

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: ENTROPIC CONSTRUCTION

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“Entropic Construction,” is an exhibition of an installation at The University of Maryland College Park. In this written component to my Thesis, I address the combination of the theory of my creative practice, material research, object ontology, personal history, and inspirations for the exhibited work.

# Entropic Construction

By

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## Preface

The following document is a culmination of my process and practice through graduate school. The words written are at best another crude reflection of the work, and a literary existential observation. This written work “Entropic Construction,” can be an approximation of my ideas and thoughts as it is a lens to better understand how I see and create, responding to a contemporary world and issues.



## Dedication

Thank you to  
those who have taught me their ways  
and shared their knowledge  
and  
my father  
Kenneth William Thron  
(Chief)

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## Chapter 1-Gathering

Before we were able to create, we had to first gather. Technology and tools were among the first defining characteristic of humanity but to acquire tools before that, early humans must have had to realize the intrinsic nature and ability that an object or material has. Collecting allowed humanity to progress; materials would become tools and this defined humanity as much as the blood in our veins. We did not become human until we used what was available to create. We have found tools, but we have also found art from the Paleolithic era. It is our nature, our essence, to gather, manipulate and create for purpose and expression. The philosopher Martin Heidegger in his book *The Question Concerning Technology*, “When we are seeking the essence of “tree,” we have to become aware that That which pervades every tree.” To understand the importance of choosing a material whether to complete a task or create a form, we must look into the “being” of that element and all that it represents to understand its possibilities.

Another way to look at humanity’s history, its evolution and technological advancement, is its relation to gathering. In Ursula K. Le Guin's book *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, she proposes the idea that “before the tool

that forces energy outwards, we made the tool that brings energy home.

Prior to the preeminence of sticks, swords and the Hero's long, hard, killing tools, our ancestors' greatest invention was the container: the basket of wild oats, the medicine bundle, the net made of your own hair, the home, the shrine, the place that contains whatever is sacred.” This notion is important because gathering, harvesting, and the process of searching adds to evolutionary changes that humanity went through. As we progressed through the ages, we collected more precious materials and manipulated them for a greater purpose. As things were gathered, an archive started to develop, a library of resources, and an inventory of materials to be transformed. Just as one stone became an axe, and pile of stones became a wall. The more we gathered the more we learned about the world and our ability to interact with it.



Figure 1. Making Flints, Print, Kean Collection, January 02, 1754

## Chapter 2- Materiality and Ontology

As I gather material, I focus not only on the aesthetic nature but also on its materiality, its ontology, its history, and what that object represents in a contemporary and historical context. This becomes a key component in the conceptual framework of my sculpture and installations. Materials and objects have stories, lineages and histories and I seek to understand those elements. For example, bronze, is an ancient alloy with a history of celebration or highlighting an idea, and it's used to memorialize a great moment or a person. Iron, just as ancient but has a different history and profile: it is used for tools of war and strengths in construction.-Aluminum, is a more modern alloy that better represents contemporary culture. It is a material that has enabled us to fly and reach outer space. It is a light and durable material used in construction, machinery, household items, and sculpture. It interacts with all levels of contemporary society, innovation and technology.



Figure 2. Gathering Material, Jack Stewarts Jon Boats, Carmel NY, photo:  
Michael Thron 2020



These are properties that I search for within all material, through research and physical exploration I learn why these materials were used in their historical process and how I can use them in an artistic way. Tar, for example is a material that I have experimented with continuously for the last three years to better understand its physical nature and social context. I use it to build, to coat, print, paint, and imprint. It is a nasty, sticky, smelly material, but I am fascinated by its history, meaning, and variety of ways it has been used. This material that was the focus of my solo exhibition, *“Death and Donuts”* at Culture House DC, with a dialogue that used tar as a visual filter to better understand our current condition in this world. I focus on tar as a material of preservation, a material of shame, a byproduct of capitalism, and a material that is bound to the history of transportation. Roads that snake across the surface of the earth and parking lots form patches of black deserts in every city and town. In Scandinavian culture, tar was used to coat the sails and the whole boat for water proofing and durability, tar and wool caulking could be used quickly if there was a leak.



Figure 3. “*Death and Donuts*”, Michael Thron, solo exhibition, 2020,  
Culture House DC, Photo: Michael Thron 2020

Coating a balled-up bit of wool dipping it in tar and stuffing in the hole then scorching it with a torch, it is a material that once saved lives. It is a material of preservation where in pits we have found fossilized bones, persevered animals and even humans. A material of shame, which along with feathers acts as a punishment and a symbol for those who have disrupted the social order. It has also been used for the repressive or terroristic purposed by authoritarian governments. These historical uses of the material also apply to issues that we will face because of the extended use of crude oil; tar being a byproduct of that process. It is part of the system that is contributing to accelerated climates related issues: greenhouse gases, pollution and changing environmental state of our planet. In “Entropic Construction,” I draw upon the material, social, and maritime history of tar. The piece can be viewed as a response to climate change, with the tar representing the preservation of these devices for when the waters rise, but with an added ironic response to society’s addiction to petroleum. One of the earliest inspirations I had on the intersection of found objects was in Jannis Kounellis’s installation “Untiled,” 2005 at the Hamburger Kuntshalle, in Hamburg, Germany.

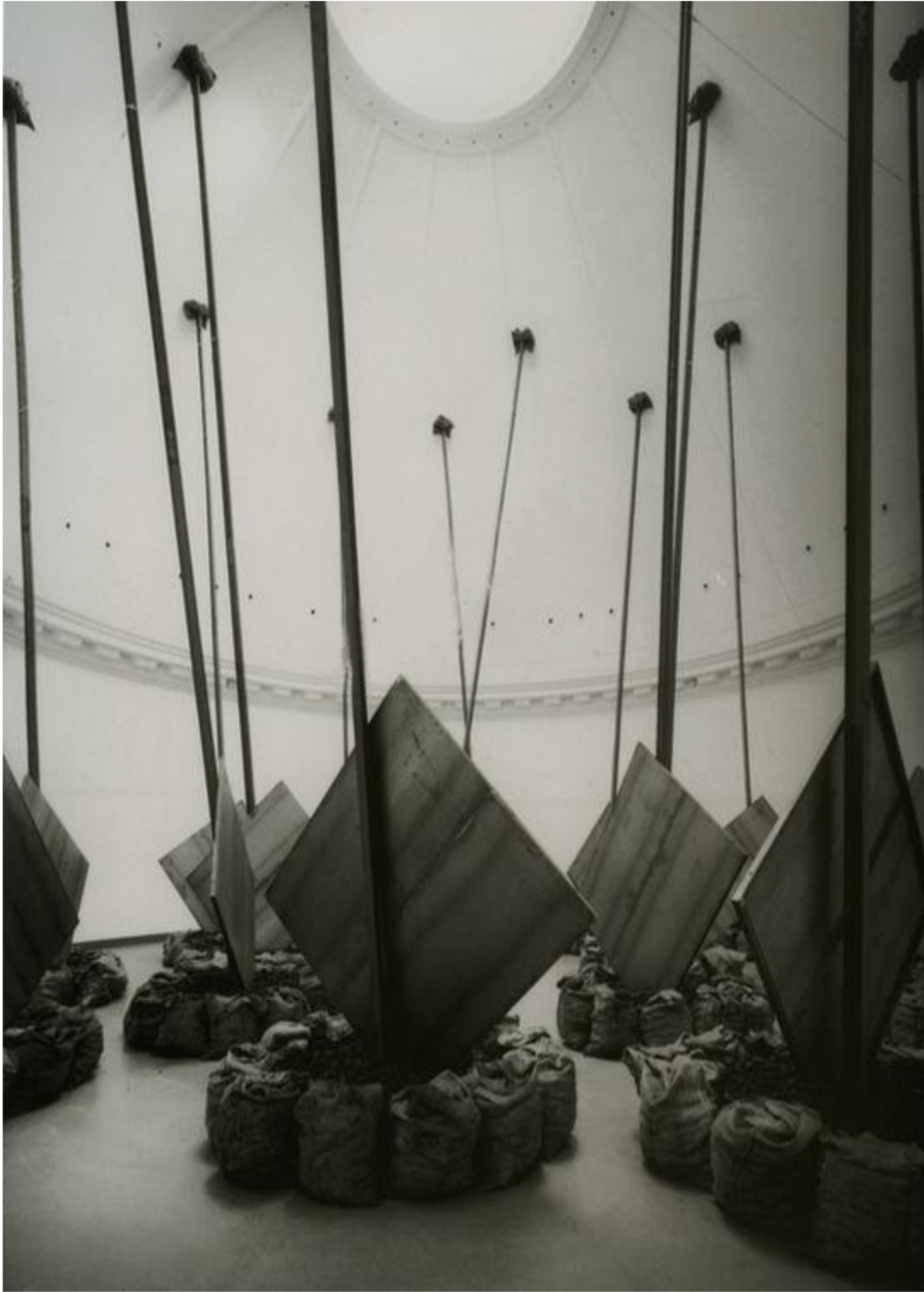


Figure 4. Jannis Kounellis, Untitled, 1995, installation at Hamburger Kuntshalle, Hamburg, Germany, photo: Claudio Abarte from the Contemporary Greek Art Institute's website

In the Arte Povera movement of the 1960's, found objects were employed to create an emotional gesture charged with a narrative, but transformed by a new context. I welcome this object ontology in my own work. I am interested in the “being” of a material and how objects are a defining element of the age in which we live in. Things have their own novel kind of presence, endurance, and the connections among pieces and wholes. They have their own way of presenting themselves and the world in which they operate. Our experience of the world is mediated through its artifacts.

I often employ this notion of material and object ontology to location and site as well. A particular space or site can be charged because of its history or use. Like a church is a sacred space and an airport is a functional/technological space. The chair where Lincoln was assassinated from or where Hendrix sacrificed his guitar to the rock gods. These locations are important coordinates that hold energy and are charged with the purpose and history of those spaces. These lived or sacred environments speak to the fact that a body occupies a certain space in history and, as the philosopher Timothy Morton states in his book, *Hyper-objects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, “Time and space exist radically inside objects rippling through them.”



Figure 5. “Occidental Catalyst”, Michael Thron, 2017, oil, bread, water, wood, gold, Lab gallery, University of Maryland, College Park, Photo: Michael Thron 2017



### Chapter 3-History and Conceptual Construction

I was raised on the shores and in the industrial districts of south Stamford Connecticut, the harbors of long island sound, and in the forests of the Hudson Valley. These environments shaped me into a maker and they are where my fascination and earliest memories of the confluence of industry and the natural elements.

I will always remember the scent of lifeless fish and the low tide in the harbor walking along endless rows of boats along the coast, like soldiers anticipating for the fish to return in the spring surf. The surrounding warehouses were in ruins, or filled with metalworkers creating with fire, masons carving earth, plumbers guiding water and contractors building in space. I would also venture away from industry and walk into the neighboring forest, seek isolation from society. Out there it was best to slow down, listen, feel, wait, and learn. These environments left an imprint on me as I proceeded through school intending at first to become an architect but ultimately these environments would act as the lens through which I would create art. In my early twenties, I moved to Florence, Italy to continue my studies in architecture but met Marco Fallani, a sculptor and painter.

He offered me an opportunity to have a studio, a welder, material and time.

This was a pivotal moment and the beginning of my practice. As my practice progressed, I remained inspired by those places, their history, the materiality of them, those ruins, and their raw elements. I am drawn to the industrial materials and objects of my youth. In the digital age, where the history of mechanical devices and processes slowly disappears due to automation and obsolescence, many processes and tools are becoming unknown to subsequent generations. I am drawn to these waning industries as if they are myths of lost civilizations or artifacts. If you spend enough time around them, they start to speak to you. I learned that we must use things in order to be able to understand them, and through manipulating identifiable objects with fabricated elements, I combine these elements through my process of hunting and gathering, disassembling and replicating, reengineering and distilling. This is my recipe to abstract and transfigure, too discover a materials ontology and history. Then it must go through a reformation to become an art object that expresses an idea or feeling that that can complement a formal and conceptual gesture.

The gestures and actions of Chris Burden and his work “*Three Ghost Ships*” inspire me in how the action of his work is accompanied by a



story. Then by transporting the objects into the gallery, the myth of those objects follows and takes on symbolic or narrative quality.



Figure 6. Installation view with Three Ghost Ships (1991) Artwork Chris Burden/Licensed by The Chris Burden Estate and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Douglas M. Parker Studio

“Entropic Construction” is a term I use to not only represent the practice that I have developed during graduate school but also a paradoxical philosophical idea around materiality and the salvage of materials to create art. In an age of overabundance, humanity’s detritus now can be found in the depths of the ocean and orbiting our planet. Within this excess I found material to create, from railroad beams on the side of the road for lumber, trashed car engines and radiators for casting metal, and within older structure being demolished due to gentrification. The history and memories of those places lives on through the materials of the buildings and in their walls. In graduate school, I have focused on trying to create work that responds to history of objects and materials applying this concept to topical work, whether existential, political, or environmental. Site is essential and the space in which I develop the work shapes that process. Through this I create work that act as a conceptual vessel, reflecting how materiality can obstruct, disrupt, and interfere in work that is created through destruction. By fabricating emulations of society and exploring the overabundant remnants of humanity through a process of gathering, transforming and repurposing, I aim to create a lense than can act as a conduit to examine the evolution of one’s self to better understand our own historical origins and reasoning.

Thus, my job is to transfigure what exists: Like an alchemist trying to turn lead into gold. In my practice of using found materials and their metamorphosis into art objects and installations, a transfiguring occurs through the transformation of recognizable materials. Experiencing a new state of an object or material that the viewer understands to work in a certain way or in a certain physical state of existence can open new doors of perception and understanding. The work can speak to greater ideas and the viewer can then question the correlation between the recognizable object and what it becomes through a transformation.

For instance, when relating memory and creation to ruination and composition, I am inspired by Anselm Kiefer's work and how he engages the viewer in an immersive experience through encounters with scale and sculpted dilapidation. His piece "*The Seven Heavenly Palaces*," creates visual narratives that bring the viewer into a dystopian world where scale, material, and disorder exists. A representation of the ruins of the western world following World War Two. I am influenced by his use of the paradox using a machete to sculpt and changing recognizable forms into an experience rooted in destruction and chaos.

Through a historical lens, I focus on moments where the past and present

compare and contrast with one another. The location of where the object or material is found speaks on a metaphysical level. It expresses its story, its memories, its uses and its importance. Finding a piece of steel from a warehouse that built weapons can guide the piece in relation to that context. It speaks to those sites, those times, its ontological memories.



Figure 7. Anselm Kiefer, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*, 2004. Photo: Agostino Osio. Courtesy Fondazione Hangar Biccocca, Milano

## Chapter 4-Ways and Skids

Earth has entered into a new epoch characterized by humanity's influence on earth's environmental systems: the Anthropocene. The rising seas, temperatures, resource scarcity, and climate-change fueled migrations (both human and animal) that mark our new age call on us to reconsider both the ideas that define our worldviews and the material culture that defines everyday experience. For generations, our society has been rooted in a culture of creation, consumption, and disposal of natural resources. We have extracted and transformed more and more to make "things" that are meant to improve life today and for generations to come. These actions and interventions inevitably having complicating and even destructive effects. We ignore our crumbling ecosystems in favor of economic expansion, our deteriorating public health in favor of mass entertainment, and our enfeebled politics in favor of the relentless infotainment news cycle. What will replace this unwieldy state of affairs as it crumbles? We are experiencing this effect; observing degradation from historic misuse, abuse, and modification of this world with little regard for any long-term, consequences. My work is an attempt to confront this environmental crisis with material, metaphor and focused consciousness.





Figure 8. Production shot of “Entropic Construction”, Metal shop, University of Maryland, College Park, photo: Michael Thron 2020



We stand at a crossroads where the past has caught up to the present, and the future age of an evolving landscape must be considered. While industrialization and technologic advancements have had many positive effects on society, they have also had a direct effect on our planetary ecosystem.

The installation “Entropic Construction,” is about abstracted dystopian ideas related to the global effects of climate change with a metaphorical emphasis on rising tides. Because the obsessive greedy advancement of fossil fuels, and through the continuous cultivation and poisoning of agriculture and maritime systems, we have abused and thus rapidly accelerated the changes in our planet’s climate and ecosystems. What we hold most precious must be raised above us to protect it.

To say that a boat is in “The ways or skid” is where a ship is either undergoing construction, being scrapped or waiting to be launched. As the waters rise, more land will erode, floods will increase and expand, creating slipways. The vessels on stilts coated in tar act as metaphorical lifeboats for climate refugees when they must leave their home town, their state, or continent from the rising tides. The tar coating on the stilts must be acknowledged and viewed not as a black matte coating but through its historical presence as a material of preservation, a material of fuel, and

as a material of shame.

I explore and touch on themes humanity will have to overcome and engage with in a foreseeable future. This need for change but must start with the individual as they realize their place and duty on earth. We have shaped and abused our environment, and now it is our time to repair it. Politics and national concerns pale in the face of possible human extinction. Our leaders are ignoring, or even worse, silencing science and their continual denial as they hold tight to ruinous ways must change.

In this exhibition, I anticipate the future ruination and dystopian carnage, informed by growing up in maritime industrial settings. My work is a metaphorical warning, layered with material history and contemporary irony. I aim to focus my attention, and get yours.



Figure 9. Installation shot “Entropic Construction”, 2020 photo: Michael Thron

## Chapter 5- Conclusion

“Entropic Construction” is not to be seen as a solution to the impending global climate events and the rising tides, but to act as a way to recognize the present through a lens to view a future dystopian world where climate refugees will have to travel away from their sacred spaces. Because of our direct hand in the acceleration of climate change with in the cycles of the earth, the objects us humans hold dear will fade and we will have nothing but memories from the ruins of our lives.

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