

miles and miles and miles

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A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Art in the Department of Furniture Design of the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island.

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First Edition

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For my dad,

Eugene "the Lord" Jones

Thank you for letting me come along for the ride, and for
turning everything into a song.

*To those devoid of imagination a blank
place on the map is a useless waste; to
others, the most valuable part.*

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

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aBstracT

miles and miles and miles is a body of work that draws design inspiration from the Driftless Area of Wisconsin, a region unflattened by ice during the last ice age. The works are site specific extrapolations that have been abstracted in order to trigger a process of memory recollection in the viewer. Selections of atmospheric prose, furniture objects, illustrations, and imagery are presented as snapshots of a place in an attempt to memorialize and make tangible ephemeral memories collected by the maker traveling in this vast landscape. Attention is given to the distillation of form in order to contemplate its material or atmospheric essence. Carved ash and neon light intersect to call attention to the relationship between the land and the built landscape. Rather than invoke criticism, it is a celebration of the harmony and beauty that exists between nature and human-made objects, architecture, and neon signs. A design ethos reminiscent of Aldo Leopold's ecological land ethic is established: a working ethos that deeply appreciates the subdued landscape and materiality of place.



Introduction

the american Midwest is often perceived as “flyover country.” It is not generally referenced as an epicenter of design or deep craft history, but simply a place one passes through by necessity.

This thesis body of work pushes against the notion that the landscape of the American Midwest is a vast nothing.

The work has been designed and created by utilizing iconography, imagery, and materials that reference landmarks and landscapes of southern Wisconsin. Particular attention is paid to the Driftless Region: an area of the Midwest that was not covered in ice during the most recent ice age, resulting in a dynamic topography that defies preconceived notions of flatness and expanse.

The Driftless Region serves as the ideal landscape for discussing an often unseen wealth of inspiration, as the most dynamic forms of the region manifest as expansive underground cave networks.

I have culled my own personal archive of photographs, souvenirs, postcards, maps and memories related to places and travels in this region.

I spent a week in the Driftless Region without a car, paddling a canoe down the Wisconsin river to the Mississippi and biking my body up and down the rolling hills.

I have read the writings of those who have lived in and studied this area, and researched those who have been inspired by it before me: Aldo Leopold, Georgia O'Keeffe, Frank Lloyd Wright, Paul Seifert, and William Cronon to name a few. I have amalgamated these references and distilled them into singular objects that I hope inspire curiosity about their origin story. They all trace back to one place.

In presenting these collections of objects, illustrations, and pieces of writing, I attempt to explore furniture making as a tool for the preservation of memory and place. I hope to exemplify the potential of inspiration and intrigue that can be found in an often overlooked landscape.

I do not wish for this place to vanish, I hope for it to be discovered.

My two years as a graduate student in the Department of Furniture Design at the Rhode Island School of Design were ultimately spent disseminating my own

relationship with transience and permanence through the lenses of designer, maker, writer, artist. I have found objects to be one way we can transcend the boundaries of impermanence. As makers we have the capacity to make what is usually ephemeral, permanent. We distill our lifelong accumulation of lived experience into objects of intrigue that exist in perpetuity.

The following text presents a collection of written vignettes that oscillate between past and present, between micro and macro, between personal and universal. The vignettes are punctuated by photographs of the physical work, imagery that has served as inspiration, and a more formal object essay examining the "Leopold Bench" and my search for a contemporary furniture ethic reminiscent of Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic."

I hope you find what you are looking for.

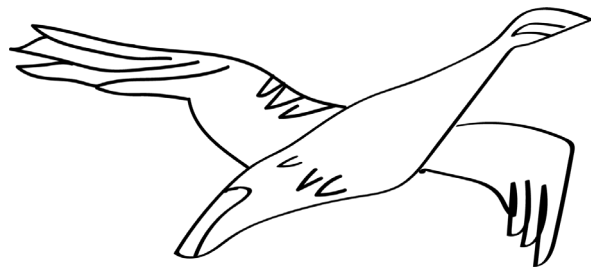
View from Wyalusing State Park in Wisconsin, which is situated atop a bluff at the confluence between the Wisconsin and Mississippi River.



*Beginning to think that I'm wastin' time
And I don't understand the things I do
The world outside looks so unkind
Now it's up to you
To carry me through*

*Give me the beat boys and free my soul
Well, I wanna get lost in your rock and roll
and drift away*

Dobie Gray, "Drift Away"



A driftless method for making is explorative in nature, it involves a state of openness, of acute receptivity, of flow. It sounds silly but I find these moments when I am on the bandsaw, the shape I need indicated for me, all I have to do is follow a line. When I am in a trance, hearing Teri Grosz's voice asking a deep and inquisitive question of someone I have never met. Or listening to the song "Drift Away" and transporting myself back into my childhood backyard, if only in my mind, if only for a moment.

In fact, I learned that the quintessential driftless mindset happens in the Driftless Region of the American Midwest, floating down the Wisconsin river and slowly flowing into the Mississippi. I have not yet encountered another landscape in which I have been happier, been more content, felt more at home, in my soul place. Feeling the wind in my hair, it fiercely glides across my face when we roll on our bikes down a long dramatic hill. We gain nearly enough speed to feel slightly out of control.

Similarly, I seek that bliss in the studio, to find the moments that just fit.

With a sharp tool, a perfect cut, a charming form that emerges accidentally, these moments come to life. Trusting my hand and mind completely with no more second guessing; ceding a bit of control and simply accepting the outcome. Finding beauty in it.

To drift is to be present and uninterrupted, to feel the permanent glow of the sun on your face. My friend Daniel remarks on a video of a sea hare floating: “we drift, events happen, we keep drifting.”

Yesterday I saw two women leaning against a building, eyes closed, soaking the sun into their skin. I looked at them for a long time to fully register their happiness, their

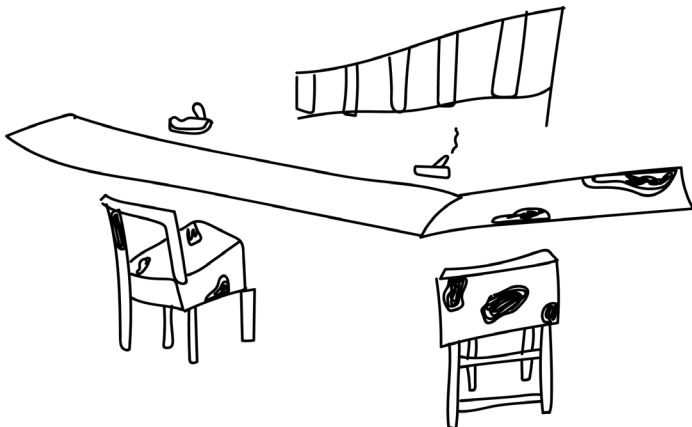
contentment. And they were doing it together. Unafraid or blissfully unaware of anyone who may be looking at them.

My old mentor, furniture designer and maker Richard Judd, sought out a driftless form of making as well. He referenced a state of “zazen”: a meditation discipline he utilized as a Zen Buddhist. He described it as a full connectedness, mind to body, person to earth and space and time. We sharpened chisels, glued up tables, listened to classical music and took lunch precisely at twelve o’clock. 141 people lived in the town surrounding us.

I’m always trying to be where I am.

*Moons and Junes and Ferris wheels
The dizzy dancing way that you feel
As every fairy tale comes real
I've looked at love that way*

Joni Mitchell, "Both Sides Now"



I spend most evenings dancing to music in my living room and in my kitchen. I am listening to Barry Gibb's falsetto. I feel my body moving automatically, not having to force it into a way of knowing. Not having to tap into a muscular training I have honed or made precise. In fact, it's better if it's loose. It is best to groove with no inhibitions. Your song comes on, the one you haven't heard in years. Sometimes I dance until I have blisters. He shows me the one he still has from the night we met.

I look into her eyes and know that her groove is the same as mine. Always has been. It is not even so much about the movements, but the mentality.

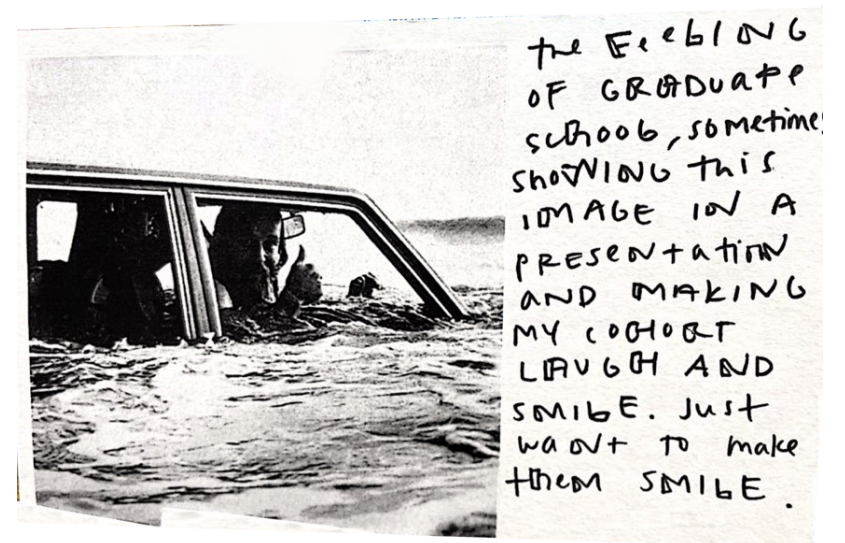
I have seen groviness because I groove through life. Somewhere between the past and the present. Lynda Barry makes a playlist for her students to groove to. We make eye contact as my body responds automatically in the hallway.

I hear Barry Gibb at the backyard wedding,
and I see my family dancing. I take a video
and my uncle is embarrassed. There is never
anything embarrassing about grooving.
Grooving is pure.

I want to share my groove, want to invite
others in to feel it.

I am back in my kitchen and I smell garlic
and onions slowly simmering in butter, one
of my favorite smells. I hear another song
and now I am sad, emotional as I listen to a
song about singing at a funeral.

I feel crumbs sticking to my feet. I
remember that I need to sweep the floor.
I turn the sweep into a groove.



*There's a light
A certain kind of light
That never shone on me
I want my life to be lived with you
Lived with you*

Bee Gees, "To Love Somebody"



I LOOK at you AND CAN FEEL YOUR GLOW.

I sense the heat of the flame that formed you.

I hear the small bursts of electricity bringing
you power.

It is impossible for neon signs to be
“machined”. The process requires someone
who is trained to bend, a craftsperson. It is
a working class job, a workload determined
by marketing trends, the desires of old beer
sign collectors hoping to illuminate their
basements.

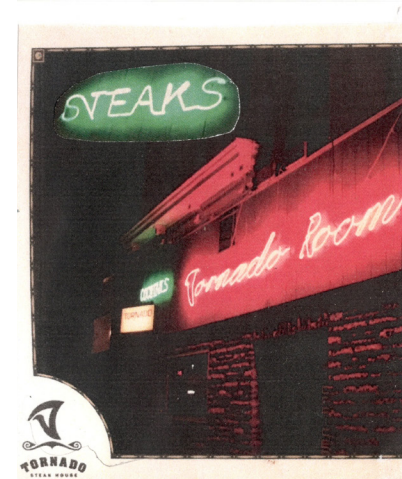
Most people learn by apprenticing and
bending for hours and hours. Burning hands,
slicing fingers on sharp glass.

Eventually your bent letters, miles of hollow
glass tube, are bombarded with a noble gas
so the Tornado Room can lure in drunk
young adults to eat steak sandwiches and spill
martinis Laugh and chainsmoke, illuminated
by the glow that you provide.

Lady Bird Johnson's Highway Beautification Act moved to limit billboards and outdoor advertising to make America's roadsides more beautiful. I agree but I also disagree: we don't mind seeing the signs on the side of the road when they are far and few between. Few and far? Far and few.

We can tell when the signs are older, a signal that they belong to a place that was conceived before we were born. We always go and hope to travel back in time.

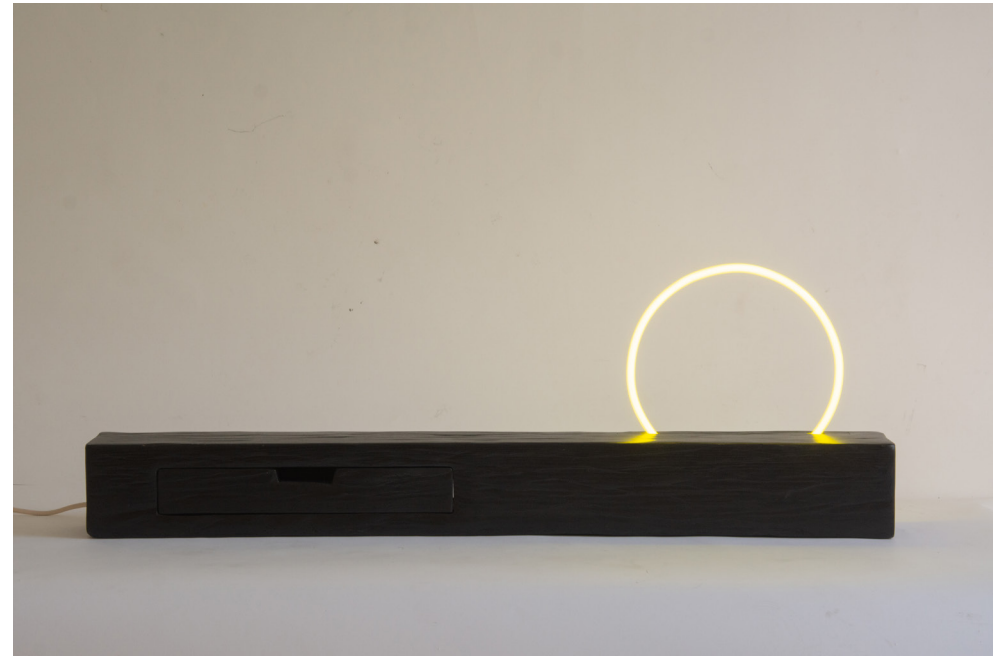
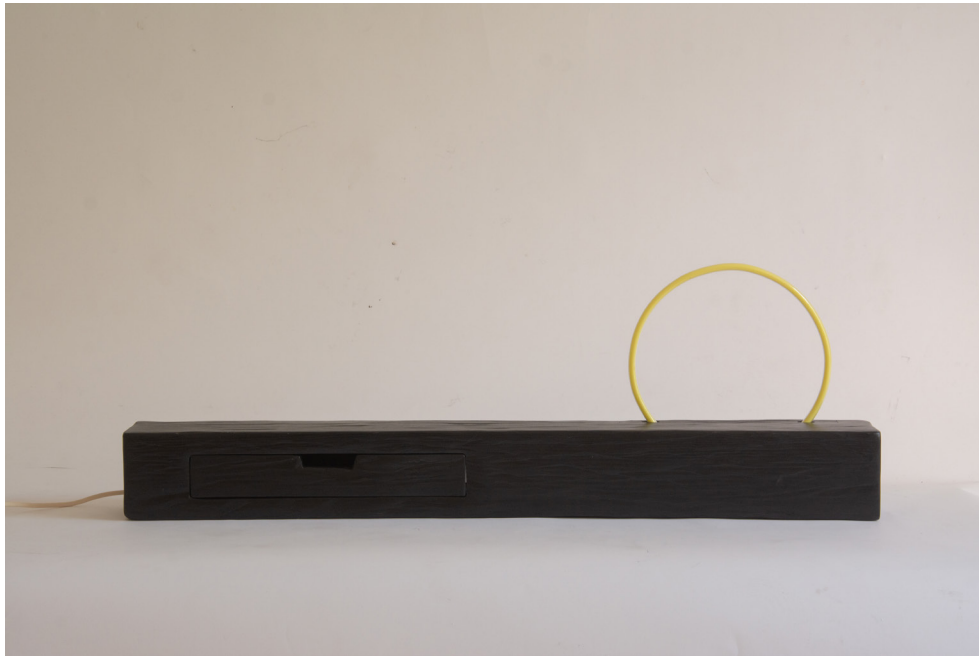
It makes me sad to watch them flicker out and die. I made them promise it was only taken down to be repaired, that the new sign was not permanent. They promised but they could have been lying.



A POSTCARD FROM MY PERSONAL COLLECTION DEPICTING THE NEON SIGN AT THE TORNADO ROOM IN MADISON, WI. I HAVE AN ONGOING ARCHIVE OF NEON PHOTOGRAPHS, AND HUNDREDS OF POSTCARDS.

horizon line shelf







Pulling my canoe across a sandbar in the middle of the Wisconsin River,
situated just high enough to make paddling impossible.

Photo by Aaron Bossen



*Islands in the stream
That is what we are
No one in between
How can we be wrong?
Sail away with me
To another world
And we rely on each other
From one lover to another*

Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton, "Islands in the Stream"

LESS THAN a Hundredth

of one percent of the world's water is cold and pure enough to harbor trout.

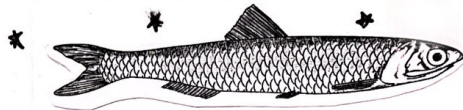
Did we catch a trout that day? Maybe it was a brown trout, but it could have been a northern pike.

We took out the boat you traded for cutting down a tree. We fished until the boat started taking on water and the motor died. We had a small kicker motor to get us back while we bailed out water.

You asked me what animal I might like to become in another life. I said maybe a river trout or maybe living with my trout friends in the Kinnickinnic river, watching waders with legs in them scooch by.

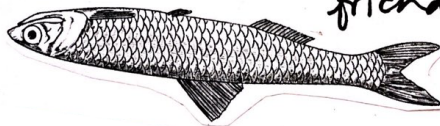
In trout fishing there is a custom that you must kiss the first trout you catch and then release it. Thank you for throwing me back.





"In general I was the
pretty one, while she was
skinny
like a salted anchovy.
she gave off an odor
of wildness."

eleni farante
my brilliant
friend



I talk a lot about wanting to get a
f a f f o o o f a n a n c h o v y .

Maybe it is silly and sweet, and maybe that
is okay.

We saw them in a food service sized can that
had been tipped upside down to release what
it held. The anchovies had formed together
in the shape of a bundt cake. Hundreds of
them, with a thin layer of oil, all perfectly
layered on top of one another and spiraling
out from a vacant core. We then delicately
peeled each individual fish from the top of
the mass and served them directly on plates,
or on top of a toast with a tomato spread.

They are strong little bombs of salt and fishy
flavor. Never something I would have tried
in a previous life. I was used to starch and
mild, processed flavors. Few spices. Kept
separate from bodies and faces and the sea.

You showed me the salt water. Far away now from the lakes but now more intimate with how it all tastes. You showed me how much salt I needed to add to our pasta water — always more than I think. You always say it should taste like the sea. Taste like the sea, taste like the sea, taste like the sea. How it stings when I dive under and it goes up through my mouth backwards and out of my nose.

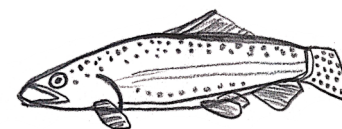
Anchovies have a bold and stunning depth of flavor, improving any dish they become a part of. Thank you for nourishing me, for showing me what it means to be fed. Closer to the salt water by swallowing its inhabitants.

Other fish eat you, too. I wonder what it feels like to be eaten by a bigger version of yourself.



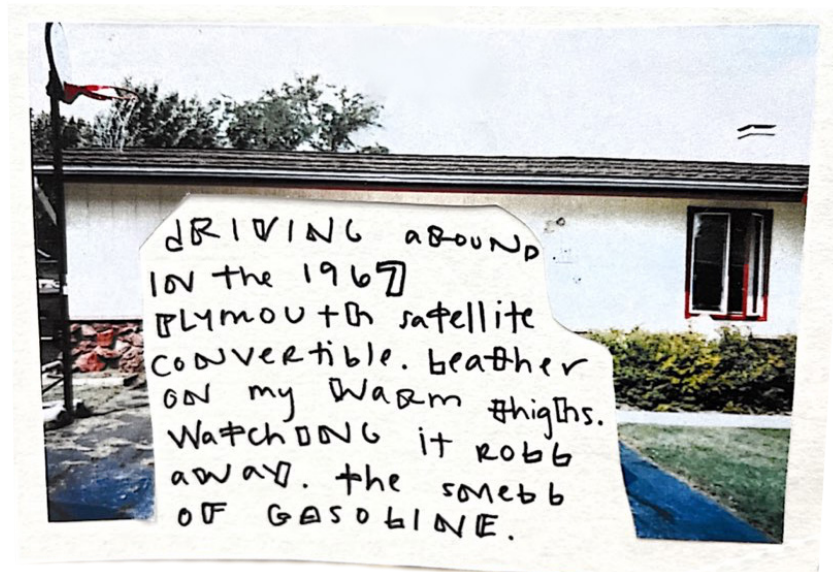


fish cabinet



fish cabinet





It is home, or
somewhere that feels like Home.

It arrives promptly as the paper, Sunday morning, coffee still hot on the windowsill.

It rises from the plains of the midwest. The cattle turn the threshed fields.

It is the river carrying the timber, washing it, eroding it, giving form to it. Floating and drifting along effortlessly.

It is found in the farm green, it is in the black of the cow's hide. It is a light poison.

Coffee brown illuminated by neon red.

It is birds and fish and beautiful things.

It smells like a fresh pot of coffee, a sweet summer breeze.

It sounds like a radio blasting, sandpaper
gently exfoliating a fresh piece of wood.

It is time paused, an early peaceful morning.

It is sitting on a trail, perched by the garage
door, sipping in a bar front window, or
lounging in a living room.

It is the shift in her posture as she moves
from watching the fireplace to glancing out
of the window.

She listens to the crackle of the fire and the
snoring of the dog.

It is **not** forced alertness, it is falling into a
deep sleep.

It is moving your legs fast enough to catch up
to yourself, and to others, just in time.

It is writing a postcard to the places you

have been, and to all of the people you
have met.

It was shot in black and white. Grainy,
scanned, photocopied over and over.

It is a quiet moment.

It is a long road trip, a good life, a cold beer, a
memory that draws a tear.

It is not being lost.

It is being found and finding yourself.

It is growing old and staying young.

Always in the perfect place at the perfect time.





sunday morning
chair

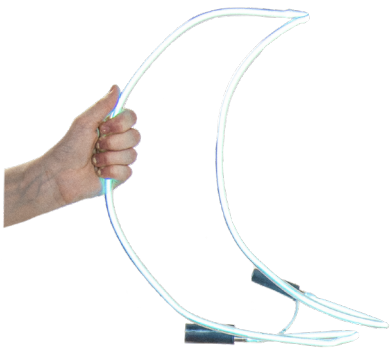


*When the sun goes down on my side of town
That lonesome feeling comes to my door
And the whole world turns blue*

*There's a rundown bar 'cross the railroad tracks
I got a table for two way in the back
Where I sit alone and think of losing you*

*I spend most every night
Beneath the light
Of a neon moon*

Brooks & Dunn, Neon Moon



It is what I would give you if I could, or so they say.

I try to look at it every day and make note of its phase. I think of the ones she had tattooed down her back, and the earrings I wear every day.

It is not that I understand it fully or anything. I know it controls the tides and that I was born during a waning crescent. Hours before a new moon.

I hear your voice impersonating Brooks and Dunn on karaoke.

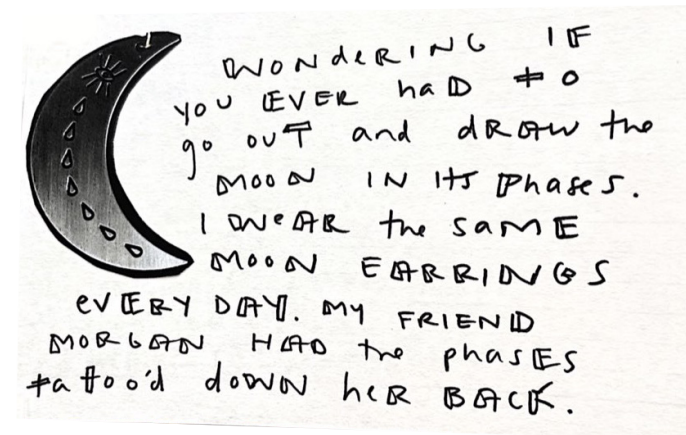
you wanted me to bend you a NEON MOON.

So I did.

There are certain cycles we can rely on, there are still permanent revolutions that we tie ourselves to. When it all exists in nuance, fuzzy layers of confusion and misremembering—it can be comforting to focus on absolute truths.

To watch it shrink and disappear only to watch it glow bright again, soon. Sooner than you might like to imagine.

There is never enough time.





brewers, bears, mammoths, and alto dairy



miles and miles



cowboys & porcupines

View from my bike as we departed Muscoda, Wisconsin. Their sign claims the town to be the "morel mushroom capital."





Aldo Leopold preparing journal note at the shack

An Evolving Design Ethic: Learning from the Lessons of the Leopold Bench

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

-Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac (1942)

I first found myself hiking on the Ice Age Trail when I was ten years old. It was a Saturday afternoon outing with a childhood friend and her family. Her mom told me we were walking just one short segment of the trail, which in its entirety traverses the entire state of Wisconsin. Those who hike it in its entirety achieve “Thousand-Miler” status.¹ We took one step at a time.

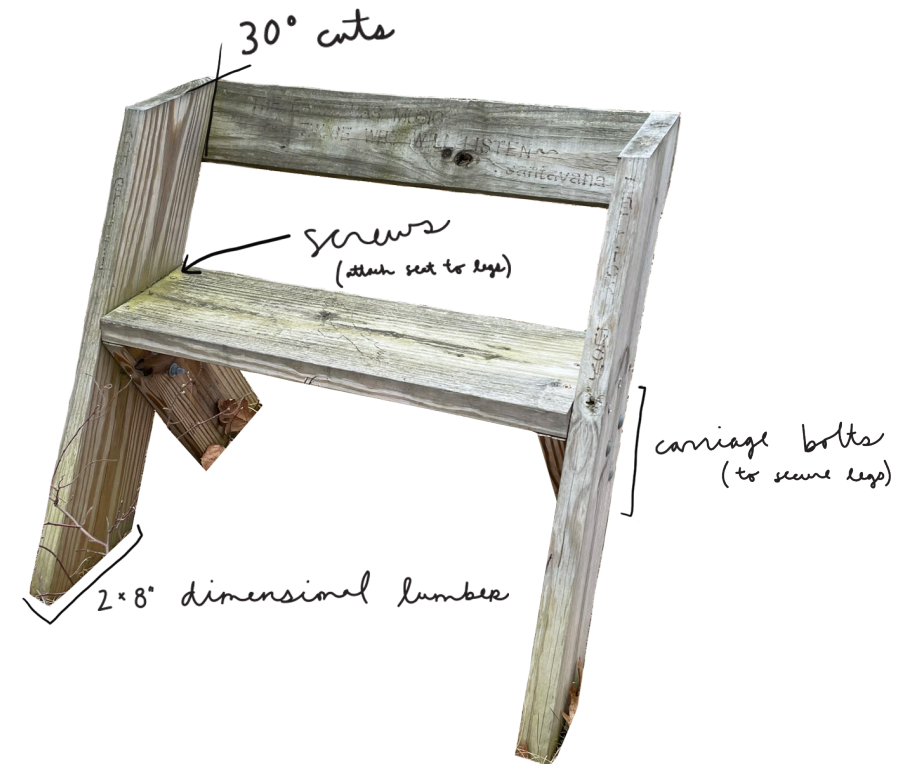
Many years later I was in my mid twenties and still living in Wisconsin, my home state. I continued to walk hundreds of miles of the Ice Age Trail with some of my closest friends. We kept track of the segments we completed in journals and on a large printout with the segments diagrammed alongside a map of the trail’s path across the state. We would bring packs filled with food and our backpacking necessities, wearing our feet down as we walked far enough to need a resting place.

I have hiked across many miles of Wisconsin, but also at many state and national parks across the United States. My college friends and I adopted the “See America” mentality, many generations after the initial Works Progress Administration poster campaign for the United States Travel Bureau.² While we wanted to see places far away from home, our weekend trips within a few hours of our homes were more fulfilling. Here we gained our competencies of belonging.

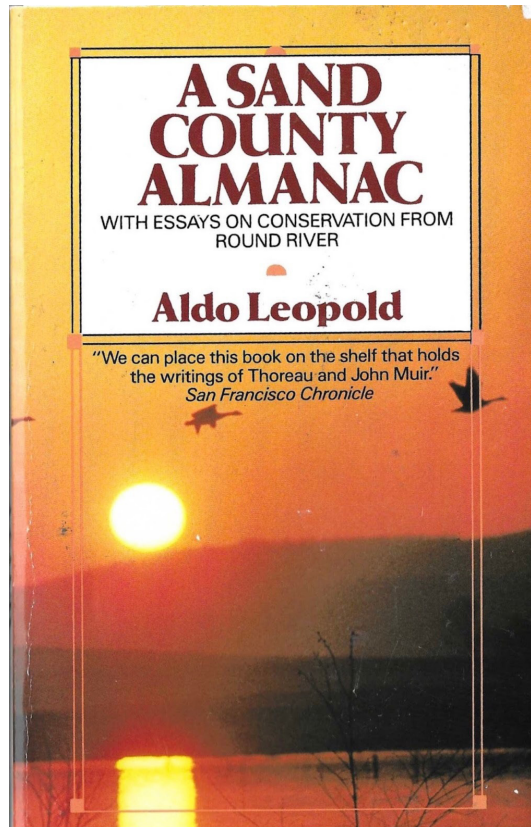
When I explored outdoor spaces near and far, I regularly encountered a familiar bench. It was a piece of furniture I had come across likely hundreds of times at scenic lookouts, in parks, and along trails but had never known it had a name. What I discovered was that this simple form had an entire history of its own. I was amazed, and pleasantly surprised, to learn that its origin story actually traced precisely back to my home, my soul place.

It is a simple form, usually constructed with 2x8 dimensional lumber, screws, and carriage bolts visible on the sides. It is a “Leopold Bench”, named after the designer and original maker, Aldo Leopold. In spending time contemplating the form, its history, and its proliferation across the American landscape in thousands of sites and reproductions I have uncovered much worth celebrating and questioning.

Aldo Leopold was a mid-century American author, environmentalist, and forester who is often best known



anatomy of a leopold bench



one of my personal copies of
A sand County Almanac

for his book *A Sand County Almanac* — a book I have read a number of times and recommended to many. He grew up in Wisconsin and spent many years teaching at the University of Wisconsin — Madison, where I would later study. In the pages, Leopold shares his observations of the wildlife and ecosystem surrounding his land along the Wisconsin River over the course of a year. It's an account that effortlessly interweaves beautiful prose with sophisticated observations about the interconnectedness of the biosphere and its inhabitants. He also articulated what he referred to as a “land ethic”, which expanded the definition of “community” to include not only humans, but all of the other parts of Earth: soils, water, plants, animals — all of what makes up the “land.”

The Leopold Bench stands out for many reasons: it is a central icon of the landscape where I grew up and learned about the natural world; it is a deeply accessible furniture piece to construct as a beginning woodworking project; it is rather devoid of ego as Leopold had no interest in licensing, patenting or otherwise profiting off of his design. Leopold first built the bench using only driftwood or found materials on his property, and did not set out to design something aesthetically striking but pure in form and function. Eventually his design would be replicated by many based on photos from this era.³

In Gerry Beegan and Paul Atkinson's article “Professionalism, Amateurism, and the Boundaries

of Design”, the authors unpack the terms ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ and discuss how some in the design field look down upon those who approach design through DIY and “amateurish” means.⁴ Perhaps pieces like the Leopold Bench are not discussed in furniture history because it is often built by amateur craftspeople, or those who are using power tools for the first time. The genre of do-it-yourself furniture objects can sometimes yield kitschy results and craftsmanship unaligned with the professional furniture maker’s standards, but that does not mean these objects should be dismissed or ignored. The article also references Ellen Lupton’s work in the graphic design world, and how she regards “DIY graphic design as a means of bypassing commercial uniformity and gaining a sense of self-satisfaction in an increasingly corporate world.”⁵ The act of building a Leopold Bench has the capacity to inspire a new craftsperson, to show them the possibility of making something themselves rather than passively consuming an already fabricated object. Especially as younger generations are farther and farther removed from tactile learning experiences, it becomes increasingly essential to advocate for teaching the use of hand tools to manipulate material.

While the do-it-yourself, backyard-making aesthetic is not necessarily what I am hoping to evoke in the furniture objects I create, the honesty and transparency of process and construction methodology inspires me and helps me as a designer to maintain a multifaceted view of what it means to be a designer or maker.

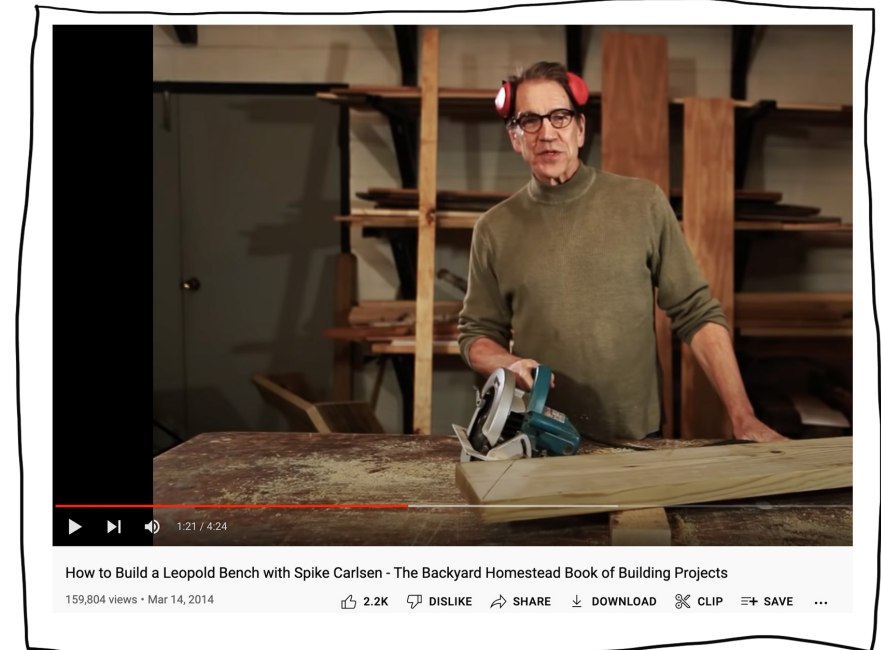
When I first began my graduate degree in the Department of Furniture Design at the Rhode Island School of Design, I had a complete identity crisis only a few months into the program. Before moving to Rhode Island, I had been working in a furniture shop in an unincorporated town of Wisconsin. I had only a few of my own tools, needing to utilize what was available to me in the shop in which I worked. Designer high-end furniture was completely foreign to me, and was something I had only seen online and in publications like *Architectural Digest* or *Dwell*. How would I possibly be able to fit into a place like RISD, with creative people working in ways that were completely unknown to me, with materials I didn’t understand. I slowly learned that I needed to trust my own past experience and figure out how to make them relevant to a contemporary audience.

The first ever experience I had using power tools was constructing a scale model of a log cabin with my dad in his basement shop and in the backyard. In middle school, I took two technical education courses where we learned how to use drill presses and bandsaws, and learned how to solder a circuit board. I didn’t realize it at the time, but my choice in educational electives was telling me that I was interested in building things. It took me a long time to sort out what part of the process I was most involved in participating in, and long enjoyed fabricating other designer’s work as my voice as the fabricator receded into the background, unseen and unknown by the final owner of the work. Learning how to use the tools, use my hands, gave me

the capacity. I just needed to find my own agency, my own voice.

So, in the midst of a creative rut in the studio, I set out to build my own Leopold Bench. I needed to put into my body the straightforward nature of the form, to remove my ego as a maker and fabricate someone else's design. The current cost of dimensional lumber is actually currently rather expensive, and with no yard for my bench to live in I decided to build a 1:4 scale model of the Leopold Bench instead of a full size version. I utilized small scrap pieces in my wood shop and watched a few YouTube tutorials until I found one that was well produced and easy to understand. The video featured a man named Spike Carlsen wielding a handheld circular saw, who apparently included the Leopold Bench in his book *The Backyard Homestead Book of Building Projects*.⁶

The steps are very simple, and require the ability to mark a few measurements with a tape measure and draw a 30 degree angle, perhaps with a speed square or other angle marking tool. Assembly at full scale asks for 6 carriage bolts to be drilled and inserted to construct the two leg components, and then screws to attach the seat and the backrest. In total the fabrication of this bench requires one 2x8 board, 6 bolts, about 12 screws, some sort of adhesive, a saw, a drill, a pencil, and some additional material for the seat and backrest. In Spike Carlsen's video he uses a prefabricated stair tread with a rounded over front edge to add a thoughtful detail to the front of the sitting surface.



*Spike showing me that
building a bench is easy*



digging new miles of trail

The process of building this simple form brought me a level of joy I had not experienced in the previous months I had spent designing and fabricating complicated and strange furniture of my own singular vision. It felt more like a collaboration as I was participating in something way bigger than myself.

Undertaking this small fabrication project reminded me of when I applied to graduate school, and I was asked to provide a short video of me building something. Rather than the more logical or sensible approach of creating a well-produced video of me building something in the furniture shop I worked in at the time, I instead uploaded a shaky iPhone video I had a stranger take of me digging miles of the Ice Age Trail that was being developed. I knew it was a strange choice, but I felt like there was some connection I was starting to understand. I wanted to find the bridge between manipulating dirt and slope to form a hiking trail and building tangible physical furniture objects. My creative process exists somewhere in between those two activities.

During one of the trail building events that I attended, an older gentleman who had been volunteering for the Ice Age Trail Alliance for years described the trail as “his cathedral”: something bigger than himself, that he would likely die before seeing finished (many miles of the trail are still connecting routes: road walks that connect actual completed sections of trail), that his labor would recede into anonymity.⁷ He decided to instead focus on the fact that every square foot of dirt

moved was, in-fact, an action that mattered in the grand scheme of things.

I carried my scale model around Providence, Rhode Island — where I now live. I carried it on my short walk from my apartment building to campus, photographing it in the landscape I now see everyday. It felt like showing a friend around your new town, bringing something familiar into a place that still feels new and strange. I look forward to one day living in a house with a yard, where I can build a full-scale Leopold Bench and admire the surroundings as Leopold did with his students and family.

Again I agree with Beegan and Atkinson, who assert that “design should not be an exclusive activity, the ‘sacred mission of an elite professional class’, but should connect with the user.”⁸ Everyone should be able to build their own bench, should be able to delight in the satisfaction of fabricating their own place to observe the birds that fly through their view, to be able to sit and watch the trees and plants as they change color and form throughout the seasons.

While my utopian vision of the future of furniture consumption is everyone building their own benches in their backyard, I’m not naive enough to believe this is the way of the future and that exclusively building objects of our own will solve the world’s problems. In Glenn Adamson’s book *Craft: An American History*, the final chapter poses a daunting question: “Can craft save America?”⁹ He discusses the current discourse in craft,



scale model of a Leopold Bench
resting beside the providence River

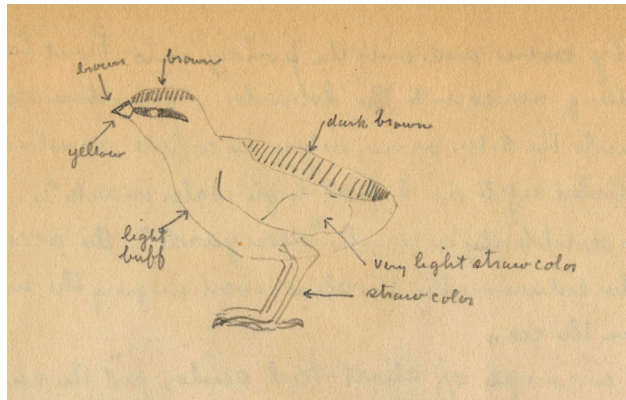
and how it has come into recent focus as a way of slowing down and connecting more to the world around us. That is precisely the strength and lasting impact of the Leopold Bench, and therefore its continued fabrication certainly has lingering positive effects both for its maker and for the objects' surrounding environment. In the same chapter, Adamson discusses Kelly Cobb's 100 - Mile Suit Project, where the designer attempted to have a menswear suit designed and constructed by makers within a 100 mile radius of Philadelphia using only locally available materials. The project was, in itself, proof of its own impracticality. As Adamson points out, the strength of the project was "...not that it establishes a new way of clothing America — that we should all start carving our own buttons, or wearing hand-knitted undies. Rather, it draws attention to the complex displacement of knowledge and materials that everyday fast fashion involves."¹⁰

My romanticization of the Leopold Bench is, like the 100-Mile Suit Project, similarly flawed. In reality, when someone follows along with a YouTube tutorial on constructing this bench, they are likely procuring materials from a big box hardware store, where the lumber has been sourced and shipped to its location of sale from likely rather far away. Excessive energy has been used to kiln dry the lumber, and large vehicles must burn gas to be driven to and from the store to transport the necessary materials. The person undertaking this project likely has excess capital and time available, and has the luxury of space and access

to tools to see the project through. Leopold had property, space, and time — three concepts or tangibles that have become smaller or less accessible throughout the 21st century.

There are many movers and shakers in the contemporary craft community who are taking great notice of these issues of access to craft and are seeking to spread the values I have been adamant about throughout this essay. In Baltimore, Maryland furniture maker Sarah Marriage founded A Workshop of Our Own (WOO) to make a space and provide workshops at low cost to create "a professional woodworking environment which cultivates and promotes the careers of women and gender non comforting craftspeople in our field".¹¹ The non-profit Crafting the Future (CTF) works to "diversify the fields of art, craft and design by connecting BIPOC artists with opportunities that will help them thrive".¹² Perhaps the most valuable attribute of the Leopold Bench today is that it can be made as a community project, that it is an easily customizable and repeatable form that could be constructed with people with skills of all levels. Community betterment and involvement through making is something that should be widely accessible, and the Leopold Bench's stance is outward facing, allowing those who have constructed it to sit and face each other and their surrounding community.

Leopold took extensive field notes throughout his life which informed the essays and prose found in *A Sand County Almanac*, as well as other writings and research

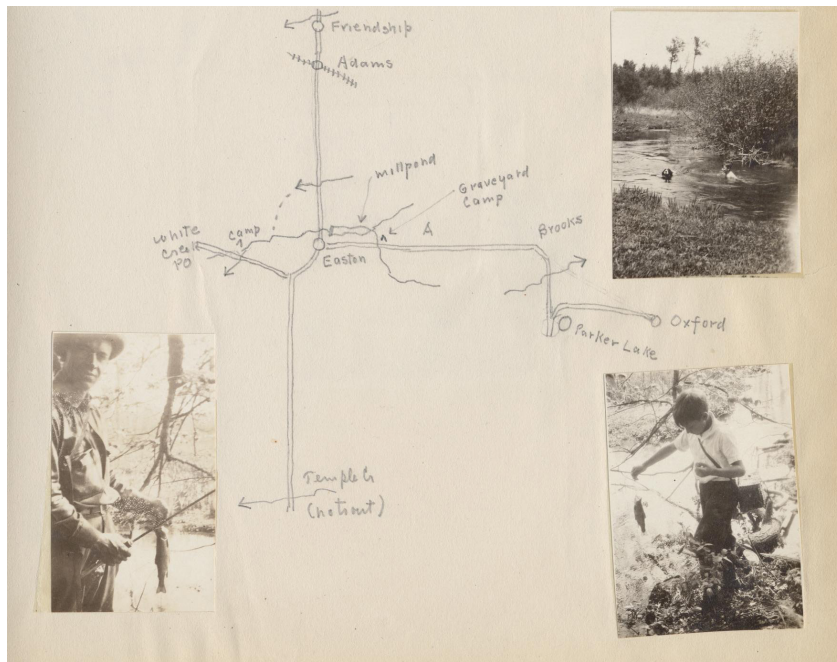


pencil drawing (by AB) of fledgling partridge

he did throughout his life. Many of these artifacts have been collected and shared through the Aldo Leopold Archives, physically housed in the University of Wisconsin - Madison libraries but much of it has been digitized and is accessible online.¹³ I have spent many hours looking through Leopold's notes, photographs, and particularly his drawings. If his daily practice of observation, recording, and outdoor exploration led to his ability to design such a remarkable piece of furniture, I'd like to believe that I could approach my own design work in such a way.

Maybe the best ideas are not one that you spend crunched hours, days, and nights working endlessly on, but the ones that build and grow slowly over time. Objects like the Leopold Bench are only born when equal consideration is given to how the object will be built, with what materials, where it will live, and how it will interact with its surroundings. Aldo Leopold was able to see beauty and potential in some pieces of driftwood that was delivered to him by the river, washing up in his sandy backyard. Perhaps the most remarkable objects and ideas are those that simply unfold in front of us, with little force. Objects that are only possible when we fully trust our lived experience and the capabilities of our hands.

Perhaps bettering the world and our communities through craft and building is our current cathedral, one where the small moments and changes often go unnoticed but culminate to large effect. In my first year as a graduate student at RISD, I have helped my peers



aldo and Luna trout fishing

use drills (sometimes for the first time), mill their own wood, glue up large panels, carve large wooden sculptural forms outside of our shop with an angle grinder, or simply understand the material properties of working with wood. Unlocking the tools of making give us a necessary glimpse into the material world: one that has always had a relationship to the human hand and inherited or shared skills. While the effects are often intangible or hard to define, that does not mean they are not worthwhile.

While the Leopold Bench is very simple in form, and rather removed from the larger furniture and design history canon, the conversation around it is still highly relevant and perhaps is one that should be discussed more. I know that the form has staying power, is still compelling, and resurfaces in very fresh and high-end studio furniture.¹⁴ Again in Beegan and Atkinson's article, they advise that "...designers should turn to the local street and its non-corporate, non-designed vernacular for inspiration. This simple, almost invisible design was clearly not driven by marketing or focus groups but was... natural and instinctive."

My observations of the Leopold Bench are the preliminary phases of research into extrapolating knowledge from vernacular furniture of the American midwest, applying the inherent values of such objects into my own work and future directions. I similarly find the written language and ethos of Aldo Leopold to be endlessly inspiring, and I hope that in sharing his wisdom through the lens of craft and furniture design

that it opens new possibilities in ways of seeking inspiration and unlocks a land-based furniture ethic of my own.

While the Leopold Bench may not be the ideal piece of furniture for all people, it certainly has its place. Near the conclusion of Glenn Adamson's *Craft, An American History*, he posits that "we can make at least some of our products in the same way that people are starting to grow their food, cooperatively, within tight, geographically specific networks."¹⁵ Perhaps we can't all find boards laying around and construct idyllic in-situ benches like Leopold did, but we can admire and be seduced by its material, formal, and structural honesty. We can extrapolate lessons in material accessibility and locality, and admire the beauty in forms simple and straightforward. We can acknowledge and emphasize the beauty in collaborative community projects, whether that is building a bench with a group of volunteers or putting together a bench in your backyard with your family and friends.

Benches are places of rest and reprieve, whether they are situated indoors or deep in the woods. They are perches upon which to speculate your surroundings and the path that got you there. The Leopold Bench, in any material or construction iteration, will never fail to give one the opportunity to stop and be present. To give us the opportunity to inhale and exhale, slowly and intentionally.



Aldo Leopold on slide hill bench

August

The Green Pasture

SOME PAINTINGS become famous because, being durable, they are viewed by successive generations, in each of which are likely to be found a few appreciative eyes.

I know a painting so evanescent that it is seldom viewed at all, except by some wandering deer. It is a river who wields the brush, and it is the same river who, before I can bring my friends to view his work, erases it forever from human view. After that it exists only in my mind's eye.

my favorite excerpt from A Sand County Almanac





carved bench





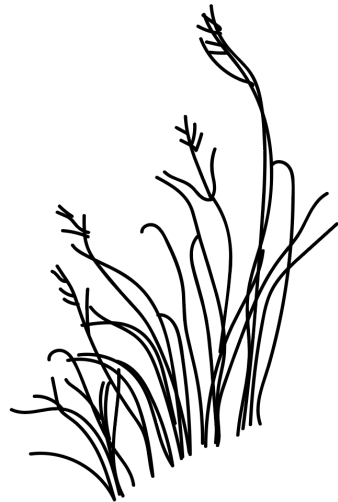
carved bench



Megan and Andrew paddling down the Wisconsin River, a few minutes before we would stop and take a swim.

*Well, I never seem to do it like anybody else
Maybe someday, someday I'm gonna settle down
If you ever want to find me I can still be found
Takin' the long way
Takin' the long way around*

The Chicks, "The Long Way Around"



No matter where we go, we always try to write each other little letters. Often we write a short recollection of a moment in time, sometimes we will tell a quick story. Sometimes we share what it smelled like, what it sounded like, what it felt like, or simply what we saw.

Sometimes I will share something small I noticed that I know you would notice too.

My collection of postcards and letters is easily in the hundreds now, and will quickly grow to thousands at this rate of correspondence. The list of people we send postcards to keeps getting longer as we get older and meet more people who would be happy to receive them. I keep a note in my phone with the addresses of my friends and family and try to keep it up to date. I buy postcard stamps in rolls of one hundred and mystify people when they learn I have them on me at all times, right next to my black

felt tip flair pens. It's funny how we develop these small habits and it's funny the things we carry with us no matter what.

We have seen post offices all over the world as they are almost always a necessary stop. Sometimes I take photographs of him standing in front of the buildings that are particularly beautiful or frozen in time. I don't know what to do with the photos but it makes us happy to take them. The zip codes and town names are all written in the same mid century municipal font. I wonder if the letters were all made in the same factory.

We seek stability and rootedness. We look for it in the root we almost just tripped over and in the narrow space where we slip our letters away into a metal receptacle. It clatters a bit when the stack of postcards hits the empty basin. There aren't too many other people sending letters the way we do.

I wonder what else is inside the mailbox and I hope it is love letters but it is probably a rent check in an envelope someone stole from their workplace.

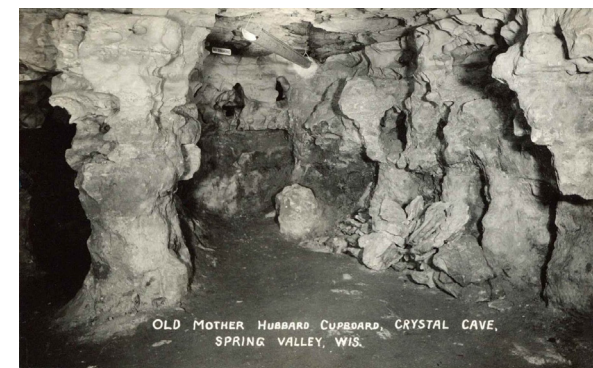
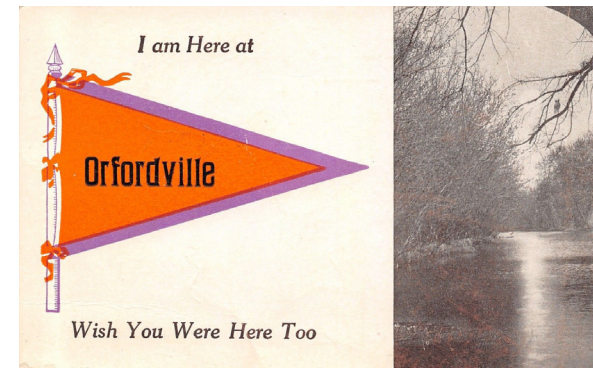
Something in us will not allow us to stay still. We are not sure what we are looking for – but, we always find the same thing. Small moments of peace and stillness – finding something to say. It is best not to overthink it.

I built a postcard writing desk so that when this is all over I can catch up on my correspondence. It's simple and wide open and it props up the recent letters that need responding. I hope it is an object that inspires me to sit down and write, for myself and maybe to you. It started as a tree and now it will be in my home. Someone else may want it in theirs, too, which makes me feel weird but is probably the point after all.

Whenever I open the mailbox I hope I see

my name written in your handwriting.

Your letters are coming from the same
place, because all places are the same. I am
still here, always wishing you were here too.





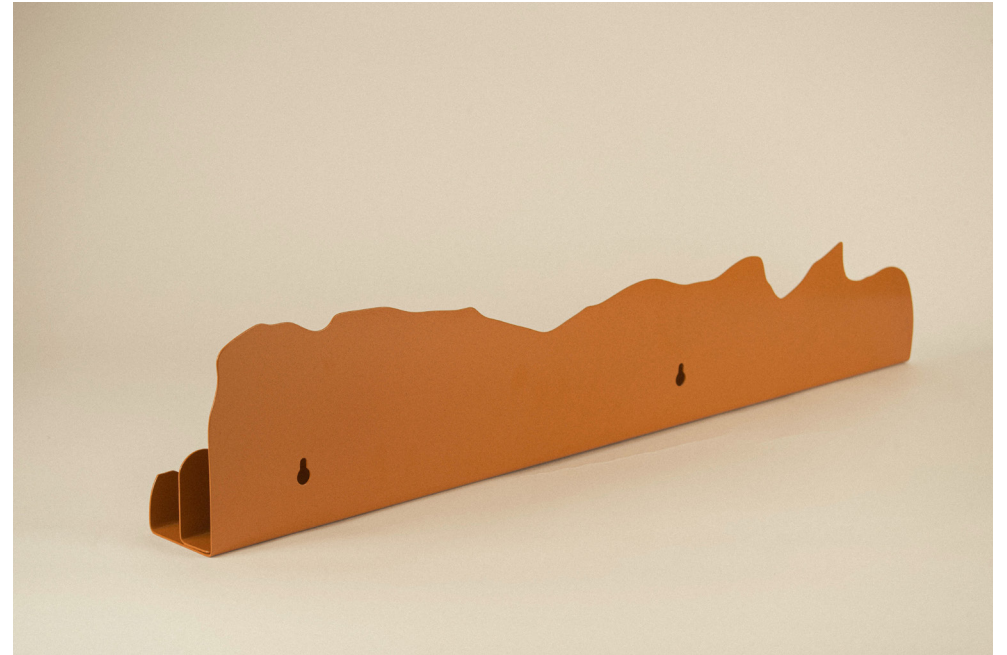
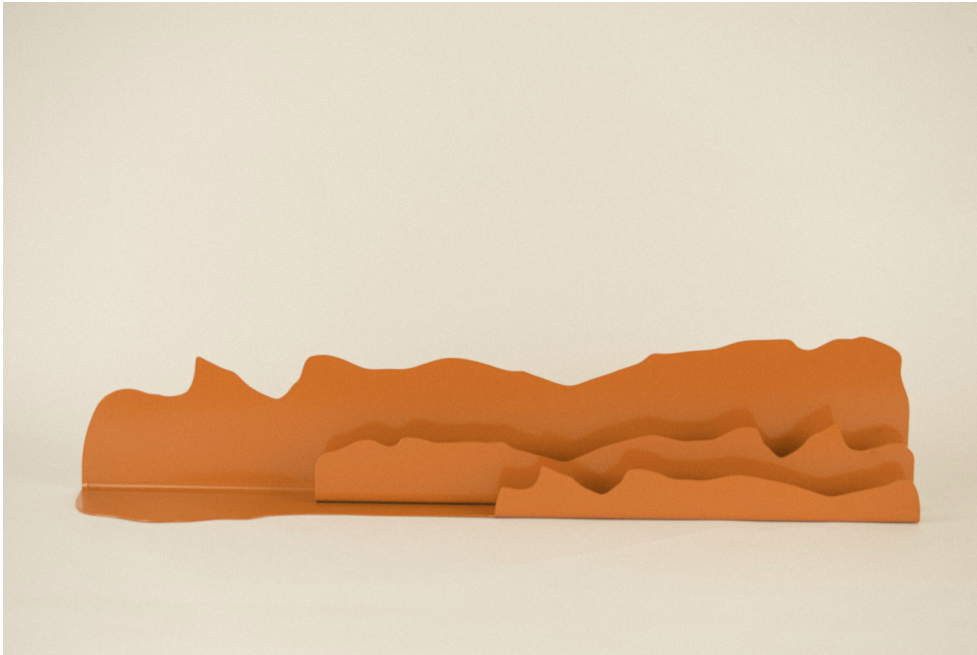
postcard writing desk





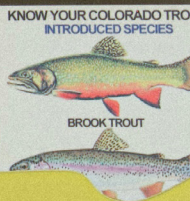
postcard writing desk





postcard shelves

postcard shelves



*Every place I go, I'll think of you
Every song I sing, I'll sing for you*

*Tell me that you'll wait for me
Hold me like you'll never let me go
'Cause I'm leavin' on a jet plane
Don't know when I'll be back again
Oh babe, I hate to go*

John Denver, "Leaving on a Jet Plane"

CONCLUSION

I lived in Wisconsin for twenty seven years before relocating to Rhode Island to pursue my graduate studies, and complete the work presented in this book.

I went to college an hour's drive away from the town I grew up in. I biked the distance between my new home and my old home by way of the Glacial Drumlin State Trail. The trail is on an abandoned rail corridor and I thought it was all paved when I started the ride but it turned out to be mostly gravel. I was riding a heavy steel Raleigh road bike from the 1980s that my dad got for me as a high school graduation present. He saw it in the corner of a customer's garage and thought it would suit me. He claims he traded it for landscape work he was doing for them, but sometimes I wonder if he stole it. I'm sure he didn't just take it but it's a funnier story and sometimes I like to believe that it is true.

How cool would it have been if I had moved to college with only my bike with my panniers filled with the things I needed and sheets flying off the handlebars. Could you imagine watching her roll onto campus grinning, unburdened by her old dressers and ready to start a new life.

They don't make them like that anymore, he said.

The bike needs repair but I can't bring myself to get rid of it. It sits on the carpet inside our apartment making indents that will take a long time to spring back to stasis.

Years later I upgraded my bike and picked one out that is specifically designed for riding on gravel. I have taken it on a handful of adventures but most notably up and over the rolling hills of the Driftless Region. You wouldn't believe the way the sun shines, you wouldn't believe the game of euchre we saw happening at the rural country club, you wouldn't believe how thirsty we were. It had been a while since our last water source.

Max, Elana, and I rode our bikes to Tillinghast Farm a few days after meeting each other. It was a beautiful sunny day and we made it to the beach where we met up with our other new friends. We would do this again about a year later with the new graduate students. I hope they continue to meet up at the beach to start the year. I never imagined I would live so close to the ocean.

A month or so into my first semester at RISD I was feeling desperately homesick. It was the fall of 2020 and I knew there was little likelihood of being able to travel home for the holidays. I had not expected the level of longing I would experience. I was constantly traveling

and exploring, and felt like I could treat this move the same way, but it was different.

I sat in the picture collection of the RISD library and asked for the file folder labeled "Wisconsin." It was a crisp fall day and I felt my eyes well with tears as I looked through dated magazine clippings and maps about the state where I grew up.

I flipped through photographs of geographical features and of students riding their bikes through the capital city. I rested my eyes on aerial views of farmland, of cornfields perfectly plowed by their caretakers. It was certainly a beauty I had appreciated before but it felt like my eyes were seeing these scenes in new ways when presented as archival imagery. I started to see the inspiration for forms I thought I had been creating intuitively, I saw gentle curves and expansive lines and the faces of people at peace.

If you had told me that I would move to Rhode Island and make a thesis body of work about Wisconsin I probably would have laughed. Sounds cheesy, sounds kitschy, sounds nostalgic. It does sometimes sound that way but it sounds better than it did when I was trying



from the RISD picture collection

to sound like someone other than myself. It sounds better than the sound of suppressing my past and who I was and who I will always be. She told me that I needed to find the designer that I am, instead of creating a persona of the designer I want to be. It is probably the best piece of advice I have received in the past two years.

It took a year from that visit to the picture collection to discover the writing of Lucy Lippard. I read through *The Lure of the Local* and my mind was blown on nearly every page. It was like she was taking the messy thoughts from my head and eloquently laying them out on the page.

"The lure of the local is not always about home as an expressive place, a place of origins and return. Sometimes it is about the illusion of home, as a memory. If place is defined by memory, but no one who remembers is left to bring these memories to the surface, does a place become no place, or only a landscape? What if there are people with memories but no-one to transmit them to? Are their memories invalidated by being unspoken? Are they still valuable to others with a less personal connection?"

What use does a collection of work about my

memories of growing up in Wisconsin have to do with anyone else? The work evolved from representative to ethereal and tactile glimpses at landscape and place. I present the objects as an attempt to make physical memories of the place in order to keep this place alive. I won't let it become a "noplac", and it is not just a landscape. It is a place where thousands of people have built their lives, where hundreds of young women rode in the backseat and felt the wind on their faces through a small crack in the window. Or even fully submerged in the wind riding around in the convertible, the sharp and tangy smell of gasoline filling her nostrils.

The work about this place also absorbs the memories of those who interact with it. When she looks at one of the steel drawings of a bird, she sees the kingfisher that she always crosses paths with on the beach with her dad. When he sees the loon, he remembers ending a hike and seeing a pair of them gracefully gliding above the surface of the pond. So much of the joy of seeing the drawings come to life is watching people interpret them, and tell me about the place they have gone in their mind.

It's rooted in my own experience but it is also a universal one. It took leaving Wisconsin many times,

and finally somewhat permanently, to fully understand the impact that landscape of the midwest had had on me. The forms I create in furniture objects attempt to whisper like soft rolling hills — the beauty more subdued and expansive. They often ask to be examined further, from a closer vantage point. To be seen from very far away, from an aerial view, but then under a microscope. Macro and micro. Made in wood, natural, but punctuated with neon and graphic elements reminiscent of roadside attractions.

I will never stop riding my bike for

miles and miles and miles

I will always go on drives simply to cruise and attempt to feel the heartbeat of the place where I am. I will never stop walking, hiking in places close to me and places far away. I will always see the most remarkable things when I reach them on foot or after three days of biking in one direction. I will never stop leaving the studio to go rollerblading on a nice day, pushing and sprinting and panting to make it nine miles because it feels better the farther I go.

The objects I made over the past two years are really mile markers, breadcrumbs to remind me of this

particular place and time. Furniture is the only thing that forces me to slow down and sit still, both in its fabrication and then in its final form. I often realize that I don't really even need much furniture in my own life, I have to force myself to sit down and often when I do I sit or lay right on the floor. Best not to think about that too much.

Even after all of this, I'm still not sure that I want to travel the miles to go back. It is sometimes harder to return only to leave again. It is sometimes harder to go back and be reminded. To see how things have changed, the businesses that have gone out, the places that are gone.

Maybe I will rollerblade across America, maybe I will buy a motorcycle, maybe I will learn how to properly ride. He let me take hot laps behind his shop. I hated motorcycles for a long time, and maybe I still do. Always forward, always in motion, he said.

Not sure where I am going with this, and I am not sure where I am going in general. One thing I am certain of, however, is where I have been.



First and foremost I have to thank my partner Daniel Manson. Thank you for moving to Providence with me, for keeping me nourished, for supporting me and my work every day. I love you always forever.

Patricia Johnson, for leading me through this program with honesty and for helping me find the designer that I am.

Anne West, for editing nearly every piece of writing in this document and for helping me find my voice.

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Emily Cornell Du Houx, Amy Devers, Jean Lin, Meg Callahan, Chris Speece, Harry Allen, John Dunnigan, Jonah Takagi, and all of the other RISD faculty I had the pleasure of learning from or working with.

Samaaya Jayamaha, for helping with the layout and graphic design of this book.

My family - Kathy, Tyler, Andy, Gene, and Cherie Jones. Thank you for always calling and understanding when I had to hang up to jump on

Acknowledgements

the table saw.

My new family - Donna Manson and Ken Lempit;
Rich Manson, Sue Radmer, Emma Manson;
Lindsey, Samantha, and Max Pearlman. Your support
is palpable from miles away.

My classmates and peers in the year above and below
me in the graduate program, and the Furniture
Design undergraduate students. Some of the coolest
and most talented people I know.

Megan Kaiser, Andrew Cavell, and Aaron Bossen,
for the week of bliss together on the Drifty 250. You
three, and that time we shared together, inspire me
endlessly.

Finally, the RISD Furniture Design Class of 2022:
Anna Dawson, Ginger Gordon, Amelia Greteman,
Elana Schvalbe, Alexis Tingey, Maxwell Taylor-
Milner, and Amy (Tzyy Yi) Young. What we all
share is singular, kismet, fate. I love each and every
one of you, and sharing space with you the past two
years has been nothing short of a dream. Islands in
the stream, that is what we are.

IT'S MORE
THAN AN
EXIT.
IT'S A TRIP.

Notes

An Evolving Design Ethic: Learning from the Lessons of the Leopold Bench

See page 66–85

- 1 Thousand-Miler Status is a term give to those who hike the entirety of the Ice Age Trail, either in sections or in a continuous “thru-hike”. <https://www.iceagetrail.org/section-thru-hiking/thousand-miler-recognition/>. Accessed May 1, 2022
- 2 In the 1930s and 1940s, the United States Travel Bureau utilized the Federal Arts Project to create the “See America First” campaign meant to encourage American citizens to engage in tourism of the states, particularly to National Parks with remarkable geographical features. An example of one of such posters is available to view here: Nicholson, Frank. NYC: Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project., “See America First United States Travel Bureau Poster,” USU Digital Exhibits <http://exhibits.usu.edu/items/show/18810>. Accessed May 1, 2022
- 3 In an article on Outdoor News.com, the author speaks to an employee of the Aldo Leopold Foundation and receives insight on the origin story of the bench. She reveals that there was never an initial construction drawing of the bench and Leopold built all of his iterations as one-offs using material at hand. Building plans, similar to the one I followed to construct my own bench, were created later by admirers of the piece.
Drieslein, Rob. “Did Aldo Leopold Actually Build a Leopold Bench?” Outdoor News, Web. May 21 2020. Web. <https://www.outdoornews.com/2020/05/21/did-aldo-leopold-actually-build-a-leopold-bench/>. Accessed May 1, 2022
- 4 Beegan, Gerry, and Paul Atkinson. “Professionalism, Amateurism and the Boundaries of Design.” *Journal of Design History* 21, no. 4 (2008): 305–13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25228602>.
- 5 I discovered this quote from Ellen Lupton embedded within a reading of the article from note 4, “Professionalism, Amateurism and the Boundaries of Design” on page 306.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25228602>
- 6 A simple internet search for “build a leopold bench” will yield many results, but here is the information for the specific video I followed to build the scale model mentioned in this essay.
StoreyPublishing. “How to Build a Leopold Bench with Spike Carlsen - The Backyard Homestead Book of Building Projects.” March 14, 2014. <https://youtu.be/1pFTbTI6tDw>
- 7 From the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources website: “The Ice Age Trail Alliance (IATA) is a nonprofit, volunteer organization whose mission is to create, support and protect the many segments of the Ice Age Trail.” While I lived in Wisconsin, I volunteered a handful of times with local chapters of the IATA during trail building events they hosted. The entirety of the Ice Age Trail is maintained by volunteers.
<https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/parks/iceagetrail>
- 8 Beegan, Gerry, and Paul Atkinson. “Professionalism, Amateurism and the Boundaries of Design.” *Journal of Design History* 21, no. 4 (2008): 305–13.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25228602>.
- 9 Adamson, Glenn, *Craft: An American History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).
- 10 I first became aware of Kelly Cobb’s 100-Mile Suit Project while reading Glenn Adamson’s book *Craft: An American History*. A brief synopsis of the project is available here:
<https://kellyacobb.tumblr.com/100>. Accessed May 1, 2022.

- 11 More information about A Workshop of Our Own is available for view on their website:
<https://aworkshopofourown.com/>. Accessed May 1 2022.
- 12 More information about Crafting the Future is available for view on their website:
<https://www.craftingthefuture.org/>. Accessed May 1 2022.
- 13 I learned about the Aldo Leopold Archives during an undergraduate course I took while a student at UW-Madison. The course was taught by William Cronon and was centered around American Environmental History. Suffice it to say taking that course as an undergraduate student significantly impacted how I view and understand the natural world, specifically the American landscape. Students are able to visit the Aldo Leopold archives in person and handle the documents themselves, but while writing this thesis in Rhode Island I was fortunate to have access to the digitized portions of the collection.
<https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/AldoLeopold>. Accessed May 1 2022.
- 14 One example of this would be the “One Pine-Board Chair, 2017” by Green River Project LLC. Available to view on their website.
<https://greenriverprojectllc.com/>. Accessed May 1 2022.
- 15 Adamson, Glenn, *Craft: An American History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

Image 1, page 54
Aldo Leopold preparing journal note at the shack, 1946
Near Baraboo, Wisconsin. Courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation, accessed through the digitized Aldo Leopold Archives housed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
<https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/5PF3BPUUHIQRK8J>

Image 2, page 57
Photograph of a Leopold Bench near Big Bearskin Lake, Harshaw, Wisconsin. Courtesy of Jeff Wiesner. Illustrated text added by the author.

Image 3, page 58
Scan of the author’s personal copy of *A Sand County Almanac*, courtesy of the author.

Image 4, page 63
Screenshot of Leopold Bench construction video.
<https://youtu.be/1pFTbTI6tDw>

Image 5, page 64
Courtesy of the author.

Image 6, page 67
Courtesy of the author.

Image 7, page 70
Pencil drawing (by AL) of fledgling partridge, journal entry from Quetico trip, June 17, 1924.
Journal entry with original pencil sketch by Aldo Leopold.
Courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation, accessed through the digitized Aldo Leopold Archives housed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
<https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/PL5HFHUUJBLTHZ8V>

Image 8, page 70

Aldo and Luna trout fishing, White Creek, Adams County, Wisconsin (map and inset photos).

Photos and map drawn by Aldo Leopold.

Courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation, accessed through the digitized Aldo Leopold Archives housed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. <https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/MWDL3DTPHWBER8F>

Image 9, page 74

Aldo Leopold on Slide Hill Bench, 1938

Taken at the shack, near Baraboo, Wisconsin.

Courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation, accessed through the digitized Aldo Leopold Archives housed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. <https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/DPZOPOCSUGUPQ9C>

Image 10, page 75

Scan of the author's copy of *A Sand County Alamanc*, page 54.

All other images printed in this document are courtesy of the author. Many are scans of disposable camera film photos. Some are scans of postcards from the authors collection. Some are scans of index cards produced during an inspiration mapping exercise done in the fall of 2021 with Professor Emily Cornell Du Houx. All illustrations and handwritten text are from the author.

