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by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the role of memory in identity development and discusses the creation of work that explores transitions that we go through in life, the effects of time on our relationships, and the shifts that happen within the person involved. The emphasis of my exploration is the investigation of states of being where the past is more than a memory, and the future is yet unclear.

Everyone grows through liminal states, especially in this time of globalization and social change. There are some rituals to help us transition into different social roles and stages of life, such as birthdays, weddings, or funerals, but these are not the only changes in an individual's life.

What happens if there is no ritual to assist with a transition? How does getting caught in the in-between state, a liminal hotspot, affect one's development and sense of identity? What happens when our stories become intertwined, and one decision affects generations? Is it possible to change these patterns?

Drawing inspiration from my own journey through cultures, relationships, and shifts in identity, Buddhist thoughts of interdependency, research of liminal periods and liminal hotspots, I have investigated in both: two-dimensional and sculptural work, the idea of interconnectivity and the effects of environments and relationships on our development. While experimenting with reproductive processes of making, such as printmaking and metal casting, I developed a vocabulary of symbols that allowed me to construct formal relationships between objects and images. This resulted in the creation of a singular body of work that functions as a sort of collection of souvenirs from various quiet, but pivotal points in my journey.

Introduction

Every person is at the center of their own existence; each is also intimately dependent upon and related to all others. Our personality is molded by an interaction of our inherited nature and the environment. Our background, a collection of particular cultural values, memories of pivotal points, experiences, and people, shape the way we view the world, influence our patterns, decisions, and are a part of what we call our identity.

Are we then no more than an ongoing assemblage of what used to be or what should have been- an accumulation of unresolved questions and trauma? Do our cumulative experiences define who we eventually become? Is our journey who we are? And if our identity is circumscribed by the journey, is it anchored by the landmarks or the times in between?

Birthdays, weddings, divorces, travel, first dates are clear landmarks; pivotal points in our timeline, often accompanied by rituals to help us transition. We tend to take pictures of significant moments and people we like, accumulate souvenirs and send postcards from places that we visit.

But there are also quiet, barely possible to pinpoint, moments in which shifts happen: during ordinary daily rituals, the heartaches we do not mention, the blink of an eye bliss that we wish had never ended. There is not always a way to mark those moments in time. Yet, something changes and all we are left with is a feeling, and then a memory of a feeling.

The artwork created for this thesis is a collection of many of these invisible pivotal points. They are souvenirs I have collected on my journey through time and space to my current self. They are symbols that stand for walks alone in the rain, for the voyagers that I have met, for stolen childhoods, for emotional labor that holds walls together, for daily rituals, for the past, for transition, for abandonment, for separation, for the heaviness of the lugging.

The processes that I chose to make this work, metal casting and printmaking were invented for reproduction and mass production of images, ideas, and objects. They were invented to create many good copies of originals. I employed these processes to reproduce my own memories which, altered by time and experience, inevitably resulted in unique images and objects.

Both processes involve a high level of repetition, a certain level of control in increasing chances for success, and an element of surprise. Naturally, production of multiples would involve many monotonous highly controlled steps, but even if the goal is to make a single object or an image, there is a ritualistic repetition in layering of the steps within both processes.

“One could not do without repetition in life, like the beating of the heart” - Kobo Abe

In order to achieve synthesis, one must turn the visual idea (object or image) inside out many times- literally, from positive into a negative, and from negative back into the positive. There is a natural abstraction that occurs during this cycle. The more you repeat, the more the original becomes removed, like a memory that gets reshaped each time depending on the audience with whom one shares it.

The symbols of journey, transition, passing time, and waiting are echoed through this body of work in ink on paper, cast aluminum, and cast iron. The use of found objects and found images is juxtaposed with handwritten text from personal letters and hand-modeled figures. Most of my found objects were translated into aluminum, a metal that was the most precious in the Victorian era when only the most respected of Napoleon’s guests received aluminum cutlery. Now aluminum is as common as a soda can. This type of transition of value through time supports my idea of reconstructed memory and old rules functioning in a new context, as well as the search for new patterns that can emerge in the reshaping of myth. Cast iron, especially in small quantities, alike glass is very brittle. Seduced by this surprising quality and its ability to change (rust) over time, I chose it to represent fragile memories of feelings. The prints function as an additional layer of information, similar to family pictures on somebody’s wall. These images were created by working with intaglio type photographic printmaking processes, cyanotype, silkscreen, and mono printing. This interdisciplinary approach allowed me to investigate the relationships between objects and materials, as well as develop a vocabulary of symbols that helped me construct formal relationships between two-dimensional and three-dimensional work.

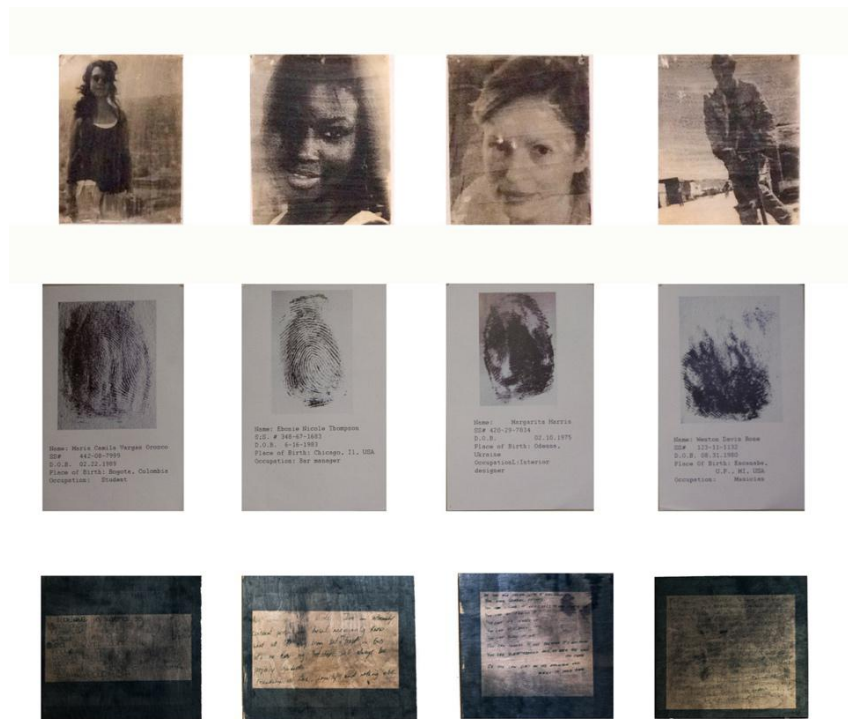


Image 1. *You see me. They see me. I see me.* 2013. Photo emulsion on mylar, Xerox print, Cyanotype on plywood.

Context and Influences

I began the research for this project with an interest in layers of identity. What can a social security number, a driver's license, a fingerprint, or even a credit score number truly say about a person? (Image 1) What is the importance of our genetics, childhood, culture, and relationships to the way we view the world or view ourselves? As someone who has experienced a radical change of culture and community, I have found myself obsessively trying to hold onto what had been familiar, while concurrently occupying a new space. It is these events in which fragile, intangible, impermanent and yet persistent connections to my past assert themselves, that I am continually fascinated. I am also amazed by the transformative power of paradox during otherwise quiet, seemingly insignificant moments and the shifts that are generated in its wake.

Essential to my explorations is Joseph Campbell's articulation of the hero's journey and J. Hollis' *The Middle Passage*. So too, the meaning and associations of liminality, liminal identities, liminal hotspots, were essential to the development of my ideas. A liminal hotspot, expressed generally from a psychosocial perspective, involves ever widening circles that become vicious. My life has been lived in these ever-widening circles that reach out across the world. At the risk of oversimplification, we might say that one enters the vicious circle of a liminal hotspot when one becomes stuck in the transition from one circle to the next, unable to integrate them into a wider unity. My artwork can be seen as the markers of these transitions from one reality to another.

Some of the artists who inspire me work with either the same or similar media, while others focus on solving similar problems, or both. Research of the artists Liliana Porter, Judy Pfaff, Julie Mehretu and Joyce Sylverstone informed my practice and helped me realize my ideas.

The connections Liliana Porter makes within her arrangements encouraged me to push for my own relationships. (Image 2, 3) Joyce Sylverstone's ripped paper mono-prints enriched my practice and visual vocabulary. (Image 4) Julie Mehretu's image complexity, layering, the idea of a mapping time, history, and culture was also an influential resource.

I admire Judy Pfaff's conduction of various materials, media, and processes into visual experimental jazz. I also strongly relate to her openness to be influenced by her surroundings, her chase after feeling, after experience. In the work *Missing Elizabeth and Jeanette*, 2011 Judy Pfaff talks about loss of her two good friends Elizabeth Murray and Jeanette Ingberman. (Image 5)



Image 2. Liliana Porter. *The Gardener*, 2016. Detail. Ceramic fragments and figurine on painted shelf. 75 x 14 x 6 in. Collection of Brook and Pam Smith, Louisville, KY
Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Ayers Bacino, Modern and Contemporary Latin American Art



Image 3. Liliana Porter. *The Gardener*, 2016. Ceramic fragments and figurine on painted shelf. 75 x 14 x 6 in. Collection of Brook and Pam Smith, Louisville, KY
Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Ayers Bacino, Modern and Contemporary Latin American Art



Image 4. Joyce Sylverstone. *Between 6*. 2014. Relief / monotype. 6" x 9"



Image 5. Judy Pfaff. *Missing Elizabeth and Jeanette*, lit, 2011. Steel wires, plastics and papers, shellacked Chinese paper lanterns, and fluorescent light. 38" x 30" x 17"

My Journey

Looking at above mentioned artists, I wanted my prints and sculptures to interact within an environment that connected them as a whole. I wanted to create a feeling of home, crowded with things, curio cabinet, etc. Then, focusing on connectors for these moments, I went through various stages of research and development. There was the grapevine stage, the chain period, and there was an everything moment, which climaxed with a rug, curtains, and plastic shelves from Walmart on the eve of the opening.

The grapevine, chains, and yarn left marks in my prints. Walmart left a dent in my memory and time. As much as one can say, “this all could have been avoided,” just as valid is an argument that it all was a necessary part of the journey. It was a necessary testing of boundaries and processes—my own, and everyone’s involved, and incorporated the building and testing of friendships and bonds within my current circle of peers and friends.

Through the ritual of the processes I came to the acceptance of my own shadows and good ideas. After all the boundaries had been found, just like the hero’s journey predicted, I came back to the beginning with new knowledge and understanding.

THE WORK

Symbols

Two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms became symbols of events and emotions that coalesced in the liminal space of my points of personal transition.

Broken glass is a point of exit and a point of entry: it is a goodbye and a hello, an ending and a beginning. What was got shattered, and now through the cracks, light and air can penetrate. It is also a spider web, which leads to a knitted web, which consists of yarn and ties.

Yarn and ties became a softer extension of the chain, carrying similar meaning of unity, bonds, bondage, strength in numbers, and repetition. Chain is a more dominant connector, and in my case, made out of circles.

Circles symbolize everyone being the center of their own universe, connected with other beings. They also stand for periods of time, social connections, and liminal hotspots.

Hand written letters are souvenirs and connectors to my parents and my closest friends before social media. They are precious artifacts and long-distance time travelers. They are markers of the personalities of each of the essential people in my life. (Image 6)



Image 6. 2001.05.10. 2018. Silkscreen/ monotype. 36''x24''

Rituals (Found objects)

Most of the objects to which I was drawn, were found at an antique shop in Maine. However, I did not realize their importance until I started working with the process of mold making. As I was coating the brush, clock, train, and the tricycle in pink silicone, then plaster, then ramming sand around the wax, I realized, that all these items are not just nostalgic randomly, they are symbols from my childhood.



Image 7. *From Her Daily Ritual. 2.1.* 2018. Monotype. 11"x18"



Image 8. *From Her Daily Ritual.* 2018. Cast aluminum, 10"x 3 1/2"x 1.5"

From Her Daily Ritual

Growing up, I watched my grandmother brush her long thick hair into a big bun in the morning and braid it for the night. Daily hair brushing was a ritual that transitioned her from a day to an evening state, but never into a new role. (Images 7, 8)

This was post WWII woman, refusing to accept the culture and identity of the “new” country, where she lived since the age of seven until she died. Her denial was quite strong, but I could never understand it. Nonetheless, it became a part of all of our lives.

At a much older age and under very different circumstances, I came to the United States for a short visit, thinking I would go back any minute. Fourteen years later, I realized that my “visit” was more permanent.

It was during the process of making this piece that I made peace with some of my own transitions. Working with a symbol of my grandmother’s daily ritual through my own ritual of making, resulted in the creation of a symbol of my own acceptance.

I left the mark of the price tag to comment on my use of a mass-produced object to talk about my own precious memory.



Image 9. *Sometime Before*. 2019. Installation View. Monotype, cast aluminum



Image 10. *Sometime Before*. 2018. Cast aluminum, 12"x 4"x 3".

Sometime Before

The clock is another item reminding of grandmother's house, because hers was the most elaborate clock in my environment as a child. It also became a symbol of a home, where placement of items and topics of conversations always remained the same.

With its main function removed, this clock now shows time the way it is in a memory or a photograph—frozen. Time has become eternal, never changing, never late, and never moving forward. This is time in ones mind and memory, transporting them to whenever and wherever they wish. (Images 9, 10)



Image 11. *From A to T*. 2019. Cast iron, print. Installation View.

From A to T

The tricycle is a child's form of transportation and escape. Also, despite being the first gift from my dad, it is more than a sentimental memory to me. It became a symbol for the passing of time, transition, and even rebellion and challenge.

From the time I was a child and the tricycle was my size, I tried to put the often removed chain back on, so I could ride it into the street. As an adult, it again tested the boundary of my skill and determination as I translated its parts into iron. (Images 11- 13)



Image 12. *From A to T*. Detail. 2018. Cast iron, 10”x 1”.



Image 13. *From A to T*. Detail. 2018. Monotype/ intaglio type/ silkscreen, 24”x 20”

Stolen from Childhood, or from Stolen Childhood

Like the tricycle, the train is a nostalgic form of transportation. With its main function removed, it becomes another transition stuck in time. The train will sit where you left it and will never come when you wait. (Image 14)

It is a symbol of my father’s stolen childhood—toys, warmth, and love he grew up wanting, but did not receive. As a result, he did not learn to give what he did not get. That affected all his relationships, including ours—I grew up fruitlessly waiting for him, the way he waited for his mother. This train stands for the heaviness of longing, hope, and failed expectations.



Image 14. *Stolen from Childhood, or from Stolen Childhood*. 2018. Cast aluminum, 5”x5”x 3”

Memories of Feelings (cast iron figures)

Leaving Any Minute. A Man with A Whiskey and A Suitcase

I am painfully familiar with someone who is in desperate pursuit of happiness – constantly on the road, searching, finding, and trying to escape –but essentially changing nothing. The suitcase never gets opened and sorted out, just lugged around.

The man is also waiting for the train. He is “leaving any minute,” but the legs are starting to crack, and the mind is becoming detached. No one would know, unless they got very close. (Image 15)

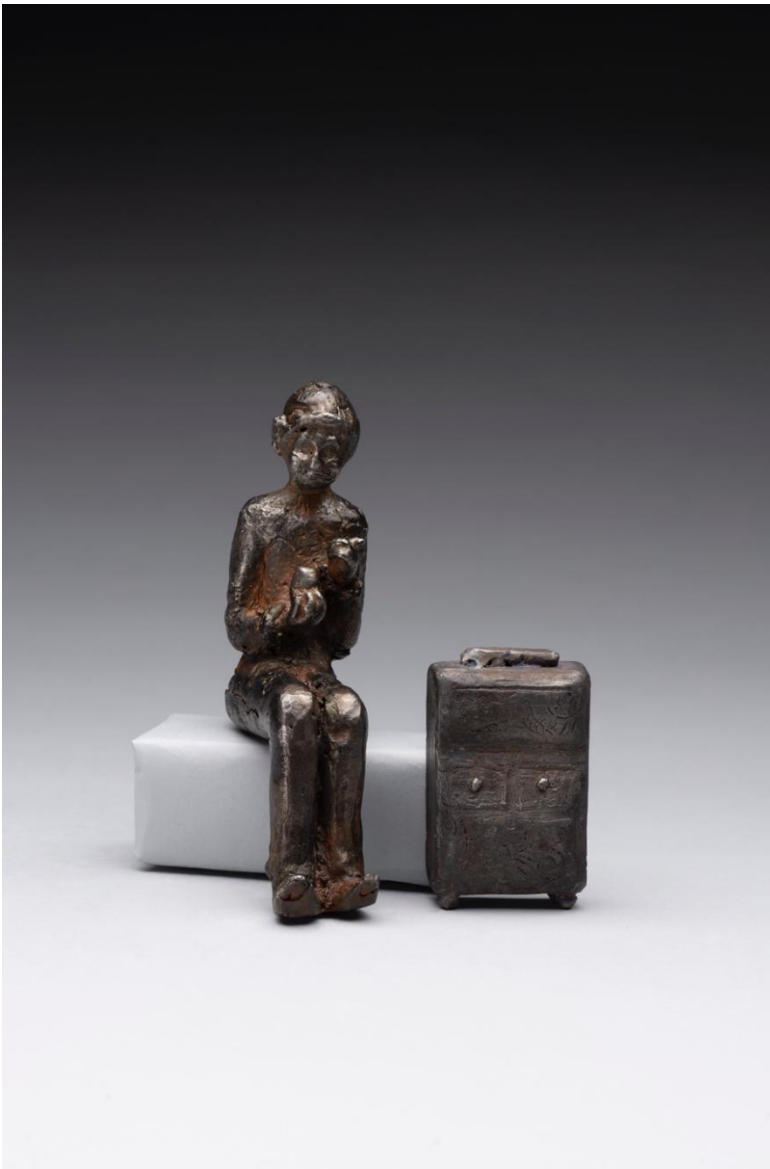


Image 15. *Leaving Any Minute. A Man with A Whiskey and A Suitcase*. 2017.
Cast iron, 4"x1", 1.5"x 0.5"

No Strings Attached

In the process of making this piece its meaning changed from being about natural balance to one of a coerced unit. It became about broken trust. Originally it was called *Lean on Me* and it had a perfect natural balance, until a significant outside interference shattered it.

After fixing the pieces and welding them into a steel ring, the relationship between the parts changed, and they are now facing in different directions, like wanting to escape, while being bound within the same ring. (Image 16)



Image 16. *No Strings Attached*. 2018. Cast iron, steel. 10".

Liberating Feeling of Having Nowhere to Be

The two cast iron figures are shaped like shadows when the sun is low. It is disconnect, parting, loss, and failure. (Images 17- 19)



Image 17. *Liberating Feeling of Having Nowhere to Be*. 2019. Installation view. Monotype, cast iron figures



Image 18. *Liberating Feeling of Having Nowhere to Be*, 2017. Cast iron, 4"x 2"



Image 19. *Liberating Feeling of Having Nowhere to Be*. 2017. Detail. Cast iron, 6"x 1"



Image 20. *Her*. 2017. Cast iron, steel. 6”x 5”



Image 21. *Her.2.1.* 2019. Monotype. 14”x 12”

Her

This piece is about confidence on the outside and redefining what is beautiful. Though gender role question is becoming somewhat outdated, I come from a society with rather strict understanding of gender roles. Scars, getting angry, and heavy labor, including carrying your bags, were for boys. Proper nails, being sweet, and looking pretty was a girl’s worry. I never liked that. “Her” is a challenger- it is my alter ego.

“Her” is also my 24-year-old friend who has all the confidence in the world, on the outside. “Her” is a girl stepping into a room full of people, or a dancer on the edge of the stage. “Her” a girl waiting for a cab at 7 am, after a night of work or a party. (Images 20, 21)



Image 22. *Emotional labor*. 2018- 2019. Fabricated steel, chain, silver yarn, ribbon, glass. 72'x 20"

Emotional labor

This piece emerged from an overwhelming sense of sadness- thinking about all the work, sleepless nights, and unfair situations women weather. Originally, I had chained the teardrops. Then crochet around the chains, because came to realize that emotional labor, so heavily associated with women, is not just exclusive to women. It may be making things pretty, but it is not just submitting to whatever life throws at one in any form of abuse. It is self-control, discipline, patience, and wisdom. It is willingness to change the pattern. It is standing up and leading by example. It is knowing that you have the inner strength to perform that “invisible” job, and taking pride in it.

The welded steel frame is what holds the delicate crocheted silver doilies and ephemeral glass teardrops. Emotional labor is what holds the walls together. (Image 22)

Conclusion

While I succeeded in producing the body of work that I originally proposed, the final installation of the work resulted in a big surprise. I found that it was not easy to accept a clean quiet space as my own. My ability to create such a space made me realize that I may have more control over the environment than I think, and that I can apply that logic to all aspects of life.

The work had been created many months prior to the exhibition, but I continually felt that it had not been “good enough.” Much like myself, it seemed to have been in a post-production transitional stage. It always reflected everything I was becoming and experiencing. When I was just ‘making noise’, my work was doing the same. When I was feeling insecure, all my spaces were crowded. There was always a very dynamic interaction between being and making.

The final installation surprised me with its quiet cleanliness. The pieces and the prints were given room to talk, to be noticed, and to be heard. They existed, as I existed, standing on display in the middle of quiet white room, honestly who they were.

This should not have been therapy, but it came a full circle. I started my research about layers of identity, drawing inspiration from people close to me, stories they have shared, as well as my own life, and my relationships.

I planned to tell a story, but had no idea that making that story would uncover so much. The process of making allowed me to learn about the way I get obsessed, crave chance, surprise, and instability. The way attraction to the impossible applies to all my relationships. I learned about the anxiety, lack of trust, and fear of being seen that made me desire to crowd my spaces. I learned the importance of breathing space and understanding noise.

This had been an absolute journey into the unknown. Where the next step was only guessed, not even estimated, where I did not know what would happen in the end, where the only constant was the goal and direction to move forward. How does one know what forward is? Maybe one is just moving in a circle, like the man with the suitcase? Does transition without ritual ever end? It may when one commits to arrival.

I chose the processes and materials that fit best with my concept and allowed me to investigate the effects of time on our memories, traditions, and relationships. The ritualistic repetition within the processes became my own ritual of letting go and accepting the need for new patterns.

These ideas and investigation of direct printing has led me to a new body of work that exemplifies *Say It Like It Is*. (Images 23, 24) I am still drawn to the use of the same symbols, but am looking towards further transformation of their meaning by incorporating associated materials and textures in the printing process. I am pushing formal conversation between 2D and 3D work further with more direct sculptural

processes as well. I am relating shapes and forms in stone and fabricated steel, which stemmed from *Emotional labor* and *Unexamined Life*.

“One could not do without repetition in life, like the beating of the heart, but it was also true that the beating of the heart was not all there was to life.” - Kobo Abe.



Image 23. *Her. 3.0.* 2019. Monotype 48"x36"



Image 24. *Hope.* 2019. Monotype 48"x36"

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