

DANIELLE ROMAGNO & MALLORY BURRELL

*2020*

MFA THESIS CATALOG







ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

College of Visual and Performing Arts  
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School of Art, Design, and Art History  
*Dr. Katherine Schwartz, Director*

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*Dr. Beth Hinderliter, Director*

SADAH Graduate Program  
*Corinne Diop, Director*

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF ART, DESIGN, AND ART HISTORY

## 2020 MFA THESIS CATALOG

### CONTENTS

- 4 LETTER FROM DIRECTOR OF SCHOOL OF  
ART, DESIGN, AND ART HISTORY  
*Dr. Katherine A. Schwartz, Director of the School of Art, Design, & Art History*
- 5 LETTER FROM THE GRADUATE  
PROGRAM DIRECTOR  
*Corinne Diop, Director of Graduate Program in Studio Art*
- 6 MFA CANDIDATE DANIELLE ROMAGNO,  
WORKS AND STATEMENT
- 15 MFA CANDIDATE MALLORY BURRELL,  
WORKS AND STATEMENT

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## DR. KATHERINE A. SCHWARTZ

Director of the School of Art, Design, & Art History

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the 2019-20 MFA Graduate Exhibition. This catalogue documents the final thesis exhibitions of Danielle Romagno and Mallory Burrell, who completed their graduate thesis after their entire program was moved online during the global pandemic. These exceptional artists dedicated hundreds of hours to their research and studio practice, creating an exhibition that demonstrates their perseverance, integrity, and an honest exploration of ideas in a range of interdisciplinary media.

Danielle and Mallory created work in response to the cultures and world they are living in, which includes; local and international environmental destruction through waste and global warming; the impact of consumerism on our lives and communities, and the absurdity of tools and tutorials that lead us to nonsense, or self-discovery. Their exhibitions challenge viewers to contemplate these issues, along with questioning our humanity in contemporary society.

Danielle Romagno has constructed sculptural forms made from a collection of wood, repurposed tools, clamps, buckets, in combination with make-up brushes, and tools sold to promise enhanced beauty. Self-portraits of the artist attempting to use the tools demonstrate the absurdity of the marketing devoted to beauty products, making false and impossible promises. Romagno's work raises the questions: How is marketing used to shape conceptions of beauty? Why do consumers continue to expect false promises, even when confronted with the absurdity of the products? What is the role of the artist in creating beauty?

Mallory Burrell has created enticingly beautiful works, that upon closer inspection, are constructed almost entirely from trash that she collected from our local streams and community. Trash spills out from a large wall painting onto the gallery floor; hundreds of colorful trash bits and pieces form a large wall collage and four textural forms; a film clip invites views to contemplate the ironic beauty of trash movements beneath the water; and a collection of cartoon drawings bring some humor to this disturbing waste. Malloy's work raises the questions: How can we begin to recognize the massive amount of trash that is collecting in our local streams and rivers? What is the impact from trash accumulating and nauseam in our communities? What is the role of the artist in developing awareness vs. developing solutions?

The questions raised in this exhibition reinforce the School's vision to radically transform ourselves and our communities through creative and scholarly work. Appreciation is extended to Professor Emeritus Cole Welter, who worked with Danielle and Mallory prior to his retirement; to Professor Corinne Diop, Graduate Director, for the enormous contributions she brings to the program, and to the graduate faculty for serving as artist mentors. I also thank, Beth Hinderliter Gallery Director, for her curatorial assistance; Frank Kwartin for designing this beautiful catalogue; and Karen Gerard, Assistant to the Director, for managing the graduate files and budgets.

*Warm congratulations are extended to Danielle and Mallory for their inspirational exhibitions. Thank you.*

## CORINNE DIOP

Director of Graduate Program in Studio Art

It was Spring Break, 2020. Mallory Burrell and Danielle Romagno were heading into the final stretch of the three-year MFA program at JMU. They were preparing work for their two-person Thesis Exhibition in Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art, the spacious university gallery that usually features nationally- and internationally-known artists, but once a year is an exhibition space for the graduating MFA cohort. They were writing drafts of their Thesis Monographs, in search of a final version polished enough to become a permanent document on JMU Scholarly Commons, and preparing for the Thesis Defense, the last battery of questions that test the candidates' readiness for degree completion. Plans were being made for the artist talks and finally, for the gallery reception that would be a celebration of their success shared with family and friends as well as the JMU community.

Simultaneously, there were rumblings about a strange virus, Covid-19, that was starting to spread in the US. JMU announced that Spring Break would be extended for a week and then, ultimately, that all classes would transition to online indefinitely to avert a deadly pandemic. Mallory and Danielle kept progressing on their thesis work while also pivoting the classes they were teaching to an online format, a feat in itself. When it became apparent that the exhibition and other plans, including graduation, would not be taking place in person, they created virtual exhibitions of their thesis work and adapted all the requirements to an online format, ever resilient. There was the promise of an actual exhibition in the gallery when it was safe and possible, which turned out to be a full-semester delay to Fall 2020.

This long-awaited-for exhibition is featured here in this catalog. Mallory Burrell's installation brings awareness of the Anthropocene through trash dredged from our local stream, Black's Run. Collections of plastic bags become sculptural forms on the wall and graceful underwater performers in video, while the stylized images of animals and landscapes derived from discarded packaging are hauntingly re-presented. Danielle Romagno displays her DIY know-how in a collection of complicated tools along with video tutorials and explanatory photos that illustrate their use. These awkward inventions that combine home improvement and self-improvement invite viewers to imagine what they would be like to use, with a result that is both humorous and disconcerting. While the two artists coalesce in reflections of the harmful seduction of labels and advertising in our current consumerist culture, the exhibition space functions as two solo exhibitions, side-by-side, each powerful and bringing pause.

A special thank you to Dr. Cole Welter who served as Graduate Director during Mallory and Danielle's entire tenure, but who retired as Professor Emeritus right before the exhibition finally took place; to the Thesis Committee Chairs and Members; and to Frank Kwartin who designed this catalog during an exceptionally busy time of his life.

*Congratulations to Mallory Burrell and Danielle Romagno!*





## RE(CANONIZING) THE TOOL: CONSTRUCTIONS AND INSINCERITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

**DANIELLE ROMAGNO**

Re(Canonizing) the Tool: Constructions and Insincerity in the Digital Age is a sculptural atrocity of humorously used clamps, chalk, wood, and nails turned beauty applicator implements. These devices rebuild spaces in which real objects and imagined uses can exist, problematizing and making special their convergencies. Playfully critiquing the empty superficiality of online beauty tutorials, this exhibition gives meaning to and reimagines the tools of beauty and construction from my youth that rarely had the chance to meet. These worlds coalesce into amalgamations of poorly built implements with influences from prehistoric tool use, hand crafting, infomercials, and YouTube beauty tutorials with my personal narrative woven throughout. This exhibition offers a chance to re(canonize) and reconstruct my relationship between self and tool.

Recalling the relationship between human and tool, sloppily-crafted makeup applicators are implements absurdly reconstruct notions of gender, the role of the artist, and truth and trickery that blend notions of reality throughout media like infomercials and YouTube throughout “Re(Canonizing) the Tool: Constructions

and Insincerity in the Digital Age”. These humorous atrocities of clamps, chalk, wood, and nails rebuild spaces in which real objects and imagined uses can exist, problematizing and making special their convergencies. Playfully critiquing the empty superficiality of online tutorials, this exhibition gives meaning to and reimagines the tools of beauty and construction from my youth that rarely had the chance to meet. These worlds coalesce into amalgamations of poorly made hardware store beauty implements, re(canonizing) and reconstructing the relationship between myself and tool.



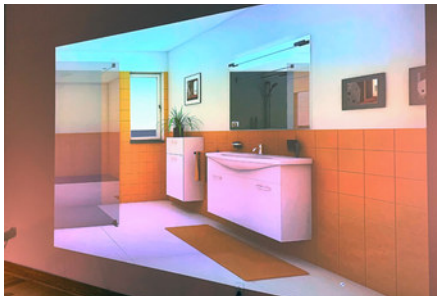

















UNEARTHING STRATA AND CHANGING  
WATERS: A LANDSCAPE FOR TODAY

MALLORY BURRELL





*"A hybrid is an offspring of two animals or plants of different races, breeds, varieties, species, or genera, or having or produced by a combination of two or more distinct elements: marked by heterogeneity in origin, composition, or appearance."*

Unearthing Strata and Changing Waters: A Landscape for Today is a mixed media exhibition including drawings, digital collage, video art, sculpture, and large debris installations. This body of work explores the intersections of artificial and organic matter found in the local city waterscape, Blacks Run, of Harrisonburg, Virginia. It focuses on themes of hybridity, collecting, and world-making.

The influx of artificial materials and products found in the stream and surrounding terrain allows me to mine vast quantities of detritus for images of flora and fauna, as well as fictitious landscapes and characters. With these discoveries, I create new species and worlds from the remnants. I assign pseudo-scientific nomenclature to the bio-hybridic specimens, and the classifications are indicative of a split species in names such as *Castor cacao* (Chocolate-chip beaver) and *Camelus nicotiana* (Camerillo).

Eerie and guttural sounds will greet you from the exhibition's video piece as the Polyrhizomatic nematoda specimens use their sonar to interact with one another in their underwater encounters. A scent of earth lingers in the air from the mounds of excavated material. The show's installations and sculptures are all larger-than-life and incorporate the gleaned detritus found over the course of a year.

Fascinated by the omissions of culture in early American landscape painters, notably Thomas Cole, I found excitement in the rejection of that notion. I sought to overly emphasize the effects of culture on the landscape. I allowed the trash and signs of culture to seep heavily into them, even making some entirely from elements gleaned from the trash. In the show, the landscape work melds at the bottom into a large installation of debris washing into the gallery creating a strong connection with the catalysts of this body of work.

In this exhibition, culture mingles with the wild. From uncertainty and convenience to detritus and dirt. It is either 99¢ or priceless.

























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