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Introduction

This essay will discuss the impact our homes have on our lives, looking at themes of home, absence and solastalgia. With the keywords home, absence, and solastalgia, looking at a range of artists who focus on childhood trauma and the home, such as Do So Huh's "Almost home", Louise Bourgeois and Doris Salcedo. All three artists create large installations made commonly from fabric and different wooden materials, with Do So Huh creating installations centered around taking his home with him, recreating what he loves most while he moved to a foreign country, and Salcedo's work on the effects of war and devastation caused to migrants living in those communities. Using household objects to create a striking narrative.

The home carries trauma and happiness within itself, as you grow more rooms are rediscovered. The home shapes the individual, with both good and bad memories, feelings and impressions, and how the people inside them contribute to the experience. Often the word home is used to describe a physical place as well as the feelings of comfort and safety, as home is often a signal of permanence and of placing roots and creating solid connections to one place. The word is often used alongside family, indicating that a home is not one without people to fill it. The home shapes the inhabitant over time, providing a safe place, or a place that inflicts pain based on those inside it. "Research on sense of place suggests that people's understandings of themselves and others is closely tied to the feelings they have about the place where they reside." (Brown, 2023). Home is strongly connected to one's self-worth and how they view themselves and others, a home full of pain and conflict will grow a different person to one in a house of love and support.

Home

Louise Bourgeois focuses on her mother and father's influence on her life and how that has impacted her through her many installations.

Bourgeois' opinions on her family and how she feels about her home, as well as how that's continued to impact her, is continually expressed throughout her career. Her 'red rooms' series (fig.1) "red room (child)" depicts a scene of anger and chaos. Her wooden cell-like structure, with bobbins, spiral glass tubes and intertwined hands that lay throughout the space are bathed in red, indicating anger towards a space or experiences she suffered within her own childhood home. The only viewpoint for this installation is through a small window adding to the voyeuristic feeling of the space. It leads the audience to feel as though they are invading a private space, like peeping through the windows of homes, creating a forbidden, uncomfortable feeling. This installation also creates a sense of invading Bourgeois' own mind and private thoughts. This cell like room was created as a reflection on Bourgeois' own fathers' infidelity as well as her reflections of childhood, with the bobbins used as a nod to her mother, who taught her to sew and created tapestries in Bourgeois' memory of her childhood. This was most likely a nod to how her mother kept the family together, repairing the damage as one would sew fabric back together.

Both rooms, *red room (parents)* and *red room (child)* are a juxtaposition of violence and intimacy, showing the relationship between parents and their daughter. They show the perspective from both the parents view and the child, however as Bourgeois is the artist it creates an unreliable narration within the spaces, having created her own interpretations of events with art. By creating the bedroom space in a small prison cell structure, it leaves the impression that Bourgeois felt trapped inside her own home, perhaps due to the arguing

and tension she may have also felt torn between her parents. Furthermore, the use of such an intimate space as the bedroom indicates how Bourgeois didn't find privacy there and may have also struggled to feel safe within the space. The parents may have invaded the space either purposefully or accidentally, regardless the space now feels alien and hostile to Bourgeois. The use of red has been a reoccurring theme amongst Bourgeois' works, from red ink when writing to red thread and now the red rooms, bathed in red lights as a display of raw anger and pain that Bourgeois was still holding onto. The doors that create walls for this installation were repurposed and weathered to create the anguished outcome Bourgeois wanted. The scratched and worn surface alludes to feeling trapped or cornered like a wild animal, as well as how much time has passed yet the feeling remains subconsciously. Using only one door with a small window for the audience to interact with could suggest that Bourgeois wanted to control the narrative, using one central door could change the impression of the space compared to having windows in all the doors.



Fig 1.



Fig 2

Absence

To continue this, absence often plays a critical role in trauma related to the home, whether that be an absence of love, people or safety.

Doris Salcedo's *Unknown* (fig 3), an installation made of fifteen hundred wooden chairs, discusses the sociological problems immigrants and refugees face - each chair representing a faceless migrant, showing the sheer number which make up the communities. The wooden chairs used as a replacement for humans evoke a feeling of lifelessness, each precious life taken and replaced with a household object, stacked into a claustrophobic space, squashed between two houses. Salcedo created this work for the 8th International Istanbul Biennale and chose the placement specifically in a public space to allow for extensive coverage.

Salcedo's work addresses the question of forgetting and memory, all the chairs used had been discarded and then re used with purpose, to create an imprint or memory of war. The work is reminiscent of mass graves, of anonymous victims, in amongst the chaos and absence, two major affects from the violence of war. She highlights how in a situation of war, we all experience it similarly, whether victim or perpetrator. The use of the chairs is reminiscent of the imagery of war, such as piles of shoes or rings as seen in the holocaust or of piles of rubble, houses broken and empty of life such as in Gaza or Ukraine. The installation of *unknown* is simple in its concept, yet powerful in its impact. The piece expresses the silenced lives of the isolated and marginalized. Salcedo also highlights the gap between the powerful and the powerless, bringing awareness for the victims of violence and forceful migration.

Salcedo in an interview (2003) said “I am a Third World artist, she says, and her work emerges from that perspective – from the perspective of the victim, from the perspective of the defeated.”



Fig 3

This piece works as a reversal of roles, with the chairs that typically hold humans are inhabiting the space humans once occupied. The colours imbedded in the chairs, of yellow and purple pigmentation is lost amongst the browns, only flashing out at the viewers if they look closely. The colours also could connect back to the violence of war, sharing colours with that of bruises and injuries. It makes the installation feel even more human. This also could impact how others react to the space, the towering pile of chairs could feel claustrophobic, making the viewer overwhelmed or fearful. It also opens conversation on the space, creating questions on how such an installation was possible, like conversations Salcedo hopes others will have about the needless violence that's bred in war. When looked at, this piece also appears as some monstrous figure or living creature. It is almost as if the 1,550 chairs are alive or like there is life inside the mass of chairs. *Unknown* also evoke feelings of togetherness and community, especially how all the chairs fit together into a single space, forming a society of sorts.

For years people have personified inanimate objects especially those from the home, adding context and personalisation to things that shouldn't wear it. However, it is time and context that highlights how we act and react to the house and its objects. "Without a past it is nothing" (Bachelard, 1994. Pg. 25). *Unknown* only holds weight due to the past context it is tied to, the viewer only sees what they know, what they can interpret. Wars throughout history have affected people more than some realise, and how the audience react to Salcedo's piece shows to what extent they have been affected.

absence noun

OPAL W

/ˈæbsəns/

/ˈæbsəns/

Idioms

[uncountable, countable] the fact of somebody being away from a place where they are usually expected to be; the occasion or period of time when somebody is away

(oxford university press, 2025)

Absence of life is often disturbing, a house full of furniture yet untouched and uninhabited can be unsettling due to being accustomed to life in everything, we often attribute certain signs to life within a home, noise being the most recognisable sign. from sounds of talking and laughter to quieter things that create background noise, such as the neighbour's cars or people talking to one another. When that is taken away and all that remains is silence, the human body responds with fear instinctually. This is how *chairs* impresses fear and overwhelming discomfort on the viewer. The sheer size of the installation coupled with the lack of sounds, or visible human life as we know it continues to impress on the viewer how migrants are viewed in communities, discarded like the chairs, piled on top of one another, crammed into uninhabitable spaces.

Solastalgia

This last keyword, solastalgia ties the previous words together, while standing on it own.

'Solastalgia' – a portmanteau of the words 'solace' and 'nostalgia'

It describes the distress caused by environmental change. Solastalgia was a term coined by Glenn Albrecht, a philosopher, while studying in Newcastle, Australia. "Solastalgia is when your endemic sense of place is being violated." (Albrecht, 2015.). This sense of violation ties into the discussion on home and trauma and how its connected, while it also bears resemblance to the Welsh word "hiraeth" a word for longing to return home, solastalgia focuses on the anger and discomfort that change can create. The concept of returning home to the same place, expecting things to be the same, and then the pain that follows when that place of safety and comfort or familiarity has changed.

Do Ho Suh's "almost home" (fig 4) is created from thin gauzy fabric, hung meticulously to create fabric houses, the thin material allows for light to travel easily through the space, giving the work a ghostly, ethereal feeling.



Fig 4.



Fig 5.



Fig 6

Almost home was Suh's first large scale exhibition on the east coast, his large-scale installations are brightly coloured, adding to the ethereal dream like effect, crated as hub sculptures. These fabrics were hand sewn delicately with traditional Korean sewing techniques and has been combined with 3d modelling and mapping technologies to create large scale accurate recreations of Suh's many homes he has lived in around the world. The installation is entirely interactable, with rooms and hallways connected for the audience to walk through and immerse themselves within imprints of Suh's own homes. Part of the exhibition was rooms based on Suh's childhood home in South Korea. the homes could be easily torn down and transported in one box or bag, leaving the viewer with both a feeling

of ghostly memory as well as the feeling that the homes are temporary, reminiscent to refugee tents or crudely constructed homeless bedding. Unlike the cardboard structures made by the homeless or the tents that serve refugees, these works are delicate and made with fondness, however similarly to them the installation he made from the pain of being unable to return home, and of the changes present each time Suh goes home. In a juxtaposition, the structures also have a sense of permanence in their shapes, as no living people reside in them, they will not change or age. This adds a sense of control to the works, as Suh decides what changes or remains the same purposefully unlike that of a home imbedded with emotions and everyday life chaos. Suh explores how home and identity and memory are evolving concepts in society. Furthermore, how traditions, migration and displacement intermingle as we build concepts of selfhood and discover our morals, origin and beliefs. The fabric that creates the structures, a polyester light organza highlights the concepts of invisible memory and displacement. It is based on a once popular fabric used in traditional Korean summer wear.

Alongside his larger works Suh also created a smaller series of works based on household items such as a toilet, also made from the same fabrics the items were encased inside a transparent case. the works could allude to discomfort to the audience and a lack of comfort as he had to acclimate to his new surroundings each time. He shows awareness for the dramatic changes he experienced within each space, and the cultural differences he noticed after moving to the US from South Korea. Solastalgia is far deeper than simply missing home, and as many have researched and discovered, our self-identity is closely tied to our homes and how we feel about them. As we change and grow, our environments change with us whether that is good or bad.

Yet, emotional bonds to place are intrinsic to human wellbeing and contribute to attributes such as identity formation, self-efficacy and a sense of continuity (Fresque-Baxter and Armitage [Citation2012](#)). The complex drivers of forced displacement mean that return is not straightforward, or even possible. (Adams, 2023)

In my dissertation I will continue to explore ideas of displacement and how our childhood homes, current homes and absence play a part in it all, using other contemporary artists and their practices, such as Dana Awartani and Mona Hatoum. The concept of home and how others and I interpret it is something that drives my own practice and is a subject I will happily expand upon in the next academic year.

In this proposal I have covered how home and trauma intermingle, using absence, childhood abuse, conflict, war and families as centre points. When writing my dissertation, I wish to write more on homes and memory, as well as how the fear of displacement fuels my own practice, both academically and conceptually. Through my writing I wish to uncover how homelessness and childhood trauma affect how we view homes, and what defines a home.

How does childhood trauma, displacement and homelessness effect how the home is represented in contemporary art?