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Epilogue to Resonance

by

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, New York

April 26, 2021

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Abstract

Epilogue to Resonance

B.F.A. Photography, University of Hartford, Hartford Art School, January 2019

M.F.A. Photography and Related Media, Rochester Institute of Technology, May 2021

Epilogue to Resonance is a body of photographic work that focuses on how the resonance of imagery can be used as a tool for communication. This thesis expounds upon that idea, reflecting on photography as a medium to convey emotional affect and thought in a non-verbal form. After situating the photographic project within the historical moment of the 2020-21 coronavirus pandemic, this thesis goes on to analyze historical, psychological, and philosophical groundings as they relate to the processing of thoughts in the mind. This is accomplished through research into concepts by Thomas Nagel, and Stephen Kosslyn, and through interviews with, Temple Grandin, Charles Kochan, and others. It discusses ideas of the subjective experience, thinking in pictures, how images are imprinted in the mind, and a new concept of vertex memory. It further reflects on how verbal communication created invisible barriers that the author overcame through the visual language of photography. *Epilogue to Resonance* was presented as a poem of visual significance. The work was displayed in various sizes and heights adding physical undulation and non-linear connections between each photograph on the wall. In addition, a portfolio of prints was displayed which viewers could touch and re-sequence, allowing them to free associate with the photographs.



Figure 1. *Epilogue to Resonance*, Installation View, April 2-11, 2021. Rochester, NY.
<https://www.robertarthurstone.com>

Epilogue to Resonance

Driven by my desire to better relate to others, my thesis focuses on how photography can be utilized as a tool for communication. Furthermore, this body of work is also about my desire to share emotions and visual thoughts that cannot be verbalized. This thesis discusses ideas of the subjective experience, thinking in pictures, how images are imprinted in the mind, and vertex memory. I utilize these and other tools to communicate my thoughts to the audience through the visual language of photography.

I spent the first few months of the 2020 pandemic in a five-hundred square foot room that felt more like a generously sized prison cell than a home. When I was finally allowed escape, I returned to the home of my mother, only to encounter an even larger cell of my own making. Taking steps to overcome my fears, I slowly ventured out into the world as if a child. First the back porch, then the back yard, eventually walks through my neighborhood. I was reminded of my connection to nature, the safe space of my youth, filled with life but absent of other humans whom I had grown to fear. I began using my camera as a way to analyze myself. The more I photographed, the more I felt as though I was finding a way to expose my thoughts in a visual exercise – a new project began to take shape. I had discovered a new kind of communication in which my images became purposeful filters for my emotional state of experience.

I have difficulty verbalizing my emotional states of being. The ‘subjective experience’, or ‘subjective character of experience’ essentially boils down to the idea that our experience is one that by its very nature can only be seen from a single point of view. This may seem self-evident,

but the idea of experience as a single point of view was not solidified until the mid 1970s by the American philosopher Thomas Nagel. Nagel used bats to clarify this phenomenon. He explained that although we and they are both mammals, we cannot know what experiencing life as a bat is like, therefore we cannot ever truly know what it is like to be a bat.¹ Trying to describe what it is like to be a bat is futile, even negligent, to assume or claim that we can. Futile in that we can never truly “grok”² the bat’s experience, and negligent in that often in life people make decisions based on the false assumption that they understand what another has experienced. This can lead to a further breakdown within the exchange.

My subjective experience exists in a form that not everyone shares, in pictures. The thoughts in my mind are not fixed, nor are they verbally concrete, instead they exist as a sequence of disjointed images. Through *Epilogue to Resonance*, I am creating an experience that visually relates to the affective states I often go through. I refer to affect several times within this paper, and it may be helpful for the reader to know that I am referring to affect as emotion, and not effect, which is change as a result of an external cause; there is important subtlety in the difference.

I have always struggled with communication. As a child I often found it easier to talk to adults than to peers. Rather than relating to others, my new work allows others to relate to me via my frame of reference, the image. A visual translation of my mental journey. The occurrence of being in my mind in pictures.

¹ Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”

² Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

Grok /'grɒk/ is a neologism coined by American writer Robert A. Heinlein in his 1961 science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*. In it, Heinlein says that 'Grok' means to understand so thoroughly that the observer becomes a part of the observed—to merge, blend, intermarry, lose identity in group experience. It means almost everything that we mean by religion, philosophy, and science and it means as little to us as color does to a blind man.

While speaking about my experience with, Charles Kochan, a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst, he explains part of the journey that takes place in the mind of people who think in pictures. “It's not logical, in terms of the sequencing of imagery, it's abstract, idiosyncratic, based on the individual's interpretation of it.”³ He goes on to describe an example of this that left me floored, it is exactly how I experience a visual thought.

“End result, classroom. So, you're ending in [a classroom], but where you're starting from is a picture of dust. The dust is a picture of dust that started in your bedroom and then from that image you took a zoomed out shot of your room, and the dust is in there, but you can't see the dust. Then there's a light in the corner of the room that catches your eye and reminds you of the sunlight that you once saw. Then there's an image of sun and that's shining really brightly. Then from there, there's a, like a hue of purple or blue and that purple or blue reminds you of the potatoes that you tried the other day that were blue that you've never had before. It was really cool, and then it was a link to your homework, and then your homework links to the classroom. So, it's just like these really in [sic] idiosyncratic thought sequences. But perfectly it makes sense to you, but it makes no sense to anyone else without context.”⁴

Kochan suggests that the challenge for me might be to sequence my work in such a way that “it provides a context, but without providing a context.”⁵

There are moments of time where I ponder fragments of thought. Moments that can spark recollections. In (fig. 2.), what exists between the droplets of water is a state of

³ Kochan, Interview by Robert Stone..

⁴ Kochan.

⁵ Kochan.

consciousness. A pause to contemplate the inevitability of moments between moments. A meditative state in which thoughts and ideas layer themselves and become both clear and unclear within me. A visual metaphor for the state of holding things both in focus and out of focus, in the light, and falling from that light. A complex weave of moments within the moment itself.



Figure 2. *Untitled*. Photograph by Robert Stone, June 4, 2020. Trumbull, CT.

Another challenge I face with this work is simply revealing part of myself to the world. Jacquelyn Fishburne, professor at Columbus College of Art & Design, said, “I think we as artists are doing that with our work. How do we invite people in? To spaces that are vulnerable or

intimate, or that we don't have the words for just yet?"⁶ Photography itself is a medium without words. Words can be applied to the image, but the image itself is a revealing space that allows a glimpse into the artist's frame of view. As artists, sharing those with other people, allowing people into your mental state, while also allowing them to explore their own mental state is really important. It allows them to understand elements to themselves that they may not otherwise have had insight into.

What I often see is more of a thought than it is an image. For example, in *fossil* (fig. 3.), some may only see a banal yard and a fence, but I see the impending struggle of life in the fossil of the trees stripped away. The dominance of humanity on the land, and the emotional weight I feel as I yearn for a deeper connection to nature. Simultaneously I feel the opposing external pressure to fit in with society by following suit in the trajectory of that dominant structure.

⁶ Fishburne, Interview by Robert Stone.



Figure 3. *Fossil*. Photograph by Robert Stone, August 4, 2020. Trumbull, CT.

Some of this same weight can be felt in the work of photographer Roger Merten. Specifically in his work of landscapes and interior spaces.⁷ Merten, like myself, grew up in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He came to the Rochester Institute of Technology in the early 1960s and studied afterward at the Visual Studies Workshop receiving his BFA and MFA respectively. He spent the remainder of his life as a professor at the University of Rochester.⁸ Merten received both a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, and two National Endowment for the

⁷ Allen, Interview by Robert Stone.

⁸ Light Work Collection, “Roger Merten.”

Arts grants.⁹ While in Rochester, he was drawn to the banal nature of the landscapes of humanity and found beauty in the everyday life around him. What strikes me most when reading about him is just how fascinated he seemed to be about the details of things. He moved to an 8x10 camera, not because it fit the subjects he was interested in, so much as it allowed him to bring out the details of things he wanted noticed by the viewer. He would drive around all day looking for something calling out to him, constantly driving and taking pictures, much like the way I work when photographing the areas I inhabit.¹⁰

I never knew him, but I feel like I know him intimately. He died the year I graduated high school. What does it mean when a person's path seems to mimic your own? Small details about his persona seem to mirror my own. He enjoyed writing postcards with a fountain pen, and became irritated when others did not see the small details that he saw in his work. He also wanted to help people, he was an avid proponent of the Artist-in-Residence program at Light Work, and questioned suburbia – but also found a sort-of beauty in its grace.¹¹

Artist Seth Price said, “photography itself is both distant and present.”¹² The narrative that the photograph tells does not exist solely in the present moment. It is a culmination of all associative imagery that exists within the experiential memory of the viewer,¹³ and perhaps even our ancestral memory.¹⁴ Meaning, there is an inherent genetic memory that we carry from generations of early humans. It explains the reason why, for example, some people enjoy the taste of food cooked over a wood fire, over that of a gas grill; an ancestral memory is locked in

⁹ Smithsonian American Art Museum, “Roger Mertin.”

¹⁰ Light Work Collection, “Roger Mertin.”

¹¹ Light Work Collection.

¹² Museum of Modern Art, “What Does the World Look Like in 2020?”

¹³ Dahl, D. W., Chattopadhyay, A., & Gom, G. J., “The Use of Visual Mental Imagery in New Product Design.”

¹⁴ Mitchell, K. J., & Johnson, M. K., *Source Monitoring: Attributing Mental Experiences*.

our genetic code of historical experience.¹⁵ This can be further complicated however, by the presence of false or generated memories that occur through our experiences in this present life, causing us to create re-remembered mental images along with imagined ones.¹⁶ This confluence of perceptual detail from actual past experiences and imagined experiences, may cause our memory to misattribute the real from the imagined.¹⁷

The benefit of this for making photographs is that I can utilize this association between the real and the imagined - invoking ephemeral details within the image or sequence of images, balancing the real and the unreal. Understanding that a viewer's own recollection of what they have previously seen may be faulty because of their own imagining, allows me to create a dialogue with their memories. This mechanism of mimetic layering is a form of imitation. I call the visceral visual link of the immediate experience and the affect of the self's own remembering of previous experiences, vertex memory. This vertex memory is the meeting point at which we have come thus far in our experiential memory between us and the thing we are observing. Similar visual experiences congress with one another as we arrive at the current moment in time. This is the vertex of our current memory of experience. The important and distinct thing to note about vertex memory is that it can only be momentary and immediate.

Memory can also be familial. Certain kinds of memory, in particular, the more potent, such as; histories of trauma, proliferation of visual-cultural attaché,¹⁸ and generational wealth or poverty, can be passed down from one generation to another unconsciously.¹⁹ Marianne Hirsch

¹⁵ Brown and Phu, *Feeling Photography*.

¹⁶ Dahl, D. W., Chattopadhyay, A., & Gom, G. J., "The Use of Visual Mental Imagery in New Product Design."

¹⁷ Mitchell, K. J., & Johnson, M. K., *Source Monitoring: Attributing Mental Experiences.*, 179–95.

¹⁸ Representative objects associated with the culture.

¹⁹ Brown and Phu, *Feeling Photography*. 326-31.

calls these experiences of former generations, postmemory.²⁰ Not just a memory, but a projection of the resonance of trauma and deep seeded experiences. Being conscious of these visual histories does, however, create potential barriers - but also connections to the affect the work may instill in the viewer. It encourages me to explore more thoroughly many possible visual futures than that of my own projections of what I, myself, see in the work. I become more informed on how the viewer might interpret the work by co-joining the experiences of others with my own.

I use this mechanism in *Mongo* (fig. 4.), an image of a green bird. A simple metaphor in the experience of loss and of death. Particularly in this past year when so many have had to face this kind of loss in new and unprecedented ways, the cultural burial practices that we each follow had to be altered. There rests in this image an unsettling point of reference. The uncomfortable lighting, the placement of the plant in a space with grey walls as if we are confined within the place that it occupies. The viewer and I can both see the odd position of the bird on what appears to be a potted tree of some kind. We can presume perhaps that, like in some burial practices, the bird will be placed beneath the tree as a symbol of rebirth; the roots of the tree drawing strength from the bird's body. We might also question, was the bird left atop the plant, or did it simply stop there and make its final rest? Understanding not only the nature of how others might experience loss, but also the varying ways in which mourning is practiced, can better allow me to place this image within a greater context and to connect my experience to others.

²⁰ Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory."



Figure 4. *Mongo*. Photograph by Robert Stone, May 15, 2020. Rochester, NY.

Although I love the idea of the story, I was never a fast reader. In my youth I read and wrote poetry. Poems gave me the brevity in text, while allowing a slow pace to contemplate the deep meaning of things. Some of my favorite authors were poets like Jorie Graham and Margaret Atwood. I did not realize the full impact nor related qualities that poetry and photography shared until much later. I now see photography as visual poetry. The way images and sequencing have visual arcs, the ebb and flow of stanzas. My attachment to that form of creation stems from the way my brain forms stories. In poetry by the aforementioned authors,

there is disjointed yet descriptive imagery that allows my mind to form pictures of scenes and make connection through leaps in thought. My mind is like an ever-playing montage of cinema and still image, filled with flashes of previous experiences. Spliced into that are fantasies and re-remembering of events; such that there are moments where I cannot tell the real, from the imagined.

I was unaware until recently that what drew me to photography was the way in which I form thoughts. This cinema-like memory is not as much a moving picture, but rather a selection of movie still frames, interspliced, that my mind flashes through as I think and perceive the world. Contrary to this, my ability to auditorily process what people say to me is severely deficient. I have encountered numerous instances where people believe, because I am good with words, that I must be good at language. Quite the opposite – what initially drew me to stories and poetry was not text, but rather the visuals that were created as my mind translated the words into meaning.

Temple Grandin discusses this way of processing the world in her book *Thinking in Pictures: My life with Autism*.²¹ In the book she describes how she was better able to design equipment by visualizing the entire design in her head. She does not imagine a crude doodle, but rather, the images she sees in her mind look like computer aided designs, three dimensional objects that can be viewed from all angles, assemblages of parts that can be linked and unlinked, like a three-dimensional model of a car engine separated down to each individual bolt. When speaking with Grandin, she explained to me that there are two types of visual thinkers, the object visualizer, and the visual special.²² The former observes the full image wholistically, while the

²¹ Grandin and Sacks, *Thinking in Pictures, Expanded Edition*.

²² Grandin, Interview by Robert Stone.

latter is how my mind imagines things, broken down piece by piece, disassembled and analyzed as separate parts – fit together. This is most likely the way my patrilineal line thinks as well, explaining why they are all engineers. Stephen Kosslyn’s study of visual thinking describes this model as the “cathode-ray tube (CRT) metaphor”, in which the mind’s eye’s interpretive function analyzes the shape of the object when we first encounter it. When we first see them, our mind creates a crude “surface representation”, and then through iterations of seeing similar objects, such as a braid in someone’s hair, we create a “deep representation” in our long-term memory. This is the process by which we identify and elaborate on commonalities and differences between objects we encounter in the world, such as mentally comparing apples to oranges.²³

When I chose the art path, rather than the engineering path of my forebearers, I did so because of a desire to connect with others – to communicate in the way my mind actually thought. However, the amount of cinematic information that flows through my mind in a brief moment is tremendous. In addition, the sequence of these flashes of imagery is not always linear, but rather a sporadic *mélange* of interconnected pieces. When I attempt to convert these images into words, the disparate pieces often come out as verbal stumbling. Through my practice in photography, I have found a way to speak via visual comparison and relationships. Donald Perrin describes this as, “simultaneous images interact[ing] upon each other *at the same time* [...]”²⁴

Synthesizing an entire concept with so many moving parts into a single thought or idea in words has been my greatest challenge. Photography allows me the brevity of instance; to

²³ Kosslyn, *Image and Mind*.

²⁴ Perrin, “A Theory of Multiple-Image Communication,” 368–82.

communicate both an emotion and multiple thoughts into a single moment. In *Braiding Daffodils* (fig. 5.), we see the edge of a garden. A figure in the upper left corner kneels on a pad at grass' edge. They are in the midst of braiding daffodils – their weathered hands still capable of creating beauty. Near a post covered with vines, we see a heart shaped rock in the center of the image. The base of the post reveals a weathered wood previously hidden by the plant life surrounding it. Finished braids fan out in every direction in a beautiful display of green and yellow undulating leaves. The image would be timeless if it were not for the singular note of a solar light, grounding it in the current era. The image contains the wisdom of age in the figure's hands; the eternal cycle of life as the dying daffodils are prepared for their final removal; the heart shaped rock in our imaginative and associative visions, like figures that we see in clouds. The post reflects on how we often only take care of the parts of us that can be seen; the surface of things freshly painted, but dig a little deeper and we are worn from time. The photograph also speaks to the rituals we have developed to deal with trauma and loss – the customs by which we process trauma together. These and many other thoughts passed through my mind as I captured this moment. Feelings are less concrete in their verbal definitions; it can be difficult for some to express feelings as words. Through a sequence of these expressive images, I am able to better bridge the gap of communication with the viewer by creating pointers of significance through the objects they contain.



Figure 5. *Braiding Daffodils*. Photograph by Robert Stone, June 6, 2020. Trumbull, CT.

Minor White, in his eloquence, spoke on a photograph he made of rocks, saying, “While rocks were photographed, the subject of the sequence is not rocks; [...] they are pointers to the significance. The meaning appears in the spaces between the images, in the mood they raise in the beholder. The flow of the sequence eddies in the river of his associations as he passes from picture to picture. The rocks and the photographs are only objects upon which significance is spread like sheets on the ground to dry.”²⁵ White draws attention to the significance of the

²⁵ Hall, “Minor White Rites & Passages,” 12.

sequence, pointing out that the mood of the viewer is created as they associate one image from the next. As this is not the first rock the viewer has encountered, the recollection of past rocks seen in the mind's eye becomes the vertex memory of experiences of that individual in that moment. They become an extension of the emotional connection to the rocks, seen more presently in White's images.

There is an inception point to feelings that begin with the first visual experience a person has, and builds as they experience new visual memories. The mind categorizes and associates visual memories and attaches emotive states to the visual catalogue. These associations ebb and flow as new visual input and stimuli are built. In photography, and through the repetitious nature of the gallery wall or the photobook, visual situations allow the viewer to reach an intended state of feeling; an associative response is engendered in the viewer, however sublime and intangible that feeling may be.

Epilogue to Resonance was presented as a poem of visual significance. This sense of poetic flow was emphasized in the installation of the work which was displayed in various sizes and heights. This created both visual undulation and non-linear connections between each photograph on the wall. A portfolio of prints was also displayed which the viewer could touch and re-sequence, allowing them to free associate with the work.

Although this series is ongoing, it concludes the end of an act. It is an epilogue to the thirty some-odd years that I have spent unsure of why I was unable to understand others, and why they were unable to understand me. It concludes a life spent with invisible barriers. It also parallels the end of a chapter in our lives. A time where we were free to roam without physical barriers. Although this thesis is not directly about the occurrences of the 2020 pandemic, it does

reflect my thoughts and emotional response to it. This work would not exist if it were not for the forced isolation, anxiety, sadness, and introspection that occurred because of this global experience.



Figure 1. *Epilogue to Resonance*, Installation View, April 2-11, 2021. Rochester, NY.



Figure 2. *Untitled*. Photograph by Robert Stone, June 4, 2020. Trumbull, CT.



Figure 3. *Fossil*. Photograph by Robert Stone, August 4, 2020. Trumbull, CT.



Figure 4. *Mongo*. Photograph by Robert Stone, May 15, 2020. Rochester, NY.



Figure 5. *Braiding Daffodils*. Photograph by Robert Stone, June 6, 2020. Trumbull, CT.



Figure 6. *Untitled*. Photograph by Robert Stone, August 1, 2020. Trumbull, CT.



Figure 7. *Untitled*. Photograph by Robert Stone, June 6, 2020. Trumbull, CT.



Figure 8. *Untitled*. Photograph by Robert Stone, October 23, 2020. Rochester, NY.



Figure 9. *Untitled*. Photograph by Robert Stone, January 4, 2021. Trumbull, CT.



Figure 10. *Untitled*. Photograph by Robert Stone, July 15, 2020. Kent, CT.



Figure 11. *Untitled*. Photograph by Robert Stone, August 4, 2020. Trumbull, CT.



Figure 12. *Untitled*. Photograph by Robert Stone, August 3, 2020. Trumbull, CT.



Figure 13. *Untitled*. Photograph by Robert Stone, October 23, 2020. West Henrietta, NY.



Figure 14. *Epilogue to Resonance*, Installation View, Opening Night, April 2, 2021. Rochester, NY.



Figure 15. *Epilogue to Resonance*, Installation View, Main Wall, April 2-11, 2021. Rochester, NY.

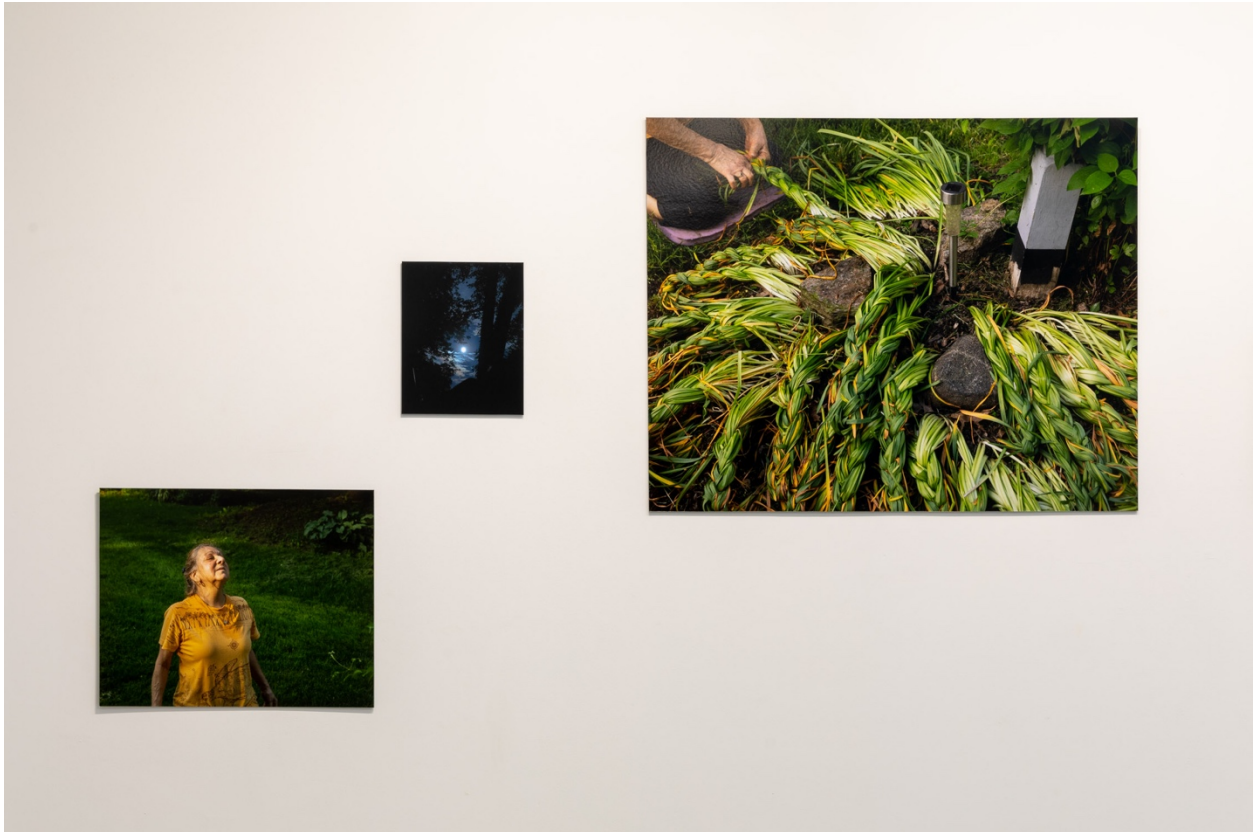


Figure 16 & 17. *Epilogue to Resonance*, Installation Closeup, April 2-11, 2021. Rochester, NY.



Figure 18. *Epilogue to Resonance*, Portfolio and Secondary Wall, April 2-11, 2021. Rochester, NY.



Figure 19. *Epilogue to Resonance*, Portfolio View Closeup, April 2-11, 2021. Rochester, NY.

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