

place/holder: a theory

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of substances—as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories.

—Roland Barthes ⁴

The varied materials in *place/holder* are, in and of themselves, unremarkable. Nonetheless, cement and dry wall and loose thread and wallpaper lug and bolster and bear and collect the truth of our shared stories like an endless anthology. And this one has it all: infidelity, immigration, loss, anxiety, hysteria. Even Bigfoot. Addressing both the remarkable and the unremarkable challenges inherent in re-telling true stories, whether verbal or visual, the artists in *place/holder* embrace alternative approaches to documentation, filling in sculptural details, closing

metaphorical gaps, and subjugating the visual space by creating decisive stand-ins for the missing (and the missed).

Though photographs, specifically, have historically served as representations of reality, as traces of the thing itself, images, in the broader sense, also ultimately take their place in the creative equation to account for what is missing, what is passed, what is otherwise unknown or unknowable, what is yet to take a physical form—ideas, experiences, feelings, mental pictures, stories. But no matter the medium, the problem of retelling these stories remains: images are always only a substitute, a placeholder for what is absent in reality, and thus, in theory, give definition to the indefinite shapes of our shared existence, give shape to the narrative substance of our human-being, however elusive, however gritty, however true.

—Diane Durant, 2016

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¹ Edward Weston, in Robert Coles, *Doing Documentary Work* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 130.
² Gerhard Richter: *Text. Writings, Interviews and Letters* 1961-2007 (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009) 14.
³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
⁴ Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” *Image–Music–Text*, trans Stephen Heath, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 124.



Gallery Hours: Mon. – Sat., 9 a.m. – 9 p.m.,
Closed Sunday

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Adam Neese, *Report #01990003, The Woodlands, TX, 2015*
Archival Inkjet print, 16x22"

place/ holder

MAIN GALLERY
VISUAL ARTS BUILDING
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SEPT 2ND TO OCT 8TH
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Exhibiting Artists:

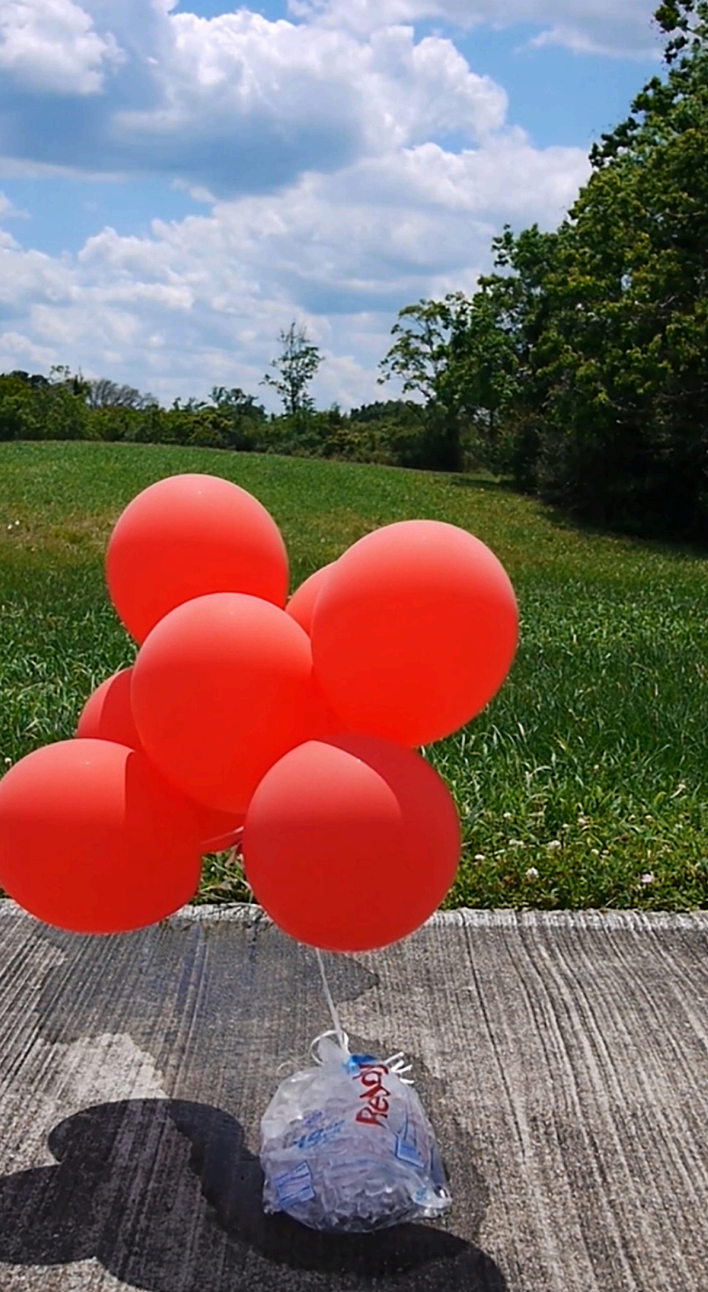
Sheryl Anaya	Tiffany Wolf Smith	Steph Keller
Devyn Gaudet	Adam Neese	Sarita Westrup
Ashley Whitt	Ciara Bryant	Lauren Christlieb
		Bradly Brown

From book arts and sculptural remnants to found objects and boring photographs, *place/holder* is an exhibition of works that attempt to address—or rather, embrace—the (un)remarkable challenges of storytelling and documentation through an array of representational substitutions.

Curated by Diane Durant

Artists’ Reception

Friday, September 9th
6:30 pm- 8:30 pm



(Left)
Bradly Brown, from *Failure to Launch*, 2016
Single-channel video, [01:41:18]



(Top right) Devyn Gaudet, *If I Were An Artist*, 2016
Ultrachrome Inkjet print, 15x22"
(Bottom right) Lauren Christlieb, *After He Passed*, 2016
Nine ink transfers onto wood, Installation variable

Re-presentation and the Problem of True Stories

Art should come with a disclaimer: *The story you are about to see is true.* No, it's not Dragnet, or "just the facts," or tidy endings where the good guys always win; it's raw emotion and pink guts and inspired (by real events), creating human connections out of the twisted sinews of our shared experience. It's empathy, and it's beautiful.

But the burden of a true story is heavy, is brutish. And art worth contemplating—a story worth listening to—is forged at the point where creative license rubs against the grain of factuality, where interpretation and expression collide with authenticity. Though, as Edward Weston asserted, "art is never a document, but it can certainly adopt that style,"¹ the works in *place/holder* celebrate that space between, acknowledging both their indebtedness to a verifiable truth as well as their creative duty to re-present. From book arts and sculptural remnants to found objects and boring photographs, *place/holder* pushes and pulls at the boundaries of creative documentation, taking a near literary approach to artmaking as it merges with storytelling.

Picturing things, taking a view, is what makes us human; art is making sense and giving shape to that sense.

– Gerhard Richter²

January 28, 1986. My first grade classmates and I lined up at the door to go outside. As soon as the teacher flipped off the light, a voice broke over the PA system. The space shuttle *Challenger* had exploded. There was a moment of silence as we stood in the dark, dumfounded, trying to wrap our young minds around the real notion of

tragedy. With *Failure to Launch* (2016), **Bradly Brown** attempts to make sense out of that cold winter day, and the shape he gives to that sense is a familiar one: balloons. As a substitute for the seven astronauts who would lose their lives, seven red balloons, tethered to a slow melting bag of ice, jerk and wrench against the wind. Hours go by. Melting ice never seemed so interesting, so appropriate a stand-in for launch pads and O-rings and rocket boosters and suspense. The tragic ending in *Failure to Launch* is easier to accept as a metaphor, though no less surprising to an unsuspecting audience in this mediated reality.

Devyn Gaudet's new series of photographs documents, well, her photographs. Scaled models of gallery spaces stand in for the real thing as she mounts her own solo exhibitions in miniature—minus the proposals, the studio visits, the receptions, the critique. In *If I Were an Artist* (2016), she's both artist and gallerist, installing full-scaled polaroid transfers and digital replicas of photographs from her relatively unrecognized 2015 series *Somewhere in Texas*, ultimately re-presenting, if tongue-in-cheek, the real-life struggle of any artist: being an artist. Other works in the series, titled *If I Were a Curator*, offer the same exhibition opportunities to other artists who find themselves pining for small gallery shows (literally).

In his 1986 essay, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes equates the photograph with death, with the documentation of a moment, a person, that will never be again. Choosing not to reproduce a photograph of his mother, because it would be meaningless to the reader, he challenges our understanding of the relationship between personal memory and reality, between the *punctum*, what pricks, and the *studium*, the message or content a photograph discloses.³ **Lauren Christlieb's** ink transfers both prick and disclose. Though she doesn't reproduce a

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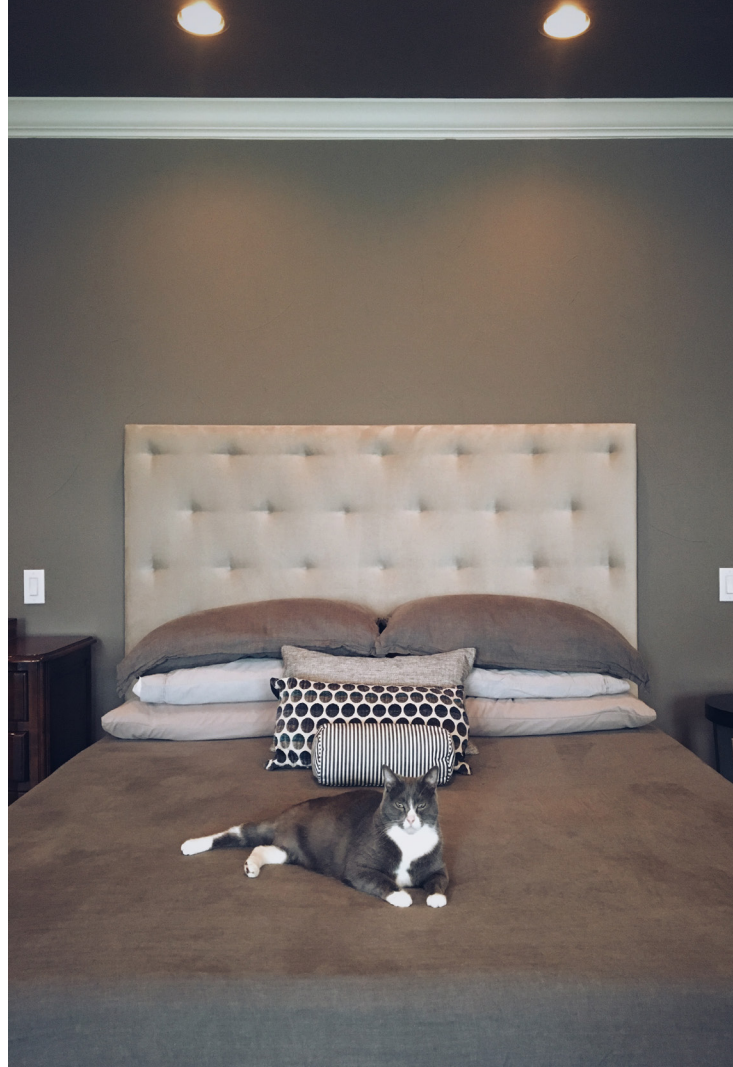
– Gerhard Richter



Tiffany Wolf Smith, *Wall 3 – Strawberries*, 2016
Wood, drywall and wallpaper
20 x 25 x 4"

photograph of her deceased grandfather—or his mother, in whose house he lived for years after her passing—she creates a biography full of the meaningless, everyday details that would otherwise go unnoticed, aspects of their shared story that would likely remain untold, and thus forgotten. The objects documented in *After He Passed* (2016) are their own placeholders—for the artist, her grandfather, his mother—carrying with them years of memories that, when placed into a new context, and made into new objects, transmit a more universal story.

Similarly, **Tiffany Wolf Smith** uses everyday objects to recreate memories of loved ones, of loved places, real and imagined. Like biographical sketches, her wall fragments document the



Sheryl Anaya, *Other People's Cats* (detail)
2016, Wallpaper, recycled frames, archival pigment prints, wooden shelf, ceramic cat figurines

curiosities (the banalities?) of domestic space. After the recent passing of her husband's grandmother, *Wall 2* (For *Jimmy B.*) (2016) became the telling of her story, her aesthetic tastes re-presented in the small collection of salt and pepper shakers nestled behind the curio cabinet doors. Unlike Gordon Matta-Clark's deconstructed "building cuts" which were removed as fragments, Smith's sculptural works recall, and then construct, new fragments that become infused with the history and meaning ascribed to them.

And loss is universal. Images charged with the weight of grief immediately resonate with the viewer and establish an empathic bond with the storyteller. On the surface, *Other People's Cats*



Sarita Westrup, *Water Milagro* (detail), 2016
Concrete, 46x48"

(2016) by **Sheryl Anaya** presents as the straight-forward documentation of just what the title states: other people's cats. However, these cats, and the photographing thereof, have become a stand-in for the artist's own cat, Rita, who was laid to rest a year ago. In the absence of a connection with her own feline companion, Anaya engages other cats in their natural habitats—sprawled on the floor, posed majestically on an owner's bed, tip-toing across a desk—while she works as a real estate photographer. Like Sophie Calle's stint as a chambermaid which produced the near-voyeuristic series *The Hotel* (1981), *Other People's Cats* grants the viewer access to other people's homes (and cats) while simultaneously documenting Anaya's attempt to fill an emotional void. The ceramic figurines on display in the

homelike installation function as placeholders in their own right, re-presenting the ubiquity of cats, in general, in the absence of one cat, specifically.

In her recent sculptural work, *Water Milagro* (2016), **Sarita Westrup** casts in cement the insides of water containers like ones that have been used and discarded by those crossing the border between Mexico and the United States. Representing these lives, some lost, and their weeks-long journeys across the desert, Westrup emphasizes the most crucial detail: water. The expansive installation consists of imperfect bits and pieces of cement floating on the wall like bone, like sacred votive offerings, like the last evidence of real human stories that can only be whispered.



Adam Neese, *Report #01990003, The Woodlands, TX*
2015, Archival Inkjet print, 16x22"



Ashley Whitt, *Anxiety Study No. 2* (detail), 2015
Sculptural accordion book, Installation variable



Ciara Bryant, *The Book*, from *warning: having a uterus can cause hysteria*
2016, Hand-sewn artist's book



Steph Keller, from *Paradise Left*
2015, Seven pigment prints and two mannequins, installation variable

Evidence. Every true story needs it. But what kind of proof can be garnered if the subject doesn't actually exist? How does one retell *that* true story? Though other artists in this exhibition have recreated and re-presented various personal truths, photographer **Adam Neese** faces a different challenge. In his ongoing series, *Seen* (2014-16), Neese uses an interactive map from the North American Wood Ape Conservancy to document the locations of Bigfoot sightings in Texas and neighboring states. Titled with actual incident report numbers, city, and state, these photographs attempt to give shape to the *story* of Bigfoot (as if giving shape to Bigfoot himself were all but impossible). By validating the claims—the real-life experiences—of people who have seen and believe, both the deadpan photographs, which have no

other reason for being, and the reports themselves function as representational substitutions for the what-might-have-been.

Ashley Whitt's hand-sewn artist's books also function as visual representations of an otherwise unseen truth. *Anxiety Study No. 1 and No. 2* (2015) replicate the constant motion of traveling by car—as Whitt commutes between four campuses to work as an adjunct professor—as well as the tremulous agitation of ceaseless worry. The repetitive nature of the accordion folds combined with the obsessive and chaotic stitches (and the loose ends of thread—oh, the loose ends!) over lumen prints give physical form to an experience and a mental disorder, both of which become easier to comprehend—to read—when re-presented as tangible objects.

Like anxiety, some things are too taboo, too socially uncouth, to share. **Ciara Bryant's** sculptural book, *The Book* (2016), from her series *warning: having a uterus may cause hysteria*, shares it all. From daily details recorded on instant film to all the detritus of a woman's monthly cycle, Bryant physically sews into the book's pages the story she wants the viewer to see—the true story that no viewer can possibly deny, and that most won't be able to look away from. There's a fascination with the sensual beauty of the book's form and construction juxtaposed with an almost morbid curiosity about what the vellum pockets actually hold. The few appearances of red letter text repeat common, almost juvenile euphemisms and further reinforce the idea that even placeholder text is more acceptable in matters of the female

body, which is neither re-presented at its most appetizing nor romanticized as an object of desire.

Steph Keller's installation, *Paradise Left* (2015), presents the female body as an object—literally, as a mannequin. The sequence of color photos reads like a storyboard, including a tightly cropped title image of a neon motel sign like an establishing shot for the scandalous narrative that will unfold. Using mannequins as stand-ins for actual human bodies, Keller develops a sensual plot without a pornographic visual tone and maintains the diegetic focus on universal themes such as passion, deception, desire, and loss. Including the mannequins in the installation itself allows the viewer to connect with the objects in reality and further personify the placeholders within the visual reenactment of an all too familiar true story.