

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

SHOULDER DEEP

Heidi Jean Zenisek, Master of Fine Arts 2021

Thesis Directed By:

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Department

This body of work reexamining my relationship to home-past, present, and future-involves seeing beyond the untarnished façade of memory to the unflattering reality, whose rough edges have been smoothed. With the realization that home no longer feels like home and carrying with me the guilt of abandoning my family heritage, I've embarked on a search for a new place to dwell. To help with this, I'm creating an obscure pseudoscience to extract information from the land. Coaxing out those indescribable, nearly incomprehensible elements of a place, tapping into what we don't know and can't see to guide me towards home, wherever that may be.

SHOULDER DEEP

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Preface

“...trust the metaphor, it knows more than you do.” -Pam Houston, 2020

Years ago, after explaining to my city friend the process of preg-checking a cow, I joked about someday titling my MFA thesis “Shoulder Deep”. I recycled this joke a few times, as one does, but the more I said it, the more it became a serious joke, and I began to see its relevance.

To check a cow’s pregnancy, a farmer or vet inserts their hand into the rectum to feel for the calf’s head, a pulse in the artery supplying blood to the uterus, and the shape of the cow’s uterus (*Pregnancy Testing of Beef Cattle*, 2021). By the time they get in far enough to feel for the miracle of life, they are shoulder deep in a cow’s asshole.

Dedication

For Roxie~

You're my lady.

Acknowledgements

Thank you from the depths of my heart to Jan for your undying support and confidence, my mentors who have lifted me up throughout the years, and friends who have lent a helping hand along the way. Art is impossible without friends.

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My Sweet Midwest

A dichroic material is one with the ability to split visible light into different wavelengths (Sears, Mark, and Hughs, 1987), which creates a curious effect. The light that passes through the material is a gradient of blue, pink, and purple, while the light that is reflected is a spectrum of orange, yellow, and green.

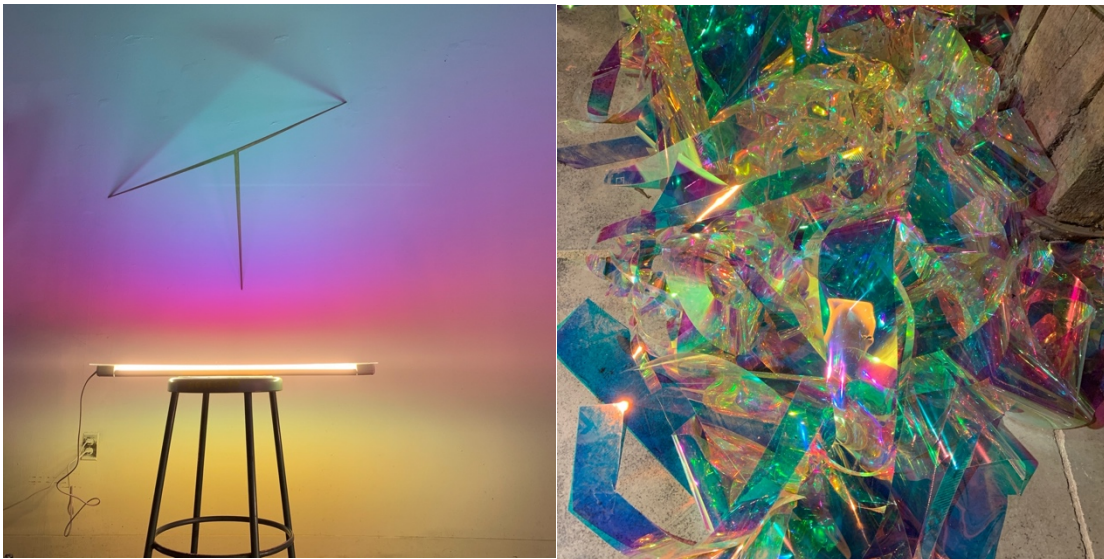


Fig. 1 – Zenisek, Heidi. Image of light interacting with a dichroic film filter. A sculpture from Monroe Isenberg’s *Intersect* series is installed on the wall. 2019

Fig. 2 – Zenisek, Heidi. Image of dichroic film scraps. 2021

The surface of the material itself is reflective and mirror-like but shifts in color and transparency when viewed at certain angles. I have been using a dichroic film in a malleable sheet, similar to cellophane, that is thin enough to be sewn but thick enough to hold a form.



Fig. 3 – Zenisek, Heidi. Detail image of sewn dichroic film. 2019

I was at school on the East Coast when a lockdown was ordered to slow the spread of COVID-19. Being stuck in a city was my living hell, so I spent much of my time fantasizing about the farm and my rural life back in the Midwest. In my makeshift basement studio, I began to sew forms out of the dichroic film to keep myself busy.



Fig. 4, 5 – Zenisek, Heidi. Image of sewn dichroic orbs in a landscape. 2021

These amorphous forms reminded me of the exaggerated sleeves that were popular in the '80s. When I slipped them onto my arms, I received a flood of childhood memories of dressing up in costumes. This was— and still is—a favorite activity of mine. The physical qualities of the dichroic orbs allude to the ethereal nature of memory, and I started to think of them as such. My sewing turned representational when I began to intentionally create objects that referenced specific Midwestern moments. They were beautiful and delicate placeholders for what I could not have. In person and in photos one can't tell if they are existing or non-existing, here or there, solid or transparent. They look almost frozen in some parallel universe, albeit temporarily, as if they belong to another world where everything is galvanized

in that way. The material is like a filter over an image, almost not real, almost digital. In that transition between real and digital, here and there, these objects got stuck on their way to somewhere else, leaving them to exist in some midpoint dimension. The dream-like recreations give the illusion of functionality but could give way at any moment.



Fig. 6– Zenisek, Heidi. *Dear Iowa, Gotta Dance with the One That Brung Ya* photographed in a landscape. 2021. 30” x 30” x 60”. Sewn dichroic film.

Fig. 7 – Zenisek, Heidi. *Dear Iowa, Wish You Were Here, H(ope) You Are Well* photographed in a landscape. 2020. 29” x 13.5” x 13.5”. Sewn dichroic film.

Fig. 8 – Zenisek, Heidi. *Dear Iowa, Tell Your Folks I Says Hi* photographed in a landscape. 2021. 48” x 16” x 12”. Sewn dichroic film.

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‘80s SLEEVES: *Dear Iowa, Gotta Dance with the One That Brung Ya*

When I was around 4 or 5 my family began the journey of remodeling our old farmhouse. We moved all of our belongings downstairs while we redid the upstairs and vice versa when it was time to remodel the downstairs. It was a huge renovation that involved resizing rooms, adding bathrooms, and moving walls. My father did everything himself, with the help of friends. Living in a house constantly in a state of change likely influenced my love of building and manipulating spaces as an installation artist. On the days my father was doing something simple, he would let me stay home from preschool. One day, he drilled some 2x4s into a sheet of plywood and screwed the other end to some exposed studs. He found me something to use as a microphone— probably a piece of wood or a paint roller— and we sang along to Shania Twain’s new CD, *Come On Over*. I danced on my makeshift stage, he worked on something with a drill, and we both donned dress-up clothes— me in my oversized sequin gown and him in Mom’s bridesmaid dress, squeezed over jorts and a tee.

CHAIR: *Dear Iowa, Wish You Were Here, H(ope) You Are Well*

My father made a firepit from the rim of a tractor wheel and placed an old set of those white plastic, flimsy lawn chairs around it. My brothers and I would always fight over who had to use the cracked chair that would pinch your legs. Every so often, a chair’s leg would snap, sending its cargo backwards. It was a rite of passage around our firepit.

OVERALLS: Dear Iowa, Tell Your Folks I Says Hi

“Helping” on the farm was a big part of my childhood. I use quotes because I’m not sure how much my contribution actually helped, but I was always determined to keep up with my brothers. We would all pile in the truck with my father to feed the cows and do whatever chores he could accomplish with three young kids tagging along. I loved riding on the tractor, which came with the very important job of hopping off to open and close the gate. Looking back, I think my favorite memory of these chores is when my father would pull the feed wagon through the pasture where the cows were out to graze. He would hop out of the truck to open the small door that lets the feed spill hollering back, “keep ‘er straight!” Even though the truck couldn’t have been going more than five miles per hour and I wasn’t tall enough to press the pedals, I would panic and grab the wheel, scooting over to sit as tall as I could to try to see over the dash. Remembering the fear I felt the first time my father pulled this stunt makes me laugh today, but he would eventually always come running back to save me.

BOTTLE: Dear Iowa, Leave the Light On

Every year my parents threw a huge Fourth of July party, complete with a horseshoe tournament and fireworks display. My whole family would arrive from all around the US, creating a wild layering of my family and hometown friends. We called it The Zenisek Fourth Fest and made different commemorative shirts every year. It’s been almost twenty years since my parents hosted a Fourth Fest, so these shirts are highly sought after in my family— Zenisek family “collector’s items”, if you will. After

these wild nights, the next morning, in the fog, I would be moseying around, once again, in a dress-up gown. My feet would become cold and wet from the dew on the grass, and it somehow still smelled like smoke from the previous night's campfire. As the adults slowly emerged from their tents and campers, they would laugh about the events of the night before while cleaning up beer cans and liquor bottles, only to repeat this cycle again that night and every night of the week.

I photographed the objects outside, allowing them to interact with the natural light, the trees, the water, the leaves.... This interaction was meant to emphasize the contrast of the organic and inorganic, but it almost does the opposite. The aurora borealis, galaxies, and rainbows are intangible, enchanting, and baffling but are in fact, natural phenomena. When in the landscape, these dichroic objects take on a similar otherworldly, yet of-this-universe, aura.



Fig. 10 – Zenisek, Heidi. Image of sewn dichroic orbs in a landscape. 2021

The Feeling Remains Even after the Glitter Fades

There are similarities between the physical qualities of dichroic film and the colorful flecks in an opal gemstone. Additionally, they share the ability to manipulate the mind, as detailed by Aja Raden in the Smithsonian GEM: The Definitive Visual Guide quoted throughout this chapter.

Gems have been considered both poisons and medicines (and some actually are), barometers of everything from truth to danger. We've used them as signifiers of virtue, nobility, and even divinity. Conversely, they've often represented tyranny, greed, and death. (Raden, 2016)

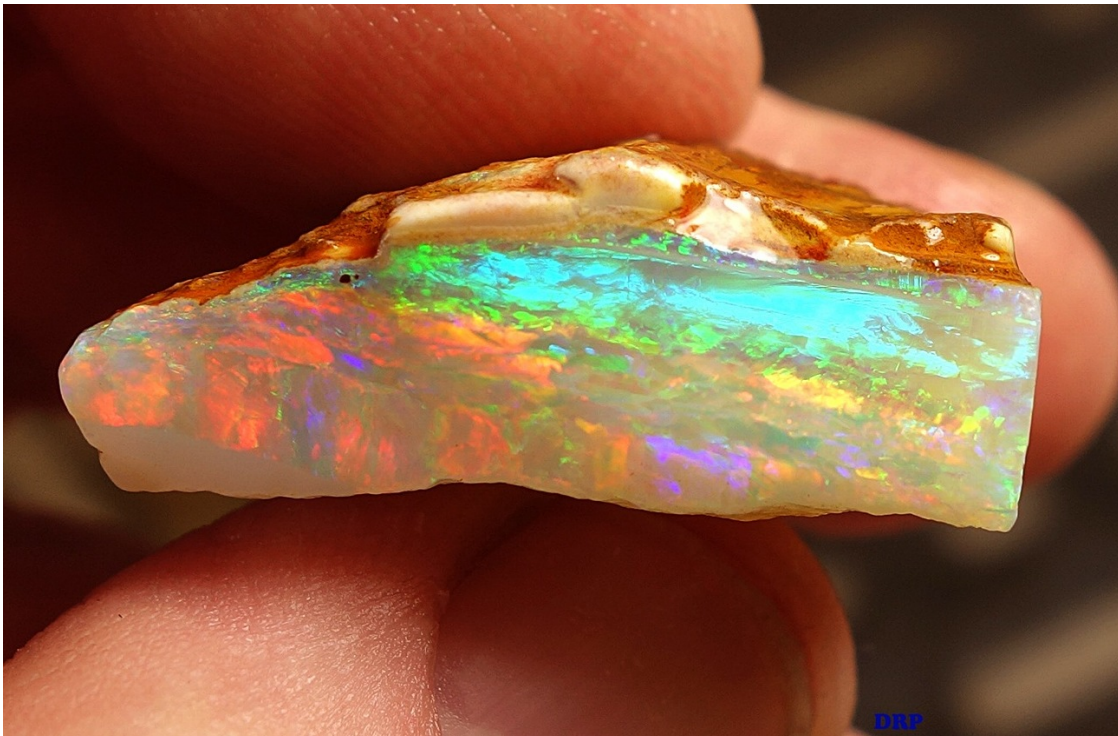


Fig. 11 – Dpultzer. “Copper Pedy Opal” Obtained from Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/01/Coober_Pedy_Opal.jpg Accessed November 2 2021

When I was finally able to escape back to my hometown for a few weeks after months of being quarantined in a city on the East Coast, I realized I had been romanticizing my home on the farm and had dreamt up this idyllic “simple life” that, in truth, did not exist. I was expecting a rural sanctuary in which to take refuge, but instead I was met with memories that triggered painful recollections of the deterioration of my family—memories that I seemed to have forgotten and refused to acknowledge when I was back East fantasizing.



Fig. 12 – Zenisek, Heidi. Detail image of dichroic film. 2020

[When thinking about gemstones] there are facts you can consider— but beware, facts aren’t necessarily the same as truths. It’s a fact that our motor cortex is stimulated when we behold something beautiful, meaning we’re literally compelled to reach out for it. Free will be damned. It’s another objective fact that there’s a small cluster of neurons in our brain...that both assigns an object it’s worth, and determines the depth of your emotional attachment to it...when confronted with great value or great beauty, of which jewels are the epitome, we’re not only overcome with equally great emotion— our moral compass is spinning and our very judgment is actually impaired. (Raden, 2016)

These dichroic objects born of nostalgia suddenly became ominous. They took on a menacing aspect: ghost images of their former selves galvanized in a holographic skin. They were idealized versions of these objects representing idealized memories from my childhood, specifically chosen by my mind to feed this fantasy of the farm. Like gems, jewels, and dichroic film, my untarnished memories clouded my judgment. When I'm away, I want nothing more than to be back, but upon return, I'm faced with the realities that I seem to glaze over the moment I leave. The objects toy with the nuances of place. They are fragile and on the verge of collapse, much like the glamorized picture we paint in our minds that skew reality.

...But that singular human weakness for beauty and the collective obsession with gemstones goes deeper than emotional neurochemistry. Our need to see and possess glowing, shining jewels is as intrinsic to what we are, as to who we are. It's a surprising but clever trick of evolution. ...We have actually evolved to look for colors, and have an extreme emotional response to them. And even more so to shine, and above all to sparkle. (Raden, 2016)

The dichroic objects play into our evolutionary chemical and emotional response to sparkle and color. “[We have evolved to] seek and to value that which glitters and shines...”, Raden states, “...whether it's the thrill we feel when we see a vivid color, a gleaming surface, or sparkles and shards of light— that need to see it, touch it, have it, goes all the way down to the bone. It's the basis of what we are” (Raden, 2016). Everything about them is designed to mesmerize us. In Greek mythology, sirens are beautiful, partly human women who are so alluring and sing a song so enchanting that no one can resist, causing sailors to crash their ships into the rocks of the siren's island (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The shiny, reflective, colorful, gem-like materiality of dichroic film renders them sirens, luring us in with glistening

visuals while taking advantage of one of our first and most basic human instincts: to be drawn to the ripples glittering across the surface of the water (Raden, 2016). Just like a siren's song, these objects and galvanized memories called me to the farm, only for my fantasy of a comforting home to be shattered. I am struck with the realization that this home no longer feels like home.

Home is Home is Home

There is obviously a close relationship between the symbolism of house and home. Both symbolize the ultimate manifestations of private place in a world of public places. However, home is more of an idea, an idea of nostalgia linked closely with the early time of life, while house serves as a continually embodiment of this idea throughout an individual life. (Fraim, 2003)



Fig. 13 – Zenisek, Heidi. Image of the installation of *Home is Home is Home* on a sunny day at Josephine Sculpture Park. 2021. 102” x 97” x 99”. Aluminum, polycarbonate, dichroic film.

As previously mentioned, for most of my childhood I was living in a deconstructed home during the renovation of our old farmhouse. During the ongoing stress of this renovation, our family dynamic began to deteriorate. It wasn't evident from the outside, as the façade remained untarnished. If I have the most beautiful

house, the home life will match, right? This dichroic structure functions as a representation of the perfect home. There's an obvious contrast between the dichroic house and the black barn on the horizon, which is symbolic of reality looming in the background of this fantasy. It is the illusion of a perfect place that can live in the mind but in actuality does not, will not, and never has existed. The seductive dichroic film once again renders the object a siren, drawing the viewer in like a moth to a flame.

When looking at the house, inside and outside become enmeshed. It's transparency layers it on top of the landscape, while its mirrored quality adorns the surroundings onto its surface, creating an art object in itself while also becoming one with the land.



Fig. 14 – Zenisek, Heidi. Image of the installation of *Home is Home is Home* on a cloudy day at Josephine Sculpture Park. 2021. 102” x 97” x 99”. Aluminum, polycarbonate, dichroic film.

Yield

While installing *Home is Home is Home*, I met a woman named Rosita. Due to the transparent quality of the material, she read the sculpture as a greenhouse. She told me about her friend in Barbados who has the most amazing garden where plants grow twice as big as they should. His secret, she revealed, is outdoor speakers playing classical music 24/7. I've heard the idea that saying positive affirmations to your plants can help them thrive, but I'd never heard about music. When she mentioned this, I immediately conceptualized a performance with my companion, Sheridan Kelly, who is a vocalist specializing in opera. It's an endurance video piece where Sheridan sings to me while I sew dichroic corn stalks. We do this for as long as we can.

I've always enjoyed hearing about the goings-on of the farm, but never wanted to work on any myself. I'm more interested in the visual aspects of everything and the systems in place. On the farm, time is measured by the color of the fields and the birth of babies. Vast expanses of crop are raised, harvested, and migrated. Large quantities of materials are vigorously used for months, then discarded or replaced, and certain animals are only as valuable as their ability to procreate. Humans manipulate reproduction cycles through breeding, artificial insemination, castration, pollination, and genetic engineering to optimize yields. The distance between life and death is collapsed. I've never wanted to work on the farm, I want to observe it. In this performance, I relate to farming in my own way and access it with my own skillset. I'm "growing" my yield in my greenhouse, stitch by stitch as live classical music is

sung. The history of sewing, being a female-oriented craft, contrasts the male-dominated farming industry that surrounded me while growing up. My experience with agriculture is on a huge scale, so there's a charm to the slow, intentional, meditative, hand-making of the crop with live singing instead of a recording, all within my holographic greenhouse instead of a field. It's a funny thought that a greenhouse is just a very small farm. A fish tank is to the ocean as my greenhouse is to a cornfield. Its size feels intimate as I tend to each plant by hand, one by one, with special care, in contrast to the mass production style of the harvesting I grew up with. The materiality evokes a feminine, soft, cozy aura in contrast to the weathered metal and huge machinery of my father's farming operation.

Leaning on the Land

Growing up, I discovered that our farmland offered me a lot of solace. When the energy in our home would shift for the worse, I would slink out of the house to avoid getting caught in the crossfire. I wandered around the farm, drawing in the dirt and throwing rocks, scaring the pigeons out of the barn, and then sticking my arm shoulder deep into a bucket of seeds. I would mosey over to the rows of huge round hay bales, strategically climb up, and jump from bale to bale until choosing one to sit on while the sun dips behind the corn. There's a stillness to a cornfield, but also a restlessness. The memory of this is so vivid and serene—the musty smell of the hay and how itchy it made my legs, the feeling of the wind and the ambient sound of it rustling the leaves of the cornstalks. I often traded the tense time in the house for hours of comfort on the haybales, no matter how itchy my legs were.



Fig. 15 – Zenisek, Heidi. *Self Portrait*. Photograph of myself in 2012 on our family farm.

I remember the first time I heard my father say, "... the farm we grew up on..." *We*. Being the fifth generation to have been brought up on this land, my dad has put a lot of pressure on my siblings and I to maintain the legacy. He has made it very clear that his dying wish is that we don't sell the farms. The pressure to return and dwell is immense, but once in the hands of my siblings and I, what happens if we don't want to live in Iowa? This experience is not unique to me. Now more than ever, farm kids are opting for an urban adult life. We share the strong sense of being tied to heritage, bound to the land, and weighed down by the guilt that came along with moving to the city to seek a life without dirt under our fingernails (Forrence, 2021). I recognize that guilt, but do I feel guilty for abandoning the Zenisek legacy? Or is it for abandoning the land that has given me so much?



Fig. 16 – Zenisek, Heidi. Image of the sunset from atop the haybales on our family farm. 2012

I lost my sense of comfort, safety, and belonging on the farm long ago, but I've only recently come to terms with it. I'm grappling with home no longer feeling like home. I am re-evaluating what home should feel like, including my relationship to the farm, and my connection to the land. Suddenly, when homesick I don't know where I'm sick for. It's no longer the farm, so where am I longing for? Where do I go? I'm not sure where home is, what it means, or how to find it.

Pseudoscience

I got my undergraduate degree in Iowa City, which is a twenty-minute drive from the farm I grew up on. It was common for my out-of-town friends and me to skip class every so often to go fishing and drink beer on my brother's boat on the Cedar River (Sorry, Professor Barbuzza.) It was euphoric for everyone involved. I loved showing them my little slice of life. One time in particular, Eric, with whom I have a deeply profound friendship, came along. Having had enough of the minnows nibbling our legs, we swam out deeper into the river. Eric was studying to become a water resource engineer and had recently learned an analog trick to gauge the pollution level of a body of water. If you put your shoulder at the top of the water with your arm straight down and bend your hand 90 degrees at the wrist, how clearly you can see your hand is how healthy the body of water is. I couldn't see past a few inches below my shoulder. As it turns out, the Cedar River is one of the most polluted in the US. I felt the need to defend my river, but instead I stayed quiet. That's the only detailed memory I have from a blur of many river trips. As I reflect on that experience, I realize that was an eye-opening moment. I was learning that this idyllic place had some dirty secrets that I had been oblivious to. I felt a bit foolish for my naiveté because I was, yet again, living with an ignorant view of this place. Choosing to only pay attention only to the good while ignoring the bad. Of course, the river is a little gross, but how did I not notice just how brown and opaque the water is? I think getting caught in this moment that highlighted my simplistic thinking incited my now observant approach to the subtleties of different places. Since my undergraduate days, I have become quite the traveler, going to where the art opportunities lead me. I've

realized that every time I enter a body of water, I check the clarity. I go shoulder deep, look for my hand bent at the wrist, and make a subconscious note of the health of the water, using this abstract surveying method to compare bodies of water and learn about the land. Nicole Shaver talks about similar ideas in the podcast *Authentic Obsessions*. When interviewed about sending her art objects made of resin and human detritus to a geology lab to go through the same series of tests they use to identify rocks and minerals she said, “I’m curious to see what that diagnosis would look like. As an artist, I am like a fake scientist. I like all those processes, but I’m not really interested in getting the *real* answer. I want to get an answer that is specific to the object that keeps getting altered” (Shaver, 2021).

I’m creating an obscure pseudoscience to extract information from the land and coax out those indescribable, nearly incomprehensible, elements of a place. I tap into what we don’t know and can’t see to help guide me towards a home, searching for that “when you know, you know” gut feeling. Through a process of inserting myself adorned in dichroic film into different landscapes, I am exploring its nuances and metaphorically collecting “data”. The dichroic wearables are a metaphysical extension of myself in conversation with the earth. We have five known senses that offer us a biological way of assimilating information, but then there’s an *otherness* absorption that is beyond our awareness and modern science can’t explain. This intuitive survey of the land yields a materialization of this unspoken *otherness* interaction. It’s a call-and-response of energy. These playful, investigative interventions are experimenting with the threshold of sense perception—looking and

seeing, hearing and listening, giving attention and awareness, and exploring what lies in between. (Howes and Salter, 2013; Von Gunden, 1983)



Fig. 17-23 – Zenisek, Heidi. Images from *Shoulder Deep* series. 2021



Fig. 24 – Zenisek, Heidi. Image from *Shoulder Deep* series. 2021



Fig. 25,26– Zenisek, Heidi. Image from *Shoulder Deep* series. 2021



Fig. 27– Zenisek, Heidi. Image from *Shoulder Deep* series. 2021



Fig. 28,29– Zenisek, Heidi. Image from *Shoulder Deep* series. 2021



Fig. 29,30– Zenisek, Heidi. Image from *Shoulder Deep* series. 2021



Fig. 29,30– Zenisek, Heidi. Image from *Shoulder Deep* series. 2021



Fig. 31– Zenisek, Heidi. Image from *Shoulder Deep* series. 2021



Fig. 32,33– Zenisek, Heidi. Image from *Shoulder Deep* series. 2021



Fig. 34,35– Zenisek, Heidi. Image from *Shoulder Deep* series. 2021



Fig. 35,36– Zenisek, Heidi. Image from *Shoulder Deep* series. 2021



Fig. 37,38– Zenisek, Heidi. Image from *Shoulder Deep* series. 2021

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