

**SURRENDERING TO THE COOLNESS  
AND THE PULL OF MY FINGERS**  
by Elisabeth H. Strunk

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## // Abstract //

This thesis weaves together personal narrative and scholarly analysis of autobiography and pain. Judith Butler's book entitled, Gender Trouble was used to look at and try to understand the performative body and in the analysis of autobiography within artwork. While Butler restricts her argument to heteronormativity, I have expanded upon that to consider the role of performativity and authority within autobiography and photography. One of the important tensions within my imagery is the question of truth. Is the body you are viewing truly in pain or do I simply look like I am performing pain. When, if ever, is something authentic? And if the world is based solely on perception, then how do we all co-exist?

Elaine Scarry tackles this problem of conveying pain in her book, The Body In Pain: Making and Un-making Culture. Scarry believes pain to be a shared cultural phenomenon, but critiques the way it is shared by saying that "having pain is to have certainty and hearing about pain is to have doubt." In my experience, embracing pain, or even just acknowledging its existence is an exercise in deep empathy. This non-judgemental empathy or cognitive knowledge building of another situation is difficult and it is rare and undervalued as a social skill. Scarry goes on to talk about the importance of objects to this world of empathy. "Because each person's made objects now inhabit the share-able external space outside her own body accessible to all, the objects she makes can be coupled with those objects made by the second, and the third, and so the large imagined town gets made." I see myself adding to the work that came before me, adding to the imagined town.

I see the need for a public discourse and identity based on expressed emotion. If empathy were more prevalent in our society, imagine the difference it could make. Imagine the town. "Through tools and acts of making human beings become implicated in each others sentience."

This work is dedicated to my husband Matthew  
who was with me every step of the way.



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## //Acknowledgments //

I'd like to thank the many people who have helped me through these three years, because after all, this document and body of work exists because of all of the images, ideas and experiments I was able to generate while in this program.

First, my thesis committee: Patricia Olynyk, the chair of my committee has been nothing short of an amazingly supportive mentor, friend and fellow artist. Who knows if I would have made it to graduation without her well intentioned threats and late night phone calls to check up on me, making sure I wasn't rotting in my studio. Anne Mondro was key in helping me experiment with materials and with the finished installation design and exhibition. Julie Ellison has supported me as my outside advisor for almost two years now and I'm incredibly grateful for all of her theory suggestions, her editing and support of my ideas and my writing and her help with putting together presentations. And finally Ruth Behar, who was key in my growth as a writer, expanding the idea of academic writing to include different genres and perspectives.

Joanne Leonard was my advisor for my Certificate in Women's Studies, which I completed just this past month and the dialogue, creativity and rigor I gained from working with her and from the Women's Studies community was instrumental in this culmination of my learning. Many faculty in the school of art and design took time out of their busy schedules to meet with me despite the fact that I was not technically their student, all of them have influenced my work, through their helpful conversations and critiques that pushed me to think about art and making in different ways.

I'd like to thank Bryan Rogers, the dean of the school of art and design for creating the connections within other schools, and strongly encouraging robust interdisciplinary conversations, for fighting the good fight to get Creative Work accredited within the academy and for all of the amazing opportunities this program afforded.

I also had help outside of the art school; Wally Meyers provided me with a great space wherein the final exhibition was installed and The Institute For Research on Women and Gender helped in funding my creative work.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family, we always seem to leave our family to the end, perhaps it's because we can trample all over them for quite some time and they still love us, or maybe we just save the best for last. My husband, Matt, whose love and support made my experience in graduate school possible. My parents, my mom and my parents in-law and my father, who I'm sure would have loved to have seen this work.

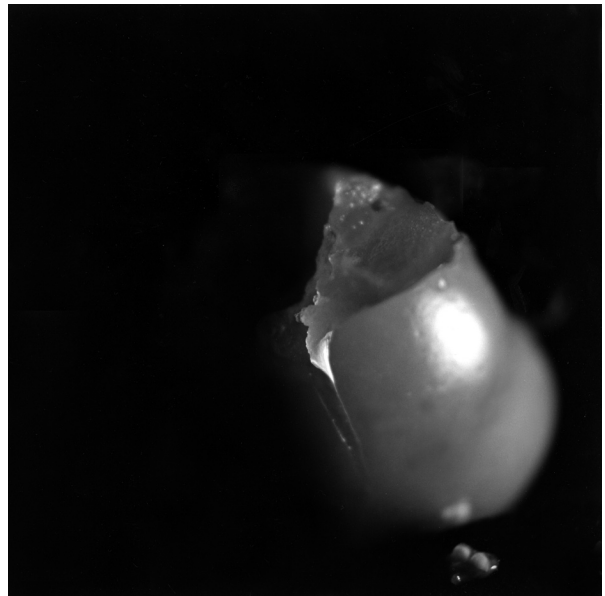
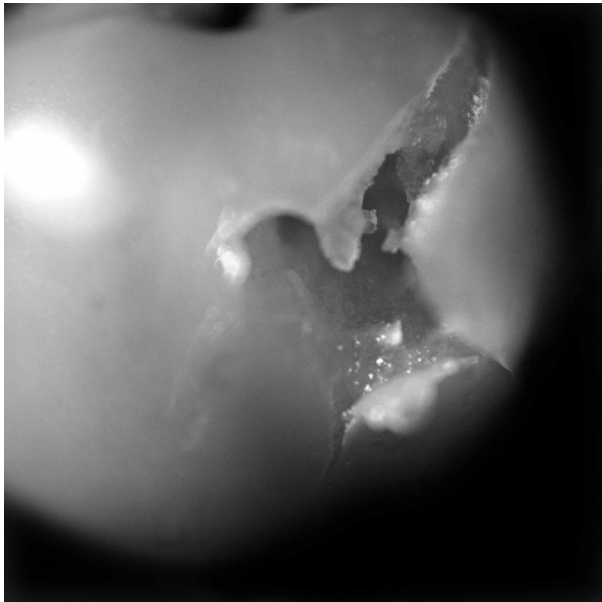
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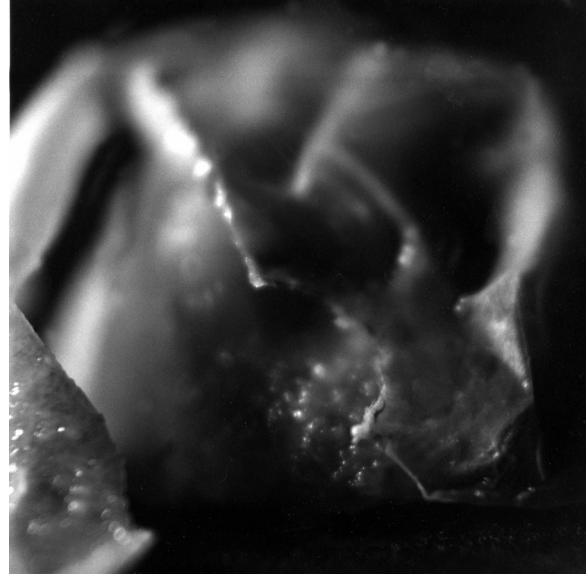
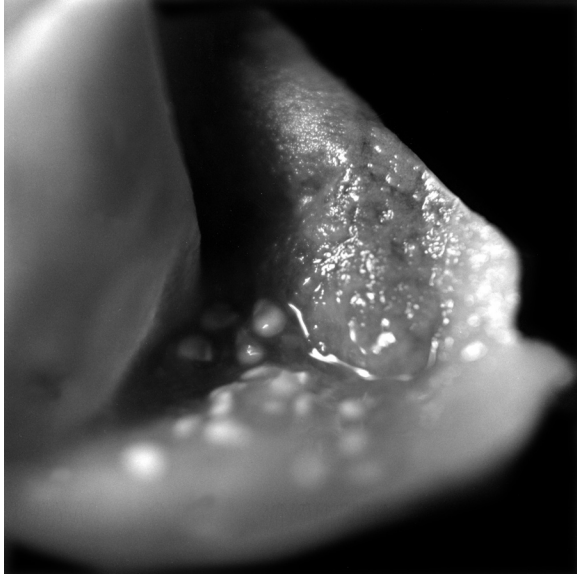
## **//Introduction: Process//**

Stare. It is the way to educate your eye, and more. Stare, pry, listen, and eavesdrop.  
Die knowing something. You are not here long.  
-Walker Evans.

Every time I scratch off one layer I find five more underneath, to me this is the vital life energy of artwork, of being an artist: ideas are neverending, and work, to some extent, is never finished.

My life in graduate school started out somewhat tumultuously with some mutilated fruit. After my father was killed I lost all confidence that what I had been doing when I applied to graduate school was still important. Who needs portraiture or feminist theory when my whole world (and arguably the world at large) was in crisis? Sometimes artists have to work with their intuition, sometimes they work with their insight, sometimes they don't know what the hell they're doing, so they just begin to make. I began graduate school with mutilating and making images of fruit.





I saw these images as self-portraits, but they were, on more than one occasion, seen as abstract Edward Westin-like formal experiments in photography. This was not my goal, so I eventually abandoned the fruit

In contemplating a more direct approach, Patricia Olynyk advised me to go directly to the source. I decided the source of my content was, at the time, wrecked automobiles. So I traded my traditional still-life photography of mutilated fruit in for altered broken car parts and an attempt at multi-media installation.

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In September of my second year the man who killed my father was put on trial and I was taking Blurred Genres with Professor Ruth Behar. One of the books we read was Jamaica Kincaid's My Brother. This book reached me in a way that made me understand grief differently but more importantly, it helped me to understand "process" differently. "When I was young, younger than I am now, I started to write about my own life and I came to see that this act saved my life. When I heard about my brother's illness and his dying, I knew, instinctively, that to understand it or to make an

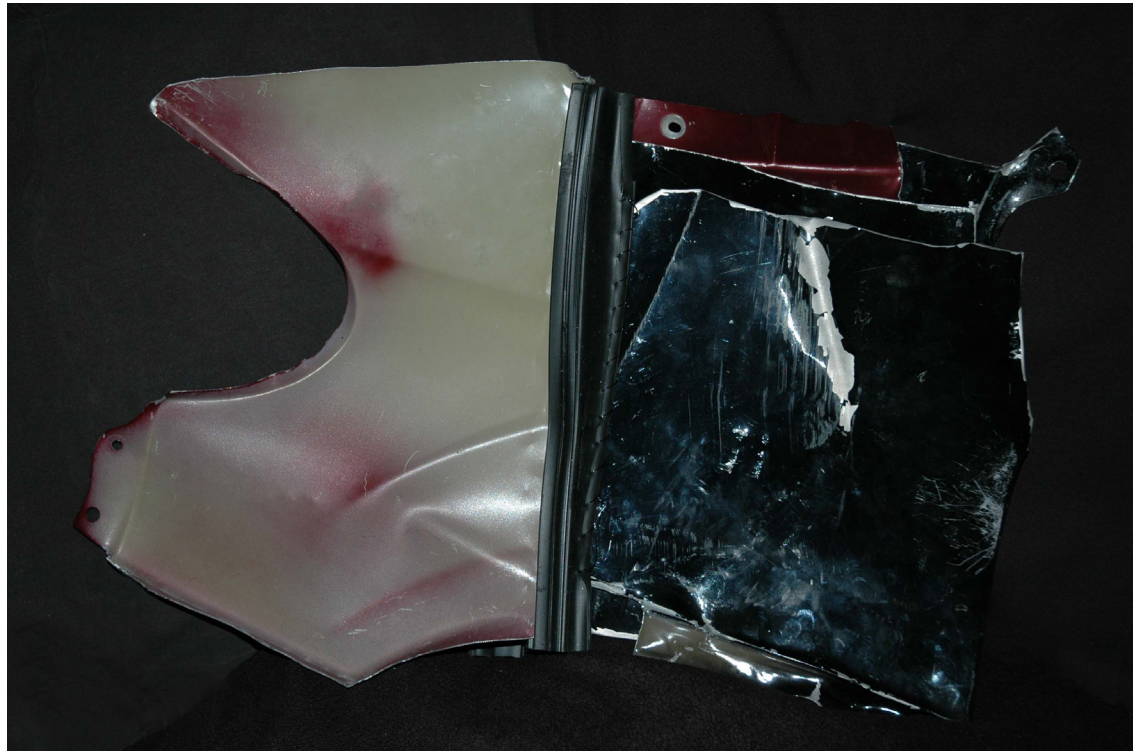
attempt at understanding his dying, and not to die with him, I would write about it". IT was the clue that Jamaica Kincaid gave me. The most obvious IT at this time halfway through my time at Michigan was the crash and the place where my father lost his life. So I started on the outside and worked my way I inward.

After the trial was over I began to collect and bring to my studio pieces of wrecked cars from auto-body shops. For a while I just sat amongst the wreckage. People would ask me why I needed these things. I couldn't come up with any theoretical or highly conceptual desire for these rotting objects even though at times I tried to proffer some academic reasoning. In many ways they were just an extension of the work with fruit, but I was getting closer. Finally, when I had sat amongst the wreckage long enough and given myself permission to move away from the medium I am most comfortable with, photography, I picked up the heavy electric tin snips with a small wire for a safety notch and began hacking away.

I merged writing and art, creating a book out of jagged and torn metal: a book of wreckage that told the story, not primarily with words, but with the look and feel of all the broken pieces bound neatly together. I used text from my father's death certificate and wove together fragments of sentences on fragments of car parts.

When the death certificate came out too cold and removed, I started searching for poetry that might better express my sentiments. I took metal stamps and started stamping *The Well of Grief* by David Whyte into a single sheet of torn metal.

Instinctively I used my literary world to help me enter my visual world. Sid Smith would refer to the style of Life Narrative I sometimes use as "Scriptotherapy" in her book [Reading Autobiography](#).







“Scriptotherapy is a term proposed by Suzette Henke to signal the ways in which autobiographical writing functions as a mode of self-healing. Scriptotherapy includes the processes of both ‘writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of the therapeutic re-enactment’”. I’m not sure my work and what I do with my autobiographical experiences would fall directly into this form of Life Narrative, but I can see where the critic would move directly to the narcissistic therapy disregarding the implications of larger societal structures at work within the exploration of my own experiences.

Eventually I began surrounding myself with my version of the crash that killed my father. I made the photographs I took at the site of my father’s death and made them life size, setting the scale of my experiences in the actual world and not in the miniaturized world of simulacra.



THE WALL OF DEATH

THOSE WHO WILL NOT SLIP BEYOND THE  
THE WALL OF DEATH IS THE WALL OF DEATH

THE WALL OF DEATH IS THE WALL OF DEATH  
THE WALL OF DEATH IS THE WALL OF DEATH

WILL NEVER KNOW  
THE WALL OF DEATH WITH US TODAY  
THE WALL OF DEATH IS THE WALL OF DEATH

NOR FIND IN THE DARKNESS  
THE WALL OF DEATH IS THE WALL OF DEATH  
THE WALL OF DEATH IS THE WALL OF DEATH

The final installation took the form of altered automobile parts hanging on a wall opposite the enlarged photographs and surrounding by wrecked automobile parts on scattered on the floor.

I had a piece of cloth with my father's death certificate printed on it hanging out of a broken airbag

I had created a place — a site for mourning.

— — — — —  
“Can we see your exhibition?”

“Um. Sure. I guess. But it isn't like anything I've done before.”

*The last thing I want to hear is, ‘wow, this is different!’. I wish they understood that there was a reason I didn't invite the family to this show. If my dad were here he would tell me that I wasn't being generous enough. ‘People sometimes surprise you if you're willing to give them the chance’, he always said. So we piled into my car and we drove up to the art school at 7:24 on a Friday night. The building was dark, with the glow of the streetlight illuminating the blinking red light on the card reader next to the door. I slid my UMich I.D. through the reader and the green button stopped the blinking of the red. We opened the doors and I*









*led them down the hallway, up the stairs and into the gallery without saying much at all. I didn't know what to say. The key sunk roughly into the lock and clicked loudly as I turned it clockwise and pushed the L-shaped brass handle down. We went into the dark space. I walked straight through the center of the room to the light switches. I pushed them all up and the room sprang to life.*

*"My work is behind that wall." I pointed to the far right hand corner of the gallery. They walked over and around the wall covered in the photographs of a classmate. I stood frozen where I was.*

*"What did you think?" I asked on our way home. Everyone had been relatively quiet about the artwork up until this point.*

*"It really was different. I don't think I could have imagined you doing something so far away from photography. Do you think you'll ever do photography again?"*

*Interesting. Mental note, my aunt clearly wants me to do photographs again and didn't like the work at all, or perhaps she simply wasn't ready to let in what I had just let out.*

*"You know." My uncle always started his sentences with a quick Kentucky 'You know?' "I wasn't quite sure what to do in the beginning, but as I slowly walked around the gallery looking at all the objects you had hanging on the wall it made me think of your father, but it also made me think of things I haven't thought about in a very long time."*

*His marine and police officer past popped into my head and I wondered if it was some tragedy that my art made him think of. The Hollywood versions of his buddy face down in the mud in some jungle far away from the blue mountains of Kentucky sparked to life in my imagination. I had never been to war, but I thought that people who went to war might understand what I had just done.*

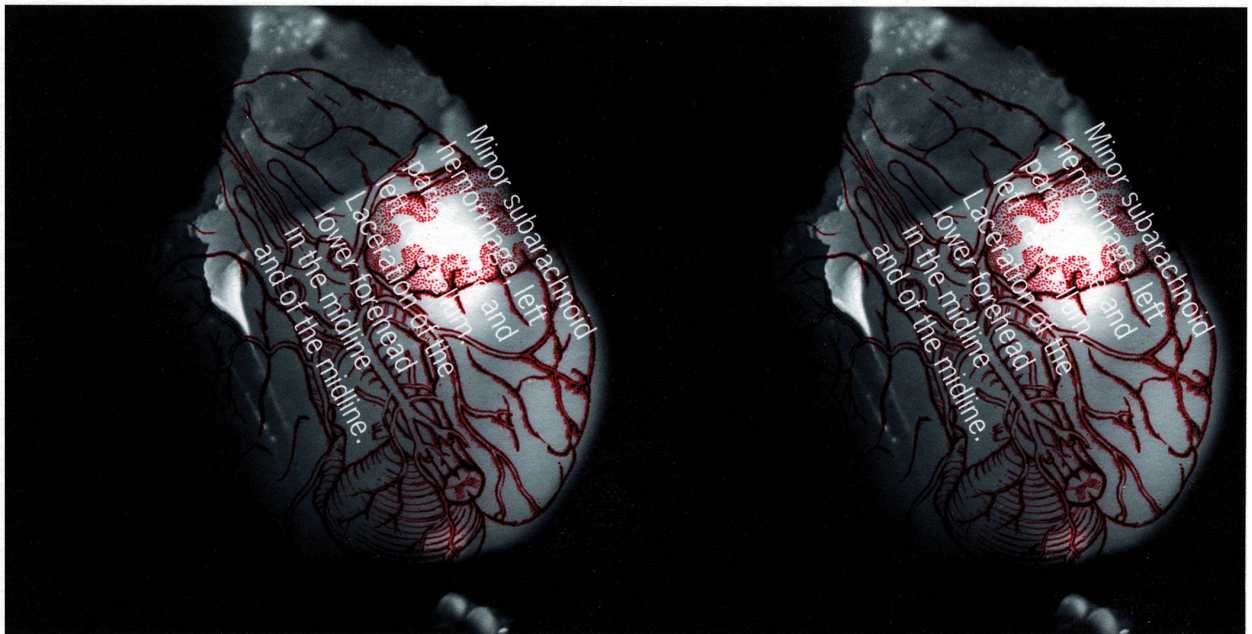
*"Now you just have to focus on feeling better."*

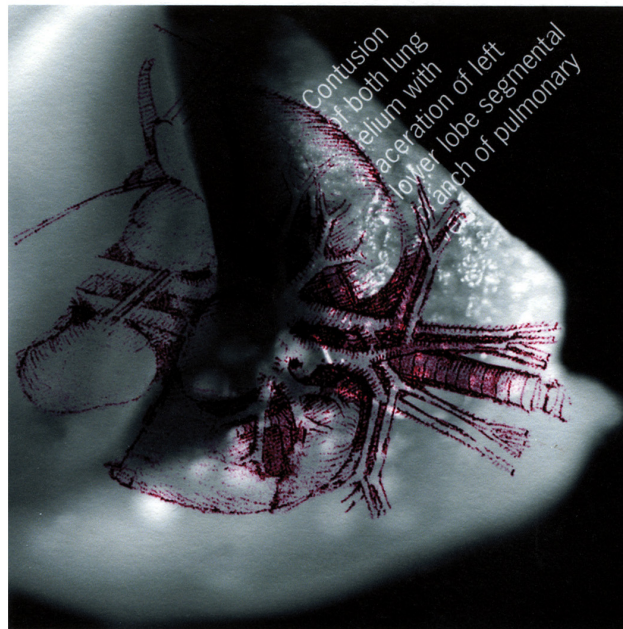
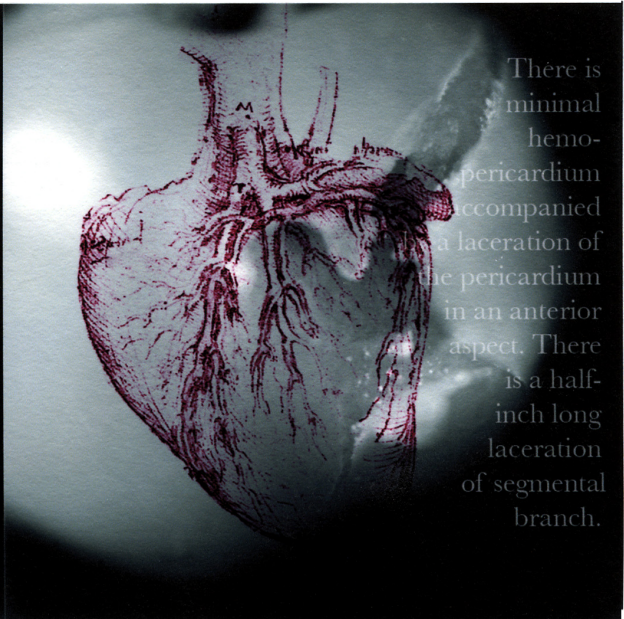
*I waited for more comments, but we were done talking.*

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A few projects later I found myself returning to the mutilated fruit. I took those abstract images and text from the autopsy report and built a layered image with schematics of internal organs finally merging my fathers experience with my own. I used a stereoscope to view these cards, isolating the viewer and making a two dimensional piece read as three dimensional to the viewer thus enabling access through vision that is set in a space, allowing the viewer the comfort and access of three dimensions. When I finished these images I felt like I was whispering my sadness into the ear of a willing participant in my story: breathing out the sorrow that comes with tragic moments in life.

During a critique of this work, it was pointed out by Professor Dennis Miller that I was always using other people's words and that perhaps it was time to use my own words. Thinking back, I hadn't realized how heavily I had been relying on the words of others and my own original objects to express the rage, the grief, the sadness and the physical heaviness I had been cycling through. In the installation I used David Whyte's poem. I used the death certificate in the metal book and now I was using text from the autopsy report in the stereoscope images. There is safety in the words of others abstractly applied to one's own situation.









Set up against a new challenge, I began writing the story of the day before and the day of the accident. I laid the story out in a way that left it to visually fall apart as the narrative takes shape and my life crumbles within it through typography and physical substance. The paper was gradually sanded down until all that was left was a pile of fibers. The story comes out of a suitcase and falls apart into compartment as the text fluctuates between prose, poetry and dialogue. The type begins to reduce itself as I flow in and out of poetry and prose and finally to simple poetry and fragmented thought at the end.





Autobiography is a good place for any author or artist to start creating. We are our experiences. And what do we know if we don't know our own experiences? Things began moving faster as I understood the importance of writing in my artwork and the importance of visual narrative and autobiographical elements within my art-making process.

This desire to understand and forge relationships of compassion and empathy with the viewer, is a thread that continues to weave its way through my artwork today. The idea for my thesis stems directly from the content of these past projects and builds directly from the visual explorations. The summer I began my official thesis research I was awarded a Community of Scholars Fellowship through the Institute for Research on Women and Gender. This generous stipend allowed me to engage in a discourse on gender with other very talented and multi-disciplined peers. I spent my summer thinking about and interviewing women about safety. Some of the questions I asked were: At what age did you feel a transfer or change in the way in which you felt safe? Can you describe those changes to me? How did it affect the way you thought about the world? How did it affect your body physically? How did it affect your interaction within world? Overall can you tell me how you responded to these changes?

As I looked at my past works, I realized how important structures have become to the creation and dissemination of my work and how this ties into my curiosity about safety and pain. My mother likes to tell the story of when I was a child and I liked to be covered in very heavy blankets despite the fact that I didn't need them for warmth. There was this chubby child sweating away, but sleeping peacefully. Everyone thought she was crazy for leaving the blankets on, in fact my grandfather always tried to take them off (assuming he knew better than my mother) and inevitably, without my covers I would wake up and cry. For anyone who has children, you can imagine how my mother felt and why she continues to tell this story to this day. However, my point is that structures provide safety. They

provide a system under which we can operate. They are the heavy blankets on a small child. These blankets are important as long as those using them are aware and continuously self-reflexive regarding their role in the process and final product. Over the past three years I've begun making books, things that hold my content or even the actual physical artwork. I have separated the viewer from my work by using optical devices and then given them the image in a more intense multi-dimensional way. I created a tension with my obvious desire to tell and my other inclination to hold back, to make it difficult to see or touch.

Moving through this idea of safety, of secondary seeing and storage and how unsafe I felt suddenly in the world without my father's physical presence, in a society where automobiles are the major form of transportation, I realized that the body and the mind are inexorably connected and often times a physical event corresponded with an emotional and/or psychic event and vice versa. I began to look at the connections between the mind and the body, the inside and the outside and pain vs. pleasure, compressing each polarity into a simultaneous existence. The questions about safety turned into questions about pain. What does a body in pain look like? Where does that pain originate, the mind or the body? Can emotional pain be worn on the body similarly to physical pain?

Visually I use portraiture of myself as the core imagery of this work with subsequent collage and text to tell a larger complex narrative about pain. The body has a distinctive boundary; it's outer membrane or skin. This effectively keeps the outside from entering the inside, with disruptions of orifices leading to the interior. However, the mind exists on a more metaphysical or quantum level where the boundaries seem to be endless. Connecting the mind to the body seems to free the body from it's boundaries while constraining the mind to the body, thus creating a symbiotic coexistence.

This thesis moves from an introduction of process and autobiographical events to an analysis and

creative exploration of autobiography, through the necessity and characteristics of empathy, to the exploration of emotional and physical pain. Each chapter is articulated through a feminist lens, bringing the theories of Judith Butler, Sid Smith & Julia Watson, Elaine Scarry, Mary Duffy and Amelia Jones to bear on the issues at hand. In addition, James Elkins adds an art historicist's perspective to the body in pain.

Elaine Scarry tackles this problem of conveying pain in her book, The Body In Pain: Making and Un-making Culture. Scarry believes pain to be a shared cultural phenomenon, but critiques the way it is shared by saying that "having pain is to have certainty and hearing about pain is to have doubt." In my experience, embracing pain, or even just acknowledging its existence is an exercise in deep empathy. This non-judgemental empathy is rare and undervalued as a social skill. Scarry goes on to talk about the importance of objects to this world of empathy. "Because each person's made objects now inhabit the shareable external space outside her own body accessible to all, the objects she makes can be coupled with those objects made by the second, and the third, and so the large imagined town gets made." I suppose I see myself adding to the work that came before me, adding to the imagined town.

## //Part I:/Autobiography/Truth/Positionality//

**Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography...  
For autobio-graphy has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the  
continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of space, of moments and discontinuities.**  
- Walter Benjamin

Are artists who display the most intimate details of their lives for public scrutiny  
simply egomaniacs? How much do we, the audience, project ourselves onto their revelations?  
Do we see them as they really are ... or as we are?  
-Barbara Steiner, Jun Yang

*The gallery floor is cold grey cement. I hold my breath and fidget while racking my brain for a suitable answer to the question. My tailbone hits the surface and stops my rocking back and forth. I let my cheeks deflate with a slight groan.*

*“Well? What part of this story is yours?” I start to explain my work, something most visual artists try to avoid at all costs. (Unless of course you’re being paid to do so, and then, well, I guess we all have our price).*

*“The first layer are photographs taken at the sight where my father was killed. The second layer is an aeronautical map of Germany where we lived and I was born. The third layer are stop signs that signify the road accident where my father was killed.”*

*“Are those details important?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“How would I know any of that if you weren’t sitting here with me? Where is your voice in this story? How am I supposed to collect the information and create my own experience if the information is so subtle? What exactly do you want me to walk away from this piece knowing or feeling?”*

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*Did I push my tailbone into the cement on purpose? If I did, can you really blame me? I’ve never met a single artist who liked being in front of the artistic firing squad, especially when the concerns and criticisms were valid. It’s always a little harder to take criticism that you know you can’t just brush off with a beer and a good night’s sleep.*

*Lying in bed, questions shoot through my mind keeping me from the little sleep I desperately need. Two AM. What is my story? Why do I want to tell the story of something so personal? Why do I need to reveal my most emotional moments? Do I feel empowered by the reveal factor in my work? How much should I reveal? What kind of information have I given the viewer? Will they see three dimensions in my two-dimensional work? Will they smell, taste and feel it in their limbs when standing just two feet away?*

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*I write my story in an effort to articulate something for which visual representation isn’t enough.*

*I am attempting to make sense of something for myself and for others. Or is it to discover some-*



thing? Like Heilbrun said, “autobiography is not the story of a life; it is the re-creation or the discovery of one.” She said, “In writing of experience, we discover what it was, and in the writing create the pattern we seem to have lived.” She said, “autobiography is a reckoning.” If experience is never shared, people will never learn by anything but doing, thus halting progress beyond one generation. I write my story because only I can know my story. I write my story because there is always something more to discover.

This is what I wrote.

My story.

The only story on my mind.

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#### HOPI AND HIGHWAY 191

*“I thought we’d leave tomorrow morning, early.”*

*That wasn’t going to go over well with Mom. She was never big on going up to the mountains with Dad. Especially not when she had to work on Monday. It was a four and a half hour trip one way, most of it on windy-two-lane roads through the mountains.*

*“Can we come back early?”*

*I knew that would be her response. And I knew he wasn’t going to like it. After all, this is his time off. Their schedules have always been something strange to witness. My mom, a teacher, works “normal” hours (all of the time), with a few weeks off in the summer. My father, a pilot, is a two-week-on, two-week-off kind of guy. This was the end of his off time, and I had spent the week watching all of the PBS specials he had taped about art and photography and talking about the future and all of its possibilities. It was great to have him all to myself, but now I was looking forward to some family time with both my parents and my sister, up in the mountains at the property my dad loved so much. I hadn’t yet had time to make a trip with him.*

*“I’m not going for the entire weekend. I have to get up and teach on Monday and you have to get ready to leave on a trip and that means Sunday night and Monday morning will be miserable. I won’t do it. Can’t we leave early tomorrow morning, I’ll take the day off and then we can come back Saturday night?”*

*“No. Absolutely not. I won’t cut my time in the mountains short. You do this to me every time.”*

*“Well if you had listened to me and bought property closer, and it didn’t take ten hours out of my weekend just to get there and back, then maybe this would be easier.”*

*The ‘if you would’ve listened to me’ argument was one my parents had all the time. One was always reminding the other about what they had missed out on or what they could be doing now if only they had listened to each other. Before I was born, at the beginning of my parents’ marriage, they were stationed at Luke Air Force Base.*

*At that time land was still inexpensive and a great investment. My mom suggested Flagstaff— a short three-hour jaunt with skiing and hiking close by. My father could have his endless sun and sweltering heat, and my mom could have the retreat of the cooler mountain climate. My father refused, insisting it would never grow, the investment that is. My mother for one reason or another acquiesced to him and they forgot about the idea of buying land for about twenty years. When I was eighteen and a freshman in college my father bought land in Alpine, this time against my mother’s wishes; but he didn’t give in. Flagstaff land was too expensive now (so that option was out) something my mother tends to remind him of. My dad thought of Alpine as the next Flagstaff. But five hours, that was hardly doable in a weekend, with traffic and work on Friday and Monday; it was really only one day away from the chaos. This didn’t seem to phase my father, whose vacation could easily creep into the work week. And so this land was a refuge for my father, a strain on my mother and a fight for my parents. Father. Mother. Parents. Three completely separate entities, one needing a partner of some sort and the others fully functional on an individual basis. This was the struggle of their marriage. Their schedule. Well, and then there is their personalities. My dad isn’t a big fan of crowds. My mom’s idea of a great holiday is a packed house with a twenty-course meal. My dad usually snuck back to his bedroom and the safety of a good quantum mechanics textbook when too many people came around. My mom could talk for hours about the interesting word she’d come across that morning and how it’s origins impacted the growth of language all over Europe. Not that they didn’t each have their moments of the opposite characteristics and I think it was their intelligence that attracted them to each other in the first place. They were both suckers for PBS and NPR. I remember my mom telling me about some crazy British comedy on PBS that they used to watch every Saturday night together. Really, I think it was the noise of people that really bothered my dad. I’d once*

looked up into the stands from the volleyball court and saw my dad with fingers in both of his ears. He just isn't a fan of having to talk over people — or to people — or drive with other people on the road — and she isn't a fan of living in the middle of nowhere. My father has Air Force Academy standards and my mom was a civilian through and through. She enjoys antique markets full of odds and ends and he wants a nice neat isle with posted signs about where things are. I often ask myself if any two people could really be married, if that was a realistic expectation to place on humans. I wondered if my two parents should be married, especially on days like today.

*“Forget it. You can either come with me or not come at all. It's up to you.”*

*I drift in and out of the verbal warfare.*

*Hoping that I'll come to rest*

*upon the mesa of comforting*

*and connected language*

*instead of stilted*

*compromises*

*and awkward*

*ultimatums.*

*“Fine. I can't come then.”*

*“Come on guys. We can work this out. Don't you think it would be fun? Wasn't the plan all along to have family time?”*

*“Your father won't compromise and I'm not going to either.”*

*“It's alright Lissa. You can come or not come. I'm going to go up there, enjoy the beautiful weather, the gorgeous trees and experience my life instead of working it away.”*

*“But I haven't seen you or Elaine all week Mom? And Dad wouldn't it be great if we all took some time together?”*

*“It would be great, but I’m not going to have your mother cut into the only time I get to spend up there. If she had her way we would never go.”*

*“That isn’t true, I go with you all the time. Just because I can’t this time I’m the bad guy.”*

*“Look it doesn’t really matter. I’m going and whoever wants to come can come.”*

*“Fine.”*

*“Fine.”*

*The seas part*

*yet no one walks*

*through the great divide.*

*It sits without guide*

*or followers*

*empty*

*What should I do? Do I go? I’ve been promising my dad forever that I would go and make photographs of The Land. He’s been planning on it and this is part of the reason I came home to visit in the first place. But then Mom and Elaine have been gone all week. I spent the whole week with him and now he’s making me choose. How could Elaine and Mom just back out all of the sudden? Sometimes I hate my family. Everything always seems so difficult. What is wrong with these people?*

*“Laine, come on, don’t you want to go?”*

*“No.”*

*“Why not?”*

*“Because I don’t want to be stuck in the car all weekend. I hate that drive and he’s being unreasonable.”*

*“Well, why don’t you come just this once. For me?”*

*“Sorry. I can’t. I absolutely won’t”*

*I retreat  
into my mind  
and down the hall  
tiled and cool.  
Each person  
sits in their  
own universe  
created in opposite  
parts of the house.  
My life, my universe  
has shifted  
and is nowhere  
in sight.  
I'm stuck.*

*I reach the kitchen and pull open the refrigerator door. I look at the "Pete's shelf" sign my dad put up earlier this morning when mom's food clutter finally got to him and he carved out another space where people were expected not to trespass. My father continually feels the all-female-world in which he lives in at home coming into direct opposition to the rules and guidelines he lives by in the almost-all-male-aeronautical world in which he works. His flight bag always has the same manual in the same place so that in case of an emergency he can reach into his bag and know exactly what book he'll come up with. This is called (as I have been told many times) "a place for everything and everything in it's place." This is just the sort of thing he always tried to instill in me which, (to his dismay,) inevitably failed. Like the time he tried to teach me my multiplication tables and was so frustrated by my seemingly foreign learning style that after finishing only one number, the number four, I was sent to a tutor. My mother, my sisters and I have our own order, our own place for everything, he just could never crack the code Assuming there is a code. Truthfully, he probably isn't entirely to blame.*

Earlier that day I walked out into the garage to ask him a question. He was out packing up a few things for the trip. Before I could get my question out he said to me,

“The day your mother dies you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to get a dumpster and throw all of this shit in it and send it away.”

“And what happens if you die before her?”

“Well, then I guess she can go and buy more shit and fill the place up.”

“Nice Dad. You know sometimes you can be a real asshole.”

I know children shouldn’t talk to their parents that way, but he needed to hear it. Not that it mattered or changed anything, but I said it anyway. Maybe it just made me feel better. Who knows. The cycle between my parents had been started long before me, and I wasn’t even sure if they spoke the same language anymore. Misinterpretation seemed to be their biggest problem. That and the smart-ass remarks that only people with a dry and brilliant wit can think of that always seem follow the miscommunication. Sifting through the leftovers wrapped in Reynolds Aluminum Foil, a few carry out cartons of Chinese food from last week (all things my mom swore she would eat for lunch the next day) and enough salad to feed a whole zoo of rabbits, (and who needs a three-pound bag of cheese?) not that I agreed with the sign, but there are points when things just become a little bit ridiculous. I finally found the clear Ziploc Tupperware with the blue lid full of carrots and closed the door on the smell of coffee grounds, Chicken Lo-Mein, and lettuce leaves. I walk over to the couch, pick up my book and fall out of the space that has become so hostile and argumentative.

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My tailbone starts to hurt from the tile on the bathroom counter. Elaine ties a clear plastic Goody hairband around her ponytail. She’s telling me about her boyfriend’s roommate who omits a faint moist-dirty-hamper odor mixed with whatever he ate last. This time in particular it happened to be garlic hummus. Apparently she got in the car to go to dinner with the dreaded parents of the boyfriend, who freak out my quiet baby sister, who has alabaster skin with tiny hamburger-bun-brown freckles that curl up and around her mouth and eyes when she smiles. She has a very low tolerance for many things, hence her refusal to go to the mountains that weekend, and her hilarious rendition of the evening’s events with Jon, his roommate and his parents. I laugh so hard, rocking back and forth on my sore tailbone, that I almost don’t notice my father standing in the doorway smiling at us.

*“What’s up?” I ask, hoping he has reconsidered his decision on going to the mountains, even though I know this would mean changing his absolute and strict pattern-pilot-like-attention to schedules and details.*

*“You girls used to giggle and laugh and play all the time when you were kids. I remember hearing you two upstairs and thinking you had friends over, but really you had just created a world of your own, with many voices and places. I miss hearing you two in here. It’s great that your home Liss. Have you decided what you’re going to do tomorrow? And Elaine can I borrow your backpack to put a few things in for the road. The blue one should work perfectly.”*

*“Dad. I think I’m going to stay here. After all, I spent the whole week doing things with you. Lunch yesterday was great. And I’ve barely gotten to see Mom or Elaine and I have to leave on Monday. I’d hate to come back with just enough time to say goodbye.”*

*“Okay, that’s fine. Some other time.”*

*A quiet  
resigned  
acceptance.*

*“Here’s the bag, Dad. Don’t get it dirty. I need it on Monday.”*

*“I won’t. Thanks, this’ll be perfect.”*

*His heels thud  
on the tile  
as he walks  
the fifteen feet  
to his bedroom  
until the sound  
is muffled by*

*the cream carpet  
and click of the  
door shutting  
in its frame.*

*I look at Elaine. She shrugs her shoulders.*

*“He has to learn that he can’t always have it his way. Besides, I don’t think he’s that upset. He’s doing what he wants to do.”*

*“Yeah, but I feel bad.”*

*“Don’t. He asked you to choose and you did. It’s not a big deal.”*

*I hop off of the counter and pull my hair back and pull the faucet to the left. Warm water drips from my hands onto the tile as I pull water up to my face and cover myself in comforting silence. After I finish my going-to-bed rituals, I tiptoe into my parents’ room and crawl onto their queen size bed, squeezing between them. I give them each a minty goodnight kiss and one giant bear hug. My dad lets out a deep breath filled with the uncomfortable grunt that signals to me that I’m not being gentle. It took me years to learn how to be gentle. I would run to my dad only to be stopped by thudding into his long runner legs that I wrapped my arms around. My head would inevitably sink into his gut. While I giggled, an Ugggh would emerge out of his mouth with a gust of air, followed by a lecture about learning to be gentle and slowing down. I sit up on my knees, resting my hands on my thighs and look at them. Twenty-eight years of who knows what. Shaking my head so that my nubby ponytail brushes the back of my neck, “You’re both crazy.” I say, smile and scoot off the bed and down the hall to my old room and my old bed with my worn comforter.*

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*Hot breath on my cheek*

*“Bye Liss. I love you.”*

*I crack my eyes open  
and feel the sleep stuck  
in the corners of my eyes.*



*My lips curl upward  
and sleepily greet him.*

*Am I twelve?*

*Twelve was good*

*twelve meant*

*life hadn't really*

*happened yet.*

*"Bye Daddy."*

*"See you Sunday night."*

*"I love you."*

*"Love you too."*

*Drifting away back*

*into the dream*

*of childhood.*

*The door closes*

*and the footsteps*

*disappear.*

*- - - -*

*The phone rang. It was about 4:00 pm. I was watching television. I unfolded my right leg from its comfortable position between my left leg and the down-filled couch cushion, stood up and went to the phone in the den.*

*"Hello?"*

*"Hey, Liss. I just wanted to let your mom know that I arrived safely. Is she around?"*

*"No, Elaine went to pick her up from school."*

*"Okay. Gosh it's beautiful here. You would love it. It's cool, the sun's out, the clouds are in the sky. It would be a great day for flying. I just met with the fire marshal out at the property and we were given a clean bill of health. Although there is a*

bark-beetle problem this year, so he gave me some helpful tips. I'm on my way into town to get some supplies. You would really love it. I'm sorry it didn't work out for you to come with me this time."

I could just imagine him on the road, driving a speedy thirty-five miles per hour, (I never understood how a fighter pilot could drive so slowly!) with his arm out the window and his left hand with the crooked pinky finger floating through the wind that flew by the small grey Civic.

"Me too. I'm sorry Dad. I didn't mean to disappoint you."

"It's okay. Some other time. I'll fly you out on America West, and we can plan the trip for just you and me."

"That sounds really great. I would love that. I miss Arizona. And I miss you."

"Me too, but that's life babydoll. You gotta grow up sometime."

"Will you come visit me soon?"

"I think I have a trip that puts me going out off of the east coast coming up, so maybe I'll swing by in a few weeks."

"That would be really great. I wish you would."

"We'll plan on it. And when I come out we'll schedule our trip up here again. You would just really love it. We can plan out the cabin. And I'll work on your mom and maybe she'll start coming up more often. You always liked to camp here didn't you?"

"Sure, we all did. I think it was just a bad weekend for Mom and Elaine."

"Yeah, I guess. Well, hon. Have a good time. I'll see you late Sunday night."

"Okay. Drive carefully. I love you."

"Love you too."

"Bye."

- - - -

The garage door rumbles. Elaine and Mom must be home. I can't believe it took them that long. What is it, almost six, holy crap.

The dogs toenails click as they meander over to the garage knowing full well who will walk through the door. Elaine and Mom come in with grocery bags full of dinner. They start to unload on the island behind me in the kitchen.

"I thought we could have steaks tonight since your Dad isn't here. Will you turn the grill on Lissa?"

*Instead of buying a car for a mid-life crisis, Dad became a vegetarian. I walk outside with Clyde following me, wagging his tail so hard it causes his thirteen year-old greying hair to sway off his body and drift quietly to the floor. I push down on the nob between my thumb and forefinger and turn counter-clockwise, one quarter of a turn. The gas lifts up through the valves and slithers up to my nose. I click the button and the flames ripple and pop into existence. I walk back in and am met by an eight-foot island covered with grocery bags, vegetables and cutting boards. Apparently tonight we will have a big dinner. I look at the clock and walk over to the couch, grab my book and sit back down. In the background the doorbell chimes. I don't live here so I hardly hear the phone or the door. My mom greets the visitor and ushers the dogs into the bathroom. As she's doing this I see the cop. That was nice he must have brought the dogs back. I wonder how they got out of the yard?*

*I turn back to my book.*

*My mother makes very distinct sounds.*

*Her exclamatory gasp  
pierces my concentration.*

*I walk warily  
into the living room.*

*My mothers thin hands  
cover her mouth  
her wedding rings slide around  
and gently kiss her cheek.*

*Elaine looks up at me*

*I sit down and ask*

*urgently  
what's going on.*

*He was pronounced.*

*Pronounced? what the...*

*No, I'm sorry, you're wrong*

*what was that you said?*

*Pronounced?*

*What on earth is that?*

*You need to use language*

*I can understand.*

*Pronounced*

*dead.*

*My eyes drift to my sister*

*whose alabaster skin*

*has become eerily green.*

*Then my mom*

*her eyes are squinting*

*her hand still shielding*

*her lips.*

*Elaine says she's*

*going to throw up.*

*I take her to the bathroom*

*we sit on the cool tile*

*she heaves.*

*I tell her everything will be fine*

*I make her remember*

*the phrase she always*

*quotes to me when*

*I can't handle life*

*except I say it wrong.*

*She has to correct me.*

*“To live is to suffer.*

*to survive is to find*

*meaning in the suffering.”*

*Sure. That. See.*

*Everything will be fine.*

*What the hell do i know?*

*My mom comes in*

*and holds her.*

*I walk out*

*he’s standing there*

*looking at me.*

*I walk past him and outside.*

*I can’t turn the handle.*

*The nob won’t turn off.*

*The propane makes me nauseous.*

*A lump of propane smelling grief*

*grows in my throat.*

*I turn around and walk back inside.*

*I can’t turn it off*

*I tell the man.*

*I’ll take care of it he says.*

*He comes back in.*

*I tell him that his job really sucks.*

*He doesn’t seem to think that’s funny.*

*Is there anyone you can call?*

*I say yes.*

*Before I go to the phone*

*I walk slowly,*

*almost float,*

*to the refrigerator.*

*The seals make a sucking*

*sound as I open the door*

*and the light flicks on.*

*There IT is.*

*That stupid sign.*

*I slowly peel it off.*

*The Scotch tape releases*

*the refrigerator*

*shelf easily and without a fight.*

*Surrendering to the coolness*

*and the pull of my fingers*

*it doesn't leave anything behind.*

*I fold it up so that the words*

*are on the inside*

*and place the piece of paper*

*in the garbage can under*

*the left side of the sink.*

*She doesn't need to see that.*

*My mother and Elaine*

*come walking together*

*slowly down the hall*

*past the front door.*

*Past the dining room.*

*Past the den.*

*They sit together on*

*the couch. Elaine*

*is talking.*

*I'm not sure what about.*

*My mom is crying.*

*I call Bob and Diane.*

*My voice cracks as I tell them.*

*They say I'm sorry,*

*we didn't hear you right.*

*I tell them with*

*dry sobs as words.*

*They say they'll be right over.*

*Everyone comes right over.*

*My house is full.*

*I have to send out an e-mail.*

*My inbox is full.*

*My head is full.*

*Full of nothing and everything.*

*I sit in the tub at 1:00AM.*

*I'm naked.*

*Diane hands me some pills*

*and a glass of water*

*I take them.*

*After a while*

*who knows how long*

*i'm water logged*

*but not from the bath.*

*I crawl into bed*

*their bed*

*next to her.*

*I put my head on his pillow*

*taking a deep breath*

*coughing out tears and*

*the smell of his aftershave.*

*At 3:00 AM I ask my mom*

*if she's still awake.*

*She responds slowly and*

*with strange calmness.*

*We talk. About what I don't know.*

*At 5:00 AM we decide to get up*

*and watch TV.*

*The aunts and uncles come*

*my husband*

*and the other sister.*

*Grandma and Grandpa.*



*People I don't know*

*walk by me when I answer the door.*

*I suppose they think I'm here to help.*

*I sit outside in the sun*

*throwing rocks from the side*

*of the flagstone*

*further, deeper into the yard.*

*We put together pictures*

*they bring back his things.*

*The backpack. It's a little dirty.*

- - - -

*I stand next to a quiet man.*

*Khaki's, a white cotton shirt and sunglasses.*

*His official court uniform.*

*He has his arms crossed and is watching.*

*His lip twitches occasionally when*

*hairs just above slip out of place.*

*I can tell by the way he looks at my mom*

*As she alertly asks questions of the other two*

*that He doesn't like to be here.*

*"Were you there?"*

*"I was. My hand*

*was on his chest."*

*I*

*look away.*

*He continues but*

*my ears fail.*

*I know the story.*

*The metal white signs*

*with black outlines*

*reflect the sun*

*stinging my eyes.*

*I shift my gaze.*

*“We just kept talking to him.*

*Telling him everything*

*was going to be okay.”*

*Knowing a hand filled with life*

*was pushing into him when*

*I thought he was alone*

*A voice was there where I wasn't.*

*The rodeo grounds are silent.*

*The excitement*

*penned into the rings*

*waiting to be released*

*the next weekend.*

*Flashes of metal pass*

*picking up the wind*

*moving my hair into my eyes.*

*The darkish grey asphalt*

*with faded no good lines*

*vanish into the horizon.*

*The sky seems an unreal blue*

*cumulus clouds disrupt the sea.*

*The brownish landscape*

*dotted with unripe plants*

*stretches off to the mountains.*

*Invisible borders*

*marking invisible paths*

*beginnings and endings*

*some just passing through.*

- - - - -

We perform a life. We perform in rituals. We layer performativity in our lives by re-making (through both visual and written media) our experiences. In analyzing the use of autobiography Judith Butler is extremely helpful in looking at and trying to understanding the performed life and the performed body. In order to grasp what she terms Performativity in her book Gender Trouble, I have explored, through writing, my role within my natal family. While she restricts her argument to hetronormativity, I have expanded upon that to consider the role of performativity and authority within autobiography and photography.

Perception is the staple of performativity. Why do we express ourselves the way we do? How are expressions of grief or roles within the family expressed as a result of our specific gender? From

a feminist perspective the inherent performativity in cultural objects (such as photographs and texts, among many others) arises from the anticipation based in dominant ideological thinking projected from the public onto the person, object or performance: “the anticipation conjures its object”. Therefore, the expectation of photographs being truthful representations produces that truth, thereby normalizing certain structures of viewing and showing work. For example, a photograph belongs in a white mat and black frame (the gallery standard) and is allowed to be seen as an actual representation of the person place or thing within the image. The mechanical interference in the creating process (the camera) creates an element of objectiveness denied to objects thought to be purely human creations: such as painting and sculpture. Because of these structural ‘truths’ about the medium of photography, the photograph, in our society performs the role of an authentic image.

Given this performance, photographs will, for the most part, be given authority as depicting something with a real and physical presence; therefore, in order to be viewed as fictional, one must first overcome the normativity of the medium and the culture in which it is viewed. Butler says that in this way gender theory expresses normativity as “that what we take to be an “internal” feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures”. In order to be ultimately honest about one's own life one must admit the possibility of a fiction constructed by the one person thought to have ultimate authority, yourself. People cannot function within a vacuum unaffected by social structures, most noticeably, the power structure of patriarchy. Our interior worlds are built up by our perceptions of the exterior world. If we tell a story from our interior worlds, does it have value in a world that theoretically we are saying does not exist? Can an individual's story have any value to another person who has her or his own individual world?

Despite the fact that photography is repeatedly discussed within the realms of literal performativity,

its use as a truthful medium is still assumed. When we look at photographs we use our interiorized worlds to project our desires onto something exterior. What results, is commonly a misassumption that what we see actually exists. Cindy Sherman has declared many times in books, magazines and artist statements that she is not working from an autobiographical vantage point, but despite these proclamations, she can't escape the question of the autobiographical because of the physical self used as the subject matter within her images. Photography is more closely aligned with documentary and journalism than performance, yet what Sherman does is clearly a photographic performance. Viewers refuse to deny a visual functionality and have an unhealthy trust in the camera precisely because of Butler's theory of performativity as it applies to visual culture. Viewers need some reflection of themselves and their world to confirm their existence; such is the power of our visual culture today. What would happen if viewers began to assume performance rather than truth as the photographic norm?

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson use Butler's theory of performativity as one of the theories through which they analyze autobiography and life writing in their book, *Reading Autobiography*. Normativity is discussed within this text as being read through experience, the primary source of autobiography and life writing that does not have the luxury of verifiable information. They say, "experience is discursive, embedded in the language of everyday life and the knowledges produced at everyday sites". The sites of experience I have chosen to work from in my previous work are: the natal home and a public road. These two places are translated through my experience in my own autobiographical writing. Not all roads should be reread through my experience, but my experience builds on the understandings others have of a parental home and public space wherein personal events take place. In this way autobiography becomes public memory and public experience. Smith and Watson talk about this filter of experience by saying, "What is recollected and what is obscured is essential to the cultural production of knowledge about the past, and thus to the terms of an individual's

self-knowledge. Autobiographical narratives, as we will see, signal and invite reading in terms of larger cultural issues and may also be productively read against the ideological grain". Often, creators use their chosen medium to subvert dominant structures by performing them away within their art objects. The viewer becomes integral to the success of their piece. If the viewers can't see the performance and instead see the object as a truthful cultural artifact, the art is in fact supporting precisely what it was hoping to undo.

I must take a second to clarify the meaning of certain words: re-making and normative. Re-making can be referring to both written and visual artistic forms of interpreting and analyzing experience. I subscribe to Butler's definition of normative, which is that, "'Normative' clearly has at least two meanings in this critical encounter, since the word is one I use often, mainly to describe the mundane violence performed by certain kinds of gender ideals. I usually use normative in a way that is synonymous with 'pertaining to the norms that govern gender'. But the term normative also pertains to ethical justification, how it is established, and what concrete consequences proceed therefrom" (xxi) With this last definition one must be careful of 'disciplining' a term to the point that the expanded definitions simply redraw the boundaries with yourself inside.

Using autobiography to access and subvert dominant notions of reality and fiction is tricky as it normalizes academic autobiography and distinguishes itself as feminist without taking into account the various feminisms that might influence it. In order to keep the boundaries open and still create an argument that pertains to autobiographical artwork and scholarship I will define my positionality and make sure the normative aspects of my argument are at the very least pointed out.

What is most important about reading, seeing and using autobiography as the basis of ones exploration of the world is the assumption of reality versus fiction. Butler refers to this as the theatrical-

ity of gender. I believe this theory can be mapped onto autobiography and visual culture. Butler's example includes a man in drag which bases itself on the normativity of male and female and usurps it by fooling the eyes of the viewer: In such perceptions in which an ostensible reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion" (xxii). Drag is an interesting example in that it performs an interior life for the exterior world, just as autobiography and photography allow one to perform interior experiences and interpretations for a public.

Smith and Watson create a space for truth vs. fiction to be situated within the genre of life writing: the writer/reader pact. This pact is based on the writer as the main character or narrator as well as the authorial signature on the text. This combination allows the viewer to see that this life has been narrated to us via a first person account of one's own life. Therefore the reader may take the authorial signature to announce that to the best of their knowledge, the writer is telling the truth about her/himself. What happens to our experiential knowledge if, through this pact, the readers/viewers are allowed to return to the point of assuming a truth within a certain medium? Smith and Watson suggest, "if we approach self-referential writing as an intersubjective process that occurs within the writer/reader pact, rather than as a true-or-false story, the emphasis of reading shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding". This is where the learned knowledge comes into play. One can only work from the toolkit they have. Therefore, if one has not been exposed to feminism, using feminism to locate a text or experience is virtually impossible.

Lauren Slater reminds us of the fine line between fiction and reality when she says "After all, when all is said and done, there is only one kind of memoir I can see to write and that's a slippery, playful, impish, exasperating text, shaped, if it could be, like a question mark". Slater uses her memoir

to highlight the use of fiction when remembering a life, or using an example or metaphor to illustrate a larger pre-determined subplot.

In order to communicate, either visually or linguistically, an autobiography must use the forms of communication available to the medium. In order to do that we must look at the iterability of performativity, a theory of agency, one that cannot disavow power as the condition of its own possibility. My story is read in the context of larger structures: the family, the daughter, the grief. The “I” cannot exist without those elements. Readers who come to my story, leave with a broader understanding of those elements as they apply to me.

Sherry Ortner is described in Smith and Watson’s text as situating women’s authorial agency “in the ability with which people play the “games” of culture—with their rules and structures—with wit and intelligence. For Ortner, sociocultural structures are always partial rather than total. And thus, there is always the possibility of changing the rules—although not of escaping the rules altogether.” In thinking about art and its role within the feminist theoretical discourse of critiquing power structures, art seems to be the optimum “medium” to use to critique gender. Art is in fact a representation that passes as real—specifically the new genre mediums (photography and film/video). This construction or performance, gives art a parallel structure to that of gender and enables it to critique what society actually deems as real (gender assignments, racial positionality and class consciousness) all of which are integral to the feminist movement. Specifically in the “third-wave” post-structuralist, post-colonial, feminist debates.

If we conclude then, that expression can not be discussed outside the dominant structures imposed on the reading and critiquing of language and art, then it is impossible for photography to be a stable notion, just as female is not a stable notion. “The moment in which one’s staid and usual



cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman. The vacillation between the categories itself constitutes the experience of the body in question” (Butler xxiii). The vacillation between realities, between topics of debate is precisely the point at which these topics become interesting, where life becomes individualistic. These joints are the points at which I hope to operate as an artist.

Many people use themselves and their lives as access points for audiences to “read culture”, but their reasons for doing so differ wildly. Andy Warhol “cultivated himself as pure surface which could be played upon at will. He deliberately extinguished his own self and story”. Samuel Clemens saw the power in photography as a means to create a self who never reveals but instead creates a concealed life by becoming a public character. This character constantly morphing and re-remembering in ways that reveal a contradictory life story made up of whole truths, partial truths and flat out lies examines the definition of one self and one life story. Samuel Clemens or Mark Twain, as he was better known, decided “The most fruitful employment of photographs plays upon their reputation as dependable truth-tellers, which makes them splendid liars”. Photography is the medium which sits squarely on the intersection of truth and fiction, and therefore possibly the reason for my intense interest in it as a tool for artistic and autobiographical exploration.

Writing is crucial to my artwork. I make art and write about the events in my life. I do these things in order to self evaluate and reflexively wonder about the world and its systems of order. I work this way not to reveal emotional scars or bruises I may have, but to use my most recent interpretation of experiences to discover moments I may have missed my first time through them. Afterall, “autobiography is the product of various factors — real experiences, together with things heard, seen, read, narrated and invented. Fact and fiction are inextricably woven together”. Remembrances become

present situations with the luxury of hindsight helping to elucidate different ideas about actions, motivations and results. Without this self-reflexive genre or category of making, no one would move beyond their present state of actions, mistakes and successes. My answer to the question posed by those who believe that my work is too personal, who want to know if I'm finished with my self-prescribed therapy, is simply, no.

A benefit to opening myself up and reworking situations within my life is the ability I then have to map larger social structures onto my own life, thereby understanding the world by comparison and empathy rather than abstract relational thinking. If I can recall the feeling that arose in my body when I sat in the front row of the makeshift church family and friends made in the park at a local airport where my father kept his Cesna, I can begin to understand why the ritual of the memorial service takes place. Thinking about my own experiences within a situation gives me some authority to think about the benefits and flaws in socially dominant structures. Without personal experience one is at best empathizing, guessing at a world they can't possibly understand. Renato Rosaldo, an ethnographer researching the practice of Headhunting within the Ilongot tribe in the Philippines, expresses this exact sentiment in his essay "Grief and a Headhunters Rage" by saying,

"Consider, for example, how age, gender, being an outsider, and association with a neocolonial regimen influence what the ethnographer learns. The option of position also refers to how life experiences both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight. In the case at hand, nothing in my own experience equipped me even to imagine the anger possible in bereavement until after Michelle Rosaldo's death in 1981. Only then was I in a position to grasp the force of what Ilongots had repeatedly told me about grief, rage, and headhunting".

It is precisely at this intersection of personal and public moments that the world of art and the genre of autobiography become the most fascinating. It is a joint, an intersection of subjectivity, experience and analysis. When one widens the lens to see the autobiography within the context of

larger social structures, history and other human lives, autobiography becomes an indispensable tool for rigorous academic and artistic work.

It is important to look closely at the constraints of communication placed upon those media, which attempt to create “an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life”. (WHERE DOES THIS QUOTE COME FROM?) Judith Butler has explained performativity, and Smith and Watson have outlined the many varied feminist aspects of life writing, so that we may see texts such as Slater’s *Lying*, and art objects such as Twain’s “Self Portrait” and create a partnership between ourselves and the work, so as to make culture in a way that is at least aware of and respondent to the dominant structures. We as viewers and readers, as a result, become active agents within our society.

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As I move forward in my work I change sites, but cling to the experiential first person narrative to guide my viewers through a subject that pertains to a broader audience. My newest site is the body. I perform a painful body in an attempt to discuss an autobiographical incident metaphorically and simultaneously give it a greater social context. Through this sorting of theoretical frameworks with which I make assumptions, criticisms and interpretations, I am able to more thoroughly analyze the topic of pain. I have spent this last chapter positioning myself within my own autobiography and will now use that position to take a closer look at what our society means by pain and painful.

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## **//Part II: Pain / Representations of a Body in Pain //**

**With body issues there exist factors that confront people with their own fears of physical vulnerability and mortality. When talking about racism or sexism there is no fear if one is white today one could end up black tomorrow, so there is room for disassociation. With disability however one could easily go to bed able-bodied and wake up with a disability. The fear is real, and it is universal.**

**-Mary Duffy**

When language is connected to text and visual elements, we inevitably come across the visceral language of emotional pain. Thus, we understand that emotions must somehow be connected to the physical body if what we are describing takes on physical analogy. Our mind and body — virtually disconnected in the contemporary terms of understanding the world — come together, despite our desire to tear them apart. Students loose their hair attempting to make the grade — desperate for accomplishment and success. We push our bodies in a mind over matter frenetic pace, only to find that our bodies have the final say. The will we exert in our lives has to be biologically as well as psychically committed to working in unison in order to succeed. How to achieve this balance may just be the meaning of life. When your body is in pain it is usually indicative of a problem. But what happens when the problem can't be fixed?

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*I sat in the coffee shop with a cup of jasmine tea in front of me. I stared at the steam pondering how to tell this self-proclaimed “bottle-blonde” of my circumstances. What if I fail and no one knows why. Shouldn't I, at the very least, inform my advisors? If I work from a personal place, the personal circumstances are unavoidable. Matt would find a way. Maybe I should be more like Matt. Maybe I should separate myself. I can't. I look up remembering the email that gave me the physical directions to my advisor in the coffee shop. “I'm a five-foot tall bottle-blond in her fifties. Let's sit in the front of the shop — whoever gets there first that is.” Sure enough I was sitting in front of an infectiously chipper bottle-blonde not afraid to describe herself with honesty and spunk.*

*“So, tell me what you did before you came to graduate school.” She lobbed one at me and I gratefully took it.*

*“I did my BFA at Miami University and got a B.A. in English literature at the same time. I was frustrated trying to combine two disciplines; so naturally, Michigan's interdisciplinary program was my first choice. I thought this might be the place to really combine both my passions and bring them together under one roof. I love to read. I love to make photographs. I know they are connected somehow (they being language and the visual) and I'm here to figure it out.”*

*“Michigan does seem like the place for you. Tell me what you do. I'm new here, so I'm not familiar with any of the incoming grads' work.”*

*"I came in with a portfolio of black and white silver gelatin prints, mostly portraiture. I had a series of collaged nudes I did and had planned on going further with Feminism and the Body, but — well—." I stopped, because what I had wanted to do last January when I applied was totally different from what I felt I should be doing now. The biggest difference being that last January I felt something and right now, well, it was safest to just not feel anything.*

*She saved me, "What do you want to do this semester? A big part of this program is experimentation, so there's tons of room for error. Screw it up. Who cares?! You're here to learn." She laughed out loud, with her bottle-blond head thrown back. A few people looked over. She came up for a little air and threw out a few more 'just chuck it all into a big art cauldron' statements before she asked another question. "No, Seriously, you really can do whatever you want despite what anyone tells you."*

*I believed her I just didn't know what to say. How do you say, 'Thank you for the great graduate school fellowship and opportunity to be here, by the way, I have no idea what I'm doing and you just let a complete failure-depressed-fatherless-child into a program where I assumed you had wanted adult artists. Sorry.' Instead I found the story coming haltingly and with an eerie cheer, from my lips. "Well, when I applied I wanted to make work about feminist issues using photography and branching into collage and really try to integrate text. But last April, my father was killed by a drunk driver,"*

*"Oh my god. I'm so sorry."*

*"That's okay." Why do I say that, really it's not okay, but I smile and tell people that it is.*

*"It must be so awful"*

*"You know, one day at a time" I let the cliché fall from my mouth, my tongue making the untruthful sounds against the roof of my mouth until my lips close around it, sealing it out. Most people just accept this brush off with no questions asked.*

*"I lost my mother to cancer and the way I dealt with it has been so different from any of my siblings. But that was ten years ago and really it took me so long to make sense of it. I made art about it for a long time."*

*"Well, since then I've sort of, well, lost a lot of my concentration. My feminist inclinations don't seem to matter as much. I don't know what to make photographs of and well, things just don't seem as important to me. I'm just not sure of anything. I look at these photographs of him and I can't help but just bring them to my chest and sob. It's like I can touch him through the photograph, like he's still alive. It's a distant second to him being here, but a second I'll take nonetheless. These days I get dressed in the morning. I put on clothes and shower and put on my jewelry, and apply make-up I never used to wear in the first*

place and then sit on the couch — lacking any purpose beyond my own starved and deserted reality. Wanting to change it I look at the pictures in utter disbelief. I touch them and remember. I hold them to my chest thinking the photograph can melt around my heart squeezing new beats out of something I'm surprised still works. I touch his hand. I remember the back rubs and pep talks. I got through high-school with him telling me I could do what I felt was the impossible — learn math, get a volleyball scholarship. I run my fingertips over the glossy surface and imagine. I get lost in my own imagination. I can feel the embrace and the kiss he gave me the last time he picked me up from the airport. If I hold this picture I can will him back to me. But then it hurts too much because somehow I get jerked back to the reality that I'm touching a photograph and not the real person. The photograph is conjuring this pain in my stomach, in my heart. My eyes fill with tears and these guttural sobs come wrenching out of my throat. I don't know what this is. I have no control over it. I didn't even know it was possible to feel these things. And it's photography that actually does all this”.

I finish with this statement as if I hadn't just recounted the horrible loss that I was actually feeling, and simply stating this fact of photography's power and how that might be interesting to investigate, still desperately trying to hang on to my academic validity in the midst of a deeply traumatic uncontrollable time in my life. In actuality I hadn't thought this through, as I was talking I was taking notice of how I described the photographs and actually thinking about the physical reaction I had to them.

I look up at her through brown eyes I got from my dad, they are glassed over by the tears that spring up whenever I talk about anything remotely emotional, much less my loss, and I see her looking back at me. Her mouth is slightly parted, and her breath comes from between her lips, the laugh lines around her green-brown eyes are bent slightly downward in a concerned, and disbelieving, and utterly sad shape: not replicating a frown, but implying a feeling of 'oh holy shit'. You can really tell if someone is hearing what you tell them just by the shape of the wrinkles around their eyes.

I continue, silence has always made me uncomfortable. I feel like I'm intruding on her space, like I'm making her feel bad and now it's my job to make her feel better. It's a strange tight rope walk, the walk of making grief public.

“And then when I put him “away”, back into the book of 4x7 slots, I loose him all over again. It's like waking up every

*morning and realizing that your life is different. That you really have no idea what life is, why it happens, and what you're supposed to do with it. I'm really sorry, this has nothing to do with what my art is about."*

*"Not yet, but maybe it should. I'm still dealing with losing my mother. It's a horrible thing to lose a parent. I'm amazed you've made it this far. Just take it slowly."*

*I look back down at the cup with the small chip just to the left of the handle I hold in between my right middle finger and thumb. I sip the jasmine feeling the heat make my taste buds prickle in protest. The heat feels good after it gets past the tongue. It runs down my throat and through my chest. I feel it come to a rest in my empty stomach. The warmth reminds me of something I no longer have — safety — and my eyes fill with regret anger and sadness.*

*"I don't know what to do."*

*"Do what you feel is good for you. Write. Make photographs. Paint. Do anything that you think is right. The physicality of your memories is amazing. What you've just described to me has so much substance. You can feel those memories. Why not make art with them? Maybe your memories are your art. Even if it's just journal entries, that is just as valid as any painting."*

*I thought about this, nodding slowly. But art has to have some physical manifestation — doesn't it? — how was I going to do that?*

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The difficulty of understanding another person who is in pain leaves that person in the dark and our society even darker still. Instead of feeling free to express our grief, funerals are filled with people numbly accepting and thanking people for coming while waiting to wail and scream in private. Not accepting a person's emotion on an outward level of the physical world, leaves them to retreat into their minds to grieve instead of grieving in the world they must still inhabit. Grief is a form of pain that connects the physical and psychic maybe more easily than other forms of pain. From this point of grief, I will connect to larger stigmas of pain, the unsharability of pain, and the impor-



tance of connecting the body and the psychic when dealing with pain.

Pain has become a private thing. In examining pain we must look at the inability to share pain. Even when those who have been through something similar, urge us to continue our talking despite our tears, we still feel some shame at having had to shed the tears in the first place. Why? Perhaps this is a solitary experience, perhaps not. How many times have you heard a person apologize for crying in public? Why do we dismiss our emotions and their physical outlets? “For the person whose pain it is, it is ‘effortlessly’ grasped (that is, even with the most heroic effort it cannot not be grasped); while for the person outside the sufferers body, what is ‘effortless’ is not grasping it (it is easy to remain wholly unaware of it’s existence; even with effort, one may remain in doubt about its existence or may retain the astonishing freedom of denying its existence; and finally, if with the best effort of sustained attention one successfully apprehends it, the aversiveness of the “it’ one apprehends will only be a shadowy fraction of the actual it)”(scarry 7). I wondered why people couldn’t grieve with me. I wondered why I was upsetting my sisters-in-law and why they didn’t want me around if I was going to be sad. Perhaps it was because I reminded them of vulnerability, of mortality. And so they shut me out. They shut out my experiences just as we shut off the television when too much violence in another part of the world is brought into our living rooms via the evening news.

I always wondered why Americans could exist without thinking too much about the rest of the world and that is because “having pain is to have certainty and hearing about pain is to have doubt” (Scarry 12). Yet, despite this perceived inability to share pain, Joan Didion wrote a best-selling memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, about the pain she felt as her daughter lay comatose in New York’s Beth Israel Hospital and her husband died suddenly from a massive heart aneurism. Somehow she was able to command language to tell the story of how her mind began to play tricks on her, sweeping her up and through time, allowing her to experience the past (with John and Quintana) the

present (with neither) and the future (without one and possibly without another). It is an extreme text, filled with beautiful language that brings the physical into contact with the mental capabilities of imagination. How did this text become so popular? Why? We watch television shows about death, perhaps the more we see death in a second transformed/mediated form, the less we have to deal with the physical reality of death. Yet, these mediated forms still create sensations within the body. The language draws direct parallels with, not emotions, but actual sensations. The mind sees the sensation and then draws the body into the conversation by feeling what the body within the medium is feeling. A relationship is made between bodies at the least, between people at the most. People claim that pain is not sharable, but I disagree. Pain is not shareable because it is not desired. If the body is the baseline and we can go back to our own sensations, then at the least we can share the re-imagining of that pain.

In both my re-examination of my experiences, and Didion's, the language of pain is directly related to the body. In fact, the "Gate Control Theory of Pain" and the "McGill pain Questionnaire" are two ways in which language gives medical professionals access to pain. Each enables pain to be quantified and determined through use of conventional modes of communication. While one must accept convention from a practical level, the responsibility to then look beyond it is or should be the next step. This next step, viewing the body and the words together becomes the access point for understanding another body, another person.

"The invention of the diagnostic questionnaire was in part occasioned by Melzack's recognition that the conventional medical vocabulary ("moderate pain," "severe pain") described only one limited aspect of pain, its intensity; and that describing pain only in terms of this solitary dimension was equivalent to describing the complex realm of visual experience exclusively in terms of light flux. Thus he and Torgerson, after gathering the apparently random words most often spoken by pa-

tients, began to arrange those words into coherent groups which, by making visible the consistency interior to any one set of words, worked to bestow visibility on the characteristics of pain. When heard in isolation, any one adjective such as “throbbing pain” or “burning pain” may appear to convey very little precise information beyond the general fact that the speaker is in distress. But when “throbbing” is placed in the company of certain other commonly occurring words (flickering, quivering, pulsing, throbbing, and beating) it is clear that all five of them express, with varying degrees of intensity, a rhythmic on-off sensation, and thus it is also clear that one coherent dimension of the felt-experience of pain is this “temporal dimension” (Scarry 7).

This clear examination of language and the subsequent application to the body enables those outside of our own experiences to relate to our own very individual pain. However, pushing the idea of listening further, one must be aware of the conventional and stigmatic projections placed on those who share the intensity of their pain and be willing to question the automatic assumptions.

In the same way as language, the body can also be used as an access point to pain which may not have reached the stage of articulation. Symptoms of depression are described through physical characteristics enacted through the body: fluctuation in weight, loss of appetite, removal of oneself from social settings, lack of engagement in previously enjoyable activities, are all avenues of communication through the body. The difference between the verbal and the physical might be described by discussing the points of connection: the body is the first point of connection, the body is also the mind, this connection is disrupted by social convention (i.e. language, art). The body is knowable from the very beginning of our lives, yet language and communication are skills that must be learned and practiced in order to appreciate them as a possibilities for externalization. One must be aware of the sensations in ones body, before they can articulate the analogies through art or through language. Therefore, one can only assume that the mind and body take on less of a duality and more of a simpatico relationship.

There are words that attach themselves to physical feelings and emotions, thereby merging language, physicality and emotion. In analyzing the language, even as specific as my language used to describe grief, we automatically arrive at pain. Heaviness. Emptiness. Seething. Numb. These are words that express specific physical environments. However, going back to Elaine Scarry's point, this only provides an opportunity for an observer to participate up to a point because the specificity of pain can only be known by the person in pain. James Elkins describes pain as "that mode of awareness that listens to the body and is aware of its feeling — whether that feeling is the low-level muttering of a body in good health or the high pain of illness" (Elkins 24). Using this definition of pain, one does not need the attention of a medical doctor in order to claim they are in pain. Pain becomes a broad term used to describe both emotion and body. The point of contention is, after pain is defined as well it can be, how do we come together through pain? How do we move beyond definitions and societal conventions to feel together what could be — what is — what was — pain. Scarry says,

"The central point here is that insofar as an actual agent (a nail sticking into the bottom of the foot) and an imagined agent (a person's statement, "it feels as if there's a nail sticking into the bottom of my foot") both convey something of the felt-experience of pain to someone outside the sufferer's body, they both do so for the same reason: in neither case is the nail identical with the sentient experience of pain; and yet because it has shape, length, and color, because it either exists (in the first case) or can be pictured as existing (in the second case) at the external boundary of the body, it begins to externalize, objectify, and make sharable what is originally an interior and unsharable experience."

This becomes different when speaking of emotional pain, because it is on the inside of the body, hence the language of external feeling to express the internal emotions. However, the ability to relate to physical feeling, comes naturally as the body is in fact reacting and causing sensation in the person who is emotionally in pain.

Didion quotes Emily Post in her memoir as being the person able to connect pain and action in her 1922 *Book of Etiquette*. Post writes under the heading of Funerals in chapter XXIV,

“The bereaved must be urged to “sit in a sunny room,” preferably one with an open fire. Food, but “very little food,” may be offered on a tray: tea, coffee, bouillon, a little thin toast, a poached egg. Milk, but only heated milk: “Cold milk is bad for someone who is already over-chilled.” As for further nourishment, “The cook may suggest something that appeals usually to their taste—but very little should be offered at a time, for although the stomach may be empty, the palate rejects the thought of food, and digestion is never in best order...Those who are in great distress want no food, but if it is handed to them, they will mechanically take it, and something warm to start digestion and stimulate impaired circulation is what they most need” (Didion 59).

Didion commented on the matter of fact directness of the relationship between grief and the body. And in fact I was quite astonished at the ability Post could so clearly articulate the connections between grief and the body “changes in the endocrine, immune, autonomic nervous, and cardiovascular systems”, which was later taken up and catalogued by the Institute of Medicine. I found myself doing just as Didion does in the subsequent paragraph, going back to my body and thinking about what it felt like in the days and months after the death.

Communicating about the body becomes laden with societal conventions and structures of control and power. Judith Butler brings this to light by soliciting social rejection and reaction (interventions) in the dominant narratives of gender and body representation. For Butler these interventions take the form of disrupting the performances of gender through alternative performances and narrative structures. Her theory of performativity, as we have seen, is critical to the study of photography and therefore critical to my own photographs wherein I perform a body in pain. Through this performance I open myself to much criticism involving the female body and all that goes along

with the visual representation of that body. This type of self-representation through performing a different self or an unspecific self, “in it’s radical narcissism, where the distances between artist and artwork, artist and spectator are definitively collapsed, such body art practices profoundly challenge the reigning ideology of disinterested criticism” (A Confusion of From and It’s Boundaries, Kusama 571). People should be concerned with the way in which a body in pain is responded to, is criticized as a piece of cultural representation as well as a feminist conversation about body and the acceptance of those things deemed private vs. those things deemed public.

The private and the public is indicative of a power structure within society. Just as gender is prescribed according to Judith Butler, modes of grieving are prescribed by a section of society coming together and arbitrarily deciding that grief or pain should be handled in a specific way. In the same way Judith Butler urged interventions in gender prescriptions, Elaine Scarry is urging interventions in pain, thus the imagined community. “It is through this movement out into the world [via representation, language etc.] that the extreme privacy of the occurrence (both pain and imagining are invisible to anyone outside the boundaries of the person’s body) begins to be shareable, that sentience becomes social and thus acquires its distinctly human form”(Scarry 170). Therefore, the importance of a shared existence is a critical point, but constant questioning and alertness is necessary to truly engage the idea of externalization and imagining thereby bringing about social change and evolution based on past experiences and knowledge, avoiding the pitfalls of predetermined definitions. In my attempts to bring about visualization of pain, I am attempting to take part in the shared future as it is imagined by the members of our world. In doing so I put my objects, my words into the world and “Because each person’s made objects now inhabit the sharable external space outside her own body accessible to all, the objects she makes can be coupled with those objects made by the second person, and the third, and so the large imagined town gets made” (171). By partaking in this imagined town I must take responsibility for the images I have imagined and thus contributed.

I make images of myself, rooting myself in an autobiographical experience and all that vexes that complicated issue and move on to other equally controversial issues: imaging women. Representations of women vary drastically. I am working from a point of intervention in the assumed roles of women behind and in front of the lens attempting to disrupt the idea of a private and public persona. I see the need for a public discourse and identity based on expressed emotion. This expression comes in the form of stereographic images of myself, first with a body cast, and second peeling a layer of skin. “In the modern period the body has become a highly political object, a crucial site for the exercise and regulation of power. In this context, power is constituted both through the production of knowledge concerning the body and through self-regulation through the individual exercising control over the self” (568). If I choose to bring pain into the public and engage in conversations that are typically held in private, perhaps I can encourage others to do the same, thus intervening in a culture of painfully closed doors and creating a space for a newly imagined world of openness and honesty. I am simply re-fixing boundaries surrounding the discussion of pain and waiting for others to add their ideas and thus keep the frame from achieving a static place within our culture. Through this discussion I hope to create empathy, which Elkins says “can help us understand how our bodies are partly our own and partly owned by the objects we see” in his book *Picturing the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis* (24). This is again, the imagined world we’ve created and I am simply adding my vision to that imagined space so as to interact with viewers, and become an active agent in the making and unmaking of culture.

Each image is relatively small, only four inches by seven inches because of the intimacy of the subject matter, but is in three dimensions for the specific purpose of causing less of a translation from 2-dimensional to 3-dimensional. One of the important tensions within my imagery is the question of truth. Is the body you are viewing truly in pain or do I simply look like I am performing pain. When, if ever, is something authentic? And if the world is based solely on perception, then how do we all co-exist?

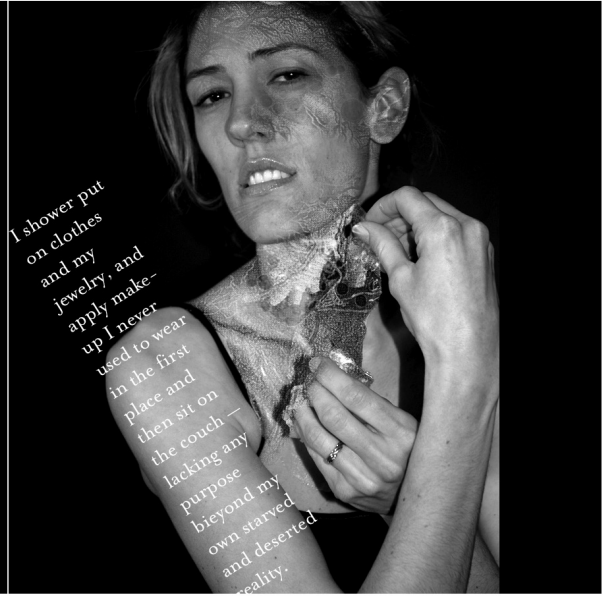






The body has a distinctive boundary; it's outer membrane or skin. This effectively keeps the outside from entering the inside, with disruptions of orifices that lead to the interior. However, the mind exists on a more metaphysical or quantum level where the boundaries seem to be endless. Connecting the mind to the body seems to free the body from its boundaries while constraining the mind to the body, thus creating a coexistence or as I said before a simpatico relationship from whence we can work. In Elkins' book, he uses a simple table to articulate the difference between Pain and Metamorphosis, thus differentiating between the two in an art historically appropriate fashion. Any picture of the body is a distortion of the body in that it represents something that actually exists in ways and using materials that are different from the thing itself, the body. Distortion can then be extended to include two categories: Pain and Metamorphosis which can then be discussed with three chapters each the first of which deals with membranes or the concept of skin and the second of which concerns itself with Metamorphosis as analogy or metaphoric substitution. While my images are more complex and should not be reduced to such closed interpretations, I operate within this project around these two categories, successfully working my way through the body and its painful reactions to stimulation.







The text used within the images is taken directly from the writing of this document, remembering what Dennis Miller suggested about using my own words within my work instead of the words of others. Both this exhibition and my written document have the same title: SURRENDERING TO THE COOLNESS/ AND THE PULL OF MY FINGERS. This comes from a portion of autobiographical narrative (see Part I: Autobiography / Performativity / Truth) within this document wherein I relate through prose, poetry and dialogue an event in my life, and subsequently analyze the ability for autobiography to be truthful, the usefulness of this genre within other fields and the level of performativity we all must assume in order to function within a structured society.

Skin is the organ most aligned with sight, where the viewer's gaze meets the pictured body. Skin has exact pain but is the boundary between the body and the world in a much more vague way. "Skin is like the thin plane of perfect focus in an optical system: everything beyond it (outside the body and the world) and everything in front of it (in the body, in the more-or-less hidden insides) is blurred" (Elkins 47). This creates a body/world polarization until we realize the connection again

between the psyche and the body and the ways in which this connection de-polarizes inside/outside relationships. My images of the body coming out of, peeling off, rejecting a cast is perhaps representative of analogic seeing — of metaphors. But the images of skin coming off of the body is seeing pain, it evokes sensation. One series of images appeals to the mind — the other to the body — both viewed together create an experience and a conversation. I disagree with Elkins, in that I don't think it possible to posit pain against metamorphoses, the two exist simultaneously with blurred lines marking their respective space.

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### **//Part III: Empathy/Space/Relationships//**

“Through tools and acts of making human beings become implicated in each others sentence”  
(Scarry 176).

“One reason to know our own histories is so that we are not defined by others, so that we can resist other people’s images of our pasts, and consequently, our futures. Beyond the “George Washington (or Al Capone) slept here” gesture, it is not only a matter of saving old things but of selecting those that mean something and cultivating responses to them”  
(Lippard 85).

I desire what Elaine Scarry assures me is possible: A community, an imagined town, where people are compassionate and empathic.

I find people disconnecting themselves from the realities they don't want to face. I too, have been guilty of turning off the television because I didn't want to let the world into my home, into my conscious everyday existence. Embracing pain, acknowledging its existence is an exercise in empathy. By giving permission for and accepting conversations about grief and pain, the performed life becomes somewhat more transparent, allowing for the engaged reader/viewer to gain a deeper understanding of gender roles and accepted and rejected cultural norms embedded within our everyday experiences. Thinking about the ways in which these larger social issues are mapped onto experiences of grief and sadness will also help to examine the process through which the body and emotions are connected, placing a visceral experience in the hands of viewers and readers. By imaging pain and by using my own body, my own stories, I hope to bring to the forefront of the public eye, the way in which sadness destroys a body when hidden. I see the need for a public discourse and identity based on expressed emotion. If empathy were more prevalent in our society, imagine the difference it could make. Imagine the town.

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*I found myself standing next to my mother, the officer looking at the asphalt for the "groove" he said was left by the accident. We had left the courthouse with pockets full of wet and overused tissues and I couldn't help but stick my hands back into my pockets to search for one that might have just one more blow left in it. I was trying to be strong, trying to be the support my mother needed. My Aunt was helping her now as she talked with the three officers that had agreed to take us out to the site of the crash. My head filled slowly with a quietness that happens when I sink deep into my thoughts and begin to interpret the world through a lens I have developed as a critical thinker and an artist. I walked the fifty feet back to where we had parked the car next to the rodeo grounds and pulled my camera back out from under the back seat. It scraped the plastic as I tugged it making a snapping*

sound when the plastic clasps that were holding it together passed the bottom of the seat cushion. Dislodged from its protective place I began unpacking the contents, taking out the black Polaroid back, several long skinny rolls of Ilford film, the kind of film that makes large square negatives and a cartridge of Polaroid film. Inhaling a large deep dry breath, more out of exhaustion than out of serious and deliberate stress relief or relaxation, I unpacked the wet tissues, leaned deeper into the car to find the trash bag and stuffed them all in, putting away my tears for at least a little while. I replaced the tissues with the film, hung the Sekonic light meter around my neck and pulled my head and upper torso out of the car, stood up straight and shut the door. I turned back around and began to live through the camera, to experience the place through a lens that was emotionless, unattached, and critical. I focused on those things I wanted to take in further when I had more time and more tissues. First, the group, standing next to “the gouge” and the road signs, both markers of two very different things, but in the same spot. I walked closer, looking up at the deep blue sky and the cotton clouds that disappeared behind the dusty clay colored mountains I thought about all the different things that sky has seen. I pointed my camera toward the clouds, first allowing the mountains to penetrate my composition and then excluding them from my thoughts. As I neared the group I heard one officer say that he wished he could just dig a hole and push him in. I assumed the he in this story was the man who killed my father. Apparently they have had prior exposure to him through their job of law enforcement. I took another picture, this time thinking about their feet. Their feet, standing in *The Spot*. One year, four months and twenty-seven days later and just one hour and thirty-four minutes prior. I know I shouldn’t count like that. I walk slowly around to the other side of the group. I can smell the aftershave of the officer I’m standing closest to. Fabric softener mixed with wood shavings comes to mind. I squat (because I’m in my good pants I can’t sit) on the side of the road, catching my light meter before it swings from the string around my neck and into the asphalt. I look at the lines, dim from the years of relentless sun and increasingly heavy traffic, I notice the man stepping out into the street just as I release the shutter. I look up. “Just wanted to make sure the car saw you, that’s all. Wouldn’t want anything to happen.” That’s nice I think, but something already has happened. And then the dreaded question. “What are you photographing?” I don’t know how to answer. I’m not sure of what I’m making. Luckily my Aunt speaks for me. “She’s an artist. I’m sure she’ll do something with them that we never thought about. Won’t ya Liss.” I nod and smile weakly, wanting to go back to my world where those uncontrollable things dim and I can breathe. For a while I couldn’t breathe anywhere, but recently my chest has loosened and the air flows more freely. I’m thankful that I’m there now. I turn from the group again and look both ways before



*crossing the two-lane highway.*

*The wind picks up my hair and pulls it in front of my eyes, blocking the sun and blurring the vast expanse of overgrazed land before me. I drag my fingers across my face, catching my hair and tucking it behind my left ear. I drop my head and my nose disappears behind the waist level viewfinder to focus on the double yellow lines separating me from my family. I realize that these men are now a part of my experience in life, in a way that some people, people closest to me will never be. I snap the shutter and numbly walk back over to stand next to my mother: the camera gives me the ability to enter and exit the situation, which I do nimbly and without thought. My mother is speaking to the detective wearing pleated khakis, a short sleeve plain white shirt, with a gun attached to his hip. I look at him, and ask the question the small voice in the back of my head had been repeating all afternoon.*

*“Were you there?”*

*“Yes.”*

*I want to know everything. I want to touch him, because I knew he was there. He saw what I wouldn't have been able to forget, and yet feel that I should have been a part of.*

*“I should have been there you know.”*

*He looks at me without saying anything for a second. I'm not sure if he's measuring his response or checking the emotions that I assumed cops couldn't have.*

*“It's a good thing you weren't there — when we got to him, he was unconscious.” His words come out in stilted fragments. Slowly. “In most cases your body goes unconscious very quickly. Our bodies have ways of anesthetizing pain on their own. I don't think he felt anything beyond the initial impact.”*

*I want to hear everything he's saying. As he talks my stomach twists up and I take in a breathe of air without making any noise.*

*“He was alive when we reached him. The doors weren't usable. I came in through the passenger window while Bryan came in through back window. I held his chest and Bryan held his head back against the headrest and we just talked to him until*

*the paramedics arrived and the door could be sawed off. We just kept telling him to hang on — that he was going to be okay.”*

*My chest filled with sadness, with regret, with guilt and finally with some relief. I was relieved that someone was touching him, that someone was talking to him, that he wasn't alone. My aunt, the cop, began talking about response times and historical precedence and the conversation moved on. I walked away with my camera.*

*The Detective wearing the kahaki's was the most quiet of the three. He stood there with his arms crossed, quietly supporting and taking in the scene. After about thirty minutes, when people felt they had had enough, the detective turned to me and reiterated his earlier statement, “really, it is a good thing that you weren't there. He wouldn't have wanted you to be.” As if he had crossed a personal line, he quickly jumped back over to the professional side and offered his services if future information was desired or needed. I thanked him and watched him walk back to his white F-150 and climb in. My family was already at the mini-van reorganizing and preparing for the four hour trip home. I walked up the road, away from the car, and my family. I pulled one more image into my camera and onto my film and then stood there in that place, looking up at the sky.*

*I returned to the car. Crawling into the driver's seat, setting down my camera and pulling the light meter from my neck, I felt a small sense of justice, and a small sense of peace pulse through my limbs. I held the steering wheel tightly. Breathing exhaustion from my body, I looked around the van making sure seatbelts had been clicked into place, pushed the break pedal feeling the rush of air as the pedal depressed, dropped the gear shift and turned the car out onto the road.*

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What is the history of this place? What is the future of this place? How do I fit into this place? Do I only fit in during a specific time or will I be inextricably attached to this place's future and simultaneously, its past? What if that street could talk, the street where he died? Would I really want to hear the story it had to tell? And what other horrible stories lay beneath my own tragedy? How many more people had died in that very same spot? Maybe the more important question to ask at this point is, if the street could talk, whose story would it tell? Would I be shocked if the street spoke up

and instead of hearing the story from my own perspective I heard the story of the Mexican-American: of the man named Johnny Gonzales.? What if I heard the story of the man without a college education, who worked on the line at the SRP (Salt River Project) energy plant, who had a marriage that fell apart shortly after the accident and no family (at least none that showed up to the trial, in fact a friend dropped him off and picked him up) to help him through his careless choice to drink and drive, leading to the death of another person? Would I be shocked if the road didn't side with me?



Questions like these provide ways to understand how human occupants are part of the environment and where we fit in personally. Research into social desire can set off a chain of personal reminiscences and ramifications, including lines and circles of thought about the interlinking of histories, unacknowledged class systems, racial, gender, and cultural divisions, and common grounds (not to mention all the possibility of past lives) - all of which define our relationships to places and help to explain the lure of the local.

(Lippard 25).

Places are made up of many memories and many perspectives. I think it is important to honor the personal and the local and not to underestimate the way in which these events color the landscape of the world in which one lives. The charge eventually brought against Mr. Gonzales was a misdemeanor charge that held no more than six months in prison and a suspended license. In addition to this, the judge ordered him to abstain from any alcoholic beverage during his entire two-year probation, which I felt was an intelligent and just decision that benefited the community more than any amount of jail time. And so while what some people believe to be the correct punishment for the crime, and while my father can never be brought back, justice at the level of community and some form of peace was achieved in many different ways.

Place stems from your roots and leads to your future and is the home of your present. Therefore, how could a large part of one's identity help but reside in the place it came from, the place it was going and the place it currently resides? Lucy Lippard argues in The Lure of the Local that "Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person's life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there"(7). In searching for those connections that made up that place to which I found myself inextricably tied, I decided to map the way in which I gained my knowledge of the accident and

simultaneously the place. Who told me that Mr. Gonzales' wife had recently left him? Who told me about the drunk driving charge that was filed and to which Mr. Gonzales pled 'no contest' to only four months after he had killed my father? How was I introduced to the town and through whom? Where did all of my knowledge of the situation come from and in what ways is it biased? What does this tell me about the social history of the town? What does this knowledge do to my biases against or for specific cultures and classes? Tim Cresswell comments "In general places are never complete, finished or bounded but are always becoming – in process" in his book Place: A Short Introduction. The town is located specifically at an interesting crossroads of history and culture. Occupied originally by the Native Americans who are now relegated to the Indian Reservation, or 'up there', later settled by the Mormon's who were fleeing persecution, and finally a respite for the Mexican community.

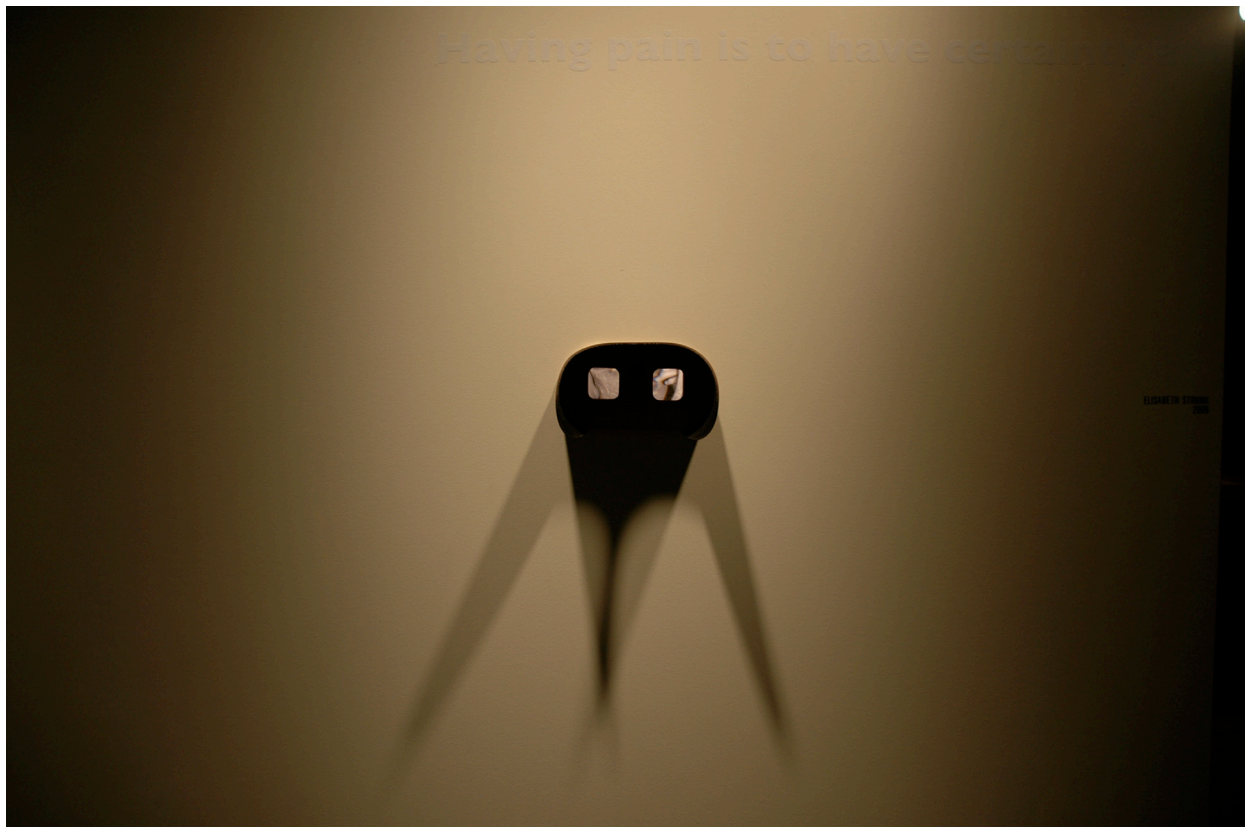
This Northern Arizona town was truly a mix of cultures. However, these cultures, living within a few miles or at times even on the same block, did not appear to mix at all. The Native Americans stay on their own land, governed by their own laws and their own officials. The The Mormon's did not like the Hispanic community because they were under educated and "for the most part, not law abiding citizens" and because the Hispanics accused the white (mostly Mormon) population of racial profiling. While the Hispanics didn't seem to like the Mormon's because of the actual racial profiling that occurs in the town and the apparent prejudice throughout the Southwest against the Mexican Immigrant population. Each time I was made aware of these general statements it was someone new introducing the information – which confirms my status as an outsider looking in. But if I were an insider in the community, maybe Johnny Gonzales would have recieved at least a traffic violation from the officer who responded to the crash and who was only one week later fired from the police department for unprofessional conduct.

This negotiation between inside and outside, reverberates throughout my work, both conceptually and physically. The structure surrounding the installation SURRENDERING TO THE COOLNESS/AND THE PULL OF MY FINGERS, forces the viewer to contemplate the polarity of inside/



outside, which is often the case when attempting to understand the pain of others.

The hood offers privacy for the viewer to completely engage the image. The portals and surrounding wall order the work, leaving it vulnerable, but only to those who will take the time and care to actually look into windows to view the image. Artists occupy a unique interstitial space between scholarship and practice. Artists are thinkers who engage the world of ideas, but are also people who put those ideas into physical form and into conversation with people outside of the academy. I am



constantly on the edge, neither inside or outside.

At the public talk I gave about this installation many people commented on the structure and the safety issues apparent within my work. They were extremely curious about what was on the inside of the structure.

There is a delicacy, an intimacy gained by asking a viewer to open a small portal into your world and contemplate something that is critical to who you are and to your idea. This requires openness on your part and compassion and empathy on the part of the viewer. To ask them to participate in what Elaine Scarry calls, your “imagined town”.











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