

Abstract

**Heirloom: An Examination of
Value, Family History and Personal Identity**

By: Abigail Heuss

April, 2012

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Metal Design

This document is written in support of the creative body of work entitled *The Art of Remembering- A Genealogy Project*. The focus of my graduate research is the collection and preservation of my own family stories. This research is manifested in a series of objects that illustrate the stories and relationships that make up my family tree.

**Heirloom: An Examination of
Value, Family History and Personal Identity**

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of the School of Art and Design
East Carolina University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Fine Arts

By: Abigail Heuss

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Dedication

This project is a gift to my niece, Mabel and her cousins and siblings yet to come. It is my hope that while she grows and becomes the woman she will be, Mabel will have these stories within which to give herself context.

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Introduction

This body of work is an exploration of my family history, which is manifested in domestic and wearable objects I made to illustrate the stories that shaped my family tree. Several of my relatives have died in the past few years and more are now experiencing declines in their mental and physical health. With the loss of life, a generation worth of stories is also disappearing. This research is an attempt to collect these stories and preserve them before they slip away. My story began long before I was born and my family history is the illustration of how I came to be. It is the frame within which my own life is housed. My ancestors' stories are my story. This body of work is a self-portrait.

To begin this body of work I interviewed many of my relatives, collecting stories and sorting through jewelry boxes, family photo albums, and old letters. My patient grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, allowed me to look at and inquire about these artifacts. None of my ancestors were wealthy. The objects they have left behind are modest, but carry with them a physicality. They embody the person who owned or made them and touched them every day. Something of their history has been absorbed into these handkerchiefs, the costume jewelry, and the letters read over and over. The tattered pictures are the ones with the best stories attached. When asked about a person or place in their history, my relatives can present me with a few facts - names and dates. Conversely when I hold up a string of plastic pearls or a postcard, my aunt's, my father's, or my grandmothers' faces light up and they begin. "Oh! Let me tell you about my Great Aunt Bun". The energy, the love, and the essence of our humanity are exposed when they talk about these relationships. In making this work, I hope to capture

that feeling. I want to share the sentiment of recalling and re-discovering, putting together the puzzle pieces of lives that make up a history, as much as I hope to preserve the stories themselves.

**Group 1:
An examination of value and sentiment
through heirlooms.**

This work is an attempt to illustrate my family stories, but it also constitutes a focused investigation of how we assign value to objects. Because I am a maker, I have an underlying interest in material hierarchies. I have attempted to address the question of how the value of an object's usefulness, its sentimental value, and commercial value are interrelated and how they inform each other.

In Service of Status: Empty Exchange



In Service of Status: Empty Exchange
Screenprinted Paper 14" x 14" x 7" (largest) 2012

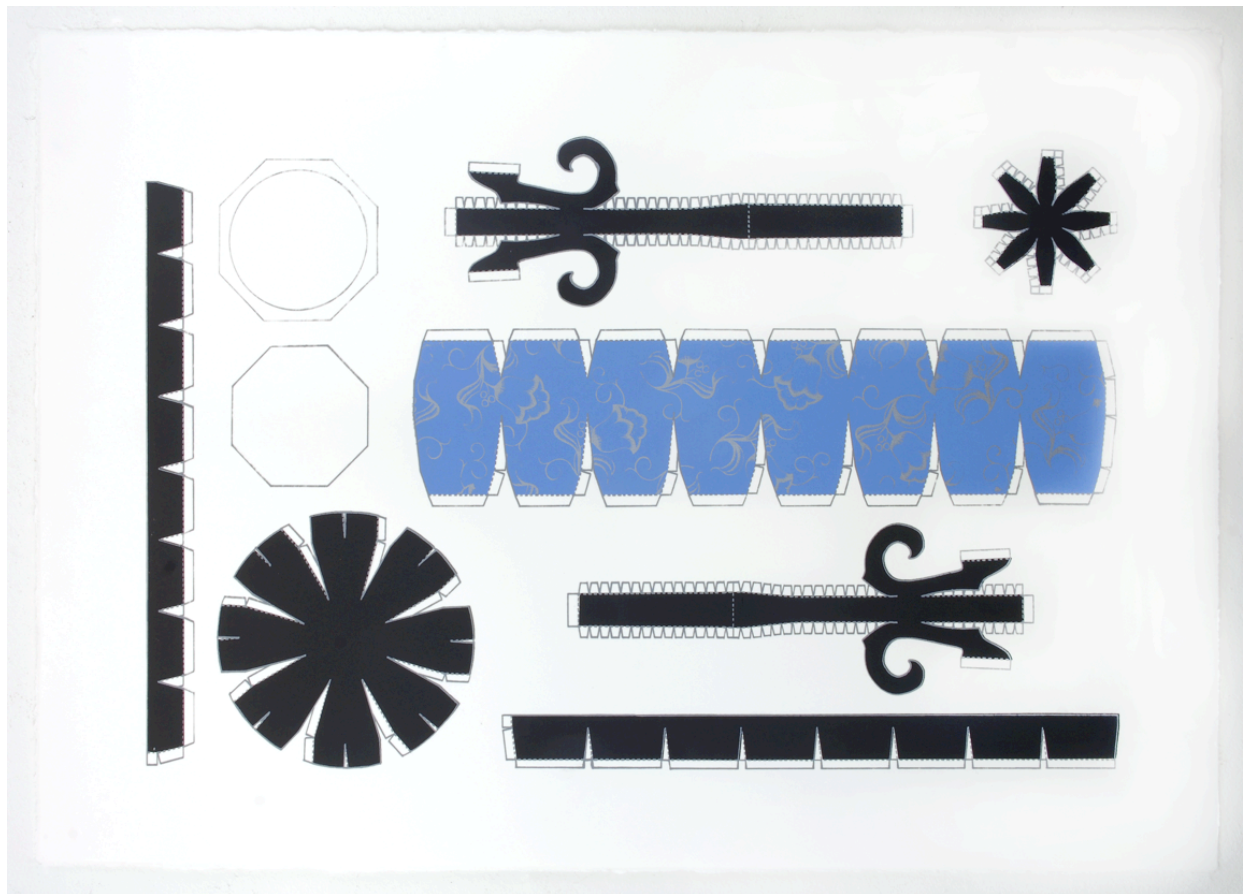
The first heirloom in this series is a coffee service which my Great Uncle, Harry Hayes, came to own during WWII. He was a cartographer in the Air Force. According to the story, the Air Force purchased a souvenir of their choosing for him and his fellow soldiers from a factory in Germany. I have my suspicions that the validity of this transaction may have been exaggerated, but whether this coffee service was purchased, or stolen, it was sent home to my Great Grandmother, Helen Hayes. There it was displayed prominently, dusted regularly, and never used.

As a medium for examining value, I find the story of this object fascinating. The commercial value of the coffee service was undermined when it was presumably stolen, or at least taken under duress from the factory. When it arrived at my Great Grandmother's home a trade was made. It was placed on a high shelf and the value of its usefulness was stripped away and traded for the status it granted the family. My great grandmother, grandmother, and mother in

turn have owned, displayed, and cherished this set of dishes. Some day my sisters and I will as well. As it is passed down it collects the fingerprints and absorbs the reverence of each generation, but forever unused it languishes.

“It is a paradox that use degrades value, that what is most precious is the untouched object (King, 40).” To bring attention to this conflict, I recreated the coffee service in paper. Because the original objects were never used, my replicas are unusable. To remark upon the material and commercial preciousness of the originals I made mine out of paper and ink, but I went a step farther, making them totally replaceable. I screenprinted a pattern I drew from the original set on paper in the form of templates. These templates can be cut up and glued together to form a paper version of the coffee service, which can be owned by anyone for little cost. Rather than money the owner has to pay in labor. These patterns are difficult to put together and require many hours of focused work and quite a bit of dexterity. Anyone who is willing and able to commit this labor to the project can have their own set, but one which replaces standard commercial value for the value of hard work and hours. The status the original set granted its three generations of owners is important, but the sentimental value it holds comes from touch. It is the careful placement, the dusting, the occasional polishing, that has imbued it with its power to transmit memory and feel like a piece of personal history. The work it takes to assemble the replica is what gives the paper version its authenticity and its warmth that comes from touch.

Because they are screen-printed by hand, each one of the prints is unique. There are subtle variations from hand registration, clarity and color that make every one just the slightest bit different from the others. I have produced them in a large quantity with no edition so that they are vastly reproducible. Each one is unique, but not special. I want them to be totally replaceable just as one might buy the missing piece in a set of china and then replace the story of that unique object, with the story of the rest. The object's life in someone else's attic and then in an antique store gets usurped by the overarching set of china and that piece becomes a part of the whole set of one's grandmother's china.



Sugar Bowl Template
Screenprinted Paper 19" x 23" 2011



In Service of Status: Empty Exchange
Screenprinted Paper 14" x 14" x 7" (largest) 2012

Empty Cups and Full Hearts



Empty Cups and Full Hearts
Paper, Steel 5" x 4" x 4 ¾"(each) 2012

I also created a set of coffee cups from the same template. Rather than sticking to the screenprinted china pattern, I made them out of different paper and a variety of other materials. This piece represents my cabinet full of mismatched coffee mugs. These cups are souvenirs, gifts, and purchases made with the intent of use. They are less precious, but they contain more of my essence, which is transferred through touch and use. The coffee mugs in our cabinets are chipped, worn, and used. They tell our stories through the marks of our lives.

The materials with which I have chosen to make these cups out of are the ephemera of my everyday life, as well as things that remind me of the people in my family. They are incidental and it is not as individuals, but as a whole that they make an indication of a personality. They are made from scraps of wallpaper, postcards, maps, placemats, and other collected materials.

I made them from the same template to give them coherence, much as if you open my cabinet, there are no two mugs that are the same, or are intended to match. They seem coherent because my taste and my experiences brought them together and they match through me.



Empty Cups and Full Hearts
Paper 5" x 4" x 4 ¼" (each) 2012

Making Home / Missing Home



Making Home
Silver, Enamel, Fabric, Thread 11" x 11" x ¼" 2011



Missing Home
Fabric, Thread 11" x 11" 2011

A second heirloom I've chosen to illustrate is a handkerchief that My great grandmother Edna was making for her husband while he was away at war. The pattern on the original is simple and includes his initials, Marine Corps insignia, and date of service. It is made from common linen fabric and cotton thread, but is hand drawn and hand embroidered. Embroidery is a traditional symbol of feminine love and service to family "because embroidery was supposed to signify femininity - docility, obedience, love of home, and a life without work, it showed the embroiderer to be a deserving, worthy wife and mother (Parker 11)". The low material value of the handkerchief is supplanted by the value of the hours of skilled labor put into making it. This object is unique as heirlooms go because it is unfinished. Edna died before she was able to finish it. The original is drawn with pencil on the fabric, but only partially stitched. This fact

forbids use, but is as a work forever in progress, is more precious to me as a maker. The handkerchief is not yet a fully realized object; it is simply the manifestation of a labor of love. In that way it is pure.

To pay homage to this object, I have made a set of embroidery tools out of precious materials. I used the silver embroidery hoop, needle and enameled thimble to create two handkerchiefs of my own. I have made valuable tools to glorify the process of embroidering and the labor that goes into the creation of the objects, rather than the objects themselves. Entitled “Making Home” and “Missing Home” they each pay homage to the tradition of needlework as well as the idea of a handkerchief as the symbol that one carries with them of the place or person they have left behind.

The first Handkerchief, *Making Home* is made from common linen and cotton fibers just as the inspiration piece was. In my interpretation, I replaced the initials and military insignia with a stitched frame around the word “Home”. Traditionally a handkerchief was given to a man who was embarking on a journey, and it would be embellished with an image, or initials that reminded him from where he came. The word “Home” signifies that regardless of the situation or circumstance of the carrier, what we miss is the same. It is the people and place that are home to us. I left the final stitches unfinished to illustrate that the object is not as important as the activity of making.

The second in this series of handkerchiefs is *Missing Home*. In this piece I eliminated the stitched border and simply outlined the word "Home". Within the outline I removed threads, inspired by the tradition of drawn work embroidery or lace making. Rather than removing them in a pattern and weaving them together into lace, I drew them out at random, indicating a more natural wear pattern. I envision the carrier of this handkerchief missing home and for comfort, rubbing the words until they are threadbare. Making both of these handkerchiefs pays reverence to my great grandmother's work, love, and her story.

Group 2:
Preserving collective memory through false heirlooms

Beginning with the generation worth of stories that is at risk of disappearing, this series is an attempt to give form to the individual stories and relationships that make up my family tree. I illuminated the details that I find moving, focusing on what makes each individual distinctive, and placing those stories within a context and historical framework. In doing so I also explored my personal connections to these individuals and their lives, through the process of collecting their narratives and making these memorial pieces. Within this group of work each piece is related through its intent, but not through its subject matter. Each object illustrates a distinct story.

I depicted these stories in the format of jewelry and household items because they are objects of intimacy. These are the types of objects my ancestors would have had a personal connection with. My pieces should feel private, intimate, but not secretive. I imagine tenderness in the respect my grandfather paid his favorite hammer or the care with which my father's grandmother opened the box that housed her crochet hooks.

To create setting, I referenced design styles, architectural elements, materials, and cultural icons from the appropriate time and place. These context clues make a frame of reference, within which I can draw my narrative. I chose my materials and processes based on what I felt to be historically and personally appropriate for the story I was working to document. For instance a piece about my great grandfather, who was a leather cutter for a shoe factory, is

made of leather. A story about my grandfather who was a machinist, is illustrated in steel.

Depression era relics are made of repurposed antique tins or fabric. I created a collection of objects that could have been heirlooms. These are pieces that embody how the connections between my ancestors could have been manifested through the lives of objects. I fabricated false heirlooms for the true stories of my genealogy.

Spoon Collection Family Tree



(Sample from) *Spoon Collection Family Tree*
Mixed Materials 8" x 2" x 1" (largest) 2012

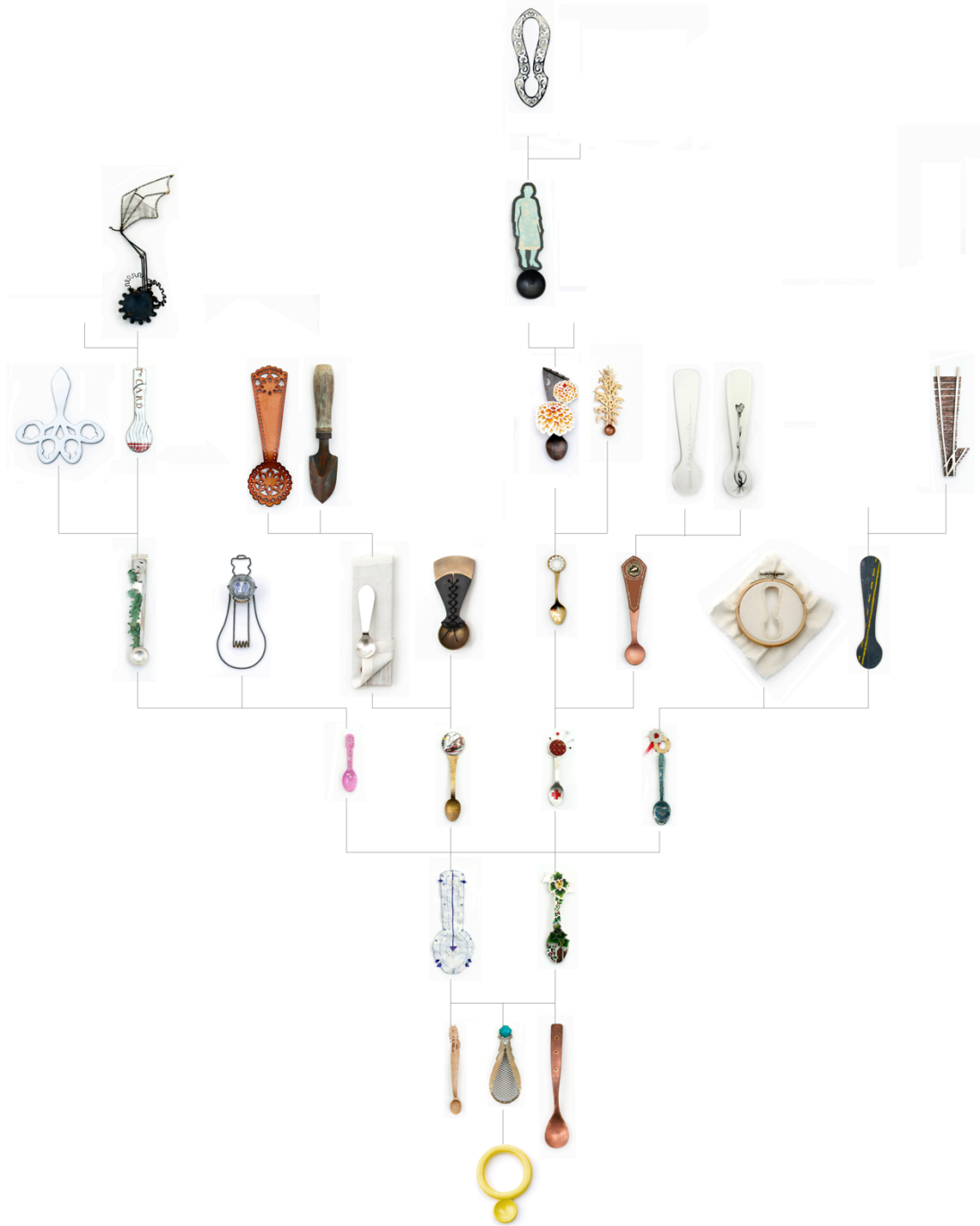
The first piece in this section is a family tree or genealogy chart, which takes the form of a spoon collection. When I was a child I remember being captivated by my grandmother's souvenir spoon collection. Souvenirs and collections are ways to take a little piece of a place home with you, to put it in a new context, and finish its story. I remember being fascinated by how far some of these spoons travelled to find their home on the shelf in my grandmother's hallway. At the time Canada and Ohio seemed a world away from New Hampshire, but they all seemed equally settled there, nestled in the cabinet in the hallway with the others. I see a parallel between this example of disparate elements that assemble to form a whole and that of a family. "Nostalgia is not the only link between collection and memory. Another is the desire to deepen a connection to another person by creating mutual memories (Akhtar 41)". We are all individuals, but we come together and bring our histories with us. We become mothers, uncles, cousins, and great grandfathers, in one frame on a family tree. I made a spoon collection family tree as a point of departure and frame of reference for the other pieces in this series. Rather than a souvenir spoon, each one is a portrait of an ancestor. Each spoon

illustrates the details of a person's life that I feel make them unique. I made these personal distinctions with color, materials, size, imagery, and function.

I was able to make detailed portrait pieces about the ancestors closest to me. As the family tree chart I have assembled goes farther back, connections fade and less is known about each link in the line. I have represented the people who I know little about as flatter, simpler objects. As the objects move farther away from me the spoons fade to white and the family tree dissolves into history. Each represents an individual but they come together to make a whole.



*Mary Ophelia Ramsey, Molly Heuss, TQ Frost, Rita Smith,
Kathleen Hayes Whitney - Heuss, Edwin Milton Ramsey
Mixed Materials 8" x 2" x 1" (largest) 2012*



Spoon Collection Family Tree
 Mixed Materials 6' x 5' x 2" 2012

Portrait Necklaces



Mary
Brass, Copper, Silver ½" x 1 ½" x 18" 2011



Ruth
Copper, Tin, Glass Beads, Sewing Pins,
Fabric 3" x ¼" x 18" 2011

When I was a child I was fascinated by my mother's jewelry box. As often as she would allow it, I would delicately unpack it, asking her to tell me the story of each piece as it came out and memorize the details as I put them back in. I was thrilled by the idea of these precious things not because they were expensive or shiny but because they seemed so heavy with memory. I imagined her jewelry box as the receptacle not for baby bracelets and garnet rings but for the day my sister was born and the adventure on which my grandfather unearthed that garnet.

As my great grandmother and then my grandmother got older and felt their lives winding down, they each had the desire to sort through their possessions and pass their jewelry, photo

albums, and keepsakes, on to their children and grandchildren. In part for both of them, this was a necessity of moving into smaller apartments closer to care. It was also born out of a desire to have these special things cared for. It was a chance to pass on the stories that went with the pieces and make sure they were put in responsible custody while they still had a say about where they found a home. While investigating the contents of these women's jewelry boxes, I have seen a definite personality in each - characteristics shared by the contents. Patterns emerge that tell the story of fashions changing, but personal taste staying the same.

I also had the experience of being given my grandfather's jewelry box when he passed away, and my great uncle's jewelry box when he lost his faculties. Seeing how they organized their most precious things as well as what kinds of objects made it into this sacred personal space was enlightening and explained more about their personalities than any story could. "The secrets of our private lives are whispered by our intimate objects, which, being material and subject only to the laws of physics, are outside the bonds of secrecy (McCrieght, Chapter 8)."

The experience of going through all of these lifetimes' worth of adornments was both foreign and intimate. I have never felt so close to these people, or so separated from their lives and experiences. In the case of the two men, one who was no longer living and one who was no longer coherent when I received their collections, I was made aware of just how personal the decision to keep and treasure something is. How does one make sense of a rock, a note, a raw-worn photograph of a woman they've never seen before, without the explanation of the person

who chose that object as their sacred relic? These jewelry boxes are mysteries to me. They are puzzles to be decoded piece by piece and with the knowledge that they will never contain my truths, but be a template into which I may weave the stories I see fit.

To honor the sacred space of the jewelry box I made a necklace for each woman in my direct family line with whom I have been close. Much like the spoon collection these are portraits. Each one is an illustration of what I pictured inside their jewelry box. I used imagery, patterns, materials and forms that reminded me of them, alluded to their lives, interests, and tastes. Each one is the summary of what I might expect to find in their jewelry box.



Kay
Copper, Enamel 1" x ¾" s 18" 2012



Betty
Copper, Enamel, Silver ½" x 2" x 16" 2012



Molly
Enamel, Thread, Silver, Oak, Glass, Emerald Ash Borer in Formaldehyde
3 1/2" 18" x 1/2" 2012

Navy Scrimshaw: USS Swearer

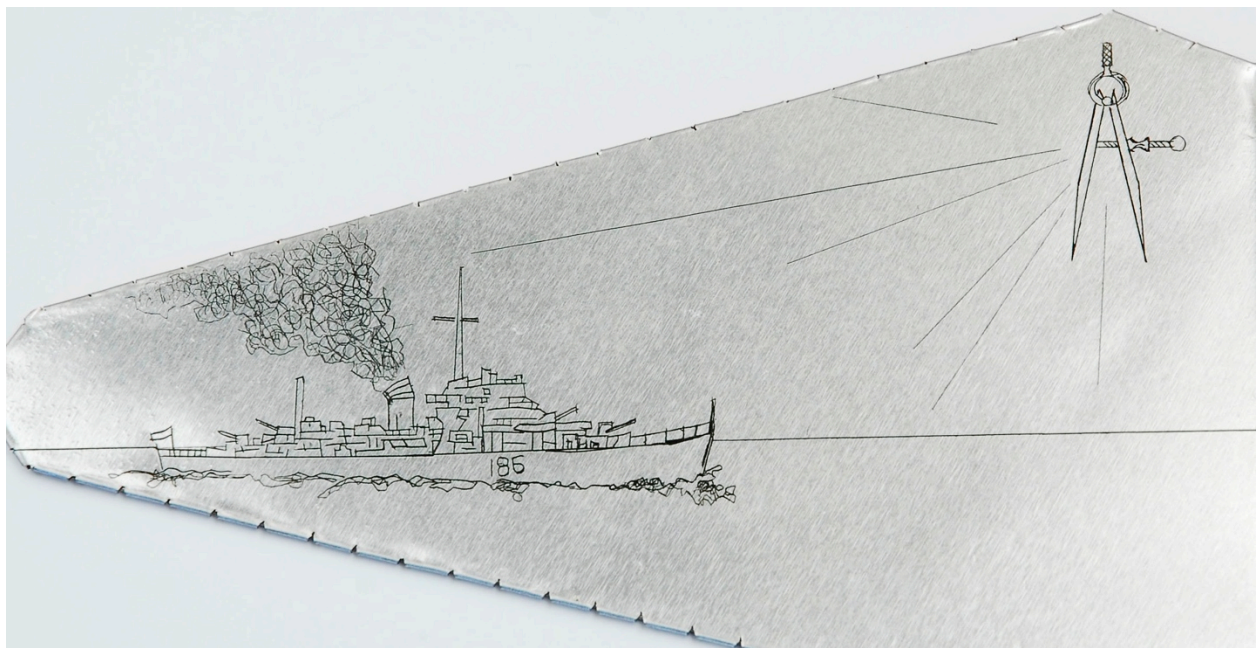


Navy Scrimshaw: USS Swearer
Tin (largest) 2" x 12" x 3 ¼" 2010

My father's parents had a passionate love and marriage. They knew each other for only two months before they wed. My grandfather Fred, was a machinist, and his wife Ruth, was a nurse. They rarely separated and he adored her as much as one person can adore another. At the end of his life, when he was dying of a lung condition caused by his years spent in the musty, metallic engine room of a submarine, Ruth was the one to nurse him, give him his injections and keep him comfortable. Their children both said that it was a good thing Fred died before Ruth, because he couldn't have lived without her.

While their marriage was young and their daughter and son were both small, my grandfather went off to war. Ruth was left home with their two young children, and I imagine they missed each other fiercely. I made *Navy Scrimshaw: USS Swearer* to commemorate this time they spent apart. This piece consists of two utensils, a pie crimper and a pie server. This set of

utensils makes reference to the New England Whaling ships' tradition of scrimshaw, or ivory carving. On long voyages the sailors on whaling vessels would carve pieces of the jawbone of sperm whales into beautiful sculptures, jewelry, and household tools. They detailed the surfaces of these pieces with images of their journeys as well as images of home. One common scrimshaw object was a pie crimper, which was made as a gift for the woman that the sailor was missing. Upon his return he would give it to his wife or mother and in return she would cook for him with it. I fabricated *Navy Scrimshaw: USS Swearer* out of Edgeworth tobacco tins rather than whalebone. That is the brand of tobacco my grandfather smoked. All of his small machinists tools were held in those tins. I wanted my piece, just like the whale carvings, to be made from the materials that would have been at hand. Just like the whalers' utensils, I used an engraving technique to embellish the utensils with images from Fred's voyage and images that would have reminded him of home.



Navy Scrimshaw: USS Swearer (detail)

Matriarch: Pearls of Wisdom



Matriarch: Pearls of Wisdom
Brass, Copper, Silver, Fabric, Plastic Pearls 3 ½" x 4" x 4" 2010

My great grandmother, Mary, had a powder box in her bathroom. It was cardboard, inexpensive and covered with a flower pattern in shades of yellow, orange, and off-white. It was nothing special, but in my childhood imagination it was glorious. It held her dressing powder and it smelled like her. I imagined it holding the secret to her quiet, feminine power. She was, after all, the family matriarch. She was the one who made decisions for everyone just with a look and never said much but everyone heard her when she spoke. As a child I would visit her bathroom just to look at this powder box. When I got a little older and braver I would open it carefully, dust my cheeks lightly with the powder and feel that same power to quietly rule the room. My great grandmother also had a long set of plastic pearls that she wore tied in a knot in the front. She wore these beads for every occasion. My father and aunt chewed on them when they were babies, and my sisters and I did the same.

Matriarch: Pearls of Wisdom is a reliquary for these beads in the shape and pattern of the powder box as I remember it. Because scent carries so much memory with it and was such a strong part of my experience with the original object, the reliquary has a hidden, removable section in which to place the powder. When the reliquary is opened, it smells just as I remember. I made the powder box with a metal inlay technique called Marriage of Metals, so that the pattern would be visible inside and out. I used this time consuming and tedious process to speak of the importance she and I both placed on this cardboard box. I put the value of my labor on this object to glorify its use and its sentimental value.

Conclusion

Just like the stories I am trying to save, I feel similarly protective of certain craft techniques and skills. Luckily there are many people who feel the same draw to learn these somewhat antiquated techniques, save them, and pass them on to the next generation of makers. My work celebrates craft and craftsmanship as well as the handmade quality we miss so much in this world of disposable everything. We are at a place in our culture where we no longer need to make things by hand. Anyone can buy a version of anything they want at a chain store, but we are linked to the objects in our lives. People have an impact on the objects with which they live and interact.

I treasure the preciousness of ordinary things, the way objects patina with use and grow to fit their owners. I want my work to honor how objects and structures become imprinted with the marks of human life. There are secrets, emotions, and habits of ritual, which manifest in the tenderness we extend to our keepsakes. This sense of history absorbed through touch is why I am so drawn to make jewelry and domestic objects. I want my finished work to be touched and worn because that absorbed history and life can only be fully translated when the objects themselves are held. I want my work to evoke sentimental feelings. It is a call to tenderness. “Familiar objects help us feel safe. They are containers of our memory and anchors of our identity (Akhtar 165)”. The things we own help define us and we do the same for them.

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