

A Sensual Exploration of Melancholy

THESIS PROJECT BY RACHEL BLUMER DIAZENA

“All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another.”

Anatole France, *Le crime de Sylvestre Bonnar*, 1881

What is my thesis?

Exploring my personal experience of the emotion melancholy by sensually interpreting it in multiple forms, including forms that are not purely visual.

Melancholy Definition:

a feeling of pensive sadness, typically with no obvious cause.

Melancholy is a misunderstood emotion. It's something that I find comforting and beautiful, but it seems like many people try to steer away from the traditionally "sad" emotions as much as possible. There are many types of melancholy. Melancholy is something that isn't just sad; it's thoughtful, gentle, and awe-inspiring. It's quiet and appreciative.

Types of Melancholy

- The **awe-inspiring** type of melancholy manifests itself to me in natural environments. The most awestruck melancholy I have ever been has been in Scotland, where it is always rainy, foggy, bleak, and ancient. The landscapes are much more dramatic than anything I've experienced so far, and they feel alive. They feel like old gods.
- **Appreciative** melancholy is nostalgic. When I think about the people in my life now (or those that aren't in my life), I am able to look back on how they came or left and feel the same emotions in a different way. Remembering times past is melancholy when you consider how much life has changed and how much is left still to change. This is especially true for me in the current pandemic.
- Melancholy is **gentle**. Depression is punishing. Depression leaves me laying in bed, thinking about nothing, feeling like a blank piece of paper. Melancholy fills me with every feeling in the world and makes me feel more empathetic. If I'm struck with melancholy, I can confront my worst worldly fear (cockroaches) with sympathy. They're inside because it's cold out. Who can blame them for intruding?

There are many other types of melancholy besides these three, and that's why it would make no sense for all of my work for this thesis to be in the same style.

It was never my plan to have an aesthetically unified final body of work. I wanted each piece to stand on its own, because each time I experience melancholy it's different. Melancholy and the way it presents itself depends on the context - your surroundings, what's happening in your life, how you're feeling, and the way the light is falling across the floor.

I want my thesis to be able to portray the beauty of melancholy, and show others that it's okay (and even good) to be sad sometimes.

What did I make?

—— Style Guide

—— Hand Lettering

—— Poetry

—— Sculpture

—— Linocut Prints

—— Tattoo

—— Perfume

—— Coat Design

—— Package Design

—— Character Design

—— Paper

—— Cyanotypes

—— Film Photos

—— Spatial Design

—— One-Page Website

*** [CLICK ON A TITLE TO JUMP TO THAT WORK](#)**

Why these things?

I chose these particular objects either because I wanted to learn more about them, or because I wanted to see how I would interpret melancholy in that specific medium.

Style Guide

Designers use style guides to explain a brand's guidelines - how the typography should be used, the way colors should be dealt with, the way images should be shot and where they should go. I thought creating a style guide for melancholy would be a good way to start out my project.

The image shows the cover of a style guide book. The cover is dark grey with the word 'Melancholy.' in a large, white, serif font. Below it, in a smaller, white, sans-serif font, is the subtitle 'A STYLE GUIDE FOR A FEELING'. The book is shown at a slight angle, giving it a three-dimensional appearance.

Melancholy.

A STYLE GUIDE FOR A FEELING

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TYPEFACE

Fahkwang

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxy

The apparition of these
faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Melancholy does not draw attention to itself.

Melancholy knows its delicate place, and respects the worth and truth of everything else. Melancholy is modest, but beautiful.

The typeface for melancholy should allow every other element to take precedent without sacrificing the beauty and subtlety of what it is by itself.

The emotion of melancholy is a vessel for things outside of our own humanity to come into contact with us. The typeface for melancholy should be a vessel to allow us to experience melancholy without becoming distracted by decorations such as serifs and ligatures.

Ay, in the very
temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy
has her sovran shrine

"Ode to Melancholy" by John Keats



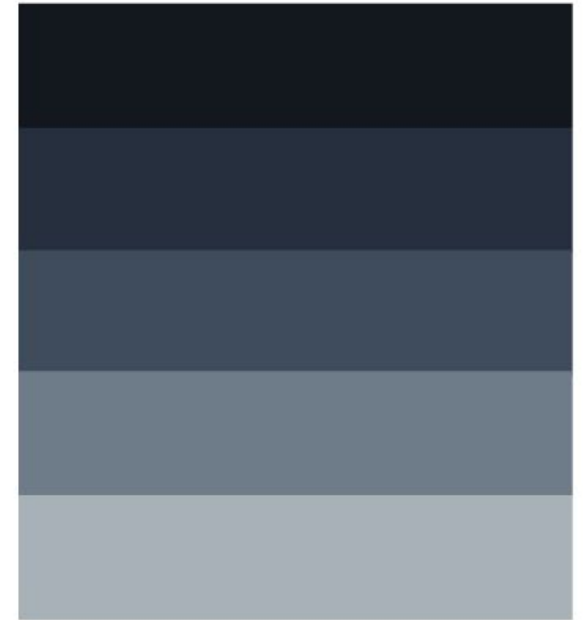
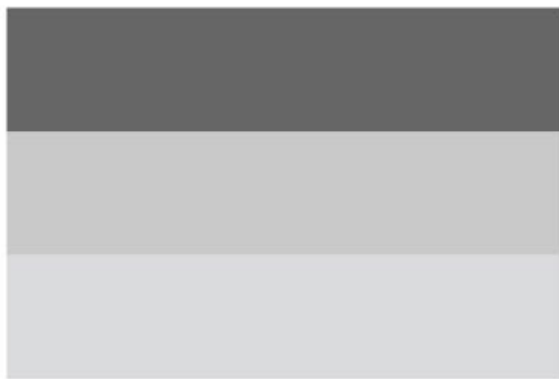
COLOR PALETTE

Storm Stone Cream

Melancholy is versatile. It could really be any color. These particular shades are reminiscent of powerful sea storms, stone beaches, and small comforts.

These are the colors of a New England Lighthouse, a Scottish morning, and a midwinter evening. A storm at sea is belittling, awe-inspiring, and fair. The storm doesn't care what it washes away.

It won't be you, of course. You are content to watch it from the window with a cup of coffee and a blanket.



IMAGERY



by George Elgar Hicks

Melancholy is a “pensive sadness.”

Imagery for melancholy should reflect the thoughtfulness of the emotion, but also the deep sadness associated with it.



by Caspar David Friedrich

IMAGERY



Images should be full of nature, wisftul
glances, and emotive lighting & color.
They should emit feelings of relfection
and acceptance.

We know we are small and we accept
that we, in the end, don't really mean
much to the universe. Isn't that freeing?



Poetry

For the poetry part of my thesis, I wrote 22 haiku. I turned 22 this year, so I wanted something to allude to my short time on this planet since I often feel most melancholy when thinking about my past. These short, restrictive poems forced me to try and distill different feelings of melancholy into tiny little vessels.

.01

My melancholy:

**Soft and docile, holding my
Hand through my nothings.**

.02

My melancholy:

**Shows me what life could be if
Things were different.**

.03

My melancholy:

**Knows what I like to be told
And how to say it.**

.04

My melancholy:

**Takes me to far away lands
And leaves me to think.**

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.05

Melancholy is

Seeing the ocean that swims

In one of your tears.

.06

Melancholy is

The magic rituals that

Happen by themselves.

.07

Melancholy is

The peace of a broken heart,

The pain as you heal.

.08

Melancholy is

The warmth of a blanket and

The cold of winter.

.09

Melancholy is

A passing scent, a texture

In a long-lost thought.

.10

Melancholy is

Rolling green hills, soggy and

Vibrant as ever.

.11

Melancholy is

A longing for something that

Is just beyond reach.

.12

Melancholy is

Knowing that there are secrets

You could never know.

.13

Melancholy is

Finding joy in the doubts that

Ripped you from your home.

.14

Melancholy is

The softness of a person

Melting into tears.

.15

Melancholy is

The acceptance of something

We don't understand.

.16

Melancholy is

Ashes to ashes, dust to

Dust, flame into ice.

.17

Melancholy is

The loneliness in a crowd,

Your quiet corner.

.18

Melancholy is

Happiness given the chance

To meet with sadness.

.19

Melancholy is

Knowing, thinking, and wishing,

Watching and waiting.

.20

Melancholy is

The stillness in a graveyard

Before burial.

.21

Melancholy is

Laughing at nature, crying

That it can't laugh back.

.22

Melancholy is

The sound that ice makes as it

Moves under the Earth.

Linocuts

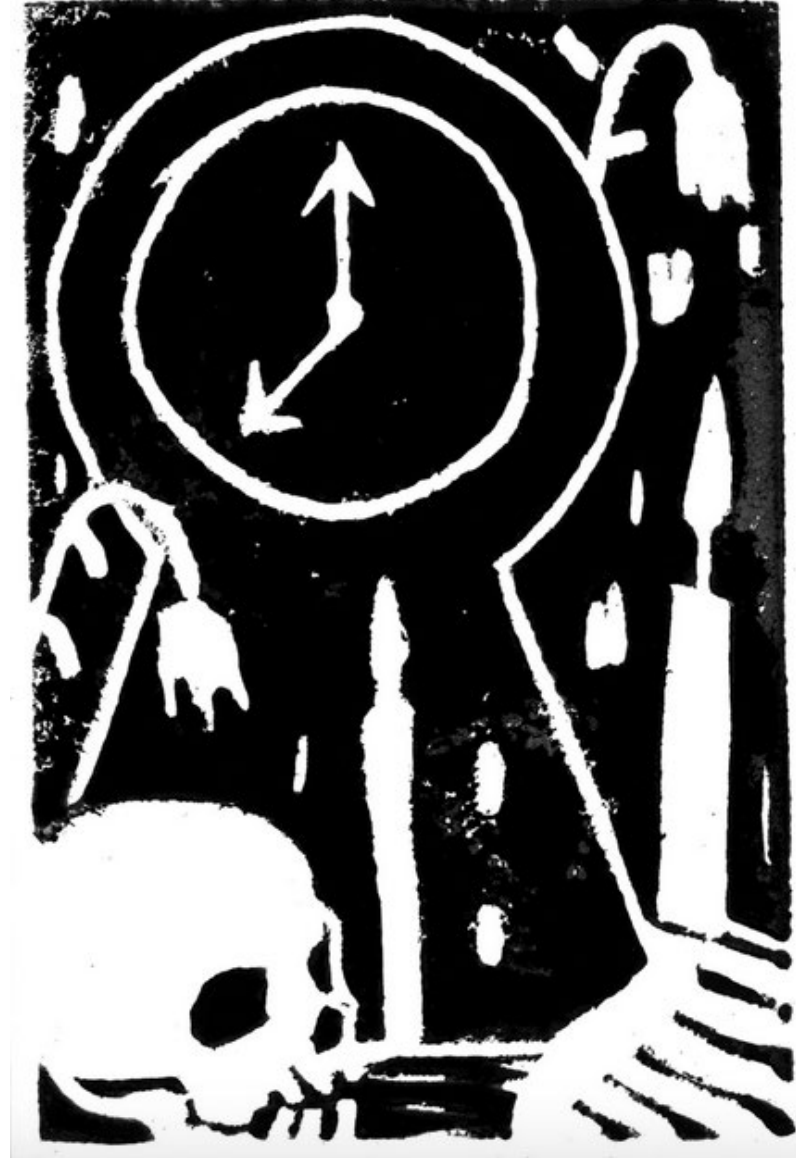
I created two linocut prints for this portion of my project. I used similar symbols and imagery from baroque still life paintings and catholic paintings of saints. These genres of art often had similar melancholy themes in the subject matter.



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Forma Bonum Fragile Est - Form is Fragile



Memento Mori - Remember You Will Die

Package Design and Perfume

I decided to combine my perfume and my packaging objects into one. I created a scent that was really nostalgic to me, using scents that smell like rain, dirt, and I used a little bit of the first perfume I ever wore which was just sandalwood. I then used photos of a place I used to go all the time as part of the packaging. I wrote the story of the packaging's appearance on the packaging itself.

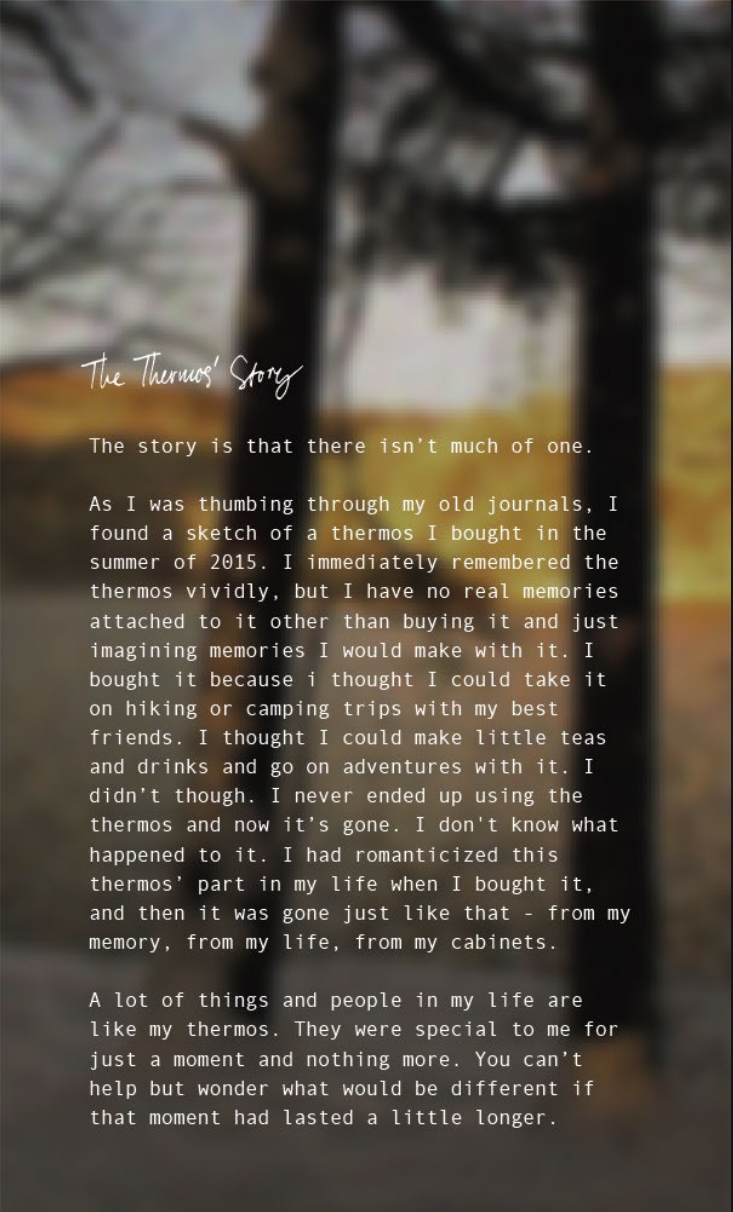


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This is the inside panel of the outer packaging of the perfume.

"The story is that there isn't much of one.

As I was thumbing through my old journals, I found a sketch of a thermos I bought in the summer of 2015. I immediately remembered the thermos vividly, but I have no real memories attached to it other than buying it and just imagining memories I would make with it. I bought it because i thought I could take it on hiking or camping trips with my best friends. I thought I could make little teas and drinks and go on adventures with it. I didn't though. I never ended up using the thermos and now it's gone. I don't know what happened to it. I had romanticized this thermos' part in my life when I bought it, and then it was gone just like that - from my memory, from my life, from my cabinets."



The Thermos' Story

The story is that there isn't much of one.

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A lot of things and people in my life are like my thermos. They were special to me for just a moment and nothing more. You can't help but wonder what would be different if that moment had lasted a little longer.

*When are you
free this week?*

Flashback is a short-lived fragrance. It is here, it is powerful, and it's gone the next moment. This is the cruel and beautiful nature of our memories. The base notes of sandalwood and oakmoss will linger just long enough for others to smell it on your neck, forget you, and remember a ghost of you years later when something specific floats by on the wind.

SCENT NOTES:

- Your best friend's house
- The lake in the summer
- A hike you never took 7 years ago
- Your first kiss
- Spells
- His head on your chest
- Old texts you read and re-read

INGREDIENTS - JOJOBA OIL, OAK MOSS OIL,
HELIOTROPE, SANDALWOOD (THE FIRST
PERFUME YOU EVER WORE)

PLEASE DON'T LET ME SIT
UNDER THOSE BLANKETS BY MYSELF

Flashback

I MISS YOU. PLEASE HOLD ME

f

EAU DE TOILETTE

88 mL e 3.0 FL OZ



The Thermos' Story

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I used old texts from years ago as slogans throughout the design.



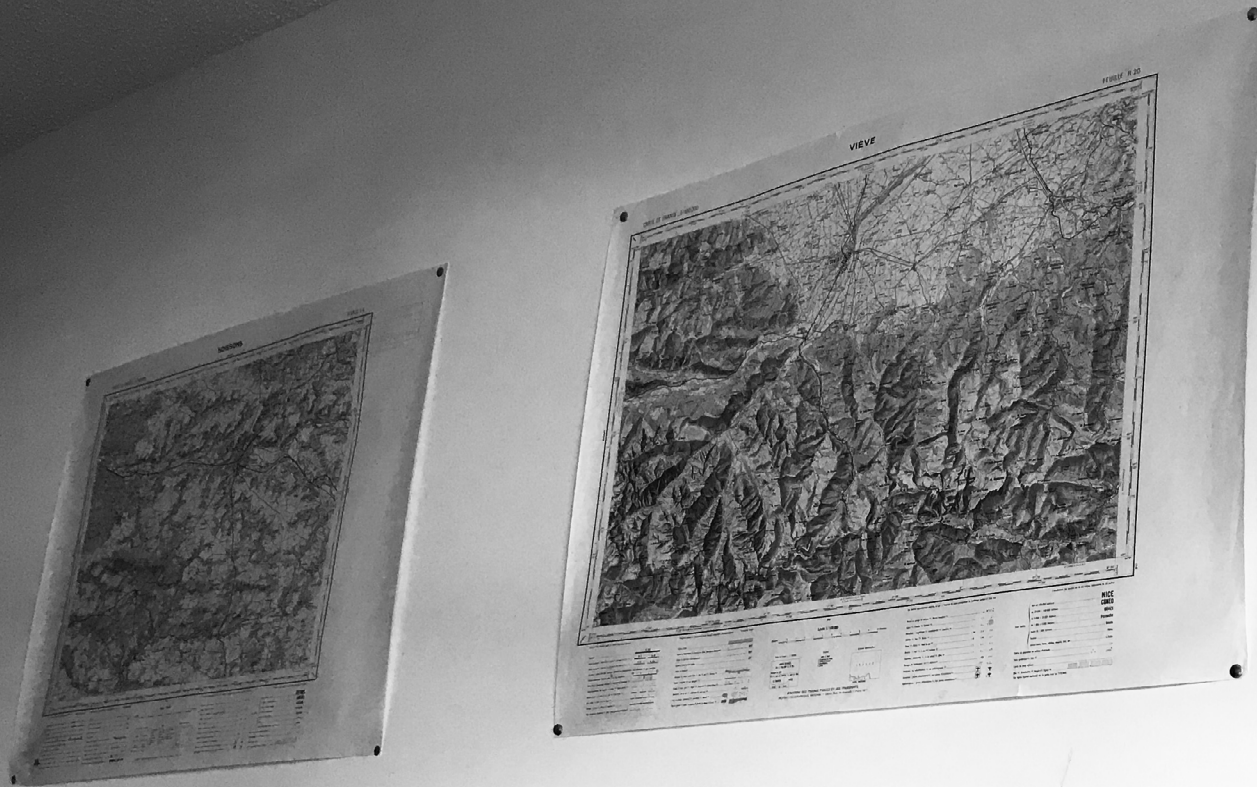
Paper

This is my handmade paper. I made this with my husband. We both wrote letters to one another and blended them up with the pulp. We didn't read them before hand. I scented the paper with the scent I made for the perfume and added flower petals from a dead Valentine's bouquet.

I had planned on using some of this paper in a final book compiling all of my work to show at my senior portfolio show, but the show was canceled.



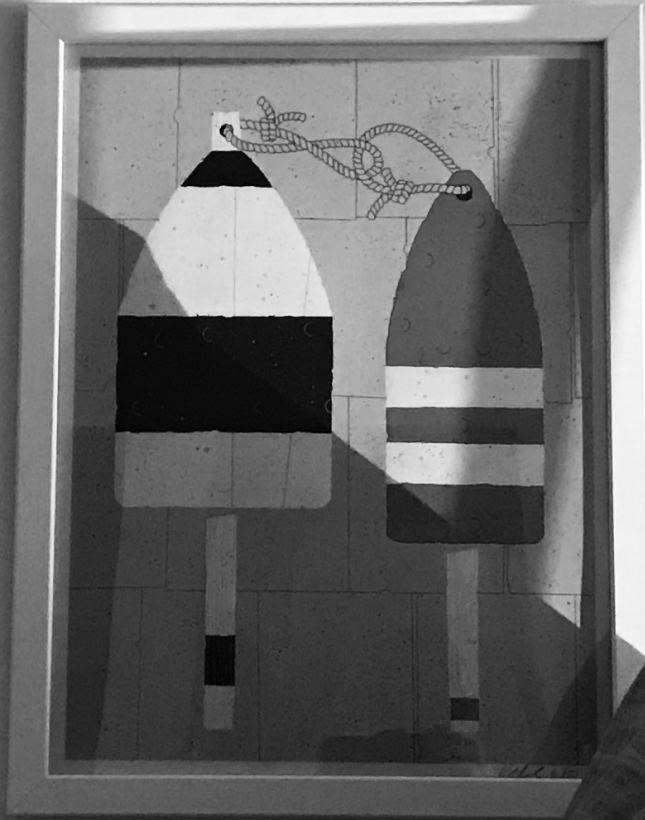
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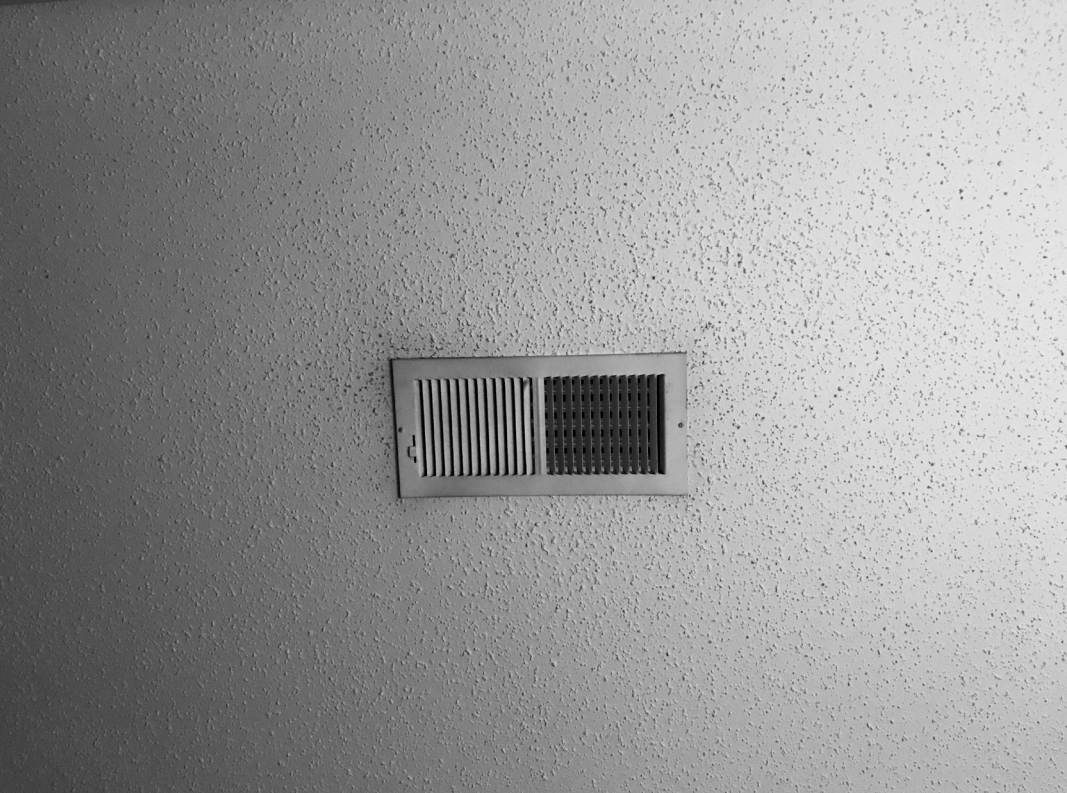


Film Photos

Unfortunately, I was unable to develop my film photos in time due to the virus. Instead, here are some photos I've been taking of my home throughout the quarantine. They're just objects that I see every day, but they've taken on a somewhat different meaning to me after being stuck surrounded by them 24/7.

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Website

I started by designing my website roughly in a website interface design program called Figma and then I started coding it. Eventually, I abandoned the design and started coding and designing more spur-of-the-moment. It's hard sometimes to design things when you just want to feel them. The website, if you can call it that, is really just a coded journal.

I'm not a developer at all, so I'm having trouble figuring out how to host the website so that you can visit it live. I'm working on that.

Here's a link to a screen record of me scrolling through the site. The password is "melancholy":

<https://vimeo.com/406580579>

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Hand Lettering

I wanted to try hand lettering because it's not a skill I've really cultivated thus far. Once I started though, I didn't think I should go too decorative because that doesn't feel "melancholy" to me. Melancholy is subtle. It leaves room for the message to outshine the vessel.

This poem is an excerpt from *Interior (with Jane)* by Frank O'Hara

...The really stupid things, I mean
a can of coffee, a 35 cent ear
ring, a handful of hair, what
do these things do to us? We
come into the room, the windows
are empty, the sun is weak
and slippery on the ice and a
sob comes, simply because it is
coldest of the things we know

Sculpture

This piece is a memorial to my old self before losing my religion. This piece references the nostalgic aspects of melancholy.



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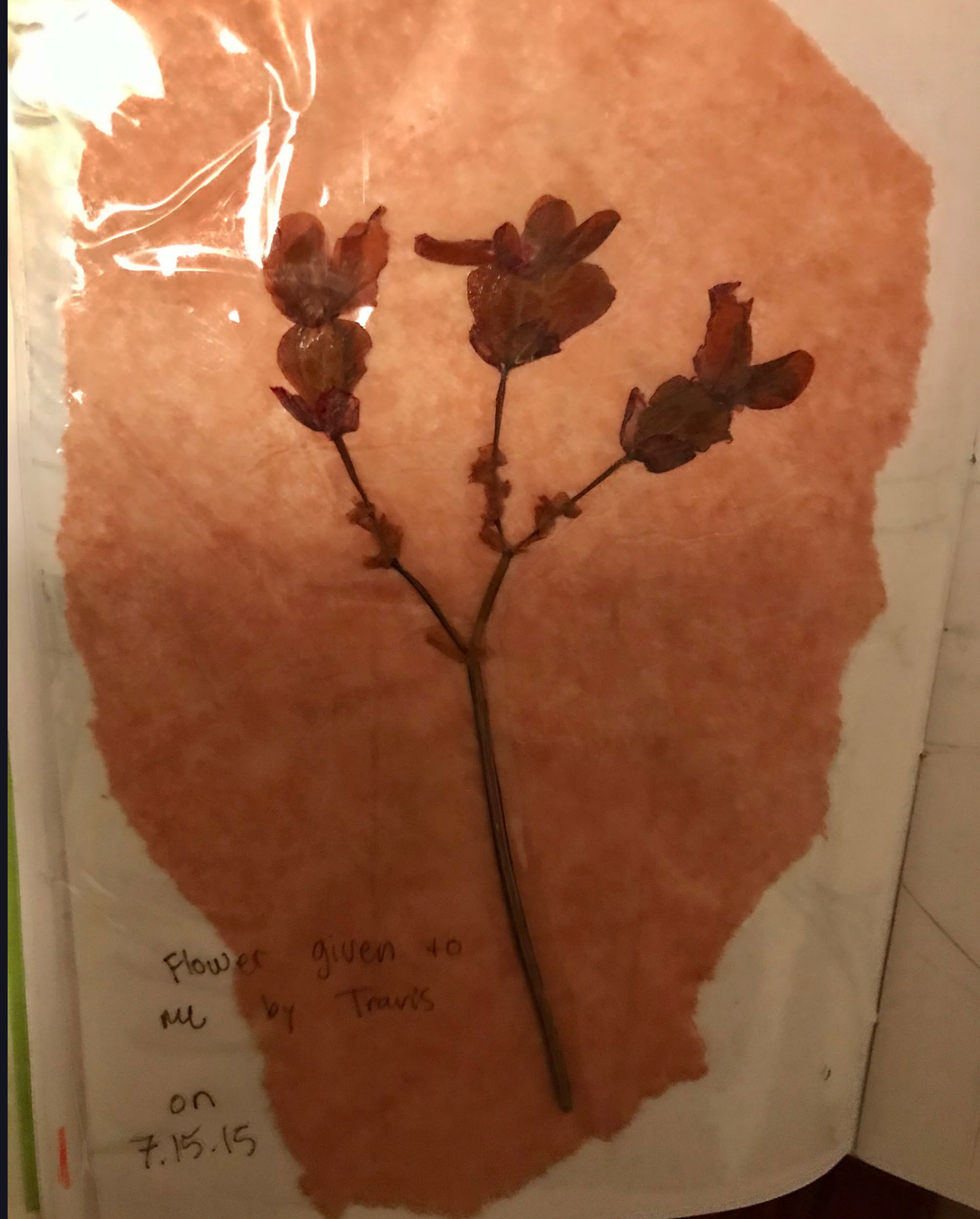
I can clearly remember the way I thought and felt in those days - I often felt like something was wrong with the things I believed. I often felt like I was worthless because of those beliefs. I remember feeling afraid of admitting that I didn't really believe what I said I did because when you grow up in a religion, that defines your worldview and your sense of self. What happens when you abandon that? I felt trapped and wasn't sure how to escape.

**Hear this, you foolish and senseless
people,
who have eyes but do not see,
who have ears but do not hear:**

Tattoo

As I was looking through old journals, I found a pressed flower in one of them. I can't remember the stories behind almost any of flowers I press even though I picked them as a way to remember. I know I have some from my first trip out of the country, multiple from some of my early dating days, some from times spent with my first best friend, but I can't remember the specific moments these flowers are supposed to spark in me.

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Flower given to
me by Travis
on
7.15.15

Tattoo

All I'm left with of these moments are melancholy objects that don't recall anything – they just hint at a moment that was special enough for me to save a piece of it. But I don't remember that moment.

The past is just as uncertain as the future.

Memories aren't permanent. Nothing is. I thought that portraying that concept through a medium that is supposedly "permanent" was interesting.



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I did the tattoo myself on top of my spleen,
where the ancient Greeks thought melancholy
stemmed from.

Coat Design

I knew I planned on designing a coat at some point, but I wasn't sure what it would look like. I allowed my feelings to guide the appearance. I think it captures the feelings I was experiencing due to the quarantine, the pandemic, and the futility of things..

I've been feeling like none of this matters anymore. I tried to use this feeling in this instance to be productive. Here's a sort of heated quarantine blanket to wrap over yourself when you don't know what happens next.

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Character Design

When I tried to figure out what melancholy would look like as a character, I eventually settled on a particular species of monkey called the lesula. These monkeys were “discovered” in 2012 and have the most empathetic eyes.

I made the lesula a sort of melancholy “god,” wrapped up in my melancholy coat and holding a memory.



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Cyanotypes

I wanted to try these because of my interest in printmaking. These prints turn out bright blue, and blue is, of course, the classic color of sadness. I used dried and dead flowers and letters from a peg board. The flowers are actually from my wedding bouquet.

I made a few different ones since they were quick, but these 3 felt the most melancholy to me. The first one here feels blurry, like how flowers look on a windy day when your eyes are halfway closed.

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SLEEPY IN
QUARANTINE



Spatial Design

I mulled over what to do with this last object for a long time. I couldn't decide how to tackle it - did I want to design a space to be melancholy in, or a space to make you feel melancholy? Is it comforting? Is it uncomfortable?

In the end, I decided to draw an almost abstract version of my own melancholy. The space I've made is made up of my own memories, places I've been, spent time in, and people I've known. Some memories are good, and some are bad. Everything in the drawing is gone now either way.



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What was the point?

The point of this project was not to create something perfectly executed to put in my portfolio and wow employers. It wasn't to impress my professors. It wasn't to compete with my classmates.

I wanted to do something for myself and only myself for my senior thesis. Design is all about creating for other people and making what works for them. I designed this project so that I was the client, the designer, and the audience.

Throughout my college career, I have been making things to be judged by others. That's normal for a designer, and I love my career path. For my last hurrah though, I wanted to be what I focused on. I learned a lot about myself, the way I work, and what I'm capable of this semester. I can stick to hard deadlines. I can stare past hurt in the face and make something of it. I can cry because of a smell. I can be proud of myself for making something that doesn't fit just right into the rubric even if I don't get a perfect grade.

I let myself relax and let go with this project. I let myself become immersed in an incredibly powerful emotion, and I think I've come out better for it. I've learned that all the days are not nearly full enough for all of the wonderful melancholy I feel.

And the days are not full enough
And the nights are not full enough
And life slips by like a field mouse
Not shaking the grass.

Ezra Pound

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