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## THE AWW

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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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## ***THE AWW***

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters  
of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## ABSTRACT

Jessica Langley's work examines animals and nature through various media and form, including watercolor and oil painting, digitally manipulated photography, both large and small scale drawing, and various combinations of each. The work has explored narrative and emotional aspects to more mystical and ecological interpretations. The current body of work settles into banal and familiar interactions with animals, or more specifically the house cat and its accoutrements. Each element of the body of work engages specific concepts that developed out of the American landscape tradition and assimilates the banal subjects into a formal framework. The subjects are monumentalized and romanticized in order to question, not the importance of the objects, but the relevance of the sublime.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate this thesis to the inspiring and passionate people in my life, the people who have challenged and asked questions of me. And to the people who have supported me no matter how ridiculous my goals seemed.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	<i>i</i>
LIST OF IMAGES	<i>iii</i>
PREFACE	1
INTERVIEW: Theresa Marchetta and Jessica Langley	2
PLATES:	16
Graduate Work	17
Candidacy Exhibition	23
Thesis Exhibition	27
BIBLIOGRAPHY	36

## LIST OF IMAGES

FIGURE 1. Original mural featured on <a href="http://www.airbrushmagic.net">www.airbrushmagic.net</a>	5
FIGURE 2. STOCK PHOTO	6
FIGURE 3. Original mural painted in 1978, featured on <a href="http://www.myrideisme.com">www.myrideisme.com</a>	8
FIGURE 4. State of West Virginia's Welcome sign	10
FIGURE 5. Top Thrill Dragster, view of front seat	12
FIGURE 6. View of Millennium Force	13

## PREFACE

This thesis is comprised of two parts: the artwork and the interview. The interview is conducted as a means to discuss the work through conversation. The interviewer asked questions and allowed for a verbal examination of the work. The conversation was later transcribed to text. All of the images included, from 2006-2008 were created during two years of graduate work. A selection of the work entitled *The Aww* was on view in the MFA Thesis exhibition at Virginia Commonwealth University's Anderson Gallery from April 25, 2008 through May 4, 2008.



## INTERVIEW

## Theresa Marchetta Interviews Jessica Langley: April 2008

Theresa Marchetta: You use animals as your primary subject matter, do you approach them as individual characters or do they play a symbolic role?

Jessica Langley: I do both. I think of the animals or figures as symbolic. In the bear series, I used the animal as a symbol of wilderness. The bear encompasses a certain set of ideas. Instead of using a series of actions to create a narrative, the narrative is encompassed in the entire piece, utilizing color, scale, medium, symbols, etc. The figure is definitely a presence, which functions in a narrative way. I see the cat towers as symbols, as well. I think of the cat towers as having a very strong visual relationship to modernist utopian architecture that may also function as an altar. With the bear series and the cat towers, the figures are characters and symbols within the painting. The interactions within the images and paint become another kind of action, one that develops out of the formal structure. Within the diptych cat tower paintings titled *The Departure* and *The Return*, I set up formal aspects of color and scale to suggest time of day. The titles refer to specific

Hudson River School paintings, that in this instance create a relationship between what I am depicting and the set of ideas represented in Thomas Cole's paintings. Cole's paintings function as Christian allegories for the cycle of life. I want my paintings to have an allegorical tone to them.

TM: The characters within your paintings are also quite passive. There is not often some happening, goal, or action. Is this because you do not want to define their motivations or thoughts? Or is it that you do not want to personify the characters by assigning them roles and goals?

JL: Instead of personifying, I think of anthropomorphizing. I see the characters dealing with emotion or thought, functioning like a surrogate human instead of trying to be human. I think about how the Hudson River School anthropomorphized trees in their paintings. They assigned a set of emotions or actions to things like a fallen tree or a broken limb, a surrogate human. The passiveness is about the figure ground relationship. The cat towers, for instance, are being monumentalized through scale and handling.

The prairie, which had looked so level, wasn't, and the grass, which, to the eye, seemed so silky, was full of unexpected brambles which scratched her calves as she ran. In what seemed like seconds Bess began to feel that she was being swallowed up by the Western distance, as Jonah had been swallowed by the whale - though being inside a whale might be cozy, whereas being on the great prairie alone was not cozy. The sky above her seemed larger than England itself. She seemed to have suddenly been sucked into a great emptiness as by a gust of wind - and what would the outcome be? When she began to run she had looked back often to the river, but now she feared to look back. What if she only saw the same distance, the same grass?

-An excerpt from Larry McMurtry's novel  
*Sin Killer*



Fig 1. This airbrush mural on a spare tire cover shows the ubiquitous and innocuous imagery depicting spirituality and landscape, and its crossover into the banal.

The “action” or “happening” occurs within the structure of the painting, not in any implied action.

TM: How do you deal with or feel about “the cute factor?” Why do you choose such familiar, even iconic species?

JL: The title of my thesis show is *The Aww*. I am aware of the cute factor. I think about the bears in terms of how I might interact with representations of, or images of the objects. In the case of the cat towers, I consider the use of the actual objects in contrast with how the object looks. With the bears I thought about different versions of representation. We have teddy bears, the *Berenstein Bears*, the hunted grizzly bear, the great wild beast that we see in eco calendars and so on. I was thinking about the grizzly bear as being really versatile in the way we imagine what the actual animal is like. The cat towers are similar, but instead of thinking about representation, I was thinking about its own function. Obviously, the cat towers exist in our home as play structures for pets. However, I was thinking about the towers as stand-ins for reality. They are representations of other things, like trees. I am taking familiar or iconic subjects, like a house cat, something that

is already idealized, and blowing them way out of proportion. In a way I am using the “dumbness” of the object or its accessibility, and romanticizing it. I am depicting the cat tower in all sincerity, showing a sense of worship to both the implied animal and to the structure itself. There is an inherent critique, and a deep acceptance in the work, as well.

TM: Are you uncomfortable thinking of them as cute and not cute?

JL: I *am* uncomfortable thinking about cuteness or “cheesiness;” although, I have embraced cuteness more in my new work. Previously, I avoided using cats with their easy association to cute stuff. But, I’ve managed to use cats, without actually depicting any. I invest a lot of thought in the idealization of my subjects. I allow myself to be completely enthralled with an image of a kitten or a photo of a sunset.

The title, *The Aww*, is playing on the idea that I of being awestruck. I play a back and forth game between the cute and the sublime. Both are simultaneously monumentalizing and diminishing each other. I make allusions to the sublime through various tropes of painting , as a search for a higher meaning in my



Fig 2. This stock photo shows three major visual cues that typically imply the sublime: 1. Sunset, 2. Mountains, 3. Big skies.

surroundings. The paintings utilize specific aspects of painting history, borrowing the hazy and dramatic lighting conditions of the Hudson River School Painters, as well as from the Luminists. I borrow the symbolic depiction of animals from the Pre-Raphaelites, not to mention their color palette. I am interested in the relationship between The Hudson River School , the sublime, and the contemporary search for higher meaning. It seems to me that there is a tension between how spirituality is depicted in images and how I might actually experience it. Since the Hudson River School painters were concerned with finding God in nature, I wonder, how we might find these experiences, or if we may find them at all.

So, my ideas might begin with something that I think is cute, but my paintings are far from it.

TM: You seem very interested in the traditions of painting. You reference time periods with both your subject matters, and the varied techniques you employ; for example you are using the Modernist idealist architecture, Romantic landscapes and Expressionist obliteration. Do you think that all painting should deal explicitly with its traditions?

'There's been kind of an explosion of tourism in Antarctica,' said Jim Barnes, executive director of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, an association of environmental organizations that participates in Antarctic treaty meetings. 'Do we want this to become Disneyland or do we want some controls?'

- excerpted from Ian Austen's article that was released just after the first enormous vessel, called the Lindblad Explorer, sunk in the Antarctic region in New York Times, November 26, 2007

The number of tourists visiting [Antarctica] has more than trebled in the last decade, from about 4,000 to 14,000, according to Scott Altman of the Antarctica Project

He said the numbers were forecast to rise to almost 30,000 by the year 2005. 'Tourists now substantially out-number scientists and support staff on the continent,' he said.

'There's increasing interest in mass-market tourism with more air links and possibly even infrastructure development ashore. We're also seeing more and more adventure tourism. There's jet-skiing, iceberg-climbing, marathons, even surfing. It will push tourism into more and more pristine areas.'

'We do not want to see areas around Antarctica becoming like parts of Mount Everest, with waste lying around every corner,' he added

- excerpted from Christine McGourty's article on tourism in Antarctica in BBC News, January 4, 2002



Fig 3. Airbrushed painting, similar to the stock photo shown previously, also uses three major visual cues that typically imply the sublime: 1. Sunset, 2. Mountains, 3. Big skies. In this case, the artist has added a Wizard, presumably to give it more of a Pagan message.

JL: I have been particularly engaged with the Hudson River School painting tradition in the America for some time, but I certainly do not have a prescription or pre-condition for painting. It was extremely important to me to realize how closely linked my ideas were to the Hudson River School because I know now where my concerns come from. Why do I idealize nature, landscape, and wilderness so much? I borrow certain tropes from periods because they have a set of ideas already assigned to them; I can juxtapose these ideas with others to create a new narrative. In the works *The Departure* and *The Return* I am borrowing the romantic sky and pairing it with the monumentalized cat tower in order to diminish the grandiose notion of the sublime landscape, as well as celebrate the devotion to house cats.

Being forceful in my beliefs is very unnatural to me. I do not take a position on any one side in my work. I think that the ambiguous message or vague standpoint to my paintings is part of the search to truly understand something. I do not take a stance on issues of globalization, climate change, or animal rights issues in my paintings, because I do not

want to tell others how to think. I am both celebratory and critical in the work. I think this might be generational. My friends and I will take the worst Top 40 pop song, play it at a party, and dance our brains out -- knowing the whole time how ridiculously bad the song is, but still loving every moment of it. I accept the bad with the good, and vice-versa.

TM: What is it that defines the boundaries of your work? Since you vary technique and media, is it your subject matter, a world-view, or a sense of humor that defines it?

JL: Subject matter defines the work's boundaries, although the work is two-dimensional, because that is how I've been processing my ideas lately. I try to let subject matter dictate the form. Sometimes the form or the medium is the subject. Humor comes in as part of what I was describing earlier about taking a terrible song and making it awesome. I often relish in how bad, dumb, or ugly something is. The body of work with taxidermy animals and foam birds is a good example of my blatant use of low-quality objects. The cat aura is my most overt use of failure in an image. I am trying to make a convincing forgery for something that cannot exist, unless you choose to believe that cats have auras, or that there is such a thing as an aura.

For subjects of my work, I try to find the humorous aspects, and then search for connections to my work and larger ideas. I usually pay attention to subject which walk a thin line between what most people take seriously, and what for others borders on the absurd.





Fig 4. This image of a welcome sign for West Virginia is a perfect example of present day tensions between environmental issues and economic or social issues.

TM: There is gravity -- almost a resigned gloom in some of your work, perhaps because of your deep color palette. I think most viewers might read that as a somber reflection of the looming environmental crisis. Do you harbor extremist environmental or animal rights views, or do you have sympathy for those views?

JL: First, I would agree that there is an emotional aspect to the work, speaking generally about loss. Whether the sense of loss is environmental or not, is up to the viewer. Personally, I try not to be forceful in my opinions or politics. However, in my own actions, aside from making art, I want to be conscious and actively try to change the way I consume and produce waste. There are no easy answers, and perhaps I have a loss of hope, but I would not align myself with extremist views. I would say that some of my actions are contrary to animal rights views. I would never pay for animal furs or hunt animals, but I do have a small collection of animal paraphernalia, some skulls, a pile of bunny furs, and a deerskin. I have a taxidermy owl and a squirrel, and some plush stuffed animals, too. This probably would not fly with PETA, but I certainly do not agree with forcing my opinions on other people. Maybe this is where the passiveness comes from.

TM: There is a strange emotionality in your subjects as if you are trying to find subjects that will evoke an authentic emotion in the face of political complexity. By political complexity I mean that there are no easy answers and no singular call to action for your work to champion.

JL: I would say that confusion or ambiguity enters in to the subject of my paintings very much. I really like what Calvin Burton wrote about my work for the Watershed exhibition in Ojai, CA. He said that I draw enigmatic connections between nature and culture, and that my work reflects both nature's emotionally neutral concept of death, that it has a quasi-mystical vision of re-generation and rebirth that is entirely human in its ambivalence. I think that I would agree with you about evoking a strange emotionality.

TM: Your current work is centered on house cats. Who do you think will appreciate the work more, the art audience or cat people?

JL: So, is this a competition? [Laughs] Actually, as both an artist and a "cat person" I hope both will respond to the work. "Cat people" will probably appreciate it because I am making the mundane spectacular and absurd. I am monumentalizing things we know, and it is funny. The moment of recognition is a great moment for "cat people;" when they realize what it is that they're looking at. They start to laugh, and this is a fantastic response. As for the art audience, I hope that they

are able to go beyond just the monumentalizing of the mundane – to revel in the irony of the sublime mundane. The relationship between the mundane and sublime is not didactic but more ambiguous and cyclical. Like I mentioned earlier, the figure and ground are working simultaneously to monumentalize and diminish each other’s roles. I see the search for higher meaning –God -- as being a very real and present desire. It is still an ideal that is sought after. The mundane objects, like the cat towers, are manifestations of this desire. The sublime is being substituted for synthetic experiences. The cat tower, itself, is a diminutive version of a modernist utopian structure. It is also an altar to the domesticated animal, as if the animal were not already being elevated.

The substitution of the natural sublime also becomes apparent in instances where titles like “adventure” are assigned or when there is implied danger in things like roller coasters, tourist traps, or reality TV shows. If something like an “adventure park” suggests that I could go to a place that is highly constructed to deliver a very specific experience and have an actual adventure, then it could either actually deliver its promise or just diminish the meaning behind the word “adventure.”



Fig 5. Front Row of Top Thrill Dragster at Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio.

*Top Thrill Dragster, Magnum XL200, Millennium Force, Disaster Transport, and Demon Drop* are names given to some of the best roller coasters in America. Cedar Point is an “adventure” park in Sandusky, OH, and it is the quintessential constructed experience. Cedar Point gives the most seamless, pleasing, and wholesome family experience while also giving a taste of danger. Roller coasters and other mechanical simulations of physical terror are the closest we can get to the sublime in present day. Now that there is “adventure” tourism in Antarctica of all places, one cannot travel there without certain expectations. The experience will be a constructed ideal because of this expectation. This just goes on and on.

The question I have is, if roller coasters or other simulations is actually the way I am able to experience the sublime, then has the way in which the sublime is interpreted shifted towards the synthetic experience and away from the natural? Or, is it that I am looking for the sublime in the mundane objects or in my relationship with domesticated animals?

TM: Speaking of pets and pet owners, how is your relationship to the animals you create in your paintings different from the animals you keep in your home?



Fig 6. View of Millenium Force at Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio.

JL: I have less power over my house cats. I think my relationship with my cats is more complex in a way. I know this sounds silly, but I derive more pleasure and pain or more complex emotions from my cats. The animals in my painting are trapped in the role I assign them. In my new work I embrace the adoration of the animal, but there is no actual animal imagery in the new work. It is just the traces of the sacred house cat that I am depicting. I am using the house-cat, or the implication of domesticated animals, as a god-like figure. *The Aww* is an image of a cat aura. The aura is the outlined shape on the black wall. It is the source of light surrounded by a black void. The ring of color is in the shape of my cat, Madmartigan. I specifically did not include the actual image of a cat, because I wanted to create an image that had more mystery behind what it is actually of rather than give it all away. I felt that in creating an overly mystified representation of Madmartigan I could show the absurdity in the search for a higher meaning. I am creating a structure of worship around something so . . . dumb. This also comes through in the failures of the image, as well. The concept of capturing a cat's aura is a little tongue-in-cheek, and it is absurd to try to impose emotion onto a creature that is not a cognitive being.

TM: I think of my paintings as pets. They are little bastards, but I love them. And, I thought you might have a very circular relationship between your paintings and your pets.

JL: No, I do not think of my paintings that way. But, the more I

ponder my paintings the more I ponder my pets, and so on. It is definitely circular.

TM: You are about to travel to Iceland. Will a landscape based on reality enter your work or will the spaces still exist simply for the subjects to inhabit?

JL: I wonder if it will enter in. Expectations of the sublime in travel are very interesting to me. I think these ideas are currently affecting my view of Iceland, but I cannot make guarantees about how they will enter my work. I don't know if going to Iceland will hurt or help my work, but I am certain that the travel to Iceland will have an effect. I have been trying to imagine what Iceland will be like, and I figure that it will be a foreign experience. Surely the foreign experience will be specific to Iceland, but whether seeing Iceland's pristine wilderness will manifest itself in my paintings, I am a bit skeptical. I think that traveling to a place with certain expectations can ruin the experience. The real place might not live up to my expectations. I also cannot escape being a tourist there. Everything will be new and different, and no doubt beautiful, but I am much more interested in the way the locals view their landscape. I hope that the way in which I am thinking about the constructed experience interacting with the notion of the sublime and the mundane aspects of life will enter into the picture. I do not want the next body of work to be about my trip to Iceland, but I hope to discover new insights into the way I understand "Eco Tourism," landscape, or the search for the sublime, for that matter. I am eager to see how my work develops.

Theresa Marchetta and Jessica Langley are both Masters of Fine Arts students at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA, expected to graduate in May 2008. This interview was conducted on April 18, 2008.

## PLATES

## Graduate Works





*Wilderness.* Watercolor, gouache, and ink on polypropylene. H 60" x W 54." 2006



*Circling.* Watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and ink on paper. H 54" x W 48." 2007



*Plumage.* Archival Giclee print, watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper. H 30" x W 22." 2006



*Black Swarm*. Archival Giclee print, watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper. H 28" x W 22." 2007

## Candidacy Exhibition



*Ophelia's Night Sky*. Watercolor and oil on polypropylene. H 60" x W 50." 2007



*Yellow Storm.* Watercolor, gouache, graphite, gold dust, and ink on polypropylene. H 72" x W 60." 2007

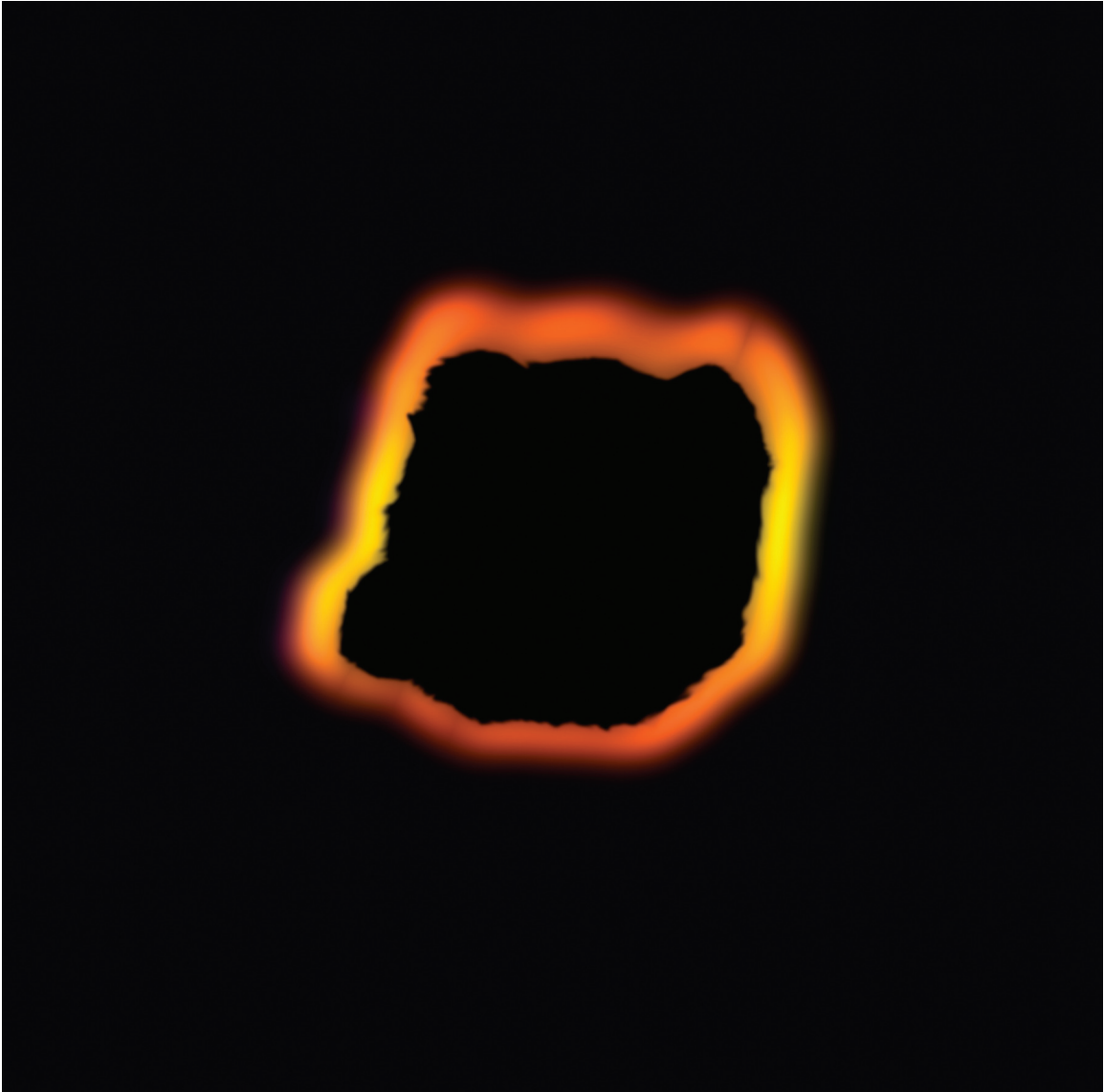






*Decomposition.* Watercolor, gouache, graphite, colored pencil, and ink on polypropylene. H 72" x W 60." 2007.

## Thesis Exhibition



The AWW. Ink-jet Epson print. H 40" x W 40." 2008



*The Departure.* Watercolor and oil on polypropylene. H 48" x W 59." 2008



*The Return.* Oil on polypropylene. H 48" x W 59." 2008



*Triple 7: Berber. Ink and acrylic on polypropylene. H 144" x W 60." 2008*



Installation view of *The AWW: Thesis Exhibition* at the Anderson Gallery, 2008. Work from left to right: *Triple 7: Berber*, *The AWW*, *The Departure*, and *The Return*.

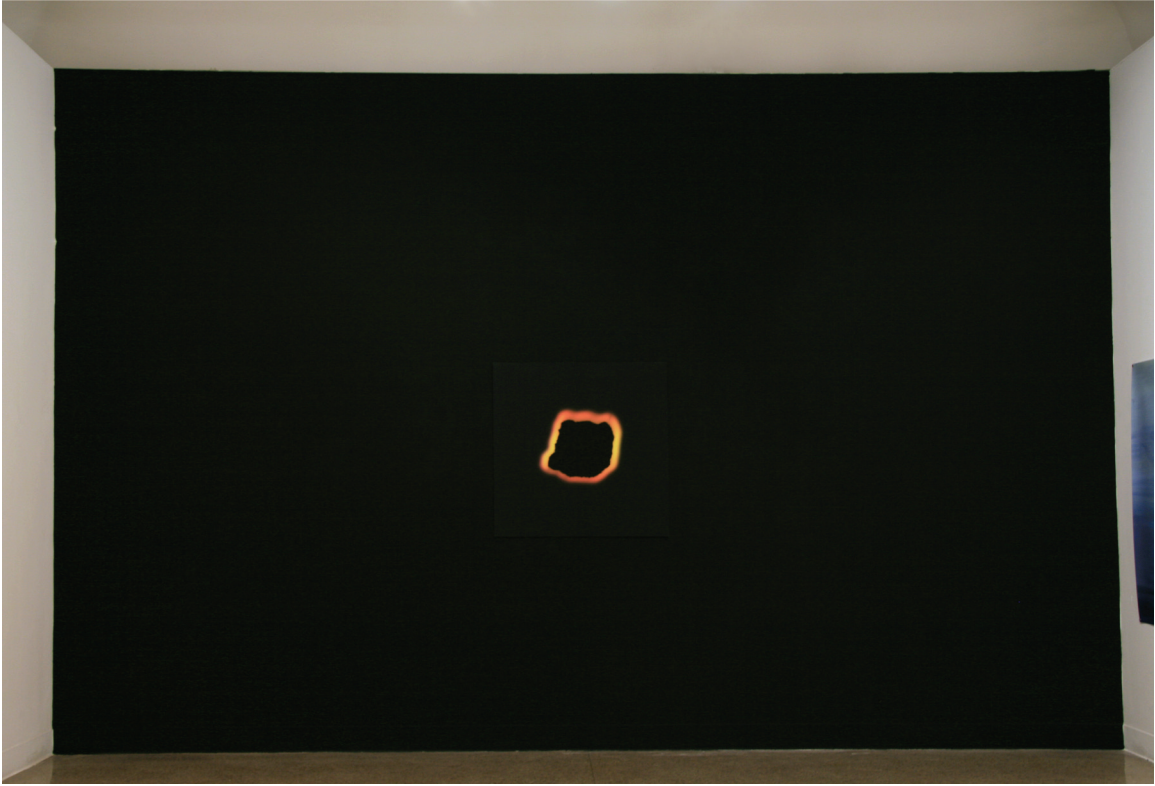


*Installation view of The AWW: Thesis Exhibition at the Anderson Gallery, 2008. Work from left to right: The Departure and The Return.*





*Installation view of The AWW: Thesis Exhibition at the Anderson Gallery, 2008. Work from left to right: Triple 7: Berber and The AWW.*



*Installation view of The AWW: Thesis Exhibition at the Anderson Gallery, 2008. Work shown here: The Aww.*

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