

BFA Senior Thesis Conversations featuring Joel Murnan

Questions by Daniela Segovia



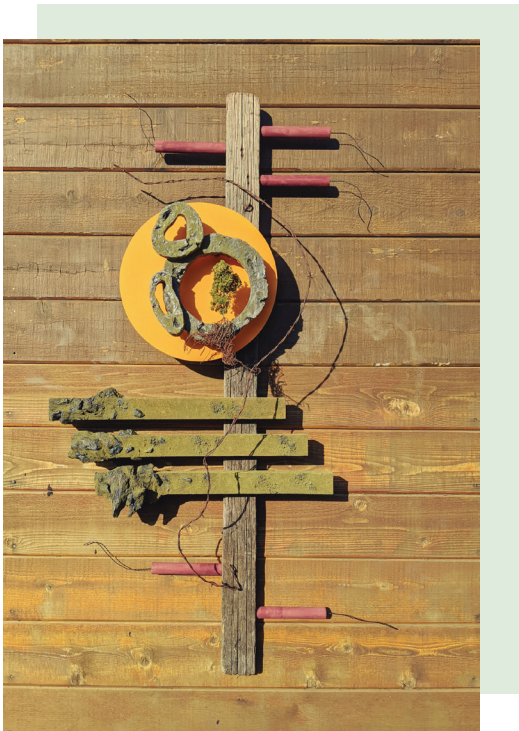
Joel Murnan is an undergraduate student working towards his BFA in Sculpture at California College of the Arts.

See more of his work on Instagram [@joelmurnan](https://www.instagram.com/joelmurnan) or visit his website www.joelmurnan.com.

What is your thesis investigating?

My thesis investigates the troubling history of barbed wire and my lifelong relationship with it. As I look around my family's ranch, it's obvious how barbed wire controls the land. As far back as I can remember I have been surrounded by enclosures. The fencing is old, crooked, broken, rusted, and filled with rot. I've come to know these tools on a personal level as brutal, flesh-ripping devices that cut, tangle, twist, and reshape the movement of this land for both humans and wildlife alike. It only took one storm to knock a line of them down and our horse found itself on the wrong side of the fence. She was injured, bleeding, and hurt from the barbs. That day forever left an impression on me and my research began.

Barbed wire continues to have major implications on the land, wildlife, and Indigenous peoples in America. My work explores my familial history in the settling of the West, which is rooted in my great grandfather's coal mine, the tradition of ranching, and my own experiences growing up around barbed wire. On my family's property, I have snipped the wire, pulled the nails, and removed the posts to be reused as a material for sculptures that examine the privatization of land. This process led me to create dioramas that confront the present issues of accessibility within contemporary American culture.



Above: *From Wire to Roots*, 2021.

58" x 15" x 7", dismantled fencepost, dismantled barbed wire, wood, acrylic, flock, plaster, foam, sunlight

Right: *Avoiding Manifest Destiny*, 2021.

12" x 8" x 8" plaster, flock, fibers, styrene, rock



What is the question you are trying to answer for yourself through your practice?

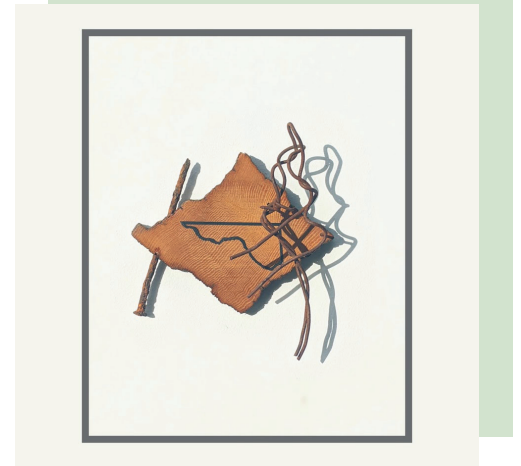
Through my research on barbed wire, I want to understand how our society can change, and move away from harmful conceptions of property. This research comes in the form of working with those very materials, learning from local Indigenous communities, historians, and creating conversations that move the discussion further. I question our laws around private property and its exclusivity. Many other countries have adopted the Freedom to Roam law, which allows anyone to have access to both public and private land, lakes, and rivers. In the U.S. you can be shot just for crossing a fence. This property aggression can be traced back to the establishment of barbed wire enclosures.

What or who are your major influences?

My biggest influence has to be the landscape I grew up in. From watching frogs in the creek to building stick forts with my friends I was lucky to have a hands-on youth. It connected me to the earth, its life, and its history. Another major influence was model dioramas. I was first introduced to them at a young age at my local county fair's train museum. The fact that I could create a new world in a physical form kickstarted my art production. Since then I have always had a fondness for creating dioramas and other models of the sort.

How has your project evolved?

I didn't search this project out, it kind of fell into my lap. I was making work with old fence posts because it was an abundant material in my location. I made compositions with them and took inspiration from their positions in light. I had gained new responsibilities on the ranch when my father died of cancer in 2019. These responsibilities led me to ask questions surrounding land ownership, borders, and place. I researched the traumatic past of barbed wire fencing. It made it apparent my place in the problem and my part in finding a solution. Now I am only at the beginning of a project that will be a long road of understanding, reconsideration, and giving back to the land and its community.



Top: *Canary In the Coal Mine*, 2020.
10" x 17" x 4", wood, polymer clay, acrylic, acrylic sheet, flock, plaster, fibers, string, coal, wire, sunlight

Bottom: *Itch to Ditch*, 2021.
6" x 6" x 2", dismantled fencepost, dismantled wire, acrylic, polyacrylic, sunlight



Left: *Go Get the Ball Adam!*, 2021.
12" x 8" x 8", foam, plaster, rocks, flock, styrene, basswood, cloth, ball bearing, acrylic, wire

Right: *Ping Pong Diplomacy*, 2021.
10" x 10" x 8", foam, plaster, rocks, flock, styrene, basswood, net, acrylic, wire