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Narratives of Loss

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Narratives of Loss



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Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, Missouri

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Narratives of Loss

An MFA Thesis Submitted to the Graduate College of Missouri State University in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Master of Fine Arts, Visual Studies

May 2018

ABSTRACT: My research revolves around impermanence, loss, and the grief that accompanies loss. My thesis work consists of digital collages interlaced with short stories, an interactive digital media piece, traditionally-made collages, a picture book, art objects, and an assortment of other supporting work. My ultimate aim is to employ both traditional techniques and digital skills to create visual narratives that supply glimpses into my personal history of loss and that speak to life's brevity.

KEYWORDS: death, impermanence, loss, collage, mixed-media, art objects, materiality, digital collage, narrative, interactive media, nothingness

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DEDICATION

This work was a collaborative effort in many ways, because none of this would have come together without the thoughtful advice and guidance of Eric Pervukhin, psychological support and design assistance of Masha Gerasimchuk-Djordjevic, and of course, my parents, who I miss dearly.

INTRODUCTION

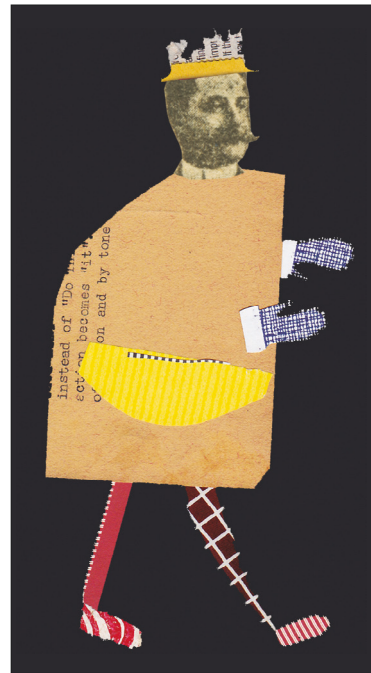
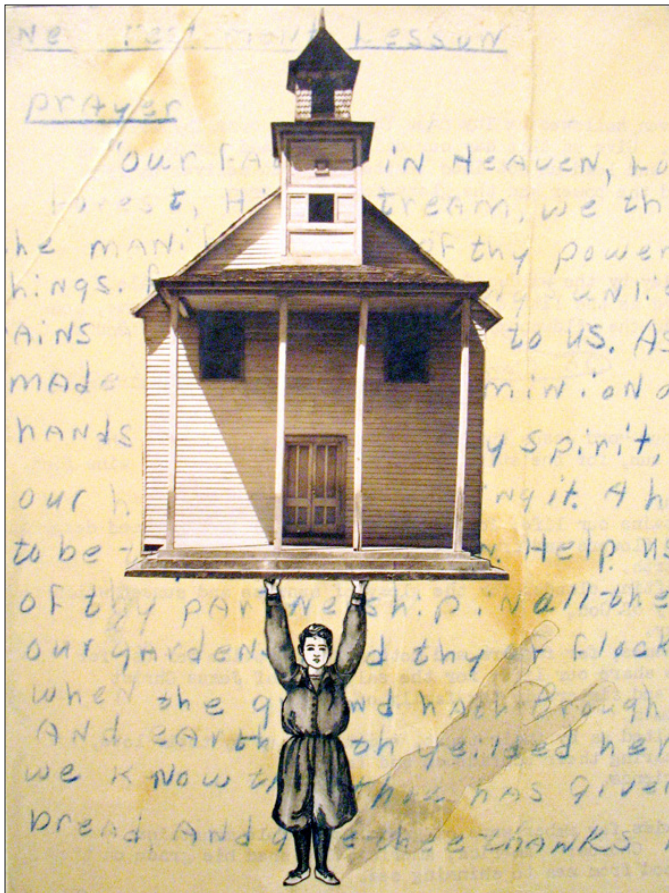
I began graduate school as a collage artist, working with papers gathered from a variety of sources, expressing my proclivity for the juxtaposition of disparate elements, an interest in texture, color, and cultural/autobiographical references. I had also maintained a practice of collage illustrations, mostly whimsical in nature.

Not long into starting graduate school, armed with lots of ideas but little direction, I sifted through papers left to me by my recently deceased parents. Going through these, I selected the most meaningful and poignant ones, scanned them, and used the images in digital collages. What I discovered are aspects of my parents that I never knew. Based on these surprises, I wrote some short stories to supplement my visual research. This led to other stories from memories that derive their strength from their proximity and allusion to ephemerality.

Some of the most compelling images that I found involved drawings made by my father in his notes from when he was studying biology in graduate school (fifty years ago). I decided to take some of these drawings, mostly renderings of microscopic plant parts, and utilize them in my digital collages. They have also served as inspiration for objects made of various materials, such as wood, felt, and porcelain. In this way I am elevating the original purpose of the sketches to something meaningful and precious.

I am interested in impermanence and mortality's impact on how we define ourselves and the way we live. Working in both traditional as well as digital media, I have created collages, small objects, and written stories, drawn from past personal experiences that allude to the fleeting nature of life. My ultimate aim is to employ traditional techniques and digital skills, sometimes together, to create visual narratives that supply glimpses into my personal history of loss and speak to life's brevity. Outsider art, postmodern pastiche, and existentialism have influenced my work, as have the artists Kurt Schwitters and Lawrence Carroll.

My work spans a broad range of media, perhaps a predisposition of collage (and assemblage) artists in general. Collage, intrinsically a collection of found objects that are rearranged or reordered, lends itself to explorations of materiality. I work in the vein of those who inspire me: Kurt Schwitters, though primarily known for his collage work, also worked as a typographer and graphic designer, and experimented with sculpture, installations, and "sound poetry."



Clockwise from top left: Maintaining the Faith, 2005; Joker, 2015; Elephant, 2015; Goat, 2015; Little Boat, 2012.

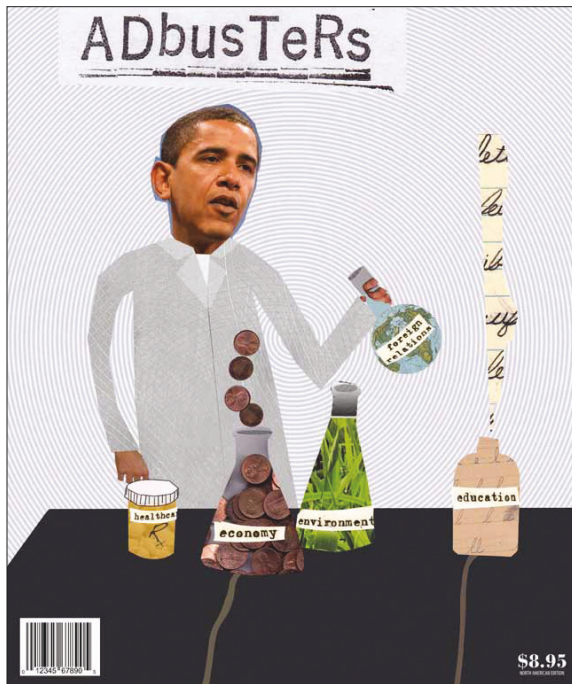
PAPER-BASED COLLAGE

My predilection for materiality goes back to my childhood, when I obsessively created with the supplies at hand—a stockpile of amassed remnants of interesting trash, donated by my creative yet excessively frugal mother. This collection consisted of such things as oddly-shaped packing material, checks from closed bank accounts, the last bits of ribbon on a spool, and scraps of fabric left over from any one of my mother’s numerous sewing projects. When my sister and I would beg her for a toy, her inevitable response was, “*you can make your own for less.*” Although I know we did have some toys, the memories that most define my childhood involve making stuff, and lots of it.

My penchant for tactile experiences continued into college through my work in ceramics. Though objectively challenged on this front, I persisted out of a stubborn desire to master the medium. I’m not certain I ever truly mastered it, but I kept at it for years after graduating, exhibiting my work here and there and selling at street festivals. Eventually, though, I confronted my personal dissatisfaction with the process, including the need to know basic chemistry (to make glazes), the monotony of waxing, glazing, stacking the kiln, and firing, and the time it takes from start to finish.



Untitled, 2012. Collage on wood.



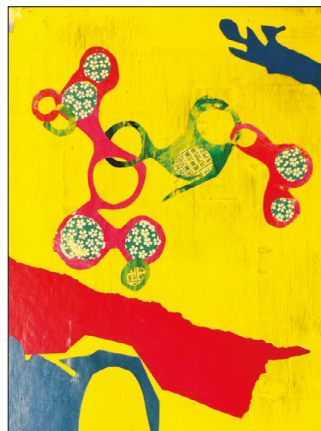
Have an Elephantastic Birthday, 2017.

Left: Cover for Adbusters, 2010.

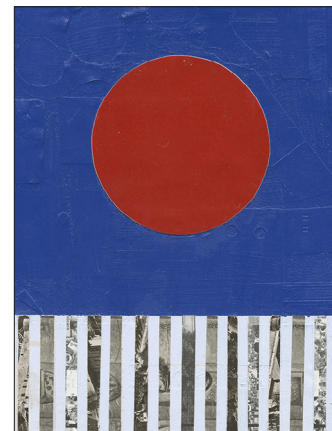
I moved on to collage and mixed media, which provided a satisfying format, given its qualities of immediacy, tactile variety, and the ease of cutting and pasting. My first collages were illustrations: lively and full of color, they demonstrated a playful approach to life and imagined humorous observations of life on this planet. My subsequent work as a store owner and interior designer led to an interest in textiles, which informed my collage work, resulting in a deeper exploration of mark making, patterns, and non-representational expression.



Untitled, 2012.



Untitled, 2012.



Untitled, 2012.

I found myself moving in two directions: the first being illustration, and the second non-representational fine art. I pursued both with equal intensity, discovering that the possibilities for illustration were exponentially multiplied with the use of computer software, specifically, Adobe Photoshop. At the same time, I continued to work with traditional materials, mostly found papers and acrylic paint, to construct work that investigated texture, color, shape, and repetition.

The physical presence of matter that had been studied, manipulated, and re-arranged was an important aspect of this line of work, stemming from my desire to connect the viewer to my humanness. I wanted the viewer to see that the paper was cut or torn by human hands, and the marks made could only be made by a fellow human, thus placing attention on particular facets of the human condition, such as physical limitations and imperfections, vulnerability, and the ephemerality alluded to via the inclusion of previously used papers. Not only did this work have a collected history, but the assembling of materials invited a new narrative.



Untitled, 2017.
Collage on wood.

It was during this period that I entered graduate school. I wanted to up my game and be pushed to think deeply about substantive reasons to create. My engagement with materiality in this body of work was determined by the decision to express the heart-rending beauty subsumed by the awareness that existence is temporal. Fragments of end papers, collected from aged books, were arranged in such a way as to maximize the papers' edges, which tend to more clearly reveal the nature of their past. Depending on the content, weight, and age of the paper, there will be varying degrees of yellowing. There may be indications of use, such as a torn or softened edge, pen or pencil markings, or accidental folds or wrinkles. While the differences between the scraps of paper are subtle, they are nevertheless unique, and suggest that the beauty of the human condition lingers in the whispers of those who made their fragile marks on pages that signal their passage of time.

The collage pictured on page 5 is about the loss of my father, whose name in faded handwriting can be seen on one of the pieces of paper. I wanted to use blank pages to emphasize the beauty of aging, the fading away, and the empty nothingness to which we return. The frailty of life is bittersweet and beautiful, and immersing myself in this understanding is how I have confronted the truth of the loss of both of my parents, the loss of friends, and the knowledge that my own life will end.

The numinous work of Lawrence Carroll was influential in the making of these collages. His paintings, quiet meditations that poignantly exude a recognition of life's tenuousness, have been described as works that "discreetly await their audience in silence. This silence, however, is not mute: the seemingly unruffled calm of the surface belies the vast energy which lies beneath."¹ Carroll's unhurried works incorporate such materials as house paint, wax, staples and canvas. Though most of his work subscribes to the format of painting on flat surfaces, I look upon his pieces as sculptures because of the strong sense of consideration to the relationship between the work and the space it occupies. Much, if not most, of Carroll's work is untitled, furthering the notion of art that is fully present and must be directly engaged with. Perhaps what resonates with me most about his work is his employment of contrast between restraint and uninhibited expression: the use of muted colors on oversized panels, for example, or a heavily layered piece with minimalist marks, yet all of his work hinges on a rawness that urges viewers to consider their own vulnerabilities, and the power in persisting not in spite of, but because of this knowledge.



Lawrence Carroll
Untitled, 2005–2010.
Oil, wax and canvas on wood.

The Dada/Surrealist artist Kurt Schwitters has also influenced my work in important ways. The materials he used were found, in the truest sense of the word, most notably during the year and a half he was interned at the Hutchinson Camp on the Isle of Man in 1940–41. He produced a number of works using the materials at hand, most often bits of trash he stumbled upon while meandering through the camp and around the island. Although Schwitters was quite prolific, and worked in other media, including graphic design, sculpture, writing, and “sound poetry,” it is the collage work he produced on the Isle of Man that I gravitate to. Curator John Elderfeld said about his work: “The struggle for form is the essence of Schwitters’ art. There is always the ambiguity between the nonsensical content and the precisely controlled form.”²

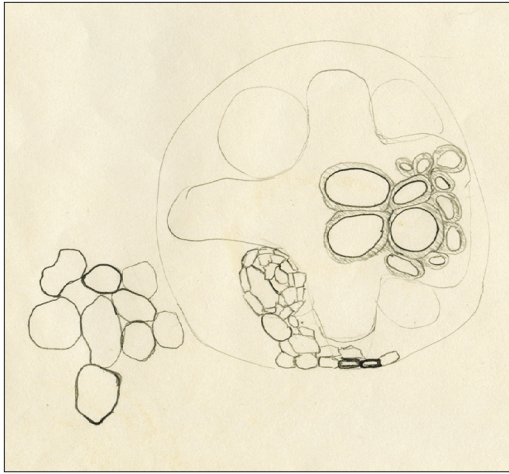
Virtually all of my collage work incorporates found papers, the process of which is informed by this tension between conscious control of the medium and a yielding to intuitive expression.



Kurt Schwitters
Anything with a Stone, 1940–1941.
Found objects and paper on wood.

ART OBJECTS

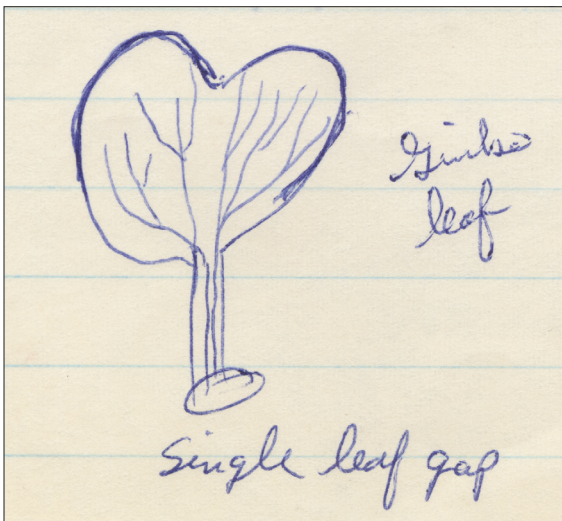
My affinity for found papers and found objects is also connected to my interest in outsider art, which often and distinctly features found materials, and is used as a matter of what is available rather than the result of a conceptual choice, as in the case of so many other artists (including me). Roger Cardinal, one of the world's leading authorities of outsider art, observed that such works are compelling "because it cultivates a characteristic repertoire of marks and signs, creating as it were a peaceful realm of its own, an intimate and vulnerable private world."³ Outsider art is inherently honest, if naïve, for its creators almost always create for themselves and not for an audience. It is this vulnerability that I am drawn to, because it strips away any possibility of pretense or attempt at persuasion, and lays bare the true thoughts of the artist. Nietzsche believed that "only artists...dare to show us the human being as he is, down to the last muscle, himself and himself alone..."⁴



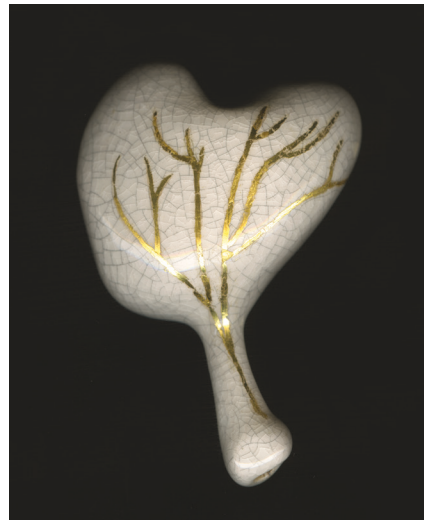
James Boyson. *Ranunculus Acris*, 1967.



Felted Ranunculus, 2017.



James Boyson. *Ginkgo*, 1967.



Ginkgo Leaf, 2017.

A thorough examination of my work would be incomplete without discussing pastiche, which plays a large role in my collages. There is an interesting connection between my penchant for puns and my affinity for collage. They are cut from the same cloth, as it were, this compulsion to pair the unexpected, to require the viewer or receiver to engage by overcoming the dissonance created by the juxtaposition of the disparate. It has been said “punning surprises us by flouting the law of nature which pretends that two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time.”⁵ One might say puns are a type of pastiche.

Pastiche has two primary definitions, unbeknown to most, and because of its seldom use, it is regularly confused. One signification of the word is derived from the Italian word *pasticcio*, a type of pie that incorporates a medley of various ingredients; it refers to multiple dissimilar ideas, styles, or genres combined in one piece of music, literature, film, or art. It is important to understand that this does not imply a blending, but rather a gathering of disparate elements, each maintaining and contributing their own distinctive flavor. Professor of Film Studies Richard Dyer, in his book *Pastiche*, offers the examples of Kurt Schwitters' collages and Hannah Hoch's rearranged photomontages.⁶ Ingeborg Hoesterey, author of *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature*, points out that in a collage, the variety of motifs preserve their physical identity in the composition's overall heterogeneity. She also observes one of the defining hallmarks of collage as the "process of assembling still discernible in the finished product."⁷

Pastiche's other meaning is imitation in art whereby the artist borrows a style, character, or genre as a specific element within the work. Though pastiche as imitation is less frequent in visual art than it is in literature, film, and music, its use in visual media tends to be more explicit. One artist who has been influential to my work is Inez Storer, whose mixed-media work has been described as magical realism. Her deft use of imitation, while managing to retain her unique presence, can be seen in *Painting with Matisse*, where Storer pays homage to the late artist in direct reference to his painting *Red Interior, Still Life on a Blue Table*.

Graduate school has afforded me the opportunity to explore other media and methods, and I took advantage of the learning the basics of printmaking, metal-working, and more. Because of these studies, I opted to create a few art objects to support the content of my thesis work. These objects are imaginative interpretations of my father's botanical renderings. One piece required learning how to needle felt, a process of creating designs by punching bits of wool fiber into a base layer of felt. The result was a small, disc-shaped pillow, with red, green and brown on an off-white background, inspired by a sketch of *ranunculus* (a type of liverwort) I found in my father's notes.

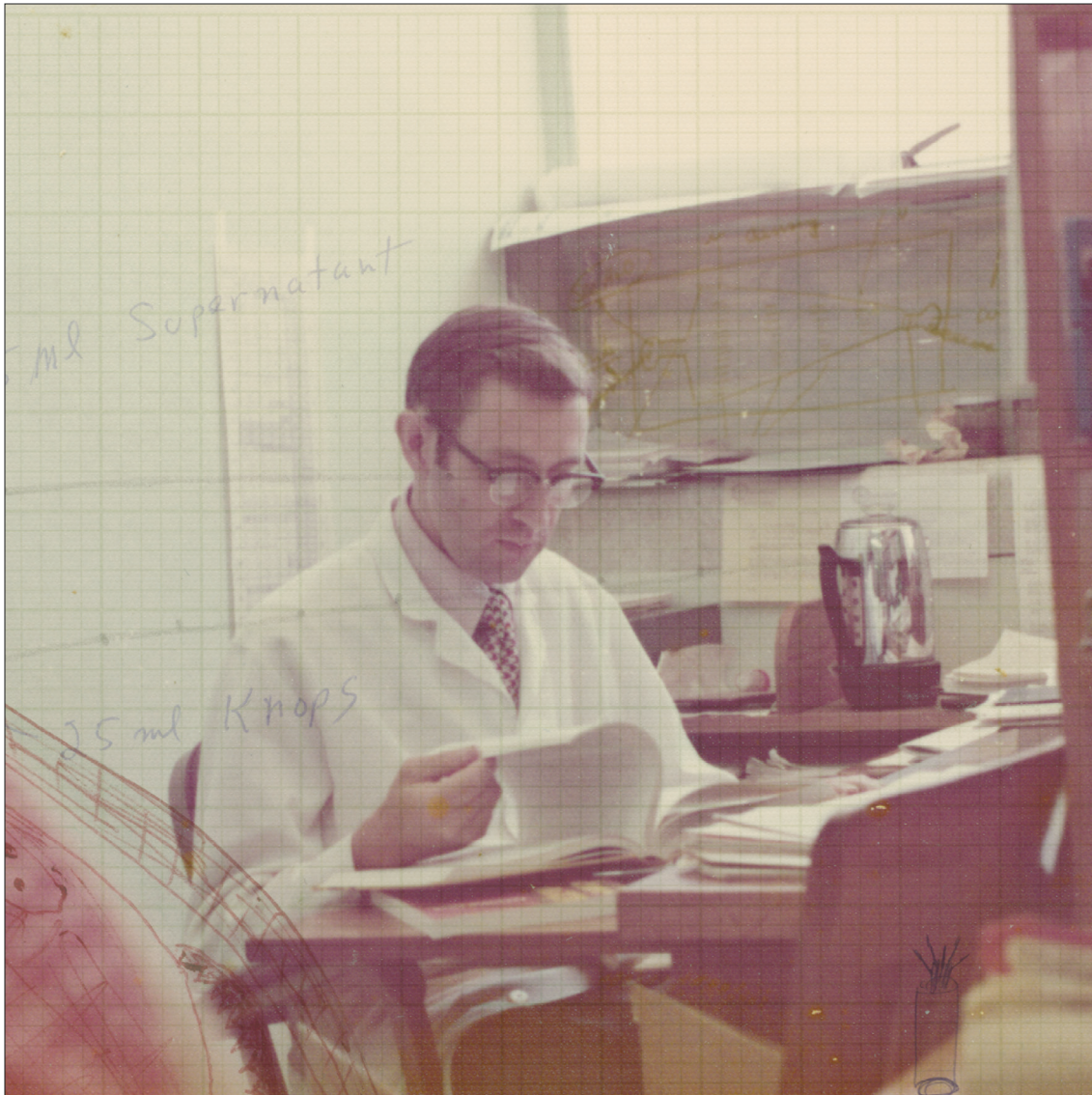
My father's drawing of a ginkgo leaf became a porcelain object with gold-leafed veins. These small objects, made out of a variety of materials, have everything to do with the marks my father made in his sketches, rather than what he was actually trying to represent.

This work has given me a way to connect with my father and turn my grief into something meaningful and substantive. These sketches that my father made were the basis of his thesis work. Now they are the basis of my thesis work, and in this way his unique imprint is honored, elevated, and made precious.

The mirrored piece with the dragonfly metaphorically illustrates the contrast between life and death, where life is seen in the reflection of the movements of the viewer, and the remains of a dragonfly, no longer the iridescent marvel that it was when alive, represents transformation (it moults multiple times throughout its life) and death as a kind of transformation. The central placement of the dragonfly refers to eternity as the primary point around which time, and thus life, revolves.



Anisos, 2018.
Dragonfly on framed mirror.



Untitled, 2016. Digital collage.

DIGITAL COLLAGES AND STORIES

Stories have been around as long as humans have been communicating. In every culture, in every era, at every stage of life, stories have been central to the human social experience. Listening to stories educates, inspires, and entertains the listener. Telling stories communicates opinions, dreams, and ideas. Storytelling can also help the storyteller clarify and organize his/her thoughts.

A year ago I attended a public storytelling event in Chicago, with a half-dozen or so people invited to speak about a personal experience with one or more family members. One participant talked about his long-ago wish to commit suicide, at a time when he felt he couldn't adequately provide for his wife and three young daughters. Another participant revealed an emotional connection with her dying mother that started with a gift of a vibrator. What did I get out of it? I got out of it what I suspect all storytellers and all story listeners long for: human connection. It is this connection that I feel when I see art that resonates with me and it is the connection I seek (though not always consciously) when I make art. More than anything, I think we long to understand and be understood.

My interest in creative writing began in childhood, though not until a writer friend invited me to participate in an anthology of 100-word stories decades later did I attempt it. This inspired me to write more, and became a natural offshoot of my digital collage work. This series of digital collages was initially inspired by my father's graduate school notes and drawings and became narratives about my parents and their past and memories of my family as I was growing up.

The stories are short clips recalling events of my past or family lore involving my parents. They do not correspond to specific collages, but there is an interplay of words and images that speaks to a general theme. Ranging in length from four to 250 words, they describe details of events that exhibit qualities of the human condition (often showing up in the banal routines of everyday life).

Here is one:

When I found out my dad was going to die soon, I called one of my best friends. She and I had met in high school and remained close, despite the physical distance between us. I lived in Missouri and she lived in Manhattan. But that particular weekend we were both in San Antonio visiting our parents. When she picked up the phone, I was so distraught and choked up I couldn't speak. But she knew I was on the line and she said, "Carla?" I started crying uncontrollably. She instructed me to breathe. I breathed. I met her for dinner two days later, before she flew back to New York. I remember complaining that I wasn't prepared. I had only packed one change of clothes, thinking I would only be in San Antonio for a few days. Now I would be there until he died. I would have to drop the classes I was taking. I would need to make some phone calls. I would need to arrange a funeral. Rene flew home, purchased what I guessed to be around \$500 worth of clothing, including underwear, a dress, several pairs of pants and shorts, t-shirts, cardigans, and more. She took the clothes home, laundered them, and shipped them overnight to her parents' house. That is one of the kindest things anyone has ever done for me.

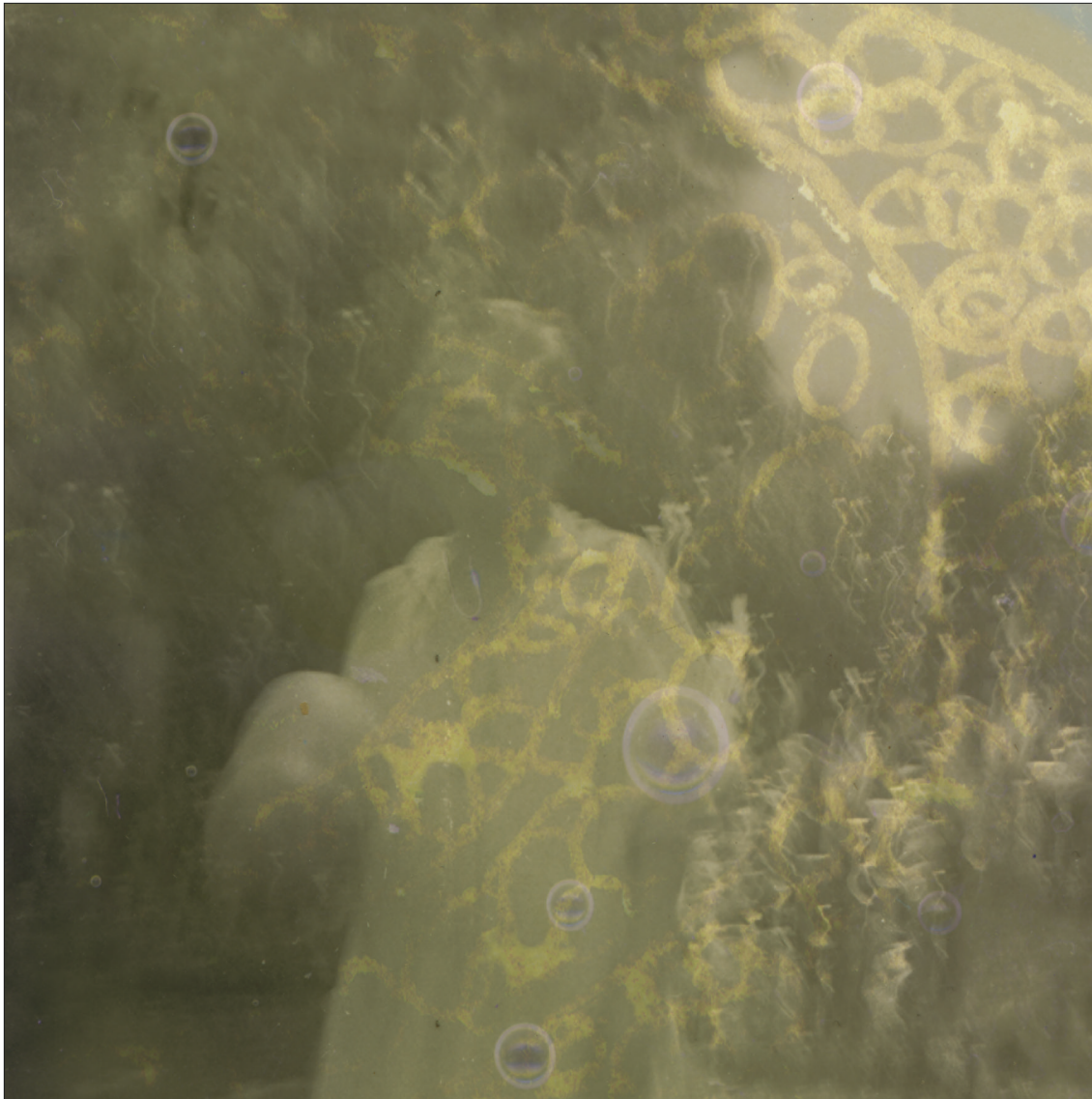
The collages consist of layers of scanned materials collected from old photo albums, boxes of letters and records, and of course, the research from my dad's graduate studies. I worked and re-worked the images, digitally cutting and pasting and rearranging, until I felt satisfied there was nothing more that could enhance the work.

These collages evoke a family history that is at once personal and universal, eulogized in the tender compositions that implore the viewer to know that the beauty of this family and the beauty of humanity must include details of intention, love, coming together, falling apart, mistakes, forgiveness, understanding, not understanding, needing, believing, honoring, and all of the facets that define an unrepeatable life.



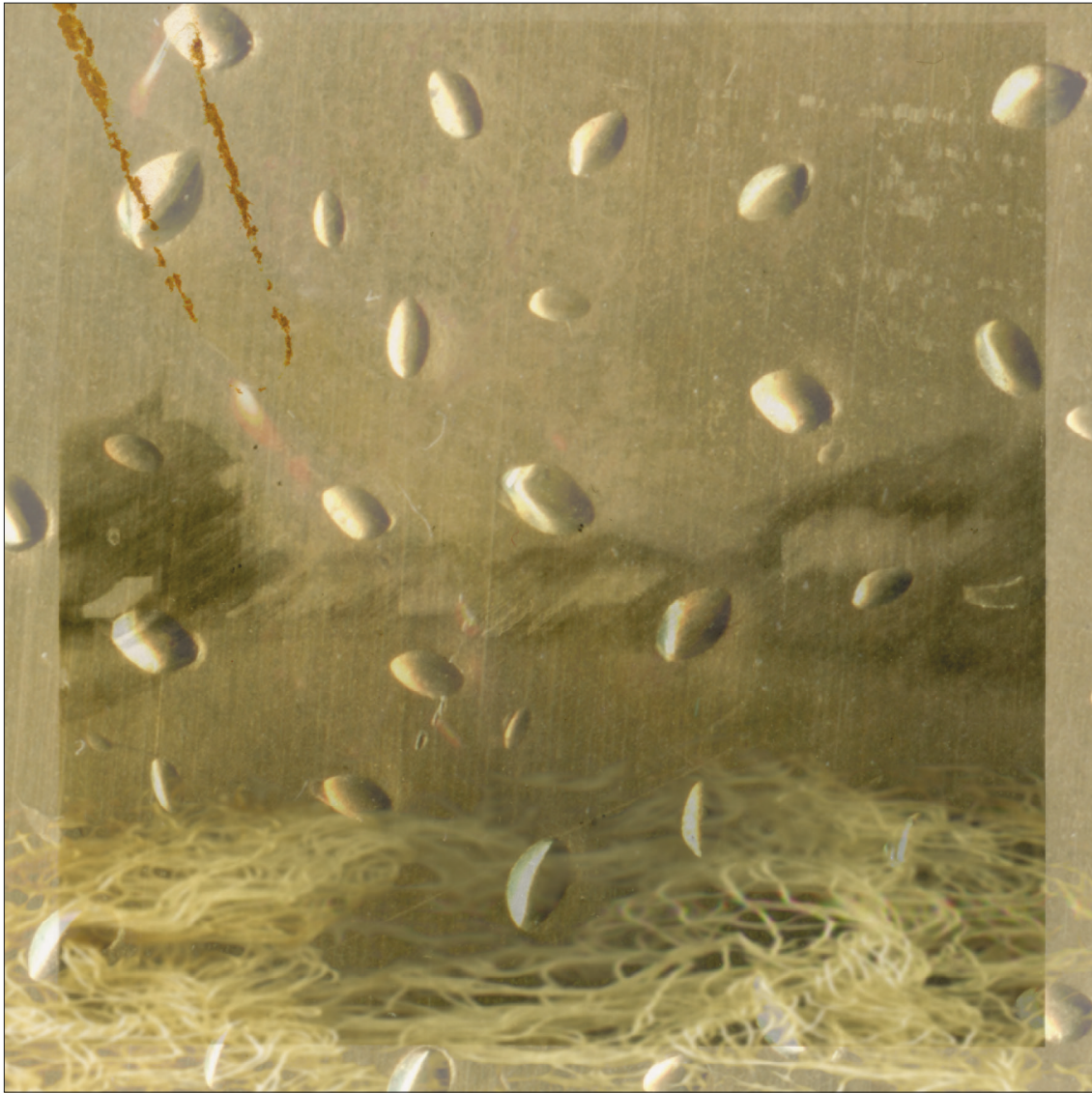
Untitled, 2016. Digital collage.

The summer between my third and fourth grade year, my sister and I played with the kids in the neighborhood, and became especially close to two other sisters our same age. Their father was a doctor, and I envied them because they lived in a big house filled with pretty things. The four of us formed a club—the “Ranger Rick Nature Club.” We made bird feeders out of used plastic milk cartons, sang songs, and played outside till we were called in for supper. I was the treasurer. Just after my first semester in college ended, I heard that friend from so long ago had died in a car wreck on the way home from her first semester in college. She had wanted to be a physician just like her dad.



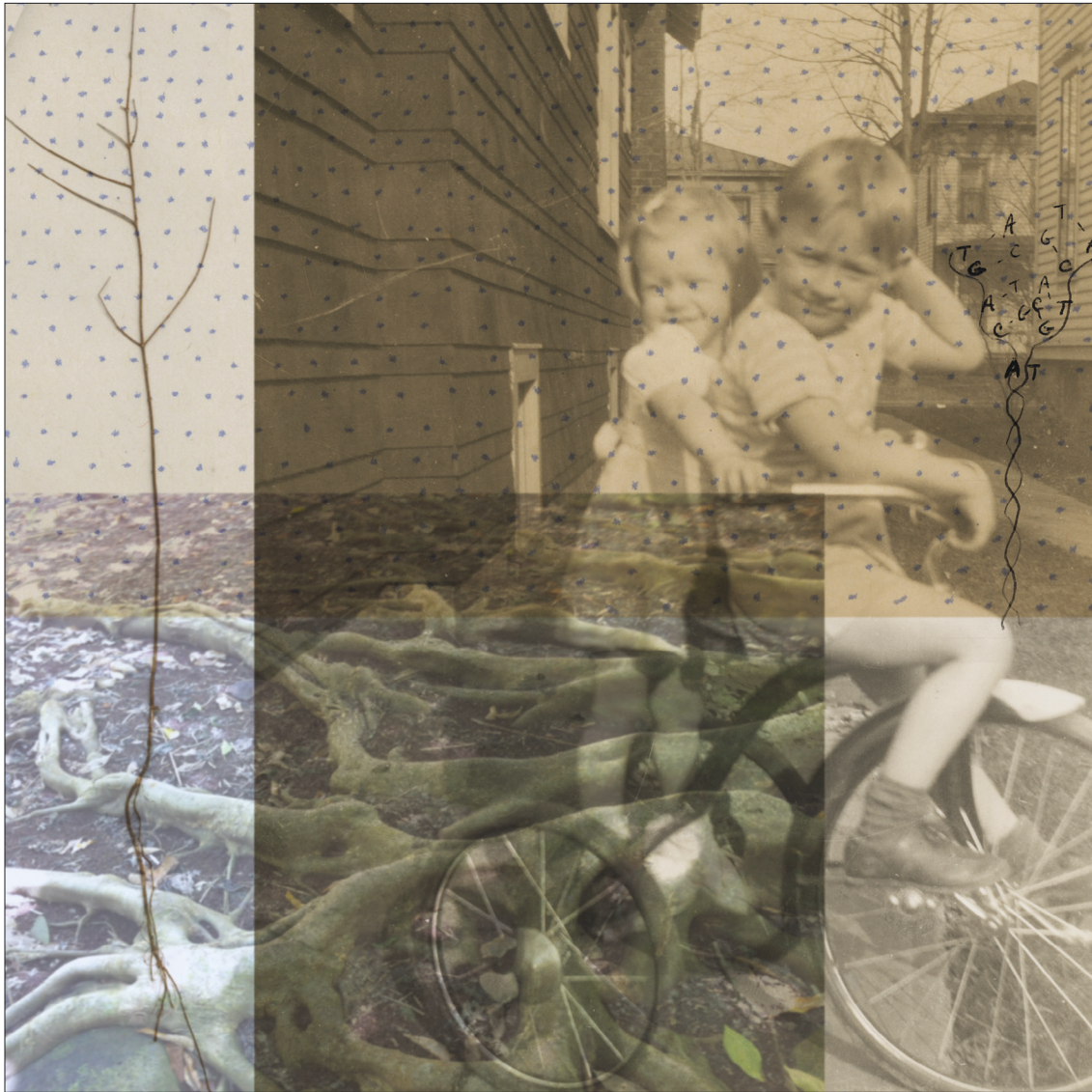
Untitled, 2016. Digital collage.

In October of 1991, my roommate and I went camping in New Mexico. We drove to the Northern part of the state, visiting Taos and driving up close to the Colorado border. We realized once we were there that we had forgotten our tent, so we slept outside, our sleeping bags zipped together and our collective body heat keeping us warm. I remember seeing the sun rise as I opened my eyes the next morning. Since then my dream has been to retire in Northern New Mexico.



Untitled, 2016. Digital collage.

I have a serious fear of cockroaches. They were everywhere growing up, and in South Texas, cockroaches are huge. And they fly. You can hear them in your trash can eating. You can feel them crawling on top of your bed sheet. And if you need to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, wear shoes, and turn all the lights on. I have frequent nightmares about cockroaches. Most of them involve me going to the bathroom in the middle of the night.



Untitled, 2016. Digital collage.

Every morning my dad got out of bed and made coffee for my mom. Then she would get out of bed and make breakfast while my dad made lunches for my sister, himself, and me.



Untitled, 2016. Digital collage.

One of my best friends ever was my dog Phil. Someone had dumped him out in the country where my husband and I were living in a renovated chicken house. It was mid-winter, and the ground was covered in snow. I made a place for him in the barn to sleep, and fed him oatmeal. The next morning I found him sleeping in the snow next to the chicken house. Phil had clear signs of abuse, and refused to allow any male to touch him that first year.



Untitled, 2016. Digital collage.

My mom was the 11th of 13 kids. Her father died in a freak accident when she was three years old, leaving my pregnant grandmother, who only had an eighth grade education, to raise the kids alone. She called a meeting with the oldest kids, and discussed the possibility of giving away the youngest four to a barren couple down the street, who had offered to take them in. They unanimously agreed to keep the family together, which meant that the older kids had to support the family. The oldest one, Henry, eventually became an astrophysicist. He never married, and supported my grandmother for the rest of her life.



Untitled, 2016. Digital collage.

My potential for existence was threatened on December 7th, 1941, when my mother, then five years old, was playing in the front yard with her two younger sisters. Her oldest brother, Henry, watched from the porch. He spotted some suspicious-looking planes flying toward the nearby airforce base, unaware that those same planes had just bombed Pearl Harbor minutes before. He called the girls inside and within seconds bullets strafed the front yard and grazed the house. That house remains in the family, and every time I visit Hawaii, I go to that house and look for the marks the bullets left.



Untitled, 2016. Digital collage.

I blame my mother for my procrastination habit. I remember one Christmas Eve when she retreated to her and my dad's bedroom and locked the door. My sister and I knew she was busy working on a project because we could hear her sewing machine humming for hours and it continued long after we went to bed. The next morning there were two beautiful handmade dolls, each with a different color gingham dress, sitting underneath the Christmas tree. That doll remains my all time favorite Christmas present. Forty years later, my dog found that doll and adopted it as her toy. It is completely torn apart and the stuffing is gone. I think she loves that doll as much as I did.



Untitled, 2016. Digital collage.

I suspected something was wrong with my dad when he fell asleep talking to me on the phone. The first chance I got I flew down to San Antonio to check things out. He had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's six months before, and I didn't know if his extreme fatigue was part of the disease. He was visibly weak and had lost a good deal of weight. I told my parents to make an appointment with their doctor and I would fly back to go to the appointment with them. Three weeks later I flew back and the next day we saw the doctor, who directed us to another clinic to get some testing. Several hours later we were told that he had acute myelogenous leukemia and that he had one to two weeks left to live. He lived for 12 more days.



Untitled, 2016. Digital collage.

I remember watching my dad and his colleagues from work installing a play set in our back yard. It had swings, monkey bars, and a trapeze. One day, while on the swing, I asked my mom if pets go to Heaven when they die. She said they just disappear, like a bubble popping.



Untitled, 2017. Digital collage.

For years I had nightmares about being hunted. The dreams varied in terms of setting and circumstances, but never was the hunter someone I knew. I would wake up right as I was being stabbed or shot. Eventually I was able to stop myself before the dream progressed very far. I would redirect the supposed ending into something more pleasant. A therapist once told me this is referred to as lucid dreaming.



Untitled, 2017. Digital collage.

My sister, Jamie, is older than me by three years. She's funny, compassionate, and genuine. She suffered a closed-head injury many years ago, and has struggled with various issues ever since. I so wish she could see her beauty and potential the way I see it, but owning up to everything she is is difficult for her, in part because of some learning disabilities that went undiagnosed until she reached adulthood, and the stigma of which continues to define her.



Untitled, 2016. Digital collage.

When I was about to graduate from high school, one of the ritual celebrations required the graduating girls to wear long white dresses. My mom waited until the day before to make it, and the pattern I had picked out was a bridal gown that had 20 pearl buttons on the back. I loved that dress, but the button fasteners kept coming loose.



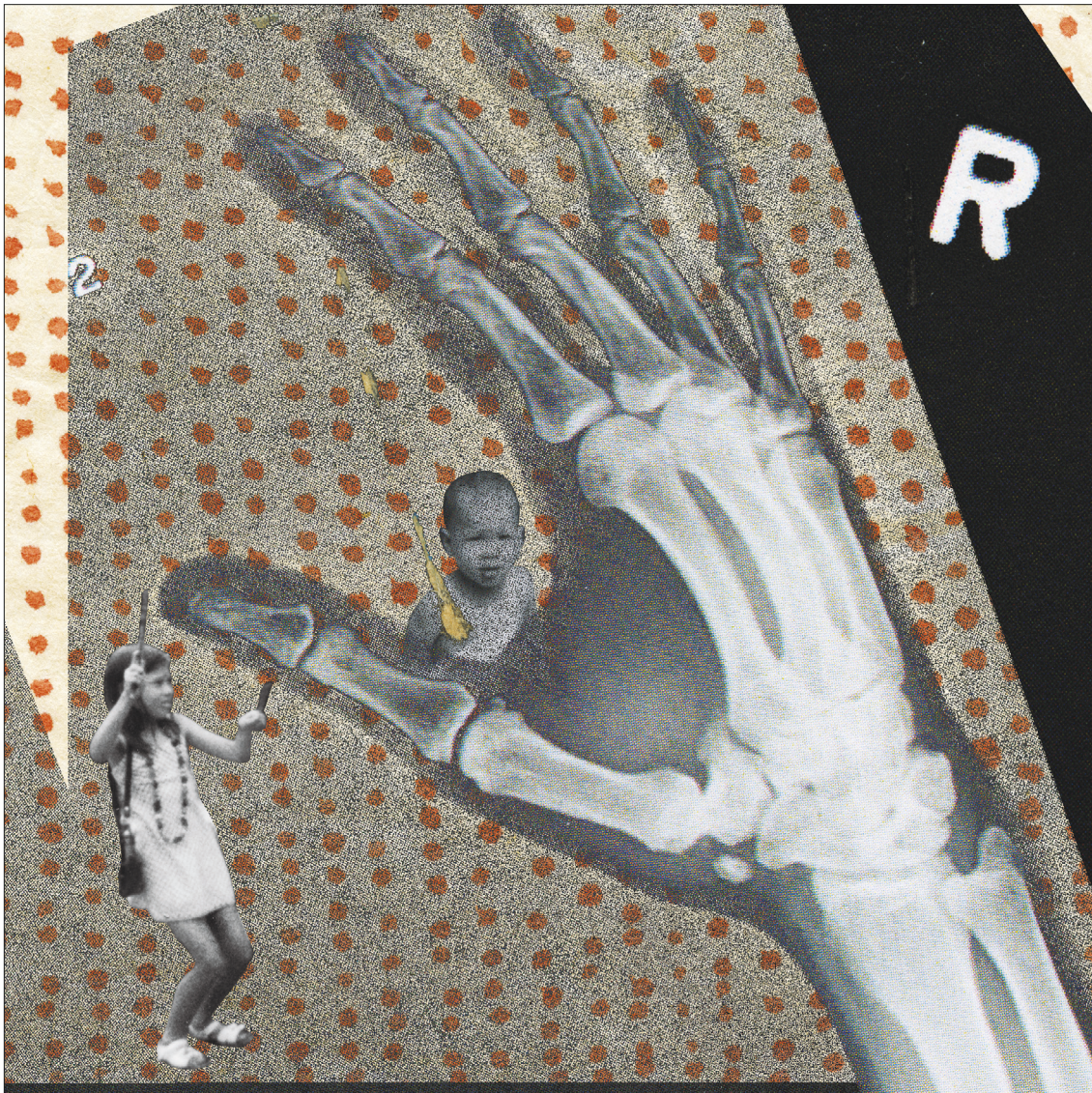
Untitled, 2017. Digital collage.

One time my husband overcooked something and didn't realize it until it started smoking. I placed the smoking pot outside. When my dog Phil looked out the window a few minutes later he growled at it. Then, when he wasn't looking, I went outside and moved the pot closer to the house. The next time he looked out the window he freaked out and barked furiously.



Untitled, 2017. Digital collage.

One time my boyfriend and I went on a hike. On our way up a hill, I accidentally stepped on a snake. I screamed, and the snake slithered off into the tall grass. An hour or so later we descended the same hill, and again I stepped on the same goddamn snake that was sunning itself on that same goddamn rock. My boyfriend laughed as I screamed once again, and once again the snake slithered off into the tall grass.



Untitled, 2016. Digital collage.

My dog Phil lived with me after my divorce. He was old by then, and got far less attention from me as I navigated single motherhood and full-time employment. One day I came home from work and saw the gate to the back yard open. Phil was gone. Anguished, I presumed him gone for good and probably dead because it was dark and raining and he was mostly blind and deaf. Just as it really started to sink in that I would never see him again, a friend called me and said that Phil was in his front yard playing with his dog. That friend had been at my house several days before, so Phil must have tracked his scent all the way to his house, which was several miles away.



Untitled, 2017. Digital collage.

My Chinese grandmother, who was born in 1898, wed my grandfather through an arranged marriage. She was young and small—(4'10") yet lived like a giant, raising her children, eventually earning her GED, learned to play the ukulele, and traveled the world. She had thirteen children, thirty-eight grandchildren, and many, many great-grandchildren. Lin Ing Luke Chun was named Hawaii's Mother of the Year in 1962.



Untitled, 2017. Digital collage.

I am acquiring an unexpected education in microscopic botany, in other words, the super duper tiny parts of plants. It started when I discovered a way to feel connected with my dad, who died five years ago. He had studied biology in graduate school, and I am now in graduate school studying art, so I decided to compile the renderings of microscopic plant parts he had drawn in his notes and research, and recreate these things in three-dimensional form, and use them in my work.



Untitled, 2017. Digital collage.

One of my earliest memories is of my mother and I putting puzzles together. They were simple puzzles, perhaps made out of wood. We put together three or four, and my mother suggested we pretend that we were selling them. Another early memory I have is bringing a handful of bugs inside to show my mother, who was napping on the couch. Some of them crawled on her, and startled her awake, and I told her that bugs were my friends. I miss her more than I ever thought possible.

INTERACTIVE MEDIA

Death and loss have often dominated my thoughts throughout my adult life, but they were brought into sharp focus when my parents died, and sustained amidst the deaths of friends and the loss of a significant relationship, as well as the loss associated with coming to terms with the discovery that my child is transgender. Loss comes in many forms, and grief too, but one's own death is the ultimate loss. It is the loss of everything forever. And every loss is a reminder of the ultimate loss. Some simply cannot accept this notion of non-existence, and cling to other possibilities. The power of a placebo such as religion can effectively erase the terror, and can often provide a vision of one's post-death life as better than one's current existence.

Although we know we will die, there are degrees of awareness. We may experience an acute sense of mortality while having a brush with death. Perhaps we narrowly escaped an oncoming train, successfully dodged a bullet, or recovered from a life-threatening illness. These sort of experiences are intense because we come so close to death, although such events do not always produce death angst, nor are such events a prerequisite for having what Thomas Nagel refers to as 'the expectation of nothingness.'⁸ It is thought that such a deep (and often sudden) recognition of our mortal nature cannot be summoned because our normal state of consciousness will not allow it. Any dissociative means that we normally employ to soften the reality of our inevitable end is suspended in those moments of shocking awareness. On the other hand, there is that low-level cognizance of mortality that is present in the everyday. We *know* we will someday die, but in the day-to-day business of living, this knowledge is situated on a mental back burner. Yet a cultivation of mindfulness regarding death was considered by Heidegger as essential to a meaningful life.⁹

The interactive media piece I designed aims to nudge viewers to consider their finitude. The idea came from a dream I had, where I found myself floating in space, much like George Clooney's character in the movie *Gravity*, after his tether is cut. In my dream, I had the option of continuing to float indefinitely, or by pushing a button, I could deactivate my being. I pushed the button, and I saw myself disappear, as though my image had been projected out in front of me, then dissipated in a static flicker. It reminded me of what happened when you'd turn off your TV, back when cathode ray tubes were in use.

Curiously, not long after I had this dream, I read an exchange on Quora, an internet forum for asking questions. The question was “What does it feel like to be dead?” And one of the respondents answered with the following description:

I'm not sure how long I was dead because I was dead (no heart beat, no pulse, no brain functions, turned blue)... I've read a lot of people speculating what it's like to be dead... You want the truth? It was like turning off an old TV that had a tube. The screen started to go dark from the edges and converged to a little dot in the middle and blinked out. Took about half of a second. No time to turn around and turn back...¹⁰



Cover for *Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch*. 2017.

AVERY, SAGE, AND THE BAD WITCH

The memories one holds throughout one's life tend to be of the more dramatic moments, mixed in with seemingly arbitrary ones. Many early memories involve loss. My own experience of loss first came around age three, when I entered the kitchen one morning eagerly anticipating breakfast with my good friend, J-Car, only to discover that said friend had been disposed of with that day's trash. J-Car was a pumpkin, *my* pumpkin. My pumpkin whom I had known for almost a month, a very close friend, now, suddenly, gone.

With a view to addressing ideas of impermanence and change to a younger audience, I produced a book that started out as a re-worked Icelandic fairy tale. It ended up so different from the original tale that I decided to change the title and the names of the characters. The story is about a witch who tries to marry a prince, but faces obstacles, namely, her own incompetence. The witch, not named, but referred to as "the witch," represents the stereotypical witch in such stories, the twist in the story being that she is bad, not because she's evil, but bad because she lacks proficiency in performing witchy actions.

There are three others in the story named Rowan, Sage, and Avery. I deliberately gave these characters androgynous names and avoided the use of she/he pronouns to describe them. My intention here is to challenge the standard of identifying characters primarily by gender. As society moves away from a binary framework and progresses to a new paradigm that realigns gender on a spectrum, I find it important to support and promote this crucial new way of thinking. My own child came out as transgender during my graduate school experience, making this a point of personal reference as well.

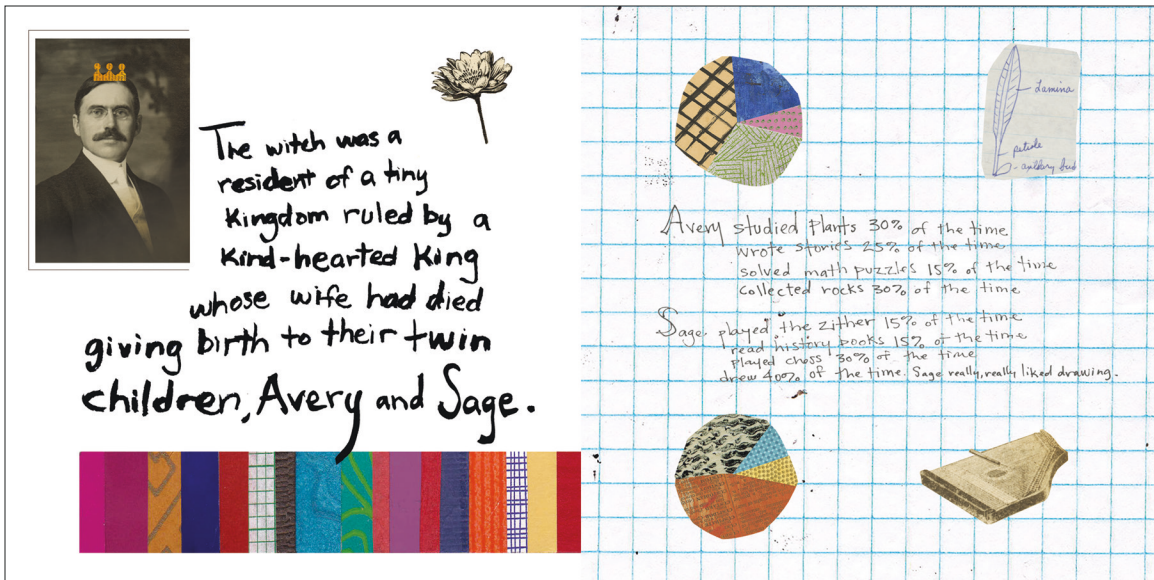
My visual approach to illustrating this book was inspired by some mixed-media picture books I bought in France many years ago. These books had such visually-compelling images, I was inspired each time I opened them. The text in these books is spare, the imagery being primary. I took the same course when developing *Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch*, resulting in a two-signature, 628-word book filled with hand-stamped, typed, collaged and drawn text, and both abstract and representational images made with a variety of materials. The book is a messy patchwork of collaged scraps of paper, interspersed with occasional "finished" illustrations, that reinforces the theme of a clumsy, incompetent witch. I hope it rises to the level of the eye-candy of the books that inspired me to create it.



Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



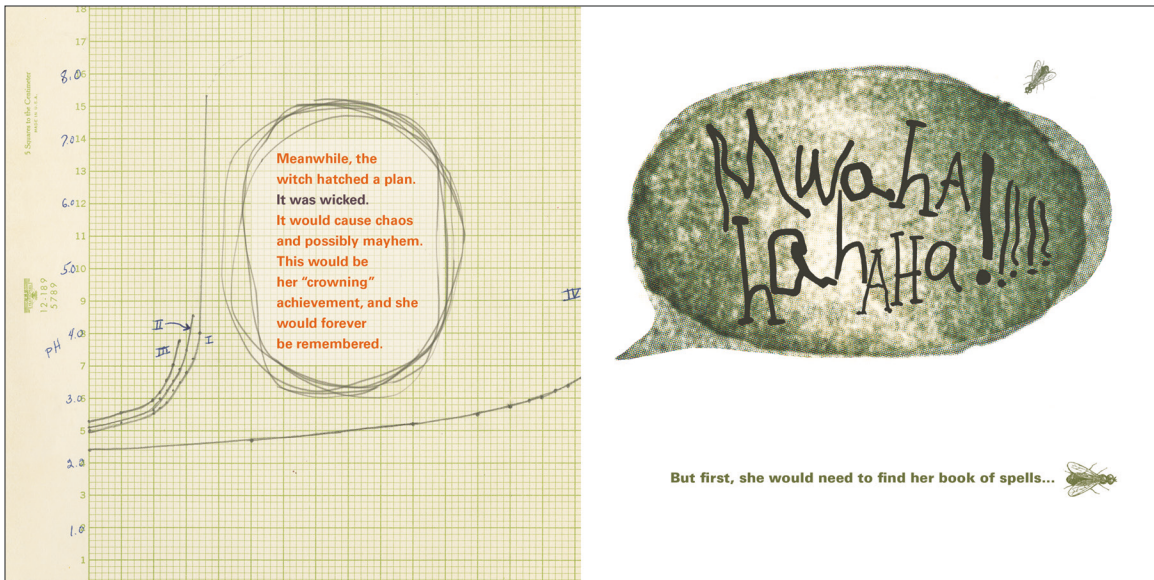
Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



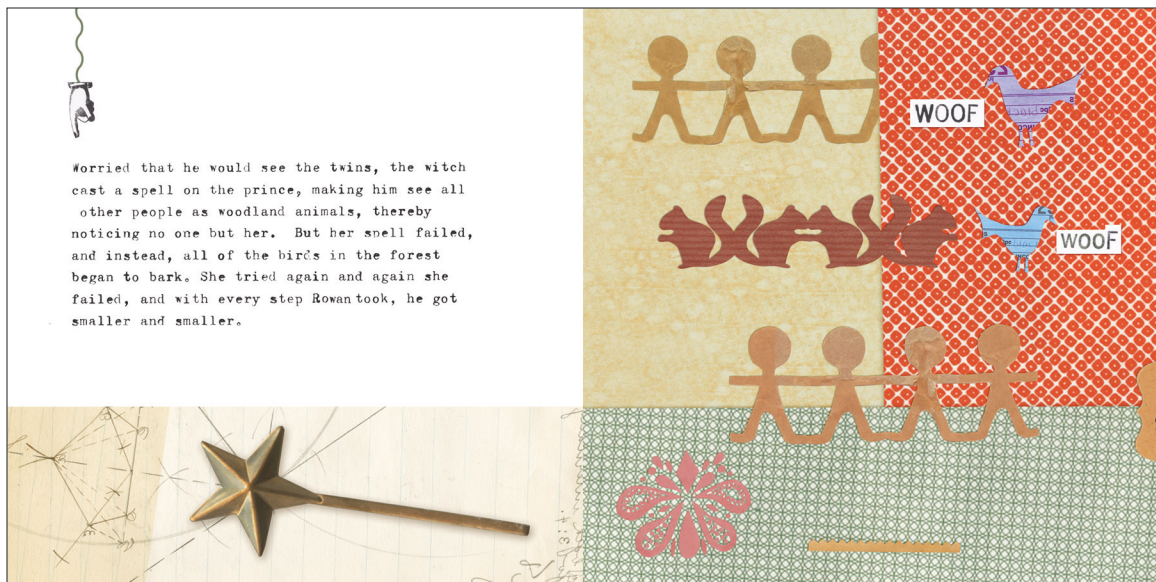
Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



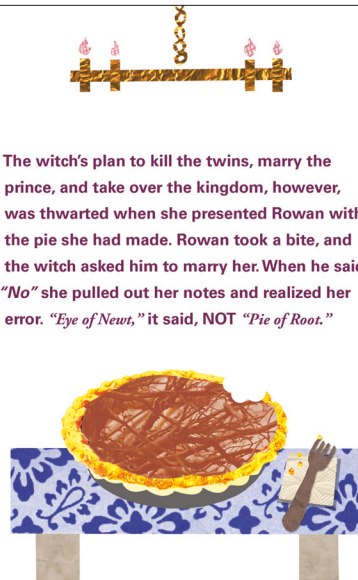
When they got to the castle, Rowan confessed he needed to rest. The witch ushered him to a room at the far end of the castle, and encouraged him to nap while she fetched some refreshments. She was determined to marry Prince Rowan, so she cast a spell that would cause him to agree to all of her demands.




Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



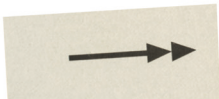
The witch's plan to kill the twins, marry the prince, and take over the kingdom, however, was thwarted when she presented Rowan with the pie she had made. Rowan took a bite, and the witch asked him to marry her. When he said, "No" she pulled out her notes and realized her error. "Eye of Newt," it said, NOT "Pie of Root."




Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.




And at that moment, Avery and Sage burst into the room and surprised the witch, who, with a swish of her wand and a mumble of hocus-pocus, the twins suddenly froze. The witch was so astonished at her success, that she took a few steps back to take in her achievement. And in that instant, the witch realized that her years of practice had paid off. She finally, finally, had the power to make her dreams come true.



Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.






 But in the instant after that, she also realized that marrying Rowan and taking over the kingdom wasn't what she really wanted. What did she want?

She didn't know.

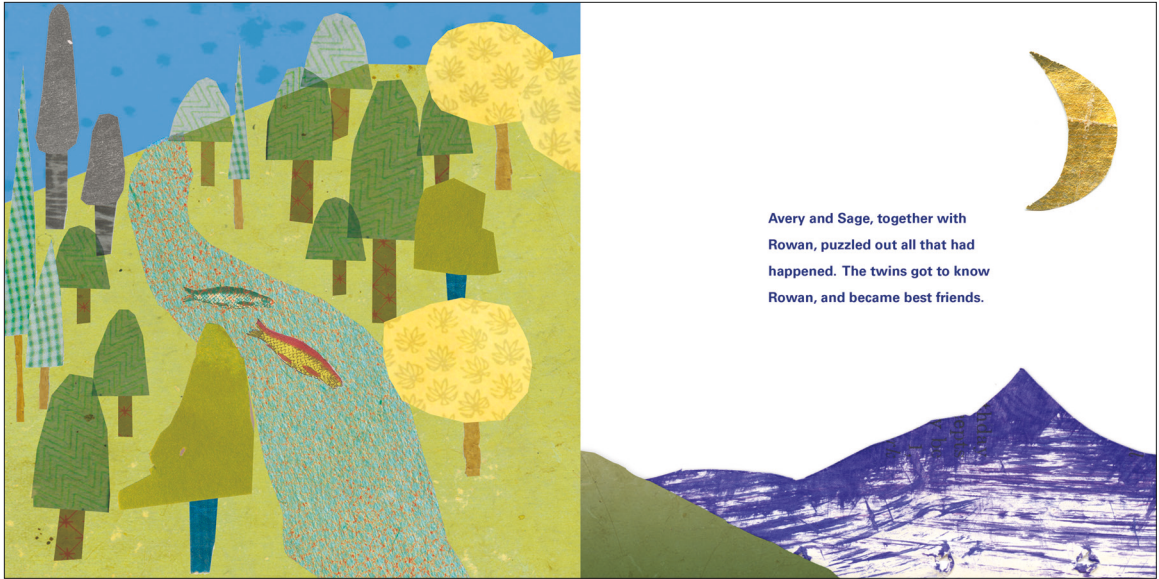
But she did know it wasn't this.

So, she unfroze the twins, apologized to Rowan, and ran away.

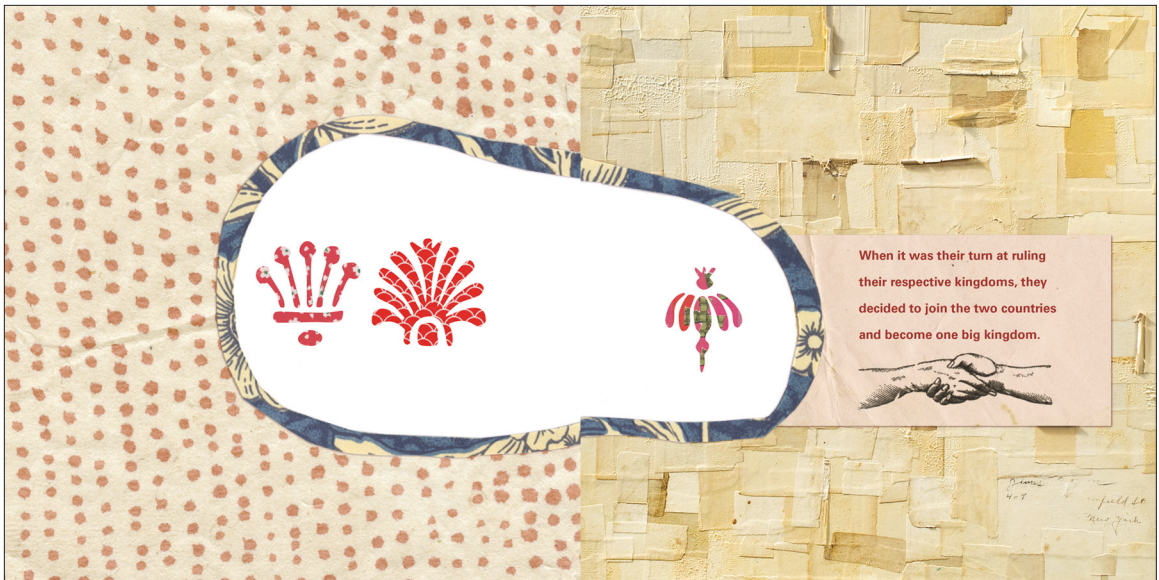




Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



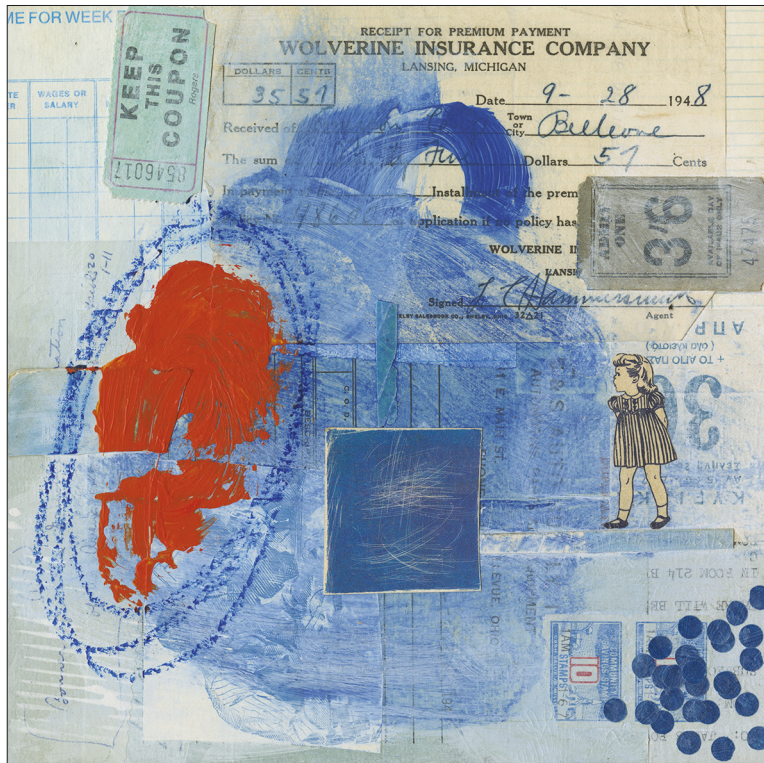
Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



Avery, Sage, and the Bad Witch. 2017.



3559, 2015. Mixed media.

CONCLUSION

While most of my current work is abstract, much of my past work is comprised of images that endeavor to direct the viewer to contemplate the truth of what they are seeing, and more broadly, to identify the illusory qualities of life. To accomplish this, I create forms using contrasting elements— some hand rendered and some found materials. For example, a drawn figure might have eyes cut from a magazine picture. To push the envelope of disquiet, I might not adhere to proportional expectations, enlarging a head here, minimizing a tail there, taking care not to over-exaggerate, but exaggerating enough that the beholder knows the distortion was intentional.

I have a propensity to put forth the unexpected. Like puns, pastiche is a tool to destabilize, an element of surprise that appeals to me at a very basic level. I want my work to be noticed, and to encourage this, I force the audience/viewer/receiver to participate through the need to reconcile that which is expected with that which is (the unexpected). If I can achieve this, I have captured the attention of the viewer, if even for an imperceptible moment, and I can then have a chance at accomplishing other goals, if any, such as the larger mission to understand, and to be understood, to connect, if only subconsciously.

Underlying this desire to connect is a wish for immortality. Milan Kundera postulated that immortality is produced through appropriated images and sound bites.¹¹ This may be true enough for some, but it is not what I seek. What I want is more akin to the sort of connection made between strangers caught up in a shared tragedy. For the connection to be established, though, the involved must acknowledge the tragic status. In this case, of course, the tragedy is the fact of our impending deaths, a “*Weltanschauung* of catastrophe.”¹² Short of an actual possibility of eternal life, or of a real connection, I am forced to be content with the next best, and far inferior, prospect, that I can temporarily engage with another human being through my art, coercing him/her as I will through my little tricks of pastiche, to see the thing that I saw when I created the work, to honor this wondrous gift of consciousness, aspiring to astonish, but knowing that it will most likely be dismissed, as most art is, as arbitrarily as my existence seems to be, or as Baudrillard put it, “*a destiny of inertia for a saturated world...short-circuited by a monstrous finality.*”¹³

Heidegger believed that art, and only art, can function as a portal to truth.¹⁴ While I disagree that art is the only portal to truth, I do believe that it has the potential to bring about sublime experiences. It also has the potential to encourage one to seek out sublime experiences. Simply opening a person's imagination, even a tiny bit, can be enough to encourage the awareness that there might be more. And the seeking out of transcendent experiences, while misguided when pursued as a form of entertainment, can lead to an attuned sense of realizing that the *something more* we seek can often be discovered in mundane things that get overlooked. It's like making poetry out of regular words.

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