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CONNECTIONS

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the connections between us as parents, children, and spouses. These relationships often involve choices to sacrifice pleasure and want for stability and the meeting of other's needs. They also encompass challenges overcome as well as dreams and wishes never achieved. These connections, I have come to believe, are at the core of what makes us who we are.

In my own life as a child, wife, mother, and artist the issues related to relationships and connections to others have defined the parameters of my journey. Bonds that link or separate us, desire, privilege, tribulation, and solace have all played a critical role. In this body of work, I am focusing on the desires of my own ego versus the needs of all others in the relationships that define my past and present. The two-dimensional prints and installation works that constitute this body of work convey the discoveries and connections that define my passage as an artist and a mother and wife. They use artifacts and images from times in my life that hold emotional and therapeutic meaning to me and that I believe many others, women in particular, can share in.

The foundation of my exploration is a collection of memorabilia, photographs, and household items through which I explore events, both happy and painful, that have had the most profound effect on my personal worldview. All this exploration will take place using experimental printmaking techniques. The installation of these images will also incorporate some actual household items in combination with my prints. Inevitably, my challenges through the 2020 Covid 19 lockdown will become crucial in my decision to depict my work in a gallery setting using Photoshop.

INTRODUCTION

Family can make you or break you: For me it was both. When I was two and a half, I woke in the middle of the night to see my mom packing up my father's belongings, namely his dishes, on the living room table. I asked her what she was doing. She explained that he was moving out, and with her answer, I turned and went back to bed. The unforeseen consequences of my parents' decisions would involve a life of searching for my family connections.

My mother would go on to marry two other negligent and abusive stepfathers. After each husband and moving on average of once every two years my mother would say, "We were going on an adventure." She is a holocaust survivor, and believes that "a child is resilient" and could thus move through any obstacle. In her early seventies, she started therapy to revisit her childhood: one that I am positive was far from irrepressible. Children may be resilient, but they can still become traumatized as she, a holocaust survivor, surely was. She moved through her younger life as a tough, self-motivated, self-employed, and occasionally single parent. She was small in stature but big in personality: I can confidently say she had kahunas.

I was born in the state of Colorado and shortly after my dad left, my mother and I would move to Alaska. My childhood was spent traveling from Alaska to Germany, back to Alaska and then to New York State. It was not until nineteen ninety-four, when I purchased my home, that I would experience what people call laying down roots. Although I was not a survivor of the holocaust, inadvertently that trauma presented itself in the way my mother raised me. She continually emphasized death, doom, and destruction. I feel that she did her best, but I have often questioned my own resiliency. It is this conflict, that, I have addressed within my art in a search for answers.

Not only is my work about connections to motherhood, past and present, but also to the disconnect that is my family. From early childhood memories pretending to be Cinderella scrubbing the grand staircase, daydreaming of being rescued to the life I now have with my spouse and children, my work has been an exploration of the personal anguish I have tried to deal with and the answers to the questions about what has made me the person I have become.

CONTENT AND INFLUENCES

I married my best friend, Brian, and we had two boys, Brian and Zachary. At that time, I was only self-employed, but my husband and I were able to take turns being stay-at-home parents. For someone who is independent and constantly driven to learn the experience of being a parent proved to be the most challenging and difficult. My role as a parent and business owner forced me to defer my dream of becoming an artist with the hope that someday I would be able to revisit it. Between working, cooking, cleaning and driving the kids to school while running a business, my dreams could no longer be for myself. The commitment to raise a healthy and happy family was dependent on my choices and willing sacrifice.

My selfish desire to shine and be heard as an individual, to feel important, validated, may seem unimportant to some. To some, family alone is the reward that confirms and validates. For me, my family came before my personal desires. I suppressed goals that lay in the recesses of my mind while I raised my family. As a parent, I agonized about how to break the learned cycle of abuse and neglect that had been my childhood, striving to become more than a carbon copy of my parents. The struggle to recognize my history and implement change was one of the most difficult that I have ever faced. I also found that this change was not instantaneous, as it is far more difficult to

reprogram nature and nurture. Resilience was my sole act of survival. I have also come to recognize that happy memories that I do not want to forget exist alongside those debilitating recollections locked up and chained behind the door inside my head, connected through time, existing in both my photographs and memories as the true reality of my family.

The connections between work, home, parents, children, and the necessities of survival verses desire is what *CONNECTIONS* is exploring. Time is a factor for learning. It is time and experiences that shapes who we become as mature adults. This struggle to convey my experiences was profound as I initiated this body of work. I spent hundreds of hours combing through family photos and memorabilia along with dozens more photographs of a messy home and myself. Searching for the right Items around the house to capture a lifetime of memories and suppressed feelings was a jumbled mess. As I strove to make sense of these things and emotions they invoked, I found myself drawn to my broom resting in the corner of my kitchen. Although it was not immediately apparent, the broom would become central to my search for answers. As I raised my family, I spent hours each day sweeping the floors and doing the dishes as I cooked and cleaned. So many of the best and worst memories I have are from the activities of this one room and the broom became a trigger for and artifact of all of these.

Experiences ranging from the collection of my father's dishes, my babies aging, becoming men, leading their own lives, the death of both my father and stepmother, the decisions of my mother and her spouses, all became references and resources for my imagery. I found that I had to share my imperfect life and its hidden messes. In the process, I have come to realize, as many parents do, that when I made the decision to sacrifice my dreams to give my children stability, it was not going to be an easy task.

Connections has been an exploration into my past. Confronting it with trepidation, often kicking and screaming, I did not want to share my experiences! I have discovered, however, that as I have unveiled a part of my life within my artwork, I have moved my feelings from the past into the present, my own form of therapy. This process has allowed me to see myself developing as an artist as I journey through academia and create a body of work that holds the dreams that almost disappeared. *Connections* is a body of work that tells the story of my life as a daughter, wife and mother and my ability to overcome broken dreams to become an artist.

My greatest influences have been my Professors, my mentors, Leonard Urso and Eileen Feeney Bushnell. It was Leonard Urso, my undergraduate professor, who inspired my path into the world of art. He had the ability to see in me what I did not. We spoke in length about our thoughts and feelings in relation to humanity in the pursuit of the truth within ourselves. He imparted in me a desire to seek the truth, not only in my art, but also inside myself. He made me realize how much my attitude and hard work through the pain, had an important role to play in furthering my career. In Leonard's belief that "If you're not suffering, you're not creating great art" was a reality for my thesis.

Furthermore, I would not have found my voice in the body of work that became my thesis if it were not for my Professor Eileen Feeney Bushnell. Eileen pushed me to reveal, despite my hesitation, the anger and frustration for my subject matter. Printmaking filled my days with learning the art of print, the skill of Photoshop and the nuances of teaching. To Eileen, printmaking is a part and form of expression. She emphasized the significance of self-expression in printmaking and encouraged experimentation with an emphasis on the thought process. Eileen's latest prints are compositions dealing with the depth of family matter. In her words, her latest prints are the...

“Personal mythology... of domesticity and suburban life...
Infused with a love of those mundane spaces and forms
that surround us and sometimes seem to dominate our
everyday lives.” (Bushnell, Web.)

The subjects of her prints aided my choice of subject matter.

The writings and feelings of Louise Bourgeois also had an influence. In a BBC documentary *Secret Knowledge Tracey Emin*, Emin is recounting the life and work of Louise Bourgeois. Bourgeois internally tormented over the loss of her mother and the death of her son was incessantly looking for answers and recording her feelings in both drawings and text.

Her loss and lack of understanding about why horrible things happen was a large part of her work.

Bourgeois was a mother of three and like me was living in a male dominant household. Her outbursts and the deliberate destruction of her work is something I am familiar with on a genuinely personal level. Her confrontation of loss and the actuality of wanting to put the past behind her all while dealing with the pain resonates deeply with me. In recently discovered archives from 1958 when Bourgeois was 47, she lamented, "I have failed as a wife / as a woman / as a mother / as a hostess / as an artist / as a business woman." (Bourgeois, Web) The familiarity of her sentiment conjures the voice of the demons that also haunt me.

THE WORK

The primary mediums that I chose to work with were screen-printing and installation. I was a sculptor before becoming a printmaker. I took printmaking to experience two-dimensional work and found the ability to work with multiple materials in varying colors and composition to be intriguing. That RIT has an all-nontoxic method to printmaking, founded by the late Keith Howard to protect the health of printmakers was an added, unexpected, benefit greatly appreciated by my worn-out lungs.

My choice was to work on large scale four feet by six feet paper. The paper was flimsy and lacked the character I was looking for. I felt that the images needed to become three-dimensional objects, substantial in perceived weight, and less easy to destroy. I was able to use wood panels in varying sizes, but the work was inevitably much smaller than I desired due to obstacles in our studio. Nonetheless, I was still able to use the largest screens that were at my disposal, some the size of a small dining table. My idea was to immerse and slightly overpower the viewer by the concept of my subjects.

Screen printing unlike welding, is a delicate process. I could not drop a piece of paper as if it were metal, nor is paper easy to clean after a mistake. I had to take great care not to damage the screens, even so many still ripped, while printing on the wooden panels. Time and space were the largest obstacles to my creativity.

I had one shot to print an image on my Gesso coated wood. If it did not produce my desired result, I would have to spend another two days re-preparing a wood panel. Many preliminary steps were necessary to determine color and composition in these multi-layered images and the necessity for clean printing presented its own challenges. My initial prints were on canvas and paper and the

care and planning for the work, often exceeding an hour and a half, were as important as creating the images. I not only learned the process but the patience necessary to create my imagery. These difficulties with printing taught me to slow down and appreciate the time spent creating, much in the same way that I had needed to learn patience, so much patience, and take the time in raising my children.

My time-consuming use of this process also resulted in unique derivations of images that are important to me. The time given to this process, which can take an inordinate amount of physical and mental preparation to create a single print, sometimes more than the creation of a painting or sculpture, was therapeutic in that it allowed me to slow down, think methodically and reflect. While the actual process of printing is relatively fast, the goal of creating layers of imagery, text and texture also required a great deal of experimentation with transparency and the choice of the surfaces on which I was printing. Experimentation with the Gesso coated wood allowed me to produce more painterly images. As stated before, the limitations in the Printmaking Studio at RIT in terms of the size of the images I could produce, conformed me to the idea of photographing my large but still smaller than desired prints on wood, to produce large scale photographs of my prints, ultimately to be used in the final installation of my show. Although most of my effort and experimentation was physically exhausting, the bigger challenge came when RIT closed the doors to the students due to the 2019 Corona Virus. The work did not lend itself to my small home studio.

Packing my desired images and much of my studio supplies was a daunting task, one filled with regret and disappointment. After all, I had at that time, realized what my thesis would entail and had imagined late nights listening to ELO and printing. So many ideas, and without much warning, an end to my ability to produce them. On this same day we were moving out, the fine art

graduate students were given two hours to set up and break down as much of, or as little of, our thesis work as we desired in one of the college galleries and photograph it.

My primary focus in that moment was to photograph my installation, which, was comprised of my original smaller prints on both wood and paper. This led to my decision to Photoshop my prints, as a means of completing my anticipated vision of my thesis show. By experimenting with scale and placement on virtual gallery walls my work has now become more than I had anticipated. I took my lemons and made a great pitcher of lemonade. Fortunately, studios were available to students the following semester and I was able to produce the larger prints previously imagined and presented as my then final thesis.

Those of the contemporary art world believe Printmaking to be a lesser form of art because traditionally it produces numerous copies rather than one original painted image, which also holds true for the art of photography. I was inspired, nevertheless, by the artists Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons, who both use photography as an art medium to convey to the world their intimate feelings and their ideas set out by former artists. Both used their art to comment on gender roles, domesticity, and the domination of male artists throughout the centuries. Their work as photographers inspired me to marry together my prints and photographs. I further blurred the lines between the two mediums when I used my prints as the source for large-scale photographs using Photoshop in an attempt to defend my work to my committee. This in turn led to my *Virtual Gallery*.

PHOTOS

DECEPTION OF DOMESTIC HARMONY

One of the things that capture and encodes family life is the photographic portrait. The image of my family in this photograph is a trope that was never true. It was the encapsulation of a moment in time unknown to me. At the age of two when my father left my mother, he had ensured he would never have the chance to have an influence in my life. This unexplained abandonment repeated throughout my childhood. The photograph of our family was an empty motif of a life that never existed. By reproducing this original image with screen-printing, the process allowed me to, visually, lay bare the falsehoods that the original sought to contain, dissolving the memory of a lie. Deception of Domestic Harmony is a series of five prints on paper, nontoxic ink and using various amounts of translucency to produce the illusion of disappearance.

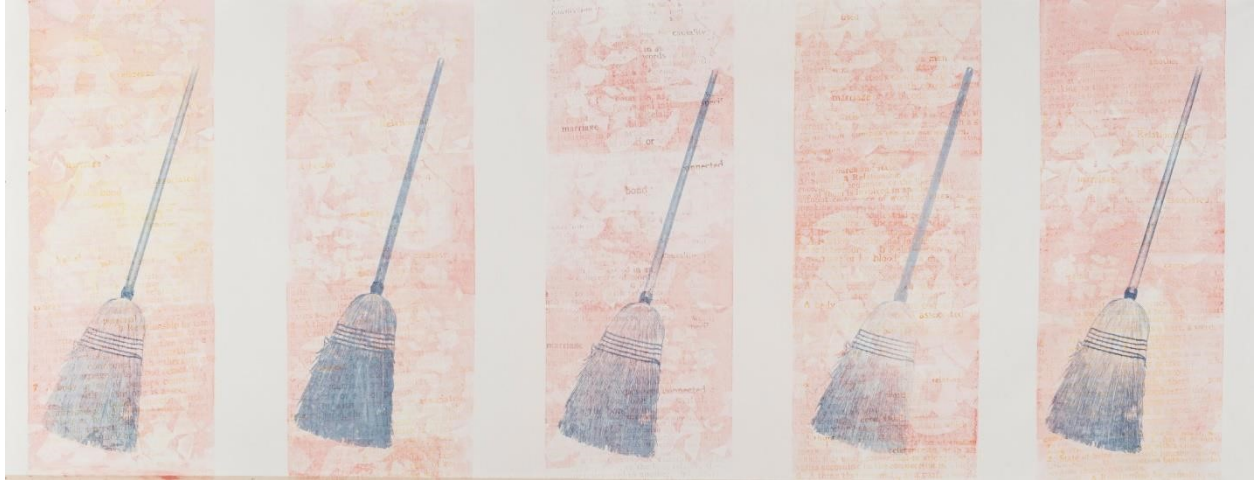


Deception of Domestic Harmony 7' 5" x 5' 2" Print, Ink on Paper

SWEEPING BROKEN DREAMS / MONOTONOUS REPETITION

Work, particularly housework, is a profound component of my relationship with my mother. While growing up, my mother's mantra was "idle hands are the devil's work." To her, cleaning was a routine to relieve boredom. As a child cleaning the house I would imagine myself as Cinderella further envisioning a better life. I despise cleaning and regret that to this day it is always my duty to supervise. The broom depicted here has stood in my kitchen for decades and symbolizes the constant of daily house cleaning and the endless repetition of "woman's work." The dishes surrounding the print are fragments of all of those that I washed as a child, place holders for the broken dreams, disappointing personal accomplishments, and the helplessness of never feeling whole that I felt growing up. The installation "*Sweeping broken Dreams*" is a print on wood panel, both sides, surrounded by hundreds of broken plates. Layered images of text on wood along with physical broken plates around the wood panel make up this installation. "*Monotonous Repetition*" portrays everyday wishes in lieu of daily chores. The nearly fourteen and a half long print of the repetition of brooms on canvas reiterates this sentiment.



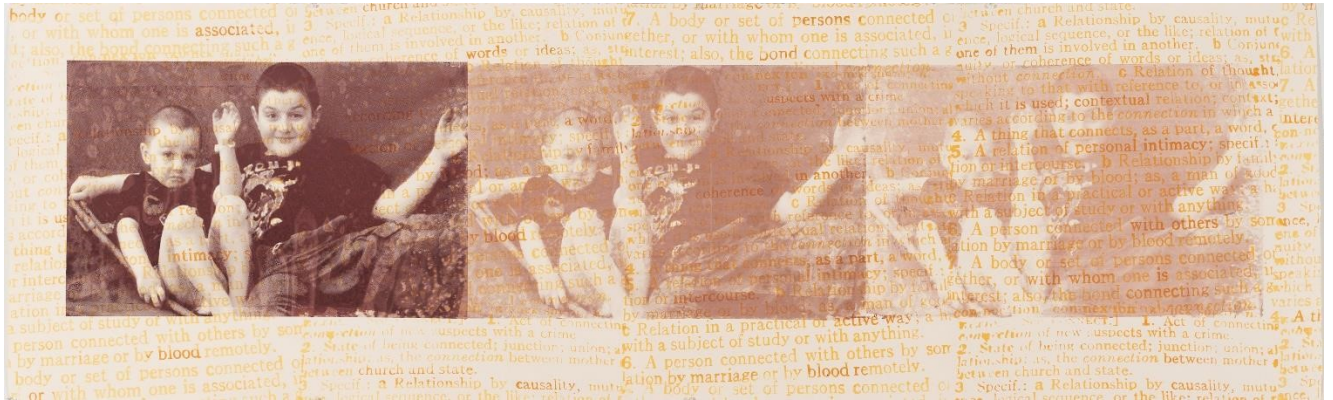


1. *Sweeping Broken Dreams* Print, Ink, Wood, Plates

2. *Monotonous Repetition* 13' 4 1/2 "x 5' 2" Print, Ink on Canvas

BYE, BYE, BABY

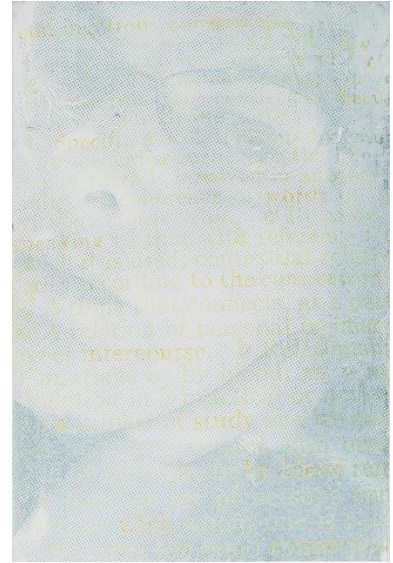
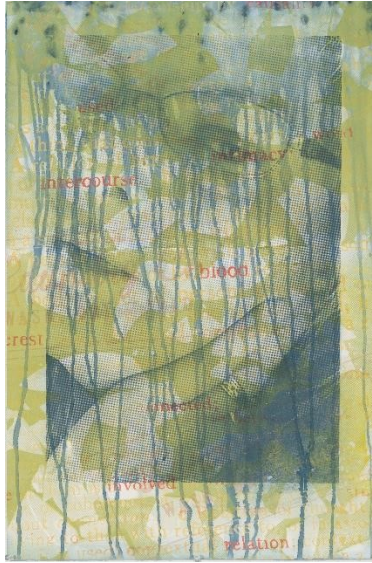
Bye, Bye Baby is a print of one of my favorite photos I took when outside with my boys playing in the yard. Now in their twenties, my children want little to do with me, and the family life I made for us. The process of printmaking allows me to distort and deconstruct this real image of family life that my children, now as adults, have moved past. Although the picture used for this print was a happy memory, it is also a sad notion that that time has now disappeared. An image of real family happiness, like the contrived happiness of my childhood family picture, is fading away. This print is a series of prints on paper, nontoxic ink and using various amounts of translucency to produce the illusion of disappearance.



Bye, Bye, Baby 36" x 28" Print, Ink, on Paper

WHAT IF / EXHAUSTING DISAPPEARANCE

Self-portraits with piercing eyes and a sad and somber facial expression, these images seek to convey the reality of the feelings that I carry with me, despite the happy face I tend to put on for my family, friends, and colleagues. To be happy is a goal every person hopes to experience but we are often left pondering and pining for a perfect life that may seem beyond our grasp. These images seek to represent the reality of this internal life that is often flowing just below our outward appearances.



1. *Exhausting Disappearance* 22' ¼ x 33' ½ “ Print, Ink on Canvas
2. *Exhausting Disappearance 2* Print, Ink on Paper
3. *What If 2...* Print, Ink on Wood

VIRTUAL GALLERY

While I was able to photograph my instillation in the gallery, which is the only one tangible object in this picture, overcoming an extensive learning curve into the use of Photoshop was the key to present my ideas to my committee members for the totality of the work I had planned. The pictures in this virtual gallery were what I had envisioned given the idea there was an actual ability to print such large scale. However, this imagery that led to the genuine prints as shown previously.



Print, Ink on Wood, plates in Gallery Photoshop: prints converted to photos then enlarged.

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, it seems that it takes much more of your lifetime to deal with the experiences of childhood than you had spent being a child. It is an even more difficult and mind-altering task to ask why and to reveal the deep connections between familiarity and change, regret and hope, grandparent, parent, and child. This body of work explores the changes in my life both good and bad, all while not losing sight of hope. The never-ending tasks of doing the dishes, cleaning the bathroom, cooking meals and constantly sweeping up family messes, both literally and metaphorically, are the subjects for my prints. I have taken photographs of the chores that often seem to define me, revealing pivotal life milestones as well as my problematic and solitary past. The family that abandoned me, my children as they disappear from my life and the family deaths that I have experienced have all provided material for my presented work.

In the end, it is my desire to generate works of art, which will connect on an emotional level to my audience. My hope is to reach a wide and diverse audience that may recognize the ideas and unspoken words in my images as a reflection of their own. I am looking for a connection with my audience, a reflection on time and life itself. As a mature and developing artist, time has slipped away and I want desperately to recapture it. My internal struggle is to let go of the past, and cease having regrets while moving forward. Laurie Simmons, a contemporary Photographer and movie artist said it perfectly,

“I am very interested in stopping time, and starting time...
it is allusive, and unnoticed...
yet really in the end, the most important thing...
The regret is the prevailing emotion.”
(Laurie Simmons) Art 21 October 8 2007

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