

ABSTRACT

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Mingling Echoes is an exhibition comprised of written word, alchemic reactions, found and repurposed objects, as well as sculptural forms of my own creation. All are abstractions from my subconscious, and they are blended with influential objects from my past in an intuitive manner. The following abstract gives a glimpse into my inspirations and personal experiences that have led to how I perceive memories are connected, intertwined, and ultimately, triggered.

Additionally, I included two contemporary artists in whose work I find correlations with my own. The found and repurposed objects come from my personal collection that I have amassed over the past three decades from myriad places including my grand-parents' property, gifts, flea markets, junk yards, antique/vintage shops, and roadsides.

MINGLING ECHOES

By

Lauren G. Koch

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Advisory Committee:
Professor Patrick Craig, Chair
Professor William Richardson
Professor Jessica V. Gatlin

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Chapter 1: STORYTELLING

Storytelling through the centuries has been a way of preserving culture and those who hold the stories are often revered and held in high esteem. North Georgia and Appalachia are full of storytellers, from the indigenous Cherokee tribes to the British, Irish, German, and Scandinavian settlers from whom I descended. They voyaged across the Atlantic to Virginia and Wisconsin to trickle southward, to Georgia where I grew up. As a southerner, storytelling is not just an essential way to preserve our heritage, but it is a way of life. Within my family, we have had a number of storytellers. They passed on our family's history for those who would listen. I know that all nine of my Pawpaw's older brothers and sisters were known for their tall tells and stories of growing up around Clayton and Athens, Georgia; however, my Pawpaw (Bobby E.) and his older sister (Margaret/Mossie), along with my aunt (Sharon) remain the three most influential storytellers in my life. The "storytelling" torch of our family now passes to me and I express that through my artwork.

From a young age, I prepared to be a storyteller and did not even realize it. I gleaned and stored information that filters out through my artwork. At bedtime or during long, evening car rides, I begged over and over until someone ceded, saying, "Tell me a story about when you were a little (girl/boy)!" Some family members were far better at this than others. Regardless of how many times I heard the same story there would always be slight changes. Often, I corrected them and said, "but the last time you told it this way." As I grow older, those discrepancies that happen through many retellings and interpretations intrigue me. In Spalding Gray's preface to *Sex and Death to the Age of 14*,

a collection of his monologues, I believe he eloquently explains how I draw correlations between storytelling and the interpretations found in my work,

Stories seem to fly to me and stick. They are always out there, coming in. We exist in a fabric of personal stories. All culture, all civilization, is an artful web, a human puzzle, a colorful quilt patched together to lay over raw, indifferent nature. So I never wonder whether, if a tree falls in the forest, will anyone hear it. Rather, who will tell about it?¹

To an extent, I feel that creating work about my personal experience and stories is a narcissistic endeavor. However, it seems that one of our most rudimentary needs, as humans, is to be heard and acknowledged. From a baby's cry for attention and sustenance to an adult rehashing and commiserating their experiences with others, I never met a person without a story to share. Not everyone possesses actual "war stories" that they tell about being in the trenches, but sometimes extreme experiences you share with your colleagues leave you feeling as if you have weathered a brutal campaign. Vietnam vet turned author, Tim O'Brien, is quoted in the New York Times explaining this, "My life is storytelling," he said. "I believe in stories, in their incredible power to keep people alive, to keep the living alive, and the dead... Storytelling is the essential human activity. The harder the situation, the more essential it is."² We are trying to keep ourselves and the ones we love alive through our stories. We need to share to prove to ourselves that the grief, the pain, the struggles, as well as the triumphs, the happiness, the joy were all worth it, that we LIVED.

Humans seem to strive throughout their lives to leave a legacy. Whether that legacy is through their descendants, their philanthropic endeavors, attempting to conquer the known world, making a difference in just one student's life, or casting bronze

¹ (Gray, 1986).

² (Bruckner, 1990)

sculptures that will exist for years beyond the artist's life. People want to be remembered for something, good or bad. Authors such as David Eagleman and artists such as Banksy have stated that we all have multiple deaths – first the actual physical death, and then the death of when we are forgotten. However, life is not solely made up of events that put you in history books or build your legacy. The moments that give our lives flavor and weave together the tapestry of our existence are often overlooked. Important life events such as graduation, promotions, and marriage, are the result of our mundane actions; these seemingly trivial moments in our lives infuse my visual language. They need to be remembered as much as the exciting moments; therefore, through referencing them, they gain elevation in the hierarchy of how we view the importance of our daily lives. Essentially, it is a moment to pause and realize, that even washing clothes, cooking, or taking a walk can hold meaning.

Chapter 2: MEMORY

As one might imagine, memory plays a major part in the creation of my work. Time does not pass without effect. There is always something left behind, a residue, created by its passage. Our life experiences and relationships leave traces on our lives both mentally and physically. These fleeting personal experiences and remnants of collective memories partially fuel my work.

I often feel like Alice falling down her rabbit hole, when transported back to a different time or place while following the paths of my memory.³ At times, memory appears to be triggered by the oddest things. These triggers respond to sensory stimuli, such as: visual perception (sight), auditory (sound), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), or somatory (touch). The character, Walter White, from *Breaking Bad* encapsulates this idea in episode *Abiquiu*, as he answers his (drug) boss, Gustavo's, musing on how the flavors of his stew triggered memories of childhood, saying:

Basically, it takes place in the hippocampus. Neural connections are formed. The senses make the neurons express signals that go right back to the same part of the brain as before. Where memory is stored. It's, uhm, something called relational memory.⁴

I feel the viewer's emotional response is often stronger when they are also exposed to non-visual stimuli. With this in mind, I often try to activate numerous senses at one time, rather than just relying solely upon sight.

³ (Carroll, 1867).

⁴ (MacLaren, 2010)

Chapter 3: PROCESS: working with the known, alchemic, and cathartic

Life experiences and inspiration are only a small portion of what goes into creating artwork. The bulk of creating is often unseen by those who witness the final piece. From hours of learning and perfecting a new process, cutting up your hands or having them covered in all sorts of filth, to emotional outburst of frustration and exhaustion, all remain the unseen parts of art, often wanting to forget and hide them. I employ experimental and often alchemic processes in my work, in addition to adopting, and altering several heritage craft techniques (see *Fig. 1*). Alchemy is considered “a seemingly magical process of transforming or combining elements into something new”; so, as artists we are all alchemists, in our own way.⁵ Many of my processes are compulsively repetitive in nature. In combination with dredging up equally bad and good memories, this often proves to be a meditative and cathartic way to work.

Fabrication, casting, wood working, printmaking, and painting, are essential to my practice. I take pride in my knowledge of and proficiency in these techniques, but I have the most fun while experimenting with processes and combining these traditional “fine art” techniques. My use of natural colorants and their mordants consumed much of my research over the past 15 years. Some of the alchemical reactions are immediately visible while others are slower and you watch them unfold over time. Regardless of how many times I witnessed the occurrence, they still fascinate me (see *Fig. 2*). Not only are these materials interesting to work with, they carry with them history and layered meanings. When using manufactured, synthetic colors and dyes, there are inherent

⁵ (Dictionary, 2012)

meanings that are evident with their application; but, for several reasons, I am attracted to processes that reference and contain much older and, at times, romanticized connections.



Fig. 1: Process image of using new technology and machinery based off the knowledge of spinning and rope making

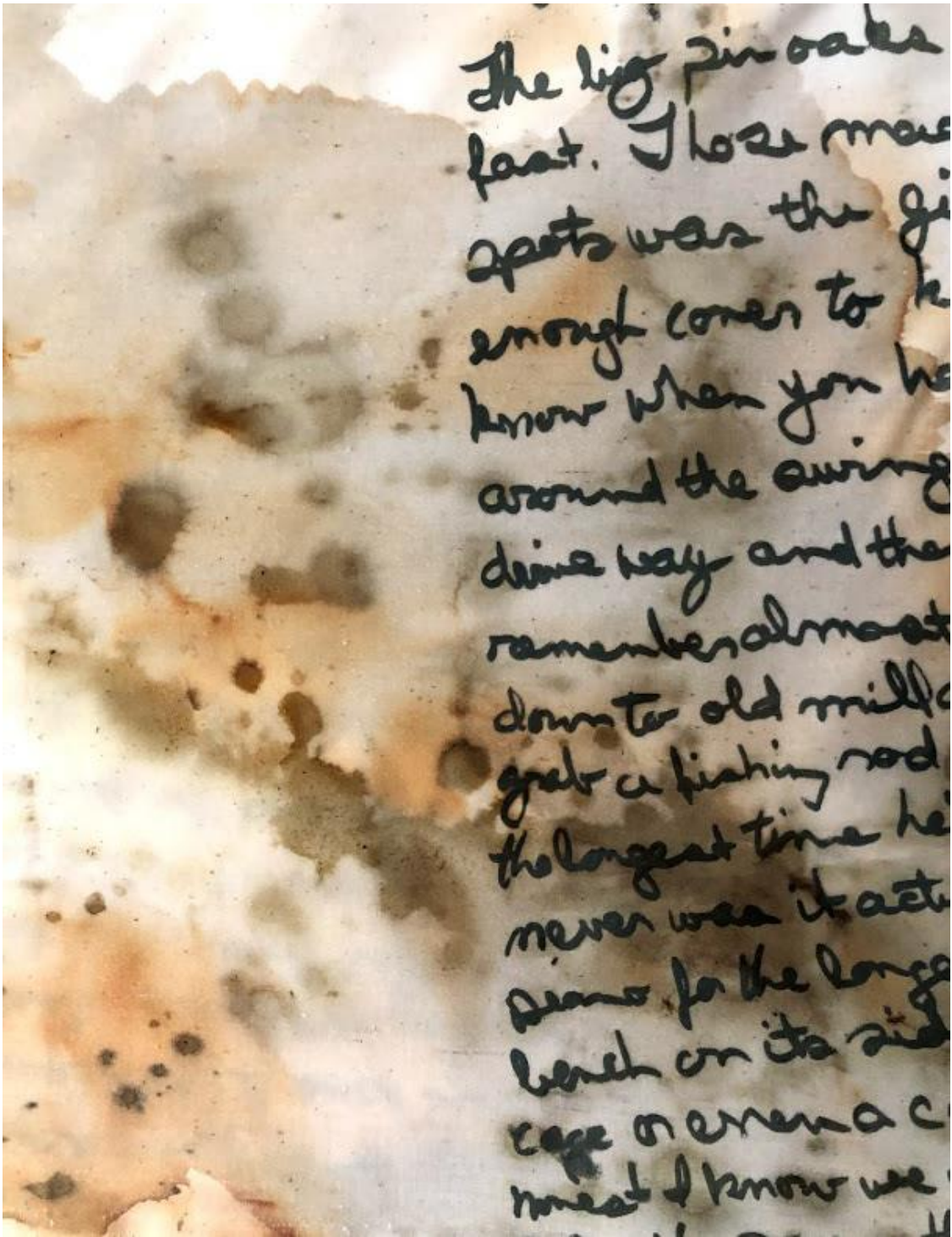


Fig. 2: process image of screen-printed memories on fabric with iron oxide and pink cosmos blossom dye prior to cutting and spinning for installation



Fig. 3: Spun from Memories, screen printed memories on muslin with iron oxide and pink cosmos blossom dye, oak



Fig. 4: Spun from Memories (details), screen printed memories on muslin with iron oxide and pink cosmos blossom dye, oak

The use of cast iron and iron oxide within my work holds especially strong collective and personal meanings for me. It flows through my veins both literally, as iron is a component within our biological makeup, and metaphorically, since I am an iron caster. The age of industry would not have happened without cast iron machinery. The farms of my ancestors would remain unsettled, unpropagated, or not maintained without the iron and steel tools they made or bought. But all of that aside, I am iron caster, and done so over half of my life. The inspiration, strength, and support I draw from the iron casting community is as strong as the molecular bonds of iron. Sometimes though, we show rough edges and look weathered, rusty, and brittle, however, we are made stronger by having the community around us. From sharing techniques to helping each other lift really heavy objects, we rely on each other. I find this similar to the farming communities that surrounded my ancestors as they experienced both good and hard times. When someone needed help they were there, the same way they were present during times of celebration. This brings me right back to my use of textiles, whether in traditional woven forms or through transforming a soft and supple object into something rigid and hard as seen in my cast iron piece, *Hardworking... is in my genes*. (see **Fig. 5**) It is wrong to say that textiles are not as strong as iron. When single fibers are spun into thread or yarn they become stronger. They become even stronger as they are knitted or woven into a fabric. Iron can easily be broken, in some cases, just by dropping it.



*Fig. 5: Hardworking... is in my genes... 39"x 39" x 3.75" (wall mounted object)
cast iron piece created from my worn-out work pants*

Utilizing textiles connotes several potentially overlooked layers of meaning. One of which is the reference to community. Communities weave together as individuals congregate to create a larger whole. A single person is weak, but together as a community, we are part of something greater, stronger, and more powerful than ourselves. Also, our memories weave together to create the fabric of our identities as individuals. Within my installation, *Mingling Echoes*, repurposed and found objects from my collection interconnect with memories infused into spun fabric (see *Fig. 6, 7, and 8*). The objects are pieces given to me or collected over the years. Some are items from my family, some are donated pieces from my friends, or replacements purchased for pieces that were lost, broken, or discarded through the years. The objects create a connection point for the memory to ground before splitting off to another object, much like the neurological pathways within the brain (see *Fig. 9*). Similar to actual memories, not all of the items are connected.

Many of my processes seem laborious and mundane in nature. However, the complexities of handwriting, more specifically calligraphy, or mold making, printmaking, and many of the processes I utilize, all are very important to me. I impulsively want to preserve the handmade. I want to elevate these processes beyond being considered antiquated or nostalgic.



Fig. 6: *Mingling Echoes* (detail), installation shot, printed memories on muslin with iron oxide and pink cosmos blossom dye, found and repurposed objects



Fig. 7: Mingling Echoes (detail), installation shot, printed memories on muslin with iron oxide and pink cosmos blossom dye, found and repurposed objects



Fig. 8: Mingling Echoes (detail), installation shot, printed memories on muslin with iron oxide and pink cosmos blossom dye, found and repurposed objects



Fig. 9: Medical Illustration of signals transmitting down neurological pathways⁶

⁶ (Artist-Unknown, 2014)

Working with written word and memory, I find it easier to hand write rather than typing on my laptop or dragging out my typewriter. While typing does have its own romantic lures there is something about pen on paper that allows the words to flow out. Instead of stopping to worry about grammar, spelling, or proper punctuation, I am just in the moment and the memories become more vivid that way. Similarly, when I become fully immersed in a project and my mind is completely engaged in the process, the rest of the world just seems to melt away. That is why for me creating has become very cathartic, in many ways, because I can let go. Also, some of my work is loosely based on how I started acknowledging and processing the physical and mental trauma I experienced along with the chronic pain I am learning to live with.

At times, the cathartic parts of my work seem chaotic and destructive, but I find that life is also that way. I like to imagine myself as an anthropologist, highlighting small hidden details I uncovered while working. The viewer sees this in the dissected quilt top, found in my photography series *Back Road Stained Glass* where one can see bits of newspaper left over from the original quilter (see **Fig. 10**). Sometimes while working, I expose unexpected emotions. One such incident occurred while processing red dirt from Carroll County, Georgia (see **Fig. 14**), where I grew up. I faced intense, sudden feelings of loss and longing for my Pawpaw, who passed away my second semester at UMD. It was rare to go to my grandparents and not find him down in the garden, red dirt staining his white undershirt and the smell of sweat and grease from the tractor engulfing you with his hug. Spreading the dirt out with my tools triggered my memories of working in the garden with him. The welling up of these emotions allowed me to truly grieve his loss, something I had not fully processed, since his death occurred at one of the busiest

times in my life. While I hold many memories and things that I associate with Pawpaw, I never considered dirt as his associative trigger in my brain. I always linked particular flowers with the matriarchs of my family, so why not dirt for the paternal figurehead in my life. I am fascinated by memory's triggers.



Fig. 10: Back Road Stained Glass, process image of quilt detail



Fig. 11: Back Road Stained Glass, photography



Fig. 12: Back Road Stained Glass, photography



Fig. 13: Back Road Stained Glass, photography



Fig. 14: Treasure Hunt, Carroll County, GA red clay and minerals, found objects, steel mesh, matte medium, nylon ceramic fibers

Chapter 4: SHARING WITH MY COMMUNITY

Experimenting and creating work are at the forefront of my practice; however, being aware of current climates in the artist community and actively contributing are also something I find important. Since high school, I have found myself taking on many roles in the artist community from volunteering at conferences and symposiums to teaching community art classes. With the onset of COVID-19, we have been quarantined. Our normal means of socializing and presenting artwork were completely turned upside down, with openings and exhibitions suffering cancelations. Artists are a reactive and resourceful group of individuals. The first week of quarantine, I was asked to participate in a round of live artist talks organized by Dane Winkler, a University of Maryland MFA Alumnus. These solo artist talks generated strong interest and a large amount of support. After watching my colleagues present their work, they inspired and filled me with questions about their work, inspirations, and processes. All I had to do was message them to get my answers; however, that seemed so selfish. I knew a broader audience of creators and supporters were also be interested in these conversations. Thus, the inspiration for *Artists Chatting with Tea* emerged.

At first, the project was started as a chance for me to catch up with colleagues I rarely see in person; however, it quickly transformed into something considerably more substantial. The premise of *Artists Chatting with Tea* is that I would interview colleagues on Instagram LIVE, while we sip on our favorite beverages. Simultaneously, our audience is able to interact and ask questions with immediate reactions from the interviewee and myself. Within just a few short weeks, *Artists Chatting with Tea* morphed into an internationally reaching project with no determinable end in sight. I am

so grateful for the support I received from other artists asking to participate and our viewers. I want this to continue long after the quarantine and watch it morph over time.

Originally, I was surprised to find myself creating and hosting an artist interview program of this type. I do not view myself as a public speaker or technologically savvy; however, *Artists Chatting with Tea* requires me to be both of these things. After having a chance to step back and examine this project, I realize this is another way to share stories and allow people to be heard in a new and fresh manner. *Artists Chatting with Tea* affords me the opportunity to collaborate and communicate with my colleagues and acquaintances. At the same time, it allows others a glimpse into collective memory woven with the personal narratives of my friends, fellow creators, and myself. Therefore, *Artists Chatting with Tea* exposing a broader audience to what it is like behind the scenes for an artist.



Fig. 15: Artists Chatting with Tea logo

Chapter 5: CONTEMPORARIES

Being aware of our art predecessors, contemporaries, and peers is an extremely important part of any artist's practice. Over the years my work has been compared to many artists, which I immediately investigate. Also, through my research and travels, I frequently encounter artists, whose work inspires me. That list is extensive and while it is hard not to mention them all, I have condensed the list to two artists whose aesthetics, content, and processes speak most deeply to me: Chiharu Shiota and Janine Antoni.

When I walked into the Venice Biennale's Japanese Pavilion in 2015, witnessing Chiharu Shiota's installation, *The Key in the Hand*, I was completely breathless (see **Fig. 16**). The luminous red threads, weighted with iron keys, and intersecting over the hulls of wooden boats, was simultaneously dense and airy, creating an emotional heaviness for me to which few installations can compare. The artist also works with memories and speaks of her experience recollections triggered during the installation. Each individual key, for her, held a story of the person who owned it previously. She hoped her viewers experienced it similarly, saying, "The keys are carrying a lot of messages from their owners. When people are walking here, it is like around human memory, human life."⁷ Her combination of found objects were deeply considered. The use and repetition of the red threads created a strong cohesive element tying the whole installation together. Through her use of lighting, shadow, and the profusion of red thread and keys, Chiharu created an atmosphere that was simultaneously relaxing and tense. A crimson glow filled the Japanese Pavilion as the lights illuminated the mass of red thread from within. The

⁷ (Miller, 2015)

shadows cast across the boats, walls, and floor seemed full of whispers creating a moody environment reminiscent of light filtering through a canopy of trees or reflections off of water. Until recently, while researching her installations and interviews, I was unaware of the correlations between our work but it is amazing the connections our subconscious mind makes. The impact other artists have upon our work is absolutely amazing. Even without looking at her work for years, Shiota and I show similar, yet different ways of interpreting memory and how it informs our work.



*Fig. 16: The Key in Hand, Shiota Chiharu, 2015, Boats, keys, red thread, Dimension variable.*⁸

⁸ (Chiharu)

Janine Antoni, is an artist I found inspiring since my first fundamentals of three-dimensional art class, in undergrad. Fortunately, in 2018, I heard her speak live as part of the National Gallery of Art's Elson Lecture series. The East building of the National Gallery of Art holds her piece *Lick and Lather* as part of their permanent collection. She seems so direct and matter of fact when she speaks of her creation process. It made me wonder if she ever feels apprehensions when approaching a new body of work.

Antoni fully immerses herself in whatever project she is working on at the moment. From dancing with materials, gnawing portions of her sculptures, blinking mascara onto paper, sleeping in galleries, to learning to tight rope, she makes herself one with the process. The physicality and visibility of the artist affecting their materials and leaving a visible trace upon a piece is something I strive to infuse in my work. I enjoy how much effort and importance Antoni puts into learning new processes. Also, I appreciate how she follows the urge to make particular elements of her installations. For instance, learning to process and jute in addition to walking tight rope for her piece *To Draw a Line* (see **Fig. 17**) to build a special loom to weave her REM sleep patterns during the installation of *Slumber* (see **Fig. 18**). Similarly, I find it very important to learn and become proficient in as many processes as possible in addition to having a hand in making my own materials. Antoni describes this very well within her **Art21** segment, saying,

Since I was a little girl, my mother and I would make things together, actually the whole family would make things together. I love the handmade in any form it takes... there's so many objects that we come in contact with that we've lost a connection to what they are made of, who made them, so that's really important for me to sort of, in the object, on the surface of the object somehow give you the history of how that objects made its way into the world... making the rope brought me to learning how to spin... on a material level I'm going back to the source but also those crafts are sort of the beginning. I think that taking on this woman's tradition is also not a small thing.⁹

Her pieces vary in complexity but they all demonstrate a high level of craftsmanship. I find many correlations between how both Antoni and I reference mundane, yet extremely, emotional memories. Additionally, I find similarities between our work as I gravitate towards incorporating written memories and physical items that hold certain connections for me as well as performing laborious tasks to create materials within my installations.

There is a sense of raw, tender, sweetness with some of Antoni's work where she explores her relationships with her husband, children, and parents that create a deep emotional connection for her viewers, as seen in *Moor* (see **Fig. 19** and **20**), where she uses items from people close to her to create a rope. She describes this in her **Art 21** segment, saying, "A rope is an umbilical cord...it's something that connects two things... it's about all these people... my life connecting all these people. Bringing all these lives together..."¹⁰ Artwork often serves as a conduit for connecting people and telling, often, untold stories of personal and collective memory.

⁹ (Antoni, Loss and Desire, 2003)

¹⁰ (Antoni, Loss and Desire, 2003)



Fig. 17: Still of Janine Antoni spinning hemp for *To Draw a Line* from *Art 21: Loss and Desire – Season 2*



Fig. 18: *Slumber*, 1993. Performance with loom, yarn, bed, nightgown, EEG machine and artist's REM reading, variable dimensions.



Fig. 19: *Moor*, Janine Antoni, 2001, Installation, material provided by family and friends, in 2009 *Moor* was 99.63 meters long and will continue to grow.



Fig. 20: *Moor*, Janine Antoni, 2001, detail shot

Chapter 5: CONCLUSION

Working on *Mingling Echoes* gave me a new lens through which to view my work a new way to translate my experiences, as well as others'. It was not easy working with memory and stories. Making sure I do not get stuck on the small details or over explain narratives within my work is hard. Overtelling a story can weaken its poetic nature and emotional connection. I believe Ellen Glasgow explained this well in the preface of her book *Vein of Iron*, saying, "What I needed, and what I had worked to attain, was a distillation of the past, not the dry bones and the decaying framework of history."¹¹ I needed to break away from historical accuracy and embrace my inner storyteller. Just like my family members stretching the truth or leaving out small details of a story after multiple retellings, I needed to find a similar process for editing out or adding visual information within my artwork to clarify the emotions I tried to convey.

Author, Tim O'Brien describes this while recounting his experiences in Vietnam, saying,

By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help clarify and explain.¹²

It is interesting to think about objectifying yourself. However, that is exactly what we are doing when we write or create work inspired from our own life experiences. We can no longer view the moment as something precious and unique; we must to reduce the moment into the bare essence of itself. Transform something ephemeral and fleeting into a concrete, solid object.

¹¹ (Glasgow, 1935)

¹² (O'Brien, 1990)

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