I travelled to London in May for my graduate international experience. This was also my first opportunity to leave the United States and thus served as both a research trip and one of unexpected personal exploration. I had believed I was travelling somewhere that would provide stimulus for my
creative practice and act as a location of transition as I take small steps out of my comfort zone. I found a place where that challenged my idea of what my nationality and regional heritage entails and was simultaneously adapting both con- and divergently from our own nation’s attitude and history.

My initial goal for the trip was to spend extensive amounts of time studying prized natural objects and collections. As last winter’s term progressed my interests oriented themselves more towards the display of the natural and made-made objects humans enjoy projecting their gaze onto. I focused my experience around The Natural History, the Victoria & Albert, and the British Museum, where I could find some of the most prized natural, man-made, and man-stolen treasures of the world. They are also locations where traditional systems of display sit alongside the new. More specialized museums I visited, like The Hunterian, Toy Museum, Science, and most art museums stayed within strict display styles.
Above is the Minerals room at the Natural History Museum; everything is on display here, the minerals, cabinetry, windows, and the Victorian building itself. Completely separate from this location is a room called Earth’s Treasury. This is where they keep the real eye candy. The room is dark and distinct from the building’s architecture, black floors and walls direct you to the only lighted bodies in the room, gemstones of various cuts and precious metals. In the Minerals room the objects in collection have a presence greater than their separate selves. In Earth’s Treasury each piece remains distinct,
the confrontation is strictly between the rock, viewer, and the lone LED light allowing each to gaze at the other.

This object is without easy name, the label is elsewhere, while the Minerals room has the pretext of edification, Earth’s Treasury is about an otherworldly presence, an out of human idea of the world.

The British Museum sometimes utilizes a similar display, though to different effect:
This is in a room of objects from the Americas. Here its otherworldly status comes from being out of the European man’s world and it is fetishized out of that same enchantment of the unfamiliar used for gems. More famous objects with the power of dislocation are the Elgin Marbles.
While the classics kid in me was ecstatic to see them, being in a room with potentially the most famous stolen objects was off-putting. Greece has to displays casts of these statues in place of their originals, the British Museum should note how powerful casts can be. At the Victoria & Albert Museum there are galleries displaying only Medieval casts.

The experience of walking around these casts was far more powerful than standing before ruins of the Parthenon in a sanitary stone room, devoid of cultural context.
Much of my time outside the museums was spent trying to reconcile myself with being in the country that I was taught to think of as both an ally and an abusive stepfather. Elementary history classes in a public Virginia school boils down to six years of colonialism study where we memorize what settlements grew what cash crop and slowly build up layers of resentment towards England. While there were moments where I felt a kinship to the location due to its directness, cool personality, and efficiency, I still have never felt more of an American, specifically a Virginian. An attachment to a heritage I have been attempting to distance myself from suddenly welling up in me, I spent a few nights watching the BBC and picking cotton bought from the flower stand on the corner.

Another arising point of interest came from the unceasing experience of reorienting myself to my surroundings. My work has been said to resemble maps before, but it wasn't until I was simultaneously using maps and then working at night that I realized the connection was more than a visual gestalt, but that the process of using maps and creating the drawings were both recorded orientation.

The experience allowed me to rapidly build my visual literacy and engage in gazing toward objects without the typical restriction of only having
a single day to pass by the contents of a whole building. I acquainted myself
with the basics of international travel and feel better prepared to visit locales
that vary in more pronounced ways without being distracted by anxieties. I
have made valuable conceptions to my life and art practice which I am sure are
only beginning to reveal themselves. Thank you to the School of Art and
Design and the staff and faculty that enabled me to make this experience so
rewarding.

I’ll close with what kept my attention the longest, a model of the Crystal
Palace, that uses a mirror to complete its form.