

*Sisyphus and the Embodied Journey*

*Noah Rudolph*

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## *Artist Statement*

“The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.”

(Camus, 1990 53)

My work evolves from a personal experience of despair, of being unable to affect change in the world, any action of mine being futile in contrast to those of governments and corporations. In the face of these colossal figures bigger than myself, my work is about acting in spite of this experience, using the opportunity to find and shoulder the burden of this planet’s preservation and protection.

Sisyphus is to me the figure of embodied action, labor and toil, and thus acts as the entry point for me to an embodied act of shouldering such a burden. I

seek to find and express the beauty of such labor by bringing together an assortment of found objects, fabrics and materials that I use to create the clothes and backpacks of my ambitions. I do this so that I may attempt to embody and perform their purpose, to find value and meaning in what the objects do and what they might bring to the world.

Camus explores how in a world reduced to futile exertion Sisyphus must come to grips with his fate. Sisyphus, with the embracing of his fate is empowered to engage with his world, it is no longer that of the gods, but that of his own. Each repetition is only a part of his journey, the futile act the gods gave him becomes his purpose, his life's goal, and maybe in the end it is no longer futile.

Sisyphus teaches us that we should not fear toil or labor at all. Before his life of singular focus, the avoiding of shouldering any burden left him deceiving

and conniving. We each differ from Sisyphus in that we get to choose our own boulder, our own Burden. It is something that gives us an opportunity to conquer despair. Sisyphus does not promise it to be easy, but to show those brave enough to embody their burden more than we can imagine. Sisyphus asks us to choose our own burden, such that, in the face of futility, we may too possibly find the simplicity and beauty in our laboring to achieve it.

“This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

(Camus, 1990 55)

# *The Work of the Embodied Sisyphus*



The work of my embodied Sisyphus is that of shouldering a burden. Though the work comprises of four different unique aspects, the main is focused on Cape Towns water crisis that began in 2015.

In this story I rely on all of the sources I have spoken about above, relying on each as a contributing facet to the journey that they inspire, each informing how to proceed. It is through having all of these stories that my embodied Sisyphus can walk unencumbered. It is with these influencing narratives that he can be guided to climb the mountain with his burden.

The process of my embodied Sisyphus here was to look at how the water flowing down the western caves rivers had been dammed, collected and stored, to then be pumped into the city to be consumed. My Sisyphus took the water from the taps and froze it responding to the stories of my Great Grandfather, Baltazar Ushca and my grand father, grounding the

stories of ice and movement in the mountains to take me to the headwaters of the rivers it once came. The burden is carried up onto a ridge line that divided two major river systems, the burg and the breeder, found high up in the Du Toits Kloof mountains. The intention there is that the water of the ice block may once again feed into the systems from where it came, given another chance to live out its destiny of reaching the sea.

It is not through one journey that Sisyphus refills the rivers or re hydrates the ground, but through an eternity of effort, each attempt futile in the face of his ambition.







As I climbed the mountains I could feel the wind through my clothes and the weight on my back. The water as my ice melted running down and onto my legs it was so cold. Somehow, I didn't feel the coolness of the ice, rather the heat in my chest carrying this heavy object up the mountain. Each step more intentional than any other, trying to stay stable and upright. I shift the weight from my one shoulder to the other to find the easy way through but it doesn't reduce it's still there, my load only lightning as it melts on our journey. In a way, my journey could only get easier by walking, any fatigue or suffering could only lessen through the process of continued exertion, through the embracing of the experience that the experience could itself become easier and more manageable and even enjoyable.



















The embodied Sisyphus walks through a field of flowers with a machine on his back attempting to pollinate them. It is here that the embodied Sisyphus fulfills the role of something that doesn't exist anymore, something that was destroyed. He does this as an act of preservation and of care, an act that allows that natural system to continue. In this way he acts as the replacement of the bee, supporting half of the system while the other half has died. Here the embodied Sisyphus is bound to an eternity of Labor to support something that never needed to be supported, to replace something that never needed to be replaced, to become a part of a system that functioned and existed but is destined to die without its other half.

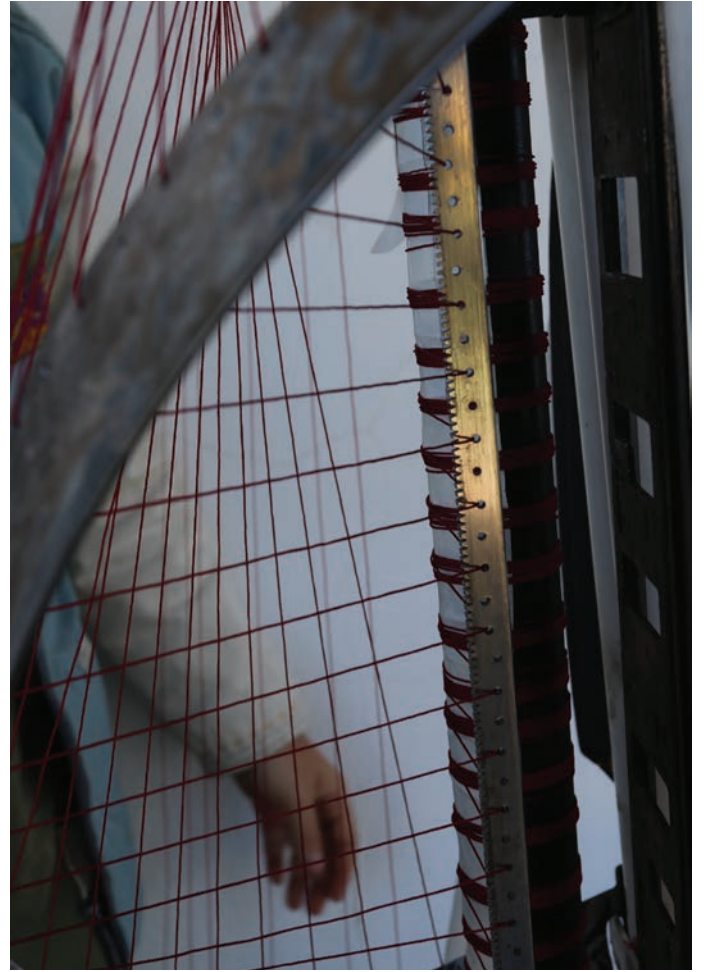




















Later, my embodied Sisyphus carries Antenna through the world, his intention here is that of cleanup, not the cleaning up of the physical waste left behind but rather the clean up of the invisible radio waves and signals that were always understood to not be effecting the world they moved through. To him they are a representation of that which was ignored and not considered, they are a representation of the kind of waste that can be left behind and not be noticed.

























Lastly, Sisyphus walks through the desert alone, with almost no life surrounding him. The heat beats down on the ground as he walks. Sisyphus, carrying above him a large sun reflector, casts a shadow below on the scorching sand. Sisyphus here seeks not to maintain or uphold half a population or half an ecosystem but rather to lessen the burning of the ground as he walks through the landscape. On his journey, he shades the tiny bit of ground below him, lowering the temperature of the earth ever so slightly such that whatever life did still exist might continue to survive.















Sisyphus walks through the landscape not with scorn or anger at the center of his being but rather intention. His life is that of an embodied purpose bringing along with it the joys and turmoil's of his ambition. Sisyphus doesn't feel the despair anymore, despair came at the beginning of his journey before he acted. The despair came From the feeling that he alone was too small to engage with the world and have it engage with him.

For me to embody Sisyphus is not only to bring my intentions and my desires onto this mythology but to allow through the actions of its embodiment the narratives and lessons to impart something of their wisdom on me.

I have come to the realisation that reality will always differ from my expectations and desires. When performing the sun reflector work, strong winds came into conflict with the fragile and delicate reflector breaking one of its arms. In one way this is a failure because it represents to me not achieving what I set out to do, maybe though in another it is a success, it represents an interaction with the real world, with a space that isn't controllable. In a way, the performing of the process has led to something incomplete compared to what I imagined, but maybe more interesting than I had imagined.

What it has come to represent to me is that it has only been in the doing of these works that I have come up against the real world, come up against the winds, heat and cold. These are experiences I could never imagine as they played out, but rather had to experience.

I am left with more questions than answers, and more wishes than fulfilled goals, what my experiences have taught me is that maybe that is how every great adventure is destined to end.

# *Sisyphus and the Embodied Journey*

*Essay*

“The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour.”

(Camus, 1990 53)

My work evolves from a personal experience of being unable to affect change in the world. It is an experience of any action of mine being inconsequential as they are performed alone in contrast to those of governments and corporations. In the face of these colossal figures and so many other things bigger than myself, I experience my voice to be insignificant and unimportant, where my own efforts to recycle does little to make the world a healthier place and even less to make me feel like the systems that function behind the scenes have been impacted whatsoever.

My work doesn't only come from this depressing place, rather one allowed to be nuanced and conflicting. It is an exploration into, not the idea that my voice needs to be heard, but rather, taking action in spite of my experience, giving me the opportunity to shoulder a burden that I see as important and valuable. It is in the carrying of a burden that I can find the meaning in what I seek to do. Sisyphus is, from this quote, the central body of my work, maybe rather than the mythical figure himself, the idea of ceaseless toil and labour. I seek to find and express the beauty of such labour, by bringing together an assortment of found objects and cloths, that I use to create the clothes and back packs of my character, such that I may embody and perform their purpose and find value and meaning in what their endeavors might bring to the world.

At the core of this idea is that to make a change is to embrace the futility of being alone in the world. It is

to face the vast impossible and to carry that burden in full commitment. I feel that this is significant because it is in the act of total devotion to a task that one can truly shoulder their burden. It is in this way that Sisyphus comes into the story of my work.

I In training for a sport one needs to balance on the line between effective training and fatigue. Its an impossible line that is only found after years of experience. It often leaves one feeling shattered and overworked but also leaves one feeling good like you've gone to easy and that you could have done more. The torture is in whether one could have done more. This is why I think Sisyphus is such an appealing character, someone who never stops, never gets sick or takes a day off. No one could question whether he could have done more, he is ceaseless forever.

Sisyphus is thus the archetypal representation of ceaseless devotion. To center my work on the myth of

Sisyphus I rely on the essays of Albert Camus found in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* in which he explores the experience of the immortal Sisyphus and his task (Camus, 1990).

What Camus explores is the nuances in the experience of Sisyphus as he rolled his boulder up the mountain and followed it back down. He shows that though the gods saw this act of futile labour to be the worst punishment imaginable, Sisyphus might have found not only satisfaction in his exertion but also joy (Camus, 1990 53). This narrative is so central to my work because it challenges the idea that futile effort and labour is meaningless and should be avoided, rather it shows us that even in the face of futility, meaning can be found, no matter how small.

Sisyphus was considered to be the most cunning of all the Greeks. Through his shrewdness he manipulated the gods again and again to attain that which he

desired, enough so that he drew their wrath for his defiance. In a last act against the gods, Sisyphus cheated death by convincing her that he should be allowed to return to the living to berate his wife who had thrown his lifeless body into the square. But when returned, he defied death's calls to return and stayed among the living, seeing once again the joys of life. Sisyphus drew the wrath of Mercury who forcibly took him to the underworld where he condemned him to ceaselessly rolling a boulder up a mountain, where, as it reached the summit, it would roll back down for him to repeat his effort. The gods thought that there could be nothing worse for Sisyphus than his eternal life being filled with such meaningless toil, but as we unpack Sisyphus' life of labour, we might find something of simplicity and beauty in the story of labour (Camus, 1990 53).

My work is about a personal responsibility to ones

purpose. Within the broader scales of eternal life that Sisyphus invites us into, the location and time of my work are allowed to wander between places and eras, referencing not just the issues local to the South African narrative (though they are most important) but spanning many different places, times and subjects that I care about.

The first part of my work comes in response to the Cape Town water crisis beginning in 2015 and worsening to record lows in 2017 and 2018 (City of Cape Town, 2022). The significance of this event was felt by everyone in the city and though relief soon came with the rains late that year, represented in visceral way the effects a more extreme climate could have on a city and population.

Later comes the topic humanities destruction of the natural world's ecosystems. An aspect of my work is to criticise the idea that many rely on as a solution

to, for example, insect population collapse, being the technological replacement of animals. This I see as robots are given more attention than the systems that are barely holding on. In response to this idea I draw on the paper published in 2017 titled “More than 75 percent decline over 27 years in total flying insect biomass in protected areas”. This essay elaborates on the decline of insects in German protected areas, highlighting the issues of such losses to the natural ecosystems (Hallmann, 2017).

## **MY OWN STRUGGLES**

I struggle with the fact that, I as a human, making these comments, must survive and want to thrive and in doing so, have to contribute in some way to the systems that I am commenting on... It is a contradiction. My work brings to the front the ideas of these issues... futility,

embodying, solitude, noble, honorable, responsibility and contradiction<sup>2</sup> but also this feeling that exists inside my chest that feels hollow, sad, and empty. It is despair, this project is about standing in the face of my despair to say what it is that means something to me. Something that can be beautiful, handmade, imagined and created, something that is beautiful but reflects the despair of a perceived future.

My work must be beautiful, it's about beauty, the beauty of one's own journey, the beauty of care, of investing oneself, and of using all of one's energy in one's toils. Camus' conclusion on his essay about Sisyphus is that in a world where Sisyphus' life is reduced to meaningless labour, Sisyphus must find his meaning. In a life with only one purpose, he eventually embraces that purpose, claiming his rock as his own and finding not only meaning in his labour but joy in it too (Camus 1990).



What the enacting of my work is, is an attempt to find the meaning, not only by theorising and conceptualising it but embodying it. Sisyphus exists in action, the meaning I extract from the story is only that which I can understand as someone who sits and watches. But to Sisyphus, his world and his rock are so much bigger, it is his interaction and intention that allows him to move every atom and molecule in the rock, requiring every atom and molecule of him to engage with that which he confronts (Camus, 1990 54). For me to tell the story of my conflicting hero it would be a lie to talk with no embodied experience. And so my work is about that, its about embodying that which is important, and carrying it, engaging with every atom and piece of that object, using every atom of ones being to bare it (Camus, 1990 53).

Thus, to me a burden unshouldered is not a burden, but as represented, an object that lies on the floor

with no life and no experience. As Sisyphus walks back down to his boulder, he knows his fate, it is not to him that of torture, but as his path, his path that leads forward. His burden is a part of him, it is his fate, and it is that which he embraces and embodies (Camus, 1990 53).

This is what I have wanted to do. Embody this experience. Embody Sisyphus.

## **CONNECTIONS TO MYTHOLOGY**

When I was younger, I couldn't read. It was a matter of most embarrassment to me and I hid it for all I was worth. It was only in about grade 6 that anyone found out and I was forced to take extra lessons and such. But how I learned, unable to grasp the meaning behind the texts was to listen. It was lucky then that

my school focused so heavily on the telling of stories as I would sit in class listening with the world in front of my eyes disappearing as I entered the ancient mythologies and stories. They were how I learned, through speaking and listening and drawing. I think that it is in the mythologies that I found my solitude, they are not the dates and facts of history, but rather the telling of an idea, telling of a feeling evoked in the hearts of gods and demons, each with a lesson or prophecy hidden inside.

Maybe because of this I found my interests drifting to the processes of making and creating, being inspired by others who creatively crafted and made. Richard Long was someone who my grandfather, a passionate mountaineer, admired greatly. His work being a simple expression of an idea that carried so much experience and story with it, maybe like the lesson carried within a mythology.

Long's works such as *A line made by walking* (Long, 1967) or *Dusty Boots Line* (Long 1988) among so many of his other works represent action. They represent action in performance, but as separate from the viewer, it is in solitude that the works must be performed, in space, in a location, because they belong there. His work speaks of a space specifically. It is located. But it is separate from the viewer, an experience far away that can only be represented, one can't see the embodied experience, only understand that it was there, that it happened, that the experience that one can't see is what the work is about. Long's representation of such works is often done with photos, but also texts, simple lines of text that tell a simple idea, but convey within them the narrative of those experiences of the works making, conjuring within the viewer the feeling of so much more.<sup>3</sup>

Solnit might add in response to Long's process that the

act of embodiment of walking is a form of resistance to the postmodern loss of space, it is a way of locating ones self and tying ones movement to a located space as space becomes claimed by the expansion of urbanisation and its more and more distant support networks (Solnit, 2002 267).

With Richard Long and my grandfather's love for his work comes the stories of both my grandfather and great grandfather. My great grandfather George Francois Petousis stowed away on a ship from Greece coming to south Africa when he was young. One of the first jobs he found was as an ice seller in the markets of Johannesburg. The story passed down to me was that the store owners would measure exactly how much ice they were getting to never overpay as it melted. My grandfather too bares an influence on my work as since his death in 2001 when I was four, I have found a connection with him when ever in the

mountains, which is why I bring him into my work as it takes on an element of exploration and adventure into nature.

There is a documentary that in a way parallels the story of my two ancestors, that being of Baltazar Ushca, told in *The Last Ice Merchant* directed by Sandy Patch. Baltazar is the last ice merchant who climbs the mountain of Chimborazo in Ecuador to mine the glacial ice that can be sold in the markets of the nearby town, where once his father and many other ice merchants would mine and sell their ice. Balthazar pursues his work these days, not because it is profitable, but because he is the last person maybe in the whole world to still collect ice from the mountains. This ice is not just frozen water but is believed to have health benefits from all the minerals and has a sweet taste to it (Patch, 2012).

Part of what is so important about Balthazar's work

is his process. He is methodical and intentional, engaging in each step in his work, from cutting the grasses on the hills to make rope, to carving out the massive ice blocks, to carrying them into the markets, each part of his process is fully embodied physically (Patch, 2012).

Maybe as something I attach to his work from my perspective in the materiality of what he makes and embodies. It is the simplicity and complexity of making grass rope, strong enough to carry massive ice blocks, the wrapping of each block in the same grasses, and the grappling with objects bigger than oneself that I draw so much experience and story from in my work4 (Patch, 2012).

I also drew connections to the works of both Francis Alÿs and Alex Oelofse. Alÿs' Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes making something leads to nothing) to me represented something of the Sisyphean journey.

Here again the artist embodies the practice of his work through action. Alÿs' work speaks of the paradox of achieving something and nothing, the ice block, destined to melt, is given both energy and experience as it is pushed through the streets of Mexico City. To me Alÿs' working embodies the futility of the material while giving it the energy that will allow it to create meaning (Alÿs, 1997).

Oelofse's work similarly embodies meaning through the 'creating of nothing' but here uses the melting of ice to speak about the value and commodification of water. To me what I found most appealing about his work was the aesthetics of the imagery, the ice block within the landscape, out of place but eventually disappearing into it. The ice becoming intangible and lost in the sands of the pan.

## MY EMBODIED SISYPHUS

Though my work speaks about embodying Sisyphus, it is not the same Sisyphus who rolls his boulder up the mountain for all eternity. It is rather an imagined figure, not unlike that Sisyphus, but who shoulders the burden of the natural world and its conflict with humanity. Yet my Sisyphus alas still exists in futility, each carried object, each embodied journey will never achieve its goal. It is different from our mythological Sisyphus in that there is intention and a goal, yet the experience of futility exists in the vastness of achieving that goal. Yet my embodied Sisyphus, similarly, has taken up the challenge, not with the search of an outcome but the search of action. I don't mean to be misleading, the actions are in search of an outcome but they are predicated on the means to the end rather than the ambition of the end. I think that seeing the goal has somewhere along the line become

somewhat confused with the achieving of that goal. But it is not. That's why this work is about action, its about the space between seeing and achieving, its about the simplicity of Sisyphus rolling the boulder.

## EMBODYING PRACTICE

Deeply involved in my practice and the idea of embodying this person comes the process of needing to understand them. In trying to understand my mythical Sisyphus, I create both the clothes and the objects that they use and wear. In doing so I attempt to give the work I'm making, as Sisyphus his rock, every little bit of detail and energy that I have, such that, in some ways, I May too use all of my being to understand their experience. I try to wear the objects as I go about daily life so that they may gain something of the residue of witnessing interaction with the world.

When designing the clothes, it became of importance to understand their place in the real world, where they went, what they saw, the environments they engaged with. Imagining my mythical Sisyphus as somewhat relating to his mythological counterpart in the underworld, as someone separated from the people of the world, existing as apart and alone. To me he is never seen, never studied, but maybe only ever so often observed. Observed far away, somewhere on the horizon, somewhere where he blends between the earth and sky. This idea of the figure of both the earth and sky I bring into being through his clothing camouflage, thick green canvas for the earth and pale blue for the sky, belonging in a space that is neither one nor the other, but a joining of earth and sky, solid and light, story and reality, imagination and intention.

The works themselves represent the many iterations of his burden, though my strange hero exists within

the linearity of his fate, within my work I have allowed him to explore the many ways he might engage with the world. In this body of work, I have brought forward four ideas, each relating to ideas and issues that resonate with my futile wishes. Those being in regard to the water crisis of cape town, the diminishing bee populations around the world, the rising global temperatures and the ideas of the invisible damage that we do not see as we observe our planet.

It is important to me that not all the works act to the same resolution, that each pack not resemble the same clarity and definition, but that through the series the story can be allowed to become more ambiguous and less detailed and descriptive, that through the story one's imagination is allowed to fill the gaps that have been created.

## THE WORK OF THE EMBODIED SISYPHUS

The work of my embodied Sisyphus<sup>5</sup> is that of shouldering a burden. Though the work comprises of four different unique aspects, the main aspect is focused on Cape Town's water crisis that began in 2015. In this story I rely on all of the sources I have spoken about above, relying on each as a contributing facet to the journey that they inspire, each informing how to proceed. It is through having all of these stories that my embodied Sisyphus can walk unencumbered. It is with these influencing narratives that he can be guided to climb the mountain with his burden.

The process of my embodied Sisyphus here was to look at how the water flowing down the western caves rivers had been dammed, collected and stored, to then be pumped into the city to be consumed. My Sisyphus took the water from the taps and froze it responding to the stories of my Great Grandfather,

Baltazar Ushca and my grand father, grounding the stories of ice and movement in the mountains to take me to the headwaters of the rivers it once came. The burden is carried up onto a ridge line that divided two major river systems, the burg and the breeder, found high up in the Du Toits Kloof mountains. The intention there is that the water of the ice block may once again feed into the systems from where it came, given another chance to live out its destiny of reaching the sea.

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the heat in my chest carrying this heavy object up the mountain. Each step more intentional than any other, trying to stay stable and upright. I shift the weight from my one shoulder to the other to find the easy way through but it doesn't reduce it's still there, my load only lightning as it melts on our journey. In a way, my journey could only get easier by walking, any fatigue or suffering could only lessen through the process of continued exertion, through the embracing of the experience that the experience could itself become easier and more manageable and even enjoyable<sup>6</sup>.

In the article on insect biomass decline by Hallmann and their fellow contributors, they observed a massive 76% decline in the total low-flying insect biomass in specifically protected areas. Though their research was not able to tie the cause of this decline directly to any specific contributing factor, they postulate that there may be several factors that influence these trends.

Namely of these are the large scale monocropping of farmlands and reduced plant biodiversity. What is important from these observations is that these ecosystems are trending towards collapse (Hallmann, 2017).

The embodied Sisyphus walks through a field of flowers with a machine on his back attempting to pollinate them. It is here that the embodied Sisyphus fulfills the role of something that doesn't exist anymore, something that was destroyed. He does this as an act of preservation and of care, an act that allows that natural system to continue. In this way he acts as the replacement of the bee, supporting half of the system while the other half has died. Here the embodied Sisyphus is bound to an eternity of Labor to support something that never needed to be supported, to replace something that never needed to be replaced, to become a part of a system that functioned and



existed but is destined to die without its other half.

Later on my embodied Sisyphus carries Antenna through a world where people no longer exist, his intention here is that of cleanup, not the cleaning up of the physical waste left behind but rather the clean up of the invisible radio waves and signals that were always understood to be not effecting the world they moved through. To him they are more a representation of that which was ignored and not considered, they are a representation of the kind of waste that can be left behind and not be noticed.

Lastly Sisyphus walks through the desert alone, with almost no life surrounding him. The heat beats down on the ground as he walks. Sisyphus, carrying above him a large sun reflector, casts a shadow below on the scorching sand. Sisyphus here seeks not to maintain or uphold half a population or half an ecosystem but rather to lessen the burning of the ground as he walks

through the landscape. On his journey, he shades the tiny bit of ground below him, lowering the temperature of the earth ever so slightly such that whatever life did still exist might continue to survive.

Sisyphus walks through the landscape not with scorn or anger at the center of his being but rather intention. His life is that of an embodied purpose bringing along with it the joys and turmoil's of his ambition. Sisyphus doesn't feel the despair anymore, despair came at the beginning of his journey before he acted. The despair came from the feeling that he alone was too small to engage with the world and have it engage with him.

For me to embody Sisyphus is not only to bring my intentions and my desires onto this mythology but to allow through the actions of its embodiment the narratives and lessons to impart something of their wisdom on me.

## *Conclusion*

At the core of the work I have created is an interaction between the conceptual figures of its founding, the objects I have made and the process of embodying them all together. It has become difficult to untangle each from one another as they each are intertwined in what I feel is a rather deeply woven rope.

I think that Camus is right, Sisyphus can be happy, he has purpose and ambition, each attempt at rolling his boulder is a step to following his destiny. What I have come to think is that Sisyphus teaches us that we should not fear toil or labor at all. I realise that I should not envy Sisyphus, his toil is not that of his choosing. But before his life of singular focus, the avoiding of shouldering any burden left him deceiving and conniving. That's maybe how we each differ from Sisyphus, we get to choose our own boulder, our own Burden, the futility I choose to embody can be that of my own desire, it is something that gives me an

opportunity to conquer despair. It is not promised to be easy, but to show those brave enough to embody their burden both the heights of happiness and lows of sorrow. Sisyphus asks us to choose our own burden, such that, in the face of futility we may too possibly find the simplicity and beauty in our laboring to achieve it.

“This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

(Camus, 1990 55)

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