

KAREN MAHAFFY
The Persistence of Moment

“...the beginning of a story, the rest
of which is written by footsteps.”

– Michel de Certeau

“The infinite miles were numbered in stars
and the earth was lit from inside.”

– John Philip Santos

“You can’t step in the same river once.”

– Houblon

Experience distilled to story. A stroll suspended in a single step. Wool compressed to felt by walking. Felted insoles stacked to form plateaus and valleys, the topography of drift and wonder, with elevations high and low, ordinary and strange.



Untitled (drift: Baltic coast), wool felt,
upholstery thread, 2010

The persistence of moment, the absence of memory by implication, is a place unreeled to the wandering mind. It doesn’t exist until you get there. You’re at the crossroads of multiple locations, an anthology of real places, a set of reassembled points aligned at an apex of presence, built from memory. However, moment can’t completely replace memory, which runs alongside, but there is an opportunity to let those footfalls fade, to walk only.

Karen Mahaffy offers a reified version of a place she sprang to on the springs of a humble hope and a personal intention to allow the inherent strangeness of a new locale to dislocate her from the conditioned conduits of the familiar.

Tallinn, Estonia offered up its streets and interiors, its sounds and its cobblestones. Winter. And the flat Karen lived in for five months in the first half of 2009.

Bells toll. Light streams in through an apartment window, casting a shadow klatch of pussy willow on the wall perpendicular. The ghost of a cathedral window hovers near an interior buttress before shivering away in the changing light.

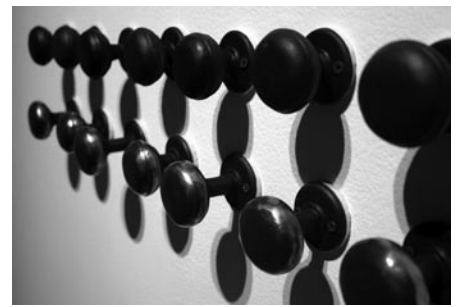
There was a short side trip to Parnü, where her room was tied too tightly with the bows of creepy taste. Muffled music haunts that room, severe with coordinated assumptions – sickly floral wallpaper, a highly polished brass wall sconce, inverted pink lily glass, shrill incandescence burning white. Later, this light increases to flash point in distilled animation: *Untitled (lamp)*.

All this is granted by the meander through any anywhere. A daily waking up into the opportunity – the one mentioned before – to make yourself and the shifting world be. It’s all there for any stealthy one to borrow. No need to ask this time. Actually, maybe you need to stop asking altogether. I’m tempted to say, just take it, but that isn’t it either: just be taken.

“Who was the first to touch that shiny nose?”

Mahaffy poses this question to a group of people gathered at Women & Their Work to talk and listen regarding “The Phenomenon of Place.” It’s happening in the midst of the spaces defined by her show, temporarily vanquished to the limbo of turned off projectors. The shiny nose she remembers from one bronze statue or another in the Field Museum in Chicago, where she was raised.

The artist brings it up because she saw it as a kid and couldn’t help but wonder at all the touches that combined to make that shine. She has alternately referred to this and other repetitive activities as propagation (one touch



Untitled (too close to be seen), cast bronze,
felted wool, 2010, edition of 7 pairs.

suggests another), accumulation (one step follows another), and “the modest work of human erosion” (traces). It’s a deeply human response, apparently universal. I’m thinking of the bronze warthog I used to visit on the street in Kansas City, Missouri. The snout speaks to the truth of this human wish – the shine will blind you at certain times of day.

Think about it – the nose is the part that sticks out the most, is most convenient for the repetitive ritual of touch. But this readiness is a byproduct of its evolutionary reach, an aid to survival in a world where danger comes with an aroma: this function of survival is why it sticks out in the first place. No one could have guessed that this organ of olfactory genius could so alter the uses of touch, and all this stroking is certainly a strangely evolved behavior – mimicry driven through morphic resonance. As a species we are getting very, very good at touching the extremities of bronze statues. Sometimes we even touch the knees if they stick out far enough (said Abraham Lincoln to Rudolph the Red).

Yes, Mahaffy’s subtle concerns in this project can awaken goofy associations. Her *untitled (too close to be seen)* is a series of paired door-knobs (based on three different knobs), cast in bronze with felted wool gaskets where they attach (quietly) to the wall. There are seven pairs lined up on two horizontal lines. The formality of the piece suggests serious inquiry, though amusement and curiosity are latent, just waiting for a twist. But first they are

encountered as a silent platoon – the mute voices of transition assembled. Imagine all those hands twisting door knobs all over the world; all those doors to anywhere surely marking passages more taken for granted than many, if only by virtue of the numbers involved. Yet doorways mark so many deeply meaningful moments – moments of return, mystery, discovery. Closing too. Still, the knob I see is the honker on the door that serves as Alice’s drink me advisor in the room at the bottom of the rabbit hole in the classic animated film *Alice in Wonderland*.

Nothing wrong with getting small.

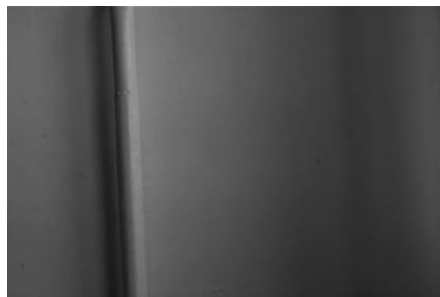
The Long Poem (approximately 26,720 steps to here and here) is made of a hand-latched wool rug, white, thirty-four inches wide by nine feet long, mounted on a long low plinth that elevates it four inches above the gallery floor. But when it was just a rug, Karen walked thirteen miles on it in her San Antonio studio during the year following her return. Those miles show in the dirty double stripe that extends down its length like a well-worn path through snow. It is thus marked by a repetition derived from the studio ritual of an artist whose residency was based on walking. This cumulative, intentional activity differed from her daily ritual in Estonia that included le flânerie, that purposeless, observational wandering made famous by Baudelaire and Benjamin. The focused purpose of the rug walk, to simulate miles of walking winter ground, opens this activity (which was directional in a way that the act it reifies was not) to an irony. Karen purposefully stepped further and further into a place that surely does not exist – nowhere. Her experiment in alternative location multiplied by duration suggests that place can be performed anywhere there is space enough to unroll a rug.

The inadvertent humor that may be found in the restrained pulse of this Mahaffian minimalism is not confined to her absurdly plinth-sized white shag snowfield, but is

also evident in the three drawings that anchor the front wall of the gallery. *Untitled (no place)*, *Untitled (a place)*, *Untitled (someplace)* – each in turn offering a stairway to no place, a place, someplace:

place
no place
I have no place
I have no place to be.

The typeface changes in each drawing – Monaco, Geneva, Georgia – all place names to further confound the existential ground (more propagation). They each suggest a malleable group of inquires which flex around the notions of presence (a fixed location) and relocation (the momentary loss of the moment).



Nonetheless, I sing (to the tune of *Do-Re-Mi* from *The Sound of Music*) place, some place, a new typeface...

But being sets the world on fire.

A bell tolls. Signals a new day, another sentence to be walked, another story to perform, one step at a time. Once upon a place there came to pass... time.

A mocked-up window, rear screen projection, fifty-four days of light, a continually mutating blue to gray and back to blue. All this about that daily awakening into the oldest story ever told. But it’s still chapter one, page one. How exceptional is the sky. Again. A different light source provides the effect on the wall opposite, perpendicular. Seems like this happened yesterday. Did not light stream in through an apartment window, casting a shadow? Pussy willow on the opposite wall? This light shimmers hypnotically. Waking up – it’s a good feeling. A passage marked by stairs. Outside now. Funny this world with its ins and outs. Space is passed and bidden, as is time. Arrival. The story is punctuated by the turning earth. The sun sits up there like a self-assured exclamation that doesn’t know it’s a question mark. Lucky. Still, a story unfolds on a stone wall, a wall built long ago on a day like today. With hands like these. By someone who also walked a story into that book. The one with the pages we’re turning still.

The ghost of a cathedral window hovers near an interior buttress before shivering away in changing light.

Artist Hills Snyder *lives in San Antonio*.

Untitled (persistence of moment) no. 2, digital video, 2010, edition of 3, 1/3.

KAREN MAHAFFY

EDUCATION

B.A. in Studio Art, Art History Minor, Hope College,
Holland, Michigan

M.F.A., University of Texas at San Antonio

SELECTED ONE AND TWO-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 *The Persistence of Moment*, Women & Their Work, Austin, Texas
- 2008 *Window Works*, Artpace Foundation for Contemporary Art,
San Antonio, Texas
- 2008 *any given moment*, Gallery 4, Blue Star Contemporary Arts
Space, San Antonio, Texas
- 2007 *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Unit B Gallery, San Antonio, Texas
- 2005 *Artists Looking at Art*, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas
- 2005 *Karen Mahaffy: Recent Work*, Sala Diaz, San Antonio, Texas
- 2001 *Wallflower Three Walls*, Blue Star Arts Complex,
San Antonio, Texas
- 1999 *without ceremony*, Cactus Bra, San Antonio, Texas

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 *La Mezcla/The Mixture*, Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center,
San Antonio, Texas
- 2009 *Perceptible Systems*, NYCAMS Gallery, New York Center
for Art and Media Studies, New York, New York
- 2008 *Playing with Time*, Blue Star Contemporary Arts Space,
San Antonio, Texas
- 2007 *Still Life in New Time*, University of Texas at San Antonio,
curator: David Rubin, The Brown Contemporary Curator,
San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, Texas
- 2006 *E-flux Video Rental (EVR)*; Traveling Program, selected by
Rene P. Barilleaux, Chief Curator, McNay Art Museum,
San Antonio, Texas
- 2006 *Impossible Exchange*, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, Texas
- 2005 *Moving Pictures*, Dallas Center for Contemporary Art,
curator: Joan Davidow, DCCA Director, Dallas, Texas
- 2003 *Beyond the Academy*, Arthouse at the Jones Center for
Contemporary Art, Austin, Texas
- 2002 *IOx3*, San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, Texas
- 2001 *PepperMint (Curiously Strong)*, Smack Mellon Studios,
Brooklyn, New York



The Long Poem (approximately 20,720 steps to here and here),
hand-latched wool rug, 13.1 miles, 2010.

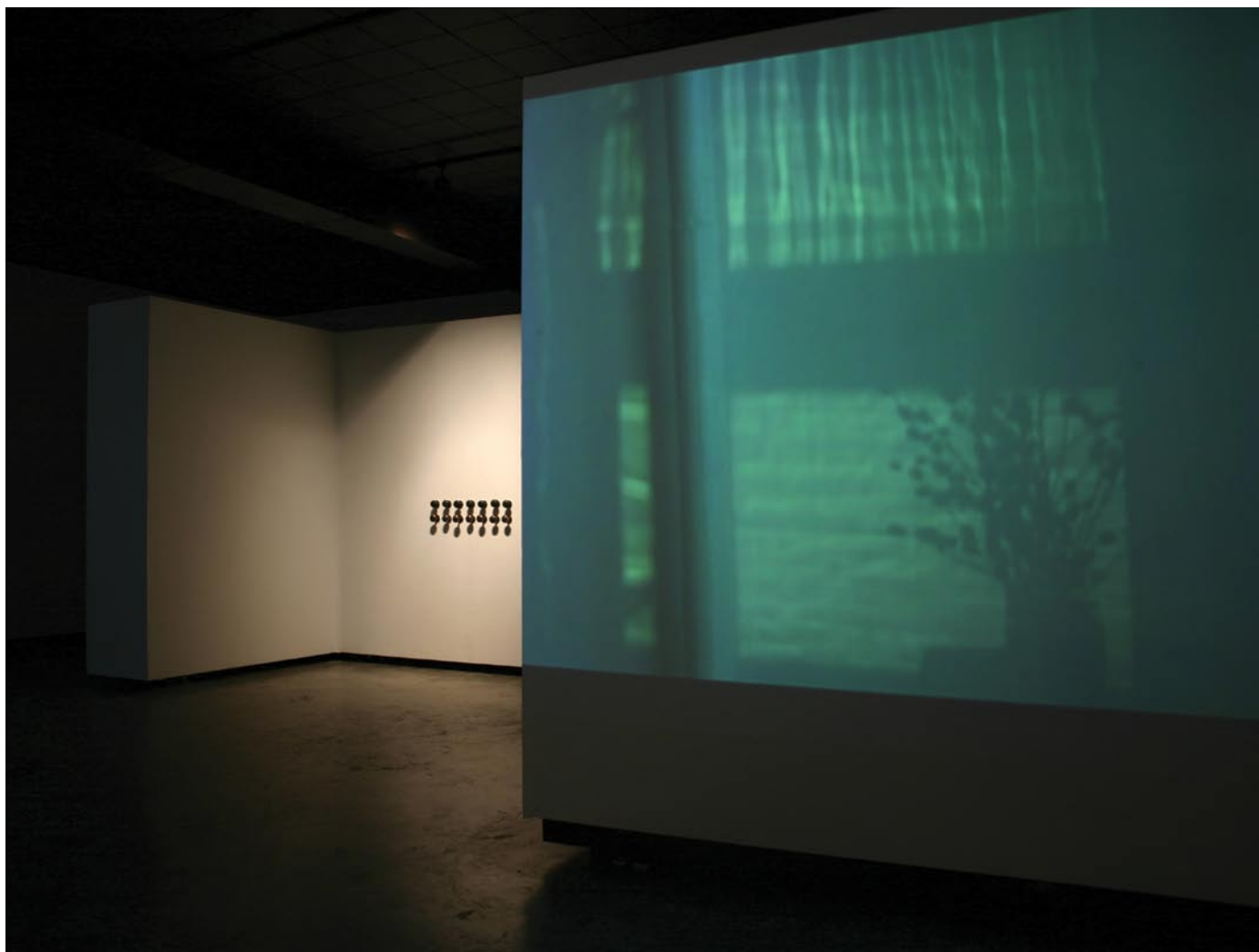
- 2001 *Once There Was a Spot*, Locust Street Projects, Miami, Florida
- 2000 *Neo-Rococo*, University of Texas at San Antonio, curator:
Frances Colpitt
- 1997 *Women's Work*, Arlington Museum of Art, curator:
Joan Davidow, AMA Director, Arlington, Texas

HONORS/AWARDS

- 2009 Media Arts Award, Artist Foundation of San Antonio
- 2008 Fulbright Scholars Grant, Estonia
- 2006 Dallas Museum of Art, Dozier Travel Grant
- 2003 Fulbright-Hays Grant, China, June 2004

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2007 Atwell, Wendy "Erin Curtis and Karen Mahaffy," *Art Lies*
(Fall 2007) no. 55, p. 114
- Wolff, Elaine "The Paper Chase," *San Antonio Current*
(August 1-7, 2007) pp. 19+22
- 2006 Walworth, Catherine "On Beauty: Karen Mahaffy,
Andrea Calliouet and Chris Sauter," *GlassTire*, (July 2006)
www.glasstire.com
- Burling Ilves, Lori "5 to Watch," *Sombrilla Magazine*,
(Winter 2006) vol. 22, issue 1, pp. 24-29
- 2005 Putze, Patrick "Karen Mahaffy Slows Your Roll at Sala Diaz,"
Voices of Art, (2005), vol. 13, issue 2, p. 8
- 2002 Colpitt, Frances "Jewel in the Rough: Report from San Antonio,"
Art in America, (February 2002), pp. 59-65, photo p. 60
- 2000 Atwell, Wendy "Neo-Rococo," *Art Lies* (June 2000)



Untitled (too close to be seen), cast bronze, felted wool, 2010, edition of 7 pairs.

Untitled (persistence of moment) no. 2, digital video, 2010, edition of 3, 1/3.

Cover Panel: *Untitled (persistence of moment) no. 1*, digital video, 2010, edition of 3, 1/3.



Untitled (lamp), digital still animation, 2010, edition of 5, 1/5.

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the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 1,800 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



women and
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WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JULY 22-SEPTEMBER 2, 2010

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