

*The Memory of a House:
Shana McCaw and Brent Budsberg*

The artistic collaboration of Shana McCaw and Brent Budsberg intuits how landscape, architecture and performance can combine into a meditation on the psychology of the Midwest and its people, present and past. Using these elements, the artists describe a world that was, but one that we are inextricably tied to as well - in the form of historical landmarks we still inhabit, and in the archetypal human gestures of labor within and around those structures.

Visual poetry and reflections on nostalgia, longing, and memory are what McCaw and Budsberg use to begin their artistic journey. In their recent projects "Inside/Outside" at the Lynden Sculpture Center in Milwaukee (March, 2011), and during a residency at The Center for Land Use Interpretation in Wendover, Utah (May, 2011) the artists use landscape and architecture that echo the ghosts of settlers we know longer recognize but who are part of our collective history as well as our contemporary consciousness.

The artists perform using the dress and demeanor of midwestern settlers. They reflect experiences and moods in the tradition of the pioneer epic "Giants in the Earth: A Saga From The Prairie" or the recently reprinted "Wisconsin Death Trip," which chronicles the brutality and isolation of rural life. Their performances are dominated by stoicism and prolonged silence, as well as symbolic manual labor. The use of detailed miniatures of houses and foundations also create an uncanny addition to the work. The artwork combines into recognizable but y elusive descriptions of our early selves, a dream that can't be fully recalled.

"Inside/Outside" begins and ends with fire. The man and wife stand side by side on a winter morning. He lights his pipe. Snow falls on their shoulders. The couple begins to dig the foundation of a miniature house, filling the shallow trough with charcoal, and set it alight. Snow continues falling amid fading blue light as the couple hauls dirt away, and dusk falls. Their work at an end, they enter the burning outline of their house, and the man repeats his gesture of lighting the pipe. The performance concludes in this pose, again side by side, the couple surrounded by night and slowly burning flames.

The images seem contradictory. The fire connotes destruction or danger, but safety and warmth as well. The couple works hard all day, but the house they outlined is never actually built. The work is futile, and destined to disappear quickly under the burden of a Wisconsin winter. Memory of it will fade as spring approaches.

McCaw and Budsberg expanded this work as they travelled to The Center for Land Use Interpretation in Wendover, Utah. Here the settlers worked against the bleak, sublime and alien landscape of the Utah salt flats.

They climb over forbidding stone outcroppings. She drops a bucket down, fills it, and lifts it again, the purpose indecipherable. The man walks upon a salt encrusted sandy road that seems to have no end.

The use of architecture also remains a fixture. A miniature version of a 19th century farmhouse appears, windblown with the violence of an oncoming storm. The couple also finds the actual remnants of a farmhouse near the site of Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty. The parallels to the artists' notions of time, entropy, and the dissolution of history (who lived in that house? Does anyone know? What remains?) become evident - a melancholy serendipity.

Ultimately, Shana McCaw and Brent Budsberg have created a haunting and emotional artistic project. Their work begs us to ask questions about how we interact with history, and how that interaction may conflict with the past. History can only be reflected on, and never fully understood. Memory fades as buildings crumble, and we are left with a sense of unease as we recognize the contradictions between our times, and nostalgia towards the lost connections to our past.

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