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# Canary in a Coal Mine: Evidence of Late Capitalism in Rural Appalachian Maryland

Rachel Precht

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CANARY IN A COAL MINE:  
EVIDENCE OF LATE CAPITALISM IN RURAL APPALACHIAN MARYLAND

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

Rachel Precht

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

May 2017

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Title: Canary in a Coal Mine: Evidence of Late Capitalism in Rural Appalachian Maryland

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I am using the domestic architecture of houses in rural Appalachian Maryland as a vehicle to address the way in which we perceive the failure of the “American Dream” narrative and late capitalism. This is the pervasive condition of our age, both economic and cultural - an unsustainable model that includes planned obsolescence. Through line drawings, connections are traced between struggling towns in a state of flux and an unsustainable post-industrial society.

I have consciously chosen houses that are worn and show obvious signs of human manipulation. Rather than exploiting the dilapidation of the houses, I have chosen to celebrate the human ingenuity of the people who have lived in them. Making things work with the materials on hand through creative, clever means is a hallmark of rugged individualism and displays the indomitable spirit that is characteristic of this region. In an area often ignored or misunderstood and painted in derisive stereotype, creative problem solving and functionality overrides aesthetics as the occupants work to live within their means. It is an exploration of function over aesthetics and a closer look at the indomitable spirit of ingenuity and adaptation in an area touched by the failures of late capitalism.

## DEDICATION

For those who saw me start this journey,  
but could not be here for the culmination.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

I am using the domestic architecture of houses in rural Appalachian Maryland as a vehicle to address the way in which we perceive the failure of “The American Dream” and late capitalism. Through line drawings, connections are traced between struggling towns in a state of flux and an unsustainable post-industrial society.

I have consciously chosen houses that are worn and show obvious signs of human manipulation. Rather than exploiting the dilapidation of the houses, I have chosen to celebrate the human ingenuity of the people who have lived in them.

The Appalachian Mountains are the oldest mountains in North America, a weathered spine down the East Coast of the United States. Historically difficult terrain kept the region fairly isolated, and allowed those who called it home a chance to develop their own cultural identity. Once the workhorse of an industrial America, the post-industrial age has been far less kind to the region.

The Appalachian Region's economy, once highly dependent on mining, forestry, agriculture, chemical industries, and heavy industry, has become more diversified in recent times, and now includes manufacturing and professional service industries.

Appalachia has come a long way in the past five decades: its poverty rate, 31 percent in 1960, was 17.2 percent over the 2010–2014 period. The number of high-poverty counties in the Region (those with poverty rates more than 1.5 times the U.S. average) declined from 295 in 1960 to 91 over the 2010–2014 period.

These gains have transformed the Region from one of widespread poverty to one of economic contrasts: some communities have successfully diversified their economies,

while others still require basic infrastructure such as roads and water and sewer systems. (The Appalachian Region. ARC).

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) is a federally- funded agency formed in 1965 to partner with state and local governments in the area along the Appalachian Mountains of east coast. The goal of the ARC is to promote growth and economic recovery and combat poverty in areas within Appalachia once hugely dependent on heavy industry. It includes portions of twelve states and the entirety of West Virginia. That is 420 counties and over twenty-five million people (*The Appalachian Region. ARC*). The only counties in Maryland recognized by the commission as part of Appalachia are the two furthest west: Allegany and Garrett. Between Pennsylvania, which known for its steel industry and West Virginia, which known for its coal mining, are Allegany and Garrett County Maryland. This area serves as the source for my observances and visual reference for my drawings.

The canary in a coal mine is a well-known metaphor for signs that might warn people of potential danger. It comes from a time when coal miners would take a caged canary into the mines with them. In underground mines, one of the greatest dangers to miners are invisible gases like carbon monoxide. The technology did not yet exist to take readings of the air quality in the mines, so miners took the caged birds as their early-warning systems. Canaries have a higher respiratory rate than humans, so they would feel the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning before any of the miners – buying them time to get out safely. This is what is known as a sentinel species – a type of animal that responds to imperceptible environmental fluctuations, sending up a warning flag for humans. I've chosen this metaphor not only because it originates from mining towns such as those I am studying, but also because I believe these

houses and the people of the area can serve as sentinels, warning us of problems that we might otherwise not see.

I've chosen the house as a subject because it can be a symbol of the people who reside within it, but it can also be passed on from one family to another. A house changes and endures as time passes, and carries the mark of its occupants as it changes to fit to their needs. It is not only a symbol of comfort, shelter, and domesticity, but also of versatility and adaptability. A great example of such versatility that is unique to the region is the porch. Caricatures of this region often feature inhabitants sitting on their front porches on swings or old couches. It is often a source of amusement, but the tradition originated from early pioneers who first settled the region and lived in log cabins. These dwellings had thick walls and few windows to keep out the freezing winter air. With low lighting and small rooms, the insides of these early houses were often cramped and did not function as ideal work spaces. Pioneers began whitewashing the inside walls of their houses to bounce light, and adding porches to their houses to double their workspace and take advantage of natural lighting for at least half of the year. Over 200 years later, the tradition has evolved and endured.

I am fascinated by the observable signs of rugged individualism prized as part of the larger "American Dream" narrative. The term "rugged individualism" comes from a 1928 presidential campaign speech by Herbert Hoover. "Rugged individualism" and "self-reliance", according to Hoover, were distinctly American qualities in which to take pride. What Hoover coined as "rugged individualism" is an attitude that persists through American culture as a carry-over from the days of Manifest Destiny, frontier ingenuity, and the stubborn will to survive. Government handouts would make people weak, dependent and complacent (*Philosophy of Rugged Individualism*. Miller Center, University of Virginia). While this approach failed in the

early days of the Great Depression, it has evolved and persisted. To many people, it means not asking for help and finding a solution to your problems on your own terms. There is a pride and patriotism to fixing things and finding your own solutions.

While Hoover insisted this was a uniquely American ideal, examples of the ingenuity and creativity of people when given specific constraints can be found worldwide. Richard Wentworth, a noteworthy member of the New British Sculpture movement, explains his fascination with exploring the versatility of mundane and everyday materials.

[...] I grew up in a world held together with string and brown paper and sealing wax, and that's how it was. I slowly realized that this is the underlying condition of the world and there's nothing I like more than when, for example, there's been a near-disaster at NASA and they say: 'If it hadn't been for the chewing gum...' It's not because I want to fetishize chewing gum or the aesthetics of gum pressed over some break or membrane; it's because we have the intelligence to think: 'Hey, there's a malleable, mastic material and we can use that.' A large part of our lives is spent using that very edgy bit of our intelligence [...] - Richard Wentworth (2007)

Signs of this ideology can even be found in pop culture. From the mid 1980's to the early 1990's, popular television hero MacGyver fascinated audiences with his ingenuity and quick thinking – often figuring his way out of dangerous situations using found materials like paper clips, duct tape, and his Swiss Army knife. This manner of making things work with the materials on hand through creative, clever means displays the indomitable spirit that is characteristic of many Americans, and is prevalent in Appalachia. Many houses show the adaptability and unique fixes to situations that lend character not found in cookie-cutter suburban homes. Many environmentally and socially conscious middle class Americans take pride in

recycling and sorting their plastics, cans, and newspapers. Their rural counterparts reuse and recycle to save money and materials. It is important to note that not all recycling looks the same or shares the same motivations. In an area often ignored or misunderstood and painted in derisive stereotype, creative problem solving and functionality overrides aesthetics as the occupants struggle to live within their means.

## CHAPTER II

### VISUAL INFLUENCES

My work for *Canary In A Coal Mine* consists of line drawings in graphite on white paper. The houses have been meticulously measured and planned, built on the skeleton framework of the base shapes. They're refined as the lines layer until they've become fully-realized representations of actual, existing houses. Each house is its own drawing, existing in a setting-less stark white environment that references the sterility of the almost mechanical line bases. The imperfections in the houses are supported by the rawness and tactility of the plywood that the drawings have been mounted on.

#### *Typologies*

Bernd and Hilla Becher worked as a duo of photographers in Germany. They were primarily interested in photographing industrial structures and landscapes from multiple angles. They found a mutual interest in the shapes contained within these industrial structures, as they had been built for functionality, but seemed to also have aesthetics in mind. They are best known for their large grid black and white photographic displays taken from straight on, "objective" viewpoints of similar industrial structures. They worked photographing water towers, blast furnaces, gas tanks, steel and mining structures. The Bechers referred to these works as "typologies".

Every element of the typology presentation adds to the successful communication of the work as a whole. Black and white photography carries the connotation of honesty and truth through documentation. As the Museum of Modern Art explains it, "The rigorous frontality of the individual images gives them the simplicity of diagrams, while their density of detail offers encyclopedic richness" (*Bernd and Hilla Becher: Landscape/Typology*. MOMA). The

consistent, straight-on angle allows the viewer to examine each structure as it exists, without being overshadowed by complex lighting, extreme angles, or other tricks that are sometimes used by contemporary photographers. It is an approach that is detached and almost scientific in the rigorous classifications - a system to categorize and examine. This allows the viewer to focus on the design of the buildings themselves and the shapes inherent in their design. The images are presented without bias or agenda. Even so, they allow the viewer to examine the everyday and the mundane in a way they may not have considered previously.

Like the Bechers, I am taking an objective viewpoint of the houses, without bias or agenda. Too often, these houses are dismissed or painted with a broadbrush stereotype. I've removed them from their environments, focusing instead on the houses themselves. The only indicators as to where they are located comes from the title, the house address. I've chosen this method to best catalogue the houses. This way they can be distinguished from one another, but are not attached to any preconceptions or associations. By focusing only on the house and all structural elements or interventions, the drawings can reveal details viewers might otherwise miss. As an example, a viewer who is distracted by a rusted car parked in the yard might miss or dismiss the clever ingenuity of a fix to the porch.

The Bechers were in direct contrast to other photographers working at the same time. Otto Stienert's "Subjective Photography" was the epitome of the contrasting point of view. Blake Stimson's paper *'The Photographic Comportment of Bernd and Hilla Becher'* explains Stienert's photography as "entrepreneurial, beauty-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder humanism" and contrasts the Bechers as a "polemical return to the 'straight' aesthetics and social themes of the 1920s and 1930s in response to the goeey and sentimental subjectivist photographic aesthetics that arose in the early post-war period"( Stimson. The Tate Papers no. 1).

When these frontal facade photographs are presented in a large grid as a “typology”, they highlight the similarities and the differences between the industrial structures. The Bechers were working to document the goliath structures of industrialism as they noticed them disappearing from the landscape around them. There is a haunting, serious nature to the work that befits an attempt at preserving something that is slowly fading into memory as the world around it continues without notice.

Bernd Becher's fascination with industrial architecture was rooted in his childhood in the Ruhr, and he was acutely aware that the mega-structures throughout Germany, Europe and America would soon disappear from the landscape, just as the ones around his home had as Germany moved into a new, postwar economic era. He once said he ‘was overcome with horror when I noticed that the world in which I was besotted was disappearing’. (O’Hagan. [The Guardian](#). 2014)

As the Bechers travelled and branched out with their photography, they brought their audiences to the realization that the designs of these industrial structures did not vary too drastically from one country to the other. Without being given the locations, one water tower very much looks like another. It is a subtle theme of universality that the viewer must come to on their own.

This is one notable area in which my work decidedly differs from that of the Bechers. Showing the houses that I have drawn in one large exhibition together allows for comparison. They do not look the same and there is a vast array of variety in such a specific region. The houses in a town that popped up around a train route look very different from those of the coal and logging towns only 10 – 20 minutes away. Viewers who are not aware of the differences may lump all of these groups under the same stereotypical depiction of what an Appalachian



house looks like. By showing the variety of different houses and innovations, I draw attention to the diversity of the population itself. While the Bechers sent a subtle message on how people world-wide are not that different, I am choosing to celebrate the differences within a much smaller demographic.

The success of Bernd and Hilla Becher and their photography is not only measured by the prestigious exhibitions and institutions that hold their work in their permanent collections. In 2002 they received the Erasmus Prize for their roles as teachers at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. They mentored a number of fellow photographers including Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Thomas Ruff, and Thomas Struth. American photographer Stephen Shore, who was a colleague and documentarian of Andy Warhol, has cited the Bechers as a large influence and admitted a fascination with their work. The style is now internationally recognized as the Dusseldorf School of Photography, or the Becher School of Photography.

Clearly influenced by the Becher School of Photography, Canadian visual artist Susan Dobson utilizes photography and film to document and explore place, isolation, ruin and memory. In her *Retail* series, Dobson photographs chain stores, often referred to as “big box stores”. She then covers the facade of the store with a flat, opaque grey, keeping to the outline to produce a silhouette of the storefront. They are photographed against an almost too-blue sky to reflect the happiness and optimism of capitalism. But the stark parking lots and foliage-less environments leave the viewer feeling isolated and disillusioned. It is a nice balance of the hope of the idea of a capitalistic society to the reality of large chain stores that decimate their competition.

Like Dobson’s box stores, the Appalachian homes that I depict are also reflections of capitalism. The towns they are referenced from sprang up around blue collar industries. These

were the people buying into the “American Dream” narrative. As industries changed and moved out of the area, some (Cumberland, Frostburg, Mountain Lake Park) were even forced to change and adapt to new industries to support them. Others (Crellin, Lonaconing) have not yet adapted, and have shrunk in population as jobs disappeared. A few (Vindex, Schell) have disappeared entirely and were unable to even be represented. In Vindex specifically, the town was what is known as a “company town”, a town in which one company owns and runs the majority of businesses and housing to support their factory. When that company left, the town was left as a ghost town.

Dobson’s *Sense of an Ending* series echoes these sentiments of disillusionment with today’s suburban capitalistic society by presenting the viewer with photographs that are reminiscent of the Becher’s photography. While the Bechers photographed actual places in an attempt to document a reality, Dobson’s *Sense of an Ending* series is created from composite images that create believable yet fictional places. They are modern monoliths, mansions, foreclosed and falling apart homes, and piles of rubble. Gregory Eddi Jones describes them, “As the overcast skies in each piece forebode cold and rain, and as the architectural styles have begun to weather and collapse, these images, while fiction, portray the inevitable truth of not just homes and buildings, but perhaps cities and civilizations as well”. It is a melancholic look at what the future holds, and a reminder that all things eventually crumble.

Dobson appears to have an interest in human perception and the very thin line between reality and fiction. The *Retail* series focuses on department stores that offer sunny, blue skies and happiness of capitalism and employment. Empty, drab parking lots and a “censored” grey outline of the store instead read of the isolation and monopoly that these chain stores create in communities.

## *Architecture & Cartography*

While the Bechers and Dobson largely photographed architecture, Perry Kulper is an architect who uses his understanding of design methodologies and techniques to create complex, layered, and highly complex and engaging images. They are part cartography, part blueprint, somehow finding the delicate balance between encyclopedic informational overload and detailed diagram. Kulper is a member of the American Institute of Architecture, and has been teaching architecture for 17 years, currently at the University of Michigan. Kulper explains his work by saying, “I have a natural curiosity toward the roles of representation and methodologies in the production of architecture, and in the broadening of conceptual ranges by which architecture contributes to cultural imagination” (*Bryant Lecture Features Architect Perry Kulper from the University of Michigan*. Kansas State University.).

Kulper often discusses drawing as a relational act, and utilizes it as a tool to explore what is spatially possible and to organize and visualize thought processes. Through his work he seeks to dissolve the boundaries between art and design and art vs. architecture.

Kulper’s discussion of his work has influenced how I regard my own. While there is undoubtedly some cartographical and architectural influence, my drawings are fine art that use the language of these other processes to further my own message. Blueprints have a recognizable style that laymen can recognize. With that recognition comes the associations of building, hope for the future, planning, measurements, and careful mathematics. Through using this style in my fine art, I can imbue it with these associations while still speaking to a larger narrative.

Kulper is interested in the way we structure things in work more than any of his images becoming a structure at any time. Kulper explains his work by saying, “I am interested in the

scope of architecture, in the roles of drawing, in broadening design versatility through diverse design methods and in re-conceptualizing architecture. I consider the labor of work, the language of representation and the language of architecture, latency in drawing and the crisis of reduction” (Kulper: Artist Portfolio.). To the casual viewer, the overlaid shapes and lines evoke the image of shifting, overlaid realities. One might be reminded of the manner in which thoughts change and develop while in the mind.

### *Artist as Anthropologist*

President Johnson declared war on poverty in the United States in 1964, and many of the images from this campaign came to define the American public’s view of the Appalachian region and the people who live there. As Roger May of the Looking at Appalachia Project puts it, “Many of the War on Poverty photographs, whether intentional or not, became a visual definition of Appalachia. These images have often drawn from the poorest areas and people to gain support for the intended cause, but unjustly came to represent the entirety of the region while simultaneously perpetuating stereotypes” (Looking At Appalachia).

Because this area is so often painted by hurtful and condescending stereotype, I have been keenly aware of my own position and how it can be defined by Joseph Kosuth in his 1975 essay *The Artist as Anthropologist*. Kosuth begins Part II of his essay by stating “The artist perpetuates his culture by maintaining certain features of it by ‘using’ them. The artist is a model of the anthropologist *engaged*” (Kosuth. 1975). It is in this way that the role of the artist and the anthropologist differ. Both seek to understand a culture and discuss it, but the anthropologist does so from outside while the artist works from within. Kosuth differentiates by saying “He (the anthropologist) is not part of the social matrix. Whereas the artist, as anthropologist, is operating within the same socio-cultural context from which he evolved”

(Kosuth. 1975). The people of Appalachia are very quick to notice and label “outsiders” and “strangers”, and, thanks to a long tradition of being misrepresented, they have grown untrusting of such. This would be a distinct disadvantage for an anthropologist. As Kosuth says, “[...] what may be interesting about the artist-as-anthropologist is that the artist’s own activity is not *outside*, but a mapping of an internalizing cultural activity in his own society. The artist-as-anthropologist may be able to accomplish what the anthropologist has always failed at” (Kosuth. 1975). So rather than critiquing and judging the people of Appalachia and their houses, as someone who comes from the area, acting in the role of artist-as-anthropologist, I am instead ‘attempting to obtain fluency in my *own* culture’ (Kosuth. 1975).

This distinction of artist-as-anthropologist and looking within my own culture in an attempt to achieve fluency is particularly important when you consider some of the images that exist and the ongoing controversy of defining the region. In 2015, VICE magazine sent photographers Stacy Kranitz and Bruce Gilden on assignment in Appalachia. The images that Gilden sent back were nothing short of caricature. Roger May, founder of Looking at Appalachia, criticizes the project by saying the photographers “reinforce the idea that Appalachia is somehow an exotic location for photographers to drop in and use people as props. They aren’t connected to any other purpose than being self-serving. In other words, they draw attention to the photographer more than the people and communities being photographed” (May. Vantage. 2015).

In contrast, my work is aware of the stereotypes that photographers are often looking to reinforce. Rather than cast judgment on the people of this area, I am looking to elevate their ingenuity and creative problem solving. There is an old adage, “Paint/Write what you know”, so with this project, I have drawn from the environment that I grew up in. I am not “dropping in”

from a big city with my mind already made up about what I will find. This is the region I consider home. Despite this, I have chosen to take myself out of the equation and present an objective view of these houses and the clever modifications made to them. *Canary in a Coal Mine* is not designed to celebrate the artist, the intent instead is to shed light on the subject. The houses are given the room to become their own characters instead of being regarded as props.

In interviews about the VICE magazine project, Krantz later admitted that she clashed with Gilden over the best approach. The two eventually split and published individual sets of images, unable to work together on the project. Krantz described Gilden's search for subjects to photograph at small churches in Appalachia and the way he wanted to keep looking because the people looked "too normal" ("Strangers with Cameras in Appalachia." Audio blog post (podcast)). Gilden seemed only interested in creating images that reinforced harmful visual stereotypes of the region. This approach and the images from *Two Days in Appalachia* (Gilden. VICE magazine) cemented my own determination in not seeking out houses that are collapsing in on themselves and ruined - but to concentrate on houses that have been modified by the people living in them, patched and evolving to fill changing needs.

If we do not do enough to explain how and why photographers came to this place we won't change the way it is seen. If we don't talk about how someone like Bruce Gilden uses people to collapse them into an ideal, a fantasy and how and why that way of making work speaks to deeply entrenched aspects of the American psyche, [...] then we fail to address the problem of documentary photography in the region. – Krantz (2015)

### *Quotidian*

Another important visual element in my work is the importance of the everyday. I first became fascinated by the houses of my area after noticing the slow and gradual ruin of one house

on my route home to visit my parents. Once I began looking, it seemed that there were more and more tiny details of the houses around me to admire – things I had seen my whole life but never noticed or paid attention to. Ilya and Emilia Kabakov capture this sort of quotidian magic and transformation in their essay, *Night Journey* (Kabakov.1998). Marcel Duchamp pays homage to noticing the little things such as “exhalation of tobacco smoke”, “stretching, yawning, sneezing” and “the sound or the music which corduroy trousers, like these, make when one moves” in his *Notes on the Infra-Slim* (Duchamp.1945).

My fascination with everyday ingenuity is that it seems to be a stroke of genius that goes unappreciated and unnoticed. It is so frequent, understated and quiet that we fail to register that it has even happened. By focusing on the things that make these houses unique – the little interventions and alterations – I can heighten my own awareness and notice more.

I have found that the materials associated with many of the interventions, quick fixes, and creative solutions observed in these houses are what inspire me. The tactile nature of them is more powerful once I have devoted myself to the idea of noticing. I notice now the difference in texture of different types of plywood. When viewed from the side, the layers mirror strata in a mountainside. I also notice that blue rain barrels and tarps are all the same shade of blue. I take the time now to notice the way the fibers of a tarp are woven together and across one another like an intricate monotone tapestry. My treatment of the wooden elements in my drawings is based not only on my observations of wood, but on my handling of it. Only direct interaction with the materials could lead me to noticing and appreciating the finer details of the materials.

Exploration of and familiarity with these materials allows me to represent them with more understanding than simply copying from a photograph.

This exploration of the tactile helps to counterbalance the reality that in most cases with these houses, I am acting as an observer from the street. I am taking the house at face value, and often to appreciate some of the fixes I observe, I first need to understand the elements used to create the modification. I often find myself trying to backwards-engineer some of the more unusual solutions I've seen to deduce what the problem was to begin with.

New York installation artist Jim Hodges utilizes everyday objects, “ordinary items such as paper napkins, artificial flowers, lightbulbs, mirrors, sheet music, Pantone chips, old clothes, chains, and rocks” (Sheets. *Jim Hodges: Under the Demin Sky*) and brings out the beauty in the mundane. Perhaps Hodges' most widely recognized work is his *Untitled (one day it all comes true)* large scale, swirling blue skyscape that is crafted entirely from denim. Seeing it from afar, the image reminds one of Romantic landscapes, swirling skies, and the sublime. Yet there is something inherently Americana about denim. The mind reels as it tries to take in the knowledge that thrift store blue jeans can become something so beautiful. Denim is known for its body-memory properties, the fibers bending and fitting to the shape of a habitual wearer. By gathering thrift store denim, Hodges' collected remnants that had the memory and history of past wearers imprinted on them.

I like how I can generate an image from this material that has been aged by different people. The variety of color is just endless... It also brought up ideas of my mom, who would patch together jackets for me out of my old jeans when I was a kid. That definitely revved up the engine to make this thing, because it resonated from something that had power and meaning for me. - Jim Hodges (Sheets. *Jim Hodges: Under the Demin Sky*.)

Jim Hodges' work is so memorable and poignant because it demonstrates the ability of an artist to engage a material. Not only can Hodges read his materials, but he can unlock whatever



memories or unspoken, subconscious connections his audience may have with the material. Instead of overpowering and bending the material to his will, he allows it to carry part of the work's message. Olga Viso of the Walker Center for the Arts described Jim Hodges by saying, "He creates these suspended moments in time for me with the simplest means. He takes his cue from his materials and brings out what's embedded in them, whether it's nostalgia or emotion or some kind of human connection" (Sheets. *Jim Hodges: Under the Demin Sky*).

It is this focus on materials that leads to some of the major choices I have made in displaying my work. I've mounted my drawings on plywood rather than sealing them away under glass or in a heavy frame. Like my drawings, the manner in which they are displayed focuses on the smaller, sometimes subtle details such as the strata of the wood on the sides, the weight of the wood, or even the smell of the freshly sanded, unsealed edges. In many cases, the stamped writing from the lumber yard can also be seen from the side. I am focused on houses that have been patched with everyday materials and am fascinated by the mundane improvisations in my drawings. I paralleled this in my display by choosing to use everyday hardware store materials rather than specialized "artistic" boards or frames. The plywood these drawings are mounted on was stored among sheets that could have been used for any number of "home improvement" projects. The repurposing and elevation of these everyday materials changes the way in which they are viewed, and this is exactly what I hope to achieve with the houses.

### CHAPTER III

#### CONCEPTUAL INFLUENCES

##### *The House as a Symbol*

To noted psychoanalyst Carl Jung, the house was one of the most common and archetypal symbols in dream analysis. The house was meant to symbolize an extension of self. Jung spent a great deal of time discussing the interiors of houses in dream analysis. The rooms could stand for different facets of a person's life, or even different times in their life. For example, experiencing one's childhood bedroom in a dream would symbolize some sort of nostalgia or yearning for simpler, more childlike times. Jung even went as far as to establish that the attic symbolized the head, and the basement or dark closets were where secrets were locked away.

The houses that are represented in my drawings functioned as someone's home, but I as the artist perceive and interact with them as an outsider. Houses are uniquely intimate spaces that cannot help but be perpetually on display for the world. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard explored the way in which humans interact with their most intimate spaces in his book "*Poetics of Space*". Bachelard suggests that "the house both encloses space (the interior) and excludes space (everything outside of it). Thus, it has two very important and different components; its interior and its façade" (Cooper. 1974). In this way, the house is very much like a person. People have a public persona and a more guarded private interior one. Like houses, the interior is only shared with the select few who are trusted and invited in. We often make judgements about people or houses based on the exterior appearance before getting to see what is inside.

The people of Appalachia are often taken at face value, based on what people observe from the outside, combined with what they expect to see. In a struggle between aesthetics and

functionality, functionality is the common victor. When this is applied to the people of this area, one could conclude that usefulness, skill, and creative problem solving are prized over ineffective beauty.

The comparison between the interior and the façade that Bachelard makes could also be applied to Appalachian culture. To many of the inhabitants of this area, there are those included, and those excluded (outsiders). There is a distinct difference between the way those inside view one another, while those outside see a façade. Often this mask is one that those outside have helped to create and reinforce. Take for example, photographer Bruce Gilden, who came into the region with an idea of what he wanted to see, and then looked for subjects who reinforced this image. He purposely chose harsh lighting and extreme close-ups to draw attention to the perceived abnormalities rather than choosing to represent the norm he was presented.

In analyzing Bachelard's conclusions, Clare Cooper delves deeper into the experience of settling into a new home. She describes how a new place can feel foreign at first, as if it is not your own. As time passes, it becomes a reflection of you, filled with your things and arranged per how things work for you. Cooper looks at these little alterations we make upon a house as messages we are looking to convey about ourselves through the symbol of the house. As we shape our environments to reflect ourselves, one might wonder if the reverse is true as well – are we changing little by little in response to our houses too? (This is a nice observation. I think the answer is yes, and there are those in the design world that would strongly argue this.)

Thus, the house might be viewed as an avowal of self – that is, the psychic messages are moving from self to the objective symbol of self – and as a revelation of the nature of self; that is the messages are moving from objective symbol back to the self. It is almost

as if the house – self continuum could be thought of as both the positive and negative of a film simultaneously. (Cooper. 1974).

### *Time and Simultaneity*

The construction lines that I have chosen to leave exposed in my drawings not only serve the purpose of evoking connections with cartography and schematics, but also link to ideas explored by artists of the Cubist and Futurist movements. The lines serve as a record of the surface history and the drawing process. The lines allow the viewer to see the drawing (and the house) in all its stages – not just the current one. Influenced by Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* (1912) and Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase No.2* (1912), I am interested in simultaneity. In this way, I show the house at its conception in the schematic style through to the realized forms and the patches, improvements, and creative interventions made by the humans who have lived in it over the years. Time collapses and becomes layered.

I am utilizing Augustine's understanding of time as a construct, the medium in which we exist. "Past Time" exists only as memory, and "Future Time" as anticipation (Augustine. *Time and Eternity*). Augustine of Hippo was an early theologian and epistemologist whose work later influenced philosophers and phenomenologists like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Russell and Yates. He was also cited as a notable influence for noted theologian Thomas Aquinas. It is with this understanding that I place my drawings of houses out of time by creating a paradox. The houses are out of time, but serve as a record of time at the same time.

The houses are drawn from specific reference, as they were in one fixed point in time. By the time the picture has been taken, that moment becomes "Past Time", a memory. These houses have existed in reality – I can remember being in front of them and taking the photograph that would serve as a reference image. But the drawings become time capsules of their own. I

can also remember the hours that passed as I hunched over my surface, working with pencils and rulers to carefully reconstruct the likenesses of these houses. In this way, each drawing serves as microcosm of time passed, the evidence of past times folded in on each other. The drawings become like the houses themselves. The houses are not new, and have stood for decades, changing with the times. But they are repositories for all this past time, holding the marks as evidence of these memories. House styles can call up memory, not only of the house itself but what else was happening in that time. It is impossible to pull the house out of time if past time is memory, and because of this, each viewer will experience each drawing differently as they draw from their own memories.

As well as relying on memory, my drawings also evoke a sense of future time, or anticipation. I have adopted a style of drawing influenced by schematics to address the hopeful anticipation of planning and building a house. Perhaps the owners of the house did not directly plan their own house, but someone had to. Perhaps large corporate owners planned an entire company town. Perhaps the sketch existed only as a dream for the future. This sharp, linear style of the schematic is a metaphor for the hope of the future and plans that we make in anticipation. Drawing is often viewed as an interpretation of the ideal world. This is in sharp contrast with the state in which many of these houses exist and the way humans have modified them to fit their needs.

### *Postmodernism and 'Late Capitalism'*

The houses that I examine are emblematic of the larger problem of late capitalism in America that I hope to address. This is the pervasive condition of our age, both economic and cultural - an unsustainable model that includes planned obsolescence. Fredric Jameson explains the addition of 'late' to the term as communicating "the sense that something has changed, that

things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thoroughgoing and all- pervasive” (Jameson). Jameson also suggests this term is synonymous with ‘postmodernism’. The houses are treated as specimens of this phenomenon; the observable evidence left in the wake and the only manner by which we can observe this problem.

In Todd-Samuel Presner’s essay “*Hegel’s Philosophy of World History via Sebals’s Imaginary of Ruins: A Contrapuntal Critique of the “New Space” of Modernity*”, Presner states “...we quickly recognize that the ruins of modernity are not just physical ruins or material remains: *they are ruins of certain kinds of narratives.*” The houses I have chosen to draw come from company towns populated by blue-collar workers. These houses were an integral part of the “American Dream” and their physical state is a reflection of that narrative’s ruin.

## CHAPTER IV

### EXHIBITION ANALYSIS

*Canary In A Coal Mine* is an exhibition comprising of thirty-six individual line drawings on Stonehenge paper, mounted on plywood. The exhibition debuted on March 22, 2017 in the Kipp Gallery at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

The viewer is confronted by the evidence left in the wake of late capitalism's sweep through rural Appalachian Maryland. With no floating walls to break up the space, the sheer number of drawings speaks to the extent of the phenomenon. This is not something that affects only a few people. The viewer can stand in the space and see all the houses surrounding them. The large, empty space of the gallery echoes the negative space left in the drawings.



Fig. 1. Installation of *Canary in a Coal Mine*. Kipp Gallery. Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

The pencil drawings are subtle, white paper hung against white walls that reinforces the unbiased and almost clinical evaluation of these houses as evidence. The drawings are hard to see at a distance, beckoning the viewer to step closer to discover the collection of construction lines beneath the drawing of the house. This exposes the elements of the drawings that hold them together. Much like the skeleton of a house bears the weight of the rest of the building, these lines anchor the rest of the drawing as it is constructed around them.

There are five overlay pieces, where the drawings are done on mylar and shown over blown-up photographs of textures commonly found in the buildings pictured. These works not

only bring moments of color to the exhibition, but the images beneath the mylar reference textures of the materials represented in the other drawings.



Fig. 2. Snowy Crk Rd, Crellin (Coal). 38” x 28”

The drawings serve as individual images of houses, but also together as one united exhibition. Viewers at the opening discussed which houses were their favorites, and compared the different shapes and modifications between them. Houses were not sorted by area that they had been pulled from to keep viewer’s interest. Similar houses from the same area may have subtle differences that are more obvious when viewed side by side, but viewers are also more likely to gloss over the second without looking closer.



In lieu of titles, I chose to identify the houses by their location to further communicate that these were real places where real people lived. Because many of these locations were rural, street addresses and towns were fluid - much like the communities the drawings were representing. Not all of the houses had street addresses and numbers, and many fell beyond the city limits of the nearest township.



Fig. 3. Mount Savage Rd NW (Railroad, Foundry, Coal, Clay, Brick). 28" x 22"



Fig. 4. Backbone Mountain, MD (Lumber, Coal, Agriculture). 24” x 16”

Drawings were also labelled beneath the location by the industries that helped to support those communities. Some had several very different industries listed as examples of towns that had adapted to the changing economic climate and adopted new ways of supporting themselves. Others were excellent examples of communities in flux. A handful of drawings came from those communities that had not yet adapted beyond their original industries, and as a result had withered, their populations shrinking over the years.



Fig. 5. Mountain Lake Park (Railroad, Tourism). 26" x 24"



Fig. 6. 56 Green St., Frostburg (National Road, Railroad, University). 22" x 24"

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

*Canary in a Coal Mine* draws attention to a part of the country that helped to build and develop the nation into what it is today. Appalachia has a wealth of ingenuity, creative problem solving, rugged individualism and a do-it-yourself attitude. Communities built on industries that are disappearing and becoming obsolete have been forced to find new ways to support themselves. These areas serve as a warning for the rest of the country in the wake of late capitalism. We cannot continue this way. We are running on an unsustainable model.

We become desensitized to the everyday and the mundane and can miss warning signs and evidence of phenomena larger than ourselves. Houses are so quotidian that we often look at them without processing what we are seeing. In the words of Paul Auster, “I’m not asking you to reinvent the world. I just want you to pay attention to it, to think about the things around you more than you think about yourself” (Auster, Calle. 1999). Through this project I have taken the time to notice more details in the everyday before allowing preconception to make my conclusions for me. It is my hope that my viewers will take the time to notice more around them as well.

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