

# UMBRALES

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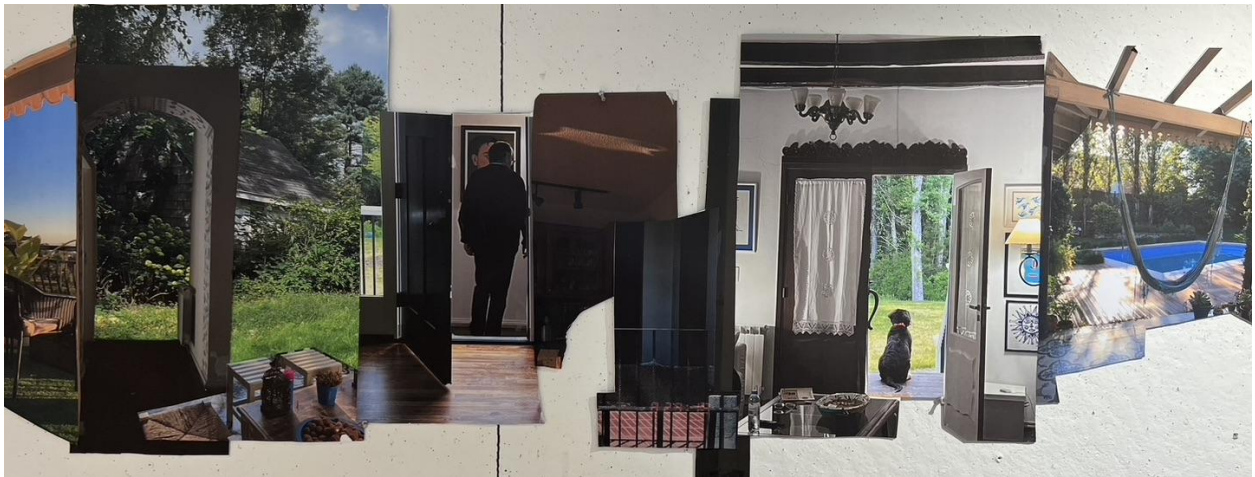


Bringing one of the walls into the Rhode Island Convention Center for installation.



*To my husband, Nyasha Hungwe*





Collage made out of photographs from my home in Massachusetts, U.S. and my parents' home in Salta, Argentina

UMBRALES

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

by Maureen Scally 2024

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Photograph taken in Cachi, a small town in the Calchaquí Valley of northwestern Argentina.

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## ABSTRACT

*Umbrales* is Spanish for Thresholds.

Thresholds are by nature ambivalent spaces, inviting two distinct realities into play. As an artist, I materialize my experiences as a migrant into an architectural form. A series of textile walls shape a space that is simultaneously interior and exterior so that the audience circulates in the negative space in between. It is in the construction of this threshold condition — a simultaneous placement, neither here nor there — that a complex narrative of place unfolds.

Keywords: architectural fabrics, memory, migration, movement, threshold.





Photograph of the stone wall that surrounds my home in Salta, Argentina.

## PERFORMING UMBRALES

I woke up that morning - unsure about what I was about to do. The alarm went off, and I got out of bed feeling a little nervous already. I knew that I had to get stuff ready and pack my car with all the things I needed, including Mate, hot water, cookies, and (why not?) some beers to celebrate after.

I grabbed the camera, the tripod, the Sumi ink (made from the soot of pine branches selected from trees in the beautiful groves on the mountainsides close to Nara and Suzuka, Japan), paper towels, a bowl to carry the ocean water, the 12 feet of muslin fabric and put everything in the trunk. I was wearing a bodysuit that I'd purchased on Amazon, boots, and a heavy jacket. The temperature outside barely reached 37 degrees Fahrenheit, but at least it was sunny!

I drove to Providence after chugging a cup of coffee and gobbling toast. I told my friends that I would meet them at Blick's because I needed to buy more Sumi ink just in case I ran out. I looked into the back of the car and was again intimidated by the length of the muslin fabric I planned to use.

And then, we were all together outside of the art store, four RISD students; two from landscape architecture and the other one from textiles. We were all laughing because we truly didn't know what we were doing and what was going to come out of this adventure. Paulina, a peer in textiles, was holding a cup of coffee and wearing a heavy cream color jacket, with a cool print on it and a white beanie. Renata from landscape architecture was drinking mate and also

wearing a black puffy jacket and a warm red beanie. Tanmayee, also from landscape architecture, was smiling as usual and bringing all the good energy. We made one last stop at Trader Joe's to buy supplies for sandwiches and headed to the RISD beach.

Upon arrival, the team was ready to roll. Everyone carried something: Renata had a drone to record the performance from a bird's eye view, Tanmayee had her camera, Paulina was carrying a cart with the food, and I was holding the tripod and my heavy bag of muslin.

Everyone helped set up and when it came time to display the fabric on the sand, Renata pointed to a spot where the water met the beach and left a strip of sand in between two bodies of water. When I saw that, I felt an immediate connection. I was that piece of land too, in this state of in-betweenness surrounded by two bodies of water. One represented my home in Argentina, while the other my home in the U.S. I wasn't sure which one was which – in fact, I suspected they could alternate in their metaphorical power. Sometimes feeling heavier, vaster, and unpredictable, while at other moments thinner, lighter, softer and vice versa.

I took the fabric out of the bag and realized then how long and wide it was. I loved seeing the sun reflecting on the surface, its shadow on the sand and the sound it made in conversation with the wind. Paulina and I gently placed it on the sand while laughing at how much it wanted to do its own thing, to twist and turn. The fabric was already performing before I had even started. I like to think about objects having their own life and wanting to do things a certain way. This fabric had personality, and I thought that was wonderful. We grabbed the tent stakes I had brought and secured the fabric to the sand. Renata was holding the control for the drone, while Tanmayee was positioning the tripod and the camera. Suddenly I was a famous



person being observed by so many lenses. I still wasn't sure how this whole thing would come together, but I knew I wanted to give it a try.

I left my heavy and warm jacket behind, grabbed my ink and my bowl, and started the performance in my bodysuit. My friends shouted: "Have fun!!!" and that was the beginning.

My body became the instrument for expressing my conflicted feelings about migration. With each gestural mark upon cloth, I unfolded the sense of navigating a new terrain where nature was an active agent. The fabric moved with the wind, creating ripples similar to those the water makes, producing a particular sound that would accompany the rhythm of my muscles. The sand, rocks and algae underneath the muslin gave the fabric a particular topography. When my body came in contact with the surface it left a mark that combined the print of my flesh and the texture of those elements.

The birds that were floating by the edge of the water were part of the piece, present and calm. At one point, a seagull came close to me, and I thought about that precise moment as part of the performance. My eyes left the fabric for a minute. I raised my head and realized how close the bird was to the piece. I wonder if it wanted to see, smell, or land there for a reason. The marks that I made on the fabric couldn't have been possible without the body of sand underneath it and without the dried pieces of wood and algae I found. I decided to soak them in ink and use them as experimental drawing tools.

What surfaced from this performance on fabric was a connection to a place that was culturally different, yet a registration of my place of origin. This performance, situated between

two channels of water, brought the symbolic tension between two parallel realities into view, framing my relationship between Argentina and the U.S.

With 12 feet of muslin fabric, an ample supply of Sumi ink, and three friends, the effort was to get as close to nature as possible and, within a span of hours, to generate an improvisational field of gestures and mark making. I used my elbows to press hard on the sand and my hands to carve holes. I poured ink inside these holes and let the fabric work as a slow colander, not letting the ink disappear on the other side. Then I grabbed the pieces of dried algae, soaked them in the holes of ink, and started painting and drawing with them. I felt an immense need to use my knees, feet, and hands to make marks, as well as my shoulders and legs. I was interested in showing movement, pace, rhythm, speed, traces of someone walking, crawling, moving from one place to another. The kinetics of migrating.



Photo documentation of the performance, November 19<sup>th</sup> 2023 Tillinghast Place, by Tanmayee Moore (Risd Landscape)



Photo documentation of the performance, November 19<sup>th</sup> 2023 Tillinghast Place, by Tanmayee Moore (Risd Landscape)



In the *Silueta* series (1973–80), Ana Mendieta staged performances where she lay down in natural landscapes or covered her body in organic materials and then documented the resulting imprints or silhouettes. *Untitled* (1978) shows a dark indentation made in a sandy landscape covered in scrub, the outline of her body suggesting its absence. These performances recall Mendieta's experience as an exile when she was separated from her homeland at a young age. In her *Silueta* performances, she marked the land, leaving the trace of her absent body. This trace serves as a metaphor for her absence from her birthplace; she was unable to return to her homeland for nearly three decades.



Untitled: *Silueta* Series (1978), Gelatin silver print. Source: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Ana Mendieta was born in Cuba on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November of 1948, but she moved to Iowa at age 12 with her sister as part of a US government asylum program for adolescents after the Cuban revolution. She eventually enrolled at the University of Iowa and, upon completing her undergraduate degree, began her graduate studies in art. After training as a painter, she quickly grew dissatisfied with the medium and transitioned to the university's new MFA in Intermedia program, where she began to develop her interdisciplinary work.

As a graduate student, she created her first performances, which survive through photographic documentation. Mendieta has been a major source of inspiration for me as I've worked to make art with my body as a material or tool. I have realized that I have so many connections to her story. We both suffered the pain of migration, and we both struggled to make our way as artists in a completely new environment. We both had to learn how to speak English and navigate a new culture. We both felt a strong connection to the land, to our roots, to our origins, and we both wanted to make statements about how migration makes us feel. Even though her story is different from mine in many ways, I read about her and the revolutionary spirit in me awakened and felt supported by hers.

How she died also makes me want to walk the streets and protest, to sing loud songs and search for justice. The podcast *The Death of an Artist* by Helen Molesworth talks about the relationship between Mendieta and her husband at that time, Carl Andre, and explains the complexity and the turmoil in their relationship. Mendieta was on the rise as an artist when she met Andre, and he was already an internationally known artist collected by important art institutions. Her work was starting to be exhibited in the New York scene and her career looked really promising. Andre, a white man, was threatened by the idea of her becoming more

successful in the art world and she was a determined and strong woman who didn't believe in someone stopping her from accomplishing her goals. One night, after ordering Chinese food and champagne, they had a discussion and Mendieta was found dead on the roof of the deli next to Andre's building. A witness heard a woman shouting, "No,No,No," and then a loud noise. She had fallen from the 32nd floor. Even though he was never found guilty, Andre was inconsistent about what he said that night to the police.

The racial elements of the story should not be ignored. Mendieta, a Latina from Cuba, was often labeled white, but as art historian Lucy Lippard wrote in the introduction to the book, *who is Ana Mendieta?* she was a woman of color operating in a world dominated by white men:

*"Although she has been described as 'white' by critics, probably because of her upper-class background, Mendieta was in fact 'brown,' and strongly identified with people of color. Her personal history was also at the heart not only of her anger, but of an ongoing sense of isolation. Although her own body was her raw material, her art was never narcissistic, but rather a process of self-discovery, self-affirmation, and the exorcism of pain."*<sup>1</sup>

Lippard's comments about Mendieta's identity resonate with my personal story. The world saw her in a way she didn't see herself. Though she came from a privileged background in Cuba, she was not white and she was not treated with privilege in US territory. In trying to navigate these misunderstandings about her identity, she used her body as a raw material to discover again and again who she was. I use my body as an instrument to deconstruct what

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<sup>1</sup> Lippard, Lucy. *Who is Ana Mendieta?* Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2011.

people see when they look at me in contrast to how I see myself. I look white, but I am Latina. I look like a person that was born in an English-speaking country, but Spanish is my mother tongue. I have to deal with being a woman in a world that is very much centered around white males and their interests. I produce work embracing this complexity and contradictions. I like to think of myself as a Latina and as someone that has an accent rather than a perfect English. I work to redefine the interpretation of people towards myself and through that process, I am able to release my emotions.

As Lippard writes, Mendieta exorcized her pain through art making, which is exactly what happens to me when I make work. Whether it is paper or fabric, plaster or cheesecloth, printing or drawing, dancing or performing, I always bring to the process how I am feeling in the present moment and that includes the challenges that come with my identity, the anger and frustration of dealing with migration bureaucracy, and the displacement I constantly feel from having a body that is here and a soul that looks back there, trying to find meaning, purpose, and direction.

In the performance that unfolded at the beach, I was able to release a range of charged emotions (pain, anger, frustration, gratitude), all of which centered on my experience of migration. As I moved along the land, I fully embraced the complex layers of what it means to adapt to a new territory where I have become hyper-conscious of my appearance and racial designation. The beach offered a place for improvisation and recollection.

There were moments where I thought about my parents and about life cycles. I could see their faces on the other side of the fabric, fading away in the sand.



During this performance I remembered my mother telling me recently that her great-grandmother met my great-grandfather during the Paraguay War, also known as the War of the Triple Alliance. This South American war lasted from 1864 to 1870. It was fought between Paraguay and the Triple Alliance of Argentina, the Empire of Brazil, and Uruguay. It was the deadliest and bloodiest inter-state war in Latin American history.

Despite these tumultuous times, my great great grandparents fell deeply in love, eloped, and had five kids. Of course, at that time, a marriage between a white woman and black man wasn't accepted by society so they had to keep their lives a secret. Their kids had kids and many years later, my mother was born. I never met them or heard about their story. The only thing I knew was that he died young and that her side of the family had been really afraid of the "black gene" showing up in future generations so they would straighten their curly hair and describe their skin as "olive." My grandmother's nickname was *negrita* which means black in a very affectionate way. We had a wonderful relationship.

She used to invite me to sleep over at her house. We would eat bread with butter and tell each other jokes in bed until our bellies hurt from laughing. It was only when I met my partner, a black man from Zimbabwe, that my family and I began to speak about this family history again, that my great-great grandparents' story came to the surface. While using my body as an instrument during the performance, I reconnected with my origins, my ancestors, my black roots, and this courageous couple, my great-great grandparents.

It is not surprising that even though I haven't met them, I feel connected and guided by them. Despite the fact many years have gone by, we still share so much. I understand the

feeling of bravery and deep love as well as anxiety about the possibility of losing your partner because of violence and racism. I know the struggle and the discomfort, the desperation that comes with wanting people to love your partner, to accept him, to treat him equally, whether you are in a friends' reunion or in a random restaurant. I sometimes think that my great-great grandmother gives me the strength to navigate life as a white person married to a black man in US territory, that she sends wisdom, love and strength from beyond. Subtle messages come during my daily walks through the woods. I accept the trees' whispers as ancestral guidance.



Photograph of the woods that surround my home in Attleboro, Massachusetts.

## FORMING UMBRALES

What does it mean to be simultaneously here and elsewhere? Till Boettger is an architect and lecturer in the Department of Design and Interior Design of the Bauhaus-University Weimar. He is the author of a book called *Threshold Spaces: Transitions in Architecture, Analysis and Design Tools*. In this book, he defines the threshold not as a blind spot, but rather a space in and of itself with a function. As an architect myself, a threshold represents a liminal state, just like the sand delta where I did my performance at the beach, surrounded by two bodies of water. Since I moved to the U.S. I started experiencing the feeling of living and inhabiting the threshold, as a particular, rich, painful, and intricate space on its own.

Thresholds are invitations; they are access and exit points at the same time. They represent ambivalence and complexity. Boettger argues for the potential of these spaces by writing about historical threshold buildings like the Acropolis and the Parthenon. He also analyzes the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) by Linda Bo Bardi (1957 - 1968) and the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts by Le Corbusier (1961-1964) which are organized and designed around this term.

Thresholds can be very difficult to define. Sometimes they are represented clearly in architecture and sometimes they belong to the world of memories, daydreaming and imagination. It is here that my thesis project lives, between the physical and the dream world.



In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard reflects on the concept of home as a space for daydreaming. He writes:

*"We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost."*<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by Bachelard's writing, I was able to broaden my concept of home, where it became as much of an imaginative imprint as a physical one. In designing this threshold space, digitally printed and surface-designed textiles are suggestive of a dreamscape reflecting my thoughts, emotions, and conflicts as a migrant. Hints of disorientation, distortion, perspective and continuity activated through a collaging process where color, photographs and textures blend. Whereas the physical scaffold allows the coexistence of my two homes, one in Argentina and the other one in Massachusetts.

The imagery comes from an integration of these two homes together, through a blending and a collaging process. Some images will be faded, less identifiable as I don't remember them clearly, whereas others feel fresh and bold, they almost want to leave the surface and get close to the viewer's skin.

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<sup>2</sup> Bachelard, Gaston. *The poetics of space*, Penguin Books, 2014



Photograph of my dad walking through the door that separates the TV room from the hallway. The carved wood above the door was carved by my mother, Cynthia Molinari.

The various thresholds amongst these spaces are an invitation for the viewer to experience the ambivalence and the complexity of how my memory works and how this space is a resource for my survival and identity in foreign territory. Umbrales will give you a broad idea of how I access loved ones, places, conversations, domestic moments, through imagery. It will allow for some blurriness, some defined moments and some intentionally undefined spaces.

The home that I share with my husband in Massachusetts is the place where we both constantly build and nourish our relationship, dreams and expectations. Our home allows for nostalgia, past experiences and life memories to become part of our present. It is a series of endless thresholds, some architectural, other psychological. These thresholds contain a complex narrative that keeps redefining itself over and over again.

The need to somehow access the house where I was raised has become important for my own development and identity. That particular house, with its unique interior full of color and textures, objects from trips, books, shelves, paintings, adobe bricks, arches, columns and beautiful hand painted floors has become central in my thesis work. The outdoors are covered in the most beautiful shades of green which are surrounded by the many trees my dad planted and took care of. The masonry walls around the perimeter frame these interior and exterior worlds in the most wonderful way. In this house is where my memories started building and becoming substantial.

The scenarios of Massachusetts, US and Salta, Argentina are part of the same thing. They all belong to my experiences as a human being and now they have a place to exist outside

of myself through my thesis work. What I can see as separate, belongs to a whole which is what I am trying to represent.

I have created a series of collages with images I picked from both homes and other places I have lived in, like the studio apartment I lived in in Laguna Beach, California and the home where I lived in until I was two years old. A common thread I have found in the pictures I selected is the light and shadows, and the presence of domestic objects such as coffee makers, flowers, books, chairs, handmade wooden sculptures, fireplaces, wood carvings, doors and windows. I have found that the light quality and the temperatures of the photographs intrigued me and inspired the work in many ways. *Umbrales* is like a memory ruin I am displaying outside of myself for people to interact with.

Boettger cites Wolfgang Meisenheimer who calls thresholds “tools for architectural choreography” and identifies the narrative moment in the threshold. He emphasizes the dual nature of thresholds, because they can connect and separate.<sup>3</sup>

The narrative moment in a threshold is an opportunity to tell a story and that is the exact point of this thesis. When I collate a series of photographs, they become a sequence of memories that I go back and forth to, that I enter and exit. Sometimes I can't tell where one ends and the other starts. Sometimes it is a whole thing without divisions and sometimes I see clear delineations amongst them. Thresholds are in relation to pain, to music, to architecture and to the human experience. Thresholds have a dual nature, they connect but they also separate, but most importantly, they slow you down.

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<sup>3</sup> Boettger, Till. *Threshold Spaces: transitions in architecture analysis and design tools*, Birkhauser, 2014.





Photograph of the shadows of the trees over the façade of the barn in our home in Attleboro, MA

BUILDING UMBRALES

Photographs of the process of making the work.

