

## The Anthropocene Terrain

My current installation *Remnants* explores our species' legacy in terms of the artifacts and ruins we will leave behind. The term "Anthropocene" was introduced in the 1980s to define the geological epoch we are living in. It was popularized and brought into contemporary discourse by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and theoretical chemist Eugene F. Stoermer,<sup>1</sup> who argued that our impact on our planet will be recognizable in a geological context long after we are gone. Rather than exalting our ability to transform our surroundings as evidence of our might, in my work, I explore the implications of the Anthropocene to shift the perspective of the conversation and contemplate the long-term unsustainability of our actions and our misplaced sense of invincibility.

*Remnants* is an on-site installation set in the last remaining unrestored space at Western Avenue Studios in Lowell, MA, a mill factory built during the Industrial Revolution.<sup>2</sup> The majority of this building, along with many of the surviving mill structures in Lowell, have undergone extensive restorations and maintenance over the years. The installation space, however, remained mostly neglected and unused, offering a rare glimpse into how nature reclaims and recycles our edifices back into the natural landscape. My art project is a hybrid on-site experiment — part archeological site, part art installation. This space encompasses my artistic interventions, what remains intact of the original room, and the evidence of erosion.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Crutzen suggested that the Industrial Revolution was not just a moment of human history, but also of planetary history. Crutzen and fellow theoretical chemist E. F. Stoermer identified 1784 as the "onset of the Anthropocene," a new geological era.

<sup>2</sup> Western Avenue Studios was originally part of the Massachusetts Mohair Plush Company founded in 1891. The five-story building where the installation resides was constructed in 1910.  
<https://www.nps.gov/lowe/learn/historyculture/upload/LOWE-ARCHIV-FindingAid-08-MMPCo-2.pdf>

Together they create a dialogue between two juxtaposing forces responsible for change, the man-made and the natural.

As one walks into the space, the first visible artistic intervention is a wall installation depicting the fragmented, crumbling landscape of an abandoned city.<sup>3</sup> Here, dilapidated building fragments individually protrude from the brick wall at varying depths and angles. A viewer moving across the work examining the details may notice common contours between neighboring pieces while in other cases adjacent pieces don't match. This relationship between positive and negative space forces each piece to claim its place among ruins. Pictorially each fragment is identifiable as a building but they can also allude to the memories and lives that once inhabited these structures. As surviving fragments of something once whole they are now kept together haphazardly, by mangled wiring and meshing, by rust, by dust, and the absence of what and who is missing.

From its inception the wall installation was influenced by both the weight of current events and the insights gained from spending time in this room (the lessons from the past). The original iteration of the piece, a 5' x 9' painting on canvas, was heavily influenced by my research on war-torn cities, human-induced natural destruction, and pollution, specifically, the decimated cityscapes of Syria's civil war.<sup>4</sup> This initial composition was a partially successful attempt to capture the geometric complexity of contemporary ruins, riddled with intersecting planes and angles common in decaying architecture. In this attempt, the vertical layering of

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<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1-3): Roneld Loes, Remnants Installation (entrance wall piece), 2021, painted canvas fragments, reinforced with corrugated plastic paneling, held together with rusted metal wiring and mesh, mounted directly on brick wall.

<sup>4</sup> The Syrian Civil War caused significant damage and destruction in urban cities including Aleppo, Ghouta, Homs, Ar-Raqqa, Hama, and others.  
[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach\\_thematic\\_assessment\\_syrian\\_cities\\_damage\\_atlas\\_march\\_2019\\_reduced\\_file\\_size\\_1.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach_thematic_assessment_syrian_cities_damage_atlas_march_2019_reduced_file_size_1.pdf)

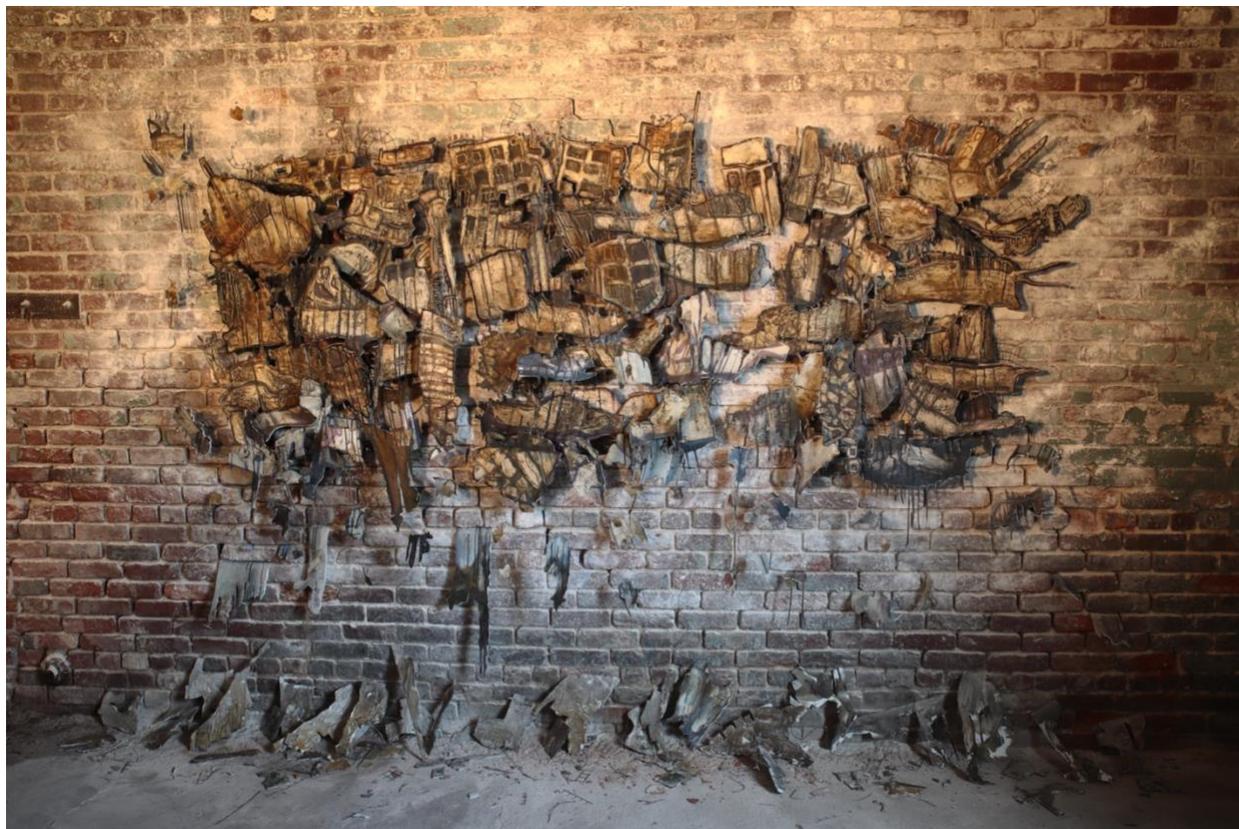
structures and artifacts stack on the canvas, alluding to the passage of time, a reminder that we have always built the present on the shoulders of our past and that through the process of decay whenever we abandon spaces, all these chronological layers and their history are exposed, rearranged, and eventually reabsorbed into the landscape.

During the time I spent working on the painting, I was beginning to spend time in the installation space in quiet contemplation, examining minute details: the flaking off paint, slowly separating into layers, concealing and revealing different stages of the wall's history. The range of decay present in the high-fired red bricks on the walls provide insight into the complexity of erosion. Some bricks remain hard as granite, while others have fractured and shed fragments from the constant freeze and thaw cycles, and others have completely turned to dust, leaving behind only their void, a hollow cavity framed by mortar. Everywhere I look, I find flakes of brick and the rusted shards from iron beams, held together in midair by cobwebs, just slightly in front of where they have separated. All of these discoveries are mirrored in the final piece. The shape of my fragments mimic the shapes of the paint peeling from the ceiling and the way they are held together by wire mesh echo the shards suspended in cobwebs. I consider this space to be an incubation chamber; a womb that is nurturing a visual language always undergoing transformation and in open dialogue with an evolving message.

In its present state the space is increasingly becoming the work. The distinction between my artistic interventions and the materiality of the room are merging. Rust remains a central symbol that binds the actions of man with acts of nature. In *Remnants* rust represents nature's reclaiming of our monuments to immortality. Oxidation is representative of the gradual recycling that is integral to maintaining a natural balance. The rusted structures and the crumbling surfaces, both in the wall installation and the room, reveal the layers of our habitation, our attempts to

rebuild and repair against the constant current of natural changes. From the human vantage point, we resist and rebel against nature because we see impermanence as a counter force to our acts of creation. The artist Robert Smithson in his musings on entropy describes construction sites as ruins in reverse and notes that "buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise as ruins before they are built." In my installation, I appropriate the erosive forces in the room and utilize them as part of my creative process, not to elicit distress or despair, but to propose that this recycling is also an act of creation. In this way we can look at our role not in opposition to nature but as a harmonious and constant celebration of living and surviving. I propose that we should strive to understand and embrace impermanence. The architectural layering in this room and everywhere around us is our true monument, not to immortality but to perseverance. The record of our resilience and our struggles, of those who tried to live within nature and those who tried to conquer it, will ultimately all compress and be woven back into the layered tapestry of Earth's geological story.

*Remnants* explores how our byproducts and artifacts are absorbed, integrated, and merged back into the natural landscape. For me this is an opportunity to present how even given the conflation of our scariest demons, human warfare and pollution coupled with climate instability are still part of the natural processes responsible for recycling chaos into equilibrium. The contemplation of the Anthropocene is an opportunity to understand how nature achieves balance even in the worst-case scenario. An honest reflection on the impact that we will have on geology long after we have gone is a study in materiality. In this space, the remnants from the industrial revolution could one day merge with the artifacts of my work in the Anthropocene terrain.



Ronel Lores, Remnants Installation (entrance wall piece), 2021, painted canvas fragments, reinforced with corrugated plastic paneling, held together with rusted metal wiring and mesh, mounted directly on brick wall.



Ronel Lores, Remnants Installation (entrance wall piece - detail), 2021, painted canvas fragments, reinforced with corrugated plastic paneling, held together with rusted metal wiring and mesh, mounted directly on brick wall.



Ronel Lores, Remnants Installation (entrance wall piece - side detail), 2021, painted canvas fragments, reinforced with corrugated plastic paneling, held together with rusted metal wiring and mesh, mounted directly on brick wall.

## Works Cited

Crutzen, Paul J. and Stoermer, Eugene F.. *The Anthropocene (2000):. The Future of Nature: Documents of Global Change*, edited by Libby Robin, Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, pp. 479-490.

Smithson, Robert. "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey." Originally published as "The Monuments of Passaic." *Artforum* 6, no.4 (December, 1967).