4-28-2022

I like to think you can still hear me

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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 Art in Photography and Related Media

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Rochester, NY
April 28, 2022

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Abstract

My work performs the act of mourning. In this body of photographs, I resurrect the items previously owned by my great-grandmother as I explore the new reality those who are living face after losing a loved one. I am curious about how we grieve and remember moments from the past. Asking myself the question, when we no longer can physically hold onto our loved ones, what are the ways that we can still find moments of connection?

I use the ambiguity offered by the lumen print process to illuminate the trace of the past in the presence. I examine and utilize these objects the same way many found solace and mourned through spirit photography. This body of work consists of objects that my family has kept after my great-grandmother's death to create lumen prints. After an entire day of exposure, the lumen print is the only evidence of the thing itself, which becomes a metaphorical representation of what once was.

To my great-grandmother, for without her, I would not be.

And to everyone who believed in me, this is for you.

Thank you.

S.

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My work performs the act of mourning. After my great-grandmother passed away, I watched my mom return home with boxes of items that she had collected from her grandmother's house, everything from clothes to Christmas decorations, right down to my great-grandmother's driver's license. My mother wanted anything she could take to keep a piece of her grandmother alive. There was a longing and a desperation to hold onto that connection.

In this body of photographs, I resurrect the items previously owned by my great-grandmother as I explore the new reality those who are living face after losing a loved one. I am curious about how we grieve and remember moments from the past. Asking myself the question, when we no longer can physically hold onto our loved ones, what are the ways that we can still find moments of connection? Poet Ocean Vuong takes note that grief is perhaps the last and final translation of love.[1] And through these items that individual's treasure after someone has passed away as a source of grief and an act of love that will never end, my photographs bring to light the metaphorical traces for those who have passed on—spiritually, showing that a piece of them still lingers.

Starting at a young age, I have always had anxiety about death. I remember telling my doctor that I was depressed. She, of course, asked why a twelve-year-old would be depressed. I told her my great-grandmother had died not too long ago. My doctor replied, "you are not

[1] Terry Gross and Ocean Voung, "Poet Ocean Vuong Sifts through the Aftershock of Grief in 'Time Is a Mother'," April 5, 2022 in Fresh Air Archive: Interviews with Terry Gross, produced by NPR, web audio, 42:41, https://freshairarchive.org/segments/poet-ocean-vuong-sifts-through-aftershock-grief-time-mother.

depressed. You're just grieving." I can still remember how consuming that grief felt. I couldn't help but think about my parents and knew that I could do nothing to prevent them from dying. I was desperate to remember every moment with them because from what I learned from my great -grandmother's passing is that death is so sudden, so uncertain, and so final.

In November 2018, I attended an artist talk by multidisciplinary artist Kiki Smith. There she advised the young artists sitting in the audience to "follow your work as truthfully as you can and listen to it. Rather than holding an idea of what you want it to be, be present with your work and let it lead you."[2] After listening to Smith speak about the relationship between the artist and the work, how I approached making art myself completely changed. While the idea that I am exploring may not always be conscious at first, it begins to appear in surprising ways through working intuitively and listening to the work. Smith enjoys making things simply to experience the process. Through my practice of printing lumen prints and my curiosity about mortality, Smith has shaped how I begin working towards an idea.

Smith is an artist who also works in themes of mortality and decay with images of the body. In her 1992 piece entitled *Worm*, she combines etching, aquatint, photogravure, and collage on black Japanese paper.[3] Smith had cut up strips out of a photograph of herself to create a worm-like figure on the bottom of the image. The other picture is a photo negative of the artist herself, curled up in a fetal position. The use of the negative creates an unnatural glow that dissolves the face and hands, portraying the idea of the body decaying into light.[4] Smith's early art was primarily focusing on death prompted by the loss of her father in 1980.

Like Smith's use of experimentation with artistic mediums and her interest in death, I am using light and photography to capture the impermanence of both my mom and dad's physical

[2] Kiki Smith, "Kiki Smith and Paper" (Artist talk, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, 15, Feb., 2018).

[3] Kiki Smith, "Worm," printed 1992, etching, aquatint, and photogravure, with cutouts and collage on black Japanese paper, 156.3 x 108.27 cm, Institute of Art, Minneapolis, https://collections.artsmia.org/art/113164/worm-kiki-smith.

[4] Ibid.

appearance. When photographing my parents, I cannot avoid the inescapable fate of what is to come, especially as I take note of their aging bodies, focusing on fragments of their body, rather than the whole.

Figure 1. Untitled from series *I like to think you can still hear me*, 2021

Here my father's hand rests on the white sheet (Fig. 1). In my photograph, my father's hand appears transparent, almost as if it were smoke, and with even the slightest breeze, it would be enough for the hand to vanish into thin air completely. The photograph has a soft-focus, almost dissolving the texture of creases on his skin. Juxtaposing the actual texture of his hand, which is coarse and covered with callouses, telling many stories of life well lived. In my photograph, I see the strength of his hand but also the fragility of it.

In her 2005 series entitled, *Scar,* Japanese photographer, Ishuichi Miyako, photographs the scars marked on various individuals' bodies. For her, scars are the visible traces of events

from the past; both photographs and scars are the manifestation of sorrow for what cannot be retrieved from history and a love for a life that can be remembered in the present.[5] There are marks, like scars and wrinkles, that remain on the body to tell a story or remind us of our past while we are living in the present.

Roland Barthes argued that every photograph is about death.[6] When we photograph others, we do so to remember them. But through that same act, we are confronting our mortality. By using photography I create beauty and light from a place of melancholy and darkness. As Larry Sultan said in his book, *Pictures From Home* (1992), "I realize that beyond the rolls of film and the few good pictures, the demands of my project and my confusion about its meaning is the wish to take photography literally. To stop time. I want my parents to live forever."[7]

Despite today's technological advancements, I am interested in earlier photographic practices. Lyle Rexer has called this desire the antiquarian avant-garde: turning to the history of photography for metaphors, technical information, and visual inspiration.[8] From there, artists expand on the traditional photographic practices with varied responses, both reimagining and redirecting photography as a modern medium of image-making.[9]

As I continued to develop concepts surrounding death, I found that the lumen print gave me the most variety. The images result in numerous ways due to different exposure times, the density of items used, the type of paper and most importantly, the quality of light. For this project I used mainly expired photographic paper for my images. There is a directness to the lumen print—a physical contact between a referent and the paper that records it. I use the ambiguity offered by antiquated practices to describe the trace of the past in the present. During this

[5] Ishuichi Miyako "Solo Exhibition." (London; Michael Hoppen Gallery, 2013), https://www.michaelhoppengallery.com/exhibitions/28/overview/.
[6] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1993), 15.
[7] Larry Sultan, "Pictures From Home," Larry Sultan, May 7, 2019, http://www.larrysultan.com/gallery/pictures-from-home/.
[8] Lyle Rexer, *Photography's Antiquarian Avant-Garde: The Wave in Processes* (New York, NY: Abrams, 2002), 9.
[9] Ibid.

process, there is no way to predict the outcome. It is a waiting game. Sometimes I am amazed by what is revealed to me on the paper. Other times I am left with nothing.

It is ultimately what the paper chooses to tell me, deepening my relationship with the medium. The paper decides what is revealed to me and what remains hidden after the 8 hours of sunlight exposure. I allow the paper and materials used to create the imagery to interact organically and what I am left with are images that I could have never imagined.

I dedicate much time to experimentation, which eventually leads to something successful. What I constitute as successful about a print is finding the balance between abstraction and my recognition of the object. During this experimentation period, I would often use plants from my backyard while I still was figuring out exposure times. During these long hours of exposure, eventually parts of the flowers would dry out, all of the life that it once had completely drained from it.

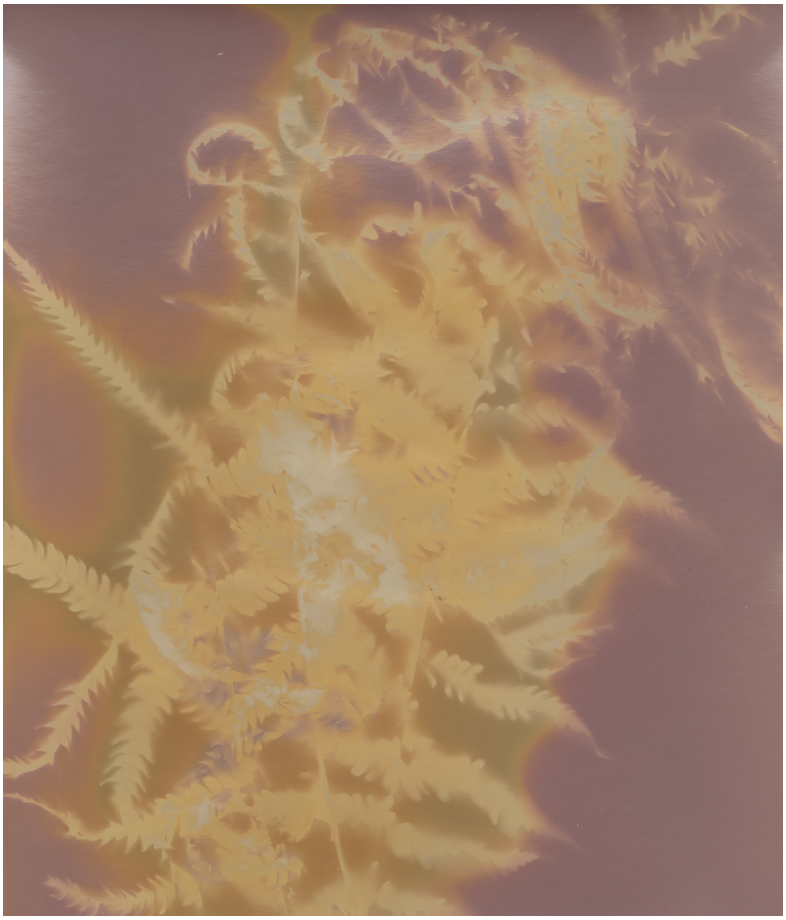

Figure 2. Untitled from series *I like to think you can still hear me*, 2021

For instance, at the top of the image here (Fig. 2), we can see that the leaves of this fern had begun to curl up, almost disappearing from the paper's surface. This lumen print has captured an in-between state. We are presented with the deterioration and ultimately death of the fern while capturing parts of the plant that was still alive, preserving the life it once had. This moisture had also mixed with the emulsion and caused the colors to bleed across the paper. I was drawn to this vibrancy that imitated this aura-like quality around the object.

Adam Fuss is an artist who has reverted to the past to create contemporary work. Fuss reinterprets many photographic media, including pinhole images, photograms, and daguerreotypes to carry out his interests in life, death and birth. Fuss aims to not reproduce the seen but to discover the unseen by using light and chemistry to explore the outer reaches of

vision. Fuss uses the beauty of his images to capture the viewer's attention but what he says beyond that beauty, is the hope that there is something relevant.

Fuss demonstrates the ability to experiment and dive deeper into these photographic processes, which intensifies the notion of melancholic remembrance and perplexes his viewers with these mysterious photographic images. For example, Fuss's Untitled photogram of a child's christening dress: the deep black ink as a result of the photogravure process offers the ethereal dress to enter a deep abyss from which to emerge.[10] The highlights that touch the parts of the fabric cause the dress to glow, strengthening the visual effect. Mark Steven, from New York Magazine, states, "That christening dress, while spectral-looking and empty, is also startlingly present: A ghost may be made of vague vapors, but it is always experienced viscerally."[11] Fuss's images can suggest a trace or traces of loved ones, whose body has been retrieved from earth, but their presence remains on an emotional and spiritual level.

In the crawl space of our attic, I found a box that contained all the curlers and hair nets that were once used by my great-grandmother. And as soon as I opened it, I could smell her again. I was transported back into her living room, where I once watched my mom spend hours putting curlers in her hair. It was like our own special ritual between the three of us, and now it has become a sacred moment every time I open the box.

This box, containing these curlers and tiny pieces of her hair, is one of the closest things that I have left of my great-grandmother. In that, I am inclined to wonder, and maybe even worry, if her scent that is still attached to these curlers will eventually fade, and it will feel like losing her all over again.

[10] "Adam Fuss 'My Ghost'," The Art of the Photogravure, January 23, 2019, https://photogravure.com/highlights/5072/.
[11] Ibid.

Figure 3. Untitled from series *I like to think you can still hear me*, 2021

Similarly, to the trace of the curlers that is seen here (Fig. 3), they are illuminated as whimsical floating objects among the negative space of the paper's surface. We can still see the detailed crosshatch pattern within each oval shape. However, there is a fragileness to their soft edges. The colors of the background and curlers almost blending into one causing parts of the object's trace to vanish.

When I began combing through all the items that my mom has held onto, I came across a jewelry box that held my younger brother's baby teeth and strands of my hair wrapped in a paper towel. I asked my mom why she kept these items; she shrugged her shoulders not really having an answer beside "I keep them to remember."

It was in coming across my mother’s personal act of remembrance, when I learned hair and teeth were common items associated with the mourning practices of the Victorians. In Geoffrey Batchen’s 2004 book, *Forget Me Not*, he illustrates the ways that people have sought to

transform the memory of the photograph into a multisensory experience. Batchen expresses that this transformation occurs with the addition of writing, embroidery, hair, flowers, and more to the pictures, to drag it from the past into the present.[12] Items such as teeth and hair transform something from the past into something in the present. Hair acts as the stand-in for the individual, once their body is gone physically, spiritually a piece of them still lingers. When hair and photos are combined it creates an indexical sign twice over—two physical traces of the same referent.[13]

Barthes states, "The photograph tells me death in the future … Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe".[14] The photographed subject always belongs to the past. The camera can preserve an instant that is already gone when the shutter closes. Understanding the nature of time and photography through Barthes's, every photograph taken is a spirit photograph—he saw death in every photograph. Therefore, allowing us to see and almost touch people as they lived in the past.

The Civil War created an urgency for these memory practices; Before men left to fight in the war, many soldiers had photographs taken, and clippings of their hair gathered, knowing it might be their last chance to be recorded.[15] Hair, as a form of remembrance, serves as two main functions: a souvenir of the deceased to be worn in memory and a reminder to the living of the inevitability of death.[16]

In the book *Victorian Photography, Literature, and the Invention of Modern Memory,* Jennifer Green-Lewis reminds us that during the beginning of photography, the Victorians

[12] Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2004), 94.
[13] Ibid., 75.
[14] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1993), 96.
[15] Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance*. (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2004), 68.
[16] Tamara Browning, "Remembering the Dead with the Hair from Their Heads," The State Journal-Register (State Journal-Register, August 3, 2010), https://www.sj-r.com/story/news/2010/08/03/remembering-dead-with-hair-from/48684254007/.

believed that they were experiencing something transformative.[17] Green-Lewis states that individuals during the nineteenth century began to have a heightened fear of forgetting and being forgotten.[18] This "crisis of memory" is explained as "a heightened fear of forgetting stimulated by the mental demands of a new concept of human history and by the emergence onto the plate of the mind of too many things to remember."[19] Photography provided individuals an opportunity to freeze a moment in time and make the fleeting permanent, Green-Lewis notes that photography asks the viewer to look and see time passing.[20]

Photography has always been a method of recording the visible with truth and accuracy. However, photographs can also provide a trace of the invisible. Furthermore, the camera played a considerable role in influencing the Spiritualist movement beginning in the late nineteenth century, with William Mumler in his photo studio.

Mumler's spirit photographs gave the bereaved a sense of closure and acceptance, along with the tangible hope for the chance of a reunion in the afterlife.[21] The individuals who used spirit photography to make these connections were once desperate for an image of their deceased loved ones that the spirit photograph itself becomes a piece of memento mori, a tangible object that provides comfort and gives the grieving some sense of connection.[22] While Mumler was accused of being a fraud during his career, this upset did not halt the increasing infatuation with the Spiritualist movement at that time. People still had a strong desire to uncover tangible evidence of life after death and contact the dead.

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[17] Anne Helmreich, Review of *Victorian Photography, Literature, and the Invention of Modern Memory: Already the Past*, by Jennifer Green-Lewis. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018). muse.jhu.edu/article/719114.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Emily Ennis, "Victorian Photography, Literature, and the Invention of Modern Memory: Already the Past, by Jennifer Green-Lewis," Victorian Network, October 27, 2020, http://www.victoriannetwork.org/index.php/vn/article/view/108.

[21] Racheal Harris et al., "Photography and Death: Framing Death Throughout History," Photography and Death: Framing Death throughout History | Emerald Insight (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, June 30, 2020), https://www.emerald.com/insight/publication/doi/10.1108/9781839090455.

[22] Sas Mays and Neil Matheson, "The Machine and the Ghost: Technology and Spiritualism in Nineteenth- to Twenty-First-Century Art and Culture," (Manchester University Press, 2013), https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvnb7m4g.

We must imagine how desperately these individuals convinced themselves of the authenticity of these photographs. They wanted to believe it was real. That it was really their loved one standing there with them at that moment. This only emphasizes their bereavement and how desperately they longed for a connection to the deceased.[23] But with our contemporary, and maybe at times cynical lens, it is difficult to believe in photographs of apparitions based on our understanding and advancement of the medium. We can, however, connect this inability to believe in spirit photography with the exact reason why we look at photos of our past: we attempt to make connections again, and photographs provide a natural source of reconnecting with those we have lost and reflecting on our history. In the end, we see what we want to see.

The impermanence of time makes memory possible, but time is also what makes our memory fade.[24] In order to conjure our memory, we tend to look back at our history during the present. This is best illustrated in Virginia Woolf's novel, *To the Lighthouse,* when Mrs. Ramsay looks forward and backward simultaneously.[25] Woolf writes,

> With her foot on the threshold, she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta's arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past.[26]

This concurrence of looking forward and backward is the same act that photography performs, which emphasizes the power of photography as a tool for memory. When making my lumen prints, I would submerge the image in the fixer most of the time, so what remained on the paper

[23] Martyn Jolly, *Faces of the Living Dead: The Belief in Spirit Photography*, (London: British Library, 2006), 9.
[24] Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance,* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2004), 78.
[25] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1974), 173.
[26] Ibid.

was permanent. There were other times when I would choose not to fix the image. In those cases, I allow the photograph's memory of the object to change and wither away as time passes until the print eventually dies. I can no longer rely on the photograph that acts as a memory or a trace of the objects.

I recently came across another photographer who is interested in the unfixed photograph. By not fixing the image, photographer Phil Chang makes prints that are themselves a reflection of the moment, impermeant, and the fleeting.[27] Chang presents photography as a durational performance by printing his images on expired photographic paper and left them unfixed for his installation.[28] The purpose of this decision was so that each picture would eventually decay when they were exposed to light. The artist unveiled the works at the opening, exposing them to the gallery's bright fluorescence, which gradually darkened the pictures until, after several hours, all appeared in a faint tone.

As a part of my installation, I put an unfixed image up on the wall and watched what would happen as the exposure continued (Fig 4). The orange that was once in the original print has entirely disappeared after 15 days of additional exposure when it was hung on the gallery wall. The print looks like it is decaying. The bright purple hue of the print, turning into a gray and muted color–Almost as if it has drained completely of life.

[27] Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, "Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer on Phil Chang," The online edition of Artforum International Magazine, June 1, 2012, https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201206/phil-chang-38962.
[28] Ibid.

Figure 4. Installation shot of unfixed lumen print. Image on the left was taken the day of the opening (March 31st, 2022). Image on the right is after an additional 15 days of exposure.

I became attached to these lumen prints, knowing that I could never recreate the same image even if I tried. There is a preciousness to them, they are simply one-of-a-kind and what I like to call pure magic. But when choosing not to fix the image, I allow for the vibrancy and life of the print to fade away, until it ultimately ceases to exist. I have discovered in that melancholy of letting go, there was something beautiful seeing it in its truest form at only one time of its life. This idea of seeing it for the first time and it has already started to disappear. Or showing up too late and missing it entirely.

Through this project of searching through the collection and items previously owned by my great-grandmother, it felt as though I was reliving her death while finding a sense of peace for something I had never entirely resolved, up until I opened the box that held my great-grandmother's wedding dress. There were many qualities that I loved about the wedding

dress that pushed me to keep finding ways to incorporate it in this body of work. I love the detailed beading in the shoulders and neckline, the new rips and poor sewing jobs that were done to patch it back together. The soft wrinkled velvet material. The long train that I needed to pick up as I walked, careful not to trip over it.

I remember being home alone as gently pulled the dress over my head and moved my arms slowly up the sleeves. The fabric was thin and yellow from being kept in its original box that it came in for so many years. I remember standing still for a long time, coming to the realization that the inside of this dress had only ever touched one other person's skin. It was when my great-grandmother wore it on her wedding day back in 1940. And with that thought cycling through my mind. I couldn't help but feel her spirit and mine woven together by the dress.

Figure 5. Installation shot from series, *I like to think you can still hear me*, 2022

My great-grandmother's dress now aged more than eighty years entices you with its beautiful and haunting qualities. Even in a gallery, it demands your attention (Fig. 5). You are

forced to walk toward it straight on. Or you can choose to creep around in, careful not to disturb its presence. The dress now frail and hollow, holds the spirit of somebody who was so strong and full of life.

The visual idea behind the self-portrait in the dress was to approach it the same way I did with my lumen prints (Fig. 6). By leaving the shutter open for seconds at a time, I could play with unpredictability and the organic, sometimes even unconscious, motion while capturing an image. Similarly, to my lumen prints, I in a way act as the paper when I photograph. I can make the decisions of what I choose to reveal and what I keep hidden from my viewers.

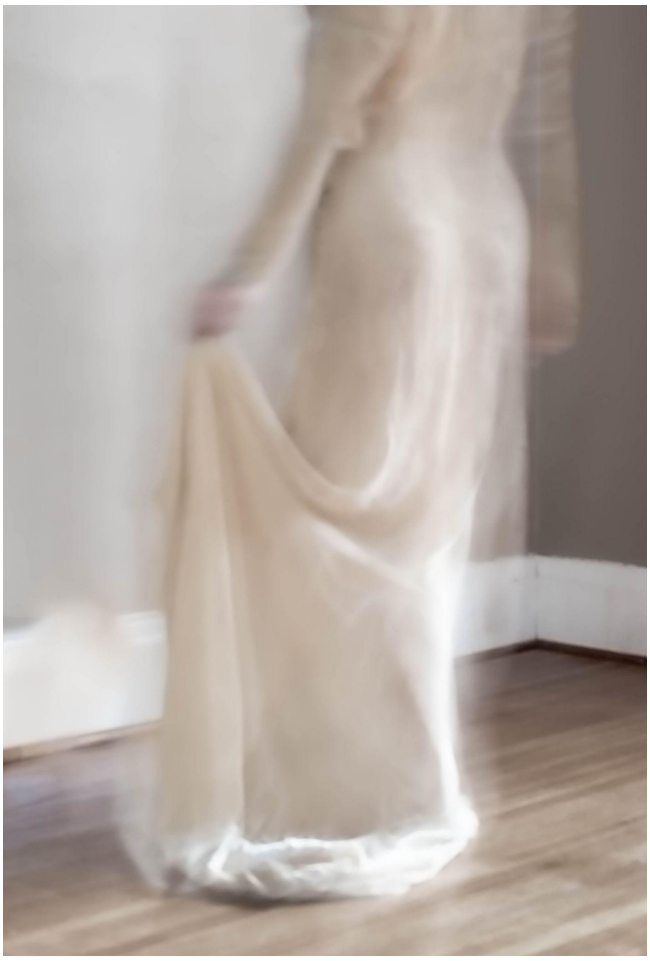

Figure 6. Untitled from series *I like to think you can still hear me*, 2021

As we grieve, we are faced with new challenges and engage with some of the compelling mysteries of life: finiteness and limitation, change and impermanence, and most of all, uncertainty.[29] The disruption that this loss causes changes the way we see the world, and we must continue living as we rely on our memories and objects to comfort the sorrow and alleviate the pain; in that, we find new ways to continue that love, even with the absence.

Grieving happens both consciously and unconsciously in the human mind. *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud's essay on the two different types of psychological responses to loss, highlights the idea that the pain we feel from loss is recognized externally and internally.[30] These two emotions look similar since they are both in response to grief; however, Freud claims that mourning is an infinite and transforming process, while melancholia is a persistent state and occurs right outside a person's conscious understanding.[31]

While mourning, a person feels their pain over a loss externally. As Freud argues, this external feeling of loss and pain can slowly transform into a place where individuals can move away from what they recognize is gone.[32] Mourning is a process which ends in acceptance, and though the loss can completely change a person's life, they eventually begin to participate in the world once again.

Metaphorically, my lumen prints unfold through an unconscious process similar to Freud's concept of Melancholia. He describes Melancholia as a loss that transpires within the unconscious. Furthermore, the implication of the loss is not as evident to the person grieving, even though the pain still exists.[33] And while these unconscious collections of feelings are outside our awareness, it does not mean they are not present.

[29] Thomas Attig, *How We Grieve: Relearning the World*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), XIIV.
[30] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," (London: Vintage, 2001), 244.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

When making my lumen prints, I gave myself no control of how the materials and paper interacted together. I set the items down on the sheet and left them out in the sun for the entire day. Most of the time, by not keeping a glass plate on the items, they moved organically on the surface. This uncontrolled method of printing helped create the abstract and ephemeral representations that I was looking for in my photographic images. And even if the object has become almost unrecognizable on the surface, it does not mean the tangible item was not once there.

When it comes to death and grief, the two are nothing we expect it to be. Like the lumen prints there is no way to anticipate how the image will appear. Some results have been mystifying, creating ambiguous and ephemeral forms made from light and shadows. Other times, I have been disappointed to see that I am left with a blank sheet—no indication of the object that spent the day casting its shape on top of the paper.

Similarly, to death, we can't predict our response. In her memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking,* Joan Didion states, "grief, when it comes, is nothing we expect it to be."[34] She argues that we cannot properly mourn a loss until we have the chance to make sense of it. There are moments of shock, abandonment, confusion, sadness, and denial.[35] The initial shock is what disconnects us from our surroundings. Didion writes, "a single person is missing from you, and the whole world is empty".[36] When faced with the reality of death, you must forget any expectation of what you believe.[37]

Light is what is at the core of this work. Light first touches the subject and then leaves its marks on the receiving surface. As expressed by Barthes, "The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed the radiations which

[34] Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, (Toronto: CNIB, 2006), 26.
[35] Thomas Attig, *How We Grieve: Relearning the World*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), xxxi.
[36] Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, (Toronto: CNIB, 2006), 192.
[37] Ibid, 26.

ultimately touch me, who am here."[38] Building off Barthes's quote, the photographs I have created for this project sheds light onto an existence beyond just the thing itself. It acts as an entrance where people can reconnect with the ones they have lost. These lumen prints become these traces of the items through light and dark working in tandem.

By working with light, I have resurrected these objects in the present after they have been kept away in the dark for so many years. We need to accept that at times there will be darkness, for it is the dark that makes it possible for the light to emerge, to carve out its path. "Light is a metaphor," Fuss describes, "where you have a dark place and where that place becomes illuminated; where darkness becomes visible and one can see."[39] Light is the first thing that we see when we enter the world, and it is the last thing we see when we leave.

[38] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1993), 80-81.
[39] James Crump, "Visceral Photography: The Work of Adam Fuss." *Afterimage* 25, no. 1 (1997), 11-12.

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