

CASEY RHEAULT

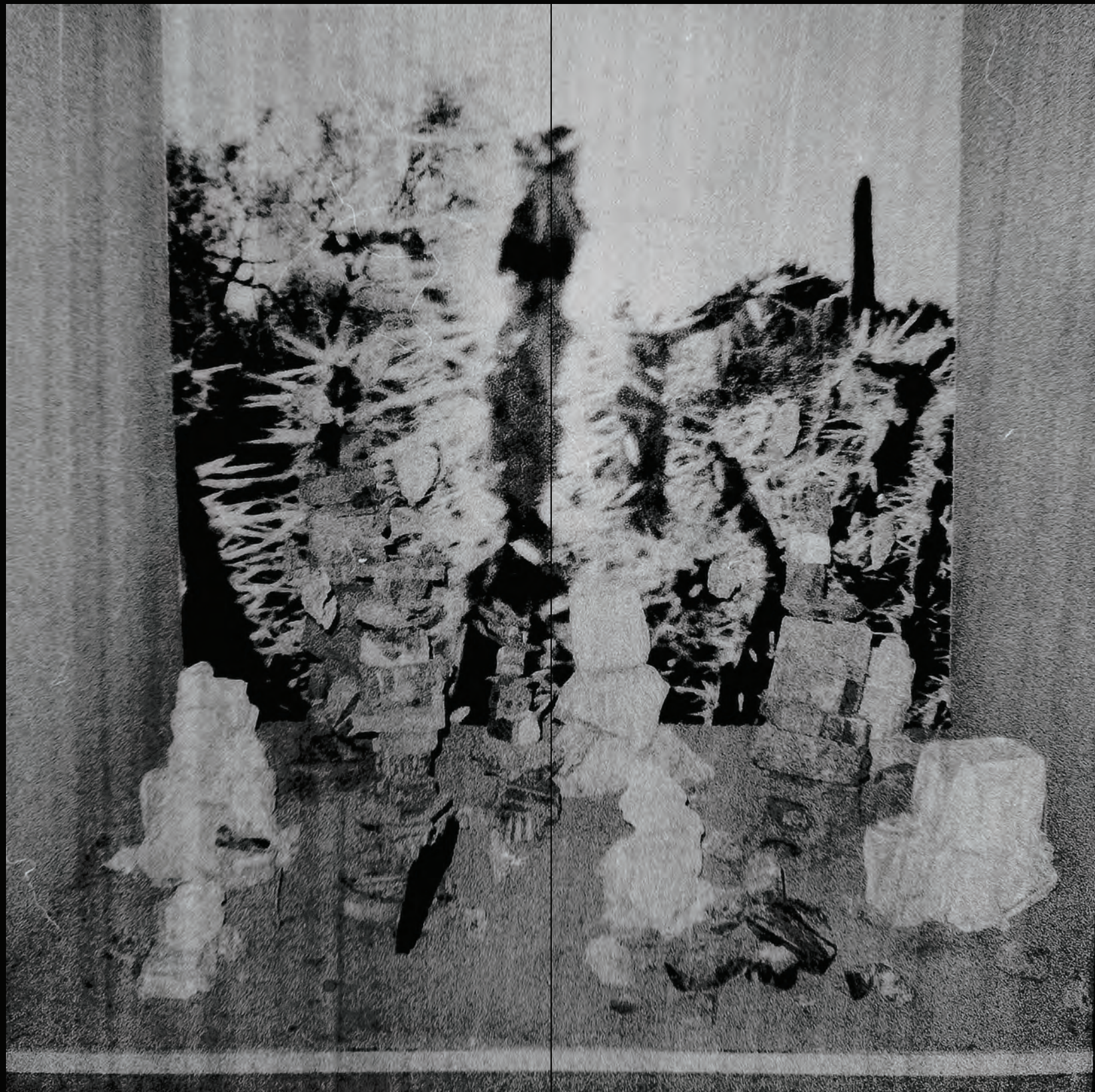
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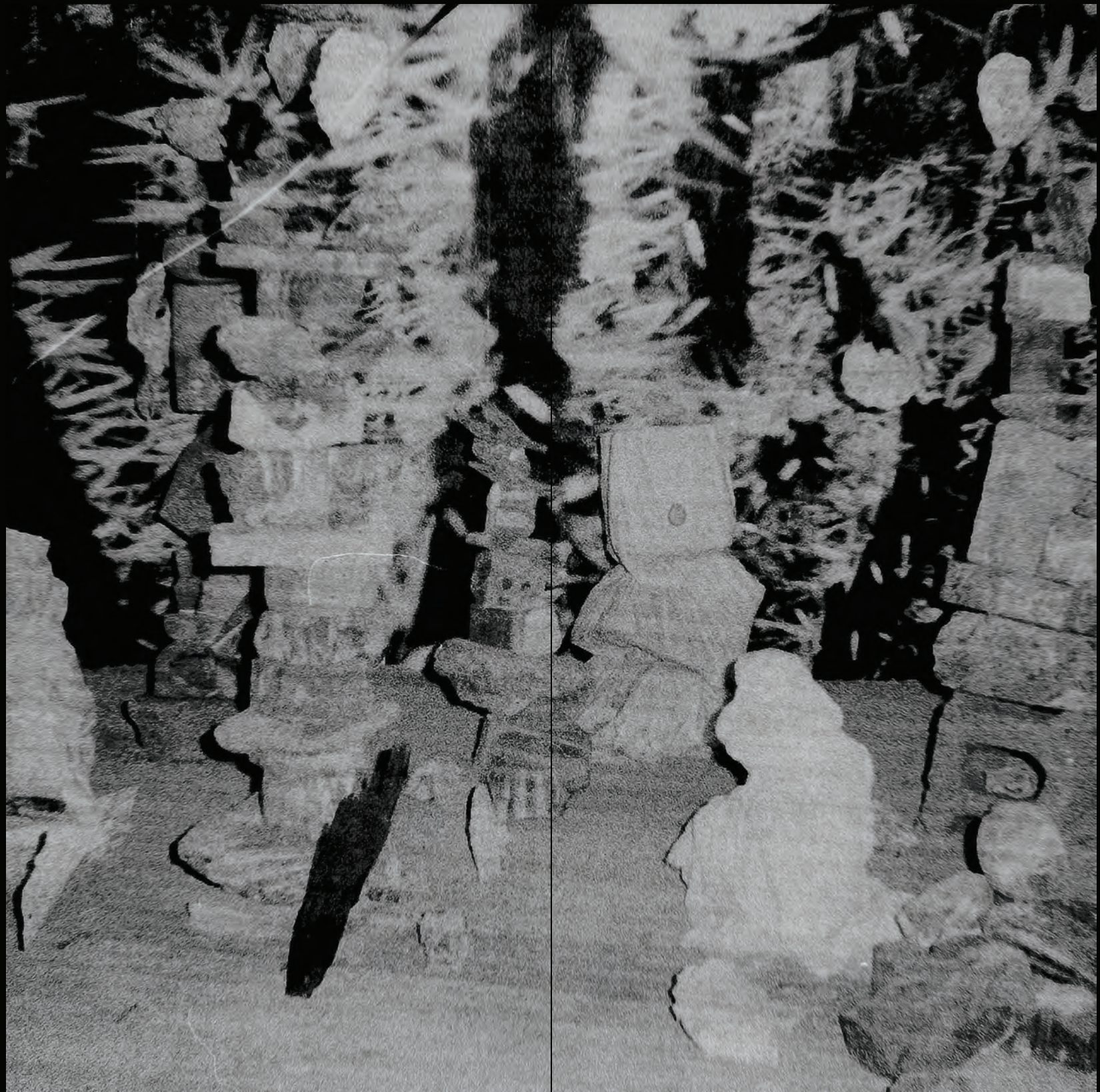
Casey Rheault. In the glinting absence I could see you once again, 2023.

Found rocks, rubble, and dirt; quickcrete; muslin; cheesecloth; paper towel; medical discharge forms; cyanotype solution; wheat paste; dried flowers and cacti; developed film negatives; monofilament; and light.

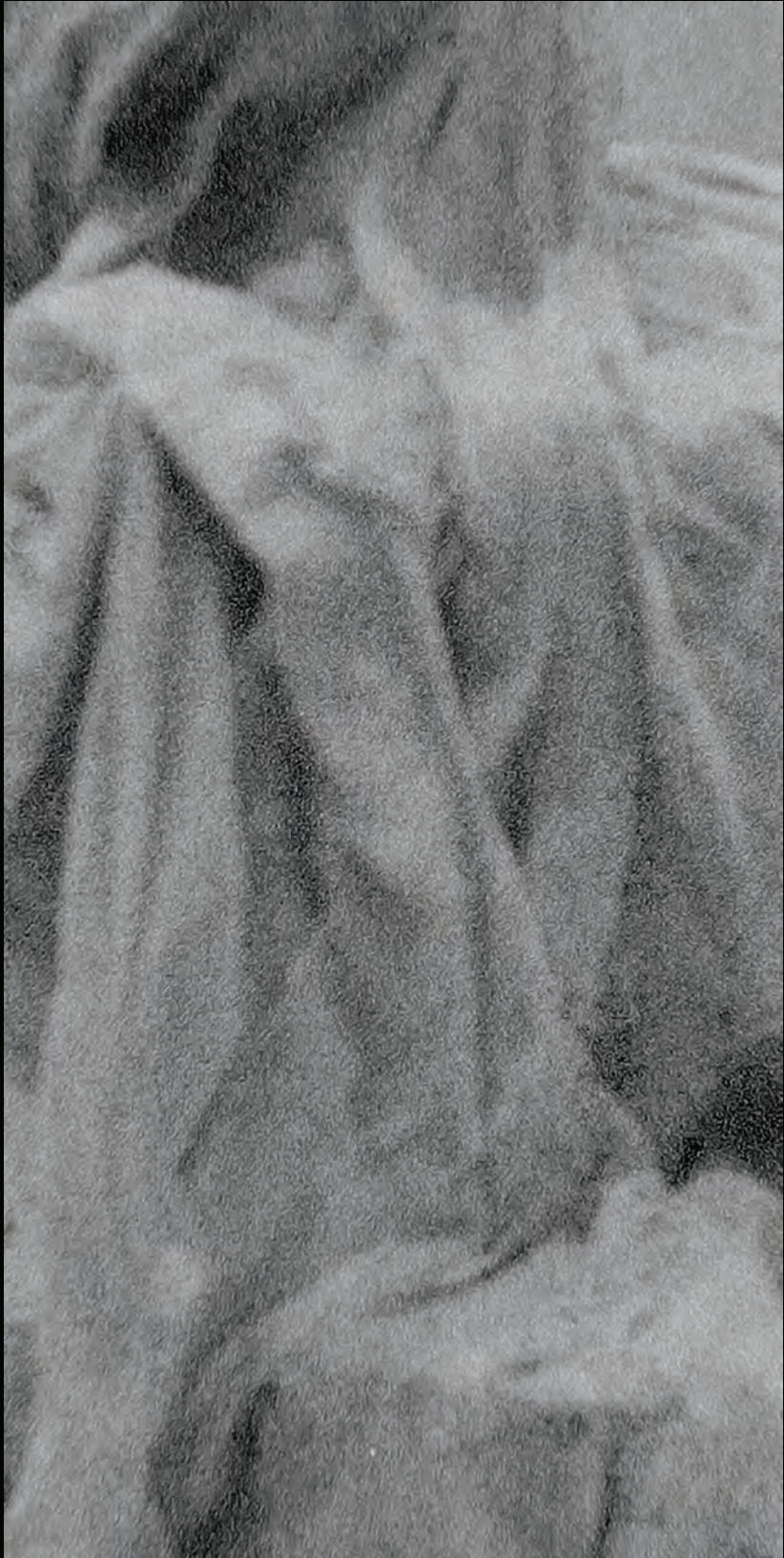
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My journey through grief has been accompanied by tension and uncertainty. Cairns, or balanced stacks of stones and rocks, are historically created as trail markers and sites of burial or memorial. These sculptures, which started as personal experiments with building structures of tension, have become meaningful pathfinders alongside my search for self. As I investigate concepts of entropy, indeterminacy, and remembrance, these forms have come to represent an acceptance of the space of an absence, while marking paths left untraveled.









Grief is hard to navigate. Perhaps this is because grief is also hard to define. It is made up of truthful contradictions that are difficult to reconcile – sharp at times, empty at times, and overpowering and desolate all at once. Its shape is amorphous. It knows no time and no measure, though many try to define it through periods and phases. It remains a thing that can only be known from the inside.

Delving into my grief through my art practice has become a necessary method for processing my experience, navigating its subsequent sensations and confusions, and uncovering insights into my own seemingly impossible quandaries.

* * *

Heidi was my sister – or at least she was meant to be.

From the first moment I met Heidi she held me close. Her warmth and her radiance had the power to capture the attention of a whole room and she possessed in her a gentle, delicate, and divine mothering energy that cradled me in a way that I had never felt.

I remember my father called me after he met Heidi for the first time. He and Heidi's immediate family gathered together in a San Francisco parking lot, dressed in the finest clothes they happened to pack on their abrupt trip to California.

They were invited inside to join Heidi in the room in which she was resting. She was laying down, softly as if she could have been in a deep sleep. Her hair was splayed out in rays, forming a haloic glow of golden streams around her head. Her

eyes were shut, her relaxed face concealing the smile that trademarked her joy.

She was completely still, there on a table in the center of the private area of the mortuary, cloaked in a black box of fabric that started below her chin and covered the rest of her body. It hid her afflictions from the car accident that hospitalized my brother and the rest of the occupants.

My dad called me to share with him the rawness of the moment, searching for an external source to help him process him and his daughter-in-law's first introduction to one another. Together, we remarked on her beauty. We confided in her immortal ability to stun and radiate the warm spirit she possessed – an energy akin to the sun itself.

Though only able to see her face, my dad shared with me how it helped him to imagine her wearing the clothes from the pictures she'd shared underneath the black cloak.

She was wearing the billowing floral dress with turquoise jewelry around her hands and neck that she wore to her brother's wedding. She was dressed for a hike, pen and journal of poetry in hand, with a sun hat that only she could naturally pull off wearing draped along her back. She had on her roller skates and roller derby uniform, with "Hellfire" written on the back.

For all we know, any of the above could have very well been true. Without revealing the contents of what was shielded, none of these presumptions could be wrong. This idea is not dissimilar from the

idea of superposition, in which two contradictory states can exist simultaneously.

This was the starting point of my project.

* * *

In filmmaker Hito Steyerl's essay "Missing People: Entanglement, Superposition, and Exhumation as Sites of Indeterminacy,"¹ she writes of instances in which paradoxical systems of identification lead to conflicting resolutions in contexts of justice. In allowing us to understand such contradictions of a missing person's labeling as alive until found or the Church's position on the state of unbaptized children, Steyerl familiarizes us with the well known experiment of the cat in the box conducted by physicist Erwin Schrödinger. Steyerl explains that this "experiment boldly replaced mutual exclusivity with an impossible coexistence," which allowed me to accept the paradoxical nature of my own grief.

Steyerl argues that the greater implications of Schrödinger's experiment leaves many similar hypotheticals stuck in states of unresolved limbos that can not be broken until observation. Until there is eye witness, both cats in the box exist, a person's states of being as alive and dead both exist, and all of the clothes my sister-in-law could have been wearing under the sheet in the mortuary exist.

Upon observation, one of the determined outcomes becomes true. But even still, seeing my sister in law's ashes in her urn with my own eyes provided me with no closure in her material disappearance. It

¹Steyerl, Hito. "Missing People: Entanglement, Superposition, and Exhumation as Sites of Indeterminacy." Essay. In *The Wretched of the Screen*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013.

felt like the incorrect outcome of my experienced indeterminacy was present.

It prompted me to turn toward experimentation and making to answer the question: "How can I create negotiations with reality similar to those present in grief?"

* * *

I began iterating structures that created a sense of unmoved potentiality and unassuredness that I felt in my own struggle in understanding death.

Cairns, or balanced stacks of stones and rocks, are historically created as trail markers and sites of burial or memorial.

I have spent much time in the desert this past year. The desert was where I first met Heidi on a road trip my friends and I had taken throughout the southwestern United States. She and my brother lived together in Tucson, Arizona.

When I visited them, we'd often take hikes together to see the sunset. Along the paths were monumental structures of balanced stones, giant rocks stacked on top of each other that possessed immense potential energy.

In witnessing these moments, I was in a state of tension as I waited for what I was taught to believe should happen to happen – that those rocks would give way to the winds and fall down the cliff side. This proved to me that potential can be enough to have an impact.

I came back from trips to the desert inspired to recreate the delicate, natural



moments of entropy I witnessed. It is my instinct coming from years of learning two-dimensional, communication design to strive for the minimal and the organized. In transitioning into much more sculptural and three-dimensional work, I was ready to unlearn this intuition. I grew frustrated that it felt so ingrained in me to subconsciously restrain from messiness and that I thought so rigidly. I had to learn to surrender to gravity, to the basic laws present in my reality. It was the relationship to that certainty that felt able to be played with in the cairns within my work.

* * *

Entropy is the measurement of disorder. It is the trend over time for structure to unravel. I have struggled to comprehend how momentous force can come to an abrupt ending, and I am learning that entropic transformations are not always slow and gradual.

Rudolf Arnheim's writing *Entropy and Art*² has expanded my understanding of the concepts of tension, potentiality, and disorder as it relates to art and design.

From the onset, the concept of entropy is analyzed and questioned against the human instinct to work towards creating simple configurations of systems. Referencing his own investigation on the matter, Arnheim states "the striving toward tension reduction is, according to Freud, not only dominant but indeed the only genuinely primary tendency of the organism," an instinct that put to rest my resistance toward the orderly.

In sculpture, installations, and accumulations of objects, Arnheim posits that max-

imum entropy can be achieved in arranging matter "according to the simplest, most balanced structure available to a system," which in this case gives my cairns structures greater potential for disorder to occur.

At this point, the small stacks of stones I was creating did not seem like enough. They needed to be larger, taller, contain more mass, and possess more potential within them. Their materiality needed to be considered as well.

I began to collect found materials for my structures. I started by gathering large rocks from walks I took around Ann Arbor neighborhoods and trails. I slowly began to grab rocks I found in parking lots and, in thinking about creating form representative in the destruction of a larger structure, I also began to take bricks, cinder-blocks, and chunks of concrete from construction sites.

* * *

When I was a kid, at a daycare I went to we would make small, statuesque ghosts every halloween time. We would take squares of cheese cloth and dunk them in a bowl filled with Elmer's glue. The cloth would be wrung out, stretched out, and draped over an upside-down styro-foam cup with a small ball on the top and two sticks pierced into the sides for arms. The fabric would harden, and we would take out the cup to create the figure of a ghost that was white and flowy, yet translucent between the holes in the cloth's mesh.

Remembering the ghosts of my childhood, I began experimenting with casting

²Arnheim, Rudolf. *Entropie und Kunst: Ein Versuch über Unordnung und Ordnung*. Köln: Dumont, 1996.



solution of wheat paste, and drape it over stacked collections of rock and rubble. Once dry, I would remove the fabric form's contents, leaving only a hollow shell of the cairns that were underneath.

While casting these artifacts which I considered memorials, I was thinking about a recent trip taken to the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. There, I saw a piece titled *A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco*, a sprawling installation by artist Marc Swanson. Among a collection of sculptural collages of white deer castings, tree limbs, fringe, mirrors, and yarn-woven spider webs, was plastered fabric that was draped in fashions that created ripples that were true to the fall of the material. It honored its malleable integrity, and in moments its sheerness could be picked up against the space's sparse lighting. It was a small reminder that there was nothing else holding up the fabric. It was mystical and magic.

Taking from these moments, I lit the insides of the fabric shells I created to offer glimpses of the emptiness. The slow and rhythmic pulse of candle light highlights small moments of absence within the muslin structures, while also highlighting spaces where the light has chance to escape.

Grief offers only figments and apparitions of what used to be large visual weight, nothing tangible into which you can sink your hands or teeth. The negative space of someone after their gone is hard to recognize and acknowledge as positive, even beyond moments under ambiguous sheets and especially when there is no indication at all.



Mark Swanson. A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco, 2021.

There are moments when you can almost peek through the veil that separates our realities – when for a second you think that there is still a probability that the cat is alive after the box has already been opened to reveal a corpse – but I get disheartened when I find them to no avail.

* * *

The work of artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres communicates with absence in similar ways.

In her essay “subversive beauty: new modes of contestation,”³ bell hooks identifies Gonzales-Torres as an artist who employs “the passion of remembrance that serves as a catalyst urging on the will to create.” I believe that in working with the guidance of the memory of Heidi that I am doing the same.

hooks calls to mind the rare instances in which work “challenges us to see and acknowledge in public space all that we have been encouraged to reveal only in private,” such as our grief, our vulnerabilities, and our sacred spaces. She emphasizes that across Gonzales-Torres’ practice, there is inclusion of the overlooked and often concealed.

A work of his that stands out to me in particular is his series of billboards around New York City that display a photograph of an empty bed. It is an image that makes intensely present a moment of private absence. In witnessing the work herself, hooks finds that the “individual looking into that vacant space must come to terms with what is not there” on their own accord. It is not work that tells you

³hooks, bell. “subversive beauty: new modes of contestation.” Essay. In *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New York, New York: New Press, 1998.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres. "Untitled" (billboard of an empty bed), 1991.



Photograph of Heidi's side of the bed, 2022.

what to think of it, or who to put in its space.

hooks' contemplation on the work of Gonzalez-Torres prompted my own reflection on the ways in which absence has been at the center of my documentation of grief throughout my travels, and on the ways in which my own grief can allow me to make space for others to insert theirs into my work.

Before becoming familiar with Gonzalez-Torres' work, I happened to take a picture of the side of a bed my sister left empty. Absence in such an intimate space is a haunting site to witness in person. It was a space that I felt I could not enter, and in that moment there existed both an emotional and physical barrier to entry. I think this barrier often exists within ourselves in allowing us to spend time with our grief as well.

This picture as well as a collection of others taken on film and self-developed were cyanotyped on paper, ripped, and wheat pasted in fragments onto the individual rocks and blocks apart of the cairns.

* * *

I lost a lot of myself this past year. There were points in which I had a severely disoriented relationship with reality. I did not know how to access the spaces and emotions that for so long I was taught not to touch. I did not know where to begin when attempting to properly process my grief and the traumas it reinvented into the forefront of my psyche.

I took time off in the Fall semester to

enroll in a partial hospitalization program through University of Michigan Medicine. The two and a half weeks were pivotal. They allowed me to do the necessary work to begin healing and continue going forward.

As a way to honor this period of my grief journey, I pulped the dozens of paper handouts I received everyday of the program and the discharge forms I was given upon leaving the hospital. Along with dried flowers and wheat paste, I blended the mixture and pressed them in a silicon mold of a prickly pear cactus petal I brought back from my last trip to Arizona.

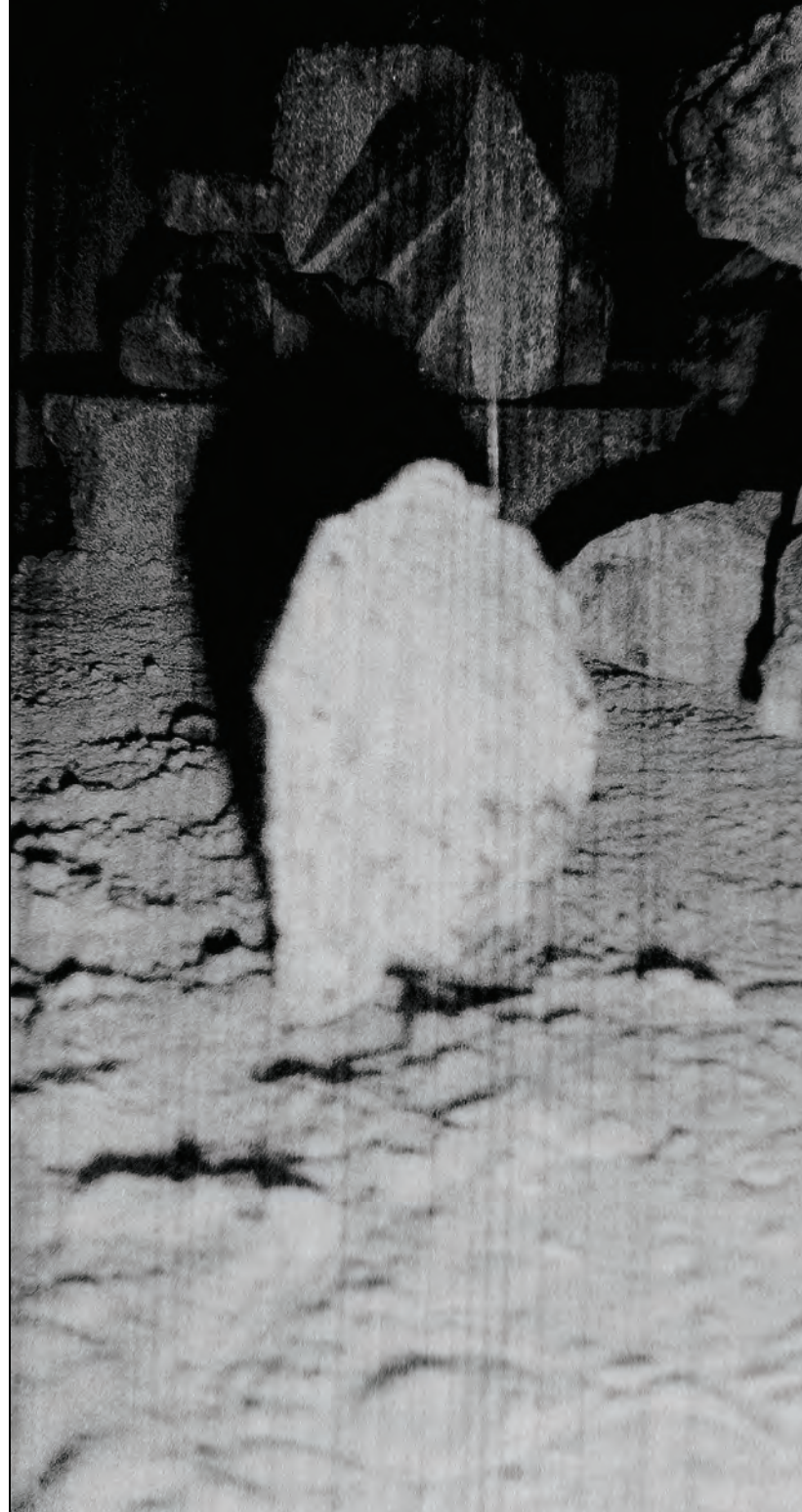
These paper petals honor the path of overcoming what I once believed needed to be left untouched.

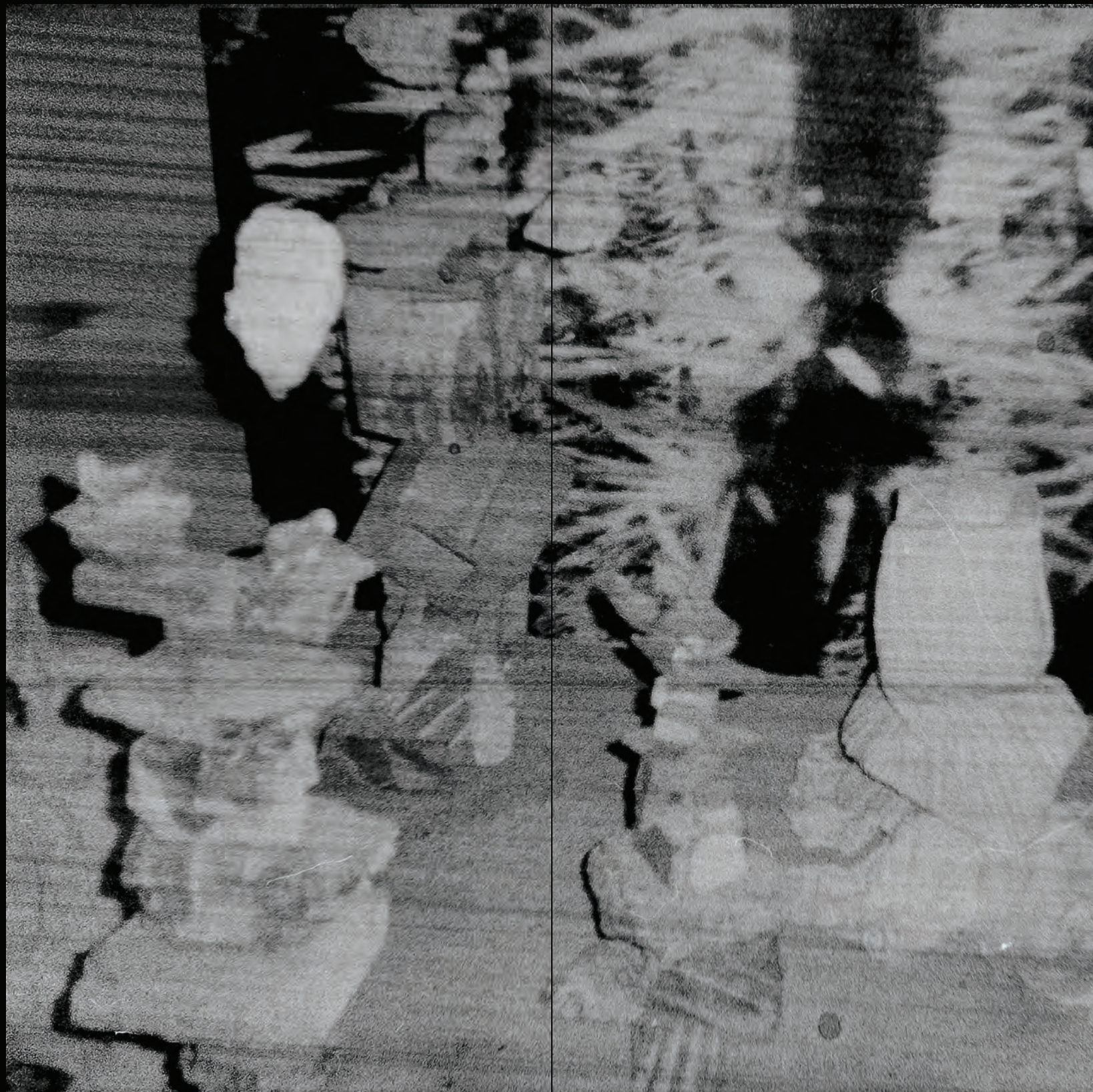
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This installation tells the story of my grief and the path of learning how to handle it, allowing myself to undergo it, and finding ways to honor it. It is full of tension and potential energy, moments of high entropy and indeterminacy, and a little bit of innocent magic, too.

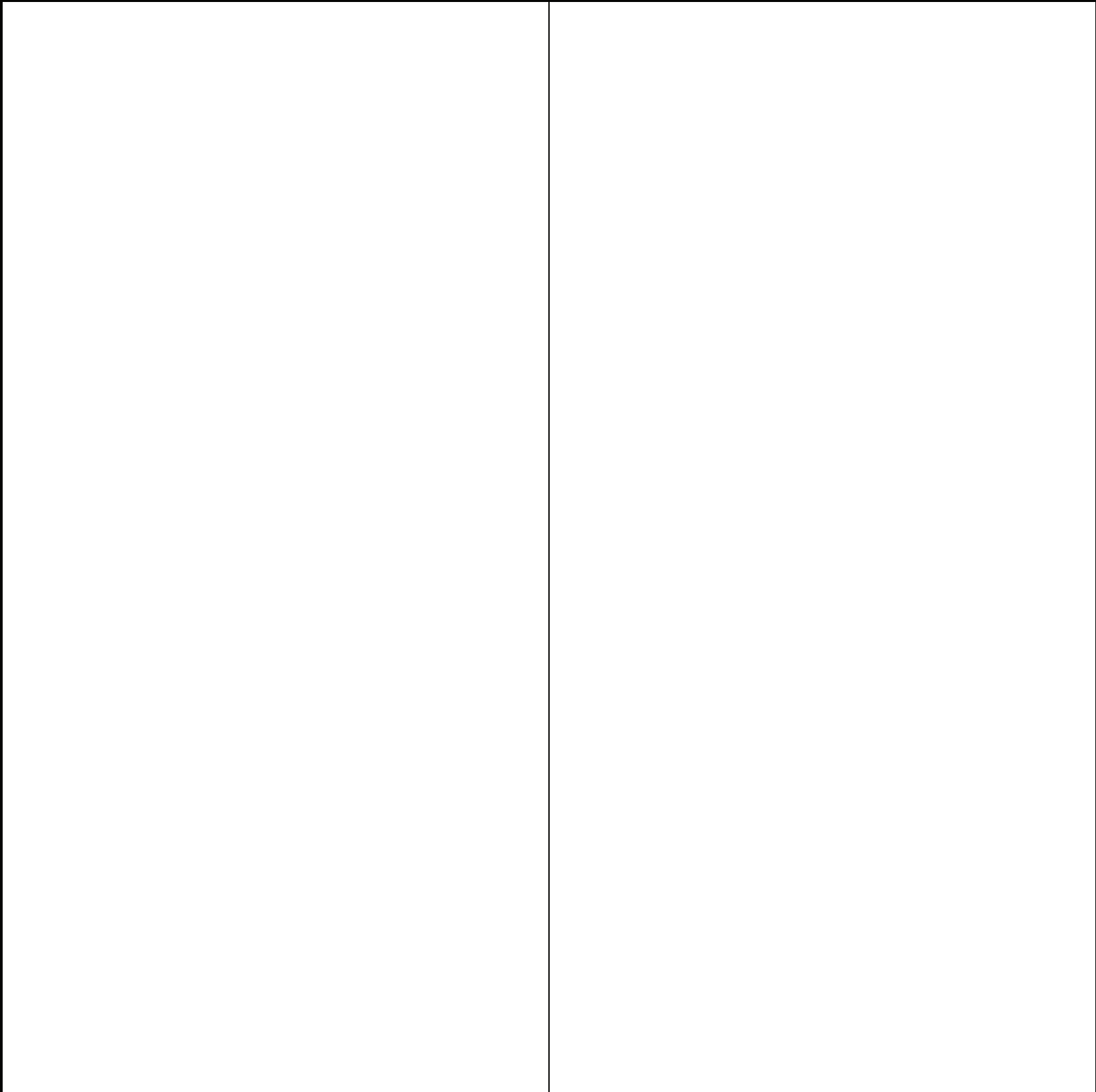
I hope to be able to show this piece in more places in the future, and use it as example in pursuing artist residencies.

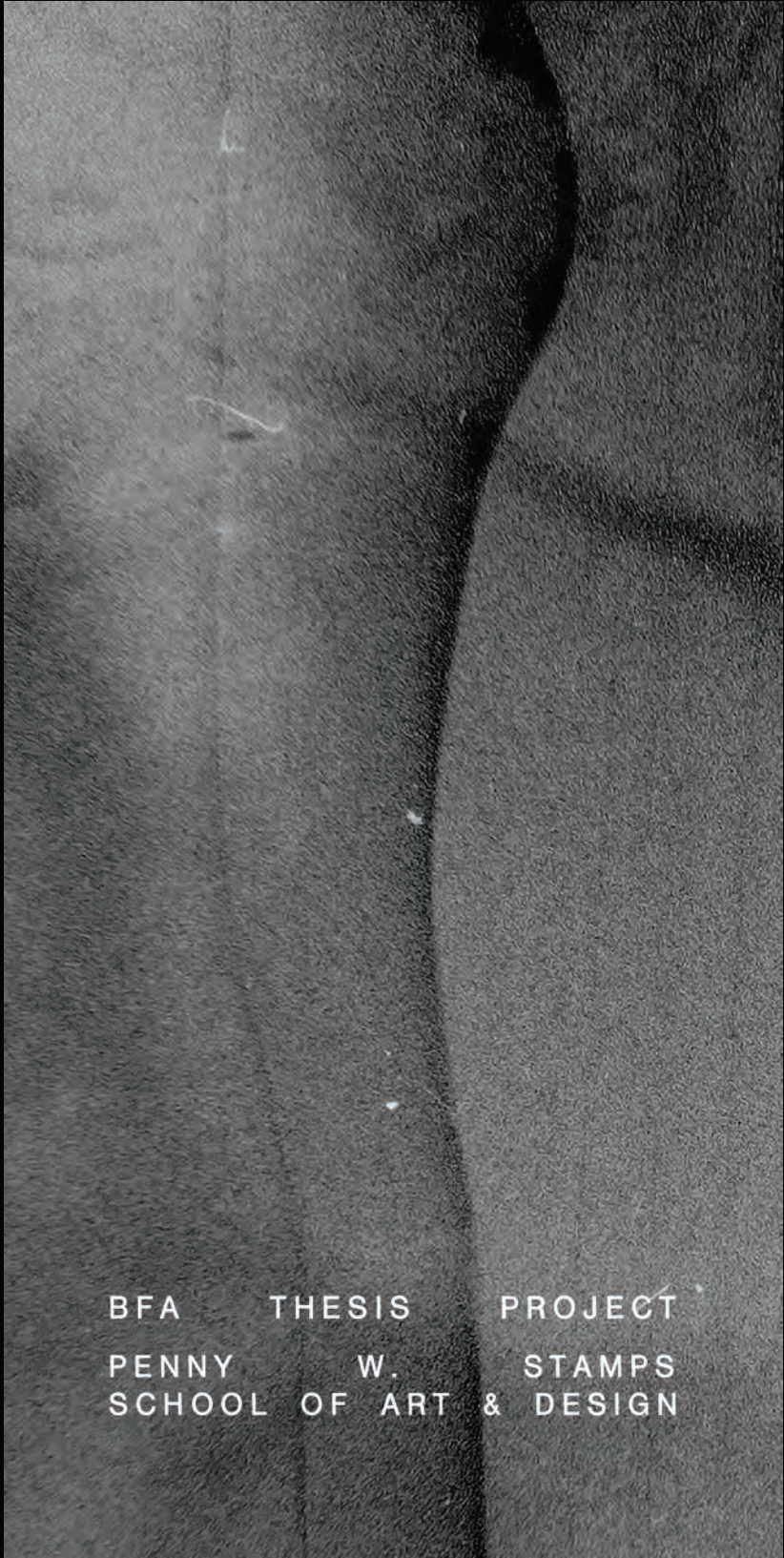
For Heidi.











BFA THESIS PROJECT
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