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## Heavy Light: Transformation of Matter in Relation to Growth and Decay

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Heavy Light:

Transformation of Matter in Relation to Growth and Decay

A Thesis Presented

By

LAUREN BENNETT

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
Of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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The Master of Fine Arts Program in Studio Arts

Heavy Light:

Transformation of Matter in Relation to Growth and Decay

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## DEDICATION

In memory of my grandmothers, Helen and Zelda, who mattered.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With deep appreciation, I thank my remarkable family for their unwavering support and constant encouragement. Your love is a light to the darkness.

And with sincere gratitude I acknowledge the contributions of my thesis committee members, Professors Shona Macdonald, Jeanette Cole, and Juana Valdes, whose wisdom and guidance have been vital. You will be genuinely missed.

I also extend great thanks to Professor Dwight Pogue, whose tireless commitment to research and development in the field of sustainable printmaking inspires me to keep working— onwards and upwards.

ABSTRACT

HEAVY LIGHT:

TRANSFORMATION OF MATTER IN RELATION TO GROWTH AND DECAY

MAY 2016

LAUREN BENNETT, B.F.A., HARTFORD ART SCHOOL

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Through my artwork I explore the cyclical relationship and inherent inevitability between the processes of growth and decay. I engage notions of place, memory, fluctuation, and ephemerality. Drawing inspiration from an abandoned house and its many atrophying, accumulated contents, I examine the human impact upon our ecological surroundings and personal domains, tied to notions of finality and sustainability. Using light and time as both narrative elements and the physical components to cultivate images, I create hybrid prints that weave a story of our ever-changing territories. I present visual works that challenge our idealized views of life, and call attention to the surprising beauty within overlooked natural processes, particularly decomposition. My generative process and use of amorphous materials embed meaning through use of metaphor, and underlie my fascination with the transformation of the ordinary or the unexpected.

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## CHAPTER 1

### MATTER AND METAMORPHOSIS



Figure 1. *Still Remains VI*, Solar print on muslin, 23.5"x33.5", 2016

"You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that... Nothing goes away."

-Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye*<sup>1</sup>

All organisms, including humans, undergo transformation during their life cycle and their struggle to sustain and survive. The natural world and our personal spaces are in constant flux; varying phases of ebb and flow. Processes of growth,

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Bricklin, *The Illusion of Will, Self, and Time: William James's Reluctant Guide to Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 243.

regeneration, atrophy, entropy, and decay are continuously transforming our physical and physiological environments. Growth and atrophy are opposing forces that present necessary foils to one another, yet in their contrast are also reliant on their indefinite cyclical relationship. Through my artwork I call attention to the duality of these constant yet contradictory stages, a mirror reflecting our tangled and impermanent place in the world. I interpret the deterioration of forms and cast-off accumulated objects over time as unexpected beauty within the midst of decay.

Over time matter does not simply disappear, it changes, shifts, and transforms. Eventually all things must decline and finally perish-- we cannot preserve eternally. Flowers go to seed, food rots, paper yellows, metal rusts, and even our bodies age and expire despite our best efforts to oppose the effects of time. In our physical world, nothing is immutable or escapable to change. Yet through this decline of matter, new forms are generated and undergo new and different states. Similarly, my process of making art is also generative and re-generative. Based upon the metamorphosis of materials, each action builds, reflects upon, and informs the next. Failures and successes when working in an alchemic and experimental way lead to growth and a conceptual expansion of ideas. In this way, the ingrained process of creating the work often becomes the work itself.

My studio workspace is a laboratory for alchemic improvisation and sustained experimental research. The hybrid solar prints that I create rely on the knowledge I have gained through my extensive research and testing conducted using new light sensitive Solarfast dyes. Intended for simple home textile projects, I

have pushed the medium beyond its limits and invented my own technique that expands far beyond the basic instructions. The process has been an involved learning experience that can be broken into three major components: production of the matrix or image template, solar printing the matrix, and final finishing of the print. For consistent production of multiple images, each step must be done correctly, though certain steps allow room for creative play. Yet unlike like most printmaking processes, this technique does not require the use of a printing press or extensive studio equipment.

In making the matrix, I print out digitally manipulated photographic negatives of my own photographs on clear film. These images act as a key or template, and are layered with separate sheets of clear Mylar that contain correlating drawings and paintings. Using opaque pen and crayon lines I choose to define some areas, or apply hazy black India ink and acrylic washes to decisively highlight, abstract, or obscure others. Collaged materials like salt crystals or bubble wrap are sometimes added to incorporate texture and pattern, acting as a physical photogram or stencil. Because the matrix is created on clear plastic with the drawing media only on one side, the back may be wiped clean and with proper care may be reused endlessly to make an edition of prints.

To create the print, I coat absorbent cotton fabric or paper with the Solarfast dye. The composite matrix of layered films is then adhered tightly against the dyed surface using pins or glass, and is placed under ultraviolet light or sunlight. For consistency, I expose it using a relatively inexpensive 400-watt ultraviolet light bulb

and fixture that allows me to replicate the effects of the sun at any time. This light immediately activates a unique process of reversal. The dye quickly develops, transforming the open areas of the films into deep and tonal ranges of color. The dark parts of the manipulated matrix, such as the ink painted areas, protect the fabric or paper from exposure to the light, rendering them bright and luminous. Once washed in hot water, the excess undeveloped dye is removed from the substrate and in final rinses, the image is preserved. Through this synthesis of photographic, digital, printmaking, solar, and drawing based processes the past and the present are knit together to form unique hybrid prints.

My methodology is based largely upon using the process and materials that I transform to also lend meaning within the work, linking substance and subject. This creates a multilayered discourse and provides a foundation for which new concepts can be researched and expanded upon. In my thesis exhibition of solar-based hybrid prints titled *Heavy Light*, I use light and time as both the narrative and the physical components with which I cultivate images. Drawing inspiration from an abandoned house and its decaying, accumulated contents, I examine the human impact upon our ecological surroundings and personal domains, tied to the notion of inevitability. This questioning of sustainability rests at the center of my ideology, as I seek to research and pursue healthier and less wasteful processes for making art that can be maintained over time. These intentions are not only reflected within my studio practice and research, but also within my images themselves.

All processes and practices must begin somewhere. Retreating to nature for a walk, ideally in the woods, is essential to my ability to create art in that it brings a feeling of renewal to my spirit and a sense of deep connectedness to my surroundings. Furthermore, my artwork is inspired by many of my observations of the natural world while I am outdoors. A section of David Whyte's poem, *Alone in the Forest*, underscores this experience.

It is only in the forest that I realize how many rooted structures exist inside of me, and it is in the forest now, with my breath lifting in billowing spirals in the cold air, that I am suddenly released into the miracle of small things; —a bird's movement on a branch, the sound of water still dripping from yesterday's rainstorm. In the forest everything in the mind can be given away, so that the heart can open up to the intense concentration that natural objects demand. Through this concentration where nothing exists but the object itself, enormous energy opens out through the woodland silhouette...<sup>2</sup>

As I happily amble along I stop often to observe intriguing natural processes that capture my attention. I am transfixed by the way moss encapsulates a rock, the way mold works its way through damp fallen leaves or a discarded newspaper along the road, how despite its sad loss, the decaying carcass of a rabbit provides nourishment for a host of organisms. I photograph what is striking and stop to collect or more closely inspect the things that I find. Delicate lichen forms, heavily encrusted rusty nails, the beautifully tangled string like roots of a plant reaching for the soil. These specimens possess qualities like intricate forms, organic lines, and complex shadows that I feel drawn to emulate in my artwork and that I seek to

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<sup>2</sup> David Whyte, *Songs for Coming Home: Poems* (Langley: Many Rivers Press, 1999), 5.

record with my own hands through mark making, layering, tracing, or printing. To hold this matter, to turn it over in my hands and feel it is to truly embody it.

Yet this overwhelming beauty of nature is tempered with a sweeping sadness of my knowledge that it too will endure loss. Trees become weakened with age and blow down in the wind; seasons will bring about changes like snow that blankets the ground and halts all growth. Even our present day actions as humans cause distress and destruction to the beauty of our fragile ecosystems. Massive deforestation, climate change caused by global warming, litter and hazardous waste spills have become daily occurrences that all negatively impact our natural world. Our need for survival also involves irreversible damage, which comes at the risk of our irreplaceable surroundings. Instead of coexisting with our ecosystem, we combat it. In her *Drifters* series, artist Pam Longobardi creates artwork using garbage and discarded plastic collected in droves from the Pacific Ocean. She writes,

The ocean is communicating with us through the materials of our own making. The plastic elements initially seem attractive and innocuous, like toys, some with an eerie familiarity and some totally alien. At first, the plastic seems innocent and fun, but it is not. It is dangerous. In our eagerness for the new, we are remaking the world in plastic, in our own image, this toxic legacy, this surrogate, this imposter.<sup>3</sup>

The effects of the numerous habitats destroyed and the plastic leeching toxins will rise and be felt throughout the ranks of the entire food chain, even at our topmost human level. Despite using non-toxic dyes, I consider the use of plastic Mylar in my

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<sup>3</sup> Pam Longobardi, Pam, "ABOUT: Drifters Project," Pam Longobardi, 2011, Accessed April 17, 2016. <http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwpam/statements/driftersstate.html>.

own art process and wonder how it is possible to ever escape the consequences of mass production, consumption, and pollution within our present day society.

One afternoon while hiking with my camera last spring I discovered an old abandoned house. The fear and danger of my trespassing was surpassed by my immediate intrigue and excitement. I was drawn to the house and the ethereal light that filtered through the shattered windows and exposed roof. Standing within the disintegrated architectural remains I was struck by an overwhelming sense of mystery bordering on the ominous. Vines and weeds flourishing amongst the rubble had overtaken the forlorn rooms and forgotten furniture. The mark of time was visible in the rusted metal, peeling paint, and moldy surfaces throughout. Succumbing to nature's elements, the structure itself resembled a decomposing skeleton, a carcass in a constant state of elapse, yet made extraordinary in its illuminated decline. Heaps of strewn-about contents, the accumulated and heavy refuse of the past teased at feelings of misplaced nostalgia and melancholy. The state of the house called to mind contrasting memories of my beloved childhood dwelling and the complicated fragility of what I call home. I proceeded with curious caution.

## CHAPTER 2

### MATTER AND MAGNITUDE



Figure 2. *Still Remains I*, Solar print on muslin, 23.5”x33.5”, 2016

“Subjects when disengaged from their objects vanish  
Just as surely as objects,  
When disengaged form their subjects, vanish too.”<sup>4</sup>  
-Seng-ts’an (Sosan), Third Zen Patriarch

Simultaneously resounding with growth and atrophy, the abandoned house has come to symbolize for me our place and impact on the world as humans. By highlighting and mimicking these processes my work indicates aspects of the abject, the beautiful, and the destroyed. To compose my *Still Remains* series, I first

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<sup>4</sup> Bricklin, *The Illusion of Will, Self, and Time*, 127.



photographed the contents of the house at different visits, documenting the disarray of objects and piled debris. The photographs from each interaction act as a visual record, an archive of the experience. Much like the trace of objects in the houses, the mysterious lives of the former inhabitants are inseparable, yet we may only speculate and imagine the narrative as to how and why the house came to be left as it was. The eight images in *Still Remains* work as a series of maps that are traces of the physical contents and experience, informing and overwhelming the viewer of the scene of the deserted house.

At its most basic level, photography is also a record of growth and atrophy in the way that it speaks to the immediacy of the moment and the brevity of life. The camera button has been pushed, the shutter snapped shut, and the quickly passing moment captured to stand still in time as basic light and dark shapes captured on the negative film. The negative matrix provides a framework for memory of experience, yet the physical photograph acts like a lifeless contrast, a reminder of the present. "In a vital way, photographs are proof of the absolute transience and unpredictability of lived time, and their truth to a moment of the past is one of our criteria of their value."<sup>5</sup> Photographic time is a ghost of our actual experience, a shadowy drifting in and out of presence and absence.

I first alter my photographs digitally on the computer and print them onto clear film from a large Epson printer. Altering the images allows me to abstract

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<sup>5</sup> Philip S. Rawson, and Piers B. Rawson, *Art and Time*, (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), 61.

areas and add clarity to others using filters, and by adding highlights and contrast where it was otherwise not present within the original image. It also allows me to make decisions about the direction of light, such as if I want to work with the printed photo as a positive or negative image. The opacity of the digitally printed ink on the clear film results in a stencil effect much like the negative of a 35mm film camera. Any area that is opaque with heavy Epson ink will block and prevent the ultraviolet light from reaching the dye coated fabric substrate, thus preserving the whites and highlights within the image. Gray or middle valued areas of Epson printer ink allow the light to enter and develop the sensitive dye into areas of tonal color. Untouched and open, clear film areas will result in rich darks. If these darks have depth, then it is an indication the dye has developed to its fullest potential range and been given the appropriate time of exposure to the UV light.

Layered with these photographic negatives are detailed line drawings and loose, flowing ink washes that I paint on separate sheets of transparent plastic Mylar. Here the painterly ink washes act as a means in which I can directly insert myself into the image and are an acknowledgement of my presence in the house at that the moment in time. The marks that I create with the ink washes and other materials enhance the sensation of decay and invented time. Multi-layered India ink applications soften and fade out tones and details like a Polaroid photograph or a piece of colored plastic that that has become bleached from the rays of the sun. When I allow the washes reticulate and form patterns, creating marks reminiscent of those found in nature, drying inwards on themselves like amorphous water stains or the rings of a tree. My painted marks and washes offer a beautiful organic line in

opposition to the hard, geometric architectural lines that are often present within the manmade objects in the images and structure of the house itself.

Heavily painted dark Sumi ink strokes result in strongly contrasting solid white lines that elicit a feeling of an internal glow or reflected sunlight, while also adding gestural, calligraphic marks. The objects begin to feel otherworldly or possessed by unnatural forces due to this eerie sense of radiation. When I drop ink into areas of the Mylar that I have first painted with plain water and leave it to dry untouched, the ink may bleed and blossom, creating an effect that resembles growth of mold or bacteria, or peeling paint; all evidence of the objects undergoing atrophy, a breaking down through the passage of time. Graphite or toner powder mixed with floor wax disperses tiny particles as it dries, further enhancing these effects of dust and dirt. When I add salt crystals, pencil shavings, or rice grains to the wet washes I can disrupt drying patterns to create further unusual textures or mimic dappled light. Using waxy crayons to outline specific areas of the images creates a resist that separates these various ink applications from running into one another. Directly drawing over areas with opaque markers or pens allows me to define areas that I want to bring forward and call attention to the viewer through sharpened focus much like a camera lens.

A counter to the allure of the incoming light, the overwhelming weight of our wasteful impact casts a dark shadow, and it is impossible to not consider the present ecological havoc occurring to the surrounding habitat as the house decays in the environment. In *Still Remains*, some of the visibly discarded objects in the

photographs speak directly to our human existence as consumers and users, depicting garbage bags overflowing with old newspapers, product packaging like cardboard boxes and excess of wrapping paper and plastic. These are intertwined with objects that reflect domestic spaces including glass-canning jars, a lamp base, and window blinds. Objects like a bicycle and toys relay a loss of innocence and the passing of childhood. Wires, cords, tubes, handles and wood planks are discernable shapes as materials we see in our daily lives, but yet still remain ambiguous in their actual purpose as objects within the heaps of refuse.

Other items in the images feel distinctly personal and haunting like clothing and handwritten labels. The discarded and abandoned objects bear the mark of time through their evident state of disarray and surface deterioration. Cardboard boxes appear moldy, paper is dirty and torn, and everything is broken and uncared for. A heavy layer of dust and grime encases the topmost layer. Enhancing this feeling of dirt and passing time is the color of the dyed prints, which shifts from organic browns to murky neutral blacks with cool undertones, a nod to the shadowy underworld of decomposition to which they will eventually succumb. The remains of the house are a modern day memento mori of sorts, objects that serve as a reminder of death. Throughout the images the presence of the natural world weaves its way in. Twisting vines, stray branches, and skeletal oak leaves are a peripheral reminder of the habitat in which the man-made objects meet their demise and are left to deteriorate.

The enlarged scale and vertical format of these prints allows them to work at a macroscopic scale when viewed far away, recalling an abstracted map that lends an aerial patchwork view. Yet the detail of textures in the photographs and the delicate mark making within the ink washes is more prominent when viewed up close, allowing them to also function at a microscopic level. A relationship forms between the intimacy of the subject matter and the distance with which one views the work. The images work together in a series, with each print informing the next, lending hints about context and further adding to a sense of accumulation in their large grouping of a timeline-like, panoramic display.

Additionally, the cropped compositions that position our vantage point to look downwards or at an angle so that the viewer is seeing deep into the heaps of detritus creates an immediate confrontation. Subject and ground are confused at points, adding to the disorienting feel. The miscellany objects are unsettling and uncanny because they are presented in a way that we are not used to seeing them. A lamp should be placed on a side table and a bicycle should be standing upright on the ground. Adding to this jarring feel is the scale of the objects being relatively close to their actual size, lending a realistic sense that one might be able to interact with them in the way we are used to knowing them from daily life. Our brain recognizes them through scale and form alone, but not through locational context. The struggle to discern what the objects we are being confronted with is not unlike the struggle between growth and decay, a cycle of endless giving and taking.

Despite their unsettling and upsetting state, I find moments of beauty in these piles of decaying objects and wasteland of wreckage. The sunlight dances on the surfaces of the objects creating a rhythm of abstracted shapes. Plastic and metal warp and distort in the rays of light. Patterns emerge and recede into the contrast of foggy shadows, like looking into a deep body of water. There is a wabi sabi to the melancholic impermanence of the house and its fleeting contents. The realization of our own transient existence brings clarity in place of fear, a sense of ease in knowing that we too, will someday become matter and dust ourselves. To live with purpose and intent is to coexist with death, for in death there is always resulting growth.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2003).

## CHAPTER 3

### MATTER AND MEMORY



Figure 3. *Still Remains (study I)*, Solar print on muslin, 8.5”x11.5”, 2016

“...As we come to realize it is ourselves  
that we lift, knowing our turn will cause  
register and weight.”<sup>7</sup>

-Larry Bennett, *The Pall Bearers*

When I think about my fascination with exploring and depicting the abandoned house, I cannot help but reflect upon my childhood home and the memories of my maternal grandmother who we affectionately called Dinny. When I was six years old we moved to the small town of Ashburnham, Massachusetts to live at her inherited house on Billy Ward Pond. First built by relatives that loved the

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<sup>7</sup> Larry Bennett, *The Pall Bearers*, excerpt from poem written by author’s father, 2010.

outdoors, the spacious brown house had many windows, a hand laid fireplace with a heart shaped keystone, and a variety of quirks as a result of numerous renovations from its early beginnings as a fishing camp.

Dinny and I spent many afternoons together, and she instilled in me an appreciation for our family home along with a sense of domesticity. It is through her that I can trace a direct line to where my overwhelming desire to make and accomplish things with my own hands first began. Irish Catholic scholar and poet John O'Donohue elaborates, "Childhood is a forest we never recognize while we are in it. Our minds and imagination and dreams constantly return there to explore the roots of our personality and presence. We try to unravel from the forest of first feelings and first events the secrets of the patterns which have now become our second nature."<sup>8</sup>

Together Dinny and I cooked and baked, washed laundry, and did housework. Each task had its own habitual process and rhythm much like the cadence within the cycles in nature. It did not matter that I was helping her work because I enjoyed being in her gentle company. From these tasks I learned practical things which are forever embedded in my memory, like the best way to iron a shirt, remove a pesky stain, or thicken a sauce on the stove. It is this methodical yet intuitive way of thinking and inventive approach to materials that continues to

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<sup>8</sup> John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes: Exploring Our Yearning to Belong* (New York: Cliff Street Books, 1999), 33.



inform my daily actions years later. And it was Dinny who first planted the magical seeds that drive my excitement to actively create and transform materials.

On the days where I was less of a helper and more of a distraction, Dinny would occupy me with items from around the house that she turned into clever art projects. Basement shelves and kitchen cabinets held a seemingly endless supply of transformable materials. I carved animals from Ivory soap bars with a pairing knife, made invisible ink for secret messages with lemon juice, and cut intricate shapes from leftover pie dough. Buttons became beads for stringing while ice cube trays were turned into paint palettes. Bamboo skewers with eyelet fabric became dollhouse curtains and stitched fabric scraps formed doll blankets.

The holidays brought special projects like dying Easter eggs. I drew with candle wax on the fragile shells, and my designs miraculously appeared when soaked in the food coloring dyes. There was no limit to what I could make, transform, or re-purpose under Dinny's tutelage and encouragement. Even the most basic and practical of materials possessed an infinite potential into which our imagination could tap. Dinny had a knack for turning the mundane and unexpected into something magical, and for seeing the positive in moments of negativity. These memories and our house as a special place are forever linked, each always recalling the other. Edward Casey explains, "...memory brings us back into the domain of the actual and the already elapsed: to what *has been*. Place ushers us into what *already is*: namely, the environing subsoil of our embodiment, the bedrock of our being-in-

the-world... By being in place, we find ourselves in what is subsistent and enveloping.”<sup>9</sup>

Through family stories I have learned that the original owner of the house, my Great Great Uncle Max, was a jobber and a scrap metal dealer years ago. Particular areas around the yard must have served as the coordinates for the various materials he would collect, sort, and pile. The two oak trees on the front lawn, which always served as first and second base in whiffle ball games played with my brother, were repositories for strange “artifacts” that sometimes unearthed and came up to the surface after heavy rainstorms. Bits of license plates, rusty bolts, and ceramic spark plugs were some of the curiosities I discovered while playing archeologist. Furthering my fascination with history and time was an empty farmhouse a little way up our road. Behind it were worn paths that would eventually connect to the Midstate Trail, and we frequently hiked or cross-country skied this area as a family on weekends with our dog. Walking by the white house with its peeling paint and old glass bottle dump below the embankment always made me inquisitive. But we were saddened and frightened when we returned home one day to see that the Nyman farmhouse had burned to the ground, leaving only a blackened, smoldering silhouette in the grass. A curious case of arson that remains to this day unsolved.

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<sup>9</sup> Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-world*, 2nd ed., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), xvii.

I was fortunate to grow up in a house that had a yard to investigate and a pond to swim in. Wildlife was always present to observe in addition to the cycles of the natural habitat. Sunfish darting under the dock to catch a hatching of mosquitos, the robin's nest that had dislodged in the wind, the big mushroom which sprouted from the decaying tree stump with its ruffled orange fungus that grew in a spiral of movement, seemingly infinite and endless. But the spring that I turned eight years old I did not stray far beyond our house. Weakened from her cancer treatments, Dinny often needed help getting up from her reclining chair in the sunroom. It was not long after that the once constant click of her knitting needles fell silent. "Death is the great shadow that darkens every life."<sup>10</sup>

As a distraction from the sadness of losing Dinny, my mother decided to earn her Master's Degree in the Creative Arts, enrolling in a two-year weekend intensive program. An elementary school teacher and a gifted self-taught artist, she would bring home the scraps from her projects and encourage me to work alongside her. We named this activity "moodling", a combined word of doodle and modeling as some of her first assignments involved using modeling clay that was cured in the oven. I was content to experiment and play with the many new tools and supplies she brought home, finding my artistic sensibilities beginning to take root.

Many years later as I began rolling out ink at my first printmaking class in college, I felt a surge of nostalgia. I called to mind fond memories of using Dinny's

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<sup>10</sup> John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 214.

glass rolling pin as we made piecrusts together in the kitchen, and recalled my happy times spent turning clay between my hands while at the table by my mother's side. A feeling of deep gratitude and sense of connectedness swept over me.

O'Donohue writes, "The beauty of loss is the room it makes for something new... The constant flow of loss allows us to experience and enjoy new things. It makes vital clearance in the soul."<sup>11</sup> While en route to walk the trail one afternoon, I noticed that even the charred fields of Nyman farm had begun to sprout wildflowers from the ashes.

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<sup>11</sup> O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes*, 240.

## CHAPTER 4

### MATTER AND MEANING



Figure 4. *Ruins II*, Solar print on muslin, 23.5"x31.5", 2016

"Deep in their roots, all flowers keep the light."<sup>12</sup>

-Theodore Roethke

In my series *Ruins*, I depict spaces of the abandoned house that provide a glimpse into the overall layout and structure of the house. The photographs are taken from the vantage point as if one approached the space itself, walking the property and then entering the rooms, just as I did. The isolated and empty scenes

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<sup>12</sup> "Classic Poetry," *Writer's Network*, Poet Theodore Roethke Biography, Poems & Quotes, <http://poems.writers-network.com/poet/theodore-roethke-23.html>.

resonate with desolation, yet the absence of human life is so striking that an immediate curiosity is elicited about the inhabitants and their reasons for leaving. A mysterious presence through absence occurs, allowing us project onto the images our own imagined narratives. As O'Donohue states, "...A ruin is never simply empty. It remains a vivid temple of absence. All other inhabited dwellings hold their memory and their presence is continually added to and deepened by the succeeding generations. It is, consequently, quite poignant that a long since vacated ruin still retains echoes of the presence of the vanished ones."<sup>13</sup>

Like an interloper of time I intervene in the images, adding ink washes to enhance the sense of emptiness by adding more depth and contrast to play upon the emotional state. The hard to discern areas of dark shadow and cloudy focus are also the same aspects that intrigue the viewer, drawing them to enter and look. Destruction is immediately evident in the images. A view of the front porch reveals twisted vines overtaking the structure, the heart shaped leaves hanging in front of our eyes and wrapping around the posts. Piles of nails, wooden boards, overturned buckets and other indiscernible debris litters the ground. An eerie sense of bright sunlight shines through the choking vines, almost blinding while casting the rest of the scene in shadow.

In another print from *Ruins*, a destroyed room reveals the marks of devastation, and bears the feeling of radiation, as if the scene was captured just moments after a tragic event occurred. From the doorway we see scattered pieces

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<sup>13</sup> O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes*, 238.

of the broken and holed walls, and ribbons of billowing peeled wallpaper that cascade to a pile on the floor. Drywall, shreds of paper, and fallen boards at radiating angles create a 'cosmic' landscape on the floor. To the right, sunlight filters into the room through a torn curtain. Here the hollow marks of my ink washes lend a ghostly presence. The print feels as if it is glowing, reminiscent of the way an x-ray becomes illuminated when lit from behind. When combined with the imagery of the destroyed room, the light is otherworldly, yet heavy and unsettling. In a final image, we step closer into a doorway, peering into a darkened bedroom. An angled mirror on the dresser reflects again this peculiar light, exposing strewn about cast-off items on top of a dresser, positioned beside a stained lace curtain that drapes in the window. The contents of the room lose and regain focus in the overwhelming brilliance, causing the room to feel haunted by a mysterious presence or unseen phenomena that might cause us to be eradicated or suddenly vanish, as if that is why no life forms are present. Danger is imminent. The images echo with abandonment and the past, yet are tied to the existence of resonant and nearby ghosts. Because these scenes are more recognizable than those of the discarded objects, they blur memory and reality.

Light provides both the narrative in my images and medium for which I use to create the works. Infusing the prints with light is relevant in the same way that light and life are inextricably tied. Sunlight breaks down and degrades matter, while concurrently causes matter to grow and flourish through photosynthesis. Light also relates to some areas of the prints that appear to have "flaws" of the printing process. These are evident as rust colored spots or unevenness in the dye

application. The spots and effects call attention to my process and intensify the awareness of time because they can be interpreted like the marks of sun fading, mold, foxing, or other degradations that occur in artworks over time when exposed to the elements.

While my artworks could be interpreted as paintings or photographs, I decisively choose to see them as prints. In printmaking, the matrix from which the print is generated has an inherent structure that suggests, like us humans, it is part of something larger. This sense of belonging to a supportive community directly relates to my desire to actively contribute to the research and development of sustainable printmaking methods, which use more bio-based and less hazardous materials. Sharing this knowledge is an affirmation of my belief in bettering the state of our natural world yet with the understanding that we do not need to sacrifice our creative endeavors to do so, but instead adjust our approach and mindset. The hybrid solar prints I create do not require extensive chemicals or equipment, only a committed methodology.

Additionally, printmaking is a process driven medium that appeals to me because it provides a sense of organization that I find comforting and guiding. The repetition of specific actions in each process establishes an educated history of what the anticipated results will produce, but the outcome is still unexpected and exciting at times. An ever-shifting balance exists between the process, the freedom of experimentation, and the unpredictability within the semi-controlled medium. There are areas of the printing process that allow for intuitive deviation and others



that remain as necessary constants, steps that act as ritualistic anchors to lose myself within the cycle of repetitive action.

Although most prints are typically printed on some form of paper, I choose to use cotton sateen fabric as a substrate for the amount of detail it captures with the solar dyes and the flexibility it allows in the printing process. The fabric adds a soft, velvety surface that unless physically touched or viewed up close, easily mimics the surface of paper. This is particularly true when the edges are trimmed neatly without fraying or evident fibers. Not only is cloth a material that appears within some of the images, like paper it is also comprised of organic matter fabricated by the process of growth, and just as easily subject to decay. Sometimes the resulting edge from where the matrix was pinned to the fabric is left in the print as a dark border, acting like a window frame into which the viewer must voyeuristically peer beyond into the scene. The use of border is another reference to traditional printmaking in which it is often customary to leave a space surrounding the image area.

Printmaking is both challenging and appealing to me because of the inherent positive to negative reversal that occurs when the matrix is printed. The negative space carries powerful weight, illuminating the importance of the shadow, of what is left unsaid. "Shadow is a beautiful, inverse, confirmation of our incarnation. Shadow is intimated absence; almost a template of presence. It is a clue to the

character of our appearance in the world.”<sup>14</sup> This dependent relationship is not unlike that which occurs between growth and atrophy, with each force reliant upon the other for existence and visibility. My time in the University of Massachusetts graduate program has helped me to understand that I am an artist who creates prints, and am not limited to the title of being a Printmaker. The experiences I take from my invented and generative processes inform and in turn strengthen my knowledge as a maker and a researcher. All things matter, all things consist of matter, and become intertwined through our constantly evolving relationships.

Photographer Sally Mann addresses this notion within her work from a similarly introspective and ponderous vantage point. In her *Matter Lent* series, she dug up the buried remains of her beloved greyhound Eva and reassembled her bones, photographing the process. She reflected, “When the land subsumes the dead, they become the rich body of the earth, the dark matter of creation. As I walk the fields of this farm, beneath my feet shift the bones of incalculable bodies; death is the sculptor of the ravishing landscape, the terrible mother, the damp creator of life, by whom we are one day devoured.”<sup>15</sup> Like an x-ray, each of our processes explore and reveal the invisible, shedding light on the often-imperceptible yet ever present relationships between existence and expiration.

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<sup>14</sup> David Whyte, *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*, (Langley: Many Rivers Press, 2015), 207.

<sup>15</sup> Sally Mann, *What Remains: Sally Mann*, (New York (etc): Bulfinch Press, 2009), 6.

In *Heavy Light*, I present visual experiences of an abandoned house and its contents as a subject for which to explore the cyclical and constant relationship between growth and decay using light and shadow. While being at odds in constant flux, the two natural processes are still contingent upon one another for subsistence and eventually, mortality. Ultimately, I seek these contrasting natural processes for the unexpected beauty that exists within, to underscore the ephemeral preciousness of our present lives. Like an x-ray, my generative solar printing process reveals the invisible. The heavily illuminated detritus and jettisoned debris of everyday life serves as a haunting reminder of the not so distant shadowland, the borderless domain of the unconscious, and warns that we cannot preserve things eternally. We are here and now.

## AFTERWARD

### Remnant

First breathing, then still.

Clinging to the splintered frame

a flutter of frayed remains,

soft ribbons amid the ruin.

Like a needle through threadbare cloth

the past and present are bound

yet forever undoing,

matter cannot preserve eternal.

Tattered swatch of time and sun

this amulet of the unknown,

a reminder of our own unraveling—

We are heavy light.

Lauren Bennett, 2016

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ARTIST-AT-WORK



Lauren Bennett at work while using her ultraviolet light in Studio Arts Studio 122 at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in April 2016.