

**Relative Space:  
An Exploration of Home Through Landscapes and Materials**

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## **Abstract**

The term place is broadly defined as a particular point or location in space. Western North Carolina is an area with a well-known description; the mountainous region of the state and a sub region of Appalachia. The landscape, ecosystems, and surrounding culture of this specific region has governed the lives of the living entities within its environment due to the rural qualities of the rugged terrain. These characteristics are significant factors in the development of Appalachian women's narratives throughout history. Traditionally these women focused their labor and energy towards the home, making it difficult to find a place within the professional sphere of creatives. This research is an exploration of historical gender roles within traditional Appalachian craft and is highlighted through functional objects, local topographical studies, and interviews. With the use of wood, reclaimed materials, and family quilts the artist joins the concepts of traditional craft and fine art to focus on the narrative of the Appalachian woman. The emphasis on functionality calls attention to the relationships cultivated through the physical interactions that occur between these spaces. An awareness is brought to the ways in which humans engage with their environments, who they share these places with, and how a particular place can connect to a sense of individuality.

## **1. Introduction**

Since the late nineteenth century the Appalachian region has been recognized through stereotypical terms set in place through media and press publications;

uneducated, anti-progress, impoverished, and lazy. Madison County, just north of Asheville, has historically existed as no exception to these labels. The women who are born and raised in this environment have a unique and intimate experience with the land and the other living entities that call this place home. The perspective of a person being a “product of their environment” weakens the idea that humans are whole, autonomous beings. Therefore, there must be an intricate combination of outside influences that makes someone feel a sense of identity, place, and belonging. This is a study to better understand the external entities that help to compose a specific sense of individuality, and is a result of the need to have a personal connection to the place a person calls home.

## 2. Finding a Place for Women and Craft

Traditionally Appalachian women have had to focus their labor and energy towards the home. In the rural areas of this region families were required to be self-sufficient in order to sustain life within these mountains. The steep and heavily wooded terrain prolonged the development of the landscape. Therefore, it was essential for women to partake in activities such as weaving their own cloth, sewing the family’s clothing, processing food, preparing meals, cleaning the home, and tending to the children. They were the caretakers of both the home and the living beings within it. Most of the traditional craft found in Appalachia was based on practicality. This was due to the inaccessibility of manufactured goods and lack of financial means and opportunities. The quilts, clothing, food, baskets, etc. made by women were necessary items that generated outlets for artistic expression. The region of Appalachia has primarily been an agriculture-driven area. Occupations of men consisted of farming, coal mining, timbering, wood working, steel fabrication, and so on. The gender roles of the past were evident; women tended to the space within the home and men supervised the property and matters outside of the house.<sup>[1]</sup>

In the *Journal of Aesthetic Education* Sally J. Markowitz writes, “difference in evaluative meaning reflects our culture’s elitist values: what white European men make is dignified by the label “art”, while what everyone else makes counts only as craft”.<sup>[2]</sup> In the historically patriarchal realm of art making it has been difficult for women to find their place in the world outside the home and integrate themselves into the sphere of professional creatives.

The Southern Craft Revival was crucial in the preservation of skills used by mountain folk to create functional and well-made objects. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the movement was centered in the southern Appalachian mountains and the upland portions of Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee. The revival continued for fifty years, peaking in the 1930’s, and focused on the making and selling of handmade products to provide work for rural families.

The production centers for the movement began as missionary projects, non-profits, and schools. John C. Campbell Folk School, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, and Penland School of Craft were all established within a relatively close proximity to one another. All of these establishments were founded by women. Olive

Dame Campbell and others in the area who were interested in preserving these skills came together to discuss creating a cooperative that would bring together craft resources, education, marketing and conservation. The area surrounding Asheville, North Carolina has been at the forefront of craft production within Appalachia. In 1930 the Southern Highland Craft Guild was created with its headquarters at the Folk Art Center in Asheville.<sup>[3]</sup>

### 3. Arts and Crafts Movement

The Arts and Crafts movement emerged during the late Victorian period in England. Concerns about industrial life fueled an interest towards a reevaluation of handmade goods and craftsmanship. People within the movement sought to improve standards of decorative design that were degraded by mechanization, and to create a space in which fine craft and skill were valued. The Arts and Crafts movement did not endorse any specific style but advocated for the advancement of the craftsman and a decline of machine made goods..<sup>[4]</sup>

During the Arts and Crafts movement in America, women began to find their place as professional makers. In a book titled *Professional Pursuits: Women and the American Arts and Crafts Movement* the author states that the movement, “was strongly connected to the home...disguising the nontraditional nature of women’s actual duties...women capitalized on these associative values and on their connection to women’s traditional roles”.<sup>[5]</sup> This movement cultivated an acceptance and open-mindedness in regards to the products and skills that women have refined over the generations while also allowing the adoption of new trades and abilities.

A primary example of women finding their place as makers during the time of the Arts and Craft Movement is evident in the work of Marie Zimmermann. She was known as a metalsmith but was also an accomplished woodworker. In this piece she successfully combined intricately carved and painted wood, metal, and gemstones to produce a functional object. Zimmermann encompasses the ideals of the movement through her attention to detail, exhibiting fine craftsmanship and an elegant grouping of various mediums. The *Box* also breaks down the stereotype of the mediums traditionally worked by men and the role women had as creatives.<sup>[6]</sup>



Figure 1. Marie Zimmermann. *Box*. Ca 1910-20. Wood, ivory, patinated silver, nickel-plated brass, steel, amethyst, and semi-precious quartz. 10 ¼ x 12 ½ x 8 5/8 in.

## 4. Inspirational Artists

### Katie Hudnall

Katie Hudnall received her BFA in Sculpture from the Corcoran College of Art and Design and her MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University in Furniture Design/Woodworking. Her work has been included in exhibitions including *Crafting A Continuum: Rethinking Contemporary Craft*, *Making a Seat at the Table: Women Transforming Woodworking*, and in *American Craft Magazine's* February/March 2017 issue.

Her work focuses on building larger furniture and furniture-like objects from small, rough, discarded bits of wood. From her artist statement she claims, "I don't hide the connections, and I leave traces of attempts and failures to make something work—an odd map of the logic and processes used to assemble the piece." Her pieces are representations of relationships and all their imperfections.<sup>[7]</sup> Hundall's use of reclaimed materials as a major component of compositions echoes the idea of using what is available. This exhibits both an inspiring and resourceful approach to the creative process, as well as an environmentally conscious way of making. Hundall's ability to create from repurposed materials inspires me to continue to look for ways to give old

materials a new life and function. It also keeps me conscious of the way in which I consume my lumber, metal, fabric, etc.



Figure 2. Katie Hudnall. *Captain Ronnie's Desk*. 2007. Reclaimed lumber, hardware, plywood, paint, wax, found fishing lure.

## Sylvie Rosenthal

Sylvie Rosenthal received her BFA from the Rochester Institute of Technology, Woodworking, and Furniture Design Program in the School of American Crafts, built two houses from the ground up, and received her MFA in sculpture from the University of Madison, Wisconsin. Her sculptures focus on the intersecting flight patterns of the histories of trade, the intentional and unintentional transplantations that come with it, hybridity, materiality, queer theory, and the natural world.<sup>[8]</sup>

Rosenthal's knowledge in regards to the construction of objects spanning from homes to non-functional objects is vast. It is a showcase of the skill set of women in modernity and an example of the capabilities of women within the woodshop. I am inspired by this ability to create on such a broad scale. When sketching out ideas for my work there is an initial focus on the construction of objects, whether that be the joinery of wood to wood or wood to metal and so on. Rosenthal's pieces hold within them a wonderful display of connections.



Figure 3. Sylvie Rosenthal. *Journey to an Empty City*. 2010. Bass wood, poplar, paint, mixed media. 69 x 54 x 24 in.

## Alison Croney Moses

Alison received her BFA in Furniture Design from the Rhode Island School of Design and an MA in Sustainable Business and Communities from Goddard College. Her artist statement reads, “I strive to create situations and objects where people are compelled to interact, to express, and therefore challenge themselves to heal, to stand taller, to build community’. Her sculptures focus on the interactions between the pieces and the senses. She pushes the boundaries of wood in order to create physical balance.<sup>[9]</sup>

The clean and crisp work of Moses is inviting and intriguing. Within my work I also strive to bring together the ideas of community and engagement. The functionality of these works is what brings together the community and the individual’s awareness of space. I am curious about these interactions and admire the approach of Moses.



Figure 4. Alison Croney Moses. *Walnut Wood Chair*. 2005. Walnut wood, steel. 18" H.

## 5. Method

The premise of my work is to highlight the complexities of Madison County that help compose my sense of place. This requires an examination of the landscape, the people, and the craft found within these mountains. In order to accomplish this I utilize materials that exist within the realm of Appalachian craft such as quilt tops made by my grandmother's grandmother. The use of salvaged metal and reclaimed wood from significant properties in my life calls attention to my own interpretation of its relevance to my discovery of self. In order to define place and home in more personal terms I reference topographical maps to highlight significant locations in my life. Interviews have been conducted with family members to gain a better understanding of my family's part within the broader Appalachian story. The use of domestic hardwoods found in the region is an effort to keep the concept and materials based around the idea of locality and home.

I aim to challenge both the conventional role of women within the household and the distinction between art and craft. I have utilized and acquired skills that have

traditionally been held by men, such as welding and woodworking, to fabricate my pieces. I create objects that dance between the line of fine art and craft due to the stories they reflect and the circumstances in which they exist. My focus on the functionality of these pieces brings awareness to the ways in which we interact with our environments, and who we share these spaces with. The exchanges made surrounding functional objects highlight the idea of a communal existence, emphasizing a person's growth throughout these support systems.

A passage from *The Critique Handbook* reads, "The notion of authenticity is attached to the idea that things hold within themselves the history of actions made on them. Objects that show signs of physical engagement communicate this history-whether the actions of an artist or of nature".<sup>[10]</sup> I strive to manifest this in my work to stress the importance of the role functional objects have within the home, the history the materials hold, and those who engaged with them.



Figure 1. *The Farm*. 2021. Maple, Black Walnut, Cherry, Steel. 27.5" x 26" x 19".





Figure 2. *Shared Warmth, Body & Soul*. 2022. Reclaimed brick and red oak, cherry. 70 x 14  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 18 in.



Figure 3. *Grace*. 2022. Steam bent hickory, organic latex, wool batting, my great, great grandmother's hand sewn quilt top. 42" x 14" x 25".

## 6. Conclusion

The historical Appalachian woman archetype is strong, and so is the contemporary one. The women in my family have deeply influenced me with their resilience and determination. The men in my family have equally inspired and impacted my definition of self. I have learned from the skilled handiwork of women and challenged the conventional role of women within the household through working with materials that bridge the gap between women and men's work. Through the combination of wood, fabric, and metal I represent a small aspect of the skill sets of women in modernity. Through this I have gained a better understanding of my identity, life experience, and aspirations as a female creative to find her sense of place.

There is a statement by Daniel Michalik in regards to studio furniture, “When the unnecessary and useless divisions are stripped away, we see that there is really no such thing as studio furniture, no such thing as design...There are no essential differences between them. They are all shades of the same thing...Let us share the knowledge and change and talk about the objects themselves, rather than being blinded by how they came to be.”<sup>[11]</sup> This perspective is also applicable to the human experience and the socially constructed divisions experienced, reiterating the research conducted through this body of work. Through education and inclusion a future full of creatives from all backgrounds can exist.

## 7. Acknowledgements

A very special thank you to Brent Skidmore, Jackson Martin, and all of the folks working at UNCA's STEAM Studio for their countless tool demonstrations and guidance throughout this research. Thank you to the remaining Art and Art History faculty and staff for the unwavering patience and support through these past several years. It has been so deeply appreciated.

Photos of the artist's work were photographed by Jackson Martin and Brent Skidmore and are property of the artist.

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