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FREE & CONTENT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MFA at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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RULE FIVE: Be self-disciplined: this means finding someone wise or smart and choosing to follow them. To be disciplined is to follow in a good way. To be self-disciplined is to follow in a better way.

- John Cage, some rules for students and teachers

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Abstract

FREE & CONTENT

By Victoria Ahmadizadeh, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MFA at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016

Major Director: Jack Wax
Professor, Craft/Material Studies, Glass

I draw on my natural interest in my family's eclectic collections – both traditional and personal – to create poetic portraits composed of carefully made and arranged objects. The goal of my portraiture is not to convey physical likeness; superseding the imitation of appearance is psychological portrayal of the desires and disappointments of the sitter. Often, a fragmented sense of self is revealed – both in others and in myself – and I

seek to depict the kaleidoscopic nature of individuals in their given situations. Possessing whimsical, playful elements as well as encounters with lack and longing, I create work to escape what in my life is unbearable as well as to finally embrace that which I cannot possibly escape.

portraiture beyond likeness

In Persian Culture, the first day of spring is New Year's Day, a holiday called *Nowruz*. A week before that day every year, my father will put out a few things in a casual attempt to assemble a *haftseen*. The *haftseen* is a traditional table setting of seven items that symbolize spring and renewal, and bring the family good luck. The seven objects begin with the letter "s;" *haftseen* roughly translates to "the seven sees." The items include:

1. *seeb*, an apple, as a symbol of beauty
2. *seer*, garlic, for good health
3. *serkeh*, vinegar, to represent patience
4. *sonbol* or hyacinth, symbolizing spring itself
5. *samanu*, a Persian dessert, to represent fertility
6. *sabzeh*, or sprouts, to show rebirth, and
7. *sekeh*, coins, to, of course, bring on prosperity.

Depending on the preference of the owner, they can make their table even more elaborate, with several other items to symbolize the future, the light of God, beauty, wisdom and wealth, but the basic *haftseen* must have

those seven items.¹ A casual worshipper since he immigrated to the states in the '70s, my father rarely assembles all seven things in his acknowledgement of *Nowruz*. What was always prepared, however, was a fancy dish filled with lentil seeds, soaked in a half-inch of water so that they could sprout into a tiny field of grass. This usually sat on a side table in the dining room, or even on a counter in the kitchen, depending on that year's level of casual execution. I was endlessly fascinated with the sprouts as a child, intently checking on them day and night to observe their growth. I was amazed by how quickly the little green blades popped out of their tiny seeds, and was often caught trying to poke the water or run my hand over the sprouted blades (which was discouraged.)

As I watched my dad prepare the decorative symbol of springtime, he would explain (every year, as if he hadn't the previous year) that there was supposed to be other "stuff" that would hang out next to the sprouts. He would then note that really, it was the sprouts that were the most important item of the *haftseen*, and his favorite.

¹ Davar Ardalan and April Fulton, "Persian New Year's Table Celebrates Nature's Rebirth

This tradition, involving the arrangement of special things to mark an occasion, and my father's casual adaptation of it as a Persian who immigrated to the United States, has raised me to have an obsession, reverence and fascination with any grouping of specially arranged objects. My mother, too, had many arranged collections of her own – ranging from multiple jewelry boxes, a vanity full of products and bottles and trinkets, figurines, thimbles, plants, and small religious shrines with an impressive and well made figurine of the Virgin Mary as the centerpiece. Mary is usually placed on a finely crocheted pineapple doily, as my mother was taught how to crochet by nuns as a little girl. On the doily, flanking the Virgin Mary, are a couple of votive candles, which she would light when it was a holiday, or she had an especially urgent prayer.

Many of the objects that my mother adopts become altered in some way. The changes made to them are perceived as improvements, but they are executed with inexpensive craft paints, glitter, ribbons, or other found materials. Her color sense is bizarre – involving bold or even garish color combinations. These alterations have made me keenly aware of when a material is trying to masquerade as another, more valuable material. Metallic gold craft paint makes a half-hearted attempt to convince you that the object is truly made from gold. Glitter, coating the robes of the Virgin

Mary in a doctored portrait of her, strives to emphasize her holy beauty. In the end though, they are just materials – and of the lowest rung.

These collected and carefully tended objects told me so much about my parents, when in many other ways they seemed opaque. Susan Stewart writes, “When one wants to disparage the souvenir, one says that it is not authentic; when one wants to disparage the collected object, one says ‘it is not *you*.’”² I often felt that their collected objects read not only as a display of what they were proud of – tradition, beauty, faith, prosperity – but also as a marker of what they felt that they lacked, or feared losing. Their beautiful collections take on the role of the portrait, belying who they really are and once were. Alexander Nehamas wrote,

*I think of beauty as the emblem of what we lack, the mark of an art that speaks to our desire. ... Beautiful things don't stand aloof, but direct our attention and our desire to everything else we must learn or acquire in order to understand and possess, and they quicken the sense of life, giving it new shape and direction.*³

² Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 159.

³ Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 76–77.

The word “portrait” originated in the mid-16th century from the French word *portraire* or “portray.”⁴ Through six years of painting classes, I primarily made portraits, of people that I knew well and models I hadn’t met before. The goal entailed capturing their likeness accurately, and in a way that flatters them. In transitioning to becoming an object maker, I found that I relied on my origins as a painter – but saw that by eliminating the figure all together, a level of anonymity occurs that can facilitate a more honest portrait. By drawing on my natural interest in my family’s eclectic collections – both traditional and personal – I can create portraits of others and of myself that go beyond physical likeness. Superseding the likeness of appearance is physiological likeness; the loves and longing felt by my sitter, and my feelings, however positive or negative, for the subject.

I believe that even a single object could act as an apt portrait of another or myself. As part of the first generation of my family born in the United States, I sometimes struggle to reconcile my Persian and Puerto Rican heritage with my American identity. I was not taught any language but English, and was not made to perform any specific religious rituals – but as I have described, I witnessed them all around me. In the work entitled

⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, sv., “portrait,” accessed 20 March 2016, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/portrait.

exile, I created an adaptation of a specific cultural object, a Persian tear-catching bottle, in an attempt to answer to American expectations of being Persian. This style of glass bottle was specifically produced in Iran around the end of the 19th century.⁵ The opening is shaped to fit underneath the eye to collect tears, but the bottle itself is an unrealistically large vessel for the task – presenting a strange expectation. I documented my cumbersome attempts to use the bottle to collect my tears in a video. The video portrays the emotions that I feel when faced with the realization that try as I might to be proud of my traditions and who I am, I feel as if I am a fraud of Puerto Rican, Persian and American culture. Possessing only partial knowledge of the traditions and norms that construct these cultures, I am exiled from all three, an impure, unwelcome hybrid.

⁵ “Bottle with Globular Body,” *Corning Museum of Glass Collection*, 28 March 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/ju7xo9a>.



Figure 1: tear-catching bottle from *exile*

Throughout her life, my mother has fought to find ways to rise above her beginnings. She grew up poor on a farm as one of 10 children, and had few material possessions to her name. As a result, she is attracted to the aesthetic of fancy things, but having what the mainstream would consider of value is a relatively new experience for her. Although she can now have a flat screen TV and comfortable bed, she feels the need to layer busy wallpaper with collections of overly ornate objects as overcompensation. Her upbringing has also resulted in post-traumatic stress and the onset of

mental illness. Overcome with anxiety, I have never known my mother to work or drive a car. She is extremely sensitive to the possibility of theft, and has insistently warned me to guard what I possess, and to trust no one with anything I consider to be valuable. She seldom goes out in public, and only does so when accompanied by family. Even so, I have always viewed my mother as independent, as she often displays herself as stern and unaffected.



figure 2: *vanity*



Figure 3: *vanity*, detail

In *vanity*, a mask sits in the center of a velvet tabletop, on a slick black platter. Punctuating the velvet surface are silver mylar peonies – a lush flower that my mother grew in the garden of the house I grew up in. The mask is made of hundreds of tiny black glass pins that were made one by one. Bundled together in the form of a vacant face, they glitter like a dish of wet caviar, and yet the overall form could resemble a face afflicted by leprosy. Objects surround the mask, and they refer to both beauty and fear

- the whole and the broken. Another tear-catching bottle sits in the corner, ready for use. More flowers, glasses with a fleshy drink in them, a lock of hair. All of the objects on the table are glittering - some possessing real value, others false. The drawer of the table has been removed, and instead, a winding, woven rope reaches out of the cavity - constricting the small tableau, from the inside out.

After creating *exile* and *vanity*, I wanted to continue to create objects and spaces that act as portraits of their owner. In *shimmer in the shadow*, I used metallic foil, flocking, tape, and rope to transform abandoned everyday objects, as well as an abandoned space. As the maker, I transform the poor and ordinary into the fantastical and individual. The installation appears as a mirage to the viewer as they walk across a dark and dingy warehouse space. A bright, silver puddle emerges from its black background, and upon it sits a chair, coated in red foil as though it were a wrapped piece of chocolate. The seat of the chair has caved in under the weight of a tuft of black feathers. Aside the chair is a small table, where one would rest their arm or a drink, but the entire surface belongs to a field of white glass shards - first resembling soft feathers, and then perhaps connoting danger. In front of the chair, there is an unusual coffee table with two tiers. It has a geometric pattern of gold and silver triangles,

and piled atop, reaching from one tier to the next, are a cluster of glass ropes, which as the eyes focus, become snakes. Two chandeliers hang oddly low above the setting, acting as hovering, unsettling creatures – right side up and upside down. Upon closer inspection, it is evident that it is all just material –and of the lowest rung – that are creating this illusory space. The viewer might wonder who was just here, or who is about to arrive. To who could this strange tableau or “living image” belong?

Although the installation exists at full scale, the high level of detail on each piece, including the patterning in the silver puddle that they all rest within, asks the viewer to focus in on a world of small nuances – like being transported into the miniature. It is as if one is looking into a diorama of the space, with every tiny detail fussed over and attended to. Perhaps the installation imprints itself upon the memory as a miniature – a sort of illusory snow globe – because of the state of atemporal daydream it promotes. Stewart writes, “That the world of things can open itself to reveal a secret life – indeed, to reveal a set of actions and hence a narrativity and history outside the given field of perception – is a constant daydream that the miniature presents.”⁶ She goes on to state, “The reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld, and as an object consumed, the

⁶ Stewart, *On Longing*, 54.

miniature finds its “use value” transformed into the infinite time of reverie.”⁷ Although not truly miniature, I want the viewer to question the secret life of these objects, and how that life may exist despite being in a world that does not possess a past nor a future; a self-constructed world of reverie.

I have often thought that I create work for two main reasons – to escape what in my life is unbearable, and to finally embrace that which I cannot possibly escape. *Shimmer in the shadow* possesses both a whimsical, escapist quality as well as an unsettling confrontation – that this space, and the woman who resides within it – are not normal, and never will be.

⁷ Ibid., 65.



figure 4: *shimmer in the shadow*, coffee table detail



figure 5: *shimmer in the shadow*, side table detail



Figure 6: *shimmer in the shadow*

the fragmented self : an unknowable face

Johann Kaspar Lavater, a Swiss physiognomist who lived during the 18th century, created a system that outlined a correlation between beauty and falsehood. Lavater noted the “hypocrisy of female appearance” and promoted the practice of physiognomy as a way to “read a woman’s outer appearance, which may trick us.” While his theories could be easily brushed off, an inkling of his logic may still remain, and women in particular may still suffer for it. ⁸ What does a truly beautiful face consist of? Psychological research has shown the majority of participants to find symmetrical faces with features associated with youth and femininity to be most attractive. Furthermore, deemed most beautiful were composite images – the average of many faces put together. ⁹ Even though an individual realizes the self through a number of projections that do not require physical presence, such as: their writing, artwork, belongings, and Internet presence; the fact of the matter is, when an individual is seen they will be consciously and subconsciously judged.

⁸ Bernadette Wegenstein, *The Cosmetic Gaze : Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 8–13.

⁹ Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, 64–65.

Lacan named the “mirror stage” as a key point during the formation of identity, the first time when one sees and recognizes their reflection in a mirror. From the moment that this occurs, a conflict presides: the reflection simultaneously shows the individual and the other. This inner conflict creates a sense of the fragmented self, with the body and mind put at odds with one another. The self cannot arise without this duality present, and between the disjuncture of mind and body lays a gap that we seek to fill via the fashioning of the self.¹⁰ Examples of the fragmented body are everywhere we go; even the mannequins used to display fashion in storefronts automatically convey the notion of the fragmented feminine self. In the frenetic quest for a stable identity, introspection is left at the wayside and becomes replaced with the acquisition of material possession and surface adornment for the body and the face.¹¹ Baudrillard pointed out our tendency toward “commodity fetishism” – the worship of material objects – and worship of material continues today as the filler of the void between mind and body.¹²

¹⁰ Alison Bancroft, *Fashion and Psychoanalysis: Styling the Self* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2012), 23–2.

¹¹ Joanne Finkelstein, *The Fashioned Self* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 192–193.

¹² Jean Baudrillard, Trans: Charles Levin, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. (Telos Press, Ltd., 1981), 88–89.

Tim Dant, *Material Culture in the Social World* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), 40–41.



figure 7: *shifting countenance*



figure 8: *shifting countenance*, performance detail

The self is strictly defined as only the person to which it refers, but at the same time, that self is also fragmented from its very formation. In some of my works, I seek to portray my own fragmented sense of self. In *shifting countenance*, a performer wears a mask made of several small clear glass loops. The loops could be flower petals, strands of hair, or pieces of disjointed cursive handwriting. In a fluttery mass, they obscure the wearer's face almost completely, distorting her facial features, making the eyes appear further apart than they truly are, only the darkness of the pupils and the pink of her mouth are visible. The viewer is allowed to step as close to the performer as they would like, but they do not know if she is watching them or not. The face, usually a familiar set of features that we use to gather information about others, is suddenly foreign and indiscernible. Her fragmented face refutes your urge to judge her by her appearance, but at the same time, she is vulnerable.

Her hands and feet are coated in glistening, sparkling glass beads, and she holds a lit candle, as if she is illuminating her passage. Seemingly mythical, and yet in plainclothes, she stands still but for the natural shifting of her weight and breath. She stands on the ground rather than a pedestal, and the viewer might wonder what she is waiting for and if she

will move, for 30 minutes in light and 30 minutes in darkness. In the darkness, her face seems to be made of a web of light cast by her candle.

I continued to explore tableau-vivant style performance and fragmented identity with *Birth of Medusa*. In this work, a woman wears opera-length gloves that have been covered in red pom-poms and bright blue eyeballs. Part campy; part terrifying, the performer covers her face with the mass of red and eyes on her hands, forming a mask. She stands upon a velvet backdrop, creating a boundary between her and those that view her. Her white footprints are evident on the velvet, tracing and recording her stance and the weight of her presence. A series of objects surround her, seemingly alchemical apparatuses that record her history and foreshadow her future.

Medusa was one of three Gorgon sisters. While Medusa's sisters were immortal, she was born a mortal and began as a fair maiden with beautiful hair. Poseidon raped Medusa in one of Athena's temples, spurring Athena to curse Medusa. The curse transformed Medusa into a hideous creature and ensured that anyone who looked her in the eye would be turned to stone. Perseus was sent to kill Medusa and was only able to achieve this by looking upon her reflection in a bronze shield. He thereafter used her

decapitated head to turn his enemies to stone. Some sources say that he too looked into her eyes and turned to stone. Others say that Perseus was able to gift the head to Athena, who used it to adorn her shield. ¹³

I found this mythical story to be troubling and fascinating – beginning with one woman punishing another for something that was no fault of her own, and ending with a man exploiting a woman until he receives his just reward. I had been exploring the imagery of the evil eye at this time. The evil eye is a talisman used by several cultures, including but not limited to Greek, Middle Eastern, Italian, Hispanic and Indian peoples, to ward off an evil or envious gaze. It is believed that if someone looks upon your appearance or possessions either consciously or subconsciously with envy, they are effectively projecting harm and cursing your prosperity.¹⁴ Perhaps Medusa’s eyes that turned others to stone were just a million evil eyes – eyes that bounced any ill gaze towards her reflexively back onto the seer.

¹³ Brittany Garcia, “Medusa,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, 20 August 2013, <http://www.ancient.eu/Medusa/>.

¹⁴Clarence Maloney, Ed., *The Evil Eye* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 223–229.



figure 9: *Birth of Medusa*



Figure 10: *Birth of Medusa*, performance detail

10 dimensions explained

*you are a lovely hinge,
an extension of my energy.
this continent feels our love from end to end!*

*a path exists between every home from there
to here;*

while you roam through frozen waters,

I boil here, in an oblivious dream.



figure 11: *while you roam through frozen waters*

She was wearing her denim jacket like it was armor, but still shivered while we smoked a cigarette together outside of school that morning. The jacket acted as a boundary between her body and the outer world. This boundary emphasized what I knew so well about her – the shape of her body, her general appearance, which never seemed to change much from day to day but would someday change drastically from decade to decade. The boundary also emphasized what I would never know about her – that I would never have access to absolutely everything that occurred within the containment of her body, her constantly flowing and changing stream of thoughts, even though she was one of my most intimate friends.

Years later, I put on a nearly identical jacket and looked at myself in the mirror, before grabbing my bag and heading to an airport to fly across the country. As my mind scanned across these memories, my identity and the identity of my friend became fuzzy and unfocused, until time collapsed on itself, and we shifted and merged together.



figure 12: *only to disappear*

*

*He taught me the lessons of
Dimensions one
through 10
(Only to disappear into four)*

*She told me life was infinite:
I don't know where the hell she went.*

*The mind is a shape-making machine,
and when I washed my face that night
he was unpacking his suitcase in
an altered state of consciousness.
I shake here, I mumble,*

What is there to place on a free moment?

We sat at a picnic table in the dark, looking out at the long field of rippling grass in the night. The wind combed through the field and a shimmer ran across it continuously. For some reason, this modest field looked more long and vast than it ever had before. I listened to him explain to me what existed in each of the 10 dimensions. I sort of understood, but not fully. At the end he said, it didn't really matter if we stayed in this one; upon death we would just slide over to the fourth dimension. I understood that immediately, and refused, but my refusal was not enough to keep him here. One day I would see him in a metal box, with its right angles as a sad replacement for his once breathing body.

*

*both hands fell off, falling to shatter,
and I awaken to see:*

your long lashes peering slightly from your sleeping bag,

a small dead fly on all three windowsills,

*and a night owl bus squawking past
each pane.*



figure 13: *falling to shatter*

It was 6 o'clock in the morning, and still dark. As I entered the kitchen, the masks that lined the walls peered down at me with their hollow, floral trimmed-eyes. Their delicate faces looked more as if they'd belong to a ghost than a living human. I stood there, pinned to the ground by their collective gaze. Why did she like these women, and why did she put them here for us to look at everyday? I wondered why she wasn't as warm and caring as people said that she was supposed to be. I wondered why she wasn't able to be – I sort of understood, but not fully.

*

Late for work again, I was getting ready to cross the street, rushing to the nearest subway station. I looked toward the ground at my shoes, which were not right for the outfit I was wearing, or for the weather. As the light changed and it was time to cross, my eyes slid across the white-striped pavement and I spotted a flash of amber light from the curb, seven feet away. I picked up pace and scooped it up without stopping, putting the small peddle reflector in my left jacket pocket. Someday, I thought, I'll be able to ride my bike to work, and I'll always be on time. For now, I had to climb the sticky blue stairs to the El, where I'd stand in a cramped car with dozens of others, watching the stops go by, watching the innards of the city go by.

*the subway is a tunnel of movement
creating portraits
in phase space.
for now I'll just ride away,
laughing and crying
at the same*

time.



figure 14: *for now I will just ride away*

free & content : the absence of longing

The Laughing Heart

*your life is your life
don't let it be clubbed into dank submission.
be on the watch.
there are ways out.
there is light somewhere.
it may not be much light but
it beats the darkness.
be on the watch.
the gods will offer you chances.
know them.
take them.
you can't beat death but
you can beat death in life, sometimes.
and the more often you learn to do it,
the more light there will be.
your life is your life.
know it while you have it.
you are marvelous
the gods wait to delight
in you.*

-- by Charles Bukowski

The arrangements of objects in *free & content* articulate a collection of overlapping thoughts. These introspections had been captured in one configuration as a series of poems. A sequence of simple words and phrases convey complex thoughts that had shifted together in my mind, floating and fighting for reconciliation. I wrote these poems six years ago in reflection on events that had occurred two years prior. As I read over them, with no one to assert their original context, I find that many of these words could just as easily be superimposed onto more recent people and events in my life.

When a phrase is written, it is completed when another person reads it. Its reading conjures an image, and extends an invitation for a response – for conversation. In this way, the work seems to be asking for completion from the present viewer. As the viewer walks through the gallery space, the beginnings of phrases hang in the air, on the fronts and backs of objects: *I JUST WANT* and *FOR NOW I WILL JUST RIDE AWAY* among others. The visual forms are a manifestation of the images that the written words evoke. Together in the room, the works become their own poetry, made of objects, with blank white spaces becoming the pauses between words. One wonders what is present visually that is not spoken in the text, and what is in the text that does not appear as a visual presence.

As your eyes scan around the room, they detect different moments, with a different feeling to each. Whimsy is apparent, followed by the somber and the lonely, followed again by celebration. Through the combination of text and objects, one might get the sense of taking the good with the bad, and the things and people encountered along the way. Each object is human, but holds mystery – something to decode, unpack and decipher.

Ultimately, full meaning will never be known, just as you may never fully know the meaning behind someone else's facial expression, or their words, just before they leave the room.

The presence of the body is apparent – through a resting jacket, a discarded shirt on the ground, and the seemingly important arrangement of personal objects. These things read as traces of the person who silently attempts to speak to the viewer through small notes that are sprinkled throughout the installation. The fact that the text appears on some objects and not others may cause the viewer to wonder what words the unlabeled objects could potentially produce later. The knitted rope with the snake could elicit a phrase such as *the snake in the grass*. One might think of the snake in Adam and Eve's garden. What sin has been committed here in the small world of the knitted green square, speckled with colors?



figure 15: *an internal logic that makes me sneer*

*The forms we see
live only through transition
(ie; roads bordered with houses)*

*(and the very fact that they can still see you, alive
and in person
is amazing.)*



figure 16: *the most unkind morsels of the self removed, detail*

Clothing acts as a containment system for the self and an advertisement of the character of the spiritual contents within. Discarded clothing carries the trace of the body that existed underneath, conjuring an image of the body itself shrinking to a pile. The feather-like glass shards lining the inside of the denim jacket act as a reminder of the most unkind morsels of the self, the parts that jab and puncture. The question is, whose self is it – my friend's or my own? The self that I was or the self I am headed toward?

*You seem invested in an amnesiac's equilibrium,
an internal logic that makes me sneer.
Clompin' around the place in boots, I'm not
really concerned with your deep / dark
secrets. When you lie it's like I've got dust
in my eyes;
the spectacle of
selective memory...*

When examining an artwork employing text, I wonder who “I” is, if it is used. Could it refer to the viewer or the maker, or both? Could it refer to the internal life of an inanimate object? In poetry, the use of the “vague you” urges the viewer to consider just who *you* is. Mary Ruefle quoted Shelly saying, “ The words *I*, and *you*, and *they*, are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement and totally devoid of the intense and

exclusive sense usually attributed to them.”¹⁵ But could it ever be possible to detach oneself from the emotions that an accusatory “YOU” conjures? Even if you know that the word is referring to everyone, every *you* ever?

The power of poetry resides in the vague multiplicity of the word “you.” The nature of a garment such as the denim jacket is almost like the nature of the word “you” in a good poem – so many people can put it on, but only certain people do. At its most nebulous, “you” can stand for “I,” “He,” “She,” “Them,” “They” and “Other” all at the same time, and the space that facilitates this multiplicity is the space of poetics. The content of the poetry is deeply personal and a description of an impression of a specific time and place. Because of this, it is a description that is open to the universal nature of emotions.

¹⁵ Mary Ruefle, *Madness, Rack and Honey: Collected Lectures* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2012), 32.



figure 17: *free & content*

I view the varied colors and textures in all of my work as parts of my personal “visual vocabulary.” Each element contains snippets of associations; each element possesses an imaginary dictionary entry. Blue eyes conjure the importance of the evil eye talisman in several cultures, and the suspicious and superstitious in general. Rope makes me think of climbing a mountain, binding or being bound. Candles relate to illumination, my parents’ religious rituals, or lighting a candle in memoriam, or to create an inviting atmosphere for guests. The color red is angry and passionate – bloody and loving. Shiny foils make me think of sucking on candy. Placed together in relation to one another, each image

fails to capture full meaning on its own, but together, they create the specific impression of a time and place.

A correlation can be drawn to textual language and Derrida's idea that words and signs can never fully summon forth their full meaning, but are only defined through their relationship to surrounding words, from which they differ. Meaning is, over and over again, deferred, postponed, as the reader hops from one sign to the next.¹⁶ The result is an intangible sense of meaning – something that can be felt but often is hard to describe explicitly. Is it possible for a collection of carefully found and made objects to evoke the events of one's life, the specific rush of feelings from a time and place? In writing of old sad love songs, Rebecca Solnit describes the feeling of trying to grasp onto an exchange long gone, reflecting that it "has something of that sense of looking at ghosts and wraiths in the rearview mirror of irrecoverable time, irrecoverable loss and error."¹⁷

This inability to fully articulate precise meanings gives way to and describes longing. In my work there is a deep sense of intense longing to know, to be one's self, to belong. The objects long to find the place where

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, translated by Alan Bass, "Différance," *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3–27.

¹⁷Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 116.

they belong, formally. They not only strive to be and to maintain the most beautiful version of themselves, but to find the others that they are meant to nestle amongst. They strive to become different, asserting their individuality, and yet eventually they all become another word in a spurt of verse – each spurt characterizing a finished work.

Longing is continually exacerbated by seeing, and the often competitive nature of seeing. I see! – is to assert that one understands – and do not assume that they don't. As in the case of the aforementioned evil eye – we love what we see, but we often jeopardize it with that relishing stare. Our longing for what the world has, for what others have, may completely destroy a pure and innocent part of ourselves. The presence of these sights rubs salt in the wounds of our longing. At the same time, there could be other ways of seeing, of knowing, that could liberate us from the dull ache of not having reached our destination yet.

I am often filled with longing, and I see it in so many others. Longing comes about when you focus on what you lack. Desire fueled by sadness – the desire for one's image to appear in a “better” way – the desire to be the best version of one's self, whatever that means at the time. Perhaps to be free and content is to experience the absence of longing; free from the

thoughts of what could be missing, content that you can just keep going without stopping, that you can perform a simple action alone that will someday amount to something. I found that what was most important to me was not to make objects that chronicle the suffering of myself and those closest to me, but rather, to create objects that could reveal the redeeming moment. The banishment of longing: the feeling of coasting downhill without a care, barely feeling my body, barely a thought for the past or the future, the moment in which you realize you can keep going without stopping, that everything has amounted to something.

Through the transition from experience to words, and then words to images – a sort of personal alchemy – I am able to redeem, and maybe even embrace, some of the most difficult and inescapable memories of my life.

*I just want
that feeling of euphoria with
no brakes:
soul-bleaching,
that comes when you are alone, making pace,
with the most unkind morsels of the self removed
(so that you can go,
free and content.)*



figure 18: *euphoria with no brakes*



figure 19: *soul-bleaching*

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VITA

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