

Speaking of Silence: Exploring Family Memory Loss

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Abstract

This paper will offer justification for the creation of my thesis projects: *Everything Is Still: An examination of home movie moments* and *too soon too late*. For several years my work has dealt with families and loss with a special interest in communication. My thesis work addresses grief within my own family concerning my grandmother's depression and suicide. When I began this project I thought of it as a video intervention with my father and his siblings to discuss memories of their mother, Mary Arlene, and her suicide on December 21, 1983. It is a culmination of several years of research and difficult conversations.

This past Christmas, while in production on the above project, I experienced the loss of my maternal grandmother, Lucille, to depression-induced suicide. Through working with my father's family, I began to realize how important it is to address grief directly and seek therapy; after this recent loss, with the support of my professors and peers I began working with a therapist. The grieving process has complicated and changed the course of my project, which is why I chose to present it in two parts.

Both projects explore loss within the context of family systems and reinterpret home movies of the 1940s-1960s. I am interested in what families chose to document/reveal and when families stop documenting/remembering.

Acknowledgments

There are many individuals to thank for their support, shared wisdom and friendship while working on my MFA thesis work. First and foremost I am grateful to my father, my aunts and uncles for their interest and dedication to my project; without them none of this work would be possible. This project is dedicated to both sides of my extended family and to anyone who has experienced the pains of suicide loss. Thank you to the strangers, close friends and mentors that revealed their own struggles with depression and their own families' histories of suicide—your stories brought me such comfort during a time of crisis.

Thank you to Andy Kirshner, my committee chair, my professor and my friend—I cannot imagine a better and brighter soul to have worked with on such difficult material. This project would not have been made possible without the advice and support of David Chung, Berit Ingersoll-Dayton and Kathy Wade. I feel honored to have worked with each of you, and I believe that the understanding and unwavering support of my thesis committee gave me the strength to complete this project. In addition, I would like to thank Brad Smith and Wendy Dignan for their consideration and patience during this painful and meandering year.

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My MFA thesis work is in memory of my grandmothers, Mary Arlene and Lucille. I made this work for my siblings Dylan, Angelica and Hannah—I love you.

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Forward

Everything Is Still is such a conceptually concise work, so precise in its' austere minimalism, yet, on first glance, elusive, confounding.

Here, the archival documentary approach is refined, distilled, "framed" to the barest of fragments: hushed anecdotal stories of unspoken familial events, snatches of hidden letters, forgotten home movies.

The treatment of these films is a conceptual masterstroke: by truncating these ubiquitous, and mostly anonymous, home movie moments into a series of disquieting and disturbing stills, the once comforting projected flow of jovial family events becomes grotesquely foreign, confusing, almost incoherent in such a de-reeled, bare simplicity.

An awkward dissonance floats through these pictures – the anticipated moments aren't there: the family vacations, the group pictures, the smiles and hugs. Frozen, these stills amplify upon us – the faces, the shadows, the halted movements; instead of having these films *projected to us*, we now *project ourselves* - our own associations, memories, perspectives – onto the stills and back into these films, filling the gaps. We become conscious of the movies as evidence, not art; artifact, not artifice; as lives lived, not simply scenes acted.

And yet, an unsettling question lingers: what does it mean?

Then, the resolution, if one can call it that; for those left living, it is often no resolution at all: suicide.

Suddenly, our entire perspective of these home movie moments shifts once again, and back we wander, observing the same images and words, but with a new understanding, seeing evidences previously overlooked.

And once again, we fill the gaps, the missing frames, the obliterated moments, haunted by our own dark, hidden histories; almost unwittingly, we accept a therapeutic condition which insists that we do, if only with ourselves, "talk about it."

Hereby, using common archival artifacts, intertwining the anonymous impersonal with the profoundly private, *Everything is Still* evokes perhaps the most difficult to attain human response of our peculiar modern age – empathy; and this, in turn, provokes us to remember, and in our remembering, to begin to heal.

There may never be any answers or resolutions or closures, but sometimes just to start talking again is the point of it all.

Dan F. Friedlaender
Co-producer, *too soon too late*

Intrigue of a Woman That Was Erased

December 21, 1983, days before Christmas, my grandmother, Mary Arlene, starts the family car in the garage and kills herself. My life had just begun 14 months prior to her death, and it would take another nine years for me to find out how my grandmother died. After years of inquiry I was finally given an answer, my mother told me in the kitchen when I was ten years old. Ever since I had tried speaking with my father about her, but just the mention of his mother caused him to leave the room in tears. All of it was too painful for him to recount—her life, her struggles, and her death—he could not think of her. This silence only lead me to more questions, what a mystery this woman had become to me, as if she was a character in one the Hitchcock films I loved—more a stranger than family.

My family was not as happy as I had pictured us to be, learning of my grandmother's suicide greatly complicated the image of my family. For years this is all I would know of my grandmother—only her tragic death—there were no stories of her singing, no stories of her life. So, I looked to old family photographs for answers, for evidence that she was more complex than a woman who was unhappy and decided to kill herself. I began to stitch together a narrative of her life through images, and I kept finding out more and more about her life through these photographs. For my own sake, I needed to make sense of my family history—I needed to understand her without shame.

Mary Arlene's decision to end her life and the grief her death caused her six children would remain near silent for twenty-five years. I felt it important to uncover my grandmother's life and death, for my generation of the family especially, as we had no memories of her. Although there would be a therapeutic benefit for my father's generation to open and share their memories, I wanted this for my siblings, my cousins and myself, I wanted us to hear our parents, aunts and uncles speak of her. I wanted the sadness to be distributed more evenly, I wanted us to have the option to grieve together, and also share and celebrate the happy memories. So, after years of working with other families, taking social work courses and studying grief and loss, I decided to make my MFA Thesis work about my grandmother, Mary Arlene Powers Finelli and work with my own family.

For some reason, I waited years to start this project with my own family; perhaps to elevate this type of autobiographical work to a higher level, I saved it for my thesis work. Yet, I had no idea what this project would turn into for me and no idea what this year had in store. This year has changed my whole outlook on life, death, suicide and grief.

The Basement of Family Memory

Family history is shifting and dynamic, told through stories and memories, but never fully revealed; many perspectives entangle and even contradict each other, creating new questions, further blurring the truth. Difficult chapters in a family's story become concealed secrets that gradually are buried and erased with each passing generation. These stains and blemishes are washed out, so that images of happiness and love remain visible. Tarnished histories are stored in the basement of family memory, if kept at all. Hoping that a flood will wash them away or that they will simply be forgotten.

This is the language I began to use to talk about family secrets—at the time I was reading the work of Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (1995); Deborah Tall, *A Family of Strangers* (2006); and Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life* (2006). These three texts greatly influenced the inception of this work, and I used them as a catalyst for brainstorming how and what I wanted to reveal. “Secrets inhabit the borderlands of memory. Since my family secrets are no doubt shaped by the same kinds of amnesias and repressions as other people’s, their substance will very likely seem familiar, commonplace even. But if my family secrets are neither unique nor special, that is precisely the point. Neither, though they take an individual life as their starting point, are the stories that I have to tell autobiographical in any conventional sense of the word.” (Kuhn, 1995). Through Kuhn’s writing I found the core of my interests in family secrets and created my own language to describe the “kinds of amnesias” present in families. I started employing the phrase ‘family memory loss’ and used the spacing to indicate my interest in all three words as separate entities to discuss my interests. However, I was also interested in the phrase as a concept of a familial dementia, a way to describe the denial and erasure of family hardships.

It was this inability of my father and his siblings to discuss or mention my grandmother at all that I was most interested in. As my previous work has dealt with families, silence and loss and though I continued to focus on these themes, in this project I would be a member, rather than an outsider to the family. Therefore I would be part of this silence in a much more intimate way. Eviatar Zerubavel writes, “Like silence, denial involves active avoidance. Rather than simply failing to notice something, it entails a deliberate effort to refrain from noticing it. Furthermore, it usually involves refusing to acknowledge the presence of things that actually beg for attention, thereby reminding us that conspiracies of silence revolve not around those largely unnoticeable matters we simply overlook but, on the contrary, around those highly conspicuous matters we deliberately try to avoid.” (2006). It is precisely this that fascinates me about familial silence—

the refraining from remembering, the silence does not mean that the memories are gone nor forgotten, they are being persistently avoided with great effort in fact.

August 2008 I set out to begin production of my thesis project with these concepts as my main interest. I spent the entire month visiting my father and his siblings. For the first time in my life, I spent time with them individually as adults to discuss difficult memories. It was important to me to make a trip to visit each of them in their own spaces; I thought that our conversation would be more comfortable and meaningful to them if it happened in their own homes. We sifted through photographs I had never seen and dusted off old letters—I scanned in over 400 photographs and over 300 pages of letters. We talked about their mother's struggles at home and the many times she had to leave them to go to the hospital. This was very painful for most, as they were not practiced at recalling these stories; these memories existed in the borderlands of their minds. Perhaps most painful were the questions about their mother's death and the shock and grief it caused them. I asked them to say, "When Mom died" and complete the sentence, and though each of their reactions was unique to the individual, they all struggled completing this statement.

At the end of August I had over sixteen hours of audio to sift through. It seemed like a near impossible task to cut everything down to something under 20 minutes. When I got back into the editing suite I started paring away the tape and was struggling to find a common voice to tell the story, and I wasn't exactly sure what the story even was about. Was it about my grandmother, my father or me?

I started calling my father and my aunts and uncles much more frequently to ask them follow-up questions. I also found out that they were calling each other more frequently as well. My project had become a platform for them to begin a more collective conversation about their mother—discussing "Adrienne's project" was a more abstract way of talking about their mother's suicide and the grief it caused them. Through these more frequent exchanges with family, my Aunt Mary and I decided to organize a memorial service for her parents.

As part of this project, a memorial service was held September 20, 2008 and for the first time in twenty-five years my family was able to collectively remember the lives of Mary Arlene Powers and Dr. Michael Finelli. I printed up memory cards for the occasion and Mary planned the invitation list: immediate and extended family attended, as well as close friends of the family and even a few of my grandparents old friends attended. We gathered at my grandparent's grave and wrote down messages—some chose to share their memories, some sang songs, and my father and I recited poetry. After the memorial at the cemetery we caravanned to a local park minutes away from my father and his sibling's childhood home—here we shared a meal, talked with one

another and strolled through the park to watch the waterfall. The event was healing in many ways—family members that had not acknowledged each other for over two decades spoke and embraced.

The Flood

Just when you think you are healing—mending your heart and patching up the holes of passed generations—think again. December 23, 2008, my maternal grandmother kills herself, only a day after my paternal grandmother's death of 25 years ago. I chose to leave out some of the details surrounding her death, as I am still processing this recent loss.

To lose my maternal grandmother this same way was beyond shocking—I had known this woman my entire life, she was not a mystery like my paternal grandmother—she was my grandmother that lived two miles away and attended every important event in my life, she was my cinema buddy and card partner. All of a sudden my life felt like a horror film, it was completely unbelievable that both of my grandmothers would kill themselves, I felt as if I were cursed in some way. Returning to the University after Winter Break to reveal this to my peers and advisors was unreal, here I was working on an autobiographical artwork about my family and suicide loss, and now I was living inside my project. There was no escaping the pain; her death was all I could think about.

This same semester I was enrolled in Prof. Joanne Leonard's Autobiography Graduate Seminar, a course that I had been extremely excited about before break. We were assigned to create a comic using family photographs in a personal memoir style, an assignment I would have usually enjoyed turned into a nightmare for me. I was considering cutting class to get out of having to complete the assignment—there was nothing I wanted to say about my family—everything I thought of was tragic and bitter and I thought that was exactly what my peers expected from me. I was feeling too tragic myself to tell a tragic tale.

While I was sifting through the numerous photos I had scanned in over the summer, I became fascinated that my family looked so happy and wonderful in many on these snapshots. Minutes before seminar I constructed *My Happy Family*, a comic composed of joyous images and a triumphant narrative about a dreamily blissful family life. Reluctant to reveal my own pain, I constructed my very own new and improved family history. During the critique of this work, people responded with such interesting comments—everyone was expecting the story to turn tragic and were upset at the sugary ending. Most found the over-the-top descriptions and images more alarming and daunting than a heartbreaking ending. This initial assignment that I was

dreading turned out to be a really important exercise for me, it allowed me to use humor as a defense mechanism when reentering the classroom after such a devastating loss.



My Happy Family, 2009

With the events that have occurred since the onset of this project (maternal grandmother's suicide, internal/external conflicts with my mother) I have realized that my initial thinking was quite naïve—thinking that I could change people and dynamics. Although, the project has helped my family talk about difficult issues, the people are the same—some will deal willingly and others will not. I thought that if I could heal the wounds of my family, I could begin to heal myself. Thinking if I fixed my family—I would be fixed and feel whole, this thinking was in fact a way for me to put off addressing myself and neglect my own needs and desires to change. I looked to old family photographs for answers about myself instead of looking inward.

With the help and support of my professors and peers I began psychotherapy work with a sensitive therapist. The work with my therapist made these projects possible for me—for without a place for my inner thoughts and struggles to be validated and made sense of I would not have found my voice. My sessions helped me navigate my feelings while making this work and allowed me to enter highly complicated thoughts and memories within a safe environment. I also feel that this work helped to protect my friendships and professional relationships while I was entrenched in a project that became much more personal than it was intended to be.



Learning to Love Myself, 2009

Self Preservation

While enrolled in courses in the School of Social Work I wrote two term papers on suicide survivorship and its unique grieving process. To begin to understand complicated grief, one must have a basic knowledge of what a typical grief process looks like. Though grief is uncertain and takes different courses for all people, in 1969, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D. publishes her renowned text *Death and Dying*, which introduces her five-stage grieving process. Kubler-Ross (1969) states that healthy grieving happens in stages (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) and it is thought by Kubler-Ross that if one gets stuck at one of these stages, complicated grief sets in (Worden, 2002).

Chronic grief is typically associated with sudden, unexpected and traumatic death, and is defined as the response to significant loss that remains stuck in an unresolved and long-lasting state (Neimeyer, 2000). Neimeyer (2000) also states that particular risk factors include excessive dependency in the relationship or a history of mental illnesses such as depression in the bereaved. When looking more specifically at complicated grief in cases of parental suicide, these factors become even more apparent.

“Grief after suicide is fundamentally different from other forms of grief.” (Ellenbogen & Gratton, 2001). Therefore when looking towards possible interventions a social worker that is seeking support services for a suicide survivor should remain sensitive to the fact that their client’s bereavement may be heightened and complicated. Studies have indicated that many more

suicide survivors feel a need for mental health service than actually access them, as only 25% of participants sought out services. Jordan & McMenemy (2004) propose this could be for a number of reasons, one being the poor state of health insurance and mental health coverage. Possible complicated grief following a suicide, or any bereavement for that matter cannot be resolved in eight 60-minute sessions. There is a great need for more highly trained professionals, a greater number of counseling sessions and of treatment closer to the time of death. This is an imperative step when considering that survivors are four times as likely to complete suicide themselves, and as a recent study conducted by Mitchell et al. (2004) has shown that children who lost a parent to suicide have the highest levels of complicated grief and other risk factors. The work and research of Robert Neimeyer shows that there is an elevated risk for completing suicide; therefore, postvention with survivors can also serve as prevention of a future suicide (Jordan & McMenemy, 2004).

When intervening and deciding on therapies the fact that “suicide affects the whole family system and each individual member differently” needs to be kept in mind (Clark, 2001). Each member will have different reactions, different coping mechanisms and different strengths, group therapy may work well for one person, but not for another. Findings also show that suicide survivors often have a higher rate of psychosocial difficulties preceding their bereavement when compared with other survivors (Seguin et al., 1995). In turn, Seguin (1994) has determined that families of suicide survivors are often troubled before the suicide occurs with family conflicts, mental health disorders and addiction problems. Demi and Howell (1991) also concluded that suicide provokes and exacerbates a long-term reaction for suicide survivors to hide their grief. Perhaps it is these preexisting problems in combination with silence and avoidance that leads to the higher rates of complicated grief. The silence can be viewed as a reaction to the social stigma that Grad (2004) speaks of in conjunction with Ellenbogen’s (2001) complex finding that suicide survivors are frequently confronted with perceptions of rejection, which is heightened by others who perceive them as having been rejected.

Documenting Family

There are two ways in which I want to speak about my research and interest in home movies, one idea is that home movies serve as a collective memory of family connection and another is looking at the meaning of a still frame within family documentary film. Both *Everything Is Still* and *Too Soon Too Late* make use of home movie footage from the 1940s-1960s; although, few of the reels are of my own family, there seems to be a certain familiarity

that provokes memories from one's personal experience. What events families chose to document and who within the family documents them has become increasingly fascinating to me.

Over the course of working on these two projects I have gone through hundreds of hours of footage, outside of a few reels that came from my own family, the remainder comes the collective archive of my dearest friend Dan F. Friedlaender, who also maintains several pieces from my collection. Two of the most frequently asked questions about collecting other's home movies are: where do you find them and why do people get rid of such treasures? The first question of where does one find old home movies, provides a more straight forward answer: estate sales, thrift shops, flea markets, and nowadays with eBay and other online sellers old Super 8 movies have become a lot easier to find. The second of question, of why people discard family photographs, letters, movies and other memorabilia, is a much more layered and complicated question. There is no clear answer as all families are different and so are the circumstances of finding such materials. Several years ago I used ask myself this same question; but I stopped, because how does one even know if a family was aware of these materials. Some people value family documents more than others, and it is also bold to think that all families want to remember the past or certain individuals from our histories, whether they are family or not.

As I spent days sifting through hours of footage there were several links that connected the families of different homes and times, largely it was what the families chose to document. There became a predictable formula to these recorded family histories: babies, birthdays, holidays, family reunions and vacations—mostly times of celebration with many smiles. The filtered reflections of families simplify the real world experience of family life, and do not touch upon the stresses and difficult times many families face. While watching hours and hours of birthday candles being blown out, people singing and dancing, celebration and smiling faces—I occasionally I would stumble across something—an expression, a gesture, an interaction—that seemed off, something that was out of sync with the cheerful mood of the reel.

While I was researching filmmakers and artists that had used film stills in their work or were inspired by them I came across the writing of Patricia R. Zimmermann. Zimmermann's *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* and *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories* became influential in this work. Looking beyond the happiness a certain trauma reveals itself in the family movies, the emotional meaning of these spaces trigger our own memories. Here I pluck stills out of home movies and give them a new life and meaning—Zimmermann discusses the newness of the camera that occurs into the 1950s. As I was researching and gathering visual materials I became fascinated with the ways in which families still thought of the moving picture camera as a point and shoot camera—often there would be

strange footage of families walking to and from the portrait location, where they would smile and wave as they stand very motionless otherwise. The approaches became so interested to me, as they seem unawares that they were still being documented, and so this footage had a much different, more organic feel to it.

Between the Smiles

The “stills project,” which I would later call *Everything Is Still* was not planned in the sense that I did not know that before the recent loss of my maternal grandmother, Lucille, that I would be making this work. This work came out of crisis and recovery. Throughout a number of previous tests I incorporated my fascination of home movie stills into the video, although had never before considered printing them and adding written narratives. I owe credit to my friend Tuan M. Tran, a visiting artist from Viet Nam, for pushing me to make new work while severely depressed and in mourning. Tuan was curating a show called *Storm* at a local gallery in Ann Arbor and asked me to submit some work that would speak to the metaphorical storms of families and relationships. His request inspired me to make *Undertow* a panel of three stills from a 1960s home movie of a beach scene.



Undertow, 2009, Work: Ann Arbor (photograph by Charlie Michaels)

Narrative:

What vacation?

She tried to leave him
a dozen times or so.

Once she took a train

from Philadelphia to
Chicago, but he found her
and brought her back.
He always did.

The piece consisted of three film stills that had been transferred to digital footage and printed onto Epson Premium Luster Paper using a large format- professional grade printer. The scroll-like digital print was mounted onto ¼ inch foam core and was reinforced and raised off the wall by ½ inch cleats. As an experiment with depth and color, a bright orange rectangle was painted onto the wall, this was only visible from certain angles and offered a warm glow, subtly activating the image. The lettering was made of a light silvery vinyl that was practically invisible at certain angles; the viewer would need to stand directly in front of the image for the text to be seen in its entirety. This choice was deliberate to illustrate the ambiguity of both the image, the narrative and their presence together, and also makes reference to Pauline Boss' concept of Ambiguous Loss, which I had become fascinated by during my research and making of my thesis work. Ambiguous Loss can be used to help explain the experience of children living with a mother with serious mental illness, as my father told me his mother was there, but not there. The uncertainty leads to an experience of loss that defies closure (Boss, 1999). I will elaborate more on this later.

I was excited by this work even before I received feedback or witnessed viewers' reactions to it. Yet, it wasn't until the night of *Storm's* opening reception that I became aware of what this work had done for me. I had spent over two years on a defeating quest trying to figure out how to bring my multimedia work into a gallery context. Some of my experiments worked better than others; I reduced the listening/viewing time by creating short vignettes, removed the equipment from sight, and restricted the installation objects to bare minimum. However, I was never fully satisfied with any of my attempts—I missed the captive audience that came with cinema, and wondered if it could be created in a gallery. When I was preparing my piece for Tuan's show I was not as concerned with audience, I was doing something that did not involve projectors, speakers, wires, etc. and to be honest my mind was too scattered to consider too much, so I kept it simple. Strangely enough this show would be a huge success for me, I realized how to modify my work for the gallery. The night of the reception I observed viewer's inactions and was surprised that they spent more time with a piece that was not "time-based". Most people looked at the image first, and then read the text and then looked back at the image—some people even re-read the text. I felt that I had figured something out that night, something that I wanted to

recreate on a larger scale, this urge to continue to explore this method of working lead me to Part I of my thesis work, *Everything Is Still*.

Everything Is Still consists of a series of digital prints that examine moments within home movies from the 1940s-1960s that may not have meant to be documented. Searching for hidden situations and interactions, I extract single frames that are imbedded in between the staged memories and smiles. The still series are then coupled with narratives of my grandmothers' lives of that period. The idea of what a still represented in home movies, something that was intended to be documentary-based as a record of family life, became so intriguing and interesting to me. This idea of becoming a detective became quite alluring to me, trying to make sense of the big picture by sifting through the mundane to find the "real" story, as if one could mine "truth" from these pictures as if it were coal. Since the recent death of my maternal grandmother, searching for stills became a form of respite to me, a way to continue working and feel productive, but also an escape the video project that had become to close to my life.

Everything Is Still: An examination of home movie moments was part of the show ***terra incognita***, a group exhibition that included the MFA Thesis work of five MFA candidates at the School of Art & Design: Sara Marie Blakely, Adrienne Finelli, Catherine Meier, Ann Stewart and Adrienne Vetter. The show was on view at a warehouse space on Wildt Street in Ann Arbor, and ran for three weeks. Upon entering the main room of the space, my work was hanging in a small house-shaped nook I created just to the right of the doorway. The title, *Everything Is Still*, accompanied by my name in smaller type was hung to the left in a light salmon colored vinyl.

Her father took off for California
to find his own dreams.
To protect her from her stepfather,
her grandmother stowed her inside
cubby holes in the attic.
When she was forty,
no one could find her.
She was found hiding
in a box in the attic.



Everything Is Still 01, 2009, Digital mock-up.

Narrative:

Her father took off for California
to find his own dreams.
To protect her from her stepfather,
her grandmother stowed her inside
cubby holes in the attic.
When she was forty,
no one could find her.
She was found hiding
in a box in the attic.

This image was the first in the series, and was placed next to the title, on its own wall space. I wanted to begin the show with this piece for several reasons; 1) there was a certain chronology of a woman's life unfolding throughout the series, 2) this particular narrative was from my maternal grandmother's life, which I had not known about till after her recent death, and wanted to place it there as a tribute, and 3) it was the most specific and detailed narrative and I wanted the viewer to be less aware of the specific as the walked through. This piece was a strong

start for these reason already listed and for aesthetic ones as well, the soft black and white of the print looked stunning next to the salmon color of the title and the composition of two by three, with strong light, shadow and line was helped by having its own wall space.

I decided not to title the individual pieces, as I had done with *Undertow*, as I was more interested in them working together than working individually. The narratives underwent four-eight edits each, trying to make them as sparring as possible. This narrative retained the most detailed, because of the particular nature of the story—it comes from my maternal grandmother's life, and was revealed to me after her death. I had known that she grew up not knowing her father at all, that he had left for California and died in 1979. My grandmother did not attend his funeral; she said she had no reason to, though she would mention this often enough to extrapolate some feelings of guilt and regret. I had also known for years that her grandmother had raised her and her three siblings after her mother remarried a man that did not want to provide for children that were not his. Although I was aware that there was abuse present with her stepfather, the type of abuse was never mentioned. Her stories subconsciously revealed that it most likely was some form of sexual abuse, as only the two daughters had to be hidden in this desperate, scary way.

The last part of the narrative, the most haunting to me, I learned after my grandmother's suicide. My mother told me about a time in her youth, the year she graduated high school, there was a two-day period that no one could find my grandmother. Finally when she was found she was hiding in a large sheet metal box in the attic of their house. This was freighting to me, I had immediately connected this story to her death and the day leading up to her suicide, which my grandmother was missing for hours and hours. My dad and I had been searching for her, making phone calls, until I finally found her in a spare bedroom on the second floor, this would be the last place I would talk to her and the place of her death. I believe these spaces represented a tomb within her soul, a part of herself that she hated, the part of herself that she could not live with anymore, and the part she wanted dead.

The images in this first sequence are all from the same reel of footage that I had purchased at an estate sale, the label was illegible however I believe the stock to be from the 1940s based on the clothing worn and the look of the footage. These images made me think of my grandmother, Lucille and this particular story after the first time I viewed it. I was drawn to this little girl she seemed so strong and independent, but helpless and constrained at the same time. During a critique of this particular piece, a peer asked why the first two stills were needed at all; they felt it did not fit the narrative and only distracted from the other four images. However, I saw the first two stills as imperative not only to this particular piece but also to the entire story/exhibit. The first still symbolizes our attachment to our mothers, our desire to feel

close and secure emotionally, as the second still of the first row displays our loss of attachment, disconnect and dysfunction, and the ruins of our mother fantasies. The young girl clings to her mother's dress, she does not seem to want to let go; yet, by the second frame she is distant, unaffected and leaving. In both images the mother does not reach for her daughter, she is incapable of extending herself emotionally, and remains frozen in time despite her daughter's drastic change of position within the frame.

The second set of stills from the first sequence shows the same woman, man and little girl, and introduces another young girl and an elderly woman. Within the first still of the second row the viewer recognizes the mother figure that is now active and reaching for the newly introduced young girl. The elderly woman, or grandmother character reaches for the girl from the previous stills, who seems reach back voluntarily. Yet, by the next frame the girl has turned and tries to get away, she now knows she does not want to go. The grandmother's presence has become more serious, and the little girl's reaction seems drastic and fear induced, as if she knows what is happening. The man, barely visible, looks to be grabbing the girl from the opposite direction. Even though there is no attic depicted in these images, the composition seems strong enough to suggest there is much more going on here than is visible, which the stark, eerie shadow in frames 1, 3 and 4 elude to.

The final two frames of the first sequence show a change in location, the little girl remains the main focus and new older man is introduced. He seems to be concerned about the girl, but at the same time wants to keep her in his control. In the first frame of the last row the girl appears very resistant, she is still fighting to be free. By the last frame the girl is uncomfortable, although she is still confined by the man's grasp, she has exhausted herself and no longer fights back. These last two frames are interesting in the sense that they could be read multiple ways symbolically with the text. A viewer could assume this is the stepfather grabbing the girl in a threatening way. Another may think that the change of location implies the future, and although the girl appears to be young, she may in fact be a mature woman stuck in a traumatic memory of her youth, and the man may be her husband, trying to bring her back to reality.

With six children
there was no peace.
The doctors gave her pills
to keep her mind right.
After a while
she wasn't even there.



Everything Is Still 02, 2009, Digital mock-up.

Narrative:

With six children
there was no peace.
The doctors gave her pills
to keep her mind right.
After a while
she wasn't even there.

The sequence pictured above was the second in the series; its placement within the show was based on the overall narrative arch and the aesthetic layout of the exhibit. The narrative of this piece comes out of the audio recordings done with my father and his siblings in August 2008—I spent a month interviewing my family about their experiences growing up and memories of their mother. This history has been hidden from my generation, and I think it is important to reveal some of these painful memories, to better understand our family history and current dynamics.

One uncle recalled the doctors not helping his mother much, claiming that they just prescribed medications to mask her current problem. “If she was up, they’d give her a pill to knock her down, and if she was down they’d give her a pill to pick her back up. There was no therapy involved, they were just pill pushers.” Later in our conversation he revealed his fear of medication, through observation of his mother’s life he associated medication, especially pills with “imprisonment” and “crushing your spirit”. Throughout the interviews I found out that most of the children in their adult life shared this fear and rarely even took an aspirin for a headache. With this I knew I needed to make a sequence that spoke to medication. The line “The doctors gave her pills to keep her mind right” came out of this conversation with my uncle. Also, within the text “to keep her mind right”

My father, the second eldest, recalled most of his childhood as non-existent, by time he was ten years old, he would make his sisters’ lunches and get them to school, go to school and then figure out what to make for dinner. “Even when Mom was at home she was so heavily medicated that she just wasn’t there. I remember her sleeping everywhere—on the couch, at the

dinner table...if there was a problem, there was no use going to her and you didn't want Dad to find out, so we had our own rules." Perhaps this was one of the most telling moments of my interview with my father, even though his mother was physically present, apart from hospitalization due to mental health complications in combination with an abusive and hostile marriage, he always felt she was not there. The line "After a while she wasn't even there" makes reference to my father's experience and also pays tribute to Pauline Boss' *Ambiguous Loss*.

The image consists of five frames that are much closer in duration than some of the other sequences. A woman rests on her back wearing a plaid bathing suit and white-framed sunglasses; she is trying to relax, sunbathing in the grass circa the early 1960s. The woman is pictured alone in the first frame, but by the second frame a pair of small legs severe the tranquility taking up a bold half of the screen space, we now assume that the woman is a mother. The third and fourth frame of the sequence show the child's legs literally walking over their mother, and even by the last still the heel of the child can be seen in the upper left hand corner. The woman's expression and position stay static throughout the sequence as if she does not notice the child or has become immune to such action. Graphically it is this static quality that I find most compelling, and because there is little change in the woman's expression our eyes stay fixed on her face and we cannot figure out her frame of mind. Is she there or not there? To the child she seems virtually invisible, as the small legs leap over her as if she were just part of the background. The woman's lack of reaction also positions her to not be there as if she is also unaware of the child and her surroundings.

Only the daughters remembered,
 it was right before the holidays.
 She couldn't stand it;
 he threw her over his shoulder.
 And on the way to the hospital he said:
 Look at what you've done to your mother.



Everything Is Still 03, 2009, Digital mock-up.

Narrative:

Only the daughters remembered,
 It was right before the holidays.
 She couldn't stand it;
 He threw her over his shoulder.
 And on the way to the hospital he said:
 Look at what you've done to your mother.

The third sequence of *Everything Is Still*, pictured above is different than most all of the other sequences in the series, it is unique in that it pulls stills from three different reels of footage and from three different sources. Three different family's home movies make up this mosaic montage to tell a new story. The narrative of this sequence comes from my maternal grandmother's life, another story I had never heard until after her death. My mother and her sister recalled this moment from their childhood as we were cleaning out my grandmother's house this past winter holiday season. It was a bizarre to learn of this story that happened years before at the same time of year only days after my grandmother's death. I had never known about my maternal grandmother having mental health issues prior to the day before her suicide; how strange families are, keeping such heavy and painful memories from each other until they

can no longer carry it with them. I wonder if my grandmother would have died of natural causes, if I would ever learn of this history.

The sisters always carried my grandfather's words with them, "Look at what you've done to your mother." How unrehearsed we are at what to say in times of crisis, as if the memory of the event itself isn't potent enough that hostile, impulsive words are attached to these difficult times, only adding to the trauma. I wondered what the children did to their mother, and were they really the cause of this breakdown? This led me to consider what the word 'breakdown' meant and how I could visually represent through images.

The first row consists of three stills from home movies of the early 1960s; of all the pieces in *Everything Is Still* these three images are the most manipulated. A lot of screen time goes on in between these stills and they are very much taken out of context and used to serve my agenda. The actual footage is a somewhat silly exchange between the woman and the camera operator, as she is very much performing throughout the whole scene. But as every direct gaze into the camera is erased, the tone of the footage changes meaning. At first she does not notice when she is being filmed, and then as she notices she puts her hands over her face and shakes them back and forth, suggesting that she feels too dressed down for the camera. The second still is taken from this exchange, but frozen at a point that you cannot make out her smile, she appears to be upset in the first still and by the second she is frantic. "She couldn't stand it," and so she runs out of the frame away from the baby.

The second row of this piece is made up of three fairly consecutive frames from a home movie labeled, 1964. The images show a very young girl having a tantrum, as her mother has a 'breakdown' above, she too has a 'breakdown' of sorts. Is this a reaction to her mother's behavior or is her mother's loss of control due to her falling apart and screaming? The cyclical nature of mother-daughter relationships, as they are sponges for each other's emotions, or lack of emotions, as the last row suggests. I think this row of images of the young girl screaming is very interesting to compare with all of the other stills in the series, as there is something quite unique that happens here. The viewer can hear the screaming, a sound that is so familiar to most everyone who can hear. I find this interesting because the source of all the 8mm, 16mm and Super 8mm reels used in this project have no sound attached to them, and most images read as silent. However, these three stills are the voice of the exhibition—a blood-curdling scream of a scared and upset child. As my work deals with silence, denial and repression, but an often pose question and urges us to break the silence—I feel although this little girl could represent my mother within the narrative, subconsciously I recognize this little girl as myself and the scream is my sharing these silent stories, the release of our pains.

“Look at what you’ve done to your mother.” Here in the last row of this sequence an older woman lies on a sofa outside, the first still suggests perhaps she is sleeping. By the second still she appears exhausted and troubled, it is clear she is not relaxing or at rest. The addition of the second still changes the interpretation of the first still from couch to coffin-like, a void that cannot be filled or fixed. In the final still of this sequence the woman stares back at us, but her looked is disturbed, she is not looking to engage, she is only waiting to rest her head down. These three stills represent the words my maternal grandmother said to me the night before her death—the disgust, the agony, how unbearable life had become to her. As the stills progress, they continue in a cycle and your eye travels from end to end, from rest to death. The motion continues back up to the young child screaming, she is the focal point; and now changes meaning with the introduction of the last row. She is now screaming for a mother whom is gone and not coming back, it is the eternal scream of loss.

Everything Is Still 04, 2009, Digital mock-up.

What vacation?
Once she took a train
from Philadelphia to
Chicago, but he found her
and brought her back.
He always did.



Narrative:
What vacation?
Once she took a train
From Philadelphia to
Chicago, but he found her
And brought her back.
He always did.

This piece is a somewhat modified version of *Undertow*, the piece from the *Storm* show that was the catalyst for this entire body of work. The title was removed, the image slightly refined and the narrative edited down to the most essential language. The story behind this sequence comes from the August 2008 interviews conducted with my father and his siblings.

Several of the children cited times that their mother tried to leave their father, so times with all the children and occasionally only with the three girls. This narrative refers to the first time that Mary Arlene made an escape, the newly weds were leaving in Philadelphia where my grandfather was finishing medical school and they just had their first child, Michael. My uncle Mike was the only one who seemed to know this whole story, a story that he learned from a cousin, Mary Carolyn, who was 12 years old at the time of the event. My grandmother took a train from Philadelphia to Chicago alone with her newborn; she decided to leave after the first remembered case of physical abuse. My grandfather managed to find her in just two days of her departure and brought her and the baby back to Philadelphia with him. Mary Carolyn remembered seeing her aunt with bruises across her face.

The beach scene refers to the family's annual tradition of visiting Wildwood Crest on the Jersey shore each year. The siblings remembered this being the only peaceful, happy time of their youth, an occasion that everyone could relax and act as children. Each felt this was due to their father's change in personality the minute their vacation started, during the interviews he was often described as a workaholic-tyrant with an extreme temper, except when he was at the beach. Perhaps this was the only place he could be free of the hard memories of his childhood, maybe this was the only place his father did not criticize and beat him, maybe the beach was also his only safe haven too.

However, I am not convinced that my grandmother was happier during these trips to the beach. She was fully aware that these trips would come to an end and her situation would remain status quo, a reality that could have been too painful to consider. Through the daughter's testimonies they remember their mother walking up and down the shoreline alone, maybe this was a place for her to get away without guilt and consequences.



Finelli family portrait at the beach, August 1964



Detail of above photograph.

How could any weeklong vacation actually be an escape to someone who had tried leaving over a dozen times with no success?

I started looking through hundreds of family snapshots and became intrigued by these vacation portraits. The children did appear more relaxed and their smiles more genuine, but I could not see this carefree outlook present in my grandmother. As the photo above displays, there often was a look of uncertainty and a distance present in her eyes. However, when I looked

back further to a time before Mary Arlene was married, before she had any children—it was the pictures of her times at the beach where she seemed truly happy and in love with life.



Mary Arlene, a friend and cousin Helen at Sea Side Heights, NJ, August 1941

I became fascinated with these photos and started to look at other pictures taken at this point in my grandmother's life, only to find similarities in her expressions and disposition. It appeared that this period of her life, from 18-28 years old she was excited to be living. During these years she would complete business school, serve in the U.S. Marines, attend Cornell University, graduate from Cedar Crest College with high honors and hold two professional jobs. I believe these images that were taken before she was married, before she had children and before she was labeled ill represent the woman that my grandmother wanted to be—social, adventurous, independent, smart and fun loving. Over the years the beach had changed meaning for her, it was no longer a wonderful place of hopes and freedoms—it had become a mirage, a painful memory of what she once had and how she once felt about herself in the world.

At first glance, the three stills of the sequence seem to evoke memories of family vacations and playful times at the beach, but with a closer look the piece becomes quite haunting and eerie, especially when combined with the narrative. In the first frame the woman leans away from the man and family in the background, her body extends from the top of the frame to the bottom; she is dominant, but only to the viewer and not to the others present in the image. She

seems unstable as if she could collapse and fall backwards; her posture is vulnerable and uncomfortable, she wants to get away but seems tied to the family. By the second frame the woman's attempt to get further away fails, her balance slips as the weight of the attachment causes her stumble into the center of the frame. At this point the man is alert to woman's actions and extends his arm, meanwhile their children seem unaware of the interactions despite their flanking position. By the third frame, it is clear that the man is not offering support or comfort, he is not there to brace her fall and protect her, he grabs her ankle only to make her even more unstable. The children seem unfazed by this behavior, never glancing over to their parents within all of the stills, as if this routine is rehearsed and something they have grown used to and remain unaffected by.

Vacations are intended to be a get-away, an escape; however, I believe that after my grandmother tried to leave that first time by hoping on train from Philadelphia to Chicago and being found and brought back, there was no hope of getting away. The ironic and heartbreaking part of her life story, is that when she was finally free of my grandfather, after he died in 1983, she would end up taking her own life within six month. So, even though she would try to leave she could not truly break away, she was tethered to him, and even though it was unhealthy it would become familiar. Their relationship was highly co-dependent there was a push and pull that grew into a cycle of repeated dysfunction.

She waited hours for him
alone with the kids.
After a long day of work
the last thing he wanted to do was talk.
She brought him his meal and
left him alone.



Everything Is Still 05, 2009, Digital mock-up.

Narrative:

She waited hours for him
alone with the kids.
After a long day of work
the last thing he wanted to do was talk.
She brought him his meal and
left him alone.

Although the narrative of this sequence comes from the August 2008 interviews it was one of the least specific and most universal, which was the reason I chose the second still to become the postcard to represent the entire show. Almost all of my aunts and uncles referred to their mother as a very social woman, an outgoing conversationalist that outside of church had little social opportunity. She was an educated woman that served in the military and held jobs until she became a mother, after which she was not allowed by my grandfather to work outside of the home. Her children saw the harm in her isolation through her repetitive tasks and increased paranoid delusions.

My grandfather operated two practices, one in Bethlehem and one in Bangor, PA and occasionally made house calls in the evenings. By nature he was remembered as a very anti-social, withdrawn man, but because of his profession as a medical doctor he was obligated to masquerade as a social man, day in and day out. His patients made accolades to his outstanding service and in both communities Dr. Michael Finelli was regarded as a saint. So, by the time he would return home from work he had no interest in conversation or acting polite and pleasant—he wanted to be left alone by everyone. During the interviews, my aunt described a typical meal—outside holidays she remembered her mother having a distaste and disinterest in cooking—on a typical night her mother would rush to prepare something last minute, “quick open up a can of peas and cook the hell out of a piece of steak.” “This was her job, something she didn’t enjoy, but she needed to have some kind of meal ready waiting for him.”

The coloring and composition of this piece is very cinematic, and almost looks to be pulled out of a narrative film despite the graininess of the film stock. In the first frame the woman stands with her hands on her hips looking back at the man approaching her, we assume them to be an older married couple. The sun is setting in the background and a warm orange glow spills onto the figures and pours across their son waiting by the front porch. The woman dressed in a plain housedress, her head is tilted to the ground, she is waiting, she is thinking. The man is dressed in a light brown service uniform, he walks with his hand in pockets at a relaxed pace, he is home, but perhaps not ready to be there. The younger man in the background is distracted away from the scene, focusing on something he is holding. The quality of light and the leafless trees hint that footage is from late autumn. The canister that contained this reel was unmarked; however the footage appears to be from the 1950s based on the clothing style of the woman and the look of the film.

The second still in this series was iconic to me since the first time I saw it—there is something so familiar about the dynamics present within this frame. The woman’s stance

becomes very pronounced, now turned facing the camera staring directly at the viewer, highlighted by the warm red glow of the sun. The sadness or worry that seemed present in the first still is gone; her pose now speaks of frustration and resentment. Even after a day of waiting she is still waiting, as the man slows his walk to a saunter. His shoulders rolled slightly forward and hands in pocket, the camera moves with him as the sunset rolls out of the frame. The young man in the background is hardly visible at this point; only a small part of his white shirt can be seen at the border of the image. The viewer remains fixed on the woman's posture and gaze, she seems as if she is trying to communicate something to us. Yet, she does not appear helpless or scared, it's as if at this point in the narrative she realizes her injustice.

In the final frame the young man is completely out of the shot, and the front porch is mostly out of sight, only the house and the couple remain prominent. The man and woman make eye contact for the first time, she stares him down with condemnation. The glow of the sun turns her arm a blazing red, the anger inside her has manifested itself onto her skin, and as if she was a projector those red feelings are cast onto him. He is frozen by her glare, no longer approaching; yet as he straightens out his posture he cracks a smile. It is taunting gesture to smile in the face of such anger, to not even acknowledge it, knowing that you are the one in control.

It was her biggest secret:
Sometimes she wondered
what her life would have
been like otherwise.
Could she keep walking
along the shore and never look back?



Everything Is Still 06, 2009. Digital mock-up.

Narrative:

It was her biggest secret:
Sometimes she wondered
what her life would have
been like otherwise.
Could she keep walking
along the shore and never look back?

The narrative of this still is loosely based on the August 2008 interviews and partly created by myself. I imagined that at some point in time my grandmother could have thought this herself—I think it is natural to consider alternate scenarios for ourselves, this may be especially true of women of a certain era, who did not have careers and social opportunities based on their mothering responsibilities. Silent wonderings of other lives for themselves, different circumstances—but never revealing these feelings to their children or family. What they had imagined for themselves before they were married, and before they had children. Where do these desires go?

Within this piece there is another reference to the beach and vacation, a reminiscing of what the beach stood for to Mary Arlene during her decade of freedom and adventure. The narrative is also somewhat based on the recollections of my aunts as they remembered their mother walking up and down the shoreline alone. This is my wondering of what was going through her mind as she paced along the water's edge.

This still stands alone as a punctuation mark, a resting spot within the whole story—it is a point to consider one's own life, a moment of reflection for the viewer. The mother stares out to the ocean, her body turned away from her children, unaware of the camera. She is once again, “there, but not there,” and she cannot travel out of this frame into the next because there is no continuum, there is only the frame she exists in. The children play in the distance, unaware of their mother's presence. She remains within the view of the children, tethered to them—for they are what keep her in existence, within the frame.

The note said PACK
 in their mother's handwriting.
 Why should you be the only one to go?
 A day after he put his son in
 a full nelson,
 they moved, and
 only left his chair.



Everything Is Still 07, 2009, Digital mock-up.

Narrative:

The note said PACK
 in their mother's handwriting.
 Why should you be the only one to go?
 A day after he put his son in
 a full nelson,
 they moved, and
 only left his chair.

This narrative is from my father's life, a memory which all of his siblings recall, and a pivotal moment in their family's history. This story was one of the more frightening and sad stories that I decided to share with the public. My grandfather was a very harsh man, especially with his three sons, he had been a football player and a wrestler all through his youth and believed that men should be rough and tough, a trait that none of his sons embraced. My father had started growing his hair out in the 1960s while in high school, something my grandfather could not accept or understand. One day he gave my father a ten-dollar bill and told him to go get a crew cut, my father took the money and later returned with his hair untouched. This infuriated my grandfather to the point that he had pinned my father on the ground, nearly breaking his own son's arms. My father was screaming and crying out of pain, which only lead my grandfather to further taunt, calling him by girl names. My grandfather grabbed the kitchen

scissors and cut his hair down to nothing. While my father told of this during the interviews, he said he did not attend school for a week after this incident, too embarrassed to be seen.

The next day my father was planning on running away, he thought of going to California or even trying to get adopted into foster home—he did not want to be part of such dysfunction and grew tired of dealing with the brutality of his father. He told his mother and older brother his plans, and Mike’s response was “Why should you be the only one to go? We’re all leaving.” There was a note written with only one-word ‘PACK’ hanging on the front screen door. And so, they packed a van and moved across town into a modest apartment—everyone feeling relieved to get away from the madness of their home.

The first still of this sequence is of a boy lying face down on the floor under an end table. His arm extends to shield his face, he appears to be upset, but does not want others to see him. His position within the frame suggests he does not want to be filmed or that he is unaware of the camera’s presence. Although the shot is from within a home, it is not a comforting image, it feels voyeuristic and holds a surveillance quality that makes the viewer see in the boy’s unease. The next frame jumps in duration, although it is unclear as to whether it is a flashback of fast forward due to the change of location as seen in the carpet design. The same young boy is pictured; he out from under the table but his face is still not visible. The boy’s hand is braced against the floor, as he resists the man in the top of the frame who has a grip on his arm. This footage looks more like a still extracted from *COPS* and less like a home movie circa the 1950s.

More details are revealed by the third still, and the viewer can now start to imagine the type of home, an old television occupies half of the frame, a dining room table with a lace cloth faintly appears in the background, as a green leather chair sits behind the boy. The father figure’s arms emerge from the top right-hand corner, as his hands clutch the boy’s shoulders as he tries to escape. The boy is seen close to center of the frame with a leg lifted up as he tries to run out of the room. Yet, by the fourth still of the top row the father become dominant grabbing onto the son’s arms. The father is wearing a white-collard shirt and gray slacks, leading the viewer to imagine the man a professional of some sort. Even by the third and fourth frame the boy’s face goes unseen and eventually his father’s arms cover his whole head.

The first frame of the second row finally reveals the faces of the boy and his father. The father sits in the green chair with a smirk on his face, pointing to the camera while looking down at his son. The boy continues to struggle, in tears and screaming, trying to break free. The father appears to be taunting his son for being so upset, and attempts to embarrass him rather than comfort him. In the second frame of the second row, the boy’s frantic cries turn into sobbing over the loss. Placing his hands to his eyes, his crying becomes the focal point of the frame. His

father's head barely visible, shifting our attention to his grasp as if his son was a football. The next room, a possible escape, becomes more visible.

The framing of the third still of the second row shifts slightly and bring the father's face back into the scope of the camera, he continues to look smug although he looses his hold. The boy is genuinely saddened and can no longer fight and resist. In the final frame of the second row the father's face becomes hidden once more, his hand is placed across the boy's torso, perhaps as an act of remorse, the apology he is capable of. Hoping to forget this experience, the boy digs his hands into his eyes, now trying to stop from crying, but is this moment locked inside him as it is now embedded on the film strip? This stills represents a slight sense of empathy towards the father, possibly this embrace of his son is as much affection as he can supply. There is sadness and longing flickering within this composition, the passing of emotional scars from on generation to the next.

In the final row of this sequence after calming himself the boy escapes his father, and runs towards the doorway. The father does not reach for him, with his hand planted on his knee he looks in the direction of his son, his face hardly in the frame. Within the next still a woman appears framed in the doorway standing with her arms extended, the boy reaches for her. The man sits quietly holding his knee; his head is turned watching the boy and his mother. By the third image boy moves out of the camera's scope and further away from his father. The mother dressed in a housedress and slippers bends down to comfort her son, it is assumed from her clothing and demeanor that she is the caregiver of the children. Leaning into the scene the father continues to sit, he becomes a spectator for the outcomes of his behavior. The final frame of this sequence shows the man sitting in the green chair alone, with only the hit of a figure's silhouette in the background. With a tall drink in his hand, he sneers at the camera, almost growling.

She spent a lifetime
trying to escape him.
When she was finally free of him,
she needed him back.
And then she left us.

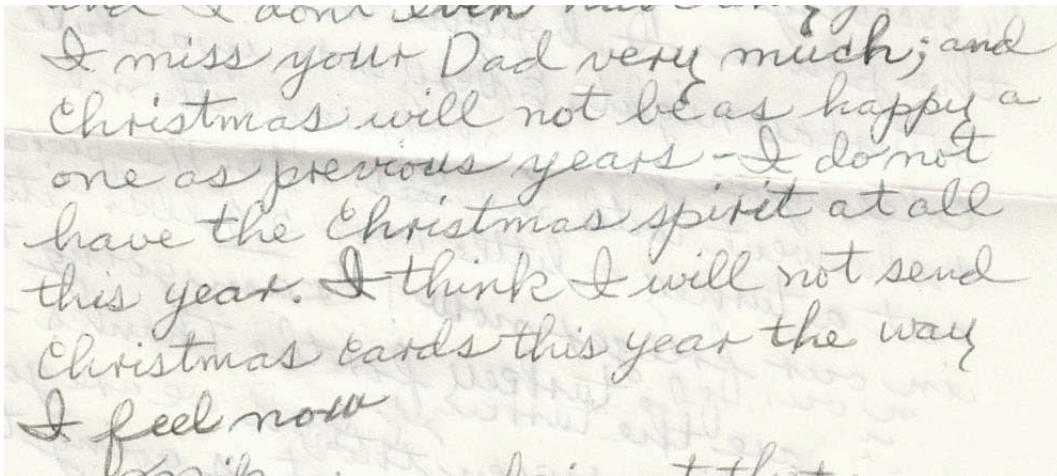


Everything Is Still 08, 2009, Digital mock-up.

Narrative:

She spent a lifetime
trying to escape him.
When she was finally free of him,
she needed him back.
And then she left us.

This sequence acts as a crescendo throughout the entire narrative, a swelling of all the passages to a final resting spot. This piece represents my paternal grandmother's suicide, which occurred on December 21, 1983, an event that shocked my father and his siblings. During the August 2008 interviews all of the children stated that my grandmother's decision to end her life was not something that they had even considered. They had assumed that her life would improve, now that their father was deceased, as she had been trying to leave him ever since they got married. In addition to their father's recent death, my grandmother reported that she had been taken off her medication. The children thought that this was good news, something to celebrate, and did not consider the possibility of their mother voluntarily discontinuing her medication without a doctor's evaluation. Yet throughout their reflections and in my grandmother's letters it was clear that she was depressed and that as Christmas approached her depression heightened.



Detail of grandmother's letter written November 21, 1983.

The excerpt above is from a letter written by my grandmother to her eldest daughter, Mary, only a month before her suicide. Even though there were clear messages of their mother's depression and unease, her distress did not register with them, as they were convinced their mother's situation would now improve. I believe the children hoped for her happiness after their father's death, they wished her a chance to live her life without his oppression.

The narrative of this piece is one I had become most familiar with, as it was all I knew of my grandmother and her life until recently. Everything else, all other stories of her were erased, too painful to mention. "And then she left us"—until recently would have been followed by "and we left her there, buried and forgotten"—but this project has changed that.

The first still in this sequence is drastically different than the four frames following it, it is medium shot of an older couple outside of a house with a middle aged man looking over at their interactions. The woman is dressed in a white housedress, standing with her arms folded staring at the ground with heavy eyes. The older man seems to be provoking a conflict, his chest puffed out and head tilted, but the woman does not step out of his way, she remains next to him. The middle-aged man observes as a spectator, he stands to the side with a hand in his pocket; he seems familiar but not comfortable with the couple's interaction. This frame represents the August 2008 interviews and the outcomes of this project—the middle-aged man symbolizes my father and his siblings as they reflect back on their parent's relationship. Perhaps their parent's attachment to each other was more complicated and layered than what they remembered.

In the following stills sadness emerges, it blurs and confuses the interactions of first still. In the series of four stills of the older man walking way from the woman and the house, the departure is broken down, making the loss more tangible. In the second frame the man looks back at his wife, she stands with her arms crossed looking off in a different direction. The woman appears strong and confident, she can imagine a life without him, but by the third, fourth and fifth frame this is not as clear. By repeating a single frame with subtle changes, the viewer is given time to question and wonder—will she ever be “free of him” as the narrative states, and is this what she truly desires?

Pat and I put a wreath on your Dad's grave today. I miss your Dad very much and it could have been a happier Thanksgiving with him here. I do not have much Christmas spirit this year. I haven't any good ideas about what to buy for Christmas presents this year.

Detail of grandmother's letter written November 26, 1983.

Afraid to go to their father,
their mother,
living in her own world.
They were the glue,
the six of them.
Together.

8



As this letter illustrates, loss is so complicated and unfamiliar—my grandmother now longing for my grandfather, after years of abuse, hostility and distrust. The stills in this sequence also speak to this strange and dichotomous feeling of wanting someone to leave, but at the same time not leave forever. To lose someone forever leaves us wondering—could it actually “have been a happier Thanksgiving with him here”?

Everything Is Still 09, 2009, Digital mock-up.

Narrative:

Afraid to go to their father,
their mother,
living in her own world.
They were the glue,
the six of them.
Together.

I chose to end the show *Everything Is Still* with this final piece about the six children’s strength and unity. To me “They were the glue, the six of them. Together.” is what is worth holding onto, and though we can find meaning in the reminiscent narratives about my grandmother’s struggles, we cannot change the past, we can only learn from it and keep on living, together. I save this sequence for the end as a tribute to my father, Patrick, and his five siblings: Michael, Donato, Mary, Darlene and Coleen—without them mysterious thought of my grandmother would still haunt me. I also thank my father, my aunts and my uncles for their support during the recent loss of my maternal grandmother; their presence and words were most comforting to me. I wanted to leave them with some comfort, and chose “Together.” as a line by itself to end with.

Counting My Losses

I was very pleased with the outcomes of *Everything Is Still*, and though many people felt it was strong enough to stand alone as my MFA thesis work, I had set out to make a video and wanted to accomplish that. *Everything Is Still* was a modified version of my project but had more of my voice present than I desired. I felt as if it were my version of the story, and though it was based on the interviews I conducted with my father and his siblings, it was very much my own poetic, ambiguous interpretation of their memories. This method of gathering clips and turning them into my own stories was an easier and more refreshing way for me to work, it was what I could handle making at that point in time. However, I made the mistake of putting all my materials and feelings into a vacuum-sealed place, thinking that once I got back into working on the video I would feel better and it would become easier. Once again I was kidding myself.

I returned back to work on the video at the end of May, and everything was as I had left it before my maternal grandmother's death. I had become so angry about the project in its current state—I felt as if it was meaningless, it did not convey what suicide loss felt like at all. However I was reluctant to throw all my work out and start over, and this would go on for a month or more. Getting back to work on the video was a nightmare; I was having flashbacks, intense feelings of guilt and could not sleep. Listening to the interviews was excruciating—I now knew exactly what my father was feeling, and often in the interviews I would refer to my living grandmother, who was no longer living. Most days I wanted to quit, I wanted suicide to just go away, but I kept forcing myself into the editing suite. Perhaps it was pride, I was so afraid of failing—there needed to be a Part Two.

I spent most of June and July feeling that to leave out my maternal grandmother's story from this piece was betraying her memory. I wrote false start after false start, thinking that I needed to begin the story with my recent loss. Thinking that if I exposed this recent loss my voice would seem more valid. Resolving this feeling was the more difficult than any other aspect of this project. However, I finally realized that I could be informed by the loss of my maternal grandmother without actually revealing her death that I was not ready to process.

the lights were out
 in the spare bedroom
 upstairs. she was
 there - dressed for the
 day ~~big~~ curled up
 on the bed in a fetal
 position. ~~she~~ wrapped
 in an afghan, resisting
 food & comfort. After
 77 years Lucille did not
 want to live - she didn't
 want another Christmas
 to pass without her son

Journal entry, June 2009

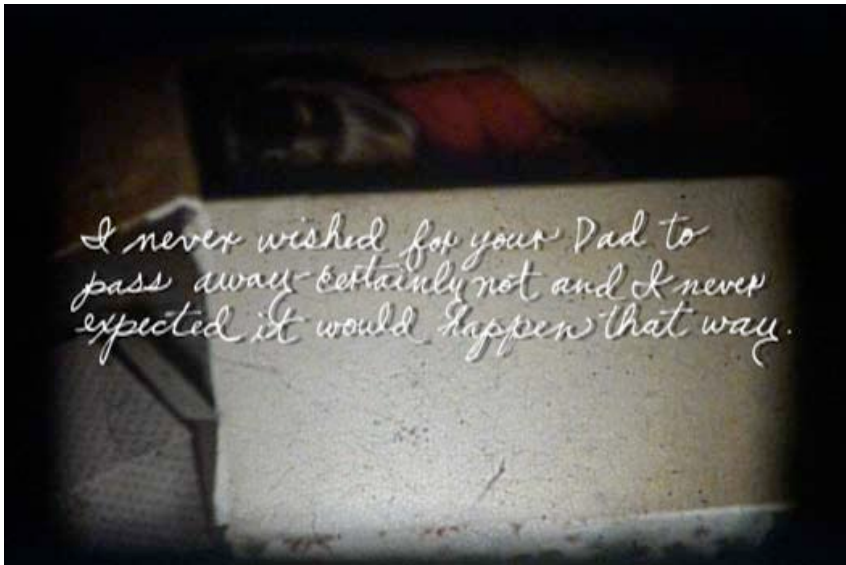
By August I didn't have to force myself to work and I spent less time crying while editing, the structure of the project finally started to emerge. I was finally excited to work on the project, I had found a structure to follow. I decided to use my paternal grandmother's letters as a way to construct her voice within the story. I reread all of her letters to find poignant excerpts



Letter sealed with a kiss, 1983

that would carry the story—sometimes validating what is being said and other times contradicting it. The letters gave me clarity and helped alleviate some of my hard feelings about leaving my maternal grandmother out of the storyline. I found myself using the letters as chapter markers of

what was being recalled, and I enjoyed working with the letters a lot which helped me progress on the project. There was also a technical aspect of the letters that I enjoyed—the process of digitizing them was challenging and intriguing. I went through about five different iterations of how the letters would look within the video. First, I enlarged the letters and made them scroll across the screen; this received poor reviews for purposes of legibility. So, I reduced their size, which improved this but was still distracting from the letters. Next, I made the letters static to fit within the frame and froze the image behind it. This led me to try to remove the paper of the letter but keep my grandmother’s handwriting present.



Still from *too soon too late*, 2009

I used Adobe Illustrator to ‘live trace’ all of the handwritten letters and turn them into vector files that could be superimposed over the footage. This attempt was my most successful for both legibility and artistic purposes.

Structuring the voices was quite challenging—it was very difficult to create a continuous story with six different perspectives. Early on I considered just using my father’s voice, as I seemed most interested in his audio clips, mainly because I had never heard him speak about his mother and his childhood. However, I thought it was important to figure out a way to represent all of the children’s voices. Originally, before winter break I was focusing on a more biographical sketch of my grandmother, with audio clips that described her physical appearance and her demeanor. I think that my original approach was more straightforward and less layered, and my focus on her depression and suicide was less complicated and more melodramatic. I had come to the conclusion that experiencing suicide in such an explicit way led me to make a less

explicit project. Having experienced suicide loss first hand just months before with the death of my maternal grandmother presented me a flurry of new questions, which really muddied up my vision of suicide loss from afar. Discovering this complication also helped me feel less guilty about not including my maternal grandmother's story, as I knew it was her death that was informing my new decisions and narrative approaches.

I wanted the first clip to be the voice of my Uncle Don, as he is the most silent about his mother's life and death. I specifically use his clip stating how numb he was because of the shock—I use it in two ways, one is internal use to explain his reactions to the family, but for the general audience it serves as a vague foreshadowing of something unsettling to come. Then a woman is introduced, she is lying down and the words “It feels like everything is closing in on me from all sides” appears and my father's voice comes in explaining that when she was really sad she would just go to sleep. Directly after a woman picking flowers in a field of appears, she seems happy and carefree, here my Aunt Coleen's voice fades up to state that she had “a very pretty smiling...when she was smiling.” Already the main character is defined, it is clear that this woman has some sort of mood disorder, although it is only inferred that she is a mother.

The next shot is a long take of the exterior of a home, my father's voice returns to state that his parents “had a strange relationship...it definitely was love hate” as he continues my grandmother's writing reappears with the message “Remember how weird your father would act with me so often.” The three daughters define the family and marriage in the following clips; dysfunction, unhappiness and hidden abuse are presented within the first few minutes. I arranged the piece this way to build up the family and define the dynamics of my grandparent's relationship before revealing the severity of my grandmother's depression and her subsequent suicide. I felt that this was an important way to draw more people into the story than if I were to reveal the suicide so early on.

While searching through countless hours of home movie reels, 8mm and some 16mm, I was looking for the same moments between smiles as in *Everything Is Still*. However, I was also thinking about concepts of home a lot, and started looking for images of exterior shots of homes without people in the frame and also interior shots of homes without people. I found these particular shots most interesting—a camera roaming around a room searching for something that wasn't there. These images of empty home were important in symbolizing depression and suicide, and also harkens back to Pauline Boss' concept of Ambiguous Loss—there, but not there.



Film still from *too soon too late*, 2009

I stumbled across a rather magical reel while making this video; it had a minute of very strange but beautiful flood footage on it. I believe this footage was taken somewhere in Indiana, as that is where the film reel was acquired at an estate sale; however it was not clearly marked with a year and location. Although my project had drastically changed form since preproduction, this footage took me to the ideas that I had set out with—thinking of stains in family history as the basement of family memory, and the hopes of a flood washing away the pain. I used this footage three times throughout the video—once in the beginning to setup uneasiness, another time in the middle as the climax and yet again at the end to provide a reflective moment. These moments of flickering footage, distortion and disaster collapse time to give the viewer space to ponder their own lives and families.



Film still from *too soon too late*, 2009.

too soon too late was informed by *Everything Is Still* and prior video experiments—I was striving to keep the ambiguity and poetics of both image and audio. I did not want the final video to be too digestible and clearly defined, as I wanted the piece to imitate the uncertainty of suicide loss and loss in general. Just as the title contradicts itself so does this loss—it is both too soon and too late—too soon for the individual to die and too late to intervene or do anything about it. I wanted the viewer to feel that in the end, and though there were clear hints that something was wrong, I wanted the actual suicide to still feel like a shock. The music adds to this quality throughout, at some points it seems to fit and at other times the music becomes eerie and ominous as to foreshadow the suicide.

Throughout the video there is a triangle of information: the home movie footage, the interviews and the letters. They exist to complement but also contradict one another, and they are often layered so that in some moments the viewer must choose what information to pay attention to, and some the subtleties will be lost. I feel this again explores the notion of family memory loss, the denial of our own dysfunction and hardship. Finally, my reworking of the found footage forms a collective memory and juxtapose with the interviews and my grandmother's letters poses questions about the causes of mood disorders in women of this era.

Looking to Others—

Pepón Osorio

Pepón Osorio remains my greatest influence in the way I think about and approach my art practice. Osorio works predominately in installation art, and as a former social worker his artwork is very influenced by social work methodologies and practices. He calls his artwork interventions and often works with a family, group or an organization surrounding a particular issue. While studying at Temple University I was fortunate enough to hear Osorio lecture and participate in a weeklong workshop on community-based art that he was teaching. Through his workshop and seeing his *Trials and Turbulence* show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, I gained a new excited of what forms documentary-based projects could take.

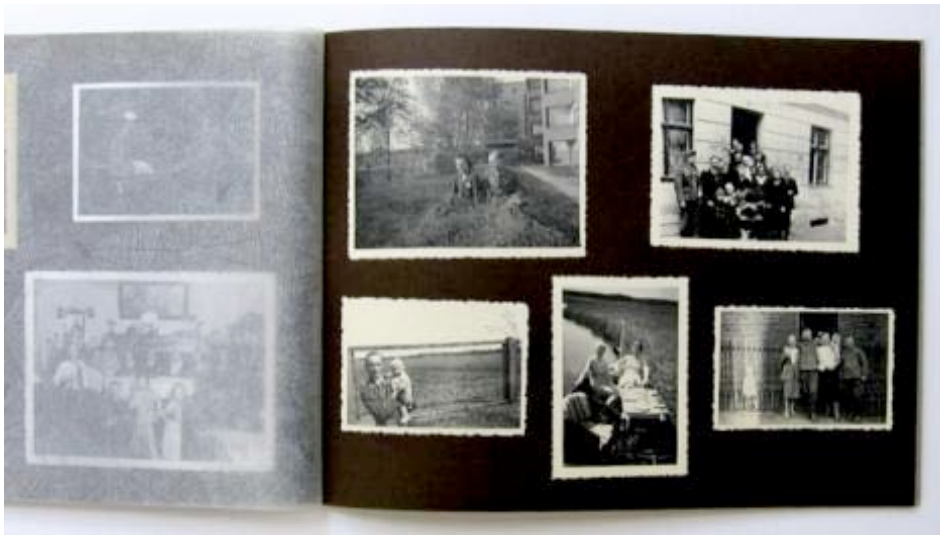


Trials and Turbulence, 2004, Pepón Osorio.

Trials and Turbulence was informed by a three-year Artist-in-Residence at the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS). Through this work Osorio examined private and personal issues of foster care within a public policy context. This show has remained one of the powerful and influential art projects I have ever experienced. The installations were so layered and complex, so real yet surreal at the same time. Since I have research most of Osorio's past and present work and continue to think of it as tactile documentary with soul. His work and practice remain an inspiration to me, and the ways in which he thinks of his participants and interacts with the community I have strived to adopt to my work.

Christian Boltanski

Christian Boltanski's use of family portraits and the presence of memory and loss within his work have been hugely influential to me throughout this project. Boltanski's disenchanting use of family portraiture challenges conventional notions of family photography, and became a great reference to me as I was working on *Everything Is Still*. Here in *Sans Souci* Boltanski reproduces found snapshots of several Nazi families, these images portray the Nazi officers as loving fathers, affectionate husbands and intimate friends. This effect can be explained by what Marianne Hirsch calls the "familial gaze," a familiarity takes over which causes us to adopt the image as our own without question of who or what the people represent.



Sans Souci, 1991, Christian Boltanski.

This notion was meaningful to me when thinking of home movies as a receptacle of collective family memory. Many of Boltanski's other works have provided inspiration to my work as he often distorts fact with fiction and interchanges the two. I often refer to Boltanski's thoughts on autobiographical work, "There's no such thing as an autobiography. If you like Proust, it's because he does not speak so much about himself as about all of us—we have all been afraid of the dark and wished that our mother would say goodnight to us, and we've all been jealous, and we've all had a pretty daft great-aunt whom we were fond of. The really interesting autobiographies are those that do not talk about the author, but about every reader."

Charlotte Salomon

Joanne Leonard brought the work of Charlotte Salomon to my attention after she heard about both of my grandmother's suicides. Salomon is a German-Jewish artist best known for her series of paintings *Life? Or Theatre?: A Singspiel* created between 1941-1943, while Salomon was in hiding from the Nazis. Salomon's mother, aunt and grandmother had all committed suicide, and her paintings were in reaction to her losses and onset of war. Her mother's suicide had been kept a secret from her for years—when this was revealed to Charlotte she believed her family was cursed. Her paintings revealed thoughts of suicide as her own destiny as well, "If I can't find any joy in my life and in my work I am going to kill myself."



Leben? oder Theater?, 1941, Charlotte Salomon.

Life? Or Theatre? was influential to me in thinking about both *Everything Is Still* and *too soon too late*, as Salomon's paintings were more like a graphic novels in that all of them had text built into the image—there was dialogue, narration and even a soundtrack for some of the paintings. Her paintings were almost constructed like a film and she even refers to the people in the images as the cast. Salomon's paintings are unlike any work I am familiar with, her use of time and memory are so creative. Her painting with the caption "All the family's suicides appears before Mrs. Knarre" is so evocative of suicide loss and was a significant piece for me—throughout the year I would refer back to this painting.

No Conclusions

As my friend and colleague, Dan Friedlaender points out in the forward to this paper: “the resolution, if one can call it that; for those left living, it is often no resolution at all... There may never be any answers or resolutions, but sometimes just to start talking again is the point of it all.” I thought I understood suicide loss and had researched and intellectualized it for the purposes of my original project; even though it was part of my family’s history, it took the recent suicide of my maternal grandmother for me to fully understand—this loss cannot be clarified. The nagging questions in one’s mind may never fully disappear—“if only I did something different.”

At first I was looking for a conclusion to offer my father’s family, I had thought that we could find one together, if only we started talking about their loss. I believed I could help heal the pain they had been carrying for over twenty-five years—and though in some ways I feel our situation improved—suicide loss is something that you carry with you for life. Perhaps you find a place where you no longer blame yourself or feel unnecessary guilt, but it never really escapes your mind. Even when you try to make sense of the circumstances and rationalize their decision to end their life—if it is your mother, your grandmother, your father, your only brother, your best friend—you cannot make sense of it, love always gets in the way of sense-making.

I have learned so many important lessons this year—both my work and I have grown up a great deal. I have learned to tell stories that have no end, no answers, and no conclusions. I have held a mirror up to my pain and the pains of my family and reflected it back for the world to see—hoping that understanding emerges and pushes shame and stigma aside. For suicide, there are no theories to prescribe to; no models that will help one make sense—only music and poetry.

*This year,
I'm raising the emotional ante,
putting my face
in the leaves to be stepped on,
seeing myself among them, that is.*

These Green-Going-to-Yellow, Marvin Bell, 2000.

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