the furniture itself became a sculptural object. The entirety of the installation was piled onto a moving pallet and covered with clear plastic wrap. Not only does this sculpture function to confirm the physical reality of



the objects in the space—as opposed to a digitally manipulated image viewed through the VR viewer—but it also amplifies the sense of transition present in the work as a whole. The emptiness of the gallery and the disorientation of the experience of the VR viewer are paired with the physical reality—the heaviness—of the furniture on the moving pallet outside the gallery doors, itself occupying a space in-between here and there, gallery and non-gallery, furniture and art-object.

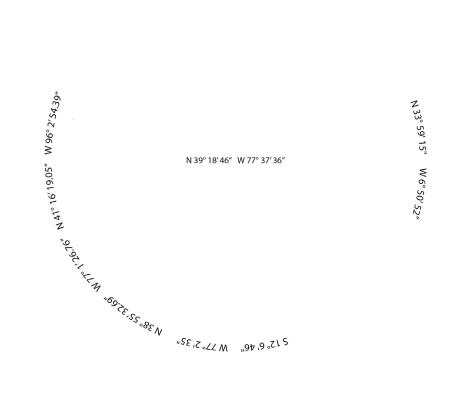
Apartment 404 Not Found is not only an exploration of displacement and an absent home, but it is also a dedication to the void. The performative aspect of the piece goes unseen, the only evidence being the VR image and the furniture that remains in a holding pattern on the moving pallet situated outside the gallery. By voiding the gallery space, I place emphasis on the absence of objects. The inevitable sense of dislocation felt when looking through the VR viewer is amplified by the absence of one's body, even, from the 360-degree image. From a central location, grounded and unmoving, the objects rotate in the surrounding space.







This feeling of centeredness in the midst of disarray is apparent in many of my works leading up to this point. A circular horizon line, a dot in the middle of a digital map, two feet planted in physical reality while the mind occupies a virtual reality. *Journey Around My Bedroom,* an artist's book, continues in this kind of circularity. The title is inspired by the travel novel *Voyage Around My Room* by Xavier de Maistre in which a prisoner considers the objects in his room as if they were from a froeign land. In a similar manner, standing in a single location in my bedroom, I spun in a circle to take a series of photographs while pointing in the direction of all the places I've lived before. The photographs are focused on an iPhone in my hand while the face of the iPhone shows a compass oriented in different directions, the space of my bedroom blurry around the edges. Complimenting the photographs are coordinates—my home in Baltimore, apartment 404—in the center, the others circling around—back to the Middle East, South America, DC, Nebraska, and forward, to the unknown. The poems explore the distance between the place where I stood in my bedroom and the objects within it—to the places much further beyond.



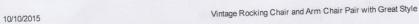


Point directly south—toward my years on the other side of the equator—where Christmas comes in the summertime and bougainvilleas bloom year round. There—then caught in between for the first time; here—now—the still, blue vintage bedspread, gifted from my grandmother. In dreams I drift—my head resting on a pillowcase stitched with purple lilacs, a symbol of love and my mother's favorite flower. They smell like the perfume she gave me for my last birthday, the scent on my neck as strong as the flowers are fleeting—an antidote to impermanence—like the lily of the valley that grow along the hedge in my parents' backyard.

Apartment 404 Not Found coincides with my participation in "not really here" at Platform Gallery, curated by Nada Alaradi. This exhibition explores the space between flight and settlement, knowing and not knowing, belonging and separation, fulfillment and loss. In tandem with the display of Free to a Good Home, I also exhibited Les Souvenirs (Memories) as well as completing a 10-page project as part of a catalogue produced for the exhibition, Envoi. These pieces demonstrate my parallel interests in the physical and the personal as well as the ephemeral and the digital that aim to instill specific feelings of placelessness when taken as a whole, but individually reference a personal timeline: the lipstick mirror of my grandmother; a bonnet for birth/a handkerchief for marriage; a braid of bison grass; matching set of Yemeni jewelry; good fortune from the red and black Huayruro seeds of the Amazon; the world, flattened for a suitcase; Syrian keffiyeh; a key to my hotel room homes; international stamp collection a house = an address; not Fiji; yellow Moroccan balghas; found photograph with clouds, 1976; here now—from then—con mucho amor.

"A man travels the world over in search of what he needs and returns home to find it." —George A. Moore





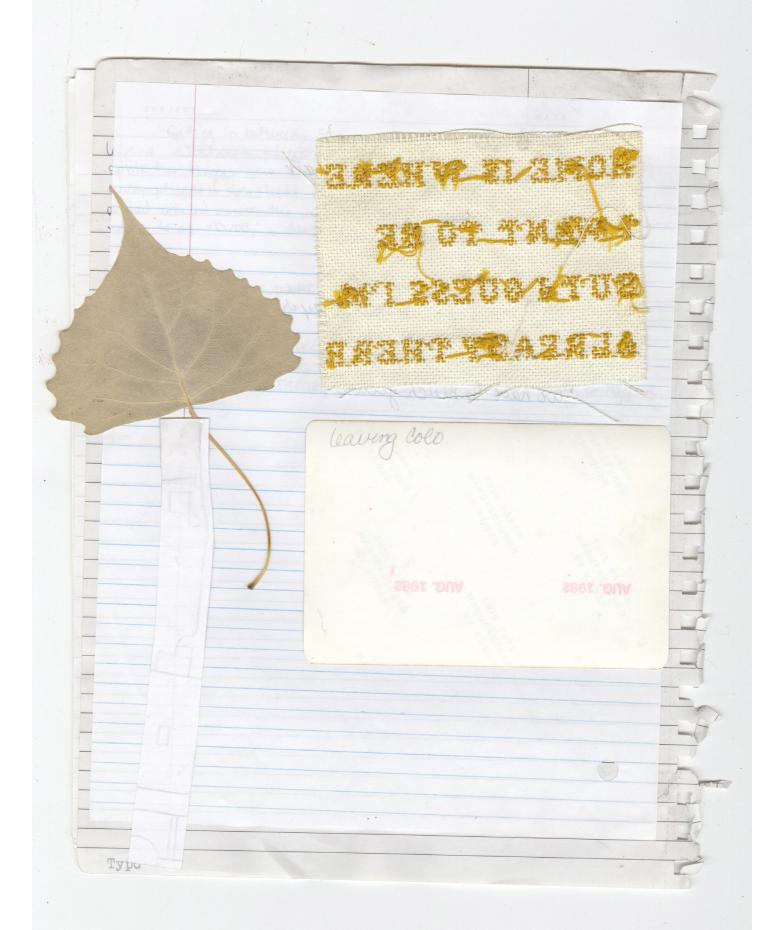
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