Remnants of Existence: Discovering Value in Loss

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REMNANTS OF EXISTENCE: DISCOVERING VALUE IN LOSS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Art

by
Andrea Hardin Garland
May 2019

Accepted by:
Professor Kathleen Thum, Committee Chair
Professor David Detrich
Dr. Beth Lauritis
ABSTRACT

Those who precede us in the continuum of humanity may affect our lives even if we are unaware of their influence. To illustrate the residue of previous generations, I emboss textiles inherited from my Southern American family. Formerly useful and distinctly decorative, these embroidered handkerchiefs, crocheted doilies, lace nightgowns and dress gloves are now antiquated curiosities. Using the force of a printing press, I form shadowy impressions of the articles on paper to communicate presence in absence, then manipulate the images with various media. I literally rinse, wring and dry many of these works in an effort to elevate the accepted understanding of domestic labor usually undertaken by women. Subverting the act of washing, I then apply smudges, streaks and line drawings to deepen the surface texture. Most of the artifacts inhabit a quiet, central place on the picture plane, allowing them to exceed their perceived value and redefining their context as memorials to bygone traditions. Layers of ragged cheesecloth shroud some of the pieces, obfuscating the image to suggest loss and the unreliability of fading memories. Portions of the drawings hearken to root forms or body structures, providing an illusion of longevity that contradicts the reality of the impermanence of home and family. My sculpture includes brittle, decaying magnolia leaves that, in an act of futility, I embellish with intricate, fractured drawings. Through this body of work and the steps involved in my process I communicate the paradox that exists between careful preservation of possessions and the burden of stewardship that sometimes accompanies inheritance.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this body of artwork and the writing to my husband, Adrian Garland, without whose patience, constant encouragement and support, neither would have been possible. And to my children, Evan and Liam Garland, who were ever steadfast and helpful to me when the hours in my studio grew long.
I thank my father, Wendell Carl Hardin, whose generosity and knowledge helped me accomplish a professional final presentation of my artwork in custom frames. The effort of that endeavor was immense, and the time spent working together was priceless. I also thank my mother, Elaine Hardin, and other family members who keep and share stories and records of family history. In addition, I thank the entire faculty in the Department of Art for their understanding and willingness to work around my unusual circumstances as a nontraditional student. I specifically want to acknowledge my thesis committee members, Kathleen Thum, David Detrich and Beth Lauritis, for your patience and guidance in critiquing the artwork, and for reading and editing seemingly endless revisions to this manuscript. Your input and counsel are truly appreciated.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

I grew up on land that was part of a 1000-acre grant originally located in the Pendleton District, now Pickens County, on the South Saluda River. It was deeded to my paternal great-great-great-great-grandfather, Joseph Hardin. The plats were registered in two parts; one in 1786 from the English Colonial Government, and one in 1809 by William Moultrie, Governor of South Carolina (Genealogy.com). This is ancient history by American standards – the first occurring two years before George Washington was elected president, and the second just three decades after the Revolutionary War. As it happens, I am also descended from the very same Joseph Hardin, mostly through the women, eight generations back, on my mother’s side. As a result, my entire life is steeped in the history of this place and the stories of these people. Though the great mass of land was diminished and divided over the years through inheritance, selling and loss, there remain significant tracts that my brother, my cousins, and I will inherit. Thus, I am deeply and irrevocably tied to the place. The road that dissects the land below my parents’ home is called 'Hardin Road'. And these names; Joseph, Vardry, Elizabeth, Emma, Carl, Bernice, Etta, Eunice and numerous others, are looming, shadowy figures whose histories were woven throughout the imaginations of my childhood. They haunt me, albeit in a pleasant way, even now.

Much of the land is an uncultivated, wild place. Owing to financial constraints and limited resources, my young parents cleared the lot for their house by hand with rudimentary tools that included chainsaws, pickaxes, sling blades and even dynamite, which, at that time, could be legally purchased at any hardware store. The grueling physical labor of taming the
forested, rocky hill into a grassy lawn continued for years after the house was built. I remember as a very small girl running into the house, closing the front door, and lifting my little brother up to the window sill so that we both could watch as fragments of tree stumps, dirt and smoke exploded from the ground, showering debris over everything within yards of the blast. My parents’ efforts, sweat and probably blood from scratches and cuts, tamed and shaped the woods into a livable space and merged with the legacy of the ground. Their optimism and hard work forged a home for their children and grandchildren to fill with memories.

The generations that lived and died on those storied acres left an enduring residue on the landscape. Living on family land means your neighbors are also your relatives, and the men of my family were either builders or preachers or both. Therefore, they built all the homes in the area by hand over several generations, along with the local church buildings, community halls, and even the family cemetery. Every nail, board, shingle and brick for miles around my home was put in place by my kin – and I was raised with a keen awareness of my responsibility to participate in and to perpetuate birth, life, death and faith within a small community.

My family enjoys a wealth of stories and knowledge about the area thanks to the careful recordkeeping of my grandparents. Extensive volumes of research exist that they amassed through scouting cemeteries, collecting census surveys and exchanging documents with extended family. A shelf-lined closet in their home held dozens of binders crammed with meticulously type-written ‘family trees’, letters written in elegant longhand from a bygone century, newspaper clippings and sepia-colored photographs bearing images of vaguely-familiar people and landscapes. In addition, my grandfather left a richly-detailed
handwritten memoir chronicling the years of his youth spent surrounded by the same mountains and rivers that I knew as a child. His stories tell of a forgotten era of traditions, customs and expectations that reflect just how much that area and the American South as a whole has changed in a short time. It's a heady thing to be descended from such a densely layered heritage. There is a sense of ownership and respect coupled with a burden of responsibility. It is tempting to venerate this history, however I sense a need to look at the combined narrative of these written accounts realistically, not only as a personal reference but also as a microcosm of the region. They are a testament to the remnants of human toil in that specific place over several decades. Though never rich, my family possessed a wealth of land, talent and resources. Necessities that they couldn’t afford were homegrown, handmade or repurposed. Thrift and economy were highly prized traits. I strive to emulate that practice in my artwork and its presentation. Thus, I make this work depicting and redefining things that I already possess using simple materials and framing it all by hand in reclaimed oak and 100-year-old wormy chestnut - wood that has a history of its own.

Over the course of my life, I am witness to rapidly increasing shifts in society and technology. Products and concepts that did not exist when I was born are now essential, expected or even extinct, as obsolescence closely follows every new idea. I long for a time when things were made to last and change was less frequent. Thus, I am acutely aware of the residue of the past as it is contained in the stories and objects entrusted to me. I experience a burden of stewardship and inheritance, and the complexity of hailing from a region that is historically resistant to change. The purpose of this body of work is to elevate the functionally outdated objects that I inherited, redefining their context in the present while paying homage to their original purpose.
I am fascinated with the quiet physical evidence of the past that exists in old objects; edges worn smooth, nail holes, shadows of old rust and worn paint. These are all examples of the wear and tear that is visited on things that are loved and used. *Gentility*, features embossings of three matching decorative doilies that were originally used to protect the arms and back of a chair from potential staining by the dirt, sweat and oil of hands and heads. I placed them centrally and fully intact on the picture plane in a specimen-like arrangement. From a point of previous damage to the paper root structures emerge that weave through the surface of the drawing, unifying the three lacy impressions. I use pastels in maroon and violet hues, lightly brushed over the surface of the line drawings and the embossment, to suggest the residue of staining left by years of human use. The visual effect is simultaneously botanical and visceral, serving as a reminder of the aging of the human body over time, and highlighting the previous employ of the original items as a protective barrier between upholstery fabric and the touch of working hands.

My research of the *Rubbing/Loving Project* by Korean-American artist, Do Ho Suh resonates with *Gentility* as a recording of tactile wear. It is a painstaking, hand-rubbed recording on vellum of the New York City apartment he inhabited for 18 years. He methodically and painstakingly captured minute details of a home where he passed an emotionally turbulent time dealing with the complexity and heartsick feeling of being caught between two cultures. It was a way of giving tangible significance to the memory of his time there. He said, “I literally had to caress every surface with my fingertips, and I started to wear
off my fingerprints. I was actually giving up my own body to the architecture…” In other words, the residue of his fingertips became part of not only the apartment, but also of his artwork as he honored every inch of that space (Rose, 2017).

The act of recording through direct rubbing reminded me of my genealogist grandparents who spent their retirement years traveling to cemeteries to make crayon rubbings of granite headstones on tracing paper rather than merely photographing the grave markers. There is a physicality and tangible connection to the past that those rubbings provide. This memory was the impetus for my practice of making direct rubbings and embossings of linens and incorporating them into my work. Through the correlation of the grave, I began to consider the brevity of life in our physical bodies, and the impact of the existence of one human being on future generations. I realized that family members long deceased, whom I had never met, but knew through stories, were powerless to confirm or deny the tales told about them – or to ever change the story for either better or worse. I am obsessed with the helplessness of that inevitability for all of us, and I lament that the enormity of our life experience may be summed up all too briefly in one or two sentences.

Slip is a spectral charcoal rubbing of a doily that is besmirched with the residual evidence of the production of other artwork that has dripped onto its surface. Those marks are energetic and active in contrast with the quiet presence of the rubbing. The doily is off-center and canted, providing a sense of displacement, indicating the peculiarity of death. The paper is shrouded in cheesecloth dyed black with India ink and stiffened into shape with acrylic. The ragged edge of the shrouding exceeds the paper substrate, appearing to defy gravity as it stands apart from the images beneath its surface. The piece is an embodiment of
things revealed and concealed and illustrates the existence of structural space in the absence of apparent support.

Years after my grandparents died and we finally parsed their belongings among the members of our large family, we experienced a new and different type of bereavement. An established household, created and maintained for decades by a gentle and loving couple was meticulously and equitably dismantled, ensuring that everyone received a fair portion. Items that existed in their collection for as long as any of us could recall, and laden with memories of times together in that specific place, were distributed to various homes. While those things were undoubtedly treasured by the recipients, there was a diminishment in their separation from one another. The formerly cheerful and tastefully decorated home was left barren for a time. Walls were festooned with bare nails from which treasured family photographs and blue patterned china once hung. It was as if, through the division of their possessions, we were forced to mourn our loved ones again – and even with our best efforts to be polite, our attachment to one another was affected.
CHAPTER THREE

USEFULNESS VS. VALUE – The Power of the Thing

There is a potency in the collection of things in one place over time. Not surprisingly, some of my grandparents’ possessions fell to me after they died. It seemed that keeping their things together made them feel closer. So, I happily accepted items that no one else wanted, simply for their association with people I missed. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, political theorist Jane Bennett challenges us to think of ourselves as sentient beings that are made up of elements that will ultimately return to the earth, and that those elements may somehow communicate with the nonliving things around us. This may lead to phenomena such as hoarding, in which the victim insists that possessions speak to and are a part of him or her. In her lecture about the book, Bennett asks us to set aside the apparent pathological illness associated with hoarders and consider the possibility that their claims of emotional trauma and physical pain may actually exist on an elemental level. Materialist theories such as these can help us better understand how and why we cherish objects as surrogates for people after they are gone (Bennett, 2010).

Bennett’s ideas shed light on my discomfort with relegating the inherited things that I cannot use in my home to a box in the top of a closet. Unable to justify having them and not using them, I give them a new voice and context in my artwork. By embossing them, I keep the original objects unaltered and intact, but I am able to make many impressions and treat them in different ways to create works that imbue them with meaning beyond mere decoration. The linens speak of hospitality, protection, concealing flaws, and keeping clean. My inclusion of them reflects New Romanticism in contemporary art, which is defined in
Notes on Metamodernism by cultural theorist Timotheus Vermeulen, as "the act of presenting the commonplace with significance, the ordinary with the mysterious…" (Metamodernism, 2010). This idea elevates the temporal with all its flaws to the level of the sublime. The linens depicted in my work were once quite common, and now they are not. Because of unfamiliarity, their context is already changing or lost in society. My specific items were inexpensive or hand-made and were used daily by working people, however, they tend to be misinterpreted as luxuries of the upper classes. I subvert the pristine baggage associated with cultural assumptions of wealth and privilege that may be attached to them by layering their exact images in dusty, powdered charcoal and pastel. I chose these media for two reasons; one, their dirty, sooty qualities contradict the crisp, white cleanliness of the real objects, and two, they are easily applied and erased, with each residual layer indicating history and a wear.

In Fancy, there is an immediate and definite reference to the human body in both scale and imagery, as some of the marks left by traces of media resemble viscera and bone. This large double embossing is the impression of a long, oval crocheted runner intended to beautify a dining table. The central positioning of the piece on the picture plane projects a confrontational, portrait-like attitude, serving as a surrogate for the maker of the original item. Fluid, energetic marks covering the surface of the paper are the result of staining through the application of water and powdered charcoal. I relinquish a measure of control and allow the natural flow of the media to determine the value and contrast in the piece. While I do make judgements regarding how much to leave and how much to erase or rinse away, the majority of the marks are left to this process. The resulting image communicates loosely-controlled chaos through murky traces of media, leaving room for the viewer to
investigate the abstracted imagery. The overlapping embossment of a damaged plywood board adds complexity and mystery, contradicting the perfect symmetry of the more prominent doily. One of my goals in this effort is to prompt a new consideration of context and significance to the decorative, effectively pushing the remnants of a bygone era and giving them a voice in the present.

In a similar piece entitled *Charity*, the doily is more apparent, but there is again an abject treatment of the image. The subject is slightly off-center on the paper, adding a disheveled presence to the ordered, symmetrical crocheted pattern. The surface is mottled with the overspray of water into charcoal powder that mars the otherwise highly recognizable lace of the hand-crafted item. I treat the clean impression of the doily this way as a reflection of the effort to keep a pretense of grace and gentility in the face of hardship or conflict; a quality for which Southerners are well known.

British sculptor, Rachel Whiteread, creates direct casts of objects and places. She says that her work captures "surfaces of objects that hold traces of the object's 'life'" (Tate.org, 2017). She effectively challenges accepted notions about which objects are considered valuable. Similarly, in my work, the embossing and rubbing of items functions to impose remembrance through literal documentation. One of her more remarkable and poignant pieces is the Holocaust Memorial in Vienna, Austria. The exterior walls of the sculpture are the interior impressions of bookshelves, but the books and the shelves are missing, leaving an exact record of the opening ends of pages and bindings. There is a quiet illusion of order, but the absence of the books speaks to lost information, vacant histories, and intangible memories. Whiteread uses material that begins in a liquid state and then becomes solid to fill spaces, suspending time, allowing for the contemplation of presence in absence and the
passing of years. In her words, her sculptures are "visible but not screaming" (Architectural-Review.com, 2017). By contrast, my thesis work is energetic and seeks to disrupt the perfect order of the items depicted. Despite the disparity of our processes, however, I believe both Whiteread’s work and mine demand that we pause and remember what once existed and has passed.

And Many More… is an amalgamation of rubbings, embossings, and actual linens. They are placed centrally on the paper as if arranged for display. A damaged doily is obscured by multiple shrouded layers, giving the appearance of a tunnel or a hidden portal. There is staining from powdered charcoal washes and charcoal pencil rubbings on selected portions of the collage. The actual white linen handkerchief is subtly embroidered in white thread with the words, 'Happy Birthday', giving the item a humorously ironic specificity, calling attention to aging, as it is doubtful that anyone would give a child a handkerchief as a birthday gift. The piece is an intentional contrast of high and low art through the mingling of the quiet dignity in the ordered arrangement of the antiques and the kitsch that accompanies the mass production of a utilitarian item. The Happy Birthday hankie, crisp and white, clearly wasn’t used much at all, indicating that it might have been considered ‘special’ because of the embroidery, which rendered this inherently useful thing ironically not useful. The handmade lace doily is damaged – yet in its damage, it is a poignant reminder that despite our efforts to preserve them, all things must face eventual demise. The entire collage is shrouded in a sheer layer of cheesecloth, a disposable fabric employed in domestic tasks that can be used but once, functioning here to illustrate the cloudy nature of fading recollections.
CHAPTER FOUR

FEMININE STRENGTH AND SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY

"Grandma Hardin...was a pretty tough old lady. She did everything from teach school to dress mud turtles in her day, but she always put emphasis on being a lady and maintaining a 'good name'."
-The Memoir of Joseph Carl Hardin

This quote from my grandfather referencing his own grandmother resonates with me because, whether by nature or nurture, I see myself in that description. I am aware of the contradictions between the reality of feminine strength and the perception of it – the erratic definitions of respectable womanhood in a culture that, since the Civil War with its resulting absence of nearly an entire generation of men, relies heavily on the fortitude of women, but often denies that reliance; or at worst, sometimes resents or belittles it. In my personal observation, being considered valuable as a woman means being self-reliant enough to change a flat tire by the side of the road, split and stack firewood, bake a perfect pound cake, wear a power suit with heels, look great in an evening gown, stoically suffer a miscarriage without calling attention to your heartbreak, never lose composure, never show too much emotion, never mention pain or abuse. I struggle with these expectations in my roles as daughter, granddaughter, niece, wife, and mother - and the glaring double standards that I witness. I also wrestle with my own admitted compulsion to meet or exceed those expectations, and frustration with myself for seeking and hoping for that approval.

In her February 2019 talk at Western Carolina University, artist Ann Hamilton said, "If you can be really vulnerable and not know, there is strength in that" (Hamilton, 2019). My perception of that statement is that there is strength for others in our willingness to
honestly share our stories. Through tales told by my grandmothers, aunts and mother over the years, I gained a litany of inspiration that sustained me through personal struggles that I thought I would not survive. Many of my female ancestors suffered the deaths of their children to stillbirth, disease and accidents. In addition to this pain, most of them faced their later years alone as widows. And at least one that I know of barely survived the emotional trauma of a brutal and unwanted divorce. The handkerchiefs that I inherited are mundane, everyday items that someone took the time to hand-embellish with lace and embroidery. I imagine them wrung tightly in worried hands to wipe furrowed brows and capture the flow of tears. Some of the linens bear the physical stains of that sorrow even now.

In *Veil*, the linen and cotton squares are flattened in a specimen-like display and are part of a quiet strata of information within the work. The base layer features a purplish-stained embossing of multiple handkerchiefs stacked in an overlapping manner, as if stored away in a drawer. I purposely arranged them this way as a metaphor for the attempt to make sense of pain by filing it away to diminish its effects on our daily lives. The items are embossed to suggest the residue of trauma, which may continue to have a real presence long after the event has passed. The purplish-red mottled coloration is suggestive of physical damage or bruised flesh. In the next layer, there are three actual handkerchiefs adhered to the surface of the paper, their translucency allowing the bottom layer to show through like a recalled memory. The stains on the antique cloths bear witness to their use to comfort in times of distress, however by incorporating the items into this artwork, I have forever removed their ability comfort. Thus, like corpses, they are now empty relics of their own past. For this reason, I encased the entire piece in a shrouding made of loosely woven cheesecloth, reflecting the loss of the body in death and the history of emotional pain.
recorded in these highly personal articles. The elements of the work quietly inhabit an ordered grid-like pattern as a reflection of the relentless succession of the passing of time despite our need for the world to pause in times of deepest mourning.

*Mended* is a conglomeration of the remains of several damaged, shredded handkerchiefs lain together and reconstituted into the shape of a whole. These are arranged in a woven manner over a rubbing of an intact handkerchief. There are clear delineations of the fragments one from another, and the cheerfully-decorative but mis-matched embroidery remaining on the edges of each fragment belies the severity of the damage. The piece reads like a scab over a wound to illustrate pulling oneself together. On first glance, there is an appearance of wholeness, but evidence of the previous tearing and destruction remains. The gossamer shroud of sheer, spotless fabric is a symbolic barrier indicative of the boundary that healing sets between us and our pain. It is not a denial of the damage, but an acceptance of the dignity and wisdom that results when we survive and overcome brokenness.

These three unframed pieces are ethereal and unrestrained, but they are also inherently vulnerable. I mounted them on boxes, suspending them away from the wall to add to the layered, sculptural quality of the work. In each of these, the cloth provides a pseudo-frame that possesses the potential to react subtly to movement in the environment. Similarly, in the framed pieces that feature the cloth, there is the sheer, layering effect, but it also functions as an additional means of mark-making. In all these, I take advantage of the cloth's ability to cast shadow or imbue a spectral, careworn appearance.
Further illustrating the subtext of women’s work and feminine roles are *Broken/Bound* and *Vivisection*. In *Broken/Bound*, the embossed impression of a dress sewn by my mother for my baptism at age seven is completely obliterated in a tangled mass of interwoven spaces that were rinsed, erased, rubbed and re-drawn. This was a garment cut from whole cloth and constructed by hand for a sacred spiritual ceremony symbolizing cleansing and purity. Using acrylic pouring medium, I create a cage-like barrier, preventing the viewer from recognizing the image of the original dress. The barrier serves as a metaphor for a season of psychological self-protection from trauma that I bore alone at a very young age and overcame in secret. Not even my parents knew of my ordeal. The end of that painful time coincided with my baptism; thus, the image of the dress is buried deeply both in the work and in my thoughts, but it is not forgotten, as the remnant of the embossing remains completely present on the back of the paper.

It is important to note the art movement of the 1970s that included female artists such as Faith Wilding, who studied at the California Institute of the Arts (DeLand, 2018). I am most interested in the works that elevate the domestic arts and comment on the separation of labors. There are clear visual and contextual relationships between some of Wilding’s work and mine. *Crocheted Environment* is a room-sized installation of loosely crocheted white yarn arranged in a gridded, suspended web-like pattern against black walls. The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston says the piece causes “contradictory sensations of security, entrapment, serenity, and danger” (icaboston.org), qualities I strive to elicit in my work. Her more recent *Battle Dresses* features translucent images of three ruined dresses, each displaying the evident trauma of abuse, which relates to my own dress pieces.
Vivisection is a large-scale drawing that began as a faint embossment of a delicate antique, lace-embellished nightgown. Spatters of water, charcoal and graphite trail down the surface of the paper, and I selectively draw back into their haphazard patterns to form an illusion of interwoven spaces with an anatomical or botanical appearance. The fragile image of a gown once worn for the peace of sleep either sprouts in energetic, groping tendrils of plant matter or suggests an animal thorax with rib-like structures to speak to the raw uncertainty and brevity of life. In this piece, I contrast the faint linear embossing of the lightweight garment with bold, confrontational drawing in varying line weights to illustrate a complexity through the mingling of feminine grace with quiet perseverance and unflappable strength I’ve observed in women I admire.

In the dress glove series, I subvert the apparent presumptions of wealth, cultural status and privilege that is sometimes associated with those garments. These particular gloves are remnants of a time before the availability of drugstore manicure kits, affordable lotions, or the unimaginable luxury of the strip-mall nail salon. The gloves that I inherited were inexpensive, and often hand-embroidered to make them prettier and unique to the owner. In my observation, they were worn on special occasions and holidays, or to attend weddings or funerals. They were a covering for callused and scarred hands of women who did hard, physical labor in fields and in the home. In my works, Lineage, Wrung and Fruits, I arranged the gloves in awkward, layered, almost painful positions, with fingers splayed unnaturally or bent backward to show the stress of toil. After the embossings were made, I drew over them with powdered media and then rinsed the paper in an attempt to wash away the stains. This is an intentional reflection of the function of the gloves to cover the unsightly residue of work and imbue the wearer with an air of gentility. Evidence of the initial marks remain
imbedded in the paper and the ever-present imprint of the embossing rises back to the surface like a scar. I re-apply media, deepening the quality and texture as I draw back into the image. I selectively add definition through linear marks and erasures that follow the natural traces of material left by the flow of the water. The weight and murkiness in the charcoal layers provide a sense of ambiguity, contrasted with the physicality of the imprinted gloves. Through the exercise of folding, wringing, washing and drawing, I challenge the compulsion to hide hands dirtied through honest work and elevate seemingly mundane but necessary tasks by including them in my process.

The linens that I inherited were regularly used by the people who left them to me. I am aware that there is an indelible trace of them left within their fibers. In *Camera Lucida*, French literary theorist, Roland Barthes, says, "...clothing is perishable. It makes a second grave for the beloved being." He describes discovering his mother in old photographs and notes her accessories, as she was "dressed up – hat with a feather, gloves, delicate linen at wrist and throat..." He describes a kind of haunting in the photographed images of items that she kept on her dressing table, remembering the sounds those objects made when she was present and using them. "...an ivory powder box (I loved the sound of its lid), a cut-crystal flagon...a low chair, which is near my own bed..." In Barthes' perspective, and as a reference to fetishism and the power of things, even the imagined loss of perishable objects that were once in the possession of his loved one is a type of death (Barthes, 1980).

Similarly, in her work titled "Mother's", Miyako Ishiuchi memorializes her own mother, a woman who had a difficult life and with whom she was not always close, through 'portraits' of portions of her body, her clothing and her possessions, to include such intimate objects as dentures and girdles. Taken before and after her mother's death, the photographs
are monumental in their presentation and many are monochromatic, lending a sense of
gravity to the otherwise quiet, seemingly abandoned objects or empty articles of clothing.

The photographs are honest, not romanticized, and almost grotesque at times, but hold a
reverent connection with her mother's body, literally and figuratively. She does not
photograph her mother's face but concentrates on marks and scars, a quality that resonates
with my work. As Ishiuchi says, "Both the scars and the photographs are the manifestation
of sorrow for the many things that can never be retrieved and love for a life that is a
remembered present" (artblart.com).
CHAPTER FIVE

LOSS AND LONGING – Reflections of Love

Annette Messager's work is a "consideration of mortality, and the juxtaposition of loss with hope...This is the truth behind Messager's work: we are constantly haunted by a pervasive sense of loss, whether it be the absence of our childhood, of play, beauty or youth" (aestheticamagazine.com).

The first time I can remember valuing objects in the place of a person was in the winter of 1996 when I lost a close friend in an automobile accident. She was 24. The shock was completely devastating. For weeks there was no room in my mind for other thoughts. It was impossible to accept that time was still moving. I needed everything to stop so that I could make sense of what was happening; that she was suddenly and absolutely gone, and I was helpless to do anything about it. I was certain that I would never recover. In some ways I have not. No matter how faithfully I tell her story, no one will remember my friend in the way that I do. But I will remember her for as long as I am able. Photographs and small items associated with her immediately became priceless relics to be preserved. They were newly possessed of an almost reverential value, as if they were somehow still connected to her.

Joan Gibbons, in *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance*, describes this condition as fetishism. To the mourner, objects hold an ability to "transcend appearances, acquiring ... an imaginary status as a relic when depicting the dead". She further states that the fetish is understood in anthropology as "an object kept to facilitate mourning and remembrance" (Gibbons, 2007).

We will all face the reality of death and its implications at some point in our lives; and whether it is a beloved family member, an acquaintance, or the family pet, we will feel, in
varying degrees, the haunting sting of irrevocable loss. Stories passed through generations, fragments of memory, the remnants of existence and the impact that a human life potentially has on the rest of the human race is no trivial matter. It is my personal belief that each life, no matter how brief or long, unassuming or influential, holds as an inheritance layers of influence and significance. Thus, I use layers of old and new materials, context and media in my work to reflect this belief. Susan Stewart says in her book, *On Longing*,

“The pages falling off a calendar, the notches marked in a tree that no longer stands, these are the signs of the everyday, the effort to articulate difference through counting. Yet, it is precisely this counting that reduces difference to similarities that is designed to be ‘lost track of’. Such ‘counting’, such signifying, is drowned out by the silence of the ordinary.” (Stewart, 2012).

Illustrating the ultimate vanity of attempts to preserve, for *Gilt*, I gather bundles of cast-off foliage from the iconically-Southern Magnolia tree. I chose them not only for their significance to the region, but for their beautiful, undulating curves and the broad expanse of their surfaces as a substrate for drawing. Each leaf bears its own unique character, shape and pattern. And in a physical embodiment directly from nature of the cycle of life and death, each took part in nurturing a tree for a season and were eventually cast aside. I prepared each leaf for drawing with a wash of pouring medium and India ink. In a nod to the labor-intensive domestic art of making hand-crocheted decorative items, I carefully rendered fragmented images of lacy doilies and handkerchiefs onto each surface in white gel pen. The drawings are life size, lending to the illusion that the leaves were actually embroidered. The fracturing of the images causes the leaves to communicate visually to one another in new ways, as the eye tries to complete each picture. But the images are intentionally left
incomplete in an additional reflection of futility. As Ann Hamilton said, "Work is an act of attention" (Hamilton, 2019). Embellishing these decaying things as they become increasingly fragile and less resistant to handling reflects the human impulse to maintain; habits reflected in embalming, bronzing and photography. My efforts, however, are absolutely in vain, as I know, even as I am making them, that they will inevitably disintegrate, and the attention of my work will be lost.

Texas artist, Dario Robleto, said in a note to me over social media that he could see that "we both have an appreciation for where love and decay intertwine. They inform each other," he added, “to get closer to the truth" (Robleto, Instagram 2019). This unexpected show of solidarity from a southern contemporary artist whose work has inspired me for years was deeply edifying. In a talk on his work investigating the American Civil War, Robleto asks the question, "How does one bridge the gulf between the home front and the frontline, and how does one remain loving in the face of sorrow?" (Smithsonian Museum, 2013). His sculpture, *A Century of November*, is a framed replica of a child’s mourning dress composed of paper pulp made of actual letters from soldiers to their wives, specifically ones that mention longing for future children. The image of the unworn garment begs the question; can the child who was never conceived mourn his or her own non-existence (Berry, 2008)? It is a poignant reminder of the legacy of loss in the aftermath of any tragedy, not just in the immediate, but in the potential future.

Similarly, my works, *Legend 1* and *Legend 2* bear the exact ghostly images of aprons that appear to stand upright, as if propped up from behind. They are obviously inanimate objects, not intended to be directly anthropomorphic, but the ties of the aprons that once held them to the neck or waist of a person lend gestural impressions that read as the
appendages of a body. They possess a stoic, reverent presence that serves as a surrogate for a human form. The drawings are washed in charcoal and water layers that emphasize the folds of the fabric in both aprons, and the details of the lace and rickrack embellishment in Legend 2. I have added a shrouded layer of the cheesecloth over each, which speaks of domestic work in the kitchen, as the delicate cotton material is used in various types of food preparation and preservation. The material also provides a quiescent change in the appearance of these items, indicating that they are relegated to history and are no longer used. The ragged edges and cast shadows from the cloth are indicative of the inaccuracy of memory and serve as a reminder of the aprons' previous function as a barrier between busy women in their Sunday best and cast-iron pans of fried chicken or basins of soapy dishwater. The title, “Legend”, is associated with the archaic expectation that a woman distinguish herself in the home and the community through her cooking skills.

When someone dies, we who are left may attempt to define that person by what we think we know. We may even allow our memories to magnify their accomplishments or failures, effectively deifying or demonizing them based on either our personal experiences with them or the stories that we hear and accept about them. The effort to memorialize the passing of impermanent life with what we hope will be a permanent remembrance crosses over cultures, nations, races and creeds. Ultimately, our proclamation is that this life was significant, that it made an impression on us, that our lives will be forever altered in its absence, and that it should be remembered and deeply missed.
CHAPTER SIX

THE AMERICAN SOUTH

“… I find it essential to tie the culture of Southern folklore with writers and artists who preserve that culture in their own work. When viewed together we are reminded why the American South has inspired so many cultural treasures, and we begin to understand that the human voice is ultimately the key to unlocking the southern experience.”
– Katelyn Chapman

My strong concern about lineage and family can be read as peculiar to the American South. The American Civil War scourged both sides of the conflict with its massive casualty count, and sometimes left members of the same family in opposition to one another. Many young wives and children were left widowed and fatherless, leading to a culture painfully familiar with devastating loss. It is my observation that the region is still struggling to define itself in the wake of that conflict.

In my research on Southern contemporary artists, I found affinities with Virginia photographer Sally Mann. Through study of her work and her memoirs, I began to appreciate her unapologetic approach when speaking about her heritage and her femininity. Mann’s work deals with the issues that accompany hailing from this region with candid honesty. Having wrestled with dual feelings of pride and self-consciousness about my southern heritage and my role as a woman in the arts, I found Mann’s boldness both refreshing and reassuring. Mann calls the South a ‘haunted homeplace’, and she notes that it is different from the rest of the nation because it is the only part of America that suffered a defeat in war (Mann, 2016). She was quoted as saying, “To identify a person as a Southerner suggests not only that her history is inescapable and formative but that it is also impossibly present. Southerners live uneasily at the nexus between myth and reality, watching the
mishmash amalgam of sorrow, humility, honor, graciousness, and renegade defiance play out
against a backdrop of profligate physical beauty” (Artsy.net, 2016). In her memoir, Hold Still,
Mann also described a certain obsession that she has with birth, death and the cycle of life,
which is an ever-present subtext of all the phases of my own work.

In an illustration of irrevocable change, Veneration is dominated by a single formal
glove from which I removed the stitches along the seam and then spread open in an act of
permanent alteration. The glove's functionality is lost forever, but despite my actions, it is
still recognizable for what it had been. In fact, the mirror image of itself that the damage
caused lends to the illusion that it is a complete pair, except for the intact thumb portion
protruding awkwardly from the middle. The glove is imbedded in a halo of handmade paper
to suggest that it has become part of its surroundings, yet it retains its distinctiveness. The
surface of the glove, the handmade paper halo and the larger substrate are festooned with
drawings of root-like images, indicating the complexity of long years of history. The rubbing
of a decorative linen square with lace edges placed centrally on the paper creates a framing or
display effect. This gives the piece an altar-like appearance. The glove is reminiscent of
Christian iconography indicating the Hand of God often seen in ‘ex voto’ paintings, the
theme of which indicate God’s miraculous intervention in the lives of ordinary people
(mariolinasalvatori.com).

An artist whose work resonates with me, and who addresses the pain of the history
of his native culture is Anselm Kiefer. He deals with the experiences of his childhood,
scarred by the ravages of World War II, and the personal and collective memories and
responsibilities of artists emerging from post-Nazi Germany. This resonates with me as a
middle-aged person raised in the American South with all of the stories of its
accomplishments and abuses. In Barjac, France, Kiefer created a vast landscape of works that are architectural and sculptural in nature. They consist of installations, fields of derelict concrete buildings, and underground labyrinths, all of which are subject to decay with the passage of time. Into these works he incorporated the feeling of "an ancient civilization that has declined and been rediscovered". One of the major components of many of his sculptural installations is lead, "the only material", he says, "heavy enough to carry the weight of human history" (theartstory.org).

In Sanguine, the embossing of the decorative doily is, once again, central on the picture plane. The conte crayon and pastel colors that I chose for this work suggests some sort of body fluid, which is unnatural for the inanimate lacy object depicted. I selectively enhanced the details of embossing, lending a sense of presence and absence. The central situation of the elongated oval form resembles a torso or an oversized fingerprint, furthering the sense of a human presence. There is a cheesecloth ‘bandage’ securing the middle of the image, indicating that damage is done, and healing is beginning, a metaphor for the cultural struggles still plaguing the American South. There is evidence of my hand in the marks made by running water leaving traces of media below the bandage and in the linear drawing on the surface of the doily beneath the bandage. The title of this piece, 'sanguine', is defined as both ‘confident, optimistic and cheerful’ and ‘the color of dried blood’, a contradiction of hopefulness and devastation that I find fascinatingly relevant to my work.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

Ironically, through my commentary about the joys and burdens of inheritance and ownership, I have produced art that someone else will eventually inherit or own. This body of work and other things that I have made, words that I have said and written, items that I have collected and used, all will be residue that I leave to those who come after. But they will not endure forever. I admit that I do not have any resolution for this situation. The truth is that our grandest efforts to memorialize people, events and ideas through material things are in vain. Words can be forgotten, inscriptions in stone will weather, and memorials that stand in place for decades may lose their context. The poignancy and pain of present loss will fade, and sadly be superseded by newer losses over successive generations. Ultimately, memorialization in all its forms is put in place by and for the living to make sense of grief and keep a connection to those lost. Thus, the cycle continues. There is hope, however. In my view, life can be bloody and messy, but it is still worthwhile. And, eventually our own memories will be cherished, for a time, by those who care to keep them.
Figure 1: Gentility
Conte Crayon and Pastel on Embossed Paper, 21" x 24", 2019
Figure 2: *Slip*
Mixed Media on Paper, 24" x 22", 2019
Figure 3: *Fancy*
Charcoal on Embossed Paper, 36" x 41", 2018
Figure 4: Charity
Charcoal on Embossed Paper, 36" x 41", 2018
Figure 5: And Many More…
Mixed Media on Embossed Paper, 22" x 30", 2019
Figure 6: *Veil*
Mixed Media on Embossed Paper, 48" x 55", 2019
Figure 7: Mended
Mixed Media on Embossed Paper, 22" x 30", 2019
Figure 8: Broken/Bound
Mixed Media on Embossed Paper, 36" x 41", 2018
Figure 9: Vivisection
Mixed Media on Embossed Paper, 48" x 52", 2018
Figure 10: *Lineage*
Charcoal and Pastel on Embossed Paper, 16" x 22", 2018
Figure 11: *Wrung*
Mixed Media on Embossed Paper, 16" x 22", 2018
Figure 12: *Fruits*
Charcoal and Pastel on Embossed Paper, 16" x 22", 2018
Figure 13: *Gilt*
Mixed Media on Magnolia Leaves, 30" x 22" x 10", 2019
Figure 14: Legend I
Mixed Media on Embossed Paper, 24" x 33", 2018
Figure 15: Legend 2
Mixed Media on Embossed Paper, 24" x 33", 2019
Figure 16: *Veneration*
Mixed Media on Embossed Paper, 22" x 30", 2018
Figure 17: *Sanguine*
Mixed Media on Embossed Paper, 22" x 30", 2019
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