

There is the Beach, There is the Ocean

Denise Burge

30–41

My work investigates our complex cultural relationship with Nature with a capital "N", in particular the fantasy of tropical space: a collage of impressions and desires which ossify into a psychological 'elsewhere' that is in fact no place at all. By making images that simultaneously trigger and violate romantic tropes, I attempt to reverse the gaze of the tourist back onto itself.

This essay describes the process by which I became a tropical tourist at the age of six, the year that I found my father's heart-attacked body on our kitchen floor. This early experience of mortality, coupled with yearly family trips to the beach, created the representational code by which I now work out poetic relationships with desire and loss.

#nostalgia

#beach

#landscape

#glamour

#mortality

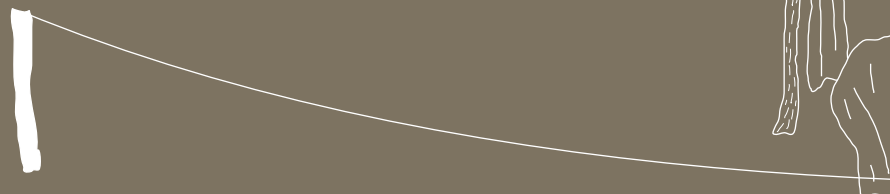




Figure 1: Denise Burge, *Pablo*, 2020. Paint, thread, and fabric, 152.4 x 167.6 cm.

Images are meant to render the world accessible and imaginable to man. But, even as they do so, they interpose themselves between man and the world.

Vilém Flusser (1983)



My work investigates tropical space as a product of fantasy, a collage of impressions and desires which ossify into a psychological "elsewhere" that is no place at all. I became a tropical tourist at the age of six, the year that I found my father's heart-attacked body on our kitchen floor.

Your body is the least part of you, perhaps: a sign marking the place where the true part of you begins. A map of the true part of you, reader, would show every place where you have been from your birthplace to the place where you sit now reading this page.

Gerald Murnane (1988)

The summer that I lost my father, and every summer thereafter, culminated in a trip from my North Carolina home to Myrtle Beach, in South Carolina. The "journey" was a five-hour drive, full of intense anticipation.

As soon as we crossed the state border, space became more exotically "Southern": the light, shapes and smells foretold the onrushing yet remote allure of the ocean. Flat roads droned through striated peanut fields. Empty, roofless cinderblock 'once-were' buildings were pagan temples. The first patches of tall pines, with sandy soil glowing beneath, signalled the final transition. Fifty miles or so from the beach, closer but ever distant billboard images of luxury beach living lured me into the "low country" state of mind, an idyll of sandy linen-wearing bodies strolling in the languid heat, disappearing behind impossible curtains of backlit Spanish moss.

Myrtle itself, by contrast, was a wild profusion of sweaty, oversexed neon-bikini-on-the-sidewalk-wearing rednecks, ready to party down. The lodgings we could afford were usually one block back from the oceanfront. Wet beach towels depicting tropical patterns and cartoon waves draped themselves over balconies and signalled the pleasures of the water.

A glamorous image appeals to our desires without becoming explicit lest too much information break the spell. In its blend of accessibility and distance glamour is neither transparent nor opaque. It is translucent.

Virginia Postrel (2013)

I don't have memories of swimming in the ocean, but I do remember drifting along the boardwalk in the afternoons, my skin glowing from a fresh burn. Idealised oceans on t-shirts, motel signs, and postcards magnified my desire, even though I was right in the middle of the spaces depicted. Cruising that same boardwalk at night – now neon tinted – I could only glimpse the ocean just over there, an ever-present black void that thrust its odour at me, reminding me of its depths.

Artificial ruins condense all the motifs of 'real' ruins – catastrophe, vanishment, irreparable damage – outside the context of history, making ruins into icons and therefore producing a 'style of loss'. ... with the transformation of artifice into second nature, both as a new, multi-layered phenomenon, and as a fully integrated cultural sensibility.

Celeste Olalquiaga (1983)

Memories of leaving Myrtle are as vivid as the ritualistic arrivals. I would gaze at the tan on my legs, wondering how long it would last. As the tall pines receded, I resolved to be back home, among ordinary lawns. My father's death returned as a fact in my life.

The story of water is the human tale of a dying water. Reverie sometimes begins in the presence of limpid water filled with vast reflections, bubbling with crystalline music. It ends in the bosom of sad and somber water, emitting strange and dismal murmurs. As it rediscovers its dead, reverie near the water, like a submerged universe, also dies.

Gaston Bachelard (1983)

For many years I didn't visit Myrtle, but recently, I've started to go back. From the perspective of being in an older body that doesn't want to give up, I respond to all of it with a new depth of feeling. I'm still seduced by an airbrushed surf, but now am equally drawn to the rough scarification of low tide. Now I see the ocean (and, by extension, my own oceanic body) as the messy thing it is: a matrix of incessant birth and death, flux and formlessness, constantly pressing, sucking and spraying. Brine permeates and erodes all structures, reducing them to skeletal ghosts. Gooey shreds of "once-were" objects wash up from miles away, drape over whatever is on the shore, and are swept back again. The water is the great destroyer, and I can only hope that my ultimate fantasy is to be dissolved by it.





Figure 2 (previous page, top): Denise Burge, *Holiday Sands*, 2019. Acrylic on paper, 25.4 x 25.4 cm.

Figure 3 (previous page, bottom): Denise Burge, *Vacancy 2*, 2019. Acrylic on paper, 25.4 x 25.4 cm.

Figure 4 (current): Denise Burge, *Miami*, 2019. Acrylic on paper, 45.7 x 50.8 cm.





There is something in tropical ruin peculiarly and terribly impressive: this luxuriant, evergreen, ever-splendid Nature consumes the results of human endeavor so swiftly, buries memories so profoundly, distorts the labors of generations so grotesquely, that one feels here, as nowhere else, how ephemeral man is.

Lafcadio Hearn (1980)

Figure 5: Denise Burge, *Shade*, 2019. Acrylic on paper, 30.4 x 35.5 cm.





Figure 6: Denise Burge, *Driveway*, 2019. Acrylic on paper, 25.4 x 25.4 cm.

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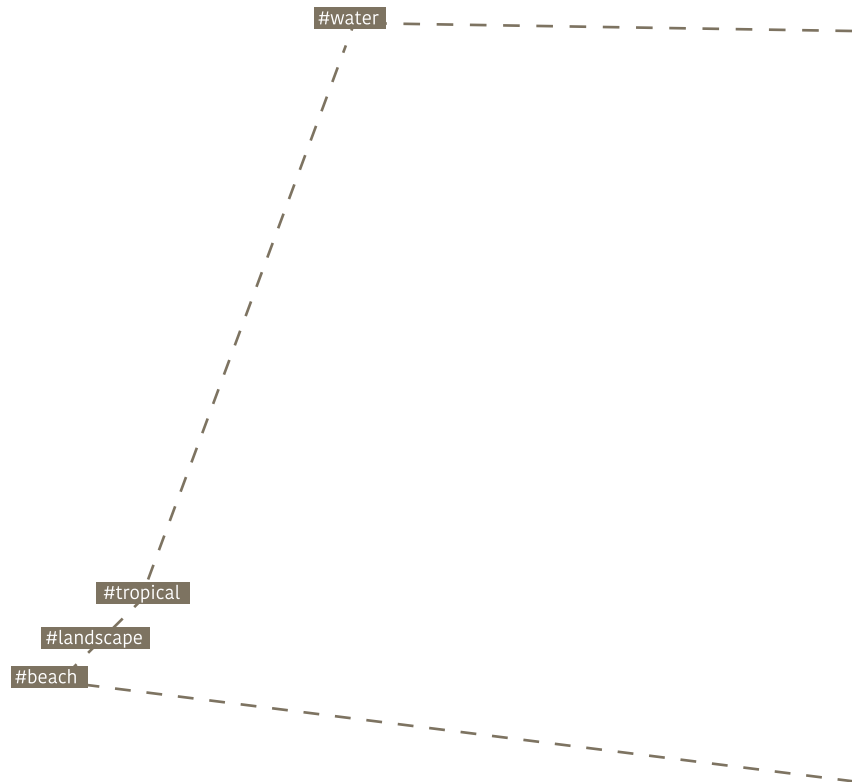
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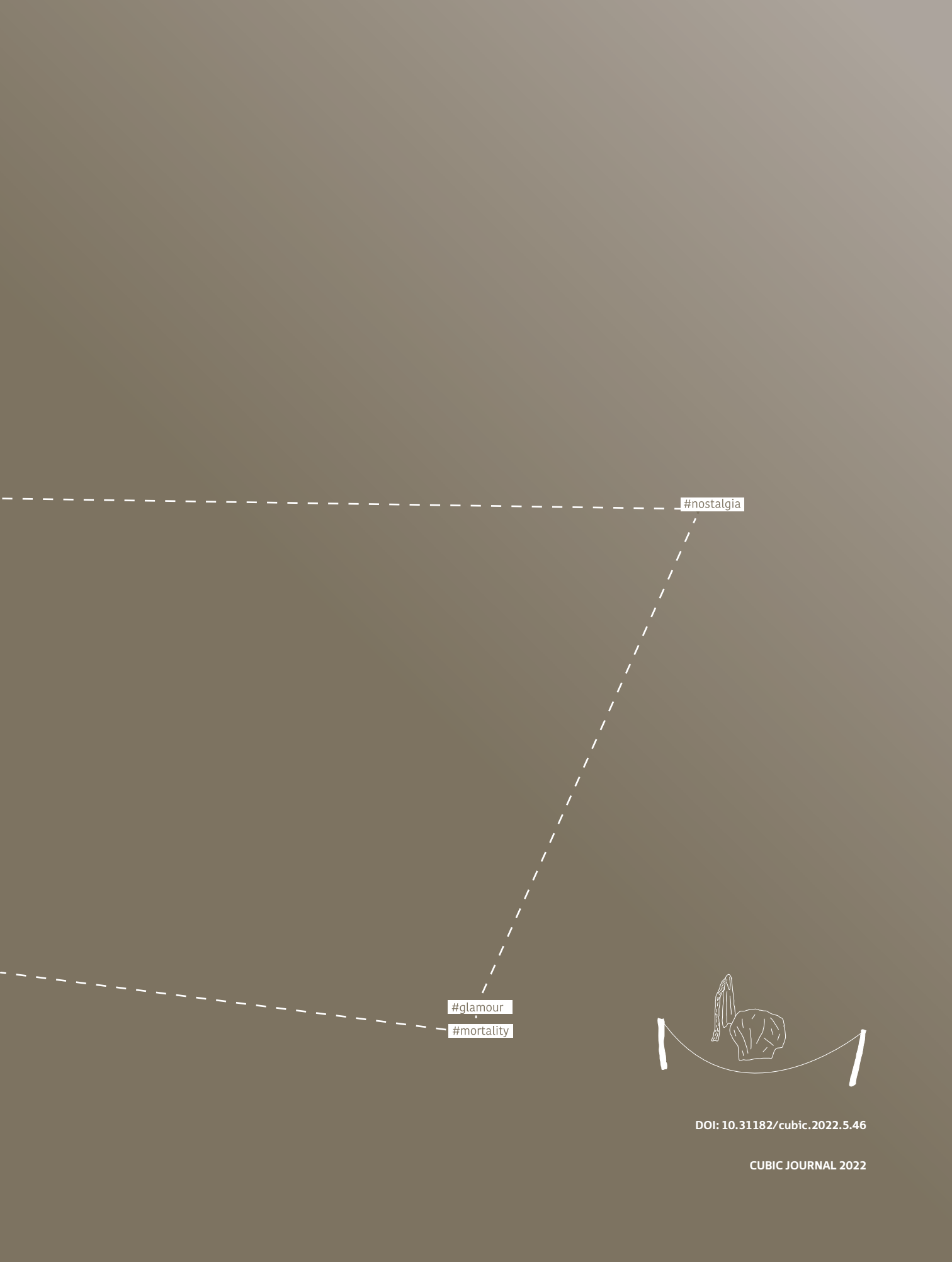
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Bio

Denise Burge is a visual artist living in the United States whose work centres around the practices of installation, and quilt making. Her quilt work has been widely commissioned and collected, having been included in two *Quilt National* exhibitions. Her collaborative work in film, animation and installation has been exhibited in several national and international festivals. She has been awarded multiple awards and grants, including residencies at the Headlands Center for the Arts, the Provincetown Work Center, and the Joan Mitchell Center. She is currently a professor of Art at the University of Cincinnati.

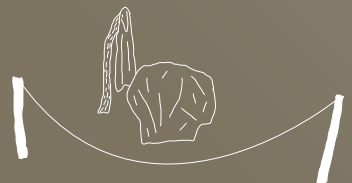




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DOI: 10.31182/cubic.2022.5.46

CUBIC JOURNAL 2022